
McDonald, in the revision to her dissertation, takes us deep inside Riazan province in order to investigate the interaction between the “Center” and the peasantry during the 1920s. She is particularly concerned with how the peasantry responded to the new Bolshevik regime, and immediately informs the reader that the dominant myth regarding state-peasant interaction during the New Economic Policy (exemplified in the works of Merle Fainsod, Leopold Haimson, Moshe Lewin, and Sheila Fitzpatrick) – that the peasants were “uninterested in accommodating to the new regime” – is false. The Riazan peasants rather “were interested in coming to a workable living arrangement with the Soviet regime in the mid-1920s.” (p. 7) Furthermore, at the local level, the level at which the vast majority of the population of the Soviet Union experienced the revolution, “the state and the peasantry did not encounter one another; they were entangled,” as peasants, seeking a voice in state institutions, served as peasant intermediaries in such “state” institutions as the rural soviets, the local police, and the forest guard. But the peasant desire to have his “say,” that is for independence within a peasant construct of right and natural, collided with the Bolshevik modernist project to “civilize,” “Sovietize,” and utilize the peasantry in the quest for a new, modern, industrial country.

McDonald investigates this clash between the wait-and-see peasantry and the rush-to-the-future Center through an analysis of how local structures of power actually worked, and the growing alarm that dominated the Center when, having turned its face to the countryside, it perceived how supposed Soviet power had been incorporated into local rule. McDonald has chosen the lens of “crime” and the institutions that dealt with its varied manifestations (the police, rural soviets, and courts) as the primarily means to contrast the divergent “hopes, dreams, and anxieties” of Center and peasantry as both sought to define the NEP world, a dance of accommodation and resistance centered around the clash between the Bolshevik civilizing mission and peasant culture that led finally to what she calls “the carnival of violence that was collectivization.”

Thus, much of this work is an institutional history of the local Riazan police, courts, and local soviets. Intertwined with this history is an analysis of the mutual incomprehensibility of the *mirovozzreniia* of the Center and the peasantry, especially those peasants who constituted local power. Thus moonshining (and drunkenness), for example, was seen by the Center as proof of “rural excess, darkness, and backwardness,” and by the peasants
(and local peasant police and rural soviet officials) as part of the natural order. The felling of trees in state forests was for the peasants “a promise of the Revolution,” for the Center the destruction of a valued state resource. With the Face campaign begun in fall 1924, such rural “criminality” and local power collusion in “anti-Soviet” behavior came to dominate the Center’s understanding of the peasantry and prepared the way for the decision to force the village out of its darkness once and for all. The more information the Center received about conditions in the countryside (“horrifying news of corruption, lawlessness, illiteracy, lack of political consciousness, and general autonomy in the periphery” [p. 175]), the greater the “panic” manifested by the regime regarding the perceived realities of rural life. This panic, McDonald argues, had by 1927 become entangled with the party debates regarding the future of the NEP. Samogon, for one example, was now defined by the Center as a weapon of the kulak, and also seen as an integral part of local power: local power thus was kulak power. And investigations into bandit groups (which marauded freely throughout the countryside, terrorizing peasants especially on the roads) revealed the integration of such networks into village power and Soviet institutions through marriage and kinship ties, whereas reports of growing hooliganism now demonstrated not youth mischief but dangerous vestiges of pre-Revolutionary culture that threatened the national commitment to rapid industrialization and wholesale collectivization.

But whereas local power did not necessarily equate with kulak or bandit power, it did equate with the peasants, McDonald demonstrates. This was especially true for the courts, “the important point being that peasants did take the courts seriously and used them to pursue particular kinds of cases [especially assault, slander, divorce, alimony, theft, or property damage].” (p. 91) However, the tendency of peasants to ignore the courts and carry out vigilante justice in certain matters such as horse thievery and arson also led in the second half of the 1920s to more and more violent attempts on the part of the Center at centralization and control over the “dark” villages. Whereas in the first half of the 1920s, agents of the Center tended, McDonald argues, to explain and make excuses for the behavior of local officials, including those of the justice system who demonstrated leniency toward samosud or those in the forest service who accepted bribes, with the information coming from the Face to the Countryside campaign, central agents increasingly saw and reported only anti-Soviet acts and evidence of “alien” influence. In 1928, as part of collectivization, the legal system was divided: a peasant part dealt through custom and tradition with apolitical, petty cases, whereas a purged official part participated in the system of “campaign justice” designed to implement collectivization and to prosecute officials charged ironically with “excesses.”

McDonald’s analysis of the rural soviet reveals much the same pattern. In contradiction to the claims of Lewin and John Keep regarding the alien nature and insignificance of the rural soviet, McDonald argues that the soviet
was “part of peasant government [along with, but not in opposition to, the pre-revolutionary village gathering (skhod) and land commune] and peasant advocacy and as such proved a serious challenge to the regime during the first collectivization drive of 1929-1930 until the regime could reconfigure their ranks with more obedient servitors.” (p. 104) “Corrupt” it might well have been, but it was corrupt within the normal rules of peasant culture: “local power was exactly that – local.” (p. 110) For the peasants, the village soviet had value as a conduit between peasants and the state, a means for “a dialogue with the outside world and with the regime” that “suggests that at least a part of the peasantry was willing to work with the Soviet regime in the 1920s, on mutually negotiated terms.” (p. 116) This was particularly true regarding taxation. The years 1924 to 1926 witnessed successful negotiation. But as with the police and the courts, the Face to the Countryside campaign together with the campaign to revitalize the rural soviets produced growing anxiety in the Center not simply over the kulaks’ control of the soviets (and thus ability to avoid taxation and hamper state grain acquisition), but also over the intertwining of the rural soviet, land commune, and village gathering. The answer, part of collectivization, was to purge the soviets of members who opposed collectivization, arrest agitators, import city workers for work in the rural soviets, and liquidate the commune. The very success of this purge, “depeasantising” the rural soviet, helps, she argues, to explain the violence of the Pitelino rebellion of 1930 that forms the major case study of collectivization in the work.

McDonnell contends that even as late as the spring of 1929, Riazan peasants still believed that negotiation with Soviet power was possible, especially with respect to the tax burden, the most crucial issue in peasant-state relations. But the impact of the Face to the Countryside campaign made negotiation impossible: “If turning the face of the state to the countryside and the resulting flood of reports, letters, and revelations unveiled anything to the Bolshevik metropole in Moscow, it was the fact that as the state attempted to extend its authority into the village, those state structures were in turn rapidly incorporated into local politics as the state itself was drawn into the countryside rather than drawing the countryside into the state. Collectivization was a desperate attempt to address this crucial issue of power and control in addition to the host of economic and ideological elements involved in the decision to launch the first collectivization push in the fall of 1929.” (p. 204)

The author turns often to a critique of the simplification of complexities relative to the NEP village and its relationship to the emerging Soviet state. However, one cannot help but come away from this work with the sense that the author’s subtext runs something like this: The village was a world, with its own customs and “laws” distinct from those of the Center, where drunkenness and bribery dominated existence, and where the wealthy lorded over the poor and expropriated for themselves what little there was to be gained from the meager produce of the Russian earth. But such had ever been. Bolshevik attempts to systematize and modernize were thus violations of a natu-
ral order ("local circumstances and age-old practices"), in short, criminal acts by a state that "dehumanized" the peasantry. However, as Theodore Von Laue argued persuasively half a century ago, whoever ruled Russia, be they tsarist, communist, or democratically elected, did not have the luxury of allowing rural Russia to remain in its primitive isolation. The West, ever encroaching on Russia, does not take prisoners: one either becomes the West or one is conquered. What had been true for the Americas, China, and India, awaited an unreformed, village Russia. Surely, a love of peasant "freedom" and agency (as expressed for example in the customs of the often lethal village brawl or the beating to death, or immersion, of suspected thieves, or acts of arson against neighbors, or, for insurance payout, against oneself) together with a neglect of threatened Russian subjugation is another simplification of a complexity. Or perhaps, it is a complexification of a simplicity – for despite the recent tendency once again to romanticize the pre-collectivized Russian village and demonize almost all Soviet efforts at modernization, sometimes barbarism, whether the acts of central power or of peasants, is simply barbaric.

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