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The Best Laid Plans [or is that]

Judith Pallot, already recognized as an outstanding scholar of Russian historical geography, has written an excellent book on the utopian intentions of rural reformers and the strategic responses of Russia’s peasants to the Stolypin land reforms. Pallot effectively applies the “anthropological” methodology of recent social historical work on the Russian peasantry to what might seem at first a very traditional “administrative” topic: the design and implementation of the Stolypin reforms. The results illuminate the mentalities of both the reformers and their “subjects.” The book is based upon extensive archival research and also shows great mastery of the published sources. Pallot provides some remarkable plates and ground plans that illustrate several of her major observations.

Pallot explores the progressive vision of the administrators responsible for defining, directing, and implementing the Stolypin reform from 1906 to 1917. For modernizing officials, progress dictated that the land commune be dismantled and replaced by a uniform landscape of “technically perfect” khutora (unitary farms in which all household land has been consolidated, with the household dwelling located on the farm itself and separated from the village). They believed that only such a transformation in the plotting of space itself (with which the reforms main designers were obsessed) could transform the peasants, bring an end to their “backwardness” and “ignorance,” and solve the ongoing agrarian crisis. The Stolypin reform is best considered, as Pallot convincingly maintains, as an enormously ambitious, utopian project in social engineering.

But as Pallot makes clear, the state’s assault on the commune was an attempt “to hit a moving target” (p. 248). Rather than an outmoded relic (as the reformers had assumed), the commune had adapted to economic and demographic pressures arising in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century and still served many of the fundamental needs of peasants living near the margins of subsistence. Still, such pressures had created great strains. Pallot argues that elements of the Stolypin reform undoubtedly attracted individual peasant households (most significantly, the chance to increase and protect their landholdings), but that peasant responses to the reform were not based upon the “instrumental rationality” assumed by reformers.

Instead, peasants more often placed community interests before their own individual interests (or to be more precise, understood their own interests as embedded in those of the community). Peasant responses to the Stolypin reforms took many forms, only a few of which were overt enough to reveal the “hidden transcript” of peasant resistance. Most often, communities resisted individual households who petitioned to claim hereditary title to their land, consolidate land (by forming an otrub, a unitary farm with partial consolidation of land and the household dwelling located in the village), or separate entirely from the village (form a khutor). In pressuring potential separators, villagers employed a full repertoire of traditional means for controlling households that had
deviated from accepted norms. In the process they not only defined separators as “outsiders,” but also reaffirmed the communal identity of those who resisted the reform. Perhaps most perplexing to the reformers, entire communities often petitioned for commune-wide title changes or enclosure as a way to eliminate any advantages that might have accrued to “pioneer separators.”

And to the great frustration of reformers, those communities that had “embraced” the land reform modified it in practice so as to retain communal practices; even separators who had formed khutora and otruba still “clung” to communal practices. The reason, as Pallot demonstrates, is that such practices were rational from the peasants’ perspective. And, in fact, the creation of unitary farms was not the silver bullet that killed agrarian backwardness; only in a few specific regions (most notably, in parts of the Northwest) had khutora come close to meeting reformers’ expectations. The reformers could not grasp this, since they were locked into a rigid utopian conception of the transformative power of land reform. (Only on the eve of the First World War did reformers recognize the importance of agricultural outreach services.) But the historian who pays attention to the peasants’ perspective, Pallot argues, can then make sense of the complex “geography of enclosure.” Pallot lays this argument out in eight tightly constructed chapters.

An excellent introductory chapter provides background on the Stolypin reforms and establishes that reformers understood agricultural modernization as a linear process “based upon private property and enclosure that existed in the West” (p. 6). She reviews the historiography of the reform with special attention to the work of David Macey and George Yaney and familiarizes readers with the “new paradigm” of Russian rural history that employs lessons from anthropology (and especially from the work of James Scott on “everyday forms of resistance” and “public” vs. “private transcripts”),[1] Pallot then provides a model of peasant interaction with the reform (essentially an overview of her argument on the rationality of peasant responses).

Chapter two, “Land Reform as Administrative Utopia,” unveils the utopianism of the Stolypin reform project, in which reformers held that radical transformation of the landscape would re-make peasants into “rational,” progressive farmers. When reformers looked at the countryside, they saw only the chaos of the repartitional commune with its hodgepodge patchwork of scattered strips. Physical reorganization of the landscape through the creation of khutora would bring order to this chaos. Their preferred result, Pallot argues, would be a more productive, more modern, more easily controlled peasantry. (In a wonderful example of the fruitful application of theory to the nitty-gritty of history, Pallot links the Stolypin reforms to Foucault’s concept of the “discipline of enclosure”).

In a very sensitive treatment of the institutional and legal setting of the reform and of debates and turf struggles within the reform administration, Pallot shows that the reformers set as their primary task the physical removal of the peasant from the village and the creation of “technically perfect” khutora: farms with no angles greater than 45 degrees in their boundaries, a length-to-width ration no greater than 5:1, and the household dwelling located in the center of the farm so that, according to the instructions provided local land-reform agents, “the farmer’s wife can call her husband for lunch” (p. 39). Otruba and other forms of land reorganization were considered inferior and at best transitional stages towards “khutorization,” which would make life conform to the geometry of perfect squares. A. A. Kofod, the reform’s principle architect, believed that the physical organization of the land shaped the peasants’ consciousness and that only “khutorization” would lead to individualism.

In Chapter three, “Open Fields, Scattered Strips, and Repartitions,” Pallot looks at the functionality of the commune. Educated Russians generally saw the fragmentation and repartition of landholding as irrational burdens holding back Russian agriculture. Pallot argues that fragmentation and repartition were strategies to reduce the risks of the starvation and disaster in a low-yield agricultural environment. They also provided for the greater diversification of land use and functioned as instruments of social control. Again, reformers were simply blind to this. Moreover, some of the more limited aims of reformers—such as widening strips and consolidating land to reduce fragmentation—could be and were achieved within the context of the commune. But although the commune was more flexible than reformers realized, economic and demographic pressures had created households that no longer needed the commune for protection against risk. Households whose pursuit of self-interest could not be accommodated within the framework of the commune were most receptive to the Stolypin reform and presented the commune with its greatest challenge in 1906-17.

In Chapter four, “Free Riders and Village-Wide Consolidation,” Pallot examines reasons why individ-
ual households and whole communities enclosed their land or converted it to individual tenure. Her emphasis is on the wide variety of motives and the many contexts that influenced peasant decision making. Reformers explained peasants’ decision to “embrace” the reform, and especially whole community enclosure and tenure changes, as a sign that reform had worked and peasants were recognizing the superiority of individual tenure or enclosure. Pallot suggests instead that whole villages often enclosed after a single household had initiated separation because other households were desperate not to lose out “in the division of spoils the land reform made possible” (p. 126). She also argues that whole communities enclosed or changed tenure as a means of neutralizing the threat posed by individual separators, as a “wrecking strategy” and a way of bogging down the reform process.

Chapter five, “The Government is For Us, Otrubniki” focuses on the tasks of the local officials charged with implementing the reform. These local agents of reform faced pressure from above to achieve “the greatest degree of separation and integration of land as possible” (p. 130) and pressure from below – from the peasants – who were supposed to give their consent to reform. The absence of any systematic record-keeping gave local reform agents some room to maneuver in working out arrangements with communities, with results that often strayed from the designers’ aims. In the drive to “capture peasants for the reform,” some local officials manipulated peasants’ fear of individual separators or used various forms of coercion and intimidation to press as many villagers as possible into the reform.

In a foreshadowing of familiar Soviet administrative drives (a comparison Pallot does not make explicitly), quantity took precedence over quality. Reformers at the center who had created circumstances that allowed for abuse of the reforms now complained of the sloppy work and inappropriate tactics of local agents. Pallot does an excellent job of explaining why local reform agents were much less likely to be concerned with the “technical quality” of enclosed farms than were those at the top of the reform administrative ladder.

In Chapter six, Pallot explains how peasants used “everyday forms of resistance” to thwart the Stolypin reforms. Although the state propagated the myth that peasants accepted and embraced the reform, and although peasants often used this “public transcript” as a means of dissembling, the “hidden transcript” of resistance to reform was manifest in peasants’ actions. Pallot examines rare cases of direct resistance through confrontation with officials, boycotting elections to the land settlement committees, and other overt and open acts. She also provides a fine discussion of the far more ubiquitous use of foot-dragging, dissembling, feigning ignorance, and other forms of “everyday resistance.” But her main concern is the pervasive phenomenon of “middle ground” resistance, in which “opposition was open ‘but not openly declared’ ” (p. 159). The targets of such resistance were households that had petitioned to separate from the commune; by opposing them, communities could opposed the reforms without drawing down the wrath and full force of the state.

While appropriately sensitive to the methodological problems of studying such forms of resistance, Pallot does an outstanding job of describing the repertoire of peasants’ middle ground strategies. These included the manipulation of appeals to the volost courts, writing formulaic, suppliant petitions that beg state authorities to intervene against “abuses” of the community, phony consolidation of whole villages, and a whole range of other actions. She explains that villagers punished separators by denying them access to communal assets, including social capital. Like other historians examining forms of social control in rural Russia, Pallot describes such actions as instructive as well as punitive: they were to teach a lesson not only to the ostracized household, but to any potential separators.[2]

Direct, everyday, and middle-ground resistance all revealed the peasants’ hidden transcript of opposition to the reform, but reformers were unable or unwilling to read this message. Instead, the state held to the myth of “a benevolent state and childlike peasantry” (p. 184). Officials blamed opposition on “the usual suspects” like leftists, workers, Jews, teachers, and other “outside agitators”; on the “natural opponents” of change like women, the elderly, and kulaks; or on overzealous or deviant local reform agents. Like the stalinist officialdom explaining the failures of collectivization (again, Pallot does not overtly make this comparison), administrators responsible for the Stolypin reform could not conceive of the possibility that it was their project itself that was flawed.

Pallot’s seventh chapter, “Peasant Modification and Adaptation of the Reform,” makes clear that even when the title to land was transferred or land was consolidated, peasant separators continued employing communal practices and maintaining communal institutions and relations. This was not simply the product of habit or ignorance (the preferred explanation of the reformers); it
was because communal arrangements had rational uses to peasants. Local officials more or less accepted peasant modification and adaptation of the reform because it allowed them to report higher numbers of “reformed households.”

Pallot offers a major revision of the views of Yaney and Macey, both of whom accept that separators had moved towards independent farming. One of the keys to understanding the persistence of the commune even where there had been “whole-village” enclosures is that the commune had more functions than the simple reparation of land. Titleholders and separators often retained communal rights and obligations essential to survival. Enclosure frequently did not include resources that villagers could use more effectively through communal control. And even when common resources like pasture, meadows, and woods were divided, peasants continued employing communal arrangements for their exploitation. Pallot reminds us that it took time and extraordinary resources to set up a khutor and make it productive; most separators lacked these resources, and many instead set up “phony” khutora while keeping their dwellings in the village. The persistence of the commune, then, was a sign not of peasant ignorance, but of the continued rationality of communal arrangements and relations.

The final chapter of this book, “Farming in the Immediate Post-Enclosure Years,” is a useful corrective to linear thinking about agrarian modernization. Pallot argues that the success or failure of unitary farms depended largely upon local conditions. Creating an otruba or a khutor could put a household at a dangerous disadvantage, not only because of opposition from other villagers, but because of the enormous expenditures in labor, time, and money necessary to improve a farm. Only a small minority of those who engaged in the reform received grants or loans from the local land settlement commissions. And enclosed farms faced serious technical problems, for instance, in pasturing livestock. The reformers’ answer to the question of how separators would replace common grazing and herding practices was that peasants should engage in year-round stall-feeding. But this “solution” begged the question of where separators would obtain needed feed grain. In trying to reduce their risks, peasantsrationally gravitated towards solutions that replicated old communal arrangements.

Enclosed farms formed under the terms of the Stolypin legislation were not alone in their failure to meet reformers’ expectations; the pre-1906 khutora, which the reformers had cited as models for the reform, also underperformed. In most regions, the “old” khutora were at best slightly more productive than communal farms. Reform officials fretted over the tendency of farmers on khutora to revert to primitive methods (like monoculture). For the reformers, progress meant more intensive farming (although in some regions, as Kimitako Matsuzato has shown, the old three-field system was objectively superior to intensification). Following the work of Matsuzato and Yanni Kotsonis, Pallot traces the reform administration’s belated realization that separators needed agricultural extension services to succeed.[3] The simple reorganization of space alone was not enough to produce agricultural modernization. Again, Pallot gives exceptional attention to the geography of enclosure in this chapter and to the regional factors that shaped the problems peasants faced on khutora and otruba.

The book ends with a compact conclusion that briefly reiterates the major points of each chapter.

Some readers may find it odd that a book on the Stolypin land reforms devotes very little space to Stolypin himself or to the idea of building a peasant middle class as a prop against revolution. But instead of covering well-tread ground, Pallot has provided a remarkably fresh reading of the reform from the perspective of the administration. Other readers might wish that Pallot had devoted more coverage to peasant disturbances and overt unrest. Again, she has not ignored these topics, but rather reminds us that they were exceptions; instead, she explains peasant strategies that were far more common.

My criticisms are minor. While Pallot provides clear and detailed source citations, the book unfortunately lacks a bibliography. The glossary of terms does not include several important Russian terms that appear frequently in the text. A few minor typographical errors slipped through Oxford’s net, such as the barely readable key to Figure 8 (p. 101) and incorrect page numbers and publication dates in a few citations. But these are slight complaints.

There are, of course, questions and comparisons that one wishes Pallot had space to address. I wanted more extensive discussion of continuities in utopian thinking about landscape and social transformation in Russia and the USSR and more comparisons between the Russian case and similar projects elsewhere (Pallot does draw several comparison from recent work on enclosure in Britain). One of the great strengths of this study is that will launch many such questions for readers.
While it might prove too densely argued for most undergraduates and lay-readers, this book is a must-read for graduate students and scholars. It marks an important contribution to the study of reform and rural society in Russia, and anyone working on the period should give serious attention to Pallot’s findings and her methodological caveats. But it is also a valuable contribution to the broader literature on state-directed agrarian modernization projects and deserves a wide audience among those engaged in agrarian studies.

Notes


Three examples of works employing the “new paradigm” of rural history are Esther Kingston-Mann and Timothy Mixer, eds., Peasant Economy, Culture, and Politics in European Russia, 1800-1921 (Princeton, 1991); Barbara A. Engel, Between the Fields and the City: Women, Work, and Family in Russia, 1861-1914 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Jeffrey Burds, Peasant Dreams and Market Politics: Labor Migration and the Russian Village, 1861-1905 (Pittsburgh, 1998). A more comprehensive list of works fitting in this new paradigm would fill several pages. Works by James Scott that have influenced Russian rural studies include Weapons of the Weak (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) and Domination and the Arts of Resistance (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990)


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