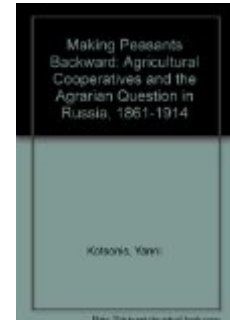




Yanni Kotsonis. *Making Peasants Backward: Managing Populations in Russian Agricultural Cooperatives, 1861-1914.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. x + 245 pp. \$65.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-312-22099-0.



Reviewed by Oliver Hayward

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This study presents succinctly (188 pages of text) the clearest and most thorough explanation yet available in the West of the failure of those ostensibly responsible for the welfare of Russia's peasantry to assist them toward the progress enjoyed by many of their contemporaries in Western and Central Europe.

In developing his analysis, Yanni Kotsonis (Assistant Professor of History, NYU) has made effective use of extensive archival materials in Moscow and St. Petersburg, as well as archives in the Archangel section of the Imperial State Bank and the Agricultural Society of Vologda. He consulted newspapers, periodicals, and serial publications of several Imperial government and private agencies operating in the decades up to 1914. Also utilized are many published monographs and articles on the subject, often by persons involved with formulating and executing policies ostensibly designed to assist Russia's peasantry out of its backwardness.

Following an introductory statement of the theoretical framework within which he explores various aspects of the peasant situation following

the promulgation of the "Great Reforms," Kotsonis analyzes the subject in more depth through chapters utilizing the following periodization: 1. 1861-1895, during which the "Great Reforms" were set in motion; 2. 1895-1904, as Witte attempted to strengthen Russia's peasantry as part of his overall program for modernizing the economy; and 3. 1906-1914, as first Stolypin and later Krivoshein made further attempts to enhance the position of Russia's peasantry. Chapter 4 ("Citizens: Backwardness and Legitimacy in Agronomy and Economics, 1900-1914") introduces the new set of forces which descended upon the Russian countryside: agronomists, economists, and "cooperators," the professionals charged with assisting the peasants in establishing agricultural cooperatives.

The final chapter ("Making Peasants Backward, 1900-1914"), utilizes the various themes from the first four chapters to explain more precisely why the promising programs ostensibly designed to assist Russia's peasants in fact for the most part conspired to "make peasants backward." No element in Russian society--the zemst-

vo nobility, government ministers and other leaders, the agronomists, and other professionals sent out presumably to assist the peasants -seems to have been able to escape the blinders created by their own prejudices and preconceptions in order to further the peasants' true interests.

Kotsonis' brief Epilogue suggests some of the implications of all this for rural Russia during World War I, especially its impact on the tumultuous years of 1917-1918.

Permeating the entire book is the overwhelmingly pernicious attitude toward the peasantry held by almost every group bearing some responsibility to assist the peasantry. Through extensive quotations from the writings and speeches of representative individuals, Kotsonis demonstrates this attitude to be a melange of the following specific assumptions: that Russia's peasantry were overwhelmingly illiterate; that they were particularly ignorant in financial matters; that they were therefore in unceasing danger of being exploited and misled by unscrupulous and predatory middlemen, and that they therefore must not be exposed to an impersonal credit market that could only be deleterious to their interests.

Based on these assumptions, the cooperative movement generally focused on bringing professionals down to the peasants in order to guide and protect them, rather than seeking to educate the peasantry and showing them how to more effectively manage their own agricultural activities. Many in the cooperative movement viewed capitalism as a form of predatory power that should not be practiced on or by the peasants except under the close supervision (*nadzor*) of agronomists and other professionals.

State officials, *zemstvo* noblemen, and agronomists and other professionals all vied to see which among them should conduct the peasants' affairs for them. Rarely were the peasants involved in the process even consulted on the chance that they might have some useful insights regarding how to improve their lot. Struggles for

influence and bureaucratic control took precedence over the interests of the peasants.

Perhaps most ominous of all, Kotsonis suggests, was the attitude with which the various groups responsible for overseeing the peasantry in Russia did so, with attitudes vastly different than those of their counterparts in other parts of Europe. While there were the familiar references to the backwardness and barbarism of peasants in European countries as well, there it was often in a context of the need to mobilize the peasantry into the broader population as a political nation. In Russia, in contrast, the presumption that peasants could not measure up to the requisite standards of citizenship, self-reliance, progress, and rationality produced not only a failure to recognize the possibility of "dynamic transformation of peasants, but often a caste-like reification of them and a justification of permanent administration over them, 'as if by a foreigner'" (p. 134).

In his footnote to this assertion (p. 218, footnote #117), Kotsonis notes that even in Poland, in stark contrast to Russia, "the integration of peasants into a national idea was the central issue in political movements from the early nineteenth century."

That a mass cooperative movement encompassing by 1914 one-quarter of all peasant households in Russia could nevertheless achieve so little in mobilizing the peasantry into a broader political nation is a situation fraught with ominous implications for post-1917 Russia. Kotsonis has made a significant contribution to our understanding of how, despite often benevolent intentions toward the peasantry on the part of many officials, professionals, and "cooperators," this dangerous situation was actually deteriorating still further in the last decades of the Russian Empire.

I would make but one suggestion for improving this study. The specific data on the extent and distribution of the cooperative movement in Russia that Kotsonis presents in chapter 5 could have been more helpful if presented much earlier, for

it helps better assess the merits of various proposals to make credit more readily available to the peasantry and thereby modernize Russian agriculture. This work is, in any event, a major contribution to augmenting our understanding of a crucial failure plaguing the troubled history of late Imperial Russia. Those who might have been able to help formulate a constructive response to the "Cursed Question" instead compounded and perpetuated the curse.

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