

Peasants into Bolsheviks?

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***Bolcheviks en Campagne* extensively documents the balance between coercion and persuasion in the Bolsheviks' treatment of the peasants. However, the author underestimates the peasants' agency and should have distanced himself more from the image of a backward peasantry, which the government used to justify collectivization and repression.**

Reviewed: Alexandre Sumpf, *Bolcheviks en campagne. Paysans et éducation politique dans la Russie des années 1920*, CNRS Editions Paris, 2010

This book is about Bolsheviks and peasants. Among the topics discussed are propaganda, cottage reading rooms, “the new socialist man,” and the experiences of rural cultural activists and cadres. The author utilizes the archives of many government institutions. The bibliography includes a wide range of printed sources, as well as repositories of photographic material and film. The author provides considerable information about the creation of local institutions designed to address the peasantry in one way or another. The author’s description of how local cultural activists and officials approached the rural population is stimulating, and historians studying these issues may also find the study of interest with respect to sources. The big issue here, which is addressed only somewhat obliquely, is the balance between coercion and persuasion in the Bolsheviks’ treatment of the bulk of the population, that is, the peasantry.

The author argues that the Bolsheviks created new rural institutions and a new intelligentsia, and deployed a discourse from above (*d'en haut*) that expressed a new language of power over the peasantry (p. 361). These conclusions are hardly surprising.

In summing up, the author cites the work of Sheila Fitzpatrick and Michael David-Fox¹ on education and social mobility (p. 366). In this respect, he missed an opportunity to map the careers of the Soviet rank-and-file “enlighteners.” A prosopography of these rural activists would have added something to our understanding of the dynamic at work. As it is, the study lacks the political edge of Aaron B. Retish’s *Russia’s Peasants in Revolution and Civil War*, which is absent from the bibliography, perhaps because it appeared too late for the author to consult it.²

The author employs the notion of “political education” to frame his approach but it is not always clear who was to be educated and in what sense. Hence the key issue of agency among the local population could have been more fully developed. Although the author provides a wealth of quantitative information about rural cultural and propagandistic institutions, he does not present a purpose for the institutions other than that of providing would-be party members and upwardly mobile enthusiasts a field of self-serving advancement. The Bolsheviks certainly did not provide peasants with much useable information about the party’s intentions or programs, and what was offered was in a form not very enthusiastically received. In fact, the authorities’ plans for the countryside were constantly in flux, and the peasants were never informed as to what taxes were to be levied or what kinds of success in farming would be rewarded or punished. Astonishingly, the author does not discuss the first mass Bolshevik newspaper for peasants, *Bednota* (“the poor”), which, in its heyday, was a chief source of official information about government policy toward the village. The paper was distributed free of charge from 1918 through 1921, as were most early Soviet mass publications. Circulation under those conditions reached eight hundred thousand copies per day in 1921, but when a price was put on the newspaper in January 1922, it fell sharply and only thirty-five thousand copies were printed in 1923, most of which went presumably to

¹ Michael David-Foxe, *Revolution of the Mind: Higher Learning Among the Bolsheviks, 1918-1929* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), and Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934* (Cambridge, Eng. : Cambridge University Press, 1979).

² Aaron B. Retish, *Russia’s Peasants in Revolution and Civil War: Citizenship, Identity, and the Creation of the Soviet State, 1914-1922* (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge, University Press, 2008).

institutional subscribers.³ The Bolsheviks eventually captured a wider readership with other newspapers but the figures on the circulation of *Bednota* indicate how little interest there was in what might be called “political education” among the broad mass of peasants.

From this vantage point, the author might have gained a better purchase on his material if he had kept the late-Imperial peasantry more clearly in mind. In 1920 over 57 percent of the population of European Russia aged 17 was described as literate according to the census of that year.⁴ These young people were part of the last generation to pass through the pre-revolutionary school system. They and their somewhat older brothers and sisters had had experiences outside their villages in the army, off farm labor, religious excursions and pilgrimages, schooling, migration and resettlement, trips to cities, and finally at least vicariously through reading about a world beyond their villages in popular printed materials.

The author presents much rich material about the peasantry, but the impression conveyed in the book is often of a mass of backward illiterate folk. This was the activists’ image of the peasants, which the government used to justify collectivization and the repression that accompanied it. The photograph chosen for the book’s cover of an ancient pipe smoking *muzhik* in a ragged sheepskin confirms this stereotype. A wider glance at the photographs of the period, however, reveals peasants in boots, hats, jackets, shirts, kerchiefs, and other items purchased from traveling peddlers or during visits to cities and periodic markets. Clearly “political education” meant one thing if those to be educated were dim illiterates and something else if they were not. Thus there may be less continuity than the author suggests between “the pedagogic dream” of the prerevolutionary populists and that of the Bolsheviks (p. 363). After all, the populists had sought to give the peasants agency, whereas Stalin certainly did not.

³ The newspaper’s circulation is listed in each issue, though there is no indication of the mix of individual, “collective,” and institutional subscriptions.

⁴ *Trudy tsentral'nogo statisticheskogo upravleniia, Statisticheskii ezhegodnik 1921* (Moscow, 1922), Vol. VIII, Vyp. 3, 34.

The author's concluding emphasis on the importance of a new political language is most meaningful with respect to the new administrators. Ordinary peasants remained marginalized in the Bolshevik strategy for Russia's future. Some systematic attention to the materials in the reading rooms might have clarified the evolving language of state power with respect to the local activists, their would-be clientele, and the idea of a "new socialist man." Lastly, a more thorough consideration of the changing language of power might have illuminated the role of these activists in the Stalinist regime's decisive turn toward brute force in its dealings with the peasantry.

Article published in [Books and Ideas](#), 13 September 2011.

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