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The 'peasant problem' in the Russian revolution(s), 1905-1929

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Henry Bernstein

Abstract

This highly selective paper covers some key aspects but certainly not all of the 'peasant problem' in Russia on the cusp of the twentieth century, in the revolution of 1905-1907, the revolution of October 1917 and the civil war that followed, and during the Soviet 1920s until collectivization. Among its concerns is why the Bolsheviks found it so difficult to 'resolve' that problem in the 1920s to the moment of Stalin's collectivization from late 1929. A brief conclusion offers some propositions about the then and there of the Russian revolution and the here and now of peasant studies (and politics) today.

Keywords: Marxism, peasants, populism, Russian revolution.

The agrarian question is the basis of the bourgeois revolution in Russia and determines the specific national character of the revolution. (Lenin 1973b, 421)

The agrarian problem in Russia is a heavy burden to capitalism: it is an aid to the revolutionary party and at the same time its greatest challenge. (Trotsky 1907, Chapter 2)

1 Introduction

The two centuries since Marx's birth are bisected almost exactly by the Russian revolution of October 1917. Probably the most fateful confrontations on agrarian questions between Marxists - and between them and others - occurred in Russia from the late nineteenth century into the Soviet debates of the 1920s.

A first preliminary is that the term 'Agrarian Marxism' to refer to lineages of materialist analysis of agrarian questions from Marx onwards, is an unusual coinage. Its only use I am aware of is for the research group of L. N. Kritsman in the Agrarian Section of the Soviet Communist Academy in the second half of the 1920s (Cox and Littlejohn 1984). Beyond this instance, are there ideologies or movements that identify themselves as 'agrarian Marxist' rather than aspiring or claiming to include oppressed rural classes within a broader Marxist analysis or programme, albeit sometimes its driving force as during the Chinese revolution? And whose conceptions of exploitation, class struggle and emancipation are principally derived from a 'proletarian line', as were those of the Bolsheviks?

Second is the particular importance of Russian histories to the formation of peasant studies from the 1960s, in which the founding of this journal in 1973 was a landmark; for example, the continuing influence of Lenin's *Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1973a, first published 1899) and the impact of the English translation of Chayanov's *Theory of Peasant Economy* (1966, first published 1925), together with, among others, the seminal work of Moshe Lewin (1968) and Teodor Shanin's remarkable trilogy (1972, 1985, 1986).¹ And there is the legacy of Stalin's forced collectivization from late 1929, which Marxists have too often avoided rather than confronted.

Third, this paper is highly selective in several ways, including its reliance on a limited number of works from the massive literatures in English alone concerned with key processes and moments of Russia's agrarian questions on the cusp of the twentieth century, in the revolution of 1905-1907, the revolution of October 1917 and the civil war that followed, and during the Soviet 1920s until collectivization. It is also selective in presenting an outline account of the Russian peasantry between 1905-1929, rather than attempting any detailed analysis of Bolshevik positions and debates on the peasantry. I provide, in effect, a series of notes, with inevitable violence to historical richness, complexity, and debate of evidence and its interpretation among historians of Russia and the USSR. For narratives of what happened when, and fuller analyses, readers must look elsewhere.

Both this framing and the selectivity it entails express an attempt to make sense of the Russian experience and its place within agrarian and peasant studies, not least through tracing connections - including the many tensions that reside in them - between, on one hand, socioeconomic analysis and, on the other, political hopes, dynamics and outcomes. In a short period of such concentrated drama, with all the surprises of its key moments, how contemporaries perceived (or misperceived) them and acted on them was key (see Shanin 1986, Chapter 5). A concluding section considers the continuing

¹ Both men were born in Vilnius, Lewin in 1921 and Shanin in 1930. Lewin lived in the Soviet Union from 1941 to 1946 and worked on a collective farm and in a metal plant before joining the Red Army; his later scholarly career took off in Paris. Shanin is writing an autobiography which, one hopes, will contain a full account of his youth in Siberia and Samarkand from 1941-7. The peasantry 'is still too often marginalized in accounts of the Revolution' (Smith 2017, 5), especially on the left, for example, in the 'centenary' volume by Ali (2017).

relevance of the Russian experience to the themes of this special issue, with all the differences of historical context between there and then, and here and now: the vastly diverse spaces of today's globalizing capitalism.

2 Before 1905: peasants, capitalism, revolution

[In 1897] at least four out of every five lived in villages; three-quarters of those employed worked in agriculture; 80 percent of army recruits were peasants. In purely numerical terms the peasants were Russia (Shanin 1972, 19).

My selectivity kicks in immediately, highlighting several key themes to carry forward. Foremost among them - and signalling probably the most general preoccupation of later peasant studies - is the impact of the development of capitalism on peasants. In what ways, to what degrees, with what effects - and what to do about it - were at the centre of the contestations of diverse strains of Russian Marxism and populism (and other socialist and anarchist currents). Walicki (1969, 12) suggested that populism represented 'the class standpoint of small producers (mainly peasants), willing to get rid of the remnants of serfdom, but, at the same time, endangered by the development of capitalism'.

In the population census of 1897, and the 'snapshot' of Russia's social structure it provided (Shanin 1985, Addendum 1, 57-65), peasants and closely associated categories comprised between 80 to 90 percent of a population of some 126 million. There was, of course, considerable diversity of peasantries across the vast expanse of Russia, not least by the ecology of farming regions, their histories and patterns of settlement, types of landholding, and forms of advancing incorporation in markets, as well as the potent effects of how non-Russian nationalities were ruled in the tsarist empire.²

Approximate generalizations are that while areas individually farmed by peasants were not much smaller in absolute terms than in France and Germany in 1900 (Shanin 1985, 141, though see note 6 below), they provided a precarious basis of reproduction as they were typically subdivided into many strips in a three-field system, used 'primitive' means of production, and, of course, were vulnerable to (often extreme) vagaries of climate. The size of farms shrank in places and times of rural population growth, which was rapid in the central regions in the late nineteenth century, and the conditions of peasant reproduction were increasingly subject to the pressures of commodification.

Serfdom was abolished formally in 1861: 'a conservative measure' through which the government attempted to 'have its proverbial cake and eat it' (Emmons 1968, 45, 47) - basically the same conclusion as that of Gerschenkron's detailed account of the complicated legislation of Emancipation and afterwards, which showed that it significantly reduced peasant land holdings in the black earth and steppe regions (1965, 730), and that the peasantry '*received insufficient allotments of land for which it had to pay a disproportionately high purchase price...actual allotments...were, as a rule, very considerably below the subsistence minimum*' (ibid, 742).³ Another factor that fed into peasant resentment was that emancipation was accompanied by restrictions on customary peasant use of forest and pasture on landlord estates. After emancipation the great majority of peasants, certainly in the central agricultural region and adjacent provinces, remained subject to onerous burdens of rent, of

² Russian agriculture was overwhelmingly grain farming, and the demarcation of grain-surplus and grain-deficit regions is a widely used convention (Wheatcroft 1991, 136-42). Fluctuations in grain supply to deficit areas and the cities are central throughout the period addressed here.

³ Unless otherwise stated, emphases in quotes are given in the original. The subsequent decline of the gentry as a *rentier* class, despite its Emancipation dividend, was marked by the estimated sale of nearly one-third of its land between 1877 and 1905 (Perrie 1972, 124 n3), especially to peasant communes.

redemption payments for land they were allotted by landowners through negotiations following emancipation, and of state exactions, adding up to formidable debt, pauperization, and famine of which that in 1891 was especially severe.⁴ Land farmed by peasants, especially in much of European Russia, was obtained from the 'peasant commune', *mir* or *obshchina* (see below) and also rented in, as noted.

In short, peasant agriculture exhibited low productivity and income, land hunger, declining *per capita* livestock holdings, and a growing 'surplus population' (Shanin 1972, 21-3, 93 for estimates of that 'surplus'). There are, of course, important qualifications to this stylized picture. Peasant land holding was subject to complex rules and the negotiation and conflict they generated within the *mir*, amply illustrated by Pallot, who also proposes the rationality of practices of strip farming and of periodic repartitioning of commune land (1999, Chapter 3).⁵ There could be measures of cooperative activity that accommodated it with the norm of individualized household farming (Figs 1986; Kingston-Mann, 1991), and there is 'unresolved debate' about comprehensive peasant pauperization (Pallot 1999, 2 n3). Wheatcroft's study of time series and regional statistics concluded that there was 'a long-term improvement in the major indicator reflecting the living standards of peasant producers, namely rising per capita grain production even net of exports.' (1991, 171), while Allen (2003, 29) suggests 'substantial' yield growth in agriculture from 1890.⁶

There were also important if uneven social changes among the peasantry, not least increasing labour migration (Shanin 1985, 72, 145-7) and growing if still limited education and literacy, both of which (often combined) contributed to significant generational differences and their political effects, including in 1905-7 and 1917 onwards (Perrie 1972; Figs 1991b, 393, 395, 401).⁷

A central issue in debates about the development of capitalism in Russia was class differentiation of the peasantry. This debate (that continued into the Soviet 1920s) centred on several key questions, if not always explicitly distinguished:

- (1) what were the forms and extent of class differentiation of the peasantry, and its trends over time? (and what were the best ways of conceptualizing and measuring it?);
- (2) what were the political effects of socioeconomic differentiation, notably for 'class struggle in the village' or countryside more broadly?;
- (3) what were the consequences of answers to those two questions for actual and potential routes to overcoming agrarian 'backwardness', and for economic development more generally?

⁴The famine had an immediate and major political effect outside the countryside (Figs 1997, 157-161), if not within it (Shanin 1986, 82). In this period Russia was a major grain exporter, as it is again today in different social and world market conditions. Between the early 1860s and early 1900s, grain production increased by 160 percent while exports increased five to six times (Hobsbawm 1987, 293), much of this growth from the ploughing of former grazing lands.

⁵A view not shared by Danilov (1988) among others. It is often remarked that repartition drove high rates of fertility (aiming for sons) to establish future claims on commune land.

⁶Allen (2004, Chapter 4) considers the North American Great Plains a more relevant comparator for Russia than western Europe. This suggests similarity in grain yields, but much lower labour productivity in Russia where farm technologies in 1900 were similar to those of North America a century before. He further explains the gap in labour productivity by Russia's peasant commune which 'acted like a giant sponge, soaking up labor by creating small farms' (ibid, 73).

⁷Lenin (1973c, 89) wrote of 'a new generation of peasants...who had worked as seasonal labourers in the cities and had learned from their bitter experience of a life of wandering and wage-labour'.

At the time and in subsequent scholarship, debate of the first question in particular was pursued through the interpretation of statistics generated by the *zemstvo* local government apparatus, from the 1897 population census (Shanin 1985, Addendum 2, 93-102) and other censuses and surveys.⁸ Two issues in any assessment of the Russian peasantry in the late nineteenth century (and of wider significance) are the extent to which poorer peasants especially relied increasingly on seasonal agricultural wage employment and cyclical urban labour migration for their reproduction, and the class character and practices of 'rich peasants', the usual English translation of *kulaks*. Shanin (1985, 156-8) argues that the term *kulak* (literally 'fist') was applied by peasants pejoratively to fellow villagers engaged in usury or mercantile activity ('bloodsuckers'), and not to richer, more 'progressive' peasant farmers, even those who might employ workers.⁹

The definitive Marxist statement of peasant differentiation, drawing on selected *zemstvo* data, was in Chapter 2 of Lenin's *Development of Capitalism in Russia* (1973a), where he argued the formation of a 'peasant bourgeoisie' (rich peasants), the 'allotment holding rural worker' (poor peasants), and between them a (shrinking) 'middle peasantry' rendered unstable by the advance of commodity relations. While Lenin's theory of the *tendency* to peasant class differentiation as commodity relations develop retains its analytical power, he was mistaken in some respects in his uses of (limited) statistics. Those mistakes included the methodological: the use of surveys at single points in time to deduce trends; the empirical: exaggerating the extent of differentiation; and the political: deriving the expectation of 'class struggle in the village' from a socioeconomic analysis of peasant class formation (itself flawed). Shanin (1985, 102) concluded that 'any realistic analysis of the Russian peasantry must take account of socio-economic differentiation and regional diversities [but]... should not overstate them'.

A central argument of Chayanov (1966) was that most of what was construed as class formation represented differences (in land farmed, livestock, agricultural equipment) generated by the peasant household cycle: 'demographic differentiation'. Shanin (1972) modified and expanded Chayanov in a model of 'multidirectional and cyclical mobility' of peasant households using data from the period 1910-1925. 'Only a multifactorial model can accommodate the complexities of peasant mobility, particularly in *conditions of growing market relations*.' (ibid, 117, emphasis added, and Part II *passim*). The outcome of Shanin's analysis was that 'centripetal' (levelling) mechanisms of peasant household mobility outweighed 'centrifugal' (differentiating) mechanisms.¹⁰

How did peasants feature in the political imaginaries of revolutionaries in Russia, especially populists of course? In his pioneering account of Russian radicalism from 1825 (the 'Decembrists') to 1881 (the assassination of Alexander II), Venturi (1966) showed that Russian populism was above all a product of the intelligentsia (a term invented in Russia), both resident, often in prison and internal exile, and *émigré*.¹¹ Walicki (1969, 26) dated the

⁸ For discussion of available statistics, their methods and limitations, from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s, *inter alios* Shanin (1972, 47-57), Kingston-Mann (1991).

⁹ Moreover, 'exploitation of the poor peasants by the *kulaks* appeared in patriarchal forms as well as capitalist ones' (Figs 1988, 16), that is, within 'traditional' structures of inequality in the *mir* rather than manifesting capitalist accumulation. Figs (1997, 232-9, 786-8) illustrates this by the fascinating biography of Sergei Semenov, 'progressive farmer and reformer', and his long running conflict with a conservative (and rich) patriarch of his village, which culminated in Semenov's murder in 1922. In Figs' view neither qualified as a '*kulak*' in the Leninist sense, but surely Semenov approximated the ideal of the 'entrepreneurial peasant' embarked on a path of technical progress and accumulation? Otherwise, *kulak* is widely used to designate rich peasant farmer by Lewin (1968) and Danilov (1988), among others.

¹⁰ For careful critique, both analytical and empirical, of Chayanov, see Harrison (1975, 1977b) and of Shanin (1972), Harrison (1977a), also Cox (1979). Both Shanin and Danilov (1988) discarded a specific element of Chayanov's model, namely the household producer-consumer ratio

¹¹ The social origins of the intelligentsia shifted over time from the aristocracy and gentry to those of humbler provenance, the *raznochintsy*, 'men of different ranks', including the provincial or rural intelligentsia often associated with *zemstvo* government as teachers, agronomists, medical practitioners, and so on. The Russian intelligentsia 'was less a class than a state of mind... [of] radical and uncompromising opposition to the tsarist

emergence of 'classical' populism in Russia from 1869, and suggested that, not by chance, it coincided 'with the first wave of the diffusion of Marxist ideas in Russia'. Hobsbawm (1977, 199) concluded that

Populism is not significant for what it achieved, which was hardly anything, nor for the numbers it mobilised, which hardly exceeded a few thousand...[but that it]... formed, as it were, the chemical laboratory in which all the major revolutionary ideas of the nineteenth century were tested, combined and developed into those of the twentieth century.

Even those populist intellectuals who embraced the peasantry most ardently as the saviours (in waiting) of Russia's future had no strategic conception of what peasant revolution might look like, nor how it might be pursued, other perhaps than facilitated by their own mission to educate the rural masses. Following the failure of the 'move to the people' in the countryside by several hundred mostly student activists in the 1870s (Venturi 1966, Chapter 18) and intensified repression from 1881, populist politics remained confined to small conspiratorial groups until the founding of the Socialist Revolutionary Party in 1901 (hereafter SRs), which then had a chequered history of internal differences and splits (including its own terrorist cells) and of influence in national and rural politics, over the next two decades. The so-called 'Legal Populists' of the 1880s and 1890s concentrated largely on socioeconomic analysis of capitalism in Russia and of alternative development policies; politically, from 1900 they broke from Russian Social Democracy and aligned themselves with liberalism and its future party politics (Walicki 1969, 170).

A central thread in Russian populism, albeit with differences of perspective and emphasis, was the peasant commune (here termed *mir* for convenience) as actual or potential basis for a Russian path to socialism, avoiding capitalism and its ravages.¹² Steinberg (2017, 175) provides an important reminder that 'the commune was not only part of the way peasants ruled themselves but also of how government ruled peasants - indeed, it was officially supported for this reason and many of its functions were the result of government mandates.' Gerschenkron (1965) argued that there was general agreement among the tsarist ruling class on the importance of the *mir* as instrument of taxation and bulwark of social order, which then began to fragment after 1905, notably in the thinking of Stolypin (below).

Marx's views were often sought by Russian radicals, including in 1881 by Vera Zasulich on the question of the peasant commune and its future. His reply has attracted much interest in peasant studies, and more generally. Marx indicated that the future of the *mir* following any prospective Russian revolution would depend on revolution in western Europe (Walicki 1969, 180, 182, 189). Whether he fully endorsed the widespread populist view of the *mir* as a basis for a future socialist agriculture remains contentious.¹³

regime, and a willingness to take part in the struggle for its overthrow' (Figs 1997, 125); see also Shanin (1985, 203-6, 211-3).

¹²For overviews of the *mir* Watters (1968) and Shanin (1972, 32-8; 1985, 72-81); Edelman (1987, 62-3) points out that many practices of the *mir* were also present in communes of so-called 'hereditary' tenure (non-repartitional communes). Shanin (1972, 168-79) outlines internal divisions of the *mir* along lines of wealth ('centrifugal' mechanisms, above) gender and generation, together with that well-known phenomenon in the political sociology of peasantries: 'considerable tensions in every community went together with overriding unity when facing outsiders' (Shanin 1986, 135). Decline in the strength of the *mir* followed by its revitalization in 1917-21 is a key dimension of the narrative of the period (below).

¹³ See especially Shanin (1983) for the various drafts of Marx's reply to Zasulich, and a number of commentaries. There was an acerbic review of Shanin (1983) by Desai (1986) in this *Journal* with a response by Sayer (1987); see also Hobsbawm's sceptical comment (1977, 198) and Walicki's observation (1969, 193) that 'the drafts of Marx's letters to Zasulich reflect the exaggerated hopes which both Marx and Engels placed on imminent revolution in Russia' (also *ibid* 180-1) although he confirms the impact of Russian radical populism on Marx and Engels (*ibid* 188-9, 192 n3, 194). For discussions in the context of Marx's interest in 'primitive' social forms and social evolution later in his life, see Anderson (2010, 224-36) and Stedman-Jones (2016, 568-86, 589-

Populism was completely rejected by ‘orthodox’ Russian Marxism like its founding figure G. V. Plekhanov (himself a former populist) and his leading disciple, the young Lenin, for both of whom Russia’s rapid capitalist *industrialization* was the key to its present and its future.¹⁴ This necessarily entailed the proletarianization of the peasantry and the destruction of the *mir*: the two motive fears of the populists and the core of Zasluch’s inquiry to Marx (Shanin 1983, 98-9). These consequences of the development of capitalism had to be embraced rather than deplored. However, for all the ferocity of Lenin’s polemics against contemporary ‘Legal Populists’, he admired greatly some of the earlier revolutionaries, especially Nikolai Chernyshevsky: ‘a utopian socialist, who dreamed of a transition to socialism through the old, semi-feudal peasant village commune’ but ‘also a revolutionary democrat’ committed to ‘the struggle of the masses for the overthrow of all the old authorities.’ (Lenin 1973d, 123)¹⁵

Given the focus of the ‘orthodox’ Marxists on capitalist industrialization, especially ‘the development of large-scale machine industry’ (Lenin 1973a, Chapter 7) which was so marked in Russia, their political attention was concentrated on the workers’ movement, which grew more important from the 1870s (Venturi 1966, Chapter 19), with increasing militancy in the 1890s, when the pace of industrialization accelerated, to the eve of 1905. From the 1890s onwards the Marxists had to confront, in socioeconomic analysis and politics, in theory and practice, the specificities of the development of capitalism in Russia, both its dynamism and its unpropitious social and political conditions (or ‘backwardness’): a mostly peasant agriculture (and population), Tsarist autocracy, and a bourgeoisie subordinate to it and unable to take on the ‘tasks’ of bourgeois revolution.¹⁶ The Russian Marxists had no detailed agrarian programme nor political presence in the countryside, little other than very general positions on the peasantry’s place in the democratic revolution against tsarism.

3. 1905-1907: the political (re-)appearance of the peasantry

In rough outline there were three principal areas of the peasant “revolution”: 1) the north which was distinguished by considerable development of the processing industries; 2) the southeast, relatively rich in land; and 3) the center, where land penury was further aggravated by the piteous state of industry. The peasant movement, in turn, developed four main types of struggle: takeover of landowners’ lands accompanied by eviction of the landowners and wrecking of their estates, with the object of extending the lands available to peasants for their own use; seizure of grain, cattle, and hay and felling of forests, for the immediate satisfaction of the needs of famine-stricken villages; a strike and boycott movement aimed either at reduction in land rents or wage increases and, finally, refusal to supply recruits or pay taxes and debts. These forms of struggle, in different combinations, spread over the country, being

95).

¹⁴ Nonetheless, Plekhanov and Lenin ‘provided valuable evidence about peasant indebtedness, rents, and tax rates’ and the economic pressures underlying peasant (wage) labour in agriculture and industry (Kingston-Mann 1991, 10-11). On Russian industrialization, including its financing by peasant taxation, grain exports and foreign capital, see Portal (1965); Shanin (1985, Chapter 3); Allen (2003, Chapter 2); and Hobsbawm (1987, 292-301) for how ‘Tsarist Russia exemplified all the contradictions of the globe in the Age of Empire’. Lenin’s attention was firmly fixed on class formation and political struggles inside Russia; he barely considered the international capitalist economy and state system until the eve of World War I.

¹⁵ On the inspirational Chernyshevsky see Venturi (1966, Chapter 5); on the significance of revolutionary populism to Lenin’s thought and indeed political personality Lih (2011); on Lenin’s battles against the ‘Legal Populists’, Lenin (1973a, Chapter 1); Walicki (1969, 165-79); Harding (1977, Chapters 4-7).

¹⁶ Trotsky (1967, Volume 1, 34) described the Russian bourgeoisie as ‘semi-comprador’. Shanin portrayed it as, in effect, a ‘dependent bourgeoisie’ in his elaboration of Russia as a ‘developing society’ akin to the contemporary Third World (1985, Chapter 5).

adapted to the economic conditions of each region. The peasant movement was at its most violent in the underprivileged central region; here, the wrecking of landowners' homes and property was devastating. Strikes and boycotts were practiced principally in the south; and in the north, where the movement was weakest, the felling of forests was its most common form of expression. (Trotsky 1907, Chapter 17).¹⁷

Perrie (1972, 128, Table 1) shows that the majority of peasant actions between 1905-7, of varying forms, intensity and violence, were directed against landowners. Nearly 60 percent of those actions were arson and others attacks on gentry estates, illicit wood-cutting and seizure of pastures and meadows: 'a major and spontaneous peasant war on the squires' (Shanin 1986, 94). A further 20 percent of actions were strikes, the large majority 'by peasant smallholders partly or seasonally employed on estates' (ibid 87). There were also many instances of direct conflicts with officials, police and troops.

The peasant movement 'was strongest in those areas...where the exploitation of the peasant renters by the gentry landowners was greatest, or where the severest hardships had been caused by the transition from renting to large-scale capitalist farming'. (Perrie 1972, 127).¹⁸ The main participants were middle peasants. Perrie suggests that where rich and poor peasants were more involved this was due to very specific local conditions (ibid 138; see also Shanin 1986, 85, 87). Only 1.4 percent of actions recorded were directed against those peasant farmers whose practices challenged the integrity of the *mir* by buying or renting land and establishing enclosed farmsteads outside the village (Perrie 1972, 142) - so-called 'separators'.

Shanin explores more fully the extent, patterns, and types of peasant political action in 1905-7 and their timing, including the effects of the annual agricultural cycle (1986, especially Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 and its useful Addendum, 174-183). He argues that the majority of peasant actions were both autonomously driven and aiming at autonomy, to obtain land but also liberty from oppression by the local state and to achieve self-management of the peasant commune: 'peasant rule' (1986, 99-119) to realize 'the peasant dream' (ibid 120-137).¹⁹ He provides examples on different scales, up to the 'Guria republic' in Georgia with its mostly peasant population of 100,000 (ibid 103-7).

A second theme of Shanin (1986) concerns the different social forces of late imperial Russia, the political ideas and organisations they generated, how they positioned themselves in the political turbulence of those years, and what they learned, 'unlearned' or failed to learn from the experience of 1905-7, especially its 'peasant war'. (Chapters 1, 2 and 5). Formally constituted political parties and other organizations now included the SRs and their various factions²⁰, and the All-Russian Peasant

¹⁷ Large-scale rural revolts like those of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were absent from nineteenth-century Russia, although there were significant rural disturbances in 1859-64, 1874, 1884, and again in the years before 1905. Wolf (1969, 52) considered the great upheavals of Razin (1667-71) and Pugachev (1773-5) as Cossack rebellions against state centralization rather than peasant rebellions against serfdom.

¹⁸ The Ukrainian provinces on the 'right bank' (of the Dnieper) were an area of large-scale commercial production of winter grains, potatoes and above all sugar beet, and agricultural processing (distilleries, refineries), and a major site of rural disturbances in 1905-7 (Edelman 1987). Although renting of estate land to peasants had not been widespread there, it became second in importance to wage increases as a peasant demand in 1905-7 (ibid 66-7, 80-1, 127-8).

¹⁹ 'Similarity of context bred similarities of peasant response all throughout Russia' (Shanin 1986, 111). That response was forged through continuous debate in villages: 'a grandiose and spontaneous effort at political understanding and self-education by millions of illiterate and half-literate villagers' (ibid 130). Albeit on some issues, like that of the tsar, there was a 'particular mixture of peasant radicalism and peasant conservatism (or caution)' (Shanin 1986, 125); the tsar, of course, was distant from peasant lives, as were more abstract constructions of democracy and constitutional change - what was closer and real was the gentry and its agents in the local state.

²⁰ This 'strange, fractured party' as Miéville (2017, 335) terms it. Kerensky, head of the Provisional

Union from 1905 to 1907 (Shanin 1986, 114-9). Both (unlike the Bolsheviks) were active in political mobilization in some rural areas, albeit without subverting the autonomy of peasant action according to Shanin's argument (1986, Chapter 4 on 'who led whom?').²¹ The Peasant Union participated in the Dumas of 1906 and 1907 - the pseudo-parliamentary forum stimulated by the revolutionary upheaval - which were dissolved by the tsarist government largely because of radical proposals for agrarian reform from peasant deputies (Perrie 1972, 154).²² Shanin's primary example of 'learning' from 1905-7 is Lenin who, he proposes, now significantly revised inherited 'orthodox' Marxist hostility to the peasantry, if in implicit and even deliberately opaque ways (1986, 151-7, 167-70, 279-305).²³

Shanin (1986, 137) concludes that 'Peasant did better out of the 1905-7 revolution than some other groups': 'rents did go down and rural wages did go up. Also most peasants' debt was cancelled by the state' (ibid, 197-8).²⁴

Repression and 'reform' were combined in the figure of Stolypin, Prime Minister from 1906 until his assassination in 1911 (Figes 1997, 221-32, 240-1). He gave his name to the hangman's noose ('Stolypin neckties') used by military field courts in the countryside, and also to the agrarian reforms from 1906 which aimed to demolish the *mir* through privatizing communal land and establishing peasants on physically separated, and enclosed, farmsteads (Pallot 1999, Chapter 2). For Shanin (1986, 247), Stolypin was one of the few in the ruling class who learned from 1905-7 but his programme of 'revolution from above' lacked support, and he failed to understand that 'one needs a corps of revolutionaries to make a revolution' (ibid 249, 250, and 241-50 *passim*). A later more detailed study by Pallot (1999) shows the range of peasant responses to the Stolypin reforms including 'everyday forms of resistance' (Chapter 6), and the challenges of assessing the impact of the reforms (Chapters 7 and 8), not least because many communes petitioned for 'enclosure' of their lands to protect themselves from aspiring 'separators', that is, changing formal land title while maintaining their practices of land management. According to figures given by Figes (1991a, 56), by 1916 between 27 and 33 percent of peasant households carried out their arable farming under private enclosed tenure, but they cannot have all been 'separators' given the communal 'enclosures' indicated.

4. 1917-1921: proletarian revolution and peasant war

If the agrarian problem...had been solved by the bourgeoisie, if it could have been solved by them, the Russian proletariat could not possibly have come to power in 1917...there was

Government(s) from July to October 1917, was formally a member of the SRs.

²¹ Peasant action included the roles of rural migrant workers, and soldiers returning from Russia's war with Japan (Perrie 1972, 136-8); Russia's defeat was another nail in the coffin of tsarist authority.

²² Lenin (1973b, Chapter 5) provided a detailed account of the positions of 'classes and parties' in the Second Duma debates on the land question. He believed that the peasant deputies favoured land *nationalization* which he argued was the most progressive measure for the full development of capitalist farming, breaking from the 'medieval' character of both gentry landed estates and peasant allotment holding through the *mir*.

²³ This is within a periodization of Lenin's thought by Shanin (1986, 283ff). Lih (2011) seems to suggest a fundamental continuity in Lenin's perspective on the peasantry as oppressed and (bar *kulaks*) exploited, hence a key constituency of democratic revolution, albeit with some shift of emphasis in face of the realities of 1917-21 (below). Harding's detailed study of Lenin's political thought (1977, 1981) proposes its major turn from his later analysis of imperialism and all that followed.

²⁴ In the 1890s the government responded harshly to the large scale of peasant tax defaults, but in 1903 shifted the burden of tax arrears from the commune to the individual household which, together with the abolition of flogging, in Wheatcroft's view did much to weaken its authority in the countryside on the eve of 1905 (1991, 167-70, 171-2).

required a drawing together and mutual penetration of two factors belonging to completely different historical species: a peasant war - that is, a movement characteristic of the dawn of bourgeois development - and a proletarian insurrection, the movement signalling its decline. That is the essence of 1917. (Trotsky 1967 Volume 1, 64)

Trotsky's two 'completely different historical species' may resonate an 'evolutionism' extrapolated from western European history (against which Shanin's work on Russia is directed), with the crucial foreshortening, so to speak, that Russia's incomplete capitalist development, proletarian revolution and subsequent commitment to constructing socialism brought in their train: the issue of 'stages' at the centre of so much Russian Marxist argument before and during October 1917, and in the transition debates of the 1920s. Less contentious, however, is Trotsky's view that 'the essence of 1917' was a (unique) combination of proletarian revolution and 'peasant war', a formulation Lenin had also used since 1905-7. Proletarian revolution has attracted more attention, especially on the left.²⁵ Here, as before, I focus on the broad contexts, contours and effects of peasant action in 1917-21.

Following the abdication of the tsar, the patterns of widespread peasant revolt of 1905-7 were resumed in several phases from February 1917 (again marked by the farming seasons), accelerating in scale and intensity by the autumn of that year (Gill 1979, 38-46, 105-114, 141-69). The map of 'rural unrest' in 1917 (ibid 158), as in 1905-7, shows its concentration in the central agricultural region and adjacent areas where peasant land hunger was most intense. One apparent difference with the earlier revolution was the higher proportion of reported actions, at 5.6 percent, against 'separators' (ibid, 154), those who had established (enclosed) farmsteads outside the *mir*. On this Shanin (1972, 161) further comments that 'The destruction of the enclosed types of farms should be treated as...[an] expression of the conservative (reactionary - one may say) strength of communal ties, rather than of class warfare...' (see also Figs 1991a, 56-61).

Shortly after the revolutionary government signed the Brest-Litovsk Treaty in March 1918 to end the war with Germany²⁶, the German army occupied the Ukraine, a crucial grain supply area, and other foreign troops invaded, supporting to various degrees the forces of White counter-revolution in a civil war marked by 'a level of chaos, strife and savagery that was unparalleled since Russia's "Time of Troubles"' three centuries before (Smith 2017, 161).²⁷ Having secured the end of gentry landed property through its seizure of land, Russian peasants were also major players in the dramas of 1918-21 albeit in different ways at different times.

The period of civil war included

...terrorism and armed struggle by Socialist Revolutionaries, anarchists, and socialists opposed to both Bolshevik 'dictatorship' and the return of right-wing dictatorship that the Whites seemed to represent; 'Green' armies of peasants who fought against both Reds and Whites, mainly depending on who presented the greater immediate threat to their autonomy; national independence movements across the empire; armed interventions by troops from Britain, France, the United States, and other allied powers; and a war with Poland. (Steinberg 2017, 97)

²⁵ From Trotsky's immensely detailed account (1967, first published in English in 1932-3) to Miéville's recent month by month narrative from February to October 1917 (2017). The thought and actions of Lenin, Trotsky and other leading Bolsheviks continue to be intensely debated on the Marxist left.

²⁶ Brest-Litovsk sharply divided the Bolsheviks and the wider Russian left at the time (Liebman 1970, 300-312). It has been calculated that as a result of Brest-Litovsk, Russia lost a third of its population, nearly a third of its agricultural land, over half of its industrial enterprises, and 89 percent of its coalmines (Figs 1997, 548); by 1922 its losses had been reduced to 3.7 percent of its territory and 31-32 million people (Smith 2017, 195).

²⁷ For surveys of the civil war Figs (1997, Chapters 12-14) and his pioneering study of the Volga region (Figs 1991a); Smith (2017, Chapter 4); Steinberg (2017, Chapter 4),

Initially the Bolsheviks had gained widespread rural support through their slogan of 'Bread, Peace and Land'. Hundreds of thousands of soldiers, not least the self-demobilized, returned to their villages where they often had a radicalizing effect.²⁸ The new Bolshevik government immediately blessed the peasant-driven land redistribution of 1917, in contrast to the prevarications of the governments from February to October (Gill 1979, 64-73, 89-97, 133-41)²⁹, and to the stance of the Whites in the civil war: 'The failure of the Whites to recognize the peasant revolution was the reason for their ultimate defeat... Whereas land reform was the first act of the Bolsheviks, it was the last act of the Whites: that, in a peasant country, says it all.' (Figs 1997, 573).³⁰

It was only after the defeat of the Whites, mostly effected by April 1920, that 'peasant revolts against the Bolsheviks assumed mass proportions' (Figs 1997, 681), in western Siberia, the middle Volga, Tambov province, and Ukraine (Shanin 1972, 147; Figs 1991a on the Volga; Smith 2017, 252-7). Those revolts variously or together occurred in opposition to conscription, to efforts to establish structures of Bolshevik rule in the countryside, and above all (and often connected) to the impositions of a state monopoly in food supply from May 1918 and forcible requisitioning of peasant grain (Figs 1997, 612-22).³¹ The end of the civil war was marked by devastating famine (Figs 1997 775-80), especially in the Volga region with its worst impact in areas of the most concentrated grain requisitioning (Figs 1991a, 268). The famine added a toll of some five million deaths from starvation and disease to those from combat and massacre, hunger and epidemic, during the civil war.

It is hardly surprising, then, that the end of the civil war (seven years after the start of international war in 1914) and its immediate aftermath saw a marked decline in the living standards of Russia's peasants. While they had seized control of arable and other agricultural land, including the enclosed farms of 'separators' (Shanin 1972, 151-2)³², this did not lead to any major enlargement of average farm size (ibid 153-4). Two other significant outcomes were a marked levelling of peasant differentiation (ibid, 156-160), and a revival in the strength of the *mir* (Shanin 1972, 160-1) from its relative decline before 1914 (Lewin 1968, 26, 85). This was due in large part to how peasant land seizures were organized and to the collapse of local government in 1917-21.³³ By 1921 'Russia as a whole had become much more "peasant"' (Figs 1997, 788, in an echo of Danilov 1988, 33-4).

²⁸ Desertion was also a major problem for the Bolsheviks at certain moments during the civil war (Figs 1997, 599, 680), although 'the Red Army was generally able to mobilize the peasants in the villages immediately behind their front lines (on account of the peasantry's fear of the return of the landowners)' (Figs 1991a, 178; also Figs 1997, 668-9, 681). There was massive recruitment from the Red Army to the Bolshevik party (ibid, 602) - 'the army proved to be a training ground for the core of activists that would staff the party and state apparatuses in the 1920s' (Smith 2017, 183).

²⁹ The SR leader Chernov, when Kerensky's Minister of Agriculture, 'favoured the immediate transfer of all land into the hands of the land committees for distribution among the peasants' (Gill 1979, 92) but was constantly thwarted. One factor deterring governments between February and October from embracing land reform was their fear that it would intensify desertions of peasant soldiers to claim land in their home areas (Smith 2017, 126-7).

³⁰ Smith (2017, 172) also emphasizes greater Russian chauvinism as the 'Achilles heel of White policy', and (ibid 183-197) traces the positioning of the Bolsheviks - whether principled or opportunistic - in relation to the non-Russian nationalities of the former empire as a key factor in their victory, and despite the 'loss' of Finland and Poland to political independence.

³¹ These 'peasant wars' shared 'many common features, despite the huge distances between them and the different contexts in which they took place.' (Figs 1997, 753, 753-8 *passim*).

³² There was massive reduction of peasant households farming under private enclosed tenure from 1916 (above), to less than two percent in the major agricultural regions in 1922 (Figs 1991a, 56). Danilov (1988, 142-153) seems to suggest that numbers of (*kulak*) 'separators' grew again in the very different conditions of the 1920s, but without the means to register (and entrench) private title made available by the Stolypin reforms.

³³ One imagines that this was one problematic reality, among many, for Lenin. There seemed no prospect of

5. 1921-1929: from NEP to collectivization

...the transition to socialism is conceivable in different forms, depending upon whether big capitalist or small production relationships predominate in the country... We must not be afraid of the growth of the petty bourgeoisie and small capital. What we must fear is protracted starvation, want and food shortage...(Lenin 1973e, 233, 237).

At the end of the civil war Russia was like a man beaten 'to within an inch of his life' as Lenin put it (Smith 2017, 263). To secure its victory the Bolshevik government deployed that bundle of measures known as 'war communism': 'an improvisation in face of economic scarcity and military urgency in conditions of exhausting civil war' (Dobb 1966, 122). Its 'economic crux' was 'the relationship with peasant agriculture': 'the Achilles' Heel of War Communism' (ibid 102-3). Grain requisitioning (above) contributed to a marked shrinkage of the sown area during the civil war, and 'could be no more than a temporary expedient' (ibid, 103).

The Bolsheviks emerged from the civil war with no coherent economic programme, and much of their politics in the 1920s was about creating a planned economic strategy, fused with the project of building a new state. All that, in turn, fed into and was shaped by struggles within the party leadership (especially after Lenin's death in January 1924), amid the devastation of the Bolsheviks' proletarian base by the civil war and its consequences (Lewin 1985, especially Chapters 8-12) and facing a suspicious, potentially hostile, peasantry.³⁴

War communism gave way to the New Economic Policy (NEP) from the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921, which replaced forced grain requisitions with a tax in kind of 20 percent of the harvest 'surplus' to household reproduction needs. Beyond that peasants were entitled to sell to cooperatives and private traders (who had flourished during the period of the civil war).³⁵ Cooperatives and private entrepreneurs were also permitted to produce and sell consumption goods in small-scale enterprises. In his Congress address Lenin (1973e, 238) concluded that in prevailing conditions, including the levelling effects of the revolution and civil war on peasant differentiation, 'It is our duty to do all we can to encourage the small farmer'. From 1919 Lenin had gradually 'worked out a new and more ambitious scenario: enlist the middle peasant directly into the socialist cause', thereby upgrading, as it were, the middle peasantry from its previous 'walk-on role' (Lih 2011, 175, and 172-181 *passim*).³⁶ In the Soviet 1920s a key factor was that the 'peasant question' and policies for agriculture were subsumed in debates about industrialization, which were entangled with the tortuous course of shifts and conflicts in the party leadership. Second, those debates were inflected by fluctuations in food supply ('the grain front'). In turn, both factors were embroiled with a third, the difficulties of establishing effective apparatuses of government administration in the countryside that also bore on, fourth, transition towards a socialist agriculture. Finally, all these interconnected issues were infused, to various degrees and in various ways, with (re-)emerging peasant class differentiation in the market conditions of NEP: the '*kulak* question'.

taking up the nationalization of land he had advocated so strongly in 1907 (see note 22 above).

³⁴The 'extinction of the proletariat' as Lewin (1975a, 6) termed it, producing in his vivid phrase 'A dictatorship in the void' (ibid, Chapter 1).

³⁵Tax in kind was replaced with a money tax from 1924 (Dobb 1966, 129 n3), which was reduced in spring 1925: 'the economic year 1925-6 may be said to mark the apogee of NEP...[when] official policy...was at its most favourable to the peasantry' (Smith 2017, 267). NEP represented a turn that many Bolsheviks were unprepared for, that Lenin struggled to formulate and justify as a transitional programme, and that, seen as a 'retreat', generated many tensions and uncertainties in the party, as Lewin emphasized (1975a, Chapter 2, Chapter 8).

³⁶At the Eighth Party Congress in 1919 Lenin had said that 'Soviet policy must reckon with a long period of cooperation with the middle peasantry' (Dobb 1966, 105).

The first factor was ‘the Soviet industrialization debate’, in the title of Erlich (1967, first published 1960). Erlich dated the debate from 1924 (after the death of Lenin in January) to 1928, following the expulsion of the Left Opposition, including Trotsky and Preobrazhensky, from the Party at its Fifteenth Congress in December 1927. Erlich helped to bring to wider attention the contributions of Bukharin and Preobrazhensky in the intense and wide-ranging debate which took in many issues, of which relationships between the demands of industrialization and peasant agriculture were central.³⁷ To simplify (drastically), Bukharin became the leading voice in favour of a continuing, and expanded, NEP that would stimulate peasant production, primarily through the provision of incentive goods.³⁸ He advocated ‘balanced growth’ and the priority of light(er) industries producing consumer goods (and agricultural means of production) over the hasty development of heavy goods industries (increasingly the stance of Stalin from 1928) - so-called ‘super-industrialization’. In short, Bukharin’s position hinged to a great extent on the terms of trade between agriculture and industry, and also entailed a gradual transition: riding into socialism on a peasant nag, as he put it (Smith 2017, 286). Preobrazhensky (1965) formulated a ‘law of primitive socialist accumulation’ (a term first introduced by Trotsky) which could only derive from taxing the peasantry ‘through the price mechanism’ (Lewin 1968, 152) to supply the industrial accumulation fund; he expected (or hoped) that this would be predicated on a growing peasant surplus product (ibid, 151).³⁹

As noted, the various moments of ‘the Soviet industrialization debate’ were heavily inflected by fluctuations in grain supply, and contending explanations of shortfalls (not least *kulak* ‘sabotage’). Before 1914, 50 percent of grain production and 71 percent of marketed supply was from large estates and *kulak* farms, which had disappeared by 1921. The number of peasant households increased from 16 million in 1914 to some 25-6 million a decade or so after land redistribution, with much subdivision hence reduction in size of holdings (ibid, 175).

After the famine of 1921-2, peasant living standards improved gradually in the 1920s as agriculture moved towards recovering its pre-1914 levels of output faster than industry. There was a favourable harvest and improved grain supply in 1922 (Dobb 1966, 154). Another good harvest in 1923, however, gave way to a ‘scissors crisis’ when ‘the terms of exchange between town and village were coming to be as bad as...during War Communism’ (ibid, 167, and Chapter 7 *passim*). 1924 was another poor harvest with recovery in 1925 but the shortfall in supply remained. In 1926 peasants marketed 17 percent of their grain harvest, and in 1927 only 13-14 percent (ibid, 214), with much of that sold through private traders rather than the array of different state procurement agencies (Lewin 1968, 184). When peasants harvested more and consumer goods were in short supply and/or prices

³⁷ The importance of Bukharin was highlighted by Erlich (1967, Chapter 1 and Chapter 6), and by Lewin (1968, especially Chapter 12); see also many of the essays in Lewin (1975b), and Cohen’s pioneering biography (1974), all of which explored shifts in Bukharin’s thinking during the 1920s; for another version of the debate see Dobb (1966, Chapter 8). Lewin (1968, 168, n 40) considered Preobrazhensky (1965) ‘the best work... written on the economic problems of the Soviet Union at this time.’

³⁸ Lenin and others had urged the need to provide incentive goods to the countryside during the civil war, but this proved impossible given the pervasive economic devastation, including destruction of communications, which stimulated a localized ‘semi-natural’ economy of farming and rural artisanal production (Figes 1991b, 388-91). Trotsky (1967, Volume 3, 29) later wrote of 1917, with specific reference to the grain supply problem, that ‘The problem of economic correlation between the country and the city... to become the central problem of the Soviet economy, was already showing its threatening face.’

³⁹ Generated by technical improvement of peasant farming (ibid, 151-2). Figes (1997, 789) suggests (with some exaggeration?) that ‘NEP witnessed a whole range of agronomic improvements which amounted to nothing less than an agricultural revolution’, including consolidation of arable strips and new multi-field crop rotations. Preobrazhensky advocated indirect taxation of the peasantry through the price mechanism rather than its direct taxation which he saw as politically more problematic.

unfavourable, rather than selling grain they could eat better, store it, use it for animal feed, or convert it to alcohol (ibid, 176, 185, 387; Smith 2017, 268).⁴⁰

After another poor harvest matters came to a head with the ‘procurement crisis’ of 1928, continuing into 1929, in a shifting political conjuncture that ended in ‘dekulakization’ and collectivization. Only by the end of 1929 was Stalin’s control sufficient to break from all previous party theory, policy and practice on agriculture through forced collectivization. The spirit and methods of war communism returned with a vengeance in the ‘chaotic, brutal and cruel’ implementation of collectivization, its ‘orgy of violence’ (Lewin 1968, 487, 490).⁴¹ Lewin’s classic book (1968, Part II), on which I continue to draw heavily, traces in dense and nuanced detail the debates, and shifts, within the party on the peasant question and the ‘grain front’ in 1928-9, in the context of party/state organization in the countryside, attempts at socialist agriculture, and the problematic of peasant class differentiation, the key themes to which I turn next.

The communist party’s ‘ignorance of the realities of village life’ (ibid, 82), reflecting its longstanding deficit in rural political work, severely limited its attempts to establish an effective presence in the countryside in terms of party membership and of local administration (ibid, 119-27, 188-92; also Shanin 1972, 151, 162-9, 180-97; Harrison 1979; Smith 2017, 298-302). Party branches were thin on the ground and consisted mostly of minor officials who were young, socially isolated, ill-paid and engaged in corruption and embezzlement. Thus when collectivization was launched, tens of thousands of workers and cadres from outside the rural areas were drafted to enforce it, as they had been for grain requisitioning during the civil war (Lewin 1968, 463, 500).

That the ‘countryside remained under-governed’ (Smith 2017, 297), and poorly governed, affected various attempts at socialist initiatives in agriculture. First, cooperatives which have been mentioned several times and were advocated by Lenin in one of his last writings. Cooperatives had been widely established in the Russian countryside for several decades, especially for credit but also consumer goods, and to a lesser extent for farm supplies and marketing (Klebnikov 1991), and attracted much interest from Chayanov among others.⁴² Lenin sought to rescue cooperatives from previous Marxist criticism (including his own, albeit unacknowledged), and to project them as an integral arm of NEP, especially ‘from the standpoint of transition to the new [socialist] system by means that are the *simplest, easiest and most acceptable to the peasant*’ (1973f, 468).⁴³ The purpose of cooperatives for Lenin was, first, to ‘educate’ peasants to be more effective agents of commodity production and circulation (within the limits set by the socialized foundations of the economy), and, second, to gradually move forward to cooperative farming. His vision did not influence policy in the 1920s, and by the end of the decade rural cooperatives were increasingly appendages of state administration, including in grain procurement (Lewin 1968, 93-102).

⁴⁰Allen (2003, 78-86) points out that compulsion on peasants to sell their produce was reduced by much lower ‘surplus extraction’ via taxes and especially rents than before the revolution (also remarked by Preobrazhensky at the time); that there were lower sales of all farm products, and not just grain; and that the key indicator is the ‘transaction terms of trade’: wholesale prices for grain and retail prices for non-food manufactured goods.

⁴¹ By contrast, Dobb (1966, especially 223-9) provides a brief and anodyne narrative of the abrupt shift to comprehensive collectivization, noting in passing, and in the terminology of the Soviet party, the ‘excesses’ of its implementation (ibid, 228). Lewin (1968, 476, 488, 494) points out that following Stalin’s injunction on ‘liquidating the *kulaks* as a class’, ‘dekulakization’ took priority over collectivization for many local officials and cadres.

⁴² The English translation of his *Theory of Peasant Co-operatives* (1991) is of a revised version of a book first published in 1919. Danilov’s informative Introduction (1991, xxxi) points out that its first edition was consulted by Lenin when he dictated the article on cooperation from his sickbed.

⁴³Lenin’s advocacy of cooperation represented ‘a complete doctrinal *volte-face*’ (Lewin 1975a, 114).

More political energy in the 1920s was directed towards the formation of collective farms: *kolkhozy*. The great majority were very small indeed, hence unable to achieve economies of scale and to demonstrate their benefits to peasant farmers (the hope that was attached to them). To the extent that political pressure could be applied and/or inducements provided, this generated the syndrome of 'false' collective farms, whose members continued to farm individually and/or hired wage labour. In some cases *kulaks* were active in ostensible *kolkhozy*, employing poor peasants (ibid, 113, 107-119 *passim*, 269-74). Danilov (1988, 78-9) gives a figure of *kolhokz* members in 1929 as under four percent of peasant households.⁴⁴

Despite his scepticism about the record of collective farms, as of state-organized cooperatives, in the 1920s, Lewin (1968, 199) concluded that '*The vast wealth of experience provided by thousands of collective associations of many different types was almost entirely disregarded, and was virtually lost to those who were destined to need it in the years to come*'.⁴⁵

Finally then to peasant class differentiation, dramatized by Stalin's explanation of grain crisis by *kulak* 'strikes' and his justification of forced collectivization as 'dekulakization'.⁴⁶ By sleight of hand this combined answers to all three questions about differentiation indicated earlier: its extent, its (political) effects, and its consequences for (socialist) development.

A different picture of the extent of differentiation, and especially the 'rise' of *kulaks* during NEP, is given in the accounts by Danilov (1988), Lewin (1968, Chapters 2 and 3), Shanin (1972), and Figes (1997). None denies the (re-)emergence of *kulaks* in the 1920s (a strong theme in Danilov especially, who deploys a Leninist approach) but their results show, in relation to the first question (above), that the 'rise' of *kulaks* was typically exaggerated by one side of the polemics on the peasant question, and possibly understated by the other side (Bukharinists).

In relation to the second question about differentiation: 'the *kulaks*, as a social stratum, never constituted a serious political force within the Soviet context, in the sense that they were not capable of organizing themselves on a wider scale than that of the village' (Lewin 1968, 471). This argument in effect straddles the second and third questions, in that the 'peasant problem' for the Soviet regime in the 1920s was (i) above all that of the middle peasant majority, as Lenin had recognized, and (ii) in both theory and practice, it was difficult to distinguish *kulaks* from middle peasants, especially their more robust or 'upper' strata. These two points are argued strongly by Lewin (1968; also Lewin 1985, Chapter 5), and 'dekulakization' campaigns quickly embraced any peasants resistant to government policies, so-called *kulak* 'henchmen' or 'ideological *kulaks*' (Lewin 1968, *ibid*, 494).

If the 'problem' was above all that of the predominant middle peasantry, this casts a different light on the third question linked to differentiation. The project of the (marginalized) Soviet agrarian historian Viktor Danilov was to retrieve Lenin's vision of a necessarily gradual and non-coercive transition from peasant co-operation to collective agriculture, which was systematically ignored in Soviet discourse in Stalin's time and for some decades afterwards (Figes 1988).

⁴⁴And less as a proportion of rural population as many were poor peasant households with smaller than average family size

⁴⁵With which Danilov, who presented a more positive picture of *kolkhozy* in the 1920s (1988, 291-302), would no doubt have agreed.

⁴⁶In the wake of several peasant risings following more stringent procurement campaigns, although mainly peasants deployed passive resistance and evasion (Lewin 1968, 393). With characteristic lack of concern for consistency, at the same time as blaming *kulaks* for the grain crisis Stalin claimed that great advances made by *kolkhozy* had prepared the mass of the peasantry to embrace collectivization.

Assessing the 1920s is a most demanding task, not least because of the brute fact of what happened, namely collectivization, and what did not happen from the many proposals in party debates before it. I can offer only a few observations, beginning with Danilov's commitment to Lenin's vision, just noted. Whether that was feasible, in conjunction with the imperatives of industrialization (however sequenced), is open to contention like everything else in the first decade of communist rule (though see note 48 below).

Knowing that Stalinist collectivization broke with all previous Bolshevik positions on the peasantry and agriculture, is hardly enough. As Alec Nove (1965, xiii) suggested:

There was in fact a real contradiction in the Trotsky-Preobrazhensky attitude. They believed in rapid industrialization, feared the rich peasant, and urged the imposition on the peasants of a price structure which would permit the state to accumulate and which would be unpopular. Yet they did not face the measure of coercion that would be required if this policy were to be put into effect.⁴⁷

There is a seemingly irresistible Pandora's Box of the counterfactual concerning Russia from 1905-1929, including 'If Lenin Had Lived...' (Lewin 1975a, Chapter 10).⁴⁸ Apart from such 'what if?' questions is that of 'what's left?' (Fitzpatrick 2017). One (common) answer is that the civil war inevitably resulted in 'defeat in victory' for the Bolsheviks (Figes 1997, Chapter 15).⁴⁹ Perhaps the bleakest assessment from the left at the time was Rosa Luxemburg's:

Dealing as we are with the very first experiment in proletarian dictatorship in world history (and one taking place... under the hardest conceivable conditions, in the midst of... imperialist mass slaughter... and accompanied by the most complete failure on the part of the international working class), it would be a crazy idea to think that every last thing done or left undone in an experiment with the dictatorship of the proletariat under such abnormal conditions represented the very pinnacle of perfection. On the contrary... *under such fatal conditions even the most gigantic idealism and the most storm-tested revolutionary energy are incapable of realizing democracy and socialism but only distorted attempts at either.* (Luxemburg, 1940, emphasis added)⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Hence Allen's reference to Stalin's collectivization as 'an extreme version of the Preobrazhensky proposal' (2003, 60, and further 101-2, 109, and Chapter 9); but see also following note.

⁴⁸ Other explicit counterfactuals include what if World War I had not occurred when and how it did? Could Russia have proceeded on a different path of capitalist development and liberal reformism (Smith 2017, 376-7)? What if Bukharin's strategy of the late 1920s (modelled by Chandra 1992) had been pursued? And most centrally for the Bolshevik leadership: what if proletarian revolution in western Europe, above all Germany, had succeeded and was able to help a socialist Russia overcome its inherited 'backwardness'? Allen's econometric counterfactuals in his model of the Soviet economy and its growth path in the 1930s (2003, Chapters 8, 9) concludes that 'the collectivization of agriculture - perhaps the archetypical Stalinist policy and the one that resulted in the most avoidable death - made only a modest contribution to growth. Modifying the NEP to include central planning, high employment and the expansion of heavy industry was a program for growth in capital, output, and per capita living standards. Adding collectivization to that recipe contributed little to growth and corrupted socialism.' (ibid 171) Allen's perspective, of course, implies Russian peasants as commodity producers responding to market signals (also the Bolshevik position), not as exemplifying a distinct 'social type' à la Chayanov and Shanin.

⁴⁹ Fitzpatrick is a review essay on recent book in these post-Soviet times with lucid insights into the historiography of the revolution in western scholarship. The only Marxist book she reviews is Miéville (2017) whose 'hopes are expressed in extremely qualified form', as she rightly observes. van der Linden (2009) is a useful survey and assessment of (western) Marxist debates of the Bolshevik revolution and subsequent Soviet experience (Chapter 2 on contemporary views of 1917 and the 1920s).

⁵⁰ From notes written in 1918 before her murder, at a time of acute distress; first published in German in 1922 and in English in 1940. Of course, Lenin was only too aware of actual and likely 'distortions', and sources of 'degeneration' of the revolution's aims and agencies, including the party, and that there was (too) much the

On the contradictions of the 'peasant problem' Luxemburg (1940, Chapter 2) first recognized that since 1905 the 'agrarian question... had been the very axis of the revolution'; second, acknowledged that the Bolsheviks had to accept the peasant-driven land redistribution of 1917; and, third - in wholly 'orthodox' fashion - feared the consequence: 'an enormous, newly developed and powerful mass of owning peasants who will defend their newly won property with tooth and nail against every attack.'

A contrary perspective to Luxemburg and the common Bolshevik view of peasants as petty commodity producers, hence agents of capitalism, is that of Shanin (1985, 1986) who did much to construct a generic theory of 'peasantry' by (i) adapting Chayanov's model of the peasant household and combining it with a similarly general model ('ideal type') of peasant community (albeit 'communal ties' could be 'reactionary', cited above); (ii) deriving from them what can be called a Chayanovian political sociology; and (iii) proposing Russia as the 'first developing society', thereby extending the lessons of its experience to the contemporary Third World. His conclusion seems to be that Soviet development could and should have incorporated the reproduction of the peasantry and sought to tap into the sources of creativity and dynamism claimed for it by agrarian populism. On the other hand, Danilov, with whom Shanin collaborated, believed that socialism could not be built on such a foundation. His study of *Rural Russia Under the New Regime* 'demonstrated beyond doubt that peasant agriculture stood little chance of solving the production problem and no chance at all of solving the deep social problems of the countryside' (1988, 304).

6 Conclusion: there and then, here and now

This conclusion picks up several themes from the Russian years so briefly and selectively surveyed above in a sequence of propositions (or assertions).

First, 'peasant societies' like nineteenth century Russia, in terms of the preponderance of peasants demographically and socially, no longer exist. It is now impossible to designate as 'peasant societies' national entities shaped only marginally by industrial production and urban concentration, and by other (non-agrarian) classes, whether industry is strongly evident within countries and/or for the poorest (the most 'agrarian', in effect) realized through their integration in international economy. Together with this is that 'peasant wars' on the kind of scale, and with the goals, of Russia's 1905 and 1917 belong to a previous historical epoch.

Second, today commodification has generalized and accelerated in every site from villages to the global capitalist economy. Peasants cannot reproduce themselves outside of commodity relations, which are internalized in their farming and other activities (not least the sale of labour power), and how they are combined. This prevents, or severely constrains, options of 'subsistence plus' - any significant degree of discretionary market involvement - followed by Russian (middle) peasants in times of market and other crises in 1917-21 and the 1920s, though other types of resistance, passive and active, hidden and overt, are pursued today.

Third, commodification has an intrinsic tendency to class differentiation of the peasantry, but is subject to 'many determinations' (Marx) hence displays great variation in its trends, mechanisms, rhythms, patterns and effects, which always require concrete investigation.⁵¹ One well-known example

Bolsheviks did not know, hence the inevitability of (serious) mistakes (Lewin 1975a).

⁵¹Including investigation of 'missing peasants' (to paraphrase O'Laughlin 1988), so often overlooked. Those who go 'missing' by extinction or migration, when they are poorer households, contribute to the 'centripetal' effect of levelling peasant differentiation (above, and Shanin 1972, 88-95) but, according to circumstances, may be a strong indicator of dynamics of differentiation.

is that of caste divisions which mark the formation of rurally based 'classes of labour' in India (see Pattenden 2016; also **Lerche and Shah in this special issue**) as well as classes of rural accumulators.⁵² Populist constructions of 'the peasant' either continue to ignore class differentiation or downplay/qualify it in the common interests of all 'people of the land' and the political project of uniting them. Moreover, the main class enemy of 'people of the land' no longer appears to be 'feudal' or 'semi-feudal' landed property, or even capitalist farmers, but is now held to be (transnational) agribusiness capital. A paradoxical effect is that after so great an expansion of capitalism, qualitatively as well as quantitatively, much agrarian populism today is more narrowly 'peasantist' in a departure (regression?) from Russian, and other eastern European, populisms of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries for which issues of industrialization (in transitions to capitalism) were central. The lacunae concerning rural class formation and struggle in today's varieties of 'peasantism' may reflect, in part, the identity of the main class enemy just noted, whose provenance is outside the countryside (and indeed the country), and - pertaining to the third type of question about differentiation (above) - the mutations or shrinkages of developmentalism in the period of neoliberalism.

Fourth, and by contrast, the second type of question about differentiation, concerning political effects, has expanded its scope far beyond peasant politics limited to the village or rural locality, as observed by Lewin (above) for *kulaks* during the Soviet 1920s, and also applicable to Russia's 'peasant wars' of 1905-7 and 1917-21 which were mostly local and spontaneous, albeit converging across great swathes of the countryside.⁵³ Today not only are there (renewed) experiences of farmers' organizations within wider political fields from the regional to the national, but also the claims made for *La Vía Campesina* as 'transnational social movement'.⁵⁴ This is a very different political animal than the conspiratorial cells of revolutionary populism in Russia or the village-centred politics of 1905-7 and 1917-21. Today's agrarian organizations and movements are hardly unambiguous, and virtuous, in their class composition and aims, as their more thoughtful advocates recognize ((Edelman and Borras 2016). Nonetheless, how they seek to connect with and mobilize around environmental and other social justice issues, and how they construct and communicate their discourses, gives them a political reach very different from anything that existed a century ago *and* much greater than any (Marxist) socialist counterparts today.

Fifth, one of the persisting tropes of agrarian populism is the strength, resilience and developmental potential of peasant community. This also goes beyond the hopes of earlier periods for the Russian *mir*. Marx's interest in the *mir* (above) did not identify any specific mechanisms and practices by which it might become a basis of socialist farming.⁵⁵ Rather, his interest was attracted by the form of *land* holding and management in the 'repartitional' commune. What is more significant, in my view, are cooperative *labour* practices in farming communities. Historical research on the *mir* reveals

⁵² Also relevant here is Capps' (2016) original theoretical elaboration of 'tribal landed property' in sub-Saharan Africa, which deploys a subtle amalgam of different determinations (and contingencies).

⁵³ As Edelman (1987, 160) remarked: 'If peasants acted cohesively...that cohesion did not extend beyond the borders of their settlements...In the fundamental struggle between outsiders and insiders, every peasant was some other peasant's outsider'.

⁵⁴ Prefigured in earlier hopes: 'It is up to the agriculturalists of the whole world... to unite for the sake of the welfare of the people - to defend society, to assist the State on its way to peace, and to uphold agriculture; that is to say, by growing food and by the character of their own existence, to fulfil the principal agrarian idea in giving the people, the States and the nations a firm foundation for a life of material and moral well-being.' (Central Office of the International Agrarian Bureau, Prague, 1922, quoted by Mitrany 1961, 143). This could serve as the charter of *La Vía Campesina*, apart from some traces characteristic of its historical moment in its reference to 'the State' and 'States', and adding today's emphasis on the virtues of agroecology practiced by at least a vanguard of farmers.

⁵⁵ The same applies, as far as I can see, to the writing of José Carlos Mariátegui in the 1920s on indigenous community (*ayllu*) in Peru as a basis for socialism, including his explicit parallel with the *mir* (Vanden and Becker 2011, 81-2).

instances of such practices that are suggestive even if they were not typical (e.g. Figes 1988 and Kingston-Mann 1991 cited earlier), and practices that are similar to some of those advocated by agrarian populism today.

An important consideration to bear in mind here was articulated by Figes (1997, 241): ‘Stolypin assumed that the peasants were poor because they had the commune...But the reverse was closer to the truth: the commune existed *because* the peasants were poor, it served to distribute the burden of their poverty...’. If so, this ‘survivalist’ logic fails to suggest a more dynamic (‘developmental’) impulse in peasant community - and perhaps the opposite? Further, if most (all?) rural communities today are marked by divisions of class (as well as of gender and generation, and so on), forms of cooperation, often dubbed ‘traditional’, can manifest hidden forms of exploitation (Mamdani 1987).

Sixth, to briefly highlight several other strategic differences between agrarian populism then and now. One is today’s ecological framing which focuses attention on farming and how it is done - a departure from, or at least modification of, the primacy of distribution over production argued as characteristic of Russian (and other) populism by Kitching(1989) among others. Another, somewhat counter-intuitively, is less emphasis on property rights in land. On one hand, ‘land-grabbing’ by transnational capitals is a major theme in agrarian populism today; on the other hand, the ongoing commodification of land, including ‘from below’, and its effects for peasant differentiation, is not. A third cluster of differences concerns the conditions of political action in tsarist and revolutionary Russia and those in which agrarian movements operate today (see Sinha in this special issue).

Finally, for subsequent generations of the Marxist left the long shadow cast by Stalinist collectivization, both intellectually and politically, leaves a serious deficit concerning imaginaries, programmes and experiences of a socialist agriculture - what it might or should look like, its departures from types of farming in capitalism, how it connects with other economic branches, how to achieve it, through which social forces. This also applies to other proposals in the Soviet debates of the 1920s which were not pursued to completion (or frustration), as noted above, whether those of Trotsky and Preobrazhensky, say, or, alternatively, of Lenin or of Bukharin and his allies. If the ‘agrarian problem in Russia’ presented the revolutionary party with ‘its greatest challenge’ (Trotsky, cited above) it failed to meet the challenge. That deficit concerning socialist agriculture has a major place in the troubled legacies of the Russian revolution.⁵⁶

It also throws light on the tensions of moving from political economy to politics. Materialist political economy with its strengths of socioeconomic analysis - including taking seriously issues of the productive forces, without reifying them - is the necessary but not sufficient basis for socialist politics. The route from the former to the latter entails many additional determinations and complexities, as well as capacity to confront the contingent, the indeterminate and unanticipated, and to change positions, that goes far beyond the comfort zone of class purism and other illusions.⁵⁷ In my view, the journey would be helped by critical engagement with the best of today’s agrarian populism, and the diverse rural struggles it addresses, rather than dismissing all *a priori* as equally ‘wrong’ and ‘reactionary’.

⁵⁶While there were, of course, much debated attempts at socialist agriculture elsewhere, for example, China and Vietnam before their turn to capitalism, Cuba, and Sandinista Nicaragua.

⁵⁷The capacity exemplified by Lenin, according to Lewin’s account of his last years (1975a), which contrasts Lenin favourably with Trotsky and above all with Stalin who was launched on a different trajectory.

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