

Peasants and Power in 1917: the Localization of the Revolution

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Abstract—This article analyzes the relationship between the peasants and the authorities during the Great Russian Revolution. The stages in the study of this problem are highlighted. When considering the mechanism of formation of power structures in rural areas, the specifics of sociopolitical associations in the countryside, which differed from those in the city, are revealed. The self-organization of the rural world manifested itself in the creation of grassroots peasant committees that implemented communal forms of popular representation. The organizing role of the provincial and district peasant congresses, which the peasants endowed with law-making powers, is shown. The reasons for the support of the peasants, both by community members and small owners, of Soviet power are revealed, the ways of its constitution on the ground are considered, and the use of power without justification of the traditional folk values is proved.

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The problems of historical research that characterizes the relationship between the people and the authorities in the context of civil confrontation is highly debatable. It depends on the ideological and political situation in society, as well as the state of the source base, methodological principles, and methods for analyzing social actions. At different stages of the historiographic development of the revolutionary process in Russia at the beginning of the 20th century, the priorities of researchers were determined not only by subjective but also by objective factors. The subjective circumstances consist of the ideological pressure of power-directive structures, the professional interest of historians, and the moral priorities of the social environment. The state of the source base, its accessibility to researchers, and the methodology and technique for processing the vast documentary heritage are phenomena of an objective nature that determine the representativeness of observations and conclusions. The main line of the development of the revolution, that is, its causes, course, and results, has been widely documented. The direction of the actions of the revolutionary flows, the most important component of which was the peasant movement, has been studied quite well. In the 1920s, historians drew attention to the presence of specific peasant organizations, different from workers and soldiers. In the 1930–1950s, we can clearly see the desire of researchers to unify the revolutionary events in the city and the countryside in

order to prove the existence of an alliance of the working class and the poorest peasantry as the driving force of the socialist revolution, acting under the leadership of the Bolsheviks. In the 1960s–1980s, there was an expansion of the problems of historical research: there were works devoted to grassroots peasant executive and land committees, congresses, and councils. At the end of the 20th century and beginning of the 21st century, the relationship between peasant organizations and zemstvos, power structures, and political parties began to be considered; and the sociopsychological motives for the behavior of rural residents in the revolution were analyzed.

The specificity of historical works of the 1920s–1950s was due to the need to fulfill the ideological order of the ruling Bolshevik Party, which sought to prove the legality and justice of its victory in the revolution. Party and Soviet functionaries, mobilized to the front of the ideological struggle, often falsified historical facts, exaggerating the influence of the Bolsheviks and underestimating the organizing activity of the socialist-revolutionaries among the peasants. The studies of professional historians who analyzed the Russian revolution of 1917 in the first decade of Soviet power are few and thematically limited. They primarily studied the agrarian

revolution.¹ This is due to the prevalence of populist traditions in Russian historiography; the decisive influence of the peasant struggle for land on the entire course of revolutionary transformations in the country; and a kind of unspoken division of the directions of historical research between the ideologists of the new government and historians loyal but not biased in favor of it. In addition, at that time, the concept of the presence in Russia in 1917–1918 of two revolutions, proletarian and peasant, was widespread. The forces were distributed in accordance with this concept: the working class and its vanguard, the Bolshevik Party, were glorified by the agitators, propagandists, and organizers of revolutionary violence; and historians tried to comprehend the peasant revolt as the leading line of the social revolution.

The “great turning point” at the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s, which marked the beginning of the emancipation of the country, led to a policy restrictions on research problems. The political opponents of the Bolsheviks in the revolution and the peasant organizations in which they competed for influence were barely studied by Soviet historians, and if they were mentioned, they were called counter-revolutionary. Foreign researchers of the Russian revolution of 1917 under the Iron Curtain were cut off from the expanding source base of the problem and were forced to make do with dilapidated myths created by participants in first wave of Russian emigrants. The tightening of the ideological dictate of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks) (CPSU(b)) led to a sharp narrowing of the source base of historical research and a deliberate limitation of their problems. Questions about power, self-government, and the activities of public organizations were forgotten. In the conditions of a kind of renaissance of Soviet historical science in the 1960s–1980s, the fundamental values of Marxist-Leninist methodology were not destroyed. The expansion of research problems and the creation of generalizing historiographical works contributed to the accumulation and classification of facts about the events that constituted the core of the revolutionary process. Analyzing the activities of grassroots self-government bodies that organized social actions, historians assessed them in accordance with the radicalism of the decisions of certain committees. The largest number of publications is devoted to peasant organizations created in the countryside after February 1917: volost and village executive, land, and food committees,

which encouraged the confiscation claims of communal peasants on the land issue.²

The systematization of the studies created in previous years made it possible to place a number of new topics in the study of Russian revolutionism.³ In the 1990s, original works appeared that not only deepened and expanded the general knowledge about the core of the revolutionary transformations of 1917 in Russia but also made significant adjustments to the established assessments of the historical significance of this global event.⁴ International discussions about the nature of the Russian revolutionary process at the beginning of the 20th century contributed to the expansion of research problems, as well a kind of convergence in the assessments of domestic and foreign authors. Together with the traditional ones, new subjects appeared that characterized the specifics of the peasant movement in 1917. The process of the formation of a new power paradigm in Russia began to be actively studied. The relationship of peasant committees with power and self-government structures was seen as a unique, although not fully realized, experience in the restructuring of social relations.⁵ The question of the reasons for the popularity of the socialist-revolutionaries in the elections to the Constituent Assembly, which made it possible to reevaluate the peasant congresses

¹ Agricultural revolution. Vol. 2: Peasant movement in 1917. M., 1928; *Dubrovsky S.M.* Peasantry in 1917. M.; L., 1927; *Chadaeva O.N.* Landowners and their organizations in 1917. M.; L., 1928; *Shestakov A.V.* October in the countryside M., 1925; *ibid.* Peasant organizations and the 1st Congress of Soviets of Peasants' Deputies // *Proletarian Revolution*. 1927. No. 5; *Firsov N.N.* Peasant revolutions of 1917 (until October) and the provisional government. Kazan, 1922; *Chernyshov E.I.* From the history of peasant movements in the Kazan region in 1917. Kazan, 1926.

² *Gerasimenko G.A.* Grassroots peasant organizations in 1917 and the first half of 1918 (On the materials of the Lower Volga region). Saratov, 1974; *Kabanov V.V.* The October Revolution and the Peasant Community // *Historical Notes*. 1984. Vol. 111, pp. 100–150; *Kostrikin V.I.* Land committees in 1917. M., 1975; *Malyavskii A.D.* Peasant movement in Russia in 1917, March–October. M., 1981; *Medvedev E.M.* Peasantry of the Middle Volga region in the October Revolution. Kuibyshev, 1970; *Sedov A.V.* Peasant committees in 1917: idea, organization, and status. Saratov, 1990; *Tyukavkin V.G. and Shchagin E.M.* Peasantry of Russia in the period of three revolutions. M., 1987. Ch. V–VII.

³ Russia, 1917: the choice of a historical path. (Round table of historians of October, October 22–23, 1988.) M., 1989; October 1917: the greatest event of the century or a social catastrophe? M., 1991; Revolution and reform: their influence on the history of society // *Modern and contemporary history*. 1991. No. 2; October Revolution. People: its creator or hostage? M., 1992; Anatomy of a revolution. 1917 in Russia: Masses, parties, and power. SPb., 1994; Revolution and Man: Life and manners of behavior, and morals. M., 1997; Great October and modern Russia. Materials of the scientific-practical conference dedicated to the 80th anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution. Nizhny Novgorod, 1997; Revolution in Russia. Controversial past and uncertain prospects (round table on the 80th anniversary of the Great October Socialist Revolution) // *Alternatives*. 1997. No. 3.

⁴ *Buldakov V.P.* Red Troubles: The nature and consequences of revolutionary violence. M., 1997; *Kabanov V.V.* Cooperation, revolution, and socialism. M., 1996; *ibid.* Peasant community and cooperation. M., 1997; *Kabytova N.N.* Zemstvo or Soviets: Russian power alternative // Samara zemstvo collection. 1996. Issue. 3.; *Lavrov V.M.* Peasant Parliament of Russia: All-Russian Congresses of Peasant Deputies in 1917–1918. M., 1996; *Martveev M.N.* Drama of the Volga zemstvo // *New World*. 1997; *Protasov L.G.* All-Russian Constituent Assembly: History of birth and death. M., 1997.

⁵ *Sedov A.V.* February revolution in the countryside. Nizhny Novgorod, 1997.

and councils, has been elaborated in detail.⁶ Considering the regional modifications of the Russian revolution of 1917, the researchers noted the significant influence of peasant organizations: ranging from grassroots committees to councils and congresses on state building.⁷ The study of these issues made it possible to identify the underlying causes of the systemic crisis in Russia, to understand the mechanism of the influence of the people on the authorities through public institutions,⁸ and stimulated the emergence of new original works that considered the socio-psychological aspects of the behavior of peasants in conditions of social cataclysms.⁹

The revival of the forums of agrarian historians at the beginning of the 21st century contributed to an in-depth study of the evolution of agrarian relations in Russia. Considering the socioeconomic aspects of the development of the village in different historical eras, the researchers inevitably identified the specifics of the behavior of economic entities that directly influenced the actions of the authorities.¹⁰ The experience of the influence of peasants on the authorities has not been sufficiently studied and requires a detailed study in the regional dimension.¹¹ Both Russian and foreign historians have resorted to identifying the specifics of the revolutionary process on the ground.¹² This makes it possible to trace how the original scenario of the rev-

olution changed, which traditionally began in the center and was carried out in the provinces.

The process of the formation of power in the countryside after February 1917 was complex and controversial. The forms of socio-political associations in the countryside differed from those in the city. There were various peasant committees (executive, land, and food), cooperatives, zemstvo services, organizations of the Peasant Union and the Union of Land Owners, church parishes, and rural societies. The peasant land community was transformed into a representative institution of the countryside. There was an expansion of the composition of the rural gathering; and the organizational and economic functions of the gathering of householders ceased to be the main ones at the meetings of rural societies. They were replaced by organized or spontaneous gatherings-rallies of the entire population, at which topical socio-political issues were resolved.¹³ In 1917, the community showed itself as a self-reviving structure, putting forward new organizational forms in the form of peasant committees to solve the current urgent problems.

The desire of the peasants to go beyond the boundaries of their territorial formation with their problems gave rise to specific forms of association such as peasant congresses. Various local congresses, class-corporate or professional in composition, practiced even before the revolution as a form of socio-political association, became widespread in the Russian revolution of 1917. Peasant congresses in the provinces of the Volga region were a significant phenomenon in socio-political life. They elected councils of peasant deputies, who, in accordance with proportional representation, had the largest number of seats in provincial public committees.¹⁴ The provincial executive committees, in turn, used the peasant congresses to strengthen their own positions in the struggle for power. The revolution manifested a new quality of peasant public associations: the formulation and solution of issues of the political organization of society throughout the country. Rural assemblies and volost assemblies, as well as provincial and district peasant congresses, actively discussed issues of attitude towards the Provisional Government, forms of state power and property, war, and peace. They did not confine themselves to expressing their opinion on these issues, but made decisions of a fundamental nature, which envisaged practical actions to implement the political ideals that had developed among the peasantry. Of course, the socio-political activity of the peasantry was aimed at achieving the age-old desire for land and freedom.

⁶ Protasov L.G. *People of the Constituent Assembly: a portrait in the interior of the era.* M., 2008.

⁷ Gerasimenko G.A. *People and power.* 1917. M., 1995; Kabytova N.N. *The power and society of the Russian provinces in the revolution of 1917.* Samara, 2002; Kabytov P.S. and Kurskov N.A. *The Second Russian Revolution: the Struggle for Democracy in the Middle Volga in Research, Documents, and Materials (1917–1918).* Samara, 2005; Simonova E.V. *Revolutionary Process in the Regional Dimension: Society, Parties, and Power in 1917–First Half of 1918.* Tula, 2017; Tropov I.A. *The evolution of local government bodies in Russia (1917–1920s).* SPb., 2011.

⁸ Danilov V.N. and Kabytova N.N. *Transformation of the institutional structure of the regions of the Volga region in 1917: driving forces and stages of the process // Bulletin of the Volgograd State University. Series 4. Story. Regional studies. International relationships.* 2017. T.22. No. 6.

⁹ Lyukshin D.I. *The Second Russian Troubles: The Peasant Dimension.* M., 2006; *ibid.* *Communards involuntarily: communal revolution from the drama of the second Russian troubles.* Kazan, 2017; Sukhova O.A. *Ten myths of the peasant consciousness.* M., 2008.

¹⁰ See, for example, Kabytova N.N. *Reboot of rural self-government in the Russian Revolution of 1917; Romanchenko V.Ya. Peasant revolution and dual power in the Russian countryside (spring–autumn 1917); Bezgin V.B. Peasant peace in the revolution of 1917 (based on the materials of the Tambov province) // Yearbook on the agrarian history of Eastern Europe.* 2017: *Forms of land ownership and land use systems, rural management, and self-government in the agrarian history of Russia in the 10th–21st centuries.* M.; Bryansk, 2018, pp. 139–168.

¹¹ *Agrarian history of the XX century: historiography and sources.* Samara, 2014. Section 3. *Regional agrarian historiography.*

¹² Characteristics of foreign literature are given in the article *Badcock Sarah.* *Rewriting the history of the Russian revolution // Domestic history.* 2007. 34, pp. 103–112.

¹³ Kabanov V.V. *Cooperation, revolution, and socialism* M., 1996. P. 79.

¹⁴ Kabytova N.N. *Power and peasant congresses in 1917 // Samara zemsky collection.* Samara, 2008. No. 1 (17). P. 64.

Carrying out democratic transformations in local government, the Provisional Government initially sought to preserve the organs of the tsarist administration and local self-government in volosts and villages. However, under the conditions of the revolution, this proved impossible. The peasants, on their own initiative, began to organize new self-government bodies, which revived the communal norms and traditions that had been forgotten under the pressure of the tsarist administration. They restored all links of rural self-government. All householders gathered at rural gatherings, and not just ten yard workers (one delegate from ten peasant households), as happened with the introduction of the institute of zemstvo chiefs.¹⁵ First, peasant soldiers, and then all women, received the right to participate in village meetings. To realize their demands in the revolution, the peasants created public executive committees, which were elected at peasant gatherings and congresses. The attitude of the Provisional Government to the committees that arose most often on the initiative of the peasants themselves was ambivalent. It may have preferred to do without unauthorized organizations, but in the conditions of the development of the revolution it was compelled to put up with them. The developments of jurists on the gradual democratization of the state and social system under the control of the Provisional Government were not applied in the specific Russian reality.

There was no uniformity in the formation and activities of the executive committees. The rural and volost peasant committees were elected in various ways. The village committees were most often elected by the peasants at meetings initially according to the old rules, simply because the new ones had not yet been developed. Later, when new instructions for organizing power appeared, and visiting agitators launched their propaganda activities, new forms of social organization began to be used in the countryside: universal, equal, and direct elections were used, most often by open voting. In the volost peasant committees, elections were held by representation from a certain number of residents. They elected delegates from settlements and villages or from village committees, if they had already been formed at gatherings and meetings. Committees were also formed at volost congresses from among the delegates.¹⁶ In March–April 1917, extraordinary provincial and district zemstvo assemblies met to express support for the Provisional Government and claim participation in the construction of new power structures. Due to the fact that zemstvos were left in the vast majority in the old composition¹⁷, they failed to sufficiently influence the composition of the volost and rural executive committees.

¹⁵Central State Archive of the Samara Region (TSASO). Fund (F.) 820. D. 1. V. 5. P. 48.

¹⁶TSASO. F. 820. D. 1. V. 5. P. 69.

¹⁷State archive of Ulyanovsk oblast (SAUO). F. 46. D. 2. V. 886. P. 10.

All new organizations considered it their task to develop rules and instructions for organizing local authorities. For this, special congresses of both public committees and commissars of the Provisional Government were convened. On the initiative and under the leadership of the socialist-revolutionaries and various zemstvos, cooperative and other organizations where they served, peasant congresses also met. They necessarily developed the norms of peasant representation in the structures of local government and self-government.¹⁸ The provisional government was unable to prevent the process of peasant law-making in the field of rural self-government, and therefore tried to take it under its control. By a decree of March 19, 1917, it recognized only volost committees, while rural ones continued to be considered illegal.¹⁹

Provincial and district commissars, who carried out the instructions of the government, could not manage structures that they considered illegitimate. As a result, village executive committees acted in the interests of the community that elected them, and not according to the instructions of the authorities. Volost executive committees were included by the Provisional Government in the local government system, but the rules and norms for their functioning were developed by public committees, congresses, councils in each province, and sometimes even the district, independently. In March 1917, on the initiative of the peasants in the Volga region, volost and rural executive committees were created everywhere. The provisional government forced the provincial commissars to organize control by the district commissars over their activities. The Ministry of the Interior sent instructions to the localities on the need to coordinate the actions of the volost committees with the orders of the provincial commissars of the Provisional Government and the decisions of the provincial and district executive committees.²⁰

In order to complete the institutionalization of local authorities, the volost executive committees were included in the system of administrative management within the territory of the volost. The first Volga Regional Congress of executive committees, which opened on May 27, 1917, adopted a resolution defining the rights and obligations of the volost executive committees. The rights of the volost executive committees confirmed the status assigned to them by the Provisional Government:

“1. The power of the volost committees extends throughout the entire territory of the volost.

2. Volost committees have the right to manage the administrative, economic, and cultural activities of the volost.

¹⁸State archive of Saratov oblast (SASO). F. 5.D. 1. V. 3870. P. 4.

¹⁹TSASO. F. 820. D. 1. V. 5. P. 34.

²⁰National Archives of the Republic of Tatarstan (NART). F. 983. D. 1. V. 16, pp. 3–5.

3. The volost committee elects the presidium and the volost commissar.

4. The volost committee controls the activities of organizations subordinate to it (village committees)."²¹

The mechanism for the implementation of these rights had not been developed. When listing the duties of the volost executive committees, the drafters of the document also limited themselves to calls for the implementation of the general instructions of the Provisional Government:

"1. The volost committees actively support the Provisional Government.

2. They contribute to strengthening the new system in every way.

3. Preparations for the elections to the Constituent Assembly.

4. Volost committees are subordinate to district executive committees. They prepare the budgets for income and expenses. They review and approve the reports of all institutions subordinate to them. They take on and dismiss officials. They execute the orders of the highest authorities."²²

In order to fulfill even the most general obligations to organize governance in rural areas, it was necessary to resolve the issue of financing volost committees. The Provisional Government had repeatedly debated this issue. Wishing to tie the peasant organizations more closely to the local administrative structures of the Provisional Government, some officials insisted on their state support. However, the funds of the Treasury were not sufficient even for the financial support of the provincial committees, which, together with the district committees, for the most part retained the status of public organizations. Therefore, not only rural but also volost committees were maintained through a system of self-taxation. Before the revolution, rural self-taxation had a class form of secular dues and it was extended to the allotment lands of peasants. During the transformation of self-government, the peasants demanded that such fees be extended to all landowners, industrialists, and church lands. "The content of the volost committees is covered by the volost funds. From now on, volost committees are granted the right to charge fees, on the same terms, from state, rural, bank, private, monastic, and church lands, as well as commercial and industrial enterprises, which were not previously subject to these fees."²³ Such a system of maintenance took the rural self-government bodies out of the system of administrative power. Rural and volost committees, in conditions of financial independence, claimed freedom of action and chose among a variety of socio-political structures those that declared their support for peasant demands in the revolution.

²¹TSASO. F. 820. D. 1. V. 5. P. 341.

²²TSASO. F. 820. D. 1. V. 5. P. 342.

²³TSASO. F. 813. D. 1. V. 13. P. 19.

In 1917, peasant congresses assumed a decisive role in regulating the relationship between the local administration of the Provisional Government and self-government bodies and other public organizations. At the all-Russian, provincial, district peasant congresses, the whole range of issues of the revolutionary period was discussed. Being the most representative mass public associations, the peasant congresses initiated changes in the party and social composition of the provincial and district administration of the Provisional Government. They developed rules for the organization of power, self-government, and agrarian relations. At the peasant congresses, heated discussions flared up on all political issues, during which delegates from peasant societies opposed the organizers from political parties. The first provincial peasant congresses took on a law-making mission, developing and approving instructions for the formation of self-government, as well as its interaction with the local administration for the transition period.²⁴ By democracy, the peasant congress delegates generally understood the norms of customary communal law. Discussing questions of the organization of local government, they sought to separate the grass-roots peasant committees from the bodies of the local administration of the Provisional Government.

The April crisis of the Provisional Government led, as is well known, to the creation of a new coalition. This event was assessed differently by socio-political forces in the center and provinces. The Bolsheviks, who were not represented in the new Provisional Government, continued to sharply criticize its policies. They reproached the socialist ministers and the party to which they belonged for betraying the interests of the working socialist ministers. Lenin assessed the agreement, reached with difficulty between the Provisional Government and the Executive Committee of the Petrograd Soviet, as the beginning of the "honeymoon of the marriage of the socialists, socialist-revolutionaries, and Mensheviks with the bourgeoisie in the coalition government."²⁵ However, the situation was not as favorable as it appeared to the Bolsheviks. Peasant congresses, held in May 1917, expressed support for the Provisional Government, but far from unconditional support.²⁶ At rural gatherings and volost assemblies, as well as district and provincial congresses, instructions were drawn up for delegates elected to the All-Russian Peasant Congress. In these orders, a number of political conditions were put forward. Soviet historiography was dominated by a nega-

²⁴See, for example, the minutes of the meetings of the peasant section of the Council of Soldiers, Workers, and Peasants' Deputies of Kazan Province. Kazan, 1917; Resolutions of the First Congress of Peasants' Delegates of Samara District of Samara Province. Samara, 1917.

²⁵*Lenin V.I.* State and Revolution // Full. coll. op. Vol. 33. P. 13.

²⁶Protocols of the second Samara provincial peasant congress from May 20 to June 6, 1917 and Protocols of the provincial all-class congress from May 28 to June 6, 1917 Samara, 1917. P. 11.

tive Leninist assessment of the entry of socialists into power both in the center and in the localities. It consisted in the assertion that “official seats, which were previously given preferentially to the Black Hundred, were offered to the Kadets, Mensheviks, and Socialist Revolutionaries.”²⁷ Meanwhile, in places where the pressure of the revolutionary masses was felt more strongly, various resolutions were adopted not only on land but also on power, which ran counter to the political line of the central leadership. And the developers of the confiscation-radical projects on the agrarian issue were the Socialist Revolutionaries.

While recognizing the Provisional Government, in matters of local government, the peasant congresses disagreed with it in determining the powers of the organs of power and self-government. They acted as organizers of the councils of peasant deputies, who became the actual leaders of the volost and rural executive committees. The “cult of popular election” surprisingly quickly established itself in the public mind and the belief that under “the new law, the will of the people ... is the highest law of the country and there is no control over the decision of the people’s rule.”²⁸ The government and the people diverged significantly in the forms of implementation of the people’s rule.

Among the main factors of the national crisis in Russia, the agrarian question by the autumn of 1917 came to the fore. The peasant Black Repartition took on an unprecedented scale and determined the relationship between power and society both in the countryside and in the city. This was due not only to the numerical superiority of the peasant population but also to the peculiarities of the functioning of the national economy. The aggravation of the food problem directly influenced the course of the social revolution and polarized the political forces of society. Peasant uprisings directed against the grain monopoly declared by the Provisional Government developed into real uprisings against government troops sent to the countryside to restore order. The redistribution of property, and hence the power in rural areas, was taken up by grass-roots peasant committees, which got out of control not only of the local administration but also of the soviets. Peasant congresses began to be regarded by local administrative structures as organizing associations capable of somehow stabilizing the situation in the countryside. During the preparations for the elections to the Constituent Assembly, the Socialist-Revolutionaries had a clear organizational advantage over other political parties. The Provisional Government entrusted the zemstvo institutions with all organizational arrangements for the preparation and conduct of elections to the Constituent Assembly

in rural areas. Zemstvos formed constituencies, prepared voter lists, registered candidates for deputies from parties and associations, and created precinct election commissions. The developers of laws on local self-government were well aware that “in Russia, which contained many millions of peasants, the composition of the Constituent Assembly depended on the elections to the volost zemstvo.”²⁹ The volost zemstvos also had to overcome the dictates of the communal peasants, united in grassroots executive and land committees and elected according to the class principle.

According to the law on the election of zemstvo members, all citizens who had reached the age of twenty, lived in the volost, owned property there, and were in the zemstvo or other local services, could run for office. Thus, estate representation was replaced by general democratic elections. As a result, not only community members but also farmers, ranchers, landowners, clergymen, employees, and merchants took part in them. However, even in the southeastern, more prosperous regions of the Volga region, it was not possible to overcome the communal revolution syndrome in the context of the growing national crisis. The people’s ideas attracted not only communal peasants but also all small proprietors in the countryside and towns, many zemstvo employees, and city self-governments. Elections of volost zemstvos, which began in August, were held until the end of 1917, but most of them took place in September-October. This was due to the difficulties in implementing organizational preelection activities in rural areas. In addition, the communal peasants, who so successfully implemented their demands through grassroots committees, were highly suspicious of the reform of self-government carried out by the Provisional Government. The peasants adhered to archaic forms of self-organization and representation in power structures from the very beginning of the revolution; their priorities did not change during the elections of volost zemstvos. Although the organizers of the election campaign gave assurances that “the countryside approached the elections responsibly, putting up a large number of candidates for the elections,”³⁰ there were numerous reports that “the population was indifferent to them or were opposed to them.”³¹

The desire of the Provisional Government to unify the bodies of local self-government in a huge multinational country, not taking into account the peculiarities of the self-organization of the peoples who inhabited it, did not contribute to the success of the transformations. On October 9, 1917, the Cheboksary district commissar noted in a memorandum addressed to the Kazan provincial commissar that “there were no

²⁹State Archive of the Russian Federation (SARF). F. 1811. D. 1. V. 67. P. 3.

³⁰The People’s Daily. Penza. 1917. 26 July.

³¹State Archive of Penza Oblast (SAPO). F. 206. D. V. C. 45. P. 32.

²⁷Lenin V.I. State and Revolution // Full. coll. op. Vol. 33. P. 30.

²⁸Red archive. M., 1926. Vol. 2. P. 40.

difficulties in compiling voter lists, with the exception of Muslim districts, which refused to give information about the female half of the population In the absence of a class or political struggle, candidate lists were drawn up either by each village or a group of villages ... The Muslim population refused to take part in a secret and equal vote and chose the members by open voting.³² The district zemstvos, under the auspices of provincial zemstvos, tried to overcome the negative attitude of the peasants towards the reforms imposed on them from above. The populist parties and unions organized various kinds of agitation and propaganda courses, “sending students and female students to the zemstvos, cooperatives, and other organizations”³³ from Moscow and local “representatives of the s-d, n-d, c-d, and s-r parties.”³⁴ For example, the course curriculum developed by the Saratov Society of People’s Universities included the following questions: “(1) According to local self-government.... (2) Synopsis of the Constituent Assembly (3) Is it possible to live without a king?.... (4) Organization of rural society (5) Local construction.”³⁵

The zemstvo officials, who were “entirely from the democratic element,” managed to compromise themselves in the eyes of the peasants, condemning their “forcible seizure” of other people’s property.³⁶ During the elections of the volost zemstvos, the peasants preferred candidates not from parties and unions, public organizations, or zemstvo institutions but representatives from among themselves. Assessing the interim results of the elections in the Samara province, the zemstvo officials bitterly stated: “The elections must be recognized as unsuccessful. The predominant element consists of prosperous peasants, who are uncultured and illiterate. There are very few intellectuals... The concept of zemstvos is poorly understood by the population....”³⁷ According to the organizers of the elections, in some volosts, “the composition of the members is good, mostly intellectuals, among whom a significant part are teachers, veterinarians, agents, and others.” At the same time, “almost everywhere there was an irresponsible attitude towards the elections There were cases when village clerks ... indicated to voters that they could only vote for the proposed list, although this went against the will of the voter.”³⁸ “In some volosts, the elections were based on party lists (Socialist Revolutionaries), and in Abdulinsky, even the Bolsheviks.”³⁹ Near cities, factory towns, and

railway junctions, there was a political differentiation of rural residents, but among the peasantry it was more intuitive than conscious. The peasants did not understand the “cunning mechanisms” of disagreements between the parties. In the context of the massive spread of radical sentiments among the majority of society, there were practically no opportunities for the implementation of liberal views in rural areas. For example, on August 21, 1917, the priest of the Nicholas Church in the village of Nizhnyaya Karmalka, Veniamin Pavlov, sent an application to the Organizing Committee of the Russian Social Democratic Labor Party (RSDLP) (Mensheviks), in which he asked to be accepted “among the full members of the RSD Workers’ Party (RSDLP).” He undertook to “pay membership dues promptly and obey the decrees of the Central Committee without question.”⁴⁰ Despite all the exoticism of Father Benjamin’s political affiliation, we can understand the reasons that prompted him. He tried to maneuver between the ruling Kadets and the left socialists in search of a moderate political center of the democratic direction.

The impracticability of the principles of the zemstvo representation in the elections to the Constituent Assembly seemed obvious to all political parties and movements in the Russian revolution of 1917. Members of the Special Conference on Elections to the Constituent Assembly formed a special commission and conducted a comparative analysis of the majority and proportional electoral systems. The commission hoped to overcome the noted shortcomings of the party-proportional system when the “country would be controlled by the political bureaucracy.”⁴¹ It considered that a proportional system would better express the opinion of the national and political minority. This last circumstance for the compilers of the draft “Regulations on Elections to the Constituent Assembly” was of particular importance given their universality. They had time to be convinced of the unpopularity in the places of the provincial and district commissars of the Provisional Government, appointed from among the chairmen of the zemstvo councils. By preferring the proportional system to the majority system, the democratic legislators could not prevent the dangers of an ochlocratic dictate in the country.

The identification of the socioeconomic demands of the peasants in the revolution showed the dominance of radical sentiments in favor of confiscation both among the community members and owners in relation to nonpeasant land ownership. Communal-equalitarian illusions were inherent to a large extent in the proletarian and semiproletarian urban strata and middle-aged soldiers. The Social Revolutionaries, who propagandized the ideas of the socialization of the land, while in power, were in no hurry to imple-

³²NART. F. 1246. D. 1. V. 102. P. 211.

³³SASO. F. 5. D. 1. V. 3894. P. 7.

³⁴SASO. F. 5. D. 1. V. 3894. P. 26.

³⁵SASO. F. 5. D. 1. V. 3894, pp. 19–23.

³⁶NART. F. 1246. D. 1. V. 44. P. 3.

³⁷TSASO. F. 5. D. 9. V. 1117. P. 5.

³⁸TSASO. F. 5. D. 9. V. 1117. P. 6.

³⁹Blumenthal *I.I.* Revolution of 1917–1918 in Samara province. Chronicle of events. Samara, 1927. Vol. 1. P. 227.

⁴⁰Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RSASPH). F. 451. D. 2. V. 116.

⁴¹SARF. F. 1811. D. 1. V. 34. P. 7.

ment confiscation measures, fearing agrarian lawlessness, but promised to approve them by law. In most of the Volga provinces, by the autumn of 1917, the Socialist Revolutionaries were the party in power, led the ideological and organizational election campaign for the Constituent Assembly, and therefore had more opportunities to win over the electorate. The outstanding Russian thinker of the first half of the 20th century, I.A. Il'in, who was expelled from Russia in 1922 by the Bolshevik regime, wrote: "Baba Avdotya spoke about her participation in the election of the Constituent Assembly in 1917": "I came to the parish, people are packed on the porch; they ask 'are you going to the polls? For the elections... – what, from where? – I say: Avdotya Mitroshkina from Pogorely Vyselki': they found and marked something on a piece of paper, and they put a cross on my palm with chalk, go home, they say, I voted; so I went..." The Socialist Revolutionaries constituted their majority in the Constituent Assembly in this way....⁴²

The peasant community members who opposed the agrarian policy of the Provisional Government and its local administration, nevertheless, supported the Socialist Revolutionaries in the elections to the Constituent Assembly, primarily because of the approval of their lists by peasant congresses. In addition, the Socialist Revolutionaries did a great deal of organizational work to identify the peasant mandates to the Constituent Assembly, distributing various forms and questionnaires through the land committees on the desired resolution of the agrarian question. The peasant owners, who were also interested in the redistribution of the land fund, demanded only "to put a strict police force in place and give it the power to arrest and imprison ... since there lot of theft and vandalism", although they also sought to "take land from the large landowners and divide it fairly."⁴³ Thus, the peasants, who were forced to be drawn into the party-proportional electoral system based on direct, equal, secret, and general voting, chose the party more familiar to them, which declared an egalitarian redistribution of land.

By the autumn of 1917, the alignment of not only the social but also the sociopolitical forces in certain regions of Russia had its own nuances, but the crisis of power was universal. Since the Bolsheviks managed not only to seize but also to retain power, special attention should be paid to their tactics in localizing the revolution. The agrarian question remained the leading factor in the relations between the peasants and the authorities. The Bolsheviks, skillfully manipulating the traditionalist illusions of the majority of society, began to organize a power vertical, creating councils

up to volosts and villages, inclusive. The Socialist Revolutionaries, who formally led all the peasant organizations, opposed them. They launched a broad anti-Bolshevik campaign, declaring from the pages of their central and local newspapers: "The Bolsheviks are destroying their homeland and the revolution, as well as robbing the state treasury."⁴⁴ In relation to the upcoming elections of the Constituent Assembly of the Central Committee of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRP), urging the peasants to vote for the list of socialist revolutionaries, it explained that in this way they would express their "protest against the Bolsheviks who had usurped power."⁴⁵ For example, the Samara Social Revolutionaries launched a counter-propaganda campaign against the organizational and administrative measures of the Revolutionary Committee. They stated: "The Bolsheviks, having come to power, cannot even carry out their demagogic slogans and appeals even in the smallest part ... they vilify the Mensheviks and Socialist Revolutionaries in every possible way ... they try to cast a shadow on the SRP, accusing it—a party that has fought for half-a-century for the people—of betrayal."⁴⁶ They were echoed by the Mensheviks, who accused the Bolsheviks of demagogic promises: "Not peace, but slavery is behind them. They bring not bread, land, and freedom, but civil war, blood, the former landlessness, and the triumph of the whip The coup that has taken place ... postpones the convocation of the Constituent Assembly and cannot create a government that enjoys popular support."⁴⁷ The zemstvo self-governments also protested "the violence of the Bolsheviks, who ignored the opinion of all of Russia and introduced councils everywhere instead of zemstvos and Dumas."⁴⁸ The peasants thought otherwise. Thus, the delegates of the fourth Insar district congress of Penza Province demanded that the Constituent Assembly resolve the issues of peace, land, and workers' control. They considered it necessary "to renew its membership through reelections in individual electoral districts under the leadership of local Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies... Any attempt by the Constituent Assembly to enter into a fight with the Soviets ... to be considered an encroachment of the will of the population."⁴⁹

To ensure the material strength of their power, the Bolsheviks turned to the peasantry, declaring its main demand in the revolution: an egalitarian land redistribution. At the Extraordinary II All-Russian Congress of Peasants' Deputies, a bloc of Bolsheviks and Left

⁴⁴News of the All-Russian Council of Peasants' Deputies. Petrograd. 1917. November 4.

⁴⁵People's business. Petrograd. 1917. November 12.

⁴⁶Earth and freedom. Samara. 1917. November 2.

⁴⁷City Bulletin. Samara. 1917. November 2.

⁴⁸SARF. F. 1781. D. 1. V. 8. P. 52.

⁴⁹SAPO. F. 206. D. 1. V. 13. P. 33.

⁴²Il'in I.A. On the future Russia. M., 1993. P. 33.

⁴³SARF. F.1781. D. 1. V. 2. P. 4.

Socialist Revolutionaries was formed. The latter condemned the position of the Executive Committee of the All-Russian Council of Peasants' Deputies, which demanded "the restoration of the legitimate Provisional Government."⁵⁰ The Social Revolutionaries, who monopolized the leadership of the peasant organizations, sought to prevent the participation of the Bolsheviks in the work of the congresses, but they could not protect the peasant deputies from communicating with representatives of the workers' and soldiers' councils. Analyzing the preferences of revolutionary currents, Lenin later stated: "In Russia in September–November 1917, the working class of the cities, soldiers, and peasants were, due to a number of special conditions, extremely well prepared for the adoption of the Soviet system and for the dispersal of the democratic bourgeois parliament."⁵¹ The peasant congresses, at first conditionally supporting the Constituent Assembly, then not only did not regret, but also approved its dissolution by the Bolsheviks. Soviet historians considered this a consequence of the successful agitation and propaganda activities of the Bolshevik Party,⁵² emigrant politicians of the first war, by the collective obscuration of the mass consciousness,⁵³ and modern researchers are actively exploiting the thesis of the victory of traditionalism over Western-style modernization.⁵⁴ Most likely, the mimicry of the majority of society in relation to the ideas and practices of the Constituent Assembly in Russia can be explained by the whole complex of the reasons mentioned, which require a special unbiased study.

Local support for the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly by the Soviets of Workers', Soldiers', and Peasants' Deputies contributed to the strengthening of Soviet power. Its legitimacy was confirmed during the joint meetings of the III All-Russian Congress of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, which began on January 10, 1918, and the III All-Russian Congress

of Peasants' Deputies, which began on January 13, 1918. Previously, an agreement was reached between the Central Committee of the Bolsheviks and the Central Committee of the Left Socialist Revolutionaries' association.⁵⁵ Here "all the decrees and resolutions of the new people's Soviet power" were approved.⁵⁶ The congress summed up the fierce struggle of political parties for the peasantry that unfolded in the provinces after the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks. In the course of it, not only democratic but also moderate socialist parties lost support, first among the workers and soldiers, and then among the peasants. They were forced to admit that "as soon as the Bolsheviks intensified their work among the masses of the peasants, it became not difficult to make them Bolsheviks."⁵⁷

During January–March 1918, the process of merging councils in provincial and district centers was completed, and the formation of volost and rural councils was underway. Initially, most councils tried to use local governments, only limiting their activities to "taking the economic part"⁵⁸ under their control. At the same time, they constantly emphasized that "the Soviets are in charge of the political system."⁵⁹ After the merger of the provincial councils of workers' and soldiers' deputies with the peasants' councils, not only in the center but also in the localities, the tendency to eliminate dumas and zemstvos as general democratic structures alien to the new government intensified.⁶⁰ At the initiative of local councils and congresses, decisions were made to combine the functions of administration and self-government in a single structure of Soviet power. The Bolsheviks, having achieved power through the soviets, sought to prevent the inevitable competition for them from democratic self-government bodies. Provincial, district congresses of councils, and even executive committees of councils adopted resolutions on the unification of power within their jurisdiction. In accordance with the decisions of the III All-Russian Congress of Soviets in the field, they reorganized "land committees and agricultural departments of zemstvos into departments of national agriculture under the councils."⁶¹ In practice, most often the reorganization turned into the liquidation of zemstvos and the loss of their experience in organizing rural self-government.

⁵⁰SARF. F. 3875. D. 1. V. 8. P. 1.

⁵¹Lenin V.I. Children's disease of leftism in communism // Comp. works. Vol. 41. P. 43.

⁵²Gorodetsky E.N. The birth of the Soviet state. 1917–1918. M., 1987. P. 281; Znamensky O.N. All-Russian Constituent Assembly. History of convocation and political collapse. L., 1976. P. 348; Mints I.I. History of the Great October. M., 1977. Vol. 3. P. 829; Trapeznikov S.P. Leninism and the agrarian-peasant question. M., 1967. Vol. 1. P. 350.

⁵³Denikin A.I. Essays on Russian Troubles. M., 1991. P. 177; Notes of the White Guard of Lieutenant NN // Archive of the Russian Revolution. M., 1991. Vol. 10. P. 62.

⁵⁴Buldakov V.P. Red troubles. The nature and consequences of revolutionary violence. M., 1997. P. 183; *ibid.* Quo vadis? Crises in Russia: ways of reconsider. M., 2007; Kabytova N.N. The organization of Russian statehood in the revolution of 1917: from democracy—through ochlocracy—to dictatorship// Russian statehood: from the origins to the present. Samara, 2012. P. 89; Leonov S.V. The Birth of the Soviet Empire: State and Ideology. 1917–1922 M., 1997. P. 159; Protasov L.G. All-Russian Constituent Assembly. History of birth and death. M., 1997. P. 224; Krasilnikov V.A. In pursuit of the past century. M., 1998. P. 57.

⁵⁵Protasov L.G. People of the Constituent Assembly: a portrait in the interior of the era. M., 2008. P. 117.

⁵⁶SARF. F. 1235. D. 2. V. 15. P. 8.

⁵⁷Our way. Penza. 1917. December 19.

⁵⁸SAPO. F. 206. D. 1. V. 13. P. 25.

⁵⁹SAPO. F. 206. D. 1. V. 13. P. 25.

⁶⁰Leonov S.V. The Birth of the Soviet Empire: State and Ideology. 1917–1922 M., 1997. P. 149.

⁶¹TSASO. F. 823. D. 2. V. 14. P. 216.

Analyzing the revolutionary events of 1917 in the Russian provinces, we state that the agrarian issue was decisive in the relationship between the peasants and the authorities. Each side implemented the ways and methods of its resolution through quasi-democratic administrative structures. The activities of the Provisional Government were aimed at creating a power vertical. However, its legislative initiatives were not implemented: it was not possible to form a clear system of subordination of the local authorities. The isolation of peasant self-government was manifested during the organization of volost and village committees, which were elected based on communal principles. Peasant congresses, recognizing the Provisional Government, disagreed with it in determining the powers of local authorities and self-government. As a result, from the center they demanded compliance with temporary legality, and the village put into practice the principles of social justice, as it understood them. All attempts to introduce Westernizing general democratic principles in the provinces in revolutionary Russia turned out to be ineffective, since the traditional foundations here were not destroyed. Most of the population adhered to the norms of community law, which created the prerequisites for changing the forms of regulation of social relations. The soviets, not only for the workers and soldiers but also for the peas-

ants, turned out to be preferable. They were built according to the class principle and first declared and then decreed the socioeconomic demands of revolutionary currents. The Soviet system of power was unified by the Bolsheviks, and local initiative associations of peasants were liquidated. Thus, the democratic initiatives of the authorities of the Provisional Government contributed to the manifestation of ochlocratic principles in the process of self-organization of the communal peasants. The soviets were adapted by the Bolsheviks to overcome the revolutionary crisis and implement dictatorship in local state building.

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