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Book Review: The End of Peasantry? The Disintegration of Rural Russia

Grigory Ioffe, Tatyana Nefdova, and Ilya Zaslavsky

University of Pittsburg Press, 2006, 249 pages.

Rural Russia has undergone at least five major upheavals since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century: serfdom was abolished by a decree in the 1860s, but the peasants were left in debt owing large sums of money to their former landlords; Stolypin freed the peasants of their debts after 1906 and encouraged family farming; land was nationalized in the revolution of 1917; agriculture was collectivized forcefully and the kulaks were "eliminated" in the 1930s; and the land was again privatized and farmers freed to leave the land after the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. Throughout this time Russia was industrialized and urbanized and many young and able people left the villages to seek their fortunes in the new sectors of the economy. In addition, revolution and war, particularly WWII, devastated large agricultural areas and resulted in death and maiming of many rural youngsters. All these are reflected in the present Russian rural society that Ioffe, Nefdova, and Zaslavsky describe and analyze. They focus mainly on the European parts of the country, home to close to 40 million rural residents.

The authors are geographers and the central motif of the book is Geography *Is* Destiny. Geographic determination is realized in several ways. First and foremost, Russia suffers from an inferior climate. Most of the country is colder than other farming areas in the world and the weather is subject to extreme variations, growing season is short, and animals have to be kept in barns for many months. Consequently, as the book reports, yields in Russia have always been lower than in western countries: a west-east gradient of agricultural productivity can be identified when moving from western and central Europe to Russia and inside the country itself.

Russia is vast, agricultural land occupies less than 8% of its area, distances are great, and infrastructure is poor. Many farming communities can be reached only on dirt roads and are effectively isolated from markets and services for long seasons. Inside Russia, geography affects farm productivity in two dimensions: soil quality and

location. Soil quality determines the fertility of the land: the chernozem regions of the southwest are better suited for crop production than the other parts of the country. And close to urban centers agriculture fares better than that at a distance: it received favorable treatment by the Soviet authorities and enjoyed then and continues to enjoy now access to secured markets of vegetables, fruits and livestock products.

In the wake of World War II and its food shortages, the Soviet regime devoted a great share of its economic resources to the promotion of agriculture. It was done in two stages. The first was extensive, through area expansion: by 1960, the cultivated land was twice the arable area of the 1920s. The second stage was intensive: the supply of fertilizers was augmented, farm income and salaries were increased, and yields grew. The expansion was costly and heavily subsidized.

The large collective farms of the Soviet Union—kolkhozes and sovkhozes—were not only agricultural production units; they provided their members and employees with municipal, social, and welfare service: roads, schools, hospitals, and assistance with inputs for the household plots. Remuneration was mostly in kind; money was seldom used. Members of kolkhozes and employees of sovkhozes worked the large farms and received in return grain for household use and animal feed, their cattle grazed on the kolkhoz meadows, and farm teams built and repaired their homes. Household plots helped to supply families in collective farms with home grown food but in some product they were also important contributors to the national food market: more than 50% of the potatoes and 30% of the vegetables were produced on household plots.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union changed the rural scene markedly. Federal subsidies were eliminated and production was exposed to economic considerations. Large tracts of marginal land were abandoned, out-migration intensified, and rural communities were fading away. The last count found 30,000 villages (out of 145,000) with less than 10 inhabitants each. Land privatization and farm restructuring is still an ongoing process.

Many of the remaining large farms operate in the old kolkhoz tradition, often run by the former Soviet managers, and employing some of their former members; but quite a few are not economically viable. A smaller number of large units have been

completely privatized and run as corporations, financed by local “investors” or foreign interests. Some are operated directly by food processors in the sugar, dairy, and meat sectors. Two types of family farms have emerged: many household plots expanded their land and market oriented production. However, they are still mostly auxiliary farms—part time or run by retirees. In addition, a smaller number of “registered family farms” were established by accumulating privatized land. Often they cultivate field crops but most are still too small to assure a reasonable level of income.

The contraction of the cultivated area modified the spatial distribution and social structure of the rural communities. Agriculture is still active and productive around urban centers. But these are far apart and the space between them is becoming an archipelago of low productivity farmland—islands in an ocean of forests, shrubs, and deserted fields. The remaining rural population is left with deteriorating infrastructure: roads, telephone lines, health services are disappearing. Many of the rural inhabitants fail to find employment; they are old and often addicted to alcohol. Exceptions are the non-Russian ethnic communities (many Muslims) where family ties have kept strong farm households together and economic opportunities have been exploited on and off the farm.

Modern Russia is a superpower, strong militarily and rich in natural resources. A great part of its national budget is financed by oil money. The government can therefore conveniently neglect the difficult task of restructuring agriculture (and manufacturing). Moreover, mineral sales create an overvalued ruble, imports are encouraged and the profitability of exports is depressed; the rehabilitation of agriculture is slowed down. In the wake of the recent (spring 2008) rise in the prices of grains, the government—so the news indicate—intends to tax food exports and to lower import duties. If true, Russian agriculture will be deprived of the opportunity to enjoy the world’s improving terms of trade.

In the concluding chapter the authors recognize the possibility that low agricultural productivity is due to weakened population and deteriorating social foundations. It seems therefore that not only geography is determining the welfare of the Russian rural residents; a stronger influence may be the Soviet legacy of oppression, neglect,

and urban bias. The authors also recognize in the conclusion that abandoned land and depopulation may be a healthy waste-reducing reaction to Soviet over-expansion. But the impression from reading the main parts of the book is that the authors view the post-Soviet transformation in rural Russia as a catastrophe that can be remedied only with financial subsidies and protection of Russian agriculture from the influence of world markets. The reader may wonder whether a more appropriate recommendation could not have been encouragement of healthy economic restructuring coupled with assistance to the farm population and rural infrastructure that were neglected and left behind in the country's march to progress. Modern Russia can afford it.

A short review cannot do justice to this richly informative volume. Despite slight disagreements, the book is wholeheartedly recommended to anyone interested in Russia and its society. It offers a colorful, vivid, detailed, and non-conventional picture of this huge land and its people.

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