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Review : 'Rural Unrest during the First Russian Revolution: Kursk Province'

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Burton Richard Miller. *Rural Unrest During the First Russian Revolution: Kursk Province, 1905-1906*. Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2013. Pp. XV + 448. Tables. Notes. Index. Maps. £50.00 (hardback) ISBN 978 615 5225 17 8.

The provincial, particularly the rural and agrarian, aspects of Russian history have received renewed attention of late. In many ways, the book under review fits well with two other recent publications by Catherine Evtuhov and Tracy Dennison (Tracy Dennison, *The Institutional Framework of Russian Serfdom* [Cambridge, 2011]; Catherine Evtuhov, *Portrait of a Province: Economy, Society and Civilization in Nizhnii Novgorod* [Pittsburgh, 2011]), contributing greatly to our understanding of provincial life and peasant economy in imperial Russia. Miller's thorough study puts Kursk province under a microscope in search of an explanation of the socio-economic causal factors that contributed to violent peasant rebellions in Kursk province during the course of the 1905 Revolution. Making use of a wide variety of provincial and central archival sources, as well as the statistical studies published by the provinces zemstvo, Miller teases out an explanation of why some villages erupted in violence throughout 1905 and 1906, and why others, despite their poorer economic position, did not (indeed, as he points out, some of the villages that rebelled were by no means the most economically disadvantaged in the province). Villages that resorted to violence in 1905-6 tended to be the province's 'big villages', to contain more younger households integrated with, and dependent upon, off-farm employment and—most importantly—villages in which the pre-Emancipation servile 'norms of reciprocity—rooted in the past—in the interaction between lord and peasant, their personal "*face to face*" component, and the *predictability* in the concrete benefits that they ensured for both parties' (45, original emphasis) had

been destroyed. In this, Miller's analysis of Kursk province confirms the hypotheses on the origins of rural unrest first articulated by James Scott in 1976 (James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* [New Haven, 1976]). In this case, Miller shows that the dissolution of the mutual ties of economic integration linking the economic fates of peasant and *pomeshchik* alike (particularly in regard the large *latifundia* of Kursk province where absentee lords shifted management of their estates to regimes of more market oriented techniques, e.g., requiring cash rents for plowland and access to other resources, renting to non-locals, shifting production to cash crops, etc.) were a major determining factor in whether or not a village resorted to violence or remained calm. It was these villages, where modernity had raised the consciousness of peasants via education and heavy reliance on outside labor markets, and at the same time increased the risk associated with peasant agrarian life by destroying mutual economic ties, that violence aimed at the property and person of *pomeshchiki* and local officials viewed as their supporters (land captains, police officers) was most heated and sustained during 1905-1906.

The author's argument moves through the following structure. The book begins with a fifty-page introduction that situates the author's work historiographically. Anyone seeking a fifty-page discussion of the last fifty years of agrarian historiography in general, and Russian agrarian history in particular, need look no further. The first chapter then lays out economic developments in Kursk province from the serf emancipation of 1861 up to the eve of the revolution.

Beginning with the emancipation land settlement, the author then paints a vivid

portrait of all aspects of the provincial population and its economy. In general, although the Emancipation's 'cut-offs' (*otrezki*) had created difficulties for peasants, they had compensated for their loss of access to forest, pasture, water and other parts of their economic ecosystem in a variety of ways such that, based on demographic criteria, 'Agrarian disorders in Kursk Province cannot therefore be viewed entirely from the unstable material position of the peasant household.' Indeed the disorders represented "a "crisis" perhaps less of the agrarian economy *per se*...than of a profound growing sense of insecurity and dissatisfaction with the existing order' for all involved, noble land owner and peasant alike (133). The greatest source of this insecurity in peasant minds was 'an increasing corrosion of the reciprocities that had long underwritten the deference of the young before their elders and defined relationships between the "dark masses" of the peasants and their "superiors"' (133).

The next two chapters narrate the course of the Kursk province uprisings throughout 1905 and 1906. The most interesting point here is the extent to which peasant faith that the Duma would resolve the land question in their favor worked hand in hand with repression to end the disturbances. The next year (1906) was relatively peaceful until it became clear that the Duma would not be allowed to enact a land reform proposal in line with peasant demands for the expropriation of private estates without compensation. At this point, encouraged in part by telegrams from their peasant Duma representatives, peasants in rebellious areas reacted less with violence against property and authority and more as an organized labor movement, engaging in work stoppages during the harvest to demand change.

These events are examined on a more microscopic level in the next two chapters to discover the attributes of those villages that rebelled. Recognizing that the great majority of villages in Kursk province did not erupt in violence, the author sets out to discover the characteristics of those that did. The villages that participated in the uprisings of 1905-1906 were those surrounding large estates where absentee owners had made a concerted effort to undertake new economic strategies that discarded the paternalistic strategies of the old regime—the old system of patron-client relationships in which risk was shared—for more rational systems of estate administration that had the effect of ‘greatly magnifying the sense of *unpredictability* and *instability* in micro-economies of sub-regions of the province’, i.e., those regions that rebelled (285, original emphasis). Furthermore, among the villages impacted by these management changes, the majority were so-called ‘big villages’ that were better educated, had a higher percentage of younger, single-worker households, and had gained a more worldly perspective on their lives through regular participation in out migration. ‘In the end,” the author notes, the institutions and aims defining the agrarian movement in Kursk province in 1905-1906 may have remained those ‘traditional’ to the peasant estate, but the forces arrayed in the movement were quite as often located on the boundary between the old order and an as yet unseen, unknown and unpredictable future’ (353).

This work represents a monumental, scrupulously detailed, analysis of peasant revolution in 1905-1905 and the peasant economy of Kursk province in general. Central European University Press is to be congratulated for allowing the published version of the manuscript to retain a high level of detail, including many

extended quotes and nearly thirty pages of appended correlation tables. At times, the reader might find him- or herself so immersed in the jungle of detail that they lose track of the bigger picture. Nonetheless, it has done much to aid our understanding of peasant violence in 1905-1906 and laid a solid basis for examining similar activities in other provinces.

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