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Searching for Peace and Harmony: The Don Cossacks and Peasants in 1917

Abstract

The article is based on archival materials from the documents collection "The Don in the days of the Revolution and the Civil War: February 1917 – March 1920." Record management documents of the Don Executive Committee and those of the legislative and executive bodies of the Don Cossack Host give evidence of an active search for a common ground in attempt to preserve the region as one of stability. The article follows two trends in the evolution of relations between two major classes of the Don region. After the February revolution these trends were reflected in relations between Cossack and peasant representative bodies and in practices of agrarian arrangements, which both affected the said institutions and were influenced by their policies. A deep contradiction between Cossacks, peasants of the Don region, and nonresidents, which is usually seen as the major factor in the political process of the region, went along with a wish to cooperate. This attempt to cooperate, although little studied in the historiography, was an aspect of the developing crisis, which brought to light something of its

universal nature. The Don region was a territory of deep-rooted conflict and of suppressed disquiet, and yet its experience showed that conflict was slow to play out. Many leaders and groups strived to reach a social consensus. The so-called “persons of no authority” who wanted to use the ensuing confusion for their own ends came not only from the left-wing or from political adventurers, but also from the conservative masses. Fear of the outside interference served as a trigger to turn the precarious balance. Thus, the cooperation trend, supported by a variety of motives, manifested itself with a varying intensity throughout 1917 and the following years. In spring 1917 there were groups of Cossacks, peasants and townspeople who supported the idea of an agreement between the native dwellers of the Don region. But there was also a large group of Cossacks who did not want to share their power, and the influence of this group grew when the ataman was once again appointed by election and the Cossack self-government restored. In August 1917 the Council of the Don Executive Committee put forward an initiative of creating a united regional government, which Ataman Kaledin disregarded. The idea was only implemented after the Bolshevik revolution and the first street fighting in Rostov (November 25 – December 2, 1917). United government lasted until the Soviet troops returned to the Don region in February 1918. In May 1918 there was established the Don Republic and a new era began in the history of the region. There was much fighting at the meetings of the Great Cossack assembly, the left wing defending the interests of the rank and file Cossacks, as well as those of the native peasants in an attempt to encourage them to fight the Bolsheviks.

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Keywords

Documents of management and record keeping, archival materials, Don Cossack Host, Cossack Assembly, Executive Committee of the Don, Don Cossacks, nonresident and native peasants of the Don.

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