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“Peasants cut down trees wholesale for their own use, without license, and there’s no way to put a stop to this unauthorized felling”: Daily life of northern village in 1917-1918.

Abstract

The article studies inner life of the northern countryside in 1917, the state and the local authorities growing weaker. It is captured in archival documents and other sources in an unobvious way, because its developments came into collision with political life, which was documented properly. Building on previous social history of the northern peasantry, the author reconstructs the main trends of the inner activity of rural communities aiming at resolution of such important issues, as border disputes over land or procurement of rights of forest and fishing grounds usage. These issues had always been important for peasants, but while the state power was strong they remained unresolved. Revolution and the destruction of the old power structures turned these issues into ones of immediate interest. Activities for their implementation promoted rallying of peasant societies and property differentiation in the village incipient in the previous years paled into insignificance. Property differentiation in peasant

community stemmed from non-agricultural trade outside the village (otkhod), which the author considers a form of social and geographic mobility and which allowed peasants grow quite rich. Success of the compatriots embittered no one, as there was a tradition of helping out, which came from a desire to demonstrate one’s success and acknowledge kindred relationship, which tied the inhabitants of the thinly populated northern villages quite closely, but also from necessity to have the fellow villagers support when getting papers for the otkhod. Successful peasants from the same district, who lived in the cities, helped out others in finding work, negotiating professional education for the children, providing means of earning money and, if needed, dispensed aid. When in 1917-1918 such peasants, who had thriven on trade, had to come back to the countryside from the starving cities other peasants often shielded them from taxes imposed on them as “members of the bourgeoisie.” Thus, there was no split on the grounds of social or property status in the northern village. Such solidarity disadvantaged the state in food purchases and military conscription, and when they come to power, the Bolsheviks adopted a policy aimed at splitting the village. Attempts to “deal” with the village proved unavailing. By late 1918 Bolsheviks changed tack and attempted to subvert the obshchina solidarity of peasants. However, a split among peasants occurred of its own accord on an area basis, there appeared conditions for "local civil wars" between neighboring rural communities and volosts. To protect themselves from bellicose neighbors the villagers created "self-defense groups", which contributed to northern peasants joining in the civil war that broke out in the following year of 1918.

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Keywords

Sources, archival documents, peasant obshchina, North of European Russia, peasantry, events of 1917, land issue, power, obshchina solidarity.

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