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Viazinkin, Aleksei Yu. Yakimov, Kuzma A.

Tambov State Technical University, Tambov, Russian Federation

Peasant Pessimism in the Days of Collectivization (1920-1930s): Anti-Soviet Rhetoric of the “Revolutionary Turning Point” Generation

Abstract

The Soviet policy of collectivization, which sought to forcibly bring the regime of agriculture

functioning in accordance with general political course on total control and authorities dictate, could not but cause discontent among the peasant population leaning to balanced autonomy. The article examines the phenomenon of peasant anti-Soviet pessimism, expressed in anti-collectivist rhetoric of the agrarian class representatives. A number of studies on the problems of public sentiments of peasants in the days of collectivization have analyzed various aspects of this problem, however, its rhetorical aspect remains poorly studied, although it significantly complements fragmented socio-psychological portrait of the Soviet village during the collectivization. The study is to eliminate this gap in scientific knowledge. It is built on the principles of historicism and objectivity, uses historical-comparative, deductive and retrospective methods. Its object is peasants of the “revolutionary turning point” generation, born in late 19th century, who took an active part in social and political life in the 1905-1930s (following Yu. A. Levada’s classification). The study is based on a wide array of both published and newly introduced archival materials from the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), the Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), the Russian State Archive of Economics (RGAE), and the State Archive of Socio-Political History of the Tambov Region (GASPI TO). It focuses on the analysis of letters and complaints of peasants of the “revolutionary turning point” generation and on the study of reports of the Joint State Political Directorate (OGPU) on the sentiments of the Soviet village during collectivization. The authors underscore the need to create a classification of rhetoric by its content, reflecting passive dissatisfaction of the peasants with the collectivization policy. Primarily, there was nostalgic rhetoric associated with patriarchal roots of the Russian peasantry, in whose historical memory paternalistic autocracy looked better than foreign and alienating Soviet power. Secondly, there was comparative rhetoric drawing parallels between the policy of collectivization and “war communism,” based on point-blank rejection of the actions of Soviet government and their comparison with banditry. Thirdly, there was rhetoric of doom in absence of any satisfactory historical prospect for peasant life, meaning its socio-economic autonomy, as well as survival. Fourthly, there were elements of introspection explaining the behavior of peasants forced to make concessions to the Soviet government contrary to their own interests. Analysis of sources suggests that rhetorically peasants’ protest against the collectivization was reduced to passive forms of resistance. Nothing remained to the exsanguinated peasantry, but nostalgic complaints; rare bold statements about leaving kolkhozes were drowned in humility, traditional for the Russian peasant culture, and bemoaning the growing sense of doom and defeatist recognition of the need to obey the authorities’ initiatives.

Keywords

Historical sources, Soviet village, collectivization, “revolutionary turning point” generation, peasant resistance, peasant pessimism, anti-Soviet rhetoric, social behavior.

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About the authors

Yakimov Kuzma Aleksandrovich, PhD in History, Tambov State Technical University, associate professor, Tambov, Russian Federation, +7-953-707-30-73, gnom-gnom123@mail.ru

Viazinkin Aleksei Yurievich, PhD in Philosophy, associate professor, Tambov State Technical University, assistant professor, Tambov, Russian Federation, +7-920-231-57-62, vyazinkin@yandex.ru

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