

### *Chapter 3*

## Peasant Conditions on the Eve of Reform

THE REVOLUTION OF 1905 famously started on January 9 with a wholly urban event, Bloody Sunday. Imperial troops in St. Petersburg fired on peaceful protest marchers, mainly workers; according to official figures, they killed 130 and seriously injured 299.<sup>1</sup> A wave of urban and rural strikes followed. Peasant groups throughout the empire moved on the estates of pomeshchiki, seizing grain and land, and burning manor houses. The rural actions started slowly, with only seventeen in January. They then gradually built up to 492 in June, slowed in July, subsided to 155 and seventy-one during the harvests of August and September, and finally surged to a peak of 796 in November.<sup>2</sup> This first set of disturbances was largely brought under control by the end of 1905, but a new round started in May 1906. This time, activity ran less to burning of estates and more to illegal grazing, felling of timber, and nonpayment of taxes. And agricultural workers went on strike, demanding better pay. The strikes proved harder for the government to stop, as doing so involved affirmatively getting peasants to work rather than negatively preventing destruction or looting of gentry property. Soldiers return-

1. Abraham Ascher, *The Revolution of 1905: Russia in Disarray* (1988), 83–92.

2. *Ibid.*, 162. These figures count large and small actions alike.

ing from the bungled war with Japan joined in support of the peasants.<sup>3</sup>

Were these signs of deprivation? Poor peasants appear to have been, if anything, underrepresented in the uprisings, possibly more easily cowed than the prosperous ones.<sup>4</sup> But the 1905 grain crop had been quite low (0.461 tons per capita, compared to 0.563 for the year before), and the harvests of 1906 proved still worse (0.377), almost at the disastrous levels of 1891.<sup>5</sup> It was natural to associate the uprisings with inadequacies in the peasant food supply, and when Stolypin became prime minister in July 1906, a top item on the agenda was the “agrarian question”—variously conceived, but revolving around ways to improve peasant welfare, or at least calm peasant unrest.

In fact, it is quite possible that attributing the uprisings to poverty was a mistake. As we’ll see, the period just before the Revolution of 1905 may well have been—like the time before the French Revolution—one of gradually increasing prosperity. But Russian peasants were still quite poor, at least relative to small-scale farmers in other countries. Proposals to ameliorate that poverty fell loosely into two types: aimed either at enhancing productivity or at redistributing land. This chapter attempts mainly to look at agricultural productiv-

3. Abraham Ascher, *The Revolution of 1905: Authority Restored* (1992), 117–18, 123–28.

4. Ascher, *1905: Russia in Disarray*, 163–64; Ascher, *1905: Authority Restored*, 115. While Governor of Saratov, Stolypin noted the overrepresentation of well-off peasants in the 1905 disturbances in a letter to the then Minister of the Interior, Dumovo. See George Tokmakoff, *P. A. Stolypin and the Third Duma: An Appraisal of Three Major Issues* (1981), 29–30.

5. Ascher, *1905: Authority Restored*, 117–18; Stephen G. Wheatcroft, “Crises and the Condition of the Peasantry in Late Imperial Russia,” in *Peasant Economy, Culture, and Politics of European Russia, 1800–1921*, eds. Esther Kingston-Mann and Timothy Mixer (1991), 142. Although the onset of disturbances would have preceded harvest times in most areas, the 1906 crop failure was in time to have kept the pot boiling. See David Moon, *The Russian Peasantry, 1600–1930: The World the Peasants Made* (1999), 124–25 (winter rye harvested in “heartland” in late July, a bit earlier in the black-earth regions).

ity and peasant landholdings, as well as trends in both, to provide perspective on the likely gains from the two competing ideas.

### *Trends in agricultural productivity per capita*

The inadequacies of the pre-reform legal regime might lead one to think that Russian agriculture at the turn of the century was utterly hopeless. That would be quite unfair. In fact, though starting from a low base compared to Western Europe, Russian agricultural productivity steadily improved after Emancipation, even, it appears, on a per capita basis. Still, at the turn of the century, it had a long way to go, and the course of improvement scarcely justified complacency about agricultural property rights.

Until recently, a gloomy view of Russian grain production in the last quarter of the nineteenth century held sway. The distinguished economic historian Alexander Gerschenkron, for example, argued that in that period “Russian agriculture . . . made a valiant effort to maintain the per capita output constant, but failed.”<sup>6</sup> But it turns out that Gerschenkron’s finding is very sensitive to the years picked for comparison. He compared 1870–74 with 1896–1900, but the first stretch was exceptionally productive, containing one spectacularly good year (1870), two very good ones (1872, 1874), and no bad ones.<sup>7</sup> If the starting period is shifted forward or backward just one year, the same data show an annual increase in grain production of about 1.5 percent, roughly equaling annual population growth.<sup>8</sup> Obukhov, a Soviet statistician addressing the period 1883 to 1914 (years selected for data availability), used a method that gives each intermediate year a weight equal to the first and last years, and found a 2.1 percent annual increase in grain production, against a 1.5 percent increase in population, for a net improvement of 0.6 percent per

6. Wheatcroft, 131.

7. *Ibid.*, 131, 133.

8. *Ibid.*, 131.

capita annually.<sup>9</sup> Wheatcroft concludes that this finding holds up, even when exports are netted out.<sup>10</sup>

Another approach is Paul Gregory's calculation of grain and other foods retained in farming areas, a measure of how well agriculture supplied its own producers. As Table 3.1 shows, taking net agricultural production and subtracting shipments away from the rural areas, Gregory found an annual growth rate of 2.7 percent from 1885–89 to 1909–13, with periods of very strong growth alternating with static or slow-growth periods.<sup>11</sup>

Gregory found similar figures for some other measures of economic change. He found labor productivity in agriculture growing at a rate of about 1.35 percent in the period 1883–87 to 1909–13,<sup>12</sup>

**Table 3.1. Annual Growth Rate of Personal Consumption Expenditures**

<i>Period</i>	<i>Personal consumption expenditures (retained farm consumption, rural housing)</i>
1885–89 to 1889–93	0.4%
1889–93 to 1893–97	5.9%
1893–97 to 1897–1901	1.6%
1897–1901 to 1901–5	3.1%
1901–5 to 1905–9	0.3%
1905–9 to 1909–13	5.1%

9. *Ibid.*, 133 and n. 5. In essence, Obukhov's regression technique plotted *all* the years of the series and generated an overall rate (or imaginary line on a graph) that minimizes the distance between the line and all the yearly figures. These rates are reasonably comparable to the findings of N. D. Kondratev, *Rynok khlebov i ego regulirovanie vo vremia voyny i revolutsii* [*The Grain Market and its Regulation in a Time of War and Revolution*] (1922), cited in Peter Gatrell, *The Tsarist Economy, 1850–1917* (1986), 121–22.

10. Wheatcroft, 133–42.

11. Paul R. Gregory, *Russian National Income, 1885–1913* (1982), 130–32, 222–45 (explanatory appendix).

12. *Ibid.*, 168; also *ibid.*, 133–34, 138. Gregory uses the term “labor productivity” for output per worker. See *ibid.*, 136. Although one can imagine inquiries into output per worker holding all other inputs constant, and thus measuring (for exam-

and per capita income growing at a rate of 1.7 percent (with much slower per capita growth in the period after 1900, due in large part to output losses during and because of the Revolution of 1905).<sup>13</sup> And he found labor productivity growth in agriculture not far behind its growth in industry (75 percent as great), a differential not far out of line with what generally prevailed for that era in the western world.<sup>14</sup> Gregory also argued that the growth in per capita urban income after Emancipation suggests parallel growth in rural income, as migration to the city would have tended to equalize real wages, absent effective restrictions on migration.<sup>15</sup> Of course, there were limits on internal migration, as we have seen, but evidently fairly porous ones.

For some time, a notion prevailed that peasants had increasingly found themselves unable to meet their redemption dues, which observers read as a sign of ever-increasing misery. But the numbers to which these observers pointed were for the *accumulated* arrears.<sup>16</sup> This plainly did not have the significance claimed. If peasants as a whole were unable to pay some small percentage of their dues each year, then the accumulated sum would have necessarily risen, reduced only to the extent that some peasants in arrears managed to make up missed payments. In fact, the average annual shortage was only about 5 percent of the amount due, with no overall trend perceptible over the whole period. In a couple of years (1887, 1888), collections were 106–07 percent of the sum owed; evidently some peasants' catch-up on arrears, and others' advance payments, more

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ple) growth in the human capital of workers, Gregory seems not to have been engaged in such a pursuit.

13. Ibid., 126, 147–48.

14. Ibid., 133, 168–69.

15. Paul Gregory, *Before Command: An Economic History of Russia from Emancipation to the First Five-Year Plan* (1994), 42–43.

16. See, e.g., Geroid T. Robinson, *Rural Russia Under the Old Regime* (1969), 111.

than offset those years' underpayments.<sup>17</sup> As the government had set redemption dues high enough so that it could pay off the owners if it collected 92 percent of scheduled payments, the 5 percent shortfall yielded a surplus. When the redemption operation ended in 1906, the government had a growing reserve fund, totaling over twenty-five million rubles, or about 60 percent of annual payments (or what they would have been in that year if the government had not cancelled half the obligation shortly before).<sup>18</sup> Thus, the redemption fees don't support an image of growing peasant poverty.

Finally, demographics can indirectly measure rural misery—or its absence. It has been common to see some sort of Malthusian story in Russia's rapid post-Emancipation population growth. The thought is that the rapid population growth rate (which Russia did experience) demonstrated a steadily deepening crunch between numbers and resources (which is doubtful, at best). In fact, Russia's population growth in the 1861–1914 era is yet another illustration of Eberstadt's dictum that the population spurts of modern times have occurred “not because people suddenly started breeding like rabbits but because they finally stopped dying like flies.”<sup>19</sup> The Russian birth rate was almost flat until 1900, when it started a steady and increasingly rapid decline (no breeding like rabbits there!). But the death rate had started down well before the decline of the birth rate, with a slow downward drift from the late 1860s to the early 1890s, and then a sharp downward tilt.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Russia's late nineteenth-century

17. Steven L. Hoch, “On Good Numbers and Bad: Malthus, Population Trends and Peasant Standard of Living in Late Imperial Russia,” *Slavic Review* 53 (1994): 44–48; James Y. Simms, “The Crisis in Russian Agriculture at the End of the Nineteenth Century: A Different View,” *Slavic Review* 36 (1977): 381.

18. Hoch, “Good Numbers,” 45, 46–47.

19. Nicholas Eberstadt, “Population, Food and Income: Global Trends in the Twentieth Century,” in *The True State of the Planet*, ed. Ronald Bailey (1995), 15.

20. Hoch, “Good Numbers,” 62–63. Because of the stable age structure in this period, the crude birth and death rates support fairly strong inferences about age-specific rates, which are the demographically significant ones. See also Arcadius

history seems to be a standard demographic case of modernity, with death rates leading birth rates down and the lag causing a large one-time increase in population.<sup>21</sup>

To the extent that better nutrition explains the decline in deaths, by reducing the toll from infectious diseases, the favorable demographic data suggest an improvement in per capita agricultural productivity. There are, to be sure, other possible explanations for the declining death rate, but most candidates (other than nutrition) don't seem very compelling for Russia in this era. A major source of infant mortality was Russia's early weaning practices, which historically led to very high death rates from diarrhoeal diseases; but there seems to have been no marked change in the practice.<sup>22</sup> Russian rural public hygiene had not changed enough for it to have played much of a role, and the modest effect of developments in immunization and therapy in pre-twentieth-century Western Europe suggests that they would have had little impact in nineteenth-century Russia.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, there was some decline in deaths from smallpox, for which nutrition is not significant, and from typhus and diphtheria, for which it plays a variable role. One feature suggesting serious improvements in nutrition was the increase in mean heights of army

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Kahan, *Russian Economic History: The Nineteenth Century*, ed. Roger Weiss (1989), 3.

21. Compare Geoffrey Drage, *Russian Affairs* (1904), 114–15 (finding population increases in first 20 years after Emancipation proportional to holdings: starting at 16.6 percent among those with less than one desiatina and running up to 30.3 percent for those with more than six). For an analysis of misunderstandings that have led researchers to an unsoundly gloomy view of trends in productivity and prosperity, see Elvira M. Wilbur, "Was Russian Peasant Agriculture Really That Impoverished? New Evidence from a Case Study from the 'Impoverished Centre' at the End of the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of Economic History* 43 (1983): 137–47.

22. Hoch, "Good Numbers," 69.

23. *Ibid.*, 70. See also, e.g., Thomas McKeown, "Fertility, Mortality, and Causes of Death: An Examination of Issues Related to the Modern Rise of Population," *Population Studies* 31 (No. 3, November 1978): 535–42.

recruits from 1890 to 1899.<sup>24</sup> Overall, the data provide mild support for a finding of improving per capita production. At the very least, they undermine the contrary account.

That said, Russian agricultural productivity at the start of the twentieth century was far behind Western Europe's. According to Lyashchenko, Russia's average yield in grain in 1909–13 was forty-three puds (0.016 metric tons) per desiatina (2.7 acres), as against 195 for Denmark, 190 for France and 152 for Germany.<sup>25</sup> Some of the lag can be explained by Russian geography, with areas of good soil generally not overlapping with ones enjoying a long growing season or having enough rainfall. The soil quality generally declines as

24. Hoch, "Good Numbers," 68–70. Elsewhere, Hoch finds that, from 1830 on, periods of substantial excess deaths (50 percent or more above trended average) are not at all associated with grain scarcity as measured by grain prices. If this were generally true in Russia, it would tend to delink severe mortality problems from food supply problems and, to a degree, undercut the inference of improved productivity from the favorable demographic data. Hoch, does not, however, suggest that these data draw his earlier suggestions in doubt. See "Famine, disease, and mortality patterns in the parish of Borshevka, Russia, 1830–1912," *Population Studies* 52 (1998): 357–68.

25. Peter I. Lyashchenko, *History of the National Economy of Russia to the 1917 Revolution*, trans. L. M. Herman (1949), 735. A general compendium of European statistics, setting forth total production of various grains and the area devoted to their production, indicates a comparable, though not quite as drastic, deficiency for Russia. See B. R. Mitchell, *European Historical Statistics: 1750–1970* (1975), 210–26, 249–66. Mitchell gives both area of land devoted to wheat, rye, barley, and oats, and output of those grains. Division of output into area shows that Russia's average yield in grain in 1909–13 was .75 metric tons per hectare, as against 1.93 tons per hectare for Germany, 1.91 for the UK, 1.29 for France, 1.64 for Sweden, and 2.37 for Belgium. Russia's relative position in 1900–1904 was no better: .71 tons per hectare, compared with 1.67 for Germany, 1.23 for France, 1.07 for Sweden, and 2.29 for Belgium. Russia's yield for 1905–1909 was .67 tons per hectare, in part reflecting the disruptions of the Revolution of 1905. (Mitchell's data for UK production in 1900–04 are in hectoliters, a measure of volume rather than weight, and thus cannot be directly compared with production of metric tons per hectare.) Anfimov presents similar data. See A. M. Anfimov, *Krestianskoe khoziaistvo evropeiskoi Rossii, 1881–1904 [The Peasant Economy of European Russia, 1881–1904]* (1980), 202. See also I. M. Rubinow, *Russia's Wheat Surplus* (1906), 25.



you go from northwest to southeast, while the rainfall pattern is the opposite.<sup>26</sup> And the rainfall tends to come too late in the agricultural season, which for the most part is very short because of the country's northern location.<sup>27</sup> An alternative explanation has focused on peasant poverty, but this seems largely circular. Of course, it is true that innovations are risky, and that taking risks is dicier for people on the edge of destitution than for more prosperous people. But at any moment in the nineteenth century, Russia was no poorer than the countries of Western Europe had been at some prior time; the Western peasants' poverty had not stifled progress.

Nor, of course, had poverty—or anything else—completely obstructed productivity growth in Russia. But it clearly lagged behind Western Europe, and Russia's peasants still operated under a system of scattered plots that the more prosperous areas of Europe had largely shed, and under repartitional rules that Western Europe had never had. It is a fair surmise that if peasants who wanted to exit the system had been allowed to do so, they could have wrung more produce from Russia's land.

### *Peasant landholdings*

As the alternatives offered in competition with the Stolypin reforms were all programs of land redistribution, an obvious question is what proportion of all agricultural land the peasants actually held. The answer is about two thirds, and the trend was ever upward. But to sense the mood of peasants and many of their sympathizers, we must also look at the Emancipation process, the source of peasants' "allotment land." The rules of that process, though they seem to have substantially improved the lot of the average peasant, gave them less than all the land they had been working at the moment of Emanci-

26. Moon, 120. See also Kahan, *Russian Economic History: The Nineteenth Century*, 7 (rainfall deficient in black soil area).

27. Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime* (1975), 5–6.

pation—and made them pay for it in “redemption dues.” Compared with full transfer of all previously worked land, and no duty to pay, Emancipation fell far short. We start with the Emancipation process and then turn to peasant landholding overall.

*The disappointments of Emancipation.* We have already considered one key aspect of Emancipation: the property rights the peasants received. Those rights left the individual serf subject to nearly as much external control as under the old regime, with some of the owner’s power shifted to the commune and some to the state.

Consider Emancipation’s effect on serfs’ resources and obligations. Before Emancipation, a serf, as such, owned no land. To be sure, some enterprising ones had acquired land on their own, and a serf household had a permanent claim to its hut and a small surrounding area. On a hereditary commune, the household had a permanent interest in its arable land and sometimes in its meadows, but not in pastures, woodlands, or water resources.<sup>28</sup> Otherwise, the serf was landless. He worked an allotment from his owner—whether of the gentry (*pomeshchiki*), the state, or the imperial family—paying with dues (*obrok*) or labor (*barshchina*).

As a result of Emancipation, the serf received an approximation of the land he formerly worked, an amount resulting from the application of various centrally imposed rules. But he was burdened with his share of a commune obligation to pay the state redemption dues. The post-reform allotment was, on average, somewhat smaller than its pre-reform equivalent; the statute raised the amount if the allotment had been below a statutory minimum and lowered it if it had been above a statutory maximum.<sup>29</sup> But, despite the apparent overall reduction (and thus the average per serf household), it appears likely that only those who had had the use of well-above average areas

28. Moon, 212.

29. Steven L. Hoch, “Did Russia’s Emancipated Serfs Really Pay Too Much for Too Little Land? Statistical Anomalies and Long-Tailed Distributions,” *Slavic Review* 63 (2004): 247, 268–74. See also, e.g., Robinson, 80–82.

were adversely affected; the statutory norms were aimed roughly at protecting the area worked by the typical peasant.<sup>30</sup>

The redemption fee was calculated as 80 percent of the value of a household's allotment, the value having been estimated by capitalizing the "quitrent" due on the space assigned—an amount agreed on by lord and serf, subject to centrally imposed ceilings.<sup>31</sup> The total redemption fees due from the emancipated peasants over a forty-nine-year period were enough to compensate the state for most of its cost in paying the former owner the capitalized value of what he had been entitled to in obrok or barshchina.<sup>32</sup> So, a natural question is: How did the value of the land received compare with the values implicit in the redemption fees?<sup>33</sup> Recent scholarship questions the notion that the serfs were subjected to an implicit overcharge. The data that all analysts use—flawed, to be sure—indicate that average prices per desiatina were considerably higher for sales of small quantities of land (fewer than 500 desiatinas), the sort of transactions that peasants would undertake, than for sales of large quantities (more than 500 desiatinas).<sup>34</sup> Weighting the data in favor of the sort of purchases that peasants probably would have made, Hoch estimates that the freed serfs were more likely undercharged than overcharged for the land they received.<sup>35</sup>

In overall effect, then, Emancipation gave serfs, as a group, a bit less land than their original holdings, but it matched that reduction with a corresponding, but *greater*, reduction in obligations, with the redemption dues fixed at only 80 percent of the serfs' prior obliga-

30. See, e.g., Hoch, "Too Much for Too Little Land," 264–74.

31. Alexander Gerschenkron, "Agrarian Policies and Industrialization, Russia 1861–1914," in Alexander Gerschenkron, *Continuity in History and Other Essays* (1968), 169–70, 176, 215.

32. Hoch, "Too Much for Too Little Land," 262.

33. For claims that the redemption prices much exceeded real value, see, e.g., Robinson, 83–84, 88; Christine D. Worobec, *Peasant Russia: Family and Community in the Post-Emancipation Period* (1995), 30.

34. Hoch, "Too Much for Too Little Land," 257–60.

35. *Ibid.*, 260–63.

tions. It appears likely that only serfs with well above the pre-reform average would have suffered a decline, and even they may have found themselves ahead of the game if their redemption dues were enough lower than their former burdens.

We can think of the serf as buying most of the land he had worked subject to a forty-nine-year mortgage. For a serf formerly under obrok, redemption fees replaced the obrok; for one under barshchina, redemption fees replaced the burden of working some land purely for the owner's benefit. Although the substantive economic change was likely about equal for both types, there was a greater change in form for the barshchina peasant. Emancipation changed his labor obligation into a monetary one, so he had somehow to earn enough extra for his share of the redemption fee—such as by farming rented land, sharecropping, or working for wages. The landlord or employer was likely to be the former owner or someone similarly situated. Although the change introduced new flexibility (the serf enjoyed increased freedom, for example, to pursue non-farm labor as a source of redemption money), the immediate economic improvement was modest. Whether on obrok or barshchina, a peasant who expected that Emancipation would instantly usher in a glorious new future must have found reality quite a disappointment.

The Emancipation statutes also allowed a serf to take a reduced allotment (or “beggar’s allotment”), one quarter of the standard one, free and clear of redemption obligations. Because of the absence of redemption duties (and thus the state’s special interest in collective responsibility), one might expect that peasants taking the free quarter (the “darstvenniki”) would have done so individually. In fact, however, the statutes authorized *villages* in Great Russia to make the choice (and in Little Russia, or Left-Bank Ukraine, and New Russia, *segments* of a village).<sup>36</sup> The rule presumably reflected government concern that with completely individual rights the less suc-

36. O. N. Burdina, *Krestiane-darstvenniki v Rossii 1861–1907* [*Peasants Taking the “Beggar’s Allotment” in Russia, 1861–1907*] (1996), 131–37.

cessful peasants would end up as rural or urban proletarians. As the darstvenniki held their land in the same communal relation as others, their post-Emancipation experience doesn't serve as a laboratory for studying how peasants would have responded to individual ownership.

Despite a good deal of scholarly hand wringing over the darstvenniki, a recent study argues that they tended to move into market economic relations more successfully than their fellows who took redemption land; in Weberian terms, they evolved more fully from peasants into farmers. In a large proportion of villages, they quickly acquired enough access to land, either by purchase or rental, to proceed with farming on more or less the same scale as they had before Emancipation.<sup>37</sup> To some degree, obviously, their farmer-like approach to land flowed from necessity: those remaining in agriculture at all (at least ones not making a radical shift to less land-intensive activities such as bee-keeping) had to use market transactions simply to renew their former scale of activity. But even in expanding their farming by rentals, the darstvenniki appear more market-oriented; they were more likely than the non-darstvenniki to pay a money rent rather than to work as sharecroppers.<sup>38</sup> And the land available to them for purchase or rental was obviously equally available to peasants taking land under the redemption system, who could have acquired similar amounts per household—but didn't.<sup>39</sup> As for productivity, the new research seems to show no consistent advantage or disadvantage for the darstvenniki.<sup>40</sup>

*Overall trends in peasant landholding.* Disappointing as Emancipation may have been, the period from Emancipation to the Stolypin reforms was one of steady peasant accretion of non-allotment land.

37. Ibid., 88–130.

38. Ibid., 103, for example.

39. Ibid., 163–64.

40. See, generally, Burdina, 88–130.

Table 3.2 covers landholding in forty-nine of the fifty provinces of European Russia for 1877 and 1905.<sup>41</sup>

What does all this show? First, we should discount the increase in peasant ownership of allotment land, which is probably just a result of the chronology of Emancipation. Although it was enacted in 1861, years passed before all serfs reached the redemption stage, which became mandatory only in 1881 and even then took more time to become universal. But peasant non-allotment land tripled. Think of Lopakhin, the upstart peasant in *The Cherry Orchard*: born a serf on a noble family's estate, at the play's end he buys the estate, which the nobles lack the will or talent to manage. Of course, gentry fecklessness is hardly the only explanation of sales: some gentry were

**Table 3.2. Landholding in European Russia: 1877 and 1905**

Holders	Holdings in 1000s of desiatinas (2.7 acres)	
	1877	1905
I. Peasants and other villagers excluding Cossacks		
Allotment lands	111,629	123,183
Non-allotment lands		
Individuals and associations	5,788	19,970
Communes	765	3,672
Total peasant lands	118,181	146,825
II. Nobles, townsmen, state, church, etc.		
Nobles	73,077	52,104
Clergy (personal)	186	322
Townsmen	11,699	16,241
Non-peasant and mixed collectives	1,717	4,350
State and imperial family	157,823	145,881
Municipalities	1,884	2,030
Churches and monasteries	2,129	2,579
Other institutions	870	643
Total non-peasant	249,385	224,150

41. The table is simplified from Robinson, 268. It omits 9.5 million desiatinas held by "other, or unspecified classes."

prudently shifting investment from land to other productive resources (or paper claims on them).<sup>42</sup> Over a period of fewer than thirty years, there was a swing of more than twenty million desiatinas from the pomeshchiki to the peasants; for the pomeshchiki, this amounted to sale of nearly a third of their 1877 holdings, for the peasants an increase in theirs by about 20 percent.

If we remove the state and imperial family lands (for reasons explained below) and add a third obscurely classified group amounting to 9.5 million desiatinas, we get a 1905 grand total of about 235 million desiatinas.<sup>43</sup> Assuming that none of the 9.5 million was peasant-owned, the division is about 147 million for peasants and eighty-eight million for all non-peasant holders, making for a 63–37 percent split.<sup>44</sup>

The holdings of the state and imperial family plainly dwarfed those of the pomeshchiki. But more than 85 percent of this was in the extreme north and northeast, and even outside that area a high proportion was forest or waste. As a result, only about four million desiatinas were in use in 1905 as plow-land, meadow, or pasture, and mainly by renters, most of whom were peasants.<sup>45</sup> In two ukazes of August 1906, early in Stolypin's prime ministership, the state committed itself to sell a considerable portion of these lands to peasants on the relatively favorable terms supplied by a "Peasant Bank,"

42. Seymour Becker, *Nobility and Privilege in Late Imperial Russia* (1985), 52–54, 172–73.

43. Robinson, 268.

44. Robinson's numbers are not the only ones. Compare, for example, V. G. Tiukavkin, *Velikorusskoe krestianstvo i Stolypinskaia agrarnaia reforma* [*The Great Russian Peasantry and the Stolypin Agrarian Reform*] (2001), 104, suggesting that by the end of the nineteenth century peasants held 34 million desiatinas in non-allotment land.

Though noble land was dwindling, its concentration was striking: about 1100 owners held more than 5000 desiatinas each, and their holdings added up to about 40 percent of the 50 million desiatinas held by nobles. Nicholas Spulber, *Russia's Economic Transitions: From Late Tsarism to the New Millenium* (2003), 76.

45. Robinson, 136.

which was owned and operated by the government; by 1914, the bank had completed the transfer of about 1.5 million desiatinas.<sup>46</sup> So it is quite understandable that all participants in the debate focused primarily on pomeshchik land.

Do the numbers show, as many have assumed, that peasants suffered severely from land shortage (*malozemele*)? The term has no agreed-on definition. We can think of it as referring to at least the following ideas: (1) per capita peasant holdings were declining; (2) per capita peasant holdings were declining, even adjusted for increases in productivity; (3) a serious proportion (or absolute number) of peasants held land that was inadequate for subsistence; or (4) a serious proportion (or absolute number) of peasants held land that was inadequate for subsistence *and* had no other actual or potential source of income.

The first two possibilities address change over time. At least for 1877–1905 as a whole, the population increase of 1.5 percent a year outweighed the peasant acquisitions of non-allotment land as a proportion of their total holdings. If we assume that the increase in peasant allotment land was more nominal than real, as seems correct, per capita peasant holdings declined.<sup>47</sup> But the data on total production and demographics suggest that there was no decline in holdings adjusted for changes in productivity. Here I must add a caution: The per capita productivity figures do not take into account the cost of inputs.<sup>48</sup> To calculate the change in net product, one would have to deduct expenses incurred in achieving that gain, such as payments for equipment or fertilizer; and if those expenses were high enough, there might have been a decline in net real income per

46. Ibid., 199, 230.

47. See also Robert Pepe Donnorummo, *The Peasants of Central Russia: Reactions to Emancipation and the Market, 1850–1900* (1987), 151 (showing declining amount of desiatinas per soul in various localities).

48. For example, Gregory's "labor productivity" is evidently output per worker, without holding other inputs constant. Gregory, *Russian National Income*, 136.



capita. But the demographic data, and Gregory's figures on agricultural product retained in the countryside, suggest the opposite.

Many writers allege the third form of *malozemele*: many peasants with holdings inadequate for subsistence. Tiukavkin, for example, says that 54.3 percent of households in repartitional communes in European Russia had fewer than the nine *desiatinas* that he views as necessary for subsistence.<sup>49</sup> And Lenin claimed that a peasant household needed fifteen *desiatinas* "to make ends meet."<sup>50</sup> If we accept Lenin's benchmark figure, only 17.7 percent of peasant households in European Russia were making ends meet in 1905.<sup>51</sup> But while average peasant life was undoubtedly miserable, there appears to have been famine only in years of disastrous harvests, such as 1891, to which the government responded with relief efforts that compare favorably with those of the British in India in the same era.<sup>52</sup> And, as we have seen, there is real evidence that conditions were improving, though very gradually.

Finally, even if one could calculate what size tract would have been necessary for subsistence if it had been a peasant family's sole source of income, the exercise would overlook the fourth—and presumably most economically significant—possible meaning for *malozemele*: amounts of land that, even when coupled with alternative sources of income, left peasants below subsistence. The most obvious alternative sources would have included work for cash or a share of the crops on fields rented from others, work for others for compensation in cash or kind,<sup>53</sup> or small-scale enterprise. In fact, at the turn

49. Tiukavkin, 76. See also, e.g., Robinson, 98 (though acknowledging the data to be "of dubious value").

50. Quoted at Tiukavkin, 66.

51. See Tiukavkin, 75. Interestingly for the issue of egalitarianism, a much higher percentage of households in repartitional communes than in hereditary ones met Lenin's 15-*desiatina* benchmark: 19.7 percent (repartitional) versus 11.0 percent (hereditary). *Ibid.*

52. Moon, 116. See also Wheatcroft, 162 (citing Richard R. Robbins, *Famine in Russia, 1891/1892: The Imperial Government Responds in a Crisis* (1975)); Ascher, *1905: Authority Restored*, 118.

53. Tiukavkin, 83–113.

of the century, peasants evidently farmed as many as thirty-seven million desiatinas of rented non-allotment land.<sup>54</sup> For reasons that are obscure, scholars have often taken rentals as an indication of peasant poverty,<sup>55</sup> and there is dispute over whether poor or less-poor peasants predominated as renters.<sup>56</sup> The difference between renting and owning plainly depends on factors besides prosperity: A farmer who works only his own land assumes a different set of risks (e.g., changes in the value of the land) from one who relies on rentals, and variations in preferences for different types of risk don't depend solely on prosperity. In any event, even if rentals were more beneficial to the well-off peasants than to the less well-off, they presumably helped alleviate the poverty of the latter; why else would they have rented?

More important in assessing the condition of the peasantry, non-agricultural employment opportunities in the countryside were increasing; even for the period 1877–94, peasants are estimated to have obtained 23.6 percent of their total income from non-agricultural pursuits.<sup>57</sup> Lenin himself noted that peasants “of the industrial localities” were starting to live “a ‘cleaner’ life (as regards clothing, housing, and so forth),” and, he added, “[T]his remarkably progressive phenomenon must be placed to the credit of Russian capitalism.”<sup>58</sup>

54. *Ibid.*, 84–85.

55. Wilbur, 137–44 (rejecting that inference).

56. Compare Wilbur, 137–44 (showing higher proportions of rental land among more prosperous farmers), and Tiukavkin, 91–92 (arguing that rentals increased the inequality of land among peasants, with the better off peasants doing the most renting), with Donnorummo, 185–86 (claiming that poor peasants predominated as renters).

57. A. M. Anfimov, *Ekonomicheskoe polozhenie i klassovaia borba krestian evropeiskoi Rossii, 1881–1904 gg.* [*The Economic Situation and Class Struggle of the Peasants of European Russia, 1881–1904*] (1984), 156–57. See also Simms, 395 (saying that “[i]n many cases, the peasants’ money income came principally from ‘craft’ earnings and not from the sale of grain.”)

58. Simms, 387, n. 47, quoting Lenin. Soviet historians such as Diakin seem to be ready to acknowledge that “from an economic point of view, the [Stolypin] reform was necessary and progressive.” V. S. Diakin, “Byl li shans u Stolypina?” [“Did Stolypin Have a Chance?”], in *Gosudarstvennaia deiatel'nost' P. A. Stolypina:*

*Peasant and pomeshchik productivity*

According to reports of the Central Statistical Committee, grain yields in the 1860s were greater on privately owned land than on allotment land (thirty-three v. twenty-nine puds per desiatina) and thereafter improved more rapidly. Table 3.3, setting production in 1861–70 at 100, shows changes over the ensuing decades.<sup>59</sup>

Volin ascribes some of the yield differential to the higher quality of the private lands.<sup>60</sup> This seems plausible for the pomeshchik lands' superior starting position; the pomeshchiki dominated the process of dividing lands between peasants and owners and likely were better able to sneak qualitative than quantitative advantages past the bureaucratic supervision. But it's hard to see why that initial difference would have accounted for the private lands' better *rate of improvement* after allotment.<sup>61</sup> Freedom from the stultifying property rights regime of allotment land—repartition, open fields, and family

**Table 3.3. Production on Privately Owned v. Allotment Land**

<i>Decade</i>	<i>Privately owned land</i>	<i>Allotment land</i>
1861–70	100	100
1871–80	112	107
1881–90	127	117
1891–1900	142	134
1901–10	163	148

*sbornik statei* [*State Activity of P. A. Stolypin: Collected Articles*], eds. N. K. Figurovskaja and A. D. Stepankii (1994), 26.

59. A. A. Kaufman, *Argrarnyi vopros v Rossii* [*The Agrarian Question in Russia*] (1918), 221. See also Gatrell, 121–22, citing Kondratev; A. P. Borodin, *Stolypin: reformy vo imia Rossii* [*Stolypin: Reforms in the Name of Russia*] (2004), 190; Spulber, 79–80. Note that the annual rates of productivity improvement implicit here are considerably lower than the 2.1 percent found by Obukhov and Wheatcroft. There are some obvious methodological problems here, such as in the classification of land that switched.

60. Lazar Volin, *A Century of Russian Agriculture: From Alexander II to Khrushchev* (1970), 69.

61. Kaufman, 221, notes this point.

ownership—surely accounted for some of the difference. And, as the Emancipation also finally removed the disabilities on peasant acquisition of gentry land,<sup>62</sup> a process of natural selection could begin, with the less able pomeshchiki selling to the more able peasants.<sup>63</sup> Thus, even before the Stolypin reforms, the Emancipation enhanced the peasants' right to acquire private land and brought together two worlds that, until then, had been largely separate: peasant talent and marketable land resources.

### *Land and grain prices; the Peasant Land Bank*

Writers have said that from Emancipation to 1905, “rising land prices were accompanied by falling grain prices.”<sup>64</sup> This raises at least the following questions: (1) Was it true? (2) If true, what might explain a serious deviation in trends of the price for a resource and the price for its (usually) most valuable product? (3) Might the government's Peasant Land Bank have played a sinister role?

That prices moved in the paradoxical way described is true in the sense that international grain prices<sup>65</sup> fell for *part* of the period and that prices of Russian land generally rose, though with considerable

62. See Chapter 2 and its discussion of the changing rules described by Gerschenkron, “Agrarian Policies,” 155–57. See also Moon, 120; David A. J. Macey, “The Role of the Peasant Land Bank in Imperial Russia's Agrarian Reforms, 1882–1917” (1998), 6.

63. A point made by Boris Fedorov, *Petr Stolypin: “Ia Veriu v Rossiiu”* [*Peter Stolypin: “I Believe in Russia”*] (2002), 1:383.

64. Dorothy Atkinson, *The End of the Russian Land Commune, 1905–1930* (1983), 32.

65. International prices are not self-identifying, but British prices, discussed below, may be a fairly good proxy, as Britain had an open economy. See Enzo R. Grilli and Maw Cheng Yang, “Primary Commodity Prices, Manufactured Goods Prices, and the Terms of Trade of Developing Countries: What the Long Run Shows,” *The World Bank Economic Rev.* 2 (No. 1, 1988): 5–7 (discussing appropriateness of using a specific country's prices as a proxy for international prices).

regional variation.<sup>66</sup> Russia was increasingly active in the world grain market, and its grain prices generally shared the trend. Mironov, for example, identifies three periods of distinct trends in Russian grain prices: 1829–81, with prices rising an average of 2 percent a year; 1881–95, with prices falling at an average rate of 4.4 percent a year; and 1895–1914, with prices rising an average of 2.7 percent a year.<sup>67</sup> British and American grain prices showed a comparable fall for 1881–94, also followed by a fairly steady rise from 1895 to 1914 and beyond.<sup>68</sup>

As a first approximation one would expect that where a resource was most valuable producing a specific commodity, changes in the resource's market value would roughly parallel changes in the commodity's price, with adjustments for changes in the resource's productivity. In fact, as we know, productivity was significantly improving on average, so a raw comparison of land and grain prices would presumably tell us little. Surprisingly, although the scholars Kovalchenko and Milov find land prices quite closely related to grain prices, they find them unlinked to productivity.<sup>69</sup> The authors of

66. George Pavlovsky, *Agricultural Russia on the Eve of the Revolution* (1968), 110 (covering 1860–70, 1870–83, 1883–89, and showing declines of 14 percent in the Central Agricultural and Middle Volga regions in 1883–89, the middle of the 1881–95 period of falling international prices).

67. B. N. Mironov, *Khlebnye tseny v Rossii za dva stoletia (XVIII-XIX vv.)* [*Grain Prices in Russia for 200 Years (18th-19th Centuries)*] (1985), 49. He appears to be speaking of rye and oats (see *ibid.*, 48.) Mironov argues that the influence of European grain prices on Russian ones steadily deepened in the nineteenth century, as transport costs between interior Russian regions and European markets fell, and the significance of distances to ports dwindled. See *ibid.*, 54–56, 159–60.

68. See Abbott Payson Usher, "Prices of Wheat and Commodity Price Indexes for England, 1259–1930," *Review of Economic Statistics* 13 (1931): 105 (for British wheat); Fred A. Shannon, *The Farmer's Last Frontier: Agriculture, 1860–1897*, vol. 5, *The Economic History of the United States* (1977), 192 (for U.S. wheat).

69. I. D. Kovalchenko and L. V. Milov, *Vserossiiskii agrarnyi rynek, XVIII-nach. XX veka* [*The All Russian Agrarian Market, 18th to Early 19th Century*] (1974), 269–72. For the period 1895–1910, the coefficient of correlation between productivity and land price was above .42 in only four out of forty-five provinces studied. But the coefficient between the price of rye and the price of land was above .70 in

the study don't offer an explanation of why changes in productivity evidently had so little effect. Some less statistical work, by Anfimov, presented in Table 3.4, seeks to relate percentage changes in the gross value of a desiatina's production in rye to percentage changes in the price of land.<sup>70</sup>

If the data in Table 3.4 are correct, it is unclear whether there is really much incongruity to explain. Over the whole thirty years, the increase in the price of land was 250 percent (the accumulation of the percentages for each of the three periods), and the increase in gross income per desiatina 188 percent (again by accumulation of the three increases).<sup>72</sup> This hardly seems a staggering deviation. True, if we look only at the twenty years immediately preceding the Stolypin reforms, the divergence is considerably greater: a 130-percent

**Table 3.4. Land Price and Gross Value of Rye Production**

	<i>Percentage change over specified period</i>		
	<i>1886–95</i>	<i>1896–1905</i>	<i>1906–1915</i>
Price of land	13.7%	102.8%	51.8%
Average income from a desiatina of rye <sup>71</sup>	10.1%	50.9%	73.3%

fourteen provinces, between .60 and .70 in another fifteen, between .42 and .60 in another ten, and below .42 in six. Black-soil provinces, where one would expect the most correlation because of the greater uniformity of land use, in fact accounted for eleven of the fourteen with the highest correlations, and for eight of the next group.

70. Anfimov, *Ekonomicheskoe polozhenie*, 142.

71. Obviously rye was not the only grain, but the trend of its price seems not to have varied radically from that of other grains. See, for example, Table 4.2 of J. L. van Zanden, *The transformation of European agriculture in the nineteenth century: the case of the Netherlands* (1994), 109, showing the price of rye declining about 18 percent in the period from 1875–79 to 1910–14, as opposed to 31 percent for wheat, 17 percent for oats, and 8 percent for barley. As always, however, the data are sensitive to the time spans selected; using 1880–84 at the starting point, rye and wheat both fell about 25 percent to 1910–14, while barley and oats changed only slightly (barley up 3 percent, oats down 5 percent).

72. As grain prices were falling in the first decade and roughly steady in the second, the increase in income is evidently due to productivity increases.

increase in land prices against a 66-percent increase in gross income per *desiatina*. But one would expect market prices for land to have reflected anticipations of increased productivity. Knowledge about improved techniques and the impact of equipment and fertilizer could have traveled much faster than their actual implementation. Land rents trailed the run-up in land prices, to some extent confirming the intuition that land prices reflected anticipated gains.<sup>73</sup> In any event, the price movements of 1906–15 would have gone far to vindicate those who had bought in the previous decade—overwhelmingly peasants, of course—in anticipation of such improvements.<sup>74</sup>

In short, then, it is simply unclear whether there is any disparity to explain. Figures averaged across all of Russia are of questionable significance, and the work of Kovalchenko & Milov, disaggregating

73. Anfimov, *Ekonomicheskoe polozhenie*, 143–45. But rents nonetheless increased in proportion to production between 1886–95 and 1906–15. *Ibid.*, 150. See the following note for a possible explanation.

Chayanov, mentioned in Chapter 2 as the source of a theory of Russia's agricultural woes independent of its property rights regime, also argued that a peasant family that devoted inefficiently high levels of labor to land (i.e., kept adding labor even when the marginal product was less than the labor's theoretical marginal product in a better mix of land and labor) might pay more for land than the discounted present value of land's net product. He hypothesized that such a strategy might increase family welfare by enabling it to employ otherwise unemployable labor. See A. V. Chayanov, *A.V. Chayanov on the Theory of Peasant Economy*, eds. Daniel Thorner, Basile Kerblay, and R.E.F. Smith, with a foreword by Teodor Shanin (1986), 9–10, 39–40, 236–37. It is unclear whether the defects in the labor market necessary to explain such overpriced purchases were severe enough to drive the price of land materially above the discounted value of its net product.

74. Compare McCloskey's argument as to why productivity improvements due to enclosure would be reflected in increases in land value. Enclosure increased the productivity of *all* factors of production, and one might expect the increment to be shared among the three (land, labor and capital). But whereas labor and capital are relatively mobile and entrepreneurs can increase their use with relatively little effect on price, agricultural land is immobile and has few alternative uses, so the productivity enhancement can be reflected almost exclusively through increases in price. See D. N. McCloskey, "The Economics of Enclosure: A Market Analysis," in *European Peasants and their Markets*, eds. W. N. Parker and E. L. Jones (1975), 154–55.

by province, is extremely puzzling. Further, the “productivity” data are obscure in the absence of data on changes in other inputs to production, such as equipment, fertilizer, and labor.

A further complication is the steady increase in available credit. Just as today we expect house prices and interest rates to move in opposite directions (everything else being equal), we should expect land prices to have risen as credit became more and more available, expanding the pool of possible buyers. In fact, quite apart from the government’s Peasant Bank discussed below, credit institutions were expanding rapidly in the post-Emancipation era.<sup>75</sup> Rural real estate debt rose about six-fold from 1870–79 to 1900–1909.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, it seems a reasonable inference that the rise in Russian land prices was primarily due to natural market forces. Nonetheless, there are suggestions that the Peasant Land Bank, or Peasant Bank for short, may have played a major role, making it harder for peasants to improve their lot through land acquisition or rental.<sup>77</sup> In fact, however, it seems unlikely that the bank’s program was to the peasants’ disadvantage overall.

The Peasant Bank was certainly a substantial player in the financing of peasant land acquisitions. The share of peasant land purchases (in *desiatinas*) financed by its activities was about 34 percent in the years from 1883 to 1892, and about 75 percent in the years from

75. According to Olga Crisp, assets of the Russian commercial credit system, in which she appears to include mortgage loans, grew 14 percent in 1881–93, 80 percent in 1893–1900, and 42 percent in 1900–08. Olga Crisp, *Studies in the Russian Economy Before 1914* (1976), 116.

76. *Ibid.*, 133 (from 353.7 million rubles to 2,123.7 million).

77. Anfimov, for example, points to the prices paid by the Peasant Bank in 1906 and 1907 (108 and 105 rubles per *desiatina*), as opposed to those paid in 1904 and 1905 (69 and 94), suggesting that the 1906–07 prices must have been above market as the bank was paying them at a time when “*pomeshchiki* terrified by peasant uprisings were rushing to sell their real property.” Anfimov, *Krestianskoe khoziaistvo*, 58–59. But peasant disturbances subsided in the course of 1906 (and thus reduced the government’s readiness to redistribute *pomeshchiki* land), so the import of the figures is far less clear than Anfimov implies.



1893 to 1905.<sup>78</sup> And an October 14, 1906, decree reduced the Peasant Bank's interest charges to well below market levels.<sup>79</sup>

Of course, Peasant Bank financing doubtless swelled demand and thus contributed to the price rise. Moreover, Macey reports that, though the Peasant Bank appraisals were lower than free-market prices, they were higher than the appraisals used for private bank lending.<sup>80</sup> In effect, the Peasant Bank seems to have been a less cautious lender than the private sector banks. So it probably had a greater effect in sustaining peasant demand than is suggested by its shares of purchases financed.

If the Peasant Bank's role was to increase demand by enabling hundreds of thousands of peasants to acquire additional land, it would seem to have harmed only two groups of peasants: those who had a strong preference for paying cash, and those who, for some reason, were ineligible for Peasant Bank loans but would have qualified for *other* loans absent the Peasant Bank's effect on price. For all other peasants, the Bank activities that increased demand did so only by increasing their opportunities—enabling them to buy more land than they could have otherwise acquired. Presumably the peasants who bought land as a result were glad to have done so; there is no suggestion that the bank dragooned peasants into accepting its loans. Nor does there seem any reason to think that the acquiring peasants were fooled. Of course, like anyone who acquired land in Russia before the Bolshevik Revolution, they must have indulged in the expectation that they were getting real rights, an expectation that, in the end, was defeated by the revolution—as were all expecta-

78. Pavlovsky, 149, 152. See also Macey, "The Role of the Peasant Land Bank," 7 (comparable figures for 1883–95); compare Gerschenkron, "Agrarian Policies," 221–22 (considerably lower estimate).

79. George L. Yaney, *The Urge to Mobilize: Agrarian Reform in Russia, 1861–1930* (1982), 253–54. And see A. D. Bilimovich, "The Land Settlement in Russia and the War," in A. N. Antsiferov, et al., *Russian Agriculture during the War* (1930), 319.

80. Macey, "The Role of the Peasant Land Bank," 15–16.

tions for property rights, rule-of-law values, and liberal democracy. If we momentarily put aside the source of the Peasant Bank's funds, then, only a miniscule number of peasants are likely to have been made worse off by its operations.

Of course, by expanding credit more than would have occurred in its absence and thereby generally raising prices, the bank presumably raised the prices received by the sellers, virtually all of whom were *pomeshchiki*. In that sense, the story of the Peasant Bank can be fitted into an ordinary "public choice" account of government activities: dominant elites used the power of government to reallocate resources in their direction. To the extent that the bank's activity may have either necessitated tax increases or prevented tax reductions that would otherwise have occurred, peasants as a group would have paid, as they bore a substantial (though not necessarily disproportionate) share of overall taxes.<sup>81</sup>

In sum, then, peasants may have been injured in several indirect and perhaps trivial ways: as the involuntary source of bank funds; as would-be buyers priced out of the purchase or rental market by credit-induced price increases; as buyers whose gain through improved access to credit was not as great as the offsetting loss through higher prices; and as renters whose rents were higher than they otherwise would have been. No one appears to have attempted to find any plausible numbers for all these effects.

### *Tax burdens*

We've addressed mainly the Russian government's role as a definer and redefiner of property rights and as a facilitator of their exchange (via Peasant Bank operations). But, like any government, the Russian state also operated as a great pump, extracting resources from the

81. See, e.g., Robert Gorlin, "Problems of Tax Reform in Imperial Russia," *Journal of Modern History* 49 (1977): 246 (describing incidence of taxation system and ministerial proposals for greater progressivity).

population with one hand and dispersing them with the other. The Peasant Bank carried out one such dispersal—subsidizing the purchase and sale of land—at least to the extent of dedicating capital to the project. Taxation in late imperial Russia is too complex a topic for analysis here. But it's worth a brief diversion to consider how taxes (arguably slightly higher than they would have been if the Peasant Bank capital had been used instead for tax reduction) might have affected the distributional picture that, still today, drives people's impassioned stances on the "agrarian question."

Tax burdens varied from province to province, but allotment land, even apart from the redemption burden, seems often to have been taxed far more heavily than pomeshchik land.<sup>82</sup> Despite that discrepancy, peasants seem to have been more burdened by Russia's heavy reliance on excise taxes (such as those on matches, tobacco, sugar, tea, and kerosene) and on the profits of the government's vodka monopoly. In the 1880s, 1890s and early twentieth century, revenue from excise taxes outweighed the yield from the so-called "direct taxes" by about five to one.<sup>83</sup> And in 1906, the government "spirit monopoly" (presumably mainly on vodka) accounted for nearly 700 million of the government's nearly 2.3 billion rubles in revenue.<sup>84</sup> The government's reliance on these sources may seem unfair to the hard-pressed peasants, but it has some defenses: First, only those who directly or indirectly bought the covered goods paid the indirect taxes. Second, many of the indirect taxes (or their equivalent via government monopoly) fell on "sin" commodities such as liquor and tobacco; if demand was very responsive to price, i.e., was highly elas-

82. Hans Rogger, *Russia in the Age of Modernization and Revolution, 1881–1917* (1983), 77, 96. See also Francis Marion Watters, *Land Tenure and Financial Burdens of the Russian Peasant, 1861–1905* (1966), 163, 170–79.

83. Rogger, 78. See also Kahan, *Russian Economic History: The Nineteenth Century*, 61–65; Simms, 377, 382 (data on liquor receipts, indirect taxes and redemption receipts for 1886–1899).

84. See, e.g., Gorlin, 249.

tic, the taxes diverted peasants from unhealthy consumption.<sup>85</sup> Third, the aggregate average tax burden on Russian peasants at century's end, even including redemption dues, has been estimated at about 18 percent of income,<sup>86</sup> not in itself enormous.

Nonetheless, given the character of the goods covered, the burden at the very lowest income seems likely to have been even higher, especially as a fraction of peasants' *market* consumption. Even if taxation drove no one to starvation, it must have increased the misery of many.

### *A glimpse of peasant life*

If the trend in peasant welfare was generally favorable in post-Emancipation Russia, physical conditions on the eve of the Stolypin reforms seem miserable by our lights. In one apparently typical village, huts of about 350 square feet held households averaging eight persons.<sup>87</sup> Observers—ones who put aside “the poorer” peasants and

85. *Ibid.*, 250 (suggesting that high officials gave considerable weight to the health purpose). Compare Iu. N. Shebaldin, “Gosudarstvennyi biudzhnet Rossii v nachale XX v.” [“The State Budget of Russia in the Beginning of the 20th Century”], *Istoricheskie zapiski* [*Historical Notes*] 65 (1959): 163, 168–70 (citing increase in rates of tobacco and cigarette taxes and liquor revenues as proof of tsarist officialdom's preference for extracting revenue from the poor).

Proponents of sin taxes, of course, tend to assume a high elasticity. If demand for a “sin” is elastic, a tax should please moralists with the likely reduction in sin; if demand is inelastic, the tax should please economists with the insignificant effect on market behavior. If the elasticity is known, at least one of the two groups seems doomed to frustration.

86. Moon, 115. Kahan, *Russian Economic History: The Nineteenth Century*, 64, estimates peasant taxes as about 11 percent of their income in 1912. Because indirect taxes so heavily outweighed direct taxes and redemption dues, the difference between him and Moon cannot be due simply to the January 1, 1907 end of redemption.

87. Hoch, “Famine, disease, and mortality patterns,” 357–68.

describe conditions for the better off—report on the lack of chimneys in many of the huts, attributing the occupants' survival to the passage of air through the walls.<sup>88</sup> Glass windows were “not the rule,” and “many windows were still covered with stretched and dried bulls' bladders or some other translucent material that allowed only the faintest amount of light to penetrate into the *izba's* [hut's] murky, grimy interior at midday.”<sup>89</sup> As we now know, wood smoke is a “witch's brew of carcinogens,”<sup>90</sup> and its chemicals are known to injure the brain, the eyes (sometimes causing blindness), and the respiratory and cardiovascular systems.<sup>91</sup> Apparently as a result of this smoke, the huts were largely free of crickets, mice, bedbugs and flying/biting insects, and even the famously hardy cockroach.<sup>92</sup>

Either in a courtyard just outside the hut, or in an outer passageway of the hut itself, lay garbage and human and animal excrement, with the latter often seeping into wells after a rain.<sup>93</sup> There were villages without a single privy.<sup>94</sup> There was virtually no furniture; the hut's stove or benches served as beds.<sup>95</sup> Shoes were “bast,” or basically straw. A peasant's best clothes were likely to be for burial; sometimes an elderly woman would proudly try on burial clothes, using a

88. Stepniak [Sergei Mikhailovich Kravchinskii], *The Russian Peasantry: Their Agrarian Condition, Social Life and Religion* (1977), 142–43.

89. W. Bruce Lincoln, *In War's Dark Shadow: The Russians Before the Great War* (1983), 44–45.

90. Richard Hellie, “The Russian Smoky Hut and its Probable Health Consequences,” *Russian History* 28 (2001): 171, 176, citing R. Stone, “Environmental Toxicants under Scrutiny at Baltimore Meeting (March 1995 Society of Toxicology Conference),” *Science* 267 (1995): 1770.

91. Steven L. Hoch, *Serfdom and Social Control in Russia: Petrovskoe, a Village in Tambov* (1986), 60.

92. Hellie, 172. See also Maurice G. Hindus, *The Russian Peasant and the Revolution* (1920), 10–11.

93. Hindus, 5–6; Lincoln, 47.

94. Lincoln, 47.

95. Stepniak, 143; Hindus, 7.

mirror made from a piece of glass with black cloth behind, enjoying the sight of “how beautiful she will look, when she is dead.”<sup>96</sup>

It seems hardly surprising that politically active people in Russia, in the wake of the Revolution of 1905, eagerly sought changes that might ameliorate the life of peasants. At the same time, the data tell us some useful things about the conditions facing reformers. Peasant ownership of non-allotment land was steadily increasing, while gentry ownership was dwindling rapidly. Despite the handicaps of communal title, peasants were becoming more productive and, in part as a result, were almost certainly getting richer, not poorer. Though land prices were rising through much of the period between Emancipation and 1906, one cannot, in light of changes in prices and productivity, tell a simple story of deprivation even for those starting with little land. With this background in mind, we turn to the political alternatives to Stolypin’s privatization policy.

96. Hindus, 6.