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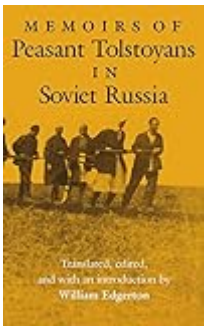

William Edgerton, ed. *Memoirs of Peasant Tolstoyans in Soviet Russia.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993. xxviii + 264 pp. $29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-31911-1.

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In 1964, at the age of 63, Boris Mazurin sat down to write an account of a remarkable life. His father a Tolstoyan educator, Mazurin turned early in life to the religious and moral teachings of Leo Tolstoy, and sought to lead a life of rural simplicity and nonviolence in accord with those teachings. In late 1921, he and a few other young people founded a small commune called "Life and Labor" 12 kilometers from Moscow, thus beginning a seventeen year experiment that would end in tragedy for most of its members. Increasingly under threat from Soviet authorities in their central Russian location, in particular during the onset of collectivization and the cultural revolution, the commune resettled to central Siberia in 1930 and 1931, not far from the new city of Novokuznetsk (later Stalinsk) and the industrial focus of the region, Kuznetskstroi. Though they struggled at first, commune members soon began to prosper and attract like-minded pacifist sectarians from across the Soviet Union. Soon, the area was teeming with settlers, who founded several different communes, all in the same area and all adhering to a greater or lesser degree to the basic tenet of nonviolence (to animals as well as to humans) that structured their social and economic existence.

During the early thirties, these communists (with a small c) lived, quite literally, on the margins of Soviet society. Though they held different opinions from one another on some questions of social organization, they all sought to avoid state intrusion of any kind and to build their own utopia in the Siberian wilderness. But they could not completely isolate themselves from the sinful world, a fact which the more realistic of the commune leaders (like Mazurin) readily recognized. In order to survive, the Tolstoyan communes integrated themselves into the regional economy by supplying Kuznetskstroi and its fussy foreign engineers with fresh vegetables and receiving in return precious industrial goods like iron, nails, and glass. The Tolstoyans wanted to live both inside and outside of Soviet society, and this was a tricky and difficult position to maintain.

Indeed, the ambiguous relation of the Tolstoyans to their neighbors and to the state eventually proved to be their undoing, as the wave of local repression associated with the Great Terror washed over the commune. In local and central government circles, the question of how to treat nonviolent, non-Bolshevik communists like the Tolstoyans had always been a difficult decision. The shift of politics to a new key forced local officials to decide whether the Tolstoyans were friends or enemies, for they no longer could be neither. They were labeled enemies. In 1936, all the leaders of the commune, including Mazurin, were arrested and sent away to the gulag or the grave. Those arrests were followed in 1937 and 1938 by

the arrests of most of the rest of the commune members, until by January 1, 1939, only a handful of women and children were left to be consolidated into a Soviet collective farm.

Mazurin survived 10 years in Soviet labor camps, and eventually decided that the story of Tolstoyans under Soviet rule should not be lost. After completing his memoirs in 1967, he began urging other survivors to do the same. Despite KGB harassment, several former commune members wrote and preserved their memoirs during the 1960s and 1970s. A string of publications in the 1980s published portions of these reminiscences, finally culminating in 1989, when historian Arsenii Roginskii published "Vospominaniia krest'ian-tolstovtsev, 1910-1930-e gody," (Moscow: "Kniga", 1989).

The work under review is an abridged translation of Roginskii's volume. William Edgerton included all the material directly involved with the Life and Labor Commune from that work, excising only Mazurin's separate piece on his experiences in labor camps, certain parts of Iakov Dragunovskii's personal papers, and a piece by V. V. Ianov that concerned the life of a Tolstoyan outside of the commune.

The great strength of this edition is that professor Edgerton clearly made a strenuous effort to make this volume accessible and understandable to non-specialists. The translation is smooth and readable, the editing informative but not intrusive, and the introduction broad but not overwhelming. At 260 pages, it is a very manageable length. More importantly, college freshmen will normally have had enough background from their high school history courses to understand the introduction, and the introduction will enable them to understand the memoirs.

In light of these tremendous strengths, the criticisms are minor indeed. Edgerton's desire to provide readability rather than consistency in the translation is usually successful. Occasionally, however, Edgerton goes too far to smooth over the original, as when he translates Yelena Shershenova's stark sentence "Nachalas' likvidatsiia i kommuny <Zhizn' i trud>." as "The first steps were taken to abolish this Life and Labor Commune too." (p. 24) In the original, this sentence, written about events in 1930, openly evokes the simultaneous process of the "liquidation of kulaks as a class," an important parallel to draw, I think. There seems to be no good reason not to translate "likvidatsiia" as "liquidation" here, as Edgerton does elsewhere in the volume.

Other criticisms of the work are likewise picky. The footnotes are generally outstanding, giving just enough relevant information about persons, groups, and events to make passages clear. Occasionally, though, more information would have been helpful. P. G. Smidovich, for instance, was more than just the "vice-chairman of the Presidium of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee," (p. 43) he was also the CEC's point man on religion, and served at the head of the subcommittee on religion throughout the thirties. Additionally, and more relevantly, Smidovich generally played the role of the defender of religious groups from over-enthusiastic persecution while in these offices. An acknowledgment of Smidovich's special position would have allowed readers to better understand not only the politics of religion in the center, but the political strategies and political savvy of Tolstoyan leaders as well.

Similarly, Edgerton's introduction, though useful overall and admirably concise, stumbled occasionally, particularly when Edgerton tried to explain why a wide audience should care about a fringe group. Edgerton's argument in this regard was twofold. On the one hand, he portrayed the Tolstoyans as sui generis, the only group that did not "fit into the Bolsheviks' blueprint" (p. ix) of a Russia neatly divided into friends and enemies. Further, he argued, the Tolstoyans were important to study because they were unusual in being "one of the three great experiments in the use of nonviolence in the twentieth century." (p. xxi). On the other hand, Edgerton argued that the memoirs were representations of much broader group, that they "document the history of the Russian peasantry from what appears to be a unique source - the peasants themselves." (p. xvii).

Neither of these claims is exactly true. In the first place, Edgerton overstates the uniqueness of the Tolstoyans in the Russian milieu. There were several other sects, also claiming thousands of members, living within Soviet borders and sharing quite similar beliefs about social organization, the state, and violence. Indeed, many of these groups are mentioned within the memoirs: Dukhobors, Molokans, Evangelical Christians, Baptists, and Mennonites were all groups who conducted "great experiments in the use of nonviolence in the twentieth century," for instance, and suffered the same slings and arrows that the Tolstoyans did, both under the tsars and the Soviets.

More suspect is the claim that what we have in these memoirs is the Russian peasantry speaking out about itself. Even if we accept the dubious assumption that rural dwellers spread across two continents were a homoge-

nous entity, we cannot accept the proposition that the Tolstoyans were typical representatives of that group. Rather, as these memoirs make perfectly clear, the Tolstoyans were outsiders wherever they lived, and were often seen as easy targets for local party members or even local peasants who wanted to appropriate Tolstoyan land and resources.

Despite this vulnerability, the Tolstoyans were also unusual in that they wielded power in high circles of government. After one instance of a local official appropriating their land for the use of the neighboring villagers, Mazurin walked straight to Smidovich, stated his case, and within days Smidovich had cancelled the order of the district executive committee (p. 43). Thus the Tolstoyans were in the rather strange position of being extremely well-connected and being marginalized at one and the same time.

Though the Tolstoyans were neither unique nor representative, they did exist in a permanent state of contradiction. These were people living untypical lives at the same time they lived typical ones. Among the experiences that they shared more widely with other members of society are ones that took place prior to the revolution. Both Dragunovskii and Morgachev, for instance, extensively delved into their pre-Tolstoyan lives in Russian villages, providing fascinating accounts of rural land politics, treatment of orphans, and of courtship and marriage. As their lives unfold, we get glimpses into World War One trenches and hospitals from a common soldier's point of view. After the revolution, we get accounts of life in communes, as well as life in Soviet prisons under both the Cheka and the NKVD. Other dilemmas faced by these memoirists were certainly not widely experienced, such as whether using livestock to farm constituted "violence towards animals." This conflict, which led to a minor schism in the community, certainly never even entered the minds of most rural inhabitants of the Soviet Union.

These retellings of lives lived on the cusp of normality and uniqueness are incredibly rich and varied. Readers should be prepared for an emotional roller-coaster ride. Humorous passages like those in which Mazurin recounted the enthusiastic response by a local Bolshevik to the commune's 1925 proposal to teach Tolstoy's religious views to neighboring peasants because he "loved speeches, lectures, and discussions of all kinds" (p. 33) are accompanied by stomach-turning scenes like Iakov Dragunovskii's account of his torture by the Cheka for refusing to serve in the Red Army (p. 206).

William Edgerton and Indiana University Press have given us all a great gift by producing this English translation. We now have a very readable and accessible account of individual lives in Russia during the first four decades of the twentieth century. Professors will undoubtedly find that the volume fills a large gap in their syllabus for Soviet history, and I sincerely hope that Indiana University Press will soon issue the volume in paperback so that it can be assigned to undergraduates even more readily.

Each reader will no doubt want to provide his or her own interpretation of how to understand these memoirs in the broader context of Soviet history. I would suggest, however, that such interpretations take note of Mazurin's own understanding of the history of the Life and Labor commune:

"Out of the stormy, boundless ocean of human life, with all its infinitely varied aspirations and fates, suddenly one part of it was caught up in a powerful maelstrom, whirled together into one unit, and torn away from the rest of the mass. It was carried off on the foamy crest of the wave. Then with a mighty surge it was lifted up into the air, toward the sun, and was thrown with powerful force against a cliff. It broke into thousands of droplets, sparkling with all the colors of the rainbow, then fell back into the ocean and merged with it. And it was no more. And it seemed that there had never been anything.

But there was! And the memory of it lives on in the souls of those who experienced it as something bright, great, necessary, and joyous" (p. 108).

There are indeed many colors in this memoir, some rare and unusual, some very common. It is worth your time to study and admire all of them.

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