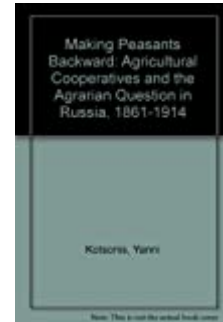




**Yanni Kotsonis.** *Making Peasants Backward: Managing Populations in Russian Agricultural Cooperatives, 1861-1914.* New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. x + 245 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-312-22099-0.



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## Keeping the Peasants Backward

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Yanni Kotsonis's compact book about the agricultural cooperatives movement argues persuasively that Russian officials and gentry-dominated zemstvos conspired to keep Russia's peasants "backward." In their own eyes the projects that ministry officials and zemstvo activists developed and funded were progressive and were meant to help peasants develop their agriculture and economy. Because they considered peasants incapable of managing their own affairs, however, they kept them locked into a legal structure that encouraged the persistence of agriculturally unproductive methods and fiscally irresponsible behavior. The "conspiracy" was at least at times inadvertent.

Kotsonis finds the evidence for this conclusion in a close study of many efforts over more than half a century by officials of the Ministries of Finance and its Main Administration of Land Organization and Agriculture (the Ministry of Agriculture after 1894) and by activists in the zemstvos to develop peasant agriculture through the creation and operation of a variety of types of cooperatives. The largest early effort involved the establishment

of rural savings and loan associations. These were meant to cut across estate barriers, loaning money to peasant as well as gentry farmer-members. After the first was established in 1866, hundreds more sprang up and soon an organization was founded in St. Petersburg to coordinate their activities. Despite enthusiasm for their work, the great majority had failed by the 1880's.

At the time most participants and observers blamed the failures on the peasants' low levels of literacy and numeracy. Others, understanding more clearly where the money had gone, saw it as evidence that peasants were wily and untrustworthy and in need of supervision. Kotsonis demonstrates that the peasants engaged in a good deal of chicanery to get money from the associations, which they apparently never meant to invest in agricultural improvements (as the associations intended) or to repay. Several aspects of traditional peasant life encouraged this behavior, which officials and other non-peasant participants interpreted as backwardness. In some cases the money was loaned to whole villages and divided equally among residents. This ensured that no household received enough to invest and therefore never made

improvements which might increase their incomes and allow them to repay the loans.

Collective responsibility for repayment also tended to mean that no one was truly responsible. Where the associations made loans to individual households, they were often repaid by wealthier (kulak) households but not by poorer families. This led the associations over time and against their inclination to help the producing laborers, not the money-lenders, middlemen and, as they saw it, other parasites of the villages to give more loans to the better off peasants. It often turned out that the kulaks used the money to give smaller loans to poorer families at usurious rates and that almost all of the money poured into the villages went in one way or another for day-to-day expenses. When it came time to collect, the inalienability of peasant land meant that there was not much the associations could do to require repayment.

Kotsonis next looks at other forms of association, particularly dairy *artels* in the northwest provinces and *artels* of poorer peasants who were meant to pool resources and farm collectively, most of which were established in Ukraine and Perm province. Both new types encountered difficulties similar to those experienced by the *s-and-l*'s and quickly failed. If the dairy *artels*, for example, were made up of equally poor members, none of the households produced enough surplus milk with which to operate and all investments simply disappeared. The few coops that did succeed seemed to benefit only their wealthier members. Most of the producer *artels* Kotsonis investigated seem to have been frauds from the beginning, formed by peasants as a ruse to get *zemstvo* loans for buying or renting horses. Rather than farming collectively, however, they usually divvied up the loans or purchases and maintained their individual economies. Where they did share horses, inspectors noticed a high mortality rate among the horses and concluded that no one was bothering to feed them.

The sum of these experiences (and other forces at work at the same time) led by the end of the 1880's to wide acceptance of the idea that peasants would have to be closely supervised. As the economic thinking of the early 1890's was dominated by men such as Sergei Witte, the Minister of Finance, who believed strongly in state direction of economic development, fresh hope was placed in peasant cooperatives overseen by trained, non-peasant specialists. Debate was joined for a time between the Ministries of Finance and Internal Affairs about who these specialists should be, *zemstvo* officials, inspectors from Finance, or the recently organized land captains of

Internal Affairs. Witte apparently saw coops as an intermediary stage between traditional peasant communes (they were voluntary, freer, more progressive) and a free market, which he was not ready to countenance. Most importantly, while he was willing that peasants should leave their communes, he was not willing to consider that they should own their land or be able to alienate it. Thus earlier problems with personal responsibility and loan collections remained.

In the wake of the 1905 revolution Peter Stolypin and others did try to create a new group among the peasants who would own their land, use it as collateral, and begin to break down traditional estate structure. Between 1906 and 1910 they partially succeeded, but by 1910 opponents of that view, mainly in the Ministry of Finance and in the still gentry-dominated *zemstvos* defeated the initiative. Peasant land never did become alienable. In 1915 the Senate confirmed the inalienability of peasant lands for all credit institutions.

In his last chapter Kotsonis examines who chose to join and who was permitted to join the many government supervised cooperatives, which encompassed approximately one-fourth of all peasant households in 1914. Here too he sees the continuation of policies begun in the 1890's. A patriarchal government, still guided by a strong suspicion of capitalism, even in the Ministry of Finance, continued to assist the peasants with loans and guidance and "protected" them from traders, money-lenders, and other peasants who did not labor in agriculture, who were not permitted to join the coops. Kotsonis also finds a great deal of ethnic and religious bias in favor of Great Russian peasants. In areas where non-Russian or non-Orthodox peasants were numerous they were often not permitted to join. Jews in the Pale of Settlement suffered particular discrimination.

A brief epilog describes the collapse of peasant agriculture in World War I and the revolutions and civil war that followed. Kotsonis writes that the decision makers' attitude toward the peasants was born of arrogance that stemmed from their superior position (in the gentry and/or the bureaucracy) and education. They believed that this allowed them to understand and act in the peasants' best interests even when the peasants couldn't comprehend them. That many bureaucrats and activists came to this conclusion is undoubtable, but the evidence Kotsonis provides allows for a more complex interpretation. During the several decades after the emancipation hundreds of efforts to assist the peasants through cooperatives and savings and loan associations failed. Again

and again peasants failed to use money loaned them productively, and just as regularly they failed to repay those loans. After Kotsonis has walked us through the details, it is easy to understand why the peasants acted as they did.

At the same time it shouldn't surprise us that lenders would be loath to lend more in the same fashion or that they interpreted the peasants' behavior as irresponsible. The root of the problem was clear: peasant land was inalienable so there was never sufficient collateral (or leverage) to encourage repayment. As long as officialdom was unwilling to permit or to require the peasants to act as independent agents in the world of capital, as owners of alienable land and individually responsible for their debts, there was no reason to hope that they would act differently. We have long known that some officials and

activists wanted to pursue that option in the Stolypin land reforms. It is less well known how thoroughly that part of the effort was defeated by 1911. It is never fair to criticize an author for the book he didn't write the book Kotsonis did write is well done in all regards; it is thoughtful and thought provoking but I would like to have read a more thorough explanation of how that crucial decision was engineered. We can hope that Kotsonis will return to this subject or that his work will inspire someone else to do so. We might also hope that someone will prepare an executive summary of this book for Vladimir Putin.

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