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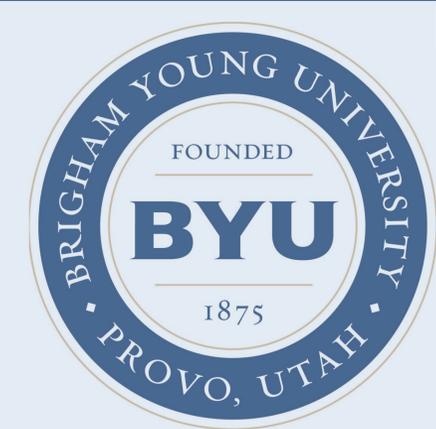
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Peasants and the Russian Revolution:

the Affects of the Russian Peasantry on the Revolutionary Outcomes of the Revolution of 1917

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Abstract

The Russian Revolution was one of the most influential events in the twentieth century. It created a state that was far different than any other in the world at the time. The Bolsheviks that came into power used high-minded rhetoric to garner support for their cause. This project examines the relationships between the communist movers and shakers that fought for the proletarians and the rural peasants of Russia. Our study seeks to understand how peasants that did not fit within the Marxist model were able to influence the revolutionary outcomes of the Russian Revolution. This is a study of the intersection of the harsh social conditions of the poor former serfs and the political changes that resulted from the Bolshevik revolution. Our research will demonstrate that Russian peasants' economic situation forced Lenin to adapt Marxist ideology that in turn led to the particular revolutionary outcomes of the Russian Revolution.

Introduction

In 1861 Tsar Alexander II abolished serfdom in Russia. Peasants were no longer subject to their lords by law. Russia began to move toward a more modern economic structure with a rising merchant class. This is an example of the class evolution and progression that Karl Marx had outlined in his *Communist Manifesto*. According to Marx, the next feasible evolution was the advent of the bourgeoisie and the subsequent proletariat revolt that would come about as a result of industrialization. Marx's history of class struggle is the basis for his arguments concerning the coming of a classless society where everyone would control the means of production. During the nineteenth century, these ideas flourished with the rise of the bourgeoisie and their alleged subjugation of workers. Laborers held to these ideas and even sought to enact them in the Revolutions of 1848. However, not until after the Russian Revolution of 1917 would someone transform Marxist ideas from high-minded rhetoric into a governing institution. From the abolition of serfdom until the formation of the Bolshevik regime, peasants played a unique role in Russia. Many of the peasants felt the direct results of the autocratic rule of the Tsar. Serfdom was abolished but the economy was still agrarian with little industrialization taking root. The peasants were poor, ignorant and unable to advance their station because of the inequitable distribution of land. However, the peasant's situation contributed to the growth of utopian ideas in Russia and helped to transform nineteenth-century Marxism into the Leninism that the Bolsheviks enacted. It was, in part, because of peasants and the revolutionary situation that they were commiserate to that the Bolsheviks were able to create the revolutionary outcomes of the Russian Revolution. Even after the Bolsheviks took power the structure of Russian society remained largely unchanged as a result of the commune organization of peasant labor that had previously existed under Tsarist rule remaining.

Peasants and the Russian Economy

With the abolition of serfdom some aspects of the Russian economy changed, but overall, the peasants occupied a similar economic station through the beginning of the twentieth century. From 1861 through 1921 the Russian economy remained largely agrarian. However, as the population grew competition for arable land increased. Although serfdom had been abolished, land ownership continued to operate under feudal-like conditions. The most nutrient and fertile soil was controlled by the wealthy landowners, leaving the less desirable soil for the newly freed serfs. In an attempt to catch up with the rest of Europe, Peter the Great instituted a policy of modernization and



industrialization which was carried on by subsequent Tsars, including Alexander II. This included building railroads and expanding the mining and oil industries. The burden of funding this rapid move towards industrialization frequently fell on the peasants. With limited land resources, peasants were often unable to pay the taxes levied on them. This was, in turn, partially responsible for the decline of the rural economy in Russia. The close of the 19th century in Russia saw the peasantry exposed to an agrarian crisis. Widespread famine resulted in food shortages as well as additional economic hardships that not only affected rural people, but also the population found within the industrial centers of Russia. The structure of the Russian work force led to unrest and caused peasants to be open to ideas of socialism.

Peasants and Leninism

Under the Marxist stages of history, a nation had to go through several stages, including feudalism and capitalism, before they could emerge as a communist entity. Lenin, while agreeing with the basic tenants of Marxism, differed in this belief and thought that it was not necessary for a state to experience capitalism to become communist, thus enabling Russia to become communist immediately instead of waiting for the rise and fall of capitalism. Because of the late abolishment of serfdom in Russia, the peasants had not had a sufficient amount of time to become an independent producing class and thus were unable to resist the demands of the state. Due to the food shortages and the need to feed soldiers in 1917 the Soviet government nationalized all land, thereby removing it from peasants' control and prohibited peasants from leaving their farm or native village, pushing them into a new form of serfdom. B.R. Roberts stated, "From a

Marxist perspective, peasant economies are seen as persisting and adaptable units of production." Unable to leave the sphere of agricultural labor or resist the demands of the Soviet government, peasants were forced to turn over all excess food produced or face terrible consequences. Under the Lenin regime, peasants were the base for the Soviet social system; they provided the food for the army and for the people in the cities. Without the peasants the socialist government would have failed, making it necessary for the Soviet government to control the peasants in a system reflective of serfdom of old.

Peasants and Revolutionary Outcomes

Peasants played a significant role in Russia's lag behind the rest of Europe in industrialization. The significant amount of poor peasants was a result of urbanization not occurring as dramatically as in Western Europe, allowing for peasants to have a more significant role in the Great War and the Russian revolution. World War 1 set up and helped create a peasant body that could play a role in the Russian Revolution by allowing peasants to join the army and learn what it was like to be treated as an individual and as an equal. In early 1917, strikes for bread broke out due to the war and unsound financial policies of the autocracy. Because many peasants had joined the army, when the government tried to contain the strikes the army would not attack their own, compounding the problems of unrest because the government was unable to contain neither the strikes or control the army. Within a short period of time the soldiers were sharing their food with those that were striking. The combination of the provisional government having no control and a peasant based economy lead to the outbreak of the Russian Revolution. This allowed the Bolsheviks to overrun Petrograd and take control of the government, leading to major changes in the outcome of the Revolution. In 1918, when the Red Troops ended the proposed general elections it consolidated the Communists power and paved the way for Russia to become an ideal Communist society. To finalize the Bolsheviks power grab they created a large governmental army and a civil bureaucracy, which they filled with the communist officials and supporters. Thus enabling them to tightly control Russia and end the Civil War in 1921. With the establishment of the Bolsheviks as the legitimate ruling power they enacted new policies, such as, the New Economic Policy, which imposed a grain tax but left the peasants free to sell their surplus crops for a personal profit and simultaneously attempted to stabilize the economy. This new economic policy made it possible for peasants to gain their own farms and to make an individual profit instead of being dependent on the state, reflecting the Communist ideal of all citizens being equal. Thus, the revolutionary outcomes were directly affected by the socioeconomic conditions of the peasants.

Conclusion

Peace, land and bread was the rallying cry during the Russian Revolution. With the Bolsheviks gaining power and instituting a new governing body the goals of Russia changed. Russia became a new kind of despotic tyranny that functioned according to Leninist ideals. The means of production were controlled in the manner that Lenin and the Bolsheviks prescribed and the citizens of Russia were subjected to tyranny much like they had been before. The success of the Russian Revolution contrasted with the failures that other workers revolutions had met during the nineteenth century. The peasants involvement in the revolution and the subsequent outcomes demonstrates the adaptation of Marxism and the effects that upon a movement. somewhat trivial socioeconomic players can have upon a movement.