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THE CONCEPT OF A 'PEASANT WAR' IN SOVIET AND WESTERN HISTORIOGRAPHY OF THE 'TROUBLES' IN EARLY 17th-CENTURY AND EARLY 20th-CENTURY RUSSIA

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Abstract. The concept of 'peasant wars' in 17th- and 18th-century Russia was borrowed by Soviet historians from Friedrich Engels' work on the Peasant War in Germany. The four peasant wars of the early modern period were identified as the uprisings led by Ivan Bolotnikov (1606-1607), Sten'ka Razin (1667-1671), Kondratiy Bulavin (1707-1708) and Emel'ian Pugachev (1773-1775). Following a debate in the journal *Voprosy istorii* in 1958-1961, the 'first peasant war' was generally considered to encompass the period c.1603-1614 rather than simply 1606-1607. This approach recognised the continuities in the events of the early 17th century, and it meant that the chronological span of the 'first peasant war' was virtually identical to that of the older concept of the 'Time of Troubles'. By the 1970s the term, 'civil wars of the feudal period' (based on a quotation from Lenin) was sometimes used to define 'peasant wars'. It was recognised by Soviet historians that these civil wars were very complex in their social composition, and that the insurgents did not exclusively (or even primarily) comprise peasants, with Cossacks playing a particularly significant role. Nevertheless the general character of the uprisings was seen as 'anti-feudal'. From the 1980s, however, R.G. Skrynnikov and A.L. Stanislavskiy discarded the view that the events of the 'Time of Troubles' constituted an anti-feudal peasant war. They preferred the term 'civil war', and stressed vertical rather than horizontal divisions between the two armed camps. Western historians, with the notable exception of the American historian Paul Avrich, generally rejected the application of the term 'peasant wars' to the Russian uprisings of the early modern period, regarding them as primarily Cossack-led revolts. From the 1960s, however, Western scholars such as Teodor Shanin (following the American anthropologist Eric Wolf) began to use the term 'peasant wars' in relation to the role played by peasants in 20th-century revolutionary events such as those in Russia and China. Some of these Western historians, including Avrich and Wolf, used the term not only for peasant actions in the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, but also for peasant rebellions against the new Bolshevik regime (such as the *Makhnovshchina* and the *Antonovshchina*) that Soviet scholars considered to be counter-revolutionary banditry. The author argues that, in relation to the 'Time of Troubles' in early 20th-century Russia, the term 'peasant war' is not entirely suitable to describe peasant actions against the agrarian relations of the old regime in 1905 and 1917, since these were generally orderly and non-violent. The term is more appropriate for the anti-Bolshevik uprisings of armed peasant bands in 1918-1921, as suggested by the British historian Orlando Figes.

Key words: Historiography of Russia, 'Time of Troubles' in Russia, Friedrich Engels, 'peasant wars', Ivan Bolotnikov, R.G. Skrynnikov, A.L. Stanislavskiy, civil wars in Russia, Paul Avrich, Eric Wolf, Teodor Shanin, Orlando Figes, Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917, Makhnovshchina, Antonovshchina.

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КОНЦЕПЦИЯ «КРЕСТЬЯНСКИХ ВОЙН» В РОССИИ НАЧАЛА XVII в. И НАЧАЛА XX в. В СОВЕТСКОЙ И ЗАПАДНОЙ ИСТОРИОГРАФИИ

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Аннотация. Концепция «крестьянских войн» в России XVII–XVIII вв. была заимствована советскими историками из работы Фридриха Энгельса «Крестьянская война в Германии». Крестьянскими войнами раннего Нового времени были названы 4 восстания: во главе с Иваном Болотниковым (1606–1607), Стенькой Разиным (1667–1671), Кондратием Булавиным (1707–1708) и Емельяном Пугачевым (1773–1775). После дискуссии на страницах журнала «Вопросы истории» в 1958–1961 гг. периодом «первой крестьянской войны», как правило, стали считать 1603–1614 гг., а не просто 1606–1607 годы. В этом подходе была признана преемственность событий начала XVII в., и это означало, что хронологический интервал «первой крестьянской войны» был практически идентичен периодизации Смутного времени. К 1970-м гг. для определения «крестьянских войн» иногда стали использовать термин «гражданские войны феодального периода», основанный на цитате из сочинений В.И. Ленина. Советские историки признали, что эти гражданские войны были очень сложными по своему социальному составу и что повстанцы не состояли исключительно (или даже в первую очередь) из крестьян, причем казаки играли особенно значимую роль. Тем не менее общий характер восстаний был расценен как «антифеодальный». Однако с 1980-х гг. Р.Г. Скрынников и А.Л. Станиславский отвергли мнение о том, что события Смутного времени представляли собой антифеодальную крестьянскую войну. Они предпочли термин «гражданская война» и подчеркивали вертикальное, а не горизонтальное разделение между двумя вооруженными лагерями. Западные историки, за исключением американского историка Пола Аврича, в целом отвергали применение термина «крестьянские войны» к русским восстаниям раннего Нового времени, считая их преимущественно восстаниями под руководством казаков. Однако с 1960-х гг. западные ученые, такие как Теодор Шанин (вслед за американским антропологом Эриком Вольфом), начали использовать термин «крестьянские войны» в связи с большой ролью крестьян в революционных событиях XX в. в России и Китае. Некоторые из них, включая Р. Аврича и Э. Вольфа, использовали этот термин не только для обозначения действий крестьян в русских революциях 1905 и 1917 гг., но и для обозначений крестьянских восстаний против нового большевистского режима, таких как махновщина и антоновщина, которые советские ученые считают контрреволюционным бандитизмом. Автор утверждает, что в отношении Смутного времени в России начала XX в. термин «крестьянская война» не совсем подходит для описания действий крестьян против аграрной политики старого режима в 1905 и 1917 гг., поскольку она в целом была упорядоченной и ненасильственной. Этот термин больше подходит для антибольшевистских восстаний вооруженных крестьянских группировок в 1918–1921 гг., как это было предложено британским историком Орландо Файджесом.

Ключевые слова: историография России, Смутное время в России, Фридрих Энгельс, крестьянские войны, Иван Болотников, Р.Г. Скрынников, А.Л. Станиславский, гражданские войны в России, Пол Аврич, Эрик Вольф, Теодор Шанин, Орландо Файджес, русские революции 1905 и 1917 гг., махновщина, антоновшина.

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The concept of 'peasant wars' in 17th- and 18th-century Russia was borrowed by Soviet historians from Friedrich Engels' work on the Peasant War in Germany. One of the first applications of the term to Russia was an article by S.M. Dubrovskii in a collection published in 1925 to mark the 400th anniversary of the German Peasant War [4]. Dubrovskii identified only three peasant wars in Russia: the first peasant war (1606-1607) led by Ivan Bolotnikov, the second (1667-1671) by Sten'ka Razin and the third by Emel'ian Pugachev (1773-1775); but by the 1930s the uprising led by Kondratii Bulavin (1707-1708) was also recognised as a peasant war.

The limitation of the term, 'first peasant war', to the Bolotnikov uprising was to prove controversial [1]. Following a debate in the journal *Voprosy istorii* in 1958-1961, the 'first peasant war' was generally considered to encompass the entire period c.1603-1614 rather than simply 1606-1607 [2]. This approach had the advantage of recognising continuities in the events of the early 17th century: the Khlopko uprising of 1603, the campaign for the throne of the First False Dmitrii and his brief reign (1604-1606), the Bolotnikov rising, the career of the Second False Dmitrii (1607-1610), popular opposition to the Polish and Swedish military interventions of 1609-1612, and the Zarutskii episode of 1611-1614. It also meant that the chronological span of the 'first peasant war' was virtually identical to that of the older concept of the 'Time of Troubles'.

In the course of the debate in *Voprosy istorii* the question was raised of whether these events of the early 17th century could be regarded as a 'civil war'. On the basis of quotations from Lenin, the editors of the journal agreed that peasant wars were 'civil wars of the epoch of feudalism', and that the term 'civil war' was therefore applicable to the events of the early 17th century [3] [12, p. 107]. By the 1970s terms such as 'civil wars of the feudal period' were commonly used to define 'peasant wars' (for example: [11, p. 115-116]; see also: [2, p. 10]). Soviet historians recognised that these civil wars were very complex in their social composition, and that the insurgents did not exclusively (or even primarily) comprise peasants – the role of cossacks being particularly significant. Nevertheless they viewed the general character of the uprisings as 'anti-feudal'. From the 1980s, however, R.G. Skrynnikov and A.L. Stanislavskii discarded the view that the events of the early 17th century constituted an anti-feudal peasant war [4]. They preferred the terms, 'Troubles (*smuta*)' or 'civil war', but in the latter case they stressed that the divisions between the two armed camps were vertical or sectional, rather than the horizontal conflicts that the Leninist definition of the civil war as a form of anti-feudal class struggle implied. Stanislavskii, in particular, also rejected any equation between the interests of the cossacks and those of the peasants [18, p. 249-251; 19, p. 246-253; 20; 22]. Some of the evidence adduced by Skrynnikov and Stanislavskii in support of their 'revisionist' interpretations was subsequently used by Western historians who also rejected the term 'first peasant war' in favour of 'first civil war' or 'Time of Troubles' [5; 15].

In general, Western historians dismissed the notion that not only the events of the early 17th century but also the later popular uprisings led by Razin, Bulavin and Pugachev should be described as 'peasant wars', preferring to see them as cossack wars, cossack-peasant wars or popular uprisings (see, for example: [8, p. 19; 26, p. 258]). A notable exception was the American historian Paul Avrich (1931-2006), whose book, *Russian Rebels, 1600-1800*, identified the main uprisings as those which Soviet historians defined as 'peasant wars' (the rebellions led by Bolotnikov, Razin, Bulavin and Pugachev). Avrich recognised that Soviet historians borrowed the term 'peasant war' from Engels' study of 16th-century Germany, and that they did so partly in order to draw an analogy between the course of Russian history and that of western and central Europe. He acknowledged that the social and ethnic composition of the participants in all four uprisings was complex, with cossacks playing an important leadership role. Nevertheless, he claimed that peasants were the most numerous recruits to the movements, 'so that the label "peasant wars", however imprecise, does in fact convey something of the nature of the risings'. Moreover, he argued that many of the other categories of participants, including the cossacks, 'were themselves essentially peasants, only recently uprooted from the soil', and that the majority of the 'tribal adherents' to the revolts (the Mordva, Mari and Chuvash) were settled agriculturists rather than nomads [1, p. 4-5]. In relation to the Bolotnikov rising, however, Avrich noted that the role of the rural peasants was slight, and was largely limited to the Komaritskaia district [1, p. 5, 23].

In the concept of the 'peasant war' Avrich also saw an element of continuity between the early-modern revolts and the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. He noted that Marx had identified the need for a 'second edition of the Peasants' War' as an accompaniment of proletarian revolution in Germany in the modern period, and that both Lenin and Trotsky had used the term 'peasant war' in relation to the Russian revolution of 1917 [5]. Marx and Lenin, Avrich argued, had borrowed their analysis from Bakunin, who had seen the Razin

and Pugachev revolts as prototypes of a forthcoming Russian anarcho-socialist revolution of all the dispossessed elements in society [6]. Such revolutions, incorporating 'peasant wars', he noted, had occurred in the 20th century not only in Russia, but also in China and in Spain [1, p. 265-267]. In spite of the obvious differences between them, Avrich identified a number of similarities between the Russian revolutions of the early 20th century and their earlier predecessors: all were complex spontaneous explosions of mass discontent, directed against the state as well as against the rich and the powerful [7] [1, p. 268-271].

After the Bolsheviks came to power, however, Avrich argued, they created a new centralised state that was stronger than the tsarist autocracy it replaced. This provoked the opposition of the anarchists and the Socialist-Revolutionaries, who attacked 'the "Communists and commissars" as Razin and Pugachev had opposed the "boyars and officials".' 'In this sense', Avrich continued, 'the anarchist Makhno, the ex-Socialist Revolutionary Antonov, and the sailors of Kronstadt were the final echoes of the earlier mass protests against centralized bureaucratic despotism' [1, p. 271] Avrich did not explicitly describe the *Makhnovshchina* and the *Antonovshchina* as 'peasant wars', but his depiction of Makhno and Antonov as the successors of Razin and Pugachev, whose uprisings he had earlier identified as 'peasant wars', indicates that he viewed these movements during the Civil War of 1918-1921 as the same type of phenomenon.

The idea that 20th-century revolutions such as those in Russia and China could be described as incorporating modern-style 'peasant wars' was not unique to Avrich. In 1969 the radical American anthropologist Eric Wolf had published a book entitled *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, which compared six cases of rebellion and revolution – Mexico, Russia, China, Vietnam, Algeria and Cuba – in which peasants played a major role [24, p. XIV, XIX]. Wolf nowhere defined his concept of a 'peasant war', but his use of the term in the title of his book suggests that he regarded his modern case-studies as somehow analogous to the German peasant war of the 16th century. Wolf presented the peasant rebellions of the 20th century as elements of broader and more complex social movements. In his discussion of Russia, for example, he described the revolution of 1905 as involving industrial strikes and mutinies in the armed forces as well as peasant disorders [24, p. 85-87]. The same three movements coincided in 1917, when mass desertions from the army led to the seizure of power by the Bolsheviks and the wholesale expropriation of land by the peasants [24, p. 87-92]. Wolf also devoted some attention to the conflict between the Bolsheviks and the Makhnovites in Ukraine, in which he detected similarities to the Zapatista movement in Mexico [24, p. 94-97].

Wolf's book appeared at a time when 'peasant studies' was becoming an exciting new academic field in the West. Interest in peasants, who had previously been of concern primarily to historians of medieval and early modern Europe, expanded after the Second World War, when the Chinese Revolution demonstrated that Russia's was not the only so-called socialist revolution to succeed in a country where the majority of the population were peasants. The wave of anti-colonial movements in Africa and Asia also raised both scholarly and popular interest in peasantries and their involvement in revolutionary events [8]. Wolf himself, in his Preface to *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, argued that American failures in the Vietnam War demonstrated the need for a greater understanding of peasantries of the type who were currently inflicting such damage on the military might of the United States [24, p. XIII-XIV]. And in an essay on Engels' *Peasant War in Germany*, published nearly two decades later, he observed that 'The re-emergence of popular, often peasant-based movements in the colonial and post-colonial worlds of this century … should remind us that the problems posed by Engels … remain on the agenda long after the first publication of *The Peasant War* in 1850' [25, pp. 83-84]

Teodor Shanin, who had played an important part in the development of peasant studies in the United Kingdom in the 1970s, devoted an entire book to the role of the peasantry in the Russian revolution of 1905-1907. In line with Wolf's interpretation, Shanin described the Russian peasant movement of 1905-1907 as the start of 'a new wave of peasant wars whose specificity is defined by their social and historical situation at the periphery of the global capitalist advance' [17, p. 82-83]. Shanin recognised that the Russian

peasant wars of the 17th and 18th centuries had all been led by cossacks, who provided military skills and experience [17, p. 81]. Yet he still used the term 'peasant war' (as well as 'Jacquery') [9] for the rural rebellions of 1905-1907, although his evidence demonstrated that these were very different from the uprisings of the medieval and early modern periods. With the main exception of arson against manor houses, peasant direct action in 1905-1907 was generally non-violent and orderly, mostly taking the forms of land seizures, wage strikes and rent strikes. Other forms of activity were peacefully political, including the formation of the All-Russia Peasant Union, and support for embryonic parties, such as the Socialist-Revolutionaries [10] [17, p. 79-137].

In 1989 Orlando Figes, then of the University of Cambridge, published a book, based on his Ph.D. thesis, on the role of the Volga peasantry in the revolution of 1917-1921. Figes, who was one of the first Western scholars to obtain access (in 1984-1985) to Russian archives, counted Teodor Shanin among his academic advisors, and his book was written very much in the tradition of Wolf and Shanin [11]. Like Shanin in relation to 1905-1907, Figes used the term 'jacquery' to describe the peasant movement in 1917; and – again like Shanin – he argued that peasant behaviour during the revolution was less violent and more organised than many of its critics had suggested [12] [6, p. 47-61]. Unlike Shanin, however, Figes used the term 'peasant war' not for peasant actions against the agrarian relations of the old regime, but rather for the anti-Bolshevik peasant uprisings of c.1919-1922, such as those led by Makhno in eastern Ukraine and by Antonov in Tambov province [13]. Figes noted that such 'peasant wars' took place in many areas across the territory of the former Russian Empire. In the Volga region, which was the main focus of his own study, he identified the 'wars of the *chapany* and the Black Eagle'; the activity of the mutinous Red Army division led by A.S. Sapozhkov; and the warfare waged by various bandit armies against the Bolsheviks. These 'peasant wars' were described by Soviet historians as 'counter-revolutionary kulak revolts' or as 'banditism' but, as Figes showed, they enjoyed broad support from the peasantry as a whole for their aim of restoring the village democracy of 1917 and opposing the Bolshevik policies of War Communism such as grain requisitioning [14] [6, p. 321-353]. These movements involved a considerable degree of violence, with military operations on a wide scale by armed bands, which were often led by deserters from the Red Army.

Thus we have seen that by the 1990s there was general agreement among both Russian and Western historians that the term 'peasant war' was not suitable for the events of the early 17th century, which were more appropriately described as a 'civil war' or by the older term, 'Time of Troubles'. In relation to the events of the early 20th century, the situation was somewhat different. Although Lenin had used the term 'peasant war' to refer to the agrarian movement of 1917, the term was not generally used in this context by Soviet historians, who preferred phrases such as 'peasant movement' or 'agrarian revolution'. Some Western historians, however, described the role of the peasantry in the revolutions of 1905-1907 and 1917, and in the Civil War of 1918-1921, as constituting a 'peasant war'. Scholars such as Eric Wolf, Paul Avrich and Teodor Shanin applied the term to the role of the peasants not only in the Russian revolutions, but also in other 20th-century revolutions in 'backward' countries, such as China. Their use of the term undoubtedly harked back to the German Peasant War of 1525, or at least to Engels' account of it. It is not entirely clear what Marx meant when he spoke of the possibility of a 'second edition of the Peasant War' in Prussia in the mid-19th century, but his idea of a revolutionary alliance between the workers' movement and a 'peasant war' was sufficiently attractive for Lenin to use it in order to provide an authentically 'Marxist' justification for a socialist revolution in a peasant country.

Although some Western historians employed the term 'peasant war' in relation to Russian peasant actions in 1905-1907 and 1917, the findings of Shanin and Figes – that peasant behaviour in those years, although mostly illegal, was generally non-violent and orderly – suggest that these events were rather a different phenomenon from the violent conflicts in early modern Germany to which Engels and others applied the term 'peasant war'. Perhaps the more appropriate parallel to the German Peasant War is the anti-Bolshevik activity of armed peasant bands in 1918-1921, for which Orlando Figes has proposed the term 'peasant wars'[15]. But these

anti-Bolshevik 'peasant wars' did not constitute the kind of alliance of peasants with workers against capitalism and the remnants of feudalism that had been advocated by Marx and Lenin. Rather – as Paul Avrich has noted – they were directed against the Soviet government and its agents and, like their early-modern predecessors, they were brutally suppressed by those who wielded centralised state power.

* * *

In relation to Russia, the concept of a 'peasant war' has been employed in various different contexts. For the early 17th century, both Soviet and Western historians applied the term to a civil war waged in a predominantly peasant society (the 'Time of Troubles'); and they also used it for the great cossack-peasant revolts led by Razin, Bulavin and Pugachev. For the early 20th century, the term has been employed by some Western scholars to describe the peasant movement in the revolutions of 1905-1907 and 1917; and also for peasant uprisings against the Soviet state in 1918-1922. All too often, historians failed to provide clear definitions of the concept, but the debates surrounding its use have raised many interesting issues concerning the role of the peasantry in popular uprisings and revolutions, both in Russia itself and in a comparative context. Some of these debates are still ongoing, and it is to be hoped that they will continue to contribute to our understanding of the nature of the Russian 'troubles' of both the early 17th and the early 20th centuries.

NOTES

[1] The most thorough account of the Bolotnikov uprising is [21].

[2] The debate was initiated by an article by A.A. Zimin published in March 1958 [27], and concluded with an overview of the discussion, published in May 1961 [12].

[3] In particular, Lenin had described the German Peasant War as a civil war between the peasants and the landowners, and noted that there were many similar examples in Russia of peasant uprisings against serf-owners [9, p. 77].

[4] Skrynnikov's work dealt in detail with events to the end of 1607, while Stanislavskii was primarily concerned with the later stages of the Time of Troubles, to the Truce of Deulino of 1618 and beyond.

[5] Marx's reference to a new Peasant War was made in a letter to Engels of 16 April 1856, and it was quoted by Lenin in 1923, in a commentary on the Menshevik Nikolai Sukhanov's book, *Zapiski o revoliutsii*. Sukhanov had criticised the Bolsheviks' seizure of power as a premature revolution, in the absence of the necessary 'Marxist' prerequisites for socialism; in response, Lenin justified his revolution as a version of 'the alliance of a "peasant war" with a workers' movement' which Marx himself had hoped for in Prussia in 1856 [10, p. 378, 380, 598-599]. The reference to Trotsky is to his *History of the Russian Revolution*. In the context of his theory of the 'combined development' of countries such as Russia, which displayed a mixture of backward elements and modern factors, Trotsky wrote that, 'In order to realise the Soviet state, there was required a drawing together and mutual penetration of two factors belonging to completely different historic species: a peasant war – that is, a movement characteristic of the dawn of bourgeois development – and a proletarian insurrection, the movement signalising its decline. That is the essence of 1917' [23, p. 63-64]

[6] Avrich's own earlier work had been on the history of Russian anarchism, a movement towards which he was broadly sympathetic.

[7] In his brief account of the revolutions of 1905-1907 and 1917, Avrich depicts them as rather more anarchic and disorganised than they appear in the interpretations of most other historians.

[8] The London-based *Journal of Peasant Studies*, which brought together the study of historical and contemporary peasantries in an inter-disciplinary approach, was founded in 1973.

[9] 'Jacquery' is an anglicised version of the French term *jacquerie*, the violent peasant uprising in northern France in 1358. By extension, the term has been applied to peasant rebellions more generally.

[10] For a similar interpretation of the peasant movement in 1905-1907, see [13].

[11] The epigraph to Figes' chapter on the peasantry in 1917 [6, p. 30] is a quotation from Wolf's *Peasant Wars*, on the context in which peasant rebellions of the 20th century took place: 'Traditional political authority has eroded or collapsed; new contenders for power are seeking new constituencies for entry into the vacant political arena. Thus when the peasant protagonist lights the torch of rebellion, the edifice of society is already smoldering and ready to take fire. When the battle is over, the structure will not be the same' [24, p. 295]

[12] For a similar interpretation, see [14].

[13] The movement in Tambov province had earlier been the subject of a book by the American historian Oliver Radkey [16].

[14] Paul Avrich noted that the term 'bandits', which was used by the Soviet government to denounce Makhno and Antonov, had earlier been used by the tsarist government to discredit the participants in popular uprisings [1, p. 272].

[15] The term 'peasant war' had earlier been used by Robert Conquest, in his book on the Ukrainian famine of 1930-1932, for the anti-Bolshevik rural uprisings of 1918-1922 [3, p. 50-54]. The Italian historian Andrea Graziosi later used the term for the entire relationship between the Soviet state and the peasantry from the revolution through collectivisation [7].

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