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# **Socio-Economic Position of Peasants in the Russian Far East in 1922–1941**

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## **Abstract**

The research objective is to study the socio-economic position of peasants in the Far East of Russia during transition from the market economy to the Soviet administrative command economy via comparative qualitative research methods. As a result, collectivization was determined by political goals rather than economic reasonability. In conclusion, Russia's federal and local authorities receive good reasons to pursue more active and efficient policy of giving the land to Russia's citizens, who wish to develop the agriculture in the Far East.

**Key words:** Collectivization, Economic, Independence, Government, Control.

## *Posición Económica y Social de Campesinos en el Extremo Oriente Ruso en 1922-1941*

### **Resumen**

El objetivo de la investigación es estudiar la posición socioeconómica de los campesinos en el Lejano Oriente de Rusia durante la transición de la economía de mercado a la economía de mando administrativa soviética a través de métodos comparativos de investigación cualitativa. Como resultado, la colectivización fue determinada por objetivos políticos más que por la razonabilidad económica. En conclusión, las autoridades federales y locales de Rusia reciben buenas razones para aplicar una política más activa y eficiente de entregar la tierra a los ciudadanos de Rusia que desean desarrollar la agricultura en el Lejano Oriente.

**Palabras clave:** Colectivización, Economía, Independencia, Gobierno, Control.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The study of the history of forming the socio-economic aspect of peasants of the Russian Far East в 1922-1941 is an important scientific task, which enables to reveal the true sense and goal of the Soviet social policy. The social position of the population is a permanently developing and evolving factor of the history of a country. This occurs under the influence of the social policy of the

state and society. The state is forming the population's social aspect in its own interests and through taking special measures. The society reacts to this policy in an appropriate manner: it supports this policy or resists it. A characteristic feature of the Soviet period was that the society could not resist the state policy, since the society did not have any relevant democratic institutions.

The world history's experience says that the more economically and politically independent the population is, the more diversified the social aspect of different social groups is. In the 1930-s the policy pursued by party and the government was aimed at removing the political and economic independence of the peasants. This policy led to significant simplification of their socio-economic aspect. There was a collapse of the previous social structure of the peasantry. New professions appeared, the forms of family and marriage changed, the peasants were deprived of all kinds of the private property. This research was aimed at studying and analyzing the process of forming the socio-economic aspect of the Far Eastern peasants of Russia in 1922-1941.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

Researching the social dynamics of the peasantry in the Russian Far East is a complicated and contradictory process. It can be divided into several periods. The first period covers the 1920-s. At that time

the papers, which were written by practical workers: the party, Soviet and economic leaders, were of the greatest scientific value. Those papers considered the social aspect of the Russian Far Eastern population as a constituent part of the general economic development of the regions. Those papers include the research by Lubimov (1925), Tselishev (1925), Derber and Sher (1927), Arkhipov (1929), Lagutin (1926), etc. An advantage of all the above-mentioned papers was their relative objectivity, the freedom of the exercised judgments and the lack of a uniform approach to covering the historical facts and judgments. In the 1920-s, scientific research was neither ideologized nor controlled by the party bodies yet.

The author used special methods of historical research to achieve the objectivity and reliability of conclusions and provisions of this paper. First of all, this is a method of scientific objectivity. This method made it possible to analyze the factual material not in terms of only a benevolent or critical approach to the policy pursued by the party and the state in relation to the peasants, but in terms of combination or contradiction of interests of the state and the peasant community, which were quite different. The method of a system and historical analysis made the author research a problem of the Far Eastern region in close relationship with the historical processes on a nationwide scale and not individually. The research of regional history through the history of the whole country makes it possible to understand the problem in the multilateral dimension.

### **3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Before 1929 the peasantry of the Russian Far East was different in a sense from the rural population of the country's other regions. Firstly, the people were divided according to their ethnic origins: the Chinese, the Koreans and the Russian peasants. Secondly, the people were divided into groups according to the length of their living in this territory. There are old residents, settlers and new settlers. The periods of residence had a great impact on the peasants' standing. They determined the land ownership size and the income level from different trades. Apart from that, an important peculiarity was the availability of a significant social group – the Cossacks, which had some differences from the peasantry in terms of the land allotments size, benefits and other advantages in carrying out the agricultural production. The land ownership size was the main factor, which determined the peasantry's economic aspect.

Considering that it is unprofitable to use the agricultural machinery in the peasant farm with the land allotment of up to 3 dessiatinas, the fact that there were 33% of such farms on a nationwide scale showed their unprofitability. There were no such farms in the Far East. This was another difference of the economic aspect of the Far Eastern peasants of the second half of the 1920-s from other regions of the country. The quantity of the draft animals and productive cattle was the next important characteristic of the socio-economic aspect of the peasantry. The 1923 census materials say that one peasant farm of

the Far East accounted for, on the average, more than 7 heads of cattle. This figure was a little more than 6 heads of cattle on a nationwide scale. Here the Far Eastern figure was higher than the figure in the whole Soviet Union.

A fundamental condition of forming their aspect was that they independently chose directions of development of their farms. This concerned, first of all, the determination of which crops should be grown to obtain a greater economic benefit. Before the 1917 revolution, it was economically reasonable to grow the indent crops – the wheat and oats. In the reconstruction period of 1922-1926, the state of the market demanded the Far Eastern peasants to change their priorities. The planting acreages of wheat and oats declined almost by half, but, at the same time, the industrial crop plantings increased. The flax acreages increased by 261%, the leguminous plants' acreages increased by 310%. Apart from that, rice plantings appeared. On average, rice was three times as expensive as oats and wheat. Those examples say that the Far Eastern farmers were quite independent agricultural producers.

The poor peasants insisted on the policy tightening in relation to the wealthy and middle peasants, as well as on rendering the state support for themselves. In January 1925 a group of poor peasants wrote a letter to the Chairman of the Central Executive Committee of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics M.I. Kalinin, which characterizes their attitudes excellently. They wrote: We can see from Molotov's report, that 40–45% of farm laborers and horseless peasants

live in our village. Comrades-leaders, please remember what Vladimir Lenin told us about those 40–45%. Those are our strength and proletarians, it is necessary to take care of them. It is necessary to look after the poor peasants and farm laborers and to give them everything (italicized by the author): tractors and all the necessary machines, to construct houses like those in a city and to pay them a salary, like workers. As we can see, the parasitical attitudes of this social group of peasants were the basis of their support for the collectivization policy. The middle peasants assessed this policy in a completely different way.

Comparison of those two letters shows that the middle peasants were right. They still believed in justice of the Soviet rule, which gave them the land and the economic freedom. They refused to believe that the Soviet rule would sacrifice the prosperity of millions of the Soviet citizens for the political reasonability, which demanded the millions of independent small owners in the agriculture to be dispossessed. Those millions were out of favor with the government because they were economically independent and they did not depend on the government. The Soviet political elite understood the parasitical attitudes of the poor peasants much better, which demanded the state to take care of them and to lead them. The policy of collectivization in the agriculture was pursued in such a way – to tear away the whole ownership (the land, agricultural implements, draft animals and productive cattle, houses and maintenance buildings) from the peasants.

Cleansing of the frontier areas from disloyal elements was the second way of depriving the prosperous peasants of their property, which was inherent in the Far East. In those areas, a good part of the prosperous Cossacks and the old residents had lived from time immemorial, who traditionally had the greatest land allotments. The disloyal peasants were subject to the administrative (extrajudicial) eviction from the frontier areas because of which they were deprived of their whole property and land. By the end of the collectivization in the Russian Far East, the socio-economic aspect of the peasants had changed very much. The farms, which owned the land, numbered only 7.5 thousand units, or 4.5% of their total number. Their average land allotment was 8–9 dessiatinas. On the average, they had 1–2 units of draft animals and 1–2 cows. Their social weight approached zero. Starting from this level the government authorities could start to deprive the peasants of the remainders of the property.

On June 17, 1939, the meeting of the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (of Bolsheviks) adopted a decision on supplies of the grain and potatoes by the individual farms in Primorye, Khabarovsk territories and Chita region. According to this decision, the individual farms were obliged to give up to 3 metric centers of the grain from each hectare of plantings to the state. Then the average crop capacity was 4–5 metric centers from a hectare. Therefore, more than half of the whole crop was subject to confiscation. Evidently, there is nothing else left for individual

peasants to do but to go to the collective farms or to leave the agriculture.

At the same meeting the Political Bureau of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (of the Bolsheviks) approved the contents of the joint Decision of the Council of People's Commissars of the USSR and the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (of Bolsheviks), which was called On organization of measurement of the plots of land of the collective farmers, and land of individual peasants and other peasants, who are not collective farmers. This decision obliged the local government authorities to measure the land of the said categories of the rural population before August 15, 1939.

The lands, which were over the standards determined by the Charter of Agricultural Brigade, were subject to confiscation. This was the third way of depriving the individual peasants of the land. The point was that small plots of land of collective farmers helped them to receive the agricultural products for personal consumption. The personal plots of land of the peasants-owners were critical in supplying the families with food. When the plots sizes were decreased to a standard specified in the Charter of Agricultural Brigade, the peasant families could not live off their land. As a result, those few peasants-owners, who were in the country at that time, were forced to give up their farms (Yang et al., 2019; Soo et al., 2019; shafiezzad Abkenar & Negahdari, 2017).

Deprivation of the peasants of their land ownership had another side too. It was impossible to keep the draft animals and productive cattle without a relevant land allotment. From 1930 to 1941 in Khabarovsk territory there occurred the most large-scale reduction of the cattle number for its whole previous history. The number of horses and cows in the peasant farms reduced, on the average, 500-fold. A consequence of this large-scale deprivation of the peasants of their ownership was the fact that they lost their economic independence. They became hired agricultural workers led by the local government authorities. If they had solved all the production issues previously, from then on the party bodies performed the function. The Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (of Bolsheviks) decided what crop and in what areas of the country the peasants should sow and what cattle they should breed in an area.

From then on this superior party body told the peasants how to sow, how to look after the plantings, how to reap and to keep the crop, how to maintain the cattle and many other things (Indriastuti, 2019). A powerful example of the above mentioned is the Decision of the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (of Bolsheviks) and the Council of People's Commissars On preparation for reaping the crop and procuring the agricultural products in 1939. According to the decision, actions of all the participants in the crop reaping were subject to strict regulation. To check the combines and tractors' operability, when giving the combine operators a set of necessary spare parts and tools (links, chains, segments, etc.). The rural laborers

received exhausting instructions on correct reaping of grain crops: To start reaping the grain by means of simple harvesters selectively at the middle dough stage. After the reaping, to sheaf all the reaped grain (Tavakkol & Fahim Devin, 2017; Chahine, 2018).

To finish the stacking of the grain, which was reaped by the simple harvesters, not later than within 10–15 days after the mowing-time, when organizing, firstly, the shook threshing, and assuring the operation of thrashing machines of the machine and tractor stations for not less than 20 hours a day. It seems that inconvenience to perceive such long quotations is more than compensated by the notion that the Soviet collective farmers did not have any rights in their work, which appears from this decision text.

During the collectivization in 1930–1941, the Far Eastern peasants were deprived of their previous socio-economic aspect. That occurred under the influence of a purposeful policy followed by the party and the state, which pursued certain goals. Those goals had nothing to do with the economic reasonability. They constituted a political will of the ruling party to turn the numerous small owners into hired agricultural workers. As a result, the Far Eastern peasants have acquired a new socio-economic aspect, which differed from the previous aspect radically. Above all, they were deprived of all the production facilities: the land, agricultural machinery, draft animals and productive cattle, buildings. Their second important feature was that they did not organize their own agriculture labor anymore. The party and government authorities organized that labor.

A new organization of the peasant labor started including such elements as the regulation of labor time, assignment of a laborer to a certain area of work, determination of the standards of making the agricultural products, implementation of specialization of agricultural professions, uniting of collective farmers into teams, the appearance of moral incentives to the labor. Thirdly, the peasants were deprived of their right and possibility to enjoy the results of their labor. They could execute relevant decisions of the party and Soviet government authorities and nothing else. In terms of their socio-economic aspect, by 1941 the collective farmers of the Russian Far East region had approached to the hired agricultural workers as closely as possible. Their differences from the city workers were determined only by the industrial nature of labor.

#### **4. CONCLUSION**

The conducted research of change of the socio-economic aspect of the peasants of the Russian Far East in 1922-1941 makes it possible to establish the goal, motivation and true reasons of carrying out the collectivization of their farms. A comparative characteristic of farms of the peasants in the Far East and in other RSFSR regions, as of before 1930, suggests that they had a higher socio-economic status. They possessed more land, agricultural implements, draft animals and productive cattle, their farms produced more revenues. This high status

was strengthened by the fact that they had complete economic independence in running their farms. The socio-economic aspect of the peasants, which was expressed in their complete economic independence, became the main reason, for which the party and the state pursued the collectivization policy in the Russian Far East since 1930.

The collectivization goal was to deprive the peasants of their status of independent owners – producers and not to make the agriculture more economically efficient. The implementation of the collectivization policy made it possible to achieve this goal. During its pursuance, the peasants were deprived of the land – their main property and the basis of the whole market agricultural production. After the peasants had lost their land, they were deprived of the agricultural implements, household buildings, draft animals and productive cattle. The peasants, who were deprived of their whole property, also lost their economic independence with all the consequences that came with it: they did not organize their labor, did not influence its eventual outcome, and did not take part in determining the size of enumeration for it anymore.

Collectivization had another consequence for the peasants' social status. Before 1930 the peasantry's social structure was represented by three groups: the poor peasants, middle peasants and rich peasants. This structure was changing under the influence of the market mechanisms, which led to enrichment or to impoverishment and to the transition of the peasants from one social status to the other.

By 1941, the social structure had been simplified to the collective farmers' social status, which was single for all the peasants. This status was confirmed by the fact that they did not have all the signs of independent owners – agricultural producers. The meaning of the obtained results is that, by virtue of them, Russia's federal and local authorities receive good reasons to pursue a more active and efficient policy of giving the land to Russia's citizens, who wish to develop the agriculture in the Far East.

Today, this policy is not efficient, and it does not bring about the important results in this industry development. It is possible to practically apply the provisions and conclusions of this research in their use when writing the generalizing papers on the history of the Russian Far East. Apart from that, they may be used in teaching Russian history, whose integral part is the history of Russia's Far Eastern outlying districts, in educational institutions. At the same time, this research is of use to everybody who is interested in Russian history, since the research will help to understand its peculiarities and logic of development better. This understanding of Russian history makes it possible to form the objective view of modern Russia.

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