Corinne Gaudin, Ruling Peasants

Stephen F. Williams

Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/6069>

DOI: 10.4000/monderusse.6069

ISSN: 1777-5388

Publisher

Éditions de l'EHESS

Printed version

Date of publication: 2 December 2007

Number of pages: 690-692

ISBN: 978-2-7132-2148-4

ISSN: 1252-6576

Electronic reference

Stephen F. Williams, "Corinne Gaudin, Ruling Peasants", *Cahiers du monde russe* [Online], 48/4 | 2007, Online since 16 June 2009, connection on 03 September 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/monderusse/6069> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/monderusse.6069>

This text was automatically generated on 3 September 2022.

All rights reserved

Corinne Gaudin, Ruling Peasants

Stephen F. Williams

REFERENCES

Corinne GAUDIN, **Ruling Peasants. Village and State in Late Imperial Russia**. DeKalb, IL : Northern Illinois University Press, 2007, 271 p.

- 1 In *Ruling Peasants* Corinne Gaudin considers the ways in which the Russian state exercised authority vis-à-vis peasants after Emancipation and especially after 1889, when the institution of land captains was established and the volost courts were reformed. She rightly includes the village assemblies and land communes, which wielded the state's authority by an implicit delegation. In all the issues examined, Gaudin displays great subtlety; above all, she reveals the full untidiness of political reality in the countryside, the gap between common stereotypes (or any other!) and life as peasants and officials experienced it.
- 2 For example, her treatment of kulaks and *miroedy* first establishes how quick central government officials and other observers were to explain any anomaly in peasant collective behavior, or any *seeming* anomaly, as the effect of these ill-defined figures' malign influence. She finds most assembly decisions more easily understood as resulting from the play of factions, with the majority sometimes throwing in a sweetener to lure votes to its side or to ease the wounds of the losers. The prevalence of "unanimous" decisions, which observers took as evidence of a peasant "herd instinct," she more plausibly explains as a formality, describing no more than the unanimity of the prevailing majority.
- 3 Similarly, land captains emerge in Gaudin's treatment not as a homogeneous corps but as a medley, unified mainly by their being stretched thin: so many duties and (for the most part) so little training, most notably for the gathering of statistics.
- 4 At every stage Gaudin refuses to see the *dramatis personae* of the countryside as stick figures, somehow devoid of the ordinary array of human passions, interests, selfishness, generosity, and sociability. She is equally unwilling to paint the peasants themselves as

some “dark” force indifferent to conventional incentives, or as easily manipulated innocents, or as a cohesive mass wielding “weapons of the weak” against the authorities.

- 5 Quite rightly, Gaudin notes the pervasive conflict in the central government’s goals: on the one hand seeking to step away from its tutelary role and on the other trying to allow peasant norms a chance to breathe. Nowhere is the split more evident than in the conflicting signals on the use of custom in the volost courts. The statutory directive to apply “local custom” was qualified as a matter of both law and practice by the difficulties of the volost courts, and the reviewing district councils, in ascertaining custom. How many instances made a custom? How could one distinguish between mere practice and a true norm? Though she does not explicitly criticize the government’s indecision on the “choice-of-law” problem, the reader is naturally curious as to how she might have advised the central bureaucracy on the point. Would it have been better to have subjected the peasants to the civil code cold turkey?
- 6 On the implementation of the Stolypin agrarian reforms, Gaudin pinpoints what is surely the key feature tending to exacerbate conflict in the countryside. The clashes in peasant attitudes toward titling and consolidating were quite similar to the conflicts endemic in commune life, perpetually raised by the recurrent need for decisions about when to repartition and what principles of allocation to apply. But the reforms raised the stakes. After their application, a household could not hope for a new repartition to recoup losses or rectify errors. Of course this very permanence is what distinguishes a system of rights from one of interests held at others’ discretion.
- 7 Gaudin is rather critical of the administrative system established for the resolution of disputes under the reforms. She notes the delays, the long trips up and down the chain of appellate review, the conflicts between the Senate and the Ministry of the Interior, the way in which even single institutions shifted their viewpoints over time. Without in any way doubting her descriptions, or the anxieties that all this must have generated among those dependent on the outcomes, I wonder if her implicit standards may not be too demanding. Certainly her descriptions will not startle persons or firms unfortunate enough to be entangled in the administrative and judicial process in the United States, and I suspect the same is true for subjects of that process in other great democracies.
- 8 While Gaudin is quite convincing in her depiction of the snarls engendered by the Stolypin reforms, there is an interesting gap. Perhaps because she believes that the commune system exacted no more than a trivial price in productivity¹ and did not seriously warp the peasants’ role as national citizens, she never asks exactly how the government might better have enabled peasants to shift out of open fields and repartition. Obviously it would have been good if the major areas of dispute had been resolved in advance, and resolved with the wisdom of Solomon. But all major legislation raises new issues, or puts a new spin on old ones. Humans lack perfect foresight, and, even when they can foresee a dispute, the ordinary divisions between schools of thought or interest groups may make it hard to achieve agreement on the solutions. Delay may not be all bad: sometimes experience sheds light on the competing solutions.
- 9 A recurrent theme of *Ruling Peasants* is the great range of decisions that devolved upon state actors of various kinds – especially land captains and village assemblies. Land captains, for example, were charged with monitoring and correcting peasant assemblies, peasant officials at village and volost level, elections, appeals from the volost courts, and communal charities; with authority to detain peasants for minor charges without trial

for up to three days; with a role in collection of taxes and statistics; with passport issuance; and, after 1906, with a share of implementation of the Stolypin reforms.

- 10 Indeed, Gaudin's description of the land captains' lives, besides making one glad not to be a land captain, throws the full dirigisme of the Russian state in one's face. Surely a sensible government could have dispensed altogether with some of these functions? How about doing away with the passport requirement, for example? Of course it is in the nature of an illiberal regime to track and control the citizenry, but even an illiberal regime must have priorities and some recognition of the costs of each extra hook used to bind the people. The reader is curious about whether the bureaucracy ever entertained proposals for relaxations of authority, and with what arguments such proposals were dispatched.
 - 11 Gaudin's work is thorough, nuanced, and written with both clarity and an agreeable, detached sense of humor. It will be an important tool for continuing research into the ways of the state in rural Russia at the turn of the century.
-

NOTES

1. Discussion of the issue is relegated to a footnote (71, p. 221).