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The Russian Peasantry

Freedom Press, Anonymous

September, 1888

Since the publication of this book* Englishmen have for the first time the opportunity of learning the life and ideas, the sufferings and wrongs of the people of Russia. The voiceless, unknown masses of cultivators of the soil, 83 percent of the whole population, have hitherto been vaguely pictured in English minds as a herd of coarse and brutalized semi-barbarians. In Stepniak's book they start into vivid reality as a nation of lovable and social human beings. Nay more, they appear before us as men whose social and personal development is in some directions wider than our own, men who bear a message of enlargement to the Teutons and Kelts of Western Europe.

In his previous works Stepniak has shown the English public how the Russian government persecutes and crushes out every attempt among the educated classes to gain freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of action, how it is the ruthless foe of all enlightenment, all reform, how this vast stronghold of darkness and tyranny is a threat and a danger to liberty and progress all over the world. We owe it to him more than to any one other writer that all this is ingrained in the practical beliefs of the English people, so that "Russian Nihilist" is an equivalent for hero and saint among

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our workmen, and the dullest speaker at a meeting can evoke a murmur of applause by an allusion to the executioners of the late Alexander as easily as by a reference to Land Nationalization. We Anarchists owe our Democratic Russian comrade a debt for the contempt he has poured on government.

But until Stepniak gave to the world his personal experience of his peasant countrymen and the fruits of his long and studious research into the conditions of then life, most Englishmen were ignorant of the motive force which has inspired the ardent faith and daring deeds of Russian revolutionists. They seemed to have devoted themselves for a principle, for an ideal freedom, for the deliverance of a comparatively small educated class. We had heard of their love for the People, but the description of that enthusiasm left us unmoved save by admiration for the men and women who entertained it.

Now we understand the enthusiasm itself. Stepniak has taught us to love the Russian People, and to shrink with indignant horror from the sacrifice of this mass of human beings to the selfish greed for wealth and power of the privileged class of rulers and officials. With an artist's skill he has painted for us the rugged life of the peasant, as beneath the heavy hand of imperial despotism, he is driven from the oppressive degradation of serfdom to the heartless demoralization of wage slavery. A life rough, bare, simple, uncultured as that of an English thrall of the Middle Ages. A life of strenuous unbroken toil and continual hardship, surpassing in its exertion and its poverty that of the most luckless proletarian of modern times. And yet a life grand with patient endurance and deep seated self-respect, dignified by willing, self-directed industry, and the love of work for work's sake. A life enlarged by public cares and public responsibilities and socialized by common possessions and common interests.

For four centuries the Russian peasant was a serf. To-day he is often compelled to be a wage-slave. Yet, in a sense, he is in a position of far greater independence and dignity than the most fortunate En-

glish workman. He still lives in the traditions of a free past where public affairs were the direct personal affairs of all and were settled by the unanimous consent of all concerned. He has his equal voice with his fellows in the village mir which manages all local business. He is still partially his own master, his own employer. He is in personal possession of the means of production. For the majority (73 percent) of peasants still live under the ancient communal land system, and as members of a visage community are joint owners of the land they till. Thus it comes about that they retain so much of a free man's self respect, his intense interest in his labor, his love for the soil.

"We are yours but the land is ours," said the peasants to their lords when serfdom was established, and they retain this conception of their relation to the land down to the present time. "Russian peasants," writes Stepniak, "hold that land, being an article of universal need, made by nobody, ought not to become property in the usual sense of the word. It naturally belongs to, or, more exactly, it should remain in the undisturbed possession of those by whom for the time being it is cultivated." In 1863, when the Emancipation Act was passed, the peasants believed that the land stolen from them by the nobles, would be restored,

Needless to say that the Russian government had no such idea. The masters were allowed to remain in legal possession of the greater part of their estates. Small slices, saddled with a heavy redemption tax, were doled out to the village communes, and the peasants have been engaged from that day to this in a desperate struggle to make both ends meet. A losing fight, in which village after village has fallen into the hands of usurers and been compelled to lease out its common lands to capitalists and work on its own soil as the wage-slaves of the new masters. Under the old lords, the serfs were at least allowed enough land to feed and clothe themselves; the "free" peasantry are being slowly starved to death. The exactions of the tax-gatherer force them to sell or mortgage their tools, their crops, their cattle, until many

a communal land-owner and member of the visage council is driven to wander through the country in winter with a sack on his shoulders asking from peasants only less destitute than himself "morsels" wherewith to feed his children.

Each village is collectively responsible for its impossibly heavy redemption fees, and where these are not forthcoming, the government officials apply a process graphically described as "the flogging out of arrears," until the necessary sum is exacted, and frequently the peasants are left without even seed for their spring sowing, obliged to pledge their next summer labor in advance to some large proprietor, or village usurer, that they may obtain wherewithal to subsist through the winter.

Under the patronage and protection of government (in Russia as elsewhere the agent of the exploiting classes) economic individualism is running the old Socialism hard. Bank credit and the manipulation of the paper currency put a tremendous power into the hands of speculators wherewith to take advantage of the needs of the village cultivators and obtain their corn and cattle at almost nominal prices when they are hard pressed by the tax-gatherer and local usurer. And this happens every year, for the peasants pay 83 percent of the imperial taxes and the burden on their land is often considerably above the value of its yearly produce. In Kazan the taxes amount to 300 percent. To pay these monstrous taxes, for which they are held collectively responsible, the village commune is forced in bad years to borrow from some *kulak* (local usurer). Stepniak gives a telling example of this ruinous mode of proceeding.

"In the Novousen district the peasants of the village of Spendorf, being in great distress during the winter of 1880 borrowed from a clergyman named K., £700, undertaking to pay him in eight months £1,050 (50 percent) on condition that in case of default they should give Mr. K. pending repayment, 3,500 dessiatines of their arable land at an annual rent of ten kopecks per dessiatine. As the peasants were unable to fulfill their engagement, Mr. K. received the

3,500 dessiatines for 350 rubles and forthwith relet the land to the peasants themselves at the normal rent, which in this province is about 10s. per dessiatine. Thus he obtained £1,715 on a capital of £700, or interest at the rate of about 250 percent a year" !

Individual peasants serape through their difficulties by giving themselves into *kabbalah* (bondage) i.e., pledging their summer labor at starvation rates to some large proprietor or capitalist, sometimes for years in advance. Almost all work, during the winter, for hours as long as those of the victim of the London sweater, at some petty trade, mat making for instance or (but these are a small minority. Less than half a million) enter factories for part of the year. The usual length of the working day, according to the latest report, is 12 hours in Russian factories, but in some of them men and women are forced to labor 20 hours out of the 24.

No wonder that under such conditions as these a class of profit and interest mongering usurers and capitalists and a class of landless proletarians is glowing up in Russia. No wonder that the death rate in Central Russia reached in 1882 sixty-two per thousand per annum, the birth rate being only forty-five. No wonder that we hear continually of peasant outbreaks and "Jewish outrages," which are frequently desperate revolts against the tyranny of village usurers, or a refusal to pay impossible taxes. No wonder that the government punishes with the cruelty of guilty terror all who attempt to draw public attention to these wrongs and miseries. No wonder that the revolutionary party are animated by a fierce and implacable hatred of the system which is ruining the mass of the Russian people in body and mind.

We propose next month to give our readers some few of Stepniak's graphic details of the social life and religious ideas of the Russian peasants.

* 'The Russian Peasantry, their agrarian condition, social life and religion' By Stepniak. Swan, Sonnenschein & Co.