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# The Russian Peasants in the Revolution

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fiscated without compensation, transformed into national goods and given to enjoy to the people who worked on it. As for the cattle found on the confiscated land, they were to be given without compensation to the state or to the peasant communities, only the cattle of poor peasants was not to be confiscated.

Peasants' motions demanded that every citizen eager to cultivate it themselves have access to the enjoyment of the land; waged work in agriculture was to be abolished.

The enjoyment of the land was to be equal between everyone, and the land was to be redistributed periodically in order to account for population increase. And, above all, full and complete freedom was to be had as to how to work the land: the land could be worked on individually, by a family, by a commune, by a cooperative, according to local decisions. Only the great domains which had been subjected to a rational culture had to be given to the state.

## Peasantry in the February and October revolutions

[...] During the first world war, millions of Russian peasants were mobilised. These soldiers in the trenches ardently longed to come back home. The longer the war dragged on, the soldiers' state of mind became less and less conformist. Soldier-peasants did not understand why they were torn away from the land which fed them. Their wives and mothers wrote letters in which they complained of the hard life in the countryside emptied from its male population. Therefore when the February revolution started in the long bakery queues of Petrograd, soldiers, at the front, were already ripe to support it.

While, in the cities, the February revolution engendered a form of patriotism in different layers of the intelligentsia – now, we know why, and for whom, we spill our blood, we are going to defend our Russia, democratic Russia, they said – these feelings seemed absent among the soldier-peasants after three years of war. They all dreamt to go back to their villages and to share the land of the nobility, towards whom they felt more hostility than towards Germans and Austrians. This feeling was irresistible and the Russian soldier, under his soldier's greatcoat took part wholeheartedly in the installation of a new order of things. He is for immediate peace and does not wait for his demobilisation order to return home. He is also for immediate land redistribution. As soon as the summer of 1917, the sailors of the Baltic Sea send their representatives all across the country in order to put this redistribution into effect. Soldiers and sailors also send their representatives to the peasants' soviets. At the first All-Russian congress of countryside deputies, held in Petrograd between May 11<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> 1917, 242 motions were registered which dealt with abolishing private property of land forever, making land impossible to sell, buy, rent, or mortgage. According to these motions, all land was to be con-

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## **The expansion of cooperatives**

When we talk about the Russian peasant economy, we need to stop on the cooperative movement, which started as soon as 1905 to expand rapidly. After this date, consumers' cooperatives and agricultural cooperatives appeared, mostly. Thus, in 1871, there were 61 consumers' cooperatives, and 21 agricultural cooperatives in the whole of Russia. In 1881, there were respectively 233 and 87 of them; in 1901, 577 and 350; in 1906, 1172 and 666; and in 1915, 11000 and 6800.

In 1908 the first congress of all the cooperative societies gathered in Moscow, in which almost 2000 delegates took part. This congress was used as a starting point for the creation of a wide network of cooperatives with their own bank (the Popular Bank of Moscow). At the head of this movement was a leading organisation with highly valuable intellectual forces. We must however point out that the most active members of this cooperative movement were not the poor peasants, but the middle peasants.

Generally, in cooperatives and even more so in agricultural cooperatives, many socialists and even more so socialist revolutionaries concentrated their action. Bolsheviks also entered the cooperative movement, but with the ulterior motive to use the cooperatives as a legal terrain for illegal or semi-legal revolutionary work.

We can say that, in general, cooperatives, during their short lifespan, played, on top of their important economic role, a cultural role of the first order, and have widely contributed to the improvement of agricultural methods and to the development of agricultural science. But fate demanded that this same cooperative movement pay a fatal role in the conduct of the revolutionary socialist party in the summer of 1917, when they opposed the decisive action of the peasants who wished for an immediate land distribution, which made it much easier for the bolsheviks to grab power by playing on the incoherent and hesitating policies of the only great party of the peasants then – the revolutionary socialist party.