



Jonathan Waterlow. A Review of **Tracy McDonald**.

Face to the Village: The Riazan Countryside under Soviet Rule, 1921–1930. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011, xviii + 422 pp.

Negotiating with the State

The disjuncture between town and countryside is a perennial motif in Russian history, as the Bolsheviks were acutely aware, and one to which they gave renewed attention after the dust of Civil War had begun to settle. That Revolution had occurred in the overwhelmingly agrarian Russia remained a source of both pride and perplexity to Russian Marxists. Although Lenin had performed a characteristic, theoretical sleight of hand to justify the pursuit of immediate revolution by a ‘vanguard’ who represented the as-yet unready ‘working classes’, and although the Bolsheviks had successfully seized, held, and consolidated power, they were now faced with the daunting task of ruling a largely peasant population which they did not very well understand, and feared in no small measure.

This, then, is a study of state-building and the realities of those attempts on the ground, in the village. The eponymous slogan ‘face to the village’ (*litsom k derevne*) was coined by Grigory Zinovyev in July 1924 and was, McDonald tells us, to become ‘a rallying cry dispatched from the Centre to scholars, the police, the courts, and to all manner of party and state organs to turn towards the villages and their inhabitants’ (p. 3). But in practice, ‘All too often the Centre’s revolutionary dreams crashed on the shores of local realities, and the response on both sides was frustration and violence’ (p. 5). Nevertheless, this is not a book about simplistic antagonisms and (violent) peasant ‘resistance’: *Face to the*

Village offers a valuable complication of the traditional centre-periphery binary in two significant ways: although Riazan was shorthand for ‘backward’, it lies a mere 200 kilometres from Moscow; moreover, like everywhere else in the Soviet Union, ‘the Centre’ was frequently represented by local individuals. When peasants were also agents of the state, the traditional binary distinctions and hermetically sealed worlds of ‘Centre’ and ‘periphery’ rapidly broke down. McDonald calls this a history of ‘entanglements’; in this case, this buzzword is perhaps justified due to the sheer complexity of these relationships, which McDonald highlights and evaluates with care, insight and impressive skill.

At first, McDonald seems oddly defensive about the specifically local focus of her study; in fact, reading a book which does not claim (even implicitly) to describe the largest country in the world with examples drawn from just a handful of towns is rather refreshing. Indeed, one might well say that all existing studies of ‘the Soviet Union’ are in truth regional studies anyway, they just fail to admit as much. Moreover, *Face to the Village* has much to say about the Soviet project at large: one cannot but admire how McDonald draws much broader, conceptual elements out of her study: evolving conceptions of time, space, and authority — all of which were out-of-sync between Moscow and Riazan.

The first, scene-setting chapter contains much useful background information to these disjunctures, focusing on the agricultural, peasant-political and material history of Riazan and its experiences from 1861 until the end of the 1920s. The statistical and descriptive details here are impressive if inevitably a little dry. Nevertheless, to have such concrete data in a book so strong in its socio-cultural and sociological analysis is a great boon: too often in histories of Russia or the Soviet Union one is faced with either statistical analyses which, even when stimulating, lack a single real person, or works which are filled with individuals but lack much sense of the physical, practical world in which they lived. *Face to the Village* achieves a delicate and often brilliant balance of the two.

The book is divided into three parts: the first sets the scene and examines the three most important points of contact between the state and the countryside — the police, the courts, and the rural soviets. The second part examines ‘What Non-Violent Crime Reveals about the Countryside’ by studying battles over resources; the final section turns to ‘What Violent Crime’ can tell us. While this structure makes it easy to ‘dip in’, this is perhaps not a book to be read from start to finish: ever more repetition becomes apparent if one does so. By the time we reach Chapter 7, ‘Bandit Tales’, we have already learned rather a lot about banditry in the countryside from earlier chapters on the courts and police; Chapter 6 (‘The

Forest: Wood, Warmth, and Repair') is very repetitious due to its thematic approach; and the chapter on 'Hooliganism' adds little if anything to the overall argumentation, providing only a few colourful accounts of village brawls and mischief (there is also some consideration of the regime's tendency to pathologise antisocial behaviour, but this has been examined before and in much greater detail by Daniel Beer in his *Renovating Russia* [Beer 2008]).

More generally, readability and depth of information are not always successfully balanced; you are likely to end up knowing far more about wood theft in Russo-Soviet history than you might ever have wanted or will need to, for example. That being said, while a number of sections are somewhat heavy-going, they unquestionably offer a rich seam of examples, facts, and figures which can and should be mined fruitfully by academics and students alike working on the 1920s countryside.

The picture of that countryside which we have held until now is of a landscape rife with corruption, drink, and resistance to Soviet power. McDonald significantly complicates this picture, perhaps the best example of this being her insistence that we interpret the endlessly-reported cases of 'corruption' back in their original context and consider what their meaning may have been to contemporaries. Local judges or rural soviets sealing technically-illegal deals or pardons with technically-illegal *samogon* is undoubtedly corruption... And yet this was only to continue long-existing practices of the village. In part, this relates to the question of 'resistance' and how to define it: was it 'resisting' Soviet power to retain these old habits, or is their retention largely independent of consciously broader, political concerns?

In McDonald's reading, corruption might still be corruption, but what this really meant depends upon how you look at it; peasants did not see it as such, nor did they see it as outright 'resistance'. However, one might well say that, from the point of view of the historian, naming the phenomenon 'corruption' really ought not to carry pejorative or moralising connotations in the first place. It is no fault of McDonald's that this has not been the case, of course, but she might have argued this very point, rather than attempting a slight shuffling in definitions through careful contextualisation. Nevertheless, McDonald's refusal to retreat into the simplification of seeing in every peasant act to displease or trouble the state an act of 'resistance' is a welcome corrective to most existing interpretations. Rather than be perplexed by the divergent behaviours and seemingly contradictory 'faces' which the peasantry presented to authority, McDonald demonstrates that that very complexity was the reality of the 1920s.

A central argument of McDonald's is that 1926 was a significant turning point in Soviet policy with regards to the countryside, and

one manifested in all spheres. Once the Centre had turned its ‘face to the countryside’ in 1924 it was horrified by what it found there, its greatest fears of the ‘dark’ peasant masses confirmed by the seemingly endless tales of corruption and drunkenness. The flexibility and negotiations possible under the NEP were rapidly superseded by ever more centralisation and a lack of sympathy for local difficulties and realities: as McDonald puts it, in this study ‘One can see the shift from a softer line, which emphasised poverty and need, to a harder line emphasising discipline and control’ (p. 182). This foreshadowed collectivisation, of course, but McDonald highlights how far the peasantry had internalised and continued to pursue the habit of negotiation with the state which had characterised the first half of the decade, especially through the rural soviets.

Indeed, this study reveals, quite remarkably, that even when the state officially eliminated numerous rural soviets in 1924 after the ‘amalgamation’ (*ukreplenie*) of various Riazan districts, the peasants themselves, via their traditional institutions of the *skhod* and the commune, stepped in to continue the funding and operation of those soviets. As McDonald stresses, ‘The commune and the gathering [*skhod*] chose to maintain the soviets and the conduit between the peasants and the state when the state could no longer afford to do so’ (italics original, p. 115). The rural soviet was thus incorporated into the peasant ‘triangle’ of administrative organisations: the distinctions between ‘Soviet’ and ‘village’ power were increasingly blurred, and the channels of communication between them were valued by the peasantry, even as they were non-violently fought over.

Another institution examined in detail is the police, the description of which calls to mind Arthur Koestler’s description of the GPU as he experienced it during his visit to the USSR in 1932–33: ‘this ubiquitous organisation without which nothing can be done, and which alone is capable of getting things done, that defines the structure of the totalitarian police state’ [Koestler 2005: 78]. The practical functions of the GPU as described by Koestler can be traced back to the 1920s police more generally, although we should discard his claim that it represented a ‘totalitarian police state’. The latter point Koestler wrote as an angrily disillusioned ex-Communist, but he was not wrong about the former: as McDonald makes plain, police involvement in so many areas was not a sign of excessive power and influence, but was a stop-gap solution to chronic disorganisation and shortfalls on the part of other ministries and state bodies. Moreover, chronic understaffing meant that this was not a ‘police state’ in any meaningful sense in the 1920s or early 1930s: while the NKVD might state in 1929 that there should be one CID officer per 5 000 citizens, the ratio in parts of Riazan was still 1:25 000 (p. 68).

A few words must be said about the sources for this outstanding study. Amongst reports at all levels of government from various ministries, courts, and the (O)GPU, McDonald makes use of peasants' letters, the reports of *selkory*, contemporary ethnographic literature, and central and local newspapers. One of the richest sources, of course, are the *svodki* reports gathered by the (O)GPU, but they are also the most controversial. Although many historians have noted the possibility that *svodki* were distilled on their way to the uppermost levels of the state, shedding all but the most extreme elements of their content, McDonald is one of the few to state as much on the basis of actual evidence. She nevertheless defends the use of *svodki*, arguing that we need not 'accept the analysis of the OGPU' when reading them (p. 24). She might have gone further still and added that such analysis is so painfully crude, as were all related attempts to 'emplot' the reported events into the regime's latest agenda, that the risk of a trained researcher with deep knowledge of the period making this error is actually very limited. This is not to deny the more significant difficulty of taking what people (were reported to) say for what they actually thought, but the latter issue is common, in greater or lesser measure, to all sources.

McDonald is careful to consider the different ways in which the most contentious and value-laden recorded speech in the *svodki* might be read. She makes successful and stimulating use of James C. Scott's idea of the 'official transcript' [Scott 1990], but with significant emphasis on peasants' ability to call the state out on its un- or only partly-fulfilled promises. This marks a welcome development of Stephen Kotkin's famous 'speaking Bolshevik' paradigm [Kotkin 1997: ch. 5], for here we see not a straightforwardly self-interested peasant invoking the regime's formulae for advancement, but a more subtle sense of the genuine desire contemporaries might have for Bolshevik dreams to become reality, at least insofar as those dreams promised practical and material improvements to everyday life. Moreover, these seem to be the desires of communities rather than of the individualistic citizens examined by Kotkin; these are not unrealistic 'tenacious liberal subjects', as Anna Krylova put it [Krylova 2000], but people who retained and developed many interpersonal and intergroup loyalties, self-understandings and practices through 1917 and beyond.

Arguably, the more we come to know about Soviet history, the messier it all seems. With limited knowledge and Cold War-infused prejudice, one could so much more easily perceive (or imagine) a monolithic, entirely uniform state, society, and culture. *Face to the Village* is in many ways a study of messiness: of complicated variables, miscommunications, wilful obfuscations, and complex accommodations. McDonald's triumph is to do more than just revel in the details of this seeming pandemonium; she significantly develops our

understanding of how the early Soviet countryside functioned, what this semi-separate society was like on the everyday level, and deepens very greatly our understanding of how the ‘Centre’ and ‘periphery’ were engaged with and mutually influenced one another. In sum, this is not only a fascinating and important contribution to our understanding of the early Soviet countryside, but also to how we approach interactions between state and citizenry; *Face to the Village* throws much-needed light upon the ‘dark masses’ of the peasantry, but there are many lessons here, too, for scholars of other contexts and countries.

References

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