April Crisis Sends Disarray Through the Peasant Class

Nathan Miller

6 March 2012

By April 1917, the Russian government had experienced drastic political changes including the overthrow of Tsar Nicholas II and the establishment of two ruling bodies, the Provisional Government and the Soviet of Workers' Deputies. Only two months into the revolution, however, dual power created divided public opinion over which side had the most authority. Perhaps one of the most volatile populations was the peasantry whose influences easily varied from village to village. Peasant views emerged from a number of sources, especially the rural, estate-owning bourgeoisie and city newspapers, which spread information to the villagers. Although the overarching goals of the peasants remained the same across most of Russia, many distinctions arose as well. The April Crisis further aggravated these differences. On April 18, 1917 Foreign Minister Pavel Miliukov sent a letter to Russia's war allies declaring the country's commitment to fighting the war until victory. The message leaked to the public, inevitably causing the lower class to choose between the war-supporting Provisional Government and the more progressive, peace-negotiating Soviets. As tensions grew in April on the streets of Petrograd, peasant volost (town) assemblies met to unify the masses and to draft letters of support, or in some cases disapproval, to the politicians.

On April 26, 1917, just 8 days after the message from Miliukov disclosed the Provisional Government's pro-war stance, the peasants of Rakalovsk Volost in central Russia drafted a letter to the Petrograd Soviet outlining their stance on key issues.[1] The authors made it clear that they

[1] "Letter to the Petrograd Soviet from the peasants of Rakalovsk Volost" (26 April 1917), in Mark Steinberg, *Voices of Revolution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 131-33.

not only supported the Soviet, but fervently disputed the Tsarist autocracy and Provisional Government as well. The peasants made a point to open and close the document with statements affirming their support. They also discussed their displeasure with the war, the sorrow felt for fallen soldiers, and the necessity of peace negotiations. In essence, the peasants aligned their requests directly with the Soviet platform, even noting, "The Socialists… are our comrades." [2] Why would the volost assembly make such a strong effort to back the Soviet? One likely explanation is that by appeasing the Soviet and accepting the revolution the peasants believed they could negotiate many of their other requests. The remainder of the letter addresses the issues of land reallocation and volia (liberty). "The land must be transferred to those who labor on it," writes the assembly chairman, "and we demand freedom of speech, the press, assembly, unions, and strikes." [3] To peasants, volia meant absolute freedom.[4] Even though they had been released from serfdom in the mid-19th century, peasants remained an underrepresented class. Now, after the fall of the Tsar, the peasants believed the new government might provide the opportunity for complete autonomy that they had waited for. If the Soviets succeeded in gaining power, peasant offerings of party support assured that their cries for equality would also be considered.

It seems natural that the majority of peasants would support the Soviet (and Bolshevik) cause based solely on the transfer of land as demanded in Lenin's April Theses. Lenin writes, "Nationalization of all lands in the country, and management by local Soviet of Poor Peasants' Deputies." [5] Regardless, many peasant organizations objected to the uprisings by the Soviet in

---

[2] Ibid.

[3] Ibid.

[4] "Recollections of a Peasant, Nizhegorod Province", in Jonathan Daly and Leonid Trofimov, *Russia in War and Revolution, 1914-1922*, (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 2009), p. 79.

[5] "Lenin's April Theses" (3 April 1917), in Richard Sakwa, *The Rise and Fall of the Soviet Union* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999), p. 33-35.

favor of the more conservative Provisional Government. Almost concurrently, on April 27, 1917, another peasant from an unnamed region of Russia submitted a letter of opposition to the Petrograd Soviet accusing them of violently attacking soldiers during the April Crisis demonstrations.[6] This peasant used much more intense and direct language to make his point. "We are shaken…by your poorly thought-out outburst against the Provisional Government," he writes; "you are like that ungrateful pig." The ungrateful pig refers to a Russian fable about greed and disrespect. The use of animals and similar terminology also carries a foul connotation that degrades the Soviet. He then rejects the idea of peace negotiations, insisting that the enemy must be vanquished and Russia must not surrender. Finally, he warns that the Soviet should not get carried away in revolution and overthrow the Provisional Government because it consists of those elected and trusted by the people.[7] Despite the fact that this letter was written by one peasant alone, we infer that many more groups shared the same ideas at the time. The peasants' sense of honor and dedication leads to this viewpoint. Even though they were considered the lowest class citizens, peasants spoke proudly of their position as the breadwinners for Russia; to them, defeat to the Germans would be perceived as weakness, and no one wanted to bear this burden.[8]

Given the chaotic events of the February revolution and the Miliukov Crisis, both peasant petitions seem reasonable responses. In April 1917 the state of the Russia political system was still unclear: would duality continue, or could one side fight its way to complete power? The publications distributed by urban workers' organizations obviously advertised the capability and readiness of the Soviets to seize control of the government. Peasants who were influenced by

---

[6] "Letter to the Petrograd Soviet from 'a peasant'" (27 April 1917), in Steinberg, *Voices* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 133-35.

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

these writings would have most likely sided with the volost assembly in the first letter. If they supported the Soviet and they prevailed, chances were high that their requests for equality in land and personal rights would be met. On the other hand, the land-owning bourgeoisie favored the Provisional Government, and those influenced by the estate-holders would have been more likely to adopt an anti revolutionary ideology like the peasant in the second letter. If the Provisional Government won in the end, the peasant class might not have experienced as much oppression if they had offered their support. The most important conclusion to draw from April 1917 is that the peasants, although they developed some sense of agenda on land rights, struggled to choose sides between the Soviet and Provisional Government. This fracture would continue until later in the summer when sentiments shifted in favor of the liberal Soviet.