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Impact of Agricultural Reforms in Russia on the Shaping of Rural Settlements

Socio-cultural, economic and legal challenges which have emerged in Russian society today are largely a result of the state which has long existed in this country. Therefore, studying historical experience might be useful for understanding the dynamics of changes in the culture of economic management and its impact on the present situation, land use and ecology of the country. Land use is an important topic for analysis, but decision-making in this domain at the level of ministries, agencies and the government, has always belonged to the political, rather than scientific, sphere. For a long time, such problems were closed to discussion. Decision-making was based on the assumption that small settlements are important only in terms of food supply problems and their solution. Such an orientation continues to aggravate the outstanding social problems within territories: undeveloped infrastructure, migration of the rural population into towns, demographic "ageing" of villages, abandoned villages and arable lands and the like.

Now, let us look at the most important reforms of the XIX—XX centuries and their impact on the natural and landscape environment of Russian settlements.

1. One of those is the 1861—1890 reform which abolished serfdom in Russia. Since before that time there were several categories of peasants in Russia — state peasants, palace (principality) peasants and serfs — the purpose of the reform was to give them equal rights.

State peasants mostly lived in the North of Russia, in Siberia in 36 provinces (*gubernias*). They were free in their choice of residence, job and land and paid rent into the state treasury in the form of money. **Palace peasants** were attached to the czar's family and mostly lived in 20 provinces in the central and industrial regions of Russia. Their socio-economic status was somewhere between those of state peasants and serfs: they had no civil rights, they paid taxes in the form of money and had to pay rent for the land. **Serf peasants**, who only lived on territories where serfdom existed, were

most devoid of rights: they were the property of the landlord, land was allotted to them for temporary use and they had to pay out *corvée* or taxes for using it. They mostly lived in 35 provinces in the central and *chernozem* regions of the country.

The central rural regions of Russia were always overcrowded, so that by 1861 their soils were the most depleted, while serfdom prevented peasants from moving onto new lands. The country was faced with crucial modernization-oriented changes both in agriculture and industry. But, as with all other reforms in Russia, it was socio-political and ideological problems which were to be solved, rather than economic. That is why, though abolishing serfdom, the government failed to solve the major problem of the pre-reform village, that is, to equalize the socio-economic status of all peasants.

In the process of "equalization" in land ownership, former serfs found themselves in a most disadvantaged position. As a rule, the landowner (nobleman) allotted them the worst land in most inaccessible places while the riverbanks, with adjoining land, and the river itself remained in his possession, though the village frequently lay on that territory. In this case, the peasant community had to pay rent for using the river banks, the river or the meadowlands. That is why in many territories of Russia where serfdom had been practised (Central, North-Western parts, etc.) lands belonging to the nobility (landlords), monasteries, the state and newly-freed peasants were alternating and overlapping.

The 1861 reform, as conducted by the landlords (allotment of strips of land), undermined the country's agriculture and brought many peasants to poverty. Cattle was destroyed, for lack of fertile land and fodder. In 1860—1900, the constantly declining horse stocks aggravated the transportation problem in densely populated Central Russia. Because of the lack of fertile land, grain-growing was being ousted by market-oriented vegetable gardening (incidentally, the same is happening now, though for different reasons).

Those activities affected landscapes, as well, though some time later: the extent of arable lands increased at the expense of meadows, grazing lands and forests. Spontaneous mass-scale sales of forests took place not only in noblemen's, but mostly in peasants' forests which had been divided into small plots. Forests were ruthlessly logged-over, with nobody ever giving a thought to revegetation. Besides, the extent of abandoned land was gradually growing. Soils were depleted and people's poverty drove them to other places. People leaving for towns in search of temporary jobs further overcrowded Central Russian regions.

As a result of the Peasant Reform, people living on the periphery of Russia (the so-called heterodox nations) found themselves better off than those living in the centre, as regards the availability of land, taxation and legal regulations. That is why large masses of the population started moving from

central regions of Russia to its periphery. This was a result of the policy implemented by the 1861 reform.

Noblemen's estates of the XVII—XIX centuries, some of which have survived until now, are remnants of Russia's history of serfdom illustrating, among other things, the development of landscapes in settlements. Most of them are now used as rest homes, sanatoria and hospitals, while others are abandoned. Some of them were turned into museums depicting, for the most part, the way of life of the nobility and peasants at that time.

Sometimes such complexes occupy more than 100 hectares of land. They were built both by Russian serf architects and builders, by free peasants, or by specialists invited from Europe. Most noblemen and landlords only lived there in the summer, and such estates were used for recreation, economic and experimental activities and were a centre of culture for the local people.

The architecture and the landscape structure in Kuskovo estate for instance, were influenced by those of the ensemble in Versailles. Count B. Sheremetyev, Peter I's comrade-in-arms, and his family used the principal idea of the famous monument, but altered its structure making it blend with the surroundings. The central axis of the ensemble is oriented towards the wooden palace, whose facade overlooks the man-made pond and the canal which had several levels. A church used to stand along the canal's axis in the forest. There is another church near the house. On the other side of the palace a park was laid, with lawns, flower-beds and sculptures. There were many buildings in the park: a Dutch house, an Italian house, a hot-house, a Hermitage, a theatre and so on. Besides, there was an English landscape park with specially arranged groups of trees, bushes, ponds, etc.

2. Another important reform took place in Russia at the end of the XIX century, when the country's geopolitical interests necessitated its economic growth. A programme targeted at the rapid development of national industry was to be implemented under S. Vitte, Minister of Finance. One of the major causes of changes in agricultural policy was the government's interest in increasing grain exports. After the 1890s, the programme infringed on the landlords' interests giving highest priority to manufacturers and protecting the incipient bourgeoisie. In contrast to Western Europe, where the bourgeoisie emerged in the course of natural historical development, in Russia it was taken care of by the state. Little by little, the government and the public in general began to regard the collapse of the peasant community as a prerequisite for achieving economic prosperity.

That period saw breakthroughs in industrial and railroad construction, navigation, extraction of peat, ores, coal, draining swamps, etc. The ongoing process of modernization affected urban settlements and urban construction. All major activities of the kind were financed in two ways: first, by "pumping out" rural resources, second, by maintaining the low cost of labour. In other

words, the advances in industry were achieved mostly through recruiting village labour, rather than through modernization and use of new technologies.

The above activities strongly affected land-use patterns and changed the country's landscapes. Forests were cleared, bridges were built across rivers in the course of railroad construction; dams were erected and canals were made to improve navigation. The rapid growth of towns altered natural landscapes: forests were cleared, rivers became shallower, suburbs and nearby villages and settlements were changing. New industrial centres appeared mostly in the Central region and in the Urals; oil extraction began to grow in the Caucasus.

However, the process of urbanization in Russia was rather slow, because of specific geographical and climatic features and large distances between settlements. Another reason was that peasants constituted the majority of the population. Rich landlords-noblemen, perusing their own economic benefits, hindered the development of towns, erecting obstacles at the bureaucratic administration level. Many towns still remained "half-towns" — "half-villages" from the viewpoint of their architecture and landscape. That is why rural landscapes can still be observed in urban structures.

3. Still, the agrarian reform advanced, by virtue of A. Stolypin's programme, though it was not completed, like any other reform in Russia. Lacking time for its in-depth analysis, let us mention its salient features, which are valid until now.

It was a comprehensive moderate programme geared, first, at resolving the problem of peasants with little land and, second, at modernizing production without resorting to strong pressure or repression. This could solve the problem of doing away with the peasant community without any special efforts. Land was given as private property for setting up either *khutors* (farms) or *otrubs* (larger-sized farms). In the first case, large or medium-sized families settled on new territories and set up farms, while *otrubs* were formed by larger groups or by several families.

However, Stolypin's reform (which amounted to the generation of the farmers' class in Russia) was opposed by the Duma and most peasants: the communal ideology and collective responsibility hindered its implementation and prevented the peasants from leaving the commune. From 1907 till 1917, only 25% of peasants left the commune. *Khutors*, as a form of settlement, found an easy way to western parts of Russia, where communal traditions were rather strong. *Otrubs* were widely spread in the Northern Caucasus, in the Trans-Volga region, i.e. in areas with fertile lands, which could be used even with low-standard agricultural practices.

The programme envisaged a large-scale migration into unoccupied territories, including the North, Siberia, Urals, etc. The state provided special

loans to those who moved to new places, paid for abandoned households, removed taxes (for a period of 5 years), paid travel expenses, etc. More than 3 million moved from the European part of Russia to the East over that period.

Such large-scale migration could not but affect the architectural and landscape environment in many regions of Russia. When they moved into new lands, different groups of the population (for instance, people from the well-to-do or poor strata) developed landscapes and formed their culture in different ways. If they came from the lower social strata, they assimilated with the indigenous culture, but if this was not the case, they developed nature, landscapes and local environment in their own way, thus creating a cultural milieu of their own. This can be observed in certain regions, for instance, in the Russian North.

For example, settling in otrubs was widely spread at that time in the north-eastern parts of the Vologda region. People who came from central and southern parts of Russia used their own way to develop those northern lands. Traditionally, villages in the Vologda region had one or several rows of houses and were built not far from a river. New settlements were built on water divides, they had a different pattern of construction and of surrounding fields and meadows. The architecture of such settlements had features of design and decor inherent to southern territories.

At the time when the government lacked money for conducting reforms, Stolypin's reform heavily relied on the spirit of entrepreneurship. This migration-oriented policy, while solving the problem of lack of land, failed to alter the obsolete system of management incapable of modernizing the production system. The peasants' mentality remained essentially the same, since the culture of management was geared towards the communal way of life. It became evident that private landownership per se could not ensure the solution of economic and socio-cultural problems. Turning to European models did not bring solutions, either. That is why the reform did not succeed.

4. After the October coup, the commune was soon restored in many regions, especially during the "equalizing" distribution of land expropriated from the landlords. In 1927—29, at the beginning of collectivization, attempts were made to destroy the village commune, since it was clear that self-government in the form of the village community assembly stood in the way of the collectivization process imposed from above.

In 1918, state farms were organized on the basis of expropriated estates of the nobility, and on the basis of monastery property communes were formed which existed no longer than 5—7 years. Then, in addition to state farms, collective farms (kolkhozes) were formed. The difference between them was in that the state farms (sovkhozes) were purely state organizations and received subsidies from the state, while collective farms had a more

democratic structure and, in Soviet conditions, they found it more difficult to solve their financial and economic problems.

Collectivization of land, cattle and formerly private household buildings brought forth changes in special characteristics of settlements. Peasants' plots of land were unified and commonly owned agricultural machinery worked on endless fields. Private barns were removed from individual peasants' farms and brought into one place forming collective barn "towns" (like those in the Vologda region) which were previously not typical for those regions.

Large cattle-raising farms were built. In the 1960s, the government's decree prohibited raising even small cattle in one's homestead. The goal was not to let peasants disperse their efforts and to make them switch to a socially useful, state-oriented system of work. The adopted laws and decrees virtually destroyed individual homesteads, thus destroying the private agricultural market in the country. High taxes on products of cottage industry and handicraft made their production unprofitable. Many trade villages had to change their functions.

Industrialization programmes undertaken during the pre-war and post-war periods hardly ever took account of natural and historical features of the environment, agriculture and landscapes. As a result, objects of industry and of the military complex shattered the landscape-and-historical foundations of farming in many regions. This is particularly conspicuous in areas lying along large rivers in Central Russia and Siberia. Thousands of hectares of farmlands and meadows were flooded during the construction of huge electric power plants. Many settlements found themselves in the midst of technogenic chemical (or some other) mud destroying delicate links in the biosphere. Oilfields, coal and sand quarries and the like destroyed conditions conducive to ecological sustainability of farmlands. Some of these quarries now look like natural ponds. Piratic forest harvesting left behind dirt and wild abandoned land. Hydro construction killed fish in many rivers. In many areas, especially in Siberia, rivers no longer freeze in winter and permanent fogs hanging over the river affect people's health.

In 1970—1980s, attempts were made to implement the so-called "project of the century" — water importation from northern and Siberian rivers to the south in order to raise the Caspian Sea level. The project was to be implemented in the framework of the Food Supply Programme. Construction of dams began on some northern rivers. The project envisaged the construction of 25 dams up to 32 m in height and two 70-meter-long dikes on the White Sea near the Solovtsy Islands. On top of huge expenditures of finances, materials and energy, 270 thousand hectares of floodlands and terrace meadows and fields were to be inundated resulting in waterbogging of forests over huge territories. This would have had a disastrous effect on fisheries and agriculture and would have changed the state of the ecology

not only in Russia, but in the Scandinavian countries, as well. Experts estimate that about 1000 historic and cultural monuments — towns, monasteries, rural settlements, archaeological sites and the like would have gone under water. Vologda, Kirillov, Totma and other towns would have been threatened with inundation. It was only due to the active public movement of protest that the project was stopped.

5. The agrarian transformations now taking place in our country entail unwelcome consequences which, in their turn, produce a negative effect on the country's development and hinder the reform. The decline of living standards, aggravation of contradictions between different social groups of village dwellers deterioration of the socio-psychological atmosphere in the village bring forth social stresses in the rural community and undermine the peasants' trust in the reform.

When assessing the 1991 reform in general, one should say that in fact it amounted to the redistribution of land without significantly touching upon the nature of land-related links. The state, actually remaining the monopolistic landowner, only took land from some collective users (collective and state farms) and gave it over to other users (village councils, industrial enterprises, gardening and country-house societies, farmers). Village dwellers were, for the most part, excluded from this process. Another drawback was that land-use remained free of charge and that the reform only involved the collective and state farms to a minor degree.

January 1992 was the beginning of the second stage of the reform involving privatization and reorganization of collective and state farms, introduction of charges for land-use, strengthening the rights of landowners. On the whole, the reform proceeds with difficulty, despite the fact that the pro-reform feelings had been strong enough.

The few attempts to set up and run farms show that this road is full of hardships. The process is hindered by disadvantageous conditions of allotment of land (which happened in Russia during the 1861 reform), machinery, transport means and the like by collective and state farms renting them out, since they (and other bodies) remain monopolist owners of everything, including land. Now only 10—15% of village dwellers intend to secede from collective and state farms and to set up independent farms. This can be accounted for both by objective historical reasons mentioned above and by present-day conditions.

In new economic conditions, with the emergence of farmers' and cooperative structures, the pattern of settlement in certain regions is sure to change, since new farmers will form khutors and group or family settlements. This raises new problems in dealing with socio-cultural and landscape dimensions of villages, including construction of new buildings, roads and communications, changes in the scope and operation of cultural

establishments and the public services sector which now exist in amalgamated centres of collective and state farms. Thus, the natural and landscape aspects in the formation of rural settlements are closely linked with the town design and specific aspects.

Legislative acts adopted during these last decades under the impact of urbanization and the need to resolve the food supply problem have substantially changed the historical environment of rural settlements, especially those lying in the zone of influence of cities and industrial centres. Simultaneously with the construction in towns of multi-storeyed "bedroom" blocks, village settlements, especially those with a mixed agro-industrial structure, developed a uniform type of construction, which conflicts with the surrounding landscape and specifics of the local population. In recent decades, garden and orchard plots, household buildings and sheds for cattle (pigs, chicken, goats) sprang up on illegally occupied land around these multi-storeyed buildings. Built chaotically, they create an ugly environment. However, such garden plots help to solve the food supply problem, though people have to work double trying to grow their own food: on collective and state farms in the daytime, and later — on their own household plots.

The problem also applies to city dwellers. Recent government acts have allowed people living, for instance, in Moscow to have country houses with an attached piece of land. Before and after the war such plots were 0,1—0,4 hectare and included forest stands, while now their size has shrunk to 0,06—0,08 ha, which is only enough for a small house and a small vegetable garden. The capital is now surrounded by such cooperatives. As a rule, they are built on land unsuitable for farming or in place of cleared forests along the roads. There are also small vegetable plots (0,02—0,03 ha) along railroads, under high-voltage power lines used for growing staple foods like potatoes and vegetables.

Such vegetable-garden plots change the landscape around towns and villages beyond recognition. The quality of such spontaneously built motley buildings depends on the well-being and social status of their owners. In many cases they look like shanty suburbs in the third-world countries; though from time to time one can see big stone houses which belong to representatives of the new class, such as tradesmen, cooperators, chiefs of commercial firms, administrators of collective and state farms, etc. The size of their plots of land can reach 0,3 ha.

In villages, many houses (50%) now belong to town dwellers who only come there to spend week-ends and vacations. The quality of their houses differs from that of the local people who are rather poor or have moderate means. However, even such use of villages allows them to survive and acquire a new socio-cultural dimension. One should not forget that relations between town and village dwellers as reflected in the structure of settlements, like the relation between the town and village in general, are rather complicated and

at times even conflicting and call for special legal regulations. This applies to the conservation of nature and landscapes, especially in the suburbs.

So, even a cursory examination of agrarian reforms conducted in the XIX—XX centuries in Russia allows one to draw certain conclusions about the formation of cultural and architectural landscape environment in settlements.

— During the period in question, the destruction of the peasant community could be observed though some of its features (collective production, social protection, lack of creative endeavour in its members) have survived and still exist in contemporary structures (state and collective farms). Brought by migrants into urban structures and industrial production, they tainted man's attitude to the environment. One cannot fail to notice people's indifference to natural resources and the desire to exploit certain features of nature without any legal regulation and without ever trying to restore them.

— The country's vast territory, great distances between settlements, affected people's attitude to nature. Restraints and regulations of economic activities were applied only within people's own surroundings. It was the country's vastness, which prompted such a previously careless attitude to nature, which became even more evident in the last decades. Absence of nature-oriented legal regulations, when only common law was applied, was conducive to such barbarous treatment of the natural environment.

— Since important decisions were taken by the country's leaders without consulting public organizations, research centres or the population (peasants and other social groups) and were not made public, many acts and decrees were either never implemented or produced only negative results in terms of history. This fact had a devastating effect on nature, bringing about its piratic exploitation and destruction.

— Attempts to use European culture as a model undertaken at different periods of history failed to bring the desired positive results. Experience has shown that economic models cannot be implanted into a different cultural milieu without an in-depth analysis, but should be studied and implemented with due account of actual socio-cultural dimensions.

— Attempts to reconstruct agriculture or industry relying only on economic mechanisms failed not only to reverse, but even to slow down the destructive economic processes taking place both in villages and in towns. It becomes evident that the formation of economic links is impossible without involving the cultural dimension (historical reasons for changes, psychological characteristics of population, support of entrepreneurship, etc.) The culture of management and the culture of land-use should be shaped along the lines of contemporary modernization-oriented trends, with a careful application of traditional forms. With such an approach, one can hopefully preserve and judiciously develop a natural landscape environment in Russian settlements.