
Review

Grigory Ioffe, Tatyana Nefedova, and Ilya Zaslavsky. *The End of Peasantry? The Disintegration of Rural Russia*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006. ISBN 0-8229-4295-X (cloth), 0-8229-5941-0 (pbk).

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At a time when academic, business, and political discussions of Russia focus on its adventures in the world of oil and gas, booming consumerism, vast inequalities in levels of living, limitations on press freedoms, civil rights, public health, and other ills, a less vivid and untold story is unfolding, namely what is happening to rural Russian settlement and Russian agriculture. This book provides an up-to-date portrait and analysis of the forces at work and their consequences. As indicated by a reviewer in one of the notes on the book's back cover, "If there is one book on the topic that one must read, this is it." I agree.

The authors, who spent their formative years in Russia, and have devoted much of their academic careers to intensive study and extensive field work on Russia's rural settlements, set out "to examine the dramatic decline of agriculture in post-Soviet Russia." Russian farmers have "always encountered difficulties relating to the sheer abundance of land, the vast distances between population centers, and harsh environmental conditions. Now, drastic depopulation of rural spaces, decreases in sown acreages, and overall inefficiency of land usage have resulted in severe disruption and spatial fragmentation of the countryside—creating a crisis for Russian agriculture with profound implications for the overall political and economic stability of Russia."

The landscape regularities of Russian agriculture, featuring gradients from center to periphery, north to south, and west to east, reflect the array of physical opportunities and limitations that have persisted through the centuries. Those regularities outlived systems of feudalism, capitalism, and Soviet-style state socialism, and their effects continue to make a difference from place to place in rural life today. In other words, in Russia and elsewhere physical environment matters, and the ways in which it matters have explained the existence of an almost-continuous zone of European settlement from the Atlantic and Baltic coasts to the Urals.

But just as *physical environment* never ceased to be important to agricultural possibilities and the human settlement it nourished, the effects of *relative location* in terms of physical distance from urban markets and urban life continue to be important because modern electronic communications and efficient transportation are not available to all. *The End of Peasantry?* argues that rural agricultural Russia, once a settlement feature that knit the country's ecumene into a continuous social space, has been fragmenting spatially into "a kind of archipelago" (p. 3). The legacy of urban settings, coupled with districts of the agricultural countryside that find themselves at varying distances from urban markets, set the stage for

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the emergence of the archipelago, which the authors identify, describe and analyze. Land close to the urban centers is farmed more intensively (à la Johann Heinrich von Thünen), while farmland is abandoned in outlying districts of many Russian regions, yielding a patchwork of farmland.

Following reviews of the Russian experience of serfdom and its presumed long-term imprint on the Russian psyche, the legal environment and social culture of the peasant commune, the New Economic Policy (1921–1927), and the collectivization of agriculture (1929–1935) that supported a crash program of industrialization, the authors compare Riasanovsky's (1968) analysis of the extreme 19th-century split between the elite and the masses with the resurgence of extreme income disparities of the 1990s. They review the familiar “peasant theory of Russian Communism” as variously advanced by Nikolai Berdiaev (1937), Nicholas P. Vakar (1962), and Anatoly Vishnevsky (2001), and conclude that “Communism came to an end when the tenacious equality-in-poverty mentality originally nurtured by the redistributive peasant commune and subsequently harnessed by the Bolsheviks had weakened its grip over the majority of educated people in a few principal urban areas” (p. 18). But this shift happened in only a few places, which became the centers for regime change, while for the bulk of rural villagers—the de facto social outcasts—it is unlikely to occur in their lifetimes (p. 18). Subsequent chapter titles profile their argument: “Working Land in Russia,” “Development in Breadth, Russian Style,” “Rural Villagers,” “Market Adjustment and Spatial Change,” “From Spatial Continuity to Fragmentation,” “Regionalization,” “The Transformation of Russian Agriculture at Close Range,” and “Conclusion: Geography *Is* Destiny.”

Chapter 2, “Working Land in Russia,” reviews the “bi-modal” structure of Soviet agriculture—with socialized collective and state farms on the one hand, and “personal auxiliary farming” or household plots on the other. In terms of rural development, life remained essentially unchanged between pre-1917 times and the 1960s, except for villages close to large cities and most villages in the Moscow, Leningrad, and Kaliningrad regions. During that period, much of the investment in rural Russia was devoted to farm equipment, seed, and fertilizer, and not to rural infrastructure—electricity, telephones, and modern household plumbing. What gains there were to the rural economy disappeared with the slaughter of livestock by peasants to avoid surrendering them to collective farms in the early 1930s, destruction during the war, the deaths of nine million rural Russians in the war, and younger villagers later relocating to urban industrial jobs.

The Virgin Lands scheme (1954–1964) diverted agricultural investment from European Russia to Kazakhstan and Western Siberia, but the 45 million hectares added were offset by a loss of 13 million in European Russia. Subsequent efforts in the 1970s to accelerate agricultural investment in neglected farming areas by means of chemicals, land reclamation, and industrialization of farming yielded results well short of their goals. Later policy shifts, both before and after 1991, led to an increase in registered private farms, in vertically integrated agribusinesses, and other corporate farming operations, but the overall results in productivity have been unpromising and Russian official statistics, according to the authors, fail to support serious and comprehensive agricultural policy analysis.

The symbiosis between the collective farms and private production remains as complicated today as in Soviet times. The authors draw on their field observations to argue that rural households use more land than they own—some of it attached to residences, some leased out by rural administrative authorities, and some leased out by the collective farms. The collective farm lingers “as a de facto conduit for state aid to household operations” (p. 37). Because private operators are able to buy fertilizer and feed through these “peculiar

collective arrangements that defy strict classification” (ibid.), it is difficult to assign the outputs to either the private or the collective columns of the ledger.

Summarizing recent ups and downs, the authors conclude that Russian agriculture continues to be the most troublesome sector of the economy, as it has been for as long as anyone can remember. And its unpromising prospects make it unlikely that the “Russian rural ecumene” will be able to hang onto its labor in a competitive market environment that has “left Russian rural folk out in the cold” (p. 44).

Chapter 3, “Development in Breadth, Russian Style,” examines the extension of agricultural settlement frontier eastward from the forested heartland in an expansion that was unique among European nations. But because it meant the nobility lost laborers, it led to Russian peasants becoming legally tied to the land in full-fledged bondage. Lenin and others argued that “development in breadth,” adding agricultural land to the realm, slowed the decrease in rural population and retarded the development in capitalism.

The steadily shorter growing seasons and colder temperatures that prevail moving east across Europe and Russia have been accompanied by generally lower agricultural productivity, but the gradient of productivity decline in Russia “greatly exceeds what the inequities of the environment might produce” (p. 54). What then is the basis for the declines? The authors argue that much of the unexplained variation can be traced to the sparseness of reliable transportation routes and long interurban distances. “Apparently farming fared better and continues to do so in an internally cohesive, well-connected socioeconomic space, where ‘propitious urban environment’ [to use Wilbur Zelinsky’s phrase] affects much of the countryside, rather than in a space whose interface with civilizing factors external to agriculture has been fragmented (patchy) and inconsistent” (pp. 54-55).

Meanwhile at the local level, an even more pronounced trend can be observed, with the distance from a city becoming the major predictor of agricultural productivity. Grain yields, milk yields per cow, and overall value of agricultural output per unit of farmland all generally decline with increasing distance from a major city (p. 58). The question raised by the authors is, “How did central planning, Soviet Style, end up with the same concentric zones” (p. 60) as identified and explained by von Thünen? The answer, of course, is that the quality of rural infrastructure is in inverse proportion to distance from the regional capital.

Existing cities’ spheres of influence fail to extend very far outward. In much of Western Europe, with market towns 8 to 20 km apart, many farmers—perhaps most—could reach a market town and be back home the same day. But at the beginning of the 20th century, towns in Russia were on average 60 to 85 km apart and in the Urals they averaged 150 km apart, spatial arrangements that changed little under the Soviets. But besides the several impacts of cities nearby on agriculture, the more profound fact remains that “Russian farmers have to contend with some of the worst climates faced by farmers anywhere” (p. 70), a fact well known in early studies of Russia but surprisingly overlooked in many studies eager to attribute Soviet agricultural failures to systematic factors arising from the political economy. Clear and well-crafted tables and maps provide a comprehensive assessment of available heat, moisture, length of growing season, and available degree days in different districts of Russia, illustrating the persistent agricultural gradients from west to east and the extent of environmentally marginal lands, concluding that “Russia’s agricultural development began to show signs of overextension long before the advent of the market economy that followed the breakup of the Soviet Union” (p. 77-78).

The fourth chapter, “Rural Villagers,” moves beyond the persistent west-to-east decline in agricultural productivity at the national scale, the rings of declining productivity with distance from cities at the local scale, and the encroachment of agriculture into harsh physical

environments, and presents a fourth factor that examines problems of working the land in areas too sparsely settled to support prevailing agricultural technology and associated managerial practices. It recounts the ways that the European Russian countryside is ailing, with its dim prospects compounded by the self-selection of “movers” versus “stayers.” The “industrious, bright, dexterous, savvy, and least given to heavy drinking tended to leave for the city, while the most passive and resigned tended to stay” (p. 105). The inevitable result is a distinctive population left behind that is poorly inclined to innovation and change. In the bad old Soviet days, firing a drunken worker was next to impossible. But whereas today’s agribusiness managers have the option of dismissing a bad worker, finding a superior replacement is harder than ever. So agribusiness concentrates on the best farms, close to the cities, and thereby compounds the geographical contrasts in agricultural productivity.

Chapter 5 exploits a data set that includes roughly 60 variables for 1,267 districts (rayons) of rural Russia, focusing on the nonchernozem zone (682 districts, with 10 to 40 percent arable land) north and south of Moscow and extending east to Sverdlovsk, and the South to Dagestan (585 districts, 60 to 80 percent arable in most districts). The emphasis is on variations in agricultural productivity of collective farms and people’s farms,² and population characteristics in rural districts as functions of nearby city size and of variables describing district location: e.g., distance from the provincial (oblast) capital, relative location of a district vis-à-vis its provincial capital (i.e., adjacent, next tier outward, etc.), and the urban population potential at a district, which is a measure of a district’s location relative to all cities of European Russia.

Building on the analysis of post-Soviet market forces, changes in farming organization and operations, the effects of differences in physical resources, and the impact of farm location relative to urban markets, remaining chapters analyze the spatial dynamics of farmland usage and the effects on Russian rural settlement, namely land abandonment, “black holes,” and “the emerging archipelago of commercial farming.” Rural population density is shown to be “a credible predictor of agricultural productivity, and harsh environment and poor accessibility to major urban centers help to mold the fragmented space of Russian agriculture” (p. 154). The authors identify and describe 10 types of socioeconomic regions in terms of their varying patterns of agricultural activity and associated characteristics, then take a detailed look at agricultural operations in selected districts within four case-study regions (Novgorod Oblast, Moscow Oblast, Chuvash Republic, Stavropol’ Kray) to assess the contemporary transformation of Russian agriculture. Cases are brought to life with excellent maps, current data, and vivid photographs.

The book concludes by recognizing that theirs is one of many efforts to monitor and interpret changes unfolding in post-Soviet Russia, which currently finds itself at a “crossroads between two economic systems—command and market” (p. 221). Their final (bleak) observation: “To be sure, a view of abandoned villages and formerly cultivable fields overtaken by shrub and birch trees is as sad as Chekhov’s doomed cherry orchard” (p. 224).

The book’s distinctive contribution lies in its argument that a settlement and agricultural archipelago is emerging in European Russia, that spatial polarization is inherently linked with social stratification, and that despite government efforts to mute or reverse certain inexorable forces, “geography *is* destiny” in many ways. It is a major task to demonstrate how large forces play out in ways that reorganize society, economy, and human settlement over an

²This category includes both so-called “peasant farms” (or registered family farms) and “household farms” (or personal subsidiary plots).

important part of the earth, but *The End of Peasantry?* succeeds in excellent fashion. This is a terrific book, and I highly recommend it.

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