

GRAEME J. GILL

The Failure of Rural Policy in Russia, February–October 1917

On October 25–26, 1917 (O.S.), the nominal government of Russia, the third coalition of the Provisional Government headed by Alexander Kerensky, was pushed from power with ridiculous ease by the Bolsheviks. The Bolsheviks' plans were no secret; it had been common knowledge for some weeks that they were planning a move against the government. The Provisional Government, however, was incapable of taking any effective action. By October the government's power had drained away, leaving little more than an empty shell which could be pushed into the dust bin of history with a minimum of difficulty. It is, of course, wrong to assume that the Provisional Government ever had "the full plenitude of state power" about which the Kadets were so concerned; the government had never been master in its own house. It had always relied on a favorable configuration of forces on the Russian political stage. Lacking formal legitimacy, the government had to depend on popular support—which was manifested in part by organizations such as the Petrograd Soviet—in order to achieve its aims. However, the government soon alienated large sections of the Russian population, a development which, in the context of the complete absence of rules regulating political conflict (which characterizes a revolutionary situation), rendered it extremely weak and vulnerable. Largely bereft of popular support in the capital, the government was toppled easily by the Bolsheviks; it fell with few supporters and even fewer defenders. The government's policy in rural areas was a significant factor in the lack of popular support because, to a very large extent, it was the government's unpopularity in the countryside that fostered the development of popular opposition in the capital.

In many areas the fall of the tsar was initially greeted with skepticism. The peasants refused to believe that the "little father" no longer ruled over them. In most areas, however, this skepticism soon vanished and was replaced by widespread rejoicing as the peasants realized the opportunities that flowed from the tsar's demise. One official report spoke of "universal joy" at the tsar's fall.¹ Only in Bessarabia and the southern counties of the Chernigov and Mogilev

1. "Mart-mai 1917 g.," *Krasnyi arkhiv*, 15 (1926): 35. Throughout this article comments about peasant actions and views are based on substantial examination of the situation in the villages in 1917 undertaken while preparing my Ph.D. dissertation at the University of London. The single richest source on developments in the countryside is the reports of local events sent to the militia headquarters throughout the year which are reprinted in K. G. Kotel'nikov and V. A. Meller, eds., *Krest'ianskoe dvizhenie v 1917 godu* (Moscow, 1927). Resolutions of peasant meetings can be found in many documentary selections, including the series edited by L. S. Gaponenko and by D. A. Chugaev, some of the volumes of which are referred to below, as well as in A. V. Shestakov, ed., *Sovety krest'ianskikh deputatov i drugie krest'ianskie organizatsii* (Moscow, 1929). All references to Russian administrative regions have been Anglicized, with district, county, and province used to refer to *volost*, *uezd*, and *guberniia*, respectively.

provinces (the area around the Stavka) were promonarchist sentiments expressed on any wide scale.

The favorable reception which greeted the fall of the tsar in the villages was manifested in a surge of enthusiasm for the Provisional Government. Peasants in many areas donated increased quantities of grain to the authorities, thereby helping to ease the dangerous food shortages in the cities that had proved so disastrous for the old regime.² In many instances peasants sought the correction of traditional grievances through new channels of local administration instead of taking matters into their own hands, as they were to do later in the year.³ Even in those cases where the peasants acted unilaterally to seize privately owned land, this was frequently done in a way that disrupted food production as little as possible; seizure of fallow land and refusal to pay rent on land under cultivation were common during the early part of the year.⁴ There was also a surge of enthusiasm for World War I, reflected in the adoption by peasant assemblies of numerous prowar resolutions and the hostile reception which greeted many deserters who entered villages throughout Russia.⁵

The widespread peasant support for the government was not unqualified however. Many of the resolutions adopted by the peasants early in the year demonstrate the contingent nature of their support. One example will suffice: the Kineshma County Soviet of Peasants' Deputies met in Kostroma on March 30, 1917, and decided

to support the Provisional Government, so long as it does not breach the declaration of freedom and goes unwaveringly along the path toward the quickest convocation of the Constituent Assembly on the basis of universal, direct, equal, and secret ballot.⁶

Although this resolution probably was not drafted by a peasant,⁷ it does reflect the basic attitude toward the new government shared by most peasants: they

2. According to one authority, in February the fronts (excluding the Caucasian front) had only 42.3 percent and the cities 29.6 percent of the planned supplies of grain produce, while in March the corresponding figures were 58 percent and 41 percent (see S. Lozinskii, *Ekonomicheskaia politika vremennogo pravitel'stva* [Leningrad, 1929], pp. 9 and 124). For examples of peasants donating grain, see *Vestnik Vremennago Pravitel'stva*, March 12, March 17, and March 21, 1917.

3. For example, see L. S. Gaponenko et al., eds., *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie v Rossii posle sverzheniia samoderzhavii: Dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow, 1957), p. 674; and "Agrarnoe dvizhenie v 1917 godu po dokumentam glavnogo zemel'nogo komiteta," *Krasnyi arkhiv*, 14 (1926): 205-15.

4. Marc Ferro, *La Révolution de 1917* (Paris, 1967), pp. 410-11. While the establishment of rental rates was by no means the single most important form of land seizure in March, during that month it did constitute a far higher proportion of all instances of land seizure than it would do at any time later in the year.

5. For example, see Gaponenko et al., *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie*, p. 670; and "Mart-mai," p. 57, respectively.

6. Gaponenko et al., *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie*, p. 383. All dates are given Old Style.

7. This is a major problem in using the resolutions of peasant meetings as an accurate guide to the sentiments of those at the meetings. The very high level of illiteracy among the peasants meant that in most cases the decisions of peasant meetings were transcribed by people who did not live permanently in the village in question, but by agitators or others coming from the towns. Such people normally were politically partisan, with the result that

offered their support to the government as long as it acted in their interests. But while the peasants were hopeful that the new regime would act in the ways they demanded, they remained wary of its intentions; they had been disappointed on too many prior occasions to place their whole trust in a government situated in a tiny urban area far removed from the villages and from their concerns. The peasants' worst fears were soon substantiated as government policy in the three main spheres of rural life—local administration, land matters, and the food question—ran directly counter to what the peasants perceived their best interests to be.

The overthrow of the tsar was interpreted in the villages as an indication of the end of the old unjust system of authority relations in the countryside, a system under which the peasants and their concerns were governed by private landowners or career officials appointed from Petrograd. Henceforth, the peasants expected to choose their own governors and to have control over their own affairs. In the words of a peasant delegate in the provincial section of the Moscow Soviet of Workers' Deputies on March 6, "it is necessary to hold new elections for all rural and village officials, to cleanse the country of remnants of the old regime, to remove land captains, police, and others."⁸ The total rejuvenation of the local administrative apparatus—the replacement of tsarist bureaucrats and gentry landowners by peasants or those chosen by peasants—was the minimum that peasants in most areas were willing to accept. Unfortunately, government action stopped far short of this demand.

One of the first problems which the Provisional Government had to face on coming to power was that of rural administration. This was of vital concern to the government because the establishment of effective control throughout the countryside was a necessary condition for the government's survival; unless roots could be sunk into the villages, the prospects for the government, and for Russia, were perceived to be slim. The government recognized the need to make a symbolic break with the past in the sphere of local administration, and yet it was acutely aware of the very small reserve of experienced administrators at its disposal if all tsarist functionaries were to be excluded from consideration. The dilemma was insoluble. On March 5, 1917 instructions were dispatched to the chairmen of the provincial zemstvo boards abolishing the imperial posts of provincial governor, vice-governor, and land captain and replacing them with provincial and county commissars.⁹ These positions were to be filled temporarily by the chairmen of the respective zemstvo boards. In the performance of their duties, these officials were advised "that it is desirable to retain, wherever possible, the entire existing administrative mechanism, with the aim of upholding the normal course of life in the country."¹⁰ Further guidance was given on March 19 when commissars were called upon to establish district committees where necessary. The commissars were instructed not only to turn to existing food committees, district committees (many of which had already been formed

peasant resolutions almost invariably were framed in the rhetoric and phraseology of political conflict in the capital.

8. Gaponenko et al., *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie*, p. 670.

9. *Vestnik Vremennago Pravitel'stva*, March 23, 1917.

10. Gaponenko et al., *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie*, p. 422.

from below by the peasants), cooperative organizations, and bodies performing social work for help in the formation of new government district committees, but were also advised that "it is recommended also to draw into the work of these committees local landowners and all the intellectual forces of the countryside."¹¹

The early moves in the realm of local administration were meant to be temporary, to hold the fort until "local organizations on correct democratic bases" could be formed.¹² These organizations were envisaged to be the district zemstvos, local bodies elected on a popular franchise and designed to administer all aspects of life in the district. Formal provisions for the zemstvo were not drafted until late May, however,¹³ and the elections were not held until August–September. By this time peasant disillusionment with the government was deep and widespread. Consequently, most elections were characterized by a very low voter turnout, and those zemstvos which were established in the twilight of the Provisional Government's life exercised very little influence in rural areas.¹⁴

The late appearance of district zemstvos meant that throughout the year local government retained the flavor imparted to it by the form in which it was established initially. However, that form was objectionable to the peasants. The first moves by the government left little scope for direct participation in local administration by the peasants, because the main positions in the local government structure were filled by appointment from Petrograd. Furthermore, the personnel of the local structures did not inspire confidence in the peasants; chairmen of the zemstvo boards, local landowners, and experienced officials were all expected to play a role. Consequently, it appeared to the peasants that the government was doing little except renaming the old structure while leaving it essentially intact. The same types of people were in controlling positions: the tsarist officials and local landowners were still exercising power in local areas.¹⁵ In the peasants' eyes the government appeared intent on defending the established interests in society and therefore preventing the peasants from achieving what they believed to be their due.

This attitude was reinforced by the government's approach to the question of rural unrest. Most disturbances in the countryside centered around land relations and the peasants' desire to gain control over those lands not currently in their hands. The government responded to peasant land seizures by a continued and forceful condemnation of the arbitrary seizure of privately owned land and of rural unrest in general. Throughout the year government spokesmen called on the peasants for restraint and patience, urging them to wait until the question of land relations could be reviewed by the proper legal body.¹⁶ Furthermore,

11. *Ibid.*, p. 440.

12. *Vestnik Vremennago Pravitel'stva*, March 29, 1917.

13. *Ibid.*, May 25, 1917.

14. Reports of the elections can be found in *Delo naroda*, September 23, 1917.

15. See a peasant call for the annulment of the decision of March 5, in Gaponenko et al., *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie*, pp. 678–79.

16. See *Vestnik Vremennago Pravitel'stva*, April 23, 1917. The government was so concerned about rural unrest that by October seven agencies had been given the responsibility for handling rural affairs: government commissar, district zemstvo, district committee, militia, land committee, food committee, and a special committee established in some provinces in September solely to combat rural unrest.

the government's basic attitude was placed in clear relief for the peasants by several attempts to suppress rural unrest using armed force,¹⁷ though such measures were not used on a wide scale. One source notes only 161 instances in the February–October period for the whole of Russia, while another cites a figure of 106 for the eleven provinces of the Central Agricultural and Middle Volga regions.¹⁸ Although the use of force was sparing, where it did occur, it served to reinforce the impression gained from the government's approach to unrest in general—that it was the defender of the landowners and therefore an opponent of the peasants' best interests. Official policies in relation to administration in local areas, emphasizing stability and law and order, thus served only to disillusion the peasants and alienate them from the government. This process was furthered by government actions in other spheres of rural life.

The central concern of the peasants was the land, around which their life revolved. The dominant peasant approach to the land question was based not on a conception of land ownership, but of access to and use of the land. The peasants believed that land should be in the hands of those who worked it with their own labor and their families' labor. Each household needed only as much land as it could work. This basic approach constituted the rationale of the repartitional commune which dominated the central grain producing regions of Russia, the regions characterized by the most rural unrest in 1917. In peasant eyes the labor norm principle was violated by many private landowners who operated their estates on an absentee basis, using hired labor, and who sent their produce to commercial markets to be sold for profit. Rather than cultivate their land themselves, many landowners preferred to rent it to the peasants at what were considered exorbitant rates. Such a description is not accurate for all private landowners; many privately owned farms—including a large number of those established under the aegis of the Stolypin reforms and many of those peasant farms traditionally held under hereditary tenure in areas where the repartitional commune was not the dominant form of traditional peasant land tenure—were very small in size, with the owner in as precarious an economic position as the peasants in the repartitional commune. Nevertheless, the view of the nonpeasant private landowner in the area where hereditary tenure was common and of all private landowners in regions where the repartitional commune was dominant was one of someone who clearly infringed the peasant view of propriety with regard to land relations; those private landowners who leased their land to the peasants were considered parasites on rural society. This view was reinforced in the Russia of 1917 by the deterioration many peasants had experienced in

17. For some examples of government statements, see L. S. Gaponenko et al., eds., *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie v Rossii v aprele 1917 g., Aprel'skii krizis: Dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow, 1968), p. 306; and Kotel'nikov and Meller, *Krest'ianskoe dvizhenie*, pp. 420–21.

18. Respectively, I. Ia. Kazinkin and P. N. Sobolev, "Bor'ba krest'ian za zemliu nakanune oktiabr'skoi revoliutsii," *Voprosy istorii*, 1957, no. 6, p. 21; and A. V. Shestakov, *Ocherki po sel'skomu khoziaistvu i krest'ianskomu dvizheniu v gody voiny i pered oktiabrem 1917 g.* (Leningrad, 1927), p. 161. These figures cannot be accepted as completely accurate, but they do indicate that the use of armed force was limited, especially in relation to the extent of rural unrest and the physical size of Russia. P. N. Pershin (*Agrarnaia revoliutsiia v Rossii: Istoriko-ekonomicheskoe issledovanie, Ot reformy k revoliutsii* [Moscow, 1966], p. 291 and chapter 8) cites some examples of its use. However, the use of armed force was neither as widespread nor as automatic as Pershin implies.

economic position during the half-century after the emancipation,¹⁹ and the fall of the tsar seemed to promise destruction of the land tenure system which the peasants blamed for their economic difficulties. The peasants widely, and unrealistically,²⁰ believed that if the land currently held by private landowners was passed into their hands, their economic problems would disappear. Consequently, the central demand of the peasants in 1917 was for both legal and actual control over that land not currently held in the traditional form of peasant tenure. The land was to be passed into the hands of the peasants immediately and without compensation.

Government policy on the land question went virtually no way toward meeting peasants' demands. There were two aspects of government policy, one dealing with increasing the productivity of the land and the other focusing on land relations. The effort to increase productivity centered on attempts to improve the distribution and use of the human labor force and of agricultural equipment in rural areas. The government tried to encourage the use of refugees, prisoners of war, military reservists, youths, and unemployed factory workers in field work, and established a committee in mid-June to coordinate the distribution of this work force throughout the agrarian economy.²¹ In addition, the government continued to urge factories to increase production of agricultural equipment and to encourage, through sharing arrangements, wider use of the equipment already in the fields.²² The peasants did not oppose this specific course of action; they shared a desire, at least early in the year, to "save the Russian land from famine." They did, however, object to the static view of land relations within which this policy was to be pursued. The government's approach emphasized the need to avoid any hasty or ill-considered change, and land tenure was to remain unchanged until a detailed investigation of all aspects of the land question could be completed²³ and presented to the forthcoming Constituent Assembly. The government thus perceived its policy as a holding operation, maintaining the status quo²⁴ until the information needed for a fair and equitable solution to the problem could be obtained. The only modification of this broad view that the government would countenance was contained in the decision of July 12 which provided a legal procedure for private landowners to dispose of their land.²⁵

19. Discussion of the changing economic position of the peasants during this period can be found in many places, for example, in Pershin, *Agrarnaia revoliutsiia v Rossii*, chapters 1, 2, and 4. For the immediate prerevolutionary period, see *Ekonomicheskoe polozhenie Rossii nakanune velikoi oktiabr'skoi sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii: Dokumenty i materialy*, vol. 3 (Moscow, 1957), parts 1 and 2. In English the best source remains G. T. Robinson, *Rural Russia Under the Old Regime* (New York, 1932).

20. The result of the seizure of landowners' land was that individual farmers in most provinces received less than half a *desiatina* each (see *O zemle*, vol. 1 [Moscow, 1921], p. 29). In any case, the peasants' problem was not only one of land shortage, but of low-level technology and high population growth as well.

21. *Vestnik Vremennago Pravitel'stva*, June 20, 1917.

22. For example, on July 26 food committees were instructed to use to full capacity those agricultural machines and implements not being used fully by their owners (see *ibid.*, August 5, 1917).

23. In practice this was modified (see below).

24. The nationalization of imperial lands was an exception to this.

25. *Vestnik Vremennago Pravitel'stva*, July 14, 1917. This decision made all transfers of land contingent on the approval of the provincial land committee and confirmation by the minister of agriculture.

The government's land policy was to be implemented through a structure of land committees established throughout the country.²⁶ At the pinnacle was to be a Chief Land Committee situated in Petrograd. Primarily designed to be a planning and advisory body,²⁷ the committee was to supervise the activities of the land committees established throughout Russia, to process the information collected by these bodies, to formulate the information into a broad plan of land reform for presentation to the Constituent Assembly, and to advise the government on legislative matters dealing with the land question. The more important committees were those established at all province, county, and district levels of rural society, which were to implement government policy in the countryside. The specific tasks of these committees included the collection of information necessary for future land reform, management of state properties, regulation of land and agricultural relations within the limits of existing government statutes, settlement of disputes arising over land and agricultural relations, and the prevention of acts by private persons which would lead to a depreciation in the value of agriculturally productive capacity. Below the county committees, district land committees were to be formed only where the county committee or the local population considered them necessary.²⁸ The powers of the district committees were to be defined by the county committee.

The government's emphasis on the need for the collection of full information on the land situation in each region prior to any attempt to resolve the land question was logically correct. In the context of the public mood of 1917, however, the delay involved in obtaining such information was politically fatal. The peasants expected the government to act quickly in placing the land in their hands. If the Constituent Assembly could not be convened immediately, and therefore the land could not legally be transferred to them, they expected the government to hand the land over unofficially before legal confirmation. The peasants feared that government policy would result in precisely the opposite situation, and it was confirmed in their eyes by a government decision of July 12 which formally restricted land transfers, but in fact provided a means whereby private landowners could dispose of their land and thus circumvent the freeze on land relations which the government claimed to desire. Since the fall of the tsar, the peasants had been demanding a total ban on land transactions in the belief that if privately owned land was sold to foreign interests or heavily mortgaged to financial institutions, it could be excluded from future land reform. Consequently, the government appeared not only to be procrastinating but also to be seeking to frustrate the peasants' expectations by allowing private landowners to dispose of their land.

26. *Ibid.*, April 23, 1917.

27. The deliberations of the committee in full session are reported in *Delo naroda*, May 20-26, July 2-7, and August 26-31, 1917. Criticism of the committee by a member can be found in V. P. Semenov Tian'-Shan'skii, "Glavnyi zemel'nyi komitet," *Arkhiv russkoi revoliutsii*, 12 (1923), pp. 291-94. A discussion of its deliberations and actions is contained in Pershin, *Agrarnaia revoliutsiia v Rossii*, pp. 295 ff.

28. The government ensured that district committees could not be established in all districts by restricting the funds allocated for this purpose. According to Pershin (*Agrarnaia revoliutsiia v Rossii*, p. 352), funds sufficient for only about 25 percent of all districts were provided. This reflects the government's inability to control committees at these levels.

The government's refusal to respond to popular opinion on land relations is clear from legislation under consideration at the time of its fall.²⁹ Introduced by Agriculture, Minister S. L. Maslov in mid-October, the bill did not propose to bring all the land under the control of the land committees, as the All-Russian Soviet of Peasants' Deputies had demanded at its congress in May and as Maslov's own Socialist Revolutionary Party had officially favored. All land currently being cultivated by the owner himself was to be excluded from the land fund proposed by the bill, except in those cases where there was an acute land shortage. Land devoted to special cultures was to be exempt as well. Confiscated land was to be passed into rental usage by those in need and able to cultivate it; thus the principle of private landownership would still remain intact. The proposal fell short of popular demands on a number of counts. During the spring peasants throughout much of the country had been willing to leave landowners with an amount of land that accorded with accepted labor norms,³⁰ but by late summer and early autumn all notion of landowners' rights had disappeared in the villages as the peasants seized whole estates leaving the landowner with nothing. Thus, although Maslov's bill may have reflected popular sentiment in the spring, by fall it was a long way out of step. Furthermore, the proposed law retained rental as a major component of land relations and retained private ownership of land. In both respects it conflicted with sentiment in the villages.

The land committees established on April 21 were not effective in implementing government land policy. Designed to pursue a policy line that was unpopular among the peasants, the land committees were also constructed in a way that hampered their ability to carry out the functions assigned to them. The structure was characterized by neither a clear demarcation of responsibility between levels nor a strong sense of accountability. Higher-level committees had no power to enforce their decisions on lower-level committees should the latter fail to implement instructions from above. The most significant failing of the provincial and county land committees, however, was in composition. Situated in the main town of a province or county and consisting primarily of people having few close links with the peasantry, they were urban in orientation; representatives of the zemstvo and the local administration dominated both provincial and county committees. Furthermore, many of the more important members of these committees were local activists of political parties—mainly the Socialist Revolutionary Party—and saw the peasants through a distorted ideological lens.³¹ Personally out of touch with the peasants and their demands,

29. *Delo naroda*, October 18, 1917.

30. For examples, see *ibid.*, May 3, 1917; and Gaponenko et al., *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie*, p. 689. A lengthy study of peasant actions, in which the changing peasant attitude is discussed more fully, is currently being completed by the author.

31. The provincial committee consisted of four members elected by the provincial zemstvo assembly, one by the municipal дума of the provincial capital, one from each county land committee, a maximum of three from the economic sections of the provincial zemstvo board, a justice of the circuit court, a justice of the peace, a representative of the Ministry of Agriculture, and experts serving in an advisory capacity. The county committee consisted of four members elected by the county zemstvo assembly, one by the municipal дума, a zemstvo agronomist and statistician, a justice of the peace, and experts serving in an advisory capacity. On the role of party ideology obscuring the perceptions of members of the party which nominally dominated organizations at these levels for much of the year, the S.R.'s, see

these committees, by and large, lacked empathy with the peasants' concerns. In the peasants' eyes they were urban committees dominated by the traditional exploiting interests. The only committees in which peasants who were actually involved in production conceivably could play a dominant part were the district committees, and these, of course, did not have to be established in all districts. The nature of the land committee structure thus ensured that they would have little appeal to the peasants and would therefore probably not be able to persuade them to accept the unpopular policy espoused by the government. Moreover, if the committees could not persuade the peasants to comply, they certainly could not force them to do so. No provision for coercive power had been made at all.³²

The utter failure of the government's land policy to obtain peasant support was matched by a corresponding failure in the matter of food policy. The government acknowledged this as an area of vital concern from the outset, recognizing the effect that food shortages in the capital had had on the fortunes of the old regime. In this sphere, however, the government was physically incapable of satisfying the demands emanating from the villages because the demands were irreconcilable. Peasants and urban inhabitants in all areas of Russia shared one basic demand: they wanted a secure food supply to guarantee sufficient grain for their needs. But peasant consumers, those who did not produce sufficient grain for their own needs, and town dwellers all wanted grain prices to be low. In contrast, peasant producers wanted the price of grain to be high. More important, however, were their demands that increased supplies of articles of prime necessity—kerosene, nails, leather, farm implements, and textiles—be channeled into the countryside at fixed prices. In the highly inflationary conditions of 1917 peasant producers needed articles of prime necessity more than they needed cash.

By the end of March the government had established the broad outlines of its food policy. On March 25 the introduction of a government monopoly on grain and the establishment of a formal structure of food committees was announced.³³ Legislation establishing the grain monopoly placed all food and fodder grains, except what was necessary for the needs of the owner of the harvest, under state control. Grain was to be surrendered at fixed prices established by the government,³⁴ and any grain not surrendered was subject to confiscation. Provision also was made for the confiscation of agricultural implements if the owner was not using them to their full capacity and therefore not processing all the grain his farm produced. At the same time the government acknowledged its responsibility for establishing fixed prices on articles of prime necessity and for coordinating their distribution throughout the countryside. The government thus acknowledged that the food question had two aspects.

Oliver H. Radkey, *The Agrarian Foes of Bolshevism* (New York, 1958). For a succinct outline of one aspect of the view of developments in the villages shared by most major political groups in the decade and a half before the revolution, see T. Shanin, *The Awkward Class: Political Sociology of Peasantry in a Developing Society: Russia 1910–1925* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 1–2.

32. Even in dealing with disputes over land relations local committees had to wait until the dispute was referred to them by the contending parties.

33. *Vestnik Vremennago Pravitel'stva*, March 30, 1917.

34. The fixed prices were 60 percent higher than those prevailing in 1916 (see Lozinskii, *Ekonomicheskaiia politika*, p. 137).

The two aspects of the food question were reflected in the tasks assigned to the food committees³⁵ which were to be formed at the province, county, and district levels throughout Russia. After determining the exact position with regard to available resources of grain and articles of prime necessity and the demand for these goods, the provincial committee was to supervise their procurement and distribution to the population. The same functions were given to the county food committees within the geographical bounds of the county and within the administrative limits imposed by the decisions of the provincial committee. However, the county committee was envisaged as little more than an intermediate administrative level between the overall control of the provincial committee and the practical implementation of measures by the district committee. The district committee was to be the operational unit, physically carrying out the government's policy.

The government's food policy was set by the end of March: a grain monopoly with fixed prices, plus state control over other articles of prime necessity, was to be implemented through a countrywide structure of food committees. The basic thrust of the government's food policy did not change, but a number of modifications were made during the ensuing seven months. The powers of the food committees were extended in such a way that they were drawn into the middle of rural unrest. In order to encourage private landowners to sow more of their land, the government made food committees responsible for protecting crops against peasant depredations, including crops standing in the fields.³⁶ Food committees were also empowered to take over land currently unused and to put it into production, and they were granted some powers over the distribution of the rural labor force.³⁷ Besides these attempts to increase food production, the government tried to reduce food consumption through the introduction of grain rationing throughout most of the country.³⁸ Nevertheless, implicit acknowledgment of the failure of the government's policy was given by the last major decision made in the food sphere: on August 27 the fixed price on grain was doubled.³⁹

Just as in the case of land policy, the Achilles heel of the government's food policy was its failure to gain peasant support. The policy satisfied none of the peasants. Despite the establishment in April of a commission to investigate the supply of articles of prime necessity to the population,⁴⁰ the government made no attempt to establish a comprehensive system for the wide distribution of such goods. Government actions in this area consisted of a series of ad hoc decisions bringing various specific articles under government control.⁴¹ The lack of adequate action seriously undermined the grain monopoly. Grain producers were trapped in a vice composed of fixed grain prices on the one hand, and of rising prices of other necessities on the other. Rampant inflation (which was given added stimulus by the increase in the fixed price of grain in March and its doubling in August), underproduction of articles of prime necessity, and a

35. *Vestnik Vremennago Pravitel'stva*, March 30, 1917.

36. *Ibid.*, April 14, and July 26, 1917.

37. *Ibid.*, April 14, and May 2, 1917, respectively.

38. *Ibid.*, May 2, 1917. However, it was not until June 6 that details of how this was to be implemented were prescribed (see *ibid.*, June 13, 1917).

39. *Ibid.*, September 10, 1917.

40. *Ibid.*, May 7, 1917.

41. For examples, see *ibid.*, June 23, and October 6, 1917.

chaotic transport and distribution system, all meant that grain producers had to pay ever-increasing prices for the goods they needed. With the price of grain pegged, however, many were unable to pay the market price for their requisites; rising prices throughout the year increased production costs so much in some areas that even doubling the fixed price in August did not enable many peasants to produce their grain without a loss.⁴² Thus, many producers withheld their grain from the government, leading to widespread shortages in both rural and urban areas.

The widespread unpopularity of the government's policy undermined the food committees as effective instruments of government authority in the countryside. But even if the policy had not had this effect, deficiencies in the structure of the food committees would have imposed serious limits anyway. Like the land committees, the food committees, both at the provincial and county levels, appeared alien to the peasants. These committees were also located in the towns and their membership was dominated by people with few direct and immediate links to the villages, including, in many cases, those party workers whose ideological views hindered their understanding of the situation in the villages.⁴³ Because the committees were both physically and psychologically isolated from the villages and peasant concerns, their ability to persuade the peasants to accept an unpopular course of action was extremely limited. Nor did these committees have the power to enforce their decisions on a recalcitrant population. Like the land committees, the food committees were unable either to persuade or to force the peasants to accept the government's policy.

Clearly, the district food committees formed as a consequence of the legislation could have been far more acceptable to the peasants: half of the membership would have had close links with the producers of grain, if they were not producers themselves.⁴⁴ However, peasant rejection of landowners and zemstvo representatives in the local administration noted above also applied to these committees. Consequently, the district food committees rarely developed

42. Lozinskii, *Ekonomicheskaiia politika*, pp. 136–38.

43. The provincial committee consisted of three members from the provincial zemstvo assembly, three from the municipal дума of the provincial capital, one from each of the local branches of the All-Russian Union of Zemstvos and Towns, one from the local branch of the War Industry Committee, five from local soviets of workers' deputies, five from the local Peasants' Union, six from local cooperatives, two from provincial agricultural societies, three from the exchange committees, and one each from the zemstvo and municipal statistical organizations and from the agronomic, economic, and public health zemstvo organizations where these existed. Representatives from county food committees and from the government departments of War, Finance, Trade and Industry, State Control, Transport, Agriculture, and Interior could be present in an advisory capacity. The county committee consisted of three members from the county zemstvo assembly, two from the municipal дума of the county capital, three from local soviets of workers' deputies, three from the local branch of the Peasants' Union, three from county cooperatives, one from the local agricultural society, two from the commercial-industrial class, and one from each cooperative, agronomic, and public health organization of the county zemstvo. Representatives of the district and regional committees and of the government departments of War, Finance, Trade and Industry, State Control, Transport, Agriculture, and Interior could participate in an advisory capacity.

44. They were to consist of three private landowners elected by the county zemstvo assembly, six peasants elected by the district peasant assembly, three from local cooperatives, two from trade unions, one from the local commercial-industrial class, and three from among local zemstvo employees. Representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture could participate in an advisory capacity.

in the form in which they were envisaged by the government. The district food committees, like all the committees the government attempted to establish at the district level, tended to be dominated by peasants and therefore were more responsive to the villages than to the government. District food committees thus made little positive contribution to the government's food policy.

Two final points should be made about the government's food policy. The implementation of the grain monopoly was dependent upon the completion of a comprehensive survey of grain resources and needs. The survey was never completed, with the result that, in procuring grain, local committees usually were forced to act on the basis of arbitrary estimates.⁴⁵ In these conditions, with no precise guidelines to which the committees could refer, government legislation left the relationship between the committees at different levels ambiguous. Although formally in a superior-subordinate relationship, there was no clear apportionment of responsibility and accountability. Provincial and county committees were accorded no power to enforce their decisions or to bring a wayward subordinate into line.⁴⁶ The ambiguity created by these circumstances was exacerbated by a similar situation in relations between food committees and land committees. When the powers of the food committees were extended, their functions overlapped considerably with those of the land committees. No attempt to demarcate clearly areas of responsibility between the two structures was made until July 16,⁴⁷ and even then duplication was not eliminated. Ambiguity thus pervaded the structure of the food committees, a fact which, coupled with the committees' isolation from the peasants, undermined their ability to implement government policy in rural areas. Even if the policy itself had not been objectionable to the peasants, the problems with the food committee structure alone probably would have ensured the failure of the government's food policy.

Because the peasants objected to government policy in all three spheres of rural life (local administration, land, and food), government authority failed to take root in rural areas. In the chaotic conditions of 1917 the peasants turned for leadership to village-based committees, composed of peasants whose lives were wholly bound up with the villages, and rejected the low-level administrative structures designed by the government—the district committee, land committee, and food committee. Bodies bearing these names were of major importance in many areas of Russia, but almost invariably they were peasant bodies rather than government institutions. Government control stopped, by and large, at the edge of the towns. The failure to establish control at the lowest levels was reflected in both the land and food spheres. With little effective opposition, the peasants acted in ways that destroyed the established structure of rural society. In many areas private ownership of land disappeared as peasants seized the privately owned estates they had craved for decades and destroyed the

45. Directions were not issued to food committees to commence the census until May 3, six weeks after the committees were formed (see *Vestnik Vremennago Pravitel'stva*, May 9, 1917).

46. In June provincial commissars were instructed to suspend low-level organs which disobeyed the government (see *Delo naroda*, June 8, 1917). This was extended in September when these bodies were made formally responsible to the courts and the judicial system (see *Vestnik Vremennago Pravitel'stva*, October 4, 1917).

47. D. A. Chugaev et al., eds., *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie v Rossii v iunie 1917 g., Iiul'skii krizis: Dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow, 1959), pp. 308–9.

achievements of the Stolypin reforms.⁴⁸ The gentry landowners, who in other circumstances might have proved to be a major prop for the Provisional Government, were thus eliminated. In the food sphere, peasant producers acted with virtual impunity in withholding their grain from the market, thereby creating food shortages in many areas of both rural and urban Russia. The specter of hunger continued to haunt the capital, providing a sympathetic context within which the radicalization of urban workers could proceed. The rupture between city and countryside was a vital determinant of the ultimate course of events in 1917.

The main features of the government's rural policy, the lack of planning and coherence, the proliferation of insufficiently defined institutional structures, and the lack of appeal to the peasants, all reflect the essential nature of the Provisional Government itself.

The first characteristic of the Provisional Government that is significant in this regard concerns the conditions under which it came to power. The fall of the tsar caught all political groups by surprise; none expected it and none had formulated a comprehensive program that could be implemented once power had been achieved. Furthermore, although those who formed the nucleus of the first government had participated in the Duma during the last years of tsarist rule, they had only very limited administrative experience upon which to draw when they had to face up to the problems of governing the country. Thus, with Russia in a situation where decisions of national importance had to be made quickly and accurately, the government was in the hands of a group of men who lacked not only a clear conception of what should be done on the national (as opposed to the local)⁴⁹ level but also the administrative background to fit easily into the role of government decisionmakers. In the initial period the government was feeling its way, uncertain of the reliability, the capacities, and the limitations of the bureaucratic machine with which it had to administer the country. Under such conditions the formulation of clear, concise, and effective legislation was virtually impossible.

The effect of administrative inexperience in a situation which required clear and commanding government was exacerbated by the chronic lack of unity which plagued the Provisional Government throughout its life. All four cabinets (excluding the Directory Government which ruled during September) consisted of loose coalitions of members of most of the more important political parties in Petrograd, plus a sprinkling of nonparty men. The unusual circumstances of the post-February power structure in Petrograd, with the right looking warily toward the newly formed soviet, while the left gazed with concern at the army command, made bedmates of the most unlikely partners; from the end of April right-wing Kadets shared cabinet posts with left-wing Socialist Revolutionaries and

48. In the north and northwest of the country the peasants adopted a less negative attitude toward the results of the Stolypin reforms. In these regions the completely enclosed peasant farm, the *khutor*, was widely allowed to remain intact (see P. N. Pershin, *Uchastkovoe zemlepol'zovanie v Rossii* [Moscow, 1922], pp. 39-43). On the inadvisability of class analysis of developments in the villages, see Shanin, *The Awkward Class*.

49. No one would suggest that all members of the government were bereft of ideas about the path Russia should take in specific areas of concern (for example, Miliukov and the war), but no one had an overall, coordinated view.

Mensheviks in an unholy marriage of necessity. However, this broad left-right division was splintered even further by the presence of deep splits within some of the parties themselves, including the two most important, the Kadets and the S.R.'s. Thus, the government frequently could reach agreement only by avoiding specifics.

Differences within the government were particularly acute on the matter of land policy. At the Seventh Congress of the Kadets in March 1917 a bitter debate broke out on this question. Many provincial delegates pressed for radicalization of party policy, but they encountered stiff opposition from the conservative Central Committee headed by Miliukov. In an attempt to resolve the differences while at the same time presenting a façade of unity, no resolution was adopted on the land question and debate was adjourned until the next congress scheduled a few weeks hence. When the Eighth Congress opened in mid-May the question of agrarian reform again became the subject of bitter and vitriolic debate. Although the need for some changes in the structure of land relations was generally recognized, there was violent disagreement over the scope and timetable of such changes. When the resolution was adopted, however, the more conservative position carried overwhelmingly. Official Kadet policy, as expressed in that resolution, favored seizure of privately owned productive land that exceeded the labor norm and the payment of "equitable" financial compensation to those whose lands were seized. Land thus seized was to be placed at the disposal of the peasants. Support for the principle of landownership was reaffirmed, but the Kadets acknowledged that final determination of this question had to be made in each particular instance by the local communities concerned.⁵⁰

At the Third Congress of the Socialist Revolutionary Party in May the land question was almost completely overshadowed by other issues. The issue was diverted to an agrarian commission of the S.R. Central Committee which was charged with updating the original program that had been drafted by V. M. Chernov and adopted by the party at its First Congress in 1906. But the commission never produced a programmatic document, with the result that throughout 1917 the party was bound officially by what was essentially a stopgap resolution from the Third Congress. This resolution called for the abolition of private landownership throughout Russia—with all land passing equally into peasants' hands for productive use—and for the introduction of a law to this effect in the Constituent Assembly. Eventually the land was to be socialized, or owned by no one and used equally by all with broad regulation by a local administration.⁵¹ Prior to the convocation of the Constituent Assembly, all land was to be placed under the care of democratized land committees, all productive implements and livestock distributed for best productive advantage, and tree-felling regulated with a fixed price established on timber.⁵²

Basic agreement existed between the Kadets and the S.R.'s on the principle of land confiscation and its distribution to the peasants, but the two programs

50. For details of the Kadet congresses, see William G. Rosenberg, *Liberals in the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, 1974), pp. 89, 127–29. The Kadet program is reprinted in abbreviated form in R. P. Browder and A. F. Kerensky, eds., *The Russian Provisional Government 1917* (Stanford, 1961), pp. 605–8.

51. The S.R.'s were never specific about how this would work, probably because they were not sure themselves.

52. *Delo naroda*, June 7, 1917.

differed substantially on other points. While the Kadets favored payment of compensation for lands seized, the S.R.'s opposed it; the Kadets supported the principle of private landownership, the S.R.'s wanted to see it abolished; the Kadets believed that only agriculturally useful land in excess of the labor norm should be subject to confiscation, but the S.R.'s felt that all land, including land in the cities, forests, and land of little agricultural significance, should be covered by the program. But despite programmatic differences, conflict over land policy within the government was not a matter of a simple division between S.R.'s on the one hand and Kadets on the other. A substantial number of Kadets had reservations about aspects of the party's land program and the resolution of the Third Congress concealed wide differences within the S.R. Party.⁵³ The most important disputes within the government over land policy were not disputes between party blocs, but assumed the form of broad opposition within the government to any actions of Chernov, the S.R. minister of agriculture in the first and second coalitions.

As the author of the Socialist Revolutionaries' agrarian program, Chernov was passionately committed to its principles. His attempts to implement certain aspects of the program during 1917 were motivated not only by the belief in their intrinsic worth, but also by the conviction that such changes would stimulate agricultural productivity. Two major disputes developed. Chernov's continued calls for the transfer of the land into the hands of those who worked it⁵⁴ provoked widespread opposition within the government, and was exacerbated in mid-July when Chernov issued an instruction to all land committees which said in part:

Committees can go a long way toward satisfying the just demands of the working peasantry, but under the absolute condition that this does not lead to the disintegration of the national economy, to the dissipation of productive forces, to the destruction of highly intensive farms, to the lowering and loss of the harvest so necessary to Russia.⁵⁵

Although Chernov's call for land committees to be receptive to peasant demands was heavily qualified, because it occurred at the time of the highest levels of unrest that the country experienced between February and October,⁵⁶ it constituted direct support from a government minister for actions which were considered by the government as a whole to be both illegal and contrary to the nation's best interests. Chernov's instruction followed from his conception of the land committees as instruments for bringing about popular control of the land⁵⁷ and was consistent with the formal S.R. Party program. His opponents in the

53. For an account of the Third Congress, see Radkey, *Agrarian Foes*, pp. 212-16.

54. See, for example, Chernov's remarks at the All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Peasants' Deputies, reprinted in F. A. Golder, ed., *Documents of Russian History 1914-1917* (Gloucester, Mass., 1964), pp. 374-75.

55. Chugaev et al., *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie v Rossii v iunle 1917 g.*, p. 308.

56. Analysis of reports sent from the countryside to the Chief Department for the Militia has produced the following pattern of unrest in European Russia (in terms of proportion of total): March - 1.9, April - 7.1, May - 11.6, June - 16.6, July - 17.1, August - 13.1, September - 16.0, October - 16.6. These figures, which can only be accepted as broad guides, are based on analysis of individual instances of unrest. The militia reports are reprinted in Kotel'nikov and Meller, *Krest'ianskoe dvizhenie*.

57. V. Chernov, *The Great Russian Revolution* (New Haven, 1936), p. 242.

government struck back immediately in the form of open circulars from the Menshevik minister of the interior, Tsereteli, and the Popular Socialist minister of food, Peshekhonov.⁵⁸ Both emphasized the need for law and order in the countryside, and Tsereteli specifically attacked what he called arbitrary land seizures and reaffirmed the inviolability of privately owned land under cultivation.

Chernov also precipitated a significant eruption in the government over the issue of restriction of land transactions. In line with his belief that land should be in the hands of those who worked it, he favored the imposition of a total ban on all land transactions to prevent landowners from disposing of land to exclude it from future reform. The imposition of such a ban would have been consistent with the government's policy of freezing all land relationships, but it was opposed vigorously by the Kadets, who argued that such a move would violate the owner's inherent right to dispose of his property, impair the credit structure of the banks by depreciating the value of land, and threaten the whole basis of production in the rural economy. The Kadets were joined in this position by the prime minister, Prince George Lvov.⁵⁹ Chernov thus faced a solid phalanx of the right in his attempt to impose a total ban. Aware of the strength of the opposition, Chernov tried to circumvent it by working through normal administrative channels rather than by means of a government decision. On May 17, at Chernov's urging, the minister of justice, Pereverzev (nominally an S.R.) dispatched an administrative order to notaries throughout the country instructing them not to acknowledge land transactions until further notice. This was, in effect, a total ban on land transactions, and when it was brought to the attention of the government it caused a storm of protest and official rescission on June 23. The matter remained under debate within the government until the announcement on July 12 of the measure which would merely restrict land transactions. This was far short of Chernov's demands and represented a significant victory for the more conservative elements in the government over the only minister who contemplated measures that would have received wide support from the peasants.

Chernov's support for radical measures caused immense strains within the Provisional Government. His "internationalist" position during the crisis in April over Miliukov's note had alienated him from many Kadets even before he joined the government. Once he became minister of agriculture his support for the immediate confiscation of landed estates and their transfer into the hands of the peasants seemed to the Kadets to be an attempt to "deepen the revolution" when that revolution already was becoming far too deep simply as a result of the actions of the population. Prompting from a government minister was the last thing that was needed. Profoundly distrusting the "socialist minister" and blaming him for the chaos in agriculture,⁶⁰ the Kadets wanted Chernov removed from the government. When negotiations were under way for the formation of the second coalition government (which coincided with Chernov's instruction to the land committees), the Kadets made it a condition of their participation

58. See *Vestnik Vremennago Pravitel'stva*, July 18, and July 26, 1917, respectively.

59. I. Tsereteli, "Rossiiskoe krest'ianstvo i V. M. Chernov v 1917 godu," *Novyi zhurnal*, 29 (1952): 231-37.

60. An opinion shared by Lvov (see Golder, *Documents of Russian History*, pp. 470-71; and Tsereteli, "Rossiiskoe krest'ianstvo," p. 233).

that Chernov be excluded.⁶¹ The man who was trying to form the government and the future prime minister, Kerensky, had little affection for Chernov. Kerensky not only disagreed with Chernov on virtually all policy issues, but he also blamed the agriculture minister for engineering his exclusion from the Central Committee of the Socialist Revolutionary Party at its Third Congress.⁶² However, under pressure from the S.R. Central Committee, Kerensky could not afford to omit Chernov from the ministry, and the Kadets finally relented. But a government that included the Kadets, Kerensky, and Chernov could not be anything but divided, particularly on the issue of land policy, and such divisions clearly thwarted the government's ability to act in the rural sphere.

The government's capacity for action in rural affairs was also affected by its isolation from the villages and their concerns. Unable to keep abreast of the swiftly running currents of opinion in the countryside, the government had no chance of making decisions that would accord with the ever-changing situation. The government consisted of men who, for the most part, were urban-based and urban-oriented, whose direct experience with the villages was minimal. Furthermore, government ministers took much of their advice from people who were similarly far removed from the villages and their concerns. The executive committee of the Chief Land Committee, for example, was dominated by people whose background was predominantly urban⁶³ and the committee itself was isolated within the Petrograd bureaucracy. The executive committee of the All-Russian Soviet of Peasants' Deputies was also centered in Petrograd and although the views it expressed in May reflected organized opinion in the villages, by October this was no longer the case. And finally, the provincial committees, which sent reports into the center, were located in the main towns of the provinces and were therefore outside the stream of rural developments. The distorting influence of party ideology in relation to province and county bodies was especially strong in Petrograd where party leaders and theoreticians were situated. In the capital the reality of village life became transposed into theoretical concepts which bore little relation to the situation in the countryside. The isolation from the peasants that characterized this urban-based government was not insurmountable. With effort, the gulf might have been bridged, but the government lacked the understanding and the will to do so.

The government's lack of understanding of the demands posed by the revolutionary situation in which Russia found itself was evident in its broad approach to policy. The most important element was the government's perception of itself and of the tasks it should perform. The view shared by all members of the government—with the possible exception of Miliukov and Guchkov—was that sovereignty rested with the Russian people. This view of sovereignty meant that the Provisional Government had to be purely a temporary body, in existence solely to fulfill the will of the people by preparing for the convocation of the Constituent Assembly which would determine the outline of future political

61. Browder and Kerensky, *The Russian Provisional Government*, pp. 1402–3.

62. See the discussion of relations between the two in Radkey, *Agrarian Foes*, pp. 227–33.

63. See the discussion of the committee's membership in Pershin, *Agrarnaia revoliutsiia v Rossii*, pp. 294–95. The biggest single bloc was the S.R.'s, but most of these came from the party's right wing. A similar situation applied to the executive committee of the All-Russian Soviet of Peasants' Deputies.

forms, but this self-perception profoundly restricted the sphere of government action. Apart from the abolition of the old power structure and the attempt to replace it with a new, albeit temporary, hierarchy of power, the government was unwilling to make major structural alterations in the country for fear that this would close future options and thereby unnecessarily limit the range of choice for the Constituent Assembly. From this perspective the government's failure to proceed with greater haste to the elections for the Constituent Assembly, and therefore to the final solution of the questions facing Russia, was ill advised.

The rejection of substantial change involved in the government's view of itself was reinforced by its commitment to continued Russian participation in the war. Support of the war effort became a cardinal principle of the government and one which remained largely unchallenged from inside the ministry. The effect on the government's rural policy was to strengthen the resolve to avoid any major changes in the structure of rural society until after the war. It was feared that introduction of major change in the countryside would disrupt production and thereby hinder the war effort, and also might encourage desertion from the front by soldiers wanting to share in the new developments. By the time of the Bolshevik coup the rural policy of the Provisional Government lay in ruins. Without a definite program of its own, the government attempted to carry out a holding operation while dealing as best it could with crises which could not be avoided. The government's loss of its early support meant that, as the year passed, it could do little but react to events over which it had no control. Instead of guiding the flow of events in the countryside, the Provisional Government was submerged in the flood.