

JAMES Y. SIMMS, JR.

On Missing the Point: A Rejoinder

In responding to G. Hamburg's comment, it is necessary to reiterate briefly the argument that I presented in my article on the crisis in Russian agriculture at the end of the nineteenth century. I began with the premise that scholarly opinion—contemporary, Soviet, and especially Western—espouses the proposition that peasant husbandry was experiencing a deepening crisis as the last century came to a close. Scholars have argued that peasant well-being was declining steadily, especially in the 1890s relative to previous decades. After providing a definition of what the term "agricultural crisis" means,¹ I proceeded to analyze what I considered to be the crucial indexes used to support the crisis hypothesis. These indexes are (1) tax receipts or burden of taxation, in particular the rise in the redemption arrears and indirect taxes, and (2) the overall standard of living of the peasant, in this instance the consumption of nonessential goods, grain available per capita, and the impact of low grain prices. My examination of these indexes, however, led me to just the opposite conclusion—that conditions for the majority of Russian peasants were improving rather than deteriorating in the last decade of the nineteenth century.²

A summary of my position is necessary because Hamburg's commentary on my article misses the point. It fails to challenge or even really discuss the basic question that I dealt with: Was the peasant relatively better off or worse off as the nineteenth century came to an end? On the contrary, the commentator seems content to discuss issues which, although interesting, are not critical to my central theme. Having made this observation, I nonetheless feel compelled to respond. I not only disagree with the views of the commentator, but also with the way several of my arguments are interpreted, as well as with the gratuitous tone of the commentary itself.

The commentator's main criticism of my hypothesis is that I do "not pay sufficient attention to the way in which other scholars and contemporary observers have used the term 'agrarian crisis.'"³ Hamburg makes essentially three criticisms of my use and understanding of this term, the first being that I am too narrow in approach. He himself takes a reverse position and attempts to circumvent my argument and preserve the existence of the agrarian crisis by defining the crisis very broadly, in particular, by including the husbandry of the nobles as a part of the crisis. My response to this criticism is that I used the term agrarian crisis as it is defined by scholars, both contemporary and modern. In the literature, scholars have equated the crisis with the poverty of the peasant, and I provided considerable documentation to support that view. While it is true that the landlords were having difficulties in the postreform period, the peasant gen-

1. See James Y. Simms, Jr., "The Crisis in Russian Agriculture at the End of the Nineteenth Century: A Different View," *Slavic Review*, 36, no. 3 (September 1977): 378.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 397–98.

3. G. M. Hamburg, "The Crisis in Russian Agriculture: A Comment," *Slavic Review*, 37, no. 3 (September 1978): 481–82.

erated the most interest and concern in terms of the agrarian crisis. If my interpretation of the accepted scholarly definition of the crisis is correct, then the commentator's quarrel is with Von Laue, Volin, Liashchenko, Robinson, and others, and not with me. In this context, the following statement made by the commentator is most interesting: "After the famine of 1891–92 *discussions on the agrarian crisis concentrated on the plight of the peasantry* in the Central Agricultural and Volga provinces, where the famine struck hardest."⁴

The second criticism of my definition of the crisis has to do with the literal meaning of the word itself, and I must admit that the distinctions made concerning *krizis*, crisis, and depression seem rather chimerical to me. If, by the word "depression," the commentator is suggesting that Russian agriculture was experiencing a Great Depression from 1883 to 1896, a phrase used later in the paper,⁵ then does the difference in terminology constitute a difference in substance? Connotatively and denotatively, both Great Depression and agrarian crisis suggest that conditions were deteriorating in Russian agriculture toward the end of the century. That, it should be pointed out, is the premise from which I began, and which I attempted to disprove. It should also be pointed out that the above criticisms are essentially contradictory. On the one hand, I am criticized for being restrictive in definition, and, on the other hand, for failing to recognize that the crisis refers "merely to the agricultural price depression of 1883–96."⁶

The third component of the discussion centering on the subject of the agrarian crisis is the argument that I unfairly and inaccurately misrepresented scholarly views concerning peasant differentiation. This interpretation of my work is incorrect and misses the point. I did not mean to imply that scholars were unaware of different strata of peasants. We have all heard of the kulaks. My point is, however, that when discussing the economic well-being of the peasantry in the aggregate, scholars state that the *vast majority* of peasants were destitute and experiencing a steady decline in their economic well-being as the century came to a close. In this connection, the commentator's presentation of my discussion of Lenin and of the agrarian crisis is confused, does not do justice to my argument, and is taken completely out of context.

After criticizing my interpretation of the agrarian crisis, Hamburg proceeds to point out examples of "serious blunders," "questionable assertions," and "casual and superficial" use of documents. This seems to be an effort on his part to refute my article by an attack on my credibility, thereby implying that the entire argument must be fallacious. In some minor instances the comments are valid, but in the main they misinterpret or distort my presentation.

An example of this approach is found in footnote 9, where Hamburg argues that I violate the "readers' trust and common scholarly practice" by presenting Geroid T. Robinson's data out of context.⁷ The commentator has apparently not read my article with sufficient care, because again the point is missed. My area of concern is with the 1890s, and I have made no statements about conditions after 1900. Similarly, concerning the criticism of my discussion of Gerschenkron, it seems to me that my point is self-evident and the comment spurious. Since I am interested in peasant well-being in the 1890s vis-à-vis the 1880s, I am quite correct

4. *Ibid.*, p. 483; emphasis added.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 485.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 482.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 483, n. 9.

in stating that Gerschenkron's own evidence supports my contention that conditions were improving rather than deteriorating as the century came to its end.

The commentator does score a point or two in his criticism of my presentation of Nifontov. I would agree that footnote 75 in my article is misleading. Quite simply, I was not as clear as I should have been in citing Nifontov, nor in separating Nifontov's work from my own calculations. I used his grain and export figures and divided them by separate population figures, which led to the statement that his data support the proposition that there was more grain per capita available for consumption in the 1890s than in the 1880s.⁸ Although the statement is technically inaccurate, it is essentially correct if one takes the time to do the arithmetic. But the point is well taken.

The commentator continues to "snip and snipe," stating that I am "cavalier" in my analysis of Gerschenkron's computations on per capita grain production because I pointed out that he ignores the growing importance of barley, oats, and corn. Hamburg suggests that these grains—actually only oats and corn were discussed—were irrelevant to per capita output of grain. I disagree with the thrust of Hamburg's argument, however, because increased production of barley, oats, and corn clearly indicated that demand for wheat and rye was satisfied. Certainly human needs always took precedence over animal consumption. As to the point concerning the small percentage of corn production in relation to the total harvest, one should note that the harvest of corn by the late 1890s constituted approximately eighteen pounds per person in European Russia, and over one hundred pounds per year for the average peasant household.⁹ This is not an inconsiderable contribution to the food supply of the peasant household. In fact, I could have made my criticism of Gerschenkron stronger, in terms of the per capita food balance, if I had mentioned that he also excluded the harvest of potatoes, which were becoming a much more important crop for the peasant as the century wore on.¹⁰

In my view, Hamburg's discussion of Nifontov and Gerschenkron is another example of missing the point. The material presented is peripheral in nature and totally ignores the more important issue, which is a determination of the amount of grain available for per capita consumption. On this question, Hamburg remains mute, and my basic point remains unchallenged.

The fourth major criticism of my article deals with my interpretation of peasant income derived outside of agriculture—from handicrafts and day labor on farms. Again, the commentator has missed the point. I was concerned in my article with aggregate peasant welfare. If the peasant chose to supplement his income, he did so because it was to his advantage and improved his standard of living. Outside employment may, after all, be a sign of opportunity rather than of poverty. In terms of the question posed in my article, therefore, the issue of why the peasant sought outside income is irrelevant.

8. Harvest and population data come from page 284 and export data come from page 310 in A. S. Nifontov, *Zernovoe proizvodstvo Rossii vo vtoroi polovine XIX veka, po materialam ezhegodnoi statistiki urozhaev evropeiskoi Rossii* (Moscow, 1974).

9. Geroid T. Robinson (*Rural Russia under the Old Regime* [New York: Macmillan, 1967], p. 118) states that there were six souls in the average peasant household in 1900. See Nifontov, *Zernovoe proizvodstvo Rossii*, pp. 270 and 284, for population and corn harvest figures. I divided the former into the latter.

10. Nifontov, *Zernovoe proizvodstvo Rossii*, p. 279.

It is my view that Hamburg's comment on my article has contributed very little to the discussion of Russian agriculture at the end of the nineteenth century. First, he has attempted to define the agrarian crisis in extremely broad terms, which is at variance with accepted opinion. Second, the commentator does not attempt to challenge the main point of my article, which is that the economic well-being of the majority of the peasants was improving in the last decade of the nineteenth century. Finally, the commentator does not attempt to challenge any of the important indexes used to support my hypothesis, for example, tax data, increasing consumption of sugar, cotton, matches, tea, and so forth, grain per capita, and the impact of low grain prices on peasant budgets. Thus, it seems to me that my hypothesis has emerged unscathed. The burden of proof still remains with those who argue that there was a crisis for peasant husbandry in the last decade of the nineteenth century.