

From the Mouths of Peasants: The Political Speech of Russian Peasant-Soldiers During World
War I

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Intro

Most of the English-language studies of World War I soldiers focuses on the experience of the soldier at the Western Front, particularly the terrible and tragic realities of daily life in the trenches that became the iconic feature of the war which raged on for years in western Europe. This body of research, along with memoirs, journals, and other media created by soldiers themselves, have provided the western world with a wealth of information on World War I's Western Front, and the soldiers who populated the trenches in France. Yet World War I was not a one-front war. The war was contested both in the West and in the East, where the Russian Imperial Army saw 1,811,000 soldiers killed in the war, to say nothing of the additional 1,500,000 civilians who perished as a direct result of the fighting and the dire conditions at the home front.

The Eastern Front, unlike the Western Front, has received much less attention from western academics. The reality of life on the ground as a soldier in the Eastern Front is much harder to pin down through the literature available on the subject. This lack of parity in English-language research into the two fronts has many causes, some of them simply logistical (such as the language barrier, or the lack of available government records from countries in Eastern Europe). This simple lack of practical access to the source documentation combines with a tendency to stereotype the Russian Imperial Army (the major army active against the Central Powers on the Eastern Front) as a mass of faceless peasant-soldiers who lacked the political and cultural engagement of their western counterparts fighting in trenches in France. This view of the Russian peasant-soldier is patently false, as a careful study of the recorded words and opinions of these soldiers reveals a staggering amount of evidence that paints a

picture of the Russian peasant-soldier as not only politically active, but keenly aware and opinionated on the politics of the Great War, the issues of class within the Russian army and wider society, and the collapsing Russian Empire that would die in the war alongside its soldiers.

Historiography

Although receiving much less attention from historians than the Western Front, the Eastern Front has seen quite a large amount of work done in the last forty years, as western historians were increasingly able to gain access to Russian source material from the Great War in the late Soviet and post-Soviet eras. As government records and documents from the war began to become available, either through declassification by the government or the opening of Russian archives to westerners, work began on the topic of the daily life and the political activities of the Russian peasant-soldier that made up the bulk of the Russian Imperial Army.

Of particular note is Allan K. Wildman's seminal work, *The End of the Russian Imperial Army: The Old Army and the Soldiers' Revolt (March-April 1917)*.¹ Through meticulous examination of thousands of Russian archive documents, Wildman turns the generally accepted stereotype of the Russian peasant-soldier on its head. Rather than ignorant, he is shown to be sharp about the political implications of the war in which they fought and died. Instead of lacking political agency, they are revealed to be quite aware of the ways in which they can exercise their political power. Instead of unengaged with the wider Russian society, they prove themselves to be opinionated on the government, the impending communist uprising, and the war itself. Wildman's use of direct quotes, collected in letters and by officers in reports sent back from the front, effectively drives home the point that the old stereotype of peasants as

¹ Allan K. Wildman, *The End of the Russian Imperial Army: The Old Army and the Soldiers' Revolt (March-April 1917)* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

uninterested in culture, incapable of political agency, and ignorant of the realities of the wider world is simply an outdated and inaccurate portrayal.

Following Wildman's initial foray into studying the Eastern Front, several more notable works have been written specifically on the subject of the political speech and activities of the Russian peasantry active in the Great War.² Historian Josh Sanborn's work on the peasants' conception of nationality and the Russian nation as a whole followed up on Wildman's work, extending the repudiation of the stereotype of the Russian peasant-soldier to the question of nationality. He proceeds to use the same types of archival evidence used by Wildman to roundly refute the idea that peasants saw themselves as separate from the idea of a Russian nation, as has been argued historically in the literature both pre- and post-Wildman. In doing so, Sanborn specifically points to the recorded statements and letters of Russian peasants showing a growing sense of nationalism in the pre-war period. In addition, peasants interacted directly with state institutions, and framed their complaints about the state of the war in national terms, not local ones, proving themselves to possess the conceptions of nationhood that historians previously assumed was non-existent in peasant culture.

In the same issue of *Slavic Review*, historian Scott J. Seregny outlined very persuasively an argument that not only did the Russian peasantry possess a sense of nationalism and citizenship, but that this identity had begun to be formed in the decade before the Great War even began.³ In rejecting the stereotype of the 'pre-political peasant', Sanborn identifies this view of the peasantry as an outgrowth of the stereotypes held by urban Russians about their more rural

² Josh Sanborn, "The Mobilization of 1914 and the Question of the Russian Nation: A Reexamination", *Slavic Review* 59, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 267-289.

³ Scott J. Seregny, "Zemstvos, Peasants, and Citizenship: The Russian Adult Education Movement and World War I", *Slavic Review* 59, no. 2 (Summer 2000): 290-315.

countrymen.⁴ He specifically points to the creation of *zemstvos* (elected councils that served to administer local affairs) and the creation of various adult education programs by these councils as the beginning of the process of nationalisation. Although he declines to make a definite statement that the *zemstvos* led to the creation of a sense of citizenship in peasants in the pre-war period, his notion that this increased level of interaction between the peasantry and the non-peasantry (along with the increased literacy rates adult education programs led to) may have contributed to the growth of the Russian nation is well-argued.

Originally published in Russian in 2003 (and translated into English in 2017), Russian historian Aleksandr Borisovich Astashov's work on how the 'peasant mindset' present in many soldiers helped to hasten the collapse of the Russian Imperial Army during the war.⁵ He specifically makes note of the tendency soldiers had to include information in their letters home that would be potentially harmful to the war aims of the Russian Army. In these letters, the peasants often give away army positions and movements, but also include political commentary and opinion about the state of the war and the state of the government back home. Astashov also explores the developing views of soldiers during the war regarding the true enemy of the Russian nation. As the war dragged on without success, and with the government back home clinging to control amid a chaotic political environment, the peasant-soldier began to express that the government of Tsar Nicholas was the actual enemy of the Russian soldier.⁶ These works all take major pains to refute, again and again, the notion of the peasant as an apolitical non-Russian who only had opinions about peasant life.

⁴ Sanborn, "Mobilization of 1914," 281.

⁵ Aleksandr Borisovich Astashov, "The Russian Peasant at the Front during the First World War," *Russian Social Science Review* 59, no. 3 (2018): 206-230.

⁶ Bernard Pares, *The Fall of the Russian Monarchy* (London: Phoenix Publishing, 2001).

Context

In order to understand the peasant-soldier as a political entity, an examination of the characteristics of the Russian Army is required. Unlike its western and central European counterparts, the Russian state still remained largely an agrarian society outside of the major centers of government and commerce. Serfdom was only officially abolished in 1861, and the vastness of the Russian Empire made the construction of a ‘nation’ in the western sense a slow process. Complicating the issue even further was the fact that Russia during the pre-war period was still a very socially stratified society, with the large majority of the population being poor peasant farmers, while those from the upper classes largely filled the administrative positions and officer class.⁷ Russia lagged behind its European counterparts in the creation of a middle class, meaning that Russians largely composed of two groups: the peasantry and the privileged.

The Russian Army proved to be a microcosm of the Russian Empire as a whole, with peasants (and related classes such as artisans) making up between 80 and 90 percent of the rank-and-file soldiers in the Army and Navy.⁸ This is such an overwhelming majority that to call the Russian Imperial Army a ‘peasant army’ is not an inaccurate statement. Due to this, the interactions between the soldiers and their officers (who generally came from the privileged classes and nobility) was not merely characterized by differences in rank, but also their differences in class. This combination of class differences along with a newly imposed authority structure (the army the soldiers were drafted into) led to large amounts of mistrust⁹, particularly a

⁷ I.N. Grebenkin, “The Disintegration of the Russian Army in 1917: Factors and Actors in the Process,” *Russian Studies in History* 56, no. 3 (2017); 174.

⁸ Grebenkin, “Disintegration of the Russian Army,” 174.

⁹ Wildman, *End of the Russian Imperial Army*, 245.

sense held by the peasants that the officers motives were not aligned with the widely held desire among peasants for the war to end.¹⁰

While the desire for the war to end would become more and more common in soldiers' letters, at the outbreak of war the peasantry largely supported the effort, mobilizing with some enthusiasm and leading historian Alexander Chubarov to conclude that the traditional loyalty of the peasant classes to the Tsar still held weight in many segments of the peasant population, with patriotic feelings.¹¹ David R. Stone disagrees in his work, *The Russian Army in the Great War*, arguing that the rural populations as well as the working class were more resigned to the inevitability of service in the war, and showed less enthusiasm and a lack of understanding of the reasons the war occurred. Regardless of how invested the Russian peasant-soldier was in the overall patriotic ambitions of the Russian Army, the fact is that they mobilized in incredible numbers, swelling the ranks of the Russian military with millions of peasant conscripts.

The Russian media played an important role in the dissemination of information, initially playing up the war as being fought for a just cause¹² in an attempt to further the government stance on the war and gin up patriotism among the troops. Access to news media was incredibly important to the soldiers at the front, who often pored over any source of information available, be it newspapers, other soldiers returning to the front from home, and even the enemy.¹³ As the war raged on, and the Russian army suffered repeated defeats at the hands of the Germans, attempts were made by the officers to shelter the peasant-soldiers from the news media's

¹⁰ Wildman, *End of the Russian Imperial Army*, 222.

¹¹ Alexander Chubarov, *The Fragile Empire: A History of Imperial Russia* (New York, NY: Continuum, 1999).

¹² David R. Stone, *The Russian Army in the Great War: The Eastern Front, 1914-1917* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2015).

¹³ Wildman, *End of the Russian Imperial Army*, 219-222.

reporting of the war, for fear that it might cause unrest and desertion.¹⁴ This was made more difficult by the consistent failure of the Russian Army to mount an effective offensive against the Germans, instead reeling from one defeat to another.¹⁵ The attempt by the officers to keep the news from the front lines was ultimately a failure¹⁶, particularly as revolution began to foment back home. By March of 1917, with Tsar Nicholas II abdicating the throne and the formation of a provisional government, these efforts ceased, and the greater part of the army was aware of the political upheaval back in St. Petersburg.¹⁷

Even before the news of political changes in the capital made it to the front, soldiers began to express their distaste for the political reality of the Russian Empire and the war in which they were dying by the thousands. In stark contrast to the vision of the peasant as pre-political and unsophisticated in opinion, soldiers' letters and reports made by officers of the speech of the soldiers they commanded made it clear that the peasant-soldier class was not only politically aware, but had begun to shift their opinion regarding the true enemy of the Russian people. The political speech recorded in the Russian State Historical Archive¹⁸, the Russian State Military Historical Archive¹⁹, and the Russian State Library, Manuscript Department²⁰ all provide scores of quotes showing peasant opinion regarding issues of class, authority structure, nationalism, and war.

¹⁴ Wildman, *End of the Russian Imperial Army*, 222.

¹⁵ Chubarov, *The Fragile Empire*, 285.

¹⁶ Wildman, *End of the Russian Imperial Army*, 113.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 219.

¹⁸ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv, listed in notes as 'RGIA'.

¹⁹ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voenno-istoricheskii arkhiv, listed in notes as 'RGVIA'.

²⁰ Otdel Rukopisei, Gosvdarstvennaia publichnaia biblioteka, listed in notes as 'ORGPB'.

Class and Warfare

The idea of the peasant as pre-political and either unaware or incapable of engaging in complex political thought is shown to be untenable by the sheer amount of letters and recorded statements made by the soldiers regarding issues of class, particularly as it relates to the officer-soldier relationship at the front. The officer played multiple roles to the soldiers they commanded -- not just acting as commanders in the field, but as the main representative of the state in the mind of the average soldiers.²¹ This meant that as fortunes turned against the overwhelmed and under-trained Russian Army, and the last traces of loyalty to the Tsarist regime began to disappear, unrest in the army became a real issue.²² As news of the failings of the Provisional Government to stem the Bolshevik enthusiasm reached the soldiers, peasants increasingly began to express sympathy and support for the Bolsheviks. Peasants saw the Bolsheviks as fighting for the interests of the working class at the expense of the entrenched nobility of the Russian Empire.²³

Part of the job of the officer class was to monitor and report on the mood and morale of the soldiers at the front. One of the most common complaints made by the peasantry being that the officers motivations and incentives were at odds with actions in the best interest of the peasant-soldier. This feeling of disconnect between the soldier class and the officer class mirrored the separation of class in Russian social society, and this intense separation only grew as the potential for victory evaporated.²⁴ Generally, the peasant-soldier assumed that an officer (drawn from noble families and likely having grown up in relative luxury) would not have the

²¹ Grebenkin, "Disintegration of the Russian Army," 175.

²² Chubarov, *The Fragile Empire*, 169-170.

²³ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁴ Grebenkin, "Disintegration of the Russian Army," 174.

same interests as the soldier pulled off his family farm in order to die for the glory of the Russian Empire.

Soldiers often complained that the officer class as a whole was more interested in continuing the war in order to keep collecting their salaries rather than admitting to the obvious ongoing collapse of the Russian war effort. As it began to become apparent to soldiers and officers alike that the war was likely to end (at least for Russia) due to the Tsar's imminent abdication and the growing feeling of revolution back in the major cities of Russia, these feelings began to sharpen:

A certain alienation between officers and men set in; the officers did not know how to explain events, and the soldiers thought the officers were keeping quiet because they did not want to admit that the war would now end...[the officers] want the war to continue because in wartime they get paid a better salary.²⁵

The experience of class struggle at the front extended to the overall developing political situation back in St. Petersburg and Moscow. Peasant-soldiers showed distaste for the overall aims of the war, even expressing disdain about the possibility of victory. One soldier declared, “[the war] had to be! Our Emperor had to be rich!”²⁶ Other peasants stated bluntly that the war (from the peasant's perspective) was being fought for no gain, as even if the Russian Army proved to be victorious, any land gained at the expense of Russian peasant lives was likely to be divided up back home to be dispensed to the nobility and upper classes of Russian society.²⁷ The peasant-soldier understood that a victory in the war would be of no particular benefit to the peasantry itself, and that the peasant-soldiers would die for the glory of their officers. One

²⁵ Wildman, *The End of the Russian Imperial Army*, 221. Translated from: MS, “Vospominaniia”, Russian Archive, 577.

²⁶ Pares, *The Fall of the Russian Monarchy*, 235.

²⁷ Wildman, *The End of the Russian Imperial Army*, 222. Full quote: “What's the use of invading Galicia anyway when back home they're going to divide up the land?” Translated from: Byvshee i nesbysheesia, II, 10.

despondent soldier stated, “Yes, the commander gets a St. Georges [a medal of commendation] for taking the hilltop, but for that we’ll be pushing up daisies.”²⁸ This awareness and apathy towards the outcome of the war only became more pronounced as the Russian war effort began to collapse under the twin weights of an outdated and poorly-trained army and the rapid disintegration of the Tsarist government in the face of the rising Bolsheviks.

Political Views

Despite much literature on the subject still promoting the vision of the Russian peasant as backwards and uninterested in the political machinations of the Russian state, material collected by the Russian Army (and later opened to historians following the death of Stalin) shows that the peasant-soldier was not only aware of the ongoing political upheaval, but grew stronger in their distaste for the Tsarist regime as the war was increasingly unsuccessful for the Russian Imperial Army. Soldiers expressed disdain at the beginning of the war, intoning, “The war will do nothing for us and the Germans will lick us good [...] it doesn’t make sense for the soldier-muzhik to fight on account of the Serbs.”²⁹ This expression contains within it a wealth of information about the ways in which the soldier-peasant viewed the war from the beginning. There was an understanding among the peasantry that the social structure of the Russian Empire made any efforts in support of the war on behalf of the peasants merely an exercise in futility.³⁰ There would be no reward for the peasant classes, any lands gained would be divided up amongst the privileged classes and the friends of the Tsar, and the peasant would resume the harsh life to which they were accustomed following the end of the war.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 77. Translated from: D. Oskin, *Zapiski Soldata* (Moscow: 1929), 36.

³⁰ Ibid., 219-223.

The lack of incentive for the peasants to fight on to victory may have played a part in the ultimate collapse of the Russian Imperial Army, but these views regarding the outcome of the war obviously did cause the entire army to defect. Peasant-soldiers, many of them resigned to the reality of the war, fought on and died in a forsaken attempt at stabilizing the Eastern Front and calming the political tensions back in the capital. Despite attempts by the media and the officers to portray the war in a positive light, for peasant-soldiers at the front the reality was clear: the war was not going well, and the likelihood of Russian victory was shrinking with every military defeat.

The facts on the ground, along with their awareness of the wider political crisis gripping the empire, led officers to begin to converse among themselves³¹ about the possibility of revolution and the end of the war. These conversations were carefully monitored by the soldiers themselves, always hungry for uncensored news from the home front.³² The environment of secrecy created by the officer class only served to further the feeling among the soldiers that the officers were actively working in opposition to the interests of the soldiers. William G. Rosenberg, in cataloging the expressions of opinion in soldier letters from a single month (Jan 1915) counted 23% of letters expressing a desire for an end to war.³³ As the war raged on into 1916 and eventually 1917, this expression of a desire to end the war became ubiquitous among the peasant-soldier.

It was in this atmosphere that the Russian Army put forth an order stating that despite widespread opposition to war within the rank-and-file soldiers, there would be no peace without full victory. This order proved to be the spark that would set fire to the growing feelings of

³¹ Ibid., 112-113.

³² Ibid., 113.

³³ Rosenberg, "Soldiers' Moods." Translated from: RGVIA f2067, op. 1, d. 3855, II, 73-79.

discontentment with officers and the war effort among the peasant-soldiers, leading to open calls for uprisings within the soldier ranks.³⁴ This tied in with increasingly ugly views of the Tsar being expressed by peasants, a class that was seen as traditionally loyal to the Tsarist regime. Peasants began to directly tie the ongoing humiliation of the Russian Army to the flailing and incompetent Tsarist regime under Nicholas II. One soldier was quoted as saying, “A fish begins to stink from the head. What kind of tsar is it who surrounds himself with thieves and chiselers? It’s clear as day we’re going to lose this war.”³⁵ Another claimed, “The commanders are all traitors...the Tsar has surrounded himself with Germans and is destroying Russia.”³⁶ This intense souring of opinion on Tsar Nicholas II, alongside mounting military defeats, left the Russian peasant-soldier absent of patriotism and loyalty to the government³⁷, and a desire to end the war at all costs. One officer reported:

I am profoundly convinced that the soldiers now want only one thing - a full stomach and peace - they are tired of war and can’t be fed any longer with loud phrases on the ‘fatherland’ or the glory and power of the nation.

While initially unaware of the potential for revolution back home due to a concerted effort to censor news traveling to and from the front, as the war effort began to falter and censorship began to become impossible the peasant-soldier became more and more brazen in his political expression. This led to even lower morale, and alongside the Russians repeatedly being bested in the field by the German Army, this meant that by early 1917 soldiers’ letters (being

³⁴ Wildman, *The End of the Russian Imperial Army*, 108. Translated from: RDAF (January 1917), 261. Full quote: “They’ve put out an order that there will be no peace until full victory. And you know how badly they feed us -- only beans for dinner and supper. Tell your comrades that we all ought to stage an uprising against the war.”

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 92. Translated from *Na Fronte Imperialistcheskoi Voyny* (Moscow, 1935), 35-36.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 458. Translated from RDAF, 270.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 219. Translated from Selivachev, KA, 1x, 112.

received and censored by a branch of the Imperial Army) began to overwhelmingly express revolutionary sentiments.³⁸

Once Nicholas II had fled, ducking out of the collapsing tsarist regime, a provisional government was set up and a major effort was made to have each individual soldier sign a document swearing loyalty to the new regime. This was a matter of some import to the ruling class, as without the traditional tsarist regime in place, the loyalty of the peasantry was up for grabs. This most often simply took the form of officers presenting soldiers with papers to sign, but even though there existed an eagerness among the peasant-soldiers to swear loyalty to a new government, they feared the motives of their officers.³⁹ Ultimately, this provisional government proved incapable of administering the needs of the state in an atmosphere of revolution, and an explosion of support for the Bolsheviks began to appear in the reports that officers submitted regarding the morale of the troops.

Order #1 was widely circulated among the troops with the help of the media, and was well-received among soldiers. Some groups of soldiers took to enacting the order in secret, hidden from the eyes of their commanding officer.⁴⁰ Officers reported with dismay that the soldiers were taking to the march slogans and that the atmosphere of the rank-and-file was alive with revolutionary enthusiasm.⁴¹ This was in no small part due to the increasing understanding among the peasant-soldiers that the revolution would mean the end of the war, the greatest desire of the peasant-soldiers as a whole. As this realization spread, the soldiers could no longer

³⁸ William G. Rosenberg, "Reading Soldiers' Moods: Russian Military Censorship and the Configuration of Feeling in World War I," *The American Historical Review* 119, no 3 (2014). Translated from: RGVA f. 2067, op. 1, d. 2938, II, 2-2ob.

³⁹ Wildman, *End of the Russian Imperial Army*, 245.

⁴⁰ Grebenkin, "Disintegration of the Russian Army," 177.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

contain their enthusiasm, with spontaneous celebrations widely reported by the officers.⁴² Army committees began to elect Bolsheviks, or completely replacing the committee with mass meetings.⁴³ This coincided with the growing understanding among the peasant-soldiers of their own political power, particularly their ability to force an end to the war.⁴⁴ With it becoming increasingly clear that the officers' power over the common soldier had disappeared, mass desertion began in earnest. Between March and October of 1917, more than two million men deserted their army units, never to return to the Front.

Conclusion

The stereotype of the Russian peasant-soldier as a backwards non-Russian with no understanding of, nor interest in, politics is false in the extreme. Through their recorded statements and remarks, the peasant-soldier proves to be not only politically aware, but politically active, particularly as the Bolshevik agitation began to turn to revolution. Their understanding of class and the class dynamics between soldiers and officers proved to be one of the most important causes of the collapse of the Russian Imperial Army, even before the February Revolution delivered the killing blow. Furthermore, their understanding of the basic calculations of war as it relates to class led them to be reluctant soldiers, whose desire to return home to the plow far outweighed their desire to be plowed into the earth themselves for the glory of a noble-born officer. They celebrated the fall of the Tsar, just as they celebrated the rise of the Bolsheviks, because they understood that ending the war was the only way to save what was left of their way of life. Historians made the mistake of projecting the bare simplicity of the lives led

⁴² Ibid., 223.

⁴³ Ibid., 461.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 378.

by the peasants onto the peasant as a person, but these peasant-soldiers proved to be anything but simple.

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Acronyms

'ORGPB' - The Russian State Library Manuscript Department

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