

Evaluate Stolypin's Land Reform: Was it Unsuccessful, or inconsistent, or unfinished?

Following the revolution of 1905 the newly appointed Prime Minister suggested implementing policies which would deal with the causes of unrest instead of continuing with the violent repression of disturbances. Stolypin believed that a policy of land reform would improve the economic situation of the peasants and decrease the number of protests and revolts. Stolypin's Land Reform policy was introduced on the 9th November 1906 (Waldon 1998:73). The aim of the policy was to convert village communes into individual private properties. However, the question remains as to whether Stolypin's Land Reform was successful.

This essay will briefly outline the historical context and the policies of Land Reform before examining whether Stolypin's Land Reform was unfinished, inconsistent or unsuccessful in turn. This essay will conclude that Land Reform was unfinished and inconsistent and would have been successful if able to have been completed.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, Russia was experiencing a surge in unrest from the peasant population. This culminated in the revolution of 1905 and the 'bloody Sunday' incident which highlighted the discontent of society, particularly after Russia's defeat in the war against Japan, and the call for a constitutional monarchy (Waldon 1998:21). There were many disturbances involving the peasant population of Russia. The aim of the revolts was to achieve the transfer of land from the gentry to the peasantry but it was assumed by the peasantry that the land would remain communal (Chubarov 2009).

The evidence of the peasants unrest and need for reform can be found in the election results of the First Duma in April 1906. The political parties which had policies of agricultural reform were the most successful in achieving votes from the peasantry for example the Kadet party (Waldon 1998:51). The policies of the Kadets included the transformation of Russia into a constitutional monarchy and the implementation of agrarian reform which would transfer land from the gentry to the peasantry (Ascher 2001:108). The need for constitutional monarchy and agrarian reform are factors which greatly inspired the revolt of 1905-07.

Tsar Nicholas II did not want a repetition of the revolt and in 1906 appointed Petr Stolypin as Prime Minister in order to achieve this aim (Waldon 1998:51-53). Stolypin had experience of peasant unrest from his previous employment as governor of Saratov, and from this experience concluded that the peasant unrest resulted from unsatisfactory conditions of Russian agriculture. Stolypin proposed that to avoid future revolutionary activity, the causes of unrest needed to be identified and reform needed to be implemented. Stolypin identified agrarian reform as the necessary prerequisite to ensure that there was no repeat of the revolution of 1905-07 (Waldon 1998:46-47).

Stolypin's land reform plan involved the introduction of private land ownership which would replace communal villages. There were two main aims to the plan which were to improve the economic situation of the peasantry and to ensure the stability of Russian politics (Waldon 1998:74-75). Stolypin stated that Land Reform would be a two stage process which would include an initial request from peasants to remove land from the commune, and following this the land would be consolidated into a plot for the ownership of a peasant family (Waldon 1998:75).

Stolypin stated that the Land Reform policy needed to be passed quickly in order to ensure any revolts were avoided. The policy could not be delayed until a Duma could be organised. Therefore Stolypin ensured that the Land Reform policy was passed under Article 87 of the Fundamental Laws on the 9th November 1906 (Dukes 1998:180).

In addition to the passing of the Land Reform policy, Stolypin managed to set up the Peasant Land Bank. The peasant would use the bank to purchase property and the bank would also be able to provide funds for the peasant to ensure their plot of land had enough water and was able to be efficiently cultivated (Pallot 1999:1). This, Stolypin stated, would ensure the creation of "an independent, prosperous husbandman, a stable citizen of the land" (Yaney 1961:132 cited in Pallot 1999:1).

Stolypin's aim was to achieve the creation of an independent, economically stable class of landowners. This new class were to become equal citizens in law and the courts therefore removing the large difference between the class distinctions (Waldon 1998:47,54). Stolypin believed that the evolution of a landowning class would remove the causes of unrest and therefore the number of disturbances would decrease. However the question remains as to whether Stolypin's land reform policy was successful.

To ensure the completion of the Land Reform policy, Stolypin stated that Russia needed at least 20 years without war due to the vast amount of peasantry in Russia that were living in communes (Waldon 1998:91). However, during the years leading up to the outbreak of the First World War the amount of enclosures decreased, this can be seen in Figure 2 below. With the start of the Revolution of 1917 against the Tsarist regime, Land Reform stopped altogether without the completion of enclosure (Waldon 1998).

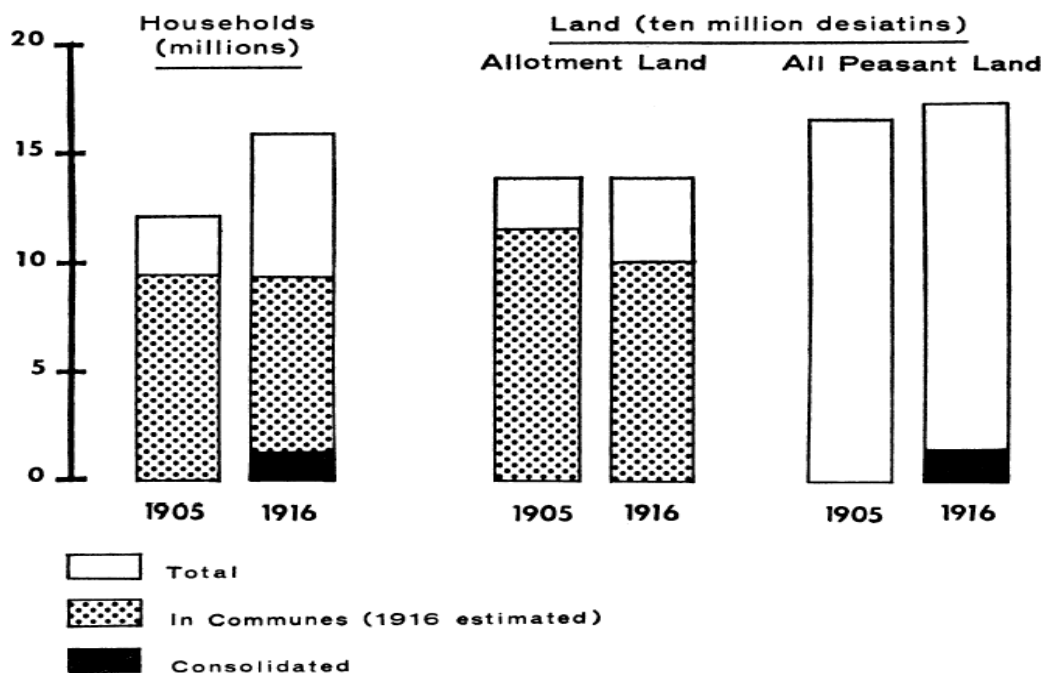
As stated by Atkinson, out of the 12.3 million peasant households that were in European Russia in 1905 an estimated 77% were in communes (Atkinson 1973:775). Following the implementation of Stolypin's Land Reform on the 9th November 1906, requests for the individualisation of land were immediately received by the government. Between 1907 and

1915, 2.7 million peasant households requested enclosure with 2 million successfully completing the enclosure of their land (Atkinson 1973:775). The further 0.7 million peasants had either removed their applications or were awaiting the finalisation from the government.

Stolypin stated "give peace to the state for 20 years, inside and outside the country, and you will not recognise today's Russia" (Nikonov 1992:1158). However Land Reform was to be a slow process which was declining in number, as can be seen by Figure 2 below, and which was to be interrupted and slowed further by both the First World War and the Revolution of 1917. Despite this the question remains as to whether Stolypin's Land Reform was unfinished.

Out of the 77% of the peasantry that were contained in communes in 1905, an estimated 26% enclosed their land by 1917. This was approximately 2.5 million households of the Russian peasantry (Atkinson 1973:782). Figure 1 below was taken from Atkinson's 'Statistics of Land Reform' and illustrates the amount of households that had left that commune in comparison with the number that remained. The graph shows that only a small amount managed to transfer land into private property. When examining these figures it must be understood that the data is an estimation which may have been an exaggeration by the government.

Figure 1:



(Atkinson 1973:782)

Pallot surmises that the quantitative results that were gathered by the government regarding Land Reform are not completely reliable. It has been suggested that the official figures were

exaggerated to provide evidence for the success of Stolypin's policy. However there is not enough documented evidence to provide one with the extent of the exaggeration. If the numbers have been exaggerated then the percentage will be lower than 26%. It can be concluded that it is possible that less than a quarter of peasant households managed to leave the commune before 1917 (Pallot 1999:11)

With only approximately one quarter of the peasant householders leaving the commune one can not conclude that the Stolypin Land Reform was completed but instead would have needed many more years of peace in Russia in order to continue, as Stolypin had stated.

Russian Land Reform was an idea that was to benefit the peasantry in order to remove their reason to revolt. However the Land Reform policy was inconsistent with how it benefited some peasants over others. The policy was biased towards the richer male peasants.

In the case of the women of the commune, the policy stated that land could only be enclosed by the male owner. This caused many widows and women without a male son to lose land on which they had previously lived. Much of their land was instead given to males that claimed land, leaving the widows homeless (Gaudin 1998:750). To rectify this situation the government introduced a civil code which stated that a widow was entitled to one-seventh of their late husbands land (Gaudin 1998:770). This enabled women to gain a small amount of land but it was still biased towards widows as they had far less land to farm on than their male neighbours. Despite this change in the law there were still other restrictions on the women of a commune. A woman could retain her land if she married within the commune, however if she married an outsider then her land would be given to the commune. This was not the case with male householders (Gaudin 1998:766).

The highest percentage of enclosures took place in mainly 'westernised' areas of Russia. The peasants in these areas had more experience with land ownership and non-communal life. These areas had a lower proportion of outmigration (Gaudin 1998:756). The map on page 100 of Pallot's 'Land Reform in Russia' identifies how the bulk of enclosures occurred along the North-West of Russia (Pallot 1999:100).

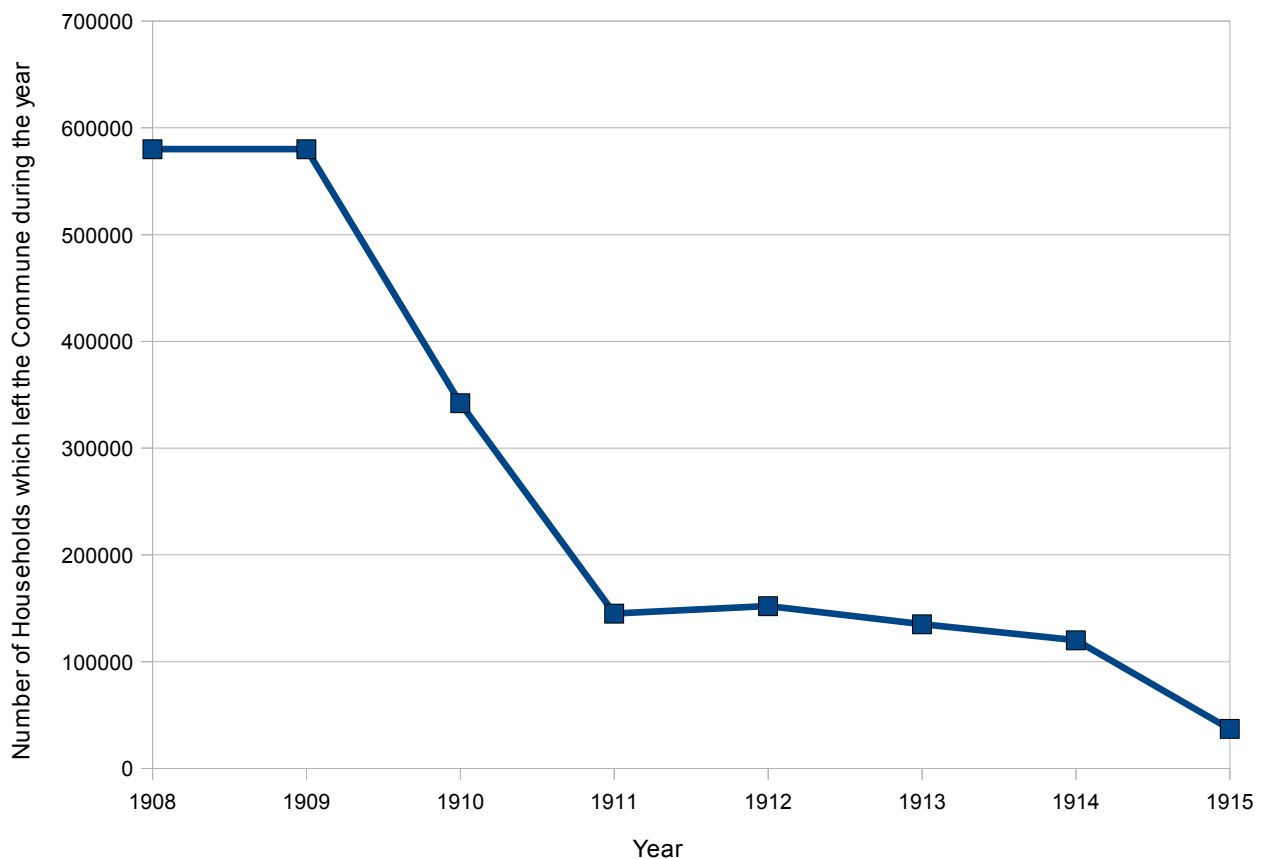
The areas with less experience of land ownership were more likely to remain in the commune as this provided a 'safety net' for when their crops failed. This occurred mainly in areas further inland of Russia which had a harsher climate as they were more prone to their crops failing due to the weather. Stolypin did not design an incentive into his Land Reform policy for areas which would not necessarily benefit from enclosure therefore many peasants in harsher areas could see no reason why land separation and enclosure would help their survival more than

communal life.

There has been widespread debate regarding the successfulness of Stolypin's Land Reform amongst academics. As Land Reform was not completed due to the slow processing of applications and the time needed by the government to implement such drastic changes. For this reason it can be argued that Land Reform was unsuccessful. However, despite the small amount of applications each year Russia was slowly evolving a class of peasant landowners. If left to continue without war or revolution it is likely that Land Reform would have successfully been completed throughout Russia (Waldon 1998).

When Stolypin's Land Reform initially began there were many applications sent to the government requesting separation from the commune. In the years 1908 and 1909 the amount of land separations peaked at 580,000 enclosures each year. However, as can be seen in Figure 2 below, from 1910 onwards the amount of enclosures decreases each year reducing to 37,000 in 1915. The numerical data for Figure 2 has been taken from Ascher and Gaudin (Ascher 2001:164, Gaudin 1998:755). The decrease in the amount of enclosures occurs before the outbreak of the First World War and the Revolution of 1917, therefore the lack of peace within Russia cannot be the only causes of the decline of land ownership requests.

Figure 2:



Owen states that Land Reform was unsuccessful because many of the peasants which had turned their land into private ownership had reverted back to communal life following the revolution of 1917 (Owen 1937:141 cited in Yaney 1964:291). However Owen's reversion theory cannot be used as evidence of the failing of Land Reform as following the Revolution of 1917 the Bolshevik party abolished the private ownership of land, which was understood as capitalistic (Wegren 2009:12). This forced many that were living as private owners to return to the commune in order to appease the government.

Despite only an estimated 26% of the population moving from a commune into a private landownership, Russia was slowly and successfully rebuilding the peasant class. If continued, it is likely that it would eventually have been undertaken by many of the peasants living in areas with harsher conditions as land ownership allowed the peasant more freedom to sell their land and move to another part of Russia which was previously impossible.

Stolypin's Land Reform was unfinished, inconsistent and due to these factors was unsuccessful. However if Land Reform had been completed it is likely that it would have been successful as it was being undertaken by a number of peasant householders each year and expanding to further regions of Russia. Instead only an estimated 26% completed the conversion to land ownership and in 1917 after the Revolution a policy of a reversal of Land Reform was implemented and many returned to the commune. It is for these reasons that Land Reform can be considered as unsuccessful for the period of 1905 to 1917.

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