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Problems of modernization in late imperial Russia: Maksim M. Kovalevskii on social and economic reform

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PROBLEMS OF MODERNIZATION IN LATE IMPERIAL RUSSIA:
MAKSIM M. KOVALEVSKII
ON SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC REFORM

A Dissertation
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of History

by
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Abstract

The problems of social and economic reform were at the center of academic and political activities of Maksim M. Kovalevskii (1851-1916), a prominent Russian historian and sociologist. The comparative study of rural communal institutions led him to conclude that the village commune remained a viable social and economic institution in late imperial Russia. Although he believed firmly in private agriculture, he criticized the Stolypin land reform for attempting to pressure peasants to separate from communes. Kovalevskii argued that in a country dominated by communal traditions the state must not destroy the collective economy by legislative fiat. He urged Russian policy-makers to support the village commune instead of destroying it and pointed to substantial evidence of the commune's economic potential. Recent studies have confirmed Kovalevskii's assertions that communal economic arrangements in the post-Emancipation Russian village were flexible enough to allow for innovation and improvement. Kovalevskii's analysis challenges us to revise our understanding of rural communal institutions and of the general dynamic of social and economic change.

Introduction

Economic modernization constituted one of the pressing issues in late imperial Russia. Agricultural development was a matter of particularly strong scholarly and practical concern. Educated Russians of all political persuasions sought to understand the peasants and rural institutions, passionately debated the “peasant question”, and offered various solutions to it. All, however, agreed on the significance of the successful modernization of the countryside to Russia's political and economic progress. Because the peasantry comprised the overwhelming majority of the Russian population, the rapid and effective resolution of problems of the agricultural sector came to be seen as the matter of the survival of the entire social order. As radical political movements became increasingly influential in Russian society, it was no longer possible to maintain social stability without improving the economic condition of the rural population.

The problems of social and economic reform were at the center of Maksim M. Kovalevskii's academic and political activities. He received a world-wide recognition as the author of numerous monographs on sociology, comparative law, political science, anthropology, and ethnography. His historical works covered a wide range of topics, including social, political, and economic history, the history of law and family, and the evolution of peasant institutions. Kovalevskii placed particular stress on the complex processes of transition from traditional to modern societies in different cultures. Influenced by positivist and liberal thought, he believed in the universal laws of historical evolution and viewed gradual change as a key factor of progress. His analysis of the general patterns of development of political, economic, and legal institutions led him to

conclude that modernization could be successful only when it was based on existing institutions and culture. Any radical break with traditional values and practices would lead to social upheavals. Based on his scholarly findings, he warned Russian policy-makers that reforms aimed at destroying traditional peasant institutions would not improve the status quo, but would only provoke social and economic degradation and thus discredit the very idea of reform.

Born on August 27, 1851, in a family of wealthy aristocratic landowners, he studied at the University of Kharkov, one of Russia's best educational institutions, from 1868 to 1872. His major professor, Dmitrii I. Kachenovskii, a prominent legal historian, a liberal, and a positivist, fostered his interest in positivist ideas and in the comparative historical study of institutions, an interest he maintained throughout his academic career. After graduating from the University of Kharkov, Kovalevskii continued his education as a graduate student in Europe. In Berlin, he studied with Rudolf Gneist, Heinrich Brunner, and Adolf Wagner. Most of the time he spent in France, where he attended lectures at the School of Paleography and Librarianship (*École des Chartes*) and conducted research at the Bibliothèque Nationale and the historical archives in Lyon, Montpellier, Rouen, and Aix-en-Provence.¹

He spent one year in England using the rich resources of the British Museum. In London, he met Henry S. Maine and Herbert Spencer, both of whom greatly influenced his scholarship. In England he also met Karl Marx, whose philosophy inspired him to turn to the study of economics as a major factor in social and political change. Although

¹ For an outline of Kovalevskii's life and works, see, for example: Nikolai Ia. Kuprits, *Kovalevskii* (Moscow: Iuridicheskaia literatura, 1978); S.N. Pogodin, *Russkaia shkola istorikov: N.I. Kareev, I.V. Luchitskii, M.M. Kovalevskii* (St. Petersburg: Izd-vo SPBG TU, 1997); and Boris G. Safronov, *M.M. Kovalevskii kak sotsiolog* (Moscow: Izd-vo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1960).

he rejected the Marxist theory of class struggle, Kovalevskii recognized Marx as a great scholar passionately devoted to intellectual inquiry.

After his return to Russia in 1876, his academic career advanced rapidly. He completed his thesis, received a master's degree from the University of Moscow, and joined the University's Department of Law as an instructor (*dotsent*) in comparative legal history. Three years later, he defended his doctoral dissertation, obtained his Ph.D., and became a full professor at the University of Moscow. His exceptional erudition and brilliant oratorical skills made him very popular with his students. Kovalevskii never limited himself, however, to strictly professorial activities. He published books and regularly contributed to liberal periodicals and academic journals. In collaboration with Vsevolod F. Miller, a famous Russian historian and ethnographer, he published and edited the *Kriticheskoe obozrenie* (Critical Survey, 1879-80). He undertook three ethnographic expeditions to the Caucasus, where he conducted extensive field work on the culture and customs of local ethnic groups.

Kovalevskii figured prominently in the circle of Moscow liberal professors which included Aleksandr I. Chuprov, Ivan I. Ianzhul, and Vasili O. Kliuchevskii. After the assassination of the Emperor Alexander II in 1881, the government declared a war on terrorism. Increasingly suspicious of any potentially dangerous activity, the authorities became particularly apprehensive of the situation in Russian universities, which they saw as a major source of political radicalism. As it often happens, however, the government victimized those who had nothing to do with terrorist activities. Despite Kovalevskii's moderate liberal platform and strong opposition to revolution, his close association with influential liberal leaders such as Sergei A. Muromtsev, a lawyer and a proponent of

constitutional reform, made him a dangerous troublemaker in the eyes of the authorities. Conservative bureaucrats, including the Minister of Education Ivan D. Delianov, particularly disliked Kovalevskii's emphasis on the advantages of Western democratic institutions, which implied criticism of tsarist autocracy. Accused of maintaining a “negative attitude to the existing regime,” he was forced to resign his position in June 1887.

Kovalevskii left Russia again, this time for eighteen years. He taught at the best European universities: Oxford University, Collège Libre des Sciences Sociales in Paris, the Free University in Brussels, and the University of Stockholm. During two visits to the United States, he lectured at the universities of Chicago and San Francisco. He spoke English, French, German, Italian, and Spanish fluently, and read Latin and Greek. One of the founders of the International Institute of Sociology in Paris, he served as its vice-president in 1895 and as president in 1907.

While abroad, Kovalevskii produced his most influential books. To his estate in Beaulieu in southern France, near Nice, he brought from Russia his private library of 50,000 volumes. He published extensively in the most prestigious scholarly periodicals, including the *Nouvelle revue historique de droit*, the *Rivista italiana di sociologia*, the *Archaeological Review*, and the *Law Quarterly Review*. Kovalevskii, however, never lost touch with the developments in Russia. He maintained a regular correspondence with his Russian colleagues, read books and periodicals from Russia, and continued to contribute numerous articles to the Russian liberal press, notably the newspaper *Russkie vedomosti* (Russian News) and the journals *Vestnik Evropy* (Herald of Europe) and *Russkaia mysl'*

(Russian Thought). Many of his European publications dealt with Russian history and economics.²

In 1901, Kovalevskii became one of the organizers of the Russian School of Social Sciences in Paris, where he served as its director and a faculty member. The French authorities closed the School in 1906, after persistent requests from the Russian government, which disapproved of the teaching of “provocative” subjects to young Russians who came to France as visitors or political refugees. In fact, most of the school's teachers openly opposed the tsarist regime and many of its courses were unavailable in Russian universities. Because the school's faculty consisted of only a few persons, it relied mainly on visiting lecturers of various political persuasions. Many prominent Russian scholars and politicians such as Pavel N. Miliukov and Sergei A. Muromtsev, the economists Petr B. Struve and Mikhail I. Tugan-Baranovskii, and the world famous biologists Il'ia Mechnikov and Konstantin A. Timiriazev lectured at the school. To represent a broad spectrum of oppositional thought, Kovalevskii invited the leaders of Russian Marxism, Vladimir I. Lenin and Georgii V. Plekhanov, to deliver a series of lectures. After Lenin's lecture on “Marxist Views on the Agrarian Question in Europe and Russia” in February 1903, Kovalevskii commented that Lenin “would be a good professor of political economy if he were not so hateful of any thought different from his own.”³

² In addition to numerous articles, Kovalevskii published several monographs on Russia, including *Modern Customs and Ancient Laws in Russia: The Ilchester Lectures for 1889-1890* (London: David Nutt, 1891), *Le régime économique de la Russie* (Paris: V. Giard & E. Briere, 1898), and *Russian Political Institutions: The Growth and Development of These Institutions from the Beginnings of Russian History to the Present Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1902).

³ Cited in Dmitry Shlapentokh, *The French Revolution in Russian Intellectual Life, 1865-1905* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1996), 75.

Kovalevskii returned to Russia during the Revolution of 1905. He continued his academic career at the University of St. Petersburg, the Polytechnic Institute, and the Psychoneurological Institute in St. Petersburg, but also engaged in political activities. In 1906, he was elected to the First State Duma (the lower chamber of the new Russian parliament), where he represented the moderate liberal Party of Democratic Reform. Although his party never enjoyed success among the masses, the educated public recognized him as one of Russia's leading liberal politicians. Second in popularity only to Pavel N. Miliukov, leader of the liberal Constitutional-Democratic (*Kadet*) Party, he was known simply as Maksim Maksimovich or “our Maksim”.⁴

In 1907, the academic community elected him to the State Council (the upper chamber of the parliament), where he served on many legislative committees until his death in 1916. A strong advocate of agricultural modernization, he strongly opposed the Stolypin land reform. The summer of 1914 Kovalevskii spent in Karlsbad, then part of Austria, for treatment of a heart condition. When the World War I broke out, the Austrian authorities detained him as a civil prisoner but soon released him after the intervention of his influential friends, including President Woodrow Wilson. His health declined rapidly, however, and he died in March 1916. His funeral became a national event that attracted tens of thousands of people in St. Petersburg. Tugan-Baranovskii considered his death the heaviest loss for Russia since the death of Lev N. Tolstoi in 1910. The French parliament sent a telegram to Russia mourning his death and praising his *Proiskhozhdenie sovremennoi demokratii* (Origins of Contemporary Democracy) as a great contribution to French historiography.

⁴ N.B. Khailova, “Maksim Maksimovich Kovalevskii,” in *Rossiiskie liberaly*, eds. Boris S. Itenberg and Valentin V. Shelokhaev (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2001), 366-370.

Peculiarly, despite Kovalevskii's outstanding academic achievements, historians have ignored much of his scholarship. The only monographic study about Kovalevskii, which appeared in the 1960s, focused primarily on his sociological work and was infused with a heavy dose of the Soviet Marxist ideology. Recovering and re-evaluating Kovalevskii's extensive scholarship is certainly much needed, especially when it comes to his works on peasant communes.

This study represents the first attempt to examine Kovalevskii's writings on peasant communal institutions in light of the evidence provided by pre-revolutionary Russian economists, agronomists, and zemstvo statisticians. His analysis of the family and village commune is also discussed in the context of twentieth-century peasant studies and recent works by Western and Russian historians and economists. Finally, the study evaluates the significance of Kovalevskii's scholarly findings and investigates their relevance to the complex processes of rural modernization in Russia and other parts of the world today.

Chapter I. Two Types of Communes: The Historical Evolution of the Family Commune

Using a comparative and interdisciplinary approach, Kovalevskii studied communal forms of agriculture in different societies throughout history. He believed that the cross-cultural study of the historical evolution of rural institutions would provide his contemporaries with “positive” knowledge about the dynamics of social and economic change and thus help them better understand current problems of agricultural development.

Kovalevskii offered the first extensive discussion of communal life and economy in *Obshchinnoe zemlevladienie, prichiny, khod i posledstviia ego razlozheniia* (Communal Landholding: Causes and Consequences of Its Disintegration, 1879).⁵ This work represented his initial attempt to examine the commune as a cross-cultural phenomenon, evidence of which he found in India, Latin America, and North Africa. In later works, he expanded his analysis to other regions of the world. Having collected ethnographic material during field trips to the Caucasus, he described the commune as an institution widely spread among the Dagestanians, Ossets, Pshavs, and other local populations. In a series of monographs between 1886 and 1905, he synthesized his own extensive research and numerous secondary sources. He concluded that the commune was a universal form of social and economic organization that existed in various cultures around the world and survived in many societies until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

Kovalevskii distinguished between the two main types of the commune: the patriarchal family and the village commune. Following Henry S. Maine and Lewis H.

⁵ Kovalevskii, *Obshchinnoe zemlevladienie, prichiny, khod i posledstviia ego razlozheniia* (Moscow: F.B. Miller, 1879).

Morgan, he described both types of the commune as archaic institutions, the origins of which he traced back to prehistoric times. At the initial stage of human evolution all property, including land, was owned collectively. In fact, no notion of property existed until the development of settled forms of life and the subsequent emergence of agriculture. Primitive people lived as nomadic tribes who made their living primarily by fishing, hunting, and gathering. In the absence of individual property, everything except clothing was owned by the entire tribe.

As settled forms of life developed, tribes gradually divided into clans, or *gens*: large agnatic kin groups. Clans, in turn, separated over time into smaller groups, the so-called extended patriarchal families consisting of three or rarely four generations of the descendants of one common male ancestor. These patrilineal relatives, together with their wives and children, lived under the same roof, thus comprising one big household. Most importantly, the extended family formed an economic unit that cultivated its land together, shared the products of its labor, and fed and clothed itself from a common stock. The patriarchal family thus exemplified the earliest type of the commune, the family commune.

Kovalevskii demonstrated that the so-called *zadruga* (association, or partnership) still existed among some Southern Slavic peoples in the form of an extended family in the late nineteenth century. As a living example, or a “survival,” of the archaic patriarchal family, the *zadruga* had been probably the best known example of the family commune by the time Kovalevskii began studying it. Historians and ethnographers “discovered” it in the early nineteenth century. Vuk Karadžić, a famous Serbian scholar, mentioned the *zadruga* in 1818 in his Dictionary of the Serbian language (*Srpski Rječnik*). In the 1850s-

1870s, Serbian historians Valtasar Bogišić and O.M. Utesenović published their first monographic studies of the *zadruga*.¹ During the same period, the first studies of the *zadruga* appeared in Russia. The emancipation of the serfs provoked heated debates over the future of Russian agriculture and fostered an increased interest in peasant institutions. In the late 1860s and early 1870s, the works of Bogišić and Utesenović were translated into Russian and the first major studies by Russian scholars appeared in print.⁶

In his discussion of the *zadruga*, Kovalevskii relied largely on the findings of Bogišić, Leontovich, and Zigel', as well as on research by Friedrich S. Kraus.⁷ From these sources, he found that the earliest Southern Slavic legal documents mentioned the *zadruga*. The Vinodol Law of 1288, Stefan Dushan's Law Code (*Zakonnik Stefana Dushana*) of 1349, and the Poljitsa Statute of 1440 spoke of the large family groups that lived together under the leadership of the patriarch, bound by common land ownership and mutual financial responsibilities. These records, Kovalevskii concluded, provided evidence that the contemporary *zadruga* represented a survival of the archaic communal family with its typical characteristics and functions.⁸

The *zadruga* constituted an economic unit based on collective property ownership and joint production and consumption of goods. Its members owned land, livestock, tools, and immovable property in common, performed all work together, and shared the products of their labor. The family's property remained undivided even after the death of the head of the household, although customary law gave individual members the right to

¹ Valtasar Bogišić, *Pravni obiçaji u slovena: privatno pravo* (Zagreb: D. Albrecht, 1867); *Zbornik sadašnjih pravni obiçaja u južnih slovena* (Zagreb: D. Albrecht, 1874); O. M. Utesenović, *Die Hauskommunion der Sudslaven* (Vienna, 1859).

⁶ Fedor I. Leontovich, *Drevnee khovato-dalmatskoe zakonodatel'stvo* (Odessa: Tip. G. Ul'rikha, 1868); Fedor F. Zigel', *Zakonnik Stefana Dushana* (St. Petersburg: Tip. T-va Obshchestvennaia pol'za, 1872).

⁷ Friedrich S. Kraus, *Sitte und Brauch der Sudslaven* (Vienna: A. Hölder, 1885).

⁸ Maksim M. Kovalevskii, *Rodovoi byt v nastoiashchem, nedavnom i otdalennom proshlom: opyty v oblasti sravnitel'noi etnografii i istorii prava*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg: Brokgauz-Efron, 1905), vol. 1, 77-86.

request their share of property and to separate from the commune. The entire family assumed joint responsibility for all financial and legal obligations, for repaying debts accumulated by the family, and for the payment of any monetary compensation for the crimes committed by a family member against a member of another family (*vira*).

In accordance with such a strong emphasis on communal economy, a relative who separated from the *zadruga* was automatically excluded from the group. On the other hand, non-relatives could join the family through adoption or marriage if they agreed to participate in the family's economic activities. Elderly people from outside the family could also be admitted to the *zadruga* after they had lost all their relatives capable of caring for them. As an act of confirmation of their membership, they usually transferred their property to the family's common fund.⁹

Substantial authority in the *zadruga* belonged to the head of the family, *domaćin* (literally, house leader), elected by all members of the *zadruga*. The *domaćin*, usually the most capable and respectable male member, but not necessarily the oldest one, presided over the family meetings, controlled the family funds, and acted as the family's representative in all outside matters, primarily in legal and commercial affairs. The supreme authority, however, rested with the family council, the assembly of all adult household members of both sexes. The council made all important decisions, especially those pertaining to land cultivation, the sale and purchase of property, agricultural produce, and instruments, financial loans, and any other actions affecting the entire community. The council could also replace a *domaćin* with another one in case he acted without its unanimous consent. The *domaćica* (female house leader) assisted the *domaćin*

⁹ Kovalevskii, *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia i razvitiia sem'i i sobstvennosti* (St. Petersburg: Tip. Iu.N. Erlikha, 1895), 66-67.

in the supervision of the female members of the *zadruga*. All adult women in the family elected the *domaćica*, subject to approval by the entire family council. Most often, the *domaćin*'s wife or the oldest woman in the family occupied the post. She supervised the women's daily work, kept the order in the house, mediated disputes, and often had a decisive voice in marriage arrangements.¹⁰

Every member of the *zadruga* performed assigned work and received a share of food, clothing, and other necessities. Most importantly, all adult family members, both men and women, had a right to vote in the family council and to speak at council meetings. The family council usually gathered every evening after supper. The *domaćin* presiding, it discussed current matters, listened to the *domaćin*'s reports, and approved or disapproved his suggestions concerning the sale of property and other financial affairs. With the council's sanction, any family members could leave the commune and form their separate household. Males were allowed to seek seasonal employment elsewhere, especially during the winter, when there was no agricultural work. In this case, they could usually keep their supplemental income to themselves, except when training provided by the family or at its expense made the extra earnings possible. As a rule, the family and an individual member who was planning to leave concluded an agreement specifying the exact part of the personal income to be given to the common family fund.

Characteristically, even when family members worked outside the family for several years, they still retained family membership and all the benefits associated with it, such as the right to property inheritance, economic protection, and support of the commune.¹¹

¹⁰ Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 54-58; *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 66-68; *Rodovoi byt*, 23-30.

¹¹ Kovalevskii, *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 67-68; *Rodovoi byt*, 23-30.

Not surprisingly, Kovalevskii paid particular attention to the patriarchal family in Russia, abundant evidence of which he found in many regions of the country. Trained as a legal historian, he based his understanding of the Russian family commune on his own extensive research in Russian legal history and on numerous secondary sources, primarily those of Russian historians and ethnographers such as Aleksandra Ia. Efimenko, Semen V. Pakhman, and Dmitrii Ia. Samokvasov. By the late 1870s, when Kovalevskii published his first books on communal landownership, the study of the Russian patriarchal family had still remained at its initial stage. The earliest published description of the extended peasant family, by Nikolai S. Stremukhov, appeared in 1829 in the *Zemledel'cheskii zhurnal* (Agricultural Journal). Stremukhov, a Ukrainian gentry landlord, noted that the *odnodvortsy* (single householders) and *udel* (appanage) peasants often lived in large communal families, which tended to be more prosperous than small individual households.¹² August von Haxthausen offered a more detailed and vivid depiction of the structure and practices of the Russian *Familiengemeinde* in his magisterial *Studies of the Interior of Russia*.¹³ Like other observers of that period, Haxthausen considered the large patriarchal family a uniquely Russian form of social organization deeply rooted in the Russian tradition of collectivism and paternalism. Almost simultaneously, a French sociologist, Frédéric LePlay, described numerous examples of extended families in Central European Russia, in Orenburg province, and among the Bashkirs and the Kazakhs. Unlike Haxthausen, however, LePlay regarded the

¹² Mark O. Kosven, *Semeinaia obshchina i patronimiia* (Moscow: Izd-vo Akademii nauk SSSR, 1963), 15.

¹³ August von Haxthausen, *Studien über die inneren Zustände, das Volksleben und insbesondere die ländlichen Einrichtungen Russlands*, 3 vols. (Hannover: Hahn'sche Buchhandlung, 1847). In English, *Studies on the Interior of Russia*, ed. S. Frederick Starr (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

patriarchal family as an anachronistic social institution, one that retarded the economic and social development of Russia.¹⁴

The systematic investigation of the Russian family commune began during the era of the Great Reforms. Despite the publication of numerous specialized studies in the 1860s and 1870s, Kovalevskii complained that Russian scholars concentrated on the examination of the village commune but virtually ignored the existence of the family commune. He believed that, like the Serbian *zadruga*, the Russian patriarchal family represented an archaic communal institution dating back to the earliest stages of the history of the Slavic peoples. He agreed with Fedor I. Leontovich's thesis that the old Slavic *verv*, recorded by the eleventh-century Russian code of law, Grand Prince Iaroslav's *Russkaia Pravda*, designated the family commune, not the village commune, as some historians argued. Kovalevskii found later evidence of the family commune in the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century tax registers (*pistsovye knigi*). The documents referred to it as the hearth (*pechishche*), using the term as a unit of taxation. Legal documents in the northern provinces of Russia also referred to the family commune as the hearth-fire (*ognishche*), which reflected the practice of the members of the extended family to cook food at the common hearth. In western and southern parts of Russia members of the family communes were known as co-partners (*siabry*), mentioned frequently in the Judicial Charter of Pskov (1397-1467), the Statute of Lithuania (1529), and the Ukrainian laws of the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁵

Like the *zadruga*, the Russian household commune included agnatic relatives, descendants of one common forefather, living together with their spouses and children in

¹⁴ Frédéric LePlay, *Les ouvriers européens. Études sur les travaux, la vie domestique et la condition morale des populations ouvrières de l'Europe* (Paris: Imprimerie impériale, 1855).

¹⁵ Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 49-53; *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 66; *Rodovoi byt*, 35-37.

one homestead and united by the common worship of ancestors. The number of family members could vary from ten to fifty and even more. Most households consisted of approximately twenty or thirty co-residing relatives: grandparents and parents, their children and grandchildren, brothers and sisters, nephews and nieces, daughters-in-law and sons-in-law. Non-relatives could also be incorporated into the family through marriage and adoption or when a widow married a member of another family and her children came to live with her under the roof of her new husband's family. Like the *zadruga*, the Russian patriarchal family functioned as a corporate economic organization based on communal economic activity, collective ownership of land and other property, and joint production and consumption of goods. Typically, all family members shared the food prepared in a common kitchen. Participation in the daily economic activities of the family gave an adopted person the status and full rights of the relative.¹⁶

The head of the family, or *bol'shak* (literally "the big man"), embodied patriarchal authority in the family, as did the *domaćin* in the *zadruga*. The *bol'shak* represented the entire family in its contacts with the outside world. He dealt with the governmental and judicial authorities. He appeared in the court to answer the complaints against the family and to defend its rights in case they had been violated. He was responsible for ensuring that the family complied with the law, provided military conscripts, and paid taxes on time. He presided over the family assembly, mediated disputes between the family members, consulted them on marriage issues, and supervised their daily work. He acted as a legal guardian of young orphans and sent them to school or to artisan shops to learn a trade by which they could make a living in the future.¹⁷

¹⁶ Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 47, 53-54; *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 65; *Rodovoi byt*, 38.

¹⁷ Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 55-58; *Rodovoi byt*, 38-40.

Despite these powers, Kovalevskii stressed, the *bol'shak's* authority should not be exaggerated. Unlike the Roman *paterfamilias*, for example, he was but the first among equals. He had no right to make decisions on any major issues without the unanimous consent of the family council, comprised of all adult members of the family, both male and female. Most importantly, he could not make any major economic decisions, such as buying or selling land or any other family property, without the approval of the council. If some members of the family could not find work within the commune, the council allowed them to seek employment elsewhere. The council also assisted the *bol'shak* in settling disputes between the family members, including marriage issues. The council, for instance, decided whether a young woman should accept or refuse a marriage offer and determined the amount of the dowry.¹⁸

The fact that Kovalevskii did not limit himself to the study of the relatively well-researched *zadruga* and the Russian patriarchal family added particular value to his work. He sought to extend his analysis to a global scale and to find evidence of family communes in various regions of the world and at different time periods. One of his most notable scholarly achievements was the discovery of numerous instances of family communes among the Dagestanians, Kabardinians, Ossets, Pshavs, and other small ethnic groups, which he observed during his multiple field trips to the Caucasus. He pointed to striking similarities between them and the *zadruga* and the Russian extended family. The differences were few and minor in character. For example, the head of the Osset family was not elected by family members, but appointed by his predecessor; and the family council included only male adults.

¹⁸ Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 55-58; *Rodovoi byt*, 38-41.

In the Indian literary epics Avesta and Rigveda Kovalevskii found evidence of ancient forms of Indian family communes called the *janmana*. Early Indian legal codes (the Manu, the Mitakshara, the Ushanas, and others) also mentioned the *sapindas*, a multigenerational large family living under the same roof, owning property collectively, and worshipping common ancestors. The *sapindas* was headed by the oldest male, whose decisions had to be approved by all family members. Although the principle of indivisible property governed their property relations, individuals could claim their portion of the property and start a separate household upon the approval of all family members. Personal earnings accumulated outside the commune were to be shared with the entire family unless a person proved that he or she owed their earnings exclusively to individual knowledge and skills.¹⁹

Drawing on a myriad of primary and secondary sources, Kovalevskii demonstrated the existence of family communes in ancient Greece and Rome and in early Celtic, Germanic, and Scandinavian settlements. He made a particularly valuable contribution to the nineteenth-century debate about the evolution of communal institutions by investigating the ancient German *Hausgenossenschaft*. Containing not only direct relatives but also servants, slaves, laborers, and all those who depended on the family economically and contributed to its daily activities, the *Hausgenossenschaft* united the individuals who lived under the same roof and recognized the authority of the head of the house. As a proof, Kovalevskii cited Julius Caesar's reference to *consaguinitates, qui una coierunt* (relatives who eat at the same table) and Tacitus' mention of the *propinquitates* (co-residing relatives).²⁰

¹⁹ Kovalevskii, *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 68-69; *Rodovoi byt*, 47-55.

²⁰ Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 4, 33; *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 65-69, 86-87; *Rodovoi byt*, 56-77.

Kovalevskii also demonstrated that the terms *confraternitates*, *consortes*, *consorteriae*, *genealogiae*, and *socii*, often mentioned in the Allemanic, Bavarian, Burgundian, Frankish, and Langobardian laws, all designated the same phenomenon: an extended family composed of three or four generations of patrilineal relatives living together and owning land and other immovable property in common. The charters of the Lower Rhine also referred to them as *cohaeredes*, *conparticipes et consaguinei*, that is, co-residents, co-owners, and relatives. In Southern Germany, this type of family was also known as the *Pfund*. Citing the lack of any reference in the Germanic legal codes to the right of testament and sale of land by individual owners, Kovalevskii argued that family property customarily remained undivided after the father's death. According to the French *coutumes* (customary laws) and the German *Weistümer* (written records of customary laws), a family member could exercise the right to individual property (*Beispruchsrecht*) and receive a personal allotment of land only upon the approval of other family members. The Germanic laws also specified in great detail the joint responsibility of the family for crimes committed by family members against the members of other families and for the payment of monetary compensations for such crimes.²¹

Kovalevskii found similar communal structures in almost every region of medieval Europe. In Wales, the Celtic family associations, known as *wel* or *gwely* (literally translated as "bed"), used land (common pasture and woodland) and other property collectively. The chieftain granted a *da* to each adult male, usually in the form of an allotment of cattle, which gave him the right to join in the communal ploughing of the waste. When a man died, his *da* reverted to the family's common stock. The members of

²¹ Kovalevskii, *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 65-66; *Rodovoi byt*, 70-71.

the *wele* were also tied by the joint responsibility of paying the *galanas*, a monetary compensation for a crime committed by a family member against a member of another family. Kovalevskii's study of the Brehon laws and Irish epic sources of the pre-conquest period led him to conclude that the Irish term *geilfines* referred to groups of close agnatic relatives who lived in undivided families under the leadership of the family patriarch. Such groups practiced open-field agriculture, owned and worked the land collectively, and did not partition their property even after the patriarch's death. Like the Welsh *wele*, they held joint responsibility for the payment of the *ericfine* as a compensation for crimes committed by family members. Other European examples of the family commune included the *companias* in Spanish Galicia and the *parçonneries* (coparceners) in France. Characteristically, the French *parçonneries* survived until the nineteenth century. The traditions of Galician *companias* remained strong in northern Spain in the early twentieth century.²²

As evidence from other parts of the world, Kovalevskii cited the ancient Mexican *calpulli* and the North African Kabyle family. According to Spanish reports during the American conquest, native Indians lived in *calpulli*, family communes headed by the chief of the family. They owned the land in common and never divided the property among their children. In North Africa, the Kabyle three-generational families lived together, owned property in common, and shared the products of their labor.²³

A detailed analysis of examples from all over the world allowed Kovalevskii to discern the common characteristics of the family commune. Clearly, it represented a complex, multi-functional institution that operated on multiple levels. First and most

²² Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 67; *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 66-68, 88; *Rodovoi byt*, 42-46, 63-69.

²³ Kovalevskii, *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 84.

important, it functioned as an economic unit based on collective ownership of property and joint production and consumption of goods. Second, the family commune existed as a territorial unit, as its members typically co-resided in one homestead. In accordance with the patrilocal residence pattern prescribed by custom, young men did not leave the parental house upon marriage to form a separate household but continued to live in the family together with their wives, children and grandchildren. Third, the family commune constituted an autonomous administrative unit governed by the family council under the leadership of the household head. Finally, the family commune served as a legal unit. Ruled by customary law, it comprised a joint object of legal obligations. Family members assumed joint responsibility for paying taxes, providing military recruits, and dealing with judicial and administrative authorities. In earlier stages of development, the family also held joint responsibility for any crimes committed by a family member against a member of another family. As Kovalevskii showed, when a family member was murdered, wounded, or otherwise victimized, customary law in many cultures prescribed the payment of a monetary compensation by the family whose member had caused the damage. After formal legal systems emerged, the head of the family appeared in the court as representative of the entire household and signed contracts and legal documents on behalf of it.

The importance of the economic functions of the family commune led some of Kovalevskii's contemporaries to view it simply as a form of cooperative (*artel'*), thus underestimating the kinship aspect. Kovalevskii criticized Efimenko for equating the family commune with the cooperative and rejecting kinship as its essential component. The fact that agnatic relatives made up the core of the commune appeared essential to

Kovalevskii. Outsiders could join it only through marriage or adoption, that is, by acquiring the status of a relative. Otherwise, they did not enjoy the full membership rights. Membership in the cooperative, on the other hand, was based solely on a contract, not on kinship ties. Accordingly, Kovalevskii dismissed Efimenko's contention that the authority of the head of the family pertained only to managing the family economy, and was similar to that of the chief (*starosta*) in the cooperative. The nature of the family head's authority, he emphasized, was exclusively patriarchal. It derived primarily from the status and the power of the patriarch as the chief administrator of the family economy.²⁴

The notion of the family commune as a universal, cross-cultural phenomenon also distinguished Kovalevskii's work from that of many of his colleagues. Despite the proliferation of peasant studies in the 1870s and 1880s, such a global vision of the family commune still appeared to many as innovative, if not revolutionary. Although the earliest descriptions of the extended family appeared in the early nineteenth century, all of them treated it as an exclusively local and particularistic phenomenon. Anthropological and legal historical studies in the 1860s and 1870s gave the first impulse to comparative studies of communal family forms across cultures. The works of Johann J. Bachofen, John Lubbock, Lewis H. Morgan, and Edward B. Tylor provided a broad theoretical framework for such studies.²⁵ Among the pioneers in the newly emerging field were Frédéric LePlay, Henry S. Maine, and Émile de Laveleye. LePlay offered a typology of family forms and described extended family households in Russia, North Africa, southern

²⁴ Kovalevskii, *Rodovoi byt*, 30-32.

²⁵ Johann J. Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht* (1861); John Lubbock, *The Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man* (1870); Lewis H. Morgan, *Ancient Society* (1877); Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (1871).

France, Italy, and Spain. Maine convincingly demonstrated that the Hindu joint family, the Slavic house community, the Irish *sept* or *fine* (mentioned in the Brehon laws), and the communal families in the French province of Nièvre displayed the same characteristics of “a community of kinsmen” who shared “the common dwelling” and “common table” and practiced “the collective enjoyment of property and its administration by an elected manager.”²⁶

Kovalevskii belonged to the first generation of Russian historians and ethnographers who addressed this issue. Like many of his contemporaries, he sought to investigate the causes and potential effects of the growing disintegration of the family commune in post-Emancipation Russia. His research revealed the complex social processes within the family commune. On the one hand, collectivism and patriarchal authority permeated the fabric of communal family life. Age and sex defined the person's status in the family hierarchy. Women were subordinate to men, wives to their husbands, children to their parents. The group interests prevailed over those of the individual. As a collective institution, it promoted social cohesion and solidarity of its members, “the feeling of mutual dependence and joint relationship without which no system of social reform can have any chance of success.” Group work fostered the sense of mutual responsibility and “reliance on one another.”²⁷

On the other hand, Kovalevskii maintained, patriarchy fostered the growth of individualistic tendencies within the family commune. The very foundations of the patriarchal order contained the “seeds of its decline.” Submission of the individual to patriarchal authority sooner or later led to increasing attempts on the part of family

²⁶ Henry S. Maine, *Lectures on the Early History of Institutions* (London: J. Murray, 1875), 77-81, 90-91, 105-118.

²⁷ Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 60.

members to assert their individual rights. Kovalevskii cited many examples from different societies and time periods to demonstrate that the “instinct of individualism” always existed in the patriarchal family and exerted a huge impact on family practices, particularly on property relations.²⁸

In India, a country with a strong communal tradition, individualism displayed itself very early during the era of the Brahman laws. According to the ancient Indian law code of Manu, members of the joint family who accumulated their personal earnings outside the family were required to contribute it entirely to the common fund. The same law, on the other hand, granted to these individuals the privilege of receiving a larger portion of property in case of the family division. By the fifth century B.C., individualism had made even greater progress, which was reflected in the practice of considering the inheritance received from the father, as well as gifts from friends, as belonging to the recipient exclusively. Furthermore, the code of Narada stipulated that in case of property division, individual members were entitled to full possession of any property acquired as a result of their personal skills and expertise.²⁹

Similar individualistic tendencies developed in the ancient Roman family. Military booty (*peculium castrense*) represented the earliest form of personal property that individuals could keep for themselves without sharing with other family members. Gradually, personal property came to include quasi-military acquisitions (*peculium quasi castrense*), that is, everything that individuals earned outside the family. In the Slavic

²⁸ Kovalevskii, *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 114-116.

²⁹ Kovalevskii, *Obshchinnoe zemlevladienie*, 110; *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 116.

zadruga, the similar practice of personal *peculium* gradually replaced the tradition of sharing all personal earnings with the entire family.³⁰

The growth of individualism, Kovalevskii noted, was particularly manifest in the evolution of attitudes toward household divisions. Initially, the custom allowed divisions of family property only after the death of the patriarch. Over time, however, divisions during the patriarch's lifetime became increasingly frequent. In India, the code of Manu recognized property divisions only approved by the patriarch, but the later code of Narada extended the right to sanction a partition to the entire family council. Nineteenth-century Indian courts acknowledged the right of any family member to demand a portion of family property. Similarly, ancient German and French laws stipulated that the head of the family had the right to decide whether or not to grant a part of family property to his sons. The *Schwabenspiegel* statute of the thirteenth century was the first to require the father to give at least two-fifths of the family property to his son if he requested a partition.³¹

In Russia, family break-ups remained rare before the emancipation of the serfs in 1861. For the state, the family commune represented a convenient unit of taxation. Joint responsibility for the payment of taxes guaranteed that taxes would be paid on time. Because of its large size, the patriarchal family could also relatively easily provide military recruits without a severe loss of labor force. For the gentry, the family commune served as a well-organized unit of agricultural labor, supervised and coordinated by the family head. Joint financial responsibility facilitated the collection of money dues. It was precisely for this reason, Kovalevskii suggested, that even after the Emancipation the

³⁰ Kovalevskii, *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 116-118.

³¹ Kovalevskii, *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 118-121.

government and the gentry continued to discourage frequent family fissions. The law of 1886 exemplified one of the attempts on the part of the state to place restrictions on household divisions by legitimizing only those divisions that received the approval of the village commune.³²

Despite restrictions, the process of disintegration of family communes gathered momentum in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Kovalevskii estimated that about two or three million household divisions took place between 1861 and 1891. In southern and southwestern parts of Russia, this process went particularly rapidly. In his opinion, the fertility of the black soil in these regions allowed a peasant to expect generally good harvests and to manage the payment of taxes without his relatives' help. The “spirit of independence” of the Ukrainian Cossacks also affected the peasant mentality in southern areas and thus contributed to the acceleration of this process. Characteristically, Kovalevskii never doubted the prospect that all regions of Russia would “sooner or later follow the same path,” and the patriarchal house community would disappear in Russia, just as it had disappeared in many parts of Europe.³³

Thus, Kovalevskii insisted that the pressures of the patriarchal order did not make the Russian peasant completely “insensible to the advantages of individualism.” Like many of his contemporaries, he attributed the increase in household divisions after 1861 to the growth of individualism and the decline of patriarchy. The “able and laborious” peasants were no longer willing “to work for the idle and incapable”. They desired to abandon “their communistic mode of life,” not fearing “the prospect of being deprived of the aid

³² Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 65.

³³ Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 65-67.

of the relatives.” Guided by the “spirit of personal enterprise,” they wanted “to have their own homes and to be their own masters.”³⁴

The dilemma many peasants increasingly faced was whether to stay in the family commune and continue to accept their subordinate position in the patriarchal order or to set up a separate household and try to start an independent life. Younger peasants were most likely to have an “urge for independence,” a desire to leave the relative security of the commune, and a willingness to take the risks of living on their own. Unmarried sons, especially, felt the injustice of being forced to share their personal earnings with their relatives who enjoyed “the pleasures of married life and a numerous progeny, who, on account of their youth, were not yet able to earn anything by the work of their hands.” Younger peasants also wished to leave the overcrowded dwellings, which were often “too small to accommodate a large family,” and strove for living “with decency” in a separate dwelling.³⁵

Women, who suffered most from oppression in the patriarchal system, also often initiated household divisions. Kovalevskii cited disputes among women as one of the most common causes of partitions. The wives of younger sons were most likely to be dissatisfied with their status. They occupied the lowest position in the patriarchal hierarchy as newcomers, as women, and as spouses of junior male members of the family. The wives of seasonal workers often desired to leave the family commune because they felt defenseless in their husbands' absence and saw the separation as the

³⁴ Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 64-67.

³⁵ Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 66.

only way to liberate themselves from oppression. No wonder that daughters-in-law generally enjoyed the reputation of potentially troublesome family members.³⁶

It was not only resistance to patriarchy that, according to Kovalevskii, turned women into agents of individualism. Paradoxically, the patriarchal system itself promoted women's individualism. The right of women to own individual property within the family commune represented, in Kovalevskii's opinion, a factor that promoted "the establishment of private property." Young women could keep for themselves any earnings they made during their leisure hours. These private belongings comprised the bulk of their future dowry. Their parents contributed only but a small addition to what a young woman accumulated by her "industry and thrift."³⁷

Although custom excluded women from property inheritance, widows and unmarried daughters received upon the patriarch's death small endowments that provided for their care until their death or marriage. Finally, women participated in family assemblies. Their opinion, though considered less significant than that of men, did not remain completely disregarded, especially given the influence they often exerted on their husbands. Kovalevskii thus stressed the important role of women in shaping the family life and economy.³⁸

Twentieth-century studies corroborated Kovalevskii's thesis that the patriarchal family existed in many parts of the world until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. An extensive literature on the *zadruga* has documented the wide spread of this type of the family commune among the Balkan Slavs. Similarly, family historians confirmed the existence of extended families in the Caucasus, India, and Western Europe. David I.

³⁶ Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 66.

³⁷ Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 59.

³⁸ Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 55.

Kertzer found a high proportion of complex family households in central Italy in the mid-nineteenth century.³⁹ David S. Reher presented evidence of high incidence of complex family households in northern Spain.⁴⁰ John W. Shaffer described the family communes (*communauté*) in the French province of Nivernais, where they survived well into the nineteenth century.⁴¹

Testing Kovalevskii's findings on the Russian family commune against the current state of research on this subject is particularly relevant for our purposes because it comprised his primary interest and concern. Western historians have generally agreed that the patriarchal family commune represented the dominant form of household organization in medieval Russia and survived in many Russian regions until the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Jerome Blum and Geroid T. Robinson, for example, showed that throughout centuries Russian peasants lived in "complex or patriarchal families which usually included not only the children and grandchildren of the head of the household, but other relatives by blood and marriage."⁴² Christine D. Worobec demonstrated that the structure and culture of the Russian peasant life dominated by the complex family displayed a marked continuity over several centuries. Despite a significant increase in family divisions in the post-emancipation period, large patrilocal households continued to exist in many regions. In 1887-1896, more than two-thirds (67.4 percent) of peasant households in Voronezh province were composed of

³⁹ David I. Kertzer, *Family Life in Central Italy, 1880-1910* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University, 1984), 57-58.

⁴⁰ David S. Reher, *Perspectives on the Family in Spain, Past and Present* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

⁴¹ John W. Shaffer, *Family and Farm: Agrarian Change and Household Organization in the Loire Valley, 1500-1900* (Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1982).

⁴² A quote from Geroid T. Robinson, *Rural Russia under the Old Regime: A History of the Landlord-Peasant World and a Prologue to the Peasant Revolution of 1917* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 66-67. See also Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia from the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 24-26.

extended families. In Kostroma province, the figure stood at nearly 47 percent of all households.⁴³

Numerous local studies conducted with advanced statistical techniques also confirmed Kovalevskii's generalizations. Peter Czap, one of the leading authorities in the field of comparative family history, concluded that "the large multi-generational family/household was the predominant form of domestic group among [seigniorial peasants] throughout large areas of Russia in the eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries." In Czap's estimate, complex family households accounted for between 62 to 85 percent of all serf households during this period.⁴⁴ A local study by Steven L. Hoch demonstrated the existence of complex family households in Petrovskoe, a village estate in Tambov province. According to Hoch, complex family households made up 60 to 78 percent of the total before 1856, when a significant drop occurred.⁴⁵ Edgar Melton found similarly high populations among serf households in Rastorg, a Kursk province estate of the Sheremet'evs. Rodney D. Bohac showed that a majority of peasant households of the Manuilovskoe estate in Tver province represented complex family structures as well.⁴⁶

In contrast, most Soviet historians believed that the simple nuclear family, not the large patriarchal family, dominated Russian rural communities "from the sixteenth right

⁴³ Christine D. Worobec, *Peasant Russia: Family and Community in the Post-Emancipation Period*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 112-114.

⁴⁴ Peter Czap, "The Perennial Multiple Family Household, Mishino, Russia, 1782-1858," *Journal of Family History* 7 (Spring 1982): 5-26.

⁴⁵ Steven L. Hoch, *Serfdom and Social Control in Russia: Petrovskoe, A Village in Tambov* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 77-83.

⁴⁶ Rodney D. Bohac, "Peasant Inheritance Strategies in Russia," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* 16 (Summer 1985): 26-27.

up to the middle of the nineteenth century.”⁴⁷ Nina A. Minenko, however, pointed to the fact that, although the small family predominated in Western Siberia in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the sources also revealed frequent instances of large family households, numbering twenty to thirty persons living under the authority of a patriarch head.⁴⁸ Boris N. Mironov criticized Soviet historians for tending to categorize some complex families as nuclear and thus exaggerating the number of nuclear family units. According to Mironov, complex family households constituted the absolute majority in the Kiev, Nizhnii Novgorod, Perm, and Iaroslavl provinces around 1850. By the turn of the twentieth century, the nuclear family dominated in all regions of Russia except the central black-earth region and Belorussia.⁴⁹

Thus, most of the evidence generated by twentieth-century historians strongly supports Kovalevskii’s assertion that the patriarchal family commune represented a widespread phenomenon in medieval and modern Russia and that it rapidly declined during the post-Emancipation period. Like Kovalevskii, historians today focus on explaining the dramatic increase in family divisions in the last several decades of the nineteenth century. For the most part, they arrive at conclusions similar to those of Kovalevskii. For example, the practice of family divisions, when each of the sons received an equal share of all property (land, livestock, and household goods) after the patriarch's death, is likewise interpreted not simply in terms of peasant egalitarianism but as a function with a pragmatic economic meaning. Equal inheritance system ensured that

⁴⁷ Vadim A. Aleksandrov, *Obychnoe pravo krepostnoi derevni Rossii, XVIII-nachalo XIX v.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1984), 68.

⁴⁸ Nina A. Minenko, *Russkaia krest'ianskaia obshchina v Zapadnoi Sibiri, XVIII-pervaia polovina XIX v.* (Novosibirsk: Izd-vo Novosibirskogo universiteta, 1991).

⁴⁹ Boris Mironov and Ben Eklof, *The Social History of Imperial Russia, 1700-1917* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 2000), vol. 1, 124, 128-131.

no heir would be dispossessed and left without the minimum economic resources needed for paying taxes and satisfying the basic needs of the newly formed family. By securing the peasants from impoverishment and proletarianization, it served as a preventive measure against the growth of landless peasant laborers, a potentially destabilizing force in the countryside.

On the other hand, present-day peasant studies offer a much more detailed and nuanced explanation of the process of disintegration of family communes in Russia than was possible in the nineteenth century. For example, scholars have found that, despite the apparent benefits of equal property distribution, peasants feared that excessively frequent use of it might pose a potential threat to household economy. As the number of family divisions increased during the post-Emancipation period, peasants became concerned that partitions could create economically weak households. Many small families, in fact, experienced a labor force shortage because they often contained only one male of working age. Such households were extremely vulnerable to crop failure, loss of livestock, and injury or ill health of the head the family.⁵⁰

For this reason, the village commune preferred to preserve large communal families as economically stable and viable. With their substantial human and material resources, the patriarchal families were more likely to operate successfully and to pay rent punctually. The village commune generally discouraged household divisions because it believed partitions endangered the productive strength and financial stability of both the household and the entire village. The inability of new households to survive on their own and to pay rent placed increased economic burdens on other households in the village, not to

⁵⁰ Bohac, "Peasant Inheritance," 29-31; Cathy A. Frierson, "Razdel: The Peasant Family Divided," *Russian Review* (January 1987): 38-39, 42-43.

mention the additional economic strains associated with the search for land on which to build the dwellings for new families and assigning them a new plot of communal field land.⁵¹

On the other hand, the village commune rarely denied actual requests for partitions. Part of the explanation for this lies in the fact that even after separation from the family commune, new households remained in the village commune and continued to adhere to communal practices. Sometimes they retained economic cooperation with the original household, continuing to work together and even sharing barn or kiln. As part of the village commune, the new household joined in the cooperative enterprise of its neighbors.⁵²

It was in the interest of the entire village community to ensure the economic viability of each new household. During divisions, it checked whether the separating householder received a fair share of property from the original household and left with some seed, equipment, clothing, grain, and livestock to ease his transition. Peasants themselves exercised great caution when it came to property division. To prevent the potential dangers of partitions, they often preferred to postpone a partition or to limit the number of new branches. Poorer households had an even greater interest in retaining their family property intact, which they usually did by disinheriting members of descending generations or by sending heirs into other households as adopted sons or in-marrying sons-in-law.⁵³

As we can see, communal family economy represented a carefully maintained equilibrium between the two seemingly conflicting tactics: equal division of property on

⁵¹ Bohac, "Peasant Inheritance," 29-31.

⁵² Frierson, "Razdel," 39-40, 49-50.

⁵³ Bohac, "Peasant Inheritance," 42; Frierson, "Razdel," 39-40.

the one hand and preventing too frequent divisions on the other. Both strategies, in fact, served the same economic function. They both were aimed at stabilizing economic stratification and maintaining the productive efficiency of the household. Both represented pragmatic responses of the peasantry to the complex social and economic processes in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Russian countryside.

The main weakness of Kovalevskii's vision of the family commune was that he understood it exclusively in evolutionary terms. For him, it represented an archaic institution, a dying "survival" of the past that essentially had no role to play in modern society. As an evolutionist, he recognized the historical transformation of the patriarchal family throughout centuries and a great variety of its forms in different parts of the world. He demonstrated that the family commune was a dynamic phenomenon that changed over time, despite the fact that its basic customs remained substantially unaltered throughout centuries. Its functions and property relations were modified in response to changing social and economic conditions. Most importantly, he showed that the communal family changed as a result of internal processes, due to the growth of individualism within it. Tensions between patriarchy and collectivism on the one side and individualistic tendencies on the other were transforming its economic and legal practices.

On the other hand, Kovalevskii failed to explain the longevity of the family commune and its persistence into the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Viewing it merely as a remnant of "archaic communism," he underestimated its functional significance in a contemporary society. Although he identified the multiple functions of the family commune, he underrated its adaptability to a changing environment, a key

factor that ensured its longevity. Paradoxically, the fact that the family commune still existed in most of the non-European world, as well as in southern and eastern regions of Europe, did not lead Kovalevskii to realize that it constituted an integral part of modern life, not just a surviving artifact of the past stages of human development. He failed to admit that the complex family continued to operate as an effective social and economic institution in a contemporary society, despite a significant decrease in numbers.

Following anthropologists and ethnographers, historians today have abandoned the vision of the family commune as a primitive “survival” of the past. It has come to be seen as a type of family that, despite its ancient origins, continues to function effectively in some modern societies.⁵⁴ Due to its high adaptability to changing social and economic conditions, the complex family has retained its viability in the modern world.

Kovalevskii's failure to recognize the family commune's viability is not surprising given the fact that such views dominated scholarly discourse during his lifetime. On the other hand, this failure presents a striking contrast with his more complex and dynamic understanding of the other communal form, the village commune. By contrast to the rapidly decaying family commune, the village commune displayed, according to Kovalevskii, the signs of economic vitality and stability. Despite the fact that peasants were willing to break up from the patriarchal family, they did not want to leave the village commune. As a rule, emerging nuclear families did not separate from the village commune but continued to live in it. In fact, as we have seen, family divisions did not produce any degenerative effects on the village level. Unlike the family commune, the village commune remained a viable institution with a significant economic potential.

⁵⁴ Needless to say, there is a growing tendency to revise the very concept of “modernity” and its application to peasant institutions. The concluding chapter of the present study addresses Kovalevskii's analysis of the village commune in light of recent scholarly debates about tradition and modernity.

Chapter II. The Origins and Historical Evolution of the Village Commune

Alongside the family commune, another form of collective social and economic organization—the village commune—developed in various parts of the world at the earliest stages of human evolution. Whereas the family commune represented a kin-based group composed of the members of the big patriarchal family with their spouses and children, the village commune could include both relatives and non-relatives living on the same territory. Because of this distinctive characteristic of the village commune, Kovalevskii, like many scholars of his era, also referred to it as the neighborhood, or territorial, commune.

Kovalevskii recognized that the lack of historical records made the origins of the village commune as obscure as those of the family commune. He never doubted, however, the ancient character of the village commune and criticized both Russian and West European historians who insisted on its relatively recent origins. In some instances, he suggested, village communes evolved directly from the tribal communes, similarly to the way the family communes originated. In other cases, they appeared as a result of the gradual dissolution of family communes and their unification into neighborhood associations. In countries like Russia, the process of formation of family communes and village communes took place simultaneously, thus leading to the co-existence of both communal forms in many regions. Even in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the majority of Russian village communes still contained family communes, or households composed of the members of extended patriarchal families.¹

¹ Kovalevskii, *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 143-144; *Rodovoi byt*, 89.

According to Kovalevskii, the main reason for the formation of these territorial partnerships was the collective colonization and assimilation of new lands.⁵⁵ Due to enormous labor investment that these tasks required, especially when it came to clearing woodlands, only the collective action of peasants living in one village or neighboring settlements could make such operations possible. Consequently, the new lands acquired by the joint effort of neighbors became to be considered a joint property belonging to all those who directly or indirectly contributed to the acquisition, that is, to the entire village community. Individual households thus received the right to cultivate their share of communal land, but not to own or sell it at will.⁵⁶

At this initial stage of the evolution of the village commune, individual plots of land did not have to be equal in size. Peasants who had smaller landholdings did not find it necessary to demand egalitarian measures, because the abundance of land allowed them to acquire any amount of additional land whenever needed. At some point, however, continuous colonization and the growth of population inevitably exhausted the land resources. When unoccupied land was no longer available, peasants with less land, who typically made up the majority in the village, started demanding the equalization of communal land. The families with larger landholdings initially resisted such attempts at land redistribution but eventually had to conform to the will of the village majority. As a result, sporadic repartitions began to be held in order to ensure equal access to the arable land for all households in a village. The process acquired more or less periodic frequency over time. Periodic land repartitions, Kovalevskii concluded, did not represent an archaic collective practice, as it was commonly thought, but appeared at a later stage of the

⁵⁵ In Russia, for example, these new colonized lands were referred to as *zaimka*. In France, peasants called them *essarts* or *purprises*.

⁵⁶ Kovalevskii, *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 145-146.

evolution of the village commune in response to the growing population pressure on the land.⁵⁷

In keeping with his notion of the village commune as a universal phenomenon, Kovalevskii presented evidence of its existence in various parts of the world and at different time periods. Drawing on the studies by the British scholars and colonial administrators Henry S. Maine and H. Rose, he showed that the nineteenth-century Indian villages practiced the so-called run-rig system, holding the arable land in common and carrying out periodic land redistributions between households. He also referred to the findings of a Belgian expert in property relations, Émile de Laveleye, to demonstrate the presence of similar practices in other regions, including contemporary Afghanistan and the Dutch colony of Java.

Kovalevskii's own research on European legal and economic history led him to conclude that peasants in Western Europe retained the common use of woodland and pastures even after the enclosure of the arable land and meadows. The persistence of English commons, French *communaux*, German *Gemeinde-güter*, Scandinavian *allmening*, and Swiss *allmenden* testified to the viability of traditional communal practices in the modern European village. For Kovalevskii, these contemporary phenomena represented the survivals of the medieval rural communes.⁵⁸

Kovalevskii devoted a great deal of attention to the study of the history of the village commune in Western Europe. In fact, he became one of the most passionate participants in the famous debate among nineteenth-century European scholars about the origins of collective property relations. Contrary to his opponents' view of the European village

⁵⁷ Kovalevskii, *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 145-149.

⁵⁸ Kovalevskii, *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 151-152.

commune as a by-product of the manorial economy imposed on the rural population in order to secure the collection of dues, he insisted that the village commune had existed long before the emergence of serfdom and the manorial system. In opposition to Frederick Seebohm and his followers, who argued that the manorial lords introduced the system of collective use of communal land as part of the enserfment process, Kovalevskii emphasized that rural seigneurs simply modified the already existing village commune in order to appropriate it to their own needs. Previously free peasants were turned into serfs, but their traditional collective practices were enhanced and incorporated into the manorial system.⁵⁹

To support his thesis, Kovalevskii cited numerous examples from late ancient and early medieval European history. Building on the findings of the German historian Georg von Maurer, he showed that the so-called *Mark*, or *Markengenossenschaft*, an association of neighboring settlements of families that occupied and cultivated land on a collective basis, represented an example of the Germanic village commune.⁶⁰ During ancient and early medieval times, he argued, free Teutonic peasant-warriors formed voluntary associations in order to manage their local economic and political affairs. Through direct assemblies, they regulated their agricultural activities and elected headmen to enforce their decisions and to lead them in war. As serfdom and the manorial system spread

⁵⁹ Kovalevskii, *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 151-154.

⁶⁰ Georg L. von Maurer, *Einleitung zur Geschichte der Mark-, Hof-, Dorf-, und Stadt-Verfassung und öffentlichen Gewalt* (Munich: Kaiser, 1854). For contemporary discussions of the German *Mark*, see Ervin Nasse, *On the Agricultural Community of the Middle Ages* (London: Macmillan, 1871), Henry Maine, *Village Communities in the East and West* (London: J. Murray, 1871), and Enoch A. Bryan, *The Mark in Europe and America: A Review of the Discussion on Early Land Tenure* (Boston: Ginn & Company, 1893). For a recent interpretation, see, for example, John W. Burrow, *The Crisis of Reason: European Thought, 1848-1914* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000), 113-124.

throughout the Germanic territories during the Carolingian period, the village commune became gradually incorporated into the new social and economic order.⁶¹

Referring to Anglo-Saxon charters and the extensive research by nineteenth-century European scholars, Kovalevskii offered a detailed description of the medieval English village commune. In opposition to Seebohm's contention that the rural commune appeared in post-Norman England as part of the development of the manorial system, Kovalevskii argued that communal practices had existed long before the Norman conquest. Free Anglo-Saxon farmers had lived in self-governing village communities called townships and used the arable and non-arable land in common. As the "feudalization" of the English society progressed, seigneurs deprived the village communes of their freedoms and converted them into manors, adjusting communal practices to the needs of the manorial economy.

Kovalevskii's scrupulous investigation of the *Lex Salica*, *Lex Ripuaria*, and other early medieval legal documents, led him to postulate the existence of the village commune among the Franks. Their concept of individual ownership, according to Kovalevskii, applied only to movable property, houses, and gardens. The commune owned the land, whereas individual households possessed the right to cultivate a portion of it. Similar practices, he pointed out, existed in many other parts of Europe, including Italy, Spain, and Russia.

Not surprisingly, Kovalevskii expressed a particular interest in the evolution of the Russian village commune. Like Pavel G. Vinogradov and other Russian students of medieval European history, he confessed that one of the main reasons he devoted so much attention to exploring communal forms worldwide was his conviction that his

⁶¹ Safronov, *Kovalevskii*, 79-80.

findings could apply to Russia and could thus help him better understand the origins and character of the Russian village commune. In his *Modern Customs and Ancient Laws of Russia*, Kovalevskii offered the most detailed exposition of his theory of the evolution of the Russian village commune. As his discussion demonstrated, the historical development of the Russian village commune indeed resembled that of its counterparts in Western Europe and other regions of the world.

Citing the earliest references to the village commune in the sixteenth and seventeenth-century Russian charters, Kovalevskii concluded that by this time many small settlements consisting of a few households had united with neighboring settlements into the so-called canton (*volost'*) communes similar to the medieval German *Mark*. At this initial stage of the evolution of the village commune, each household continued to own and cultivate its arable land individually. The same usually applied to the use of the meadow land. Pastures and woodland, on the other hand, were owned by the entire *volost'* commune. "No one had the right to clear the forest or reclaim the wasteland lying within the limits of a *volost'*, unless authorized to do so by the elders and the assembly of peasants."⁶²

Most importantly, during this period Russian *volost'* communes, like their counterparts in medieval England and Germany, did not enforce egalitarian measures, which was clearly reflected in the charters repeatedly mentioning the "best men" and "the men of wealth" (*zhitii liudi*) side by side with the "smaller men" (*molodshie liudi*). The size of an individual plot of land, as well as the economic standing of a household, could differ significantly from those of other households in a *volost'*. In matters of taxation, egalitarianism was similarly unknown. Communes did not distribute tax burdens equally among its household members, nor did they bear collective responsibility for the payment

⁶² Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 75-87.

of taxes. Each household paid its share of the land tax determined by the amount of land it owned.⁶³

Significant changes in communal practices started taking place with the emergence of serfdom and the “manorial” economy in sixteenth-century Russia. The most dramatic change involved the extension of collective ownership and cultivation rights to the arable land and meadows. In exchange for dues (*obrok*) or agricultural labor (*barshchina*) received by the landlord, each peasant household received the right to cultivate its share of the village land. Deprived of land-ownership rights they had possessed before, individual peasants now became enserfed tenants on the lord's land. In addition to manorial obligations, they continued to pay the land tax to the state. Since collecting the state tax was the entire village's prerogative, it made perfect economic sense to place the customary village land under communal authority and give the commune an exclusive right to distribute land among its members. The collectivization of the arable land thus benefited both the peasant serfs, who now had access to at least a minimum amount of land that could guarantee them subsistence and a sufficient income to meet their financial obligations, and the elites, who viewed the communal system as an effective means of securing the payment of taxes and manorial dues by each household.⁶⁴

Communes did not yet enforce egalitarian measures at this stage of development. The amount of land households could receive for cultivation varied greatly, and so did their tax payments and manorial duties as they both depended on the size of a family's land allotment. The relative abundance of land, as well as the right of Russian serfs to leave

⁶³ Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 87-89.

⁶⁴ Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 89-91.

their current landlord and to resettle in another manor, allowed peasants to migrate in search of better lands without becoming discontented with the existing allotments.⁶⁵

Further changes in communal organization occurred when, as a result of the growing population pressure, arable land became increasingly scarce. The state responded to this tendency by changing the taxation system. In 1719, Peter the Great replaced the land tax with the poll tax, or the “capitation” tax. When, due to limited land resources, the taxation system based on the amount of cultivated land could no longer serve as a stable source of revenue, the state decided to secure a flow of money by taxing each household according to the number of people in a household. Furthermore, in order to ensure the full and regular payment of the new tax, the state enforced the principle of mutual fiscal responsibility of the entire village and abolished the peasant serfs' right to free migration.

Unable to leave their current residence and confronted with new fiscal obligations, communal peasants realized the inadequacy of the previous practice of land distribution, which allowed for inequalities between households, and started equalizing their land holdings by adjusting the size of each allotment to the number of people in a household that farmed it. This measure made perfect sense in the context of the new poll tax of Peter the Great, which fell on all household members. To ensure that the amount of land each family cultivated corresponded to changes in its composition over time, communes held periodic land redistributions, at least every nineteen years after an official tax revision, or even more frequently if needed.

State authorities and landlords welcomed these peasant initiatives. Kovalevskii even mentioned several instances when provincial governors and gentry landowners enforced the practice of equal land distribution among local peasants. Clearly, the principles of

⁶⁵ Kovalevskii, *Modern Customs*, 91-93.

egalitarianism and periodic repartition served the interests of the ruling elite by providing them with a guarantee of peasants' fulfillment of their financial obligations.

By no means, of course, could Kovalevskii be credited with the “discovery” of the Russian village commune. By the time he published his first books and articles about the commune, it had become a widely researched and hotly debated issue. Andrei T. Bolotov and other Russian economists in the eighteenth century debated the advantages and disadvantages of communal farming. The issue became a matter of particular intellectual interest in the 1840s and 1850s, when both the government and the educated elite realized the urgency of rural reform. The public debate over the abolition of serfdom and the fate of the peasant commune turned these academic and bureaucratic discussions into one of the most heated controversies in Russian history. The numerous publications of the Slavophiles and particularly the appearance of the book by the German observer, Baron August von Haxthausen, provoked an active response from both their enthusiastic supporters and equally enthusiastic critics. Another strong stimulus came from the influential liberal thinker and politician Boris N. Chicherin, who in 1856 published his famous article about the origins of the Russian village commune. Chicherin's attack on the Slavophile vision of the commune provoked a series of monographic studies that defended Chicherin's theory or attempted to refute it. Finally, the Emancipation Statute of 1861, which freed Russian peasants from serfdom but retained and even strengthened the power of the village commune, provoked another wave of disputes and arguments. Over 3,000 books and articles on the subject appeared during the last three decades of the nineteenth century.

Despite such enormous numbers of monographic studies on the topic, Kovalevskii's writings became recognized as a remarkable contribution to a better understanding of the Russian peasant commune. His readers both in Russia and abroad respected him as one of the most ardent critics of the Slavophile and populist writers, who considered the village commune a uniquely Russian phenomenon that allegedly exemplified the innate nature of peasant collectivism and egalitarianism and could thus serve as a safeguard against the purported evils of European capitalism and individualism.

Kovalevskii ridiculed such views of the commune as idealistic and unsupported by historical evidence. He emphasized the universal character of the village commune and pointed to its existence in different societies and at different time periods. Moreover, he insisted that, despite its collective and egalitarian aspects, the village commune did not entirely stifle peasant individualism and initiative. Most importantly, collective and egalitarian practices themselves evolved not because of the collectivist instincts allegedly inherent in Russian peasant mentality, but as a pragmatic response to the pressures of Russia's climate, environmental conditions, and the ever-increasing financial demands of the state and gentry.

At the same time, Kovalevskii criticized the simplex explanations of the evolution of the village commune advanced by Chicherin, a prominent historian of the so-called state school, who, like Seebohm, stressed the principal role of the government in the emergence of the village commune. According to Chicherin, the state simply invented the commune as a collective agency to facilitate tax collection. Chicherin denied the ancient origins of the village commune and insisted on its relatively recent appearance due to the

government's policy to bind the peasants to their place of residence so no one could escape the tax.

Kovalevskii argued that Chicherin had distorted the past by focusing exclusively on the role of the state and ignoring other factors. Unlike Chicherin, he emphasized the equal significance of demographic, environmental, and economic factors in the evolution of the village commune. Only multi-causal explanations, in his view, could adequately explain both the historical continuity of the commune and the changes it underwent at different stages of its development. As an evolutionist, he regarded the commune as a product of the natural evolution of peasant practices, not simply a fiscal device imposed by the state. Communal forms, he insisted, had evolved long before the state decided to appropriate them to its needs. Nor did they remain static, as Chicherin suggested, but changed over time in response to changing demographic, economic, and political conditions.

It remained to explain the disappearance of communal forms in some countries and their continued existence in others. A firm believer in the positivist idea of progress, Kovalevskii never doubted that, in accordance with the universal laws of history, communal agriculture would inevitably decline and give way to individual farming. Generally, this process would take place over a few centuries, although he admitted that the sequence of change could vary widely in regions as diverse as Western Europe, Russia, India, Africa, and Latin America.

Kovalevskii attributed particular importance to the demographic factor in the dissolution of communes worldwide. The growth of population, in his opinion, put increasing pressure on the village commune by aggravating land shortage. Inevitably, as new settlers continued to arrive in villages, diminishing land resources prompted

commune members, who used to be more tolerant toward newcomers claiming common rights, to become more reluctant to accept them. Gradually, the village commune became a sort of a closed corporation where new rural immigrants, denied the right to use the common land and pasture, remained virtually landless. This situation caused growing tensions between old and new members of the commune and often led to the disintegration of many village communes.⁶⁶

If commune members were victorious in the struggle with landless newcomers, the commune would continue to exist as a closed corporation, where immigrants were allowed to reside in the village but could not claim their rights to communal land. The so-called *partecipanza* in the Italian provinces of Emilia and Romagna represented an example of a closed village commune that did not extend communal land privileges to new immigrants.⁶⁷

More frequently, however, the growing numbers of landless rural elements forced the village commune to abandon the practice of common use of arable land and adopt individual (*podvornoe*) land ownership. Commune members feared that their landless fellow villagers would exercise the right to vote and take advantage of their majority at village assembly meetings to gain access to arable lands. To prevent this, communes preferred to allow its member households to own a plot of land individually, still retaining the practice of collective use of woodland and pastures. As an example of such transformation, Kovalevskii referred to the surviving practice of common use of pastures and meadows in some parts of nineteenth-century Europe, including Swiss mountain

⁶⁶ Kovalevskii, *Obshchinnoe zemlevladienie*, 6-7.

⁶⁷ Kovalevskii, *Ekonomicheskii rost Evropy do vozniknoveniia kapitalisticheskogo khoziaistva* (Moscow: Tipo-litografiia V. Rikhter, 1898), vol. 2, 924-936, 940; *Ekonomicheskii stroi Rossii*, (St. Peterburg: Izd. A.V. Ermolaevoi, 1900), 120-121.

villages called *Allmenden*. If Swiss peasants had a chance to migrate to other regions where land was still available, he noted, they would still hold their land in common and practice periodic repartitions.⁶⁸

In Russia, the growth of a landless peasantry did not occur because peasants could migrate and resettle on lands abundantly available in northern European Russia and Siberia. In the second half of the nineteenth century, however, a rural proletariat did begin to emerge in the Russian countryside. According to the Emancipation statute of 1861, certain categories of ex-serfs such as personal servants (*dvorovye liudi* or *kholopy*), who had typically resided in the landlord's house rather than in the village, received very small plots of land or none at all. Peasants who had fallen in debt or systematically failed to pay taxes (*nedoimshchiki*) could also lose their land. Their property could be sold to wealthier villagers, or their land might be redistributed to a more successful family. Often, indebted peasants themselves sold their property or rented their lands to other families in order to prevent confiscation. Finally, ex-soldiers who had been absent for a long time and new settlers had very meager chances to receive any land. These categories of impoverished peasants lived in the village side by side with the commune members, participating in the village assembly meetings but lacking the economic privileges that commune members would normally enjoy.⁶⁹

Kovalevskii regarded these tendencies as a serious threat to the very existence of the commune. At any point, landless peasants could demand their share of arable land. It came as no surprise to Kovalevskii that communal peasants in Russia, like their Western European counterparts, increasingly accepted the possibility of reforming communal

⁶⁸ Kovalevskii, *Ekonomicheskii stroi Rossii*, 140-141.

⁶⁹ Kovalevskii, *Ekonomicheskii stroi Rossii*, 120-124.

practices, so that individual household members of the commune would gain the unalienable right to use and inherit arable land plots, while retaining the common rights to pasture and woodland. It was important, in Kovalevskii's opinion, to encourage peasants to migrate to Siberia and less populated parts of European Russia in order to prevent or at least minimize peasant landlessness and potential social tensions in the countryside. Intensive industrialization and urbanization could also contribute to the resolution of the problem by absorbing the increasing masses of rural proletariat and providing them with employment in the factories and small businesses.⁷⁰

These measures, of course, could only retard the process of the dissolution of the village commune, not prevent it. Unlike the Slavophiles and populists, Kovalevskii did not believe in the possibility of avoiding the decay and disintegration of the commune. As a convinced positivist, he never doubted that the universal laws of historical progress and evolution would inevitably replace communal institutions with more advanced forms: individual farming and private ownership. How to avoid the devastating social and economic consequences of drastic changes in the rural economy and peasant land arrangements? This complex issue caused heated debates both in Russia and abroad.⁷¹

In addition to the demographic factor, economic processes also weakened the village commune. Kovalevskii recognized that the rapid spread of capitalism caused private agriculture to become predominant in Western Europe earlier than in other parts of the world. The expansion of commerce and markets led to fundamental changes in rural land arrangements. Growing population density also fostered agricultural transformations by

⁷⁰ Kovalevskii, *Ekonomicheskii stroi Rossii*, 141.

⁷¹ Kovalevskii's views on the social and economic consequences of land privatization are discussed in Chapter IV.

increasing the demand for land, thereby raising land prices. Land became increasingly to be seen as a commodity that could be bought and sold for profit.⁷²

In England and other parts of Europe, these processes led to the disappearance of common fields and massive enclosures of land. To obtain higher profits by renting land rather than by collecting dues from serfs, landlords released the communal peasants from manorial dues. Deprived of the right to own a piece of communal land, peasants became free tenants, who now rented land from the landlord. Capitalist agriculture thus replaced the manorial economy, of which the village commune was a part.⁷³

Another strong stimulus for the destruction of common fields came from the growth of towns. Towns offered large markets for farm products. Increased food prices fostered the re-orientation of predominantly subsistence-based communal agriculture to commercial farming, in which production of crops and livestock for sale directed the decisions of farmers. Communes came to be seen as lacking economic flexibility that the market economy required. Enclosed farms, on the other hand, appeared to be more conducive to agricultural intensification and specialization, as well as more receptive to market demands. Also, urban industries provided extensive employment opportunities, which encouraged poorer peasants to withdraw from agriculture. At the same time, the urban bourgeoisie invested capital in land and thus created additional incentives for enclosure. The commercialization of agriculture, Kovalevskii concluded, formed part of the

⁷² Kovalevskii, *Ekonomicheskii rost Evropy*, vol. 2, 377, 476; *Razvitie narodnogo khoziaistva v Zapadnoi Evrope* (St. Petersburg: Izd. F. Pavlenkova, 1899), 52-55.

⁷³ Kovalevskii, "Iskhodnye momenty v razvitii kapitalisticheskogo khoziaistva," 246-250; "Obshchinnoe zemlevladienie na Zapade," *Vestnik Evropy* no. 3 (1909), 208.

fundamental process of economic improvement and rationalization in the context of population growth and the development of capitalism.⁷⁴

Despite the significance of external factors, Kovalevskii attributed the key role in gradual decline of the village commune to internal processes. His comparative economic studies provided him with compelling evidence of the growth of individualism within the commune. The most enterprising peasants, who took advantage of new commercial opportunities and accumulated wealth, eventually viewed their membership in the commune as an obstacle to further enrichment. Economic differentiation in the village weakened communal ties and intensified internal conflicts between wealthier and poorer peasants. “Everywhere the change from common to private property is brought about by the same phenomenon one encounters the world over—the conflict of interests.”⁷⁵

Even as Kovalevskii recognized the growth of individualism in the post-Emancipation Russian countryside, manifested by the increasing frequency of family repartitions and the dissolution of extended patriarchal families, he sought to determine the extent to which the Russian village commune still remained a viable social and economic institution. For this purpose, he undertook a careful investigation of statistical data, field observations, and cross-cultural historical comparisons. Just as he opposed the populist and Slavophile exaggeration of the virtues of the village commune as a social and economic organization, so he questioned the widespread belief that the commune represented an economically outmoded institution that must be replaced by private farming as soon as possible. Both the idealistic defense of the village commune and its unconditional condemnation appeared to him to be unscientific and abstract.

⁷⁴ Kovalevskii, *Ekonomicheskii rost Evropy*, vol. 2, 376; *Razvitie narodnogo khoziaistva*, 210.

⁷⁵ Kovalevskii, *Obshchinnoe zemlevladienie*, 3-4; *Ocherk proiskhozhdeniia*, 143; *Razvitie narodnogo khoziaistva*, 177-178.

Kovalevskii's own research, as well as studies by Russian economists, agronomists, and zemstvo statisticians, provided him with abundant evidence that, unlike the family commune, the village commune remained a viable institution in most regions of Russia. Predictions of its rapid decay appeared premature and poorly documented. In the turn-of-the-century Russian village commune, Kovalevskii wrote, collective and individualistic practices not only co-existed peacefully but complemented each other in various ways. Most importantly, due to its adaptability, the Russian peasant commune possessed a significant economic potential that allowed it to survive rapid change and to contribute to rural progress. He viewed communal peasants as capable of productive and profitable labor. Insisting on the compatibility of the communal system with agricultural innovation, he argued that advanced technology and farming methods could be successfully assimilated into communal practices. The rural economy, in his opinion, could thus advance without the destruction of the commune.

Kovalevskii found historical precedents in Europe demonstrating that communal forms did not necessarily present an obstacle to economic improvement and the expansion of the capitalist economy. In late medieval Italy, for example, the so-called *partecipanza* in the regions of Emilia and Romagna demonstrated the capacity of the commune to adapt to the changing socioeconomic conditions associated with the development of capitalism. In fact, criticizing the excesses of the Stolypin land reform, he referred to the Italian *partecipanza* as an example of a potential path of development of the Russian village commune.⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Kovalevskii, *Ekonomicheskii rost Evropy*, vol. 2, 902-913, 924-936; "Obshchinnoe zemlevladienie na Zapade," 202-206.

Chapter III. The Economic Viability of the Late Nineteenth- Early Twentieth-Century Russian Village Commune: Kovalevskii's Argument in Historical Perspective

Kovalevskii's argument for the compatibility of communal practices with economic innovation deserves a detailed examination in light of evidence generated by both his contemporaries and recent scholars. Assertions that communal land ownership did not necessarily impede rural progress commonly encountered a great deal of skepticism in the last few decades of the tsarist period. Today, debates over land privatization cause just as much controversy as they did a century ago.

Russian economists, agronomists, and zemstvo statisticians gathered much evidence testifying to the economic potential of the village commune. For the most part, these materials were either ignored or dismissed as containing a strong “populist” bias. Quite understandably, opponents of the commune in the tsarist bureaucracy and the liberal and Marxist intelligentsia remained unconvinced by the statistical data and economic analyses that challenged the very foundations of their political and economic programs. For them, the communal system represented not merely an outmoded and backward economic institution, but a persistent and dangerous phenomenon that plagued Russian peasant culture and prevented peasants from improvement and rational behavior. Traditional defenders of the commune, who agreed with the zemstvo's appreciation of the commune's economic capacity, did so primarily for political reasons as well, readily accepting the supporting evidence for their preconceived ideological constructs. For both the ardent critics and supporters of the commune, it represented an ideological phantom, with either negative or positive connotations but equally distant from the complex realities of the Russian village life.

Kovalevskii studied the village commune with no intention to defend or oppose it. As a historian and sociologist, he sought to understand the real state of affairs in the countryside. Inevitably, his optimistic assessment of the economic potential of the Russian village commune clashed with the prevailing opinions about communal practices among many of his contemporaries. Since the Enlightenment, collective ownership and economy had been traditionally identified as backward and stagnant. Intellectuals both in Europe and Russia commonly condemned peasants as indifferent to agricultural improvement and saw village communes as “medieval” obstacles to progress.

The French Physiocrats set the stage for the negative assumptions about communal practices as inefficient and incompatible with the productive use of land. Quesnay, Roubaud, and Turgot unconditionally admired English-style enclosures and endorsed the replacement of peasant communes by large private farms. Nineteenth-century positivist historians such as Frederic Seebohm and Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges likewise stressed the historical primacy of private property, depicting the medieval commune as a repressive institution imposed by rulers as a “feudal” constraint upon individual freedom of action and economic initiative. According to Seebohm, communal practices disappeared in England because of their incompatibility with the productive economic behavior characteristic of the modern age.⁷⁷

Karl Marx and his followers similarly portrayed peasants as wretched savages with no discernable values or culture who lived in villages that resembled a “sack of potatoes” more than a community. Despite his faith in social justice, Marx found nothing positive

⁷⁷ Frederic Seebohm, *The English Village Community* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1883); Numa D. Fustel de Coulanges, *Recherches sur quelques problèmes d'histoire* (Paris: Hachette et Cie, 1885). For a detailed discussion of the negative attitudes of Western European intellectuals toward the peasantry and their institutions, see Esther Kingston-Mann, *In Search of the True West: Culture, Economics, and the Problems of Russian Development* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

in rural social relations. Having never researched the peasant economy, he categorized village communes as prehistoric and believed that only capitalism could encourage rational economic behavior among peasants.⁷⁸

Russian economists likewise excluded communal peasants from their projects of agricultural improvement. In the eighteenth-century, such diverse thinkers as Ivan T. Pososhkov, Vasilii N. Tatishchev, and Mikhail V. Lomonosov described peasants as idle and apathetic. The agronomist Andrei T. Bolotov considered peasants too stubborn and ignorant to recognize the technological advantages of individual farming.⁷⁹ Some post-Emancipation observers of the commune like Skaldin (F.P. Elenev) and Gleb I. Uspenskii perceived apathy and lack of incentive as defining features of communal village life. Without any systematic evidence, they generalized their observations of some of the most poverty-stricken villages to the entire rural population.⁸⁰

Nineteenth-century Russian Marxists accepted this notion of the peasants' inherent backwardness. Georgii V. Plekhanov, for example, referred to Russian peasants as "barbarian tillers of the soil," incapable of the efficient use of technology and unreceptive to modern production methods. Communal peasants, in his description, failed to grasp the advantages of private land ownership even after explanations had been repeated to them

⁷⁸ Esther Kingston-Mann, "Marxism and Russian Rural Development: Problems of Evidence, Experience, and Culture," *American Historical Review* 86 (October 1981): 731-752; Frank E. Manuel, *A Requiem for Karl Marx* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 122, 125, 175; David Mitran, *Marx Against the Peasant* (New York: Collier, 1961); Teodor Shanin, ed. *Late Marx and the Russian Road: Marx and the Peripheries of Capitalism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983).

⁷⁹ L.R. Lewitter, "Ivan Tikhonovich Pososhkov and the 'Spirit of Capitalism,'" *Slavic and East European Review* 51 (1973): 524-553; I.S. Bak, "Ekonomicheskie vozzreniia V.N. Tatishcheva," *Istoricheskie zapiski* 54 (1955): 362-381; I.S. Bak, "Ekonomicheskie vozzreniia M.V. Lomonosova," *Problemy ekonomiki* 4 (1940): 131-143; Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 42,49.

⁸⁰ Skaldin (F.P. Elenev), *V zakhlost'i i v stolitse* (St. Petersburg, 1870); Gleb I. Uspenskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, vol. 5 (Moscow, 1940): 124-150; Cathy A. Frierson, *Peasant Icons: Representations of Rural People in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 153, 243.

“ten times over in ten different ways.” Their “Asiatic” apathy and ignorance allegedly prevented peasants from becoming individual farmers.⁸¹

Inspired by both the positivist belief in science and a romantic faith in the civilizing mission of capitalism, liberal thinkers blamed communal institutions and practices for retarding Russia’s economic growth and preventing the nation from becoming a modern, prosperous, and stable society. The liberal economists Ivan V. Vernadskii, I.I. Sreznevskii, and D. Strukov blamed the commune for retaining outmoded and unproductive field systems and for discouraging peasants from the use of advanced field systems, improved tools, and fertilizers.⁸² Boris N. Chicherin, the liberal historian, denounced the Russian land commune as a “social monstrosity” that allegedly suppressed all economic incentives for improvement.⁸³ Petr B. Struve, a leading economist, insisted that the “backward” system of communal “natural economy” must give way to private property relations. He ridiculed any attempts to defend “medieval” communal institutions as reactionary, sentimental, and unscientific.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Arthur P. Mendel, *Dilemmas of Progress in Tsarist Russia: Legal Marxism and Legal Populism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961): 108-110; Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 141-142, 144, 156.

⁸² Despite a heavy dose of Soviet-Marxist analysis, the two studies from the Khrushchev “thaw” period still remain informative and contain insightful observations: Nikolai A. Tsagolov, *Ocherki russkoi ekonomicheskoi mysli perioda padeniia krepostnogo prava* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo politicheskoi literatury, 1956), 357-362, and Nikolai K. Karataev, *Russkaia ekonomicheskaiia mysl' v period krizisa feodal'nogo khoziaistva (40-60-e godv XIX veka)* (Moscow: Izd-vo Moskovskogo universiteta, 1957), 81-82. For more recent discussions, see, for example, Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 95-98, and L.A. Zubchenko and L.I. Zaitseva, eds. *Russkie ekonomisty, XIX—nachalo XX veka* (Moscow: Institut ekonomiki RAN, 1998), 52-57.

⁸³ Boris N. Chicherin, *Sobstvennost' i gosudarstvo* (Moscow: Tip. Martynova, 1882), vol. 1, 457; Gary Hamburg, *Boris Chicherin and Early Russian Liberalism, 1828-1866* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 72, 85-88; Andrzej Walicki, *Legal Philosophies of Russian Liberalism* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987): 125-126.

⁸⁴ Petr B. Struve, *Kriticheskie zametki k voprosu ob ekonomicheskome razvitii Rossii*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg, 1894), 124; Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 142-143; Richard Pipes, *Struve: Liberal on the Left* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970), 91-92.

Dmitrii A. Stolypin, an uncle of the future leader of the land reform Petr A. Stolypin and chairman of the Moscow Agricultural Society, published numerous anti-communal books and pamphlets. On the basis of an explicitly positivist (and allegedly “scientific”) analysis of the rural land system in Russia, he concluded that the peasant commune represented a stagnant relic of the medieval past, incompatible with progress and modern economic standards. He insisted that the solution to rural Russia's problems lay in the introduction of English-style private farming.⁸⁵

By the end of the nineteenth century, non-populist Russian intellectuals and government officials had concluded that that the peasant commune had outlived its usefulness and represented the key obstacle to Russia’s agricultural advance and overall economic growth. The paradox was that such exclusively negative—and presumably “scientific”—views of the peasant commune were in fact based predominantly on cultural assumptions about the superiority of private ownership over communal tenure rather than on empirical studies of rural life. Moreover, they deliberately ignored some significant features of the communal economy and avoided the evidence of the commune’s flexibility and capacity to change. Poorly informed about the complex realities of village life, the critics of the commune confidently denied the ability of communal peasants to innovate and improve.⁸⁶

In the 1840s and 1850s, some intellectuals questioned the classical liberal notion of the unconditional superiority of the private land system and stressed the necessity of researching the Russian peasant commune instead of arrogantly dismissing it as

⁸⁵ Dmitrii A. Stolypin, *Uchenie Konta i primeneniie ego k resheniiu voprosa ob organizatsii zemel'noi sobstvennosti* (Moscow, 1891).

⁸⁶ Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 118; Judith Pallot, “Imagining the Rational Landscape in Nineteenth-Century Russia,” *Journal of Historical Geography* 26 (Spring 2000): 274.

backward. From a romantic socialist perspective, Aleksandr I. Herzen strongly criticized both Western European and Russian economists and historians for their cultural arrogance toward allegedly “backward” peasant societies.⁸⁷ Konstantin D. Kavelin, a legal historian and the president of the Free Economic Society after 1861, became the first liberal Westernizer to challenge the conventional liberal contempt for communal practices and to call for a more balanced vision of the Russian village commune. Kavelin strongly disagreed with Chicherin's identification as “irrational” any peasant actions that did not conform to the classical liberal ideal of the “economic man.”⁸⁸

The most enthusiastic revisionist impulse came from the Slavophiles, who protested against the elitist attitudes of Russian Westernizers toward the peasantry and their institutions as based on abstract economic theories rather than on empirical investigations of the realities of peasant culture. As romantic nationalists, the Slavophiles pointed to the urgent need for systematic studies of Russia's rural life and economy.⁸⁹

Ludwig V. Tengoborskii, a Polish economist, published one of the first studies of the Russian commune based on fresh statistical data. In his three-volume work entitled *Commentaries on the Productive Forces in Russia*, Tengoborskii cited evidence that

⁸⁷ Alexander I. Herzen, *My Past and Thoughts: The Memoirs of Alexander Herzen* (New York: Knopf, 1968), vol. 2, 354; vol. 3, 1084; Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 89-92, 105; Martin Malia, *Alexander Herzen and the Birth of Russian Socialism, 1812-1855* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961); Franco Venturi, *Roots of Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1960), 34-35.

⁸⁸ Konstantin D. Kavelin, *Krest'ianskii vopros: issledovanie o znachenii u nas krest'ianskogo dela, prichinakh ego upadka, i merakh k podniatuiu sel'skogo khoziaistva i byta posel'ian* (St. Petersburg: Izd-vo Stasiulevicha, 1882); Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 99, 120, 228; Derek Offord, *Portraits of Early Russian Liberals: A Study of the Thought of T.N. Granovsky, V.P. Botkin, P.V. Annenkov, A.V. Druzhinin, and K.D. Kavelin* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

⁸⁹ See, for example, Aleksandr I. Koshelev, “Obshchinnoe pozemel'noe vladenie,” *Sel'skoe blagoustroistvo* 8 (1858): 107-113. For discussions, see, for example, Abbot Gleason, *European and Muscovite: Ivan Kireevsky and the Origins of Slavophilism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972); Stephen Lukashovich, *Ivan Aksakov, 1823-1886: A Study in Russian Thought and Politics* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1965); Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 99-101, 126-127; and Andrzej Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy: History of a Conservative Utopia in Nineteenth-Century Russian Thought* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

communal agriculture was indeed compatible with economic growth, even under serfdom, as peasants introduced new crops into their field systems and strove to employ the most productive farming techniques available to them. Tengoborskii described the communal peasants' economic behavior as being flexible and occasionally innovative rather than rigid and conservative.⁹⁰

Aleksandr I. Chuprov, one of the leading Russian economists and Kovalevskii's close friend and associate, recognized the scarcity of empirical knowledge about rural life and emphasized the need for systematic empirical studies in order to assess the economic potential of the Russian village commune. A student of Wilhelm Roscher and Ivan K. Babst, who translated into Russian the works of the leaders of the German "historical school," Chuprov became one of the most enthusiastic and widely recognized initiators of the zemstvo statistical investigations of the Russian countryside in the 1870s-1890s. By the turn of the century, zemstvo statisticians had interviewed over 4.5 million peasant households and created the world's largest database on peasants.⁹¹

Today, a century after Kovalevskii and his contemporaries debated the issue of the commune's flexibility and compatibility with agricultural progress, strictly negativistic conceptions of the Russian peasant commune continue to dominate scholarly discourse. Historians continue to argue that village communes in imperial Russia "acted as a powerful brake on the rationalization of agriculture" and that the "institutional structure

⁹⁰ Cited in Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 101.

⁹¹ Aleksandr I. Chuprov, *Rech'i i stat'i* (Moscow: Izdanie M. i S. Sabashnikovykh, 1909), vol. 1, 12-17, 48-50; Kingston-Mann, "Breaking the Silence," In *Peasant Economy, Culture, and Politics of European Russia, 1800-1921*, ed. Esther Kingston-Mann and Timothy Mixter (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991); Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 129.

of the repartitional commune made it impossible to improve the technical level of peasant agriculture.”⁹²

The three-field system represented the most strongly criticized aspect of traditional communal agriculture. Opponents blamed it for multiple drawbacks, but the most common allegation was that it wasted one-third of the arable land by leaving it fallow. Many agricultural specialists also stressed its inefficiency in producing summer and winter fodder resources. The majority of educated Russians regarded the three-field system as a primitive survival of the past incompatible with progress and innovation. In seeking to explain its backwardness, they pointed to the tremendous increases in yields and labor productivity in Northern and Western Europe, where more intensive and industrialized farming regimes had replaced the three-field system by the end of the nineteenth century.

Strip cultivation became commonly associated with excessive fragmentation and scattering of land holdings. Although the situation varied greatly from region to region, zemstvo censuses and government surveys, in fact, revealed disturbing conditions in many parts of European Russia, particularly in the provinces of the mixed forest belt. In Tver province, for example, peasant households in more than half the communes held their lands in forty or more separate strips. In extreme cases, a household might have up to a hundred strips. In Riazan province, one of the most affected by fragmentation, surveyors found communes with 110 strips per household, although in other Riazan communes a typical family held only four or five strips. In the central black-earth region,

⁹² Richard G. Robbins, *Famine in Russia, 1891-1892: The Imperial Government Responds to a Crisis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975), 4; Robert E.F. Smith and David Christian, *Bread and Salt: A Social and Economic History of Food and Drink in Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 345.

fragmentation was not as severe. In Tambov province, the average number of strips varied from twenty-eight in the north, to sixteen in the center, and only fourteen in the south. Three to six strips per household were quite common in Tambov's southern areas.⁹³

Extreme land fragmentation was caused by the practice of not only dividing all the arable land into three fields but further dividing each field into sections, or furlongs (*kony* or *iarusy*) according to soil quality, the lay of the land, and the distance from the village. The more complicated the landscape, the more strips each field could contain. Every household member of the commune received a certain number of long and narrow strips (*polosy*, *nadely*, or *delianki*) scattered throughout various sections in each of the three fields. Not only did multiple strips held by commune members intermix with one another, but communal lands could also intermingle with privately-owned lands within one village or even with the lands belonging to neighboring communes.⁹⁴

One of the most troublesome effects of land fragmentation was the progressive thinning of individual strips. In Voronezh, the average width of strips equaled approximately to five *sazheni*, while the thinnest strips tended to be only one or two *sazheni* wide. In Tambov province, the typical land strip could be as narrow as two or three *arshiny* (approximately two yards) and the strips wider than two *sazheni* were

⁹³ David Kerans, *Mind and Labor on the Farm in Black-Earth Russia, 1861-1914* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2001), 320-321; Judith Pallot, "The Development of Peasant Land Holding from Emancipation to Revolution," In *Studies in Russian Historical Geography*, ed. James H. Bater and R.A. French (New York: Academic Press, 1983), vol. 2, 88; Pavel N. Zyrianov, *Krest'ianskaia obshchina Evropeiskoi Rossii, 1907-1914* (Moscow: Nauka, 1992), 218.

⁹⁴ David Moon, *The Russian Peasantry, 1600-1930: The World Peasants Made* (New York: Longman, 1999), 220; Zyrianov, *Krest'ianskaia obshchina*, 39-40.

considered “thick” (*tolstiachki*). In communes most affected by fragmentation, each land parcel rarely exceeded one-fifth of a *desiatina* (half an acre).⁹⁵

Extreme parcelization was believed to waste substantial amounts of land in boundary furrows, verges, and headlands. Indeed, the thinner the strips, the more land was lost to borders. Zemstvo statisticians calculated that a household with thirty-three strips would lose 2.5 percent of the arable land in boundary furrows. In David Kerans's estimate, a strip 4.6 *sazheni* wide (about ten yards) would forfeit 5.6 percent of the land to the furrows on its borders. According to an official study in the 1920s, borders between multiple strips consumed about 7 percent of the entire arable land in Russia.⁹⁶

Critics also blamed multiple strips for causing significant time losses in transit from strip to strip, which could be a pressing issue during tilling and harvest seasons, when peasants worked with exhaustive intensity under heavy time constraints. Peasants frequently neglected or even abandoned their most distant parcels. The intermingling of strips was believed to provoke disputes between neighbors in cases of compaction by trampling or furrow stealing. Among the most economically deleterious “neighborhood effects” was contamination of contiguous fields with weeds. Untended borders between strips might become breeding grounds for weeds and pests that could infect adjacent areas of the arable land and decrease their productivity.⁹⁷

Most importantly, holding land in strips, critics argued, prevented peasants from innovation and experimentation. Unsuitable for wheeled plows and advanced agricultural machines, excessively narrow strips restricted peasants to the use of the *sokha* and other traditional tools. The intermingling of strips allegedly compelled peasants to synchronize

⁹⁵ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 322; Pallot, “Development,” 88; Zyrianov, *Krest'ianskaia obshchina*, 218.

⁹⁶ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 327-328, Pallot, *Land Reform*, 72.

⁹⁷ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 325-329, Pallot, *Land Reform*, 69-75.

the execution of the major farming operations like the sowing and harvesting of crops and even to sow the same type of crops within each large field. It has been argued, for example, that the communal practice of collective herd grazing required all its members to open their arable land after harvesting to the neighbors' livestock and thus put at risk those families who did not comply with the commune's cultivation schedule. Not only could foraging livestock consume the crops if a family failed to collect them on time, but the same could happen if a strip owner sowed a late-ripening crop like corn among early ripening grains like oats growing on adjacent strips. Another disincentive to diversify crop selections allegedly stemmed from the peasant practice of the broadcast sowing of seeds. Peasants feared the potentially harmful effects of the spraying of unlike crop seeds onto neighboring strips, and so chose to grow a single crop.⁹⁸

The practice of periodic land repartitions was blamed for promoting primitive egalitarianism, which they believed discouraged peasants from improvements. Frequent repartitions, they argued, aggravated the negative effects of strip farming by making land holdings even thinner and more scattered with the following redistribution. They ignored the well-known fact that non-repartitional communes suffered from land fragmentation as much as did those that repartitioned their lands. Moreover, in villages with predominantly hereditary tenure, land fragmentation progressed just as rapidly. Repartitions were also commonly cited as one of the main causes of poor husbandry and soil degradation. Reassigning land to a different household at the next repartition allegedly reduced incentives to improve farming methods and soil quality.

Critics of the commune system overlooked an important fact that the agricultural advancements in Belgium, Denmark, England, Germany, and Holland, had taken place in

⁹⁸ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 253-254; Pallot, "Development", 86.

very different socioeconomic and geographical contexts. The three-field system persisted well into the twentieth century in Russia, as well as in many other parts of the world because it suited countries where land was plentiful. Not only communal peasants, but also many private landowners used it. Throughout centuries, peasants have used extensive tillage regimes in areas with a relative abundance of land. American farmers, for example, employed the system in parts of the Midwest until the early twentieth century. As historians of agriculture have demonstrated, intensive tillage systems without fallow appeared first in the Low Countries and eastern England, where land was in such short supply that it was reclaimed from the sea or the fens.⁹⁹

Generations of experience have proven the system's appropriateness for Russia's climatic and environmental conditions, particularly for the non-black-earth regions. In Russia's northern latitude, late harvests left insufficient time to prepare the soil for sowing winter crops after harvesting. It thus made perfect sense to insert a year between spring and winter crops so that the soil could regain moisture and fertility by absorbing nitrogen from the air and organic matter from the manure spread on the field. Fallowing also allowed peasants to control weeds by plowing and harrowing the field several times.¹⁰⁰

Similarly, European Russia's long winters and short growing season determined the sequential combination of crops in the three-course rotation. Frost-resistant grains like rye represented the most commonly used winter crop to be sown in a previously fallow land, whereas fast-ripening grains—oats, barley, or buckwheat—comprised the typical

⁹⁹ Moon, *Russian Peasantry*, 128; Mark Overton, *Agricultural Revolution in England: The Transformation of the Agrarian Economy, 1500-1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 16-17, 89-90; Werner Rosener, *The Peasantry of Europe* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1994), 127-129, 134-137.

¹⁰⁰ Moon, *Russian Peasantry*, 126-128; Judith Pallot and Dennis J.B. Shaw, *Landscape and Settlement in Romanov Russia, 1613-1917* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 114-116

spring crops. In the southern black-earth provinces, favored by a longer frost-free period and more fertile soil, winter and spring wheat could replace the hardier grains. Various combinations of crops used in the rotation cycle stood in a delicate balance relative to each other.¹⁰¹

Significantly, the three-field system worked well with another important aspect of the peasant economy, animal husbandry. Peasants allowed natural vegetation to grow in the fallow and used it for pasturing their livestock before other sources of fodder, such as hay and crop stubble, were available. Herds, in turn, were believed to improve the fallow soil by eating and trampling down the weeds growing there. More importantly, livestock produced organic fertilizer for the fields and provided draught power for *sokhi*, plows, and other agricultural tools.¹⁰²

The notion that peasants adhered to strip cultivation because of their strong egalitarian sentiments appears erroneous. Communal peasants themselves justified the strip system primarily in economic terms, seeing in the proliferation of strips an effective protection against the risk of the loss of harvest due to damages caused by hailstorm, drought, pests, fire, or livestock trampling. From generations of experience, peasants knew that harvests could vary dramatically from area to area in the open fields. Because of the different quality and fertility of the soil, some parts of the village lands could be more productive than others. Micro-climates and landscapes might also vary to the extent that some sections of the fields were likely to be more exposed than others. Damage caused by birds and insects, or livestock trampling could affect a portion of a field. All these factors made a family with a single plot of land in one area much more vulnerable to weather

¹⁰¹ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 228-233; Moon, *Russian Peasantry*, 121; Pallot and Shaw, *Landscape*, 114-116.

¹⁰² Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 37-41; Pallot and Shaw, *Landscape*, 115.

fluctuations and other risks than a family with many strips scattered around open fields. Strip farming allowed all households in the commune to share potential risks and to ensure their subsistence by collecting at least a minimum harvest.¹⁰³

Zemstvo experts documented the economic rationality of strip cultivation as a risk-aversion mechanism. In the 1890s, Vasilii V. Vorontsov, for example, quoted peasants who explained the use of land scattering as a guarantee of an “even” harvest in the areas where localized hailstorms presented a constant threat to crops. Another leading economist of the time, Boris D. Brutskus, observed that peasants commonly viewed strip scattering as a more reliable insurance strategy against the potential damages of hailstorm than consolidated plots. A survey conducted by the Imperial Free Economic Society a few years after the inception of the Stolypin land reform recorded instances of peasants justifying their unwillingness to consolidate their strips by the fear that they could lose all their crops in a single hailstorm. Numerous cases demonstrated that peasants had all practical reasons to defend the communal practice of land scattering. According to widely publicized reports, consolidated farms did suffer from crop failures as a result of hailstorm damage, and the owners never received compensation from the local land settlement organizations.¹⁰⁴

The continental climate of European Russia, in fact, made crop production extremely vulnerable to the localized effects of storm damage, particularly at the end of the growing season, when the standing crop was brittle. In many areas, the rain tended to fall in bands,

¹⁰³ Moon, *Russian Peasantry*, 132-133; Judith Pallot, *Land Reform in Russia, 1906-1917: Peasant Responses to Stolypin's Project of Rural Transformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 75-76; Zyrianov, *Krest'ianskaia obshchina*, 43.

¹⁰⁴ Pallot, *Land Reform*, 76; Vasilii V. Vorontsov, *Progressivnye techeniia v krest'ianskom khoziaistve* (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia I.N. Skorokhodova, 1892); Boris D. Brutskus, *Zemleustroistvo i rasselenie za granitse i v Rossii* (Moscow, 1908).

which might expose half of a commune's fields to frequent rains while leaving the other half to suffer from drought. Other everyday risks included locust swarms, gopher infestations, trampling by livestock, and fires sweeping through a field. Scattered strips could reduce the potentially devastating consequences of these conditions.¹⁰⁵

Contemporary peasant studies have provided compelling evidence of the economic utility of strip cultivation in different parts of the world. The economic historian David N. McCloskey, for example, argued that the scattering of land in English open fields served as an effective insurance policy against risk “in a milieu in which agricultural yields were low and unpredictable, and in which the costs of a shortfall—at best crushing debt or malnutrition and its associated diseases, at worst starvation—were high.” Strip farming, widespread throughout pre-industrial Europe, persisted well into the twentieth century in many regions of the world. Wherever peasants employed the practice, they justified its economic utility by its risk-spreading benefits. The rationale behind it was essentially similar to that of modern investors, who hold diversified portfolios of shares in different companies and in different markets.¹⁰⁶

Importantly, strip cultivation could also allow peasant households to distribute their labor resources effectively throughout the year. Because growing conditions might vary considerably from spot to spot, land plots would be ready for tillage and harvesting at different times. This made it possible to space out the execution of the major agricultural operations like tilling the land, sowing crops, and collecting the harvest. Strips thus enabled peasants to organize their labor at peak moments with less stress and more

¹⁰⁵ Pallot, *Land Reform*, 76-77.

¹⁰⁶ Donald N. McCloskey, “The Persistence of English Common Fields,” in *European Peasants and Their Markets: Essays in Agrarian History*, ed. William N. Parker and Eric L. Jones (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 114-115; Moon, *Russian Peasantry*, 132-133. See also McCloskey, “The Prudent Peasant: New Findings on Open Fields,” *Journal of Economic History* 51 (June 1991): 343-355.

efficiency than on unified plots.¹⁰⁷ Finally, strip cultivation promoted participation in collective livestock grazing by preventing individual households from withdrawing its land from the common grazing cycle. The economic historian Carl Dahlman used the same argument to explain the persistence of the open-field system in Europe.¹⁰⁸

Communal enforcement of simultaneous and uniform agricultural operations has also been largely exaggerated. To be sure, communes often imposed common work regimes. In regions with extremely severe land fragmentation, communes might forbid its members to till, sow, or reap ahead of schedule. In those areas where strips and pathways leading to them were particularly thin, coordinated execution of agricultural operations helped peasants to prevent neighbors from walking over their land and damaging crops. However, household members never had to collect crops on their strips exactly at the same time. Crops could stand drying in the fields for some time after reaping, and one week's difference in the timing of reaping never caused any problems. Harvesting in the spring field required particularly little coordination because the livestock would already begin grazing on the winter field stubble before the ripening of spring crops. Grazing on the spring field crop stubble would not normally start until September, when all but the last crops—beets, potatoes, and sunflowers—would have been harvested.¹⁰⁹

Significant regional variations in communal practices also proved their economic rationality. Repartitions, for example, varied greatly depending on local contexts and conditions. The most radical type of repartition, a general, or “black,” repartition (*obshchii, korennoi, or chernyi peredel*), involved a complete restructuring of all the

¹⁰⁷ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 335.

¹⁰⁸ Pallot, *Land Reform*, 77-79. Also see Carl J. Dahlman, *The Open Field System and Beyond: A Property Rights Analysis of an Economic Institution* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

¹⁰⁹ Illarion V. Chernyshev, *Krest'iane ob obshchine nakanune 9 noiabria 1906 g.* (St. Petersburg: Severnaia pechatnia, 1912), 5-7; Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 255, 299.

arable land in the village, a removal of all field boundaries, and a full revision of the number, size, and location of land strips. All households returned their strips to the commune, which then redistributed them between its members. Less radical forms of repartition, a repartition “by lot” (*zhreb'evka*) and a “re-ordering” repartition (*pereverstka*), also implied redistribution of strips between all household members, but did not alter the size, number, and location of the existing strips. More frequently, communes conducted various types of partial repartitions (*chastnye peredely, svalkinavalki, skidki-nakidki*), which involved only a few households, whose land holdings were adjusted to changes in the size and structure of a household due to marriages or family divisions. Some communes, in fact, never held general repartitions but maintained a balance between the sizes of the households and their land allotments exclusively by partial repartitions.¹¹⁰

The frequency of repartitions also varied across regions and time periods. Whereas some communes maintained regular intervals between repartitions, others redistributed their lands irregularly, only when needed. Many villages had abandoned repartitioning by the late nineteenth century, others continued the practice with increasing frequency. In the black-earth zone, general repartitions tended to be more frequent than in the non-black-earth provinces and might take place as often as every three years. In most parts of European Russia, communes undertook general repartitions every ten to fifteen years, usually after poll tax censuses, which determined the current number of taxable “souls” in a village. It made perfect sense to reapportion taxes and land allotments at the same time, after a commune's tax liability had been adjusted according to population changes.

¹¹⁰ Vadim A. Aleksandrov, *Sel'skaia obshchina v Rossii (XVII-nachalo XIX v.)* (Moscow: Nauka, 1976), 238; Moon, *Russian Peasantry*, 220-222; Pallot, “Development”, 86.

Communes could also hold general repartitions after large numbers of villagers had died in famines or epidemics, had been conscripted in wartime, or had migrated elsewhere.¹¹¹

The criteria by which communes assigned land to households also varied from locale to locale. Before the abolition of serfdom in 1861, communes typically allocated land to each household according to its labor capacity measured by the number of marital pairs in it (*po tiaglam*). The serf-owning nobility enforced this system of land distribution in order to ensure each family's capacity to fulfill its obligations to the landlord and the state and to have enough resources left to subsist.¹¹² After the emancipation, other methods gradually replaced repartitions *po tiaglam*. By the end of the nineteenth century, many communes were redistributing land according to the number of male souls per household (*po nalichnym dusham muzhskogo pola*). Because males constituted the main and most productive agricultural labor force, assigning more land to families containing more males made perfect economic sense, because all adult male peasants in the village remained employed and each household received an adequate amount of land commensurate with its male labor force. Not surprisingly, many communes chose to reduce their land repartition criteria to the actual number of males of working age in a family (repartition *po nalichnym rabotnikam muzhskogo pola*), thus excluding non-adult males from consideration. This measure did help communes to distribute land in more precise proportions to each household's male labor force, but often led to more frequent repartitions.¹¹³

¹¹¹ Andrei M. Anfimov and Pavel N. Zyrianov, "Elements of the Evolution of the Russian Land Commune in the Post-Reform Period (1861-1914)," *Soviet Studies in History* 21 (Winter 1982-83): 68-96; Moon, *Russian Peasantry*, 221; Pallot, "Development", 85-87; Pallot and Shaw, *Landscape*, 148-149; Zyrianov, *Krest'ianskaia obshchina*, 40-41.

¹¹² Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 330; Zyrianov, *Krest'ianskaia obshchina*, 43.

¹¹³ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 330; Zyrianov, *Krest'ianskaia obshchina*, 43-45.

In the late nineteenth century, the migration of male peasants to the cities in search of an additional income led to an increased involvement of women in agricultural activities. Communes responded to this tendency by practicing repartitions based on the number of all workers, or “producers” in a family, including women. Some communes even assigned land on the basis of the total number of “consumers”, or mouths to feed, in each household (*po edokam*). This repartition method clearly reflected communes’ growing concern for more equal and fair distribution of land in the face of increasing economic differentiation. Larger communes, however, feared that such repartitions might contribute to extreme land fragmentation and preferred to distribute land according to males per household.¹¹⁴

Communes in which peasants engaged in non-agricultural activities as well as farming might use peasants’ earnings from crafts and trade as a criterion for land repartition. In the central non-black-earth zone, land distribution criteria could include the number of draught animals owned by the household. In regions with developed animal husbandry, such as Siberia, communes allotted meadow land according to the number of cattle that each household possessed.¹¹⁵

Various repartition rules and procedures represented different pragmatic responses of communal peasants to specific local environmental, economic, and social conditions. Even within one province, repartitioning practices could vary substantially from village to village. Contrary to the common assertion that repartitions manifested above all the pervasiveness of primitive egalitarianism in peasant culture, peasants themselves used the repartition system to manage land and human resources. To be sure, repartitions played

¹¹⁴ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 330-331; Moon, *Russian Peasantry*, 220-222; Zyrianov, *Krest'ianskaia obshchina*, 44-46.

¹¹⁵ Moon, *Russian Peasantry*, 220-221.

an important welfare function by providing them with the minimum amount of land they needed to meet their tax obligations and to satisfy their subsistence needs.¹¹⁶

Undoubtedly, repartitions did reflect a certain degree of egalitarianism in communal practices. Land redistributions ensured the right of each household to use at least some of the commune's best and most accessible land. Peasant egalitarianism should not be exaggerated, however. Even repartitions that took into account women workers, in fact, treated them unequally. Male peasants were typically entitled to receive three times as much land as females. Not uncommonly, communes declined apportioning land to widows. Again, as many recent studies have stressed, repartitions served a far broader range of economic and social objectives than just an egalitarian distribution of land. They allowed communes to respond to changes brought about by out-migrations, family divisions, or epidemics, to adjust the shape of the open fields to changes in crop rotations, and to bring order into strip fields by reducing their number.¹¹⁷

Many of Kovalevskii's contemporaries, including both the critics of the commune and its Slavophile and populist defenders, regarded repartitioning as a uniquely Russian phenomenon. Modern scholars, however, found examples of distributional land communes throughout Europe, although most communes outside Eastern Europe repartitioned only meadows, pastures, and waste lands. Customs similar to Russian repartitions also existed in some non-European societies—for example, in pre-colonial India and among Mongol nomads, who reassigned grazing rights in particular pastures in accordance with changes in household size.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁶ Moon, *Russian Peasantry*, 217; Pallot, *Land Reform*, 81; Zyrianov, *Krest'ianskaia obshchina*, 42-48.

¹¹⁷ Pallot, *Land Reform*, 85-90.

¹¹⁸ Jerome Blum, "The European Village as Community: Origins and Functions," *Agricultural History* 45 (1971): 171-174; Stella Hryniuk, *Peasants with Promise: Ukrainians in Southeastern Galicia, 1880-1900*

As paradoxical as it may seem, innovation has always formed an integral part of the communal tradition. In fact, the economic strategies and farming techniques of communal peasants never remained static. As we have seen, however, most of Kovalevskii's contemporaries never recognized the dynamic nature of communal practices. Nineteenth-century scholars focused predominantly on the advantages brought about by the large-scale transformation of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century European agriculture—the Agricultural Revolution—and associated it with land enclosures and privatization. Most of them ignored an earlier agricultural revolution that occurred in Western and Northern Europe between the sixth and the ninth centuries, the period long known as the “Dark Ages,” characterized by alleged economic and political stagnation. August Meitzen and a few other nineteenth-century historians pioneered the study of early medieval technological progress, particularly the introduction of the heavy wheeled plow, as fostering the spread of open-field arrangements and other communal practices in medieval German villages.¹¹⁹ Even the prominent twentieth-century historian Henri Pirenne, who so brilliantly overturned the stereotypical portrayal of the early medieval period as the “Dark Ages,” did not mention the significant innovations that occurred in the rural economy during that time. It took an effort of the two other prominent historians, Marc Bloch and Lynn White, to draw scholarly attention to technological improvements in the predominantly communal medieval agriculture.¹²⁰

(Edmonton: Canadian Institute of Ukrainian Studies, 1991), 117-118; Moon, *Russian Peasantry*, 217; Eric R. Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 47.

¹¹⁹ August Meitzen, *Siedlung und Agrarwesen der Westgermanen und Ostgermanen, der Kelten, Römer, Finnen und Slaven* (Berlin: W. Hertz, 1895).

¹²⁰ See Marc Bloch, *Les caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française* (Oslo, 1931), English translation: *French Rural History: An Essay on Its Basic Characteristics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Lynn White, *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966).

Today it has become common knowledge that the introduction of the heavy wheeled plow during the period from the sixth to the ninth century represented a tremendous landmark in the evolution of communal farming technology.¹²¹ One of the most important implications for communal agriculture was that the use of the heavy-wheeled plow required a cooperative effort. The deep plowing of heavy soils made it necessary to team up a greater number of draught animals, up to eight oxen or four horses. This significantly reinforced the economic value of communal farming practices for many centuries to come, since only village communes could afford owning and using expensive tools and feeding draught animals they required.¹²²

The adoption of the three-field system represented another example of the communal effort to improve farming methods. In comparison with the previously dominant two-field system, it increased the amount of land under cultivation from one-half to two-thirds. The agricultural cycle also changed. In the two-field system, one field was planted in the fall and the other left fallow, the process being reversed every year. In the three-field system, one field was planted in the fall with grain, another one was planted in the spring with spring grain and peas, beans, and vetches, and the third lay fallow. In the summer, when both winter and spring plantings were harvested, the cycle altered: the fallow field became the winter field, the winter field became the spring field, and the spring field turned to fallow. As a result, the varieties of vegetable protein from the spring planting improved and varied the diet. Even more importantly, the three-field

¹²¹ For recent discussions of technological innovations in medieval agriculture see: Grenville Astill and John Langdon, eds. *Medieval Farming and Technology: The Impact of Agricultural Change in Northern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 1997); Peter Fowler, *Farming in the First Millennium AD: British Agriculture Between Julius Caesar and William the Conqueror* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); and Del Sweeney, ed. *Agriculture in the Middle Ages: Technology, Practice, and Representation* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995).

¹²² Jean Gimpel, *The Medieval Machine: The Industrial Revolution of the Middle Ages* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1976), 41.

system retarded soil exhaustion and thus increased productivity. The beans yielded by the same spring planting returned valuable nitrogen to the soil and the rotation of crops made the exhaustion of the soil by exclusive grain growing less likely.¹²³

Historians of English agriculture have stressed that innovation and risk-taking have always been part of communal peasant practices. According to George E. Mingay, “the old picture of an extremely conservative, rigid, and inefficient system which persisted unchanged over the centuries has had to be considerably modified.”¹²⁴ Despite limited resources and insufficient agronomic knowledge, English communal peasants who survived enclosure introduced many innovations. “Fields were divided so as to allow more complex rotations and to reduce fallowing, and holdings were consolidated by exchanges among the owners. New crops were brought in and grass leys appeared within the common fields.”¹²⁵ Even Arthur Young, a convinced eighteenth-century advocate of enclosures, admitted that some areas under communal cultivation flourished and that some open-field farmers were “sensible, intelligent men, for they agreed among themselves to sow turnips instead of fallowing on many of their lands.”¹²⁶ Historians increasingly recognize that “the assumption that open fields were old-fashioned and enclosed ones new and improved is unhistorical [and] has little bearing on the agricultural revolution.”¹²⁷

Along similar lines, historians of Russia have documented the peasant commune’s capacity to promote and incorporate innovations. Far from being inflexible, the three-field system allowed for significant adaptations and modifications. The fallow field could

¹²³ Edward Peters, *Europe and the Middle Ages*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Pearson, 2004), 204-205.

¹²⁴ George E. Mingay, ed. *Arthur Young and His Times* (London: Macmillan, 1975), 98-99.

¹²⁵ George E. Mingay, *A Social History of the English Countryside* (London: Routledge, 1990), 50.

¹²⁶ Mingay, *Arthur Young*, 99-111.

¹²⁷ Eric Kerridge, *Agricultural Revolution* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1967), 16.

be used for the cultivation of forage crops or could even be cut back to less than one-third of the arable area. Peasants employed various strategies to modify the three-field practices to include grass cultivation. For example, on the so-called employed fallow (*zaniatyi par*) peasants sowed fast-maturing grasses like vetch as early as possible in the spring and harvested it for hay in June. This technique made it possible for peasants to accumulate at least four times more fodder than if the land had remained green fallow and still left enough time for planting and sowing grains like rye for the next year.¹²⁸

Tillage regimes could also be intensified within the three-field system. The second tillage (*dvoenie*) of the fallow field represented one of the most widespread examples of such improvement. Usually performed about a month after the raising of fallow, second tilling improved the structure and moisture of the soil and suppressed the growth of weeds, thus creating better conditions for subsequently sown crops. In Voronezh district, for example, this practice allowed to raise rye yields from 78 to 82.1 *puds* (from 1.4 to 1.5 tons) of grain per *desiatina* and to collect nine extra *puds* of straw in one year. In drier years, increases in grain yields due to this technique could be even larger. The rapid spread of second tilling demonstrated communal peasants' willingness to adopt improved farming techniques even at the cost of increased labor intensity. Despite the fact that the second tillage often overlapped with the reaping of rye, thus demanding an additional labor investment during one of the busiest periods in the agricultural calendar, many communes readily included it into their tillage regimes. Communal peasants were agreeing to work harder in order to produce more, even though *dvoenie* could provide only a relatively modest return in the form of crop yields.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 277-281.

¹²⁹ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 47-49.

Another improved tilling technique—the plowing of the spring field during the preceding fall (*ziablevaia vspashka*, or simply *ziab*)--began spreading rapidly among communal peasants in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Aware of the harmful effects of premature spring tillage on soil quality, peasants often chose not to till the spring field at all, especially because grains like oat could be sown directly onto the remnants of the rye stubble and then immediately tilled in and harrowed. The introduction of *ziab* reduced the potential dangers of early spring tillage and at the same time provided all the benefits of pre-sowing tillage. In various regions, the execution of the *ziab* system increased average grain yields by 7 to 20 per cent. In addition to productivity increase, *ziab* allowed to improve the peasants' overall labor regime and resource allocation. Instead of working horses in the early spring, when they were more likely to be weakened by malnutrition or illnesses over the long winter, peasants could complete plowing in September or October without overstressing themselves and their horses. Consequently, this permitted peasants to begin sowing earlier in the spring, which significantly relieved the spring labor crisis.¹³⁰

In addition to improving the traditional farming techniques, peasants experimented with new multi-field systems that included grass cultivation. They quickly recognized that grasses like clover not only provided large yields of excellent fodder for livestock but also acted as fertilizers for subsequent crops. In many cases, zemstvo agronomists encouraged and assisted peasants in these experiments by helping them to set up demonstration plots and explaining the benefits of crops like clover. Grasses regenerated the soil by accumulating reserves of nitrogen from the air and storing them in their roots. The northern and central non-black-earth regions of Russia, where nitrogen-deficient

¹³⁰ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 49-51.

arable lands predominated, particularly needed such improvements. In the black-earth provinces, where lands generally did not suffer from nitrogen shortage, grasses could still enrich the quality of frequently over-tilled land by choking out weeds and pulling up phosphate and potassium from deeper layers of the soil, which grain roots could not normally reach.¹³¹

As a rule, a village-wide introduction of grass cultivation occurred after several years of trial on the garden plots of individual members, on rented or purchased land, or on specially allotted “experimental” lands (*vygorodki*) separated from the regular three-field system. Once a village majority recognized the advantages of grass cultivation, a communal assembly passed a resolution to incorporate the new technique into the regular crop rotation cycle.¹³² Such gradualism, however, did not necessarily reflect the peasants' conservatism or apathy, as it has been commonly argued. As we have seen, practical considerations most often determined the pace of change. Because grass cultivation required significant adjustments and modifications in the traditional three-field system, a commune could adopt it only after trying it on lands outside the regular rotation, thus ensuring that its introduction would not threaten the peasants' subsistence.

With the aid of zemstvo agronomists, peasants in various regions came up with different alternatives to the existing three-field arrangements: four-, or six-, or even eight-field rotation systems. Four-field farming spread particularly rapidly in non-black-earth provinces. In the Iamburg district of Petersburg province, for example, 14 per cent of

¹³¹ Kerans, *Land and Labor*, 228-229, 284, 400-402.

¹³² Kingston-Mann, “Peasant Communes and Economic Innovation: A Preliminary Inquiry,” In *Peasant Economy*, 36-40.

communes had introduced four-field cultivation by the late 1890s.¹³³ In the Volokolamsk district of Moscow province, where only two villages were sowing forage crops and employing a four-field rotation in 1892, 127 villages were using the system by 1900, and two years later, 245 out of 368 villages in the district practiced it.¹³⁴ Not surprisingly, zemstvo agronomists enthusiastically praised the role of Russian communes as “pioneers” in the progressive transition to grass cultivation.¹³⁵

Communal peasants devised simple but effective strategies to reduce or eliminate the negative effects of strip farming. Boundary furrows, verges, and headlands, commonly believed to reduce the amount of arable land, could be utilized for multiple purposes. Furrows and ditches marking strip borders could serve as drainage channels. In extremely dry years, peasants could collect at least some crop from the furrows, and in wet years crops could be yielded on the well-drained ridges. Verges and headlands provided space for depositing stones cleared from the land. Occasionally, peasants used these areas for mowing or grazing of tethered livestock. Distant strips could be converted to pasture or hay for collective use by the entire village or rented out to neighboring villages. In Moscow province, peasants assigned abandoned distant parcels, called *pustyri*, to households that had managed the land badly in the past or were in the process of giving up farming. In the context of the commune's joint obligation to meet the annual tax levy, this measure represented a rational means of conserving the collective land resource and ensuring its most effective use for the benefit of the community.¹³⁶

¹³³ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 223-303; Zyrianov, *Krest'ianskaia obshchina*, 60-61, 220-222; Vorontsov, *Progressivnye techeniia*, 156.

¹³⁴ B.G. Bazhaev, *Travopol'noe khoziaistvo v nechernozemnoi polose Evropeiskoi Rossii* (St. Petersburg, 1903), 260, 331, quoted in Kingston-Mann, “Peasant Communes”, 38.

¹³⁵ S.V. Kuznetsov, *Traditsii russkogo zemledel'ia: praktika i religiozno-nravstvennye vozzreniia* (Moscow: In-t etnologii i antropologii RAN, 1995), 47-48; Kingston-Mann, “Peasant Commune,” 38.

¹³⁶ Pallot, “Development”, 91; *Land Reform*, 77-81.

As recent peasant studies have demonstrated, critics of the commune tended to overstate the time wasted by peasants in journeys from strip to strip. Even when an individual household held its land in multiple strips, it rarely needed to work more than a few strips in a single day. Moreover, separate strips could be adjusted to the size of a single day's plowing. In England and right-bank Ukraine, strips traditionally held the amount of land that could be tilled in one day: a "day of land" (*den' zemli*). Russian peasants practiced similar adjustments of the size of strips to the performance of agricultural tasks. In Iaroslavl province, peasants arranged the width of strips to allow "four revolutions of the scythe," and in Kaluga province they measured strips in units of three paces, which matched the distance that seeds could be broadcast.¹³⁷

Peasants tried various strategies to combat excessive thinning of strips. Households with narrow strips practiced exchanging strips with the neighbors to make their holdings wider. Small families could merge and reapportion strips among themselves. Some communes preferred to rent a part of their land to neighboring villages instead of dividing it into very thin strips. Larger communes could fight the negative effects of land scattering by forming new, smaller villages, or sub-communes affiliated with a parent commune.¹³⁸

In fact, peasants tried to avoid throwing seeds onto neighbors' strips. Appreciating the value of grains, they sowed carefully enough to keep all the seeds on their own land. Concerns about unlike sowings on adjacent fields did not deter peasants from experimenting with new crops. For instance, the survey of communal peasants and individual farmers in the six provinces of the central agricultural region in 1910-1911

¹³⁷ Pallot, *Land Reform*, 80-81. On England, see McCloskey, "Persistence," 78.

¹³⁸ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 325, 340; Pallot, *Land Reform*, 87; Zyrianov, *Krest'ianskaia obshchina*, 40.

revealed approximately the same percentage of respondents from the both groups who had adopted improved seeds. Communes rarely imposed any restrictions on crops choices beyond the general division into winter and spring crops, and even these limitations could be modified. With the exception of the fallow field, peasants could select their sowings as they saw fit. The quality of each unit of soil determined crop choices in most cases. Crops that tended to grow poorly on a particular field would not be sown there. In some instances, peasants even managed to overcome the commune's prohibition to sow on the fallow field.¹³⁹

Land redistributions, commonly blamed for intensifying land fragmentation, could in fact be used to reduce it. In Vladimir and Tver provinces, for example, peasants undertook general repartitions to eliminate the excessive multiplication of strips that resulted from frequent partial redistributions. Instead of multiple strips in the fields, each household received one parcel per field. Communes modified their repartitioning techniques in order to redistribute land in wider strips. For example, they could reduce the precision of their qualitative evaluation of land and thus decrease the number of furlongs subject to repartitioning. This measure alone was reported to reduce fragmentation by four to six times. Some communes enforced regulations regarding the width of strips, not allowing its members to subdivide their holdings below a certain size. In Smolensk province, for example, each parcel had to contain at least a quarter of a *desiatina*. In Iaroslavl, Moscow, Orenburg, and Tver provinces, peasants adopted a new system of allocating land to households in standard units called hundreds (*sotni*). In Moscow province, communes practiced a variety of other techniques, including

¹³⁹ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 254-257; Pallot, *Land Reform*, 84-85. For a detailed discussion of the commune's flexibility in crop selection and the timing of farming operations, see Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 253-257.

apportioning land to small households collectively and allowing them to decide among themselves how to divide it, or allotting double-sized strips to small households in alternate fields.¹⁴⁰

Families that received lower-grade or distant parcels as a result of the new methods of strip widening could be compensated in money or with supplementary land. In Moscow province, for example, households whose strips were vulnerable to trespass and compaction due to their proximity to roadways and meadows received additional strips. The Kekhotskaia commune in Archangel province divided all arable land into three categories according to its distance from the village. Households which did not have land in the first category were entitled to receive twice as much land in the second category and three times as much in the third.¹⁴¹

The massive evidence gathered by zemstvo surveys indicates that communes could utilize the repartition mechanism to sustain high farming standards and even to foster agricultural advancements. Communes could manipulate their repartition techniques to reward their member households for manuring and other land improving measures. Again, the motive underlying these practices was predominantly economic, not egalitarian, in nature. Repartitioning land in order to ensure the effective use and improvement of communal land facilitated the reproduction of the village land resource base and the payment of taxes.¹⁴²

In the non-black-earth provinces, communes often practiced the so-called “shuffling repartition” (*peredel v peredvizhku*), which involved the widening or narrowing of strips

¹⁴⁰ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 324; Pallot, *Land Reform*, 86-87, 96; Zyrianov, *Krest'ianskaia obshchina*, 57, 218.

¹⁴¹ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 334; Pallot, *Land Reform*, 87-88.

¹⁴² Pallot, *Land Reform*, 81-85; Vorontsov, *Progressivnye techeniia*, 113-133.

in accordance with changes in household structure. The majority of strips typically retained their central core, migrating slightly backwards and forwards across a field. Shuffling repartitions thus allowed households to extend their use of the same strips for up to thirty years. The shuffling repartitions represented another example of communal peasants' attempts to maximize the effective use of land by retaining existing strips in the hands of their current users and simply adjusting the size of holdings to changes in households without relocating them. This technique allowed communal peasants not only to extend their use of the same strips, but also to widen strips when needed.¹⁴³

Agricultural innovation and productivity growth depended on consistent efforts to improve soil quality by the use of fertilizers. By the turn of the twentieth century, fertilizer use became widespread in communes all over Russia, except the southern black-earth provinces, where manuring did little to improve the already fertile soil. Zemstvo statistics indicated that communes in the central non-black-earth region used organic fertilizers even more intensively than private land owners.¹⁴⁴

Communes devised various reward mechanisms to stimulate peasants to manure their land. Peasants who fertilized their allotments received either special monetary payments at the time of repartition, or similarly well-fertilized plots, or the right to retain their original allotments. Manured strips (*navozniki*) could be excluded from repartitions and kept in the permanent possession of their current users. Once peasants stopped using manure, however, these strips again became subject to general repartition rules, to be redistributed to other owners. If a household consistently failed to maintain or improve soil quality on its lands, a village assembly could penalize it by assigning it the same or

¹⁴³ Pallot, *Land Reform*, 83, 85-90; Vorontsov, *Progressivnye techeniia*, 145-150.

¹⁴⁴ Kingston-Mann, "Peasant Communes", 40-41; Zyrianov, *Kresti'ianskaia obshchina*, 58-59.

even more degraded strips at the next repartition. Thus, contrary to the conventional belief that repartitions discouraged peasants from innovations and fertilizer use because peasants were likely to lose their allotments in the next repartition, communes in fact used the repartition mechanism to stimulate soil quality improvement.¹⁴⁵

Some communes went even further by making manuring mandatory for all member households. In Moscow province, for example, village assemblies passed resolutions specifying how much manure each household was required to place on its allotment each year. In some cases, communes prohibited the sale of manure to neighboring villages as well as its use on non-commune lands until the commune's requirements had been met.¹⁴⁶ Such uniform measures, however, were possible only in the regions with more or less equal quality of land. Often, great variations in soil quality within a single commune required more flexible approaches. In such cases, peasants adjusted the use of manure according to a variety of factors, including the type of soil, the location of the land allotment, the amount of livestock, and the specific needs of the household and the community. Fertilizer use might also vary according to cultivation regimes necessary for different crops. In the black-earth provinces, for example, manure was rarely used in cereal cultivation, but frequently applied to strips reserved for crops like tobacco, vegetables, and hemp, which required intensive cultivation.¹⁴⁷ The communal practice of mutual aid (*pomochi*) also promoted the village-wide use of fertilizers. Long before the Emancipation, communal peasants assisted each other in delivering manure to the fields.

¹⁴⁵ Pallot, *Land Reform*, 82-84; Zyrianov, *Krest'ianskaia obshchina*, 58-59.

¹⁴⁶ Pallot, *Land Reform in Russia*, 82; Kingston-Mann, "Peasant Communes", 41.

¹⁴⁷ Kuznetsov, *Traditsii*, 67-78. See also Pallot, *Land Reform*, 84.

Joint effort in this case helped to complete manuring in a more effective and timely manner.¹⁴⁸

Zemstvo statistics provided similarly impressive record of communes' other land improvement activities, such as swamp drainage, irrigation, and land clearing. Again, because such projects usually required large labor input, communes often possessed better resources than individual farmers to implement them fast and effectively. V.I. Orlov documented numerous examples in Moscow province of communal peasants acting in common in swamp-drainage projects and transforming massive amounts of infertile soil into productive land. In addition to collective digging of drainage ditches, communes used special machinery, with rental payments raised by means of levies that the communes imposed on their members. Although typically zemstvo experts assisted peasants in these projects, peasants often acted independently, devising and implementing improvement plans without any outside guidance.¹⁴⁹

In Tambov and Saratov provinces, communes organized irrigation projects including the digging of ditches, wells, and ponds and the use of primitive but effective peasant-designed and built water-raising machines. In Ekaterinoslav province, communes in one district built a water-supply system which extended over a distance of three versts. In the thickly forested Vologda province, collective land clearing projects included tree cutting, digging up of roots, and the burning of stubble. Although zemstvo statisticians never claimed that all communes engaged in such activities, they used land improvement measures as evidence of the commune's capacity to act as an agent of economic progress.

¹⁴⁸ Marina M. Gromyko, *Traditsionnye normy povedeniia i formy obshcheniia russkikh krest'ian XIX v.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1986), 39-47; Kuznetsov, *Traditsii*, 74-75.

¹⁴⁹ Kingston-Mann, "Peasant Communes," 43.

Zemstvo statistics also reported the peasants' growing interest in technological change. Although the wooden plow (*sokha*), the wooden-framed harrow, the scythe, and the flail still predominated the late nineteenth-century Russian countryside, the use of plows, seed drills, and reaping machines was becoming standard practice. Characteristically, the equipment-lending stations established by local zemstvos during the Stolypin reform were often unable to meet increasing peasant demand for improved tools and machinery.¹⁵⁰

Despite the challenges that the introduction of new tools presented, communal peasants quickly recognized their advantages. The plow, for example, improved soil fertility by tilling the soil deeper and eliminating weeds more effectively than the *sokha*. Unlike the *sokha*, which could easily skid off the tillage line in stubble and tough soils, the plow went straight along the tillage line and maintained an even depth of plowing. This constituted a significant advantage because keeping tillage lines straight helped to maintain a proper distance between furrows. Straight tillage also eliminated the probability of leaving the significant portion of unutilized land in between the furrows, which would be the case if the gaps were too wide. The plow offered a significantly wider range of adjustment than the *sokha* in both the depth and width of plowing. Its stability enabled it to perform operations like cross-tillage (perpendicular to previous furrows), which was important for leveling off the surface. The plow's land-improving effects allowed peasants to sow less seeds per unit of land and thus to economize on seed grains. Finally, whereas the *sokha* could easily swell up in wet weather and become brittle in dry weather, the plow was much more resistant to weather conditions and less

¹⁵⁰ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 400-402.

likely to break. The iron parts of the sokha tended to dull faster than the steel share of good plows.¹⁵¹

The next stage of the farming process, sowing, was improved by the increasing use of the seed drill instead of hand-sowing. This tool maximized the seeds' growth potential by sowing them at a predetermined depth and at an appropriate distance from each other, which allowed crops to grow faster and more uniformly, so all of them would ripe by the time of reaping. The seed drill also made it possible to employ the so-called “ribbon sowing” (*lentochnyi posev*), an advanced technique that permitted peasants to arrange the sprouts in even rows set widely apart, after which they could perform additional tillage between the rows in order to kill weeds and retain soil moisture.¹⁵²

Mechanized threshing increasingly replaced traditional technologies like flail threshing, rail beating, and animal trampling. Threshing machines powered by hand, horse, and engines increased productivity at a dramatic rate. Despite the fact that they could smash from a minimum of two to four per cent of the grains to a maximum of twenty to twenty-six percent when improperly adjusted or operated, they could thresh up to twenty or even twenty-five haystacks (*kopen*) of grain per day, which equaled to around half of the quantity of an average family's annual harvest. The major problem with threshing machines was that even its simplest hand-powered versions were expensive, while horse-driven models might require from four to six horses to operate. Wealthier peasants, who were most likely to acquire these machines, usually hired them out, together with a couple of horses, to other families for an affordable fee. According to

¹⁵¹ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 18-21, 54-66.

¹⁵² Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 77-81.

zemstvo data, more than half of the peasants were using machine threshers by the early 1900s.¹⁵³

About the same time, peasants started utilizing winnowing and sorting machines instead of the traditional spades, sieves, and shovels. The most advanced models of the winnowing machine could winnow as much as 100-150 *puds* from the threshing floor in just one hour. Since most peasants rarely or never needed such a work rate, they commonly preferred slower, cheaper, and less advanced versions. Very popular among European Russian peasants were hand-powered models manufactured in Riazan and Smolensk provinces.¹⁵⁴

The sorting machine, due to its ability to combine winnowing, cleaning, and sorting operations, represented an even more efficient tool. Its high speed, low labor input requirement, and the capacity to separate chaff, weed seeds, and different-size grains made it one of the most advanced technological innovations available at the time. Again, due to its extremely high cost, only communes and agricultural cooperatives could afford it. Local agronomists enthusiastically propagandized the benefits of the various models of sorters and strongly encouraged peasants to purchase them for collective use.¹⁵⁵

In general, peasants selected new agricultural implements very carefully. Local geographical and economic conditions, soil quality, and other specific circumstances of a given area determined peasants' decisions to adopt or reject the use of improved tools and machines. Often, peasants combined new tools with traditional ones. The fact that communal peasants could be reluctant to adopt a particular tool did not necessarily reflect their indifference or hostility to innovation. As a rule, they were unwilling to use

¹⁵³ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 92-94.

¹⁵⁴ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 95.

¹⁵⁵ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 95-96.

advanced tools when they were convinced of their counter-productivity. The plow, for example, presented significant disadvantages for owners of multiple thin strips. First, being heavier than the *sokha*, the plow was more difficult to maneuver around obstacles and to carry from strip to strip. Second, the wheeled plow might need up to five yards to make a comfortable turn at the end of a furrow, whereas the ability of the *sokha* to turn tightly was important when tilling very thin strips. Third, the *sokha's* adjustable *politsa* enabled the tiller to direct all lifted soil toward one side of the strip. Because the plow did not allow this, it required double the number of dead furrows per strip. A plowman had to walk all the way to the other side of the strip each time he completed a furrow.¹⁵⁶

Poorer peasants also had many reasons to prefer the *sokha* over the plow. The low price of the *sokha* made it affordable. It could operate with a single horse, whereas the use of the plow often required two horses. In addition, the *sokha* could perform a variety of additional functions such as covering seeds, planting potatoes, or tilling in between ribbon-sown crops. Finally, because of its simpler construction, local blacksmiths could always repair a *sokha* and village experts could help peasants to assemble it, which was not always the case with plows. Only the establishment of agronomic networks throughout European Russia in 1910 eased the problems associated with the acquisition and maintenance of plows and other new tools.¹⁵⁷

Most importantly, the plow performed poorly on certain types of soils or in certain weather conditions. In Vladimir province, for example, peasants preferred to use the *sokha* on sandy soils because the plow tended to till the land too deeply and bring up a layer of unfertile sand, which significantly decreased productivity. For similar reasons,

¹⁵⁶ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 18-23, 54-58.

¹⁵⁷ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 54-58; Kuznetsov, *Traditsii*, 62-63.

agronomists recommended the use of the *sokha* instead of the plow for the second tillage in the black-earth region. Plowing during dry summer months could result in raising large brick-like clods that no harrow could reduce.¹⁵⁸

In some cases, deeper tillage provided by the plow could actually damage soil quality. Plowing more than one and a half *vershki* (2.5 inches) deeper than the soil had previously been tilled might lift hard and unfertile soil that had not been in contact with air for a long time. Even harrows with metal teeth often could not handle thick layers of such soil. Generally, tilling deeper than about thirteen centimeters was rarely needed. Rye, oats, and potatoes did in fact require slightly deeper tillage than other crops. For the most part, however, as experimental stations in Samara and Simbirsk demonstrated, deeper tillage increased crop yields by only a few percent. Contrary to the widespread belief that deeper tillage increased productivity by facilitating the penetration of roots into the soil, Russian agronomic knowledge determined that crop roots would seek nourishment and grow below the tilled layer of land anyway, regardless of tillage depth. As a matter of fact, the timing of tillage represented a much more important factor than the depth, especially in drier climates.¹⁵⁹

On lands infected with couch grass, the plow could even worsen the situation. The plow's shares cut under the entire surface of the soil and turned it over, leaving most of the root fragments intact. As a result, the grass would resprout from the undamaged root fragments and spread to an even larger territory than before plowing. The *sokha*'s blades, by contrast, undercut at least two-thirds of the surface and brought most of the root fragments up to the surface, where they could dry out. It would not then come as a

¹⁵⁸ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 62; Kuznetsov, *Traditsii*, 62-64.

¹⁵⁹ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 25-27, 57-58.

surprise that even in regions where peasants widely used the plow, they still continued to combine it with the *sokha*. In Moscow province in the 1880s, for example, peasants tilled the land with a plow and after harrowing tilled it again with a *sokha*.¹⁶⁰

Land cultivation was not the only area of economic improvement. Communal peasants actively responded to the expanding market opportunities opened up by Russia's intensive industrialization and urbanization in the second half of the nineteenth century. Growing urban demand for agricultural products provided the rural population with regional markets and incentives to engage in commercial farming and gardening, or the production of meat and dairy. Villagers delivered milk, butter, eggs, poultry, and vegetables to neighboring cities and towns or sold their products to buyers traveling around the countryside. Families used their private garden plots (*usad'ba*) or part of their arable land holdings for cultivating onions, potatoes, cabbages, raspberries, sunflowers, tobacco, flax, hemp, and other cash crops that might yield a profitable price at the markets. Some communities or entire rural regions specialized in particular cash crops and practiced inter-village trade. Many realized the commercial advantages of fishing, horse-breeding, raising geese and chicken, and rearing cattle and sheep. During the non-agricultural season or when local conditions did not allow for enough income from farming operations, peasants focused on non-agrarian activities. Local industries and trades (*promysly*) have always played a significant role in augmenting rural household incomes. Growing markets prompted individual peasants and families to expand their pursuits in handicrafts and small-scale manufacturing. They realized that spinning, weaving, hand-knitting, and cloth-making could serve much more than merely domestic

¹⁶⁰ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 58, 61.

needs. By the turn of the twentieth century, a growing number of villages had been turning into semi-farming, semi-industrial communities.¹⁶¹

In addition to diversifying economic activities within the commune, peasants increasingly sought supplementary income outside the village. Critics commonly blamed the commune for placing severe restrictions on peasant mobility, which allegedly impeded rural development by causing over-population and aggravating the land hunger problem. The village assembly might in fact take some of the household's land at the next repartition if an adult family member had been absent from the village for an extended period of time. Evidence suggests, however, that peasants were able to leave the village in search of alternate employment when they were willing to do so. Because the time between redistributions tended to be relatively long and, most importantly, because outside earnings could add substantially to the family's income, peasants actively engaged in seasonal or long-term migrant labor (*otkhodnichestvo*). They might find a job in a factory or a small business in a nearby city or work as hired laborers in bigger farms. Frequently, migrant peasants formed cooperatives (*arteli*) specializing in a certain area of production. The data on internal passports issued during the post-Emancipation period demonstrate the dramatic increase in peasant mobility. The notions of the commune's restrictive nature and of peasants' isolationism and attachment to the commune appear to be largely overstated. As a matter of fact, it was not the commune but the pace of urbanization and industrialization that limited peasant mobility. Despite their intensive

¹⁶¹ For examples of peasants' commercial farming and non-farming activities within the village, see Marina M. Gromyko, *Mir russkoi derevni* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1991), 57-63, and Leonid V. Milov, *Velikorusskii pakhar' i osobennosti rossiiskogo istoricheskogo protsesssa* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2001), 214-299, 483-553.

growth, Russian industries could not absorb migrant labor in greater numbers than they did.¹⁶²

In light of the above discussed evidence of the commune's capacity to innovate and to respond to market opportunities, what conclusions can we make about its economic performance? There is no doubt, of course, that communal farming at the turn of the twentieth century continued to rely predominantly on the traditional practice of extensive rather than intensive production. In most cases, the need for subsistence rather than a desire to maximize productivity determined the peasants' economic decisions. Peasants preferred to use crops and farming techniques that had been tried and trusted by generations and could thus ensure the production of food sufficient for subsistence. They tended to avoid risky experimentation, which might improve production but might also ruin the entire harvest and therefore jeopardize the household's survival.

Do these features of the communal economy testify to its stagnant and backward nature, as its critics argued? Evidence gathered by Russian zemstvo statisticians, agronomists, and economists (and “rediscovered” by recent studies) suggests much more complex patterns of communal peasants' economic behavior than it has been commonly assumed. In line with the pragmatic risk-aversion logic, communal peasants certainly exercised caution in adopting innovations, but they never were hostile or unreceptive to beneficial change. In fact, as Kovalevskii's comparative-historical analysis demonstrated, communal practices never remained static and uniform. Peasants modified and adapted their economic behavior to local environments and changing socioeconomic conditions,

¹⁶² For a recent detailed discussion of peasant mobility in post-Emancipation Russia, see Jeffrey Burds, *Peasant Dreams & Market Politics: Labor Migration and the Russian Village, 1861-1905* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998). For evidence from the pre-Emancipation period, see Boris Gorshkov, “Serfs on the Move: Peasant Seasonal Migration in Pre-Reform Russia, 1800-61,” *Kritika* 1 (Fall 2000): 627-656.

which led to considerable regional variations in repartitioning and farming techniques. They readily adopted new tools and techniques when they proved to be more effective or better suited to specific local conditions than traditional practices.

The capacity of the village commune to introduce technological and farming improvements became particularly evident during the post-Emancipation period. Communal peasants responded to the changes that Russia's intensive modernization and industrialization brought to the countryside. Peasants increasingly used new tools and machines, engaged in commercial farming, trade, and other market-oriented activities. They improved and diversified traditional farming techniques such as the three-field system and experimented with grass cultivation and multi-field systems.

Critics of the commune underestimated the viability and flexibility of Russian communal agriculture. The commune's restrictive rules and regulations, they argued, made productivity improvements and individual initiative impossible. Strong evidence, however, indicates that the actual operating arrangements of the village commune were much more flexible than its formal rules might suggest.¹⁶³ As we have seen, despite imposing some constraints, the commune left substantial room for individual initiative. The three-field system allowed for considerable flexibility in the selection of crops and farming procedures. The commune provided entrepreneurial peasants with resources and opportunities for experimentation that individual farmers could rarely afford. Commune members could try new crops and farming methods on specially designated lands or collectively rented plots. Once the majority in the commune became convinced of the

¹⁶³ The flexibility of communal arrangements in the Russian post-Emancipation village is discussed in Paul R. Gregory, *Before Command: An Economic History of Russia from Emancipation to the First Five-Year Plan* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 50-52. For evidence from medieval Western Europe, see Susan Reynolds, *Kingdoms and Communities in Western Europe, 900-1300* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), 153.

benefits of a new crop or technique, the assembly decided to adopt it on a village-wide scale.

Contemporary observers, including Kovalevskii, stressed the dual character of the Russian village commune. The commune's economy and property relations, in fact, represented a combination of both collective and individualistic claims and practices. Each family possessed its own dwelling and a garden plot, as well as livestock and tools, with which it cultivated its portion of communal land. The commune did not command the farming and economic operations of individual member households or appropriate the product of their labor. Strip cultivation and common grazing usually did not prevent peasants from managing their sowings as they saw fit.¹⁶⁴

Contemporary observers pointed to the capacity of the village communes to adopt and spread innovations faster and more effectively than individual farmers. Irrigation and other improvements that required collective effort could be implemented more rapidly in communal villages than on private farms. Unlike individual cultivators, communes possessed sufficient labor and financial resources to buy new tools and machines and to engage in large-scale projects. Communes often fostered manuring and other advanced agricultural techniques by rewarding peasants for their efforts at improvement.

The growth of agricultural output in the 1880s-1890s corroborates the significant economic potential of the post-Emancipation village commune. According to Gregory, Russian net grain and potato output in the 1880s-1900s rose at an annual rate of over three percent, that is, well ahead of rural population growth (1.2 percent per annum).¹⁶⁵

Average grain yields per hectare increased by 1.5 percent and output per worker grew by

¹⁶⁴ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 253-257; Pallot, *Land Reform*, 84-85.

¹⁶⁵ Gregory, "Grain Marketings and Peasant Consumption in Russia, 1885-1913," *Explorations in Economic History* 17 (1980): 147.

approximately 1.35 percent each year, which by 1911 allowed Russian peasants to collect yields close to those in the countries with similarly short and moisture-deficient growing seasons like Spain, Portugal, Greece, and Argentina. By the early 1890s, Russia's per-capita grain and potato output slightly exceeded the European average and was more than double the levels for Italy, Portugal, Greece, and Japan.¹⁶⁶ Russia's stock of agricultural equipment roughly trebled between 1890 and 1913.¹⁶⁷ In the 1890s, agriculture consumed more of Russia's iron output than did the rapidly expanding railway industry.¹⁶⁸

In view of this evidence, the widespread assumption that the village commune trapped peasants in an “almost unbreakable cycle of poverty”¹⁶⁹ appears to be an exaggeration. The predominantly subsistence-oriented communal economy did not keep peasants on the edge of starvation and destitution. In fact, conclusive evidence suggests that peasant living standards steadily improved in the last two decades before the inception of the Stolypin land reform. A key indicator of peasant real income, grain retained by peasants for their own consumption, grew three times faster than did rural population. Grains like wheat, which had been considered a “luxury” and produced primarily for the market prior to the 1890s, were becoming part of the peasant diet. Peasants also enriched their diets by growing diverse crops and vegetables, particularly potatoes, which significantly increased their calorie intake. In the 1890s, per-capita food supplies in Russia were considerably higher than those in Southern Europe and Japan. Agricultural capital stock (farm

¹⁶⁶ Aleksandr I. Chuprov and Aleksandr S. Posnikov, eds., *Vliianie urozhaev i khlebnykh tsen na nekotorye storony russkogo narodnogo khoziaistva*, vol. 1 (St. Petersburg: Tip. V. Kirshbauma, 1897), 69; Robert Bideleux, “Agricultural Advance Under the Russian Village Commune System,” in *Peasant Economy*, 201, 203; Gregory, *Before Command*, 29-30.

¹⁶⁷ Arcadius Kahan, “Capital Formation during the Early Period of Industrialization in Russia,” in *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, vol. 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 300.

¹⁶⁸ Petr Liashchenko, *History of the National Economy of Russia* (New York: Macmillan, 1949), 508.

¹⁶⁹ Robbins, *Famine*, 4.

equipment, structures, and livestock) was also growing more rapidly than farm population during this period.¹⁷⁰

Undoubtedly, extreme poverty did exist in pre-revolutionary rural Russia, particularly in the most densely populated central black-earth region. Recent studies, however, have criticized the tendency of many Russian and Western historians to generalize about the condition of the entire Russian agriculture based on the extreme cases of rural poverty in some areas. Economic historians have convincingly demonstrated that the existence of rural poverty in a particular time and place does not necessarily reflect its trend over time and its spatial distribution. Evidence of the economic decline in one area may conceal evidence of successful agricultural performance in other regions. Even though some agricultural regions may experience a decline in per capita output, the aggregate national per capita output can be on the rise.¹⁷¹ Some types of sources can produce misleading evidence. For example, government surveys, which have commonly been used as a graphic proof of agricultural decline in late nineteenth-century Russia, generally focused on problematic cases rather than success stories. Literary accounts of that period also often tended to depict the most downtrodden families rather than average ones.

Evidence of the compatibility of subsistence and rational economic orientations tends to vindicate Kovalevskii's analysis of the Russian village commune. The subsistence priorities of communal peasants did not prevent them from maximizing productivity and profit. The village commune possessed a significant economic potential, which allowed it to become an agent of change and improvement. The Russian government, however, chose to ignore the capacity of the commune to contribute to economic progress.

¹⁷⁰ Bideleux, "Agricultural Advance," 200-205; Gregory, *Before Command*, 46-48; Kahan, "Capital Formation," 300.

¹⁷¹ See, for example, Gregory, *Before Command*, 38-39, 47.

Chapter IV. Kovalevskii's Opposition to Stolypin's Land Reform

The inception of the Stolypin land reform in 1906 presented Kovalevskii with an opportunity to voice his opinions about the Russian village commune. Kovalevskii's scholarly findings led him to oppose the Stolypin land reform. He criticized Stolypin's attempts to undermine the village commune and to pressure peasants to separate from communes. Although he believed firmly in private agriculture, he argued that in country dominated by communal traditions the state must not destroy the collective economy by legislative fiat. He accused the government of advancing its own political agenda instead of promoting beneficial change in the countryside.¹⁷²

Prior to the Revolution of 1905, the attitudes of Russian officials toward the post-Emancipation peasant commune had been strikingly ambivalent. On the one hand, bureaucrats viewed communal practices as economically "backward" and "irrational." On the other, the tsarist government strongly supported the village commune on political, fiscal, and administrative grounds. In the absence of seigniorial authority in the village, communes acted as local organs of social control. Communal regulations proved to be an effective hindrance to the impoverishment of the peasant masses, which, in government's eyes, made the commune a guarantor of social stability and a strong safeguard against revolution. Repartition practices ensured that peasants redistributed land among themselves instead of making land claims against the gentry. Finally, the principle of collective financial responsibility ensured that peasants met their fiscal obligations and

¹⁷² For Kovalevskii's criticism of the Stolypin land reform, see his articles "Spor o sel'skoi obshchine v komissii Gosudarstvennogo Soveta," *Vestnik Evropy* no. 1 (1910): 259-284; "Sud'by obshchinnogo zemlevladieniia v nashei verkhnei palate," *Vestnik Evropy* no. 6 (1910): 58-81; and "Proshloe i nastoizshchee krest'ianskogo zemleustroistva," *Vestnik Evropy* no. 5 (1911): 234-264.

thus provided a stable flow of revenue for the state. Clearly, political and administrative concerns predominated in the governmental policy toward the commune prior to the Stolypin reform.

The same proved to be true after the revolution of 1905, when the active participation of communal peasants in rural upheavals radically changed official attitudes. Once the communes demonstrated that they could serve as agents of the peasants' organized protest, the government immediately decided to replace them by private farms. A series of legislative acts introduced in 1906-1911 suggested two major changes. First, every peasant family received the right to consolidate their strips into one plot and withdraw from the commune by forming a separate farm (*otrub*) or requesting an individual land allotment outside the village (*khutor*). In contrast to previous laws requiring the consent of at least a two-third majority in the village to allow a peasant to leave the commune, the Stolypin decrees permitted peasants to separate from the commune without approval of the other commune members. Second, peasants living in villages which had not undertaken general repartitions during the previous twenty four years were automatically declared owners of their individual land holdings. This measure represented the most radical change in the rural economy, allowing the authorities to eliminate non-repartition village communes regardless of whether or not their members were willing to abandon communal practices.

By creating a large class of rural property owners, the government sought to consolidate the political support for the regime among the country's largest social group. According to reformers, private ownership rights would ensure farmers' loyalty and obedience to the regime. Stolypin himself repeatedly emphasized the explicitly political

significance of the land reform. Presented the land reform as “the wager on the strong,” he proclaimed that privatization would turn hard-working peasants into economically prosperous and politically conservative citizens. Ignoring both the evidence of the commune's economic capacity and the potential dangers of the radical change in the peasant economy, state officials sought to eliminate the commune as soon as possible.¹⁷³

Kovalevskii warned Russian policy-makers that Stolypin might well achieve his goal of creating a class of politically conservative private property owners, but at the cost of increasing the mass of impoverished and potentially revolutionary peasants. An accelerated transition to private agriculture, he insisted, would intensify social polarization in the village. Although a few wealthy villagers would benefit from privatization and new market opportunities, millions of poor peasants would be unable to compete with them. As a result, they would lose their lands, turn into rural proletarians, and, in desperation, opt for violent protests that would threaten political stability.

Kovalevskii emphasized that the Russian political and economic system was unprepared to deal with the social consequences of the Stolypin land reform. Despite intensive industrialization in 1890s-1900s, capitalism in Russia had not reached the stage when urban industries would be able to offer jobs to millions of rural proletarians. The cities would fail to absorb a large-scale migration of the peasant masses desperately searching for work and new places to live. The state, in turn, lacked financial resources to implement a large-scale poor relief program to prevent a massive social chaos.

¹⁷³ See, for example, David A.J. Macey, *Government and Peasant in Russia, 1861-1905: The Pre-History of the Stolypin Reforms* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 1987) for an argument that the 1905 Revolution forced the government to elevate political over economic considerations. In Macey's opinion, the pressure for speedy results meant that the land reform measures lacked coherence and clear direction.

Instead of fostering stability, Kovalevskii stressed, the Stolypin reform would only aggravate the existing social problems. Referring to the studies by leading Russian economists and zemstvo statisticians, he pointed to the fact that the post-Emancipation village had already been suffering from the mounting social and economic differentiation. In Kovalevskii's opinion, the government acted irresponsibly in seeking to weaken the traditional communal guarantees of security. The destruction of the source of peasants' livelihood would "quite legitimately" provoke violent protests and resistance to reform. As a result, peasants would come to form part of an impoverished and frustrated majority, which would be easily driven to revolution.

To support his prognosis, Kovalevskii cited numerous historical precedents demonstrating the potential social dangers of radical agrarian change. His research on late medieval and early modern England provided compelling evidence of the devastating social consequences of enforced enclosure of the common fields which produced masses of landless rural proletarians, who fled to already crowded cities in search of work and food.¹⁷⁴ Similarly disastrous were the results of the aggressive anti-communal policies of the British colonial administration in nineteenth-century India. The break-up of the Indian *panchayat* commune led to peasant impoverishment, the decline of competition, the concentration of land ownership in the hands of a few, and social unrest. His other examples included North Africa and Latin America, where the use of force by colonial authorities eager to eliminate local communal practices caused social polarization and long-term economic decay.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ Kovalevskii, *Obshchestvennyi stroi Anglii v kontse srednikh vekov* (Moscow, 1880), 134; *Razvitie narodnogo khoziaistva*, 166.

¹⁷⁵ Kovalevskii, *Obshchinnoe zemlevladienie*, 196.

Kovalevskii urged the Russian government to refrain from acting like “colonizers” of their own people. He ridiculed the rhetoric used by the British colonial administrators to describe the disappearance of the Indian *panchayat* communes. Claims about the alleged backwardness of communal practices, Kovalevskii asserted, allowed the British to avoid responsibility for the poverty and suffering caused by their anti-communal policies. Similarly, in North Africa, French colonists ridiculed the backwardness of local peasants and justified the forcible introduction of private land tenure by the claim that they were serving the cause of economic progress. In fact, as Kovalevskii demonstrated, they were pursuing the political aim of destroying the basis of Algerian society. As he saw it, idealized notions of the unconditional advantages of private-property rights simply disguised French efforts to establish their control over the Algerian economy.

Kovalevskii was not alone in his attempts to apply the historical experience of other nations to Russia's rural development. His colleague and friend, Paul Vinogradoff, used his studies of medieval England to criticize Stolypin for creating the prospect of social upheaval and “gambling with revolution.” Blaming Stolypin for radicalism, Vinogradoff emphasized that Russia needed “thorough organic reforms, something like the movement of the sixties on a larger scale.”¹⁷⁶ The historian Ivan V. Luchitskii likewise drew on his examination of the village commune in Spain to stress the importance of social consequences of the rural reform in Russia.¹⁷⁷

Kovalevskii would have undoubtedly agreed with another Russian student of medieval English agriculture, Aleksandr N. Savin, who argued that destroying the village commune in Russia was the same as “planting gunpowder in the cellar of a house where

¹⁷⁶ Paul Vinogradoff, *The Russian Problem* (London: Constable and Company, 1914), 40.

¹⁷⁷ Ivan V. Luchitskii, “Pozemel'naia obshchina v Pireneiakh,” *Otechestvennye zapiski*, no. 9, 10, 12 (1883).

you yourself live.”¹⁷⁸ Instead of attempting to eliminate communal guarantees of security, Kovalevskii insisted, the state should protect them by legislative measures. He questioned the possibility of creating a class of socially stable and politically conservative class of strong individual farmers in the near future, which the authors of the land reform widely propagandized. Instead, Kovalevskii urged the government to support communal institutions with their security mechanisms and mutual aid practices that had proven to impede the process of social differentiation in the countryside and thus acted as safeguards of stability. He suggested that reducing tax burdens, promoting the migration of peasants to sparsely populated regions, and permitting them to rent land owned by the state or the gentry would promote stability much more effectively than radical attempts to demolish communal institutions.¹⁷⁹

In addition to intensifying social problems, Kovalevskii maintained, a radical land reform would fail to ensure significant economic improvement. Peasants would be reluctant to accept any innovations that put their livelihood at risk. Kovalevskii reminded Russian politicians that it took centuries in Western Europe to transform peasants into individual farmers. In Russia, it would also take a long time to change the peasants' economic behavior. Capitalist farmers could not instantly emerge from the constraints of the commune. The peasants could not miraculously acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to successful entrepreneurship by the simple act of leaving the commune. He cited evidence from India, Algeria, and the Spanish colonies in Latin America demonstrating that the disappearance of the commune in these regions did not generate any significant improvements in farming and even caused a short-term economic decline.

¹⁷⁸ Aleksandr N. Savin, “Russkie razrushiteli obshchiny i angliiskie ogorazhivатели,” *Moskovskii ezhenedel'nik*, no.2 (1909): 38.

¹⁷⁹ Kovalevskii, *Ekonomicheskii stroi*, 77, 87.

He also referred to Russian zemstvo surveys revealing that many peasants who consolidated their lands into individual *otruba* and *khutora* continued to employ the same tools and farming methods that they had become accustomed to in communes.

Kovalevskii accused government officials of using administrative pressure in order to force peasants to leave the commune. Believing that the process of land privatization must be exclusively voluntary, he urged the political elites to abandon their traditional paternalistic and dirigiste attitudes toward the allegedly “backward” peasantry and to let the peasants decide for themselves whether to stay in the commune or to separate from it. He reminded Russian policy-makers that peasants possessed sufficient expertise and pragmatism to be able to make informed economic decisions. Regarding peasants as actors in the reform process rather than passive recipients of state-directed reform, he argued that peasants desired economic improvement and knew better than the St. Petersburg officials how to reform the village.

Finally, Kovalevskii criticized the authors of the Stolypin land reform for focusing exclusively on land-tenure issues and presenting the communal system as the single source of all rural problems. Asserting that changes in land ownership could not provide the ultimate solution to peasant poverty, he urged agrarian reformers to concentrate their efforts on such issues as increasing capital investment in the agricultural sector, developing rural infrastructure, building roads and communications, improving housing and public health conditions, and providing agronomic assistance to peasants. Moreover, Kovalevskii emphasized, farming and technological improvements could be implemented without any change in land tenure arrangements. He drew attention to the capacity of communal peasants to introduce innovations just as rapidly and effectively as individual

farmers. In his opinion, both the private and communal sectors of Russian agriculture could equally contribute to rural progress.

Could communal egalitarianism prevent the growth of social and economic differentiation among peasants? Or were opponents of the commune correct in arguing that collective mechanisms in the village declined to the extent that it was no longer possible to consider the commune a safeguard of social harmony and stability? Kovalevskii's answers to these questions were not simple. As we have already noted, he repeatedly stressed the growth of individualism and economic stratification in the commune and, at the same time, believed that communal practices could prevent the excesses of economic differentiation.

Recent research has provided evidence in support of Kovalevskii's complex vision of communal egalitarianism. Communes were by no means model egalitarian societies, as some Slavophile and populist intellectuals argued. In fact, economic inequality has always been a common feature of communal life. Numerous accounts documented the existence of wide disparities in peasants' wealth and economic status. Differences in households' farming ability, family size, fertility of holdings, and many other factors contributed to different economic outcomes. The fundamentally egalitarian practices such as repartition could in reality promote inequalities. Wealthier households might benefit from the fact that repartitions, while redistributing land allotments, very rarely addressed the inequalities in livestock and garden holdings. The expanding economic opportunities of the post-Emancipation period only intensified the existing disparities. This was clearly manifested by the increase in conflicts between peasant families and the growing influence of rich peasants on village affairs. Frequently, the wealthier families were able

to affect the votes and decisions of the village assembly and to exert economic pressures on their poorer co-villagers who depended on them financially due to indebtedness or worked for them as hired laborers. Not surprisingly, commune members often referred to wealthy peasants pejoratively as *miroedy* (literally “commune-eaters”).¹⁸⁰

Despite increasing peasant stratification in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, communal practices did continue to serve as an effective counter-balance to excessive economic differentiation. Communes mediated disputes between households and organized assistance for the families suffering from a sudden economic crisis. A household experiencing extreme material difficulties could be temporarily freed from some or all of its tax obligations, be allowed to defer payments, or receive an interest-free loan. Communes could help a family to rebuild a house destroyed by fire or flood or even assist in plowing or harvesting its land allotment in case of a family member's illness. As evidence indicates, mutual aid continued to be a common practice among turn-of-the-century Russian peasants.¹⁸¹

Although critics regarded peasants' collectivism and cooperation as a manifestation of their primitive egalitarian instincts, peasants themselves understood them in purely pragmatic terms. Through generations of experience, they realized that providing mutual aid and maintaining some degree of egalitarianism served their interests better than seeking their own advantage at the expense of others. By ensuring the subsistence of each

¹⁸⁰ On social and economic differentiation in the Russian village commune, see, for example, Teodor Shanin, *The Roots of Otherness: Russia's Turn of the Century*, vol. 1, *Russia as a 'Developing Society'* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986).

¹⁸¹ The effectiveness of the commune in impeding peasant stratification is discussed in Daniel Field, “Stratification and the Russian Peasant Commune: A Statistical Enquiry,” in *Land Commune and Peasant Community in Russia: Communal Forms in Imperial and Early Soviet History*, ed. Roger P. Bartlett (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 143-164; and Heinz-Dietrich Löwe, “Differentiation in Russian Peasant Society,” *ibid*, 165-195. On peasant mutual aid practices, see Marina M. Gromyko, *Traditsionnye normy povedeniia i formy obshcheniia russkikh krest'ian XIX v.* (Moscow: Nauka, 1986).

family in the village, communal practices prevented excessive impoverishment and destitution. In the absence of the organized social welfare system, cooperation performed the functions of mutual insurance policy. During hard times, the commune acted as a defense mechanism allowing rich and poor peasants to band together to survive during famines or to protect themselves against the excessive demands of the state. As Dorothy Atkinson noted, “the conditions of rural life gave rise to a social concept of egalitarianism, not as a ‘Utopian illusion’ but as a practical and culturally conditioned adjustment to limited resources.”¹⁸²

Since the principle of joint financial responsibility required commune members to make up the difference for the households that failed to pay their share of taxes, it made perfect economic sense to provide temporary relief to families in crisis so they could recover as soon as possible and be able again to make their contribution to the commune's obligations. Peasants also offered assistance not to abstract individuals but to their fellow villagers, whom they knew well and whose help they expected to receive reciprocally at times of need. In that respect, mutual aid practices served as a pragmatic group survival mechanism.

This does not mean, however, that the commune acted as a safety net for everybody. Well aware of the possibility that egalitarian benefits might allow “free-riders” to take advantage of the other villagers, peasants were very selective in providing assistance to their less fortunate neighbors. Typically, a temporary crisis due to a natural disaster, an accident like fire, or a family member's serious illness could qualify a household for communal help. Those who continuously failed to be productive village members, particularly of alcoholism or laziness proved to be the cause of the problem, had very

¹⁸² Dorothy Atkinson, “Egalitarianism and the Commune,” in *Land Commune*, 11.

little or no chances to receive neighborly support. Moreover, communal assemblies punished repeated instances of tax evasion by fines, arrest, or even property confiscation.¹⁸³

The realities of peasant life and economy were far too complex to fit a single-factor explanation. Contrary to the political elites' unconditional belief in the “magic of property,” tenure changes could not provide the ultimate solution to all problems in the Russian countryside. Scholars have stressed that transition from subsistence to market-oriented economy requires large-scale social and economic transformations, of which tenure forms are only a part. In fact, evidence from various regions of the world indicates that land privatization by itself does not necessarily lead to significant agricultural improvement. While Stolypin and his supporters referred to England as a model of successful agricultural reform, historians of English agriculture have repeatedly questioned the results of the land enclosures. Many studies have demonstrated that enclosures in England did not always foster improvements in husbandry. In both open and enclosed fields, peasants continued to use the same outmoded farming techniques.¹⁸⁴

The Russian economist Aleksandr S. Posnikov, Kovalevskii's contemporary and an expert in rural economics, argued that changes in property rights did not always correlate with productivity increase and agricultural innovation. His findings demonstrated that English tenant farmers improved their farming methods and productivity despite the fact that they did not own the land they worked. Temporary rental contracts did not diminish their economic incentive to invest time and money. Posnikov concluded that factors other than property arrangements determine the dynamics of productivity growth and overall

¹⁸³ Christine Worobec, *Peasant Russia*, 23-24.

¹⁸⁴ Robert Allen, for instance, has shown that enclosure had little effect on yields in *Enclosure and the Yeoman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

agricultural progress. Another Kovalevskii's contemporary, the statistician-economist Nikolai A. Kablukov pointed to the rapidly declining levels of productivity and innovation among late nineteenth-century English private farmers. He found that, instead of intensifying land-use regimes and diversifying their crops, large farm owners responded to market fluctuations by resorting to cheaper and more primitive cultivation methods, which resulted in soil degeneration and even the abandonment of arable fields to grazing.¹⁸⁵

Similarly, local surveys indicated little or no correlation between tenure arrangements and economic initiative. A survey in the Simbirsk province, for example, revealed that only fifteen percent of privatizers sought to enclose their land with the purpose of improving their farming operations. The surveys by the Free Economic Society found no difference in the use of agricultural techniques between communal peasants and individual farmers. Peasants who privatized their lands often retained the same farming methods that they had employed in the commune. In some cases, they continued to use strip cultivation and even agreed to shift the location of their strips when the remaining members of the commune undertook a land repartition. On the other hand, when improvements occurred, they took place on both communal and private farms. No compelling evidence suggests that individual farmers adopted advanced techniques or equipment at a faster rate than did their neighbors in the commune.¹⁸⁶

Comparisons of productivity rates in the communal and private sectors of Russian agriculture also do not provide any conclusive evidence of a better economic

¹⁸⁵ Cited in Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 151-152, 242-243.

¹⁸⁶ Dorothy Atkinson, *The End of the Russian Land Commune, 1905-1930* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1983), 71-100, 177; Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 352, 361-366, 379; Zyrianov, *Krest'ianskaia obschina*, 183.

performance on privatized farms. Bideleux, for instance, has found no evidence of the advantages of private farming in turn-of-the-century Russia. His analysis of regional variations in rates of grain yields increase shows that regions and provinces with predominantly communal agriculture could have both the lowest and highest increases in yields. Grain productivity levels in the predominantly communal central black-earth regions did not deviate significantly from the average rates for all regions. Most of the individual farmers who did achieve higher grain yields appear to have been stronger households, who had been receiving above average yields before they privatized their land holdings.¹⁸⁷

Numerous factors unrelated to land tenure played a greater role in peasant poverty than allegedly backward communal practices. Shortage of capital, lack of infrastructure, weakly developed markets, little access to existing markets because of poor roads and communication, as well as, of course, such factors as low living standards, unsatisfactory housing conditions, the poor quality of medical care, and low literacy rates, produced deleterious effects on Russian agriculture. Russian peasants did not enjoy the benefits of public health care services that ordinary people experienced in other European countries. As a result, infant mortality rates in Russia, which in 1861 did not differ much from those in Germany, Italy, and Austria-Hungary, remained unchanged until 1900, whereas in the other countries they had declined significantly.¹⁸⁸ Inadequate infrastructure and communications discouraged peasants from setting up a separate farm far away from a village, where they could regularly attend a church and send their children to school. Many feared the inevitable social isolation of the life in a farmstead. The global

¹⁸⁷ Bideleux, "Agricultural Advance," 201-203; Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 365.

¹⁸⁸ Gregory, *Before Command*, 22-23.

agricultural depression of the 1880s-1890s affected the peasant economy by significantly reducing grain prices. The state, however, instead of encouraging capital investment and expanding financial and agronomic assistance to the most poverty-stricken rural regions, further increased tax burdens on peasants in order to finance its ambitious industrialization and railroad construction programs. Characteristically, Kovalevskii repeatedly criticized the government for its short-sighted policy of modernizing Russia's economy at the expense of agriculture.

Some historians have linked the relatively low productivity on peasant lands to the terms of the Emancipation, which allowed gentry owners to retain the best-quality land in their possession and apportion less productive sections to communes. Landlords did not give up their top-quality lands even when they were located in the midst of peasant holdings. The fact that gentry lands were often closer to the village, whereas peasants had to travel considerable distances to their allotments, also affected productivity. In the decades following the reform, gentry owners increasingly sold portions of their land to communal peasants, but, again, these lands typically had lower potential for productivity improvement than those that the gentry kept to themselves. In addition, to compensate the gentry for the loss of labor and land as a result of the Emancipation, the government frequently established redemption payments above market value. Consequently, peasants received less land and more financial and fiscal obligations than before the Emancipation.¹⁸⁹

Finally, unfavorable climatic, geographical, and environmental conditions could considerably limit the scope of economic improvement. Peasants developed elaborate

¹⁸⁹ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 344; Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 109; Zyrianov, *Krest'ianskaia obshchina*, 38-39, 43-44.

strategies to cope with the environments they lived in. In the absence of modern technology, however, the possibilities for improvement were limited. Weather fluctuations, environmental changes, and other random natural factors over which peasants had no control continued to influence peasant farming choices and economic decision-making. A recent study, for instance, has shown that the prevailing conditions in the central black-earth provinces simply did not allow for the spread of multi-field systems. In many regions, the sparse distribution of water resources, meadows, and forests created unfavorable conditions for the formation of separated farms.¹⁹⁰

One of the crucial factors that bureaucrats had traditionally ignored was the peasants' willingness and ability to contribute to rural reform. Blinded by their elitist attitudes toward the peasantry, officials could not admit that peasant economic behavior could be rational or innovative. Peasant culture and interests seemed to them “grey” and unremarkable. A conviction that allegedly “backward” and “apathetic” peasants needed tutelage and direction from above led Russian reformers to rely on paternalism as the most effective rural policy.

Although it is hard to measure precisely the scope of peasants' intelligence and agronomic expertise, many observers have stressed peasant pragmatism and sharp-mindedness (*smekalka*).¹⁹¹ Russian rural studies of the post-Emancipation period pointed to economic interest as the dominant factor in peasant behavior. The peasant came to be seen as essentially an economic actor who “struggled with the Russian soil and climate in

¹⁹⁰ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 339. For a recent discussion of Russia's harsh climate and environment as determinant factors in Russian peasant life and economy, see Milov, *Velikorusskii pakhar'*.

¹⁹¹ The literature illuminating peasant intelligence and creativity is extensive. For recent discussions, see Marina Gromyko, *Mir russkoi derevni* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1991), 64-65, 273-311, and Frierson, *Peasant Icons*.

an effort to master the land rather than be mastered by it.”¹⁹² The influential economist Nikolai Bervi, for example, concluded that, provided with better access to technology and education, peasants could themselves play a leading role in the improvement of Russian agriculture.¹⁹³

As social and cultural history flourished in the second half of the twentieth century, historians began to “rediscover” the role of the peasantry in the technological change. Peasants are now credited with a more active role in introducing innovations than has been previously perceived. Following anthropologists and sociologists, historians have abandoned the notion of peasant primitivism and irrationalism. Peasant culture is no longer seen as rigid and stagnant, but flexible and complex. Scholars have increasingly stressed that custom and tradition did not prevent peasants from choosing what they thought suited them best. Communal practices and customs “allowed for an adaptation so spontaneous and natural that it was often unperceived.”¹⁹⁴

Likewise, Russian peasants are now seen not as merely passive subjects but as active participants in the process of change. Whereas earlier works focused primarily on the static and authoritarian aspects of peasant culture,¹⁹⁵ recent studies have stressed the pragmatic nature and flexibility of peasant mentality and behavior. Based on data gathered by Russian zemstvo statisticians, recent works have demonstrated the peasants'

¹⁹² Frierson, “Razdel,” 45.

¹⁹³ Cited in Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 126.

¹⁹⁴ Terence Ranger, “The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 247. Also, see, Grenville Astill and John Langdon, eds., *Medieval Farming and Technology: The Impact of Agricultural Change in Northwest Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 1997), 225-250, 275-292.

¹⁹⁵ See, for example, Jerome Blum, *Lord and Peasant Russia from the Ninth to the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Atheneum, 1968); Geroid T. Robinson, *Rural Russia under the Old Regime: A History of the Landlord-Peasant World and a Prologue to the Peasant Revolution of 1917* (New York: Macmillan, 1949); Lazar Volin, *A Century of Russian Agriculture: From Alexander II to Krushchev* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970).

continuous efforts to modify traditional farming strategies and devise new ones. It has been shown that in most cases peasants acted independently, without any outside help. Sometimes, zemstvo specialists assisted them in adopting innovations. Overall, communal peasants responded to innovations with the same degree of enthusiasm and appreciation as individual farmers. In the 1880s, two decades before the inception of the Stolypin reform, communes in the western Russian provinces started spontaneous consolidations of their strips into unified plots (*voloki*), similar to the enclosed farms (*otruba*) suggested by Stolypin.¹⁹⁶

In contrast to the elitist vision of peasants as a “grey mass” of mindless primitives suffering from a “culture deficit,” a vast body of evidence indicates that Russian peasants possessed a complex and rich culture of their own. As one expert wrote, “peasants did not need to wait for outsiders to fill the void in the lives with meaning. Despite widespread illiteracy and the low level of technological achievements, peasants did not seem to lack useful and practical knowledge, motivation, or images of well-being and public virtue.”¹⁹⁷ Although typically unaware of latest scientific discoveries and innovations, peasants developed extensive agronomic knowledge and skills. Repartitions alone involved complex land surveying procedures that required a detailed knowledge of soil fertility, local topography, accessibility, drainage, and many other agronomic and environmental factors. Characteristically, local agronomists who dealt with peasants on a regular basis attributed the peasants' ignorance to the lack of specialized education rather than their inability to comprehend rational economic principles.¹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁶ Pallot, *Land Reform*, 88-89.

¹⁹⁷ Kingston-Mann, “Breaking the Silence,” 14.

¹⁹⁸ Among numerous studies of peasant agronomic knowledge and skills, particularly noteworthy are Leonid V. Milov, ed., *Agrarnye tekhnologii v Rossii IX-XX vv.: XXV sessiia simpoziuma po agrarnoi istorii*

Collective practices did not represent merely static “relics” of the past, but continued to serve important and pragmatic functions. They reflected the interests and worldview of the peasants, helping them to defend themselves against the pressures of the environment they lived in. They bound peasants together in a complex web of economic, social, and legal relationships. They transmitted the collective wisdom, expertise, and experience, which not only offered tried and trusted ways of survival but also fostered, if not required, adaptation and change. Modernization processes occurred in Russian post-Emancipation agriculture not simply because of the involvement of the elites. Peasants themselves took an active part in shaping rural change.¹⁹⁹

Critics cited indifference and even antagonism to children's education as one of the most illustrative examples of peasants' low intellectual horizons. In reality, long before zemstvos started establishing village schools, peasants had organized and maintained their own informal “free schools” (*vol'nye shkoly*) taught by local priests or retired soldiers. Viewed by peasants in purely pragmatic terms, reading and writing skills offered important advantages. The ability to read documents was necessary to avoid being cheated by local bureaucrats or traders. Innovation-minded peasants appreciated the opportunity to learn about agricultural improvements. In many villages, local agronomists encountered “peasant-intellectuals” who read agronomic literature.²⁰⁰

Vostochnoi Evropy: Tezisy dokladov i soobshchenii, Arzamas, 10-13 sentiabria 1996 g. (Moscow: Institut rossiiskoi istorii RAN, 1996); Leonid M. Goriushkin, *Opyt narodnoi agronomii Sibiri: vtoraiia polovina XIX-nachalo XX v.* (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1993), Milov, *Velikorusskii pakhar'*, and two studies by Gromyko, *Mir russkoi derevni* and *Trudovye traditsii*. For a discussion of peasant ability to perform complex land surveying procedures, see Pallot, *Land Reform*, 85-88. On zemstvo agronomists' attitudes toward peasant agricultural expertise, see Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 422.

¹⁹⁹ The argument about an active role of peasants in rural modernization has only recently begun gaining recognition among historians of Russia. See, for example, David Moon, *Russian Peasants*, 342.

²⁰⁰ Ben Eklof, “Face to the Village: The Russian Teacher and the Peasant Community, 1880-1914,” in *Land Commune and Peasant Community in Russia: Communal Forms in Imperial and Early Soviet Society*, ed.

This explains why village and district authorities, not the peasants, often resisted peasant literacy, fearing that it would give villagers too much freedom and enable them to keep track of bureaucratic operations. Not surprisingly, when the government launched the rural educational reform in the 1880s, peasants displayed suspicion toward the state's attempts to replace old informal village schools with formal schools operated by local zemstvos and with a uniform curriculum approved from above. They did have all practical reasons to see such educational changes as another attempt on the part of the state to control peasants' behavior and culture. Despite the general distrust of the state-imposed measures, however, peasants were typically respectful of teachers. Although they might have regarded zemstvo school teachers as cultural outsiders, they knew that, unlike bureaucrats, teachers did not have formal authority to coerce and command. Most importantly, teachers taught literacy, which every peasant recognized as useful, if not necessary.²⁰¹

Commonly accused of the lack of understanding of private property rights, peasants in reality could clearly distinguish between private and collective property arrangements. They held to communal practices not because of their inability to comprehend a modern conception of private property and the advantages it offered, as it was commonly thought, but because they believed that the communal system served their interests better than individual farming. As we have seen, the commune allowed for economic flexibility by permitting peasants to own private garden plots and to buy or rent additional arable land when needed. Peasants cherished their communal allotments but also appreciated the

Roger Bartlett (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 341, 351-352; Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 399; Kingston-Mann, "Peasant Economy," 9.

²⁰¹ For a detailed discussion of peasant attitudes toward zemstvo schools and teachers, see Ben Eklof, *Russian Peasant Schools: Officialdom, Village Culture, and Popular Pedagogy, 1861-1914* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1986).

value of property acquired by purchase and the advantages associated with it. The communal system did not thus prevent peasants from understanding private property rights and, of course, did not promote disrespect for private property, as its critics insisted. On the contrary, the commune offered its members an opportunity to benefit from both collective and private property arrangements. Undoubtedly, compared to their counterparts in Western Europe, Russian peasants may have had a weaker understanding and appreciation of private property. This applied, however, to all strata of Russian society. The notion of private property and legal support for it had been traditionally less developed in Russia than elsewhere in Europe.²⁰²

It is true that peasants often disapproved of their neighbors who decided to consolidate their holdings and separate from the commune. This was due, however, not to the peasants' alleged innate hostility toward private property, but to the economic problems they experienced as a result of consolidations. Each separation led to the reduction of the commune's arable and common grazing land and, consequently, to significantly decreased fodder resources for those who stayed in the commune. Peasants were also dissatisfied when they were forced to relocate some of their best-quality land strips to make room for consolidated plots for separators. As Kerans has suggested, it was the sense of private property that could discourage peasants from forming a separate farmstead. Moving to a *khutor* meant selling the household's individual garden plot, which many peasants valued as much as the communal allotment of arable land.²⁰³

²⁰² For a discussion of peasant perceptions of property arrangements, see Olga Crisp "Peasant Land Tenure and Civil Rights Implications before 1906," in *Civil Rights in Imperial Russia*, ed. Olga Crisp and Linda Edmonson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 33-64. On the historical evolution of the concept of private property in Russia, see Richard Wortman, *The Development of a Russian Legal Consciousness* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976).

²⁰³ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 345, 356.

Convinced that peasants were incapable of change, officials believed the state needed to assume the directing role in rural transformation. The peasants' unwillingness to follow the state-led reform was simply dismissed as a sign of peasant backwardness. Coercive policies could thus be employed when needed and were accepted as a necessary element of the "civilizing process." The use of force was justified as a means to achieve the goal of promoting the triumph of reason and science over peasant backwardness.²⁰⁴

Historians disagree in their evaluations of the scope of coercion used by the authorities to accelerate peasant participation in the Stolypin reform. All, however, agree that the government did pressure land captains and other local administrators to push peasants to consolidate and privatize their lands. Despite the fact that many peasants were particularly hostile to the idea of *khutora*, local bureaucrats pressured peasants to arrange *khutora*, not *otruba*, whenever possible. In addition to extra-legal coercion, they might offer generous financial assistance to cover the costs of relocating to new sites.²⁰⁵

The Stolypin reform thus represented an example of the reform from above, an attempt of the government to impose its own vision of progress while ignoring the alternative reform projects suggested by zemstvo experts and peasants themselves. Characteristically, the sources that Stolypin and his supporters used as evidence of the commune's inefficiency were often produced by government officials themselves. Frequently, bureaucrats manipulated this information. For example, the data gathered by the Valuev Commission in the 1870s were based exclusively on the testimony of local bureaucrats and gentry representatives. Contemporary commentators questioned the reliability of the Commission's report and strongly criticized Valuev, the Minister of State

²⁰⁴ Pallot, "Imagining," 275.

²⁰⁵ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 314-317, 345-349; Pallot, *Land Reform*, 117-126, 135-136; "Khutora and Otruba," 243-244, 249-252.

Properties widely known as an opponent of the commune, for deliberately excluding direct peasant testimony.²⁰⁶

Desiring to transform the village, the Russian government never intended to allow “initiative from below,” particularly initiative from the peasants, who presumably needed guidance from above. The reform's authors failed to understand that the peasants might have their own economic rationality and their own understanding of the costs and benefits of different land arrangements. The measure that peasants favored most during the Stolypin reform, the so-called group land settlement (*gruppovoe zemleustroistvo*), did not require any tenure changes but did help to reduce the worst effects of inter-stripping. Nearly half of all peasant requests in 1906-1914 involved such group settlements. Despite its appeal to the peasants, the government gave this type of change low priority, turning down applications for it and allowing it only after more radical solutions proved to be impossible. The government was determined to eliminate communes, not to improve them.²⁰⁷

Importantly, local resistance to the Stolypin reform came not only from peasants, but from zemstvo specialists, who were well aware of the commune's capacity to introduce innovations. Despite the government's attempts to pressure the zemstvos into providing special assistance exclusively to consolidated and privatized farms, zemstvo experts refused to focus their efforts on the small minority of consolidators, but insisted on extending agronomic aid and training to all peasants including those living in the communes. In fact, zemstvo specialists argued that, due to the lack of agronomists and

²⁰⁶ Among the critics of the Valuev Commission were foreign observers, such as Paul Leroy-Beaulieu, the German scholar Christian Walcher, and the British journalist Donald Mackenzie Wallace, who stressed the arbitrariness of the Commission's conclusions. See Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 128.

²⁰⁷ Pallot, *Land Reform*, 96-97.

resources, it was more practical to arrange agronomic assistance to communal villages rather than to individual farmers. The widespread collaboration between zemstvo experts and communal peasants became a sort of a grass-roots alternative to the Stolypin land reform. Zemstvo specialists preferred to provide technical and agronomic aid to village communes, where they could help to a greater number of peasants within a relatively short period of time. Reaching out peasants who separated from the commune, particularly *otrubniki* frequently living in remote areas, required more specialists and more time, which often presented a serious problem for local zemstvo organizations. The lack of agricultural experts, as well as of financial and technical resources, made it extremely difficult to assist every individual farmer.²⁰⁸

As disappointment with the Stolypin reform grew among peasants, zemstvo activities expanded even more actively. Relying on the “magic of property”, the government made little effort to provide agronomic assistance to individual farmers. The authors of the reform appeared to have expected an agricultural revolution to occur instantly once farmers privatized their lands. The only financial assistance provided by the state included coverage of peasants' expenses on moving their dwellings to new locations. Officials ignored the necessity of arranging agronomic instruction, equipment stores, and animal-breeding services for consolidators. Inevitably, this led to widespread economic failures among consolidators all over the country.²⁰⁹

Zemstvo agronomists assisted communal peasants by distributing agronomic literature, offering lectures, and organizing discussions of agronomic issues at village meetings. They advised and consulted peasants individually, set up experimental stations,

²⁰⁸ Zyrianov, *Krest'ianskaia obshchina*, 93-140, 227.

²⁰⁹ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 392.

where peasants could see advanced tools and techniques in action, managed equipment-lending stations, supervised peasant experiments with new tools, farming techniques, or crops on specially designated demonstration plots. By seeking to promote technological change in the communes, the zemstvos inevitably came to challenge the government's program of reform. Unlike state officials, zemstvo agronomists saw their main goal in working through existing institutions, not in uprooting the farmer from the village and turning him into individualistic yeomen. Characteristically, local agronomists generally opposed Stolypin's over-emphasis on privatization measures.²¹⁰

As an alternative to land consolidation and privatization favored by the government, zemstvo agronomists suggested a number of effective improvement measures within the framework of the commune. Decreasing the number of furlongs, or *komassatsiia*, for example, could help reduce the negative effects of land fragmentation by widening strips while at the same time allowing the retention of the benefits of common grazing. Another measure called "group land organization" could ease the problem of distant and inaccessible lands by forming out-settlements from over-sized communes. According to Kerans, local zemstvo agronomists in the Tambov province preferred group land organizations over consolidations. In March 1912, the agronomic conference in the Tambov province passed a resolution approving group land organization projects. The state officials, on the other hand, strongly opposed such measures. It was only in 1913 that the Ministry of Agriculture began admitting the effectiveness of group land organization, thus breaking the Ministry of Internal Affairs' pressure to emphasize

²¹⁰ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 391-392, 412-415.

consolidations. Such discord among the two ministries, however, did not change the government's overall policy stressing the consolidation and privatization of land.²¹¹

It is important to note that the government's distrust of the peasantry—and of zemstvo specialists who advocated the peasants' rights—reflected its general distrust of Russian society as a whole, its traditional desire to exercise control over every aspect of public life in almost a military fashion. The Stolypin land reform represented essentially a radical attempt on the part of the government to create the “well-ordered” rural society in a rapidly changing world. Restoring and enhancing order in the largest sector of the Russian economy was crucial to the survival of the tsarist regime, weakened by the defeat in the Russo-Japanese war, the revolutionary chaos of 1905, and the challenges of the new constitutional system.

Whereas state officials claimed that the land reform was liberating peasants from the constraints imposed on them by the commune, it was in fact the government that was imposing on peasants its elitist vision of the reform. In contrast to the classical liberal assertion that private property rights enhance personal freedom and independence, Russian political elites had quite different goals in mind when they initiated land privatization programs. For Stolypin, the primary goal of the land reform was to create a class of obedient and loyal citizens in the countryside. Earlier, Count Illarion I. Vorontsov-Dashkov, Minister of the Imperial Court and a member of the State Council, advocated the extension of private land tenure as a measure limiting rather than fostering peasant freedom of action. Like the English proponents of enclosure, who saw one of the dangers of communal practices in peasants' self-reliance and independence from authorities, Vorontsov-Dashkov blamed the Russian village commune for its “excessively

²¹¹ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 368-371.

democratic” features, which, in his mind, undermined peasants' respect for authority. Similarly, many state officials favored the destruction of the commune as a means to reinforce the loyalty and subordination of the peasantry to the authorities in the face of the increasing influence of political radicalism in Russian society.²¹²

Russian government's approach to reform was in many ways reminiscent of eighteenth-century German rulers who, inspired by the Cameralist theory of a well-ordered police-state, sought to replace the “irrational” practices of the peasant commune with “rational” bureaucratic controls of the state. Viewing the commune as an obstacle to the expansion of state power, German political elites denounced it as a hindrance to economic progress. Land privatization came to be seen as a part of the “rationalization” of the entire social order, which, in the opinion of German rulers, justified the use of force when peasants resisted improvement measures imposed from above. During the reign of Frederick the Great, for example, peasants could be subject to corporal punishment if they refused to grow recommended crops. Ironically, Russian elites did not recognize such actions as constraints on individual freedom. Influenced by the statist economic traditions of Germany, Russian rulers themselves readily used coercion to enforce peasant loyalty and compliance.²¹³

The results of the reform revealed the government's misconceptions and miscalculations about rural realities. According to official figures, between 1906 and 1914, about 25 percent of all peasant households left the commune, including 10 percent of those who consolidated their lands and the other 15 percent who withdrew without consolidating. Contrary to the government's expectations, only a small percentage of the

²¹² Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 154-155.

²¹³ Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 26-29, 41.

strongest households consolidated and privatized their lands. Wealthier peasants could buy their own land or rent additional holdings without leaving the commune.

Entrepreneurial individuals had a chance to open a store in the village, operate a windmill or a threshing machine, or simply live off interest on loans to fellow villagers. If they wanted to try a new crop or an advanced farming technique, they could do so on some of their non-communal lands. In some cases, a big household could arrange for one of the sons to separate and thus enjoy the advantage of both having an *otrub* on the side and maintaining communal benefits, particularly the right to common grazing of livestock.²¹⁴

In many cases, it was not the most prosperous, but the poorest and smallest villages that requested village-wide consolidations. As a rule, these villages contained many failing households, with extremely small land holdings. Conversely, larger villages resisted land consolidation, because this would have made it inevitable for some households to accept a plot far away from their home. Many of those who consolidated their lands never completely cut off their ties with the commune. Wealthy peasants could accumulate large private land holdings by buying the consolidated plots from weaker farmers, but at the same preferred to retain their original communal allotments so they could continue to enjoy the right to common grazing. Overall, more than a half of the consolidators kept at least a portion of their communal allotments in order to remain eligible to communal benefits. Even more strikingly, neighboring individual farmers sometimes “simulated” communal arrangements by coordinating their sowing and farming operations so that to allow common herd grazing on the arable land. Many individual farmers continued to practice common grazing, subdivided their holdings into strips during family divisions, and even undertook land repartitions with their neighbors

²¹⁴ Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 357-358; Pallot, “Development,” 84.

as they had in the communes. One of the most devastating effects of forced privatization was the creation of a large amount of ineffective individual farms. Purchasers of consolidated plots often found themselves in a desperate situation when they realized that, even with the loans from the Peasant Land Bank, they lacked financial resources to relocate their dwellings, pay for their plots, and reorganize their farming operations at the same time.²¹⁵

As we can see, substantial evidence corroborates Kovalevskii's thesis that, due to its misplaced focus, the Stolypin land reform failed to reform Russian agriculture. Instead of addressing the numerous issues hindering economic improvement in the countryside, the Russian leadership concentrated its efforts on eliminating the village commune as the only source of peasant poverty and other rural problems. Ignoring the economic potential of the existing communal institutions, the government chose to destroy them.

Kovalevskii's assessment of the Stolypin land reform fits in the concept of "repressive modernization" suggested by modern scholars.²¹⁶ The tsarist government used the reform to strengthen the power of the state. Moreover, the reform represented essentially a radical project of social engineering, an attempt to fashion a "well-ordered" peasant society according a preconceived plan of rural progress, a plan that was largely based on abstract economic theories and general cultural assumptions rather than on systematic empirical studies. In that respect, the reform represented an example of "administrative utopia,"²¹⁷ based on the government's narrow—and in many respects utopian—vision of rural transformation, which inevitably resulted in its very limited practical impact on the

²¹⁵ Atkinson, *End*, 88, 97-98; Kerans, *Mind and Labor*, 317, 359-362, 381; Pallot, "The Development," 93-94, 103-106.

²¹⁶ See, for example, Kingston-Mann, *In Search*.

²¹⁷ The term suggested by Judith Pallot. See, for example, her *Land Reform*.

peasant economy. Its goal was not only to transform the rural economy but also to change peasants' mentality and value system. As Kovalevskii's analysis has demonstrated, the Stolypin land reform failed to realize these goals.

Conclusion

Kovalevskii's analysis demonstrates that, despite their ancient origins, both communal forms—the patriarchal family and the village commune—had survived well into the early twentieth century in Russia. Both types of the commune represented dynamic institutions that changed over time. Despite the predominance of collective elements, both the family commune and the village commune experienced the growth of individualism within their framework. The fundamental difference between them was that, while the family commune was rapidly decaying in post-Emancipation Russia, the village commune retained its social and economic viability and displayed the signs of significant economic potential. Kovalevskii criticized the authors of the Stolypin land reform for ignoring the evidence of the village commune's capacity to contribute to economic progress and attempting to destroy communal institutions by legislative fiat.

Kovalevskii's scholarship deserves to be praised for its distinctly scientific qualities. His efforts to minimize political bias distinguished him strikingly from many other Russian thinkers. Unlike the majority of Russian intellectuals, he built up his theories not on political considerations but on a balanced, detailed, and meticulously documented study of social, political, and economic institutions. He therefore became one of the first Russian social scientists, in the true meaning of the word.

The scope of Kovalevskii's scholarship distinguished him as well. As a historian, he investigated a variety of political, social, economic, legal, and cultural issues. In addition, he was recognized as a prominent sociologist, political scientist, legal expert, anthropologist, and ethnographer. The geographical scope of his studies was also

impressive, as he was one of the first historians in Russia and Europe to use records and sources from virtually all continents and historical periods in his comparative and cross-cultural research. In many cases, he worked with documents that had never attracted scholarly attention before. He pioneered the application of statistical techniques in historical research. Finally, he relied on his own ethnographic field work in his analysis.

Historians of Russia have long recognized the contributions of Vorontsov, Chuprov, Posnikov, Chelintsev, and Chaianov to our understanding of the peasant economy and culture. Kovalevskii's studies of the peasantry, however, remain largely unappreciated and misunderstood. Historians have particular difficulty conceptualizing and contextualizing Kovalevskii's views of the Russian village commune. They found it hard to reconcile his positivist belief in the universal laws of historical progress, according to which rural communes would inevitably decline and give way to private farms, with his criticism of Stolypin's attempts to destroy communal institutions in Russia. It seems contradictory that a convinced liberal and an advocate of private property rights such as Kovalevskii could oppose the land privatization reform and defend the traditional communal practices of Russian peasants.

This study has attempted to demonstrate that Kovalevskii's understanding of the Russian village commune remained remarkably consistent throughout his academic career. In accordance with the positivist idea of unilinear progress, he accepted the notion that private agriculture would eventually replace traditional collective farming everywhere in the world. Unlike many other positivists, however, he extended the concept of progress to include traditional communal institutions as well. In his comparative studies of communal forms, he argued that communal practices also changed

over time, progressing from simple forms to more complex and advanced ones. For Kovalevskii, adaptation and change constituted integral parts of the communal economy. At the time when Stolypin was attempting to destroy the village commune, it possessed a significant economic potential, which led Kovalevskii to conclude that it should have been supported, instead of being undermined, so that it could continue to contribute to economic progress in the Russian countryside. As paradoxical as it may seem, such an unconventional positivist analysis of agriculture remained consistent with Comte's well-known contention that human societies develop from simple to more complex forms. The greater the complexity of social phenomena, the more they admit modification. Thus, Kovalevskii considered it perfectly logical to apply this developmental scheme to peasant societies and to assume that the village commune could also progress from simpler to more advanced forms.

Kovalevskii's analysis also challenged common assumptions about tradition and change, which are often regarded as antagonistic forces in the historical process. He was one of the first social scientists to argue that these two categories appear not as mutually exclusive but as inseparable and even complementary. In fact, they exist in a dialectical relationship, interacting permanently and beneficially. Tradition emerges not as anachronism or transmission of outdated knowledge but as the heritage that continues to hold value, as the collective wisdom of the past that has full contemporary legitimacy and relevance. Moreover, Kovalevskii stresses the adaptive and dynamic nature of traditional practices. Inherent in human history, change represents an integral part of traditional institutions, not just an attribute of modernity.

Drawing on this notion of tradition and change, Kovalevskii urged Russian policy-makers to move from a static vision of traditional peasant institutions to a more dynamic consideration of their social and economic potential. He repeatedly pointed to Stolypin's failure to recognize the innovative potential of the village commune, which, according to Kovalevskii, would inevitably lead to the failure to modernize Russia's agriculture. He warned the Russian government that it was making a fatal mistake by seeking to destroy traditional communal institutions instead of incorporating them into the reform process. As we have seen, such an interpretation of the "tradition versus innovation" dichotomy radically differed from the prevailing visions of progress among Kovalevskii's contemporaries. Remarkably, it anticipated the understanding of tradition and change that historians began articulating only in the last decades of the twentieth century. Recent studies of economic development in the Third-World countries have legitimized this analysis.²¹⁸ The controversy continues until today, and the assertions that tradition and modernity are not necessarily conflicting forces are still being perceived by many as revisionist, if not revolutionary.

Kovalevskii defined the meanings of the "traditional" and the "modern" in their specific historical and cultural context. While acknowledging the theoretical validity of the "modern" notion of advantages of private over communal land ownership, he warned that this notion might be inapplicable to a particular situation in a particular society. The actual operations of both traditional and modern institutions varied significantly in different historical contexts. In early twentieth-century Russia, he argued, traditional communal institutions successfully adopted modern techniques, just as allegedly

²¹⁸ See, for example, Bonnie J. McCay and Jay M. Acheson, eds. *The Question of the Commons: The Culture and Ecology of Communal Resources* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987).

“modern” private farms continued to hold to traditional practices. The imposition of “modern” private land tenure, he stressed, would not automatically elevate the economic efficiency of agricultural production to the “modern” level.

Kovalevskii arrived at such conclusions on the basis of empirical studies by Russian economists, agronomists, and zemstvo statisticians, as well as his own comparative historical research. This comparative approach not only determined his attitude toward the commune and the Stolypin land reform, but also confirmed his reservations about the positivist concept of unilinear progress. Although he agreed in principle with the general postulates of the evolutionary doctrine as outlined by Comte and Spencer, he emphasized great variations in the course and manifestations of progress in different societies depending on the political, socioeconomic, cultural, demographic, and environmental conditions. Aware of the increasing skepticism toward the positivist idea of progress among late nineteenth-century intellectuals, he in fact contributed to its criticisms and revisions. He regretted “the unfortunate dominance of the organic theory of society”²¹⁹ and criticized scholars who uncritically accepted the notion of unilinear evolution as taking place uniformly in all societies. Moreover, in his late works, he preferred to describe the historical process in terms of social change rather than social progress. In opposition to the widespread misconception that “evolution always tends to the cure of social ills and to the growth of public welfare,”²²⁰ he called for a broader and more particularistic understanding of historical progress than that of the founding fathers of positivism. As much as he admired England and its achievements, he rejected the idea that Russia should emulate English political and economic institutions. He encouraged

²¹⁹ Kovalevskii, *Sotsiologiia* (St. Petersburg: Tip. M.M. Stasiulevicha, 1910), vol. 1, 261.

²²⁰ Kovalevskii, *Sovremennye sotsiologi* (St. Petersburg: L.F. Panteleev, 1905), 286.

Russian leaders to learn important lessons from England's historical experience, especially from the mistakes of forcible enclosures, but insisted at the same time that it was primarily Russia's own historical and cultural context that determined what progress meant for Russian society.

These aspects of Kovalevskii's thought suggest a much more varied picture of positivism than it is commonly assumed. They allow us to speak of a variety of schools of thought within positivism. Characteristically, Kovalevskii himself never perceived positivism as a strict dogma but rather as a mode of thinking or a general intellectual orientation that could produce different intellectual results when applied to different phenomena. Positivist rationalism implied critical approach to any theory, including positivism itself, which justified its constant revisions and re-evaluations by positivist thinkers themselves, not only by its critics. In fact, as we know, positivist scholars differed greatly in their interpretations of the key concepts of positivism. Kovalevskii was no exception. The simplistic picture of positivism generated by its numerous critics does not reflect the complexity and diversity of positivist thought.

Kovalevskii's example challenges much of the conventional knowledge about Russian liberalism and its responses to social and economic problems in late imperial Russia. It is commonly believed that Russian liberal thinkers and politicians unconditionally supported land privatization as an essential component of rural modernization. Petr B. Struve and Boris N. Chicherin, for example, enthusiastically advocated the destruction of peasant communal institutions. The case of Kovalevskii, however, demonstrates that liberal visions of rural modernization were much more nuanced. His liberal convictions did not prevent him from criticizing the Russian government for attempting to impose

private landownership by legislative fiat. As we have seen, he repeatedly emphasized that the accelerated destruction of the village commune would result in the massive impoverishment of the peasantry and, instead of promoting stability, would lead to a nation-wide social and economic crisis.

Because of such assertions, which diverged from classical liberal thought, one might reasonably doubt Kovalevskii's commitment to liberalism. In fact, some scholars have stressed the importance of populist and Marxist ideas in shaping his critique of the Stolypin land reform.²²¹ A close look at his European contemporaries, however, reveals that such views were becoming increasingly common among liberal thinkers and politicians of that time. They reflected the transition in late nineteenth-century European liberal thought from *laissez-faire* capitalism to more socially-oriented strategies of economic development. The mounting social problems caused by the Industrial Revolution prompted European liberals to favor the welfare state. This new type of liberalism recognized the importance of a more balanced distribution of wealth as a guarantor of stability in a democratic society. Disturbed by the prospect of revolution and the proliferation of radical political ideologies, new liberals considered economic security for the poor essential to maintaining the peaceful course of the political and economic progress of European nations. In Germany, a group of scholars known as “academic socialists” (*Kathedersozialisten*) justified government regulation of the economy as a means of promoting social justice. One of the most respected economists of that period, Émile de Laveleye, argued that unregulated markets fostered extreme social differentiation and thus posed a threat to political stability and the advance of freedom in

²²¹ See, for example, Shlapentokh, *French Revolution*, 88-94.

Western societies. John Stuart Mill, to whom Laveleye dedicated his most influential book, endorsed this argument.²²²

It was in the context of the new liberalism that Kovalevskii criticized Stolypin for his socially irresponsible agrarian policy, which essentially prescribed economic disaster for millions of peasants. Urging the government to devise more socially-oriented strategies of rural development, he pointed to the lesson of the French Revolution which, in his opinion, could have been prevented if the French monarchy had been more sensitive to the economic demands of the rural population. In his magisterial four-volume study, *The Origins of Contemporary Democracy* (1895-1897), Kovalevskii argued that the failure of the French *ancien régime* to resolve the pressing social and economic problems of the peasantry had led to the outbreak of the French Revolution. The Russian monarchy, he maintained, was paving the way for the same catastrophic scenario by implementing a radical land privatization program that would sanction the immiseration of the peasant masses.

Kovalevskii's analysis of the peasant commune also appears to be remarkably relevant to contemporary debates about the nature of the peasant economy. Both scholars and policy-makers continue to debate this issue today, particularly in regard to the ongoing land reforms in Russia and in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Two major schools of thought dominate scholarly discourse today. Following Chaianov, James C. Scott and Teodor Shanin emphasize the predominance of subsistence priorities in the peasant economy, which they describe as a peculiar type of the so-called “moral economy” with its own rationality, distinct from the rationality of capitalist market relations. According to this view, the primary goal of peasants' economic activities is to satisfy the

²²² See Kingston-Mann, *In Search*, 117, 121-123, 139.

consumption needs of the household and to avoid the risks associated with market-oriented production, particularly the risks of specialization and experimentation.²²³ By contrast, Samuel L. Popkin and his followers assert that the peasants' economic behavior is often just as rational as that of capitalist entrepreneurs. In Popkin's opinion, peasants operate according to capitalist logic because they seek to maximize productivity and profitability of their labor.²²⁴

Kovalevskii's scholarship provides us with evidence that both aspects—subsistence needs and productivity-maximizing efforts—characterize peasants' economic behavior. Paradoxically, it took several decades for scholars to recognize the idea of the duality of the peasant economy. Sadly, Kovalevskii's insights did not contribute to this recognition, they remained largely ignored in the Soviet period.

The first discussions of the dual nature of the peasant economy appeared in academic journals devoted to peasant studies in the late 1960s and early 1970s. George Dalton, for example, was one of the first scholars to mention the presence of both subsistence and market production in peasant economies.²²⁵ More recently, scholars have begun systematic empirical studies of the plurality of economic rationalities and productive relations within peasant communities around the world. Victoria Bernal, for example, has found evidence of the intertwining of market and non-market relations in modern African rural communities. According to her, peasants respond to market conditions by their involvement in off-farm work, particularly wage work, and participation in food markets.

²²³ Alexander V. Chayanov, *The Theory of Peasant Economy* (Homewood, Ill.: R.D. Irwin, 1966). For expositions of the peasant “moral economy” thesis, see, for example, James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant: Rebellion and Subsistence in Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), and Teodor Shanin, *The Awkward Class: Political Sociology of Peasantry in a Developing Society: Russia 1910-1925* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

²²⁴ Samuel L. Popkin, *The Rational Peasant: The Political Economy of Rural Society in Vietnam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979).

²²⁵ George Dalton, “Peasantries in Anthropology and History,” *Current Anthropology* 13 (1972): 404.

Subsistence production, although not driven by the profit motive, becomes increasingly dependent on the operation of labor and food markets.²²⁶ A growing body of literature suggests that non-market transactions characterize productive exchanges within the village, while market relations link peasants to the larger economic system of which they are a part. In light of these contemporary discussions, Kovalevskii's insights appear to be particularly noteworthy.

Regarding the complexity of peasant society, another important historical parallel could be made. Although there is no indication that Kovalevskii ever met Ferdinand Tönnies or was familiar with his works, we can see clear similarities in their visions of peasant life and culture. Tönnies described pre-industrial communities as dominated by *Gemeinschaft* type of relations but also containing elements of *Gesellschaft*. Likewise, Kovalevskii demonstrated the coexistence of tradition and collectivism with growing individualism and modern rationality within the Russian village. This is an important reminder to those present-day scholars who tend to define societies in the framework of either the *Gemeinschaft* or *Gesellschaft* paradigm.²²⁷ It should be noted that Kovalevskii avoided the extremes of such “either-or” thinking and offered a balanced and nuanced analysis of peasant communities.

Kovalevskii urged scholars to refrain from simplistic interpretations of the peasant economy and warned them of the dangers of what Esther Kingston-Mann called “strictly dichotomized thinking”²²⁸ and what Robert Allen defined as “agrarian

²²⁶ Victoria Bernal, “Peasants, Capitalism, and (Ir)Rationality,” *American Ethnologist* 21, no. 4 (1994): 792-810.

²²⁷ For a discussion of contemporary uses of the *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* concepts, see, for example, S. Brint, “*Gemeinschaft* Revisited: A Critique and Reconstruction of the Community Concept,” *Sociological Theory* 19 (March 2001): 1-23.

²²⁸ See Kingston-Mann, *In Search*.

fundamentalism.”²²⁹ He cautioned that contradistinctions between private and collective practices, as well as their supposed advantages, might not be as clear-cut as many tended to think. In the context of the Russian village commune, collective and individualistic elements complemented rather than contradicted each other.

While the elitist ideas of Auguste Comte encouraged Russian intellectuals and politicians to assume the role of missionaries to the allegedly “backward” peasants, Kovalevskii urged them to abandon their intellectual arrogance toward peasants and to recognize the peasants' capacity and willingness to improve and innovate. Kovalevskii recognized the civilizing and enlightening mission of intellectual and political elites, but at the same time he stressed that peasants could actively contribute to social and economic progress in Russia. The village commune, he believed, was capable of generating from within itself the impulse to change. He argued for projects of economic reform that would recognize the significance of the peasants' expertise, as well as peasants' real—not imagined—interests and needs.

Only recently, historians of Russia have begun to focus their attention on the active role of the peasantry in shaping rural modernization. Remarkably, Kovalevskii attempted to draw scholarly attention to this issue more than a century ago. His analysis challenges us to revise our understanding of the logic and dynamic of social and economic change.

²²⁹ Allen, *Enclosure*.

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Vita

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