

THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE IN TRANSCAUCASIA: AGRARIAN POLICY OF THE LATE 19TH-EARLY 20TH CENTURIES (SOCIOLOGY OF HISTORICALLY PROSES)

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Abstract. The author analyzes the Russian Empire's agrarian policy in Transcaucasia at the turn of the 20th century and also examines the factors that made peasant reform and the new rules of land allotment inevitable. The reform, however, did nothing to improve the life of peasants: they paid for the allotted land with labor service. The colonial powers tried hard to preserve the old order of things in the agrarian sector. The situation in Transcaucasia remained vague even when the reform based on the Regulations of 14 May, 1870 began; the local official structures and top bureaucrats spared no effort to assure the peasants that as soon as they redeemed their land they would no longer be tied to their landlords. The Council of Ministers gathered three times to discuss the Notes submitted on 22 November, 1905, which outlined the conditions on which the relations of dependence and temporary obligations could be discontinued by making the peasants owners of land without redemption payments and by shifting to the state treasury the burden of redemption payment to the landlords. The second draft was amended accordingly. In fact, before the second draft was submitted, the Viceroy and the Ministry of Internal Affairs had agreed that the land should not be transferred to the peasants free of charge: this looked like a flagrant violation of the right of ownership; this explains the second (less radical) draft. On 19 December, 1912, the State Council approved the draft with no considerable changes; on 20 December it was signed by Emperor Nicholas II and became a law. On the one hand, it presupposed that the czarist government would insist on its agrarian policy started when the region was united with Russia.

Keywords: The Russian Empire, Transcaucasia, agrarian policy, village, reform, landlords, redemption payments, land allotments, peace mediators.

1. Introduction

Peasant reform in the Caucasus started later than elsewhere in the Russian Empire and did not do much to make landowners out of peasants: the huge redemption payments were beyond their earning power.

Instead, the reform made them "temporarily obligatory peasants"; by the turn of the 20th century, their vague status could no longer be tolerated: the government had to act fast to avoid further complications.

By 1864, peasant reform finally reached Transcaucasia; serfdom was abolished in the Tiflis and Kutaisi provinces. In the Muslim provinces, the process went on for seven years, from 14 May, 1870, when the Regulations concerning settlers (*poselyane*) were published, until 1877 [4].

2. Materials and methods

The reform, however, did nothing to improve the life of peasants: they paid for the allotted land with labor service. The conditions of labor service proved to be much more favorable for the settlers in the eastern part of Transcaucasia: they acquired their household plots for free. In the Baku and Elizavetpol provinces (with the exception of the Qazakh district), they paid 30 kopeks per 1 desyatina (1.09 hectares.—*Ed.*), a regulation limited to estates in which the peasants were burdened with labor duties [1].

The land allotments were too small: in some places, and not infrequently, they were 0.9-0.6 desyatina per male peasant [See: Ibid., p. 11.]. In Transcaucasia, peasants leased land to increase their plots. In the late 1880s, 33 percent of

the peasant population worked on leased plots; by the early 20th century, this number had nearly doubled [See: Ibid., p. 12]. From the very beginning, leasing was very expensive, the price of plough land and even hay land steadily climbed. In the Baku and Elizavetpol provinces, leasing was usually paid in kind (a certain share of the yield) and, rarely, in cash.

The colonial powers tried hard to preserve the old order of things in the agrarian sector. This explains why the Regulations of 14 May, 1870 (in the parts related to the above-mentioned provinces) tied land redemption (the main point of the reform) to several conditions, which made redemption too expensive for the local peasants.

The situation in Transcaucasia remained vague even when the reform based on the Regulations of 14 May, 1870 began; the local official structures and top bureaucrats spared no effort to assure the peasants that as soon as they redeemed their land they would no longer be tied to their landlords [State Archives of the Azerbaijan Republic [3], rec.gr. 387, inv. 1, f. 300, sheet 4.]. The uncertainty (which had persisted far too long) was discontinued on 20 December, 1912 when Czar Nicholas II signed a new agrarian law [5].

3. Results

After peasant reform, the fast changes in commodity-money relations, private property on land, and the methods of private land use in Northern Azerbaijan made readjustment of Russia's agrarian policy in Transcaucasia inevitable [1, p. 14.].

As time went on, the economic and, later, political shifts in the Caucasus on the eve and during the first Russian revolution convinced the colonial powers that the category of "temporary obligatory peasants" could no longer be tolerated. It was decided that peasants should redeem their land. This first evidence of attention, albeit involuntary, to the situation in Transcaucasia produced several agrarian laws and a transfer to prompt and obligatory land redemption [See: *Ibid.*, p. 15].

The first Russian revolution slowed down the process: the draft laws discussed for a long time remained suspended; after the revolution, however, the process accelerated. The new agrarian laws of the early 20th century [1 May, 1900 and 21 April, 1903] related to the state peasants of Transcaucasia (who constituted the absolute majority) specified their legal status, but did not improve their life [See: *Ibid.*, p. 15].

This meant that the status of "temporarily obligatory peasants" survived in two provinces of Northern Azerbaijan and the Caucasian Territory until 20 December, 1912 [See: *Ibid.*, Vol. 32, 1915, pp. 1688-1696] [See: *Ibid.*, Vol. 32., 1915, pp. 1688-1696.] and 7 June, 1913 when the settlers of the eastern part of Transcaucasia were obliged to redeem their land with the financial support of the state.

While the peasants of central Russia were exempt from redemption payments on 1 January, 1906, the peasants of Transcaucasia had to carry the burden much longer, despite the two laws. It should be said that the Russian colonial authorities in the Caucasus procrastinated far too long: St. Petersburg distinguished between the peasant question in central Russia and in Transcaucasia, hence the hardly justified ambiguous policies in the region.

On the other hand, continued temporary obligations turned out to be a hindrance for the agrarian economy, of which the local power structures in Transcaucasia were fully aware.

Count Illarion Vorontsov-Dashkov, appointed Viceroy of the Caucasus in 1905, played an instrumental part in drafting and adopting a new law. On 22 November, 1905, he published his draft law Notes on Regulating the Peasant Question in the Caucasus, a very much needed and long overdue step toward lightening the burden of redemption payments [21]. In his letter dated 22 November, 1905 addressed to Minister of Internal Affairs Pyotr Durnovo, the count pointed out that "starting in 1873, the Caucasian administration has been working on all sorts of measures designed to discontinue the status of 'temporarily obligatory' peasants and introduce obligatory redemption of land allotments; none of them were of any importance for the peasants. In the last forty years, none of the laws have improved the situation [1, p. 41]."

In June 1904, the Council of the Caucasian High Commissioner drew up and adopted Draft Provisions for the Redemption of Land Allotments by Peasants and State Settlers Still in Temporary Obligatory Relations with Landlords and Landowners [9, rec. gr. 396, inv. 3, f. 560, sheet 4.]. Approved by Prince Grigory Golitsyn, Chief Authority of the Civil Administration of the Caucasus, on 17 December, 1904, the draft was presented to the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which approved it [*Ibid.*, sheet 230.]. On 2 March,

1905, the Minister of Internal Affairs asked the Minister of Justice to give his opinion on the document, which recommended discontinuing the existing obligations by asking the government to help the peasants with redemption payments. The Minister of Internal Affairs pointed out that he agreed with the Council's decision and, in turn, was ready to support the planned measures and prevent possible opposition. He discussed in detail what might be said to justify the government's refusal to help the local people redeem their land allotments, in particular, because the peasants did not have enough money for redemption payments, which meant that the loans would not be repaid on time [1, p. 28.].

By 1904, the Ministry of Internal Affairs had drafted (or compiled, according to certain sources) a law on the need to promptly discontinue "temporary obligatory" relations; it was suggested that the peasants be simultaneously made landowners through obligatory redemption. In 1905, the Caucasus became a viceroyalty; the project was never implemented.

Count Vorontsov-Dashkov, the newly appointed Viceroy, admitted that the political situation in the recently restored viceroyalty in Transcaucasia was very complicated. He had no choice but to support the prompt elimination of temporary obligatory relations. In his letter to Pyotr Durnovo of 22 November, 1905, he pointed out that the Manifesto of 3 November, 1905, which cut dues in kind by half as of 1 January, 1906, and discontinued them as of 1 January, 1907, should be extended to state settlers in the Caucasus. The Viceroy was convinced that the emperor should go further; in particular, peasants and state settlers still dependent or in obligatory relations with landlords and the khizans of the Tiflis and Kutaisi provinces should acquire property rights to the land they were using within the borders registered in corresponding documents and khizan protocols [10, sheets 4-5.].

The Notes on Regulating the Peasant Question in the Caucasus the Viceroy presented as a draft law on 22 November, 1905 was a necessary step toward improving the position of the peasants. It was suggested that the peasants who had agreed to redemption payments should be freed from interest payment in 1906-1907 [21, op. cit. p. 126].

The Notes enumerated the necessary introductory steps, such as loans from the Transcaucasian Branch of the State Peasant Bank to be opened on 1 January, 1906. The Document specified that vacant state land and forests, and also other servitudes (lands used communally) could be used in favor of peasants with little or no land [11, sheet 31.].

The Viceroy suggested that the redemption payments from the peasants of Transcaucasia should be cut by half as of 1 January, 1906; on 1 January, 1907, they should be abolished altogether; from that time on, the owners of the redeemed land should start paying state and local taxes on a par with the owners of other types of landed property [11, sheet 18.].

The Council of Ministers gathered three times to discuss the Notes submitted on 22 November, 1905, which outlined the conditions on which the relations of dependence and temporary obligations could be discontinued by making

the peasants owners of land without redemption payments and by shifting to the state treasury the burden of redemption payment to the landlords.

In 1906, the Council of Ministers pointed out to the Viceroy that there were plans to transfer the peasants from dues in kind to monetary and much lower dues based on the price of agricultural products that existed at the time when the Regulations that discontinued personal dependence and established the status of temporary obligation were published. The Council of Ministers was convinced that this was a step toward complete discontinuation of temporary obligatory relations and the complete redemption of land allotments.

The Council invited the Viceroy to submit a detailed draft law on elimination of dependent and obligatory relations in the Caucasian Territory to the legislatures in the shortest time possible [12, sheet 1.].

The Viceroy at first suggested that in the Caucasus land allotments should be transferred to the peasants free of charge; the Council of Ministers disagreed [1, p. 39.].

The second draft was amended accordingly. In fact, before the second draft was submitted, the Viceroy and the Ministry of Internal Affairs had agreed that the land should not be transferred to the peasants free of charge: this looked like a flagrant violation of the right of ownership; this explains the second (less radical) draft. The first draft emerged amid the storms of the first Russian revolution, while the second was written after the bourgeois-democratic revolution had been suppressed. In these conditions, the government no longer needed extreme measures to detach the peasants from the working class to rout the revolutionary forces. All extreme measures, therefore, were declined under various pretexts as the revolutionary fervor abated and finally died out [21, p. 125.].

On 15 December, 1908, one more draft On Elimination of Obligatory Relations between Peasants and Landlords in the Transcaucasian Territory [19, pp. 34-35.] signed by 34 members of the State Duma was offered for discussion. It differed greatly from what the Viceroy had suggested and contained the following points:

(1) dependent and temporary obligatory relations in Transcaucasia should be discontinued immediately without new sacrifices in favor of landlords;

(2) all duties of temporarily obligatory and dependent settlers to the landlords should be abolished, while the land allotments these peasants were using should become their property within the factual borders or the borders registered in documents;

(3) the right to use servitudes (grazing land, forests, water, etc.) should be granted to the peasants of the above categories on the conditions accepted in the northwestern provinces of Russia (under the Rules of 26 March, 1869, Points IV and V) until legally settled.

The balance of political forces in the State Duma gave the project no chance: it was declined like all its predecessors [14, sheet 115.].

In 1908, after his first draft had been declined, the Viceroy revived the problem of discontinuation of "temporary obligatory" relations in the Transcaucasian Territory and,

early in 1909, submitted his draft to the Council of the Viceroy [Ibid., f. 583^A, sheet 316.].

The Council discussed the draft in late April and early May 1909 and also on 22 May, 1910; in October-December 1910, it was discussed by the interdepartmental meeting chaired by the deputy Minister of Internal Affairs [1., p. 69.].

Still later, the Viceroy took into account certain debatable issues, including the redemption prices, to improve his draft. While the landlords in Northern Azerbaijan insisted that the prices should be geared toward the agricultural prices of the early 20th century, their opponents wanted to use the prices of 1870 (when the Regulations were adopted) as the starting point. In 1909-1910, the Council under the Viceroy twice returned to the draft amended by the Viceroy [14, sheet 43.].

The discussion of the redemption prices went on and on. Members of the top Muslim social groups rejected the suggested prices; they sent their messengers to St. Petersburg to the interdepartmental meeting [20, p. 114.], which declined their objections; it was decided that the peasants who belonged to private owners should use cash for redemption payments and not cheques or bonds, as was allowed in central Russia [18, p. 91.]. It should be said that the latest draft that reached the Council of Ministers on 20 December, 1910 differed from the version of 22 November, 1905: while the earlier version included the Zakatali District and the state peasants in the scope of the law, the later one left them outside it.

After being endorsed by the Council of Ministers on 17 March, 1911, the draft law was passed to the State Duma of Russia on 24 September. It caused little disagreement (except Point 9, which presupposed free transfer of marshes and other land little suited for agriculture to peasants free of charge) and was passed by a majority [1, p. 106.].

On 19 December, 1912, the State Council approved the draft with no considerable changes; on 20 December it was signed by Emperor Nicholas II and became a law. On the one hand, it presupposed that the czarist government would insist on its agrarian policy started when the region was united with Russia. On the other, it ushered in a new and equally trying period in the life of peasants. The law, the instructions for its application, and the table of land prices regarding the first desyatina of land were published on 25 December, 1912 in a special 260th issue of the laws and bylaws of the Russian Empire [2, sheet 63.]. Acting according to the law, the Viceroy prepared and the ministries of internal affairs and finance approved two instructions—on implementation of the reform [Ibid., sheet 79.] and on the rules of calculation of redemption payments [Ibid., sheet 88.].

Under the Rules, the privately owned peasants in five provinces of Transcaucasia were relieved from their temporary obligations in favor of their landlords as of 1 January, 1913 and had to pay a certain amount of money to make their land allotments their property [Ibid., sheet 84.]. Under the new law, the peasants could use the servitudes only if landlords and other landowners allowed them; water resources remained the property of landlords.

Under the new law, all temporarily obligatory and other dependent peasants in five Transcaucasian provinces

were transferred to obligatory redemption payments as of 1 January, 1913 and had to pay annual interest to the treasury [1., p. 117.].

The Rules stressed that redemption and other procedures should be limited to the boundaries of former land allotments of dependent peasants. If the borders outlined in the documents and the actual borders did not coincide, the procedures should be applied to the actual borders of land allotments.

The Rules relating to the repayment procedure indicated the deadlines for each zone and each village within the span of 28, 41, and 56 years [2, sheet 83.]. The tables that supplemented the Law established all redemption prices for the first desyatina of land of each type of plough and other land. For each of the five provinces, the prices were arranged by districts and zones within districts. The state structures used the document to establish the size of the redemption payments to the landlords and other landowners and to assess the total volume of money to be paid.

On 2 November, 1913, the ministries of internal affairs and finance agreed on instructions for those officials who would be implementing the reform and indicated the source of money to pay for the operations [Ibid., sheet 88.].

The Law of 12 December, 1912 regarded the "temporarily obligatory peasants" as owners; they, however, were not completely relieved from the very heavy tax and other payments for the use of land allotments they had received from their former owners. It was expected that from 1 January, 1913 they would annually pay huge redemption sums for the next 28, 41, or 56 years. This did not lighten the burden of the former serfs, even though their status of free people and the fact that land allotments became their partial property slightly improved their living and working conditions.

The agrarian law opened a new stage in the evolution of the forms of land property in the general context of the bourgeois transformations going on in the region. On the other hand, the law did not completely defuse tension, which caused clashes between the top Muslim social groups, who deliberately interfered with the implementation of the reform, and their former serfs.

While the Law of 20 December, 1912 presupposed immediate and complete discontinuation of the temporary obligatory relations in five provinces of Transcaucasia (to which Northern Azerbaijan also belonged), the process was often very slow: it took too much time to transfer peasants to redemption payments, draw the necessary documents, etc.

The annual reports of the commissions on peasant affairs operating in different provinces confirm this. For example, between early 1913 and 1 January, 1917, the five provinces drew up 2,795 redemption acts (or 45% of the needed), which caused discontent among the peasants [1, p. 139.].

Point One of the Rules that supplemented the Law was related to the peasants and settlers of the Tiflis and Kutaisi provinces, who lived on the land of the highest Muslim clergy, and other landowners of the Baku and Elizavetpol provinces. As of 1 January, 1913, it discontinued their

status of "temporarily obligatory peasants" to make them landowners with all the corresponding rights [2, sheet 83.].

The Law specified the forms of redemption payments in detail. Starting on 1 January, 1913, landlords and other landowners could expect 4.5% of the total redemption payment for the lands transferred to the peasants. This meant that the Law retreated from the previous figure of 5% cited in the draft [12, sheet 91.].

The size of the redemption payments was established with the help of peace mediators. They had to receive copies of corresponding documents or a land-survey map from each peasant. If this proved impossible, they had to go to the provincial committee for peasant affairs for copies; peace mediators could rely on tax inspectors; together they gathered all the necessary information and, after calculating the cost of peasant labor service on the land of landlords, arrived at a final figure for the redemption payments.

The mediators were given a month to complete their jobs, inform both sides of the results, and announce the sizes of payments and deadlines to peasant gatherings. After defining the size of the redemption payments, the mediator drew up a corresponding document and a list of peasant households expected to pay the money; it was his duty to regularly inform the provincial commission about his progress.

Two other documents, Orders and Instructions, were drawn up to stress that the redemption payments could not and should not be increased; the peasants were allowed to pay higher annual interest, if they so wished, which was, by all means, to be subtracted from the total [2, sheet 80.]. Land surveyors of the Tiflis Judicial Chamber were invited to establish the amount of land to be redeemed as established by the peace mediators. The final document was drawn up in the presence of two peasant representatives; if the village community failed to appoint its representatives, other people could be invited as witnesses. The landlord was also expected to witness the procedure; if he failed to attend, it was the duty of the mediator to deliver him a copy of the repayment documents; the absence of any of the sides from the procedure could not slow down the process.

4. Conclusions

An assessment of the price of one desyatina of land was based on the agricultural prices of 1870 (when the Regulations had been published). In all provinces, the prices were geared at the type, fertility, location of land allotments, and other factors. Local lands were primarily assessed according to two categories or zones. This explains the different prices in different districts: in the Sharur-Daralagez District of the Irevan Province, irrigated plough land was assessed in five categories, while in the Irevan District, in four.

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