

**Book Review: *Soviet Peasants (or, The Peasant's Art of Starving)*, by Lev Timofeev. New York: Telos Press 1985. 160 pp. \$15.00 (hardbound).**

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Lev Timofeev is a pseudonym for a Russian journalist who specializes in agricultural affairs. Although Pitassio and Zaslavsky's introduction claims *Soviet Peasants* to be a work of social anthropology, the case material (including some unpublished investigations) is far too limited and the book much too polemical to qualify as a traditional ethnographic monograph. The value of the book lies in the way Timofeev integrates seemingly disparate phenomena into a single scheme of analysis. He demonstrates how the collective farm is linked to the private plot, the state planning system to the black market and how well-off peasants can co-exist with the drudgery, alcoholism and personal degradation of Soviet village life.

The private plot, for example, is essential not only for the reproduction of the peasant household, but also for urban workers and the kolkhoz. So much does the state realize the value of the plot that peasants who seek to relinquish it and obtain the countervalue of their production from the kolkhoz are denied this possibility. For Timofeev, the personal plot (and contract labor systems) in agriculture are not islands of initiative but insidious forms of exploitation (Here Timofeev's analysis echoes that of Haraszti regarding piece-work). The peasant must not only work a second shift--self-exploitation--but must also rely on the free labor of spouses, aged parents and children. That such self and family-exploitation can result in prosperous households building irrationally large houses is hardly surprising. What is surprising, according to Timofeev, is that such self-exploitation produces so comparatively few of these prosperous households. Similarly, the black market is an integral part of the planned economy. "Black market relations are also planned, but of course, this sort of planning is not likely to be publicized" (p. 151). The bureaucracy tolerates the black market as a substitute for genuine open markets which would challenge their authority directly.

The dual system of oppressive formal institutions and personal household strategies--kolkhoz vs. plot, official vs. black market, exploitation of "us" and stealing from "them"--produce moral consequences as well. Peasants send their children to steal from the kolkhoz; the

peasants suffer from "pathologies of consciousness (nervousness, psychological illness) and of behavior (alcoholism, violence, rudeness, hooliganism, rape)". This has led to "the degeneration of the very people whom we prefer to regard as resistant to degeneracy" (p. 118).

Simply leaving the peasants alone would be enough to get the Soviet rural economy moving again and increase living standards. Those who today hail the Soviet peasants' private inventiveness, ingenuity and improved standard of living must realize that it has been achieved at a tremendous price--extra labor, self exploitation, stealing, duplicity and moral depravity. These societal responses are turning into a "way of life", such that those who do not treat the state as a collective forest to be exploited will come to be regarded as "stupid". The "personal plot" will thus become a metaphor for the way citizens of Eastern Europe regard all public institutions--from the peasant ripping off the kolkhoz to the butcher holding meat for his special contacts, to the clerk who dispenses Moscow residence permits to his friends, to that woman in the Romanian hotel kiosk who rented her one copy of Newsweek until finally forced to sell it to a foreigner. A longer review-symposium on the book will appear in the forthcoming issue of *Telos*.