

The agrarian reforms of Pyotr Stolypin



Fig. 6 Count Pyotr Stolypin

An outbreak of rural violence following the disastrous harvest of 1901 led to the establishment of a Commission of Agriculture in 1902, on which the most influential member was Pyotr Stolypin, the Governor of Saratov province and himself a landowner.

Stolypin was a hard-liner. When Saratov had been badly hit by peasant disturbances in 1902, and again in 1904–06, he had won a reputation as the only governor able to keep firm control. He developed an efficient police force and used it to build up a profile of every male under his control. His known efficiency and ruthlessness recommended him to Nicholas II; he was appointed minister for internal affairs and in July 1906 replaced Goremykin as Prime Minister.

Although not totally against the idea of Dumas he was determined to ensure that its members were compliant and his dissolution of the first Duma led to uprisings and threats to his own life. In August 1906, he established court-martials led by senior military officers to deal with crimes deemed to be political in intent. In these courts, all cases had to be concluded within two days and the accused was not allowed a defence counsel, while death sentences were carried out within 24 hours. Over 3,000 were convicted and executed by this court system between 1906 and 1909 and the hangman's noose gained the nickname 'Stolypin's necktie' (*stolypinskii galstuk*).

However, Stolypin combined this intolerance and ruthlessness with a belief in a radical reform of agriculture as the best strategy for resisting revolutionary demands. He strongly believed that the future of Russia depended on building a prosperous peasantry and his motivation for reform was both political and economic. Despite the widespread rural poverty, a significant number of peasants had managed to improve themselves since the emancipation decree by buying up land and farming more efficiently. They had come to form a 'rural upper class' of better-off peasants known as the Kulaks. Stolypin described them as the 'sturdy and strong' and he believed that the future of Russia depended on encouraging men like this to flourish. They would, he believed, act as a bulwark against revolution, since their own prosperity would make them hostile to further change and supportive of the tsar who had made them wealthy. Furthermore, their industry would improve agriculture, and their wealth would be spent on consumer goods, so stimulating industry.

Key profile

Pyotr Stolypin

Pyotr Stolypin (1862–1911) came from an aristocratic Russian family and after attending university in St Petersburg had entered government service. He rose to become the youngest ever governor – in Grodno in 1902 – and subsequently was promoted to Governor of Saratov province in 1905. He was the first governor to use police methods to quell disturbances in his province and his reputation for law enforcement brought him to the attention of the tsar who appointed him as Prime Minister in July 1906. He held this position until 1911, during which time he instituted a

new court system and carried through a major programme of land reform. He also muzzled the Dumas, changing the electoral law after the Second Duma, and carried through a major programme of health and educational reform. It has been suggested that he was responsible for staving off the disaster threatening the Russian monarchy. He was assassinated in 1911 but the cause gave rise to speculation. Bogrov, the assassin, was both a Social Revolutionary and a member of the *Okhrana*. Some suspected the conservative right were anxious to get rid of him because they were afraid of his reforms and his influence on the tsar, although this has never been proved.

Stolypin's plans, therefore, revolved around the abolition of the *mir's* communal land tenure, which had proved the main cause of peasant discontent, so making it possible for peasants to become the permanent owners of their land. This land would also be in one piece, rather than a collection of scattered strips around the village. Such ambitions involved no less than the complete transformation of the communal pattern of Russian rural life.

This programme of agricultural reform had begun in 1903, when the *mir's* responsibility to pay taxes on behalf of all the peasants in the village was removed. However, it was not until after the unrest and violence of 1905 and Stolypin's promotion to the prime ministership that major changes were undertaken. The most important legislation was passed in November 1906 and this was supplemented by further legislation in 1910 and 1911.

Cross-reference

To review the unrest and violence of 1905, look back to Chapter 5.

The land reforms



Fig. 7 Russia suffered from widespread rural poverty

In September 1906, the amount of state and Crown land available for peasants to buy was increased and in October, peasants were granted equal rights in their local administration. In November 1906, peasants were given the right to leave the commune and the collective ownership of land by a family was abolished. This made the land the personal property of an individual (usually the eldest male) who was given the right to withdraw it from the commune and consolidate the scattered

strips into one compact farm. Land organisation commissions were set up, containing representatives elected by the peasants, to supervise this procedure and a new peasant Land Bank was also established to help peasants fund their land ownership. (These reforms did not actually become fully operative until approved by the Third Duma – where the Octobrists and Kadets were strong supporters – in 1910.)

Redemption payments were officially abolished – as promised in 1905 – as from January 1st 1907, but in reality they had long since ceased to be paid in full. In June 1910 all communes which had not re-distributed land since 1861 were dissolved. There was also an increase in government subsidies to encourage migration and settlement in Siberia.

The legislation was complex but it encouraged land transfers and the development of larger farms as poorer peasants were encouraged to sell out to the more prosperous ones. Stolypin is said to have claimed that he needed 20 years of peace for his reforms to have an effect and the coming of the war obviously prevented this. However, peasant ownership grew up to 1914 and the hereditary ownership of land by peasants increased from 20 per cent in 1905 to nearly 50 per cent by 1915. A run of good harvests played a significant part in increases in production and rising peasant prosperity, but the development of larger farms able to use more machinery and artificial fertilisers must have played a part. Between 1905 and 1915 Stolypin's encouragement of emigration also took 3.5 million peasants from the over-populated rural districts of the south and west away to Siberia. This move turned the region into one of the Empire's major agricultural regions, particularly for dairy farming, eggs, butter and cereal production.

Limitations

However, there were limitations to the improvements. Only 14 per cent of communal allotment land had passed into private consolidated ownership by May 1915 and changes in the land tenure arrangements took a long time to process. By 1913, only 1.3 million out of 5 million applications for the consolidation and hereditary tenure of individual farms had been dealt with. Furthermore, strip farming persisted, particularly in the central districts of Russia, where conservative peasants were reluctant to give up the security which the *mir* provided for them. By 1914, there were still only around 10 per cent of peasant holdings that had moved beyond the traditional strip farming. There was also the land which remained as the private property of noble landowners, although violence – or the threat of violence – forced many to relinquish their holdings. The opportunity for peasants to build up large farms was, nevertheless, limited by these landowners as well as by cash.

Perhaps the most important limitation of all was that Stolypin's reforms produced a growing class of alienated, poor and landless peasants. Whilst some peasants rose in rank and joined the Kulaks, once again, for every family that improved its status, there was another which descended into deeper hardship and either had to rent land, to be paid for in money or by their own labour, or was forced to join the wandering ranks of the landless, drifting to the cities to work in the factories.

It is impossible to know what the full outcome of Stolypin's programme would have been as it was cut short by the coming of war in 1914. As Russia entered that war, rural poverty was still widespread and considerable tensions remained.

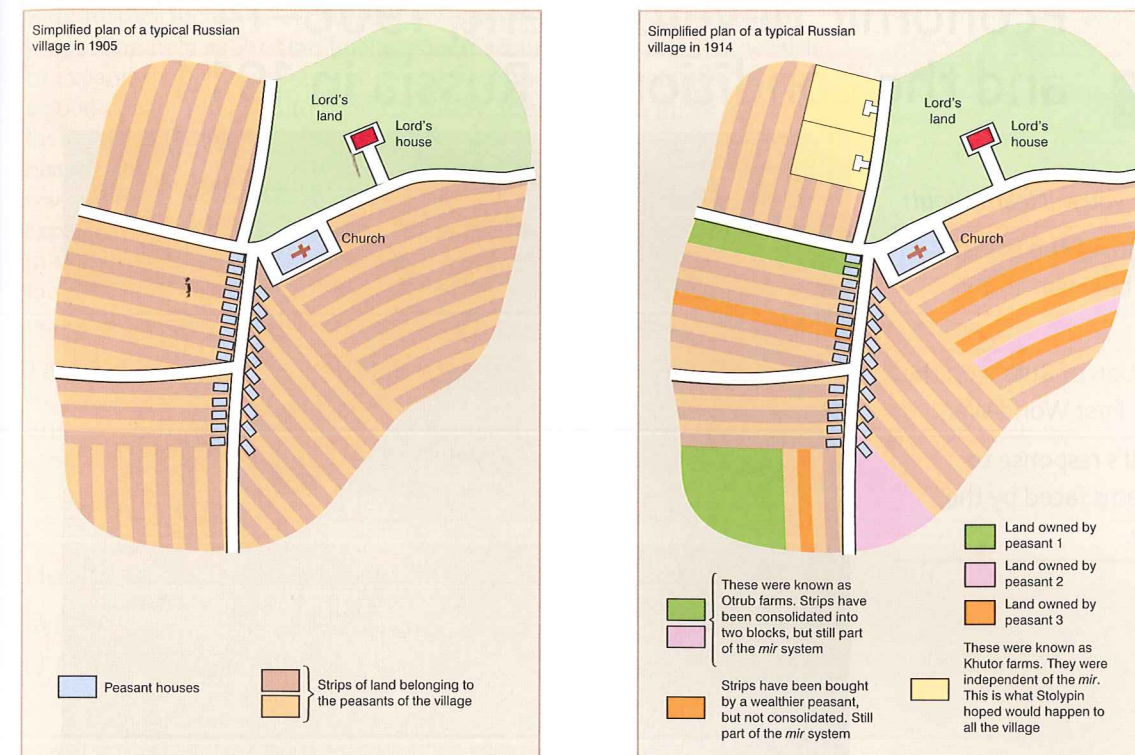


Fig. 8 Changes in farming, 1905–14

A closer look

Stolypin's reforms – an assessment

It is difficult to assess the effect of Stolypin's reforms because of the wide variations that existed between areas. In some provinces, peasants owned practically all the arable land by 1914, but in others the proportion was much lower. According to McCauley, although there were a lot of land sales, in Voronezh province 37 per cent of the land bought was purchased by landless peasants, whereas the more prosperous farmers with 20 desyatinas and more acquired only about 4 per cent. This would suggest that these reforms were not helping to create Kulak farmers in that area, but simply ameliorating the lot of the poorer peasants. The historian Shanin has also argued that the reforms did not have the intended effect of concentrating land in fewer hands. He has argued that there was cyclical change. A peasant with a large family who kept the profits within his family prospered, while a peasant with a smaller family could move down the hierarchy. There was, therefore no clear dividing line between rich and poor peasants. A rich peasant's son might work for a poor peasant while a poor peasant might choose to let his land and work in a factory. There is also some dispute as to whether Stolypin's policy could have worked if given more time. Its problem was not only that it required fast industrial growth to provide employment for the surplus rural labour, but also, that a cultural change was required on the part of the peasantry, a desire for self-improvement, a higher level of education and an awareness of the need to think and plan ahead.

Activity

Write an obituary for Stolypin following his assassination in 1911. Decide firstly whether this will be published in a tsarist or radical newspaper.

Summary question

How successful was Stolypin in helping to improve the lot of the peasants in Russia between 1906 and 1911?