

Introduction

Western approaches to the study of Soviet history in the era of NEP and Stalin's 'revolution from above' generally suffer from an over-preoccupation with 'high politics' and a tendency to consign provincial areas of the country to the historical margins. Consequently, local influence on policy-making at the centre and local considerations in the implementation of orders 'from above' are downplayed and glossed over. This fundamental gap in our understanding of events in this period has been partially overcome by the substantial body of Western scholarly works that have focussed on the Smolensk Archives in the USA, a unique and rich source of local material, while studies of the 'big city' party organisations of Moscow and Leningrad remain accessible and popular. Outside of these areas our knowledge of events across most of the country is patchy. In the 1980s the conceptual approach of local studies, assessing the dynamic of history in operation at the grassroots where party and government most impinged upon the vast majority of Soviet citizens, has been applied by some social and economic historians to the years of Stalin's revolution, but so far the NEP era has escaped investigation from this angle.¹

The deficiency in our knowledge of NEP – the strategic retreat to a gradual transition to socialism imposed by Lenin in 1921, whereby the 'commanding heights' of the economy (large-scale industry, banking, transport, foreign trade) remained under state ownership and management, while a regulated market mechanism was established in the economic relationship between the state and the peasantry – is highly unsatisfactory given that it is part of the Western academic conventional wisdom that local factors were of crucial importance in Stalin's decision to abandon NEP in favour of a 'great turn' to rapid collectivisation and industrialisation. It is generally recognised in the classical works on this period that the grain procurement crisis of 1927/8 was a watershed in Soviet history, and that Stalin's experiences

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during his tour of the Siberian Krai in January 1928 in search of a quick breakthrough in the crisis had a critical, negative effect on his outlook towards the programme of socialism 'at a snail's pace' entailed in NEP. There is agreement that Stalin's enthusiastic advocacy of the use of emergency coercive measures against peasants delivered a death blow to NEP, and initiated a new radicalism which led to the second revolution of late 1929. It also brought to a close the years of oligarchic rule by a party elite, as on his return from Siberia Stalin inaugurated the power struggle with his former political allies on the Right of the party that ended with the consolidation of his personal dictatorship.²

This book seeks to contribute to a more complete understanding of the processes at work during NEP and the reasons for its disintegration by means of an interpretive structure that analyses the events of these years from the regional perspective and Siberia, given its significance in 1928, seemed an interesting candidate. I begin with a survey of Siberian rural society and agriculture in the 1920s which brings out how peculiar Siberia was in comparison with other areas of the country, in terms of the wealth of its peasantry and their use of advanced, mechanised farming methods. This aims to explain how the region developed so dramatically into one of the most important agricultural bases of the country in the mid-1920s, particularly for state wheat procurement, and assesses the claims that there was a prolific growth of petty-capitalist kulak peasants in the territory during the years of NEP. It examines the nature, organisation, recruitment and social composition of the regional party and reveals the extent to which the exceptionally large component of peasant communists in Siberia were linked with the well-off stratum in the countryside, and how unreliable they proved once NEP was reversed. In this respect, it should be noted that the population and party membership of Siberia were overwhelmingly Russian and therefore relations between the party and the peasantry were not complicated by nationalist or ethnic tensions as in the Ukraine and North Caucasus.

The theme of centre-periphery relations is pursued mainly in relation to the operation of Stalin's patrimonial system of client provincial party chiefs, a much emphasised but relatively uncharted aspect of political life in the 1920s. The activities of senior regional officials are shrouded in obscurity and it is surprising just how little we know about them considering their importance in deciding the outcome of the factional disputes in the central party leadership through their membership of the Central Committee and control of the voting power of the constituent party organisations at congresses and confer-

ences. In tracing the career and opinions of the Siberian Kraikom Secretary, S. I. Syrtsov, a Stalin loyalist, a new insight into Stalin's relationship with his network of party clients is provided. Given that Syrtsov's views on NEP and the peasant question were consistently closer to Bukharin's than to Stalin's at this time, it would suggest that Stalin's ability to maintain the support of his party political machine owed less to policy issues and choices, and more to his power of patronage as General Secretary. The regional dimension of intra-party factionalism is also reviewed: specifically, the degree to which political differences in the Siberian party elite mirrored the contours of the schism in the Politburo in the aftermath of the grain crisis or were determined by and reflected purely local matters.

At another level this book may be viewed as a study of the origins of Stalin's 'revolution from above' in the crisis of 1927/8. The causes of the grain crisis are well established but we know less about its development and impact at the regional level. Thus, the extent to which price imbalances, goods shortages, high peasant incomes and other factors were involved in the drastic fall-off in Siberian grain procurement is detailed. Stalin's decision to go to Siberia in early 1928 was clearly a momentous event, for it was the first time since the civil war and, as far as is known, the last time that he visited the countryside. An account of the tour and its significance for local and Soviet politics concludes that the date of Stalin's decision to implement all-out, forced collectivisation and the 'liquidation of the kulaks as a class' should be projected backwards from late 1929 to the time of his stay in Siberia.

The emergency measures taken at Stalin's insistence were a decisive factor in the successful resolution of the grain crisis, and he was now convinced that coercion was the best method of dealing with the peasantry and bringing them to heel. However, his frame of mind was rattled and his confidence in the efficacy of NEP shaken by his Siberian experiences. His actions and speeches in the region bear witness to the outrage he felt not just at the obstructionism and recalcitrance of regional officials in the application of the emergency measures, which he interpreted as connivance with 'kulak sabotage', but also at what he considered to be their outright siding with the kulak against the party. Thereafter, he had an abiding mistrust of lower-level officialdom. At the same time, there were positive results in the performance of the party from Stalin's viewpoint because he regarded those few officials in Siberia who enthusiastically embraced the emergency measures as evidence of a dynamic 'from below' in support of a new militant line. Moreover, he left Siberia confirmed in the belief that he had hitherto

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underestimated the growth in the economic power of the kulaks, as the disturbing stranglehold which Siberian kulaks held on agriculture in the region indicated that they did indeed pose the kind of threat of which the Left Opposition had been repeatedly warning.

Stalin extrapolated from these distinct Siberian conditions and concluded that the degeneracy of the party and the existence of a powerful kulak stratum were endemic in the country as a whole. The only solution, he determined, was immediate large-scale purging of the party and a rapid advance to collectivisation, otherwise the party's continued monopoly of power was threatened. Although a shift in the mood of the Stalinist section of the party leadership against NEP and in favour of an acceleration of industrialisation and collectivisation was evident from the late autumn of 1927, the Siberian expedition saw a significant radicalisation of Stalin's views against the policy of conciliation of the peasantry enshrined in NEP. This point marked the juncture where the Soviet Union began the descent into the cataclysm of the 'second revolution'.

Finally, the evidence presented in this work facilitates the drawing of more sophisticated comparisons and contrasts between Soviet politics in the 1920s and 1930s: periods currently under reassessment in the Soviet Union and the West in the light of *glasnost*. In particular, a recent Western reevaluation of the Great Purges of the mid-1930s from the regional perspective concluded that Stalin's role as political prime mover in this instance has been exaggerated and that his function was secondary to the 'existence of high-level personal rivalries, disputes over development or modernization plans, powerful and conflicting centrifugal and centripetal forces, and local conflicts', all of which 'made large-scale political violence possible and even likely'.³ What is striking about the study of Siberia in the 1920s is the extent to which regional politics were determined by local antagonisms and the competition of a plurality of local interests and forces, and centre-periphery relations were played out against this background. In the late 1920s prior to Stalin's consolidation of absolute power, regional conflicts, no matter how bitter, did not lead to the mass fratricidal destruction of intra-party political opposition.

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The pre-revolutionary heritage

Siberian society and economy under NEP were unique by Soviet standards as they were distinguished from other areas of the country in several significant respects, some of which were a legacy of the pre-revolutionary settlement of the region. The development of Siberia followed the common pattern of colonisation of new territories in the latter part of the nineteenth century and was largely determined by its rich economic potential, climate, means of communication with other developed areas and the character of its settlers. The 'endless steppes' of Russia are a mere prelude to the unchecked expanses lying east of the Urals, for the west Siberian lowland steppe encompasses one of the most vast plains of arable and pasture land on earth. From the Ishim river over 1,000 kilometres east and south-eastward to the Altai mountains stretches an unbroken tract of practically level steppe 300–500 kilometres wide intersected by two great rivers, the Irtysh and the Ob, and their tributaries. The soils of much of this area are of the highly fertile black-earth and chestnut-brown kind but unstable continental climatic conditions create difficulties in agricultural production and the wide divergences in winter and summer temperatures make the area highly susceptible to droughts and winter killing of crops and animals. The most suitable area for agricultural production in the region is the Altai steppe in south-west Siberia where the climate is milder and the chestnut-brown soils receive adequate rainfall.¹

Grain cultivation in Siberia is crucially affected by climatic conditions in two main respects. Firstly, seasonal changes are sudden as winter sets in very quickly in late October and ends just as suddenly in early April. The effect of this is to shorten the spring sowing and autumn harvesting to a matter of three weeks and thus to greatly enhance the time-saving benefits and profitability gained by the use of agricultural

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machines. Secondly, as a consequence of the short sowing season the grain harvest critically depends not only on the level of precipitation but also on its timing. A good grain harvest in south-west Siberia is determined by soil humidity and this depends on the scale of snowfalls in winter followed by sufficient rainfall in the first stages of growth during late June and early July. Grain farmers in this region faced a precarious situation of drought once in every three years on average, and a severe drought once in every decade. However, after the drought of 1920–1 Siberian grain producers entered a trouble-free boom period and within the Altai the area enclosed by the Biisk–Barnaul–Rubtsovsk triangle became a major source of high quality wheat for the country.²

Siberia was Russia's contemporaneous frontier equivalent to the American and Canadian 'Wild West', and the settlement of its steppe regions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is comparable both in scale and endeavour. Pre-1870 settlers and their descendants in Siberia were the kind of heterogeneous mixture common to all societies at the margin and may be divided into five main groups: religious fundamentalists (Old Believers or non-Orthodox sectarians), political exiles and convicts, voluntary migrants (mainly runaway serfs, small-time entrepreneurs and freebooting adventurers), Cossack and military personnel, and government officials. Siberia was also sparsely populated by indigenous nomadic peoples (though in colonial jargon it was an 'empty' land) and consequently became an obvious resettlement area for the impoverished land hungry peasants of the European Russian empire. From 1885 to 1914, with the construction of the Trans-Siberian railway and its branch lines, a flood of over 5 million immigrants poured into Siberia, most of whom settled in the Altai. The bulk of these (over 4 million) were peasants from the overcrowded agricultural regions of European Russia and the Ukraine. The tsarist government actively encouraged voluntary migration to Siberia primarily by keeping railway charges low and through the promise of generous land grants to new settlers. From this time forward, as G. T. Robinson observed: 'Among the peasants west of the Urals, Siberia was regarded as a kind of Utopia.'³

As immigration reached a peak in the first decade of the twentieth century, there was a considerable counter-movement of peasant 'returners' to European areas as the best Siberian lands had already been claimed by earlier settlers. The formidable experience of migration and settlement led to the emergence of a society and sub-culture which was different in character from that which existed in

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European Russia. Although the dividing line of the Ural mountains was not a major geographical obstacle in terms of size, it constituted a significant psychological barrier as illustrated by the Siberian description of the return journey across the Urals as 'going to Russia'. The huge distances and poor communications insulated Siberians from Russian society and caused them to develop a consciousness as a people and place apart. On the eve of the First World War one traveller in the region noted that 'just as the English settler in Canada has become Canadian, so the Russian settler in Siberia has become a Siberian'.⁴ Unlike Russia, Siberian society was a melting-pot, with the inter-mingling of Russians, Belorussians, Ukrainians and indigenous peoples, and there was even a linguistic dimension to its development as it has been asserted that Siberian Russian is 'almost as distinctive as . . . American English'.⁵ The 'frontier spirit' of Siberia fostered amongst its people a temperament of fierce resentment of established authority and a great willingness for self-help and cooperation. The Russian Prime Minister, P. A. Stolypin, returned from a fact-finding tour of the region in 1910 disturbed by the ethos of independence in this 'enormous, rudely democratic country', and other writers have mentioned the tendency of Siberians to address 'highly placed officials as equals, not superiors'.⁶ Hugh Seton-Watson described Siberian society as one where: 'There were no noble landowners. The leading people were largely self-made men, farmers or merchants who were proud of their success, and judged others by their merits and not by their social status. It was an individualist, self-reliant society, the only part of the empire in which anything like a bourgeois ethos prevailed.'⁷

Given the poor communications and the absence of landlords, Siberian peasants were not subject to the kind of outside pressures that weighed heavily on the peasantry of European Russia. In keeping with the 'Siberian spirit' the peasants of the region eschewed the *pokornost'* (resigned submissiveness) of their counterparts west of the Urals. Most striking of all was the superior economic condition of the Siberian peasantry and it has been estimated that the average settler family more than tripled its possessions in eleven years. This comparative prosperity was accurately encapsulated by the peasant saying: 'the Siberian *bedniak* is your Russian *seredniak*'.⁸ The main reason for such prosperity lay in the large size of farms and the method of land tenure in the territory. The most distinctive feature of the Siberian countryside under the *ancien régime* was that land was held in what amounted to a state of nationalisation and the *latifundia* of European Russia were almost non-existent. In 1917 the ownership of agricultural land was as

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follows: state (35.5%), Cossack military colonies (8.1%), Tsar's personal demesne (7.2%), private (0.5%) and peasant (48.9%). Of the land held by peasants some was occupied at small quit rents on long leases from the state (8%) and Tsar (12.2%), but a substantial part was in tenure by unregulated means (28.7%) i.e., by right of permanent usufruct (*zemlepolzovanie*) or squatting (*vol'nozakhvatnyi*). During the great migration period the government attempted to restrict peasant holdings to a norm of 15 desiatina (16.35 hectares) per household (*dvor*) but, given the abundance of open virgin steppe, squatting or freeholding was widespread and settlers often held 40–50 desiatina (45–55 hectares) of arable land alone.⁹

The harsh experiences of settlement, the shortage of open water sources on the steppes and, specifically, the opportunities for establishing extensive landholdings gave rise to the development of a peculiar Siberian form of the peasant commune (*obshchina*). A distinctive feature of villages, particularly in the Altai, was their large size, containing 200 or more households on average, often 500–600 and sometimes even 1,000. Contemporary observers of village life in Siberia noted that whilst nominally the commune regulated land tenure, in reality many did not engage in general or even partial redistributions of land and even fewer established equal divisions of land as was the tradition in European Russia. This brought one commentator to declare that the Siberian commune was 'at present being shattered at its foundations'. In fact, the fundamental principle of the redivisions which did occur in Siberia was 'the right of each householder to remain on his own place', and the transfer of land among households was rare.¹⁰ The incentive to improve productivity arising from the stability of land tenure was another factor contributing to the prosperity of many Siberian peasants.

Revolution, civil war and NEP

One of the principal causes of the revolutionary upheavals of 1917 to 1921 was the land hunger of the peasantry and its disgruntlement with the great landed estates of the nobility. During these years land was not an issue in Siberia as there were huge state reserves and only an insignificant number of landed estates. Consequently, the peasant revolution which transformed the Russian countryside in 1917–18 had no counterpart in Siberia and therefore it escaped the sudden, mass forcible seizure of estates and general redistribution of

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land characterised by the 'black transfers' (*chernye peredely*) in European Russia. Rather, there was a relatively peaceful process involving the 'nipping off' and redistribution of small plots of land from large holdings which were close to settlements whilst distant holdings were left intact. Large peasant farms emerged virtually untouched by the redistributive process because the extensive reserves of unsettled state land (substantially increased by the incorporation of the Tsar's demesne into the Treasury by the Provisional Government in March 1917) were available. Landless and small-scale peasant farmers received grants of land, the norms and distribution of which were administered by local soviets and varied by district, for example, in the Altai grants were per family member, in Enisei Guberniia by farm worker, but both procedures favoured the larger, well-off peasant families.¹¹

As with the rest of the country the redistribution of land in Siberia was conducted in an anarchic manner during 1917–18, when state lands were seized wholesale by the peasantry, and was only regularised after the Bolsheviks defeated Kolchak and established their authority in the region at the end of 1919. In March 1920 a decree of the Bolshevik dominated Siberian Revolutionary Committee (Sibrevkom) established labour norms for land redistribution, forbade the use of hired labour in agriculture, and established collective farms as 'schools for working farms'. This was followed by a decree in August 1920 which transferred 'unused' lands for redistribution among the 'unregistered' peasant population and further restricted the hiring of labour, the leasing of land and decreasing of sowings. These acts were framed as 'anti-kulak' measures and were intended to curb the large holding farms which had escaped the revolutionary 'levelling' process which had occurred in other parts of the country. The main instruments for the general 'levelling' amongst the peasants of European Russia were the poor peasant committees (*Kombedy*). Yet the Siberian countryside was left unscathed by the attentions of these committees as they were dissolved by the Bolshevik government at the end of 1919, just before the establishment of Soviet control of Siberia. In fact, the Siberian peasantry escaped the kind of havoc and massive destruction which the civil war brought to other major agricultural regions such as the Ukraine and North Caucasus because the struggle between the Bolsheviks and Kolchak had been concentrated along the Trans-Siberian railway network whilst foreign intervention was largely confined to the Far East. As in European Russia the loyalties of the Siberian peasantry fluctuated during the civil war and it would be more accurate

to say that they fought to preserve their land rights against Kolchak's reactionism rather than for the Bolsheviks.¹²

During 1920–2 the Bolsheviks attempted to organise a more systematic policy of 'levelling' in the Siberian countryside. These campaigns had two important consequences for the future of agriculture in the region. Firstly, there was a significant equalisation in peasant livestock holding, especially of cattle, which as we shall discuss below had a disastrous effect on the Siberian butter industry. Secondly, the greater part of 'dead' farming equipment (agricultural machines and implements) remained untouched and in the hands of their owners, despite the fact that the short sowing and harvesting seasons in the region meant that mechanised agricultural equipment (particularly mowers and threshers) made a significant contribution to peasant prosperity. Further, although most poor peasants had received land it was impossible to work this efficiently without implements. In chapter 3 I shall discuss how after the introduction of NEP these machines and implements played a crucial role in the development of peasant differentiation and the emergence of a petty-capitalist kulak stratum in the Siberian countryside.¹³

In the mid-1920s the predominant features of Siberian society and economy were small-scale peasant family farms and agriculture. According to the census of 1926 there were over 8.6 million inhabitants of the Siberian krai, of whom almost 7 million (80.6%) were classified as peasants by employment (about 1.4 million farms in all), while over 7.5 million (87.2%) actually lived in the countryside. Only 12.8% of the population of Siberia were defined as town dwellers (against just under 18% for the USSR) and as many as 10% of these were actually peasants (typically semi-settled peasant migrants en route to rural settlements). Before the rapid industrialisation of the early 1930s Siberian towns were mainly small rural market centres, with a handful of medium sized industrial and commercial cities that had developed along the Trans-Siberian railway. Business and industrial enterprises were predominantly small scale and privately owned and in late 1925 state-owned industry employed just 27,000 workers. As late as 1927 the industrial output of the region was a meagre 1.9% of the USSR total and much of that was accounted for by agriculture related industries.¹⁴

Immigration to Siberia fell to a trickle during the turmoil of 1914–21, but with the establishment of the Soviet regime and the introduction of NEP it was revived with official encouragement and in the years 1920–4 over 330,000 migrants arrived. The Bolsheviks initiated a planned settlement policy and an All Union Migration Committee was