THE RUSSIAN PEASANT: HOW AND WHERE HE LIVES. BY ISABEL F. HAPGOOD

NOTHING could be more confusing to an uninitiated foreigner than the present topsy-turvy state of affairs in Russia. Even to Russians many of the chameleon-like phases of the strikers' "logic" are surprising. To most others the state of affairs is absolutely baffling, as soon as one tries to advance a single step beyond the bald statement and fact of the corruption of the bureaucracy and the vast need of improvement in the condition of the working-classes. But then no fair-minded person can justly deny that as much may rationally be said of our own working-classes; and that we have bloody strikes and a well-rooted bureaucracy of our own not lacking in corruption is testified by many events extending over many years,—say, from the date of the Star Route frauds to the Post Office malfeasance and "graft." Therefore, if a few salient points are explained, the foundation for sympathy and understanding of the present crisis in Russia is certainly within the reach of Americans.

Thorough comprehension, of course, is not to be expected, except from those rare foreigners who are acquainted with people of all classes in various parts of Russia, and are able through adequate knowledge of the language to make personal investigations; and who also are possessed of that indefinable quality of insight which enables them on occasion to assume the mental and moral attitude of a people which, in many respects, look at things from an angle quite different from the ordinary viewpoint of Western nations.

Probably the question which first of all forces itself upon the lay mind, and recurs daily during the perusal of the cablegrams from various centers of disturbance is:—What is the class distinction between the strikers and the revolutionists who are impelling them to a course of action as obviously ruinous to themselves as well as to the country? Even Father George Gapon, their enthusiastic leader of a year ago, pronounces it indiscreet to the verge of madness. And on the other hand what is the social difference between the soldiers who are repressing disorder and the infuriated peasants who are turning upon their self-styled champions and theoretical benefactors and rending them?

Naturally, the cause of the whole matter lies in the conditions of daily existence. But before I proceed with that subject, let me make
the following stipulations; that all anarchists and reckless degenerates, bent upon unearned, unmerited aggrandizement at the expense of their hard-working and better principled, normal fellow-citizens, shall be excluded from our calculations; that neither the conditions of existence, form of government, personal character, nor any other factors have the remotest connection with the springs of action of such agitators. That they are actuated merely by insane ambition or by the motives I have already mentioned, is abundantly, daily proved in every “civilized” land on the globe, from republican America to—well, let us say, to that land of supreme and perfect patriotism and cheerful obedience to authority, Japan. Let me also say, that the “revolutionists” are almost exclusively from classes higher than the peasant, which latter class, considered as furnishing strikers, soldiers, and exterminators of revolutionists, is the subject of this article. Hence, to reach any conclusion in regard to these questions it is first necessary to ask one more:—How and where does the Russian peasant live?

H OW he lives depends in great measure, as in other lands, upon his capacity and industry. In general his dwelling and mode of life depend greatly upon the part of the country where his lot is cast, and often, also, upon the season of the year. If he lives in the forest-zone, which extends with an irregular boundary line from the Arctic ocean to a little below Moscow on the south, his log cottage, caulked with moss and clay, is roofed with planks. Further south, where wood is scarce, it is thatched, and set flat upon the earth. In the far north, in the Archangel Province, for instance, and in the vicinity of St. Petersburg, the peasant wisely utilizes the ground floor as a wagon or tool-shed and storehouse, while his story-and-a-half residence rises high and dry above “damp Mother Earth,” as the poetic national phrase runs. In the olden days, when enormous families dwelt under the same roof, in patriarchal fashion, the houses were proportionately large, but at the present time, two or three rooms as a rule comprise the available space, the attic rarely being inhabitable to any extent. A tiny kitchen, a living-room, sometimes an extra bedroom, all heated by the huge oven, in, not on, which cooking is done and in which a hot-air bath is often taken. The platform above the oven is the choice sleeping-place, reserved for the elder members of
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the family. The rest dispose themselves on the bench which runs around the walls, or on the floor. Occasionally one encounters a sloping platform, like the nari on which all soldiers in barracks and convicts in Siberian prisons sleep. Bedclothing? None—or, sometimes, a small, felt-like gray blanket. Bedclothing is not needed in the intense heat of the oven, when plenty of fuel is to be had. Furniture is scarce. Under the holy pictures of Christ and the saints, in the right-hand corner facing the door, stands the table. There the family sits at its simple meal of cabbage soup, called lazy when made, in summer, of unsoured cabbage; buckwheat, hulled and boiled; making a heat-producing, nourishing groats; black rye bread; mushrooms which have been gathered in the forest and dried; perhaps tea, or even milk, if it be not during a fast and there is a cow. When times are good, the peasant occasionally indulges in a little mutton, horribly vulgar viand in high life! and sugar for his tea. Small babies are not required to sleep on a hard board, even in Russian peasant cottages. A stout but supple sapling is fastened to the floor against one wall, and a sort of square hammock, distended with two poles,—like that which belonged to Peter the Great, preserved in the Kremlin museum, in Moscow—is attached to the tip; and this cradle is easily rocked from a distance by a rope. I saw one ingenious peasant who had fastened a thick spiral spring to the ceiling, and from the hook on the lower end had hung a splint market-basket, which rocked at every movement of the baby. But he was progressive.

IN the north, a huge pair of gates generally flanks the house, giving access to the farmyard, where the buildings, like the house, are of logs or planks. Gables of both the house and out-buildings are nearly always surmounted by rude silhouette carvings of horses’ heads. The Grand Duke Vladimir has an original fence around his summer palace at Tzarskoe Selo adorned with a whole herd, so to speak, of these archaic horses’ heads. When the peasant is well-to-do, and sometimes he is sufficiently so for the women-kind to wear gorgeous old brocade sarafani and head-dresses adorned with seed pearls and gold embroidery and lace veils, he is fond of ornamenting the frames of his windows with intricate carving. These log houses with elaborate carving are in great favor for villa-residences in some places,
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for instance, at Pavlovsk village where the Grand Duke Constantine resides in Paul I’s old palace, and a decorated log-cottage which a lady of the Empress’s court had erected on the Baltic coast. The ancient Tzars of Moscow had huge palaces of wondrous architecture, all built of logs and boards, and such houses are considered by many persons to be the warmest and most healthful, even at the present day.

IN the Black Earth, the forestless zone beginning a little south of Moscow, there are no carvings. The farm buildings, like the fences, are often ingeniously constructed of wattled tree-boughs, some on Count L. N. Tolstoy’s estate at Yasnaya Polyaya, furnish a good example. Sometimes the cottages, like many old-fashioned churches in town and country, have a “cold part” for summer, and one which can be heated for winter use. Queen Elizabeth of England used to “go to sweeten,” as I remember my historical reading, moving on from palace to palace, and leaving the one last occupied to be aired and the floors, carpeted with rushes and covered with food, bones for dogs and other vivacious and fragrant inconveniences, to be cleaned up. So why should not the Russian peasant humbly imitate her, even though he be forced by circumstances to combine his summer villa and winter mansion under one roof? Occasionally one encounters brick cottages, where, by energetic and philanthropic landlords, peasants have been persuaded of their utility, especially in case of the scourge of fire which so often sweeps a village out of existence. I remember a neat little modern cottage that Count Tolstoy’s head butler owned. It had a fashionable green iron roof, quite in town taste, of which he was, not unreasonably, very proud. For while Lyeff Nikolaevitch preaches the simple life, and practises it to the extent of his ability so far as food, clothing and personal appurtenances are concerned, living in some respects as much like a peasant as possible, the entirely obvious and amusingly contradictory fact remains, that the first thing required in the elevation of the true peasant is the abandonment of precisely this genuine simple life, and the acquisition of a taste for and possibility of what Lyeff Nikolaevitch would doubtless call “sinful luxuries,” but what the unregenerate remnant of mankind would designate as ordinary decencies, comforts and conveniences. For instance, peasant washing facilities, for bath and clothing, are rudimentary. The weekly steam bath in the communal
TYPES OF THE RUSSIAN PEASANT
REAPING THE RYE
PEASANT DRESS LIKE COURT COSTUME
WATTLED GRANARY AND FARM
PEASANT GIRL WASHING
RUSSIAN RUSTIC WASHSTAND
PEASANT COTTAGE, NORTH RUSSIA
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bath-house does, indeed, remedy matters to a degree; but one marvels that they maintain so cleanly an appearance under the circumstances.

In Southwestern Russia—“Little Russia”—the land of poetry and song, the handsome, vivacious peasants live in cottages of plastered rubble, with plank shutters decorated with wonderful plants in gay pots, painted in high colors. They wear a garb more picturesque than in many other sections of the country, and all the maidens used to wear thick wreaths of natural flowers to crown the effect of their elaborately embroidered chemises. The ingeniously simple but highly effective “adaptable” petticoats are of indestructible, homespun étamine, in fancy checks of red, yellow, green and white, a material which artists eagerly purchase for draperies and upholstery. In this section the simple fare is increased by Indian corn, which grows freely, and which the peasants understand how to use, although in St. Petersburg and the north I was told that it was not only not to be had, but was not fit for human food! I found two spindling stalks of Indian corn growing in a bed upon the terrace of the Emperor’s great palace at Tzarskoe Selo, each with an ear about the size of a baby’s little finger, and a tuft of silk to match; and the gardener explained to me that it was an exceedingly rare ornamental plant, and very precious.

Owing to various circumstances, the ordinary vocations of the inhabitants in all regions of the country are, almost without exception, insufficient by themselves to provide full support. In the frozen north, where agriculture is almost impracticable, and fishing in the Arctic waters and also inland along the fish-bearing rivers is possible for a few months only, and out of the question during the greater part of the year, the natives must eke out their scanty incomes by “cottage industries.” In the fertile zone of the center and south, agriculture alone is, as a rule, insufficient, and home industries must be resorted to. The communal system of land-tenure, so highly lauded by certain theorists who have no knowledge of its practical operation, with the individual plots which were never sufficient and are growing steadily less so with the increase of population, is, happily, soon to be abrogated. The system of tillage is necessarily superficial and the fallow-field method imposed by it still further reduces the area under cultivation at one time; the lack of cattle
in adequate numbers for manuring the soil, and the use for fuel (dried) of what dung is produced in the forestless tracts; the inability to purchase chemical soil-foods; the frequent droughts in a region where the average rain-fall is too meagre to admit of decrease without evil effects; the perfectly natural dislike of the peasant to enrich a plot which, in the next communal re-allotment of the land may,—nay, almost certainly will,—fall to some other man,—all these factors combine to force members of the agricultural communities to also adopt cottage industries, or to seek work either in factories or as cabmen, porters, servants, etc., in the towns. The “cottage industries” which are of wonderful variety, ingenuity and great value, encouraged and aided by the government and by private philanthropists, include beautiful laces, drawn work, embroidery in silver and gold, and colors, the famous translucent papier maché enamel (the invention of a peasant), fine gold and silversmiths’ work, metal work of many sorts, handsome woodcarving, toys, potteries, fine cloths, and a multitude of other beautiful and useful things. All this, in addition to the weaving of linens, firm and durable as iron, and stout woolens, with elaborate drawn work and embroideries for personal costumes, occupy sometimes as many as sixteen hours out of the twenty-four, either all the year round, or during the otherwise idle season. Unhappily, the peasant taste is rapidly being ruined in Russia, as in other lands, and the women, in particular, are happy to render themselves hideous, by dressing in ugly calico prints, made in the scantily-ruffled petticoat and dressing-jacket pattern, with an unbecoming factory kerchief knotted under the chin, instead of their own beautiful costumes, headdresses, and home-made stuffs. As the Russian workman works best and naturally in self-organized bands called artéls, or guilds, some of these domestic industries have been developed into regular factories, while many remain confined to the individual cottages, as heretofore.

ONE of the greatest difficulties with which Russian manufacturers have to contend is the love of the peasant for the soil, and his obligations to the communal system, meeting the taxes, etc. This has led to the workmen abandoning the factories for the fields during the agricultural season. A constantly increasing number have abandoned the fields altogether for labor in towns, and so have formed
the nucleus for a “town proletariat” like that in other lands. This naturally suits the manufacturers. But another difficulty arises from the numerous holidays, religious and secular, and the entire absence in the Russian make-up of western “hustle,” with a few notable exceptions, of course, like Count Witte and Prince Hil-koff. Consequently, the workman takes twelve, fourteen or more hours daily to accomplish what American workmen effect, when they choose, in eight; and the contention of the manufacturers that they cannot afford to increase the low wages and decrease the long hours until the men change their methods of work, has a good deal more justification than Westerners who theorize on the labor question without adequate knowledge of the Russian situation are willing to realize. Some changes can be made; but the abrupt one demanded cannot. Englishmen take life easily, and make business and enjoyment go hand in hand, in a way which is enthusiastically praised—or condemned—by the strenuous Americans, according to the point of view, or personal convenience. For the same sort of thing Russians are universally objurgated, without the manifestation of the slightest desire to take conditions into consideration. One of these conditions unquestionably is the climate, which may be held responsible for much that is criticised in the Russian alternations of fierce activity and relaxed inertia. The climate is by turns exhilarating as champagne, and insidiously relaxing; alternating, nay, even simultaneously, if such a thing can be possible. Perhaps a good simile would be the effects of over-stimulation produced by very strong coffee. The combination of spasmodic energy and aversion to activity may be very reprehensible in the Russian; but he is no more to be condemned for it unheard than is the American for the nervousness and energy, arising in great measure equally from climatic conditions, which so frequently so rasp and exasperate the natives of more equable zones. It should be quite easy for nervous, excitable Americans to understand how such temperaments can be suddenly swept off their feet, so to speak, by real wrongs and the mistaken idea that the whole social fabric can be reformed over night; and then, regaining their reason, be goaded to fury against those who have incited them to deeds alien to their settled convictions, and rational methods. For the factories which these misguided people have been destroying, together with their own means of subsistence, will not all rise, like the Phoenix, from
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their ashes. Many peasants, urged by needs and by the indispensable requirements of the manufacturers for skilled and permanent labor, have long since abandoned their rural occupations, and more or less have lost their hold there. They have rendered themselves, in the most unfortunate sense of the word, the “town proletariat” and will, no doubt, bitterly regret even the defective conditions of the recent past, before new establishments rise on reformed or improved lines to replace them. This proletariat of the town dwells in slums, like the corresponding poor in England, America and elsewhere; or in cellars, or log-houses in the outskirts. The factory workers are often housed in barracks by the company, and the government regulations as to medical attendance, schools for the children, insurance and indemnity against accidents, are enforced by inspectors. In St. Petersburg the conditions are worse than elsewhere, owing to the marshy soil, dangerous dampness, and the not infrequent submerging of low-lying sections by the Neva, driven in from the Gulf of Finland by strong southwesterly winds, which are a constant menace to the very existence of the entire capital. Against this insidious dampness even the peasant’s sheepskin coat, with the wool inside, and his felt boots, worn over crash leg-cloths, home-made linen trousers, and cotton shirt, must furnish very inadequate protection in genuine winter weather. One could hardly blame him for taking to vodka to supply the warmth for which his meagre vegetarian diet was inadequate; but now that he has adopted the “revolutionary” policy of boycotting vodka because the government controls the monopoly, and has resolved to stick to tea, the teetotallers will go on their way rejoicing, while they shake their heads over the unsound “principle” on which liquor is abandoned.