

Hugh D. Hudson, Jr. *Peasants, Political Police, and the Early Soviet State: Surveillance and Accommodation under the New Economic Policy*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012. xiii, 177 pp. \$80.00. ISBN: 978-0-230-33886-9.

As its title suggests, Hudson's book traces the evolution of the Soviet regime's attitude toward the peasantry from accommodation in the early 1920s to a full-scale war on the peasants as a class by the end of the same decade. To illustrate this transformation in state-peasant relations, Hudson relies almost exclusively on secret police reports on peasant behavior during the New Economic Policy (NEP). The secret police, operating for most of the NEP period as the OGPU (*Ob"edinennoe gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie*, or Unified State Political Administration), were charged with monitoring the popular mood and economic and political conditions in the villages and thus served as the Soviet state's "eyes and ears" in the countryside. OGPU field agents submitted their daily observations to the provincial OGPU office, which compiled these observations into reports, known as *svodki*, and forwarded them to central OGPU authorities. The Information Department of the OGPU then summarized the contents of the *svodki* in monthly submissions to the state and party leadership (p. 4). According to Hudson, the information provided by the secret police influenced Stalin's decision to embark on collectivization and dekulakization (p. 2). Initially, the secret police portrayed peasants' concerns as legitimate economic grievances and urged the regime to try to attract peasant support for the communist order by correcting these grievances and accommodating peasant needs. It was only when the secret police ceased to believe in their own argument for conciliation and accommodation that the destruction of the peasant way of life through collectivization became the most logical course of action (p. 3).

Hudson dates the shift in the secret police's approach to the peasantry from 1924, when the Soviet leadership began the "face to the countryside" campaign (p. 66). In observing the attempts to bring the peasantry closer to the regime, the police encountered more resistance than they had anticipated. Policies enacted during early NEP to redress peasant dissatisfaction, most notably the replacement of the compulsory grain delivery to the state (*razverstka*) with a fixed tax (*prodnalog*) and the legalization of the market for grain, had the unintended effect of benefitting the well-to-do peasantry at the expense of poor and middle peasants, whose allegiances the state was actually cultivating. In 1924, genuine economic hardships combined with uncertainties in the wake of Lenin's death and fears of impending war led peasants to turn away from the state and toward the wealthy peasants, or kulaks, as a source of political guidance and economic assistance. Secret police agents were dismayed by the peasantry's rebuff of NEP-era policies that the police had recommended that the state undertake to alleviate peasants' economic situation and win their support. Having witnessed peasant attempts to drive up prices for grain by withholding it from the market and to reduce the

Communist Party's influence in rural soviets, the secret police began to doubt the rationality of peasant behavior that they had heretofore emphasized. In their reports, references to the harmful influence that kulaks were wielding over the mass of peasants increasingly appeared alongside sympathetic explanations for peasant actions. Therefore, Hudson argues, the change in the secret police's opinion of the peasantry was based not on orders from above, but on agents' perception of local conditions (p. 75).

Hudson does a fine job using the police reports to trace the evolution of both local and central attitudes toward the peasant question. His assertion that the secret police's disillusionment with the possibility of compromise with the peasantry began as early as 1924 distinguishes his work from that of Tracy MacDonald, who argues that the years 1924-1926 constituted a window of opportunity for state-peasant cooperation (p. 3). Hudson finds official frustration with peasant obstinacy to have been more widespread by 1924 than other scholars have posited, yet he simultaneously maintains that the state-sanctioned use of repression against the peasantry was not an a priori policy, but one that was reached after many failed attempts at negotiation with the countryside on the part of the secret police. Hudson rightly points out that acknowledging the failures of the regime's efforts to work with and reform peasants is not the same as arguing that such efforts were never made (p. 4).

Hudson's argument that the secret police reports actually influenced Stalin's implementation of collectivization and dekulakization is less convincing. Hudson explains that, as late as 1928, local secret police agents continued to offer rational, economic explanations for peasant resistance to the regime even as the central OGPU reports compiled for the leadership consistently depicted the political opposition of the kulaks as the main obstacle to the establishment of Soviet rule in the village (pp. 100-101). According to the author, this "bipolar reporting" demonstrates that OGPU agents, at least at the local level, were still trying to portray peasant grievances as economically legitimate without challenging Stalin's conviction that speculative activity by wealthy peasants was the primary impediment to grain procurement (p. 105). The fact that the secret police continued to justify peasant complaints with reference to economic conditions, well after the central leadership had decided that the peasantry as a class constituted a political threat to the Soviet Union's survival, raises doubts about whether Stalin and other party-state leaders ever gave serious consideration to the information provided in the *svodki*. In other words, it seems equally likely that the content of the secret police reports changed in response to the central leadership's evolving attitude toward the peasantry, rather than the other way around.

Moreover, what Hudson terms "bipolar reporting" – the simultaneous assertion that "all is well and everything is collapsing" (p. 105) – could be as much a legacy of tsarist-era police reporting practices as evidence of the OGPU's struggle to portray economic realities in the countryside while adhering to Stalinist dictates. Hudson references Russia's long tradition of using the police to monitor the mood of society, which he traces back to the reign of

Ivan the Terrible, to explain the Soviet state's reliance on the OGPU as its link to the peasantry's world (p. 7). Somewhat paradoxically, Hudson also argues that entrusting the surveillance of the countryside to the secret police "represented a major shift in 'policing' efforts, given the long history of ignoring the countryside with the exception of dispatching troops to suppress rebellious peasants" (p. 23). Both claims challenge Peter Holquist's argument that the state's surveillance of the population is a relatively modern phenomenon originating in the late tsarist period. In fact, the submission of regular police reports on the mood of the population to central authorities was a measure enacted by P. A. Stolypin in the wake of the Revolution of 1905. During World War I, imperial officials reaffirmed the importance of the police's submission of comprehensive and accurate mood reports as a means of surveillance over the political mood of the population. However, provincial and local-level police officials viewed the compilation of reports on the population's mood as a complete waste of time and loathed writing them. They therefore resorted to formulaic descriptions of the mood of the population in their monthly accounts. The police's disdainful attitude toward writing these *svodki* combined with their superiors' instructions to include more detailed information in the reports resulted in exactly the same kind of "bipolar reporting" during World War I that Hudson describes during NEP: The reports opened with assurances that "the mood of the peasants is peaceful," which were immediately followed by enumerations of peasant complaints and disorders. In addition, in their explanations of peasant behavior, the tsarist-era police, like their OGPU successors, often refrained from assigning political meaning to peasant riots in response to wartime prohibition or the rising cost and shortage of food items, instead preferring to ascribe such disturbances to economic motives.

Nevertheless, Hudson is to be commended for other continuities that his book illustrates between the tsarist and Soviet periods. Specifically, Hudson effectively demonstrates how peasant memories of their experiences of World War I and the Russian Civil War influenced their attitude toward the Soviet state when rumors of another impending war were circulating among the peasantry in 1925 and then again in 1927. In anticipation of the wartime requisitioning of livestock and grain, peasants sold off their horses and stockpiled food supplies (pp. 77, 94-95). Overall, the greatest contributions of Hudson's study are that it introduces a third actor into the story of peasant-state relations in the early Soviet period – the secret police – and that it suggests that, if the regime failed to reach an accommodation with the peasantry during NEP, it was not for a lack of trying.

Colleen M. Moore

Indiana University, Bloomington

colmmoor@indiana.edu