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A New Look at Kiev Rus'


Since the late 1940's Soviet historical perspectives of the Kiev period of Russian history have been dominated by the work of B. D. Grekov (1882-1953). There has been no attempt to produce an overall view in conflict with his interpretations, in spite of the accumulation of new material through the archaeology and research of the last twenty years. Soviet historians have added new problems and investigated new areas rather than revise Grekov's view on the fundamental socioeconomic nature of Kievan society.

Grekov held that Kievan society was in the Marxist sense "feudal" (that is, based on seigneurial relations), and not a society based on slaveholding. He also rejected the possibility that Kiev Russia was a primitive society in Engels' sense, that is, a society that preceded the appearance of social classes. These formulations were in large part the result of the controversies among Soviet historians of the early 1930's, in which the primary aim was to find a place for early Russia in the Marxist interpretation of medieval history then emerging in the Soviet Union. But the importance of Grekov's work went beyond these disputes: it gave for the first time in Russian historiography a detailed consideration of the Kiev period's social and economic institutions. Froianov's book represents the first serious challenge to the Grekov school to appear since the latter's death. Unfortunately, it is not clear that this new interpretation represents an improvement.

Froianov's book consists of three parts. The first two treat the nature of the village community, and of the extent of seigneurial (votchina) landholding. The third part, the least successful, is devoted to an analysis of the terminology of peasant status, familiar to historians from the Russkaia pravda and Grekov's work.

The first section, on the village community and the family, is the most interesting and successful part of the book. Froianov argues that the monogamous family was not the predominant type of family, but rather that the extended family was still a viable institution into the twelfth century. Against the archaeologists who argue that villages of small houses prove the existence of the nuclear family, Froianov offers ethnographic evidence that extended families can exist easily in villages where the houses contain nuclear family units within the extended family (pp. 30-33). This is an important observation and one that was long overdue, for although it is possible to dispute the extent of such family institutions and their importance, they certainly existed in the Kiev period. The one "family" of which we know in detail, the Riurikovichi, conceived their affairs in terms of the extended family, where the dead prince's eldest brother or eldest son fought for the succession, and the political relations among the princes were described by family terms. The repeated Church prohibitions against polygamy are also to be read not as directed against pagan peasants in the backwoods, but most likely at the Kievan
aristocracy in the chief towns. Froianov offers some interesting comments on the village community, and makes it clear that the whole complex of problems involving kinship and other ties among the rural population of the Kiev period is worthy of reexamination. However, the village community is certainly a more complicated problem than either Grekov or Froianov make it out to be. Both primarily discuss the *verv* which occurs in the *Russkaia pravda* and have nothing to say about the terms *pogost* and *volost*, apparently following the notion that these terms refer only to administrative units. But did they? The "black *volost*" of the fifteenth century was a rural community, and the same may have been the case in the Kiev period. V. V. Sedov interprets the *pogost* as a rural community.¹

In discussing the problem of the *votchina*, Grekov's chief concern was to demonstrate the existence of an institution analogous to the West European manor and to prove it to be the dominant social institution of the time. He did this partly by an analysis of the terms of peasant status (*zakup, kholop, smerd*, etc.) and partly by trying to demonstrate the widespread existence of the *votchina* outside the princely domain. With this second contention, Grekov was on rather shaky ground, and certainly exaggerated his results. The conclusion to be drawn from his work is that Russia in the Kiev period was liberally sprinkled with *votchina* ranging in size from the great princely and ecclesiastical estates to small holdings. An extreme result of this view can be found in B. A. Rybakov's work, where it is asserted that the face of Kiev Russia was covered with small castles, each the seat of a *votchinnik*.² It is difficult to accept such statements as they stand, especially for the eleventh century, and Froianov is quite right to point out that at that time the great mass of the peasants must have lived not on private *votchina*, but on land held by the village community, and paid taxes in some form to the prince. Nevertheless, Froianov has fallen into the opposite extreme from Grekov. He concludes that the few *votchina* of the eleventh to twelfth centuries were like "islands in the sea" of free peasants (p. 158). While very correctly rejecting some of the weaker arguments for the extensive spread of the *votchina*, he does not succeed in supporting his own view.

It is not original to point out that our sources do not illuminate the problem sufficiently. The chronicles by their nature do not give more than occasional hints about the social structure. The *Russkaia pravda* is also not very helpful, since it is a collection of answers to specific problems, drawn up for a society where most legal problems were probably settled by a customary law preserved in oral tradition. Froianov dismisses the early charters to the Novgorod monasteries on the grounds that the holdings are not very extensive: only one or two sela. However, we have no evidence that the land charters of the Novgorod monasteries dating from the twelfth century represent the totality of the monasteries' land holdings. There is only one source that reflects to any extent the internal life of an ecclesiastical

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¹ V. V. Sedov, *Sel'skie poseleniia tsentral'nykh raionov smolenskoi zemli (VIII-IV vv.)*, Materialy i issledovaniia po arheologii SSSR No. 92 (Moscow, 1960), pp. 31-35.