THE WORKHORSE IN PEASANT AGRICULTURE: AN EXPLORATION

Notwithstanding the central role of workhorses in pre-industrial life and technology, historians have done little to elucidate the dimensions, limitations, and evolution of their contribution to agrarian life. In large part, of course, this topic is hidden, or at least shielded, from the historian’s view. Peasants in traditional agricultural societies leave few enough records behind for us to investigate. Their workhorses leave none at all. Huge gaps remain, therefore, in agrarian history’s treatment of traditional agriculture. Fortunately, the spectacular variety and volume of information available on agrarian society in late Imperial Russia permits us to fill many of these gaps. The abundance of the sources is not accidental: as Tsarist Russia struggled to industrialize without adequate reserves of machine power, the country was forced to rely heavily on horses. At the turn of the century Russia had almost twice as many horses as Austria-Hungary, Germany, France, and Great Britain combined.¹

The present essay seeks to trace the most important, typical, and enduring features of workhorses’ role in Russian peasant society. Of course the horse was not a static accompaniment to pre-mechanized rural life. The development of specialized breeds of horses and the history of farming technologies testify all by themselves to many transformations and permutations in horses’ roles. Still, the emphasis here will be on the nature of the horse’s contributions, not their change over time or variation across space. The circumstances and sensations of the horse’s annual cycle and life trajectory are themselves sufficiently complex to warrant our attention. The exploration of these themes should contribute an important perspective on traditional agriculture in Russia and the many aspects of peasant culture that were intertwined with the animal kingdom.

Our subject

If you take a quick look at the local horses the following features will strike you. A crude, awkward, over-sized, and constantly downcast head, equipped with sunken eyes, a despondent, tired gaze, and dangling ears. The neck is straight but gaunt, weak, and not particularly long. The back is angled and narrow, the vertebrae protruding, along with a low-set, sparse tail. The chest is narrow and abbreviated between the shoulder blades, with clearly delineated ribs. The stomach protrudes a bit like a womb. The pelvis is narrow. The whole body is rather short, supported by thick legs set under the belly. The gait appears labored. The coat is rather thick, which only accentuates the animal’s crude and ugly appearance. It is not tall — on average only about two arshins, never much taller. The color is varied from one to another. The productivity of these animals corresponds to their appearance — it approaches the minimum. Its weak form begets its unimpressive work capacity.

— I. P. Popov, a specialist on peasant horses

God grant that you do not see the local peasant horses. The pigs of the local landowner are bigger than those pathetic animals.

— I. G. Tkhorenko, from Kursk province

This was the animal on which peasants’ lives depended. Generally weighing only about 25–40 percent as much as the Shires in vogue in contemporary England, the Russian horse was not imposing. He was more likely to evoke pity than inspiration. Indeed, this was the creature which Russian peasants understood Christ to have sentenced eternally to serve man. As they told the story among themselves, when in his youth Jesus was hiding under hay in a barn, a horse had begun feeding on the hay, which threatened to expose him. “May you toil from now on for man and the cow, and be meat for the dogs alone,” decreed the Son.

2. As quoted in Konevodstvo v Kazanskoi gubernii (Kazan’: Tip. A. M. Petrova, 1904), 49.
4. One observer (likely exaggerating the difference) reported a typical weight of 430 pounds for peasant horses, as against 2,000 for English Shires (“Doklad L. D. Moiseeva o zhivotnovodstve,” Trudy mestnykh komitetov o nachadykh sel’skikhoziaistvenoi promyshlennosti [hereafter cited as TMK], 79 vols. [St. Petersburg: Tip. V. Kirshbauma, 1903–06], 19 [Kurskaia guberniia]; 375).