The second Russian time of troubles and the collapse of the imperial Russian state was marked not only by disorder in the towns and violent political clashes, but also by widespread peasant unrest, far exceeding the Pugachev uprising. Indeed, this should come as no surprise, since the peasantry comprised no less than 80 percent of the population in early-twentieth-century Russia. And since Russia was a country of peasants, it was only natural that the peasantry should determine the country’s fate. But these millions of Russian peasants possessed neither the means to organize themselves politically, nor, arguably, the will to do so.

Contemporary scholarship indicates that the social structure of the Russian peasantry in the early twentieth century had not adapted to existence within the framework of a Westernizing industrial society. In the mid-nineteenth century it became obvious that the traditional government apparatus was incapable of satisfying the autocracy’s imperial ambitions. Modernization of the army and navy had altered the form of Russian society’s traditional patriarchal structures. This process had rendered the peasantry, that inexhaustible source of conscripts and taxes, a “superfluous” class, at least as far as the representatives of the new (Westernized) Russia were concerned. Yet the peasant stratum remained the main source of taxes and produce (including export produce). The persistence of traditional agricultural methods in Russia made for low productivity, but the government had no other source of income. It would be misleading to assert that the government paid no attention to agrarian problems. But it is certainly the case

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1. This figure refers not to those classified as peasants on the basis of their social origins (which would comprise an even larger group), but to petty agricultural producers who, to borrow Shatin’s definition, “... using the simple resources and labor of their family-members, work – directly or indirectly – to meet their own consumer needs and to fulfill their obligations with regard to those who hold political and economic power.”

2. In the late 1920s the prominent Russian historian S. F. Platonov noted that the Bolshevik regime had been established in Russia by virtue of “the tolerance of the peasantry.”
that so long as the population continued to meet the state’s needs, the state preferred not to interfere in village affairs beyond the level of cursory political surveillance. Meanwhile, the peasant communities themselves were primarily concerned with the matter of simple survival, and hence indifferent to anything taking place beyond the borders of their own villages.

Centuries of practice in the art of survival had given rise to a complex system of technological and social practices aimed at creating the most comfortable living standards possible for the peasant communities. These practices varied somewhat in accordance with climatic and other natural local features, and were slowly transformed with the passage of time. But the basic goal pursued remained constant: ensuring the physical survival of the greatest possible number of the members of the community, and reproducing its structure. This way of life, which James Scott has termed the “ethics of survival,” engendered a highly specific world-view, which involved a particular understanding of how relations between the peasantry and the outside world – Scott’s peasant “moral economy” – should operate.

After the Great Reforms of the second half of the nineteenth century, the village structures in different parts of the empire came under varying degrees of pressure from the forces of state-sponsored modernization and industrialization. This being said, Lenin’s evaluation of the dynamics of modernization of the country, outlined in his The Development of Capitalism in Russia, was clearly exaggerated. In the early twentieth century, Braudel’s traditional “structures of material life” continued to prevail in the majority of Russian gubernii. The government’s modernizing efforts had the least impact on the way of life in the remote parts of Russia, particularly in the Volga region – home to around 6 percent of the empire’s population, and the focus of this article.

The Volga region can serve as a sort of model or microcosm of broader processes in Russia as a whole. One of Muscovy’s first colonies, the region had been completely assimilated into the imperial structures by the early twentieth century. Remaining polyethnic and polyconfessional, the

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3. It is somewhat unclear what Lenin meant by “capitalism,” but it would seem that, following Marx, he erroneously combined under this label the development of capitalism in the narrow sense of the word (that is, credit-interest relations), and the geographical expansion of market exchange. This is illustrated, for example, by one of the book’s subheadings, “The process of formation of the domestic market for large-scale industry.” Annales historian Braudel has drawn a persuasive distinction between these social phenomena. By all appearances, the processes of capitalization and market development in Russia were relatively autonomous processes, which merely happened to coincide chronologically.