

A Russian Village

Sophie Kropotkin

1902

The first impression produced upon a stranger by a village in Great Russia is undoubtedly gloomy. The small, one-storied cottages have neither flowers in front nor clean, white-curtained windows. They look depressingly dark. The unwhitewashed walls are built of thick logs, if there are woods in the neighborhood, or else of rough stone. The windows, of which there are never more than three, are small, with tiny panes of glass,—for glass is expensive.

The straw roofs are unsightly, as in most cases they are unthatched and are merely made out of bundles of straw held together with straw ropes. Sometimes, when fodder is scarce, it will even happen that the roofs are removed to feed the cattle, and the cottages then look still more forlorn. Many of them have only one room and a small passage, entered by two or three steps. When there are two rooms they are built on opposite sides of the passage.

The interiors are as poor as the outside. The walls are neither papered nor whitewashed, and a fourth of the room, sometimes even a third, is occupied by a large brick or beaten clay oven. The top of this is generally used as a bed for the aged or sick, and as a nursery for the children.

Two deal forms and a deal table are the furniture. These are placed along the two principal walls, and here also is fixed cornerwise a little shelf for the sacred pictures, painted in dark colors on wood, before which hangs a little oil lamp to be lighted on holy days. A small bottle of holy water, a colored Easter egg, a bunch of dried willows in bud,—a substitute for the palm,—these or similar relics complete the decorations of that side of the room.

In the corner, nearer the stove, is a bedstead, consisting generally of two or three planks fastened to the wall; there are seldom sheets or blankets on it. This bed is reserved for the father and mother; the other members of the family sleep on the benches or on the stove. Sometimes there is a little loft made of planks fixed underneath the ceiling where three or four persons can lie. The fourth corner by the stove contains the crockery and a few kitchen utensils. Under the bed there may be a large, unpainted wooden chest, wherein all family linen and clothing are kept. The two-roomed cottages may be richer in a few articles, a brass *samovar*, or tea urn, perhaps, but this is the exception.

The village looks even less attractive than it might, owing to the absence of trees and shrubs near the houses, and the unpaved condition of the road, which in the rainy season is so deep in mud that the pigs can bury themselves up to their snouts in it. Some of the more prosperous cottagers try to add some external decoration, and here and there artistically carved porches and window shutters may be seen; but these ornaments are lost in their gloomy setting.

The village, however, is not altogether lacking in brightness. There is often a river close by with very picturesque banks and a mill, and there is always the church, built in Byzantine style and standing in the most prominent position. It is whitewashed and generally surrounded by an inclosure planted with lilacs and acacias.

The priest's house, too, is pleasant to look at, as a rule, with its garden and white-curtained windows; and if the village boasts a resident "squire," the visitor may be still further cheered by the sight of a large house, roofed with green iron and having an extensive garden and other luxuries obtainable only by the rich. Nowadays there is sometimes a school, though this rarely differs in appearance from the usual peasant's cottage, and even a cottage hospital may be found in some villages, built and maintained by the local government; but both are, unfortunately, very rare.

Nevertheless, as regards the land, the peasants in Great Russia are better off than those of many other countries, for the little they have belongs to them; their cottages and the ground at the back are their own. From time immemorial the land has been the communal property of the village. There are no private owners except the squire and the few who have bought some land from him, and the old-time custom of supplying every inhabitant of the village with some land is still strictly observed.

While woods and pastures are used in common, the arable land is divided into three parts, according to its quality, and each household is allotted a fair share in these three parts. The size of each allotment depends in the first instance on the quantity of land held by the community, and then on the number of male workers in the family. Each household cultivates its plots independently, but no hedges are grown between the divisions, only a small furrow marking them off; and for this reason Russian grain fields, although cultivated in small allotments, are well adapted for the use of steam implements.

Only poverty and ignorance prevent the peasants of Great Russia from growing their grain with modern methods and improvements. In South Russia, where the peasants are a little better off, the fields in many places resound with the whir and whistle of labor-saving machinery.

This system of property in land has developed a strong village organization, called the *mir*. All that concerns the village as a whole is decided by the mir and carried out by the community. It is not an elected body; its members are made up of all those workers who have attained their majority. Every head of a household, women included, if there is not a son of ripe age, has a voice in the assembly.

There is no voting in the mir, no chairman, no secretary, no special time or place of meeting. Whenever a matter turns up which concerns the whole village the men and women gather together at some place of their own choosing—in summer time this is always out of doors—and talk over the affair until they arrive at an agreement. If the subject is one of importance, the meeting will be convoked again and again until it is settled; for unanimity is indispensable in the mir decisions.

Besides questions concerning the division, purchase, and renting of land, the mir decides about the building of churches, the opening of schools, the digging of wells, and the making of roads and bridges. It also fixes the dates for plowing, haymaking, and harvesting. When these are arranged, men, women, and children all turn out and work to the accompaniment of cheery laughter and songs. Indeed, in passing through a village when some communal work is in hand, such as building a bridge or repairing a road, one might easily fancy the villagers were out for recreation, so bright and merry do they look and so easily does the work seem to be done.

The grain fields, although cultivated separately, must all be harvested at the same time, because, when the grain is cut, the land becomes the pasture for the cattle of the whole village. The driving out of the cattle devolves upon a communal headman, who is himself a characteristic figure in the Russian village. He is generally a lonely old man, who is appointed to this post by the mir; and each household contributes to his food, clothing, and shelter. In some villages the mir builds him a cottage, in others each family receives him in turn; but the mir provides for his wants and punishes him for any neglect of duty.

In harvest time the fields are a beautiful sight. All the men wear straw hats and snow-white shirts and trousers belted with a gay woolen girdle, the handiwork of their women folk. The women themselves are clad in finely embroidered white linen shirts and bright-colored skirts and kerchiefs, also the result of their own industry. On any other occasion a woman might wear some article she had bought, but when harvesting it is her pride to wear everything of her own fashioning.

Narrow as the village life may be, it still retains many good old customs. If a family is in distress through death or illness of the father, and too poor to hire labor at harvest time, help is always forthcoming. When the grain is reaped and brought home and there is nothing wherewith to entertain the harvesters, they themselves supply the materials for a feast, without which it would be considered disrespectful and unlucky to close the day.

“Bees” are an institution in the Russian village. All summer they are in full swing, especially among the women. Each one’s flax is gathered and beaten in turn, the potatoes are dug and stored, and so on. But at the end of every day the evening air is full of song and dance, for in Russia they do not forget to play after work.

In fact, the village youth lose no opportunity of meeting for amusement. In the summer nights there are the national songs and dances out of doors. In winter the girls meet at one another’s houses to spin, and the young men join them to sing and play games while spindle and distaff are plying.

The Russian peasants are a striking example of restricted needs and self-supply. They buy very few articles of either food or clothing. Rye bread, cabbage soup, potatoes, or a porridge of buckwheat or millet form their usual dinner. On Sunday a dish of milk or eggs may be added. From time to time a sheep or pig is killed, and then there is a little meat. Only the richer families or those who live near the great towns drink tea, the poorer having tea only when they are ill; and the only article of everyday use which they buy is salt.

The clothing is altogether homemade. Each family grows the flax out of which the women make the linen. Every woman may not know how to fix the loom, but nearly all know how to weave. That very necessary winter garment, the sheepskin, is from their own sheep, as is the woolen cloth of which the overcoat is made.

The usual costume for a man consists of a white linen shirt worn over the trousers and belted in about the waist; the trousers are of the same coarse linen and are worn with the ends tucked into the top-boots. But as a rule boots are worn only by the richer peasants, and even among them the old people keep them for Sunday wear. The general foot gear is bast (bark fiber) shoes, the legs being wrapped in a bandage of linen or woolen, according to the season. The shoe strings keep these leg wraps from unfastening, and the trousers are tucked inside them. An overcoat with a girdle, a conical hat, and a pair of warm gloves complete the outfit.

The women’s dress is extremely picturesque. They wear a white linen shirt with long, full sleeves; over this a short, colored skirt and a long apron; shoes or boots similar to the men’s, but

hats never; their heads are covered with a kerchief or shawl, which on Sundays is replaced by an embroidered headdress for married women, while the girls twine bright ribbons in their own long plaits.

Nowhere, perhaps, has woman such a wide sphere of activity as in Great Russia. There she is the gardener, the dairymaid, the sheep-shearer, the spinner, the dyer, the weaver, and the sewer of the cloth when it is woven. She works, moreover, beside the man in the field, in the wood, and on the river. In several parts of central Russia the men are compelled to leave the village for many months in the year to earn a little money, and at such times all the field work is done by women. Their home industries are various and of a high quality. In the small markets of the smaller towns, which are held once a week, one sees hundreds of peasant women selling garden, dairy, and poultry produce, as well as rolls of finest linen, tablecloths, towels, fine laces, and artistic embroideries.

Yet with all these conditions favorable to prosperity, the Russian peasant is, as a rule, terribly poor. This is due to several causes. The first and most important is the smallness of the allotments, which necessitates the renting of other land, especially meadow land, for which the rent is much too high.

In 1861, when the peasants were liberated, the government forced the serf owners to sell so much land to the communes. For this the government paid, and the peasants are bound to refund this money within the next forty-seven years. But the land which the owners were willing to give up has already proved insufficient; since then the agricultural population has greatly increased; consequently the allotments have grown ridiculously small, and pasture lands are especially scarce, as the landowners retained nearly all of them. The lack of suitable pasturage is a very serious difficulty.

Although the allotments produce little, it would be possible to manage were it not for the ruinous rate of taxes. It is usual for a peasant family to pay from twenty-five to thirty-five dollars, besides all the indirect taxes, which are heavy, especially as the average income of the peasant is very small. To pay rates and taxes he sells his grain, at times, for half price, and then for nine months out of twelve the family eats bread adulterated with all sorts of things; really pure rye bread is eaten only in exceptionally good years.

Any one looking at a Russian peasant, especially at plowing time, can see that both he and his horses are permanently underfed. The man is small, his face and hair are colorless, and his expression is hopeless. Watch him at his dinner in the field; it will consist of a piece of dark, sour, unwholesome rye bread and onions washed down with a sour drink made of bran and a little flour.

His horse is not so tall as an English yearling; it is mere skin and bone. In the spring the horse does not get enough even of the old rotten roof straw. The harness is made of scraps of rope and leather; the plow is miserably small and scratches the soil just a few inches deep, over which plowing a wooden harrow will be dragged. The Russian peasant's intelligence is unquestionable. He is quick to learn new things and to adapt himself to new conditions—witness those who migrate to Siberia, where the land is free, and those who find their way to America, where there are free schools. What wonders might we not justly expect to be worked in the little villages of Great Russia by liberty and education!

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Retrieved on 30th May 2024 from www.libertarian-labyrinth.org
Published in *Northern Europe*, pp. 109–122.

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