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The role of land committees in the implementation of the agrarian policy of the Central Rada in Ukraine in 1917-1918

The process of forming the agrarian policy of the Central Rada, as well as the role of land committees in its implementation, is considered. It is shown that this policy, aimed at preserving agricultural production by preserving large land holdings, caused a sharp drop in peasant support for the Ukrainian government.

Keywords: Central Council, land committees, agrarian policy.

In today's conditions of a multi-stage and rather ambiguous process of reforming the sphere of land ownership relations in Ukraine, the problem of studying the domestic experience of agrarian transformations acquires not only academic, but also practical significance. Such experience, in particular, provides a study of the policy of the Central Rada aimed at solving the land issue almost a century ago.

The topic of agrarian transformations in Ukraine during the revolution of 1917 is quite widely presented in the national historical science. Soviet historiography, traditionally associating these transformations exclusively with the activities of the Bolsheviks, left no room for the study of the agrarian policy of the non-Bolshevik Central Rada. For this reason, relatively little attention was paid to the study of the activities of land committees - public bodies, which began work on the transfer of landlord lands to peasants six months before the Bolshevik Land Decree was announced. Even in the writings of M. Rubach, who devoted separate chapters to land committees in his research on the agrarian and revolutionary movement in Ukraine in 1917, consideration of their activities begins only from the second half of autumn 1917, and all the actions of these committees are attributed to Bolshevik influence [1; 2].

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The topic of the activity of land committees in Ukraine during the period of activity of the Central Rada is briefly reflected in the writings of V. Kabanov [3] and P. Telychuk [4]. Separate provisions are considered in dissertation works of the last period [5; 6; 7; 8]. The theme of the Central Council's implementation of socio-economic policy and, in particular, agrarian policy, was reflected in the works of V. Lozovoy, V. Soldatenko, I. Khmil, and N. Kovalova [9; 10; 11; 12; 13]. In the latest historical science of Ukraine, the problems of the socio-economic policy of the governments of the National People's Republic of Ukraine during the Central Rada era were covered in the pages of the scientific publication "Problems of studying the history of the Ukrainian revolution 1917-1921" [14], as well as in the collection of scientific works of the Institute of History of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine "Studies on the history of the Ukrainian revolution of 1917-1921" [15]. Nevertheless, an objective assessment of the activities of the land committees of the era of the Central Rada requires further research.

The purpose of this article is to study the activity of the Ukrainian government in solving one of the main issues of the revolution of 1917 - the agrarian one, as well as the relationship between the Central Council, its General Secretariat and the land committees, which at that time were actually the main instrument for carrying out land transformations on the ground.

Since the Russian Provisional Government, which came to power as a result of the February Revolution, did not dare to take responsibility for the alienation of large landholdings (which was demanded by the peasantry), the peasant movement led to the formation of bodies for the automatic redistribution of land at the local level - village and parish land committees.

In order to regulate the agrarian movement on the ground, direct it in a peaceful direction and prevent arbitrary redistribution of land by peasants, the Provisional Government by its decree gave the land committees an official status, including them in the state management system and thus placing them under its control. The purpose of the committees' activities was to prepare a law on land reform for consideration by the upcoming All-Russian Constituent Assembly and to preserve the existing system of land tenure until it is held. At the same time, the main rights were given to the provincial and district land committees, which consisted mainly of zemstvo specialists and government officials. Volos and rural land committees, which consisted of the peasantry and acted most radically, were prohibited from any independent actions. They had only to carry out the orders of the provincial and district authorities, being under their constant supervision [16].

Since such a provision did not meet the expectations of the Ukrainian peasantry, the demand for the creation of its own body for carrying out land transformations - the Regional Land Committee - and the establishment of the Ukrainian Land Fund, which would include all the agricultural lands of the region, was recorded in the resolutions of the congresses of all the main political parties of Ukraine. which took place in the spring and summer of 1917 [17]. The same demands were put forward by the First All-Ukrainian Peasants' Congress [18], which was held on May 28-June 2, 1917, and the First All-Ukrainian Workers' Congress [19], held on July 24-26 of the same year.

The materials of these congresses give a fairly clear idea of their determination of the meaning of the activities of land committees and the direction of the agrarian reform in Ukraine. All agricultural land that did not belong to the peasants was supposed to form the Ukrainian Land Fund, from which the land committees would allocate the peasants land "according to the norm no less than for consumption and no more than for labor" [20, pp. 21-22.]. In fact, it was a demand for the socialization of the land, which at that time was recorded in the agrarian part of the program of the party of the Ukrainian Socialist-Revolutionaries - one of the most influential political forces in the Central Rada and the most massive of the Ukrainian parties, whose members often constituted the majority not only in local but also in provincial land committees.

In June 1917, the organ of the Central Committee of the Ukrainian SSR "People's Will" published an article by one of the leaders of the left wing of his party, O. Shumskyi, in which the provision by the Provisional Government of the Land Committees of the right to court in land matters was interpreted as the transfer of the entire matter of carrying out agrarian reform to the hands of local land committees [21].

Such views on the tasks and powers of the committees were quite widespread locally, even at the level of the provincial land committees. For example, the meetings of the Kyiv Provincial Land Committee, which was chaired by the well-known SR activist M. Kovalevskyi, allowed local committees to take land from landowners for use by landless and landless peasants [22].

The revolutionary sentiments of the land committees and the growth of the peasant movement were also reflected in the position of the Central Rada, which, by including representatives of the All-Ukrainian congresses, undertook to fulfill their agrarian demands. Thus, the program declaration of the General Secretariat dated July 9, 1917 testifies to the decisive attitude of the Council to the implementation of the

socialization of the land expected by the peasants [23, F.1060. - Op.1. - Issue 6. - Ark. 62-63].

However, neither the Central Council nor the General Secretariat was united on this issue. This is explained by the contradiction between the need to provide the peasantry with land and the need to preserve commodity production in agriculture. The main problem during socialization was the liquidation of large private farms with a developed agronomic culture and a high degree of mechanization, which prevailed among landlord lands in Ukraine. The transition to small peasant land ownership inevitably meant a decline in the level of productive forces and a sharp decrease not only in the volume of production in agriculture, but also a general decrease in its marketability (and in the near future, a transition to subsistence farming). This threatened not only the state budget, but also the supply of agricultural products to the urban population and the Russian army, which was fighting German and Austro-Hungarian troops on the territory of Ukraine.

The fact that the main efforts of the government must be directed to the preservation of the existing level of productive forces in agriculture and the volume of production of agricultural products was recognized by almost all parties represented in the Central Rada. However, fundamentally different ways of solving this problem were planned. If the Polish parties and organizations that were part of the Council advocated the unconditional preservation of large private land ownership (since it was the Poles who made up the most significant part of the landowners and managers of estates on the Right Bank), then the leading Ukrainian parties - the UPSR and the USDRP - tried to preserve large commodity farms by transferring them into state property. However, here too there were fundamental differences in the approach to the reform. The Ukrainian Socialist-Revolutionaries demanded the abolition of private ownership of land, the transfer of all land to the Ukrainian Land Fund, from which part of the land would be distributed by the land committees to the peasantry, and part of the land that made up the highly cultivated farms would remain at the disposal of the land committees themselves, thus constituting state property.

Activists of the USDRP, also advocating the transfer of all land to the Ukrainian Land Fund, did not raise the issue of abolishing private ownership of land. According to this approach, the management system and ownership of land would remain unchanged in landlord farms, which were nominally at the same time transferred to the disposal of land committees. Thus, the state would establish control over large commodity farms and their production of agricultural products while preserving landlord land ownership. Such a policy,

leaving the peasants' demands for land unsatisfied, provoked the further growth of the agrarian movement.

The General Secretariat for Land Affairs chose the last path of reform, the actual leadership of which from July to the winter of 1917 was carried out by the well-known figure of the USDRP B. Martos. Within the framework of his policy, the land committees were supposed to act as mediators in peasant-landlord conflicts, if necessary disposing of estates and thus taking them under their protection, making every effort to ensure a normal harvest. Thus, in July 1917, the General Secretariat for Land Affairs appealed to all land committees with a call to take over the organization of the harvest, to carry out work on resolving conflicts between peasants and landowners, as well as to record the harvest (both in peasant and landowner farms). In the explanation to the appeal, it was stated that in the case of the landlord's refusal to pay the hired workers for harvesting work, the land committees themselves must hire workers and organize agricultural work[24].

At the meeting of the provincial land committees, convened in Kyiv on August 7 and 9, 1917, the main task that the government set before the committees was to ensure the harvest before arbitrary appropriations [25]. In fact, these actions of the government meant steps in the direction of expropriation of large landholdings, and at the current moment, the establishment of state control while preserving landlord land ownership. At the same time, the main task of the land committees was not to carry out land reform, but to ensure the functioning of landlord farms while preserving peasant small-scale land. This policy of the government contradicted the declared reform, which inevitably led to a conflict between the Central Rada and its main social base - the Ukrainian peasantry.

Already at the meeting, which was constituted as a congress of representatives of land committees, it was noted that since the revolution took place due to the dissatisfaction of the people with the existing system, the implementation of land reform cannot be postponed. The participants of the congress expressed their support for the speedy arrangement of land legislation and the immediate adoption of the law on land committees. In the draft resolution adopted at the congress, it was planned to transfer all agricultural land in Ukraine to the disposal of the Regional Land Committee, which was supposed to distribute land for the use of peasants.

It is clear from the decisions of the congress that the representatives of the land committees, facing the real state of affairs on the ground on a daily basis, understood that neither the government's decisions nor the activities of local bodies to appease the peasant

movement would succeed. As N. Polonska-Vasylenko notes, since the summer of 1917, the aspirations of the peasantry to seize the landlord's land pushed aside all other aspirations[26]. The peasants tried to use the land committees in the struggle against the landlords, giving their actions an organized character. Thus, from the end of July 1917, the peasants declared that they would not pay the rent to the landlords, but to the land committees [27], which can be regarded as a spontaneous form of land nationalization on a local scale. Satisfying the demands of the peasants, a number of parish and even county land committees canceled the lease contracts concluded by the peasants with the landowners, and obliged the latter to transfer to the coffers of the land committees all the money received for renting the land. In addition, under the pressure of the peasantry, the land committees made a decision to expropriate almost all the land from the landowners in order to lease it to the peasants at a reduced price [23, F.1434. - Op.1. - Issue 1. - Ark. 2-6, 8-12, 15, 17-19, 23, 31].

Thus, local bodies were significantly ahead of the General Secretariat in carrying out land transformations. The subordination of the General Secretariat to the all-Russian Provisional Government, which clearly had a negative attitude to the abolition of private ownership of land, also played a significant role in the fact that the position of the Ukrainian government remained conservative. Thus, all the warnings of the Central Rada officials about the explosive situation in agriculture and the request to speed up the adoption of land legislation, which were sent to the Provisional Government, remained unanswered. Instead, an order came to cancel all orders of the land committees, which affected the restriction of private ownership of land. And only in October, when the situation in the village had finally gotten out of control, the Provisional Government adopted a declaration that announced a significant increase in the role of land committees, but again "without destroying the current foundations of land ownership" [23, F.1064. - Op.1. - Issue 4. - Ark. 1]. In practice, this meant the continued use of land committees to protect landlord lands.

Under the pressure of the Ukrainian Socialist-Revolutionaries, the Central Rada, which until now had been patiently waiting for Petrograd to resolve the land issue, again tried to show activity. On November 12, despite the opposition of its chairman M. Hrushevskyi and the USDRP, without whose consent it was impossible to implement any law, with a majority of only 4 votes, she approved K. Matsievich's draft law on the transfer of landlord and state lands to the disposal of land committees [23, F.1060. - Op.1. - Issue 4. - Ark. 62]. The draft law was of a compromise nature, as it did not abolish private ownership of land, and also

established a rather high standard of so-called labor land ownership, below which land ownership was not transferred to the land fund - 50 decyats.

This caused sharp criticism of the draft law by peasant representatives in the Central Council. The peasantry, after eight months of the revolution, did not wait for the satisfaction of their land needs, and stopped trusting their national government. The adoption by the II Congress of Soviets in Petrograd of the Decree on Land, which incorporated peasant orders, ultimately led to the Central Soviet losing the initiative in carrying out land reform. Trying to regain its influence over the peasant masses, the Rada in the Universal Assembly finally announced the abolition of private ownership of land and "recognition of the idea that the land transferred to the land committees for arrangement is the property of the entire working people and should pass to it without redemption" [28]. However, while repeating the main provisions of the Russian Decree on land, Universal did not directly talk about giving peasants land. Unlike the Bolsheviks, Ukrainian activists were unable to put the interests of the peasantry above the need to maintain the level of productive forces in agriculture. Therefore, the Central Rada could no longer focus on the support of the peasantry. On the other hand, Universal caused sharp opposition from large landowners and commercial and industrial circles, who saw in its social declarations a threat to the existence of private property. At a meeting of government leaders with representatives of these circles, the latter announced that they would stop all support and funding of state institutions in the event of the implementation of the provisions of the Universal Law [29].

Sensing the threat of a financial blockade, the government, represented by its leader V.Vynnychenko, issued a statement that Universal does not resolve the issue of land ownership, but only "expresses the view" of the Central Rada on this issue [30, p.189]. In the government clarification, which was published together with Universal, it was clearly stated that until the holding of the Ukrainian Constituent Assembly, the land remains at the disposal of the former owners "under the care" of the land committees. In the explanation, it was emphasized that Universal in general "not only does not give the right to arbitrarily dispose of lands or agricultural remnants, horses, cattle..., but, recognizing it as a good of the people, transfers everything to the care and disposal of the county and provincial land committees" [28]. The appeal "To the people of Ukraine" signed by B. Martos, placed right there, instructed the land committees to take into account the estates transferred to the land fund and to ensure their protection from peasant robbery, even with the use of military force.

The appeal of the General Secretariat in land affairs to the provincial, district and parish land committees, dated November 15, 1917, more fully outlined the government's policy in the land issue. According to the Universal Law, all land committees were ordered to take landlord lands under protection. Separately, estates were allocated, which were to be "in the future transferred whole to the peasantry or public organizations." Prior to the issuance of the law on the transfer of land to the disposal of land committees, the economy had to remain with the landowners, but "under the supervision of the land committees." The main task of the land committees was declared to be the preservation of estates. It was emphasized separately that only provincial and district committees can dispose of estates, and volons (the most radical, as they consisted of peasants) do not have the right to "occupy land for its distribution" [28].

With these actions, the Central Rada finally alienated the peasantry, which was its main social base. The peasants continued the agrarian revolution, using no longer the laws of the Ukrainian government, but of the Russian Soviet People's Commissar and focusing on the Bolsheviks. At the same time, calculations on the support of the socialist Central Rada from large landowners and entrepreneurs did not come true either. Before the invasion of Bolshevik troops into Ukraine, the Rada found itself in political isolation and practically without protection. Adopted during the battles with the Bolsheviks on January 31, 1918, the temporary law on land use [23, F.1060. - Op.1. - Issue 6. - Ark. 62-63], developed by Ukrainian and Russian SRs - members of the Central Rada, could no longer be implemented due to the lack of real political power in the hands of the Ukrainian government.

Thus, the underestimation of the importance of land reform by the Central Rada officials led to the fact that the government of Ukraine lost the initiative in solving the land issue, letting the anti-landlord movement of the peasantry out of control, which immediately took on, according to D. Doroshenko, a pogrom character [27, p.184] However, the main consequences of mistakes in agrarian affairs were much greater and had fatal consequences for the Central Rada. The main part of the population saw the main task of the Ukrainian government in the redistribution of the land fund in favor of the working peasantry. It was this peasant movement that formed the basis of the revolutionary movement of the Ukrainian people, laying the foundations for the national movement of the intelligentsia. The broadest support enjoyed by the created Central Rada among the mostly peasant Ukrainian population was determined not only by the national consciousness of the peasants, but

primarily by their hopes of receiving land from the hands of their national government.

The efforts of the General Secretariat to find a compromise between the peasant requirements of comparative distribution and the objective needs of the development of the agrarian sector of the national economy, which required the preservation of large commodity farms, led to a conflict between the Central Rada and its main social base - the Ukrainian peasantry. As a result, the Rada lost the support of the main part of the population and was forced to withdraw from the political arena.

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