



Naiveté or real intuition? Peasant attitudes and agrarian policies in the Baltic region from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century

Juhan Kahk

To cite this article: Juhan Kahk (1997) Naiveté or real intuition? Peasant attitudes and agrarian policies in the Baltic region from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century, *Journal of Baltic Studies*, 28:3, 247-254, DOI: [10.1080/016297797000000081](https://doi.org/10.1080/016297797000000081)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/016297797000000081>



Published online: 28 Feb 2007.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 41



View related articles [↗](#)

NAIVETÉ OR REAL INTUITION? PEASANT ATTITUDES AND AGRARIAN POLICIES IN THE BALTIC REGION FROM THE SIXTEENTH TO THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

Juhan Kahk, Estonian Academy of Sciences

In 1784 the rebellious peasants of Livland declared that the announcement of Empress Catherine II concerning the new “head tax” had released them from all duties to their landlords and that now they only had to pay direct taxes to the Crown.¹ Later, when the new peasant laws of 1816 and 1819 had spread disappointment and caused disturbances in Estland and Livland, the peasants of Rāpina village declared: “We gladly give to God what belongs to him and to the emperor that which belongs to him, and as much he demands, but an end must be put to the labor duties to landlords, because God has given the land to us as well as to landlords.”²

The peasants’ demands for breaking their ties to the landlords, and their declarations about belonging to the emperor, who is the overlord of all lands, are permanent ingredients of all peasant rebellions in the Baltic region during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Contemporaries explained such attitudes by the stupidity of the peasants, who had misunderstood the governmental decrees. Some historians have interpreted this as erroneous behaviour caused, according to Marxist historians, by the “naive monarchistic” mentality of the peasants. But was it all really so simple? Did not these intuitive feelings of peasantry have some basis in reality?

Radical changes in the agrarian development of the Baltic region began with the sixteenth century when the landlords on the territories of present-day Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania started to expand estate economies, forcing the peasants to perform labor duties in order to produce grain for the market. In the fifteenth century the process had just begun—the number of manors, called *Gut*’s on the Baltic-German lands, and *folwarks* (Lith. *palivarkas*) in Lithuania, was still relatively small, and their own economies limited and undeveloped.³ But the peasants were irritated at the unexpected changes and, from the first half of the sixteenth century, we have, from the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, frequent peasant complaints about the “unjustified innovations and misbehaviour of local administrators and leaseholders of the Crown estates.”⁴ One of the royal decrees of the time asserted that “... this great wilfulness and robbery has caused many taxpayers to abandon our counties...”⁵

Before the Tsars: Agrarian Policies in Lithuania and Sweden

To avoid such disasters and to guarantee a secure income, King Sigismund I and his wife, Queen Bona, promulgated several ordinances (called *ustava's*), strictly regulating the management of Crown manorial farms by local administrators and holders of the estates to whom the state lands had been donated. Such regulations were promulgated in 1514, 1529, 1549 and during the 1550s. In 1557 the new king, Sigismund II Augustus, issued detailed and complex rules for reorganizing the management of all Crown folwarks: the Voloka, or Vloka (Lith. *valakas*, Pol. *włoka*) Rules (*Ustava o vlokach*). A *vloka* was a unit of land consisting of about 23 ha.⁶ Vladimir Picheta, the author of major monograph about the agrarian reforms in Lithuania in the sixteenth century, has stressed that one of the major reasons behind these regulations was the mistrust of local functionaries and leaseholders who had administered the *folwarks*.⁷

With the regulation of 1557 a profound agrarian reform was initiated. In all of Lithuania the Crown lands were measured and redistributed among the peasants: every peasant household received 1 *vloka*, of land. With the new rules the relations between peasants and the estate administration were radically changed. Until the introduction of these rules, the *folwark* administration had unlimited power to demand labor duties from the peasants, regardless of the amount of land in their possession.⁸ The ordinance of 1529 introduced rules by which the payments and labor duties of peasants were fixed and were supposed to depend on the amount and quality of the peasants' land. The joining of peasant lands to manorial farm lands was strictly forbidden. With the regulation of 1557 a general norm of labor duties (two weekly workdays from a *vloka*) was introduced in the entire Grand Duchy of Lithuania.⁹ By the same rules special Crown inspectors (auditors) were installed to whom the peasants could turn with complaints about "unjust" actions on the Crown's manorial farms.

As a result of all these legislative measures in the Crown villages of Lithuania the situation was radically changed: first, in the administration of the Crown's manorial farms, the relatively independent local administrators were replaced by Crown officials carrying out the policies of the central administration; second, the unregulated duties of peasants were replaced by duties fixed and prescribed by universal governmental regulations so that the amount of peasant duties and payments depended on the area and quality of peasant lands as evaluated by Crown officials; finally, the new holders of the Crown estates were subjected to strict control by the state administration and could be punished for misbehavior.

On the territory of old Livonia (present-day Estonia and Latvia) the manorial system based on the labor duties of peasants also developed in the

sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Unlike Lithuania, until the second half of the sixteenth century, Livonia represented a patchwork of small feudal holdings (bishoprics and the lands of the Livonian Order). After long and devastating wars, these territories were incorporated into Sweden in the middle of seventeenth century; here the power of absolute monarchy reached its apex during the reign of Charles XI (1660-1697). Earlier, however, the economic and political position of the Swedish monarchy had been seriously undermined by generous donations of Crown lands to the nobility. As early as 1655 the Parliament (Riksdag) of Sweden had decided to return (*reduce*) the crown lands, previously belonging to the state, but donated to nobility (mostly to the higher aristocracy) by Gustavus II Adolphus and Queen Christina. In 1680 Charles XI got from Riksdag the mandate to carry out the reduction and, in the same year, a special commission was established for the Swedish Baltic provinces: Estland and Livland. Overcoming the tenacious resistance of local nobles, Charles XI resolutely carried out the reduction; as a result, by the end of the 1680s about 80% of the lands in Livland and 50% of the estates in Estland were in the hands of the Crown.¹⁰ In the course of discussions over the reduction, the conflict between the king and the provincial nobles became so heated that Charles XI threatened to prevent the rental of the "reduced" estates to local noblemen.¹¹ Governmental officials calculated the possible incomes from the returned Crown estates and some of them concluded that the state could get the highest profit if the estates were parcelled out and rented to the peasants directly. The same calculations also proved that the state income would be greater if the estates were administered by Crown officials rather than rented to landlords. But in the end political motives prevailed: the need to guarantee the support of the local nobility forced the government to rent the estates to local nobles; as a rule, the so-called "reduced" estates were usually rented to their previous owners.

In connection with the reduction, a general revision of all lands was carried out with unprecedented thoroughness—all estates were measured and their lands were classified according to their fertility. On the basis of these data the potential incomes of estates were calculated in order to establish the amount of rent due to the Crown. In carrying out this revision, the government engaged the peasantry. The transfer of an estate from private ownership to the status of a Crown estate was carried out by Crown officials, who, when arriving at the estate, called together all the peasants and collected from them supplementary information about the incomes of the estate and the duties and payments of the villagers. By establishing the real incomes of estates, the Crown officials preferred the information received from peasants to the data proffered by the landlords. The collected information was used by Crown officials for establishing,

according to general rules prescribed by special decrees, the amount of peasant duties: the general amount of all payments and duties to the estate was not to surpass half of the net income of the peasant fields. In order to avoid the mismanagement of Crown estates by the future tenants or holders, numerous decrees and regulations were enforced and special Economy Directories established. These were intended to supervise and control the management of the estates.

In the heat of the discussions with the opposition-minded nobility of Livland, Charles XI admonished the noblemen in July 1681 to abolish serfdom. Answering the bitter protests of the nobility against this proposition, Charles XI declared that he would remain true to these ideas and would call for the abolition of the serfdom of the Crown peasants.¹² However, these plans were not explicitly formulated during the following years while the king was absorbed in intensive political activities on the eve of the Great Northern War. But some historians have concluded that, during the last years of Swedish rule in the Baltic, the peasants of the Crown estates were practically enjoying the status of free peasants.¹³

We can see significant similarities in the agrarian policies carried out by the Lithuanian Grand Duke in the middle of the sixteenth century, and those of the Swedish King at the end of the seventeenth century. The results of the reduction-revision reform of the Swedish Crown at the end of the seventeenth century can be characterized as follows: first, most of the estates were taken back from their former owners and were transferred into Crown lands; second, the unregulated payments and duties of peasants were replaced by duties and payments prescribed by law and dependent on the amount and quality of land possessed by peasants; third, the management of Crown estates was subjected to the strict control of the Crown's administration: special regulations were promulgated to achieve this, and detailed Economy Directories were established.

The Catholic Grand Duke of Lithuania and King of Poland, Sigismund II Augustus, as well as the Protestant King of Sweden, Charles XI, justified their "peasant policies" in essentially the same way. They both stressed that the policies of the central government represented the higher and more general interests of society compared to the limited and egoistic interests of local nobles and administrators.¹⁴

On the basis of his fundamental studies about the agrarian policies of the Grand Duke of Lithuania in the sixteenth century, Picheta concluded: "Nowhere can we see the intention to defend by all means the fiscal interests of the state. The wish to consider the situation of the working people is a central idea expressed in all the documents drawn up as answers to the complaints of peasants."¹⁵

In his answers to the nobility of Estland on July 10, 1681, Charles XI stressed that the King had the right to carry out all measures necessary to guarantee "... the welfare and the security of the state and the provinces joined to it..."¹⁶ Charles XI stressed that one must guarantee the interests of the peasants since it was against Christian principles that "... a man could be subjugated to the discretion and affections of another man..."¹⁷ For their part, Lithuanian rulers stressed that they were defending the traditional rights of peasants. In the last years of his reign Charles XI enforced new measures to improve the situation of the peasants—in 1696 he ordered the General-Governor of the Baltic Provinces to regulate and limit the punishment of peasants and to defend those villagers who had presented their complaints to him, from persecutions.¹⁸ In the instruction about the Lithuanian agrarian reform of 1557, it was stressed that God himself must be regarded as the initiator of reform because He desires that "everybody gets his rightful land," and that justice reigns not only in heaven, but must be established by the hands of men already on earth (numerous citations from the Bible confirmed these theses).¹⁹ Werner Conze has pointed out that, at the time, Sigismund II Augustus and some of his closest collaborators were influenced by Calvinist ideas.²⁰

Rural Policies under the Tsars

The policy of "defending the peasants" was continued by the rulers of the Russian Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries when all the territories of the present-day Baltic States were gradually incorporated into the Russian state. Catherine II (1762-1796) had, during her first years as Empress, composed a special document about the necessity of regulating peasant duties and criticized the Baltic landlords for their "despotic and cruel treatment" of the peasants. She demanded that the nobility of Livland promise to regulate and alleviate the duties and payments of their villagers.²¹ Radical measures were taken during the reign of Alexander I (1801-1825: in the first years of his rule a new "peasant law" was prepared by mixed committees of crown officials and representatives of local nobles, and was then introduced in Livland and Estland in 1804. By these laws, especially by the law of Livland, the principles and regulations of the above-mentioned Swedish regulations from the end of seventeenth century were introduced anew on all estates, and in this case, they also became obligatory on private estates. The central idea of the peasant laws of 1804 was to ensure that the amount of peasant duties to landlords depended on the area and quality (fertility) of land possessed by the peasants.

Nicholas I (1825-1855) was more cautious in his agrarian policies and stressed that the central government must interfere only in cases where the

local nobility was unable to regulate relations with their peasants in a just manner.²² The agrarian-political measures of Nicholas I were carried out by the Minister of Crown Domains, Count Pavel Kiselev, whom the emperor called his “chief of staff in solving the peasant question.”²³ Kiselev played an important role in the region by introducing in the western provinces of the Russian empire, including Lithuania, the so called obligatory inventories in 1841. This reform prescribed that all peasant lands be measured and classified (according to their fertility). On this basis, all payments and duties of the peasants were fixed, and they were not to surpass one-third of the income of the peasant household.

Kiselev also had an influential role in preparing new peasant laws, which were promulgated in the gubernia of Livland in 1849 and in Estland in 1858. According to these laws, the principle of governmental regulation of peasant duties was reintroduced (it had been temporarily revoked by the laws of 1816 and 1819) and the lands in the hands of villagers were declared to belong inalienably to the peasant estate. But the Baltic nobility fought and won a concession: Kiselev’s proposals, according to which the process of transferring the lands to the perpetual ownership of the peasants was to be regulated by the state, was abandoned; now the peasants had to buy the land from their landlords at prices established by free negotiations during which, of course, the landlords had the upper hand.²⁴

Historians have traditionally interpreted the agrarian policies of absolutist rulers as a part of their fiscal policies. But J. Vasar, analyzing the agrarian policies of Charles XI (who was called “the peasants’ king” by his contemporaries),²⁵ pointed out that it was almost impossible to ascertain where the defence of fiscal interests ended and the policies of defending the interests of peasants began.²⁶ He concluded that in Charles XI’s policies, the defense of peasant interests prevailed. Vladimir Picheta evoked numerous examples in his monograph of how the mistrust of local administrators revealed itself in the policies of the Lithuanian rulers, and how they reacted to the complaints of peasants by taking measures to defend the villagers’ interests.²⁷ N. M. Druzhinin expressed the opinion, that Kiselev “subjectively” defending the interests of peasants and had tried to improve their situation.²⁸

As we have seen, there were numerous occasions when the rulers of absolutist states, the overlords of Baltic peasants, had tried to improve the situation of the peasantry. At the end of the seventeenth century Swedish officials seriously considered the possibility of parcelling out the lands of the “reduced estates” among the peasants. The prevailing ideology of agrarian policies carried out in the Baltic-German provinces between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries was the introduction and perfection of rules according to which the peasants were not to be dependent on the

demands of their landlords; the duties and payments of peasants were to be regulated by government rules. Using the same principles in their agrarian policies, the rulers of Tsarist Russia stressed that they were enforcing "Swedish rules" (as expressed in the introduction to the peasants' law for Livland in 1804). As a result, the peasants associated the idea of "justified duties" with the memories of Swedish administration; therefore, the myth of the "golden Swedish age" was very popular among many generations of the Latvian and Estonian peasantry.

Keeping all this in mind, can we truly regard the peasants ideas, discussed above at the very beginning, as completely naive and unrealistic? Although they had no concrete and explicit information, the peasants intuitively felt that the central government was the only political power that had some interest in defending their rights. From the middle of the nineteenth century, when the relatively well educated peasants of the Baltic provinces had learned to carry out such political actions as presenting petitions, they turned to the Tsarist administration, asking it to enforce laws which would make the price of land more attainable.²⁹

In some sense the agrarian policies of the absolute rulers in the Baltic constitute a unique phenomenon. There are few cases elsewhere in Europe where the central political power so clearly revealed a contrast with local authorities and the nobility, and so openly declared its intention to defend the interests of the peasantry. At times, the paternalistic feelings of responsibility toward their lowly subjects seemed to be stronger than the regime's solidarity with the noble estate. One can also characterize this attitude as a sense of public duty, but by explaining this phenomenon we, nevertheless, come to the conclusion that the public duty demands from the sovereign that he be righteous and defend the interests of the weaker members of the society, the peasants, against the selfish demands of landlords and local authorities.

Notes

1. *Eesti talurahva ajalugu* (Tallinn, Olion, 1992), 588-589; M. Stepermanis, *Zemnieku nemieri Vidzeme 1750-1784* (Riga: Akademia izddevniciba, 1956), 328.
2. J. Kahk, *Eesti talurahva võitlus vabaduse eest. Talurahva vastuhakud ja rahutused aastail 1816-1828* (Tallinn: Akadeemia, 1962), 100.
3. V.I. Picheta, *Agrarnaya reforma Sigizmunda Avgusta v litovsko-russkom gosudarstve* (Moskva: Akademia, 1958), 143-144.
4. *Ibid.*, 120-126.
5. *Ibid.*, 124.

6. Ibid., 87, 94-95, 99 and 135.
7. Ibid., 85 and 115.
8. Ibid., 165.
9. Ibid., 94-95, 99-100, 105, 113, 133 and 135.
10. *Eesti talurahva ajalugu*, I, 553.
11. A. Loit, *Kampen om feodaleräntan. Reduktionen och domänpolitiken i Estland 1655-1710, I* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universit t, 1975), 272.
12. J. Vasar, *Die grosse livl ndische G terreduktion: Die Entstehung des Konflikts zwischen Karl XI und der livl ndischen Ritter- und Landschaft 1678-1684* [Acta et commentationes Universitatis Tartuensis, B XXII. 2] (Tartu, 1931) 126, 231-233 and 239; J. Vasar, "Karl XI talupoegade kaitse p hialuste v ljakujunemine Liivimaal a. 1681-1684," *Ajalooline ajakiri*, 1931, 7-9.
13. A. Loit, "Structural Changes in the Baltic Provinces during the End of the Period of Swedish Rule (1680-1710)," *The Role of Feudal Peasantry in History* (Tallinn: Estonian Academy of Science, 1991), 132-134.
14. J. Vasar, "Karl XI talupoegade kaitse," 7-8; V. I. Picheta, *Agrarnaya reforma*, 85 and 186.
15. Picheta, 421.
16. A. Loit, *Kampen*, 106.
17. Vasar, "Karl XI talupoegade kaitse," 8.
18. A. Loit, *Kampen*, 240 and 244.
19. Werner Conze, *Agrarverfassung und Bev lkerung in Litauen und Weissrussland, I Teil : Die Hufenverfassung im ehemaligen Grossf rstentum Litauen* (Leipzig, s.a.), 108.
20. Conze, *Agrarverfassung*, 109.
21. A. Tobien, *Die Agrargesetzgebung Livland im 19. Jahrhundert, Bd. I* (Berlin, 1899), 104; R. J. L., Samson v. Himmelstiern, *Versuch  ber die Aufhebung der Leibeigenschaft in Ostseeprovinzen in besonderer Beziehung auf das Herzogthum Livland*, Beilage zu "Inland," 1838, Sp. 112.
22. A. Tobien, *Die Agrargesetzgebung Livlands im 19. Jahrhundert, Bd. II*, (Riga, 1911), 122.
23. A. Tobien, *Agrargesetzgebung*, II, 122; N. M. Druzhinin, *Gosudarstvennie krestiane i reforma P. D. Kiseleva* (Moskva-Leningrad: Akademiya, 1946), 256.
24. A. Tobien, *Agrargesetzgebung*, II, 14-18, 179.
25. *Eesti ajalugu, k. III*, Tegevtoimetaja O. Liiv (Tartu: Eesti Kirjanduse Selts, 1940), 185.
26. J. Vasar, "Karl XI talupoegade kaitse," 142-143.
27. Picheta, 115 and 120-126.
28. N. M. Druzhinin, *Gosudarstvennie krestjane*, 278.
29. *Eesti NSV ajalugu, kd. II* (Tallinn, Eesti Riiklik Kirjastus, 1963), 50-52.