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Looking in to the kaleidoscope of Soviet court records

Many authors have written about citizens' resistance to the Soviet state during Stalin's regime. But little has been penned about how ordinary citizens – peasants – engaged with that regime, or how they reacted to its legal system and coped with its proclivity to the use of force. To understand how their relationships were reshaped and the extent to which they could preserve practices they valued, a Wayne State University researcher has embarked on a study of the rural Soviet courtroom system by researching historic Soviet court records.

While many scholars have made discoveries from their research of 19th century Soviet court records, particularly about the nature of their society and its people, Aaron B. Retish, Ph.D., associate professor of history in the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, aims to reveal how the Soviet courts played a central and complex role in daily life, especially in the relations between the Soviet state and its citizens.

The Soviet state viewed law and courts as a tool for control and transformation, while, according to historians, peasants saw it as a way to resist the state, to manage conflict with neighbors and for other purposes. Retish will explore the implications for individuals living in a violent state and time period, how they coped and how they developed an acceptable sense of moral justice. Historians have assumed that peasants withdrew into their own forms of government and isolated themselves, but previously secret court records now show that the court system gave them a sense of citizenship by allowing them a forum to act out relationships

legally and to bring their complaints into the public arena.

"After the state dissolved the revolutionary tribunals at the end of the civil war in 1922, it replaced them with comrade and people's courts," said Retish. "Peasants flooded the courts, and in doing so adopted Soviet legal norms and became active citizens.

Retish said that with the shift to Stalinism in 1929, the courts emphasized coercion over mediation, forcing peasants into collective farms and categorizing a new class of criminals. But rural court records show that Russia's peasants used the legal system to be victorious over the dominant elite. Peasants and state agents used the legal arena to secure their own well-being, and by doing so agreed to codes of citizenship to dispense justice. "This story has not been told because Western scholars have largely ignored local Soviet courts, focusing instead on famous show trials," said Retish. "This is the first study of Soviet local courts by a Western scholar using recently opened archives."

These local court records offer a rare window into how the justice system shaped peasants' identities, and present a portrait of household divisions, property disputes and familial tensions. The cases reveal how Soviet citizens used the court system to resolve disputes, but they also describe the everyday violence such as spousal abuse, street fights and inter-ethnic violence that was prevalent in rural Soviet life.

"Retish is the first Western scholar to explore and write about citizens' resistance to the Soviet state, particularly during Stalin's time," said Gloria

Heppner, associate vice president for research at Wayne State University. "He is one of the foremost scholars of Russian peasantry in wartime and revolution, and this project, funded by Wayne State's Research Enhancement Program, continues his already prestigious work offering original and meaningful insight into controversial topics."



About Dr. Aaron B. Retish:

Dr. Retish received a B.A. in history from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, an M.A. in history and a Ph.D. in Russian and East European history from The Ohio State University. He joined Wayne State in 2003.

To learn more, visit:

<http://clasweb.clas.wayne.edu/aretish>



