Securing the Benefits of Socialism: Understanding Peasant Legal Culture and Gender Dynamics in the People’s Courts, 1917-1929

On Tuesday July 25th Dr. Aaron B. Retish gave a lecture entitled “Securing the Benefits of Socialism: Understanding Peasant Legal Culture and Gender Dynamics in the People’s Courts, 1917-1929” as part of the Noontime Scholars lecture series. Dr. Retish, Associate Professor of Russian history at Wayne State University, is the co-editor of the journal Revolutionary Russia and the author of the book Russia’s Peasants in Revolution and Civil War: Citizenship, Identity, and the Creation of the Soviet State, 1914-1922 (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

Dr. Retish’s lecture explored the ways in which peasants actively used the new Soviet judicial systems. With the passage of a new family law code in 1917 and a new criminal code in 1922, the people’s courts were in high demand in the countryside both during and after the Russian Civil War. The cases that Dr. Retish encountered during his research included veterans who claimed pensions from the state, compensation for crops or property sold at exceptionally low rates during famines, and reimbursement from destruction of crops caused by animals trampling on plants.

The vast majority of cases, however, dealt with domestic and property disputes over divorce and alimony claims, ownership of land and resources, and over inheritance and the sale of property. Perhaps most strikingly, many of the claims made in this period illustrate women’s attempts to claim new rights under the Soviet government that accepted them as full citizens. They sought divorce from abusive or absent partners, financial support for children born both in and out of wedlock, and claimed rights to property.

The judges of the new Soviet courts held special esteem within peasant communities. Initially, many of them lacked formal legal training although they had often received religious training before the October Revolution which ensured their literacy. By 1922 judges needed to demonstrate judicial training or were expected to have experience in political (Bolshevik) activities. They held office hours during which citizens could ask questions and published articles explaining new laws in local newspapers. Thus, the legal profession became well respected within peasant society and Soviet judges themselves were esteemed despite not being members of the local community.

Dr. Retish’s arguments consisted of two major points. First, a mature legal culture already existed within the rural regions of the Russian empire directly before the 1917 Revolution. This meant that the Soviet state was not starting from scratch when it came to instituting a legal culture. Secondly, Soviet restructuring of the legal system allowed women in particular to gain more rights than they had during the imperial period. From the perspective of the state, legal institutions were also effective purveyors of implementing a new Bolshevik moral prerogative on peasant communities.
Dr. Retish's lecture was drawn from his current book project, tentatively entitled “In the Courts of Revolution: Vengeance, Legality, and Citizenship in the Rural Soviet Courtroom, 1917-1939.” He continued research on this project during his stay with the Summer Research Laboratory and will conduct further research in archives in Kazakhstan.

Nellie Manis finished her MA at REEEC with a graduate minor in European Union Studies in May 2013. She received a BA in History and a BA in International Studies from Penn State University in 2008. In August she will begin a Fulbright Student grant at the Linguistics University of Nizhnii Novgorod in Russia. In addition to coursework in translation and interpretation, she will research the differences between translation pedagogy in the United States and Russia.