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The Stolypin Agrarian Reform and Peasant Migration

Internal migration stands as an important feature of economic development. Economists commonly argue that rural to urban migration allows unskilled labor to be employed more productively and the promise of a higher wage motivates this movement. Internal migration can also occur from populated areas to underpopulated areas, as it did in Russia in the beginning of the twentieth century, as a solution to overexploitation of a fixed resource such as land. In comparison to the rural/urban migration, migration to areas with low population density can involve considerably more costs and uncertainty about the promise of a higher future income stream. The Stolypin agrarian reform beginning in 1906 that gave peasants the right to withdraw from the commune to become individual landowners has been primarily viewed as a solution to the agrarian problem of inefficient agricultural production related to communal land tenure. However, the proponents of the reform had an additional goal in mind that the exit from the commune afforded peasants the opportunity to migrate to less populated areas such as Siberia. This paper studies this connection between the agrarian reform and internal migration. Many additional factors affect the migration decision, not least of which is the government's migration policy that underwent changes during the same time as the Stolypin reform. Thus, a systematic empirical analysis is needed to determine whether or not the reform was successful in the relieving population pressure through migration. We construct a panel of historical data from 1896-1908 on regional migration and other variables affecting the costs and benefits of migration in order to analyze the effect of the Stolypin reform on migration. We find a strong positive correlation between the reform and migration. We also employ instrumental variables to address the possible endogeneity due to omitted factors that might drive both commune exit and migration.