

Cattle pasturing as a traditional form of forest use and conflicts between peasants and forestry administration in the long nineteenth century (The case of Białowieża Forest)

Abstract

The article deals with one of the key resources for peasants of Eastern Europe, wood pastures. Relying on new archival material, we demonstrate that peasant communities, in the spirit of James Scott, consistently sabotaged state efforts to ban livestock pasturing in the forests. The state, over the long nineteenth century, strengthened control over many aspects of the economic life of the village, which gradually made the conflicts of the peasants with the state forest administration more acute. We apply a case study approach to investigate the relations between peasants and the local and metropolitan administration in the Białowieża Forest. A unique feature of the Białowieża Forest is its long and continued history of effective protection measures, which facilitated finding sources on this topic. Our research reveals the motivation in the struggle for control over forest resources between the peasants and the administration as experts of 'rational' forestry. Throughout the long nineteenth century the peasants used all means of resistance available to them: petitions to the authorities at all levels, sabotage of administrative orders, bribes to forestry personnel and direct violations of orders. These conflicts, which lasted for many decades, demonstrate that peasant communities only partially followed the rules introduced by the state administration, which tried to change the principles of forestry management, making forests more profitable and 'rational' from the point of view of the experts of the time. The administration spent significant resources on the control of wood pasturing, but achieved very modest results, both in terms of reducing the number of livestock in the forest and in terms of collecting compensation for damage made by ungulates. The most important changes occurred in the second half of the nineteenth through the early twentieth century and were associated with more consistent and strict control over the traditional forest resources, especially during the final appanage period (1889–1915). If we consider the reaction of the administration to peasant petitions regarding wood pastures, we see sympathy and positive reactions both at the provincial and at the ministerial levels. Obviously, this tolerance was connected with both the shortage of pasture and fodder, and with the general paternalistic sentiments of the Russian government. The administration tried not so much to increase the income from wood pasturing as to 'accustom' the peasants to the idea that the forests were not public, but rather private, state or appanage property