

Abstract

JOHNSON, ANTHONY W. "Wildfire: Rumor and Peasant Resistance to Collectivization." (Under the direction of Dr. Gerald D. Surh).

This thesis is a general examination of rumors in the Soviet Union during the very turbulent period of collectivization. While this thesis examines the upheaval in Russia prior to collectivization in order to show how the rumors were grounded in reality, it specifically deals with the confusion in the countryside just prior to and during "the great offensive" of wholesale collectivization [*sploshnaya collectivizatsiia*] in the Soviet countryside. This thesis also attempts to address rumor not as a means of carrying peasant ideology, but as a form of peasant resistance to collectivization.

These rumors, whether containing aspects of a coming apocalypse, the faltering morals in the village, imminent invasion from foreign powers, or a return to a long-abolished social institution, were symbolic representation of the hopes and fears which the peasants kept in the back of their minds during the brief relaxation of the New Economic Policy. While the fears were buried in the peasant consciousness, one needed only to scratch the surface in order to reveal these general themes, and the catastrophic upheaval of wholesale collectivization again brought these fears up to the surface.

Will this thesis convince everyone of the correctness of the ideas presented? Hardly. However, the ideas represented herein deserve attention. They are worth considering because in examining the composition of rumors during the period of collectivization one can see what the peasants feared in the coming of the collective farms. Rumors of the coming apocalypse, the deterioration of the moral economy of the countryside, and the resurrection of the institution of serfdom reflect peasant fears of a world that some could not comprehend and that others believed they understood all too well. These rumors were a social construction and a social logic that was an attempt at presenting a narrative that the peasants lacked. In the midst of this lack of narrative, almost any construction, no matter how far-fetched in retrospect, took root in the peasant psyche and flourished in this atmosphere of upheaval. But the upheaval and the rumors that began circulating during that time contain very real peasant fears based upon their experiences.

Another important factor driving this study is an attempt to understand this social construct in terms of what other scholars have not fully considered: rumor purely as a form of resistance to an unwanted policy. The only pioneering work done on rumors during collectivization places rumor in the position of an ideology of resistance as opposed to a form of resistance in itself, albeit a very weak form. To get at the root of hopes and fears is to understand rumor as a form of

resistance. Aversion, distaste, or speaking out against an institution is rarely done blindly. In fact, resistance tends to be very specific in nature. Allowing for this specificity, one can look at the rumors as a reflection of fear or hope in the face of menacing change imposed from above. If I can convince just one, then I have done my job. I hope to convince more.

Wildfire: Rumor and Peasant Resistance to Collectivization

by

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my family: my father, Tony Johnson, who paid for my education with few complaints; my mother, Teresa Johnson, who molded my life before the professors got to me; and my sister, Crystal Johnson, who served as a moral compass, steering me in the direction of things that are more important.

Also, I would like to dedicate this work to my grandmothers. Bessie Johnson hounded me to try and get me back home, and that kept my nose to the grindstone and allowed me to finish my graduate studies as quickly as possible. Eula Prince wished me well when I began my studies and taught me never to forget where I came from. Even though both saw me on my way when I came to NC State, neither lived to see the completion of my studies. Their influence on my life cannot be measured in mere words.

Biography

Anthony W. Johnson was born on 2 February 1979 in Loris, South Carolina and has lived in Tabor City, North Carolina for more years than he cares to remember. Amazingly enough, he managed to graduate from South Columbus High School in Tabor City in 1997 despite a valiant effort at flunking AP Calculus and English. From there he stepped to Southeastern Community College for two years and an AA degree. A strange twist of fate pushed him in the direction of history and the University of North Carolina at Pembroke and a BA in 2001. Fully prepared to join the workforce when he began his senior year, another strange twist of fate occurred when Dr. Kathleen Zebley asked him if he had ever considered going to graduate school. [Strange because she had all but expressed the opinion that he would never get into graduate school with *that* kind of attitude—she eventually wrote him a letter of recommendation.] The twists just kept on coming, and he finally made the decision to study Russian History, which is what brought him to NC State.

Blissfully single, he decides to devote his attention to books rather than people, which is a good attribute for a graduate student in History.

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I would like to acknowledge the assistance of three professors without whom this work would never have been accomplished: Dr. Gerald Surh, who worked very hard at steering me in the right directions when I had lost my rudder; Dr. Bruce J. DeHart, whose abilities and knowledge in Russian History [and seemingly insatiable curiosity about history of any kind] has inspired me to try and reach new heights in my studies; Dr. Kathleen Zebley, who pounded it into my head that I was not as simple-minded as I once believed and asked me the simple question “Have you considered graduate school?” All occupy diverse and special places in my mind. To these people I owe much gratitude and will forever be in debt.

There are a lot of people for whom I have to express my appreciation. In the course of preparing this thesis, I asked for help from many people, some of whom read the drafts and made suggestions. Among these are the other members of my thesis committee: Dr. Alexander De Grand and Dr. Akram Khater. Both assisted me in polishing my language and made me stick to the point, no matter how many times I tried to stray. I also want to thank Dr. David Gilmartin and D. Kroll, both of whom took time out of their very busy schedules to read the rough drafts, make helpful suggestions, and thanks to D. for dragging me away from my computer long enough to shoot the

occasional game of pool. The amount of material that I requested from people in the Interlibrary Loan Department at NC State's D. H. Hill Library, and their ability to locate the material, contributed to this work immeasurably, and without their assistance this thesis would have fallen completely flat. They turned even the most obscure reference into a collection of documents. Also, a special mention goes to the History Department's Student Services Assistant, Norene Miller, who served as my surrogate mother while in Raleigh. If it were not for her I would never have made it. I owe you.

Any mistakes, as usual, are mine and mine alone.

Table of Contents

Dedication	ii
Biography	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Table of Contents	vi
Glossary of Terms	vii
Introduction	2
The Path to Collectivization	16
Collectivization	20
A “Social Apocalypse”.	26
Morality and the Peasantry	42
“Wars and Rumors of Wars”.	49
“A Second Serfdom”.	56
“Now They Arrest the Kulaks”.	61
Famine in the Countryside	66
Conclusion	70
Bibliography	76

Glossary of Terms

agitprop a shortened version of the Soviet agency for agitation and propaganda

baba a peasant woman (word usually used in a pejorative or belittling way)

barshchina labor dues under serfdom

batraks a peasant hired laborer and typically a peasant who was not a landowner

bedniak a poor peasant

chastushka a popular song or verse (in this paper relaying the situation in the countryside or a way of passing along rumors)

kolkhoz the Soviet collective farm

kolkhoznik collective farm member

Komsomol the Communist Youth League

kulak literally translated as “fist” means a bourgeois farmer, one who uses hired labor, or is better off than other peasants; politically, a farmer who feeds off of the blood of the poor and middle peasants; many Russian peasants saw very little difference between the poor, middle, and rich peasants

muzhik a peasant male (word usually used in a pejorative or belittling way)

nekulurnost uncultured or uncivilized; usually translated as “dark” when describing the peasants

obrok the agricultural tax system under serfdom

OGPU *Ob”edinennoe gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie*; the Soviet internal police

podkulachnik a kulak hireling, someone with kulak tendencies, or a “subkulak”

pomeshchiki landowners

sel'sovet the lowest level of rural government; a village soviet

seredniak middle peasant

smychka the revolutionary worker-peasant alliance

This really happened when I was back visiting the old man who lived across the road from my mother in my home town of Ninety Six, South Carolina. J. Hilton Lewis was his name. While I was there two other men, who I also knew well, drove up. As they approached us, they asked Hilton if he had heard about the murder. Hilton said he hadn't heard of it, and one of the visitors explained that it happened "on Saturday, or maybe Friday, or sometime at the weekend, maybe even late Thursday evening, but at any rate it happened in Saluda or Modoc, or maybe in Aiken or near Edgefield." It happened down the road, he was pretty sure. Hilton asked what happened, and the other visitor said that a man "was shot, or maybe stabbed to death." The other visitor disagreed: "he was clubbed to death, or maybe hit with a tire iron, it could have been a golf club . . ." Hilton interrupted, "Oh yes, I'd heard about it, I just didn't have any of the details until now."

Story told by Vernon Burton, May 1995
From Louisa White, *Speaking with Vampires*

Wildfire: Rumor and Peasant Resistance to Collectivization

For Russian peasants during collectivization, the state was an all-powerful institution. It moved into a village and restructured village life and values. The peasants were relatively weak in the forms of resistance with which they could strike back at the Soviet government. These “weapons of the weak,” To use James Scott’s term, ranged from active resistance, such as mounting the rare peasant insurrection against the government, to delays and obfuscation, and even migration to other cities or *raions* within the Soviet Union. The peasants also relied on rumors to deter other peasants from joining the collective farm, to express their dissatisfaction with Soviet policy, and to relay their hopes and fears during this very turbulent period. Rumors during collectivization were a partial representation of the collectivity of peasant consciousness. Rumors are present in every society and are especially plentiful in the midst of extreme social upheaval. This thesis will seek to analyze how these rumors reflected the hopes and fears through the peasants’ life experiences and how these rumors fit into more recent ideas of peasant resistance in Soviet Russia during the period of wholesale collectivization. In an effort to place these rumors in their appropriate contexts, this thesis must examine the extreme shifts in rural society prior to and during collectivization.

Studies of peasant resistance to collectivization in the Soviet Union have increased in popularity and in number during the last twenty years. However, the ever-growing number of books and articles concerned with peasant resistance cannot possibly explore every possible avenue of resistance. Active and passive resistance to collectivization have been examined by a substantial number of authors, including Sheila Fitzpatrick, Tracy McDonald, and Lynne Viola, with Viola representing the only deeply-rooted examination of this paper's subject: rumors. However, Viola's work on rumors consists of an article from the *Journal of Modern History* and one chapter in her book, *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin*. Both represent a rather full picture of apocalyptic rumors and the ideology of peasant resistance.

Viola has done much to further the study of peasant resistance to Soviet power during collectivization. In her studies Viola has equated the ideology of peasant resistance through rumor with the strictly black or white world view of apocalyptic rumors in the countryside, which the peasants used in their efforts to combat an enemy as potentially repressive as the Soviet state.¹ In chapter two of *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin*, "The Mark of the Antichrist: Rumors and Ideology of Peasant

¹ Viola's work on rumor in the countryside during collectivization, is usually couched in apocalyptic terms. For examples see Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), Chapter 2, "The Mark of Antichrist: Rumors and the Ideology of Peasant Resistance;" and Lynne Viola, "The Peasant Nightmare: Visions of the Apocalypse in the Soviet Countryside," from *Journal of Modern History* (1990) Volume 62, Number 4, 747-770.

Resistance,” Viola examined, in detail, rumors as a form of peasant resistance during collectivization. “In the terrible years of collectivization, rumor held the Soviet countryside in a vise of fear and dread anticipation.”² These rumors took the place of the formal news and “functioned as a weapon in the arsenal of peasant resistance.”³ According to Viola, “Collectivization led to an explosion of apocalyptic fears among the peasantry.” These fears were most often spread throughout the countryside by rumors.⁴ Viola noted that the first and most frequent type of peasant rumor was one that combined Soviet power and the collective farm with the mark of the Antichrist and the powers of darkness.⁵ Viola concluded that, “The apocalyptic undercurrents of the 1920s came to the fore in the course of wholesale collectivization, becoming a potent *symbol* of peasant opposition.” Also, she believed that the rumors took on an apocalyptic nature because, in the minds of the peasants, the apocalypse accurately described what they saw in wholesale collectivization.⁶

As the above shows, Viola, for the most part, limited herself to an apocalyptic framework in her discussion of rumors and the ideology of peasant resistance. This is understandable, as an examination of all of the rumors in the countryside amounts to casting the net too wide for

² Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 45.

³ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 46.

⁴ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 55.

⁵ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 56.

⁶ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 65, 66; Italics mine.

practicality. She managed to bring in a cursory examination of the other types of rumors in the countryside in an effort to show how they fit into the ideology of peasant resistance as regards the peasants' millenarian mindset and their visions of an apocalypse in the countryside. This thesis is an attempt to go beyond the eschatological framework of Viola and the symbols and ideology of peasant resistance to collectivization. It will examine the rumors and their symbolic nature [a symbolism deeply rooted in the experiences of the peasantry], how these rumors give a glimpse of peasant hopes and fears concerning collectivization, and how these rumors operate within modern ideas of peasant resistance.

In mentioning "the apocalyptic undercurrents of the 1920s . . . becoming a potent *symbol* of peasant opposition," Viola's idea is that of "symbolization." One method for mobilizing groups of people to a collective action is symbolization, or "the process through which objects, whether physical, social, or abstract, take on particular meanings."⁷ This represents one way of understanding rumors as a form of resistance in Soviet collectivization, but for Viola, these symbols were used, not for resistance, but for a motivating ideology for resistance rooted in the abstract, namely the apocalyptic mindset of the peasants. However, the peasants used symbols representing the physical and the social, as well as the abstract, aspects of peasant existence and fears in their effort to

⁷ Louis A Zurcher and David A. Snow, "Collective Behavior: Social Movements," from *Social Psychology* Eds Morris Rosenberg and Ralph Turner, New York: Basic, 1981.

fight against the encroachments of the Soviet state. This represents something a little more basic than an ideological struggle between the peasantry and the Soviet state, even though the Soviet government placed a large amount of emphasis on the ideological implications of the peasants' resistance to collectivization.

For the Russian peasants, the structure of their society provided a reason as well as a means for resistance. The peasants' religion, morals, and village dynamic, were all threatened by collectivization, supplied the peasants with a pool of symbolism from which to cull ideas for the rumors in their resistance to collectivization, and perhaps supplied the peasants with sufficient reason to resist collectivization. The rumors couched in terms of apocalypse, serfdom, morality, or war, reflected what the peasants knew and were a defense of the village dynamic in the face of wholesale collectivization.

The scarcity of documents relating to rumor as a form of resistance is one of the limiting factors in this study. The peasants passed around rumors by word of mouth and typically did not write them down simply because most of them could not write. The documents that are readily available for study usually passed through the prism of the Soviet government's different branches and the constant thinning of information which occurs as the reports go up the chain of command. But in examining what James Scott calls the "moral economy of the village," something that is usually shielded from the outside world, it

appears that there is a need to go beyond the apocalyptic rumors and announcements of divine retribution and examine as much of the society as possible in an attempt to dissect rumor and resistance during collectivization.⁸

As this thesis's epigraph shows, getting a firm grasp on rumors and their underlying meanings is like "nailing jelly to the wall."⁹ Rumor is an event that can change definition when structured differently or encountered in different social settings. A statement could be considered a rumor and one that undermines the Soviet state when uttered in the presence of farmers at a meeting concerning membership in a kolkhoz but not considered a rumor when written in a diary intended for the author's eyes only or spoken in the presence of family and friends already sympathetic to the speaker's opinions.¹⁰ So, the morphological considerations concerning rumors during collectivization [or any period] becomes paramount in any attempt to study the origins of rumor and the why that these origins influence the forms that these rumors take. The basic premise is that within different social settings the idea of rumors is altered. The peasant in his home, discussing the situation in the

⁸ James Scott, "Hegemony and the Peasantry," from *Politics & Society* Volume 7 Number 3, (1977), 279-281.

⁹ Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 7. Novick uses this phrase in relation to the "objectivity question," but it gets to the point of how difficult it is to sufficiently get a handle on rumors and their underlying meaning.

¹⁰ Lynne Viola, "Popular Resistance in the Stalinist 1930s: Soliloquy of a Devil's Advocate," from *Kritika* Volume 1, Number 1 (2000): 45-69.

countryside with his family may not fulfill the base definition of rumor. However, this type of peasant discourse is very important, because what a person talks about in the privacy and security of his house is an important barometer of his true feelings, the same goes for diary or journal entries. *Red Bread*, by Maurice Hindus, purports to move into the peasant households to get at the peasants' mentality and their opinion of collectivization. The information contained in books like *Red Bread* allows the historian brief glimpses into the peasants' attitudes without relying wholly on the information in the Soviet government publications. This paper will take these instances as reflective of the fears and experiences that fueled rumor during collectivization. These communications, either at the well or the mill, or just in everyday conversations with other peasants in their huts, is a way of spreading rumors and forming bonds of peasant society.¹¹

Another aspect of the rumors circulated concerns the inability of the peasants to verify the rumors and see whether they are true or false. This is perfectly logical. Fussell comments on men in the Second World War, living on rations, hearing that the rationing of food was so out of control that the navy was dumping surplus coffee off of the coast of New York.¹² When peasants living in the Northwestern *raion* hear rumors of peasants in the Northern Caucasus being slaughtered by the

¹¹ Information pulled from Scott, "Hegemony and the Peasantry."

¹² Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Undersanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 38.

communists, the distance between the two camps makes it virtually impossible to verify the rumors. When the possibility of verification narrows, what is left is trust in the rumor's report. And, as Fussell acknowledges, people want to trust in these rumors because "even a pessimistic, terrifying story is preferable to unmediated actuality."¹³ The fear of not knowing is overridden by the desire for even the most horrible narrative. Therefore, the peasants take the negative as an accurate report of what is happening throughout the countryside.

In the instances proposed in this paper, the rumors, first and foremost, must be considered subversive either by the peasants uttering them or by the Soviet government that eventually documented them. This may seem simplistic but every analysis needs a starting point. While the ability to tap in to the mind of the peasantry is difficult, the information provided by the Soviet government documents and other sources, allows us to see the rumors as they spread across a relatively wide spectrum, and it is the rumors that this paper will attempt to use in explaining the peasants' fears about the transformation of peasant society. Fear of war, grain requisitions, and war communism all reemerged during the period of wholesale collectivization. After 1929, rumors of apocalypse, declining morals, approaching war, Cossack brigands that would slaughter the collective farmers, and a return of the *pomeshchiki* in what the peasants called a "second serfdom" recalled the

¹³ Fussell, *Wartime*, 36.

experiences of the peasantry and represented the peasants' hopes, fears, and anxieties about the future while they simultaneously represented the threat to peasant society.

The rumors ranged from the improbable to the almost prophetic. To focus on the improbable, the peasants more likely than not did not regard these rumors as an accurate representation of what was happening in the countryside during collectivization but were playing the role of the “dark” [*temnyi*] or “uncultured” [*nekulturnost*] *muzhik* all too well.¹⁴ In an effort to minimize the dire consequences of their resistance, the peasants would feign ignorance in an effort to show that they were not intelligent or capable of understanding the consequences of their actions. Whatever the circumstances, the peasants either believed these rumors, or circulated them widely enough as a symbolic representation of what was happening in the countryside, so that they warranted the government's attention.

Again, rumors appear to operate most effectively when the basic structure of society is turned on its head, and some historians claim that in these periods of extreme upheaval, rumors tend to take apocalyptic undertones.¹⁵ These could also be seen as representing the fears of the

¹⁴ The term used, *nekulturnost*, is variously translated as uncultured, uncultivated, but I have chosen to use the word “dark” in an effort to show the Soviet government's opinion that peasant society is “dark” whereas urban society represents the “light.”

¹⁵ For an examination of the way rumors can take on apocalyptic undertones see Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* Revised and expanded edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961, 1970), 21-22, 41-42, 82-83, and 127-

peasantry about threats to the traditional existence. The Great Fear in revolutionary France was based, in part, upon peasant fears about a monarchical plot to starve the peasants. Rumors circulated throughout the French countryside about the plot, and the peasants formed into armed units to repel the brigands who, as the rumor held, would set fire to the crops and destroy the French peasantry.¹⁶

In *That Noble Dream*, Novick quoted Bronislaw Malinowski on the subject of myths. Malinowski says: “[A myth is] not merely a story told, but a reality lived . . . It expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficacy of ritual and enforces practical rules for the guidance of man.”¹⁷ This definition, with an alteration made to rectify it based upon preconceived notions of myths, can also serve as a definition of rumors. Within our notions of myths, the idea of the longevity of myths is preeminent. Rumors are a short-lived myth. In collectivization they showed a photographic negative of society, displaying all of Malinowski’s requirements for the definition of myth. This is done within these short-lived rumors, not by showing the peasants the correct path, but the incorrect path. The negativity of the rumors during collectivization can easily be allied with the peasants’ attitudes.

128; and Viola, “The Peasant Nightmare,” 747-770. Her ideas were discussed in greater detail earlier in the paper.

¹⁶ The best study of this period is still Georges Lefebvre, *The Great Fear of 1789: Rural Panic in Revolutionary France* Translated by Joan White (New York: Pantheon Books, 1973).

¹⁷ Novick, *That Noble Dream*, 4.

If one associates the definition of rumor with Malinowski's on myth, it seems that one of the qualifying measures of a rumor would be untrue. The caveat being that some of the rumors circulated, while highly prophetic, were still rumors. Just because the rumors spread around the countryside touched on events that were yet to come to pass does not disqualify them as rumors. Prophetic [for those who believed in prophesy] or merely a prescient observation of the events at hand, rumors always circulated best when they had an element of truth to them. When events occurred that turned the rumor into an unmitigated fact that can then be applied to the veracity rumors in general. That does not diminish the quality of the rumor; it enhances it, and gives the peasants more reason to hang onto the rumors that ran rampant through the countryside during collectivization. If some rumors passed around the countryside become true in the long run, that fact places emphasis on the ability of rumors to accurately describe the situation in the countryside.

Historians of Russia and the Soviet Union know that prior to the October Revolution the rumor mill was already a well-established means by which information was disseminated among the peasants. It served as the way peasants both received and processed information from the government and rest of society. Rumors flooded Russia during the era of Peter the Great. The peasants, and more than a few nobles, resented Peter the Great, and he was depicted as the Antichrist for his apparently

anti-religious attitudes and his reforms of Russian Orthodoxy. Also, Peter managed to break down, to some extent, the ways of life in Russia through his policy of westernization. The schismatic Old Believers were of the opinion that the apocalypse was upon them and that Peter was the Antichrist. And this represented only one of the multitude of attitudes regarding Peter.¹⁸ Such apocryphal utterings sound familiar to historians of collectivization.

Rumors surrounded Peter III, the tsar who was removed from the throne and subsequently killed by his wife Catherine. The Russian peasants believed that Peter III was killed because he had secretly prepared for the emancipation of the peasants. Moreover, the Russian peasants were willing to believe that Peter III was lying in wait, preparing for the day when he would emerge from the shadows and free the Russian peasantry from the onerous demands of the Russian nobility. That day never came, but that did not keep the Russian peasants from spreading the rumor that the day would soon come. Such rumors gave some credence to the more than forty imposters that emerged in Russia during the eighteenth century, as Peter III and other tsars.¹⁹

¹⁸ Robert O. Crummey, *Old Believers and the World of Antichrist* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1970); Eugene F. Shmurlo, "The Opposition of the Traditionalists," from Marc Raeff, ed. *Peter the Great Changes Russia* Second Edition (Lexington, MA, Toronto: D.C. Heath and Company, 1972), 170-176.

¹⁹ Philip Longworth, "The Pretender Phenomenon in Eighteenth Century Russia," *Past and Present*. 1975 (66): 61-83.

Prior to the emancipation of the serfs, the Russian government required weekly reports on rumors and gossip in the provinces. When the ministers and local officials read the Emancipation Manifesto the peasants were certain that it could not possibly have been the real emancipation decree. When the decree was read aloud in the churches, the peasants waited patiently to hear the rest of the decree. When it was clear that the reading of the decree was finished, the rumor began to circulate that the real emancipation was not read, and that the nobles had switched the real emancipation for the false one that they had heard.²⁰

More recently, the rumor mill began to turn with ferocity during the First World War, subsequently aiding in bringing about the downfall of the Romanov Dynasty. Among the Russian masses, the great majority of whom were illiterate, rumors were the medium through which all information and misinformation regarding the dynasty circulated. No matter what the validity of the rumors, they served to stoke the fears and prejudices of the public and sometimes compelled them to take action. Rumors about corruption, treason, and questions over who actually

²⁰ Larissa Zakharova, "Autocracy and the Reforms of 1861-1874 in Russia: Choosing Paths of Development," Translated by Daniel Field. From Ben Eklof, John Bushnell, and Larissa Zakharova eds. *Russia's Great Reforms, 1885-1881* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 25.

ruled Russia provided part of the catalyst for the subsequent downfall of the Romanov Dynasty.²¹

²¹ Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999), 9-27.

The Path to Collectivization

The early years of the Soviet regime saw enormous destruction in the nation as a whole and tremendous losses for the peasantry in particular. Still reeling from the devastation of World War One, the peasants then had to contend with a Civil War in which they suffered a disproportionately high number of the casualties. The peasants' initial trust of the Soviet regime was shaken by the Civil war due to the regime's rather heavy-handed grain requisitions. Of course, the Whites also confiscated grain from the peasants, and when the peasants had to make a choice, they normally decided to cast their lot with the Bolsheviks. The peasants feared that if the Whites won they would bring back the former landowners. It was a decision for the lesser of two evils. When the dust finally settled and the policies of War Communism had become counterproductive, the New Economic Policy [NEP], a mixed economic system of petty capitalist and state run enterprises, had emerged²²

NEP had its own problems from the outset. To the workers, NEP appeared to contradict everything that the October Revolution stood for, and they saw NEP as selling the proletariat down the river in an effort to appease the peasantry. While agriculture flourished, industry bordered on chaos and "[t]he industrial worker had become the step-child of NEP."

²² Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance & Survival in the Russian Village After Collectivization* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 24.

Prices for agricultural goods were too low, and prices light industrial goods were too high. Industry joined together to keep prices high, and then agricultural prices plunged, developing into the “scissors crisis,” or what E. H. Carr called a “crisis of prices,” threatening the *smychka* early in the existence of NEP. The scissors eventually closed, but not before they revealed the instability of NEP.²³

In an attempt to alter NEP, the Bolsheviks changed the tax in kind to a money tax which they called the agricultural tax. This tax became a major peasant complaint against the Bolsheviks. “Peasants sometimes referred to the agricultural tax as *obrok*, using the term for money dues under serfdom, and rumors circulated that the state [used the money] to compensate the landowners and industrialists . . .” The peasants took the good with the bad, and this translated into their attitude of the Soviet government, which “was neither strongly approving nor strongly disapproving.”²⁴

By the time of the Fifteenth Party Congress in December 1927 [the collectivization congress] the size of the Soviet government's grain procurements had dropped to around half of the 1926 total. This threatened hunger in the cities and created a problem for the industrialization drive, which was supposed to be financially driven by state sale of exported grain. This party congress “marked the beginning

²³ E. H. Carr, *The Russian Revolution: From Lenin to Stalin* (New York: The Free Press, 1979), 50-60.

²⁴ Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, 26-28; and Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 18.

of a profound shift in agrarian policy, but as yet there was no clear commitment to socialization of dekulakization.” The only certainty was that it would be a struggle to shore up the failing NEP. This forced the Soviet government to look for an alternative economic solution.²⁵

The 1928 harvest saw the emergence of the Ural-Siberian method of grain collections, which was tantamount to a government invasion of the countryside. According to Robert Conquest, “the Ural-Siberian method was an attempt to use the coercion suitable to a command economy which was still in principle a market economy.” Ural-Siberian method began when the Soviet government examined the plentiful harvests of 1925 and 1926 in which the peasants were unwilling to part with their surplus grain. The Ural-Siberian method sparked fears of a new wave of grain requisitions reminiscent of War Communism. And while, according to Roy Medvedev, the government still had some room for economic and political maneuvering, it was locked into the system of “high politics” which limited the possibilities. This emergence of these so-called “extreme measures” also marked another increase in peasant resistance to government interference.²⁶ This served as the another step

²⁵ Chris Ward, *Stalin's Russia* (London, New York: Edward Arnold, 1993), 40-41.

²⁶ Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 96; Ward, *Stalin's Russia*, 39-41; Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism* Edited and translated by George Shriver, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 219.

along a path which reached a crescendo in the collectivization of agriculture.

Collectivization

During collectivization the Russian peasants responded to the coercive measures of the Soviet government by both violent [peasant insurrection, assassinations, and brigandage] and nonviolent [avoidance, obfuscation, migration, and rumor] means. The bulk of peasant resistance was passive in nature.²⁷ Soviet documents reported on the meetings of the village councils where peasants appeared willing to join the collective farms, even to the point of being overly enthusiastic. But just before voting commenced on whether or not to join the collective farm, children might run into the meeting, shouting “Uncle, uncle. They have stolen your horse!” Everyone “as if on cue” would leave the meeting without voting on the motion to join the collective farm.²⁸ A Ukrainian woman from the Poltava Region said, “They [government plenipotentiaries] called meetings every evening that Fall [of 1930], every

²⁷ I spent a semester studying several types of peasant resistance to collectivization. An examination of several key works on the period showed that while violent opposition to state policies certainly emerged from time to time it was the exception rather than the rule. See also Moshe Lewin's conclusion on the nature of peasant resistance to collectivization in *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power* Irene Nove and John Biggart trans. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 393.

²⁸ *Smolensk Archive*, WKP 261: 71. Now noted as SA, with the WKP number (WKP simply stands for All-Union Communist Party-*Vsesoiuznaia Kommunisticheskaia Partii*) and page number.

evening to get the people to join the collective farm. But people tried to avoid collectivization; they didn't want it."²⁹

No doubt there were people in the countryside who were completely willing to join the collective farms and who shared the communists' vision of the collectivized countryside. However, those people typically were in the minority in the countryside. The problem for the Soviet government was that the ideas of the class struggle did not translate to the countryside very well. There was no set manner for carrying out collectivization and dekulakization [which could be anything from burdensome taxes, expropriation of goods, or arrest and deportation to another area of the Soviet Union] nor any clearly drawn lines for class struggle. "Unlimited powers were entrusted to highly limited functionaries to implement a campaign which had no precedent on paper nor in the imagination, a campaign which was at best risky, and at worst tantamount to social apocalypse."³⁰

Sometimes poor or middle peasants would be classified as kulaks depending upon their stance on collectivization. This shows the Manichaeian world view of the communists. However, this world view worked both ways, with the peasants playing the role of the good in their own world view. In the government's opinion, if the peasants resisted

²⁹ Anonymous woman quoted in Commission on the Ukraine Famine, *Investigation of the Ukrainian Famine, 1932-1933* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1988), 269. As an acknowledged "enemy of the people," she may have had an axe to grind. This seems worth mentioning.

³⁰ Lynne Viola, *Best Sons of the Fatherland* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 101.

collectivization it was because they were showing kulak tendencies. In the peasants' minds, the state's enforcement of collectivization was a betrayal of the tenets of the revolution.³¹

The way that the mass of workers and communists swarmed into the villages to promote collectivization must have seemed to announce a return to the years of civil war and war communism in the countryside. When the collectivizers spoke of a coming new world, the world of the collective farm, some peasants read into these statements the beginning of the end for the peasant way of life. But for peasants coming face to face with the destruction of life as they knew it, the rumors of the apocalypse were a symbolic representation of the end of the traditional peasant existence so threatened by the coming of the collective farm.³² Nadezhda Mandelstam summed up this idea efficiently when she said that "[t]he collapse of all familiar notions is, after all, the end of the world."³³

In looking at rumor as a form of passive resistance, it becomes necessary to examine the social prism through which these rumors were formed, evolved, and communicated. For Russian peasants caught up in the whirlwind of wholesale collectivization, the rumors that flowed through the countryside reflected a historical logic. The rumors were a peasant construction, wrapped within their experiences of years of war,

³¹ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 33, 35.

³² Viola, "The Peasant Nightmare," 759.

³³ Nadezhda Mandelstam quoted in Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 45.

memories of serfdom, encroachments from the Soviet government, and fears about the future. They were also symbolic constructs that corresponded to what they feared that collectivization portended. These rumors also formed part of the edifice of peasant resistance. And in order to make the people more receptive to the rumors, each had to have an element of truth, and that nugget of truth was usually based upon the peasants' experiences or religious persecution, war, serfdom, etc.

The word whirlwind was used above in an effort to accurately describe what was happening in the countryside during wholesale collectivization. The decision to carry out collectivization at a slow pace, over the entire period of the Five Year Plan, was very quickly altered by the government in favor of wholesale collectivization by the government plenipotentiaries in the countryside. The extremism with which the government carried out collectivization sometimes motivated the peasants to violent respond violently.

All of the problems that the peasants faced, with the exception of the brief relaxation during NEP, emerged as a crescendo that had its loudest point with wholesale collectivization. Viola concluded that, "The apocalyptic undercurrents of the 1920's came to the fore in the course of wholesale collectivization, becoming a potent symbol of peasant opposition." In considering how these rumors took on an apocalyptic nature, Viola concluded that it was because, in the minds of the

peasants, the apocalypse accurately described what they saw in wholesale collectivization.³⁴

Groups of workers that went to the Soviet countryside to promote collectivization, the so-called 25,000ers, encountered all types of peasant resistance to the policy of collectivization. Again, there was a return to rumors as a form of passive resistance in the countryside. “Even if a 25,000er was fortunate enough to escape the consequences of what were described as kulak-inspired fires, riots, ‘bullets from corners,’ livestock massacres, and sabotage, it was virtually impossible not to confront the vast rumor mill which hung over the villages in those days . . .”³⁵

For the peasants, the rumor mill served the same purpose as the other forms of passive resistance, such as the slaughter of livestock in order to keep it from being co-opted into the collective farm, or foot-dragging: it showed the widespread peasant discontent with Soviet policies during collectivization and slowed the government’s implementation of this policy, forcing Stalin to apply the brakes to wholesale collectivization in his *Pravda* article, “Dizzy with Success.”

The rumors also painted a picture of the peasants’ fears during collectivization. The rumors showed the aspects of the peasant way of life that they were afraid of losing. “In the terrible years of collectivization, rumor held the Soviet countryside in a vise of fear and dread anticipation.” These rumors took the place of the formal news and

³⁴ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 65-66.

³⁵ Viola, *Best Sons of the Fatherland*, 106.

“functioned as a weapon in the arsenal of peasant resistance.”³⁶ The peasants viewed collectivization as a threat to their way of life, a threat to the essence of their existence, and it is through this perceived threat that the rumors spread by the peasantry can be better understood. Rumors that associated Soviet power with the Antichrist also brought the collective farm, *kolkhozniks*, and collectivizers into the realm of powers of darkness, each threatening an end of the peasant existence.

³⁶ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 45-46.

A “Social Apocalypse”

For the peasants, the Russian Orthodox Church was an important part of their existence. Also, peasants had in the past connected Orthodoxy with resistance to the state. As a result of the 17th century Schism in the Russian Orthodox Church, between fifteen and twenty percent of Russians separated themselves from the state sanctioned church and became known as Old Believers. Later, the Old Believers, in the name of true Orthodoxy, resisted the transformation of Russia during the reign of Peter the Great. Rumors abounded that the tsar was the Antichrist, or “that Peter I on the Russian throne was not the true Peter I, but a substitute and, apparently an un-Russian and evil one.”³⁷ Peter fit the definition of the Antichrist, so long as the Old Believers defined the word “Antichrist.”

Religious dissent extended into the late Imperial period. Some peasants drifted away from the Old Belief, becoming radical sectarians, but that did not lessen the resistance to the state. Peasants opposed government policies during this period, using religion as a backdrop to that opposition. “Many historians, starting with the Populist A. P.

³⁷ There is a very good section on the Old Believers, apocalyptic fears, and the construction of the antichrist in a very human manifestation in Nicholas V. Riasanovsky’s *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 76-85. The length of time that these views held sway, even with the non-appearance of the apocalypse, show just how powerful these themes are in history. (Note I did not say just *Russian History*.)

Shchapov in the 1850s and subsequently most Soviet historians, argued that the motives of peasants who adhered to Old Belief were as much social and political as religious . . .”³⁸ The idea of religion as a vehicle for peasant political ideology was not new to the collectivization drive, and the violation of Orthodoxy by the Soviet state, prior to and during collectivization, was a touchstone for peasant resistance.

During the 1920s Ia. A. Iakovlev, a future Commissar of Agriculture reported on the indifference among the peasants, especially the men, concerning the Orthodox Church. He made the observation that if the Soviet government wished to start a revival of the Orthodox Church it should attempt to close all of the village churches by administrative fiat. With the anti-religious campaigns and collectivization the peasants feared that the Soviet government would do just that. Surely the leaders in Moscow would have been delighted had this been accomplished.³⁹ This was a reasonable fear for the peasants, because the Bolsheviks had not attempted to hide their anti-religious nature and had no problems with the militant atheism of the Komsomol or other groups in the Soviet Union. Nor did the Soviet government plan to soothe the peasants’ fears concerning its position vis-a-vis the Orthodox faith. The atheistic nature of the Bolshevik regime sealed their opinion of the Orthodox Church, even though the Constitution of the

³⁸ David Moon, *The Russian Peasantry, 1600-1930: The World the Peasants Made* (London, New York: Longman, 1999), 277.

³⁹ Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants*, 35.

Russian Republic called for “freedom of religious and anti-religious propaganda.” Despite the tone of this statement, it hardly ever translated into a well-balanced policy towards religion and the church in the Soviet Union⁴⁰ and the peasants understood the government’s attitude toward the church as a threat to the religion of the peasants. Moshe Lewin wrote that “Religion is a key component of the peasants’ social and cultural world, an important factor that allowed them to survive and to retain their identity as well as to manifest enormous resilience and resistance to change whenever ‘change’ looked menacing.”⁴¹ That threat to the Orthodox Church represented a threat to peasant society and culture, and the peasants’ experience during the anti-religious campaigns of the 1920s proved that the Bolsheviks had no intention of easing off of their stance.

The Soviet attempt to upend peasant society rarely resulted in a total inversion of peasant norms. “The undermining of the old ways frequently led to conflict and confusion rather than the creation of a new society.”⁴² In some instances the peasants attempted to blend the ideas of the Orthodox Church with the tenets of communism. This hodgepodge of beliefs, which attempted to blend oil and water by in its combination of Orthodoxy and communism, served only to reveal the confusion felt by many peasants. Some of them practiced the

⁴⁰ Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants*, 33.

⁴¹ Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 58.

⁴² Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 50.

“Octobering” of children rather than baptism; the icon corners of the peasants’ homes contained photos of Lenin or Kalinin. The uncertainty of the peasants was also revealed through the emergence of religious sects that gradually gained in popularity in the years prior to collectivization.⁴³

“The peasant nightmare,” to quote Viola, revolved around several aspects that began to surface prior to wholesale collectivization. Church closings were increasingly common in the cities and villages just prior to collectivization. The destruction of church bells was a practical consideration as well as just another facet of the anti-religion campaign. The OGPU [*Ob”edinennoe gosudarstvennoe politicheskoe upravlenie*, or the security police] reports describe villagers gathering around and on the steps of the church and shouting, “stand up for the orthodox faith!” The sounding of the church bells usually called the villagers to demonstrations such as these.⁴⁴ Besides, the Soviet state could use the metal from the bells for the industrialization drive while simultaneously destroying an important symbol in the village.

Sheila Fitzpatrick describes the culmination of such anti-religious activity in the destruction of 4,000 icons in Gorlovka in the Donbass in December 1929. Fitzpatrick describes how the “icons were

⁴³ Viola, “The Peasant Nightmare,” 755; Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 51.

⁴⁴ Tracy McDonald, “A Peasant Rebellion in Stalin's Russia: The Pitelinskii Uprising, Riasan 1930,” from *Journal of Social History* Volume 35 Number 1, 125-146. The use of the bells in calling meetings during this uprising are well documented in McDonald’s study.

ceremoniously burnt in a bonfire in the city square while a crowd of miners estimated at 15,000-18,000 danced and celebrated in the streets.”⁴⁵

The destruction of icons prior to and during collectivization seemed to be a very ceremonial act. In the *Smolensk Archive* a member of the Young Pioneers is described as suggesting that the members of the village give up their icons. The villagers collected eight cartloads of icons and burned them on market day in the market square.⁴⁶ Members of the Komsomol and the League of Militant Godless were usually participants in acts such as this. The dismantling of the Orthodox religion shocked the peasants into action by giving them a rallying point for their resistance to collectivization.

From the destruction of icons, rumors of renewed icons began to circulate. In Voronezh, Kursk, Saratov, Kiev, Samara, the Don and in other areas prior to and during collectivization, old and dirty icons emerged as shiny and new. As the rumors circulated as to the miraculous nature of these icons, pilgrims began to come around and view those renewed icons.⁴⁷ These actions grew out of the peasants' attempts to counteract the anti-religious campaigns and reveal the peasant mentality towards the Soviet government's anti-religious campaign.

⁴⁵ Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, 45.

⁴⁶ SA, WKP 261: 70-71.

⁴⁷ Viola, "The Peasant Nightmare," 756.

In the Soviet Union, official sources of information which reached the village were rare, and even when these information sources did make it to the countryside, the massive rate of illiteracy slowed the dissemination of information. Besides, even the information that the peasants received was usually taken with an enormous grain of salt. Within this absence of reliable news, rumor rose in status and importance. The negative caught on so well because the peasants wanted to believe these rumors, which confirmed their fears about the coming collectivization. The fear in the peasantry arose because of what the peasants thought the government could and would do and how that would alter the situation in the countryside. In addition, peasants looked for a way to offer resistance to Soviet governmental policies and they needed a negative story to resist and motivate resistance.

According to Lynne Viola, "Collectivization led to an explosion of apocalyptic fears among the peasantry." These fears were most often spread throughout the countryside by rumors. Her study claims that rumors combining Soviet power and the collective farm with the mark of the Antichrist and the powers of evil represented the bulk of peasant rumors during collectivization. Accordingly, this paper will have much to say about these rumors.⁴⁸

Viola argues that rumors of the apocalypse in the Soviet countryside during collectivization, while couched in the themes of the

⁴⁸ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 55-56.

apocalypse, were the ideological backdrop for resistance to the collectivization of agriculture. The peasants were apparently coming face to face with the end of life as they knew it, and for them, one of the few readily available references for the situation they were facing could be explained in terms of the apocalypse. They had faced such upheaval before, in periods of war, revolution, civil war, and were facing upheaval yet again. In Viola's opinion, for the peasants the Antichrist and the four horsemen of the apocalypse were very important symbols used to set up an ideological front for peasant resistance to collectivization.

In the Volga region a popular rumor was that "Soviet power is not of God, but of Antichrist."⁴⁹ The suggestion that joining the collective farm meant signing oneself over to the Antichrist and other similar rumors were part of the peasant defense mechanism which tried to keep peasants from joining the collective farm and breaking the village dynamic. Throughout the countryside rumors about the end of the world and the reign of the Antichrist circulated almost constantly. When an older woman asked, "is it true or not? - they say that all who join the collective farm will be signed over to the Antichrist?" she was not hoping to get on the Antichrist's good side.⁵⁰ When the collectivizers arrived in Smolensk, they were seen as heralding the coming of the Antichrist much as, Biblically speaking, the four horsemen of the apocalypse

⁴⁹ Viola, "The Peasant Nightmare," 762.

⁵⁰ Woman quoted in Lynne Viola, "*Bab'i Bunty* and Peasant Women's Protest During Collectivization," from *The Russian Review* Volume 45 (1986), 28.

portended the coming of the Antichrist.⁵¹ An Old Believer passed around the rumor that “You will be forced to work on Sundays if you go in to the collective farm, [they] will put the seal of Antichrist on your forehead and arms. Now already the kingdom of Antichrist is begun and to go into the collective farm is a big sin. About this it is written in the Bible.”⁵²

These rumors about the Antichrist, it would seem, carried more weight with the women, especially older women, who were the standard bearers of the Orthodox faith in the countryside. For instance, an “[o]ld women asked the 25,000er Berson . . . whether it was not true, as they had been told, that joining the collective farm meant signing oneself over to the Antichrist.”⁵³ Rumors of the apocalypse and the Antichrist had a profound effect on the women in the Soviet Union, as the women were usually the group that carried the religious beliefs from generation to generation. This assumption was also made by the Soviet government, which believed that the *baba* was easily influenced by the kulak agitation in the villages.⁵⁴ While most rumors were ascribed to the kulaks, religious pilgrims, monks, indigent beggars, and “holy fools” also served as the vehicles for the rumors of the apocalypse and antichrist. The government typically assigned these persons kulak status, but “whether

⁵¹ SA, WKP 434: 214.

⁵² Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 57.

⁵³ Viola, *Best Sons of the Fatherland*, 106.

⁵⁴ Viola, “*Bab'i Bunty*,” 33-38.

kulaks initiated rumors or became kulaks because they initiated rumors is an open question.”⁵⁵

Peasants also passed around rumors saying that “in the collective farm, there will be a special stamp, [they] will close all the churches, not allow prayer, dead people will be cremated, the christening of children will be forbidden . . . ”⁵⁶ Rumors circulated in the Lower Volga that “[t]he collective farm is incompatible with religion. There you will be forced to work on Sunday, [they] will close the church and not allow [you] to pray,’ and ‘Joining the collective farm you sign yourself on to Antichrist's list. Run from the collective farm, save your soul!’ ” Other rumors said that, “the collective farm – this is the devil’s branding.”⁵⁷ The peasants equated the Soviet government with their ideas of Antichrist, and by spreading the rumors that the mark of the Antichrist will be placed on those peasants who joined the collective farm, they brought the Soviet government and collective farm together in an amalgam of ideas of Antichrist. In making this association, the rumors condemned the Soviet government and the collectivization drive.

The rumors circulated that the collectivizers in Smolensk “promis[ed] a better life but sign[ed] them [the peasants] up for Hell.” ⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Viola, “The Peasant Nightmare,” 761. This is a very good point that Viola raises. It drives home the point that kulak agitation is a fluid and dynamic term that changed with each new situation. It works well for the government when describing what exactly constitutes kulak agitation.

⁵⁶ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 59.

⁵⁷ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 56-57.

⁵⁸ SA, WKP 434: 214.

When collectivizers came to the Northwestern Region of the Soviet Union, evangelicals began announcing that the Antichrist had come to Earth so that “Satanic nests,” presumably the *kolkhozes*, could be planted.⁵⁹

Rumors of “unclean forces” emanating from the homes of newly collectivized farmers, and rumors that “in order to enter the kingdom of god” the peasants had to avoid the collective farms also helped to push to the forefront the ideas of the collective farm as Hell on earth, again indelibly linking the collective farm, and by implication, the Soviet government, with the Antichrist and the powers of darkness.⁶⁰

Some rumors argued against joining the collective farm [and subsequently disrupting the village structure]. When rumors in the Ivanovo Industrial Region in January 1930 spoke of the complete destruction of society in accordance with the word of God, the reflection of the peasants’ fears about the destruction of their society needs no further elaboration.⁶¹ But when these rumors did not work in keeping the villagers out of the collective farms, rumors of a day of retribution, in which all of the *kolkhozniks* and communists on the collective farms would be killed, began to emerge in the countryside. When peasants in

⁵⁹ *Kollektivizatsiia sel'skogo khoziaistva v Severo-Zapadnom raione* (Leningrad, 1970), 163. Now noted as *Northwestern Region*. These documents fall under the group of documents known as *Istoriia kollektivizatsii sel'skogo khoziaistva SSSR* published by the Main Archival Administration, the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, and the Institutes of History and Economics of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR.

⁶⁰ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 56.

⁶¹ *Kollektivizatsiia sel'skogo khoziaistva Tsentral'nogo promyshlennogo raiona* (Riazan, 1971), 336. Now noted as *Central Industrial Region*.

the Kuban heard rumors about an approaching band of Cossacks who would massacre the poor or non-Cossack peasants on a day of retribution, variously called St. Bartholomew's nights or "black nights," they either hid in the steppe or gathered twenty to a hut, armed with whatever weapons they could find.⁶² In the summer of 1929 a rumor of an impending St. Bartholomew's night in which anyone who joined the collective farm would be killed made the rounds of the countryside. When collectivization began in the Urals and in Chuvash areas the rumors of St. Bartholomew's nights circulated through the villages, and these rumors usually carried the idea that only the farmers who joined the collective farm would be massacred.⁶³ The Antichrist's "mark" that the peasants on the collective farm would receive no doubt signaled that they were the appropriate ones to slaughter. The peasants might also be hearkening back to the period of civil war, when the tsarist forces and the Bolshevik forces rode into the villages and confiscated grain and sometimes men.⁶⁴

Chastushki, popular songs or verse reflecting a peasant experience, served as commentary on the situation in the countryside and sometimes touched on apocalyptic ideas as well. One such *chastushka*, found in Evdokimov's *Kolkhozy v Klassovykh boiakh*, pleaded with peasants not to

⁶² *Kollektivizatsiia i razvitie sel'skogo khoziaistva na Kubani* (Krasnodar, 1981), Volume 2, 52-53. Now noted as *Kuban*.

⁶³ Viola, "The Peasant Nightmare," 763-764; Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 57.

⁶⁴ Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 714-744.

join the collective farm because that was where the antichrist could be found. “O, brothers and sisters, do not go into the kolkhozes. . . Three times the Antichrist will put his mark on you.”⁶⁵ Of course the Soviet government would not be the Soviet government if it did not place the origins of these *chastushki* at the feet of the kulaks.⁶⁶

Sometimes documents or “heavenly letters” that showed up in the countryside were the vehicles used for spreading rumors. In one holy letter from a village in Oirotiia, “God wrote, ‘People no longer believe in me. If this [non-belief] continues, then in two years the world will come to an end. I can no longer be patient.’ ” There were rumors in Astrakhan that the Virgin Mary had sent a letter claiming that sickness and punishment awaited those people in the collective farms, and that the members of the collective farms “would be destroyed by bands of horsemen,” which played off of apocalyptic symbols and ideas.⁶⁷

Rumors of a mysterious light coming from a recently closed church drove the people to examine what had happened. They found a sign on the cupola saying: “Do not go into the collective farm and commune because I will smite you.”⁶⁸ While the rumors about the collectivization drive and the Soviet state being the harbingers of the apocalypse on earth served as a disincentive for joining the collective farms, the “divine” nature of

⁶⁵ A. Evdokimov, *Kolkhozy v Klassovyykh boiakh* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1930), 34-35.

⁶⁶ V. P. Danilov and N. A. Ivnitiskiy eds. *Dokumenty Svidetel'stvuiut* (Moscow: Political Literature Publishing House, 1989), 256-257.

⁶⁷ Viola, “The Peasant Nightmare,” 762.

⁶⁸ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 57.

these letters also validated the peasants' apocalyptic view of collectivization in the countryside. "Threats and calls to action lamenting the fate of the peasant were glued to fences and walls. These anonymous writings called for a return to the 'old life' and threatened those 'who drink the blood of the peasant.'" ⁶⁹

The nature of the rumors of the apocalypse [either black or white, for or against the Antichrist/Soviet state/collective farm] was designed to evoke some reaction from the peasants. The rumors that circulated exhibited the peasant mindset during wholesale collectivization, and a basic premise was that one could not be neutral on a moving train. In the rumors of the apocalypse, the peasants, with their ideas of Soviet high politics, combined the apocalypse, Antichrist, Soviet power, and collective farm into one and the same set of ideas, while simultaneously setting a plan of action and resisting collectivization. ⁷⁰

In an effort to counter the glut of rumors in the countryside and the relatively broad base from which these rumors spread, the Soviet government proclaimed that the rumors were part of "kulak agitprop." ⁷¹ A peasant who had been overcome by a petit bourgeois mentality emerged as *podkulachnik*. Behind that term, variously translated as "kulak agents" or "sub-kulak," was the threat of being dekulakized or

⁶⁹ McDonald, "A Peasant Rebellion in Stalin's Russia," 134-135.

⁷⁰ Viola, "The Peasant Nightmare," 767.

⁷¹ McDonald, "A Peasant Rebellion in Stalin's Russia," 128. The OGPU report on a relatively minor uprising of women in Riazan placed the blame for the uprising not on the women but on a group of kulaks who had met in secret to plan the uprising.

deported.⁷² While it was easy to apply labels to the rumors, the Soviet government found it difficult to react to the kulak agitprop in the countryside, and rightly so. Fighting an abstraction was a difficult thing. There was no weapon to confiscate, no body to kill.

The attacks on the church that began prior to collectivization, increased in number dramatically during the period of massive collectivization, and were condemned only in March 1930, in the face of heavy resistance to collectivization and “extreme excesses” on the part of local officials.⁷³ The Soviet government had not planned to back off of its policy towards the Orthodox church, but the peasants’ reaction to the members of the Komsomol, the League of Militant Godless, and government plenipotentiaries who were involved in the collectivization drive was enough to get the Soviet government not only to call off the anti-religious campaign and wholesale collectivization in the countryside, but to disavow any knowledge of the actions. When, in March 1930, Stalin finally put the brakes on wholesale collectivization, he wrote in the *Pravda* article “Dizzy with Success:”

I say nothing of those “revolutionaries” - save the mark! - who *begin* the work of organizing [kolkhozes] by removing the bells from the churches. Just imagine, removing the church bells - how r-r-revolutionary.⁷⁴

⁷² Viola, “*Bab'i Bunty*,” 28.

⁷³ Viola, “*Bab'i Bunty*,” 29.

⁷⁴ J. V. Stalin “Dizzy with Success,” *Pravda*, Number 60 (March 2, 1930) reprinted in J. V. Stalin *Problems of Leninism* (Peking: Foreign Languages Press, 1976), 490. Italics in the original.

This represented a brief respite from the attacks on the church. The connection of Soviet power to ideas completely antithetical to peasant ideas of religion, and the way that this connection was spread through rumor, probably influenced Stalin in his decision to call a halt to the persecution of the church while simultaneously calling a halt to collectivization. He most likely wanted to disassociate the two, as the rumors of the apocalypse were used to delegitimize the collective farms and by extension the Soviet government.

While the rumors began as response to the anti-religious campaign which aimed at more than bringing atheism to the countryside, they evolved into a response to the government's attempt to destroy traditional peasant society by going through with wholesale collectivization.⁷⁵ Sometimes these rumors served as a direct call to action for the peasants, such as a deacon's statement which said, "I pronounce onto [sic] you that the end of the world is coming. With the help of God, it is necessary to struggle against Antichrist and his sons."⁷⁶ Other times they served as an allegorical vision of right and wrong in the countryside, such as the story about a woman who handed a peasant man a Testament and told him that only it could help him. The only stipulation being that, for the Testament to work, the man could not join the collective farm. This is a reflection on how, within a world that has been turned upside down, reliance on a Testament for a good luck charm,

⁷⁵ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 39.

⁷⁶ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 62.

advice of “Holy Fools,” and rumors of apocalypse are not only understandable actions but useful actions in resisting the destruction of peasant society.

Morality and the Peasantry

The peasants' fears concerning the "moral abomination in everyday life in the collective farm," though related to their defense of religion, formed another group of rumors in the countryside.⁷⁷ These rumors on the decline of morality reveal another threat that collectivization posed to peasant society. The rumors about the "common blanket" that would be used by everyone in the village were well known in the Russian villages during collectivization,⁷⁸ and rumors such as this one cut to the heart of the matter, revealing peasant concerns about the downward spiral of morality within the village.

In *Red Bread*, Maurice Hindus described his home village during collectivization, and this book contains remarkable detail about the peasants and their attitudes concerning the deterioration of society during this period. One thing that stands out most is how the villagers complained that they hardly recognized their children anymore, and how their children did not adhere to their parents' ideas of morality. In conversations in their homes, the villagers expressed their dissatisfaction with the coming collective farm, and they associated it with the destruction of peasant values and morals.

⁷⁷ Viola, "The Peasant Nightmare," 765.

⁷⁸ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 59.

The peasants had already disassociated themselves from the city as much as possible, and a wide gulf opened between village life and city life in a type of social and cultural division. But within the village there was already a social and cultural rift developing between the older peasants and the children. The young people in the village welcomed the new system, and the Komsomol was a major force in the countryside. But while there was growing participation in politics for the youths, there was also a general decrease in morality in the countryside.⁷⁹ And along with this the fear emerged among peasants that their way of life was in danger of complete destruction. Lynne Viola noted that there was “a decline in standards of morality among peasant youth, and [that decline] pointed to an increase in sexual promiscuity, venereal disease, prostitution, and hooliganism in the villages.”⁸⁰

The rumor of the “communal blanket” hinted at the possibility of sexual promiscuity and could have developed from events that actually happened. “In the Northern Caucasus, local activists in one village *actually* went so far as to confiscate all blankets. They told the peasants that from henceforth there would be no more individual blankets; all would sleep on a 700 meter-long bed under a 700 meter-long blanket.”⁸¹ Old women asked the collectivizers if it was true that they would have to

⁷⁹ Viola, “The Peasant Nightmare,” 752-753.

⁸⁰ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 51.

⁸¹ Viola, “*Bab’i Bunty*,” 31-32. My italics.

sleep under a common blanket as they had been told.⁸² And rumors about wife sharing, just like the common blanket, probably arose due to instances in which the collectivizers lent credence to the common blanket fear. For example, one government administrator reportedly “told women that they would all have to sleep, along with all of the men, under one common blanket.”⁸³

Some other rumors claimed that “all will be shared, both husbands and wives . . . [they] will cut off [your] hair. . . . They will take your children from you and you will not see them, they will raise them in a satanic spirit . . . [and] they will burn down the churches.”⁸⁴ The suggestion that the women of the villages would be shared in the collective farms was startling for the peasants to hear, even if it was not accurate, and the infamous communal blanket under which everybody was to sleep was another symbolic representation of peasant fears about fading morality.

The rumors that decent, hard-working peasants would avoid the collective farms were passed around in the Central Industrial Region, along with the rumor that only shirkers and drunkards would join the collective farms. The peasants believed that the *bedniak aktiv* was nothing more than just a few drunkards who took everything they could

⁸² Viola, *Best Sons of the Fatherland*, 106.

⁸³ Viola, “The Peasant Nightmare,” 765.

⁸⁴ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 59.

from the hard working peasants to build up the stores of the collective farm.⁸⁵

“The women of the village Starye Chleny in Starochelinskaia *volost*’, Chistopol’skii kanton in Tartariia feared that in the collective farm their hair would be cut like horses’ tails, the children would be taken, they would all have to eat dog meat, and they would be given husbands that they ‘did not need.’ ”⁸⁶ This rumor briefly encapsulates several of the basic fears of the peasantry during collectivization: humiliation, the “loss” of their children, starvation, and amorality.

A *sel’sovet* [local soviet] member “in the Sasovo district, joined the collective farm but took the opportunity to speak out against the collective farm at each meeting, calling it a ‘whore house’ [*publichnyi dom*].”⁸⁷ This qualification of the collective farm by a member of the local soviet undoubtedly reaffirmed the peasants’ fears concerning morality, and influenced the local peasants, whose attitudes towards the collective farm were already decidedly negative.

Tracy McDonald commented on an analysis of the uprising in Riazan by A. N. Ianin, a former party worker. In true party fashion, Ianin commented on how the blame for the total upheaval in Pitelinskii could be laid at the feet of the usual enemies. According to McDonald,

Ianin left no stone unturned as he unmasked those behind the extraordinary events: political-economic

⁸⁵ *Central Industrial Region*, 257-258; SA, WKP 261: 94-95.

⁸⁶ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 58-59.

⁸⁷ McDonald, “A Peasant Rebellion in Stalin's Russia,” 137-138.

enemies (the kulaks); political-historic enemies (white guards and emissaries of Antonov all rolled into a unique hybrid); former tsarist officials (members of the tsarist duma); religious enemies (the local priest); wayward women; recidivist criminals; and gypsies.⁸⁸

Ianin himself said, "In these villages there appeared mysterious wanderers, informants, soothsayers spouting the most unimaginable nonsense, spreading wild rumors, gossip that women and children would be socialized. . . ."⁸⁹

Rumors were spread that said, "Beautiful men and women will be taken and brought to one place to produce beautiful people. Children will be taken from their parents, there will be wholesale incest: brothers will live with sisters, sons with mothers, fathers with daughters, etc. The collective farm-this is beasts in a single shed, people in a single barrack."⁹⁰ The fear that children would be taken from their parents was perhaps a reflection of the peasants' belief that they had already "lost" their children in that they were no longer following the village beliefs. In one village, when a 25,000er suggested opening up a day care center, rumors circulated that the children would be socialized.⁹¹ Other rumors have children "exported to China to 'improve the race' (presumably of the Chinese)." Or that the children "would be sent to a special children's colony."⁹² Rumors claimed that when the collective farms arrived the

⁸⁸ McDonald, "A Peasant Rebellion in Stalin's Russia," 131.

⁸⁹ Ianin quoted in McDonald, "A Peasant Rebellion in Stalin's Russia," 131.

⁹⁰ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 59.

⁹¹ *Central Industrial Region*, 398-399.

⁹² Viola, "The Peasant Nightmare," 765-766.

government would take the village children, cut the women's hair, export the women and girls to China to pay for the Far Eastern Railroad, or that old people would be turned into glue.⁹³

Fitzpatrick mentioned the fact that hair played an important role in the collectivizers' humiliation of the peasants and in rumors. Collectivizers would pull the hair out of peasants' beards remarking loosely, "Here's some *util'syrye* [industrial scrap]-that's an export item." Another instance was reported in which local communists "cut off the hair of 180 women after persuading the peasants to vote for the following resolution: That there is no point in women having long hair; the hair could be sold to buy a tractor, and then we would ride the tractor."⁹⁴ Whenever the peasant women would offer resistance, the collectivizers would drag them around by their hair, no doubt fueling the rumors of pulling out hair and beards.⁹⁵ Rumors said, "they will cut off the women's hair and stamp their foreheads,"⁹⁶ or that the women would have to cut their hair off because it was to be used for scrap in the industrialization drive.⁹⁷ The rumors circulated that the Soviet government would cut off the beards of the Old Believers to "[send] abroad in exchange for tractors" or the women's hair for scrap to be

⁹³ Viola, "The Peasant Nightmare," 766; and Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 59.

⁹⁴ Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, 52-53.

⁹⁵ McDonald, "A Peasant Rebellion in Stalin's Russia," 126.

⁹⁶ Viola, *Best Sons of the Fatherland*, 106.

⁹⁷ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 58.

exported to China could be traceable to some of the excesses on the part of the collectivizers.⁹⁸

While not as blatantly confrontational as rumors of the coming apocalypse or of war with the rest of the world, rumors about the decline of morality and a degeneration of society in the collective farm did much to show the threat to the peasants' way of life. They were symbolic of some crisis that revolved around the question of joining the collective farm, and they mention situations that were similar to what the peasants faced during collectivization. These rumors were a reaction to the threat to peasant society and were directed towards the preservation of that society. In theory, communist ideas concerning morality could be quite liberating, but in practice these usually were taken to excess. These rumors, then, feed off of the excesses of Communism and represent an attempt to fight off the communist encroachment into the countryside.

⁹⁸ Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, 68; Viola, "The Peasant Nightmare," 766.

“Wars and Rumors of Wars”

During the immense upheaval of collectivization rumors began to circulate that the nations of the world were banging the war drum and preparing for their imminent invasion of the USSR. This seems to be appropriate considering the recent history of the Russian peasants. During World War One the peasants formed the bulk of the Russian Army that suffered massive casualties. Also, the years of Civil War and War Communism which followed the October Revolution provided much of the structure of peasant mentality in the period of wholesale collectivization.

These real fears reemerged during the War Scare of 1927. In 1926-27 suspicions about European nations drove Soviet foreign policy makers to step up cries about capitalist encirclement and the threat to the Soviet Union. When the British government broke diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union, the escalation of fear, generally incited by the Soviet press, spread around the Soviet Union. This fear also drove the governmental reaction and fed anxiety about the perceived domestic instability in Georgia and Ukraine.⁹⁹

⁹⁹ Kenneth Bourne and D. Cameron Watt, General Editors, *British Documents on Foreign Affairs, Part II, Series A: The Soviet Union, Volume 9: The Soviet Union, January 1927-April 1930* Volume Editor, Dominic Lieven (Publication location unknown: University Publishers of America, 1986), 12-14, 58-59; Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States* (New

In the Northwestern Region the peasants believed that war was on the way. When the rumors that the peasants spread claimed, “in the spring there will be war, and then there will be no bread in the USSR,”¹⁰⁰ the peasants were showing clear fears about the possibility of fighting in a war and suffering through another disastrous period of grain requisitions reminiscent of War Communism.

During collectivization the perceived difficulties in foreign relations were brought about by the very real domestic upheaval. The peasants used the experience of war as a vehicle to spread rumors of war during the collectivization drive. For the peasants who fought and lived through World War I, which violently ruptured peasant societies, these rumors managed to strike a particularly ominous chord. When ethnographers went through the countryside making “sketches of the villages, rumors flew that ‘foreign spies are coming, they are drawing maps.’”¹⁰¹ The previous document from the Northwestern Region remarked that “Poland and England are breaking off relations [with the USSR] in view of the coming war. Poland and Rumania do not recognize us. In order to delay war they [the Soviet Government] export grain and leather . . .”¹⁰²

The rumors concerning war usually carried the ideas that the peasants on the collective farms would either be the first conscripted to

York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 164-165; Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, 37.

¹⁰⁰ *Northwestern Region*, 76.

¹⁰¹ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 30.

¹⁰² *Northwestern Region*, 76.

fight the battles or they would be the first ones slaughtered when the invasion began. Concerning such rumors about the coming war, peasants would say, “We peasants will not go to war, let the workers fight.”¹⁰³ When Maurice Hindus met with the peasants in his home village, some discussed the possibilities of the collective farm; however, the discussion was one of twists and turns:

“But supposing there is a war,” broke in the fat-chinned woman again, “have you ever thought of that?”

They stared at one another with and at me, transfixed with anxiety.

“Do you think there will be a war?” the little man turned to me.

“Why are they shouting so much about it if there isn't going to be any?” someone speculated.

“Yes, why? Why?” several others repeated almost in unison.

“And if there is a war, and the invaders come and find us living on a kolhoz, they will say we are Communists and they will cut our throats.”

“The Poles will do that anyway.”

“They will, they will. Oh, how they will!”¹⁰⁴

Some rumors reveal the peasants' belief in the possibility of civil war in the countryside. Rumors circulated that the Soviet authorities were ruthlessly putting down the rare peasant insurrection. In the Poltava Region, one Ukrainian peasant had heard rumors of peasant insurrection in other villages where “the authorities sent squads of soldiers who shot the villagers.”¹⁰⁵ She could not verify the story, but

¹⁰³ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 30.

¹⁰⁴ Maurice Hindus, *Red Bread: Collectivization in a Russian Village* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1931, 1988), 26.

¹⁰⁵ Anonymous woman, Commission on the Ukraine Famine, *Ukrainian Famine*, 276.

undoubtedly such reprisals did not seem out of the realm of possibility for her.

In January 1930 Pope Pius XI called for an international day of prayer for all of the faithful in Russia, to be held on 16 March 1930. After this, Pius played a prominent role in peasant rumor as a hero coming to rescue the peasants with his armies. The rumors concerning Pius were particularly prominent in the northwestern region and western regions of the Soviet Union, an area with a large Catholic and Uniate population. These were recorded in the *Smolensk Archive*, and they claimed that “The Pope of Rome has interceded for us”, and “The Pope of Rome has announced war against the Bolsheviks.”¹⁰⁶ In the Middle Volga priests spread the rumor “that soon the Roman Pope will come, the government will fall, and all the communists and collective farmers will be crushed.”¹⁰⁷ This was quite an extrapolation from a request for an international day of prayer.

Rumors of war with China began to circulate following minor skirmishes on the Far Eastern Railroad.¹⁰⁸ In 1930, rumors circulated among the peasantry that the world powers were coming together to crush the Soviet Government. These rumors claimed, “All the world is for us,”¹⁰⁹ or in another, slightly different, variation which suggested

¹⁰⁶ Medvedev, *Let History Judge*, 229; SA, WKP 261: 71, WKP 151: 194.

¹⁰⁷ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 62.

¹⁰⁸ *Kuban*, 73-75.

¹⁰⁹ SA, WKP 261: 71.

that, “The whole world is against Soviet power.”¹¹⁰ The peasants in the west constantly circulated rumors about impending war with Poland.¹¹¹ “The most frequent invaders named were the British, the Poles, the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Whites”, even though the rumors were purposefully vague at times, speaking only of “bands” or “horsemen.” Viola recounts the story of Zamiatin, a worker but not a 25,000er, who reported the situation faced by a 25,000er whose name of Klimov:

Zamiatin said that the approach to Klimov's village resembled an armored camp . . . When he arrived, Zamiatin found the village alive with rumors of the approach of a band of riders who were coming to kill all the Communists and collective farmers.¹¹²

Again, the peasants circulated the rumor of a band of riders coming to the countryside to kill the Communists and *kolkhozniks*. Nothing specific was offered according to this recounting, but there was enough in this small rumor to send the entire village into an uproar. For the peasants, conditioned by World War I and the Civil War, such rumors could be seen as a return to the fighting in the meat grinder that was the eastern front, or as a return to the brutal struggle between the “reds” and the “whites” during the Civil War.

The peasants even mingled rumors together for the desired effect. In the summer of 1929 the peasants claimed that collectivization was happening because the former Russian lords living abroad had forced the

¹¹⁰ SA, WKP 261: 16.

¹¹¹ *Kollektivizatsiia sel'skogo khoziaistva v zapadnom raione* (Smolensk, 1968), 256. Now noted as *Western Region*.

¹¹² Viola, *Best Sons of the Fatherland*, 105.

Soviet state to reconstitute their estates so that they could come and reclaim them, “otherwise all the nations will go to war against Russia.”¹¹³ This summarized the opinion that what some peasants saw as a potentially liberating war for the peasantry could be a just be another series of problems. Remembering the horrendous experience of the Civil War, the peasants circulated rumors that there would be a “return of the Whites.”¹¹⁴ Rumors such as this one carried the threat of potential return to the days of serfdom or other responsibilities that reduced the peasants’ independence.

Again, these rumors were an improvisation on reality. They were fabrications, naturally, but they were fabrications that reflected the international instability, and they were fabrications that the peasants found easily acceptable. With World War I, foreign intervention, the Civil War, and the War Scare of 1927 still noticeable scars on peasants’ memories, the rumors of war were an important symbol in their ideas of collectivization.

For the peasants, these rumors meshed easily with the question of the collective farms. The collective farmers would either be the first to be slaughtered when or the first conscripted to do the fighting if and when war came.¹¹⁵ This was another reason for the peasants to try and avoid joining the collective farms. The rumors of wars also hinted at the

¹¹³ SA, WKP 434: 214.

¹¹⁴ Viola, “*Bab’i Bunty*,” 28.

¹¹⁵ Viola, “The Peasant Nightmare,” 764.

conflict between *muzhik* and Soviet power while signaling a potentially violent end to that confrontation. Similarly, the peasants' experiences with war during this period was one of horrific bloodshed on the front lines and difficulties in the village. The rumors of war were another symbolic representation of the threat to the village and the peasant way of life.

“A Second Serfdom”

The comparison of the collective farms as a type of second serfdom and corvée labor seems worthy of mention. Even prior to wholesale collectivization the peasants began to refer to Soviet policies as akin to serfdom or slavery. During NEP, when the Bolsheviks stopped using the tax in kind in favor of the agricultural tax, the peasants referred to the new agricultural tax as *obrok*, bringing back memories of the money dues during serfdom.¹¹⁶

A peasant related the *batraks'* and *bedniaks'* reactions to the attempt to collectivize his village. This peasant, Ivan Chugunkov, wrote to the government:

You are driving them into the kolkhoz by force. For example, I will take my own Iushkovskii rural soviet: a brigade of Red Army men came in, that brigade seized control of all populated centers, and you think that they organized a kolkhoz, no they didn't, the *batrak* and *bedniak* spoke against that enterprise and said we don't want *barshchina*, we don't want serfdom.¹¹⁷

This shows how some peasants referred to *barshchina* [or labor dues under serfdom] when comparing the collective farm to the institution of serfdom. One rumor from the Moscow Region said that “The collective farm is *barshchina*, a second serfdom.”¹¹⁸ The peasants were attempting

¹¹⁶ Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, 27.

¹¹⁷ Chugunkov quoted in Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, 69.

¹¹⁸ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 60.

to associate the Soviet regime with the annihilation of the peasants' freedom.

When the peasants sat around another peasant's house, or their own house, they would discuss the situation and would usually talk about their ideas of what would be likely to happen during collectivization. Hindus recorded a peasant who said that he was not sure that there would be enough bread to eat on the collective farms: "But in the kolkhoz, no more potatoes of our own, no more anything of our own. Everything will be rationed out by orders; we shall be like mere *batraks* on the landlord's estates in the old days. Serfdom-that is what it is-and who wants to be a serf?"¹¹⁹ With only seventy years separating the period of serfdom from wholesale collectivization, serfdom was still a legacy of repression and an idea constantly in the forefront of peasants' minds, and serfdom represented another potent symbol for peasant resistance to collectivization.

In some rumors, the common initials for the All-Soviet Communist Party [VKP-*Vsesoiuznaia kommunisticheskaia partiia*] were rendered as associating the party with "a second serfdom," or *vtoroe krepostnoe pravo*.¹²⁰ When Prokofii Maksimovich sent in a letter that talked about the new labor obligations in the collective farms, it said, "One may think either that it is forced labor for the peasant because he lives under Soviet power, because they ride on the *muzhik's* back now as they rode on him

¹¹⁹ Hindus, *Red Bread*, 24.

¹²⁰ Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, 69.

before. Or is it that the old serfdom is alive and kicking[?].”¹²¹ Such sentiments were common among many peasants.

At meetings the peasants had no qualms about standing up and shouting their belief that “You [communists] are pillaging the peasantry and have pillaged all the kulaks. . . . Under the tsar we lived better, the collective farm is a noose. Down with slavery, long live freedom.”¹²² In the Ukraine, peasants were saying, “They push us into the collective farm so we will be eternal slaves.”¹²³

A return of the *pomeshchiki* and the landowning class were fears that the peasants seized upon during collectivization which were related to the fears of serfdom. Rumors surrounding the reasons for collectivization were that the former landlords had wanted their estates returned: “The collective farms have been organized so as to reestablish the lords’ estates, after which the lord will appear and take over.”¹²⁴ Such rumors were tied into the rumors of war as mentioned before, when the peasants said that the landlords had demanded their estates back and, should they be denied, had enough support from various world governments to start widespread war.

The Ukrainian woman from Poltava region mentioned earlier in the paper knew that the peasants were against the collectivization. “[P]eople tried to avoid collectivization; they didn’t want it. . . . [T]he more

¹²¹ Maksimovich quoted in Fitzpatrick, *Stalin’s Peasants*, 69.

¹²² Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 151.

¹²³ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 60.

¹²⁴ Viola, “*Bab’i Bunty*,” 28.

courageous ones said, ‘What is this, Serfdom again?’ ”¹²⁵ The peasants were clearly concerned about the potential loss of freedom that collectivization represented to them. The agitation did not go so far as to cause peasant insurrection in her village, which was in the Poltava Region. However, she had heard rumors of peasant insurrection in other villages where “the authorities sent squads of soldiers who shot the villagers.” During the drive for collectivization, the peasants began to see the collective farm as a return to the era of serfdom. One of the commission members asked the woman: “When collectivization began did people see this as a new serfdom?” She responded: “People did say this.”¹²⁶

The peasants probably did not think that collectivization was a return to serfdom as the term applied to the institution of the imperial period. But by attaching collectivization to serfdom the peasants were trying to draw parallels from an exploitative and injurious institution so that they could provoke a negative reaction towards collectivization. As far as the peasants were concerned, the collective farm was just another form of exploitation at the hands of a dominant government. This served to delegitimize the Soviet government, as it represented a betrayal of the ideas of the October Revolution. The peasants’ memories of the onerous

¹²⁵ Anonymous woman, Commission on the Ukraine Famine, *Ukrainian Famine*, 269.

¹²⁶ Anonymous woman, Commission on the Ukraine Famine, *Ukrainian Famine*, 276. The way that the question was asked suggested a certain answer anyway, but it was the idea conveyed that required I include this conversation.

system of serfdom represented another potent symbol for peasant resistance to collectivization.

“Now They Arrest the Kulaks”

Following the October Revolution the peasants had already experienced the period of dekulakization in the countryside. The Soviet government had attempted to foment class differentiation in the countryside and divide the peasants against one another. The plan was not entirely successful. Typically the kulaks tried to uphold the village, and with few exceptions, the rest of the village usually supported the kulaks¹²⁷ Not much changed during the interregnum of NEP.

In *Red Bread*, Hindus related a comment of one peasant on the subject of dekulakization and class war in the countryside:

“There was a time, my dear,” began Lukyan, . . . “there was a time when we were just neighbors in this village. We quarreled, we fooled, sometimes we cheated one another. But we were neighbors. Now we are *bedniaks*, *seredniaks*, *koolacks*. I am a *seredniak*, Boris here is a *bedniak*, and Nisko is a *koolack*, and we are supposed to have a class war-pull each other's hair or tickle each other on the toes, eh? One against the other, you understand? What the devil!” And he shrugged his shoulders as though to emphasize his bewilderment at the fresh social cleavage. To him the launching of the class war in his village was an artificially made affair.¹²⁸

According to Fitzpatrick “the ‘strong’ [*krepkiĭ*] peasant - the kind the Bolsheviks often called a kulak - was an object of admiration in the village, as well as of envy and perhaps resentment.” The peasants would sometimes put up active resistance to dekulakization, even resorting to

¹²⁷ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 86-89.

¹²⁸ Hindus, *Red Bread*, 22.

an attack on the head of the village soviet. More normally they would just look on in silent resignation or weep softly. During the carrot-and-stick period of wholesale collectivization, the peasants saw dekulakization both as a way that the Soviet government could force the peasants to join the collective farms and as another aspect in the destruction of village life. Some peasants said, "By arrests and deportations of kulaks, the Communists are trying to scare the rest, so that . . . all the peasants join collective farms."¹²⁹ Sometimes the peasants mentioned their belief that once the strong peasants were out of the way it would then be the middle and poor peasants' turn.¹³⁰

Dekulakization proceeded in conjunction with collectivization and sometimes began as a prelude to collectivization, in an effort to rid the countryside of the peasants who would be most likely to oppose collectivization.¹³¹ The problem with dekulakization was that the definition of who was a kulak changed from one situation to another. Some of the middle peasants would slaughter their livestock in an effort to avoid being classified as a kulak, but the situation backfired for the peasants when the Soviet government passed laws that made dekulakization automatic for anyone who had slaughtered or sold their livestock.¹³² If they were in danger of being classified as a kulak the

¹²⁹ SA, WKP 260: 27.

¹³⁰ Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, 30; 58-59.

¹³¹ Viola, *Best Sons of the Fatherland*, 102.

¹³² Viola, *Best Sons of the Fatherland*, 96-97.

peasants would simply sell off their land and move away before they were arrested.¹³³

Peasant unrest was a byproduct of forced collectivization and dekulakization, and this unrest was made manifest in a nature that reflected the peasants' attitudes about the functioning of radical politics. Peasant unrest during this period was based upon reality, how it was perceived, and how it was represented in the rumors which circulated during this period. In some instances, the terrifying possibilities represented in the rumors drove the peasants from passive to active resistance.

The rumors in the countryside at that time claimed that the Soviet regime was arresting and deporting the kulaks in order to frighten the rest of the peasantry into joining the collective farms.¹³⁴ Some of these rumors said, "Now the Soviet regime arrests kulaks, later they will tax and arrest the *seredniaks*"¹³⁵ or "Once they [the Soviet government] start to arrest kulaks, then they will take away the *seredniaks* and make everyone destitute."¹³⁶

In 1927 the government imposed tax system that was supposed to facilitate class struggle in the countryside. That had failed miserably, and poor peasants who were theoretically "barbarically exploited" by the

¹³³ SA, WKP 260: 25.

¹³⁴ SA, WKP 260: 27.

¹³⁵ SA, WKP 260: 26.

¹³⁶ SA, WKP 260: 26.

kulaks continued to support and respect them.¹³⁷ Rather than establishing the class struggle in the countryside the Soviet government managed to create a struggle between the *kolkhozniks* and the individual farmers.¹³⁸

In the case of Zamiatin and his approach to Klimov's village, the problem with the kulaks was attributed to the fact that, while dekulakization had already taken place, the dispossessed kulaks had not been removed from the village yet. When some of the kulaks were finally exiled, one returned a few days later and said that he and the other kulaks would soon return to seek vengeance.¹³⁹

For the Russian peasants, the kolkhoz and collective agriculture were the dreaded beasts. The reason was that they threatened the peasant existence. Dekulakization was a part of that threat, and that was what motivated the peasants to spread rumors about collectivization and the changes that they believed collectivization portended. No matter what the rumor, the Russian peasantry circulated the representations of collectivization that would aid them in coming to terms with the potential destruction of their ways of life. It seems that the peasants were fighting as much for the kulaks as they were for preserving the village dynamic. Many of the kulaks threatened by dekulakization were usually related to

¹³⁷ McDonald, "A Peasant Rebellion in Stalin's Russia," 133.

¹³⁸ Hindus, *Red Bread*, 171.

¹³⁹ Viola, *Best Sons of the Fatherland*, 105.

the poor and middle peasants by birth of marriage. One historian has said, “the kulak stood for the village and the village for the kulak.”¹⁴⁰

¹⁴⁰ J.M. Meijer in Richard Pipes ed., *Revolutionary Russia* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 268.

Famine in the Countryside

The Soviet countryside had experienced years of plenty and years of famine during years prior to the collectivization drive. The harvests of 1925 and 1926 were plentiful, and the Soviet government had gained rather large grain procurements during that time. But the peasants soon decided to hold onto the grain and sell it at market prices, forcing the government to institute the “Ural-Siberian method” of grain procurements. This rekindled another fear for the peasantry concerning grain requisitions and possible famine. And these fears were not entirely unwarranted.

The OGPU reported that, in the countryside, peasants complained of the shortage of bread, high taxes, and the exportation of grain. And after experiencing the grain requisitions and the “Ural-Siberian method” in the late 1920s, the peasants “feared that state policy would lead to starvation and as a consequence had little faith in the regime.”¹⁴¹ The peasants had a legitimate reason to believe that there would be a shortage of grain, especially at times when the collectivizers forgot about the necessary seed for sowing when they were collectivizing the village. The consequence was that, when the time came to sow the fields, there was a danger of there not being enough seed.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ McDonald, “A Peasant Rebellion in Stalin’s Russia,” 133.

¹⁴² Viola, *Best Sons of the Fatherland*, 104.

One villager was not sure that there would be enough to eat on the collective farms. While he was an independent farmer he had what he needed, “[b]ut in the kolkhoz, no more potatoes of our own, no more anything of our own. Everything will be rationed out by orders. . .”¹⁴³ A *sel’sovet* member in the village of Velikii Studenets, Makarov, told the peasants “not to enter the collective farm, telling them that the collective farm meant ‘hunger and ruin.’” The OGPU agent who reported on Makarov said that he was giving the peasants in the village a reason not to join the collective farms.¹⁴⁴ While the peasants in the Soviet Union were circulating rumors of impending war, these rumors were mingled with rumors of famine. The 25,000ers who went to the countryside confronted rumors such as, “The children will go hungry on the collective farm.”¹⁴⁵ In Ivanovo, rumors circulated that “Bukharin and Trotskii are good . . . [while] Stalin wants to leave everyone starving.”¹⁴⁶

Collectivization went hand-in-hand with an industrialization drive in agriculture, which was manifested in the Machine-Tractor Stations [MTS], translated by the peasants as “*Mir Topit Satana* [Satan is ruining the world].” Or the tractors served as the target of the peasants’ rumors, such as, “the tractor poisons the soil with its gases and in five to ten

¹⁴³ Hindus, *Red Bread*, 24.

¹⁴⁴ McDonald, “A Peasant Rebellion in Stalin’s Russia,” 137-138. McDonald reports on a number of instances like this in her article.

¹⁴⁵ Viola, *Best Sons of the Fatherland*, 106.

¹⁴⁶ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 56.

years the land will cease to be fertile.”¹⁴⁷ A *chastushka* mingled tractors and the collective farm by saying:

The tractor ploughs deeply,
The land dries up.
Soon all the collective farmers
Will die of starvation.¹⁴⁸

The collectivization of livestock was a problem of particular interest for the women in the countryside. Socialized animals were usually not well cared for, and the mortality rate was very high. No cows meant that there would be no milk for the children. The uprising in Riazan started because the village was alive with rumors that the plenipotentiaries were going to ship the cows off to Moscow.¹⁴⁹ Some rumors said that, “[t]he Communists deceived us in the revolution, all land was given out to work for free and now they take the last cow,” “[They] don't give peasants any freedom, they persecute us and take [our] last cow,” “I worked as a worker for 30 years, [they] said to me ‘revolution.’ I didn't understand but now [I] understand that such a revolution means to take everything from the peasants and leave them hungry and naked,” or “Here is your power [*vlast*], they take the last cow from a poor peasant, this is not Soviet power, but the power of thieves and pillagers.”¹⁵⁰ In the Moscow

¹⁴⁷ *Northwestern Region*, 162-163.

¹⁴⁸ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 63.

¹⁴⁹ McDonald, “A Peasant Rebellion in Stalin’s Russia,” 126.

¹⁵⁰ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 59.

Region rumors claimed that the peasants who joined the collective farm would have to eat rats in order to survive.¹⁵¹

The potential for famine during a poor harvest was a very real fear that the peasants faced every year. The possibility of a poor harvest threatened peasant existence. The rumor that joining the collective farm meant hunger and ruin for the collective farmers was another way to try and induce the farmers to stay out of the collective farms. The possibility of famine was far too great for the peasants without adding to it the unknown practice of collective farming.

¹⁵¹ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 57.

Conclusion

As far as the question of who believed the rumors is concerned, it is impossible to say with any certainty just who believed rumors about the apocalypse, war, famine, etc. It appears that the women in the villages served as the carriers of rumors more often than the men. One reason appears to be that the Soviet government was the organ documenting the uprisings, and it saw the peasant *baba* as an object of derision, and the documents reflected that. Due to their position in the village as caring for the livestock, caring for the home, and holding to the tenets of Orthodoxy, the peasant woman was considered petit-bourgeois and a *podkulachnik*, easily swayed by the kulak agitation. But perhaps the women had more to lose from the collectivization of agriculture. The women undoubtedly hid behind the official image of them as the backward, irrational group in the countryside in order to survive while participating in rather sophisticated, rational forms of protests.

The women did not get into as much trouble as the men did when they acted out against collectivization. Perhaps they carried the rumors easier because they would get out of trouble easier, or get into less trouble than their male counterparts. In the uprising in Pitelinskii, where a rumor circulated that the members of the local soviet were “gathering cattle to slaughter and ship to Moscow” the women were leading the fray. It was very easy for the male peasants to “let the women do the

talking.”¹⁵² The men deferred to the women on occasions of minor rebellion and rumormongering, sometimes even in major rebellions as McDonald suggests, but the men would step up and help the women if things started to get out of hand.

The younger generation in the village seemed to welcome the collective farm more so than the older peasants in the village. Hindus' *Red Bread* allows for an examination of these factors.¹⁵³ While the *caveat* about using these books in an examination of rumor has been mentioned already, this is not purely an examination of rumor; this is an examination of the Soviet village on the eve of and during collectivization, of who was welcoming the collective farms with open arms and who was hesitant about the new system, of the symbolic nature of the rumors during collectivization, and of passive resistance to collectivization. The younger and wealthier peasants in the village would be more likely to take any rumors circulated with an enormous grain of salt.

It seems that the different classes resisted the arrival of the collective farms with about equal vigor. Many peasants believed that they had something to lose with the coming of the collective farm. That being said, the economic position of poorer peasants precluded them from having as high an education as the wealthier peasants, and they probably had to rely more on the rumors in the countryside as an unofficial news network.

¹⁵² Hindus, *Red Bread*, 170.

¹⁵³ Hindus, *Red Bread*, 21.

Were there educated peasants involved in the resistance to collectivization? If so, what were their reasons behind this resistance: was it an ideological, religious, economic? Was the “dark” *muzhiki*, more likely to believe the rumors as they circulated in the countryside? The answers to these questions are tough to tackle and must be left unanswered, at least in this study.

Did the rumors originate with the “dark” *muzhiki*, or were they just the vehicle for carrying the rumors? That last question hints at how the Soviet analysis of the rumors typically placed their origin with the kulak *agitprop*, not the average small peasants. They didn't want to admit that these rumors could have originated with the “dark” peasants because that would hint at a grassroots resistance to the policy of collectivization. It would be easier to document the rumors as kulak agitation. But perhaps the peasants were not so “dark” as the Soviet government thought. Viola says evidence is lacking as to whether the peasants used their status as “dark” to manipulate the government. But inferences could be made. The peasants used symbols of peasant existence in the rumors during collectivization, but the manner in which these rumors were used, either as an ideology of resistance or resistance in a passive form, is still in debate.¹⁵⁴

¹⁵⁴ Viola, “The Peasant Nightmare,” 767. Daniel Field has discussed the ability of the peasants to use the official view of peasants to manipulate the government. That is discussed in *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989).

The problem with the analysis of how the peasants received rumors of the apocalypse, war, famine, falls into the trap of saying that rational people need not believe in the apocalyptic. Belief in any one thing or another cannot be discussed as a matter of rational or irrational behavior. Sometimes people believe in something simply because it will serve a purposes. The rumors circulated in the countryside during collectivization were symbols that the peasants had drawn on from their own experiences and fears. They had reason enough to believe them because, first of all, they had seen the world turned upside down before, and secondly, the rumors served minor way of resisting the policy of collectivization. This is not an attempt at a vague generalization that all peasants were against collectivization, or that all peasants were ardent believers in the rumors of an apocalypse, war, famine, or a return to serfdom. It is an effort to analyze the functional as well as the symbolic meaning of these rumors.

Rumors of all kinds circulated in the countryside during collectivization. Apocalyptic warnings, destruction of the morality in the countryside, and invasion, all came together in rumors that stirred the hopes and fears of the peasants during the upheaval in the countryside. The rumors worked to prove the individual peasants correct in their assumptions by pointing out what was wrong with the communists, collective farms, and *kolkhozniks*. This attempt to prove a negative never brought forward any positive end result for the peasants in the Soviet

Union. There were not any rumors about the millennial reign following the reign of the antichrist; everything was essentially negative. The peasants were trying to avoid joining the collective farm, and the best they could possibly hope for was the maintenance of the status quo.

These peasant rumors about collectivization show a basic level of passive opposition to collectivization. They represent a combat between the ideas of the village and the ideas of the city on more levels than just the issue of collectivization, even though that was the particular institution which drew peasant resistance. In the face of collectivization the peasants were attempting to reinforce normalcy and maintain the status quo in the countryside, while in the process upending the Soviet policy. When rumors argued that the Antichrist was in the collective farms, they were not just speaking in apocalyptic terms, they were pleading with the peasants not to join the collective farms: resistance at the basic levels of the dissemination of anti-Soviet ideas and footdragging. Rumors that were couched in terms of apocalypse, morality, war, and famine carried the very thinly veiled ideas of do not join the collective farm, or preserve the village dynamic.

That was why the Soviet government played the class warfare card by labeling rumors “kulak agitprop” rather than treating it as an issue of who was for or against collectivization. Usually, peasant resistance invoked state repression in a cycle of action and reaction, with increasing resistance to increased Soviet repression. Peasant traditions and culture

represented the village autonomy that was a threat to Soviet power in the countryside. Collectivization attempted to do away with the peasant institutions that solidified their autonomy and identity by breaking down the barriers between the state and the individual.

The peasants' fears and anxieties about the future, couched in their experiences in the recent past, were used in the form of rumors to resist the threat of collectivization. The Soviet state's frontal assault on peasant values started the rumor mill, and this rumor mill served to unify and strengthen the peasants' resistance to collectivization.

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