

PEASANTS INTO SOVIETS: RECONSTRUCTING KOMSOMOL IDENTITY IN THE RUSSIAN COUNTRYSIDE OF THE 1920s¹

ISABEL TIRADO

Growing up in the village of Bogorodskoe, Penza province, Aleksei Soldatov loved school, but he had to quit when he finished grammar school to help support his family. After six years of war and revolution, Aleksei's household was unexceptional: it had no father or older brother. The fourteen-year-old described his oppressive isolated life as that of a "monk," filled with hard work and devoid of friends and fun. In his narrative, his dismal life took a turn for the better when, following his sister's footsteps, he joined the local Politprosvet. At first, he couldn't understand what they were discussing. A few weeks later, he joined a new Komsomol cell established five *versts* from his home. There, he began to understand the new language and rediscovered reading. Soon, he organized a village reading room and became its librarian (*izbach*). To his family's dismay, throughout 1924 and 1925 he did little farming; instead, he read magazines and newspapers and familiarized himself with current events and with Party and Komsomol life in order to answer the many questions readers asked him. While continuing to work as village librarian, when a Komsomol cell was founded in his own village, he became its secretary, head of its political reading circle, and Pioneer group leader. At the ripe age of eighteen, he could say:

I have given myself body and soul to civic work, science, development, and culture. I am now prepared to work for the soviet state, the Party and Komsomol come hell or high water, and all this thanks to the Komsomol, which has changed me from my previous condition.²

The letter offers a glimpse of a group identity that was based on rejection of peasant traditions and patriarchal structures, loyalty to and self-sacrifice for the soviet state and the Komsomol, expectations for a better life and social mobility, and an implicit sense of entitlement. It casts light on the activist's understanding and utilization of the new language and concepts of socialism popularized by the Soviet press and Komsomol circles. Rural *Komsomol'tsy* appropriated and adapted official discourse on the "new village" and on the class

1 I am grateful for a Foreign Visiting Fellowship at the Slavic Research Center in Hokkaido University, and grants from IREX, the American Philosophical Society, and The William Paterson University of New Jersey.

2 "Kak ia perevospitalsia v Komsomole," Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Ekonomiki (RGAE), f.396 [Krest'ianskaia gazeta], op.4, d.187, ll.43-44, 1926.

struggle to reinvent themselves in opposition to their peasant neighbors, old and young, to recast and modernize the village, and to carve a place for themselves in the new society. Since the 1920s, historians, folklorists and political observers have disagreed about the impact that the first years of Revolution had on peasant life and *mentalité*. Some have argued that peasants changed little in the decade before collectivization that if anything, NEP strengthened traditional patterns and therefore contradicted some of the major goals of the Revolution. While impressive scholarship has been done on the “ruralization” of post-civil war society, less has been done on the parallel process of urbanization of the Soviet countryside. The rural Komsomol’s trajectory points to the advent of a new political and social “type.” Its study contributes to a nuanced and complex view of NEP society, one which suggests alternative paths within Communist structures, and the weakness of those alternatives.³

Embedded in the NEP was the goal of turning peasants into Soviet citizens, breaking their traditional isolation, and integrating them into the political and economic structures superseded the radical Utopian goals of the civil war period. As the Party launched *Litsom k derevne* [“Face the Village”], which marked the high point of the conciliatory policy toward the peasantry, Zinoviev and other leaders acknowledged the Communists’ ignorance of the countryside and the absence of levers in the village. Within that context, the Komsomol was given the critical role of preparing rural cadres and of serving as mediator between the Communist Party and the peasantry. By October 1927 the rural network had more than a million members, over half of the Komsomol’s total membership.⁴ At times the Komsomol became the sole Party organization in the Soviet countryside; in most rural areas it outnumbered Party membership, at times eight to one. It was common for peasants to refer to it as “the Komsomol Party.” In spite of its success, or because of it, the policy split the Komsomol. An anti-NEP camp resented the Party’s “peasantization” of the League. For their part, rural *Komsomol'tsy* embraced the soviet state, the revolution and modernity on their own terms. Rural cadres questioned the Party

3 For example, Moshe Lewin, “Russia/USSR in Historical Motion: An Essay in Interpretation,” *Russian Review* 50:3 (1991), pp.249-266; Bertram Patenaude, “Peasants into Russians: the Utopian Essence of War Communism,” *Russian Review* 54:4 (1995), pp.552-570. See also, Altrichter, “Insoluble Conflicts: Village Life between Revolution and Collectivization,” in S. Fitzpatrick et al., ed., *Russia in the Era of NEP; Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture* (Bloomington, 1991), pp.192-209. For a discussion of Teodor Shanin, Esther Kingston-Mann and Seregniy in relation to the controversy over peasant institutions and modernity, see Matthew Schneer, “The Markovo Republic: A Peasant Community during Russia’s First Revolution, 1905-1906,” *Slavic Review* 53:1 (1994), pp.104-119. A notable exception is Orlando Figes, *A People’s Tragedy. A History of the Russian Revolution* (New York, 1996).

4 Tsentral’noye Upravleniye Dokumentov Molodezhnykh Organizatsii (TsKhDMO), f.1 (Materialy Tsentral’nogo Komiteta VLKSM), op.23, d.820, l.10, “Korni uklonov v Komsomole.” Also, *Polozhenie i osnovnye itogi razvitiia VLKSM k XV S’ezdu VKP (b)*, Komsomol Central Committee Report for the XV Party congress (Moscow-Leningrad, 1927), p.46.

and Komsomol's commitment to them and their ability or willingness to satisfy their most pressing needs and aspirations. This made them suspect among their more radical urban counterparts.

This article is based on more than a thousand letters and articles written by Komsomol members and sympathizers to the editors of *Krest'ianskaia gazeta* [*Peasant News*] and the Komsomol magazine *Zhurnal krest'ianskoi molodezhi* [*Peasant Youth Journal*]. Many of the writers were rural correspondents (*sel'kory*) and most were men; with few exceptions, only letters from Central Russia have been selected. Because of the nature of the archival collection on which this article is based, I have used primarily letters from 1924 to 1928, and therefore the discussion focuses on group identity during the high and late NEP.⁵ Editors were flooded by torrents of scraps of paper filled with the undecipherable scribbles of barely literate peasants, whose every other word was likely to be misspelled or misused, only occasionally relieved by sheets embellished with the careful penmanship, syntax and orthography of the rural teachers' compositions. All vied to see their work in print. The letters and articles cast light on the writers' faith in the written word and the phenomenon of "*pisatel'stvo*," or writing for its own sake, that blended citizenship, creativity and individualism. Written spontaneously or in response to newspaper campaigns, they described a wide variety of topics about public life in the village, and intimated the writers' vision of the socialist future and their disappointments in its progress. The writers proffered suggestions to the center for improvements in rural life, complained about the shortcomings of the Komsomol, Communists and the Soviet government, criticized abuses of power by local officials and activists, and begged for jobs and admission to schools.⁶ To provide some diversity, I have also used a limited number of members' letters to the Komsomol and Party leadership; the majority of these fall under the rubric of appeals and complaints, and therefore have a narrower focus.

In culling the broad outlines of the Komsomol self-identity from letters, stories and articles, both the themes that resurfaced often and the unusual ones are significant. The common ones allow us to establish thematic categories, while the unusual ones are striking precisely because of their individuality. The letters capture the authentic voice of the rural Komsomol in ways in which

5 The letters were preserved in the Russian State Archive of the Economy. The earliest ones date back to 1924, shortly after the newspaper *Peasant News* was founded. See also A.K. Sokolov, ed., *Golos naroda. Pis'ma i otkliki riadovykh sovetskikh grazhdan o sobytiakh 1918-1932 gg.* (Moscow: Rossiiskaia politicheskaia entsiklopediia (ROSSPEN), 1997).

6 Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Supplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s," *Slavic Review* 55:1 (1996), pp.78-105; Mary Buckley, "Krest'yanskaya gazeta and Rural Stakhanovism," *Europe-Asian Studies* 8 (1994), p.1389; Michael Gorham, "Tongue-tied Writers: The *Rabsel'kor* Movement and the Voice of the 'New Intelligentsia' in Early Soviet Russia," *Russian Review* 55:3 (1996), pp.412-429; Stephen Kotkin, "Coercion and Identity: Workers' Lives in Stalin's Showcase City," in Lewis Siegelbaum and Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *Making Workers Soviet. Power, Class and Identity* (Ithaca), 1994.

official representations of that social group could not. Some factors compromise the letters as a historical source: writers may have been replying to a particular campaign, or tailored compositions in order to have them published after numerous rejections.⁷ Although they are no more objective than the letters, other types of sources, such as official Komsomol reports that assessed the political mood of rural members, or statistics, serve as a counterbalance. The letters to the editors and to the leadership reflected the ways in which the Komsomol became a linguistic bridge in the village, an eager interpreter of official language. Mastery of the new language and concepts conferred special status. While it is true that the letter-writers had internalized official language, it would be wrong to dismiss even those letters that were part of campaigns as merely formulaic. To take an example, the many articles on the radiant future of socialism go beyond the quest to appear in print and reflect the writers' mission to end the village's backwardness and their vision of youth's role in the construction of the new order.

BECOMING RURAL KOMSOMOL'TSY

In 1924 the Komsomol member was an anomaly in his village. Relatively few villages had cells, and where they existed, few local youths joined: at that time, only 2% of all young peasants were League members. This changed dramatically when the Party launched "*litsom k derevne*" and relied on the support of the young in the countryside to achieve its goals. In order to expand and serve as an effective mediator between the Party and the peasantry, the Komsomol was asked to recast its public image from that of "would-be commissars," grain requisitioners and tax collectors of the civil war to peacetime builders of the socialist village.⁸ The majority of young peasants remained at best non-committal in relation to the Komsomol and the soviet state, not surprisingly, given its anti-peasant record. But a growing minority cast their lot with the Komsomol, which recruited approximately 9% of all young peasants within a year.⁹ Peasants joined the Komsomol for a variety of reasons. Young peasant men especially had experienced a long process of politicization that dated back to 1904-5 and which continued unabated during the World War, revolution and civil war. The generation that reached Komsomol age in the 1920s lived

7 For example, RGAE, f.396, op.5, d.197, l.458, "Ne iacheika - odno gore," Kaluga, 1927.

8 G. Zinoviev, "Soiuz, kotoryi dolzhen vospitat' lenintsev," in N. Bukharin, G. Zinoviev and N. Krupskaja, *Partiia i vospitanie smeny* (Leningrad, 1924), p.10; A. Gorlov, "Chto mogut delat' komsomol'tsy v derevne," *Komsomol v derevne (Nash opyt)*, p.15; RGAE, f.396, op.3, d.287, l.22, "Kak zapisalis' v Komsomol Molodezh izmenilas' - ili muzhiki pererodilis'," Ivanovo Voznesensk, 1925; op.4, d.183, ll.744-745, Kursk, 1926.

9 TsKhDMO, f.1, op.3, d.26, ll.197-201, "Dokladnaia zapiska po voprosu o regulirovanii rosta komsomola v derevne," 22 September 1926; Chaplin, "O zadachakh VI-ogo Vserossiiskogo S"ezda," *Iunyi Proletarii* 9 (1924), p.4; "Nashi derevenskie iacheiki," *Iunyi Kommunist* 12 (1924), p.442; RGAE, f.396, op.2, d.111, l.2, Saratov, 1924.

through the civil war and had learned to take ideological sides. The Revolution's close identification with youth, and the state's position that the young were the bearers of the new order acted as a powerful stimulus to many. The state's proclaimed goals of urbanization and modernization and adolescent yearning to break with family and adult society were as powerful motivators as those political factors.

Adolescent rebellion and angst became politicized. The camaraderie of cell and club meetings provided an alternative to backbreaking and thankless farm work and to the restrictions placed on the young by the family. Peasants opposed their children's membership and threats and actual violence against members was common. Anti-Komsomol violence was especially severe when the member was also a rural correspondent who "exposed" local problems for the press, or served on the soviet or a Soviet institution and thus incurred his neighbors' enmity.¹⁰ Although young peasant men had become increasingly anti-clerical and non-practicing since the World War, the Komsomol's militant atheism scandalized and terrified their communities.¹¹ In addition, peasants worried that their children would not develop work skills, and might not fit in the tradition-bound village. The situation was worst for young women. A young *bedniachka* recounted how her family did not want her going to school or reading at home for fear that she would become a "loafer." She joined the Komsomol on the sly, but her father found out and confiscated her *znachok* [pin]. Her pathetic letter was accompanied by several poems, which seemed only to confirm her parents' anxiety about her impractical activities.¹² Given her inclinations, she might have joined a different type of organization, were it not for the Komsomol's monopoly as the single youth organization in the country.

With inadequate resources at their disposal, the Komsomol center and its provincial and uezd committees could hardly assist the burgeoning rural network. For most of the new recruits political education entailed random reading of newspapers and scant pamphlets, and irregular and rudimentary talks with activists from other parts of the network. Minimal and inconsistent as it was, this training intersected with peasant perceptions and expectations to mold a distinctive rural Komsomol identity. Four broad subgroups emerged, each voicing aspects of the rural Komsomol's collective persona. The subgroup with the longest trajectory in the countryside was characterized by a belligerent, "macho" subculture which emerged during the civil war but had not died out in the 1920s, in part because veterans established so many of the first Komso-

10 RGAE, f.396, op.4, d.183, ll.744-745, Kursk, 1926; d.287, l.22, Ivanovo Voznesensk, 1925; d.184, ll.42-48, Penza, 1926; op.5, d.181, l.923-924, Nizhnii Novgorod, 1927.

11 TsKhDMO, f.1, op.23, d.273, ll.24-26, "Oдна из mnogikh," report from Orekhovo-Zuevskii uezd, Moscow, 1924.

12 RGAE, f.396, op.4, d.183, ll.726-729, 1926.

mol cells.¹³ Closely linked with that group, but not always coinciding with it, were the young bureaucrats and “careerists” who sought leadership positions in the League and local government. Like the first group, “careerists” often came from among poor peasants and could be found on the village soviet or other soviet institutions.¹⁴ A third group, the “*kul'turki*,” was led by young teachers and *izbachi* and was attracted to the Komsomol’s cultural and educational activities. “Careerists” and “*kul'turki*” dreamed of leaving oppressive village life and farming, working in a factory, joining the army, becoming *beloruchki* - white collar workers in a soviet institution, - attending secondary schools, or moving to a city to enjoy the cultural facilities such as reading rooms, clubs, libraries, and movies.¹⁵ Last and smallest of all were the progressive farmers, the young heads-of-household who were attracted by the Komsomol and Party’s images of the modern Soviet village. Most of the Komsomol heads-of-household (*Komsomol'tsy-domokhoziaine*) were slightly older and supported their own families. Because their households were spin-off units, they had limited tools and animals, and tended to be poor. The category includes younger members, who also championed modern agriculture, but who were not heads-of-household. These four discursive categories were used by the Komsomol in its internal and external pronouncements, often accompanied by unconvincing class ascriptions. They were porous categories and, as all such stereotypes, were simplifications. But for the purposes of this article they serve as multiple voices within the rural Komsomol’s “imagined community.”

The *kul'turki* best captured the spirit of NEP. The post-revolutionary village conferred an exalted status on the young and literate, who were at ease with the new urban culture; the Komsomol provided the (minimal) training and ethos of an educated subculture. This group was more heterogeneous than the others and attracted *seredniaki* and young women; therefore, it made the Komsomol more representative of the rural population than it had been prior to the mid-1920s.¹⁶ Many activists sought to distinguish themselves by their “book learning” and their drive to read and study. This was the case with G.I. Galchev, an activist from Riazan Province, who headed the village reading room, and was nicknamed “Ilich” by his fellow villagers because he always wore a Lenin pin. The head of household since his father’s death, he supported his

13 In fact, in the Central Agricultural Region, this group made up 28 % of the volkom leadership as of November 1926. TsKhDMO, f.1, op.23, d.653, l.57.

14 They came from *bedniak* but seldom from *batrak* backgrounds. Rossiiskii Tsentri Khraneniia Istoricheskikh Dokumentov Noveishei Istorii (RTsKhIDNI), f.17 (Materialy Moskovskogo komiteta VKP (b) po voprosu o vnutripartiinom polozhenii, 1926-1927), op.69, d.46, l.246, 1926.

15 TsKhDMO, f.1, op.23, d.771, ll.4-8, 20, “Rabota Komsomola v derevne. Obzor po materialam Inform. p/otdela TsK VKP (B). vyp.V,” October 1927.

16 Unlike its counterpart in Central Russia, the Siberian Komsomol was made up predominantly of *bedniaki*. Viktor Isaev, “Molodezh Sibiri v usloviakh radikal’noi transformatsii obshchestva (1920-1930-e gg.),” given at conference “Soviet Youth in the Interwar Era,” Marburg, May, 1999.

mother and three siblings, and lived in a very poor hut adorned only by pictures of Lenin and other Communist leaders. But the modest dwelling had a desk, newspaper articles, brochures, and books, paper, and pencils. A rural correspondent, Galchev wrote political verses under such contrived titles as "Thoughts of a recruit" and articles about village life for *Peasant News*.¹⁷

Reminiscent of the Kanatchikovs of an earlier era, Galchev was not alone in cultivating this image of aspiring writer and student. Komsomol propaganda fostered the idea that members were bringing enlightenment to the "dark masses." The biggest obstacle in their quest to transform the village into a modern and civilized place were those peasants who remained outside the Party and Komsomol.¹⁸ The "other" was almost always a peasant adult, often a woman; young males always had the potential to remake themselves by membership in the Komsomol and by siding with the new *byt*. Adults represented the stagnant village to be destroyed and reconstructed by young communists and sympathizers. Komsomol membership removed members at least partially from the category of peasant. Paradoxically, Komsomol propaganda chastised rural members for setting themselves apart from their communities. Non-members and some *nizy* agreed with the center that all too often the rural Komsomol behaved as an exclusive, closed caste and did not reach out to the peasant community.¹⁹

In spite of such inherent tensions, through their activities in the Pioneers, libraries, cultural activities, and schools, the *kul'turki* became a visible and important group in the village, and one that met NEP goals of modernization and good will to the Soviet state. They shared these cultural values and ideas about the new society with the progressive farmers. For both groups the library or reading room, *Peasant News*, *Sam Sebe Agronom* [*the Self-made Agronomist*], *Sel'kor* [*Rural Correspondent*], and popular science manuals became essential symbols of the new village. Letters from the progressive farmers were particularly triumphal in tone and depicted the young vanguard pulling the rest of the reluctant peasantry toward progress:

Science has proclaimed its power in the village and is beginning to take hold thanks to Komsomol agitation and to progressive young people in- and outside the organization. Through knowledge and persistent work, young people are constructing a bright future in the countryside.²⁰

The stilted use of official language in this statement does not negate the fact that such *Komsomol'tsy* were in the forefront of agricultural change, promoting

17 RGAE, f.396, op.2, d.111, 1924.

18 RGAE, f.396, op.3, d.312, ll.90-91, "Opis derevenskoi molodezhi, i svoego polozheniia," Kaluga, 1925.

19 RGAE, f.396, op.4, d.184, ll.40-41, "Ni slova," Pskov, 1926; d.312, "Zakryvaet dveri," Kaluga, 1925; ll.33-35, Viatka, 1926. See Reginald Zelnik, ed., *A Radical Worker in Tsarist Russia. The Autobiography of Semen Ivanovich Kanatchikov* (Stanford, 1986).

20 RGAE, f.396, op.2, d.112, l.7, 1924 1. Similar statements in op.2, d.112, l.123; op.3, d.59, l.160 "Bor'ba dvukh pokolenii," 1925.

multiple field crop rotation, soil improvement, the cultivation of grasses, edible roots and clover, and the sorting and cleaning of seed.²¹ Groups mounted farming displays and organized public talks with agronomists and veterinarians in village reading rooms.²² They got involved in draining tilled land and securing credit and tax exemption, furthering improvements in cattle breeding and raising, and advocating collective buying of farming implements.²³ These activities stimulated the expansion of Komsomol activities in the countryside and sometimes enhanced the organization's believability.²⁴ The Moscow committee took the lead in making the Komsomol heads-of-household the centerpiece of all their agricultural activities and hosted special conferences for them. Control over their land allowed this group to undertake progressive farming, a decision that sometimes earned them their neighbors' ire; often, progressive farmers were the targets of violence. Although they made up roughly 8 percent of the rural membership, in the mid-1920s, the Komsomol heads-of-household emerged as the hope for the Soviet village because they promoted the state's productivist goals and served as role models for their community. Also, they did not seek to leave the poor and backward village as generations of young people had sought to do since the previous century.²⁵ Many factors defined the particular nature of the Komsomol's "scientific-secular" education. It was influenced by the legacy of the revolutionary movement and its emphasis on popular science education. Many of the early rural activists had been in the Red Army, where they acquired basic health and science information, which they shared with their villages. Together with the *kul'turki*, the progressive farmers represented a small but critical layer of young peasants who saw themselves as allies of the new state in promoting modern agriculture against the resistance of the "dark masses."

CIVILIZERS, HOOLIGANS AND PETTY BOSSES

Membership in the Komsomol was supposed to act as the antidote to hooliganism, a broad description for a variety of social ills that included drinking, fighting, juvenile delinquency, gambling, cursing, and violence. Cell meetings discussed discipline and Lenin's precepts, the appropriate behavior code, and the kinds of community work and agricultural activities expected of mem-

21 M. Lenov, *Letniaia massovaia kul'tprosvetrabota v derevne* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1927), pp.18-19; RGAE, f.396, op.5, d.181, l.29, 1927; f.396, op.6, d.124, l.268, 1928.

22 RGAE, f.396, op.2, d.112, l.132, "Inaia zhizn'," 1924; op.3, d.55, ll.98-100, 1925; op.5, d.187, ll.1011, 1927.

23 RGAE, f.396, op.2, d.111, l.83, "Dvigaiutsia vpered," Cherepovets 1924; op.3, d.57, part 1, ll.116-11, "Nasha zhizn'"; op.3, d.57, part 1, ll.198-200, "Orlikovskii komsomol," 1925; op.3, d.53, l.68; op.2, d.111, l.5, "Kuiut pomoshch' krest'ianstvu," 1924; op.5, d.181, l.506, Riazan, 1927; op.5, d.181, l.29, Vladimir, 1927.

24 TsKhDMO, f.1, op.2, d.51, "O rabote Komsomola v derevne," October 1927.

25 VLKSM, *Biulleten' V Vsesoiuznoi Konferentsii VLKSM* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1927), No.2, pp.18-19; No.7, pp.10-11.

bers. Countless letters echoed this idealized concept of the Komsomol as cultural agent: "Under the Komsomol's influence young people are casting off old customs and forms of entertainment and, instead, are drawn to enlightenment and knowledge."²⁶ In its campaign as the scourge of hooliganism and other "uncultured" ways, the Komsomol's enemies were myriad. Rural poverty and alcohol were at the core of the problem. An inadequate police force looked the other way, especially in villages at a distance from *volost'* centers. As representatives of soviet power, many *Komsomol'tsy* were concerned that rampant criminality was undermining the government's credibility among peasants.²⁷

In reality, Komsomol members could be found on both sides of the hooligan divide. Some joined the Komsomol in order to bear arms, conduct searches, and destroy moonshine distilleries; the head of the local militia was often a *Komsomolets*.²⁸ While some were eager to raid *samogon* breweries, other members and cell secretaries had close ties to moonshine distillers and were known to imbibe and take part in all sorts of rowdiness. Some correspondents were outraged that it was so difficult to differentiate between a member and the average hooligan. Innumerable letters and articles disparaged members who did no cultural or community work and drank and played cards, and even wagered their KIM [Communist International of Youth] and MOPR [the symbol of Komsomol] *znachki* [pins], risking expulsion from the Komsomol both for gambling and for not wearing their pins. The situation was especially embarrassing if members' drunkenness or criminal behavior resulted in losses to others. A writer denounced a group of *Komsomol'tsy* who mangled a cow while carousing after a wedding. He was especially upset because their behavior discredited the organization. Similarly, letters criticized members who used their status to requisition property for personal or for organizational use. Usually, when such matters were referred to the *uezd* committee, the culprits were reprimanded or expelled. Nonetheless, the Komsomol came to be associated with hooliganism and parents refused to let their children join for that reason. Even village reading rooms, the symbol of Komsomol *kul'turnost'* [being cultured], were tainted with hooliganism in the eyes of peasant adults. Of course, it is difficult to know whether there was any criminal or hooligan activity going on in such cases, or whether older peasants were reacting merely to the fact that young people had taken over the reading rooms and had created a space for youth culture.²⁹

26 RGAE, f.396, op.4, d.185, ll.453-454, "Bol'she etiki," Smolensk, 1926; op.4, d.184, ll.42-48, Penza, 1926; op.4, d.185, ll.467-468, Kursk, 1926. *Molodoi Leninets* 26 March, 8 April, 7 May 1926 for coverage of the campaign.

27 RGAE, f.396, op.4, d.184, ll.42-48, Penza, February 1926.

28 S. Makar'ev, "Komsomol Prionezh'ia," *Komsomol v derevne*, p.102; M. Iaskevich, "Nashi bol'shie iz'iany," *Iunyi kommunist* 9 (1923), pp.27-28.

29 RGAE, f.396, op.3, d.312, l.46, Kaluga, 1925; op.4, d.183, l.107, "Smychka Komsomol'tsev s bespartii noi molodezh'iu," Kaluga, 1926; op.5, d.181, ll.725-726, Briansk, 1927; op.4, d.183, ll.629-630, Tula, 1926; d.378, Moscow, 1925; op.4, d.186, ll.556-565, 1926; op.5, d.181, 1927, ll.406-407, Orel, 1927; op.5, d.125, l.62-62b, Smolensk, 1926.

The many letters denouncing hooliganism, improper conduct, and abuse of power by the Komsomol responded to the anti-hooliganism campaign launched by the press and government agencies in the mid-1920s. The press encouraged exposes, in part to stay informed, in part to foster a sense of empowerment. In response, Komsomol members and sympathizers devoted countless *stengazety* [wallpapers] to individual hooligans or to the problem in general. When this type of public shaming failed to get the desired results, correspondents sent thousands of letters of complaint and articles to newspaper editors or to Kalinin, Stalin and Komsomol leaders in the hope that the “higher ups” would rectify the situation.³⁰ Among their favorite subjects were local Komsomol leaders or Komsomol hooligans, most of them “tough guys” and “careerists,” all of whom were very familiar to the writers. The campaign added an element of arbitrariness and coercion to membership, since members could be disciplined and even expelled for minor infractions. Some members were distraught when their transgressions were discovered, even to the point of suicide.³¹

In its campaign against hooliganism and juvenile crime, the leadership was responding to objective conditions as well as using hooliganism for political aims. The official obsession with youthful hooliganism and criminality revealed the Party leadership’s dismay at the Komsomol’s resistance to NEP and at the League’s attraction to oppositional factions. But there were other reasons as well. In the mid-1920s the crime rate rose, in part because so many orphaned children, the *besprizornye* [abandoned children and adolescents] of the civil war and early 1920s, were turning to crime as adults. The pervasiveness of hooliganism and juvenile delinquency in the countryside and its growing incidence partly explains the leadership’s seeming obsession. The anti-hooligan campaign coincided with the establishment of the State Institute for the Study of Crime and the Criminal and with efforts to study crime and the criminal personality as scholarly and practical subjects. Knifings, destruction of property, rape, beatings, robbery, aggravated by alcoholism and by the many holidays, accounted for as many as a third of all arrests in the countryside. Hooliganism had become part of the everyday life of young peasant men. Probably, that was the tip of the iceberg, as most incidents never reached the legal system.³²

30 See, Fitzpatrick, “Supplicants and Citizens”; Buckley, “*Krest’yanskaya gazeta* and Rural Stakhanovism.”

31 RGAE, f.396, op.4, d.183, ll.629-630, September 1926, Tula.

32 Reports on growing incidence of criminal acts in TsKhDMO, f.1, op.67, d.141. Also, V. Isaev, “*Molodezh’ Sibiri*,” in Peter Juviler, ed., *Revolutionary Law and Order. Politics and Social Change in the USSR* (New York, 1976, pp.31-33; Aleksandr Iu. Rozhkov, “*Molodoi chelovek i sovetskaia deistvitel’nost’ 1920-kh godov: formy povsednevnogo protesta*,” *Sposoby adaptatsii naseleniia k novoi sotsial’no-ekonomicheskoi situatsii v Rossii*, vyp.xi (Moscow, 1999), pp.140-141. According to Rozhkov, the rate of hooligan activities trebled between 1924 and 1926; and 13% of those arrested for hooliganism were *Komsomol’tsy* or Communists. See also Anne Gorsuch, “NEP Be Damned! Young Militants in the 1920s and the Culture of Civil War,” *Russian Review* 56:4 (1997), p.572; Eric Naiman, “The Case of Chubarov Alley:

Although most youthful offenders were not *Komsomol'tsy*, there are indications that the Komsomol's share of hooligan acts was greater than their proportion in the population.³³ Bukharin and Komsomol leader, Nikolai Chaplin condemned these types of members for not shedding their "Civil War mentality," and as a result, perpetuating peasants' perception of the Komsomol as an armed fraternity.³⁴ From 1926 through the end of NEP the League's stringent policy concerning breaches of organizational discipline and hooliganism contributed to high turnover rates. Together with religious observance and abuse of power, drinking and card-playing became the most common ground for expulsions and reprimands.³⁵ The pressure for more "civilized" behavior was at odds with the tough "macho" subculture that prevailed throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The political culture, and specifically the ever-present propaganda about class conflict, reinforced the penchant for many rural *Komsomol'tsy* to resort to threats and force:

The volkom "otsek [secretary]" has gone too far. His actions force young peasants to look upon him as a bandit. He carries a revolver in plain sight for all to see... certainly, he sees himself as a big boss and thinks that he needs to taunt the village.³⁶

A thin line separated everyday hooliganism from abuse of power. Usually, the bands of *Komsomol'tsy* who scandalized the villages with their godless pranks, disrupting religious services, beating up church goers, desecrating or destroying icons and religious objects, confiscating church bells and other valuables, and turning churches and the houses of priests and other "class aliens" into clubs and reading rooms, acted with impunity.³⁷ Such activities were po-

Collective Rape, Utopian Desire and the Mentality of NEP," *Russian History* 17:1 (Spring 1990), pp.1-30; Peter Konecny, *Builders and Deserters. Students, State, and Community in Leningrad, 1917-1941* (Montreal & Kingston-London-Ithaca, 1999).

33 Viktor Isaev has found documentation on Komsomol gangs in Siberia. I have found some documentation for Central Russia; letters and other archival materials suggest that members made up a large portion of rural hooligans. V. Isaev, "Molodezh Sibiri." *RtsKhIDNI*, f.17, op.67, d.125, ll.125-126 (1926).

34 N. Chaplin, *Ocherednye zadachi Komsomola* (Kharkov, 1925), p.18; Bukharin's speech, VKP (b), XIV S"ezd Vsesoiuznoi Kommunisticheskoi Partii (B) 18-31 dekabria 1925 g. *Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1926), pp.825-826. See also, S. Stebnitskii, "Novgorodskaia vol'nitsa," *Komsomol v derevne*, p.61.

35 RGAE, f.396, op.5, d.187, ll.10-11, Vladimir, 1927; f.396, op.5, d.181, ll.406-407, 448-450. Also, "Za distsiplinu," editorial, *Molodoi Leninets*, 8 April 1926; op.3, d.378, l.60, Kolomenskoe, 1925. For a discussion of this sub-culture, see Figes, *A People's Tragedy*, p.389; Gorsuch, "NEP Be Damned," p.574.

36 RGAE, f.396, op.4, d.183, l.32, "Nuzhno odernut," August 1926. For similar cases, f.396, op.4, d.186, ll.549, 1926; op.4, d.186, ll.556, 561-565, 1926.

37 Dimitry V. Pospelovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Anti-Religious Policies*, I (New York, 1987), 40-41. According to Pospelovsky, Komsomol activities were dictated by the Party Central Committee, but there is evidence that suggests a degree of Komsomol autonomy in this area. TsKhDMO, f.1, op.23, d.392, ll 19-20; Smolensk, WKP 458, ll.28-30.

litically acceptable. Discrediting the organization or the state through hooligan acts was not.

Most of the complaints concerned corruption, misconduct in office, poor leadership, or malfeasance. For example, a *bedniak*, who joined the Komsomol to get a job, used his position as forest watchman to sell stolen wood. With the proceeds, he bought himself a new house, clothes and even a watch.³⁸ The complaints about leadership style outnumbered those about impropriety in office. In the second half of the 1920s the Komsomol promoted the specialization of its staff at all levels of the organization; even *volost'* activists became salaried, small-time bureaucrats.³⁹ The rank-and-file did not elect their cell secretary directly.⁴⁰ Meetings often consisted of dull reports, while rank-and-file and nonmember sat in silence, waiting for the end. Only the promise of a dance afterwards kept them there.⁴¹ A literate writer, possibly a teacher, depicted a typical meeting in his village and intimated why poor attendance had become the norm. Meetings consisted of reports on the international and domestic situation, the significance of International Youth Day, the history of the Komsomol, and Soviet politics. They were incomprehensible, prepared speeches read for hours at a time by the same speaker to an audience that did not understand them and was not interested. The most interesting conversations took place simultaneously among the audience, whose questions and comments on the speeches remained unanswered and private. Those less interested dozed off, or talked about the girls at the previous evening's *posidelka* [youth gathering]. At times, the conversation became so loud that the chairman was forced to call for order in the room. At the end, the music and words for the "Internationale" were handed out, and the same reporter found himself singing alone.⁴² Correspondents criticized leaders for their haughtiness, preoccupation with upward mobility and salaries, and cliquishness. They held local leaders responsible for their cells' inactivity or ineffectiveness, and for training their members poorly. Many of the critics feared that bureaucratization was driving away members and potential recruits. In one narrative, the son of a former policeman and cell secretary expelled any member who dared to criticize him, and, according to the writer, impeded the cell's expansion because the community looked upon it as nothing more than a "police force." Letter-writers used the press as mediator between the cell and a higher level of the Komsomol hierarchy, usually the *volkom*, in their quest to replace ineffective youth leaders.⁴³

38 RGAE, f.396, op.4, d.185, ll.335-337, Kostroma, 1926; a similar case in f.396, op.4, d.125, ll.82-82b, Voronezh, 1928.

39 TsKhDMO, f.1, op.2, no.31, l.19, 23 March 1926.

40 TsKhDMO, f.1, op.2, d.37, l.115, 5-6 November 1926.

41 RGAE, f.396, op.3, d.53, ll.19-24.

42 RGAE, f.396, op.4, d.187, ll.60-63, 1926.

43 RGAE, f.396, op.4, d.184, ll.203-205, Briansk, 1926; op.3, d.312, "Zakryvaet dveri," Kaluga, 1925.

By late 1926 and throughout 1927 there was widespread dissatisfaction with the Komsomol hierarchical structure. In the cities, "Down with the committees" had become the slogan of those clamoring for greater internal democracy. Although the central leadership ascribed these sentiments to the Opposition, it acknowledged the validity of some of the criticism.⁴⁴ Motivated to a large extent by the desire to make the base leadership more responsive to its constituency and more organic, the Central Committee made the position of cell secretary non-salaried. But in the countryside the organization was dealing with immense problems whose roots were as much economic as they were institutional. To stop paying salaries to cell secretaries triggered other resentments. At all levels of the Komsomol network, the cells were riven by internal conflicts and tensions.⁴⁵ The anti-hooligan campaigns contributed to high turnover rates of members and local leaders and exacerbated strains throughout the network. Overzealous cell secretaries complied with directives on internal discipline by punishing members for petty misdeeds. Expulsions split cells into camps. Often, the *raikom* had to intervene when the cell deteriorated and could not function.⁴⁶

"ENVY OF THE CITY," ENTITLEMENT AND DISAPPOINTMENTS

In 1927 a group of rural correspondents from Samara complained to the Central Committee about an article in the newspaper *Molodaia derevnia* [Young Village] that counseled peasants to stay in the village and improve farming. According to them, Komsomol leaders who discouraged peasant migration, as this article did, either came from the city, or themselves were peasants who had recently left the village. Having secured white collar jobs and briefcases, they did not want competition from other peasants. The writers scorned the careerists for their conceit and for seeking to learn a few "foreign" words (i.e., the new official language) in order to leave the peasantry behind. But their most strident criticism was reserved for the state and its inadequate investment in rural schools.⁴⁷ The letter captured the divisions among rural *Komsomol'tsy* and their resentment of Soviet policy in the countryside in general and toward peasant migration to the cities in particular. In all likelihood, the letter was filed away under the category "peasant envy of the city."

"Envy of the city" was a catch-all concept that allowed newspaper editors and Party and Komsomol leaders to deflect criticism of Soviet rural policy lev-

44 TsKhDMO, f.1, op.2, d.37, l.85, 5-6 November 1926; f.1, op.2, d.19, l.95; f.1, op.2, no.31, ll.84, 93-95, 23 March 1926.

45 This discussion excludes the impact of the expulsions of those associated with the Lenin-grad and the United Oppositions in 1926 and 1927.

46 RGAE, f.396, op.4, d.183, ll.501-503, Tula, 1926; f.396, op.4, d.184, ll.12-13, "Buza sekretarskaia," Ivanovo-Voznesensk, 1926; ll.69-70, Smolesnk, 1926.

47 TsKhDMO, f.1, op.23, d.677, ll.119-121, January 1927. For similar conclusions, see Rozhkov, "Molodoi chelovek i sovetskaia deistvitel'nost'," 132-33.

eled by rural *Komsomol'tsy* and Communist sympathizers. In using the term, they acknowledged that peasants resented the unequal terms of the *smychka*, the political alliance and touted foundation of the worker-peasant state, and the inferior "construction of socialism" in the village. The term also recognized the persistence of peasant identification and class consciousness among rural cadres, and their sense of entitlement to the benefits enjoyed by workers and urban dwellers. In contrast to the letters on hooliganism and abuses, letters in this category tended to be broader in their criticism and to deal with systemic problems rather than individual shortcomings. Disappointed activists used the system's pronouncements to measure its deficiencies and to criticize the gap between the reality of life in the NEP village and the representations of progressive farming, schools and cultural development in the press.⁴⁸

The magazines write about villages that are simply paradise. Come to our village... it's like being in a separate part of the USSR. Our inhabitants are so ignorant that I can hardly describe them. And I stopped making efforts to work with local government. No matter how hard I try, straining myself to the breaking point, I accomplish nothing and cannot attain any of my dreams.

Such letters expressed a profound frustration with the NEP and a moral indictment of the urban leaders in the Party, government, and Komsomol for their ignorance and neglect of the underfunded, overpopulated village. How could the promise of modern agriculture and a happier future be relevant to the "dark" and ignorant village when the state and the Party did so little to bring them about? What real prospects did the poorest peasants have for a better future? The poor's only hope for a livelihood and education seemed to be outside the village.

Affiliation in a Communist organization enhanced but did not guarantee the chances of admission to educational facilities.⁴⁹ A common observation went: "Lenin told us to study, study, study, but this does not apply to poor peasants."⁵⁰ Sergei Mamontov joined in order to be sent to study or to work. From his native Tambov he went to Rostov to find a job, and simultaneously, applied to a school. But he failed at both. Upon his return, the demoralized Sergei stopped going to cell meetings although they were held a few steps away from his house. After he was admitted to "traveling courses," he only attended three classes, which cost him his expulsion from the cell. The despondent and hopeless Sergei said that the cell had nothing useful to offer him. Instead, he started coming home late, slept in late and did nothing all day. According to his scandalized friends, he traded the Komsomol for his girlfriend Lusha Makarova.⁵¹ Another glimpse of the strong urge to study came from a note sent to Chaplin by Yaroslavskii, the Party liaison with the Komsomol:

48 RGAE, f.396, op.3, d.312, l.60, Kaluga, 1925.

49 RGAE, f.396, op.4, d.183, ll.707-708, "Dlia chego zapisaiutsa v Komsomol," Tambov, 1926.

50 RGAE, f.396, op.4, d.183, ll.83-84, 1926.

51 RGAE, f.396, op.4, d.183, ll.385-386, "Komsomol'e smenial na Lushu," Tambov, 1926.

Yesterday a young peasant lad came... to ask for your help in getting admitted to a *rabfak* [workers' faculty]. Wearing *lapti* [bast shoes], he walked from Tambov, a 250-mile trek, and arrived after office hours. We sent him to the Komsomol Central Committee, but although he had a membership card, he was not allowed in.

Yaroslavskii tacitly admitted that the Party and Komsomol's control over jobs, education and services could earn Communist organizations gratitude or bitterness. By intervening and reprimanding the Komsomol for chasing out this member, Yaroslavskii validated the petitioner's assumption that the leadership was accessible, accountable and paternalistic.⁵²

Many joined the Komsomol expecting that the organization would find them jobs. The Komsomol national leadership was well aware that such sentiments prevailed throughout the rural network:

The flight of *Komsomol'tsy* to the city may be explained by the strong desire to study and by poor economic conditions... Peasant youth in general and *Komsomol'tsy* in particular find that they cannot get their poor households established, and this leads them to conclude erroneously that their only alternative is to leave for the city in order to improve their lives... The majority of members want to leave agriculture and get a government job in the city or go off to study.⁵³

Because of the economy's inability to provide sufficient jobs, the Soviet state sought to discourage migration, but failed. A Komsomol publication about the Mozhaisk *uezd* organization described how the League appealed to many unemployed youth, a generation which would have gone to the city's factories if industry had continued to expand as it had in the prewar era. Located in a "peasant" *uezd* in Moscow province, the Mozhaisk organization doubled in size in the first five months of 1924 and quadrupled by the following year. It succeeded because, from the start, its *volost'* cells served as employment bureaus. The book denounced the use of the League as a job locator and made it sound as if young peasants preferred to flee boredom and subsistence farming rather than channel their energies into improving agriculture.⁵⁴ In fact, the author had to admit that the World War and Revolution had disrupted familial and regional labor market networks that had provided generations of young peasants links to employers. This disruption was all the more serious because so many young men had to assume financial responsibility for their fatherless families. This is why entreaties to stay put in the village sounded cynical to the Saratov rural correspondents and to other critics. The young generation lacked

52 TsKhDMO, f.1, op.23, d.315, l.167, 1925.

53 TsKhDMO, f.1, op.4, d.31, ll.41-55, 1927, "Dokladnaia zapiska o rezul'tatakh obsledovaniia raboty Saratovskoi organizatsii VLKSM po uluchsheniiu khoziaistva i kooperirovaniia der-evni."

54 Fedor Ziman, *Po iacheikam Mozhaiskogo uezda* (Moscow, 1925), pp.68-70, 93-95.

the skills necessary to survive in an employment environment governed by market relations, and thus depended on the Komsomol to act as intermediary. Not only was NEP failing young peasants; the Komsomol was failing them, too.⁵⁵

That young peasants should join the Komsomol and the Party to improve their lives, in the words of Moshe Lewin, was “a sociologically inevitable process in a backward country with low standards of living and high expectations.”⁵⁶ Paradoxically, the press and official propaganda counteracted the efforts to discourage migration. The frequent articles lauding workers’ faculties, Party schools, the army and navy, or explaining how to become a driver or a pilot (with pictures featuring young students), nurtured the desire to flee village life and created unrealizable expectations.⁵⁷ Illustrative of such aspirations, a *batrak* went to Moscow, seeking “to escape his exploiter” by volunteering in the Red Army. He took offense that all doors were closed in his face, including at the Komsomol and in Kalinin’s office. He concluded that, in contrast to its good relations with *intelligenty*, the Komsomol had difficulties in communicating with *batraks* like himself.⁵⁸ Therefore, the League was not living up to the revolution’s promise to equalize the playing field for the poorest members of society.

Bedniak and *batrak* activists, the revolution’s putative beneficiaries, sent numerous complaints to the Party and Komsomol leadership and the press. A *batrak* activist by the name of Riabov wrote about his disappointment that his sacrifices for the cause had not been rewarded. The orphaned son of a Party member, Riabov lived in foundling homes until he was nine, when he began to work for a kulak. In 1919, at the age of fifteen, he joined the Komsomol, went off to fight Antonov’s bands, and was wounded. During the famine that followed, he begged for food from house to house and contracted typhus. He had been cell secretary for the Komsomol and earned a miserable nine rubles. After all his travails, when he applied for admission at a workers’ faculty he was turned down. Riabov believed that his proletarian pedigree, political affiliation, service, and self-sacrifice entitled him to benefits.⁵⁹ Another activist wrote to complain that he had been rejected by the Tver Party school. He joined the Komsomol in 1923 with great sacrifice since his father chased him out of his home. He was bitter because he had expected the League to help him. Instead, he had to take to the railroads to find a job, first as a seasonal worker in a factory and later, as a rural letter-carrier. Since then, he had served as cell secretary,

55 Aleksandr Rozhkov, “*Molodoe pokolenie v usloviakh Novoi Ekonomicheskoi Politiki: oblik, problemy, protivorechiia. 1921-1929 gg.*” *Avtoreferat dissertatsii*, Krasnodar, 1992, pp.18-19.

56 Lewin, “*Russia/USSR in Historical Motion*,” p.257.

57 “*Skoro otkroiutsia dveri rabfaka*,” and “*Kak postupit’ v rabfak*,” *Molodoi Leninets*, 15 June 1927, p.4.

58 TsKhDMO, f.1, op.23, d.313, l.11, March 1925; RGAE f.396, op.6, d.124, ll.601-603, 1928.

59 TsKhDMO, f.1, op.23, d.314, l.218, 1925.

secretary of the village soviet, member of the district soviet, and head of *Politprosvet* and the Pioneers; in 1927 he was accepted as Party candidate. He enumerated his many positions because he believed that they had earned him admission to the Party school. Voicing the increasingly militant class rhetoric of 1927, the Tver activist griped that the school discriminated against *bedniaki* like himself, who lacked the proper connections. To be consistent with the state's promises to the laboring poor, he maintained, preference should be given to poor peasants and not to the better-educated middling and prosperous peasants, as was the practice in school admissions.⁶⁰

Many of the disillusioned found themselves in a new but growing subgroup at the end of NEP - the so-called *pererostki*, overage members, who were too old to be in the Komsomol but were not going to be admitted to the Party. Many of them had been activists and "careerists," who had held positions in the reading rooms, village soviets, schools, and other soviet institutions. When he turned twenty-three, Adrian Vokhmianin applied for Party membership and was accepted by the local cell. He had done everything that was expected of him, and wanted to continue working with the "dark masses." But the Party accepted relatively few rural *Komsomol'tsy*, and his application was rejected; instead, he was asked to do civic work. In his appeal to Stalin, Vokhmianin also invoked the class struggle: he felt insulted that at the same time his friend, a *seredniak*, was accepted as Party candidate by the *gubkom*.⁶¹ Vokhmianin and other *pererostki* had become a problem for the organization. By January 1927 they made up 12 percent of the membership (or close to 226,000), almost half of them from rural organizations. Local cells had begun to expel those who had not been accepted by the Party, regardless of their service. Grigorii Makarenko from Penza was bitter: in spite of a successful career as cell secretary, reading room librarian and village soviet activist, he was rejected because, like many other rural activists, he lacked the required number of recommendations from Party members in good standing. He had earned the respect of the GPU and the newspaper editors, presumably for exposing a Party member's malfeasance, and was ready to take the next logical step and join the Party. The fact that *Komsomol'tsy* outnumbered rural Party members posed difficulties in obtaining letters. His denunciations impaired his quest for recommendations. In fact, an ousted Party member did everything in his power to have Makarenko expelled from the Komsomol.⁶² In their appeals for reconsideration, with their litany of their service, the "careerist-*pererostki*" portrayed themselves as a kind of revolutionary sainthood of the unrewarded.⁶³ Increasingly, the Komsomol leader-

60 TsKhDMO, f.1, op.23, d.677, ll.100-101, 1927.

61 RGAE, f.396, op.6, d.126, ll.38-40, Samara, 1928. In 1927 the maximum age for Komsomol membership was 23.

62 RGAE f.396, op.5, d.187, ll.36-36b, "Bor'ba za sushchestvovanie v soiuzhe molodezhi," Penza 1927.

63 TsKhDMO, f.1, op.23, d.671, ll.31-33, Chaplin, "O komsomol'tsakh-pererostkakh;" d.680, l.114, 1927 letter to Chaplin; ll.2, 18, 20-21, "Pererostki v Komsomole.," May 1927.

ship was concerned with the implications of this group's alienation. It could only pressure the Party to admit more *Komsomol'tsy*, but paradoxically, the Party was weary of opening membership to the Komsomol's peasant masses.

Sometimes, anger and frustrations were turned inward: there were growing numbers of suicides from the mid-1920s to the end of NEP. A letter described how Andrei Ivanov, a poor, hard-working activist went to Leningrad from Pskov and, after two unsuccessful job searches, killed himself. This disheartened migrant was part of a large army of peasants, who flocked to the cities beginning in 1926. The Revolution weakened the family and older networks that helped young people navigate the passage to adulthood. Many, including Ivanov, were their family's sole supporters and found the responsibility and uncertainty of the economy and post-revolutionary society to be overwhelming. Ivanov and other Komsomol suicides expected help from their surrogate family. But the Komsomol could not get most members jobs or schooling, or ease the transition to city life for those who did get accepted to the coveted workers' faculties, only to take their lives.⁶⁴ Because private life had become so politicized, such suicides became the subject of constant unsympathetic coverage in the press. The leadership took offense at the hopelessness of those same young people who had been equated with the revolution shortly before, as if their suicides negated their faith the "bright socialist future."

Envy and anger turned inward (depression) or its outward expression, aggression against friends, comrades, neighbors, and family members found expression in letters to the editors, and in denunciations to Komsomol committees or other authorities. Not only did these include missives about hooliganism, abuse of power or dysfunctional cells and local government, but also letters from sisters describing unruly, foul-mouthed brothers, and young men exposing the unseemly behavior of romantic rivals. Some of the members who had been reprimanded or expelled during the "ethics" campaigns or at other times settled scores with their exposers by denouncing them on valid or trumped up charges, as in Makarenko's case.⁶⁵ All of them invoked a higher authority which they hoped would intervene from the outside, even in personal matters. In most cases the writers represented a minority asking the authorities to be arbiters in a very contentious countryside.⁶⁶ The Soviet state encouraged such

64 David Hoffmann, "Moving to Moscow: Patterns of Peasant In-Migration during the First Five-Year Plan," *Slavic Review* 50:4 (1991), pp.848, 857; RGAE, f.396, op.4, d.184, ll.24-25, 1926, Pskov, 1926. Letters by Komsomol suicides and report about the phenomenon in TsKhDMO, f.1, op.23, d.506, ll.166-174, 1926; RTsKhIDNI, f.17, op.67, d.125, l.46, 1925. Special thanks to Monica Wellman for her paper, "Suicide among Young People in Moscow in the 1920s," Marburg Conference, May 1999.

65 For example, RGAE, f.396, op.4, d.183, Totma, 1926; op.5, d.181, l.244, Voronezh, 1927; op.6, d.124, ll.507-508, Nizhnii Novgorod, 1928.

66 Boris Mironov found a similar propensity in post-emancipation villages. Minority factions would appeal contentious decisions to the state. See B. Mironov, "Glavnye sotsial'nye organizatsii krest'ianstva, gorodskogo sosloviia i dvorianstva," *Acta Slavica Iaponica* XXVI (1998), p.167.

behavior by protecting the denouncers' identity in ensuing investigations, by fostering divisions within families and other social units, and offering class antagonisms as the explanation for all social, political and economic ills. Competition for limited services and goods perpetuated divisions, anger, and the sense that the leadership could be asked to intercede. A barefoot, barely literate Pioneer leader hoped for a favorable disposition of his case by stressing his poverty and bleak prospects for the future, and by using the language of class:

Only the priests' and kulaks' sons don't work in society, and yet everywhere they make excuses for them... That vermin already left the village to study, but I'm still home[.] I put in an application for admission to the [local] *shkola krest'ianskoi molodezhi* but it's August 29 and I'm still sitting home...⁶⁷

The choice of words bespoke the breakdown of civility, irrespective of the ethics campaign. The tensions and envy evoked in this letter were aggravated in mid-1927, when the press announced a new campaign to expose alien elements in the organization's ranks. Letters likened the sons of former kulaks who sought to join the Komsomol to "wolves in sheepskin," and informed on children of priests who had managed to get themselves into workers' faculties or other schools.⁶⁸

In response to this campaign, in August 1927 a near-illiterate Riazan rural correspondent falsely accused a member of hiding his social origins as the son of a landlord, and of using the Komsomol for personal gain. The village commune joined the rural correspondent in filing charges. The accused, a progressive farmer and head of household by the name of Pashkov, was the son of a *batrachka* and a white-collar worker, who had returned to the village in 1921 after his father died. Ironically, Pashkov's crime seemed to be that he applied what he learned in farming courses at the local *shkola krest'ianskoi molodezhi*. A successful farmer, in 1927 he owned a brick house, a horse, a cow, smaller animals and a fruit orchard, which riled some of his Komsomol comrades and neighbors. The rural correspondent and others protested at a meeting that Pashkov had become too interested in private farming, and clamored to have him expelled. Fortunately for Pashkov, when the *volost'* committee investigated the charges, it determined that they were false and, instead, brought charges against his accusers. Pashkov was fortunate that his *volost'* committee was sympathetic. A few months later he and other prosperous *komsomol'tsy-domokhoziaine* were obliged "to initiate and participate in the transformation of individual households to collective forms."⁶⁹ In 1928, after the Komsomol network was purged of pro-NEP activists, the Pashkovs would find few defenders. Once the hope

67 RGAE, f.396, op.5, d.181, l.35-36, Siberia, 1927. On political uses of scarcity Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley, 1995), p.108.

68 "Mnogolikii Vrag," *Molodoi Leninet*s, 26 July 1927; RGAE, f.396, op.5, d.181, ll.474-475, 524-528, 1927; op.5, d.125, l.77-77b, Nizhnii Novgorod, 1928; op.6, d.124, ll.655-657b, Riazan, 1928.

69 RGAE, f.396, d.182, ll.47-54, Riazan, 1927; TsKhDMO, f.1, op.2, d.51, l.26, October 1927.

for the modernization of the NEP village, progressive farmers and *komsomol'tsydomokhoziaine*, would stand accused as kulaks.

THE RURAL KOMSOMOL AT THE END OF NEP

NEP lacked staunch support in Communist urban organizations; this was particularly so within the Komsomol. The League experienced NEP as a prolonged political crisis over its membership's social composition and over its relationship to the Communist Party and to oppositional factions therein. Throughout the period, urban Communists feared the possibility of peasants organizing against the Party. In 1924-25 the specter of a peasant league or party had prompted the Komsomol leadership to accelerate rural expansion in order to forestall that possibility and, simultaneously, to eradicate independent peasant leagues.⁷⁰ With the reactivation of the Left Opposition Komsomol organizations in universities, institutes, factories and working-class districts in 1926 and 1927, radical urban organizations criticized the League's Central Committee, Chaplin and his supporters for allowing the organization to lose ground among young workers while they pursued a policy of rural expansion. The Komsomol heads-of-household became symbols of rural private enterprise and everything that was wrong with the Komsomol's adaptation to NEP. The League's cultural work was deemed responsible for its de-politicization and emasculation.⁷¹ By the beginning of 1927, under pressure from the left, the Komsomol Central Committee began to restrict rural recruitment.

On the eve of "the great turn," the magnitude of discontent and frustration within the rural network compounded the political difficulties of pro-NEP sectors within the Party and Komsomol leadership. Those critical of NEP pointed to rural discontent and insisted that peasant *Komsomol'tsy* were unreliable. Although by comparison to their urban counterparts, the rural organizations had remained relatively quiet, there was some interaction with urban oppositionists, significantly, with those who were transferred to rural areas. The critique of the urban organizations was added to the distinctively peasant grievances discussed above.⁷² In the crisis atmosphere precipitated by Britain's breaking diplomatic relations, N. Starodubov, a *batrak* activist from Saratov province vented his bitterness in a letter to Kalinin. He upbraided Communists for displaying their extravagant taste in clothes and carelessness with public funds, while they sent barefoot *komsomol'tsy* in rags to persuade other peasants how the state was defending the interests of the poor. The letter bespoke the idealism and the rancor of a rural Komsomol, who felt that the Revolution had cheated

70 TsKhDMO, Chaplin's remarks at a Central Committee plenum, f.1, op.2, d.10, January, 1925.

71 D. Khanin, "Vsesoiuznaia pereklichka," in I. Shtein, and N. Potapov, ed., *Vsesoiuznaia pereklichka* (Moscow-Leningrad, 1927), p.7.

72 RGAE, f.396, op.5, d.181, l.772, "Buzetory," Saratov, 1927.

peasants. It was full of traditional motifs: the peasants would mete out their kind of justice to the potbellied parasites from the city, with the added twist that this time they had been promised a place at the banquet table. Worse yet was its political assessment: "Our country is governed not by the working class, but by the Party, ... it is the Party who selects VIK members... And congresses only serve to cover up the Party's pressure on the *volost'*."⁷³ The letter expressed awareness of current issues, and probably was inspired by Opposition rhetoric. However, it is clearly peasant in orientation, and especially in its evaluation of the war scare and its implications for his cohort:

We peasant *Komsomol'tsy* are looked down upon as nonessential. But let's say a war broke out... then there'll be fiery speeches: "comrades let's defend our state!" ... in order to send us, rural *Komsomol'tsy* to the front. In the meantime we are looked upon as dumb beasts...⁷⁴

There was no political space for this particular appropriation of revolutionary rhetoric. The Saratov activist applied his political training to place peasants in a larger context, and to critique the worker-peasant state for failing the peasantry. As their father's generation had done in 1904-6, such rural *Komsomol'tsy* adapted "the rhetoric, demands and tactics... of urban politics" to their own needs. They had learned them from city activists, clubs, the press, rural teachers, and other agents of soviet culture.⁷⁵ They were not passive or stagnant, and were not isolated from civil (urban) society, but were instead members of "a class restlessly in motion," whose member had experienced "active and self-conscious mobilization" in the years of wars and revolution.⁷⁶ To NEP's detractors within the Party and *Komsomol* leadership, these qualities made rural cadres unreliable and, at worse, politically dangerous. Implicit in Starodubtsov's pronouncements was nothing less than a rural *Komsomolets's* vision of political autonomy of a socialist countryside, as unacceptable to most urban Communists as the return of the countryside to pre-revolutionary conditions.

In retrospect, the *Komsomol's* initial mass efforts paved the way for the eventual Sovietization of the countryside by promoting universal education, rapid modernization, popular science, and the integration of the countryside into urban culture and polity. The *Komsomol's* work with the Pioneers and among young rural teachers is especially worthy of mention. Indisputably, the rural organization had a negative impact as well. Although it was not respon-

73 TsKhDMO, f.1, op.23, d.680, l.120, 1927.

74 Ibid.

75 Schneer, "The Markovo Republic"; Jeffrey Rossman, "The Teikovo Cotton Workers' Strike of April 1932: Class, Gender and Identity Politics in Stalin's Russia," *Russian Review* 56:1 (1997), pp. 44-69.

76 Geoff Eley, "Remapping the Nation: War, Revolutionary Upheaval and State Formation in Eastern Europe, 1914-1923," in P. Potichnyj and H. Aster, ed., *Ukrainian-Jewish Relations in Historical Perspective* (Edmonton, 1988), p.232.

sible for initiating policy, the Komsomol participated in and promoted the ever-present fixation with class antagonism, the forsaking of peasant traditions and institutions, the culture of denunciation and aggression, state intervention in personal life, and the Communists' radical agenda of splitting the village along generational and socioeconomic lines.

The "great turn" eliminated the development of "organic" rural Communists with strong ties to their community and squandered a great deal of human capital. The first to be sacrificed were the Komsomol heads-of-household and the many *seredniaki* who had joined since the mid-1920s only to come under suspicion in 1927. By the end of NEP, the Party and Komsomol, plagued as ever by the "weakness and fragility" of rural organizations, had to rely instead on city activists, on splitting the peasantry, and ultimately on coercion.⁷⁷ The Party and government had a ready-made pool of supporters who might have filled many positions in the countryside and who they managed to alienate. During the period of the "revolution from above" the Komsomol split, and many cadres found themselves in opposition to grain procurements, anti-kulak policies, and collectivization. In refusing to join collectives or persuade their families to do so, in hiding grain and avoiding participation in self-taxation (*samooblozhenie*), some members sided with their families and communities against the Party. Others, especially the disillusioned among "the *declassés* of NEP society (horseless *bedniaki*, the unemployed, and field hands), supported the attack on the better-off and middling peasants."⁷⁸ Frustrated and disaffected by NEP's inability to meet their expectations, they were receptive to the propaganda of class war against their better-off neighbors.

The Stalin Revolution appealed to many who sought a radical break with the gradualist pace of NEP. Unquestionably, the Komsomol was instrumental in accelerating NEP's demise. Countless *Komsomol'tsy* benefitted from the Stalin Revolution. Many dissatisfied "careerists," "kul'turki" and "tough guys" found opportunities for mobility in- and outside the village. Rural *Komsomol'tsy* would enjoy better prospects for finding jobs in the countryside, and especially in industrial centers, and for getting the training and formal education they sought. The Stalin Revolution closed some of the gap in opportunities that had separated rural and urban members, though major differences persisted. The League committed its energies to the cultural revolution and the grandiose projects of the Stalin era, from collectivization to building the Moscow metro. The generation of *Komsomol'tsy* of the 1920s and 1930s became the pillars of the Stalinist system and many among them would be critical of the reforms of the Khrushchev and Gorbachev years. All of this must be put in perspective, for that same generation suffered disproportionate losses in cataclysm of the 1930s.

77 Y. Taniuchi, "A Note on the Ural-Siberian Method," *Soviet Studies* 4 (1981), p.538.

78 Gennadii Bordyugov, "The Policy and Regime of Extraordinary Measures in Russia under Lenin and Stalin," *Europe-Asia Studies* 4 (1995), p.624; RGAE, f.396, op.6, d.124, l.489, Smolensk, 1928, l.573, Saratov, 1928.