

Introduction

The opening of the Soviet archives in the early 1990s led to a rapid expansion of historical writings on collectivization. Even before this, however, the historiography of the Soviet Union had undergone a long, difficult transition away from interpreting Soviet history with a state-centered, totalitarian model, to one that illuminated the social basis for the Stalinist system and the fractures within the Soviet state. Scholarship concerning the popular resistance to Stalinism, despite coming into vogue as a topic of study towards the end of this shift, was not fully able to escape the historiographical tradition of viewing the Stalinist Soviet Union in purely Manichean terms, with resisters exclusively valorized and unduly focused upon.¹

In this essay, I will argue that the main narratives of collectivization fail to capture the importance of the contingency of peasant resistance to collectivization. In Chapter 1, I will examine in detail the central works on collectivization by two of the most prominent Soviet historians of this period, Lynne Viola and Sheila Fitzpatrick. I will argue that neither of these authors adequately explains the causes of peasant resistance, and as such, how it could have been avoided. In the next chapter, I will expand my study to a number of critical works by other historians, some writing during the Cold War and some after, to draw out the valuable aspects

¹ Lynne Viola, "Popular Resistance in the Stalinist 1930s: Soliloquy of a Devil's Advocate," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, 1 (2000): 45.

of these works that are underemphasized in the historical paradigm. In my final chapter, I will analyze a series of peasant letters to the authorities, compiled and translated by C.J. Storella and A.K. Sokolov, to make my argument that the possibility of a lasting alliance between the peasantry and the regime was not an impossibility, even given the regime's ideological commitment to the modernization, collectivization, and socialization of the countryside.

The concept of resistance underpins much of this essay and, as such, deserves a proper definition. As Viola argues in an article published after her monograph that appears to cast some subtle criticisms on both her own earlier work and that of Fitzpatrick, resistance is a concept that is not easily captured by a universal definition; as a result, I will seek to provide one that accurately represents the concept as it is deployed in this particular context. Viola claims that the central tenet of any definition of resistance must be that it is oppositional, but whether that opposition must be active or passive, open or disguised, and real or even merely perceived is unclear. One thing that historians must be certain of, however, is that what they see as resistance actually existed as such, and is not "merely in the eye of the beholder."² This essay, which focuses on the consciousness of peasants, will define resistance as any act which was intended by an individual or a collective to either prevent the state from taking a certain action, to prevent that action from having the state's desired effect, or simply to punish the state and its perceived representatives for real or imagined mistreatment. I will not, however, accept as

² Ibid., 46.

sufficient for the label of resistance any action which was perceived as such; were this study focused on the state, this might be the most appropriate conceptualization, but given that I am seeking to discover the motivations of peasant animosity, I believe I am behooved to accept as resistance only that which was intended by the resisters.

Chapter 1: Contingency and Agency in the Works of Viola and Fitzpatrick

In Sheila Fitzpatrick's *Stalin's Peasants* and Lynne Viola's *Peasant Rebels Under Stalin*, the authors seek to advance interpretations that, while certainly not identical, share many of the same weaknesses. As the two books in question are major studies of peasant resistance by famed historians of the Soviet Union, these shared flaws are especially important because they set the paradigm of understanding for students, researchers, and educators. In this chapter, I will analyze these two key works in order to identify where I believe the historical narrative must be corrected. I will argue that these two works delegitimize the agency of the peasant resisters by portraying resistance as an inevitable consequence of the decision by the state to 'go to war' with the peasantry, rather than as an outcome contingent upon a wide variety of decisions and failures taken by both the state and by individual peasants in the period preceding and during the collectivization drives.

Viola presents the conflict over collectivization as an inevitable consequence of having a socialist state in an underdeveloped agrarian nation. She argues that the Bolsheviks and the peasants were ideologically opposite: one urban, atheist, and 'modern;' the other rural, Orthodox, and 'backwards.' She claims that contrary to Bolshevik rhetoric, the competing interests of these two groups could never be reconciled. In fact, Viola even suggests conceptualizing the October Revolution as

two separate revolts – one the Bolshevik coup against the Tsarist government, and the other the peasant seizure and redistribution of noble landholdings. Once the peasants completed their revolution, all they wanted was to be left alone.³ The state, however, would go on to push the peasantry into a position from which violence was its only option; this begat an answer in violence by the state, which then resulted in a vicious circle of escalating retaliation.⁴

The presentation of the collective farm as a parody of socialism is a tool used by both Viola and Fitzpatrick to explain the resistance of the peasantry to collectivization. The question of why peasants would resist socialism is deflected by the claim that the collective farm was not true socialism. While I would not dispute the truth of this statement – I agree with Viola that the collective farm was “socialist in name only,” and was used by the regime to “transform the peasantry into a cultural and economic colony”⁵ – I do not believe that it is appropriate to conceptualize this as a cause of peasant resistance, as this truth would not have been apparent to the actual actors during collectivization.

Fitzpatrick understands the purpose of collectivization in more concrete terms – not to create a colony, as Viola claims, but to enable the expansion of grain procurements by both increasing grain production and decreasing peasant ability to withhold grain. She argues, briefly, that the peasantry understood this intuitively, as it was a continuation of the struggle for grain that had been fought between the

³ Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 14-15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, vii.

Bolsheviks and the peasantry since 1918.⁶ To Fitzpatrick's economic argument Viola adds the Stalinist desire to destroy peasant culture, a notion that is prevalent in her work, arguing that the regime and its agents deliberately assaulted peasant culture during collectivization by attacking key institutions such as the *skhod* (traditional peasant councils), churches, and even mundane institutions such as markets and mills that might create opportunities for communication between the spatially separate peasants and thus facilitate the spread of rumours, news, and other information that was uncontrolled by the State.⁷

The argument made implicitly by Viola and explicitly by Fitzpatrick is that the peasantry was able to anticipate the negative effects of the collective farm before it was implemented. Fitzpatrick argues that the peasantry correctly understood that they as a class would claim no portion of the much-lauded advantages of collectivization; as evidence, she presents excerpts from peasant writings of the period referring to collectivization as a 'second serfdom,' which she views as a clear allusion to the not-so-distant epoch in which the surplus grain produced by the peasantry was claimed in entirety by the landowners.⁸ This argument is compelling, if not flawless; the metaphor of serfdom is the author's interpretation, and could be interpreted differently. But even if we accept that the peasantry did conceptualize the collective farm in this way, the question of why they did so remains. The fact that

⁶ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 4.

⁷ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, vii.

⁸ Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, 4.

they were correct is able to overshadow this, to make it seem obvious, but it is an anachronism to allow the vindication of an idea to represent its cause.

Viola's study of peasant rumours during collectivization does much to exemplify how a thorough analysis of peasant beliefs and attitudes can be completed. Although she acknowledges Viola's work in this area as of great value,⁹ Fitzpatrick herself attempts no such thorough examination of peasant ideologies. In an extensively researched and well-supported chapter, Viola argues that during collectivization, rumours spread rapidly across the countryside. An analysis of these rumours, she claims, can provide for us a "map... of peasant attitudes and beliefs," since these rumours were the material structure of what she terms "peasant ideology."¹⁰ She argues that these rumours were organized around five central themes – "the reign of Antichrist, retribution, impending war, ... godless communists and immorality, and the collective farm as serfdom."¹¹ Although the specific details of these rumours could vary – some of the most common were that collective farm members would be conscripted in case of war, or that collective farms would lead to the "common blanket," the peasant term for an (imagined) socialist policy that women would be treated as communal sexual property – they were united in that they each presented a Manichean world in which the rural population was essential good, and the socialist state essential evil.¹²

⁹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁰ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 46.

¹¹ Ibid., 57.

¹² Ibid., 45.

This chapter, however, suffers from a single looming problem – the cause of these rumours, the reason why the peasantry began to conceptualize the world in this way, is never examined. It is taken as common sense that in a world in which the state had ‘declared war’¹³ on the peasantry, such discourse could be expected. However, as I will suggest, the characterization of the collectivization drive as a war launched by the state is not entirely unproblematic; it is vitally important to understand that without the decision by a large portion of the peasantry to resist collectivization with all the means available to them, collectivization would not have been a war but a simple shift in agricultural policy, and possibly a successful one. When the peasantry’s resistance is conceptualized not as an inevitable reaction but as the actual cause of the conflict, the ideology of peasant resistance also shifts from being caused by the struggle to being a cause of the struggle. Thus, in order to understand peasant resistance, we need to consider the origins of this attitude, a task that is especially important given that it is itself a cause of the conflict.

The origins of peasant animosity towards the regime, and their continuity from the NEP and Civil War periods, is one that is in general neglected by these works. This is not to say that the earlier interactions between the peasantry and the regime are completely ignored. However, both Viola and Fitzpatrick tend to ascribe responsibility for the conflict of collectivization solely to the state in general, and Stalin in particular. Fitzpatrick states that the regime was initially viewed favourably by the peasants, but that the requisitions of war communism damaged

¹³ Both Viola and Fitzpatrick make extensive use of the metaphor of collectivization as a war of aggression launched by the state against the countryside.

their approval.¹⁴ During the NEP years, the Bolsheviks favoured the proletariat at the expense of the peasants, which, along with a high rate of taxation on richer peasants, made them few friends in the villages. Fitzpatrick describes the village as “apathetic” towards the regime by the end of the NEP.¹⁵ Viola assumes that as victims of collectivization, the peasantry cannot have been responsible for it, even when her own arguments lead to the (unstated) conclusion that the peasants began instigating conflict with the regime before collectivization was initiated. Perhaps capitalizing on the stereotype of rural Russia as static and unchanging, Viola states that relations between the regime and the peasantry in Russia had never been amiable. She goes on to argue that the civil war served to further deteriorate this relationship and that the NEP was not enough to repair the damage, only to defer it in time. According to Viola, the peasantry was further alienated by the War Scare of 1927, and finally reached the breaking point in its relations with the regime with the onset of collectivization, which it viewed as an apocalypse.¹⁶ However she does not consider the implications of this trajectory, of the move towards aggressive conflict not by the state but from below.

The Bolsheviks had only a short time to rebuild relations during the NEP, but that does not mean that their efforts were unimportant historically. The ability (or lack thereof) of the regime to build peasant support in the NEP era is the best indication we can hope for as to whether the conflict between the regime and the

¹⁴ Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, 24.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 28.

¹⁶ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 30.

countryside was inevitable. It affects the way we conceptualize the collectivization drive and Stalinism in general. If the Bolsheviks had been in the process of gaining adherents and building socialist hegemony in the countryside, then the violence of collectivization was not inevitable, but caused directly by Stalin's rushing of the process; conversely, if relations between the regime and the peasantry were *continuing to deteriorate* through the 1920s, then the questions we must ask as historians are poignantly different – we must look at why the state was unable to build support, how their actions failed, and what role peasants as individuals played in resisting the colonization of their consciousness.

Thus far, I have focused my critique on the unintentional delegitimation of peasant agency through the portrayal of the conflict over collectivization as inevitable, given the decisions taken by Joseph Stalin and the party center. Now, I intend to shift to a new angle – the erosion of the very concept of 'resistance' by the overuse of the term in the work of Fitzpatrick.

One of the most important disagreements between Fitzpatrick and Viola is their portrayal of peasant resistance itself. While Viola, clearly intent on writing a victim's history, lionizes violent resistance at the outset of collectivization, Fitzpatrick argues that direct, forceful resistance to the state was infeasible due to the state's coercive power, and therefore extremely limited. Instead, Fitzpatrick portrays the peasantry as resisting collectivization through "subaltern strategies"

such as foot dragging, flight, and theft.¹⁷ This itself is not a problem, and is mirrored in Viola's work. What makes Fitzpatrick's portrayal problematic is that she extends the term 'resistance' to actions that are in no way aimed against the state or collective farm. For example, Fitzpatrick defines as resistance what she terms "active accommodation," or the action of increasing one's own wealth by becoming more valuable to the collective farm. Thus, peasants who worked hard and advanced through the ranks to become office holders, machine operators, or Stakhanovite's are considered to be 'resisting.'¹⁸ What exactly they are resisting is unclear, unless Fitzpatrick understands the state as seeking to impoverish or exterminate the peasantry for its own sake. Viola argues that these types of actions, although they may have been characterized by the state as "resistance," were in fact simply efforts taken to survive after the state had pushed the peasants past the point of subsistence.¹⁹

Furthermore, Fitzpatrick's discussion of "active accommodation" is accompanied by a mysterious lack of discussion of open, violent resistance. That such resistance occurred is undoubtable; Viola devotes entire chapters to it, in which she discusses the rising rate of terrorist incidents in the Soviet Union during collectivization, the fear of local officials that a Kulak with a shotgun may be lurking around every corner, the specific ritual strategies of peasant resistance, and the ability of peasants to forestall and even dismember collective farms. She also

¹⁷ Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, 10.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 221.

explains that rebels were adept at exploiting the stereotypes of peasants held by the urban communists to deprive the state of the discursive ability to denounce them as enemies, and thus to prevent the state from exercising its coercive force against them.²⁰ That Fitzpatrick was unable to come to the same conclusion, I believe, is a result of her failure to grapple with the causes of resistance. Admitting widespread violent resistance to collectivization would require Fitzpatrick to provide an explanation of *why* the peasants might resist collectivization so ardently.

Because the consequences of collectivization for the peasantry are so well known today, Viola and Fitzpatrick are able to avoid discussing why the peasantry resisted collectivization as tenaciously as it did. There was no need, by the 1990s, to spend valuable pages explaining why the peasantry might resist collectivization; the specter of the famines of the early 1930s and the common stereotype of peasants as a conservative force resistance to change sufficed to satisfy the curiosity of the audience. The famine, however, was neither inevitable nor predictable; it cannot be claimed that the peasants of 1928 and 29 foresaw the collective farm as the cause of that great human tragedy. And the inherent resistance of the peasantry to change, while conceivably a cause of early resistance, hardly explains why the peasantry continued to practice subaltern strategies of resistance long after the collective farm had been firmly established as the new norm in the Soviet countryside. In the subsequent chapters, I will argue that peasant resistance to collectivization can only be adequately explained when one also understands the efforts, or lack thereof, of

²⁰ Ibid., 148.

the Bolshevik regime to build peasant support for socialism both before and during collectivization.

Chapter 2: Contributions from the Historiography

Although the accounts by Viola and Fitzpatrick define the current historiographical understanding of peasant resistance to collectivization, they are not the only authors to make valuable contributions to this field. In this chapter, I will consider several competing historians' analyses of peasant resistance in order to identify which of their points of focus can be of value to the construction of my narrative. It is important to note that this section is both less focused and less critical than the preceding chapter, in which I closely analyzed only two major works with the aim of illuminating their flaws. This section will consider a much broader range of sources, and its goal is to find the positive, rather than the negative, in their approaches. In this section, I will argue that themes of continuity, culture, and the agency of ground-level Soviet officials are better represented by some historians other than the two I have already discussed.

Several historians have produced narratives of the conflict over collectivization that place a far greater emphasis on the continuity of the conflict

with the preceding periods of Bolshevik rule. This is especially true of historians of the leftist tradition, who published extensively on collectivization during the Cold War era. In R.W. Davies' *The Socialist Offensive: The Collectivisation of Soviet Agriculture*, for example, the narrative starts in 1917 and recounts in some detail the widespread unrest of the peasants during war communism.²¹ He does not, however, pose this conflict as having a direct result on the resistance to collectivization. I would suggest that this is because Davies understands the resistance to collectivization as very muted and tame compared to the rigors of the civil war, arguing that "even if the figures for terrorist acts and peasant demonstrations are taken at their face value, this [resistance to collectivization] did not amount to 'peasant war' or 'rebellion.'"²² E.H. Carr takes the narrative even further back, beginning with the implementation of the Stolypin reforms in 1906. Specifically, he examines the effect on the commune of the Stolypin peasants defecting to become private landholders. He then examines how the commune was able to seamlessly reabsorb these peasants in the revolution of 1917, and maintain its authority in spite of Bolshevik attempts to replace it with committees of poor peasants and, later, rural Soviets.²³ Carr presents the reaffirmed and reasserted commune as a principle cause of the conflict, arguing that the commune was inherently opposed to the "innovating processes of the revolution;" thus, "the way was open to the tragic

²¹ R. W. Davies, *The Socialist Offensive: The Collectivisation of Soviet Agriculture, 1929-1930* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 1-7.

²² *Ibid.*, 87.

²³ E.H. Carr, "Bolsheviks and Peasants," from *From Napoleon to Stalin, and Other Essays*, (London: Macmillan, 1980), 76-77.

battlefield of collectivization.”²⁴ Still, however, Carr lapses into a deterministic approach that robs the peasantry of agency in inciting the conflict, claiming that “the problem they [the state] faced was the age-long problem of the opposition of conservative agriculture to innovatory industrial interests, of country to town.”²⁵

The historians of the left consider the impact of war communism, but fail to make an explicitly causal argument – Davies because he does not believe in the intensity of the collectivization resistance, and Carr because he still sees the conflict as the inevitable clash of conservative peasants with a modernizing regime. One author who does connect the era of war communism directly with the conflict over collectivization is Andrea Graziosi. Although his work is, in many respects, deeply flawed, his argument that the conflicts between the state and the peasantry during the Civil War and collectivization should be understood by historians as a single entity – or, as Graziosi defines it, a single peasant war – has validity. He argues that no historian has yet attempted this, and as a result, that many studies of the NEP and collectivization have been compromised by their failure to account for the true consequences of war communism.²⁶

Graziosi characterizes the resistance of the peasantry during War Communism – what he refers to as the first ‘act’ in the peasant war – as centred around the desire for self government, the dislike of Bolshevik-created rural institutions such as collective farms, and outrage over attacks on peasant religious

²⁴ Ibid., 78.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Andrea Graziosi, *The Great Soviet Peasant War: Bolsheviks and Peasants, 1917-1933* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press for the Ukrainian Research Institute, Harvard University: 1996), 2.

and cultural traditions.²⁷ Furthermore, he argues that it was the impact of the famine of 1921, not the conciliatory Bolshevik policies embodied by the NEP, which brought an end to this first phase of the conflict. The NEP, he continues, was a time when peasants realized their hopes and dreams were possible, but not a time of reconciliation. Peasants were still vividly reminiscent of the horrors of the civil war, while Bolshevik favouring of industry and proletariat over agriculture and the peasantry served as a constant reminder of their role as the State's cash crop. Peasants during the NEP still felt like second-class citizens, and the themes of their regular complaints remained consistent with those of the preceding era.²⁸ The onset of collectivization in 1928, Graziosi argues, was the result of a decision by Stalin to "consciously reopen" the conflict of the early 1920s, since he by this point knew he had the strength to overcome peasant resistance.²⁹

Graziosi's argument that the peasant resistance of the Civil War and War Communism constitute a single conflict hinges upon his identification of continuities between the two temporally close eras. Both periods, he argues, featured deportations, dekulakization and incentivization of class conflict, and torture or the threat of torture to extract grain and valuables from the peasantry in order to serve the interests of the state. Furthermore, threats of mass shootings by officials during collectivization carried far greater weight since peasants could remember a situation when such threats had been translated into reality only a few short years

²⁷ Ibid., 25.

²⁸ Ibid., 41-42.

²⁹ Ibid., 45.

earlier.³⁰ For the peasants, their 'program' for revolt was essentially a copy of that of the Civil War with a few notes about collectivization tacked onto the end. The main difference – that peasants were more likely to opt for less open forms of resistance in this era – is also conceived of by Graziosi as a result of the Civil War, as peasants knew now what reward a direct challenge to the coercive power of the state was likely to reap.³¹

The importance of continuity to the conflict over resistance is also realized by Hugh Hudson Jr. in his study of Soviet police reports from the 1920s and 1930s. Hudson finds considerable discontent in the village in the 1920s. For those peasants who benefited from the NEP, this time might be one of quiet contentment, but for those who did not – and especially for those with a strong commitment to socialism, which was often the case for Red Army veterans – the apparent alliance of the socialist regime with the wealthiest stratum of the rural community served to foster resentment.³² Hudson argues that, partly as a result of these economic and ideological disappointments, the War Scare of 1927 resulted in widespread defeatism and pacifism among the peasantry. To the OGPU, this confirmed that the peasantry as a whole, and not just the Kulaks (the assigned class enemies in the countryside) were a threat to the survival of the regime. However, Hudson is unwilling, as some authors might be, to dismiss this as simply the “party seeing specters;” instead, he takes at more-or-less face value the assertion by the OGPU

³⁰ Ibid., 49-52.

³¹ Ibid., 54-58.

³² Hugh Hudson, *Peasants, Political Police, and the Early Soviet State: Surveillance and Accommodation under the New Economic Policy* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 58.

that “a growing number of peasants appeared to desire a showdown with the regime.”³³ Hudson argues that both aspects of this shift – the shift of the peasantry towards confrontation and of the OGPU towards viewing the peasantry as a counter-revolutionary force – can be traced to 1924. For the OGPU, it was this year that the ‘Face to the Countryside’ campaign’s disastrous attempt to revitalize the rural Soviets proved incontrovertibly that the peasantry as a whole were not supporters of the revolutionary regime.³⁴ For the peasants, 1924 was a turning point for a different reason – it was the year in which the peasants lost the one Bolshevik most peasants trusted and respected enough to forgive the entire party for its offenses against the countryside: Vladimir Lenin.³⁵

Hudson’s analysis of OGPU reports reveals another interesting continuity neglected by Viola and Fitzpatrick, this time with Imperial Russia: the re-emergence of the myth of the Good Tsar in a Soviet context. He notes that OGPU reports from 1923 portray a very optimistic situation in the countryside. They claim that the NEP is working as planned, that the peasants are gradually being won over to supporting the Party, and that a positive relationship between the regime and the peasantry – essential for the State’s goal (at this point) of getting the grain they need without resorting to open violence – seems possible, if not yet achieved.³⁶ Lenin’s death in early 1924, however, drastically altered this budding relationship. Peasants of all social strata (if the wealthy who had benefited from the NEP were somewhat

³³ Ibid., 96-97.

³⁴ Ibid., 123.

³⁵ Ibid., 45.

³⁶ Ibid.

overrepresented, that is hardly surprising) were stricken with grief upon hearing the news. This grief was exacerbated, Hudson argues, by the peasants' deep dislike of Lenin's heir apparent, Leon Trotsky. Trotsky's lack of popularity was the result of several mundane factors, including his association with the Civil War and his Jewish heritage. However, Hudson suggests another element – the veneration of the Good Tsar (in this case, Lenin,) at the expense of the officials surrounding him.³⁷ Hudson argues that through his perceived ability to “protect his people from depredation [and] make certain of the economic well being” of the peasantry, Lenin had succeeded in fulfilling most of the traditional requirements to be considered a ‘Good Tsar’ by the peasants. The party leaders and rural officials, meanwhile, took on the role of the ‘Evil Overlords,’ the advisors and landlords of the Tsarist era.³⁸

Many of these other historians also devote a much greater focus to an analysis of Soviet efforts to win the peasants' allegiance through a cultural shift than is presented in the works of Viola and Fitzpatrick. Carr, as I previously discussed, analyses the resiliency of the commune in the face of Bolshevik attempts to erode its traditional authority. Davies also examines the Bolsheviks' efforts on the culture front. He begins by pointing out that the Bolsheviks had hardly any party members in the countryside in 1917, and that numbers remained low in the formal party throughout the 1920s, despite the Komsomol's ability to grow to over 1 million rural members by 1928.³⁹ This would hardly have been helpful to their efforts, however,

³⁷ Ibid., 45-49.

³⁸ Ibid., 50-51.

³⁹ Davies, *The Socialist Offensive*, 51.

as Viola identified the presence of Komsomolers in the countryside as an irritant to most of the rural population.⁴⁰ Aside from village youth joining the Komsomol, Davies identifies several other groups who might be more likely to join the Communist Party, including rural government employees and, crucially, former Red Army soldiers, about whom Davies argues that “during their period of service, they were subject to systematic political education.”⁴¹ Despite this ability to indoctrinate significant segments of the peasantry, Davies argues that culturally, the regime failed to take control of the countryside in the NEP years. Illiteracy remained widespread, so the circulation of Bolshevik newspapers remained minimal; religion hung on tenaciously, with churches outnumbering reading huts 5 to 1, religious holidays continuing to be observed, and 60 000 professional priests remaining in their profession; private tea rooms and vodka stills, places outside of state control, remained the primary point for the exchange and generation of rural discourse; and, crucially, teachers remained more loyal to their rural origins than their Soviet employers, preventing the spread of socialist ideals among the next generation of the peasantry.⁴² Davies summarizes his thoughts on Soviet attempts to transform village culture in the following paragraph:

“The organizations established by the Soviet regime in the villages were utterly inadequate, in numbers, in the quality of their personnel, and in the material resources at their disposal, to persuade the peasants to accept voluntarily the replacement of the market by grain collections at fixed prices, and the replacement of their family farm by the kolkhoz. The new policies launched in 1928 and 1929 could be carried out only by reinforcing rural

⁴⁰ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 51.

⁴¹ Davies, *The Socialist Offensive*, 53.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 53-54.

soviet and party organizations with a massive influx from the town of officials, industrial workers and young people, and of soldiers and police.”⁴³

Finally, there is one further group whose agency is neglected by Viola and Fitzpatrick: the police whose job was specifically to act as intermediaries between the countryside and the Party, therefore, the state and the nation. Although there is no shortage of agency given to the regime’s rural agents by these authors, it is almost exclusively in the negative sense – that is, they are blamed for aggravating the peasantry through corruption, zealotry, and incompetence, but never given credit for their efforts or potential to avoid the conflict in the first place. Hudson’s work on the relationship between the police and the peasantry is designed precisely to correct this neglect. He argues that the secret police were initially sympathetic to the peasantry, and presented their grievances to the state as those of a group of people rationally angered by their economic and political circumstances. Hudson argues about the police reports on the famine of 1921, for example, that “what is most striking about these reports is the stress that the local police placed on the logical basis for peasant dissatisfaction.”⁴⁴ However, as I recounted earlier, 1924 marked a profound shift in police attitudes. Reports became less focused on the economic, logical, and (in Stalinist terms) ‘mechanistic’ explanation for resistance, which was replaced by a political, or ‘voluntarist’ explanation.⁴⁵ Hudson argues that police (and local officials) struggled in this time because the class-divided countryside they were required to believe existed did not exist in that sense. He

⁴³ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁴ Hudson, *Peasants*, 32.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 55.

concludes that before the political decision to go to war with the countryside had ever been made, the police had begun to identify the peasantry as a unified oppositional force and to perfect the oppositional class-based rhetoric that would so characterize collectivization.⁴⁶

Despite their apparent efforts to break with the totalitarian-dominated model of Soviet history, I believe that the works of Viola and Fitzpatrick remain constrained by the paradigms that that school established. They continue to ascribe the ability to act only to the state, or to Stalin in particular, while describing the actions of peasants and local officials as a reaction to those actions. The authors I have selected for analysis in this section of the paper prove that this is an inherently flawed structure of analysis; while Stalin and the state did exercise considerable impact on the course of collectivization, the actions of other actors were not simply reactionary; they made choices, instigated conflicts, and helped to create their own history. Furthermore, many of these authors indicate that the conflict between the state and the peasantry was not inevitable in the Soviet Union; with more patience, attention, and equitable treatment, the peasantry could have been won over to socialism, as is shown by the party's successes and failures in establishing socialism in rural culture during the NEP years. In my final chapter, I will present a model for studying the history of peasant resistance to collectivization that I believe to be an improvement on that designed by Viola and Fitzpatrick by combining the

⁴⁶ Ibid., 91.

contributions of the authors discussed in this chapter with my own primary and theoretical research.

Chapter 3: Hegemony and Discourse as seen through Peasant Letters

The key to understanding the contingency of the conflict over collectivization is the struggle by the Bolsheviks to win the allegiance of the peasantry to the Party. In his various writings, Antonio Gramsci laid out a theory of non-coercive control of marginalized social groups by those in power that he described as 'hegemony.' He believed that hegemony, the domination of one style of thought and conceptualization of reality, prevented the fall of bourgeois states to socialism by binding civil society to the state in such a way that the collapse of the state in a quick, violent coup would result only in the reformation of a new state based on the

same principles.⁴⁷ A hegemonic state was not vulnerable to a revolutionary “war of maneuver,” as Gramsci termed the socialist uprisings of the 19th and early 20th centuries; the Bolsheviks had been successful only because the outdated Tsarist state was not hegemonic, and relied on coercion alone to secure the allegiance of its population. As a result of this, the Bolsheviks were able to come to power without winning the loyalty of the majority of the population.⁴⁸ The NEP was a direct result of this lack of hegemony – it was a compromise by the Bolsheviks in order to placate an allied social class, the peasantry, and preserve the revolution. In this chapter, I will examine the efforts of the Bolsheviks to woo the peasantry and establish hegemony in the NEP period, and the impact of their failure to do so on the collectivization drives. I will base my argument on letters sent from the village to Soviet authorities, often newspapers, which have been compiled by C.J. Storella and A.K. Sokolov in their work “The Voice of the People.” Ultimately, I will argue that while the Bolsheviks were able to win some converts in the countryside during the NEP, and therefore prove that a peaceful resolution to the opposition of state and countryside was not impossible, they would ultimately fail to complete the process, for a variety of reasons. As a result, by 1928, the peasantry as a whole was not only unwilling to support collectivization (which I think is fair to consider as the implementation of socialism in the countryside, as this is what it was conceptualized

⁴⁷ Antonio Gramsci, “[War of Position and War of Manouver],” from *The Gramsci Reader*, ed. David Forgacs (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 227.

⁴⁸ Antonio Gramsci, “War of Position and War of Manouver or Frontal War,” from *The Gramsci Reader*, 228.

as by contemporary actors at the ground level), but was in fact ready oppose the Soviet state in general.

The Bolsheviks' forays into rural culture were not entirely without success. Although the assaults of the collectivization era served only to embed hostility, a more measured approach during the NEP was able to win some converts. For example, secular 'Red Baptisms,' or 'oktiabrina,' made gains at the expense of Orthodox religious tradition in this period. One peasant, S. A. Ganin, describes the first Red Baptism in his village as drawing a crowd of over 200 people, including even some peasant elders, all of who were fascinated by the new rite. Ganin describes how "when the oktiabrina began, the audience, as never before, listened attentively and was very quiet, and at the end of each speaker's address stormy applause rang out."⁴⁹ Furthermore, there is evidence that the press – an essential tool for the establishment of hegemony, according to Gramsci⁵⁰ – was also able to have some effects in the village in this period. In a letter praising the announcement of the *smychka*, or alliance between workers and peasants, the peasant I.N. Demidov writes that "after reading a few of your newspapers, I was deeply touched by a spirit of happiness and hope for a better future existence for the peasants and the workers." He then asserts "all the peasants of our region are now convinced that we are setting out on the sure road of a life of brotherhood."⁵¹ This optimism about the

⁴⁹ Letter to Krestianskaia Gazeta from the peasant S. A. Ganin, in *The Voice of the People: Letters from the Soviet Village, 1918-1932*, ed. C.J. Storella and A.K. Sokolov (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 195.

⁵⁰ Gramsci, "War of Position and War of Manouever or Frontal War," 228.

⁵¹ Letter to Krestianskaia Gazeta from the peasant I.N. Demidov, in *The Voice of the People*, 121-122.

smychka is not confined to Demidov's letter; it is apparent in many letters in this volume, including that by A. Kechuneev, which he concludes by declaring "long live the international union of workers and peasants! Long live the Russian Communist Party!"⁵²

Support for the *smychka* was fairly widespread and, frankly, unsurprising, given its pro-peasant orientation. What is more interesting is the evidence of peasant support for collectivization. Letters of this variety are fairly rare, but that they exist at all is notable. One such letter was penned by K.F. Khersun in early 1928. In this letter, Khersun describes himself as a prototypical peasant supporter of socialism: a Red Army veteran with many years of service (and therefore direct exposure to Soviet political 'education'), poor, and an avid reader of the state-controlled *Krestianskaia Gazeta*. Khersun states that in the Red Army, he learned "what our Soviet power is trying to accomplish and what the benefits will be if you conduct yourself in a cultured way." As a result, immediately upon his demobilization in 1924, he desired to join the local collective farm, but was prevented by his wife, who remained attached to the concept of private property. After four years of economic struggle, Khersun finally convinced his wife of the necessity to join, and he happily entered a collective farm; his relatives, however, remained unconvinced, and even believe that Khersun "has disgraced the family name."⁵³ This letter shows both the potential and the difficulty of building peasant support for socialism in the countryside. On the one hand, Khersun's wholehearted

⁵² Letter to *Krestianskaia Gazeta* from the peasant A Kechuneev, in *The Voice of the People*, 122-123.

⁵³ Letter to *Krestianskaia Gazeta* from the peasant K.F. Khersun, in *The Voice of the People*, 311-312.

support for the collectivization project provides evidence that individual peasants could be convinced to support the regime in this project; on the other, the extreme opposition that even a peasant as devoted as Khersun faced in joining the farm shows that these ideas had hardly taken hold among the mass of the peasantry, and how familial ties to less 'conscious' peasants could prevent even supporters of Soviet power from joining the collective.

Peasant optimism towards the *smychka* and the emergence of a Good Tsar myth under Soviet power were intricately connected in an overdetermined relationship. Kuchuneev, for example, praises the *smychka* that "the late Vladimir Ilych Lenin bequeathed to us,"⁵⁴ and Demidov concludes his letter by stating "only now it's a shame that we don't have our father, Comrade Lenin. He would have done something for our future holiday."⁵⁵ These letters indicate that the peasants strongly associated Lenin with the *smychka*, and that the positive connotations of both were mutually reinforcing, and continued after Lenin's death.

After 1924, at least some peasants seemed to assume Trotsky to be the legitimate successor to Lenin, and to begin to transfer the myth of the Good Tsar to him. In a letter from 1927 that the author requests to be forwarded to Trotsky, the peasant I.P. Vostryshov refers to him as "Respected Comrade and our supreme leader, Lev Davydovich Trotsky," and requests for Trotsky to answer the accusations leveled at him by the newspaper's editorial boards, since he is unable to

⁵⁴ Letter from Kuchuneev, 122-123.

⁵⁵ Letter from Demidov, 121-122.

believe that they could possibly be true. Upon reading the slander of Trotsky in the papers, Vostryshov “became quite sorry for you [Trotsky] and your supporters – not, of course, [out of] an animal attachment to you as an individual, but to you as a distinguished state and public official who enjoyed a close bond and strong alliance with our great leader – Lenin.”⁵⁶ Despite any possible perception of him as Lenin’s heir, however, there also existed in the peasantry a deep animosity towards Trotsky and his allies. The peasant A.F. Sdobniak notes that “for the peasantry, the names of the opposition leaders, the names Trotsky and Zinoviev... are associated, like a nightmare, with the difficult memories of the “war communism” period.”⁵⁷ I would suggest that these memories, combined with Stalinist propaganda, anti-Semitism, and a fear that Trotsky and the Left Opposition would undo the gains of NEP, served to delegitimize Trotsky as an heir in the minds of the peasants before 1928; however, that does not mean that his image could not be resurrected, Peter III like, to symbolize legitimate resistance to government authority during collectivization. The presence of Trotsky in peasant rumours during collectivization is not remarked on in Viola’s discussion of them or in *The Voice of the People*, but it may be a fruitful avenue for future research. Furthermore, while Trotsky may not have been considered a legitimate heir, I have found no evidence that Stalin was either – at least until the publishing of *Dizzy with Success* in 1930, which, Viola argues,

⁵⁶ Letter to Krestianskaia Gazeta from the peasant I.P. Vostryshov, in *The Voice of the People*, 220-222.

⁵⁷ Letter to Krestianskaia Gazeta from the peasant A.F. Sdobniak, in *The Voice of the People*, 222-224.

unhelpfully increased the resistance to collectivization by giving the peasants a Good Tsar who *opposed* mandatory collectivization.⁵⁸

While the sources do indicate some success by the Soviet state in claiming peasant loyalties, there is far more evidence in the letters of hostility, or at least grievances. This could even be noticed in letters from peasants who were erstwhile supporters of the party, many of whom were disillusioned with the Bolshevik's implementation, or lack thereof, of socialism. Ya. Shepelyov, a Civil War veteran, wrote to the *Bednota* in 1922 to say that by failing to equitably redistribute land, the Bolsheviks had betrayed those who had given their blood for the revolution. He stated that "the poorest peasantry waited for socialization like the biblical manna from heaven. Instead of manna, the revolution would give the poor peasant wounds."⁵⁹ Another peasant, V.A. Biakov, complained that the only good the Bolsheviks had done for the peasants was to get rid of the landlords, but that even that had been negated by the imposition of Bolshevik officials and taxes. "The people all revile Soviet power," writes Biakov. "There would be a lot of pride if everything would go according to the Bolsheviks program. Then only a fool would begin to curse at Soviet power."⁶⁰ This resentment of local officials coloured many letters from this period, including that of Red Army veteran F Romanovsky, who wrote that "Soviet decrees proclaim how things should be, but our local leaders are governing

⁵⁸ Viola, *Peasant Rebels*, 28.

⁵⁹ Letter to *Bednota* from the peasant Ya. Shepelyov, in *The Voice of the People*, 69-70.

⁶⁰ Letter to *Krestianskaia Gazeta* from the peasant V.A. Biakov, in *The Voice of the People*, 91-94.

the localities differently," before launching into an account of his specific grievances.⁶¹

Some peasants in this period even went so far as to claim that life had been better under the Tsar. The former Red Army soldier G. Yerofeev made this explicit in a letter to the People's Commissariat of Agriculture in 1922, remarking derisively that "it turns out that the Soviet power is probably no better than the Tsar."⁶² Another peasant, F. Morozov, wrote in 1924 that "all the organizations of the republic, without exception, hang on the neck of the peasant alone." Referencing tax rates and the refusal of the party to allow a peasant union, the writer makes comparisons between the Party and the old Tsar, with the ominous, unanswered question, "who is worse?"⁶³

Morozov was not alone in resenting the peasant's role in the new state. Language, as always, cannot be ignored; many peasants noticed that, beyond purely internal definitions, the new state spoke solely of the 'proletariat,' with no mention of the peasantry at all. The peasant S. Gorgoi wondered in 1926 "why is 'Proletarians of all countries unite' written here, there, and everywhere, but not 'Proletarian and peasants of all countries unite'?"⁶⁴ The peasant G. Masiura took this criticism one step farther, arguing that the source of peasant hostility towards the workers "came out of the very heart of the communist party, from its sacred slogan – dictatorship of

⁶¹ Letter to Krestianskaia Gazeta from the peasant F. Romanovsky, in *The Voice of the People*, 86-87.

⁶² Letter to The People's Commissariat of Agriculture from the peasant G. Yerofeev, in *The Voice of the People*, 72-73.

⁶³ Letter to Krestianskaia Gazeta from the peasant F. Morozov, in *The Voice of the People*, 128-129.

⁶⁴ Letter to Krestianskaia Gazeta from the peasant S. Gorgoi, in *The Voice of the People*, 132-133.

the proletariat.” “There are no generals or landlords to establish a dictatorship over,” he continues. “This leaves only peasants.”⁶⁵ Peasants also had far more than linguistics to be concerned about. Both Gorgoi and Masiura grounded their complaints in more concrete grievances about the subordination of the peasantry to the workers and the overrepresentation of workers at the Congress of Soviets, respectively.

Another common complaint, and one that best reflects the fundamental inability of the regime to communicate with the peasantry, regards the ascription of social classes onto the peasantry by the state. When punitive taxes on the upper strata of the peasantry increased in 1926, letters from the peasantry began to reflect dissatisfaction and confusion with the state’s class politics. In a letter to All-Russian Central Executive Committee Chairman M.I. Kalinin, the peasant T.V. Shevchenko describes how the new tax policy “forces large families to break into smaller ones just not to be considered kulaks. The result is that we are heading not towards socialism but towards small poor farms that will be forever seeking state aid.”⁶⁶ This resentment was stoked by the perception among many peasants that the poor favoured by the new system were lazy or incompetent, and that the new tax code served only to encourage this behaviour. “The proletarian [poor peasant, in this case] lays around, does nothing, and reckons like a lout how to enjoy someone else’s labour,” writes a peasant identified only as S.M., “and now this is the conversation

⁶⁵ Letter to Krestianskaia Gazeta from the peasant G. Masiura, in *The Voice of the People*, 134-135.

⁶⁶ Letter to M.I. Kalinin from the peasant T.V. Shevchenko, in *The Voice of the People*, 138-139.

going on amongst the peasants – we’ll sow less so not to pay taxes, and we’ll fall into the 35% of the poor; till then we’ll be working for them, the lazy ones.”⁶⁷

That these tax codes are so firmly denounced in letters is hardly surprising, given that those peasants who were negatively affected by them were also the peasants most likely to be engaged with the Soviet propaganda machine. In a letter complaining about the designation as ‘kulaks’ of industrious, hard-working peasants, I.G. Shokin identifies as “prosperous” the peasant who “wears more becoming clothes and shoes, *reads the newspaper*, and isn’t an inebriate (emphasis mine).”⁶⁸ This obviously indicates a potential bias in the letters received, if those peasants most likely to write correlated with those identified by the regime as class enemies; however, it also shows a fundamental flaw in the Soviet strategy to dominate rural discourse, if the peasants they were relying on to act as mediums between the regime’s propaganda and the mass of the poor peasants were those who had the most to lose if the regime’s policies were implemented. It seems that as the NEP progressed, the peasantry became less and less trusting of the *Krestianskaia Gazeta* and other regime-controlled newspapers. The peasant Grigoriev writes to the *Gazeta* in 1926 that “in reality, the rural [situation] is far worse from what they say at conferences and congresses and in the newspapers.”⁶⁹ A different Grigoriev, writing to denounce the “bureacratism” of the government, builds on this theme of peasant distrust of the press: “For some reason, you write about the unemployed in

⁶⁷ Letter to *Krestianskaia Gazeta* from the peasant S.M., in *The Voice of the People*, 140-41.

⁶⁸ Letter to *Krestianskaia Gazeta* from the peasant I.G. Shokin, in *The Voice of the People*, 229-231.

⁶⁹ Letter to *Krestianskaia Gazeta* from the peasant Grigoriev, in *The Voice of the People*, 240-241.

other [countries] but are blind to the thousands of unemployed and the daily victims in the Union.... And even though you are covering this up, the peasant knows all about it and sees how well Soviet power [is working]."⁷⁰ The hostility of these letters is centred around aspects of press reporting that followed the Soviet party line, in defiance of the first-hand knowledge of the peasants. Given that they were being asked to read information that both damned them as class enemies and asked them to deny the evidence of their experiences, it is hardly surprising that the portion of the peasantry privy to the information presented by the Soviet press came to vehemently dislike and distrust it. And given that the press, the main vehicle of Soviet political education, had been discredited as a means of acquiring information by those of peasantry that read it, it is also unsurprising that the establishment of hegemony in the countryside by the Soviet government failed to take place before the coercive arm of the state was brought to bear in the battle for collectivization.

Conclusion

With the newspapers discredited, the police disillusioned, and the local officials inadequately supported, it may indeed seem inevitable that the peasantry would refuse to accept the State's official view on collectivization, and resist the socialization of the countryside with all the means available to them. However, these

⁷⁰ Letter to *Krestianskaia Gazeta* from the peasant A. Grigoriev, in *The Voice of the People*, 235-236.

factors were not themselves unavoidable; each was contingent upon a mix of decisions and chance occurrences. The ability of the Bolsheviks to win supporters of socialism so devoted that they voluntarily sought to enter collective farms proves that the antagonism of town and countryside that had so characterized Russian history need not have continued throughout the Soviet experiment; with more patience, perceptiveness, and willingness to compromise, the *smychka* could have been a period of socialist ideological conversion in the countryside. However, it would not be accurate to claim that Stalin single-handedly destroyed this possibility through the hasty implementation of collectivization. Peasant letters from the NEP period show that the *smychka* was not strong enough to last until the new generation of peasants, those who had been drafted and indoctrinated in the Red Army and converted into radical socialist Komsomolers, grew strong enough to dominate the construction of rural discourse. With the exception of these groups, the peasantry was growing increasingly alienated from the regime and from socialism as a concept during these years. In fact, letters even seem to indicate that the late 1920s may have been a time of great conflict even without the onset of collectivization: ““Damn the tyrants and torturers and the entire Soviet government,” writes an anonymous peasant in August 1928. “Better we perish with honour than continue to live in shame.”⁷¹

The understanding collectivization not merely as a human catastrophe but as a missed opportunity is noticeably missing in the major books discussed in this

⁷¹ Letter to *Krestianskaia Gazeta* from an anonymous peasant, in *The Voice of the People*, 228.

essay. For Viola, a desire to portray the resistance of the peasantry as an anti-colonial narrative, in which the towns play the role of the colonizer and the countryside as the colonized, makes inconceivable the ascription of possible positive connotations to the process. For Fitzpatrick, a career built around the distrust of theory and dogged by (mostly unfounded) accusations of Stalinist apologism may have prevented her from grappling with the concept of socialist hegemonic construction in the early Soviet countryside.⁷² Some other authors do a better job of accounting for the agency and contingency that led to the disaster of collectivization: Hugh Hudson Jr, for example, analyses in detail the deterioration of relations between the peasantry and the crucial arm of rural state power, the secret police, and presents possible reasons for this decline. Still, a proper analysis of the failed domination of peasant consciousness and establishment of socialism as the new normal in rural Russian discourse during the NEP is lacking. In the final chapter of this essay, I have attempted to provide a model for what such a work may look like, although I do not pretend to have researched thoroughly enough to make any more than the broadest of definitive claims.

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