

BLICKPUNKT EUROPA

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The Peasant Union Movement: The Quest for the Political Organization of Peasants in the Soviet Union in the 1920s¹

Documents from the Soviet archives show that a powerful peasant movement for the creation of a Peasant Union (PU, *krestsoiuz*) existed in the 1920s. While opposing the Bolsheviks' policies in the countryside, peasants developed and articulated specific demands for representation – in the form of a Peasant Union – to defend their political and economic interests. Though this movement failed to develop into a full-scale political institution, to a considerable extent due to repression by the Soviet authorities, its history reveals a great potential of the peasants to oppose the regime and the growing class consciousness among peasants during this period. The movement for the PU in the 1920s has yet to be explored by scholars,² and this article is the attempt to draw attention of scholars to the new characteristic of the social landscape in the Soviet countryside of the 1920s.

The primary sources for this essay are documents reflecting the political moods of peasantry: particularly letters they wrote to the authorities and newspapers. Along with complaints, such letters often included practical suggestions and discussions of various political topics. Another kind of letters used in this essay is private correspondence which was secretly intercepted by the VChK-OGPU-NKVD. In comparison with the letters to the authorities, private letters are more sincere and open-minded documents, mostly unaffected by attempts of self-representation. The OGPU and party reviews (*svodki*) of the public's moods comprise the third source for this study. Usually they include analysis and statistics, in addition to quotations from conversations and other utterances – both formal and informal. Memoirs complement this corpus of sources. These documents

¹ The idea of this article came from Lynne Viola and her works. I appreciate very much her professional guidance in the field of peasant studies. She read the early version of the manuscript and gave me very valuable critique and comments. I perceive as blessing the encouragement to write this article from the late V. P. Danilov that he gave me in our meeting in summer 2003. The work greatly benefited from the discussions at the meeting of the Canadian Association of Slavists in 2003 and then at the 2004 convention of the American Association for Advancement of Slavic Studies. The article is a part of a project supported by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada and the University of Toronto. My special thanks go to Mikhail Iakovlev, Rachel Applebaum and Ilona Kosova, who helped to prepare the manuscript for publication.

² It was briefly described by Brovkin, Vladimir: *Russia after Lenin: Politics, Culture and Society*, London/New York 1998, pp. 68–71.

provide the historian with a source of first-hand information for analyzing peasants' views.³ From these reports, letters and memoirs we can determine how peasants perceived themselves in relation to the authorities and other social classes. The sources show that peasant beliefs and representations were in flux. However, familiarity with the complete mass of this documentation provides an impression of some of the dominant trends, patterns of perception and demands in the countryside in the 1920s. Among various different trends, the scholar meets very powerful narratives, which have not yet been described in full in historical writings and which reflect the peasants' growing self-identification embodied in the movement for PU. Because of the serial character of the sources, I do not cite all available material from the documents. They are often repetitive. Instead I will support my theses by focusing on the most representative quotations from this serial material.

The Peasant Unions, 1905–1921

The three Russian revolutions produced several political institutions that represented, or pretended to represent the interests of the country's most numerous class, the peasants, who quickly entered the world of politics: the Party of the Social-Revolutionaries and the All-Russian Congress of Soviets of Peasant Deputies. The Constituent Assembly was another institution which potentially could have reflected the interests of the peasants. The Bolshevik dictatorship destroyed all these bodies.⁴ The attempt of the peasants to create a Peasant Union as an all-

³ Analysis of these documents, possible approaches to interpretation, problems of their representativeness can be found in comments to the numerous collections of documents published in recent years Berelovich, Alexei/Danilov, Viktor: *Sovetskaia derevnia glazami VChK-OGPU-NKVD. Dokumenty i materialy* [The Soviet village with the eyes of the VChK-OGPU-NKVD. Documents and materials]. vol. 2: 1928, Moscow 1998; Livshin, A./Orlov, I. (eds.): *Pis'ma vo vlast', 1917–1927* [Letters to the Rulers], Moscow 1998; Viola, Lynne (ed.): *Ryazanskaya Derevnia v 1929–1930 gg. Khronika golovokruzhenia. Dokumenty i materialy* [The village of Ryazan in 1929–1930. Documents and Materials], Moscow 1998 and many others. See also of Holquist, Peter: »Information Is the Alfa and Omega of Our Work«. *Bolshevik Surveillance in its Pan-European Context*, in: *Journal of Modern History*, no 69 (September 1997); the special issue of *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 24 (1997), no 1/2 and the work of Sarah Davies, based on *svodki*, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia. Terror, Propaganda and Dissident, 1934–1941*, Cambridge 1997. My contribution to the discussion is in Velikanova, Olga: *Berichte zur Stimmungslage. Zu den Quellen politischer Beobachtung der Bevölkerung in der Sowjetunion*, in: *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 47 (1999), no 2, pp. 227–243 and in the chapter on sources in Velikanova, Olga: *The Public Perception of the Cult of Lenin Based on the Archives*, New York 2001, pp. 9–41.

⁴ The Constituent Assembly was driven away in January 1918 because of the prevalence of Socialist-Revolutionaries in it. In 1922 the Social-Revolutionary party itself was eradicated. The I Extraordinary, II and III All-Russian Congresses of Peasant Soviets (1917–1918) undertook attempts to limit the dictatorship of the proletariat, and to transform it into a democratic and

Russian class organization was the last in a series of remarkable political acts, which reflected the growing class awareness of the peasantry, their strive for independent representative institution strengthened in opposing to the Bolsheviks' policies.

The All-Russian Peasant Union (PU) arose spontaneously in the fall of 1905 during the first Russian Revolution. At its peak it had more than 200,000 members in 111 counties and 359 villages.⁵ In late December 1905, the Tsarist government crushed the movement with the imposition of martial law. The Peasant Unions re-emerged between 1918 and 1920 in order to fight the policies of the Bolsheviks⁶. As in 1905, these unions were started by the Social-Revolutionary party. During the peasant uprisings of 1918–1919 against War Communism, the peasantry advanced their demands, which were surprisingly homogeneous and politically mature. Besides demanding the abolition of requisitions, and the state's monopoly on trade, the main demand everywhere was for self-government – either in the form of communist-free soviets, the traditional rural gatherings (*obshchina*)⁷, or through the organization of Peasant Unions. The 1918 alternative to the soviets was the Constituent Assembly. It became a consolidating slogan in some areas – in Volga, where the Committee for Constituent Assembly was created and in the North-West of Russia. Facing hunger, requisitions and conscriptions in 1918, many peasants referred to Constituent Assembly as a benevolent provider of better life and blamed Bolsheviks for its dissolution. In 1919 the power of this consolidating symbol waned.⁸ Also as in 1905, 1919–1921 the Peasant Unions managed to take administrative control of vast areas under rebellion, including the Voronezh, Tambov, Ku-

Soviet multi-party authority, by combining the Soviet and parliamentary political systems. The Bolsheviks, who did not wish to share their power, used rhetorical tricks to close the last All-Russian congress of peasant Soviets (January 13, 1918), hinder the convocation of the new congress and dispossess the local peasant soviets of their authority. The liquidation of the executive committee (*ispolkom*) of the congress and the peasant section of the All-Union Central Executive Committee of the Soviets (VTsIK) meant the abolition of the national class organization of the peasants. See Lavrov, V. M.: »Krestianski Parlament« Rossii (Vserossiiskie s'ezdy sovetov krestianskikh deputatov v 1917–1918 godakh) [The »Parliament of the Peasants« of Russia. All-Russian congresses of the Soviets of Peasant Deputies], Moscow 1996, p. 5.

⁵ Seregny, Scott J.: A Different Type of Peasant Movement: The Peasant Unions in the Russian Revolution of 1905, in: *Slavic Review* 47 (1988), no 1, p. 53.

⁶ Berelovich/Danilov: *Sovetskaia derevnia* (footnote 3), p. 630. See also Brovkin, Vladimir: *Behind the Front Lines of the Civil War: Political Parties and Social movements in Russia, 1918–1922*, New Jersey 1994, Chapters 10 and 11. The programme of the Union of Toiling Peasants in Tambov (December 1920) can be found at <<http://www.uea.ac.uk/his/webcours/russia/documents/trud-krestyane.shtml>>.

⁷ Graziosi, Andrea: *The Great Soviet Peasant War. Bolsheviks and Peasants, 1917–1933*, Cambridge, Mass 1996, pp. 24 f.

⁸ Yarov, Sergei: *Krestianin kak politik. Krestianstvo Severo-Zapada Rossii v 1918–1919 gg. Politicheskoe myshlenie i massovy protest*, [The Peasant as politician. The peasants in North-West Russia 1918–1919. Political thought and mass protest], St. Petersburg 1999, pp. 14–21.

ban, Tobol'sk, Volga, and Siberian provinces. They cooperated with military formations of peasant rebels and were exceptionally successful. They ceased to exist in 1921 when the Bolsheviks suppressed the rebellions. All in all, the peasant resistance was one of the major factors that caused the Bolsheviks to change the policies of War Communism for those of New Economic Policy (NEP). However, this half-hearted concession to the village did not meet the peasants' expectations in full.

Peasants' Activism

The ideas of social equality and classless society formed the foundation of the official socialist myth. The Bolsheviks' official declaration of social peace and unification with the peasantry (*smychka*) promulgated during NEP, was, in reality, contradictory to the de facto policy of discrimination of the peasants. In public transcript⁹ authorities described their relationship with the peasantry in terms like unification (*smychka*) or »facing the village«. At the same time, the hidden transcripts of the authorities revealed distrust and wariness towards the peasants as a dangerous and backward class of »petty bourgeoisie«. In public transcript the policy toward peasantry was called »modernizing«, in hidden transcript it targeted »taking grain«.

Peasants also expressed a similar suspicion towards »aliens« – be they city folk, representatives of the authorities, or bureaucrats. This suspicion was reinforced by the authorities' confiscation of grain during the Civil War, the war against religion and, of course, collectivization. Hopes that soviets, as government of the working classes, would guard the interests of the peasants, although initially sparked by the decree on land, soon diminished.¹⁰

This essay deals with the period in which the illusions originally created by NEP began to erode in the minds of the peasants reflecting reaction to government efforts to control market and grain prices undertaken in the mid 1920s in response to urban dissatisfaction and the Left Opposition debates. According to Graziosi, in letters from peasants to Mikhail Kalinin at the height of NEP, the initial positive criticism yields to increasingly bitter and pessimistic appraisals of the politics of the authorities in the village.¹¹ The same change in the mood scholars can see in

⁹ Public transcript is a kind of discourse, a conversation that was meant [by authorities] for public promulgation. Hidden transcript is a discourse, orderly expression of thoughts, that was not meant for public declaration. See Scott, James: *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, New Haven 1990.

¹⁰ The decree about the socialization of land passed on February 9, 1918, and the following VTsIK order regarding redistribution of land and shift towards socialist farming, passed in February 1919, declared all land property of the state and *sovkhozy* and *kolkhozy* to be the central forms of farming.

¹¹ Graziosi: *The Great Soviet Peasant War* (footnote 7), p. 42.

letters to *Krestianskaia Gazeta* and private correspondence. A 1925 private letter written by a peasant and secretly intercepted by OGPU stated: »The sternness of the authorities towards the working population is unprecedented. They [the officials] fine us mercilessly [...]. They blew smoke into our eyes, saying that they had reduced the direct tax, but in a roundabout way we paid twice as much. Here you go peasant, live like this. Can he look favorably at the Soviet authority like at a protector? No, [he cannot]. He is extremely angry with it.«¹²

The remarkable political and social activism of the peasants was a feature of the 1920s. The liberalization of the economy during NEP fueled peasant political participation. In 1924 Felix Dzerzhinski recognized the rise of peasant political culture. »They acquired an ability to understand their particular interests and deliberately defend them, opposing the policy of Soviet power.«¹³ The peasant activism of the 1920s represented a continuation of their longstanding political quest for autonomy that began at the end of the 19th century¹⁴. The peasants' activism on the basis of realization of their own particular interests and role in society is especially impressive when weighed against the parallel disintegration of the workers as a political class in the 1920s.¹⁵

The main motivation for all forms of peasant political mobilization in the 1920s was the desire to attain power and to control their own lives. Again and again in their letters to the authorities and newspapers, peasants demanded equal representation within the power structures of the dictatorship of the proletariat. »Through our own representatives we must organize peasant committees, here in the villages, as well as in *uezds* and provinces. Through these committees we will enter into the authorities' structure [...]. Insofar as our state is made up of peasants and workers, it must be governed by them via elections, but not through appointed people from the party or wherever.«¹⁶ In order to achieve this, they attempted to utilize existing political institutions – the party and the soviets. One peasant wrote:

¹² Survey of correspondence (April 1925). Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv istoriko-politicheskikh dokumentov Sankt-Peterburga/Central State Archives of Historical-Political documents St. Petersburg (hereafter: TsGAIPD SPb), f. 16, op. 6, d. 6938, l. 174.

¹³ Berelovich/Danilov: Sovetskaia derevnia (footnote 3), p. 15.

¹⁴ See recent studies Graziosi: The Great Soviet Peasant War (footnote 7), pp. 9 f.; Lavrov: »Krestianski Parlament« (footnote 4); Seregny: A Different Type (footnote 5); Seregny, Scott J.: Peasants and Politics: Peasant Unions During the 1905 Revolution, in: Kingston-Mann, Esther et al (eds.): Peasant Economy, Culture, and Politics of European Russia, 1800–1921, New Jersey 1991; Figes, Orlando/Kolonitski, Boris: Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917, New Haven 1999; Brovkin: Behind the Front lines (footnote 6); Brovkin: Russia after Lenin (footnote 2); Male, Donald J.: Russian Peasant Organization before Collectivisation. A Study of Commune and Gathering, 1925–1930, Cambridge 1971.

¹⁵ Suny, Ronald Grigor: The Soviet Experiment: Russia, the USSR, and the Successor States, Oxford 1998, p. 176.

¹⁶ Letter from peasant A.N. Krutasov, Verkhne-Kamskaia Volost', village Nizkoe, to *Lenin-gradskaia Pravda*, 1924, in: TsGAIPD SPb, f. 16, op. 5, d. 5335, l. 87.

»There is concern among the peasants that the people who are sitting in VIKs [Local Executive Committee]¹⁷ are not ours, they don't know the peasants' needs. Since the appointed people filled all of the senior positions, in order to solve a question about land distribution, we need to enter the [Communist] party and take the positions that are rightfully ours as we are the real workers of the land.«¹⁸

The »Stepsons« of the Soviet power

The serial documents allow us to identify several narratives that dominated in peasants' discourse. First of all, peasants regarded themselves as the class the furthest removed from the power structure: »Do the Soviet authorities consider peasants people?« and »Are we not part of the Soviet republic? [...] Rural Communists don't regard us as humans.«¹⁹

Voices filled with dignity and self-respect came from the villages, testifying to the peasants' increasing realization of their role in society. »The government works for us, we are its masters, so the authorities must listen to us.«²⁰ Peasants perceived themselves as masters, as »the salt of the earth«, without whose products society would cease to exist. In the years of post-revolutionary chaos and the disintegration of government and economy, Russia saw how true such claims really were. It was during the civil war that the city-folk abandoned the towns for the countryside to find food. Instinctively, peasants understood the city's dependence on countryside, and sometimes used their self-sufficiency as a means to apply political pressure. Prosperous farmers wrote anonymous letters threatening to reduce land under cultivation, and consequently, reducing the future supply of grain. They warned: »We would have held out for a year without your manufactured goods but you would not have had bread [...]«²¹

The emerging consciousness amongst peasants of their own distinctiveness can be explained by the growing mobility of the population during the revolutions

¹⁷ Volostnoi Iсполnitel'nyi Komitet (VIK). They became major centers of local Soviet power in the countryside. See Shanin, Teodor: *The Awkward Class: Political Sociology of Peasantry in a Developing Society: Russia 1910–1925*, Oxford 1972, p. 193.

¹⁸ TsGAIPD SP f. 16, op. 6, d. 6916, l. 80 (1925).

¹⁹ Osokina, Elena: *Za fasadom »Stalinskogo izobilii«: Raspredelenie i rynek v snabzhenii naseleniia v gody industrializatsii, 1927–1941* [Behind the facade of »Stalin's opulences«. Distribution and market in the years of industrialization, 1927–1941], Moscow 1998, p. 120; Krukova, Svetlana (ed.): *Krestianskie istorii* [Peasant stories], Moscow 2001, p. 110 (1925).

²⁰ Rossiiski gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii/Russian State Archives of Social-Political History (hereafter: RGASPI), f. 17, op. 85, d. 16, l. 31, and 52 (1926).

²¹ RGASPI f. 17, op. 85, d. 318, l. 5. These threats were very widespread according to the correspondence received by *Krestianskaia Pravda* and *Krasnaia Derevnia* in the period from March to June 1928; Brovkin: *Russia after Lenin* (footnote 2), p. 75.

and wars, along with interactions and conflicts with other social groups. The economic revival of the village during NEP contributed to the rapid growth of peasant self-consciousness and esteem. Simultaneously, pressure from the authorities stimulated greater solidarity among them.

In the mid 1920s an intense social conflict emerged between the city and the countryside. Urban unemployment (a rise from 1,344,000 to 3,000,000 in 1927 according to different sources) during the NEP deepened workers' hostility toward peasant in-migration. According to Douglas Weiner the *otkhod* involved 3,25 million peasants in 1925/26. More than 2 million settled permanently in the cities in 1926/27.²² Workers also expressed discontent for villagers selling their products above the price level of state stores. From the peasants' point of view, the hostile urban world included not only the Bolsheviks, but also factory workers, since the latter theoretically held power. The main source of envy was the higher level of life in the city. A poor peasant's average annual income of 128 rubles in 1927 was only 35 percent of the average urban worker's.²³ This hatred caused tension even among Party and Komsomol cadres. For example, in 1925, during a plenum of rural party organizations in the Nikolaevski district of the Odessa province, rural communists' hatred of those from the city was expressed openly and with vigor,²⁴ as the participant Kondrashov wrote a report to Stalin.

The peasants' discontent with the material and political inequality with the workers was the overarching theme in their mood. Their longing for equality was reinforced and justified by official socialist narrative of social equality and a classless society. Feelings of discrimination fueled the peasants' demand for justice. As James Scott writes, »The essence of peasant moral standards is a crude notion of equality and stressing of justice.«²⁵ The utopian revolutionary slogan of equality corresponded to the old peasants' ideal. One peasant author in the newspaper *Bednota*, contemplating the reasons for this inequality, opposed both community and capitalist values, when he wrote that inequality arises when people begin to work not for the general good but for the individual or family good.²⁶

Equality was often understood by peasants in a very simplistic way. Here is a 1927 letter from a Don peasant, Ivan Khomich, to the newspaper *Krasnoe Priazov'e*: »As a community of peasants and community of workers, we exchange

²² Weiner, Douglas R.: »Razmychka?« Urban Unemployment and Peasant In-migration as Sources of Social Conflict, in: Fitzpatrick, Sheila et al: Russia in the Era of NEP. Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture, Bloomington 1991, pp. 145 f.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Krukova: Krestianskie istorii (footnote 19), p. 121.

²⁵ Scott, James: Peasant Moral Economy as a Subsistence Ethics, in: Shanin, Teodor (ed.): Peasants and Peasant Societies: Selected Readings, Oxford/New York, p. 307.

²⁶ Viola, Lynne: The Peasants' Kulak. Social Identities and Moral Economy in the Soviet Countryside in the 1920s, in: Canadian Slavonic Papers, 42 (2000), no 4, p. 446.

goods. A worker should work for food and clothes and the rest should go to the government. And I, the peasant, give the extra bread, onions, potatoes, eggs, and butter to the government. Just give us boots, a hat, a jacket, a shirt, or some pants in exchange [...]. Give [to the peasants] industrial goods; take the bread [in exchange]. Where is equality, where is brotherhood? Down with taxes, down with wages, down with money inside Russia. Long live socialism!»²⁷

In private conversations and correspondence, and in official complaints, peasants persistently compared the conditions of life in the villages with those in the cities. Their main complaints revolved around the higher salaries earned by workers, and the fact that workers were not subjected to taxes, while the peasants were burdened by high taxes. Moreover, peasants also believed that their access to education, culture, and medical assistance was quite limited compared with that of city workers. »The village lives with the discussion that workers live better than peasants, they earn more but work less, and they have social insurance, schools, hospitals, resorts, while the authorities give none of that to the peasantry. Peasants pay taxes, but workers do not.«²⁸

»Peasants are unclothed, barefoot and hungry; workers are eating eggs, butter and meat [...]. We were fighting together, but the kingdom goes to workers, while peasants are alone in defeat. Every peasant knows that the worker is our enemy [...]. Be condemned today and forever the peasants' enemy – a worker.«²⁹ »It is often heard in the factories that peasants should not be employed there. Where is the [declared] union with the peasants on such case? The peasants are so offended, industrial products are much more expensive than agricultural products. The peasants should organize and not give the workers their output.«³⁰

Peasants had many reasons to complain. Their lives were much harder than that of workers. In 1926, 55 % of peasants were illiterate and 40 % of peasant children did not attend elementary schools. For every seven hundred people in the countryside there was one teacher, and for every seventeen thousand – one doctor.³¹ Egalitarianism was fueled by the abrasive force of envy.³² The peasants were envious of the more prosperous urban population. They called for real equality, lamenting: »Even out the situation in the villages and the cities and spread the weight around equally between peasants and workers [...]. Workers

²⁷ RGASPI f. 17, op. 16, d. 16, l. 244 (1927).

²⁸ RGASPI f. 17, op. 84, d. 916, l. 2–7.

²⁹ RGASPI f. 17, op. 85, d. 16, l. 243 (1927). See similar comments in Viola: Ryazanskaya Der-evnia (footnote 3), pp. 14 f.

³⁰ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 86, d. 95, l. 18. Summary of notes given to the presidiums at the Guberniya congresses of trade unions. Organizational department, Information subdivision, Moscow Committee of VKP (b). October 1927.

³¹ Suny: *The Soviet Experiment* (footnote 15), p. 179.

³² Scott: *Peasant Moral Economy* (footnote 25), p. 306.

should bear the same burden that peasants do, i.e. work more than 8 hours, and have a salary that is not so rewarding [...].³³ The Manifesto of the All-Union Central Executive Committee of the Soviets (VTsIK) on the 10th anniversary of the October revolution in 1927 caused an explosion of protests and grievances from deprived peasants, who were upset that the Manifesto gave workers many privileges, as they believed, at their expense³⁴.

The demand for equality also drew upon references to official rhetoric, which peasants regarded as government promises. It is surprising how actively and skillfully the peasants employed the party's official rhetoric on »the union of laborers« – a worker-peasant alliance. The peasants constantly used the authorities' slogan, »face to face with the village« as argument in their letters. They quoted Communist party documents, articles from *Pravda*, the works of Lenin, articles of the Constitution and referred to the decrees of the Soviet government, indicating the discrepancy between official rhetoric and action, and demanding that the authorities fulfill their promises and implement the laws they had issued³⁵.

The demand for social equality with workers was often based on the peasantry's numerical predominance as well as on their active participation in the revolution and civil war. Peasants argued that workers and peasants had fought side by side³⁶, they had suffered the same losses, and together, therefore, they should enjoy the results of their struggle. In appealing back to the state's myth, peasants complained over and over again that the revolution, despite its promises, had brought material and political benefits only to the workers, while the peasantry »did not see anything good from the revolution. The authorities only look after the workers; the government is like a mother to the workers and like a stepmother to the peasants all at the price of the peasants' misery.«

Metaphors such as »sons« and »stepsons« dominated the peasants' discussion of Soviet social policies. Since the family was the basic unit of peasant life, this model was transmitted to the state level, and peasants seemed to act within this

³³ Krukova: *Krestianskie istorii* (footnote 19), p. 80. Letter by N. Ezhov, Yaroslavl guberniya, selo Gregorievskoe to M. I. Kalinin, January 1927

³⁴ Danilov, Viktor et al (eds.): *Tragediia Sovetskoi derevni: Kollektivizatsiia i raskulachivanie: dokumenty i materialy v 5 tomakh, 1927–1939*, [The tragedy of the Soviet village. Collectivization and de-kulakization. Documents and materials in 5 volumes, 1927–1939], Moscow 1999–2000, v. 1, pp. 124 f., 131, and 134. In due course, this increased the number of demands to create a PU.

³⁵ »Peasants carry the newspapers with speeches of party leaders and the government, in which they laid out their political course, in their pockets, and often stick them in the noses of poor Party men, showing them that newspapers write one thing, and yet they do altogether something different.« See Ryazantsev, N. P.: *Nastroeniya Rossiskogo krestianstva na vyborakh v soviety v seredine 20h godov* [Moods of the Russian peasants in the elections to the Soviets in the middle of the 20s], in: *Istoria Rossiyskoy Povsednevnosti* [The History of every day life in Russia], St. Petersburg 2002, p. 202.

³⁶ Peasantry comprised about 77 % of the Red Army during the Civil War.

social frame of reference.³⁷ The letter from the Smolensk province depicted an epic image of two fighters, the peasant and the worker, who had struggled and suffered together for the better future; but when »the mansion of life« was ready, the worker became its superintendent, and the peasant only a tenant without any rights. The worker, advanced leader, who became the superintendent of the building, was unable to improve the life of his fellow comrades in this building. The letter went on to note that »Soviet authorities elevated workers to the status of the masters of Russia and made them guardians, superiors to the peasants; it is time to realize once and for all, who exactly made the revolution possible; if it was not for the peasants in the army, the revolution could not have been successful, what would the workers have been able to do – absolutely nothing.«³⁸

Envy of workers reached such a level that the peasants distributed leaflets calling for the removal of the proletariat from power, and calling that peasants take power into their own hands. These leaflets demanded: »Let's take part in the Dictatorship of the Proletariat!«, and »Long Live Peasant Power!«³⁹ Peasants' hatred and envy was one of the sources for class self-identification.

Apart from resentment towards the workers, another stimulus for consolidation was the Bolsheviks' political attempt to differentiate the countryside. Marxists considered the polarization of the countryside into capitalist owners and a rural proletariat to be inevitable. In the 1920s, the Bolsheviks counted on the support of the poor, a split among middle peasants, and the isolation of the kulaks. Y. Sverdlov warned soon after the revolution that the Soviet regime would survive »only if we can split the village into two irreconcilably hostile camps, if we succeed in raising the village poor against the village bourgeoisie.«⁴⁰

Peasants vigorously rejected this policy: »[...] we are being divided: You are *kulak*, you are *seredniak* [middle peasant], you are poor [...] With such a division of peasants one cannot even speak of socialism [...]. Peasants should not be separated into classes.«⁴¹ The peasantry belonged to a different frame of reference, primarily fixed in terms of the traditional world of land commune. For the Bolsheviks, the term *kulak* meant enemy. From the peasants' perspective, the world,

³⁷ Shanin: *The Awkward Class* (footnote 17), p. 205.

³⁸ RGASPI f. 17, op. 84, d. 916, l. 7 (1924).

³⁹ Berelovich/Danilov: *Sovetskaia derevnia* (footnote 3), pp. 15, and 619.

⁴⁰ MacKenzie, David/Curran, Michael W.: *A History of Russia. The Soviet Union, and Beyond*. 4th edition, Belmont, CA 1993, pp. 569–570.

⁴¹ Letter from Afanasi K. N. O., poselok Lugovoi, Ivanovsky rayon, Melitopol'ski okrug USSR, February 22, 1927, in: Kozlov, V. A. (ed.): *Neizvestnaia Rossiia, XX vek* [Unknown Russia, the 20th century]. vol. 3, Moscow 1993. p. 215. Similar comments see Krukova: *Krestianskie istorii* (footnote 19), p. 208; RGASPI f. 17, op. 85, d. 508, l. 24 (1927); Danilov: *Tragediia Sovetskoi derevni* (footnote 34), vol. 1, pp. 485, and 575; RGASPI f. 17, op. 21, d. 3075, l. 15 (1929).

the rural society and the notion of the enemy appeared quite differently.⁴² The documents reviewed by the author in the archives provide a lot of evidence that from the peasants' perspective, hostile forces were still often seen as coming from outside the community and included the workers, Bolsheviks, and the cities in general: »In our village, there are no kulaks, but there are plenty of Soviet kulaks in the city, those who carry a briefcase and get 200 rubles in salary.« »Why did the Party speak so much about the danger of the kulaks during the congress and not even notice the bourgeoisie in the city?«⁴³ As Lynne Viola has concluded, many peasants believed that the town – rather than the kulak – was the real exploiter.⁴⁴ This clash of hierarchical categories reflected the confrontation between the peasants' communal world-view and the Bolsheviks' class-based perspective.

Hatred towards workers molded the feeling of distinctiveness which echoed in the consolidation of peasants against the urban world and the superficial categories that were forced upon them. Many peasants viewed the Bolshevik policies of economic differentiation as intended to tear up the social communal fabric in order to exploit the people.⁴⁵ In their deliberate resistance to the Bolsheviks' policies of differentiation in the countryside, the peasants proved that communal cohesiveness was very often stronger than class polarization.⁴⁶

Search for an agency to protect peasants' interests

All these narratives mirrored the peasants' growing self-awareness, and resulted in demands and actions to find the agency to protect and advocate their interests to the Soviet authorities. The more Bolsheviks sought increasingly to control the

⁴² For how peasants interpreted the notion of kulak, see Viola: *The Peasants' Kulak* (footnote 26), pp. 431–460.

⁴³ TsGAIPD SPb f. 24, op. 5, d. 1323, l. 40 (1929); RGASPI f. 17, op. 85, d. 16, l. 30 (January 1926).

⁴⁴ Viola, Lynne: *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance*, Oxford 1999, p. 30.

⁴⁵ As Viola put it, analyzing Soviet countryside relationships: »Rural divisions and conflict derived not from capitalist class formations but instead were based on pre- or even noncapitalist social relations.« Viola: *The Peasants' Kulak* (footnote 26), p. 435.

⁴⁶ In debates on social tensions in peasantry the foundations for interpretations in favor of the relative cohesiveness of the peasantry as a class were laid by Shanin: *The Awkward Class* (footnote 17) and Lewin, Moshe: *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power: A Study of Collectivization*, New York 1975. The opposite view emphasizing social differentiation dominated in Soviet historiography and is presented in a recent study by Hughes, James: *Stalinism in a Russian Province: A Study of Collectivization and Dekulakization in Siberia*, Houndmills/Basingstoke 1996 and his article *Re-evaluating Stalin's Peasant Policy in Transforming Peasants: Society, State and the Peasantry, 1861–1930*, in: Pallot, Judith (ed.): *Transforming Peasants. Society, State and the Peasantry, 1861–1930*, Houndmills/Basingstoke 1998, pp. 244–245. The movement for the Peasant Union adds new evidence in the support of peasants' class solidarity.

market and regulate grain prices, the more the countryside consolidated in its demand for peasant organization. By the mid-1920s, numerous complaints, letters to the administration, and resolutions passed by peasants' meetings concluded with demands such as the following: »Give peasants their own union! Why did all those posh officials and creators of the Soviet Republic rise as one against the peasantry and try to drain the last bit of blood out of them? Remember, there is an end to everything, and there will be an end to the peasants' yoke.«⁴⁷

The experience gained from the Peasant Unions of 1905 and 1917–1920 was not lost – neither the peasantry nor the authorities would forget this. The OGPU noted that the instigators of the movement in the 1920s had often participated in the Peasant Unions of 1905–1906 and 1917–1920.⁴⁸ Though many local OGPU authorities were prone to ascribe the growth of the PU to the intrigues of former socialist-revolutionaries, the reasons were much more complex. During the first three years of NEP the terms of exchange between industry and agriculture were quite favorable to the countryside. In 1923 (the scissors crisis) and in 1925 again the official agencies made a concession to the peasantry, increased the price of grain and forced the industrial prices down. These three years of NEP improved the economy of countryside. As soon as a peasant became wealthier, he now had to pay higher taxes, and became the target of political discrimination as a kulak. It fueled discontent in the village. Discontent grew when government stopped concessions and turned to curtailing NEP. For example, when in 1927 price divergence arose again, the state's low price of grain was kept stable. Under the new circumstances, the peasants' infringed interests caused them to promote the idea of a union. At that moment they saw the PU as the only channel able to communicate their genuine needs.

What other channels were available? What place did Peasant Unions occupy among other local, traditional, as well as political institutions in the countryside in the 1920s? By that time, the Soviet government had created a whole spectrum of organizations that, in theory, dealt with the peasants' various interests and needs – soviets, cooperatives (co-ops), Committees of Peasants' Social Mutual Aid (KKOV), and credit funds. The most important among them were the soviets.

The peasant masses initially believed in the soviets, which attracted them first and foremost as potential instruments of autonomous self-governance. Despite the discrimination against prosperous peasants in favor of the poor in the local soviets, the former nonetheless attempted to use soviets for their own purposes throughout the 1920s.

⁴⁷ Letter of F. Morozov to *Krestianskaia Gazeta* in: Sokolov, Andrei (ed.): *Golos Naroda: Pis'ma i Otkliki Riadovykh Sovetskikh Grazhdan o Sobytiakh 1918–1932 godov* [The voice of the people. Letters and reaction of ordinary Soviet citizens about the events of 1918–1932], Moscow 1998, p. 124 (1925); RGASPI, f. 17, op. 86, d. 95, l. 3 (December 1927).

⁴⁸ Survey from Stavropol'skii region, RGASPI f. 17, op. 85, d. 16, l. 251; f. 17, op. 85, d. 71, l. 4; Berelovich/Danilov: *Sovetskaia derevnia* (footnote 3), pp. 630, 786, and 787.

Though the authorities controlled the local soviets through their nominees (Party members, outsiders from the working class, or poor villagers), and excluded kulaks from the elections by disfranchising them, nonetheless the middle and even wealthy peasants fairly successfully used the 1925, 1927 and 1928/29 election campaigns to put their representatives in the local soviets.⁴⁹ An anonymous peasant wrote: »There were elections to the soviet. Do you know that the peasants organized themselves and did not let any Communist and Komsomol (VLKSM) member enter the soviet, [but] only old and experienced people passed. Now we have a soviet composed of non-party men. In the village Khoroshee all the non-party men were elected as well; in short, everywhere in our district the non-party men have entered the soviets. The peasants woke up. Here at the bottom, the [Communist] party of course is defeated, because the Communists were the chairmen and mismanaged [the whole affair].«⁵⁰

In 1928 the OGPU mentioned »the seizure of the local soviet and co-operative apparatus by the kulaks as one of the main features of anti-soviet activity in the countryside along with counter-revolutionary agitation, dissemination of leaflets, demands for a PU, kulak agitation and kulak terror.«⁵¹ Disfranchised wealthier peasants demanded voting rights in exchange for selling grain to the authorities at state-established prices. They stated, »we'll bring grain, but in exchange you restore our voting rights and announce in your newspapers that we are [...] helping [the Soviet power] to reconstruct the economy«⁵². The desire of middle and wealthier peasants to participate in the soviets is evident in their demands for the equal representation of all strata of the peasantry and of political parity between peasants and the proletariat.⁵³ Peasants even referred to the Constitution: »Examining the Constitution, one inevitably comes upon Article 9, in which any person from the city is given more privileges than a peasant; it reads that [factory] workers have one representative to the Congress [of Soviets] for every 25,000 people, whereas peasants have the same one representative for every 125,000 people. For me, a peasant, this seems very odd. I am thinking that there are sons there and stepsons here.«⁵⁴

Peasants often demanded changes to the Constitution and free multi-candidate elections.⁵⁵ They rejected the workers' and communists' nominees appointed from

⁴⁹ See Brovkin: *Russia after Lenin* (footnote 2), pp. 164–168, and 170.

⁵⁰ Survey of private correspondence (April, 1925), in: TsGAIPD SPb f. 16, op. 6, d. 6938, l. 166.

⁵¹ Berelovich/Danilov: *Sovetskaia derevnia* (footnote 3), pp. 626–627.

⁵² *Ibidem*, p. 667.

⁵³ Krukova: *Krestianskie istorii* (footnote 19), pp. 209, and 577–578.

⁵⁴ Letter from I. L. Chibutkin, village Efremovo, Yaroslavl' region to the Congress of Soviets, 1927, in: Sokolov: *Golos Naroda* (footnote 47), pp. 129–130. Similar demands see in the summary of OGPU, RGASPI f. 17, op. 84, d. 916, l. 2–7.

⁵⁵ RGASPI f. 17, op. 21, d. 3075, l. 20 (1929); Krukova: *Krestianskie istorii* (footnote 19), pp. 208–209; Danilov: *Tragediia Sovetskoi derevni* (footnote 34), vol. 1, p. 577.

above, as well as poor villagers, whom they considered ill equipped to rule the village. They promoted their own peasant candidates from the bottom and, overall, used all means they could to influence the elections. Wealthy and middle villagers bought votes, formed voting blocks, held boycotts, and canvassed electors using all possible methods of political pressure in order to represent their interests. The fact that throughout the 1925–1929 election campaigns the local soviets remained predominantly peasant (non-workers) and non-party⁵⁶ made the authorities constantly worry about the »contamination« of the soviets by »enemy elements.« Meanwhile, the peasants were gradually coming to the realization that the soviets had no real power in comparison to the Communist Party. »Why are you shouting about elections to the soviet? The authorities bypass the soviets and this is not likely to change.«⁵⁷ The disproportionate representation of diverse strata of the village in the local soviet organs, as well as their pursuit of party interests instead of the peasants', repelled the majority of the countryside from this form of local governance.⁵⁸

On the national level, the People's Commissariat of Agriculture of the Russian Republic pretended to be a state agency representing the interests of the peasantry and helping peasants to modernize their life. However, the Commissariat found itself in between the official goals of transformation of the village according to the socialist project, as the Communist party understood it, and Commissariat's adherence to the NEP policy. It led to ineffectiveness of this mediating body and it vanished in 1929 when NEP was abandoned. Peasants' promotees could not function effectively in this body and were neglected by the bosses.⁵⁹

Apart from the soviets, a number of bottom ground organizations existed formally to aid the peasantry, including cooperatives (co-ops), Committees of Peasants' Social Mutual Aid (KKOV), and credit funds.⁶⁰ Officially these organizations represented the interests of the poor, but in reality they very often reflected the exploitative interests of the Soviet authorities. The People's Commissariat of Workers' and Peasants' Inspection reported in 1925: »Local soviets have provided good implementation of tax-collection work for the higher authorities, but independent work done by them in serving the basic needs of the village is negligible«. Commenting on that quote,

⁵⁶ See McGury, Melissa: Protecting Local Interests: Peasant Administrators' Strategies for Obstructing Soviet Collectivization, Manuscript presented at the 2002 AAASS Convention, Pittsburgh, PA 2002, p. 10.

⁵⁷ Brovkin: Russia after Lenin (footnote 2), p. 74.

⁵⁸ Male: Russian Peasant Organization (footnote 14), p. 99.

⁵⁹ Heinzen, James: Inventing a Soviet Countryside: State Power and the Transformation of Rural Russia, 1917–1929. Commissariat of Agriculture. Pittsburgh, Pa. 2004, pp. 1–10, and 128. It is interesting that in 1926 Andrei Platonov worked as an inspector of Commissariat in the Tambov region, area heavily inflicted by peasants' uprising and its suppression during the Civil War. His experience as a representative of authorities made him go through an internal crisis in 1927. He returned to Moscow to write his famous novels *Chevangur* and *The Foundation Pit*.

⁶⁰ Danilov: *Tragediia Sovetskoi derevni* (footnote 34), vol. 1, pp. 771, and 774.

Teodor Shanin adds: »This seems equally applicable to all the rural organisations of the plenipotentiary outsiders.«⁶¹ The performance of these organizations, designed by the authorities to mediate between the village and the state, remained poor because the Soviet government's interests conflicted with those of the majority of peasants. Even the poor peasants were often dissatisfied with the performance of these organizations, and they frequently shut down the KKOVs. Instead, the peasants – wealthy, middle and poor – suggested their own intermediary institution: a Peasant Union. Not accidentally, pro-PU agitation increased dramatically during the election periods for the Soviets, co-ops, and, especially, the KKOVs.⁶²

At the same time, in the villages, the communal system, as the traditional, most significant form of local self-government, remained functioning and was even on the rise.⁶³ According to Shanin, Male and Heinzen, communes and village gatherings, not soviets, were the real coordinators of rural life and possessed far more substantial budgets than the soviets.⁶⁴ Among other functions, communes organized saving banks and apportioned all taxes.⁶⁵ Unlike in the soviets, all strata of the peasantry were represented in the local village communal gatherings, including wealthy farmers, who were banned by law from participation in the soviets. However, the communal system's confined structure could not match the demands of modern life. As Male put it: »There was no official machinery for presenting directly the views of the commune on national issues [...].«⁶⁶ The increasingly complex arrangement of contacts with the outside world led to demands for representational institution with advanced bureaucratic functions. While a whole host of institutions claimed to reflect and protect the interests of the countryside, in practice they did not work well. There are many reasons for their failure, including obsolescence (in case of the *obshchina*) and/or the incompatibility of the actual interests of the Soviet authorities and the bulk of peasantry. This failure was yet another reason why the peasants strove to create their own institution, independent of the authorities.

⁶¹ Shanin: *The Awkward Class* (footnote 17), p. 194.

⁶² On Krestsoiuz. Informational Department of TsK VKP, in: RGASPI f. 17, op. 85, d. 16, l. 249; Danilov: *Tragediia Sovetskoi derevni* (footnote 34), vol. 1, pp. 120, 123, 134, and 135.

⁶³ The policy of the Bolsheviks in restricting the functions of the *obshchina*, the division of it, completed the liquidation of it in the progress of collectivization. See Danilov: *Tragediia Sovetskoi derevni* (footnote 34), vol. 1, pp. 55–56.

⁶⁴ In 1927 the budgets of the rural soviets were only 16 per cent of the recorded budgets of the peasant communes. Shanin: *The Awkward Class* (footnote 17), pp. 165–167. Male discusses the interlocking of functions of soviets and commune. Male: *Russian Peasant Organization* (footnote 14), pp. 97–99. According to Heinzen »Commune remained by far the most widespread form of land tenure [...]. In 1927 peasants still held 97 % of agricultural land in the RSFSR in repartitional tenure.« Heinzen: *Inventing a Soviet Countryside* (footnote 59), p. 143.

⁶⁵ Male: *Russian Peasant Organization* (footnote 14), p. 98.

⁶⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 97.

Goals, participants, and geographic coverage of the PU movement

Attempts to organize Peasant Unions locally were undertaken beginning in 1924.⁶⁷ Usually they occurred at meetings of peasants or rural communal gatherings (*skhod*). »Having heard: the information from comrade Golubkov about the organization of the Peasant Union. Decreed: by the common opinion of the gathered to acknowledge the necessity of the organization of the PU by the type of the workers' trade unions. (Uglich uezd, Yaroslavl guberniia, January 1929).« The OGPU summary includes the statement by a member of the party on the meeting in the village Okulino, Burlakinskaia volost, Yaroslav guberniia (1929): »To better arrange [our] own life, we need to organize our own Peasant Union. The worker is organized, he lives better, and we need to organize [ourselves] to live like the workers [...]. With every day our life becomes worse and worse. The union is necessary to us also so that the peasant will be more closely allied and organized, and will not experience the pressure from the side of the Soviet authorities, which he feels now.«⁶⁸ The question of the projected functions of a Peasant Union was somewhat ambiguous. Both political and economic functions were incorporated into a single initiative. Chart (1) illustrates the objectives of the PU.

Chart (1): Goals of the Peasant Union in 1926 and 1927⁶⁹

<i>Objectives/Goals/Demands</i>	<i>Percent</i>
To change the price ratio between agricultural and industrial goods	38
To organize the PU based on the model of trade union	21
To decrease the agricultural tax	17
To further peasants' political demands	15
To replace the KKOVs	1
Other Demands	8

The economic objectives included balancing agricultural and industrial prices, changing existing tax policies, and allowing free access to outside markets. Over-

⁶⁷ RGASPI f. 17, op. 84, d. 916, l. 2–7.

⁶⁸ Khrestomatiia po otechestvennoi istorii, 1914–1945 [Reader for Russian history], Moscow 1996, pp. 373–374.

⁶⁹ The chart summarizes data from four different archive sources. OGPU review (May–December 1926), in: RGASPI f. 17, op. 85, d. 16, l. 253; TsK VKP review on public moods in May 1927, Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii/State Archives of the Russian Federation (hereafter: GARF), f. 374, op. 27, d. 1211, l. 137; RGASPI f. 17, op. 85, d. 71, l. 13; Danilov: Tragediia Sovetskoi derevni (footnote 34), vol. 1, pp. 72, 75, 121, and 125. These data collected by the author from various OGPU and Party sources can be compared with the table compiled by OGPU and published in Berelovich/Danilov: Sovetskaia derevnia (footnote 3), pp. 1028–1029.

all these objectives equaled 56 % of the total objectives. The political objectives encompassed the demands to create an independent peasant party and the intent to oppose the Soviet authorities in general. In addition, the peasants defended their election rights and their right of education. Overall, these objectives accounted for 15 % of the goals. The initiative for the PU to operate as a peasant trade union was also widespread. Together with the political demands it accounted for 36 % of the total goals.

This categorization, of course, is very relative. First of all, every pro-PU debate included a wide spectrum of demands. The analysts from the Central Committee (TsK) and OGPU usually selected one central theme for each of the public debates and addresses. Secondly, the above classification of the PU's objectives was determined by the OGPU's staff, or party analysts who interpreted the peasants' demands in accordance with official policies. Finally, the peasants themselves, in their demands, for example, that the PU take the form of a trade union, loosely understood the functions of the latter, and included in their mandate both economic and political objectives. Such an amalgamation of objectives into a single concept of a »trade union« can be found in many of the pro-PU programs. For example, one of these programs, approved by the electoral congress in the Vasilievskaya district in the Samara region, declared: »To organize the PU based on the model of a trade union and include in its functions:

1. To attain an equal distribution of wealth between the workers and the peasantry (an extended working day for the [factory] workers, wage cuts for the proletariat, the transfer of the valuables from clubs in the cities to the villages in order to organize *narodom*⁷⁰, etc).

2. To increase the percentage of peasants attending universities and colleges by decreasing the percentage of workers attending these institutions.⁷¹

3. To achieve political equality and amend the Constitution regarding the participation of peasants in the soviets. There is to be one candidate per 25,000 people instead of one per 125,000.«⁷²

In the OGPU's summations, this program was most likely categorized as »the PU as a peasant trade union«, even though the program's directives extended beyond the traditional economic functions of a trade union and covered mostly social and political rights. Economical demands, which were mostly protests against economic discrimination, inevitably acquired political coloring in party or police discourse.

The prevalence of one or another of these demands varied according to agricultural region. The central provinces with surplus peasant populations more often

⁷⁰ Narodnye doma (people's houses) – enlightenment institutions for the public created at the beginning of the 20th century.

⁷¹ The quota of students from different population groups was pre-determined by the state.

⁷² RGASPI f. 17, op. 85, d. 16, l. 254 (June 1926).

insisted on organizing a PU on the model of a peasant trade-union, with the goal of improving access of peasants to jobs in industry. Up to 50 % of such demands came from the centre and North-West of Russia, where peasants traditionally went away to work in industry to supplement their agricultural income. But they were unable to do this as easily in the 1920 as before the revolution because of high unemployment in the cities. When peasants saw that access to jobs in the cities was opened only for the members of workers' trade-unions, they demanded to create their own peasant trade-union. In these provinces the middle and poor peasants took a very active part in the movement. In the producing provinces, where wealthy peasants dominated, the purposes of a PU more often included balancing prices for industrial and rural products, taxes and access to external markets. In Ukraine and the Caucasus these kinds of economic demands were advocated by up to 60 % of the peasants. The data on the supposed functions of the PU in an OGPU report from 1928 (chart 2) largely coincide with that of chart 1.

Chart (2): Supposed functions of the PU according to an OGPU in 1926 and 1927⁷³

<i>Function</i>	<i>1926</i>	<i>1927</i>
Political function	17,5	22,6
To balance prices	34,8	33,1
Trade-union functions	29,3	30,7
To regulate taxes	17,7	11,5
Other	0,7	2,1

Which groups in the village were the most active PU advocates? To answer this question we encounter the problem of the vague boundaries of social categorization. Terms and labels imposed from above on the village often did not coincide with social identity as it was perceived from below. The vagueness of the social boundaries and the arbitrariness of imposing the categories or labels make it difficult to distinguish the origin of that or another narrative in the situation of social conflict in the village. While some part of the village was allied with the Bolsheviks, the documents I have studied give evidence that the pro-PU campaign represented the majority of the peasantry. This is demonstrated by the following statistics.

Chart 3 and 4 follow the OGPU's socio-political classification of the participants in the movement for the Peasant Union in the USSR in 1926 and 1927.⁷⁴

⁷³ Iz dokladnoi zapiski informotdela OGPU ob antisovietskikh proiavlenijakh v derevne za 1925–1927 gg. [From the report protocol of the information department of the OGPU about the anti-soviet activities at the countryside, 1925–1927], in: Berelovich/Danilov: Sovetskaia derevnia (footnote 3), p. 632.

Chart (3): Social composition of the movement for the Peasant Union in Percent

<i>Social status</i>	<i>1926</i>	<i>1927</i>
Peasants:		
Kulaks	39,1	36,3
Seredniaks (Middle)	51,2	52,5
The poor	9,7	11,2
Total Peasants	72,2	82,0
Workers of the lower Soviet apparatus and co-operation	2,9	1,3
The village intelligentsia	4,2	2,7
Handicraftsmen and craftsmen	1,4	1,5
Workers	1,0	0,6
Others and unidentified	18,3	11,9
Total	100,0	100,0

Chart (4): Socio-political status of Peasant Union supporters in Percent

<i>Socio-political status</i>	<i>1926</i>	<i>1927</i>
Members of VKP (b) and VLKSM	0,9	0,8
Former Members of VKP (b) and VLKSM	1,5	0,9
Workers in public organizations, village correspondents, and soviet members	5,1	3,6
People with an anti-Soviet past	11,3	1,2

I discussed earlier the fact that this official categorization was biased. Again, authorities always blamed »kulaks« (identified as enemies in public transcript) for initiating the Peasant Union movement as an opposition to soviets. However, even the biased OGPU records confirm that the demands to create a Peasant Union were often initiated by the poor or the middle peasants. This table indicates that many local Soviet personnel as well as Party and Komsomol members spoke in support of the PU.⁷⁵ Chart (5) shows the participants of the movement in Ukraine in 1927.

To summarize the data on the social base of PUs, even following the official biased classification, we can say that the demands for their creation came from all

⁷⁴ Berelovich/Danilov: *Sovetskaia derevnia* (footnote 3), p. 1027. See also pp. 633, and 787. The composition varied in different agricultural regions.

⁷⁵ Danilov: *Tragediia Sovetskoi derevni* (footnote 34), vol. 1, p. 122.

strata,⁷⁶ with wealthier and middle-income peasants as the prime advocates, and the poor peasants' following their lead.

Chart (5): The participants of the PU movement in Ukraine in 1927.⁷⁷

<i>Socio-political status</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Percent</i>
Kulaks and wealthy peasants	80	41,4
Middle peasants (<i>seredniaks</i>)	61	31,6
The poor (<i>bedniaks</i>)	22	11,4
Others	30	15,6

Chart (6): Geographic coverage of the pro-Peasant Union campaigns (Total from the period of January 1, 1924–January 1, 1928)⁷⁸

<i>Regions</i>	<i>1924</i>	<i>1925</i>	<i>1926</i>	<i>1927</i>	<i>Total</i>
Central	34	210	578	857	1679
North-West	4	25	99	97	225
West	29	65	90	117	301
Ukraine	1	50	338	478	867
The Crimea	2	4	22	65	93
Northern Caucasus	9	93	279	274	655
Volga region	39	43	123	125	330
Ural	6	8	20	48	82
Siberia	7	29	97	151	284
Far East	8	16	30	100	154
Total	139	543	1676	2312	4670

Pro-PU campaigns took place throughout the USSR, including even the Far East. According to a report from the Information Department of the Central Committee on April 3, 1929, »there is no region left where this demand, in some form or

⁷⁶ An OGPU report stated: »All population [of the Shakhtinsko-Donetski district] consider organization of the PU to be necessary.«, in: Danilov: *Tragediia Sovetskoi derevni* (footnote 34), vol. 1, p. 77.

⁷⁷ Information summary N 16, TsK KPU from May 6, 1927, in: GARF, f. 374, op. 27, d. 1211, l. 137.

⁷⁸ Iz dokladnoi zapiski informotdela OGPU ob antisovetskikh proiavleniakh v derevne za 1925–1927 gg. [Report protocoll of the information department of the OGPU about anti-Soviet appearances at the countryside in 1925–1927], in: Berelovich/Danilov: *Sovetskaia derevnia* (footnote 3), p. 631.

another, had not been brought forward».⁷⁹ In this regard, the most active areas were in the Central region and the Ukraine. The following chart (6) provides an account of the geographic coverage of the pro-PU campaigns.

Demands for renaming the party and the government

The peasants' campaign for equal rights can be seen in one more discourse. This longing for equality resonated in numerous demands from the village to change the official name of the government from »the state of workers and peasants« to that »of peasants and workers«. These demands were complemented by peasants' petitions to the government and the press to change the official slogan »Workers of the world, unite!« to »Workers and peasants of the world, unite!« For example, S. Gogoi, a peasant, wrote to Stalin: »Our outpost supervisor said that the slogan cannot be changed, that the proletariat would [fare] better in establishing and upholding the Soviet rule in other countries than the peasants, because the latter are considered petty proprietors. From the above, one conclusion is drawn, that peasants can surely doubt their equality [...] Peasants are unhappy that our government is described as »of workers and peasants« and not »of peasants and workers.«⁸⁰ There were also demands to »rename the Party, to call it the Russian Party of Workers and Peasants.«⁸¹

The interest in slogans and names was by no means accidental. As semioticians have shown, in mass consciousness, an identification between a word (sign) and its meaning takes place. A new condition of thing is reflected in a new name and vice versa. Since the name reflects the very essence of an object, a change of name is considered to be a total transfiguration of an object. The peasants' demands to change the name of the government and the party referred to very deep archetypal layers of mass consciousness discussed by Youri Lotman and Boris Uspensky. Renaming was interpreted in this frame of mind as transfiguration.⁸²

However, the idea to change the name of the government was articulated not only at the bottom of society but also among the party elite. In 1923 (not later than June 10) Grigori Zinoviev, a chair of Comintern, forwarded to Stalin the project of address at the extended meeting of the Execution Committee of the Comintern on the need to change the title of »Workers Government« into »Workers and Peasants Government«. He criticized the »social-democratic« attitude among the parties of the Communist International towards the peasantry, which was that peasants were

⁷⁹ Ibidem, p. 575.

⁸⁰ Sokolov: *Golos Naroda* (footnote 47), p. 127 (June 13, 1926); see also the letter by Kondrashov, in: Krukova: *Krestianskie istorii* (footnote 19), p. 122 (1925).

⁸¹ GARF f. 324, op. 27, d. 1211, l. 139 (1927).

⁸² Lotman, Y./Uspensky, B.: *Mif – Imya – Kultura* [Myth – Name – Culture], in: *Trudy po znakovym systemam* (Tartu) 6 (1973), pp. 283–303.

allegedly unable to comprehend and accept socialism. He argued that the new title would neutralize the peasants' antipathy towards the Bolsheviks, and would enable them to begin feeling sympathy towards the communists. According to Zinoviev, the new motto would also serve to distract middle and poor peasants from the kulak peasants' parties, which were attempting to create a »Green International«. Though the leader of the Comintern referred to the political practice in foreign countries, he concluded his proposal with the remark that »this new motto of workers and peasants government is applicable in agitation everywhere, where this question arises as actual problem.« He emphasized that it was very important to let peasants know that communists rise this question.⁸³ Supposedly Zinoviev's suggestion was not only a reflection of the popular moods, but also partially a response to the growing peasant party movement in the West and a reflection of the struggle inside the RKP (b) regarding NEP. The available documents do not give us any evidence of the immediate consequences of Zinoviev's project. However, continued discussions and pressure from the bottom forced Stalin finally to react.

In 1927, Stalin published an article in the magazine *Bolshevik*, in response to a letter by a certain A. K. Dmitriev, who asked about the »social essence of our government and the state« – whether it was the state of workers or workers *and* peasants. Stalin answered with a play on words. He repeated several times on five pages of his article the need for a union of the proletariat and peasantry, and the leading role of the workers in this union. He stressed several times the necessity for the proletariat to govern the peasant masses.⁸⁴ Behind their questioning of the government's name and description lay the Russian peasantry's extreme discontent with their current deprived situation, their lack of rights, and their desire to defend their own interests.

The reaction of the party: repression and cover-ups

Documents in my possession provide little evidence as to how PUs functioned. It is the subject of further investigation. According to some estimates, between 1924 and 1927, 3,000 to 4,600 public demands for a PU were made.⁸⁵ Their work was limited by local frameworks. For example, one such organization, the *Soiuz Khleborobov*, existed in the village of Gavrilovka, Dzhetyysuisk gubernia, Taldy-Kurgan region (Kazakhstan) for three years (1924–1926).⁸⁶ Its relative longevity proved to

⁸³ RGASPI, f. 17, op. 86, d. 30, l. 2–6.

⁸⁴ K voprosu o raboche-krest'ianskom pravitel'stve [Zur Frage der Arbeiter-und-Bauern-Regierung], in: *Bol'shevik*, no 6 (1927), pp. 96–102.

⁸⁵ Danilov: Tragediia Sovetskoi derevni (footnote 34), vol. 1, p. 768; Berelovich/Danilov: Sovetskaia derevnia (footnote 3), p. 786.

⁸⁶ Dokladnaya zapiska V. Molotovu o Soyuse Khleborobov [Report to V. Molotov about the Union of Peasants] [1927], in: RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 170, l. 120–130.

be an exception; for the most part the PUs were short-term endeavors that tended to be liquidated by the OGPU almost upon their creation. Because of that, the PUs often functioned semi-legally under the umbrella of existing legal institutions – circles of mutual aid, or circles of agriculture (in the Moscow district, North Caucasus) or agricultural societies (in the Volga district), which often possessed a large number of participants and a membership fee.⁸⁷ The OGPU called such organizations »surrogates of the PU«. Some of them established loan and grant foundations that offered interest-free loans to the poor in times of emergency.⁸⁸

In the same way the attempts to build the central organ of the Peasants Union that would coordinate the local organizations were quickly destroyed by the OGPU. Whenever such entities arose, the OGPU reported to the central authorities in Moscow about the existence of such clandestine central organizations which tried to coordinate the network of local PUs. Among these higher level organizations were the South-Eastern Committee in Kuban' and Stavropol' districts in 1925, the Ukrainian Peasant Union, eliminated by OGPU in 1926, the Ukrainian Peasant (Muzhitskaya) Party in Khar'kov (1925–1927), eliminated by OGPU in 1927, the Golovko and Shchadilov group in the Ukrainian Beet Co-Operative Society in 1927, and the Union of Peasant Self-Defense in the Moscow district (1927–1928). In May 1927 the OGPU destroyed an organizational group for the All-Russian Peasant Union established in Moscow by L. I. Batai and N. A. Malinovski, who were urban intellectuals and former members of the Socialist Revolutionary party. They worked to create a program and rules, issued questionnaires, and relied on local village co-operatives as their base.⁸⁹

These central bodies were more vulnerable than their local counterparts, as the OGPU immediately suspected that their intention was to create a counterrevolutionary party, and arrested the organizers. Therefore, all these attempts to build the center and to coordinate the local organizations were quickly destroyed by the OGPU. The information about coordinating centers comes exclusively from two documents from the OGPU, which certainly could have ascribed conspiratorial intentions to them.⁹⁰ However, if we trust this information, these attempts to build up the PUs' hierarchy in combination with other more radical peasant

⁸⁷ RGASPI f. 17, op. 84, d. 916, l. 2–7; Danilov: *Tragediia Sovetskoi derevni* (footnote 34), vol. 1, p. 575; Berelovich/Danilov: *Sovetskaia derevnia* (footnote 3), p. 635.

⁸⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 788.

⁸⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 634, and 789–791.

⁹⁰ At the time when facts about the local PU can be rechecked through sources of various origin – party or police *svodki* and letters, data about attempts of organizing central organs of PU are known exclusively from two summarizing materials of the OGPU, which were prepared for the leadership of the country. These two documents require caution in interpretation, since the practice of creating invented cases or processes for the punishment of potential enemies is known.

groups (according to the OGPU – Peasant Russia and the journal *Stremlenie*⁹¹) demonstrate the strength of the peasant movement. According to the OGPU report, surveillance, recruiting (*verbovka*) and demoralization (*razlozhenie*) as well as arrests were the methods of OGPU to control peasants' independent organizations.⁹² Probably, together with more general factors, which can explain the failure of the movement – for example, variety of local and social interests, difficulties of communication, organizational weakness, lack of leadership, spontaneous rather than rational behavior of the peasants and so on – OGPU repression was one of the main reasons why this movement failed to be successful.

Important evidence we possess about the party authorities' reactions. The problem of the PU was discussed twice at the very top levels of the government in 1921. In May-June 1921 the deputy commissar for agriculture, V. V. Ossinski (V. Obolenski), applied to the Central Committee with a letter claiming a need for organizing a Peasant Union within the Soviet system. Although, according to Viktor Danilov, Lenin had positive attitude, it was rejected by the majority of the Central Committee. During the discussion, Mikhail Kalinin, who paradoxically was perceived by many peasants as their defender, said that such an organization would unite the kulaks and their supporters, and that it »contradicts the interests of Communism«. Another member, E. Yaroslavski, was afraid that a PU as a class organization might compete with the Communist party.⁹³ In December 1921, the Plenum of the TsK discussed it and rejected it again. The logic of the leaders is revealed in a statement Stalin made in 1928 at the Plenum of TsK: »The peasants, encouraged by the kulaks [...] might request from us freedom to organize »the Peasant Union«. But then we would have to declare freedom to political parties and lay a foundation for a bourgeois democracy.«⁹⁴ Such an outcome was incompatible with the monopoly of the Communist party.

In order to prevent its promotion and diminish the scope of the movement, authorities tried to suppress any information about the PU movement in public transcript. A 1926 secret letter from the North-Caucasus Party Committee to local party organizers, entitled »On the Peasant Union (synopsis of arguments)«, consciously underestimated the significance of the movement and explained: »Since this slogan is being advocated only in some regions and does not have extensive cross-country support, it would be a political mistake for us to begin a public and media campaign against it, because this would inevitably make such

⁹¹ Berelovich/Danilov: *Sovetskaia derevnia* (footnote 3), pp. 791–802.

⁹² Ibidem, pp. 635–636.

⁹³ Kukushkin, U. S.: *Sel'skie sovety i klassovaia bor'ba v derevne, 1921–1932* [The village society and the class conflict at the countryside, 1921–1932], Moscow 1968, p. 53; Berelovich/Danilov: *Sovetskaia derevnia* (footnote 3), p. 18. I very much appreciate these important references and other comments, that the late V. P. Danilov gave me in our talk in summer 2003.

⁹⁴ Berelovich/Danilov: *Sovetskaia derevnia* (footnote 3), p. 19.

demands popular in regions, where they are not being raised and are not supported by the local peasants.«⁹⁵ In spite of a policy of cover-ups and secrecy, the scope of the spontaneous union movement grew.

Local party committees tackled the problem on their own. At the end of 1926, Party Committees in the Saratov, Stavropol, and Voronezh regions dedicated special plenums to debate ways to combat demands for PUs. Special secret letters of the North-Caucasus and Zaporozhski *Krai* Committees explained the Party's negative position on Peasant Unions and provided party functionaries with rhetorical arguments against PUs. The Party's main argument was that institutions had already been established for the peasantry in the form of soviets and co-ops, through which peasants were expected to promote their interests. Local officials were told to revive the soviets, co-ops, credit associations, and other rural institutions, and to supply additional goods to local stores, as well as to escalate the OGPU repressions against the »instigators.«⁹⁶ Occasionally, to combat the peasants' envy and hatred towards the workers, local party committees organized excursions to plants and factories in order to allow the peasants to see the conditions of workers' labor. After one such trip to Shakhty's mines, peasants from the Salski region had a chance to see that »the life of a miner is as hard as the life of a convict (slave laborer) [*katorzhnik*].«⁹⁷ In general, however, repression and cover-ups were the strategies chosen by the Party to undermine the peasants' growing desire to create and control their own political union.

To sum up, the notion of a Peasant Union endured throughout the Russian revolutions of 1905 and 1917 and the Civil war, and persisted during the 1924–1929 period. The movement finally dissipated only after it was suppressed by terror during de-kulakization and collectivization. Nevertheless, in 1936, during the public discussion on the Constitution, some peasants returned to the idea of a union once more, arguing that it was necessary »to give to all kolkhozes and individual peasants the right to organize a local Peasant Union within every rural soviet«⁹⁸. As with the discussions of the Peasant Union in the mid-1920s, the 1936 debate centered around the issue of inequality between workers and peasants. »Why have we ended up here, in the USSR, with two classes – one liberated, and one oppressed? The state buys from us cheaply, and sells to us at great cost [...]. Workers, employees [*sluzhashchie*], farmers – we are all toilers; a kolkhoznik is also

⁹⁵ RGASPI f. 17, d. 85, op. 71, l. 5.

⁹⁶ RGASPI f. 17, op. 85, d. 16, l. 257–258.

⁹⁷ RGASPI f. 17, op. 85, d. 71, l. 14.

⁹⁸ Letter from I. A. Tushin from the kolkhoz Voskhod of the Breitovsk district, Yaroslav province in: Sakharov, A.N.: *Obshchestvo i Vlast': Rossiiskaia provintsia, 1917–1980-e gody v trekh tomakh* [Society and Government: The Russian province, 1917–1980 in three volumes], Moscow 2002, p. 149.

a human being; he also needs to eat well.»⁹⁹ In their demands for equality, peasants referred to Chapter 10 of the new Constitution «The citizens' rights and responsibilities», which alone received 53 % of all public comments in the all-union discussion. This persistence proves that the idea of a Peasant Union was an expression of the growing self-awareness among Russian peasants that they were a separate class with specific needs. The process of modernization, Bolshevik socialist rhetoric, and the illusions of NEP all triggered an identity search within the peasantry.

The entire period of the 1920s was dominated by the movement for a PU among all strata of the village and throughout all geographic regions. The roots of this desire lay in the Soviet policy of economic exploitation, and the political deprivation of the peasantry. As a means of opposing this policy, those peasants who were not satisfied with Soviet power advocated for a Peasant Union. The lack of evidence of practical functioning of PUs does not devalue the significance of the story. For example, the collective representations and expectations remain rightful historical evidence in the cultural realm. The movement for PU – arguments, behavior, different forms (petitions, meetings and creation of local organizations) – exposed the peasants' specific cultural patterns and the process of peasants' self-identification.

The story of the Peasant Union movement in the 1920s provides new evidence to the historiography approach of the last decade debunking the widely accepted depiction of the peasantry as having comparatively low class consciousness or as politically weak and passive. The same way as in 1905, when peasantry demonstrated active and flexible political interactions with the outside world, its ability to organize itself as a political class, and its responsiveness rather than isolation,¹⁰⁰ in the 1920s once again it demonstrated ability for class formation by responding actively to the challenges of modernization in political terms. They realized the necessity to create their own nation-wide organization. The Peasant Union movement also shows that the peasantry was not only an object of manipulation, but could independently express its interests through political actions. We can see this in the peasants' attempts to deliberately use the local soviets in order to promote their goals,¹⁰¹ in their resistance to collectivization,¹⁰² and in the fact of oppositional Peasant Union movement. The movement, perceived as a threat by authorities, might have contributed strongly in their decision to start the collectivization in 1929.

⁹⁹ Ibidem, p. 134. The letter is signed «Collective farmer-widow, half-hungry, I am crying while writing this» (1936).

¹⁰⁰ Seregny: Peasants and Politics (footnote 14), pp. 342 f.

¹⁰¹ McGury: Protecting Local Interests (footnote 56).

¹⁰² Viola: Peasant Rebels under Stalin (footnote 44).