



REVOLUTION AND RECALCITRANCE

WHEN THE ANTONOV brothers were finally killed in a shootout with Cheka agents in late June 1922 in the village of Nizhnii Shibriai, they had with them few personal possessions. After nearly one full year in hiding in the forests and swamps of southern Tambov Province, the former leaders of one of the largest rural insurgencies in modern Russian history were isolated in a forest hideaway, dependent upon a handful of sympathetic villagers and former comrades for food and, as proved critical to their discovery, medicines to treat the malaria that the elder brother, Aleksandr, had recently contracted. Although Aleksandr and Dmitrii had managed to evade capture in the very region that had for so long been considered their stronghold, and which had been the focus of all efforts by Soviet state authorities to locate them, they were only barely surviving, and if their presence near Nizhnii Shibriai was widely known among locals, it was hardly a source of inspiration and celebration for nearby village communities. It was rather one of curiosity and, perhaps, toleration.

The Cheka and other provincial party and state officials announced the deaths of the Antonovs in the local and central Soviet press, providing what details they could about the famous bandits who had, for nearly a year, from the autumn of

1920 to the summer of 1921, led an insurgency against the Soviet government in the profoundly agricultural province of Tambov, located some 350 miles southeast of Moscow, and home to a population of just over 3 million persons, over 90 percent of whom lived in the countryside and made their livelihoods through agriculture and small crafts. The rebellion in Tambov ended only after the concessionary measures of the New Economic Policy in the spring of 1921 and the deployment of tens of thousands of Red Army troops to the southern half of the province over the first months of that year. The Partisan Army, which at its height could boast a mounted force of 20,000–30,000 men, had been under the command of Aleksandr Antonov, and the network of village cells—called Unions of the Toiling Peasantry (known by the acronym STK, from *Soiuz trudovogo krest'ianstva*)—formed a civilian support structure for the insurgents that incorporated tens of thousands of people and hundreds of villages in a region where the Communist Party cells and institutions of the Soviet state had been rapidly and violently removed during the first weeks of the conflict. Yet, by the end of 1921, any vestiges of the rebellion and the ideas and ideals it sought to promote had been removed from the Tambov countryside, and the defiance of the Antonovs, when they were discovered by Cheka agents in the summer of 1922, was now supported by only four handguns and a briefcase full of ammunition.

Press reports in 1922 found it important to mention that two of their guns were monogrammed on the handle—“A. A.” and “D. A.,” respectively—and that the Antonovs were also reported to have in their possession a map of Tambov Province and a copy of a recent newspaper containing reports of starvation in the wider region. (At first glance, this latter detail is a somewhat odd inclusion in official press notices regarding their deaths.) If officials in the provincial administration and Communist Party were worried that their earlier failure to catch or kill the Antonovs left open the possibility of a return of the insurgency in southern Tambov, and with it the bloodshed that had taken the lives of hundreds of Red Army and Communist Party soldiers and of thousands—possibly even tens of thousands—of civilians in Tambov, then the marginal existence of the Antonovs upon their discovery in Nizhnii Shibriai must have been reassuring. Also among their possessions were notebooks that contained scattered writings, including what appeared to be the beginnings of a history of the Tambov rebellion written by Dmitrii Antonov. The central press in Moscow reported that Dmitrii had even penned an opening dedication to his brother, Aleksandr, recalling “every alcove (*ugol*), every bush, valley and forest that for us became familiar.” This was, according to Dmitrii, the “best of times,” when “during our ten-month-long war we defeated many Red Army forces and killed not a few Communist Party units.”¹

If there was confirmation that the Antonovs had no designs to renew their struggle with the Soviet state, then these few words from the pen of Dmitrii Antonov were that. However, they had long since been marginalized and defeated, and the village communities of southern Tambov, which had at one time mobilized for armed resistance to the Soviet state and which had paid a heavy price for their defiance in the summer of 1921, had actively distanced themselves from the experience and memory of the insurgency. The Antonov rebellion, part of the “petit-bourgeois counterrevolution” that Lenin had rather dramatically identified in March 1921 as “more dangerous than Denikin, Iudenich, and Kolchak combined,”² had been rapidly consigned to history as those same rural communities struggled to regain a normal life amid terrible material conditions and hardships at the close of the civil war era. The rebellion, and particularly its “heroic” pacification by the Red Army and Communist Party, would be far from simply “airbrushed” entirely out of official histories in the Soviet Union.³ But if Dmitrii Antonov had completed his own account of the *antonovshchina*, as the rebellion became known, it would no doubt have dwelled on considerably different themes, no less heroic, drawn from the brief but spectacular time when the Partisan Army and STK dominated the countryside of southern Tambov Province and endeavored to instill and promote a collective identity for insurgents that rested upon the shared experience of injustice imposed by the Soviet state and on the prospects for positive change.

At the height of the Antonov rebellion, the support of the vast majority of village communities in the zone of the conflict was recognized by Soviet government and Red Army officials, and popular sympathy for the cause of the rebellion extended well beyond the immediate control of the Partisan Army. Yet no one in Tambov lamented the death of the “hero” Aleksandr Antonov in 1922, and the partisan leader did not survive in popular folk culture or local mythology. It was not until the very end of the century, after the Soviet Union had formally ceased to exist, that certain groups in Tambov began to champion the rehabilitation of the Antonovs as local heroes, and then it was principally ultranationalist and racist fringe groups that sought to rebrand the former “bandits” as true Russian patriots and no-nonsense “Tambov wolves.”⁴ While a memorial now stands near the site where the Antonovs were unceremoniously buried in the regional capital in 1922, the unveiling of the memorial (and the Orthodox church service that accompanied it) attracted relatively little attention, even from the local public. If the rebellion is remembered at all, it is as a tragedy in which countless innocent lives were lost, an episode in a wider tragedy of revolution and civil war in Russia.⁵

LOCAL GOVERNMENT, VILLAGE COMMUNITIES, AND DESERTION IN TAMBOV, 1918–1920

What came to define the political situation in Tambov Province during the civil war years was the weakness of local government. The province had always suffered from “underadministration” like all such territories in Russia in the late imperial period, and this characteristic was only exacerbated by the events of 1917 and the agrarian revolution against private estates in the countryside that continued into the early months of 1918. The inability of the Provisional Government to contain the land seizures was indicative of its own problems in this regard, and when the Bolshevik Party eventually assumed power in the province in 1918, problems with local administration hampered their own efforts to gain control over the villages and districts at a time when the Soviet government was beginning its mobilization for civil war.

For agrarian provinces such as Tambov, the contribution of the local population to the civil war effort against the various anti-Bolshevik forces in Soviet territory came down to supplying grain and army recruits from the countryside. This chapter seeks to describe these interrelated pursuits and the development of state relations with the village population by focusing on desertion and resistance to conscription. Desertion was one of the consistent problems for the Soviet government and Red Army throughout the civil war, and the Red Army deserter became not only emblematic of the failings of local administration, but also the principal enemy of the Soviet government as it confronted periodic resistance to its policies. In a very real sense, the Red Army deserter was the tangible face of so-called kulak resistance to Soviet authorities in the countryside.

Yet, as this chapter hopes to illustrate, the desertion problem was a complex and ambiguous one. Although significant as an indication of government failings, desertion arose for many reasons and from a variety of circumstances, and deserters themselves did not constitute a coherent political force in the Russian civil war. Nor, indeed, did they even represent a natural pool of support for opponents of the Soviet regime, as government officials feared and reported in the case of the Antonov rebellion after it began in the autumn of 1920.⁶ Instead, to situate the Red Army deserter in the political landscape of civil war Tambov is to illustrate the potential and contingent, rather than existing and powerful, base of support for rural political opponents of the Soviet state, such as Antonov.

TESTING THE WATERS: THE FIRST CALL-UP OF 1918

The Red Army's desertion problem began in late May 1918, when the Soviet government made its first attempt at general conscription. The revolutionary government's reliance on the urban workers, Bolshevik Party members, and pro-Bolshevik volunteers was appearing insufficient for waging a war against the growing fronts of counterrevolution and foreign intervention facing the young Soviet state.⁷ This first attempt at general mobilization was to be carried out in various towns and localities in Soviet Russia, not only in those areas with significant working-class populations, but also in those considered under threat from known counterrevolutionary fronts.⁸ Soviet authorities in Tambov Province had already endeavored to create small military units for immediate dispatch to nearby areas where clashes had occurred with units of the Czechoslovak Legion, such as in neighboring Saratov Province, and Tambov was considered one of those territories facing immediate dangers and thus required to undertake a general mobilization.⁹ The decree announcing the mobilization in Tambov declared that all adult men between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-five were to present themselves at muster points in their locality, where their suitability for service would be assessed and they would begin the process of assignment within the nascent Red Army.¹⁰ The general outlook on the mobilization from the perspective of Moscow was to regard the exercise as experimental. Not only was this the Red Army's first attempt to conscript the peasants of central Russia, whose reliability was questioned principally on the grounds of class affiliation, but also the plan for general conscription was embarked upon with very little information on the number of young men of conscription age in the catchment area. Expectations may have been limited, but there was little or no concrete idea of what sort of turnout would constitute success.

As the announcement of the mobilization quickly filtered out to the rural localities, the response was not encouraging for government authorities in the province. The plans for conscription were received at a time when the village communities had already learned of the government's declaration of a state "monopoly" on grain, set out in decrees issued on 13 and 27 May 1918, and plans were already afoot for the requisition of those same foodstuffs for the task of alleviating the already desperate conditions affecting the urban population. Some efforts at food collection were already under way, and agents of the Food Commissariat—mostly groups of factory workers dispatched from the major industrial cities—had been greeted with partial confusion and almost uniform resistance, as villagers were still finding their way in a fluid political situation in the province and especially in the countryside.¹¹

It was no surprise to provincial officials that village groups were hesitant to answer the call for military conscripts without strong reassurances for the safety of the village community at large. Two issues were most important in evaluating the initial responses of village communities: trust and security. The Bolshevik-led Soviet government did not take effective control of the provincial administration of Tambov until April 1918, and the Bolshevik Party's struggle to emulate their comrades in Petrograd by assuming control of the provincial administration had been largely conducted in the more substantial towns and the provincial capital, without the involvement of the rural localities.¹² Although "Soviet power" had been declared in individual uyezds some months before the provincial government had made a similar break, such acts were largely a part of local political struggles within small municipalities. The declarations of Soviet authority were uniform on the surface, attaching local developments to a nationwide phenomenon, but they quickly revealed themselves to be expressions of local political assertion at the expense of provincial and central state authority, even where the local Bolshevik Party had assumed a leading role.¹³

While the Bolsheviks would hardly be an unknown commodity to those in the village communities of Tambov when conscription was to begin in June 1918, vocal opponents of the Bolsheviks only heightened the level of natural suspicion that greeted the mobilization order. Local soviet offices, charged with communicating and explaining the mobilization decree to village communities, reported to provincial officials that the reaction of the villagers did not inspire confidence. According to some reports, people had failed to comprehend the justification for conscription. In isolated reports, the need for a standing army was called into question. In other areas, though, the knowledge that civil war threatened inspired a mix of concern and outrage. Individual villagers decried the outbreak of a fratricidal war (*bratoubiistvennaia voina*); in the village of Mordovo, one local man snatched the firearm from the holster of a government representative sent to explain the conscription order and quickly rose before a village assembly, dramatically asking, "Look, comrades! For whom is this revolver loaded? Is it for our brother?"¹⁴ The slogans of antiwar sentiment—calls to resist both international war and civil war—were already quite familiar to those in the isolated villages of rural Russia.

Anxiety and skepticism were expressed in clearer terms in other localities. A familiar call reported by local soviet officials and representatives of the Military Commissariat was for the state to distribute firearms among the village population. The reasoning was simple: if the threats to security and well-being were so great, it is better to train the population at large to defend the homestead and native vil-

lage.¹⁵ In some places, this was made a condition for agreeing to mobilization—losing able-bodied young men to the army could be compensated by the distribution of weapons to the community, possibly with arrangements for universal military training.¹⁶ In the village of Safonov (Usman uezd), nearly 400 locals gathered to pass a resolution stating: “The mobilization of the people designated [by the conscription decree] will take place only when weapons are delivered for distribution among the citizens of all Safonov volost, and after a training center is opened at the offices of the volost soviet, where all people can be taught how to use these weapons . . . but until this is done, no mobilization will be allowed to proceed.”¹⁷

For Safonov volost, the mobilization order only heightened anxieties, for it came at a time when such communities were reconciling the appearance of new central state demands in what was, ostensibly, the postrevolutionary countryside. Distrust of the state administration—its motives and intentions vis-à-vis the rural population—combined with reports of counterrevolution to create a strong sense of insecurity in the summer of 1918.¹⁸ Despite the common reasoning popularized in the Bolshevik press that the peasantry supported the Soviet government after its decision to transfer all private lands to the peasants in November 1917, distrust of state administration was much more concrete to peasants in mid-1918 than the threat of counterrevolution.¹⁹ The dependence of the Soviet administration upon the “enthusiasm” of the working masses for the success of this first mobilization was more an admission of weakness than of optimism.²⁰

The first attempt at general conscription in Tambov was undone by even more practical considerations than this. As happened with mobilizations during the 1904 conflict with Japan and in the weeks before the outbreak of hostilities in Europe in 1914, provincial officials in Soviet Russia were unprepared to carry out the general conscription order.²¹ With Military Commissariats organized in the provinces and a limited number of localities beginning only in April, when, in the case of Tambov, the Bolshevik Party was still only establishing itself at the head of government in the province, the test of military mobilization of the general population was extremely daunting for provincial officials.²² On 17 June, when young men eligible for conscription were to present themselves at the Military Commissariat in the provincial capital and in other towns, very few preparations had been made to process even the small number anticipated to respect the mobilization order. An official sent by the Military Commissariat in Moscow to report on the preparations being made in Tambov, upon arriving only a couple of days before the mobilization was set to begin, was horrified to discover “that no work had been done, except for that completed with a criminal sloppiness.”²³ The chaos that resulted,

as groups arrived from the surrounding countryside and began to form a mob of confused and anxious young men, was enough to temporarily overwhelm local administrators. Most spectacularly, in the provincial capital of Tambov, hundreds of men called up for military service set upon the local magazine, emptying it of rifles and machine guns. Opponents of the Bolshevik Party and the recently deposed provincial officials of the Provisional Government assumed brief control of the municipality, arresting leading members of the provincial soviet administration.

For nearly two days the Soviet regime in Tambov was overthrown. The brief reign of the reconstituted municipal Duma was more of appearance than substance, as its leaders were unable to control the mob. In fact, their reign was brought to a close when, abandoned by the mob of call-ups, whose taste for looting and joy-riding in the streets of the provincial capital was sated, the Duma leaders were unable to withstand the pressure of Red Army troops brought in to deal with the emergency. It was the last gasp of the Provisional Government in the province, but it was the beginning of another struggle for Soviet authorities to gain mastery over the rural population.²⁴

While the events in Tambov city were uniquely serious in that the disorders took place at the political center of the province, similar disorders accompanied the June mobilization campaign in other provincial towns as well. Within Tambov Province, popular insecurity and distrust, combined with a lack of preparation for the mobilization, created disturbances in the uezd towns of Kirsanov and Borisoglebsk, and in the town of Kozlov, simultaneous disorders among the garrisoned soldier population—discontent with material conditions and anxious at the prospect of assignment to combat zones—resulted in a brief uprising similar to that in the capital, with the uezd administrators temporarily deposed and incarcerated by insurgents. These rebellious servicemen and call-ups were possibly emboldened by news of serious disturbances among soldiers in other provincial cities, notably in nearby Saratov, where Red Army soldiers in May 1918 resisted being transferred to the front lines by attacking the provincial soviet.²⁵ The mob of young men called to the muster point in Tambov were reported to be discussing precisely such precedents for rebellion, and their moves to escalate the defiance on 17 June were justified by other, less reliable reports of a wider political context informed by rumors, for example, of the assassinations of both Lenin and Trotsky in Moscow. Despite this effort to place measures of defiance into a wider frame of reference, and despite the best efforts of many of the remaining opponents of the Bolsheviks to exploit the public disorders in Tambov, the discontent among the mobilized villagers in the provincial capital was spectacular in effect

but brief in duration.

ESTABLISHING A Foothold: STATE-VILLAGE RELATIONS, 1918

The shambles of the June mobilization campaign left the government with its own priorities regarding the reestablishment of authority in the provincial capital, while for the young men who had traveled from the villages to the muster points, their attention similarly returned to more domestic matters. The Bolsheviks' drive to reassert control over governmental affairs following the June uprisings was severe and wide-ranging, and many known supporters of the Duma opposition were executed in the weeks that followed. The consolidation of political control over the provincial government and bureaucracy became even more urgent following the spectacular break between the Bolshevik Party and their former coalition partners, the Left Socialist Revolutionaries (LSRs), although in the case of the LSRs, there was less a crackdown by provincial Bolshevik officials than a facilitated disengagement.²⁶ The experience of the uprising, then, may have helped the Bolshevik Party consolidate control over the government by eliminating known opponents, but it left the question of mobilizing the local population for war unresolved. To a small extent, the rebelliousness of the mob in the provincial capital was carried to the villages with the erstwhile military call-ups, but it similarly died down with the passage of time and attacks on village soviets and recently established cells of the Bolshevik Party were isolated occurrences. While distrust of the government still reigned throughout much of the countryside, there was nothing particularly cathartic about the uprising in the provincial capital for villagers whose experience with the new Soviet government was in its first weeks.²⁷

The next round of mobilizations to the Red Army would not be ventured again in Tambov until the late autumn of 1918.²⁸ According to a senior Red Army official, S. S. Kamenev, writing in 1923, the Red Army remained a largely volunteer force until the end of 1918, consisting mainly of urban workers and Bolshevik Party members.²⁹ Membership in the Bolshevik Party expanded considerably as the first year under the Soviet government drew to a close, and in the province of Tambov this expansion proceeded only modestly. At the time of the October seizure of power in Petrograd, the Bolshevik contingent in Tambov numbered just over 1,000 members, and by August 1918, the party had still made little headway.³⁰ One of the few lessons drawn by officials in Moscow from the experience of the June uprising in Tambov was the need for strong Bolshevik leadership in the province.³¹

But even before this event, the Soviet government had recognized the need to

forge an effective network of *local* institutions to manage the rural population. The network of volost and village soviets had taken shape with tremendous rapidity in the first half of 1918, but these were rarely more than ad hoc assemblies, often the former institutions of local administration (such as the zemstvos, the institutions of local self-government in postemancipation Russia) renamed in conformity with the changing national political situation.³² These local soviets, serving as legitimate organizational representatives of the community, did more to frustrate the efforts of state representatives working in the countryside than to assist them, as they often identified principally with the interests of the locality in opposition to those of the central government. The Soviet government saw that it had to rely on the resources of the countryside in order to survive and to mount a credible war effort in its conflict with the Whites and their supporters in the West. This meant not only grain to feed the army and the urban population, but also manpower for the army and for maintaining a basic infrastructure in Soviet territory.

Toward this end, the government launched an initiative to replace the local network of soviets with institutions that would be more responsive to the needs of the Soviet government. These institutions, the committees of the poor (*kombedy*), were ideally to be class-based bodies, composed of members of the rural proletariat and working in the interests of the village poor at the expense of the wealthier members of the village communities. Because the village and volost soviets were believed to have promoted the interests of the wealthier and more powerful members of the village communities, the new committees of the poor were intended to redress that balance and bring the proletarian revolution to those rural communities. The official rhetoric advocated bringing a civil war to the villages that would end with the triumph of the powerless in the hierarchical peasant society.

Unlike the soviets, which had genuinely spread through the province of Tambov as communities united to embrace the revolution against the landed gentry and landholders operating outside the peasant commune, the *kombedy* were brought to the villages by agents of the Soviet state and Communist Party. Party activists by the hundred were brought into provinces such as Tambov to organize *kombedy* in the localities and to transfer village authority away from the village soviets.³³ A significant contribution was made by military servicemen from the garrisons in towns such as Kozlov and Usman, while in Borisoglebsk uezd, soldiers in the town of Borisoglebsk and at railway stations awaiting assignment to the southern front also played a central role in organizing *kombedy* in the surrounding countryside.³⁴ Groups of soldiers were dispatched to bring the *kombedy* to the villages. Some activists were more zealous than others, and some communities resisted the

new institutions.

In many villages, the creation of the *kombedy* was as effortless as the previous creation of the village soviet: a matter of a name change and the formal election of the same individuals who had been serving in the soviet.³⁵ In other communities, the idea of a new institution to replace the soviet was resisted tooth and nail. This was hardly unexpected, given that the *kombedy* were conceived as institutional weapons in the class war. Where local communities were against the replacement of the village soviet by such a committee, state organizers resorted to a variety of means to establish such a committee. Finding people to serve as members of the *kombedy* was difficult in such cases, and organizers enlisted the involvement of the nonfarming peasantry and those who had only recently arrived in a locality, such as refugees from war-torn areas or in-migrants from the starving cities of Soviet territory. Often, service in the *kombedy* was the only source of income for such people who, at best, had only a tenuous membership in the local community. Organizers often had to resort to fixing elections—when elections were actually staged—to get such “outsiders” selected for membership to the *kombedy*. In many cases, the organizers themselves served in some capacity as members of the new *kombedy*, although they were not locally based and could be in a given village or volost only periodically. In the first instance, the principal task was getting *kombedy* organized in as many localities as possible. Some were organized clandestinely—not simply against the wishes of the local community, but under their noses, as well.³⁶

The *kombedy* would be forced to find their feet in the autumn and early winter of 1918, when the provincial government was confronted with the twin tasks of procuring food from the countryside and conscripting local men from the villages for service in the Red Army. The timing for the former task was determined by the harvest, which began in August and extended through October. Tambov had already become a favored destination for the squads of workers and soldiers who scoured the countryside for grain to be purchased at government prices under the terms of the food monopoly established in May 1918. Despite the poor weather at harvest time, officials in Moscow encouraged these procurement squads to go to Tambov, where the harvest was believed to be “gigantic,” according to Lenin, enough “to save the entire revolution.”³⁷ The number of such procurement agents present in Tambov during the autumn was lower than during the more chaotic days of the summer of 1918, a reduction owing to the steady mobilization of Communist Party members and workers for service in the Red Army. But the overall number was still significant—just under 5,000—and Tambov was a principal destination for such procurement squads.³⁸ Armed with state decrees, por-

traits of Lenin the leader, as well as rifles and handguns, procurement agents became one of the more active groups in organizing local committees of the poor, and the greatest expansion in the network of *kombedy* occurred when these squads of procurement workers were at the peak of their activity, registering harvest totals and securing the delivery of “surpluses” to government collection points.³⁹ By the beginning of October 1918, there was a total of 315 *volost*-level committees of the poor, and some 2,576 such committees at the village level.⁴⁰

For the task of mobilizing soldiers, the timing for a second attempt at general conscription was determined by the simple need for a larger army force, one that would require less preparation for combat. The Red Army’s reliance on trade union and Communist Party members may have created an elite force of relative reliability and effectiveness, but it was always going to fall short of the requirements of a Soviet government facing threats on multiple fronts. When the Red Army achieved its most significant victory to date in early September—the recapture of Kazan from the forces of the *Komuch* government—this was achieved with units organized along traditional military lines and with the extensive use of officers who had served in the tsarist army. This victory effectively ended the threat posed by the *Komuch* government in the Volga region, but at no time did it appear to be the end of hostilities with anti-Bolshevik forces. Yet the victory at Kazan did demonstrate the effectiveness of a traditionally organized Red Army. Trotsky, as people’s commissar for the army and navy and now chairman of the Revolutionary Military Council (RVS), set to extending these principles to the Red Army as a whole. *Ad hoc* partisan units were to be integrated into formal regiments, and there would be fewer divisions of the Red Army, organized into army groups. What is more, a complementary system of reserves was required to reinforce these active units, but because of the developing threats facing the Soviet Republic in late 1918, there would be fewer strategic reserves in proportion to active front-line units.⁴¹

An overall expansion of the army was necessitated; for Lenin, the magical figure of 3 million represented the manpower target for the Soviet armed forces, faced with the threats of counterrevolution and the challenges of defending the coming world proletarian revolution.⁴² On 11 September 1918, the Soviet government announced its intention to conscript a single age group—twenty-year-olds (born in 1898)—as well as to mobilize former officers and NCOs of the tsarist army, those born between 1890 and 1897.⁴³ This was quickly followed by the call-up of all men born between 1893 and 1897, precisely the same groups who had been among the last ones mobilized during the world war effort in 1916 and whom the Bolsheviks had initially sought to recall in selected localities in June 1918, with such disas-

trous results for the Tambov provincial government.⁴⁴

As the system of *kombedy* expanded, so did the network of local military commissariats responsible for compiling lists of men eligible for military call-up.⁴⁵ The announced mobilization itself was to be undertaken in November and December, after such lists were drawn up and after the major work in the fields and preparations for the procurement campaign were completed. While the introduction of local military commissariats and *kombedy* was intended to improve the state's capacity to undertake measures such as a conscription drive, the upheaval brought by the changes connected with the introduction of the *kombedy* only served to complicate matters in the short term. Tensions were raised in villages where the *kombedy* had been introduced after a struggle with local supporters of the soviet, and these tensions were further heightened when the new *kombedy* were called upon to oversee the registration of harvest collection and surplus grain for procurement by state agents.

In addition, in certain communities where locals were polarized over the introduction of the *kombedy*, the "civil war" or "class war" within the village became a tangible component in consolidating the authority of the *kombedy*. The instructions issued by *uezd* officials concerning the duties of the new committees of the poor varied in certain nuances and in their emphasis, but in many localities the new byword of the Soviet regime—*terror*—represented a critical function of these new agents of the state in the villages.⁴⁶ The registration of "bourgeois" households—persons and property—and placing these individuals on the lowest level of rations (a status they shared with other members of the "exploiting classes" in the towns), was one facet of the class war the *kombedy* were intended to introduce into the villages. Because the *kombedy* were introduced on a shoestring budget, and often on no budget whatsoever, the mandatory "contributions" by these households and individuals became an important source of income for the new committees almost from the moment of their inception.⁴⁷ Once again, the experiences of individual communities varied considerably, according to how much resistance there had been to organizing a committee. But in those localities where the new committees were embattled and engaged in an increasingly polarized environment, the *terror* in the villages could be very real, rather than the stuff of reports and stories from the towns.

A Communist Party member from the region of Tokarevka and Abakumova in Tambov *uezd*, S. Bulgakov, described the developing situation in a report to VTsIK, based on his impressions following a brief trip home:

In the villages now people are afraid of wearing clean clothes in public because they might be branded "bourgeois" and have their clothes confiscated. Anyone who owns

a half-decent horse is at risk of being called “bourgeois,” and God help you if your house is actually clean and tidy—even if you have a family of ten to fifteen persons living there and you slave day and night just to keep it moderately clean. It too can become a “contribution,” or whatever they call a tax these days.⁴⁸

Bulgakov further described the confrontational atmosphere that surrounded the *kombedy* and the fact that the Communist Party members who served on the *volost* committees of the poor in Tokarevka and Abakumovka were never seen on the street or in meetings without brandishing personal firearms. There was a siege mentality displayed by many members of the Communist Party and of the *kombedy* in the countryside. In the towns, Communist Party members behaved similarly. And the tasks set for these individuals by the Soviet state in late 1918 only accentuated this mind-set.

At the time of the call-up of the former officers, junior officers, and twenty-year-olds, the campaign to collect grain from the village farmers was also in full swing. Villagers were enticed to deliver their foodstuffs to collection points by promises of exchange for various necessary items, such as salt and kerosene, whose distribution the government controlled.⁴⁹ Despite these promises of goods exchange, the declared monopoly over grain surpluses remained controversial. The involvement of government agents and the *kombedy* in registering the harvests and evaluating consumption norms for individual households only made the policy that much more controversial and unpopular, even if the alternative, represented by the grain speculators who were so numerous in the late summer of 1918, was equally menacing and unpopular. Some localities, though, were more primed for confrontation with the government agents than others, and in these areas violence quickly erupted once demands for delivery of surpluses were issued.

The first major outbreak of hostilities occurred in an area already familiar to provincial officials. In Morshansk uezd, a conflict had developed within the soviet administration itself over the state's declaration of the food dictatorship in May 1918, and in June this resulted in a violent schism within the Communist Party and soviet administration. On 10 July 1918, the Morshansk uezd Congress of Soviets was forcibly dispersed by progovernment troops after the faction of delegates who were opposed to the provisions of the food dictatorship decree passed a protest resolution. Many delegates were arrested, but those opponents to the grain monopoly who managed to escape arrest took their struggle to the countryside, convening a dissident congress on 22 July that drew representation from a nine-*volost* region in southwest Morshansk uezd. This “extraordinary” congress was also forcibly dispersed by Cheka agents and progovernment troops, and the main dis-

sidents were finally rounded up. But the opposition to the grain monopoly and planned campaign to requisition surpluses from the village farmers in the region was already primed for action.⁵⁰

It would come as little surprise, then, to the embattled Communist Party and soviet administration in Morshansk uezd that when hostilities began over the requisitioning of grain in October 1918, it was principally in the region where the dissidents had made their final stand. Some clashes between government agents and local farmers had occurred in early August, but by early November clashes necessitated the intervention of government troops. The defiance began in the village of Ostrovka, where villagers began a march toward the uezd town of Morshansk following a prolonged dispute with a grain requisition detachment. Hoping to protest directly to uezd officials, the crowd gathered supporters as it moved from village to village. The marchers were finally met by armed troops some twenty miles outside Morshansk, and after several rounds were shot by both sides, the government forces made several arrests from among the marchers.⁵¹ The spirit of defiance, though, had already spread through much of the region, as locals carried the news of the clashes from village to village, and in many cases the news was accompanied by calls for similar resistance to the government. In the village of Cherkino, locals took the occasion to disband its local committee of the poor and to restore the village soviet in its place. In the nearby village of Pavlovka, locals did much the same, disbanding the *kombedy* and restoring the institution of the soviet, electing Filipp Khromtsov as chairman. Khromtsov had been the chairman of the village committee of the poor, and before that he had been chairman of the village soviet.⁵²

It was in the midst of such disturbances that general conscription was ventured, and clashes over military mobilization led to the overall crisis in public order facing provincial officials. In Morshansk, uezd officials were confronted with peasant marchers to the west and with rebellious military call-ups to the east. On 10 November, over 600 soldiers had to be brought in from Tambov uezd and from neighboring Penza Province to regain control over rebellious military conscripts who had already disarmed one unit of armed government soldiers and who threatened to bring their rebellion to the town of Morshansk and its sizable garrison population.⁵³ At the same time, conscripts in southwestern Tambov uezd were similarly resisting mobilization, requiring the eventual intervention of over 1,000 government troops armed with artillery and machine guns.⁵⁴

In October and November 1918, seven out of twelve uezd in Tambov Province reported serious disturbances and clashes between village communities and government agents.⁵⁵ In many localities that experienced uprisings, the committees of

the poor emerged as the principal targets, for the *kombedy* were the institutional embodiment of so many of the changes that were being brought to the countryside, and in most cases they were the agents of many of the new demands being made of the rural population. In many cases where local communities had been divided over the legitimacy of the *kombedy*, or where the *kombedy* had been fiercely resisted by the local community as a whole, committee members often met extremely violent ends, as the spirit of rebellion spread through the countryside. One *kombedy* member who was spared such a fate in the village of *Levye Lamki*, in *Morshansk uezd*, described events in the village in a letter to his brother:

On 31 October, a delegation from a neighboring village arrived and began sounding the church bell. It was an awfully hazy day, but there was no fire to be seen. People assembled after the sounding of the bell, and there the delegation explained the situation. Then the assembled crowd seized two members of the committee of the poor, dispatching one of these out of the village, and the other they killed. The people at the assembly had arrived armed with staffs and pikes in order to do battle against the Soviet government. Orders from the assembly were to pick their own delegation and set off for another neighboring village and sound the alarm for an uprising there. . . . The spirit of the crowd was fabulous, and especially their grand designs, as they wanted to march all the way to Moscow, and from there, it seemed, their spirit would carry them all the way to New York. It seemed as if everything was complete. There was now a new government in place.⁵⁶

The author of this letter, *Victor Sakharov*, survived the events uninjured, although the other five members were murdered by the crowd. Yet, in *Sakharov's* strangely bemused opinion, "if there had been no uprising [brought from the neighboring village], then our villagers would have just sat around and discussed matters. But, as it happened, there was an uprising, and there were no discussions, and quite simply, the lot of them ate a bit too much meat that day and they needed to go out and throw a few punches."⁵⁷

Provincial officials publicly identified this and other village uprisings as the work of counterrevolutionary "whiteguardists" and agents of the Bolsheviks' socialist opponents, the Left and Right SRs.⁵⁸ But in their investigations into the disorders, and in their instructions to local administrations, they recognized that the failure to contain panic and rumor was the most important explanation for the seriousness and scale of the uprisings in the autumn of 1918.⁵⁹ Investigators in *Tambov uezd* found that a variety of rumors had fueled the disturbances across the countryside. "In general, we can ascertain the following," they wrote,

The majority of peasants, including in part the poor peasants, were deluded and misled by various provocateurs and slanderers, who spread absurd, seditious rumors, such as that Krasnov and his bands were drawing close and had already taken Tambov city, that the Bolsheviks were forcibly removing religious icons from schools and private homes, that the soviets were going to require that each woman hand over ten arshin of canvas, or that from those who did not have canvas, money would be collected, and that they were confiscating 3–6 funt of fleece per person, and money from those who did not keep a flock. The prohibition on teaching religious lessons in schools—it is rumors such as these that disturbed the peasants; . . . the majority of poor peasants did not know what or on whose behalf the uprisings were actually being fought.⁶⁰

Many of the village communities in the province were aware of a general sense of anxiety surrounding the increasing presence of government agents in the countryside, as well as the demands connected with the civil war, such as the requisition of horses and the conscription of young men.⁶¹ There was a strong element of desperation in the rebelliousness of the village groups who attacked the kombedy and who refused to give grain on demand or recruits to the Red Army. Much had changed in the lives of people in the countryside, and fear was combined with confusion over events both near and distant.⁶² One village man who was involved in a local uprising told investigators: “No one has attempted to set right the views of myself and us peasants, for we live in a remote village. In our village, they don’t read newspapers, and no one explains to us the truth about Soviet power.”⁶³ This was a familiar refrain to the relatively new officials in the Soviet government, as it was to government officials in rural regions of Russia before the revolution. But the professed ignorance of individual peasants in the Tambov countryside was not simply strategic, designed to gain pardon. In a political environment fraught with risk, and with people still struggling to gain their bearings following a full year of upheaval, not everyone embraced the call to active resistance. Instead, many chose, as one villager explained, to “await their saviors,” whoever those saviors might be.⁶⁴

COUNTING THE COSTS: DESERTION, 1918–1919

The conscription drive in the final months of 1918 may have been beset with troubles in its execution, but the overall result for the Red Army was far from insignificant. Drafting former officers had resulted in over 20,000 experienced army

personnel joining the Soviet armed forces. Over 81,000 junior officers also were drafted in the course of this November campaign.⁶⁵ Although by most accounts the mobilization of these military “specialists” had been the most troublesome for local military commissariats, trained military men were required for the continued expansion of the Red Army and its transformation into a regular military force drawing on the mass of the eligible population, rather than a limited enterprise dependent entirely upon Communist Party members and the urban population. Mobilizations of party members remained an important part of the contribution of soldiers from Tambov Province, as the local party organizations were first called to contribute one-fifteenth of their expanding membership to the Red Army and then quickly required to mobilize a further one-fifth.⁶⁶ While the overall effect of the mobilization drives in the autumn and winter of 1918 was to change the character of the Red Army irrevocably, from a force of largely urban volunteers to an army dominated by rural conscripts, the main combat duties were reserved for the most reliable volunteers and conscripts from the Communist Party and the cities of Soviet Russia.⁶⁷

During the winter months, the actual fighting of the civil war briefly impinged on the southern territory of Tambov Province, sending the local administration into chaos as advance units of General Petr Krasnov’s Don Army advanced into Borisoglebsk uezd. Left weakened by the diversion of Red Army forces to regain control in the Novokhoper region in Voronezh Province to the west, local Communist Party members quickly capitulated in Borisoglebsk when Cossack troops began their attack on 22 December 1918. It was later reported that the Cossacks were better equipped to deal with the freezing temperatures and high winds in the region, and several also wore seized Red Army uniforms to confuse the town’s defenders. The evacuation by Soviet and Communist Party personnel was hasty and chaotic, and the subsequent occupation by the Don Cossacks, lasting over two weeks, was brutal and lacking in any long-term objective.⁶⁸ Abandoned by the main forces of the Don Army that were bogged down in Voronezh and Tsaritsyn, the Cossack occupiers in Borisoglebsk—isolated and dispirited—eventually succumbed to a small force of rapidly mobilized Red Army units composed of Communist Party and Komsomol members.⁶⁹

While the threats to Tambov Province receded, and as attention shifted to the eastern front as the Red Army gained the upper hand in the south, the local military commissariats continued to grapple with the demands of general conscription and processing recruits brought into the ranks during the mobilization drive in the final months of 1918. The integration of rural conscripts was made more difficult by the army’s inability to accommodate them and by the problems of the provin-

cial administration and transport system in processing and delivering them to their new assignments. Some of the first reports from front-line commanders as the conscription campaign took shape spoke of reinforcements arriving unannounced in rail cars, without guns, boots, or adequate provisions. Local military commissariats, overwhelmed in some cases by the sheer number of recruits, hastily formed these young men into units and dispatched them on trains for the front. In many cases, particularly when soldiers were sent without guns, the recruits simply jumped off the trains and took flight, at the very least unwilling to go into battle without a firearm. The availability of rail cars to transport such newly formed units was rare enough; the majority of conscripts who absconded in 1918 and early 1919 did so while waiting—often for days—for transport to arrive. Every moderate-sized railway station in central Russia was also a temporary home to countless young soldiers who billeted in whatever shelter they could find, from derelict railcars to commandeered space in nearby villages (peasant huts, churches, abandoned houses). In the freezing winter, often lacking adequate provisions, the futility of military service often occurred to these new recruits well before they had seen battle or even boot camp. Given such ample opportunity, thousands of recruits simply disappeared, one by one or in groups.⁷⁰

The haste with which local commissariats dispatched these new conscripts is partly explained by reports from division commanders of the urgent need for reinforcements on the front lines. But another major consideration for commissariats in charge of mobilizations was the desire to move newly formed units out of their jurisdiction. In the case of Tambov, the riots in June 1918 that accompanied the initial attempt at conscription served as an object lesson in the volatility of newly conscripted young men and in the fundamental weakness of Soviet administration in the provinces.⁷¹ The shortage of barracks space for the newly mobilized men, as well as the problems caused by inadequate rations, left many local administrations wary of the potential public order problems that could result. Local commissariats were thus more than happy to transfer troops to the front or to other towns and provinces to cope with their predicament. However, while placing new conscripts on trains may have relieved some of the anxiety felt by local officials, it only contributed to the ongoing problem of desertion. Despite the efforts of the military commissariats to place armed guards on each railway carriage, one inspector believed that the rate of desertion among soldiers actually en route was between one-quarter and one-half of conscripts.⁷²

INSTITUTING THE STRUGGLE WITH DESERTION, 1919

During the occupation of Borisoglebsk, the Soviet government was taking its first steps toward consolidating its commitment to general conscription. By decree of the Soviet Central Executive Committee (VTsIK), the All-Russian Antidesertion Commission was created in late December 1918.⁷³ The Central Antidesertion Commission was to be a part of the Defense Council, created in November 1918, and local bodies were to be established in parallel with the administrative system in the provinces. By the beginning of 1919, provincial antidesertion organizations were already being formed.⁷⁴

The antidesertion commissions were established at a time when the Soviet countryside was once more undergoing an administrative shake-up. The committees of the poor were formally abandoned by the central government in November 1918, at the Sixth Congress of Soviets in Moscow, as part of a new emphasis in government policy that was designed, in essence, to be less antagonistic toward the peasantry. While the antipathy toward the village kulaks remained, the Soviet government, dependent upon the mass of the peasantry both for its soldiers and for grain, sought to broaden its base of support by embracing the poor and middle peasants.⁷⁵ The strict rhetoric of class war that had accompanied the introduction of the committees of the poor was reconsidered, and the committees themselves—which had become the target of so many violent attacks in the final months of the 1918—were to be phased out and replaced by newly elected soviets.⁷⁶ Electoral lists were intended to exclude individuals registered as belonging to the village bourgeoisie, or kulaks, and the local organizations did all they could to guarantee that the new soviet elections would return a favorable leadership composed of Communist Party members or individuals loyal to the Soviet government.

The elections took place mainly in January and February 1919, although some localities did not resolve their elections until the end of the summer. On the whole, the process of reelecting the soviets occurred without major incident.⁷⁷ The ability of the uezd administrations and Communist Party to influence the outcomes of village and volost elections was limited, especially in the case of the Communist Party itself, which had expanded considerably in the previous months but was steadily depleted by mobilizations to the Red Army, and with a great many withdrawing from the party before they too were mobilized for military service.⁷⁸ Not surprisingly, and particularly in the case of village-level soviets, the elections returned a vast majority of local officials with no party affiliation, meaning that they did not belong to the Communist Party.⁷⁹ At the next level in the administrative hierarchy, results for the volost soviets were significantly different, with a much higher proportion of Communist Party members serving on the all-im-

portant executive committees.⁸⁰

These local institutions were vital to the government's efforts to combat desertion, for they were now the institution of governmental authority closest to the village communities. The chairman of a village soviet was made the military commissar for that locality and was given responsibility for maintaining accurate lists of male villagers eligible for service. These chairmen were also the first level of authority in regulating exemption from military service, and these responsibilities placed them at the heart of the struggle with desertion. Young men who refused to serve in the Red Army, whatever their motivation, often had to secure the consent (implicit or explicit) of the local soviet chairman if they were to carry on a relatively normal life in their native village. Through the soviet chairman, official exemption or temporary release from duty was secured from the military commissariat in the uezd.

The desertion problem in the first months of 1919 was still very much defined by the failure of soldiers to appear for mobilization. While significant numbers of conscripts did manage to desert after appearing for mobilization at military commissariat offices and at muster points, the vast majority of those considered deserters according to the definitions established by the Antidesertion Commission, were those who had failed to heed the call to duty issued by the mobilization officials of the Red Army in the previous year and in the first weeks of 1919. One inspector believed that in some areas of the Moscow military sector, as many as 95 percent of eligible men refused to appear for muster. Overall, the success rate was rarely better than 40 percent among eligible men in the winter of 1918–1919.⁸¹

This continued into the first half of 1919. The government attempted to correct this pattern by altering their conscription tactic with the volost-based mobilization campaign in April–May 1919, but it failed to change matters for the better. In their appeal to volost soviets to produce ten to twenty of their finest men for military service, the Soviet government was breaking with the familiar tradition of conscripting entire age groups. This break with custom resulted in some confusion as to whether the call for ten to twenty soldiers from each volost was a recruitment drive or a mobilization campaign. Was the government calling for volunteers, or was each volost required to produce on average fifteen new soldiers for the Red Army? Obviously, the government hoped that a spirit of voluntarism could be cultivated among the working peasantry. In mid-May 1919, the Central Committee even announced that any men enlisted during the volost mobilization drive would be officially considered “volunteers” and would receive correspondingly more advantageous benefits packages. But at no time did the government call the volost campaign a voluntary recruitment drive; it was a mo-

bilization, and in some localities, strict instructions were delivered to volost soviet administrations detailing the required number of soldiers to be produced by each locality. Overall, however, considerable confusion blighted the April–May campaign, and the results were extremely unsatisfactory for the Defense Council and the Red Army. Only some 24,000 soldiers were enlisted as a result of the volost mobilization campaign—less than one-fifth the total anticipated by officials.⁸² Provincial military commissariats cited the continuing “petit-bourgeois” mentality of the great mass of the peasantry in Soviet Russia. The fact that the mobilization drive coincided with the spring sowing season and the intense field work this entailed, only served to bring that mentality to the fore, as young men obeyed the “higher calling” of responsibility to their fields and family.⁸³

By the time the volost mobilization campaign came to close, the scale of the desertion problem was truly becoming apparent. People who had failed to appear for mobilization—draft dodgers—accounted for over three-quarters of all deserters. In some provinces, as much as 90 percent of young men registered as eligible for conscription had failed to appear for mobilization.⁸⁴ The ineffectiveness of the policy of general conscription was becoming clear just as the crisis on the eastern front was reaching its height. The Defense Council dispatched plenipotentiaries to the various provinces to inspect and report on the conduct of local administration that related to the desertion problem and other difficulties associated with the “rear guard” behind the front lines.⁸⁵ The individual sent to Tambov, V. N. Podbel’skii, was a native of the province who had long been a member of the Bolshevik Party and had held senior positions in the Soviet government from the time of the revolution in 1917. Podbel’skii’s first telegrams back to Moscow reporting on the situation in Tambov concentrate on the desertion problem and on the weakness of local soviet administration that permitted the problem to worsen. Soviet executive committees, according to Podbel’skii, were often complicit in concealing known deserters, and the soviet chairmen regularly failed to respect the instruction concerning, in particular, the volost mobilization campaign. He attributed this to the shortage of Communist Party members in the countryside represented in the rural soviets.⁸⁶ The soviets were instruments of the community rather than of the Soviet government.⁸⁷

The effective enforcement of conscription orders, and rounding up known or suspected deserters, required agents of the state who could bypass local administration. At the time of the volost mobilization campaign, such agents were only in a state of formation. Among the host of measures taken at the end of 1918 and in early 1919 to combat desertion was the formation of patrols of Communist Party

members and Red Army soldiers that would scour the villages for recalcitrant men who had either failed to appear for mobilization or had actively deserted their units. The antidesertion patrols in Tambov in the late spring of 1919 were, as one local Communist Party official reported, “merely a drop in the ocean,” but their appearance in the countryside had a swift effect on the local political environment.⁸⁸

In his memoirs of life in Podgornoe village (Borisoglebsk uezd), Anton Okninskii described the first encounter of the local community and administration with an antidesertion patrol. At dawn one morning, the locals were drawn out of their homes by the sound of singing approaching the village. Upon seeing a group of Red Army soldiers singing revolutionary anthems, people initially believed that they were drunk. Others, however, were quickly aware that it was a patrol searching for deserters. News of their presence in the region had already reached Podgornoe, and those who had sons and husbands intent on evading military service reacted as if well prepared for this occurrence. Okninskii began questioning one peasant man who was helping his two sons cover their faces with black axle grease. Their plan, Okninskii was told, was to go through the fields to the neighboring volost. “By the time the soldiers make their way to [our] volost soviet and enjoy the gossip there, my boys will be nearly ten kilometers outside Podgornoe, over in the area where those soldiers have already searched.”⁸⁹

When he soon encountered the commander of the patrol—the sole member of the patrol on horseback—Okninskii introduced himself as the volost soviet accountant. “Very pleased to meet you,” said the commander. “Your job must deal with statistics and so on. My duties are different altogether—my job is to shoot people! And it is for this purpose we have arrived here in your volost. No one from your volost presented himself for the last military call-up.”⁹⁰ While one may be disinclined to take Okninskii’s portrait of the commander at face value, the antidesertion patrols were authorized to conduct public trials of captured deserters within the villages. In addition to their role as agents of the developing propaganda campaign to discourage desertion, the patrols also acted as tribunals with the authority to execute the captured in exceptional cases.⁹¹

In Okninskii’s account, the determined commander of the antidesertion squad resisted attempts by the local soviet officials in Podgornoe to “soften him up”—he refused offers of food and, especially, drink. Instead, he stuck to his task, demanding to see the soviet’s lists of local men who were eligible for military service. While the squad commander was examining the list of “counterrevolutionaries,” as he insisted on calling them, the chairman of the volost soviet was trying to dis-

suade him from targeting certain individuals whose names were on the list:

“This one’s a good *muzhik*, reliable, always stood by the soviet.”

“Comrade,” inquired the squad commander, “are you a party member?”

“No, I’m nonparty.”

“Then your opinion regarding these men holds no significance for me whatsoever.”

The work of the antidesertion squad proceeded, following methods and strategies that had been honed in a short space of time through constant interaction with village communities intent on protecting their own. The first targets were men known to have served in the tsarist army who were still eligible for service in the Red Army. Their refusal to serve the Soviet cause was taken as a clear indication of counterrevolutionary sympathies, owing to their past association with the old regime, and the antidesertion squad commander in Podgornoe intended to execute these men publicly as a warning of the serious intentions of the antidesertion squad. There remained the far more numerous group of young men who simply did not want to serve through personal disinclination or the pressure from family members.

The squad commander forbade all villagers to leave the village while the squad conducted its searches. Included in the ban were all children, to prevent them from running out to the fields to warn their brothers and fathers of the presence of an antidesertion squad. The squad machine gun would be trained on the nearest open field, where it was suspected young men were hiding in the tall grass. Each evening of their stay in Podgornoe, the squad commander would order the soldiers to open fire on the fields. “In the last instance,” explained the commander over the protestations of the soviet chairman, “everyone will at least know that we are not here playing some sort of joke, but that we intend to deal with these deserters and with those who hide them.”⁹²

The crackdown on deserters in the countryside of central Russia truly began when the attentions of the Red Army shifted from the eastern front and the armies under Admiral Kolchak to the offensive launched from the south of Russia by the White and Don armies. The resurgence of the Whites in the south of Russia had gained considerable momentum by mid-May 1919, at a time when Red Army forces were concentrated in the Urals and western Siberia.⁹³ With the Whites pushing toward the heart of the Soviet Republic along an expansive front line, the formation of military reserves continued in a chaotic manner, as local military officials in the provinces patched together units from recently mobilized men and their brethren apprehended by antidesertion patrols. These recently formed units were

not, in the words of one Red Army inspector reporting to Trotsky, “composed of trained, politically conscious people banded together around common ideas, but are instead dubious squadrons composed of every imaginable social element.”⁹⁴ As the drive to form reserve units intensified, military commissariats eased the restrictions on eligibility for military service, filling garrisons with individuals who did not belong to conscripted age groups, those who had previously served in the tsarist army, and those who had earlier been apprehended as deserters. The latter were, according to one commander, an “invaluable resource” for military commissariats in the provinces confronted with orders to form reserve units in short order.⁹⁵

As the threat from the approaching front intensified, the major towns of the rear were declared “fortified” regions by the Revolutionary Military Council (RVSR), creating a line of defense just south of the southern front command headquarters in Kozlov.⁹⁶ In Tambov, the Red Army was to attend to the formation of a single brigade-strength force, transferring units from other garrisons to secure defenses in the provincial capital. Workers were to be mobilized to prepare defensive positions within the newly formed region, digging trenches alongside the growing contingent of Red Army soldiers.⁹⁷ Soon after, the southern uyezds of Tambov were placed under martial law, and provincial authorities were issuing appeals for calm alongside calls to vigilance.⁹⁸ The public stance of the provincial authorities was to express faith that the people, particularly in the countryside, would rally to the defense of the Soviet regime and especially that erstwhile deserters would return to the fold. An amnesty was announced in June for deserters precisely to encourage such a response to the impending threat by the Whites, and in the province of Tambov the amnesty was extended well into July.⁹⁹ By the beginning of that month, uezd-level administration was handed over to extraordinary three-person revolutionary committees (*revkomy*), and one of the first acts of these revkoms was to intensify the struggle against desertion. Sanctioning the seizure of hostages among the village population, threatening to confiscate all household property of known or suspected deserters, and levying massive fines on entire villages for concealing deserters, the uezd officials authorized the increasingly numerous antidesertion patrols and Red Army units in the territory to resolve the desertion problem by any means necessary.¹⁰⁰

Officials in the province began noting a “massive” return of deserters as soon as June, when the first amnesty was announced, and while they preferred to cast this change in fortunes as a sign of authentic support for the Soviet government in its hour of need, the truth of the matter is much less clear. In the month of June alone, antidesertion patrols succeeded in apprehending 44,000 deserters. In the same month, over 156,000 men voluntarily surrendered to military officials. The

situation continued to improve in July, with an increasing proportion of deserters surrendering to military commissariats as distinct from those apprehended by antidesertion patrols.¹⁰¹ The massive influx of deserters soon overwhelmed local commissariats, who were once more facing an overstretched transport system and overcrowded garrisons. Telegrams to the Revolutionary Military Council and to Supreme Headquarters complained of overcrowding and of the fear of public order problems caused by food shortages and poor security for the growing numbers of deserters returning to the army. Food riots threatened garrison towns, where, as in the case of Kaluga, recently processed deserters numbering in the thousands were kept corralled under armed guards on the street, due to the lack of space in the barracks.¹⁰²

Except in extraordinary cases, deserters who surrendered or were apprehended in the summer of 1919 were assigned to reserve units, rather than to front-line duty.¹⁰³ What is more, according to instructions dated 7 July from Red Army Supreme Headquarters, individuals were not to be assigned to reserve units in their native regions nor were they to receive assignments in the area where they had been captured, especially if those regions were near the front lines.¹⁰⁴ When the dividends of the recent crackdown on desertion began to appear, local military commissariats were able to process the returnees and dispatch them to areas where either reinforcements were required or where men were needed to fill reserve garrisons. Officials in Tambov predominantly directed new inductees to the right flank of the southern front (Fourteenth Army group), as well as to areas on the western and southeastern fronts. These units of deserters were often dispatched in groups of several hundred. Redesertion remained a problem for these hastily dispatched reinforcements, especially considering that many were sent with (at best) a bare minimum of supplies, and often without guns.¹⁰⁵

As in the beginning of the year, many former deserters simply deserted once more after being loaded onto transports.¹⁰⁶ In addition, disorganization contributed to this problem, as the troops were often transferred with a minimum of coordination between military commissariats. Areas near the western front, such as Smolensk, and to the immediate north of Tambov, such as Riazan', found themselves the unexpected recipients of new deserters. Already facing difficulties with their own swelling garrison populations, the military commissariats in these areas pleaded with Red Army Supreme Headquarters to reconsider its policy of transferring these groups of deserters out of their native territories at all costs. Likewise, they urged the army not to press on with plans for further conscription of younger age groups.¹⁰⁷ Local commanders in charge of the garrisons were allowing many

of these recent arrivals effectively to redesert, as they were unable to provide them with adequate food or shelter.¹⁰⁸ Military officials in Tambov noticed the same behavior, so overwhelming was the supply crisis during the summer of 1919.¹⁰⁹ Desertion rates began to climb almost immediately after the crisis on the southern front had passed.¹¹⁰

Reports such as these moved Red Army officials to reconsider their initial instructions regarding the transfer of deserters. Originally intended as a pragmatic measure designed to limit desertion—distancing young men from their native regions as a means of diminishing localist tendencies—the effort of moving units composed of former deserters was found to exacerbate the problem. Hoping to reduce the congestion on the railways and to defuse antagonisms between provincial and regional military commissariats, Red Army Supreme Headquarters accepted the advice of the Antidesertion Commission and on 4 September 1919 rescinded the instructions regarding the transfer of deserter units. Processed deserters designated for service in the reserves could be assigned to units in their native territory.¹¹¹

Following this decision, further chaos with the coordination of reinforcements and reserves behind the front lines was especially unwelcome, as the Red Army prepared to launch a major counteroffensive on the southern and southeastern fronts. In Tambov, the provincial administration was just surveying the damage caused by the two-week raid into its territory by a force of White cavalry and infantry, during which this force of Don Cossacks, led by General K. V. Mamontov, briefly occupied the provincial capital and the town of Kozlov, the base of the Red Army Southern Front Command.¹¹² While causing extensive damage to the transport and communications infrastructure, as well as committing countless atrocities in the towns and villages, the White cavalry raid did not significantly delay the Red Army counteroffensive, and the White armies encroached no further into Tambov Province.

Provincial officials, like their superiors in Moscow, desperately wanted to believe that the return of deserters in the summer of 1919 to fill the ranks of the Red Army was an indication of the true political sympathies of the Russian peasantry. In particular, following the direct experience with the harsh conduct of the White forces in Tambov, provincial officials spoke often of having reached a *perelom*, or turning point, in relations between the Soviet government and the peasantry. This sort of rhetoric was certainly informed by local experience, but it was characteristic of official discourse throughout the Soviet republic at this time, which sought to “emplot” the phenomenon of the massive return of young conscripts into the

revolutionary narrative. The government in the last ten months had altered its policies toward the rural population in significant ways by abandoning the *kombedy* and voicing commitments to the “middle” peasantry, and the return of former deserters in 1919 constituted an important dividend derived from this alteration in the party line.

For provincial officials, the brief experience of White rule in Tambov meant that the expected *perelom* had been reached.¹¹³ Officials began to speak of the imminent prospect of resolving the desertion problem once and for all.¹¹⁴ Such talk caused them to turn a blind eye to the many attendant problems that complicated the picture for provincial government, notably, the violence provoked in the countryside both by intensified antidesertion efforts and the virtually simultaneous escalation of panic in local administration, faced with the prospect of evacuation as the threat from the White offensive from the south grew more tangible.¹¹⁵ In response to both these developments, bands of village men, mostly deserters themselves, began to take matters into their own hands, attacking local soviet administrations and railway stations and issuing cries of defiance to both the Soviet government and the advancing White forces. The “greens,” as they became known, imperfectly filled the void being left by the Soviet government in certain parts of the countryside during the summer of 1919, asserting a measure of agency on the part of a village population facing occupation by counterrevolutionary forces, yet the roving bands of “greens” never managed to improvise any effective authority among that same population during the height of their activities.

It would be impossible to deny that the organization of “green bands”—reported in some cases to number in the thousands during June and July in Tambov Province and in many other provinces of Soviet Russia—was a response to the security situation confronting both village men of mobilization age and the village population as a whole. But the rapid disappearance of the “greens” as a mass phenomenon in the autumn of 1919, as the security situation in Soviet Russia once again improved, meant that the influence of the “greens” on the outlook of Soviet officials was correspondingly temporary. In the wake of the military crisis in Tambov, some officials emphasized the continuing need to address popular, particularly economic, grievances if any substantive progress in peasant-state relations was to be achieved and any *perelom* was to be secured.¹¹⁶ However, in the wake of the Whites’ summer offensive, officials in the province were more likely to understand the *perelom* in relations with the village communities as the consequence of the popular practical experience with White “rule” in Tambov in August 1919 and the common Soviet citizen’s recognition of a higher calling in defense of the revolution. What is more, experience with the counterrevolution effectively legitimized the conduct

and policies of the Soviet government's revolution.

TESTING THE *Perelom*: REQUISITIONING GRAIN, 1919–1920

The turning point, or *perelom*, was tested almost immediately after provincial officials had declared its achievement. The disruptions brought by the encroaching front line, and the chaos and destruction visited upon the province by White cavalry forces particularly hit the system of food procurement that had been the focus of government administration in Tambov since before the revolution. This fact was made more damaging by the timing of the cavalry raid, which concluded at harvest time, when food procurement should have been entering its most intense period of activity. While soviet officials from the lower levels of administration—particularly in the *uezds*—appealed for a reform of administration and for more effective decentralization of authority as a means of consolidating the support of the village communities in the wake of Mamontov's raid, provincial authorities demanded precisely the opposite. While publicly declaring the achievement of a *perelom* in peasant-state relations, provincial officials demanded more extensive centralization to counter the influence of the kulaks and of "parochial" officials whose actions only undermined the state's efforts. At the forefront was the state's critically important campaign to procure grain under the policy of the *razverstka*, whereby collection targets were set in a top-down manner, from the central government to the province, and all the way down to the individual household. The food commissar in Tambov, Iakov Gol'din, addressed his critics from the *uezd* administrations at the Fifth Congress of Soviets in Tambov in mid-November 1919:

The food question is the most important one in Tambov Province. Up until 25 October, the rate of grain collection was on average only 8,000 poods per day, but now it has risen to 50,000–60,000 poods. The most important month, November, is passing by, and we have until the first half of February [to complete the campaign]. After this, the intensive period will have come to an end. If we have failed to raise collection rates massively by then to make up for lost time, we will find ourselves saying that our food campaign has been a complete failure.¹¹⁷

The Food Commissariat in Tambov Province assumed an ultra-hard line following Mamontov's raid, conducting requisitions in the manner of a military campaign and systematically ignoring the dissent of local soviet officials—in the *uezds* and districts, as well as the villages—with the assumption that such complaints

were fundamentally parochial and thus illegitimate.¹¹⁸ Working on the assumption that “the food question is exclusively a question of force,”¹¹⁹ Gol’din personally monitored the progress of requisition agents, urging them to disregard complaints from any quarter, as well as to make liberal use of punitive measures such as arrests and the full confiscation of grain stocks. In an exchange with one such agent, Badaev, who had encountered resistance from local Communist Party officials in Kirsanov concerned about damage to the local economy and to relations with the peasantry, Gol’din demanded that no thought of concessions be entertained:

Either you didn’t understand [my earlier instructions] or you’re going soft—my orders are: (1) Not one head of cattle is to be given over to the poor; transfer all confiscated livestock as well as sufficient feed to the state farms [*sovkhozy*]. Horses are also to be given over to the state farms, with some reserved for our use; confiscate carts from those who haven’t fulfilled the *razverstka*; (2) Make a list of all those who participated in the Kirsanov Conference and draw up an order for the Cheka to confiscate all their property and to arrest each and every one of them. . . . I am giving you a top-priority order to break this kulak sabotage immediately, do this by any and all means, and at first only in one *volost* [as an example to other districts]—no mercy, no retreat. The *uezd* party committee and the executive [in Kirsanov] will pay for their indiscipline.¹²⁰

Outside inspectors, as well as other individuals who witnessed the requisitioning campaign in 1919–1920, filed reports and wrote appeals that backed up the complaints of local officials and village representatives, claiming that the militarized effort to procure grain was severely damaging the local economy as well as the morale of the village communities. Any systematic effort to assess grain harvests, evaluate grain stocks, and distribute contribution burdens either on the basis of class or on the basis of simple means, had been discarded in order to raise the collection rates that Gol’din demanded to meet the targets set by Moscow. The result was overrequisitioning. This problem, together with the wholesale confiscations of draft animals and other moveable forms of property that were often carried out as punishment for even the mildest form of protest, made the prospects for the next season already a source of extreme anxiety. One Red Army official, E. Artamanov, who witnessed a portion of the campaign unfold in Kozlov *uezd*, wrote to authorities in Moscow that they should heed the complaints about the economic impact of the latest requisition campaign. They needed to make the effort to “understand the internal life of the peasant villages here, lest the peasantry perish by starvation or at the hands of the requisition squads.”¹²¹

The early warning signs of hunger in the villages were already visible after the end of the campaign to requisition grain. Because the vast majority of grain stocks were concentrated in the southern two-thirds of the province, the Food Commissariat's efforts to procure grain were naturally concentrated in that area. And it was here, as well, that local officials began to report the sight of malnourished children wandering the dirt tracks of the large villages, begging for handouts.¹²² One militia member, reporting to his superior in the Tambov uezd militia organization, noted similar sights during his rounds in late February 1920:

Now it is already evident in Ekstal'ka, Bogoslovsko-Novinkovka, and in Kun'evska districts, the beginnings of a dangerous ferment due to the onset of hunger in the area; there have been large groups of peasants gathering outside local soviets, literally clamoring for grain. In Bogoslovsko-Novinkovka volost, there was even one case in which a single peasant drove his only cow to the nearby *sovkhoz* and pleaded with them to take his cow in exchange for a mere five measures of millet, saying that he and his entire family will certainly starve to death unless he is able to make a deal for the cow. The last *razverstka* severely affected the population, and many do not have the ability to meet another *razverstka* due to a clear shortage of grain.¹²³

The immediate onset of starvation, no matter how widespread, was overshadowed by a greater anxiety regarding the next harvest.¹²⁴ With substantially diminished amounts of seed grain, which had been requisitioned or confiscated during the procurement campaign, village households feared for their survival even without another round of grain requisitioning in the autumn.¹²⁵

CLOSER TO THE HOME FRONT: DESERTERS AND DESERTION IN 1920

If provincial authorities imagined, along with their superiors in the central government and Red Army, that the desertion problem had been overcome when the tide definitively turned against the White armies in the summer of 1919, the new year brought a strong dose of reality. Whereas desertion in the first year of mass conscription to the Red Army essentially involved the mobilization of recalcitrant young men intent on evading conscription, after the summer of 1919 and the intensified efforts to round up draft dodgers and the threat of victory for Denikin and the Whites with their "drive on Moscow," the problem for military officials became one of managing the Red Army's swollen ranks. Maintaining stability within

the ranks on the front lines was only a small portion of this problem, as the main challenges involved control over the large garrisoned population of former deserters and reserve soldiers, which numbered in the tens of thousands in some major provincial towns, and which were a considerable element in any uezd town in provincial settings such as Tambov. Controlling overcrowded garrisons required a strong measure of administrative virtuosity in the best of times, and it was a challenge significantly complicated by the critical economic situation of the final year of the civil war, both in the towns and in the countryside.

Weak local administration continued to hamper efforts by the provincial Military Commissariat to carry out conscription drives, but the final major round of mobilizations in March and April 1920 in Tambov did produce results that surprised commissariat officials. The campaign to call up the single age group born in 1901 was informed by the mistakes made in the previous year, when the mobilization of five separate age groups in the spring of 1919 had coincided with both the Easter holiday and the muddy spring thaw, which presented both moral and practical complications.¹²⁶ Awareness of the importance of proper timing for the 1920 campaign, combined with the more limited objectives represented by the call-up of a single age group, appeared to produce far greater success. By the end of March 1920, officials in Tambov reported that of the 23,010 young men considered eligible for conscription, nearly 14,000 had appeared at muster points, and of them, over 8,000 had been enlisted and assigned to units. By the end of the mobilization campaign in May 1920, the gap between those registered as eligible and those actually appearing for mobilization had narrowed considerably, with 24,230 having appeared at muster points.¹²⁷ Nearly all of those actually enlisted—14,855 men, according to the final count—were given assignments in reserve garrisons, principally in two of the larger towns, Tambov and Lebedian.¹²⁸

The success of the 1901 call-up was attributed to practical innovations in the process of military mobilization rather than to any general improvement in relations between the state and the village peasantry. One reason for the restrained reception was the continued problem of desertion, particularly from the reserve garrisons that were the final destination for the majority of those recently called up for military service in 1920. Early in 1920, the rate of desertion from reserve garrisons had exceeded 60 percent throughout the Orel military sector, to which Tambov Province belonged, and the rate declined only marginally as winter gave way to spring.¹²⁹ The garrisons were filled not only with recent call-ups, but also with those already classified as deserters—those who had either previously deserted from their units or recidivists who had surrendered to military officials or

had been apprehended by antidesertion squads.

Those who carried the stigma of deserter and were stationed in reserve garrisons were principally used by the provincial administration to perform various labor duties. In the winter of 1919–1920, the then chairman of the Tambov Soviet Executive Committee, V. A. Antonov-Ovseenko, reported that an ongoing fuel crisis in the southern half of the province was being partially alleviated by assigning over 22,000 deserters to timber-cutting duties.¹³⁰ Beyond concerted campaigns to address particular problems, such as clearing transport lines after heavy snowfall, those branded deserters were given other noncombat tasks, such as employment in the state-operated bakeries, state farms, telegraph and postal services, at grain collection points, on railways, and in a variety of sentry and guard duties required by the provincial administration.¹³¹ In addition, as already described, deserters accounted for a large number of grain requisition agents and were also assigned to the antidesertion patrols. Such sustained assignments, however, were the exception. Despite the efforts of the Military Commissariat to utilize the labor of the massive soldier population systematically in 1920, the vast majority of apprehended deserters were effectively incarcerated in the garrisons of the main towns of Tambov Province, as they were elsewhere in Soviet Russia.¹³²

The continued desertion problem from garrisons and from compulsory labor duties throughout 1920 was caused by the continuing food crisis throughout Soviet territory. In the garrisons themselves, military authorities struggled to maintain a swollen population of reserve soldiers, deserters, as well as cavalry horses. Problems primarily concerned food supply, but also involved basic hygiene and acceptable quarters for soldiers. As one Military Commissariat report on the situation in Kirsanov put it in 1920: “The garrison does not receive any monetary allowances, its soldiers are ill-clad, ill-shod, and often malnourished; there is no proper barracks facility, barely any cots or bunks, no kitchen facilities whatsoever, and all sit in the cold without any artificial light. As a result of all this, we have epidemics, desertion, a diminishing cavalry stables, and many other disasters besides.”

In the same garrison in Kirsanov, nearly 70 percent of the horses kept in the stables had already starved to death by the late summer of 1920, and as for the garrisoned soldiers themselves, according to the same report, “in the past, [the provision of food] has limped along on both legs, and it continues to limp along to this day.”¹³³ Securing enough food for the garrisons, as well as safeguarding against outbreaks of infectious diseases, left local commanders and military commissars often struggling to manage rising levels of visible discontent among the soldiers. It was not unknown for officials to look the other way as soldiers absconded to their home villages, especially if those villages were within the province, as this would

help alleviate the supply problem in the garrison.¹³⁴

A second facet of the connection between food supply problems and desertion surrounded the villages communities themselves, with diminishing conditions under the pressure of the grain procurement campaigns. Certainly soldiers were not without incentives to leave their garrisons, given the lack of food and general conditions. Moreover, there was tremendous pressure from family to return home. Concerns about leaving the homestead at such a vulnerable time certainly weighed on the minds of soldiers and prospective soldiers alike. Promises that the Communist Party and the Soviet state were protecting the welfare of the serviceman's family formed a vital part of the "political education" of the Red Army soldier, an innovation in large part informed by the growth of the desertion problem in 1919.¹³⁵ The propaganda campaigns aimed at deserters intensified in the second half of 1919, complemented by the development of welfare provisions for the families of Red Army servicemen, intended to reassure prospective and existing soldiers who had left their families and villages behind. Recent historians have placed considerable emphasis on this modern approach to the connection between martial and civil society by the Soviet government, both to explain the phenomenon of desertion during the civil war and especially as a means of understanding the nature of the Soviet state itself following the revolution.¹³⁶

Yet despite promises from the Soviet government and its Military Commissariat that soldiers' families would be protected and provided for by the local communities and soviet administration, such promises were quickly compromised, both by the severe demands placed on rural communities by the state, and by the limited capacity of local soviets to manage such welfare provisions. Much depended upon local circumstances. The wife of a Red Army serviceman (a *soldatka*), without the support of her blood relatives, could find that the village community and local administration was unwilling to extend promised welfare provisions, as a letter intercepted by military censors demonstrates:

Dearest husband, I have received from you three letters, and from these I have learned that you are alive and well, for which I am very thankful. I have written three letters to you, as well as a telegram and a correspondence from our local soviet. Dearest husband, Daniil Vasil'evich, do you receive my letters or not, and why do you not show any concern for my situation here, it is as if you have tossed me off into the muck. I went recently to your family's house, but your brothers refused to receive me, they would not even allow me to approach the home; I also went to your local soviet regarding the plot of land—but there they also refused to hear me and would not give me any land. What am I to do now? My dear husband, Daniil

Vasil'evich, how am I to survive, when I write you letters asking what to do and you pay no attention whatsoever. Unless, that is, you have not received any of my letters. In that case, I write to you all, my dear comrades [apparently an address to the censors], take pity on my inescapable predicament, grant my husband leave, even if only for three days, as my situation here is extremely poor. Believe me, I am not amongst my own here, having arrived here, I do not have my own family, no one who will help me get by, and everything that I had the child and I have now eaten. Most important, I am unable to work in the fields, and I do not receive any help from the family here, it is useless to even ask. My dearest husband, come back, even if for only three days, or I shall surely be done for.¹³⁷

Unable to depend upon the goodwill of the local community or even village administration, the Soviet government established a special commission that oversaw the protection of Red Army households. The Pomoshch' Commission established affiliates in the provinces and uyezds of Soviet Russia over the course of 1919, particularly to coordinate the delivery of direct aid to such households, or to provide assistance to homesteads during the periods of intensive field work. However, the responsibilities of the local affiliates of the Pomoshch' Commission far exceeded their capabilities, and for some localities, assistance was provided on paper only.¹³⁸

In practice, assistance and relief to Red Army households was delivered by the antidesertion patrols that were active in the countryside.¹³⁹ Typically, there was one antidesertion patrol of 50–100 members operating in each uezd, and it was part of their responsibility to ensure that the antidesertion message came through in their punitive actions against the households of deserters by distributing confiscated property directly to the households of Red Army servicemen.¹⁴⁰ The scope for corruption in such an arrangement was extensive, and investigations into the activities of antidesertion squads were a constant source of tension within the provincial administration.¹⁴¹ While far from being uniformly corrupt, the antidesertion patrols, like the food procurement squads, were more often considered exemplary of Soviet power when their actions belied the words and policies of the Soviet government, not when they conformed to those policies.¹⁴² As such, the powerlessness of Red Army families, and the anxieties they shared with other community members about the worsening situation in the villages in 1920, came through to the men in the garrisons, either through letters or by word of mouth.¹⁴³

Concerns about material conditions at home and dissatisfaction with the privations endured by the Red Army were only two of the burdens on servicemen.¹⁴⁴ While the provisions crisis prompted some military officials to turn a blind eye when soldiers absconded from their units, this did not make desertion an easy option.

Garrisoned soldiers were concerned with their reception in their native villages. Being branded a deserter had practical consequences for households, so that individuals and families appealed against the stigma in terms that must have been gratifying for officials in the Antidesertion Commission. The vast majority of cases heard by the Antidesertion Commission involved men who either claimed medical exemption from service or who had been ill and granted a leave of absence to recover. Staying at home past the designated recuperation time was formally considered desertion. Documentation was vitally important, not only for those who claimed exemption, but for any man of mobilization age who was approached by antidesertion agents in the countryside.¹⁴⁵ Many who had their cases reviewed were brought before the local commissions by antidesertion patrols. Effectively apprehended under suspicion of desertion, many men were left in holding cells at local soviets and offices of the Military Commissariat until authorities reviewed their cases. For those who claimed medical exemption, it could be a matter of days and even weeks before their cases were resolved and they were released.¹⁴⁶ “For the second time,” wrote Aleksei Gorin, a village schoolteacher from Rudovsk volost (Kirsanov uезд), “I request that the Antidesertion Commission lift from me this shameful label of ‘deserter,’ take pity on my large, orphaned family, help me and my family out of our impossible situation, and release me from the detention house and hand back my papers, so that I can appear before the medical commission—as is my right—in order to set this matter straight once and for all.”¹⁴⁷

Men who protested their innocence often did so out of fear that their families would suffer. Although Gorin’s status was as yet unresolved, he was classified as a deserter, and his family could be made to suffer for this in the village, where food procurement agents, in particular, targeted the households of known deserters. It is unsurprising, then, that many appeals protesting the innocence of suspected deserters were issued by their wives. Often these women were aided by sympathetic and, most important, literate members of their local soviet, and their appeals focused on the hardships facing the family in the absence of the husband.

Moreover, men who were actively serving in the Red Army submitted appeals protesting official classification as a deserter. Because so many of the soldiers in the army were, as one historian has highlighted, “second-chance men,”¹⁴⁸ for some the status as a deserter was difficult to overcome even after reintegration into the ranks. The files of the Antidesertion Commission are filled with appeals by Red Army soldiers who had initially been apprehended as deserters. They appealed (in the words of one such soldier) against the “disgraceful stain” of being classified as a deserter.¹⁴⁹ In many cases, men felt genuinely aggrieved because they had been away from their units for medical reasons and had either overstayed their leave of

absence beyond an acceptable limit or had failed to produce adequate documentation for antidesertion officials. These men, too, were deserters in the eyes of state authorities. The issue, once more, was of genuine importance for the families of these men, not simply an issue of pride or honor for the soldier.¹⁵⁰ Their status as deserters placed their families in a delicate situation, especially when the drive to requisition grain in the countryside became more intense.

The “deserter,” as we can see, occupied an ambiguous place in the political world of the villages. Very few, if any, would have embraced the label with pride. Men may not have been ashamed of having deserted the army as long as they could rely upon the local community for implicit support and approval. As long as the local soviet chairman was willing to look the other way and the majority of the village population did not protest, men who had evaded the draft or actively deserted could realize their ambition—to live the quotidian lives they had known before the war. There was no dishonor in such a situation.¹⁵¹

Soldiers were known to ask pointedly in their letters home whether the situation there would enable them to return. As one soldier wrote from his garrison: “Please write to me again, which of my buddies [*rebiata*] has already run back home, and is it possible to live at home as a deserter, because for us here things are really bad.” Despite the best efforts of state censors, such letters did get home and received replies. “Dearest brother, Serezha, we miss you so much, all your friends are now home, and only you are missing.” “All your friends are home. Whoever is a deserter just gets on with his life, and now folks are beginning to joke [about people who enter the Red Army], ‘Well, there goes another one to serve in the army, obviously refused to volunteer for work at home.’” “Comrades from our regiment are almost all home. I would really like to see you home, too, and even though comrades here don’t live entirely peacefully, it is still a whole lot better than in the city.” “Mitia, in our village no one serves in the Red Army—everyone is home now.”¹⁵² The clear intention behind such letters was to encourage the soldier to desert and not to fear the reactions of fellow villagers, or indeed of the local soviet administration and agents of the state.¹⁵³

This did not mean that desertion carried a positive connotation in the villages. However much the campaign to discourage desertion may have permeated the countryside through propaganda posters on the trains or by the antidesertion patrols, the negative label *deserter* was wielded strategically by villagers just as frequently as it was by the agents of the Soviet state.¹⁵⁴ Distrusted or despised local soviet workers or Communist Party members were described by villagers as deserters, since so many had been exempted from military service in order to work in the countryside administration and party organizations.¹⁵⁵ Many who

joined the party in 1918 and early 1919 were seeking a more secure life, rich with perquisites and power, but also risks. However, the increasing number of mobilizations of Communist Party members to the Red Army tested the political loyalty of such individuals, and party officials noted with some alarm and dismay the vast numbers who resigned from the party just when military mobilization appeared imminent.¹⁵⁶

In most cases, such state and party officials were already distrusted by locals, and their exemption from military service only sharpened the disdain felt by villagers. Likewise, those who worked in state collective farms and who formed small farmsteads outside the communal system (*artely*), were accused of being nothing more than self-serving deserters interested only in evading military service.¹⁵⁷ Once more, this was not a principled stand against desertion, as local villagers were never short of grievances against the state farms and *artely*. Villagers were frequently required to contribute their labor and machinery, as well as seed grain and livestock, to collective farms. And because of its proximity, such farmland was always under the covetous gaze of village farmers, who were often appalled at the misuse—and, frequently, *disuse*—of the fields controlled by these collectives.¹⁵⁸ A common expression of anger against these farms was that they were operated by “deserters,” people whose only interest was not in cultivating the land but in obtaining an official exemption from military service. Villagers were acutely aware of who among their neighbors was evading military service, just as they were watchful of those among their enemies who could be so accused.

The general context for desertion drew in several considerations—conditions at home, conditions in the garrisons and units, the receptivity of the local community, and the question of security both in the villages, where local authorities and antidesertion agents were a factor, and in the garrisons, whence the young men absconded. The fact that so many in the garrisons of Tambov were themselves natives of the province lowered the risk felt by soldiers, and the draw of the home village was strong. But many factors contributed to the general problem of desertion, none of which was unique to Tambov Province. The provisions crisis, the weakness of soviet administration and the Communist Party in the countryside, and a strong war weariness that had been in evidence at least since the days of the revolution in 1917—all these were outstanding characteristics of provincial life in Soviet Russia, and all encouraged desertion in 1920.

The problem of desertion and redesertion from reserve garrisons in 1920 provoked a major cleavage in the provincial administration, in which the Antidesertion Commission and the Military Commissariat each blamed the other for the continuing problems.¹⁵⁹ Authorities in the Antidesertion Commission in Tambov,

when held to account for the large number of deserters still believed to be at large in the countryside, pointed the finger of blame at the Military Commissariat, which had not only been unable to support the soldier population in the province, but also guilty of providing inadequate security in garrisons.¹⁶⁰ They pointed to the high levels of infectious disease in the garrisons, which often resulted in leaves of absence that would be exceeded by soldiers, thus earning the status of “deserters,” and the rates of redesertion, creating a cycle that appeared to be effectively tolerated by Military Commissariat officials.¹⁶¹ Sensing that their institutional autonomy was under threat, authorities in the Antidesertion Commission, like so many bureaucrats in the Soviet Republic during the civil war, raised the intensity of the dispute in the hope that a compromise might be achieved:

The continuation of this type of life for the deserters and soldiers of the Red Army is inconceivable. The Military Commissariat's efforts toward reducing desertion, as well as the purely internal work of the commissariats [in the local administrations], is completely ineffective and, what is more, it is criminal. The entire range of work by the commissariats is intended to reinforce the Red Army, but with such conditions in the garrisons, and given the slipshod work of the military commissars, there will be no effective reinforcement and desertion will continue to grow. If the responsible military commissars are not removed, and if present conditions continue into the future, then the Antidesertion Commission will have no choice but to recommend to Moscow that official criminal charges be brought against the provincial Military Commissariat.¹⁶²

Such threats, however, were not enough to preserve the commission's autonomy, and on 1 June 1920, it was officially made subordinate to the Military Commissariat.¹⁶³ Maintaining that the desertion problem was chiefly attributable to the failings of the antidesertion officials active in the localities, the formerly independent commission was now made the subject of intense internal reviews that found its organization and operations to be corrupt and incompetent. The new head of the Antidesertion Commission in Tambov, Shikunov, reported his shock at the state in which he found the organization in the summer of 1920:

In the first place, the provincial commission had no effective contact with the local commissions, such that in the course of an entire year they had not once undertaken to provide instruction for the uyezds, and the uezd commissions likewise made no such effort to train those in the districts. Thus, antidesertion work was carried out at all levels in the manner of a cottage industry, without any systematic coordination of efforts. Second, working as they were for nearly eighteen months without any

formal contact with the military authorities, not being answerable to the Military Commissariat, the antidesertion commissions naturally became infected with an ethic of haphazardness, which was quickly revealed for all to see over the course of their formal subordination to the commissariat. Third, judging by the available reports and estimates found in the possession of the Antidesertion Commission, the commission actually had very little idea as to how many deserters there actually were in the province, let alone where to find them. . . . Fourth, the local antidesertion commissions at the village and volost levels were most often composed of only one member, and in the most exceptional cases there were up to two members. Obviously, to talk of productive, effective work, given these circumstances, is impossible.¹⁶⁴

These conclusions were written in August 1920, at a time when the provincial administration was once more facing the prospect of renewed instability in the countryside as another campaign to procure grain from the villages was about to be initiated. The weakness of local administration remained a problem that threatened to compromise the state's ability to meet its targets for the procurement of food, and the continued failure to control desertion remained an important indication of that weakness. Estimates at the time placed the number of deserters still at large in the countryside at just over 27,000, with the highest concentrations being in Tambov, Kirsanov, and Morshansk uezds.¹⁶⁵ Deserters still at large in the villages represented a potentially volatile element within the communities, and they were a particular focus of anxieties as the confrontation between the peasantry and the state resumed.

Yet as we have seen, while weak administration and the "reach" of the state into the villages was a real problem, the phenomenon of desertion was a complex one that did not necessarily reflect the fears of many Soviet officials in Tambov and Moscow. Desertion was certainly resistance to military mobilization, and it was also a response to the severe conditions of crisis, particularly the food crisis, that affected Soviet society as a whole. Desertion in its provincial context was often a pragmatic response conditioned by both desperation and realism. Young men serving in the reserve garrisons often deserted precisely because they could, and they did so on the basis of individual circumstances rather than out of political principle. Deserters did not constitute a natural collective actor mobilized, or primed for mobilization, in a movement of resistance to the Soviet state. Desertion was, if anything, a symptom of the weaknesses of state authority in Tambov, one that Soviet officials were all too aware of and yet limited in their ability to redress.