

Introduction

Inventing a Soviet Countryside examines the urban-based Bolshevik regime as it confronted what its leaders viewed as two critical problems in the first dozen years after it seized power—a countryside that seemed to them to be profoundly underdeveloped and decades away from reaching socialism; and the personnel of the state administration they inherited across the revolutionary divide, which they regarded as untrustworthy, alien, and often thoroughly bourgeois. Between 1917 and 1929, in the aftermath of the largest peasant revolution in history, the Bolsheviks undertook the mammoth task of peacefully recasting the economy and political loyalties of the Russian peasantry. This period included both the great famine of 1921–23 and the prelude to collectivization of agriculture launched at the end of 1929, a cataclysm that contributed to a second famine in 1932–33. During this time, the revolutionary regime mobilized state power and institutions in an attempt to “modernize” and ultimately “socialize” the Russian village.¹ A principal question is why the state agency in charge of modernizing the countryside was vanquished and rendered impotent in 1929. This is a critical issue since the state’s failure to come to terms with the peasantry helped to cause the collectivization catastrophe with its countless victims and the ruin of Soviet agriculture for decades. Indeed, the post-Soviet countryside has not yet recovered from the legacy of those years.²

Reshaping the modes of production and the mentalities of the peasantry, who still comprised the great majority of the population, was central to the Soviet socialist experiment. Adopting the propensity of the Russian Imperial government (and of other modern European states in the nineteenth and twentieth

centuries) to seek solutions to stubborn social and economic problems via government intervention, the Bolsheviks made the state an engine in the processes of modernization and social revolution. In this *étatist* spirit, the Bolshevik leadership formed the People's Commissariat of Agriculture of the Russian Republic (Narkomzem RSFSR) to push a peasantry that it considered a relic of the feudal era into the modern era. By the end of the decade, the Commissariat of Agriculture had become the country's largest commissariat, with over seventy thousand employees in Moscow and throughout the provinces. The Commissariat's Moscow headquarters aimed to establish a countrywide network with hundreds of local branches to offer agronomic aid, to educate farmers about modern techniques, to blanket the countryside with new equipment, and (to a very limited extent before 1929) to create large state and collective farms.

This story is perhaps even more striking as the case study of a state agency responsible for an extraordinary task. In the words of one Commissariat leader, the agency's mission was no less than to use the state "to organize the peasant in his entirety." This enormous undertaking, however, was for a variety of reasons entrusted to a cohort of employees about whom the Bolsheviks harbored distinctly ambivalent feelings. The vexing problem of cadres therefore is crucial to understanding key problems in the Bolshevik experience in the 1920s. The sudden success of the 1917 October Revolution created two major dilemmas for a party-state intent on establishing revolutionary institutions as vehicles for bringing new ideas to the peasantry: the social origins of its personnel and their political reliability. Who would build and staff the new state, especially in light of the very weak Communist presence outside the largest cities? Could the existing ministerial and administrative staffs in Moscow and the provinces be trusted? Which social groups' members belonged in specialist and administrative positions? The makeup of the Commissariat of Agriculture is especially revealing because of the questions raised by the prominent position of politically suspect "bourgeois specialists" and former sympathizers of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SRs) in central offices and because of the governments' programs to recruit peasants into executive positions in Moscow and the provinces. Tracing the organization's experience casts light on the paradoxes of revolutionary institution building, the vulnerability of new Soviet agencies, and their susceptibility to attack by Stalin's supporters at the end of the decade. What can the nature of the state and its cadres tell us about the stability of the Soviet state administrative systems that were broken apart in 1929? Indeed, the upheavals we recognize as characteristic of 1929 took root a decade earlier in the labeling of large numbers of government employees as "hostile and alien," itself a consequence of a volatile mixture of modernization and class politics.

The Commissariat's planned "organization of the peasant" had many dimensions. Economically, the goal was to raise what Bolshevik leaders regarded as the very poor productivity of farming; to unleash the vast, unrealized produc-

tive potential of the countryside, and to address the simultaneous threat of severe grain shortages. With the introduction of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in March 1921, the Commissariat's personnel abandoned plans for the creation of a huge system of collective farms that the state had strived for briefly during the Civil War (1918–21).

Following the logic of the NEP (1921–29), Commissariat personnel provided technical and educational assistance to villagers who retained the right to choose their preferred type of land tenure and farm the land as they wished. Despite the change in method, the impulse to reorganize and “rationalize” traditional modes of farming remained powerful throughout the period. During the 1920s, agronomists and other technical personnel traveled to distant villages and tried to persuade peasants to abandon their “primitive” modes of production and embrace new techniques based on the latest science. Commissariat specialists strove to “bring light” to a “benighted” peasantry that they believed would not be able to shed its traditional ways and become modern in the ways that it farmed, worked, and thought without the help of science introduced from outside. In the eyes of most Bolsheviks, villagers were ignorant, economically backward, and culturally primitive.

The view among Russia's elite that peasants were dark and primitive was nothing new. Moreover, they believed traditional modes of farming hindered progress toward a rationally organized and productive economy. The peasantry, dispersed on tiny plots and living mostly at subsistence levels, was a far cry from the type of efficient, large-scale, highly productive farmers that many Bolsheviks envisioned. Nearly all land used for agricultural purposes was still tilled by peasants within the confines of traditional communes (95 percent of sown land in 1927). Soviet political leaders and scientists alike felt an urgent need to fix the agriculture “problem.” Russian villages were starved for modern tools, machines, and draught animals. Farmers mostly organized their fields in the three-field and strip systems that Western European tillers had abandoned centuries earlier. Seven years of fighting on Russian territory during World War I and the Civil War left agriculture ravaged. Though production quickly improved in the several years following 1922, increases slowed in the second half of the 1920s. By 1928, some critical areas of output, deliveries of produce to market, and export still had not fully recovered to pre-war levels, creating anxiety among many Communist Party leaders. Equally important, in terms of the regime's powerful drive to catch and overtake the West economically, Soviet Russia was in even worse shape than before World War I. The industrial powers of Europe and the United States had moved farther ahead by comparison, having suffered far less in wartime than Russia. Production per capita in the industrialized Western economies was still growing at a more rapid rate than in the USSR; technological change was also leaping forward more quickly.³ The Commissariat's tasks of managing the recovery of agricultural production, reshaping the farming prac-

tices of the peasantry, and managing the nationalized land fund were key components of Bolshevik efforts to extend the foundation for socialism to the countryside. As long as the productive capabilities of Western Europe (and North America) were used as the yardstick for comparison, however, the agricultural sector would remain a source of impatience and frustration.

Agriculture remained the heart of the economy in the 1920s, still providing almost half the national income, while industry contributed less than one quarter of the total.⁴ The success of industrialization and, indeed, the entire socialist project depended upon the production of sufficient food and raw materials for the cities, for the army, and to export for hard currency. In the 1920s, most Bolsheviks believed that a relatively peaceful relationship with the peasantry was crucial for the new regime's stability. Efforts to build bridges to the farming population formed an important element in this search for stability and productivity. Over 90 percent of Communist Party members lived in cities, yet 85 percent of the population resided in the countryside. The village population was further separated from the regime by an enormous cultural gap, and the Bolsheviks were slow to set down roots and gain legitimacy among the mass of the peasantry. Despite the Party's ambitions, transforming the agricultural sector was not as easy as simply lecturing farmers or distributing new tools. A persistent difference in worldview separated the agricultural specialists, trained mostly in urban schools, from the villagers they were instructing.

The Commissariat of Agriculture was also charged with a challenging political mission: to create an organizational base in the countryside from which the state could try to establish relations with the peasantry. A high level of involvement in the rural economy demanded the creation of a gigantic, sprawling bureaucracy to grapple with what one Bolshevik official called "the most complicated, enormous, and disorganized affair" that the new regime faced.⁵ Nevertheless, it was a central paradox of the young Soviet state (one that affected all branches of the government) that the Communists who embraced state-conceived solutions to intransigent socioeconomic problems were deeply mistrustful of bureaucracy in general and, more significantly, of their own government's apparatus in particular. Indeed, forced collectivization involved not just an attack by Stalin's group on the peasantry, but also an effort to destroy and recreate the state administration with the greatest degree of contact with the peasantry.

The evolution of tsarist administration in the last decades of the Old Regime provides a useful framework for conceptualizing the limitations of initial Soviet efforts at constructing a new state. Much like its tsarist precursors, the executive branch of the Soviet state comprised ministries that were responsible for particular niches of social and economic life. At the same time, they did not work completely in isolation from that society, but were grounded in the segments of society that they dominated. State institutions, like all bureaucracies, had their own political interests and constituencies and were shaped in part by them.

Each agency created its own internal, cultural world that helped to mold its actions in the political world.⁶ Contemporaries called this *vedomstvennost'* (which might be defined as institutional self-sufficiency or autarky, but came to have the negative connotation “self-interest”), a phenomenon according to which the leaders of state agencies often acted in the interests of “their” organization, “their” staff, or “their” constituency, ignoring or contradicting the instructions of superiors or the concerns of peers in other institutions. The notion of *vedomstvennost'* is quite useful as a tool for examining the Soviet state in this period.⁷

A comparison of Soviet local government and tsarist administration also demonstrates similarities that were deeply troubling for the Bolshevik regime. Despite its reputation for stifling, overweening bureaucracy, tsarist Russia at the local level (like the Soviet state) was seriously “undergoverned,” to use S. Frederick Starr’s term.⁸ Historians have emphasized the barriers that tsarist officials confronted in both reaching and controlling the mass of the rural population.⁹ Scholars have also underlined the fear among tsarist and Soviet officials alike that underfunded and isolated provincial administrations were a breeding ground for disloyalty, “localism,” corruption, and other challenges to central power and policies. Suspicion of the rapidly growing “third element” of doctors, teachers, agronomists, and other professionals, voiced by tsarist ministers and local officials during the final decades of the Old Regime, was echoed by some Communist Party servitors in the 1920s (and by the police) in their anxiety about the inordinate influence of non-Communist specialists in far-flung areas.¹⁰

To carry out the ambitious changes it envisioned, however, the Commissariat also faced serious challenges inside the ruling party itself. Politically, the agency found itself in a quandary, an unexpected byproduct of its uncomfortable role as the manager of peasant affairs in the proletarian dictatorship. Since the peasantry had seized (and the state subsequently had nationalized) nearly all state, private, and royal family land in 1917 and 1918, the Commissariat of Agriculture served the function, in essence, of a commissariat of the peasantry, a ministry representing a teeming “petty bourgeoisie” in the world’s only country where private property in land had been permanently outlawed. The Commissariat’s leadership took their assignment very seriously, openly stating that they believed that they represented, and would labor on behalf of, the economic interests of the peasantry. At the same time, the Commissariat’s political leaders believed that protecting the interests of the farming population served the goals of the Revolution. The Commissariat argued that, in certain cases, the need to satisfy villagers in the short run surpassed the need to placate the minority of urban workers who comprised the Communists’ principal social base. Indeed, the Commissariat advocated policies that increased the level of social differentiation among farmers. Stratification within villages—a direct consequence of Narkomzem’s policies—would result in the creation of a class of well-to-do agri-

culturalists, traditionally condemned in Marxist literature, but upheld as models of innovation and productivity by Commissariat officials.

Before 1928, despite the guarded and wavering support of the majority of the party leadership for NEP concessions, the Commissariat found itself in an awkward political predicament. It was an institution that served as the advocate for a population considered by most Communists to remain stubbornly capitalist and if not latently hostile to the new ruling class, then at best indifferent to the proletariat's aspirations. The Commissariat's ideas and programs acted as lightning rods for criticism from many party members throughout the 1920s.

Nevertheless, some studies have downplayed the contradictions and internal tensions among party moderates at the time, while tending to overlook the political weaknesses of those who advocated a continuation of NEP policies. Stephen Cohen, for example, focuses on the ideas of one person, Nikolai Bukharin, often taking at face value the worldview propagated by Bukharin and the Right that held up "social harmony and class collaboration."¹¹ NEP measures toward the peasantry, though "gradualist" (at least relative to the bloody forced collectivization that came afterward), were not always "conciliatory,"¹² as indicated by severe restrictions on certain peasant preferences, such as households' separating from the commune. Even among moderates, there were persistent fixations on social class and notions of "alienness," restrictions on private property in land, and concerns with social control. The Communist Party was pervaded with widespread suspicion of spontaneous action among the population and the overriding belief that traditional peasant agriculture was dying out and (although there were disagreements about timing and method) must eventually be replaced with large-scale, collective production to reverse rural underdevelopment. The ever-present sense of urgency about "catching and overtaking" the West added to a sense of impatience with gradualist approaches.¹³

The Commissariat of Agriculture provides a revealing case study of the tribulations of an agency advocating for the economic interests of the petty bourgeoisie in a Marxist regime. It also presents a vivid arena for examining understudied elements of Bolshevik efforts to make concrete the rhetorical alliance, or *smychka*, between the urban regime, claiming to represent the proletariat, and the peasantry. In studies that investigate Bolshevik efforts to overcome the gap between city and countryside and to win the political and economic support of rural areas, little attention has been paid to programs that aspired to render the alliance physical by bringing peasants into key posts in government administration between 1921 and 1929. Nearly a decade of highly publicized programs to promote peasants into senior leadership positions in the central government had the Commissariat of Agriculture as a focal point. To encourage social support for the new regime among ordinary Russians, and as a critical element of the *smychka*, the Bolsheviks constructed a plan to place nonelites—"socially promoted

cadres”—into various senior posts in the ministerial bureaucracy. Many commissariats took part hesitantly in ambitious projects intended to give farmers input and experience at the highest levels of national government.

The desirability of popular participation in the revolution and in government was central in Bolshevik political discourse. Yet the context for these promotion programs and their ideological goals has not been fully analyzed. Nor have historians explored the deeper implications for Bolshevik political culture and conceptualizations of the countryside. Programs to promote industrial workers “from the bench” into leading positions in the Soviet state have been thoroughly investigated; parallel programs for promoting peasants have not. With the availability of reports, correspondence, and statistical material in Soviet state and Communist Party archives, we now for the first time can form a complete picture of peasant promotion during this period.

The planning, execution, and reaction to programs to promote peasants between 1921 and 1929 provide insight into Bolshevik political and bureaucratic culture, the nature of post-revolutionary elites, and aspects of Bolshevik and intelligentsia perceptions of the rural population. The evolving politics of symbols and of class in the post-revolutionary situation are thus critical, as are the construction and fluid nature of social and professional identities and the political use of those identities. The Moscow offices of the Commissariat of Agriculture, then, provide a concrete location, a cultural world, within which a major goal of Soviet ideology—the mass participation of the lower classes in supervising and running the state—can be better understood.

Although some Bolsheviks regarded “bourgeois” groups as irredeemably counterrevolutionary, a “soft line” on cadre policy was embraced by many leaders, including those who headed administrations charged with the economic transformation of the country. Most leading Bolsheviks regarded bourgeois officials and scientists as reformable and potentially (or actually) loyal to Soviet power. Moreover, if efforts to camouflage one’s social identity or one’s past were endemic in this period of struggle over fluid class definitions, then the enormous Soviet state administration should be regarded as a place where compromised people could be sheltered and receive help reengineering their identities by, among other people, Communists desperate to staff the overburdened and understaffed agencies of state. In the face of growing criticism about the suspect social origins and political loyalties of their cadres in the mid-to-late 1920s, how did party leaders of state administrations attempt to defend those cadres, to shield them from attack or removal, and in many cases simply to hide them from view?

Local agricultural specialists functioned as an interface between the regime and the rural population. With their very difficult economic position under the NEP, many grew disillusioned and frustrated. Historians of the period have assumed that specialists seeking gradual change naturally opposed Stalinist prom-

ises of an explosive acceleration of industrial and rural development at the end of the 1920s.¹⁴ To be sure, most top agricultural specialists in Moscow opposed collectivization policies as they were designed and implemented in 1928–29. But in the provinces, local specialists were, in fact, divided about plans to rapidly transform the Soviet countryside. Some local specialists definitely objected to plans for the accelerated collectivization of agriculture, fearing that it would create inefficiencies, disorganization, and a search for scapegoats amid chaos. Yet many non-Communist agrarian specialists, especially those living outside the big cities, showed enthusiasm for the rhetoric of accelerated modernization in 1928 and mid-1929, that is, before the massive collectivization drive became akin to Civil War in December 1929. This finding demonstrates the breadth of Stalinist appeals to professionals and specialists frustrated by many facets of NEP.

A major obstacle for scholars seeking to understand the role, worldview, and fate of specialists in the early Soviet period is the imbalance of studies of urban professionals at the expense of those working in rural areas. Generalizations about specialists are usually made on the basis of our knowledge of urban experts, especially engineers employed in heavy industry.¹⁵ This focus on urban specialists in an agrarian country has created a blind spot. Based on these studies, historians of Soviet professions and of Soviet officialdom have largely come to a consensus that during the 1920s the privileges accessible to the Soviet functionary and specialist created expectations of a certain level of status and comfort among state bureaucrats. In the only collection of scholarly articles treating Russian officialdom that crosses the 1917 divide, Stephen Sternheimer summarizes the conventional wisdom. He argues that over the course of the 1920s, “seldom in Russian history had the lives and fortunes of those occupying lower-level posts in the outer reaches of the state’s far-flung bureaucratic network so visibly improved.” “Technicians and managers once again occupied comfortable and remunerative posts,” he continues.¹⁶ While it is true overall that later in the decade most types of specialists seem to have earned more than before the revolution, cultural and professional issues also affected professional self-esteem, outlook, and sense of mission. Certain strata in the bureaucracy, especially those associated with industry, the military, and the Communist Party, did enjoy relatively high salaries and expanded prestige in Soviet society. For employees of agricultural and land reform agencies, however, status, working conditions, and living standards remained poor in comparison with their urban-based colleagues. Reflecting their low status as professionals who were not highly valued in the NEP era, this gap affected the way that modernization plans were received by agrarian specialists in 1928–29. Poor conditions made some local specialists susceptible to radical solutions that would lift their salaries and prestige, value their skills, and offer them a role as the designer of a mechanized rural Russia, reorganized along scientific lines. Party leaders appealed to local specialists precisely on the grounds of elevating their positions, while lauding their expertise and “superior urban culture.”

Historians have mostly neglected the importance of the Commissariat of Agriculture in their discussions of the 1920s, largely because until recently they have downplayed the importance of the state altogether. For years, historians and political scientists characterized Soviet state commissariats as nearly invisible, yet wholly obedient and homogenous, “transmission belts” between the Communist Party elite and the rest of the population, including the peasantry. Scholarship treating the Soviet state remained in the shadow of debates on the Communist Party’s policy-making process and infighting at the highest levels. This preoccupation with an impersonal and nearly omnipotent Communist Party discouraged studies of the interaction between the decision-making elite and the governmental apparatus that was to implement the decisions.¹⁷ In this view, the Commissariat of Agriculture was the loyal servant of the party leadership, as were all government agencies. In this conceptualization, the state was not and could not have been an autonomous actor with interests set apart from those of the party. A dearth of analysis of the Soviet state (as opposed to the Communist Party)—its culture, political face, and personalities—has resulted from a commonly drawn “totalitarian” portrait of a monolithic Communist Party and Soviet government that ruthlessly dominated a splintered and passive society. The state was considered the subordinate actor in the party-state, little more than an appendage of the party. By analyzing a critical part of the state as a complex interface between the urban Communist Party and the local village populations, this work challenges these assumptions. Commissariats embraced their role yet were frequently hindered by a party leadership suspicious both of the bulk of the alien nonparty government employees and of the capitalist peasantry. The ineffectiveness of such mediating bodies and the go-between specialists they employed laid the groundwork for the catastrophe of crash collectivization.

With few exceptions, scholars of Soviet history have only recently begun to recognize the central importance of the Soviet state and its officials (as distinct from the Communist Party organization) in the complicated revolutionary processes during the first dozen years after the October Revolution. From very early on, the Bolsheviks envisaged a critical role for the state administration as an “organizational weapon.” Moshe Lewin, Roger Pethybridge, and others agree that the bureaucracy was a key tool in the Bolsheviks’ ambitious projects for social and economic transformation. Yet, these scholars also emphasize that the bureaucracy was itself shaped by social forces beyond the party’s control.¹⁸ Investigation of the worldviews and political cultures of the early Soviet state is in its nascent stages. David Shearer, Peter Holquist, and Don K. Rowney have all made valuable contributions to our understanding of the critical role of the early Soviet state.¹⁹

The opening of Soviet state and Communist Party archives has allowed more comprehensive investigations into the dynamics of the early Soviet state machinery. A recent spate of archive-based histories examining aspects of the

early Soviet state present new approaches, methods, and sources. Although they range widely in subject matter, these studies share an interest in the formative years of the Soviet state machinery.²⁰ My work pursues a number of the themes developed in this new scholarship, examining an ambitious project in state-directed transformation of a complex social reality. Each study explores a powerful faith, shared by specialists and political leaders alike, in the state as an instrument for overcoming what the intelligentsia regarded as Russia's persistent backwardness. Yet each ultimately highlights the limitations of social engineering in the Russian countryside, helping to demystify the catastrophe of 1928–30.

Although this book is neither an in-depth study of the Soviet peasantry nor a detailed discussion of their farming methods, the peculiarities of a post-revolutionary countryside prone to crop failure provide a backdrop. Moreover, while this study does not focus in detail on the processes of policy formation inside the party-state, it does examine a number of questions that were central to the way participants envisioned the future of the Soviet village.²¹ Nor is this book a regional or local study, though such studies add to our growing understanding of provincial politics, society, and experience in this period.²² In the final analysis, the Commissariat of Agriculture can be seen as a bellwether for the prospects of NEP. While NEP policies were in ascendance between 1923 and 1926, the Commissariat thrived, if uneasily; when the tide turned against NEP in 1927–28, the Commissariat found itself in deep trouble. Ultimately, the Commissariat's close identification with NEP policies and worldview left it vulnerable to attacks by NEP's many enemies. The regime's scapegoats of 1928–29—a government bureaucracy plagued with “alien” personnel, the “bourgeois” specialists and former sympathizers with anti-Bolshevik political parties, the “kulaks” and the policies that seemed to favor them, the “backwardness” of communal agriculture, the Communist Party's “Right deviation,” the seemingly unbreakable cycle of crop failures and grain shortages, the relative gradualism in agrarian policy that seemed to block the Soviet Union's great power aspirations—all shared one thing in common: the People's Commissariat of Agriculture.