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Source: *Russian Review*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (Jan., 1986), pp. 23-42

Published by: Blackwell Publishing on behalf of The Editors and Board of Trustees of the Russian Review

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Бабы Бунты and Peasant Women's Protest during Collectivization

LYNNE VIOLA

Bab'i bunty were an integral part of the rural landscape during the years of wholesale (or сплошная) collectivization. The term could be translated roughly as "women's riots," yet this translation does not begin to do justice to its specific cultural and historical evocations. "Бабий" (the adjective) is a colloquial expression for women that refers in particular to country women with country ways. The "баба" (singular noun) is most often perceived as illiterate, ignorant (in the broader sense of "некультурная"), superstitious, a rumor-monger, and, in general, given to irrational outbursts of hysteria. The *baba*, might best be seen as a colorful combination of the American "hag," "fishwife," and "woman driver" all rolled into a peasant mold. The element of stereotype is evident. Accordingly, the modifier colors and reinforces the noun that follows. A "бунт" is a spontaneous, uncontrolled, and uncontrollable explosion of peasant opposition to authority. Not quite a demonstration, it is often aimless (at least in the mind of official observers), generally unpredictable, and always dangerous. A "*babii bunt*," then, is a women's riot characterized by female hysteria, irrational behavior, unorganized and inarticulate protest, and violent actions.

Such, in any case, were the denotation and connotation of the term as used by Communist Party leaders, local activists, and other observers during collectivization. Rarely, if ever, were *bab'i bunty* described or evaluated in political or ideological terms. The causes of the *bab'i bunty* were generally attributed either to the instigation of agitators, the "kulaks" and "*podkulachniki*" (kulak henchmen), who supposedly exploited the irrational hysteria of the *baba* for their own counterrevolutionary purposes, or else blamed on the reckless and lawless actions of the cadres who implemented collectivization and had succumbed to "dizziness from success." *Bab'i bunty* appear to have been tolerated to a far greater extent than were similar protests led by peasant men. They also seem to have been dealt with less harshly in cases when criminal charges ensued, the women escaping prosecution under the RSFSR penal code article 58 for counterrevolutionary crimes. The *baba* was not perceived as the fairer sex, but as the darker sector

of the already dark peasant masses; consequently, like an unruly child or a butting goat, she was often not held responsible for her actions although sometimes subject to reprimand and punishment.

Officials' perceptions of peasant actions are generally based on assumptions about peasant ways and mores. As Daniel Field has demonstrated, however, peasants appear at times to have exploited these official assumptions about themselves for their own ends. Field suggests that peasants manipulated their reputation for naive monarchism as a means of deflecting punishment and as a rationalization for confrontations with officials who, according to peasant claims, were violating the will of the tsar.¹ Although the *baba* was no longer a naive monarchist during the First Five-Year Plan period (despite some cases of a Soviet-style naive monarchism that pitted Stalin and the Central Committee of the Communist Party against local officials after the publication of Stalin's article "Dizziness from Success"), it may well be that the *bab'i bunty* belied the official perception of peasant women's protest and were neither as irrational nor as hysterical as they appeared to outside observers.

This article is an exploration of the anatomy of the *bab'i bunty* and the protest of peasant women during collectivization. It is an attempt to examine the basis of peasant women's protest, the forms that such protest assumed, and the influence of official perceptions of and government reactions to the women's actions. The article is not intended as a comprehensive treatment of peasant women during collectivization. Nor is it meant to imply that *all* peasant women were opposed to collectivization. Due to the inevitable source problems connected with a topic such as this, the article will necessarily be somewhat impressionistic and the conclusions tentative. It is based on cases of protest in (ethnically) Russian and Ukrainian villages where the *bab'i bunty* occurred; the responses of women to collectivization in Central Asia and in non-Slavic villages are not explored, due to the very different cultural styles of women there and the absence of any overt or exclusively female peasant protest in these areas.

The collectivization of Soviet agriculture gave rise to a massive wave of peasant protest and violence in the countryside during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Peasant unrest began on the eve of wholesale collectivization in 1928 during the implementation of "extraordinary measures" (i.e., forced requisitions) in state grain procurements. It continued, at varying levels of intensity, to the end of the First Five-Year Plan, by which time wholesale collectivization was basically

¹ Daniel Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar*, Boston, 1976, pp. 23, 209-210, 214.

completed.² The largest waves of peasant protest appear to have occurred in the second half of 1929 and in the years 1930-31. In 1929, for example, 30,000 fires were registered in the RSFSR alone and many, if not most, were attributed to arson, or the *krasnyi petukh*.³ The number of cases of rural mass disturbances prosecuted under article 59² of the RSFSR criminal code increased in 1929 from 172 in the first half of the year to 229 in the second half of the year.⁴ Although similar statistical data for 1930-31 are more difficult to extract from the sources, there is little doubt that the wave of violence and unrest in those years far surpassed that of the second half of 1929.⁵ Peasant violence and protest were an inevitable byproduct of forced grain requisitions, collectivization, and dekulakization and were shaped by the traditional peasant approach to radical politics.

The Communist Party was aware of the dissatisfaction of the peasantry on the eve of and during the collectivization drives of 1930-31. Party concern over the extent of peasant unrest, moreover, appears to have played a significant role in shaping policy. Olga Narkiewicz has concluded that "it was the fear of a full-scale peasant revolution (whether real or imagined)" that induced the party leadership to pursue the policy of all-out collectivization in the late autumn of 1929.⁶ R. W.

² By the end of 1931, approximately 60% of peasant households were collectivized. See I. E. Zelenin, "Kolkhoznoe stroitel'stvo v SSSR v 1931-1932 gg.," *Istoriia SSSR*, 1960, no. 6, p. 23.

³ V. P. Danilov, M. P. Kim, and N. V. Tropkin, eds., *Sovetskoe krest'ianstvo. Kratkii ocherk istorii (1917-1970)*, 2nd ed., Moscow, 1973, p. 280.

⁴ "Doklad o rabote UKK Verkhnsuda RSFSR za vtoruiu polovinu 1929 g.," *Sudebnaia praktika*, no. 8, 10 June 1930, p. 12.

⁵ For a rough indication of the scope of peasant unrest in the early part of 1930, see R. W. Davies, *The Socialist Offensive: The Collectivisation of Soviet Agriculture, 1929-1930*, Cambridge, MA, 1980, pp. 257-258. According to one Soviet article (which, unfortunately, provides no source), there were 1,678 armed uprisings in the countryside in the period January to March 1930 alone. See B. A. Abramov and T. K. Kocharli, "Ob oshibkakh v odnoi knige. (Pis'mo v redaktsiiu)," *Voprosy istorii KPSS*, 1975, no. 5, p. 137. In the Lower Volga, there were 165 riots (вольнок) in March 1930 and 195 in April 1930 according to V. K. Medvedev, *Krutoi povorot (Iz istorii kollektivizatsii sel'skogo khoziaistva Nizhnego Povolzh'ia)*, Saratov, 1961, p. 119. In the Middle Volga, there were 319 uprisings in the first four months of 1930, as compared to 33 for the same months of 1929 according to F. A. Karevskii, "Likvidatsiia kulachestva kak klassa v Srednem Povolzh'e," *Istoricheskie zapiski*, vol. 80, 1967, p. 92. And, finally, in Siberia, in the first half of 1930, there were 1000 "registered terrorist acts" according to N. Ia. Gushchin, "Likvidatsiia kulachestva kak klassa v Sibirskoi derevne," *Sotsial'naiia struktura naseleniia Sibiri*, Novosibirsk, 1970, p. 122. Data on 1931 are more scarce, but according to Zelenin, in the spring of 1931, there were open attacks (e.g., arson, destruction of livestock and agricultural equipment, etc.) in 15.8% of all collective farms; see Zelenin, "Kolkhoznoe stroitel'stvo," p. 31.

⁶ O. A. Narkiewicz, "Stalin, War Communism and Collectivization," *Soviet Studies*, vol. 18, no. 1, July 1966, p. 37.

Davies has linked the March 1930 "retreat" from breakneck collectivization inaugurated by Stalin's 2 March article, "Dizziness from Success," and the Central Committee decree of 14 March to the widespread peasant unrest of the first months of 1930.⁷ This second contention is, in fact, frankly expressed in the later editions of the official history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.⁸ The party publicly acknowledged the extent and dangers of peasant dissatisfaction in the months following the March retreat and, in particular, at the Sixteenth Congress of the Communist Party in late June and early July of 1930. This acknowledgement was to be the most explicit admission of the extent of the threat to the state posed by peasant unrest during collectivization.

Speakers at the Sixteenth Party Congress noted the key role played by women in the protest against collectivization and the collective farm. Although the extent and intensity of the women's protest were not specified, they were serious enough for Lazar Kaganovich to make the following remark:

We know that in connection with the excesses [перегибы] in the collective farm movement, women in the countryside in many cases played the most "advanced" role in the reaction against the collective farm.⁹

A. A. Andreev, the first secretary of the North Caucasus Regional Party Committee, seconded Kaganovich, claiming that women were in the vanguard in the protests and disturbances over collectivization.¹⁰ These claims received concrete substantiation in reports written by workers and officials who served in the countryside during collectivization.¹¹ The reasons for the "vanguard" role of peasant women in the protest against collectivization were considered to be the low cultural and political level and backwardness of peasant women, the "incorrect approach" of rural officials, "dizzy from success," to the volatile women, and, finally, the exploitation of the women's irrational fears and potential for mass hysteria by the kulak and the omnipresent *podkulachnik*.

⁷ Davies, *The Socialist Offensive*, pp. 255-256. For Stalin's article and the Central Committee decree, see I. Stalin, "Golovokruzhenie ot uspekhev. K voprosam kolhoznoho dvizheniia," *Sochineniia*, vol. 12, Moscow, 1952, pp. 191-199; and *KPSS v rezoliutsiakh i resheniakh s'ezdov, konferentsii i plenumov TsK*, 7th ed., part 2, Moscow, 1953, pp. 548-551.

⁸ *Istoriia KPSS*, 2nd ed., Moscow, 1962, p. 444; and 3rd ed., Moscow, 1969, p. 405.

⁹ *XVI s'ezd VKP (b). Stenograficheskie otchet*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1930, p. 70.

¹⁰ *XVI s'ezd VKP (b)*, p. 123.

¹¹ For example, M. N. Chernomorskii, "Rol' rabochikh brigad v bor'be za sploshnuiu kollektivizatsiiu v Tambovskoi derevne," *Materialy po istorii SSSR. Dokumenty po istorii Sovetskogo obshchestva*, fasc. 1, Moscow, 1955, pp. 347-348, 350, 354, 364-366, 369, 375; and examples cited below, pp. 30, 35-37.

The party's response to women's protest against collectivization was different from its response to (male) peasant protest in general, which was usually labeled kulak opposition and dealt with by increasing the level of repression. Instead of repressive measures (although these were not always excluded), the party emphasized a more "correct approach" to peasant women—an end to the excesses—on the part of rural officials and the need to improve work among women.¹² The importance of work among women, in fact, had been a concern from at least the time of the grain procurement crisis when the potential dangers of female-led opposition to Soviet policy became clear.¹³ Work among women basically had two objectives. First, it was held necessary to educate women and expand political indoctrination among them. A second task was drawing more women into active involvement in the political life of the village through participation in the women's delegate meetings, soviet elections, and membership in local soviets and the Communist Party. And, indeed, during the years of collectivization, there was a gradual, but noted improvement in such work as local officials were implored to pay more attention to women and increasing numbers of women were recruited to the party and elected to the boards of local soviets.¹⁴ The state's response and its emphasis on the need to improve work among women were predicated upon the official conception of peasant women's protest as essentially non-political and a function of the ignorance and backwardness of the *baba*.

¹² XVI s'ezd VKP (b), pp. 70, 457. Also see similar statements in *Kollektivizatsiia sel'skogo khoziaistva na Severnom Kavkaze (1927-1937 gg.)*, Krasnodar, 1972, pp. 262-264, 266; and *Zapadnyi oblastnoi komitet VKP (b). Vtoraiia oblastnaia partkonferentsiia (5-12 iunია 1930 g.)*. *Stenograficheskii otchet*, Moscow-Smolensk, 1931, pp. 164-165.

¹³ To cite just two examples of such concern, at the Fourteenth All-Russian Congress of Soviets in May 1929, a peasant woman activist and delegate from Siberia stressed the need to improve work among women in light of a series of *bab'i bunty* during grain requisitioning. This plea then was echoed by A. V. Artiukhina, the last head of the *Zhenotdel* before its dissolution in 1930, at the Second Session of VTsIK (All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Soviets), Fourteenth Convocation, in November 1929. Artiukhina warned that if such work was not improved, "backward" peasant women would not support collectivization and would be exploited by the kulak. See *XIV Vserossiiskii s'ezd sovetov. Stenograficheskii otchet*, Moscow, 1929, Biulleten' no. 3, pp. 11-12; and *II sessiia VTsIK XIV sozyva. Stenograficheskii otchet*, Moscow, 1929, Biulleten' no. 7, pp. 25-28.

¹⁴ See, for examples, *Chto nuzhno znat' kazhdomu rabotniku kolkhoza? (Dlia 25000 tov., edushchikh v kolkhozy)*, Moscow, 1930, p. 7; *Derevenskii kommunist*, no. 1, 12 January 1930, p. 32; and M. Kureiko, *25-tysiachniki na kolkhoznoi stroike*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1931, pp. 44-45. For information on the expanding role of women in political life in the countryside, see Dorothy Atkinson, *The End of the Russian Land Commune, 1905-1930*, Stanford, CA, 1983, pp. 367-368; and Ethel Dunn, "Russian Rural Women," in Dorothy Atkinson, Alexander Dallin, and Gail Warshofsky Lapidus, eds., *Women in Russia*, Stanford, CA, 1977, p. 173.

Nevertheless, the party's efforts were too little and too late. Moreover, and despite periodic waves of party and government expulsions and purges to offset local excesses, the party's contradictory demands of a "correct approach" to the peasantry and the timely implementation of often brutal policies made it highly unlikely that the rough, civil-war methods of rural officials would be or could be tempered or civilized. Nor could the party mitigate the effect that it perceived the kulak and *podkulachnik* had in sparking women's opposition and the *bab'i bunty*. As a consequence, the party failed to quiet the fears of many peasant women or to prevent the wave of *bab'i bunty* that erupted in the countryside as a reaction to both rumor and reality.

The Communist Party claimed that the underlying basis of women's protest during collectivization was irrational female hysteria unleashed by the "kulak *agitprop*," or the rumor-mill, and reinforced by the women's *petit bourgeois*, small landholder instincts. It was true that the rumor-mill often played a very important role in sparking *bab'i bunty* and women's protest; it was also true that peasant women's "*petit bourgeois* instincts" played a central role in their opposition to collectivization and the transformation of the life of the village that it entailed. However, the protest engendered by the rumor-mill and by some of the policies of collectivization was not always "irrational" or the manifestation of a *petit bourgeois* class consciousness.

Rumors about collectivization and the collective farm raged through the countryside. Heated discussions took place in village squares, at the wells, in the cooperative shops, and at the market.¹⁵ At one and the same time, there were tales of the return of the Whites and the *pomeshchiki* (landlords), the coming of Antichrist, Polish *pans*, and the Chinese, the arrival of commissars, Bolsheviks, Communists, and Soviet gendarmes, and impending famine and devastation.¹⁶ Among the rumors were many that struck a particular resonance in the minds and hearts of peasant women. These rumors, broadly speaking, touched upon questions of religion, the family, and everyday life.

¹⁵ Sadovnikov, "Shefstvo nad kolkhozom 'Revoliutsii,'" *Sovetskaia iustitsiia*, no. 6, 28 February 1930, pp. 5-6.

¹⁶ These rumors were widespread and have been gleaned from many different sources. See, for examples, TsGAOR (Central State Archive of the October Revolution, Moscow), *f.* 5470, *op.* 14, *d.* 204, *l.* 54 (trade union of chemical workers, *svodka* on the work of Leningrad 25,000ers in the countryside); I. A. Ivanov, "Pomoshch' leningradskikh rabochikh v kollektivizatsii sel'skogo khoziaistva podshefnykh raionov," *Rabochie Leningrada v bor'be za pobedu sotsializma*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1963, p. 219; N. A. Ivnitiskii and D. M. Ezerskii, eds., "Dvadtsatipiatitysiachniki i ikh rol' v kollektivizatsii sel'skogo khoziaistva v 1930 g.," *Materiialy po istorii SSSR. Dokumenty po istorii Sovetskogo obshchestva*, fasc. 1, Moscow, 1955, pp. 425-426; and *Sotsialisticheskoe zemledelie*, 31 December 1930, p. 3.

Some of them assumed fantastic dimensions; others—whether fantastic or not—were sometimes based on actual occurrences.

Rumors concerning the Apocalypse were widespread at this time. During the initial stages of collectivization, there was a wholesale attack on religion and the Church, which, although largely the result of actions of local crusaders and militant atheists, was not officially condemned by Moscow until after March 1930. At this time, churches were closed down and transformed into clubs or offices, church bells were removed, village priests were hounded and imprisoned, and icons were burned. Both the onslaught on religion and the scale of the general offensive on traditional ways of life in the village served to encourage an apocalyptic mindset among the peasantry.

The collective farm became the symbol of the Antichrist on earth. In one village, old women asked, "Is it true or not?—they say that all who join the collective farm will be signed over to the Antichrist."¹⁷ On the eve of collectivization, reports from the North Caucasus claimed that a certain personage assuming the identity of Christ was wandering through the villages proclaiming the coming of the Last Judgment. He had in his possession a document from the Virgin Mary calling for everyone to leave the collective farm prior to Judgment Day or else to face the wrath of God. The Christ of the North Caucasus also had a blacklist of collective farmers for use on Judgment Day.¹⁸ When, in the autumn of 1929, the church was closed in the Ukrainian village of Bochkarko, it was claimed that a miraculous light issued from the church and a sign appeared on the cupola, which read: "Do not join the collective farm or I will smite thee."¹⁹ In the village of Brusianka (Bazhenskii raion, Sverdlovskii okrug, in the Urals), tickets to the next world went on sale; they were sold in three classes and prices ranged from 50 kopeks to 2 rubles 50 kopeks.²⁰

Peasant women were especially susceptible to rumors about the Apocalypse and Antichrist and to news of events like those described above. The peasant woman was the upholder of religion within the village and household, so it was natural that the attacks on religion and the Church often affected women most acutely. The peasant woman,

¹⁷ L. Berson, *Vesna 1930 goda. Zapiska dvadtsatipiatitsiachnika*, Moscow, 1931, pp. 18-19.

¹⁸ TsGAOR, f. 5469, op. 13, d. 123, ll. 28-40 (*Dokladnye zapiski* on the activities of metal workers in the North Caucasus countryside in the fall of 1929; compiled by the metal-workers union).

¹⁹ TsGAOR, f. 5469, op. 13, d. 123, ll. 78-91 (*Dokladnye zapiski* on the activities of metal-workers in the Ukrainian countryside in the fall of 1929; compiled by the metal workers union).

²⁰ A. Angarov, "Sel'sovet i likvidatsiia kulachestva kak klassa," *Bol'shevik*, no. 6, 31 March 1930, p. 25.

however, was also said to be particularly responsive to tales of the supernatural. It may be that women's protest sparked by such fantastic rumors was based on a combination of devotion to the faith and superstition. It may also be that tales of the Apocalypse, which forecast an imminent cataclysm in which God destroys the ruling powers of evil and raises the righteous to life in a messianic kingdom, served as a religious justification (either perceived to be real or exploited as a pretext) for peasant resistance to the state or provided a peasant vocabulary of protest.²¹ Whether a particular form of peasant protest, a pretext for resistance, or an irrational impulse, peasant women's protest raised by religious rumors and the attack on the Church derived at least in part from legitimate concerns over the fate of the Church and the believers.

There were also rumors that touched upon questions of the family and everyday life and that were especially troubling to peasant women. Some of these rumors were in the realm of the absurd, such as the rumor that spread through the countryside that four thousand young peasant women were to be sent to China to pay for the Far Eastern railroad or the variation of this rumor, which stated that only women weighing over three and one half *puds* (approximately 126 pounds) would be sent to China.²² Mikhail Sholokhov in the novel *Virgin Soil Uplifted* provides another example of rumor in the category of the absurd, most probably a variation of a rumor in actual circulation. Sholokhov writes:

There was a nun in the village the day before yesterday She spent the night at Timofei Borshchov's and told them the fowls had been got together so we could send them to town for the townsfolk to make noodle soup with, then we would fix up little chairs for the old women, a special shape, with straw on them, and make them sit on our eggs until they hatched, and any old woman who rebelled would be tied to her chair.²³

This rumor clearly verged on the fantastic, but it should be noted that it was based on two real grievances that women held during collectivization. These concerned the socialization of domestic livestock—the economic mainstay of a peasant woman's existence—and the introduction of incubators, opposition to which was due either to the fact that

²¹ During the Schism, the Old Believers often expressed protest in similar terms. Moreover, an apocalyptic mindset among peasants seems to be a characteristic response at times of momentous upheaval and transformation. See, for example, Michael Cherniavsky, "The Old Believers and the New Religion," in Michael Cherniavsky, ed., *The Structure of Russian History*, New York, 1970, pp. 140-188.

²² Angarov, "Sel'sovet i likvidatsiia," p. 25.

²³ Mikhail Sholokhov, *Virgin Soil Uplifted*, tr. by Robert Darglish, vol. 1, Moscow, 1980, p. 176.

their use was predicated on the socialization of poultry or else the perhaps frightening novelty of their appearance.

In addition to these rumors, there were a series of rumors of equally fantastic dimensions, which claimed that collectivization would bring with it the socialization of children, the export of women's hair, communal wife-sharing, and the notorious common blanket under which all collective farmers, both male and female, would sleep.²⁴ These rumors were of obvious concern to women and, moreover, very possibly were inspired by cases when local officials either attempted to implement similar practices or told peasants that such practices were in the offing. For example, the 25,000er Gorbunevskii, working in the Crimea, announced on 1 March 1930 that his collective farm would become a commune and that all of the peasant children would be socialized. When the parents of the soon-to-be socialized children heard this, they began a massive slaughter of their also soon-to-be socialized livestock, fortunately sparing the children.²⁵ The RSFSR Commissar of Justice, N. M. Ianson, told of a case involving an "aesthetic deviation" that may have been the basis of tales of the export of women's hair. According to Ianson, there was a local Communist in the Urals—a former partisan and party member from 1917 or 1918—who made all the village women cut their hair short. Ianson claimed that the Communist took seriously (and literally) the propaganda centering on the need to create a new life (быт) in the village and to bring the countryside closer to the city. The Communist felt that short hair—as well as the introduction of short skirts—would give the *baba* a more urban look. One *baba*, who felt differently, wrote in a letter of complaint, "he has shamed us for all of our life, only death remains"²⁶ Rumors of the common blanket, which were probably the most pervasive of all, also may have derived from one or two cases when local activists discussed the promise of communism. One *Rabkrin* (Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate) plenipotentiary told women that they would all have to sleep, along with all of the men, under one common blanket.²⁷ In the North Caucasus, local activists in one village actually went so far as to confiscate all blankets. They told the peasants

²⁴ Berson, *Vesna 1930 goda*, pp. 18-19; *Bastiony revoliutsii. Stranitsy istorii leningradskikh zavodov*, fasc. 3, Leningrad, 1960, p. 241; and see note 16 above.

²⁵ *Trud*, 28 March 1930, p. 3.

²⁶ This local Communist was originally sentenced to six years for his "aesthetic excess" but later the term was lowered. Ianson claimed he was extremely progressive, given his social conditions. See N. M. Ianson, "O peregibakh i ikh ispravlenii," *Sovetskaia iustitsiia*, no. 11, 20 April 1930, p. 3; and "Rech' t. Iansona na 3-om soveshchanii sudebno-prokurorskikh rabotnikov," *Sovetskaia iustitsiia*, no. 24/25, 10-20 September 1930, pp. 7-8.

²⁷ *Sovetskaia iustitsiia*, no. 13, 10 May 1930, p. 10 (Editorial by P. I. Stuchka).

that henceforth there would be no more individual blankets; all would sleep on a 700 meter-long bed under a 700 meter-long blanket.²⁸

Many of these rumors clearly played upon the real fears of peasant women concerning issues of family and everyday life. Moreover, given the enormity of the transformation implemented by the state at this time along with the "excesses," the horrendously low level of rural officialdom, and the actual occurrence of any number of bizarre instances such as those described above, one can only say with difficulty that peasant women's protest was irrational. One could perhaps claim, as Petro Grigorenko suggests in his memoirs, that women often simply exploited the rumors of the absurd, without really believing them, as a way to attack the collective farm under the guise of irrational, nonpolitical protest and, consequently, as a way to avoid the suppression of resistance by outside forces (armed civilian forces, security troops, or the militia) as might have been the case in an overtly anti-Soviet village uprising.²⁹ The plausibility of this suggestion will be examined below. For now, it is sufficient to conclude that, whether pretext or actual belief, the rumor-mill struck a deep chord among peasant women who saw many of their most cherished beliefs and domestic interests under attack.

Rumors, however, were not always the spark behind the *bab'i bunt*y. Quite often, protest was triggered directly by clearly articulated opposition to the implementation of radical policies. This opposition raises the issue of the "*petit bourgeois* instincts" of peasant women. Such "instincts," indeed, formed a part of the basis for resistance and figure largely in the rumor-mill, but opposition to policy deriving from so-called "*petit bourgeois*" concerns was often less motivated by "instinct" than by a set of rational interests, revolving around the family and the domestic economy. For example, peasant women led the protest against attempts to socialize domestic livestock because the domestic livestock was generally the basis and justification of the woman's economic position within the household. Women also protested directly and without recourse to the rumor-mill over issues concerning their children. Once again, the socialization of domestic livestock could be a threat because the loss of a milch cow could very well mean that peasant children would be without milk.³⁰ In later years,

²⁸ Angarov, "Sel'sovet i likvidatsiia," p. 21.

²⁹ Petro G. Grigorenko, *Memoirs*, tr. by Thomas P. Whitney, New York, 1982, p. 35.

³⁰ Anna Louise Strong, *The Soviets Conquer Wheat*, New York, 1931, p. 37. It should be noted that Beatrice Farnsworth briefly mentions the rational content of the *bab'i bunt*y of collectivization in an essay that appeared as this article was being revised. See her interesting "Village Women Experience the Revolution," in Abbott Gleason, Peter Kenez, and Richard Stites, eds., *Bolshevik Culture: Experiment and Order in the Russian Revolution*, Bloomington, 1985, p. 254.

Stalin even admitted how important an issue the loss of a cow had been in provoking women's opposition to the collective farm when he said, "in the not too distant past, Soviet power had a little misunderstanding with the collective farm women. The issue was cows."³¹ In one village, a *babii bunt* occurred over the proposed closing of a mill. The women's concern here was that, "we cannot feed our children" if the mill closes down.³² Some women also objected to the introduction of nurseries. According to Maurice Hindus, the Ukrainian-born American reporter, this was due to the high infant mortality rate in the village. Hindus claimed that there was not a woman in the village that he visited who had not lost a child in infancy, so it was natural that these women were reluctant to entrust their children to the care of others. (This reluctance, moreover, was particularly appropriate, given the experience of caring for socialized livestock.)³³ None of these concerns derived from "instinct"; rather, they were legitimate and articulate protest against specific policies and practices associated with the initial stages of collectivization.

It is evident that official perceptions of the basis of peasant women's protest were at least in part misconceived and that the *content* of women's protest was rational and based on legitimate concerns. The question that now arises is the extent to which official perceptions about the *form* of women's protest, the *babii bunt*, were accurate?

The *bab'i bunty* were depicted as spontaneous outbursts of mass hysteria marked by indiscriminate violence, disorder, and a cacophony of high-pitched voices all shouting demands at once. Groups of women assembled at the village square became "milling crowds." And behind every *babii bunt* could be found a kulak or *podkulachnik* agitator who exploited the ignorant, irrational *babas*. Instead of calmly discussing grievances in an organized, "cultured" manner, reports describing women's protest claimed, for example, that, at soviet meetings, the women would simply vote against *all* measures of Soviet power regardless of content or that, at secret meetings against the collective farm in March and April 1930, the women (who formed the majority of those in attendance and were the most active participants) would all talk at once with neither chairman or agenda, in an atmosphere of bedlam.³⁴ Women often physically blocked the carting away of requisitioned grain

³¹ Stalin, "Rech' na pervom vsesoiuznom s'ezde kolkhoznikov-udarnikov," *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, p. 252.

³² V. Denisov, *Odin iz dvadtsati piati tysiach*, Krasnoiarsk, 1967, pp. 19-21.

³³ Maurice Hindus, *Red Bread*, New York, 1931, p. 14.

³⁴ Berson, *Vesna 1930 goda*, p. 73; S. Leikin, "Raskulachennyi kulak i ego taktika," *Bol'shevik*, no. 13, 15 July 1930, p. 74; Sadovnikov, "Shefstvo nad kolkhozom 'Revoliutsii,'" *Sovetskaiia iustitsiia*, no. 6, 28 February 1930, pp. 5-6.

or the entrances to huts of peasants scheduled to be exiled as kulaks, forcibly took back socialized seed and livestock, and led assaults on officials. The response of officials was frequently to hide or run away and to allow the *bab'i bunty* to take their course until the women ran out of steam—for the most part without recourse to the use of force. In the first half of 1930, the end result was generally the dissolution of the collective farm. The women were seldom held responsible for their actions, thanks to official perceptions of the basis of such actions. The *bab'i bunty* thus accomplished what they set out to accomplish and the state held strong in its perceptions of peasant women's protest.

There is a most illuminating case, rare in its detail, of a *babii bunt* in the Russian village of Belovka in Chistopol canton in the Tatar ASSR in 1929 which perfectly illustrates official perceptions of and reactions to the *bab'i bunty*. The cause of the *babii bunt* in Belovka was a decision made by the local soviet in August 1929 to introduce a five-field system of crop rotation in the village and to carry out a redistribution of peasant lands. Behind the *babii bunt*, according to the description of the case, loomed the "local kulaks" and, in particular, the insidious figure of one Sergei Fomin, the "kulak" miller. The case report read:

As a result of kulak agitation among the *dark, illiterate* [italics mine—L.V.] peasant women, a crowd of 100 people ... firmly demanded the repeal of the decree on the introduction of the five-field system.

Despite warnings to disperse, the crowd, "supported by the general din," continued its protest, knocking to the ground and beating a member of the local soviet. At this point, other soviet activists entered the fray and, according to the report, prevented the crowd from realizing its presumed intentions of beating the activist to unconsciousness. The case was brought to the attention of the regional court, which prosecuted the ten most active *babas* and the miller Fomin, who was described as the "ideological instigator" of the disturbance. Fomin, who was also charged with setting fire to the local soviet secretary's home, was prosecuted separately, according to "special consideration." The women, prosecuted under article 59² of the criminal code for mass disturbances, were given sentences of imprisonment with strict isolation ranging from two to three years.

The Belovka case was reexamined by the Supreme Court in January 1930, at which time the decision of the regional court was overturned. The Supreme Court held Fomin *exclusively* responsible for the women's actions, describing him as the "ideological inspiration," the "ideological leader [вожак] and main "culprit" in the disturbance. Fomin's "counterrevolutionary organizational role" in the disturbance was the "actual root" of the *babii bunt* and, according to the Supreme

Court, the regional court had failed to discern this clearly enough. In addition, the Supreme Court accused the local soviet of Belovka of insufficient preliminary preparatory work among women, something that could have mitigated the effects of Fomin's propaganda. Finally, the sentences of the women, all described as illiterate, middle and lower-middle peasants, and representative of the "most backward part of the peasantry" (i.e., women), were lessened to forced labor within the village for periods ranging from six months to one year. The purpose of the sentences was to serve as a warning and an educational measure and *not* as punishment.³⁵

This case is instructive in illuminating official views of and reactions to peasant women's protest. In Belovka, the women were viewed as no more than naive dupes of the local kulaks who served as a figurative battering ram against Soviet power. The local soviet's failure to work among the women and prepare them for the new policy transformed them into ammunition, which the kulak could fire at the Soviet regime. However, the Belovka case may not tell the whole story of the *bab'i bunty*. Petro Grigorenko, in his memoirs, described the *bab'i bunty* as a kind of "tactic." The women would initiate opposition to the collective farm or other policies and the men would remain on the sidelines until the local activists attempted to quell the disorder. At that point, the more vulnerable peasant men could safely enter the fray as chivalrous defenders of wives, mothers, and daughters rather than as anti-Soviet *podkulachniki*.³⁶ Descriptions of *bab'i bunty* by cadres in the field offer confirmation of Grigorenko's findings and appear to belie the official image as presented in the Belovka case.

A riot that occurred in the village of Lebedevka in Kursk at the Budennyi collective farm may serve as an example. A 25,000er by the name of Dobychin, serving as a plenipotentiary for collectivization, arrived in the collective farm on 7 March. Dobychin called a meeting of the peasant women and was greeted with cries of "We do not want a collective farm" and "You want to derail the *muzhik*." Dobychin responded, "We will not hold such types in the collective farm, good riddance [s]leep it off and you'll see that we will let the *bedniak* [poor peasant] derail him who made you drunk and sent you here." Dobychin's tactic led to a general uproar and an assault on Dobychin. The women, with one Praskov'ia Avdiushenko in the lead, approached the stage where he stood. Praskov'ia said to Dobychin, "Ah well, come nearer to us." With this, she grabbed the worker by his collar and

³⁵ "Nepравil'noe vydelenie dela ob ideinom vdokhnovitele massovykh bezporiadkov," *Sudebnaia praktika*, no. 3, 28 February 1930, pp. 11-12.

³⁶ Grigorenko, *Memoirs*, p. 35. Also see Atkinson, *The End of the Russian Land Commune*, pp. 367-368, for support of Grigorenko's conclusion.

dragged him off the stage. Dobychin somehow managed to escape, but the unrest continued and even escalated when the church watchman's wife began to ring the church bell. With this, all of the peasants entered the fray. They seized their recently socialized livestock and prepared a collective declaration requesting permission to quit the farm. This disturbance, like many others, was not suppressed, but simply ended with the collapse of the collective farm.³⁷

A similar situation was described by the worker Zamiatin who was among those workers recruited from the city soviets in early 1930 to work in the local rural soviets. Zamiatin depicted the situation faced by the 25,000er V. Klinov. Zamiatin said that the approach to Klinov's village resembled an "armed camp"; on his way, he saw a sign nailed to a bridge that read: "Vas'ka [Klinov] you scum, get out. We will break your legs." When he arrived, Zamiatin found the village alive with rumors of the approach of a band of riders who were coming to kill all the Communists and collective farmers. In this village, dekulakization had already been implemented but, as happened elsewhere, the kulaks were not yet removed from the village. This omission, according to Zamiatin, had led to the crisis that existed. With Zamiatin's arrival, Klinov set about preparing for the exile of the kulaks. He began by removing the church bell, which traditionally served as tocsin to gather together the peasants in case of emergency. The heads of kulak families were exiled, and all went well until one of the exiled kulaks returned to announce that the other kulaks would soon be coming back to seek vengeance. This led to the decision to exile the families of the exiled kulak heads of households. The announcement of this decision led to an uproar. The peasant women, in an attempt to forestall this action, blocked the entrances of the huts of the kulak families. Several days later, the women also led the opposition to the attempt to cart away the village's grain by blocking the grain warehouse. This led to a *babii bunt*, followed quickly by a general free-for-all in which all the peasants participated in a pitchfork battle. The disturbance was suppressed by the militia, which was called in after all of the peasants had joined the rebellion.³⁸

In both of these cases, peasant women were responsible for initiating the resistance and were soon joined by the peasant men in a general village riot. In a classic depiction of a *babii bunt* in a Cossack village in *Virgin Soil Upturned*, the Cossack men stood at the back of the crowd of women urging them on when they attacked the chairman of the local soviet. Here, the women led the attack on the grain warehouse "with

³⁷ G. I. Arsenov, *Lebedevka, selo kolkhoznoe*, Kursk, 1964, pp. 43-44.

³⁸ S. Zamiatin, *Burnyi god. Opyt raboty piatitistachnika v Rudnianskom raione na Nizhnei Volge*, Moscow, 1931, pp. 9-16.

the silent approval of the menfolk at the back.” And while the women were dragging the chairman of the collective farm through the village, the Cossack men broke the locks of the grain warehouse and seized their grain.³⁹ The women served both as initiators and decoys in this disturbance.

Lev Kopelev has provided yet another description of a *babii bunt*, and one that closely conforms to Grigorenko’s hypothesis. Kopelev described a disturbance in a Ukrainian village:

A “riot” also broke out in Okhochaya. A crowd of women stormed the kolkhoz [collective farm] stables and barns. They cried, screamed, wailed, demanding their cows and seed back. The men stood a way off, in clusters, sullenly silent. Some of the lads had pitchforks, stakes, axes tucked in their sashes. The terrified granary man ran away; the women tore off the bolts and together with the men began dragging out the bags of seed.⁴⁰

Here, as elsewhere, the *babii bunt* was the first stage in a general peasant riot. Here too the women had specific aims and, whether the riots were intended to dissolve the collective farm, halt dekulakization, or retake socialized seed and livestock, they accomplished their aims.

Women tended to lead the village riots because they were less vulnerable to repression than peasant men. There were even reports of *bab’i bunt* in 1929 when the women brought their children with them into battle or laid down in front of tractors to block collectivization.⁴¹ In the *bab’i bunt*, the men stood to the side. In non-violent protest, the situation was similar. Peasant men frequently allowed their female relatives to express opposition to policy. According to a report of a worker brigade in Tambov, in the Central Black Earth Region, the men did not go to the meetings on collectivization, but sent the women instead. When asked why they did not attend the meetings, the men replied, “They [the women] are equal now, as they decide so we will agree”⁴² In this way, it was easy for a peasant to claim that he had not joined the collective farm or surrendered his grain because his wife would not let him or threatened him with divorce. The 25,000er Gruzdev was told by one peasant, “my wife does not want to socialize our cow, so I cannot do this.”⁴³ One peasant man explained the power of

³⁹ Sholokhov, *Virgin Soil Uplifted*, vol. 1, pp. 311, 316, 321.

⁴⁰ Lev Kopelev, *Education of a True Believer*, New York, 1980, p. 188.

⁴¹ *II sessiia VTsIK XIV sozyva*, Biulleten’ no. 7, p. 28.

⁴² Chernomorskii, “Rol’ rabochikh brigad,” p. 325.

⁴³ Denisov, *Odin iz dvadtsati piati tysiach*, p. 27. It should be noted that in many cases peasant men were sincere about their wives’ resistance and that there were reports of divorce and family strife over the collective farm. See Strong, pp. 114-115; and R. Belbei, *Za ili protiv. (Kak rabochii ispravliaet peregiby v derevne)*, Moscow, 1930, p. 50.

the women in the following way:

We dared not speak at meetings. If we said anything that the organizers didn't like, they abused us, called us *koolaks*, and even threatened to put us in prison We let the women do the talking If the organizer tried to stop them they made such a din that he had to call off the meeting.⁴⁴

It is clear here that at least some peasant men recognized both their own vulnerability and the far greater leverage that peasant women had in speaking out against state policies.

Peasant women were able to get away with a great deal more than their male counterparts in resisting collectivization and the other policies of the times. Force was generally not used to suppress *bab'i bunt*y. Furthermore, it would appear that women tended not to be prosecuted under article 58 of the criminal code for counterrevolutionary crimes in cases when opposition to policy led to court actions: in reports of court cases in *Sudebnaia praktika* (supplement to *Sovetskaia iustitsiia*, the organ of the RSFSR People's Commissariat of Justice) in 1930 and 1931, only men appear as defendants in cases prosecuted under article 58. This tendency, along with the infrequent use of force to suppress *bab'i bunt*y, was a function of both official images of women's protest as irrational and the fear and inability of rural officials to respond effectively to the type of bedlam created by disgruntled peasant women. And, if actions reveal motives, it is likely that peasant women who rebelled against the policies of collectivization clearly understood how they were perceived and appreciated the power of their "irrational behavior."

The *bab'i bunt*y that occurred during the years of collectivization were neither as irrational nor as spontaneous as the official accounts tend to conclude. The anatomy of the *bab'i bunt*y and the content of peasant women's protest contained several consistent features, which belie the official images. First, the *bab'i bunt*y often revealed a relatively high degree of organization and tactics. Following the initial articulation of protest, which could frequently resemble a mob scene, the peasant women would endeavor to disarm local activists or plenipotentiaries by one means or another, sound the church bell to alert the village and mobilize support, and, finally, approach directly the resolution of the problem that had given rise to the protest.⁴⁵ Moreover, the

⁴⁴ Hindus, *Red Bread*, pp. 169-170.

⁴⁵ See the case described in Lynne Viola, "Notes on the Background of Soviet Collectivisation: Metal Worker Brigades in the Countryside, Autumn 1929," *Soviet Studies*, vol. 36, no. 2, April 1984, p. 216, in which the women organizers of a rebellion called upon

women's protest frequently had a specific goal in mind (dissolving the collective farm, seizing socialized seed or livestock, halting grain requisitions or dekulakization, etc.). Second, the women's protest was frequently based upon opposition to specific policies and, whether inspired by seemingly irrational rumors, rumors used as a pretext for resistance, or direct opposition to the implementation of policy, it derived from rational and legitimate concerns and socio-economic interests, which were under attack by the state. Third, peasant women's protest seems to have served as a *comparatively* safe outlet for peasant opposition in general and as a screen to protect the more politically vulnerable male peasants who could not oppose policy as actively or openly without serious consequence but who, nevertheless, could and did either stand silently, and threateningly, in the background or join in the disturbance once protest had escalated to a point where men might enter the fray as defenders of their female relatives. Finally, an important feature distinguished women's protest from protest (generally led by males) officially branded as "counterrevolutionary." Many of the counterrevolutionary cases prosecuted under article 58 of the criminal code in late 1929 and early 1930 occurred while the defendants were drunk. Women's protest, on the other hand, appears to have been, with few exceptions, sober and, consequently, perhaps, more rational than male protest⁴⁶

Several other conclusions about official perceptions of the *bab'i bunty* and women's protest supplement direct observations on the nature of peasant women's opposition during collectivization. First of all, the *bab'i bunty* were very much a part of the traditional peasant approach to political protest. Peasants rarely resisted the state through organized political action. Their resistance often assumed the aspect of a spontaneous, disorganized, irrational *bunt*. However, peasant rebellions frequently merely *appeared* irrational to outside observers, who were powerless to cope with massive explosions of discontent and who, in the case of the *bab'i bunty*, were reluctant to resort to armed force to quell riots.⁴⁷ The outside observers who wrote about the *bab'i bunty* tended, in addition, to be city people or, at the very least, of a higher cultural level than the peasants and, consequently, had a very different conception of the forms that protest and rebellion were expected to

all women to join the protest or face a fine of three rubles.

⁴⁶ "Direktiv UKK VerkhSuda RSFSR," *Sudebnaia praktika*, no. 5, 10 April 1930, pp. 4-6.

⁴⁷ Roberta Manning has analyzed peasant rebellions during the 1905 revolution and its aftermath and has concluded that, "however spontaneous and chaotic they [riots] might have appeared, they display signs of organization and prior planning and a rudimentary sense of strategy." See her description of peasant protest in Roberta Thompson Manning, *The Crisis of the Old Order in Russia*, Princeton, 1982, pp. 148-158.

assume. The rudimentary organization behind the *bab'i bunty* and the specific grievances articulated in protest were often, in the eyes of outside observers, overshadowed or impossible to discern against the backdrop of apparent pandemonium.

Second, and of equal importance, there is a real possibility that the Communist Party was aware of the true nature and dynamics of the *bab'i bunty* and women's protest during collectivization. As Field has argued, the "myth of the tsar" was as useful to the tsarist government as it was to the peasantry. It was based on the "myth of the peasant" and provided the regime with a rationalization for any problems leading to peasant disturbances.⁴⁸ In the Soviet context, the myth of the peasant could serve several purposes. First, official images of the *bab'i bunty* and peasant women's protest could be manipulated to minimize the true nature and extent of the opposition engendered by collectivization. Second, it served a particularly useful purpose when women's protest engulfed entire villages, including poor and middle peasant women. In these cases, the party had a ready rationalization for the contradictions of the class struggle in the village, for its failure to capture the support of its poor and middle peasant allies among the peasantry. Finally, particular injustices could be attributed to officials who, it was said, were violating the essentially correct policy of the center. In this way, Moscow could, and often did, seek to divert grievances from the state to local officials, who were frequently used as scapegoats. Moreover, it is clear that, at least in the months following the March 1930 retreat, peasants also adhered or pretended to adhere to this rationalization, displaying a Soviet-style naive monarchism which pitted rural officials against Stalin and the Central Committee of the Communist Party.⁴⁹

Peasant women played an important role in the protest that consumed many Russian and Ukrainian villages during the First Five-Year Plan, and it is important to attempt to understand the nature of this protest and the state's response to it. Yet, one cannot claim that all women were united, on the basis of similar interests, in opposition to the collective farm. Dorothy Atkinson has suggested that there were also women (widows, heads of households, wives of seasonal workers) who supported collectivization because of the difficulties of working their land alone and women, mostly young, who were genuinely

⁴⁸ Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar*, pp. 2, 213-214.

⁴⁹ See Lynne Viola, "The Campaign of the 25,000ers. A Study of the Collectivization of Soviet Agriculture, 1929-1931," Ph.D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1984, chapters 4 and 5.

enthusiastic about collectivization.⁵⁰ Furthermore, the general scale of peasant resistance to the state during collectivization should not be exaggerated. Although the exact dimensions of peasant resistance are not known, it is quite clear that the opposing sides in the rural conflicts caused by collectivization were unevenly matched. With the possible exception of the early months of 1930, the state always retained the ability to respond to peasant unrest in an organized fashion with a show of force. And—again with an exception, that of Central Asia—the confrontation between state and peasantry in no way approached the scale of a full-fledged civil war with troop formations and organized national or regional resistance. Despite these qualifications, however, the peasant unrest of these years was of sufficient scale and ferocity to force the state to take notice. And notice it did. The Party admitted that the “retreat” of 1930 came about as a response to peasant unrest, and Stalin even made note of the opposition of peasant women to the attempt to socialize domestic livestock when, in 1933, he promised a cow for every collective farm household. This was clearly not a retreat from collectivization, but it was a retreat—and a retreat that proved permanent⁵¹—from many of the most objectionable policies and practices of those times, such as the open attack on the Church, the attempt to socialize domestic livestock, and the unsanctioned “dizziness” of local cadres who sought to impose upon the peasantry their ideas of socialist construction in the realm of everyday life. It is plausible and logical to suggest that the protest of peasant women played an important role in the amendment of policies and practices in these spheres.

⁵⁰ Atkinson, *The End of the Russian Land Commune*, pp. 367-369.

⁵¹ As R. W. Davies has demonstrated in *The Soviet Collective Farm*, Cambridge, 1980, the basic shape of collectivized agriculture took form in the years, 1930-31, as a compromise (albeit unbalanced) between the state and the peasantry, between socialist fortress-storming in the village and traditional ways. The state was forced to settle for a program minimum, in which the peasantry was allowed to maintain a private plot, domestic livestock, and limited direct access to the market. After 1930-31, the compromise would be maintained of necessity, and no longer on the basis of peasant protest, by what E. J. Hobsbawm has labeled the “normal strategy of the traditional peasantry”—passivity—which, he adds, “is not an ineffective strategy, for it exploits the major assets of the peasantry, its numbers and the impossibility of making it do some things by force for any length of time, and it also utilises a favourable tactical situation, which rests on the fact that no change is what suits a traditional peasantry best.” See E. J. Hobsbawm, “Peasants and Politics,” *Journal of Peasant Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, October 1973, p. 13. For further information on the shape of collective farming in the 1930s, see Roberta T. Manning, *Government in the Soviet Countryside in the Stalinist Thirties: The Case of Belyi Raion in 1937*, Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies, no. 301, Pittsburgh, 1984.

The *bab'i bunty* and the outspoken protest of peasant women do not appear to have continued beyond the First Five-Year Plan. Nevertheless, during the early years of collectivization, the *bab'i bunty* and women's protest proved the most effective form of peasant opposition to the Soviet state. Peasant women played an important role in the resistance to collectivization, defending their interests and demonstrating a degree of organization and conscious political opposition rarely acknowledged.