

## The Futility of Resistance?

While an authoritarian society diminishes the freedom of its people, sometimes it inadvertently produces leaders who fight back against the oppressive dominance of ideas and policies. As Stalin's collectivization plan unfolded in the 1930s, everyday rebellion became a mandatory part of the existence of millions of peasants. Collectivization essentially became a civil war between the peasants and the Soviet state. Peasants also used the tactics of *razbazarivanie*, which meant the killing or selling of privately-owned cattle and livestock, instead of handing them over to the state. The herds of livestock began to decline dramatically across the Soviet Union, as peasants slaughtered cows, goats, and sheep in record numbers. They also destroyed agricultural machinery and withheld grain for the state.

Rumors played a pivotal role for peasant rebels, as a cultural network for combatting the Soviet state. Poor peasants and kulaks (independent farmers who owned land and hired agricultural labor), used rumors of an impending apocalypse as a tool in a war against collectivization and *dekulakization*. Rumors were everywhere about the evils of collective farms, and they circulated in an underground communication circuit. Peasants viewed collectivization as an assault on their way of life, and news of imminent apocalyptic occurrences was spread through dark rumors. Peasants truly believed that the collective farm would close the churches, that all peasants would have to work on Sundays and they would be prevented from offering prayers. But rumors did not only induce fear, but also were used as weapons by peasants in their fight during collectivization. According to Lynne Viola, rumors united villages and mobilized peasants against the state.<sup>1</sup> Solidarity among the peasants was the foundation for their culture of resistance and they used the rumors, gossip, and conversations as a tactic to sway other peasants who had agreed to work for the state. Peasants used violence against peasants who had sided with the state, and if conversations did not help, anonymous letters and proclamation were sent as threats to intimidate peasants to withdraw their support for the Soviet state.

Even though peasant society was dominated by men, women played a unique role as peasant rebels. *Bab'i bunty*, or women's uprisings, helped foment resistance to collectivization in novel ways that men could not emulate. Women were not subject to the same retaliation and punishment as men, and this allowed them to get away with acts of small scale resistance. Women blocked the entrances to huts of peasants men who were exiled by the state. They also led assaults on state bureaucrats as the punishment meted out to women would be lighter. But in the end, the small acts of uncoordinated acts of violence, and of individual resistance proved to be futile. The Soviet state won the war of collectivization through terror. Many young peasants chose the rewards of modernity, education, and upward mobility in cities, and were persuaded to abandon the lifestyles of their peasant ancestors.

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<sup>1</sup>Lynn Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin. Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).