Peasants into Russians: The Utopian Essence of War Communism

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In Iurii Libedinskii's 1925 novel, *Komissary,* a provincial Bolshevik is heard to say to his colleagues in the summer of 1921:

> There is nothing worse than when you conjure up for yourself a utopia. This, comrades, is a terrible loss, and it was our utopia that, having finished the [civil] war, we turned the army to the labor front, and then [we thought] in a single stroke, at once, we will build socialism. This mistake of ours was shown to us by Kronstadt.[1]

The Bolsheviks depicted in *Komissary* were suffering from the Great Hangover that afflicted party members during the period of retreat from the Civil War economic policies to the New Economic Policy (NEP). The retreat began, generally speaking, at the Tenth Party Congress in March 1921, when grain requisitions and a ban on trade were abandoned in favor of a tax-in-kind and limited trading rights, and it continued until the basic framework of NEP fell into place by early 1922.

As Libedinskii's commissar relates, the Bolsheviks' successes on the battlefield led them to overestimate their abilities and achievements on the economic "front." They came to believe that they could apply the draconian methods used to fight the Civil War to the construction of "socialism," or "communism"—indeed, they assumed that they were well on their way toward its construction, and without the assistance of the revolution in the West, only recently considered essential. It was only the violent force of the worker-peasant-sailor uprisings in January–March 1921 that brought the leading Bolsheviks to their senses and to initiate a retreat.

The transition period was marked by a tremendous sense of letdown. A Western journalist who arrived in Moscow in the summer of 1921 likened the atmosphere to the "aftermath of a big religious revival," noting the "tepid apathy" all around.[2] At

The author thanks Terence Emmons for his helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

[1] Iurii Libedinskii, *Komissary,* 2d ed. (Leningrad, 1926), 114.

[2] F. A. Mackenzie, *Russia before Dawn* (London, 1923), 29.

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party gatherings the sobered talk was of the shattered "illusions" from the period that now came to be called "War Communism." Beneath them all lay the fundamental illusion of War Communism: the Bolsheviks thought they had resolved the dilemma of a proletarian dictatorship in peasant Russia. They allowed themselves to believe that they had managed to accomplish in only a few years what the tsarist government had not been able to achieve over centuries; namely, to break down the traditional isolationist mentality of the Russian peasant, transforming him into a citizen of the Soviet socialist state.

Once this was revealed, in the first weeks of 1921, to be a product of collective Bolshevik self-delusion, the entire structure of assumptions based upon it came crashing down. It was this that Bukharin had in mind when he wrote that "the transition to the new economic policy represented the collapse of our illusions."[3]

To understand how the Bolsheviks "conjured up" their War Communist "utopia" it is necessary to understand the rise to extraordinary status of the People's Commissariat for Food Supply (Narkomprod) during the Civil War. The Bolsheviks established Narkomprod the day after they took power in November 1917. By mid-1920 it had become, next to the War Commissariat, the most powerful government ministry. By then it was a huge apparatus, dominating the entire economic policy.[4] It had surpassed its chief rivals in the Soviet economic bureaucracy, the Supreme Economic Council (VSNKh) and the Commissariat for Agriculture (Narkomzem). It had gradually displaced the peasant cooperative organizations, so that by 1920 the administrative apparatus of the cooperatives had been reduced, in the satisfied words of one leading food official, to a "living corpse."[5]

Narkomprod rose to its position of prominence as the problem of food supply became a critical concern of the Bolshevik government, especially after the onset of civil war. To defeat the White armies, the Red Army would have to be fed—this became the overriding objective of economic policy in the years 1918–20. From the October Revolution until the introduction of NEP in the spring of 1921 there were four successive phases of Bolshevik policy toward the countryside.[6]

[3] *Bolshevik*, 1924, no. 2:3.

[4] On the structure of the Narkomprod apparatus in 1920 see *Chetyre goda prodovol'stvennoi raboty* (Moscow, 1922), 101–7.

[5] Aleksandr Sviderskii in *Ekonomicheskaia zhizn'*, 25 June 1920. By a decree of 27 January 1920 all forms of cooperation were united and placed under Narkomprod's authority. See *Tri goda bor'by s golodom* (Moscow, 1920), 10–12.

[6] The single best study of agricultural policy during the first five years of Bolshevik power was completed in Moscow in 1922 by the non-Marxist agrarian economist Lev Nikolaevich Litoshenko. His manuscript, "Sotsializatsiia zemli v Rossii," was brought out of Soviet Russia in 1922 by Professor Frank Golder and deposited at the Hoover library at Stanford, where it was only recently identified in the Golder Collection (box 20). It is a scholarly study based upon official Soviet publications, supplemented by the author's first-hand observations from within the economic establishment. It will be published in 1995 in Moscow, edited by V. Danilov, I. Egorova, T. Emmons, and B. Patenaude. Lars T. Lih, *Bread and Authority in Russia, 1914–1921* (Berkeley, 1990), offers the best discussion of Bolshevik food policy in 1917–18, emphasizing continuities with the policies of the tsarist and provisional governments. His interpretation of the Civil War period, however, underestimates the influence of ideology on the Soviet leadership and misses important changes in Bolshevik policy and mentality as regards the peasantry, causing him to misrepresent fundamentally the significance of War Communism and the transition to NEP. Sylvana Malle,

The first phase, which lasted from the October Revolution into spring 1918, was based on the "populist" land decree of 8 November 1917, a product of the Bolshevik coalition government with the Left Socialist Revolutionaries (SRs). During this period, partly out of political expediency, partly due to the lack of an apparatus for pursuing a more interventionist policy, the Soviet government was content to allow local authorities to referee the partition of the land. The Bolsheviks temporarily put aside Marxist ideas of encouraging class divisions in the countryside and accepted the SR notion of the "socialist instinct" of the peasantry as a whole—assumed to be overwhelmingly "poor" peasants—in the name of consolidating the "bourgeois" phase of the revolution.

The second phase marked a turn to class war in the countryside, beginning with the May 1918 announcement of a "food dictatorship," the subsequent formation of poor peasants committees and local food committees, and a more aggressive promotion of collective forms of agriculture. The change in policy was caused not by the onset of civil war—in fact, it served to exacerbate hostilities—but by the government's inability to collect adequate amounts of grain, as during the first six months of 1918 most of the grain-consuming regions of Russia became threatened with starvation. The committees of poor peasants were introduced not only as a way to collect grain but also as a way to split the peasantry—which was now conceptualized as divided into rich and poor, haves and have-nots—and to secure a foothold for Soviet power in the countryside. Lenin called the period of spring 1918 the peasant "October."[7]

The "food dictatorship" gave extraordinary powers for food collection to Narkomprod, making Food Commissar Aleksandr Tsiurupa "food dictator," and reaffirmed the principles of the state grain monopoly and fixed grain prices, both of which had been introduced by the Provisional Government. Peasants were instructed to hand over all grain surpluses to the state, and Narkomprod was authorized to use armed force to collect them.[8]

This class-war strategy proved to be a disaster and was abandoned after only several months—in some aspects already by late summer, but generally by the end of 1918 and officially in the beginning of 1919. It gave way to the third phase of Bolshevik peasant policy, which lasted until autumn 1920 and which marked a retreat from the interventionist approach of class war to an attempt merely to "neutralize" the peasantry. The Bolsheviks scrapped their rich-versus-poor division of the countryside and reintroduced into their vocabulary their prerevolutionary concept of a dominant mass of wavering "middle" peasants. The idea now was to pursue a policy of noninterference in the peasant economy and to downplay the notion of class conflict.

The Economic Organization of War Communism (Cambridge, 1985), provides a good overview of economic policy during the Civil War period, albeit with very little political context. See also Bertrand Mark Patenaude, "Bolshevism in Retreat: The Transition to the New Economic Policy, 1920–1922" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1987).

[7] V. I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed., 55 vols. (Moscow, 1958–65), 37:314–15 (hereafter *PSS*). At the time Lenin called for a three-month "grain war" (ibid., 36:374–76).

[8] See *Sistematicheskii sbornik dekretov i rasporiazhenii pravitel'stva po prodovol'stvennomu delu*, 7 vols. (Moscow and Nizhnii-Novgorod, 1919–23), 1:33–34.

At this point there emerged an internal contradiction in the Soviet government's policy toward the countryside. On one hand, Narkomzem followed the policy of noninterference in backing off on its previously aggressive promotion of collectivized agriculture. It went over to conciliatory methods of cultural propaganda among the peasants to promote the benefits of large agricultural units, the sovkhozy and kolkhozy. On the other hand, Narkomprod, charged with feeding the Red Army and the towns, was forced into further intervention into the peasant economy. Thus, in the area of food policy there was much more continuity with the spirit of the "food dictatorship," despite significant changes in principle and method, discussed below. This contradiction between the methods of the two commissariats would remain until, with the fourth phase of Bolshevik peasant policy introduced in autumn 1920, Narkomprod would resolve it by essentially colonizing Narkomzem.

Circumstances in the second half of 1918 prevented Narkomprod from pursuing a food policy that could live up to the new spirit of nonintervention, even as the commissariat had to retreat from enforcing the grain monopoly. The idea behind the monopoly was to calculate the amount of *surplus* grain in the hands of the peasants. But without an effective organization to calculate the actual grain stocks of each peasant household and thereby distinguish between essential and surplus grain, local food committees and party and soviet organs were increasingly reverting to a practice of calculating the sum of grain they absolutely had to collect, giving no thought to a proper registration (*uchet*) of the *total amount* of grain harvested. By the end of 1918 this local practice of *razverstka* was becoming widespread. The method was sanctioned nationally first by the All-Russian Food Conference that met from 30 December to 6 January 1919, and was approved by the Council of People's Commissars on 11 January 1919.[9]

Implementation of the *razverstka* was decentralized. Although Narkomprod set the overall figure, based on the amount of grain needed to support industry and the military, collection was left to local authorities. Narkomprod assigned each province a grain assessment; provincial officials in turn passed on assessments to local authorities down to the village officials, who would figure the breakdown by household. Thus, the center relieved itself of the task of grain registration, and also of having to calculate and enforce payment beneath the provincial level.[10]

At first, this method applied only to grain and fodder, other food products being channeled through the trade unions and peasants' cooperatives. But experience taught the Bolsheviks that where there was no *razverstka,* there was "speculation" and rising prices, and in the course of 1919–20 most other agricultural products and raw material came to be collected in this manner.[11]

Although the *razverstka* total set at the top was supposed to represent the minimum *needs* of the state, it was said to be approximately equal to the total grain

[9] Ibid., 2:324–25. For the prerevolutionary sources of the *razverstka* see Lih, *Bread and Authority,* 48–56.

[10] See N. Osinskii in *Prodovol'stvennaia politika* (Moscow, 1920), 189–90; and Lih, *Bread and Authority,* chap. 7.

[11] *Kalendar'-spravochnik prodovol'stvennika na 1921 god* (Moscow, 1921), 46; K. Ogrin', *Prodovol'stvennaia politika sovetskoi vlasti* (Moscow, 1920), 12–15.

surplus. This preserved the notion of the state monopoly on grain, endowing the state with the legal right to the entire surplus. But it confused the terminology. In fact, the *razverstka* was a kind of tax, but to emphasize this would have been to admit the de facto abandonment of the monopoly.

Clearly the *razverstka* was a recognition of the state's inability to execute genuine *uchet* and of the necessity to appease the countryside. No longer was the state saying it wanted to confiscate all surpluses outright; it was rather stating an amount it required. But that amount was set far above what the peasants collectively were able to give; moreover, because local authorities determined the size of the *razverstka* for individual households, totals that they and the local military could "supplement" for their own needs, it made no difference to the peasants that the general amount was stated beforehand at the top.

The peasants were not free to dispose of whatever grain was left over to them after payment of the assessment; instead, they were supposed to hold on to such surpluses or to trade them to the state at fixed prices as part of compulsory collective state-sponsored goods exchange (*tovaroobmen*). This principle, introduced in March 1918, then reinforced by later decrees as the state moved to suppress all private trade, established that unless the state received 100 percent of a given quota of agricultural products from a given village, no industrial items would be supplied to that village.[12] When such goods were supplied, they were distributed collectively to a village, so that there was no direct relationship between the amount of grain an individual household handed over and the amount of industrial goods it received.[13]

Initially, *tovaroobmen* was supposed to be "equivalent," but as shortages of manufactured goods made this impossible, the exchange was said to be "proportional." Soon, however, even this term became meaningless. According to the most generous estimates, only about half of all grain requisitioned in 1919 was compensated for in any fashion, and the total was estimated to be around 20 percent in 1920.[14] Thus it was necessary to retreat further still to the idea that the manufactured goods owed to the peasants would materialize only in the future and that the peasants should hand over their grain and other products as a "loan" to the town. To the peasants, of course, such promises meant nothing. The *razverstka* had become a requisition.

Tovaroobmen was supposed to be compulsory, but private trade flourished. Early on it did so with limited official sanction, as the government made concessions to workers and "sackmen," mostly peasants from the northern consumer provinces

[12] See N. A. Orlov, *Prodovol'stvennoe delo v Rossii vo vremia voiny i revoliutsii* (Moscow, 1919), 21–25; Ogrin', *Prodovol'stvennaia politika*, 10; *Tri goda bor'by s golodom*, 58; *Vtoroi god bor'by s golodom* (Moscow, 1919), iv; and E. H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, vol. 2 (New York, 1952), 235–36.

[13] See *Prodovol'stvennaia politika*, 183. Lev Kritsman, *Geroicheskii period velikoi russkoi revoliutsii*, 2d ed. (Moscow, 1926), 217, noted that it was poor peasants who received most of the available goods and gave little or nothing in return for them.

[14] Malle, *Economic Organization of War Communism*, 405–6. Z. Atlas, "Iz istorii razvitiia tovaroobmena mezhdu gorodom i derevnei (1918–1921)," *Voprosy ekonomiki*, 1967, no. 9:79. One food official wrote in 1921 that during the Civil War the amount of industrial goods exchanged for grain was so small that "many [food] workers could not formulate what *tovaroobmen* was" (*Chetyre goda prodovol'stvennoi raboty*, 69).

who went south in search of bread and returned, often atop railway cars, bearing sacks of grain. But in 1919–20, as the number of nonmonopolized goods grew smaller, there were only periodic and progressively narrower concessions to private trade.[15]

The guiding principle of the *razverstka* was supposed to be, "Rob from the kulak, don't offend the middle peasant, and give to the poor peasant."[16] Here it was impossible to distinguish between the kulak and the "middle" peasant because both had an interest in not cooperating. The fact that the village collectively was responsible for grain deliveries and that the peasant could not trade or be compensated for his products encouraged the concealment of grain and a decrease in the area of sown acreage.

Despite the talk of noninterference in the peasant economy, the assumption from the outset was that few peasants would voluntarily part with their surpluses. The element of coercion directed against the entire peasantry was to become the hallmark of the *razverstka.* "If you don't give what you owe, we will fight using all methods, up to carrying off your farm," Tsiurupa warned in 1919. "The force of state coercion is the basic measure of our activity. Everything else is subordinated to this."[17] "Coercion" meant the use of armed force. For this a special paramilitary apparatus was required.

Food detachments (*prodotriady*) were first established on a large scale in May 1918, in conjunction with the food-supply dictatorship, as a response to a shortage of local food committees. In August, at the time the Bolsheviks were abandoning their class-war strategy, the government issued a series of decrees in an attempt to impose central control over, and bring order and higher quality to, an activity that had heightened tensions in the countryside. Trade unions, factory committees, and urban and rural soviets were encouraged to create detachments to requisition grain.[18]

Food detachments consisted of two groups: Narkomprod's food army, formed partly by mobilized troops from the Forces of Internal Protection, partly by volunteers recommended by factory committees; and the armed food detachments under the Military Food Bureau (Voenprodbiuro) attached to the All-Russian Central Council of Trade Unions, which operated exclusively in the grain-producing regions and received instructions from Narkomprod and its local organs. By mid-1920 their numbers had swelled into the tens of thousands. The primary purpose of both sets of detachments was to assist in assessing and collecting the *razverstka.*[19]

[15] Patenaude, "Bolshevism in Retreat," 40–44.

[16] Lenin phrased it this way at the Eighth Party Congress in March 1919. See *Prodovol'stvennaia politika,* 185.

[17] Ibid., 196. See also Ia. Brandenburgskii in *Ekonomicheskaia zhizn',* 18 January 1920.

[18] Iu. K. Strizhkov, *Prodovol'stvennye otriady v gody grazhdanskoi voiny i inostrannoi interventsii, 1917–1921* (Moscow, 1973), 100–106, 130; Orlov, *Prodovol'stvennoe delo,* 25; *Prodovol'stvie i revoliutsiia,* 1923, nos. 5–6:173; *Vtoroi god bor'by s golodom,* 7–8; Ogrin', *Prodovol'stvennaia politika,* 8–10.

[19] See *Sistematicheskii sbornik dekretov* 2:25–31. The numbers given for the food army and food detachments vary significantly from source to source. One reliable account lists the peak number under Narkomprod at 62,043 and those under Voenprodbiuro at 30,570, or 1,019 detachments, in December 1920. See S. A. Chernomerets, "Obrazovanie narkomata prodovol'stviia RSFSR i ego deiatel'nost' v

A second element of coercion was aimed at another aspect of enforcement. As the monopoly spread to most food products, Narkomprod established guard detachments to crack down on sackmen and prevent the illegal transportation of food. These were charged with guarding the rail and waterways and the main roads.

Given the reputation that the various food and guard detachments acquired, they appear to have used coercion liberally and arbitrarily. Narkomprod's own documentation testifies to the widespread abuse of their power.[20] When the various food detachments were themselves not the dominant local political force, those in power often relied heavily on them to ward off "kulak" uprisings and bring in the grain. By 1920, their reputation firmly established, the food detachments could rely on intimidation to accomplish their ends. Often their mere arrival in a locale could make grain suddenly appear; they produced, in the words of one Narkomprod official, the "necessary moral effect."[21] All sources agree that without the armed food detachments, the *razverstka* would have been unenforceable.[22]

The guard detachments had an even worse reputation, perhaps in part because of the poor quality of their personnel. Again, the abundant anecdotal evidence aside, official documentation itself is revealing. A VTsIK resolution of 3 January 1919 condemned the reported behavior of guard detachments as a "shocking disgrace"; they "stop trains at every substation, treat searched passengers rudely, especially women, confiscate personal items and products for personal consumption, etc.," and requisition "to the last *funt* even nonregulated products."[23] "There is no statistic to calculate the endless quantity of tears, suffering, the deprivations of a last possession and of life itself, which befell the unlucky sackmen in the memorable winter of 1919–20," Litoshenko wrote in 1922. "In the Russian north you cannot find one village where there were no victims of the food monopoly and of the primitive struggle for bread and life."[24]

During the course of 1919, the hunt for grain became another front in the Civil War. The battles of the food armies and detachments as they brought in an ever increasing (though increasingly insufficient) amount of grain were enthusiastically hailed in the press in the fashion of heroic military struggles. Less often now did one

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1917–1920" (Candidate's dissertation, Saratov University, 1973), 100, 134–35. See also Strizhkov, *Prodovol'stvennye otriady*, 153–61, 249–55. Litoshenko, "Sotsializatsiia zemli," 147, also lists among the armed forces collecting food the militia, the Red Army, and the local Narkomprod officials. See also Patenaude, "Bolshevism in Retreat," 32–38.

[20] See "Prodarmiia" and "Na prodovol'stvennom fronte," in *Biulleten' Narodnogo Komissariata po Prodovol'stviiu*, 28 June 1920 and 21 December 1920, respectively. See also Patenaude, "Bolshevism in Retreat," 142–43, 176, 242–43.

[21] P. K. Kaganovich, quoted in Litoshenko, "Sotsializatsiia zemli," 148. Peasants were still trembling in November 1921, when an economic official reported from Voronezh Province: "The methods of last year's *razverstka* terrorized the population. They shake when the name of a food worker is mentioned and are horrified when armed detachments arrive." See Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv narodnogo khoziaistva (TsGANKh), Moscow, f. 1943, op. 6, ed. khr. 578, l. 6.

[22] For example, *Vtoroi god bor'by s golodom*, vii; *Prodovol'stvie i revoliutsiia*, 1923, nos. 5–6:174–75; and A. Sviderskii, *Prodovol'stvennaia politika* (Moscow, 1920), 4.

[23] *Sistematicheskii sbornik dekretov* 2:131–35. These guard detachments were a major catalyst to peasant and especially worker rebellion in January–February 1921.

[24] Litoshenko, "Sotsializatsiia zemli," 151.

hear about outright requisitions as an extraordinary measure, to be enforced until genuine *tovaroobmen* could be established.

By 1920, Narkomprod had gotten itself very deeply into the distribution side of food supply, having taken on—as trade was outlawed and the monopoly was expanded to include the most important food products—responsibility for feeding not only the Red Army but also the entire civilian population of the towns and a large part of the rural population of the "consumer" provinces. And so, despite the absolute rise in the total amount of grain brought in by the *razverstka* year by year, Narkomprod's targets were rising as more and more people were added to the feeding rolls. When these targets could not be met, the Bolsheviks blamed the "sabotage" of peasants who hid grain and reduced their area of sown acreage.[25]

By December, with the agricultural crisis deepening and fulfilment of the *razverstka* under threat, the newspapers and agitational journals barked their orders with particular vigor. On 21 September 1920, *Vestnik agitatsii i propagandy* employed a military analogy, calling the *razverstka* a "fighting task, without whose fulfillment one cannot return. Returning without having fulfilled the *razverstka*, even if only by a few percentage points, will be in fact premature flight from the field of battle."

By mid-1920 the word "razverstka" had come to stand for something more than simply "requisitions." Widespread illegal trade proved irrepressible and a true state monopoly on grain came to be viewed unofficially as unrealizable in the near future. The word "monopoly" gave way to "razverstka" as a catch-all for the *principle* of state ownership of all grain surpluses and as a statement of *intent* to squeeze out all illegal trade.[26]

At the same time, the notion of the *razverstka* as a "loan" from the countryside to the towns had lost its meaning. This idea had come into circulation in late 1919 as it became clear that the towns had no goods with which to effect genuine *tovaroobmen*.[27] No one, however, elaborated on the timetable for repayment, and it seems not to have occurred to the Bolsheviks that their credit was good only so long as the White armies were in the field. By the end of 1920, the notion of a "loan" had by and large been replaced by the *razverstka* as a "tribute" or "obligation"—even as Bolshevik rhetoric continued to pay occasional lip service to the idea of eventual repayment.

[25] For a discussion of *razverstka* totals see *Chetyre goda prodovol'stvennoi raboty*, 18–19; and Litoshenko, "Sotsializatsiia zemli," 165–68. In 1919–20 the amount of grain brought in under the *razvertska* barely reached 200 million puds. By early 1920 the rationing system pieced together by Narkomprod was a confusing array of categories and loopholes, marked by abuse, corruption, and genuine "parallelism," with over thirty different norms of rations (Patenaude, "Bolshevism in Retreat," 45–51).

[26] The considerable fuzziness about what the *razverstka* really entailed is evident in the tone of the discussions surrounding two proposals in 1920 to replace the *razverstka* with a genuine tax and limited rights to trade the surpluses. See Patenaude, "Bolshevism in Retreat," 57–72. In fact, during the period of the Civil War there were genuine taxes on the books, aimed primarily at the kulaks, as the poor peasants and most middle peasants were exempt. These were never enforced and fell dormant. But it does demonstrate that, at least as of 1918, the government was not in principle against taxation. See ibid., 53–54; and Malle, *Economic Organization of War Communism*, 372.

[27] See the resolution of the Seventh Congress of Soviets, December 1919, in *S"ezdy sovetov v dokumentakh, 1917–1936*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1959), 117. See also *Prodovol'stvennaia politika*, 56–57; and Lenin *PSS* 39:357–58, 40:109, 120, 186, 42:148, and 44:7.

From here it was an easy step to accepting the *razverstka* as a long-term principle. Less often were party and government officials heard to speak about the temporary, emergency nature of food policy; indeed, they began to make a virtue of necessity, ascribing a special role to the *razverstka* as a conveyor of "enlightenment" to the peasants, serving to lift their collective "consciousness." The *razverstka* "penetrates into the consciousness of the masses," Food Commissar Tsiurupa told the Seventh Congress of Soviets in December 1919: "The peasant population slowly but firmly recognizes the necessity and unavoidability of the *razverstka*."[28] A Narkomprod publication in 1919 spoke of a "revolution [*perevorot*] in peasant consciousness," and called this the "greatest victory of Soviet power."[29]

During 1920 this kind of rhetoric intensified, especially at Narkomprod. "As a general rule," a handbook for food officials remarked, "one can say that the more energetically the *razverstka* has been enforced, the more the peasants' consciousness has worked and the more they have developed an understanding of the tasks of Soviet power." The peasants, it continued, have started to think of themselves as "part of one social whole."[30] One Narkomprod publicist remarked that the *razverstka* had drawn millions of peasants into Russian political life, causing a "leap forward" in their consciousness. They now understood their obligations to Soviet power.[31]

This kind of thinking and rhetoric was by no means confined to Narkomprod officials. Curiously, one of the greatest enthusiasts was Mikhail Kalinin, chairman of VTsIK, symbol of the middle peasant and, one would assume, someone sensitive to peasant thinking and attitudes. Writing in November 1920, Kalinin made the following remarkable statement:

> The very method of grain *razverstka* has changed, having become an educational measure. Never could any kind of book so captivate the peasant as the grain monopoly has seized him. Now he is beginning to be interested in where the grain taken away from him is going, how it is used. . . . Thus, the peasant masses are beginning to prepare themselves for participation in running the government.[32]

In the 7 November issue of *Ekonomicheskaia zhizn'*, Kalinin hailed the "tremendous change in the heads of the peasant masses," proclaiming that Narkomprod had produced "a tremendous jolt toward the awakening of the political consciousness of the peasants." The peasant now possessed an "understanding of state sovereignty [*gosudarstvennost'*]" and recognized the "moral correctness of the *razverstka*." He concluded: "Taking stock of the last three years we can bravely say that in that time the mind of the peasant has grown more than in the past one hundred years."[33] In accordance with this notion of a shift in peasant mentality, Soviet authorities began to

[28] *Izvestiia Narodnogo Komissariata po Prodovol'stviiu* (January-February 1920): 26.

[29] *Vtoroi god bor'by s golodom*, xi–xiii.

[30] *Kalendar'*, 50. See also *Tri goda bor'by s golodom*, viii.

[31] G. Kramarov, "Vospitatel'noe znachenie razverstok," *Biulleten' Narodnogo Komissariata po Prodovol'stviiu* (4 December 1920).

[32] M. I. Kalinin, *Voprosy sovetskogo stroitel'stva: Stat'i i rechi, 1919–1946* (Moscow, 1958), 65.

[33] To be fair to Kalinin, such November 7 anniversary articles were usually the occasion for romantic descriptions of the road just traveled and the road ahead.

invoke the image of the peasantry as a rural proletariat. I. A. Teodorovich, for example, saw evidence that the peasant, albeit hesitantly, was "adapting to the situation where in the present state of things he is *a state worker on state land,* that he must work according to the tasks of the state under one leadership according to one plan."[34]

The use of coercion to enforce the *razverstka* was similarly rationalized and corresponded to what was intended to be the "cultural enlightenment" role of the food detachments. In particular the *prodotriady* were charged with "propaganda" tasks of organizing meetings of peasants, distributing literature among them, setting up village reading rooms, and organizing Communist cells.[35] Tsiurupa gave the official view early on, at the Fifth Congress of Soviets in July 1918, when he asserted that the government did "not regard these detachments merely as a military force"; they were also "agitators" who would "conduct propaganda" in the countryside.[36]

A Soviet publication in 1923 recalled the ideal Civil War image of the food army

> not simply as a rough military force, descending on the population with the goal of taking away food products, but to a significant degree as a kind of strictly organized delegation from the hungry towns to the satiated villages. One had to take not only with the help of the bayonet, but by repeatedly explaining why he was taking and why the peasants themselves should meet the government halfway.[37]

By the end of 1920 it was said that the peasant, as he became increasingly enlightened about his obligations to Soviet power, was ready to exercise "self-coercion."[38]

The point is that by 1920 these methods of bringing enlightenment to the countryside were seen as having had effect: the peasants were beginning to see themselves as "state workers on state land."[39] This appears to have meant several things. Most tangibly, it meant that the peasants had been destroyed as commodity producers. But on a deeper level it implied that they had shed their traditional desire to be,

[34] I. Teodorovich, *O gosudarstvennom regulirovanii krest'ianskogo khoziaistva* (Moscow, 1921), 8 (emphasis added). See also the articles in *Ekonomicheskaia zhizn'* by M. Shefler (3 November 1920) and A. Khrushcheva (7 November 1920); and A. Sviderskii, *Kak organizovano borot'sia s padeniem zemledeliia* (Moscow, 1920), 6.

[35] Ogrin', *Prodovol'stvennaia politika,* 8–10; M. I. Davydov, *Bor'ba za khleb: Prodovol'stvennaia politika kommunisticheskoi partii i sovetskogo gosudarstva v gody grazhdanskoi voiny (1917–20gg.)* (Moscow, 1971), 101–6. See also *Petrokommuna* (Petrograd, 1920), 22.

[36] Cited in Carr, *Bolshevik Revolution* 2:149.

[37] *Prodovol'stvie i revoliutsiia,* 1923, nos. 5–6:175. A correspondent in *Bednota* (6 January 1921) asserted that "the food detachments should bring light [*nesti svet*] to the countryside." See also V. I. Shishkin, "Prodovol'stvennye otriady v Sibiri (iul' 1920-mai 1921g.)," *Sotsial'no-politicheskoe razvitie sovetsko-sibirskoi derevni* (Novosibirsk, 1980), 94.

[38] A. Mitrofanov in *Ekonomicheskaia zhizn'*, 21 December 1920; and Iu. Steklov in *Izvestiia VTsIK,* 15 December 1920. In his *Ekonomika perekhodnogo perioda* (Moscow, 1920), 143–44, Nikolai Bukharin used phrases such as "self-coercion of the working class" and "coercion of a new type."

[39] The peasant view of the *razverstka* and the food armies was, not surprisingly, very different. In June 1920 a food official summed up the attitude of the peasants in the producing provinces as: "Don't look in my pocket, just tell me how much you need and I'll give it to you" (TsGANKh, f. 1943, op. 6, ed. khr. 609, ll. 24–25). The following summer, after a trip through the countryside, Preobrazhenskii reported that peasants recalled the *razverstka* as a "terrible nightmare" (*Pravda,* 13 August 1921). Two revealing, if understated, discussions of the increasing peasant resistance to the *razverstka* toward the end of 1920 are E. B. Genkina, *Gosudarstvennaia deiatel'nost V. I. Lenina* (Moscow, 1969), 44–46; and Iu. A. Poliakov, *Perekhod k NEPu i sovetskoe krest'ianstvo* (Moscow, 1967), 193–202.

above all else, left to themselves; they now had a sense of belonging to a larger entity, the Russian state. The *razverstka* had managed to instill in them a sense of "citizenship," and in effect, to adapt a phrase, had turned peasants into Russians.

Only with this background is it possible to understand the fourth phase of Bolshevik food policy, introduced in the autumn of 1920, as the last of the White armies was being repelled. Circumstances now encouraged the Bolsheviks to move beyond state control of food collection and distribution and into the area of production. The problem was the reduction of sown acreage and a resulting drop in agricultural production as the peasant household, exercising a form of passive resistance, produced only enough to meet its own needs. Moreover, to escape the *razverstka* peasants chose to plant crops not as vulnerable to requisition, notably substituting vetch and grasses for oats. At the same time, stocks of cattle were rapidly diminishing.

The planted area had been decreasing steadily since before the Revolution, but a severe drought in the Black Earth region in the summer of 1920 and a subsequent crop failure created a sense of crisis. In food circles the talk was of catastrophe. It now was necessary to extend the *razverstka* principle to production in order to preserve the *razverstka* at all.

Not surprisingly, the impetus for the new policy originated within Narkomprod. The man who showed the way was Nikolai Osinskii of the Narkomprod collegium, who presented a plan he called a "great campaign" for the "state regulation of agriculture," which he layed out in a series of *Pravda* articles beginning in September.[40] As Osinskii and others pointed out, the idea seemed especially suited to the moment. With the war over, there was much discussion among economic officials about the need to overcome the haphazard planning of the wartime bureaucracies and come up with a "unified economic plan." One main consideration behind Osinskii's call for "state regulation" was that the Soviet government could not have a planned, "militarized" economy if the overwhelming majority of the population remained outside of state control. "We up to now almost completely have failed to recognize," he asserted, "that the *militarization of the economy and the introduction of a general labor obligation* should have *its first application in agriculture.*"[41]

Osinskii's scheme, to be implemented in phases over several years, called for the center to set up an obligatory program of land cultivation, instructing peasants as to the extent of areas to be sown, the proportions of various crops to be planted, as well as the particular methods of cultivation (grass cultivation, rotation of crops, and so on) to be employed. The new administrative units created to implement state regulation, called sowing committees, were to distribute seed, organize sowing, and specify the types and quantities of crops to be planted and by which methods. As an immediate step, the *razverstka* was to be extended to seed, with the establishment of an inalienable state seed fund.

Osinskii now intended, among other things, to put an end to the contradictory

[40] These were published as N. Osinskii, *Gosudarstvennoe regulirovanie krest'ianskogo khoziaistva* (Moscow, 1920).

[41] Ibid., 10.

policies of Narkomzem and Narkomprod. He rejected as "utopian" Narkomzem's conciliatory policy of attracting peasants to collective farms through cultural propaganda.[42] While he recognized the need to respect the individual plot, he sought to undermine its independence, not through collectivization, forced or otherwise, but through a broader scheme of "the compulsory state regulation of agricultural production *as a whole,* a regulation that will penetrate more and more deeply and go over to the state organization of that production. . . . *Socialism will be built only through the transformation of the entire economy and all economies simultaneously.*"[43] Osinskii maintained that Narkomzem's "course on the middle peasant," begun in 1918, had been correct until recently, but that agriculture was now entering a "new stage."[44] Narkomzem was to be forced to abandon its policy of noninterference in favor of unprecedented state intervention, and the commissariat was to be turned into a "fighting organ" to lead the "great campaign."[45]

Osinskii's plan prescribed a mixture of incentives and coercion. Incentives were to be targeted at the "industrious middle peasants," now believed to be the dominant element in the countryside as a result of the "equalizing tendencies" of the Revolution. Coercion was to be employed only on "loafers," who were to be encouraged to follow the example of their industrious neighbors. The element of incentives was so prominently featured that Lenin and others took to calling the plan a "wager on the industrious peasant," recalling the agricultural program of tsarist Prime Minister Petr Stolypin.

But how credible was the element of incentives in Osinskii's plan for state regulation? To begin with, as everyone knew, the state had precious little to offer as premiums in the form of industrial goods, and whatever it could give would not match the value of the surpluses the peasants were to be made to give up. Furthermore, although the peasant would be allowed to keep a higher percentage of his grain as a reward for fulfilling state planting obligations, the state grain monopoly remained in place. What incentive was there for him to fulfill his obligation (other than fear of coercion) when he would not be allowed to trade his surplus and it remained subject to requisition?[46]

Then there was the question of how a peasant could safely demonstrate his "industriousness." The resolution passed by the Eighth Congress of Soviets in Decem-

[42] Ibid., 9.

[43] Ibid., 8–9.

[44] Ibid., 10. In *Ekonomicheskaia zhizn'*, 10 December 1920, Osinskii stated that sowing committees had been operating since mid-March 1920 in Tula Province, enjoying great success in reversing the decrease in sowing. Also recognized for their early experimentation with sowing committees were the Tatar Republic, Simbirsk, and Tambov. See *Vestnik agitatsii i propagandy* (4 February 1921): 13–14, 18–19.

[45] Osinskii, *Gosudarstvennoe regulirovanie,* 5, 10. A. Mitrafonov used the imagery of Narkomprod forcibly impregnating Narkomzem so that it would give birth to "this child" (*Ekonomicheskaia zhizn'*, 21 December 1920). In fact, given the hostility at Narkomzem to "state regulation," Osinskii was made deputy commissar of agriculture on 4 January 1921, effectively replacing ailing Commissar Aleksandr Sereda.

[46] Although the contemporary discussions make it appear that way, the idea of allowing peasants to keep part of their surplus as a reward for good behavior was not new. On 17 February 1920, Tsiurupa sent a telegram to local food officials instructing them to tell the peasants that if they planted more they would get to keep more for themselves (*Sistematicheskii sbornik dekretov* 2:237).

ber 1920 embodying the final plan made special note that premiums would be awarded first and foremost to "whole societies and collectives," and that there would be the strictest observance that those individual households given premiums had achieved success "without the least application of kulak methods."[47] Moreover, premiums were to be handed out only after a peasant's fields had been planted and his "industriousness" demonstrated. Thus, the plan assumed a degree of trust by the peasants toward Soviet power, which, given all the unpleasantness that had come before, they could not reasonably be expected to give.[48]

Yet Osinskii was convinced that the "industrious" peasants would greet the idea of "state regulation" with enthusiasm, and that only mild coercion would be necessary: "There is no doubt that all this—especially in the present critical year—will be supported by the best, working and conscientious part of the peasantry."[49] How could he believe this?

The answer is that Osinskii's entire scheme was based on the Bolshevik illusion that a critical mass of peasants had undergone a revolution in mentality, and that "the petty-bourgeois world view of the middle peasant" in particular was breaking down. After three years of fulfilling state orders, of working "according to assignments," most peasants had "recognized in principle obligations [toward the state] in the areas of food, labor and even taxation." Because of this "turning point in the world view [*mirosozertsanie*] of our middle peasants," Osinskii proclaimed, the entire countryside was now placed "*nolens-volens* within the framework of state socialism."[50]

The failed harvest had demonstrated to the industrious peasant that old ways were no longer viable,

> that "bourgeois" methods here come into contradiction with the interests of economics, that another way out is needed. To return to the past, to the bourgeois order, is not a way out, and no one is considering that. The sole way out is submission to state discipline in the area of agricultural *production*. Without this the peasant gets tangled up in contradictions. . . . [T]he middle peasant is coming to realize that agricultural production is a state matter which the state can and must regulate and organize and that *only state intervention will prevent an otherwise inevitable crisis and will preserve, consolidate and develop farming.*

Osinskii's "industrious middle peasants" were the ones "capable of going over from the private-farm to the state point of view."[51] They were ready to work with the state, awaiting a plan, an assignment.

[47] *Vos'moi vserossiiskii s"ezd sovetov rabochikh, krest'ianskikh, krasnoarmeiskikh i kazach'ikh deputatov* (Moscow, 1921), 267–71. Bolshevik delegates successfully moved to withdraw the principle of *premirovanie* of individual households, wishing to restrict its application to the encouragement of collective forms of agriculture. Only after Lenin's intervention in the party fraction was the element of premiums for individual households restored (Lenin, *PSS* 42:178–89).

[48] A point underlined by Litoshenko, "Sotsializatsiia zemli," 191.

[49] Osinskii, *Gosudarstvennoe regulirovanie*, 18.

[50] Ibid., 7. See also Kantor in *Vestnik agitatsii i propagandy* (4 February 1921): 12–13; *Vos'moi vserossiiskii s"ezd sovetov*, 126, 267; *Prodovol'stvennaia politika*, 193; and *Krasnaia gazeta*, 1 February 1921.

[51] Osinskii, *Gosudarstvennoe regulirovanie*, 7, 10.

Such attitudes explain why it was assumed that state intervention *in and of itself* could be promoted as the principle incentive. Osinskii himself wrote that the state was in a position to provide "above all, the help of knowledge, organization, and discipline."

> In place of bourgeois incentives the socialist state puts in first place a healthy economic labor instinct, which it strengthens and organizes through methods of state coercion. . . . [T]here is no need to "shed tears" about the awful influence of the grain monopoly and helplessly grab for the old incentives, but to "understand" that to the new form of goods exchange [*produktobmen*] must be added the new form of production—the system of state regulation of the private peasant economy.[52]

Interestingly, no one argued that the "turning point" in peasant mentality extended to an acceptance of the principle of tilling the land in common, and thus, in 1920, no one argued in favor of coerced collectivization. Thus, in one critical aspect the leadership recognized that the peasantry still thought in the old way.[53] Nonetheless, while officials occasionally expressed the need to respect the independence of the peasantry, the VTsIK could still declare, as it did on 10 January 1921, that "agriculture is declared to be not a private matter of separate or even collective farms, but a matter having general state [*obshchegosudarstvennoe*] significance, demanding state power, control and guidance."[54]

Clearly "state regulation" in action would have to rely heavily upon coercion. The words Osinskii used to describe its implementation imply as much. He wrote that the "center of the work of socialist construction" was "in the massive coercive intervention of the state." "It will be above all," he wrote, "a single, great campaign in the countryside . . . a new big march into the countryside." The "great campaign" was conceived as a true war-communist military expedition, calling for "shock work" and "fighting work," carried out by "a whole army of instructors, propagandists and organizers, acting in a solid fighting front." The core of this "army" was to be the veteran food officials of the requisition campaigns. Yet Osinskii gave great weight

[52] Ibid., 28, 18–19. The resolution of the Eighth Congress of Soviets mentions awarding individual heads of households "badges of distinction" (*Vos'moi vserossiiskii s"ezd sovetov*, 271). At a provincial agricultural conference in January 1921, one speaker mocked the idea of incentives: "The incentive is the workers-peasants power. Consumer interests cannot and should not be incentives in the reconstruction of the economy" (Poliakov, *Perekhod k NEPu*, 228). In giving their blessing to Osinskii's project, the editors of *Ekonomicheskaia zhizn'*, 29 November 1920, argued that, given the lack of material incentives, "state force" was the "sole means" of economic revival. Osinskii argued that the idea of introducing a tax and allowing the peasants limited rights to trade their surpluses was out of the question because the state would be overwhelmed by "free trade." He was later proved right about the last point (*Gosudarstvennoe regulirovanie*, 16).

[53] On this point see P. and V. Vasiliev in *Ekonomicheskaia zhizn'*, 12 November 1920.

[54] *Vestnik agitatsii i propagandy* (4 February 1921): 18. In the same issue (p. 13), Kantor noted the impossibility of the simultaneous existence of the new economic system of a unified plan with the old system of the "proprietary isolationism of a huge mass of petty producers." In mid-1920, Osinskii argued that replacing the *razverstka* with a genuine tax "would mean a rejection of the grain monopoly, of the right of the state to all surplus grain, *would mean the recognition of the independence of the individual household*, and finally, a recognition of free trade of the grain remaining with the farmer." See *Prodovol'stvennaia politika*, 189 (emphasis added).

to the participation of "*peasants,* who undoubtedly will work in this direction with enthusiasm."[55]

This was not simply a short-term response to a crisis of food production, but the treatment of a crisis as an opportunity to step up the march toward socialism. The threat to agriculture was not leading, Osinskii wrote, to a return of the "bourgeois" order, as the Mensheviks and SRs desired.

> On the contrary, it will lead *to the strengthening of Soviet power and to the acceleration of the socialist restructuring* of the countryside—and by methods which up to now have not been tried. Only in this way will the crisis be overcome. . . . Several years will pass and the *countryside*, alongside the town, will become an unshakeable support of Soviet power, socialism, and the Communist party.[56]

The most outspoken opponent of Osinskii's program was Narkomzem's Nikolai Bogdanov, who called the plan "totally unrealizable" both "psychologically and technically." Where Osinskii saw a "turning point" in the attitude of the middle peasant, Bogdanov saw hesitation. The psychology of the countryside, as well as the economy itself, was in a "transition period," and given this fact only "the market in its present form" could serve as "the basic method of state regulation." He rejected the coercion at the heart of Osinskii's project, arguing that the middle peasant's "recognition of the state's right to his surpluses will increase proportionately to the increase in the amount of goods the state can provide him." The critical factor for Bogdanov was the "psychological readiness of the masses." He apologetically referred to his own ideas as "Menshevik."[57] In fact, by the end of the year there was no middle road: the choice was between deepening state intervention or "Menshevism," and the Bolsheviks chose the former familiar road, only to be forced to retreat down the latter several weeks later.[58]

[55] Osinskii, *Gosudarstvennoe regulirovanie,* 8, 10, 11, 27, 28, 29.

[56] Ibid., 7, 11. This entire phase of Bolshevik food policy is strikingly absent from Lih's *Bread and Authority.* He dealt with it in a subsequent article, "The Bolshevik Sowing Committees of 1920: Apotheosis of War Communism?" *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies,* no. 803, March 1990, where, in attempting to maintain his revisionist notion of an essential continuity between War Communism and NEP, he sets up a straw man, arguing that Osinskii's state regulation was not a "great leap forward in the style of Stalin or Mao" (pp. 23, 24, 32).

[57] *Ekonomicheskaia zhizn'*, 16 September and 2 December 1920. Mensheviks led the criticism of "state regulation" at the Eighth Congress of Soviets, urging the replacement of the *razverstka* with a tax and limited trading rights for the peasants (*Vos'moi vserossiiskii s"ezd sovetov,* 128–53). Bogdanov eventually became reconciled to Osinskii's plan. See Kantor in *Vestnik agitatsii i propagandy* (4 February 1921): 14.

[58] The reaction of one of Libedinskii's provincial Bolsheviks to the introduction of the *prodnalog* in spring 1921 is a baffled, "What, Menshevism?" (*Komissary,* 113). The "great campaign" turned out to be a great failure (Litoshenko, "Sotsializatsiia zemli," 194–95). Osinskii told the All-Russian Central Executive Committee on 20 March 1921 that the peasants viewed the formation of sowing committees as the return of the committees of poor peasants. See *Sessii vserossiiskogo tsentral'nogo ispolnitel'nogo komiteta: VIII sozyva* (Moscow, 1920), 104. For peasant hostility to the sowing committees see Poliakov, *Perekhod k NEPu,* 273–75. The sowing committees were officially abolished in early 1922 in the wake of the deliberations of the Ninth Congress of Soviets in December 1921. See *Deviatii s"ezd sovetov. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1921), no. 4:5–6; and *Novaia ekonomicheskaia politika i zadachi partii* (Petrograd, 1921), 56–57.

By the second half of 1920 the Bolsheviks had deluded themselves into believing that the question of the relations between classes, of *Kto-kogo?* had been decided in favor of the proletariat. They saw the peasantry as the junior ally, the subordinate partner, in the union of workers and peasants, and assumed that the wartime alliance between the two could continue on essentially the same terms during peacetime reconstruction. This was the most fundamental illusion of War Communism.[59]

Once the old economic policy collapsed and they could see the countryside as it really was, a number of leading Bolsheviks confessed to the extent of their self-delusion. Among them was Vladimir Smirnov, the former Left Communist, in an acutely self-critical article published in early 1922. Looking back on the *razverstka*, he recalled how it had been a necessary practice:

> But very soon we created a theory, according to which this cable [*kanat*] became a purely socialist "type of connection" between the town and the countryside, that it was not a temporary means, but a new achievement, which would be preserved for the ages, of course with a few improvements.

Coercion, too, had been necessary,

> But out of that necessity we made a virtue, and the idea of a direct transformation of the peasant into a member of the socialist society, working on government assignment and handing over his goods according to assignments, was made the central point of our economic program.[60]

The Bolsheviks managed to convince themselves that the extreme measures that were partly forced on them by circumstances—requisitions, food armies, the state regulation of agriculture, the abolition of trade and taxes, the withering away of monetary relations—were elements of a program for building communism, forged in a bloody civil war against the class enemy and thus sanctioned by the laws of history. Measures of expediency and revolutionary gestures fed the Bolsheviks' desire to speed up what they perceived as an inevitable and imminent outcome.[61]

They were swept up in the enthusiasm of the moment and the rapid pace of

[59] There is evidence that not a few party leaders had gone so far as to stop thinking about the peasantry as a distinct class (Patenaude, "Bolshevism in Retreat," 368–70). Lih's interpretation that at the end of 1920 the Bolsheviks went over from a "class struggle" to a "partnership" view of the peasantry is inadequate: the point is that they assumed they had *won* the class struggle and had brought the countryside into the socialist framework ("Bolshevik Sowing Committees of 1920," 5–11).

[60] *Krasnaia nov'*, 1922, no. 1:201–2. The phrase "type of connection" is an allusion to the language Bukharin used to characterize requisitions in his *Ekonomika perekhodnogo perioda*. Bukharin wrote in *Pravda*, 6 August 1921, that the government's economic policy before NEP was based "almost exclusively" on "the requisitions system of the *prodrazverstka*." With the introduction of NEP, Narkomprod found itself unsuited to the new atmosphere and rapidly self-destructed. It was officially abolished in May 1924 (Patenaude, "Bolshevism in Retreat," 241–63).

[61] This is not an original interpretation. See, for example, Carr, *Bolshevik Revolution* 2:55. In November 1920, Kantor wrote: "If these tasks, [the state regulation of] distribution and sowing, amount to the introduction of socialist principles of the regulation of the economy, then no one is as guilty in that as is the socialist logic of history." See *Vestnik agitatsii i propagandy* (25 November 1920): 20. With the retreat underway, the Bolshevik A. L'vov wrote in *Pravda* on 26 March 1922 that the Civil War measures in themselves had not been mistaken, but rather "what we took them to mean."

change. "Everything was carried away by a mighty current overflowing with revolutionary enthusiasm, belief in oneself and a bit of, let us say, youthful light-mindedness of officials," Anatoly Lunacharskii remarked toward the end of 1921. Speaking of the previous year as if it were already the distant past, he reminisced on how "it was difficult to speak of half-measures, of stages, of the approach step-by-step to such an ideal."[62] That ideal, of course, was "communism," and to Lunacharskii and many other leading Bolsheviks it was a goal that seemed to be within their grasp. As Lunacharskii wrote:

> After a certain period of time communism [sic] became a mistake. But we got used to it, almost fell in love with it. And when we should have understood that it was time to abandon it, to start out on a new path, we deliberated and marked time.[63]

As Lunacharskii's choice of words reveals, the Bolsheviks in autumn 1920 did not think of the building of communism as some far-off eventuality. They thought they were in the process of creating, or had in fact already achieved a form of communism. "Things went at such a pace," Mikhail Pokrovskii stated in 1922, "that it seemed to us that we were very close to communism—communism created with our own hands, and not waiting for the victory of proletarian revolution in the West."[64]

This helps to explain why party members so readily embraced "War Communism" as a label for the old economic policy.[65] Yes, it suited the ideologists and publicists who sought to rationalize the old economic policy as a product of the military requirements of the Civil War. But the phrase struck a chord more because of its *communism* element. It was *communism*—or something approaching it—not so much *caused by* war, but *forged in the fires of* war, a war against the class enemy fought on an international scale.

Lenin's own characterization of NEP as a retreat (implying a retreat from communism) and of the Civil War food policy as "communist" is indicative of the Bolshevik mentality in 1921.

> The *razverstka* in the countryside—that *direct communist approach* to the tasks of construction in the town—prevented an increase in productive forces and turned out to be the basic reason for the deep economic and political crisis which we came up against in spring 1921.[66]

[62] Cited in V. I. Billik, "V. I. Lenin o sushchnosti i periodizatsii sovetskoi ekonomicheskoi politiki v 1917–1921gg. i o povorote k NEPu," *Istoricheskie zapiski* 80 (1967): 152.

[63] A. V. Lunacharskii, *K kharakteristike Oktiabr'skoi revolutiutsii* (Moscow, 1924), 15. Osinskii remarked in December 1921 that the previous economic policy had not been a mistake but had "corresponded to the *spirit* and needs of those times" (*Deviatyi s"ezd sovetov,* no. 4:2) (emphasis added).

[64] M. N. Pokrovskii, *Sem let proletarskoi diktatury* (Moscow, 1924), 8. This does not mean that it was a brand of "communism" that most party members would have prescribed before the Civil War. As Pokrovskii wrote about War Communism in 1924: "It is important to note that this period brought to our psychology, if not to our ideology, certain new features, alien to it in the years 1917–18" (*Bol'shevik,* 1924, no. 14:15).

[65] The term was attributed to Lenin by N. Ovsiannikov in *Kommunisticheskii trud,* 21 May 1921.

[66] Lenin, *PSS* 44:159 (emphasis added). Lenin's choice of the term "state capitalism" to define NEP served to encourage this kind of thinking. See *3e vserossiiskoe prodovol'stvennoe soveshchanie* (Moscow, 1921) 8, for evidence that in food circles it was generally assumed that the *razverstka* was "the direct

Nor was Lenin singling out party extremists or isolated food officials as the sole adherents of this type of thinking. For all his hard-headed moderation on selective issues during the wartime period, Lenin included himself when, in the autumn of 1921, he characterized the party's war-communist mentality:

> We decided that the peasants would give us the necessary quantity of grain according to the *razverstka*, and that we would distribute it to the factories and the workshops—and then we would have *communist* production and distribution.
>
> I cannot say that we pictured for ourselves so definitely and vividly such a plan, but we acted approximately in this spirit.[67]

There is a tendency in the Western literature, acquired in part from Soviet historiography, to attribute enthusiastic support for War Communism to party extremists, notably Lev Kritsman and Iurii Larin. It is no doubt correct to note the diversity within the upper reaches of the Bolshevik party throughout this period, just as in 1917. But it is important as well to make clear that there were common denominators among party leaders and that the most important of these was a fundamental illusion at the heart of War Communism: that the Bolshevik government had essentially resolved the question of *Kto-kogo?* between the proletariat and the peasantry. This was a general assumption among party officials from Larin to Lenin. As Lenin described it,

> Lifted by a wave of enthusiasm, having aroused popular enthusiasm at first general-political, then military, we figured that we could accomplish directly on that enthusiasm equally great (as the general political and the military) economic tasks. We figured—or maybe it is truer to say: we assumed without sufficient consideration—that through the direct orders of the proletarian state we could establish state production and state distribution of goods in communist fashion in a country of small peasants. Life demonstrated our mistake.[68]

Only the traumatic events of January–February 1921 stripped away these illusions and made the Bolsheviks realize that they could not go on as before. "Our situation in February and March was difficult," Lenin wrote to Klara Tsetkin and Paul Levi in mid-April: "It's a peasant country. The peasant household is the overwhelming majority of the population. It vacillates. It is devastated, dissatisfied."[69]

At the Tenth Party Congress, Lenin led the way, stressing the need to understand "the relations between classes, between the working classes [sic] and the peasantry. These relations are not what we thought they were."[70] There was no talk about a turning point in the peasant mentality. Now Lenin said that "to remake the small

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conclusion from the theory and practice of communism," and that the *prodnalog* was a retreat from communism. See also N. Valentinov (Vol'skii), *Novaia ekonomicheskaia politika i krizis partii posle smerti Lenina* (Stanford, 1971), 29, 35.

[67] Lenin, *PSS* 44:157 (emphasis added).

[68] Ibid., 151.

[69] Ibid., 52:149–50. For a description of this period see Patenaude, "Bolshevism in Retreat," chap. 2.

[70] Lenin, *PSS* 43:18.

landowner, to remake all his psychologies, is a matter that will take generations." The mission of the party with regard to the peasantry was "to cure, so to speak, its entire psychology." After all, Lenin reminded his audience, "you cannot deceive classes." The party had to face up to reality and "present the issue directly":

> The interests of these two classes [workers and peasants] are different, the small landowner does not want what the worker wants. . . . [W]e should not try to hide anything, but should say directly that the peasantry is not satisfied with the form of relations which we have established with it, that it does not want this form of relations and will not live like this any longer.[71]

At the congress, Bukharin aptly dubbed the end of the *razverstka* the "peasant Brest," recalling an earlier Bolshevik confrontation with reality. Three years later, Pokrovskii agreed that "peasant Brest" was indeed "a very accurate label" for what took place in the spring of 1921. Whereas the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in 1918 had signaled the demise of the Bolsheviks' "ideological and, in essence, idealistic approach to international relations," NEP marked the end of their "idealistic approach to the countryside." At the Tenth Party Congress, Pokrovskii observed, "we began to proceed not from some imaginary plan of the future countryside, but from the real possibilities of the actual countryside, the countryside as it is."[72]

The Soviet agricultural debates of the 1920s were essentially about what constituted the limits of those "real possibilities." These debates came to an end when, toward the end of the decade, Bolshevik peasant policy began once again to proceed from an "imaginary plan of the future countryside."

[71] Ibid., 60–61, 58–59.

[72] M. N. Pokrovskii, *Oktiabr'skaia revoliutsiia: Sbornik statei (1917–1927)* (Moscow, 1929), 375. Historians sometimes attribute the term to Riazanov, who, however, echoed Bukharin at the congress. See *Desiatyi s"ezd RKP(b): Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1963), 224, 468.