

Peasant Rebels Under Stalin

Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance

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"We Let the Women Do the Talking": Bab'i Bunty and the Anatomy of Peasant Revolt

"We dared not speak at meetings. If we said anything that the organizers didn't like, they abused us, called us *koolacks* [*sic*], and even threatened to put us in prison."

"We let the women do the talking," cried a voice from the back of the crowd.

"They did that in every village, just let the women talk."

"And how they did talk!"

"They went on day and night. The organizers had not a chance."

"If the organizer tried to stop them they made such a din that he had to call off the meeting."

"What is there to be proud of in that?" broke in another *kolkhoznik*.

"Plenty of reason for us," screamed a middle-aged woman with a baby. "Our men folk," she complained ..., "had cold feet, so we decided that we'd do something on our own account."

—Maurice Hindus, *Red Bread*

"The revolution began with the *baba*, and with the *baba* it shall end."

—overheard at a *babii bunt*

Bab'i bunty were a specific type of peasant riot. They were the most prominent symptom of March fever and best exemplified the forms and rituals of peasant rebellion during collectivization. The term *bab'i bunty* may be translated literally as "women's riots," yet this translation does not begin to do justice to its specific cultural and historical evocations. *Babii* (singular adjective) is a colloquial expression for women that refers in particular to country women with country ways. The *baba* (singular noun) is most often perceived as illiterate, ignorant (in the broader sense of *nekul'turnaia*), 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 cast in a peasant mold. The element of stereotype is evident. Accord

ingly, the modifier colors and reinforces the noun that follows. A *bunt* (singular noun) is a spontaneous, uncontrolled, and uncontrollable explosion of peasant opposition to authority. It is a riot, seemingly aimless, unpredictable, and always dangerous. A *babii bunt*, then, is a women's riot characterized by female hysteria, irrational behavior, unorganized protest, rage, and violence.

Such, in any case, were the denotation and connotation of the term as used by party leaders, local officials and other observers. Rarely, if ever, were *bab'i bunty* described or evaluated in political or ideological terms. Instead, they were the most malignant feature of the disease borne by March fever. Their causes were generally attributed to the contagion of male agitators, the kulaks and *podkulachniki*, who supposedly exploited the irrational hysteria of the *baba* for their own counterrevolutionary ends, or else blamed on the mistakes of cadres who succumbed to "dizziness from success." *Bab'i bunty* were tolerated to a far greater extent than similar protests led by peasant men. They were also dealt with less harshly in cases when criminal charges ensued. 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 not held directly responsible for her actions, even in cases when she was subject to reprimand or punishment.

Officials' perceptions of peasant actions are generally based on assumptions, in this case highly ideological and politicized, about peasant ways and mores. As Daniel Field has demonstrated, however, peasants appear at times to have exploited official preconceptions about themselves for their own ends. In his study of postemancipation peasant disturbances, 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 peasants, were violating the will of the tsar. ¹Such dissembling before power in order to mask subversive acts is a traditional peasant tactic in rebellious confrontations with authority. ²Peasant women may have had an additional advantage in their encounters with Soviet power. Not only could they play on official images of the peasantry as dark mass or the peasant as ideological friend or foe, depending upon social status, they could also call upon the culturally generalized image of what Natalie Zemon Davis in her studies of early modern France has labeled the "disorderly woman,"

a[n] image that could operate ... to sanction riot and political disobedience for both men and women in a society that allowed the lower orders few formal means of protest ... [s]he [the disorderly woman] was not accountable for what she did. Given over to the sway of her lower passions, she was not responsible for her actions. ³

If, indeed, the *baba* bore some resemblance to the disorderly woman of other times and cultures, then it may well be that *bab'i bunty* belied the official depiction of peasant women's protest and were not as irrational as they appeared to outside observers. In much the same way that the *causes* of mass disturbances were rooted in "generic" sources of peasant discontent, their predominant *form*, the *babii bunt*, and its rituals were also drawn from a peasant culture of resistance.

"A little misunderstanding"

In 1933, when Stalin called for a cow in every peasant household (partly to placate collective farm women and partly to mask the famine), he acknowledged the opposition of peasant women to collectivization by remarking that, "Of course, not long ago Soviet power had a little misunderstanding with collective farm women. This business was about cows." ⁴The "business about cows" became a national phenomenon in the late 1920s and early 1930s, evolving well beyond the confines of the "little misunderstanding."

A Central Committee report of late 1929 noted that women provided the main support for "kulak insurrection." ⁵Top secret briefing papers for Stalin, Molotov, and other key leaders on collectivization in the winter of 1930 reported that, "[i]n all kulak disturbances [*vystupleniia*] the extraordinary activity of women is evident—a circumstance sufficiently serious to draw to your attention." ⁶These conclusions were echoed in the provinces. In the North Caucasus, where women were said to be the *zastrel'shchiki* (leaders) of resistance, ⁷a regional party committee circular letter of 18 February 1930

on excesses in collectivization noted that the widespread and threatening unrest in the villages was centered among women. ⁸A Middle Volga regional party committee decree of 11 March 1930 on excesses in the Penza area also singled out women in its discussion of unrest, pointing to a large number of *bab'i bunty*. ⁹In 1929, 486 mass disturbances (from a total of 1,307) were made up exclusively of women, with an additional 67 consisting primarily of women. In 1930, 3,712 mass disturbances (from a total of 13,754) were made up almost exclusively of women, and in all remaining cases, women constituted either a majority or a significant proportion of the participants. ¹⁰When the nation's leaders met at the Sixteenth Party Congress in June and July 1930, speakers frankly admitted the key role women had played in collective farm disturbances. Lazar Kaganovich, a Politburo member and one of Stalin's closest aids, said "We know that in connection with the excesses in the collective farm movement, women in the countryside in many cases played the most 'advanced' role in the reaction against the collective farm." ¹¹Andreev, first secretary of the important North Caucasus regional party committee, seconded Kaganovich, labeling women the "vanguard" in the protests against collectivization. ¹²

The Communist party explained the "vanguard" role of women in the protest against collectivization by reference to what was considered to be the low cultural and political level of peasant women, the "incorrect approach" of rural officials to the volatile women, and, finally, kulak and *podkulachnik* exploitation of the women's irrational fears and potential for mass hysteria. The party's response to women's protest was different from its response to male peasant protest, which was inevitably labeled kulak opposition and dealt with by increasing the level of repression. Although repressive measures were not always excluded, the party instead emphasized a more "correct" approach to peasant women. A correct approach in this instance was a euphemism for ending the arbitrary violence—the excesses—of collectivization. The party had also stressed the importance of political work among peasant women, beginning from the time of the grain procurement crisis when the potential dangers of female-led opposition to Soviet policy first became apparent. ¹³Such work had at least two objectives. First, the party sought to "educate" women by expanding political indoctrination among them. Second, the party attempted to draw more women into active involvement in the political and administrative life of the village through participation in the women's delegate meetings and soviet elections, and membership in local soviets, collective farm boards, and the Communist party. During the years of collectivization, there was a gradual, but noticeable, improvement in such efforts. ¹⁴The party's emphasis on work among women was predicated on the official assumption that women's protest was apolitical, a function of their backwardness and therefore politically curable.

It was for that reason that the party's efforts to educate peasant women were largely ineffective in quelling resistance during collectivization. Although the co-optation and advancement into soviet and party work of women, especially younger women, would have a relatively more positive effect in the mid- and later 1930s, these measures failed to address, let alone alter, the egregious policies and practices that were at the root of women's protest—indeed, the protest of *all* peasants—against the collective farm system. Moreover, the party's contradictory demands for a correct approach to peasant women on the part of rural officials and the correct implementation of its own brutal policies made it highly unlikely that the barbaric, civil-war style of rural officials would or could be tempered. As a consequence, the party was unable to quiet the fears of peasant women or to prevent the wave of *bab'i bunty* that erupted in the countryside.

Kulak agitprop and petit bourgeois instincts

Official reasoning claimed that the kulak was the chief culprit behind *bab'i bunty*. Accordingly, because she was bereft of political consciousness and agency, the *baba* easily succumbed to the influence of the kulak, *podkulachnik*, and omnipresent kulak spirit pervading the countryside at this time. In the words of an OGPU official, "kulak anticollective farm agitation *flows* among the backward female masses of the village." ¹⁵According to another OGPU official, "The most active participants in disturbances are primarily women who act under the influence of kulak agitation." ¹⁶

The kulak's supposed success was based on the "low *kulturnost'* of women" and the "excesses" of overly enthusiastic local officials. ¹⁷The *baba*, moreover, was said to be a means to an end: the kulak used her to get to the men, all in the aim of counterrevolution. ¹⁸

It was the kulak *agitprop*, ¹⁹or rumor mill, that cynically manipulated the backwardness of peasant women and artfully exploited the mistakes of local officials. Kulak *agitprop* capitalized on the *baba's* ignorance by forecasting the end of the world and moral decadence in the collective farm. It also played upon her "petit-bourgeois instincts," supposedly stronger than those of male peasants (excepting, of course, the kulak) and the material source of her counterrevolutionary malleability. Petit-bourgeois instincts mostly pertained to concerns centering on the domestic economy, subsistence issues, and family, concerns that could only be instinctual, given the *baba's* low *kulturnost'*. They also included matters of "superstition"—that is, issues relating to the church, priest, and religion. While this official version of the nature of women's resistance was not entirely lacking in substance, women's protest engendered by the policies of collectivization was not irrational and seldom the manifestation of instinct.

Peasant women's opposition came as a direct response to the implementation of the state's destructive policies. The OGPU, which sometimes stepped partly aside from the official version of *bab'i bunty* in its classified documentation, analyzed the causation behind women's mass disturbances in 1930. According to its observations, in the first half of the year, 1,154 women's revolts were centered around the collective farm, 778 arose on religious grounds, 422 concerned the defense of the dekulakized, and 336 derived from food difficulties. In the second half of the year, 36% of women's revolts were over grain requisitioning, 20% in defense of the dekulakized, 12% on religious grounds, 10.7% due to food difficulties, 10% connected to collectivization, and the rest, miscellaneous. ²⁰The causes of women's protest were roughly similar to the causes of peasant rebellion in general, reflecting no more and no less than the paramount concerns of peasant politics during collectivization. ²¹

Women protested vehemently against the threat that collectivization posed to the economic survival of their families and village communities. Throughout the countryside, women struggled to prevent the economic ruin of their households. The requisitioning of grain and seed reserves during collectivization presented an especially grave danger to subsistence, serving as important sources of unrest among peasant women. In V. Irmyshskii *raion*, Barnaul'skii *okrug*, Siberia, for example, crowds of women demonstrated continually, sometimes day and night, against requisitioning in the spring of 1929. ²²In 1930, in the village Tuluzakovka in Penzenskii *okrug* in the Middle Volga, a group of 70 women blocked the removal of the seed reserves, threatening to massacre an OGPU plenipotentiary if need be, while in Rybinskii *raion*, in Mordovskaia *oblast'*, at least three *bab'i bunty* erupted over the socialization of seed grain. ²³In the village Sokolov and elsewhere in Kamenskii *raion*, Kamenskii *okrug*, Siberia, crowds of women broke into collective farm granaries and took back their seed grain by force in the winter and spring of 1930. ²⁴

Peasant women struggled with equal determination against the socialization of domestic livestock. In the North Caucasus *stanitsa* Staro-Shcherbinskaia in Eiskii *raion*, the women fought back attempts to socialize the livestock, biting the hands of the stablemen who held the animals' reins while their children pelted the collectivizers with stones. ²⁵In the Ukrainian village Mikhailovka in Sinel'nikovskii *raion*, an inspector arrived only to find that the women were nowhere to be seen. He was told later that they slept in the cowsheds in fear of the cows being taken. ²⁶The socialization of domestic livestock directly threatened peasant women. A peasant woman's economic position within the household was based largely on the care and cultivation of domestic livestock. ²⁷The loss of a dairy cow, moreover, could mean that peasant children would be without milk. ²⁸

Women understood clearly what collectivization portended, not limiting their protest to grain requisitioning and the socialization of domestic livestock. In January 1930 in Belotserkovskii and Korostenskii *okrugs* in Ukraine, groups of from 50 to 500 women went into the fields to block the land reform that sometimes preceded the organization of a collective farm. In the village of Shevchenko and elsewhere in the Khar'kov area, women broke up meetings dedicated to land reform and collective farm construction, shouting "[We] will not go into the collective. [We] were not and will not be slaves.

" ²⁹In late 1929 in the village of Mordov in Bugul'minskii canton in Tataria, women broke up a collectivization meeting and called their own meeting, at which they passed a decree categorically refusing to join the collective farm. ³⁰Three hundred women angered by the organization of a collective farm in the village Elzhoszernoie in Ul'ianovskii *okrug*, Middle Volga, broke into the *sel'sovet* and beat up their local officials, while in the village Salovka in Buguruslanskii *okrug*, 100 women demonstrated against the collective farm, refusing to disperse until arrests were made. ³¹And everywhere women were in the forefront after March, when peasants quit the collective farms in droves, taking back their property by force and chasing officials out of the village.

In the aftermath of the winter 1930 collectivization campaign, *bab'i bunty* broke out over the increasing food difficulties experienced in the collective farms, especially among poor peasants. In the Mavrinskii collective farm in Dergachevskii *raion*, Central Black Earth Region, 40 women paraded with red flags, demanding the distribution of twenty *puds* per person of the newly threshed grain. ³²(A *pud* is approximately 36 pounds.) Six mass disturbances, composed mainly of women, occurred in Buguruslanskii *okrug* in the Middle Volga in spring 1930 as crowds of up to 400 people attacked *sel'sovets* and RIKs, demanding bread and attempting to storm the buildings. ³³*Bab'i bunty* over food difficulties erupted throughout the North Caucasus in the spring and early summer of 1930. In many parts of the region, women, especially poor women, besieged *sel'sovets*, pleading, "Give us bread." In the village Znamenka in Slavgorodskii *okrug*, 20 women gathered at the *raion* party committee office, demanding bread. When they received no response, they moved on to the RIK chairman's office, where they refused to leave until they were given bread: "We got nowhere with this scoundrel [the RIK chairman] by peaceful means, [we] will all go to the [soviet] officials' homes and take bread from those who have it." ³⁴In the village Ptich'e in Izobil'no Tishchenskii *raion*, Stavropol'skii *okrug*, 100 women descended upon the cooperative shop with plans to carry out a *samosud* against its manager, while in the *stanitsa* Novo-Titarovskaia in Kubanskii *okrug*, 200 women threatened to destroy the cooperative shop and murder its chairman. In A.-Tuzlovskii village, Shakhtinsko-Donetskii *okrug*, women called an illegal meeting at which they decreed "to propose that the *rai[on]* center immediately dispatch ... the essential quantity of grain for food. In case of refusal to send the grain, to distribute [grain] from the emergency seed grain." In their desperation, the women of one Osetian village went so far as to threaten to burn down a grain elevator if their demands for bread were not met, arguing that their children were wasting away from hunger. ³⁵

Women's protest over collective farms, the socialization of livestock, grain requisitioning, and food difficulties raises most clearly the issue of what Soviet power derisively labeled the petit-bourgeois instincts of peasant women. While instinct may have played some role, women's opposition to the destruction of peasant farming was motivated largely by a set of rational interests revolving around subsistence and survival, the family, and the household economy. It was natural for women to take the lead in such protest, given their central role in the domestic economy. Like the women who led bread riots in England and France in earlier centuries and in many other parts of the world into the modern era, peasant women in the Soviet Union assumed the initiative in resisting policies and practices that threatened their families' existence and encroached directly on their sphere of labor and life. ³⁶Such protest, moreover, reflected the most vital and central concerns of the peasantry as a whole. Motivated in their resistance by a subsistence ethic that taught peasants that experimentation could be dangerous, peasant women would be sadly vindicated when the Soviet "experiment" in socialized agriculture led to catastrophic disaster in 1932-33.

Women's fears extended well beyond the material domain. Peasant women found their basic belief system under attack as the collective farm brought with it the destruction of the church, a wholesale assault on religious beliefs, and a revolution in the everyday spiritual world of the peasantry. Women were active in demonstrations against church closings, bell removals, and the arrests of priests. In a Middle Volga village, for instance, peasant women led the protest against the arrest of their priest, organizing three separate meetings at which demands were put forth for his release. ³⁷In Sukhinshevskii *okrug* in the Western Region, the closing of churches and the removal of icons led to what the sources labeled a "mass movement" in defense of the church, supposedly under the slogan "The Roman pope supports us, all the world is behind us, all the world is against Soviet power, [and] in the spring there will be war." Women led the revolt, gathering daily at the Bariatinskii and other RIKs to present their demands in crowds that soon grew to 400 people. ³⁸Unrest in the Catholic Kamenskii canton in the Volga German Republic at the end of December 1929 was stirred up by

rumors of church closings and soon led to an uprising reportedly inspired by the slogan "For faith and God, against the collective farm." The revolt began in the village of Keller, where rumors spread of the impending arrest of the priest and the closing of the church. The believers organized a guard at the church and the priest's home, and the ringing of the church bell was to be the signal of the approach of the authorities. In early January, illegal meetings were held in a number of villages in the canton, where, according to official sources, the farmers decided "to use the women" to fight the collective farm. In Keller, crowds of women took back their property and released arrested peasants. The revolt spread to four other villages. From the beginning, the *sel'sovet* was paralyzed and the village run by leaders of the revolt. ³⁹

Women were fierce in their defense of the church. Some sense of this, although obviously distorted through the official lens, can be gleaned in the unpublished letter of an official writing from the Ukrainian village of Mikhailovka in the Poltava area. He wrote, "Men and women gathered and ran to the church as to a fire in order to defend the church.... Some women acted like beasts and went against the authority of the village [government] in order to defend the church." The women who "acted like beasts" succeeded, however, in keeping the church open. ⁴⁰ Peasant women were the upholders of religion within the village and household, and they played an important lay role in the church as deaconesses, caretakers, and loyal parishioners, so it was natural that the assaults on the church would affect them most acutely. Rather than irrational beasts acting on instinct, they acted out of a devotion to their faith and church, convinced that the collective farm was the apotheosis of evil and a blasphemy before God. In defending the church, moreover, women were defending their community, because the former, perhaps more than any other village institution, signified the wholeness and unity of the latter.

The same notions of community animated peasant women in their defense of relatives, neighbors, and friends who faced expropriation and deportation as kulaks. Throughout the countryside, women bravely stood up to the officials and activists who carried out dekulakization. In a series of Crimean villages, for example, women organized demonstrations against the deportations. When the deportations finally began, the women of the district accompanied their ill-fated neighbors for some five kilometers beyond the village, in tears, cursing Soviet power. ⁴¹ And in a Russian village in Bashkiriia, one Anna Borisevich [sic] convinced thirty other women to walk out of a meeting in support of the families of those who had been stripped of their civil rights. ⁴² Peasant women defended their neighbors out of a sense of community and of justice. The importance of justice was magnified in a world suddenly turned on its head, as became tragically clear in a *babii bunt* in the Ukrainian village of Kiselevka in Lebedinskii *raion* in June 1931. Kiselevka was engaged in the cultivation of strawberries, and due to low requisitioning prices the state's procurement plan had only been fulfilled by 80%. The local officials consequently set up a checkpoint to prevent black market trade in strawberries. On 24 June, the guard stopped a middle peasant who had refused to surrender his strawberries, arguing that he personally had fulfilled his procurement obligations. The guard shot him and his horse, gravely wounding the man. As soon as word spread about the brutal and unprovoked assault, a group of 150 women gathered. They first went to the school in search of the teacher activist, then to the collective farm chairman's home, and finally to the *sel'sovet*, where anger boiled over into a riot as the women shouted, "Sov[iet] power kills people for berries. This [will happen] to all of us." ⁴³

Women's protest over church, neighbors, and family did not derive from instinct; rather, it was legitimate and rational, and based on universal peasant concerns derived from a peasant moral economy and political consciousness. And just as women were capable of reasoned objections to the collective farm, they were also able to initiate and organize reasoned and peaceful protest. In an Elets'kii *okrug* village in the Central Black Earth Region, after the publication of Stalin's "Dizziness from Success," women led demonstrations against the collective farm, parading with black flags. ⁴⁴ In another Central Black Earth village, women simply boycotted meetings when the collective farm organizer refused to allow peasants to express their opinions. ⁴⁵ In a Lipetskii *raion* village meeting (also in the Central Black Earth Region), the women were so incensed by official policies and actions that they brought meetings to an impasse by raising their hands unanimously against all measures proposed by the officials, regardless of their content. ⁴⁶ In the village of Goluboko in the Leningrad Region, the women took the initiative in organizing a meeting at which they passed a decree "To reject [all] measures of the party and Soviet power." ⁴⁷ In these cases, women attempted to exert their will without resorting to violence. The problem with nonviolent protest, however, was that it was

so rarely heard during collectivization. It was instead ignored or crushed by the weight of repression, or pushed by provocation into violence. It is for that reason, rather than any supposed irrational or hysterical nature, that women in the end turned most frequently to the *babii bunt*.

Bab'i bunty

Bab'i bunty were depicted as spontaneous outbursts of mass hysteria marked by indiscriminate violence, disorder, and a cacophony of highpitched voices all screaming demands at once. Angry women assembled before the rural soviet were "milling crowds." The presence of children and babes-in-arms imparted an unreasoned and unreasonable air to the scene, throwing some officials off their guard and confounding others. The silent gathering of the village men off in the distance unnerved and terrified. A general din of shouts, curses, and threats filled the air, serving as the auditory context for the women's approach to Soviet power. Those officials who dared meet the women found themselves jostled, pushed, and crushed within the folds of the enveloping crowd. The foolhardy among them who thought to chase away this *baba* rage with jokes or soothing and patronizing words were rebuffed with full-fisted blows from strongly hewn female working hands. Wiser officials, or those who knew something of village women, hid out or ran away, waiting for the *babii bunt* to run out of steam or the men to take control of their women. Most women's riots fizzled out—generally without the use of repressive force—when the women attained their goals. The women were seldom held responsible for their behavior, thanks to official perceptions of the basis of their actions, as well as the embarrassment of male officials incapable of controlling disorderly women. The *bab'i bunty* thus accomplished their ends and the state held strong in its perceptions of peasant women's protest.

The official depiction of the *babii bunt* was captured concisely in a most illuminating case of a women's riot in the village Belovka in Chistopol' canton in Tataria in August 1929. The cause of the *babii bunt* in Belovka was a *sel'sovet* decision to introduce a five-field system of crop rotation in the village and to carry out a redistribution of peasant lands, most probably preliminary to the formation of a collective farm. Behind the *babii bunt*, according to the official 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 peasant women, a crowd of one hundred people ... strenuously 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 rural soviet member. 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 senseless. The case was heard before the regional court, which prosecuted the ten most active women and the miller Fomin, who was described as the "ideological instigator" of the disturbance. Fomin, who was also charged with setting fire to the rural soviet secretary's house, was prosecuted separately, according to "special consideration." The women, prosecuted under Article 59 (2) of the penal code for mass disturbances, received 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," and the main "culprit" in the disturbance. Fomin's "counterrevolutionary organizational role" in the protest was the "actual root" of the *babii bunt* and, according to the Supreme Court, the regional court had failed to discern this fact clearly enough. In addition, the Supreme Court accused the rural soviet of Belovka of insufficient 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 rather than as mere punishment. ⁴⁸

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, as figurative

battering rams against Soviet power. The soviet's failure to work among the women and prepare them for the new policy transformed them into ammunition that the kulak could fire at the Soviet regime. However, the Belovka case may not tell the whole story of the *bab'i bunt*. Petro Grigorenko, in his memoirs, described the *bab'i bunt* 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 antisoviet *podkulachniki*.⁴⁹ Descriptions of *bab'i bunt* by officials 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 named Dobychin, serving as a plenipotentiary for collectivization, arrived in the collective farm on 7 March 1930. Dobychin soon called a meeting of the peasant women, at which he was met with extreme hostility. The women cried, "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 ... sleep it off and you'll see that we will let the poor peasant derail him who made you drunk and sent you here." Dobychin's words enraged the women, and led to a general uproar and an assault on the worker. The women, with one Praskov'ia Avdiushenko in the lead, approached the stage where the worker stood. Praskov'ia said to Dobychin, "Ah well, come nearer to us." She then grabbed him by his collar and 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. At that point, the male peasants entered the fray, joining the women in seizing their recently socialized livestock and preparing a collective declaration to quit the farm. This disturbance, like many others, was not suppressed, but simply ended with the collapse of the collective farm.⁵⁰

A similar case was described by the worker Zamiatin, who was among those workers recruited from the city soviets in early 1930 to work in the sel'sovets. Zamiatin depicted the situation faced by the 25,000er 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 the kulaks had not yet been exiled. This omission, according to Zamiatin, had led to the existing crisis. With Zamiatin's arrival, Klinov set about preparing for the exile of the kulaks. He began by removing the church bell. The heads of kulak families were then exiled, and all went well until one of the exiled kulaks escaped and returned home to announce that the other kulaks would soon be coming back to seek vengeance. This news led to the decision to exile the remaining members of the kulak families. The announcement of this decision led to an uproar in the village. In an attempt to forestall this action, the peasant women blocked the entrances of the huts of families slated for deportation. Several days later, the women also led the opposition to the attempt to cart away the village's grain by blocking entry to the granary. This action led to a *babii bunt*, followed quickly by a general free-for-all in which all the peasants participated, many armed with pitchforks. The disturbance was suppressed by the militia, which was called in after all of the peasants had joined the rebellion.⁵¹

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 Sholokhov's *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 *sel'sovet*. Here, the women led the attack on the grain warehouse "with the silent approval of the men folk at the back." And while the women were dragging the collective farm chairman through the village, the men broke the locks of the grain warehouse and seized their grain.⁵² The women served both as initiators and decoys in this incident.

In the village of Belogolovoe in Zhukovskii *raion*, Brianskii *okrug*, Western Region, a decision to remove the church bell (supposedly taken by a general village assembly and the RIK) touched off a *babii bunt*. On 13 January 1930, eight local activists arrived at the church to take down the bell. Before they could complete their work, a group of women, armed with stakes, stormed the church, beating up the activists and bringing their work to a halt. On the next day, following the church service, the priest held a meeting to condemn the illegal activities of the local authorities and to collect

money to send a petitioner off to Moscow to complain. The meeting was closed to all activists and the church bell was to sound the alert in case of trouble. On 15 January, the RIK sent in a plenipotentiary to enforce its decision to remove the bell. As soon as the plenipotentiary was sighted, the tocsin rang out and women, along with a smaller number of men, came pouring into the streets. The crowd assaulted the official, driving him out of the village and thus, for the time being, saving their bell. On the next day, 600 people arrived from neighboring villages to join the Belogolovoe peasants in a gathering of the faithful. Predictably, the OGPU blamed the kulak and the church council for the disturbances in this village. The resistance of the village's women, however, was notable for the persistence and determination it demonstrated, as well as the fact that very few male participants were involved in the protests. ⁵³

In the *bab'i bunty* in Karasukskii raion, Slavgorodskii okrug, Siberia, the men, in fact, stayed home. The rioting in this raion began on the eve of collectivization, over the issue of grain requisitioning. In April 1928, at meetings of poor peasants, villagers demanded an explanation from the state of how the people would feed themselves following the draconian requisitions. In May, some 120 women gathered at the raion center's soviet executive committee office demanding bread. They succeeded in forcing the RIK chairman to distribute grain to them. Once word got out about this event, the unrest was carried back to the villages. In six different villages, the women seized the grain from the cooperative granaries. The crowds involved in the *bab'i bunty* sometimes included as many as 200 women. According to the official postmortem on the disturbances, very few of the demonstrators actually needed bread. Rather, the blame was placed, predictably, on kulak instigation and the incorrect actions of local officials who by arresting some of the women in the early stages of the unrest supposedly provoked the others. In the Karasukskii riots, the village men stayed home (it was Sunday). According to the official report, the men neither objected to the women's actions nor participated in the rioting. Instead, they "silently supported the disturbances," saying "the *babas* are protesting, nothing will happen to them, they won't be punished." ⁵⁴

In some *bab'i bunty*, peasant men played no role at all, suggesting that women's protest was often much more than a simple ruse or front for male or general peasant rebelliousness. In the village of Blagoveshchensk in Pervomaiskii raion, Mariupol'skii okrug, Ukraine, a *babii bunt* broke out on 24 April 1930 over the arrest of a peasant named Gakh who was the chairman of the church council. Three hundred women stormed the *sel'sovet*, demanding the keys to the church and the liberation of Gakh. The women arrested Naumenko, the *sel'sovet* chairman, forced him to sit in a wooden cart, and wheeled him to Gakh's house. There, they taunted him with threats of a *samosud* if he refused to sign an order releasing Gakh. The women also arrested the party cell secretary, who received the same treatment as Naumenko. The women spat in the officials' eyes, calling them "bandits, thieves, and white guards," all the time threatening to kill them on the spot. OGPU officials arrived in the nick of time to liberate the officials, but the women continued to gather every day for the next five days, escalating their demands to include the dismantling of the collective farm and the return of the kulaks' property. ⁵⁵

A *babii bunt* that broke out in the village of Butovska in Klintsovskii raion, Western Region, was also made up exclusively of women. Early on the morning of 3 March 1930, the tocsin was sounded, bringing the women of the village out in what the report notes was an "organized fashion." The women marched off to the *sel'sovet*, demanding that a meeting with officials be called. The soviet officials refused to meet with the women. At that point, the women dispatched one of their contingent to the neighboring village to bring back (a presumably friendly) cooperative chairman. When the chairman arrived, a meeting with the soviet officials was called. At the meeting, the women demanded that the collective farm be dismantled, raising such a din, with shouts of "down with the collective farm!", that the officials closed the meeting. The next morning, 300 women again called on the *sel'sovet*, some armed with pitchforks, demanding a meeting. When their demand was refused, the crowd broke into the *sel'sovet* and passed their own decree dissolving the collective farm. They also elected a new *sel'sovet* consisting exclusively of women. The new *sel'sovet* secretary, labeled the daughter of a kulak in the official report, donned men's clothing and rechristened herself Vasillii Vasil'evich Antonenko in a reversal of gender and power that, however rare in its form, symbolically mirrored the overturn of government that had just taken place. The next day, the women got rid of the former soviet officials, shouting "we don't need you" and "we are all mutinying." Although the report notes that the officials fled to their homes to hide, there is no indication of how the *bunt* ended

or what the consequences were for its participants. The Butovska *bunt* did, however, spark other *bab'i bunt*y in the *raion*, including one in the village of Gorchaka. In Butovska, the village men were nowhere to be seen. Here the women were not only the leading force of rebellion, but also displayed a degree of organization, persistence, and, in their elections of a new local government, political awareness not expected from supposedly backward *babas*. Despite the facts of the case, it is important to note that the official report concluded that in Butovska and elsewhere in the *raion*, the organized nature of the *bab'i bunt*y, the seeming pattern of events, suggested planning by someone (most certainly male) "hiding behind the backs of poor and middle peasant women." ⁵⁶

A *babii bunt* that occurred in the village Tankeevka in Spasskii canton, Tataria, revealed a level of organization and political consciousness similar to that of the Butovska incident. Here women led the protest against the decision to turn the church into a "cultural center" and melt the bell down for the purchase of a tractor. With cries of "We don't need tractors or collective farms" and "We won't give up the bell," the women attacked and beat the *sel'sovet* members. After thus disposing of the local government, they organized a meeting and elected their own government.

Interestingly enough, the official report on the incident made no claim to outside or male leadership of the protest, instead labeling the apparent female ringleader a *kulachka*, or woman kulak, and thereby providing a rare example of the "kulakization" of female protest. ⁵⁷

Events in the Lower Volga village of Boltunovka also demonstrated a degree of organization not expected according to official stereotypes. Here the *babii bunt* began because of the state's attempt to dispatch the village's recently requisitioned grain. At 8:00 A.M. on 20 September 1929, a crowd of women converged from all ends of the village at the point from where the grain was to leave. According to the report, poor peasant women had organized the *bunt* in advance, knocking on all the hut windows and warning women to come to the demonstration or face a three-ruble fine. ⁵⁸ Ultimately, the protest failed because the women did not manage to show up all at once. The report, written by Leningrad workers, blamed the *bunt* neither on the women nor on kulaks, but on corrupt and rude *okrug* plenipotentiaries. This conclusion thus shifted blame to *other* officials, ones, moreover, who were often involved in power conflicts with worker brigades, thereby continuing to rationalize and depoliticize women's protest by redirecting agency and causation. ⁵⁹

A series of *bab'i bunt*y that broke out in response to dekulakization demonstrate further the determination and initiative of village women. In the village Verkhniĭ Ikorets in Bobrovskii *raion*, Ostrogozhskii *okrug*, Central Black Earth Region, a *babii bunt* occurred on 10 February 1930 as officials attempted to carry out dekulakization. A crowd of 200 women and children pelted officials with snowballs and stones, eventually forcing them to cease their activities. All through the night, groups of from five to ten women each sat vigil and guard at the homes of peasant families that had been labeled kulak. Two days later, a detachment of forty armed Communists and militia entered the village only to be met by a crowd of 600 women, apparently ready for them, who, with shouts of "hurrah," drove back the intruders. The women then moved on the *sel'sovet* where they endeavored to put an end to the collective farm and take back their seed grain. ⁶⁰ In two Western Siberian villages, the women also took the initiative in defending their neighbors. In the village Petrovka in Cherlaxskii *raion*, forty women prevented the exile of two kulaks, hiding kulak children in their homes and threatening to beat up the RIK plenipotentiary. The women argued that "We have no kulaks, they [were] incorrectly deprived of their legal rights." In Rozhdestvenskaia village, in Kargatskii *raion*, a crowd of women gathered after hearing the cries of their neighbor Liakhov who "categorically refused to leave" with the dekulakization brigade. The women hid Liakhov's children and placed Liakhov under their personal protection. When officials returned later to try again to take Liakhov, a crowd of seventy women blocked his exile, shouting "[We] will not let [you] take him" and "The plenipotentiaries should be beaten." At the same time, other women went from hut to hut gathering signatures for a petition in support of Liakhov. In the end, the women turned their wrath against the collective farm and took back their property by force. ⁶¹ Each of these incidents involved a certain amount of organization and none can be characterized as anything but reasonable in intent.

Even the most violent and seemingly irrational displays of women's anger reveal elements of prior

planning or, at the least, ritualized behavior indicating that women were not simply engaged in hysterical, uncontrollable outbursts. In the village of Krivozer'e in Romodanovskii *raion*, Mordovskii *oblast'*, for example, a crowd of 200 women converged at the *sel'sovet*, demanding to be released from the collective farm. They reassembled at the same place the next day, only this time the crowd had grown to 400 and the women were demanding that the poor peasants vacate the kulaks' homes or else see their children slaughtered. The angry crowd then threatened the local activists with murder and chased them into a nearby building. There, the crowd, seemingly out of control, broke the window and attempted to force entry into the house. Despite the wildly violent nature of this revolt, the women of Krivozer'e had prearranged signals with the women of two neighboring villages, who had participated in the *bunt*. The signal for the neighboring village women to come to Krivozer'e was the waving of a red shawl.⁶² A women's revolt in the village Kareli in Morshanskii *raion*, Tambovskii *okrug*, Central Black Earth Region, also showed signs of forethought as well as certain rituals of revolt. On 12 January 1930, a youth meeting decided to close the church and transform it into a school. On the 13th, several women ran into the street, crying "*karaul*" (in this instance meaning "help" or "danger"), which, like the church bell, had the effect of a war cry, bringing other women out into the street with the same cry on their lips. Several hundred women gathered at the consumer shop, where they discussed the plans to close the church, and placed the blame for this decision on the local school teacher. The crowd then decided to call out some of the young people who had been at the meeting, yelling "*na rasprava*" (roughly, "come out for punishment"), a frequent cry in village riots. When the youth failed to show, the crowd broke into their homes, armed with hatchets and stakes. The crowd soon grew to 500 people and, with this, decided to march on the teacher's house. The teacher wisely vanished, and the crowd proceeded to the church, beating the wife of a local Communist on the way. The revolt ended when a *raion* plenipotentiary met with the women and promised them that no one would close the church. Even in this seemingly frenzied revolt, it should be noted that the women, whether by tradition or design, raised the conventional war cries and, moreover, managed to stop at the priest's house for his blessing on their way to the church.⁶³

These cases demonstrate that peasant women were capable of acting independently in opposing the policies of Soviet power, with or without their men's aid and support. They also reveal some rudimentary degree of organization and political sense. In classified documents, the OGPU claimed that women's revolts were frequently distinguished by a high degree of organization and persistence, and noted several cases in which women organized systems of patrols and pickets to guard kulaks and their property.⁶⁴ That peasant women sometimes arrived at protests armed with pitchforks, stakes, knives, and other weapons provides further evidence of reasoned intent and organization behind the rebellions.⁶⁵ And in some instances, peasant men were even said to have actively opposed their wives' actions. In the mostly Baptist village of Novosrednyi in the Stavropol'skii region, for example, a *babii bunt* broke out in late 1929. Here the peasants viewed the collective farm as a threat to their livelihood, and all sorts of rumors flew concerning the socialization of children and the introduction of an eighty-meter blanket. When women from a neighboring village sent word that they had taken back their recently socialized livestock, the women of Novosrednyi went, *en masse*, many with children in hand, to the collective farm office to demand the return of their animals. The collective farm officials telephoned the *raion* party committee for instructions and were told, according to the account later written by a local official, that the use of repression was forbidden. The local officials then attempted to talk to the 200 women gathered. In response, the crowd became angrier, and when someone shouted, "*Babas* [go] for the horses," the women attacked the stables and reclaimed their horses. Reportedly, many of the husbands resisted, ordering their wives to return the horses with the reasoning that "I do not want to answer for you." That night, a collective farm meeting was called. The men sat silently while the women claimed full responsibility for their actions, adding "We don't need your collective farm!" Of course, the possibility remains that the men (and women) were claiming male innocence to avoid more serious repercussions. Regardless, the events in Novosrednyi show clearly that women were capable of protest independent of male participation.⁶⁶ In a village in the Don, a mass disturbance following the publication of the Central Committee's March decree on excesses also showed signs of male reluctance to engage the powers that be. Here, women called a meeting to rail against the collective farm. They occupied the collective farm buildings and arrested the collective farm chairman, spitting in his eyes and threatening to beat him. Their husbands were at work in the field during the disturbance, but returned home to attempt to "calm" their wives as soon as they heard of the revolt.

The sincerity of the men's opposition cannot be determined for certain, but it is clear that the initial revolt was initiated independently by women.⁶⁷

Bab'i bunt, however, should not be narrowly construed as women's protest. With or without the support and participation of male peasants, they represented village resistance as a whole, serving as perhaps the dominant mode of active protest in the peasant culture of resistance during collectivization. And contrary to official images or depictions, they were in fact highly ritualized acts in which the women took center stage both as directors and actors. *Bab'i bunt* followed a relatively stylized scenario in which all peasants, not just the women, had a defined role, with the village serving as their backdrop and peasant stereotypes as their props.⁶⁸

Bab'i bunt frequently involved a kind of peasant battle formation that was both functional and ornamental. While the peasant men generally distanced themselves from the demonstration by standing off to the side, the women came to the fore, often with children in tow.⁶⁹ The presence of men could be a defensive gesture—the men could easily come to the women's defense in the event of violence—or could serve as intimidation. Children were there both as shields and as reminders to officials of the humanity of the situation they were confronting. The dominance of women was thought to be a possible deterrent to violence or, failing that, a less ostensibly politicized mode of confrontation with Soviet power. The battle formation and the roles thus implied were less consciously construed than a part of the popular culture of resistance that had developed over time as a way to confront power.⁷⁰

By physically distancing themselves, peasant men were at the same time politically distancing themselves from the women's seditious acts and all possible and probable consequences. Both men and women were aware of the dangers of male involvement in protests against the state and appear to have formed a kind of alliance centered on the protection of males. This was likely the case in Novosrednyi when, after the *bunt*, the women insisted on claiming full responsibility for their actions.⁷¹ In the German village Zonnental', Krapotkinskii *raion*, North Caucasus, the women "categorically forbade" the men to come anywhere near the crowd, telling them, "This is our women's business. Don't you interfere."⁷² In the Karasukskii riots, the alliance was even articulated by men who claimed in regard to the women's protest that "nothing will happen to them, they won't be punished."⁷³ And in the Lower Volga, women assumed the "vanguard" in revolt under the pretext that "women will not be touched."⁷⁴

Off the record, the OGPU clearly understood at least some of the dynamics of women's protest, arguing that men tended to stay to the side in most disturbances for fear of incurring the harsh punishments meted out to kulaks. The men then "allowed" the women to take the lead with the understanding that "women can [do] anything, nothing will [happen] to women, they carry less responsibility." For instance, the OGPU reported that in the village Antonovka in Bugskii *raion* in Ukraine, women proclaimed, "We fear no one, we were already at the GPU, and they did nothing [to us] and will do [nothing]." And in the village Krasnoe in Nikolo-Pestrovskii *raion*, Middle Volga, women said, "Women [*baby*] don't give [them] the bell, nothing will happen to us for this." According to the OGPU, it was the "condescending relations of the punitive organs to women ... that enable[d] the strengthening of opinion about the invulnerability [*beznakazannost'*] of women." And in fact, if OGPU sources are to be trusted, armed force was used in only seven cases to put down a *babii bunt* (five times in Ukraine, and once each in the Central Black Earth Region and North Caucasus). OGPU data indicate that 68% of *bab'i bunt* were "liquidated" by persuasion, 15.5% through the satisfaction of the rebels' demands, and only 14% through the arrests of leaders and the most active participants, thus providing some justification for opinions regarding the reduced vulnerability of women to repression.⁷⁵

In *bab'i bunt*, then, men tended to stand to the side, as far as that was possible. In nonviolent protest, they did the same. Artfully dissimulating, peasant men played upon the dominant images of the *baba* to opt out of the collective farm or other unwanted measures. For example, according to the report of a workers' brigade in the Tambov area, 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 replied, "They [the women] are equal now, as they decide so we will agree."⁷⁶ The 25,000er

Gruzdev was told by one peasant, "My wife does not want to socialize our cow, so I cannot do this," and a Moscow area peasant told officials that he was willing to join the collective farm, but that he was afraid because his wife had confused him. ⁷⁷ Peasant men in the Odessa area told officials, "We will not go into the [collective farm] because [our] wives won't let us" while in the village Borka in Osterskii *raion*, Chernogovskii *okrug*, the majority of poor peasants reportedly refused to join the collective farm, claiming that their wives would not agree to their membership. ⁷⁸ One observer noted that the men often appeared ready to join a collective farm, but would procrastinate by saying that they needed "to consult with the *baba*." ⁷⁹ It was both easier and safer for a peasant man to claim that he could not join a collective farm because his wife would not let him.

The women played along. In many parts of the countryside, women told officials that they would not join the collective farm and that if their husbands did they would divorce them. ⁸⁰ In a North Caucasus village, women warned an official that, "If our husbands join the collective farm, we will not let them [come] home." ⁸¹ In the *stanitsa* Vladimirskaiia in Stavropol'skii *okrug*, North Caucasus, 150 women gathered at the *sel'sovet*, demanding divorces and divisions of property because they did not want to be in the collective farm, while their husbands purportedly would not give up their memberships. Elsewhere in the *okrug*, women demanded that their husbands be taken off membership lists of collective farms or face divorce. ⁸² In some areas, women were reported to show up at official meetings and, by force or pretext, drag their husbands away. ⁸³ In a village in Tataria, peasant women stormed a men's meeting on collectivization in late 1929. They led their husbands away by the hand and then returned to beat up one of the presiding officials. ⁸⁴ This is not to say that there were not cases when men and women did differ over the issue of collectivization without ruse or pretext. Officials sometimes noted that the men were far more cooperative than the women. In one village, a woman organizer wrote that the "men are very conscious and help in work," while the women were "backward," ⁸⁵ and Hindus and others have provided cases of seemingly genuine marital strife over the collective farm. ⁸⁶ Moreover, in areas where male peasants participated heavily in seasonal out-migration, women appear to have had the upper hand in village affairs. A former peasant soldier living in emigration after World War II told a Harvard interviewer in the 1950s:

The women played an active role against the collective farm. The men were in general passive. The woman's role especially in the central areas was to work the land and to take care of the house. There was more or less of a matriarchy here. The men left for the city to work for wages.... The women told the men what to do. In Smolensk in 1931, our troops were stationed here. In one village, the women decided to call a meeting and destroy the collective farm. There were meetings all over. I remember in the town of Dubrovka near Smolensk the women decided to give out seed for sowing, the men took no part in this. They kept away. The chairman of the collective farm first laughed at this "women's nonsense" and then when the women got down to cases and it seemed that they were really serious about it he had to call in the troops. ⁸⁷

Whether the women were in charge or opposed their husbands, what is clear is that many men and women recognized male vulnerability and the far greater leverage that peasant women had in protesting against state policies. This recognition came out in the form of everyday dissimulation, and dissimulation writ large on the canvas of the *bab'i bunt*y. Dissimulation thus became a part of the ritual, a characterization assumed by the actors for the benefit of their audience.

The presence of children at *bab'i bunt*y also served a purpose. Their presence might have suggested to officials that protest was peaceful, or served as a cordon to protect adult women from retaliation as they approached the object of their protest. The use of children may also have been intended to humanize the situation, to remind often brutal officials that they were dealing with people, with families. In a village in the Middle Volga, it was the women who, with children in hand, came out to talk to collective farm organizers as they went from hut to hut cajoling peasants to sign up. ⁸⁸ In a hungry village in Kazakhstan in the fall of 1930, women took their children in silent protest to the home of the resident 25,000er. As he sat at his table eating his dinner, the women and children surrounded his hut, staring and knocking on his door and windows. ⁸⁹ In some parts of the country, rumor sanctioned or, depending upon perspective, rationalized the presence of children at women's protest. In a Kuban village, the word was that pregnant and nursing women could act without

culpability. Here, some women were even said to have borrowed other people's children when they went to meetings. Officials naturally attributed the rumor to the local kulak who supposedly referred to a nonexistent law to back the rumor.⁹⁰ Hindus also quoted a peasant woman who said about women's protest: "Many of us came with our babies on purpose because we knew that the laws about women with babies would prevent their touching us."⁹¹ Whether or not these women actually believed in the existence of such a law or appealed to an idealized version of "law," they clearly used the rumor of the law to their own ends.⁹² Dissimulation once again assumed center stage in the production of *bab'i bunt*.

The peasant "battle formation" was but one dimension of the ritual of *bab'i bunt*. The church bell also played a key role. A village's bell was much more than an ornament or a simple device for calling peasants to the church. The bell had great significance, serving as a tocsin in emergencies and a symbol of the idea of community.⁹³ Many a riot erupted precisely over the issue of the state's removal of the bell (whether to melt it down for its precious metals or to punish the village by removing one of its cultural symbols), and in so doing illuminated through village unity in revolt the community meaning of the bell. The bell was also a revolutionary herald, its peals sounding a call to arms at the onset of *bab'i bunt* and peasant rebellion.⁹⁴

The bell, however, was only the most important of an entire supporting cast of auditory actors. Officials encountering a *bunt* not only confronted the pounding ringing of the tocsin, they also were assaulted by a veritable women's orchestra of shouts and curses, including the ritual cries of *karaul* and *rasprava*, as well as calls for a *samosud*. The "noise protest," not unlike that sometimes practiced at meetings, served to confuse, disorient, and vocally disarm Soviet power, preventing it from exercising its voice of power. The noise, in a sense, allowed the women to take the upper hand from the outset. Their male adversaries, while possibly adept in speech-making, were not practiced in having to raise their voice above a provocative din. The women were able to move the confrontation to their own "turf" through their vocal artistry, for surely the craft of interruption, shouting down, and irrational cacophony (as it seemed) was in the peasant woman's sphere of talents. The milling, pushing, and density of the female crowd then merely reinforced the threat and power of what appeared to officials to be a hysterical and dangerous mob of *babas*.

All of this constituted the first scene of the play. In the next, the women made their approach to Soviet power. Most often, they went to the sel'sovet, sometimes even assaulting the building, as in the example of a Smolensk village in which the women smashed up the offices and tore up a portrait of Kalinin.⁹⁵ In some cases, the women beat up, sometimes quite seriously, the local officials until they no longer put up resistance. If necessary, the men could more or less safely enter the picture at this point if it became necessary to "defend" the women. Most of the time, though, the agents of Soviet power hid or ran away as soon as the women's crowd began to threaten.⁹⁶ Once the women had rid themselves of their main adversaries, they turned to the next stage of the revolt.

The resolution of the *babii bunt* occurred as the women endeavored to accomplish the goals of their revolt. These generally related to such explosive issues as church closings and bell removals, dekulakization and deportations, grain requisitioning, livestock and seed socialization, and the formation of a collective farm. Women sometimes could do little more than physically block access (in the event of church closings, bell removals, and deportations) or, on their own initiative, unofficially reverse official decrees. Or they could chase away deportation escort guards and collective farm organizers.⁹⁷ They were most effective, however, when their object was to reclaim socialized property or dissolve the collective farm. In these cases, the women, on their own or in union with the men, would storm the collective stables or granary where their property was stored and tear up the collective farm charter.⁹⁸ The revolt often ended with the resolution of the issue that had started it, although on occasion, as we have seen, the women could go so far as to form a new local government.⁹⁹

The epilogue of a *babii bunt* usually did not include the use of state force. In most cases (and these still seemed to be rare), repression was limited to the judicial branch of government. When charges ensued, a few of the local male "kulaks" or outspoken (again, male) peasants were scapegoated, and the women either received a minor penalty or none at all. Women seem not to have generally

been prosecuted under Article 58 of the penal code for counterrevolutionary crimes in cases when *bunty* ended in court actions; in reports of court cases in *Sudebnaia praktika* (case supplement to *Sovetskaia iustitsiia*, the journal of the RSFSR People's Commissariat of Justice) in 1930 and 1931, only men appear as defendants in such cases prosecuted under Article 58. The main refrain in the epilogue of *bab'i bunty* was "We are backward." And as the women repented of their backwardness, the state charged them with little more than the same. This conspiracy of stereotypes was illustrated cleverly at a peasant meeting in the village Kozlovka in the Western Region. The meeting passed a resolution condemning *their* women's riot, which had resulted in the destruction of the collective stables. The meeting pledged its honor not to allow such an incident to recur and, while asking the OGPU to take all necessary measures, also requested it not to arrest the poor and middle peasant women who participated in the *bunt* due to their "lack of consciousness."¹⁰⁰ A chorus of *mea culpa* generally brought the curtain down on the *bab'i bunty*, thus ending the spectacle of village revolt.

Bab'i bunty, then, were relatively ritualized performances in which villagers played parts that were customary and familiar to insiders and outsiders alike. Role playing and dissimulation were integral to the performance, as were the aspects of hysteria, disorder, and spontaneity. Women were ritual bearers as well as leaders in revolt. The *bab'i bunty* began in response to specific policies and were never aimless but always goal-oriented, whether the object of revolt was a church closing, dekulakization, or the formation of a collective farm. Both content and form were rational, and at times there was even a relatively high level of organization and political awareness behind the tumult. *Bab'i bunty* were, moreover, doubly subversive in that they not only directly challenged state power, but inverted traditional gender roles and therefore the patriarchal hierarchy of the village and state. The *babii bunt* was perhaps the most peasants (and therefore the whole village in economic terms and by association) by conforming to official images of dark masses, disorderly women, and kulak and *podkulachnik* agitation and propaganda.

Conclusion

Peasant women, in league with peasant men, exploited the dominant images of the *baba* for their own ends. Making use of a Soviet version of Davis's "disorderly woman,"¹⁰² peasant women took advantage of the leverage and protection provided to them by misconceived images of their actions formed by outsiders with little or no real knowledge of peasant ways. The Soviet construction of the *baba* placed gender (and all it implied) at center stage while denuding peasant women of any class attributes. By virtue of her gender and classlessness, the Soviet *baba* was denied political consciousness and agency. She was therefore and by definition incapable of political protest, given that in the Soviet context politics and, by implication, political protest could occur only in conjunction with and by derivation from class. Peasant women played into their expected roles. This tactic was a part of a peasant popular culture of resistance and exemplified the public transcript of peasant protest wherein, in rebellious encounters with dominant classes, "the public performance of the subordinate will ... be shaped to appeal to the expectations of the powerful."¹⁰³

If the *bab'i bunty* were more than they appeared to be, is it possible that the official image of them was a political construct of another sort? That is, is it possible that the state too had an unofficial agenda that was better served by maintaining a public posture toward *bab'i bunty* that was contrary to reality? In *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar*, Field suggested that the "myth of the tsar" (i.e., a feigned naive monarchism) was as useful to the Tsarist government during postemancipation peasant disturbances as it was to the peasantry. The myth of the tsar was based on the "myth of the peasant" as backward and loyal, and rebellious only when misguided or exploited by outsiders. These myths, according to Field, provided the regime with a rationalization for any social or political problems leading to peasant disturbances. In other words, both tsar and peasant may have participated in a deception meant to defuse and depoliticize rebellion.¹⁰⁴

The myth of the peasant may have lingered into the Soviet period in more ways than one. Accordingly, the degree of state condescension may have been in direct proportion to the threat posed. Official depictions of *bab'i bunty* and peasant women's protest could have been utilized in

order to minimize the true nature and extent of the opposition engendered by collectivization. In its most classified documentation, the OGPU, after all, appears to have understood many of the ramifications of *bab'i bunty*, even though it continued to blame the kulak for their instigation and to deny

peasant women agency in their protests (see above). The public facade on *bab'i bunty* and the classless nature of the *baba* served a particularly useful purpose in explaining why and how village protest drew in poor and middle peasants, offering a ready rationalization for the contradictions of the class struggle in the village, for the state's failure to capture the support of its supposed poor and middle peasant allies among the peasantry. Moreover, by allowing the women relatively more leeway for protest, the state may have hoped that it could restrain the surely more dangerous protest of peasant men for, as the author Mikhail Sholokhov wrote to Stalin in 1932, if the men entered the picture, "the business ended in murder."¹⁰⁵ That the state understood, despite official images, the full ramifications of women's protest is also apparent in the disappearance of the *baba* in Stalinist political art in the first half of the 1930s. Victoria Bonnell has written that "[t]he new world of the village depicted by Stalinist posters effaced virtually all aspects of the traditional peasant woman, her culture, her way of life."¹⁰⁶ This disappearance, however, may have derived not only from the state's antipathy to the *baba* as a cultural symbol of backwardness, but also from the state's fear of and hostility toward the peasant woman as symbol and primary agent of collective, active peasant resistance to collectivization.

Bab'i bunty do not appear to have continued in any significant way beyond the season of March fever. Nevertheless, during collectivization, *bab'i bunty* and women's protest proved the most effective and widespread form of peasant collective action against the state, playing a key role in forcing the state's temporary retreat in the spring of 1930 and subsequently ensuring a more cautious approach to peasant issues that were centered on the household, family, and belief. Peasant women played a leading role in the resistance to collectivization, defending their interests and demonstrating a degree of organization and conscious political opposition rarely acknowledged. Their determined resistance, moreover, had more than a degree of prescience to it, something of which Solzhenitsyn reminds us through the words of Ivan Denisovich:

The thing Shukhov [Ivan Denisovich] didn't get at all was what his wife wrote about how not a single new member had come to the kolkhoz since the war. All the youngsters were getting out as best they could—to factories in the towns or to the peat fields. Half the kolkhozniks had not come back after the war, and those who had wouldn't have anything to do with the kolkhoz—they lived there but earned their money somewhere outside. The only men in the kolkhoz were the gang boss, Zakhar Vasilyevich, and the carpenter, Tikhon, who was eighty-four, had married not long ago, and even had children already. The real work in the kolkhoz was done by the same women who'd been there since the start, in 1930.¹⁰⁷

And it was precisely those women who had fought so hard against collectivization and whose interests, life, and culture were most at stake in the peasant civil war against Soviet power.

