

Lynn Viola Mel'nik, Sergei Vladimirovich Zhuravlev, Tracy MacDonald, Andrei Nikolaevich, eds. *Riazanskaia derevnia v 1929-1930 gg Khronika golovokruzheniia: Dokumenty i materialy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998. xliv + 703 pp. No price listed (cloth), ISBN 978-5-86004-175-2.

Reviewed by Mark B. Tauger (Department of History, West Virginia University)
Published on H-Russia (April, 2002)



The Banality of Crazyiness

This remarkable book is the first extensive collection of documents on collectivization published from fully opened local archives. It relies mostly on reports by the OGPU (the security police agency that ultimately became the KGB), but also includes many reports by the Soviet procuracy and some reports by local or regional government agencies as well. By focusing on one *okrug*—the equivalent of a large county in a U.S. state—the documents allow a grass roots view of the villages and local administration rarely found in any other publication. In the process, the documents provide a perspective on the events of 1929-1930 that differs in substantial ways from our conventional views.

The collection begins with several useful prefaces. A. N. Mel'nik explains the choice of Riazan with reference to a conference held on the region in 1993 at the University of Illinois and to the novel *Muzhiki i baby* by Boris Mozhaev, which focused on Riazan. S. V. Zhuravlev explains the strengths and limitations of the documents. While they represent a “microanalysis,” a “slice of life,” he notes, they do not tell the whole story because the OGPU reports especially emphasize the negative and because they are to a certain degree subjective, especially when they give direct quotations from people. Tracy MacDonald provides a very useful historical background essay on Riazan that highlights many important aspects of the region’s agrarian history. In particular she emphasizes the chronic food-supply problems in the region during the 1920s. Lynn Viola adds to Zhuravlev’s point that the

documents are not fully objective because they emphasize class struggle and minimize problems for which the OGPU was responsible. As she points out, however, the documents remain extremely valuable sources because they report on the work of local organizations and attempt to capture popular attitudes.

The editors grouped the documents into four chronological chapters. “On the Eve” has documents on the period leading up to the first collectivization campaign. “In Full Swing” presents the campaign itself, from January to March 1930. “Down with the Kolkhoz” documents the immediate aftermath of the campaign after Stalin’s article “Dizzy with Success” that called a halt to it. The last chapter, “Calm before the New Storm,” chronicles the summer months before the revival of collectivization.

The first and perhaps most important aspect of the conditions in the region in late 1929 that these sources indicate is the food shortage, which affected towns and villages throughout the region. The first document in the collection is a report on interrupted supplies to industrial workers (p. 3). Several documents in this section show that regional and local authorities distributed food supplies to part of the rural population, usually the poor peasants (*bedniaki*) or the very poorest families. In many villages peasants had to resort to food surrogates, and doctors reported many cases of typhus and other starvation-related illnesses (pp. 6, 20). In other words, the documents show that famine relief occupied much of

the attention of Riazan *okrug* in 1929, and this was by no means unique to this region.[1]

The most interesting aspect of the documents in this section, however, involves ordinary people's interpretations of the crisis. So some workers blamed the food shortages on local government rulings that prohibited private trade in certain regions (p. 4), which often was the case. Some peasants, on the other hand, assumed that workers obtained regular supplies, and attributed the shortages to regime efforts to stockpile reserves for war or exports (pp. 6, 14-15). This was not entirely inaccurate: the USSR exported more than a million tons of grain in 1929-30, and also placed more than a million tons in reserve in that period.[2] Other peasants, however, explained the shortages as the result of a growing rural population on fixed land: "There is not enough bread because earlier there were five houses in our village, but now [there are] 28, yet the land has remained as before." These peasants thought that some of them should resettle on open land, even in Siberia (pp. 7, 20). This was of course a major direction of Soviet policy at the time.[3]

Still other peasants said that the government should rely on the Stolypin reform, with its consolidated land holdings, because "in Germany and Denmark there are no kolkhozy, and the peasantry lives there like we cannot imagine" (p. 84). And a few documents contain what I consider remarkable passages in which peasants acknowledge the serious need for food in the towns and for industrialization. One group of middle peasants admitted that while grain procurements were difficult, "we cannot live like before, we need to build factories and for that we need grain" (pp. 57, 81). Another document quoted at length the views of the "intelligentsia," including doctors, a judge, managers, and specialists in economics and finance. All of them criticized Soviet policies. A retired finance officer analyzed the regime's assumption that all problems derived from the lack of grain, which in turn was the result of the small-farm system in the country. He rejected this interpretation and argued instead that the solution to the grain crisis had to be small farms and peasant initiative and interest in production (pp. 85-87). This chapter also includes documents on other subjects, especially initial efforts to collectivize farms and collect high taxes from "kulaks," and kulak and other peasant resistance to these policies.

Perhaps the most important and remarkable document among those from the first collectivization campaign is the excerpt from the *okrug* authorities' provisional instructions for collectivization (document 37, pp.

147-158). This document expresses idealistic, even at times utopian, expectations that officials had about collectivization. It states, for example, that the kolkhoz should be the size of a rural soviet (*selsov*) district, which is of course the familiar "gigantizm" of the period, but adds to this plans for rural food procession centers, workshops, cultural centers, and more. This indicates, in other words, that the "gigantizm" was not simply some sort of infantile or "Russian" fascination with size, but reflected a practical awareness of the need for substantial consolidated regional agricultural units and rural industrialization. Many such units were in fact formed in the Brezhnev period, but such plans were highly unrealistic in 1929. This document also discusses practical management problems of kolkhozy, anticipating income distribution primarily by family size (by "eaters"), which was the method employed during the next two years. The document also anticipates the problem of free riders: it notes the criticism that some peasants would loaf in collectives, but asserts that because work will be done collectively, such loafing will rarely be possible. It adds that anyway work will be more interesting when done together, and proceeds to paint an idealistic image of collective farming that reminded me strongly of Vera Pavlova's last dream in Nikolai Chernyshevskii's novel *What Is to Be Done?*

Of course, these idealized expectations differed greatly from the reality in the *okrug*. According to an OGPU document from January 14, 1930, Riazan *okrug* officials had no idea what to do in collectivizing their farms because Moscow oblast authorities had changed the *okrug's* control figures seven times. Understandably, district personnel who came to Riazan seeking directions could see no one because *okrug* personnel were always in meetings. One document described the situation in the *okrug* as "total chaos" (p. 129). Organizers varied greatly in their approaches to conducting collectivization. Workers went through a seminar before going to villages to conduct collectivization, but one organizer claimed to know nothing about a kolkhoz (pp. 116, 118). At an *okrug* meeting of district officials one described a kolkhoz chairman sent from Moscow as having begun work very well, "with love" (p. 295). On the other hand, one organizer gave a report at a village meeting, then drew a revolver and said "whoever opposes the kolkhoz is against Soviet power and we will shoot him." *Okrug* authorities treated this as a distortion; the document does not specify what action was taken but peasants said "they sent us some crazy man, try building a kolkhoz with him!" (p. 207).

Documents repeatedly criticize organizers for malfeasance, especially intimidation, tactless and incompetent relations to the peasants, drunkenness, vulgarity, and other abuses (pp. 234-37 for example). In most such cases the personnel responsible were drunk. Yet some district authorities endorsed and even recommended the use of pressure and abuses to fulfill collectivization targets (pp. 274, 358).

Many abuses occurred dekulakization. In a number of cases, organizers conducted dekulakization at night, ostensibly in order to avoid panic, but the result was just the opposite (pp. 241, 274). Many documents cite cases of non-kulaks subjected to dekulakization. Organizers even applied dekulakization in the city of Riazan, in some neighborhoods establishing martial law, patrolling the streets and demanding verification of ID of all passers-by (p. 395). It is also noteworthy that organizers frequently took food from peasants in the process of dekulakization, and immediately ate it (document 80, pp. 394-96, and previous documents). Since food was being rationed in Riazan as in other towns by 1929, reports such as these seem to indicate that these local personnel may have been starving, which in combination with alcohol probably contributed to their aggressive attitudes and the excesses they committed.

Peasants also differed in their responses to these policies. Some peasants (according to one document, most peasants) approved of collectivization, asserting that it was "time to stop individual farming." Peasants in one district even reorganized their fields to form kolkhozy "spontaneously" (pp. 120, 121, 127). Some peasants also seem to have supported dekulakization, in some cases taking everything they could from the kulaks and distributing their takings among themselves (pp. 208, 271), in other cases standing guard over dekulakized property to prevent kulaks from reclaiming it (p. 313). Many others, however, opposed the policy. In one village meeting, peasants quoted from Lenin that such a program had to be gradual, not a "jump," and accused the Communist Party of going against Lenin by forcing collectivization (pp. 143-144). In another village a peasant protested against collectivization by going on a hunger strike for several days (p. 198). Peasants also actively opposed dekulakization and in some cases actually stopped it (p. 208).

Peasants also committed suicide, fled from the villages, wrote a variety of protest notes and pamphlets and circulated them, attacked organizers and also peasants who had joined kolkhozy, and most notably initiated up-

risings and rebellions (*volneniia*). Several documents discussed the large uprisings in Pitelin and Shatskii districts. Peasants, usually village women, initiated these protests in response to the arrest of the village priest and intrusive socialization of livestock for the kolkhoz (see especially documents 60, 62, 71). Peasants repeatedly expressed their fears that the kolkhoz would bring the village only the forced labor of serfdom (*barshchina*), famine, mismanagement, and heavy obligations to the state, and that the kolkhoz could not survive (e.g., pp. 349).

The OGPU reports from the collectivization campaign repeated assert that peasants invariably agreed to state policies, including procurements, seed gathering, and collectivization, when organizers explained the policy and the reasons for it. So according to such a source, in one village plenipotentiaries tried to organize a seed fund by forced searches. The "terrorized" peasants refused and forced the plenipotentiaries to leave the village, after which a group of armed *kolkhozniki* from a neighboring village came and arrested eight of the protesters. Then OGPU officials came and released the arrested peasants, called a village meeting and explained the reason for gathering seed. The next day the peasants turned over the requisite seed to the collective barn. The document noted that this village traditionally had a pro-soviet attitude and ordinarily fulfilled the tasks imposed on it (pp. 198-99). In another case a group of women, including widows, organized and came to the village meeting with the intention of disrupting discussion of the kolkhoz, but when then found out what a kolkhoz actually was, they were among the first to join (p. 170).

As counterexamples the documents criticize abuses by officials who failed to follow such a patient approach. So peasants were arrested (sometimes under Article 58, section 10) for telling bad stories about a kolkhoz, for spreading rumors about kolkhozy, for objecting verbally to collectivization or even for asking for a more detailed explanation of a kolkhoz (pp. 173, 337, 348).

The documents in the third chapter show that Stalin's article "Dizzy with Success" did not actually initiate the massive decollectivization of spring 1930. Peasants began demanding to leave, and leaving, the kolkhozy several days before the publication of Stalin's article "Dizzy with Success" at the beginning of March 1930 (pp. 304-305, 310, 314, 322, 363). According to these OGPU reports, excesses or abuses always motivated such departures. Giant kolkhozy reportedly fell apart in one day, or in one morning (p. 461). One document, from a month after Stalin's letter, notes that the new kolkhozy lost the

most members, while old kolkhozy grew and became more consolidated despite the chaos (p. 493). Another, however, asserts that many kolkhozy fell apart, while most of the rest were “pygmy” in size, with fewer than ten households (p. 502).

Stalin’s article led peasants frequently to express distrust or hostility toward the local officials who forced them into the kolkhozy, to leave kolkhozy, demand back their livestock and land from the collectives, or to demand immediate application of the new kolkhoz statute allowing peasants a private farm within the kolkhoz (p. 390). Peasants also overwhelmed local agencies and the procuracy with hundreds of complaints and appeals every day regarding dekulakization, church closings, confiscations of property to pay taxes, deprivation of rights, and similar actions by local officials (pp. 522, 538). Sometimes peasants would use the kolkhoz as a “scarecrow,” as when a peasant ended an argument with his wife by threatening her, “look, I’ll join the kolkhoz!” or when the wife threatened the husband with divorce if he did not leave the kolkhoz (p. 462). In at least one case, however, peasants told organizers that if they had followed the principles in Stalin’s letter earlier, “we would all be in the kolkhoz” (p. 412).

The publication of Stalin’s article caused what one document termed a “revolution” in the minds of lower-level officials (p. 390). A week after Stalin’s letter an OGPU report asserted that local personnel “in positively all districts” used administrative coercion to carry out collectivization (p. 397). Another report referred to the use of the revolver as “the basic ‘argument’ for collectivization.” This stated that threats and intimidation had a “mass character,” citing cases of organizers dekulakizing middle peasants to force them into kolkhozy (p. 411). Local officials’ actions and attitudes were thus becoming well known to regional and central authorities, especially the OGPU.

Many local personnel tried to conceal their excesses and peasants protests against them, and thereby avoid punishing each other (p. 423). Reports from mid- and late-March complained that many local personnel had not changed their work and were still forming large collectives coercively, with all livestock socialized. A district soviet chairman asserted “I am sure that Stalin’s article will destroy completely our work in collectivization” (pp. 427, 482-483). The OGPU removed from office many officials who committed excesses, and often arrested them (pp. 474 ff). One interesting document reports on the attitudes of teachers toward collectivization,

noting the effects of class-based screening and purges in 1926-29, and also cases of teachers organizing resistance to collectivization (document 101).

During the calmer period of late spring and summer 1930, peasants returned to farm work when they could. The documents report considerable animosity between kolkhozniki and noncollectivized peasants over land or just on principle (pp. 566ff, 605, 643-44, 650). Noncollectivized peasants watched the collectives for every problem (p. 606). Some kolkhozy started and finished sowing before noncollectivized peasants, sowed more than the plan, and their work led peasants to join these kolkhozy (pp. 580-81, 612, 616). Other kolkhozy, however, exhibited serious mismanagement, with “everyone drunk” (pp. 614, 624). Noncollectivized peasants had difficulty in obtaining land; in some cases collectives simply claimed their land, but in other cases noncollectivized peasants ignored kolkhoz land holding (pp. 516, 566, 605, 613).

Collectivization, dekulakization, and excesses continued in April and May (pp. 552-53). Food shortages continued in both towns and villages. In Pitelin district, the site of a major rebellion, poor peasants’ food supplies had been disrupted for weeks, and those peasants took empty sacks to local officials appealing for food at least for their children (document 142, p. 656). Peasants also resisted and complained about the contracts to turn over crops to the state, which authorities tried to make peasants sign. Peasants distrusted these contracts because the contracting organizations did not fulfill their plans the previous year, so the Riazan *okrug* authorities published a decree obliging contracting organizations to fulfill their plan (p. 608). OGPU documents also reported that contracting agencies had still not paid for the previous year’s crops in some regions, and left too little of the crop for peasant families (p. 618).

The most striking aspect of these documents overall, in my view, was their extremely critical, even moral attitude toward the events they described. Many documents that summarize developments during and after the first collectivization campaign sound very similar to a critical description of collectivization written by a Western author like Moshe Lewin or even Robert Conquest. The documents express surprise, scorn, and even shock at the abuses of local officials, and decry them for discrediting collectivization among the peasantry. They also express sympathy for the peasant victims of these abuses and record efforts by the OGPU and other officials to correct some of the excesses. In many cases, OGPU officials released peasants arbitrarily or incorrectly imprisoned by

local officials (e.g., pp. 359-371, 431).

In general, the OGPU officials who wrote these documents were convinced that all of these irrational and violent acts could have been avoided if local organizers had relied on explanation and patience. The documents reflect a strange combination of morality and immorality: for example they discuss “illegal acts” committed during dekulakization, but never see that policy itself as illegal, violent, and cruel. Consequently they never connect the essentially criminal character of dekulakization with the crimes they identify as having occurred in the process of conducting it. Yet the numerous documents on violations of law during collectivization and dekulakization indicate that OGPU officials conceived of these policies as legal and thought that they could be conducted without excesses (p. 566). These officials’ ostensible morality even reached the point of prudishness: one document, that discussed extremely violent and cruel actions like dekulakization, arrests for minor offenses, attacks, rebellions, and so forth, quoted a protest letter and censored certain words from it as obscene (p. 251).

The OGPU reports frequently refer to excesses that the agency investigated and exposed, with the result that certain individuals, usually local officials or organizers, were arrested or tried. Yet these reports usually do not explain the fate of the victims of those excesses. I also found it strange that the documents repeat themselves, reporting the same cases over and over again, even from the same administrative level (e.g., 409, 411ff, 420ff, 637 and 654). Did such repetition mean that the OGPU sought to give the impression that they were doing their work exposing malfeasance by highlighting specific cases? This, it seems to me, would have to encourage skepticism regarding how representative these abuses were. The overall impression that the documents convey, I believe, is close to Hannah Arendt’s idea of the banality of evil. These Soviet officials deal with traumatic, cruel, chaotic policies as though they were nothing extraordinary, that the peasants could be easily persuaded by a calm explanation to change dramatically their farming methods and surrender their “kulaks” and priests to the ferocious security police. Then when local organizers used threats, coercion, guns and force, and peasants respond in kind and in every other way they could think of, the OGPU personnel profess shock and take measures, without acknowledging the role that the basic policies had in fomenting the situation.

This was, of course, the attitude of the Soviet leadership, and OGPU officials certainly had to protect them-

selves by expressing such views. I wonder, however, about the underlying attitudes of officials who report that organizers used coercion virtually everywhere, that peasants protested in response to excesses, that contracts left peasants with too little food, and who released imprisoned peasants and restored unjustly dekulakized peasants to their homes. Are these documents also a form of Aesopian language? Do they express an implicit criticism of the policies they had to enforce? This review has focused on the main theme of this volume: collectivization and dekulakization, but these documents include much anecdotal information on many other aspects of village life. Many of the documents, for example, are “situation reports,” compilations of brief reports from local OGPU personnel and other local agencies about unusual events in particular villages and towns. These deal with a wide variety of topics, including crime and “hooligans,” fires, religion, family conflicts, protests about matters other than collectivization, official malfeasance, natural calamities, and more.

These reports vividly illustrate that many conflicts divided the villages, and that Soviet policies, including collectivization and dekulakization, affect the villages in their local context. So peasants in some cases went along with dekulakization because it reinforced animosities that already existed in the village. Also collectivization took place in a context of widespread violent crime in the villages, which may also help to explain the violence of the period (pp. 593-94). These documents are thus a rich and varied, but also highly enigmatic, source of information on the crisis of collectivization and on Soviet social history in 1929-1930.

Notes

[1]. RGASPI, f. 17, op. 85, d. 307, ll. 41-51.

[2]. On limited reserves, see R. W. Davies, M. B. Tauger, S. G. Wheatcroft, “Soviet Grain Stocks and the Famine of 1932-1933,” *Slavic Review* v. 54 no. 3 (Fall 1995), pp. 642-657; on exports, see R. W. Davies, *The Socialist Offensive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 432.

[3]. See for example M. L. Bogdenko, *_Stroitel'stvo zernovykh sovkhozov v 1928-1932 gg.* (Moscow, 1958), pp. 17-38.

Copyright (c) 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of pub-

lication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-russia>

Citation: Mark B. Tauger. Review of Mel'nik, Lynn Viola; Zhuravlev, Sergei Vladimirovich; MacDonald, Tracy; Nikolaevich, Andrei, eds., *Riazanskaia derevnia v 1929-1930 gg Khronika golovokruzheniia: Dokumenty i materialy*. H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. April, 2002.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=11070>

Copyright © 2002 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.