
 Lev Kopelev, "The Last Grain Collections"

1933

Kopelev, who we met before as a young Trotskyist, had become a "true believer" in Stalin by the time of the "revolution from above." Without questioning the wisdom of forced requisitioning of grain from hungry, even starving, peasants, he and his comrades swept into the Ukrainian countryside at a moment of widespread famine. The famine in Ukraine was one of the great unplanned misfortunes that followed collectivization and the removal of the most productive peasants, the so-called "kulaks." It is estimated that five million people died from starvation. This catastrophe has become an iconic event in Ukrainian national history, and many historians, most notably Robert Conquest, argue that the famine was a deliberate state policy designed to eradicate Ukrainian nationalism by weakening Ukraine's peasants.¹ The famine was certainly the result of the state's absurd calculations that Ukrainian peasants were sabotaging the grain collections and could contribute more, but it was more the result of government incompetence than a clear plan to kill ethnic Ukrainians. German, Jewish, and Russian villages in Ukraine also suffered, and far from Ukraine, in the Volga region, the North Caucasus, and Kazakhstan, similar policies led to horrendous loss of life.

The grain front! Stalin said the struggle for grain was the struggle for socialism. I was convinced that we were warriors on an invisible front, fighting against kulak sabotage for the grain which was needed by the country, by the five-year plan. Above all, for the grain, but also for the souls of these peasants who were mired in unconscientiousness, in ignorance, who succumbed to enemy agitation, who did not understand the great truth of communism. . . .

We did not consider them opponents or feel like hostile aliens among them. For in every village we found comrades, like-minded people.

In Petrivtsy our mentor was the head of the village soviet, Vashchenko. He had served in the German war to the rank of noncommissioned officer and had won two Saint George decorations, and in the Civil War he had commanded a company.

"It was easier then. Believe it or not, but it was lots easier. Everything was clear as clear could be. Say right here was your unit, your position. Then there was the enemy—the Cadets, the Petlyurans, the Makhno rabble. They were bad, the rats, the counterterrevs! So you light 'em up, like from one cigarette to the next. Blast 'em with machine guns and rifles. And then wiggle like a snake around the side, or rush 'em head on, one after the other. Hurrah! Stick 'em with the bayonet! Butt 'em in the chops! If they don't raise their hands, pack 'em off to the graveyard! And keep going—march, march! Take the Crimea! Take Warsaw! Clear as clear can be. But now the enemy, maybe, is sitting next to you, maybe he's shaking your hand and saying hello. I've got my Nagan revolver on me, you can be sure, but I got to keep it in my pocket. You can pull it out only in dire emergency: for self-defense or for show. To shake up some real rat. But even this ain't often. And still the front

1. Robert Conquest, *The Harvest of Sorrow: Soviet Collectivization and the Terror-Famine* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).

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is all around you. I figure the grain sacked up and buried in Petrivtsy alone must amount to over seventy thousand pounds. Those dirty turkeys hid it. [Individual farmers were derided as “turkeys, gobblers, hoaxers.”] They themselves eat only makukha. Some of ’em got kids with bloated bellies already. But they don’t open up their underground stores. The hoaxer hopes he can sit out the grain collection, we’ll give up, and then he’ll dig it up and stuff himself silly. Or else he’s afraid we’ll find the hoard, take away the grain. And then his family’ll be hungry again, and he’ll be cooling his heels with the polar bears. What kind of hayseeds are they, anyway? Cunning as cunning can be, but stupid. I know them real good. I’m from the same stock. Born here, ten kilometers away. At the age of six I was already working for the kurkuls. My mother was a farm girl, a widow. I was her only son. Hadn’t grown as high as the table, but I tended the master’s geese. Then I went to school, onct or twict a week. And all the other days and all the mornings and all the evenings I was moiling and toiling with the master’s cows, pigs and sheep. And I plowed and cut. . . . And only when I was fourteen did I get my first few coins. Two, then three rubles a month they gave me. Before that everything was ‘natural payment’: grub, living expenses. Summer in the threshing barn, winter in the hut, keeping one side to the stove, the other to the cowshed. For clothes—the master’s worn-out rags. . . . Mama worked herself to death as a farm girl. Caught cold one spring. She had shoes only for going to church, strolling on a holiday. So in the winter she wore bast sandals with leg wrappings; the rest of the time, always barefoot. Through the cut fields, through the forest, through all the sticker bushes. . . . Mama used to say her feet were hard as oak, no worse than hoofs. But the sandals got soaked, and Mama caught cold. Got a fever. She was like a drunk or someone with typhus—said all sorts of things, sang songs. Then she died in the cold barn, on the straw. The master didn’t even send for the village doctor. Didn’t give any horses to go for him. ‘It’s nothing,’ said he. ‘She’ll pull through. That woman’s stronger than them all. But right now we need the horses to pull the manure. What a spring this is—all the snow has washed away in one week. The ground’s already soft.’ He carted the manure. Mama died. And I had to go bowing and scraping to him, so he’d give me a couple rubles for the priest and the coffin. He didn’t give it outright, he took it off our pay. This kurkul had a rule: farm hands are paid only in the autumn, after the harvest. I got so worked up over Mama and this kurkul greediness that I grabbed a wood-chopper and went at ’im. If the lads hadn’t caught holt of me, I would’ve hacked ’im in two. And gone to hard labor without regret. He got real scairt then, gave me all his small change and chased me away. ‘Go wherever you wish, just so it’s far from the village. Or else I’ll tell the village elder and the mounted police that you’re a Gaidamak, a rebel, a murderer.’ I left and walked through all the Ukraine, from one end to the other. Worked for the kurkuls and worked for the pans. Both in the city and in the mines. Until I got made into a soldier. . . .

“So you see, I’ve hated the kurkuls since childhood. They’re worse than any pan landowners, any Prussian gentry, any officers. They’re your worst enemies. You can see the pan’s white bones a mile away, you know who he is. And some of ’em are even good people. Who did Lenin come from? And there were others too. But these princes who climbed out of the mud, who curled the bulls’ tails themselves—they grew up in manure! They’ve got no learning and no respect. They’re so heartless to the farm hand, to the poor man, that they’re worse than

all pans. Even if it's their own blood, their own kin, they'll tear out his throat for a kopeck. They begrudge a starving man his last crumb. You could be dying—they wouldn't give you a drop of water. Because they can't make a profit out of someone who's dying."

He spoke without raising his voice. His little, deep-set, slightly slanted eyes had no glint. His big "goat's leg"—a roll-your-own cigar with a turned-down end, made from a quarter page of the district newspaper—let off a steady stream of smoke. Only his broad hands balled into fists and showed white knuckles.

He spoke just as quietly, evenly and distinctly at the meeting held every evening in the "corners." The big village was divided into several sections (or "corners") enclosing fifty to one hundred farms. The village executives and kolkhoz activists invited/induced into the hut all those who had not fulfilled the grain quota, and then they made sure that no one left without special permission.

Usually Vashchenko began. He would tell how much grain the village had given, how much more remained to be given. He would name the malefic holdouts and report in detail who had hidden grain and where it had been found.

"He thought he was so smart. Buried it in a distant field. Only he didn't outsmart the mice. They found his hoard. And the fox found them. And our lads there, who love hunting, noticed that the fox was always in the same place, mousing in the same field. So that's how they found that smart hoard. It was filled up—half with grain and half with mouse shit. Well, farmers, of course the NKVD took 'im. Now he's going where the sun ain't seen all winter. And his family is left without grain. Turns out he's not only an enemy to the empire, but the worst enemy to his own children."

Then the new arrivals had their say: the district grain collectors, Volodya and I, the local Komsomol activists, the kolkhoz crew leaders.

All the speakers sat at a table under the icons. On the white wall you could see big dark frames stuffed with different-sized photographs. Nikolai soldiers in visorless hats, cocked rakishly. Girls in ribbon garlands. Red Army men in Budyenny helmets. Hayseeds standing petrified before the camera in stiff visored hats or sheepskin caps, in embroidered shirts and city jackets. And right alongside them, color pictures from old journals, postcards with mustachioed Zaporozhian Cosacks dancing the hopak.

On the benches and simply on the floor by the stove sat huddled together scowling bearded men, mustachioed men in fur jackets, in gray caftans, young lads dreamily indifferent or sullen with contempt. The womenfolk clustered in separate groups, wearing dark kerchiefs tied up cleverly like cabbages or spread like tents over bright bandannas, and also half-length cloth coats called yupkas, embroidered along the collar and breast with bright strips of sheep fur.

The blue-gray smoke of the makhorka tobacco formed thick clouds in the shifting half light. There was little illumination from the home-made candles, the burning sticks, the occasional kerosene lamp. Villages which did not fill their grain quota were put on the "blacklist" and subjected to a "trade boycott." The shops were closed. It became impossible to obtain either kerosene or nails.

Every time I began to speak I wanted to prove to these people that they were making a serious mistake by hiding the grain, that they were harming the entire country and themselves. I tried to repeat myself as little as possible, though I was

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called upon to make a speech at several meetings a day. I told them how hard was the life of workers in the cities and at construction sites. They worked two and sometimes three shifts in a row, without a day off. Their wives stood in line because our country was threatened on all sides by mortal enemies. And that meant we had to muster up our strength in order to fulfill the plans on time. And therefore grain was needed. . . .

I told them about the worldwide crisis (we didn't know then that it had already subsided). I spoke of the German fascists, the Japanese troops in Manchuria, the craftiness of the Polish pans. They were all getting ready to pounce on us, they wanted to master, enslave, rob us.

I said only what I definitely believed. And every time I got carried away, screamed, waved my arms. They listened, it seemed to me, attentively. The women stopped whispering. No one left to have a smoke, exchanging curses with the officials at the door who held back those suspected of intending to sneak away. . . . And to be sure, I reviled and cursed the kulaks and their hangers-on every which way. And all those who out of malice or lack of social conscience were concealing grain I threatened with the people's contempt and the proletariat's avenging sword.

Our superior also went to such meetings, several times to the same ones as we. He never sat at the table with us and never made a speech, but found himself a seat somewhere in the back.

Vashchenko time and again would make the appeal:

"Who wants to stand up and state voluntarily that he will do his duty?"

Sometimes a hand was raised. A young lad or a spry peasant woman.

"Tomorrow maybe I can. A relative promised me a bag or two. Then I'll cart it in."

Such conscientious people were resoundingly praised and permitted to go home to sleep. And the next day our news sheet would come out: "Bravo to the honest villager who has taken the path to the fulfillment of his duty before the people. Follow his example!"

But usually after a number of determined appeals, Vashchenko would start calling the holdouts to the table by name.

"Well, citizen Dubyna, Stepan, how many times is it we've sawed the same old saw here with you? Why the tight lip? The Soviet power is asking you—how many times have we already called you up?"

"Don' know. Din' reckon."

"Eh, so you're still cracking wisecracks. Joking jokes. Well, I'm telling you seriously, very seriously, that this is the fourteenth—no, wait—the fifteenth time we have asked you this. When will you fill your quota?"

"Ah han't e'en a pound a grain. . . . Ma kids already eating makukha."

"So you want to play it smart? How much did you plant? Five and a half hectares. It's known for a fact: you had two hectares of wheat and one and a half of spring wheat. And then the peas and barley and oats and sunflowers and corn make up two more hectares. Don't hand me any bull; I know your fields. They didn't lie fallow. So how much did you harvest? How many ricks? Don't play smart, don't hand me any bull, how many? . . . You don't remember anymore? What kind of sorry farmer are you that you don't remember your own harvest? Well, I'm just going to remind you. There wasn't some other sun shining on your field. And the

rains didn't pass you by. That means you took in twenty-four metric centners of wheat. Well, say twenty-two. And how much did you hand over? Eight metric centners in all, and that's including the corn and barley! Hardly forty percent of your quota. And your quota is hard and fast. We know who you are, citizen Dubyna, Stepan. The Soviet power knows everything. I didn't come here from far away, from Kharkov, from Moscow. I can still remember how you got married. The same year the lightning burned down the pan's barn. You didn't even have new boots then. Had to borrow them from your older brother Taras for the wedding. We know you come from poor people. Only you shunned your own class. Now right here in front of everybody I'm going to figure out how much grain you need for your family. We'll allow one pood [thirty-six pounds] a month for each soul. Let's count up all of you, the young and old, and the grandkids on the tit. In all—nine souls. We'll count up the tsarist way—nine poods a month. That's one and a half metric centners. Now, during the winter you would have been hard put to eat up six centners. You have both barley and corn. So where are they, all the other centners? Don't know? If you didn't stash them away, it means you sold them. Broke the law! Didn't fill your grain quota, but speculated instead. You're undermining our plan and secretly passing grain to resellers. You know the penalty for that?"

"Chop off ma head! Ah don' have a pound! No' a bit a grain."

These were exactly the words heard most often in such nightly exchanges: "Chop off my head!" Some uttered them gloomily, furiously, some tearfully, heart-rendingly, some fatalistically, wearily, almost indifferently.

"Chop off my head. There's nothing in the hut. Not a pound."

The women often cried, screamed, ranted.

"May I neva see ma kids again! May ma eyes roll out of ma head. I won't budge from the spot if I'm fibbing! May I be struck down with paralysis, may ma arms and legs shrivel up! May I see no good till I die! I'm not fibbing and neva fibbed as long as I lived! I swear it to God, I don' have no grain, not an itsy-bitsy bit! Chop off ma head, right here on the threshold!"

Vashchenko banged his fist heavily on the table, but spoke just as calmly and evenly as before:

"Hold it! Enough! Sit down there and don't get up until you think of something! Until you promise what you're supposed to. Sit there and don't ask to go home; we won't let you."

So it went, night after night. Some meetings continued straight through two or three days and nights. The activists took turns at the table. We relieved one another, went out or slept right there in snatches, leaning back against the wall, in the stifling smoke. Many peasants also slept, sitting and lying on the floor.

Vashchenko was the most indefatigable. Again and again he took charge, interrogated the next holdout to the end. The others sitting around seconded him, nodding or straining not to doze off. They asked the same questions, some more calmly, some in a shout. They repeated the same appeals and threats.

And I, too, confronted more than once some downcast, sleepy peasants, stupefied by the insistent clamor, stuffiness and lack of sleep.

"Do you really fail to understand? Just think about it: the workers are your brothers, your sons, after all. They are waiting for grain, asking for grain, so they can live, so they can work. Come on, think about it."

I pleaded with a woman wiping her cheeks—which were wet with sweat and tears—with the ends of a fringed kerchief tied cabbagewise around her head:

“You yourself are a mother, you love your own children. Now just imagine how the mothers in the cities are crying now. They don’t know what to feed their little ones. Have pity on them and on your own. Because the grain you’ve hidden you have taken away from your own children. And if they punish you, what will happen? Your children will be left hungry, without a mother.” . . .

It was the rule not to “detain” peasants in the village soviet cooler longer than a week. After that the detained were either released or dispatched to the district.

The only policeman in the village, Vasil the Copper, a former master sergeant, wide-shouldered, red-snouted, a sot and a letch, would wave his Nagan pistol around. Two guards with sticks would lead out the benumbed, dirty-faced people wrapped up in ragged fur jackets and sackcloth. At the porch they were put in the sled. The drivers were often their relatives, holdouts like themselves.

Vasil took charge with a stentorian voice:

“Sit down, you lousy mob! Sit closer together! So you’ll keep warm and we’ll keep farther away from your lice!”

And Vashchenko would go into the cooler and tell those remaining:

“Let’s go, off to your huts. And make sure you fill your quota! Else it’ll be worser next time. It might be cold here, but it’s in your own village. But you get sent from the district and you’ll be minding polar bears. There it’ll be a bit colder.”

The highest measure of coercion on the hard-core holdouts was “undisputed confiscation.”

A team consisting of several young kolkhozniks and members of the village soviet, led as a rule by Vashchenko himself, would search the hut, barn, yard, and take away all the stores of seed, lead away the cow, the horse, the pigs.

In some cases they would be merciful and leave some potatoes, peas, corn for feeding the family. But the stricter ones would make a clean sweep. They would take not only the food and livestock, but also “all valuables and surpluses of clothing,” including icons in their frames, samovars, painted carpets and even metal kitchen utensils which might be silver. And any money they found stashed away. Special instructions ordered the removal of gold, silver and currency. In a few cases they found tsarist gold coins—five-ruble, ten-ruble coins. But usually the hidden treasures turned out to be paper: old bonds with Peter and Catherine, horribly faded Kerensky notes, Hetman and Petlyura “paces,” Denikin “bells,” and likewise Soviet “lemons” (million rubles) and “lemonards” (billion rubles). They also came across Soviet silver rubles, half rubles and even copper five-kopeck pieces. “Coins minted and legal before the kolkhozes.”

Several times Volodya and I were present at such plundering raids. We even took part: we were entrusted to draw up inventories of the confiscated goods.

“The comrade chiefs from Kharkov can check to make sure everything was as it should be. Give the weights. We’ll reweigh all your wheat in pounds. We won’t take a grain of wheat for ourselves.”

The women howled hysterically, clinging to the bags.

“Oy, that’s the last thing we have! That was for the children’s kasha! Honest to God, the children will starve!”

They wailed, falling on their trunks:

"Oy, that's a keepsake from my dead mama! People, come to my aid, this is my trousseau, never e'en put on!"

I heard the children echoing them with screams, choking, coughing with screams. And I saw the looks of the men: frightened, pleading, hateful, dully impassive, extinguished with despair or flaring up with half-mad, daring ferocity.

"Take it. Take it away. Take everything away. There's still a pot of borscht on the stove. It's plain, got no meat. But still it's got beets, taters 'n' cabbage. And it's salted! Better take it, comrade citizens! Here, hang on, I'll take off my shoes. They're patched and repatched, but maybe they'll have some use for the proletariat, for our dear Soviet power."

It was excruciating to see and hear all this. And even worse to take part in it. No, it was worse to be present without taking part than when you tried to persuade someone, to explain something. . . . And I persuaded myself, explained to myself. I mustn't give in to debilitating pity. We were realizing historical necessity. We were performing our revolutionary duty. We were obtaining grain for the socialist fatherland. For the five-year plan.

Our only worry was to make sure that there were no "gratuitous" cruelties, that no overeager Komsomol activist used his fists on a woman lying across her trunk and saying, "I won't give it up!" And to make sure that the confiscated goods were accurately described, in two copies. Because the condition of such confiscation was this: hand over the grain and we'll return everything we took.

Some sort of rationalistic fanaticism overcame my doubts, my pangs of conscience and simple feelings of sympathy, pity and shame, but this fanaticism was nourished not only by speculative newspaper and literary sources. More convincing than these were people who in my eyes embodied, personified our truth and our justice, people who confirmed with their lives that it was necessary to clench your teeth, clench your heart and carry out everything the party and the Soviet power ordered. . . .

When I recovered from my illness, I rode out to the protectorate villages only on short official trips, for several days, for a week.

A murky gray foggy morning. The snow still on the ground. Whitish spots and strips on the thatched roofs. Snow turned gray, with bluish pockmarks and bruises, lying on both sides of the street, alongside the hedges, alongside the huts. It was mixed with brownish-yellow muddy slush in the middle of the street, frozen in some places, melted in others. The ruts were dark brown, though there were few people riding through the village.

Two sleds plowed ahead, drawn unsteadily by sagging nags with their ribs showing. Three drivers made their way on foot. They had tied something over their caps like hoods—not exactly sackcloth, nor women's kerchiefs. Their grimy reddish caftans were tightly fastened with the typical braided cord. They strode along deliberately, placing their bundled-up feet carefully.

In one sled lay two stretched-out mat sacks, covered over with a bag and bast matting. The other sled was empty.

They passed by the blinded huts, whose windows were stuffed up or boarded over. In others the windows were untouched, but the doors hung open on their hinges. It was obvious no one lived there.

They lumbered up to a hut with a smoking chimney. The chief driver rapped on the window.

"Got 'ny?"

"Nh-uh, thank God, n'n."

At the next hut, the same question. The same answer. And at another.

They came to a little hut with peeling stucco and no smoke from the chimney.

"Priskilla w's alive yestyday."

"Yestyday. But there's n' fire t'day, dad."

The young driver, wrapped up like an old man, goes up to the hut. The horses are led to the hedges. They gnaw some twigs. The lad returns.

"Still breathing. Lying on th' stove. Gave 'er water."

They pass by two more homes.

A large cottage with clean, recently whitewashed walls. And the straw on the roof is bright, barely beginning to darken.

"Got 'ny?"

From the window a faint, tearless woman's voice.

"Ye? Pop died las' night."

"Bring 'im."

"I don' have the strength. It's jus' me and the kids."

The drivers glance at each other. The three go in. They carry out a skinny body on a sack. The face covered with a towel.

The woman leans on the doorjamb. Her kerchief hangs askew, her gaze is burned out. She slowly crosses herself.

They put the body in the second sled. Cover it up. Another stretched-out mat sack.

Beyond the village, a cemetery. At the edge of the forest, a long ravine, half covered with earth and snow—a mass grave. No cross. . . .

In the spring the village shops and kolkhoz storehouses distributed relief once or twice a week: little bags of flour, peas, groats, preserves, sometimes baked bread.

Women with kerchiefs wrapped over their fur and velvet jackets stood and sat in line. They were still cold, even on sunny days. Edematose faces, dull, apparently unsighted eyes. The men were fewer. Skinny, bent, they looked even more emaciated next to the swollen, wrapped-up women.

The silence of these lines was frightening. Both old and young conversed little, with weak voices. Even the most shrewish squabbled quietly and somehow without passion.

The chairman of the village soviet, very skinny, pale yellow, a mummy come to life, tried to buck up his spirits as he related to the big shots:

"For today we have a reverse improvement. Neither yesterday, nor the day before, was there any fatality. All this week only four were buried, and two of them were from various illnesses. They caught cold, and they were old people

besides. But those from insufficiency of nourishment—that's definitely down to a few. And you could even say some of them are doing it from lack of social conscience. Soon as they started getting relief, soon as the first grass came up, the first green shoots, they started eating like mad. But their health is weak. You have to do it a little at a time, go slow. But some of 'em, even though they're full-grown daddies, they're worse than kids. Soon as they saw borscht or kasha, be it a potful or a bucketful, they wouldn't leave off till they had downed the whole thing. And then their guts don't turn over the way they're supposed to. Just like a horse: if it eats too much clover or drinks too much cold water, it gets a belly like a mountain and kicks out its hoofs for good. . . . Or it happens that the old boy got fresh-baked bread for the whole family, a loaf and a half, or twice as much, and while he's carrying it home he gobbled it all up. The kids cry with hunger, and he's clutching his belly, groaning his groan. And then he ain't breathing no more. That's how they're dying—not from hunger, but from stupidity. This is mostly the muzhiks. The women—they're more conscientious, you could say, about nourishment. Or more patient. And of course, they're sorrier for the kids. The women don't die that way."

Not that way, but all the same the women died too. Even in May, when the weeding of the vegetables began. The work best suited for women.

A hot afternoon in May. The women weeders move down the dark furrows between the rows of bright green young leaves. They take heavy steps. Bend over slowly. Even more slowly stand back up. Some can only crawl on all fours. Dark and dingy clumps amid the fresh, gay greenery.

One has stopped. She didn't exactly lie down, didn't exactly sit down. An hour later someone notices.

"Oy, woe, Auntie Odarka, she's up and died! And I thought her's just taking a rest."

But in the spring they were able to bury them in separate graves. And in coffins.

They were dying less and less often. In the second half of May there were no burials for weeks.

A day in June. The district agit brigade drove in to the kolkhoz field camp. Young lads in embroidered shirts, wide blue trousers; young lasses in ribboned garlands, blouses with even more variegated embroidery, multicolored skirts with petticoats, fancy dress boots.

Lunch break. Women behind wooden tables spooning up thick gruel from earthen pots. Cauldrons steaming on the fireplace under a canopy. The rich aroma of cooked millet.

The women are hot: they are wearing white kerchiefs, bright jackets or linen undershirts. And therefore their faces and hands, blackened by the smoke, become even darker. No edematose faces. Almost all the women are thin, dried up, hardened, like old bark on logs.

And they are no longer silent: even though they have worked since sunup—"checked" the sugar beets, banked the potatoes, burned off the weeds in the cabbage field. The young people laugh to one another, looking at the rigged-up visitors.

The agitators lined up in front of a table. The musical director, in a little pea jacket, announced in a rather hoarse tenor:

"In honor of the shock workers of the socialist fields, our choir will perform folk songs."

*... I gaze at the heavens
Their riddle to ponder . . .*

They sang full volume, in one voice. And right away you could tell they were not from the city. They sang not in neatly rounded melodies, as on the stages and music hall platforms, but way up high, in long, drawn-out, sonorous phrases. The way they sing in the villages—at friendly get-togethers, at weddings.

The women leave the pots, put aside the spoons. Stand fixed to the spot. Some lean on each other, press into little clusters.

And suddenly one breaks out crying. And then another. Crying softly. Covering their faces with their bandannas.

The choir falters. The director looks around. Whispers. A slender young woman in a garland strikes up a merry tune:

*Oy, beyond the grove,
Grove so green, so green . . .*

The choir picks it up quickly, in a slapdash manner:

*There plowed a little lassie
With bull so keen, so keen . . .*

But the women keep crying. And another. And now another. First those who are older, then the young ones. And now they are crying openly, sobbing out loud.

*She plowed, she plowed,
Worked till she could scream,
So she hired a little Cossack
To play on his violin . . .*

The singers begin to lose their places. The dressed-up girls in the choir wipe their eyes and wet cheeks. The director looks around anxiously.

"What is this, good women, comrades? What's wrong? Who's making you sad? We're trying to make things more merry."

The women's crying is broken by a shout:

"It's not you, not you! Oy, good people! It's we ourselves. We will never sing again. . . . Oy, how we used to sing! We don't even hear those songs in our sleep anymore. . . . We've buried everything. . . . We ourselves are already dead. . . . Oy, Mamochka my own, where are your bones? Oy, children, my own little dears, my own little darlings, I didn't cry over your little graves. . . . I handed you over to a stranger to bury without any coffins."

Another, and still another, began to scream, to lament.

The singers bunched together. And several of the young women in garlands began crying out loud.

The director rushed to the brigade leader, who was standing to the side with the drivers who had brought the guests. The men were smoking roll-your-owns,

looking off to the side. The cook sat down on the ground, covered her face with her bandanna. Her shoulders shook.

The brigade leader, a broad, almost square man with a reddish tan and a rusty stubble of many days growing up to his cheekbones, waved off the director irritably:

"Just take it easy, dear comrade. . . . Let the women have their cry. . . . Their tears have welled up. . . . They're crying for everyone now. Don't interfere. They'll cry it out, then things'll be better."

Lev Kopelev, *The Education of a True Believer*, trans. Gary Kern (New York: Harper & Row, 1978), pp. 226–235, 280–281, 283–86.

I. V. Stalin, "New Conditions—New Tasks in Economic Construction," Stalin's Speech to a Conference of Economic Managers

JUNE 23, 1931

This speech, which at first must seem a relatively anodyne presentation to a conference of khoziaistvenniki (which I have translated here as "economic managers"), in fact was a major policy statement from the very top of the political hierarchy about a profound shift in economic and social policy. The period of the First Five-Year Plan (1928–31) was also, in Sheila Fitzpatrick's suggestive phrase, a time of "cultural revolution," "a political confrontation of 'proletarian' Communists and the 'bourgeois' intelligentsia, in which the Communists sought to overthrow the cultural authorities inherited from the old regime."¹ Those years were marked by vigorous campaigns to promote workers from the bench into positions of authority, into educational institutions and new jobs as engineers, and into the party, which became more effectively "proletarian" than it had ever been before. Radical egalitarianism was practiced by workers, and all things "bourgeois" were suspect. Particularly hard hit were the so-called "specialists," engineers and technicians, professionals who brought rare knowledge to their tasks.

[T]he old Russian intelligentsia was buffeted by a military movement in which Communist youth were particularly prominent. Students challenged their professors, forcing them to undergo 'reelection' to their positions. In the professions, established authorities were overthrown by younger, more militant, Marxist groups, and scholars were urged to focus their research on topics that were of practical relevance to society and the economy. Along with a drive to link the whole educational process with the 'real life' of industry, kolkhoz agriculture, and the political campaigns of the day, Communist and working-class students were recruited to higher education in unprecedented numbers.²

By all accounts, Stalin was an enthusiastic supporter of these policies. In February 1931, he proclaimed. "It is time that Bolsheviks became specialists. There are no

1. Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Cultural Revolution as Class War," from her edited volume, *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931* (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978), p. 8.

2. Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Introduction," *ibid.*, p. 1.