

Rural Russia on the Edges of Authority: *Bezvlastie* in Wartime Riazan', November-December 1941

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German forces set foot in Riazan' province on November 23, 1941. In the next two weeks, the Wehrmacht established a presence in much of the southern and western areas of the province, coming as close as thirty kilometers from the territory's capital. Staring occupation in the face, party administrators fled their posts for neighboring districts. Soviet power left the Riazan' countryside. But absence of Soviet power and the presence of the Wehrmacht in the region did not amount to German control. In western territories of the Soviet Union, extended occupation provided the Germans time to develop ruling mechanisms and to commit atrocities. In Riazan', the two weeks of German presence amounted to a standstill, however. Both Soviet and German forces were exhausted and overburdened. Neither could advance. The result was an interim period of *bezvlastie* (non-control), where neither force had authority over the population. In this power vacuum, Riazan''s inhabitants participated in mass appropriations of goods from state agencies and some enterprising Soviets attempted to accommodate themselves to the new power circumstances.

The reaction of the population in Riazan' province was typical for rural Russia at war.¹ Not only did these peasant protests against central authority bear similarity to contemporaneous reactions, but they echoed revolts in the countryside of the late 1920s and early 1930s.² Unlike earlier peasant movements, though, when rural inhabitants strove for a measure of inclusion in local governing bodies, peasants neither supported Soviet authority nor sought inclusion in the new German order.³ In Mikhailov, the only town captured, middle managers readily pursued accommodation with the Germans. Their antipathy toward the Soviet system played a role in their joining Mikhailov's pro-German town council. Yet even their anti-Soviet feelings were less ideologically motivated than driven by lack of opportunities under the Soviets and the possibility for advancement under a new power.⁴

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1. For a similar reaction upon occupation, see Igor' Ermolov, *Russkoe gosudarstvo v nemetskom tylu: Istoriia Lokotskogo samoupravleniia, 1941-1943* (Moscow, 2010), 30, 32.

2. Lynne Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin: Collectivization and the Culture of Peasant Resistance* (Oxford, 1996), 29-38; Tracy McDonald, *Face to the Village: The Riazan Countryside under Soviet Rule* (Toronto, 2011), 259-97.

3. McDonald, *Face to the Village*, 51-122; Aaron Retish, *Russia's Peasants in Revolution and Civil War: Citizenship, Identity, and the Creation of the Soviet State, 1914-1922* (Cambridge, 2008).

4. On this phenomenon in Smolensk, see Laurie R. Cohen, *Smolensk under the Nazis: Everyday Life in Occupied Russia* (Rochester, 2013).

German rule in Riazan' was not to be, though. On December 6, the Red Army began a counteroffensive in the Battle of Moscow that pushed the Wehrmacht away from the capital for good. Victories in Riazan' were among the first that the Red Army registered in the battle and German forces were thrown out of the province in a matter of days. Soon after, the party and secret police (NKVD) returned, searching for collaborators and "marauders." Authorities identified them among the usual range of anti-Soviet suspects: former kulaks, independent farmers, and members of opposition political groups.⁵ Even Soviet authorities recognized that large numbers of *riazantsy*, however, not just "anti-Soviet elements," had not been paragons of resistance. Party leaders' preparations for evacuation and their reactions upon return belied the lack of trust they placed in the rural population.

Riazan''s brief time as a frontline in the war affects what the case can tell us about the Soviet wartime experience. A burgeoning field is examining the occupation of Ukraine and its aftermath, where occupiers stayed for years and attempted to rule over a complex landscape of national and political groups.⁶ In contrast, few studies have examined the occupation in the Russian heartland.⁷ Occupiers interacted with a population made up overwhelmingly of ethnic Russians, instead of non-Russian nationalities whose sympathies occupiers played on elsewhere. In Riazan', Russians made up 98.4 percent of the population.⁸ The brief occupation of the province provided no chance to

5. On the discourse of rural enemies, see Moshe Lewin, "Who was the Soviet Kulak?" in Moshe Lewin, ed., *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia* (New York, 1985), 121–41; Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin*; McDonald, *Face to the Village*, 267–68.

6. Among many others, Martin Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust: Crimes of the Local Police in Belorussia and Ukraine 1941–44* (New York, 2000); Oleg V. Budnitskii, *Odessa: Zhizn' v okkupatsii. 1941–1944* (Moscow, 2013); Karel C. Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair: Life and Death in Ukraine Under Nazi Rule* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 6–34; Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, 2002); Vladimir Solonari, "Hating Soviets—Killing Jews: How Antisemitic Were Local Perpetrators in Southern Ukraine, 1941–42?," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 15, no. 3 (Summer 2014): 505–34; Jared McBride, "'A Sea of Blood and Tears': Ethnic Diversity and Mass Violence in Nazi-Occupied Volhynia, Ukraine 1941–1944" (PhD diss., University of California Los Angeles, 2014); Tarik Cyril Amar, "The Making of Soviet Lviv" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 2006); Wendy Lower, *Nazi Empire-Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine* (Chapel Hill, 2005); Kate Brown, *A Biography of No Place: From Ethnic Borderland to Soviet Heartland* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003); Svetlana Frunchak, "The Making of Soviet Chernivtsi: National 'Reunification,' World War II, and the Fate of Jewish Czernowitz in Postwar Ukraine" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2014).

7. Exceptions have mostly been published in Russian. These include Ermolov, *Russkoe gosudarstvo v nemetskom tylu*; Sebast'ian Shtopper and Andrei Kukatov, *Nelegal'nyi Briansk, 1941–1943* (Briansk, 2014); Cohen, *Smolensk under the Nazis*. On the occupation of Kalinin province and its aftermath, see Vanessa Voisin, "L'épuration de guerre en URSS, à partir de l'exemple de la région de Kalinine, 1941–1953" (PhD diss., University of Paris I: Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2011).

8. Small percentages of Ukrainians and Tatars were the next largest ethnic groups in the province. "Demoscope Weekly, Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1939 g. Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniia po regionam Rossii," available online at www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_nac_39.php?reg=50 (last accessed May 31, 2016).

commit atrocities on the scale of other areas. There was no Holocaust in Riazan', although nascent plans for the extermination of its small Jewish population were underway. The short absence of Soviet power from Riazan', however, also provides a compelling window onto the rural population's reaction to war. In territories where occupiers remained for months or years, atrocities and the looming process of re-Sovietization mediated how Soviets remembered the beginning stages of occupation. In contrast, and unexpectedly for many, Soviet authorities soon returned to assess the damage done in the short period they were away. Some officials even reported as eyewitnesses from safe houses during the period of *bezvlastie* itself.⁹

The reports of returning authorities contain pitfalls, of course. Party and NKVD administrators described their world in the framework of Stalinism. Peasant revolt was not the product of mass dissatisfaction with collective farms but the work of a handful of supposed kulaks. When NKVD interrogators questioned collaborators, they sought and extracted testimony that proved their assumption that only "anti-Soviet elements" would work for the Germans. As Peter Holquist warns, police surveillance records are not faultless replications of popular attitudes but often reflect the regime's goals to transform the population, even under the conditions of war in Riazan'.¹⁰ A related problem with the use of Stalin-era NKVD documents is that officers extracted confessions using torture or even outright falsification. In his study of the Great Terror in the provinces, however, Alexander Vatlin asserts that unmistakably genuine fragments of popular opinion sit beside outrageous accusations in NKVD case files.¹¹ Similarly, NKVD interrogations of Mikhailov's town council, as well as material from Riazan's party authorities, contain details too specific and too contrary to Soviet conceptions of occupation to be falsified. Authorities' conclusions about the culpability and motivations of actors on the ground were largely mistaken. However, their observations allow a reconstruction of rural Russia in the brief transitional period between Soviet and German powers.

A central question of the Soviet wartime experience is why ordinary people supported or opposed Stalin's regime. Works about the popular mood on the home front find that responses generally correlated with the Red Army's fortunes; in the disastrous first year of the war, anti-Soviet defeatism was particularly rampant.¹² A key issue in studies of the occupation is what drove

9. The documents used in this paper are largely from the State Archive of Riazan' Province (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Riazanskoi oblasti, hereafter GARO). For the sake of transparency, I have included the title of each document or a brief description upon first citation.

10. Peter Holquist, "Information Is the Alpha and Omega of Our Work': Bolshevik Surveillance in Its Pan-European Context," *Journal of Modern History* 69, no. 3 (September, 1997): 415–50.

11. Alexander Vatlin, *Agents of Terror: Ordinary Men and Extraordinary Violence in Stalin's Secret Police* (Madison, 2016). It is forthcoming in October.

12. Richard Bidlack, "The Political Mood in Leningrad during the First Year of the Soviet-German War," *The Russian Review* 59, no. 1 (January 2000): 96–113. See also Oleg Budnitskii, "The Great Patriotic War and Soviet Society: Defeatism, 1941–1942," *Kritika: New Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 15, no. 4 (Fall 2014): 767–97; Nikita

collaboration, nationalist movements and anti-occupation partisan activity.¹³ Many scholars have shown that pro-Soviet resistance picked up as occupiers' atrocities dispelled illusions about a gentle occupation and as the Red Army's victory appeared more probable. The case of Riazan' reveals how the rural population showed little loyalty to one power or the other but rejected both during their absence. In the early period of bezvlastie in Riazan', Soviet authority disintegrated with minimal interference by the Germans. However, rural opposition to Soviet power was not a vote for German authority, even for those who offered their services to the occupiers. Rather, it reflected the countryside's stance against central authority in general and the population's desperate struggle to survive on the front lines of total war.

On the Edges of Authority

Riazan' city's proximity to Moscow, just two hundred kilometers away, belied the province's demographic and economic distance from the capital. Its northern districts near Riazan' city had some industry, although they were mostly rural. The southern districts had rich black earth soil that made them excellent agricultural territory and a prime target for state-sponsored coercion during collectivization. The nine districts that the Germans invaded in the south and west were overwhelmingly rural. Their population was just under 400,000 according to the 1939 census, of which only 5 percent was "urban."¹⁴ However, even the townspeople of the province's southwest had lives inextricable from the rural agricultural economy.¹⁵

Between the start of the war and the German army's approach, provincial police recorded anti-Soviet rumblings, especially among peasants. Military conscription of large segments of the population became a particularly heated issue. In September 1939, the Soviet government lowered the mandatory service age from twenty-one to nineteen to support the occupation of soon-to-be annexed western territories and to wage a war with Finland. The increase in recruiting caused outrage among peasants, particularly religious pacifists.¹⁶ After the outbreak of war with Germany, discontent caused by Red Army conscription only increased. In July 1941, NKVD agents arrested two residents

Lomagin, "Soldiers at War: German Propaganda and Soviet Army Morale during the Battle of Leningrad, 1941–44," *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 1306 (1998). On the popular mood in the home-front Soviet Union, see also articles from Robert W. Thurston and Bernd Bonwetsch, eds., *The People's War: Response to World War II in the Soviet Union*, (Urbana, 2000).

13. Kenneth Slepyan, *Stalin's Guerrillas: Soviet Partisans in World War II* (Lawrence, 2006); Dean, *Collaboration in the Holocaust*; Budnitskii, *Odessa*; Berkhoff, *Harvest of Despair*; Ermolov, *Russkoe gosudarstvo v nemetskom tylu*; Cohen, *Smolensk under the Nazis*; Solonari, "Hating Soviets—Killing Jews."

14. "Demoscope Weekly, Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1939 g. Chislennost' nalichnogo naseleniia SSSR po raionam i gorodam," available online at www.demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus_pop_39_2.php (last accessed March 30, 2016).

15. For information on Riazan', see McDonald, *Face to the Village*, 34–50.

16. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, l. 3 (Report about the liquidation of counterrevolutionary formations and anti-Soviet element for 1940). On Soviet pacifism, see Karen Petrone, *The Great War in Russian Memory* (Bloomington, 2011), 178–84.

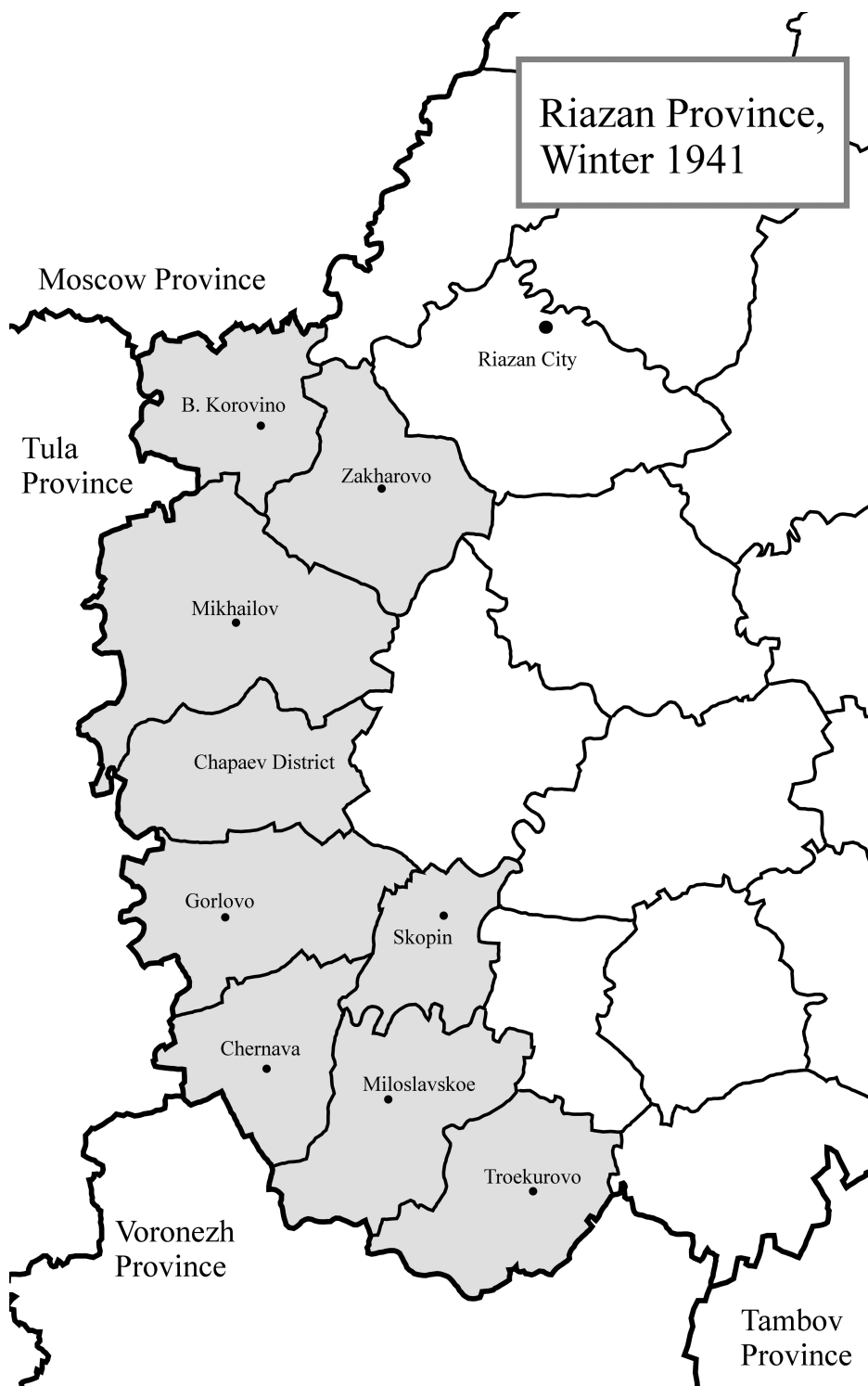


Figure 1. Riazan' Province, Winter 1941. Caption: The south and western regions of Riazan' province. Occupied districts in gray. Credit: Author derived map from 1940 official map of Riazan' Province.

of Novaia Pustyn', a village in the southwest of the province, for possessing pamphlets of a "counterrevolutionary character." The pamphlets accused the Bolsheviks of reinstating serfdom and taking young men to fight in the army while parents and wives starved. The pamphlets closed, "Give your greetings to the German leader and the friend of the people, Comrade Hitler."¹⁷

As the front neared Riazan', the popular mood soured even more. On October 16, as the German army closed in on Moscow, Stalin ordered the evacuation of many of the capital's political and governmental organizations, creating a panic in the city.¹⁸ The atmosphere in the capital spread to Riazan'. According to a report from the province's procurator Ivan Vlasov to the Riazan' party secretary Stepan Tarasov, the first months of the war had been trying, but the popular mood deteriorated further in October when authorities registered a "sharp increase" in "counterrevolutionary activity." In that month alone, Vlasov charged ninety-three people under the infamous article 58 ("counterrevolutionary activity"), nearly as many as the 118 tried in the previous two months combined. Undoubtedly, the increase was related both to real defeatism and Soviet authorities' penchant to repress potential sources of dissent preemptively. Those charged in Riazan' came from a broad range of social backgrounds, split between village and city dwellers. Vlasov categorized seventeen as belonging to typical anti-Soviet groups like kulaks, but the majority were ordinary workers, civil servants or peasants.¹⁹

At the beginning of November, the German 2nd Panzer Army neared Riazan' province. Under General Heinz Guderian, the army was part of the attack on Moscow, coming at the capital from the south. Guderian later wrote that his plan was to capture the city of Tula, bordering Moscow and Riazan' provinces, and to use it as a staging area. His army was exhausted, overstretched and freezing. It needed Tula's airfields to mount a flanking attack on Moscow. Guderian claimed that despite his better judgment, Army Group Center commander Field Marshal Fedor von Bock instead ordered him on November 23 to press forward in the attack on Moscow. The immediate directive was for Guderian's army to take the line from Mikhailov toward the capital to the town of Zaisk and destroy the railroad between Riazan' and Moscow. Later that day, scouting parties appeared on the province's borders and on November 24, the Wehrmacht occupied Mikhailov.²⁰

Soviet administrators and people did not know how far the Wehrmacht had overreached. Instead, they saw an enemy that, when set against thousands of deserters from the Red Army and panicking officials, seemed invincible. Attempting to instill fear of desertion, in early November the province's military tribunal had held an open trial of three deserters in Riazan' city at the club of a local factory. Nearly three hundred Red Army soldiers attended the trial,

17. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, ll. 29–31.

18. K.I. Bukov, *Moskva voennaia 1941/45: Memuary i arkhivnye dokumenty* (Moscow, 1995), 116–19.

19. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 199, ll. 19–20 (Short summary of the activities of the NKVD Military Tribunal of Moscow territory in Riazan' province for the period of July 1941 to January 1942).

20. Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996), 252–255.

which ultimately convicted the men and sentenced them to execution.²¹ Outside of the province's capital, authorities would find some 2,500 supposed deserters in formerly occupied districts. Caught in December and January, these soldiers had allegedly taken up residence in villages—often with relatives or in their own homes—instead of meeting at the mustering point in Sarai, a village in the east of the province.²² Undoubtedly, their presence in districts was notable and contributed to the sense that Soviet authority was fading.

On November 24, the Soviet general staff ordered General Filipp Golikov and his 10th Army to Riazan'. Only a month earlier, Stalin had commissioned Golikov to form the army from new reserves of called-up thirty and forty-something year old men. When Golikov arrived in Riazan' on November 26, he found the situation to be "alarming." The forces in the area included his army, a handful of military units and paramilitary outfits recently organized from local party members and workers. Golikov summoned the general in charge of the defense of the city Vasilii Mishulin and asked for the disposition of Soviet and German forces in the region. Mishulin stuttered that he did not know exactly how many Soviet troops there were between Riazan' city and the occupied territory: "It seems there are none," he said.²³

In fact, the main forces between Riazan' city and German units in the south and west were paramilitary formations. In the weeks before the invasion, province party secretary Tarasov had demanded that district party organizations form partisan groups, destruction battalions and pro-Soviet undergrounds in towns. Despite the different titles of these groups, the mission of all was to fight both the Germans and internal disorder. More than half of the partisan chiefs were members of the party leadership in districts, while a considerable number of the others came from the NKVD.²⁴ The lists of would-be partisan fighters, mostly party members, contained detailed information about their families—including the names and ages of children as young as two months old.²⁵ It seems likely that this information existed to intimidate partisans who refused to fight. By Stalin's order on August 16, the families of commanders and political workers who deserted faced arrest.²⁶

The party's transformation into guerrilla detachments upon the arrival of the Germans had mixed success. Paramilitary forces were generally unwilling to engage the Germans in combat. The partisans from Skopin, a town of more than ten thousand in the south, were an exception. Armed party members fought and killed five German motorcyclists scouting the town. However, they had assistance from the forces of General Sergei Rudenko, who took Skopin on November 29 with a battalion of marines that had been awaiting the

21. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 199, l. 22.

22. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 304, l. 2 (Report: About the work of the procuracy of Riazan' province on the question of desertion during the period of military activity).

23. Filipp Golikov, *V Moskovskoi bitve: Zapiski komandarma* (Moscow, 1967), 31.

24. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, l. 6 (Report from S.N. Tarasov to A.A. Andreev, January 1942).

25. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 74.

26. Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Voennyi Arkhiv (Russian State Military Archive), hereafter RGVA, f. 4, op. 12, d. 98, l. 617–622. (Published in *Voенно-istoricheskii zhurnal* no. 9 (1988): 26–28.)

arrival of the 61st Army forty kilometers east at Riazhsk.²⁷ On the outskirts of Mikhailov on November 24, a detachment of the town's destruction battalion marched to meet the enemy with rifles in hand. When they saw a line of tanks approaching the town, however, they dove for cover in ditches and then seemingly dispersed.²⁸ Upon the German entrance in Miloslavskoe district, S.I. Ustinov, the district secretary and head of a destruction battalion, found himself in a heated debate with a Red Army lieutenant who wanted to demolish a railroad bridge to impede the Germans. Ustinov believed the bridge was too important to destroy (he did not clarify in his report whether to the local economy or to a future counteroffensive) and he used his destruction battalion to detain the officer. Later, Ustinov's battalion set off to fight the Germans but retreated when he learned that the difference in firepower was overwhelming. The German forces they targeted had six vehicles, each with a dozen automatic rifles while his battalion had eighteen rifles and six grenades, some of them located in the homes of individual battalion members.²⁹ Throughout the occupied districts, Germans executed a handful of party and NKVD authorities who stayed. However, most Soviet officials left their district seats. While some fled altogether, others took to nearby villages, waiting for the arrival of the Red Army and attempting to quell local disturbances.

Local party organizations made their main contribution to the military struggle by providing intelligence. As the Germans arrived in the province, party secretary Tarasov commanded district secretaries to report on the disposition of enemy forces in the region. From November 24 to December 8, local party chiefs would send reports daily, or sometimes more frequently, with information they gathered through partisan scouts or from rumors spread by people fleeing the Germans. These reports sometimes proved inaccurate. For example, two dispatches reported Mikhailov unoccupied on November 26, two days after Germans appeared in the town. Nonetheless, Golikov later described the reports as his "main source" of intelligence. The importance of scouting to the impending counteroffensive made the collection of military intelligence a preoccupation of local party authorities.³⁰

As district leaders gathered intelligence, they also reported on a situation where Soviet power was crumbling before their eyes. The province's plans called for the evacuation of 170,000 tons of grain. However, on November 20, 70,000 tons remained in the districts, and a disproportionate amount of this grain seems to have been in occupied areas.³¹ Rather than risk losing resources

27. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 72, l. 31 (Report from Starostin to Riazan' Party Committee, November 29, 1941); Golikov, *V Moskovskoi bitve*, 14.

28. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 89, 131–32 (Petition of Anna Riabikina to Mikhailov Party Committee).

29. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, ll. 20–21 (Report from Miloslavskoe District Secretary Ustinov to Tarasov).

30. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 72, ll. 1, 6, 9 (Reports of District Committees to the Riazan' Party Committee); Golikov, *V Moskovskoi bitve*, 37. Another source of information was militarized workers battalions that worked as scouts, whose records are available at GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 128; d. 129.

31. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, ll. 2, 9; GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 87, l. 93 (Telegram from Tarasov to Andreev).

to the enemy, local authorities had orders to burn the grain. At the outset of the war, Stalin himself called for a scorched earth policy where “all valuable property . . . must be destroyed without fail” as the Red Army retreated.³² But few districts were able or willing to fulfill these orders. In Chernava district, the party secretary reported that the destruction battalion only managed to burn 400 of 1,350 tons before people from surrounding villages arrived—perhaps smelling the burning grain—to take the rest. On November 25, roughly four thousand Germans arrived and the district leadership, including sixteen destruction battalion members, fled.³³

In Gorlovo district, party secretary Iudkov organized the destruction of 1,500 tons of grain and twenty tons of meat kept in the district center.³⁴ Iudkov could not destroy all the grain in the district, though. On November 29, he reported to Riazan’'s party committee on mass theft from local collective farms by “kulak elements” and asked what he could do in these circumstances. The reply from the center was that Iudkov should organize local activists to confiscate the stolen goods and arrest those who had participated in the theft. “Those who resist, shoot on the spot. Shoot those who continue to steal.”³⁵ This tactic was not limited to Gorlovo. On November 28, Troekurovo district secretary Zhuravlev reported that in the village Zagriadchino, a provocateur-exile from Moscow had spread rumors that the German occupation was imminent, inciting peasants to steal the local collective’s property. Without reporting the outsider’s name, the party secretary said that a special detachment had summarily executed him.³⁶

In many cases, Soviet authorities themselves succumbed to panic and defeatism. When the Germans occupied Zakharovo, assistant district procurator Serafim Bubnov set off to the evacuation point for district leaders. Learning along the way that he had missed the convoy, he buried his party card and fled on foot. A German patrol detained him briefly at one point. Although he soon reconnected with other party members, seeing the enemy made an impression. Over the next three days, defeatist sentiments overcame him. His fellow Zakharovites reported his statements about the weakness of the Red Army and the quality of the German army’s shoes and clothing. He used “uncensored language” to summarize: “All of Russia is f—ed.” He then suggested that life with the Germans would be similar to life under the Soviets, because “they will still need educated people to work in institutions.”³⁷ V.N. Zharova, the procurator of Zheltukhino district, an unoccupied area just east of Skopin, fled her office on November 24 for the village Khmelova. There, she married a soldier in the village on short-term leave because of a wound he had re-

32. “Vystuplenie po radio Predsedatelia Gosudarstvennogo Komiteta Oborony I.V. Stalina,” *Pravda*, July 3, 1941.

33. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, l. 73–74 (Report about the consequences of the occupation of Chernavskii district by German aggressors).

34. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 72, l. 2 (Summary of district reports about enemy formations).

35. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 72, l. 26 (Iudkov to Riazan’ Party Committee).

36. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 72, l. 24 (Zhuravlev to Riazan’ Party Committee).

37. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 71, ll. 58–62 (Special Report from Riazan’ Procuracy to Tarasov).

ceived in battle. NKVD officers had just days before dropping an investigation into the soldier's alleged hooliganism and counterrevolutionary activity at Zharova's urging. Apparently preparing to flee the district, Zharova wrote a requisition order for supplies from a local collective farm. However, when the farm's chair became suspicious, she took the supplies at gunpoint.³⁸ Both procurators would face arrest after the occupation ended.

Among NKVD officials panic also ensued. The head of Miloslavskoe's NKVD left his post along with the rest of the district's leadership. However, according to the Riazan' NKVD chief, the Miloslavskoe policeman "took liquor, honey, a record player, and a woman he met haphazardly" to a safe house for the remainder of the occupation period. Whether the woman consented to being the NKVD man's companion is unclear, although her willingness was immaterial to the chief of Riazan's NKVD. The latter was concerned by the lack of resistance his subordinate offered. Nonetheless, Miloslavskoe's NKVD head would remain in office until superiors fired him for excessive drinking in June 1942.³⁹ In Bol'shoe Korovino province on November 24, cars arrived from Stalinogorsk (now Novomoskovsk, Tula province) carrying NKVD officers and four Red Army families to evacuation. The district's leadership let the visitors stay at a local school. Overnight the NKVD men found the school's sizeable apiary with 120 hives. After harvesting a hundred hives for their precious honey, they packed up the cars and left at 4 a.m., abandoning the women and children.⁴⁰

The affair with the Stalinogorsk NKVD perhaps contributed to insubordination in Bol'shoe Korovino. There, authorities did not try to control theft but encouraged the population to take grain. On November 24, although the province had ordered the evacuation of stored grain, the district had sent just a hundred tons among thousands. Meanwhile, district party secretary I.E. Isaev said that "there were absolutely no Red Army detachments" in the area. Facing imminent invasion, Isaev issued a bold order for local authorities in the district consumer union (*potrebsoiuz*, the Soviet organization in charge of selling consumer goods), and the local grain requisition warehouse. He proposed to sell grain and other goods to the local population "so that nothing was left for the enemy." Moreover, he loaned more than a hundred tons of seed grain to peasants from collective farms with the understanding that they would give the grain back following the occupation.⁴¹

Soon, Isaev's underlings, the head of the consumer union, the chairs of village soviets and the heads of local consumer outlets, opened their stores wide to clamoring crowds. Instead of setting fire to the grain, from November 24 to December 2 local salespeople set up a fire sale of all goods at district warehouses. On November 27, Titov, the head of the district general store (*sel'po*), told two saleswomen: "I'm leaving. Sell what you can and then leave the store doors open. Let the people sort it out." Isaev later said that Titov

38. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 71, l. 39 (Procurator Vlasov to Tarasov).

39. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 107, l. 99–100 (Report from NKVD Head Iur'ev to Tarasov).

40. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, l. 56 (Report about the state of affairs in B. Korovino district).

41. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, ll. 52–53.

had told the crowd at the store: “Take everything quickly because tomorrow we’ll burn it.” The head of the general store in Novoe Kobyl’skoe sold grain for fifty rubles a bag, eyeballing the weights and pocketing a great deal of the money. Isaev personally seems not to have profited from the chaos, but all the other figures involved later would face accusations that they had stolen state property. Isaev admitted that his orders had ended “not with sales but with theft.” He estimated that two-thirds or more of the grain in the district was unrecoverable.⁴²

Even in areas that the Germans barely reached, the lack of authority created an opportunity to overturn Soviet power, however briefly. Small parties of Germans arrived on November 23 in Chapaev district. Despite the relative weakness of the enemy, local NKVD and party officials remained in hiding until November 27. The lack of authority in the region allowed locals to loot at will. Germans remained in parts of the district until December 7 but only on its outskirts. During the four days that party authorities were absent, however, the population privatized 4,301 tons of grain, 682 beehives and 2,500 horses, among other goods.⁴³ In Skopin, authorities “brought order to the town” when they executed three “marauders” on the spot upon returning to town on November 29.⁴⁴ The district secretary reported, however, that in the three days of absence of Soviet control, the majority of village council and collective farm chairs had disappeared, their whereabouts unknown. Undoubtedly, these village authorities feared what would happen to them both if they stopped locals from taking grain and if district leaders came back to grain stores emptied on their watch.⁴⁵ Throughout the province, the property of local leaders who fled became prime targets for looting. In all likelihood, this looting reflected score-settling with old authorities as well as a pragmatic choice in a time of extreme want. Local authorities were more likely to have property worth taking.⁴⁶

The mass seizures and panic that occurred in areas with departing Soviet officials strikingly contrast with the comparative order in territories where no German forces reached. Besides the problem of deserters, party organizers noted few other disturbances behind the front. On November 26 and 27 in Pronsk district, thirty-five kilometers north of the fighting in Skopin, the only incident occurred when NKVD agents arrested peasants—supposed former kulaks and large holders—from two collective farms for their attempt at “marauding.”⁴⁷ In Riazan’ city, the only reports of disturbances came when authorities accused several groups of “thieves and marauders,” almost all in their teens or early twenties, of using the chaos of air raids to steal individuals’

42. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 71, ll. 35–37; d. 73, l. 56.

43. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, l. 141; GARO, f. p-3, op. 2, d. 92, 114 (Report about the state of the [Chapaev] district).

44. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, ll. 47–48 (Report about the consequences after the Germans’ attack and measures taken for the restoration of normal life to Skopin district).

45. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 72, l. 27 (Dispatch from Skopin Secretary Starostin to Riazan’ Party Committee).

46. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 92, l. 114; GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, ll. 88, 94 (Report on the Occupation of Gorlovka District).

47. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, ll. 14–15 (Special Report about the theft of socialist property in a number of kolkhozes in Pronsk district).

property.⁴⁸ The disorder in Pronsk and Riazan' was inconsequential compared to what occurred in areas from which Soviet plenipotentiaries departed.

The total losses for a short occupation were staggering. Riazan's secretary Tarasov wrote to Politburo member Andrei Andreev that in Mikhailov, Chernava and Skopin districts alone, theft of state property was valued at over four million rubles in goods. In six of the nine occupied districts, the documented combined losses from theft and, less often, intentional destruction was over ten thousand tons of grain. It is unclear what the percentage of grain stores these losses represented in the districts, but the proportion was likely quite large.⁴⁹

Peasants themselves left few records about why they so quickly turned on Soviet power, but their actions were telling. In a matter of days, the seeming majority of collective farms effectively disbanded and became the property of individual peasants. The rapid but temporary death of the collective farm bore similarities to other peasant uprisings in the recent past. During the revolutions of 1917 and their aftermath, individual communities of peasants spontaneously seized and divided noble plots, autonomously enacting their revolution in the countryside.⁵⁰ In the first months of collectivization in 1930, activists forced much of the countryside into collective farms, bringing the regime's representatives into a ferocious conflict with the peasantry. Yet, with Stalin's seeming retreat from coerced collectivization signaled by his March 1930 article, "Dizzy with Success," the majority of collective farms disappeared instantly.⁵¹ Only through several more years of coercion would Stalin's regime collectivize agriculture. Even then, scholars have argued that the regime only gained control over grain but not over village culture itself.⁵²

Party sources did not reconstruct what happened on the ground in occupied Riazan' province in detail. However, it is easy to envision events in the Riazan' countryside unfolding much as they had in peasant rebellions during collectivization. Rumors of the Soviet retreat likely spread from village to village, and peasants took their chance to redistribute property. As in collectivization, administrators found that protest worked through religious activity.⁵³ In Kobyl'sk in Bol'shoe Korovino district, the party leader sent an underling to close the church in an effort to derail the unauthorized redistribution of grain.⁵⁴ In this case and others, peasant appropriations were organized rather

48. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 71, ll. 41, 42–43 (Special reports from NKVD police heads to Tarasov).

49. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, ll. 2, 9.

50. Orlando Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War: The Volga Countryside in Revolution 1917–1921* (Oxford, 1989); Aaron Retish, *Russia's Peasants in Revolution and Civil War*; Michael Hickey, "Peasant Autonomy, Soviet Power and Land Redistribution in Smolensk Province, November 1917–May 1918," *Revolutionary Russia* 9, no. 1 (June 1996): 19–32.

51. "Golovakruzhenie ot uspekhev," *Pravda*, 2 March 1930.

52. Viola, *Peasant Rebels under Stalin*; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village After Collectivization* (Oxford, 1994); Auri Berg, "Reform in the Time of Stalin: Nikita Khrushchev and the Fate of the Russian Peasantry" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2012).

53. Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants*, 7.

54. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, l. 56.

than entirely spontaneous. On the collective farm Kollos, in Chapaev district, a local commission supposedly headed by a former kulak and a deacon redistributed the farm's horses. Chapaev district's party chief wrote that at the Krasnoe Znamia farm, former kulaks had taken the strongest horses for themselves and gave the weakest to pre-collectivization poor peasants. Even if one accepts the class-warfare worldview the party head superimposed on the village, the report indicates that all the villagers participated in the redistribution.⁵⁵ Similar incidents occurred in other regions. In Orel province in October 1941, NKVD officers reported that the local population "whistled and [made] unambiguous threats" as authorities and their families left before the arrival of the occupiers. Orel's peasants dismantled the kolkhoz system shortly thereafter.⁵⁶ In Riazan' and elsewhere, the retreat of Soviet power without the introduction of a new authority gave peasants a window to appropriate property and perhaps even to restructure their communities.

Other aspects of peasant appropriations in Riazan' differed from the past. In contrast to collectivization, when women's protest played a key role, party officials accused only peasant men of "marauding" in 1941–42.⁵⁷ With the wartime countryside largely deprived of service-eligible men, women's seeming silence is surprising at first glance. Women's rebellion in the early 1930s was a "weapon of the weak"—a tactic that exploited Soviet authorities' gendered assumptions about the source of peasant resistance.⁵⁸ With the party broken in their villages, peasants were no longer weak.

The war created a desperate environment where a few sacks of grain might make the difference between life and death. As outsiders—deserters, evacuees and others—took advantage of the power vacuum in the region, peasants also appropriated what they could rather than allowing others to take what would allow them to survive. They perhaps also believed that the new occupiers would accept, if not welcome, their looting of the homes of authorities who had fled. Yet party reports rarely noted interaction between the peasantry and the Germans. It seems that the experience of the civil war and ten years of collectivization had taught peasants a lesson: take as much as possible because the next state authority that arrives, either the Germans or the returned Soviets, will squeeze the village no less than the last. Peasants were not just anti-Soviet but were against outside authority altogether. Rather than seek out a new central authority for protection, peasants turned inward to restructure life in their villages, hopeful that their action in the period of *bezvlastie* might become a *fait accompli* when one or another authority returned.

Mikhailov under Occupation

For the people of occupied Mikhailov, too, the chaos of the German invasion presented an opportunity to gain resources for survival. For some it also

55. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 92, l. 115.

56. Ermolov, *Russkoe gosudarstvo v nemetskom tylu*, 30–32.

57. See Lynne Viola, "Bab'i bunt and Peasant Women's Protest during Collectivization," *Russian Review* 45, no. 1 (January 1986): 23–42.

58. James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, 1985).

offered a chance to prosper under a new regime. Mikhailov was a small town with nine thousand residents whose livelihoods were largely tied to the surrounding countryside. Its location at a railroad junction made it a key strategic point in German plans to take Moscow, however. On November 24, Soviet forces retreated from Mikhailov, allowing the Germans to take the town and begin to establish mechanisms of control over the population, including a pro-German town council.

The central figure on the new council was Grigorii Savel'ev, who became its chief gendarme. Under the Soviets, Savel'ev was the head of the district consumer union warehouse. He was not a member of the party but he was ambitious. According to his teenage daughter Rufina's testimony to the NKVD, Grigorii said that he "wanted to be a big man and die with glory or be absolutely inconspicuous, but not someone in between." Although Grigorii had not said as much, Rufina believed that her father did not think the Soviets would return after leaving Mikhailov.⁵⁹ His occupation provided an ideal position to appropriate property as soon as Soviet authorities left. It also meant that he had connections with other important figures in town. On the day the Germans arrived, his son Aleksandr (also interrogated by the NKVD) ran into his father's associate, Vasili Kokorin, the head of the felt boot workshop. Kokorin gave Aleksandr three pairs of boots—a crucial commodity for trade—before opening the warehouse to the gathering crowd.⁶⁰

The family had hidden when soldiers came to their house on the first night of the occupation, but Grigorii and other family members soon ingratiated themselves to the Germans. On November 25, German soldiers—an officer named Gilbert and his interpreter Valdemar—approached Grigorii's other daughter, Valentina on the street. When they asked Valentina where the felt boot workshop was, she had Aleksandr show them. Later that evening, the Germans stopped by the Savel'evs' home for supplies. They soon began to ask about how to find or make felt boots—the Germans likely had discovered the workshop emptied—and Grigorii told them that Kokorin was reliable and "not a communist." Grigorii said if they needed help finding other goods, they could talk to him. The next morning, Grigorii showed Gilbert and Valdemar the locations of various warehouses around the town. On November 27, Grigorii began to work as the local gendarme and, according to his son, was the real authority among locals.⁶¹

Meanwhile, other members of the town council approached the Germans on their own. Petr Ezhokin, a senior teacher in a local school, would hold the position of town head. According to testimony he gave under interrogation, he had been a member of the Socialist Revolutionary (SR) party during the revolution before joining the Bolsheviks. In 1922, in the post-civil war purging of the party, Ezhokin lost his membership for continuing SR sympathies. Although he claimed to have remained politically inactive since the 1920s, he blamed Soviet policies for rural poverty on collective farms and a dearth of consumer goods. His antipathy toward Soviet authority also had roots in

59. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, l. 81 (Interrogation of Rufina Savel'eva).

60. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, ll. 71–72 (Interrogation of Aleksandr Savel'ev).

61. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, ll. 72–73.

personal ambition. Despite having received some higher education, unusual even among educators in small towns, he complained that leaders had passed him over for promotion. His career may have stalled because of his political history, as he claimed. Authorities had also prosecuted him under the June 1940 anti-shirking law and it is possible the local education department did not trust him for this reason.⁶² Alternatively, perhaps, as a fellow council member asserted under interrogation, Ezhokin was a drunk.⁶³ Until the Germans arrived, however, he had seen “no real chance” in an anti-Soviet uprising and kept his feelings largely to himself.⁶⁴

Ezhokin had revealed his beliefs to one person before the occupation, Konstantin Poletaev, the future chancellor of the town. During his NKVD interrogation, Poletaev, the former secretary of the district grain-requisitioning department, admitted to sharing his “displeasure with Soviet power” with Ezhokin. In the disastrous summer of 1941, Poletaev had also encountered Grigorii Savel’ev, who told him: “The war is lost, the Red Army is in ruins and flees from the Germans on all fronts.”⁶⁵ Like Savel’ev and Ezhokin, Poletaev wanted to move up in the world. He repeatedly explained why he had joined the Germans, “I was a minor clerk under Soviet power who experienced material shortages (because I have a family with eight dependents) and here before me was a path to a high-ranking position.”⁶⁶ When his interrogator called the story of material want “false,” Poletaev unveiled a tale that fit Stalinist ideology. He claimed that SR sympathies had led him to despise Soviet authority, although he had never been a member of the SR party. Like Ezhokin, he claimed to have had no contact with any SRs after the early 1920s.⁶⁷ Poletaev’s story of material want and anti-Soviet feelings were not necessarily contradictory explanations. He was not particularly vengeful toward Soviet authorities, though. Antipathy toward them only permitted Poletaev to join the Germans. Opportunity compelled him.

Poletaev learned on November 25 that the Germans had ordered workers to return to their jobs. The next day, he and Ezhokin went to the German commandant’s office to offer their services. After presenting their professions and non-party status to the Germans, Ezhokin launched into a prolonged diatribe against Soviet rule, becoming so aggravated that the commandant told him to calm himself. The German asked for their help in gaining the support of the population: “We aren’t the parasites that Soviet papers describe but cultured people.” The two proposed Savel’ev as the town’s leader but Savel’ev had already become its gendarme. The German instead proposed that Ezhokin take the position since he represented the town’s “old intelligentsia.” Ezhokin then suggested that Poletaev become the chancellor and Mikhail Orlinov the town elder (*starosta*).⁶⁸

62. For information on the anti-shirking law, see Peter H. Solomon Jr., *Soviet Criminal Justice under Stalin* (Cambridge, Eng., 1996), 299–322.

63. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, l. 69 (Interrogation of Petr Tiuneev).

64. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, ll. 59–62 (Interrogation of Petr Ezhokin).

65. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, ll. 42–43 (Interrogation of Konstantin Poletaev).

66. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, ll. 44–46.

67. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, ll. 40–41.

68. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, ll. 44–46, 52–53, 54.

Those four men made up the core of the town council, whose first goal was to manage the transition to German control. Above all, German authorities wanted the town to supply the Wehrmacht.⁶⁹ Working along these lines, Savel'ev became the central contact between the local population and the Germans. In the upheaval of the occupation, many of Mikhailov's inhabitants found themselves without work and went to Savel'ev to request that he recommend them to the Germans.⁷⁰ Because German speakers in the town were needed but few were available, Savel'ev sought them out through his contacts among the handful of local ethnic Germans.⁷¹ By the second week of the occupation, the Germans and the town council had reestablished several important concerns. Petr Tiuneev, the new head of the council's agricultural department and former head of the incubation station under Soviet rule, recruited six of his former co-workers to return to their positions.⁷²

Of the town council's members, Savel'ev and his family became the closest to the Germans. Perhaps giving NKVD interrogators the politically charged testimony they desired, Savel'ev's son recalled that on one of the Germans' house calls, Grigorii told the soldiers that Bukharin had been correct on the politics of the countryside. In contrast, "one party leader," Stalin, was a cobbler's son and "listened to Jews, and therefore Russia was losing the war." On Savel'ev's birthday, December 4, the family invited several of the Germans, who came very briefly, just long enough to make a toast and leave.⁷³ Valentina became close with the interpreter Valdemar, questioning him about fashion in Germany. Once she asked if she would be able to travel to Berlin after the war. The interpreter was coy: one of the sides would win the war and it would be possible for Russians to go to Berlin after—as conquerors or conquered.⁷⁴

With the occupiers seemingly organizing a stable transition, even some communists had given up on the Soviet return. According to Aleksandr Savel'ev, Mikhail Volkov, a party member who headed the grain warehouse, was supposed to destroy all the grain. He became ashamed at the thought of destroying food when the population needed it, however, and reportedly said that "his hands and his heart would not allow it." Volkov in the following days disappeared and his wife desperately scoured the town for him. In her search, she approached Grigorii Savel'ev about Volkov's prospects for returning. Would the Germans persecute communists? He asked Gilbert, the officer, what would happen to those communists who had gone against the orders of Soviet authorities. Gilbert merely said that a penal brigade would arrive soon to decide the fate of communists.⁷⁵ Savel'ev's daughter Rufina overheard Valdemar say, "Nothing bad will happen to ordinary communists who were

69. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, l. 47–48, 55.

70. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, l. 75.

71. Interrogation of Adel' Engel's, GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, ll. 88–89. Engel's, a deportee from Moscow who had been arrested in 1935, was one of just 3,501 Germans in the entire province. Engel's mentioned just three other ethnic Germans in her interrogation. "Demoscope Weekly, Vsesoiuznaia perepis' naseleniia 1939 g. Natsional'nyi sostav naseleniia po regionam Rossii."

72. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, l. 66.

73. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, l. 76.

74. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, l. 81.

75. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, l. 74.

small-time civil servants. When the Gestapo comes, they will only ask for those communists who held important positions.”⁷⁶

The search for communists tied into another important task of the town council—a census of the local population. Poletaev and Ezhokin claimed that the Germans wanted the list to enable the distribution of grain cards to residents.⁷⁷ Anna Riabikina, a communist who would be removed from the party for burning her party card, confirmed that the Germans were preparing a rationing system. A former worker at the printing house, she went back to work on December 5 at the prodding of the house’s director Ia. M. Zolotov, whom the Germans tasked with printing the cards. But Riabikina also feared that the Germans would discover local communists from materials at the printing house. When she appealed her party expulsion, she wrote that she had not gone to the printing house to collaborate but to destroy information about communists, saving herself and her comrades.⁷⁸

Several of the town council members gave credence to Riabikina’s fears that the Germans were working on a list to repress party members. Savel’ev told Poletaev during the final days of the occupation that the Gestapo would arrive soon and “create order.”⁷⁹ Ezhokin claimed that the council had created a list of communists with relative ease. Everyone in town knew the communists, there were only three hundred in the whole district, and the council members merely starred the names on the town census.⁸⁰ Without the interrogator’s prompting, Poletaev offered more information about the Germans’ targets: “On December 5, Savel’ev suggested that I make an announcement for all Jews, Tatars and other aliens [*inorodsty*] in the town to register with the town council.”⁸¹ Poletaev was unable to fulfill this order before the Red Army arrived, but it seems plausible that German authorities were planning to repress these people upon the arrival of the Gestapo.

The list of residents had another use. Ezhokin claimed that the Germans meant to find able-bodied Soviet citizens that they could take as workers in the rear.⁸² On December 6, Poletaev organized a town-wide gathering at Savel’ev’s request. While the initial announcement had been for both working-age men and women, Ezhokin crossed off the word “women.” Poletaev claimed that when the town’s men arrived in the center, the German troops took a hundred of the younger and healthier among them.⁸³

The mass abduction of these men may have indicated the precariousness of the German position. On the evening of December 6, Ezhokin was at the Savel’evs’ house when Valdemar visited. The Russians pressed him about the military situation but the interpreter would only say that “our position is strong” before leaving. Nonetheless, over tea Grigorii Savel’ev suggested that

76. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, l. 82.

77. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, ll. 48–49.

78. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 89, ll. 131–35.

79. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, ll. 48–49.

80. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, l. 57.

81. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, l. 50.

82. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, l. 56.

83. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, ll. 50–51.

they gather supplies for the road. If the Germans left, he would go with them. Artillery fire began soon after and when it finished, Savel'ev and another member of the town council, Solodov, went to gather supplies at the police office, leaving Ezhokin with the family. Ezhokin laughed nervously: "I love to travel, except these aren't exactly the conditions for a trip." When Solodov returned for Savel'ev's suitcase, Ezhokin left with him.⁸⁴

After a fierce battle for the town, Golikov's 10th Army took Mikhailov on December 7.⁸⁵ When the Soviet army entered, its special department executed four men on the spot: three alleged police under the Germans and one deserter. In the next week, NKVD agents, the procuracy and the army would arrest 170 people from the district, including fourteen for desertion and eleven for stealing socialist property. Riazan's procurator Ivan Vlasov did not name the other crimes but presumably many faced accusations of collaboration.⁸⁶ Soon after the Red Army took the city, authorities found the Savel'evs, minus Grigorii, and placed them under unguarded house arrest. The family escaped easily and hid with friends and relatives in neighboring villages.

On December 24, relatives told the family that Grigorii was staying nearby in another village. Savel'ev wanted them to bring him food. Grigorii had gone with the Germans to Epifan', some fifty kilometers southwest of Mikhailov, in Tula province. Savel'ev apparently realized that he had overestimated the Germans, however. What if they retreated even farther from Mikhailov? Would he see his family again? He decided to return. On December 24, the family reunited briefly but his wife and children left in the morning, leaving the wary Grigorii behind. Days later on December 28, authorities caught Aleksandr and Grigorii during a subsequent visit, sending them and the entire Savel'ev family under guard to Mikhailov. There, according to Aleksandr, Grigorii ordered his family to tell the NKVD that the Germans had forced him to collaborate at gunpoint and that he had been head of the administrative-economic department of the town council rather than its de facto leader.⁸⁷ Rufina would tell that story to the NKVD interrogator but admitted it was false upon further questioning.⁸⁸ The paper trail of Mikhailov's town council ends with the interrogations of its members. The procuracy's reports to the party do not reveal their punishments, although presumably most were executed.

Although Mikhailov's town council members harbored anti-Soviet sentiments, their collaboration was not an inevitable consequence of their antipathy toward Soviet rule. They were ambitious petty officials who felt overlooked and undercompensated. They viewed the occupation as a fresh start under an authority that would see their hostility toward Soviet socialism as an advantage rather than a liability. They also viewed the German presence as permanent. When Soviet control returned, its representatives would place their own ideologically motivated interpretation on the massive upheaval of the previous two weeks.

84. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, l. 76.

85. Golikov, *V Moskovskoi bitve*, 53–61.

86. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 71, ll. 49–50.

87. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, l. 78.

88. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, ll. 79–80.

Assessing the Occupation

Soviet power returned with clockwork violence. Authorities from the NKVD, procuracy and local party leadership descended upon each district and summarily executed a handful of supposed looters, collaborators and deserters.⁸⁹ In the following weeks, authorities would prosecute approximately one hundred people in each district—at least 698 people by the end of December, based on data from just six districts. Roughly a tenth of these arrests would end in a death sentence.⁹⁰ Although the numbers of arrested and executed were high, they did not encompass all those who had acted against Soviet rule in the preceding two weeks. How could they? As authorities re-established themselves in the area, the prerogative of control, ensured through the selective use of violence to discourage future anti-Soviet activity, took precedence over total retaliation.⁹¹

Riazan' party secretary Tarasov indicated that communists were not blameless for the chaos in the districts. Although the party had recruited 1,260 partisans, they had played almost no role in maintaining order.⁹² A relatively small number of communists, 282 of the province's 9,135, burned their party cards, although the proportion was higher in districts that were occupied. In Mikhailov, seventy-one of 308 members destroyed their party cards. Not all these waverers faced repression, however. Among those in the province who had burned their cards, 181 had been expelled from the party by January 1942, with fifty cases still outstanding.⁹³ Party members caught stealing goods, collaborating with the Germans or making defeatist statements invariably faced retribution, but those who simply fled or failed to organize resistance typically received no punishment. Miloslavskoe's NKVD chief, who spent the occupation drinking with an unknown woman, kept his job until June 1942 when his drinking became too problematic for superiors.⁹⁴

When Soviet authorities returned, their job was to regain state property from the population. Most were unsuccessful in this task. In the aftermath of the massive sale and theft of grain in Bol'shoe Korovino district, authorities were able to return just thirty-two tons of grain while arresting thirty-two people for desertion and "marauding."⁹⁵ In Mikhailov, the local garrison head issued an order for the return of all government property on December 9. The order was accompanied by searches, arrests and three executions eleven days later. Despite the use of repression, little was returned. District secretary Korchagin blamed the failings of the campaign on the local NKVD, perhaps cor-

89. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, ll. 19, 47.

90. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, ll. 17, 27, 47, 49–50, 99.

91. The Soviet reaction fits with the theory of selective violence found in Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge, Mass., 2006), 195–207, where violence increases when one power enjoys prevailing but not total control in an area. In the case of Riazan' province, the weakness of German control in the area following the counter-offensive made the use of mass violence unnecessary.

92. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, ll. 4–6.

93. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 255, l. 11.

94. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 107, l. 99.

95. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, l. 60.

rectly. The police had placed the Savel'evs under unguarded house arrest and allowed several others accused of "marauding" to go free. Korchagin even requested a special military tribunal be sent to Mikhailov because he maintained that justice was not swift enough when cases had to go to Riazan'—some forty kilometers away. In the holdup, "repressive measures lost their meaning."⁹⁶ In Chapaev district, the party sent out thirty members to villages to organize the return of grain and property. By December 19, locals had returned just 190 tons of grain and 626 horses—fewer than a quarter of those taken.⁹⁷

When party leaders in the districts assessed the causes of the mass theft, they placed the blame firmly on kulaks, the religious, and other "anti-Soviet elements." At the post-occupation plenum of Riazan's party in January 1942, provincial NKVD chief Semen Iur'ev said that the mass theft was the result of "the presence of a counterrevolutionary element." He cited the example of Miloslavskoe district, where organized theft began before the Germans arrived.⁹⁸ Kulak returnees to the districts supposedly had also played a role. Tarasov wrote to Politburo member Andrei Andreev that dekulakized peasants had exploited the period of chaos to return to their villages after an absence of ten or more years. According to Tarasov, a former kulak named Ovchinnikov had returned from Tula province to his former home in Gorlovo district where he used the disorder to take a horse and began working at the local mill.⁹⁹ It is possible that these "anti-Soviet elements" became local heroes and truly did galvanize the population. As Tracy McDonald notes, bandits and other marginalized populations under Soviet power sometimes became the leaders of anti-Soviet rebellion because of their marginal status.¹⁰⁰ Of course, just as likely is that Ovchinnikov sought shelter among former neighbors away from the front lines in Tula.

Although Soviet leaders blamed the usual "anti-Soviet elements" for the disturbances, their actions demonstrated wariness toward the political loyalties of the peasantry as a whole. It is worth returning to the case of Bol'shoe Korovino, where the exception proved this rule. District party secretary Isaev had authorized the sale and distribution of grain and other supplies to the population on the eve of evacuation. In his report to party leaders after the occupation, Isaev justified this policy by claiming that provincial procurator Vlasov had encouraged these measures. Vlasov allegedly told him that the district should give grain to the rural population "with the goal of creating a hostile mood if it [the food] was taken by the enemy."¹⁰¹ Vlasov was enraged by the policy or perhaps by Isaev's invocation of his name in its defense. The

96. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, ll. 65–66 (Report about the consequences of the fascist occupation of Mikhailov district and the measures to liquidate them).

97. f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, l. 146 (Report about the state of affairs in Chapaev district after the temporary occupation of a number of settlements by German fascists).

98. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 135, l. 60 (Stenographic Record of January 1942 Riazan' Party Plenum).

99. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, l. 3.

100. McDonald, *Face to the Village*, 201–02.

101. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, l. 53.

procurator claimed that Isaev had panicked, pointing to the thirty kilometer distance that had separated the district from the Germans when the district chief had ordered the distribution of bread. Other officials in the district who had participated in the mass theft of goods were arrested. Although Isaev had not profited as far as the procurator could tell, Vlasov nonetheless recommended his arrest.¹⁰²

Isaev was not the only authority who had distributed state resources. Out of a combination of fear, compassion and avarice, many of those in charge of warehouses had also opened their doors to the population. Isaev was the only district leader, however, who maintained that this policy was a system of pre-occupation preparation. It is difficult to know whether Isaev's actions were truly humanitarian or if he later invoked altruism as a defense against accusations of panic. The party secretary himself asserted that giving grain to Soviet peasants and townspeople on the eve of occupation had a pragmatic element. He was probably correct insofar as his options were some combination of distribution, destruction and desertion. Rather than attempting to destroy the food or, more likely, simply leaving it, he chose to make it a temporary parting gift in a troubled but ultimately loving relationship between Soviet authorities and the peasantry.

Instead of supplying a population that would desperately need grain, Tarasov and Vlasov demanded the destruction of resources that remained in the region. Riazan's provincial leaders, based on Stalin's orders, wanted to deny the Wehrmacht resources through a scorched earth policy. Yet the policy also belied a fundamental distrust of the Soviet peasantry. When the Bolsheviks had entered the countryside in the civil war and again during collectivization, they had sought class allies among poor peasants whom they could mobilize against the kulaks.¹⁰³ During and after the occupation, reports spoke about the kulaks who remained but talk about loyal poor peasants largely disappeared. They merged into "collective farmers," "peasants" or simply "people." The lesson of the 1930s and of the brief occupation of Riazan' province was that the regime's only ally was force from above.

As time passed, the memory of violence in Riazan' and elsewhere would center on the Germans. When the USSR's Extraordinary State Commission for investigating German crimes gathered reports from Riazan', none focused on the role of Soviet citizens in the disorder of the brief occupation period.¹⁰⁴ Instead, the files for Riazan' include scattered information on schoolhouses destroyed, Soviet citizens killed in the line of fire and truly horrible, and perhaps exaggerated, stories of civilians' experiences as prisoners.¹⁰⁵ Most of

102. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 71, ll. 35–37 (Vlasov to Tarasov).

103. Figes, *Peasant Russia, Civil War*; Retish, *Russia's Peasants in Revolution and Civil War*.

104. On the goals of the Extraordinary State Commission, see Marina Sorokina, "People and Procedures: Toward a History of the Investigation of Nazi Crimes in the USSR," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 4 (Fall 2005): 797–831.

105. GARF (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii) f. 7021, op. 41, d. 43 (Extraordinary Commission Records for Riazan' Province); also d. 44–49.

the recorded executions of Soviet citizens by Germans occurred during the Wehrmacht's arrival in or retreat from population centers. For example, the twenty-eight people the Germans executed as they took the town of Skopin.¹⁰⁶ Lack of documentation makes other indictments difficult to assess. Mikhailov town council member Poletaev testified that the Germans had taken a hundred of Mikhailov's men, but Extraordinary State Commission documents and Riazan' party reports did not mention this incident.¹⁰⁷ According to his letter forwarded to the Extraordinary Commission from the NKVD, a Mikhailov man reported that the Germans kept him and a thousand others in a jail meant for a hundred prisoners, marching them at ten kilometers per hour southwest out of the district. In the immediate aftermath of the occupation, however, party leaders did not write of this seemingly noteworthy occurrence.¹⁰⁸

Rather than laying the blame primarily with the Germans, reports from the immediate aftermath of the occupation focused on local "marauders" more than on the occupiers. Besides destruction and death occurring in military operations, the Germans seem to have done comparatively little damage—nothing on the level of the systematic violence inflicted in areas taken for longer periods. This observation does not absolve the invaders of the violence they committed or intended to commit. It does, however, reveal a different side of the war, where both Soviet and German rule were either absent or weak in the countryside. Although Soviet memory would rightfully indict German atrocities, the dynamics of bezvlastie were different than the settled occupation that would dominate Soviet war memory.

Riazan' province was on the frontier of German conquests in 1941 for two weeks. The return of Soviet rule was swift, brutal and pragmatic. For a handful of days prior, many inhabitants lived in a limbo of bezvlastie where Soviet rule had left but the anticipated new German control had not yet set down roots. Few mourned the fall of the Soviet regime but only a handful jumped to aid the Germans. Members of Mikhailov's town council, disparaging of Soviet rule and sure it was defeated, tried to prosper under a new authority. Their ready acceptance of the Germans seemed to confirm what Soviet leaders had feared—that a fifth column of class enemies would arise from "anti-Soviet elements."¹⁰⁹ Yet in the chaos of war, most *riazantsy* used the absence of state power to appropriate goods they would need to survive and to throw off the instruments of state control, especially collective farms. Their resistance was anti-Soviet in a narrow sense but reflected a broader mistrust of central authority. This wariness was mutual, as party figures refused to aid the countryside, choosing to destroy grain rather than distribute it to starving villages. Why give grain to peasants who, Soviet leaders believed, would only fall under the sway of "anti-Soviet elements" during the occupation?

106. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 73, l. 3.

107. GARO f. p-3, op. 2, d. 66, ll. 50–51.

108. GARF f. 7021, op. 41, d. 46, ll. 16–18.

109. David R. Shearer, *Policing Stalin's Socialism: Repression and Social Order in the Soviet Union, 1924–1953* (New Haven, 2009), 299–302; Oleg Khlevniuk, "The Reasons for the Great Terror: The Foreign-Political Aspect," in Silvio Pons and Andrea Romano eds., *Russia in the Age of Wars, 1914–1945* (Rome, 2000), 159–73.

In Riazan' today, people remember November and December 1941 as the province's heroic stand against Nazism. They are not wrong that the fighting in Riazan', as part of the greater Battle of Moscow, was a turning point in the war against an enemy that would make a return to Soviet rule seem desirable.¹¹⁰ Under the prolonged ordeal of occupation, people made and remade alliances, tales and themselves. In the winter of 1941, however, the survival of the Soviet government was questionable, and the prospect of its return grim. For many, the interim between the warring powers was an opportunity to create or take part in a new order, or simply to survive.

110. Weiner, *Making Sense of War*; Anika Walke, "Memories of an Unfulfilled Promise: Internationalism and Patriotism in Post-Soviet Oral Histories of Jewish Survivors of the Nazi Genocide," *Oral History Review* 40, no. 2 (September 2013): 271–98.