

## ОТЕЧЕСТВЕННАЯ ИСТОРИЯ

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Д. ШИРЕР

### СКАЗ О КУЛАЦКОЙ КОРОВЕ: ТРАНСФОРМАЦИЯ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЕЙ, ОБВИНЕНИЯ И СКРЫТАЯ ЧИСТКА 1930-х гг.

Университет Делавэр,  
США, DE 19716, Ньюарк Джон Монро Халл, 117

В статье описывается курьезный случай, произошедший в 1935 г. в Усинском районе Западно-Сибирского края. Районный комитет ВКП(б) признал дойную корову «кулацкой» и в качестве штрафа обложил ее сбором в размере нескольких литров молока в месяц. Хозяин коровы, фельдшер, пожаловался краевому прокурору, что повлекло за собой серьезное разбирательство. Автор изучает более широкие последствия этого, казалось бы, абсурдного инцидента и приходит к выводу, что данная история показывает в высшей степени размытость категорий социальной идентичности и социальной стигматизации в сталинском государстве. Обвинение коровы как «врага народа» раскрывает нечто большее, чем просто патологическую паранойю власти, а именно режим, не способный справиться с массовыми потрясениями, вызванными его собственной экономической и социальной политикой.

*Ключевые слова:* СССР, Западная Сибирь, 1930-е гг., сталинизм, раскулачивание, корова, идентичность, вина, голод, скрытая чистка.

DAVID R. SHEARER

### THE TALE OF THE KULAK COW: SHIFTING IDENTITIES, BLAME, AND THE HIDDEN PURGE OF THE 1930s

University of Delaware,  
117, John Munroe Hall Newark, DE 19716, USA

This article examines a strange case from 1935, in the Usinsk region of Western Siberia. There, a local Communist Party Committee indicted a milk cow as a “kulak” cow, an enemy of the people, and, as a fine, assessed it several liters of milk a month. The owner of the cow, a veterinary assistant who had purchased the animal at an auction, complained to the oblast prosecutor, and the matter created serious tension. This article examines the broader implications of this seemingly absurd incident and argues that, in fact, it is the absurdity of the story that begs explanation and holds a clue to the meaning of the tale. The tale of the kulak cow reveals, in the extreme, the way in which categories of social identity and social stigmatization in Stalin’s socialism became blurred, loosed from their moorings in class and property relations. The indictment of a cow as an enemy of the people reveals more than just a pathological paranoia; it shows a regime unable to cope with the massive dislocation created by its own economic and social policies. The indictment of a cow was a sign, not of arrogance and power, but of weakness and instability, the instability of a state and a regime whose local officials felt simultaneously besieged by an unruly and often hostile population and forgotten by a demanding state.

*Key words:* USSR, Western Siberia, 1930s, Stalinism, de-kulakization, identity, blame, famine, hidden purge

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Дэвид Ширер – д-р ист. наук, проф., Университет Делавэр (США), e-mail: dshearer@udel.edu  
David R. Shearer – Doctor of Historical Sciences, Professor, University of Delaware (USA).

In August 1935, the Soviet state's chief prosecutor for the Western Siberian district, Ignatii Barkov, received a curious complaint from the local prosecutor in the region of Usinsk, an isolated area in the central part of the huge Western Siberian agricultural plain. The complaint concerned a cow and a veterinary assistant, a certain Kil'diashev, who worked in the region. Kil'diashev, it seems, purchased the cow at a public auction of property confiscated from local families whose households had been seized for violations of Soviet property laws. These "kulak" families had been exiled to special labor colonies. Their property was sold publicly to local inhabitants under the auspices of two local government agencies: the Usinsk Regional Village Council (сельсовет Узинского района) and the Executive Committee of the Usinsk regional governing council (the Usinskii raionnyi ispolnitel'nyi komitet, or raaispolkom).

Kil'diashev thought he had struck a good bargain. His new cow was still young and producing milk, whereas the cow he had exchanged as the price for his new cow was old. Soon after his purchase, however, Kil'diashev received a notice from the Usinsk sel'sovet informing him that he was to be assessed a "kulak household obligation" («задание на кулацкое хозяйство») of five hundred liters of milk, yearly, owed to the sel'sovet<sup>1</sup>. Believing he had been wronged, Kil'diashev took the matter to the local prosecutor and the prosecutor protested the obligation to both the sel'sovet and the raaispolkom. The prosecutor argued that, although Kil'diashev was an agricultural specialist, he engaged in no agricultural production and owned no land. Therefore, he should not be assessed a kulak obligation. In addition to his protests to the two local government agencies, the prosecutor asked for a review of the matter by the regional communist party committee, the raikom. The latter was not officially a government agency, but as the local representative of the country's ruling Communist party, the raikom was, in fact, the ultimate authority in the region on sensitive political matters such as assessment of kulak status.

Raikom first secretary Andreev delivered a terse reply to the Usinsk prosecutor. The obligation would not be withdrawn, explained Andreev, since it was not assessed against the veterinary assistant's household, "but against the kulak cow." The raikom would not allow anyone to change its decision. Andreev, not content with such a sharp reprimand, berated the prosecutor for not upholding the "law." He demanded that the prosecutor interfere no further in the matter. The last was a thinly veiled warning to the prosecutor not to refer his protest to higher authorities, which the prosecutor did anyway. Thus, the story of Kil'diashev and his cow ended up on Chief Prosecutor Barkov's desk in Novosibirsk, the administra-

tive and political center of the Western Siberian district. Barkov agreed with the Usinsk prosecutor and referred the matter to Robert Eikhe, First Secretary of the Western Siberian Communist Party. Barkov recommended that the obligation be removed from Kil'diashev's cow and that disciplinary action be taken against Andreev and other members of the local raikom and sel'sovet.

Archive documents do not reveal whether Eikhe upheld the decision of the Usinsk party leaders, or sided with Barkov and the Usinsk prosecutor. No other records of the matter exist, and there, unfortunately, the story ends. Yet, what a curious story--that political and civil authorities should, in all seriousness, dispute the socially dangerous attributes of a milk cow. Why did no one question the essential absurdity of the situation--the indictment of a cow as an enemy of the people? More to the point, what circumstances made it seem both appropriate and compelling to imbue an animal with the supposedly dangerous social traits of its owner-- its previous owner, at that? Something was amiss in a state whose local officials imbued a cow with politically suspect credentials, as if the social "disease" of being a kulak was caused by a strange, species-jumping virus.

In fact, it is the absurdity of the story that begs explanation and holds a clue to the meaning of the tale. The story of Kildiashev's cow highlights one of the central contradictions of the "victory of socialism" in the USSR, proclaimed by Soviet leaders at the end of the first five-year plan in January 1933. The tale of Kil'diashev's cow reveals, in the extreme, the way in which categories of social identity and social stigmatization in Stalin's socialism became blurred, loosed from their moorings in class and property relations. The indictment of a cow as an enemy of the people reveals more than just a pathological paranoia; it shows a regime unable to cope with the massive dislocation created by its own economic and social policies. The indictment of a cow was a sign, not of arrogance and power, but of weakness and instability, the instability of a state and a regime whose local officials felt simultaneously besieged by an unruly and often hostile population and forgotten by a demanding state.

#### WEAK AND STRONG STATE

To call the Stalinist state weak sounds like an inversion of common sense. By the early 1930s, Stalin and his circle had isolated and defeated any internal opposition. Stalin had firm control over the party and state apparatus. Similarly, by the middle years of the 1930s, the Stalinist version of Soviet power had been established throughout the country. The regime had won the major battles to industrialize the country rapidly, to collectivize agriculture, to eliminate private land stewardship and commercial trade, and to break rural resistance to Stalinist rule through de-kulakization and famine. According to most

<sup>1</sup> GANO. F. 3. Op. 9. L. 25.

accounts, Stalinist leaders felt secure enough in their victories that, beginning in 1933, they retreated from the harsh revolutionary policies of the early 1930s. The supposedly “three good years” between collectivization and the Great terror are seen as a period of respite, an attempt to stabilize the economy and society in a period of relative normalcy. The regime made its peace with the peasantry. If the early 1930s was a world full of kulak peasant saboteurs, then after the “successful” completion of dekulakization in 1933, peasants became, by definition, loyal collective farmers, *kolkhozniki*. The regime allowed an increment of revival of market relations in what some have described as a “mini-NEP”<sup>2</sup>.

This is an accurate picture to some extent, but overdrawn, especially the image of stability in the countryside. After 1933, the regime may have relented in their repression of peasants, but this did not solve shortages and other structural problems in agrarian sectors of the economy. Leaders could not admit the flaws and inefficiencies of collectivization policies, and they could no longer blame loyal *kolkhozniki*, so they had to find some other group to scapegoat. As a result, beginning in 1933, local officials, not peasants, became vilified and purged to account for failures on the agricultural front. Between 1933 and 1937, over a million rural administrators and “activists” were arrested. This local level mass purge has gone almost completely unnoticed, but it disrupted agricultural policies in rural areas throughout the middle years of the decade. It created a sense among local officials of being besieged by a hostile mass of peasants and abandoned by the state. This purge also belies the argument that the mid-1930s was a period of relaxed repression, of a truce between the regime and society. If there was a truce it was for a brief period between the regime and the mass of peasants, but that truce, while providing a brief respite for peasants, came at the expense of local administrative officials. This article examines this little-known purge, the shifting politics of identity, blame, and repression in the countryside in the mid 1930s, and how all this led to the indictment of a cow as a kulak enemy of the people.

#### SOVIET POWER VS. SOVIET ORDER

Central institutions of power were secure, but the picture that emerges from local archives is of a soviet system in the 1930s that was seriously undergoverned with still only a tenuous measure of legitimacy and a weak network of local administrations struggling to establish Soviet authority and order. Even a cursory look at regional archives—at the actual exercise of Soviet author-

ity at local levels—reveals a picture different from that found in central archives. Our interpretation of the Seventeenth Party Congress, held in 1934, is a case in point. This was called the Victors’ Congress, the party gathering at which Stalinist leaders announced the triumph of socialism in the USSR. Yet, in the years following the congress, local party, Soviet, and police officials did not behave as if they had won any victories. Their actions resembled those of an occupying but beleaguered army, victorious in the extension of state socialism, but overextended, its resources stretched thin. Certainly, military units and special OGPU troops had won the major battles of collectivization and de-kulakization. In the aftermath, however, the task of reconstructing Soviet society and protecting state assets proved daunting. In other words, by the mid-1930s, the party, Soviet authorities, and the NKVD, including the *militsiia*, had established the institutions of Soviet power, but not the acceptance or legitimacy of Soviet order.

The weakness of the regime lay not in the central organs of power but in the weak infrastructure of local Soviet governance. The regime’s sense of being besieged was nowhere more apparent than in the Western Siberian krai, or district. In Western Siberia, local officials were as beset as they had been during the early 1930s to make the peasants yield grain, to keep order in cities and industrial areas overrun by socially marginal populations, and to hold their own against the continuing waves of lawlessness and social disobedience. In Western Siberia, one does not find the sense of accommodation with the regime or the institutions of Soviet authority during the mid-1930s that was supposed to have existed. Moreover, the policies initiated by the regime to stabilize political and social relations after 1933 in fact had the opposite effect. The well-known directives of May 1933 to curb political excesses, follow legal process, and reduce repression helped to regularize relations between the state and the peasantry. At the same time, these directives created contradictory pressures and set local prosecutors, party officials, and police against each other.

The Western Siberian chief prosecutor, Barkov, took the May 1933 directives seriously. Throughout the 1930s, he waged an aggressive battle against the police and against government and party officials to ensure their compliance with his understanding of the new socialist legality. Yet, many local NKVD and party officials believed that the new rules laid down by the prosecutor and his staff undermined their efforts to fight crime and attacks against Soviet order. They, in their turn, bullied local prosecutors and accused them of interfering in the execution of revolutionary justice by protecting criminals and class enemies. In December 1935, for example, the Chairman of the Kyshtovsk regional soviet executive committee, a certain comrade Krotov, accused the local prosecutor, Shurybin, of violations of “revolutionary le-

<sup>2</sup> Naum Jasny originated the phrase “the three good years” in his [1]. On the mid-1930s as a period of relative normalcy, see, for example [2], esp. p. 177 and [3], esp. chapter 5, “Stalin’s ‘Soft Course’ and the Soviet 1930s Phenomenon”.

gality” and of “unwarranted harassment” of Party, soviet, and police officials in fulfilling their duties. The charges, compiled in a five-page document sent to Feodor Griadinsky, head of the district soviet executive committee, ranged from the petty to the most serious accusations bordering on counter-revolutionary behavior. Among other things, Shurybin, it seems, had dared to arrest a member of the regional soviet executive committee, the *raispol'kom*, and several chairs of village soviets on charges of corruption and abuse of power. He also had ordered the release of several “kulak saboteurs,” arrested by NKVD officers. The latter he did on the grounds that insufficient evidence existed to hold and interrogate the prisoners. Shurybin ordered the local branch of the state bank to pay a “group of kulaks” 2, 127 rubles they claimed was owed them for an unspecified amount of work they had done, but for which the executive committee refused to pay. Krotov accused the prosecutor of bias in favor of class enemies by ordering the kulaks be paid when local school teachers had also not been paid for several months. Similarly, Shurybin acted in favor of class enemies by ordering horse fodder be transferred from a regional soviet warehouse and given to a certain kulak, Zubrilov. The latter, according to Krotov, had been excluded from the local party organization. Nonetheless, the prosecutor had ordered the allocation of fodder, “under threat of arrest of the head of the warehouse,” and “simply because the kulak Zubrilov had fallen temporarily on hard times and needed the fodder for his animals.” Krotov failed to elaborate on the circumstances of any of these charges, but emphasized the point that Shurybin consistently acted against Soviet authorities in favor of enemies of the state<sup>3</sup>.

Comrade Krotov was not alone in his complaints. Local officials complained of “intolerable” interference by prosecutors in their affairs, of “hampering” the efforts of police, party, and soviet officials to fulfill their duties in fighting for socialist construction. Yet, it was not just jurisdictional and bureaucratic conflicts that frustrated officials; an overwhelming sense of being besieged by an unruly and often hostile populace drove many officials to distraction, and some to suicide. In his suicide note (последнее слово) from 23 December 1936, the chair of the Belkovsk sel'soviet, party member Petrovskii, wrote in despair that their enforcement of new forms of legality made the district's procuracy officials “blind to the enemies of the people, who everywhere tear down our kolkhoz... They beat up shock workers, steal horses and kolkhoz goods, they rape young girls, and beat up nationals (нацмены), they don't fulfill their duties, and [they] drink constantly. They are bandits!” he concluded, “yet,” he lamented, “we are powerless by the new rules to deal

with them.” Petrovskii declared that the situation had not always been so. As a party member and former red army soldier, Petrovskii was sent to the countryside in 1930 to help dekulakize it. “I persecuted and hunted down kulaks,” he wrote, “but,” he added, “I had the support of the old kind of chekisty. We finished the job, and right to the very end.” In 1934, Petrovskii was transferred “to this backward sel'soviet of Belkovo.” There, he continued, he attempted to build a socialist kolkhoz, but got “no help, only resistance from the procuracy and organs of justice against our class enemies.” In one of his last sentences, Petrovskii claimed he had given up, the difficulties were insurmountable, and he blamed Barkov, by name, for being one of those having a “legalistic and bureaucratic attitude” toward the countryside<sup>4</sup>.

Petrovskii's note articulates the frustration that many local officials felt, being caught between an unruly populace and a regime which they felt had abandoned them. Reports to the Western Siberian Party Biuro by local party and NKVD officials expressed a widespread sense of isolation and embattlement. Local political and NKVD officials worried about the small number of communist actives in their regions, a growing number of peasant households withdrawing from kolkhozes, and hostile moods of kolkhozniki that simmered just below the social boiling point. Pointed disrespect of officials, both symbolic and real, resulted in violence and even murder. Vandalism and theft of state property, including and especially rustling of animals, continued on a widespread scale. Party and state officials were shocked and unprepared to deal with the massive amounts of theft of state property, an epidemic of political murders, train derailments and robberies, widespread black market activities, official corruption on a massive scale, and a dramatic increase in numbers of homeless and hooligan children's gangs. Armed and mounted bandit units roamed the countryside requiring, in some instances, small-scale military campaigns to suppress them. In mixed ethnic areas, non-Russian populations frequently protected bandits and other outlaws from authorities.

In a bizarre twist to the story of the suicide, Barkov noted in his report on Petrovskii's death that the body of a second missing party envoy had been discovered near the village of Belkovsk while prosecutors were investigating the chairman's suicide. The incidents were apparently unrelated, but showed how dangerous the countryside could be for Soviet authorities. The regional party committee had sent comrade Kruglov, the envoy, on business to the sel'soviet, although Barkov did not elaborate on the reasons for the visit. NKVD and police investigators suspected that local kolkhozniki beat Kruglov to death after getting drunk and picking a fight with him in a

<sup>3</sup> GANO. F. 47. Op. 5. D. 211. L. 79–81 ob.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. D. 227. L. 196–199.



beer club. Kruglov had been missing for over a week before police found his body<sup>5</sup>.

Such a state of affairs was not peculiar to the Belkovsk region. Regular reports by local NKVD officers and party heads on "political-moral conditions" in their regions expressed the same sense of isolation and embattlement as did the Belkovsk party boss. D. Laskin, party chief in the Kur'sinsk raion, wrote in January 1936 that he could count only one hundred forty-nine communists in his region; of these he could only count on thirty to thirty-five party actives to accomplish all the tasks set before them. The party was stretched thin in his region, Laskin wrote. The local newspaper was "out-and-out bad" (the editor was a "disciplined communist, but a hopeless editor"), and people developed all sorts of wrong political views, despite his staff's efforts to propagandize the correct line. There was not nearly enough seed grain for the spring or animal fodder for the winter, and this was breeding an "unavoidable and very openly unhealthy attitude" among kolkhozniki. Many kolkhozniki had not been paid their in-kind grain wages (трудодней), which added to the bad feelings and, to top it all, activities of "fanatical" religious sects were on the increase. Laskin penned his complaints in response to a circular letter from Robert Eikhe, the Party head in Novosibirsk, admonishing local leaders for relying too much on the "center," Novosibirsk. Dutifully, Laskin declared his region would cease the practice of constantly turning to central authorities for help. Yet, throughout the report, he pleaded for grain and equipment loans, the dispatch of special envoys, special considerations for reduction in quotas, and extraordinary financial expenditures<sup>6</sup>.

Like Laskin, other political and NKVD officials worried about the small number of communist actives in their regions, a growing number of peasant households withdrawing from collective farms, and barely contained hostile moods of kolkhozniki<sup>7</sup>. As rumors about a new constitution gathered force in 1936, local leaders also worried about the rise in religious sectarian activity. As one MTS political officer reported, rumors were widespread that the new constitution would not only legalize but sanction the revival of religion. He noted already a rise in the number of proselytizing groups of lay priests in his region (район)<sup>8</sup>. Another regional party head wrote that several lay priests were stirring up converts in kolkhoz villages. They used the argument that, according to the new constitution, if mothers did not have their babies baptized, they would be expelled from the kolkhoz<sup>9</sup>. Still

another rumor had it that the new constitution "allotted three priests to every village"<sup>10</sup>.

In Western Siberia, officials took threats against their lives as a serious possibility, and were especially careful when traveling in the district as envoys, investigators, or as plenipotentiaries with special powers. Many officials expressed their open fear of confrontation with the kolkhoznik-peasants in their regions. In January 1937, for example, assistant chief prosecutor for the district, a man named Pozdniakov, visited several collective farms in the Belovo region as a plenipotentiary of the district's party committee. In his report, Pozdniakov described several incidents that he regarded as blatant counter-revolutionary provocations, including open and hostile heckling at kolkhoz meetings, and he also described the palpable fear expressed by the regional party head, Guseev. Following a general meeting at the Voroshilov farm, Guseev warned Pozdniakov privately "not to press the issue of grain fulfillments. 'Otherwise,' he said, 'they might kill you (Не нажимать в вопросах о государственной сдаче, иначе еще могут убить).'" Pozdniakov concluded in his report that local party officials were cowed by these unspecified "counter-revolutionary elements," that local authorities had not taken a hard enough line against them, and that they did not have control over their region. But, while he blamed local authorities for allowing such a situation to develop, Pozdniakov nonetheless acknowledged that Soviet authority was weak in the region and to impose its will still needed to rely on outside plenipotentiaries and other forms of assistance from central party and soviet authorities<sup>11</sup>.

#### WHO'S WHO: IDENTITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

What is interesting about Guseev's wording is that, by not specifying the third-person pronoun, the local party chief left open the question of who "they" were who might kill Pozdniakov...or Guseev. Presumably, "they" were kulak elements, except that all those at the meeting were "kolkhozniki," and kolkhozniki, by definition after 1933, were not a counter-revolutionary social strata, Guseev's grammatical ellipse highlighted a central contradiction of the so-called socialist victory of 1933. Clearly, party and state officials faced widespread hostility and social disobedience, even after the supposed victory of socialism. Officials attributed that hostility, of course, to the continuing influence of kulaks and other dangerous elements still abroad in the population. Party authorities such as Pozdniakov exhorted local officials to remain vigilant, to root out enemies wherever they were to be found. Indeed, this was their duty.

<sup>5</sup> GANO. F. 47. Op. 5. D. 227. L. 195a.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. F. 3. Op. 2. D. 726. L. 7–20.

<sup>7</sup> See, also, Sheila Fitzpatrick on hostile peasant attitudes in [4, p. 287–296].

<sup>8</sup> GANO. F. 3. Op. 2. D. 726. L. 45.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. D. 233. L. 15 об.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. L. 18.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. D. 810.

Yet, how were officials to identify kulaks and other enemies who supposedly engaged in anti-Soviet activities and spread anti-Soviet attitudes? Organized class war had supposedly ended with the victory of socialist collectivization. Kulaks, as a class, officially ceased to exist after 1933. Before that date, a kulak could be readily identified using tax roles, land holding deeds, hiring practices, animal ownership, and other forms of property ownership. With the socialization of agriculture, however, such differences no longer existed. After 1933, in other words, the practical criteria officials had used to determine social class all but disappeared. This was not just a semantic inconvenience, but created serious practical problems of governance for local officials; without class, they were denied the means to distinguish social enemies from socially loyal groups.

We can see the problem they faced reflected in changing definitions of social categories. In the newly socialized countryside after 1933, officials rarely referred to inhabitants of rural areas even as peasants (крестьяне), let alone as kulaks. In the countryside after 1933, there existed sovkhozniki, kolkhozniki, and single household farmers-edinolichniki. After 1933, all these strata were defined as socially “near” and politically loyal to the regime and to Soviet authority. Kulaks still hid in the guise of kolkhozniki, but officially “most kolkhozniki [had] decisively...undergone a break (перелом)” and now “enthusiastically” accepted the kolkhoz order. Even edinolichniki were identified positively as “trudyashchikhsya edinolichniki,” laboring farmers<sup>12</sup>. Of course, edinolichniki were always suspect. Yet, as hostile as the regime was toward edinolichniki, it was not easy for local officials simply to blame all their troubles on them as a hostile class. In the Russian republic, convictions of edinolichniki for any crimes dropped from 1933 to 1935 from 22 to 12 percent of all convictions. More dramatically, the proportion of kolkhozniki convicted of crimes dropped from 35 to 12 percent of all court convictions<sup>13</sup>. Courts were instructed to exercise “maximum caution” when considering to bring indictments against kolkhozniki [5, c. 13]<sup>14</sup>. In line with this policy, Barkov instructed his subordinates on numerous occasions to ensure that edinolichniki were not illegally harassed by local police and soviet officials.

Thus, party and state officials not only felt embattled by an ubiquitous enemy, but, after 1933, by a nearly invisible one. And local officials paid the price for this contradiction. With the regime’s major social enemy, the peasantry, redefined into loyal Soviet citizens, high party and police officials placed the blame for continued social and economic problems squarely on the shoulders of lo-

cal Soviet, party, and agrarian officials and activists. In the same survey cited above, criminal convictions of rural administrative officials rose sharply in the mid 1930s (1933–1935) from 9.3 to 35 percent<sup>15</sup>. Between 1934 and 1937, about 25,000 rural and other local officials in Western Siberia were arrested and charged under various crimes, ranging from petty forms of mismanagement and abuse to supposedly counter-revolutionary acts of sabotage. In the Mordovsk Republic, 344 local officials were sacked out of 1300 in 1935, and that was in a year that saw a “noticeable” decline in punishment of rural officials [5, c. 11]. In the country as a whole, at least 1,200,000 local officials and rural «activists» were arrested and sentenced between 1933 and 1937<sup>16</sup>.

#### TYPES OF PUNISHMENT

When they ran afoul of higher authorities, most rural officials found themselves under indictment for one of several crimes: either embezzlement, statute 116 of the criminal code; the various statutes having to do with abuse of authority; and especially statute 111 on nonfulfillment of duty. Focus on embezzlement and other crimes of financial corruption increased in general in the mid-1930s, but especially in rural areas, convictions rising 40 percent in urban areas and 60 percent in the countryside from 1933 through 1935<sup>17</sup>. Sentences under these convictions ranged from two to three and four “years loss of freedom,” but it is not clear how many of those convicted to confinement spent time in labor camps or in some form of local prison or jail. As well, apparently many rural officials convicted under these statutes were not deprived of freedom. Rates of sentencing to some sort of confinement varied considerably. In the Russian republic rates varied over three years, 1933–1935, from 24.5 to 14 to 26 percent. Presumably, courts gave suspended sentences or some sort of restriction in place to the remainder. In Belorussia, confinement ran at 28 percent, although in the Uzbek republic, rates ran at 60 to 80 percent<sup>18</sup>. The Supreme Court study that generated these figures warned against groundless indictments of local officials on vague charges of negligence, but also noted the tendency to do just that. Appeal courts and procuracy reviews vacated more than 70 percent of indictments against local rural officials and activists in the years 1934 and 1935<sup>19</sup>.

Interestingly, it was not just Barkov and procuracy authorities who were behind the attack against local officials. Arrest orders came largely through the district’s party committee and from envoys sent from Novosibirsk with special powers. Barkov had no qualms about pun-

<sup>12</sup> GARF. F. 9474. Op.16. D.79. L.11, 56, 62.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. L. 56.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. L. 62.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. L. 56.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. F. 5446. Op. 83. D. 2. L. 255.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. F. 9474. Op.16. D. 79. L.57.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. L. 63ob. See, also [5, p. 22].

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. L. 63.

ishing abuse of authority and violations of socialist legality, but he adamantly opposed what he described as a campaign of administrative mass repression against local officials. In September 1936, Barkov protested to both Eikhe and Griadinskii, the respective heads of the party and soviet apparatus in Western Siberia. After citing numerous instances of what he regarded as unlawful arrest orders, Barkov wrote to Eikhe, "As you can see, [these actions] against local activists are in no way [judicially] justified and are purely administrative...Taken together, they come close to being a form of mass repression"<sup>20</sup>.

Local authorities may or may not have appreciated the distinction between administrative and judicial repression. From their point of view, the distinction mattered little. They were censured or even arrested on administrative order from the party and by police if they did not squeeze peasants hard enough to fulfill state quotas. But, if they did resort to the methods of abuse and starvation necessary to fill state quotas, then they could be arrested under judicial and procuracy orders for violating kolkhozniki rights. Local authorities were, literally, damned if they did and damned if they didn't. It is no wonder this kind of contradictory pressure drove some local officials to suicide. The grammatical ellipse used by Pozdniakov's host, Guseev, the party chief of the Belovo raion, expressed the way many local officials faced this dilemma, by trying to avoid it--by literally refusing to put a name to the regime's enemies.

#### THE COW, AGAIN

The victory of socialism and the regime's consequent re-definition of social categories created an administrative and political crisis of significant proportions and led to all manner of bizarre behavior by local officials, suicide not being the strangest. The story of the kulak cow is an example of the kind of ambiguity that arose over categories of social identity and political culpability. Pressed hard in 1935 to root out kulak enemies, but unable to round on their traditional enemies, the peasants, party officials of the Usinsk raion solved their dilemma by indicting a cow. The cow, after all, had been part of the repossessed property of a formerly convicted and deported kulak. Indicting a cow must have appeared a safe and reasonable solution in every respect. By naming the cow a kulak cow, the Usinsk sel'sovet and party committee could not be accused of mis-identifying a loyal citizen, but they could, in good conscience, discharge their revolutionary duty to the state, and gain some revenue in kind, as well.

Without class categories to guide them, and with the regime's traditional enemy, the peasantry, redefined into loyal citizens, party and police authorities began to trans-

fer political culpability not just to local officials, and not just to cows-- but increasingly to socially deviant and marginal populations-- groups that, while socially disruptive, had not previously been considered a political threat to the regime. Throughout the 1930s, the list of these so-called "socially dangerous elements" grew rapidly. By 1937, they included not just known criminals, former criminal convicts, and former kulaks, but other groups: gypsies, certain non-Russian groups, "professional beggars," homeless people, people found in cities without proper resident papers, petty thieves, religious sectarians, even political refugees and orphan children, and even so-called Dal'novostochniki (far easterners). Beginning as early as 1933, these types of people were subject to summary arrest and deportation by police and, beginning in April 1935, to sentencing by extra-judicial committees of the NKVD for up to five years in labor camps<sup>21</sup>.

Most social marginals fell under harsh administrative sanctions such as restrictions on residence and work, but local officials convicted of violating socialist legality faced demotion, prison terms, or even labor camps. This dynamic changed in late spring and early summer 1937 as the regime began to move toward the deadly campaigns of mass repression characteristic of those years. As is well known, "kulaks" bore the brunt of the police's repressive campaigns in 1937 and 1938 as they had in the early 1930s, while social marginals also became subject not just to sanctions but to outright extermination. And by summer of 1937, kulaks were more "visible" than they had been previously. This was so because kolkhozniki had been demoted, in a sense, for the purpose of repression. The instructions that party plenipotentiaries gave to local officials during the campaigns of repression no longer referred to residents of collective and state farms as kolkhozniki and sovkhozniki, but once again as peasants (крестьяне). This change in language opened the door to de-sovietize farm workers and edinolichniki and reclassify them as kulaks.

The transition in official language was unmistakable. Whereas in January 1937, Pozdniakov, the Novosibirsk plenipotentiary, spoke of kolkhozniki being threatened by vaguely defined anti-Soviet elements, in June, he got right to the point, but a different point. In local meetings, he spoke in specific rather than vague terms about the threat to the socialist countryside. "It is anti-Soviet," he said bluntly to one audience, "to believe that peasants cannot be wreckers." So, now, rural farm workers were no longer kolkhozniki but merely peasants, once again. This was the signal that mass repression against officials had ended, and large-scale repression of peasants could begin again. In reporting the results of his June tour to local Party groups, Eikhe, Pozdniakov recounted the

<sup>20</sup> GANO. F. 3. Op. 2. D. 813. L. 24-25.

<sup>21</sup> On socially dangerous elements, see [6, 7].

large number of “peasant-kulaks” he had encountered who engaged in anti-Soviet agitation or outright sabotage. To Pozdniakov and other high Party leaders in Western Siberia, peasants were no longer protected by their socialist identities as collective or state farm workers. The countryside was suddenly full of peasant kulaks and needed to be cleansed<sup>22</sup>.

#### REHABILITATION

In the summer of 1937, the regime’s leaders turned the state’s violence once again against peasants and socially marginal populations. This tragic story is well documented. Less well known is that, at the very height of the mass terror, the autumn of 1937, the country’s leaders began a campaign to rehabilitate the hundreds of thousands of local officials who had been arrested, imprisoned, or otherwise punished during the course of the 1930s. The first archival indication of this process appears in the form of a decree, sent by telegram and dated 26 October 1937. Chief Procuror, Vyshinsky, and the Commissar of Justice, Krylenko, signed the telegram jointly, which was distributed to all oblast and district level judicial and procuracy officials. In it, the two officials referenced a previous decision (постановление) from the “directive authority” (either Sovnarkom or the Party’s Central Committee). It called for a review of all cases of local rural officials (village council and kolkhoz and sovkhoz officials, MTS workers, and agricultural activists) who had been convicted of occupational crimes. The review was to stretch back to the beginning of 1934 and was to be done with a view to quashing the convictions and releasing the individuals “immediately” who had been incorrectly convicted. Review was to begin immediately with the first results due by 15 November and reports every ten days thereafter<sup>23</sup>.

Apparently not much was done, since Vyshinsky issued yet another circular on 1 November clarifying procedures for review and of what kind of cases. He sent a second circular from 25 November that supposedly clarified yet again how reviews were to be done, by which authority (procuracy or courts) and for which crimes<sup>24</sup>. The delay should not be surprising, given that procuracy officials were under severe pressure during the mass operations, or had themselves been arrested, leaving their positions unfilled. As of April 1938, procuracy officials had reviewed nearly 757,000 cases, vacating sentences of nearly 60 percent<sup>25</sup>.

Vyshinskii reported this as positive news to Stalin and Molotov, but by summer 1938, the Chief Procuror made known his displeasure over what he described as lack of progress in the reviews. In early June, his circular admonished procuracy officials for both their slowness and the still unacceptably high percentage of convictions that had been upheld. In some oblasts, convictions were upheld in 72 percent of cases reviewed. In the Novosibirsk oblast, on the other side, only 2 percent of sentences had been upheld which, according to Vyshinskii, was too low. Novosibirsk courts were being too lenient. The Kursk oblast seem to have hit on the golden number of 14 percent of convictions upheld while the rest were quashed<sup>26</sup>.

In a September circular, Vyshinskii reiterated his admonitions, but also criticized procuracy and court authorities for continuing mass convictions of local farm chairmen and other rural officials. He singled out Novosibirsk oblast, again, though this time for being too vigilant. Vyshinskii noted that, in 48 regions of the oblast, 265 kolkhoz chairs and 283 brigade leaders had been arrested and convicted of minor charges. Most of the cases were initiated without sufficient grounds. One kolkhoz chair, for example, was convicted to 2 years loss of freedom because he was late in delivering the farm’s grain quota to state storage facilities, even though he had done exemplary work in securing the farm’s harvest and protecting and preparing the grain for transfer<sup>27</sup>.

Vyshinskii’s memorandums embody the dilemma in which local authorities found themselves. In late 1937 and again in January 1938, the Procuror berated his subordinates, particularly in Western Siberia, for being too harsh in their approach to local officials and for not making sufficient progress in reversing convictions. Then, in June, Vyshinskii reversed himself, criticizing Siberian officials, in particular, for being too lenient. Then, again, his September circular singled out Siberian procurors once again for being too harsh.

In a follow up memorandum to Stalin and Molotov, Vyshinskii reported in early January 1939 that close to 1,200,000 cases had been reviewed, resulting in the quashing of 58 percent of them. He noted that an additional 23,000 cases were being reviewed for a second time. In addition, the review of activists’ convictions had been folded into a more general review that included rank and file kolkhozniki, as well<sup>28</sup>.

#### CONCLUSION

It is a grotesque irony to note that, at the height of the bloodshed of mass purging and killing of late 1937 and 1938, Vyshinskii and other Soviet leaders berated lo-

<sup>22</sup> GANO. F. 47. Op. 1. D. 233. L. 16–17.

<sup>23</sup> GARF. F. 8131, D. 22. L. 26. So far, the original decision is not found.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. F. 8131. Op. 38. D. 23.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. F. 5446. Op. 26. D. 110. L. 12–13.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid. F. 8131. Op. 38. D. 33. L. 14–16.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. L. 25.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. F. 5446. Op. 83. D. 2. L. 255.



cal authorities, procuracy officials in particular, for negligence in restoring citizenship rights to local officials convicted of petty offenses. As a result of the purge there were no procuracy officials to conduct such reviews in many oblasts and regions of the country. Although obvious, nothing was said about this in official communiques. Procuracy officials who still retained their positions understood very well, of course, that the only important priority was to process the mass of convictions that passed across their desks for purging and execution, not for rehabilitation. This contradiction was part and parcel of the Stalinist regime, its absurdity and, more important, the violence that lay at its core. Violence and repression were not just episodic during the Stalinist regime. As this article shows, repression, in one form or another, defined the essence of the regime's relationship to Soviet citizens. Repression came in waves of intensity, against different groups at different times. It was always there, even during periods of supposed social stability, because the regime could not admit the failure of its own policies.

Just as important, this article shows that, already in the 1930s, the demarcation of class had begun to lose force as a criterion for determining loyalty to the regime<sup>29</sup>. This created all sorts of problems in laying blame for failure, but it also resulted from the regime's own policies, specifically, the declaration that "successful" collectivization had broken organized class opposition. Henceforward, failure could be attributed to any number of reasons--false consciousness, individual masking of anti-Soviet hatred, saboteurs, etc. As in the cases cited above, however, without the traditional crutch of class, local Party officials were hard pressed to find enough individual scapegoats for all the shortcomings on the agrarian front. Suddenly, in 1933, the clear-cut world of local Bolshevik activists became threateningly, incomprehensibly, complicated, even turned on its head. Their impunity to pursue and punish peasants as class enemies now became punishable as arbitrary abuse of power against loyal kolkhozniki. Class, as these local officials understood it, suddenly no longer mattered. Class, which for so

long had been a guiding principle, suddenly lost its substance and meaning. It is no wonder that many felt abandoned and, at least some, felt the only recourse left was suicide. The latter is still an untold but no doubt important story to be told.

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<sup>29</sup> On the decline of class in the 1930s see, Shearer. Policing Stalin's Socialism, 131–136, 420–422, 438–440.