

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA

Los Angeles

We Shall Refashion Life on Earth!

The Political Culture of the Young Communist League, 1918-1928

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy

in History

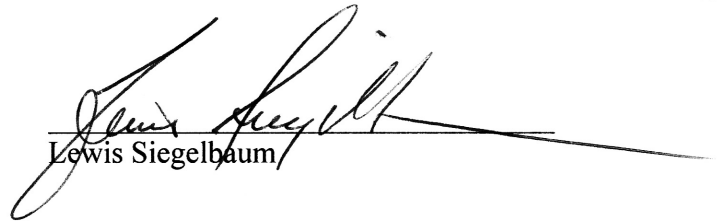
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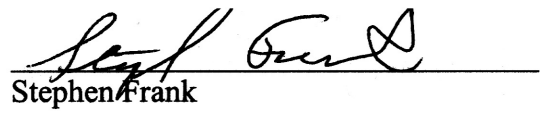
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To Rodney, Roderick, Dianne, and Maya

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

We Shall Refashion Life on Earth!

The Political Culture of the Young Communist League, 1918-1928

by

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Doctor of Philosophy in History

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Professor J. Arch Getty, Chair

We Shall Refashion Life on Earth! The Political Culture of the Young Communist League, 1918-1928 examines the struggle over identity and ethics in the Communist Youth League, or Komsomol. The modern perception of youth as the future, combined with the absence of effective Communist Party control gave youth significant power to create and shape the political culture of the emerging Soviet society. The Komsomol served as a space autonomous from adult authority in which young people disciplined each other and defined what it meant to be a young communist. Founded in 1918, the Komsomol was a militant youth organization. Its members were united by a common goal to fight enemies of the Revolution and destroy the old order. In 1921, when the Russian Civil War ended, the League lost its unifying purpose. It was no longer clear

what its function was in the new peaceful post-revolutionary society. Young communists were confused as to what being a communist meant. Rapid growth complicated the situation further as more and more politically raw youth joined the Komsomol's ranks. The Komsomol which used to be an intimate coterie of like-minded youth became a mass organization diverse in experience, social background, styles, practices, and relations. The 1920s were marked by a constant negotiation over what constituted acceptable and unacceptable communist behavior. Young communists worked out their codes of conduct through public scandals and moral courts which provided models of how a komsomol should not behave. By 1928, the Komsomol was in a state of crisis. Disillusionment, pessimism, and even suicide shrouded the League's political atmosphere as young communists searched for a way to escape the doldrums of Thermidor. But 1928 was also marked by a revival of communist militancy, romanticism, and class warfare which offered young communists a grand purpose to reunite them.

Introduction

What is the Komsomol?

In late October 2008, a lucky visitor to Russia could have stumbled upon a series of commemorative events taking place around the country. The festivities were not the gallant Victory Day parades of medal-chested old men. Nor were they the xenophobic Russian Marches shouting “Russia for Russians!,” the vitriolic “Dissident’s March,” where riot police inevitably clash with defiant National Bolsheviks, or the drunken jaunts of paratroopers through parks and public spaces. Rather, these celebrations would not have been quite so boisterous, flamboyant, or cantankerous but no less jubilant. Their marches were small, mostly consisting of middle aged and elderly Russians dressed in long, dull coats to stave off the October chill. If the visitor were lucky, he or she might witness the marchers bellowing tunes to an accordion at their lead. Songs like “Long Live Youth!” (*Da zdavstvuet iunost!*), “Let’s be Friends” (*Davaite družhit*), and other ballads hailing Russia’s youth would have thrown the visitor back in time. These small processions were not the only celebratory signs. Also scattered across Russia—in its metropolises and provincial backwaters, and in some cases even in some of the Soviet Union’s former republics, a curious visitor could take in a series of parades, lectures, symposiums, and exhibitions on history, politics, and culture of Soviet youth. These events were so many that only the most earnest could attend them all. What was this celebratory hubbub about? What celebration could bring at least three generations

together? The answer would surprise not only visitors, but probably even a few Russians. It was the 90th anniversary of the Young Communist League, or Komsomol.¹

It is surprising that any marking of the Komsomol's 90th anniversary occurred in the first place. After all, the Komsomol had collapsed with the Soviet Union eighteen years earlier.² Some of the former Soviet republics, Ukraine, Georgia, and the Baltic have sought to distance themselves from Russia and their communist past. Other former Soviet states in Central Asia and the Caucasus have developed their own national identity distinct from Russia.³ Yet, celebrations of the Komsomol's anniversary occurred in Kiev, Grozny and Almaty. The Kremlin held a special concert which was attended by over 400 former Komsomol leaders from all over the CIS including over 40 veterans of youth leagues from former communist countries.

Some Russians see the Komsomol as a symbol of the Soviet Union's totalitarian past. As one commentator to an article on the 90th anniversary said, "I see this as the same as a festive celebration of the Hitler Youth in today's Germany . . . Once a *sovok* always a *sovok*."⁴ Yet, for the majority of Russians, the Komsomol has escaped association with the stigmas of the Soviet regime. The celebrations united at least three

¹ Varvara Petrenko, "Dve nedeli komsomolskikh gulyanii," *Gazeta.ru*, October 10, 2008.

² The Komsomol continues as the League of Communist Youth of the Russian Federation, SKM RF, and makes claim to be the official successor of the Soviet Komsomol. See www.skm-rf.ru. The SKM RF has an estimated membership of 28,000. Several Russian communist youth groups claim the Komsomol as part of its history.

³ Ronald Grigor Suny, "Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations," *The Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 4 (2001).

⁴ Petrenko, "Dve nedeli komsomolskikh gulyanii." "Sovok" is short for *sovokopnyi* or cooperative or a collective person. It refers to citizens of Russia who lived the majority of their lives in the Soviet Union. "Sovok" is often a derisive word for people who maintain Soviet values and behaviors.

generations despite difference in political persuasion, nationality, and experience. Some former members now own profitable companies while others have lost their livelihood thanks to privatization. Even members from Nashi and the Young Guard paid homage to the Komsomol.⁵ As Moscow's mayor Yuri Luzhkov stated, "The Komsomol [represents] an entire era in the life of the country" that was responsible for "many glorious, necessary, and interesting affairs in our nation's history." Therefore, he continued, such a celebration was necessary to offer "an objective study of the Komsomol's history and traditions that will be useful to youth entering [adult] life as a creative approach to modern realities."

Newspapers, radio and television stations used the occasion to interview distinguished people about their reflections on the organization. Interestingly both former members and people who rejected the organization implied that the Komsomol was a community of shared values, comradeship, solidarity and mutual aid. The Komsomol brought millions of young people together under a common goal that cannot be besmirched even in retrospect. When asked for his thoughts about the League, Zhores Alferov, the 2000 Nobel Prize winner in Physics, said that "The Komsomol was an absolute organization of the masses. It educated people in a lot of things, including management and ethics." Vladimir Sungorkin, the current editor of *Komsomolskaya pravda*, vilified those who now shun the Komsomol: "Lots of people today say that they hated the Komsomol, that they knew they had to keep as far away from it as they could.

⁵ The Young Democratic Anti-Fascist Movement, Nashi was formed in 2005 by the Kemlin. See www.nashi.su. Young Guard is the youth auxiliary of the United Russia party. See www.molgvardia.ru

But that's just rubbish. The Komsomol was founded on Christian, humanitarian ideals, the ideas of equality and brotherhood.”⁶ For Alferov and Sungorkin, membership in the Komsomol meant being a part of a united community based on shared values, memory, comradeship, and mutual aid. Iuvenalii, the metropolitan of Krumitsk and Kolomensk agreed, though he was never a member because of his religious beliefs. Although Iuvenalii was never pressured to join, he nonetheless paid a small price at the hands of Komsomol youths. “Guys knew I went to church, and at night they would gather near the school and tease me.” Like Alferov and Sungorkin, Iuvenalii recognized the shared values of the Komsomol community. Religious people were not welcomed in the organization. Summing up this sense of the Komsomol community, Alu Alkhanov, the Russian Deputy Justice Minister and former president of Chechnya, stressed how the League’s activities brought youth together. “I think that [my] time in the Komsomol played an indispensable role: it captivated and united youth. Construction brigades, student festivals—all of these facts are hard for anyone to deny. Now there is nothing quite like it.”⁷

The Komsomol brought together people from a myriad of backgrounds and experiences. It joined the urban and rural, Russian and non-Russian, the educated and ignorant. It transcended generations through a common memory and shared ethical norms. Former members of the Komsomol strongly believed that this consensus could be traced back to the very foundation of the League in 1918. Moreover, for those celebrating

⁶ "Young Communists Mark Anniversary," *Moscow News*, October 30, 2008.

⁷ "Vas kak v komsomol prinimali?," *Kommersant Vlast'*, no. 42 (2008).

the Komsomol's 90th anniversary, the ethics of a young communist were coherent, natural, and transparent. But this was not the case in the Komsomol's early years. What former Komsomols take for granted as emblematic of "Komsomol ethics" and the community it united was neither consistent nor coherent.

This study examines the development of the Komsomol as a community during its first decade. It argues that the lack of ethical consensus after the 1918-21 Civil War produced an identity crisis at the foundations of the Komsomol community. The League's increasing diversity resulting from rapid growth exacerbated the crisis over the values attached to Komsomol identity about historical memory, comradeship, gender, relations between activists and rank and file, ethics and deviance, and activism. To complicate matters, the leadership consistently refused to dictate an "ethical law" and instead called on the rank and file to construct the ethical boundaries of their community. In the absence of a proactive code of conduct prescribed from above, the rank and file was left to create codes of conduct through their relations with each other.

The Komsomol played an important role in the formation of the Soviet system. As members, young people participated as administrators in agencies of government, institutions of culture and education, media, military, economic enterprises, and social and political organizations. Komsomols were key actors in the major events of the early Soviet period from the Revolution and Civil War to industrialization and collectivization. And yet the League was not merely a handmaiden of the Soviet State. Nor was it simply an institution of indoctrination and control. The Komsomol was a space for youth which gave them significant autonomy in shaping their own political lives.

Much of the League's autonomy was the result of weak and sometimes non-existent local and central control. Poor communication between center and periphery, a shortage of qualified personnel, and sheer geographical distance allowed rank and file members to administer and regulate themselves according to their own interpretation of what it meant to be a young communist. By the middle of the 1920s Komsomol cells outnumbered the Party's two to one in the countryside, making communist youth the only representatives of the Soviet state in many areas. This gave young komsomols enormous power not only in their organization, but also in the implementation of the Party's directives and policies.

A Brief History of Komsomol Growth

The Komsomol was founded in the fall of 1918 when 195 delegates representing over 22,100 members gathered in Moscow to form a national youth organization. A majority of the delegates came from two pro-Bolshevik youth groups, the Third International from Moscow and Petrograd's Socialist League of Worker Youth, and a minority were from independent anarchist, socialist, cultural and student groups from provincial centers.⁸ The Komsomol's purpose was to represent the economic interests,

⁸ The scholarly literature and official histories on the Komsomol's origins are too numerous to list. A few examples include A. N. Atsarkin and A. I. Kamshalov, *Leninski komsomol. Ocherki po istorii VLKSM* (Moskva: "Mol. gvardiia," 1969); Ralph T. Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth: A Study of Congresses of the Komsomol, 1917-1954* (Columbia University Press, 1959), 9-17; V. I. Sokolov, *Istoriia molodezhnogo dvizheniia Rossii (SSSR) so vtoroi poloviny XIX do XXI veka* (Ryazan: Uzoroche, 2002), 105-06; Isabel A. Tirado, *Young Guard! The Communist Youth League, Petrograd 1917-1920* (Greenwood Press, 1988), 65-73. For an example of histories and recollections from the 1920s and 30s, see A. N. Atsarkin, *Iunosheskoe dvizhenie v moskve (1917 god)* (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1930); idem., *Nashe rozhdenie : sbornik vospominanii, statei, materialov, dokumentov po istorii vzniknoveniia iunosheskogo dvizheniia v Moskve*, 5. perer. izd. ed., *Istoriia VLKSM*; ([Moskva]: OGIZ Molodaia gvardiia, 1933); A. Kirov, *Materialy k*

provide socialist education and training, and facilitate the participation of youth aged 14 to 23 in the building of a socialist society. Though originally conceived as an “independent organization,” with only an affinity toward the Bolsheviks, the Komsomol was quickly subordinated to the party and deemed its “helper and reserve,” responsible for harnessing and cultivating youth for service in the interests of the Party/State.⁹

The Russian Civil War (1918-1921) was a definitive event for the Komsomol’s identity as a youth organization. It gave many youths their first experience participating in the revolutionary changes engulfing Russia. For many, this experience would define what it meant to be a communist. Being in the Komsomol during the war was a daring political move wrought with danger. Joining in the years 1918 to 1920 made one, in the words of one commentator, “a candidate for certain death.”¹⁰ Despite the dangers the war presented, the Komsomol enthusiastically threw its weight behind the war effort.¹¹

Estimates of the number of Komsomol youth who participated in the war are difficult to find but between 1919 and 1921, the League organized several mobilizations of members

istorii VLKSM (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1925); A. Shokhin, *Kratkaia istoriia VLKSM* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1928); I. Skorinko, *Komsomoltsy oktiabria* (Leningrad: Iunyi proletarii, 1925).

⁹ The purpose and goals of the Komsomol were stipulated in its three charters (1918, 1920, and 1926). Each increased the Komsomol’s political and institutional subordination to the Party. For the 1918 Charter see A. S. Trainin, *1 Sezid RKSM protokoly* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1990). For the 1920 and 1926 Charters see TsK VLKSM, *Tovarishch komsomol: Dokumenty s’ezdov, konferentsii i TsK VLKSM, 1918-1968* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1969), 41-48, 247-65. Tirado provides an English translation of the 1918 and 1920 Charters in Tirado, *Young Guard! The Communist Youth League, Petrograd 1917-1920*, Appendix 4 and 5.

¹⁰ Istmol, *Bezumstvu khrabykh poem my slavu* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1929), 3-4.

¹¹ For a history of the Russian Civil War see W. Bruce Lincoln, *Red Victory: A History of the Russian Civil War* (Simon & Schuster, 1989); Evan Mawdsley, *The Russian Civil War* (Pegasus Books, 2007); I. V. Narskii, *Zhizn' v katastrofe : budni naseleniia Urala v 1917-1922 gg.* (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2001). For a general treatment of the of the Komsomol’s involvement in the war see Tirado, *Young Guard! The Communist Youth League, Petrograd 1917-1920*, 81-170.

into the Red Army totaling around 30,000. Thousands of other youth fought behind enemy lines as partisans in local skirmishes as the war's fronts engulfed villages and towns.¹² An early history of the Komsomol estimated that between 50,000 to 60,000 members fought, while another claims that up to a third of the Komsomol's 400,000 members "defended the Revolution with guns in their hands."¹³ Even if members did not fight, the Civil War touched their lives in other ways. Thousands participated in famine relief, fund raising, agitation and propaganda, Soviet administrative institutions, grain requisitioning, and in the Cheka.¹⁴

The Civil War also contributed to the Komsomol's rapid growth and institutional chaos. During the Civil War the membership grew from roughly 22,000 in October 1918 to 400,000 in 1920.¹⁵ There were few if any restrictions on membership. Usually declaring oneself a supporter of the Revolution was enough to be considered a member. However, the rapid growth coupled with the exigencies of the Civil War made the membership size unknown to the leadership. Records were poor, if they existed at all. Members constantly moved as they were mobilized to the front, their cells liquidated by

¹² For one memoir of a young communist partisan see A. Khaikevich, *Komsomol v podpol'i* (Proletarii, 1926).

¹³ Institut zur Erforschung der UdSSR., *Soviet Youth: Twelve Komsomol Histories* (Munich,: 1959), 8; Shokhin, *Kratkaia istoriia VLKSM*, 75.

¹⁴ "Komsomol v grazhdanskoi voine," *Komsomol'skaia letopis*, no. 1 (1926): 123-28; M. Afonin and A. Kortsev, ed., *Na front i na fronte: sbornik vospominanii* (Moskovskii rabochii, 1927); V. Sorokin, *Pervye batalony* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1931); E. D. Stasova, ed., *V kol'tse frontov: Molodezh' v gody grazhdanskoi voiny, sbornik dokumentov* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1963).

¹⁵ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth: A Study of Congresses of the Komsomol, 1917-1954*, Appendix B; T. H. Rigby, *Communist Party Membership in the USSR, 1917-1967* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), 52.

military advances and retreat. Others died, deserted, or simply disappeared. There was no single national Komsomol membership card to identify members, and local organizations often issued their own. Some young communists, especially partisans, created their own local “Komsomols” complete with names, cards, charters, and regulations. Ties to the center were in name and political affinity only.¹⁶ Lastly, the Civil War thwarted efforts to create a workable institutional apparatus. Relations between the center and periphery were virtually non-existent. The center rarely received regular reports from its regional organizations; and communiqués from the leadership seldom reached lower organs, or were simply ignored because of a lack of resources and personnel.

The Komsomol’s immediate postwar years were marked by an internal crisis over its composition and future direction. Factions in the Komsomol Central Committee debated questions of the League’s class composition, work, relationship with the Party, bureaucratic structure, and general future course.¹⁷ When the war ended, there was a sense that the core of the Komsomol—worker youth—abandoned the League, leaving it populated with “careerists” and “anarchist elements.” Moreover, many rank and file

¹⁶ The Komsomol repeatedly issued new Komsomol cards throughout the 1920s. For early exchanges of Komsomol cards see “Instruksiia o pogubernskom chlenskom soiznom bilete,” RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 67, l. 61-64.

¹⁷ On these internal struggles see S. Ignat, “Iz istorii Ukrainskoi diskussii,” *Komsomol'skaia letopis*, no. 1 (1926): 129-49; idem., *Pod prikrytiem 'kassovosti': Anarkho-sindikalistskii uklon v Ukrainskom komsomole (1920-21)* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1931). “Iz epokhi soiuznogo krizisa 1920-1921 gg.,” *Komsomol'skaia letopis* 1, no. 2 (1926): 31-151; Tirado, *Young Guard! The Communist Youth League, Petrograd 1917-1920*, 185-98. For Lenin’s speech at the Third Congress and efforts to plot a new course see V. I. Lenin, “Tasks of the Youth Leagues,” in *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1986); O. Tarkhanov, “Na ushcherbe,” *Iunyi kommunist*, no. 52-53 (1922). For N. Chaplin’s speech on the need to change course see RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 60, l. 31-33.

members were unsure of the League's postwar purpose and goals. If its function was to be educative, then, many wondered, what would become of the militancy that attracted youth to it in the first place. For some rank and file members imagined the League as a purely revolutionary shock force bent on destroying the old order. For others, once the war was over, they left the League for the countryside, returned to their families; left politics altogether, joined rival youth groups, or simply felt they had outgrown the organization.¹⁸

For those who remained, splits and bitter disputes erupted up and down the League's hierarchy.¹⁹ Regardless of the particulars, the Komsomol's very identity as a youth organization was at the heart of these disputes. Would the Komsomol remain an exclusively proletarian, militant youth organization or would it open admission to politically unconscious peasant and other youths in hopes of indoctrinating them? The main confusion over the Komsomol's postwar direction was reflected in the leadership's division into classists (*klassoviki*) and massists (*massoviki*) with regard to the League's future class composition. Classists argued for admitting only politically committed, working class youth into the membership. In some lower committees, infighting between komsomols was so heated that the situation had "lost all principled character and has

¹⁸ After the Civil War the Komsomol devoted a considerable amount of effort combating rival youth groups like the Boy Scouts, social-democratic, socialist revolutionary, and anarchist youth organizations. The Komsomol even created special sections in the Cheka to combat rival groups. See Pitirim Derkachenko, *Molodezhnoe dvizhenie rossii v dokumentakh 1905-1938* (Moscow: OMP Press, 1999), 93-114.

¹⁹ The history of this crisis was chronicled by the Komsomol in the late 1920s. For that official history see "Iz epokhi soiuznogo krizisa 1920-1921 gg.," 31-151; Ignat, *Pod prikrytiem 'kassovosti': Anarkho-sindikalistskii uklon v Ukrainskom komsomole (1920-21)*; V. Dalin S. Ignat, ed., *Diskussii v Komsomole* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1926). Historical treatments are in Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth: A Study of Congresses of the Komsomol, 1917-1954*, Ch. 2 and Ch. 3; Tirado, *Young Guard! The Communist Youth League, Petrograd 1917-1920*, 175-98.

morphed into personal groups.” They acted “in such a caustic manner that it became impossible to work together.”²⁰ A Komsomol with a working class majority, they argued, would maintain the League’s vanguard position and identity as a united militant working class organization. They also advocated a sweeping purge of the Komsomol’s ranks. Lax admissions, they stressed, degenerated the League’s revolutionary vigor and cohesion. As one classist advocate explained at the Third Congress in 1920, “We have squabbles and personal frictions everywhere in the localities.... Our League has no internal cohesion and unity. There are conflicts in the very composition of our League. . . . And what are the reasons for these conflicts? The composition of our League is very spotted, very many petty-bourgeois and other elements have gotten in. They need to be considered for expulsion.”²¹ Massists, on the other hand, argued that the Komsomol, while certainly a vanguard for youth, should first and foremost be an organization for political education. Allowing only politically conscious youth to join, they contended, would alienate the millions of potential converts to socialism. Massists also vehemently opposed a general purge of the organization. As Lazar Shatskin emphasized at the Third Congress, “We are against implementing such measures [i.e. a purge] for a struggle against these sicknesses (*boleznennyi iavlenie*) as proposed principally by our Ukrainian comrades, which in essence are a pogrom against intellectuals. . . . This is an old position;

²⁰ RGASPI-M f. 1 op. 2 d. 6, l.

²¹ *Tretii Vserossiiskii s"ezd RKSM 2-10 oktiabria 1920 goda. Stenograficheskii otchet*, (Moskva: Leningrad, Molodaia gvardiia, 1926), 112.

our League will always fight against it and view that it is necessary to accept into our League the best parts of the intellectual youth.”²²

The compromise was a complete re-registration of the Komsomol’s membership in the Winter-Spring of 1920/21. The re-registration looked to provide an account of the composition of the Komsomol’s membership, trim the fat, put local recordkeeping in order, and consolidate the center’s authority over regional committees. Though the Central Committee repeatedly urged that re-registration was not a purge, it ended up being one nevertheless. Overall membership plummeted by almost fifty percent to 250,000.²³ Entire cells collapsed. For example, of the twenty three organizations in Ryazan province, seven collapsed and six were folded into other cells because they lacked the members to sustain themselves.²⁴ Members were expelled for all sorts of reasons: not attending meetings, having moved to another town, not paying dues, and negligence to Komsomol duties. Many were thrown out simply because they did not know about the re-registration and did not show up to exchange their cards. In the end, the measure created more problems than it solved. The loss of membership immobilized League activism, an accurate assessment of the general membership was still lacking, and the center had no clearer indication of how active the rank and file was. For most, the re-registration simply proved that the Komsomol was experiencing an institutional crisis. Not much had changed two years later. As Secretary Smorodin stated at the Fifth

²² Ibid., 247. Komsomol delegates from the Ukraine were the strongest supporters of a general purge.

²³ *IV s'ezd RKSM; stenograficheskii otchet. 21-28 sentiabriia, 1921 g.* (Moskva: Leningrad, Molodia gvardiia, 1921), 110.

²⁴ GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 172, l. 14-15.

Komsomol Congress in 1922, “We know that there is an organization that sends us protocols only three times a year, and of these we only see that something was proposed and passed, but what it was we have no idea. We don’t know the social composition of this organization, its figures, the practical work it has carried out, or have a complete account of all the activists.”²⁵

This institutional crisis was compounded with an ideological one that appeared in response to Lenin’s speech “The Tasks of the Youth Leagues” at the Third Komsomol Congress in the fall of 1920. In the speech Lenin called on communist youth to moderate their expectations for rapid revolutionary change. Instead he urged them to “learn communism.” According to Lenin, being a communist no longer meant only destroying the old order, barking slogans, and trying to apply “cut-and-dry conclusions” to the construction of communism. Rather, the archetypical young communist was one who “pledged himself to help the Party build communism and to help the whole younger generation create a communist society,” while understanding that “he can create it only on the basis of modern education.” Failing to do so, Lenin insisted, would relegate communism to “remain merely a pious wish.”²⁶

Many komsomols responded to Lenin’s speech with shock and dismay. They saw the turn toward “learning communism” and the reintroduction of capitalism as a retreat at the very moment of victory. In Tula province, for example, some were certain that NEP would just last a few months regardless of what Lenin said. They reasoned, a delegate

²⁵ Istmol TsK VLKSM, *Pyatyi vserossiiskii sezd RKSM, 11-19 Oktiabr 1922 goda: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1927), 77.

²⁶ Lenin, “Tasks of the Youth Leagues,” 289-90.

explained, “Oh well, we’ll collect taxes in the fall, and after that, we’ll get rid of the “new economic policy,” grab the specialists by the throat and knees, and start a second, third, and fourth revolution.”²⁷ But such attitudes were wishful thinking. NEP continued to compound the belief that the revolution was over. But this did not mean the Komsomol had found its niche in the new order. Still in 1922, regional Komsomol leaders were complaining that they still did not understand what the Komsomol Central Committee meant by a “new course.”²⁸ Moreover, to many komsomols NEP meant a worsening of their living standards. The cities were burgeoning with unemployment. Youths were often the first fired and the last hired.²⁹ And the Komsomol’s failure to fight for the practical interests of working class youth only exacerbated the prevalent bitterness and disillusionment.

The Komsomol’s transition to the New Economic Policy thus profoundly impacted the contours of the League as a community of communist youth. The end of the Civil War was also the end of members’ imagined unity against a common enemy. As many complained, NEP complicated the political landscape. The differences between “us” and “them” which were so stark during the war were now more difficult to identify,

²⁷ *Vtoraia Vserossiiskaia konferentsiia RKSM 16-19 maia 1922 goda. Stenograficheskii otchet.*, (Moskva - Leningrad: Molodaia gvardiia, 1928), 52. It was views like this which made many Komsomol support Trotsky because he advocated the idea that there were two generations within the Party

²⁸ VLKSM, *Pyaty vserossiiskii sezd RKSM, 11-19 Oktiabr 1922 goda: Stenograficheskii otchet*, 82.

²⁹ William J. Chase, *Workers, society, and the Soviet state: labor and life in Moscow, 1918-1929* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 150-51; Diane P. Koenker, "Fathers against Sons, Sons against Fathers: The Problem of Generations in the Early Soviet Workplace," *The Journal of Modern History* 73, no. 4 (2001): 27-35; N. B. Leбина, *Rabochaia molodezh' leningrada: Trud i sotsial'nyi oblik, 1921-1925 gody* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1982). According to Chase, in 1926 over two-thirds of teenagers were unemployed and in 1928 44 percent of youths aged 18-24 were jobless.

fight, and expunge. Without a clear, common enemy to rally against, differences between League members, (the “us,” in class, age, experience, and political and cultural temperament) became starker. Further, the “them” became a more abstract adversary clothed in a variety of inborn or potentially infectious traits: political unconsciousness, class backwardness, petite-bourgeois philistinism, and intellectualism. Fighting these was not like battling the White Army, foreign intervention, or moderate socialists. Overcoming these “illnesses” (*bolezni*) required the hard weapons of revolutionary warfare—guns, conspiracy, armored trains, artillery, and counter-espionage—to be exchanged for the soft tools of political education, agitation, and propaganda. Many young communists could not reconcile themselves to this shift in course. The result was a deep nostalgia for the Civil War years on the one hand, and a reactionary hatred for the New Economic Policy on the other.

The crisis over the Komsomol’s identity only increased as the League grew into a mass organization. On the one hand, like the Party, the Komsomol established strict admission criteria to screen new applicants, but on the other it conducted periodic mass recruitment campaigns which loosened membership rules.³⁰ The Komsomol conducted

³⁰ To join the Komsomol, an interested youth filled out an application, which asked for the prospect’s name, sex, social position, year of birth, education level, ethnicity, army service, and membership in social/political organizations. Applicants also had to write a statement (*zaiavlenie*) declaring why they wanted to join. This was usually no more than a sentence or two. According to applications from Ryazan, these statements tended to be rather standard: “I wish to educate myself in the Communist spirit and offer help within my powers in socialist construction” and “I see that the Komsomol is the defender of the proletariat and the builder of a new life and therefore I wish to be a steadfast fighter and builder of communist society.” Many simply stated they wanted to join out of “personal conviction,” to “fulfill Lenin’s command” or for “political development and as a result a defender of proletarian interests.” The sincerity of such statements is difficult to gauge. It was likely that applicants wrote what they were told or what they thought others wanted to hear. Several applications were clearly written by someone else (perhaps because the applicant was illiterate) and signed with a different signature. Applications then had to pass through a series of bureaucratic screenings. The application’s facts were verified which was

two in the mid-1920s: “Face to the Countryside” and the Lenin Levy.³¹ These campaigns doubled the Komsomol’s membership from 840,000 to 1.7 million between July 1924 and December 1925. Recruitment efforts were especially successful in the countryside. In 1925 alone, the number of cells increased from 39,797 to 55,097 with around three-quarters of new cells in village localities.³² Rapid growth also tilted the League’s class composition in favor of the peasantry. At the beginning of 1924, the Komsomol was 46 percent worker youth and 39.4 percent peasant. By January 1926, peasants accounted for 46 percent while workers had dropped to 42.7 percent of membership.³³ Mass recruitment was a double-edged sword, however. While it bolstered the Komsomol worker composition, it also allowed a host of undesirables, particularly peasants, into its ranks. By the middle of 1925, the worker youth and the Komsomol press were decrying the “dangers of growth” and the potential “peasantization” of the League.

followed by a discussion about applicant at general meeting. In this quasi *auto de fe* the candidate answered questions about his or her desire to join, recite their autobiography, and even sometimes endure the prying inquires and laughter of cell members. If the cell voted to accept the applicant, the confirmation was sent to the district committee for approval. GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 660, l. 4, 8, 16, 29. For examples of applications with identical handwriting see l. 6, 7, 10, 12-14. "Kak vstupit' v Komsomol," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, March 20, 1927, 6. For the impact of mass recruitment in the Party and Komsomol see John Hatch, "The "Lenin Levy" and the Social Origins of Stalinism: Workers and the Communist Party in Moscow, 1921-1928," *Slavic Review* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1989); Rigby, *Communist Party Membership in the USSR, 1917-1967*, Chapters 3 and 4; Isabel Tirado, "The Komsomol and Young Peasants: The Dilemma of Rural Expansion, 1921-1925," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 3 (1993).

³¹ For the particulars of these campaigns and their political fallout see Tirado, "The Komsomol and Young Peasants: The Dilemma of Rural Expansion, 1921-1925."; VLKSM, *Tovarishch komsomol: Dokumenty s"ezdov, konferentsii i TsK VLKSM, 1918-1968*, 132-37. On the fluctuations of Komsomol membership see TsK RLKSM, *Komsomol SSSR: Statisticheskii sbornik o chislennom i kachestvennom sostave i politprosvetrabore RLKSM s 1/6/1924 po 1/1/1926* (Moscow: 1926).

³² RLKSM, *Komsomol SSSR: Statisticheskii sbornik o chislennom i kachestvennom sostave i politprosvetrabore RLKSM s 1/6/1924 po 1/1/1926*, 49.

³³ *Ibid.*, 26. Students and white collar workers were categorized as “Other” and made up rest of the League.

Rapid growth also created the impression that drunks, hooligans, sexual deviants, and class aliens had taken over the League. To combat the increase of wayward youth in its ranks, the Central Committee created the Conflict Commissions in 1925. The Conflict Commissions served as moral courts at the local level to adjudicate incidents of moral corruption and malfeasance, address members' claims of unjust expulsion, and surveil komsomol's personal and public behavior. However, even while creating the Conflict Commissions, the leadership provided little guidance for what constituted an expellable offence. The expulsion trial, therefore, became a site for not only punishing the morally corrupt, but for defining the parameters of Komsomol ethical behavior. Total expulsions steadily increased but remained a fraction of the total membership (From 1924 to 1926 there were 70,582 expulsions or 5.8 percent of a membership of 1.2 million). Nevertheless, expulsions accounted for over a third of all Komsomols who left the League, and demonstrated both the lack of ethical consensus among the rank and file and the leadership's inability to fashion new members into upright young communists. Over half of expulsions were peasants who had joined two years prior. The vast majority were expelled for acts of personal behavior: hooliganism, drunkenness, card playing, sex, and violations of the League's charter and program.³⁴

Rapid growth had profound effects on the Komsomol's political culture in other important ways. It created a new majority of politically unseasoned, mostly peasant youth who quickly overshadowed the minority of komsomols who had cut their teeth in the Civil War. This influx only exacerbated the identity crisis the League had been

³⁴ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 316, l. 38.

experiencing since the introduction of NEP. Its growth transformed the Komsomol into a diverse organization variegated by experience, background, temperament, and style. The organization's fluidity complicated attempts to establish a stable consensus among the rank and file over the contours of the Komsomol community. Instability within the Komsomol community was articulated in debates about the historical memory of the Civil War, the meaning of comradeship, masculinity, activist moral corruption, ethical norms, and activism in the Komsomol. The Komsomol leadership aggravated the situation further by refusing to provide concrete guidelines for resolving these debates. Instead, it pointed to the need to establish a consensus of public opinion around the League's ethical boundaries. The rank and file, therefore, was given a great amount of power to pour meaning into the ethical vacuum. In some cases, such as the historical memory of the Civil War, the appeal to the rank and file came from necessity. As guardians of the Civil War's remembrance, rank and file veterans articulated their memory in the very traumas that moralists found incompatible with the times. In other instances, appeals to the rank and file were based both on ideology and pragmatism. Komsomols and Bolsheviks alike rejected notions of universal morality and instead argued for codes of conduct to be established and regulated by consensus. Also, Komsomol mutual regulation was a practical substitution for the lack of central oversight. Thus, in debates about comradeship, masculinity, activist corruption, and deviant behavior, rank and file members were encouraged to practice mutual surveillance and adjudication according to the agreed consensus established in their organization.

By its tenth anniversary in 1928, the Komsomol had a membership of two million youths from all walks of Soviet life.³⁵ However, the threads that bound them together as a community were still looser and looser with each new member. Unlike the League's founders, the komsomols who joined after 1925 lacked a great event that could bind them together. Militancy was denounced as wrongheaded and anachronistic. Sweeping revolutionary change was supplanted by obsessions with the minutia of everyday life. Disgruntled and disappointed, these recent komsomols turned to alternative organizations like religious sects, anarchist, left communist and even nationalist groups to channel their political and social energies. Others called for a new form of the romanticism of the Civil War to reinvigorate the Komsomol's militant tradition and provide a stable foundation to unify the Komsomol community. However, the romantic revival of the Civil War was not a preconceived strategy concocted by the leadership, nor was it a pure duplication of the war's culture and atmosphere. Rather, the revival of the Civil War motif in the Komsomol was an attempt to reconfigure the past to regenerate the League's unshakable solidarity, militancy, enthusiasm, and purpose for the present and future. The Civil War's revival was enacted through a "new voluntary movement" based on "new methods" of activism in the form of cultural campaigns in 1928-29. Based on local initiative and spontaneity, these campaigns facilitated rank and file initiative and creativity to overcome the pessimism and lethargy pervading the membership by giving young communists the sense that they were embroiled in a new civil war.

³⁵ For a breakdown of its composition in 1928 see: A Balashov, *Komsomol v tsifrah* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1931), 6.

The Komsomol as Community

Communities are collective entities that give people a sense of place, security, aid, and identification. They come in a variety of social and institutional configurations based on familial, religious, cultural, economic, political and symbolic associations.

Communities are always defined by borders which regulate their membership. But these borders can be exclusive, inclusive, limited to particular social and political spaces, temporal or eternal with centuries of history, tradition, and lineage. Despite their many shapes, sizes, and temporalities, communities are all predicated on principles of inclusion and exclusion that seek to unite members despite their many differences.

It is this need to establish a shared commonality that makes all communities fundamentally ethical, if ethics are understood as normalized virtues and values that govern the proper ways of conduct for individuals or collectives. Ethics can be based on universal moral codes or subject to historical contingency and political exigency. A community's members create the ethics that form the basis for a shared sense of identity, which in turn transcends their individual differences, inequalities, and hierarchies. But the maintenance of a community's codes of conduct always involves systems of power, domination, and sometimes even violence. Members' mutual regulation and enforcement, rituals of inclusion and exclusion, systems of punishment and the identification of potentially harmful "others" inside and outside its borders produce and

reproduce codes of conduct.³⁶ Often a community's ethics are adjudicated by the mutual recognition of a sovereign—a king, leader, council, or the public—who stands as a representation of the community's will and is given the power to pardon and punish those who violate a collective's norms.

The Komsomol was a community which sought to fortify members' identification with each other despite their many differences. Theoretically, a komsomol was a komsomol regardless of ethnicity, class, gender, generation, or geographical location. But creating a sense of shared identity was a formidable task in the tumultuous times of post-revolutionary Russia. Not only was the Soviet Union a conglomerate of ethnicities, cultures, traditions, religions, and values, the sheer geographical enormity of the country proved daunting. Members inevitably came together around preexisting or new shared experiences, styles and temperaments, social, political and cultural commonalities, personal loyalties and geographical identifications. Moreover, the League minority status among Russia youth always threatened its internal cohesion. Despite its rapid expansion, the League never represented ten percent of the estimated 26.7 million youths of Komsomol age in the 1920s, relegating it to a small, yet expanding island floating in a sea of potential dangers to its internal stability.

What distinguishes the Komsomol's first decade from most communities was the lack of clear definitions of its ethical boundaries. No one knew what the ethics of this new and growing organization were or should be. Rank and file komsomols had

³⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, Rev. ed. (London ; New York :: Verso, 2006), 5-7; Kai T. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (John Wiley & Sons, 1966), 8-11.

divergent opinions as to what it meant to be a young communist, how he or she should behave, dress, relate to others, and conduct their personal and public lives. Throughout the 1920s, komsomols repeatedly asked-who they were as an organization and as an ethos. During the Civil War, the Komsomol ethos was very specific. However, while the Civil War provided a template for the ethics of a young communist as a hard, militant, uncompromising fighter, this model was deemed incompatible with the introduction of NEP and alien to a new generation of communist youth who had no revolutionary experience. Moreover, existing traditional codes of conduct were deemed backward or bourgeois and antithetical to socialism. Once both traditional and militant practices were tabooed, the Komsomol was left without solid ethical boundaries to define the borders of its rapidly expanding community.

The story of Komsomol ethics in the 1920s was one of perpetual crisis. Debates over issues both great and petty were all part of the same general question: Who are we? The constant posing of this question eventually resulted in a phenomenon Kai Erikson calls a “boundary crisis.” According to Erikson, such a crisis occurs when a community’s norms, or in the Komsomol’s case, the lack thereof, is challenged or made unstable either by groups within the community or outside it.³⁷ In the 1920s, the Komsomol experienced crises in historical memory, solidarity, gender relations, associations between leaders and led, ethics, and activism. Each crisis identified a set of corresponding deviants who threatened community norms: the war invalid and militant,

³⁷ Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance*, 68-69. Moral panic is a similar phenomenon. See Stanley Cohen, *Moral Panics and Folk Devils*, 3rd ed. (2002), 1-15.

the indifferent youth, and the sexist philander, the corrupt activist, the wayward youth, and the depressed and pessimist, to name a few. Boundary crises are always public affairs where a community collectively debates, discusses and clashes over how to address social, cultural and moral threats. Such crises, however, are not merely about identifying and expunging deviance from a community. The very act of identification and expulsion are critical to the process of creating a new set of ethical standards and community borders.

The Komsomol community built a general consensus through negation. The identity of a young communist was increasingly defined by rejection and reaction rather than acceptance and pro-action. Beyond general prescriptions Komsomols rarely stated or were told what a “good” Komsomol was.³⁸ Instead they defined the Komsomol through what it was not, usually through the inverse of an Other.³⁹ Komsomols were told not be drunks or hooligans, but what exactly constituted a “drunk” or a “hooligan” was subject to local interpretation. Moreover, the ethical boundaries of the Komsomol were not based on simple binaries. They were characterized by considerable ambivalence. For example, with respect to alcohol Komsomols did not expect each other to be teetotalers. Youth could be turned off from joining the Komsomol if it came across as too

³⁸ The Komsomol Charter from 1926, for example, listed seventeen “tasks and duties” for its members. Usually beginning with “a Komsomol must know,” these statutes addressed very general issues like the requirement to know Leninist ideology, follow orders, help the Soviet state, proletariat and peasantry, serve in the Army, and help construct socialism. It said nothing about issues that concerned most komsomols: sex, drinking, personal relationships and conduct, and how to live ones personal and public life. VLKSM, *Tovarishch komsomol: Dokumenty s”ezdov, konferentsii i TsK VLKSM, 1918-1968*, 249-52.

³⁹ One might even say that importance of the Other in the constitution of komsomol ethics is fundamentally Hegelian. On Hegel’s notion of identity as a negation of the Other see G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. Arnold V. Miller and J. N. Findlay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 111-19.

sanctimonious. In addition, abstinent komsomols also ran the risk of being ostracized by their fellow members. As a result, there was an acceptable amount of drinking allowed. That said, there was also a point at which drinking too much became problematic, especially if it adversely impacted Komsomol work, personal, family and social life. Excessive drinking often resulted in expulsion from the League. The rejection of both extremes thus placed an “ethical” komsomol somewhere in the middle between teetotaler and drunkard. The end result was a Komsomol identity not defined by a binary of good/bad. Ethical consensus was a range of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. A youth stayed a Komsomol member as long as he remained within these often fluid and contingent parameters. If one violated its borders, their peers, not the leadership, excluded them from the community.

Historiography of Youth and Youth as History

This study examines how youth worked out their political, cultural, and social lives. It seeks to make two contributions. First, it offers an analytical contribution to the historiography of youth and youth organizations. Second, it provides a history of the early Komsomol and its role in the formation of Bolshevik hegemony in the Soviet Union. It offers social and cultural insights into the still largely political and organizational orientation of the existing historiography on the Komsomol. The Komsomol was a space that empowered youth to actively create, shape, and regulate social relations, practices and codes governing their conduct and by extension the larger social and cultural norms of the Soviet system.

Most historians and social scientists consider youth a modern category that dates from the seventeenth century. Changes in European social and family life, urbanization, industrialization, the growth of education, and the emergence of mass politics allowed for the creation of adolescence as a liminal stage between childhood and adulthood. By the middle of the nineteenth century, youth took on increasing political and social significance as societies began to identify them as either dangers to or hopes for the future of the nation state.⁴⁰ Seemingly every Western nation displayed some measure of anxiety about the status of their young citizens, especially those among the urban lower classes. In every country, institutions and organizations were established to deal with youth moral corruption and indoctrination. Public education was expanded not only to better prepare young people for work in an industrial economy and service in conscription armies, but also to foster their civic and national development. Every nation agreed in concert that the “health” of their respective youth were barometric indicators for the nation as a whole. To ignore youth and leave them to their own devices was to condemn the nation to certain decline.

Russia was no different. By the mid-19th century Russian youth were also increasingly viewed as a danger to the present and hope for the future.⁴¹ The

⁴⁰ Most historians agree that youth is a historically constructed category that began to emerge in the seventeenth century and become concretized in the nineteenth. John R. Gillis, *Youth and History: Tradition and Change in European Age Relations 1770-Present* (Academic Press, 1974), Chapters 1-3; Michael Mitterauer, *A History of Youth* (Oxford, UK ; Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), 1-34. For an argument that puts the creation of youth in the sixteenth century, see Natalie Zemon Davis, "The Reasons of Misrule," in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, ed. Natalie Zemon Davis (Stanford University Press, 1975); Konrad Eisenbichler, ed., *The premodern teenager : youth in society, 1150-1650* (Toronto: Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, 2002).

⁴¹ Rebecca Friedman, *Masculinity, Autocracy and the Russian University, 1804-1863* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

participation of young people in radical political movements, the growth of street crime, hooliganism, and other social ills caused much trepidation among Russia's moral and political elite as the century waned. Concern for the political, moral and social health of adolescents particularly increased after 1905. Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese War and the 1905 Revolution seemed to signify that Russian youth were simultaneously unfit to defend the nation in modern warfare and were increasingly considered politically suspect, if not unreliable. At the same time, energies of young people were needed to be harnessed and directed for the good of the nation state. The expansion of public education and the creation of a conscription army turned them into an object to be courted, monitored, directed, harnessed, and deployed.⁴²

The late nineteenth century was also a political awakening for Russia's younger generation. Though youth had been playing a part in Russian politics for over half a century, after 1905, they increasingly organized themselves with interests distinct from adults and children. Elite Russian youths formed political, cultural, and educational clubs and societies in Russia's gymnasiums and universities. Working class youth began coming together in factories and other mostly urban, lower class settings to struggle for their corporate interests. As a result of rapid industrialization and urbanization, a distinct urban youth culture was emerging that not only altered young people's consumption patterns in the city, but increasingly transformed traditional youth cultural and social

⁴² Susan Morrissey, *Heralds of Revolution: Russian Students and the Mythologies of Radicalism* (Oxford University Press, 1998); Joan Neuberger, *Hooliganism: Crime, Culture, and Power in St. Petersburg, 1900-1914* (University of California Press, 1993); Joshua A. Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation: Military Conscription, Total War, and Mass Politics, 1905-1925* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2003).

practices in the countryside.⁴³ By 1917, youth based political activity could be found in a variety of places and persuasions around the Russian empire.⁴⁴

The emergence of youth in Europe and Russia and the anxieties and hopes they engendered, gave rise to sociological and psychological studies of adolescence. In order to set them on the moral straight and narrow on the one hand, and the need to inculcate and harness them on the other, made academics seek to understand youth as a distinct period in human development. One outcome of this discourse was the creation of adolescence as a natural, universal, and undifferentiated social category. Social scientific studies helped craft youth as devoid of any national or cultural particularity. Youth were people with common interests and experiences regardless of whether they lived in city or village, in France or Russia. Moreover, youth became more attached to biological concepts of age, mental and physical development, and maturity. A young man or

⁴³ Stephen P. Frank, "Simple Folk, Savage Customs? Youth, Sociability, and the Dynamics of Culture in Rural Russia, 1856-1914," *Journal of Social History* 25, no. 4 (1992).

⁴⁴ Sokolov, *Istoriia molodezhnogo dvizheniia Rossii (SSSR) so vtoroi poloviny XIX do XXI veka*, 5-61. Despite the Party's dominance over the Komsomol on paper, the League itself should not be seen merely as a creature of adult communists. Though Lenin was one of the first leaders in the Social Democratic movement to advocate courting youth, and organized student and worker youth circles and organizations, the Komsomol belongs to a much broader history of Russian youth organizations. As in Western Europe, youth based organizations had developed in Russia in the middle of the 19th century. The majority were small, student study circles based in universities and gymnasiums. Others were underground revolutionary organizations of anarchist, socialist, and populist lineage. Still others were nationalist, both Russian and non-Russian, connected to the international scouting movement, religious based, or sponsored by the Tsar or members of the nobility. Whatever their origin, composition, or political persuasion, the proliferation of youth based organizations in Russia make it part of the general rise of youth as a political subject and object in modern history. For a general overview of youth organizations in Russia see K. V. Andreevich and L. A. Yakovlevich, *Iunaia Rossiia: istoriia detskogo i molodezhnogo dvizhenie v Rossii v XX veka* (St. Petersburg: ISPP, 2000), 10-26; Sokolov, *Istoriia molodezhnogo dvizheniia Rossii (SSSR) so vtoroi poloviny XIX do XXI veka*, 5-104. For the pre-revolutionary student and radical movements see Abbott Gleason, *Young Russia : the genesis of Russian radicalism in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), Franco Venturi, *Roots of revolution : a history of the populist and socialist movements in 19th century Russia*, Rev. ed. (London: Phoenix Press, 2001), Susan Morrissey, *Heralds of Revolution: Russian Students and the Mythologies of Radicalism* (Oxford University Press, 1998).

women, his or her mind and biology, practices, interests, and relations were viewed as more or less similar across space and time. Like their counterparts elsewhere, young people in Russia were increasingly defined by a particular age range, intellectual, psychological and physical status, their culture and practices, and in terms of the law.

What then is youth? For the purposes of this study, youth are those who were defined as such in Soviet Russia. The Soviet usage of the word youth (*molodezh'*) and its synonyms teenager and adolescent (*podrostok* and *iunost'*) increasingly pervaded political and cultural post-revolutionary discourse.⁴⁵ A Russian more or less between the ages 14 to 23, (an age range that conveniently coincided with Komsomol membership) was a youth (*molodezh'*) regardless of his or her particular status in the community. The traditional rites of passage that normally transitioned a young person into adulthood—economic independence, marriage and parenthood, for example—did not significantly change their status. For example, a Komsomol who was married, had children, or lived independently was still considered a youth. This is not to say that the scientific and institutional definition of youth was universally accepted in Russian society. As T. A. Bernshtam has noted, there were regional concepts of youth operating in village life well

⁴⁵ For examples of sociological and psychological studies of Russian youth from the period see: I. Gel'man, *Polovaia zhizn' sovremennoi molodezhi* (Moscow: 1923); A. G. Kagan, *Molodezh' posle gudka* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1930); V. Ketlinskaiia and Vlad Slepko, *Zhizn' bez kontroliia polovaia zhizn' i sem'ia rabochei molodezhi*, Biblioteka bytovoii konferentsii; (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1929); M. M. Rubinshtein, *Iunost' po dnevnikiim i avtobiograficheskiiim zapisiim* (Moscow: 1928); V. E. Smironov, *Psikhologiiia iunosheskogo vozrasta* (Moscow: Molodiia gvardiia, 1929); A. B. Zalkind, *Revoliutsiia i molodezh' : sbornik statei* (Moskva: Izd. Kommunistich. yn-ta im Sverdlova, 1926).

into the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁴⁶ Yet, none of these linguistic and category variations appear in Soviet literature.

It is young people's continued role as both national danger and savior that has driven historical studies about them. Scholars first became interested in youth as objects of history study in response to student and youth movements of the 1960s. Anxious about contemporary youth's impact on global politics and culture, and armed with a new body of theories on adolescent psychology that emphasized it as an inherently crisis ridden period in human development, many scholars began wondering about young people's capacity as historical agents in their own right.⁴⁷ The rebellious, revolutionary nature and (counter)cultural flare of 1960s student movements inspired social historians to consider youth politics, culture, and organizations and their role in history more generally. However, these historians looked to illuminate the role of youth as historical agents, they nonetheless reproduce the danger/hope paradigm informing their sources with conceptual adjustments to fit contemporary notions of youth as crisis ridden and rebellious. On the one hand, these studies tended emphasize young people's resistance to political and cultural conformity, generational conflict, and propensity for "at-risk"

⁴⁶ T. A. Bernshtam, *Molodezh v obriadovoi zhizni russkoi obshchiny XIX-nachala XX: polovozrastnoi aspekt traditsionnoi kultury* (Leningrad: "Nauka," Leningradskoe otd-nie, 1988), 28-29. For example, in Olonets province, a girl between the ages of 13-15 was called a *devohen'e* and at 17-18 years old was called a *nevestoi* (bride). In Tver, a girl of 15-16 was considered *glupoi* (silly) but at 18 she became *bolshaya* and at 20 a *nevesta* or *rastovaya*. A girl's status changes after she got married: *zaletaya*, *pererodnitsa*, *posidelka*, *zasidok*, and *kosnik* to name a few.

⁴⁷ American psychologist Erik Erikson is most important for positing the idea of "identity crisis" in youth. See Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, youth, and crisis*, [1st ed. (New York,: W. W. Norton, 1968)]. For a brief discussion of Erikson's idea of identity crisis and adolescence see Kent Baxter, *The modern age : turn-of-the-century American culture and the invention of adolescence* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2008), 89-90; Patricia Ann Meyer Spacks, *The adolescent idea : myths of youth and the adult imagination* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), Chapter 10.

behavior—hooliganism, crime, suicide, sex, and drug and alcohol use.⁴⁸ On the other, historians began looking at the way youth were presented as the future by examining the formation and character of youth organizations, their representation in media, attempts at moral and cultural inculcation, discipline and political mobilization.⁴⁹

The present study seeks to make an analytical contribution to the history of youth through an examination and understanding of young people from their own perspective. As scholars of “new childhood studies” argue most scholarship on youth consciously or unconsciously reproduce how *adults* perceive, define, judge, and understand them. Adolescents are often placed in “generations” that situate them not only in relation to adults, but often inevitably in conflict with them. Youth are also often understood in the process of *becoming*, whether they are becoming adults, citizens, or in the case of Soviet Russia, communist or soviet. Rarely are youth understood as an autonomous category

⁴⁸ Some examples include: Cohen, *Moral Panics and Folk Devils*; Mark Fenemore, *Sex, thugs and rock 'n' roll : teenage rebels in Cold-War East Germany*, Monographs in German history (New York: Berghahn Books, 2007); Stuart Hall and Tony Jefferson, *Resistance through rituals : youth subcultures in post-war Britain*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2006); Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* (Routledge, 1979); John Springhall, *Youth, popular culture and moral panics : penny gaffs to gangsta-rap, 1830-1996* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998).

⁴⁹ There have been several studies on youth organizations in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Most focus on questions of institutional structure, indoctrination, ideology, and purpose. On the Hitler Youth and Germany see Michael H. Kater, *Hitler Youth* (Harvard University Press, 2004); Guido Knopp, *Hitler's children* (Stroud: Sutton, 2002); H. W. Koch, *The Hitler Youth: Origins and Development 1922-45* (MacDonald and Jane's, 1975); Walter Laqueur, *Young Germany: A History of the German Youth Movement* (Basic Books, 1962); Peter Stachura, *Nazi Youth in the Weimar Republic* (Santa Barbara: Clio Books, 1975). Britain: Robert H. MacDonald, *Sons of Empire: The Frontier and the Boy Scout Movement, 1890-1918* (University of Toronto Press, 1993); John Springhall, *Youth, Empire, and Society: British Youth Movements, 1883-1940* (Archon Books, 1977). The United States: David I. Macleod, *Building Character in the American Boy: The Boy Scouts, YMCA, and their Forerunners, 1870-1920* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1983); Jay Mechling, *On my honor : Boy Scouts and the making of American youth* (Chicago ; London: University of Chicago Press, 2001). China: Anita Chan, *Children of Mao : personality development and political activism in the Red Guard generation* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1985). Italy: Tracy Koon, *Believe, Obey, Fight: Political Socialization of Youth in Fascist Italy, 1922-1943* (University of North Carolina Press, 1985).

with their articulations of their experience and relations that shape their identities autonomously from adults.⁵⁰

This study attempts to question the paradigm by examining Komsomol youth in relation to each other rather than to an outside authority. By focusing on komsomols horizontal relations, it seeks to give them some voice and agency, however filtered, fragmentary, or faint, in defining what it meant to be a young communist in the 1920s. Like most youth-dominated spaces, the Komsomol's meetings, clubs, campaigns, social events, dormitories, and gatherings were places where young people came together often outside the surveillance of adults. It was in these spaces that komsomols came to understand their world through their interactions with peers and cliques rather than as a response to regime commands. All komsomol members, whether leaders or rank and file, were more or less peers in terms of age and background. The six Komsomol general secretaries of the 1920s were all in their early or mid-twenties. Even important Komsomol moralists like Alexandr Slepko, Viktor Kin, and Vera Ketlinskaya were in their early to mid-twenties at the time of their writing.⁵¹ Every general secretary, except for one, was born in the Russian periphery, was modestly educated, and came from worker or peasant backgrounds. Provincial and cell secretaries, whose mean age was late teens and early twenties, were even closer to the rank and file in similar regard. Komsomol peer groups constructed the symbolic codes, relations, language, and culture

⁵⁰ Amy L. Best, *Representing youth : methodological issues in critical youth studies* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

⁵¹ Slepko (1899-1937) published articles and books on Komsomol culture and morality. Viktor Kin (1903-1938) had a biweekly column in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. Vera Ketlinskaya (1906-1976) was another moralist who coauthored *Zhin' bez kontolii* (1928) with Slepko.

which allowed them to articulate their experiences. Sometimes these overlapped with the overarching culture, but often young people reconfigured and redeployed them with different meanings and ends. Communities of youth also have their own hierarchies and rules. Some youths hold more authority than others. Through practices of inclusion, peers shape how a young person relates to others and how they ethically navigate their environment. Peer groups also regulate the codes of conduct of their group through practices of exclusion: taunting, ostracism, alienation and sometimes even violence. These codes of conduct were the ingredients in making a particularly *young* communist culture. They are important in all their contradictions in order to posit youth as a historical subject that defies stable categorization, internal cohesion, and moral hypocrisy however ghastly and offensive they seemed to adults' sensibilities.

Understanding komsomols in relation to each other rather than to the Party or State will add to our understanding of the importance of the Komsomol in constructing Soviet hegemony. Over the last twenty years, the knowledge about Russian youth has increased substantially thanks to the work of several historians. Much of that work, however, has followed the youth as danger/hope trope established by historians of American and European youth. Historians have either focused on Bolshevik efforts to indoctrinate and discipline young people, and how the latter identify, resist, or ignore efforts to subordinate and shape them. Again, like studies on European and American youth, Soviet youth are seen in relation to a non-youth authority: usually the Bolsheviks. Young people either reflect Soviet leaders' anxieties and hopes or react to them in roles as resisters or accommodators. However much agency these studies ascribe to youth,

they are always in a subordinate position vis-à-vis Bolshevik power. They are never the creators of that power.

The Komsomol figures directly or indirectly in most histories of Soviet youth. Historical studies on the Komsomol tend to examine its leadership, ideological and structural development, and attempts at indoctrination as a test case for the efforts and limits of Soviet totalitarianism.⁵² Ralph Fisher and Isabel Tirado address the Komsomol's ideological and institutional development, relationship to the Party, and role in Soviet society. Fisher's pioneering text charts the major issues the Komsomol leadership confronted from its founding in 1918 until 1954. By analyzing the stenographic records of its Congresses, Fisher shows the variety of demands that the Soviet state put on youth, and that the Komsomol in turn put on its members. However, written in the 1950s, the book focuses on debates among its highest leaders and says little about the day to day workings of the League and the role played by its membership.⁵³ Isabel Tirado's study on the League during the Civil War offers the only full account of the Komsomol's predecessors—the Socialist League of Worker Youth and III International—and how they rose to prominence in 1917. She shows that youth were a key “social base” and “consensus builder” for the new Soviet state.” Youth enthusiastically supported the Revolution and actively and creatively participated in the early shaping of the new order. However, she contends, the Komsomol, like so many Soviet institutions, was eventually sapped of its revolutionary vigor as it transformed

⁵² Merle Fainsod, "The Komsomols--A Study of Youth Under Dictatorship," *The American Political Science Review* 45, no. 1 (1951).

⁵³ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth: A Study of Congresses of the Komsomol, 1917-1954*.

from “a broad, loose coalition of radical youth to a politically exclusive, bureaucratic, hierarchical institution.”⁵⁴

After the opening of the archives in 1991, historians began delving further into the Komsomol’s development and participation in Soviet society and looked at youth culture more generally. Unlike the previous studies, these works focused more on the Komsomol and youth at the grass roots level, with an emphasis on the League’s efforts to make youth “Soviet.” Despite their effort at history “from below,” however, these studies nevertheless position youth within the danger/hope paradigm. In regard to the Bolshevik hope for youth, historians have examined their representation in Bolshevik discourse, the ways debates in the Komsomol reflected Party politics, the excesses or shortcomings of Komsomol participation in anti-religious campaigns, and Bolshevik efforts to inculcate, appeal, and discipline youth or to get them to invest in the goals of the Soviet system.⁵⁵ Most of these studies therefore examine youth in relation to Bolshevik efforts to control or represent them. Moreover, they tend to share the same conclusion: the Bolsheviks failed to completely dominate youth. As for youth

⁵⁴ Tirado, *Young Guard! The Communist Youth League, Petrograd 1917-1920*, 1-2.

⁵⁵ Peter Gooderham, "The Komsomol and Worker Youth: The Inculcation of 'Communist Values' in Leningrad during NEP," *Soviet Studies* 34, no. 4 (1982); Corinna Kuhr-Korolev, *Gezähmte Helden: Die Formierung der Sowjetjugend* (Essen: Klartext, 2005); Yasuhiro Matsui, "Youth Attitudes Towards Stalin's Revolution and the Stalinist Regime, 1929-41," *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 18 (2001); Matthias Neumann, "Revolutionizing mind and soul? Soviet youth and cultural campaigns during the New Economic Policy (1921-8)," *Social History* 33, no. 3 (2008); Isabel Tirado, "The Komsomol and the Krestianka: The Political Mobilization of Young Women in the Russian village, 1921-1927," *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 23, no. 1-4 (1996); Tirado, "The Komsomol and Young Peasants: The Dilemma of Rural Expansion, 1921-1925."; Isabel Tirado, "Nietzschean Motifs in the Komsomol's Vanguardism," in *Nietzsche and Soviet Culture: Ally and Adversary*, ed. Bernice Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); idem., "Peasants into Soviets: Reconstructing Komsomol Identity in the Russian Countryside," *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 18 (2001); idem., "The Revolution, Young Peasants and the Komsomol's Anti-Religious Campaigns, 1920-1928," *Canadian-American Slavonic Papers* 26, no. 1-4 (1992).

themselves, they are merely the measure of Bolshevik's success or failures in meeting their revolutionary goals.

Historians have focused in particular on how youth were a danger to the social fabric of society and on the anxiety they caused their Bolshevik parents. These historians emphasize youth resistance, accommodation, indifference, or identification with the Bolshevik project. Soviet youth, as Anne Gorsuch rightly argues, "were far from universally communist."⁵⁶ Soviet Russia's urban environment allowed for a diverse youth culture, ranging from the militant communist, the jazz-crazed, foxtrotting flapper, to the young street tuff. Many young people fashioned a variety of ways to resist efforts to control them through the creation of alternative cultures. While these historians give youth agency in how they relate to Bolshevik power, that agency is nevertheless reactive: "The variety of youthful responses to Bolshevik ideology and transformative efforts demonstrates both the 'power and fragility' of the Bolsheviks' attempted domination;" "the massive cultural transformation the Bolsheviks had hoped for had yet to take place;" "Despite the Bolsheviks' many educational efforts . . . too many young people remained uncommitted;" "It was the double-sided image of youth that made youth such an

⁵⁶ Juliane Furst, "Prisoners of the Soviet Self?: Political Youth Opposition in Late Stalinism," *Europe-Asia Studies* 54, no. 3 (2002); idem., "Re-Examining Opposition under Stalin: Evidence and Context: A Reply to Kuromiya," *Europe-Asia Studies* 55, no. 5 (2003); Anne Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents* (Indiana University Press, 2000), 1-2; Peter Konecny, *Builders and deserters : students, state, and community in Leningrad, 1917-1941* (Montreal ; Ithaca [N.Y.]: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1999); Matsui, "Youth Attitudes Towards Stalin's Revolution and the Stalinist Regime, 1929-41." The study of postwar Russian youth and youth culture is now developing: Mark Edele, "Strange Young Men in Stalin's Moscow: The Birth and Life of the Stiliagi, 1945 - 1953," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 50, no. 1 (2002); Juliane Fürst, "'Friends in Private, Friends in Public: The Phenomenon of the kompaniia among Soviet Youth in the 1950s,'" in *Borders of Socialism*, ed. Lewis Siegelbaum (New York: Palgrave, 2006); idem., *Stalin's last generation: Youth, State and Komsomol, 1945-1953* (London School of Economics: PhD dissertation, 2003).

appropriate metaphor for this period of transition and transformation, especially for the double-edged dangers and opportunities of NEP.”⁵⁷ In each of these statements the Bolsheviks are the subject, and if youth have agency, it is only in relation to the Bolsheviks.

Another trend of the historiography focuses on “at-risk” or “troubled” youth: hooliganism, violence, suicide, and sexual deviance. These studies add to the complexity of young people, the trials and tribulations they encountered in the new order, and the moral panics they caused among the Komsomol and Party leadership.⁵⁸ These works do much to demystify the particularity of Russian youth. Certainly there was a heightened political atmosphere in Russia, and those deemed “non-communist” were seen as social diseases requiring cultural inoculation that threatened the very potency of the revolutionary transformation. But when stripped of its particular ideological bluster, Soviets anxieties were very similar to American and European ones. “Moral panics” over the immoral influences on youth culture in Britain, for example, were hardly different than moralists in Russia.⁵⁹ “At-risk” scholarship places Russian youth as part of an emerging globalization of youth and youth culture in concert with their American and European counterparts. Yet, by focusing on “at-risk” behavior and the Soviet state’s

⁵⁷ Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents*, 182-84.

⁵⁸ Corinna Kuhr-Korolev, Stefan Plaggenborg, and Monica Wellmann, *Sowjetjugend 1917-1941 : Generation zwischen Revolution und Resignation*, 1. Aufl. ed. (Essen: Klartext, 2001); Eric Naiman, *Sex in public : the incarnation of early Soviet ideology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997), in particular Chapter 7; Monica Wellmann, *Zwischen Militanz, Verzweiflung und Disziplinierung. Jugendliche Lebenswelten in Moskau zwischen 1920 und 1930* (Zürich: Pano Verlag, 2005).

⁵⁹ For moral panics in Britain that coincide with those in Soviet Russia see Springhall, *Youth, popular culture and moral panics : penny gaffs to gangsta-rap, 1830-1996*, Chapters 3 and 4.

responses to them, scholars continue to say more about Bolshevik concerns and how they objectified and constructed youth, rather than youths themselves. Youths engaging in the behaviors that caused adults so much anxiety did not see themselves and their peers as “at-risk.” And youth certainly did not see their acts and the scandals they generated as “discursive act[s] of self-purification.”⁶⁰ In an inversion of the scholarship that focuses on youth as a measure of Bolshevik hopes for the socialist future, “at-risk” scholars examine youth as the body on which the Bolsheviks articulated their many anxieties and horrors.

Western scholars are not alone in addressing the history of Russian youth. Since the disbanding of the Soviet Union in 1991, Russians, too, have published numerous studies and document collections reevaluating the place and experience of youth in Soviet Russia. V. I. Isaev, A. A. Slezin, N. B. Lebina, A. Ruzhkov have illuminated the participation of youth in Russia’s urban centers and provinces. Their research interests both coincide with and diverge from those of their Western colleagues in that they are primarily interested in the effects modernization (industrialization, urbanization, and state building) had on youth’s social, economic, and cultural conditions. Like their Western counterparts, some Russian scholars, particularly Ruzhkov, Lebina and Slezin, show the diversity in youth culture and practices to prove that the Party failed in making substantial inroads in courting Russian youth. Others have a more overtly political agenda. They seek to rewrite the history of Russia’s youth to not only delegitimize the

⁶⁰ Naiman, *Sex in public : the incarnation of early Soviet ideology*, 288.

Soviet system but to bring historical voice to marginalized youths or to demonstrate how the Bolsheviks deployed youth in their acts of social, cultural and political coercion.⁶¹

Despite their differences in theme, method, and historical period, these histories fit within an overarching paradigm: they reproduce the notion of youth as danger and savior. While several historians rightly view youth as historical actors, youth are nonetheless rendered reactive rather than proactive. Rather than being political subjects in their own right, their agency is only in relation to the state/Party power.⁶² Never are they *active subjects* in the construction of that power or the particular spaces, environments, and institutions they inhabit. In the end, the regime failed to communize youth, and the scope of this failure is seen in its anxiety, if not obsession, with wayward youth behavior.

The second contribution this study makes concerns the role of komsomols in shaping the contours of Soviet hegemony in formation. Here I move away from evaluating the Soviet system on the basis-of success and failure in transforming youth

⁶¹ V. I. Isaev, *Molodezh sibiri v transformiruiushchetsia obshchestve: usloviia i mekhanizmy sotsializatsii (1920-1930-e gg.)* (Novosibirsk: Novosib. gos. un-t., 2003); N. B. Lebina, *Povsednevnaia zhizn Sovetskogo goroda: normy i anomalii, 1920-1930 gody* (Sankt-Peterburg: 1999); Lebina, *Rabochaia molodezh' leningrada: Trud i sotsial'nyi oblik, 1921-1925 gody*; A. Iu. Rozhkov, "Molodoi chelovek 20-kh godov: protest i deviantnov povedenie," *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia* 7 (1999); idem., *V krugu sverstnikov : zhiznennyi mir molodogo cheloveka v Sovetskoi Rossii 20-kh godov : v dvukh tomakh* (Krasnodar: Perspektivy obrazovaniia, 2002); A. A. Slezin, "Miru kriknu li gromko . . ." *Komsomol Tsentralnogo Chernozemya v dukhovnoi zhizni obshchestva 1921-1929 gg.* (Tambov: Izd-TGTU, 2002); idem., *Molodezh' i vlast': iz istorii molodezhnogo dvizheniia v Tsentral'nom Chernozem'e 1921-1929* (Tambov: Izdatel'stvo TGTU, 2002).

⁶² Furst, "Prisoners of the Soviet Self?: Political Youth Opposition in Late Stalinism."; idem., "Re-Examining Opposition under Stalin: Evidence and Context: A Reply to Kuromiya."; Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents*, 1-2; Konecny, *Builders and deserters : students, state, and community in Leningrad, 1917-1941*; Matsui, "Youth Attitudes Towards Stalin's Revolution and the Stalinist Regime, 1929-41."; Tirado, "The Komsomol and the Krestianka: The Political Mobilization of Young Women in the Russian village, 1921-1927."; idem., "Nietzschean Motifs in the Komsomol's Vanguardism."

into their own image. The historiographic discourse of “failure” suggests that there is an end point to the formation of cultural hegemony. The assumption scholars make is that by the late 1920s the Bolshevik push to inculcate youth in communist values should have been completed, and that the Party should have enjoyed not only political domination, but cultural domination as well. Some histories go so far as to argue that continued diversity among youth is proof of Bolshevik failure as if the Party was seeking to cast every youth with one mold. But hegemony is never completely fixed. It is always a contested terrain that inevitably involves the constant shifting of calculations of force and consent in relation to material conditions.⁶³ By looking at the Komsomol’s rank and file, I endeavor to understand how komsomol youth contributed to the emerging communist political culture of their organization. I work from the premise that what a young communist was had no clear definition or consensus. Moreover, I show that the political and cultural questions that Komsomol youth tackled were rooted in the material conditions within the League. The present study shows that the increasing concern about Komsomol daily life was not simply based in a growing general anxiety about the influence of NEP. Rather, the “identity crisis” in the League was a result of the material and structural conditions associated with incorporating a large and diverse group under a common, though as yet undefined, political and cultural banner. It was this clash of differences over the meaning of that common banner that engendered wider concerns about the League’s historical memory, basis of solidarity, gender equality, activist cadres, ethics, and social activism.

⁶³ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the prison notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, trans. Quintin Hoare, [1st ed. (New York: International Publishers, 1972), 257-70. For a thorough exploration of Gramsci’s different configurations of hegemony see Perry Anderson, “The Antinomies of Antonio Gramsci,” *New Left Review* 1, no. 100 (1976).

It was through efforts to find answers to these problems that rank and file members shaped the content of their community and by extension the new order itself.

This study has six chapters that deal with particulars critical to the creation of Komsomol as community of shared values. Chapter one examines the legacy of the Civil War in the Komsomol. It argues that the Komsomol had an ambivalent attitude toward the Civil War throughout the 1920s. On the one hand, some young people were nostalgic for the Civil War's militancy and imitated its style. On the other hand, Komsomol moralists decried Civil War veterans' inability to adjust to peacetime as a result of traumatic neurosis. The traumatized war invalid was symbolic not only of the war's debilitating costs, but also the arrogant, militant, reckless, and hot-headed communist. By the middle of the decade, the Komsomol's search for identity and purpose led it to solicit recollections from veterans. Yet, the memory veterans offered was rooted in the very trauma that made them war invalids. As a result the Komsomol's identity became one based in the experience of adventurism, violence and torture. Rather than create cohesion around a shared past, the Civil War's memory highlighted the different experience between the old and the new generation. The new generation which did not know the war was left hungry for its own revolution.

Chapter two examines the effort to create cohesion based on comradeship. Friends were an important aspect of being a Komsomol, which served as a place for friends to commiserate, have fun, and develop a sense of belonging and solidarity. The

Komsomol was a space of sociability that facilitated cohesion among youth based on their common membership card. However, the diversity in background, age, temperament, and experience, resulting from the League's rapid growth caused a crisis in comradeship. By 1926, friendship could mean separating from the broader collective. Friends placed loyalty to each other above responsibility to their fellow members. The alienation, disregard, and apathy toward members in trouble gave rise to search for a new basis for solidarity. In order to find a middle ground between the intimacy friendship and indifference toward comrades, the Komsomol emphasized that mutual aid was a possible foundation of comradeship.

Chapter three focuses on the role of masculinity in the Komsomol. The Komsomol served as a rite of passage into maturity for many young men. Membership came with recognition, power, responsibility and prestige. A komsomol's sense of himself as a man was also reinforced by the fact that throughout the decade the League was 80 percent male. Young men learned the meaning of masculinity in interaction with other young men, and most importantly, through their collective exclusion of young women. The result was the development of a hyper-masculinity. By the latter part of the decade scandals erupted over komsomol's exploitation and abuse of women, and this hyper-masculinity required reigning in. As a solution, the Komsomol encouraged its members to get involved in their comrades' private lives and not stand idle as their female comrades were abused. The result was the blurring of one's personal and political lives to prevent Komsomol young men from sliding into moral corruption.

Chapter four examines the place of activists in the Komsomol. Being an activist afforded privileges and power, but these came at the price of long hours, low pay and poor working conditions. Moreover, activists were caught between the high leadership and the rank and file. They were supposed to carry out the directives of the former while representing the interests of the latter. Both rank and file and the leadership targeted activists for the League's shortcomings. As a result of these conditions, activists began to form a corporate identity based on their mutual experience. Identifying with each other, they tended to protect other activists from complaints from the rank and file.

Chapter five looks at how the Komsomol expulsion system contributed to the formation of its ethics. As the preceding chapters show, there was no consensus about what it meant to be a Komsomol. Expulsion posited the boundaries of acceptable and unacceptable behavior. But removing an unethical member from the community was not simply a matter of expelling him. The Komsomol constructed an identity based on the rejection of "Other." A wayward komsomol had to first be constituted as a deviant. But this process of redefinition did not come from the Komsomol leadership, which did it provide concrete guidelines of what was unethical behavior. The only guidelines the center provided were in the form of inquiries into Komsomol malfeasance. Despite these reports, central leaders preached tolerance and re-education of unethical members. The rank and file, however, were not so forgiving. Through the expulsion trials, rank and file komsomols regulated their peers, established the parameters of behavior, and facilitated the process of excluding a member from the League's community.

Chapter six examines the Komsomol's turn in 1928 to romanticism and volunteerism as a way to reinvigorate the organization. In a reversal of its earlier position, the Komsomol returned to the romanticism, populism, and Civil War militancy as a way to overcome lethargy and inject the organization with enthusiasm, utopianism, militancy and purpose. Active participation was seen a means to get members to feel passionate about the organization. However, not just any activism would do. Activism needed to be based on "new methods" that stressed volunteerism, creativity, and initiative. I examine these qualities in the context of the cultural campaigns of 1928/29. In the end, in order to revive itself with a grand purpose and cohesive identity, the Komsomol looked at the very thing it had shunned since 1921: the foundational identity of the Civil War. But this return was not a return to the past, but an imagined Civil War suitable for the present and future. Through this reenactment and re-articulation, the Komsomol was able to not only give its second generation their own revolution; it did so by connecting that revolution to the experience of its founders.

Chapter One

“We were not heroes. Our times were heroic”

Saint Peter, the strict doorman, musingly jingling
his keys will carelessly spit out and ask:
“Your profession?”
And how will we answer him?
“A machine gunner”

D. Khanin, *The University of my Generation*, 1930

The Eighth Komsomol Congress opened on 5 May 1928 with the presentation of the Order of the Red Banner to the Komsomol for its sacrifices during the Russian Civil War. Created in 1918, the Red Banner was the highest military honor for heroism. This honor recognized more than just komsomols' bravery. It reminded the Congress' four thousand attendees of the founding role the Civil War played in communist youth's revolutionary experience. As I. Unshlikht, the Deputy Commissar of the Army, explained, by virtue of their age, youth “did not and could not participate in this way under Tsarism nor in the struggle against the abhorrent yoke of capital.” The Civil War demanded from them “selfless heroic struggle, iron discipline, consciousness, unity, and organization at the front.” Though young communists entered battle with little experience, they nonetheless displayed “the greatest (*velichaishii*) enthusiasm and exceptional loyalty” as they “gave their lives on the battlegrounds of the Civil War for the triumph of the proletarian revolution.” Similarly, Nikolai Chaplin, the General Secretary of the Komsomol, heaped praises on youth's valiant participation in the Civil

War, adding that the Red Banner “compels us to relentlessly prepare for new future battles.” For him, the commemoration of the Komsomol’s first generation pointed to the future as much as it did the past. The memory of “tens of thousands” of the League’s “best sons” served as a rallying call of a new generation.¹

Unshlikht and Chaplin both positioned the Civil War as *the* pivotal moment in the Komsomol’s history. It was not only a formative period that reared youth into revolutionary communists.² It also served as a collective memory that fortified them for the present struggles, and according to Chaplin, prepared them for future battles. More importantly, the references to the Civil War’s temporal elasticity spoke not so much of the event that demanded commemoration, but of a memory that had to be perpetually recalled, reconfigured to reflect present conditions, and propelled into the future. But the memory of the Civil War was not so easily recalled, tamed or deployed. Komsomols agreed that the war represented a time of unheralded heroism and enthusiasm when young people overcame overwhelming odds and sacrificed their youth, bodies, and minds in the name of revolution. But there was no consensus on how that memory of heroism,

¹ *VIII s”ezd VLKSM, 5-16 maia 1928 goda, stenograficheskii otchet*, Molodaia gvardiia, 1928, 8-9.

² The war, as many historians have noted, was a “formative experience” that left a legacy of toughness, intolerance, impatience and the belief that every task could be solved through coercion and terror, and that fundamentally transformed Russian communists as they tried to transition from destroyers of the old order to builders of a new one. Robert C. Tucker, “Stalinism as Revolution From Above,” in *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (Norton, 1977), 91-92, 94. Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Civil War as a Formative Experience,” in *Bolshevik Culture*, ed. Peter Kenez Abbott Gleason, and Richard Stites (Indiana University Press, 1985), 58; Moshe Lewin, “The Civil War: Dynamics and Legacy,” in *Party, State and Society in the Russian Civil War*, ed. William G. Rosenberg Diane P. Koenker, and Ronald Grigor Suny (Indiana University Press, 1989); Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Legacy of the Civil War,” in *Party, State and Society in the Russian Civil War*, ed. William G. Rosenberg Diane P. Koenker, and Ronald Grigor Suny (1989). V. S. Tiazhel'nikova, “Voennyi sindrom” v povedenii kommunistov 1920-x gg.,” *Voенно-istoricheskaia antropologiia* (2002): 291-305.

enthusiasm and sacrifice should be remembered. Those komsomols who fought in the war were left with indelible marks on bodies and psyches that made their experience unique to their generation. The war left traumatic memories of torture, captivity, and sacrifice that could hardly serve as an overarching collective memory for younger komsomols to relate to. Veterans' memory of the Civil War made them, and by extension their Komsomol, a completely different animal than the youth who did not experience the war. What was to serve as a wellspring of collective memory that could give the Komsomol community a collective identity instead only highlighted the distinct historical experiences of its members.

The Eighth Congress itself highlighted this gap between historical experiences. Though Unshlikht and Chaplin called for a revival of the Civil War's memory as a source of future inspiration, Nikolai Bukharin argued that the war was on the verge of being forgotten among the Komsomol rank and file. He noted that the Komsomol was entering into a new phase in its development. Gone were the so-called "Chaplin types" who knew the Tsarist "official, the industrialist and old police" and "received the excellent battle hardening and training in the boiling cauldron of the Civil War." These Komsomol "elders" had outgrown the organization and a new generation reared in the peaceful atmosphere of NEP had become the majority. This new cohort of young communists, Bukharin warned, "*did not even know the Civil War.*"³

³ *VIII Vsesoiuznyi s"ezd VLKSM 5-16 maia 1928 goda. Stenograficheskii otchet*, (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1928), 30. Emphasis in original.

For this new generation, “not knowing” had a double meaning. First, and most obvious, it meant that the majority of the Komsomol were too young to have fought in the war. According to membership statistics at the end of 1927, roughly 85 percent of members were 22 years old or younger and most were under 20.⁴ The vast majority of members, therefore, were between the ages of 8 and 12 at the outbreak of the Civil War. They had witnessed the war but did not participate in it. Their memory of the war was represented through fractured, fuzzy childhood recollections or transmitted through its historical representation in the 1920s. But more importantly, “not knowing” implied that the Civil War had been forgotten. In his memoir, D. Khanin complained that members who joined after 1924 had no clue of the Komsomol and the Civil War. “New birds sing a new song,” he wrote. “The memory of struggle which rattled us in 1920 has been erased. And only individual ‘elders’ remember those unforgettable days with smiles.”⁵

Janus faced Civil War - Lenin’s “Strategic Retreat”

The Bolsheviks paradoxical attitude toward the Civil War’s legacies contributed to the lack of knowledge. On the one hand, the Civil War represented the pinnacle of revolutionary struggle; a heroic period that displayed all the best qualities of the Komsomol. On the other hand, the methods deployed in this struggle—violence, coercion, and destruction—came with immeasurable costs. Though Lenin declared the

⁴ A Balashov, *Komsomol v tsifrah* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1931), 15.

⁵ D. Khanin, *Universitet moego pokolenie* (Moscow: Priboi, 1930), 38.

defeat of the Whites a “miracle without parallel,” in reality, victory was bittersweet.⁶ This aftertaste led him to repudiate the war period as “war communism” in his speeches introducing the New Economic Policy. Lenin continually posed the Civil War and NEP as diametrical opposites where the existence of one negated the other. To get the Party ranks to fall in line, Lenin denounced “war communism’s” defenders as “dreamers” and crafted NEP as a “strategic retreat” to comfort those “despondent” and “panic stricken” with ideas that the regime was abandoning socialism. Therefore, in the immediate postwar years, the Civil War was viewed as necessary to rid Russia of enemies, but impossible to continue because of its overwhelming cost.⁷ With the war over, Lenin argued, the young state had to begin building rather than fighting.

Lenin’s renunciation of the Civil War caused an ideological crisis in the Komsomol. Writing in *Young Communist*, Oskar Tarkhanov reported that some komsomols viewed the New Economic Policy as the “ruin of Bolshevism” and had “doubts” about Lenin’s new course. For the young communists conditioned by the Manichaeism of class war, violence, and coercion, “war communism” was “simple, clear, and understandable,” while NEP made politics complex and they failed to understand it. “[They] do not see the forest for the trees,” Tarkhanov wrote. NEP, for them, represented a “profound retreat.”⁸ Many young communists felt that the revolution needed to accelerate at home and abroad, not be drawn back. But to their surprise, Lenin rejected

⁶ V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 45 vols., vol. 33 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1965), 117.

⁷ Lewis Siegelbaum, *Soviet State and Society Between Revolutions, 1928-1929* (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 64; Lenin, *Collected Works*, 63.

⁸ O. Tarkhanov, "Na ushcherbe," *Iunyi kommunist*, no. 52-53 (1922): 12.

this and firmly stated at the Third Komsomol Congress in 1920 that the task of communist youth was not to continue destroying the old order but to take from it what was useful to “learn communism.”⁹ Lenin’s command to young communists to study evoked immediate confusion. “We almost jumped out of our seats,” recalled D. Khanin. “Learn?! But the enemies were still in the country, still menacing. How could we take a drafting compass into our hands?! Then it seemed to us, that in those early years it was necessary to fight.”¹⁰ As Klaus Mehnert reported, some youth simply concluded that Lenin had grown too old and “didn’t understand us young ones anymore.”¹¹

Komsomol veterans in particular experienced “a confused and perplexed depression.”¹² Many left the League in disillusion. Their past efforts were now said to be a mistake and the providence of dreamers, and they refused to reconcile with capitalism, “What does a mistake mean?” Khanin cried at the time. “Doesn’t it mean that we were all mistaken these last three years? That we suffered years of torment for nothing! That we were mistaken in carrying out experiments! It can’t be that millions could have perished for nothing!”¹³ Some Komsomols sought to remain in the past by keeping military discipline in their cells. But as one provincial secretary wrote in 1921, this was

⁹ V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 45 vols., vol. 31 (Progress Publishers, 1986), 283-99.

¹⁰ Khanin, *Universitet moego pokolenie*, 59.

¹¹ Klaus Mehnert, *Youth in Soviet Russia*, trans. Michael Davidson, [1st ed. (New York,: Harcourt, 1933), 61.

¹² Khanin, *Universitet moego pokolenie*, 69.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 76.

“destroying our organization” because it alienated communist youth from the masses.¹⁴

Others simply rejected Lenin’s “strategic retreat” by re-embracing their hooligan past. “I didn’t see the meaning of work, didn’t understand events, and didn’t find an explanation [for them] in the past,” Khanin wrote in his memoir. “What was happening in the country, toward what and for what?” Failing to find an answer or determine one himself, Khanin turned to what he knew best. “If life didn’t want to consider me, then I would not consider it. And I again returned to the path of hooliganism. This was the easiest means of protest.” He and his comrades quelled their confusion and frustration by harassing and assaulting “fat, pink” Nepmen on the streets.¹⁵

The Traumas of Civil War

The end of the Civil War in 1921 culminated seven years of war in Russia. Millions of Russians severed and died at its fronts. For those who survived, returning to normal life proved to be a daunting task. Reconnecting with family, settling back into home life (if there was a home to return to) and finding employment was difficult after so many years of living day to day under constant fear of death and in an atmosphere of violence. Their physical and mental scars only made their efforts more challenging.

¹⁴ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 34, l. 42. Party leaders were also concerned about the militarization of political life because it reduced the discussion political and social problems facing the war torn country to cavalry charges and militant speeches. For the dangers of militarization in the Party see Mark Von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship: The Red Army and the Soviet Socialist State, 1917-1930* (Cornell University Press, 1990), 141-42.

¹⁵ Khanin, *Universitet moego pokolenie*, 70-71.

Though the state provided social welfare for war invalids, it could do little to adequately deal with their mental and physical disabilities.

Psychologists and moralists became increasingly concerned with veterans, especially those like Khanin who turned to violence as a means of protest. They reasoned that many veterans' failure to adjust to postwar life resulted from "traumatic neurosis." Studies on "traumatic neurosis" in the 1920s built on research which began in Russia in the 1880s. Contrary to studies in the Tsarist period, which focused on the effects of war on soldiers during battle, the majority of studies in the 1920s sought to explain how trauma prevented veterans from adjusting to peacetime.¹⁶ For example, E. N. Kameneva argued that "traumatic neurosis" did not manifest during the war but appeared only when the soldier attempted to reintegrate into postwar society. The stress of reintegration often exacerbated veterans' emotional state to the point where any "intense, unexpected shock

¹⁶ Julie V. Brown, "Revolution and Psychosis: The Mixing of Science and Politics in Russian Psychiatric Medicine, 1905-1913," *Russian Review* 46, no. 3 (1987); Laura Goering, "'Russian Nervousness': Neurasthenia and National Identity in Nineteenth-Century Russia," *Medical History* 47(2003). The study of the effects of war on Russian soldiers was part of the wider European concern. And though Russia's resources and institutions for war invalids were few and far between, the scholarly research was quite lively and in dialogue with European scholarship. This is evident from Russian doctors' and psychologists' extensive usage of Western European terms and concepts to diagnose war invalids. War trauma (*voennyi travma*), "shell shock" (*kontuziia*) "psycho-traumatism" (*psikhotravmatizm*) and "traumatic neurosis" (*travmaticheskii nevroz*), and "psychoneurosis" (*psikhonevroz*), were all cognates originating from European research. Germany appears to be the main source of scholarly influence. Research in Germany was often referenced in Russian articles on the matter. See for example, S. A. Preobrazhenskii's review of German literature on labor therapy of war invalids in Germany. S. A. Preobrazhenskii, "Trudovaia terapiia nervno-psikhicheskikh invalidov voiny," *Zhurnal nevropatologii i psikiatrii imenii S. S. Korsakova* 1(1925): 139-49. According to E. S. Seniavskaia the period of 1906-1916 was the heyday of research on military psychology. Dr. G. E. Shumkov, one of Tsarist Russia's leading military psychologists, published more than 40 books and articles in this period alone. E. S. Seniavskaia, *Psikhologiya voiny v XX veke: istoricheskii opyt rossii* (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 1999), 5-7, 330. One article of note in English on the Russo-Japanese War and traumatic neurosis is R. L. Richards, "Mental and Nervous Diseases in the Russo-Japanese War," *Military Surgeon* 36(1910). See for example, A. B. Zalkind, "Voina i "psikhonevrozsy"," in *Ocherki kul'tury revoliutsionnogo vremeni sbornik statei* (Moskva: Izd-vo Rabotnik prosveshcheniia, 1924).

or fear” triggered an attack. Kameneva defined “traumatic neurosis” as episodic or chronic stammering, bodily shakes, increased irritability, ticks, and epileptic attacks, proclivities to explosive violence, and flashbacks. Sometimes, veterans developed traumatic neurosis while coming to terms with their physical disability. But physical wounds did not necessarily cause these symptoms. The lingering impressions of traumatic events on war invalids —violence, mass death, constant fear, and their ensuing paranoia—targeted the mind rather than the body.¹⁷ Doctors found that for many war invalids, the Civil War was so traumatic that it failed to recede in their memory.

Doctors estimated that Russia had about one million war invalids, and surveys found that they tended to be young. S. I. Goldenberg found that of 170 invalids, 50 percent were between the ages 20-30. Moreover, children and youth displayed symptoms of traumatic neurosis more often than adults. Goldenberg recorded 9 cases of bed wetting, 5 cases of repeated nightmares, 10 cases of alcoholism, and 4 youths with mental illness.¹⁸ Invalids often emphasized that they fought in the Civil War rather than WWI. Goldenberg’s survey found that 150 or 80 percent of invalids claimed to have fought in the Civil War. However, while 65 percent of these “red invalids,” (i.e. communist veterans) fought in both wars, most of them claimed that their moment of trauma occurred during “the years of the revolution.” Finally, Goldenberg found that “war neurosis” was more common among Civil War invalids than among those of WWI,

¹⁷ E. N. Kameneva, *Nervnoe zdorob'e invalidov voiny* (Izd-vo Narkomzdrava RSFSR, 1928), 8.

¹⁸ S. I. Gol'denberg, "O rezul'tatakh psikhologicheskogo obsledovaniia invalidov voiny," in *Sovetskaia meditsina v bor'ba za zdorovyie nervy sbornik statei i materialov*, ed. A. I. Miskinov (Moskva: 1926), 82. There are very few studies on WWI and traumatic neurosis. One notable exception is I. N. Filimonov, *Travmaticheskii nevroz po materialam voiny 1914-1918 g.*, Izdatel'stvo MGU, Moskva, 1926.

though the latter were nonetheless afflicted with “traumatic epilepsy, traumatic dementia and psychopathic behavior.”¹⁹

Of all the veterans, the so-called “red invalids” posed the biggest political problem not only because they fought in the Civil War but because their membership in the Party and or Komsomol signified their higher political conscience. This consciousness gave red invalids a sense of entitlement. “Red invalids” felt that their war experience gave them the right to receive aid “before invalids of labor and the European war.” Goldenberg referred to this consciousness of rights as “immovable.”²⁰ Kameneva agreed. Civil War “invalids who were not compassionate for Soviet power,” she explained, “cannot argue that the state has a debt to them and expect to obtain special compensation for their damaged health.” The Soviet state and society’s failure to meet red invalids’ sense of entitlement only aggravated their neurosis. Meager pensions and the lack of work caused many “to feel insulted and anger” not only at the state, but also “at healthy people.” As Kameneva explained,

To them it seems unfair that these people, many of whom did not participate in the war and didn’t suffer from it, live better than them, have good benefits and use all the blessings of life, which for the invalids are inaccessible. Therefore they think that they have the right to obtain any means to improve their existence and often beset state institutions with various unjust demands and requests.²¹

¹⁹ Ibid., 83.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Kameneva, *Nervnoe zdorob'e invalidov voiny*, 20.

Such attitudes only enhanced Civil War veterans' self perception as "fighters and heroes" of the Soviet state "in the name of which [they] risked [their] life." Invalids were known to frequently ask "And where were you when I was tortured at the front?"²²

While for Civil War veterans' the self perception of a hero was a source of pride, psychologists had a different view. Doctors viewed entitlement as another symptom of "traumatic neurosis." As long as red invalids felt they deserved benefits that could never be concretely met, their symptoms would only exacerbate. "If it seems that something is unfair or denied to them," wrote Kameneva, "their anger is expressed in scandals" on the streets and in public institutions. They often "smash glass, break things, or assault someone" or worse went down an ideological road that only increased their incompatibility, and even opposition, to the Party's New Economic Policy.

One such "red invalid," was the komsomol "Comrade P." He received therapy from the Soviet psychologist Aaron Zalkind in a study of psychoneurosis among communist students attending universities and factory schools (*rabfaks*) in 1923.²³ Comrade P. was 24 years old, a Komsomol member since 1918 and a student at Sverdlov University. In addition to bouts of insomnia, poor concentration, nervousness, depression, and stress; P. suffered from hysterical delusions, seizures, and headaches. His "hysterical delusions" particularly interested Zalkind because they were the direct

²² Gol'denberg, "O rezul'tatakh psikhologicheskogo obsledovaniia invalidov voyny," 83. Very few studies of the effects of WWI on soldiers were conducted in the Soviet period. One such study was I. N. Filimonov, *Travmaticheskii nervoz po materialam voyny 1914-1918 g* (Moskva: Izdatelstvo MGU, 1926).

²³ Zalkind was one of the first to combine Freudian theory with Marxism, and dealt with diverse subjects such as revolutionary psychology, pedagogy, morality, sex, youth, and mental illness. Alexander Etkind, *Eros of the Impossible: The History of Psychoanalysis in Russia*, trans. Noah and Maria Rubins (Westview Press, 1997), 272-77; David Joravsky, *Russian Psychology: A Critical History* (Blackwell, 1989), 236-37.

result of Civil War fighting. In therapy, Zalkind learned that Comrade P. witnessed a “savage bandit pogrom,” and this violence, he surmised, “left an indelible impression which filled [P.] with a great unquenchable hatred for White Guards.” During the war, he satiated this hatred by serving in the secret police (Cheka), where he always appeared “full of energy, versatile, fearless, and ruthless toward enemies.” His symptoms emerged only in 1922, when he had to “transition to peaceful work”. P. felt that it was too early to celebrate victory because peace allowed the enemy to root himself deeper in NEP society. The anxiety caused by the belief that enemies were still everywhere but “battle charges were no more” led P. to develop a nervous disorder. To him NEP allowed the reemergence of the decadence that the revolution promised to destroy. “Jubilant Nepmen, fat and dressed up, displays in shops, and rising economic crime, all of this leads him to anger, deprives him of peace, mental versatility, and causes him sharp physical pain,” wrote Zalkind. “And the aforementioned nervous symptoms appeared all the more aggravated and deepened.”²⁴ It made P feel that people like him, the true revolutionaries, were no longer needed. “We are only suited for danger and fighting,” he told Zalkind in one meeting. “The dull peacefulness doesn’t suit us and we are not suited for it.”

The worst of P’s ailments was his propensity to slip into a delusional state, a condition which Zalkind called “nervous sleepwalking”.

²⁴ A. B. Zalkind, *Revoliutsiia i molodezh’: sbornik statei* (Moskva: Izd. Kommunistich. yn-ta im Sverdlova, 1925), 43.

“Comrade P would cross into another world, which was antithetical to the present peaceful reality, where he embodies his own desires: he finds himself once again in battle, commanding, chasing enemies, and serving the revolution in his own way. Characteristically, the events in Germany²⁵ completely [freed him from hysteria],—in a span of four weeks, he only experienced one attack (until then he had one to two attacks a day)—he intended to set out and join the German underground.”²⁶

Thus when revolutionary events occurred in Germany, P’s “hysteria” subsided. Only when the present once again appeared like his past, did his condition improve. The idea of a revolution as a cure did not escape Zalkind, who during one of their last meetings recommended that P. “goes into military-political work or goes abroad to join a communist underground.” Perhaps P. took Zalkind’s suggestion because the psychoanalyst lost track of him shortly thereafter. “Presently,” Zalkind concluded, “Comrade P’s activities are unknown.”²⁷

The present collapsing into the past also proved therapeutic for another of Zalkind’s patients. Comrade S., 22 years old, a komsomol since 1918, and a rabfak student suffered from insomnia, poor concentration, severe irritability, baseless fear and migraines. S. spent two and a half years at the front as a regiment commander in the Civil War. During the war he “felt completely okay” because of the “serious risks and responsibilities” it demanded. He became neurotic only with the introduction of NEP. S. complained that “NEP pressed down” on him, that there was “nowhere to disappear” and

²⁵ “The events in Germany” refers to the failed revolution attempted by German communists in 1919, factional infighting and subsequent splits, and abandoning of the immediate goal of revolution.

²⁶ A. B. Zalkind, *Revoliutsiia i molodezh’: sbornik statei* (Moskva: Izd. Kommunistich. yn-ta im Sverdlova, 1926), 43.

²⁷ Zalkind, *Revoliutsiia i molodezh’: sbornik statei*.

“a melancholy and desire to be alone” set in. “The saintly people (*sviatye liudi*), who came from revolutionary battles,” he told Zalkind, “quickly began to rot in the prose of humdrum life. The Revolution was definitely victorious, and the war years were not in vain, but already much of the great scum [has returned]—to breathe. There is no strength to live alternatively.”²⁸ Yet, like P., the events in Germany and the internal Party discussions, which S. considered “an internal self-catharsis of the Party,” reinvigorated him. But instead of a calm stability, this catharsis sent him on a neurotic rollercoaster. During the Party debates, S. felt well and alive, but he received “a new harsh blow” with the defeat of the Left Opposition. Again his symptoms returned, this time “sharply more aggravated.” The death of Lenin “put him back on his feet.” S. felt reenergized with a new sense of responsibility, revolutionary faith, and self-confidence, and “his symptoms gradually faded.”²⁹

Veterans could not reconcile themselves to peacetime because they believed that the war experience separated and distinguished them from the komsomols who joined after the war. As a Komsomol veteran named Grigorii Abramovich wrote to the Moscow organization:

We were a small circle then. Any minute we could have been murdered by Savinkotskii agents, white bandits, etc, and powerlessness, hatred, philistinism, and typhus raged around us. We had lice, we were hungry, but all this united us as one family. There was such comradeship between us, [...] that [we knew] we were fighting for the right cause, and we [would be] victorious.”

²⁸ Ibid., 41.

²⁹ Ibid., 42.

NEP, however, made the sacrifices, which had turned communists into a united family, meaningless. After the war, veterans like Abramovich believed, the Komsomol became a cesspool of “careerists” and “sycophants” who saw the organization as a vehicle for social mobility. He felt that his comrades’ sacrifices during the Civil War were beyond reproach, especially from those with so “little revolutionary experience.” “And now these toadies insult me and dare to question me about my past, which I am proud of?” he asked. Abramovich’s “past” was one where “selflessness was common because in the Party a provincial secretary and a courier were equal members.”³⁰

The tragic irony was that these words were not written to celebrate Abramovich’s Civil War experience, but are found in his suicide letter. As one internal Komsomol report argued, the main reason for veteran suicides was that they “couldn’t reconcile themselves to the Party’s politics in the transition to NEP.”³¹ Aware of this, Abramovich’s Moscow recipients forwarded his letter to the Komsomol Central Committee, which subsequently distributed it to other Komsomol organizations, alerting them of the growing disillusionment among older members.

Suicides increased in the immediate postwar years. According to N. P. Brukhanskii, recorded suicides in Moscow dropped during the revolutionary years (1917-1921) from a pre-revolutionary (1910-1916) average of 147 per million people to 97 per million a year. In the immediate postwar years (1922-1924), however, the Moscow

³⁰ TsAODM f. 634 op. 1 d. 98, l. 4.

³¹ RGASPI f. 1M op. 23 d. 822, l. 123.

suicide rate raised to an average of 233 per million a year.³² War veterans of Komsomol age were frequently encountered in the statistics. Brukhanskii, for example, had a case of one P, 24 years old, a former miller, and war veteran. P. served both in WWI and in the Civil War, where his legs were wounded. His wounds repeatedly reopened and therefore required several operations that left him dependent on prosthesis. The extreme conditions during the Civil War drove him to alcohol, and presumably because of his chronic injuries, he soon added cocaine to his self-abuse.³³ Brukhanskii found P. to be a complex character. At times he was “active, busy, sociable, trustworthy, decisive,” but these qualities were undermined by his stubbornness, aggravation, irritability, and malice. He also displayed the symptoms of “traumatic neurosis”. “He often fumed over trifles,” wrote Brukhanskii, “screamed, beat the children of his housemates, cried and complained about severe depression.” He talked of shooting himself and his housemates prevented it on a number of occasions. But even that could not stop his death wish. On the evening of December 31, 1923:

[P.] stopped by a neighbor’s in a heavy drunken state with a bottle of wine, which he drank while cursing and waving a revolver. He then left. He soon returned

³² N. P. Brukhanskii, *Samoubiitsy* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1924), 15.

³³ Drug addiction was also a means to escape the stress of postwar life. In his study of 170 invalids, S. I. Gol'denberg found that 18 percent were drug addicts, almost all of which were diagnosed with psychoneurosis. He found that many of them had connections with drug smugglers from Tashkent. Tashkent proved to be a “golden mine” for invalids. Tantalized by tales of “immeasurable wealth” and “easy profit” many invalids descended on the city beginning in 1920. However, upon arrival reality quickly set in and many were driven to hashish and opium which was quickly joined by cocaine and chloralhydrate since “usage of one narcotic substance was rare.” Chloralhydrate is a sedative that is often used in veterinarian medicine. Gol'denberg, “O rezul'tatakh psikhologicheskogo obsledovaniia invalidov voiny,” 84. On drug trafficking in the Soviet Union in the 1920s see S. E. Panin, “Potreblenie narkotikov v Sovetskoi Rossii (1917-1920-e gody),” *Voprosy istorii*, no. 8 (2003): 129-34.

and said that he drank more and sniffed cocaine and that he was fired from work. He was very agitated, he screamed and then cried. He then stood against a mirror and shot himself in the mouth.³⁴

Many communists saw suicide as a weakness. Especially during NEP, they were expected to confront personal despair and hardship by redoubling their will and discipline. As Aaron Solts told students at Sverdlov University in 1925, under the conditions of NEP “many people’s nerves are more tested and they don’t have the strength to go on doing what the Party demands of them.” Young communists were particularly susceptible because the Civil War demanded so much that they expected to “enter into communist paradise” in return. But betting on an immediate communist heaven only exacerbated the despair when they realized that this paradise did not exist. As so, Solts explained,

It is said that [a communist] commits suicide, because he has some kind of defect (*chervotochina*), [and that] he is a bad Party member. We demand from our Party members to be steadfast, have the ability to evaluate events, and to fight against the obstacles they meet along the way. You see when a person decides to commit suicide they conclude that there is no exit. This is an abnormal feeling, and people with this view are always mistaken.³⁵

³⁴ Brukhanskii, *Samoubiitsy*, 37-38. Kameneva attributed similar incidents of violence and suicide to “traumatic neurosis” in her study of a Moscow invalid home. One well known resident named B was found hung in his room. Another beat his wife and put his hand through glass while in a drunken rage. An invalid named G attacked a police officer while in line for his pension. Another ran down the home’s corridor with a knife screaming obscenities and assaulting women as he passed. And finally, Kameneva wrote of yet another B who attempted to rape a pregnant woman but was stopped when residents heard her cries. The most antisocial of these veterans were eventually sent to Solovki making them hardly examples to inspire a glorious memory of the Civil War. N. E. Kameneva, “Rezultaty obsledovaniia invalidov voiny v odnom iz Moskovskikh invalidnykh domov,” in *Sovetskaia meditsina v bor’ba za zdorovye nervy sbornik statei i materialov*, ed. A. I. MIskinov (Moskva: 1926), 101.

³⁵ M. A. Makarevich, ed. *Partiinaia etika: Dokumenty i materialy diskussii 20-kh godov* (Moscow: 1989), 280.

The Bratishka: the Civil War's Cultural Face

If the invalid was the physiological expression of the Civil War's traumatic legacy, the figure known as the *bratishka* (pl. *bratishki*) was its cultural equivalent. The term was derived from the Russian word for "brother" (*brat*) and roughly translates as "little brother."³⁶ More commonly, the word denotes comradeship among members of the Russian military.³⁷ In the 1920s, the term referred to young people who adopted the Civil War culture as their identity. Several historians have noted that the Civil War produced a hyper-masculine culture rooted in emotional hardness, political militancy, class intolerance, violence, and aggression.³⁸ Some youths acquired these qualities during their experience in the war, while others emulated them as the embodiments of revolutionary culture. Bratishki, in the words of V. Slepkov, considered "themselves [to be] the direct heirs of the revolutionary sword bearer of the epoch of war communism."³⁹ They did not "learn communism" but actually lived it through cavalry charges, brandishing revolvers, hunting bandits, sporting shaved heads, jackboots, and leather jackets. Their politics was

³⁶ According to S. I. Ozhegov's dictionary, "bratishki" means "a young brother" but it also is a "familiar and friendly address to young man." S. I. Ozhegov and N. Iu. Shvedova, *Tolkovyi slovar' russkogo iazyka* (Moskva: Az", 1993), 56.

³⁷ The Soviet lexicographer A. M. Selishchev found that the terms *bratan*, *bratishchka*, and *bratva* were common greetings among sailors, soldiers, Komsomols and workers. A. M. Selishchev, *Iazyk revoliutsionnoi epokhi: iz nabliudeniĭ nad russkim iazykom poslednikh let (1917-1926)* (Moskva 1928), 93. For example, see the current Russian military magazine *Bratishka*: <http://www.bratishka.ru/>

³⁸ For a discussion of the bratishka and the political challenge the style posed to NEP see Anne Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents* (Indiana University Press, 2000), Chapter 4 and 5.

³⁹ Vlad Slepkov, *Na bytovye temy* (Leningrad: Krasnoi gazety, 1927), 9.

waged by putting a revolver to the temple of the class enemy and pulling the trigger without a thought, for tomorrow they might be in his place. Despite the fact that the Civil War was over, the bratishki's world continued to reflect the Manichean simplicity of "us" versus "them."

Playhouses provided dramatic examples of the war's simplicity for the bratishki to emulate. Popular plays like *Storm* (1924), *The Gale* (1924), *Roar, China!* (1924), *Armored Train No. 14-69* (1925), and *Liubov Iarovaia* (1925) supplied literary representations that utilized the Revolution, the Civil War, or international revolution as the backdrop for emphasizing heroic struggles against incredible odds. The Civil War play, according to one literary critic, was a response to Soviet dramatists' call for "a drama of action, excitement, and strong emotions."⁴⁰ Though most dramatists saw themselves as realists, melodrama served as a more effective technique to convey a hero's emotional intensity and revolutionary will. Playwrights endeavored to show that the Civil War encompassed more than the military battlefield. Most of the plays, like in *Storm*, *The Gale*, and *Liubov Iarovaia*, were set in provincial towns along or behind the front with a few dedicated communists as the protagonists. Bolsheviks were often shown as "iron men in leather jackets, tirelessly and unfeelingly carrying out the will of the Party; men for whom personal affairs no longer existed, if they ever had."⁴¹ Bolshevik heroes and heroines were often placed in moral/ideological dilemmas, where they had to choose between loyalty to a lover or friend and their fidelity to the revolution. The

⁴⁰ Harold B. Segel, *Twentieth-Century Russian Drama: From Gorky to the Present* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 148.

⁴¹ Robert Russell, *Russian Drama of the Revolutionary Period* (Macmillan Press, 1988), 56.

antagonists were a panoply of “enemies” including the Whites, counterrevolutionaries and spies, turncoats, and even hunger and epidemics like typhus and lice. The wide range of antagonists reminded the audience that during the Civil War the fronts were everywhere and all enemies could be dealt with through military means.

A typical example was K. A. Trenev’s *Liubov Iarovaya*. The life of the heroine, a school teacher named Liubov Iarovaia is pulled apart by the war, politics and personal relations. Though she is not a Party member, her political loyalty is nonetheless tested when her husband, Mikhail, who she believed perished in WWI, suddenly returns. Mikhail is disguised as a Bolshevik but to her he reveals that he is really a White officer. When Mikhail discovers her Bolshevik sympathies, he spares her from the Whites and suggests that they run away and forget about politics altogether. The drama comes to a head when Liubov must decide whether to warn her comrades of an impending White attack, which would lead to Mikhail’s unmasking, or run away with him and live an apolitical life of happiness. The magnetism of revolution and her dedication to her comrades, however, proves too powerful to forsake. Despite her love for Mikhail, she gives him up to the Reds.

Plays like *Liubov Iarovaya* also gave illustrative examples of how unmasked enemies, like Mikhail, should be dealt with. In one of the play’s final scenes, as the White Army moves to sack the city, the hero, Roman Koshkin, still finds time to unmask traitors. The scene begins with the typist Panova who tells Koshkin that his comrade Grozny is stealing jewelry and giving it to her to woo her love. Koshkin tells her to “not joke about these things. Grozny and I are blood brothers.” Thus, like in the previous

case of *Liubov*, the scene places the dilemma of loyalty before the audience: Should Koshkin adhere to the Revolution and punish his friend or look the other way? For a heroic bratishka like Koshkin the choice is obvious. He experiences no real moral dilemma because Koshkin's devotion to the Revolution is thicker than blood. He confronts Grozny and finds that Panova was telling the truth. The two men draw revolvers on each other. Koshkin orders Grozny, "In the name of the revolution drop that [gun] to the desk. And whatever's in your pockets." As gold jewelry drop out of Grozny's pocket, Koshkin calls him a "bandit," forces him out the Party office and leads him off the stage. The audience hears Grozny's plea: "Roman, mercy!" and Koshkin's reply, "Up against the wall!" A shot is heard. Koshkin quickly returns to the stage and the curtain draws as he dramatically orders the city's evacuation.⁴²

The Civil War hero provided a clear model of communist ethics for an audience of young spectators. The most dangerous enemies were those close and hidden, be they lovers or friends. The real danger, however, was not the hidden enemy as such. It was the sentimentality that clouded a communist's vision and served as the real ethical hurdle. The Civil War play demonstrated to a young inspiring bratishka that a hero was distinguished by an emotional hardness and unequivocal revolutionary solidarity. A communist had to suppress his sentimentality for his revolutionary honor to be upheld. And the characters and scenes like in *Liubov Iarovaya* gave the bratishka a template for

⁴² K. A. Trenev, *Izbrannye proizvedeniia: P'esy, stat'i, rechi*, vol. 2 (Moskva 1955), 103-4.

becoming, according to one Komsomol moralist, “a profoundly upright, eloquent, and fabulous figure that speaks to the environment of the Civil War.”⁴³

The Civil War dramas only reinforced a phenomenon already present among militant komsosmols. Literature and everyday life formed a cultural Mobius strip where the two dialectically reinforced each other. Just as literati sculpted the theatrical bratishka style out of the marble of everyday life, youth actively shaped the bratishki image through application and modification of its temperament, mannerisms, and dress. The bratishka’s ethic was a celebration of the Civil War as an ascetic defense against the perceived decadence of NEP. Understood this way, the bratishka style was not simply a remnant of the Civil War and war communism; rather it was a rejection of the NEP present. It was at the same time a refusal and a re-articulation of what the status quo signified. It was a class war fought through memory and style. As Dick Hebdige reminds us, “style is the area in which the opposing definitions clash with most dramatic force.”⁴⁴

Bratishki komsomols rejected a whole host of mannerisms, behaviors and styles that they felt epitomized the decadent behavior of many youths.⁴⁵ In this sense, they

⁴³ Slepkov, *Na bytovye temy*, 7.

⁴⁴ Dick Hebdige, *Subculture: the Meaning of Style* (Routledge, 1979), 3. It would also be a mistake to think about the bratishki as a subculture within the Komsomol. Subcultures, according to Dick Hebdige, exist when there is a dominant hegemonic culture that the subculture is reacting to. While the culture of the bratishki was a reaction to NEP, to say that it is a subculture within NEP is to suggest that NEP culture had hegemonic unity. Russian youth culture in the 1920s was such a polyvalent mix of the old, new, revolutionary, conservative, urban, rural, religious and secular, among others, that it is difficult to place them in a hierarchy of dominant and subordinate.

⁴⁵ For a genealogy of philistinism in Russian culture and intellectual circles see Timo Vihavainen, *The Inner Adversary: The Struggle Against Philistinism as the Moral Mission of the Russian Intelligentsia* (New Academia Publishing, 2006).

participated in the debate over what constituted authentic communist behavior. To accentuate their “proletarianess” and therefore their revolutionary class consciousness, bratishki dressed slovenly and disheveled to reject the individual stylishness of flappers, dandies, and French fashions, which were gaining popularity among many youths. The drabness of the leather jacket, workman’s cap, and leather boots made bratishki indistinguishable from their proletarian compatriots. Bratishki also spat at the thought of wearing neckties (the symbol of professionalism and order) and saw Komsomols who wore them as “unconscious” careerists who “crawl to leaders.” In their own statement of authenticity, “genuine” Komsomols “open their necks to the sun, and do not walk around like a little dog in a collar.”⁴⁶

Komsomol bratishki targeted more than just dress. In a letter to *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, an anonymous writer identified an array of behaviors bratishki considered decadent.⁴⁷ Handshaking was denounced as “unsanitary,” because it transmitted a number of infectious diseases: tuberculosis, angina, lobar pneumonia, and venereal diseases. Moreover, shaking hands reproduced manners considered “criminal inventions of priests and the bourgeoisie.” Similarly, the author labeled love letters, poetry, and flirting as sentimental “trash.” “There is no love,” he declared, “there is only the physical

⁴⁶ A. Slepkov, ed. *Byt' i molodezh: sbornik statei* (Moskva: Izd-vo "Pravda' i 'Bednota", 1926), 65.

⁴⁷ The letter was originally published as Vladimir Kuz'min, "Pis'mo o novom byte," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, October 2 1925, 1. Though the letter is signed by Vladimir Kuz'min, judging from his other works it is unlikely that he was the author. In fact, Kuz'min wrote a number of articles criticizing such aestheticism. These will be discussed below. “Letter on a New Everyday Life” was republished in two tracts on Komsomol morals as an example of communist immorality. Slepkov, ed. *Byt' i molodezh: sbornik statei* 65-67. and I. Razin, ed. *Komsomolskii byt': Sbornik* (Moscow: 1927), 319-21. My citations to this text come from the Slepkov’s collection.

facts of nature and sloppy sentimentality has nothing to do with it.” The author also chided komsomols’ “childishness” in meetings and clubs. “During my speech,” he complained, “I heard an indecent komsomol snore and after I finished one comrade began to whistle rudely and others followed.” This type of behavior, he argued, was such “a sting to proletarian morality” that these komsomols stood with “Mensheviks and SRs.”⁴⁸

The bratishka’s perception of “proletarian morality” extended to language itself. The author shunned the formal address for “You” (*vy*) as hierarchical and instead insisted on using the informal “you” (*ty*). Neither was cursing a problem, the bratishka rained “hails of reproach” on violators of “proletarian morals” with epithets of “bastard,” “prune,” and “jerk” to color their harangues against their opponents. Stronger language was reserved for class enemies. Curses like “bastard,” “son of a bitch,” and “rotten to the core” often preceded bourgeoisie and intellectuals.⁴⁹ To many young communists, the obsession with the minutia of everyday life kept the utopian spirit of the Revolution alive. One Komsomol-rabfak student wrote that the letter “points to the relics of everyday life.” One sixteen year old “Komsomol philosopher” concurred, reasoning that, “You need to fight for communism 24 hours a day. You need to work and work tirelessly.”⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Slepko, ed. *Byt' i molodezh: sbornik statei* 65-66. V. Fedorov complained of similar behavior of Komsomols in meetings saying that such acts contributed to hooliganism on the streets. V. Fedorov, "O distsipline," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, June 6 1925, 3.

⁴⁹ Slepko, *Na bytovye temy*, 60.

⁵⁰ ———, ed. *Byt' i molodezh: sbornik statei* 29, 39.

Komsomol moralists repeatedly labeled the bratishki's militancy, brutishness, and intolerance as "nonsense," "farfetched," and "silly."⁵¹ Bratishki who attempted to accent their "proletarianess" were particularly singled out for scorn. "Genuine proletarians," argued A. Stratonitskii, saw right through this "masquerade and rightly resented" these *faux*-proletarian Komsomols for it.⁵² Instead, he suggested, a komsomol should set an example by dressing cleanly and orderly to encourage hygiene among the working classes. In response to the 16 year old "Komsomol philosopher," Vladimir Kuzmin emphasized that that "now there are new conditions." "The comrade cannot and doesn't want to understand," he continued, "that such ideas are no longer suitable because the fiery times of the Civil War are over."⁵³ In another article on Komsomol asceticism, Kuzmin added that the person who wrote "A Letter on the New Everyday Life" was "not a young, vivacious youth, but an old monastic galosh." Labeling the bratishki unauthentic, Komsomol moralists were struggling to define the ethics of a young communist.

Some moralists, like Vladimir Slepkov, went even further and argued that the bratishki were an unfortunate relic of war trauma. Among the bratishki, he argued, were many "invalids of the Civil War, neurasthenics, and the "injured." The traumatized bratishka's constant state of paranoia even precluded him from seeking medical treatment. "They don't even wish to reconcile themselves to the internal regulations of

⁵¹ Ibid., 42.

⁵² A. Statonitskii, *Voprosy byta v komsomole* (Leningrad: Privoi, 1926), 19.

⁵³ Slepkov, ed. *Byt' i molodezh: sbornik statei* 39.

the hospital” viewing any rules in any regime as “despotic.” The bratishki saw doctors and nurses as “hidden counterrevolutionaries” and their care exacerbated their paranoia. Their tendency to see conspiracies everywhere, Slepkov explained, was a direct result of their experiences in the Cheka, GPU, grain requisitioning detachments, and the Office of Special Purposes (ChON). These conditioned bratishki to “camp conditions” of “dangerous days and nights” that brought “the great risks of military work.” Worse, they eschewed Bolshevik discipline, making their behavior lack “the elementary laws for self-control (*samoupravstvo*).” This made them see compromise to NEP as a “hindrance to their development.”⁵⁴ For Slepkov, the bratishki’s rejection of NEP led them into dangerous political territory. Their injuries and chronic pain gave these “revolutionary fighters” a license to “make stringent condemnations of Soviet power and they are inclined to view it even in degeneration.” They were quick to remind everyone of their “revolutionary credentials and innumerable wounds.” They frequently asked, “What did we fight for?” and “What did we spill our blood for?” and publicly admonished Soviet workers, with whom they have common interest, as traitors to the Revolution”.⁵⁵

According to many Komsomol moralists, the bratishki were a pathology that did more than expose the hypocrisy of the NEP. Their continued existence perverted the memory of the Civil War. Slepkov’s text implied this. Though he admitted that there were genuine veterans among the bratishki, there were also some youths who merely mimicked the style. Many bratishki youths, Slepkov argued, did not really live up to the

⁵⁴ ———, *Na bytovye temy*, 10.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

positive qualities of those “optimistic, purposeful, indefatigable, energetic and irreproachable young revolutionaries that we saw in the Civil War.” The bratishki of NEP were “something completely different.” The “real” Civil War veteran put down his weapons and changed with the times while bratishka continued to carry them in peacetime. In many ways the bratishka was the Revolution’s Cain.

Constructing a Collective Memory

The condemnations of the invalid and the bratishka were part of a struggle over the memory of the Civil War, and subsequently the identity of the Komsomol itself. It is important to recall the way speakers at the Eighth Congress utilized the Civil War’s memory in order to orient young communists toward the future. Memorializing komsomols’ heroism and sacrifice were viewed as vital instruments in maintaining an identity rooted in revolutionary fervor and romanticism as opposed to the infectious “bourgeois” culture of NEP. In fact, a resolution of the Fifth Komsomol Congress in 1922 stressed this explicitly when it called to tap into youth’s romantic proclivities using “all romantic-revolutionary material for the education of youth—the underground, the Civil War, the Cheka, the heroic acts and revolutionary adventures of workers, the Red Army, scientific expeditions, etc.”⁵⁶ The memory that the invalid and bratishka represented, however, was fixated on the past, and as a result only highlighted present despair. The Komsomol’s collective memory of the Civil War could not dwell on

⁵⁶ TsK VLKSM, *Tovarishch komsomol: Dokumenty s’ ezdov, konferentsii i TsK VLKSM, 1918-1968* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1969), 89. See Chapter 6 on the issue of romanticism.

“weakness,” “indifference,” “chaotic, random patterns,” “contemplative psychology” or “subjectivity.” Instead, Civil War veterans should orientate their memories into a “projector [that] illuminates the Komsomol’s future path.”⁵⁷

The need for a collective memory of the Civil War went beyond combating the memory of the invalid and bratishka. A new generation of komsomols needed a collective memory to provide a historical identity that would connect them with the historical experience of older members. This became all the more urgent as those living relics of the Civil War were leaving the League in greater numbers. In 1926, A. Kirov said at the Sixth Central Committee Plenum: "It is necessary to understand that many old League members are leaving and a new stratum of activists is emerging. Naturally, if young new members are to lead the organization, they need to know the history of the League. In several organizations, mistakes have been made because of growth and because there hasn't been any study of history. A whole host of these mistakes could have been avoided, if comrades knew the excellent history of our League."⁵⁸ However, the few published histories available, concluded one report, failed to provide a “complete and continuous” picture of the “bright moments in the life, struggle and creativity of revolutionary youth.”⁵⁹

Constructing a collective memory that would serve as a guide for the future was hardly a matter of going to archives, digging out the necessary materials, and writing a

⁵⁷ Vlad Slepkov, *O vcherashem dne komsomola: proshloe soiuza v memuarnoi literature* (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1932), 7-8.

⁵⁸ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 2, d. 21, l. 177.

⁵⁹ RGASPI f. 70, op. 1, d. 128, l. 50.

narrative. In the early 1920s, Komsomol historians lacked materials to construct an authoritative history. The Civil War made the effort to produce, collect, and preserve documents difficult. As V. Gross reported in 1923, "Almost everything that archives collected at that time was destroyed, and as a result it is almost impossible to reconstruct the history of the League from 1917-1918."⁶⁰ The fluidity of membership during the war left organizations in chaos, making storage and preservation of documents virtually impossible. In addition, many organizations did not have the resources to preserve important documents. Since the front was constantly shifting, members were afraid that the enemy could use documents and therefore took or destroyed them. But even had there been a stable archival system in place, quality paper was a rare luxury.⁶¹ Protocols, resolutions, reports and directives from local Komsomol organizations were often illegible half-literate scrawls on the back of recycled newsprint or other previously used papers.⁶²

The Komsomol's attitude toward the historical value of its documents changed in early 1920, when the journal *Young Communist* announced that a group of forty students from Sverdlov Communist University had created a special committee to study the history of the Russian youth movement. The Central Committee followed in December with a resolution on the creation of the Commission for the Study of the History of the

⁶⁰ V. Gross, "Bol'she vnimaniia Istmolu," *Iunyi proletarii*, no. 50-51 (1923): 35.

⁶¹ Paper production plummeted from 197 thousand tons in 1913 to 35.4 thousand tons in 1920. Most of the paper produced was allocated to the state apparatuses, the press, and the Army. See K. A. Beinov, *Bumazhnaia promyshlennost' SSSR, 1917-1957* (Moscow 1958), 63-64.

⁶² This point is based on my own work in Ryazan provincial, city, and district Komsomol files from 1919-1920. The few documents that still exist are in deplorable conditions.

Russian Youth Movement, or *Istmol*. *Istmol*'s mission was to collect and preserve historical documents, create central and local archives to store them, and write and publish histories and recollections about the youth movement's development, the founding of the Komsomol, and its members' sacrifices in the Civil War.⁶³

It was no coincidence that history became a concern for the Komsomol at this point in time. *Istmol*'s founding was proof that Soviet power was going to survive and the Komsomol would have a future and therefore a past worth remembering. Writing in *Young Communist* a few months after the war's end, V. Feigin rightfully declared that, "Hundreds of thousands of Komsomol members gave reliable support to the state on the military and economic fronts. And this work must be included in the history of the youth movement in Russia."⁶⁴ Despite the emergence of a historical consciousness among the leadership, it was still absent among many rank and file members. Newcomers in particular saw archival concerns as a "dirty and useless work and considered all these old documents as useless bureaucratic paper and excessive red tape, too insignificant to be deposited in archives."⁶⁵ The efforts to preserve the Civil War's history and memory were undermined by the very revolutionary impulse it sought to keep alive. Therefore, even when Komsomol archives were established in the mid-1920s, many of them were in "chaotic conditions" and "quite a lot of valuable material was lost."⁶⁶

⁶³ L. V. Badia, "Komissiiia po izucheniiu istorii VLKSM i revoliutsionnogo iunosheskogo dvizhenie (1921-1930)," in *Voprosy istorii VLSKM*, ed. V. V. Dolgov (Moscow: 1980), 173.

⁶⁴ V. Feigin, "Istmol," *Iunyi kommunist* 8, no. 3-4 (1921): 19.

⁶⁵ RGASPI f. 70, op. 1, d. 128, l. 62.

⁶⁶ RGASPI f. 70, op. 1, d. 128, l. 176.

The lack of historical documents made central and local Istmol commissions reliant on the memory of the very people, whose memories were deemed problematic: Civil War veterans. As V. Gross cautioned, "To reconstruct history based on the recollections of old members only allows for an incorrect and confused path. Documentary confirmation is necessary [to verify] a whole host of contradictory views that are often found in recollections."⁶⁷ Nevertheless, Istmol distributed several calls throughout the decade asking Komsomol "elders" to send in documents in their possession because as Gross recognized, "it was necessary to collect the existing crumbs of material, to forage for those pitiful leftovers which still have not perished."⁶⁸ Subsequent notices urged older members to recognize that those "pitiful leftovers" were no simple mementoes, but vital to the "present and future development" of the Komsomol. Anything that left a trace of the League was of importance: newspapers, leaflets, posters, brochures, proclamations, protocols and stenograms of congresses, conferences, and general meetings, recollections, notes, and photographs. Veterans were urged "turn back and dig into their personal archives to find material to send to Istmol."⁶⁹ As if to appeal to the veterans' war experience, the notices always concluded with the battle call, "it is your duty to answer our call!"⁷⁰ Collecting documents, however, was easier said than done. In 1926, Istmol chairman A. Kirov still complained that many "old

⁶⁷ Gross, "Bol'she vnimaniia Istmolu," 35.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ , *Mysli iunogo kommuna*, 29 June 1921, 3.

⁷⁰ "Vsem starym chlenam soiuzha, svem uchastnikam iundvizheniia v proshlom," *Izvestiia TsK VLKSM*, no. 15 (1927): 12.

comrades” neglected to turn over their documents when they left the Komsomol, making the “reconstruction of the [history of the] young communist movement difficult.”⁷¹

In addition to calling upon veterans to send in their documents, central and local Istmol organs urged veterans to participate in historical commissions. These were local bodies that focused on collecting and preserving documents, and publishing local histories. Members who joined between 1918 and 1920 were likely to be participants or eyewitnesses to historical events. If not, then they might know some of the people who were. Veterans, therefore, were themselves “documents” of living history. Newspapers and journals urged old members to get involved in historical work because of their personal experience in the war.⁷²

In addition to urging participation on local commissions, old members were also recruited to form groups of “friends” (*liubitel’naia gruppа*) of the Komsomol and participate in evenings of reminiscence (*vecher vospominaniia*). Friends’ groups were a collection of five to ten senior Komsomols, who volunteered to do Istmol work—help gather, organize and study materials and work on improving local Komsomol archives. Istmol organizers thought that regular meetings of friends’ groups would further advance the creation of a collective memory. Evenings of reminiscence brought old komsomols together to tell younger ones of their experience in a particular event in Komsomol history. Audiences were treated to displays of both oral and documentary evidence: poster and photographic displays, dioramas, timelines as well as other relics to

⁷¹ RGASPI f. 1M op. 2 d. 21 l. 173-9.

⁷² RGASPI f 26M, op. 1, d. 2, l. 1.

provide context. Young members in the audience not only heard history; they could see and even touch it. Discussants were accompanied by “photographic displays with the help of an enchanting lantern,” films and art installments that illustrated the “dramatic historical episodes in the life and struggle” of the League’s past.⁷³ Sometimes the local drama circle was commissioned to perform a short play about local historical events.⁷⁴ “Such evenings,” wrote Valdi in 1922, “very commonly reignite the interest of young workers in the League’s past and at this moment serve as one of the most suitable forms for gathering historical material. Sometimes a League elder (*starik*) can’t express himself on paper, between two lines. (*ne vyzhmet iz sebia na bumagu i paru strok*), but will gladly share his recollections in a meeting.”⁷⁵ This “sharing” often served as the basis for collective histories of an organization, factory, or locality.

To get these desired results—elder participation, youth interest, and a collective recollection—the evenings had to be “skillfully organized.” Local organizations recruited known authorities on the past and the present to attend the event. Usually, the evenings were organized in conjunction with the local organization’s anniversary. But Komsomol veterans were not simply asked to show up and tell stories of their individual heroics. The local Istmol commission decided which topics were most important and distributed questions to the participants “to direct all comrades to the most necessary

⁷³ P. Beliakov, *Gotov’tes’ k desiatiletnemu iubileiu komsomola* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1928), 35.

⁷⁴ RGASPI f. 26M, op. 1, d. 43, l. 5.

⁷⁵ Val’di, “Zapushchennaia rabota,” *Iunyi kommunist*, no. 13-14 (1922): 18.

issues.”⁷⁶ Often instructions urged that “live transcripts” of these evenings be recorded. They asked members to describe the anatomy of their organization, how they heard of and joined the League; the class and gender composition of its members, growth, activities, slogans, demonstrations, youths’ general participation in politics, its relations to the Party, and whether any “non-Bolshevik” youth groups existed in their localities. Participants were also asked to give an account of youth groups before and during the Revolution and their own “personal participation in battles, barricades or, if [they] were eyewitnesses, who of their comrades perished.” Unfortunately, the central Istmol archive does not contain participants’ answers or the collective histories extracted from the evenings.⁷⁷

By 1926, Istmol began publishing veteran’s recollections and memoirs about the Civil War. The reasons for the turn to memoir literature were in part coincidental. Efforts to gather reminiscences from veterans and archival materials began to bear fruit. Komsomol archives though still disorganized began to see increases in holdings from both the Revolution and Civil War, allowing memoir collections to be supplemented with documents from the period. This allowed local Istmol commissions to provide memoirists with an overarching narrative in which to situate their recollections. In addition, the tenth anniversary of the Komsomol provided an opportune time to immortalize the memory of the Civil War and its participants. The organizing committee for the Komsomol Tenth Anniversary urged local organs to utilize a wide variety of materials for the celebration:

⁷⁶ RGASPI f. 26M, op. 1, d. 1, l. 13.

⁷⁷ RGASPI f. 26M, op. 1, d. 1, l. 12.

parades, music, plays, film, fiction, exhibits, and historical literature to show how the League “grew and was forged in the maelstrom of the great battles for Soviet power and in the innumerable fronts of the Civil War.”⁷⁸ Many local organizations followed suit. For example, the Central Black Earth Komsomol organization erected more than 200 exhibits to commemorate the tenth anniversary.⁷⁹

“Thou shalt live on in the songs of the brave”

One of the more interesting publications to commemorate the anniversaries of the Komsomol and the Civil War was a necrology titled *We Sing Praise to the Madness of the Brave* (1929) (*Bezumstvu khrabrykh poem my slavu*). Like other efforts to construct a collective memory, Istmol sent calls requesting “close buddies” (*rebiata*) to send any remembrances of “lost comrades”.⁸⁰ Collecting information on a generation totaling an estimated fifty thousand Komsomols proved to be an impossible task. By the end of the project, the editors of *We Sing Praise* received information on only a “tenth of those perished” (about 5000 Komsomols), 1000 of which were merely names. Information about many of those featured in necrologies was culled from local archives, testimonies, and obituaries from newspapers and journals from the period. Most submissions, however, came from a select number of local organizations, while the “remaining

⁷⁸ RGASPI f. 26M op. 1 d. 43, l. 19.

⁷⁹ A. A. Slezin, "Opublikovannye istochniki po istorii komsomola tsentral'nogo chernozem'ia 1920-x godov," *Vestnik TGTU* 8, no. 4 (2002): 713.

⁸⁰ RGASPI f. 26M, op. 1, d. 2, l. 19.

[organizations] preferred to forget their debt to the memory of their perished comrades.” Much more work was needed and the editors urged readers to continue sending in information to the Komsomol Central Committee in Moscow.⁸¹

The entries in *We Sing Praise* remember those who died at every “front” of the Civil War. “We must not exclude those comrades,” the editors wrote, “who gave themselves to the League, who were consumed by Komsomol work and died of social diseases like tuberculosis, of unfortunate accidents in *subbotniki*, or from the careless handling of weapons . . . The League has a duty to remember their names.”⁸² By recognizing a wide breath of youth’s Civil War participation, *We Sing Praise* sought to highlight the heroics of the past to inspire enthusiasm among the lethargic younger generation. “Our younger generation, who are young in living experience,” one call to local organizations stated, “must study and learn by the examples of dead comrades, to revive their energy and devotion to the proletarian revolution.”⁸³

The dead were more heroic sources than the living. The Komsomol needed heroes and the behavior of many Civil War veterans hardly served as an example of “lives full of energy, will and heroism.”⁸⁴ In fact, S. Kemrad’s introductory remarks to *We Sing Praise* explained how the madness of the dead was entirely different from the

⁸¹ Istmol, *Bezumstvu khrabykh poem my slavu* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1929), 7-8.

⁸² Ibid., 8. Subbotniki were mass mobilized voluntary workdays that the Komsomol organized beginning in the Civil War. See William J. Chase, “Voluntarism, Mobilisation, and Coercion: Subbotniki 1919-1921,” *Soviet Studies* 41, no. 1 (Jan. 1989).

⁸³ RGASPI f. 26M, op. 1, d. 2, l. 4.

⁸⁴ RGASPI f. 26M, op. 1, d. 2, l. 4.

madness of the living. Unlike the “red invalids” and bratishki, the dead did not “die a death of fanatics seeking martyrdom in order to receive a mythical eternal blessing here or in heaven.” Instead, these Komsomols “knew that there was nothing beyond the grave—no paradise, no hell, no gift.” “They loved life as people love it in the bloom of strength and health, ardently and passionately with all the fiber of their heart, with all the strength of their soul.” In the end, their “death was not madness” that “titillated the nerves with dangerous adventures.” Theirs was a bravery fueled by a “higher madness” that “sang the songs of humanity’s freedom.”⁸⁵

The participatory nature of crafting publications like *We Sing Praise* nevertheless gave veterans a voice to articulate this “higher madness” in their own terms. Rather than positing a collective memory that downplayed individual heroics for the grand march of History, Civil War veterans glorified the very horrific memories, which psychologists argued caused “traumatic neurosis” and moralists saw as sources for the bratishki’s militant temperament. Komsomol recollections centered on bearing witness to violence and torture, execution, arrest, and captivity, surviving harsh conditions, a consuming hatred for class enemies, and living in a constant atmosphere of danger and death. The traumatic suffering and sacrifice that remained in the minds and bodies of war invalids was recast into a wellspring of honor, comradeship, hardness, and revolutionary consciousness that distinguished them from their younger Komsomol readers.

The story of Senka Nazarenko’s death serves as an example of how suffering and sacrifice made veterans’ experience historically unique. “Senka” was written by Ivan

⁸⁵ Istmol, *Bezumstvu khrabykh poem my slavu*, 4.

Kovylev, a Komsomol village correspondent, as a submission to the newspaper *Krestianskaya molodezhi*. “Senka” was eventually published unedited in the Komsomol’s historical journal *Komsomolskaya letopis*, and served as the basis for his entry in *We Sing Praise*.⁸⁶

Kovylev’s story about Senka detailed how an impetuous youth was swept up in the “storm of the Revolution” only to have it consume him. Contrary to the archetypical young communist, Senka’s participation was not that of a Komsomol imbued with class consciousness. Rather, he joined the Komsomol out of a thirst for adventure. The passionate, heroic tales of Red Army soldiers passing through his village ignited his imagination. Encouraged by dreams of heroism and adventure, Senka gravitated toward the Komsomol because “they take rifles and go and fight bandits.” And it was through this shared desire that his “enthusiasm flared up even more, for he saw that he was not alone.” While Senka found common cause in the Komsomol, he saw his role in the Revolution as a personal vendetta. “He desperately, desperately wanted to settle accounts for the mockery of the proletariat, and to die heroically, to give his life and blood on the field of death, and return as a knight (*rytsar*) of the revolution.” wrote Kovylev.

Senka displayed other characteristics that symbolized the trauma of a Civil War veteran. He considered himself a “red fighter” and “a defender of the Revolution.” He also acclimated himself to “camp conditions” favored by the *bratishki*. “His custom,”

⁸⁶ However, not all submissions were edited. The entries for Alexandr Marov and Dmitir Bakhtov, which were submitted by their local Komsomol organizations, were published verbatim. The submissions are found in RGASPI f. 26M, op. 1 d. 114. “Senka” was published in Ivan Kovylev, “Senka,” *Komsomol'skaia letopis*, no. 1 (1926): 126-27. Their entries for Marov, Bakhtov and Nazerenko are in Istmol, *Bezumstvu khrabykh poem my slavu*, 22, 75, 82.

Kovylev explained, “was to not sleep at night and eat on the run.” Senka committed himself to “liquidating banditry” in his native region even after the war ended. He quickly became an expert in hunting down the bandit “insects” and uncovering their “nests.” Moreover, he liked to do this work as a lone cavalier. The police captain would say to him “Senka we need to find out where the bandits are. And he would always give one answer “ok” and where Senka went, no one knew.”

The tale also recounted Senka’s brutal, tragic but heroic death at the hands of bandits. Kovylev’s description of Senka’s fate was only a part of the story; the obituary in *We Sing Praise* focused solely on his torture at the hands of bandits in front of several hundred witnesses. His sacrifice solidified him as a martyr not just for the Revolution, but for his comrades. The necrology tells how on 15 May 1921 a group associated with the Ukrainian anarchist Nestor Makhno raided Senka’s village. “Senka was a hard guy, he didn’t beg for mercy”. When the bandits brought the cell secretary forward and demanded that Senka confirm his identity, he replied, “An ordinary local citizen.” Senka saved the secretary’s life. The bandits proceeded to torture him. “It is difficult to recall the terrifying scene that occurred in the village square,” Kovylev wrote. “The bandits brutally tortured the 19 year old. They cut him eighteen times and finally killed him.” The bandits then took the Komsomol banner out of the League office and threw it on him. Despite the brutal torture, Senka did not name a single comrade. And even in death Senka managed to inspire his comrades. “His comrades buried him, vowing at his grave to fight like he did.”⁸⁷ Kovylev ended his eulogy with the following:

⁸⁷ Istmol, *Bezumstvu khrabykh poem my slavu*, 82.

Then they still rallied more and rode out on a mission, going into battle without fear, and with rage (*zloba*) and vengeance (*mest'*) for their comrade. Senka perished, but he was not alone, many youths gave their life to the cause of the Revolution. This was a proud, courageous, and vigorous Komsomol who perished at the hands of bandits—saving his comrades. This was the Komsomol 19 year old youth Senka Nazarenko.⁸⁸

In many Komsomol hagiographies the marks of one's Civil War experience and communist identity were sacrifice, torture and death. Often the consciousness of this identity was crystallized just before a komsomol's execution. As one Odessa komsomolka, Dori Liubarskaya, assured her comrades before her execution, "I don't pity myself for such an end, for I die an honest communist." Nevertheless, she expressed regrets for she had done "so little for the revolution" adding "only now do I feel myself to be a conscious revolutionary and Party worker."⁸⁹ The obituary of Ivan Karasev, 15 years old, related a similar moment before his execution by the Whites. When his captors asked him if he was a communist, Karasev proudly answered "Yes, I'm a communist." His torture and execution immediately followed. "They undressed him and threw him on to the street. It was -39 C (-38.2 F). He was whipped and beaten with rifle butts, but the boy didn't say a word. After these tortures, he was led to the snow and shot." Another Komsomol veteran named I. Savin wrote similarly in his recollection, "*Fighting Days*." He and his comrade Vasia had been taken prisoner, interrogated, and tortured by the Whites. "The court" was accompanied by beating to the face," he recalled. "They beat us for being volunteers, for being Reds, for silence. They beat us for protesting. They

⁸⁸ RGASPI f. 26M, op. 1 d. 114-115.

⁸⁹ E. D. Stasova, ed. *V kol'tse frontov: Molodezh' v gody grazhdanskoi voiny, sbornik dokumentov* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1963), 163.

beat communists. They beat Jews. They beat us for everything that was in our head. They beat everyone who fell into their hands—with revolvers, swords, and pieces of chairs.” Yet, their revolutionary will was not shaken, Savin emphasized. “Neither I nor Vasia said a thing, [we] remained silent.”⁹⁰

Silence in the face of the enemy marked veterans as true revolutionaries willing to sacrifice themselves. Captured komsomols emphasized in their reminiscences that they remained silent despite tortured. Young communists’ first task before evacuating a town was to destroy any compromising documents. Failure resulted in a fate similar to what befell Vasilii Likhoperskii and his comrades. Bandits executed Likhoperskii in June 1920, after they found documents that listed his membership in the Komsomol.⁹¹ Since documents were rare, the Whites often extracted information by other means. Captured Komsomol youth were often tortured to extract information about their comrades’ whereabouts, activities and tactics. Tamara Malt, who was captured, beaten, and possibly raped “didn’t utter a single word” to her captors. Five members of the Young Revolutionary International, an underground Komsomol organization in Odessa, were all silent despite being beaten half to death and held in a suffocating train car. One member managed to escape. The rest were shot.

Veterans wrote how their silence allowed them to face death with a clear conscious. As one Zigmund Dunikovskii, who was arrested by the Whites in 1920 with seventeen other komsomols in the Odessa, described his hour long torture:

⁹⁰ A. Kortsev M. Afonin, ed. *Na front i na fronte: sbornik vospominanii* (Moskva: Moskovskii rabochii, 1927), 23.

⁹¹ Istmol, *Bezumstvu khrabykh poem my slavu*, 71.

They beat my legs with rubber and twisted my arms and legs. One leg was pulled to my face and the other to the back of my neck. They picked me up by the hair, dropped me to the floor and danced on my body.

Not even this could get him to talk. His silence frustrated his interrogators. “Infuriated by my silence, Ivanovskii, the number one bastard in the world, hit me on the head with his revolver. I fell spitting blood.” At the end of his letter he made a point to tell his comrades that his defiance allowed him “to meet death with his head raised high.”

Another of his comrades, Boris Mikhailovich, similarly wrote: “Our mood is very cheerful and happy for we know what we are dying for.”⁹²

Other Komsomol memories bore witness to the enemies’ violence. One Komsomol member named R. Iurovskii recalled that he and several of his comrades came upon the bodies of several Bolshevik scouts on the side of a road. “They were mutilated by the White Guards and laid horribly disfigured with their eyes gouged out and five pointed stars carved on their bodies.”⁹³ The Whites carved five pointed stars, the military emblem of the Red Army, as a means of disfigurement, deterrent, and identification.⁹⁴ The carving or burning of five pointed stars on the bodies of Komsomol prisoners was just one method of mutilation. As the obituary for Iakov Nagornov, 23, read, “Bandits began to torture him. First they cut off his nose, his ears, gouged out his eyes, and then one by one lopped off his arms and legs, and after having a good laugh, finely chopped

⁹² Stasova, ed. *V kol'tse frontov: Molodezh' v gody grazhdanskoi voiny, sbornik dokumentov*, 161-62.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁹⁴ According to Bolshevik and Komsomol prisoner accounts, the Whites carved or branded five pointed stars on their bodies as a method of torture.

[them] in pieces.”⁹⁵ His dismembered body was left in a pile as a warning to the local inhabitants.

Witnessing such brutality and violence transformed survivors into hard, merciless, unforgiving class warriors. The fierceness of the Civil War turned them into people attuned to a single devotion of the revolution; creatures, who could not shake the horrors they had witnessed and endured from the memory of their experiences as they sought to settled down in peacetime. “It was necessary for me to suspend opinion, smother sensitivity, to dress myself in armor in those brutal days,” wrote D. Khanin. Because of this suspension, the war had a deep transformative effect that separated them from those Komsomols of the next generation. The war, as Khanin recounted, “shaved the unruly cowlicks off heads of the young” and made them “the hard and cheerful, hungry and desiring youthful generation of the Civil War.”⁹⁶

The effort to create a collective memory around the Civil War was only one attempt to forge a unitary identity among young communists. This memory was to stand not simply as a reflection of the past but also serve as a site for identification for the present, and a pillar of inspiration for the future. But even as this memory sought to downplay what Komsomol moralists considered the Civil War’s traumatic legacies, the reliance on veterans as sources of “living history” only reaffirmed the traumas at the

⁹⁵ Istmol, *Bezumstvu khrabykh poem my slavu*, 82.

⁹⁶ Khanin, *Universitet moego pokolenie*, 22.

center of their experience. As we will see in the following chapters, every attempt the Komsomol made to draw ethical boundaries by which its members could identify themselves only reaffirmed the chaotic and fluctuating differences within its ranks. The traumatic myth of the Civil War did indeed provide an identity and an experience to bolster the comradeship of the “Komsomol elders” who walked the stage at the Eighth Congress to receive the Order of the Red Banner. But where would the young member in the audience look to find for common solidarity with his neighbor in the next seat over? The life of a young communist under the New Economic Policy provided nothing on par with the traumatic heroism of the Civil War to forge a common experience. The source for Komsomol friendship, comradeship, and solidarity would have to be found elsewhere.

Chapter Two

“Are you a komsomol? Member of the party? Our guy!”

Manka cries shrilly:
“Ah! Vanka! Vanka is here! . . .”
-And she begins to sing:
“Vanka, little Vanka-puff,
About as big as a pinch of snuff; . . .
Now we’re all in the Komsomol.
Only Vanka is too small—
He has no party—he is barred,
The only one without a card.
Tell me, little *shpingalet*,
Why haven’t you got your card as yet?”¹

Manka’s teasing rhyme from Mark Kolosov’s *Thirteen* (1923) ridicules little Vanka Nazarenko for being too young to join the Komsomol. Vanka is a thirteen year old filled with uncontrollable youthful fire.² Though his age jumps like “tiny imps over [his] joys,” he nevertheless strives to fit in. He makes a point to “scurry joyfully” to congratulate his fellow workers. When “a Menshevik attempts to bamboozle his comrades,” he whistles “frenziedly” and shouts “Down!” (*Doloi!*) louder than the other Komsomols. Vanka’s is an eager, archetypical young communist in the making. Yet, while Vanka is welcomed to hang out with the Komsomol cell, his presence is always looked at suspiciously. “Why do you disturb us?” asks his older brother Dmitry, a

¹ Mark Kolosov, “Thirteen,” in *Flying Osip: Stories of New Russia* (Freeport, New York: Books from Libraries Press, 1970), 149. ———, *Inaia Iunost’: Izbrannoe 1923-1933* (Moskva: Sovetskaya literatura, 1933). *Shpingalet* is a slang term referring to a person who sneaks into a meeting, theater etc without a ticket.

² According to the Komsomol charter, a young person had to be at least fourteen years old to join.

respected komsomol. “Better listen to our discussion.” When Vanka asks him, why the Komsomol charter says fourteen years old, Dmitry responds annoyingly, “It’s there to keep runts (*shpingalets*) like you out of the League. Understand?” “Yes, but Mitry, why am I worse than the others?” Dmitry cuts back “It ain’t allowed . . . He knows, damn him, that it ain’t allowed and still he wants to butt in . . .” Vanka’s loitering is reluctantly tolerated by his peers. They have to tolerate him to a degree because the Komsomol charter gives him “a voice but not a vote.” Chasing Vanka away would violate Komsomol ethics. Thus, when the cell votes they allow Vanka to remain as a spectator. But it is at these moments that he feels so alienated. He “wants so much, so much to raise his hand together with the rest, but he is afraid: it seems to him that everyone is eyeing him with the warning. “Vanka don’t forget the charter!” This exclusion “makes one feel hurt and wronged.” He can’t understand why he must wait when “Grishka is a member with a full vote, and he is in the same grade and in the same shop . . . And so are Fedka, Senka, Vaska, Stenka, and Skinny Vanka. What have they done to deserve it? It’s all the fault of thirteen” he laments.³

While only Vanka’s age prevents him from joining the Komsomol, his desire cannot be reduced to wanting to “grow up.”⁴ He so desperately wants to join the Komsomol to be like his friends. His Uncle Van asks him, “Say, Vanka . . . and why do you want to join the Komsomol so much? Is it just because everybody is in the Komsomol?” Vanka’s not completely sure. He answers, “No, Uncle Van, it ain’t that—

³ Kolosov, "Thirteen," 148-51.

⁴ The role of the Komsomol in maturity is discussed in Chapter 3.

or maybe, I don't know, I can't say 'gzactly; but the main thing, the orator said, 'The Komsomol,' he says, 'is the brain of youth.' I want to be with the brain, Uncle Van."⁵

Joining "the brain of youth" gave a young person an entrance into an exclusive community and imparted a cause greater than the self. It satiated the ideologically committed, like Vanka, by conferring them a special place in Soviet society. Not only would they one day replace the older generation, they had a particular obligation to the present. "Worker and peasant youth have an obligation to fulfill the struggle for socialism," read one League proclamation. "We live in a country surrounded by enemies, [we are] ten years behind the West in industry, agriculture, culture etc. Communism will not come from heaven, it must be built. This is not just for Russia but for all of humanity."⁶ The League was a community that granted access and privilege, respect and power. By the mid-1920s, Komsomol members were given priority in university and technical school admissions, employment, Party membership, and local administrative positions. Membership also provided connections to local and central power which could be exploited for material and personal gain.

Yet beyond the ideological and careerist reasons, most young communists joined the League to be with friends and make new ones. Membership was an entrance into a milieu of comradeship, friendship, support and mutual aid. Despite many social and cultural differences, fellow komsomols were supposed to look after each other like brothers and sisters. But while friends served as key to introducing a youth to the

⁵ Kolosov, "Thirteen," 151.

⁶ L. Stalskii, *Chto takoe Komsomol* (Moscow 1925), 1.

Komsomol, and providing spaces for youth to socialize, too close friends could estrange themselves from the collective. And as the Komsomol diversified, personal, social, and cultural forms of group identification engendered a myriad of conflicts that whittled at League solidarity. The forms of comradeship that developed during the Civil War provided little remedy. Whereas the Komsomol's earliest members could claim solidarity and comradeship through their mutual wartime experience, the next generation lacked an axis around which to forge a unity of differences. Since intimacy of friendship could not bridge these differences, League moralists attempted to facilitate cohesion using a concept of comradeship that emphasized mutual aid and support. This effort to make young communists comrades in word and deed was a means to build a Komsomol community that united all of its cardholders as one. So when young Vanka turned fourteen and rushed to turn in his Komsomol application, just who were the people he found himself an equal with? Where were his friends, comrades, or something else? What were relations between komsomols based on and what kind of community did they create?

A Space for Friends and Fun

Friends brought magnetism to the Komsomol. In his recollection, "*Fighting Days*," I. Savin told that in 1917 he met several "comrades" at his workplace, an artisan shop. "My political education began with them," he recalled. But Savin was hesitant to get involved in radical politics. He had remembered how "the police severely beat [his

father] for participating in the 1905 Revolution.” Savin’s comrades, however, were a magnetic force. “My new comrades broke my fear, and I became courageous and I dived into [political] work.”⁷ Similarly, Nikolai Bocharov, who joined in 1919, recounted how Leonid, the brother of his school teacher, was “mostly responsible” for his introduction to the “Communist idea.” “He would invite me to his room or take me for a walk and would unfold before me tempting pictures of the future . . .” Bocharov attributed his conviction to his close bond with Leonid. “Leonid won me over by talking to me on equal terms as though I was a grown up [Bocharov was 12 years old at the time], and by taking interest in my opinions.” A few years later this introduction to Communism via friendship led Bocharov to take an interest in the Komsomol. “I soon met and befriended a member of the Russian Komsomol, Zhenia Vedernikov,” he recalled. “From him I learned that a cell already existed in town, and even received an invitation to take part in the next Komsomol *subbotnik*.” Bocharov’s admission soon followed. “I made new friends: boys and girls who were inspired with feelings of comradeship, who were ready to devote all their efforts to the cause of the Revolution. I was attracted to the Komsomol organization, as young people usually are by any compact and purposeful group. . . . Before long I was invited to a meeting of the Sychevka Komsomol organization. I went gladly.”⁸ Nikolai Lunev too was introduced to the Komsomol by a Civil War vet and organizer, Morozov. Morozov invited Lunev to his apartment and convinced him that his

⁷ M. Afonin and A. Kortsev, ed. *Na front i na fronte: sbornik vospominanii* (Moskovskii rabochii, 1927), 17, 26.

⁸ Nikolai Bocharov, "Off the Beaten Track," in *Soviet Youth: Twelve Komsomol Histories*, ed. Nikolai K. Novak-Deker (Munich: Institute for the Study of the USSR, 1959), 43-44.

place was in the Komsomol. Morozov's enthusiasm ignited Lunev's interest. "Not understanding very much of what he was telling me, I agreed to join the Komsomol."⁹ Lunev's admittance to the Komsomol community gave him the new status. Others "began to regard me differently." People now knew his name and addressed him as "comrade." "After the meeting everyone began to call the previously unnoticed sixteen-year old messenger boy by name, adding the word "comrade," he recalled.¹⁰

Socializing with other young people was vital to a member's life in the organization. The Komsomol was more than just a political organization, it was a social space that allowed members to develop personal relationships, hang out, have fun, and commiserate with like minded and similarly aged people. Local Komsomol activists understood that if they wanted influence over young people, they had to provide spaces for them to gather. Naturally the organization offered a range of political spaces—League offices, meetings, clubs, and events. But Komsomol leaders understood that if the organization was limited only to the political, many youths would turn away. Soviet youth wanted to dance, drink, gamble, sing songs, tell jokes and stories (*anekdoty*), fight, court and flirt, have sex, talk politics, and discuss Komsomol business. They desired spaces no different than other youth culture—parties (*posidelki* and *vecherinki*), the streets, clubs, dormitories, apartments, cafes, and reading rooms.

The League had a rather ambiguous attitude to parties, dancing, holidays and other forms of youth sociability. Komsomol moralists often pointed to these as enabling

⁹ USSR, *Soviet Youth: Twelve Komsomol Histories*, 28.

¹⁰ USSR, *Soviet Youth: Twelve Komsomol Histories*, 28.

rowdiness, sex, drunkenness, and hooliganism, which they inevitably pinned of the influence of “class aliens.” Yet much of what moralists saw as corruption was an integral part of youth culture. Therefore, instead of shunning popular forms of youth sociability, Komsomol activists attempted to alter their content as a way to dissuade youth from “unnecessary and useless entertainments.” Activists were encouraged to create “red parties”—reading rooms, clubs, and red corners in order to direct and monitor youth activity. A committee of two to three people planned the parties, complete with invitations, a set program of dances, songs, and discussions. Cells provided refreshments, journals, newspapers, and books and organized games and other collective entertainment that “might interest youth.” Organizers were also required to draw up a report on the party and how it was received by local youth.¹¹ One cell in Moscow province reported that the appeal of one large festival “exceeded expectations.” The festival’s organizers taught youth news songs and games like “Indian Dance,” “Odd Man Out” and “Telephone,” and created a “celebratory mood.” They reported that “youth hungrily embraced new games and songs if they are presented in a clear manner closely related to their everyday life.”¹² One *Komsomolskaya pravda* correspondent described an ideal party as a “comradely surrounding without tension,” in which the attendees could discuss political and cultural questions. With a snack table added to the mix, this Komsomol party served as a healthy and politically acceptable alternative.¹³

¹¹ TsAODM f. 1884, op. 1, d. 15, l. 201.

¹² TsAODM f. 634, op. 1 d. 128, l. 39, 42.

¹³ S. Kogan, “Kulturnye tovarishcheskie vecherinki, Nash opyt,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, October 17, 1926, 4.

The problem was that many youth considered these parties hopelessly boring. “Guys are not content with evenings set up by the club’s youth section, because they frequently have an official character,” explained S. Kogan. Most komsomols, he argued, were more interested in spending their free time with “a guy or a girl” in a house, club or on the street serenaded by the “cracked sounds of guitars, drunken gypsy songs, and chats about fashion, love, and raunchy jokes.” As long as these were the desires and temperaments of young people, local Komsomol activists had little power to regulate spaces, and youth sociability took a life of its own. Usually activists caved to popular whims. Many of them probably shared similar tastes. Moreover, sponsoring events like mass fist fights or dance parties provided the organization a means to influence non-Komsomol youth, who often crashed Komsomol sponsored parties and events.¹⁴ In general, a typical Komsomol party was a mixture of business and revel. For example, a newspaper account described one Komsomol party as follows:

Today, a group evening was organized by the Komsomol to close out the district Komsomol conference . . . There was free tea and buns downstairs in the cafeteria. And near the buffet there was a group of “famished”. Here they meet, are glued to each other in semi-darkness around tables of incessant talk and laughter. Upstairs there is a concert, or not a concert, but a meeting, or maybe not a meeting, a lecture, it’s too difficult to tell, and no one tries to.

Complete unity! Lunacharsky’s dreams have come true: not only are spectators and performers joined in one general purpose, but the orchestra has fallen here into a general revel of life and happiness. “Berezyinka!” cries the dance floor. Carmen!” rumbles the rows behind. The conductor leans over the rail of the balcony. “Your wish is my command!”

There is a girl on the stage. She gives a lecture on Nekrasov. Why about Nekrasov? It’s unknown. “My voice is weak comrades . . .sit down, quiet!” They stop for five minutes and then like a river under a spring snow they begin

¹⁴ TsAODM f. 634, op. 1 d. 128, l. 39.

quietly, quietly, and then louder and louder and the rows of the audience begin to whisper, talk and explode in continuous laughter.

The boring lecture split the friendly family into two camps: “lecturers” and the “dancers.” The girl is stubborn: “Don’t make any noise! I’m almost done!” The submissive public waits patiently: “How soon to the end?” comes from whispers from the bored.

Backstage they are organizing an evening for a dissatisfied audience. “Everyone dance!” Dancers are ready finally to split off from the general group. As for me? I don’t think that this group of proletarian youth has split. I see everyone cheerful and happy, I heard a boring lecture, and was at a group night where everyone wanted to rest, shout, and laugh . . .¹⁵

Dances were so popular among some komsomols that a certain Nefedov, a cell secretary from Ryazan, decided to use his position as head of political education to profit from dances. One uptight komsomol complained, “Nefedov collects a fee at the entrance. He never gives a report to anyone. No one knows what happens to the money he collected.”¹⁶ Some cells even went a step further and offered dance classes to their members. In Odessa, one cell discovered that League members attended dance classes with great excitement and carried out their own “steps” with no less zeal than their League duties.” When the cell committee tried to close down the classes, cell members threatened to leave the Komsomol.¹⁷

Some komsomol activists were even admonished for alienating youth because they refused to mix a Komsomol political space with entertainment. One cell shot up in membership numbers when it coupled political discussion with afterhours dancing. That

¹⁵ M. Kovshov, "V glukhovskoi m-re," *Bogorodskii rabochii*, October 8, 1922, 2.

¹⁶ GARO f. 487, op. 1, d. 614, l. 162.

¹⁷ O. Tarkhanov, "Na ushcherbe," *Iunyi kommunist*, no. 52-53 (1922): 12; Anne Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents* (Indiana University Press, 2000), 74-75.

worked until a local activist named Posov “categorically forbade” them, shouting “the reading room is not a bar!” *Komsomolskaya pravda* lambasted such myopia and told its readers that because of Posov, “youth are once again on the street. Drunkenness and hooliganism has increased and many have been driven from the cell.”¹⁸

For Komsomol moralists the problem was not dancing as such but the types of dancing. Like elsewhere, Soviet moralists decried the dance moves of the jazz craze as overtly sexual or akin to nervous convulsions or seizures. Dances like the waltz, two-step, foxtrot, and the shimmy were considered culturally and physically dangerous. One critic wrote about the waltz,

The waltz has especially spread among us. True, the music of the waltz is usually beautiful and measured, but the dance is the most harmful dance of all others. It provokes dizziness. The dancers do not stop dancing before the music ends. As a result, after dancing, and especially after the waltz, many turn pale and onlookers quickly remove them, and press a wrap on their whitened lips.¹⁹

Most popular dances evoked similar opinions. The foxtrot received particular scorn because it was seen as a gateway to a litany of wayward behaviors: sex, drunkenness, and hooliganism. Judging from the descriptions in the Komsomol press, the foxtrot was the hippest dance for the coolest kids. Foxtrotters showed up at dances dressed to the hilt in bright colored jackets, neckties, bell-bottom pants, and duck-billed shoes. These so-called “dandies” (*pizhony*, more about them below), like B. Kopylov, “loved balls” and “danced till morning.” Korylpov introduced his local Komsomol cell to the shimmy and

¹⁸ “Komsomolskie nozhnitsy,” *Kom Prav* 1 January 1926, 3

¹⁹ Petr Tikhonravov, “Umeiuchi provodit’,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, January 27, 1927, 3.

foxtrot. Soon his comrades forgot all about studies and focused on what fashions suited the next dance best. “The foxtrot is our whole life” became their mantra.²⁰ Instead of condemning dancing outright, moralists tried to get youth to embrace more traditional dances like the “Mazurka” and “Gopak.” They were wholesome and good for “strengthening the legs and arms,” they said, though the traditional Caucasian dance, the Lezginka, was considered harmful.²¹

Given the popularity of dances, clubs, and parties, the Komsomol had to balance its criticism toward youth culture. The League was battling to gain influence over youth, and therefore it had to conform to its tastes and temperaments. Leisure time was an important means for komsomols to associate with each other as young communists outside the confines of “League business.” In this way, a sense of shared komsomol identity and community could develop in a more relaxed, less official, but no less political atmosphere. Yet as the decade closed spaces of Komsomol sociability only became more complicated and chaotic. With more and more youth joining at a faster rate, their differences in social attributes and styles served as difficult barriers to transcend.

“There are many bastards in the Komsomol”

²⁰ K. Shuvalov, "I vsia-to nasha zhizn' est' fokstrot," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, May 13, 1927, 3.

²¹ K. Shubalov, "Kto za tantsy?," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, January 27, 1927, 3.

The Komsomol offered young people a variety of spaces and activities to attract them. Yet once the League was successful in increasing its ranks, a whole new set of problems emerged. The Komsomol which had been a small cohesive group turned into a mass organization of young people from all walks of Soviet life. The League became a microcosm of Soviet society, and therefore a space for the social conflicts predominant in the 1920s. Conflicts between social classes, ethnic groups, and individual personalities weakened the Komsomol's internal solidarity.

Between 1923 and 1926 the Komsomol had grown four times from 400,000 members to 1.6 million.²² New members quickly eclipsed those seasoned by the revolution and the Civil War. As K. Galperi explained in 1926, "A lot of water has flowed under the bridge. Our organization has more than a million members. . . . An entire new generation has emerged. Our gigantic Komsomol brings together the most diverse groups of youth. A guy just out of the village sits in a meeting with students who have been in the organization for two years. There are not only Old Bolsheviks, but also Old Komsomols."²³ But Galperi was only reiterating what Komsomol leaders had already recognized in 1923: that a generational gap between old and new members was emerging.²⁴ At the Third Komsomol Conference in 1922, Dmitri Matveev said, "Fifty

²² For a statistical examination of the Komsomol's growth in this period see TsK RLKSM, *Kosmomol SSSR, statisticheskii sbornik o chislennom i kachestvennom sostave i politprosvetrabote RLKSM s 1/6/1924 - 1/1/1926*. (Moscow 1926). For the Lenin Levy and Face the Countryside campaigns see John Hatch, "The "Lenin Levy" and the Social Origins of Stalinism: Workers and the Communist Party in Moscow, 1921-1928," *Slavic Review* 48, no. 4 (Winter 1989); Isabel Tirado, "The Komsomol and Young Peasants: The Dilemma of Rural Expansion, 1921-1925," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 3 (1993).

²³ K. Galperi, "Otvét na "Pismo tovarishchu"," *Iunyi proletarii*, no. 5 (1927): 21.

²⁴ Sandra Pujals, "Fathers and Sons: The Politics and Culture of Generational Class War in Revolutionary Russia, 1918-1935," *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 32, no. 2-3 (2005): 209-32.

percent, maybe even more, of our members joined in the last year. Neither the Civil War nor the capitalist factory hardened this element. We have a new and growing worker youth who entered industry during our revolution, in 1918, 1919, 1920, 1921.” These young worker are especially influenced, Matveev continued, by “the perversions of NEP.”²⁵

The most dramatic increase in membership was of peasants. In June 1924, the Komsomol was about 39 percent peasant. Sixteen months later, they accounted for 45 percent.²⁶ Komsomol newspapers singled out the peasant as the chief “danger of growth.” One article in *Komsomolskaya Pravda* predicted that the peasant would eventually takeover the League demographically. “In January 1923 there were 303,944 [Komsomol members]. In January 1924, there were 500,700, and in January 1925, 1,140,706. At present [June 1925], there are 1.5 million members and candidates. That’s 900,000 new members in the last two years. The majority of them are peasants. If you count the League and those outside it, we have 700,000 worker youth between the ages of 14-23. There are 25.9 million peasant youths in those ages . . . All the heated talk in the League about “peasantization” and a “peasant faction” in the Komsomol originate from these facts.”²⁷

²⁵ Istmol TsK VLKSM, *Tretia Vserossiiskaya konferentsiia RKSM: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1929), 78.

²⁶ TsK RLKSM, *Komsomol SSSR: Statisticheskii sbornik o chislennom i kachestvennom sostave i politprosvettrabore RLKSM s 1/6/1924 po 1/1/1926* (Moscow 1926), 12.

²⁷ G. Grigorov, "Rost soiuz a i krestianskaia molodezh," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, June 28 1925, 1.

The press reflected real class tensions among the rank and file. The animosity between peasant and worker was mutual. Peasants were envious of worker youth's privileges: they had employment in factories, higher pay, and better access to services like clubs, libraries, and education. Worker youth despised village komsomols for their provincialism and feared the League's "peasantization."²⁸ Many workers adamantly refused to work in the countryside with the peasantry. One report from Spasskii district in Ryazan province noted that some worker youth "whined" about participating in "face the countryside" campaign because it was difficult to work in the village.²⁹

Peasants were perceived either as too simple or too stupid to understand the intricacies of communist ideology or were viewed as inherently individualistic. The teen drama *Konstantin Terekhin (Rzhavchina)*, which depicts student life in the Moscow Mining Academy, plays on these stereotypes. Beseda, the peasant, is a studious, determined youth who intends to take advantage of his education to help his family. However, his dorm mates' constant chatter about communist ideology, revolution, girls and sex interrupt his studies. Having had enough, Beseda ridicules their silly navel gazing, while they chastise him for his petite-bourgeois mentality. "You're a muzhik," says Petr. "You're here to learn how to drive a nail into your cart and go on happy. What more do you need?" Beseda replies: "I don't need anything more. And that's right

²⁸ "Opasnosti rosta," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, June 18, 1925, 1.

²⁹ "O deiatelnosti Spasskogo ueznoho komitet RLKSM za Iuil-Avgust-Sentiabr mesiatsy 1925," GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 618, l. 14.

I am a muzhik. And I must lean for the muzhik. And the muzhik doesn't need your philosophy (laughter)."³⁰

The idea that peasants were uncultured was common among worker youth. One report from Moscow noted that komsomols in the district of Ilichnskii sometimes looked at peasants as "inhuman." "Frequently [they] don't look like komsomols, and [as a result we] look at them not as equals but condescendingly. We think batraks (poor peasants) are even worse."³¹ Indeed, peasants were often blamed for the increasing lack of discipline. When the Komsomol leadership ordered to pay more attention to regulating peasants, some organizations took it as a mandate to expel all of them. Several cells were known to reason, "We've grown extremely fast and we have more peasant youths than workers and the Komsomol will become peasantized. Our ranks have been penetrated by many ineligible elements. This widespread growth is the reason for the rise of abnormal behavior."³² Moreover, Komsomol slogans called to recruit the "best" middle peasants into the League and gave local organizations a lot of room to decide what exactly "best" meant. For some, "best" meant those who "don't drink" or were "pals" with local komsomols or sometimes stopped by the cell. Others simply confused poor peasants with middle peasants and vice versa, or considered "poor peasants prosperous and even labeled them kulaks (i.e. rich peasants)." Overall, local Komsomol activists were said to "dread" rapid growth. "Poor peasants join us and they are undeveloped and who will

³⁰ V. Kirshon and A. Uspenskii, *Konstantin Terekhin (Rzhavchina)* (Moscow: Gos. Izdat., 1927), 17.

³¹ TsAODM f. 634 op. 1 d. 128, l. 37

³² M. Labadaev, "O roste Komsomol v derevne i nastrorenniakh vokrug rosta," *Izvestiia VLKSM* (1927): 3.

teach them?” asked a district secretary from Likopvskii. “We need to be more cautious with admittance.”³³

The enmity between workers and peasants was not the only example of conflict between classes. Poor and middle Komsomol peasants were also known to fight against one another. In 1926, *Komsomolskaya pravda* reported that in the village of Trebuniv in an argument between batraks and seredniaks (middle peasants) caused the cell to spilt along class lines. The argument, the paper emphasized “was unprincipled from the beginning.”³⁴ Workers also complained about white collar and intelligentsia members, especially when they thought privileges were unequally distributed. As a certain Barlasov wrote to the Komsomol Central Committee in 1924:

The Komsomol now has a large number of white collar komsomols. This is the category of youth that work in soviet institutions, trusts, banks, etc. These youths receive quite a large salary compared to worker youth and many of them use their financial surplus to buy books and other useful things. A sizable part of these youths idly loaf at night at bars and at other entertaining places, make acquaintances with NEP-like elements and slowly but surely rot.

Barlasov’s ire did not end with white collar privilege. He also viewed intellectual youth as apt to use Komsomol membership for their own interests “It’s well known,” he wrote, “that youth’s thirst for education is great. This of course is not bad, but it is bad and even dangerous when many come to us exclusively to use the Komsomol for their own interests.” Barlasov’s solution was like so many other worker youth. “It is necessary to

³³ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 488, l. 59ob.

³⁴ D. Gorin, "Vzaimootnosheniia mezhdru raznymi sotsialnymi gruppami v soiuze," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, January 5, 1926, 3.

take two measures to cure the Komsomol: hit new arrivals with political-educational work, and purge the university and soviet Komsomol cells.”³⁵ Knowing that they were susceptible to purges, some students used the summer months to get a factory job with hopes of getting a more bonafide worker class status. As one komsomol wrote complaining:

“University students in particular go to the factories and workshops, but only during vacation. . . . Those of them who don’t return to the university in the fall are, in my opinion, the worst komsomols of all because they fear any purge or screening hoping to acquire an artificial worker’s designation. Healthy Komsomol university students remain in school unafraid of a purge. On the contrary, they see a purge and screening as the only measure and means of filtering our ranks of any bandwagon jumpers.”³⁶

If class animosities and envy corroded Komsomol cohesion, local clan rivalries divided komsomol organizations. A report on Turkmenistan’s Geok-Teinskii district told of one clan that took control over the Komsomol chairmanship and proceeded to stack the local cell bureau. Opposing komsomols tried to unseat the clan’s control by spreading rumors that the secretary was engaging in the “sale of girls, enmity and malice toward individual komsomols and even vengeance between clans.” Undeterred, or perhaps needing more political security, the leading clan challenged the local party organization by submitting its own candidate, a certain Khozhdi Klychev. The report also listed other

³⁵ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23 d. 218, l. 1. Certainly to Barlasov’s delight, Soviet universities were purged in the mid-1920s of class aliens, passive members, and other undesirables. For the effects of the purge of Leningrad State University see Peter Konecny, "Chaos on Campus: The 1924 Student Proverka in Leningrad," *Europe-Asia Studies* 46, no. 4 (1994).

³⁶ RGASPI-M f. 1 op. 23 d. 218, l. 1

examples of clans using komsomols in local positions of power to increase their political influence and undermine their local rivals.³⁷

Differences between ethnic groups also strained the solidarity between komsomols. Growth in membership, especially in ethnically mixed areas increased national diversity. For example, at the beginning of 1925, Russians comprised of 69 percent of the membership. Ukrainians and Jews comprised of 9 percent and 5 percent respectively. The rest of the League's ethnic composition was a hodgepodge of over 50 other groups. Two years later, in 1927 Russians were 61 percent and by 1930 their representation dropped further to 57 percent. Ethnic tensions, discrimination, rivalries and hatred were part of Komsomol life. For example, komsomols in Tartaria complained that Russians attempted to "liquidate any privileges for Tatars." In several areas—Belorussia, Tataria, Central Asia, and the Caucasus—locals protested that the "Russians ruled over everything, and we are all oppressed."³⁸ In Uzbekistan, it was known that "if an Uzbek communist meets a Jewish communist, the first refers to the latter with the familiar "you" (*ty*) and the latter by the formal "You" (*vy*), because many view Jews as a lower caste."³⁹ Some Komsomol organizations solved the ethnic problem by ethnically splitting up. In Azerbaijan, one investigation found that the village of Kakh had two separate national komsomol cells. Mereflinskii district in Ukraine had a similar

³⁷ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 822, l. 117

³⁸ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 661, l. 35.

³⁹ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 820, l. 101

situation. Komsomol cells divided between Ukrainians (so-called “khokholtsy”) and Russians (“katsapsy”) or “nashi” (ours) and “chuzhi” (aliens).⁴⁰

Anti-Semitism distressed Komsomol leaders the most. By the mid-1920s, concern for anti-Semitic attitudes among the rank and file sparked a crackdown on this “most common weapon of our class enemies.”⁴¹ Reports created a perception that violence and verbal hatred against Jews was on the rise.⁴² Some komsomols even formed their own nationalist organizations like the “Russian Komsomols,” a group whose program called to end Jewish “oppression.”⁴³ The idea that Jews represented the new ruling class was at the center of Stanislav Vidman’s letter to his sister in 1926. In the letter, which was intercepted by the secret police, Vidman complained about the Komsomol’s uselessness and that socialism was far away. His indignation stemmed not from the failures of his comrades, but rather it was the Jews. He wrote,

You admonish me about my views toward “yids” but I will never come to terms with them. I am an enemy of yids and will be all my life. Look at how they live in Moscow. Before there were “pany” (Polish landlords), and now there are “yids.” Yids are everywhere. Who lives in better apartments than us? They do. Who can purchase a room? They can. They drive workers into the cellars just after workers battled on the barricades of October. Now the yid is in power and exploits the workers. And I as a Komsomol will also fight against the yids in light of this injustice.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ “Sluchai ideologicheskogo pererozhdeniia v komsomole,” RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 661, 29.

“Khokholtsy” is a Russian slang word for Ukrainians derived from the custom of shaving their heads except for single tuft of hair. “Katsapsy” is a Ukrainian slang word for Russians.

⁴¹ I. Bobryshev, *Melkoburzhuaaznye vliianiia sredi molodezhi* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1928), 18.

⁴² See for example RGASPI, f. 1M, op. 23, d. 661, l. 35.

⁴³ Ibid, 19. For a discussion of the Jews and the Bolsheviks see Yuri Slezkine, *The Jewish Century* (Princeton University Press, 2004), 175-88.

⁴⁴ RGASPI-M f. 1 op. 23 d. 695, l. 93

Vidman was not alone in his hatred of Jews. In Turkmenistan's town of Chardzhui, local komsomols and Party members joined village mullahs in leading a pogrom against Jews for the alleged "ritual murder" of a Muslim boy. Local Jews were rumored to have made a keg out of the boy by throwing him into a barrel and draining his blood by hammering nails into his body. When the angry crowd caught the Jews in question, they placed a noose around one and dragged him throughout the town. Rather than stopping the violence, the communists, Komsomols, and mullahs fomented it but warned the crowd not to "kill the Jews, [and] only beat them because if there is a murder, then you will be arrested." According to the report on the incident, the pogrom was organized several months in advance in factory party cells where local communists held special meetings on the subject "Whether every Jew takes blood." Among the pogrom's leaders were three komsomols: Shakhnazarov, Yakolov, and Aliev.⁴⁵

Age and generation also split young from old and the experienced from the novices. Again, rapid growth played a primary role in throwing together youths of different ages and life experiences. While there are no accurate statistics on members' age at the end of the Civil War, one can speculate that the Komsomol was composed mostly of teenagers. The youthfulness of the organization was a contentious issue. At the Third Congress, General Secretary Shatskin stated that "many comrades object to include members who are 14 to 16 years old." The problem was not just older members' prejudice against younger ones. The gap in maturity and experience between a fourteen

⁴⁵ RGASPI F. M-1, op. 23, d. 820, l. 4

year old and a twenty-three year old became a practical problem. “It’s difficult to [conduct political-educational] work simultaneously with a 14 and a 23 year old,” Shatskin noted. But this was a difficulty the Komsomol had to overcome since to exclude these ages would “cast aside half the youths who are interested in our work.”⁴⁶ Working or even hanging out with younger members was more an issue for older members. Writing in *Young Communist*, Roter Dan reported that two 20 year old youths refused to join the Komsomol though they attended lectures and parties. They said they were “ashamed to be in the League where the majority are kids.” Dan suggested that the League split into four sections. “The first section will include youth 11 to 14, the second 14-17, the third 17-20, and the fourth will unite worker youth 20-23 years old.”⁴⁷ A komsomol activist named I. I. Baskakov simply called to bar 14 and 15 year olds from joining. His cell had so many young teens, he said, it couldn’t carry out “the tasks the Party entrusted us.”⁴⁸ Sometimes older members took measures to make their local organizations more amenable to their age. Fourteen and fifteen year olds were excluded from activism, ostracized, ignored or expelled for trifles. A local Komsomol leader in Ryazan warned against older members’ disregard for younger ones. “It is our (i.e. older comrades) duty to teach them so that they will not be “kids.”

Even the Komsomol’s commitment to Marxism-Leninism failed to provide sufficient substance to keep its ranks in line. The League adopted “democratic centralism

⁴⁶ *Tretii Vserossiiskii s’ezd RKSM 2-10 oktiabria 1920 goda. Stenograficheskii otchet*, (Moskva: Leningrad, Molodaia gvardiia, 1926), 256-7.

⁴⁷ Roter Dan, "O starshikh vozrastakh," *Iunyi Kommunist* 57-58(1922): 44.

⁴⁸ RGASPI f. 1M, op 23 d. 313, l. 197

and iron discipline” at its Third Congress in 1920.⁴⁹ Democratic centralism was supposed to provide the League with the necessary “internal discipline, solidarity, [and] cohesion” for a “fighting proletarian organization.”⁵⁰ However, the political conflicts between the leadership and rank and file over what constituted the Party line turned “democratic centralism” into a rhetorical device rather than a strict code of political ethics. Thus, Lenin’s “ban on factions” produced the opposite result. Rather than quell factional infighting, their prohibition only made it easier for “factions,” whether real or not, to be conjured into existence.⁵¹

Conflicts between Komsomol members were not limited to social attributes. Sometimes youths simply did not get along with each other. Cells were known to erupt into squabbles (*skloki*) over sheer nonsense driven by personality conflicts. One article in *Komsomolskaya pravda* described an incident where a local cell had split into two factions over how to carry out educational work. One group argued that the current conditions necessitated more pervasive (*uglubliat'*) educational work. The other disagreed and argued that the conditions required redoubling (*usugubit'*) the work. “Both groups recruited supporters and accused the other of factionalism and other deadly sins.” In this nonsensical fight each group “swore by Marxism and Leninism,” but in order to better define their positions, the lead spokesman for each called the other asses (*osei*), blockheads, and factionalists. The principles each cited as justifications for their position

⁴⁹ TsK VLKSM, *Tovarishch komsomol: Dokumenty s' ezdov, konferentsii i TsK VLKSM, 1918-1968* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1969), 35-38.

⁵⁰ *Tretii Vserossiiskii s'ezd RKSM 2-10 oktiabria 1920 goda. Stenograficheskii otchet*, 243.

⁵¹ VLKSM, *Tovarishch komsomol: Dokumenty s' ezdov, konferentsii i TsK VLKSM, 1918-1968*, 89.

merely covered the personal animosity between the two.⁵² Though they often began as quibbles, disagreements between cell factions could put a halt to all local activism. In a letter sent to Secretary Chaplin in 1927, a certain Dmitrii Yashin complained that very little work was going on in his organization. When he inquired why, he was told that the district committee had split into “us” and “them.” “I was shocked. I believe that there should be no divisions between komsomols. Let him be an Englishman, a Frenchman or a Chinese, but once he’s a komsomol we must recognize him and not treat him like an alien.”⁵³

The Bonds of War

The height of the conflicts occurred in 1926 when Komsomol moralists opened public discussions about the nature of Komsomol friendship and comradeship in the press. Coincidentally, Istmol began publishing Civil War memoirs and organizing “evenings of reminiscence.”⁵⁴ These gave komsomols a picture of the organization’s cohesion during the most important period in its history. Not surprisingly, Komsomol veterans framed their memoirs in contrast to the conflicts embroiling the League in the mid-1920s. Their sense of comradeship was one based on unbreakable solidarity of a “family of friends.” The myth of Civil War’s cohesion only exacerbated the sense that

⁵² Viktor Kin, “O sklokakh,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, February 25 1927, 3.

⁵³ RGASPI F. M-1 op. 23 d. 679. l. 38

⁵⁴ On Istmol and the evenings of reminiscence see Chapter One.

the Komsomol was in crisis. Komsomol moralists rejected veterans' romantic notions of comradeship, arguing that a more mature code among comrades that stressed mutual aid and ethical growth.

Their shared experiences at the front, in captivity, barracks, and camp provided the conditions for the emergence of a collective identity as comrades. These experiences made strangers trustworthy, strengthened members' obligation to each other, and reaffirmed their shared expectations of selflessness and sacrifice. Grigorii Abramovich, a Civil War veteran who would later commit suicide, proudly recalled how during the war "selflessness was common because in the Party a provincial secretary and a courier were equal members." He contrasted this with the "careerists" and "self-seekers" in the mid-1920s who use their Party card as means for professional advancement.⁵⁵ A. Khaikevich too noted that during the war "komsomols worked arm in arm with Party members." "During the Civil War we went to the front as a collective," recalled N. Galperi.⁵⁶ Another Komsomol veteran named Mikhail Pryamitsyi who was killed at the front was known for saying, "The League is everything for me. Neither I, or you, or he exists for me. I see in everyone a single whole, a single tight family."⁵⁷

The conditions of the Civil War reinforced the "single tight family" by throwing communist youth together into a collective "fighting baptism," as Komosmol veteran named N. Pelevin recalled. Komsomol youth constantly moved around, often to villages

⁵⁵ TsAODM, f. 634 op. 1 d. 98, l. 4

⁵⁶ Galperi, "Otveta na "Pismo tovarishchu", " 20.

⁵⁷ Istmol, *Bezumstvu khrabykh poem my slavu* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1929), 94, 99, 102-03, 08-09, 26.

and towns where their fellow komsomols were all they knew. Komsomols were outsiders to the local inhabitants. Sometimes they were greeted with suspicion, other times they were seen as simply aliens. They were often despised, especially if they participated in grain procurement detachments. This feeling of being foreign only brought komsomols closer together. “We had just arrived to Kirsanov and the people ignored us. But there were ten among us. Our own,” wrote Viktor Forlov. The feeling of “ours” was also strengthened because komsomols tended to be mobilized in groups from their districts and remained together throughout fighting. N. Lebedevskii’s 1918 diary tells that he left Moscow in December 1918 with a hundred volunteers. Over the next year, the war whisked him and his regiment through the Belorussian towns of Staryi Bykhov, Gomel, Mozyr’, Kalinkovich, Luninets, Pinsk, Gansovich, Vidibor, Turovo, and finally back to Moscow. Only fifty of a hundred survived.⁵⁸

During the Civil War, the dyad of “us” and “them” created a notion of comradeship that was based in komsomols’ mutual struggle. As N. Kanin stated, during the Civil War “the basic question of ‘is or isn’t’ [he with us] was decided in the battle between the Reds and the Whites.” In Kanin’s view, the simplicity of “with us or against us” made personal relations secondary to politics. One did not need to personally know a comrade in order for him or her to be one. Kanin continued,

Any one of us could arrive in a completely strange town and be certain that there are close comrades there, who would immediately accept you into their family of friends (*druzheskoe sem’ia*). “Are you a komsomol? . . . Member of the party?” and that was enough. “Our guy (*svoi paren*)!” Upon arrival, they allotted a place

⁵⁸ Kortsev, ed. *Na front i na fronte: sbornik vospominanii*, 57-63.

in a dormitory or at a raikom table, providing you with *vobla* and tobacco. The comradely commune grew by one member. In the roaring stress of work every petty individual trifle, habit or mark of character was never examined. The question was decided on the basis of: “Are you for the Revolution? A communist? This means you’re with us!”⁵⁹

The war’s “camp conditions” not only reinforced a sense of us and them.

Komsomols’ experiences huddled around a fire, in a bombed out hut, or back at the district club severed as spaces for fun, intimacy, and male bonding. N. Pelevin described how after a battle, he and his fellow youths would gather separately from the older soldiers and pass the night vying over who could best recount their “experiences and adventures.” They encircled the speaker “like bees in a beehive” and listened while each tried to outdo the other with tales of “comedic and tragic luck,” colored with “bombastic phrases” and “vulgar expressions.”⁶⁰ Komsomols travelling on the KSM Armored Train No. 93 passed their time bunched in the train cars. Some komomsols slept. Others read in their bunks. The rest of the car was buzzing. I. Afanasev and I. Bortikov described the car as a place of “lively discussions . . . memories of the front, far away Moscow, fleeting romances with girls in train stations, cooked up anecdotes. The buzzing was peppered throughout with laughter, jokes, and sharp humorous sayings, which added to the ardor of the ‘orator’.”⁶¹ Clubs were similarly full of “noise, conversations, and laughter.” This was especially the case in spring 1921 when komsomols began returning to Moscow from the front. Their first stop was the district club, the “center of Komsomol life, where

⁵⁹ E. Lavrov, ed. *Druzhba i tovarishchestvo v komsomole sbornik* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1928).

⁶⁰ Kortsev, ed. *Na front i na fronte: sbornik vospominanii*, 50.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

they could once again see their comrades.” There, “guys were still steeped in the memories of fighting still under the fresh impressions of bygones that no colorful pictures and flowery words [could describe].”⁶²

These memoirs of Komsomol elders offered a notion of cohesion based in comradeship. In their recollections, memoirists spoke of comrades more than about “friends” (*druz'ia*). This is not surprising given the popularity of the word “comrade” after the Revolution. It is likely that young communists used both words—friend and comrade—interchangeably. According to the Soviet linguist A. M. Selishchev, the Revolution made “comrade” ubiquitous as well as overtly political. It served as a metonym for “a soldier-revolutionary” and a “communist.” It was, in the words of Boris Kolonitskii, a “truly revolutionary self-identity.” To identify others as comrades meant that they, like you, supported the Revolution. On the whole, “comrade” was an address that separated “us from “them.”

Though Komsomol moralists sought solidarity based on comradeship, they rejected the notions expressed by Civil War veterans in their memoirs. Komsomol elders, they argued, offered flat and one dimensional descriptions of their “brothers.” Often one’s comrade only had a name, an outstanding external characteristic, and a temperament, especially in the face of battle or at work. Descriptions were affectionate, and respectful. A. Zverev described two of his comrades as follows: “Sanka Medvedia was garrulous and unattractive, with slanted eyes, but with a wonderful clear soul” and “Lebedev was a very serious, thoughtful guy.” Another, a certain Kosmovskii, whom

⁶² Ibid., 128-29.

Zverev “closely befriended” was a former officer, who “like us, conducted himself heroically.” I. Uvarov described a certain Vanka Tavkich as a “strong, tough guy,” a bit taller than average, dark, and reminded him of a Circassian or an Ossentian. Uvarov recounted a comrade named Parfen as “cheerful and always jumped from his bunk bellowing a song.”⁶³ These descriptions were so superficial that one critic of V. A. Sorokin’s memoir stated, “Vanka, Petka and Kolka are all one mold, all his friends, and he doesn’t allow any difference (in social features).”⁶⁴

This notion of comradeship was entirely inapplicable to the Komsomol of NEP. In the 1920s, the Komsomol was a diverse organization which sought to include youth from all walks of society. It varied ethnically, drew in different social classes, and incorporated youth of different ages and temperaments. By contrast, the Civil War’s Komsomol was depicted as homogenous by class, style, and mentality. Moreover, Civil War veterans were criticized for focusing on their individual experience and adventurism outside the context of social and economic relations. Civil War veterans placed themselves as the war’s primary historical agents and relegated no place for the Komsomol as a force in history.

While Komsomol ethicists saw a need for friendship—“Today friendship and comradely attentiveness is as necessary as political education” one moralist wrote—they nevertheless rejected what they considered “romantic friendship.” Romantic friendship was where each person put their comrades everything else. Two examples were the

⁶³ Ibid., 114-15.

⁶⁴ Slepkov, *O vcherashem dne komsomola: proshloe soiuza v memuarnoi literature*, 59-60.

sayings, “For me a friend is the first person above all. I have my friends’ back in fire or in water” and “All for one and one for all! Never betray!” This romantic friendship was one of the outcomes of the Civil War. Veterans formed their own brotherhood (*brazhka*) based on their war experience. This type of friendship, moralists argued, fostered “group solidarity” (*krugovaia poruka*) and therefore encouraged moral corruption. Members protected each other, especially if one of them committed some kind of offense. Group solidarity also promoted peer pressure. If a member did not go along with the group, he was shunned as a poor comrade. “Betray a comrade!? Refuse to drink with friends? Yes, this is a dishonor to the entire republic!” While all this was problematic for the Komsomol, the real problem with group solidarity was that it was based on the principle of “our own” (*nashi*). “Our own . . . Never betray Ivanov, Petrov, and Sidorov!” We don’t need such a friendship which drags a person down into a drunk swamp,” wrote N. Kanin. Instead he argued, “We fight for a friendship which rallies people not in the cover of group solidarity of mutual villainy, not for “friendly” drunkenness, but for helping each other in growing and moving forward.”⁶⁵

Searching for Cohesion amid Difference

In March 1927, a certain Nikolai from Leningrad wrote a letter to *Young Communist*, which sparked a lively debate among readers. At the center of the debate was whether komsomols could have friends but still remain connected to the collective.

⁶⁵ Lavrov, ed. *Druzhba i tovarishchestvo v komsomole sbornik*, 57-58.

The concern was that all close friendships had the potential to foster group solidarity which would separate the group from the collective.⁶⁶ Nikolai wrote that he became lonely after his recent transfer to Leningrad from another town. His days consisted of going to work and coming home. And if there was no work to occupy him at home, he went to the movies alone or read a newspaper. He did meet other komsomols at cell meetings, but he found no intimate friends among them because conversations never went beyond official business. "I wanted comradeship and friendship," he lamented.

Things changed one day when a cell member named Volodya Stupin invited him over for tea, food, music, and chess. Their mutual Komsomol membership served as an icebreaker. They began discussing affairs in the cell but quickly moved on to other things. They formed a bond over the course of the evening over tea, games of chess, and singing songs at the piano. They had fun together in a way that Nikolai had not had with another komsomol. Their relationship had little to do with politics. It was simple mutual companionship. As they parted, they promised to get together again in the coming days. The next day, Stupin called on Nikolai again. When he arrived, there were five others strewn across Stupin's couch, laughing. Among the boys were Lenka Putaigin, the jokester of the bunch, who loved to tell stories and knew lots of songs; Mishka Triasanov, a quiet, serious chap, who was terse and always talked directly to the point; and Alesha Vaskin, a curious and patient guy, who also had a penchant for the reckless and foolhardy. There were also two girls. Marusia Vasileva was a nice and pleasant Pioneer leader who was diligent and strict, yet affable; and Vera Tikhomirova, a beautiful and

⁶⁶ Ibid., 18.

flirtatious girl, but a little airheaded and naive. Together the group spent the evening drinking wine, stuffing themselves with cheese and sausage, and singing songs.⁶⁷ Nikolai's new circle of friends changed his entire outlook on life and Komsomol work. With them he forged a real intimate bond, particularly with Stupin and Vaskin. "I often just hung out with Stupin and Vaskin. If they had money we went to the movies or to the theater or simply sat all night on the banks of the Neva telling each other our experiences and hopes."⁶⁸

In addition to hanging out, Nikolai and his friends began sitting together at cell meetings, and even voting as a block. The latter was a natural outcome of their friendship. They often discussed cell politics and came to a consensus before voting in the cell. The rest of the cell, however, began to view this behavior as a kind of "group solidarity" and look at them with hostility. Nikolai and his friends did not see anything wrong with their behavior.

The "Stupin seven," as they were called, became an open problem when a certain Merzlrakov accused them of abandoning the collective. "We never see them at the club and [they] blow off everyone from their company," he declared at a cell meeting. This made Nikolai and his friends feel even more unwanted in the cell. So much so that they refused to go to the cell's celebration of the Tenth Anniversary of the October Revolution, opting instead to go to the citywide celebration. Their decision gave Merzlrakov the evidence he needed to denounce the group, and in particular Stupin, for

⁶⁷ Ibid., 13.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 14.

breaking Komsomol discipline and abandoning the cell. A disciplinary committee was formed, and Stupin was expelled for six months and the other six were reprimanded.⁶⁹

Nikolai's letter sparked a debate. At its center was the question whether komsomols could have friends but still remain connected to the collective. All commentators agreed that there was nothing wrong with Nikolai's desire for friends. "My dear friend Nikolai," wrote N. Galperi, "I completely understand that you and Stupin, and all the other guys from your circle of friends found closeness, gathered together, talked, thought, entertained and formed strong support for each other. This is completely fair. No one can say that you did anything wrong." Galperi admitted that many youths did not find satisfaction in their Komsomol work because of the impersonal relations. "We mostly relate to each other on business matters and rarely according to our interests and we frequently are estranged from each other." The bureaucratic, dispassionate relations between members, he explained, "were inevitably and sadly a sickness resulting from our growth."⁷⁰

Because of the "bureaucratic" conditions in the Komsomol, several commentators felt that it was not the "Stupin seven" that was mistaken, but the collective. "[The cell] should have tried to incorporate them back into the collective," argued N. Kanin. Instead they treated Stupin's group "without a drop of comradely sensitivity, and didn't make a single attempt to use their friendship for general work." In many ways Nikolai and his

⁶⁹ Ibid., 17-18.

⁷⁰ Galperi, "Otvét na "Pismo tovarishchu", 20-21.

friends were pushed out of the collective as a result of the malicious stares, gossip and ostracism.

Readers of the debates could not decide. Some, like a certain Komsomol P. Blizniuk thought that the cell took the appropriate measures. “This gang isolated itself, cloistered itself from the collective and conducted itself in an anti-social way. It is completely clear that they voted as a single block on all contentious issues. These facts and others define this circle of friends as a sect of Komsomol aristocrats.” Others, like Vsevolod Pass, a komsomol from Leningrad, disagreed. He felt that Nikolai and his friends were treated unjustly. “Doesn’t a komomsol have the right to a personal intimate friendship that doesn’t stray from the collective?” he wrote echoing Nikolai’s initial concerns. “Nikolai is right that there is a limit to collective cohesion.”⁷¹

In an effort to reconcile the two poles, moralists insisted that the problem was not one of friendship circles versus the collective, but what role should the former play in the latter. “We are for collective solidarity,” wrote Kanin, “but that doesn’t mean we gang up on every group created on the basis of friendship.” Instead, he argued, friendship circles could be valuable “nuclei” for practical work beneficial to the collective. For example, the close bond between friends could be harnessed in carrying out projects like running a wall newspaper or putting on a play. They could be the basis for a reading or political education circle. This way there could be friendship and comradeship. Friendship was understood as close bonds between individuals. Comradeship was a group acting in line with the larger interests of the collective.

⁷¹ Otliki,

Moralists advocated a strong difference between friendship (*druzhiba*) and comradeship (*tovarishchestvo*.) Friendship was the idea of a close intimate bond between youths or a group of youths who supported each other in times of loneliness, depression and despair. Soviet moralists, sociologists and psychologists all viewed friendship as integral part of a young person's life and development. For example, M. M. Rubinshtein found that friends played a vital role in a young person's "self discovery" and realizing their "life path." Youth, he argued, had a particular "thirst for a partnership and the possibility to share [their experiences], to feel that there is some sympathetic person close to them." Rubinshtein supported this idea with surveys conducted on youth attitudes toward friendship and love. He found that the majority of boys and girls longed for friends. About of third of each expressed a "longing for people and community."⁷² Youth were social, making their tendency to form groups a part of their nature.

Friends, therefore, played an important psychological function. They satiated a youth's desire for companionship with sympathy, understanding, and confidence. This made friends "an all embracing need" that occupied a "special place" in a young person's life. Friends were so special, Rubinshtein concluded, because they gave a youth the feeling of being "understood" (*ponimaniia*). Understanding, he continued, was a "magnetic word" which formed the bond of friendship; a bond that was governed not by a "logical, objective understanding" between two people, but a "subjective, emotional

⁷² M. M. Rubinshtein, *Iunost' po dnevniam i avtobiografichskim zapisiam* (Moscow: 1928), 64.

feeling of a friendly person in the life of a given young person.” To be understood was when someone was “prepared to feel, listen, give concern, and support.”⁷³

Rubinstein also found that youth were fickle. They often felt alienated from and hostile toward others. Almost half of boys and girls were inclined toward loneliness. Some of this loneliness was a result of shyness. As one young woman explained, “I long for people, but I am shy and reserved. I lock up.” Ultimately her shyness kept her from “opening up,” making her “quickly disappointed and turned off” to developing friendships. True friends were difficult to find. As a 24 year old student said, “I often argue and make up with friends (*podrugi*), but never was there some kind of a ‘main’ or one ‘in a century,’ which I especially loved and even was jealous for her toward others.” A youth’s inclination toward loneliness was a result of an unfulfilled desire doubled back as disappointment, undesirability, rejection, and alienation. Often these feelings of loss and loneliness were expressed in statements of abandonment or disregard like “No one understands me,” and “No one loves me.”⁷⁴

The problem was not with friendship as such. Rather friendship was based on a tight emotional bond between a select group of youth that fostered indifference toward those outside the circle. This apathy could eat away at the “comradely unity of the entire collective” that allowed feelings of loneliness to go unnoticed by others. One moralist described this increasing alienation between Komsomol youth as a “high impervious wall.”

⁷³ M. M. Rubinshtein, *Iunost’ po dnevniam i avtobiografichskim zapisiam* (Moscow: 1928), 64.

⁷⁴ M. M. Rubinshtein, *Iunost’ po dnevniam i avtobiografichskim zapisiam* (Moscow: 1928), 67.

Across it no drunken sobbing or dying cries can be heard. Leaving from a meeting, you don't know whether your neighbor goes to a pleasant party or maybe he drives a nail into the ceiling of his lonely room and in the morning they pull him down with a blue face. Moreover, you are a member of an organization. You both have a KIM logo and the identical red Komsomol card. Both of you work in the same factory and maybe even live in the same dormitory.”⁷⁵

Aron Solts, the Chairman of the Party Central Control Commission, addressed the tendency toward neglecting comrades in his speech “On Party Ethics” at Sverdlov Communist University in 1924. He argued that the lack of ethical discipline was a result of the breakdown of mutual relations between members. Too often members washed their hands of troubled members by reporting them to the Party's disciplinary organs. Real comradely relations, however, required being more sensitive to a comrade's plight, to counsel him, and, if necessary, to be ready to lend him a helping hand if needed. “Real comradely relations—love and friendship toward comrades—can become stronger with the recognition that after all he is my partner. Because of him I hold on to everything that is good to me. I am a Party member in his name.”⁷⁶

Besides general prescriptions that encouraged a young communist to be attentive to their comrades personal lives, like most ethical questions, proper conduct was demonstrated by examples of how not to act. Comradeship was defined by what it was not: apathy, disregard, and the shunning of members in trouble. Negative examples were reminders that cells were responsible for all their members, and if one of them got into trouble, it was the collective responsibility of the cell to come to their aid. This was

⁷⁵ Viktor Dmitriev, “Borba za cheloveka,” *iunyi proletarii*, no. 6 (1927): 22.

⁷⁶ M. A. Makarevich, ed. *Partiinaia etika: Dokumenty i materialy diskussii 20-kh godov* (Moscow: 1989), 266.

especially the case if a member became depressed or pessimistic, or simply “loafed, skipped work and worked poorly.” These youths were even given a special name: “stumblers” or “backsliders” (*spotknuvshiesia*). Moralists recognized that every cell had them. The task was to reach out and help them before they “fell into a hole” (*v ukhabe*). Moralists were alarmed at how “bureaucrats and red-tapists “looked at people like they were “a paragraph of the rules on two legs.” Even worse was the rest of the collective’s attitude to these “stumblers.” “Guys begin to avoid him, and rumors about decadence, depression creep around the collective and this creates isolation,” wrote Kanin. “As a result of pessimistic feelings, which could be easily eliminated, enormously increases and the guy begins to roll down the hill.”⁷⁷

Komsomol indifference was especially blamed when things “went bad,” i.e. in cases of suicide. One example was the case of Komsomol Sh., a factory worker in the Nogin textile factory in Leningrad. He began missing work and when he showed up, he idled around. When the foreman told the cell bureau about Sh.’s conduct, the cell recommended he be fired. Sh. stabbed himself in the chest after his dismissal. The worst part about Sh.’s suicide was not just that he killed himself, but that his suicide might have been prevented if someone took Sh. aside and tried to straighten him out. Instead, “no one talked to him. Not even the cell bureau or the any of his comrades from the collective.”

Sometimes a member’s depressive and lonely state was made worse by members shunning those who did not fit in with the rest of the group. Such was the case with a

⁷⁷ Lavrov, ed., *Druzhiba i tovarishchestvo v komsomole sbornik*, 52.

certain komsomolka named Cherepanova. Her fellow komsomols shunned her because she was overzealousness in the factory. Sometime in 1927, Cherepanova introduced a proposal in her factory newspaper Ural Worker urging komsomols to increase their production and improve their labor discipline. As a result, members began attacking her at cell meetings for taking the Komsomol too seriously. They even began to “boycott her by refusing to work with her.” The hounding finally got too much for her and she left her job. This, however, was only the beginning of Cherepanova’s hardship. “It is necessary to add to this that,” an internal report on the incident read,

She did not have an apartment and several times slept at the police with her baby. Appealing repeatedly to the okrugkom to put her child in an orphanage, Cherepanova was finally successful, but she soon took the kid out of there, because of its poor conditions and relations. During all of this, she wandered from apartment to apartment, the child caught a cold and after a few days died in a hospital. Rumors had Cherepanova sexual relations with women began to circulate. All of this caused her to turn to suicide. She attempted but was unsuccessful and got better after a few days.

The TsK commission held the cell and the Komsomol district committee responsible for creating an intolerable atmosphere for Cherepanova instead of providing her support.

The increasing tendency to hold cells responsible was because of the Central Committee’s belief in the rise in Komsomol suicides. Cells were ordered to conduct thorough investigations of members’ death to ascertain the causes and, more importantly, whether there was anything could be done about them.

Cases of suicide proved to moralists what happened when a member “fell under the influence of a depressive mood.” “Very often,” wrote N. Kanin, “these pessimistic feelings are expressed as in a variety of violations of League discipline, in the alienation

from the collective, etc.”⁷⁸ Moreover, they were completely preventable as long as members took responsibility for each other and stepped in to give a comrade a hand. In many of the moral scandals that erupted in the late 1920s, ethicists decried how komsomols dealt with them by shrugging their shoulders and saying, “My pad’s on the other end, so I know nothing.” Sophia Smidovich, the head of Zhenotdel, chastised this view as “a philistine, narrow minded washing of the hands.” The idea that “a comrade’s personal life is not my affair” was an anathema to comradeship.⁷⁹

To combat komosmols' indifference to each other, moralists tried to use examples to show how comradely relations could indeed pull a troubled comrade out of even the most extreme cases. The case of Cde. K proved to moralists the effects isolation and ostracism had on troubled youths. K. was a Komsomol activist, Party member since 1922, and Civil War veteran. He had a good job in a factory. But like many other Civil War veterans, it was difficult for K to hold things together. He suffered from severe neurasthenia “which he got at the front.” Sometime in 1927, he “began weakening in theoretical questions,” that is, K began studying alone (*samoobrazovanie*) without anyone helping him chose books and directing his reading. As a result, he quickly took to “difficult philosophical works” (this usually meant Hegel, Kant, Schopenhauer, and even Nietzsche) which inevitably led to “chaos” in his perception of the world. He began to talk about the “meaning of life” and the “dialectical universe” (*dialektika kosmosa*). He started talking so strangely that the other collective members started to “glance at him

⁷⁸ Lavrov, ed., *Druzhba i tovarishchestvo v komsomole sbornik*, 52-53.

⁷⁹ S. Smidovich, "O Koren'kovshchina," in *Partiinaia etika: Dokumenty i materialy diskussii 20-kh godov* (Moscow: 1989), 381-83.

puzzled.” Soon after, they began “to be afraid of him, and finally they hated him.” Cell members would see him coming they would say “Our K. is self-absorbed . . . he wants to be *so* smart.” K’s fate did not stop at being shunned and mocked. His spiral into the “philosophical” resulted in his demotion to candidate. Then misfortune hit his personal life. He and his wife divorced “even though they have a child together.” The end of his marriage was probably the result of him spending his nights scouring books to find answers to the questions that tortured him. Then he took to booze. The Komsomol collective did nothing to save K. from himself. It just kept giving K. “slaps on the wrist,” lamented N. Kanin.

Finally, K hit rock bottom. His neurasthenia got worse and he became “severely psychologically ill.” Even then no one did anything to help K, not even his two close comrades. Finally, however, “seeing that K was on the edge and that the whole thing might end badly, guys began to “come to their senses” and spent time with K. But it was too late. He was in such a hole that his friends were forced to take radical measures to pull him out. They put pressure on the collective to find K. a place in a sanatorium. Two months later, K. returned to the collective good as new thanks to his friends stepping in to help him. “He didn’t stop studying alone, but now he did so under the direction of an agitprop activist from the Party district committee. K devoted himself to social activism with passion and used it to become popular in the collective.”⁸⁰

Sometimes, however, friends could be unnecessarily concerned, thereby taking measures that went to far. This was clearly illustrated in the story Iak. Okunev reported in

⁸⁰ Lavrov, ed., *Druzhiba i tovarishchestvo v komsomole sbornik*, 53-55.

Komsomolskaya pravda about a certain Sumilov, chairman of a Komsomol cell in the village of Borisov, Nizhni Novgorod province. Sumilov became depressed, began to slack at work, and eventually developed a “nervous disorder.” Sumilov’s condition was recognized by everyone and what to do about him became a subject of cell meetings. “Are we Sumilov’s friends or not?” one komsomol asked. “Comrades, do you notice something strange in the eyes of our dear chairman Sumilov?” Luckily for him, Sumilov was surrounded by several friends, who decided, after some discussion, that they should step in and help him.

However, when the group went to Sumilov’s place, he refused to let them in. “We must take you to the insane asylum,” the activists told Sumilov through the locked door. “I’m not crazy. I’m sick. Leave me in peace,” he responded. “Are we your friends or not? We want you well. Come out!” Finally, the group of activists broke down the door, but they were too late. Sumilov managed to slip out a small window in the back and darted over a fence into a nearby field. His friends ran after him. “Give me a revolver,” one friend asked in desperation. “I’ll knock him out with it.” Luckily for Sumilov, that proved unnecessary. One clever activist caught up with Sumilov, and tied him up with some rope. With Sumilov safely in tow, they led him to the asylum. Days later the cell found out, with some embarrassment, that Sumilov was not crazy but simply overworked. He was ordered to spend a few weeks at a health resort. Nevertheless, the lesson was clear. It was better for cell members to overreact to a friend in need rather than not act at all. After all, to ignore a comrade in need for the sake of his personal life was unbecoming of a good young communist.

The Komsomol was a place for fun and making friends. However, the organization became embroiled with conflicts as it drew more and more youths into its ranks. In order, to foster cohesion, young communists were urged to treat each other as comrades. What comradeship meant, however, was unclear. What did it mean, and how did it relate to friendship? Could a member have friends that did not preclude having comrades? Some looked to the unbreakable bonds of the Civil War as a model. Others saw the Civil War comradeship as no longer viable for a growing organization and called on members to practice mutual aid and support. This way young communists like Nikolai could have close friends but still maintain concern and responsibility for others in their cell. Friendship, therefore, was recognized as close intimate bonds with a select group of people, while comradeship was the broader concern for the welfare of those you shared Komsomol membership with. It was through finding a middle ground between romantic friendship and apathy that governed how komsomols were supposed to relate to each other.

The attempt to create League cohesion through mutual aid and support did not just apply to friends and comrades. An ethics of mutual aid was also to be the basis of relations between genders. Young men and women were supposed to treat each other with respect and support. But when it came to gender relations, the Komsomol was hardly a space of equality. The League was an overwhelmingly male space where boys

became young men through the exclusion of their female comrades. As we will see, the (re)production of Komsomol masculinity through the exclusion of women was an increasing problem that not only inevitably made fodder for scandal, but could also have deadly results.

Chapter Three

“He’s one of the guys and if he wants three wives that’s his business.”

“No, he’s right, guys. I can’t live too long with one *baba*. You love her, but you feel kind of trapped like a diapered child to crib. They’re like some kind of chain and when I’m connected to one, others become one hundred times more lovely. You see that’s how God made it.”

—Andrei, 21 years old¹

On 25 January 1927, *Komsomolskaya pravda* announced that the bandits Konstantin Korenkov, his younger brother Andrei, and Timofei Smirnov were sentenced to death for the robbery-homicide of the treasury at the Moscow Mining Academy. The death sentence, which the prosecution had adamantly sought, was a fitting end to a scandalous drama marked by machismo, sexual depravity, spousal abuse, and tragic death. The three assailants were not ordinary criminals, the article explained. They, and especially their ringleader Konstantin, were “the most prominent representation” of a phenomenon dubbed “*korenkovshchina*.” This “social evil,” the jurist continued, “grows in the soil of a perverted understanding of all the tasks of socialist construction. We see a new *byt* (everyday life) struggling for new relations imbued with comradely respect toward women. The “Korenkovs” perceive the simplest “offense” as a right to wantonly trample on another’s life . . .” What made Korenkov’s crimes particularly heinous was that he was a Komsomol member and candidate Party member. For the prosecution, he was another example of a growing trend in NEP Russia: the party member who “takes

¹ V. Kirshon and A. Uspenskii, *Konstantin Terekhin (Rzhavchina)* (Moscow: Gos. Izdat., 1927), 7.

everything for himself, even life, and gives nothing [back],” a Party member who treated his “party card and proletarian social origin” as “noble privileges” that gave him the right to say to the Party, “I’m a Party member—give me.” It was for these reasons, the persecutor Arsenev concluded, that “the proletarian court must answer with the highest measure of social defense, execution.”²

The drama of the brothers Korenkov and Timofei Smirnov began a year before. On the Sunday after May Day the trio assembled in Andrei’s room to plot their crime. Between shots of cognac and deep drags on cigarettes, they decided their plan had to be executed that night because the next day stipend payments would drain the treasury. Slightly drunk, they set out for their prey. What happened next was part fate, part villainy. As the journal *Smena* recounted:

[Konstantin, Andrei, and Timofei] went to the cashier’s office. It was locked. The cashier wasn’t there, and the key was with him—they had to get the key. They needed to go to his apartment. They could see through the cashier’s door what was going on in the apartment. Petrov and his wife were eating dinner. The time wasn’t right; they had to wait. Let them eat and go to bed. All the same, it was necessary to run to the student cafeteria and get a knife. It was clear: the caper promises to be “wet” . . . Choke the old woman, strangle the old man Petrov, slit his throat with the kitchen knife, take the key, and go to the cashier’s office. . . And there in a cabinet, already in an envelope the Academy stipends: All they had to do is role it up and stuff it in their pocket.

The trio managed to kill Mrs. Petrov and steal the money but the old man survived. After his arrest, Korenkov admitted that the stolen money was for a train ticket to the Crimea.

² P. S. Staronsov, "Bratia Korenkovy (K protsessu o banditskom nalete na kassu Gorn. Akademii)," *Smena*, no. 2 (1927): 15.

The elder Korenkov was apparently tired of the big city. It is no wonder, considering the scandal he had been embroiled in over the past year.

Habitual readers of *Komsomolskaya pravda* would have been well aware of *korenkovshchina* and its face, Konstantin Korenkov. But his notoriety did not originate with the robbery-homicide. The murder of the Treasurer's wife was an extension of Korenkov's history of abusing women. In the summer of 1926 his name became synonymous with the abusive Komsomol philanderer, whose masculine swagger and self-declared rejection of "decadence" (*meshchansvto*) served as justifications for tormenting his wife Riva Davidson, committing adultery, and bullying his fellow young communists. A year prior Korenkov was embroiled in a scandal at the Moscow Mining Academy after Davidson was mysteriously found dead with self-inflicted gun shot wound. The Academy's Komsomol organization held Korenkov "morally responsible" for her death. But he managed to escape expulsion despite overwhelming evidence of his longstanding abuse of Davidson. Korenkov's behavior was so reviled that it inspired a litany of public condemnations. Interestingly, his relationship with Davidson took center stage after his arrest for the Treasury robbery-homicide. His attitude toward women had foretold his future crime. According to many, Korenkov's behavior could not be reduced to his person. Rather he was a symbol - one could even say a product - of the hyper-masculinity that ran rampant in the Komsomol.

Despite efforts to close the gender gap, by the end of the 1920s, the Komsomol was very much an organization for young men. Males outnumbered female four to one, and this numerical superiority made them the authority in defining the gender identity of

a young communist. Komsomol young men's view of themselves as men was based in polarized notions of masculinity and femininity. Therefore masculinity involved the exclusion of femininity for styles, mannerisms, temperaments, and practices that hyped their manliness. Given this, it is not surprising that the forms of masculinity the situation facilitated resulted in abuse of women, violence, and death.

The forms of masculinity young communists like Korenkov embraced presented an ethical conundrum for the Komsomol community. On the one hand many of them represented all the positive qualities a komsomol should have: a proletarian background, talent, ingenuity, determination, will, and fortitude. On other hand, the Korenkovs of the Komsomol were examples of how many capable young communists applied their talent and social power over women toward unworthy and even criminal ends. Not only did the domination over women negate the Revolution's promises to emancipate them, it exacerbated the broader confusion of how young communist men and women were supposed to act and relate to each other.. Komsomol masculinity was not just about the physical exclusion women. It was also about making practices coded feminine—skirts, make-up, jewelry, coquetry, sentimentality, etc.—taboo. For women to join the young communist boys' club they had to act and appear like young men. Of course, the masculinized girl was just as problematic and led to a young woman's further exclusion, ostracism, and alienation.

This chapter addresses the ways masculinity was formed in the Komsomol. First, it examines the ways joining the League served as a rite of passage that allowed young men to distinguish themselves from children and challenge or break parental authority.

Then it moves to understand the ways young communists formed their notions of masculinity through the ethos of the revolutionary legacies of the “iron Bolshevik,” the exclusion, abuse, and torment of Komsomol girls, and the rejection of femininity associated with the concept of *meshchanstvo*. Lastly, it turns back to the Korenkov Affair to show how rank and file komsomol were encouraged to practice mutual surveillance of and responsibility for the conduct in male-female relations.

The chapter argues that the Komsomol’s attempt to control members like Korenkov was an effort to rein in the hyper-masculinity that burst forth from the Revolution and Civil War. Despite the Komsomol’s efforts to revolutionize gender relations, the content of those efforts was rather conservative, for imbedded in the Komsomol’s gaze was an effort to renormalize men’s sexual habits and family relations, which were seen as having gone awry as a result of the devastation and liberation brought by years of war, revolution, and civil war. These attempts were not to destroy masculinity as such, but to stabilize it using the Komsomol as an institution of mutual surveillance to regulate males at a time when the family was under social, economic and ideological attack. The Komsomol, however, was more than a regulatory apparatus; above all it was an institution that sought to facilitate the maturation of its male members at a time when the traditional family was viewed as too weak or inadequate to address the sexual lives of young people.

Masculinity in Crisis

Historians have often characterized the turn of the century as a period that witnessed a “crisis in masculinity.” Increasing feminist challenges to patriarchy and domesticity, the birth of the suffrage movement, increasing liberalization of sexual practice and culture, the more visible presence of women in the industrial workplace and in political and cultural circles all served to rattle male domination in state and society. War had the greatest impact on masculinity. The technologies introduced in WWI—machine guns, poison gas, artillery, trench warfare—made traditions of honor, chivalry, and individual prowess less important. Mass death produced few traditional heroes when front ground the fit male into a mangled parody of himself or simply wiped a generation of fathers and sons out of existence. The medicalization of the male body, mind and sex brought the essence of masculinity into question as doctors created new disorders and deviances that were said to cause male degeneration.³

Russia was hardly isolated from these historical and societal changes. Soviet social scientists and moralists argued that the war and revolution only accelerated changes to the family and men’s position in society that were already underway. But unlike in Western Europe, Russian masculinity appeared to be a problem of hyper-masculinity rather than of feminization. It was not that young men were not becoming proper men. Rather they were becoming too manly too fast. In their aptly titled study

³ Leo Braudy, *From chivalry to terrorism : war and the changing nature of masculinity* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003); Christopher E. Forth, *Masculinity in the modern west : gender, civilization and the body* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the male: men's bodies, Britain and the Great War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

Life Out of Control, V. Ketlinskaya and V. Slepkov argued that the moral degradation and sexual licentiousness prevalent especially among male youth was due to the “enormous dislocation and shock to all aspects of everyday life, social ideas, and morals during the years of the war and revolution.”⁴ Citing the findings of a certain Prof. Orshanskii, the authors emphasized that young Russian males were entering adult life at an earlier age than previous generations. Orshanskii’s statistics on marriage, they noted, demonstrated that youth began living independently at 17-18 years old, five to six years younger than before the revolution. The average age of marriage also experienced a steep drop. Previously, Russian men married at 23-27 years old. Now they were getting married on average at 17-23 years old. Young men were also more sexually active at an earlier age than before. The majority of boys were sexually active between 16 and 18 years old, experimenting with sex even earlier, frequenting with prostitutes, and engaging in casual sex. Interestingly, the archetype for these men-children was the young communist of the Civil War.

“We know the example of the “old” Komsomol generation that at fourteen and fifteen years old had already entered not only into independent life—working in the factory, and participating at the front—but often entered into work as political leaders. Who doesn’t remember the callow commissars, the 15 year old activists of the provincial headquarters, and the fiery orators with cracked, immature voices?”⁵

⁴ V. Ketlinskaiia and Vlad Slepkov, *Zhizn’ bez kontroliia polovaia zhizn’ i sem’ia rabochei molodezhi*, Biblioteka bytovoii konferentsii; (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1929), 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 17-18.

The phenomenon of the “old” Komsomol and the sociological findings that characterized their behavior alarmed Ketlinskaya and Slepkov on two fronts. First, they viewed this early and quick entry into adulthood as having disastrous effects on young people’s sexual lives. “The beginning of one’s sex life at the moment when a person’s mind and body are still forming, when there are no durable and fixed relationships, and when the early establishment of a family, creates preconditions for a number of negative phenomena in the sexual life of youth.” Second, their study showed that the increase in sexual and social licentiousness was more prevalent among Komsomol youth. Komsomol members did not “consider personal life an especially interesting one, and give it little attention. They wish to not be bound by any fixed responsibilities toward family, but also do not want to deny themselves the pleasures of personal life. These youth transform their sexual lives into easy and pleasant pleasures and entertainments after the working day.”⁶

The idea that young Soviet males were entering adult life too fast was not simply the result of moral panic. Already in the late 19th century young Russian working class and peasant males increasingly lived independently from their family at an earlier age. Peasant males often migrated to the city in their teens where they remained, maturing in a bachelor dominated environment of hard labor, hard drink, and hard play. Contact with family back in the village was seasonal or sporadic. If they were married, their time in the town was without wives and children, who remained in the village. Efforts by village elders to control young migrants were infrequent at best as more young people wanted to

⁶ Ibid., 43-44.

live completely independent from their parents' households, were attracted to the freedom of city life, or gained power by becoming the main breadwinners.⁷

Even those youths raised in the city tended to grow up with little parental supervision. Long hours stymied working class parents' control over their children. This independence was extended into their teens when they began apprenticeships around 12 years old. As Diane Koenker concluded, "the urban young generation reached social and economic independence at a comparatively early age. Their lives were not completely centered on the family or home, since parents were likely to be at work and "home" was a kitchen-mother down the hall."⁸ Moreover, thanks to migration and wage labor coupled with late marriage, early independence allowed male adolescents to be in a "position of doing adult work but without adults' social responsibilities (marriage and family)."⁹

While labor patterns allowed more youths to have independence from their parents, the greatest impact on family relations came with WWI, the Revolution and Civil War, which served to accelerate the weakening of the family that was already underway. WWI and the Civil War drew millions of fathers to the front, broke or decimated families, and scattered refugees across Russia. Children and teenagers were the primary

⁷ Jeffrey Burds, *Peasant dreams & market politics : labor migration and the Russian village, 1861-1905* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1998), 29-30. A similar process was occurring in Western Europe. See John R. Gillis, *Youth and History: Tradition and Change in European Age Relations 1770-Present* (Academic Press, 1974), 55-61; Bettina Hitzer, "Amid the Wave of Youth: the *Innere Mission* and Young German Migrants in Berlin c. 1900," in *European Cities, Youth and the Public Sphere in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Axel Schildt and Detlef Siegfried (Ashgate, 2005), 8-26.

⁸ Diane P. Koenker, "Urban Families, Working-Class Youth Groups, and the 1917 Revolution in Moscow," in *The Family in Imperial Russia : New Lines of Historical Research*, ed. David Ransel (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1978), 287-88.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 282.

victims as hundreds of thousands were left homeless, fled from the front or famine into Russia's urban centers, where they tried to scrape out a living begging, running with gangs, or committing petty crime. Despite efforts to place homeless children into orphanages, incorporate them into the labor force, or reunite them with their families, many more slipped through the state's institutional grasp.¹⁰

If the wars did not leave children and teens as orphans, it often left them with one parent, usually a mother. War made women involuntary heads of households while their husbands and sons were away or when they never returned from war. Exact estimates of fatherless families are unknown, but one study suggests that even at the end of the 1920s, 15 percent (around 3 million) of peasant households were headed by women.¹¹ This number also includes the unknown number of families abandoned by their fathers thanks to labor migration and easily acquired divorce under Soviet law.

While there are no statistics on how many Komsomol members were orphans or came from broken families, personal information about their family life suggests that growing up an orphan or losing a parent at an early age was a common experience. For example, Anna Liadova's father fought in both the Russo-Japanese War and WWI, where he perished. Her family "was left in poverty," forcing her mother "to work day and night

¹⁰ Alan M. Ball, *And Now My Soul is Hardened: Abandoned Children in Soviet Russia, 1918-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994); Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890-1991* (New Haven [Conn.] ; London: Yale University Press, 2007), Chapters 5-8; Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the state, and revolution : Soviet family policy and social life, 1917-1936*, Cambridge Russian, Soviet, and post-Soviet studies (Cambridge ; New York, New York, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1993), Chapter 2.

¹¹ Barbara Evans Clements, "The Effects of the Civil war on Women and Family Relations," in *Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War : Explorations in Social History*, ed. Diane Koenker, William G. Rosenberg, and Ronald Grigor Suny (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 107-08.

to support five children.”¹² Nikolai Lunev’s father died in the 1905 Revolution. He was “rarely mentioned” in Lunev’s family, and as Nikolai grew older he took on the tasks that “normally [fell] on grown men.” I. Savin’s father died a year after being severely beaten by police during the 1905 Revolution.¹³ Boris Lennov’s father, a peasant, died “in the heat of the Revolution.” Komsomol member Kiakovin’s father died in 1918. Pavel Kokorev’s father and oldest brother died in WWI leaving him, his mother, and his six siblings in difficult economic conditions. He moved to Ryazan at 14 years old, where he was accepted into a vocational school for poor children.¹⁴ Komsomol members Yatsevich, Bulygin, Rodionov, Lopchkin, and Chesheiko, who were arrested in 1927 for beating up two Komsomol secretaries, had all grown up in an orphanage.¹⁵ D. Khanin’s mother died when he was a child. In his memoir he remembered how he said “three prayers in her memory” on her death day.¹⁶ Anastasyan Vairich’s childhood in Armenia during the Civil War was especially harrowing. Turkish troops made his life a “triumph of evil” after they went on a killing rampage in his native town of Aleksandropol in 1918. “Two of my three uncles were brutally murdered before my eyes,” he recalled.

¹² GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 750a, l. 172.

¹³ M. Afonin and A Kortsev, ed. *Na front i na fronte: sbornik vospominanii* (Moskovskii rabochii, 1927), 17.

¹⁴ GARO f. 478, op. 1 d. 569, l. 33.

¹⁵ GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 812, l. 74.

¹⁶ D. Khanin, *Universitet moego pokolenie* (Moscow: Priboi, 1930), 9.

“Mutilated corpses lay all around. My family fled to the country to escape the massacre. My father disappeared during this flight and was never seen again.”¹⁷

The dislocations caused by industrialization, urbanization, war and revolution upset many of the traditional institutions through which most boys learned to become men. Social and economic changes allowed them to “grow up” faster than previous generations. Growing up in fatherless households forced them to take on adult male roles. In this climate, the Komsomol served as a potential substitute to provide the rites of passage for a boy’s maturation into a man. As an organization for young men, the Komsomol acted not so much as an surrogate family (in the sense of creating a collective family that superseded the one’s blood relations), but as a substitute family that facilitated the maturation of its members at a time where the traditional family was viewed as too weak or inadequate to regulate lives of young people.

Boys into Komsomol Men

The Russian Revolution and Civil War was encoded male. The proletariat usurping the Tsar was symbolic of a war against patriarchy, of sons overthrowing their father’s authoritarian rule. Lewd rumors and jokes about the royal family’s debauchery, implications that the Empress was the real ruler of Russia or that depicted Nicholas II as a

¹⁷ Anastasyan Vairich, "Youth It Was that Led Us," in *Soviet Youth: Twelve Komsomol Histories*, ed. Nikolai K. Novak-Deker (Munich: Institute for the Study of the USSR, 1959), 56.

cuckold served to symbolically emasculate the monarch's power.¹⁸ Post-revolutionary images continued to accentuate the Revolution as an act of manhood by contrasting the physically fit and powerful proletariat against the fat, bloated Nepman, the insect-like capitalist, or the wrinkled priest. Within communist circles, the muscular and virile proletarian man was juxtaposed against the gangly, bespectacled (often Jewish) intellectual on one side and the elderly, worn and earthly peasant on the other.¹⁹ The feminized intellectual and peasant functioned as a subtext to the view that their influx into the Komsomol brought degenerating sicknesses or threats to the League's proletarian core, fighting spirit, and revolutionary will.²⁰ The revolutionary ethos itself was imbued with a hyper-masculinity. For most komsomols, the introduction to revolution was not February or October 1917, but the violent and heroic "fiery baptism" of the Civil War. Forged out of this cauldron of violence was a myth of the Bolshevik iron will, bravery, heroism, self-sacrifice and militancy.²¹ A communist was a man who denied all bodily and emotional desire—hunger, cold, stress, sentimentality, personal relations, individual self-interest, and sex—for the euphoria of revolutionary struggle. The Komsomol's 1920

¹⁸ Orlando Figes and Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 14-15.

¹⁹ Igal Halfin, "The Rape of the Intelligentsia: A Proletarian Foundational Myth," *Russian Review* 56, no. 1 (1997); Eliot Borenstein, *Men without women : masculinity and revolution in Russian fiction, 1917-1929* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 2000); Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet man was unmade : cultural fantasy and male subjectivity under Stalin* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008).

²⁰ At the Third Komsomol Congress, **it was argued that** the prevalence of intellectuals and students on Komsomol committees was one of the illnesses that the League had to overcome by proletarianizing the ranks of activists. By the mid-1920s, the peasantry was viewed as a danger that could dilute the Komsomol's proletarian strength.

²¹ For a general investigation in the relationship between war and concepts of masculinity see Braudy, *From chivalry to terrorism : war and the changing nature of masculinity*.

Charter painted itself as a fighting organization with calls for “young and fresh warriors” to embrace “the high-minded and inevitable task” of liberation that was only possible at “the cost of selfless struggle, of the greatest heroism, of preparedness for sacrifice, suffering, and hardships.”²² Given this image of the revolutionary vanguard, it is hardly surprising that the future New Soviet Person would also be painted as masculine. As Eliot Borenstein has noted, “the frequent translation of the phrase *novyi chelovek* as “new man” (rather than the more precise “new person”) is no accident, for the new man must be manly to the extreme.”²³

The Komsomol’s masculine culture was not only a simple product of revolutionary ethos, ideology, and imagery. Participating in the Revolution, volunteering to fight in the Civil War, and joining the Komsomol were ways for young communists to distinguish themselves from children. These events and institutions catapulted them into an adult world of politics, violence, and responsibility.²⁴ This instantaneous and forced maturation did not cause a clean break between boyhood and manhood, however. Rather, the dissonance between milieu and maturity left some in a liminal hybrid of boy-men. V. Sorokin painted a picture of a soldier mobilization in his Civil War memoir: “Little men of Pioneer age, 12-13 years from birth with tears in their eyes when they gave them a

²² Isabel A. Tirado, *Young Guard! The Communist Youth League, Petrograd 1917-1920* (Greenwood Press, 1988), 238.

²³ Borenstein, *Men without women : masculinity and revolution in Russian fiction, 1917-1929*, 4.

²⁴ One account says that one demonstration in Petrograd in 1917 had around 100,000 youth most of which were under 18 years old. Also of the 16 active members of district council of the youth organization Labor and Light, two were 15, 2 were 16, 10 were 17, and one was 19 years old. S. Zilberman and V. Zlotin, "O "Trude i Svete" i SSRM," *Molodezh i revoliutsii* 1, no. 1 (1931): 11.

rifle.”²⁵ Not only were new recruits to the Red Army and Komsomol young; so, too, were those who joined the Bolshevik Party. One survey from the period showed that over half of Bolshevik Party recruits during the Civil War were under the age of thirty. By mid-decade, about twenty-five percent of Party members were under twenty-five years old.²⁶

Revolution and Civil War broke the bond between parent and child. Therefore, amid the social dislocation, a young communist’s affiliations increasingly trumped filiations. In place of the patriarch, political and social institutions (the factory, the army, the Cheka, the Party, or the Komsomol) became sites in which boys became men.²⁷ The idea that these affiliations acted as a “university,” where boys entered and men exited, did not escape the men who lived through them. “We went into the Komsomol as teenagers,” wrote D. Khanin. “We gave our youth to it and came out as mature people full of strength with a singular life experience.”²⁸

After the war, joining the Komsomol continued to be regarded as a way for males to leave childhood behind. As gender theorists have noted, notions of masculinity have a temporal dimension. Masculinity takes different forms and meanings within a male as he

²⁵ V. Sorokin, "Ob odnoi soeni i ob odnoi vesne v istorii komsomola," *Molodezh i revoliutsii* 1, no. 1 (1931). 1, no. 1 (1931): 77.

²⁶ T. H. Rigby, *Communist Party Membership in the USSR, 1917-1967* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1968), 353-54.

²⁷ Borenstein, *Men without women : masculinity and revolution in Russian fiction, 1917-1929*, 15.

²⁸ Khanin, *Universitet moego pokolenie*, 129.

moves from childhood to adolescence and adulthood.²⁹ The relationship between age and masculinity has particular importance for understanding the formation of masculinity in the Komsomol. Joining not only made a boy feel and be recognized as a young man, it also gave him the personal authority to challenge his parents. The ascribed “adulthood” of Komsomol membership gave a young male a sense of independence, duty, and rights to engage in relationships and enter spaces forbidden to him as a child.

Komsomol ethicists saw League membership as a stage of maturity. Upon admission members were to “feel that they have turned some kind of new, great page in their lives from which breathes with a desire for a great and meaningful struggle.”³⁰ The “new, great page” in the book of life, was the transcendence of the self in service of a greater, higher cause or inclusion into an exclusive group. How youths became part of something much larger than themselves is visible in how a member was recognized by others. Vanka, the hero of Mark Kolosov’s novella *Thirteen*, viewed joining the Komsomol as a rite of passage to maturity. Vanka wanted not only to be considered on equal par with his friends, he also wanted to be like the other men in his family. Part of his impatience originated from his humiliation at the hands of his mother’s doting and his father’s and brother’s affectionate teasing about his desire to join. “Drink, Drink, Vaniushka,” his mother jabs, “and take some bread, sonny. You’re getting too thin in

²⁹ Gabriela Spector-Mersel, "Never-aging Stories: Western Hegemonic Masculinity Scripts," *Journal of Gender Studies* 15, no. 1 (2006); Judith Kegan Gardiner, "Theorizing Age and Gender: Bly's Boys, Feminism, and Maturity Masculinity," in *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory: New Directions*, ed. Judith Kegan Gardiner (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002).

³⁰ VI. Vitin and A. Slepko, *Azbuka komsomol'tsa*, Biblioteka raboche-krest'ianskoi molodezhi; ([Moskva]: Novaia Moskva, 1926), 89.

your Komsomol.” They ironically call him “Komsomol” “on purpose” because they know he “has no membership card.” His mother’s teasing is worse because she infantilizes Vanka, especially as he listens to his father and brother talking about politics. Vanka’s lack of a card reinforces his position in the home as the child. Like with the cell, Vanka exists in a liminal stage between childhood and the mature male world of his brother and father. Komsomol membership would facilitate his passage from the one to the other. “A sense of hurt swells in Vanka’s heart. Oh, how he hates mother with her caresses and care! How he would like to join the conversation of his father and brother.”³¹

Not being old enough even caused some trepidation when a boy’s physical and mental maturity did not match his age. When Nikolai Bocharov decided to join the Komsomol he worried that being only thirteen would be a problem since the League accepted only those fourteen and above. “But I was bigger and more fully developed than is usual for my age, and my fears turned out to be groundless.”³² Sadik Alimov, in contrast, said that he did not join the Komsomol despite being old enough because he considered himself too young. Only when a representative invited him did he acquiesce. Alimov thought joining the League was more serious than his time as a Pioneer because he would be “held more accountable for [his] actions and conduct.” He accepted accountability as the cost of maturing. “This did not frighten me, however. On the

³¹ Mark Kolosov, "Thirteen," in *Flying Osip: Stories of New Russia* (Freeport, New York: Books from Libraries Press, 1970), 152.

³² Nikolai Bocharov, "Off the Beaten Track," in *Soviet Youth: Twelve Komsomol Histories*, ed. Nikolai K. Novak-Deker (Munich: Institute for the Study of the USSR, 1959), 43-44.

contrary, it gave me greater strength,” he recalled.³³ When Nikolai Lunev left the Komsomol at age 28, he expressed reluctance at breaking with an organization that helped him become “a man conscious of the breadth of his rights as a citizen.”³⁴ Moreover, Bocharov saw the Komsomol organization as a kind of surrogate family where the older men nurtured the younger. “The older Komsomol members treated the younger ones as brothers; they poked fun at our weakness but were always ready to offer any help we needed.”³⁵

While Komsomol membership facilitated the transformation of a boy into a man, parents continued to be an intransigent force and a source of conflict. If a youth was of Komsomol age, leaders reasoned, they could join of their own free will without their parents’ permission. Older members were duty bound to encourage young members’ “to be manly (*muzhestvennyi*) and strong and not give in to their parents’ influence” if their parents forbade them from joining.³⁶ However, komsomols were not encouraged to break from or even denounce the family for their Komsomol family. Instead, they were expected to exert a paternal influence over home life and act more as “carriers of a new everyday life in the family” and “upholders of the communist ideal and Soviet legality” rather than destroyers of old traditions. Taking the position of “upholder” and “carrier” of

³³ Sadik Alimov, "Through the Eyes of My Youth," in *Soviet Youth: Twelve Komsomol Histories*, ed. Nikolai K. Novak-Deker (Munich: Institute for the Study of the USSR, 1959), 75.

³⁴ Nikolai Lunev, "Blind Faith in a Bright Future," in *Soviet Youth: Twelve Komsomol Histories*, ed. Nikolai K. Novak-Deker (Munich: Institute for the Study of the USSR, 1959), 34-35.

³⁵ Bocharov, "Off the Beaten Track," 45.

³⁶ "Tsirkuliarnoe pis'mo Diatlovskii org. RKSM 26.2.1922," GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 135, l. 55.

Soviet morality inevitably put them in conflict with their parents. As a result, some parents, especially those in the village, were hostile to their teenage sons for joining the Komsomol. As Isabel Tirado noted, Komsomol membership often pulled young men away from their family obligations.³⁷ The League's atheist message was particularly offensive. Its regulations called for its members to stop going to church and compelled them to imbibe and agitate anti-religious propaganda at home. Others, like a mother named A. Venskaya, continued to dote on their sons, fearing that the heavy workload of a Komsomol activist would drive them to illness. "I support him in everything and only fear for his poor health and overwork which doesn't give him time to eat," she wrote in a letter to *Komsomolskaya pravda*.³⁸

Male komsomols acting as the paterfamilias of revolutionary ethics directly challenged their father's authority as the *bol'shak* or the household head. Boys were usually embroiled in familial conflicts as a result of their Komsomol work. Take the case of a village komsomol named Alesha Maslov, for example. Alesha hid his Komsomol membership from his father, who was furious when he found out. "I'll kill him or throw him out of the house because he's my kid, and I will answer to God for him." Tensions in the house increased as Alesha's allegiance to his new comrades tore him away from the church. But despite his protests, the elder Maslov was forced to realize that his son "began to slip from his grasp." The most effective way for a young communist to free himself from his father's authority was to go to study in town. Alesha seized at this

³⁷ Isabel Tirado, "The Komsomol and Young Peasants: The Dilemma of Rural Expansion, 1921-1925," *Slavic Review* 53, no. 3 (1993): 464.

³⁸ E. Lavrov, "Ne s togo kontsa," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, June 2, 1925.

opportunity when his district committee sent him to a factory school. After his graduation, he began to forge greater independence by working in a cooperative. As he rose up its ranks, his father accepted this begrudgingly but eventually began to attack openly. Alesha reasoned that his father's anger arose because "I actively work in the cooperative and little at home. And therefore he always causes a scene."³⁹ As one commentator for *Komsomolskaya pravda* put it, "True, there will be cases where a komsomol breaks from his family. Without question, there will be cases where a komsomol doesn't intervene in every family squabble or crisis. It is bad when a komsomol falls under the influence of his parents and has animosity toward the Party and Soviet power. But this does not mean that every komsomol must break from his family or even see his family as a political enemy. If a komsomol has difficulties with his family, it is because they have a number of habits from the "good ol'days."⁴⁰

For the most part, komsomols were encouraged to show patience and even understanding for their parents' reluctance to embrace the new ways, even if that tolerance put them at odds with their more hotheaded peers. Nikolai Lunev relayed in his recollection:

I once attracted the attention of the secretary of the *raion* committee of the Komsomol, a young girl in a leather jacket and a red kerchief. She showered me with reproaches: "What sort of Komsomol member are you, if icons and a portrait of Nicholas II are hanging in your home?" "Well, you see, my mother . . .," I tried to explain. "Your mother?" she teased me. "You ought to convert her!" After this I tried to persuade my mother to take down the picture of the Tsar and

³⁹ V. Ershov, "Komsomolets v sem'e," in *Komsomol v derevne: ocherki*, ed. V. G. Tana-Bogoraz (Moskva: Gos. Izd., 1926), 120-21.

⁴⁰ Lavrov, "Ne s togo kontsa," 3.

at least some of the icons, to which the entire entrance hall of the house was given up. However, nothing came of this. My mother not only flatly refused, but even complained about me to Morozov [an elder Komsomol member]. I do not know what Morozov said to her, but she only took down the portrait of the Tsar. Morozov chided me, and told me not to bring up the subject of the icons again. "It's not yet time. The people can't achieve everything at once," he concluded.

Morozov's intervention suggests komsomols like Lunev were expected to find a "common language" with their parents, which included inviting elders to the local komosmol club, theater and to lectures, getting a radio in the house, and teaching their mother to read. Komsomols were to talk to their parents with a "calm tone" to alleviate tension. Most of all, the common language required a pragmatism that trumped the rapid pace of revolutionary change. Even if a young communist could get his parents to the club for their re-education, it was often to his own embarrassment. "It's embarrassing to take mother to the club," wrote one komsomol, "If you come with your mother, guys will laugh at you."⁴¹

Despite whatever independence and maturity Komsomol membership inspired, the fact of the matter was that in most cases young communists had little choice but to give in to their parents' authority. The alternative could result in being cast out of the house. Most working class and peasant youths remained too economically dependent on their parents to challenge them forcefully. This is what a Komsomol political court discovered when it put two komsomols on trial for singing in church. The court decided

⁴¹ Ketlinskaiia and Slepko, *Zhizn' bez kontroliia polovaia zhizn' i sem'ia rabochei molodezhi*, 85-86.

to be lenient because both youths were unemployed and “if they refused to sing, they would have been driven out of the house.”⁴²

Nevertheless, rebellion against parents was certainly one motivating factor for young men to join the Komsomol. W. I. Hryshko recalled that most peasants in his village forbade their children from joining the Komsomol or the Pioneers. But parental intransigence only increased the attractiveness of these organizations, a fact which the League exploited for its own benefit. According to Hryshko the Komsomol in particular played on the “age-old rift” between fathers and sons and promoted “a form of crusade against their elders” by opposing “new and progressive” Soviet youth against their “antiquated and outworn” views of their parents. Hryshko’s parents “categorically refused” to let him join or “have anything to do with the Komsomol.” He did not give a precise explanation why, but recalled that the prohibition made the League all the more attractive as he began to equate membership with fulfilling his desire for self-expression. “My longing for self-expression was so strong, and the parental ban seemed so unjust, that it often came to family quarrels in which I would follow the pattern of the young heroes of Soviet literature and rebel against the wishes of my parents.” Unfortunately for Hryshko, parental authority was too strong despite his view that they were “behind the times” and were “motivated by their reactionary outlook.” “Nevertheless,” he wrote, “family discipline carried the day, and I was obliged to stay outside the Pioneers and the

⁴² TsAODM f. 634 op. 1 d. 98., l. 44

Komsomol.”⁴³ For others, the subject of Komsomol membership resulted in détente between parent and child. Sadik Alimov hid his Pioneer membership from his mother. His secrecy, however, clearly wore on him because he was “greatly relieved” when his mother confronted him about his conversion to communism. To his surprise, his mother did not disapprove but “expressed her fear that it was possible that the Soviet regime would soon collapse and then I would be in trouble.” Alimov assured her that there was nothing to fear and “here the conversation ended.”⁴⁴

Revolutionary Manliness

If the Komsomol was an avenue for male independence and maturity, then what kind of masculine culture could a young man expect to encounter? Throughout the 1920s, membership hovered at around 80 percent male, a situation that served to render even more influential the already existing Russian working class and peasant notions of masculinity. In addition, as S. A. Smith has noted, Russian masculinity in general was undergoing transition. Labor migration, the challenge to peasant patriarchy, the importance of strength, stamina, know-how and skill in the industrial workplace, and the influence of the politically “conscious” worker, who rejected swearing, drinking, and misogyny for comradeship, solidarity, and self-respect, all contributed to a panoply of

⁴³ W. I. Hryshko, “An Interloper in the Komsomol,” in *Soviet Youth: Twelve Komsomol Histories*, ed. Nikolai K. Novak-Deker (Munich: Institute for the Study of the USSR, 1959), 91.

⁴⁴ Alimov, “Through the Eyes of My Youth,” 74.

ways men acted and thought of themselves and others as men.⁴⁵ For the Komsomol in particular all of these notions combined with the revolutionary ethos to produce a culture where hyper-masculinity was synonymous with being a young communist.

It is important to note that hyper-masculine behaviors and practices are performative and not necessarily tied to being male. Masculinity, Judith Butler reminds us, is a process constituted through “a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”⁴⁶ Namely, what appears as indicative of being masculine is the result of repeated acts (mostly by men) that reproduce cultural notions of manliness. It is important that performance is also a rejection of what is considered its opposite, femininity. This affirmation/rejection paradigm is the reason I speak of Komsomol masculinity as “hyper.” Komsomol masculinity was “hyper” because it was rooted in a total rejection of notions of femininity.

Male komsomols performed their masculinity through their style and mannerisms. The most visible symbol of proletarian toughness was the leather jacket, knee high leather boots, a Sam Brown belt, and a pistol. Anastasyan Vairich described his “Komsomol uniform” as consisting of a “military jacket and breeches and a Sam Brown belt over the shoulder.”⁴⁷ Indeed, one commentator noted that the “chador” of the so-

⁴⁵ S. A. Smith, "Masculinity in Transition: Peasant Migrants to Late-Imperial St. Petersburg," in *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*, ed. Barbara Evans Clements, Rebecca Friedman, and Dan Healey (Houndmills ; New York: Palgrave, 2002), 99-103.

⁴⁶ Judith Butler, *Gender trouble : feminism and the subversion of identity* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 43. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 43.

⁴⁷ Vairich, "Youth It Was that Led Us," 61-62.

called “pure blooded proletarian” included a whole assembly of fashion and attitude. Komsomols went around in “dilapidated boots with permanently stuck on black dirt, a long, worn out leather jacket, living on "dry crusts," delved into some kind of work day and night, denying themselves rest, entertainment, and often food.”⁴⁸ When V. F. Panova’s husband decided to “forge” himself into an “iron Bolshevik” he not only donned a leather jacket but also “spoke with an echoing base” and “worked at a wild pace.”⁴⁹

The young tough communist was bombastic, pigheaded, and lived by his own rules. Those who stood in his way were attacked with profanity. Swearing was a mark of one’s proletarian stock and manliness. Profanity was an act of verbal degradation against other men and especially women. Often this speech was an “odorous assortment” borrowed from both the factory and criminal lexicon. “Shut ya yap!” (*zakroi khailo*) “Shut ya trap! (*zatknis*), “scoundrel,” (*merzavets*), “bastard” (*svolich*), “motherfucker” (*tvoiu mat*), “knocked up” (*papsik*), “to take a piss” (*vzyat’ na poit*), “a bore” (*zanuda*), “noggin” (*kumpol*).⁵⁰ Boys addressed each other with “What are you doing there, you bastard?” “Hey you Vanka, you devil, let’s go”; or as “goblin” (*leshii*), and “rascal” (*shalavyi*). The ability to spit out a string of good profanity was a feat of admiration and respect, a test of manhood, and a means of male bonding. “We amused ourselves by

⁴⁸ V. Rozin, *Osnovnye problemy komsomola* (Moscow 1926), 43.

⁴⁹ N. B. Lebina, *Povsednevnaia zhizn Sovetskogo goroda: normy i anomalii, 1920-1930 gody* (Sankt-Peterburg 1999), 212.

⁵⁰ S. Poleseva, "Pomesi frantsuzskogo s nizhegorodskim, o "blatnom zhargone", o kulture rechi," *Iunyi Proletarii*, no. 20 (1927): 23-24. Epithets, slang and curse words are a common feature of Civil War memoirs.

indulging in obscenities,” a worker student explained, “a game in which everyone tried not to be left behind, and thus be considered an idiot.”⁵¹

Guns, a thirst for adventure, and a love of violence were other masculine symbols that infatuated male komsomols. His “weakness for weapons” was fueled by a “thirst for excitement” that “approached a carnal desire, a reckless addiction to adventurous experiences.” “He was no coward that’s for sure,” added V. Slepko. “His manliness finds its use not only in simple fights of “drunk brawls” but also in “open honest fights.”⁵² Pistols, adventure and heroics were exactly what captivated the young mind of Nikolai Bocharov and drew him to the Komsomol. Bocharov described how older youths like his friends Zhenia Vedernikov and Zhora Spitsin carried “pistols on long leather lanyards” like komsomols and soldiers of the Special Purpose Unit. “These pistols, which to our youthful imaginations seemed to be the distinctive insignia of a specially chosen and trusted category of young people, roused a burning envy in me and my classmates,” he recalled. The pistols also “entailed certain obligations,” were passed out when there was a threat, and made their wielders “heroes ready to die in the struggle with enemies.”⁵³

Much of this bravado and machismo found its home in a Komsomol club or meeting, which were breeding grounds of masculine behavior. Clubs and cells were

⁵¹ Quoted in S. A. Smith, “The Social Meanings of Swearing: Workers and Bad Language in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia,” *Past and Present*, no. 160 (1998): 186; Poleseva, “Pomesi frantsuzskogo s nizhegorodskim, o “blatnom zhargone”, o kulture rechi,”: 24.

⁵² Vlad Slepko, *Na bytovye temy* (Leningrad: Krasnoi gazety, 1927), 12.

⁵³ Institute for the Study of the USSR, *Soviet Youth: Twelve Komsomol Histories* (Munich 1959), 43-44; Anne Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents* (Indiana University Press, 2000), 44.

“scattered [with] cigarette butts, sunflower husks and spit, dirty grubby clothes, . . . rudeness, swagger in expressions, extremely rude and insolent attitude toward girls—these and a whole host of other habits are all still cultivated by komsomols.”⁵⁴ Drinking, card playing, pranks, and fighting were forms of entertainment and bonding as well as a means to strut one’s manliness. Drink made some guys hotheaded, uncontrollable, and violent. For example a certain komsomol M. came drunk into his dormitory one evening, went up to some guys drinking tea, and without saying a word knocked two of them across the “noggin’ (*baska*).” When one of the guys said they would snitch, M. “hit him three more times.”⁵⁵ Another incident involved a drunken student with a revolver. In drunken rage, he broke down the door to the girls’ dormitory room and began cursing. He did not calm down until some other students were able to disarm him.⁵⁶ For the most part, guys were simply more apt “to monkey around (*vlyat’ duraka*), strut and show off in front of a girl, blow smoke in people’s faces, trip people in the street and play other tricks.” Forcing a comrade to drink was also an important form of peer pressure. In some cell committees, those who did not partake were ostracized. One activist said in an anonymous survey, “I began to drink when I got on the committee. I drink in company. It’s a ritual during send offs and meetings with activists. I don’t especially like to drink,

⁵⁴ Rozin, *Osnovnye problemy komsomola*, 43.

⁵⁵ I. Bobryshev, *Melkoburzhuzaznye vliianiia sredi molodezhi* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1928), 81.

⁵⁶ RGASPI F. M-1, op. 23, d. 820, l. 7

but it just happens. You drop by a comrade's, you have company, and of course there is a bottle on the table. It's not possible to refuse, and, well, you drink together."⁵⁷

That the Komsomol style was also an expression of masculinity is best seen in how girls who adopted it were treated. As a small minority within the League, girls were put in a precarious position of having to struggle to fit in. Komsomol girls cast off their dresses, makeup, and other forms of feminine beauty for a more masculine style to appear more authentic. However, to komsomol males, this gender bending was an anathema. "Such outward "pure blooded proletarians" often turns out to be girls," wrote V. Rozin. "They completely cut their hair, don't bathe for months, wear felt boots, together with a blouse with some kind of satchel, with a skirt These girls have completely lost their appearance as women, creating some kind of new middle gender. . ." He added, "Let women remain women. Let them wear their usual suit of armor, and men theirs."⁵⁸ Others suggested that girls' "masculine appearance," which was associated with debauchery, might scare youth away from the Komsomol.⁵⁹ Even public health officials like the People's Commissar of Health Nikolai Semashko decried these masculine women with their "disheveled, frequently dirty hair, a cigarette between her lips (like a man), deliberately gruff manners (like a man) deliberately rude voice (like a man), etc."

⁵⁷ RGASPI f. 6, op. 8, d. 11, l. 32.

⁵⁸ Rozin, *Osnovnye problemy komsomola*, 45.

⁵⁹ Orlov, "Omuzhchivat'sia," *Rabochii kliuch*, March 3 1925, 2; A. Statonitskii, *Voprosy byta v komsomole* (Leningrad: Privoi, 1926), 20-21.

as violations of nature itself. “Women at the very least in the present and the near future [have] their own social function and special character traits,” he wrote.⁶⁰

Girls were at pains to find a middle ground. On the one hand outward displays of femininity were considered taboo and threatened to divert the attention of sexually charged boys away from Komsomol business. On the other, girls’ efforts to erase their feminine appearance were met with scorn and isolation for their self-masculinization. This gender conundrum was seen in the story of Klasha. When Klasha joined her cell, her beauty made her an instant hit with the boys. “Klasha was a favorite of ours. Before you was a terribly pretty girl, well dressed, with plaited braids, and in it a bow bounced like some kind of butterfly. It must be said that many of our guys terribly liked her. Many of them approached the other girls but their hearts lay more on this one.” When Klasha gave a speech on petty bourgeois ideology, the cell secretary called her a hypocrite for “not living by the words she spoke.” Apparently her beauty and feminine appearance contradicted her communist stance. Her braids were singled out in particular as an un-communist symbol. After being criticized, Klasha adopted the “Komsomol look”: “She got rid of the bow, braids, and colored stockings in exchange for a cap. She even started smoking. . .” Adopting the Komsomol look resulted in her losing her attractiveness to boys. “Our komsomols stopped fancying her, no one walked her home, or went to the skating rink with her, and general attention toward her went to zero.” Cell meetings went on without interruption. The boys were able to fixate their attention on the

⁶⁰ Quoted in Frances Lee Bernstein, *The dictatorship of sex: lifestyle advice for the Soviet masses* (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), 71.

issues at hand rather than on Klasha's bouncing butterfly-like bow. "Why [go out] with this kind of girl? It's a man in a skirt, nothing more."⁶¹ Girls like Klasha defined the borders of masculinity itself. Appearing and acting feminine prevented a girl from becoming a true communist. But adopting the codes that made her a genuine young communist not only turned her into a "man in a skirt," perhaps even more telling, these mannerisms also de-sexed her as an object of male lust; an objectification rooted in her femininity.

"Every guy swarms around me and plays nasty tricks."

Unlike most youth organizations in Europe at the time, the Komsomol was open to boys and girls.⁶² There was never any debate as to whether there should be separate organizations for boys and girls when the Komsomol formed in 1918. The revolution's commitment to women's liberation would have made separate organizations out of step with the times. The Komsomol's charter was devoid of gender distinctions, the only marker of eligibility was the category "youth." Despite its openness toward girls, the difficulty in drawing them into the Komsomol quickly became an issue. At the Second Congress in 1919, the Central Committee passed a resolution calling work among girls as "important and necessary." Yet this call for increased focus stemmed from the notion that girls were politically backward. Girls, read the resolution, were "the most backward

⁶¹ I. Razin, ed. *Komsomolskii byt': Sbornik* (Moscow: 1927), 324-25.

⁶² The Hitler Youth is one notable exception. For girls in the HY, see Michael H. Kater, *Hitler Youth* (Harvard University Press, 2004), Chapter 3.

element of the working class.” It was the duty of girls, “but also boys” to increase agitation among them. The phrase “but also boys” suggests that the recruitment of girls was not on most young male communists’ agenda. The League should be more attractive to girls, the resolution stated. It called for drawing more of them to meetings, appealing to mothers to urge their daughters to join, and for local cells to give courses on more female-centered themes like civil literacy, medical-sanitation, and nursing. In some cases, separate meetings for girls were tolerated, especially in Muslim areas where gender mixing was taboo. While the League made a specific effort to target girls, it stopped short of creating a special women’s section.

Despite these efforts, the Komsomol remained an organization of boys. Part of the reason was traditional discrimination of women in Russian social and political life. Girls were viewed as inferior, and naturally many of these broader attitudes were carried into the Komsomol. Women were traditionally subordinate to their husbands and fathers and their labor relegated to “women’s work”—childrearing, the kitchen and other domestic duties. In peasant society, girls were seen as a drain on the overall household economy since they would one day get married and go live with their husband’s family. Parents forbade girls more often than they did boys, and the Komsomol, dominated by boys, paid little attention to girls in practice. Overall, most Komsomol activism targeting girls came in cooperation with Zhenotdel, the Party’s women’s department, leaving little incentive for the League to conduct its own independent work with its female members.⁶³

⁶³ Isabel Tirado, "The Komsomol and the Krestianka: The Political Mobilization of Young Women in the Russian village, 1921-1927," *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 23, no. 1-4 (1996): 349-50; Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents*, Chapter 5.

Komsomol leaders and moralists were not blind to the problem of gender inequality. At the Eighth Komsomol Congress in 1928, a certain Niurina castigated the mostly male delegates for the lack of attention to the problem. “Comrades, if you think of it, one can walk away believing that the Komsomol is a league of boys and not one of male and female laboring youth (noise in the hall).” She underscored this fact by pointing directly to the gender composition of the congress. “It’s possible to think that the congress gathered here is a male youth organization (noise in the hall). Comrades, I will be very happy if you manage to prove that this isn’t so in this tribunal [i.e. the election of the Central Committee.]”⁶⁴ Niurina was stating the obvious. Despite efforts to increase female membership, the Komsomol was never able to create anything close to gender balance. By 1928, males made up 80 percent of the organization.⁶⁵

Not surprisingly, this imbalance translated into a disproportionate number of males in positions of power. Of the 656 voting delegates at the Eighth Congress, 589 (98.2 percent) were young men. This statistic was replicated right down to the cell level. At the beginning of 1928, cell bureaus were around 80 percent male. Males made up about 94 percent of cell secretaries in factories and villages. Among the 3000 Komsomol district committee chairmen, 2670 were young men. At the cell level in Ryazan province, out of 376 full time Komsomol activists in factory cells, merely 35 were young women. In village cells, out of 2,236 activists only 225 were female.⁶⁶ Moreover, as

⁶⁴ *VIII Vsesoiuznyi s’ezd VLKSM 5-16 maia 1928 goda. Stenograficheskiĭ otchet*, (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1928), 85.

⁶⁵ A Balashov, *Komsomol v tsifrah* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1931), 14.

⁶⁶ GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 730, l. 158, 159.

Niurina stressed, the number of girls attending school was falling. Even if the Komsomol was willing to increase the promotion of girls into leadership positions, there was a smaller pool of qualified members to draw from. As the Ryazan report explained, “There are instances when they promote a girl to a job that she cannot cope with because of her poor training.”⁶⁷

An internal survey shed more light on boys’ domination over Komsomol life. League activists ignored recruiting, promoting, and fostering comradely relations toward young women. The services the Komsomol provided to girls were mostly void of political content. One girl complained that while her cell had a knitting circle, there was nothing by way of political study. When special meetings and conferences were held, she reported, the scheduled speakers never showed up. Her frustration was clear: “Komsomols don’t let us into the club. We don’t go to the Komsomol. We don’t need it the way it behaves and avoids us.” Another girl from the village of Kuzyaevov complained, “There has been no work with us whatsoever. There was only one girls’ conference which did little for us. It presented political questions, but we didn’t analyze them because we didn’t understand, ask or speak up. We weren’t determined and they ridiculed us.”⁶⁸ Both of these testimonies point not just to the fact that girls were ignored, but also how their male comrades denied them participation.

Girls who defied the odds and joined the League were faced with boys’ constant discouragement, discrimination, and harassment. The Komsomol was a particular

⁶⁷ Ibid, 161.

⁶⁸ “O rabote komsomola sredi devushek,” GARO f. 478, op. 1 d. 929, l. 6.

masculine space and its maintenance was predicated on the exclusion of women. But ridiculing and teasing girls was not just a way to drive them away or simply forms of malicious sexism. Tormenting the opposite sex was also a way for boys to constitute and reproduce the space as masculine. A girl who was an object of ridicule turned into a pariah to other boys. The masculinity of a boy who sympathized or defended her was questioned. Teasing therefore also served as a way for boys to create and maintain a bond as boys through the exclusion of girls.

Girls were denied Komsomol cards, or simply not invited to meetings. Cell secretaries ignored demands to increase recruitment. Most went through the motions to recruit girls simply to pad their reports. For example, the Komsomol cell in the village of Gudelen remained “exclusively boys” until late 1925, when a representative from the Party arrived at the cell and called together a girls-only meeting. He managed to convince all those attending to join the Komsomol. Fifty-four applications were sent to the district office for approval. However, none of the girls received their cards, and they were never told that a membership card was necessary. Some were even refused cards when they requested them. The cell never invited any of the girls to regular meetings. When Komsomol and the Party district secretaries stepped in to force the cell to accept girls into its ranks, the cell played on well known stereotypes that religion and parental pressure drove girls away. The secretary told his superiors that 43 of the girls left the League “for religious reasons.” To further the cover up, the secretary held a meeting

explaining that the cards were sent out but their parents did not pass them along out of “fear.”⁶⁹

Many boys felt that politics was their own special preserve. For example, a certain Kharitonova complained that whenever she approached a group of boys talking about politics and asked them “What’s up?” they either stopped talking or answered “disdainfully because they cannot talk with girls as openly as they do with boys.”⁷⁰ Part of this reaction was certainly awkwardness in front of the opposite sex. But a lot of it was simple sexism. When girls were involved in the cell, they were usually chosen to head the local Pioneer group⁷¹ Even the well intended believed that girls could not handle complicated tasks. One commentator suggested that if a girl did not want Pioneer work, she should start off with “small tasks” like chairing a meeting as a way to let her show “initiative” and “interest” in “developing her independence.”⁷² But including a girl on a cell bureau was rare. For example, when one “compassionate guy” pointed out that “We forgot about a girl. I propose we elect a girl to the presidium!” the proposal was shouted down, and amid a roar of laughter, a girl was selected to represent the Pioneers.⁷³

Beyond their exclusion from the Komsomol space, girls were also targets of obscenities and torment. Ridiculing girls offered a way for boys to unite and reinforce

⁶⁹ TsAODM f. 634, d. 98, l. 154,

⁷⁰ E. Lavrov, ed. *Druzhba i tovarishchestvo v komsomole sbornik* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1928), 90; B Iunkorka, “Devushki v komsomole,” *Iunyi proletarii* 6, no. 92 (1925): 18-19.

⁷¹ “Otkrytoe pis'mo devushek-komsomolok ko vsem chlenam VLKSM,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, June 1, 1927, 1.

⁷² Naum Bimts, “Eshche o devushkakh,” *Iunyi kommunist*, no. 80 (1924): 27.

⁷³ “Otkrytoe pis'mo devushek-komsomolok ko vsem chlenam VLKSM,” 1.

their common masculinity. Much of the profanity uttered by Komsomol boys targeted girls. Cells often had only a handful of girls, leaving them largely isolated in a sea of male members. Typically, komsomol boys saw girls as “inferior” and rarely “addressed them by their names” but with cries and epithets like “old bag” (*baba*) “cunt” or “whore” (*shmara*), and “bitch” (*samka*).⁷⁴ Boys also shouted well-known sayings like “A chicken is not a bird and a *baba* is not a person.” Or “A *baba* doesn't have a brain for politics.” Komsomol speech was so offensive that sometimes “girls avoid meetings, are repulsed from Komsomol work so as not to get embarrassed from the colorful, overheated conversations.”⁷⁵

One way to torment girls looking to join the Komsomol was to invite them to a general meeting and ask them lewd questions about their sex lives. This usually caused the girl to burst into tears and run out of the meeting, to the boys’ laughter. I. Boryshev related other ways boys liked to torment girls. A cell would invite a girl to a meeting to evaluate her for Komsomol membership. The secretary would ask her to sit. When she did another boy would pull the chair from under her. The girl would “crash to the floor,” and the cell would burst into laughter. “Red-faced the girl would run from the cell with tears in her eyes.” Boys would also physically harass girls, especially if they possessed physical marks of femininity—wide hips, a large behind or large breasts. “We have one girl in the cell. Nature cursed her with a wide butt,” reported Boryshev. “Whoever comes by the cell now hits her on the behind like a big drum. The girl “heard” 15 so-called

⁷⁴ RGASPI f. 1M op. 23, d. 822, l. 83

⁷⁵ Poleseva, "Pomesi frantsuzskogo s nizhegorodskim, o "blatnom zhargone", o kulture rechi,"": 24.

“salutatory” pranks a night.”⁷⁶ Slapping and hitting girls was a means of hazing them. There were guys who considered it a “duty to slap girls on the back” as they passed by them or “to strongly pinch their arm so they jump from pain.” Some komsomols saw this as “genuine komsomol behavior” that brought together and established lasting comradely relations.”⁷⁷ One girl complained, “To hell with the Komsomol! I’m not allowed to go to the cell. Every guy swarms around me and plays nasty tricks.”⁷⁸ One such trick involved guys “passing around a box to girls with a penis in it modeled out of bread or a pancake.”⁷⁹ There were instances where girls banded together and took a stand against their male comrades. The “Victor of Labor” factory cell, for example, “split into two camps—women and men—and carried out a genuine struggle. If the guys thought that it was necessary to approve an issue, the girls would go against it, and vice versa,” one report explained. The standoff was the result of “the cell having a negative view toward girls.”⁸⁰

Dangerous Women and “Mustachioed” Men

⁷⁶ Bobryshev, *Melkoburzhuzaznye vliianiia sredi molodezhi*.

⁷⁷ Statonitskii, *Voprosy byta v komsomole*, 26.

⁷⁸ Mikh. Kurskii, "Pochemu ukhodiat iz Komsomola," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, February 17, 1926, 3.

⁷⁹ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 879, l. 44.

⁸⁰ “O rabote komsomola sredi devushek,” GARO f. 478, op. 1 d. 929, l. 24.

It was not just girls that Komsomol boys rejected. Their gendered worldview was one split into mutually exclusive notions of the masculine and the feminine. This exclusivity was evident in their use of *meshchanstvo*. It is difficult to provide an adequate English translation of *meshchanstvo* that would capture its many historical, cultural, political, and psychological meanings. Historians have defined *meshchanstvo* as philistinism and decadence, petite-bourgeois, individualism, and moral and personal corruption. In the 1920s, it was used to denote a certain class based psychology that was opposed to the conscious proletarian. In this usage, *meshchanstvo* was applied to anyone who possessed an innate bourgeois class character—Nepmen, kulaks, and to some extent peasants—or a person, usually a proletarian, whose psychology expressed so-called “non-proletarian” values. Whatever the context of its usage and meaning, *meshchanstvo* was always negative.

Within Komsomol circles, *meshchanstvo*, and its embodiment in the gendered figure of the *meshchanin* (male) and *meshchanka* (female), became completely subjective. “*Meshchanstvo* is a fashionable word in the Komsomol,” wrote I. Bobryshev. “It’s thrown around at girls in makeup, wearing good boots and not giving sex to the collective. For boys it’s used for those who wear neckties, dressed neatly, and have stopped blurting out curse words. *Meshchanstvo* is also used for healthy things: a clean room, prohibition against changing bed sheets, and also regularly bathing. The misuse of the label *meshchanstvo* is well known.”⁸¹ One example of its abuse was its elevation to a slander against women. *Meshchanka* was a particularly popular slur that Komsomol boys

⁸¹ Bobryshev, *Melkoburzhuaaznye vliianiia sredi molodezhi*, 62.

favored doling out to girls they found disagreeable. “Every komsomol must fulfill his sexual urges” and “a komsomolka must assist in this, if not she’s . . . a *meshchanka*,” was one saying.⁸² In this context, the *meshchanka* served as an equivalent to a “bitch” who flaunted her femininity by appearing attractive and desirable to men, but denied males the sexual exploitation of her body.

As Bobryshev’s comment on the elasticity of *meshchanstvo* suggests, its meaning tended to be associated with practices coded feminine. Expressions of beauty and fashion were particularly targeted. While Komsomol moralists like A. Stratonitskii repeatedly stated that communists “were never opponents to beauty,” that the Komsomol was “not a monastic order,” and “dressing up in sacks and bast shoes is not becoming of us,” beauty was nevertheless seen as a dangerous threat to the Komsomol’s revolutionary vigor.⁸³ Komsomols, and youth in general, according to one young communist, “have created a cult of outward luster.”⁸⁴ Girls who emphasized their femininity by wearing makeup, jewelry, fashionable dresses, scarves, gloves, and hats were labeled as *meshchanki*. Bobryshev described these girls as

[Those who] dress in fashionable dresses with large cleavage (regardless of the season). Scanty shoes that show the toes. . . When they go out they wear a thick layer of makeup, like dolls, they carry small handbags, with bracelets and rings on their hands. They avoid hanging out with workers because they are not their "type." They go around with "high society," with the children of specialists, Nepmen etc.⁸⁵

⁸² RGASPI f. 1 op. 23 d. 308, l. 45

⁸³ Statonitskii, *Voprosy byta v komsomole*, 18-19.

⁸⁴ T. Kostrov, "Kultura i meshchanstvo," *Revoliutsiia i kultura*, no. 3-4 (1927): 27.

⁸⁵ Bobryshev, *Melkoburzhuaaznye vliianiia sredi molodezhi*, 67-68.

Stratonitskii viewed coquettes as a throwback to the methods bourgeois women used to ensnare rich men. “The mild flirtation and a show of willingness, makeup, perfume, and a hairdo were all put in motion to achieve the timely victory to seduce men and attract several admirers to themselves.” he wrote.⁸⁶ Beauty, flirtation, and seduction therefore upheld the gender stereotypes that labeled women as mere sexual objects of men’s desire.

Beauty was not the only practice marked as feminine. A much debated anonymous letter titled “A Letter on a New Everyday Life,” labeled such diverse practices as neckties, sentimentality, and silliness as childish and feminizing, and therefore unfit for a genuine revolutionary. He called poetic expressions of sentimentality and romance “trash.” Lovers were to deny all emotion and attempts to adorn love with “a colorful bouquet of flowers.” Another commentator stated in regard to sentimentality that communists were “often ashamed to display [it]—after all it’s stupid sentimentality, “*meshchanstvo*.”⁸⁷ The ideal communist, according to a certain Nikolai Kartsev, was “serious, businesslike, showed disdain for all dancing and any gallantry, only sang revolutionary songs, dispersed secluded pairs [having sex?], didn’t attend village parties, only hung out with “non-party” guys for political discussions and not for fun.” Namely, a komsomol was to be a stoic, emotionless, impersonal, and single-minded young man.⁸⁸

⁸⁶ Statonitskii, *Voprosy byta v komsomole*, 24.

⁸⁷ Ippolit, "Pravo na liubov," *Iunyi kommunist*, no. 3 (1927): 60.

⁸⁸ A. Slepkov, ed. *Byt' i molodezh: sbornik statei* (Moskva: Izd-vo "Pravda" i "Bednota", 1926), 69.

Though a young communist man was to be sexually prudent, dating and sex took up a good amount of boy-girl relations. Because the League included youths between the ages of 14 and 23 years old, relations between boys and girls inevitably involved young men's first feelings of sexual attraction; sexual experience, emotional intimacy and attachment and thus helped constitute their masculine identity as sexual beings. However, sexual relations were rife with dangerous temptations. The *meshchanka* represented the biggest threat to a young communist man because of her seductive beauty, penchant for sentimentality, and hypnotic coquetry. Her fine dresses, hairstyles, perfumes, and flirtatious glances were seen as having wondrous powers over a lust filled komsomol. The *meshchanka* represented a potent threat to the masculinity of a true proletarian/communist, his austere asceticism and emotional toughness. Moreover, if komsomol boys were going to denounce as *meschanstvo* komsomol girls who embraced beauty, they could at least avoid the double standard and reject its sexual allure. As one woman put it: "You stigmatize every form of artificial, pomaded, and painted woman as a rude, coarse, sexual provocation. But meanwhile even Komsomol members and Communists cling to precisely these women and run from female comrades."⁸⁹

While such statements certainly point to the inherent sexism and age old double standard practiced by men, it also spoke to the real difficulty that komsomol boys had in finding ideologically suitable partners. Komsomol members were expected to stick to their own class when forming sexual relations. In his "Twelve Commandments of Communist Sex," the famous psychologist Aaron Zalkind urged youth to see sexual

⁸⁹ Quoted in Bernstein, *The dictatorship of sex: lifestyle advice for the Soviet masses*, 70.

relations as class based eugenics to improve the health of the proletarian body. Young male proletarians were expected to reject flirting, courtship, coquetry, “the class-sterile” notions of “beauty”, “femininity,” vulgar “brawniness” and “mustachioed” masculinity.”⁹⁰ Aron Solts, the Bolshevik Party’s own moral vicar, called for the reinstatement of class discrimination in marriage and sexual relations in favor of the proletariat. “Now we are the ruling class,” he declared in 1922, “and among us the same attitude must prevail. Intimacy with a member of a hostile camp when we are the ruling class must provoke such public condemnation that a person will think it over thirty times before making such a decision. . . One must repeatedly think it through before deciding to take a wife from an alien class.”⁹¹

Though Zalkind and Solts were not alone in calling on proletarians to stick with their own kind, few komsomols were punished for having sexual relations with the wrong class before the late 1920s. By the end of the decade, dating, or worse yet marrying, a *meshchanka* was considered not only to associate with the wrong crowd but an invitation to personal corruption, and even an open door for alien class infiltration into the Komsomol. For example, the batrak Sosipatrov was expelled from the Komsomol in 1928 for dating the daughter of a local disenfranchised citizen (*lishenets*). “As a result, he was carried away by the *meshchanka*, he abandoned his studies in school, and this eventually led him to completely forsake social activism.” Another worker named Strupov’s involvement with a *meshchanka* not only pulled him away from activism but

⁹⁰ A. B. Zalkind, *Revoliutsiia i molodezh’: sbornik statei* (Moskva: Izd. Kommunistich. yn-ta im Sverdlova, 1926), 85-86.

⁹¹ Razin, ed. *Komsomolskii byt’: Sbornik*, 66.

led to drunkenness and indifference to the Komsomol.⁹² The attraction of the *meshchanka*, it was said, was in her ability to provide the good life of a comfortable apartment, parties with lots of food and drink, and other entertainments out of reach to most workers. One komsomolka from Kiev complained in 1927, “The unhealthiest elements among komsomols are those who go out with the painted daughters of Nepmen. When you ask them “Why do you like such a girl? They answer, “First, she has a piano, an amazing voice, and when you come over, you sit on a deep, soft chair, and she, you understand, plays some kind of soulful ballad with her delicate hands.” What one reception costs her papa and mama! This is all done to make the daughters happy. You hardly see such a reception among workers. And then there is no interest in marrying a worker girl, or even a komsomolka, and they latch on to [the girl] with the drinks. This in my opinion is utter nonsense!”⁹³

While this ideological bluster was all well and good, the reality was that young male komsomols had few options but to get with a girl of the wrong class. Some komsomols viewed every girl who was outside the League as a *meshchanka* since they were considered more politically and culturally conservative, incapable of understanding politics, and influenced by religion. And given that there were so few girls in the League, getting together with a “non-Party girl” seemed inevitable. “We have eight communists for every one *kommunistka*,” explained T. Kanin. “Seven of eight communists will find a non-party wife and comrade.” This reality made resolving the question “according to a

⁹² P. O Udalov, *Na boevoi poverke: itogi opytnoi chistki v Leningrandskoi organizatsii VLKSM* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1931), 12.

⁹³ Kostrov, "Kultura i meshchanstvo," 27.

bare map absurd. It is not clear whether it's necessary to marry a communist and not a *meshchanka!*" Others just assumed that they could "re-educate" their spouses and bring them into the communist fold. But Kanin warned, "Comrades, it's hard to re-educate a person with an already fixed view of things, to make a non-party person into a party member, [to transform a woman] from a *meshchanka* into us, one of our own people." The same moralist also cautioned, "Sometimes the opposite occurs, when the leadership goes to the *meshchanka*."⁹⁴

Most critics were disturbed by the possibility that the *meshchanka* would rule over her communist boyfriend/husband or that her allure would sap his revolutionary vigor. Their fear was that young communist men would begin dressing fancy to attract a girl or spend all their earnings on taking her to the movies or buying her presents. *Meshchanki* also led some komsomols to engage in the very sentimental and flirtatious acts that were an affront to revolutionary masculinity: writing poetry, singing love songs, and other romantic gestures to woo a girl. One Moscow komsomol wrote about young men's obsession with fashion: "Among some youths, the culture of dress now dominates over all of their aspirations . . . They started looking down at other guys—at guys who focus on bettering their education. They say to them "What are you fussing over? Look how great we live. We get the best girls for ourselves." And the dandy (*shchegol*) and ladies' man (*kavaler*) ladle up these manners and expensive gallantry from the movies where they keep up with the adventures of socialite lovers with deep-seated breaths."⁹⁵

⁹⁴ Lavrov, ed. *Druzhba i tovarishchestvo v komsomole sbornik*, 85-86.

⁹⁵ Kostrov, "Kultura i meshchanstvo," 27.

If the hard, leather jacketed communist represented the pinnacle of revolutionary masculinity, the dandy was his feminized brother, and male version of the *meshchanka*. Dandies were typically young men who donned the latest fashions of the Soviet “Roaring Twenties,” swooned to the sounds of Western jazz, and frequented Russia’s urban nightclubs, cafes, and other nighttime hotspots to dance until dawn.⁹⁶ Dandies could be found inside and outside the Komsomol’s ranks. Though coded feminine in communist circles, the style and conduct of the dandy represented another expression of Komsomol masculinity.⁹⁷ Unlike the leather clad, jack-booted, emotionally cold Komsomol ascetic, the dandy was a colorfully flashy young man driven by pleasure and lust. Detractors described the dandy’s style of dress as a colorful mosaic of Western and Russian fashions: “An English jacket, penny-trumpet pants, a flaring necktie, patent leather “jimmies,” and a silk scarf that screams [of] a rainbow of colors.”⁹⁸ V. Slepkov noted that the dandy sported ragged bohemian attire. “The dandy’s culturedness is doubted because of his attire, sometimes, as ill luck would have it, an unwashed undershirt shoots out the collar or sleeve that incorporates red colors from worn in dirt—and his hands and neck are covered by a dark layer that says to people that they have long forgotten the road

⁹⁶ For the 1920s jazz craze in Russia see S. Frederick Starr, *Red and Hot: the Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union, 1917-1980*, 1st Limelight ed. (New York: Limelight Editions, 1985), Chapter 4. For a discussion of flappers see Anne E. Gorsuch, "Flappers and Foxtrotters: Soviet Youth in the "Roaring Twenties"," *The Carl Beck Papers*, no. 1102 (1994).

⁹⁷ Several terms were used in the 1920s to describe the Russian dandy. I have been able to identify the following: *frant*, *zhorzhek*, *shchehol*, *fat*, *dendi*, and *pshiut*. For a history of Russian dandyism see: Olga Vainshtein, *Dendi: moda, literatura, stil' zhizni*, Kultura povsednevnosti (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2005).

⁹⁸ Viktor Braunshtein, "Dzhimmi, galstuk, i shelkovyi platok," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, May 13, 1927, 3.

to the bath.” If the proletarian body was an austere specimen of will, health, strength and vitality, the dandy’s body was an abused temple of pleasures:

If you look attentively at [the dandy’s] face you see extinct eyes covered in a muddy film which is outlined by dark evil circles, a limp, flabby skin on the cheeks, a little touched up by powder, and anemic lips which hang down at the corner of the mouth—this is the footprint of sleepless nights, debauchery, and an excessive form of life. The dandy "burns life" and lays down "slaps against social taste" by their negligence, unscrupulous relations toward health, principles, and norms of behavior. They are addicted to the taste of alcohol, passion, and everything that awakens the tide of internal indefatigable strength and gives a feverish tempo to life.”⁹⁹

This description figured as the opposite of the revolutionary male. The dandy was not exactly of a “middle gender” but certainly not the symbol of male vitality. Rather, he appeared to Komsomol moralists as a zombie of the Russian jazz age. He was the undead of a decadent lifestyle.

While the dandy was coded feminine, he was not soft.. Alongside displays of sexual prowess he demonstrated his toughness on the street. Like their revolutionary counterpart, dandies were known for their impulsiveness and aggressiveness. Komsomol moralists often conflated the dandy with the street hooligan. He shunned social activism and study for the street. When he and his buddies attended Komsomol meetings, they were “always around the buffet, sipping beer.” They also seemed to take on the role of door security. Sometimes they were found “filling the role of a hellhound (*tserber*), grabbing the collars of non-ticketed patrons and throwing them out the door.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Slepkov, *Na bytovye temy*, 31.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 29.

Yet there was a motive behind the dandy's style, mannerisms, and tastes.

Dancing in Russia's nightclubs or gathering on city streets swooning to the romantic tunes of "gypsy music" enabled him to show off his sexual prowess. For along with his hip colorful bohemian dress, expertise in the tango, foxtrot, waltz or other erotic dances, had a certain charm rooted in the sophistication of high class, or if the situation demanded, the intellectualisms of Marxian discourse colored by the absurd. "When you listen to them," explained Slepkov "before your eyes stands the heroes from the *End of Krivorylsk*. They nicely explain from a "Marxist" viewpoint that "a horse, of course, is a conscious animal, but versus a dog, critics can't support this whatsoever." If their intellectual snobbery was not enough to impress a girl, their mastery of the "good tone" of aristocratic speech, interspersed with "the incorrect use of foreign words" culled from Soviet literary magazines, was deployed to make them sound attractive and worldly.¹⁰¹ Indeed, the dandy's speech was laced with words adopted from French and English.

If a Western lexicon were not enough, dandies took on personae from popular adventure stories or films circulating throughout NEP Russia. For example, one literati named Lenya Dergalenko, who wrote for *Krasnaya zvezda*, adopted the name Harry Piel after the famous German action film star. Dergalenko took up the name because an opera actress said he resembled the "dynamite director." After that, Dergalenko began to wear a mustache like Piel and go around like a "beau monde" (*bomond*).¹⁰² Dergalenko was not the only young communist to take on a hipper alter ego that placed being a ladies' man

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 27-28.

¹⁰² Kostrov, "Kultura i meshchanstvo," 27-28.

on center stage. Some young komsomols lived double lives; they were humble workers by day and hip Casanovas by night. The Komsomol Boris Kliuev, an electrician at the Putilov factory was a typical example. During the day Boris was an average worker and a komsomol, but by night “this komsomol was no longer your comrade.” Boris adopted the name “Bob” and even went around speaking with a “nasally French accent.” He traded his worker’s smock for a uniform more suited for nightlife: “spick and span bellbottom (*dudochki*) pants, Boston shoes, a starched, glaringly white shirt and silk scarf in the left-hand pocket of his jacket.” “Bob” was often found in a park with some “dame” and when his fellow workers approached him, he would quickly snub them and turn his attention back to the girl.”¹⁰³

While Komsomol moral rhetoric strove to distinguish the dandy from the upright young communist, in reality, the two often converged. The dandy, despite his immoral proclivities, could not claim a monopoly over sexually conquering women as a sign of a young man’s virility. Komsomol young men would play similar dubious games to ensnare pretty girls. “[A komsomol] “cleverly” sets his trap from the first meeting with a pretty girl with phony gallantry, expressions “to love,” not even stopping at deceitful promises of marriage.” Satisfying his sexual urges through deceit only got the young communist in a heap of trouble with the girl’s father, who demanded that boy “marries [her] or pay alimony.” For the komsomol, however, paying alimony was not “a good idea” and it was “too early” to marry. The result was that as soon as the pressure was on,

¹⁰³ Poleseva, "Pomesi frantsuzskogo s nizhegorodskim, o "blatnom zhargone", o kulture rechi,"": 23; Kostrov, "Kultura i meshchanstvo," 27.

especially if the girl got pregnant, “the guy tries to cut himself loose from this story, run away from the girl . . . [And] the naïve, inexperienced girl is left as one of the casualties.”¹⁰⁴

Indeed, like their fashionable counterparts, komsomol boys exerted their manliness by racking up sexual victories over girls.

Unfortunately, there are many similar cases of uncomradely attitudes toward women. Guys count their bravado by their victories. There is a definitive type womanizer (*seredtseed*), boastful enslavers of women's hearts. When he is with a girl, he speaks unusually well and finds the most beautiful words. When he returns to his circle of guys, he begins to boast about how he wooed her. Such boasting, such naked Don-Juanism has nothing to do with comradely relations.¹⁰⁵

As Ketlinskaya and Slepkov, who conducted surveys on the lifestyles of worker youth, discovered, komsomols often justified their philandering by emphasizing their commitment to social activism. Often komsomol activists would claim that marriage would tie them down. “I don't want any relationship in my life” and “I want to be an activist” were common excuses for jumping from one girl to the next. One komsomol girl said, “Relations to girls are never suitable. They look at how they can use girls and that is all. A guy goes out with a girl and tells her that he likes her, but after he uses her he says “No I don't like you.” He throws her away and moves to another.” Another, a certain Sh. complained, “We have active guys at the October factory who go by the saying “I got three, and I'm going on to a fourth.” Many young girls are in love with him and the guy isn't stupid, he's an active komsomol. But he doesn't love them. He uses

¹⁰⁴ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 822, l. 83

¹⁰⁵ Lavrov, ed. *Druzhiba i tovarishchestvo v komsomole sbornik*, 84.

them and brags about it.”¹⁰⁶ The sexual abuse of komsomol girls was so widespread in the cell at the Chernishevsky School in Novgorod that thirty-seven girls sent the following letter of complaint to the Komsomol Central Committee in 1926:

We ask the Bureau VLKSM to take immediate measures to liquidate hooliganism in this cell. At night this cell holds drunken parties (this happened in March) of both sexes, after which the guys badger girls with propositions about a ‘sexual encounter.’ The majority of the girls agree, but those who don’t are sent packing from the cell. [Members] from the city *raikom* come to these evenings and assemble an equal number of boys and girls. Many girls are pregnant and therefore live poorly. This Komsomols group [of female authors] left this organization and send you an appeal for the rapid cessation of this hooliganism, to shut down the cell and place its main offenders on trial. We state this summarily so that it will reach you. For this reason we ask that a commission be rapidly sent to investigate this incident.¹⁰⁷

Collective Castration

When Konstantin Korenkov’s name hit the pages of the Komsomol press, it was clear that he was hardly an anomaly. In fact, for Komsomol moralists Korenkov personified a “type” beyond circumstance and personality. “Korenkov is a type of “woman chaser” (*okhotnik za devushkami*) who declares “meshchanstvo” when a girl dares to not give herself up to him,” wrote the editors of *Komsomolskaya pravda*.¹⁰⁸ And like many other ethnical questions the League grappled with, the “Korenkov Affair”

¹⁰⁶ Ketlinskaiia and Slepkov, *Zhizn’ bez kontroliia polovaia zhizn’ i sem’ia rabochei molodezhi*, 43.

¹⁰⁷ TsAODM f. 634 op. 1 d. 98. l. 51

¹⁰⁸ There were other “types” of “woman chasers” featured in Komsomol discussions on relations between the sexes. Peter Konecny, “The “Red Don Juan” Assailed: The Male Role Model and Soviet Students, 1924-1926,” *East/West Education* 17, no. 1-2 (1996): 35-69.

served as a real life example scandalous enough to show how womanizing and abuse could lead to deadly results.¹⁰⁹

According to a press profile, much of Korenkov's background was archetypical of a successful young proletarian man: an ardent miner, ambitious, and intelligent but also tough, aggressive, belligerent, and violent. Korenkov was a 23 year-old student at the

¹⁰⁹ "Delo Korenkova," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, June 20, 1926, 4. The Korenkov Affair was too juicy to be left in the hands of the Komsomol moral police and Soviet courts. Packed with a lurid drama, flamboyant characters, and an ideal setting, *korenkovshchina* served as the perfect plot for the stage. Quick to realize its dramatic potential, V. M. Kirshon and A. Uspenskii adapted the Affair into the youth drama *Konstantin Terekhin (Red Rust)*. The play centers around Konstantin Terekhin, who is loosely based on Korenkov, a Party member since 1917, Civil War veteran, and all around belligerent philanderer who commands authority among his fellow students. A self-declared enemy of decadence, Terekhin is an archetype of the revolutionary relic. He lives on his revolutionary credentials, which he does not hesitate to throw in the face of his detractors. He and his circle of friends long for the days when bullets danced around their heads, their days set to the tune of sabers rattling, and nights on stealthy reconnaissance. Now in the "transitional period" revolution is only on paper, and the only solace to their boredom is to drink and reminisce. Terekhin is also a symbol of more than this. He also represents the crude proletariat who thinks that the revolution freed him from all personal and moral accountability. Terekhin is an egoist who only thinks of himself and himself alone.

Opposite him is Nina, a quiet soft spoken girl based on Riva Davidson. Davidson is hopelessly in love with Terekhin. So in love she continually puts up with his abuse. She even goes so far to think that she is the root of the problem. Nina is aware of Terekhin's philandering, and even challenges him on it. But she quickly gives in and believes his lies. When friends try to convince her to leave Terekhin, she acts as if everything is okay, and that if only she improved herself their relationship would blossom. See Uspenskii, *Konstantin Terekhin (Rzhavchina)*.

The real genius of Kirshon and Uspenskii's play is not so much that the drama, with the crude and witty Terekhin at the lead, doubles as a dark comedy. It is in their ability to capture youth relationships, culture, and life. The play raises ethical questions of sex, love, and marriage without making them didactic. Terekhin and Nina are surrounded by a cast of young people who hang out in the dorms, clubs, and on city squares partying and engaging in frank discussions about love, sex, marriage, and relations between the sexes. The realism of *Konstantin Terekhin* was so striking that it was translated and performed as *Red Rust* in London, Paris and New York in 1929 and 1930. As one reviewer in the *New York Times* wrote, "*Red Rust* has a stirring quality, and, even in dialogue, which in translation, sometimes sounds like parts of *The Front Page* crossed with Channing Pollock, it provides the invaluable essential of illusion. The people seem to be real Russians as often as they seem to be Theatre Guild actors, and you are conscious of the tremendous upheaval which that nation has experienced and from which it is creating its individual State and civilization." "Red Rust is Given by Theatre Guild," *New York Times*, 18 December 1929, 31. The Theatre Guild performed *Red Rust* as its initial production and ran in New York from 17 December 1929 through mid-February 1930. Though it received favorable reviews in the *New York Times*, the *Nation*, and *Vogue* magazine, the play bombed at the box office. It ended up losing \$13,000 and threatened to sink the Theatre Guild project. On the production of *Red Rust* see Wendy Smith, *Real Life Drama: The Group Theatre and America, 1931-1940* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 25-27. *The Front Page* was a popular Broadway comedy written in 1928. Channing Pollock was a famous American playwright from the 1920s and 1930s.

Moscow Mining Academy, Komsomol member, and Party candidate known for his ability to “conform to his surroundings.” He had arrived in Moscow four years prior from the dark shafts of the Makeeva mine in the Donbass. His journey to the capital was secured by his quick rise from a “simple miner” to the “personal secretary of the mine’s director.” After acquiring this position, he used connections through his local Komsomol organization to be sent to study in Moscow.¹¹⁰

In Moscow, Korenkov was known among his fellow students as a “disagreeable type” with a “strong character.” His cohort described him as the manifestation of Komsomol masculinity: he was rude, aggressive, and intimidating. He confronted his detractors with sprays of profanity. Despite his quick temper, he never lost his “unusual coolness” under pressure. In one legendary feat, Korenkov was said to have stolen a radio from a sixth floor dorm by “successfully advancing along the fifth floor ledge, and then effortlessly climbing, like a cat, to the roof.” It was this type of manly composure that made Korenkov move from robbery to homicide so natural.

Despite its gruesomeness, Konstantin Korenkov’s *real* crime was not the robbery homicide. His infamy came from the fact that a year prior his Komsomol cell attempted to expel him for driving his lover/wife (which exactly was a matter of much debate) Riva Davidson to suicide. Davidson, also a student at the Academy, arrived in Moscow in 1923. She came from Odessa where she spent the Civil War years as a “fighting komsomolka” working underground. Davidson was said to be a quiet, nervous young

¹¹⁰ G. Grebnev, "K delu Korenkova," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, October 14, 1926, 4.

woman. She explained the latter trait as a result of her difficult years in the Odessa. Those years continued to haunt her, inevitably affecting her ability to study.¹¹¹

Davidson was well liked among her comrades. In the words of a fellow Komsomol member, a certain A., “Davidson appeared an interesting brunette, intellectually developed, and generally liked. . . Her character was very affable and friendly, in the best sense of a good comrade, [she was] tenderhearted. Her abilities were above average and before the crime at the Mining Academy, she finished the rabfak well and loved social work.”¹¹²

Davidson and Korenkov met at a Komsomol party in the spring of 1924. According to witness accounts, she made the first move. By autumn she had moved into Korenkov’s dorm room in Moscow’s Sokolniki district. At first, Korenkov refused to allow Davidson to live with him. He argued that “living together would disturb studying.” Davidson, apparently under the assumption that their sexual relationship meant they were married (a claim Korenkov repeatedly denied), could not understand “why husband and wife had to live apart.” She remained obstinate and took a more passive-aggressive approach. She periodically brought some of her things over to Korenkov’s and asked his “permission to leave them in his room for a time.” This was followed by occasionally staying overnight. Eventually Korenkov “clenched his teeth” and relented.¹¹³ It was after this that things began to go sour. The cramped conditions in

¹¹¹ "Sud nakanune protsesssa Koren'kova," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 23 November 1926, 4.

¹¹² S. Smidovich, "O Koren'kovshchina," in *Partiinaiia etika: Dokumenty i materiallyi diskussii 20-kh godov* (Moscow: 1989), 380.

¹¹³ L. Sosnovskii, "Delo Koren'kova," in *Komsomolskii byt': Sbornik*, ed. I. Razin (Moscow: 1926), 126.

the dorm prevented both of them from advancing in their studies. “The circumstances began to weigh on them and served as a topic of daily arguments which ended in mutual admonition.”¹¹⁴ While the animosity between Korenkov and Davidson was mutual, accounts of the couple’s relationship identified him as the abuser.

Korenkov repeatedly called her a “hooligan” and a “Jewish weasel” (*zhidovskaya prolaza*), often spoke “about women in general with degrading expressions,” and bragged to her about sleeping with other girls. He even locked Davidson out of their room on several occasions to prove that he backed up his boasts with action. He also frequently invited friends to stay over forcing Davidson to sleep elsewhere. In addition, Davidson had three abortions in one year. After her last one, Korenkov locked her out of their room, leaving her still bleeding from the procedure with no place to go. During one fight Korenkov summed up his feelings toward Davidson with,

“I’ve told you a thousand times Riva, I don’t love you and never will. It’s impossible to love you. You are a freak, a bitch (*barbos*), a crocodile. All my buddies (*brazhka*) laugh at me. You are a philistine (*meshchanka*), and you prevent me from studying and growing. To me you are a loathsome woman. There is nothing between us and nor will there ever be.”

It began to weigh heavily on Davidson. According to her friend A., Davidson developed such “severe neurasthenia (in my opinion from the abortions) that she could not study.”

On 8 June 1925, a shot rang out in the Mining Academy dormitory. Students rushed into the room to find Davidson dead from a gun shot to the head. Korenkov’s revolver rested in her lap. The combination of abuse, rejection, repeated abortions, and an inability to concentrate on her studies drove Davidson to suicide.

¹¹⁴ "Sud nakanune protsesssa Koren'kova."

Rumors about Davidson's suicide quickly spread among the Mining Academy student body. Many assumed that Davidson's death was the result of her nervous illness. Though she appeared stable among friends, she was repeatedly overheard talking about killing herself. Most saw this as a cry for attention and never suspected that she would ever act out. Others suspected that Korenkov might have killed her. One student went as far as to say that there was no way Davidson could have committed suicide. He had run into her "a few minutes before the shot."

"She was happy," he said, "On that day she got a job and was going to work, she was excited." If he didn't kill her, said those who had been first hand witnesses of the couple's relationship he was guilty of leaving his loaded revolver out on the table just so Davidson could see it. It was said that Korenkov wanted Davidson dead because his wife was arriving from the Donbass and he needed to cover up his polygamist scheme. One witness said that Korenkov's "behavior was suspicious after the suicide" and that he was seen taking the revolver from Davidson's lap and putting it on the floor. Some students found that the fact that Davidson's arms were crossed as a sign of foul play. Suspicion of Korenkov only increased over the following days. One student claimed that "the night after the suicide a strange light was seen through a crack in Korenkov's door that didn't look like a light from a light bulb. Something was definitely burning." The rumor was that the smoldering ember was Davidson's diary, in which students believed she documented Korenkov's torments. Korenkov had burned the diary to hide his guilt, they said..¹¹⁵ An investigation into Davidson's suicide conducted some ten days after she had

¹¹⁵ Sosnovskii, "Delo Koren'kova," 128.

died revealed that any allegations that Korenkov killed Davidson could not be proved. However, the investigators' report stated that relations between them drove her to suicide.¹¹⁶

After conducting an investigation of Davidson's death, the Zamoskvoretskii Komsomol took the unprecedented step of putting Korenkov on trial for the "moral murder" of Davidson. It argued that his abuse of Davidson made suicide her only way out. Korenkov responded to these allegations indignantly. "You're all bastards!" he shouted after giving testimony that was "interspersed with rude profanity". He maintained that his relationship with Davidson was "purely casual" and that he never loved her. When the committee inquired about Davidson's three abortions, he waved the pregnancies off as "accidents." In fact, Korenkov claimed, he was "burdened by her" and he, not Davidson, was a "victim of blackmail and badgering."¹¹⁷ Despite Korenkov's pleas, the cell found "nothing akin to communist ethics in his behavior" and unanimously voted to expel him from the Komsomol.

However, when the cell's ruling reached the Party district committee (since Korenkov was both a Komsomol member and Party candidate, the Party was the ultimate judge of his fate), his expulsion was overturned. The Party was reluctant to interfere in Korenkov's relationship with Davidson, citing that it was a matter of "private life." Further, as one committee member noted, there was no Party law obliging members to be monogamous. The Party felt that it had no jurisdiction over the case. All they could do

¹¹⁶ "Sud nakanune protsesssa Koren'kova."

¹¹⁷ ———, "Delo Koren'kova," 127.

is reprimand him for “uncomradely behavior.” “[The district committee] took his youth into account,” L. Sosnovskii explained in *Pravda*. “It was content with giving [Korenkov] a reprimand and a warning for un-communist behavior and decided to expel him from the Academy, sending him to work in industry.”¹¹⁸

After the robbery-homicide, the Komsomol press erupted in indignation at the Party’s tolerance toward the abuse of women and its reluctance to involve itself with a communist’s “personal life”. L. Sosnovskii, while rejecting the idea that Korenkov “murdered” Davidson, nevertheless pointed out that people like Korenkov “who trample a gullible young girl with such frivolity” were “immoral in personal and family life.” His vacuity toward marriage was a case in point. “Korenkov didn’t consider her his wife despite the year long sexual relationship, and the resulting three abortions,” Sosnovskii wrote. Korenkov was with many women before and while he was with Davidson and he did not call them his wife either. “Just what is a wife in Korenkov’s mind? I’m at a loss to answer.”¹¹⁹

Sofia Smidovich, the head of Zhenotdel, could not agree more. She felt the Party’s moral court was staffed with hypocrites. “If [Korenkov] lost the trust of the state or stole party funds or beat up, even in a drunken state, a comrade or even simply defamed someone with swearing or anti-Semitic curses,” Smidovich opined, “expulsion from the Party would have been guaranteed.” However, when it came to women and sexual relationships the committee’s moral compass went awry. “It is a family affair,

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 126-27.

who can judge it. Who knows who is right and who is guilty?" For Smidovich the case was crystal clear. "Perhaps [the Party thinks that] marital relations give a communist the right to mock a comrade, to humiliate him?" she added sarcastically.

While Korenkov received the bulk of moralists' venom, perhaps more disconcerting was that Davidson's comrades stood idle as he abused her. If komsomols could not be trusted to police their own person, then the collective had to step in and protect victims and punish the perpetrators. Instead, komsomols were more apt to look the other way and pretend that nothing was happening. Smidovich did not accept that a fellow komsomol would claim that he was "not aware of the details of [Korenkov and Davison's] family life." Everyone in the dormitory knew that "they did get along," but students did not feel that they needed to intervene. "My pad's on the other end, so I know nothing," she wrote, referencing a common excuse for indifference toward one's comrades, "is a decadent (*meshchanskii*), narrow minded washing of the hands. Korenkov locks out his severely ill, literally bleeding wife in front of the entire student collective, and well, this is his business. He addresses her only with profanity and contempt and no one interferes." For Smidovich it was komsomols' indifference as much as it was Korenkov's behavior that led to Davidson's tragic demise. She concluded:

This, essentially, is the most painful thing about *korenkovshchina*. In a student dormitory what appears to be a responsible person, and yet is psychopath, who at the end of the day is a downright bandit. There is nothing particular about this, except that there are youths around him, living with him from day to day, witnessing his relations with the unfortunate Davidson, declaring his rudeness, cynicism, and his mockery of her, yet in no way react and denounce him only

after two brief commissions find him guilty of Davidson's death—here is the worst of *korenkovshchina*.¹²⁰

Korenkov escaped with his Komsomol membership intact. But it was his friends and comrades who denounced him. This signaled a sea change in how komsomol regarded male-female relations. Davidson's death drove home that the ostracism and abuse of women could have deadly results, and youths like Korenkov, needed to be identified and punished.

The Komsomol looked to mutual support and surveillance in order to reign in its male members hyper-masculinity. As the Korenkov Affair proved, the abuse of women could hardly be explained by one individual's sexism. Rather the Korenkovs of the League sprung out of a culture where young men dominated, and in order to maintain this power, sought to exclude women, even if this exclusion meant harassment, ostracism and abuse. Moreover, this exclusion of women served a more fundamental purpose. It was, in part, about reproducing young men's sense of themselves as men. As we shall see in the following pages, the privileges Komsomol men took, especially if they were afforded by positions of authority, at the expense of women and family drew them further down the path of corruption.

¹²⁰ Smidovich, "O Koren'kovshchina," 383.

Chapter Four

“Activists are a special element”

On 1 July 1926, the Komsomol Central Committee issued a memo to all lower organizations familiarizing them with a letter sent to *Komsomolskaya Pravda* from the town of Korsun. Signed “Svoi,” the letter detailed a lurid sex scandal involving a Komsomol cell secretary and district bureau member named Romanov. The scandal erupted when locals learned that Romanov had left his wife, Sonia Greenberg, and their newborn child for a sixteen year old Pioneer girl named Kasaeva. According to the letter, Romanov began an affair with Kasaeva while serving as her Pioneer troop master. “Svoi” believed that Komsomol activists like Romanov should lead a pristine personal and public lives and shun the moral dangers of adultery and licentious sex. Accordingly, he depicted Romanov’s liaison as an act of “moral murder” against both Greenberg and Kasaeva. Usually, such personal matters were dealt with swiftly and quietly through the Komsomol’s Conflict Commission. However, Romanov’s philandering was merely the immoral spark that ignited a politically inflammatory blaze. Romanov, aided by his personal connections, managed to thwart attempts to expel him. This amounted to a violation of League democracy, and turned Romanov from a predator of the young and a family destroyer into a corrupt activist, who had no qualms about exerting his power to protect himself at the expense of the League’s public name.

To say the least, ‘Svoi’ was outraged by this overt abuse of power, political coercion, and sexual lechery. What was once a proud organization, the supplicant

lamented, to which parents were excited to send their children, was now a cesspool of personal and institutional corruption. “Svoi” even claimed that other komsomols began taking up Romanov’s “example” and started trolling the Young Pioneers for girls. “And where did our tactics, charter, program and discipline disappear to? Who will now come into our ranks, who could join such ranks, and what worker would allow their children into our ranks if everyone disregards tactics? . . . This is not our Komsomol. There should not be sickness in our ranks . . . Our ranks must be healthy. We honestly say that we are an upright and strong organization, and at any moment all this sickness can be excised and make a healthy daily life.”¹

As “Svoi” emphasized, Romanov and his patrons repeatedly used “pressure” (*zazhim*) against criticism from the rank and file. This constituted a violation of the League’s democracy. Komsomol internal democracy gave rank and file a check against activists’ authority, if the latter violated Komsomol ethics and political doctrine. It was designed to close the gap between the rank and file and activists. Officially, the latter’s authority was derived from the former. If an activist violated the consensus of the majority (as long as that consensus was within the confines of Komsomol’s political line), he was duty bound to accept their judgment. However, rank and file condemnations of unethical behavior rarely became overt political contests. Thousands of komsomols were expelled for so-called moral corruption without any gesture toward the political. The fact that Romanov had protection from “above” and tried to use his authority to silence his detractors made his affair with Kasaeva more than a case of

¹ TsAODM f. 634, op. 1, d. 98, l. 45-46.

adultery and preying on the young. It pointed to a very real problem within the League: the gap between rank and file and activists was widening as the latter increasingly considered themselves a privileged and essential layer in the organization. Negligence in dealing with moral and political corruption of the leadership contributed to the perception that it—and by extension the Party—were nothing more than a new ruling class that wantonly preyed upon the population with impunity.

Young “active workers” (*aktivnye rabotniki*) like Romanov—a cell secretary, district committee member, and a Pioneer troop leader—were supposed to be the cream of the Komsomol crop. They were not simple rank and file members. They were salaried Komsomol workers who received perks such as priorities in housing, education, Party membership and other benefits. For the majority of Komsomol staff, being an activist was a full time job. Komsomol activism promised guaranteed upward mobility in the Komsomol, Party, or if they desired, in state and economic institutions. “Activists are a special element,” Nikolai Chaplin, the General Secretary of the Komsomol, stated at the Fourth Komsomol Congress, “who we must seize upon in order to take hold of the Komsomol network.”² Activists were essential nodes in this network. They were the organizational backbone and arteries of the Komsomol, who shouldered the majority of day to day work and were the leadership’s link to its rank and file membership. Put simply, activists were people of modest power and privilege.

² P. Serebrennikov, *Vospitanie i vydvizhenie komsomolskogo aktiva* (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1926), 13-14.

Why did activists protect Romanov? Activists comprised a layer of their own, a social group that when push came to shove closed ranks and used their power to protect each other. Their collective defense was a way to protect their corporate power, privilege, and position. Expelling Romanov could set a dangerous precedent in disrupting their position, however meager and precarious it was. In this sense, the Romanov case speaks to several problems plaguing the “Komsomol network” in the 1920s. As the face of the Komsomol’s authority and in many cases the state itself, activists were put in a precarious position. As the mediation between the top leadership and rank and file membership, they were often subject to criticism from both as each tried to exert pressure to direct their activities. Activists’ malfeasance confirmed charges that they manipulated League democracy, were corrupt, and increasingly prevented the rank and file participation.³

Komsomol workers bound together to protect people like Romanov for another reason: their common experience as activists. Activist life was far from glorious. Many cell activists volunteered for Komsomol work out of commitment, desire to gain training and an education, or out of hope to rise up its ranks. But ambition came at a price. Hours were long and pay low, when and if they were actually paid. Their health and living conditions were horrible. While being an activist could take an aspiring rural youth to the city, it also sent city kids to the strange and inhospitable environs of the village. Moreover, criticism of their work and behavior rained down from above and swelled

³ One should not think that “democracy” in this context was not about elections. In the Soviet sense, democracy meant participation and criticism from below. For an exposition on Soviet democracy see David Priestland, “Soviet Democracy, 1917-91,” *European History Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2002): 111-30.

from below. Rank and file, like the ones at the 1st State Paint Factory, denounced their local leaders to the Central Committee. Newspapers presented them as uneducated, belligerent drunks and spun scandalous portraits of their moral and political corruption. For the majority of activists, life was one of low and middle management. Promotion usually meant taking on more rather than less with little rewards. Concrete payoffs came sporadically, and when they did not, activists spoke out or used their position to squeeze out what they could. The actual everyday life of a Komsomol activist was often tragic. Their positions could command authority, a few perks, and even respect, but the price was high.

Komnsomol Democracy and the Creation of a Caste

Technically, any Komsomol member could be an activist. The League's regulations required members to participate. Participation could mean doing as little as attending meetings to taking on an official position in the local cell. Every Komsomol member who "engages in active participation in cell work" was considered an activist, not simply those who were "elected or hold a position or give speeches at meetings" as many assumed.⁴ As V. Kuzmin reminded readers in the *ABCs of a Komsomolets*, "the Komsomol demands from every member activism (*aktivnost'*) in the struggle, labor and

⁴ Serebrennikov, *Vospitanie i vydvizhenie komsomolskogo aktiva*, 22.

study, it stands as the foremost condition of his membership.”⁵ Sometimes becoming an activist was as simple as this commentator explained:

They call to the cell komsomol-newcomer, who is still unaccustomed to his komsomol position and ask him: “What kind of work do you want in the cell? What interests you the most?” The fellow is at a loss and answers, “I’ll do whatever you give me.” Well, they do [give him whatever] without finding out what this guy is skilled in.”⁶

But active participation in League work was not just a condition of membership. Participation was essential for League democracy. Nikolai Chaplin defined Komsomol democracy as: “Every Komsomol actively participating in the life of the League, carrying whatever specific work, [that was] meaningful and useful to him, no matter how small, but directed in the general course of socialist construction.”⁷ Mass participation rather than election was supposed to check the authority of activists and hold the former accountable to the latter and close the gap between the apparatus and the masses. The more rank and filers played an active role in the Komsomol affairs, the more its leadership represented the membership.

Yet, getting youth involved in their local cell on a day to day basis was difficult to accomplish. Activist work took a lot of time and young people found it difficult to squeeze activism into their everyday lives. Activism pulled youth away from their friends, leisure and entertainment. Most members were satisfied with maintaining a bare

⁵ Vl. Vitin and A. Slepko, *Azbuka komsomol'tsa*, Biblioteka raboche-krest'ianskoi molodezhi; ([Moskva]: Novaia Moskva, 1926), 100.

⁶ M. Teterin, "Zhizn i rabota komsomola v mestakh," *Izvestiia TsK VLKSM*, no. 1 (1926): 6.

⁷ RGASPI f. 1M op. 2. d. 19, l. 93

minimum commitment—going to a meeting here or to a demonstration there—or take part only to drop out shortly thereafter. This inevitably resulted in a demand for full time professional Komsomol activists to shoulder the majority of the League work.

Despite the Komsomol's populist impulses, in reality, a small layer of members were responsible for carrying out the vast majority of Komsomol work. Moreover, they were recognized and referred to as a particular stratum of the organization. Speeches, statistical studies, and articles were devoted to the evaluation of their work, and social conditions. Activist positions included “elected” posts like cell, district, provincial and Central Committee bureaus as well as administrative roles such as political instructors, agitators, and organizers.⁸ Many active workers were full or part-time Komsomol employees, who found in the League their sole source of income; others, especially at the cell and district levels volunteered.

Though activists occupied distinct positions within the Komsomol hierarchy, there was no formal evaluation procedure, screening or interview for a rank and file member to become an activist.⁹ A budding activist did not have to apply or demonstrate

⁸ For a list of the various workers in the Pribaikal gubkom in 1921 see V. M. Pykin, *Istoriia komsomola Buryatii: dokumenty, fakty, imena 1920-1991* (Ulan-Udz, 2002), 14.

⁹ To aid in this transition from revolution to construction, the Komsomol conducted a review (*peresmotr*) of its activists in 1922. This screening was not just to evaluate the competency of its activists, but also to get an account of who was available. Activists were to appear in front of their committee, present a short autobiography, where they described their Komsomol work, experience and attitude toward it, and what type of duties they would want to fulfill in the future. These materials were then evaluated by a Party-Komsomol committee before a general meeting.⁹ The purpose of the review, a certain Grebenev explained, was to ensure that activists understood that “now work must be administrative, and primarily pedagogical-educative.” Moreover, activists were to lead by example and maintain the Komsomol's authority among the masses. The post-Civil War activist was to be a serious, organized, conscientious, accurate, orderly, abstinent, the “masters of politics and the Party's policy,” a coordinator who was “politically developed enough” to answer any komsomol's questions, and a knower of facts. See Serebrennikov, *Vospitanie i vydizhenie komsomolskogo aktiva*, 20-21.

any adherence or knowledge of Marxist ideology. Most activists had only a basic grasp of reading and writing. Often a youth was given the position of cell secretary because he was the only one who could read. A member, therefore, could become an activist simply by having a modicum of skill, showing a desire, and a measure of responsibility for carrying out the League's work.

In the absence of popular participation, the Komsomol used elections to strengthen rank and file influence over activists and bolster internal democracy. Komsomol elections were a combination of appointment from above and confirmation from below. When there was a need to elect a new district bureau - the provincial committee would submit a list of candidates. Cell delegates then voted on the list and approved it. Yet the relationship between the Komsomol's upper and lower committees was circular. This elected bureau for example would submit lists of cell secretaries to be elected and take part in the approval on a new provincial bureau. But since conferences were infrequent (about once a year) many bureaus were appointed in the meantime and then approved via vote post-facto. According to A. A. Slezin, the practice of appointing activists between conferences reduced elections to a mere formality already by 1921.¹⁰ As one 1927 report from Ryazan noted, "In several districts the promotion of activists occurs through giving guys individual assignments."¹¹

Even though bureau candidates were "appointed," cells did not always accept the choices given to them. Granted, members could not declare their candidacy for positions.

¹⁰ A. A. Slezin, "Aktiv v strukture komsomola v rogy NEPa," in *Obshchestvenno-politicheskaya zhizn Rossiiskoi provintsii XX veka* (Tambov: 1993), 62.

¹¹ GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 730, l. 161.

Candidates were put forward on lists submitted for vote. Members voted by placing a mark next to the names they wanted elected and left blank those they did not. The election for nine seats for the Pribaikal provincial committee (*gubkom*) at the First Pribaikal Conference in 1920 occurred as follows:

The elections of the *gubkom*. Cde. Lentsner put forward the following list of names of active workers: Abramov, Gobernnik, Krylov, Yakobson, Koton, Legkov, Pilienko, Rovenskaya, Smirnov. The following were added: Pesechnik, Alekhin, Agafonov, Stolyar.

After the recording the “for” and “against” the vote shows the following: Abramov – 23; Gobernnik – 26; Krylov – 29; Yakobson – 33; Pilienko – 36; Smirnov – 33; Pasechnik – 26; Stolyar – 22 and Agafonov – 22; are *gubkom* members; Koton – 20; Alekhin – 21, Legkov – 21; and Rovenskaya are *gubkom* candidates.¹²

Thus a list was presented to the delegates by a certain Lentsner, presumably a representative of the Central Committee (TsK) or perhaps the Party. The delegates approved the list with several changes. First, four extra names were added. They may have been added by the delegates or perhaps they were simply last minute additions from “above.” Second, not all of the names on the original TsK list were elected as *gubkom* members. Koton, Legkov, and Rovenskaya, all original submissions, were chosen as candidate members, while three of the four late additions were elected as *gubkom* members. Moreover, delegates voted in favor of Yakobson, Pilienko, and Smirnov while Abramov, Stolyar, and Agafonov barely made the cut. Though all the listed members were elected as full *gubkom* members or candidates the disparity in votes suggests that some members were more popular than others.

¹² Pykin, *Istoriia komsomola Buryatii: dokumenty, fakty, imena 1920-1991*, 7.

Not all elections went so smoothly. One komsomol from Tambov complained to *Komsomolskaya pravda* that at a district conference, the district secretary presented a list of candidates “completely unknown to the conference delegates,” and he was being asked to vote for candidates he knew nothing about. Moreover, since the list had already been approved, it could not be altered. Nevertheless, he still voted but explained “I can’t swear by it because I didn’t know the majority of [those elected] and they didn’t give us any character descriptions.”¹³ As the letter implies, delegates could theoretically reject an upper committee’s candidates, but often they voted out deference to those above them. Voting for candidates out of duty shows the contradictory nature of Komsomol elections. On the one hand, members had power to vote for their representatives. If they did not want any of the candidates, they could simply not vote for any of them. On the other, it showed that there was little recognition that elections equaled democracy. After all, this Tambov Komsomol was not complaining about being presented set lists that constrained his choices, he was objecting to the fact that he was not given the proper information about them to make an informed decision.

Yet it was precisely this attitude to elections that brought rank and file criticism. The rank and file members saw democracy as something different. It had little to do with participation but rather symbolized the “League’s rejection of methods of pressure and appointment,” “widespread election and regulation of accountability of leadership organs before the masses,” and “the establishment of real relations between activists and the masses.” Some rank and file members saw democracy as the “unconditional fulfillment”

¹³ "Komsomolskie nozhnitsy," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, January 12, 1926, 4.

of their demands in that “They say that democracy is what we, the masses, decide.”

While the Komsomol’s leadership certainly urged that activists be accountable to their members, the idea that democracy was accountability without mass participation was considered impossible.¹⁴

Another reason why elections were not essential for Komsomol democracy was because the demand for activists made them inexpedient. The vast majority of interim appointments tended to be transfers to fill staff vacancies, reaffirm control from above, or mediate intractable disputes among bureau members. Often lower organs welcomed appointments because they got much needed personnel quicker. Similar to the Party, the Komsomol had a supply and demand problem. Demand in provincial areas was higher than the pool of well-trained activists to fill the positions. Appointments were a means for a local organization to swiftly get much needed personnel from other organizations, or promote within their own ranks without having to go through the electoral system.

Komsomol democracy was stymied by the conditions most activists found themselves. As a result, activists increasingly saw themselves as a caste. Few rank and file members willfully participated in League work or took on any responsibilities. Since most activists were appointed from “above,” they had no reason to be accountable to anyone but their superiors. But activists’ disregard for democracy had another source. Most cells existed by their labor alone. “Activists frequently take all the work onto themselves, run from meeting to meeting, delve into circulars, plans, give speeches etc.

¹⁴ Teterin, "Zhizn i rabota komsomola v mestakh," 6.

The Komsomol masses do nothing.”¹⁵ Activists tended to hold more than two positions at the same time and their overwork gave them the sense that their bailiwick was their own to do as they pleased.

The development of a caste of Komsomol activists was also a product of the League’s circular structure. Bureau members were able to ensure their status by presenting lists of delegates who would in turn re-elect them to their positions. Indeed delegates tended to be comprised mostly of activists. According to the composition of the delegates to the First All-Buryat Conference in 1924, 31 of the 47 delegates were activists at the provincial and district level, while only 14 were rank and file komsomols. Given the power activists had to choose delegates from among their own (many of which were already working in their positions), elections became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The electoral structure contributed to activists becoming a caste in another way. There were no term limits and members tended to serve multiple terms. There were even some cases where committees were re-elected over ten times.¹⁶ Demotions were rare (usually only by official reprimand or expulsion). Once an activist was elected to a committee, his movement within the organization tended to be up the ladder rather than down it. This is not to say that there was no turnover. In the 1920s, the demand for personnel was so high that activists did not stay in one position for too long. Ambitious youth found themselves rapidly promoted. A lowly rank and file komsomol could find himself running a district in a matter of months. Such was the case with a komsomol

¹⁵ "Aktiv yacheiki," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, November 13, 1925, 4.

¹⁶ Serebrennikov, *Vospitanie i vydvizhenie komsomolskogo aktiva*, 30.

named Boris Lennov. Lennov joined the Krasnyi Vodnikov cell in Ryazan in September 1921. He was chosen as its secretary only after two months and served three terms. After that he was elected at the Fifth District Conference to the district committee and then “after some time” sent to be its representative in the Provincial Department of Labor Management. By March 1922 he found himself in the department of sport in the Provincial Military Committee. In a six month period, Lennov had moved from being a rank and file member to mid-level provincial activist.¹⁷

Provincial secretaries tended to serve no more than one to two years. Sometimes less if they were transferred to a different organization. I. A. Strobykin was the responsible secretary (*otvetstvennyi sekretar*) of the Tver gubkom for less than a year from January 1926 to November 1927. I. N. Sergeev was elected to the Tver gubkom in 1925, became a member of its bureau a year later, and served as its responsible secretary in the beginning of 1927. He was in that position for a little more than a year. After that he was transferred to be the Komsomol TsK representative to Central Union of Consumer Cooperatives.¹⁸ Rapid turnover was not just relegated to the League’s lowest structures. Turnover in the Central Committee also increased with each Congress. For example, while over half of the Central Committee (18 out of 24) were reelected in 1921; by 1926 only 35 out of 93 members (37.6 percent) returned to their positions.¹⁹

¹⁷ GARO f. P-478 op. 1 d. 338, l. 57

¹⁸ S. N. Korsakov, *Tverskoi komsomol: pervye litsa* (Tver: Bukaitsa, 1998), 19-20.

¹⁹ Ralph T. Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth: A Study of Congresses of the Komsomol, 1917-1954* (Columbia University Press, 1959), 153.

Voting and transfers were not the only source of turnover. Another was the military draft. All males were required to enter the army at 20 years old for a two year Army service.²⁰ Conscription could be particularly devastating to the activist core of a cell. One activist wrote in *Komsomolskaya pravda*, “The position of activists in our cell is very poor. The Artemov district lost 48 percent of its activists to conscription. . . In our collective [the following] left for the army: 1) the collective secretary; 2) the secretary of the large workshop cell; 3) the wall newspaper editor; 4) the representative to the union; 5) the representative to the patronage committee; 6) club workers; 7 and 8) Pioneer group leaders. There are no replacements for them.”²¹

“Comrades Look at Their Stay in Syr-Dar’e as Temporary Exile”

There were other historical reasons for the creation of an activist caste. During the Civil War the Komsomol’s apparatus, where it existed, was chaotic and inconsistent. The war prevented solid lines of communication between its upper and lower organs. In an effort to consolidate its authority and establish a consistent organizational structure, the TsK, along with its provincial committees quickly began appointing secretaries. Moreover, activists were in short supply. The front drained organizations of personnel. The remaining activists were whisked around the country to organize or lead provincial and district committees. Frequent transfers and appointments further solidified active

²⁰ Mark Von Hagen, *Soldiers in the Proletarian Dictatorship: The Red Army and the Soviet Socialist State, 1917-1930* (Cornell University Press, 1990), 208-09.

²¹ "Aktiv yacheiki," 4.

workers as a profession. Constant moving from one locality to another prevented activists from developing professions of their own making Komsomol activism their sole source of income. After the Civil War, the tendency persisted. A 1921 survey of Voronezh activists found that 32 activists listed no general profession, while 33 put down “paper pusher” as their occupation.²²

The Komsomol's increasing reliance on transferring activists was an effort to allocate personnel more efficiently. There was an extreme shortage of personnel throughout the decade, and talent was even scarcer. “You understand, comrades,” Lazar Shatskin told delegates at the Third Komsomol Congress in 1920, “we have an extremely small staff of active workers” and there were “extremely few good [ones among them].” The TsK’s ability to tightly control this shallow pool of personnel became one of the few means to carry out its directives.²³ Komsomol bureaucratic chains were slow and often unresponsive. “District committees wait for the provincial committees, the provincial committee very often waits for the TsK,” General Secretary Tseitlin complained in 1921. Direct appointment of a known and trusted activist was a way to hold a person accountable and to circumvent the unreliable chain of command. Local organs seemed to have raised few complaints about appointments from above. They hungered for qualified personnel and repeatedly demanded bodies from the center. Any objections they had were with delays in getting people or how transferred personnel was often unqualified or refused to work when local conditions did not suit them. As a certain Breitman

²² Slezin, “Aktiv v strukture komsomola v rogy NEPa,” 64.

²³ *Tretii Vserossiiskii s’ezd RKSM 2-10 oktiabria 1920 goda. Stenograficheskii otchet*, (Moskva: Leningrad, Molodaia gvardiia, 1926), 243.

complained, his organization received thirteen new workers but “not a single one of them was according to the settled plan of transfer.”²⁴ Meaning that none of them had the qualifications Breitman had requested. The problem of transferring unqualified or useless activists continued throughout the decade. One report from 1926 stated that of the fourteen activists sent to Tambov, only two remained. The reasons were:

1) The ideological instability of some of the transferred (four comrades were fired for drunkenness and one committed suicide.); 2) insufficient qualifications for League work among some of the transferred (The gubkom fired three for not working); 3) Failure to cooperate with local activists (one comrade was fired); 4) the indiscipline of several comrades (two remain working by personal commitment to work.)²⁵

By the middle of the decade city committees were doing better. One study boasted that factory committees that a deficit in activists three years prior were now able to fill their vacancies. “Cases are extremely rare where a worker cell or worker raikom now sends an "alien" (*chuzhoi*) secretary. However there are still cases where there are not enough activists and it is necessary to send them to ukoms, raikoms and gubkoms from other organizations.”²⁶ Organizations in the countryside did not fair so well. Most indigenous activists wanted to be sent to towns while very few wanted to be transferred to the village.

²⁴ *IV s'ezd RKSM; stenograficheskii otchet. 21-28 sentiabriia, 1921 g.*, (Moskva: Leningrad, Molodia gvardiia, 1921), 123, 37.

²⁵ B.M., "Itogi posylki rabocheho aktiva v dereniu (po materialam Tambovskogo gubkom VLKSM)," *Izvestiia TsK VLKSM*, no. 2-3 (1926): 10.

²⁶ N. Mislavskii, "O litse komsomolskogo aktiva," *Molodaia gvardiia* 5, no. 4 (1926): 135.

Technically, activists had a say in when and where they were transferred. According to the rules, an activist had the right to be transferred to any locality in the Soviet Union but both the sending and receiving organizations had to agree to the move. If either refused an activist's transfer request, they had to give a written explanation. Komsomols transferred at their own risk. Neither the sending or receiving organization were required to "guarantee them work or material support."²⁷ Most transfers, however, occurred by order of an activist's superiors. And while activists could technically refuse to be sent to another organization, it was frowned upon for them to do so. Komsomols were duty bound to execute orders from "above" and committees often appealed to an intransigent activist's "komsomol duty and conscience." When that did not work, they simply threatened him with expulsion. For example, when one unnamed komsomol told his superiors that he could not move to the countryside because his family was poor, he was told that "if you don't go we will expel you." He eventually went "as a conscious and active komsomol," threw himself into work as village district (volkom) secretary in the village of Peski, and forgot about his family's destitution. After a successful period of work, it "no longer suited him," and he appealed to be transferred out of Peski or be relieved of his duties. Unfortunately for him, the gubkom not only refused to relieve him; it added to his responsibilities.²⁸

The Komsomol's reliance on transfers contributed to activists' estrangement from the organization and the communities they served. Activists spent little time serving in

²⁷ RGASPI f. 1M op. 23 d. 480, l. 14.

²⁸ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 315, l. 34.

one locality, especially in the early 1920s. They were rarely in a position for more than a year as they bounced from one district or province to the next. Rarely did activists come from the areas they worked. For example, from May to December 1925, the Kursk gubkom transferred 48 activists to its various districts, and only seven were natives to the province.²⁹ Sometimes transfers occurred as part of larger campaigns to fill vacancies in the countryside and national republics. Activists often landed in areas where they had no personal or cultural ties, had little understanding of local conditions and customs or, worse, found themselves in committees that treated them as invading outsiders. This is what happened to Dmitrii Yashin when he was sent to work in the Krech district committee. To his surprise the raikom refused to put him on the rolls and denied him any work. Yashin eventually discovered that the root of the raikom's hostility was that activists were "divided between "us" and "them" (*nashi i vashi*). Local activists tended to group together and view newcomers as aliens at best and at worse spies for the center. Disillusioned, Yashin decided to leave the Komsomol completely since "if a komsomol lands in Krech, he's not considered a komsomol."³⁰

Newly transferred komsomols could also become disillusioned or isolated. Often they found it difficult to adjust to their new surroundings. This was especially true for those activists sent to the countryside from cities and towns. These activists were often "unseasoned" for village life or politics. Many simply had no desire to work in the countryside. Urban komsomols were also said to be "afraid of the village and have

²⁹ Slezin, "Aktiv v strukture komsomola v rogy NEPa," 63-64.

³⁰ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 679, l. 38

shown weakness and have run away.” Some simply chose not to comply with the transfer. One report explained that activists “panicked” at the prospect of going to the village leading some to “refuse to work” and “sometimes consciously do not fulfill the decisions of League committees.”³¹

Repeated transfers could also be a burden on an activist’s family especially if he was the primary breadwinner. One komsomol pleaded for the Ryazan gubkom to stop moving him around. He had been transferred to six different districts, he complained, and could no longer do it because of the strains his constant moving put on his family.³² Another problem was that activists arrived to find horrible living conditions. Some did not receive their salary for two to three months if at all (negligence and slow paperwork were usually to blame), making it impossible to purchase even the necessities of daily life. Some activists were even taken to court by their landlords when they could not pay rent. Others could not find a place to live at all.³³

Horrible and intolerable local conditions prompted many activists to immediately look for a way out of their posts whatever the cost. They used tactics like foot-dragging, feinting incompetency or caused discord or scandal in the organization. To save face, not to mention rid itself of a useless worker, local leaders usually requested their retransfer. One report sent from Kazakhstan noted how four of their new arrivals—Mosin, Goldenberg, Bernat, and Koslov—used a combination of slacking, incompetence, and

³¹ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 400, l. 55.

³² GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 117, l. 86.

³³ Gavriushin, "O prislannykh "litsom k derevne"," *Kommunist*, no. 2 (1926): 18. For a complaint about not getting paid see RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 315, l. 34.

offense to be sent back to Russia. To push the matter further, the four refused to get along with their new comrades. Things got so bad that “feelings of mistrust” began growing in the organization because of their disparaging treatment toward other activists. Finally, the gubkom had enough of their antics and requested that the TsK transfer them out. “The comrades don’t want to work,” the request noted, “and constantly think about returning to Russia and look at their stay in Syr-Dar’e as a temporary exile . . . The Syr-Darinskii gubkom considers their further stay in Komsomol work in our province impossible and ask you to allow the transfer of [them] into your command and if this is impossible, we ask you to permit their transfer into Soviet work.”³⁴

Other activists tried to get out of their village assignments by emphasizing their service as a means to be sent to study. This was the approach Luba Zabolotskaya took in her appeal to Nikolai Chaplin. She explained how in 1924 she arrived in the countryside “full of enthusiasm, heroism, and devoted to all work, forgetting myself entirely.” Her dedication paid off. Soon after her arrival, she started a local Komsomol cell and even began a Pioneer group. “Everyone’s strength was directed toward work and the results were visible as youth began to hold their heads up high.” But after eighteen months of hard work, Zabolotskaya had enough. While her constant dedication bore fruit, it left her no time “to expand her horizons.” She wanted out of the countryside and go to the city to “learn or serve.” Then she poured it on to Chaplin, “It torments me that this is not Leninist.” She was worried that her personal desire would make her appear as an unethical komsomol. “It is difficult to find the right moral path” she explained. Despite

³⁴ RGASPI f. 1M op. 23, d. 695, l. 22

her moral torments she was determined to get to the city regardless of Chaplin's opinion. "I sincerely worked for two years to the end of the school year and now I will apply all my effort to get back to the city."³⁵ Whether she made it or not is unknown.

For the most part, being a komomsol activist was inglorious. Work was long, pay low and living conditions squalid. Life was one constantly on the move as they were unwillingly sent to places far from familiarity, family, and friends. In the end they were left with few options. An activist could succumb to their sense of discipline and duty with the expectation that they would move up the chain of command or they could leave the organization entirely. Regardless, the experience contributed to activists seeing themselves as distinct from the rank and file they ruled over.

Becoming Active

Why did a rank and file komsomol become an activist? Many activists seem to have been sucked into the work. Some were drawn into it because their friends were activists. Some had a craving for power or out of ideological commitment. Others sought to grease their path to a career. Generally speaking, activists had one thing in common, they tended to come from modest family, social, and economic backgrounds. The Komsomol offered some upward mobility that opened doors for getting out of the factory or away from the village into higher education. Activists had preference in school admissions, Party membership, and employment in state institutions. Often a few years

³⁵ RGASPI f. 1M, op 23, d. 313, l. 236

of activist service led to a free berth in a technical school or university. Activism also allowed a young person to establish connections with other Komsomols and Party potentates at the local and national level. Connections were resources for career advancement since promotion, Party and school admissions required personal recommendations. At the least, activism allowed for independence and an avenue for getting away from the tutelage of one's parents.

Activism as social promotion served more than a member's personal desire to move up in society. Since the end of the Civil War, the Komsomol was elevated to the status of "helper" and "reserve" of the Bolshevik Party. The Komsomol's role as "reserve" was codified in the new regulations it adopted in 1926. Only then it was clearly stated that the Komsomol and the Party were linked in a chain of promotion where "the best members of the Komsomol enter into the [Party's] ranks and must be prepared to be worth of fulfilling its great and laborious duties."³⁶ Activists were considered the "best members" and were guaranteed Party membership. The Party held periodic mass recruitments in an effort to promote activists on the one hand and strengthen Party leadership over the League on the other.³⁷

The autobiography of Semen Kozyrev offers a glimpse of the path a Komsomol activist took in the early 1920s. Kozyrev was born in 1903 to working class family in Moscow province. Both his parents worked in a Gerasimov dye factory. Kozyrev

³⁶ TsK VLKSM, *Tovarishch komsomol: Dokumenty s"ezdov, konferentsii i TsK VLKSM, 1918-1968* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1969), 250.

³⁷ *VKP(b) o komsomole i molodezhi: sbornik reshenii i postanovlenii partii o molodezh, 1903-1938* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1938), 93.

worked alongside his mother at a textile twisting machine until he was eight years old (he did not state when he began working). He then entered a village school but did not finish the first year. The outbreak of WWI brought hard times to the Kozyrev family. At a few months shy of twelve years, Semen was forced to quit school and return to work in the dye factory.

The war brought dramatic changes to the Kozyrevs. Semen noted that between 1914-1918, his family moved to the countryside where they worked “a small patch of land.” Before the war his family’s income came from wages, but during it they “had nothing, not even a hut in the village” to live in. To make ends meet, his father began working as a forest guard. The younger Kozyrev continued working at the Gerasimov factory first at a stamping machine and then as a packer. After the Revolution broke out in 1917, he fell in with a group of “social democratic youth” he had met. He was drawn to them because he liked to read the newspapers at their meetings. Soon after, he began spending time with a worker named Filimonov, who introduced him to the Bolsheviks. It was at this point Kozyrev became an activist. Along with seven other friends, he formed a “batch of youth” all aged 15-19 who “collectively” read the newspaper *Social Democrat* and “supported Bolshevik orators at workers’ meetings.” He also joined the textile union, where he was elected to represent worker youth on the factory subcommittee on wages.

In October 1918 the factory closed and the Kozyrevs moved to Ryazan “to build a life.” Yet Kozyrev did not join the Komsomol until 1921. Nor did he explain why he decided to join the League. That year, he volunteered for the Red Army, where he served

in a Special Purposes Unit of the secret police for five months. Perhaps it was during that time he was exposed to the Komsomol as many of its members served in these units. He began active Komsomol work in 1922. His Komsomol career took off from there. Already seasoned by revolution and soldiering, which made him a popular choice among his fellow comrades, Kozyrev was selected to be a district committee member, and by the end of 1922 its secretary. In addition to his Komsomol work, he became a Party candidate in June 1922 and a member eight months later. His rapid promotion into the Party and then from candidacy to membership was certainly helped by his class lineage, position as cell secretary and military background. In 1923, he was elected to the Komsomol provincial presidium as the chairman of its economic commission, a position he still held when he wrote his autobiography in 1925.

What can be inferred from Kozyrev's biography about the first generation of Komsomol activists? First, Kozyrev's social and economic background is representative. Most Komsomol activists came from worker or peasant backgrounds with little education. Since the Komsomol was geared toward lower class youth, becoming an activist potentially introduced them to opportunities previously unavailable. Second, like many youth, Kozyrev's activism allowed for a curious youth to improve his education. Time and again, he referred to Komsomol as a place in which young people collectively read news about the world. Youths like Kozyrev had new horizons opened to them, and if they were politically deft, could easily carve out a career at a very young age at a time where talent was short. At 19 years old, Kozurev was no longer a simple worker in a dye factory but an official within the Komsomol, Party member and a representative to the

Soviet government. Instead of working in the economy, he represented worker youth like himself as the chairman of the Komsomol's economic commission. His rise was smooth and rapid.³⁸ Though the benefits of activism might never materialize, then they nonetheless provided enough of a promise to attract youths like Kozyrev, and if they lucky, could improve a modicum of their lives.

Only after the Lenin Levy did Kozyrev's generation begin to give way to a new crop of activists.³⁹ The Levy not only increased Komsomol membership, but also encouraged the promotion of newer members to positions of authority. The increase in active workers was a way for the Komsomol to make good on its promise to promote worker and peasant youth. Yet it was exactly this promise which raised suspicion about their reasons for serving the Komsomol. These youth, according to one internal assessment of the League, "go into the Komsomol mainly to satisfy their personal interests: self-education, training, and sport."⁴⁰ Social promotion through factory schools, universities, clubs, "ensured the promotion of the deepest of the League's masses and education of a new cadre of activists."⁴¹ Unlike their predecessors, the new activist of 1925 was a raw, poorly trained, half literate, untested, and politically inexperienced youth who only joined the Komsomol a few years prior. This was especially the case at the district and cell level. The majority of activists in factory and

³⁸ GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 262, l.

³⁹ The Lenin Levy (1924-1925) was a mass recruitment campaign in honor of Lenin's death which brought tens of thousands of worker and peasant youth into the Komsomol.

⁴⁰ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 499, l. 98.

⁴¹ Teterin, "Zhizn i rabota komsomola v mestakh," 111.

village cells joined the Komsomol only two years before getting their position. One third of activists on district committees in Ryazan province in 1927 had only a year of activist experience.⁴²

Activists tended to reflect the characteristics of the rank and file membership in class, experience, and background. For the Komsomol as a whole, worker youth occupied almost half of district and provincial committees. Peasant representation among activists however remained low even in areas dominated by peasants. In provinces like Ryazan, where rank and file membership was predominately peasant, worker youth still were the majority of its 225 district secretaries.⁴³

To ensure that more experienced working class and peasant youth occupied secretary and bureau positions, requirements were introduced in 1926 for committee membership and cell secretaries. According to the regulations, intelligentsia (students) and youth from white collar backgrounds had to have at least four years Komsomol experience and/or three years Party experience to be on a provincial committee. Lower committees required three years Komsomol and two years Party membership. Workers and peasants however had to have less: at least three years Komsomol and one year Party experience for a provincial committee and two and one year respectively for lower committees. Membership on cell bureaus required no particular class background or experience though cells were urged to elect worker and peasant youth. These regulations tended to be followed, though not without some glaring exceptions. According to 1926

⁴² GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 730, l. 158.

⁴³ Ibid.

figures from Omsk, 342 of 472 activists were not Party members; this was higher in the villages where 404 out of 454 activists did not hold a Party card.⁴⁴

Most activists were young men, though women had more opportunity to be activists in the city than in the countryside. In Omsk women comprised a third of urban cadres, but only a sixth in the villages. Also the vast majority of Omsk activists had three years or less of Komsomol experience. Taken together, by 1926 the Komsomol's active core was male, less experienced, and with fewer direct ties to the Party.⁴⁵

Activists at the cell level tended to reflect their general membership. For example, in a 1923 book on the Komsomol in the village, Andrei Shokhin examined the Knyazh-Bogoditskaya village cell in Tambov district. The cell was comprised of ten members, all of whom were between the ages of 19 to 20 years old, poor or "middle" peasants by class, had joined the League in the past three years, and a few were former Red Army soldiers and Civil War veterans. Almost all expressed a desire to study, and perhaps saw the Komsomol as a way to gain more education. However since all were half illiterate and political novices, they faced challenges. The cell's three member bureau was indistinguishable in terms of social characteristics and reflected the rank and file. Leontev, 20 years old, a poor peasant, who joined the Komsomol in 1920, was a Party member, served as the cell representative to the district executive committee. He was also a member of the Komsomol raikom. He was the sole bread winner in his family which consisted of himself, his wife, and mother. Shokhin described Leontev as

⁴⁴ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 499, l. 56-57.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

“politically and generally illiterate,” with a tendency to “overestimate his abilities.” Yet much like the others, Leontev possessed a great aspiration to study in a rabfak. His fellow bureau members, Sorokin, a 19 years old poor peasant and Timofeev, also 19, were of similar quality. Sorokin joined the Komsomol in 1920, was a Party candidate, and doubled as cell secretary and member of the Komsomol district committee. Sorokin was “somewhat politically literate but “struggled on political issues.” He was “without any political initiative,” and focused more on restoring his farm than on cell work. Nevertheless, he came across as “businesslike.” Timofeev, the trio’s final member, worked on the staff of the district executive committee, was also poorly politically developed. His family responsibilities also pulled him away from Komsomol work as he was the main breadwinner for five dependents. He too had a strong desire to study.⁴⁶

The main difference between activists and the rank and file was age. By the end of the decade, activists got older. Over two thirds of the Komsomol was between 17 to 22 years old in 1927, but in Ryazan for example, half the activists were over 22 years old.⁴⁷ Half the voting delegates to Eight Komsomol Congress in 1928 were 23 years or older.⁴⁸ This is in stark contrast to activists at the cell level. In the aforementioned Ryazan survey, the majority of cell activists were 21 years old or younger.⁴⁹ An age gap between

⁴⁶ Andrei Shokhin, *Komsomolskaya derevnia* (Moskva-Petrograd: 1923), 10.

⁴⁷ GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 730, l. 158.

⁴⁸ Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth: A Study of Congresses of the Komsomol, 1917-1954*, Appendix D.

⁴⁹ GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 730, l. 158ob-159.

the rank and file and activists was emerging which further contributed to the notion that activists were a caste of their own.

Activists used a lexicon, usually adopted from Party speech, to distinguish them from the rank and file. They were identified by their overtly bureaucratic language, especially in the villages. Activists often incorporated the stilted discourse of internal documents into their everyday speech. Activists used words like “reconcile” (*soglasovyvat*), “coordinate” (*uvyazyvat*), “make it plain” (*vyyavit*), “ascertain” (*ustanovit*), and phrases like “concrete measures” (*konkretnoe meropriyatie*), “set by the line” (*napravit’ po linii*), “concentrate data” (*skontsentriruvat’ dannye*), “proceed to the right moment” (*pereiti k nadlezhashchemu momentu*), “raise a question straightforward” (*stavit vopros rebrom*). Activists even talked this “muddy flow of bureaucratic tongue twisters” “at home, around friends, [and] at the movies.” Activists were said to speak with terms and phrases alien to common people “to show off” by “muttering words with no regard about their meaning” to display their expertise and “imaginary education.” Indeed when one activist gave a speech littered with these words and phrases, the peasants “seized every word of this ‘enlightener’ and after listening to the report became ‘competent’ in international affairs. They decided that the Triple Entente declared war on the League of Nations; that they don’t pay the salaries of the mercenaries of global capital, and they assembled to strike.” Activists also showed a propensity to spout off slogans gleamed from the newspapers, speeches from Party notables, and from texts by Marx and Lenin that demonstrated more their dialectical diletantism. “On the one hand the sunset cannot be firmly declared (*konstatirovat*),” one budding dialectician was

overheard explaining, “but on the other it’s necessary to recognize the moonrise, and altogether perceive a definite lack of coordination [between the two].”⁵⁰

Another issue that contributed to activists’ corporate identity was that they were perpetually overburdened with work. Despite the ease in which a rank and file member could become an activist, there were never enough members willing to take on the League’s day to day duties. What theoretically promised to be a fruitful career move with future payoffs ended up leaving little time for anything but work. Because of the overload, activists had no time for personal enrichment and study, let alone rest and leisure. The result was a cadre that was not only overtaxed but had low morale, suffered from a number of mental and physical ailments, and lived a poor quality life despite promises of a better living.

Overwork was the most pressing problem within the Komsomol and the main cause of its cadres’ detriment. “It’s like this all the time,” complained one activist about being overburdened.

“The TsK rightly and appropriately started studying this question because it is impossible to work in such conditions. Frequent speeches (which are inappropriate to refuse), and various meetings take an enormous amount of time. It is impossible to fill one’s bag with theory and broaden one’s horizons. I think that the TsK must make a decisive conclusion in alleviating [the workload of] activists.”⁵¹

⁵⁰ S. Poleseva, "Pomesi frantsuzskogo s nizhegorodskim, o "blatnom zhargone", o kulture rechi," *Iunyi Proletarii*, no. 20 (1927): 23-24.

⁵¹ *Trud, otdykh, son komsomol'tsa-aktivista*, ed. Tsk RLKSM statisticheskii otdel (Moscow: Molodiia gvardiia, 1926), 20.

The TsK tried alleviating the burden on local activists throughout the 1920s by passing resolutions to limit the number and length of meetings, create subcommittees to improve the League work, and draw in more rank and file participation.⁵² Unfortunately, such measures did little to alleviate the problem.

A Komsomol cell secretary had to be an adroit juggler of time and energy. His responsibilities included calling and facilitating meetings, making sure they were focused and did not drone on too long, keep a record of members, their dues payments, and meeting attendance, write up meeting protocols and other papers, file monthly reports, coordinate the local study, drama, and other political educative circles, keep track of outgoing and incoming correspondence “from above,” among other secretarial tasks.⁵³ In addition, the cell secretary was the face of the Komsomol and in many places the Soviet state. He often had to be the liaison with the local soviet, sometimes even serving on it, the Party, and other institutions. He also had to address the complaints and needs of local youth. Though all Komsomol members were duty bound to fulfill the plans of their cells, the responsibility fell squarely on the secretary’s shoulders.

The most common complaint of activists was the deluge of reports they had to write. Secretaries were to keep a daily log of their cell’s activities and file monthly reports to their upper committee. These reports tended to be several pages that catalogued their organizations composition, mood, activities, living conditions, and relations with the local population. In addition, secretaries had to send whatever

⁵² Tsk VKP, *Spravochnik partiinogo rabotnika* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izd-vo, 1926), 28-29.

⁵³ E. V. Kodin, ed., *Deti i molodezh Smolenshchiny, 1920-1930-e gody* (Smolensk: Madzhenta, 2006), 36-37.

information and materials requested by upper organs. Often the amount of paper work remained ignored, was bottlenecked, or as one provincial secretary named Kliuchinskii complained, for the lack of supplies. “We also don’t send [reports],” he explained, “but not because we are against them in principle, but because there is no money to buy paper and we can’t print up the forms.”⁵⁴

It Is Impossible To Work in Such Conditions

Shortages of materials, endless stacks of backlogged requests from the center, circular memos, and other paper must have driven a cell secretary mad. Looking at the archival files of some Komsomol organizations, one wonders how much of the correspondence was actually read. Moreover, office conditions were not conducive to managing all of the paperwork. The dearth of office space was reflected in the TsK call for “the creation a special office for activists in several organizations.” This way activists would have a permanent place to work and an address for the TsK to send its directives. Most village activists did not have a separate office and most work and meeting space was attached to a local Party office (if there was one), the local club (if there was one), or was rented from a local resident. Another possible place for a bureau office was the secretary’s own apartment. Descriptions of what regional Komsomol offices looked like are few. One can picture a small room, with a desk stacked with files and papers,

⁵⁴ *Vtoraia Vserossiiskaia konferentsiia RKSM 16-19 maia 1922 goda. Stenograficheskii otchet.*, (Moskva - Leningrad: Molodaia gvardiia, 1928), 149.

surrounded by a few wooden chairs. If the bureau was really lucky, it had a cabinet to store its documents and supplies.⁵⁵ Memos attempting to discipline office work suggest that working conditions were poor and discipline was lax. One memo chastised TsK employees for throwing “garbage, paper, broken glass etc.” out their office window. Another ordered workers to make sure everything was in order before they left for the evening. This included making sure all desks were cleared of files and papers, doors locked, windows closed, and lights turned off.”⁵⁶

When they were not writing up reports and answering inquires, managing their offices or castigating their subordinates, secretaries were running back and forth to meetings, many of which could last for hours. A typical factory cell meeting was described as follows:

The meeting was called at 7:30. It's already 8. Only 300 komsomols out of 634 showed up. The meeting opened at 8:30. The orator hurled thunder and lightning on the heads of Poincare and Chamberlain. It was smoky and stuffy in the hall. Some talk in one corner, nibbles on sunflower seeds in another, and in a third some were ardently practice boxing. The orator says “in short.” The rows empty. The first speaker gives way to a second, the second to a third. After every report the chairman beseeches the meeting “Who wants to speak in discussion? Petrov, would you like to? There is a dead silence among the attendees; an unknown voice timidly sounds, “Everything is clear.” “Did the report have some kind of proposal?” Again dead silence. The clock already shows 12.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Serebrennikov, *Vospitanie i vydvizhenie komsomolskogo aktiva*, 67. For a memo complaining about TsK activists showing up late to work see RGASPI f. 1M op. 23 d. 292, l. 43

⁵⁶ RGASPI f. 1M op. 23 d. 292, l. 2

⁵⁷ Teterin, "Zhizn i rabota komsomola v mestakh," 5.

The fact that rank and file members were silent was not rare. Often they were not listening but rather talking to their friends, boxing in a corner, playing games like blind man's bluff or cards, or slouching down in a corner falling asleep. Some guys used the opportunity of close quarters to flirt with or tease girls. An indifferent rank and file was not the only obstacle a cell secretary had to overcome. Sometimes the hurdle was the cell secretaries themselves. Ragged from overwork or unable to juggle their litany of duties activists showed up to meetings unprepared. When a meeting in the Matusov factory came to accepting new members, the secretary suggested that they move on to the next agenda item because he "forgot the applicants' applications at home."⁵⁸ Unresponsive, disinterested crowds, unprepared secretaries, and boring speech after boring speech were made worse by drawn out sessions. Secretaries and attendees alike were just happy to get through the meeting, sometimes to the point of shutting down discussion. When members of the Bogushev cell wanted to discuss their secretary's report, he turned to them and said, "I'm tired. I just can't. I ask that discussion not be opened."⁵⁹

No secretary was a member of just one bureau or committee whether they were activists in the city or the village. As V. A. Kasimenko noted, "In the Krasnaya Presnia district in Moscow every cell worker has 14 meetings a week . . . and even the cell secretary has 14 meetings in a week, maybe in the village the situation is better but there it is even worse."⁶⁰ One survey of activists in Ryazan noted that in several cells in

⁵⁸ "Komsomolskie nozhnitsy," 4.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁶⁰ RGASPI f. 1M op. 2. d. 10, l. 109

Sasovo district “one komsomol held five positions.” One secretary named Dmitri Smirnov complained that one of his comrades held a litany of jobs: he was secretary of his cell, raikom member, responsible for leading three village cells, chairman of labor security, a member of the district peasant committee, a member of the village peasant committee, head of the reading room, and member the club’s board.⁶¹ It was normal, wrote one commentator on activists’ workload, that “5-10 members have a workload that is roughly for 40 members.”⁶² The multiple duties with multiple meetings caused a scheduling nightmare for activists. Often meetings overlapped or were set at the same time forcing an activist to choose which meeting to attend and which to skip. As one activist complained.

A Party meeting was scheduled (with my report) at the same time as a union meeting (with my report) and a Komsomol district bureau meeting (with my report). I decided to go to the Komsomol meeting and give a brief [of my report] to the others. To my brief they answered: “1) You are a Party member and don’t forget your Party discipline; 2) You are a labor union member and don’t forget your union discipline.” What’s the solution?⁶³

The numerous reports, meetings, and other tasks amounted to long hours.

According to one survey, the Komsomol activists worked an average of 9 hours and 26 minutes a day leaving little time for leisure, study, and sleep. Overwork even gave activists little time to eat. One activist reported that he had not taken a lunch break in over two months because he “couldn’t fit it in.” Another explained that the constant

⁶¹ RGASPI f. 1M op. 23 d. 504, l. 98

⁶² Teterin, "Zhizn i rabota komsomola v mestakh," 6.

⁶³ *Trud, otdykh, son komsomol'tsa-aktivista*, 26.

filling out of reports prevented him from having a decent meal. “I never eat lunch at the appropriate hour and eat hot food very rarely, but I snack on something.” One provincial worker said that his lunch consisted of “a glass of tea and a sandwich.”⁶⁴ “And it’s like this all the time,” wrote one activist. “The TsK [needs to] correctly and appropriately study this issue because it is impossible to work in such conditions. Frequent reports (which are unacceptable to refuse) and all kinds of meetings take up a lot of time. To fill one’s bag with theory and broaden one’s horizons appears impossible. I think that the TsK needs to decisively spell out the workload of an activist.”⁶⁵

N. Mislavskii blamed the activists themselves for their own intolerable workload. Activists, he argued were reluctant to delegate tasks to others and took on “3/4 of all cell work” out of mistrust of his fellow comrades or because they wanted to pad his resume with their achievements. These activists were so consumed that they did not understand that “if all of this work was spread between ten komsomols, it would not be "overwork.” Activists were also reluctant to delegate tasks because there was no one to delegate to. Indeed, many activists took on so much work because few rank and file members were willing to step up and take responsibility. Other activists were afraid to give out duties because lower activists and rank and file were too inexperienced and unqualified.⁶⁶ The reluctance to delegate created the very conditions of overwork that activists complained about. Not allowing others to get involved prevented lower activists from getting

⁶⁴ Ibid., 85.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 20.

⁶⁶ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 499, l. 49.

experience and precluded rank and file involvement in League work. According to Mislavskii, the lack of rank and file involvement stifled Komsomol democracy (which he and others defined as popular participation) and the reason why many Komsomols were leaving because “there is nothing to do” or “they don’t give me any exciting work.”⁶⁷

Long hours were even more difficult to bear because there was little compensation in return. Only a minority in a Komsomol organization were paid for their work. And those who did, received low pay. A rural district activist received an average of 25 rubles a month, while a city activist got 30 rubles. This was hardly enough to live and it prompted many activists to send appeals for more money, steal from their organization’s treasury, or quit Komsomol work altogether. Abandoning activism because of low pay was especially acute in the countryside during the summer months. With school out and no harvest to attend to, young activists ran to the nearest town to pick up extra income working in a factory.⁶⁸ To make matters worse, often activists’ pay was delayed, there was confusion over whom should be paid what, and sometimes activists were not paid at all. Complaints about low pay often went unanswered but they reflected the need and desperation of some activists. One district secretary named Nikolai Lutkov wrote that he received 14 rubles a month and paid 20 rubles monthly rent. He feared that he would be taken to court for not paying his rent. “This is utter mockery,” he wrote. “Do you think 14 rubles is enough for me to exist on if I don’t have my own farm and I’m in a strange village and must rent an apartment for 20 rubles?”

⁶⁷ Mislavskii, "O litse komsomolskogo aktiva," 133-34.

⁶⁸ RGASPI-M f. 1 op 23 d. 313, l. 198

Apparently, he was taken to court for not paying his rent and as a result, his organization threatened to expel him for violating “League discipline.” “I don’t know what to do in this situation,” Lutkov lamented. “I wake up, lying in a bed without enough clothes or shoes, and if I leave, the organization will inevitably collapse because almost all of the active workers have left. After all we have 73 people in the organization and several district committees have 30-40 people who are on the TsK payroll. They punish me for this letter saying that I engage in squabbles, but I don’t know how to work it out. . . If nothing is done, then I’ll probably quit.”⁶⁹ A district secretary from Ryazan described how his pay hardly covered his living expenses. His expenses included 24 rubles for a room with a desk, 5 rubles for dues to the Komsomol and other organizations. After all this he was left with 2 rubles to live on.⁷⁰ Others did not bother to explain their situation at length and simply demanded the Komsomol leadership pay for their work. A certain Levek wrote to the TsK saying that his activism left his family, who was living in Poland, in destitution. He often traveled back and forth to help them, but now things got even worse after his brother was drafted into the army. “I don’t work now, but study,” Levek explained. “My family situation is catastrophic. . . Therefore I appeal the TsK for assistance and ask to give me 10,000 rubles for my family’s relief.”⁷¹

⁶⁹ RGASPI f. 1M op. 23 d. 314 l. 74

⁷⁰ GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 730, l.162

⁷¹ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 104, l. 35.

Studying activists' Lives

Complaints from activists sparked a number of inquiries into the conditions of their private and social life. Internal and published studies focused on how activists allocated their time, sometimes down to the minute. Improving the living conditions of activists had its practical and ideological reasoning. Practical, because the better an activist lived, the better he would work. More importantly, the strict regulation of an activist's time would allow him more opportunity for intellectual and physical improvement. Activists were to live as examples to other youth. "Every komsomol, and especially activists," read one resolution on activists' health and living "must be an example of cleanliness and orderliness in work and also in everyday life." Activists were to be under "perpetual social control."

Surveys established that a third to half of activists were stricken with some disease or ailment. A survey of 125 Komsomol activists found them afflicted with the following diseases and conditions: anemia, neurasthenia, cardioneurosis, bronchitis, respiratory inflammation, tuberculosis stage 1 and 2, defective heart, malaria, chronic rheumatism, and poor eyesight.⁷² Activists lived among the population and were therefore afflicted with the common diseases of the day. Yet many of them also suffered ailments related to stress and overwork, such as chronic headaches and neurasthenia. As

⁷² *Trud, otdykh, son komsomol'tsa-aktivista*, 18.

one activist complained, “I work from 10 p.m. to 7 a.m. From 4 a.m. my head terribly hurts all day.”⁷³

Activists' living conditions only contributed to their poor health. Technically, the Komsomol was to help activists find housing, but shortages and bureaucratic backlog kept many waiting. Many activists were forced to live with their parents, where the long hours spent attending to Komsomol work caused conflicts.⁷⁴ The lack of housing for activists was especially acute among employees in the Central Committee. One report from 1926 noted that a third of Central Committee activist families were left without housing. Their situation had become “extremely critical” after the Party Administration Committee reneged on its promise to allocate apartments. Some activists were able to find a place in dormitories, others spent the summer months in dachas and returned to the city in the winter, and still others simply felt they were “at a dead end.”⁷⁵

The resulting desperation can be sensed in an appeal from Beliakov, a TsK Istmol worker to Nikolai Chaplin and Istmol Chairman Shatskin.⁷⁶ Beliakov requested to be moved up the queue to receive an apartment from the Management Department. He was fourth in line, he reported, and according to the Department head he was to expect an apartment five months at the very least. “I think that comrades in line ahead of me have more possibility to wait 2-4 months for an apartment because they all have some kind of

⁷³ Ibid., 20.

⁷⁴ On family conflicts see Chapter Four.

⁷⁵ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 695, l. 87.

⁷⁶ Istmol stands for The Committee for the Study of the Russian Youth Movement. See Chapter One.

room,” Beliakov justified his request. Unlike these comrades, Beliakov and his wife were living in the kitchen of a communal apartment. He claimed that because of these “abnormal conditions his wife’s health worsened every day.” To make matters worse, he was responsible for his brother and sister who were living in two separate spaces and he had to pay for three rooms at the same time. Such conditions, he argued, were having detrimental affects on his Istmol work. Also since the Istmol staff reduction in October 1926, all of its organizational and technical work fell on him. “I am extremely burdened with work as the only worker in Istmol,” he wrote. Moreover, the work in connection with the upcoming 10th Anniversary of the October Revolution was so great that he worked at home no less than five to seven hours a day, but only after midnight “when the children stop crying and the cannonade of pots and pans ceases.” If his request for a new apartment could not be met, Beliakov asked to be removed from Central Committee work so he could join the army because his present conditions were starting to affect his morale and health.⁷⁷

As one could imagine, TsK workers were not the only ones with poor living conditions. Komsomol surveys found activists suffering from “hunger and cold” in cramped and stuffy rooms. Few had their own bed, many slept in shifts, or two to a bed. The rest slept on the floor. Sleep was restless, five to seven hours on average. Some activists suffered from insomnia and slept one to three hours a day.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ RGASPI f 1M, op. 23, d. 803, l. 62-62ob.

⁷⁸ *Trud, otdykh, son komsomol'tsa-aktivista*, 85.

Overburdened, low pay, poor health and living conditions had a profound effect on activists' attitudes toward their work. The burnout was visible among delegates attending the Eight Komsomol Congress in 1928. Clearly concerned about the state of its cadres, the Komsomol conducted an anonymous survey of attendees to get "completely thorough and direct Bolshevik answers" on the life and work of activists. The assumption was that if the lives of the delegates to the League's highest collective body were in dire straights then, its lowest rungs could not must different, and probably even worse. The survey addressed questions of everyday life (drinking, sex and leisure), Komsomol work, and activists' general attitudes and aspirations.⁷⁹

The report demonstrated that activists were "split into two camps"—new and old. The longer activists worked in the Komsomol the more the job weighed on them. New activists tended to have a more favorable attitude to their work, one even went so far to say that Komsomol work was "the most lively and interesting work that always seethed with healthy creative meaning." This attitude was more prevalent among those active for less than a year. Seasoned activists were "weighed down and overburdened." "I've been working for six years," said on district secretary. I feel that I'm starting to not have the energy I did before. I'm sick of this work. I want to leave."⁸⁰ Another, a cell secretary, concurred, "I see work in the Komsomol as a job (*sluzhba*). I'm sick of it because I'm overloaded to capacity." Others simply viewed their Komsomol duties as "useless" and that they took "a lot of strength and energy" but "beneficial results are not seen." Such

⁷⁹ RGASPI f. 6M, op. 8, d. 11, l. 28.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 39

answers were not only found in this survey. Many seasoned activists wanted out. Seeing little benefit in their duties, activists were known to “go work in industry to get training.” “It’s better to work in a factory. I will not be a secretary,” reported one activist.⁸¹ When one secretary from Vladimir province found that he was not reelected to his cell’s bureau, he declared, “Thank god, I’m free.”⁸²

The disillusionment among activists was not just because of overwork. It was also that the life of an activist was one of political and personal conflicts. Activists, especially those looking to exploit their position for their own personal advancement, stepped on whoever they needed in order to get ahead. The conflict ridden and stressful atmosphere made some activists develop “irritability, excessive suspiciousness, and sometimes depression.”

Several activists pointed out how Komsomol work weighed on their morale as the deluge of paperwork made them long for the simplicity of factory work. “When I’m in the factory, I feel great,” wrote one union representative. “But when I return to the committee, I’m grief stricken: summaries, handouts, and summaries. I’m barely literate and [when] I sometimes make mistakes in the wording, guys laugh . . . I would be happy to go back to the factory, but they won’t let me.” Another, an ubkom secretary, was tired of the constant squabbling among committee members. “I was always in high spirits, but recently the squabbles in the apparatus of my region make me very uneasy. They unfortunately flare up not on the principle to fight for every Bolshevik comma, but to pad

⁸¹ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 499, l. 95ob.

⁸² "Komsomolskie nozhnitsy," 4.

one's resume—that is the basis of our infighting.” A secretary of a city district simply got fed up the sheer hypocrisy of his superiors.

I view life positively but sometimes depression seizes me especially when I see how often words are divorced from deeds. Take this example. Our gubkom secretary always shouts about proletarian morals and he himself left his wife and baby for another. They know about this in the Party gubkom and they just laugh. What remains is a child left to the mercy of fate.⁸³

One district secretary summed everything up with: “We don't have the special energy which moved Tsarist Russia to the October Revolution in our time. We remain far behind our old Bolshevik guard.”⁸⁴

Complaints about activists' hypocrisy and moral corruption did not just come from the activists themselves. Rank and file members flooded the TsK with instances of activist corruption and malfeasance. One komsomol named Ablov wrote that his district secretary considered “work generally unimportant.” He was more interested in “engaging in hooliganism, drunkenness, and playing the accordion.” No Komsomol work was done as a result and to make matters worse some cell secretaries were following his example. “Meetings occur irregularly,” Ablov complained, “the cell secretaries are under the influence of the district secretary, and the district secretary is under the influence of samogon.”⁸⁵

⁸³ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 313, l. 38.

⁸⁴ RGASPI f. 6M, op. 8, d. 11, l. 40.

⁸⁵ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 313, l. 38.

A list of activist corruption and malfeasance could go on infinitely. On one level, Komsomol activists were no more morally corrupt than the rank and file they represented. In this sense there was a measure of cultural convergence in their everyday lives. But the problem was that activists were not ordinary members. They were the face of the Komsomol to the rank and file and the public at large. Their corruption, whether it was moral or otherwise had political consequences for how the Komsomol was perceived. But considering the conditions in which activists worked and lived, their lack of energy, disillusionment, and moral decadence is not surprising; nor is identifying it really the point. What is important is that activists' shared experience contributed not only to a sense of themselves as a distinct layer within the Komsomol, but also caused others to regard them as separate too.

Romanovshchina

The Romanov Case, which broke in the Komsomol press in early July 1926, was a sign that the Komsomol leadership wanted to take activists' abuse of power and moral corruption into the court of public opinion. Like other scandals, the Romanov case was to send a message. It was to let activists know that such behavior would no longer be tolerated. To the rank and file, the case was to send signals that the Komsomol leadership was indeed aware of such abuses, and as guardians of their interests, would take appropriate action against the Romanovs of the Komsomol. In the ensuing months, numerous debased activists would be connected to Romanov's name to the point where

they symbolized a phenomenon: *Romanovshchina*. What was this new plague infesting the Komsomol's ranks? G. Bergman, who coined the term, spelled out the Romanov case and the meaning of *Romanovshchina* in two articles in *Komsomolskaya pravda*, "Untouchable" (*Neprikosnovennyi*) and "Boomerang." Both articles were based on "Svoi's" letter and the protocols of 1st State Paint Factory cell meetings where Romanov's expulsion was debated. V. Repin, the chairman of the TsK's Conflict Commission, referenced the Romanov case in his report on "On the struggle with sicknesses" published in the journal *Young Communist*. At the end of the media flurry Romanov and *Romanovshchina* came to represent activists' sexual depravity, corruption of the young, destroyers of wholesome family life, and in the words of Repin, "a complete misunderstanding on the part of several local organizations of communist ethics and the spirit (*dukh*) of inter-League democracy." The crimes of Romanov and those of his ilk represented all the ills infecting Komsomol activists as a whole and proved that the leading cadres had truly "separated (*otryv*) from the masses."⁸⁶

Over a period of several months in 1926, members of the Komsomol 1st State Paint Factory cell repeatedly attempted to expel Romanov for his adulterous affair with a Pioneer girl. Their efforts were to no avail despite public outcry and Romanov's wife's dramatic pleas to the cell bureau that they take action against his abuse. However, each time Romanov's behavior came before the cell, he trotted out the often played assertion that "It wasn't the Komsomol's place to interfere in his personal life," adding that "If I

⁸⁶ G. Bergman, "Neprikosnovennyi," in *Komsomol'skii byt: Sbornik*, ed. I. Razin (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1926); V. Repin, "Na bor'bu s bolezennymi iavleniiami," *Iunyi kommunist*, no. 22 (1926): 42-43; S. Smidovich, "O Koren'kovshchina," in *Partiinaia etika: Dokumenty i materialy diskussii 20-kh godov* (Moscow: 1989).

want two wives then it is my business.” He even justified his actions by claiming that his wife possessed a “*meshchanka*’s psychology.”⁸⁷ According to communist ethics, men were repeatedly urged to avoid entangling themselves with the moral corrupt and political suspect “*meschanka*.”⁸⁸ When his twisting of Komsomol logic proved unconvincing, Romanov abruptly ended the meeting but not before pummeling the cell’s members with profanity and threatening to expel anyone who brought up the issue again. As ‘Svoi’ recounted, “The cell bureau heard such authoritative words from a cell secretary and a raikom bureau member that everyone fell silent.” At another meeting, after he had lost reelection and was no longer the cell secretary (but still remained on bureau), Romanov changed his tune. “The bureau couldn’t do anything because Romanov began to put on some kind of act,” recalled “Svoi.” “He began crying and screaming that he would shoot himself if he was expelled. The bureau was afraid.” Romanov’s conduct proved his dubious character. “When Romanov was “in power,” wrote G. Bergman, “he terrorized the masses and used his position for self-defense; now he changed his tune and became hysterical.”⁸⁹

The cell’s inability to rid itself of Romanov was not just the result of his guile and theatrics. His position as cell secretary and raikom member granted him protection from “higher organs”—in particular, Svoi told of two raikom secretaries, Staliniskii and Kaniuka—who stood by their fellow activist and used their power to intimidate cell

⁸⁷ See Chapter 3 on the use of *meschanka*.

⁸⁸ See Chapter 3 on Komsomol’s men relations with decadent girls.

⁸⁹ Bergman, “Neprikosnovennyi,” 308.

members. Without their backing, Romanov's theatrics would have certainly gotten him the hook. According to 'Svoi,' Stalinskii and Kaniuka subverted any attempt to expel Romanov. At first they stood before the cell and argued, like Romanov, that his personal life had no bearing on his standing as a good Komsomol and activist. In addition, they questioned the charges against Romanov, claiming that they were overblown. He had committed only forgivable mistakes. After all, if "Trotsky could be mistaken," they asserted, "then why not Romanov?" adding "there is nothing to be afraid of and if he made a little mistake, then so what, who hasn't made mistakes. . ." Kaniuka argued, "Romanov went with a Pioneer-Komsomolka who was already 16 years old. She could already get legally married. Therefore Romanov did not commit any crime." "True," Stalinskii stated, "[Romanov] held an incorrect line toward the Pioneer organization. He undermined the authority of the cell. But this is in no way a crime. You can't expel him from the Komsomol for this, but it's required to give him a strong reprimand and put it in his personal file." When cell members challenged the two raikom secretaries, Stalinskii and Kaniuka turned to more forceful tactics. They "berated the komsomols for engaging in such nonsense" and labeled the cell's keeping track of "whose house [Romanov] visits" and spreading "such gossip" as spying. They also warned that "if anyone said anything more about Romanov they would be expelled from the Komsomol." They reiterated that Romanov "would never be expelled" because he was a good activist and raikom member. "Without his work you would have nothing," they scolded. They even labeled objections to Romanov's behavior as part of a political campaign by "squabblers" to disrupt the organization.

Armed with Svoi's letter, G. Bergman lambasted Romanov and his protectors in the pages of *Komsomolskaya pravda*. But what struck him was not so much Romanov's sexual escapades but rather the attempts to whitewash them. "What is the special meaning of the Korsun case? The bureau "cannot" in any way deal with one of its scoundrels (*prokhvost*). The entire cell is pressured first with intimidation, and then cajoled by rhetoricians from the raikom. They bent over backwards to defend an 'irreplaceable worker' in front of the worker masses. The special meaning of *Romanovshchina* is in the gross violation of inter-League democracy, repression [of the voice of rank and file], and the division of activists from the masses."⁹⁰

Romanovshchina was no longer about Romanov. Bergman pointed to an article in *Komsomolskaya pravda* from the previous month that chronicled how activists in Minsk shouted and mocked members, tending to use "coercion rather than persuasion" in their relations toward the rank and file. "When a rank and filer speaks, the activists sit in a bunch (*v kuchke*) and chuckle."⁹¹ Grigorii Abramovich, a longtime Komsomol member and Civil War veteran, complained that activists had become nothing but hopeless careerists and bureaucrats who "attach a star on their lapel" and think they had "a right to hold on to their posts." For him, activists who took on Komsomol work to ensure their "climb into the Party" were symbolic of how they had become a separate layer within the League. "The Komsomol is broken into two camps: activists and non-activists."⁹²

⁹⁰ Ibid., 309.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² TsAODM f. 634 op. 1 d. 98., l. 9ob.

Indeed, rank and filers tended to view activists in similar negative terms. They were called “staff activists,” bureaucrats and officials (*chinovniki*) who monopolized and controlled all speech and activities, stifled rank and file participation, or used their authority to coerce others and their position for profit. Peasant youth in particular viewed activists as “the authorities,” “bookworms,” “atheists” and “bossy” because of their constant denunciation of religious worship, forceful interventions in village soviets, and efforts to police the morality of youth street culture and sociability at parties.⁹³

In return, activists thumbed their nose at the rank and file and considered it beneath them to even talk to them. As one member complained, “Our activists think that members of the bureau—the secretary, political educator, representative to the ukom—are the cell and no one else.”⁹⁴ This division between activists and the rank and file was visible at the Twelfth International Youth Day celebration in Novosibirsk when activists went to the city demonstration while “a tight circle” of rank and file went to an excursion in the forest.⁹⁵

Some activists used their position to advance their personal profit. Activists in several cells in Smolensk province used general meetings to speak out against paying taxes. A Komsomol named Yazakov, a member of the volkom, told peasants “They squeeze us with taxes, there is no end, and workers are drunk with power.” Other komsomols used their position to embezzle funds. One telling example involved a

⁹³ Shokhin, *Komsomolskaya derevnia*, 12.

⁹⁴ “Komsomolskie nozhnitsy,” 3.

⁹⁵ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 499, l. 42.

certain Abaildinov, an obkom secretary, who embezzled 104 rubles from membership dues he collected. After he was caught, Abaildinov denied any embezzlement and argued that he was only guilty of miscalculating the dues. The money he took was for his salary. “Comrade Abaildinov is strongly convinced that he had a right to use dues for his salary” because, he claimed, “he had not been paid.” In another instance, Abaildinov was discovered to accept a blanket instead of dues from a member named Toidenazarov. Other activists collected membership dues but never turned the money over to the Komsomol. One report on from the Narynsk raikom stated that “the cell’s work is limited to the collection of dues. All the dues are collected by a representative who takes them in three categories: 3 rubles, 1 ruble 50 kopecks, and 90 kopecks.” The raikom activists divvied up the money amongst themselves claiming that they had not been adequately paid.⁹⁶ Some activists embezzled funds and then skipped town before they were discovered. One circular from the TsK warned members to be on the look out for a certain Vasilii Zaranin, a secretary of a village soviet in Novosibirsk who ran off with 186 rubles. Before he disappeared he made sure to steal his photograph, personnel file, certificates, references and recommendations from committees on his past work. Presumably, Zaranin figured he could easily turn up somewhere in a shorthanded Komsomol organization and begin anew.⁹⁷

Another indication that activists sought to protect their positions was their obstinacy toward promoting new activists. Since the Komsomol was the “reserve” of the

⁹⁶ Molodezhnoe dvizhenie, 175-177

⁹⁷ GARO f. P-478 op. 1 d. 682, l. 21

Party, promoting rank and file members into activist positions was a way to prepare them for future Party work and employment in state enterprises. Social promotion was seen as too slow. By 1928, the Komsomol still had too few activists to handle its workload causing much of Komsomol work to consist of pushing paper. “Ninety-five percent of an activist’s time is spent on a variety paperwork, on writing circulars, and on defining the so-called “line,” Chaplin reported. For Chaplin, this paper pushing translated into “the well-known danger of ossification of our activists, his bureaucratism, his isolation from the masses, and we must prevent this danger by firm and precise decisions and the transformation of these decisions into action.”⁹⁸

The instances above gave critics fuel to turn the behavior of activists like Romanov into a public scandal. But the members of the Kurson raikom were not going to remain silent to Bergman’s accusations. In response to his article, “Untouchable” the raikom sent a collective letter saying that Bergman’s narrative was “inaccurate to the core” and “did not correspond to the real state of things in the Kurson organization.” There was no “coercion” exerted on the rank and file or any “separation from the masses” whatsoever. They tried to prove this by saying that in the last cell bureau elections over half of those elected were freshmen activists. Bergman responded to this rejoinder by citing rank and file and raikom members’ statements in meeting protocols. Here is a sample of two statements from rank and file members interspaced with Bergman’s interjections.

⁹⁸ *VIII Vsesoiuznyi s’ezd VLKSM 5-16 maia 1928 goda. Stenograficheskii otchet*, (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1928), 46.

Marchekhovskii: The question of Romanov had already stood before the cell a second and third time. When Romanov was secretary he said that no one had the right to interfere in his personal life, and that he'd punch in the mouth anyone who carried on or talked about him and closed the meeting (*this is not coercion?—G. B.*). My suggestion: to expel Romanov for the corruption of the Pioneers and un-Komsomol behavior.

Sventsitskii: Cde Romanov undermined the authority of our cell. Raikom secretary Stalinskii prevented discussion of this question at the meeting (*This is not coercion? G. B.*), and because of this the question remains uninvestigated. This issue has once again come to light. Such a Komsomol must be expelled from our ranks.

Bergman cited other rank and file members who described how Romanov's behavior caused parents "to curse and beat" their children for joining the Pioneers. For Bergman, these testimonies were exemplars of Komsomol democracy. Its silencing on the part of Romanov, Stalinskii, and Kaniuka was clear proof of its violation. If that was not enough, the three raikom members went even further in their effort to protect Romanov. They claimed that the attacks on him were perpetrated by cell members who "engage in squabbles against Romanov and other comrades." Another defender named Mnishchenko claimed that "there were no facts" to support the charges against Romanov. The most forceful exclamation came from another defender and raikom member named Radchenko:

"We must get to the bottom of this "Romanovshchina" [and] the instigators appear to be Kagan and Marchkhovskii . . . We will give an answer to [Bergman's] article, and now investigate the group which engages in squabbling in the cell. . .

Romanov, as a worker, cannot be intimidated by philistine (*meshchankii*) bourgeois degenerates.

The Korsun raikom's defense amounted to nothing. Bergman's articles were enough to force the hand of the Central Committee's Conflict Commission, which took the unprecedented step in publishing its verdict in *Komsomolskaya pravda*.⁹⁹ Romanov was expelled from the Komsomol for "the gross violation of Komsomol ethics and the violation of the principles of inter-League democracy." But the TsK's verdict went further. It concluded that the Romanov case disclosed "abnormalities" in the Kurson organization and called for the Ukrainian TsK to conduct a full investigation. What came of that investigation remains unknown.

The Komsomol community was predicated on its leadership and rank and file to work in concert toward their common goal. The former was supposed to represent the latter, and the latter was to have the opportunity to participate unhindered in the political life of their organization. The conditions the Komsomol found itself in, however, required a core of professional activists to shoulder much of the League's daily operations. Reality indeed made Komsomol activists a "special element" within the League, as Nikolai Chaplin stated,.

⁹⁹ For the procedure for expulsion see Ch. 4.

Though Chaplin did not intend it, the two words that make up this designation, “special” and “element,” spoke directly to activists’ experience. They were “special” because they had power and responsibilities as local leaders. They were charged with implementing directives from their superiors, maintain and carry out work in their organizations, and act as direct representatives of the regime. Activists were also supposed to be attentive to their flock, represent their interests, and lead by example. However, being “special” came at a price. Life as a local leader was hardly glamorous and often unrewarding. While Komsomol activists committed themselves to League work, potential benefits rarely materialized as quickly as they hoped. Activists were often caught in the moral pincers of their superiors and their subordinates, subject to harsh working and living conditions, and the supposed benefits were frequently pushed into the future.

The downtrodden and tedious life of a Komsomol activist became the basis for them as a particular “element” within in the League. Because of their common experience, activists increasingly regarded themselves as a distinct layer which exercised its influence and, when necessary, closed ranks to protect each other from attempts to dilute their modicum of power and privilege. Despite their internal fractiousness, discord, and competition, activists could at times close ranks and act as a corporate body when under threat. As the Romanov case showed, solidarity as activists could prove a potent force and easily navigate the floods of local public opinion. Activist corporate power, however, proved limited when pummeled by the rain of condemnation from above.

There were many Romanovs in the Komsomol, and the perception of their increasing malfeasance alarmed the leadership and rank and file to the point where their interests converged. However, despite efforts to rein in the Romanovs of the League, their acts of corruption and moral degradation pointed to a more pressing problem that went beyond the “special element.” Romanov’s repeated arguments that the Komsomol had no jurisdiction over his personal life applied equally to the rank and file. As long a member was a good Komsomol, many reasoned, then what he did in his personal life should have no bearing on him as a young communist. After all, the Komsomol was a political organization, not a moral one. But at the center of this problem was not so much the League’s ethical jurisdiction, as it was what constituted a “good Komsomol.” Where did one’s personal and political life begin and end? How, if at all, did the latter bear on the former? Just what were Komsomol ethics anyway? And how were they concretized when the leadership itself refused to establish a “Komsomol law”? To answer this question, we must now turn to the dialectical relationship between Komsomol ethics and the attempts to regulate them through the League’s disciplinary body, the Conflict Commissions.

Chapter Five

“The right to punish and pardon - like God judges the soul”

“The transgression does not deny the taboo
but transcends it and completes it.”—
Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*

Komsomolskaya pravda columnist Viktor Kin’s fans would have been sorry to miss his feuilleton, published on 18 July 1925. Positioned prominently at the top of page three, the piece, entitled “‘The Individual’ and Komsomol Ethics,” treated readers to all the trappings of a Komsomol morality tale: love at first sight, passionate sex, deceit, and just desserts. Such was Viktor Kin’s trademarks: columns that wove authentic youth culture with Aesopian tales to keep members on the ethical straight and narrow. The tale told of Liakhov, a respected komsomol and army commander, who was emblematic of a new type of young communist. He was, as Kin dubbed him, an “Individual” (*Individ*). And what was this ethically suspect creature?

The story began one afternoon when Liakhov and his platoon of thirty volunteers were marching through the streets of Vinnitsa. As his comrades bellowed the verses of Pushkin’s *Legend of Oleg the Prophet*, Liakhov suddenly turned to ogle something off to the side. This caused his soldiers to break step and stop the song short. The object of Liakhov’s gaze was a silent siren with “two braids and irresistible eyes,” named Schwartzman. It was love at first sight. However, as Kin reminded his readers with a hint of foreshadow, “love is cruel.”

Laikhov's passion for Schwartzman was to be short lived. He was to be shipped out a few days later, most likely never to see her again. Left with little time to spare, Liakhov fell victim to his passions. "What would you think," he asked Schwartzman at the end of another steamy encounter, "Would you like to be the wife of a soldier?" From her response, Kin wrote, "an astute reader could predict a wedding without an effort." But a hasty marriage is rarely a lasting one. After four passionate days with Schwartzman, Liakhov began having second thoughts. "Was it better to be married or single?" he thought to himself. "It was better to be single," he decided. "Not wasting any time," Kin reported, "he bid his lover farewell, put his cigarettes and matches into his pocket, and set off for the train station." But thanks to the moral fortitude of the Komsomol, Laikhov's escape failed. Just as he was taking his seat on the train, a few of his fellow komsomols grabbed him and dragged him off the train to answer for his "violation of Komsomol ethics." "You have no right to interfere in the personal life of an individual," Liakhov angrily told his fellow young communists. "Now, be so kind as to go to hell!" Despite his objections, Kin told his readers, this "*individ* stood before a comrade court several days later."

Liakhov mounted a predictable defense to the presiding cell bureau. "Does Komsomol ethics really apply to living with a *meshchanka*?"¹ The bureau would not hear of it. By late 1925, crying "personal life" and smearing girls as "petite-bourgeois" to justify philandering was wearing thin. Such a defense also smacked of the egotistical

¹ *Meshchanka* is an epithet common in the 1920s meaning petite-bourgeois girl or philistine. See Chapter 3.

opportunism and impulsiveness of the “individual.” It was too late for Liakhov to play the class card. “No,” the chairman of the court curtly replied. “But Komsomol ethics forbids treating a girl, even a *meshchanka*, as a plaything for four days.” With that, Liakhov, the respected komsomol and army commander, vanished. In his place was Liakhov the *individ*. And not having any place for such creatures in a *communist* youth league, he was expelled from the Komsomol.²

Liakhov, like many komsomols, did not realize that a shift had occurred in Komsomol morality. The days of tolerating a komsomol’s double life—a good activist by day, and unruly youth by night—had hit its political and cultural limits. While there was something romantic, even heroic about the free spirited communist of the Revolutionary and Civil War years, such libertinism proved dangerous in period of “socialist construction.” The socialist future required Komsomol ethics that recognized no contradiction between one’s social and personal life. But what was this “komsomol ethics” and how would it be constituted? What was to prevent the Liakhovs of the League to wield ethical hegemony over communist youth? The answer to these lies in the expansion of the League’s ethical jurisdiction over its membership. But this expansion was not solely the creature of the Komsomol leadership. Nor was it an expression of the ethical power of its rank and file. Ethics were constituted through the

² Viktor Kin, “Individ’ i komsomol'skaya etika,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, July 10 1925, 3.

dialectical flows between the Komsomol's commanding heights and lowly predilections; flows that clashed at varying nodes in the League's hierarchy.³

One such node was the expulsion trial, for it was there that a whole host of Komsomol deviants were constituted with real material force. But the belief in the deviant's complete extrication from the Komsomol body was an utter fantasy. The deviant, once cast outside the Komsomol community, would double back as a border from which to constitute the League's ethical inside. The virtue of komsomol Abel had no meaning without the vice of his brother Cain.

Komsomol ethics before 1925 was marked by a certain divide between one's life as an activist and one's personal relations. If a member was a good activist, much of the misconduct in his personal life was disregarded. This changed as the League's membership doubled from roughly 840,000 members in July 1924 to a 1,708,000 in December 1925.⁴ The majority of these new recruits were politically uneducated peasants, knowing little about the League's ethics, let alone its communist ideology. The sudden peasant influx resulted in demands from older and more proletarian members for a purge of the League. The League's leadership, however, rejected these calls and repeatedly suggested that local organizations practice tolerance, rehabilitation, and education of wayward youth. At the same time, the Komsomol leadership refused to supply lower organs with clear guidelines of what constituted a dismissible offense which

³ I want to be clear that my designation of an "above" and "below" are merely abstract. There is no definitive point in the Komsomol hierarchy.

⁴ Ralph T. Fisher, *Pattern for Soviet Youth: A Study of Congresses of the Komsomol, 1917-1954* (Columbia University Press, 1959), Appendix B.

allowed cells to make up with own ethics. Frivolous expulsions ensued as well as complaints from expellees about unjust expulsion at the hands of overzealous cells. By late 1925, the Komsomol was marked by ethical chaos and an identity crisis.

To get a handle on frivolous expulsions, the League's Central Committee created the Conflict Commission, a centralized body that stretched from the district level to the Central Committee to adjudicate ethical violations, hear appeals, and study the roots of Komsomol deviance. In theory, the Conflict Commissions were supposed to enforce tolerance and rehabilitation. To investigate deviance, the commissions demanded information from local cells. The cells, which were often unaware of "deviance" in their midst, became aware of it through the the production of reports. Thus, studying deviance increased surveillance over Komsomol daily life. The piles of reports about wayward young communists made deviance appear so widespread that it caused a belief that the League was infected with "sickness" (*boleznennye iavlenii*). The resulting fear of "sickness" reduced the level of tolerance towards behaviors that previously went unnoticed. Like so many Soviet institutions, the Conflict Commissions, which were established in order facilitate rehabilitation, produced the opposite effect. By the end of the decade, room for any contradictions between a member's social and personal life was obliterated. So too was rehabilitation as an effective remedy. What were once curable bacteria within the League's ethical body were now viral. Ironically, the contradictions in League ethics lay not in their practice, but in the efforts to streamline, regulate, and to a large extent, standardize its adjudication.

The Absence of “Komsomol law”

Expulsion figured only marginally in the League’s first two charters of 1918 and 1920. Both stated that a member could be kicked out of the Komsomol for so-called “misdemeanors, breaches of League discipline, and disobedience of governing organs’ decisions,” failing to pay dues for three consecutive months, or for missing three meetings without a valid excuse. There were certainly exceptions, but for the most part the grounds for expulsion tended to be connected to a member’s duties and obligations rather than his personal relations and behaviors. A list of expulsions from Ryazan province in 1921 included violations almost solely concerning a members’ negligence of their League duties. The fourteen expellees did not attend meetings, failed to pay dues, and abandoned their Komsomol appointed post, or ignored directives and orders from above. Only one, a certain A. Ia Lozynikov was expelled for attending church.⁵

The criteria for expulsion, however, began to expand shortly after the end of the Civil War. In 1923, the Komsomol Central Committee’s (*TsK*) resolution “On the Expulsion of Members from the League” added the phrase “undignified conduct” (*nedostoinoe povedenie*) to the list of expellable offenses.⁶ The resolution, however, offered no explanation to what constituted “undignified conduct” or how it was to be determined. Nevertheless, the phrase allowed for an expansion of the League’s ethical jurisdiction to include a member’s conduct beyond his specific duties as a komsomol.

⁵ Six years later attending church would be one of the many personal behaviors that would dominate Komsomol expulsions. “O ukhodiashchikh chlenakh RKSM,” GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 172, l. 3, 16.

⁶ TsK VKP, *Spravochnik partiinogo rabotnika* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoe izd-vo, 1924), 256.

Members were rarely expelled for a singled offense. Violations like excessive drinking were usually connected with more general breaches of discipline. For example, komsomols N. Ionov, Milovanov, Savatin and Blagov were put on trial for lacking discipline in the factory in 1924, but their fate was determined by their overall behavior. Ionov and Milovanov were accused of leaving work early; Savatin for hooliganism, and Blagov for skipping work and drinking moonshine. Ionov was expelled from the Komsomol for six months and suspended from work for three. Milovanov received a reprimand in his League file and was suspended from work for six months. Savatin was expelled for hooliganism; and Blagov was expelled and fired from work. The severest punishments were given to the most egregious offenses—hooliganism and drunkenness.⁷ Though this case suggests that violations of discipline became more explicit, there was no uniformity in sentence, and the combination of infractions that resulted in expulsion remained vague and based on circumstance.

The 1926 Komsomol charter further broadened the meaning of “undignified conduct” and set procedure for adjudicating members at the local level. The criteria for expulsion now included “misconduct considered in violation of the League’s public opinion” (*za prostupki, priznavaemye prestupnymi obshchestvennym mneniem soiuza*). The charter once again did not offer specific examples of misconduct neither did it define what constituted the “League’s public opinion.” Nevertheless, it situated violations of League ethics in relation to the collective norm. Misbehavior remained unclear and

⁷ Leshia Krasnyi, "Komsomol'skii sud," *Krasnyi Voskhod*, 11 November 1924, 2.

arbitrary but by attaching the court of “public opinion,” cells were given power to regulate the behavior of its members.⁸

The 1926 Charter also clarified the expulsion process. Expulsions were to take place during general meetings of the cell, which would then send its decision to the corresponding district committee for approval. This was an important step in giving cells the power to enforce the norms of public opinion. The decision also made the expulsion trial a space for forming a collective consensus as to what constituted an ethical violation. Since every cell decided for itself what constituted a “violation of League public opinion,” there was no standardized code of behavior for a komsomol. An act that one could be expelled for in Tambov was tolerated in Ryazan.

The localization of expulsion exacerbated ethical confusion in the League. Nikolai Bukharin, in his speech at the Fifth Komsomol Congress in October 1922, agreed that “anarchy reigned” with regard to questions of morality, and yet labeled a notion of universal “communist morality” as “fetishistic” and “bourgeois.” “I protest against ‘moral’ trappings, but at the same time I categorically assert that there must be codes of conduct for youth.” Bukharin argued that ethics should consider social class. A worker should be held to the same ethical standards as a son of a priest.⁹ Bukharin was not alone, Aron Solts, the head of the Bolshevik Party’s Central Control Commission, argued in his speech “Communist Ethics:”

⁸ TsK VLSKM, *Ustav vsesoiuznogo leninskogo kommunisticheskogo soiuz molodezhi* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1926), 47-48.

⁹ N. Bukharin, “Vospitanie smeny,” in *Komsomolskii byt’: Sbornik*, ed. I. Razin (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1927), 21-23.

We are saying that a member of the party must have an opinion and work out for himself a general view of what it means to be a member of the Party, how a member of the Party must behave.

Communist ethics, therefore, were not to be enforced by officials sitting on the disciplinary organs of the Party or Komsomol but by ordinary members themselves. Norms, codes of conduct, and ethics were to be formed through the “public opinion” of the toiling masses. “We are the ruling class now in our country, and life will be constructed according to us,” Solts continued. “It is according to how we live, dress, value this or that relationship, according to how we behave that customs will be established in our country.”¹⁰

The Komsomol’s rapid growth made constructing codes of conduct and a public consensus even more difficult. Throughout 1925, the Komsomol press was filled with articles on the dangers growth posed to the League’s social, cultural and class integrity. The uproar was not simply over class alien infiltration. The real panic was over the Komsomol’s “peasantization.” For many in the Komsomol press, the lowly “*batrak-bedniak*,” the dung of the peasant crop, uneducated, and tempered by the dark customs of the village, represented the source of hooliganism, thievery, and indiscipline.¹¹ Veteran komsomols increasingly called for the leadership to “cleanse” the League of unfit peasant members. “Many untrained new Komsomols have poured into our organization,” wrote

¹⁰ A. A. Solts, “Kommunisticheskaia etika,” in *Komsomolskii byt’: Sbornik*, ed. I. Razin (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1927), 55-57.

¹¹ E. Kolokoltseva, “Otseivanie iz Komsomola,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 18 August 1925, 1.

I. I. Vaskakov to the Komsomol Central Committee in 1925, “[this resulted in] un-Komsomol conduct (*ne komsomol’skie postupki*). [They] are a cancer that allows our organization to lose its authority among the masses.”¹² One member wrote to *Komsomolskaya Pravda* saying that rural cells “drink, vandalize, and are interested in dancing etc.”¹³ A certain Fratkin, felt that this influx demanded “a more serious and strict approach to admissions and expulsions.” Another member, Dmitriev, wrote that expulsion commissions should hold a harder line especially in rural cells. “These commissions,” he wrote, “would serve as a filter which will prevent kulak elements from penetrating the League.”¹⁴ In some localities efforts to maintain working class hegemony resulted in the mass expulsion of “all peasants in the League with one to two years [experience]”.¹⁵

The Komsomol’s rapid growth produced a crisis in the League’s identity. As more and more youth joined, the Komsomol’s purity was perceived as increasingly diluted. Older activists’ outcry about ethical violations reflected an attempt to maintain the integrity of *their* status as the definers of Komsomol culture. As Murray Miner notes about cliques in American high schools, “those with higher status tend to elaborate and complicate the norms to make it harder for outsiders and upstarts to conform and thereby

¹² “V TsK RLKSM,” RGASPI f. 1M op 23 d. 313, l. 197.

¹³ N. Shastin, “Vrednye nastroeniia,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, November 18, 1925, 4.

¹⁴ “O prieme i iskliuchenii,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, July 10 1925, 3.

¹⁵ RGASPI, f. 1M, op. 23, d. 509, 14.

become competitors. They also do this to reassure themselves that they are accomplished and sophisticated, and hence deserve their superior status.”¹⁶

Older members asserted their “true” Komsomol identity by distancing themselves from a Komsomol they believed had become morally corrupt. Fed up with the direction the League was going, they requested to be expelled because of their disgust with the leadership’s embrace of peasants. Such was the case of one anonymous letter featured in *Komsomolskaya pravda*.

Comrades, I write under the influence of anti-Komsomol feelings and psychology. But as a member of the Komsomol since 1920, who was stewed in the cauldron of war and in the struggle against banditry, I cannot reconcile myself to the situation found in our rural Komsomol and am disappointed in its work. I want to write a request to the district committee to expel me from the League for disagreeing with the Central Committee’s policies.”

The author described his comrades at the rural cell who were indistinguishable from non-Party youth because of their propensity toward “drunkenness and hooliganism instead of social work and study.” This was not what he had risked his life for at the front, he wrote.¹⁷

What disconcerted the Komsomol leadership were not merely the frivolous expulsions or the deepening cultural gulf between older and younger activists. It was the fact new inductees were the majority of those expelled. Komsomol statisticians recorded that from 1 June 1924 to 1 January 1926, the League expelled 70,582 members. Over

¹⁶ Murray Milner, *Freaks, Geeks, and Cool Kids: American Teenagers, Schools, and the Culture of Consumption* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 30-31.

¹⁷ Shastin, "Vrednye nastroeniia," 4.

half were peasants, and around 20 percent were workers.¹⁸ Central Committee expulsion assessments lamented that most expellees had no more than one to two years Komsomol experience. This finding caused great concern that expulsion was used too quickly as a punitive measure and threatened to undermine the League's authority among non-Party youth. Too many members were expelled for "frivolous" mistakes and out of "personal" vendettas. Expulsions were often "political execution" (*politrasstrelom*) and "without the right of reapplication."¹⁹ According to the TsK, the wanton use of expulsion "only strengthened the incorrect impression that the League did not educate youth or make it better".²⁰ As one youth was quoted saying in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, "They very zealously expel us in the Kuban. They run guys out for committing the smallest offense—Down with it!"²¹

Yet despite what Bukharin labeled "anarchy," the Komsomol refused to clarify which offenses were grounds for expulsion. The Central Committee recognized that most members were being expelled for widespread, but nevertheless corrigible, "unhealthy remnants of the past" such as drinking, hooliganism, religious worship, and passivity. These social ills were based in NEP society, the Central Committee argued, and blaming the victim would not help extricate them from the body politic. "Needless to say, the problem is not the absence of a codex of 'Komsomol law,'" wrote a certain V. K.

¹⁸ TsK RLKSM, *Komsomol SSSR* (Moscow: 1926), 44.

¹⁹ "O metode rabota KK," RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 138, 23-24. "Political execution" essentially blacklisted a person from participating in any political and social organizations.

²⁰ "O smiagchenii karatel' noi politiki soiuz," RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 189, l. 32.

²¹ Mikh. Kurskii, "Pochemu ukhodiat iz Komsomola," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, February 17, 1926, 3.

in *Komsomolskaya Pravda*. “Dead codes of conduct and punishment have no place in a living, voluntary organization.” It was more important, V. K. argued, to make sure expulsions were not the result of “squabbles” or “personal motives.” He then went on to describe a case in Ukraine, where a cell secretary named Bobrykin engineered the expulsion of four members who had challenged his reelection. Bobrykin hid his personal vendetta, and accused the four of “corruption” and “connections to families of alien elements.”²² A certain Borisov stressed that it was inevitable that the Komsomol’s rapid growth would result in more “undisciplined” youth and that they should be met with tolerance and given guidance. “The newly admitted guys are all young—ages 15 to 19 years old. And we must not think that they are incorrigible. We must cultivate them, lead them by the reins—and they will be good komsomols.”²³

The Creation of a Komsomol Judiciary and Deviance

The Komsomol Central Committee's response to these concerns was to streamline and standardize the expulsion process, creating the Conflict Commissions (KK) for this purpose in late 1924.²⁴ The Conflict Commission like the Party’s Central Control Commission, was responsible for overseeing, studying, adjudicating, and enforcing Komsomol discipline. Every level of the Komsomol hierarchy had a corresponding

²² V. K., “Karatel’naia politika v Komsomole,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, October 10, 1925, 4.

²³ Borisov, “Ch’ia vina?” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, September 2, 1925, 4.

²⁴ “K dokladu Konfliktnoi Komissii TsK,” RGASPI, f. 1M, op. 23, d. 509, l. 10.

Conflict Commission from the district level to the Central Committee and each KK acted as a semiautonomous judiciary. The commissions were designed to alleviate a number of problems. First, there was concern that local organizations were not taking expulsions seriously. Expulsions were often addressed last in an often lengthy and, needless to say boring, meeting. As a certain A. P. reported in *Komsomolskaya pravda*, “Expulsion should not be discussed when guys are tired because many good members are expelled thanks to exhaustion [at the end of] meetings.” Tired and bored members were said to rush through the final items on the protocol with little interest to closely examine expulsion cases. Expulsions became formulaic as a result. Offenders were not given adequate time, often “three minutes or less,” to defend themselves. Expulsions were ratified without discussion of the particulars of a case.²⁵ As one report from the TsK complained, “very often no attention is paid to the comrade’s age, his rank and value to the League, the degree to which his mistake harmed the League and the Party, and the potential of the comrade’s future rehabilitation, etc.” This was especially the case in cells.²⁶ Some organizations, like those in the North-West region, became so drunk with power that they “turned into real judicial institutions with the right to punish and pardon ‘like God judges the soul.’”²⁷ Needless to say, such a hard-line and hurried approach made members feel that they were unjustly expelled. The Conflict Commissions sought to alleviate this problem by examining expulsions separately, and independently from the

²⁵ A. P., "O prieme i iskliuchenii," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, July 1 1925, 3.

²⁶ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 509, l, 14.

²⁷ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23 d. 316, l. 40.

cell. They promised to give adequate time to every case and allowed the member to explain his behavior. Conflict commissions were staffed by older members, who were elected precisely for their experience and understanding of Komsomol ethics. In addition, moving expulsions to Conflict Commissions stripped cells of their power to expel a member outright. A cell still placed its member on trial, but its guilty verdict was merely a recommendation that required approval at the district level. The district committee had the power to confirm, amend, or overturn the cell's recommendation.

Second, the Conflict Commission dealt with appeals. Until then, the Komsomol had no standardized appeal process, and having no place to turn, disgruntled former members flooded the Central Committee with complaints of unjustified expulsions. The Conflict Commission decentralized and streamlined the appeal process. A member who felt he was unjustly expelled had to appeal to his corresponding district committee. The district committee reviewed the case and decided whether to overturn or uphold the expulsion. If the district upheld the decision, the expelled member could appeal to his provincial committee and only then to the Central Committee. Appeals were based on documentary evidence: a letter of appeal explaining why the expelled member felt the expulsion was unjust, an autobiography, transcripts or protocols of the expulsion, letters from witnesses, and character testimonies from employers or Komsomol superiors. Members had the right to be physically present at their appeal hearing, but this was not required. Given the expense of time and money to travel to regional centers, let alone Moscow, most appeals were decided in absentia.

The Central Committee instructed cells to inform expellees of their right to appeal their expulsion, and for good reason. Provincial Conflict Commissions overturned cases at rates approaching fifty percent. One Ryazan report from 1926 indicated out of 69 appeals the regional committee overturned 30.²⁸ Of the 39 expulsions it deemed legitimate, fifteen members decided to appeal further to the Central Committee. There was a similar situation in other organizations. The Third Ukrainian Komsomol Regional Committee received 87 appeals in the three months between March and June 1925. Twenty-nine expulsions were overturned. Expulsions were reversed usually because of insufficient evidence, suspected motives, or if the punishment did not fit the crime. For example, a certain A. I. Knutova was expelled for “squabbling in the Komsomol and Party circles, violating Komsomol ethics, and joining the League for career purposes.” She appealed all the way up to the Central Committee, which found that the motives for her expulsion were “suspected.” She was reinstated with full membership rights.²⁹ S. Ia. Vavonov was expelled in 1925 for not attending meetings and neglecting Komsomol work. Vavonov appealed his case arguing that he missed meetings because of a Civil War related “psychological illness.” He presented the Commission a doctor’s note attesting his illness. His expulsion was overturned.³⁰

Despite the high probability that a young communist’s expulsion would be overturned, many youths did not take advantage of their right to recourse. Central

²⁸ GARO f. 478 op. 1 d 748, l. 2

²⁹ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 1, d. 509, l. 49.

³⁰ “Zasedaniia KK MK VLKSM ot 8 Ianvaria 1927,” RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 682, 90.

Committee studies of appeals found that workers and peasants were less likely to file appeals. Not only “illiteracy, backwardness, distance, immobility, the lack of material means, even stamps, and frequent misunderstanding of the Komsomol’s structure” prevented appeals. Moreover, Conflict Commissions were charged with “rude attitudes” toward expellees. There were many, particularly workers and peasants, “who wish to appeal, but are often afraid to.”³¹

Beyond their duty to oversee expulsions, Conflict Commissions studied “sickness” among the Komsomol rank and file. The term “sickness” (*boleznennoe iavlenie*) had already existed in Komsomol parlance. Its meaning however was far from consistent. In 1920, Komsomol “sickness” was restricted to political and organizational deficiencies: bureaucratism, disconnect between leadership and rank and file, and intellectual dominance on committees.³² By 1925, however, the concept described members’ attitude to the League: absence from meetings, neglecting activism, holding meetings “only on paper,” and lack of discipline.³³ A year later the meaning broadened and depicted members’ personal behaviors. Now “sickness” reflected the social disease which affected Soviet society under NEP. It described drunkenness, hooliganism, sexual depravity, suicide, crime and corruption, indiscipline and violating the program and charter, and participation in “anarchist groups.” In the span of a few years, Komsomol

³¹ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 1, d. 509, l. 14; GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 748, 2.

³² Lazar Shatskin, "Predislovie," *Komsomol'skaia letopis*, no. 2 (1926): 33.

³³ G. Vil'chik, "Bolezennnye iavleniia," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, June 19, 1925, 4.

“sickness” went from an illness inhabiting the arteries of the organization to an affliction that coursed through its most individuated capillaries.

After 1925, the Komsomol was obsessed with deviance and deviants within in ranks. No doubt there was an objective cause to the obsession. Crime statistics compiled during the middle of the decade showed a steady rise in criminal convictions, with 1,000 convictions per 100,000 people in 1925, to 1,363 per 100,000 in 1929.³⁴ The perception that hooliganism was on the rise prompted the secret police to conduct its own study in 1926. The report painted a picture of the countryside arrested with robbery, banditry, murder, vandalism, and terror. Gangs of demobilized soldiers still in possession of their Civil War weapons raped and pillaged Russia’s provinces. The hooligan was said to have a type, he was young and “dressed in brown shirt, black pants, boots, and a cap.”³⁵ Given the popular Komsomol’s dress of the period, one wonders how the two were distinguished. In fact there might not have been a distinction worth making. The Komsomol leadership knew perfectly well that its membership was impacted by the general growth in hooliganism. After all, it was not so much that yesterday’s hooligan would become today’s Komsomol; it was that today’s hooligan was *already* today’s Komsomol.

³⁴ Peter H. Juviler, *Revolutionary Law and Order: Politics and Social Change in the USSR* (London: Free Press, 1976), 31, 33.

³⁵ "Sovershenno sekretno" *Lubianka--Stalinu o polozhenii v strane (1922-1934 gg.)*, ed., ^eds., vol. 4, Part 2 (2001), 884.

Yet the League's moral panic over "sickness" produced the Komsomol deviant as much as his apparent manifestation produced the panic.³⁶ The Komsomol's own attempt to grapple with deviance, in the form of Conflict Commission surveillance, was a vital mechanism in the production of the categories of deviance. Thus in August 1926, the Conflict Commission TsK sent memos to its regional bodies requesting that they "study the question of sexual depravity among youth and Komsomols." The memo provided local organizations three criteria for studying sex. They were to identify the degree of sexual depravity; what was the prevailing opinion of sex among youth; and what the cells and local committees were doing to actively fight it.³⁷ All this information was to be sent to the Central Committee so that a complete survey could be compiled. The Ryazan regional committee forwarded the request to its district committees. A certain Vyvshev composed a report implying that the district was unaware of such a deviance. "In general," he wrote, "there was no mass sexual depravity." Nonetheless he threw in a few examples for posterity. When a komsomol found out that his wife was cheating on him with a fellow cell member, he decided to follow her, and did not allow her to attend cell meetings alone. A komsomol girl came home to find her husband having sex with another komsomolka. The wife broke a window over the girl causing bruises and cuts on

³⁶ Stanley Cohen argues that in order for a phenomenon to engender a "moral panic" it must fulfill three criteria: 1) there must be a suitable enemy, an individual or group that is easily denounced with little power to defend themselves. 2) A suitable victim or victims that the public at large could identify with. 3) A consensus that the activities of the "enemy" are or could pose a threat to society unless something is done. The Komsomol leadership's obsession about deviance certainly fit all three of these criteria. Stanley Cohen, *Moral Panics and Folk Devils*, 3rd ed. (2002), xi.

³⁷ GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 812, l. 17.

her face.³⁸ Another report told of how a non-party girl was impregnated by her father. A Komsomol girl was having an affair with her teacher, an amateur photographer, who took pornographic pictures of her dressed as “Eve.” The report went on to describe instances of infanticide, abortion, and adultery.³⁹ Reports from other districts catalogued similar incidents.

Drinking and hooliganism were the most common “sicknesses” detailed in reports. Since the League began keeping statistics on expulsions in 1924, hooliganism and drinking accounted for a third of all expulsions. The numbers were steadily rising. E. Kolokol'tseva's article “Bolting from the Komsomol,” was based on a report detailing that “mischievousness, hooliganism, drunkenness, and theft” accounted for 23 percent of all expulsions in 1924 and 32.9 percent in 1925.⁴⁰ By 1927, the number was bordering 50 percent in several local organizations. For example, in the First Raikom VLKSM, hooliganism accounted for 46.6 percent of expulsions according to one Komsomol report.⁴¹ And though the same report claimed that “debauchery” lacked any “mass character” and was only resigned to “individual incidents.” Nevertheless, it told of two komsomols who received a two month jail sentence for assault. One beat up a policeman, while the other attacked a GPU agent. Both were drunk. The report went on

³⁸ GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 705, 123

³⁹ GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 705, 108-109.

⁴⁰ “O karatel'noi politike v komsomole,” RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, 316, 38,

⁴¹ “O stepeni rasprostraneniia khuliganstva sredi komsomol'tsev i bespartinnoi molodezhi,” RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 743, l. 22.

to catalog several instances of Komsomol hooliganism.⁴² The phenomenon of hooliganism was especially acute in Ryazan. During a meeting of the Ryazan Conflict Commission in October 1926, a certain Eremin told of local komsomols who gathered together, got drunk and sang songs. When they got bored or got a tingling for a bit more excitement, they set out to find policemen to beat up. In addition, Eremin added a story of how a cell bureau from one village ran themselves like a gang. “Members of the cell are afraid to go out into the streets, because a member of the bureau is a hooligan himself and beats up komsomols.”⁴³

Once the regional committee received these materials, it compiled summary reports and sent them to the Central Committee. Naturally the most egregious incidents and facts made it into reports.⁴⁴ Once all the reports from all the regions were collected, they were further redacted into summary reports and presented to the Central Committee. The final product not only gave the TsK an overall picture of “sickness” among its members, it gave the impression that the most heinous acts were the norm. These reports often became the basis of articles on Komsomol discipline and everyday life.⁴⁵

Given all this, it should come as no surprise that local Conflict Commissions focused on expelling members that fit categories the Central Committee was obsessed

⁴² Ibid., 22.

⁴³ “Sovershchaniia ukolkomochenykh konf. delam UK RKSM ot 24-10-1926,” GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 700, l. 20.

⁴⁴ GARO f. P-478 op. 1 d. 705, l. 128.

⁴⁵ RGSAPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 743, l. 22-23. The material was also used for articles in the press. One article by V. Repin, who was the chairman of the Conflict Commission TsK stated under its title that the material came from KK surveys. His article is therefore quite an expose on Komsomol deviance. V. Repin, “Na bor'bu s bolezennymi iavleniiami,” *Iunyi kommunist*, no. 22 (1926): 42-47.

with: sexual deviance, hooliganism, drunkenness, religious worship and other deviant behaviors associated with a member's personal life.⁴⁶ Taking their cue from above, local commissions would in turn expel more and more members according to those labels. The result was not an increased understanding of the root of "sickness" nor a decrease in frivolous expulsions. On the contrary, local organs simply broadened the label to fit the crime. Thus when a certain Abdul Amanov, a student in Ryazan, was expelled for calling some girls at his school prostitutes, his act was labeled hooliganism.⁴⁷ In early 1926, Anna Liadova was expelled for writing in a letter to her husband that she had contracted syphilis. But when she appealed her expulsion, the regional committee, perhaps thinking that expelling someone for the contents of a private letter was inadequate, expelled her instead as a "parasite."⁴⁸ By the middle of 1926, sex appeared to be a favorite charge in the Dolzhanskii committee. Tatiana Chernaya, a 16 year old member, was expelled for prostitution. As was a certain Uliana Zaikina, but not so much because she was a prostitute but because she "took" ten rubles a month from her best customer, a Party member named Shekhovtsov. It is unclear whether anything happened to Shekhovtsov considering that he was a husband and father. Therefore, if the Central Committee asked local organs to watch out for "sexual depravity," cells often simply had to look at their own membership and adjudicate accordingly.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ For example see GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 614, 26-27.

⁴⁷ "Iz protkola obshchego sobraniia Starozhilovskoi sel'sk-iacheika VLKSM ot 16.11.1927," GARO f. 479, op. 1, d. 445, l. 62.

⁴⁸ GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 749, l. 1

⁴⁹ "K dokladu Konfliktnoi Komissii TsK," RGASPI, f. 1M, op. 23, d. 509, l. 11.

One can safely say that by late 1926, when the sex, rape, and murder scandals began hitting the Komsomol press, the internal dynamics of the Conflict Commissions had already constructed set categories of Komsomol deviance. Now that local expulsion commissions had a categorical shell, the expulsion trial acted as a site that filled that shell with content.

The Anatomy of a Trial

Denunciation was the first stage in a member's journey from inside to outside the League. Komsomol members were usually put on trial in response to a written or verbal denunciation. Denunciations came from acquaintances, friends, fellow members, and even family members. Sometimes they were written by witnesses or were the result of investigations by local newspaper correspondents with no direct relation to the accused. Their authors rarely chose anonymity; nor were they always written by individuals. They could also be a collective action.⁵⁰ Some wrote denunciations out of avarice, prejudice, malice or revenge. Others made them out of a sincere concern for hypocrisy, moral corruption, criminality and a desire for justice.⁵¹ Sometimes denunciations narrated a

⁵⁰ Fitzpatrick contends that "It is hard to form an accurate assessment of the proportion of denunciations that were anonymous, but it appears surprisingly small. According to the registry of incoming letters kept by the secretariat of the Leningrad party committee in the mid-1930s, fewer than one letter in a thousand was anonymous." Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Signals from Below: Soviet Letters of Denunciation of the 1930s," *Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 4 (1996).

⁵¹ For an analysis of denunciations in the 1930s, see *Ibid.* Fitzpatrick identifies five themes of denunciations: loyalty, class prejudice or hatred, concern for the abuse of power, moral and family corruption, and as a means of manipulation. For a general discussion of denunciation in Europe see Sheila Fitzpatrick and Robert Gellately, "Introduction to the Practices of Denunciation in Modern European History," *Journal of Modern History* 68, no. 4 (1996): 1.

variety of grievances. However, no matter who sent them and for what reason, denunciations were always made with the expectation of action. As Sheila Fitzpatrick notes, denunciations were always addressed to those in power. The highest officials of the Soviet state all received denunciation letters from lowly citizens. Most, however, were sent to more public forums like newspapers which, if taken seriously, were spirited off to the appropriate office for action.

Denunciations always starred a villain, a foreign body hiding in the community, who should be unmasked. As Fitzpatrick observes, in the Soviet context, denunciation was a form of class warfare against those labeled “class enemies” and other social aliens posing as communists. Bringing suspicion against the former was easy, but exposing the latter required unmasking. In the 1920s, it was often not enough to say that a communist was a class alien, corrupt or a deviant. Nor was it enough to simply situate the crime as individually harmful. Authors had to construct their narratives to suggest first that the communist offender was not some ordinary malefactor. His “crimes” had to resemble something habitual. Also the authors of denunciations tended to place the crime in a wider field of harm to show how it undermined the grander interests of the state. By undermining the very thing a communist was to represent—the Party, the Komsomol, and the Soviet State, and thus the “People”—a denunciation called a communist’s right to be a member of those institutions into question.

For example, the movement of a young communist from his firm standing within the Komsomol to its borderlands is seen in the following denunciation letter written to *Krestianskaya gazeta* in 1926. In the letter, titled “A Purge is Needed,” an anonymous

author from Ryazan province accused P. Vogorditskii, the local Komsomol cell secretary from the village of Pechernikovskii, of losing authority among local youth. For the author, the source of Vogorditskii's corruption lay in the fact that he was a son of a priest. He was therefore a class alien. But noting the secretary's class background was not sufficient to initiate his removal. The denunciation had to construct a narrative that showed that the secretary's behavior was indicative of his alien class: he neglected his fellow komsomols, facilitated moral corruption, and used his position for personal gain. Employing a narrative which isolated Vogorditskii from the rest of the local Komsomol, the author complained that the secretary "never thought of the cell" and rarely held meetings though members had a "thirst for social work and a replenishment of knowledge." As a result, the secretary displayed an "incompetent and politically uneducated approach toward the people."⁵² Distinguishing Vogorditskii's behavior from that of the other komsomols placed him under suspicion. But this was not enough to push him to the edge of the Komsomol community. The author argued that Vogorditskii's offense potentially compromised the Party's and Komsomol's standing among the community at large. Faced with supplying his upcoming wedding with alcohol, Vogorditskii expanded his "crimes" to demand bribes of moonshine from bootleggers in exchange for not reporting their activities; an act that the author felt "threatened to undermine the Party's authority in the eyes of laboring people."

The editors of *Krestianskaya gazeta* were convinced and forwarded it to one Khanevskii, the secretary of Skopinskii district committee, Ryazan province. Khanevskii

⁵² "Nuzhna chistka," GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 407, l. 5.

was persuaded of the account's veracity and sent it to the Mikhailoskii district committee with a request to "quickly carry out an investigation of the given account and send its conclusions to the district committee."⁵³ The investigation proved that the allegations were true and as a result placed Vogorditskii on trial for the crime. He was eventually expelled. On the whole, denunciation was the first step in moving the negligent and hypocritical Komsomol secretary from the political space of a member to that of the accused. Cast out into the borderlands of the Komsomol, one's status as an accused was brief, though significant because it placed him under the community's optic. He became an object of the community's scrutiny; a malleable mound of flesh that was kneaded and pulled to its will. For it was as an accused that a suspected komsomol was either absolved of his crimes, merely reprimanded for them, or cast out of the League as the their embodiment.

After a member was accused of some infraction, his culpability had to be determined through witness testimony and evidence. Because the League's leadership stressed rehabilitation, it urged not toss komsomols out without specifying the exact infractions. The Central Conflict Commission provided lower organs with a litmus test committees had to pass before expelling a member. It contained three criteria. First, expulsion committees had to establish whether a member's violation caused any harm to the League and whether that harm could be repaired. Second, determine if there was any possibility that the member could be educated or influenced by comradesly intervention. Lastly, committees had to evaluate the member's social position and his importance to

⁵³ "Mikhailovskomu Volkomu RLKSM," GARO, f. 478, op. 1, d. 407, l. 5ob.

the League and the Party. Even after meeting all these criteria, if “there was still some possibility that the comrade could be corrected,” the committee still had to use “all preventative measures,” like making his behavior the subject of a general meeting and even passing a suspended expulsion.⁵⁴

The main function of this litmus test was not to prevent the use of expulsion as a punitive measure or place the offender’s fate on his own shoulders. The criteria aided in establishing culpability. Interestingly, the committed offense was rarely at issue during an expulsion trial. Most offenders openly admitted that they committed the act. What was determined was whether it violated “League public opinion” and whether the violation was committed consciously. Essentially, the trial focused on the consequences of an offender’s behavior, what was the intent behind them, and whether the offender knew right from wrong and understood the consequences of his actions.

Concern over culpability was a central theme in the mock trial *A Trial of a Komsomolets or Komsomolka for Violating League Discipline*. Mock trials, or *agitsudy*, were short plays, written in the form of a trial, which served as a space for discussing ethical malfeasance or social ills.⁵⁵ Bolshevik activists adopted the *agitsud* during the Civil War as a way to communicate the political and moral qualities of the Soviet system. In these plays, Komsomol youth addressed the problems of everyday life such as drinking, hooliganism, sex, relations between men and women, and League discipline. The prosecution’s main argument in *Trial of a Komsomolets* was that the nameless

⁵⁴ “O smiagchenii karatel’ noi politiki soiuzza,” RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 189, l. 32.

⁵⁵ Elizabeth A. Wood, *Performing Justice: Agitation Trials in Early Soviet Russia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2005), 162-65.

komsomol knowingly violated League discipline. Reading the charges, the judge stated that the cell's investigation determined that it was "completely clear that [the komsomol] consciously evaded League work." This assertion was buttressed by the fact that he did not abide by any warnings or comradely advice to change his behavior. "We lambasted him," a fellow komsomol turned witness told the court. "He was completely out of hand. We shamed him in a comradely manner—he couldn't be reached. He ran from us and began to go with the bourgeoisie. He completely withdrew from his workers' family."⁵⁶ The repeated intransigence of the accused proved him culpable. He himself abandoned the Komsomol, and if he was expelled, it was his fault.

Giving a member a chance to redeem himself depended on the offense.

Corruption, abuse of position, embezzlement, theft, violence, rape, and other criminal acts evoked no patience. The offenses that were mostly likely to illicit warnings were those that inhabited the grey area of Komsomol ethics (i.e. the public versus personal life) or behaviors that appeared to be easily corrected (drinking, hooliganism, etc). If a member failed to show conscious willingness to correct himself, he was placed on trial.

That expulsion trials were held during general cell meetings made the attendees and accused alike captive of Komsomol ethical jurisprudence. The audience of expulsion trials was simultaneously a participant and a spectator. While only some cell members actively denounced and testified against the accused, the cell as a whole watched the proceedings and voted. Members were encouraged to ask questions or interfere as long

⁵⁶ Boris Andreev, *Sud nad komsomolets ili komsomolka narushaiushchimi soiuznuiu distsiplinu* (GUBONO, 1924), 13-14. More about agitsudy and *The Trial of a Komsomolets* will be said below.

as it did not disrupt the proceedings. Thus expulsion trials attempted to make the audience personally invested in the trial by having it participate in its proceedings as judge, jury, and witness. Trials, and especially more consciously orchestrated “show trials,” adjudicated issues that audience members faced in their daily lives. Komsomol cells were often tight knit communities in which everyone knew each other. Members encountered ethical malfeasance and brought their personal experiences and impressions to the trials.

Attempts to promote audience participation were clear in the staging of Komsomol agitation trials. As Julie Cassiday argues, the *agitsud* was a favored method because its “use of manichaeian oppositions” placed characters in a “struggle between good and evil” in which poetic justice served “evil” its just deserts. In all, the *agitsud* provided audiences with crude binaries, even an eschatological ethical vision of Marxism that was within their cognitive grasp and practical application.⁵⁷ In this sense the justice meted out on the *agitsud* stage corresponded with lay understandings of justice and the absolutes of religious morality. There, the promises of Bolshevik rhetoric were always fulfilled. The meek always inherited the earth, and Justice always broke the arms of the wicked.

If the morality on display was to have any pedagogical value the expulsion trial needed to call upon the audience to consider their own behavior as well as the accused.

The *agitsud* plays provided workable models. As Elizabeth Wood observed, *agitsud*

⁵⁷ Julie A. Cassiday, *The Enemy on Trial: Early Soviet Courts on Stage and Screen* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2000), 52, Dr. E. B. Demidovich, *Sud nad polovoi raspushchennost'iu* (Moscow: Doloi negramotnost', 1927), 6.

authors tried to personally invest the audience-jury by leaving the verdict open ended and instructing organizers to open up the case to discussion among the audience.⁵⁸ Giving the audience the opportunity to debate the verdict forced them to consider the offense in relation to their own moral standards and everyday life. That is to say, in order to judge the accused, they had to apply the moral question at hand to themselves. Second, applying that personal moral standard to an other inevitably transformed the accused into an object of scrutiny. Unlike in liberal law where juries are instructed to feign objectivity and only judge according to the law, participants in Russian jury trials were encouraged to judge the case subjectively. For example, Dr. E. B. Demidovich's 1927 *agitsud Trial of Sexual Depravity* put a Party member named Vasilev on trial for abandoning Vtorova, his pregnant Komsomol "wife."⁵⁹ Demidovich left the verdict up to the audience so, in the words of the judge, "each of us must be an active and conscious judge in hearing this case." "I recommend," he continued, "that during the examination of the case you critically analyze all that is shown so you can make a conscious, well thought out decision when voting."⁶⁰ This was hardly difficult. Many experienced the betrayal of adultery and marital abandonment or witnessed its effects on family or friends. But audience members' role did not end with judgment. Their verdict taught them of the

⁵⁸ Wood, *Performing Justice: Agitation Trials in Early Soviet Russia*, 162-65.

⁵⁹ According to the play, Vasilev and Vtorova were not legally registered, but the latter was nevertheless called the former's wife. Vasilev's failure to officially marry Vtorova is a topic of discussion in the play. The question of marriage was a typical one in Komsomol expulsion cases. Many Komsomol men were held morally accountable to young women as soon as they had sexual relationships with them, even though no official marriage took place. Philandering Komsomol boys who jumped from one girl to the next were often closely scrutinized for abandoning their "wives".

⁶⁰ Cassidy, *The Enemy on Trial: Early Soviet Courts on Stage and Screen*, 68.

disastrous effects of adultery. At the conclusion of the trial proceedings, the audience not only decided Vasilev's guilt and whether his behavior posed a greater "social danger" but was presented with a list of possible verdicts which could be used to educate Komsomol youth about "a healthy sexual life."⁶¹

Audience participation, however, was also a double edged sword. While turning Komsomol morality into an important political issue, it could also easily slip into chaos. Since the gravity of an ethical violation was localized, the trial did not always function as Komsomol leaders had hoped. Sometimes trials were met with disinterest and boredom; other times their topics were too juicy to contain: two qualities that led a trial to become a mockery of itself.

Complaints from the Komsomol press abounded about members' lackadaisical approach to expulsions. When members took advantage of the open floor, it often became the stage for ridicule. Ridicule and laughter undermined the testimony of witnesses and the accused alike. Komsomol boys tended to be harsh, even rude to girls standing trial. "In cells where there are few girls," wrote one E. N. to *Komsomolskaya pravda*, "[boys] often don't allow them to completely explain themselves and erupt in laughter. Girls get nervous and there is nothing they can say in their defense." In addition, E. N. explained, "they are more strongly invasive into girls' everyday conditions (*bytovye usloviia*) than into those of guys."⁶² The collective hardly felt the shame that agitation trial authors tried to instill, but threw it onto the accused. This was

⁶¹ Demidovich, *Sud nad polovoi raspushchennost'iu*, 5, 39-40.

⁶² "O prieme i iskliuchenii," 3.

especially the case in trials that involved girls and sex, or testimony from girls considered promiscuous. The laughter and ridicule Liza, as an advocate of “free love,” received from her male comrades in V. Kirshon and A. Uspenskii’s *Konstantin Terekhin* serves as a telling example. ‘Comrades, I’ve know Comrade Terekhin well (*laughter*). That is, I didn’t mean to say . . . (*still more laughter*).’⁶³

Boys were not completely spared from shame and ridicule. One newspaper account described a Komsomol named Gromov, who was put on trial for hooliganism. He “hid his eyes from the audience’s gaze, examining, as if for the first time, his tattooed arms.” Gromov was accused of spending his vacation at a Party funded rest home drunk, dancing the foxtrot, and playing cards, all of which he capped off with seducing a maid. He responded saying “This is all nonsense . . . It’s true, I drank but I don’t remember the maid, I was drunk...” The audience erupted in laughter.

Trial testimony of girls and boys alike was often the victim of sexual innuendo. Laughter also figured in the trial of Lukin, who was charged with frequenting prostitutes, beating up a local girl, and practices that crowned him the “first master expert” among other Komsomol boys. The judge explained that Lukin’s “expertise” was his knack for approaching “a new Komsomolka, lur[ing] her down to the basement, and there she would take her pants off for him and . . .” But the judge couldn’t finish because the attending cell members burst out in laughter. Lukin did not let himself fall completely victim to the crowd’s hoots and howls. He used his testimony to chastise his accusers: “I never once went to prostitutes. Those who came to me were simply young ladies

⁶³ V. Kirshon and A. Uspenskii, *Konstantin Terekhin (Rzhavchina)* (Moscow: Gos. Izdat., 1927), 75.

(*baryshni*).” “It’s true I beat Lidka, but she was a *real* whore because she demanded money from me for an abortion. Do you think I work myself to death for abortions? Besides maybe her abortion isn’t from me. . . This is all nonsense.” He then sat down, but suddenly stood up with more to add. “They all lie, lie like pigs because they’re jealous. . .”⁶⁴ The crowd roared with howls in response.

Not everyone had Lukin’s rhetorical skills. During expulsion trials, witnesses’ authority depended on their “performance” as speakers. The sheer anxiety of standing up and testifying could be enough to discourage a witness or undermine his or her testimony. *Konstantin Terekhin* demonstrates the dilemma by depicting the young and obsequious Pryshch (Pimples), who agonized over whether to testify or not. “To speak or not to speak, the devil knows what is better,” he mutters to himself. When the cell secretary suddenly calls on him, he is rattled with nervousness. “I . . . No, I didn’t ask . . . or did I. . . It seems that I did . . . I want to say. I can’t speak, but still it is better if I speak,” he mumbles. When he finally begins, he immediately understands his lack of authority. His rambling caused members to shout “Closer to the point!” and “Louder, with passion!” When he begins to quote Lenin, the audience cuts him off with “Beat it! Don’t let him speak!” and start to stamp their feet in unison. Pryshch throws up his arms in frustration and takes his seat.⁶⁵

During expulsion trials, the audience could be a powerful, even if at times an unpredictable force for scrutinizing the accused, witnesses, and fellow audience members

⁶⁴ M. Popeliukher, "Sud," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, September 20, 1925, 4.

⁶⁵ Uspenskii, *Konstantin Terekhin (Rzhavchina)*, 105-06.

alike. But on the whole, by drawing the audience into the trials' orchestration and adjudication, expulsion trials created a space where the accused stood at one end and the community, embodied by the audience, at the other.

Rewriting the Accused: the Trial of Egorov and Bogdanov

The 1927 trial of Vasilli Egorov, 21, and Boris Bogdanov, 19, for “debauchery” caused no scandal, its testimony pricked no journalist’s ears, and its verdict received no public quarter. Had it not been for the archive, the case would have faded into the ether of unrecorded history. Yet the ordinariness of Egorov’s and Bogdanov’s trial is what makes it an interesting case for analysis. This was a fairly typical trial and could therefore shed light on the politics of Komsomol ethics.

Vasilii Egorov and Boris Bogdanov were friends. The bond between them was probably forged in their mutual propensity toward excessive drinking. Both were hardly dilettantes, since boozing had landed both of them in trouble before. Vasilii had already served two months mandatory labor for “debauchery.” This was after he had a run-in with the local police for public drunkenness and rowdy behavior. He was also known in the cell for coming drunk to the club. Boris had recently been fined and expelled from a sports club for fighting. It’s safe to guess liquor was the cause of his dirty play.

It was sometime in March 1927, when Vasilii and Boris were hanging out getting drunk. It’s not clear what they were drinking, but whatever it was, they ran out of it. Both were broke and unemployed. The money Vasilii had received from his meager

unemployment benefits was already depleted. He blew it on some buddies sometime before. And since Boris had recently been fined six rubles for punching a player at a football match, his pockets too carried only lint. The funds for more liquor had to come from elsewhere. Then Boris had an idea. He suggested that they steal his mother's coat, pillows, and chair and hock them for some quick cash. It was hardly a caper fit for a detective novel. Vasilii and Boris were the impulsive types, driven by the drunken fears of a dry palate. Since both were drunk, and neither too bright, (their education registered as low in the trial documents), it's not all that surprising that they landed in a Komsomol court. They sneaked into Boris' place and stole his mother's things. Vasilii, clearly having done this before, took the items to a local fence. After securing the money, he set off for the nearest restaurant and called on Boris to meet him. It's unclear how the duo got caught. Perhaps it was because the sight of two drunken youths having enough money to splurge on a restaurant aroused suspicion. Or perhaps some of their fellow comrades saw them and told the cell secretary. It's not even too far-fetched to think that Boris' mother denounced the culprits, when she discovered the crime. Whoever snitched on the two, their denunciation was enough to get the local cell to step in.

The trial took place on 25 March 1927 in the Stenka Razin factory in St. Petersburg. A panel of four judges, Ridel', Svetlov, Andreev, and Krylov, presided. Eighty cell members were present. Clearly, while the adjudication of poor Boris and Vasilii was nothing special, the packed crowd suggests that something about it promised entertainment. Moreover, the Stenka Razin factory was not some insignificant local shop. It was the home of the oldest tsarist brewery Kalinkin, dating back to Peter the

Great. What better way to teach the consequences of drinking than put a few riffraff on trial for all komsomols to see? After all without an adequate knowledge of the dangers of excessive drinking, a young komsomol could have a respectable job at Stenka today, and tomorrow, weakened by the smell of boiling hops and barley, become a debauched cur. Vasilli's and Boris' habitual drunkenness, thievery, and unemployment therefore served as an example for all.

The distillation of Egorov and Bogdanov's lives into the statistics of debauchery began with their biographical profile. Listed in each was a litany of facts that allowed for their placement in the charts of Komsomol statisticians. From Egorov's profile we learn that he was born in 1906; a Komsomol member since 1925; a worker by class; education: lower; and Russian nationality. He was currently unemployed, and his profession was listed as a manual laborer. He did not hold any official Komsomol duties and had never served in the army. Bogdanov's profile was only marginally different. He too was a Russian worker with low education and unemployed. Yet Bogdanov was younger than his friend, born in 1908 and though he too had been a member since 1925, he joined the komsomol at a younger age. His profession was noteworthy by virtue of the fact that he had one: he was a former camera operator at the local cinema. Like his comrade, he did not hold any Komsomol responsibilities and had never served in the army.

Egorov's and Bogdanov's biographies were typical of the average Komsomol facing expulsion. Their class, Komsomol experience, age, gender, and accusation allowed for their smooth insertion into the mathematical calculation of the "type" of Komsomol deviant. As with all expellees, the particularities of Egorov's and Bogdanov's social

composition were broken down, counted, and inserted into distinct boxes labeled “age” “male” “worker” and “hooliganism, drunkenness, card playing and theft,”⁶⁶ These categories allowed the Komsomol to arrange its former members into distinct social types and determine who was being expelled and for what reason. For example, had Egorov and Bogdanov been from Moscow, they would have joined 74.9 percent of men, 44.2 percent of workers, and 32.8 percent of “hooligans,” who were expelled.⁶⁷ It was through such statistics that the Komsomol was able to identify which characteristics deviants were more or less likely to possess. An expellee’s social composition was fragmented, reordered and reconstructed into typical representations of expellees. The numerical value taken from Egorov’s and Bogdanov’s offense, debauchery, theft, and drunkenness, helped to define the borders that divided acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

In addition to determining a social type of deviant, Egorov’s and Bogdanov’s offense was similarly categorized to provide a schema for what constituted a dismissible category of “hooliganism.” As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the categories that gave Komsomol norms their shape - often defined locally - provided local Conflict Commissions with a de facto “law” for adjudicating cases. The interplay between the expelled and their numerical values formed a mobius strip that reinforced their material existence. Therefore, reports distributed to local organs on the scope of expulsions justified the very categories local cells used to adjudicate them. For example, a bimonthly report from Ryazan district in 1925 reads thus: “Twenty-five people were

⁶⁶ TsK RLKSM, *Komsomol SSSR: Statisticheskii sbornik o chislennom i kachestvennom sostave i politprosvetrabore RLKSM s 1/6/1924 po 1/1/1926* (Moscow: 1926), 44-45.

⁶⁷ “Informatsionnyi otchet na nastroenii molodezhi,” TsAODM F. 634 op. 1 d. 128, l. 14

expelled. Expulsions were for drunkenness, 17 people; for hooliganism, laziness, and ignoring the League, 6 people; for religious worship, 2 people.”⁶⁸ The wedding of statistics with expulsion formed a marriage that exercised its paternal influence over Komsomol ethical life.

The trial itself, however, did not revolve around the duo’s crime. The facts of the matter had been established and the accused confessed. Rather the question was one of culpability and character. Faced with two members, who committed an act of hooliganism, the cell had to decide whether they were actually hooligans. The initial facts of Egorov’s and Bogdanov’s person were provided in their biographies; facts which served as springboards for probing their consciousness, culpability, and character. Egorov’s biography betrayed him. It revealed that he had recently become unemployed, lived with his sister, had already served two months mandatory labor for past offenses, and repeatedly engaged in debauchery in the local club. Bogdanov fared only marginally better. He also was an unemployed recidivist in violating Komsomol norms. His biography noted that he was prone to fighting, for which he had been expelled from a sports circle, and was also a habitual drinker. Our heroes’ biographies already engendered suspicion that their disagreeable character pointed to their culpability and a consciousness about the impropriety of their conduct.

The terse facts embedded in their biographies, however, were not enough to condemn poor Egorov and Bogdanov to expulsion. They were only leads, words that

⁶⁸ “Informatsionnyi otchet: Ryazanskogo uездnogo Komiteta RLKSM za iiul’-avgust 1925,” GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 614, l. 27.

pricked the inquisitive interest of Ridel', Smirnov, Dubrovskii, Bezgaus, Glinsenko, Maitus, the six fellow komsomols who put questions to the two accused and a witness, Vasiliev, the secretary of the collective.

Testimony began with secretary Vasiliev's statement on the character of Egorov and Bogdanov. Vasiliev opened with an impression of Egorov: "Egorov was a bad komsomol and worker because of his hooliganism and drunkenness." It seemed that Egorov's insolence went beyond mere cavorting and imbibing. His drunken bouts often slipped into debauchery. Moreover, the unemployed Egorov decided to use his freed up time to consume more booze, which, of course, led to more debauchery and eventually into the arms of the law. But not only was Egorov a lousy member of the collective, Vasiliev reported, he also treated his sister poorly. He had "scandalized her." The cell secretary did not explain how, but he elaborated the consequences: Egorov's behavior "forced" the poor girl "to jump out a window."

Vasiliev was no less accusatory when he turned to Bogdanov. Yes, Vasiliev confirmed, Bogdanov was accused of stealing from his mother, was prone to drinking and hooliganism, and had already been warned by the cell bureau about it. Thus, according to Vasiliev, Bogdanov was a spoiled seed. He had recently left the Young Pioneers, an experience that should have taught him to shun debauchery, but seemed to have no effect on him since he "already began to drink, and engage in hooliganism." In an attempt to nip Bogdanov's wayward behavior in the bud, the cell bureau "called him more than once" and reprimanded him for his "tactless behavior."

Vasiliev's testimony provided flesh to Egorov's and Bogdanov's otherwise mundane biographies. The court surely had enough to stop there and simply expel both youths. Still Vasiliev's testimony was just the opening salvo in the court's reconstruction of Egorov's and Bogdanov's person. If anything, it merely gave the six inquisitors something to hang their questions on.

The first question, which the transcript attributed to no particular person, was that of intent. Just what impelled Egorov and Bogdanov to steal? Or in other words, did the duo make a calculated and conscious decision to engage in theft? In response to this, Bogdanov did not parse any words. "We needed drink and there was no money," he reported. He admitted that he came up with the idea, but that it was Egorov who did the dirty work. "Egorov sold all of [the items] himself and went to the restaurant, and from there he called me."

Bogdanov's answer prompted more questions about him and Egorov's culpability and consciousness. Bezgaus asked, "Do Bogdanov and Egorov know that this behavior harms the organization and raises doubt about them as a Komsomol, have they recognized that this was bad behavior?" "Who was the first of them to come up with the idea about the theft," Glinsenko added, "how long did they drink and whether they thought about drinking more?" Smirnov was interested in whether either participated in the Komsomol. "Do they study or are involved in any kind of reading circle?" Dubrovskii was curious about the duo's recidivism and Egorov's personal relations with his sister. Ridel', the court's chairman, wondered how the two were able to get the funds for their first rounds of alcohol. "Where did Egorov get the money to drink since he is

presently unemployed?,” he asked without hiding his underlying implication that Egorov probably stole those funds too.

Vasiliev was the first to answer the court’s questions. Egorov, he reported, “studied.” The transcript does not state what and where was he studying. As to where Egorov got money to drink in the first place, well, the answer to that question only padded his already prodigious résumé. It appears that Egorov’s Komsomol brothers had pity on him when he was fired from his job. “Egorov was given the chance to earn money,” Vasiliev recounted. “We have a cloakroom in the club, [but] he could not keep this job and was fired for negligence toward [people’s] things.” He then added in another statement, “When Egorov is sober he promises not to [drink] anymore.” But the promises were empty. And it was this, according to Vasiliev, which made him incorrigible. “We gave him the chance to correct himself,” he added. “We gave him comradely advice, but he did not fulfill his promise and it can be said that whether he reforms himself or not, he himself broke away from the Komsomol, and therefore such ballast we don’t need.”

Then Egorov spoke in his own defense. He argued that he spent his own money on drink, money he got from state unemployment benefits. He squandered this on a few comrades. In response to Vasiliev’s claims about his empty promises, Egorov said, “I don’t know if I can stop drinking.” It was hardly a rousing indication that he understood how his debauchery undermined the Komsomol and himself as a member. If his non-confession was not enough, he explained his relations with his sister without regret. “I live here in the club. She took everything from me and didn’t allow me to live in the

room. When I worked, and she lost her job, I supported her for a year on 33 rubles. When I became unemployed, she didn't help me at all, and it was then that I behaved like that toward her." Egorov proved himself not only to be a drunk, a thief, an abuser, and irresponsible, he was also vengeful and unrepentant. It's no surprise, then, that when the court made its decision, Egorov was expelled from the Komsomol.

When Vasiliev turned to Bogdanov, he once again reiterated that the youth was recently expelled from a sport's club for hooliganism. Bogdanov's interest in football was the extent of his Komsomol involvement. Yet he did what Egorov failed to do, he confessed and expressed remorse. "I've drunk since 1924, and I don't know if I can stop. I know why this behavior is unbecoming of a Komsomol. I understand this and acknowledge my guilt and I promise to correct my mistakes in the future and not repeat them." Bogdanov's confession was probably accepted with a grain of salt. Luckily for him, another witness named Maitus stepped up and put the former's behavior into perspective. "I don't think Bogdanov is a bad guy. I know him from work, but recently he's gone astray. But there is hope that he will correct what is necessary and break away from these comrades who corrupted him." Maitus' testimony carried some weight. Bogdanov was given a "reprimand and a warning was placed in his personal file." His reprimand stated that in the eyes of the eighty members of the cell his deeds were wrong, but he could not be said to be incorrigible. In the end, Bogdanov was certainly guilty of *deviance* but he was no a *deviant*.

Egorov, however, was not so lucky. If the ethical standards of the Collective VLKSM were indeed sobriety, uprightness, and fortitude, then he was the epitome in

their violation. Not because he was involved in hocking Bogdanov's mothers things for booze. It was the testimony about other aspects of his life that made drunkenness and theft merely additions to a long, itemized rap sheet. If Bogdanov could be seen as wondering off the straight and narrow, Egorov was said to have never set eyes upon the path. He was rotten to the core, a characteristic that was proven in his runs-ins with the law, negligence at work, repeated drunkenness, and vengeful abuse of his sister. His final act, which landed him before a Komsomol court, was merely part of the logic that ruled his life. In this way the accusation and verdict were locked in similitude, held together by the narrative chain constructed out of witness testimony. In the end, what made Egorov a deviant, and not merely one guilty of deviance, was that his life was a litany of unethical acts. None of which he repented. On the contrary, Egorov rationalized ("I spent my own money on drinking") and justified them ("She didn't help me at all, and therefore I behaved like that toward her.") For this, Egorov was cast out of the Komsomol community, an expulsion that doubled back to reaffirm the Komsomol's ethical borders.

Deviants are hardly external to the ethical system they violate. In many ways, while their behavior places them outside the community, they still remain inside it. Their violation doubles back as a means for the *community* to not only create an identity, but also reproduce it through their collective denunciation of the deviant.⁶⁹ Thus by casting Egorov out of the Komsomol, the Collective VLKSM reiterated its own ethical standards—sobriety, uprightness, and fortitude. Moreover, these ethical standards were

⁶⁹ Kai T. Erikson, *Wayward Puritans: A Study in the Sociology of Deviance* (John Wiley & Sons, 1966), 4.

not only reconfirmed through their negation, (that is through the body of Egorov) but also through the re-inclusion of Bogdanov back into the fold. Bogdanov's reprimand was not merely the result of his confession but his understanding of his action as a violation of the collective code. The importance of "confession" was not so much for Bogdanov to bare his soul to the community to show that "he was not really a bad sort of fellow," but to reaffirm that the community's ethical standards were correct and the court's adjudication just.⁷⁰

Like many Komsomol expulsion trials, Egorov and Bogdanov's trial rotated around what type of people they "really" were. It was during the period of testimony that Bogdanov's and Egorov's lives, as an objects of the court, were rewritten to show how they embodied the acts they committed. The testimony given during their expulsion trial served three functions. First, it created a logical congruence between the accusation and the verdict. This was important because if the "punishment did not fit the crime," the legitimacy of the court, and therefore the community as a whole as the arbiter of ethical adjudication, would be in jeopardy. The court's verdict, whether it was conviction or exoneration, had to appear just. Second, testimony transformed Vasilii Egorov and Boris Bogdanov from objects into deviant subjects. That is to say, the trial's testimony became the basis for determining the kind of person they really were. Egorov's and Bogdanov's lives were reduced into a direct reflection of the offenses they were accused of, however extraordinary and fleeting those acts may have been. Further, testimony was not simply about the offense, how it was committed and why. It allowed the court to delve into

⁷⁰ Ibid., 194-95.

other aspects of the person's life, aspects which rarely had any direct connection to the accusation. It was these tangential facts that made the two youths the epitome of debauchery. Lastly, Egorov's and Bogdanov's presence in front the court was doubled. On the one hand, *they* were on trial for acts *they* committed. Their conviction had very real consequences—expulsion from the Komsomol, the loss of privileges, stigma, and ostracization—to their person and their standing in the community. On the other hand, they were merely corporal stand-ins for the trial of “debauchery” itself. The information provided during testimony filled “debauchery” as a category of deviance with descriptive content. It was through this filling, that the Collective VLKSM determined what “debauchery” was and what it was not. It was the line between debauchery and its *Other* that not only informed the court's verdict, which formally branded the accused as “debauched,” but also allowed for the momentary fixing of the Komsomol's often shifting ethical borders.

Expulsions trials were one way in which the Komsomol constructed an identity. Rapid growth caused a crisis in the League's codes of conduct. No one knew where the line between one's personal and public life stood, or which acts bore on a youth's standing as a Komsomol. The trial served as a space for working these issues out locally. Expulsion also contained its own contradictions. The more the League's ethical boundaries ossified, the more youth were expelled. The increasing numbers of expulsions only supported the belief that the Komsomol was infected with sickness. This belief only redoubled the feelings of disillusionment and pessimism among its ranks. After all, the drunken and rowdy young communist could not be fully blamed. What else

could he do with himself in the mundane times of NEP, where no great purpose gave him the opportunity to channel his energies? Ironically, the search for that great purpose resided in the reenactment of the repressed: The Russian Civil War.

Chapter Six

“A New Voluntary Movement”

On 5 May 1928, over 4,000 komsomols, Party and state officials filed into the historic Bolshoi Theater in Moscow to attend the Eighth Komsomol Congress. It had been almost two years since the last convocation of the League’s governing body, and a lot had happened worth celebrating. The revived “Left Opposition” had been successfully routed; a feat Secretary Chaplin stated the Komsomol had diverted the “overwhelming bulk of its strength and energy” to defeating.¹ Moreover, the League had topped the two million mark in membership. In addition, the Komsomol was increasingly fulfilling its duty as the “helper and reserve of the Party.” Since the Seventh Congress (1926) the Komsomol had transferred over 300,000 members into the Party, representing about 37 percent of all Bolshevik inductees. It also had made significant inroads into local administration. About 6,000 young communists staffed city soviets, while their comrades in village soviets numbered an astounding 69,000. Moreover, over 128,000 labor union members and 130,000 recruits in the Red Army and Navy had Komsomol affiliation. While the Komsomol did not capture the majority of Soviet youth—it still only represented a fraction of the estimated 26.7 million youths of League age—it was nonetheless an important player in Soviet politics and society.²

¹ *VIII Vsesoiuznyi s’ezd VLKSM 5-16 maia 1928 goda. Stenograficheskii otchet*, (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1928), 2.

² *Ibid.*, 42. *Vsesoiuznaia perepis’ naseleniia 1926 g.*, 26 vols., vol. 17 (Moskva: Izd TsSU SSR, 1928-1933), 50. By mid-decade the Komsomol was the main representative of the Soviet State in the

The year 1928 was important for other reasons. First it was the League's tenth anniversary, and though celebrations would not occur until that fall, it nevertheless used the Congress to honor and remember that its origins coincided with the founding of the Red Army and the revolutionary cauldron of the Russian Civil War. Though still in the planning stages, the anniversary celebrations would be a time of commemoration and reflection on the League's past, present, and future.³ The commemoration of the Komsomol's glorious past was as much a send off as it was a celebration. The honoring of the Komsomol's Civil War veterans was a symbolic passing of the torch to a new generation of young communists.

Yet, despite the public pomp hailing these achievements, something far less celebratory existed behind the Congress' scenes. Delegates to the Eighth Congress were filled with trepidation. The regime was on the eve of launching a massive industrialization drive, and Komsomol was to supply it with a new generation of foot soldiers. Though the League was willing to confront the great tasks before it, there was nevertheless a sense that the Komsomol was adrift. Rapid growth and expansion had a profound effect on its social and cultural dynamics, resulting in the many issues discussed in previous chapters. The previous two years were marked by a series of scandals over on the behavior and ethical character of its membership. Moreover, if there were three words to describe the League's own self evaluation, it was depression

(*upadochnichestvo*), pessimism, and sickness. Instances that pointed to a general state of

countryside. Komsomols outnumbered Party members two to one, and in some localities there were no Party members whatsoever.

³ RGASPI f. 26M, op. 43, l. 7.

depression and pessimism filled endless reams of internal reports. “Sicknesses” such as sexual debauchery, alcoholism, and hooliganism proved that the League had lost its revolutionary edge and had become disconnected from its militant roots. League life, in particular its social activism, had become rote, formulaic, and in the view of many, meaningless.

Nothing pointed to this more than the survey of League delegates to the Eighth Congress. The survey questioned respondents’ attitudes toward three areas of Komsomol life: their everyday life and living conditions, their League work, and their attitudes toward their comrades..⁴ What the survey revealed was that there was a dark side to the Komsomol’s achievements. It showed that many members were ensconced in alcohol and sex. Their personal conduct provided little inspiration for leading a healthy, clean life. Morale was low, Komsomol work was described as useless, and boredom reigned. Many admitted that they willfully turned to drink and sex as antidotes to their increasing depression, pessimism and boredom. For example, one komsomol stated that while he began going to “scabby (*parshiven’skaia*) prostitutes” at age 17, his “penis didn’t make any demands because of a strong enthusiasm for work during the reconstruction period.” His licentiousness, however, soon returned “when there was a lot of free time.” Then it “gorged (*ob’elsia*) itself well,” proudly adding, “I screwed seven women.”⁵ Vodka served as a means to lubricate the grating monotony of Komsomol life. “I drink in a circle of activists and I don’t see anything bad about that because the monotony of work

⁴ RGASPI f. 6M, op. 8, d. 11, l. 28.

⁵ RGASPI f. 6M, op. 8, d. 11, l. 32-33.

drags on,” wrote a district secretary. Relations with fellow komsomols were tense. Adding to their depressive state was a growing irritability and suspiciousness toward other members. All of this culminated in a feeling that the new generation of Komsomol lacked revolutionary fire. “I don’t see any youthful fire,” observed a cell secretary. “The old (*stariki*) are everything.”⁶ The times had taken the fire out of the youthful vanguard. As one critic named Agrenev lamented in a different context, during the Civil War the Komsomol was a “tight-knit group of young worker-fanatics” who were driven by a “blind faith in immediate socialism. . . . Then NEP came” and “revolutionary action” became “only phraseology” which “as time went on it increasingly didn’t correspond to reality.”⁷

This chapter examines the depression and disillusionment felt by many Komsomols as the organization entered its tenth year. More and more members were dropping out either by leaving the League, committing suicide, joining a religious sect, or forming their own underground groups. At the center of this lethargy and disappointment was the League’s failure to provide its members with creative forms of social activism. Activism had become rote and predictable. Many clamored for something to believe in, a grand purpose that they felt had been lost with the end of the Civil War. The past, however, could not be recovered but could only be refurbished and repackaged for the present and future. The effort would be to create a “new voluntary movement” based on

⁶ RGASPI f. 6M, op. 8, d. 11, l. 39-41.

⁷ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 499, l. 97-97ob.

romanticism, volunteerism, and action that would give the next generation of komsomols their own formative experience; their own civil war.

Lack of Exceptional Energy

Komsomol social activism always fell short of the ideal, but not for lack of interest. One 1929 survey of 232 worker youth from the Egorov factory in Leningrad discovered that the majority (88 percent) showed interest in the Party's internal politics and international news. Only 13 respondents followed politics on a case by case basis, and 14 were apathetic.⁸ However, despite this interest, Komsomols felt that social-political activism had few positive effects on their lives. As one critic named Agrenev stated in his assessment of the Komsomol in 1927, the reason many youth were leaving the League was that they were "dissatisfied with League work" and "desired to receive a serious, genuine education" rather than the formulas Komsomol literature provided. Often the material offered to embolden a young communist's political aptitude was just too boring. Instead, many komsomols found "boulevard" fiction like Verbitskaia, romance pulp, or Tarzan adventure novels more interesting. In fact, Agrenev emphasized that surveys showed that komsomols actually read *less* than other youths. This was especially the case for Komsomol political literature. "No one reads books that we write on the youth movement. They just lie on the floor of libraries."⁹ Study circles consisting

⁸ P.I. Berezin, *Rabochaia molodezh' kak ona est'* (Leningrad: 1930), 44.

⁹ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 499, l. 95ob.

of bland political education and drawn out meetings generated little excitement in youth looking to make a social difference.

This made many rank and filers see no point in activism. All their hard work seemed like empty gestures that had little impact on their present lives. The 1929 survey found the reason so few youths consistently engaged was the result of the types of activism the Komsomol promoted. Social-political work “did not take [youth’s] interests into account” and therefore was not attractive.¹⁰ One komsomol complained that even though he was “politically literate” and “devoted” to Lenin, there were “no benefits in Komsomol work, and in general there is no work.”¹¹ Another komsomol wrote to *Komsomolskaya pravda*, “Today matters to us. Today we get low wages. But you talk about socialism. [You say that] this socialism will arrive in some time. But you don’t eradicate the bad in the present. You say a lot of words but do little.”¹² Other komsomols’ doubts about the prospects of socialism consumed them with indecision. “Can we really build socialism?” one komsomol asked in a letter to the Central Committee. “I don’t know whether I will be in the Komsomol. I’ve already gone to hand over my card to the district committee, but then changed my mind. You live on paper, and I don’t believe our leaders because you cannot understand how life is.” Another longtime komsomol simply felt that social activism was worthless because the Komsomol itself had gone astray. “I, a member of the KSM (Communist Youth League)

¹⁰ Berezin, *Rabochaia molodezh’ kak ona est’*, 43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 89.

¹² RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 499, l. 95ob.

of six years, take stock of the activities around me and have come to the conclusion that Soviet power began fading in 1921. I've accumulated a lot of material on the degeneration of the KSM."¹³ It is not surprising that this Komsomol situated the beginning of the League's decline in 1921. Many komsomols felt that the introduction of NEP had numbed youth's passion for revolution. This view was echoed in Komsomol S-vich's article "Komsomol Perspectives" in *Komsomolskaya pravda*. "When the next generation doesn't witness brutal class struggle or participate in revolutionary wars, it is not raised as revolutionary communists, but as shallow and vulgar petty bourgeoisie (*meshchan*)."¹⁴

The lack of "revolutionary fire" in social or political life was a persistent theme in letters from "depressed" komsomols. For communist youth committed to building socialism, life in the 1920s appeared mired in a swamp of gradualism, conciliation, and tolerance. And these were sapping youths' energies. Filling the void was a belief that the glorious socialist future offered by Soviet leaders was nothing but an illusion, a darkening light at the end of the tunnel of history. As a certain Sererov, a komsomol of six years wrote to *Komsomolskaya pravda* in the summer of 1926.

Our life is miserable. The old ideals have collapsed under the powerful blows of history and there are no new ones in the present crisis. Where to find them? Again in ourselves. Indeed, Russia has turned to an eternal mission. Having freed itself from autocracy, from the most ghastly, conservative strangling of any free thought, now we are living in a not much better situation. Our apostles have

¹³ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 499, l. 96ob.

¹⁴ Quoted in V. Rozin, *Osnovnye problemy komsomola* (Moscow: 1926), 12.

led us into darkness. They regale us with illusions about our future which has also promised little good.¹⁵

While Sererov thought that his “apostles” led him into darkness, where future promises were merely illusions, others felt that life moved so quickly past them that they wandered blindly through the present. As one village komsomol stated in his suicide letter, “Look at how contemporary life moves quickly forward. And me? I fall behind every hour, and in the end I will wander, like a child who’s lost his way in the dense forest. You see how I’ve already fallen behind the present. I’ve already become a foreigner to my Komsomol circle. No, I cannot live any longer.”¹⁶ However divergent their sources for depression, Sererov and the anonymous komsomol shared the same view: the time was characterized by an aimlessness shrouded by the darkness of a dense forest. And, perhaps more importantly, the Komsomol and the Party provided no guidance. As another komsomol named Krupnov stated in a letter to his friend:

Maybe after reading my letter, you’ll say that I am a coward. This isn’t so. . . I can’t take it! I’m insulted, very insulted when some kind of Party guy sits in an institution and doesn’t even want talk to me like he some kind of bourgeois! And our fathers spilled their peasant blood, perished at the front from a hail of bullets defending the victory of October. And now, look, Party guys sit on a ready-made nest and act like bureaucrats. No, I can’t take it in this world anymore where lies and deceit are never overcome. I’m fed up with everything! To hell with the present! I don’t need it anymore!”¹⁷

¹⁵ TsAODM f. 634, op. 1, d. 98, l. 43.

¹⁶ L. Stalskii, "Upadochnye nastroyeniia sredi krestianskoi molodezhi," *Iunyi kommunist*, no. 6 (1927): 51.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*: 51-52.

As Krupnov's statements suggest, many young communists saw death as their escape from the despair induced by the hypocrisies of NEP. Komsomol suicides became an increasing concern to the Komsomol leadership after a wave of copycat suicides followed Sergei Esenin's in late 1925. Esenin was a cult hero among many youth. His poetry spoke to them as a kind of "pure depression" rooted in the political darkness of the times. Esenin's lyrical musings on life and death and his praise of drinking, sex, and hooliganism struck moralists as the root of youth despair. After Esenin's death, Komsomol moralists, as well as Party leaders like Bukharin and Lunacharsky carried out a fierce ideological campaign against his memory.¹⁸ As one Komsomol wrote in her suicide letter, "I'm convinced that I am wasted in this society, that my life is worthless, or in the words of Esenin, "Life is not new, to die is not new / and how can you think the future will be any better," but as a member of the Komsomol I say that this pessimism must be combated. If not then I will not fulfill Lenin's command. I am not worthy of the title of Komsomol. This consciousness awakens me, but I don't know if it will be victorious."¹⁹ "Youth are right to be attracted by Esenin," the komsomol Sererov wrote. "[He] is the spirit of the day to every youth, the most natural representative, a victim of the lifelessness of our stagnant times."²⁰ Moralists were aghast at young communists' devotion to Esenin. For them his poetry was a self-destructive path of "discontent,

¹⁸ For a collection of articles on the influence of Esenin's poetry on youth see V. Ermilov, *Protiv meshchanstva i upadochnichestva* (Moskva: Gos. Izd., 1927). Ermilov unequivocally blamed Esenin for a rash of student suicides in the spring and summer of 1926. For internal investigations and monitoring of youth's infatuation with Esenin see RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 879. l. 44.

¹⁹ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 879, l. 47

²⁰ TsAODM f. 634, op. 1, d. 98, l. 43.

pessimism, sexual chaos, and drunkenness,” all of which inevitably “hurled [a person] to death and suicide.”²¹

In the minds of many komsomols, the despair of the times was only made more apparent when contrasted with the Civil War years. The Civil War, they were repeatedly told, represented a more revolutionary and enthusiastic period. Komsomol youth were bound together in a common cause; a determined, disciplined force that fought valiantly against the class enemy. It was within this dichotomy of the Civil War as heroic and NEP as dispiriting that caused some to view suicide as a “protest against the socio-economic and psychological condition that surrounded them.” The komsomol G became an adherent of this view when he chose suicide as a form of protest in the winter of 1927. Though G. appeared as a competent and qualified worker with a good living, according to his suicide letter, he “could not find anything good in life.” The Komsomol commission investigating his suicide discovered that G. was “immersed in pessimism, shunning all of society, and complained of “drabness” and “a humdrum life.” This complaint must have struck a cord with his comrades. They explained that the general “drabness” and “monotony” of the times “justified” his suicide. As I. Bobryshev explained,

They cited that before, in the period of the Civil War, suicide among communists and Komsomols didn't happen because before there was heroism. Now in the transition period the most trivial things occupy him which cannot summon enthusiasm and ignite the revolutionary fire. In justification to this, they say that the old Bolshevik-Undergrounders can't endure the monotony and leave to “another world.” In general, they conclude that suicide is all but the only act deserving praise as a worthy revolutionary step.²²

²¹ "Esenin--znamya upadochnykh nastroyenii," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, June 6, 1926, 2.

²² I. Bobryshev, *Melokoburzhuznye vlianiia sredi molodezhi* (Moskva: Molodaia gvardiia, 1928), 98.

To many Komsomol moralists' surprise, even rural komsomols agreed that suicide was a revolutionary act. As one rural correspondent wrote, "In the villages the majority of komsomols, and youth in general, view suicide as heroic, decisive, and that life has no mercy."²³ The pessimism among many komsomol youth, according to L. Stalskii, had colored their surroundings "black" and as a result young people "turned to the revolutionary banners in mourning."

Many komsomols explained their pessimism and depression as a result of the Komsomol's failure to provide the romanticism necessary to sustain their belief. As Sererov began his letter, "I've become gradually convinced and my belief has hardened that our Komsomol is fated to perish or [needs to] regenerate. . . . The last few years have shown that the Komsomol has become more conservative than progressive."²⁴ For him, living by the Komsomol alone prevented young people from living a "human life." Young people were interested in "nothing," did not attend the League meetings, and were turning toward religion to find alternative systems of belief. Others spoke of how the general ideological crisis among their comrades produced a personal loss of "strength," "energy," "confidence," and the "possibility" to go on. Still others felt an anxiety about the future and whether Soviet power would survive "NEP's noose" around its neck.²⁵ Depression and pessimism also sparked harsher condemnations of the regime. As one angry letter from a certain Mikhail Petrovskii stated, "The Communists can't do anything

²³ Stalskii, "Upadochnye nastroyeniia sredi krestianskoi molodezhi," 51.

²⁴ TsAODM f. 634, op. 1, d. 98, l. 43.

²⁵ TsAODM f. 634, op. 1, d. 98, l. 9ob; RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 107, l. 4.

and can't create mythical socialism even if they were in all the world's governments. It's fantasy and the people don't want it . . .”²⁶

One way some komsomols tried find a way out of the darkness was by forming separate political and social groups. Komsomol youth formed anarchist, Marxist, and nationalist groups, or joined the ranks of the burgeoning religious sects as a way to reinvigorate their political and social lives.²⁷ One internal report chronicled how far left and right wing groups were especially sprouting in universities. Groups adopted names that fit their position like the Trotskyist Youth League, Orthodox Marxists, the Left-Anarcho Communists, Ray of Truth, Down with the Cross-eyed (*kosoi*, a slang term for komsomols), League of Nations, and Gang of Hooligans. Though small in number, these groups met regularly to discuss their opposition to Party policy, agitate among young people or, in the case of the Left-Anarcho Communists, plot how they could obtain weapons. One anarchist group in Voronezh urged that “Youth, create separate groups and carry out agitation. After that all will be known to you.”

Some groups had little to do with politics. For example, the group “Hospital,” was dedicated to studying Esenin’s poetry for the purpose of committing suicide. Others just dropped out of organizational life altogether. One former komsomol stated, “I’ve decided to live on my own. I don’t need any kind of organization. I won’t copy newspapers anymore. Everyone lives for themselves. It’s better. Until now I was a

²⁶ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 679, l. 95

²⁷ A. Iu. Rozhkov, "Molodoi chelovek 20-kh godov: protest i deviantnov povedenie," *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia* 7 (1999): 107-14.

fool.”²⁸ In a letter to the Central Committee, another komsomol named Makarevich explained he decided to leave the Komsomol because though he wanted to fight for socialism, he thought that the League was “a useless organization” and therefore it was “useless to be a member.”²⁹

However small their impact, these groups were a source of reinvigoration. Participation gave young people the impression that they were heroically *fighting* to change politics for the better. Clandestine groups focused on revitalizing the lofty goals believed to have been abandoned in the Komsomol and issued manifestos to that effect. For example, one group calling itself the “Committee of Humanity” called on workers and peasants to stand up against the Soviet government for all its broken promises. One proclamation blamed the government for not fulfilling such utopian promises like the one where every citizen would be driving cars by the Revolution’s tenth anniversary and that all agriculture would be done by machines. For them all the Party and Komsomol provided were words and “deeds were nowhere to be found.”³⁰ In the Crimea, a group that went under the name “Freethinking Youth” declared themselves committed to educating youth in the “bourgeois spirit” and called for a “constituent assembly in opposition to the dictatorship of the proletariat.”³¹ The strategy of one anarchist group from Novgorod was to destroy the Komsomol from the inside by urging its followers to

²⁸ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 661, l. 37.

²⁹ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 509, l. 63.

³⁰ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 820, l. 18.

³¹ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 661, l. 25.

"work in the Komsomol to fight against the Komsomol." An investigation discovered that a group of five or six people was propagating anarchism while they doubled as komsomol members. The leader recruited youth to study "the writings of anarchism (Bakunin and others) and criticize Marxism and Leninism from this viewpoint."³² Some youths imagined themselves genuine revolutionaries and even went so far as to design their own symbols and aliases. For example, in Lugan region, a cell secretary organized group called Fighters for Truth (BZP). The group consisted of 15 komsomols who identified themselves as "Lenzintsev" (a combination of Lenin and Zinoviev) and adopted a skull and crossbones with the letters BZP as their insignia. According to a statement issued by the group, they declared a war against mismanagement, abuse, nepotism, bureaucratism, and red tape. They signed their proclamation with the aliases: Spark (*Iskra*), Creep (*Zhut'*), Scar (*Sled*) and Experience (*Opyt*)³³

It was a similar loss of faith that led to the growing popularity of religious sects. A 1927 assessment of the North Caucasus estimated that there were over 1000 separate religious groups totaling about 80,000 members. The report claimed that "sectarianism directed a lot of attention toward youth with the intent to win it over to its side against the Komsomol."³⁴ On the whole, Baptists and other religious sects were so effective that some suspected their ranks numbered "as many as the Komsomol." This reality, Bukharin stressed, required the Komsomol to take "strong conclusions" from them for its

³² RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 661, l. 23-31

³³ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 661, l. 26.

³⁴ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 742, l. 20.

own work.³⁵ His answer to all the Komsomol's problems, however, was not to produce more "dismal puritans." Rather, it was to "train optimistic fighters" prepared to mercilessly sweep out all the "individualistic dirt" from the "Komsomol's cottage."³⁶

Despite efforts to clean the Komsomol of religious youth, sects like the New Israelite Movement, which operated in the North Caucasus, proved quite successful in recruiting komsomols. So much that they managed to turn their local Komsomol organization into a front for proselytize among youth. Komsomols Margunov, Pasko, and Krul' would hold meetings as the Komsomol cell #20 and then conduct a New Israelite meeting on how they would "insert" religious themes into the League's "red corners." Their efforts proved quite fruitful. Attendees to their meetings and "Red corners" would sometimes number in the hundreds.³⁷

Komsomol activists saw such groups were as response to many things—growth of the bourgeois influence, opposition in the country, poor economic conditions—but mainly out of "a growing disbelief in the construction of socialism and the difficulties that we live in." "The growth in depressive feelings," the report went on, "plays a large role in [the growth of] opposition." The times were painted in "thick colors without any ray of hope" and this atmosphere created "depression and disappointment" among youth. "Demoralized" komsomols were inevitably "pushed on a path to struggle against the

³⁵ *VIII Vsesoiuznyi s"ezd VLKSM 5-16 maia 1928 goda. Stenograficheskii otchet*, 22.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 26.

³⁷ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 742, l.19, 44, 158.

Party and to embrace petite-bourgeois poetry.”³⁸ V. Ermilov, a virulent critic of komsomols’ pessimism and depression, argued similarly. For him, the reason so many youths were joining religious sects was because the Komsomol “had not yet learned to satisfy the emotional aspirations of youth.” Religious sects more successfully tapped into youth’s “inherent urge” for “brashness,” “boldness,” and “heroism.”³⁹ Similarly, Nikolai Bukharin labeled religious sects as particularly dangerous because they provided an alternative for youth interested in social activism. He noted that more and more of the “best cadres of young workers and peasants” were attracted to religious groups, particularly the Baptists, because they advocated “a stricter life.” While the Komsomol appeared to be flooded with debauchery, individualism, irresponsibility, and “a general disregard toward the public and its interests,” religious leaders were at their pulpits hammering away at immorality, drunkenness, smoking, infidelity and sexual promiscuity. Many religious sects even provided economic aid to unemployed youth. Religious groups’ success, Bukharin complained, was in part because they more effectively adopted “*our* cultural work.” This attitude was similarly expressed among the Komsomol rank and file. In a letter to the Central Committee, a certain Malkin wrote: “We, komsomols, are still not politically literate. By virtue of this, I have several times thought about going to the Baptists. They’re a strong organization and it carries out cultural work. They sing

³⁸ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 661, l. 38.

³⁹ Ermilov, *Protiv meshchanstva i upadochnichestva*, 3-4.

choir songs, there is discipline, and we komsomols have none of this. . . I will go over to the Baptists, I will receive an education and other support.”⁴⁰

The Komsomol engaged in a concerted struggle against alternative youth groups, whether they were the Boy Scouts, Trotskyist, anarchists, communists, or religious throughout the decade.⁴¹ Its efforts to uproot them utilized a combination of arrest, expulsion, and surveillance. Besides religious groups, the Komsomol’s main concern was centered on “Trotskyism.” Some komsomols considered Trotsky the “leader of youth” because of his anti-bureaucratism, revolutionary rhetoric, hero status from the Russian Civil War, and advocacy of generational conflict. However, the fight against opposition within and outside the League tended to only fuel a member’s disillusionment. Anastasyan Vairich, a komsomol from Armenia, noted how the arrest of his friend Tatevos Gasparyan for “Trotskyism” “cast a shadow” over his “joy” at being a komsomol. Until then, Vairich recalled, politics had been “freely discussed” and neither he nor his comrades ever had any idea that there were counterrevolutionaries among them. Nevertheless, Vairich dismissed Gasparyan’s arrest as a mistake. But his discontent deepened when another friend, Varazdar Arutyunyan, was arrested for being a member of the Dashnak underground youth organization. “Those two events,” he wrote, “forced us to give up our heated disputes about which of the Bolshevik Party leaders was

⁴⁰ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 820, l. 7 On the Bolsheviks’ competition with Baptists see Heather J. Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905-1929* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), Chapter 10.

⁴¹ Space unfortunately does not allow a full discussion of alternative youth groups inside and outside the Komsomol. For more information see: Pitirim Derkachenko, *Molodezhnoe dvizhenie rossii v dokumentakh 1905-1938* (Moscow: OMP Press, 1999), 93-114; Rozhkov, "Molodoi chelovek 20-kh godov: protest i deviantnoy povedenie."

right and which was wrong. Not a trace remained of our former comradely sincerity and our youthful spontaneity.”⁴²

Romanticism for the Future

The growing pessimism among communist youth was often shrouded in the imagery of dark forests, an uncertain future, and a directionless present. All of this spoke to the assumption that youth were naturally romantic. Whether it was in love or life, young people were believed to be slaves to emotions and inborn energies that propelled them into unthinking action. Youth were attracted to great feats and world-historical tasks, and believed that they as individuals could effect positive, dramatic change to their surroundings. Indeed, the idea that youth bore a proclivity toward romantic ideas and an inner impulse to realize them was a popular public and scientific sentiment. The German communist Alfred Kurella argued that romanticism was part of a young person’s physiological and psychological development. When a person hit adolescence, they began to “more intensely observe and notice the connection between events that didn’t catch their eye before, make small conclusions, and understand and interpret their surrounding world.” These revelations, Kurella believed, inevitably tapped into youth’s

⁴² Anastasyan Vairich, "Youth It Was that Led Us," in *Soviet Youth: Twelve Komsomol Histories*, ed. Nikolai K. Novak-Deker (Munich: Institute for the Study of the USSR, 1959), 61. On the Komsomol’s efforts against Trotskyism see *Trotskizm i molodezh’ : sbornik materialov, Za partiiu, za leninizm*; (Leningrad: Sektor "IUnyi proletarii" rabochego izd-va "Priboi", 1924); G. Bespalov, "Trotskisty v komsomole," *Molodaia gvardiia*, no. 12 (1927); D. Khanin, *Protiv komsomolskoi oppozitsii* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1926); Lazar Shatskin, "Oppozitsiia i komsomola," *Molodaia gvardiia*, no. 12 (1927); TsK VKP(b), *Spravochnik partiinogo rabotnika*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe izd-vo, 1925), 472-76. On the connection between Trotskyism and hooliganism see Anne Gorsuch, "Smashing Chairs at the Local Club: Discipline, Order, and Soviet Youth," in *Sowjetjugend 1917-1941 : Generation zwischen Revolution und Resignation*, ed. Corinna Kuhr-Korolev, Stefan Plaggenborg, and Monica Wellmann (Essen: Klartext, 2001), 247-62.

proclivity for the “fastest and most comprehensive understanding of all things.” Young people’s desire “to significantly and quickly take hold of the world” draws them to “simple, clear ideas and purposes which overwhelm and strongly cling to them.”⁴³

It was also believed that youth naturally positioned themselves as essential to realizing these. For example, in his study of youth diaries, the psychologist M. M. Rubinshtein found that the majority of his subjects dreamt of doing something heroic. One, a 21 year old student felt that “something exceptional” awaited her and that her life was not “grey” or “ran along an ordinary path.” She imagined herself becoming a “great social actor” or a well known writer. Another student, 26, recalled how in her youth she dreamt of “changing the world and doing something great for the general good.” Young romantics often saw themselves as potential martyrs. One peasant wrote that he not only wanted to impart something great on the world, but wanted to suffer for it so that “people who look at martyrs would have compassion for me.”

Though Komsomol welcomed such romantic attitudes, and even tried to harness and direct them toward the general good, Rubenshtein noted their potential dark side. Because romanticism was an important to a young person’s growth, if not facilitated correctly the resulting disappointment could result in “negative behavior, extravagant orgies, debauchery, cynicism, and even lewdness and hooliganism.”⁴⁴ Namely, youth would embrace the many “sickness” the Komsomol associated with disillusionment.

⁴³ A. Kurella, "Romantika v iunosheskom dvizhenii," *Molodaia gvardiia* 7, no. 4 (1928): 168-69.

⁴⁴ M. M. Rubinshtein, *Iunost' po dnevniam i avtobiografichskim zapisiam* (Moscow: 1928), 142, 45, 46-47.

If young people really possessed a penchant to romanticism, then komsomols' turn to the Civil War to accentuate their desperation was hardly surprising. "The heroic times of the Civil War," Kurella explained "presently take on a great role in satisfying youth's romantic proclivities." It was during the Civil War, he maintained, that youth carried out direct struggle in service of a great purpose: the defense of socialism, the overthrow of the world bourgeoisie and the realization of world revolution. "Communism became a reality, solidarity and society were a single principle in the personal life of the individual . . . There was no individualism: all surrendered to a great purpose; individual identity only had significance as a member of a great family and conformed to the principle that bestowed life or death."⁴⁵

Gestures toward the Civil War, however, also created a backlash. The romanticism associated with the Civil War gave Komsomol youths a reference to a past that only highlighted the monotony of the present. Rather than maintain revolutionary enthusiasm, it contributed to the feeling that their present did not or could not transform the rhetoric of "hero worship" and "glorious exploits" of the Civil War into a reality. Therefore, Kurella concluded, romantic-revolutionary literature should not be the means to generate enthusiasm. These, he argued, only orientated "all heroic aspirations *toward the past*." "And this turn to the past, especially if it appears protracted, is absolutely harmful."⁴⁶ Instead, Kurella urged that "We need romanticism which will not lead youth backward, but forward." Communist youth needed to create new ideals of "utopian

⁴⁵ Kurella, "Romantika v iunosheskom dvizhenii," 168-69.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*: 167.

aspirations” and direct all their effort to a new “heroic struggle” to develop “higher forms of human existence” and against “the stagnancy and chronic illness surrounding us—schematism.” Nostalgia had to be transformed into utopianism, not to “return to the ‘excellent heroic past’” but “to dream about the beginning of a new war.”⁴⁷ But for Kurella, romanticism for the future was not the goal in and of itself. After all, like the Civil War, utopian dreams of the future had a limited lifespan when void of attempts to concretely realize them. The main goal of Kurella’s romanticism was to provide the idealist “form” for the “*creation of a new type of youth, a new type of humanity.*”⁴⁸ On the one hand, this new type of youth was to serve as the antithesis to the youth “with the tilted cap, the plucky guy who is inconsiderate to others and things, knows how to sweep a girl off her feet, and knows how to drink. He swears with everything scared, rains profanity and laughs at the “good,” “moral,” and “serious” comrades.” And on the other, the “new youth” was to also negate the “admirer of Esenin and sympathizes with him” who leads a life “completely opposed to the mainstream.” But this new youth would not come out of thin air. Rather, young people had to engage in a “struggle for a new everyday life” whose whole purpose was to create the “consciousness of a new person, a person of the socialist epoch, which simultaneously allowed for the conflict between youth idealism and the realism of adults.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Ibid.: 174.

⁴⁸ Ibid.: 179. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁹ Ibid.: 180.

Though relying on a Civil War redux presented its own contradictions, Kurella nevertheless maintained that this “new type of youth” had to be produced through a grand struggle. Though youth were attracted to the “struggle with themselves” to revolutionize the small, everyday aspects of personal lives, this individuated endeavor proved ineffective. Their personal and family lives were ensconced in “old traditions” and it was easy for even the most dedicated to fall victim to their influences. As a remedy, Kurella suggested a turn to a struggle “*based on actual enthusiasm*” where youth “fought for a romantic future.” “Up until now,” he continued, “all attempts to create a ‘new everyday life’ were based in dry ‘arguments.’ It’s necessary to realize the romantic and emotional side of this problem and make it interesting for the younger generation.” Namely, the Komsomol needed a “new movement,” a new grand purpose, a new civil war.⁵⁰

“An Unprecedented Campaign”

Interestingly, Kurella’s article appeared at the very moment komsomols in Leningrad were engaging in a romantic cultural campaign (*kultpokhod*). In early April 1928, *Komsomolskaya pravda* reported that a district of the Leningrad Komsomol was transformed into a makeshift command and control center. Its office was a hotbed of enthusiastic chaos and motion, abuzz with ringing phones and shuffling papers. A noisy crowd of young volunteers surrounded sign-up tables. Slogans and directives hanging on the doors and walls hovered over them. “As it was in the most critical and difficult

⁵⁰ Ibid.: 174. Emphasis in original.

moment in the Civil War, the Leningrad Komsomol has once again declared a war-like situation,” S. B—ov began. But the war the Leningrad Komsomol was preparing for was not a war per se, at least not one that put young lives at risk. It may have conjured the imagery of the Civil War and even employed its militarist language but did not mimic it. Rather this was a virtual war where the fighters were soldiers of culture, slogans and proclamations served as armaments, the enemy was backwardness and decadence, and the fronts were the street, the club, the factory, and the home. On 7 April, S. B—ov reported, following the directive of the district headquarters, the “best of the Komsomol’s cultural soldiers set out to fight . . . classical music.”

The Leningrad campaign was hailed in the press as an example of komsomols not relying on “directives from above” or for not using “any resources from the state whatsoever.” Indeed, while the exact origins of the “cultural campaign” are murky, according to one report, two komsomol activists concocted the idea and convinced the Leningrad leadership to adopt it. The Leningrad komsomol showed “great interest in it” and provided logistical and institutional support.⁵¹ Local komsomols worked out their plans themselves, tailoring their activities to the “interests of worker youth” in a way that created an entertaining, festive atmosphere.⁵²

This campaign, declared S. B—ov, represented “an unprecedented maturation of new creative forms of Komsomol work.”⁵³ It wedded entertainment, action, and

⁵¹ M. Yankovskii, “Kulturnyi pokhod,” *Iunyi proletarii*, no. 9 (1928): 9.

⁵² G--Na Z, “Kulturnyi pokhod,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, April 11, 1928, 1.

⁵³ S. B--ov, “Nevidannyi pokhod,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, April 8, 1928, 1.

propaganda with the trappings of volunteerism and militarism. Even if a youth became bored with the campaigns accompanying speeches, that boredom was alleviated by its marches into concert halls, museums, and theaters. Indeed, S. B—ov’s article chronicled how over the subsequent days a “Komsomol battalion” took over the Academic Philharmonic, and after the battalion’s leaders gave speeches outlining the duties of a “cultural soldier,” some 2,500 youths were treated to the classical melodies of cellos and bassoons. Shortly thereafter, a detachment of scouts (*razvedchiki*) were dispatched to the city museum to prepare it for the 4,000 spectators who would tour it and thirty five other museums and exhibitions in the coming days. Another group of youths were dispatched to a local factory to give a performance of *Zovi fabkom*, a play about the evils of anti-Semitism. After the play the komsomol actors organized a ten minute discussion on anti-Semitism in the factory and labor discipline.⁵⁴ On the 14 April the Leningrad campaign hit its peak, it sent patrols of 40,000 komsomol into the streets, cultural buildings and worker clubs. Armed with projectors and radios they battled “religious customs.”

The cultural campaign was not just an example of a new creativity in Komsomol activism. It also showed it could be executed with a good measure of fun, humor, and a hint of political mischievousness. This was evident during a humorous episode at a circus organized for the campaign’s cultural soldiers. Tickets to the circus were in such high demand that “bitter arguments” broke out between the district committee and the editorial board of *Smena* over the controlled of their allocation. The excitement was in

⁵⁴ S. Ershov N. Korovkin, *Zovi fabkom*, 3rd ed. (Leningrad: Teakinopechat, 1929). For Komsomol youth’s participation in theater, particularly through the Theater of Working Class Youth, or TRAM, see Lynn Mally, *Revolutionary Acts: Amateur Theater and the Soviet State, 1917-1938* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000).

part generated by a scheduled performance of the magician Kefalo. However, much to Kefalo's dismay the crowd of hardened Komsomols sabotaged one of his tricks.

“For the following number I ask from my esteemed audience six ordinary rings from your fingers!”

The esteemed audience didn't budge.

“Perhaps six rings can't be found among you?”

Then a storm of cries and laughter erupted.

“We don't have rings!”

“Komsomols don't wear rings! Don't you know that already!”

The circus bellowed a long time inflamed by such ignorance of the famous magician. Kefalo didn't get any rings.

Despite Kefalo's cultural faux pas, the circus along with the many plays and concerts, excursions to the museum and historical tours provided young communists with a new enthusiastic spirit. The campaign was marked by its constant parades of youth through Leningrad's streets. As one komsomol wrote to *Young Proletarian*, “Nearly everyday “Red Beacon” komsomols assaulted something. . . . Komsomols go, watch and leave so that after two to three days go, watch, and leave again.” Another participant described how “dozens of guys” leapt off trolleybus cars, came together by collectives and formed “new detachments of cultural soldiers.” The aim of their “assault” was a tour of the Peter and Paul Fortress where “grey haired elders” like “hypnotists” took the soldiers “back in time” for a lesson in the ABCs of prison life. “The feeling after the visit was unforgettable,” said K. Vislenskii, “We exited the gate [of the fortress] onto the crowded, noisy street subdued and contemplative.”⁵⁵ The campaign's emotional effects on

⁵⁵ Yankovskii, “Kulturnyi pokhod,” 17.

participants, be it enthusiasm or sobriety, caused it to be hailed as a perfect and much needed example of Komsomol initiative, inventiveness and creativity.⁵⁶

Over the ensuing weeks several articles appeared in the Komsomol press highlighting the Leningraders' activities. The festivity of the campaign is not to suggest it lacked an overt political mission. One article noted how the campaign was a "war for cleanliness and cultured daily life, to help comrades in need, well conducted parties, a struggle for collectivism, comradeship, and labor discipline and against drunkenness, foolishness, and burning away pay on vodka, parties, and swank."⁵⁷ The trips to museums and monuments, the Peter and Paul fortress, and concerts and theaters reinforced the virtues of Soviet culture and history. Perhaps more importantly, the campaign, in the words of one reporter, created "such a reveille, such comradeship, solidarity, and collectivism that old timers of the Leningrad Komsomol hadn't seen in years."⁵⁸

Seeking to understand the campaign, it is significant to note that it was held during Easter. It was then, one article pointed out, that all church activists "mobilized for conducting broad agitation" which included "festive Easter services," "frenzied campaigns that even featured "free instruction of the foxtrot and Charleston." It was against this "organized campaign of obscurantists," one article noted, that the Komsomol

⁵⁶ S. Bezborodov, "Odinadtsat' dnei pokhod," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, April 21, 1928, 5.

⁵⁷ Z, "Kulturnyi pokhod," 1.

⁵⁸ Bezborodov, "Odinadtsat' dnei pokhod," 5.

advanced its own cultural campaign.⁵⁹ The night before Easter, the Leningrad Komsomol organized a slew of antireligious events including ninety-eight “anti-religious evenings in thirty-eight district clubs.” There they distributed theater tickets which attracted an estimated 35,000 people. Districts around the city similarly reported attendances of thousands to the Komsomol’s anti-Easter events. One sign of the evening’s success at promoting a festive but abstemious evening was that “even there were no drunks in clubs for construction workers which are perennially scandalized by drunkenness.”⁶⁰

The cultural campaign, with its reliance on initiative, volunteerism, entertainment, and festivity, injected life into forms of Komsomol activism that had become stagnant, and in many cases, perceived as ineffective. The cultural campaign served as the type of “new forms of work” the Komsomol leadership had been searching for since the Seventh Congress in 1926. Throughout the following months similar campaigns were organized in Perm, Stalingrad, Smolensk, and Samara, emulating the “Leningrad example.”

The Turn to Populism

The cultural campaign showed that despite Alfred Kurella’s warnings that Civil War motifs could result in despair and pessimism, war still served as a means for mobilizing youth for a proactive and militant struggle to create new everyday life. As the editorial staff of *Molodaia gvardiia* noted in a statement appending Kurella’s article, the Civil War “must be assigned one of the most honorable places” in the education of

⁵⁹ Yankovskii, “Kulturnyi pokhod,” 18.

⁶⁰ Bezborodov, “Odinadtsat’ dnei pokhod,” 5.

communist youth.⁶¹ The task, therefore, was not to wipe the Civil War from memory, but to reorient it to serve the immediate tasks of socialist construction. Approximately a month after the Leningrad cultural campaign, D. Khanin's speech dedicating the Red Banner at the Eighth Congress in May 1928 served as the clearest articulation of this reorientation. "Let every one of you firmly remember," he told the crowd, "The [Red Banner] is not only an award; the medal is a great duty which the Leninist Komsomol commits itself." He then outlined the fronts for the current generation's "civil war." Commanding youth to "take rifles in their hand, and take to battle horses," Khanin called on them to storm "the barricades of everyday life (*byt*)!"

Against the old, moldy prejudices, for universal literacy and culturedness, for fraternal, comradely relations toward women and each other, for a bright and cheerful life, for happy communist *byt*! A Leninist's bright and rigid dignity stands above all. [It stands] above personal attachments and comforts, above the "I". Remember that you are a fighter for communism, a Komsomolets, a Red Army soldier!⁶²

Much of Khanin's declaration repeated a number of persistent issues the Komsomol had been struggling with since its founding. Cultural backwardness, illiteracy, inequality between the sexes, and comradely relations, were consistent barriers for creating a new everyday life. Yet, Khanin's tone was markedly different. It was laced with the romanticism Kurella felt necessary to push communist youth toward the future. Khanin made overtures to military rhetoric employed by the Leningrad komsomol in their campaign. He encouraged komsomols to attack these social evils as if they were

⁶¹ Kurella, "Romantika v iunosheskom dvizhenii," 166.

⁶² *VIII Vsesoiuznyi s"ezd VLKSM 5-16 maia 1928 goda. Stenograficheskiĭ otchet*, 11.

“fighters.” They were, he said, “a two million army of Leninists.” Social activism was to become an open war without mercy; a war of martyrdom. “Our knowledge, our muscles, and our lives belong to the workers and peasants government. We did not spare them in the fiery years of the Civil war. We, without any regard, will give them in the days of new trials and victories. We wait for our commanders’ orders!”⁶³

How exactly the Komsomol would storm the barricades of everyday life and mobilize its two million soldiers was left to two of the League’s most prominent spokesmen: Nikolai Bukharin and Nikolai Chaplin. Taking a queue from events in Leningrad, both speakers called for the Komsomol to create a new voluntary movement based on mass mobilization. Initiative groups like shock brigades, Bukharin noted, already had a limited presence in the Komsomol life. Now the task was to multiply their number and scope. “All of these experiences, which are beginning to obtain a mass scale, must be taken into account and proceed,” he stressed.

Nikolai Chaplin expanded on Bukharin’s theme of voluntary groups and underlined their effectiveness as a new method of organizing and promoting youth participation.⁶⁴ Chaplin argued that the tasks of socialist construction required the participation of millions of people. However, the Komsomol still lacked “enough people for the work.” The League needed to quickly mobilize its members in massive numbers

⁶³ Ibid., 11-12. Khanin’s words were also reminiscent of the vanguardist and Nietzschean tendencies in the Komsomol. See Isabel Tirado, “Nietzschean Motifs in the Komsomol’s Vanguardism,” in *Nietzsche and Soviet Culture: Ally and Adversary*, ed. Bernice Rosenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

⁶⁴ Chaplin gave a similar but shorter speech a week prior at the Leningrad provincial conference. N. Chaplin, “Umelo rukovodit dobrovolcheskom dvizheniem,” *Komsomolskaya pravda*, April 28, 1928, 2.

and to do so it had “to find such forms of organization of mass activism which would be able manage its growth.” Chaplin’s solution was to call for a “new voluntary movement” similar to the cultural campaign in Leningrad:

“We discovered a new way of organizing the activism for the masses, a way to involve millions in construction. Just what is this form of work? This, comrades, is a new voluntary movement, which begins in the depths of our League’s growing proletarian organizations, and then is transferred to more backward organizations. These initiative groups, which were created by Komsomol and worker youth in various branches in the most variety of areas of our construction, are according to the struggle for culture and development of a cooperative village economy.”

To bolster this change of course, Chaplin grounded his call in a passage from Lenin’s speech at the Third Komsomol Congress in 1920. In it Lenin called on young communists to “be a shock force” that helped in “every job” and displayed “initiative and enterprise” in their communities. Young communists were to prove themselves to the working class through their deeds. “The League should be an organization,” Chaplin stated quoting Lenin, “enabling any worker to see that it consists of people whose teachings he perhaps does not understand, and may not immediately believe, but from whose practical work and activity he can see that they are really people who are showing him the right road.” It was only this way, Chaplin concluded, that the Komsomol could “involve the masses in the various branches of socialist work.”⁶⁵

Bukharin’s own addition to the “new voluntary movement” was for komsomols to form “Light Cavalry” brigades within Rabkrin (Workers-Peasants’ Inspectorate) as a means to combat bureaucratism in industry. The Light Cavalry brigades were small

⁶⁵ *VIII Vsesoiuznyi s’ezd VLKSM 5-16 maia 1928 goda. Stenograficheskiĭ otchet*, 43-45.

“unofficial” groups of Komsomol volunteers who would “go in to the shops, institutions, bazaars, stores, and commissariats.” They would “arrive not in the character of fiscal controllers, not with mandates, not with check stubs, and not with official demands.” Rather they would present themselves as “customers, complainers, or petitioners, using words like ordinary mortals [and stand] in line with all others.” Bukharin stressed that only with voluntary groups like the Light Calvary could the Komsomol successfully battle against poor accounting, negligence toward consumers, corruption and embezzlement and other practices increasingly associated with bureaucratism.⁶⁶

Bukharin’s and Chaplin’s call for a “new voluntary movement” based on initiative and mass mobilization was both a break with and a return to the past. It was a break because until the Eighth Congress the Komsomol policy had followed Lenin’s instance that youth “learn communism.” Now, Chaplin was gesturing to the more populist aspects of Bolshevism which championed the unleashing of young communists on Soviet society. Chaplin’s move, therefore, was akin to what David Priestland calls “populist revivalism.” This line of Bolshevik thought advocated “a populist form of mass mobilization, and their model of society was perhaps closest to the small partisan military unit—a force that had leaders but allowed rank and file members to take initiative, within limits.”⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Ibid., 34-35.

⁶⁷ David Priestland, *Stalinism and the Politics of Mobilization: Ideas, Power, and Terror in Inter-war Russia* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 42. For a discussion of mass politics and Stalinism see Michael Gelb, "Mass Politics Under Stalinism: Two Case Studies," in *Essays on Revolutionary Culture and Stalinism*, ed. John W. Strong (Slavica, 1990).

Indeed, Bukharin's and Chaplin's advocacy of volunteerism and initiative did not mean an eschewing of leadership or discipline, as some feared. Rather, "the role of leadership in the development of a voluntary initiative movement does not decrease, but increases."⁶⁸ The increase of initiative was not just about deploying more komsomols into action. It also looked to provide activists with more practical training. Congress delegates like Bordadyn from Moscow welcomed this turn toward more "lively forms" of activism. But, he warned, many rank and file komsomols did not view volunteerism in the same way as the leadership. "Several comrades," he explained, "understand slogans of voluntarism as "I do what I want—I want to study, or don't want to, I want to execute what the League has charged me, or I don't want to"⁶⁹ Another delegate, Lebedev from Central Asia, was optimistic that initiative groups could inject some enthusiasm into Komsomol activism since it was well known that "work through committees doesn't inspire initiative or spontaneity" and many members "wasted time in meetings and committees." In his view, initiative groups could "stoke the fires around [the rank and file] and begin a struggle" and teach them to not be "passive screws in a common machine."⁷⁰

Activism, Campaignism, Militarism

⁶⁸ VIII Vsesoiuznyi s"ezd VLKSM 5-16 maia 1928 goda. *Stenograficheskii otchet*, 45.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

The emphasis on volunteerism and campaigns in 1928 signaled the revival of methods already present in the Komsomol. Since the Civil War, the League used campaigns to increase youth participation. Campaigns were intense periods of activism usually lasting a few days to a few months where the Komsomol concentrated its manpower around a particular task. Since the Civil War, the League conducted a number of campaigns around Komsomol, Party and military recruitment, famine relief, agitation, anti-religion, and elections to soviets. Organizers believed that an intense burst of focused activity could draw in large numbers of participants, generate enthusiasm, and provide a rapid blow against its intended targets. Campaigns were executed in quick bursts, clumsily labeled as ten-dayers (*dekadniki*), two-weekers (*dvukh-nedel'niki*), monthers (*mesiachniki*) and two-monthers (*dvukh- mesiachniki*).⁷¹ The initiation for early campaigns came from above, often directly from the Komsomol Central Committee. It often provided local organizations didactic instructions for organizing and carrying out a campaign, provided propaganda and other materials. In some instances, like in the “Face the Countryside” campaign in 1924/25 the Central Committee dispatched members to particular localities under orders.⁷²

Campaigns also tended to be colored in military motifs. The word “campaign” (*kampaniia*) had its roots in military discourse, and for the Komsomol the Civil War played the greatest influence. Campaigns also incorporated military methods like the issuing of instructions and orders, conducting parades, marches and demonstrations, and

⁷¹ Isabel Tirado, "The Revolution, Young Peasants and the Komsomol's Anti-Religious Campaigns, 1920-1928," *Canadian-American Slavonic Papers* 26, no. 1-4 (1992).

⁷² *Komsomolskaya Paskha*, (Moscow: Novaya Moskva, 1924).

using audio and visual materials like music, songs, placards and banners, and costumes. Militaristic language was deployed during Komsomol campaigns. Words like war, assault, struggle, enemy, strike (*udar*), and storm were part of their general lexicon. One early pamphlet for conducting Komsomol Easters called for “a necessary unyielding and enduring struggle, a genuine war” against religion. “This war,” the pamphlet continued, “must employ all the military arts.” The Komsomol Christmas was referred to as the “first serious assault (*shturma*) on the advanced positions of the enemy,” an assault that was preceded by “serious artillery preparation”⁷³

The use of such military metaphors greatly increased after the Eight Komsomol Congress. The campaign became virtually ubiquitous as *the* method of activism. Komsomols participated in campaigns for libraries (*bibliotechnyi pokhod* or *bibpokhod*), literacy (*likbezpokhod*), harvests (*pokhod za urozhai*), forestry (*kampaniia po lesozagotovkam*), and cotton (*khlopkovaia kampaniia*), not to mention the campaign to collectivize agriculture.⁷⁴ Campaigns became more militaristic, complete with soldiers, detachments, fronts, armies, plans, headquarters, raids, and assaults. Some Komsomols treated the “cultural army” as an actual military organization. In Tula, cultural political scouts “practiced roll-call assemblies and roused up the cultural army out of bed in the middle of the night by signal in order to check its military preparedness.”⁷⁵ Klaus

⁷³ *Komsomolskaya paskha*, (Moscow: Krasnaya nov', 1923), 5.

⁷⁴ For information about *bibpokhod* and *likbezpokhod* see the pamphlets Narkompros RSFSR, *Ha shturm za kachestvo likbezpokhoda* (Moscow: 1931); Il'ia Tsaregradskii, *Bibliotechnaia rabota na novykh putiakh: kak organizovat' bibliotechnyi pokhod* (Leningrad: 1929).

⁷⁵ L. S. Frid, *Ocherki po istorii razvitiia politico-prosvetitelnoi raboty v RSFSR, 1917-1929* (Leningrad: 1941), 141.

Mehnert, a Russian born German sociologist, noted the “warlike character” of Russia at the time. He described how “newspapers [were] like war communiqués” and every economic and intellectual endeavor was laden with militarist terminology.⁷⁶

For many Komsomol youths, militarism provided the perfect backdrop for fusing utopian aspirations with the collective sacrifice for the “great purpose” of a brighter future.⁷⁷ Some komsomols called for the adoption of military green khaki uniforms, the use of orchestras, and parades in the style of German communist paramilitary organization the “Iungsturm.” Komsomols assumed that uniforms would instill discipline and military preparedness combat pessimism and depression. As one advocate for adopting “iungsturm methods” in the Komsomol reasoned,

A military appearance and uniform is not only necessary for us to handsomely march in demonstrations and to show our valor. The form constantly gives the sense of one’s tasks and duty and military dress instills energy and courage. And with such fervor “iungsturm” will take on work and always conscientiously fulfill it! Among them there is no depression.⁷⁸

The iungsturm style was embraced on a limited scale. The Komsomol Central Committee went so far as recommending it for International Youth Day celebrations to give the impression that participating youth were of different nationalities but, because of

⁷⁶ Klaus Mehnert, *Youth in Soviet Russia*, trans. Michael Davidson, [1st ed. (New York,: Harcourt, 1933), 67.

⁷⁷ Richard Stites also has noted the connection between utopianism, violence, and revolutionary nostalgia in the 1920s. Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), Chapter 2 and 3.

⁷⁸ N Kudryashev, "Voennaya vypravka i forma nuzhny," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, March 2, 1927, 3.

their uniformed, militaristic dress, were united under one banner.⁷⁹ In addition, militarism tapped into the very romantic and enthusiastic idealism advocated by Alfred Kurella. As Mehnert noted, the Komsomol's militaristic turn was "peculiarly suited to the character of youth." "[It was] as if," he continued, "the spirit of the civil war had been recovered, the a-heroic dullness of the NEP period had disappeared. The traditions of the civil war, eagerness for the fray and a warlike spirit, blazed up again. . . All the energies that had been slumbering were roused to new life."⁸⁰

There was some truth to Mehnert's comment about slumbering energies being awakened by campaigns and militarism. By the mid-1920s, most Komsomol campaigns had lost their spontaneous and carnivalesque flavor. Some like, Komsomol Easter and Christmas campaigns, were a mixture of traditional Russian carnival (*maslenitsa*) with costumes, processions and mockery, revolutionary songs, plays, and imagery, and anti-religious propaganda. Like traditional Russian carnival, they provided the chance for youth to challenge authority.⁸¹ Komsomol Christmas and Easter were stopped after 1924 because they tended to be more focused on revelry and their confrontational anti-religious message alienated many peasants. Some Komsomol youth even used the campaign as an opportunity to ransack churches and beat up priests. One of the campaign's organizers, Ivan Stepanov, admitted that the holidays often "turned into Komsomol mischief." In

⁷⁹ Statements for and against Iungstrum were published in *Komsomolskaya pravda* throughout February and March 1927.

⁸⁰ Mehnert, *Youth in Soviet Russia*, 67-68.

⁸¹ For this in the 19th century see Stephen P. Frank, "Simple Folk, Savage Customs? Youth, Sociability, and the Dynamics of Culture in Rural Russia, 1856-1914," *Journal of Social History* 25, no. 4 (1992).

1924, even Stalin publically called for their termination because Komsomol Easters were “hooliganistic escapades under the guise of so-called anti-religious campaigns.”⁸²

Alarmed that Komsomol holidays could get out of hand, the League adopted more structured and less offensive antireligious efforts.⁸³

The negatives associated with Komsomol Easters and Christmases added to a growing dissatisfaction with campaigns in the mid-1920s. According to Daniel Peris, “campaignism” became a “dirty word” because they were unsustainable and ineffective.⁸⁴ While campaigns attracted a measure of volunteerism and participation, their spontaneity was stifled because local activists prevented rank and filers from taking any independent action. As Chaplin explained in 1928, activists were afraid of “losing their leadership” and as a result either “hovered” over or “tried to press” youth activism.⁸⁵ Rank and file participation was further curtailed because activists became too reliant on campaigns and failed to provide opportunities for ongoing action. As one report stated, “At meetings, non-Party youth say that [activists] only give us work around campaigns, but don’t call on us at other times.”⁸⁶

⁸² Quoted in Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Cornell University Press, 2001), 39.

⁸³ William Husband, *“Godless communists”: Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000), 58-59, 64-65; Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless*, 39; Tirado, “The Revolution, Young Peasants and the Komsomol’s Anti-Religious Campaigns, 1920-1928,” 109-11.

⁸⁴ Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless*, 100.

⁸⁵ *VIII Vsesoiuznyi s’ezd VLKSM 5-16 maia 1928 goda. Stenograficheskii otchet*, 46.

⁸⁶ TsAODM f. 634, op. d. 128, l. 27.

Despite the shortcomings of campaigns, they did provide youths the opportunity to participate in society. Social and political participation was what attracted many youths to join the Komsomol. For example, Nikolai Bocharov stated that his decision to join the Komsomol was in part “the wish to take an active part in building a new life.”⁸⁷ Others explained their desire to join the Komsomol came from wanting to “actively participate,” having “a desire to develop” politically or culturally, or to be a part of a “struggle” to change society.⁸⁸ This opportunity to be a part of building a new life also gave youths the impression that the construction of socialism depended on them. Such a weight sat well on the shoulders of Nikolai Lunev, a Komsomol activist during the Stalin Revolution, who wrote:

I carried out all kinds of small and large Party and Komsomol tasks answering some inner call. I believed that the construction of socialism in our country would radically change the future of the nation, and that by a high degree of the mechanization of labor and scientific achievements the doors would be flung open to cultural growth and a life free of care. I saw the older generation, worn out after years of war and the postwar chaos. They were no longer in a position to withstand the difficulties involved in the construction of socialism. Therefore I came to the conclusion that success in transforming the country depended entirely on the physical exertions and the will of people like me. And I went among the young people to infect them with my faith and my belief in the approaching hour of victory of socialism and to lead them to share in the most difficult parts of this construction program.⁸⁹

⁸⁷ Nikolai Bocharov, "Off the Beaten Track," in *Soviet Youth: Twelve Komsomol Histories*, ed. Nikolai K. Novak-Deker (Munich: Institute for the Study of the USSR, 1959), 43.

⁸⁸ GARO f. 478, op. 1, d. 660, l. 17, 18, 22, 53.

⁸⁹ Nikolai Lunev, "Blind Faith in a Bright Future," in *Soviet Youth: Twelve Komsomol Histories*, ed. Nikolai K. Novak-Deker (Munich: Institute for the Study of the USSR, 1959), 34.

Others spoke about the inspiration generated by the discipline, comradeship, and pageantry of Komsomol activism. Nikolai Bocharov recalled that such qualities attracted him to the League:

“The members of the Komsomol always came to their *subbotniks* in an organized fashion, carrying red flags and singing revolutionary songs. They all worked with great spirit, quickly and conscientiously, competing with each other in agility, strength, and endurance. The enthusiasm of the Komsomol members on these occasions was infectious. I made new friends: boys and girls who were inspired with feelings of comradeship, who were ready to devote all their efforts to the cause of the Revolution.”⁹⁰

All of these recollections about activism share one important thing: that participation had a direct affect on member’s attitude, enthusiasm and optimism for the future, communist ideology, and their role in making its theories a reality. Activism pulled them out of the “humdrum” of daily life.

Like the Komsomol Christmas and Easter campaigns, komsomols took their enthusiastic and militant spirit to much to heart. Activists in Smolensk, for example, reported that some komsomols participating in the “Light Calvary” asked “with all seriousness” whether they would be given horses. Another Light Calvary group conducted themselves as a clandestine organization. They snubbed their local Komsomol leaders and conducted their own “secret” raids of institutions where they covertly handed over materials from their actions to the Workers-Peasants Inspectorate. The report referred to these secret raids as “Pinkertonism.”⁹¹ Finally, in villages outside of

⁹⁰ Bocharov, "Off the Beaten Track," 43.

⁹¹ Pinkertonism referred to the turn of the century American private security firm known for busting up strikes and unions and attacking leftists. To refer to something as “Pinkerton” was to suggest its secret,

Smolensk, the military metaphors made some village cells confuse Light Cavaliers with the cavalry of the Red Army.⁹²

The military rhetoric adopted by komsomols was not simply revolutionary posturing. Behind it laid a genuine belief that mass mobilization of youth could solve all problems. Many in the Komsomol leadership, like Malchikov, believed that issues as complex as illiteracy could be conquered if “every Komsomol and every cell [became] an initiative detachment, efficient fighting guys, that sever all that is unhealthy in the process of our construction and steadfastly fight under the symbol of cultural revolution.”⁹³ The success of campaigns only further bolstered calls for their militarization. Speaking to the success of the Komsomol’s cultural campaign (*kultpokhod*) in fall/winter 1928, a Komsomol leader named Brotsdo called for turning the *kultpokhod* into “a revolutionary war, to a war to a victorious end.”⁹⁴

However, some saw the militarization of Komsomol campaigns as a potential “danger” that could sully the campaigns “real tasks.” “Several [komsomols] now think,” read an editorial in *Komsomolskaya pravda*, “that the cultural campaign would quickly rescue us from illiteracy and ignorance, immediately increase as if by magic the cultural level of youth, and what remains of cultural issues, perhaps there is nothing of

unlawful, and often violent activities. I assume the adoption of “Pinkertonism” in Soviet Russia came from news reports about the crackdown on American labor.

⁹² E. V. Kodin, ed., *Deti i molodezh Smolenshchiny, 1920-1930-e gody* (Smolensk: Madzhenta, 2006), 225.

⁹³ *VIII Vsesoiuznyi s’ezd VLKSM 5-16 maia 1928 goda. Stenograficheskii otchet*, 456.

⁹⁴ RGASPI f. 37M, op. 6, d. 6, l. 203.

concern."⁹⁵ When the all-union cultural campaign was announced in summer 1928, the Central Committee stated that it considered headquarters, orders, and cultural armies “inexpedient.” The tasks of Cultural Revolution could not be decided by “campaign methods alone” explained TsK secretary Rakhmanov. Military methods were only “an organizational beginning” for “the eradication of various illnesses in our daily life” not an end in itself.⁹⁶

Storming the Barricades of Byt

Despite the divisions over the effectiveness of militarizing Komsomol activism, war motifs continued to serve as a dominant feature in the *kultpokhod* after its expansion into an all-union campaign in the fall of 1928. This expansion of the cultural campaign (*kulpokhod*) was the result of a resolution adopted at the Eighth Congress on the “liquidation of illiteracy.” The resolution was important not so much for its content but for its tone. Previous resolutions on fighting illiteracy, like the one adopted at the Sixth Congress in 1924, were verbose documents that urged komsomols to participate in literacy efforts, join organizations like “Down with Illiteracy!,” set up schools and education circles, all under the slogan “A literate teaches the illiterate.”⁹⁷ In contrast, the 1928 resolution was a pithy document that sought to apply the militarism of the cultural

⁹⁵ "V letnii pokhod," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, June 1, 1928, 1.

⁹⁶ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 3, d. 47, 1. 15. The resolution was published in G. Rakhmanov, "O Vsesiuznom kultpokhod komsomola," *Izvestiia TsK VLKSM* 14, no. 30 (1928): 10.

⁹⁷ TsK VLKSM, *Tovarishch komsomol: Dokumenty s"ezdov, konferentsii i TsK VLKSM, 1918-1968* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1969), 178-81.

campaign to teaching people how to read. Instead of the vague calls to the literacy flag, the 1928 resolution was concrete. It spoke of a month long “wide campaign” where a thousand komsomols were to be “mobilized” to train communist youth in literacy pedagogy, organize a “holiday” to celebrate reading at the beginning of the school year, and even set up “contests” between cells over which one could teach the most people. Moreover, while the previous resolution encouraged komsomols’ participation, the new decision was a list of orders that demanded that “every komsomol” focus their efforts on the campaign.⁹⁸ Moreover, the general expansion of the cultural campaign to other spheres of Komsomol activism signaled an attempt to standardize the all-Union campaign by applying “concrete slogans to define [its] contents”: illiteracy, drunkenness, dirt, and negligence in personal and social life.⁹⁹

Though the Central Committee presented komsomols with a list of “concrete tasks” for the campaign, how exactly komsomols were to fulfill them was left undefined. This added to komsomols’ confusion and intransience as they tried to make sense as to what exactly was a cultural campaign. The most pressing problem was communication. For example, though the center sent out directives about the campaign, cells “in the most far off districts” knew nothing about it and asked, “When does this campaign start and where do we need to go?”¹⁰⁰ One report from Samara stated “all activists were still confused on the formation of various groups, on the endless ‘preparatory’ questions, as to

⁹⁸ Ibid., 396-97.

⁹⁹ Rakhmanov, "O Vsesiuznom kultpokhod komsomola," 10.

¹⁰⁰ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 859, l. 68.

its organizational scale, [and as a result] forget about the purpose of the campaign—a real struggle for culture.”¹⁰¹ Komsomols in Pezen thought that the *kultpokhod* was really a holiday, and took the opportunity to “rest with a bottle of vodka in the pub.” Many organizations “waited” for “directives from above,” thereby failing to begin the campaign on the scheduled date, while some cell secretaries shoved the directive “in their pocket, and forgot it in their pants at home.” Sometimes directives were sent to the Party by mistake. A cell in Samara waited for the directive about the campaign, but “it was sent to the secretary of the VKP(b) cell and he lost it.”¹⁰² Activists from one komsomol collective were said to “brush off talk about the campaign like it was obnoxious flies.” A report from another locality simply stated, “We don’t know . . . We did nothing . . . We’re waiting for a directive from the raikom.”¹⁰³ As one Komsomol named A. B. complained to the newspaper *Kultarmeets*, few in his cell understood the full extent of the campaign and its purpose. Instead, “they cried about it and don’t lift a finger,” leaving only three or four members to participate “while the rest of the cell sleeps.”¹⁰⁴ While some cells were sleeping, others formulated a lot of plans which were left mostly unexecuted. Komsomols in Chita, for example, made an extensive plan for the campaign that included “a war against beer,” a show trial of drunken komsomols, debates, movie

¹⁰¹ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23 d. 960 l. 1.

¹⁰² RGASPI f. 1M, op 23 d. 859 l. 111

¹⁰³ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 858, l. 12.

¹⁰⁴ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 859, l. 68.

nights, lectures on hygiene, and teaching illiterates. But the plan remained on paper and “none of [it] was executed in real life.”¹⁰⁵

Yet the other side of disorder was a license, given to Komsomol youth, to shape the particulars of attacking “illiteracy, drunkenness, and dirt” according to their own specific styles, views, and practices. Komsomols showed their creativity in activism, and this in turn produced enthusiasm and participation. As one evaluation of the *kulpokhod* read, “During the *kulpokhod* there were many new forms and methods of work. . . This stimulated work.”¹⁰⁶ In far off Kizil-Kiya in Kyrgyzstan, the campaign “livened the mood of the organization” as more than 300 youths volunteered to form a variety of groups that addressed sanitation, renovations to clubs and housing, alcoholism, youth literature, and illiteracy.¹⁰⁷ At the Lenin Factory in the town of Dneprapetpovsk, some Komsomols became sponsors of a local drunk. Like a modern day Alcoholics Anonymous, a group of youths took an alcoholic named Guzeev “under their wing” after he was fired for absenteeism and drunkenness. During a section meeting they “secured his rehabilitation” and forced Guzeev to proclaim his sobriety to the crowd.¹⁰⁸ In the Crimea, a group of komsomols built a “Museum of the Uncultured” as part of an evening carnival to convey the perils of filthy living. The “museum” was complete with exhibits of dirty rooms with Komsomols posing in tattered clothing, displaying “a devil may care

¹⁰⁵ M. Teterin, “Kulpokhod na Dalnem Vostoke,” *Izvestia TsK VLKSM*, no. 8-10 (1928): 9.

¹⁰⁶ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 858, l. 34.

¹⁰⁷ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 931, l. 77.

¹⁰⁸ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 858, l. 30.

concern” toward political education. Above the living diorama they hung a sign, “Do you see anything here about yourself?”¹⁰⁹ A Komsomol cell at the Olympic Factory decided the best way to thwart hooliganism and drunkenness was to hold an open air party with games and dancing. The festivities lasted from early afternoon to late evening drawing many people.¹¹⁰

Komsomols also used the cultural campaign to institute improvements to their living and working conditions. Under the “struggle against dirt” a group of youths were able to pressure their factory to install new ventilators, improve the quality of food at factory cafeterias, encourage youths to stop cursing, and conducted inspections and collective cleanings of apartments and dormitories. Sometimes their activities put them at odds with local administration. When an “initiative group” of fifteen Komsomols began protesting for the closure of taverns, the local soviet told them that he could not close all of them because the loss of revenue would “damage the state.” The komsomols finally won after appealing to the local Party committee. But the victory was not enough for the youths. The initiative group reorganized itself into a militia (*druzhina*) and began patrolling the streets administering fines to drunks and barkeeps they “caught in the act.”¹¹¹

In addition to these localized forms of activism, the cultural campaign was also mobilizing youth from the cities to do cultural work in the countryside. This was

¹⁰⁹ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 858, l. 35.

¹¹⁰ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 858, l. 24.

¹¹¹ RGASPI f. 1M, op. 23, d. 859, l. 56.

especially the case in the effort to combat illiteracy. University students in particular, were recruited, trained in condensed two month pedagogy courses, and then sent into factories and villages as cultural soldiers. Anastasyan Vairich, the Armenian komsomol introduced above, recalled his experience teaching people how to read:

During term time, some of our Komsomol members were assigned to individual blocks and buildings in the town in order to fight illiteracy. Their first duty was to establish which of the inhabitants of their section were illiterate, and then, after they had finished their studies, to visits their charges and teach them to read and write without difficulty. In the summer months every Komsomol member was detailed to a pasture field, where he had to teach the old shepherds and their boys. I well remember how in 1929 our organization undertook that each Komsomol member would teach not less that 45 people. That summer, I too had to teach illiterates on the pastures in the valleys around Mt. Aragats.¹¹²

Some cells organized their campaigns as a cultural exchange where youths in the towns would travel to villages to disseminate “culture” and help them organize their own cultural campaigns, or conduct city tours for village youth to show them all the “cultural progress of the city” by taking them to the movies, plays, and concerts, and tours of museums and exhibitions.

The most common form of urban youth campaigning in the countryside was the so-called “cultural assault” on villages. A Middle Volga Komsomol committee report from 8 December 1928 gives a vivid account of such an “assault” that “shook” the village of Shelekhmet. Komsomols from provincial center organized an army of 130 cultural soldiers, consisting of communist youths, a doctor, tinsmiths, carpenters, metal workers, an agronomist, and a jurist. At the head of their contingent was a tractor they secured

¹¹² Vairich, "Youth It Was that Led Us," 63.

through the provincial administration. The report of the assault reads like a military campaign. The army arrived a few days before and set up outside the village. Scouts (*razvedchiki*) were then sent into the village to find out if it was “uncultured.” They discovered that many in the village “did not have the means to thresh grain and it [lied] unthreshed” because the farming equipment was broken. The scouts returned to the camp and reported that in addition to needing help with threshing, the village school and village soviet needed repair. The army then decided the goals of the *kultpokhod* would be to “live collectively,” teach villagers how to read, train residents to work in the village school, and provide the village whatever help it needed. They “chose a headquarters” and “established a military position (*voennoe polozenie*) and three komsomols went on a second reconnaissance.” Back at the headquarters, a military camp atmosphere engulfed the army “orders and instructions flew; people began running around and began working urgently and intensely.”

The next day the “assault began.” The village was informed of the cultural army’s arrival beforehand and according to the report some “prosperous peasants” were said to have declared, “No komsomols will arrive. This is all nonsense. Tomorrow will make it certain.” The report described their entry into the village as follows:

“And when on Sunday the peasants saw the tractor and 130 cultural soldiers, they couldn’t believe their eyes. Guys collected all of them in a meeting; where they announced that they would thresh the grain for the poor peasants, mend shoes and glass frames. The peasants regarded this with mistrust. The prosperous [peasants] intensified this feeling by letting out another rumor, ‘When the Komsomols found out who has grain they will take it as though to thresh it, but they will take it for themselves.’”

The report concluded that the cultural army began teaching 160 people to read, organized a group for further literacy work, distributed 185 books, organized a village economic reading circle and got a local agronomist to lead it. Four days later, the “army” left as quickly as it arrived.¹¹³

Despite its problems and shortcomings, the Komsomol’s internal evaluation suggests that the *kultpokhod* proved to be an effective means combat illiteracy and other forms of cultural backwardness. The campaign in Saratov was held up as a prime example. There, the Komsomol managed to mobilize over 4000 people into literacy work, taught over 20,000 students in Saratov, and another 140,000 in its environs over a nine month period.¹¹⁴ “Without a doubt,” a certain Muravenko said at a Komsomol plenum evaluating the campaign, “the *kultpokhod* showed that the liquidation of illiteracy can be conducted at a far faster tempo than it was before.”¹¹⁵ Moreover, the effectiveness of the campaign and the methods it introduced particularly impressed the Komsomol Central Committee. In a report on the liquidation of illiteracy to the Agitation-Propaganda Department of the Party, B. Ol’khovii stated that the Saratov *kul’tpokhod* attracted a wide spectrum of the masses and it unified all the efforts of the Party, Komsomol and social organizations around illiteracy. The successes in Saratov, the Middle Volga region, the North Caucasus, and in the Bauman district in Moscow convinced him that the cultural campaign gave way to “a new type of work” that was

¹¹³ RGASPI f. 1, op. 23, d. 859, l. 90-92.

¹¹⁴ RGASPI f. 17, op. 113, d. 718, l. 23.

¹¹⁵ RGASPI f. 1, op. 5, d. 21, l. 256

constructed “as a unified systematic organization.” Moreover, Ol’khovii added, thanks to the use of voluntary labor the “cost of teaching illiterates shrank by four to five times.”¹¹⁶ Not only was the *kul’tpokhod* a success in generating enthusiasm and volunteerism of youth and non-party people, it was also cost effective!

The question, however, is whether the eruption of activism reversed the pessimism and depression felt by many komsomols. The rapid upsurge in activism certainly reversed the disillusionment felt by many komsomols. Anastasyan Vairich, for example, explained that the “inner shock” he suffered in 1927 was “gradually being smoothed over” as a result of participating in literacy campaigns and as a Pioneer leader. This formerly disaffected youth soon became one of the more active komsomols in his college.¹¹⁷ In a letter to the Komsomol Central Committee, a komsomol named Fedor Nikitich described his participation in the *kultpkhod* with much enthusiasm. He wrote how he stoked “the cultural furnace” in the village. Nikitich and his comrades engaged in a number of activities. They set up a reading hut, a red corner, taught illiterates, and opened an illiteracy liquidation point. They then set their sites on “vodka, dirt, and hooliganism” and created a “special group” that conducted show trials of drunken youths and their fathers, organized twelve *subbotniki* where he and other youths repaired two wells, a hut, and a school. “We ourselves take away a feeling of gratitude for all the confirmed directives which were sent by the central organs of the Komsomol. Our

¹¹⁶ *Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii* (RGASPI) f. 17 op. 113 d. 718 l. 22, 24.

¹¹⁷ Vairich, "Youth It Was that Led Us," 62.

organization still asks for more work that would teach the Komsomol. . . Dear Comrades! I give you a reminder that we, and in particular myself will wrestle with this work to its completion and will always stand on the battlefield of our fatherland.”¹¹⁸

Komsomols like Vairich and Nikitich were not alone in displaying enthusiasm for the cultural campaign. Some non-party citizens hailed the *kultpokhod* and welcomed the burden of extensive cultural transformation. A certain Dr. Golubov wrote this letter to a komsomol named Devyatov in response to an invitation to give lectures for a *kultpokhod*:

“Your voice is heard by some youths with exhilarating appeal in the neglected backwoods corner like our Kizil-Kiia. We suffocate among the ignorance, darkness and dirt and unsurprisingly the best Soviet citizens, like the professor which you spoke of, give a hundred lectures [for the *kultpokhod*] in order to contribute even though he is a small mite in this enormous task.

The cultural revolution is especially valuable to the conditions of the Soviet state. And if you draw up such wide plans how could they not burden many comrades. It will always seem to me that there is not enough of this.”¹¹⁹

Despite its successes, the volunteerism, initiative, spontaneity, and enthusiasm the Komsomol hoped to foster could also become excesses. The League’s unleashing of youth on society came with great risks as overly zealous and opportunistic members took advantage of power the campaign gave them. It is not surprising that some komsomol militants took the attack on culture beyond their leader’s desires. For example, the secretary of the Central Committee of the Turkmenistan Komsomol, one Murada, described “hooliganistic outbursts” on the part of local Komsomols during a *kultpokhod*.

¹¹⁸ RGASPI f. 1, op. 23, d. 824, l. 51

¹¹⁹ RGASPI f. 1, op. 23, d. 921, l. 23.

According to the report, local Komsomols organized a demonstration to commemorate the passage of the new Turkmen alphabet. During a procession against the veiling of women, the wearing of turbans, and attending mosques, some komsomols (all identified as Russian) “yelled and screamed at Muslims passing on the street and forcibly removed their veils and turbans” which caused “great displeasure” among local population. This was only the beginning. Murada also reported that a few days later, two Komsomols offended and “beat him up” a well-known mullah named Shiek Gani.¹²⁰ If this was not enough, another komsomol, under the auspices of anti-religion, “took all the property out of a mosque and announced that by the decision of the cell, the mosque was [confiscated].”¹²¹ There were also instances of Turkish komsomols using the same logic to attack an Armenia church which further fomented “ethnic antagonisms” Murad firmly stated that such behavior only further increased tensions with the local population, relations that were already strained by the lack of food and goods in the region.

In calling for spontaneity and volunteerism among its rank and file, the Komsomol leadership hoped to reverse its disillusionment and complacency. But opening a greater space for renewed volunteerism and spontaneity meant that the leadership relinquished much of their control in shaping local activity. Many Komsomols took the initiative and organized campaigns around the cultural questions that they viewed as most important to their own conceptions of culture. This local Komsomol spontaneity and initiative ran contrary to the immediate needs of the

¹²⁰ RGASPI f. 1, op. 23, d. 921, l. 29.

¹²¹ Ibid., 30.

leadership, who wanted the *kultpokhod* to focus on literacy. This was remedied over the following two years as instructions as to how a *kultpokhod* should be organized and implemented would be more clearly stated. These directions stressed literacy work as the central goal of the *kultpokhod* and organized according to a unified plan and centralized leadership.¹²² As a result the festive and creative activism youth displayed throughout 1928 was lost.

Nevertheless, the value of the *kultpokhod* was in its ability to generate enthusiasm and participation, especially among young people. It allowed them to not only become more familiar with the necessary tasks of constructing socialism, but, perhaps more importantly, the belief that they could realize them through activism. This was the view one Evintov who stated at the June 1929 Komsomol plenum, stated:

“It seems to me that on the whole our cultural campaign assisted our passing to a period of wider development of proletarian Soviet democracy . . . in that every toiler gradually becomes more accustomed to the tasks of administration. You know that besides the cultural campaign, economic campaigns, campaigns for the harvest now begin.”¹²³

It is fruitful to consider Evintov’s use of the term “democracy” in his statements about the *kultpokhod*. Certainly “democracy” in this context can simply be viewed as a Soviet rhetoric that had little correspondence to reality. But his statement takes on a more significant meaning when taken with his point that more citizens became more familiar with the tasks of the state. Mass participation and campaigns like the *kultpokhod* gave

¹²² N.K., "Kak organizovat' kul'tpokhod," *Posveshchenie na urale*, no. 9 (1930): 90-96. is just one example.

¹²³ RGASPI f. 1, op. 5, d. 21, l. 250.

Soviet citizens greater opportunities to participate in a way that made the system an expression of their will.

For Soviet youth in particular, the Komsomol was the institution that facilitated this participation. Komsomol youths were expected to play a large role in the development of the Soviet system. The cultural campaign was just one way for them to fulfill this expectation. However, young people were not that easily controlled. While the Komsomol leadership was successful in directing youth energy in a particular direction, young people frequently had the power to determine how these energies were spent. The dialectic between controlling and appeasing youth enthusiasm was a constantly evolving process. Its reconciliation presented a particular problem for the Komsomol, especially when it called on its members to participate in greater numbers according to their own volunteerism and initiative.

Whether the Komsomol's turn toward these new methods successfully pulled its members out of depression is difficult to measure. One thing, however, is certain. It provided its new generation the beginnings of its own formative experience. It was an experience that would only become more decisive with the populist and popular campaigns that accompanied the Stalin Revolution.

Conclusion

“Youth it was that led us”

“By 1928 life had become so dull, revolutionary watchwords seemed to have lost their spirit, that even the young folk were becoming "bourgeois." Dancing, flirtations, the love of finery on one side and the pursuit of learning and knowledge on the other, were drawing the young away from the outposts and lowering their enthusiasm. The Five Year Plan opened a new period of fighting for a grandiose task and called for hands and for inspiration. Again there was revolution, on a new plane.”¹ Thus wrote Katherine Kuskova, a Russian Marxist and pre-revolutionary sparring partner with Lenin. Though her thoughts about the dullness of the 1920s were formulated in exile in Geneva, they nonetheless captured the feeling of many young communists of the time. As this study has shown, the 1920s were hardly a “golden era,” as one historian has suggested.² Rather for communist youth, the 1920s represented loss, confusion, depression, anxiety, disunity, disarray, and uncertainty. NEP “pressed down” on them psychologically and politically. The Komsomol

¹ Katherine Kuskova, "The League of Communist Youth: Enthusiasm as a Driving Force," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 10, no. 29 (1931): 310.

² Stephen F. Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History Since 1917* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 76.

seemed to offer no way out of the humdrum of life. In fact, the organization as represented by its rank and file saw nothing worth living and fighting for in the present and no indication that the future would hold more promise. To be a young communist in the 1920s was to be a member of a community that lacked any definitive purpose, aim, or task. By 1927, Lenin's call to "learn communism" offered no inspiration if only because "communism" seemed so remote and unclear.

Throughout the 1920s, the Komsomol community experienced an identity crisis. It was unsure of its purpose, codes of conduct, and character. The militancy associated with war communism was considered "wrong headed" and "silly" and young communists struggled over defining what would be the basis of their political culture and how would it inform relations between members. The overarching issue that confronted rank and file members was finding unity within an ever more fluid organization. Rapid growth generated questions about internal cohesion and the nature of comradeship and friendship. The belief that the formative experience of the Civil War was being forgotten caused a crisis in historical memory. The hyper-masculinity at the heart of communist culture only widened the gap between Komsomol boys and girls. The growing burden on the shoulders of a small layer of activists produced a caste that saw itself as distinct from the rank and file. A new

generation of communist youth, ignorant of Komsomol codes of conduct, required the creation of disciplinary bodies to adjudicate their ethical violations. The lack of a grand unifying purpose produced pessimism and disillusionment even among some of its most committed members. Within this context, the adoption of militarist rhetoric and action in 1928 hardly signaled the end of utopia but rather its rebirth and reinvigoration.

What would be called the Great Break or the Stalin Revolution, and eventually Stalinism itself, was born in the first years after 1928. The Komsomol's many campaigns gave the transformation of Russia's economy, society, and culture a populist current that continued throughout the 1930s. The Komsomol's "new voluntary movement" was only one path through which youth contributed to the content of an emerging Stalinism. The Komsomol had already been a "major force" in Soviet cultural politics since the end of the Civil War.³ This role was expanded as communist youth became "particularly prominent," if not vital in the execution of the Great Break.⁴ Whether they were attacking bureaucracy through Light Calvary raids, waging class war against "bourgeois" professors and intellectuals in universities,

³ Katerina Clark, *Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995), 186.

⁴ Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Editor's Introduction," in *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984), 1.

RAPP, and Narkompros, or rooting out and purging class aliens in state and Party institutions, Komsomol youth were always in the front lines.⁵ The Komsomol created or at least shaped shock brigades, the Light Cavalry, 25,000ers movement, militarist language, and a variety of other social and campaigns.⁶ The cultural campaigns (*kultpokhod*) in the summer and fall 1928 were held up as models for the League's participation in the "campaign for grain" (collectivization) and "campaign for economic reconstruction" (industrialization).⁷ The Komsomol's cultural campaigns against illiteracy were potent in facilitating cultural transformation. As Lenin said to Komsomol activists in 1920, "Communism means that the youth, the young men and women who belong to the Youth League, should say: this is our job; we shall unite and go into the rural districts to abolish illiteracy, so that there shall be no illiterates among our young people."⁸ The Eighth Congress reiterated this fact by ordering that "every literate komsomol (either in the city or countryside) must teach one illiterate."⁹

⁵ idem., "Cultural Revolution as Class War," in *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Indiana University Press, 1984).

⁶ Lewis Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941* (Cambridge, 1988), 40; Lynne Viola, *Best Sons of the Fatherland: Workers in the Vanguard of Soviet Collectivization* (Oxford, 1987), 37-38.

⁷ G. Lebedev, "Uroki kulturnogo pokhod," *Iunyi kommunist*, no. 5 (1929): 40.

⁸ V. I. Lenin, "Tasks of the Youth Leagues," in *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1986), 297.

⁹ TsK VLKSM, *Tovarishch komsomol: Dokumenty s'ezdov, konferentsii i TsK VLKSM, 1918-1968* (Molodaia gvardiia, 1969), 296.

Young communists answered this call with great enthusiasm. The enthusiasm with which young communists participated in the cultural campaigns proved that the League served as the main constituency for the revolutionary populism of the Great Break if not a main lobby for its advocacy.

The mass participation of Komsomol youth also bears on the general meaning of cultural revolution in Soviet Russia. Sheila Fitzpatrick identifies cultural revolution as a distinct period that was characterized by class war, the creation of a new intelligentsia, and rapid social mobility.¹⁰ Michael David-Fox calls for its reevaluation in regard to its longstanding presence in Bolshevik circles. In his formulation, Bolshevik notions of cultural revolution can be conceptualized in two ways: inward and outward. The former is characterized as a “civilizing-enlightening (positive) program” and the latter is a “militant, antibourgeois, antispecialist, *antipasséiste* (negative) agenda.” David Fox connects inward cultural revolution to the soft efforts to transform the minutia of everyday life in the 1920s.¹¹ He typically associates outward cultural revolution with the militancy, campaignism, and destructiveness of the Civil War and the Great Break. Any historical notion of

¹⁰ Fitzpatrick, "Cultural Revolution as Class War."

¹¹ Michael David-Fox, "What Is Cultural Revolution?," *Russian Review* 58, no. 2 (1999): 182. David-Fox also breaks down the various historiographical treatments of cultural revolution (183-187)

cultural revolution therefore must account for its “bulky yet plastic rubric” which could be adapted to “current tasks” but still connected to a “far broader vocabulary of transformation.”¹²

Historians have duly noted the “peaks and valleys” of cultural revolution between the Revolution and the Stalin era.¹³ They have noted the political atmosphere the Great Break occurred: the class war against the “bourgeois specialists” ignited by the Shakhty trial in March 1928; the need for mass cultural transformation to accompany the twin revolutions of industrialization and collectivization, and A. I. Krinitskii’s call for melding class war with cultural revolution at an Agitprop conference in late May-early June 1928, to name a few.¹⁴ No one explains why a valley became a peak in 1928 and in particular why it took forms reminiscent of the Civil War that were communicable to a generation too young to have experienced the war. Whatever atmosphere the Party developed or manufactured, and however theorists and moralists debated the various meanings of cultural revolution, they required bodies to materialize their ideas. If youth were as

¹² Ibid.: 199.

¹³ Clark, *Petersburg, Crucible of Cultural Revolution*, 284.

¹⁴ Fitzpatrick’s lay out the various events in late 1927 and early 1928 that set the stage for Cultural Revolution remains the excepted standard among historians. Fitzpatrick, “Cultural Revolution as Class War.”

much a major force as some have suggested, then understanding why so many young communists were ready and willing to take up the flag of Cultural Revolution in the form it did requires explanation.

As this study suggests, the Komsomol's embrace of an "inward" and "outward" (to use David-Fox's terms) or the "peaks and valleys" (to use Clark's) of cultural revolution was connected to objective material circumstances within the League. The height of the "inward" cultural revolution in the Komsomol occurred at the very moment the League was experiencing rapid growth after 1924. The influx of hundreds of thousands of new members made the meaning of "communist" for komsomols unclear. In an effort to build a community identity, members' focused on the minutia of everyday life to form a consensus around its own *communist* code of conduct that stood somewhere in between "bourgeois" practices and militant asceticism. This search for an ethical middle ground was in an effort to bind a growing diverse membership without disenfranchising hundreds of thousands of would be members.

Similarly, the Komsomol's change to "outward" cultural revolution in 1928 was in relation to the real problems of pessimism and directionless among the rank and file. The identity crisis that had plagued the Komsomol came to a head in

1926/27 as a series of public scandals brought the question of the League's ethics into full view. Moral corruption, debauchery, and cultural degradation among Komsomol youth only added to the feelings of disillusionment many rank and file young communists were expressing. Moreover, 1928 was the 10th anniversary the Komsomol and Red Army, two organizations that were joined together through their participation in the Civil War. However, when communist youth compared NEP with the mythologies of the Civil War, the former only appeared direr. The historical memory of the Civil War as a heroic fighting time made the new generation who had not experienced it feel even more detached from the League's militant legacy. The forms the "outward" cultural revolution took cannot be understood outside the context of the memorialization of the Civil War and the lethargy many young communists felt. Given the tendency of komsomols to forge an identity through negation, the re-embrace of the very inversion of NEP—the Civil War and war communism—was a natural choice.

Negative identity worked in other ways. The recalling of the Civil War was no mere "class war game" nor was it a motif conjured by Party and Komsomol leaders to mobilize activists into action.¹⁵ The Civil War was more than the only

¹⁵ Fitzpatrick refers to the Civil War motifs of Komsomol activism as a "class war game." *Ibid.*, 25; Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Cultural Revolution in Russia 1928-32," *Journal of Contemporary History* 9, no. 1 (1974): 36.

heroic period that functioned as a potential wellspring for romanticism and enthusiasm. It was also a memory of a politically simpler time where the division between “us” and “them” was unmistakable. The return of intolerance toward the class enemy that had been absent for so long served as means to forge unity against a common foe. Given this, it should hardly be surprising that komsomols were eager to rail against their “bourgeois” professors, specialists, and bureaucrats in Soviet institutions, not to mention conduct a thorough mass purge of its own ranks in 1929, the first since 1920.¹⁶ The Civil War motifs prominent in the Komsomol’s activities after 1928 were no mere “re-enactment” but a recasting of the war’s memory to fit a new generation’s reckoning of present and thrust into future.

Both totalitarian and revisionist historians of Soviet Russia often explain mass participation within the framework of “above” and “below.” For scholars of the totalitarian view, those above—the Party, Stalin, etc—use a variety of measures to manipulate the masses into action. The regime’s success in doing this is indicative of its ability to control the population. Revisionists, however, explain Soviet populism

¹⁶ Fitzpatrick, “Cultural Revolution as Class War,” 23-27. Unfortunately space does not allow for a discussion of the Komsomol’s internal hunt for class enemies. On that and the 1929 purge of the Komsomol see A. Evdokimov, *V borbe za molodezh* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1929); A. Fillippov, “Litso kulatskoi agentury v komsomole,” *Iunyi kommunist*, no. 13 (1929); P. O Udalov, *Na boevoi poverke: itogi opytnoi chistki v Leningrandskoi organizatsii VLKSM* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1931); VLKSM, *O bolezennykh iavleniakh v soiuze i o zadachakh konfliktnykh kommissii v bor'be s nimi* (Moscow: 1930).

in opposite terms. The “below” (i.e. the masses) put pressure on those “above” who in turn “unleash” them. In both formulations, it is the leadership that holds the power to initiate or react to the masses.¹⁷ But as this study suggests, the divide between “above” and “below” was far more murky. Instead of a binaried, hierarchical position separated by an abstract line, “above” and “below” might be better represented as Venn diagram of two horizontal overlapping circles that shared much of the same area. The Komsomol leadership and rank and file were similar in age and background, and in some cases experience and temperament. There was congruence between how the rank and file and leadership understood and responded to the objective realities in the Komsomol. If there was any power hierarchy between leadership and led, the former was beholden to the latter for information and implementation. Poor communication, distance, institutional chaos and fluidity gave the rank and file a large measure of autonomy of interpretation and action. Whatever control the leadership possessed, whether it was at the Central Committee or regional levels, was made superfluous when confronted with the power hundreds of thousands of komsomol youth spread out across Soviet Russia.

¹⁷ For the classic discussion of “totalitarianism” versus “revisionism” in regard to Stalinism see, *Russian Review* 45, no. 4 (1986): 357-413; , *Russian Review* 46, no. 4 (1987): 379-431. For a recent assessment see Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Politics as Practice: Thoughts on a New Soviet Political History," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 5, no. 1 (2004): 27-54.

Finally, in reflecting on the Komsomol community's identity crisis throughout the 1920s and the attempt to forge unity around a grand purpose in 1928, one cannot pass over the primacy of youth. As this study has shown, youth were a vital political subject for the Bolshevik state. Not just because young people were believed to have some natural tendency toward revolution or were easily manipulated, but because youth as a historical category came into its own in the late nineteenth and twentieth century. Young people were viewed as subjects to be appealed to and objects to be studied and controlled. But youth stood as historical actors in their own right. The Komsomol as a space of and for communist youth was one place where we can see them working out their practices, mores, and behaviors amongst themselves. It is through their relations with each other that their past, present, and future was determined.

It is often said, quoting Martin Luther, that "who has the youth has the future." Perhaps we should pause and recognize that in particular places and circumstances youth defies capture. In fact, upon closer inspection we might find that it is youth that has us and the future we hope to possess is in reality already theirs.

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