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TRADING ICONS:
CLERGY, LAITY, AND RURAL COOPERATIVES, 1921-28*

In 1927, a priest was working as an accountant in both the milk artel and machine cooperative in the village Mikhalevo (Ivanovo-Voznesensk province). In the same village, a deacon and his son served as stewards in another local cooperative, while a choirboy in the village church worked as a wagon operator in the milk collective. Thus, with the exception of prominent lay religious leaders, a representative of every major subdivision within the rural religious community held an important position in a Mikhalevo cooperative.

This article explores the significance of such religious involvement in the cooperatives given Bukharin's championing of these institutions as a bridge to socialism. Self-consciously dependent upon Lenin's "original theory of 'agrarian cooperative socialism,'" Bukharin maintained in 1925-26 that the Soviet peasant would come to socialism through "'ordinary cooperatives—marketing, buying, credit.'" He linked the cooperatives'...
power to bring socialism to the countryside with their capacity to break the economic clout of the kulak. On the surface, then, the debate between Bukharin and his opponents over the cooperatives centered around economic goals, economic means, and economic categories. Implicitly, however, Bukharin and his supporters were promoting cooperatives to effect a cultural as well as an economic transformation of the Soviet countryside, to remake what Marx had called the superstructure. The peasantry's involvement in the cooperatives would catalyze them to both create and accept a "socialist culture" based on literacy, technological advancement, and atheism. While Bukharin was sitting in Moscow debating the value of cooperatives with the Left Opposition, however, Orthodox and sectarian clergy and laity were securing leadership positions in those very institutions. I argue here that religious villagers throughout the R.S.F.S.R., stung economically by certain measures of the regime's anti-religious campaign, were attempting to use the cooperatives to sus-


3. Bukharin, for example, declared: "We will fight against the kulak and the user by economic means: he opens a store; we open a cooperative against him." Quoted in Kooperatsiia k desiatiletiiu oktiabria (Moscow: Izdanie gazety "Kooperativnaia Zhizn", 1927). In the spring of 1925, he made the following prophecy: "... even the kulak cooperative [credit cooperatives] will grow into our system." See Cohen, Bukharin and the Bolshevik Revolution, p. 196. According to Kooperatsiia k desiatiletiiu, the expansion of the cooperative movement in agriculture began to occur in 1924-25, and declined in the summer of 1926. In 1924-25, 15 percent of all households in the USSR (outside the Ukraine) belonged to cooperatives. In 1925-26, this figure had climbed to 24 percent, while by 1926-27 it had reached 29 percent. By 1927, there were roughly 7.5 million peasant households that belonged to cooperatives. See p. 21.