THE REVOLUTION, YOUNG PEASANTS, AND THE KOMSOMOL'S ANTIRELIGIOUS CAMPAIGNS (1920-1928)*

My sweetheart is the secretary
Of the executive committee.
He christens babies without priests,
And marries girls and lads.
The church bells ring,
The greasy candles burn,
But my sweetie and I
Are off to the Komsomol.¹

These verses, intended for young peasants, celebrated the revolution, its institutions, and the new secular culture. They drove home the message that the Church was superfluous in the new village, especially among the young. Peasant "girls and lads" would construct the new village, liberated from the superstition and backwardness that had shackled it since time immemorial. The Komsomol would interpret the revolution's political, economic, and cultural agenda to young peasants. For the Komsomol, as for the Communist Party, the young were the revolution's natural ally in remaking the world. Demographic realities made the Komsomol's outreach to young peasants imperative: children and adolescents nineteen years of age or younger made up half of the rural population in the mid-1920s. The Komsomol sought to transform the world view of the new generation, and that transformation entailed the rejection of traditional beliefs of which religion formed an integral part. For many Komsomolites, their identity as young Communists was insepa-

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1. "Chastushki," Zhurnal krest'ianskoi molodezhi (hereafter, ZhKM) No. 4 (1925), p. 8. This article discusses the League's antireligious activities in European Russia.
rable from their avowed atheism. For others, especially the peasant recruits who joined at the height of the New Economic Policy (NEP), participation in the Komsomol did not necessitate breaking with religious traditions and beliefs.

Organizing Young Peasants

The Communist youth movement emerged in 1917 as an urban phenomenon. Komsomol activists began to work among young peasants as early as 1918, primarily in preparation for the founding national congress of the Komsomol that year. But those early efforts were limited to areas near major cities. Urban activists went to nearby provincial towns and organized collectives to convene provincial conferences and congresses. Those efforts normally resulted in large turn-outs for the planned gathering but the collectives thus founded dwindled to a small core of devotees or disappeared soon after. The first stable rural cells were those established by demobilized soldiers returning to their villages after the civil war and by young workers fleeing the city's unemployment and hunger. These origins colored the peasants' perception that the Komsomol was alien to village life.

During the civil war the Komsomol channelled its energies into the military effort and state service, and could not expand or develop its activities in the rural areas. Yet during that period, peasants began to organize independent cultural youth clubs, in response to that ferment that had led to the creation of grassroots organizations in cities and industrial centers. Adopting such names as "Dawn" and "Awakening," these clubs, which were organized by rural teachers and other village intelligentsia, sponsored dances, games, drama circles, and shows. Komsomol leaders identified these clubs as undesirable and, in their quest to establish the League as the sole youth organization in the country, they asked the rural politprosvet committees to deprive the cultural clubs or kul'turki of literature and kerosene. In many areas the Komsomol was at a disadvantage in relation to the kul'turki, whose village roots made them more appealing to the peasantry. Komsomol-peasant relations were aggravated by the combativeness of demobilized soldiers who, as they tried to estab-