THE KOMSOMOL AND THE KREST'IANKA: THE POLITICAL MOBILIZATION OF YOUNG WOMEN IN THE RUSSIAN VILLAGE, 1921-1927*

I am now a komsomolka
I no longer wear a cross.
I don't listen to my folks,
To communion I won't go.1

The feisty young peasant woman who was the protagonist of this humorous chastushka was sui generis. A rebel in the hierarchical peasant family which prized deference from its children, she scoffed at parental authority. An atheist in a religious world, she rejected the time-honored rituals that gave peasant life its color and sense of community. A member of the Komsomol (acronym for VLKSM, or the All-Union Leninist Communist Youth League), she was a politicized woman entering the exclusively male public domain. Though she constituted part of a minuscule minority of peasant youth, nonetheless, she was a common feature of Communist popular culture in the 1920s. The Communist youth movement emerged in 1917 as an urban, male phenomenon. In the mid-1920s the Komsomol expanded very rapidly in the countryside, despite almost universal parental opposition, and

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1. I am indebted to the historian Viktor P. Danilov for this peasant chastushka and subsequent ones in this article. They come from the Riazanskii istoricheskii-arhitekturnyi muzei-zapovedniia. Nauchnyi arkhiv (hereafter, OIRK), Kn. 20, no. 490, list 119 (1929). Chastushki are short, humorous folk songs or ditties that enlivened all youth gatherings.
became a major catalyst for social change. The Komsomol succeeded in integrating a critical layer of young peasants into the Communist political system. Komsomol expansion allowed the state to fulfill a dual goal of politicizing the young generation as a whole and training future rural cadres, including a small but significant number of women. The League launched its organizational efforts in rural areas at a time when the Soviet peasantry was experiencing an economic, cultural, and even political renaissance. To the dismay of many Communists the peasant resurgence seemed to strengthen the traditional patriarchal rural world. The Komsomol's organizational efforts represented a counterforce to that renaissance and the League challenged the patriarchal nature of peasant life. This article looks at the Komsomol's outreach to peasant women in the 1920s. It begins with a survey of Komsomol efforts to recruit young peasant women, the obstacles to those efforts and their successes. It then examines their integration into Komsomol rural activities during the first decade of Soviet power.

Komsomol Recruitment Efforts: Obstacles and Successes

In 1923 and 1924 the Komsomol launched a recruitment campaign in rural areas, driven by the imperative to establish an organizational monopoly as sole representative of the country's young generation. The Komsomol's working-class identity and ethos notwithstanding, peasants made up 80 percent of the country's population, with their children under nineteen years of age comprising half of the rural population. More important, the Party needed an effective youth organization in the countryside to promote its conciliatory policy towards the peasant that was at the core of the New Economic Policy (1921-28). Not all Komsomol members welcomed this immersion in village politics: many rural cells opposed the Party's new line on the peasantry, called "face to the countryside." Despite that opposition, from 1923 to 1927 the organization pursued an aggressive recruitment effort in the rural areas that led to rapid growth of the League's peasant sector. By July 1924 the proportion of peasants in the Komsomol had climbed 39.2 percent of the membership and to 44.7 percent by January 1925. From July 1924 and throughout most of 1925 the Komsomol more than doubled the number of rural cells ev-

2. V. P. Danilov, Rural Russia under the New Regime, trans. O. Figes (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1988), 42.