FROM KREST’IANSKAIA GAZETA’S FILES:
LIFE STORY OF A PEASANT STRIVER

On November 10, 1938, Andrei Ivanovich Poluektov, a fifty-two-year-old peasant from the Dzerzhinskii kolkhoz, Losevo raion, Voronezh oblast’, sent off a letter to the editors of Krest’ianskaia gazeta. It belonged to the common genre of “abuse” letters, detailing the misdeeds and incompetence of the kolkhoz chairman. But it was by no means a standard peasant letter. Its length alone set it apart: the copy of the letter typed out by Krest’ianskaia gazeta (which is the text published here) ran to thirteen pages, at least four times as long as the average “abuse” letter to the newspaper. Equally striking were the individuality and intelligence of the writer and the ambitious scope of his epistle, which included a history of the Dzerzhinskii kolkhoz, an analysis of its social relations and ethnic conflicts, and Poluektov’s life story, to which about half the letter was devoted.

This document is exceptionally valuable for several reasons. In the first place, first-hand descriptions of particular collective farms by members or longtime observers were very unusual in the 1930s. Sociologists were largely banished from the Russian countryside, few members of the intelligentsia had contact with villages, and censorship was very heavy, especially with regard to the kolkhoz. Poluektov, a natural (though untrained) sociologist with a long lifetime’s experience of peasant life in the Losevo area, is a real gift to historians of the Russian countryside. In the second place, Poluektov’s document is a rarity in that it is a genuine peasant autobiography. Peasants rarely write autobiographies, even in times and places more conducive than the Soviet 1930s to tranquil reflection about the past. The urge to self-exploration and the quest for a meaning to one’s individual life that is inher-

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ent in autobiography is generally absent in peasants, at least as long as they remain in the village. 3 When peasants do make public autobiographical statements about their lives, as Stakhanovite peasants were encouraged to do in the 1930s, they are usually non-introspective and follow stereotyped patterns (e.g., comparison of the “bad life” before collectivization with the “good life” now). 4 But the life story Poluektov tells has nothing to do with these stereotypes.

Poluektov was born a peasant and presumably died one, but not for want of trying to improve his lot in life. It is probably this upward striving that gives him the perspective to look at himself and his life in a way that is atypical of peasants. Notable also is his adaptability and the range of ways of getting ahead—commercial apprenticeship, accountancy, officer-training, soldiers’ committees and revolutionary speeches (1917), employment as a Soviet official—that he tried at different times. His efforts were often frustrated by the sudden shifts in the rules of the game that occurred during his lifetime. In the Soviet period, he was hampered by having a “bad” class background (his father was a Stolypin separator, which put him dangerously close to the kulak category in Bolshevik eyes), and by failure to join the Communist Party (he passed up an early chance of joining and was rejected later as a “Stolypinite”). In the final analysis, since he ended up in the village as a kolkhoznik, these attempts to achieve upward mobility must be accounted a failure. But Poluek-

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4. The Stakhanovite life stories, which generically resemble Latin American testimonios, were usually related orally at conferences of Stakhanovites. For a brief discussion, see my Stalin’s Peasants, 275–79. The genre is discussed, and examples given, in a forthcoming book of Russian women’s autobiographical narratives from the prewar Soviet period compiled by Yuri Slezkine and myself. There are also some longer, published Stakhanovite autobiographies, e.g., Fedor Dubkovetskii, Na put’ k kommunizmu. Zapiski zainitsiatela kolkhoznogo dvizheniia na Ukrainie (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1951); P. Angelina, O samom glavnom. Moi otvet na amerikanskiiu anketu (Moscow: Izd. “Pravda,” 1948); idem., Liudi kolkhoznikh polei (Moscow-Leningrad: Gos. izdat. Detskoi Literatury, 1952).