

# Peasant Wars in Tambov Province

Delano Dugarm

1997

On 8 August 1920, A. G. Shlikhter addressed the Tambov Provincial Food Supply Conference. A longtime party member with a reputation for increasing grain procurements without inciting uprisings, he had just been appointed chairman of the Tambov provincial executive committee. In his speech opening the conference Shlikhter said that food supply workers should “work like law-abiding revolutionaries” to erase the “bitter memories of food supply workers, especially of what they were doing two or three months ago;” so that they could in the future “safely walk in the countryside.”<sup>1</sup>

This exhortation came too late. Three weeks later, an armed detachment from the Provincial Food Supply Committee entered Kamenka, a village seventy-five kilometers south of Tambov, in search of grain to requisition. The detachment was ambushed as it left the village, and annihilated. The peasants defeated several more punitive detachments sent against them. Organized by local Socialist Revolutionaries and led by a shadowy figure named Aleksandr Antonov, this rebellion soon encompassed the richest areas of the province and took tens of thousands of Soviet troops and many of the Red Army’s finest commanders to suppress.<sup>2</sup>

This uprising was hardly unique in the civil war history of Tambov province. Tambov’s Communist government was weak throughout this period and suffered many disadvantages in its attempts to rule the province, even though “rule” actually meant only collecting grain to feed the army and the cities, obtaining recruits to reinforce the Red Army, and keeping trains running through the province. Neither the provincial government nor the Communist party organization were up to the task of governance.

Government bureaucrats were ignorant, inefficient, and corrupt. Security forces executed for malfeasance the first man appointed provincial Food Supply commissar, probably the most important official after the chairman of the provincial executive committee. Lower ranking individuals were often little better: the provincial Cheka regularly arrested provincial and *uezd* government officials for corruption, on occasion shooting them. The Tambov government, though, had to settle for what it could get. A. Okninsky, a Petrograd bureaucrat who settled in Podgorskaia district, Borisoglebsk *uezd*, to sit out the civil war, writes that educated office workers were in

---

<sup>1</sup> Speech by A. G. Shlikhter to Gubernskoe prodovol’stvennoe soveshchanie, 8 August 1920, Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Tambovskoi oblasti (hereafter GATO), f. R-1236, op. 1, d. 765, l. 8.

<sup>2</sup> V V Samoshkin, “Miatezh. Antonovshchina: kanun i nachalo,” *Literatumaia Rossiia*, no. 23 (8 June 1990): 19.

such short supply that to keep himself from being requisitioned he had to bribe the head of the district office workers' union not to mention him to the *uezd* center.<sup>3</sup>

Even when officials were not criminal or venal, they were rarely efficient. Recruits who voluntarily showed up for enlistment often found that no preparations had been made to house and feed them. Peasants who carted grain to government collection points rather than selling it to black marketeers sometimes found the collection points full and had to bring their grain home. These experiences contributed to bad feelings among the population: as one report had it, "Dark elements used this in agitation against Soviet power."<sup>4</sup>

The Communist Party was not a reliable instrument, either. Total cadres were tiny, given the size of the province. In addition, as the tables shows, party ranks swelled and shrank enormously. Party organizations filled with poorly indoctrinated new members during membership drives, then shrank as inactive or inadequate members were purged and effective party members were promoted and drafted for work at the front or in other provinces.

Date	Number of Party Organizations	Number of Party Members
December 1918	469	10049
April 1919	476	9923
July 1919	441	3997
October 1919	156	1676
July 1920	640	17528
October 1920	675	11521
December 1920	unknown	7087

#### Tambov Provincial Party Organization, December 1918-December 1920

Those party members who remained in the villages developed bad reputations. Boris Shekhter, traveling in late September 1918 from Petrograd to Treskino (a village in Kirsanov *uezd*) was astounded at how unpopular Communists were. He blamed this unpopularity on the illegal exactions and brutal behavior of local Communists.<sup>5</sup>

These inadequacies spelled trouble when combined with a village population that was hostile and suspicious of the Communist government and well armed with weapons taken from the front when the Imperial Army collapsed. Violent insurrections punctuate the history of Tambov province during the civil war, starting before the October overturn. Attempts by the provincial government to collect grain by force and stop peasants from seizing non-peasant lands led to uprisings in much of the province in September 1917, and ended with the government retreating.

<sup>3</sup> *Uezd* was a political subdivision of a Russian province (Tambov province had twelve *uezds*). "Kazri komissara Seremiagina," *Izvestiia Tambovskogo gubernskogo soveta*, 12 September 1918, 1; GATO, f. R-1236, op. 1, d. 746, 1. 10; Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (formerly Tsentral'nyi Arkhiv Oktiabrskoi Revoliutsii; hereafter GARF), f. 393, op. 13, d. 463, 1. 338; report of Tambov Revision Commission, 14 February 1919, GATO, f. R-394, op. 1, d. 392, 11. 128-128ob; Instructor Gados to Gubernskii otдел upravleniia, 6 January 1919, *ibid.*, 11. 90-93; A. Okninskii, *Dva goda sredi krest'ian* (Riga: M. Didkovska Izdavnica, 1936), 38.

<sup>4</sup> *Izvestiia Narodnogo komissariata po prodovol'stvuii*, nos. 1-2 (January 1919): 57; Protocol 30 of Tambov Gubprodkollegiia, 31 March 1919, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Ekonomiki (formerly Tsentral'nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv hlorodnogo Khoziaistva; hereafter RGAE), f. 1943, op. 3, d. 293, 1. 344ob; also Protocol of 6 May 1919 instructors' meeting, *ibid.*, 1. 485ob.

<sup>5</sup> Boris Shekhter to VTsIK, stamped 27 January 1919, GATO, f. R-1, op. 1, d. 138, 11. 122-122ob.

After the “establishment of Soviet power” the next year, the first attempt to draft peasants into the Red Army ended in a debacle in June 1918. Recruits in Tambov itself rioted, arrested most of the provincial government, looted armories, and dispersed to their villages with arms and ammunition.<sup>6</sup>

In November 1918 much of Tambov province exploded again in a series of rebellions. Peasant anger over the activities of the local government had been building, especially over the abuses of the new Committees of the Rural Poor (*kombedy*), but the spark that set it off was a renewed attempt to conscript peasants, an effort that coincided with the first anniversary of the October revolution. Unrest was not limited to Tambov province: peasant rebellions flared up throughout central Russia in November 1918, typically incited by recruiting. [8 ]

Although the previous draft in June 1918 had caused serious rebellions in Tambov province, and there had been sporadic attacks on committees of the poor and Soviet officials since then, authorities were ill prepared for the widespread resistance that the new draft brought forth.<sup>7</sup>

The course of this rebellion is worth studying in some detail, as its suppression foreshadows the tactics that the Soviet government would use unsuccessfully against the 1920-21 uprising. The uprisings started in Morshansk, where peasants had especially suffered from committees of the poor.<sup>8</sup> Peasants ambushed and killed a group of *uezd* officials, including the chairman of the *uezd* party committee. The Morshansk *uezd* Cheka declared that peasants who attacked Soviet officials were outlaws, but this decree had little influence on peasants who soon afterward attacked local committees of the poor around the Berdy Iagodnoe railroad station. Insurgent peasants sent emissaries to other districts, where they successfully spread the rebellion over much of Morshansk *uezd* and parts of Kirsanov *uezd*. Army units supported by armored railroad cars with the machine guns were sent from Kaluga and Morshansk on 10 November to restore order. The peasants defeated them as well. The *uezd* authorities sent frantic telegrams to Tambov and Moscow demanding military aid “with artillery,” to fight the thousands of armed peasants they reported were marching on Morshansk.<sup>9</sup>

The uprisings in Morshansk *uezd* were not unique. Tambov’s provincial government received daily reports about new peasant uprisings in November, and uprisings also occurred in Kirsanov, Usman’, and Tambov *uezds*.<sup>10</sup> In Shatsk *uezd* mobilized men rioted in early November. Detachments sent to suppress the outbreaks met armed resistance, and an attack on the city of Shatsk by peasants was beaten off only after prolonged street fighting. The peasants then besieged the city until a large detachment of soldiers from Tambov drove them away.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>6</sup> E. A. Lutsii, “Krest’ianskoe vosstanie v Tambovskoi gubernii v sentiabre 1917 g.,” *Istoriicheskie zapiski*, no. 2 (1938), 72-75; P. Kroshitskii and S. Sokolov, eds., *Khronika revoliutsionnykh sobytii v Tambovskoi gubernii (1917-1918)* (Tambov: Tipografiia “Prole tarskii svetoch,” 1927), 60; “Tambovskie motivy” *Izvestiia Tambovskogo gubernskogo soveta*, 7 July 1918, 2; Kolosov, *Put’ bor’by*, 35-37; V. Vasil’ev, “Iz istorii antonovshchiny,” in *Antonovshchina* (Tambov: Izdatel’stvo Tambovskogo gubkoma partii “Kommunist,” 1923), 11; Provincial Commissar of Labor B. Vasil’ev, report to Narkomtrud, 19 June 1918, GARF, f. 393, op. 3, d. 378, l. 134ob.

<sup>7</sup> V. V. Aver’ev and S. Ronin, “Kulatskie vostaniia v epokhu kombedov,” *Bor’ba klassov*, no. 3 (1935): 87; Gubernskii otdel upravleniia report to NKVD otdel mestnogo upravleniia, 16 October 1918, GARF, f. 393, op. 3, d. 378, l. 146.

<sup>8</sup> Protocol 37 of the Morshansk uispolkom, 23 October 1918, GATO, f. R-20, op. 1, d. 30, l. 204.

<sup>9</sup> Glavnyi Komissar s.v. dorogi Kudriavtsev to Gubispolkom, 10 November 1918, GATO, f. R-1, op. 1, d. 31, l. 218; Deputy Chairman of Gubispolkom Monaenkov [sic] to Sovnarkom, VeCheKa, etc., 10 November 1918, GARF, f. 130, op. 2, d. 631, l. 39.

<sup>10</sup> Krotshitskii and Sokolov, *Khronika revoliutsionnykh sobytii v Tambovskoi gubernii*, 70.

<sup>11</sup> A. Komarov and P. Kroshitskii, *Revoliutsionnoe dvizhenie: Khronika 1918 goda* (Voronezh: Izdatel’stvo “Kom-muna”), 150; N. P. Zybko, *Tambovskaiia partiinaia organizatsiia v gody grazhdanskoi voiny i inostrannoii interventsii*

The life cycles of these uprisings were similar. A village assembly would organize an attack on the local soviet or committee of the poor, both to obtain weapons and to destroy tax records. In these attacks they usually arrested most soviet employees, but the peasants murdered hated officials in a variety of inventive ways.<sup>12</sup> The rebels would then send emissaries to other villages or even to other districts, asking them to join the rebellion and threatening them if they did not. This level of organization seemed sufficient to peasants, who had no interest in organizing resistance in any area larger than one to three districts, or in creating a disciplined armed force. When former army officers tried to organize them to fight the punitive detachments, peasants were unwilling to follow, and the disorganized mobs that did assemble usually broke at the sound of machine guns or even heavy rifle fire. Rumors that the rebellion had been quelled in a neighboring district often were enough to persuade peasants to release arrested officials and send them to negotiate peace with Soviet punitive detachments.<sup>13</sup>

This vacillation, lack of wider goals, and concern over White advances meant that small detachments of Soviet troops could put down series of uprisings across large areas. Rusel'nikov, a peasant from Sosnovka in Morshansk *uezd*, testified to the Tambov Provincial Revolutionary Tribunal how his group (part of the thousands of peasants that so frightened Morshansk officials) melted away on the march: "Thursday morning when the church bell rang we gathered in the field. There we were put into ranks by those ... officers... I cannot say exactly how many of us were from Sosnovka, but anyhow it was not less than four hundred men. We had just marched out of Sosnovka when we heard machine-gun fire in Lamki. We got scared and we began to slip away from the column unnoticed in small groups. I went into the forest and sat there till I saw that many others were going home. Then I went home too."<sup>14</sup>

When punitive detachments entered a village that had supported the rebellion, they would release any imprisoned soviet or committee of the poor officials, conduct a quick investigation, and execute ten or twenty peasants as "kulak ringleaders." The detachment would also collect large fines and food products.<sup>15</sup>

The approach of Kasnov's Cossacks from the South in late November 1918 also hastened the end of the uprising. While Tambov peasants hated the Soviet government, they feared the Whites more, since the latter presaged the return of the hated gentry who would demand back their land. Also, the depredations of the Food Supply detachments lessened as many of those detachments were transferred to the front to stem the advance of the White Cossacks.<sup>16</sup>

While peasant disorganization made it easy for the Soviet government to suppress the November 1918 uprisings, the unrest did force the authorities to make concessions. On 10 November they temporarily abolished all taxes, requisitions, and conscription. Investigations into the causes

---

(1918-1920 gg.J (Tambov: Tambovskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1961), 16; "Doklad o vazhneishikh sobytiakh v Kir-sanovskom *uezde* za god sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii;" GATO, f. R-1, op. 1, d. 138, 1. 21ob; Gubinstruktor V Zheladnov report to Gubprodkom, 23 November 1918, GATO, f. 81236, op. 1, d. 94, 1. 105; Tambov Voenkomat to the Commander of the Southern Front, 12 November 1918, GATO, f. R-1, op. 1, d. 31, 1. 239.

<sup>12</sup> Zybko, Tambovskaiia partiinaia organizatsiia, 16; Aver'ev and Ronin, "Kulatskie vostaniia v epokhu kombedov," 87.

<sup>13</sup> Aver'ev and Ronin, "Kulatskie vostaniia v epokhu kombedov," 94.

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 94.

<sup>15</sup> Gubinstruktor V Zheladnov, report to Gubprodkom, 23 November 1918, GATO, f. R-1236, op. 1, d. 94, 1. 105; Bor'ba rabochikh i krest'ian pod rukovodstvom bol'shevistskoi partii za ustanovlenie i uprocheenie Sovetskoi vlasti v Tambovskoi gubernii (1917-1918 godyJ (Tambov: n.p., 1957), 90.

<sup>16</sup> A. Morozov, "Doklad-Otchet o prodarmii," n.d., RGAE, f. 1943, op. 11, d. 204, 11. 62, 69.

of these rebellions exposed widespread corruption and abuse among government officials. In the weeks that followed, some officials were fired and a few were tried. The committees of the poor, a major subject of peasant complaints, were abolished, though only after they supervised new elections to local soviets.<sup>17</sup>

In July 1919 a new danger threatened Communist control of the province as General Anton Denikin's army began to advance north. As Red Army forces fell back, Tambov sent several drafts of party members and Food Supply soldiers to help stiffen resistance, but the Communist forces continued to retreat. Borisoglebsk fell to the Whites on 8 July 1919, and on 10 August a White cavalry corps commanded by General Kontantin Mamontov broke through the Red Army lines and headed straight for Tambov.<sup>18</sup>

Most of the provincial government fled from Tambov to Morshansk, leaving the defense of the city to a motley, poorly armed force of recaptured deserters, officer candidates, and mobilized Communists. D. E. Sokolov, the commander of this brigade, went over to the Cossacks with some of his troops during the White assault on the city, and the rest of his command retreated in great disorder to the north. The Cossacks occupied Tambov for several days, destroying government offices and looting warehouses and homes. They then turned northwest toward Kozlov, captured and looted that town, and finally broke through the Red Army lines again near Voronezh.<sup>19</sup>

The raid was especially destructive to government in the countryside. Most reports show that peasants took advantage of the Cossacks to eliminate irritants like Food Supply requisitioning agents and detachments. Even village and district soviets often arrested, disarmed, and robbed Food Supply officials and then turned them over to the Cossacks to be beaten or killed. Those Soviet officials who attempted to act differently usually became targets for attack themselves, especially if they were Communist Party members. Cossacks or peasants alone or in combined groups attacked and looted collective and state farms, warehouses of goods set aside to barter for grain, and destroyed railroad tracks and telegraph lines. Cossack bands trampled crops and requisitioned horses as remounts. Soviet troops in pursuit of Mamontov added to the destruction, trampling crops themselves and requisitioning grain on their own. As pro-Communist authority evaporated in the countryside in Mamontov's wake, moonshining and illegal grain smuggling reached new heights.<sup>20</sup>

Furious that local peasants had contributed to this destruction, the provincial government decided to make them pay for it. Just as the Food Supply Committee announced new, larger procurement quotas for the new harvest, the provincial government announced that peasants

---

<sup>17</sup> Margolin to the Provincial Requisition Department, 15 November 1918, GATO, f. R-1236, op. 1, d. 155, 1. 160; Protocol of Gubcheka Collegium, 28 April 1919, GATO, f. R-1, op. 1, d. 120, 1. Gob; Report to Gubprodkom from Gubinstruktor V Zheladnov, 23 November 1918, GATO, f. R-1236, op. 1, d. 94, 1. 105; Telegram from Tambov Voenkamat to the Commander of the Southern Front, 12 November 1918, GATO, f. R-I, op. I, d. 31, 1. 239.

<sup>18</sup> N. E. Kakurin, *Kak srazhalas' revoliutsiia* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennoe Izdatel'stvo, 1926; reprint, Moscow: Politizdat, 1990), 2: 261; *Ocherki istorii Tambovskoi*, 110.

<sup>19</sup> "Delo o sdache g. Tambova," *Vestnik Tambovskogo otdela upravleniia*, nos. 30-31 (27 September 1919), 44; V Verkhovnykh, "Shest' let partraboty v Tambovskoi gubernii," *Kommunist* (Tambov), no. 11 (1923): 19.

<sup>20</sup> Lipetsk Zarekviotdel to Gubrekviotdel, 21 September 1919, GATO, f. R-1236, op. 1, d. 578, 1. 33ob; *Zhurnal* no. 69 of the meeting of heads of state farms of Kozlov *uezd*, 16 September 1919, GARF, f. 4390, op. 7, d. 44, 1. 9; Shmidt to Gol'man, report, September(?) 1919, RGAE, f. 1943, op. 1, d. 439, 1. 7; Gol'man to Tsiurupa, August 1919, *ibid.*, 1. 16; Tambov Gubotdelupravleniia to Militia chiefs, 12 November 1919; GARF, f. 393, op. 13, d. 463, 1. 140; Head of Kirsanov *uezd* administration department, Report on 1919, *ibid.*, d. 472, 1. 5.

would also be assessed a 10 million ruble fine to rebuild Soviet property destroyed in the raid.<sup>21</sup> After Mamontov's raid, the provincial food supply organization had to be reorganized almost from scratch, but Moscow immediately demanded enormous amounts of grain and fodder. Iakov Gol'din, newly appointed Food Supply Commissar, began to exert enormous pressure to ensure that grain was collected. He ordered the heads of grain collection points shot if they allowed grain to rot. In the 1918-19 procurement campaign, the government had threatened chairmen of local soviets with fines or imprisonment if their villages did not meet procurement norms. Now, entire village soviets were arrested for this reason, soviet members were threatened with execution, and all of their grain and livestock was confiscated.

All claims that the quotas were too high because of crop failures or damage by passing troops were ignored.<sup>22</sup> As Gol'din himself reported to the Sixth Provincial Congress of Soviets, "The tactics of the Province Food Supply Committee [Gubprodkom] differed sharply [under Gol'din] from those of previous years ... The [consumption] norms were established when the *razverSTKa* was compiled, and if the peasant speculated away all of his norm, it wasn't the food supply organs' fault if the peasants then had to give up even their seed."<sup>23</sup> He did admit that some excesses occurred in this process. By this he might have been referring to the case of Iakov Margolin, head of the Requisitioning Department, who was twenty-five at the time. According to one report, Margolin, at entering a village to procure grain, would announce ceremonially, "I bring death to you scum! Look, every one of my Food Supply Army soldiers has a hundred twenty lead deaths ready for trash like you ... I'll strip you sons of bitches down to your skins, just as you looted and made off with the gentry's property." Then he would get down to the business of grain procurement.<sup>24</sup>

The Tambov party organization did its best to support Gol'din's efforts. Local party conferences emphasized the need for propaganda explaining to the peasants the reason for grain procurements. They also spoke of the need to oversee the food supply organs to prevent abuses, although this was an impossible task without a permanent party presence in the villages. In February 1920, in the face of many complaints from local party organizations about tactics used by food supply workers, the Provincial Party Committee wrote a circular letter to all *Uezd* Party Committees emphasizing the need to increase procurements: "The Province Committee demands the immediate liquidation of all conflicts [with food supply organs]. You will develop food supply work to the maximum. You will answer for any decrease in procurements." The provincial party organization mobilized hundreds of its members to procure grain and to serve at the front, but it

---

<sup>21</sup> Minutes of the 28 October 1920 meeting of the Collegium of the Tambov Provincial Finance Department, GATO, f. R-1, op. 1, d. 137, 1. 962. This tax was abandoned in December; see *ibid.*, 1. 963.

<sup>22</sup> Telegram from Gol'din to all Uprodkomy, 17 February 1920, GATO, f. R-1, op. 157, 1. 129; Telegram from Shpunt to Smirnov, December 1919 and note from Gol'din to all heads of collection points, RGAE, f. 1943, op. 1, d. 576, 11. 2, 20.

<sup>23</sup> *Izvestiia Tambovskogo gubernskogo soveta*, 23 May 1920, 2.

<sup>24</sup> Report to the Gubispolkom by Chairman of the Borisoglebsk uprodkom, 9 February 1920, GARF, f. 1235, op. 95, d. 430, 1. 34ob. Margolin was arrested by the Cheka on direct orders from VTsIK February 1920 (see *ibid.*, 1. 35) but was not brought to trial until November. He was found guilty of exceeding his power, but his prison term ° was suspended due to his services to the revolution. See *Kniga registrasii sudebnykh del 1 prodovol'stvennykh rabotnikov Tambovskoi gubernii za dekanbr' 1920-ianvar' 1921*, GATO, f. R-1236 op. 1, d. 798, 1. 2.

attempted to protect its image by carefully forbidding local party cells to participate directly in food procurement.<sup>25</sup>

Gol'din reached the logical extreme of his policy in a 10 June 1920 telegram he wrote to send to all *uezd* Food Supply Committees. Referring to Lenin's recent telegram demanding increased grain deliveries, he ordered all armed forces in the province to form two or three large detachments. Each detachment would descend on one village at a time, demanding immediate complete fulfillment of that village's delivery norm. If this was not forthcoming, the detachment would be ordered to arrest the entire village and confiscate all of its property. Shlikhter, the head of the Provincial Executive Committee, refused to allow this order to be carried out, writing, "Being of sound mind and body I cannot sign this order, or allow you to do so." He then wrote to the Commissariat of Food Supply explaining that Gol'din's complaints about the Provincial Party and Executive Committees were "partly the deliriums of a sick man and partly irresponsible petty tyranny" He wrote that he had replaced Gol'din with his assistant and asked Moscow to send Gol'din's replacement immediately.<sup>26</sup>

Gol'din's tactics had been successful in some respects: they allowed the authorities to extract 12 million poods of grain from Tambov province in 1919-20. This achievement caused much bad feeling toward the party and government among peasants and damaged the peasant economy. Peasants planted less, not only because they saw no reason to work when the reward would inevitably be confiscated, but also because many peasants had neither the tools nor the horses to plow: the Food Supply detachments had either destroyed or confiscated them. A drought in the summer of 1920 that lowered yields drastically exacerbated the effects of this decline. This was no secret to the authorities. A Cheka report from July 1920 described the peasants' plight and their hostility to the government and the Communist Party in particular and warned, "This lays the groundwork for widespread uprisings."<sup>27</sup>

On 8 August, A. G. Shlikhter described the need for more intensive work to fulfill the new quota, since the harvest was going to be worse because of the drought and peasants would genuinely have difficulty meeting their quotas.<sup>28</sup> He did not explain how this greater intensity was to be combined with law-abidingness, but clearly the more important task was getting the grain. Another policy article published about this time reminded party members that the provincial quota for the new food supply campaign was so high that some poor and middle-income peasants would not have enough grain to plant and eat after fulfilling their quotas, and that party cells must work out plans to redistribute within the village grain left after the quotas were filled. Local party officials were not sanguine about the prospects for collecting this grain: the Ninth

---

<sup>25</sup> A. L. Avrekh, "Partiinye organizatsii Chernozemnogo Tsentra Rossii v bor'be za khleb v period inostrannoi voennoi interventsii i grazhdanskoi voiny" (Cand. diss., Tambovskii gosudarstvennyi pedagogicheskii institut, 1978), 76, 86, 98.

<sup>26</sup> Telegram to all Uprodkomy, 11 June 1920, GATO, f. R-1, op. 1, d. 234, 1. 501; Telegram to People's Commissar Tsiurupa from Shlikhter, 15 June 1920, RGAE, f. 1943, op. 1, d. 576, 1. 112.

<sup>27</sup> Weekly Report of the Secret Department of the VeCheKa, 1-16 July 1920, GARF, f. 130, op. 3, d. 414, 1. 31; protocol of 23 April 1920 meeting of Usmari uispolkom) GATO, f. R-1236, op. 1, d. 849, 1. 32; Vladimir Samoshkin, "Mitatezh. Antonovshchina: kanun i nachalo," Literaturnaia Rossiia 1990, no. 23 (8 June 1990), 18-19; Sergei Pavliuchenkov, "Pochemu vspykhнула Antonovshchina," Nedelia, no. 44 (1989): 10-11.

<sup>28</sup> Speech by A. G. Shlikhter to Gubernskoe prodovol'stvennoe soveshchanie, 8 August 1920, GATO, f. R-1236, op. 1, d. 765, 1. 8.

Tambov Provincial Party Conference in July 1920 called for strengthening armed Food Supply detachments, since the bad harvest meant that grain could be obtained only by force.<sup>29</sup>

This was an especially dangerous situation because of the tens of thousands of deserters and draft-dodgers who hid in Tambov's forests or in their own villages, avoiding detachments sent to find them. While many thousands reported for service when White armies approached Tambov in August and September 1919, by mid-1920 recruitment had fallen drastically and desertion was up. With the war with Poland in full swing, capturing deserters and sending them to the front was, along with extracting grain, the major task set by the provincial party committee.<sup>30</sup>

In spite of the Cheka's warnings and obviously tense relations with peasants, it still came as a great surprise to provincial authorities when another peasant rebellion exploded in southern Tambov *uezd* in August 1920. Initial attempts to quell the unrest failed, because Tambov authorities assumed that this rebellion was as unorganized as previous ones and thought that peace could be restored after a small punitive force conducted a few massacres and burned some villages. What the Tambov government did not realize was that the Communist Party now had competition in the countryside.

During 1920, hundreds of secret committees of the Union of Toiling Peasantry (Soiuz Trudovogo Krest'ianstva, or STK) appeared in villages throughout Tambov, Kirsanov, and Borisoglebsk *uezds*, and in other areas of Tambov province as well. The STK was a putatively nonparty, anticommunist organization with the goal of staging a mass organized peasant uprising against the Communists. Its origins are described in an SR Central Committee circular of 13 May 1920 that argued for a three-pronged organizational initiative. The first was the "verdict movement" (*prigovornoe dvizhenie*), in which village and district meetings would condemn the Communist government and call for a national vote of confidence. This movement would prepare the ground for the formation of the STx, a multiparty organization uniting all anticommunist forces in the countryside. The SR party organization would work simultaneously to develop itself to take the lead in the STK.<sup>31</sup>

In Tambov province, the work of organizing fell to hundreds of SRs who labored under enormous difficulties. The Tambov provincial Left SR party organizations were suppressed in July 1918, and performing any party work after that was perilous. In addition, rivalries still existed between Right and Left SRs. In 1920, membership in the official underground Tambov SR organization totaled only a few dozen members. Considering the great attention that the Cheka paid to organizations of other Socialist parties, it seems likely that the people who led STK committees could not have had direct connections to the SR party hierarchy, even if they considered themselves Socialist Revolutionaries. In fact, while hundreds of village STK committees existed, local cells of the STK had only limited communications with higher-level regional and *uezd* committees when the local village STK in Kamenka, Tambov *uezd*, fearing that the Cheka had discovered it, started the rebellion. Even after the Kamenka STK began fighting, SR activists in the regional STK did their best to keep peasants from indulging in what they saw as a futile rebellion. National leaders refused to support the uprising as well: the All-Russian Conference of the Socialist Revo-

---

<sup>29</sup> R., "Dve boevye zadachi," *Kommunist* (Tambov), no. 1 (1 September 1920), 3; Avrekh, "Partiinye organizatsii," 94.

<sup>30</sup> "Perelom sredi dezertirov," *Vestnik Tambovskogo gubernskogo otdela upravleniia*, 26 July 1919, 339; R., "Dve boevye zadachi," 4.

<sup>31</sup> *Obvinitel'noe zakliuchenie po delu tsentral'nogo komiteta i otdel'nykh chlenov inykh organizatsii partii s.-r.* (Moscow: VTsIK, 1922), 40-41.



lutionary Party on 9 September rejected calls by Tambov delegates to support the uprising. These leaders were unsuccessful, though, in calming the peasants. Instead, they were carried along by the rush of events. Additional proof of the STK's independence from the SR organization is the fact that the STK network remained effective even after September 1920, when most Tambov SRs were arrested. The remainder, kept under surveillance, never dared to contact Antonov.<sup>32</sup>

In fact, as Antonov began to unite and organize the guerrilla bands that emerged following the Kamenka uprising, he also took steps to gain control of the village STKs. A pro-Antonov, three-man provincial STK committee replaced the less-militant regional committee. This new organization, originally based in Kamenka, the birthplace of the rebellion, transmitted orders and received information from local STK committees through a small but strictly organized bureaucracy. While their members masqueraded as peaceful, unarmed peasants when Red Army detachments came through the villages, the STK committees formed a shadow government in the countryside when the detachments left. They worked through their peasant communes to organize voluntary deliveries of supplies, recruits, and especially the remounts that gave the insurgent forces much greater mobility than Soviet cavalry. Some evidence suggests that they, like village soviets, often functioned as much as executives of the peasant commune (*obshchina*) as their leaders. Unlike the Communist-controlled village soviets, though, which depended on whatever armed detachments might be nearby to enforce orders that were against the commune's wishes, each STK committee usually had several armed guards (*vokhry*) to enforce their demands. The committees spied on large army detachments and ambushed small ones, and murdered local soviet and food supply workers and party members who did not cooperate with them. They encouraged Red Army soldiers to desert, and they apprehended deserters from the insurgent forces. The STKs also carried out more peaceful duties: keeping the peace, punishing crimes, and helping partisans' families.<sup>33</sup>

The local committees of the STK created the higher organization that the previous peasant rebellions had lacked, and generally they were successful. A Cheka agent who infiltrated the Antonov movement wrote, "Traveling with the Antonovites I was struck by the discipline that ruled among them ... and by the close bond Antonov's forces had with the peasants." The ideology of the STK was simple: eliminate the Communist government and end its depredations in the countryside. Various proclamations and platforms expanded this program, promising a new Constituent Assembly, personal freedom, and development of the economy through cooperation, but all of this was in the future, after the victory over the Communists. Almost all STK activities focused on the military struggle.<sup>34</sup>

<sup>32</sup> For the clearest exposition of the murky issue of SR collaboration in the uprising see S. A. Esikov and V. V. Kanishchev, "Antonovskii NEP" (Organizatsiia i deiatel'nost' 'Soiuz Trudovogo Krestianstva' Tambovskoi gubernii: 1920-1921 gg): Otechestvennaia istoriia, no. 4 (1993): 60-71. See also Oliver H. Radkey, The Unknown Civil War in Soviet Russia (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1976), 120, 143-146; V. P. Antonov-Saratovskii, ed., Sovety v epokhu voennogo kommunizma (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Kommunisticheskoi Akademii, 1928-29), 2: 447-448; A. Kazakov, Partiia s.-r. i Tambovskoe vosstanie 1920-1921 gg. (Moscow: n.p., 1922), 7-8; Petitions of Kirsanov ex-SRs, arrested in July 1920, GARF, f. 1235, op. 95, d. 432, 11. 54-57; GARF, f. 393, op. 22, d. 340, 1. 51; [Iurii Podbelskii], "Po Rossii."

<sup>33</sup> "Vosstanie tambovskikh krest'ian," Volia Rossii, 22 April 1922, 3-4. Esikov and Kanishchev, "Antonovskii NEP," 65; B. Leonidov, "Esero-banditizm v Tambovskoi gubernii i bor'ba s nim," Revoliutsiia i voina, nos. 14-15 (1922): 156; M. Tukhachevskii, "Bor'ba s kontrrevoliutsionnymi vosstaniiami. Iskorenenie tipichnogo banditizma (Tambovskoe vosstanie)," Voina i revoliutsiia, no. 8 (1926): 8; E. F. Murav'ev, "O likvidatsii Antonovshchiny," 1964, Manuscript, Pokaliukhin folder, Tambovskii Oblastnoi Kraevedcheskii Muzei, 34; V. Andreev and S. Kulaev, Oktiabr'skaia revoliutsiia i grazhdanskaia voina v Tambovskoi gubernii (Tambov: n.p., 1927), 45.

<sup>34</sup> Esikov and Kanishchev, "Antonovskii NEP," 63-64; Murav'ev, "O likvidatsii Antonovshchiny," 29.

Along with the new, better organization of peasants, the crucial element in the great 1920-21 uprising was the leadership of Aleksandr Antonov. Antonov had been active against the Soviet government starting in 1918. By early 1920 he had become successful at terrorizing soviets, destroying grain collection points and state farms, and killing soviet and party workers in Kirsanov, Tambov, and Kozlov *uezds*. His gang even managed to ambush and murder M. D. Chichkanov in October 1919, shortly after the latter was removed as chairman of the Provincial Executive Committee. A Cheka death squad sent after him at the time failed to find him, in part because Antonov had spies in local government, including the Kirsanov *uezd* Cheka.<sup>35</sup> His gang was small and mobile, with no more than two hundred men, but this was sufficient to keep Kirsanov *uezd* under martial law when it was lifted in the rest of Tambov province and to make the head of the Tambov provincial Cheka request "secret espionage forces" to fight him.<sup>36</sup>

After assuming command of the uprising, Antonov organized his forces much better than forces had been organized in previous uprisings. While initially he commanded mobs of poorly armed and organized peasants, as found in previous uprisings, after some defeats Antonov disbanded the large groups of *vil'niki* and sent them home to be the *vokhry* mentioned above. He focused his efforts on arming and organizing mounted regiments of three hundred to five hundred men, usually deserters or draft dodgers. Many guerrillas and all of their commanders had experience in the First World War. His army maintained discipline with stern punishment, especially flogging and shooting. The organizational structure mimicked that of the Red Army: each detachment even had a political officer to maintain morale and persuade insurgents to obey orders.<sup>37</sup>

The insurgents' tactics were simple: they used their knowledge of the region and their superb intelligence network to avoid large forces, ambush small ones, and destroy the fabric of Communist government in the countryside. They sacked collective and state farms and destroyed grain collection points and district soviet offices, often with the help of local peasants. Recognizing the importance of communications, they destroyed railroads, bridges, and telegraph lines. They tortured and murdered Communists, food supply workers, and other representatives of the Communist authorities. If Red Army soldiers were captured, they were usually released; the insurgents tortured to death officers and Communist Party members, though. Occasionally the insurgents would organize kangaroo courts to try local Communists in the villages they occupied; those found innocent of abusing their power allegedly were freed. The number of freed Communists could not have been very high, however, as hundreds of Communists died at the hands of the insurgents in the fall of 1920.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> Osipova, "Krest'ianskie vosstaniia v gody grazhdanskoi voiny," 64-65; M. I. Pokaliukhin, "Razgrom kulatsko-eserovskogo miatezha na tambovshchine," in Krai, preobrazhennyi oktiabrem, 1: 38-39 (Tambov: Izdatel'stvo Tambovskaiia Pravda, 1967); Ezhenedel'naia svodka sekret'nogo otdela VeCheKa za vremia s 1-7 fevralia 1920 g., GARF f. 130, op. 3, d. 414,1. lob. See also GARF, f. 1235, op. 95, d. 429,11. 502, 506, 510ob for the unsuccessful petition for amnesty of a member of the Inzhavino rairevkom, condemned to death for spying for Antonov.

<sup>36</sup> Svodka # 170/op voisk vnutrennei okhrany respubliki za 27 dek. 1919, GARF, f. 130, op. 3, d. 428, 1. 129; Sovety Tambovskoi gubernii, 227 (Gubispolkom decree dated 12 January 1920).

<sup>37</sup> M. I. Pokaliukhin, "Ob Antonovshchine (vospominaniia chekista)," 1964, Manuscript, Pokaliukhin folder, Tambovskii Oblastnoi Kraevedcheskii Muzei, p. 20; V. Mokerov, "Kursantskii sbor po bor'be s antonovshchinoi," Voina i revoliutsiia, no. 1, (1932): 65-66; Jan M. Meijer, ed., The Trotsky Papers, 1917-1922 (The Hague: Mouton, 1964-71), 2: 500-502; B. Leonidov, "Esero-banditizm v Tambovskoi gubernii i bor'ba s nim," 159-160.

<sup>38</sup> RTsKhIDNI Rossiiskii Tsentr Khraneniia i Izucheniiia Dokumentov Noveishei Istorii (formerly Tsentral'nyi Partiinyi Arkhiv; hereafter RTsKhIDNI), f. 17, op. 84, 1. 138 (I thank D. A. Nalitov for this citation); Telegram from

N. Raivid, a member of the Military Council appointed to suppress the uprising, reminded Tambov Communists in October that they were facing not a “bandit movement” but a “real peasant uprising- a movement ... against the Communist Party, against the grain monopoly, the labor duty and the fight against desertion.” He maintained that the countryside was almost without Communist influence: there the STK ruled. Most peasants encountered only the government when detachments arrived looking for grain or recruits.<sup>39</sup> Throughout 1920 and early 1921, though, they could find no way to exert such influence in the villages. Instead, the Soviet strategy to suppress the uprising was based on intermittent terror. Government forces shot on the spot all captured insurgents and burned and looted villages seen as supporting the uprising. They arrested all men capable of bearing arms and sent them to concentration camps around Tambov. This strategy was both too harsh and not severe enough. It was too harsh because the government did not attempt to differentiate between peasants who supported the rebels and those who opposed them or were neutral: collective responsibility made all peasants guilty for the actions of their neighbors. This solidified commune unity against the Communist government, since waverers knew that the government would have no mercy. In addition, the Communist practice of shooting all captured guerrillas helped insurgent discipline, since the rebels were more likely to fight with desperation rather than surrender to be “chopped up like sheep.” The minor attempts to reward villages (never individuals) for loyalty to the Soviet government never amounted to anything, because they also required the villages to first fulfill impossible procurement targets as well as fight the insurgents.<sup>40</sup>

On the other hand, the policy was insufficiently severe because the government did not have enough forces to intimidate all the peasants through this terror. In September 1920 there were only thirty-five hundred troops in Tambov province. Most were poorly armed and equipped, and many lacked even boots. These troops were largely local peasants, new draftees, or recaptured deserters who received internal-security duties because they were physically unfit to serve in the regular army. Morale was low, and entire companies of local soldiers deserted or went over to the insurgents rather than fight them. The other major support for the government, the Communist party, declined drastically. Provincial party rolls plunged from 17,500 members in July 1920 to 7,000 by the end of the year.<sup>41</sup>

Even as the uprising took on a larger and larger aspect, the central authorities in Moscow did not take it seriously. While sending few reinforcements they continued to demand that equal attention be paid to forced grain procurement. These commands, when not ignored, only aggravated the situation.<sup>42</sup>

---

Gubispolkom to Lenin, 8 September 1920, GATO, f. R-1, op. 4a, d. 83,1. 702; I. P. Donkov, *Antonovshchina: zamysly i deistvitel'nost'* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1977), 29, 39.

<sup>39</sup> N. Raivid, “O rabote v derevne,” *Kommunist* (Tambov) nos. 2-3 (15 October 1920), 2; see also Trotsky Papers, 2: 507.

<sup>40</sup> V. V. Samoshkin, “Miatezh. Antonovshchina: protivostoianie,” *Literaturnaia Rossiia*, no. 43 (26 October 1990), 18. The quotation is from N. Raivid in his report to the 5 October 1920 Gubispolkom meeting, GARF, f. 393, op. 22, d. 340, 1. 50, *Sovety Tambovskoi gubernii v gody grazhdanskoi voiny 1918-1921 gg.* (Voronezh: Tsentral'no-Chernozemnoe Knizhnoe Izdatel'stvo, 1989), 265-266, 307-308.

<sup>41</sup> Gubprodkom Protocol 57 for 16 December 1920, GARF, f. 393, op. 22, d. 341, 1. 96; Samoshkin, “Protivostoianie,” 18; Verkhovnykh, “Shest' let partraboty v Tambovskoi gubernii,” 21; Reports from A. G. Shlikhter to Revvoensovet and Tsentroevak, 11 September 1920, GATO, f. R-1, op. 1, d. 137,11. 713, 716; V. I. Lenin i VeCheKa (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoi Literatury, 1972), 403.

<sup>42</sup> *Vnutrennye voiska Sovetskoi respubliki (1917-1922 gg.)* (Moscow: Iuridicheskaiia Literatura, 1972), 524-525.

A. S. Kazakov described the results of these policies: Our forces ... concentrated more on cleaning the countryside out of all property than on clearing out and destroying bands [of insurgents]. It was not decided who was innocent and who was guilty. The entire peasantry fell into one heap and was called "bandit." The part of the peasantry that was loyal to us was in a hopeless position after it lost all its property and housing from a full *furazhirovka* [their homesteads were looted and burned]. For them there was no solution except to join a [guerrilla] band to get revenge for the destruction of their goods, obtained at such effort. Entire villages, fearing our "Red Terror," took their livestock, women and children and hid in the forests. Because of such "liquidations" the bands popped up like mushrooms, and the total number of rebels reached tens of thousands. The actions of the commanders remind us of the deeds of the person who, losing his head when he sees his house on fire, pours kerosene on it.<sup>43</sup>

Government reports from late 1920 and early 1921 are stereotyped. Government forces pursued guerrilla bands everywhere. They reported high body counts but low numbers of captured weapons, and in spite of their supposed successes and constant reinforcements, Antonov's forces continued to control the countryside while Communist power held only *uezd* capitals and other heavily garrisoned towns. Even these outposts were not always safe. Antonov's forces sacked the important market town of Uvarovo on the main Moscow-Saratov railroad after its thousand-man garrison fled, while Rasskazovo, a factory village just outside Tambov, fell to Antonov's forces both in October 1920 and in April 1921, the first time shortly after Antonov's main detachment had been reported destroyed.<sup>44</sup>

The crucial change came in February 1921. To eliminate the principal source of peasant discontent, on 8 February the central government also officially suspended forced grain requisitioning in twelve provinces, including Tambov. While this act did garner a certain amount of support, many peasants were suspicious, thinking that the suspension of forced procurements was temporary or that the tax-in-kind would just turn out to be forced requisitions under a new name. With the end of the war with Poland, the central government had the forces available to combat the rebellion, and Moscow sent to the province a plenipotentiary commission headed by V. A. Antonov-Ovseenko; he had full powers to suppress the uprising. As winter ended, major forces were moved into Tambov province. By the end of May there were roughly fifty thousand troops in the province, including crack cavalry brigades from Ukraine, thousands of military cadets to be used as shock troops, eight artillery brigades, and armored car and automobile detachments. These forces were heavily leavened with Communists: one source suggests that 10 percent were party members. Their commanders were heroes of the civil war, including I. P. Uborevich, G. I. Kotovskii, and M. N. Tukhachevsky, the new commander of all forces in the province.<sup>45</sup>

The Plenipotentiary Commission in Tambov was in charge of the entire operation, emphasizing close cooperation between political authorities, the secret police, and the military. Each *uezd* affected by the uprising had an *uezd* political commission made up of the commander of mili-

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Samoshkin, "Protivostoianie," 18.

<sup>44</sup> Pokaliukhin, "Ob Antonovshchine," 40; *Vnutrennie voiska*, 539; Telegram from Tambov Gubotdel'tekstil' to VTsKVPS Tekstil'shchikov, dated 20 April 1921, GARF, f. 1235, op. 96, d. 590, 1. 5; Tukhachevskii, "Bor'ba s kontr-revoliutsionnymi vosstaniiami," no. 9, p. 7. For typical reports see *Vnutrennie voiska*, 520-522, *Operativnaia svodka za 13 maia 1921*, GARF, f. 130, op. 5, d. 712, 1. 13 or *Operativnaia svodka za period 13 marta po 16 marta 1921* *ibid.*, d. 713, 1. 2.

<sup>45</sup> S. A. Esikov and L. G. Protasov, "Antonovshchina": *Novye podkhody* Voprosy istorii, nos. 6-7 (1992): 51; Mokerov, "Kursantskii sbor po bor'be s antonovshchinoi," 61; V V Samoshkin, "Posledniaia krest'ianskaia voina," *Trud*, 21 October 1990, 4; *Vnutrennie voiska*, 596.

tary forces, the head of the *uezd* party committee, the chairman of the executive committee, and the chairman of the *uezd* Cheka. Party organizations were strengthened and harshly disciplined, and Communists brought in from other provinces filled out their ranks. Those areas whose soviets had been destroyed or were unreliable were placed under revolutionary committees, which were appointed from above to administer their areas and backed up by the garrisons that soon arrived even in small villages to root out bandits. This permanent presence in the village struck at the root of the STK's success: before, Communist propagandists had come like circuit-riding preachers who had no effect against the STK. Now the revolutionary committees, usually headed by Communists, were a local government responsive to Tambov officials. Realizing the unpopularity of the Communist Party, the new provincial authorities launched a series of Non-Party Conferences of Peasants and published huge amounts of propaganda to convince peasants that the rebellion in no way served their interests and that those things they wanted most—an end to recruitment and forced requisitions—were already a reality.<sup>46</sup>

After several weeks of preparation, Tukhachevsky launched a new offensive against the main insurgent forces on 1 June 1921. When he left the province forty days later the rebellion was broken, the guerrillas reduced to small groups hiding in swamps, and Soviet power had been reestablished. Tukhachevsky's success was based on his enormous reserves of manpower, which strangled the rebellion by cutting off its life-source, the local communes. His forces occupied the entire area under rebel control, depriving the rebels of popular support while crack cavalry brigades hunted down and destroyed the two main insurgent detachments, now deprived of new recruits and supplies.<sup>47</sup>

In his instructions issued on taking up command, Tukhachevsky listed the basic measures to be taken.

1. Never make a threat that cannot be carried out.
2. Once given, threats must be carried through to the end.
3. Resettle families that do not surrender bandits in distant regions of the R.S.F.S.R.
4. Confiscate these families' property and divide it among Soviet-minded peasants. This will cause the division of the peasantry into layers, and on this Soviet power can lean.
5. Soviet-minded peasants must be firmly and reliably protected by our forces against bandit attacks. In general, pacification will immediately create many supports of Soviet power, since banditry is wearisome and destructive for the peasant masses.
6. Soviet-minded peasants must be drawn into Soviet work by all means, into the organization of spying on bandits, etc. This will create an insurmountable barrier between those peasants and the bandits.<sup>48</sup>

---

<sup>46</sup> "Otchet Tambovskogo Gubernskogo Komiteta R. K. P za mai 1921 g." *Kommunist* (Tambov) 1921, no. 5, p. 9; "Otchet Gubkoma XII Gubpartkonferentsii," *Kommunist* (Tambov) 1921, no. 7, p. 4; *Trotsky Papers*, 2: 520; Radkey, *Unknown Civil War*, 244-245.

<sup>47</sup> Tukhachevskii to Military District Commanders, 30 May 1921, GARF, f. R 8415, op. 1, d. 122, l. 44; Leonidov, "Esero-banditizm v Tambovskoi gubernii i bor'ba s nim," 167-168.

<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Leonidov, "Esero-banditizm v Tambovskoi gubernii i bor'ba s nim," 171.

On 12 May the Plenipotentiary Commission issued Order 130, which put into law Tukhachevsky's third point. As codified in operational instructions, a detachment would enter a village equipped with lists prepared by the Cheka. They would arrest those men present who were on the list of suspected bandits (these included insurgents and especially STK committee members). The families of those not present who were on the list of bandits, or those who were not on the list but had no good reason for being absent, were also arrested and their property confiscated. The detachment then posted signs warning that the suspect had two weeks to surrender with his weapons. He was guaranteed his life if he did this, and his family would be freed and his property surrendered. Otherwise the family was deported to forced labor in another province, the house burned, and the property divided among "honorable peasants, especially those who suffered from the bandits." The suspect was to be shot on sight.<sup>49</sup>

Difficulties soon emerged when this plan was carried out. The Plenipotentiary Commission ordered *uezd* political commissions not to arrest as hostages people who could not work: the Tambov concentration camps were clogged with old people and children who could not be transferred to forced labor camps.<sup>50</sup> Also, peasants soon found a way to hinder the commissions' work: they refused to give their names. This problem was surmounted by Order 171: all those who refused to give their names to a commission carrying out Order 130 were to be summarily shot.<sup>51</sup>

Some detachments found two weeks too long a period to wait for bandits to surrender to free their families, and in Kirsanov *uezd* they pioneered a new method that the Plenipotentiary Commission soon recommended to all its detachments. A detailed report survives of how this technique worked. A detachment sealed off Osinovka, a hamlet that insurgents frequented. The peasants there claimed to know nothing of the insurgents even after Orders 130 and 171 were read, along with the list of suspected bandits. The detachment then took forty hostages and gave the villagers two hours to deliver both bandits and weapons, or the hostages would be shot. The village assembly wavered on what to do, so after two hours the detachment executed twenty-one hostages in front of the assembly "with all formalities." The horrified peasants soon came up with three rifles and five bandits. "With the goal of rendering the settlement more healthy, families of those who were shot and of bandits who were hiding were sent to a concentration camp." The detachment then moved on to the next village, where the peasants were much more forthcoming.<sup>52</sup>

The data used to compile the accompanying table are incomplete, but they give some idea of the scope of the campaign and of its results.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Sovety Tambovskoi gubernii, 319-320 (Prikaz 130); Prikaz 14, GARF, f. 8415, op. 1, d. 122, l. 55; Tukhachevskii, "Bor'ba s kontrrevoliutsionnymi vosstaniiami" no. 8, p. 8.

<sup>50</sup> GARF, f. 8415, op. 1, d. 122, l. 125.

<sup>51</sup> D. Fel'dman, "Krest'ianskaia voina," Rodina, no. 10 (1989): 57; Tsentral'nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sovetskoi Armii f. 235, op. 3, d. 13, l. 14 (my thanks to D. A. Nalotov for this citation).

<sup>52</sup> Report by Shchekoldin, chairman of a Polnomochnaia Piaterka, dated 8 July 1921, GARF, f. 8415, op. 1, d. 122, ll. 103-103ob; Telegram to Predupolitkomissii of all military districts from Antonov-Ovseenko, Tukhachevskiy Lavrov, dated 23 June 1921, *ibid.*, l. 94. See also Tsentral'nyi Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Sovetskoi Armii f. 235, op. 3, d. 13, l. 14 (my thanks to D. A. Nalotov for this citation).

<sup>53</sup> Reports by the Plenipotentiary Commission, GARF, R-8415, op. 1, d. 121, ll. 30-33ob, *ibid.*, d. 122, ll. 82-83, TsDNITO, op. 1, d. 1048, ll. 9-16ob (my thanks to S. A. Esikov for this reference and that from TsDNITO in previous note).

	Insurgents	Insurgents	Insurgents	Hostages Taken	
Date	Captured	Surrendered	Shot	Individuals	Families
June 1–9	424	201	120	920	209
June 19–25	728	479	no data	1847	308
June 26–July 2	596	507	183	683	183
July 2–9	347	476	394	432	161
July 10–16	621	796	286	942	283
July 17–23	344	768	199	642	98
July 24–30	83	508	42	327	53

#### Results of Order 130 Campaign

The Plenipotentiary Commission publicized widely the results of the Order 130 campaign and soon added further rigor to it. A 12 June proclamation announced that families who hid weapons, insurgents, or even the families of insurgents would be arrested and sent to hard labor, except for the oldest male, who would be shot. Property would be confiscated, of course.<sup>54</sup>

After a district was purged of bandits and their families, the authorities appointed a revolutionary committee to govern the area. As regular military detachments were withdrawn from pacified areas for use elsewhere, they were replaced by mounted militiamen (recruited from other provinces) and local self-defense units called *druzhiny*. Drawn from the local population, these units gave the revolutionary committee armed force with which to repel insurgent incursions, spy on insurgent groups, and enforce orders on the local population. The *druzhiniki* were reliable, because any betrayal would result in severe reprisals against not only the *druzhinik* himself but all members of his immediate family.<sup>55</sup>

While most Soviet forces were thus winning over the Tambov peasantry, the elite cavalry of the Red Army, commanded by such heroes of the civil war as Uborevich and Kotovskii and reinforced with Fiat automobiles mounted with machine guns, were ordered to pursue and destroy the main insurgent armies. At this point the insurgent forces were concentrated in two armies, the First Army, with two thousand troops under Bogoslavskii, and the Second Army, with three thousand men commanded by Antonov himself. They first struck against Antonov's army. Before, Antonov's men had been able to outdistance Red cavalry by frequently changing horses. When they had lost touch with their pursuers, Antonov's forces could stop, rest, and reequip. This was no longer possible. Faster, tireless automobiles followed them constantly. Red Army commanders had trouble in coordinating cavalry units with the automobile detachments, allowing most of Antonov's forces to escape both a surprise attack on 1 June at Elan and another at Chenyshevo five days later, but the insurgents suffered serious losses both of men and especially of weapons. In addition they became intimidated by the automobiles, whose engines frightened their horses and who followed them constantly. The insurgent forces melted away, especially after Antonov

<sup>54</sup> "Krest'ianstvu Tambovskoi gubernii," 12 June 1921, GARF, f. R-8415, op. 1, d. 122, l. 79.

<sup>55</sup> Leonidov, "Esero-banditizm v Tambovskoi gubernii i bor'ba s nim," 171; Tukhachevskii, "Bor'ba s kontrrevoliutsionnymi vosstaniiami," no. 9, p. 10; Instructions on Re-Establishing Soviet Power, GARF, f. R-8415, op. 1, d. 116, ll. 18-19ob; Instructions on organizing district *druzhiny*, *ibid.*, d. 122, ll. 63-64.

received a serious head wound in Chenyshevo. Guerrillas hid in the woods along the Vorona river, attempted to return home secretly, or surrendered to the Communist forces. Antonov was left with only a few dozen men. Similar tactics were successful against Bogoslavskii's army.<sup>56</sup> When the remnants of the larger insurgent groups fled to forests and swamps along the Vorona river, Tukhachevsky ordered preparations to use another modern weapon, poison gas, to "smoke them out." Although Antonov-Ovseenko announced publicly this plan to encourage insurgents to surrender, it seems not to have been carried out because of technical difficulties.<sup>57</sup>

Such extreme measures were not necessary. The rebellion was finished by September because the insurgents found no safe base in which they could recuperate and reorganize, even though Antonov remained at large. The revolutionary committees, *druzhiny*, and militia had replaced the STK committees in the villages, and the insurgents could no longer count on the support of the peasants. The government had abolished forced food requisition, removed the Food Supply detachments and allowed free trade in grain.

Conscription was much less pressing as the Red Army demobilized. If even some members of the Tambov *uezd* STK committee thought the "Bolsheviks had gone over to the STK program" with the introduction of NEP, it is not surprising that peasant support for the uprising vanished when the rebel armies were crushed and the Communist government offered real reforms. This is especially true given that the peasantry risked much greater dangers in supporting the rebels after the Communist government was firmly in place in the villages. In any case, all energies had to be focused on surviving a winter that was even hungrier than those before.<sup>58</sup>

Aleksandr Antonov and his brother remained at large for several more months, hiding in forests along the Vorona river or with old friends in the Kirsanov area. The Tambov secret police continued to search for them and other remnants of the uprising, using former insurgents now desperate to pay their debt to society by hunting down their former comrades. Only in June 1922 did the Cheka find the Antonov brothers. Suffering from malaria, they were recovering in a peasant hut in the village of Nizhni Shibriai. Cheka agents surrounded the hut, set it afire, and shot the men as they fled. Soviet authorities took measures to assure that Antonov would not become the subject of folklore. They distributed slides of photographs of the naked corpses of the brothers throughout the province, where activists used slide projectors to show them to peasant assemblies.<sup>59</sup>

The Tambov peasant uprising of 1920-21 was doomed to failure once Moscow could concentrate sufficient forces against it. Confronted with overwhelming force and swayed by the removal of many of the most galling aspects of early Soviet power, peasants weary from eight years of war returned to rebuilding their farms. But if Antonov was killed and his insurgency crushed,

---

<sup>56</sup> Combined Cavalry Group Combat Report, 28 May-8 June 1921, GARF, f. 8415, op. 1, d. 122, 11. 49-52; I. I. Trutko, *Takticheskie primery iz opyta bor'by s banditizmom: Unichtozhenie bandy Bogoslavskogo*, Krasnaia armia nos. 3-4 (1921): 35-37.

<sup>57</sup> I. I. Trutko, "Takticheskie primery iz opyta bor'by s banditizmom: Primenenie aeroplanov kak rezervov," Krasnaia armia, nos. 5-6, (1921): 41-43; GARF, f. 8415, op. 1, d. 122, 11. 70, 80 (Order from Tukhachevsky to use poison gas dated 12 June 1921, and proclamation from Antonov-Ovseenko dated 11 June 1921 threatening its use); Mokerov, "Kursantskii sbor po bor'be s antonovshchikoi," 79; Fel'dman, "Krest'ianskaia voina," 57.

<sup>58</sup> B. V. "Partiia na prodrabotu," *Kommunist* (Tambov) 1921, no. 6, p. 2; Kazakov, *Partiia s.-r. i Tambovskoe vosstanie 1920-1921 gg.*, 10; Vasil'ev, "Iz istorii antonovshchiny" 16.

<sup>59</sup> Boris Ileshin, "Posle pozhara," *Krest'ianskie vedomosti*, no. 15, (1991): 13; Ser. Polin, "Poslednie dni esero-bandita Antonova. (iz zapisnoi knizhki chekista)," in *Put' bor'by* (Tambov: Izdatel'stvo Tambovskogo gubkoma R. K. E. "Kommunist," 1923), 51-53.



the Soviet government did not forget his movement. Insurgents who had surrendered to the government and redeemed themselves by fighting against their former comrades were later arrested and sent to concentration camps. Even fiction could be dangerous: Nikolai Virta's novel of the rebellion, *Odinchestvo*, led to denunciations of several peasants from Virta's village.<sup>60</sup>

Peasant uprisings were a constant factor in Tambov province during the civil war. The central government's policies of forced food procurement and recruiting inevitably caused discontent among the rural population. Corruption and tyranny by local government officials compounded this and led to violence. The peasant commune provided an organizing principle for expressing discontent, but only on the village or district level. This local disorganization allowed small government forces to suppress large uprisings piecemeal.

The great uprising of 1920-21 presented a new challenge to the Communist government. Still poorly armed but with a much better organization, Antonov's Insurgent Army required far greater effort to suppress, and it also forced a reassessment of the sources of peasant discontent, especially the forced grain procurement system. Military operations and cleansing of villages of "unfriendly" peasants by exile and executions ended the 1920-21 uprising, but only the abandonment of forced requisitions and the government withdrawal from confrontation with the village brought calm to the countryside. But this calm was only temporary, lasting until the new upheavals at the end of the 1920s.

---

<sup>60</sup> Ileshin, "Posle pozhara," 13.

The Anarchist Library  
Anti-Copyright



Delano Dugarm  
Peasant Wars in Tambov Province  
1997

[euphrates.wpunj.edu/~dugarm/](http://euphrates.wpunj.edu/~dugarm/) [[web.archive.org](http://web.archive.org/)]

In Vladimir Brovkin, ed., *The Bolsheviks In Russian Society: The Revolution And The Civil Wars*  
(New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 154–76.

**[theanarchistlibrary.org](http://theanarchistlibrary.org)**