Delusion

In building an authoritarian state, the use of constant and subdued violence is a key tool in driving the societal goals of the state itself. In Stalinist Russia, this violence took many forms. Instead of overt mass killings, as was customary in the Nazi regime, much of the violence was relatively covert. These concealed events, however, were practiced on a massive scale. Thus, it created the illusion of a 'caring father state.' The many problems that occurred on a daily basis were blamed on 'bad neighborhood officials.' In fact, many people supported state policies, and many victims of localized violence actually petitioned the central state for help. During the 1930s, the Stalinist regime forced independent farmers and small estate holders to join state-owned farms in a process called 'collectivization.' These policies allowed the central state to cannibalize peasant landholdings, while simultaneously turning former landowners into sources of cheap labor. Local supporters of the government fulfilled the state's labor needs by forcing well to-do farmers to join collective farms. The collectivization of independent farms also enjoyed widespread local support, producing muddled thought at the local level.

In 1938, a woman named Olga Petrovna Semyonova wrote a complaint to the regional government office.[1] She began by explaining her situation: she was a widowed mother of three young daughters, her late husband was a crippled veteran of Russia's civil war, and she lived on her own farm. Two local officials and three staunch Communist Party activists came to her farm while her daughters were at school and confiscated almost everything. Their reasoning was that she owed the state back taxes, but she was probably labeled as a *kulak*. When Semyonova tried to show them her receipts, the collectivizing team said they had no time to look at the paperwork. There was no warning or formal address, the team just broke the lock to her farm shed and started taking her property. Kulaks were viewed as traitors to the state because they owned property. With no means to pay, Semyonova's property was confiscated by the state and she was forced to join the collective farm. Actions like these forced independent farmers, with no other possessions to keep them afloat, to become laborers on the collectivized state farms. Kulaks were often used to deflect public anger and criticism about the processes of collectivization. Since local officials and many local supporters were all too ready to attack and destroy internal, "enemies of the state," the mandates from Moscow were easily fulfilled. This, in turn, led victims to incorrectly assume that miseries of collectivization were not the fault of the Soviet state, but of corrupt locals with personal scores to settle with neighbors. Semyonova's letter expressed confidence that if the Soviet state was made aware of the injustices committed in its name, they would intervene and rectify the situation. As Stalin was seen as the father of the nation, her refusal to believe that he was in conspiracy with his officials worked in tandem with her deep-seated belief that the state only had the best intentions for its people.

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[1] Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stalinism as a Way of Life: A Narrative in Documents.* Compiled by Andrej K. Sokolov, Ludmila Koseleva, Larisa Rogovaia, Vladimir Telpukhovsky, and Sergei Zhuravlev. Translated by Steven Shabad and Thomas Hoisington (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 216.