

A Noah's Ark: Material Life and the Foundations of
Soviet Governance, 1916–1922

Anne O'Donnell

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Abstract

Where most histories of governance, market life, and economic culture look at how markets are built, this dissertation investigates instead how they are dismantled; it asks how the Bolsheviks attempted to dismantle market life in revolutionary Russia during and after the October Revolution. The Revolution signaled a rupture in economic and material life no less than in politics and ideas, meaning that the transformation of Russian state structures occurred simultaneously with attempts to form a non-market economy. It was through the dismantling of the market, through confiscation, inventorying, and redistributing material possessions, that the Bolshevik state and governing practices were formed. The research presented here investigates the lived experience of socialist revolution in Russia between 1916 and 1922 through the prism of material things. In the weeks and months after the Bolsheviks seized power, they declared themselves, and the dissolving state they inherited from the Imperial regime, to be the rulers not only of the land and the people, but also of a dazzling array of material objects. Through case studies of particular objects such as buildings, movable goods, valuables, and money, the chapters that follow illuminate the cultivation of new categories of economic life and new tools for managing them in the crucible of revolutionary practice, to reveal the interplay of the multiple mentalities at work in the revolutionary era, derived from socialist ideology, the Imperial inheritance, and the basic requirements of governance. The experience of revolution, the dissertation argues, was not simply a field where other, already-existing forces in social and political life played out; it bore a productive capacity in its own right. The experience of socialist revolution left a deep imprint on individuals, interpersonal relationships, and institutions, cleaving to state forms and practices in the sphere of material goods and things.

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The interests that motivate my research first took shape during a summer spent interviewing the residents of a public housing structure on the 4100 block of Prairie Avenue in Chicago, slated to be demolished as part of the Chicago Housing Authority's most recent strategy for urban renewal. Born of an ambition to change people through space, by the time I arrived there the Prairie Avenue building, like its better-known neighbor the Robert Taylor

Homes, had been judged an abject failure. For the opportunity to work in the Bronzeville neighborhood and witness this transformative moment, I am grateful to Dr. Sokoni Karanja of the Center for New Horizons, who generously opened his life's work to me. Linda Weatherby of Deerfield High School taught me how to read and write analytically, and I often hear her editorial voice as I work. My early interest in housing and urbanism was stoked in a delightful seminar on the topic offered by the late Robert Gutmann when I was an undergraduate at Princeton University. At the University of California at Berkeley, I benefited from John Connelly's succinct precepts as to what a dissertation should and should not do. David Henkin's seminar on the methods of cultural history inspires major components of this project, as does Yuri Slezkine's example of creativity in his approach to Russian history. Robert Crews, Michael David-Fox, Peter Holquist, and Yanni Kotsonis all gave generously of their time and insight in responding to queries and drafts of my research. Peter Holquist deserves special thanks for agreeing to serve as outside reader on my committee. I am grateful for useful suggestions on papers and presentations offered over the years by Marjorie Balzer, Mark Beissinger, Rohit De, Will Deringer, Franziska Exeler, Krista Goff, Kathryn Hendley, Penny Ismay, Masha Kirasirova, Igor Khristoforov, Kyrill Kunakhovich, Thomas Lahusen, Eric Lohr, Noah Millstone, Serguei Oushakine, Aaron Retish, Ben Siegel, and Alexia Yates.

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List of Abbreviations

Archives

GARF	Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii, Moscow, Russia
NIOR	Nauchno-issledovatel'skii otdel rukopisei, Rossiiskaia Gosudarstvennaia Biblioteka, Moscow
RGAE	Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv ekonomiki, Moscow
RGASPI	Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsialno-politicheskoi istorii, Moscow
RGIA	Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv, St. Petersburg, Russia
TsAGM	Tsentralnyi arkhiv goroda Moskvy, Moscow
TsGASP	Tsentralnyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Sankt-Peterburga, St. Petersburg

Institutions

Central Committee	Central Committee of the Communist Party
Cheka/VChK	All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Battle against Counterrevolution and Sabotage, subsequently the GPU.
MChK	Moscow Cheka
Gokhran	State Depository of Valuables, department of Narkomfin
Gorprodukt	City Provisioning body in Petrograd
Goskon	People's Commissariat of Government Control, succeeded by Rabkrin

<i>Kvartkhoz:</i>	block economic unit; neighborhood-level administrative unit responsible for registry of built space in Moscow
Mossoviet	Moscow Soviet of Workers', Peasants' and Red-Army Soldiers' Deputies (subsequently People's Deputies)
Narkomfin	People's Commissariat of Finance
Narkomiust	People's Commissariat of Justice
Narkomvneshtorg	(NKVT): People's Commissariat of Foreign Trade
Orgbiuro	Organizational Bureau of the Communist Party
Petrokommuna	Petrograd commune, city provisioning body in Petrograd
Petrosoviet	Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies
Rabkrin/RKI	Worker-Peasant Inspectorate, successor to the People's Commissariat of Government Control
Soviet raionnykh dum	Council of Neighborhood Dumas, municipal government of Moscow after the February Revolution, incorporated into the Mossoviet in spring and summer 1918
Sovnarkom	Council of People's Commissars
TsBRU	Central Budget-Accounting Administration, department of Narkomfin
TsZZhO	Central Land-Housing Department of the Mossoviet (sometimes abbreviated TsZhZO)
VSNKh	Supreme Council of the National Economy
VTsIK	All-Russian Central Executive Committee

Introduction: The Revolutionary

Experience

“The Central Warehouse was under the direction of a certain Ostrovtsov, who in an act of sabotage, destroyed the warehouse’s records. This forced us to create everything anew, to set up bookkeeping anew, to begin a new life.”

Institutions, people living through the Bolshevik Revolution knew, have lives. This is a story of how revolutionary change entered those institutional lives, and those of the people who inhabited them, not just through party platforms and personalities, but through material things. All revolutions draw energy from a material dimension. Looting, seizing, and dispossessing—these acts are at the heart of revolutionary experience wherever property equals power.¹ In Russia as elsewhere, disempowering occurred through dispossessing, and transfers of property did not simply register external transfers of power, they embodied it. If in this the Russian experience of revolution was far from unique, nonetheless, in Russia, these acts of dispossession carried an unusual charge and bore a potent legacy. Unlike those of revolutions past, they were intended not only to deprive the rich and powerful of the Old Regime of their property rights, but to destroy those rights altogether, to put an end to private property as an institution. The Bolshevik Revolution was an avowedly socialist

1. And thus they can be witnessed in revolutions everywhere. For the American Revolution, Howard Pashman, “Enemies of the State: Property Redistribution in Revolutionary New York,” presented at “Defining the Economy in Political Crisis: Revolution, Rupture, and the Law,” Harvard University, October 4, 2013. For the French Revolution, see the classic Richard Cobb, *The People’s Armies* (Yale, 1987), Book Two, Chapters 1 and 7.

revolution, and where the revolutionaries who came before aimed to recast relationships among people, to draw up social contracts and remake subjects as citizens, the Bolsheviks aspired to transform the relationship between people and material things. Where other revolutionaries, therefore, celebrated dispossession as a transfer of power, the Bolsheviks and many others celebrated it as a transformation in the relationship between property and power itself. This dissertation centers on the experience of revolution in material life and its legacy for the early Soviet state because this, it argues, was where the Bolshevik Revolution was made.

Where the French Revolution had liberty trees, patriotic altars, and cockades, the October Revolution, alongside other symbols and gestures, had inventories of material objects.² This was a Revolution of ledgers and currency. It inhered in papers designed to mark, officialize, and legitimate acts of material dispossession and redistribution; through papers, the Revolution entered the lives of individuals and institutions great and small. Consider, for instance, the example of the Central Warehouse for City Cafeterias in Moscow, which “began a new life,” according to interviews with its staff, on November 22, 1917. Precisely when its old life ceased was unknown; at some moment between October 25 and November 22, its former director, in an act subsequently defined as “sabotage,” destroyed the warehouse’s account books. This act of sabotage was also the act with which the Revolution was introduced into the life of the little warehouse. After a lull of indeterminate length, a new manager appeared, named P. Iudov, who as his first act of business took an inventory of the warehouse’s contents. Composed on November 22 and signed by both Iudov and the “deputy commissar of the First Arbat [neighborhood] Commissariat,” this inventory was designated an “intake act,” by which the warehouse crossed the threshold into its new existence.³

2. Russia also had a symbolic revolution, of course, as James Von Geldern makes clear. James Von Geldern, *Bolshevik Festivals, 1917-1920* (California, 1993).

3. TsAGM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 60, l. 3.

Truth be told, there were some questions about this modest document. Certainly no one was accusing Iudov himself of having made off with goods from the warehouse; for Iudov there was nothing but “all due respect.”⁴ It was just that there was an unexplained gap in the dates between when Iudov signed the document, on November 22, 1917, and when the Deputy Commissar of the First Arbat Commissariat signed the document—on January 8, 1918. As was only natural, the gap “created the impression that the inventory of goods within the warehouse itself was performed by the director Iudov alone, and that, to give the act an official character, the signature of the deputy commissar was later added to it.”⁵

In late February 1918, a self-appointed commission of representatives from Moscow’s cafeterias gathered with the express purpose of familiarizing themselves with the state of the warehouse and the growing network of city cafeterias after the Revolution. Like archaeologists of a world now shattered, they sought not simply to investigate the functioning of the warehouse, but to piece together the fragments of its “life”— “to conduct an investigation into the accounts of the C.W. [Central Warehouse] from that very day, when it *began to live again*, that is, from 22 November 1917, and then day by day, according to the materials, to *follow the life* of the C.W., ...*how it lived* before, *how it exists* at the present time, and *how it should live*” in the future.⁶ Gathered before the records, exchanging information about how an employee had acquired “potatoes, cabbage and various vegetables,” the members of the cafeteria commission spoke of their mission in the lofty tones of revolutionaries everywhere. The inspection-cum-archaeological dig appeared urgently necessary to them because one had not been performed “since October,” during which time much in the life of the warehouse had changed. The cafeteria commission wrote to the local branch of the “Bureau for Main Control,” uncertain heir to the former audit and accounting office known as the Ministry of Government Control, and requested the help of a controller. Together, a cafeteria representative and a controller turned over the shards of the warehouse’s “life.”

4. Ibid, l. 8.

5. Ibid, l. 3.

6. Ibid, l. 9.

These were the first and second comings of the Revolution in the cafeteria warehouse. The rupture of Revolution happened once, and then it happened a second time, “officially.” Both instances occurred on or through paper. The first coming was the upheaval: the previous director’s sabotage of the old inventory and Iudov’s opening of a new one stacked like two bookends back-to-back, supporting the weight of their respective eras. The second, a search for officialization, began with Iudov’s determination, some eight weeks after inaugurating the new era with a new inventory, that this document could use a bit of a boost, in the form of the neighborhood deputy commissar’s signature. With each successive development in the life of the warehouse, the search for official ratification recurred; so it was in February, when the cafeteria commission met under the auspices of a new municipal government, and saw the need for another pass at the inventory. Through the inventories, a definitive timeline of the earlier upheaval emerged, a chronology of rupture recorded in the movement of things.

Revolutions, Lynn Hunt writes, are “first and foremost an experience.”⁷ A “new experience of temporality,” she suggests, was perhaps “the single greatest innovation of the [French] revolution,” all the more remarkable for the fact that it could not be decreed (despite several attempts), only “lived and learned.”⁸ Whatever their ties in the empirical world to the institutions, motifs, and practices of the past, revolutions are perceived by those who live through them as rupture. It is this perception of rupture that gives the experience of revolution its special generative power, “alter[ing] the mental state of millions,” producing new conditions of possibility and engendering previously unthinkable outcomes.⁹ In the Russian Revolution, as in the French, people believed they were living through a re-

7. Lynn Hunt, “The World We Have Gained: The Future of the French Revolution,” *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 108, no. 1 (February 2003), pp. 1-19, here p. 6.

8. Hunt, “World,” p. 3.

9. Hunt, *ibid.* Another model for the study of revolutionary experience is that proposed by the sociologist Charles Kurzman, who offers explanation of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which he terms an “anti-explanation,” arguing the Revolution unfolded as it did not due to Islamist ideology, popular organization, or institutional failure, but rather due to the local choices made in the heat of revolutionary events by individuals experiencing a moment of profound “confusion.” Charles Kurzman, *The Unthinkable Revolution in Iran* (Harvard, 2004).

markable time, a feeling they recorded in diaries and memoirs of revolutionary events. “I could conclude my memoirs of my work here,” wrote Aleksei Iakovlevich Monisov, a self-described “major industrialist” before the Revolution and employee of the Commissariat of Government Control after it, upon completing a narrative of his personal journey from capitalist to Soviet bureaucrat—on page 24 of his 200-plus page memoirs. “But the times were so interesting, that I think it not excessive to observe a few episodes from our voyages” in and around Moscow, which consumed an additional 175 pages.¹⁰ This sense of having entered an extraordinary epoch set apart from what had come before, a time outside of time, was cultivated by the revolutionaries themselves. Among other things, the Muscovite N.P. Okunev noted in his diary in July 1918, the Bolsheviki had a taste for emotionally-saturated prose that endowed every “battle,” in the factories or on the front, with a sense of world-historical significance.¹¹ The newspapers no longer reported on neutral events, Okunev grumbled, only “‘major’ victories and ‘desperate’ situations.”¹² Yet Okunev, too, felt his life shift irrevocably around the orienting chronology of revolutionary events, writing, on July 19, 1918, the day he learned of Nicholas II’s execution, “farewell to the best two decades of my life.”¹³

The belief in rupture was thus more than “an ideological tenet preached by the high priests of revolution.”¹⁴ It was a common perception, and equally important, it was one that people acted on in the empirical world, etching it into account papers, banks, warehouses, apartments, and countless other trappings of everyday life.¹⁵ The revolutionary everyday was not mundane; it was peculiarly influential, because it was construed as a “zero degree

10. NIOR f. 369, kart. 397, d. 14, l. 24.

11. On the emergence of a “specific civilian-military hybrid” realm during the First World War in Russia, see Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia’s Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921* (Harvard, 2002), citation p. 286.

12. Nikita Okunev, *Dnevnik Moskvicha, 1917-1924* (Paris, 1990), p. 212.

13. Okunev, *Dnevnik*, p. 202.

14. Hunt, “World,” p. 8.

15. The interpretation of the relationship between discursive and “empirical” spheres, and the need to study the two together, is borrowed from Timothy Mitchell, “The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics,” *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 85, no. 1, (January 1991), pp. 77-96, citation p. 82.

of social and political life” that encouraged the recreation and reenactment of “founding acts” across the polity.¹⁶ Where in the French case, founding acts revolved around the forging of the social contract, a previously unthinkable format for social relations summoned into physical form again and again during the revolutionary era, in Russia, founding acts revolved around the allocation of material things according to principles and practices that could, in the moment or subsequently, be identified as “socialist.” Material life is the ground on which the experience of revolution and the ambition to create a socialist polity met.

This dissertation examines how people became enmeshed in the project of making a socialist revolution and how that process cleaved to state forms and practices in the sphere of material goods and things. I argue that the experience of socialist revolution left a deep imprint on individuals, interpersonal relationships, and institutions. The experience of revolution was not simply a field where other, already-existing forces in social and political life played out; the argument here is that the experience of revolution bore a productive capacity in its own right. Histories of experience, Joan W. Scott warned, have a tendency to treat it as transparent, authoritative, and objectively true, with the result that, instead of illuminating the particular histories of peoples and deeds once marginalized, they efface them, burying them beneath the universalist assumptions they were meant to undermine. Heeding this caution, I treat the experience of revolution not as an inert, authoritative record, but rather as a moving object of inquiry and the fertile spring of many of the people, practices, and institutions that emerged as building blocks of socialist management and the Soviet state. To paraphrase Scott, it was not individuals who had experience, but subjects—and institutions—who were constituted through the experience of the October Revolution.¹⁷

In Russia, as in France, the experience of revolution was physical no less than cognitive. It was made real in account books and in countless meetings between people dubbed representatives of the old and new. It was an object, a target of revolutionary activity, and

16. Hunt, “World,” p. 11.

17. Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17 (Summer 1991), pp. 773-797, citation p. 779.

thus while it could never be wholly decreed, it could be scheduled or arranged around particular material features of the revolutionary landscape. Across the city of Moscow over the summer of 1918, the newly-created Central Housing Department of the Mossoviet sent representatives to appointments with the plumbers, engineers, janitors, and “building committee” chairmen who were responsible before the Revolution for the upkeep and maintenance of all the properties “formerly of” the Holy Synod, the Moscow Merchant Society, and the Moscow Industrial Bank, now “of the Mossoviet.” Together, these representatives of the old and new regimes walked basements, reviewed fuel reserves, and inspected outbuildings. Agents from the Commissariat of Government Control, invited to witness the inspection, recorded detailed descriptions—inventories—of the municipalized buildings.¹⁸ How many stories, what floor coverings, running water or sewage, what type of heating—the substance of the encounters was utterly mundane, but through them the transfer of property and power took corporeal form.

In these scheduled and unscheduled encounters around material things, definitions of socialism as a system of economic management and political organization also emerged. Karl Marx’s writings did not prescribe what a socialist revolution should look like; it fell, in his view, to the proletariat to “devise the means of its revolution” once it was already underway.¹⁹ He left the mechanics of the socialist economy in operation similarly unspecified.²⁰ The Bolsheviks, Ekaterina Pravilova notes, continued a long tradition of belief in Russia that the “renunciation of private property” might “change not only the political order but also people themselves.”²¹ Through material life, it was hoped, Russians might gain access to modes of political organization and selfhood that they had long been denied. But the path to implementing this conviction did not find illumination in the pre-revolutionary tracts of Russian socialists. As the chapters that follow demonstrate, this left a wide berth

18. TsAGM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 86, l. 86. This entire file consists of reports of such meetings between July and September 1918.

19. Hunt, “World,” p. 2.

20. Ekaterina Pravilova, *A public empire: property and the quest for the common good in imperial Russia* (Princeton, 2014), p. 277; also Chapter 1 here.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 13.

for invention and experimentation, not only on the part of the Bolsheviks and the Soviet state's new administrators, but on the part of the entire population, of all those now thrust into the project of living in a socialist economy. Rather than examining this process in the fields and factories, known and comparatively well-studied sites of economic production, I observe it in the finer-grained world of the material things and resources held by individuals, firms, and institutions.²² From the perspective of subjectivity, this was where the socialist economy was made, in the surging waves of stuff, already-existing objects, changing hands at a frenetic pace in the whirlwind of revolutionary dispossession and redistribution. Through encounters about things, officials and subjects were constituted, if only in that moment; need was defined, class ascribed, and the socialist revolution made real.

State and Revolution

The October Revolution was framed and understood as an explicitly socialist revolution. Of the many questions to spring forth from this endeavor, the greatest concerned the role to be played by the state, in making a socialist revolution and managing a socialist economy. The idea that the socialist revolution was “made,” and thus inauthentic, was marshaled against the Bolsheviks by their political opponents during the Revolution and remained a source of debate among historians for decades to come. Soviet histories, while embracing the role of the dictatorship of the proletariat in shaping the Revolution, denied the existence of a gap between that Revolution and a separate or more authentic revolutionary process; social histories of the Revolution in the West meanwhile affirmed the authenticity of the Bolshevik Revolution by discovering genuine popular support for it, at least for a time. The role actually played by the state in “making” the Revolution—did it command the authority and capacity to direct a revolution? What, if any, were the effects of revolution-making on the state itself?—was long buried beneath arguments over the Revolution's authenticity,

22. Silvana Malle, *The Economic Organization of War Communism 1918-1921* (Cambridge, 1985), Lars T. Lih, *Bread and Authority in Russia, 1914-1921* (Berkeley, 1990), among many others.

thus obscuring one of the most interesting features of the Revolution and its legacy *for* the state: that the state was simultaneously subject and object of the revolutionary process, maker and made.

The question of whether the state would continue to exist and on what terms was, of course, foremost among those considered by Lenin and other Bolshevik theorists in anticipation of the revolution. On the eve of their seizure of power, Richard Sakwa observes, “the Bolsheviks had two contrasting approaches to state organization.”²³ One was modeled on the “commune state” of Paris, hailed as a decentralized workers’ democracy and initially favored because it seemed to “already contain some of the elements of statelessness” to which the Bolsheviks aspired.²⁴ The goal of the commune state was to eliminate the class of functionaries who held the tools of state administration as a monopoly and deployed them in the interests of the bourgeoisie. Lenin valorized these tools of administration, particularly those related to accounting, which had been developed by bourgeois states and multinational firms on the eve of the First World War, and which he believed had simplified the administration of economic activity to such a degree that going forward, it would be possible for people with no special training to administer goods and resources, interchangeably with one another and with other jobs. All necessary information about material goods—the account books themselves—would also be open to the public. Just as private property would be abolished in the socialist revolution, then, so too would the “public functions” of state administration, Neil Harding explains, “cease to be the private property of the Central Government,” turned over to the small, self-governing communes.²⁵

Lenin abandoned the commune state model as unworkable in the summer of 1918, around the same time that the regime launched its first major programs of officially-sponsored nationalization and redistribution. Under the strain of managing economic crisis

23. Richard Sakwa, “The Commune State in Moscow in 1918,” *Slavic Review* vol. 46, no. 3/4 (Autumn/Winter 1987), pp. 429-449, citation p. 429.

24. Sakwa, p. 430.

25. Neil Harding, “Socialism, Society, and the Organic Labour State,” in *The state in socialist society*, Neil Harding ed. (Albany, 1984), p. 6.

at home and a nascent civil war, he turned instead to a different approach to state organization, a “dictatorship of the proletariat,” which stressed strong, centralized management, labor discipline, and the promotion of party cadres, and which was also drawn from Marx’s writings.²⁶ As Peter Holquist makes clear, far more than the Bolsheviks’ ideological prescriptions went into the state that grew out of this conjuncture. Both the Bolsheviks and their ideological opponents made use of practices of economic administration and population management developed in tsarist Russia, as in other states, during the First World War, that favored robust state interventions in economic life. In retrospect, Russia’s post-revolutionary path away from the commune state and towards a hulking bureaucracy with ambitions to forge dramatic social change appears overdetermined. A “transformationist and tutelary ethos of etatisme was an enduring feature of Russian political culture,” Holquist notes, and ultimately the question for the Bolsheviks no less than their political opponents was not whether but how to make change in Russian society using state power.²⁷ To the pervasive etatisme among Russia’s political class one might add the Bolsheviks’ inability, observed by T.H. Rigby, to identify an “effective formula for proletarianizing and de-bureaucratizing the field units of the state,” that is, to shift its forms away from the ministerial system of the Old Regime and to center them on Russia’s tiny working class.²⁸ Whatever their aspirations to statelessness, in order to neutralize the Imperial bureaucracy as a source of political opposition and extend their reach, the Bolsheviks created their own “commissariats” in the mirror image of the tsarist ministries, in the hopes of ruling through them. The body that directed these efforts, the Council of People’s Commissars or Sovnarkom, became Lenin’s chief power base for the first years of Soviet rule and the most important in the revolutionary regime, surpassing even those of the Communist Party. Most significant was the mission this new entity faced: managing the cascade of material

26. Sakwa, “Commune State,” p. 431. In this argument, the shift to the dictatorship of the proletariat model was in fact necessitated by earlier attempts to implement the commune model, which had profound disorganization and chaos as the result.

27. Holquist, *Making War*, p. 285.

28. T.H. Rigby, *Lenin’s government: Sovnarkom 1917-1922* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 12.

things flowing into state coffers under the auspices of the “nationalizations,” “municipalizations,” “requisitions,” and “confiscations” playing out at every level of society, all across the Republic. In practice, the essential task of socialism—the abolition of private property—“necessarily also meant a burgeoning bureaucracy,” Alvin Gouldner suggests, to perform the work of expropriation, to manage expropriated property, and to redistribute and allocate material things.²⁹

If the Bolsheviks’ general trajectory toward bureaucracy was clear, far less is known about precisely how this astonishingly populous, bulky apparatus came into being, and the legacy of its origins for its subsequent operations. One of the puzzles of the revolutionary state is its remarkable generative capacity, hinted at in the incredible scale of its expansion after the Revolution. There were roughly 70,000 employees of the central state living and working in the capital of the Russian Empire, Petrograd, on the eve of the First World War. By 1920, according to a census taken by the new regime, there were 231,140 state employees working in Moscow, the Soviet Republic’s new capital.³⁰ Of these, around one-third worked for the Moscow City Government, the Mossoviet, in its administrative offices and in all the enterprises and spaces it municipalized.³¹ By 1920, then, the city of Moscow alone counted the same number of people in its employ as the entire Imperial central government had before the war, while the size of the central government working in the capital had roughly doubled. “How was it possible,” Daniel Orlovsky asks, “in such a short time for the young Soviet state to have produced hundreds of institutions with tens of thousands of functionaries?”³² Orlovsky explores one possible answer to this logistical challenge: the regime’s willingness to co-opt members of a “lower middle strata” of clerical and white collar workers to staff the new state. This work examines several other social sources of the

29. Alvin Gouldner, “Stalinism: A Study of Internal Colonialism,” *Telos*, no. 34 (1977-8): 5-48, p. 11, although Gouldner refers explicitly to “Stalinism.”

30. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2710, l. 117.

31. *Ibid.*, l. 38.

32. Daniel Orlovsky, “State Building in the Civil War Era: The Role of the Lower Middle Strata,” in *Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War: Explorations in Social History*, eds. Diane Koenker, William G. Rosenberg and Ronald Grigor Suny (Indiana, 1989), p. 191.

new state, but more important, it examines the generative capacity drilled into the very tasks the new regime attempted to carry out. Many of these tasks—the composition of an inventory of all built space in the city of Moscow, for example, or the social valuation and sorting of every material object deemed “necessary” or “valuable” to daily life—would have been virtually impossible for even the most robust of state structures to perform. At the same time as many of these tasks were being newly removed from the purview of the market, which may earlier have handled them, and taken on as the purview the revolutionary state, so too did that state resort to freelancing them onto individuals, families, and other groups in the population.

This dissertation thus investigates the state that emerged around this monumental task as both agent and site of revolution. The people who were charged with making the Revolution were living it, too, in multiple registers; their experience inside and around state institutions must be, as Scott suggests, historicized together with the identities it produced. The October Revolution signaled a rupture in economic and material life no less than in politics and ideas, meaning that the transformation of Russian state structures occurred simultaneously with attempts to form a non-market economy.³³ It was through the dismantling of the market, through confiscation, inventorying, and redistributing material possessions, that the Bolshevik state and governing practices were formed. Histories of governance during the Russian Revolution tend to focus primarily on the politics and structures of revolutionary parties, despite the fact that for most people, the primary point of contact with the Revolution, as a political enterprise and an experience, was with the burgeoning branches of revolutionary administration. This contact came through administration, through complaint and discipline, and it came through employment, as increasing numbers of Soviet subjects

33. In drawing the study of the revolutionary state into conversation with the management of material resources and economic life, this work thus borrows perspective from literature dealing with the end of the Soviet Union, in which this nexus has served as the focal point of everything from anthropologies to sociologies to histories. Despite this prominence in the study of the Soviet Union’s demise, this perspective remains inexplicably absent from the study of its creation. Venelin Ganev, in the tradition of Charles Tilly, most clearly articulates the imperative to study the state through its acts, on the principle that the state is what the state does. Venelin Ganev, *Preying on the state: the transformation of Bulgaria after 1989* (Cornell, 2007).

took on the task of managing the new state's new possessions. The chapters that follow examine how people brought this new entity to life through the project of allocating the material inheritance bequeathed by the Empire, and the many questions, technologies, and tools this project generated.

Although the action in this project is not fixed in just one place, it does have a geography. First and foremost, this is a study situated within the revolutionary city. A great many of the stories collected here originated in Moscow, the capital of the Soviet Republic from March 1918, with a sizable minority drawn from the Imperial capital, Petrograd. As such, the chapters that follow tell an explicitly urban tale. While the regimes of possession, dispossession, and allocation described here were not necessarily exclusive to cities, the countryside had its own dynamics of material life, which were generally regulated by different decrees and enforced, particularly when it came to grain, by different bodies (most prominently the People's Commissariat of Food Provisioning, Narkomprod, which figured weakly in the capitals). Moscow and Petrograd, while briefly imperiled by White armies at different moments, never left Bolshevik control. Their municipal governments enjoyed generally close connections with the central organs of state, and both were also centers of Communist Party organization and activity.³⁴ They were at the very heart of the revolutionary project, particularly Moscow, which rapidly assumed a role as model city that it would occupy for the duration of the Soviet project. In this role, Moscow stood physically and chronologically separate from the rest of the Republic. The eviction of those deemed dissolute in one respect or another—prostitutes, criminals, those without jobs—began shortly after the central government arrived in the city. Ostensibly the policy aimed to clear valuable working and living space for employees of the new regime, but it also

34. G.S. Ignatiev, *Moskva v pervyi god proletarskoi diktatury* (Moscow, 1974), V.A. Klimenko, *Borba s kontrrevoliutsiei v Moskve, 1917-1920* (Moscow, 1978), Iu. A. Poliakov, *Moskovskie trudiashchiesia v oborone sovetskoi stolitsy v 1919 godu* (Moscow, 1957). D. Tolstykh, "Ukrepenie mestnago gosudarstvennogo apparata v stolitse v pervoi polovine 1918 goda" in *Moskva v dvukh revoliutsiiakh* (Moscow, 1958). For counterpoint via Petrograd, M.N. Potekhin, *Pervyi Soviet proletarskoi diktatury* (Leningrad, 1966) and A.L. Fraiman, *Forpost sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii: petrograd v pervye mesiatsy sovetskoi vlasti* (Leningrad, 1969).

served to reinforce Moscow's exceptional status. As the Republic fell deeper into civil war, Moscow's experience of revolution emerged as an actual model, suitable for exporting to newly-conquered localities. The People's Commissariat of Enlightenment operated a "Congress Department" that arranged for housing and city excursions for the tens of thousands of people who flooded into Moscow annually to attend conferences and meetings, as well as a print depot where they could collect brochures and other paper documents to take home with them.³⁵ The People's Commissariat for Government Control, meanwhile, sought to create an office dedicated to inspection along the front lines with the purpose of helping these regions bypass the "mistakes" that had been made in the center.

While this project illuminates pieces of the revolutionary experience in the capital, Moscow still awaits a comprehensive history of its Revolution.³⁶ This work is oriented instead around stories about the material experience of revolution generated from a diverse group of sources. It draws on internal correspondence, expert reports, published and unpublished memoirs, newspapers, and a rich stock of petitions sent to Bolshevik authorities when the Revolution, "Soviet power," or both were not living up to expectations. These petitions had two productive effects: first, they often spurred the Council of People's Commissars (Sovnarkom) or the institutions of state control—the Cheka, and the People's Commissariat for Government Control, subsequently the Worker-Peasant Inspectorate—to launch audits of the government agencies responsible for the petitioner's problem. These investigations are a treasure trove for the historian, replete with interviews, institutional flow charts, audits of account books, and often-candid assessments of institutional functionality. Control documents, of course, cannot be treated as either neutral or transparent; like other documents, they were moving parts in personal and institutional rivalries, policy disputes, and other

35. GARF f. 4085, op. 1a, d. 368, l. 16.

36. Regrettably I was not permitted access to the files of the Moscow Soviet between 1917 and 1928 by the Central Archive of the City of Moscow, making a detailed study of Moscow in the revolutionary era impossible. Papers of the Mossoviet nevertheless figure in this study, not only because it corresponded with institutions whose files are open, but also because other institutions, most notably the Commissariat for Government Control/Rabkrin, collected meeting notes from the Mossoviet in the course of its investigations.

political practices of the time.³⁷ Particularly for a project interested in experience of state institutions, however, this feature is not disqualifying. Moreover, rarely did petition-writers content themselves with just one avenue of recourse in pursuing satisfaction of their claim. More often, people brought their problems to multiple outposts of officialdom, or individual officials passed petitions on to whomever they deemed the “competent” authority in the matter at hand. As a result, the progress of the petitions throws light on the veins that connected different limbs of the revolutionary state. These various branches issued from widely differing points of origin; some, such as the Commissariats of Government Control and Finance, two of the institutions studied carefully here, were inherited from the Imperial state, while others, such as the Cheka and the Sovnarkom, were created during the Revolution. Following individual cases across institutions has the secondary benefit of mapping the personal and institutional ties connecting disparate organs to one another. Altogether, while these sources were directly and indirectly generated by the state, they provide extraordinary access into the lived experience of revolution as an event in material, familial, occupational lives—in short, to revolution in the everyday.

The title of my dissertation is taken from the memoirs of prisoners at Moscow’s Lubyanka complex, where the secret police (*Cheka*) performed interrogations and executions. Home to an insurance agency before the Revolution, the Lubyanka housed, in addition to the prison and execution chamber, a warehouse, stockrooms, and a cobbler’s shop, where the oceans of goods seized nightly from the homes of Muscovites were meant to be processed and somehow put to use for the good of the socialist republic. To call the cells of the Lubyanka miniature “Noah’s Arks,” as these writers did, was to signify their role as a staging ground in the broader endeavor facing the Bolsheviks as they came to grips with what it meant to rule Russia, to determine quite literally what and who it had, and what they, as authors of a socialist revolution, should do with it.³⁸ This work is divided into three

37. Stephen Kotkin, “The State: Is it Us? Memoirs, Archives, and Kremlinologists,” *Russian Review*, vo. 61, no. 1 (January 2002), pp. 35-51, citation p. 47; also discussed here in chapter 5.

38. *Che-Ka: Materialy po deiatelnosti chrezvychainykh komissii* (Berlin, 1922), p. 172.

parts. The first, composed of two chapters, examines attempts to erase private property in two spheres of material life, real estate and movable goods. As these chapters demonstrate, far more than the aspiration to socialism went into the material experience of revolution. The Revolution was capacious: lawlessness and mayhem, score-settling and the pursuit of personal ambitions all found room within the whirlwind of dispossession that swept across Russia, deepening wherever the Bolsheviks secured power. These features commingled with the pursuit of socialist allocation; as they consolidated power, one of the Bolsheviks' chief tasks in the material world would be to sort through the myriad ways in which people lost and gained things during the Revolution, as they sorted through the things themselves. Together, these chapters connect the experience of dispossession with the administrative, practical, and legal tools developed to put an end to private property in the revolutionary era. The first chapter deals with dispossession and redistribution in the built environment. Few projects embodied the Bolsheviks' ambition to transform people through property as succinctly as this one, which saw newly-created housing departments embark on audacious programs they could only partly control to sort people and spaces. Lacking the capacity to measure every room in the city or assign all residents spaces suitable to their personal and political qualities, the chapter demonstrates that the institutions in charge of these tasks relied instead upon the "accidental information" submitted by the residents themselves, using it to craft the most important tool of socialist allocation: the inventory. The second chapter turns to the objects found inside built spaces—apartments, banks, shops, and warehouses—as they changed hands together with the buildings and separately. It traces the institutionalization of dispossession, from its monopolization inside particular branches of the state to the disposal of seized goods, as the regime struggled to find a way to delegitimize seizure, or at least certain seizers, without at the same time legitimating private property.

The second part of the dissertation moves into the institutions designed to manage material life, centering around efforts to create hierarchies of goods that reflected socialist values and to negotiate the continued, unexpected need for measures of economic value

as a part of this project. The first chapter of this section concerns the practices by which Soviet subjects measured and expressed the value of material objects in the absence of a legal market to determine their price, and how these practices were managed and deployed within state institutions. The next chapter examines the revolutionary experience of money inside state institutions and in public usage. Like the experience of revolutionary time, the experience of money was both profound and difficult to decree. “Of this there can be no doubt,” wrote one observer at the time, of a particularly treacherous revolutionary currency, “that as the centuries pass, the generations change, the heavy burden of the cursed Penza bills will live long in the memory of the people.”³⁹ Together these chapters investigate the regime’s attempts to create separate spheres of valuation, inside the state and outside it, around particular objects, on paper and in practice.

Where the earlier parts of the work examine the practices that lent the state its generative capacity to project itself outwards, into the physical environment and the conceptualization of material life, the third part shifts the focus inwards, onto the structures, practices, and ideas of the revolutionary state itself. The long final chapter of the dissertation explores the experience of revolution inside state structures. The chapter’s first half traces the mechanics of the state’s expansion, the meanings ascribed to it, and efforts to build the Revolution into institutional forms and interpersonal relations among people at work. Its second half examines the vast new sphere of workplace practices and behaviors identified as “crime on the job.” Finally, the dissertation concludes with a brief look at the changes wrought by the New Economic Policy on the realms of property, value, and state structures.

39. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 120, l. 165.

Chapter 1

Building Stock: Inventorying the Built Environment

One day in August 1918, the 236 residents of 29 Povarskaia Street, an art-deco apartment house near the Kremlin that still stands today, received a letter informing them that they had three days to vacate their homes. The instructions they received from Moscow’s Central Housing Department were confusing. First they were told that not everyone had to leave, just enough people to empty out the top two floors of the building, which had been claimed “for operational purposes” by the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Battle against Counterrevolution, Sabotage, and Speculation—known as the Chrezvychaika or the Cheka. Who had to leave and where they were supposed to go was not specified. The residents fought this order successfully in person at the Housing Department, but the very next day, they received a new slip of paper, stating that the entire building had been requisitioned—and this time, no one at the Housing Department could say by whom. At this point, the residents wrote a letter to Vladimir Bonch-Bruevich, head of the Administrative Directorate at the Council of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom) and Vladimir Lenin’s right-hand man, who—miraculously—intervened personally for them with Felix Dzerzhinsky, the head of the Cheka. From Dzerzhinsky, Bonch-Bruevich learned that the Cheka was

not behind the requisition of 29 Povarskaia Street—not this time, at any rate. The building had been claimed by the People’s Commissariat of Government Control (Goskon). A group of residents, acting on the building’s behalf, requested a meeting at the Commissariat of Government Control and again to their astonishment, they were received by Karl Lander, the Commissar himself. “I agree with all you say,” Lander told them after sympathetically hearing their case. Still, as he put it, “I need your building”—or rather, as he clarified, he needed *a* building. Lander was more or less indifferent as to which building, precisely, he received: “you show me some other suitable building,” he gamely proposed to the residents of 29 Povarskaia, “and I will put a stop to the requisition of your building immediately.”

The residents of 29 Povarskaia left Lander’s office baffled by this suggestion: find him another building? Where did one go to “find” whole apartment buildings? How did one find them? Were they really being asked to serve as real estate agents to a commissariat of the new Soviet state? Mystified, they ignored Lander’s proposition and plunged back into the task of protecting their building from requisition through endless petitions at the Housing Department of the Moscow Soviet (Mossoviet). They failed. By October, they were gone.¹

We begin with the story of 29 Povarskaia for two reasons. Like the Russian schoolboy of the economist Alexander Gerschenkron’s famous formulation, who falls asleep before the First World War and awakens after the Second, the residents of 29 Povarskaia were, and felt themselves to be, refugees from an old world, thrust into a new one that looked so similar on

1. Their failure was quite spectacular, coming after they had been bounced back and forth between two competing officials at the Moscow Central Housing Department, both widely reviled, by the names of Shneerson and M.F. Vladimirkii. The latter rose to positions of prominence in the Commissariat of Internal Affairs. “Our daily torment was met with everywhere with nothing but senseless obstruction,” the residents wrote to Bonch-Bruevich. Shneerson, head of the Department for the Requisition of Space, “said categorically that the question had been decided and the building would be cleared out within five days.” A third official, Serebriakov, told them by contrast that the “question was far from decided, and instructed us to see Vladimirovskii [sic],” who in turn sent them back to Shneerson. “That was the end of the closed circle we fell into,” they lamented, and at the end of another day of fruitless meetings at the Housing office, they got home to find a notice of eviction posted on their door. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 77, l. 44. Story composed from ll. 35, 40, 36, and 44.

the surface to the one they knew, but was in reality quite different.² Unlike Gerschenkron's schoolboy, the residents of 29 Povarskaia were wide awake through the months of war and revolution they had so far endured. Yet they found themselves confronted by a man speaking to them in a language they did not understand. Lander proposed a way out of a situation from which they desperately wanted relief, yet still they were unable to heed his suggestion. The idea that they would find him a different building, occupied by different people, was one they simply could not comprehend, whether as a technical feat or as an intellectual and ethical one.

The second reason we begin with the residents of 29 Povarskaia, is so as to emphasize Lander's willingness, which he seems to have viewed as an act of generosity, to see the world—and especially Moscow's built environment—through these residents' eyes. All across the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) in 1918, Bolshevik authorities embarked on the task of resettling cities and seizing land in the countryside, in an effort to wage class war through the use of space. In the case of land, as is well known, Bolshevik authorities recognized widespread popular seizures of noble estates that began well before they came to power. To a much more limited degree, as we will see, the same was true of urban built space. In Moscow and elsewhere, however, the popular whirlwind of dispossession intersected with Bolshevik ambitions to nationalize or municipalize whole sectors of the economic plant, including space in buildings, private ownership of which the Sovnarkom abolished with certain loopholes in August 1918.

This chapter examines how Bolshevik authorities attempted to take the built environment in hand. It does so through the prism of information, and in specific, through attempts to create an "inventory" of all built space in the city. The inventorying of space involved first defining "space" as a resource, determining its relationship to square meters, its relationship to the appropriate usage of rooms and buildings, and clarifying the nature of the

2. Alexander Gerschenkron, "Industrial Enterprise in Soviet Russia," in Gerschenkron ed, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective* (Harvard, 1962), pp. 270-271. Cited and further glossed, vis-à-vis money, by Gregory Grossman, "Gold and the Sword: Money in the Soviet Command Economy," in Henry Rosovsky ed, *Industrialization in Two Systems: Essays in Honor of Alexander Gerschenkron* (Wiley, 1966), p. 204.

rights that individuals, families, and institutions had to them. It impinged on perhaps the most monumental task of the revolutionary era—the sorting of people into bourgeois and worker, revolutionary and counterrevolutionary. As we will see, the sorting of people occurred, in large part, through the sorting of space and things. Visions of socialist society as a material system took shape through the allocation of built space as a resource. These visions had various authors, and they often conflicted with one another. Through the effort to take stock of the built environment, space became a vector of power in revolutionary society, for both individuals seeking to expose their neighbors or protect themselves, and institutions seeking to establish their role in the new, socialist firmament. As the popular impulse to redistribute space as an act of revolutionary upheaval merged with the regime’s attempt to establish the new government in Moscow, both individuals and institutions found themselves engaged in a land grab the likes of which they had never before seen.

The Marxist critique of capitalism was an internalist critique; the labor theory of value, the fetishism of commodities, these were withering criticisms of the market economy, but they did not prescribe positive programs for the creation of a socialist one. In their search to achieve the allocation of resources without a market, without prices and profits and maybe even money itself, the Bolsheviks struggled to answer two questions about the wealth of resources they had inherited from their Imperial predecessors and were in the process of “nationalizing”: first, what there was, and second how much people needed of it. These two processes, inventorying and norming, played out across the Republic, authored by central and local institutions, born of the ambition to eliminate the market, redistribute property, and achieve revolutionary justice. Inventorying formed the technical basis for all of these efforts; norming was its prescriptive counterpart. Both became foundational elements of Soviet socialist economic management, but in the revolutionary era, proved elusive.³ Even

3. Inventorying as described in this chapter—an attempt to count physically units of space—remained a dominant method of Soviet economic management into the post-war era, Arunabh Ghosh suggests. Ghosh finds that the Soviets remained committed to counting physical objects into the 1950s, rejecting random sampling as a violation of Marxist laws applying to humans and the natural world, and which ruled out ‘chance’ as a feature in historical development. The Chinese turned away from Soviet statistical methods and towards Indian ones, his dissertation argues, in part to overcome the Soviets’ dependence on physical counting. Arunabh

as the norms kept falling—first from a little over five square meters per person, then to three and a half, then to a little over one—there was never “enough” space. It was also never known how much space there actually was. In their effort to find out, this chapter argues, the Bolsheviks ended up freelancing the redistribution of space onto the population itself. Lacking the ability to compose a clear and transparent picture of the built environment on their own, Soviet authorities relied on the vision, shaded by ideology and opportunism, of their subjects.

1.1 Socialist Revolution, State Management, and Redistribution

Prior to the February Revolution, ambitions to redistribute built space, on the one hand, and to concentrate it as a resource in the hands of state authorities, on the other, existed in separate pockets of revolutionary ideology. As the authors of *Red Moscow*, a Mossoviet history of revolution in the new capital, observed in 1920, neither the redistribution of space nor its municipalization figured with any regularity in the pre-revolutionary programs of the socialist parties. Of the two, the municipalization of apartment buildings attracted more attention than the redistribution of space, but even this was paltry. They reported with amazement that “mention of the municipalization of building-ownership” could be found “neither in pre-revolutionary programs of the socialist parties nor in the political platforms or socialist press of the period up to October.” Paging through stacks of socialist pamphlets, the Mossoviet historians were unable to find support even for the municipalization of urban land, in spite of the fact that this was already a “long-standing demand of bourgeois reformers.”⁴ The only reference they could locate concerning socialist perspectives on the status

Ghosh, To ‘Know’ the Nation: Statistics, Quantification, and State-Society Relations in the Early People’s Republic of China, 1949-1959 (*Ph.D. Columbia University, 2014*).

4. As was common at the time, land and the buildings that stood on it were understood as separate commodities and treated as such during the process of municipalization. The Mossoviet effected the municipalization of urban land and that of apartment buildings by separate decrees, and judging by the comments of the

of urban buildings before the October Revolution was a “pair of articles by I.I. Skvortsov-Stepanov” published in the Moscow *Izvestiia* during the summer of 1917, “in which the author, with the utmost delicacy, almost timidly suggests that perhaps it would be possible, without great trouble, to get by without landlords.” But these suggestions “left no trace in party programs or slogans.”⁵

There was, however, growing support for the idea of municipalizing apartment buildings during the First World War outside of the party programs. In keeping with other programs advocating for increased state intervention in Imperial economic life, these initiatives focused on beating back what was viewed as rapacious speculation in basic necessities during the War, rather than waging class war through the redistribution of built space. In Moscow, many apartment buildings were de-facto or partially municipalized during the course of the war. As fuel prices rose and materials for repairs grew scarce, landlords struggled to keep their rentals profitable on existing rents. Enormous rent hikes grew common, as did subsequent evictions for non-payment, producing a popular backlash against urban landlords and the vilification of the “landlord unions” formed to undertake bitter negotiations with tenants. In 1916, the Moscow city government stepped in, forbidding both rent hikes and evictions until the end of the war.⁶ The landlords, in response, ceased to fulfill their contractual obligations to provide their buildings with heating fuel and refuse removal. Buildings quickly fell into disrepair and the streets ran foul with trash, which forced the city’s hand further, leading to the implementation of municipal fuel subsidies and municipal maintenance services in many buildings.

Perhaps the most notable precursor to the revolutionary redistribution of space was launched by the Provisional Government, in a plan composed to fight Bolshevik creep in Petrograd and defend the new Republic from a looming German attack by moving the cap-

Red Moscow authors, the municipalization of land was viewed as a less extreme measure than that of built space. *Krasnaia Moskva* (Mossoviet: Moscow, 1920), pp. 335-336.

5. *Krasnaia Moskva* (Moscow, 1920), pp. 335-336.

6. This order was modified by an order of the Provisional Government in August 1917 allowing increases in the rents of certain spaces (those rented after 1912, and other provisos). GARF f. 4390, op. 2, d. 10, ll. 74, 75.

ital to the more defensible climes of Moscow. In late August 1917, the Provisional Government formed a special commission to plan the “evacuation” of the central state from Petrograd. The commission borrowed heavily from current military concepts and terminology, instituting a spatial “norm” for offices participating in the evacuation, on the one hand, and for domestic space, on the other, both based on the person: offices were to receive a little over three square meters per employee, while households would be allocated around five square meters per resident.⁷ Evacuation planning authorities also envisioned performing “requisitions” of necessary space in Moscow, to occur on the same terms and with the same compensation requirements as those for other goods “necessary to the war effort.” Planning got far enough along in September and October 1917 that individual ministries within the Provisional Government sent envoys down to Moscow to look for suitable spaces.⁸ Their search was facilitated by authorities in the Moscow city government, who deemed it necessary to create an inventory of available spaces and willing landlords, which they could then recommend to the visiting Petrograders. The first parties of government employees had just left Petrograd when the Bolsheviks seized power, the less important offices destined for provincial cities and the most important on their way to Moscow. When the Bolshevik regime decided to abandon Petrograd in March 1918, government offices dusted off their evacuation plans from before the Revolution and set to work.

The redistribution of built space and its municipalization, from their separate corners on the pre-Revolutionary ideological landscape, fused during the revolutionary conjuncture, weaving their way as a twinned strand into Bolshevik programs thanks to the practice and experience of revolution in the capitals. As Hubertus Jahn observes, popular efforts at the redistribution of space targeting the wealthy began just days after the February Revolution, when boisterous crowds, having already emptied the city jails and stormed the offices

7. RGIA f. 560, op. 26, d. 1413, ll. 20, 78, 98.

8. For the Ministry of Finance/Narkomfin’s efforts, see RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 79, l. 1 in particular, as well as RGIA f. 560, op. 26, d. 1413, especially ll. 3, 5, 18.

of the tsarist political police, turned their attention to the mansions of the Tsar's intimates.⁹ Most famously, they ransacked the mansion of Nikolai II's mistress, the ballerina Matilda Kshesinskaia.¹⁰ This spatial dispossession, according to the commissar of the Moscow police at the time, was increasingly known as "requisitioning," thus endowing the term with a layer of revolutionary meaning on top of its existing military one.¹¹ The spontaneous "requisitioning" of space remained rare, however, before the October uprising. Lenin officially spoke of the redistribution of space several weeks after the Bolshevik Revolution, affirming the desirability of "requisitioning the apartments of the rich for the needs of the poor" in a speech on November 8. A few weeks after that, on November 20, he turned to the issue of the *etatization* of apartment buildings, drafting "Theses for a law on the confiscation of buildings rented to tenants," specifying that "all (urban) buildings systematically rented out are alienated-confiscated to become the property of the people."¹² Lenin wrote out both the more familiar, Imperial term, "alienated," and the increasingly common "confiscated" to describe the action to be performed on the apartment buildings, suggesting a lack of clarity surrounding the language of appropriating space: this was an unfamiliar business, even to the leader of the socialist revolution.

Although Lenin's theses give an idea of his views, they were never formalized into law; the Council of People's Commissars, or Sovnarkom, the executive of the revolutionary government and Lenin's central power base, took them up for discussion but passed no decree on the administration of space, either as an object of redistribution or as a target for Republic-wide *etatization*, leaving the matter open to popular action and local initiative. Of the Empire's major cities, only Moscow seems to have acted before the year was out, "municipalizing" apartment buildings where rents of greater than 750 rubles a month

9. Hubertus Jahn, "The Housing Revolution in Petrograd, 1917-1920," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* *bd. 38, h. 2, (1990) pp. 212-227.*

10. A.N. Voznesenskii, *Moskva v 1917 godu* (Moscow, 1928), p. 40.

11. *ibid*, pp. 41-43.

12. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 4, l. 1. Lenin also supplied multiple options for the term "property" itself, writing first the fairly concrete term for property, "sobstvennost," and later replacing it with the more fluid "dostoianie," or "wealth." Emphasis original.

were collected on December 14, 1917, amounting to nearly half the buildings in the city, housing almost two-thirds of the population.¹³ Moscow's measure was by far the most comprehensive of any in the new republic, suggesting that the move reflected the city's recent history of conflict between landlords and tenants as much as a new revolutionary program. The Petrograd Soviet, for example, acted in a more piecemeal fashion, "confiscating" its first 29 buildings in January 1918 and another 259 in February, a procedure that was regularly repeated over the next few years, but which, because it lacked formal definition, kept apartment buildings as a class under private ownership well into 1920.¹⁴ The effects of municipalization in Moscow, meanwhile, were initially fairly limited; the authority to collect rents and perform necessary services was transferred from the landlords to small, tenant-controlled "building committees," elected bodies of building residents formed over the summer of 1917, as the police melted away and cities descended into chaos, to help residents work collectively to secure necessary supplies, such as fuel and occasionally food, and provide security at night.¹⁵

Neither the municipalization of apartment buildings in Moscow nor their seizure in Petrograd automatically led to the redistribution of space. In Petrograd, the first efforts at redistribution dated to December 27, 1917, when a neighborhood soviet announced the creation of a "register" of available living space and required all landlords to report empty apartments to a registration bureau, which would match them to the families of Red Army

13. *Krasnaia Moskva*, 335.

14. Memoirs of A. Monisov, NIOR, f. 369 kart. 397, d. 14, l. 11.

15. The desire for security was the driving motivation behind the formation of most building committees, judging from handbooks written in Moscow and Petrograd to instruct interested residents on how to establish their own. The degradation of security, these handbooks noted, was the product not only of the absence of police and skyrocketing crime rates, but of the insubordination of the "dvorniki," or building caretakers, who over the summer of 1917, like the landlords, formed their own union demanding better conditions and respect. Testifying to the general breakdown in social relations of the revolutionary era, many dvorniki were reportedly at open war with their buildings; there were even rumors that dvorniki worked in concert with the bands of thieves roving city streets, pointing out rich apartments for a share in the booty. The dvorniki especially hated the building committees, which threatened to supplant them entirely. A.N. Voznesenskii, pp. 31-32. N.I. Bronshtein, *Instruktsiia dlia uchreditelei DOMOVYKH ORGANIZATSII [s prilozheniem 'polozhenie o domovykh organizatsiiakh']*. (Izvestiia moskovskago soveta predstavitelei raionnykh dum'Moskva, 1917).

soldiers and other citizens.¹⁶ Results were modest, producing just one known case of resettlement of a family in need into an empty apartment owned by a landlord.¹⁷ In Moscow, redistribution received a jump-start from the arrival of the central government. A sharply intensified drive to search out spaces suitable for redistribution began on March 11, 1918, the day that the Sovnarkom train carrying Lenin, his deputy and administrative director at the Sovnarkom Vladimir Bonch-Bruевич, and a handful of other Bolshevik V.I.P.s steamed into the city, after a two-day journey from Petrograd. On Lenin's heels followed tens of thousands of government employees over the next six months, as every branch of every commissariat, and an eclectic society of hangers-on, jostled to find a situation in the Republic's new capital.

By the time the Sovnarkom took the decision to leave Petrograd, the immediate danger of a German attack on the Imperial capital had faded. There was no imminent security reason for all of these offices, all of their workers, and all of their families to throw themselves on Moscow, to flood its streets with their envoys, searching for suitable office space and a place for the employees and their households to take up residence, to lodge shrill complaints with the Sovnarkom, with municipal authorities, with anyone who would listen, when they were (inevitably, it seemed) double-crossed or beaten to the punch by the representatives of a different institution.¹⁸ There was no reason for them to rush to Moscow, but rush there they did. So anxious were people to get down to Moscow that they came without offices lined up, without a place to live. The People's Commissariat of Agriculture arrived in Moscow on March 13 despite the fact that it had secured neither office nor living space.¹⁹ The People's Commissariat of Finance (Narkomfin), historically one of the most

16. A.L. Fraiman, *Forpost sotsialisticheskoi revoliutsii Petrograd v pervye mesiatsy Sovetskoi vlasti*. (Leningrad, 1969), p. 328.

17. *Ibid*, p. 329.

18. As T.H. Rigby notes, Trotsky wrote of the "fierce struggle" for space among the institutions moving to Moscow, as well as the preference for avoiding buildings associated with the Moscow merchantry. Allegedly, "Stalin's Commissariat for Nationalities was one of these, and his deputy Pestkovsky describes an unsuccessful attempt by Stalin to take over in dead of night a former hotel building claimed by another department." T.H. Rigby, *Lenin's Government: Sovnarkom, 1917-1922* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 57.

19. *Moskovskii vechernii chas* March 13, 1918 no. 2, p. 2. Employees lived and worked in their train cars. *Moskovskii vechernii chas* March 1, 1918 no. 1, p. 2.

substantial institutions in the Imperial firmament, completed the bulk of its move within just six months—indeed, the largest party of employees, more than two thousand, left for Moscow the week after Easter—despite the fact that it had upwards of 7,000 staff members and family to find space for, plus offices in which to work.²⁰

The appearance of tens of thousands of government employees in Moscow over the course of just a few months shook the city loose, displacing people from their homes and entire buildings from their established uses. The arriving Petrograders approached Moscow's built environment with tremendous creativity; where some might see the old orphanage named after Metropolitan Sergei and converted to a veterans' hospital during the war, as a derelict criminal den, home to a brisk trade in document-forgery and speculation in normed goods run by the veterans themselves, emissaries from the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment saw a future "home for defective children."²¹ Detailed records from the archives of the Commissariat of Finance indicate that envoys sent ahead to search for space made efforts to locate empty buildings. The arriving institutions were also instructed by the Sovnarkom commission on the move to Moscow to adhere to a spatial "norm" of two square sazhen, about three-and-a-half square meters, per person at home and at work.²² Despite these measures, however, it was not long before the space-seekers from Petrograd and their Moscow interlocutors began to resort to various forms of seizure, targeting apartments and rooms currently inhabited by people with no desire to move.²³ To handle the rush of requests from arriving central government offices, the Mossoviet created a "housing soviet" in late February 1918, which assigned space to government institutions and concurrently managed the claims of displaced Muscovites. It also created a "housing commission" that met on Tuesday afternoons to resolve the growing number of conflicts over the right to inhabit spaces that were claimed by multiple parties.

20. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 79, l. 24. Several thousand more employees and family members, just from Narkomfin, were scheduled to arrive in the weeks after that. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 76, l. 2.

21. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 79, l. 24.

22. N. Okunev, *Dnevnik Moskvicha 1917-1924* (Paris, 1990), p. 16/29 October 1918.

23. Iu. A. Poliakov, *Moskovskie trudiashchiesia v oborone sovetskoï stolitsy v 1919 godu* (Moscow, 1957), p. 20.

These disputes did not revolve around the ownership of space as a legal or economic matter, which belonged much of the time, in the wake of the municipalization order, to the Mossoviet. They revolved, instead, around the more fundamental question of who had the right to use space and who had the authority to decide. The connection between ownership and the right to dispose of space was not formally severed until the summer of 1918, when the Mossoviet empowered itself to dispose of all built spaces in the city, regardless of their ownership. The Mossoviet's Central Land and Housing Department (TsZZhO) claimed the "right to requisition space and perform evictions" everywhere in Moscow, even in buildings that "belonged to other institutions and societies" or to "private owners, on the basis of the principle that all real estate in Moscow is at the disposal of the Mossoviet."²⁴ The Mossoviet's declaration pointed up the broad lack of clarity about which, if any, of the bundle of rights traditionally ascribed to property ownership persisted after the abrogation of private property. But it did little to resolve the question, insofar as numerous other government institutions continued to claim the authority to dispose of built space for themselves. The Commissariat of War, for example, possessed its own "apartment commission" that seized hospitals, schools, monasteries and storefronts across the city, in addition to apartments. It put many of these spaces to use for its own institutions, but it also rented space out to other institutions and even to private parties.²⁵ The Commissariat of Government Control was not powerful enough to seize space on this scale for itself, but it did see fit to "inspect" the seizures performed by other institutions, and even claimed the right to rectify the improprieties discovered by its agents—mostly inexperienced young people, many of whom were related to one another.²⁶ The Mossoviet complained to the Commissariat of Government Control about its alleged overreach, but it could do nothing to stop the free-for-all space giveaways. Indeed, word soon got around that the Commissariat of Government Control was handing out space, and it was not long before representatives from other commissari-

24. GARF f. 4390, op. 4, d. 44, l. 26.

25. GARF f. 4085, op. 1a, d. 231, l. 4. Rentals continued until at least 1922.

26. GARF f. 4390, op. 4, d. 44, ll. 1 – 20 for the mandates carried by the inspectors, revealing at least two pairs of siblings; l. 25 for their attempts to distribute space on their own.

ats began writing to the non-existent “Department of Government Control for Apartments” with requests for “seven to eight room houses in the central neighborhood” or for the protection of particular apartments from seizure.²⁷ Both the Mossoviet and the Sovnarkom attempted to crack down on the proliferation of institutions dealing with space: the Sovnarkom, characteristically, by creating another commission, and the Mossoviet by declaring its monopoly over the distribution of all space in the city, to government institutions and everyone else.²⁸

This lack of clarity about who was empowered to dispose of space in the absence of property rights meant that it was not simply hard for government institutions to find office or living space in an unfamiliar city; it was hard to keep built space, once acquired. It was hard to hang on to an apartment or office, once found. The first attempt to fight the rapid and ostensibly unstoppable turnover took the form of a document called the *okhrannaia gramota*, a “pass” that could be applied to furniture and other personal belongings as well as space. The *okhrannaia gramota* was little more than a letter from an important person-

27. Ibid, ll. 28, 29.

28. The Sovnarkom assigned the work of “tabulation and distribution” exclusively to the Mossoviet, but created not one but two new “inter-institutional” commissions manned by representatives of the Sovnarkom, the Mossoviet, the Professional Unions, and the Cheka (replaced in August with the Commissariat of Justice), to perform “control over the distribution and concentration of space and to organize the eviction of parasitic elements from the city.” [*Dekrety sovetskoi vlasti*, vol. 2, p. 496, 27 June 1918.] The Sovnarkom empowered an “All-Russian Extraordinary Commission on the Evacuation of Government and Civic Institutions from Petrograd,” operating out of VTsIK, the week after it arrived in Moscow, with the exclusive right to find space for all institutions and resolve disputes. The Mossoviet created a full-time “Housing Soviet” to assign space to government institutions and make arrangements for the many Muscovites displaced by the newcomers and formed a “Housing Commission” that met every Tuesday at one o’clock to resolve the growing number of disputes over space. Additionally, the Mossoviet ordered the creation of “raion housing-land departments” to fulfill the orders of the Central Housing Department, which were to send representatives to regular meetings of a revised Housing Soviet where “questions of housing politics” would be discussed and “connections and coordination of the activity of raions” with the center would be achieved. It also created “acquisition” and “appraisal” bureaus in its Departments of Municipalized and Soviet Buildings, which performed tasks like interviewing the pre-revolutionary caretakers of municipalized buildings to learn how much fuel they consumed annually and what they charged in rent. Even the Moscow Oblast Sovnarkom got in on the space race, abolishing the right to private ownership of urban real estate on 20 April, four months before Lenin’s Sovnarkom, and entertaining complaints about the activities of the Sovnarkom and Mossoviet authorities. [Poliakov, p. 20; Tolstykh, p. 398.] It also created “acquisition” and “appraisal” bureaus in its Departments of Municipalized and Soviet Buildings, which performed tasks like interviewing the pre-revolutionary caretakers of municipalized buildings to learn how much fuel they consumed annually and what they charged in rent. Even the Moscow Oblast Sovnarkom got in on the space race, abolishing the right to private ownership of urban real estate on 20 April, four months before Lenin’s Sovnarkom, and entertaining complaints about the activities of the Sovnarkom and Mossoviet authorities.

age on institutional letterhead, declaring that the space assigned to the person named on the document—usually an employee, but not always, especially when the author was someone from the Cheka—was protected from requisition. Anyone could write an *okhrannaia gramota*; the higher the placement of the letter-writer, the more weight carried by their protection permit, but it was also common for the bosses of average enterprises and offices to issue protection permits to their employees. In November 1918, Bonch-Bruevich wrote a letter to the TsZZhO observing that “for the second time, Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin,” the renowned leader of Russia’s anarchist movement, now in fragile health, “is being deprived of his apartment.” Bonch-Bruevich first asked that the housing department help him find a new one consisting of “four rooms with a kitchen,” but when this failed, he instead asked the Gorodskoi neighborhood commissariat to allow Kropotkin to return, when he was in Moscow, to the “two rooms he has rented here in the past, which should not be subject to requisition,” in light of the fact that Kropotkin was extremely old.²⁹ Bonch-Bruevich fielded similar petitions on behalf of numerous aging revolutionaries, widows, and artists of his acquaintance. In October, Bonch-Bruevich received a letter from VSNKh’s Main Committee for State Installations, asking that an engineer, Finkelshtein, working on a project for the Northern Peace-Path, the work of the “artists A.A. Broisov and I.E. Gannevig,” be protected from the requisition of his furniture. At the bottom the request, in hand, Bonch-Bruevich added that the “*Upravlenie delami* joins this request,” and sent it along to the Basmannyi neighborhood soviet.³⁰ He handled similar requests for countless others, including Maxim Gorky and Trotsky’s dentist.³¹

The sheer volume of people brought to the city of Moscow by the arrival of the government aggravated these underlying uncertainties about the fate of property, while heightening what was already perceived as a shortage of living space in Moscow, caused by the

29. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 79, ll. 56, 76.

30. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 79, l. 45.

31. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 77, l. 79, for Gorky, and RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 45, ll. 1, 3, for the dentist.

deterioration of the building stock during the war and the influx of refugees to the city.³² Under pressure to discover vast new quantities of space in a city that already appeared full, the Petrograders and their Muscovite partners devised what can only be described as a new form of settlement to meet these new demands. *Uplotnenie*, or “concentration,” involved assigning those who needed a place to live to apartments that were already inhabited. It was rarely accompanied by precise instructions as to how, precisely, the current inhabitants of a given space were to rearrange themselves to make way for the newcomers; the details, rather, were left to the residents themselves. At first, the current residents of Moscow apartments seem to have interpreted the “concentration” orders borne by strangers knocking at their doors as some sort of mistake. In June 1918, Vladimir Bonch-Bruевич received a letter at the Sovnarkom from the building committee of no. 12 Sobachei Square protesting an order issued by the “Central Housing Soviet” that assigned an apartment in their building, belonging “to its owner, A.M. Obukhov” and presently occupied by Obukhov and his family, to a representative from the Commissariat for the Affairs of the Caucasian Nationalities. Obukhov and his six family members had “occupied the apartment without break” since the Revolution—an important fact, as unoccupied apartments were ripe targets for reassignment—but the order given to the newcomer from the Commissariat appeared to state that the entire apartment was empty, or at the very least, that it was open to new inhabitants, suggesting to the building committee that the “information of the Housing Soviet does not correspond to actual fact.”³³ As the Housing Soviet explained, however, “we knew the apartment under discussion was not empty, but in view of the lack of space, it was presented to the commissariat in the course of concentration.”³⁴ In the coming months, the

32. While the bulk of the people rushing to Moscow were undoubtedly drawn there by the prospect of current or hoped-for employment, the move also elicited a steady stream of hangers-on, hoping to trade in the uncertain political environment on their proximity to the new regime. Interestingly, and reflective of the rapidly changing relationship between private enterprise and the state in the period, many of those to follow the government to Moscow “uninvited” were the directorates of private firms hoping to retain their business ties to the state.

33. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 79, l. 22, without break meaning no one fled during the Revolution, which was common grounds for seizure of space.

34. *Ibid.* l. 27.

Housing Soviet printed up blanks expressly for the purposes of “concentrating” residents in a given apartment.

PERMISSION

[date]

The Sub-Department on the Concentration and Distribution of Space of the Land and Housing Department of the Moscow Soviet of Workers’ and Red Army Deputies permits comrade _____ to occupy in the course of concentration one room in apartment no. ____ in building ____, on _____ street.

Signed.³⁵

Even before the full extent of the space “shortages” in Moscow became known, the Sovnarkom opened consultations with the Commissariat of Labor on the question of banishing Muscovites not engaged in “productive labor” from the city. In April, just weeks after arriving in Moscow, Nikolai Gorbunov, then Bonch-Bruевич’s deputy at the Administrative Directorate of the Sovnarkom, proposed evicting all “prostitutes, speculators, brokers, middlemen, and those occupied in street trade.”³⁶ Several weeks after that, in early June, the Sovnarkom empowered Moscow’s housing authorities to search out “parasitic elements” suitable for eviction from the city, an order that coincided with the ransacking of Kitai-gorod, Moscow’s commercial center.³⁷ In a rabble-rousing speech at the end of June, Leon Trotsky proposed marking each building where members of the bourgeoisie lived with yellow flags he called “bourgeois tickets,” and invited workers to harass anyone they found walking on the streets of Kitai-gorod.³⁸ A middle-aged shipping agent who spent his life on those streets, Nikita Okunev, reported in his diary in mid-July that nearly every storefront in the neighborhood had been sealed, stamped, or otherwise cleared.³⁹

35. TsAGM f. 2382, op. 1, d. 1, ll. 2, 3 dating from 2 June 1918.

36. TsGASP f. 1000, op. 2, d. 84, l. 95.

37. *Dekrety sovetskoi vlasti*, vol. 2, June 27, 1918.

38. Okunev, p. 192, June 17/30 1918.

39. Okunev, p. 216, 29 August/11 September 1918.

By early August, the work of the municipal housing authorities had broadened to reflect this shift in interest toward the social status of the inhabitants of built spaces, no less than the spaces themselves. At a meeting on 13 August, the TsZZhO's collegium discussed the "the distribution of living space" and resolved that recently-formed neighborhood-level housing departments, local bodies with presumably closer ties to inhabitants, "should participate in the work of evicting the parasitic elements of Moscow and resettling the laboring elements in healthy spaces."⁴⁰ To collect information about the "parasitic elements" and the "healthy spaces" alike, the collegium recommended relying upon bodies with the closest ties to the residents: building committees, the elected bodies of residents formed over the summer of 1917 to pick up the slack from absent landlords and weak municipal services, whose activities slowly expanded, in a period of great turmoil, to include provisioning, security, and some legal services, such as notarizing and character witnessing in case of arrest. Since the Bolshevik Revolution, the building committees had also become critical interlocutors for the new regime, charged with answering innumerable surveys attesting to the number of former officers, foreign nationals, or other suspicious social groups residing in the building, and responsible for enforcing the popular disarmament campaigns run by the Cheka. Among the first things the Bolsheviks did when they arrived in Moscow in March 1918 was to call new elections to the building committees, in an attempt to flush the "bourgeoisie" out of their positions in building management and replace them with trustworthy members of the working classes. The new elections were governed by the same rules as those in place for the elections to the city and neighborhood soviets, which stipulated that all voters had to be at least eighteen years of age and engaged in socially-useful labor. Where no residents of a given building met these qualifications, local soviets were empowered to resettle the building entirely or to "concentrate" it with members of the working class, who would also represent the building on the new building committee.⁴¹ In August, the collegium ordered

40. TsAGM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 85, l. 32.

41. As the TsZZhO explained to Bonch-Bruevich in the summer of 1918, "the permission of the building committees is not required for concentration, as building committees protect the interests of their residents, and are not inclined to cede these interests." GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 79, l. 27.

that each building committee submit a list of residents to the raion housing departments, that would allow “the raion housing departments to establish the buildings from which parasitic elements should be evicted.”⁴² The collegium also planned to publish the lists in *Izvestiia*, such that neighborhood housing departments could refer back to them in the coming months while distributing space. If someone identified as a parasite requested a place to live, they were to be refused.⁴³

Shortly thereafter, the Mossoviet issued a four-part rubric, dividing the population into categories depending on the source of their income.⁴⁴ In keeping with the opacity with which the redistribution of space was handled—the fact that tens or hundreds of thousands of people were uprooted from their homes during the revolutionary era was formally acknowledged only in 1920 and 1921, when the Sovnarkom began issuing decrees restricting the practice—the Mossoviet’s regulations focused primarily on the usage rights vis-à-vis movable goods that accrued to members of each of the four classes, rather than dealing with space itself. Nevertheless, these were also the only formal guidelines that existed to help neighborhood-level authorities and building committees shape the assignment of space. The divisions revolved around employment and separated the population into four categories: “workers”; “petty and middling employees of private and government enterprises,” as well as actors in state theaters; senior employees in these same organizations, as well as the proprietors of commercial enterprises; and finally, all those “living on the product of non-labor income: former factory owners, landlords, and others belonging to the major bourgeoisie.” Only after addressing the allocation of objects did the Mossoviet order turn to the question of space, retaining the same categorization of the population and assigning a similar structure of rights and deprivations. Workers were permitted to keep

42. TsAGM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 85, l. 32.

43. *Ibid.*

44. Okunev cites the creation of six categories of residents, one of which, for example, was for members of the “bourgeoisie, having liquidated their affairs and living on hidden capital, or possessing property: factories, plants, buildings, trade, and the like.” They would have “everything taken from them,” Okunev observed, “and were given only the minimum livable paika, two pairs of underclothes, a pillow, a blanket, that is, what is given to a Red Army soldier leaving for the front.” Okunev, p. 216.

their homes and could not be evicted without their agreement. Petty employees could “be left in their space or given different apartments in the neighborhood where they work”; if those in the second category were resettled, they “should be given all necessary furniture and property to go with them,” implying that the furniture and property currently in their possession would not be going with them. The third category was also subject to eviction without their agreement, but they too were to be rehoused in the neighborhood where they worked. Unlike the petty employees, however, those belonging to the third category could be evicted “without necessary furnishings”—that is to say, they could be forbidden from taking their household objects with them and were to be given no replacements. The fourth category was not mentioned at all in the section dealing with space, suggesting that those who belonged to it could be evicted without receiving either a substitute home or furniture.⁴⁵

Attempts to sort the population into parasitic and useful elements, and space into healthy and unhealthy abodes, began immediately. In Moscow, they were overseen by a Comrade Kuzovkov, who stood at the head of two of the Moscow Soviet’s most powerful departments—finance and housing. Kuzovkov belonged to a fraction of the “left social-democrat internationalists” rather than to the Bolshevik branch of the Communists; perhaps for this reason, he is identified in Government Control documents as a “bourgeois specialist” in housing affairs. Émigré memoirs paint a more radical picture, with A. Gurovich, a memoirist who worked for a year in VSNKh before leaving Russia, recalling Kuzovkov as “the terror of the Moscow ‘bourgeoisie,’” who from his dual platform of power in finance and housing “‘stormed,’ in his own personal expression, the bourgeoisie.” As head of the finance department, he collected taxes that could never be paid, setting in motion the ‘municipalization’ of countless firms or the arrest of their proprietors.⁴⁶ And in the realm of housing, he oversaw the eviction of households identified as bourgeois from numerous apartments. According to Gurovich, Kuzovkov once told him that “I myself know that these

45. *Izvestiia*, October 18, 1918. No. 220. For more on the application of these categories to the usage of movable goods, see Chapter 2.

46. *Arkhiv russkoi revoliutsii*, vol. 6, (Berlin, 1922), p. 306.

apartments often stand empty afterwards, but that is not important; what is important is to show the bourgeoisie that its former way of life has ended.”⁴⁷

How to apply the new rules became a source of dispute, even at the highest levels of the Bolshevik regime. On 12 August, Bonch-Bruevich received a frantic letter from Vasili Orlov, an employee of the Upper Military Soviet, whose wife and mother had received a slip of paper informing them that “on the basis of a decree of the Sovnarkom on the clearing of non-laboring elements from the city of Moscow, the Central Housing Commission of the Mossoviet orders you to leave Moscow within three days.” Orlov could not imagine that the decree on parasites meant his wife and mother would have to leave the family home and so posed the question to Bonch-Bruevich, who had no answer for him. He forwarded Orlov’s question to the Commissariat of Justice, with a note at the top of the page reading: “are they required to leave? They are his wife and mother. Bonch-Bruevich.”⁴⁸ The Commissariat of Justice replied that “people located in the lines of direct descent from the heads of households, as well as wives, are considered to be one family, and are not subject to eviction.”⁴⁹ Only then did Bonch-Bruevich write to the TsZZhO, stating that “it was obvious that the Sovnarkom decree on clearing the non-laboring element from Moscow was not under any circumstances meant to destroy families,” deeming the order given by the TsZZhO “neither correct nor acceptable” and demanding it halt the eviction immediately.⁵⁰

During the fall of 1918, the redistribution of space became a popular project, implemented at the neighborhood- and building-level, alongside parallel efforts among higher authorities to regulate the resettlement of government offices and displaced people. The shipping-agent Okunev noted in his diary on 11 September 1918 that “it is only in the rare building that eviction and resettlement has not occurred. At first it was unsystematic,” but with the introduction of the categories of Moscow residents, resettlement had become

47. Ibid, l. 307.

48. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 77, ll. 26ob, 28.

49. Ibid, l. 27.

50. Ibid, l. 29.

“practically an art form.”⁵¹ By late September, Okunev reported, “all the prominent people in Moscow have been evicted,” an impression he gained from the daily newspapers, which published regular updates on recent evictions.⁵² By early November, government agents reported to Bonch-Bruevich that “the eviction from apartments being undertaken by raion soviets now bears a mass character.”⁵³ Neighborhood-level authorities often led the charge on eviction campaigns. *Izvestiia* reported in mid-September that the Basmannyi neighborhood housing department had undertaken “energetic eviction of the non-laboring element,” going so far as to form a dedicated “Eviction Soviet” that had already managed to “clear five large buildings of merchants and factory-owners,” which were now being “settled with workers.”⁵⁴ In the Sushchevsko-Mariinskii neighborhood in early November, the housing department “requisitioned an entire building,” a pre-war co-operative that housed 400 people in 50 apartments, for “the workers of the Kramer factory, the Gustav List factory, and Tsentrotekstil,” giving the current residents ten days to move out, with no suggestions as to where they should go. Unfortunately, the workers for whom the building was intended did not want it; they suspected would be difficult to heat. “The workers of the Gustav List factory are moving against their will,” the building committee reported, “as they would prefer a simpler building, and among them only 28 people want to move, and 14 from the Kramer factory.”⁵⁵ But the chair of the raion housing department, a man named Abaiants, “stated that he will not leave a single shareholder [of the co-op] in the building on principle.”⁵⁶

51. Okunev, p. 216

52. Okunev, p. 221.

53. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 77, l. 145.

54. *Izvestiia* no. 208, 1918.

55. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 77, l. 137.

56. All of them, that is, except the residents of apartments 4, 42, and 48, with whom Abaiants had made deals “allowing them to stay in their apartments.” Deals were brokered all across Moscow during the first wave of eviction. The building inhabited by a Sovnarkom clerk, Charykova, who lived in the Basmannyi raion, was first requisitioned by the Basmannyi housing department sometime in September 1918 to be placed at the disposal of the “Valtsov Stock-Company of Valtsov Mill.” But Charykova and some of her neighbors came to an agreement with the building’s commandant, Matveev, who had been appointed to their building in place of the presumably-bourgeois building committee, whereby they were allowed to stay on the grounds that they were members of the “laboring intelligentsia.” The deal broke down in just a few short weeks, when the “commandant of the building” began to come around, saying that “the building is being occupied as a workers’ laboring commune.” But the commandant again offered to make an exception for Charykova, provided that, together with her 83-year-old father and a distant relative, she consolidate her household into

Numerous instances of denunciations, mistakes, and score-settling fed the churn of evictions. In November, Bonch-Bruevich received a letter from old acquaintance, a former officer of the Imperial army wounded in the head during the First World War, reporting that he had been “threatened with eviction several times already, but as my wife and son work in soviet institutions nothing has come of it before.” Earlier that day, however, “the chair of the building committee came by to inform me that my family and I are going to be arrested as co-conspirators in the escape of the former owner of this apartment to the Czechoslovakian front.” The officer had never met the former owner of his apartment—having only just recently been settled there himself, long after the owner had fled the city. “Apparently,” he wrote, “this was done for some reason by a denunciation, so as to free up my apartment.”⁵⁷ Personal animosities exploded in this combustible mix, as witnessed by a secretary at the Sovnarkom named Charykova, who was being evicted from the apartment she shared with an elderly uncle and another woman (likely a servant). In response to her building commandant’s orders that she leave, Charykova cited a Mossoviet decision protecting “soviet workers” from eviction. In response, the building commandant “mockingly said that he knew ‘soviets’ like me, and began to take an inventory” of the apartment’s furniture, “adding as a taunt that soviet employees were not supposed to have so much furniture.” He threatened twice to arrest her and allegedly stomped and yelled in her presence.⁵⁸

By late November, the flurry of resettlement had grown so explosive that *Izvestiia* published an article entitled “The Bacchanalia of Eviction,” decrying the “incomprehen-

two rooms, one of which was a hallway. She declined the new offer, leading to repeated unpleasant scenes in her foyer and living room, in which she refused to pack her belongings, and the commandant “stamped his feet,” screamed, and threatened her with arrest. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 77, ll. 162, 163.

57. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 77, l. 153. The officer had never met the previous owner of the apartment, as he had only returned from a German prisoner of war camp in June 1918, while the owner had fled Moscow in March.

58. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 77, l. 163. The presence of a building commandant marks Charykova’s building as one labeled “bourgeois” by neighborhood housing authorities, who appointed commandants when they were unable to seed the building with laboring elements for one reason or another. The fact that Charykova and her uncle may have had some sort of domestic servant in their employ confirms this likelihood; it also categorizes Charykova among that interesting group of early Soviet state employees hailing from affluent backgrounds, whose literacy and numeracy made them appealing hires despite their class origins. Many of these people found work in Soviet offices, particularly in the ranks of the Commissariat of Government Control, which earned it a bad reputation.

sible and unnecessary bacchanalia of eviction that is costing the working people masses of strength and energy and awakens in the masses nothing but ill-will.” It was as if the Mossoviet had set itself the task not of “resettling laborers into the apartments of the bourgeoisie,” *Izvestiia* wrote, but of simply “moving all the residents of Moscow from one place to another...They are resettling, evicting, and concentrating absolutely everyone, without the most basic sorting.”⁵⁹ In an effort to improve “sorting,” the Mossoviet tried to crack down on the neighborhood-level housing departments it had empowered to implement the resettlement, decreeing that “the eviction of people not occupied with socially-necessary labor is to be performed only by order of the Central Housing Commission, signed and stamped by the chair of the commission,” and threatening any housing employee “permitting themselves willful activity” in the matter of “eviction, requisition, and the like” with immediate termination.⁶⁰ The Mossoviet also instituted rules protecting certain social groups, such as the families of Red Army soldiers, doctors, and soviet employees, from resettlement. When all of these measures failed to slow the whirlwind of resettlement, the “bacchanalia of eviction,” the Mossoviet decided in late November to declare a two-week moratorium on all resettlement of any kind. But even this did not slow evictions in the neighborhoods, according to a telegram sent by a group of people employed at the People’s Bank and the All-Russian Soviet of the National Economy (VSNKh) to Lenin on December 4. The Basmannyi neighborhood soviet, among the most energetic in the matter of resettlement, pressed ahead with the requisition of their building despite the fact that there were “plenty of free apartments in the building” already, as well as many empty rooms, meaning that a large number of workers could be resettled in the building without displacing the current residents at all.⁶¹ A transport worker being moved from a three-room apartment well-suited to his family to a five-room apartment larger than they needed—meaning cer-

59. *Izvestiia* November 29, 1918. As noted below, clipping of the article was sent to Bonch-Bruевич by an irate transport worker, underlined to make sure he noted important passages. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 77, ll. 198, 199.

60. *Izvestiia* September 8, 1918, no. 194, and *Izvestiia* September 11, 1918, no. 196.

61. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 77, l. 181.

tain “concentration”—discerned a similar, unsettling uselessness in his move. “If evicting me from my apartment was necessary for the renewal of the country, I would not delay leaving for even an hour,” he wrote to Bonch-Bruevich. “But when they could just put the workers” in an already empty building located less than a block away from his own, “it would be so much simpler.”⁶²

In an effort to convince Bonch-Bruevich of the seriousness of the problem, the transport worker clipped out a copy of the *Izvestiia* article, “The Bacchanalia of Eviction,” underlining the most important passages to make sure they caught Bonch-Bruevich’s eye. Among them was the observation that, as the *Izvestiia* article put it, the chief criterion predicting whether a person would be evicted appeared to be not his class or personal history, but whether information about his apartment happened “one way or another to fall into the Housing Commission’s hands.”⁶³ At base, this was a complaint not that the “bacchanalia of eviction” had spun completely out of hand, or that there was simply not enough space for all the people, but rather that the campaign was targeting the wrong people—people who were simply unlucky enough to have information about their space captured by housing authorities. Whatever the problems of the actual spaces running through the housing authorities’ fingers—which, truth be told, were difficult to identify and even harder to fix, given the continued absence of money and materials for repair—the problem pushed to the fore by the *Izvestiia* article and its readers was one of information: the housing authorities lacked a comprehensive knowledge of spaces and people, such that their interventions in the built environment appeared random, and devoid of even “the most basic sorting.” Not only did this article resonate with the experience of its Muscovite readers, it also represented an important turn in the management of space as a resource, a growing recognition that whatever the politics of allocation, they would depend on the generation of information about the built environment.

62. *Ibid.*, I. 197.

63. *Ibid.*, II. 198, 199.

1.2 Monopolizing Information

The problem of generating and gathering reliable information about the built environment was no less central to the allocation of space and resources in a market setting, such as that of pre-revolutionary Moscow or Petrograd, than it was in a socialist one. Property markets, writes a historian of the Parisian building boom of 1878, “are dependent on the formulation and circulation of information.” In the case of Paris, developers and municipal officials strove to generate reliable information about two issues—demand and valuation—that would dictate patterns of growth. The techniques favored for creating information about future demand and past purchases were themselves enmeshed in market practices: the Parisian building boom of 1878 was underwritten by new limited-liability joint-stock companies, which encouraged both the accrual of capital and “personal networks and exchange mechanisms that facilitated business collaboration.” New periodicals and the publication of the first municipal data on property values in 1891 further enhanced the “information networks through which property was mobilized, markets in land, buildings, and apartments were made visible, and a vision of Parisian growth was constructed and naturalized.”⁶⁴

Unlike the property developers of Paris, who desired information about the demand for built space to determine its value, the Bolsheviks wanted to know about supply, in order to generate inventories and norms. This set their project apart both from the informational excursions undertaken in the West, and from those established by their Imperial predecessors. In their quest to achieve the allocation of key resources without recourse to the market, revolutionary housing authorities sought to determine how much built space there already was, not so they could project how much more they needed—at least not yet—but so that they could distribute what they had according to an evolving set of revolutionary principles. Insofar as the money and building material for renovations or new construction was non-existent, the politics of allocation was called upon to stand in for substantive

64. Alexia Yates, “Developing Knowledge, the Knowledge of Development: Real Estate Speculators and Brokers in Late Nineteenth-Century Paris,” *Business and Economic History* online, vol. 9, 2011, pp. 1-14.

changes to built space, which might otherwise signal the blossoming of a socialist city. As a housing department in Petrograd explained, “in reality, the so-called communist housing politics cannot be understood in the narrow frame of temporary goals,” necessarily limited by present conditions to “providing the population with healthy, hygienic space.” In the current, “transitional time, before an entirely new foundation” for socialist housing was built, big dreams had to be set aside in favor of “implementing a healthy housing politics in the conditions of the socialist physical plant,” that is to say, by allocating space in the built environment as it was.⁶⁵ “Without an account of living space and of urban properties in general,” an employee of Petrograd’s Real Estate Department reflected in 1919, “it is impossible to bring about the housing politics of soviet construction. For that reason, the necessity of rapidly organizing an apparatus for accounting is so essential and so obvious that it hardly demands any kind of explanation.”⁶⁶

The ambition to take exhaustive stock of the resource they controlled was one that housing authorities shared with a great many other state agencies, also created to administer newly-nationalized economic goods; inventorying, no less than seizing or redistributing, was a fundamental practice of economic management in the revolutionary era. In July 1918, the Commissariat of Government Control launched a project to make a central, state-wide inventory of all “nationalized property,” everything the state now owned, throughout the Republic down to the district level. The directive sent to guberniia and oblast branches instructed them to begin with an inquiry into the process of nationalization itself: how did properties change hands, who ceded them, who received them, and—optimistically—“according to what documents.” Assigned to the (short-lived) “Department of Accounting,” the project’s goal was to create “a complete account of property of all types,” requiring first and foremost “a description and appraisal of them, to use as a starting-point.” The inventory would contain multiple kinds of information about each property, presented in a tiered fashion, such that the descriptions grew more detailed in accounts held further

65. TsGASP f. 3201, op. 1 d. 113, l. 4.

66. TsGASP f. 3201, op. 1, d. 115, l.1.

down the “administrative ladder.”⁶⁷ The Commissariat of Government Control expected that the composition of the “material account” would require rules and guidelines, “blanks and books,” and the “training of staff of accountants.”

Of the many challenges posed by an inventorying project of this scale, one of the most troublesome concerned the category of ownership. Municipalized buildings, we have already seen, technically belonged to the city of Moscow, which both collected rents on them and claimed the right to control their disposal. But the extent of these rights—particularly what happened when they intersected with the desires of a different state agency—was unclear. This confusion resurfaced in the composition of the Republic-wide inventory of nationalized property. Not only did the Commissariat of Government want local controllers to sort government-owned properties according to their status as “public” or “private,” they also envisioned the creation of a “detailed nomenclature” to describe the “extremely varied forms of property belonging to the various Government institutions,” although this was quickly abandoned as “hardly feasible.” The public-private categorization proposed by Goskon avoided the language of ownership—the state owned everything—favoring instead considerations of usage and output: “As is well known government property is divided into two categories,” a preliminary set of instructions began. The government “possessed rights” to the first category, consisting of canals, water infrastructure, ports, streets, squares, monuments and the like” as the “supreme power” in the land. It “controlled” the other category “as a private owner [*sobstvennik*],” consisting of “state factories and railways.” Where the many new types of state property created during nationalization would fit was not specified. The first group of properties was to be called “property of general use,” while the second would be known as “patrimonial property.” Patrimonial property was to be further divided into “service” properties, or “properties serving the demands of various government institutions,” on the one hand, and “fiscal” properties, those that were “free” in the sense that they could be “exploited for income.” The authors of the note even included a

67. TsGAM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 3, l. 6.

brief analysis of this categorization in the context of foreign law, noting that the French law of December 23, 1873 failed to acknowledge the category of “properties of general use,” whereas Italian law, “correctly,” did.⁶⁸

The first sustained effort to collect information about individual buildings in Moscow began in the summer of 1918, when the Central Housing Department ordered its neighborhood branches to gather lists from every building committee, specifying the number of apartments in each building and the rooms and inhabitants per apartment.⁶⁹ Municipal authorities anticipated that building committees would collect this information using the so-called building books, or *domovye knigi*, apartment-by-apartment registries of all a building’s inhabitants, which had served for decades to establish residency in the Imperial passport system.⁷⁰ After the Revolution, rather than abandoning the books, the building committees took their maintenance upon themselves, initially as a means of keeping order in the building and protecting against the infiltration of bandits or other undesirables.⁷¹ Housing authorities also sought to collect information about the usage of space by government institutions. In early June 1918, the TsZZhO prepared its first “surveys” of space, to be distributed to all “Soviet institutions about the space they occupy.” Almost no one replied, despite reminders published in the newspapers, leading the Mossoviet to declare in late July that “as a result of the sharp deficiency of spaces for civic institutions and their uneven distribution,” it would refuse to cooperate in the distribution of space to unresponsive institutions.⁷² The non-response, however, was not simple obstructionism on the part of government institutions; as municipal authorities learned in August, many of the most im-

68. TsGAM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 3, l. 7. For more on the Imperial distinctions of “general use” and “patrimonial” property, from which this document borrows, and on the concept of property in Imperial Russia generally, see Ekaterina Pravilova, *A Public Empire: Property and the Quest for the Common Good in Imperial Russia* (Princeton, 2014).

69. TsGAM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 85, l. 32.

70. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 381, l. 11.

71. As before the Revolution, the chief purpose of building registries was to record the movements of the people living there: whenever someone moved in or out of the building, the committee was expected to record that change in the *domovaia kniga* and register it “the commissariat,” presumably a branch of the local soviet. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 381, l. 10.

72. TsAGM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 85, ll. 2, 21.

portant central institutions, such as the Commissariat of War and VSNKh, had no idea how many offices they occupied or where they all were located, information that was partially generated for the first time only when Bonch-Bruevich took it upon himself to compose a government telephone book in the fall of 1918, and which remained incomplete into the mid-1920s.⁷³ At the same time, the TsZZhO hired Kuzovkov, described now as an expert “consultant,” who was instructed to determine “how to organize an informational section (*informatsionnaia sektsiia*) attached to the Housing-Land Department.”⁷⁴ In July, the collegium of the Housing Department approved the salaries for a group of “statisticians, second class,” to study built space using data gained by the “general census” of the city of Moscow planned by the Department.⁷⁵

Because the building committees were known to hide spaces from the housing authorities and accept bribes from those looking for space, in mid-1919 the Mossoviet created “economic quadrants,” or *kvartkhozy*, that were staffed by volunteers who checked the information submitted by building committees, usually at night.⁷⁶ The *kvartkhozy* were the brainchild of Kuzovkov, who first proposed them in June 1918. Kuzovkov’s proposal was only implemented in the latter half of 1919, when Moscow’s 230,000 estimated apartments were divided into “700 large economic units,” the *kvartkhozy*, charged with assuming all duties relating to the distribution of space from the building committees, though the latter retained other important economic functions, including the distribution of food and other ration cards. Intended to serve as an intermediary between the buildings and the raion housing departments, the *kvartkhozy* were to be composed of local workers who, because they were appointed by the raion soviet rather than elected by a building’s residents, would presumably

73. GARF f. 4085, op. 1a, d. 231, l. 20. As late as 1921, VSNKh occupied no fewer than 126 distinct addresses in Moscow, and the Commissariat of War more than 200.

74. Ibid, l. 5.

75. TsAGM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 85, ll. 13, 14.

76. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 381, ll. 8, 113, 114. TsAGM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 85, l. 4. See also *Krasnaia Moskva*, p. 339.

protect the interests of the housing department over those of a building's residents.⁷⁷ They were regularly visited by "controllers," employees of the housing departments, who traveled about the neighborhoods verifying information received from the building committees, *kvartkhozy*, or residents themselves. By 1920, the bulk of employees at neighborhood-level housing offices worked as controllers. The Gorodskoi neighborhood, centrally-located and home to Moscow's richest trove of "bourgeois" housing stock, possessed the largest staff of the bunch, employing 102 people, 62 of whom worked as controllers and 7 as their overseers.⁷⁸ The Baumanskii neighborhood, a working-class area east of the center, employed 33 people, of whom 12 were controllers; Khamovniki, in the south, employed six.⁷⁹

Despite efforts by the Central Housing Department and the Commissariat of Government Control, which investigated the distribution of space in Moscow in a lengthy report towards the end of 1920, what neighborhood housing departments did with the information they collected about the built environment varied. Few offices adhered to a standard organizational format; eyewitness accounts suggest that they were physically messy as well, a common affliction of the revolutionary bureaucracy. In the Khamovniki office, employees evidently failed to adhere to rudimentary habits of bookkeeping, such as recording information from written rather than oral sources. The woman in charge of the communal building inventory, identified as Comrade Tishchenko, liked to sit not with her co-workers but in the room next door, such that whenever information about a particular space came up, they had to "yell out (to her), Comrade Tishchenko! Record the following space on the account!"⁸⁰

77. Extensive debates about the relative merits of the building committees and the *kvartkhozy* were conducted throughout 1920 and 1921, in both Moscow and Petrograd. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 381, ll. 125, 126, 145, 162-165.

78. *Ibid.*, l. 6.

79. *Ibid.*, ll. 11, 13. We know little about who the controllers were and where they came from. Paperwork from the fall of 1918 gives information about a Comrade Shatrov, hired from the Moscow labor exchange by the Gorodskoi neighborhood housing department to work as a controller; Shatrov's papers state that he served in the Red Army and completed some secondary education. A meaningful proportion of the housing department employees appear to have been women. Two of the six controllers in Khamovniki raion were women; others, identified casually in the reports of people who visited the housing offices, were employed in desk jobs filing information in the lesser sub-departments of the housing offices, such as the Furniture Department and the Worker's Section. Few were party members. As of 5 December 1920, two of 33 employees in the Baumanskii office were party members; in the Gorodskoi raion, 14 of 102 employees belonged to the party.

80. *Ibid.*, l. 111.

Inspectors who reviewed the accounts of the Gorodskoi neighborhood reported that it was kept “in extremely imprecise shape,” with “notes in pencil everywhere,” underlining, and torn pages. The pages of the account books were not numbered, making it nearly impossible to retrieve information once recorded.⁸¹ In interviews with Government Control inspectors, few housing employees could answer what the inspectors believed should be basic questions about their work and the state of the inventory. In Khamovniki, “neither the housing department nor the *kvartkhoz*” could state the “level of concentration of their neighborhood.” In the Baumanskii neighborhood, it was observed that “a precise and correct account of rooms and apartments does not exist, nor does such an account exist at the *kvartkhoz*, which do not maintain books recording the number of rooms or apartments given out.” Investigating the Gorodskoi neighborhood housing department, inspectors concluded that “a precise inventory of living space is not possible, due to the absence of a cadre of trained workers.”⁸²

The central work of this housing apparatus, as stated in its mandate in 1918, was the “production of an inventory of apartments and spaces on the territory of the city,” on the one hand, and the “clarification of the level of housing need among the population” on the other.⁸³ By late 1920, when the Government Control inspectors appeared in the offices of the city’s housing authorities, it was clear this had not come to pass. Employees at the Gorodskoi neighborhood housing office, in interviews with the Rabkrin investigators, agreed that the attempt to create an account of all built space in the neighborhood had failed. Inspectors who talked with them reported that “there is no inventory. Neither cards nor account books were held at the center or in the neighborhoods.”⁸⁴ “Every possible method of accounting has been attempted to keep track of space,” the director of the Central Housing Department explained in an interview with inspectors, “but none of them proved suitable

81. Ibid, l. 6.

82. Ibid, ll. 10,11, 14. The problem with *uchet*, to be sure, was not unique to Moscow. When Petrograd attempted to create an “Accounting-registration apparatus in the center and the neighborhoods” on the Moscow model in 1920, it too reported that “unfortunately, the absence of paper and manpower made it impossible to implement this register in the necessary dimensions and desired scale.” TsGASP f. 3201, op. 1, d. 113, l. 3.

83. GARF f. 4390, op. 4, d. 44, l. 26.

84. Ibid, l. 6.

for the rapidly changing picture of the use of space.” Attempts were made to substitute the accounts generated by the housing authorities with data gathered from a April 1918 housing census performed by a statistics branch of the Mossoviet, but this data, which included information about the number of rooms per apartment and number of inhabitants per room at the time of the census, was also found insufficient, for reasons left unspecified. “Finally,” the director of the Central Housing Department stated, “it was decided to implement the inventory in the simplest form, that is, to implement no inventory at all.”⁸⁵

1.3 Space and Power

In keeping with their longstanding focus on the techniques of accounting and paperwork, honed over years of work inspecting Imperial ministries before the Revolution, the inspectors from the Commissariat of Government Control understood the failures of the housing authorities as a matter of mechanics, the result first and foremost of the reliance on micro-level institutions such as the building committees and the *kvartkhoz*y. Naturally the building committees were unable to maintain an “organic connection with housing affairs,” as they were both reviled by Bolshevik authorities and “unfinanced, without rights, alienated, and existing half-legally.” The *kvartkhoz*y were similarly “in no condition to check” the information presented by the building committees, “as they have no workers and those they do have work roughly two hours a day,” after their regular jobs. “Thus the entire basis of the housing system is supposed to be the *kvartkhoz*y, of which there are about 540 in Moscow, that are totally incapable of playing this role,” the inspectors reported.⁸⁶ As they bluntly observed again and again, the departments of accounting “do not know how much free space they have as the *kvartkhoz*y and building committees do not tell them and they do not possess the apparatus to find out.”⁸⁷

85. Ibid, l. 18.

86. Ibid, l. 18.

87. Ibid, l. 11.

This was undoubtedly true, and hardly unique to the Bolshevik regime; few states, no matter how robust, would have had the capacity to inventory every square meter of built space at their disposal, just months after a revolution, in the midst of civil war and economic chaos. Yet the Government Control inspectors made a number of discoveries inside housing offices that contradicted their conclusion that the problems with the inventory inhered solely in the mechanics of the enterprise—or in malfeasance, which they also observed in abundance. Most notably, they discovered the existence of something called “black lists” in most every office. Black lists, an inspector at the Gorodskoi neighborhood housing office explained, recorded “free spaces that were not supposed to enter into the general account at all.”⁸⁸ They were meant to be ephemeral, destroyed as soon as the spaces recorded on them had been distributed, but the Rabkrin inspectors managed to uncover one specimen, allowing them to investigate the status of the fourteen spaces listed on it. The inspectors had been told that employees of the housing offices kept such lists for emergencies, as it were—“for the settlement of workers evicted from worker-buildings and dormitories.” Yet the inspection of the fourteen spaces on the black list they found revealed that “only ten percent of these spaces were being used for their designated purpose”—that is, the off-book resettlement of evicted workers. The rest had either been given to other people, or had “disappeared from view.”⁸⁹ A director in the housing office acknowledged to the inspectors that “spaces on the black lists were used against their intended purpose in the following circumstances: up to ten spaces each day were given out for general distribution, but without being registered or processed with account cards, according to official, as well as unofficial orders [*zapiski*] from, for example, a chair of a communal economic council, the director of the Central Housing Department, the director of the accounts, members of the presidium of the raion soviet,” and other important personages.⁹⁰ Not only were spaces on the black lists distributed through “connections,” under the “influence of institutions...and powerful

88. *ibid* l. 8.

89. *Ibid*.

90. *ibid* l. 20.

individuals,” information about these spaces was wiped from inventories entirely, or never recorded in the first place.⁹¹

As the existence and operation of the “black lists” makes clear, the inventorying of space depended on more than the collection and recording of square meters and rooms; it was imbricated in a system of power reaching far beyond housing authorities, one that touched every rung of new regime. The project of building a spatial inventory occurred in a revolutionary context, in which space was becoming a vector for power both within the population at large, and among revolutionary institutions. Over the course of 1918, the popular impulse to redistribute space as an act of revolutionary upheaval merged with the regime’s attempt to establish the new government in Moscow to produce a land grab of epic proportion. Because there were few reliable means of securing space once it was found, for either individuals or institutions, this land grab was also endlessly self-renewing, an enormous game of musical chairs—until, as we shall see, the Sovnarkom called time, in early 1921. The same spaces changed hands over and over again. At the technical level, because the inventory failed to reveal built spaces in quantities sufficient to house all those displaced in the land grab, individuals and institutions sought out their own techniques for identifying and securing places to live and work—to the further detriment of the inventory, from which these spaces were often intentionally hidden. At the level of politics, the construction of the inventory intersected with efforts to create new hierarchies of power and to establish the position of living space within the broad panoply of socialist goods—who deserved space, on what terms.

The best way to observe the emergence of these hierarchies and the framing of space as an object of socialist consumption is through the stories of conflict over its allocation collected primarily by the Commissariat of Government Control, subsequently reformed as the Worker-Peasant Inspectorate or Rabkrin, supplemented by materials from local housing offices and the Sovnarkom, which—though the highest state power in the land, chaired by

91. Ibid, ll. 7, 12.

Vladimir Lenin himself—was regularly called upon to resolve the most stubborn spatial conflicts and eventually created a dedicated commission to adjudicate institutional tussles over space in 1921. In April 1921, Rabkrin investigated the circumstances surrounding the assignment of a room in an apartment on Kolokolnikov Street in Moscow that had been occupied by an actress, M.V. Dantsiger-Poniatkovskaia, to a Chekist identified as Comrade Dymov. One day, Comrade Dymov appeared at her door, “presenting himself as an employee of the VChK.” He was accompanied by an unnamed woman and a police officer. According to Dantsiger-Poniatkovskaia, the three visitors entered her room “and announced that they liked this room very much, and that this woman would occupy it and that she would not be leaving, and she refused to allow me even to remove my things from the room. I tried to explain,” Dantsiger-Poniatkovskaia wrote, “that there had obviously been some kind of confusion, as I had the corresponding orders and permissions for both this room and the other one and that without these two rooms I could not make do.” But “they also had an order.” Dantsiger-Poniatkovskaia telephoned her theatre union, which somehow put an end to the encounter, she believed permanently. Four days later, however, while she was out, Comrade Dymov, the police officer, and the chair of the building committee sealed her room. When she returned, Dymov threatened to break down the door unless she signed a document relinquishing her rights to the room. Dantsiger-Poniatkovskaia again called her union representative, who demanded to speak first to the police officer and then to Dymov, but Dymov hung up the receiver and claimed that “the room was being occupied by him for secret-operative work and that he would have no more conversations about rights to this room.”⁹²

In reviewing the case, Rabkrin investigators found that Dantsiger-Poniatkovskaia’s room had been inventoried by a controller from the Gorodskoi raion who went to her apartment with the express purpose of “investigating its level of concentration.” What drew the controller to her apartment in the first place is not specified in the report, but it seems likely

92. GARF f. 4085, op. 22 d. 166, l. 36.

that the cause was the Cheka. Attached to the file, handwritten in pencil, was a letter from the director of the Cheka's chancellery, Genrikh Iagoda, that read simply: "The V.Ch.K. requests permission to occupy a room in apartment no. 10, building no. 10 on Kolokolnikov Sidestreet..." Iagoda did not request just any room; he requested a room in Dantsiger-Poniatkovskaia's apartment. When Dymov and his associates got to her apartment, they did not inspect each of the rooms; they targeted just one of her two rooms, suggesting that someone had found the space for them and set in motion its accession to the Gorodskoi neighborhood inventory. Unable to determine whose claim should be honored, the Rabkrin inspector put the matter before the neighborhood "conflict commission"—bodies created by the local soviet to hash out housing allocation—for resolution.⁹³

Something similar happened to citizeness Stulova, an elderly woman whose room in apartment #1 at no. 116 Malyi Znamenskii Alley was given to a fairly prominent Chekist named G.F. Sosnovskii the day before New Year's Eve, 1920. Stulova received a room in apartment #3 in the same building, a large, drafty space that had been unoccupied for some time, save for a family of feral rabbits. She was also given just ten hours to vacate her room, a demand so egregious that her building committee intervened on her behalf, filing a petition with the conflict commission at the Central Housing Department to stay the resettlement until after the holiday break. But on January 3, "Comrade Sosnovskii appeared with the head of the raion police, Comrade Vasiukov, and armed policemen, and demanded the immediate resettlement of citizen Stulova within a period of four hours."⁹⁴ Documentation collected by Rabkrin revealed that Sosnovskii had his eye on Stulova's room as early as November 20. More than that, he intended eventually to take possession of the whole four-room apartment, presently inhabited by a citizen Shmit, who lived in two rooms, and two pairs of women—Kabatova and Makarova, and Stulova and Karaseva—in one room each. Among the papers gathered by Rabkrin was an order issued by the director of the Operation Department of the Cheka, one of its most important branches, labelled "Operational—TOP

93. Ibid, l. 37.

94. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 165, l. 2.

SECRET,” that makes clear that the Cheka possessed intelligence about the living circumstances of the women in apartment #1: namely, that the elderly Stulova shared a room with her servant, likely true of Kabatova as well. The Cheka’s top secret order on the apartment instructed local police to “resettle KABATOVA to one of the rooms on a higher floor of the same building, and STULOVA with her servant from the *two rooms* they occupy into the room cleared out by KABATOVA.” But the Cheka’s information was incorrect: it was Shmit, not Stulova, who occupied two rooms in the apartment. Sosnovskii appears to have learned of the mistake only when he arrived at the apartment on January 3. According to testimony from the local police, which also sided with Stulova, Sosnovskii grew extremely angry at the obstacles appearing before him, demanding that the police “perform the eviction under Sosnovskii’s personal authority as an agent of the Operations Department of the Cheka” and threatening to “throw Stulova’s belongings out of the room, without taking responsibility for their integrity,” if she refused to sign a document—just as Dantsiger-Poniatkovskaia was made to do—ceding her claim on the room to Sosnovskii.⁹⁵

Through these confrontations around rooms, built space became a vehicle for making policy. The policies established through space were various and not always official. On the one hand, Stulova’s eviction served as another small battle in the ongoing class war, the dispossession of a presumably bourgeois woman, encumbered with a servant, in favor of a Chekist and his family. But the situation might just as well have been otherwise, as we will see; what the evictions of Stulova and Dantsiger-Poniatkovskaia reinforced is perhaps better understood in more structural terms, as the extension of the Cheka’s authority to wage the class war through space, than it is a judgment on the attributes of the women involved. In other cases, the allocation of space served to effect policy more concretely, as occurred in September 1920 at no. 10 Kozmodemianskii Alley, in apartment #3, an enormous, nine-room space that housed three families and the Hebrew language school that two of them ran together. Instruction in Hebrew was an explosive topic; in separate cases in Saratov and

95. Ibid, ll. 19, 5.

another provincial city, the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment had grudgingly ruled that the Hebrew language courses founded after the Revolution could not be closed, despite the vehemently-stated preference for instruction in Yiddish, as a language of the people.⁹⁶ The Hebrew School on Kozmodemianskii Alley in Moscow was run by citizen Z. Pugachev, his wife, and another couple, the Serebrianikovs as a night school offering instruction in the ancient heritage of the Jewish people to interested adults.⁹⁷ In an astonishing coincidence, in September 1920 the Jewish Section (Evseksiia) of the Communist Party discovered that it needed a nine-room apartment to house the offices and workers of a new, Yiddish-language newspaper it planned to open. "In light of the fact that here in Moscow, we do not have any Jewish communists who could work on our editorial board," Evseksiia explained, "we had to send away for them from Kiev, Kharkov, Odessa, and Vitebsk. We have to supply them with apartments."⁹⁸ The apartment on Kozmodemianskii Alley fit the bill, not only because it had nine rooms, but also because it was, Evseksiia testified, in reality not a night school for Jewish adults, but a secret "Zionist kheder for children."⁹⁹ Rabkrin ultimately sided with Evseksiia, not as a matter of principle on the suitability of teaching Hebrew, but rather because it learned that apartment # 3 "was put at the disposal of Evseksiia by the V.Ch.K.," which allegedly possessed documents—shown to Evseksiia employees—attesting to the fact that ten-year-old children studied there.¹⁰⁰

Visions of socialist society—as a place without instruction in Hebrew; as a place without a bourgeoisie—took shape through the allocation of built space as a resource. Even claims motivated by opportunism drew upon the principles enshrined in the Mossoviet's four-part rubric categorizing the right to space through labor, other rulings on housing affairs, and broad tropes of revolutionary justice. Both individuals and institutions lodged what we might call "targeted" requests for space with housing authorities, in which not just

96. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 422, l. 2.

97. Ibid, l. 4.

98. Ibid, ll. 7,8.

99. Ibid, l. 15.

100. ibid l. 14, 7-8.

a quantity of space was specified, but a particular address. In several instances in municipal records, entire workplaces requested space as a unit, a tactic that reflected both the nascent tendency of the Soviet regime to dispense welfare and resources through the workplace and a commonsense pragmatism on the petitioners' part, as the claims of large groups of employees, while harder to fulfill, were also harder to dislodge, solving the problem of hanging on to space identified above: once a group of employees managed to find a space, it was much harder for municipal authorities to remove them from it when some other offer came along. Harder—but not impossible, as the case of no. 17/2 Bezborodkin Prospect reflects. The conflict surrounding this building, which housed nearly 2,000 people, broke out when a portion of those residents, workers at the Gavaner factory nearby, attempted to seize the entire building on the factory's behalf, enlisting the help of the raion housing department to issue an order specifying that the building was to be settled “exclusively by workers of the Gavaner factory.” Thanks to the fact that the original tenants of the building decided to hold a building-wide meeting on 5 October 1919, attended by more than 500 residents and transcribed for municipal authorities in Petrograd, the case is uniquely well-documented.¹⁰¹

As the transcript made clear, nearly all the building's 2,000 residents were workers and their family members. Only a small portion of them, around 150, worked at the Gavaner factory, which employed 300 people total. One day, a delegation from the Gavaner factory came to see the head of the building committee and announced that they would like to see “the best apartments in the buildings, to be taken for the workers for the Gavaner factory.” During the tour, it somehow came out that the delegation intended to take possession not just of the “best” apartments, but of the entire building. “Learning of the intention of the representatives of the Gavaner factory,” the building chair testified at the meeting, I asked them, ‘what will happen to the workers who lived here before and who made repairs at their own expense,’ and I received the answer that the housing commission will give them apartments located close to their own factories.” Shaken by the encounter, the building chair paid

101. TsGASP f. 3201, op. 1, d. 55, l. 111.

a visit to the neighborhood housing commission, where he learned that “representatives of the Gavaner factory had already been by, and had pointed out the building as bourgeois,” the kiss of death—a label that would have allowed the housing department to evict the current residents without finding them replacement housing. After their discussion, the director of housing department informed the building chair that “there had probably been some sort of confusion,” in an attempt to allay his concerns. The fate of the building was unresolved when the building committee held its meeting, to which it invited the representatives from the Gavaner factory. Eight speakers made statements at the meeting, seven from among its current inhabitants, and one from the Gavaner group, who was quoted in the transcript as having “announced at the end of his speech, ‘that we will nevertheless manage to occupy this building and evict you all.’” A current resident who spoke after him tried to “appeal to the good sense of the Gavaner factory committee, to not introduce enmity between workers.” He proposed that the factory representative retract his malicious statements, but no such retraction is noted in the transcript.¹⁰²

In addition to seizing buildings that some of their number already lived in, workplaces also seized buildings where none of their employees lived, but where they had secured the help of one or several of the building’s current residents. This was the case at no. 79 Sadovaia-Zemlianka Street in Moscow. The residents of 79 Sadovaia learned of their building’s impending transformation into a worker-commune for the Ustinskii factory on 26 May 1921, which they opposed in a petition to housing authorities that made reference to numerous Mossoviet orders on housing.¹⁰³ The residents of 79 Sadovaia Street also held a “general meeting of residents” on 14 June 1921 and included a transcript in their petition to the Central Bureau of Complaints. The meeting was attended by representatives of 23 out of the building’s 24 apartments, as well as the chair of the factory committee of the Ustinskii factory, “who appeared at the meeting for informational purposes.”¹⁰⁴ After

102. *Ibid.*, l. 112.

103. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 165, l. 134.

104. *Ibid.*, l. 135.

reviewing their situation and voting on the strategy of writing a complaint to Rabkrin, they chose a committee to compose the complaint consisting of three residents, and explicitly passing over the person who would normally lead such an effort—the building committee chair, by the name of Batkov. Their reasoning soon became clear: the final order of the evening’s business was the matter of “ask[ing] Batkov for an explanation about why he did not inform the residents in a timely fashion about the possibility of the building being transferred [to the factory] and why he did not take the necessary measures to protect the interests of the residents by requesting that the TsZZhO cancel its order.”¹⁰⁵ Indeed, as Rabkrin investigation revealed, not only had Batkov failed to protect the interests of the residents, he had sold them out. The transfer of their building hinged on one of the dozens of convoluted rules tying the right to inhabit an apartment or building to the ability to repair it—a necessity at a moment when much of the city’s housing stock, after years of neglect, was horribly decayed. Batkov provided testimony to the effect that the residents had not paid for necessary repairs. The Ustinskii factory took this testimony, which the residents disputed, to the housing office. The housing office, in turn, gave the building to the factory.¹⁰⁶

While many such transactions in space—present an address to the housing department, get a stamp for it, claim it for yourself—undoubtedly came about as a consequence of back-door deals, bribes, and other frowned-upon behaviors, this mode of acquiring space was too widespread to be characterized as malfeasance alone. Rather, as the next section demonstrates, the submission of these sorts of tips, what housing authorities identified as “accidental information,” was foundational to the practice of uncovering space and rendering it transparent in an opaque urban environment, a tool of inventorying deployed by housing authorities and the populace alike.

105. *Ibid.*, l. 135.

106. *Ibid.*, l. 146.

1.4 Accidental Information

Despite the ineffectiveness of the housing offices, they serviced an extraordinary number of space-seekers. In the month of December 1918, the ten people working in the Khamovniki neighborhood housing office—a director, an accountant, two clerks, and six controllers—processed 237 requests for apartments and 604 for rooms, of which they satisfied 196 and 478 respectively.¹⁰⁷ The office had “huge lines,” composed mostly of new arrivals to Moscow, “looking for space, who end up having to spend the night at the train station. Sometimes they live there for weeks,” the Rabkrin inspector observed. But over the course of the year, the Khamovniki housing office claimed to have met 3407 of 4145 requests for apartments, and 6681 of 7611 requests for rooms.¹⁰⁸ Between 26 April and 15 December 1920, the Baumanskii neighborhood office, with a staff of 33—four directors, ten clerks, two instructors and twelve controllers—had satisfied 5115 of 6407 requests for rooms and 1113 of 1478 requests for apartments.¹⁰⁹ To explain this perplexingly high rate of satisfaction, an investigator from Rabkrin spent the day of December 8, 1920 observing the work of the Gorodskoi neighborhood housing office. He estimated that 150 people came through the office that day, of whom “around 50 were satisfied.” Yet only “an insignificant number” of the spaces they received, “perhaps seven over the course of two weeks,” had been assigned in “the usual order, that is from cards registered in the journals of space.”¹¹⁰ The great majority of applicants, by contrast, found space on their own.

Such cases took place as follows: seeing that there was no free space on the registers, the applicant himself finds a free room and acquires the necessary inventory card at the *kvartkhoz*; the ‘greater part’ of citizens bringing such fortunately acquired cards to the department are given the order of occupation by

107. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 381, l. 14.

108. *ibid.*

109. *ibid.*, l. 11.

110. *Ibid.*, l. 7.

the department for the space they found, although each such instance is ‘looked over separately.’”¹¹¹

Instead of the housing department finding space for the citizens, then, citizens were finding space for the housing department. “Often, the department makes use of accidental [*sluchainye*] information,” inspectors wrote of the Khamovniki office. “Sometimes citizens bring information about free space with them in the hopes of receiving it for themselves and with a heap of papers, demonstrate their right to the space.”¹¹² Sometimes the housing department bestowed the right to occupy the hard-won space on the petitioner who found it, but often it did not, and the space found by one person was given to another. Inevitably, the inspector mused, “the matter ends up with the conflict commission,” the neighborhood-level committee composed of representatives from the raion, the housing department, and occasionally the party or the Cheka, charged with resolving disputes about space; “and in this way, only those spaces that somehow come across their desks get distributed.”¹¹³

Housing authorities could only distribute spaces they could see, and given the failures of their own efforts at collecting information about space from building committees and the *kvartkhozy*, they could not, on their own, see very much. They relied, instead, on accidental information. A file of documents collected between April and December 1919 by the Petrograd Communal Economic Soviet, labeled “Acts of investigation of apartments and correspondence with the Central Housing Department,” contains numerous examples of what might be called targeted requests for space—requests, tips, and invitations from Petrograders, pertaining to spaces that the petitioners already knew about, and that they deemed, for one reason or another, suitable for redistribution. On 18 November, for example, the Housing Department of the Spaskii raion in Petrograd received the following statement:

111. Ibid.

112. *ibid.*, 1.12.

113. *ibid.*

Citizen Vasiliï Sintsov would like to receive an apartment (occupied as housing) on 25 October Prospect in building no. 46, apt. 23, from which [the previous occupant] has left for his homeland and not returned, and at present is occupied by nobody, the apartment consists of one room there is a stove in it.¹¹⁴

Many of the tidbits of information submitted by petitioners revolved around precisely such issues of use: whether the housing authorities had apartment #23 in no. 46, 25-October Prospect on the books or not, according to the petitioner it was currently standing empty and unused. That autumn, the Housing Department received similar declarations from people interested in occupying a one-room apartment on Karl Marx Street whose owner had also “left for his homeland,” apartment on Panteleimonovskaia Street where an unregistered couple was squatting with their servant, two rooms with furniture in apartment no. 22, building no. 5 on Baburin sidestreet, a two-room apartment, no. 15, in building no. 29 on Morskaia street that was presently unoccupied, and either apartment 5 or apartment 6 in no. 53, on 25 October Prospect, both empty, among others.¹¹⁵ These tips pointed to a persistent obstacle to the project of inventorying, one referred to by the chair of the Moscow Housing Department, when he observed that his office struggled to capture “the rapidly changing picture of the use of space,” cited above. It was one thing to record every room, every apartment in the city and its dimensions, so as to learn the normed number of people it could house; it was quite another to record the movement of all of a city’s inhabitants, to know who left and who moved, who died or got married. This was what the inventory demanded, but it was not something that immediately occurred to the housing authorities, who only began to require reporting on changes in the usage of space in October 1920.¹¹⁶

Other tips alerted housing authorities to real or perceived misuses of space, violations of the rules of occupation or excesses of space according to the norm. One such tip drew controllers to the apartment of a doctor and his family of three, that is to say, four people to-

114. TsGASP f. 3201, op. 1, d. 55, l. 17.

115. Ibid, ll. 21, 19, 41, 46, 76.

116. TsGASP f. 3201, op. 1, d. 113, l. 5.

tal, occupying six rooms (the norm in Petrograd was conceived not in arshins, as in Moscow, but in rooms—one per person—until the early 1920s). To someone who knew the residents only by sight or by reading the list posted at the entry, this would appear excessive, and this seems to be prism through which information about the space was conveyed to housing authorities. Upon inspection, however, the authorities determined that it was “not possible to present a room in accordance with statement no. 3651,” the original tip, “as the doctor occupies two rooms for receiving patients and four people live there,” bringing him in line with the Petrograd norm.¹¹⁷ A similarly targeted request, but for furniture, instead of space, came from a man named Zabak, who worked as “assistant to the director for equipment of the Supply Department of the 7th Army.” Happily, Zabak had already managed to scare himself up a room in an apartment next door to his office, occupied by citizen Kozlovskii. Zabak appears to have come to an agreement with Kozlovskii about the room on his own; his problem now was that Kozlovskii wanted to give him the room but take all its furnishings. Zabak wrote to the housing authorities to ask that an order be issued concerning the “transfer of the room and that a representative be sent to clarify everything in person, and to issue me the necessary furniture,” as Kozlovskii possessed an entire “room full of excess furniture, unnecessary to him.”¹¹⁸

A significant proportion of the targeted requests for space, however, did not criticize the way current residents used their space so much as they engaged with qualities of the residents themselves. In specific, they made claims about the social history of the current residents, or that of their associates. One building committee chairman in Moscow requested permission to transfer a room in his building from a widow, Zyvina, to citizen Frankovskii, who needed a study for his work as a “responsible employee.” Zyvina, by contrast, “serves nowhere, lives on the spilled blood of her husband (he was shot for speculation in ration cards) and has a three-year-old child and in spite of all this occupies a living space of 66 square arshins (two rooms) when workers at the present moment are living through a

117. TsGASP f. 3201, op. 1, d. 55, l. 66.

118. *Ibid.*, l. 23.

crisis of space.”¹¹⁹ A police chief in Moscow’s thirteenth precinct named Miachikov sent the following request to the housing authorities in the Krasno-presnenskii neighborhood:

In light of the fact that I was given Vorontsov’s apartment only temporarily, until 20 August 1921, which is very inconvenient for me, I ask that Vorontsov’s apartment be taken back onto the inventory, and that I be presented apartment no. 16, at 91 Novinskii Boulevard, evicting in advance citizens: Kasatkina, and Danilov, and leaving the furniture of the pharmacist “GVATUV” who ran off to the Whites in my temporary use until such time as the case is resolved according to the act set in your presence with a representative from R:K:I (Rabkrin) additionally citizen DANILOV is not living in his neighborhood and I took his Party documents and sent them to the Khamovniki RKP and citizen KASATKINA has been turned over to the court for registering speculators at Smolenskii Market and speculation in old currency/Nikolaevskie bills of credit/with comradely greetings, A. MIACHIKOV.¹²⁰

As Danilov, the man targeted in Miachikov’s petition explained, he had never met the suspicious previous owner of the apartment where he currently lived—the pharmacist Gvatuv. But Danilov’s living situation made him an easy mark for Miachikov. Danilov’s housemates, Kasatkina and Lebedeva, appear to have been illiterate; Kasatkina signed her testimony in a weak, child-like hand, while Lebedeva was signed for by a scribe. Despite their illiteracy—and presumably simple social origins—they possessed an unusually large stock of furniture; it was not a great leap to assume they speculated in furniture, a common but strictly-regulated, and therefore risky, activity. To this already delicate picture, Miachikov added layers of additional, equally suspicious detail: he asserted not only that the women speculated in furniture, but that this furniture had once belonged to the pharmacist Gvatuv, who fled to the Whites. It was even rumored that Danilov and the women were

119. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 165, l. 239.

120. Ibid 99.

hiding “another apartment, in addition to this one, belonging to Gvatuv,” though this hidden apartment was never found. Danilov knew he was being set up. One of the policemen searching Danilov’s apartment in his presence asked him, “who got so angry at you and now denounces you?” Danilov begged the policeman, in reply, “if you know this person, tell me who it is, so that I can complain about this comrade,” but the policeman gave him no answer. Reflecting a common fear of the time—one with grounding in reality, as we have seen—Danilov believed the denunciation, likely in the form of an “Anonymous letter,” had come “from the VChK or the MChK,” the Cheka and its Moscow branch. Instead it was the work of Miachikov, whose request to take up residence in the Danilov-Gvatuv apartment was approved.¹²¹

These invitations to inspect, investigate, and resolve the ugly conflicts that emerged from the project of redistributing space drew representatives of the state deep into the inner-workings of buildings as physical and social organisms. In the course of these investigations, agents of the Soviet state collected vast troves of information about people and space, much of it proffered by residents themselves. Numerous petitioners included hand-drawn maps and floor plans of individual apartments, a technique that was developed within the Housing Department’s successor, the Municipal Administration of Real Estate (MUNI), only in the mid-1920s. These floor plans were labeled with the measurements of each room, the names and relations of the occupants, and the current usage of each space—all information the housing authorities struggled to collect on their own. One such map was sent in by the residents of apartment # 22 at no. 15 Shvivaia Gorka, of a railroad-style five-room apartment inhabited by seven people. At one end of the apartment, in the first room on the left, lived Iugan Borkhardt and his wife; to their immediate right lived his wife’s sister I.E. German; next to her lived Borkhardt’s sister Sh.F. Borkhardt; to her right lived a vivacious young woman in the Red Army, M. Saveleva; and finally, at the other end, lived I.A. Fekhner and his wife. Recently, someone from the neighborhood housing department

121. Ibid.

had appeared at their apartment and ordered the two sisters'-in-law to move in together, and M. Saveleva, the young Red Army woman, to be "concentrated" in a different apartment in the building, thus freeing two rooms to be taken onto the inventory. In protest of this new arrangement, all the apartment's residents gathered to draw the floor plan, take measurements, and present information about the various *okhrannye gramoty* protecting them from resettlement.¹²²

MUNI would spend the first few years of its existence developing floor plans like the ones sent by the Borkhardts and other petitioners, but in the hands of the neighborhood housing authorities in 1921, they lay dormant. Housing authorities and all the other institutions involved in the redistribution of space struggled to manage this unevenness in the collection and treatment of information. The challenge of creating an inventory of built space inhered not simply in uncovering what was hidden, the spaces that residents, building committees, *kvartkhozy*, and other state agencies sought to keep off the registers; it was also in wading through the enormous quantities of information that the task of redistribution produced, information that was concerned with the inhabitants themselves and their mode of inhabitation or usage of space. The collection of information about the social history, current employment, living habits of individuals was an inevitable byproduct of the housing authorities' mission. From an ideological standpoint, the projects of sorting spaces and people moved in lockstep. As it was constituted through redistribution, the very conception of "space" depended on definitions of the family, of socially-useful labor, and of normed or normal inhabitation. The content of these categories was flexible: as we saw at the start of this chapter, until a ruling from the Commissariat declared otherwise, not only Moscow's housing authorities but Bonch-Bruевич himself considered it possible that "clearing the non-laboring elements from the city of Moscow" might mean separating wives and mothers from their husbands and sons, that the city of Moscow might become a buzzing center of exclusively revolutionary labor.

122. *ibid.*, I. 103.

Indeed, as this chapter has demonstrated, they relied on popularly-generated, what we might call “free-lanced,” information about space and people to do their jobs. Their willingness to engage with this kind of “accidental information” facilitated their deepening involvement in the social project of redistribution; it was through the cultivation of accidental information that housing authorities—and the many institutions of conflict-resolution, such as Rabkrin, that grew up around them—embedded themselves in the homes and lives of Muscovites.

Chapter 2

Seizure and Seizers: The Dispossession of Movable Goods

Looting, seizure and disorder are a part of all revolutions, but not everywhere are they elevated and knowingly recreated throughout the revolutionary era. In Soviet Russia, the official extraction of resources from the population and the unofficial theft of them both went by the same names: “requisition” and “confiscation,” terms that suffused the revolutionary landscape but escaped formal regulation until April 1920. In Soviet historiography, the portrayal of requisition and confiscation has generally fallen into one of two narratives. The first appeared immediately after the Revolution, authored largely by exiles from Soviet Russia, many of whom opposed the Bolsheviks politically and related episodes of criminality as evidence of their depravity.¹ The second was authored by the Bolsheviks themselves, who acknowledged the explosion of violent dispossession and theft during the Revolution, but framed these acts as extraordinary measures of revolutionary exigency.² This chapter

1. See, among others, Vasilii Klementiev, *V Bolshevitskoi Moskve* (In Bolshevik Moscow) 1918-1920 (Moscow, 1998); Sergei Melgunov, *Red Terror in Russia* (Hyperion, 1975). A representative Western account is Marguerite E. Harrison, *Marooned in Moscow* (Doran, 1921).

2. M.Ia. Latsis (Sudrabs), *Dva goda bor'by na vnutrennem fronte: populiarnyi obzor* (Moscow, 1920); M.Ia. Latsis (Sudrabs), *Chrezvychainye komissii po borbe s kontr-revoliutsii* (Moscow, 1921). An Old Bolshevik, Latsis was also one of the founding members of the Bolshevik secret police, the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Battle against Counterrevolution, Sabotage, and Speculation, known as the Cheka.

departs from these interpretations, both of which depict criminality as external to the project of state-building, to consider requisition and confiscation as ordinary, rather than extraordinary, techniques of revolutionary governance—albeit ones the Soviet state struggled to hold firmly in its grip.

The inspiration for this approach comes from Charles Tilly, whose study of early modern state-building identified a common set of extractive behaviors deployed by a variety of force-wielding groups, the meaning of which changed depending on the surrounding circumstances.³ Tilly's great intervention was to lay bare the mechanics of the transition from rent-seeking to state-making, from a society organized around groups that acted as both the threat and the protection from the threat of violence (rackets), to those that acted primarily as protection from the threat of violence (state-making). Early Soviet society was awash in bandits, who were often functionally impossible to differentiate from bureaucrats or agents of the Bolshevik regime. The Bolsheviks participated in this riotous world of extraction. Beginning in 1920, however, Soviet authorities attempted to bring the popular practice of requisition and confiscation to heel—to differentiate between the bandits and the bureaucrats. And much like in the model described by Tilly, as will be seen, the Bolsheviks faced an array of institutional challenges in effecting the transition from revolutionary whirlwind of dispossession to state-making extraction. Yet the bigger obstacle to putting an end to requisition and confiscation for the Soviet regime was ideological: because they were socialists who sought to create a society without a market, in which private property did not exist, the Bolsheviks had to find a way out of the chaos of dispossession that did not at the same time legitimate private possession. This makes their state-building story quite different from the one described by Tilly, as it hinges on a category—ideology—that sociological models often fail to capture. As this chapter argues, when Soviet authorities attempted to build restrictions around seizure and legitimate only certain seizers, they turned not to ideas about the inviolability of private property, but to new concepts of economic crime, cate-

3. Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime," in P. Evans, D. Rueschemeyer, and T. Skocpol, eds., *Bringing the State Back In* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 169-191.

gorizing all those who seized without the state's permission as economic criminals, whose victim was not the individual sustaining the loss, but the state, deprived of its just due. The possibility of ownership—rooted in concepts of personal possession and the right to own movable goods—shifted irrevocably during the upheaval, even as the memory of property, and of particular possessions, remained.

2.1 Requisition, Confiscation, and the Erasure of Property

Legally, in the wake of decrees passed in 1918 that abolished private ownership of real estate, nationalized heavy industry, monopolized distribution, and restricted consumption, the Soviet state already controlled large portions of Russia's material resources. But some of these resources were more difficult to monopolize than others. Grain and food goods were among the most difficult, and the object of a form of forcible seizure known as the "*prodrazverstka*" for much of the Civil-War period. When it came to the extraction of other forms of wealth, revenue that the struggling regime still desperately needed, it was harder to know just how this should occur. Conventional taxation, Vadim Volkov notes, "implies a distinction between the taxing authority (the state) and the entity taxed (the private economy) and, accordingly, a system of exchange between them."⁴ This distinction grew blurry during the revolutionary era, even as private economic activity continued. In tandem, the practice of taxation—though not of extraction—faded. After the February Revolution, many people simply stopped paying taxes, upsetting the budgets and scrambling the books. "Among the peasants of the Tavricheskaia guberniia," one tax office reported in April 1917, "there has appeared the view that the changed political order of Russia has removed the old tax system and with it, the state income tax." In the city of Simferopol, the local director wrote, "several merchants have asked the employees of the Treasury whether it is necessary to pay what they owed in the enterprise tax from [the previous year], as ru-

4. Vadim Volkov, *Violent Entrepreneurs: The Use of Force in the Making of Russian Capitalism* (Cornell, 2002), p. 173.

mors are circulating in the city that back taxes will be cancelled by the New Government.”⁵ At the same time that the Empire’s taxpayers had become convinced that changed political circumstances mitigated their obligations to the Treasury, the Treasury was growing increasingly unable to collect taxes and manage the abundant paperwork associated with them. In July 1917, the Provisional Government ordered the new militia to take up the burden of collecting taxes, with help from the old tax collectors, but preliminary reports from the provinces were not encouraging. “The half-anarchic condition of the guberniia,” reported the director of the Volynsk office, “combined with the agrarian and provisioning problems, sharply increases the risk that the tax collectors will be robbed, which of course makes for great difficulties in composing a staff for this institution.”⁶

After the Bolshevik Revolution, many Imperial taxes were abrogated at the national level, although municipal taxation remained common. In the fall of 1918, a new, “extraordinary” tax was announced, intended to raise ten billion rubles across the Republic, with each locality responsible for a certain portion of the total and funds to be raised from members of the bourgeoisie and other class enemies. Local officials reported that the mode of collecting taxes, however, was changing. In specific, it was growing indistinguishable from the chaotic experiences of seizure witnessed in other settings. A complaint lodged on behalf of a resident of Tver described a process of tax assessment marked by arbitrariness and intimidation. “On March 11 (1919) the volost commission, together with a representative from the district financial commission I.V. Razvitnovyi, arrived to confiscate property from V.V. Zhurkin,” the Moscow resident. “The latter was not home,” the report read, “but in spite of the fact that he was sent for immediately and that he truly did return within the hour, the commission hastened to break into Zhurkin’s house through the window and performed a confiscation of goods.” Despite the fact that Zhurkin had been assessed an extraordinary tax payment of just 1,000 rubles, “the commission all the same confiscated goods worth 2,726 r. 50 k., and that by a shockingly low evaluation” of their true worth, demonstrated

5. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 925, l. 26.

6. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 925, l. 8

by the fact that the commission was able to resell them immediately—the fate of much seized property—for the price of 3,242 r. According to the “testimony of witnesses,” members of the tax commission seized goods that did not belong to their intended target. The tax agents “permitted themselves to threaten Zhurkin with a revolver and to demean him with crude language.” Although the commission did draw up an act of confiscation, it did not record acts for the “forced entry into [Zhurkin’s] house, the sale of property, or the removal of a portion of it in nature.” General investigation revealed extensive malfeasance in the tax commission, including “great arbitrariness, the use of force...forgery,” and unlawfully “assessing people who had been freed from the tax.”⁷

Though finance officials at the center disapproved of the independence shown by the localities, who often assessed taxes on objects not approved by the center, they often greeted such methods of implementation with satisfaction. In an article on the collection of the extraordinary tax in the Commissariat of Finance’s journal, *Izvestiia finansov*, that recounted the journey of the budgeting director of the People’s Bank to the Smolensk region, officials reported the appearance of a “totally new, authentic, temporary tax organ,” mobilized by the local professional union, which had enjoyed “staggering success in collecting 117,000 rubles of contributions from the residents of the Khislavicheskii volost.” In the village of Zakharin, 10,000 rubles were collected in just two hours. “During this time, a list of payers was posted in the space of the local Ispolkom, a gathering was called, and the list was announced with an order to bring the money within the half-hour. All the money was collected. The delegates and the people who accompanied them fired shots from a gun and rode off.” The *Izvestiia finansov* authors mused that the episode “illustrates that there are major resources to be had from the population.”⁸ Taxation in experience thus merged with the more forcible forms of revolutionary extraction known as requisition and confiscation.

When applied by the Imperial Government during the First World War, the term “requisition” denoted the officially-sanctioned seizure of objects necessary to the government

7. GARF f. 4390, op. 4, d. 68, l. 31.

8. *Izvestiia finansov*, no. 5-6, 1919, p. 23.

as part of the war effort. The punitive counterpart to requisition was confiscation, which according to Imperial law was to be applied only in cases of treason, although as Eric Lohr has demonstrated, this stipulation was frequently violated in order to seize the property of enemy aliens and Jewish Imperial subjects.⁹ Peter Holquist makes clear that even before the Bolshevik insurrection, forcible extraction seeped out from the military setting into the civilian use, particularly with regard to grain.¹⁰ Under the Bolsheviks, forcible extraction became commonplace. The Bolsheviks began seizing material goods within days of seizing power—not just big things, like buildings and telegraph stations, but small things, like wallets and coats. The first complaints about this kind of extraction appeared in the mailbox of Vladimir Bonch-Bruевич, administrative chief of the Council of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom), on November 12, and originated in Petrograd. Bonch-Bruевич forwarded packets of such letters, all to do with the assessment of “contributions” on Petrograders on the street, to V.R. Menzhinskii, who was at the time the “People’s Commissar for the Affairs of the Ministry of Finance,” suggesting that Bonch-Bruевич understood the contributions to be an affair of financial administration, no less than class war or punishment.¹¹ Domiciliary seizure was rare in the six weeks or so between the Revolution and the formation of the Cheka, although there is some evidence that personal items or movable property, possibly from houses, were being requisitioned in Petrograd as early as November 20.¹² In handling these first instances of seizure, Bonch-Bruевич, Menzhinskii, and other senior members of the regime embraced them as a normal part of making revolution: their interest was in ensuring that seizure was being applied in the right way, against the right people, a process that—while the regime was still in Petrograd, and into its first year or two in Moscow—they often addressed personally. On November 21, Bonch-Bruевич forwarded a complaint to D. Bogolepov, one of Menzhinskii’s assistants at the Commissariat of Finance, “because

9. Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign against enemy aliens in World War I* (Harvard 2003).

10. Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution* (Harvard, 2002).

11. GARF f. R-130, op. 1, d. 26, ll. 1, 8.

12. *Ibid.* l. 3.

citizenness Brio,” its author, “makes reference to her father’s personal acquaintance with you, thinking it possible that you would support her petition to have the goods that were confiscated from her father returned.”¹³

Forcible extraction grew to become a platform of Bolshevik power, yet it was not something the Soviet state possessed a monopoly on, any more than it possessed, for the first few years of its existence, a monopoly on violence. Revolutionary society was riddled with bandits, hooligans, and thieves who terrorized the population and infuriated Soviet authorities with their daring, often spectacular, raids. Like any city without a functioning police force, Moscow was plagued by petty and major crime.¹⁴ Audacious street attacks became commonplace; one especially notorious event occurred on May Day, 1919, when a gang of five bandits positioned their car at the top of one of Moscow’s major thoroughfares, Vozdvizhenka. According to the Moscow Cheka report on the incident, “the bandits worked on both sides of the street, stopping and stealing from all the well-dressed passerby who crossed their path,” packing the stolen objects and clothing into the car as they went. The gang, led by the infamous bandit Koshelnikov, killed three policemen in their escape.¹⁵ Lenin himself was famously carjacked in January 1920 on his way to visit his wife at a sanatorium outside of Moscow. Bandits stopped his car under pretense of a document check, but

13. GARF f. R-130, op. 1, d. 26, l. 3.

14. Reported crimes in the city of Moscow: 1914, 1918-1920 (Source: *Krasnaia Moskva* (Moscow, 1920), p. 637-638.)

	1914	1918	1919	1920*
Theft	3507	11036	9402	7328
Armed robberies	2	570	252	143
Simple robberies	49	421	73	28
Attempted murders	1	16	14	13
Murders	14	148	125	65
Embezzlement**	281	436	216	105
Blackmail**	123	454	276	195

*Reporting for January-September 1920 only.

**The definitions of these categories shifted substantially even within the tables created by the authors of *Krasnaia Moskva*, reflecting the ever-changing perception of economic crime in the revolutionary period.

15. *MChK: Iz istorii Moskovskoi chrezvychainoi komissii 1918-1921* (Moskovskii Rabochii: Moscow, 1978), p. 287.

when Lenin genially offered them his identity card, the bandits tossed it into a snow bank, demanded that he, his sister, and their driver get out of the car, and drove off in the direction of Moscow.¹⁶ Memoirs of Moscow life recount that many incidents of banditry occurred under the star of requisition and confiscation, often in the home, at night, when they would be easy to mistake for the “searches” perpetrated regularly by agents of the secret police and other revolutionary authorities. Vasilii Klementiev, a former Imperial artillery officer returned to Moscow from the front in the winter of 1918, recalled that “there was not one night when searches were not conducted in Moscow. Who and by what right forced themselves into rich apartments, stole all kinds of things, beat people up, murdered the inhabitants, was not clear. ‘Lawful organs of power’ did this, ‘bands of anarchists’ did this, and the most ordinary bandits did this. Of course, no documents were shown during the search. They limited themselves to the declaration that they were searching for counterrevolutionaries. They looked for counterrevolutionaries, and took the valuables.”¹⁷ Beginning in the early 1920s, the Sovnarkom launched the “Commission against banditry” to tackle what remained a devastating problem, especially in the Republic’s south.¹⁸ But the slippage between “real” and “fake” requisition remained a persistent problem, and a challenge to those who sought to legitimate seizure and empower certain categories of legitimate seizers.

Requisition and confiscation also lacked juridical definition, one result of which was that the authorities themselves feared that seized goods were slipping through the state’s hands. On October 21, 1918, the fourth civil department of the Commissariat of Government Control—the Russian Empire’s historic accounting office which was responsible for auditing all branches of the state, a mission carried over into the revolutionary era—sent a notice to the Commissariat’s legal department observing that “in Moscow as in other populated places of Soviet Russia, the requisition of the personal possessions [*dvizhimoe imushchestvo*] of citizens is occurring by the orders of various powers.” In contrast to the

16. Pavel Malkov, *Zapisiki komendanta Moskovskogo Kremliia* (Moscow, 1961), p. 159; Dmitri Volkogonov, *Lenin: A New Biography* trans. Harold Shukman (New York, 1994), 229.

17. V. Klementiev, *V Bolshevitskoi Moskve* (Russkii Put’: Moscow, 1998), p. 53.

18. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2449, ll. 15-16.

property transfers underway due to the “municipalization of real estate,” which in the fourth department’s view, “by its very nature could be easily registered,” the personal possessions being seized “by all kinds of orders, by separate groups, by the directive of individual people, their right to do so founded on the simple fact of their having been sent [to the place of requisition] with several armed people” were in distinct danger of escaping state control. Objects as diverse as “food stuffs, being held by their owners in quantities excluding even the suspicion of speculation,...clothing, domestic objects, valuables, money, artistic objects, books, and objects bearing a scientific importance” were being requisitioned. Rarely were these objects registered in any way by those performing their requisition. It was impossible to discern any common method or standard for requisition. The People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment issued its own orders concerning the seizure and registration of objects of art and historical monuments; other governmental bodies issued orders on the “accounting and distribution of furniture,” still others issued orders to do with permissible quantities of food stuffs and seizure above those norms. “None of these are united,” the department observed, “nor do they agree with one another, nor do they cover all forms of requisition or set out foundations for it” as a concrete category of seizure. Summing up the legal uncertainty surrounding the practice of seizure, the department posed these questions, none of which would receive an answer for almost two years: “To whom, through what body, where, and for what goals are requisitions of personal possessions permitted, and what kinds of possessions exactly? On what basis, equalizing or otherwise, and by what norms should requisition be conducted? How are the requisitioned goods to be understood—with whose permission, in what order, and by what norms should they be distributed, and on whom lies the responsibility for all of these goods from the moment of their alienation for the benefit of the government to their release from a storage space, either to individual people or institutions?”¹⁹

19. GARF f. 4390, op. 1, d. 33, l. 247.

Until 1920, the most important regulations dealing with the requisition and confiscation of personal possessions were created and implemented by municipal, rather than central authorities. Despite variations from city to city, commonalities in the treatment of particular categories of possession did exist, as can be seen from the example of domestic furnishings. Furniture and associated household objects came to occupy a distinct legal category of goods in early Soviet regulation, one that depended both on the status of its owners (which was true of a variety of goods), but also, more particularly, one that depended on the physical location of household goods inside domestic spaces. What constituted this category of goods regularly shifted: some orders limited the category to goods that furnished houses, such as beds, tables, cabinets, shelves, sofas, and chairs, while others included objects associated with the arts of domestic life and bodily care, such as kitchen tools, clothing, and bed linens. It is possible that inspiration was drawn from the categories of goods that debtors were permitted to keep in the event of bankruptcy before the Revolution, commonly household goods and tools necessary for work.²⁰

Over the course of 1918 and 1919, the cities of Moscow and Petrograd both established regulations dissolving the personal ownership of furnishings by connecting decisions about their disposal to the spaces in which they presently stood, rather than the people who owned them. In practical terms, what this meant was that people who were evicted from their homes did not have the right to take their furnishings or other domestic objects with them. On September 21, 1918, the Mossoviet forbade the “sale and transfer of furniture located in apartments,” in muted recognition of the upheaval in housewares that accompanied the upheaval in houses, which had made for lively semi-legal exchange in all manner of domestic goods in the cities unofficial markets, the Sukharevskii and Smolenskii markets. Several weeks later, as the “bacchanalia of eviction” intensified in the built environment, the Mossoviet issued a more capacious order, “On the Accounting and Distribution of Furniture,” dividing the population of the city into four categories, organized around their

20. I am grateful to Alexia Yates for this observation, drawn from French bankruptcy law, which requires investigation in the Russian case.

intended relationship to their personal possessions. The first category, “workers,” were entitled to keep “all furniture they have,” and to “receive for their use objects of the domestic environment from those entering into the stock of the neighborhood soviets”—that is, objects that had been seized from other people. Petty and middling employees of private and government enterprises, as well as actors in state theaters, were permitted to keep what they had, but got nothing new. More senior employees in these organizations, as well as the proprietors of commercial enterprises, were “deprived of their excess domestic housewares, with the exception of objects necessary for their work,” and finally, all those “living on the product of non-labor income: former factory owners, landlords, and others belonging to the major bourgeoisie, are deprived of all domestic housewares to the limit of the most essential. Linens, clothing, and other objects not relating to the domestic environment,” however, were “not subject to requisition” as part of this order, although they could continue to be seized “as a measure of punishment assessed by the Cheka.”²¹

Like Moscow, Petrograd forbade the transport of any furniture currently held inside the city to points beyond city limits, and the requisition of domestic goods occurred in tandem with the seizure of space.²² The Petrograd Soviet, however, attempted to regulate furniture possession not on the basis of reducing or increasing an individual’s current holdings, but on the basis of a “norm” applied to all citizens, depending on occupation (scholars were permitted to possess both a writing table and a dining table, for example, while non-scholars got only a dining table) and the size of one’s family (two chairs for the first person and one chair per additional person). Absent specifications as to which organizations were empowered to seize what from homes during the municipalization and redistribution of space, a glut of pretenders arrogated that right to themselves. In Moscow, neighborhood Housing Departments created “furniture sections” responsible for performing the registration of household goods, much as the housing departments inventoried built space, and with similarly unsatisfactory results. In Petrograd, at least three organizations claimed the right to

21. *Izvestiia*, October 18, 1918. No. 220.

22. TsGASP f. 1000, op. 4, d. 105, l. 59.

dispose of furniture: the Petrokommuna, a consumer cooperative society, and the Petrograd Gorprodukt, a distribution agency, both of which were branches of the Petrosoviet; and an “inter-institutional commission,” formally staffed by representatives from each of the first two organizations plus employees of the Petrograd Cheka and other bodies, but practically operated by a smattering of employees of Gorprodukt, who singlehandedly slogged through the contents of more than 9,000 apartments seized from the bourgeoisie. Two years into the job, they had managed to complete inventories of approximately 300 apartments, while the contents of the remaining 8,700 festered behind sealed doors, or were looted.²³

Popular acts of dispossession commingled with official requisitions of furnishings and other personal possessions in the course of the redistribution of space, as was revealed in December 1920, when a group of Moscow officials inspected the “furniture sections” of the neighborhood housing authorities.²⁴ Led by inspectors from the “Roving Audit Section” of the Worker-Peasant Inspectorate, or “Rabkrin,” an agent of the Moscow Cheka, and a representative from the People’s Commissariat of Justice, the inspections revealed stark patterns of mismanagement in the furniture departments.²⁵ Several offices simply destroyed their records of requisitions and confiscations from the previous two years when they learned that the inspectors were coming, suspicious in and of itself. “Whether the acts from the destroyed books were transferred to the new registration book is unknown and cannot be clarified,” the senior inspector reported from the Gorodskoi neighborhood. “The explana-

23. *ibid.*

24. Inspections of one government institution by another were commonplace in the years after the October Revolution. When performed by agents of the Commissariat of Worker-Peasant Control, the audits bore a mixed character: part financial review, echoing the long tradition of the pre-revolutionary Ministry of Government Control, in which every receipt, every invoice, every register was painstakingly analyzed by accountants sworn to protect the “interests of the Treasury,” and part revolutionary tribunal, especially since the overhaul of the Commissariat earlier that year, when actual workers—janitors, seamstresses, machinists—were assigned to participate in Rabkrin audits in an attempt to strengthen “worker control” over government institutions. There is some evidence that a worker participated in the review of the City Neighborhood’s housing section in December 1920. At the bottom of the scrap of paper where all the representatives involved in the audit signed their names and institutional homes was the light, barely legible signature of a certain “Shliachov[illegible]” who listed his institution as “worker.” GARF f. 4390, op. 22, d. 381, l. 2.

25. Rabkrin was the successor to the People’s Commissariat of Government Control, known Government Control or “Goskon.” My usage reflects the transition around the middle of 1920, but readers should know that the two are the same institution.

tions of comrades Rudko (a clerk) and Tarasov (her boss) about the ... the destruction of the old registry of descriptions were unsatisfactory and contradictory.”²⁶ In the Baumanskii neighborhood, the furniture section “kept no books whatsoever in 1918 and 1919. Acts that were registered in notebooks are now lost.” In general, one Rabkrin inspector concluded, all transactions in movable goods during the previous two or three years were now “covered in the fog of uncertainty.”²⁷

And yet, even without the account books, the Rabkrin inspectors managed to piece together a striking portrait of the whirlwind of dispossession that had held Moscow in its thrall during the previous three years. Bereft of paper documentation, the Rabkrin inspectors interviewed the employees of the neighborhood housing departments, some of whom had worked there since their formation in March and April 1918. From an interview with comrade Tarasov in the Gorodskoi neighborhood office, the Rabkrin inspectors learned that during the redistribution of space, “the apartments of wealthy people had been inventoried.” This was unsurprising, as the neighborhood was home to many of Moscow’s grandest homes and mansions. In these apartments, however, “there had been clothing, fur coats, leather shoes, expensive dishes, paintings, clocks, gold objects, silver, money,” Tarasov testified. “Thirty percent or more of this valuable property from apartments disappeared, a portion of it stolen by residents of the building, and a portion of it picked up [*vyrezena*] by employees of the Central City housing section,” he claimed, and deposited somewhere “completely unclear.”²⁸ When the inspectors set out to trace the fate of some of these domestic objects, they established popular dispossession, or what they classified as “the theft of a portion of the property,” in every case on the list.²⁹ In their report on the Baumanskii neighborhood, the Rabkrin inspectors took as an example the inventory of Novo-Basmannaia Street, no. 10, apartment #3, made at the end of 1918. From an interview with the secretary of the building committee, they learned that a portion of the contents of apartment #3, which were

26. Ibid. 1. 9.

27. Ibid.

28. Ibid.

29. Ibid. 1. 10.

listed on the inventory as “requisitioned,” had indeed been “taken away by order of the economic section,” the officially-sanctioned fate for requisitioned furniture. “It became clear that a portion of the furniture,” however, was still “located inside the building.” In fact, it was located in the possession of “current residents of building.” When the inspectors asked to verify the location of the furniture that had not been taken away, the secretary of the building committee informed them that such verification “would not be possible, as it was spread about the entire building,” among all its residents, “and he could not show where one object or another was located.”³⁰ In a different building, inspectors learned that while the “contents of a dead citizen’s apartment were recorded, there was no stamp indicating that they had indeed been given to storage. No one knew how much furniture was there or was supposed to be there, so of course widespread theft of furniture took place.” One local employee had “taken measures to secure the furniture by means of branding it.”³¹

As one woman, named Materina, observed in a letter to Bonch-Bruevich, there were “no decrees on the topic” that could shed light on the relationship between resettlement and requisition, making it impossible for her to judge “by what principles those who took all of my household goods into their private ownership [chastnaia sobstvennost’]” operated. In Materina’s case, dispossession came on gradually. Whereas for some it happened in one sharp burst, at night, for her, it spread itself out over months, as her apartment in the city of Tula welcomed a steady stream of new residents. “First Vasilii Dmitrievich Tokarev arrived with his wife Olga Ivanovna and three children.... Then Nikolai Bufetov and his wife Bufetova were settled in my apartment,” followed by the Zapevalovs and their elderly mother, the Kolokolov brothers with their wives, and a single woman, Maria Lauktina. “Finally, on September 10, 1918, they evicted me, Materina, from my building, and occupied the entire building, with all storage spaces, and in the apartment they seized all the furnishings...” “Those same residents, prior to the eviction of me, Materina, during one of the searches without authorization (*samochinno*) took various household goods, as well as

30. Ibid. 1. 12.

31. Ibid.

two ethnographic collections.” These people, Materina suggested, were not revolutionaries but “rogues of revolution,” or “criminals of revolution”—people who “gave themselves to be revolutionaries” but in reality were “living off the revolution like the most inveterate kulaks.”³² Bonch-Bruevich agreed, demanding that the Commissar of Internal Affairs “investigate this matter immediately and once and for all put an end to this arbitrariness, when people having no right to it tear into houses, throw out the owners, and seize other people’s property. These sorts of events are completely unacceptable in socialist Russia.”³³

The All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for the Battle against Sabotage, Counter-revolution, and Speculation (Cheka) was meant to draw clear lines between those “[giving] themselves to be revolutionaries,” and those who actually were. In his first statement to the people of Moscow, Dzerzhinsky announced that he viewed the primary task of his organization as “the battle for the total security and inviolability of all persons and property from *proizvol* and violent aggressors and bandits.”³⁴ The arrival of the Cheka, however, deepened Moscow’s crime wave, offering the city’s bandits yet another identity to assume as they went marauding about town. As Dzerzhinsky realized when he announced especially severe penalties for those “giving themselves to be Red Guards and members of different revolutionary organizations,” agent-of-the-Cheka quickly became one more identity for the city’s robbers to assume as they went about their business.³⁵ For this borrowed identity to bear weight, of course, it had to have support in actual fact, that is, the behaviors of the bandits and the Chekists had to more or less coincide. Allegations that Chekists profited personally from requisitions dogged the Commission from its founding. On March 24, 1918,

32. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 77, l. 138.

33. *Ibid.* l. 128.

34. *MChK: Iz istorii moskovskoi chrezvychainoi komissii (1918-1921)* (Moscow, 1978), p. 19.

35. *Ibid.* Impersonation was a problem for the Cheka in Petrograd as well. The Cheka’s very first official execution, performed on February 21, 1918, was of a “blackmailer and bandit” who went by the name of “Prince Eboli,” and who pretended to be a Chekist during robberies. George Leggett, *The Cheka: Lenin’s Political Police* (Oxford, 1981), p. 58. The execution order is published in *Arkhiv VChK: sbornik dokumentov* eds. V. Vinogradov, A. Litvin, V. Khristoforov, N. Peremyshlennikova (Moscow, 2007), p. 168. “Question Eboli and then shoot him, to be widely publicized.”

just two weeks after the Cheka arrived in Moscow, the bourgeois newspaper *Novoe slovo* published an article entitled, “The Secrets of the Investigative Commission,” alleging that agents of the Cheka had engaged in any number of “heavy crimes,” including acts of “theft during the search,” “ransoming in return for freedom,” and the arrest of people positioned to expose those crimes. Dzerzhinsky took to the pages of a circular to rebut the charges. “The fact of thefts during searches has, it is true, infrequently occurred,” he wrote. “All those caught in the act have been shot, either by order of the commission or on the spot, by the decision of the search team themselves, namely NIKOLAEV, VINOGRADOV, AND SHEVAR.”³⁶ Allegations of economic malfeasance in the Cheka persisted, however, and other highly-ranked Soviet officials raised them with Dzerzhinsky. In May 1918, Bonch-Bruevich took to forwarding complaints about the behavior of Chekists to Dzerzhinsky multiple times a day. In June (with Dzerzhinsky ostensibly on leave in Poland, to collect his wife), Bonch-Bruevich addressed a curt message to Dzerzhinsky’s deputy Peters “personally,” relating to statements taken from “employees of the [Extraordinary] Commission: Melnik, Pistunov, Gorbatov, and Sherstobitov, concerning the malfeasance of several employees of the Commission. The correctness of the statements given by these complainants must be investigated and clarified.”³⁷ In reply, the Cheka published a statement in its own newsweekly disparaging the claims of its “opponents, [who] under the influence of ‘heated polemics,’ have even declared that those who enter the extraordinary commissions are people ‘prepared to take up banditry.’”³⁸

The requisition of personal possessions exploded with the establishment of the Cheka in early December 1917. On December 9, 1917, three days after it was created, the Cheka conducted its first search, of the apartments of five men accused of “blackmail.”³⁹ Initially, searches were performed as auxiliaries to arrest. As the mission of the Cheka expanded

36. GARF f. A-353, op. 2, d. 436, l. 5.

37. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 97, l. 37.

38. MChK, p. 106.

39. Blackmail was also a common charge levied against agents of the Cheka itself. GARF f. A-353, op. 2, d. 436, l. 5.

to include speculation and other forms of economic malfeasance, however, searches were increasingly conducted for their own sake.⁴⁰ The first major searches of businesses were performed in Petrograd in late December.⁴¹ By January 14, 1918, the Commission had accumulated a sufficient quantity of “things taken during the course of arrest,” as it called them, that it ordered the Left-Socialist Revolutionary and newly-appointed member of the Cheka Petr Sidorov to open a storeroom for requisitioned goods, which he directed until his own arrest during the Left-SR uprising in July 1918.⁴² Minutes from the meetings of the Cheka indicate that by February it was in possession of quantities of gold and silver, “confiscated for the profit of the Soviet Republic.” It had seized *portsigars*, watches, and wallets, as well as a Ford, a Mercedes-Benz, a “Bezho” (Peugeot?) and numerous trucks. Like other agencies of the new government, many of which were performing their own seizures at the same time, the Cheka termed these seizures “requisitions” and “confiscations,” both with a punitive aspect: on February 18, for example, the commission ordered the “requisition of all shoes exposed at Bocharov, Katkov, and Kutuzov’s.”⁴³ Around this time, evidence also began to appear that the Cheka was making use of the objects it seized. A separate “requisitioned” supply of shoes was distributed directly to employees, at a rate of one pair per person.⁴⁴ A few days later, the commission ordered that “confiscated weapons can be given out only to members of the VChK, its soldiers, and its intelligence officers.”⁴⁵

The Cheka seized both goods and money, the latter in the form of “fines” and “ransoms.” On January 12, 1918, Abram Davidovich Grinberg, an industrialist who had made arrangements with the head of the commission on nationalizing the banks, Grigorii Sokolnikov (the future Commissar of Finance), to withdraw 75,000 Finnish marks from his accounts at the Russo-Aziatskii Bank, was arrested in Sokolnikov’s presence at what was

40. Leggett, pp. 30-31. A department to deal with speculation was added on December 11, 1917, and one on misconduct in office, or *prestuplenie po dolzhnosti*, in late January 1918.

41. GARF f. 4390, op. 2, d. 255, l. 42.

42. *Arkhiv VChK*, p. 158, 703.

43. *Arkhiv VChK* p. 165.

44. *Arkhiv VChK*, pp. 167, 160.

45. *Ibid.* 166.

supposed to be their final meeting.⁴⁶ During the questioning, a Chekist accused Grinberg of “tricking the factory committee,” and of holding “35,000 marks at [his] apartment, which was found during the search conducted after [his] arrest.” Galpershtein freed the factory committee chair arrested with him, “and as he had suffered innocently from all this ordered that compensation be issued to him, which was done in my presence, from the money that was seized from my house during the search.” As Grinberg attempted to explain in his petitions, he held large sums of money at his house “out of concern for the supply of the factory with necessary materials, so that it can function in this period of worry and difficulties” when, indeed, one had to hold a meeting with a high official in order to withdraw money from a bank. His activity “could not be called sabotage. The meaning of this term is entirely different, and is absolutely inapplicable, as is the term speculation, to the character of my activity, which is that of a *kommersant* and director of an industrial firm.” Nevertheless, when Grinberg was freed several weeks later, his money was kept as a fine.⁴⁷ In other cases, commissars of the Cheka instructed the families of people it arrested to pay an amount set by the agent investigating their case, with whom they usually had personal contact.⁴⁸ This practice, known as “ransoming” [*zalog*] or “blackmail” [*vymogatelstvo*], was close enough to being viewed as illegitimate that Dzerzhinsky himself, in a statement from March 1918 that freely refers to multiple executions performed by the Cheka, flatly denied engaging in it at any point.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, the correspondence of the Sovnarkom,

46. GARF f. A-353, op. 2, d. 778, l. 7. The whole affair, in retrospect, stunk of set-up: Grinberg met Sokolnikov at his office at 8 p.m., and during their discussion a commissar of the Cheka, Galpershtein, appeared by chance at the office and, as Grinberg later related, declared “that he had known me for a long time as a speculator and a saboteur, in light of which he asked commissar Sokolnikov to cancel the withdrawal and declared me and the chair of the factory committee [Grinberg’s employee] under arrest and personally brought us to the Commission for the battle against counterrevolution, speculation and sabotage.” When Grinberg protested to Sokolnikov as he was led away, the latter mildly assured him that everything would come out in the interrogation and that “there was no cause for concern.” Grinberg and the factory director were placed in the same cell at Gorokhovaia 2, the Cheka’s headquarters, where they sat until the following night, when Galpershtein returned to question them.

47. GARF f. A-353, op. 2, d. 778, l. 7-8.

48. GARF f. 4390, op. 2, d. 255, l. 21. Numerous petitions refer to the “interrogator” handling their loved one’s case by name, with references to moments when they have been permitted to speak and correspond with the interrogator about the case.

49. GARF f. A-353, op. 2, d. 436, l. 5. “As for the practice of blackmail with regard to monetary sums, in return for freedom by agents of the commission, we can state that not one accusation we know of has been

to which subjects across the Republic directed their complaints about the behavior of Soviet authorities, is littered with accounts of the Cheka's hostage-taking and demands for ransom money.⁵⁰ When it seized the assets—400,000 rubles and 58,000 Finnish marks—of M.A. Aleksandrov's trading firm at the end of December 1917 and arrested its director and his assistant, the Cheka also demanded a ransom of two million rubles, one million for each man, which according to the firm's lawyer, was paid.⁵¹ The men were freed, but about three months later, they were arrested once more, which their lawyer protested on the grounds that they had already paid their ransom.⁵²

The seizure of objects occurred primarily in the context of the search. The Cheka commonly targeted individuals it suspected of counterrevolution, speculation, or other crimes, even setting people up when hard pressed to secure evidence for its charges, despite the prejudice against "provocation" among revolutionaries.⁵³ But the practice of the search rapidly

confirmed. To the contrary," Dzerzhinsky elaborated, "it is obvious that these slanderous accusations were fabricated to compromise our commission. In many cases it has become clear that con-men have taken bribes using the commission's name."

50. Ibid, l. 16. *Arkhiv VChK*, p. 165. One woman's husband was arrested by the Cheka, she complained to Bonch-Bruevich in February 1918, because they were unable to come up with the 100,000 ruble "fine" laid upon them; another was freed on February 18 after paying a 35,000 ruble ransom.

51. It would be fascinating to trace the dying out of lawyers in private practice, hired by individuals and firms, during the revolutionary era. The Cheka explicitly banned petitions from lawyers and warned the population to avoid them in an announcement to the population issued in June 1918. Such a warning was necessary because in the short period of time since the Cheka began work in Moscow, a cottage industry of rogue "lawyers" had sprung up quite literally around the Lubyanka (the less illustrious among them apparently waited along the Lubyanka's walls like free-lance tour guides). These men accepted "massive sums with many zeros" from the families of the accused, sometimes pretending to be Cheka agents themselves, other times promising to make applications on behalf of the arrested with the relevant courts and offices. *Che-Ka* (Berlin, 1923), p. 154. Ill-established as the legal profession was when the Empire collapsed, it nevertheless took time for people to realize that their "applications and defenses," their services and their bribes could wield "absolutely no influence on the progress of the case," that they were dealing with an organization not without precedent among Russian institutions, perhaps, but whose manner of operation was utterly closed to them. There were, of course, countless exceptions, and it was in the shadow of these exceptions that the rogue lawyers flourished, holding out false hopes for months or years after the Cheka issued this statement.

52. GARF f. 4390, op. 2, d. 255, l. 42. *Arkhiv VChK* p. 155. GARF f. 4390, op. 2, d. 255, l. 42. The fact that the purse seized from the Aleksandrov Company was brought to Moscow, and never entered into the People's Bank, was a source of considerable upset to the firm's lawyer, hired to recover the money, who had to travel back and forth between Petrograd and Moscow no fewer than five times before ultimately securing its return (and then some, as discussed later in this chapter).

53. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 99, l. 23. In the case of the Khodakov brothers, for example, after the Cheka's own investigations into their alleged speculation in bonds led nowhere, the Speculation Department hired a man named Aleksandrov to ask the brothers if they would facilitate a bond trade for him. When they agreed, the brothers were arrested, Aleksandrov was "paid, just like any agent of the commission who gives information about people occupied with speculation, a reward that is known to him," and the brothers'

expanded out from these targeted efforts to include neighbors, friends, and passers-by, casually caught up in the whirlwind of requisition and confiscation. A soldier storing his possessions at his sister's house learned they had been seized during a search of her apartment, despite the fact that by law, as he put it, "the goods of Red Army soldiers are not subject to confiscation."⁵⁴ Especially after the neighborhoods formed their own chekas, searches were often conducted on a building-wide basis, meaning they were something neighbors experienced together. A report from early September 1918 announced that a recently created neighborhood-level cheka had performed a "search at building no. 36 (the former Beliaev) Dolgorukovskaia Street in the Sushchevsko-Mari'inskii neighborhood. The search was conducted from midnight until 6 a.m. 53 apartments were searched."⁵⁵ Neighbors also experienced each other's searches through the practice of the "*zasada*" or ambush, in which agents staked out the apartments of people they had arrested for several days, sometimes as long as a week, and arrested all those who came by.⁵⁶

If, after investigation, it was revealed that the arrested party was innocent, the goods seized in the course of the search—many of which were food products or goods having nothing to do with the case—were sometimes returned and sometimes not. In the case of the Muscovite Voevodskii, whose apartment was searched in January 1919 because the Cheka had intercepted a suspicious telegram from his son asking him to help a group of

property was searched and seized. Due to the delicacy of provocation, the Cheka's response to the charges that it used the practice veered somewhat erratically between denial and justification. This particular set-up and seizure appears to have elicited a great deal of upset in official circles. Bonch-Bruevich fielded so many complaints about the Khodakov case that he sent an inquiry to Peters, then temporary head of the Cheka, questioning both the use of Aleksandrov and the subsequent seizure of the brothers' property. In general, however, set-ups were common. A review of Cheka procedures in the fall of 1918 noted that "a large number of cases are made by provocateurs, especially in the spheres of speculation and crime on the job. Special people set up deals, and then hand in the people they have deceived. They systematically propose arranging freedom in return for a bribe, and then turn people in and punish them for that deception." GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 103, l. 1.

54. GARF f. 4085, op. 2, d. 166, l. 129.

55. *MChK*, p. 95.

56. GARF f. 4390, op. 2, d. 255, l. 24, for a teacher whose husband was wanted by the Cheka, but was away when agents came to arrest him, and arrested the teacher instead, setting up an ambush outside her door and arresting a co-worker who came to look for her the following day; GARF f. 4390, op. 2, d. 276, l. 174, for an account of a search conducted on the order of the Osobyi Otdel of the VChK in November 1919, resulting in the arrest of Nikolai Tikhomirov and others who visited him, that was the result of a case of mistaken identity, as Tikhomirov happened to have the same name as a different man wanted by the Cheka.

“Old Believers” purchase tea and iron, a search of his apartment revealed no tea or iron, but it did turn up 200 funts of caramel, which was seized despite the fact that, Voevodskii claimed, it did not even belong to him alone but was shared among the residents of his “concentrated” apartment and stored in a common cabinet.⁵⁷ The apartment of Evdokiia Iureva, an employee of the Rumiantsev Museum, was searched the day after her arrest. Missing after the search were her typewriter and camera—both objects in great demand within state offices—as well as a gold brooch, an American fountain pen, a stamp with the Iureva’s initials, and a black leather portfolio, which she never got back.⁵⁸ Both Voevodskii and Iureva were cleared of wrongdoing and released; the seizure of their goods functioned something like a tax for having passed through the Lubianka and availed themselves of the Cheka’s services.⁵⁹

In addition to their resemblance, from the perspective of experience, to theft, blackmail, and provocation, part of the reason that requisition and confiscation looked so much like crime was that there was no legal basis for them. The project of extracting personal possessions unfolded in an environment of minimal legal regulation, against the backdrop of nationalization, municipalization, and the general degradation of the institution of private property. This would not change, no legal basis for requisition and confiscation would be provided, before the Sovnarkom decree of April 1920, but starting in the summer of 1918, the Cheka made efforts to officialize the search by endowing it with a documentary foundation. This was done not only to legitimate search and seizure procedures in the eyes of the public, but also to consolidate the position of the Cheka as sole purveyor of the right to search and requisition within the Soviet state, a right that was claimed by numerous other

57. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 96, l. 4. Voevodskii’s case suggests that the sort of perustration described by Vladlen Izmozik that was in use in Petrograd at the time had also been adopted by Moscow authorities. Vladlen Izmozik, *Glaza i ushi rezhima* (St. Petersburg, 1995), chs. 3-4, pp. 36-78. On the search of the living places of former officers conducted in late summer and early fall 1918, see GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 97, l. 50.

58. GARF f. 4390, op. 2, d. 255, l. 45.

59. This is where the connection to Tilly’s model is especially strong, as the Bolsheviks acted here as both the threat and the protection, albeit somewhat after the fact.

authorities, as we have seen, particularly the local soviets. In the summer of 1918 the Cheka began to require the use of a document called the search “protocol” in all its searches. In its first iterations, the protocol was little more than a blank, double-sided piece of paper with lines designating where agents were to record the names and addresses of those being searched, a description of the objects reviewed and/or seized, and the signatures of all the participants, including a representative from the building committee, who was now formally required to be present at all Cheka searches within a given apartment building. Later forms included a space for agents to list the assessment of the worth of the objects at hand, as a means of identifying objects such that they could not be substituted for cheaper, similar goods by a crooked Chekist, but also as a means of assessing the value of individual households (for more on searches and valuation, see Chapter 3).⁶⁰

The use of the protocol dictated a sequence of additional steps around the search. First, agents it required agents to secure a “search order” before they performed the search itself, forcing them to register their activities with central authorities. Much like arrest orders of the period, search orders were initially general permits. They adhered to the person performing the search, who could do so whenever he deemed it necessary, rather than to the target of the search, who could be anyone, for any reason. Through the search order, the Cheka attempted to extend its monopoly on searching, to be sure, but the goal was also to give the public a means of quickly assessing the legitimacy of a given search or searcher. On October 15, 1918, after suffering a wave of unauthorized (i.e. bandit) searches, the Zamoskvoretskaia neighborhood cheka drew “the attention of all citizens of Zamoskvorech’e (neighborhood) that searches can be performed only by people supplied with orders from the Zamoskvoretskaia extraordinary commission, under the signatures of

60. GARF f. 4390, op. 4, d. 49, l. 21. The frequent practice of swapping was exposed, among other places, in the famous Shiperko warehouse when it was transferred from the control of the VChK to that of the Mossoviet in February 1919, after months of dire mismanagement. “Things were simply stolen from several units, but determining what exactly was stolen is impossible in light of the fact that the warehouse had no oversight. ...either criminal inattention to duty, or a greater degree of criminality either toward the goods of citizens or, in the case that these goods were requisitioned or confiscated, towards the property [*sobstvennost*] of the Russian republic.there were also instances where members of the VChK substituted goods ordered for release with goods forbidden from release,” presumably controlled substances and goods.

one of three people: Zakharov, Stepnyi, or Vikman...Orders already issued for the right to search, requisition, and the like, to other institutions must be verified at the Zamoskvoret-skaia extraordinary commission.”⁶¹ As the Cheka’s procedures evolved, however, so too did those of the bandits, who began to wave pieces of paper before the eyes of those they intended to rob. In mid-July, reported the *Mossoviet Evening News*, “five unknown individuals appeared at a door in Iamskoe pole and “presented some kind of scrap of paper and demanded entry to perform a search,” which later turned out to be a simple robbery.⁶² The MChK frequently stumbled upon caches of blank forms—illegally procured official documents or counterfeits—in the possession of bandits at the time of arrest.

After months of lawless searches in their homes, the residents of Moscow and Petrograd embraced the protocol. From their complaints about searches after the protocol was instituted, we know that its strictures were widely-known, if also commonly ignored. On the night of November 22, 1918, for example, agent Dobr----skii (illegible) of the Cheka led a search at No. 4 Putinkovskii Sidestreet in the Second Arbat district. The search began at about 2 a.m. in the apartment of Sergei Ivanovich Kassel and a little over an hour later migrated to the apartment of the Vainshtein family, where the building committee chair, A.E. Fidler, rented a room. As Fidler later reported to Bonch-Bruevich, he believed that the search was somehow “provocation” implemented not by real Chekists but by unknown enemies. As grounds for his claim he offered irregularities in adherence to the protocol, exposed when Fidler held a building-wide meeting to discuss the previous night’s events. First of all, it was learned, members of the militia contacted the building’s watchman (*dvornik*) to let them in to the courtyard only at 3:15 a.m., but the search began at 2 a.m. When the *dvornik* met the policeman at the gate, the latter “expressed his surprise to him, [saying] that

61. MChK, p. 104. Reprinted from *Izvestiia*, October 15, 1918, no. 224.

62. *Vechernie izvestiia Moskvy*, July 23, 1918. The Cheka was not alone in attracting impersonators, however. The same day, the newspaper published the account of a cafeteria director, who reported that three unknown men had entered the establishment on Malaia bronnaia and demanded vodka, which it was illegal at the time to sell. When the cafeteria director refused them, they took their own bottle out and began to drink, demanding that the cafeteria director give them 1000 rubles each and saying they were agents of the regular (criminal) militia. They also had a revolver and were later, the paper reported, arrested.

usually they came along with the commissar [Chekist] and were in attendance at the search, but in this case they were left on the street and were called only when Sergei Ivanovich [Kassel] was already arrested.” Fidler was certain that if “the search began at two at night in the absence of the building committee chair and the *dvornik* was called only at 3:15 at night, we can all conclude that the search was conducted improperly.”⁶³

Even aside from its technical shortcomings, the protocol posed an array of epistemological problems. First and foremost, in all the rules surrounding its adoption, nowhere was it specified whether the protocol was to contain a list of all the objects possessed within a household, or only those subject to requisition and confiscation. If the protocol was to list only the objects subject to requisition and confiscation, this still left a wide berth for light-fingered Chekists to pocket other items found in the home, which he could simply refrain from listing on the protocol, leaving the resident with no documentary basis for making a claim against him. The other option was for the Chekist to list everything in the household, to make a full inventory of its contents, whether they were subject to seizure or not. This would seem to address the concern that Chekists might steal objects not listed on the protocol—but in order for this method of proof in the case of theft to work, residents needed to already have a complete inventory of their household goods in their possession, so as to demonstrate that they indeed possessed an object that was now missing and that the Chekist had not listed on his protocol.

An illustration of the protocol’s limitation in this regard we might look to the case of Iu.V. Maksimov, a resident of Petrograd and acquaintance of Vladimir Bonch-Bruевич, to whom Maksimov wrote when agents of the Petrograd Cheka searched his apartment on October 31, 1918. Maksimov was a scientist-entrepreneur of indeterminate, but likely fairly wealthy, background. He was, as he put it, “unaffiliated with the state.” He possessed a utopian streak, and was currently at work on creating “the first-ever, in Russia and the

63. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 102, ll. 14-15.

world, real state communist farm,” an enterprise that would be replete with the very latest machines, crafted by “professors of machine-building famous the whole world over.”

In addition to his scientific plans, Maksimov also possessed an object that was described in subsequent Cheka protocols as an “apparatus for the making of alcoholic spirits”; 8,000 rubles; and a Browning revolver with military binoculars.⁶⁴ After the Cheka searched his apartment, Maksimov was left with a copy of the “protocol” of his possessions made by the Chekists. In Maksimov’s case, “the protocol was made in two copies,” which regrettably “differ[ed] from one another” in the precise definition of the most contentious object on the inventory, the metal apparatus somehow associated with liquids—one version listed it as a simple teapot, the other as the more damning “apparatus for making alcoholic spirits”—*samogonka*—an illegal enterprise. More upsetting to Maksimov, however, was what had been left off the protocol. “In accordance with the text of the protocol,” he noted, “I have the ability to demand the return of the goods taken from me by the commission, excluding those that are not described on the protocol. Consequently, I do not have the right to demand any kind of compensation in the case of the loss of some object or another during the search. This concerns me a bit,” he explained, “as I had 8,000 rubles in cash at home... it would also be unpleasant to lose other objects, especially those relating to the memory of my dead father,” all of which went missing after the search. But since those objects had not been registered by the Cheka agent in the protocol, Maksimov had no grounds to make a claim. “I cannot establish the loss as a legal fact,” Maksimov concluded, “as in order to do that it would have been necessary to have had, prior to the search, a verified inventory list, which, of course, not a single private person possesses, nor do I.” The protocols created by the Cheka could never be checked, because prior to the appearance of agents of the Cheka in a given apartment, no such list would have existed.

64. Maksimov’s account as recorded in his letter to Bonch-Bruevich at GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 102, l. 9.

2.2 Counting it Up: The Inventory of Requisitioned Possessions

The legitimation of requisition was seen to hinge not only on how it was performed, but on what happened to requisitioned goods. In the most basic sense, this meant ensuring that seized goods made their way into institutional coffers rather than lining the pockets of those who seized them. Yet in the revolutionary era, the boundaries between the institutional and the personal were muddy. Institutional enrichment—the effort to secure scarce resources for your own institution (workplace) and its employees—was frowned upon as “separatist” and disruptive to state-sponsored efforts at allocation.⁶⁵ But insofar as the only sure resource the central government had at its disposal to fund the regime was the printing press, institutional enrichment was also a necessary mode of survival. Nowhere were these tensions more fully expressed than in the management of requisitioned and confiscated goods in the coffers of the Cheka.

The Cheka moved to Moscow on March 12, 1918, a day after the Sovnarkom, bringing its stockpile of seized goods with it.⁶⁶ It settled in a complex of gray stone buildings occupied by several insurance agencies, with which it shared office space until the end of March, as well as a hotel and restaurant, Billo, favored by the city’s German community.⁶⁷ Pris-

65. For more on the problems of institutional “separatism” and economic crime see Chapter 5.

66. A handful of agents chosen by Dzerzhinsky had been sent down to work in the city several months before that, but there is little evidence that they cooperated with the Mossoviet’s security agency, known as “Rogov’s Commission” after its director (and similar to the Cheka, known as “Dzerzhinsky’s Commission” until mid-1918). Rogov’s commission had not been nearly so effective in Moscow as Dzerzhinsky’s, or for that matter Bonch-Bruевич’s, in Petrograd, the latter of which had disarmed Petrograd’s “anarchist clubs” earlier in the year. The Mossoviet ordered Rogov’s commission to do the same in late February 1918, at which point they occupied nearly two dozen mansions in the city’s poshest neighborhood, to no avail—the disarming of the anarchists, on April 11, was the Cheka’s Moscow debut, and like virtually everything else the Cheka did when it arrived in Moscow, it was heavily publicized. Just days before the Petrograd Bolsheviks’ arrival, the Mossoviet attempted to overhaul its security apparatus, declaring the creation of a new city-wide “extraordinary commission” to fight counterrevolution on March 8, 1918, and inviting all neighborhood soviets to participate. (MChK, p. 16.) But Dzerzhinsky ordered a merger of the Mossoviet’s commission into his own just a week after arriving, creating at the same time an initiative to form neighborhood-level chekas (raion chekas). (ibid, pp. 17, 15.) Just one Moscow neighborhood had responded to a directive issued from Petrograd several weeks before, inviting them to create commissions modeled on the central one.

67. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 79, l. 1.

oner memoirs indicate that the best rooms in Lubianka no. 11 were turned into offices for investigators and members of the Cheka, while the Billo's wine cellar was transformed into the "Storage Department," run by Comrade Minenko (Mitseiko), who distributed seized goods from the Cheka's storeroom to other agencies at the instruction of Dzerzhinsky and Peters. Next door was the till (kassa), which before August 1918 was also administered by Minenko, and later, after it was decided that different people should manage the goods and the money, by an accountant, Comrade Rutenberg.⁶⁸

Prior to the April 1920 decrees on requisition and confiscation, the Sovnarkom paid little attention to the question of what to do with the mountains of movable goods Soviet institutions began collecting after the Revolution, especially those bearing no special artistic or monetary value. The matter was discussed for the first time at a meeting of the Sovnarkom on June 3, 1918, resulting in a vague order concerning the "use of the confiscated means and property located at Dzerzhinsky's Commission," stipulating only that "all confiscated means and property enter into the use of the Treasury and be distributed to the corresponding Commissariats."⁶⁹ No methods of enforcement were suggested in the order, which appears to have been signed only by the Sovnarkom secretary rather than Lenin and Bonch-Bruевич, which marked it as unimportant. Nor did it treat the enormous quantities of "means and property" being confiscated by Soviet agencies other than the Cheka.

The Commissariat of Government Control, by contrast, took a keen interest in the accumulating wealth of the Cheka, and apparently found allies who shared this concern among some senior members of the Bolshevik regime. The first audit of the Cheka was requested by an unnamed source just two months after the commission was created, in February 1918. The request so angered Dzerzhinsky that he sent a representative to the Sovnarkom to learn its origin.⁷⁰ Dzerzhinsky fended off that initiative, but only for a time. A Government Control inspector and Communist Party member named Ozerevskii paid two

68. Che-Ka, p. 152.

69. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 97, l. 14.

70. *Arkhiv VChK*, p. 167.

visits to the Cheka in September and November 1918; representatives from Goskon returned several more times in 1919 to evaluate progress made by the Cheka's chief accountant, Shepelinskii, the treasurer, Rutenberg, and the small flock of mostly female clerks they employed.

Ozerevskii did not find much material to audit when he and a colleague first arrived at the Lubyanka in September. In keeping with standard procedure, they presented their mandate to the accountant, Shepelinskii, with the request that he "recognize it and enter into the review." Shepelinskii declared that he would be unable to cooperate; not for lack of a desire, he explained, but because he had been hired only a month earlier, and rather remarkably, no books existed for the period prior to his tenure. Ozerevskii judged Shepelinskii a competent accountant, well-versed in the double-entry (Italian) bookkeeping that Government Control aspired to instill in all institutions; nevertheless, "he could vouch for the accuracy of the figures only from August 1," and it later came out that even those sums were little more than estimates, insofar as no one was certain how much money the Cheka held on August 1 itself. Reviewing the books kept on just one day, September 29, 1918, as compared to the kassa's actual holdings, Ozerevskii discovered an excess of 964,562 rubles. Ozerevskii encountered a similar state of affairs in the physical space of the treasury, located on the first floor and run by Rutenberg with the help of a female clerk named Bi(t)ts. "In response to the question—how much money is in the cash-box right now—the director of the treasury department Rutenberg and the cashier Bits could not precisely answer, according to their statement, they themselves did not well know. Information about the daily condition of the cash-box is not maintained."⁷¹

At first, Ozerevskii recounted, the "ignorance on the part of the people charged with directing the treasury of how much was stored in it" struck him as "strange"; but "upon further acquaintance with the work of the kassa—this occurrence turned out to be completely explicable: in fits and starts, hundreds of thousands of rubles pass through the kassa, and

71. GARF f. 4390, op. 2, d. 281, l. 23.

neither Rutenberg nor Bits nor the other assistants manage to count all these sums up and record them in an account book.”⁷² Rutenberg later ventured a guess that “something more than 2 million rubles” was held in the treasury on the day of Ozerevskii’s first visit, but when the latter began an inspection of the room’s multiple cabinets, safes, and canvas bags containing cash, he found more than 2 million rubles in the first fireproof safe alone. He sternly ordered an “emergency cash transport” to the People’s Bank; three more emergency transports were executed after Ozerevskii’s September visit. In total, Ozerevskii found more than 5 million rubles in cash in the kassa on his first visit, in addition to 6,930 gold rubles, 13,559 silver rubles, more than 36 pounds of silver bars, and approximately 1,044 pounds of copper coins worth hundreds of thousands of paper rubles.⁷³ Ozerevskii’s first impression of the kassa was confirmed upon his return trip in November, after which he remarked: “[a]s is obvious from the act attached here, the turnover of the VChK’s kassa is enormous: the balance for August 1 alone, not including the data from the storage department, was 1,149,840 rub. 19 kop.” On November 4, two months later, it was nearly 3.5 million rubles, again not including the storage department. “The current account of the VChK for November 20 is 7,518,675 r. 93 k. The current account grows daily due to ransoms and fines.”⁷⁴

The Goskon investigations provide a fascinating vantage into a little-seen dimension of the Lubianka: its life as a workplace in the new regime, and as a hub of revolutionary practices dealing with both people and things. We know most about the practices dealing with people—the arrested and imprisoned—gleaned from memoirs written by those who spent time inside the building, either as agents or prisoners, and experienced firsthand the rigors of arrest, incarceration, and interrogation. Ozerevskii’s reports trade in tropes familiar from these documents. Because they targeted an explicitly official audience—I found copies of them in both the Goskon and Sovnarkom files, among the papers of the Adminis-

72. GARF f. 4390, op. 2, d. 281, l. 24

73. *ibid.* l. 24.

74. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 103, l. 2.

trative Directorate—they also contributed to a growing knowledge of the Cheka’s practices within the regime. His November report was prefaced with an untitled list enumerating ten critiques of Cheka practices. The list touched upon a wide range of issues, from the inexperience of the rank-and-file investigators, “the majority of whom are inexperienced young people between the ages of 19 and 22 or 23,” to the use of “threats and punches during interrogation,” and other methods bordering on outright psychological terror; according to “those questioned” in the course of the Goskon review, agents routinely simulated preparations for execution, even going so far as lining those who refused to confess up against an execution wall and firing blanks.⁷⁵

Moreover, the Government Control reports provide access to the treatment of things by the Cheka, as it built its reputation and authority as an important arbiter of material life. The Lubyanka was a great sorting ground of revolution. Hundreds of people were filtered through the Lubyanka’s holding pen, cells, and interrogation rooms each day, and they did not come empty-handed. They came, and their lives were cast, against the backdrop of their worldly possessions, whether recorded on an inventory, seized as evidence, confiscated as punishment, or stolen during the search. The Government Control investigations provided rare access to the physical spaces of the Lubyanka where these objects were stored. After his first visit, Ozerevskii wrote, “I think it necessary to give a few of my impressions as to the nature of the chaos that reigned prior to our appearance at the VChK,” he began, “and to say a few words about the very space of the *kassa*.”

The treasury of the VChK is located on the first floor, with unsecured Venetian windows opening onto the courtyard of the Commission. It is divided from the

75. From inspections made within the Cheka, Goskon agents also determined that investigators regularly held off on questioning suspects for as long as three to four weeks after arrest, “in spite of an announcement hanging in the space of the commission requiring interrogation within 24 hours.” Men and women were held within the same cells, lunches were regularly “distributed not to ‘all’, as they fail to cook enough,” leaving about half of the incarcerated to eat just once a day, and “on April 8-9 [likely meaning the night of April 8th, when a visit was presumably conducted], 125 people were confined to a space of not more than 45 square sazhen” in Lubyanka no. 11, the holding room for the arrested. The Goskon report also critiqued the investigative procedures of the Cheka. A large number of cases, it alleged, “were built by provocateurs, especially in the spheres of speculation and crime on the job,” in which “special people set up deals, and then turn in the people they have deceived.”

main corridor of the Commission by a light glass door, and from the general space of the Storage Department by thin glass barriers that do not reach the ceiling. Any employee of the VChK can enter, as there are no special passes required and no special security guards in place.

The interior: a small space [15 x 15], packed with random objects that have nothing to do with the treasury—three large, warped canvas boxes that had come in, according to the Administration, from the Storage Department; rolling around on the floor were bags of silver coins and boxes full of money.

After Ozerevskii's first visit, some of his proposed reforms were implemented. When he returned in November, he confirmed that "the treasury of the VChK was moved into a more suitable space, and the various bags and boxes that did not belong to it were removed from its control." Nearly eight million rubles had been transferred from the Lubyanka to the People's Bank, improvements had been made to the keeping of accounts, hours of deposit and withdrawal were fixed, and most important of all, "the precise amount of money in the treasury was established, and the cashier on duty made responsible for giving a daily account to the presidium about the movement of the sums in the cash-box."⁷⁶

Idiosyncrasies and shortcomings in the office life of the Lubyanka persisted, however, especially when it came to the management of things, centered in the Storage Department. The Storage Department was located one floor beneath the treasury. In his first report, Ozerevskii explained that "[seized] goods are given to the Storage Department, which has grown to enormous dimensions (there one can find everything imaginable, starting with diamonds and children's toys, and ending with soap, wine, and fabrics)."⁷⁷ Sensible of the fact that few members of the regime would have personally visited the Department (or were likely to have seen anything like it in the past), Ozerevskii again deemed it "necessary to offer the general impression made upon me during my visit to the Storage Department:

76. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 103, l. 2.

77. GARF f. 4390, op. 2, d. 281, l. 28.

A former wine cellar, damp, packed with everything imaginable, poorly guarded, with broken glass windows through which a man of average corpulence could fit. The storeroom has a tendency to expand, that is, to become more and more stuffed. Goods, such as cotton and other materials, are rotting, shoe leather is growing moldy....There are things stored in boxes, suitcases, and other packing materials there, sealed up. What is stored inside of them is unknown to the proprietors of the storeroom, and I would wager that no one else knows either.⁷⁸

Shortly after Ozerevskii's visit, the Storage Department lost its accountant, Iansen, to investigative work, and Bits, the female clerk in the treasury, transferred to the Speculation Department. These personnel transfers hinted at what Ozerevskii deemed a persistent, inappropriate intimacy between the agents who collected wealth and the agents who managed it. Some employees worked in both branches at once, a schedule that was logistically possible due to the fact that operational work occurred at night, while accounts were managed during the day. The technical procedures of the Storage Department were also found lacking. It maintained a ledger where all newly-acquired goods were registered, but it kept no records concerning the "movement of goods," such that it was easy for them to disappear. Prior to the arrival of inspectors, the Storage Department had insisted on keeping its books secret, even from the treasury. Rutenberg, the treasurer, relayed rumors that the Storage Department had its own private till, that he received only a portion of the cash, coins, and precious metals collected by agents, while some undefined amount flowed instead into the coffers of the Storage Department. Ozerevskii remedied this bifurcated cash flow, reporting that "at the insistence of Control, the Storage Department, where the deposit and release of valuables coming in from arrested people or after confiscations, was reorganized, and at the present moment all money and other bills of credit that enter the department are imme-

78. *ibid.*, I. 22.

diately given to the general treasury, and are not saved in the Storage Department as they were.”

But these improvements would be little more than “palliative,” in Ozerevskii’s view, until the members of the VChK addressed a more fundamental absence: the Cheka lacked a budget, that critical tool of articulating its boundaries as an institution, vis-à-vis the central government and its own employees. Ozerevskii initially found this absence difficult to understand. In deference to the “exceptional position occupied by the VChK, as a weapon of political battle,” he approached the review with a willingness to tolerate “a few departures from the usual forms of accounting, called forth by the necessities of life.” A deeper acquaintance with the Cheka’s practices, however, had convinced him that “even from this perspective, the representatives of Goskontrol [his shorthand for Government Control] cannot deem the accounts of the VChK to be satisfactory,” not so much because they were incomplete or sloppy as because they did not exist. “In the widest sense of the word ‘accounting,’ the VChK simply has none,” Ozerevskii explained. Bits and pieces of accounts had appeared in recent months, both organically, as the Cheka’s work settled into extractive routines, and as a result of Government Control’s efforts. Shepelinskii kept accounts of the Cheka’s total income from August 1, and thanks to Ozerevskii’s demands, Rutenberg was on his way to keeping abreast of the treasury’s cash flow. But there were virtually no records of spending. The books from immediately before Shepelinskii arrived on August 1, Ozerevskii reported, “were completely clean on the debit side, aside from a few minor entries. What the Commission lived on before August 1 and how much it spent was completely impossible to determine.” This was not something the Government Control review or the Cheka’s own accountants could remedy. Numerous efforts had been made to convince the operational departments to record their expenditures, but in every case, their presidiums had refused. The senior members of the VChK, made aware of the problem, declined to fix it. The accountant of the Economic Department, responsible for funding the Cheka’s operations and paying wages, had made repeated attempts to “separate” its accounts “from

the general accounts of the entire VChK,” a separation that would establish a distinction between what the VChK spent on itself and all the wealth it accrued through its nighttime labors, “but these efforts,” he reported, “are not met with sympathy by the administration of the VChK.”⁷⁹

In the absence of firm boundaries separating the wealth of the Republic from the holdings of the Cheka (to say nothing of the pockets of employees), Ozerevskii asserted, “the cornerstone of the VChK is the Economic Department.”⁸⁰ An audit was “not really possible in the conditions in which the department was kept,” but its general principles of operation were clear: “the economic department receives goods and materials from the storage department, and this confiscated property, in accord with the orders of the VChK, is sold to employees at prices lower than production costs, that is first, and second the money earned from the sale of this property is not entered into the income of the republic, but rather remains with the economic department, and the latter, apparently considering it its own, spends it as it sees fit.”⁸¹ The Cheka, Ozerevskii reported with amazement, operated several retail establishments trading in requisitioned goods, housed at the Upper Trading Rows, just like a regular shop, in the city’s historic commercial district. The store was apparently only open to Cheka employees, but it seems to have supplied other state institutions with goods upon request. Ozerevskii only managed to find records from one day of business at the store: August 20, 1918. “A review of documents attached to various orders” from that day, he reported, “indicated the following: from the VChK stores/The Upper trading rows/ money in the sum of 33,286 rubles 51 kopecks came in, and 9,752 rubles 40 kopecks were spent on the needs of the store.” Because none of the earnings were handed over to the treasury, this left a substantial profit for the Cheka—not when compared to the quantity of wealth it seized, perhaps, but certainly enough to keep the Cheka, as an institution, afloat. The Cheka, as an institution, was living off of seizure. Its sloppy books were clean on the

79. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 103, l. 3.

80. *Ibid.*, l. 4.

81. *Ibid.*, l. 8.

debit side because it spent what it seized. In his reports, Ozerevskii repeatedly returned to the observation that even the office space of the Cheka, sword of socialist revolution, resembled nothing so well as a shop. “I do not understand the existence of this warehouse,” he wrote after his first trip there. “The VChK is the highest instance of investigative power, not a Commercial enterprise, which sets itself the task of stuffing its warehouse.”⁸²

The practice was informal policy in the branch Chekas as well; in Astrakhan a review of the local Cheka revealed that “confiscated goods, clothing, shoes, and the like, were given out to employees of the Chrezkom and their release was often ordered solely by the chair F. Daviat or his secretary K. Nevzorov.” As in Moscow, goods were released to employees “for payment” or “against salary,” for advantageous prices.⁸³ In Moscow, the very buildings of the Cheka housed a whole complex of spaces to meet its employees’ needs. While the self-supporting, self-enclosed nature of the Cheka’s supply operation would not have been unusual for the time, it seems likely that it was differentiated from similar supply programs mounted in other institutions by its extensiveness and the quality of its stock. “In the buildings along Bolshaia Lubyanka in nos. 7, 9, 11, 14, 18, and 22 are located the departments of the VChK,” Ozerevskii reported, as well as “a cafeteria, a kitchen, a shop for employees, and part of a cobbler’s workshop to satisfy the needs of employees.” Around the corner, “in the buildings on Varsonof’evskii side street no. 7 and 10 are located a cobbler’s workshop, a junkyard, a leather workshop, a metal workshop, and a garage.”⁸⁴

82. Reiterated after his second visit: “The VChK is first and foremost an investigative instance, and all claims on the right to utilize the property and sums once wielded by the arrested should be alien to it. The VChK is a weapon of Soviet power for the battle against counter-revolution and its manifestations, it is not a commercial enterprise, the motto of which is: assess as many fines and perform as many confiscations as possible.” [ibid] It should be noted that Ozerevskii’s motivation in leveling this critique was not a discomfort with the act of seizure in itself or a desire to preserve the institution of private property, as one could be forgiven of suspecting of an employee of Goskon. Rather, he proposed that through greater accountability and intelligent management, the Cheka might contribute not only to the material well-being of the Republic, but to the creation of a new type of economy, in which even petty possessions were elevated by being endowed with social value. Instead of simply amassing bags of money and piles of objects like any other “Commercial enterprise,” Ozerevskii believed the Cheka’s warehouses should serve as distribution centers, from which the collected resources could be sent out and put to use: “fabrics go to Tsentretekstil,” Ozerevskii imagined, “and medicines to hospitals, and so forth.... The Storage Department of the VChK, in my opinion, was intended for this, and should not serve simply as a warehouse of goods.”[ibid, l. 28]

83. GARF f. 4390, op. 4, d. 45, l. 12.

84. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 103, l. 8.

The Cheka's storerooms did not serve only its employees, however; other institutions, particularly the Sovnarkom, habitually availed themselves of the Cheka's confiscated stock. This pattern of consumption was harder for Ozerevskii to see because it was conducted through correspondence that he did not have the right to inspect. While Ozerevskii was undoubtedly right that the Cheka's easy access to cash bolstered its autonomy vis-à-vis the central government, its correspondence indicates that it used this wealth in a manner that solidified its position and raised its stature at the center of institutional distribution networks. Indeed, on the very same day in June 1918 that the Sovnarkom discussed the fate of confiscated possessions for the first time, and suggested they be handed over to the "corresponding" institutions, Bonch-Bruевич filed the following request with Comrade Minenko, Raman's predecessor at the Cheka's Economic Department:

Men's shoes: Boots, one pair no. 38, two pairs no. 41, three pairs no. 39, two pairs galoshes no. 12, one pair galoshes no. 9, one pair men's shoes no. 38.

Galoshes: one pair in flannelette, size 12, one pair size 12, one pair size 13, one pair size 10, one pair size 9, one pair size 7.

Women's shoes: a. boots: two pairs size 34, one pair size 38, two pairs with galoshes size 3, two pairs with galoshes size 4, one pair with galoshes size 5, four pairs with galoshes size 6, two pairs with galoshes size 7, and in addition to that women's boots size 17-6/high heels/, size 15-6/low heels/, size 14-5/high heels/, size 12-6/low heels/, size 18-6/low heels/. Women's low boots size 14-5/high heels/, women's low boots size 36, high heels.

Women's galoshes: two pairs size 9, one pair size 5.

Aside from that fabric is needed: for a women's jacket, three cuts for men's suits, one preferably black, two for men's suits preferably in grey and light

brown, one cut for men's pants, black, a children's jacket, children's sandals size 7 or 8, children's shoes size 7/7, and women's shoes size 4 or 5.⁸⁵

Over the course of 1918, the Sovnarkom asked the Cheka to issue it hard-to-find perishables, such as sugar and port, 30 revolvers for couriers serving the Administrative Directorate, and typewriters. In response to the Sovnarkom's request for the latter in November 1918, the Cheka replied, "we inform you that we have not a single typewriter, and the ones that we had before have mostly been sent to the front." The procedure for acquiring typewriters was as follows: "At the present time requisition of typewriters is being conducted by means of the tips we receive" with machines taken "from private individuals. We ask that you look for the machines among private people and the Department will requisition them immediately for you."⁸⁶ The Cheka offered itself, then, as a procurement service: if the Sovnarkom identified the necessary typewriters, the Cheka would seize them. In these transactions, as in its store, the Cheka did not distribute its wares for free. Bonch-Bruевич offered to pay for his clothing and footwear order upon being presented with a bill by the Economic Department.⁸⁷ In the localities, the chekas appear to have driven harder bargains. The Povenetskii Cheka, outside the city of Arkhangelsk, developed a habit of "confiscat[ing] goods from residents, and then giv[ing] them to the district provisioning committee, at which point it demanded payment for these goods, to one specific person, which was fulfilled by the provisioning committee. For what reason payment was required for confiscated goods, and why to that person in particular, rather than the treasury, was not clear," an inspector reported.⁸⁸ A review of a district cheka outside of Astrakhan found that the Cheka had required a payment of 518 r. 55 k. from the economic council in return

85. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 97, l. 15.

86. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 96, l. 60.

87. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 97, l. 15.

88. GARF f. 4390, op. 2, d. 276, l. 73.

for “wool released from the warehouse of the Chrezvkom.”⁸⁹ Small-time institutions⁹⁰ and individuals solicited the Cheka’s help with procurement as well.⁹¹

The scope of the Cheka’s involvement in the management of material life supports a familiar argument that locates the success of the Cheka in its ability to cut through the “ballast” of early Soviet institutions and explains its power with reference to its efficiency.⁹² Yet the Cheka was also monumentally inefficient, most obviously in the management of its own finances. Insisting that the Cheka adopt a rigorous system of accounting, shed

89. Note that the Goskon agents’ objection in this case was not that the Nikolaev cheka had demanded payment for the wool, but rather that the sovnarkhoz had indeed paid a sum of 519 r. 25 k. to the cheka, whereas the latter demanded only 518 r. 55 k., and the cheka had not made up the difference. GARF f. 4390, op. 4, d. 45, l. 7.

90. GARF f. A-353, op. 2, d. 415, l. 2. In July 1918, the Central Collegium on Prisoners accepted an offer to acquire 50,000 pairs of English boots for 25 rubles a pair, sending a representative to Moscow to conclude the transaction. For whatever reason, the representative went missing en route, and the Collegium had recently learned that the shoes had been sold “by some Mendelson to the Oblast Union of Towns, but now already for 29 rubles a pair.” The Collegium asked “the commission for the battle against counter-revolution” to “make an immediate order: on the requisition of the entire party of boots and their transfer to the Central Collegium, that is to us.”

91. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2560, ll. 11, 12. In December 1918, a Comrade T.M. Dreiman, agent of the Atkarskii district empowered to found an agriculture collective near Saratov, met with a common problem of the time, when one agent of the central government refused to accept papers issued by another. Dreiman’s experience illuminates role frequently adopted by the Cheka, that of notary or vouchsafe in the uncertain world of post-revolutionary exchange. On December 10, Dreiman received an order from the Department of Communes at VSNKh stating that it would permit the release of various agricultural implements to Dreiman. “The signature on the resolution was supported with a stamp,” Dreiman explained—stamps were critical tools of verification in revolutionary offices, and often counterfeited—“but the director of the warehouse refused to release the goods because ‘this signature is not familiar to me.’ [sic] I pointed to the stamp, but he snapped back ‘that does not mean anything.’” Dreiman wrote for help to the VChK’s Department of Warehouses, which courteously sent a representative to accompany him to various Moscow offices until he had both the necessary goods and a few train cars to carry them back to Saratov. (Dreiman’s story, it should be noted, was submitted to the Sovnarkom several months later as part of a packet of testimonials demonstrating the extent to which “only the VChK is in a condition to help those who have fallen into despair due to the sabotage and willfulness of the chancelleries that worked their way into our soviet institutions.”

92. In January 1919, the VChK ordered M. Iakovlev, together with Comrades Zissor and Dombrovskii, all employees of the VChK, to travel to Rostov “to clarify certain questions about production.” Iakovlev and his companions visited the local distribution organs as well as Union of Gardeners, and determined that “the information we got there completely departs from what we have in Moscow,” namely that supplies were much more extensive in Rostov than previously known. Such on-the-spot interventions and fact-finding missions became a staple of the revolutionary distribution system. In July 1920, for example, the Sovnarkom received a report from the Saratov gubcheka explaining that through investigation, it had been determined that “the chief hindrance in the implementation of the decree from November 21 on the preparation of wood for government needs was...the Gubleskom and other organs through which it was to have been implemented, who received it only on February 4, 1920, that is at a time when the thaw had already begun...” The members of the Gubleskom were immediately “accused of sabotage” and arrested, but the shortcomings in timber production attracted the personal attention of Ksenofontov and Mikhelson at the VChK, who remained involved through July. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2560, l. 13; quotation from l. 63, general correspondence between Moscow and Arkhangelsk on the matter, ll. 44-62.

its warehouses and treasuries, and turn its attention to “its political rights and functions,” Ozerevskii relayed the details of investigations he made into the resolution of individual cases and the attendant fines settled upon them. In the case of citizen Grinberg, whose petitions for the return of thousands of seized rubles were lodged with Bonch-Bruевич in January 1918, Ozerevskii learned the following: “by order of the Department for the battle against crime on the job, from June 11 no. 76, the storeroom released 1400 rubles to Grinberg on the basis of receipt no. 315, and additionally a current account was opened for him in the amount of 9,000 rubles. By the Department’s order from August 2 no. 3384, Grinberg was issued a check for the receipt of 10,400 rubles, thus the same sum figured twice and citizen Grinberg received back, instead of the 10,400 rubles taken from him, 20,800 rubles.” In June, citizen Liven received “17,931 rubles, the total sum taken from him.” Like Grinberg, however, Liven was also given both cash “for 11,573 rubles” and “a current account for 17,931, meaning that he really received 39,504 rubles. In August, a citizen Sedov, who had 2,125 rubles taken from him by the Department for the battle against counter-revolution, not only received his original 2,125 rubles back, but also, “in accord with a different order, got another 1,105 rubles.”⁹³ Ozerevskii presented information about numerous similar cases dealing with smaller sums.

As Boris Kolonitskii writes, the “specific forms and methods of exercising power” during revolutions “differ greatly from those practiced during ‘normal’ times.”⁹⁴ It is not so much that conventional “structures of authority” disappear or that new ones fail to take their place; rather, the “direct and indirect influence of political cultures and subcultures on the formation and activities of institutions of authority is extraordinarily great during revolutionary eras.” As a measure of the subculture of power that grew up around the Cheka in the revolutionary era, we might look to interventions in material life. In the summer of 1917, the Russian historian A. Kizevetter wrote of socialism not just as a political movement, but

93. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 103, ll. 4-5.

94. Boris Kolonitskii, “‘Anti-Bourgeois Propaganda and ‘Anti-Burzhuī’ Consciousness in 1917’,” *Russian Review*, 53, 2 (1994), 183–96, citations p. 183.

as a “fashion,” one that, as Kolonitskii demonstrates, undergirded a sweeping embrace of “anti-bourgeois” rhetoric in the months before the Bolsheviks seized power. After the Bolshevik Revolution, among employees of the Sovnarkom and other institutions, a fashion emerged for dressing like agents of the Cheka, all in leather: leather caps, leather pants, leather jackets, leather gloves. Eager as the Cheka was to insinuate itself into the state’s unofficial supply chains, it guarded control over its leather look carefully. Bonch-Bruевич twice requested that the VChK’s Economic Department “release 29 (leather) suits (jackets, pants, caps, and gloves) for agents serving the Sovnarkom’s Administrative Directorate.” But this request, the Cheka denied.⁹⁵

2.3 Coughing it Up: Legal Closure and the Memory of Property

It was only in 1920, when the Soviet regime attempted to put an end to the whirlwind of dispossession that had visited the Republic over the past years, that it seems to have realized the true depths of this visitation, and just how difficult it would be to call time on a practice that had, for many, defined the experience of revolution. “Prior to the decree of April 15, 1920 S.U. 1920 no. 29, st. 143,” the Commissariat of Justice later observed, “there existed no defined and precise legal definition of requisition and confiscation. Forced alienation (exception the nationalization of industrial and commercial enterprises) occurred according to the orders of central and local, higher and lower powers, elementally and without order, in an atmosphere of sharp civil war.”⁹⁶ As this war drew to a close, and Soviet authorities turned their attention to resurrecting the attributes of law and order in the new society, the Sovnarkom embarked on a project to give legal footing to the alienation of movable goods. The Sovnarkom’s “Decree on requisitions and confiscations” came into effect on

95. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 97, l. 72a, GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 96, l. 52.

96. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 10, l. 39.

April 15, 1920, and was published in *Izvestiia* a week later. It had the “goal of establishing a general order for requisitions and confiscations,” and stipulated that, for the first time, “no property can be requisitioned or confiscated other than by this order.” The definitions adopted in the decree were unremarkable, largely echoing those established by the Imperial government during the First World War: requisition was considered the “forced alienation or temporary seizure by the government of property located at the disposal of private people and societies, for a payment defined by the organs of power.” Confiscation was the “uncompensated forced alienation by the government of property located at the disposal of private individuals and societies.” Confiscation retained a punitive valence, expressed in the fact that “the presidium of the VChK, revolutionary tribunals, and people’s courts” were empowered to perform it “as punishment.” The implication was that only “food products” and “materials necessary for agricultural production” were subject to requisition. Such restrictions were not specified when it came to confiscation, which could be performed by VSNKh and Narkomprod in addition to the Cheka and other punitive organs. The decree also created a legal category of objects known as “household goods,” defined as “furniture, clothing, shoes, dishes, and the like.” Requisition and confiscation of household goods was forbidden outright—except in cases of “special need” determined by a “special commission with representatives from the gubispolkom, gubsnkh, and gubprodkom.”⁹⁷

The April 1920 decree on requisitions and confiscations hinted at a bracketing of seizure; the untrammled whirlwind of the previous two and half years was to come to an end. “All earlier decrees of all kinds are replaced by this one,” the April order concluded. “All violations” were to be “brought before the People’s court.” The legal closure provided by the decree, however, was ambiguous. In the first place, large segments of the population refused to observe it. In August 1921, the Cheka plenipotentiary in Siberia, Pavlunovskii, reported that “the poor” were “not adopting the new course of soviet politics and are continuing the redistribution [*pereraspredelenie*], namely the requisitions, confis-

97. *Izvestiia* April 22, 1920. No. 85.

cations, and the like, events that we can call economic banditry.” Pavlunovskii believed these events merited this new name—economic banditry—due to the fact that “in this new period, this battle of the poor against the kulak unfolds outside of our organizational influence.”⁹⁸ In June 1920, the Mossoviet published a decree on furniture that directly contravened the April decree, allowing new residents in a given apartment to supply themselves with furnishings “from other rooms of the very same apartment” if they lacked their own. The Mossoviet specified that the quality of this new possession was not ownership: “the furniture” in question would be “located only in the temporary use of the newly-settled residents, remaining the property [*sobstvennost*] of the original owners.” Nevertheless, as a Government Control analysis pointed out, the Mossoviet order violated the Sovnarkom decree on numerous counts, most importantly by allowing regular residents of an apartment, completely independently of any kind of government authority, to seize the possessions of others for themselves.⁹⁹

Far and away the largest question opened up by the April decree, however, had to do with the fate of all those possessions that had been requisitioned and confiscated over the past two and half years on terms that were now explicitly declared to be illegal. The memory of property persisted long after the goods themselves had perished. Starting in April 1920 with the publication of the new decree, roared back to life, as those who remembered their seized goods attempted to get them back, on the basis of the new law. One such attempt was made by a man named Sokolov, a treasurer on the Turkestan Front who stored his family’s household goods in Tver and left for the front, sending his wife and children to relatives in Samara. “For more than two years I could not make it back [to Tver] myself, and there was no one to send on this matter,” the controller wrote, and at some point in this period, his goods were requisitioned. “There was never any decree on the requisition of household goods,” Sokolov observed his request to have his goods returned in October 1920. “At the very least in Turkestan and along the front such a thing was not known.” Nor did Sokolov

98. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2560, l. 93.

99. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 62, l. 23.

meet what he believed to be the personal standards for confiscation, never articulated in law, but quite well-known:

Personally, I am neither a counter-revolutionary, nor a bourgeois, nor a speculator. I am not a counter-revolutionary, as from the first days of the revolution I served soviet power and not from fear but from my conscience. I am not a bourgeois, as I have never had real estate, trade or industrial enterprises, and I have not exploited the labor of others, but have earned my sustenance from my personal labor, albeit intellectual, and for that reason I have always considered myself a proletariat. I am not a speculator as I have never bought for the purpose of selling and have not sold for profits (I am not talking about the sale of old things out of necessity).¹⁰⁰

A similar case unfolded in Novgorod, where the director of the Institute of People's Education, V.I. Pokrovskii, actually won the support of the regional cheka in his attempt to have his household, seized by local Chekists while he was moving it across town to a warehouse, returned to him, on the ground that it had been "incorrectly confiscated in violation of the decree of April 16, 1920." But the decision was overruled by higher-ranking authorities, who highlighted the danger embedded in such a return:

If everything that in its own time during 1919 and 1920 was illegally confiscated by the regional cheka had to be returned back to its owners, then we would have to give back everything, down to the monastery in which the Cheka is housed.¹⁰¹

Everything the Cheka had—the very building in which it was housed—had been requisitioned or confiscated according to terms now categorized as illegal. If the Cheka had to give back Pokrovskii's possessions on the basis of the new regulations, where would it stop?

100. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 191, l. 181.

101. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 240, l. 1.

In the wake of the April decree, both Moscow and Petrograd established special bodies known as “*troikas*” attached to the soviets whose job it was to review instances of dispossession and petitions for the return of seized goods.¹⁰² As the work of the troika makes clear, the recognition of legal limits on requisition and confiscation in the present was not the same as a disavowal of their applicability to the past. The restoration of certain rights to things, in the form of limits on those trying to take them away, did not amount to the restoration of particular things, particular possessions lost during the whirlwind of dispossession, even when those things were ready at hand. Property rights, that is to say, were not resurrected by the repudiation of requisition and confiscation as tools of extraction, a logic thrown into sharp relief through the case of citizeness Tikhobrazova, once of Petrograd, lately of the Caucasian railroad town, Armavir. In November 1917, Tikhobrazova left Petrograd with her son, a railway engineer, who obtained a posting in Armavir. Both the timing of their departure and the household goods listed on Tikhobrazova’s inventory of her possessions suggest that the family was of the bourgeoisie. Just before leaving for Armavir, Tikhobrazova moved all of her possessions into the Kokorevskii warehouse. Shortly after she left Petrograd, as the Civil War raged, rail connections with the Caucasus were severed.

Tikhobrazova returned to Petrograd on December 30, 1920, nearly three years later. One of the first things she did upon her return was to go to the warehouse where her possessions were stored. She learned that she had lost possession of her things two times over: first, in December 1918, when the Sovnarkom declared all warehouses to be “the prop-

102. The troikas were meant to serve as the highest instance for the resolution of contested seizures, putting an end to the circulation of petitions for the release of this or that, on behalf of this person or another, that filtered through numerous institutions, from Narkomfin to the Cheka. In fact, the problem of subordination persisted, as people who did not like the decision of the troika continued to take their case to the Ispolkom (which appears to have remained the functional highest instance), the People’s Court, or to Rabkrin’s Bureau of Complaints. Indeed, the Petrograd Rabkrin observed, since the formation of the troika on October 1, the bureau had received “many complaints about incorrect decisions” taken by the troika. Upon investigation, the Bureau of Complaints determined that the troika rarely offered any reason or logic for its decisions. “Usually, in fact almost always, with rare exceptions, the order simply states: denied. No reasons for the refusal are specified, no traces of investigation are visible. Meanwhile,” the Petrograd Rabkrin concluded, “the very essence of the matter and the social position of the complainant demand careful and comprehensive investigation.” As this critique of the troika indicates, reviewing the mistakes that had been a part of seizure did not mean abandoning the regime’s commitment to viewing people through the prism of their possessions, or effecting social justice through things.

erty of the RSFSR” and gave owners ten days to “declare their intention to remove their things,” which Tikhobrazova, of course, had not done; and second, in October 1920, when her storage unit was declared “ownerless” and its contents transferred to the control of the housing authorities. Tikhobrazova protested these decisions, and the Petrograd troika, after initially refusing to satisfy her requests, eventually decided to meet her halfway, allowing her to receive household goods sufficient for two people “by the full norm, that is, including a samovar.” The catch was that these goods could not come from Tikhobrazova’s own store of possessions. The troika claimed this was because Tikhobrazova’s possessions had already been physically moved from the Kokorevskii warehouse to the city storage department. Tikhobrazova went to the warehouse to see for herself. She was armed with a decision from a local court, allowing her to have the normed quantity of goods, taken from her own possessions at the warehouse, but the warehouse director refused to honor the order. She stood at the edge of the warehouse, as the director told her, “get out of here, it is not yours, it is all the people’s.” But just then she spotted some of her possessions, in tact, and began to cry. A warehouse worker named Samodurova approached her, asking, “why are you crying so bitterly?” Tikhobrazova answered, “I have been left destitute, they have taken everything, even the remembrances of my relatives are gone, even the album....” The girl asked her what her album looked like, then went away. A few minutes later she returned, bearing the album of photographs Tikhobrazova had described, and a permission slip allowing her to take it home with her.¹⁰³

Tikhobrazova’s case made it all the way to the top of Petrograd’s administrative and judicial hierarchies, thanks in part to its promotion as an instance of obvious injustice by the local branch of the Worker-Peasant Inspectorate. In its final ruling on the case, however, the Petrograd Department of Justice made clear that no injustice had been perpetrated; indeed, it recused itself from hearing the case entirely, deferring to the original decision of the troika. The Department of Justice argued that Tikhobrazova should never have been allowed to

103. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 630, ll. 13, 18, 19, and 40.

bring a complaint against the troika to the courts in the first place, because the only crime the court would have been competent to address was malfeasance, which had not been demonstrated or even alleged. “If Tikhobrazova had raised a case about the malfeasance of the troika,” the Department argued, “about it exceeding its powers, about red tape, or the like, as the result of which her property interests suffered, then the People’s Court could have taken up a criminal case...but as no such accusations have been made, the People’s Court” had no standing to hear her case.

The determination to hang cases of “incorrect requisition” on the demonstration of some sort of malfeasance by the state’s agents was solidified in decree released by the Sovnarkom in October 1921, to clarify rules for requisition and confiscation in the wake of the New Economic Policy and the economic freedoms, including the right to accumulate wealth, it allowed. The decree itself differed little in substance from its predecessor. Requisition remained something “exceptional,” ordered by the highest central authorities, implemented by the regional executive committees; confiscation remained the “uncompensated forced alienation by the government of property as a punitive measure,” implemented by the People’s Courts, the revolutionary tribunals, and the chekas.¹⁰⁴ Alongside the decree, however, Narkomiust released instructions for its interpretation, and these instructions represented a watershed moment in the practice of dispossession and the attitude toward its ignoble past. This intervention concerned precisely the problem of “incorrect requisitions” that might have occurred in the past. “In connection with the publication of this decree,” the statement began delicately, “Narkomiust has been receiving many inquiries concerning on what grounds and in what legal order matters on incorrect requisitions and confiscations from the period prior to the decree should be considered.” Before April 1920, the instructions observed, no legal definitions for requisition or confiscation existed. Instead

104. New to the October 1921 decree was the stipulation of a protocol or “act” to be composed “at the moment of requisition or confiscation,” in recognition of the state’s presence in the process, that listed the names of those performing the seizure, those from whom property was being seized, and those accepting the seized goods into storage, as well as “detailed and precise information about the property itself.” The act was to be signed by all three parties, as well as two additional witnesses. *Izvestiia* October 26, 1921 no. 240. Original decree, October 17, 1921.

dispossession occurred “elementally,” at the instruction of any number of revolutionary authorities. “For that reason,” Narkomiust ordered, “it is impossible today to enter into a discussion about the evaluation of all the requisitions and confiscations that took place before April 15, 1920.¹⁰⁵ The netherworld of dispossession that had gripped the Republic for the past three years—the things, the money, the effects on human and material lives—all was ceded, “elementally,” to the natural disaster of revolutionary disorder. Wrongs could not now be righted and questions of guilt or innocence would not be considered. The Revolution was bracketed as an exceptional time in which the exceptional had occurred.

The same was not true, however, for cases occurring after April 15, 1920. “It is worth looking differently upon requisitions and confiscations that took place after the decree came into force, after April 16, 1920,” the instructions continued. Here it was possible to evaluate guilt and innocence, because here, for the first time, there was a victim in whose interests wrongdoing could be prosecuted. That victim was the Soviet state. “[N]ow that there are firmly set rules for requisition and confiscation and all forced alienations, violations of them should be categorized as crimes on the job.” The wrongdoer, in improper cases of requisition and confiscation, was not a thief, stealing the possessions of individuals; he was an employee of the state, who obstructed the state from claiming material possessions from individuals, possessions that were owed to it not as dubiously-gotten booty, but as a right and just due. All wronged parties who were not the state ceased to exist.

A continued influx of petitions for the return of seized goods, however, forced the authorities to reconsider the matter again in March 1922, this time from a slightly different angle: that of “previous owners” attempting to reclaim possessions now in the hands of “current owners,” whom the previous owners, apparently, had located. The Sovnarkom issued an “Order for the Demand of Property (*imushchestvo*) by Previous Owners (*sobstvennikami*) from Current Owners (*vladeltsev*),” the tortuous language of which matched an equally tortuous implementation. The decree made one category of goods entirely inaccessible to the

105. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 10, l. 39.

demands for return: “household goods,” again defined as “furniture, clothing, linens, shoes, dishes, and the like,” that had been “received from the appropriate government (communal) organs in the fixed order” could not be sought for repossession by their original owners from their current ones. In cases where it was impossible to prove, however, that objects had been received in the “fixed order” from the appropriate governmental institutions, the resolution of disputes turned on an alchemy of social class and timing. If the “current owners belong to the laborers, they retain the objects in their possession, so long as the former owner lost possession of this property not less than two years before the publication of this decree”—that is, on or before March 29, 1920. The decree allowed that some transfers of property between past and present owners might have occurred by means of “crime,” in which case exceptions to the timeline could be made, but these had to be “proven in court,” which was highly unlikely. Transfers that had been made by “agreement” between the two parties were also open to dispute. The March 29 decree thus completed a process of remaking the whirlwind of dispossession into something that occurred along two rails: via the seizure of property by agents of the state who might have been dishonest and taken what was not theirs, not because it belonged to the person from whom it had been seized, but because it belonged to the state; and via crime that occurred between two individuals, one a thief, and the other a victim, of property that should never have been seized to begin with. Both the state and its subjects could be victims, in this narrative; but subjects could never be victims of the state. The outcome of seizures that occurred between state agents and citizens was the one left largely unexplored in this new landscape of seizure.

The most important achievement of the decrees on seizure had to do with timing. The March 1922 decree solidified a timeline of seizure that was simultaneously a timeline of revolution, charting the Republic’s long walk back from lawlessness to order. What happened before April 15, 1920, when the first decree on requisition was issued, was lost to the ages. There was no getting it back. Seizures that occurred between April 15, 1920 and October 24, 1921 were to be evaluated based on the laws of that period; and seizures from

after October 25, 1921, on the basis of the October 1921 decree. Thus the lawlessness of the Revolution was enshrined in legal code. Nowhere was this more evident than in an explanatory note attached to the critical passage of the March decree: that “current possessors who are also laborers retain the objects in question in their possession if the former owners lost possession of this property more than two years before the publication of this decree.” This was as close to a direct statement of timeline of revolution as redistribution as you could get: workers who gained objects between October 25, 1917 and March 29, 1920 kept what they had, as a measure of the Revolution’s justice. But a place like Siberia, conquered long after the center, might need more time to make mistakes, to experience the lawlessness of revolution, and so the decree provided that in “Siberia, the south-east region, and the Crimea, the period specified in article two of the present decree [which closed the whirlwind of dispossession at the two-year mark, for a March 29, 1920 cutoff] is reduced to one year.”¹⁰⁶ Siberia would get a year’s more disorder. The decree protected this special revolutionary era, not just for those who had experienced it in the past, but for all those who might yet experience it in the future.¹⁰⁷

106. *Izvestiia* March 29, 1922, no. 71.

107. Significant as this shift was for the conceptualization of seizure, in practice the punctuated thrust of the decree was likely lost. When the decree was published in *Izvestiia*, the second article read clearly that current possessors retained their rights so long as the former ones lost possession more than two years *before* the publication of the decree. Due to a typography error, the version of the decree disseminated in the *Sobranie uzakoneniia*—the publication of record for all government organs—read instead that current owners could keep their objects so long as the previous owners had lost them at some point *since* March 29, 1920. Rather than closing the door on the past, the disseminated version of the text opened it up to new scrutiny, and a plethora of cases wanting to revisit past mistakes.

Chapter 3

Old-regime Valuables and New-regime

Values: The Appraisal of Money and

Things

A little after ten o'clock on the night of October 31, 1921, after four days of hearings, a court in Moscow handed down its judgment in case no. 10069. Though charged with a variety of crimes, ranging from theft of an amethyst ring to harboring their husbands from the law to offering bribes of more than 40 million rubles, the 59 defendants in the case had been grouped together by the court in recognition of their common tie to an institution called "Gokhran," the State Depository of Valuables, where everything valuable from every corner of the Republic was being collected in the coffers of the former municipal pawn bank on Moscow's Nastasinskii Side-street. The rules governing what, precisely, constituted a valuable remained nebulous. The long answer was a regularly-changing list of objects that included anything made of gold, silver, platinum or precious stones, no matter how useful or useless—teaspoons, asparagus forks, candelabra, crucifixes, watch chains, watches—as well as objects made of other sumptuous materials, such as bed linens, underwear, coats, and tablecloths. The short answer was, if it had been seized at some point in the previous

four years, and it seemed fancy, it probably should be sent to Gokhran. There, it would be sorted, appraised, “depersonalized,” and then stored, until such time as it could be put to use for the good of the Republic, most likely through “foreign trade, to get things from the capitalist countries of Europe that are necessary for the development of Soviet Russia’s economy—silver for industry, German nickel for rest homes,” and the like.¹

But that was not what had happened at Gokhran. The silver had not been spent on industry and proceeds from the German nickel had not been deposited in the bank accounts of rest homes. What happened instead was that the staff of Gokhran had palmed the silver and spoiled the nickel, and that was why they, the wives who sheltered them, and the fathers who offered 40 million-ruble bribes to get their sons’ charges downgraded to non-capital offenses were all listed on the docket of case no. 10069. Hours after the Moscow court pronounced its verdict, the 19-year-old son in whose name the bribe had been offered was shot, as was the official who accepted the 40 million rubles. The bribe-offering father was sentenced to a year in a labor camp. The daughter who refused to give investigators her father’s address got six months; her father was shot. The wife who hid her husband and her father got a year. Her husband and her father were shot. The man accused of stealing the amethyst ring, who also happened to be the director of Gokhran, Eduard Levitskii, a former nobleman and longtime head of the municipal pawn bank before the Revolution, was cleared in the matter of the ring but nevertheless sentenced to “imprisonment with forced labor” for five years on account of his “criminally negligent relationship to his work.”²

Criminally negligent relationships to work suffused the landscape of early Soviet institutions—in this Gokhran was far from unique.³ In the case of Gokhran, work-related criminal “negligence” appeared in two aspects: first and most obviously, in the rampant thieving Gokhran’s employees perpetrated on its holdings, which grew to such astonishing proportions during the first year of its existence that every major institution of the Soviet

1. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 343, l. 232.

2. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 127, l. 103.

3. For more see Chapter 5.

state and Communist Party—the Council of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom), the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK), the Politburo of the Communist Party, the political police (Cheka), and the Worker-Peasant Inspectorate (Rabkrin)— launched its own investigation into malfeasance at Gokhran. Second and just as damaging, if less clearly malicious, negligence at Gokhran appeared in a spate of objective failures in the performance of its chief task: valuation. Gokhran bungled each of its major shipments of precious objects abroad, preparing a package of diamonds worth fifteen million gold French francs for transfer to Poland when the agreed-upon value was supposed to be just five million; failing to get a ten-million-franc shipment to Riga entirely; succeeding, after the personal intervention of Lev Trotsky, at getting a shipment to Riga, only to see it sit in a warehouse for months, unsold, either because the diamonds it contained were priced too high or too low or were somehow no good, no one could say.⁴

Consensus within the Cheka, which spearheaded the many investigations into Gokhran’s failure, settled on the idea that each of these problems stemmed from the same root cause: Gokhran’s rotten employees, who when they were not cheating and stealing, utterly refused “to employ their many years of knowledge and experience” to their work.⁵ The inspectors from the Worker-Peasant Inspectorate, meant to oversee Gokhran’s work, earned the similar charge of “failing to warrant the trust placed in them,” as well as their fair share of “systematic theft.”⁶ In all, on the night of October 31, 1921, nineteen people were executed in the Gokhran case. Another 35 were sentenced to imprisonment in jails and labor camps for periods ranging from six months to thirteen years. Five were cleared of charges.⁷

A major shortcoming of this explanation for Gokhran’s failure, however, had to do with the fact that none of these employees had given any indication of their tendencies prior to working at Gokhran; on the contrary, most had been hired for their supposed “honesty.”

4. Ibid, ll. 116, 94.

5. Ibid, l. 103.

6. Ibid, l. 105.

7. Ibid, l. 109.

At a meeting hosted jointly by Leonid Krasin, the Commissar of Foreign Trade, and Sergei Chutskaev, Deputy Commissar of Finance, back when Gokhran was being formed in February 1920, all had agreed that in the matter of staffing, everything came down to “elementary honesty, so that stuff does not disappear,” as Krasin put it. He proposed “searching out” the “Jews [he] knew, specially occupied with this” matter, because they worked “disinterestedly.”⁸ This had been done; the Jews had been searched out, for work with valuable objects at Gokhran and elsewhere. Krasin personally recommended hiring “an extremely experienced” jeweler who had been entrusted for work “at the Moscow Chrezvychaika, it would seem, by the name of Aleksandrov.” Aleksandrov was hired. Chutskaev suggested tracking down “Comrade Pozhamchi, he is experienced,” and was known to the group. Pozhamchi, too, was added to the ranks.⁹ But whatever it was that happened at Gokhran—a transformation of some kind, or a taint—overtook them there. The Jews were subsequently arrested; Varlam Avanesov, deputy commissar of Rabkrin and member of the Cheka, received desperate letters from their wives, pleading for their lives.¹⁰ Aleksandrov was sentenced to five years’ forced labor, while Pozhamchi miraculously disappeared shortly before sentencing.¹¹ And it was not just the jewelers whom Gokhran pried away from the honest path. The services of a cipher clerk named Vera Zarkhi were specially requested by an envoy to Riga, assigned to coordinate diamond transfers between Moscow and Latvia when relations were reestablished. The envoy sent the previous clerk home, deeming her “unsuitable for conspiratorial reasons.” “Finding a suitable employee for the task is extremely difficult,” the envoy reported; thankfully he had “suddenly remembered that in the Gokhran department there was a certain Vera Matveevna Zarkhi who would be suitable for the job,” presumably also for “conspiratorial reasons.”¹² Zarkhi left for Riga immediately, but within months the

8. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 231, l. 40.

9. *Ibid.*, l. 39.

10. GARF f. 4085, op. 1a, d. 123, ll. 34, 35.

11. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 127, l. 109.

12. GARF f. 4085, op. 28, d. 20, l. 26. It is possible, of course, that Zarkhi and the envoy had their own conspiracy planned.

Cheka was searching for her in connection with case no. 10069.¹³ It was almost as though the people had not spoiled Gokhran so much as Gokhran spoiled the people.

Moreover, the explanation that Gokhran's workers were corrupt, or that work at Gokhran corrupted its workers, failed to address the second major dimension of its failure: the difficulty it had in assessing the worth of "valuables." While Gokhran's employees might have profited personally from stealing valuable objects from its coffers in Moscow, as we will see below, there was no percentage for them in sending fifteen million francs' worth of diamonds abroad when they were only supposed to send five; no benefit in pricing a shipment too high or too low so that it would languish unsold in Riga, of all places.

This chapter asserts that Gokhran beached on the rocks of valuation—on the problem of determining what kinds of things were valuable and what value was in a socialist polity. Defining the nature of economic value, measuring it, and establishing its relation to other sorts of "values"—these were both ideological and practical challenges in the revolutionary era. According to Marxist theory, capitalist commodities—objects that met human wants or needs and were external to an individual, such that they had to be acquired through exchange—carried multiple forms of value on their backs as they circulated in the market: use value, exchange value, and an abstracted value representing "socially-necessary labor time." As David Harvey explains, these three distinct strands of value were inseparably melded in the commodity form. In order to bear economic value, to become a commodity, an object had to be useful and recognized as such, desired in some way. If use-values for Marx were heterogeneous, determined by a potentially endless combination of "material qualities and quantities," exchange-values, by contrast, were "homogenous and quantitative." Exchange-value represented the relative value of one commodity measured against another, discovered in the course of exchange. The point at which objects achieved commensurability, in Marx's view, was not accidental or random; it reflected their shared origins in human labor, which Marx defined in abstracted form as "socially necessary labor time."

13. Ibid, I. 112.

This was the third plank of value in the commodity, a value that was immaterial but, since it could be measured, still in a certain way “objective.”

The Marxist conception of value, then, traced it to the social relationships embedded in every commodity—forged in labor, expressed in exchange, affirmed in the definition of usefulness. Value did not inhere in the objects themselves; it was an outcropping of these social relationships. The immateriality of value, as Harvey notes, caused significant and longstanding debate among Marx’s interpreters over the extent to which value could actually be measured.¹⁴ The value of a commodity was objective only in the sense that the quantity of socially necessary labor time invested in it could be measured, but this measurement, expressed in money, was necessarily inexact. Money, the subject of the next chapter, represented value only approximately, meaning that even in an ideal capitalist system, valuation was ineluctably imprecise.

Marx’s tripartite characterization of value applied only to commodities in a capitalist system of exchange—objects that met human needs or desires and passed through the market before they could be consumed. It was in the act of exchange that use-value was affirmed, exchange-value discovered, and the more ambiguous value (socially-necessary labor time) affixed. There were, of course, objects within the capitalist system that were not commodities, to which this form of value did not apply. These objects, according to Marx, simply did not bear value, even if they were the product of human labor. Tomatoes grown at home for domestic consumption, in Harvey’s example, possessed both a use-value and a labor value, in that they resulted from human labor, but because that labor was deployed for the self or the household, rather than for others—because the tomatoes would not be put up for sale, but consumed domestically—they were not commodities, and as such, did not bear value in the tripartite sense.¹⁵

14. Harvey’s own view is that “if [value] is immaterial,” as Marx suggests, “you cannot measure it directly. To find value in a commodity by just looking at a commodity is like trying to find gravity in a stone. It only exists in relations between commodities and only gets expressed in the contradictory and problematic form of the money commodity.” David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx’s Capital* (Verso, 2010), p. 37.

15. Harvey, p. 22.

Marx did not specify what would happen to value in a world without capitalist exchange. This was the world the Bolsheviks sought to realize when they seized power, and in a certain sense, as Peter Holquist makes clear, it was also the world they inherited from their Imperial predecessors.¹⁶ Three long years of total war led authorities in the Russian Empire, as elsewhere in Europe, to adopt heavier controls over market activity, visible in the regulation of grain and other strategically valuable commodities, in restrictions on capital flows abroad, and in the seizure of property owned by “enemy aliens.”¹⁷ After the February Revolution, the Provisional Government deepened many of these measures, with the perverse result, as Holquist demonstrates, that as government programs to monopolize trade in grain progressed, regular markets disintegrated further. By the time the Bolsheviks seized power in October 1917, speculative prices for grain and other necessary commodities were stratospheric, transportation networks had buckled under the strain of the war, exacerbating shortages, and the state had resorted to printing ever-increasing quantities of money to cover growing budget shortfalls. While petty trade in foodstuffs and other goods thrived in the interstices of this disorder, the major building blocks of the Russian economy had been twisted into unrecognizable formations even before the Bolsheviks came to power.

The Bolsheviks deepened this disorder, setting out to eradicate the social relationships that enabled capitalist exchange—and produced exchange values—by abolishing private property, waging a class war against the bourgeoisie and all those who possessed capital, and instituting an alternative mechanism of distribution based on the establishment of normalized consumption. In theory, the absence of capitalist exchange relationships would seem to preclude both the existence of commodities and the tripartite structure of value cloaking them. In practice, the eradication of the market was neither automatic nor comprehensive. The Bolsheviks inherited an economy and material plant in which the value of objects was known and knowable. They interacted with a world outside the Republic’s bor-

16. Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia’s Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921* (Harvard, 2002).

17. For the campaign against enemy aliens and non-Russian nationals see Eric Lohr, *Nationalizing the Russian Empire: The Campaign Against Enemy Aliens during World War I* (Harvard University Press, 2003).

ders in which markets, for the time being at least, thrived. Expressions of economic value loomed large in Bolshevik dealings with the outside world, and in attempts to “liquidate” the tsarist past. Yet, as this chapter demonstrates, the Soviet reckoning with value was not external to the project of socialism, nor was it something that took place only in relations with the Imperial past or the foreign present. The encounter with value was embedded within socialism. Attempts to establish what kinds of things were valuable and where that value inhered appeared organically, even within official institutions charged with the disposal of goods according to normalized principles of distribution, such as Gokhran. This chapter traces the forms of valuation deployed in acts of seizure, that foundational practice of Soviet material life, as seizers struggled to determine what kinds of things to seize from whom, and those from whom things were taken struggled to defend their possessions or get them back. It next turns to the articulation of a distinction between valuable and non-valuable goods within Soviet distribution agencies, as they processed the ocean of things seized from people and apartments on a nightly basis. Finally, it circles back to Gokhran, the official repository of valuable things, where value, nevertheless, proved difficult to find.

3.1 Non-Market Valuation I: Seizure

Reflecting on the state of the RSFSR’s “general financial politics” in 1921, it appeared to the young Bolshevik bureaucrat A.O. Alskii that together with the broad “deterioration” of the financial infrastructure and “absence of naturally-occurring economic relationships,” the most critical development of the past four years had been the “property-leveling effected by the revolution on the population.”¹⁸ Of the myriad ways “property-leveling” occurred, perhaps the most widespread was the seizure of personal assets at home or on the street. As we saw in the previous chapter, many different groups and individuals practiced seizure, acting on behalf of the state and themselves, sometimes at the same time. Seizure was of-

18. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 343, l. 275ob.

ten accompanied by theft, despite official efforts to regularize seizure and legitimate certain groups of seizers through the application of new rules and standards of paperwork. Paradoxically, the papers and bureaucratic instruments generated to handle seizure, a practice that worked intentionally and otherwise to scramble the conventions of market-based private property regimes, depended on concepts of value and valuation that were often borrowed from these same market-based regimes. Seizure documents, therefore, are unexpectedly among the richest repositories of information about revolutionary practices of valuation, which figured prominently at two moments in the seizure process: first, in the determination of what should be taken from individuals, households, and firms, and second in efforts to determine what had been taken and what was thus now held by state institutions.

The earliest efforts to regularize seizure and establish standards for the prosecution of the class war involved the establishment of value limits on personal possession. Value limits first appeared in the application of “extraordinary” taxes on households or firms deemed capable and deserving of paying. In May 1918 the Shenkurskii district sovet, outside of the city of Arkhangelsk, reported to Narkomfin that it had implemented three types of taxes on its population: a “one-time, extreme” tax on property, a guberniia-wide income tax, and the old state income tax, “thus far being implemented with no changes.” The property tax, of the district’s own devising, applied to its entire population, urban and rural, and targeted “residential buildings and all buildings and constructions without exception, even if they are not fully built; machines of all kinds, if they are used for production (small machines, used for sewing and the like, for example, that serve not for production but for the needs of one’s own family are not subject to assessment); and third, all commodities and objects of trade no matter what they are, intended not for the personal needs of the owner or his family but for sale. And finally,” the rules read, “all property [*imushchestvo*] the value of which is more than 5,000 rubles.”¹⁹ Around the same time in Penza, 600 kilometers southeast of Moscow, a conference of district financial workers decided to recommend forbidding cash

19. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 120, l. 3.

holdings greater than 3,000 rubles per family and ordered the seizure of 100 percent of income over 10,000 rubles, with stiff rates applied to any income over 1,000 rubles.²⁰ The city of Mstislavl, halfway between Moscow and Minsk, announced a plan to seize all cash holdings above 3,000 rubles.²¹ And in Viatka, to Moscow's northeast, guberniia authorities proposed a "one-time property tax" applied to all citizens and juridical entities, "to be assessed from the general sum of the value of all property and monetary valuables belonging to them, evaluated at current prices of 10,000 rubles or more." Exceptions were made for icons and other "objects of the cult, books, dishes, samovars, utensils, clothing, shoes, tables goods and linens," but other household goods, including furniture, were included.²²

Issued throughout the Republic in the late winter and spring of 1918, these and similar provisions fixed an upper value limit to personal wealth, a practice that also found favor in the decrees of the central government. Neither the Sovnarkom nor any other institution of the central government appears to have issued a comprehensive statement on property limits at the time, but through a smattering of circulars on related topics, the figure of 10,000 rubles emerged as the upper limit on permissible holdings—a value limit, affixed to both money and things. Thus the decree on inheritance of April 27, 1918 ordered that "all property [*imushchestvo*] of the dead becomes government property [*dostoianie*]; "needy relatives," however, were entitled to receive "support from the property of the dead," and according to a different article of the same decree, if the total value of the estate did not exceed 10,000 rubles, it was to pass to the relatives in its entirety (whether they were needy or not).²³ Holdings in safes and bank accounts were likewise opened to requisition or confiscation if they contained money or objects in "sums greater than 10,000 rubles according to official assessment," noting however that "where the speculative origin of the things is certain, confiscation is acceptable in the case of lower sums as well."²⁴ The 10,000 ruble limit

20. Ibid l. 26.

21. Ibid l. 75.

22. Ibid l. 61.

23. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 187, ll. 6, 9.

24. Ibid l. 18.

seeped out far beyond these concrete settings, assuming a status as the legally-recognized value ceiling even in circumstances where none existed. In November 1919, the Moscow Finance Department requested guidance from Narkomfin; “lacking a corresponding directive,” the office asked to be instructed “at what sum and what weight limit silver coins and objects were subject to confiscation,” only to be informed by the Central Chancellery that “a definite order concerning the requisition or confiscation of silver from private people by the government has not been issued.” Nevertheless, the Chancellery recommended “adhering to the norms fixed with regard to withdrawals from safes, that is the sum of 10,000 rubles.”²⁵ The solidity of the 10,000 ruble limit was convincing enough that in July 1921, despite never having been formally established, it was formally repealed, with new possession regulations fixed at “twenty times the minimum salary” per family, to reflect the devastating pace of inflation.²⁶

However straightforward in theory, in practice the attempt to cap personal wealth at 10,000 rubles proved challenging. For starters, it often seemed to depend on a conceptualization of the value of objects as a fixed, intrinsic quality, something that could be divined from simply looking at them, like their color or their shape. In addition to running contrary to Marx’s vision of value as a social judgment discovered in the act of exchange, this expectation that the value of objects was an intrinsic quality that could simply be known, or discovered, in the moment of seizure caused trouble in implementation. In the course of arresting a Muscovite named Sergei Lvov, and in accordance with new search procedures put in place to combat light-fingeredness, agents of the Cheka composed a detailed inventory of the Lvov family household, listing every object they owned and how much it was worth, whether it was subject to seizure or not. Before granting a petition for Lvov’s freedom, an agent in the Cheka’s Counterrevolution Department reviewed the inventory from the search of Lvov’s apartment. He noticed that a crystal vase in the family’s possession had been assessed at just five rubles. The total value of the apartment’s furnishings, including a

25. Ibid.

26. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 343, l. 17.

piano, hovered at a mere 500 rubles. Clearly, the Chekist decided, “there had been deceit,” and ordered Lvov returned to prison. When Lvov’s wife learned the reason for her husband’s continued detention, she wrote a frantic letter to Vladimir Bonch-Bruевич, Lenin’s assistant at the Sovnarkom, describing the confusion that had arisen around the valuation of her goods. First of all, she noted, the inventory had been drawn up during a visit from the Cheka after her husband’s arrest; she had signed it, not her husband, so holding him for deceit made no sense. Moreover, she explained, the agents who conducted the inventory had refused to listen to her explanations of what her possessions were and how much they cost. “They did not permit any intervention” in the assessment; “they were told that both the apartment and the furnishings belonged to me, the contract for the apartment was signed by me and the piano belonged to citizen Torr, from whom it was rented. But they took none of these statements into account.” As for the assessment of the other furnishings, Lvova noted, “the act of evaluation was performed by people who were not knowledgeable, such that there could have been mistakes on their part” in the assessment of her goods. Lvova herself “did not even look over the inventory, did not even look at how they were assessing things.” As she later explained: “I was in a state of such awful panic...I gave no meaning to this act, as I believed it was all a mistake that would soon be resolved...Could this truly be the reason that my husband continues to sit prison?”²⁷

If the Cheka inventory procedures treated value as an intrinsic quality of objects, other efforts to implement the value limits on property worked in a more social vein. The months after the Revolution witnessed a flowering of “appraisal commissions” across the revolutionary landscape.²⁸ The idea of local appraisal commissions was not new, having been introduced and debated at great length in official circles during preparations for the Empire-wide income tax in 1915 and 1916. But the revolutionary commissions had little in common

27. Lvova’s account as recorded in her letter to Bonch-Bruевич, at GARF f. 4390, op. 1, d. 204, l. 11b.

28. A plenipotentiary from the center sent to the Penza region to speak at the first “regional congress of finance workers,” held in June 1918, encouraged the creation of assessment commissions for the appraisal of all municipal property, all apartments and buildings, no matter who their owners, and income statements. In later days of the congress, several villages reported that they had already done so. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 120, l. 26.

with their most immediate predecessors, which were appointed bodies tasked with reviewing income declarations for the new tax in early 1917. As Yanni Kotsonis observes, revolutionary assessment commissions were composed as an institutional expression of social upheaval rather than expert technocracy. Their composition varied from place to place, but in nearly all cases centered on the participation of the local poor. In the city of Viatka, the city soviet appointed a commissar charged with “justly assessing the income of all those subject to the tax and defining their tax burden,” to be aided by a “commission from the have-not classes of the population.”²⁹ In the Shenkurskii district, outside of Arkhangelsk, assessment commissions were slated to consist of three or four members of the volost soviet and two or three people “from among the poorest citizens of the volost.”³⁰

Though engaged in what might be deemed a more appropriate process of valuation, from a Marxist perspective, the popular appraisal commissions did not escape the thorny question surrounding the source of value—either in the theoretical absence of the market, or in the presence of the highly-disordered post-war market, to which their assessments made recourse. On what basis were the appraisal commissions to make their judgments? Present-day market conditions? Official prices? Some as yet indeterminate hierarchy of objective necessity? In a section entitled “how to perform the appraisal of property,” the Shenkurskii district finance department instructed local assessment commissions to base their appraisals “on two evaluations, namely: the appraisal before the war and the appraisal according to current cost [*stoimost*],” as if the current cost could not, in itself, adequately represent the object’s true value. “Say that a building was assessed before the war at seven hundred rubles,” the instructions clarified. “Now it costs not less than seven thousand rubles. We

29. Ibid. l. 33. As Yanni Kotsonis notes, over the course of 1918 the Soviet government repealed most property taxes. These efforts date to the spring and summer of 1918. Kotsonis also provides a distinction between the pre-revolutionary assessment commissions formed to implement the 1916 income tax and the post-revolutionary variety, including the committees of the poor, which aimed explicitly at waging class war. Yanni Kotsonis, “‘No Place to Go’: Taxation and State Transformation in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia,” *The Journal of Modern History*, Vol. 76, No. 3 (September 2004), pp. 531-577, here, p. 566. See also Linda Bowman, “Russia’s First Income Taxes: The Effects of Modernized Taxes on Commerce and Industry, 1885–1914,” *Slavic Review* 52 (Summer 1993): 256–82.

30. Ibid. l. 3.

put these two sums together and take the average cost from them—7700, we divide in half = 3850.” This imaginary building thus crept in below the 5,000 ruble local threshold for taxation. But this assessment need not be considered definitive; the social conditioning of appraisal persisted into the realm of calculation. “If the appraisers/assessment commission/finds it necessary to assess this property at the base rate, then the owner is required to pay a tax as if from five thousand rubles, or a five ruble [tax].” Despite the calculations, then, the value of the property lay almost entirely in the eye of the beholder. “Another example,” the instructions continued. “Before the war a property was valued at two thousand rubles, now it costs twenty thousand rubles, the average cost will even out at 11,000 rubles but the assessment commission has the right to take it for the price of 15,000 and name a tax of 150 rubles.”³¹

When the object of seizure was bank accounts instead of things, implementation of the upper value limit was more straightforward. Narkomfin called the 10,000 ruble limit a “norm,” but like other norms of the time, it functioned more as a trigger for seizure than as a legal boundary or prescriptive average. While people with bank balances of less than 10,000 rubles were usually permitted to keep their holdings, accounts exceeding the limit were seized not down to 10,000 rubles, but down to zero. Narkomfin later claimed that it restored assets seized from people who could demonstrate they were either members of the working-class or actresses; the latter needed jewels and other accoutrements to perform historical roles.³² Nevertheless, many petitions for the return of assets valued at 10,000 rubles or below were denied. Some petitioners undoubtedly hailed from the privileged classes, such the 60-year-old member of the noble Shcherbakov family who claimed in August 1920 that she was “unable to work, with nothing to feed herself on,” and who was refused permission to withdraw her 6,000 rubles, a collection of gold coins from the era of Catherine II, and the private papers of an ancestor. Other petitioners came from more modest

31. *Ibid.* l. 3.

32. Predictably, lots of people claimed artistic talents they did not possess in order to retrieve their own or other’s valuables. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 242, l. 22.

origins: a scribe who had worked in Siberia since 1905 lost his life savings of 14,000 rubles in the spring of 1920; an 87-year-old railway worker who had 20,000 in the bank around the same time suffered the same fate, as did a seventy-year-old widower named Saitov, whose wife had recently starved to death and who sought the release of some medals in his safety deposit box.³³

Ultimately, however, the meaning and usefulness of the value limit was destabilized by its expression in money—or rather, its expression in one of the many monies circulating in the former Russian Empire during the revolutionary era, the soviet ruble. The value of the soviet ruble dropped precipitously during the revolution and civil war, with especially sharp falls beginning in 1919, when the Soviet government removed legal limits on emissions. In the decade between 1914 and 1923, claimed the prominent Imperial economist Z.S. Katsenelenbaum, the ruble depreciated roughly fifty million times.³⁴ Narkomfin also formally refused to recognize a distinction in the application of the value limit in the different issues of rubles in circulation in the RSFSR at any given time, some of which—generally those printed before the October Revolution—were worth far more on unofficial markets than others. (All were technically legal, but the government did not formally recognize pre-October currencies.) For the Bolshevik regime’s first few years, the soviet ruble was just one among several ruble currencies in active use in the RSFSR, to say nothing of the foreign and local monies also in circulation. Among these “other monies,” as they were known—consisting of rubles from various pre-October issues, known as “nikolaevki,” for Nicholas II, “kerenki,” for Provisional-Government leader Alexander Kerensky, “dumskie” rubles, another interim issue, and several others—the soviet ruble was by far the weakest, printed in ever-larger issues and ever-higher denominations each year. Regulation of these “other monies” was inconsistent, due in no small part to the government’s own dependence on them to supplement the uneven money supply and—no different from any other participant

33. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 191, ll. 152, 104, 156, 149.

34. Zakharii Solomonovich Katsenelenbaum, *Russian Currency and Banking* (P.S. King: London, 1925), p. 10.

in the revolutionary economy—for use as a store of value at a time when the government’s own money could not fill that role. Non-soviet rubles, particularly the pre-revolutionary issues of nikolaevki and kerenki, enjoyed a more robust “moneyness” than the soviet ruble in every respect: they were enthusiastically accepted across the Republic; they garnered lower prices vis-à-vis the soviet ruble for buyers; they held their value over time; and they even circulated abroad.³⁵

As the anthropologist George Dalton explains, the investigation of money cannot be isolated from the study of other types of valuable objects in a given society. Dalton’s main argument is that Western anthropologists, most notably Malinowski, “use the bundle of attributes money has in Western market economy to comprise a model of *true* money.” Because few of the economies studied by anthropologists adhere to the “dominant transactional mode” for which the “English monetary vocabulary” was created—market exchange—anthropologists evaluating the “money-like stuff” of primitive economies inevitably found it lacking, as no single object within these economies carried all the attributes of Western money.³⁶ Dalton, by contrast, proposes using money-like objects as a means of departure for understanding broad differences in socio-economic organization, asking not whether shells or other objects are ‘really’ money, but rather “how are the similarities and differences between such items and dollars related to the similarities and differences in socio-economic structure?” By breaking up the bundle of attributes ascribed to Western money—medium of exchange, measure of value, store of value, standard of deferred payment—Dalton brings into focus both a range of “limited purpose monies” at work in such economies, “part-time monies” that work sometimes as money, and sometimes as something else, and a set of non-commercial uses of money objects. It was the latter observation—the existence of a variety of non-commercial uses of money objects—that attracted the attention of the Berkeley economist Gregory Grossman, who observed in the introduction to his edited volume on

35. George Dalton, “Primitive Money,” *American Anthropologist*, New Series, Vol. 67, No. 1 (Feb., 1965), pp. 44-65. For more on money, see Chapter 4.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

money in Soviet-style economies that “some anthropological studies of ‘primitive money’ are quite suggestive for understanding Soviet-style money: for example, the distinction between general purpose money and limited purpose money.”³⁷

Perhaps inevitably, as an economist Grossman adopted only half of Dalton’s argument, using the anthropological intervention to explore the varied uses of the actual money object, the ruble, in different spheres of Soviet economic life. Grossman suggests, for example that the ruble exhibited a high degree of “moneyness” in the household sector, where the freedom of economic choice was wide, and a low degree of moneyness in industry, where it functioned more as an instrument of control. He does not examine other objects that may have functioned as money objects in these or other settings, the second part of Dalton’s programmatic statement, perhaps because none were especially significant in the Soviet economy of the mid-1960s. In revolutionary economic life, however, such objects were plentiful and various. We now turn to the investigation of one of the most important distinctions applied on the material world in the revolutionary era, that separating valuable from non-valuable goods.

3.2 Non-market Valuation II: Gorprodukt

Numerous institutions sprang up, especially at the local level, to shepherd seized goods from their previous lives as objects that gained their value from exchange, into a new state of being, one that took its cues from norms, inventories, and release orders instead of market indicators, personal affections, and consumer desires. The suppression of market benchmarks of value in the management of seized goods occurred in two ways, both of which had to do with standardization of objects into two categories: valuable and non-valuable. The existence of these two pathways represented a broad challenge facing the regime in its attempt to institutionalize material life: how to determine what was valuable—what value

37. Gregory Grossman, “Introduction,” *Money and Plan: financial aspects of East European economic reforms*. Edited, with an introd., by Gregory Grossman (Berkeley, 1968), p. 16.

was—in the absence of “naturally occurring economic relationships,” including the relationships formed through exchange.³⁸ Gokhran, formed to manage the disposal of “valuables,” was one outcome of this division. By the time objects made it to Gokhran, however, they had already made it through numerous rounds of culling, usually performed in municipal rather than central distribution chains. These municipal institutions, dealing largely with the disposal of non-valuables, are our subject here.

In the city of Petrograd, the first forays into the management of seized goods were undertaken by a pair of overlapping municipal institutions, Gorprodukt and Petrokommuna. Gorprodukt was more active in 1918 and 1919, at the end of which it was ordered to merge itself into Petrokommuna, in an effort to mitigate the severe mismanagement of resources exposed by a Rabkrin investigation.³⁹ (Alas, a Cheka svodka from January 1920 reported that the employees of Petrokommuna also practiced “major theft.”⁴⁰) They handled more or less the same type of goods, dominated by a category called “goods of first necessity” that included food products, soap, matches, and other consumables, certain types of basic clothing, such as underwear, and sometimes essential household objects, including dishes, primus stoves, and furniture.⁴¹ In April 1919, the Petrosoviet created yet another body, known only as the “inter-institutional commission” or IIC, to supplement the work of Gorprodukt by focusing explicitly on a different category of seized goods—those taken from or still located inside sealed “bourgeois apartments.” The commission’s mandate covered all moments in the life of seized goods, starting with the “inventory of household goods in nationalized (sic) mansions, apartments, and warehouses” through their “removal, as confiscated [goods], from apartments and mansions to warehouses”; it empowered the commission to release these objects “to institutions, organizations, and private people” and to

38. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 343, l. 275ob.

39. TsGASP f. 1000, op. 4, d. 105, l. 60.

40. GARF f. R-130, op. 29, d. 49, l. 179.

41. TsGASP f. 1000, op. 4, d. 105, l. 60.

regulate the movement of all manner of “domestic property [*imushchestvo*],” no matter who owned it and where it came from, through the city.⁴²

The distinction between Gorprodukt and the IIC mirrored institutionally a growing distinction between average or regular goods, on the one hand, and goods that were somehow special or valuable on the other. Gorprodukt quickly grew into a massive administrative apparatus, while the IIC remained smaller, employing just a handful of staff from, oddly enough, Gorprodukt’s rival, the Petrokommuna, and “for some reason” no one understood, the city military commission. Hundreds of municipalized stores served as Gorprodukt distribution points and also fell under its jurisdiction, as did numerous warehouses. Both Gorprodukt and the IIC had the power to “seal” spaces.⁴³ Despite the great variety in scale and scope, work in the two institutions functioned in more or less the same way, and in fine grain, it looked a lot like scavenging. It began in the apartments, mansions, embassies and offices that had either been seized by housing agencies or the Cheka, or abandoned by their inhabitants. In the first instance, the task of sifting through apartments and other spaces was often conducted by the numerous raion-level affiliates of Gorprodukt, operated by the local soviets and only indifferently subordinate to the municipal agencies. These raion-level bodies bore “various names,” one report explained: one called itself “the raion department of Gorprodukt for the nationalization of property,” for example; another was “the department of furniture distribution.” When interviewed, one such local body claimed subordination to the “[inter-institutional] commission,” the IIC, almost as if Gorprodukt and its fellow travelers represented competing seizure/processing rackets around town. But even this claim of subordination was a fake, the Rabkrin inspector reported. In actual fact, the local groups worked independently; “the decisions of the center are not taken as final in the majority of the raions,” the report observed.⁴⁴ The work varied from neighborhood to neighborhood: in the Vyborg neighborhood, it was said, “the raion is poor, and the valuables are few,” so most

42. Ibid, l. 58.

43. TsGASP, f. 3201, op. 1, d. 55, ll. 52, 87.

44. TsGASP f. 1000, op. 4, d. 105, l. 89.

work consisted of traipsing through abandoned apartments, sorting their contents, and “distributing [them] among citizens in need.”⁴⁵ In the Smolninskii raion, by contrast, workers came upon vast stores of porcelain, bronze, silver and copperware. Reports on Gorprodukt indicate that the workers in its “raiprodukt” neighborhood offices regularly stripped the spaces they worked down to the bones: a complaint lodged against the director of the Petrograd neighborhood warehouse, comrade Briskman, noted his failure to record the size of carpets and pieces of parquet flooring brought to the storeroom.⁴⁶ The neighborhood offices were likely required to hand over everything they found to Gorprodukt and the city-level institutions, but it was common enough for them not to do so that Gorprodukt periodically instituted a “*razverstka*” for necessary goods, the form of seizure applied to grain in the countryside. One report claimed that it was only by declaring a *razverstka* that city supply agencies got their hands on necessary substances like fabric, shoes and needles.⁴⁷

Aside from the goods themselves, the most important thing raion-level bodies could give the city agencies was information about the objects they came across, in the form of an inventory.⁴⁸ Here the work of Gorprodukt intersected with a republic-wide ambition to inventory the entirety of the new state’s material wealth—everything that had been seized,

45. Ibid, l. 101-102.

46. Ibid, l. 103.

47. Ibid, l. 89.

48. As discussed in Chapter One, the abolition of private property and the adoption of normed allocation of resources obliged the Soviet government to generate new kinds of information about the material environment. In specific, and in contrast to market economies, it drove the creation of reams of data about supply, about what there was, not only at the level of heavy industry and agriculture, but on a much smaller scale, in shops and apartment buildings across the Republic. This search for information about the Republic’s material supplies manifested itself in the flourishing of a particular documentary form, the inventory. The inventory was a mainstay of early Soviet governance in the sphere of material life, from the earliest days of the Revolution to the pinnacle of “war communism” and into the formative years of the New Economic Policy. It survived and thrived even after the recommitment to the existence of money in late 1920; money, as Gregory Grossman has observed, eventually took on its own role in the informational landscape, not—as in market economies—in its capacity to serve as a “positive inducement for the allocation of resources,” a reflection of consumer choice, but as an instrument of “control.” Control in the Soviet usage of the mid-century, Grossman observed, “does not mean guidance; rather, it refers to the full range of activities aiming to ensure, ex ante, that the positive directives are followed and that laws and regulations are observed, and ex post, that the deeds of omission and commission are discovered and the culprits identified.” In its robust form, it was one of the most powerful impulses underlying Soviet administrative practice, a “combination of supervision, surveillance, inspection, audit, and administrative prophylaxis.” (Grossman, *Money and Plan*, p. 5.) The inventory was one among several tools—eventually including money as a unit of account—that came to perform the all-important task of “control” in the nationalized economy.

nationalized, or otherwise accrued to state agencies in the wake of the socialist revolution. At the republic-wide level, this project ultimately foundered, not only due to the sheer scale of it, the utopia of counting up every material thing found in state coffers, but also due to the problem of valuation. In July 1918, the Commissariat of Government Control launched the first project of the central government to make a state-wide inventory of all “nationalized property,” everything the state now owned, throughout the Republic down to the district level. Among the chief tasks of this initial inquiry would be the status of the “liquidational balances set at the moment of nationalization,” that is, the appraisal of property when it changed hands. The instruction listed a variety of pricing categories by which the property could have been evaluated—“by market price, sale price, actual cost/sebestoimost, or a conditional assessment”; it was the job of the government controller to determine which form of assessment had been used, if any, and credit the receiving institution with its value.⁴⁹ Properties would be categorized not only according to their status as “public” or “private,” but according to further divisions, based on their usage, with the goal of creating a “detailed nomenclature” that would describe the “extremely varied forms of property belonging to the various Government institutions” in the new nationalized landscape. Imagining precisely what these property forms would look like, and how they could be appraised, however, proved difficult. The Government Control proposal focused on distinctions between properties the state operated as private proprietor and those that were “properties of general use” common to the recent pre-Revolutionary usage, as Ekaterina Pravilova illuminates. It would be impossible to appraise properties of general use, Goskon declared; “this type of property cannot serve as an object of civil exchange, and for that reason it cannot have a market price.” Nevertheless, information about expenditures on such properties should be collected, as it was deemed “important for the population to know what portion of the

49. TsGAM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 3, l. 6.

resources gathered from them went toward consumer spending and what portion went to capital expenditures, for the creation of constructions that will serve many generations.”⁵⁰

Work on the project appears to have started over the summer of 1918, but quickly foundered on the matter of pricing. In August 1918, the Moscow branch office Goskon promised the release of a “reference table of normed prices, necessary to subordinate institutions for their work on government buildings,” but encouraged them in the meantime to go by VSNKh’s hard prices or to gather the necessary information themselves.⁵¹ By the following summer, *Izvestiia finansov* reported, “the question remains unresolved.”⁵² In 1919, VSNKh embarked on its own effort to create an “account of property,” but this too remained unfinished into the spring of 1921, when the Technical-Industrial Department of Rabkrin, in a set of “theses on setting up a preliminary account of the material valuables of the RSFSR,” observed that the absence of such an inventory prevented the Republic from making expedient use of its resources. In September 1921, the economist A. Kiselev, wrote in a report sent to Lenin that “the Republic does not know its means, and without that, the implementation of the new economic [*khoziaistvennyi*] politics is impossible.”⁵³ His musings were heavily underlined by whoever read the report.

At the municipal level, the process of inventorying seized goods was inextricably tied to their categorization. One of the hallmarks of the institutionalization of material life, in this respect, was its capacity to elicit elaborate feats of sorting, the generation of new categories into which various kinds of objects were place. The primary criterion applied by Gorprodukt involved the rough division of seized goods into two categories: things that were special and things that were not special. Things that were not special remained in Gorprodukt’s control. Special things were transferred to the IIC, the local Commissariat of Enlightenment, Narbank/Narkomfin, or a handful of bodies created by the Sovnarkom. By

50. TsGAM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 3, l. 7. For more on tsarist property regimes, see Ekaterina Pravilova, *A Public Empire: Property and the Quest for the Common Good in Imperial Russia* (Princeton, 2014).

51. *Ibid.*, l. 38.

52. *Izvestiia finansov*, no. 1-2 (September 1, 1919), p. 9.

53. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2754, l. 4.

and large, this division was made based on the status of the apartment where the objects were found as “bourgeois.” All objects located within apartments deemed “bourgeois” were treated as valuable in some way and thus worthy of being recorded in inventories. The inter-institutional commission was castigated for “breaking records for slowness,” but given the scale of its task, its pace was hardly surprising. Over the course of 1918 and 1919, around 9,000 of Petrograd’s 43,000 apartments were sealed, their space unusable and contents immobilized until such time as the two regular employees of the inter-institutional commission appeared to perform an inventory. In its first year of work, the IIC managed to “empty out and move to a warehouse, without a detailed inventory,” the contents of 300 apartments; only 119 of these had been inventoried according to the desired standard. The commission was simultaneously criticized, however, for inventorying useless things. In their haste to capture all that might be valuable out of bourgeois apartments, agents inventoried actual bags of trash. Sacks full of pottery shards and kitchen rags were ceremoniously opened and recorded in government accounts. This practice attracted special censure in the inter-institutional commission in Petrograd, which after all “had at its disposal artists and specialist experts” capable of separating the wheat from the chaff.⁵⁴ Despite this advantage, “everything is carted over to the warehouses of the inter-institutional commission,” an observer reported, “and these warehouses produce an impression of a total absence of even the slightest desire to use the essential objects located there, such as dishware, tables, linens, furniture, beds, mattresses, pillows, clocks, a huge quantity of porter, carpets, and other goods. All of this has been lying in the warehouses for already a year now in the most chaotic condition, spoiling, flooding, being eaten by mold and mice, with hardly anything being distributed. It almost seems as if there are no consumers for these goods, as if Piter wants for nothing.”⁵⁵

Once objects arrived at the warehouses, another major “sorting” (sortirovka) occurred. Upon arrival, the committee siphoned off those objects destined for “Narbank, gold and

54. TsGASP f. 1000, op. 4, d. 105, l. 59.

55. Ibid.

precious things, the portion for museums and the commission for the defense of artistic monuments, [and] for the expert commission of sotsobezpecheniia.” Meanwhile, “furniture and objects of household use,” that is, non-valuables, would be “distributed by the [inter-institutional] commission” itself. The next step was inventorying what remained. In their inventories, agents struggled to represent seized objects in appropriate levels of detail. Too abstract and the inventory was useless. Warehouse workers were criticized for recording objects such as “one bag with things.” What kind of things,” a controller scoffed. “[W]hether linens, dishes, coats, fur valuables, or kitchen rags, is unclear, or ‘some clocks’ what kind of clocks—stone, bronze, wall, pocket, gold or not, this is also unsaid.”⁵⁶

The project of determining what kinds of things were valuable, and the sharpening definition of valuables as exceptional, non-quotidian objects, was closely linked to judgments about what kinds of goods were truly necessary to everyday life, and the search for what the Petrosoviet called expressions of “natural demand.” In January 1920, the Petrosoviet issued further guidance for the sorting and allocation of seized, nationalized, and abandoned things, in a “mandatory directive” that had the dual goal of “providing workers with fully equipped and comfortable apartments,” and ensuring the “identical usage of furniture by all citizens, living in Petrograd.” To that end, the department announced a set of “norms for the usage of furniture” that specified:

For one room of approximately 6 by 9 square arshins:⁵⁷

Dining table 1

Sofa 1

Armchairs 2

Chairs 4

Cabinet for clothing 1

Chest of drawers 1

Bed 1

56. Ibid.

57. One arshin = 28 inches.

Small table 1

Mirror 1

Emphasis was on the identical usage of space and objects rather than communal foundations of life. The only things explicitly designated for “general use on a communal basis” were those also characterized as “inessential”: writing tables, buffets, bookshelves, card tables, and “cabinets of all possible construction.” The inhabitation of rooms in a manner other than that described by the furniture norms was envisioned only in special situations, also outlined in the order:

Rooms carrying special names, such as ‘dining rooms’ and ‘living rooms’ can be in apartments from six rooms with no fewer than 10 people living there, one family or several living communally.

Rooms bearing the name ‘office’ can have a place in the apartments of people occupied with intellectual labor, senior soviet workers, and people who need a separate room based on the character of their work.

Rooms bearing the name ‘nursery’ can have a place in apartments where no fewer than three children between 3 and 15 years of age live, so long as it is established that the ‘nursery’ is truly necessary and with the permission of those living in the apartment.”⁵⁸

Carpets, drapery, dishware, pots and pans, and other objects necessary to rooms bearing special names were to be provided “as available, according to a norm not exceeding natural demand.” The implementation of these designs was entrusted to three new commissions: the “apartment” commission, which would deal with the “furnishing of rooms according to the norms presented above”; the “norming” commission, which would “fix the norms for furnishings in the rooms specified”; and a control commission empowered

58. Ibid, I. 12.

to evaluate individual living spaces in order to determine the “true need” for the aforementioned objects. The Housing Department even envisioned the creation of a staff of interior decorators, people graced with both the skill of rational management and the gift of tasteful design, to ensure “that the apartment is arranged with truly essential objects and with taste.” To this end, the order specified that “the enumerated commissions may be staffed only by those people well-acquainted with the character of furnishings for each room, i.e., specialists.”⁵⁹

In the interests of streamlining the information contained in inventories, Gorprodukt’s employees were encouraged to drop superfluous information about seized goods. One of the pieces of information deemed extraneous to the inventory was the price of seized objects. Non-valuables, that is, were to be seen and categorized according to their functionality, their use-value, as it were, as opposed to their exchange value (or, for that matter, their labor-value). Rabkrin inspectors chastised the manager of one of Gorprodukt’s warehouses for appraising individual objects separately rather than assigning them “hard prices.” “Take typewriters,” one report observed. “Hard prices for typewriters have not been fixed, and those set by appraisers” during the inventory process “fluctuate between 5,400 rubles and 13,000 rubles for one.”⁶⁰ The report does not specify whether the two typewriters in question were of the same brand or whether one was much newer or better-made than the other; in the distribution systems envisioned by the Petrosoviet, it did not matter.⁶¹ A representative order issued by the Petrograd Central Housing Department “on the distribution of furniture among workers and employees of the city of Petrograd,” specified that workers, employees, and the unemployed “received” furniture according to a norm, for which they paid a set fee on an installment plan, making payments at a rate of ten percent of the salaries of “all those who would be using the furniture” until its assigned cost had been met. Total

59. Ibid, l. 12.

60. Ibid, l. 91.

61. Brand awareness was widespread, particularly with regard to machines coveted by state institutions, such as typewriters. Whether awareness translated into preference is harder to determine. For descriptions of typewriters by brand, for example, see GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 10, l. 6.

household expenditure on the acquisition of all normed furnishings was capped according to the number of residents in a household. A chart included in the order provided a convenient summary of the norms and the maximum household cost of acquiring them.⁶²

Although the final product of the inventory existed on paper, the act of inventorying and the feats of sorting that accompanied it were physical processes as well. The physical standardization of seized goods generally occurred in the warehouses of city agencies, where it was known colloquially as “depersonalization,” or *obezlichenie*. The Petrograd Regional Soviet (Gubsoviet), the local branch of the Commissariat of Justice (Narkomiust), and Rabkrin hotly debated the legal meaning of the term after the Gubsoviet released a decree ordering the “depersonalization” of all furniture within city limits in October 1920. The timing of the debate was an important clue to the meaning, as it turned out; although depersonalization seems to have been widely practiced in government warehouses even before the Gubsoviet order, it began to appear in official documents with regard to furniture and other non-valuable seized goods only after the Sovnarkom issued its decree on requisition and confiscation in April 1920, on the basis of which people began petitioning state agencies for the return of their now-wrongfully seized property. As in the case of citizeness Tikhobrazova, described in the previous chapter, local authorities frequently denied claims on the grounds that the objects requested had already been depersonalized. Tikhobrazova was told by the troika and the warehouse manager that “storage unit 31,” where her things were, “had already been cleared out, Tikhobrazova’s property was registered by Chrezuchet and given to the Petrokommuna,” where it was added to the general stock.⁶³

This had become a common problem with the Petrograd troikas, Rabkrin observed: “to

62. TsGASP f. 1000, op. 2, d. 136, l. 15. After the furniture had been paid for, its “users” (*polzuiuushchi[e]sia mebeliu*) became its “owners” (*vladeltsy*) and the furniture became their “full property” (*polnaia sobstvennost*), but even then, they were forbidden from moving it outside of Petrograd or selling or giving it to any person or organization without permission from the housing department. (ibid, l. 17.) Although the distribution of furniture was to occur “through stores of the Central bureau for the distribution of objects of first necessity” and for payment, the economic transaction was far from the primary component of the acquisition. Only those groups named in the decree had the right to acquire furniture in the stores, which also required the presentation of an inventory of the purchaser’s current furniture, verified in two copies by the building committee, and proof of employment from his or her professional union.

63. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 630, ll. 4-5.

oral questions put to employees of the chancellery and members of the Troika by the Bureau of Complaints” concerning the fate of various cases and goods, Rabkrin had received “quite curt and indefinite replies, such as the goods had already been sent away, carted off, and given out.”⁶⁴

The usage of “depersonalization” in Tikhobrazova’s case reflected an earlier definition of the term, borrowed from storage of commodities in bulk and now, after the Revolution, being applied in a new way, to a different sort of material thing. According to the employee of the Petrograd branch of Narkomiust reviewing the case, this new usage was inappropriate. “Depersonalization can be applied only to things of just one type that belong to different people,” the agent argued, referring to the pre-revolutionary usage, meaning “things that can be counted off/measured off or weighed off.” Before the Revolution, “this sort of depersonalization applied, for example, to firewood arriving from various addresses and being loaded onto the railways.” One owner’s batch of wood might be larger than another’s, but once a given stock of firewood was joined together with others at the rail depot, it became impossible to differentiate one load from another, one person’s wood from his neighbor’s.⁶⁵ Depersonalization, then, was a shorthand for describing what happened to bulk commodities when they entered warehouses, where they were stripped of their attributes as personal possessions and recreated as interchangeable representations of a given category of thing. In the view of the Petrograd Narkomiust, unlike firewood or grain, furniture—the object slated for “depersonalization” in the Gubsoviet decree—was a “thing of the most varied quality and meaning.” The depersonalization of furniture would be “unacceptable from the viewpoint of a worker’s state, as it would result in an impermissible waste of the people’s wealth [*dostoianie*], because to equate objects of the highest artistic value, antique things and the like, with objects of average work, intended for kitchen work or trade labor, would be to effect a destruction of valuables that would endanger the national economy.”⁶⁶

64. Ibid, l. 4.

65. Firewood was a common example in tsarist legal usage of “depersonalization” as well, evidently. Ekaterina Pravilova, *A public empire*, p. 274.

66. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 10, l. 46.

3.3 Valuation and the Ruination of Valuables

While non-valuables drew the attention of all manner of municipal authorities, the valuables that had been culled in parallel languished in city coffers, bank safes, or in the sealed apartments where they were found. Certain precious objects did attract the attention of central authorities for their symbolic value, especially as the idea of displays and exhibits became popular. In the fall of 1919, an “expert commission” in Petrograd affiliated with the Commissariat of Foreign Trade proposed mounting an exhibit of “artistic and historical objects and so forth” in the abandoned British Embassy, in the once-wealthy neighborhood around Millionaia Street.⁶⁷ Because it had collected so much material, more than it could possibly use, the commission requested rooms in a neighboring building on Millionaia Street from the housing department, which it intended to use as a “reserve warehouse for the objects of luxury that we are not going to put on display.”⁶⁸ The Petrograd expert commission never mounted its exhibition, but the impulse behind it reveals one possible mode of valuing precious goods, focused on their symbolic value as artifacts of bourgeois accumulation that

67. M. Gorky, *L.B. Krasin i Savva Morozov Lyadov/Pozner*, p. 210-211, cited in M. Glenny, “Leonid Krasin: The Years before 1917, an outline,” *Soviet Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2 (Oct. 1970), p. 219. Krasin was uncannily well-prepared for his role as Commissar of Trade, combining two unique sets of skills—bank robbing and managing a major multinational—gained during two very different phases of his life. As a young man involved in radical politics, Krasin ran Party finances at the turn of the century, for which task he organized the robbery of a major Baku bank performed by the Bolshevik bandit Kamo and secured extensive underwriting from Morozov. Shortly after the bank robbery 1908, forced into exile, Krasin drew upon his technical education to go to work as an electrical engineer, salesman, and manager in series of major German and Russian industrial concerns. After four years in Berlin, Krasin participated in Siemens’s expansion into Russia as one of the company’s head salesmen in St. Petersburg between 1912 and 1914, when A.M. Putilov, impressed with his work, offered Krasin the management of a subsidiary branch of the Putilov empire, the Baranov gunpowder works, which he ran through the war. Putilov also appointed Krasin to a spot on the board of the Russo-Aziatskii Bank, cementing the latter’s turn away from radical politics, or any politics at all, save for a few overwrought refusals to contribute to Lenin’s upkeep in Geneva sent through his once-and-future party associate, G.A.Solomon. In the summer of 1917, Lenin visited Krasin, now quite wealthy, numerous times with entreaties to rejoin to the party and, after October, participate in the business of running the country. Krasin refused and was overheard expressing the opinion that Lenin had been paid by the Germans to return to Russia. Trotsky eventually convinced him to join the Soviet delegation to the Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations, securing his re-entry into party ranks and launching him into a series of elite posts that kept him mostly abroad until his death of blood disease in London in 1926 at the age of 56. For more, see Glenny.

68. *Ibid.*, l. 107. The exhibit was never mounted, despite the expert commission’s success at gathering space and materials for it. In February of the following year, Krasin identified the English Embassy and surrounding buildings as “stuffed” with valuables, “partly household objects, partly materials for museums and such,” that had not yet been sorted. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 231, l. 37.

made sense only at the edges, encased behind ropes and glass. In Moscow, Narkompros collected valuables with what it called “artistic significance,” arranging for their distribution to cities across the Republic. Casting precious goods as objets d’art was another means of securing a place for them in socialist society. Competition for hosting such objects was fierce. “Battles” were reportedly “waged between individual cities on this question because the valuables are few, and the cities many.”⁶⁹ Still, many goods that had been deemed “valuable” at the moment of seizure did not fall into this category. Objects that were made from gold and silver, but were not in the shape of coins and bars, such as jewelry and tableware, were not regulated by Narkomfin, and provided they bore no special artistic qualities, were not of interest to Narkompros. The same was true of religious valuables, many of which, though formally protected from seizure ended up in government hands anyhow, particularly objects of a personal rather than ritual nature, such as gold or silver crosses, which again, Narkomfin did not want.

In February 1920, after several years of general inattention, the Republic’s stores of bourgeois treasure began to appear urgently necessary, a change of heart that stemmed not from a new curiosity about the valuables themselves, but rather from a new set of expectations about the timing of world revolution. “Two years ago,” a prominent party consultant on the matter, Ia. M. Iurovskii, reflected in mid-1921, “we looked at all of this as something that did not merit attention, that oh the revolution in the west is coming tomorrow, and all these types of things like diamonds, precious stones, and such, we do not need this.”⁷⁰ By 1920, it was clear that “a different approach was necessary.” Faith that world revolution was coming remained high; the new goal, however, was to profit on the delay by selling off Russia’s valuables to the foreign bourgeoisie. At a meeting hosted by the Commissar of Trade, Leonid Krasin, and the deputy Commissar of Finance, Sergei Chutskaev, Krasin explained to the assembled group that “if the revolution abroad begins, everything will be

69. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 341, l. 17.

70. In a measure of how rapidly interest in sale grew, Iurovskii added, “I am not even speaking about 1921 when this question undoubtedly attracted the deepest attention of all relevant institutions.” RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 127, l. 132.

lost. [This stuff] has to be gotten onto trains right away.”⁷¹ He proposed presenting “catalogues in America, that we have this many teaspoons and other objects. Listed in metric measurements. All our strength must be put into this. To have the wares as fast as possible.”⁷² Lenin himself stressed the urgency of Gokhran’s work in a handwritten letter to Chutskaev reading:

Com. Chutskaev

It is necessary to take especially urgent measures to speed up the collection of valuables.

If we are late then they will give us nothing in Europe and America.

In Moscow there can (and should) be mobilized for this a thousand party members and the like with special controllers.

Obviously you all have this business moving archaically.

Show what emergency measures you are taking to speed things up. Lenin.⁷³

But knowledge of this alleged foreign market for Russian valuables was scarce; the ambition to sell valuables abroad was not driven by obvious market demand for them.⁷⁴ Indeed, no market research backed the supposition that great profits could be earned by flooding western markets with the riches of Russia’s dispossessed, which was guided instead by the belief that the bourgeoisie loved diamonds.⁷⁵ Opinions split as to whether this

71. Ibid, l. 38.

72. Ibid, l. 39.

73. Ibid, l. 49.

74. Ibid, l. 37. Domestic sale was considered briefly and dismissed. At Krasin’s meeting on Gokhran in February, Chutskaev proposed releasing a separate collection of simpler objects “for sale in the villages.” The proposal was met with skepticism by Krasin and the others, who objected that the release of gold in the countryside “would call forth great speculation,” even if the idea made sense; in the past year, the peasants had, by all accounts, developed a taste for used luxury goods, among the few things they accepted for trade in grain on free markets.

75. At times the conceptualization of the market evinced in the planning board’s discussion approached caricature, surprising particularly in light of Krasin’s long experience working as an executive in major industrial multinationals before the Revolution. In addition to his proposal to create catalogues of teaspoons for America, Krasin also suggested, on the question of how information about Russia’s valuables should be disseminated abroad, that “everything should be photographed” and the images “released around the whole world, [we should] hire a few princesses who live in Switzerland to serve as couriers, maybe they can take on the task of distribution.” l. 38.

general maxim held true even in a period of postwar dearth. Comrade Bruk, a gold expert and party member who had concluded a successful sale in Berlin the previous June, assured everyone at Krasin's meeting that the "petty and major bourgeoisie are trying to buy as many diamonds as possible," likely in an effort, another participant mused, to "save themselves from the fall of the currency." It was now May 1920; no one in the group had any definitive information about what might have changed in the previous year, but Krasin, who had lived and worked in Berlin as an executive at Siemens between 1908 and 1912, believed that "Germany was no market" for their wares, especially "after defeat in war." "We should go to the land of the victors," he argued. In short, no one knew what kind of response they would get from the global markets in precious things, nor did they want to ask the Soviet representative, Gukovskii, a deputy Commissar of Finance, whom they deemed a "dilettante—he writes in such a way that they will all laugh at us."⁷⁶

As work on Gokhran got underway, officials discovered new benefits, both practical and ideological. On the practical side, it was undeniable that the collection of seized valuables and their storage in poorly-guarded local finance departments had made those departments ripe targets for bandits. "The storage of these valuables in different places posed a great danger," one report explained, "in the sense of protecting them, and a great inconvenience, in the sense of keeping or making an account of them. In light of this, there arose a great need to create a consolidated apparatus for inventorying and storing these valuables."⁷⁷ Narkomfin administrators trumpeted the "social and political meaning" of Gokhran as one of the "largest and most symbolic conclusions of the expropriation from the hands of the bourgeoisie the means and forms of their direct accumulation of wealth." "In the creation of Gokhran," one report explained, "one finds the brightest symbol of that sharp boundary between the old and new worlds, telling us that what was before the wealth [*dostoianie*] of a few individuals and served as an object of their enjoyment or a means of accumulation has now become the wealth of the whole nation [*obshchenatsionalnoe dostoianie*], con-

76. Ibid, l. 40. Krasin evinced repeated concern with demonstrating "just how not poor we are."

77. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 343, l. 229. Emphasis original.

centrated in the hands of the proletarian government power for the use and good of all.”⁷⁸ The Narkomfin report characterized the seizure of luxurious objects as an opportunity to recapture “surplus” value from capitalists, the “added value or even more simply, the unpaid popular labor that the bourgeoisie appropriated,” represented in the excessive luxury of precious goods. “Soviet power could not leave these things in the hands of their owners without contradicting its major efforts to expropriate the means of production such as factories, machines, materials, and money from the hands of capitalists and landowners.”⁷⁹ Selling off the valuables abroad presented an opportunity to affirm the symbolic values of the Bolshevik regime at home, stressing the uselessness, and valuelessness, of valuables inside the socialist Republic.

It was never imagined that Gokhran would be a long-lasting fixture of Soviet institutional life. It was envisioned as a sort of single-use institution, created to perform a specific, finite task—counting up the material valuables of the RSFSR—after which it would be dissolved. Initial estimates projected a completion date in December 1920. Gokhran’s mandate listed its tasks as:

- a. Receiving valuables belonging to the RSFSR from various institutions and individuals, consisting of gold, platinum, silver, in bars and objects made of them, diamonds, colored precious stones, pearls, and coins.
- b. The appraisal of newly-acquired valuables on the basis of norms, set by the relevant organs.
- c. The storage of the valuables mentioned in point a of this instruction.
- d. The release of valuables.
- e. Accounting for the valuables stored in Gokhran.
- f. Accounting for the valuables that are not subject to transfer to Gokhran.

78. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 343, l. 231.

79. *Ibid.*, l. 231.

- g. The depersonalization, sorting, and assessment of newly-acquired valuables by a special Commission attached to Gokhran...⁸⁰

In answer to the question, “What should Gokhran be?”, as the consultant Iurovskii explained in a report to the Politburo, “it should be a factory that issues a product based on a strict calculation of gold, platinum, in weight, in bars, and the like.” Strict calculations of value, Iurovskii well knew, even those based on weight, had been elusive in recent years. Narkomfin’s Department of Foreign Currency, for example, viewed the information about foreign and domestic gold prices that it collected as “secret,” and regularly denied requests on the topic from the Cheka on those grounds in 1920. It also refused to inform the Cheka about the prices and locations involved in its Sovnarkom-mandated “secret purchases of gold, platinum, and foreign currency” across Russia over the next two years.⁸¹ The resurrection of the Government Bank and its publication of Republic-wide exchange rates at the end of 1921 did not put a stop to the frequent negotiation of special prices for particular individuals. To the contrary, members of the Gosbank collegium occasionally traded on its position as rate-fixer in order to offer “personal” exchange rates.⁸²

Gokhran was intended to overcome this cloistered, personalized pursuit of valuation, to get at what Iurovskii repeatedly called the “real” value of things, “so that Narkomvneshtorg or Narkomprod *firmly* knew, that it was getting goods of a *definite* value all ready to go and

80. The official mandate, at RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 231, l. 7 and published in *Izvestiia*, February 13, 1920 no. 32, abbreviated the institution as “Goskhran,” with an ‘s’. In a meeting held the same week, a delegate from Narkomvneshtorg, Novakovskii, observed that, “those are sharp sounds, unpleasant to the ear: ‘goskhran.’” Krasin informed him that it would be called, instead, “Gokhran,” but both names proved awkward. *Ibid.*, l. 39.

81. *Ibid.*, l. 139. The purchases mentioned here were likely affiliated with Narkomfin’s monetary unification campaign, which aimed at sucking gold, old money, and foreign currency out of the “jars” in which it was believed peasants were storing huge quantities of it, into government hands. Narkomfin sought to make its purchases open and legal, in the belief that drawing gold and foreign money out into circulation was the only way to gain a monopoly on it. The Cheka opposed this policy, seeking instead to draw such resources out through “merciless confiscation,” i.e. continued criminalization of their holding. The Cheka’s reaction, penned by Unshlikht and the deputy director of Ekonomupr (the Economic Directorate), Iurovitskii, to the publication of the September 6, 1921 Sovnarkom decree allowing Narkomfin to buy up gold and foreign money “at prices fixed to correspond with the course on foreign markets” is published as “Zapiska v TsK RKP[b] Tov. Molotovu, 28 September 1921,” in *Denezhnaia reforma 1921-1924 gg. : Sozdanie tverdoi valuty. Dokumenty i materialy*. L.N. Dobrokhotov, V.N. Kolodezhnyi, V.S. Pushkarev eds. (Rosspen, Moscow, 2008), p. 54. Narkomfin’s reply, p. 55.

82. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 75, with citations here from l. 7.

that depending on its ability and the market it would receive a profit or suffer a loss, but then the valuables would figure in government balances in their *real* value.”⁸³ In entering into the project of selling Russia’s valuables abroad, then, Soviet authorities would inevitably tangle with market-based expressions of their value, the prices for which they would be sold on foreign markets; but Iurovskii also staked out the need for a measure more “real” than what the foreign market could provide—against which the fluctuations of market prices, enabling profits and losses, could be judged. But where did this real value lie, and who, in the socialist polity, should be empowered to decide?

In attempting to determine the real value of precious goods, Soviet authorities proceeded not on a case-by-case basis, appraising particular objects as they arrived, but rather attempted to create a picture of the totality of valuables in the Republic, in the form of an inventory.⁸⁴ “We have to check everything,” Krasin emphasized. “We have to do this systematically.”⁸⁵ The formal intake of goods sent from the provinces or outside institutions was to occur in the presence of the director of Gokhran’s storage department, accompanied by a controller from Rabkrin, and an appraiser from Gokhran. After intake, valuables physically went into storage units, but administratively they now belonged “Commission for depersonalization, sorting, and appraisal of valuables,” where the real work of determining what they were and what they were worth would be performed. According to Gokhran’s mandate, the commission, consisting of the director of Gokhran or his deputy, and representatives from VSNKh, NKVT, RKI, and Narkompros, was to meet regularly to sort objects into two primary groups: the first, consisting of “valuables bearing artistic significance due to their age, craftsmanship, valuable artistic design, interest of a historical character, etc., as well as rarities and unique objects [*unikum*],” was to be “kept separately from the general mass” in a special section of the “Storage Department of Valuables of a Mixed Character.” The “general mass” of goods was next to be turned over for a process called “deperson-

83. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 127, l. 134. Emphasis original.

84. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 231, l. 37.

85. *Ibid.*, l. 35.

alization,” involving the “separation of diamonds, precious colored stones and pearls from metals and systematizing valuables according to similarity, quality, price and the like.” The “separation” identified in this process entailed the physical removal of stones from their settings and the separation of one sort of metal from another; an informal but commonly used synonym for depersonalization was “*lomat*,” “to break,” or to be sent “*na lom*,” to scrap. In the Sovnarkom decree on Gokhran, this action was described as stripping objects of their “individuality,” as in: “objects of the category [of rarities and historical valuables] should not lose their individuality and are to be stored separately, unmixed with the general mass of depersonalized stones, bits and pieces of gold, platinum, diamonds, etc.”⁸⁶

The preference for depersonalization in the handling of all but the most exceptional valuables revealed a prevalent conception that the value of the vast majority of precious goods, those lacking in artistic or historic merit, inhered not in their style or beauty but in their raw materials. Depersonalization stripped away the traces of an object’s previous owners, but it also stripped away the traces of work and craftsmanship invested in the object. It turned rings and spoons, objects with use-values and products of human labor, into raw gold—the ur-commodity. The inventorying process reflected this approach to valuation. In Gokhran’s preparatory documents, the process of appraisal is described as an application of “existing norms.” Gokhran’s mandate instructed that “the accounting of Gokhran should be organized in such a way that at every moment, there is a complete picture of the valuables stored there according to their type, quality, weight, and valuation, and that at every moment in the case that VSNKh’s appraisal norms change, there is complete ability to rapidly recalculate according to the new norms without examining the actual objects.”⁸⁷ The mandate included a classification scheme by which the raw diamonds and scraps of gold were to be grouped—stones by the quarter-carat, metals by type and weight—and then packed.⁸⁸ Diamond rings, gold crosses, silver tea services, it all became so many “metric measures”

86. Ibid, l. 2.

87. Ibid, l. 4.

88. Ibid, l. 3.

of melted metal and loose stone. Those who handled valuables were repeatedly chastised for recording descriptions of the objects in too much detail.⁸⁹ Krasin envisioned that these packages, once composed, could remain “stored in depersonalized aspect,” sealed and with weight and valuation written on the outside.⁹⁰ This way, as Krasin put it, “diamonds are diamonds and pearls are pearls,” and “at any moment, this or that amount can be sent when it is necessary.”⁹¹ Depersonalized packets of gold could be “counted up, weighed, and assessed on the basis of norms set by VSNKh” or according to the prices of 1914 translated into gold—“[pre-war gold] is firm,” Krasin said.⁹²

At the same time, depersonalization also reflected concern for a very different dimension of the valuables, what we might think of as their “life history.” The anthropologist Arjun Appadurai describes two types of past that can impinge on the valuation of material objects. The first, formulated by Igor Kopytoff as the “cultural biography” of things, “is appropriate to *specific* things, as they move through different hands, contexts, and uses, thus accumulating a specific biography, or set of biographies.”⁹³ The second, what Appadurai calls the “social history” of things, applies to a class or type of thing, describing “longer-term shifts (often in demand) and larger-scale dynamics that transcend the biographies of particular members of that class or type.”⁹⁴ Both are frequently applied to relics and other sacred objects, where the creation-story and history of changing hands draw new layers of meaning and value to unchanged objects: “thus a particular relic may have a specific biography, but whole types of relic, and indeed the class of things called ‘relic’ itself, may have a larger historical ebb and flow, in the course of which its meaning may shift significantly.”⁹⁵ Both types of life history likely impinged on the valuation of precious goods at Gokhran, especially the most recent moments in their cultural biography—their capture

89. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 341, l. ___

90. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 231, l. 39.

91. *Ibid.*, l. 38.

92. *Ibid.*, ll. 2, 3, 37, 39.

93. Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: commodities and the politics of value,” in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Appadurai (Cambridge, 1986), p. 34.

94. *Ibid.*

95. *Ibid.*

through seizure. Gokhran's creators were sensitive to the recent past of their wares. During the organizational meeting held in February 1920, Chutskaev in particular expressed concern that the life history of the seized valuables would negatively affect their valuation abroad. From the meeting transcript:

Chutskaev: Of course in this preparatory organizational work we are forced to consider the negative attitudes.

Bruk interrupts: Abroad one can find people who will say that this is all stolen. They have to get used to it. We must wait it out.⁹⁶

His concern extended to his perception of which objects were suitable for trade, even abroad:

Chutskaev: We have lots of watches, which cannot be sold, which were rewards, with stamps.

Solomon: Why not?

Chutskaev: They have names.

Krasin: They can be put up for barter. Not so much metal will be lost.⁹⁷

Depersonalization was the middle ground; it allowed the "individuality" of objects to be eradicated, returning precious things into the raw materials from which they came.⁹⁸

Having turned countless everyday valuables into scrap, however, Gokhran still faced the task of plugging this new commodity into the foreign market, creating an interface between Soviet valuation processes and those of the outside world, at a moment when the socialist Republic remained isolated. Tuning the process of valuation to foreign frequencies

96. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 231, l. 38.

97. Ibid, l. 40.

98. C.A. Bayly, discussing the social history of cloth in India over two centuries, observes that commoditization of produce and labor is often assumed to entail a severing of formerly "tight associations" between people and things, by which objects could pick up the substance of the people who handled them. Commoditization, by contrast, required "things...to acquire a neutral status" for exchange to occur. Bayly, "The Origins of Swadeshi: Cloth and Indian Society, 1700-1930," in Appadurai ed, op.cit. p. 297-298.

proved difficult, as witnessed in a parallel effort, around the same time, to establish prices to be charged to foreign envoys in Soviet space. A report written by a finance official, likely A.G. Orlov, on the new problem of properly assessing the rooms, sofas, water, and newspapers consumed by envoys in Moscow outlined two basic approaches to the task. The first was identified by the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs as “mutuality,” meaning that the RSFSR would charge foreigners the exact same rents, food prices and the like that Soviet agents paid abroad. In the absence of domestic markets on which to base valuation, the RSFSR would simply mirror prices on foreign markets, “permanently fixed according to average rates in Paris and London,” charged in British pounds, as the most “reliable” currency.⁹⁹ The other approach, which Orlov preferred, would be more difficult, but had the benefit of expressing the “true value” [istinnnaia rastsenka] of things, a goal Orlov, like Iurovskii, Krasin, and Gokhran’s other founders, returned to again and again.¹⁰⁰ Instead of borrowing prices from the foreign market, Orlov proposed borrowing them from pre-war Russia, multiplied by a “coefficient of difference” that would be calculated by comparing “prewar prices in Moscow, or Petersburg, on the one hand, with those of London and Paris” on the other, so as to reflect innate differences between the Russian and foreign markets, differences that the Revolution had not extinguished.¹⁰¹

Gokhran experienced many of these same hurdles in its attempt to discover the value of precious goods, beginning with the seeming impossibility of securing reliable information about foreign prices, even in rudimentary forms. At a meeting in late April 1920, ostensibly the first held on the issue, two months after Gokhran’s creation, Levitskii asked Narkomvneshtorg to either provide Gokhran with foreign prices for precious stones or, if this was not at hand, to radio Comrade Litvinov with instructions to collect it across global markets but particularly in London, where Gokhran now planned to open a “permanent outlet stocked with a defined fund of valuables, operated by people enjoying the Republic’s trust.”¹⁰² In

99. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 377, l. 71.

100. Ibid, l. 72.

101. Ibid, l. 71.

102. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 231, l. 51.

the meantime, he proposed working off of the data collected the previous August by Comrade Bruk in Berlin, despite the fact that “in accord with the opinion of Comrade Krasin, Berlin never was a center for trade in diamonds” and more important, the German mark was suffering from an “instability” no less dramatic than that of the ruble.¹⁰³ An inventory prepared for Lenin in August 1920, the first he received, would seem to indicate that efforts to track down London prices had come to naught, and that the Berlin prices had been abandoned. The inventory categorized all the objects Gokhran had counted thus far according to name, weight, price in rubles, and price in “French pre-war francs.”¹⁰⁴ Subsequent inventories dropped references to pricing entirely, listing only the quantities of goods involved. When Iurovskii arrived to clean up Gokhran in May 1921, he ordered Narkomvneshtorg to acquire at long last “illustrated catalogs of diamonds and colored stones from before the war, during the war, and after the war” as well as to perform basic research on “the demand for objects of gold, silver, and diamonds on the retail markets, showing rough value and what goods are in demand,” neither of which had been done.¹⁰⁵

Lenin received the first of what became fortnightly tallies of valuables in April and May 1920. Between May 1-10, Gokhran “opened and sorted” 4,088 carats of diamonds, 1,359 carats of pearls, 42 gold watches, and long lists of other objects. What precisely these objects were remained in many cases quite vague: 6,126 “silver objects united with other materials and objects of the religious cults” were amassed between April 6 and May 1, with another 11,000 added to the stash between May 1 and 18.¹⁰⁶ By August, Gokhran was processing nearly 1000 watches of gold or silver, 3000 silver religious objects, and 20 pounds

103. Ibid.

104. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 127, l. 2.

105. Ibid, l. 124. He also ordered the MChK to “gather from its archives various catalogs of foreign and Russian books from the major enterprises of Petrograd, Moscow, Odessa, Kharkov, and Baku, displaying precious stones and objects, as well as a list of the former owners of these enterprises, for the purpose of using them for encoding secret prices.” This was likely to remedy one of the chief flaws he observed, that people inside Gokhran—perhaps Shelekhes et al., making use of their foreign connections—informed foreign trading partners of what the Soviet Republic would offer in advance, deflating the inexperienced employees of Narkomvneshtorg, more accustomed to trading in manufactures than in fine jewels.

106. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 231, l. 56

of loose gold objects each week.¹⁰⁷ But even this extraordinary turnover paled before the flood of shipments from the peripheries. Gokhran's storage units quickly overflowed; a Rabkrin inspector reported that the valuables coming in from the provinces were "spread out everywhere," often "sitting out for weeks in hallways."¹⁰⁸ Moreover, Gokhran's employees, like those of other branches of Narkomfin, brought their personal possessions to the vaults for safekeeping. Levitskii, the director, kept seven pounds and 32 small packets of gold and silver objects in a safe at his personal disposal, a practice imitated by most of his employees as well as his superiors—Chutskaev acknowledged that the quantity of valuables belonging to employees in the safes was "huge." Chutskaev himself was found by a Rabkrin inspection to have more than 200,000 rubles in nikolaevki and dumskii denominations in his own safe.¹⁰⁹ He defended the practice among Narkomfin employees, saying that the attempt to protect the "relics of their former bourgeois existence is quite understandable for the far-from-communist milieu from which the employees of our commissariats are recruited," especially "given the inability of our authorities to provide even minimal security... against the systematic theft of apartments."¹¹⁰

The presence of these outside valuables in Gokhran's coffers represented more than a breach of protocol: it represented an alternative mode of valuation—one based in domestic circumstances, reflecting the ability of precious objects to hold value in a way that currency could not—that severely impinged on Gokhran's work. Gokhran was a physically porous institution. Over the winter of 1920, as Gokhran's coffers filled up and its heat gave out, employees began "dragging hundreds of boxes back and forth each day" to the neighboring apartment building where many of them lived, so as to work at home, where the pipes had not burst. One of the major sorting workshops shifted itself more or less permanently to the apartment building's second floor. There were reports that the six rooms of the sorting workshop in the apartment building had become in fact "not a sorting workshop but a

107. *Ibid.*, l. 131, 145.

108. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 242, l. 18.

109. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 242, ll. 20, 21.

110. *Ibid.*, l. 76.

Sukharevka market.”¹¹¹ This physical porousness was a source of significant upset in the first round of reviews issued on it in the summer of 1921. Officials tried to plug the spatial holes around Gokhran by hiring more security guards, installing a direct signal line to the Cheka, but of course this approach, oriented as it was to some sort of external threat, missed the point.¹¹²

Intended to prepare Russia’s valuables for foreign sale, large quantities of Gokhran’s stock was indeed taken by employees for storage or sale at home. The contents of an entire “fund of so-called domestic implements [khoziaistvennye veshchi]” culled from the great diversity of objects deemed special enough to ship to Gokhran by local institutions, but unsuitable for foreign sale, lined the hallways and were piled into heaps, often still in the bags and boxes in which they had arrived, in spare rooms.¹¹³ Once a month, in what Iurovskii aptly described as a “legal bacchanalia,” they were “distributed among the workers, controllers, and everyone else.” As Iurovskii learned:

No one blushed at dragging off whatever took their fancy, which they received permission to do from their desk mate. Of what did these domestic implements consist? There was everything here...the only thing they did not give out was the weaponry, everything else, it is difficult even to recount it all, but let’s say binoculars, compasses, all possible kinds of dishware, linens, silk, metal ware, household goods, bathroom and toilet things, shoes, all possible headwear, wallets, knives, bags, briefcases, dresses and clothing, and on and on without end.¹¹⁴

In testimony collected by the Cheka, the silver department emerges as the epicenter of theft at Gokhran. “I personally saw how they in the silver department of Gokhran stole valuables several times,” testified the Rabkrin inspector Nikolai Avetik’iants, later shot for

111. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 127, ll. 132, 8. Sukharevka was one of Moscow’s largest open-air semi-legal markets, before it was shuttered in 1921.

112. Ibid, l. 8.

113. Reported by Bokii, l. 34.

114. Ibid, l. 133.

his own role in the crimes.¹¹⁵ This testimony echoed the official conclusion, repeated in the sentencing documents, that “the largest percentage of theft in Gokhran occurred in the silver department during the mass rough sorting of valuables among which could be found gold and other precious stones.”¹¹⁶

Theft at Gokhran was by definition a group activity; according to Imperial banking regulations, intentionally preserved in Gokhran’s work, all contact with valuables occurred in troikas or pairs, never alone.¹¹⁷ Employees who wanted to pilfer valuables therefore had first to secure the agreement of their co-workers. The most renowned clique of alleged thieves at Gokhran was that of Pozhamchi and Shelekhes, the jewelers, assisted by their Rabkrin inspector, the noblewoman Maria Kozlovskaiia, and occasionally a third jeweler, Aleksandrov. “According to the testimony of numerous witnesses,” Budnikov informed Avanesov, “these three held themselves apart from the others and appeared to be one closely connected group. By their own admission, they could not have stolen without the others.”¹¹⁸ Evidence against the group was speculative and vengeful. Pozhamchi, “until just recently, had a permanent mistress alongside his wife, whom he supplied with money and food. According to the testimony of witnesses, Shelekhes has recently been living better than earlier and has even become richer than before the revolution.” All three brought “good breakfasts

115. Ibid, l. 72. Avetik’iants’s testimony bears strikingly transparent signs of coercion, as do several of the others included in the Cheka’s case no. 10069, on Gokhran. “At Gokhran, the following appraisers stole valuables: Petrov, Nikolaev, Vlasov, Zhaliev, Makarov, Lu--chev, Stychkin, Kruglov, Danilov, Kochnev, Moroznikov, and Rabkrin inspectors: Balkin, Karshin, Sokolov-Shch—glov, Durov, Balakhin, and others whose names I do not presently remember, but I will try to remember them.” Ibid, l. 72 (dashes where letters are illegible to me). Avetik’iants confessed completely to his crimes; as Bokii reported to Lenin with satisfaction, “Nearly all the accused have confessed, with the exception of a few people. Those who have confessed are turning in their co-conspirators and other thieves.” Ibid, l. 75. Bokii sent Avetik’iants’s testimony to Avanesov at Rabkrin, responsible for delegating controllers to Gokhran, as “wholly characteristic,” with the request that the latter choose more carefully, from among inspectors who had been cleared by the party cell, in the future. Ibid, l. 73.

116. Ibid, l. 88, 103. Iurovskii also identified the silver department as the heart of Gokhran’s theft circuits, stating in one of his early reports to Lenin that he had managed to reduce theft at the gold and diamond tables simply by slowing it down considerably—for which he was vociferously criticized by the anxious Basha—but that such measures would be insufficient for the silver department, where “theft will continue until there are new reforms.” Ibid, l. 122.

117. E. Levitskii, Gokhran’s first director and the former director of the Moscow *ssudnaia kazna*, cited this provision in response to one of the investigations into theft at Gokhran, with the evocative question: why, if these methods worked perfectly well under the Imperial regime, would they not continue to do so now?

118. Ibid, l. 76.

to work with them of various tasty things that they even shared with Kozlovskiaia,” their inspector. They had “fabulously furnished apartments and supported large families.” Like everyone, they lived “on far more than their salary.” “All are, of course, non-party.”¹¹⁹ A search of Pozhamchi’s apartment revealed 15 paper envelopes with 36 small diamonds in them; two such packets were found at Aleksandrov’s, incriminating because “diamonds were stored in the very same envelopes at the MChK,” where the latter had worked. After “much stalling, Pozhamchi disclosed a compartment hidden in a metal clothing wardrobe for diamonds and pearls, but said that these all belonged to bourgeois who fled abroad.”¹²⁰

There was some hard evidence against the men. Aleksandrov was caught with six gold watches in his pockets in August 1920, when the Cheka performed an emergency search of all workers leaving Gokhran’s premises, though he claimed, to the Chekist interviewing him, that the watches were in fact for the Cheka. Having worked as a jeweler at the Cheka himself, Aleksandrov was tasked with delivering them. Both Pozhamchi and Aleksandrov maintained ties abroad, “making inquiries into the current prices of precious stones for unknown purposes, without any instruction to do so.” Though unstated in the criminal complaint, the implication is that they sought this information in order to price their own presumably stolen gems for sale on the “free” market, whether at home or abroad.¹²¹ The charges against Pozhamchi and Aleksandrov need not have been true to speak accurately about the role that valuables played in and around Gokhran; they express what was plausible, if not what actually happened. They indicate that the valuables collected in Gokhran occupied many of the same jobs as a currency might—as a means of payment, for bribes; as a commodity in themselves, for sale; and as a store of value, for savings. The valuables, however, did not buy much: Pavel Latov, a 22-year-old peasant and Rabkrin inspector, was charged with the standard slate of crimes—failing to merit the trust placed in him, systematic theft of the republic’s property—as well as having “used his position and job

119. *Ibid.*, l. 77.

120. *Ibid.*, l. 76.

121. *Ibid.*, l. 77.

as an inspector NKRKI to offer a bribe to the appraiser Petrov, consisting of two pairs of diamond earrings and one ring,” thus acquiring through the latter “permission to use a bicycle.”¹²² Many of the valuables recovered by the VChK were allegedly exposed not during a process of sale but in hiding places—the Rabkrin inspector Avetik’iants promised in his confession to take authorities to the spot near a suburban rail station where he had buried his treasure—suggesting that they were being stored, to retain value when money could not do so.

If there was a lot of theft at Gokhran, however, there was also a lot of regime-sanctioned diversion in the disposal of valuables. Aleksandrov in particular appears to have participated in an alternate, but firmly institutional, channel of disposal that ran through Gokhran, one that emptied out back into the regime, rather than abroad. As those responsible for prosecuting wrongdoing at Gokhran rapidly found, theft was difficult to distinguish from this other mode of transmission. Employees caught red-handed in compromising situations exploited this similarity, but it was a real and substantial part of Gokhran’s regular work. The majority of these transfers occurred “without written orders, by telephone.” Occasionally the Narkomfin official Alskii jotted down his orders on scraps of paper. “In the files of Gokhran,” one Chekist reported, “there are a series of notes of this character from Comrade Alskii, in particular the correspondence from March 10, 1921, ordering the release of ten gold rings with diamonds to Comrade Krylenko, without a stamp and without a visa from NKRKI.” Budnikov continued:

We must also recognize the great ease with which senior individuals empowered to do this work by Narkomfin made orders [for the release of goods] as well as the ease shown on the part of Gokhran’s administration in releasing various valuables.¹²³

122. *Ibid.*, l. 105.

123. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 127, l. 27-28.

As an example, he cited an instance involving the release of “200 wrist and pocket watches for employees of the ChK and MChK of which 100 should be metal, 88 silver, and 12 gold.”¹²⁴ The order was issued in a senior Narkomfin official’s name in late July 1920, and the person empowered to fulfill it was the jeweler Aleksandrov.¹²⁵

Over just one month in 1921, “805 million rubles’ worth of valuables were released from Gokhran” to various institutions in this informal manner, according to notes studied by Budnikov. The majority—622 million rubles’ worth—had been given to Narkomvneshtorg; the runner up, with 157 million, was the Communist Party, while the military came in a distant third, with four million rubles’ worth. Most of the goods released were categorized as diamonds, followed by pearls and other stones, then gold.¹²⁶ Gokhran kept running tabs for each institution it served, and though the economic meaning of such payments in a planned monetary system was minimal, in return for its distributions, Gokhran’s kassa was credited with some of the money it was nominally owed, 425 million rubles. These informal distributions served distinctly corporate aims, as seen by the number of watches Gokhran distributed during the month of May alone: around 2,800 total, 516 of which were gold, 913 silver, and 1,391 of plain metal. In May 1920, Gokhran sent instructions to an organization calling itself “Red Gift” [Krasnyi podarok] asking for guidance as to “what objects and in what amounts could be given to the commission for rewarding exceptional Red Army soldiers,” and evidently requesting some watches and portsigars as a start.¹²⁷

124. Ibid. Watches—especially when made of gold—occupied a special place in Gokhran’s gift economy. According to the Sovnarkom decree on requisitions and confiscations of October 1921, watches were not considered pure valuables, regardless of the metal they were made of. “Goods which are not considered to have the value of precious metals include gold watches or glasses,” the decree stated; they were characterized instead as “technical equipment.” (RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 343, l. 18.)

125. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 127, l. 29.

126. Ibid, l. 33. Gokhran’s “petty-craft” approach to distribution was also criticized by Krasin. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 127, l. 122. For an alternate view, see Sean McMeekin, *History’s Greatest Heist: The Looting of Russia* (Yale, 2008). McMeekin classifies virtually any redistribution of seized objects that ended up in the hands of regime members as theft, an interpretation that manages simultaneously to apply idealized universal moral codes to the process of seizure and to adopt the ideal/ized Bolshevik stance on valuable objects as worthless and undesirable, such that any desire for them can be exposed as subversive or cynical, and the Bolsheviks can be exposed as traitors to their faith.

127. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 231, l. 60. Chutskaev declined the request and Gokhran responded that it had “watches, portsigars and the like in comparatively small quantities, with the result that they are released only

Such disbursals formed a regular part of Gokhran's daily activity. Chutskaev ordered the release of one gold portsigar and 23 silver watches to the Mossoviet "as a reward for the Brand-maior Comrade Panafidin and the comrade firefighters on the liquidation of the fire in the artillery warehouses" of Moscow, as well as ten metal watches to the Communist Party of Latvia.¹²⁸

The physical porousness of Gokhran, expressed in the regular movement of valuables across its cordons through theft, loss, and give-away, was not merely one more episode in the annals of early Soviet mismanagement, nor can it be chalked up to a few bad eggs in the batch, as the subsequent narrative of Gokhran insisted. Rather, it reflected an alternative measure of value applied to precious goods. Thieving and other forms of redistribution were not separate or external to the project of selling valuables abroad; they and the estimates of value they involved shared a common point of origin with the impulse to bring valuables to foreign markets. The very foundations of the project to sell off Russia's valuables had been built on the assumption that precious goods, gold, silver, and diamonds would be extremely valuable on foreign markets. This view not only failed to consider the depressing influence a flood of Russian gold would have on European markets; it also took its inspiration from the exceptional values assigned to gold and other forms of "hard" currency at home—on the "free" market (*volnyi rynok*), in goods, and the "black" market (*chernaia birzha*), in currency—during a period of spiraling inflation. Writing about the regime's new plan, in mid-1921, to "buy up secretly or openly gold, gold coins, diamonds and the like," the economist P.A. Genzel cautioned:

It is undoubtedly true that we value gold, and especially gold coins, abnormally highly right now. This is explained, of course, by our paper money inflation and currency politics. The public throws itself on these valuables in the hopes of protecting their savings from systematic devaluation. However, the laws of

with special permission in exceptional circumstances for rewarding servicemen for special service." Ibid, l. 71, 73.

128. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 231, l. 75, 53.

soviet power are also responsible, as they threaten the accumulation of material goods with high fines and confiscations, prosecuting it, and artificially creating a premium for gold...¹²⁹

Genzel went on to note the fashion in Soviet officialdom for the idea that “the purchase of gold and other valuables with what would seem to be worthless ‘papers’ would be ‘profitable’ to the government. The theory that by this means, somehow we would levy a ‘tax on the bourgeoisie’ and that the fisc in this manner would somehow trick naïve sellers out of real valuables in exchange for ‘pieces of paper that cost nothing’ is in essence dangerous and below all criticism.” He also questioned the underlying premise of the plan, observing that gold would be no more or less valuable on global markets than grain or other commodities. “They are all valuable in the same way on the foreign market,” Genzel explained. “The question is whether they are valuable in the same way on the foreign as on the domestic market.” And that valuation could not “be demonstrated in advance.” It required prices from abroad that were not available to Genzel—he suggested learning them from Narkomvneshtorg—but he doubted that the sale of gold abroad would be especially profitable. What gold had not already been swept into government coffers during years of systematic seizure was likely held “in strong hands,” with the result that “the ‘market’ valuation [i.e. in Russia] is artificially high and exaggerated.”¹³⁰

Between 1920 and 1922, the conviction that selling off Russia’s valuables would bring great profit, alongside its ideological benefits, was disproved at multiple points. Foreign sales of religious objects that occurred around the same time generated far less revenue

129. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 6302, l. 66. Genzel’s reports, several dozen of which are contained in this file, are interesting not only for their content but for the topics he chooses, generally selected to respond to ideas he overheard in his meanderings through various financial or official circles during the previous few weeks. His reports thus provide a valuable index of hot topics in the official world at any given moment over the course of 1921-1922, at the start of the NEP. Like all Institute of Economic Research (subsequently the Finance-Economic Bureau; IEI-FEB) reports, they were circulated among the senior officials at Narkomfin; the reports contained in this file appear to have been received by one person, as they are marked “read” at the top of the first page and signed in the same hand. Often Alskii, Chutskaev or Orlov would request individual reports by name from the IEI, having apparently heard about them elsewhere. The IEI ran a particularly interesting series of lectures in late 1921-early 1922 analyzing the history of economic crises around the world, including reports on crises over time in Brazil, Germany and China, among others, and policy responses to them.

130. *Ibid.*, l. 68.

than expected. As a committee recommending against the sale of “museum valuables” abroad in the spring of 1922 recounted, “it is worth remembering that the seizure of church valuables, in the sense of earnings, did not come close to vindicating the hopes placed in them....Selling off museum valuables to aid the budget,” they concluded, “is like running out to water the fields with a teapot.”¹³¹ The Commissar of Enlightenment, A. Lunacharskii, weighed in, appending a note to the top of the report to the Sovnarkom with the conclusion that “I personally think that they [the authors] are wholly correct, that we will not be able to earn an amount of money that would even in the slightest respect ease our financial burden.”¹³² Gokhran’s transfers to Warsaw as part of the RSFSR’s peace settlements with Poland went disastrously; the first, Iurovskii reported, occurred in a state of “total bewilderment and unpreparedness” that resulted in “the most shamefully, colossally unprofitable transfer of valuables” imaginable. Poland received three times more diamonds than it was supposed to—15 million francs’ worth, instead of the agreed five million; the second happened only by the grace of “Comrade Trotsky and Krasnoshchekov’s intervention.”¹³³ Sales went even worse. Roughly 80,000 carats of diamonds were sitting somewhere in Latvia, unsold, and no one knew why—“either because the appraisers valued them too high, or because selections were made such that the shipment could not be purchased without great risk,” because “our specialists had warned [buyers] not to rush into anything,” or because “of course, Comrade Krasin cannot have firm certainty in the quality or the price of the goods he is selling.”¹³⁴

From the perspective of foreign sales, however, perhaps the most damaging practice at Gokhran was depersonalization. In June 1921, Iurovskii made a short study of the effects of

131. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 341, l. 21. In an effort to convince the Sovnarkom not to turn to museum-quality goods as a source for foreign revenue, the authors of the report—who included Igor Grabar from Narkompros and Glavmuzei, Rykov and Smolianinov from the Sovnarkom, Bazilievich as plenipotentiary on the matter from the Sovnarkom (having handled early work on archives as well) and the deputy director of the Hermitage Museum—argued that similar sales in previous revolutions had brought significant economic losses on the countries involved, citing in particular the experience of French de-Christianization orchestrated by the Jacobin Joseph Fouché. *Ibid.*, l. 17.

132. *Ibid.*, l. 15.

133. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 127, l. 117.

134. *Ibid.*, l. 134.

depersonalization on the value of goods put up for foreign sale. He came to the conclusion that to depersonalize was to “destroy the most valuable things and thus to devalue them,” giving examples in his report of diamond rings worth 20 pre-war gold rubles in parts, and 60 rubles “as a thing.”¹³⁵ “Thousands of such examples could be given,” he told the Politburo. Krasin himself apparently made a similar observation, suggesting that leaving things whole would be “more profitable” for both “political” and “economic” reasons.¹³⁶ Why, then, did depersonalization persist? Part of the reason was that there was virtually no way for it not to occur, no way for the project of sorting through thousands of ill-packed, unlabeled boxes of other people’s stuff to take place without leading to the effective junking of that stuff. The process was baked into the task; sorting and depersonalization went hand in hand. By the time objects from the banks and the provinces had made it onto Gokhran’s conveyer belt in Moscow, they had already been through seizure, storage, and shipping, and many were already damaged beyond recognition. Inside Gokhran, Budnikov recounted, “all the objects are heaped in the storage spaces into piles, in which, from the weight, they fall apart, and are turned from this poor management into completely unusable trash.”¹³⁷ In this sense, depersonalization was not so much an ideological aspiration in itself as it was an organic, unavoidable consequence of the much larger project, one that was at the core of the Bolshevik material regime, of separating people from their possessions.

3.4 Signs of Belonging

The breakdown of Gokhran reflected a collision between multiple, competing mentalities at work in early socialism, coming to a head around the problem of valuation: an inherited faith in the inherent value of gold and other precious metals, shared by officials and Soviet subjects alike, that was heightened by the revolutionary economy and mixed with the ambi-

135. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 127, l. 135.

136. *Ibid.*, l. 134.

137. *Ibid.*, l. 43.

tion to overturn conventional measures of value and assumptions about what kinds of things were valuable. All of this was backed by the lurking ghost of necessity—the Bolsheviks’ dire need for an infusion of foreign cash to keep themselves afloat, tied to popular hunger for a stable store of value in a period of tremendous economic instability. These multiple mentalities were not mutually exclusive. Rather, they merged explosively in Gokhran. What Gokhran ultimately produced, however, was not the discovery of value, but its destruction, evinced nowhere more vividly than in the practice of depersonalization.

No matter how organic depersonalization might have been, that was not how it was perceived at the time. Depersonalization was perceived as intentional. Pointing to the negative economic consequences of the practice, Iurovskii asked the Politburo:

Do we need to perform depersonalization in itself, that is the destruction of signs of belonging [*priznaki prinadlezhnosti*] in storage places, as I was informed of it and that the sorting that is performed there is meant to mask this true goal, the latter in Gokhran is a secret to no one, they look on this matter as the bolsheviks wanting to destroy documents and mix up stolen valuables.¹³⁸

The working definition of depersonalization among Gokhran employees, in Iurovskii’s words, was to “depersonalize [valuables] such that they would be impossible to recognize.”¹³⁹ Chutskaev’s concern, voiced in the preliminary meetings about Gokhran—that engraved watches could not be sold, that foreigners would look on Russia’s wares as so much stolen goods—found a powerful echo in Gokhran’s actual work processes. Gokhran employees thought of themselves as engaged in the task of scrapping that was, at the same time, scraping away the recent life history of seized goods, the marks of their previous possession, and with them, the story of their loss and recreation as an asset of the Soviet state. Depersonalization was thus both a failure and an odd kind of success. It destroyed the eco-

138. Ibid, l. 135.

139. Ibid, l. 133.

conomic value of seized valuables on the foreign market, but in Gokhran—as in Gorprodukt—depersonalization was also a pathway to the production of socialist objects.

The deeper Iurovskii probed into depersonalization, the stranger it got. Depersonalization was woven into a system of production that extended beyond Gokhran. Its reach extended not only to seized objects and former possessions, but to “totally new [tea] services that have never been in use, contained in wonderful new cases,” as Iurovskii learned:

It is all heaped into piles...and thrown into the large and small boxes prepared for it, and judging from the objects it is thus transformed into trash no one needs, and the cases get torn up, these cases sometimes have two or three rows covered in suede, there are suede pillows and cases of an arshin and a half. Suede is an object that we just do not have right now, it is very hard to find, and there are thousands of these cases, and all this perishes for the state [gosudarstvo]. Some of the cases are pilfered and the rest are burned. That is how state property [dobro] is accounted for.¹⁴⁰

Strangest of all, at the same time as new services of silver and so many other objects perished at Gokhran, at a factory outside the city of Kostroma, 1,600 craftsmen employed by Glavzoloto, VSNKh’s precious metals branch, were making those very same objects, new. “People will always seek wedding rings,” Chutskaev said at the planning meeting. “They will always seek crosses. We have to meet this and trade in it as a commodity.” But rather than simply drawing from the vast stores of such objects pouring into Gokhran, Glavzoloto established the Kostroma factory, where, according to Chutskaev, “tens of thousands of workers are occupied with remaking” rings and crosses, simple objects, for domestic sale.¹⁴¹ Over the course of 1920, Iurovskii estimated, they had made approximately four million various silver objects, “including for example crosses, which at Gokhran at the very same

140. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 127, l. 133.

141. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 231, l. 37.

moment are being destroyed and sent to be melted down (it is some kind of fairytale, but unfortunately a fact).”¹⁴²

142. Ibid.

Chapter 4

The Spectrum of Value: In Search of Socialist Money

In the fall of 1921, *Ekonomicheskaiia zhizn* published a routine article about the sorry state of coal-mining in the Don basin. But to the shock of G.I. Krumin, the newspaper's editor, the content of the article so infuriated Lenin that he ordered an immediate investigation—not of the coal mines in the Don basin, but of Krumin's editorial offices, in Moscow. *Ekonomicheskaiia zhizn* had to do more than content itself with reporting on the failures of the socialist economy, Lenin alleged; the work of the newspaper was to explain why such failures occurred. In specific, it was the obligation of the socialist newspaper to unearth why one enterprise, industry, or region performed well, while another fell flat. Krumin reported back to Lenin that there were a variety of obstacles to making *Ekonomicheskaiia zhizn* into the sort of analytical tool he wanted. Very few enterprises willingly gave the newspaper's reporters access to the kinds of information about their operations such a mission would require (especially in the era of “*khozraschet*,” which saw many of the enterprises deemed least successful by the state cut off from state credits under the auspices of the New Economic Policy). Over the course of 1920, Krumin told Lenin, numerous state enterprises had cut ties with *Ekonomicheskaiia zhizn* after it published negative materials about them.

The director of a transportation enterprise had managed to get the newspaper's leading reporter on the transportation sector mobilized for the Red Army after he published a story revealing its shortcomings.¹ Shortly after receiving Lenin's angry letter, Krumin personally paid a visit to the Professional Union of Metalworkers to "see what materials they had on various enterprises." In the course of his visit, he learned that they had "extremely valuable materials on the real wages of metal workers, for around 120 enterprises for the past month." Krumin informed the Union that he considered it "essential to use these materials immediately in the newspaper, after the necessary preparation of course." But the Union "categorically refused" on the grounds that the materials could "cause strikes"; when Krumin pressed further, they declared that they would release the materials only to the personal review of Lenin himself.²

As Krumin's experience with the metalworkers makes clear, it was not just material resources that were hoarded by Soviet enterprises and institutions—it was information, especially information about failure. Not only had such information grown difficult to find in the revolutionary era, it had also grown difficult to produce and parse. Part of this difficulty lay in uncertainty about the goals of economic activity in a socialist polity and how to rank them. Should success and failure be measured in terms of profits and losses? In the value of "real wages of metalworkers," this rare information that had been generated by the metalworkers' union but was deemed suitable for the consumption of just one man, Lenin himself? In the prevention of strikes? What was the role of money in generating assessments of success and failure? As Krumin learned, money still figured in the analysis of success and failure in the present moment, but it occupied this role in an unusual way.

As part of the investigation into the editorial practices at *Ekonomicheskaiia zhizn*, Krumin issued a general query to his reporters across the Republic asking them to address the question posed by Lenin: why certain enterprises, regions, or economic units succeeded, while others failed, and why the correspondents failed to report on such matters. It was in

1. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 186, l.14.

2. Ibid, l. 79.

this context that he received the following letter from his Tula correspondent, A. Voskresenskii:

I turn gradually to a concrete answer to your question, why one region gets better results than another. . . . Let's say that the Obolenskii region has agents that are more suave and are able to set up deals with the guys at the gubprodkoms, they receive grain and food, faster and of higher quality, and in general they get more than they should, more than, say, the Shekinskii region, whose agents work through formal channels.

It's the same when it comes to money.

Here is one explanation for you: you have to have your people at the Gubprodkom, at Narbank. Without grease nothing runs.

You yourself will agree that what I am explaining to you right now in a private form and confidentially cannot be printed in a newspaper.

Moreover, I gather my information and material (for articles) in parallel with fulfilling my work duties. I do not have the ability to spend time on this separately, as just like any person in contemporary conditions I have to keep in mind how to keep myself supplied with the necessary quantity of money.³

The distribution system that Voskresenskii described bears a likeness to one defined by anthropologists as "primitive rationing," in which money, though "a necessary part of [certain] regulated transactions, [is] not sufficient to complete them." Systems of primitive rationing, Mary Douglas explains, are designed to "restrict and channel the purchasing power of money."⁴ The concept of primitive rationing has been commonly employed to

3. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 186, l. 25. Without grease nothing runs: *Bez smazki nichego ne poidet*.

4. Mary Douglas, "Primitive Rationing: A Study in Controlled Exchange," in *Themes in Economic Anthropology*, ed. Raymond Firth, (Routledge, 1967), pp. 119-148.

characterize the distribution of consumer goods in the late-Soviet era, like automobiles and washing machines, demand for which always outstripped supply. But here, in Voskresenskii's letter, we see something like primitive rationing at work in the revolutionary era—not for the procurement of other commodities, but for the procurement of money itself. How did the supply agents of the Obolenskii region make sure they had enough money to meet demand? The same way they made sure they had enough grain and food—by establishing well-lubricated informal channels with “their” people at the People's Bank. Being owed a particular quantity of paper bills according to the Bank's distribution plan was not adequate to receiving those bills, as in 1921, despite the fact that the printing press worked day and night, there were never enough of them. In short, money was not available as a transparent measure of success and failure because money itself was an object of primitive rationing; compounding matters, Voskresenskii himself was not available to gather other kinds of information about success and failure, because he had to keep himself supplied with the necessary quantity of money.

Is all money inherently capitalist money? For long, George Dalton observed, the answer was believed to be yes. Even “economies without markets,” Dalton wrote, were commonly viewed by his fellow anthropologists “through the theoretical spectacles designed for Western economy,” that is, the capitalist economy.⁵ Anthropological greats such as Malinowski assessed the economies of “primitive societies” they studied as objects in a state of becoming, on the path to development along tracks already traveled Western/capitalist societies. So too did they evaluate the monies of such societies according to the extent to which they did or did not fulfill the four chief functions performed by money in the West/capitalism: its service as a medium of exchange, a means of accumulation, a standard of deferred payment, and a measure of value. As a result, Dalton argued, those interested in the functioning of money objects in non-capitalist societies nevertheless discerned only

5. George Dalton, “Primitive Money,” *American Anthropologist* vol. 67, no. 1 (Feb. 1965), pp. 44-65. Here p. 44.

those functions that fit within the schema of capitalist money, obscuring the many important “non-commercial uses” to which local money objects could be put. Money, Dalton insisted, was not irreducibly capitalist. It reflected the economic and social structures of the surrounding environment, performing “market-integrative” functions, the four outlined above, in capitalist societies, but potentially at least, performing different functions in societies integrated in different ways.

Writing in 1965, Dalton explicitly invited socialist societies into his discussion of the “non-commercial uses of money,” which, as he observed, were present everywhere, including in capitalism.⁶ Precisely the task of students of money, he argued, should be to understand the relationship between the sources of an economy’s modes of “integration,” its guiding principles and practices, and its monies. “Exactly how the arrangements vary for political authority to acquire and disburse goods and services is one way of differentiating between the organization of Soviet, American, and (say) Bantu economies.”⁷ Several years later, the economist Gregory Grossman picked up Dalton’s suggestion, citing it in his now-canonical study of the variable “moneyness” of the ruble in Soviet-style socialism. Inspired by Dalton’s admonition to study the functions performed by money objects in all their diversity, Grossman argued that the Soviet economy was partitioned through its money into two sectors: in one, the household and retail sector, the ruble was “active,” in that it maintained an ability to represent value autonomously, functioned as a medium of exchange, and generally bore the same “secular” power to acquire—a power that adhered to anyone who carried it—as capitalist money. Grossman dubbed the money used in the industrial sector and in official planning organs, by contrast, “passive” because it was “employed for controlling compliance with directives only.”⁸ Passive money, in the form of credits and other instruments, could only be exchanged for active money with difficulty; the two existed on

6. For further development of this theme and a theorization of money on its basis see Viviana Zelizer, *The Social Meaning of Money* (New York, 1995), especially chs. 1-3.

7. Dalton, “Primitive Money,” *op.cit.*, p. 47.

8. Gregory Grossman, “Gold and the Sword: Money in the Soviet Command Economy” in *Industrialization in Two Systems: Essays in Honor of Alexander Gerschenkron* (Wiley: New York, 1966), pp. 204-236, here p. 216.

opposite sides of the partition. Though just one object, then, the ruble performed multiple functions in the command economy. In Grossman's articulation of it, the ruble is not failed money, but rather an integral feature of the Soviet political project and a source of institutional and functional creativity. Even in its "passive" variation, Soviet money performed an essential function in the command economy, the function of control—one that did not exist in capitalist systems but which was an integral part of socialist ones. The institutions of control, "at least in their lower and intermediate levels, are essential components of the *economic* system," Grossman argued. "They thrive on the continual local crises. They goad on the sluggish, seek to safeguard the official values and priorities, and coordinate and expedite things." They were also a critical feature of Soviet political life. Passive money was the tool by which control was performed. Passive money facilitated political control over economic life. "The more passive the money," Grossman observes, "the more its use is subordinated to physical planning and checked by materials allocation, the less its subversive potential." As Grossman concludes, "passive money equals active party."⁹

Grossman's analysis of the Soviet economy as a partitioned space, with blended features of market and command, was widely adopted in subsequent studies of Soviet economic life; yet his nuanced appreciation of the implications of this partitioning and the spectrum of possible functions it afforded to Soviet money has not received the same attention. Histories of money written in the Soviet era did not question the viability of a socialist system that included the use of money; after the Soviet Union collapsed, however, it suddenly became apparent that all money was indeed capitalist money, and that the Soviet Union's inability to do away money objects completely planted the seeds of its demise.¹⁰ Most recently, the historian Jonathan Zatlin, while acknowledging the partitioned character of Soviet-style economies in his study of money in German Democratic Republic, deems the money of the GDR an innately "flawed" and "failed" object on the grounds that it was insufficiently dif-

9. Ibid, p. 235.

10. See for example Iurii Bokarev, *Russkii rubl': Dva veka Istorii* (Moscow, 1994), p. 186, where Bokarev argues that the continued existence of money and the possibility of accumulation it afforded irrevocably corrupted socialism in Russia by reintroducing inequality into society.

ferentiated from Western money.¹¹ Due to the fundamental “misapprehension” of money’s true character by virtually all socialists both before and after Marx—indeed, by everyone except Marx himself—the Communist parties of the Soviet Union and the GDR “foolish[ly]” “contented themselves” with a “partial adoption” of the command economy, permitting money to bear value in certain sectors of the socialist economy and most critically, growing dependent on the full-throated money of West Germany for the resolution of the GDR’s financial problems.¹² Rather than exploring the ways in which this “partial adoption” of “socialist” money—as if it was or had to be just one thing—functioned in social, political, or cultural terms, Zatlin treats this commingling of Western and socialist monies as a theoretical failure with fixed, real-world, and disastrous repercussions for the legitimacy and indeed, broad chances of survival of the German socialist regime. His interpretation begs a question: had the socialists better “apprehended” money, could their project have succeeded? How would that success have been measured? Zatlin accepts the terms on which Soviet-style regimes themselves claimed to measure their success, and deems them a failure when they came up short, having created a “communism too dependent on capitalism.”¹³

The most recent contribution to the study of money in the revolutionary era, by Stephen Marks, elegantly illuminates key attributes of the monetary landscape between 1914 and 1924, a period during which the Russian Empire and its successors—as well as its neighbors in Western Europe—experienced the devastating effects of hyperinflation and monetary instability after the First World War.¹⁴ Marks traces both the popular engagement with the devaluation of money—recorded in diaries, he aptly notes, alongside the weather—as well as theoretical debates about money’s future. But he focuses exclusively on money in its active form, concluding that the Bolsheviks would have done well to retain the ambiguously gold-backed “hard” currency introduced by Commissar of Finances Grigorii Sokolnikov, which

11. Jonathan Zatlin, *The Currency of Socialism: Money and Political Culture in East Germany* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 23.

12. *Ibid.*, p. 24.

13. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

14. I am grateful to Stephen Marks for permitting me to read a penultimate draft of his forthcoming essay, “The Russian Experience of Money, 1914-1924,” from which quotations are taken.

he deems compatible with the outlines of socialist society (a sort of monetary Bukharin alternative). Marks overlooks functions being performed by the new Soviet money that may not have coincided with traditional Western definitions. Yet as we can see from Krumin's exchange with Voskresenskii, the correspondent who characterized money as an object of primitive rationing even as he begged off extra hours of reporting by citing his need to "keep himself supplied with money," by October 1921, expectations about how money worked within Soviet society already incorporated features and functions that were distinct from Western money. Indeed, these features and functions bore some resemblance, if only hinted at, to the passive and active monies of much later eras—and contrary to Zatin's claim, the one did not automatically delegitimize the other. On the active side, we might consider the phrase, "keeping oneself supplied with money," as Voskresenskii characterized his concern with cash—could such an aspiration be equated to earning money or accumulating it, in a Western setting? Or did it represent some new method of handling money objects, particular to the revolutionary era? On the passive side, we can observe the imbrication of monetary allocation—the physical distribution of bills—by the lights of the personal constellations, and use of grease, that Voskresenskii describes.

The general outlines of the story of money in the revolutionary era suggest tantalizing paradox at every turn. To pay for its war effort, the Tsarist Ministry of Finance took Russia off the gold standard, funding the war instead through the printing press. As the Empire's political and military fortunes tumbled, the ruble lost value on foreign markets at the same time as it inflated at home. As early as 1916, gold and silver coins began to disappear from circulation, followed by copper and, after the February Revolution, small Imperial-era bills. Thus began a process of "demonetization" that the Bolsheviks deepened, both by expanding the work of the printing press, and by expanding the payment of wages in kind and so-called "natural" exchange of goods. According to V. Diachenko's estimates,

93 percent of workers' wages were paid in kind by the end of 1920.¹⁵ Workers, however, were comparatively privileged in the "war communist" economy. Moneylessness was one such privilege afforded to workers and other members of the revolutionary establishment; it was not a condition that obtained for the whole of the population, to be sure, nor were the natural wages that workers and others received usually sufficient to meet their consumption needs. Most households supplemented their earnings with petty trade and the "grease" on the wheels to which Voskresenskii referred. Moreover, although the period is commonly viewed under the star of "demonetization," this label is not wholly accurate. It was also, as already observed, an era of hyperinflation. It was not that money disappeared, then, so much as its use and meaning changed. How did the demonetization square, from the perspective of experience, with the other central feature of the period, hyperinflation? How did changes in individual usage influence institutional usage, and vice versa? If the revolutionary era witnessed the gutting of money's ability to autonomously represent value, how did the process of gutting money work? How was money reconstituted within the political infrastructure of the socialist Republic?

Guided by Grossman's conviction that money in the Soviet period changed functions and meanings—that passive money was more than neutered active money—this chapter explores the functionality of money in the revolutionary era. It splits the treatment of money in two, dealing first with a form of money usage that has received less historiographical attention but which was essential, in the Bolsheviks' view, to the creation of socialism: money as a ledger form, or as a unit of account. The Bolsheviks sought to preserve money as a unit of account when they seized power. Accounting and ledgers left behind by Imperial firms, banks, and state agencies, were seen as the bedrock on the socialist enterprise would be built. Those accounts would provide the raw material for the grand inventory of the Empire's possessions that the Bolsheviks sought to create. In the course of nationalizing the Empire's

15. V. Diachenko, *Istoriia finansov SSSR* (Moscow, 1978) p. 52, which has been cited repeatedly as evidence of full-scale demonetization in the revolutionary economy, including, for example, by O. Kuschpeta, *The Banking and Credit System of the USSR*, from which Zatlin in turn cites the figure, p. 34, n. 43.

banking infrastructure, however, the project of mastering the accounts intersected with the physical qualities of money in ways the Bolsheviks could not have anticipated. The process of nationalizing the institutions that sustained money—state and private banks—had as a side effect the destruction of all kinds of accounts and the information they contained. Nationalization, which was intended to swap private control of banks with state control, turned out to be the same thing as expropriation. This chapter explores the information about paper valuables as a synonym for the value itself. Unlike gold or other material valuables, the value of many paper instruments disappeared along with current information about them.

The chapter then takes up money as a physical object more directly, casting light on both its institutional and popular usage in the revolutionary era. It examines the multiple monies that came into use and the unusual origins of their value. To understand money in the revolutionary era it is necessary to disaggregate its functions: individual monies, “old money,” local money, Soviet money, and White money, each performed different roles within the many communities of valuation that sprung up on the Empire’s fractured territory. Money during the Revolution was local; it was also deeply strange, and estranged, in many respects, from the institutions and sources from which it would previously have derived its value. Rather than the reputation of an issuing institution or a guarantee of payment in hard currency, the multiple paper monies that circulated in revolutionary settings gained a position on the spectrum of value from a mixture of sources that included rumor, distinctive markings, and the recognition or even the refusal of local authorities to recognize their value. As this chapter aims to demonstrate, the many branches of the Soviet state did not act in concert on the question of money (which would have been difficult given the state of communications even had they wanted to do so). While more often appreciated at the level of policy, this fracturing also had important effects at the micro-level, within the many local communities of valuation that flourished across the Republic’s territory and at its edges. State institutions and officials were not simply policy makers in the realm of money,

they were actors within the local communities of valuation. This chapter illuminates the effects of this fracturing on the valuation of the different varieties of money available in the revolutionary Republic.

4.1 Money, Accounts, and Information

Prior to the October Revolution, the Soviet historian V. Diachenko observed, Lenin's vision of socialist revolution in the sphere of finance adhered to the steps laid out by Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*, supplemented by measures necessitated by Russia's particular circumstances. To the nationalization of private banks and the centralization of all credit and money resources in one central bank, the implementation of a progressive income and property tax, and the nationalization of land, Lenin added demands for the abolition of commercial secrecy—the regulations allowing corporations and banks to keep their balances private—and for an end to the emission of paper money, which the Imperial government depended upon to fund its participation in the First World War.¹⁶ His modifications to the Marxist program for the Russian setting, that is, straddled money's duality, at once capital and information. The pledge to seize capital was enshrined in the Soviet constitution of 1918, which defined the “financial politics” of the RSFSR as the “expropriation of the bourgeoisie and the preparation of conditions for the general equality of all citizens in the sphere of production and the distribution of wealth.”¹⁷ At the same time, Lenin anticipated that the nascent socialist state would rely on the information conveyed by the corporate balance sheets, opened up to the state thanks to the abolition of commercial secrecy and the institution of “worker control.” Lenin's faith that the tools of capitalist accounting could be turned to the goals of socialist production with relative ease fueled his conviction that the opening for socialist revolution had finally arrived.¹⁸

16. Diachenko, p. 8.

17. Diachenko, p. 44.

18. Neil Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought: Theory and Practice in the Democratic Revolution* (London, 1977), p. 74.

It was the “great mistake” of the Paris Commune in 1848, Soviet historians of the October Revolution wrote subsequently, that the communards, “fearful of violating [France’s] ‘sacred’ credit,” failed to seize control of the French Emission Bank and its holdings of more than three billion francs and other valuables the Commune desperately needed.¹⁹ As E.M. Solovei, one of the first Bolsheviks to go to work in the nationalized “People’s Bank” after the October Revolution, recounted in 1961, “the Bolshevik party, led by the great Lenin, in the October days of 1917 did not make the same mistake.”²⁰ At six o’clock in the morning on October 25, 1917, V.R. Menzhinskii, an old Bolshevik who would be better known for taking the helm at the Cheka after Felix Dzerzhinsky’s death, led a unit of armed revolutionaries to the gates of the State Bank on the Ekaterinskii (Griboedov) Canal. The bank’s unarmed guards immediately conceded and Menzhinskii and his men entered the premises peacefully, installing a checkpoint at the bank’s front gates. After taking physical control of the bank building, however, Menzhinskii’s operation stalled; over the coming days, the majority of bank workers either went on strike or planted themselves at their desks, “Italianing” (work slowdowns), refusing to grant the Bolsheviks’ increasingly desperate requests for money. According to the Soviet historian A.M. Gindin, Menzhinskii and his bosses felt hemmed in by “bourgeois” newspapers that charged them with “theft” at the first hint of force, with the remarkable result that Menzhinskii spent much of the following two weeks corralling various high-ranking officers of the State Bank and then backing away when they declined to transfer money to an account in the name of the Sovnarkom. The Bank continued to pay out claims its directors deemed necessary for the functioning of the “state” until the Constituent Assembly convened in December, mostly for the military; but it did not grant money to the Bolshevik regime, nor did it pay on checks issued through private banks, which handled a large percentage of Russia’s commercial enterprises, including the salaries of many workers.

19. E.M. Solovei and N.F.Stratilova in A.M. Gindin, *Kak bolsheviki ovladeli gosudarstvennym bankom* (Moscow, 1961), p. 3.

20. *Ibid.*

On November 13, fearful that their shutdown had irrevocably damaged Russia's finances, a group of bank workers agreed in Menzhinskii's presence to release 25 million rubles to the Sovnarkom, but when the bank's newly-appointed director, V.V. Obolenskii, appeared the next day to collect it, he found the bank closed and its workers on strike. Finally, on November 15, Obolenskii and Menzhinskii went apartment to apartment with arrest orders naming each of the employees who held one of the eight keys to the Bank's safes. Keys in hand at last, Lenin sent his aide Nikolai Gorbunov to retrieve 10 million rubles in cash and bring it back to him at the Bolshevik headquarters at the Smolnyi institute. When Gorbunov returned to Smolnyi, sacks of paper bills in hand, he could not find Lenin, so he sat on the mound of money holding a revolver. Gorbunov's boss, Vladimir Bonch-Bruевич, took control over the 10 million rubles and through judicious use of the cash and expansive use of "assignments," or promissory notes, he made it last until the end of November, by which time the Bolsheviks at last managed to clear out the Italian-ing bank workers, hire a skeleton staff, and partially resume work the Bank's existing departments.²¹

Seizing the reins of the State Bank was essential to the seizure of state power; nationalizing the private banks, was necessary to the launching of a socialist revolution, Lenin believed—not for the assets they contained, but for the information they contained. Only with the nationalization of the private banks, Lenin claimed, "can the state put itself in a position to know where and how, whence and when, millions and billions of rubles flow."²² Just before the October Revolution, in "Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?", Lenin focused on banks as a means of control "created not by us, but by capitalism in its military and imperialist stage. Our task here is merely to lop off what capitalistically mutilates this excellent apparatus, to make it even bigger, even more democratic, even more comprehensive...this will be country-wide bookkeeping, country-wide accounting of the production and distribution of goods, this will be, so to speak, something in the nature of the skeleton

21. This account taken from A.M. Gindin, esp. pp. 27, 33, 49, 54, 59.

22. Vladimir Lenin, "The Impending Catastrophe and How to Combat it: Nationalization of the Banks," p. 2, cited Neil Harding, *Lenin's Political Thought* vol. 2, (London, 1979), p. 77.

of socialist society.”²³ In late September 1917, Lenin argued that “nationalization of the banks has only to be decreed and it would be carried out by the directors and employees themselves.”²⁴ Although he anticipated resistance from the “managers and higher bank officials,” he expected nevertheless that nationalization would be performed by the banks’ own employees. Congresses of bank workers called in all the major cities by the revolutionary government could perform the “immediate amalgamation of all banks into a single state bank,” a reform that could be accomplished, Lenin estimated, within a matter of weeks. The goal of this nationalization was not the seizure of assets, he insisted, but rather the establishment of political control over the banks as an element of “popular self-government.” Essential to this process would be the careful examination of all manner of accounts, so as to “prevent any sabotage of the economy or any defrauding or plundering of the government.” Among Lenin’s chief plans for the banks after the Revolution was the publication of all banking operations.²⁵

On the eve of the October insurrection, the State Bank had balances amounting to 24.4 billion rubles and controlled a network of approximately 150 branch offices across Russia. According to calculations made years after the Revolution, private banks had less on their balance sheets, roughly 18 billion rubles, but wielded a network of more than 572 branch offices across the former Empire.²⁶ They also contained personal wealth subject to revolutionary expropriation decrees, not only in bank accounts, but in hundreds of thousands of private safes. In addition to the ideological grounds for seizing private banks, then, they posed an important logistical stronghold of the bourgeoisie—one that began slipping off the grid even before the Bolsheviks came to power. Beginning in August 1917, as the value of the ruble plummeted, jittery account-holders began withdrawing funds from their private bank accounts. In August, according to one set of figures cited by Diachenko, private cash holdings registered at 9.847 billion rubles; by October 1, this figure had dropped

23. Harding, 131.

24. V.I. Lenin, *Lenin Collected Works* (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1977) vol. 25, p. 334.

25. Harding, *op.cit.*, p. 76.

26. Diachenko, pp. 14-15; *Istoriia ministerstva finansov* (Moscow, 2002), p. 15.

to 9.123 billion.²⁷ After the Revolution, rumors swirled that the private banks were involved in funding counterrevolution, which rapidly became an additional justification for their nationalization. Indeed, in later narratives, it became the dominant explanation for their nationalization.²⁸ The Sovnarkom issued its decree nationalizing the private banks on December 14, 1917, just days after it had begun to implement “worker control” over the banks. Worker control required them to submit daily summaries of their balances and holdings to worker-controlled review committees; the private banks were widely disparaged in later histories of the nationalization for falsifying their balances and thus bringing nationalization down upon themselves. The nationalization decree elicited immediate strikes across the private banking network. In Moscow, all but a few dozen of the city’s nearly 6,000 bank employees walked out in protest the wake of the decree. The majority of employees returned to work only in March 1918, when the unions representing State and private bank workers ran out of money to pay the striking employees’ salaries.

The Bolsheviks gained physical control over the banks of Petrograd on December 27 and those in Moscow on December 28. Yet the meaning of the nationalization of private banks was ambiguous. Before the Revolution, Lenin repeatedly rejected the idea that nationalization was synonymous with expropriation. “The ownership of the capital wielded by and concentrated in the banks is certified by printed and written certificates called shares, bonds, bills, receipts, and so forth,” Lenin explained. “Not a single one of these certificates would be invalidated or altered if the banks were nationalized, that is if all the banks were amalgamated into a single state bank.”²⁹ In unpublished theses written around the time of the insurrection, Lenin toyed with the idea of using control over the private banks to support normed limits on cash-holding. But no mention of expropriation or cash-holding

27. Diachenko, p. 20.

28. Z.V. Atlas, *Sotsialisticheskaia denezhnaia sistema* (Moscow, 1969) p. 67. In 1918, some months after the formal decree, Grigorii Sokolnikov, the commissar in charge of bank nationalization and future People’s Commissar of Finance, published a brochure justifying the nationalization of the banks on the convoluted grounds that private banks were making use of funds received from the State Bank to underwrite “counter-revolution and support the white guard.”

29. V.I. Lenin, *Lenin Collected Works* (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1977) vol. 25, p. 334. Ibid.

limits was made in the final draft of the nationalization decree, which declared a “government monopoly” on all bank affairs, united all private banks with the State Bank, and simultaneously affirmed that the “interests of small account holders would be completely protected.”³⁰ In practice, and in the wake of subsequent decrees regulating particular types of money-valuables, the nationalization of the private banks amounted to expropriation, often at the expense the informational goals with which it began. Much as in the registration of private apartments, as we saw in the first chapter, the registration of bank accounts itself provided an opening to their seizure, whether on formal or informal terms. The “elemental process of liquidating the financial might of the old power,” a history of Narkomfin later reflected, “was most vividly expressed in nationalization of commercial banks and arrest of safes.”³¹

In January 1918, the skeleton staffs of the State (now People’s) Bank and the private banks began work on merging the accounts of private individuals. Lacking the employees necessary to pore over bank books and register account-holders themselves, the new banking apparatus depended on the account holders themselves, to present themselves before bank authorities and share information about their individual accounts spread across multiple banking institutions, now to be merged into one central holding place at the People’s Bank (Narbank). The first step, the Moscow office responsible for nationalization reported, was “uniting the accounts of one and the same client in various banks into one account: these centralized accounts, copied into a new book, were carried over into a new department, which after all the accounts were united, would become the dedicated central department of current accounts of the People’s Bank.” As of July 1918, of the total 175,000 private bank accounts in the city, 52,500 had been transferred and merged into 35,700 accounts. At the same time, multiple commissions were created—by the Sovnarkom, by Narkomfin, and by VTsIK—to inventory the rich contents of bank safes, which contained not only material valuables such as jewelry, precious books, and works of art, but large quantities of valuable

30. *Dekrety sovetskoi vlasti* vol. 2, p. 230.

31. *Istoriia ministerstva finansov*, p. 15.

papers: stocks and bonds, held in foreign companies and governments—which remained valuable abroad—as well as domestic ones, which in the wake a decree issued in January 1918 annulling all domestic loans and bonds, had become technically worthless overnight. Toward the end of 1918, the Sovnarkom at last addressed a category of private banking—mutual credit societies—that had been left unregulated by the nationalization decree. With the nationalization of the mutual credit societies, *Izvestiia finansov* confirmed, there were “no private credit organizations” left on Russian territory.³²

Although the nationalization decree made no mention of expropriation, local soviets interpreted nationalization as seizure of assets, sometimes in full, sometimes up to a particular cash-holding limit established by local authorities. Even in Moscow, finance officials reported, the decree on nationalization was interpreted by local authorities as a declaration that the banks had become “the people’s property.”³³ Instructions regarding the seizure of money property were further complicated by the decree annulling government loans and other valuable paper instruments, issued in late January 1918, around the same time that many localities were hearing of the bank nationalization. According to the terms of the decree on government loans and valuable papers, “those in possession of annulled government papers of the internal loan worth no more than 10,000 ruble (face value) will receive in exchange documents in their name for a new loan of the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic in a sum not greater than 10,000 rubles.” The Sovnarkom ordered local soviets to create special commissions “to determine which citizens numbered among the smallholders,” and empowered the commission to “annul completely any savings acquired by means other than labor, even if these savings do not exceed 5,000 rubles.”³⁴ Within the decree, that is, the central government put forward two different potential value limits for local soviets to work with—10,000 rubles for government loans; 5,000 rubles for personal savings—which were easily confused. Administrative work on determining “an order for

32. Summary of nationalization process authored by the People’s Commissar, Krestinskii, in *Izvestiia finansov*, no. 10 (Oct. 25-Nov. 7, 1919), p. 2.

33. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 63, l. 7.

34. *Dekrety sovetskoi vlasti*, pp. 386-387.

satisfying small-holders in possession of annulled papers” and “setting up an order for liquidating annulled government loans” fell to the reformed “credit department” at Narkomfin, intended to function as a liquidational branch that would take apart the Empire’s private credit apparatus, which also found itself “performing major interpretive work on the decree of January 21, 1918 [on annulling the bonds] as there are lots of questions coming in from citizens and legal entities.”³⁵

The process of nationalization—and the means by which the nationalization of banks gradually came to be equated with the expropriation of privately-held assets in them—was extraordinarily messy and haphazard. As Narkomfin’s official journal, *Izvestiia finansov*, reported in October 1919, nearly two years after the nationalization decree was issued, but still deep in the throes of its implementation, the contents and assets of private banks were “poured organically into the state.”³⁶ In practice, the nationalization of the banks destroyed, in multiple respects, precisely the sort of information that Lenin had hoped to glean from it in the transition to socialism. While unintended, the disorder created by nationalization was an unavoidable consequence of both the Bolsheviks’ financial policies, and at the same time, of the larger revolutionary conjuncture, which kept bank employees home from work, brought new, inexperienced workers in to replace them, and sparked a chain-reaction of decay across bank books and balance sheets across the former Empire. In reports composed by the former offices of the Ministry of Finance in the summer of 1918 to narrate revolutionary events and characterize each office’s work for the new Bolshevik finance officials, bank workers described a slow, steadily rising burn of degeneration in the quality of bookkeeping beginning in the summer of 1917, and in some offices sooner, as experienced workers who had so far avoided the draft were called to the front, and as those left behind struggled to keep up the burden of accounts in extraordinary times.³⁷

35. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 61, l. 17.

36. Krestinskii in *Izvestiia finansov*, no. 10 (Oct. 25-Nov. 7, 1919), p. 2.

37. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 63, l. 5.

After the October insurrection, the steady burn burst into a sharp explosion. Employees stayed home or went on strike, many never to return to their desks; postal and telegraph communications broke down, preventing offices from updating their books to reflect a picture of both state and private holdings as an Imperial whole. “In connection with the October events,” the People’s Bank reported, “the normal progress of bank activity was violated. The periodical publication of the bank’s balances, which gave the population the ability to inform itself about the amount of paper bills circulating in the country and the movement of commercial bank operations, was ceased.”³⁸ The central bank directorates in Petrograd and Moscow lost touch with the peripheries, with the result that “the bank was deprived of the ability to close its accounts, due to the lack of data from branches and offices spread out in Ukraine, in Central Asia, in the Caucasus, and most recently in Siberia. The balances without the inclusion of turnover from the branches in those localities would not express the true situation of the bank accounts,” the office explained; the balances themselves might be crafted, but they would be empty forms and figures, devoid of the weight of real value and the “true situation” of affairs, meaning that they would “not be comparable to the data presented for previous periods. For that reason,” it determined, “the publication of the balances was not desirable.”³⁹ In a similar fashion, the office of foreign currency found itself unable to respond to the “mass of inquiries flowing in from various institutions and enterprises about the exchange rate of this currency or that one,” due to the “absence of official market exchange rates for foreign currency.” The office of foreign currency similarly found it impossible to prepare its balances from 1916 due to the fact that it “lost many documents during the break in the chancellery’s work” associated with the insurrection and subsequent strike.⁴⁰ Reports from the offices of the central government that moved into the buildings of nationalized banks that spring describe a picture of great disarray. “The archives of the former United Bank on Kuznetskii most,” according to the director of VSNKh’s Mining

38. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 62, l. 1.

39. Ibid, l. 2.

40. Ibid.

Department, which moved into the bank's space, "were found in chaotic conditions, with important and unimportant papers, orders, and books all thrown together in one pile. Figuring out what is among them seems impossible," an inspector continued. "If the archive of the bank is not moved shortly, the director of the Mining Department states that he will throw all of it into bins and put it out in the courtyard."⁴¹

The fate of private bank balances hinged not only on the skill of the replacement finance employees, but on a broader attitude toward the information they contained, despite Lenin's exhortations regarding the significance of accounting to the socialist future. In the wake of the bank nationalization, of course, those who would have been most likely to concern themselves with the treatment of account books and bank records (boards of directors, congresses of employees, and so forth) were in no position to do so—except in a handful of cases where they were. One such case occurred around the fate of a bank evacuating during the First World War from Latvia to the city of Iaroslavl, in the Russian interior. After the Revolution, the bank remained stuck in Iaroslavl, even as Latvia declared its independence from the new Russian socialist Republic, and thus its independence from the many decrees concerning the abolition of private property and nationalization of the banks the Republic was busily putting into place. But many of the new Latvian nation's key institutions—including the offices and archives of As part of peace negotiations in July 1920, the Latvian envoy demanded the return of the Latvian Commercial Bank, the Latvian Savings and Loan, and full roster of others from Iaroslavl. As the envoy explained to A.A. Ioffe, a Bolshevik negotiator, "these institutions possess valuables, such as books, paperwork, and the archives [of the banks] which are highly essential to renewal of their activity in Latvia once the peace is concluded." In Latvia, the banks would keep functioning, and in order for them to do so, they needed their balance sheets. "Meanwhile," the Latvian envoy had learned, "the Iaroslavl organs of soviet power, for some reason, looked over the archives and books and paperwork of the aforementioned institutions and ordered that they be taken from the

41. GARF f. 4390, op. 1, d. 204, l. 8.

Commissariat of Latvian Affairs and used as chancellery material”—meaning that the bank books had been turned into scrap paper. The practice of using repurposing prerevolutionary paperwork was fairly widespread in light of the severe paper shortages affecting the Republic, but the Latvian envoy, “not thinking it necessary to linger on the total unacceptability of this approach to objects bearing enormous meaning for the restoration of the economic life of the country with which peace agreements are currently being conducted,” demanded the “property of the above-named institutions, including the books and paperwork, be left untouched” until such time as it could be returned to the bank directorates in Latvia.⁴²

There was, of course, no order stipulating that the balance sheets of private banks be transformed into scratch paper for new Soviet offices, desperate for writing materials amid the nation-wide shortage. Nevertheless, the repurposing of the balance sheets eloquently conveyed the Iaroslavl authorities’ expectations about the future usefulness of the information contained in bank accounts and their assessment of its present value.⁴³ In 1919 and 1920, “liquidational commissions” attached to Narkomfin sorted through the remnants of private bank books, reporting to the center, for example, that they had completed the liquidation of the state land banks, as well as regional credit societies, and had “partially inspected the materials of the private banks.” Of the 22,678 safes in this particular segment of banks, 17, 371 had been opened; only those that were “flooded with water and frozen shut” remained sealed, “left until spring.” Finally, the liquidation commission reported, “two archives of former private commercial banks were looked over and given to Glavbum.” Glavbum, short for “Central Paper,” was the institution responsible for pulping and recycling paper products; giving bank archives to Glavbum was the same as destroying them.⁴⁴

42. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 231, l. 115.

43. The anthropological inspiration for the argument that the materiality of bureaucracy shaped its operation and constrained the substantive possibilities of its work—in this case the desire to reconstruct the indebtedness of the Empire on the eve of the Revolution as a means of recreating a baseline from which Bolshevik-led growth and value could be measured—is provided by Matthew Hull, *Government of Paper: The Materiality of Bureaucracy in Urban Pakistan* (California, 2012).

44. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 236, l. 51.

Several years later, in the early 1920s, the RSFSR sought to resurrect trade relations with Great Britain and other European nations. The absence of such figures hindered finance officials in their quest to determine the indebtedness of the Russian Empire to European powers on the eve of its dissolution, the basis for negotiations restoring trade ties between them and the focus of work taken up by a series of committees in Narkomfin beginning in 1921. In response to exhortations from the center to speed up their work, one committee replied, “indeed, determining our indebtedness abroad should consume a large part of our work, and that it has not yet been done can only be complained about. But if it is decided that it must be done immediately, it must be kept in mind that it would require great strength and focus and much force in the localities as well as in the center, and that in many places, such as in Ukraine, the Caucasus, Siberia, this work will not give the desired results due to the destruction and removal of the books of the former private credit institutions.”⁴⁵

The Bolsheviks aspired to eliminate the spontaneity connected to the market, replacing it with the ordered production of the plan. The nationalization of the banks and the seizure of capital it entailed was intended as a first step toward this goal, to open up account books across the former Empire to new informational purposes. Instead, as we have seen, in ways intentional and otherwise, it destroyed them. The kind of information the balance sheets conveyed was cumulative; they traced growth and contraction, profits and losses. The figures mattered only when set up against one another. Once a piece of the whole picture of the Republic’s finances was lost—once receipts from Ukraine, or Siberia, or even, as was often the case, Moscow, stopped flowing in—all the receipts lost their meaning because, as the accountants at Narkomfin testified in the summer of 1918, they lost their comparability to the same figures of the previous period. The nationalization of the banks resulted in the loss not only of money as capital, but of the informational picture that money described.

45. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 377, l. 4.

4.2 Spectrums of Value

Like the destabilization of the bankbooks, the decline in the ruble's value on both domestic and foreign markets began before the Bolshevik insurrection. On the eve of the First World War, in compliance with rules dating to 1897, when Russia went on the gold standard, 1.604 billion of the 1.633 billion rubles in circulation were backed by gold reserves. Nearly 500 million rubles circulated in the form of gold coins, supported by 244 million rubles' worth of silver and copper coins. Unable to dig deeper into foreign lending sources to fund the war effort, however, beginning in 1915 the tsarist regime turned increasingly to the printing press to meet the financial demands of total war. Soviet economists later estimated that more than a third of total war expenditures came from emissions; by the end of the war, on the eve of the October Revolution, just 8.4 percent of paper bills had gold backing, more than 15.3 billion rubles now circulated in the Empire, against a gold reserve whose worth had dropped to 1.293 billion. The purchasing power of the ruble in September 1917 was one-tenth of what it had been when the war began.⁴⁶ To keep pace with the ruble's plummeting value, the Provisional Government released two new kinds of paper bills, known as "dumskie" or duma money, in the higher denominations of 100 and 250 ruble-notes, and "kerenki," nicknamed after the leader of the Provisional Government, Alexander Kerensky, worth 20 and 40 rubles. In addition to violating a long-standing state tradition of not issuing bills in 20- or 40-ruble denominations, kerenki lacked a series numbers and the signature of the State Treasurer, as well as other basic "defenses" against counterfeiting, with the result that it became one of the most infamously spoiled bills in Russian history. To supplement the new designs, and ease the looming "small change" crisis that accompanied the inflation, the Provisional Government also ordered the Mint to re-release five-ruble notes that retained tsarist motifs and were easily confused with issues from 1909. It also reissued a special celebratory edition of the ruble dating from 1915 and dedicated to the Romanov Tsars,

46. *Istoriia ministerstva finansov*, p. 104.

indistinguishable from the originals except for the absence of a watermark and the official Imperial stamp.⁴⁷

Prior to seizing power, the Bolsheviks decried the Provisional Government's dependence on emissions and claimed that if they were in charge, they would cut power to the state's money machines. In the months immediately after the insurrection, Lenin continued to adhere to his pre-revolutionary stance, calling for an end to emissions and proposing a Republic-wide "exchange" of weak, devalued paper bills for new, strong ones. At the First All-Russian Congress of Finance Department Chairs held in Moscow in May 1918, Lenin characterized monetary policy as a "political" question, to be resolved "chest to chest with the class enemy." The Bolsheviks' goal, he explained, was not the restoration of the money economy to health, but the seizure of money from the bourgeoisie.

Money, little papers—everything that is today called money...is dangerous in that the bourgeoisie, storing up reserves of these papers, will remain in economic power. To weaken this occurrence, we must make the strictest account of all existing little papers for a full exchange of all old money with new. We will name a short period, in the course of which everyone must make a declaration about the amount of money he has and will receive new money in exchange; if the amount is small, he will receive [new money] ruble for ruble; if it exceeds a norm, he will receive just a portion....this will be the last decisive battle with the bourgeoisie.⁴⁸

Lenin's proposal to print several billion new rubles, to be "exchanged for old money in the shortest possible time," was meant to stabilize the monetary system and advance the class war simultaneously. Full compensation for cash-holdings would be sharply limited

47. Taken from the excellent review of the Provisional Government's monetary practice provided by Iurii Bokarev in "Rubl' v epokhu voin i revoliutsii," in *Russkii rubl'*, pp. 176-197, especially pp. 181-186.

48. Cited in Bokarev, p. 189.

under the plan, fixed by a ceiling or value-limit, above which no individual holdings could be exchanged.⁴⁹

With the onset of the Civil War, however, the Bolsheviks were forced to abandon their exchange scheme, and indeed, found themselves expanding the printing of paper money. Narkomfin opened new branches of the Mint, in Penza and Perm, to supplement the heroic work of the Moscow and Petrograd presses, whose directors boasted in their activity reports that never before, in the history of the Mint, had it achieved such levels of productivity, especially in such dire working conditions, where basics such as paper with watermarks and the necessary inks were nowhere to be found. Even this dramatically increased pace of printing, however, could not match demand for paper bills across the Republic. Over the course of 1918, the Soviet regime legalized the circulation of annulled bonds and other loan papers as cash money in small denominations.⁵⁰ At the same time, it released enormous reprints of Provisional Government-era money—the so-called “dumskie” and “kerenki” bills—but with even lower “defenses,” that is to say, absent watermarks and special, difficult-to-counterfeit inks. Later calculations suggested that during 1918, the government more than doubled the quantity of money in circulation, from 27.6 billion rubles to 57.3 billion rubles.⁵¹ In February 1919, the Soviet government issued its first money for use as small change, known as “motylki,” worth one, two, and three rubles; in May, it abolished the legal limits inherited from the tsarist era on the printing of new bills, with the result that prices and emissions skyrocketed. Several months later a full range of denominations worth between one and one-thousand rubles followed, bills that were known as “1918 money” or “penzenki,” after the city of Penza, where they were printed.⁵² Because they were so easy to counterfeit, the population “met these bills coldly,” often refusing them as payment and demanding older money, with the results that, as we will see further below, older money quickly gained value against the new bills. By the summer of 1920, one petitioner reported

49. *Istoriia ministerstva finansov*, p. 109, Diachenko, pp. 9, 41.

50. *Istoriia ministerstva finansov*, p. 105.

51. *Ibid*, p. 110.

52. *Ibid*, p. 121.

to Narkomfin that “it must be said that right now, absolutely everywhere there is strong speculation, in the millions, with monarchical bills of credit, which are bought at a rate of 25- 30,000 soviet rubles for 1000 monarchical, and in regular purchases of foods for example butter, you have to pay 1500 soviet rubles for a funt and just 40-50 in monarchical.”⁵³ By early 1921, Sergei Izmailov, a young Bolshevik at the head of Narkomfin’s most important department, reported to his party bosses that the “paper ruble [had lost] its meaning as a firm measure of value.”⁵⁴

There were those among the Bolshevik establishment who welcomed this transformation in the usage and meaning of money, hailing it as the beginning of the end of the market economy. The official resolution adopted by the Seventh Party Congress in March 1919 stressed the need to expand “moneyless accounting” and measures leading to the “liquidation of money circulation,” while a Narkomfin specialist, S.A. Falkner, proposed a theory of emissions according to which limitless emissions and inflation would transform money into a “tool of the Soviet government, rather than the bourgeoisie.”⁵⁵ Narkomfin also received numerous popular projects to eliminate money, some of which anticipated the Bolsheviks’ own concerns about doing away with money and the multiple functions it performed. An engineer named Solntsev submitted a project in 1921 that would retain the usage of paper bills as a medium of exchange, but would peg the value of money to a fixed quantity of grain instead of gold. Gold, Solntsev argued, could not serve as a measure for the value of goods because it had “no internal use,” it lacked use value. Grain, by contrast, was “a product of human labor, necessary to life.”⁵⁶ Another, entitled “A project to destroy capitalism,”

53. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 187, l. 155.

54. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 344, l. 7.

55. *Istoriia ministerstva finansov*, p. 119.

56. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 343, l. 320. The existence of such projects provides an interesting point of comparison vis-à-vis the comparative social and political repercussions of inflation. As Kazimierz Wyka notes of occupied Poland during the Second World War, inflation can produce, as it did in that instance, an effervescent sense of “artificial excitement and vitality, of playing with easy money obtained no one knew where,” even in conditions of great dearth. The legacy of the inflation on Soviet popular attitudes to money is unstudied and too large a topic to manage here. As will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter, the years after the First World War in Russia, as in other European countries, were marked by a “tropical economic climate,” in the words of R.H. Tawney, one that was perhaps shared qualities with that noted by

was submitted in May 1920 by citizen M. I. Shadrin-Shuiskii, with the observation that “the question of destroying money is so interesting that it has occupied all segments of society.” No one had yet succeeded in resolving this problem of “global” interest, Shadrin-Shuiskii argued, due to the challenges posed by money’s inherent multi-functionality, serving at one and the same time as both a “measure of value and means of exchange,” and rooted in its link with gold. Money made “all things equivalent,” and the difficulty of identifying an equally versatile object to replace the precious metal on which this power was based, “especially now, when gold has such might and everyone has been subdued by it,” Shadrin-Shuiskii noted, had foiled efforts to reform the currency and “free the population from capitalism.”⁵⁷ But, he triumphantly reported, “there is nothing impossible in this world,” and he, Shadrin-Shuiskii, had hit upon the way out: an “immaterial thing,” with no material value in itself, that nevertheless had the power to “define the value of all other objects and to equalize them.” He called this thing the “percent,” the basic unit of an index system encompassing the whole material plant of the socialist economy. The percent system would require a complete inventory of all goods “subject to exchange,” a categorization of their “qualities” and their “value,” compared to one another.⁵⁸ Narkomfin officials read the projects carefully and composed detailed rebuttals explaining why the proposed measures would lead neither to moneylessness nor a functioning economy. These replies appear in at least one instance to have been composed not for the proposal’s original author—the authors received brief replies from Narkomfin informing them that their projects, while welcome and valuable, could not be implemented at the present time—but rather for other officials at Narkomfin, and perhaps for those at the Sovnarkom who sent over the projects for review.⁵⁹

Wyka several decades later. Additionally, however, it also produced numerous popularly-authored manifestos forecasting the actual end of money.

57. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 187, ll., 69, 155.

58. *ibid.*, l. 69.

59. Shadrin-Shuiskii’s project was initially received by Bonch-Bruevich in the Sovnarkom. Bonch-Bruevich forwarded it to the Department of Special Questions at Narkomfin, where Sergei Kistenev appears to have read it and replied, *ibid.*, ll. 70, 71. Solntsev’s report was also read carefully by the Department of Special Questions at Alskii’s request, and composed a lengthy rebuttal of each individual point.

The prospect of moneylessness was not welcomed at Narkomfin, but given the scale of the inflation, it was taken seriously. As Izmailov, the young finance official, mused in a report to his bosses:

In 1917, the kopeck was real. In 1918, the role of the kopeck was played by the ruble. In 1919, the kopeck was forgotten and the ruble, as a real value, was replaced by ten rubles, in 1920 the real unit became the hundred and then a thousand rubles, and finally in 1921 the unit of account hit the thousands.

When will the collapse of paper circulation arrive?⁶⁰

Izmailov worried both about the continued existence of “old money,” bills dating from before the Revolution, worth many times their face value in Soviet bills, and about the growing “naturalization” of economic life, warning in August 1921, a few months after the Soviet government embarked on its market-oriented New Economic Policy, that it was the most “dangerous” threat to the continued existence of the money economy.⁶¹ The naturalization of the economy was the product of both the inflation and specific policies adopted by the Bolsheviks. The range of policies adopted in the service of naturalization was wide, spanning from the assessment of taxes in kind, to the institution of “labor cards,” stamped with quantities of labor performed for the social good that could be redeemed for goods in government stores, to the abolition of payment for services such as sewage, housing, and transportation. In part these measures were designed to blunt the effects of the inflation, by making money less necessary in daily transactions and thus reducing demand for it that could drive prices higher. At the same time, many naturalization measures also worked in the service of prosecuting the class war. With the help of labor-cards and work-based ration books, all state employees living in the cities were separated into four categories according to which they received fixed allotments of basic necessities. Heavy physical laborers received the largest allotment; those who worked in offices received the least. (For more

60. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 344, l. 16.

61. *Ibid.*

on the paek system see Chapter 5.) Peasants experienced the effects of naturalization as well, in the form of the *prodrazverstka*, a tax-in-kind on grain so onerous that it left many starving.⁶² Naturalization was also attempted at higher levels of governance, in the form of “moneyless accounting” between government enterprises and institutions, according to which state bodies transferred credits to one another through accounting systems, rather than cash, and in plans for the creation of a “material budget” to replace the money-based one.⁶³

Historians of war communism have long referred to the period as one of “demonetization,” reflecting the language of naturalization that dominated economic discourse and the real moves made toward it, intentionally and otherwise, in economic policy.⁶⁴ Yet the reach of demonetization was not uniform. Living without money on a daily basis was a privilege afforded primarily to individuals at the pinnacle of the Bolshevik regime in their daily life. It was far less accessible to people on the margins politically, socially, or geographically. In institutional life its adoption was uneven, with most institutions engaged in a mixture of cashless accounting that was denominated in rubles—Narkomfin experimented with the creation of “material budgets” for state enterprises but ultimately did not introduce them on a large scale—and transactions in various forms of money on semi-legal markets and unofficial exchanges. Moneylessness extended unevenly over different sectors of the economy, remaining necessary for the acquisition of particular kinds of goods in certain sectors at both the individual and institutional levels.

The persistence of money, even radically devalued money, in the naturalized economy could be seen most vividly in the household sector. Intended to cover most basic needs, the ration cards supplied to state employees provided them with roughly half of what they needed to survive in the cities, at best, according to one Soviet economist; for the rest, government employees were on their own. “Despite the naturalization of the economy,” writes

62. *Istoriia ministerva finansov*, p. 124.

63. Diachenko, *op.cit.*, pp. 52, 5.

64. See for example the foundational Alec Nove, *An Economic History of the U.S.S.R.* (London, 1969) as well as numerous Soviet histories of the era including Diachenko, *op.cit.*, Bokarev, *op. cit.*, and Atlas, *op. cit.*

the historian Diachenko, “demand for money grew.”⁶⁵ Characterizing the circulation of paper money in the Tver region in the first half of 1921, when “naturalization” peaked, the local finance department reported that “all finance departments experienced great insufficiencies of paper money. The sums sent from the center were not enough. The money released [to the population] was not observed returning [to state finance departments]. No reduction in demand for money due to barter was observed.”⁶⁶ A report for the same period sent from Moscow noted that “despite the unceasing supply of paper bills, major shortages, sometimes rising to the level of crises, are felt constantly.”⁶⁷

Reports of popular hoarding of paper money began to appear within months of the Revolution, particularly in the wake of the nationalization of the banks, which was reported to have “ruined the trust of the population in the banks and the savings bureaus, as a consequence of which there has been observed a reduction in the flow of money into these institutions.”⁶⁸ Instead of keeping money in banks, people kept it in “jars,” known as *kubyski*, at home—the revolutionary equivalent of stuffing cash under the mattress. They brought it out to acquire necessities they could not otherwise obtain on what was known as the “free market,” most powerfully symbolized by the Sukharevka open-air market in Moscow.⁶⁹ Money remained a vital resource for most people, even as the idiosyncrasies of government policies and supply chains required them to use money differently. People living in cities, Z.V. Atlas observed, stopped using money to acquire durable goods, rich or fatty foods, and concentrated their cash spending on bread. Between January 1918 and January 1921, the real value of the largest bills in circulation dropped from 50 rubles to one ruble.⁷⁰

Among the many resources for sale at Sukharevka and its kin was money itself. The streets lining Narkomfin’s Moscow headquarters also served as popular places to trade in

65. Diachenko, p. 53.

66. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 408, l. 183.

67. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 1932, l. 8.

68. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 120, l. 18.

69. Both before and after the October Revolution, the life of Moscow’s profiteers and speculators concentrated on Sukharevka.

70. Z.V. Atlas, *Ocherki po Istorii denezhnogo obrashcheniia v SSSR (1917-1925)*, pp. 67-68.

currency. “The underground exchange traded in everything,” another memoirist recalled. “It took up along Ilinka [street], near the gates, and there deals were made and prices were fixed. They traded in everything there, just like at a real exchange: checks from foreign banks, foreign money, and [annulled] bonds.”⁷¹ Periodically criminal proceedings were initiated against those accused of organizing the market in paper valuables, as in the “case of the Ilinskaia exchange” filed against the employees of the commission tasked with liquidating Moscow’s mutual credit societies after the Revolution. These employees, it was alleged, “took direct part in the organization of a conspiratorial market in bank building,” where all sorts of paper valuables circulated: annulled bonds, various monies, as well as precious stones and metals. Their activities, it was alleged, sustained an “arbitrary exchange rate in annulled papers and valuables”—they created value, that is, where none was supposed to exist. They were even held responsible for “artificially lowering the exchange rate of the Russian ruble.” In all, more than two dozen “representatives of the financial world of the city of Moscow” were charged in association with the case, of whom 10 were freed and the rest sent to labor camps for terms of two to 15 years.⁷²

Money objects were also essential at the institutional level, in both concrete and abstract ways. In the process of nationalization, two kinds of state enterprise had been created: one type that was permitted to have its own accounts at the People’s Bank, into which it deposited earnings and from which it drew expenditures, separate from the state budget; and a second type whose finances moved entirely from government accounts, in the form of “assignovki” or credits. Both types of enterprise were nationalized, but the first type was allowed more autonomy than the second, and the money in its possession could be deployed in ways that more closely resembled those of a conventional market economy.⁷³ In March 1919, the Sovnarkom decreed that the state budget would serve as the exclusive funder of all government enterprises, merging these two types of state enterprise into one.

71. *Arkhiv Russkoi revoliutsii*, as cited in *Istoriia ministerstva finansov*, p. 119.

72. *Kommunisticheskii trud*, no. 75, 1920.

73. Diachenko, p. 60.

The money that circulated through state institutions flickered back and forth between the “active” and “passive” moneys of Grossman’s designation. The March 1919 decree shunting the funding of all government enterprises through the state budget liquidated any debts state enterprises or institutions owed to one another. The transfer of all enterprises onto the budget also eliminated the need for credit, paving the way for the dissolution of the People’s Bank.⁷⁴ In May 1919, the Sovnarkom declared the “unity of the budget and the treasury,” concentrating the movement of all money, across all enterprises, in the treasury, and in January 1920, it formalized the dissolution of the People’s Bank and created in its place a department called the “Central Budget-Accounting Directorate,” or TsBRU, for short. The task of the TsBRU was to organize funding and budgeting for state institutions, including in many cases nationalized enterprises. The management of these accounts was handled by a perpetually understaffed body called Tsentrokassa, the Republic’s central bookkeeper.

Tsentrokassa distributed money to enterprises according to calculations it made about their need for it, for the purpose of paying salaries.⁷⁵ The trouble was that once in possession of their allocation of paper money, enterprises and other institutions used it in ways that were not foreseen by the budget. Rather than handing over the sums of cash money received in the course of sales or the provision of services, government enterprises and administrative bodies kept this money for themselves, in separate “accounts” held either at the institution itself or in local deposits. “In connection with the destruction of private banking and the striving of soviet power toward a non-money accounting system,” a report submitted by the Worker-Peasant Inspectorate explained, “the institutions of Narkomfin are formed with the goal of creating a united accounting apparatus for the Republic. . . . Information from the localities makes clear that this work is far from complete,” in large part due to the continued existence of so-called “institutional tills.” During the revolutionary period, one report affirmed, “all institutions held for themselves in their hands large sums of money, which they

74. Ibid, p. 62.

75. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 421, l. 6.

spent on their own needs, outside of the general-government institutions and control.”⁷⁶ In May 1918, the Sovnarkom issued a decree declaring the “unity of state finances,” abolishing individual tills separate from the state accounts, but “despite the Sovnarkom decree from May 2, 1918” and repeated subsequent orders “to do the same, in this sphere at the present time such institutional tills continue to exist.”⁷⁷ It was as if, a report to the Sovnarkom affirmed, every institution was its own “state within the state.”⁷⁸ Despite the Sovnarkom decrees repeatedly affirming the necessity of merging individual budgets with the central one, institutions fought such efforts and routinely accused the inspectors sent to perform “control” over their budgets as “tsarist.”⁷⁹

Government institutions faced a variety of restrictions on both what they could spend cash on, and how they could spend it. First and foremost, they were obliged to spend cash only on “state needs.” But what constituted “state needs” was far from clear at a time when virtually all employees were employees of the state, and when the state took responsibility not only for paying their salaries, but also for providing large portions of those salaries in kind. The challenge of procurement sent not just individuals but whole institutions to speculative markets in search of essential goods. As the newspaper *Kommunisticheskii trud* reported in 1920 from the trial of some VSNKh employees, the previous months had witnessed the birth of a “new type of ‘legal speculator,’” who speculated “for the needs of the institution.” These employees had engaged in speculative grain purchases and accepted a “bribe-in-kind” in the form of an expensive lunch from a trader.⁸⁰ More often than not, institutions used the money they acquired from state coffers in distinctly “active” ways. Money continued to play an uneven but essential role in the distribution of goods at both the individual and institutional levels.

76. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 240, l. 3,

77. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 242. L. 23.

78. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2765, l. 21.

79. GARF f. 4390, op. 2, d. 281, l. 98.

80. *Kommunisticheskii trud*, no. 114, 1920.

Compounding the complexity of the monetary landscape was the fact that there was not one money in the revolutionary era, but many, each of which possessed its own geography, its own source of value and community of valuation, and its own manner of usage. During economic booms, Marx observed, “everyone is a protestant, acting on pure faith.” Paper money robustly expresses the attributes we now conventionally ascribe to it: instrument of credit, seal of trust, promise of confidence that now as in the future, debts will be paid. In busts, however, those attributes dissipate, Marx said. “Everyone is a catholic,” rushing for cover under the original money commodity: gold.⁸¹ In the revolutionary setting, naturalization and money hunger were accompanied by a search for “surrogates,” alternative money objects that, it was hoped, might represent and hold value more effectively than the paper bills being printed by the Soviet regime. The result was a proliferation of monies: “old monies,” bills dating from before the October Revolution; foreign monies, acquired from abroad and hoarded at home; White-guard monies; local monies, printed by everyone from regional governments to local enterprises; “surrogate” monies, such as annulled bond papers and stocks; and finally, as Marx predicted, precious metals. As the history of these multiple money objects demonstrates, value in the revolutionary era was not an “all or nothing” proposition; it was a spectrum. In the search for a money object that would hold value over time and represent value to the outside world, individuals and institutions weighed multiple considerations, including the given object’s legality, its substance, the purpose for which it would be used, and the setting in which use would occur. The story of the multiplicity of revolutionary money objects is not one that can be split into binaries of official and unofficial, legal and illegal, or formal and informal; rather, through an examination of the variety of money objects in circulation in the revolutionary era, what we see is the depth of interpenetration between these two spheres.

81. Harvey, p. 79.

4.3 Old Money

Perhaps the most striking of the money objects to circulate in the revolutionary era was money printed by the Tsarist regime. “Old money” was the name given to bills printed under Nicholas II and after his abdication by the Provisional Government; the bills themselves were produced both under the Old Regime and after its demise, as the Bolsheviks continued to issue bills in the Imperial molds until the spring of 1919, when the first Soviet replacements were released. Whatever the age of the bills themselves, “old money” as a substance did not come into existence until those new Soviet bills appeared, that is, in the spring of 1919. Old money was created as a separate currency, oddly enough, through its disappearance from circulation. In the summer of 1919, it was reported in *Izvestiia finansov* that “according to reports from a variety of places, all *nikolaevski kreditki* [bills of credit from the reign of Nicholas II] from one-ruble notes to the 500-ruble notes, have completely disappeared from circulation, hidden away in jars (*kubyshki*).”⁸² *Izvestiia finansov* presented this event as an auspicious one for Soviet power. The collection of old money in jars “has the benefit of making it easier for Soviet power to regulate the circulation of money by means of annulling the old forms of bills of credit,” which, it was asserted, would pose no loss to “workers, in whose hands there could not be a large amount of the old *kreditki*, and Soviet power is hardly going to bother stopping before the jar-owners.”⁸³

But old money did not stay put in jars. The old bills were brought out for market purchases and enjoyed an active life on the speculative currency market. The value of “old money” bills soon began to surpass that of soviet bills of the same denomination, producing a value-gap or “lazzh” between them. Already in April, just a month after the new soviet bills were issued, some *gubfinotdels* began reporting to the center that they had instructed local authorities, “in view of the speculation in Kerenki and Nikolaevki (the name given to bills issued under the murdered tsar, Nikolai II)” to take a “whole series of measures to ensure

82. *Izvestiia finansov*, no. 3-4, September 1919, p. 6.

83. *Ibid.*

that nikolaevskie money did not fall into the hands of speculators and marauders.”⁸⁴ The possession of old monies was never overtly forbidden, however, because to do so would have required Narkomfin to recognize the ever-widening value gap between old and new monies, which it refused to do. In cases of seizure subsequently deemed “incorrect,” for example, in which the wronged party was awarded the return of the money seized from him or her, it was Narkomfin practice to return the nominal quantity of seized money in exclusively soviet bills: a party from whom 2,742 rubles in old money was seized received the same amount, 2,742 rubles in soviet denznaki, “provided there are no accusations of speculation in money against you,” Narkomfin officials explained in one case.⁸⁵ This practice was formalized in circular no. 4A dating from July 1920, which forbade the payment of “private individuals” in old money with the goal of preventing speculation, but it existed for some time before that as well, and produced numerous protests lodged against Narkomfin by “private individuals” who had suffered grave losses as a result.⁸⁶ The regime’s resolute refusal to recognize the growing value gap between old and new money did nothing to slow it. By the summer of 1920, one petitioner reported to Narkomfin that “it must be said that right now, absolutely everywhere there is strong speculation, in the millions, with monarchical bills of credit, which are bought at a rate of 25- 30,000 soviet rubles for 1000 monarchical, and in regular purchases of foods for example butter, you have to pay 1500 soviet rubles for a funt and just 40-50 in monarchical.”⁸⁷

As the anthropologist Beth Notar observes, in places where multiple monies circulate, it is common for one or several of them to be stronger than others, that is, to provide its bearer access to favorable prices and terms of exchange. Early twentieth-century China, she explains, also witnessed a “profusion of market monies,” issued in the “absence of a strong

84. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 171, l. 42.

85. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 187, l. 257.

86. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 187, ll. 257, 265, 266, 276, 277, 279; RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 191, l. 40.

87. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 187, l. 155.

and effective monetary authority.”⁸⁸ In this environment, “the greater the authenticity of the currency in one’s possession, the lower the payment one could negotiate.” Authenticity accrued to a currency along multiple lines: it derived primarily from the “reputation of the issuing institution,” the extent to which the currency was deemed “authentic,” or not counterfeit, the size of the transaction, distance the currency had to travel, place of payment, and the socioeconomic status of the parties involved.⁸⁹ Like the “authentic” money of Notar’s description, the use of “old money” in the revolutionary environment bought lower prices and improved access to goods—despite the fact that old money possessed almost none of the qualities that could have bestowed “authenticity” upon it. No one quite knew where or how old money attained its value. There was some thought, initially, that the usage of old money was indeed linked with political opposition to the regime, that is, that its use reflected an abiding attachment to the “reputation of the issuing institution,” the Imperial State, and a confidence in its eventual return. Writing about old money in 1928, the economist L.N. Iurovskii gave voice to a common belief that the high demand for “tsarist money and kerengi” was initially “enabled by various political motives, that is, the lack of certainty in the stability of soviet power.” But as time went on, Iurovskii acknowledged, these political motives, to the extent that they ever existed, almost certainly disappeared. In Iurovskii’s view, the value gap between old and new monies remained thanks to the fact that old money was the currency of choice for those formerly-Imperial subjects now migrating, after the Revolution and the creation of an array of new states on Imperial territory, to their “homeland.” Until the new Baltic states and Poland created their own currencies, they used Imperial rubles. Rubles were also traded on some foreign exchanges, which Iurovskii suggested kept their price high along the borders of Soviet Russia. Yet as he notes, the value gap between old and new monies existed across Soviet Russia, not just in the border areas.⁹⁰

88. Beth E. Notar, “Ties that Dissolve and Bind: Competing Currencies, Prestige, and Politics in Early Twentieth Century China,” in *Values and Valuables: From the Sacred to the Symbolic*, Duran Bell and Cynthia Werner, eds. (Walnut Creek, CA, 2004), p. 132.

89. *Ibid.*, p. 136.

90. L.N. Iurovskii, (1928), pp. 79-80. Citing Z.N. Katsenelenbaum, *Denezhnoe obrashenie Rossii 1914-1924* (Moscow, 1924), p. 76.

And the Moscow finotdel reported in February 1921, “according to rumors, in Moscow as in the provinces, there has been a buying up of both kerenski and tsarist money.”⁹¹ Old money was valuable not just on the Republic’s borders, but at its heart.

Part of old money’s value undoubtedly came from its “defenses.” Printed on paper with watermarks, using hard to imitate dyes and inks, old money was a far cry from the Soviet bills, which lost their value so quickly that they were sometimes released into circulation in the sheet-form, famously used by the population as wallpaper. To a greater extent than the monies of more stable polities, old money’s value inhered in its physical qualities. Still, old money was a proxy for no live political regime and had no bank to back it; to the extent that it derived its value from its “authenticity,” as Notar terms it, it was a funny authenticity, borne precisely of the fact that its issuing authority, the Tsarist regime, was never coming back. Amid the profusion of monies fanning out across the Republic, examined below, only one could claim to represent a regime that had no running interest in the present or future, a regime that was spent and that, as a result, would never print more money again. Old money gained value to the extent that it was believed its makers would not return.

The value of all monies is produced by the people who hold them; in this old money was not an exception. At issue is the relationship between this community of valuation, the people who used old money and formed assessments of its worth, and other bodies claiming the right to rule on the value of money, such as the state. In the case of old money, this relationship was ostensibly antagonistic. Narkomfin denied the existence of the value gap separating old from new monies. Paradoxically, it would later become clear, this denial drove the value gap wider. In the meantime, Narkomfin continued its efforts to collect old money in its coffers, but this policy was challenged both by popular hoarding and by the monetary usage of other state agencies, and indeed, of offices within Narkomfin itself, in their pursuit of their official tasks. Old money was also a mainstay in institutional use, despite central orders demanding that local finance departments remove it from circulation

91. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 1932, l. 8.

and send it to Moscow to be destroyed. Indeed, in the course of an inspection of Narkomfin offices, it came out that Narkomfin's own Department of Foreign Accounts paid its employees in *kerenki* more than half the time.⁹² To manage the demand for old money, Narkomfin eventually set up a system of "permissions" for the usage of old money, to be review by the Deputy Commissar of Finance, Sergei Chutskaev, "in each separate event."⁹³ Permission was ostensibly to be granted when the requesting agents could demonstrate that they intended to spend old money exclusively "on government needs," but again, in the circumstances of War Communism, determining what constituted a "government need" and what fell under the rubric of "non-government" or "private" needs was next to impossible.⁹⁴ Petitions from state institutions for permission to use old money became so numerous that Chutskaev soon transferred them to an office run by one of his subordinates, A.G. Orlov, known as the "Department of Special Questions." Orlov fielded especially frequent requests from local finotdels being pressed to release old money to the Cheka, which claimed to need it for "operations."⁹⁵ In March 1921, no less an authority than the Orgbiuro of the Communist Party determined to form a "small fund of Nikolaevskie bills of credit so that it will not be necessary to go through the state financial apparatus for occasionally necessary small exchanges and withdrawals."⁹⁶

Acting as "states within states," as the earlier Narkomfin report observed, individual branches of government institutions made their privileged access to old money into a pillar of their procurement practices, sustaining the alternative valuation of old money in the process. Procurement agencies, the Kaluga gubfinotdel explained in a report to the Department of Special Questions, "have very often addressed themselves and continue to address themselves at the present time to the finotdel with requests that their representatives be allowed to make purchases in *kerenki* money, noting that sellers eagerly take [*kerenki*] and

92. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 242, l. 8.

93. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 187, l. 15.

94. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 187, l. 173.

95. Ibid, l. 239, from the Severo-dvinskii gubfinotdel, regarding its Cheka, and l. 255, for the same from Arkhangelsk.

96. GARF f. 4085, op. 28, d. 20, l. 63.

give much lower prices when they are told that payment will be in *kerenki*.” Traditionally the Kaluga gubfinotdel “satisfied these requests,” and thus asked Department of Special Questions whether it could keep its own stock of *kerenki*, to be left “on the account of the GFO to be given out exclusively to organizations traveling to purchase goods and to inform the latter about such permissions.”⁹⁷ As one district finotdel wrote to Moscow with confusion, despite the circular forbidding state agencies from using old money, “Narkomzem agents arrive here from Moscow to buy horses and they receive, through the Narkomfin Kassa, large sums/in the hundreds of millions/ exclusively in the so-called ‘kerenki’ form of money.”⁹⁸ The Horse Section of the Commissariat of War complained to Narkomfin that “of late it has been noticed that various institutions and organizations, when they freely buy horses from the population, are paying for them in old tsarist and provisional-government money, as these bills are the object of secret speculation, and are assessed on the market several times higher than bills of the soviet republic, thus naturally the population eagerly sells horses to these institutions and organizations.” Not only did these institutions introduce an “unacceptable principle of speculation, the initiators of which are civil organizations,” into the exchange, they blocked the acquisition of horses by the Commissariat of War, which paid in regular money.⁹⁹ How, asked the district finotdel, was it to handle the “abnormal situation thus created, when one institution is taking measures to battle against speculation in money surrogates, and another is releasing these surrogates into circulation by means of using them as payment for purchases”?¹⁰⁰ If part of old money’s value, then, was indeed drawn from its continued circulation abroad, other factors and the valuation of communities inside the Republic, both official and unofficial, sustained the value of the papers and produced an extensive system of permissions that were nearly as valuable as the currency itself.

97. Ibid, l. 173.

98. Ibid, l. 247.

99. Ibid, l. 153.

100. Ibid, l. 247.

4.4 Local Money

As the money hunger sharpened and communication lines connecting the former Empire's regions to one another were severed, numerous localities took to printing their own local currencies to supplement their dwindling supplies of what came to be known as "general-government" money. Efforts at printing local money began almost immediately after the October insurrection. In the spring of 1918, for example, the Penza branch office of the People's Bank released 36 million rubles' worth of "bon" [pl. *bony*], to supplement existing money supplies in the region. Bony were local money; they circulated (legally, at least) only in the region that issued them, and in this respect, as historians later noted, they reduced the "moneyness" of revolutionary money, by making it less universal and fracturing the Imperial as a unitary economic space.¹⁰¹ But the bigger problem with bony at the time was that they were so easy to fake. "They were printed on horrible paper," a local official reported, "which greatly facilitated the work of counterfeiters. Many fake bony appeared and the urban and rural poor suffered most from them."¹⁰² By May 1918, fake bony outnumbered real ones by nearly four to one; having released just under 40 million into circulation, the Penza region now found itself flooded with somewhere between 150 and 200 million in circulation. As the production of fake bony expanded, the quality of the counterfeits surpassed that of the real bills: "in recent times the virtuosity of the counterfeits has gotten to the point that the majority of fake bony, technically, are better pieces of work than the real ones, and that is a huge burden for our population here in the Penza region," one report noted.¹⁰³ On a trip to Kyiv, a procurement agent for the Kremlin cooperative "Kommunist" reported that with practice he learned to "tell false bills apart from the real ones, but the strangest of all was that upon arriving in Kiev they explained to me that the Odessa counterfeits of the 50 ruble karbovantsy [a local currency] where the mark

101. A.V. Aliamkin and A.G. Baranov, *Istoriia denezhnogo obrashcheniia v 1914-1924 gg (po materialam Zauralia)* (Ekaterinburg, 2005).

102. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 120, l. 25.

103. *Ibid.*, l. 165.

was absent—were real money, and with the mark—they were false.”¹⁰⁴ Monisov observed an entirely new market profession spring up in the bazaars he frequented—the currency checker, called over by merchants immediately upon concluding a sale, trained in the arts of counterfeit, ready to help the merchant run after the counterfeit-passer if necessary.¹⁰⁵

The usage of money was localized in two respects in the revolutionary era; not only did local governments print their own currencies to supplement “general-government” supplies, local communities also developed their own, idiosyncratic practices of money-holding, use, and valuation of the multiple monies available to them across the spectrum of value. Much as in the case of old money, described above, the source of this money’s value was often uncertain. In some places, a given valuation was sanctioned, often against orders from Moscow, by local authorities. “In the course of work,” the regional finance department in Ekaterinburg reported to the center, “we have noticed that in several localities, ‘siberian monies’ still circulate and several commissars, without considering orders from the center, are publishing their ‘own proprietary orders’ [with regard to money], as for example took place in the Berkhoturskii district, where commissar Babilov issued order no. 2 on the ‘free circulation of siberian bills on equal footing with soviet bills.’” The regional finance department thus requested that Moscow “issue a general decree annulling Siberian money,” but as Moscow replied, such orders had already been issued repeatedly; stamping out local communities of valuation, declaring money the public viewed as valuable to be in fact valueless, proved difficult.¹⁰⁶

Often, however, particular habits and beliefs around the value of a given type of currency sprang up independently of decisions by the authorities. Rumor carried immense power in all dimensions of revolutionary life, including matters of valuation, where it shaped the circulation and longevity of both local and so-called “general government” monies. Contrary to the Narkomfin’s expectations, the value of money in the revolutionary

104. NIOR f. 369, kart. 397, d. 14, l. 39.

105. Ibid, l. 38.

106. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 187, l. 66.

period did not spring directly from its official legality or validity. In order to ensure that bills officially removed from circulation were actually destroyed, for example, Narkomfin required that all “exhausted” bills be shipped to Narkomfin’s incinerator in Petrograd. Bills slated for incineration were stamped with the letter “G” and stored in finance offices until they could be sent—unless, that is, they were stolen first. For reasons Narkomfin struggled to determine, “in the poorly-informed milieu, in the villages, stamping [the bills] with the letter G has apparently given them a special value,” rendering them more desirable among the populace and thus the object of theft.¹⁰⁷ Something similar occurred in the case of money “surrogates”—the bond papers, treasury notes, and coupons released by the Bolsheviks in early 1918 to cover paper money shortfalls until such time as new money could be printed, and gradually removed from circulation over the course of 1920. But as local finance offices reported, many localities did not recognize the valuelessness of surrogates, with the result that “there is major speculation going on in these surrogates in certain regions, possibly facilitated by malfeasance on the part of the treasury personnel who are supposed to be preparing them for accounting.”¹⁰⁸

4.5 White Money

Especially in periods of political upheaval, multiple layers of meaning accrue on money objects.¹⁰⁹ Revolutionary monies carried symbolic, political, and economic meanings simultaneously, nowhere more visibly than on the Republic’s borders. As the Red Army fell back in Siberia under the assault of White forces, local authorities eagerly overturned Bolshevik policies in the realm of money and financial politics. After the Red Army withdrew from Tiumen, a gathering of bank workers and city officials released a statement that read:

107. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 1926, l. 133.

108. *Ibid.*, l. 21.

109. Notar, *op.cit.*, p. 131.

Citizens, the Bolsheviks have fallen in all Siberia. Order is returned. Commercial life is returning. Banks, treasuries, savings banks, credit associations, all bonds, including the Freedom Loan, that were annulled by the Bolsheviks are restored to their value.¹¹⁰

While such declarations stemmed the tide of withdrawals from the banks, however, few new deposits were made. Siberia endured the same money shortages as elsewhere in the Republic and had many of the same money surrogates, plus a few that were annulled in Soviet-held territory. It also suffered from an overabundance of *kerenki*—the 20- and 40-ruble bills with which, the Kolchak government’s Minister of Finance lamented, the Bolsheviks had “showered” Russia. It was the Bolshevik regime’s only achievement, the Minister wrote in a popular address: “their printing presses work day and night without growing tired, pouring down a rainfall of twenties and forties over Russia.”¹¹¹ White authorities took to mocking the *kerenki* by stamping witticisms on them in ink and sending them back out into circulation. Propaganda *kerenki* read: “money for idiots”; “take a look at this little guy! What in the world can you use it to buy!”; and the less catchy, “The Bolsheviks promised you peace, bread, and freedom, and they gave war, hunger and the *chrezvychaika* [Cheka], in return for false money.”¹¹²

White governments also created monies of their own. The Arkhangelsk government issued a currency backed by the British pound in the name of its leader, Chaikovskii, known as the ‘*chaikovki*,’ which were intended for use primarily for deals made with British troops in the area, but seeped out into local circulation along with the mix of *nikolaevki*, *kerenki*, annulled papers and other monies that were widely available.¹¹³ The only attempt to supplant Bolshevik money entirely—or at least its most infamous representative, the *kerenki*—occurred in May 1919, after the Kolchak army’s successes led to the creation of a White

110. Aliamkin, p. 154.

111. Reprinted address of I. Mikhailov, Minister of Finance in the Kolchak government, *Izvestiia finansov*, no. 1-2 (September 1919), p. 24.

112. Aliamkin, pp. 194-195.

113. *Izvestiia finansov*, no. 13-14 (December 1919), p. 18.

government in Omsk. The White Ministry of Finance announced a mandatory exchange of *kerenki* for new “Russian State” money. *Kerenki* were to be officially removed from circulation as of May 15, 1919. Between May 15 and June 15, they could be presented at any savings bank, credit society, or State Bank branch for exchange at face value; after June 15, they would continue to be accepted for exchange at progressively discounted rates, until they were worth nothing. There was another catch: for bills brought in before June 15, although they would be assessed at full value, citizens could receive in exchange half of the total sum they brought in to the bank in “cash of the Russian State.” The other half was to be entered into a forced 20-year non-interest-bearing government bond, to be paid out at regular intervals over the following twenty years.¹¹⁴

The Bolsheviks viewed the possession of multiple monies as suspicious in itself, both as a likely indicator of speculative activity and also as suggestive of an aura of general mobility that was viewed as dangerously close to counterrevolution.¹¹⁵ The perception that White monies were dangerous in themselves and required containment persisted even after the military defeat of the White armies and the collapse of their governments and banks. At the end of the Civil War, as Narkomfin set about the task of reintegrating enemy-occupied territories into the Soviet monetary plant¹¹⁶ it formally annulled White money, allowing local authorities to set what were usually very tight time frames during which the population could exchange their enemy bills for Soviet money. Anyone who missed the exchange window was out of luck. No effort at collecting the annulled White money from the population was made, which meant that it continued to circulate in some communities, and especially across the borders, where many White soldiers, officers, and sympathizers had fled. But

114. *Izvestiia finansov*, no. 1 (1919), p. 24.

115. For more on the perceived connections between mobility, multiple monies, and counterrevolution, see the case of Tsentropchat, treated in the next chapter.

116. A project led by the inimitable Fridrikh Zemit, an old Bolshevik and gorgeous writer who penned regular missives back to his comrades in Moscow, jovially requesting they send him additional support in the form of his wife and demanding a cushier post, perhaps in Berlin, upon his return. As his letters make clear, Zemit followed the Red Army in bank cars wherever it went, arriving like clockwork in cities it conquered the day after victory. For a representative sample of Zemit’s handiwork, as a Red financier and correspondent, see RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 198, l. 2.

the continued circulation of White bills, though valueless within the Republic, did not sit well with border guards accustomed to seizing them. “The present orders on the movement of paper money over the borders consider only the removal of money from Russia,” several guards wrote to Narkomfin. “Recently, a local check point raised the question as to whether there were any rules or limitations on bringing money into the Republic from abroad.” In particular, border authorities wanted to know what to do with foreign money being brought in to Russia, as well as “bills that do not circulate in the RSFSR—chaikovki, denikinskie, petliurovskie, and the like,” all forms of White money.¹¹⁷ Should border guards seize such money, they wanted to know? If so, they wondered, should it be sent to Narkomfin for destruction, or to the Cheka, as evidence of counterrevolution? Narkomfin’s answer to this common query was always the same: “the import of the money of whiteguard governments, insofar as it is annulled in Russia, is unimportant in every way, and for that reason it is unnecessary to take any measures in regard to it.”¹¹⁸

Narkomfin ultimately implemented the exchange of White for Soviet money on a class basis. “This year,” the Department of Special Questions reported in August 1920, “in places cleansed of the whites, compensation for annulled white money was given to workers, employees, and red army soldiers.” Those who did not fall into those three categories would not receive compensation. Moreover, the amount of compensation was determined not by how much the workers, employees, or soldiers possessed, that is how much they presented for exchange, but rather by the salary their profession was slated to earn within the Soviet firmament, that is, “at soviet rates.”¹¹⁹ The annulling of White money thus effected a radical leveling of the population not unlike what residents of the center had experienced.

117. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 187, l. 105.

118. *Ibid.*, l. 113.

119. *Ibid.*, l. 142.

4.6 Monopolizing Money

After several years of fielding amateur plans for eliminating money, in 1921, Narkomfin received a proposal from an interested citizen by the name of Seniavin about how to save it, and in particular, how to “restore the ruble to its strong pre-war value.” Some Bolshevik theorists might object, he anticipated, on the basis of their “principled relation to money and the retention of money in society, K. Marx-style,” that his plan, by improving the buying power of the ruble, would also “raise the meaning of money in the eyes of the population.” Seniavin reassured these imagined critics with the observation that “it was not money in general that lost meaning in the eyes of the population” over the past few years, “but our soviet money. Money in other forms: nikolaevki, coins, are valued by the population very highly still, and soviet money has lost value only relatively. The ruble truly is worth nothing, but a million rubles, or even larger sums, they still have their hypothetical power. So the danger posed” by strengthening the ruble, Seniavin disclosed, “is not that great.”¹²⁰

Although Soviet officials and institutions themselves traded on the value-gaps separating old money from new, and local money from “general-government,” the regulations governing money did not recognize the existence of these gaps. Quite the opposite—according to the provisions of circular no. 4A, as noted above, old money and soviet money were to be valued identically by authorities. The “incorrect” seizure of old money, specified the circular, was to be compensated with an identical quantity of soviet bills. As numerous petitions and protests made clear, in effect this policy amounted to expropriation, pure and simple. The refusal to recognize the value-gap between the more official soviet bills and their less official, but not illegal, counterparts was not rooted in an inability to do so, nor was it adopted with the goal of expropriation, though this was one of its effects. In 1920, for example, Moscow city authorities practically begged Narkomfin for permission to reassess the “extraordinary tax,” first levied against the bourgeoisie in the fall of 1918, according to the new market prices that could be obtained by gold in 1920. The official prices for gold,

120. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 1926, l. 139.

they observed, set in 1918, were laughably low: in today's prices, gold objects that had been valued in 1918 at less than 10,000 rubles would today fetch in the millions. City coffers would benefit enormously from acknowledging the new prices and reassessing the tax on their basis. But Narkomfin denied the request.¹²¹ The refusal to acknowledge the value gap was, instead, an ideological and tactical choice. One of the oddities of the non-market economy in practice, as it turned out, was that market value was not so much suppressed as it was made secret. To recognize the market value of old currency would have been to recognize the existence and authority of an alternative sphere of valuation to the one offered by the state, a sphere that existed abroad, on foreign markets, on the one hand, and at home, on "black" or "free" markets, on the other. As economists hired by the Bolsheviks to consult at the opening of the New Economic Policy were quick to observe, the regime's official stance on old and new money, and particularly on the official and unofficial prices for gold, almost certainly drove these value gaps wider.¹²²

In keeping with the New Economic Policy in the spring of 1921, the regime solidified its commitment to the continued existence of money in the socialist polity going forward. As the deputy director of Narkomfin, A.O. Alskii, and the theorist and bureaucrat O. Shmidt wrote in a memo in August 1921:

If previously the [financial] politics were based on the use of the monetary emissions as a source of income replacing taxes, and the far-reaching devaluation of money even before it was released was kept in mind, leading gradually to the total alienation of money from the sphere of state economic activity, then in the present time there can be no more talk about the death of monetary exchange.

The task of strengthening the monetary system arises... .¹²³

121. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 187, l. 143.

122. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 6302, l. 66. As discussed in the previous Chapter, in mid-1921 the economist P.A. Genzel explained in a report to Narkomfin's collegium that gold was valued "abnormally highly" in the Republic due to the population's preference for gold as a means of protecting their savings from devaluation.

123. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 343, l. 275.

At the same time, Narkomfin reconsidered its stance on the gaps in value separating various kinds of money, seeking increasingly to recognize and incorporate the value gaps into its official handling of all kinds of monies, including old money. In the latter part of 1921, Narkomfin announced a change in its treatment of pre-revolutionary money seized “without foundation during searches,” which had previously been based on circular no. 4A requiring authorities to treat old and new bills as equivalent in value. Now, it was found that this practice frequently “conflicted with court orders [stipulating] the return of money in the same currency” in which it had been seized. The Commissariat of Justice did not respond to Narkomfin’s inquiry into “the question in essence” of whether old money could be replaced with soviet money, but shortly afterwards, it issued its own circular ordering “all judicial institutions of the RSFSR to show in their rulings in what currency money is taken or ordered,” legal recognition that there was a meaningful distinction between them. Narkomfin argued that it was required to honor “all judicial decisions and orders once they have entered into legal force, obtaining the same strength as law,” and that on this grounds, if nothing else, it “must be observed that Narkomfin’s practice of giving soviet money for nikolaevskii and kerenskii money is not correct. We cannot close our eyes to the fact that old money has a value tens of times higher than that of the same name of soviet issue.” The Narkomfin report delicately maneuvered through the question of why these monies had such a high value, noting only that “these differences [in value] have a real basis insofar as they are grounded on foreign currency,” thus displacing the generation of money’s value onto foreign markets. But it boldly declared that “the official recognition of [old and new monies] as being of equal value” was declared “a fiction.” For “private individuals, old money notes” were deemed a “legal means of accumulation,” serving a role that “soviet money cannot perform in view of their rapid devaluation.” People who had their old monies seized and returned in new soviet bills were right to view what had happened to them as “expropriation,” one that was “undeserved and not founded on the basis of law.”¹²⁴

124. *ibid.*, l. 14.

The official recognition of old money's value was ultimately what dispersed it. Its value had derived not from its usage abroad, nor in its affiliation with the Old Regime, but from its inconvertibility to Soviet rubles, which gave it a finitude that no other domestic currency could match. Once official outlets, such as State Bank branches and tax offices, began accepting old money at market value, it came quickly out of jars and was soon drowned in the profusion of Soviet bills.¹²⁵ State agencies began to collect information about old money's value and use. In the summer of 1921, Narkomfin began receiving, as part of its monthly reports from the provinces, information on the going rates for old monies on semi-legal regional exchanges. Cheliabinsk reported, for example, that "romanovskie" money was circulating at a rate of 100 rubles to 10,000 soviet rubles; kerenki at 100 rubles to 5000 soviet, and the silver ruble at 15,000 soviet.¹²⁶

The reappearance under the NEP of markets to generate information about value and to recreate money as a source of its representation did not eliminate questions about how or whether such information could be used officially, and the role of the state in assigning monetary value. Nowhere were these uncertainties expressed more vividly than in the regime's attempt to create a stable unit of account for itself, now that it recognized the multiplicity of moneys coexisting on Russian markets, with which it could reliably represent changes in value over time. Weary of adding flocks of zeros to its account books on a daily basis, in the winter of 1921, with help from the recently-created State Planning Bureau, Narkomfin created a unit of account it called the "pre-war gold ruble." "It was impossible to keep track of our finances and economy when the ruble was constantly falling," an article in *Vestnik finansov* explained. Adopted for use in the 1922 budgets, the pre-war gold ruble was created by "taking the average market price for goods and services across the whole of Russia and comparing it to the [equivalent] average market price in October 1913." The "differential" between the two was 60,000; that is, on average, 1921 prices were 60,000

125. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 1932, l. 32.

126. *ibid.*, l. 34.

times that of 1913 for the same goods and services. Narkomfin thus set the “differential” for the month of November at 60,000, and applied it widely to all budgets and accounts.¹²⁷

Problems with the pre-war ruble were multiple. Not only were the calculations it involved clunky, it required “immense statistical coordination, using the very freshest data, for the same districts and localities, the development of which in current conditions and given the state of the statistical apparatus of the country, and the means of communication that we have, was an insuperable obstacle.” The localities, it was said, “stubbornly refuse to give information.” The difficulty of collecting data on a wide variety of goods from a wide range of places forced Narkomfin, instead, to use whatever figures it had at hand, which were usually food prices. But because this was a period of near-famine, the food prices were in fact “hunger prices,” reflecting “manias for buying up food goods” that bordered on a state of “mass psychosis.” Perhaps the most significant challenge associated with the pre-war ruble, and the one responsible for Narkomfin’s abandonment of it, was its explosive and unexpected adoption by the free and semi-legal markets springing up across the country under the auspices of the NEP. As Narkomfin authorities later explained, the pre-war ruble was an attempt to get out ahead of the inflationary spiral by setting stable prices for internal government use. To the authorities’ surprise, however, the pre-war ruble was “rapidly adopted by the market itself,” and used in “all kinds of private-legal relations” and “agreements of the most varied character: for the hiring of services, the sale of goods, for literary property and so forth.” To an extent, this unexpected adoption of the pre-war ruble by the nascent NEP-era market was pleasing: “the fact that the market so quickly appropriated the method of accounting in pre-war rubles shows the huge influence (a commanding role) wielded by our government economy on the economy as a whole,” *Vestnik finansov* reported. Yet the widespread market adoption of the pre-war ruble ultimately drove the speculative prices it was designed to combat even higher. The most problematic feature of the pre-war ruble difficult relationship between money and the state: desperate to adopt a

127. *Vestnik finansov*, no. 5 (1922), p. 3.

hard measure of value backed by political authority. “Running after the speculation price,” Sokolnikov concluded, “is like running after your own shadow.”¹²⁸ The dawn of the New Economic Policy augured a new era of experimentation in the relationship between state authority and autonomous expressions of value.

128. *ibid.*

Chapter 5

Being at Work: The Experience of Revolution inside the State

Wherever it went, across the Steppe or across the Bug, the Soviet regime brought with it a seeming paradox: it lacked the bureaucratic capacity to perform the great feats of social transformation to which it aspired, and yet great feats of transformation, if not always the ones intended, occurred anyway. It possessed an ability to generate capacity almost overnight—not by drawing from fixed state structures, but by rooting itself in the social environment, drawing nourishment from the ambitions, feuds, and basic needs of its subjects.¹ Although the best-known illustrations of this essential feature of Soviet governance are found in studies of the conquest of Eastern Europe, it was present earlier, perhaps from the very start. As Daniel Orlovsky put it, the attention of historians of the revolutionary era and civil war should fall not on “Bolshevik factions and individuals” and the intricacies of “formal administration”, but on mechanics: “how was it possible in such a short time for the young Soviet state to have produced hundreds of institutions with tens of thou-

1. Jan Gross, *Revolution from Abroad: The Soviet Conquest of Poland's Western Ukraine and Western Belorussia* (Princeton, 1988), as treated by Stephen Kotkin in “The State: Is it Us? Memoirs, Archives, and Kremlinologists,” *The Russian Review*, vol. 61, no. 1, (January 2002), pp. 35-51.

sands of functionaries?”² Only by tackling this remarkable generative ability, Orlovsky suggested, would scholars gain insight into the tactics of “nationalization and economic administration” driving a broader “revolutionary process that included the creation of the Soviet state.”³

In turning to the problem of mechanics—the problem of *how* the revolutionary state propelled itself aloft—this chapter draws on a tradition of inquiry into the genesis of the modern state. The exploration of mechanics animates nearly all of the modern state’s origin stories, from Charles Tilly’s canonical study of early-modern war-making and revenue-raising, to the more recent work of Pierre Bourdieu and Timothy Mitchell. These latter theorists of the state locate its forms and the source of its power not simply in its monopolization of violence but in its monopolization of the symbolic and perceptual systems—in its ability to generate habits of mind that take physical form in the material world, and thus allow the state to appear natural, distinct, and objective. For Bourdieu, the modern state came into being through the concentration of different kinds of “capital”—physical, economic, informational, and symbolic—which coalesced to produce its most significant power: the ability to curate what practices and categories of thought appear part of the natural order, and to appear a part of the natural order itself.⁴ For Mitchell, the historical origins of the modern state likewise reside in the mechanics of “how,” in the many detailed “methods” of disciplinary power developed during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that produced modern individuals and organizations, setting some of these organizations apart as state institutions.⁵ The idea of the state as a distinct entity, Mitchell observes, is an “effect,” “itself a mechanism that generates resources of power.”⁶

2. Daniel Orlovsky, “State Building in the Civil War Era: The Role of the Lower Middle Strata,” in *Party, State, and Society in the Russian Civil War: Explorations in Social History*, eds. Diane Koenker, William G. Rosenberg and Ronald Grigor Suny (Indiana, 1989), p. 191.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 182.

4. Pierre Bourdieu, “Rethinking the State: Genesis and Structure of the Bureaucratic Field,” trans. Loic J.D. Wacquant, *Sociological Theory* vol. 12, no. 1 (1994), pp. 1-18, here pp. 2, 13.

5. Timothy Mitchell, “The Limits of the State: Beyond Statist Approaches and Their Critics,” *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 85, no. 1 (1991), pp. 77-96, here pp. 92-93.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 90.

Orlovsky, in his search for the generative power of the early Soviet regime, finds an answer in a social group he calls the “lower middle strata,” composed of white-collar workers and the “laboring intelligentsia,” employed in both public and private organizations before the Revolution. In 1917, according to Orlovsky, the lower middle strata were engaged in a social revolution of their own. The February Revolution and the collapse of the autocracy saw them take over the management of important state functions; after October, their “social movement provided much of the infrastructure for the new state in the form of the numerous institutions, offices, and life possibilities that became the party/state.”⁷ The fact that the Bolsheviks did not make the Revolution in the name of these village agronomists and shop clerks did not prevent them from “influencing” and “nourishing” the nascent state with their skills and presence. Ultimately, the lower middle strata fused itself into the Bolshevik regime, Orlovsky suspects, with important consequences for the shape of the resulting state.

What of the effects of this fusing on, as Bourdieu would have it, the people who “thought” the state—the members of the lower middle strata themselves? Orlovsky hints only that, in joining the Bolshevik regime, members of the lower middle strata shed a piece of themselves, abandoning their “ideological commitments” in favor of “security and order.”⁸ Yet surely, especially when it comes to how they considered their “life possibilities” going forward, that category Orlovsky so evocatively raises, they were not so scratch-resistant as to have come through the lived experience of populating the early Soviet state without an altered sense of their own “life possibilities”? Surely, as they and the many others who joined the revolutionary state left their mark on it, so it too left a mark on them?

In an effort to extend the inquiry into the mechanics of the revolutionary state, this chapter turns to the experience of revolution inside state institutions. Where the earlier parts of this dissertation have examined the practices that lent the state its generative capacity to project itself outwards, into the physical environment and the conceptualization of material life, this chapter shifts the focus inwards, onto the structures, practices, and

7. Orlovsky, p. 191.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 203.

conceptualization of the revolutionary state itself. As if the state were a train, all kinds of people boarded it during the revolutionary era—whole families and social networks, as well as individuals—out of patriotism, need, revolutionary fervor, socialist belief, opportunism, ambition: the motivations were as numerous as the people themselves. What they shared was an expectation that this train would carry them through the tumult all around. And true to revolutionary form, the revolutionary state-as-train miraculously expanded to accommodate them, in fact and in mind. For as gigantic as this entity was numerically when compared to its predecessor, in perception it loomed even larger. Building off the questions posed by Orlovsky, this chapter explores how people from all walks of life got enmeshed in the early Soviet state and what they found and made when they got there: how people behaved at work, their relationships with their colleagues, and the material and immaterial expectations they attached to state service during the Revolution. Drawing on internal documents, personnel files, and published and unpublished memoirs of those who served in the state, some of whom emigrated and some of whom remained, the chapter’s central finding is the strikingly common perception that state service during the Revolution changed those who performed it, in ways that were almost always impossible to predict.

5.1 “*Drugoi Rossii krome Sovetskoi, net*”

“There is no Russia besides the Soviet one”

In December 1923, under the headline, “there is no Russia besides the Soviet one,” one of Moscow’s evening newspapers trumpeted that “an influential Yugoslav trade-industrial newspaper” was lobbying its government to renew relations with Soviet Russia, arguing that “to ignore further the Soviet government is not possible: a different Russia, besides the Soviet one, does not exist.”⁹ At a certain point, the Sovietness of Russia became an inevitability, inside the Republic and beyond its borders. But individuals reached that point,

9. *Vecherniaia Moskva* no. 12, (1923), p. 1.

if they reached it, at different moments and for different reasons. What began as an interpretive stance, a principle, a point of dispute, gradually became a statement of fact.

On the eve of the First World War, there were roughly 70,000 employees of the central state living and working in the capital of the Russian Empire, Petrograd. By contrast, there were 231,140 state employees working in Moscow, the Soviet Republic's new capital, according to a census taken in August 1920.¹⁰ The Moscow Soviet (Mossoviet) alone employed nearly a third of these, 31.7 percent, meaning that just three years into its existence, Moscow's city government counted the same number of people in its employ as had the entire Imperial central government before the war.¹¹ Meanwhile, the size of the central government working in the capital had more than doubled. At the height of war communism, on the heels of two straight years of energetic nationalization, an explosion of this scale in the size of the state was perhaps not surprising. It was, however, distressing to Lenin and other party leaders, who launched crusades to "reduce" the number of state employees by whatever means possible. Yet as the Commissar of Justice, struggling to find legal remedy for the "red tape" that plagued the state machine, wrote to Lenin in November 1921, the Commissariat had investigated all kinds of instances of red tape, but rarely found a punishable offense at fault. "Our red tape, as a general rule, is connected" not to criminal malfeasance among state agents, he argued, but "to the enormousness and bureaucratic complexity of our apparatus."¹² Everything was tried in an effort to reduce the size of the state: assigning normed "essential" staffing levels based on the type of work performed; applying sweeping reduction quotas; turning off the spigot of official subsidies. Nothing worked.¹³

10. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2710, l. 117.

11. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2710, l. 38.

12. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 310, l. 3. The entire file is dedicated to a special investigation of red tape and correspondence on it between Kurskii and Lenin.

13. A detailed look at the efforts of one Commissariat, Narkomfin, to reduce its staff can be found at RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 336, especially ll. 68, 98. The file also contains "skhemy," institutional maps, of other offices and commissariats intended to identify potential for reduction. One of the few mechanisms available to the regime to reduce the size of a given institution was to reduce, or limit, the size of the space it occupied. The links between the "redistribution" of space undertaken by the Sovnarkom between 1922 and 1924 and efforts to make the state smaller are multiple and manifest throughout GARF f. 4085, op. 1a, d. 231 and GARF f.

Two years later, with the New Economic Policy (NEP) in full swing, the Central Statistical Administration prepared a new census of government employment in Moscow to assess the effects of the NEP on the size of the state. The expectation seems to have been that tally of state employees would reflect the policy's central thrust of sloughing off the enormous dead weight of unprofitable factories, plants, and other enterprises from "government supply." Considerable efforts were made to reduce the number of enterprises counted as part of the state. Notes to the tables of data pointedly observed that "in 1920, employees of distribution apparatuses were registered in the number of employees. In the census of 1922, only the employees of government institutions in this category were included. Employees of private institutions were not counted." Factories and plants were excluded entirely from the census of 1922 (suggesting that they had been included in the 1920 figures); syndicates and trusts, "many of which existed in 1920, in the administrations of VSNKh and MSNKh, and whose employees were included in the 1920 census," were left out of the 1922 census, in part because they did not provide information about themselves. Despite all of these exclusions from the 1922 figures, the total number of state employees in Moscow rang in at 243,455.¹⁴ Having shed all the factories and trusts that had since been privatized, the state nevertheless continued its inexorable expansion.

The astonishing growth of the early Soviet state occurred at the confluence of two phenomena, one related to the disorder of the revolutionary era, the other to the etatization of Russia's private enterprises through the outlawing of private property and trade. It is possible that the Russian state would have expanded during 1917 no matter what the political aspirations of its leaders, simply because weak states have to work harder to achieve what those with larger capacities can take for granted. In the summer of 1918, at the behest of the new senior staff appointed by the Bolsheviks, each of the various departments of the Commissariat of Finance composed a memo narrating its experience of revolution across

4085, op. 1a, d. 368, both of which deal with the commission for the redistribution of space (technically, for the "clearing out of Moscow").

14. The comparison of the two years is explained in detail at RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2710, l. 117.

three, pre-assigned periods: from October 1916 to the February Revolution of 1917, from the February Revolution to October 24, 1917, and from October 25, the day the Bolsheviks seized power, to the present. As these reports made clear, the work of governance grew quantitatively and qualitatively more demanding after the February Revolution. For one thing, there was no money. Not only was the currency in free-fall, but no one wanted to pay their taxes to a regime whose longevity was in question.¹⁵

Perhaps the most widely-reported effect of the February Revolution was a uniform “enlivening” of work inside the state: “With the huge changes in financial-juridical relations connecting the Credit Chancellery to its subordinate institutions,” the Fifth Division of the Credit Chancellery reported, “our work grew significantly more lively, as all kinds of questions for us started pouring in.” The collapse of the Empire unleashed an intensification of exchange in goods and property, as accommodations that had been made by Imperial businessmen to the restrictive regime of official property rights were abandoned. In its final months, for example, the Ministry of Finance fielded inquiries from its branch office in Odessa asking how to transfer enterprises from the shell companies under which they were previously registered to their true Jewish owners. Among all the Empire’s subjects, exchange grew more common after the February Revolution. The Mint reported that demand for bills of sale skyrocketed from 28,000 in the period right before the February Revolution to 187,000 for the period between February and October 1917. The sale of promissory notes rose even faster, from 176,000 in the six months before the February Revolution to 1,150,000 in between the Revolutions. “These changes,” the Department explained, “are the result of various governmental and social conditions: thus the rise in the distribution of bills of sale and promissory notes in the period [between the Revolutions] can be explained by the increase in various types of transfers of property.

After the October Revolution, these demands only intensified as bodies of all kinds competed with one another for the official mantle, a task defined with remarkable speed

15. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 925, l. 26. Specific reports are discussed in Chapter 2.

around efforts to implement socialism. As more and more workplaces were “nationalized,” “municipalized,” or otherwise seized resources and enterprises during this process, more and more employment became state employment. Not only did the etatization of large swathes of economic life mean that all those working in those sectors overnight found themselves state employees; etatization itself required a vastly expanded administrative apparatus of seizers, inventory-makers, distributors, and controllers. Once performed by the private market, all sorts of informational work now also had to be shouldered by the state. The new regime, as Alvin Gouldner notes, “necessarily also meant a burgeoning bureaucracy, needed both to expropriate the old owners and to administer the newly expropriated property.”¹⁶

The Revolution deepened an upheaval in personnel across state offices, most dramatically in the general strike of government employees sponsored by the two unions of state officials from November 1917 to March 1918.¹⁷ This upheaval in and of itself led to further growth in the state’s size.¹⁸ At the Fifth Division of the Credit Chancellery, an important office in the Ministry of Finance, nearly the entire staff went on strike and was among the

16. Alvin Gouldner, “Stalinism: A Study of Internal Colonialism,” *Telos*, no. 34 (1977-8): 5-48, p. 11, although Gouldner refers explicitly to “Stalinism.”

17. Participation varied according to both rank and government agency: senior officials were more likely to participate than junior ones, as were those employed in certain ministries—with Justice, Transportation, and Agriculture holding out longer than Finance, Foreign Affairs, and War. In the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, for example, this role was occupied by E.D. Polivanov, a mid-level employee of the Asia Department, who escorted the Bolshevik I.A. Zalkind into the Ministry’s offices. Iu. Ia. Solov’ev, *Vospominaniia diplomata* (Moscow, 1959). Cited by M. Iroshnikov, *Sozdanie sovetskogo tsentralnogo gosudarstvennogo apparata sovet narodnykh komissarov i narodnye komissariaty okt 1917g ianvar 1918 g.* (Leningrad, 1967), p. 171.

18. Even offices that did not participate in the strike, however, saw growth in their ranks during the Revolution. In July 1918, the Moscow Tax Inspectorate boasted of the fact that “it did not close even for one day, from the beginning of the revolution to the present time, supposing that it was not its place to occupy itself with politics, and being guided exclusively by its official duties, keeping in mind the good of the people.” Nevertheless, it opened up 52 new inspector positions at the beginning of 1918, which it proposed to fill with “experienced provincial colleagues.” RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 75, l. 8. Similarly, the Payments Department of the Bureau of the Soviet of Neighborhood Dumas—created after the February Revolution to supplant the municipal administration of the old regime—did not participate in the government strike after October. Interviews with staff in early April 1918, however, indicate that every one of the six interviewed was new to his job. The longest serving, Nikolai Ponomarev, had been on the job only since December 15, 1917; two men were hired in both January and February, and the shortest-serving, I.V. Arkatov, had been hired on March 12, 1918. One of the new hires had earlier worked as a controller with a railroad, a position he left during the railway union strike; another, Nikoforov, evidently saw the writing on the wall early, presciently selling a tavern he owned before it could be confiscated in the second half of 1917, then going to work in the Payments Department. TsAGM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 111, ll. 13, 17, 20, 21, 25.

last to return to work.¹⁹ When the office resumed work, on March 25, 1918, returning employees described finding “the files...heaped in piles.”²⁰ The skeleton staff cobbled together by Menzhinskii and the other Bolshevik appointees to the Ministry of Finance was “extremely insufficient, numbering two or three people, on whom lay the task of familiarizing themselves with the affairs of the Division and bringing order to the files,” a task they had not managed before the strike ended.²¹ The strike opened up state employment to new segments of the population, many of whom were judged quite “inexperienced” and “poorly prepared.”²² Much of what we know about their social makeup comes from the first census of state employees conducted in August 1918 by VTsIK’s Commission for the Verification of Government Employees, which questioned respondents about their employment history as well as their class background and party affiliation.²³ The survey’s basic finding was that 45 percent of all employees in one subset of commissariats (Group A) could be categorized as “employees” before the Revolution—meaning not that they had worked for the same commissariat before the Revolution as after, or even that they had worked for the state, but simply that prior to October, they had worked in an office, public or private, in an administrative capacity. Of the senior staffs (surveyed in the Group B institutions), 80 percent came from an administrative employment background.²⁴ Those who could not be classi-

19. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 61, l. 22.

20. Iroshnikov, p. 166. An internal report by the People’s Commissariat of Labor reported that it had been bequeathed “in inheritance bare walls and empty desks”; the first entrants into the Medical Inspectorate of the Ministry of Internal Affairs found that departing bureaucrats had removed even the nubs of pens and dumped ink from the inkwells.

21. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 61, l. 22.

22. *Ibid.*, ll. 28, 27.

23. The data collected by the VTsIK commission was split into two parts: a Group A that comprehensively analyzed the staffs of one set of government agencies, from the most junior to most senior positions; and a Group B that assessed the backgrounds of only senior staff in a slightly different set of agencies. Group A was composed of the Commissariats of Internal Affairs, Health, Agriculture, Foreign Affairs, the Navy, Justice, Nationalities, the Cheka and VSNKh; Group B of Government Control, the Army, Food, Transport, Social Welfare, Trade, Labor, and Finance.

24. The groupings were somewhat misleading; as M.P. Iroshnikov, who has made the most thorough study of this census, observes, the proportion of “former bureaucrats” employed in a given Soviet institution heavily depended on the nature of its work. Hardly any could be found in the Cheka, while in the upper ranks of the Commissariat of Finance, the proportion of employees who had worked not just in an administrative capacity, but for the Ministry of Finance before the Revolution was 89.2 percent. M.P. Iroshnikov, “K voprosu o slome burzhuaaznoi gosudarstvennoi mashiny v Rossii,” in *Problemy gosudarstvennogo stroitelstva v pervye gody sovetskoi vlasti: sbornik statei* ed. Iu.S. Tokarev (Moscow, 1973), pp. 61, 54.

fied as “administrative” personnel before the Revolution, T.H. Rigby suggests, were drawn from the mix of communist party members, politically reliable soldiers, sailors, workers, and students, “vigorously recruited through the Smolnyi period.”²⁵

Depending on the office, then, some portion of the new staff was made up of pre-revolutionary employees. Sometimes these people slotted immediately back into their old jobs, but some who wanted to return to government service were not accepted back.²⁶ In Narkomfin, as in other commissariats, Bolshevik senior appointees conducted a “filtration” of employees that assessed both personal characteristics and behavior during the strike. A representative narrative of the rehiring process comes from the Moscow Temporary Bank Administration, responsible for the city’s nationalized banks. “All but a few dozen ‘shtreik-brekers’” among the city’s 6,000 bank workers went on strike after the Bolsheviks nationalized the banks in mid-December. Together with a “few members of the Moscow Sovdep Ispolkom”, the “strikebreakers” were “spread out in the capacity of commissars, their assistants, and first-workers in the nationalized banks.” Poorly-qualified replacements for the striking workers were hired in January; around the same time, 200 former employees of the Moscow Merchant Bank offered to return on the condition that they exercise “control over the technical and organizational” operations of the nationalized banks, leaving “only

25. Party membership was as unevenly distributed as previous administrative experience: 18 percent of the staffs comprehensively surveyed in Group A belonged to the Communist Party (767 of 4377), but 408 of those worked in one institution, the Cheka. When the Cheka was taken off the table, 10 percent of employees in Group A and eight percent of the senior staff members surveyed in Group B belonged to the Party. The Commissariats of Foreign Affairs and Nationalities both had high proportions of party membership as well, at 49 and 39 percents respectively; Narkomfin registered the lowest percentage of party members in the group. Most of these party members were “old Bolsheviks,” but in the Cheka in particular, more than a third of party members had joined since the October Revolution. As Rigby notes, while there was “an obvious need to staff these departments with politically reliable personnel, it is hard to escape the impression that they were also attracting more than their share of those who, in their tens of thousands, were now throwing in their lot with the party for the advantages it could bring.” T.H. Rigby, *Lenin’s Government: Sovnarkom 1917-1922* (Cambridge, 1979), p. 63.

26. This occurred at the Foreign Department of Credit Chancellery. When the Department reopened in late November, as was typical, the first employees back to work were “just a few people from among the lower ranks of employees, with the main group composed of the newly-hired, often very poorly prepared for the specialized work of the Foreign Department.” The first large group of returnees resumed work on March 13, 1918, “with the main accountant of the Foreign Department at the head”; the remainder came back in early April. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 61, l. 27.

the direction of bank politics to Soviet power.” They were refused.²⁷ In March, a large group of former employees asked to “open further negotiations,” dropping the stipulation that they retain technical control over the banks. Between March 11 and April 2, lists of all former employees “wishing to begin work” were collected and passed to the “Central parity commission,” which was ordered to “compose a group of people necessary for placement in the banks and in newly-organized departments,” and to “compose a group of people subject to rejection.” The commission estimated that 30 percent of the 3,500 bank workers who applied were ultimately taken back into service in banking.²⁸ Those who returned joined the roughly 1,000 cashiers and low-level personnel “who did not participate in the strike.” In total, then, just over a third of Moscow’s pre-revolutionary bank workers were reemployed in the banking sector after the Revolution—at least for a few months.²⁹

The moment Soviet employees joined or rejoined the state did not happen just once; it was memorialized and recalled over and over in the coming years through the many “standardized surveys” regularly distributed to employees, requiring them to create timelines of their employment histories and answer questions about their service at every major moment of the Revolution. The earliest forms borrowed freely from Imperial employment registers, Questions dealt with native language, nationality, religion, social estate, parentage, dependents, current salary, and whether they had the right to wear any medals rewarded for service. To these categories were added questions about whether the respondent’s family owned property. To the surprise of some who filled out these questionnaires, how one answered these delicate questions about party membership and belief did not seem to matter very much; at the very least, it left no discernible effect on one’s employment trajectory in the first few years. “It is not quite correct, within the limits of my experience at least,”

27. Some of them were subsequently invited to work as “specialists” in the newly-formed “centralized departments” of bank administration, responsible for the liquidation of private banks and the centralization of their accounts and assets in municipal administration. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 63, ll. 5, 6.

28. Presumably many of those rejected also found work within the state, just in different institutions; bank workers were prized hires in Narkomfin, for example, which sought technical expertise in its hiring but similarly refrained from rehiring the employees most active in the strike.

29. By July 1918, in keeping with the broader employment upheaval noted by Rigby, nearly 500 of those categorized as “former bank workers” had already moved on to other jobs. *ibid.*, l. 6.

declared I. Rapoport, a former section director at the state timber concern in Moscow, subsequently a resident of the Slovenian countryside, “that employees [of the state] are forced to enroll with the Communists or give themselves to be sympathizers. True, we had the questionnaires about party membership, but for me,” Rapoport wrote, “it was possible to get by with reference to no affiliation or even to ‘independence.’”³⁰ What mattered were answers to questions about work itself, arranged around an ever-shifting assemblage of dates—between February and October 1917, and after October 1917. Later surveys even asked about professional activities during the revolutions of 1905. Regardless of the continuity in employment a particular staff member might have enjoyed, the surveys enforced a conceptual break across the revolutionary divide.³¹

If it was a given that the state was going to balloon to a size previously unseen, the paths by which individual employees found their niche in the new regime nevertheless varied. Recruiting, retraining, and job-hunting all had their place in this process; yet the flow of prospective hires into new jobs moved through channels carved by local social networks, often oriented around the family. At all rungs of the government hierarchy, the expansion of the regime opened the door to vertiginous career advancement. Toward the top of the ladder, the career of Stanislav Daniilovich Pekarskii neatly encapsulates this trajectory. Pekarskii served as a provincial accountant in the offices of the State Bank until the strike when, according to one of several (varying) autobiographical accounts of his career, he and his colleagues in the local State Bank decided to ignore their orders to join in the strike.³² Once he got to Moscow, Pekarskii hustled, throwing himself into the path of A.O. Alskii, the energetic young Bolshevik who informally led Narkomfin for stretches between 1919 and 1921, and serving in his off-hours on N.N. Kutler’s “Commission to organize accounting”

30. *Arkhiv russkoi revoliutsii*, ed. I.V. Gessen, (Berlin, 1922), vol. 2, p. 102.

31. For a representative example, see RGAE f. 7733, op. 18, d. 2654, l. 39.

32. RGAE f. 7733, op. 18, d. 6644, ll. 6, 7. In one scenario, Pekarskii, “motivated by a desire to help our administration in the center,” requested a transfer to Moscow; in another, he was selected as a delegate to the “Congress of Evacuated Bank Institutions” to be held in the city, where he “conducted negotiations with the Narbank administration on the fate of evacuated institutions.”

in institutions “where it had been allowed to lapse in 1917.”³³ Equally striking is the rise of Nikolai Alzamovich Dobrosmyslov, a history graduate and son of a deacon from Simbirsk. Dobrosmyslov took a job as an assessor in the Saratov Kazennaia palata (provincial treasury office) in 1898, working his way up to the rank of deputy director in Saratov before the February Revolution. According to his autobiography, “the Provisional Government at last honored [him] after long service in subordinate positions with an independent post—to the position of Director of the Vitebsk Kazennaia palata.”³⁴ In April 1918, Dobrosmyslov was “invited” to serve as the deputy director of Narkomfin’s Department of Direct Taxation in Moscow; he subsequently oversaw the restoration of taxation-in-money across the RSFSR, having been named director of Tsentronalog in 1922.³⁵ According to Dobrosmyslov’s own account of his career, he brought multiple provincial colleagues with him when he made the leap into central service.³⁶

For those without a service background, the revolutionary era saw a flowering of independent and state-organized “courses” offering training in skills that might lead to official employment. The A.L. Shaniavskii Moscow City People’s University, which counted the Chekist M.Ia. Latsis among its alumni, offered courses on a range of topics, including a three-month accounting course that concluded on December 20, 1917 where one student, a self-described “supporter of Soviet power wanting to help how [he] could to strengthen that power,” learned that “due to the departure of saboteurs, workers were needed” at the Presnenskii coal warehouse. He signed himself up as an accountant.³⁷ Especially popu-

33. Ibid, l. 8.

34. RGAE f. 7733, op.18, d. 2654, ll. 4, 5.

35. Ibid, l. 44. Dobrosmyslov subsequently rose to the position of deputy director of the State Tax Department in 1922, after which point he stalled out, dogged by persistent “intrigues” in the mid-20s, allegedly of his own making, and like many others in his position pushed out of service at the end of the decade. His personnel file is at RGAE f. 7733, op. 18, d. 2654, for the allegations of Dobrosmyslov as a lover of intrigue, l. 9.

36. Ibid, ll. 6, 9. His account, though frequently self-aggrandizing, bears at least some grounding in fact; a *kharakteristika* from a review conducted in 1923 notes (disapprovingly) that Dobrosmyslov had “managed to gather a whole group of old *spetsy* around him, on whom he depends in his work.” Dobrosmyslov’s “*spetsy*” ultimately seem to have turned on him: a subsequent review revealed that even his own *spetsy* found his manner imperious and did not like him. l. 41.

37. TsAGM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 83, l. 24. M.Ia. Latsis, *V poslednei skhvatke s tsarizmom: vospominaniia o rabote moskovskikh bolshevikov v gody imperialisticheskoi voiny* (Moscow, 1935), p. 9.

lar were driving schools. According to Vasilii Klementiev, a white-guard conspirator who enrolled in a driving school during the winter of 1917-1918, most of his classmates were demobilized soldiers.³⁸ By 1923, even after the spell of reprivatization and trustification of the NEP, 4,414 of the 4,440 cars known to exist in Moscow belonged to state institutions, and insofar as they were used to ferry regime elites around the city, chauffeuring became a fast-track into the corridors of power and reward.³⁹ Chauffeurs enjoyed some of the aura of their charges; in October 1918, Dzerzhinsky received a letter “begging [his] deep forgiveness” from two Sovnarkom employees who had apparently offended Dzerzhinsky’s chauffeur one night after a Sovnarkom meeting.⁴⁰

Whatever their background, a great many of the state’s employees learned of their positions or acquired them through acquaintances, and often through family members. Unlike education and social background, family ties were not an aspect of employment that the new regime carefully studied. But evidence of family ties in early Soviet workplaces is easily found. A resident manifesto of an apartment building in the Krasno-presnenskii neighborhood, for example, records two separate instances of fathers and daughters employed in the same office, out of just a handful of families with both parents and children of working age. One of these families established itself in a position of power within Moscow’s municipal tax apparatus: the father directed the State Tax Department at the Moscow Finance Department, while his two daughters worked as a neighborhood chair of local tax collection and an accountant, respectively. The building’s less illustrious second father-daughter pairing worked in a naval office, where the father assisted a brigade head and the daughter was a typist.⁴¹

Lenin in particular railed against “nepotism” in state hiring, and the Sovnarkom passed decrees forbidding the employment of multiple family members in the same office. But

38. Klementiev, p. 190. Viktor Shklovsky taught at a driving school, although an official military one, the same winter.

39. *Vecherniaia izvestiia Moskvy*, no. 15 (1923) p. 2. The same was not true of motorcycles, interestingly, of which just 382 of the 830 in the city were in state hands.

40. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 97, l. 72.

41. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 243, l. 24.

the practice did not die out; according to Alain Blum and Martine Mespoulet, one in ten employees of the Central Statistics Administration had a parent who also worked there in 1926.⁴² Blum and Mespoulet interpret this figure as evidence of the Revolution's inability to "eradicate mechanisms of social and cultural reproduction," with the result that the Statistics Administration inherited "a conception of administration forged in the nineteenth century" along with its personnel. While this may well be true, the prevalence of kinship hiring in the revolutionary era was also conditioned by multiple factors particular to the time, with deep roots in the particularly revolutionary operation of the state. Indeed, it was encouraged both by official hiring procedures and by the dynamics of revolutionary workplace sociability, both of which unfolded in an environment of extremely low social trust. As we will see in more detail below, extraordinary demands were placed on workplace relationships in the revolutionary period. Coworkers relied on one another for everything from food supplies to help getting out of sticky situations with the Cheka, to say nothing of their regularly assigned work, the stakes of which were often quite high. These multiple demands made solidifying workplace relationships with additional layers of association a top priority.

Even before these demands were made manifest, the Bolsheviks themselves conducted hiring after the October Revolution much as they had conducted party membership before it: through the use of recommendations from people already accredited by the regime. Long accustomed to depending on recommendations for recruiting in a conspiratorial environment before the Revolution, the Party formalized recommendation requirements in August 1917, when all applicants were made to obtain "recommendation by two party members."⁴³ After the Revolution, the requirement briefly fell into abeyance until the Central Committee, disturbed by the effects of rapid growth on the party's "harmony and discipline," encouraged its re-adoption in May 1918.⁴⁴ Local organizations responded energetically, sometimes

42. Alain Blum and Martine Mespoulet, "*Le passe au service du present. L'administration statistique de l'Etat sovietique entre 1918 et 1930*," *Cahiers du Monde russe*, vol. 44, no. 2/3 (April-September 2003), pp. 343-368. Citation p. 352.

43. T.H. Rigby, *Communist Party Membership in the U.S.S.R., 1917-1967* (Princeton, 1968), p. 71. Citing *KPSS v rez*, vol. 1, p. 384.

44. *ibid*, p. 70.

demanding “more than two recommendations,” or requiring recommenders themselves to have standing of a certain duration.⁴⁵ Letters of recommendation were also common in Imperial hiring practice.⁴⁶ But tolerance for patronage, widespread as it was, soured during the War, particularly in relation to that most illegitimate patron and beneficiary of patronage, Rasputin. The Committee to investigate the crimes of the tsarist elites hit its stride with the prosecution of crimes “of the pen,” as one committee member recalled. By this was meant all meddling “outside the chain of command,” but especially the wielding of “influence” to place beneficiaries in jobs and “protect” them once they were there.⁴⁷

The use of recommendations inside the revolutionary state never achieved the degree of routinization that obtained in the Party. Nevertheless, recommendations likely played a role, often a formal one, in the vast majority of hires. Just weeks after the Revolution, when Bonch-Bruевич initiated a commission to study the staff at Smolnyi, newly-printed forms ordered respondents to specify their “political convictions,” whether they were party members, “by whose recommendation” they served, and that person’s home or work telephone and address.⁴⁸ Narkomfin personnel questionnaires produced sometime between the latter half of 1921 and 1923 instructed respondents to list “by whom they were recommended” to their current post.⁴⁹ Aside from occasional mentions of party recommendations in documents submitted by local party committees, most Narkomfin personnel files did not formally record recommendations.⁵⁰ Talk of recommendations, and of their potential mis-

45. On the heels of a major membership purge in 1921, the Tenth Party Congress formally required all recommenders to have standing of at least a year; in 1922, these provisions were expanded and made more detailed recommendations or more senior recommenders were required for applicants of non-worker origins. Rigby, pp. 96, 100-101.

46. As seen, for example, in the personnel file of the State Bank (Lodz branch) cashier A.N. Vinogradov, who sought a transfer to the Warsaw branch of the State Bank in 1912 in order to advance son’s education. His boss in Lodz carefully drafted (three tries) a letter to his superior in Warsaw, Baron N.O. Tuzengauzen, attesting to Vinogradov’s trustworthiness with the cash box and tact with the public. Tuzengauzen subsequently became Vinogradov’s patron, arranging for his transfer to Moscow when his son enrolled in university and his timely evacuation from Revel during the First World War. RGAE f. 7733, op. 18, d. 1528, ll. 2, 74.

47. Colonel S.A. Koreneva, “Chrezvychainaia Komissiiia po delam o byvshikh Ministrakh,” *Arkhiv russkoi revoliutsii* (Berlin, 1922) vol. 7, p. 15.

48. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 397, l. 2.

49. RGAE f. 7733, op. 18, d. 3766, l. 3.

50. Such as a letter from the mestkom in the file of V.M. Shebanov citing his two party recommenders, RGAE f. 7733, op. 18, d. 9798, l. 14.

use, was ubiquitous, as we can see from the memoirs of A.Ia. Monisov, an industrialist before the Revolution who went to work for the Bolsheviks after it, first running a cooperative that supplied the Kremlin called “Kommunist,” and subsequently employed as a senior investigator in the Commissariat of Government Control. In both roles, Monisov was an avid beneficiary and dispenser of recommendations, having found his way into the regime through recommendation by Bonch-Bruevich. Before the Revolution, Monisov owned the Petrograd building where Bonch-Bruevich rented space for his publishing house. In the late summer of 1917, he heard rumors for the first time that his tenant, with whom he had always enjoyed friendly relations, was a Bolshevik. After October, Monisov unexpectedly found himself petitioning Bonch-Bruevich on behalf of his industrialist friends, when they got into trouble with the local revolutionary authorities. When the regime left for Moscow, Monisov made a deal with Bonch-Bruevich that “if there were suitable work for me, no matter where it was, he could give me my orders as a boss, and I would go into service with pleasure.”⁵¹

When those orders arrived, Monisov sprang into action. “I had waited for that telegram,” Monisov recalled, “as did the several merchants, former millionaires, major industrialists, who had preserved their old, loyal *prikazchiki*, their commercial apparatus, who agreed to work with me and also prepared to leave with me for Moscow at the first request.”⁵² Their assignment—to organize the “Kommunist” cooperative—in turn required the activation of other, more distant circles of acquaintance. “I gathered the major millionaire fish industrialists ~~hiding out then in Moscow~~, the so-called wholesale route-fixers,” so called because they controlled not only the movement of fish products between Astrakhan and Moscow, but the movement of train cars; no effort at increasing provisions to Moscow would be successful without their help.⁵³ Monisov and his “trade delegation” traveled to Ukraine to make deals with “contrabandists” who would supply Moscow co-

51. “Vospominaniia A. Monisova 1927 Mai” NIOR f. 369, kart. 397, d. 14, l. 11.

52. Ibid.

53. NIOR f. 369, kart. 397, d. 14., l. 12. Redactions original.

operatives through the city of Birzul, where Monisov “had people who had relatives and business friends,” and to the Black Sea region to establish contacts between Tsentrosektsii, for whom Monisov now worked, and traders in Istanbul and along the coast.⁵⁴

Disillusioned with supply work, Monisov left Tsentrosektsiia and took a position as an investigator in the Commissariat of Government Control, where he was charged with leading “extraordinary reviews of the economic sections of military and civil narkoms,” which he combined with work as a “member of the economic department collegium at the MChK.” Despite the change in post, Monisov recalls, “I did not leave behind my loyal colleagues in food supply, a portion of whom I brought on to supplying the economic departments of the All-Russian and Moscow Chekas, and a portion of whom I set out into various government organizations connected with supply.”⁵⁵ He again drew on his “large circle of acquaintances” to fill out his control work:

To find good, honest investigators I did the following: I knew that many of those who were without party, who did not politick about and did not want to engage in speculation and sit a spell for it in Butyrki, went into Control...taking the list of Goskon controllers, I marked off those who were law-abiding, proper, honest, intelligent [tolkovye] people, who had been lawyers, industrialists, former directors and former bureaucrats under tsarism. Among them were those with big estates and senators. And I took this bunch into my investigative work. In the future, for example, former Senator Garin, an investigator on special questions under the tsar, Kliarfeld, the most honest fellow, intelligent, Bezrebrannik, whom I had knew for dozens of years, and many others served as permanent participants in my reviews. As it happens, Garin and Kliarfeld

54. NIOR f. 369, kart. 397, d. 14,, l. 22. Tsentrosektsiia was a large provisioning apparatus affiliated with VSNKh. Monisov resigned after the latter trip “ended in failure.” Although the contacts had not panned out, he was told by his boss, Comrade Khinchuk, Monisov’s “business information about the possibilities for Tsentrosektsiia with Bessarabia and Constantinople are very valuable and the information was worth the expenditure” of the money he lost, and a monetary “reward” besides. Ibid, l. 24.

55. Ibid, l. 48.

still serve today, ten years after the October Revolution, in control, one in Leningrad, the other in Moscow.⁵⁶

Dependent as Monisov was on recommendations, he was also aware of their potential pitfalls, revealed in an episode involving a group of “Terek Cossacks who, presenting recommendations from party comrades, took upon themselves the delivery of large quantities of uniforms for Voenzag.” Instead of delivering the uniforms, the Cossacks sold them on the speculative market, illustrating the “shameless theft perpetrated by various types of agents who sneakily managed to get recommendations practically from members of VTsIK.”⁵⁷ Fed up with “these light-minded references from senior workers that I met with so often in my review,” Monisov turned for help to the chair of the Cheka, Dzerzhinsky, who allegedly came up with the following solution: “all recommendations will be considered as bond in the case of arrest. If it turns out that due to a recommendation, the Soviet treasury suffers a loss or the recommended person turns out to be a complete fraud, the person who recommended them will be held responsible.”⁵⁸

With all their shortcomings as a principle of hiring, recommendations nevertheless powered the peopling of the new regime. To witness their effect on just one revolutionary workplace—one unaffiliated with either the Bolsheviks or the tsarist regime—consider the example of the “Bureau of the Soviet of Neighborhood Dumas.” Created after the February Revolution to supplant the Imperial institutions of municipal governance in Moscow, the Bureau of the Soviet Raion Dumas survived the October Revolution and was just about to be coopted by the Moscow Soviet when local representatives of the Commissariat of Government Control appeared in April 1918 to investigate claims of malfeasance among its cashiers. All six of the cashiers with whom controllers spoke had been hired in the past four months. Two had been hired at the “recommendation” of other cashiers in the office, while the other four were related to co-workers by marriage. Cashier A.M. Putilovskii was

56. *Ibid.*, I. 52.

57. *ibid.*, I. 20.

58. *ibid.*, I. 101. Monisov claimed to know of two, possibly three, arrests resulting from failed recommendations.

hired at the recommendation of his wife in February 1918, having worked as a railroad controller before the strike. Cashier Nikoforov was hired at the recommendation of a co-worker named Semesov, while cashier A.S. Kabanov was hired at the recommendation of another cashier, Gerasimov, following medical discharge from the military. But the most richly-connected group in the office was composed of three brothers-in-law—A.K. Iuriatin, I.V. Arkatov, and N.K. Ponomarev.⁵⁹

The flipside of recommendations, negative assessments and denunciations, also played a part in the hiring process, although they too were subject to considerable anxiety about the potential for misuse. In deference to the negative connotations surrounding the practice, denunciations were typically identified as such by their readers rather than their authors, who labeled their statements generically, as a “written declaration.”⁶⁰ While plenty of denunciations were authored individually and/or anonymously, it was not uncommon for such testimonials to be orchestrated and written collectively. A soviet from the Vladimir region wrote shortly after the October Revolution to warn it against hiring three people with whom it had recent experience, one characterized as “on the side of capital,” another who “did his best to undermine Soviet power,” and a third, recently named the regional commissar of labor, who had been previously arrested for stealing 10,000 rubles from the cash box of an insurance company.⁶¹ A campaign against an Imperial postal bureaucrat, I.I. Vanag, seems to have been coordinated by members of the Government Control Party fraction,

59. In specific, a group of the Bureau’s cashiers were accused of operating a check-cashing scheme that made use of a provision allowing subjects who owed the Bureau taxes and fines to pay up to a third of their total burden in checks drawing on local bank accounts, the use of which had been otherwise forbidden since the bank nationalization. Shortly after he began work at the Bureau, Nikolai Ponomarev began using his position to cash checks for Moscow merchants, with the help of an old family acquaintance, the merchant M.F. Strausov, who, like many of his neighbors in the Semenovskaia zastava, found the Bolsheviks’ banking regulations burdensome. Strausov passed business along to Ponomarev (whether he took a fee for this service was disputed), collecting checks from relatives and fellow traders around Moscow. Ponomarev later arranged for his two brothers-in-law to take jobs at the Bureau alongside him; one had worked for years before the Revolution with the renowned Cherviakov firm, and the other had ties in jewelry circles. Both launched successful check-cashing operations of their own, drawing business from their earlier connections. Reconstructed from TsAGM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 111, ll. 4-35, esp. ll. 13, 16, 17, 19, 21, 22.

60. See the anonymous, poorly-spelled “pisminnoe zaiavlenie” at RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 191, l. 17, asking the reader to “put a little pressure on the bureaucrat Pruss,” characterized as a “thoroughgoing speculator” and incorrigible drunk.

61. GARF f. R-130, op. 2, d. 73, l. 69.

who not only made copies of documents from Vanag's revolutionary personnel file, where accusations against him were first made in March 1917, but tracked down Vanag's pre-revolutionary coworkers and recorded their testimony about his misdeeds, which may or may not have included service in the Okhranka, the tsarist secret police."⁶² The committee of employees and its successor, the All-Russian post and telegraph workers' union, kept abreast of their Commissariat's hiring decisions and intervened when, in November 1918, it learned that Vanag was up for a post, informing the Commissar that "Vanag [was] a typical bureaucrat of the tsarist regime, having made his career with the help of letters from various highly-placed and titled swine," who if he were to be allowed back should be given "no higher than the third category," the rank of new hires.⁶³

Remarkable as the growth of the revolutionary state was, it paled in comparison to the behemoth that rose up in Muscovites' imaginations when they pictured the new administration. The economist Pavel Genzel was a voracious consumer of raw data about revolutionary economy and society. His essays to Narkomfin's think tank, the Institute for Economic Research, written in the summer and fall of 1921, nimbly dart between data sets published in the newspaper *Economic life* and internal reports of government commissions. In one report discussing "the question of payment for services of communal economy," a hot topic with the advent of the NEP, Genzel even evinced familiarity with the results of the 1920 census of Moscow, in making his case that the population should pay for their sewage and electricity. Those who sought both revenue from utilities and continued discounts for "Soviet employees and workers in nationalized enterprises," because they saw little point in the state paying out salaries only to then demand a portion of the money back for utility payments, Genzel argued, failed to understand the basic truth of Soviet society: that "workers and soviet employees make up the dominant contingent of urban consumers."⁶⁴ Anyone

62. GARF f. 4085, op. 28, d. 197, l. 28.

63. Ibid, l. 31.

64. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 6302, l. 19.

who hoped to earn back the cost of sewage by assigning a “lower tariff to soviet employees” than the one charged to the “rest of the population” would be heartily disappointed—as to Genzel’s discerning eye, there was no “rest of the population” in Russian cities, no “other,” outside the state.⁶⁵ “First,” Genzel argued, “in the cities, the so-called ‘other’ [*prochii*] population is very small, hardly anything. Of the 1,028,000 residents of Moscow, perhaps 2,000 of them are ‘other’.” Unlike the census data, Genzel conceived of the population in households rather than individuals; it was not unusual for one individual of working-age to support a household that included non-working elderly and children, such that a household need only include one state employee to fall into the category of “soviet employees.” As Genzel noted, however, this interpenetration only deepened the difficulty of distinguishing between state and non-state in picturing the urban population: “how can we set different tariffs for a soviet employee and someone else living in that same apartment,” even if that someone else was a “speculator”?⁶⁶ Nor was Genzel alone in his perception of the state’s expansiveness. A year later, in November 1922, the economist N. Mikhailovskii, in a comment on currency reform sent to Lenin and Stalin at Kamenev’s request, inveighed against the “army of accountants necessary to keep track of all the zeros” weighing down official accounts due to the inflated currency. Just “accountants and bookkeepers now across the whole republic,” Mikhailovskii estimated, to say nothing of the rest of the state, “amount to 200,000 ppl, that is equal in number to the entire bureaucratic horde of the old regime.”⁶⁷

Whatever its actual size, the revolutionary state felt huge. One of the chief “effects” of the revolutionary state was its seeming enormity. And indeed, like an apartment taken over by Woland, ordinary offices doubled or tripled in size, seemingly overnight.⁶⁸ People piled in; work rooms normed for two or three routinely served multiples of that. Somehow, this new entity accommodated all these people. We turn now to the question of what they found in the revolutionary workplace and what they made with it.

65. Ibid, l. 20.

66. Ibid.

67. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2765, l. 13.

68. Woland, the devil, from Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*.

5.2 “A New Life”: The Revolution at Work

Sources for examining the inner life of revolutionary offices are abundant, first and foremost because after seizing control of the tsarist bureaucracy, the Bolsheviks ordered its offices to compose narratives of their experience of the Revolution. In July 1918, for example, as the Commissariat of Finance completed its evacuation to Moscow, all departments received a directive to compose the first “accounts” and “explanatory notes” of their “activity” during the Revolution. Recollections of state service during the Revolution consumed dozens of pages every month in historical and literary journals in the early 1920s, both inside Soviet Russia and in the major cities of the emigration. No-name staffers from the early days of the People’s Commissariat of Agriculture told their stories alongside Lev Trotsky and Ia. Kh. Peters, deputy director of the Cheka, at the “Recollection Evenings” hosted continuously by municipal soviets and Communist Party organizations. Among the émigrés, the multi-volume *Archive of the Russian Revolution* published memoirs authored by a similar mixture of distinguished-generals and unknown department-heads.

Perhaps the largest cache of contemporaneous accounts of the Revolution inside the state, however, was produced by the People’s Commissariat of Government Control. Historically, the Commissariat’s ministerial predecessor audited other government bodies, reviewing account books and cashboxes to prevent against fraud and protect state property. After the Revolution, as the definition of state property expanded and enormous quantities of it changed hands, the Ministry of Government Control—now the People’s Commissariat—eagerly expanded together with its historical dominion. Representatives from the Commissariat ceremoniously attended the transfers of paperwork and other institutional possessions—space, telephones, typewriters—from old-regime institutions to new ones.⁶⁹ They also began to take on new missions extending out from their historical

69. As institutions expected them to do—the presence of Goskon representatives solemnized the recreation of old institutions as new ones. See for example when they were summoned in November 1918 to the “Space of the Moscow guberniia Committee of the All-Russian Union of Zemstvos” on Tverskaia-iamskaia to witness the handover of institutional paraphernalia and files to the Moscow guberniia sovdep. TsAGM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 3, l. 3.

association with the proper techniques of governance, jobs that pertained not simply to the practices of responsible of accounting, but tackled broader issues of governance and the precepts of “soviet construction.” Toward the end of 1918, Varlam Avanesov, Deputy Commissar of Government Control, begged Lenin to read a report on the work of the “Department of Roving Inspections,” tasked with investigating not only the account books of the organizations it visited, but also their organizational structure and work methods, with the goal of eliminating “red tape,” ensuring the “proper implementation of decrees,” and generally “improving the administrative-economic state apparatus.”⁷⁰ Inspectors did more than criticize the work of the institutions they visited, the report pointed out; they also “instructed” their charges about how to improve, using skills gained at practical institutes run by the Commissariat where they studied “how to run the country.”⁷¹ This work required agents of Government Control to “enter into the very essence of a given institution” and as such, the report advertised, the Commissariat had become “a practical school for soviet workers, and an organ that directly accumulates the experiences of socialist construction.”⁷²

In keeping with this conceptualization, in June 1919, with the civil war raging, a senior controller in the Moscow branch of the Commissariat of Government Control by the name of Polivanov composed a report for his superiors on the necessity of opening a “rear inspection” division inside the Commissariat. The goal of the rear inspection would be to “ensure the correct foundations for communal construction” in newly-conquered territories along the front, where based on his readings in *Izvestiia*, Polivanov concluded that the poor behavior of local authorities was alienating the population and making them unwilling to assist the Red Army.⁷³ The rear inspection would concentrate on “the alienation of those sorrowful and hurried measures on the part of the *revkomy* [revolutionary committees] and other organs of the transitional period,” allowing territories newly-conquered by the Bolsheviks to bypass the mistakes of transition altogether, moving directly into “soviet construction.”

70. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2660, l. 38.

71. *ibid.*

72. *ibid.*, l. 42.

73. TsAGM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 3, l. 169.

The inspectorate would “instruct the rear in revolutionary work”; its operations would be coordinated by a senior inspector who would oversee the work of several groups in different regions, and who would be charged with comparing measures and experiences in several different places to see what sort of “revolutionary work” was most effective.⁷⁴

Polivanov’s plan hints at a strikingly common intuition about the state in the revolutionary era: that the Revolution itself was not simply an event, but was and came to be viewed as a central *task* of governance, to be administered, in part, by institutions of the state. As Nicholas J. Astrov notes, by the summer of 1917, the goal of furthering the Revolution had seeped onto every available political stage, even that of the local governments more typically concerned with the collection of fines and water supply. In part, this was due to the widespread “partification” of Russian society⁷⁵: “party quarrels and electioneering propaganda were carried into the new Dumas,” Astrov observes, which, despite their comparatively low rank in the government machine, took up for debate “all the problems which the country had at heart, such as the question of war and peace, the causes of the War and its responsibilities, the breakdown of the national economic system.”⁷⁶ So fervent were these debates that the municipal agencies “could not concentrate for any time on purely local problems.” Instead, they sought to “develop the work of the Revolution,” exchanging the “purely practical business” of administration for the “defen[se]” of revolutionary “conquests.”⁷⁷

The Bolsheviks embraced the idea that the central mission of the state was the furthering of the Revolution. As the central mission of states in the capitalist west was the protection of that system, so now would the Soviet state dedicate itself to the implementation and defense of socialism, a task that would presumably require new institutional forms.

74. Ibid.

75. In Peter Holquist’s felicitous phrasing, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia’s Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921* (Harvard, 2002).

76. Nicholas J. Astrov, “The Municipal Government and the All-Russian Union of Towns,” part II of *The War and the Russian Government* (Yale for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace: Division of Economics and History, 1929), p. 307.

77. Ibid.

As a Narkomfin report observed in 1920, “Soviet power received in inheritance a complex financial apparatus, adapted exclusively to the service of a capitalist state. The apparatus, of course, could not serve the goal of socialist construction of financial administration.”⁷⁸ As T.H. Rigby argues, this mission left a deep imprint on the Soviet state’s subsequent operation, despite the fact that Lenin and his colleagues failed to identify an “effective general formula,” cleanly prescribed and “consistently implemented,” to light the path toward socialist state building. In contrast to the “rule-applying” states of the capitalist West, which aimed to “provide, administer and enforce a stable framework of law and regulations for market forces to operate effectively,” the Soviet-style “task-achieving” state was “goal-rational.” Its rationality revolved not around adherence to rules but around the pursuit of the “supreme legitimating goal” of communism.⁷⁹

There was also a shared set of practices aimed at turning revolution into a central task of state administration, some of which took on institutional forms. One of the chief institutional manifestations of the attempt to build the Revolution into the functionality of the state was the creation of so-called “liquidational” departments within existing state institutions, bodies empowered to identify and dismantle branches of an institution deemed unnecessary or harmful to the task of socialist construction. Liquidational departments worked like pipes joining the old regime to the new, controlling the flow of materials, practices, and people from one side of the revolution to the other.⁸⁰ In the financial sector, they were staffed

78. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 240, l. 1.

79. T.H. Rigby, “A Conceptual approach to authority, power, and policy in the Soviet Union,” in *Authority, Power, and Policy in the USSR: Essays dedicated to Leonard Schapiro*, eds. T.H. Rigby, Archie Brown, Peter Reddaway (London, 1980), pp. 18-19.

80. Such was the exponential growth of the new state that efforts to liquidate unnecessary branches of the Imperial government merged seamlessly with campaigns, initiated as early as the spring of 1919, to reduce the size of the Soviet administration. At a meeting of the collegium of the Commissariat of Government Control called to discuss the structures of provincial administration and chaired by the Commissar, I.V. Stalin, conversation took an unexpected turn when Stalin abruptly questioned the Petrograd authorities—in the midst of their presentation on the involvement of judicial experts in provincial administration—about what they had done to eliminate “institutions that ha[d] outlived their usefulness,” so-called “dead” institutions. They pointed to the work of Narkomfin’s “reduction commission,” which was tasked with reducing the size of the government by cutting funding both to institutions deemed “dead” and to those bloated with unnecessary staff. According to the Petrograd representatives, Narkomfin’s reduction commission “had not found any dead institutions in Petrograd.” Stalin found this claim unconvincing, countering that “we know from both oral and written reports that there are many dead organizations in Petrograd,” and pointing approvingly to

predominantly by “previous” employees of the former ministries. Indeed, at Narkomfin, so-called “previous” [*prezhnie*] finance workers were viewed as essential to the task of building the new state. Their “sabotage at the beginning of the revolution,” one report later explained, “stole a great deal of time from soviet power—more half a year on mastering and becoming familiar with the old apparatus, as without them it was impossible to break off from the old apparatus all that was unnecessary for the new system and make use of what could be made to work for new goals.”⁸¹ One Narkomfin office classified more than 60 of its 120 employees as “previous,” now devoted to liquidational work. Other liquidational bodies, such as the one attached to the “Commissariat for the Property of the Republic,” the former Ministry of the Imperial Court, were staffed by new employees. As the Commissariat explained its liquidational work:

After the February revolution, just one word was added to the title of the ministry of the court and the cabinet of His Highness: ‘former’ but in essence everything remained the same: all the parasitic court institutions ... all the untouchable generals and bureaucrats continued to receive their salaries, they stole the people’s money.... And only with the victory of the October revolution did the revolutionary proletariat create the commissariat for the property of the republic, rather than the former ministry of the court and cabinet, setting itself the task of liquidating institutions that were dedicated to the service of the tsar and his lackeys.⁸²

Various types of liquidational departments proliferated after the Revolution across the Republic, snuffing out institutions deemed extraneous to the task of socialist construction. As local officials in the Sumskii district explained in a report detailing their liquidational

work done by a special commission established in Moscow by STO, charged with reducing staffs by 25 to 50 percent. Avanesov, Stalin’s deputy and the effective Commissar of Government Control, agreed, adding that it really was necessary for once and all to determine “which organizations can be destroyed and which can be united with others.” GARF f. 4390, op. 2, d. 281, l. 9.

81. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 240, l. 2.

82. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 75, l. 3.

work in the banking sector in early 1920, “the fundamental operations of banks in the capitalist system” served to “accumulate monetary resources,” turning “inactive monetary capital” into a “profit-bearing” resource, which was then “put at the disposal of capitalists.” The “duty of the finance department” was to “reorganize” the banking network “such as was necessary for the battle against capitalism. This work was done as follows. The SNKhs, prodotdels, and other organs gathered up the hard, dead structure [*stroï*] in their hands.... A liquidational technical collegium was created of proponents of Soviet power, whose job it was to liquidate.”⁸³ Regrettably, the district reported, it “lacked the necessary instructions from the center to completely finish destroying the remnants of capitalism,” a task that was still ongoing.⁸⁴

Other aspects of liquidational work involved the inversion of pre-revolutionary institutions, that is, their retention in order to perform precisely the opposite work they had performed before the Revolution. This was especially evident in the financial sector, where, for example, the Second Department of the Credit Chancellery, responsible before the Revolution for foreign currency politics, devoted itself afterwards to “the liquidation of annulled government loans.”⁸⁵ The Fourth Department of the Credit Chancellery, which before the Revolution performed oversight of private banks, became the center of efforts to coordinate the nationalization of the banking sector.⁸⁶ These institutions, while carryovers from the Old Regime, were nevertheless viewed as working in the service of the Revolution. Perhaps more remarkably, the same was often true of institutions, offices, and jobs that had not substantively changed before and after October. Consider, for example, the position of tax collection bureaus after October. Despite deep uncertainty as to the suitability of taxation to a socialist economy—stoked, some authorities observed, by “agitators traveling

83. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 241, l. 16.

84. Ibid. As the report observed, just one “instructor,” by the name of N.T Mumanov, had been sent from Moscow to cover virtually all of Ukraine; he was deemed “unsuited to his assignment” and it was said that most local authorities “related skeptically” to the instructors sent from Moscow. The instructors themselves testified that they were of little help in directing local bodies: “my work is progressing extremely weakly. The center has set us all in a truly awkward position, not giving us any orders or instructions...” *ibid.*, l. 11.

85. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 61, l. 17.

86. *Ibid.*, l. 20.

about the towns and villages, advertising the benefits of the communist system, carelessly explaining to the peasants that under communism taxes will become unnecessary and will be cancelled”—attempts to collect taxes after the Revolution were widespread.⁸⁷ Many localities pursued the collection of back taxes with special vigor, perhaps to avoid questions about their legitimacy. “The most successful part of tax work at present,” the Sumskii district reported in early 1920, was the “liquidation of previous taxes... understandable insofar as the methods of collection and accounting are all as in the past, according to destroyed or fallen away with the transition to communist forms of life.”⁸⁸ Not only did the district undertake to collect tax bills assessed under the old regime, it also resolved to perform the collection using tsarist tax collectors—the *podatnye inspektory* or tax inspectors of yore. Frustratingly, real-life inspectors were often unavailable. “We cannot get the old ones,” the Sumskii uезд reported, “as many of them have left for new workplaces.” Instead, the district trained new people to work the imperial job.⁸⁹ This recreation of imperial methods stood in stark contrast to the efforts underway at the same time to generate new sources of revenue, most prominently the “newly introduced income-property tax,” which the district sought to assess and collect according to new methods—with tax rolls and assessments determined by “commissions of the local population,” a common revolutionary practice.⁹⁰ The whole enterprise—to collect old taxes with old, if *newly-trained*, tax inspectors, parallel to the collection of new taxes, generated by new methods—required a crystal clear vision of the distinction between old and new institutions, even as both existed at one and the same time.

87. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 241, l. 8. With the exception of a brief period in the winter of 1920-21, Narkomfin never fully abandoned efforts to levy monetary taxes in one form or another.

88. Ibid.

89. *ibid.*

90. *ibid.*, l. 9. As the report noted, hardly anyone was actually paying the property-income tax, and few localities had actually gathered commissions to assess it. Local tax commissions also had a heritage, albeit a very recent one, in Imperial practice, having been introduced in plans for the Imperial income tax, levied for the first time in 1917. Though modeled on similar elected bodies in Great Britain, Imperial commissions were appointed rather than elected; post-revolutionary tax commissions were to be composed of the local poor. Yanni Kotsonis, “‘No Place to Go’: Taxation and State Transformation in Late Imperial and Early Soviet Russia,” *The Journal of Modern History*, 76 (Summer 2004), pp.531-577.

The Sumskii district trained new Imperial tax inspectors not to bring the Empire back, but to finish its work.⁹¹

The perception of the revolutionary state as a changed entity, even when certain institutional forms carried over or remained the same, responded to a logistical and political imperative. As one Narkomfin report observed, the “immediate destruction of the [old] apparatus was impossible.” The “financial-economic conditions of life” could hardly be expected to change “immediately after the October Revolution,” which in turn required, at least for a time, the continued existence of institutions and practices inherited from the Old Regime. But the effect of this overlap between old and new, in both time and space, as the Revolution spread, was separate; the effect was the cultivation of an ability to read the institutional landscape, to discern old, new, and in-between—an ability that located the reader on the side of Revolution. Consider, for example, a report composed on “organization of the financial apparatus” in 1920, narrating the stages of the “transitional epoch demanding continuous and careful reconstruction of the apparatus.” So far, that reconstruction had unfolded in three “directions”:

First of all, there was the destruction of those component parts of the apparatus that were unnecessary to the construction of the new apparatus; after that, there was the adaptation to new tasks of those parts of the old mechanism that were able to perform them in the conditions of the transitional epoch; and finally, the conclusion of this epoch was crowned by the creation of a new socialist finance apparatus.⁹²

While the three phases were distinct, their chronology was not: the process of destruction and reconstruction did not play out in a neat, “chronologically parallel” fashion in all

91. In September 1920, some months after this report was prepared, the Central Tax Administration sent a notice to all Gubispolkoms ordering that they stop collection on all tax arrears from before 1918. “Taking into account the disorder of the local collection apparatuses,” the order read, “and the distraction of finotdels from the preparatory work on new taxes they must perform, the center has recognized a need to liquidate in their entirety the oldest arrears left over from the time before the establishment of soviet power, dating before January 1, 1918.” RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 187, l. 334.

92. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 240, l. 1.

walks of life, or even in all branches of the same institution, everybody moving in lockstep across the whole institutional plant with everybody else. In some spheres of the financial sector, such as banking, “the destruction of old forms was begun with the very first steps of soviet power.”⁹³ In others, “destruction was carried out only when the fundamental forms of the new socialist apparatus were already in place.” Spread out across the institutional landscape, old institutions whose time had not yet come jostled ripely alongside new ones; destruction, reconstruction and creation unfurled all at once. This unevenness—expected and natural—demanded the cultivation of perceptive skills that would allow one to tell the old from the new, to differentiate among institutions at the many stages of the revolutionary life cycle. Each of “these three periods,” the author of the report explained, was “characterized by three signs.”⁹⁴ Deciphering this complex institutional landscape required seeing by the light of these signs, a kind of sight that demanded embedding the Revolution as a perceptual touchstone, no less than in institutional form.⁹⁵

Ideas of the Revolution and expectations of the changes it would bring about seeped into other dimensions of workplace experience, from sociability to remuneration. Anticipation ran high that the Revolution would transform not just the institutional structure and mission of the state, but how its employees did their work, why they did their work, and how they related to one another in the process. Even when these expectations were disappointed, people talked about them on the job, situating the Revolution within the particular social dynamics and business of their offices. In one case of disappointed expectations, a clerk in the Mossoviet Sub-department for the accounting and distribution of books found herself betrayed, and out of a job—thanks, she asserted, to her colleagues’ failure to drink in the Revolution’s precepts for workplace behavior. Olga Makarova worked in a part of

93. Ibid, l. 2.

94. Ibid, l. 1.

95. One of the clearest manifestations of this conceptualization of the Revolution was the Soviet government’s interest in “closing out” the Empire, as an accountant would close out a fiscal year. The desire to obtain a final read on the Empire’s achievements, against which all subsequent developments could be judged, appeared both in the collection of tax arrears, where it also had an overt revenue component, and in more abstract efforts, carried on into the late 1920s, to establish the Empire’s level of indebtedness on October 24, 1917, the day before the Revolution.

the Print Department responsible for selling off printed matter published before the Revolution, held in the storerooms of the city's major, now-municipalized publishing firms. One day, an order slip from the Lebiadinskii Union of Maimed Veterans crossed her desk, requesting permission to purchase a batch of oracles and small-format prints [*lubki*] from the Sytin press. The order also contained at least two pornographic titles—"Woman," and "The Perverted World"—which Makarova found offensive. Such literature, as she knew, had not been forbidden, and the order had already been approved—her job was simply to gather the necessary signatures on the order for the release of the literature. Still, Makarova decided that she "did not want to be just a machine." She set the order slip aside until she had time to show it to her bosses, but to her disappointment, they saw nothing wrong with releasing the material. One "expressed surprise that in our times, the ability to take offense"—Makarova's ability, that is—"still existed." Dismayed, Makarova took the receipt home with her and showed it "a totally neutral person" and her "best friend," a woman named M.I. Gliasser. At this point, the situation escalated dramatically, because in addition to being Makarova's best friend, Gliasser was one of Lenin's personal secretaries at the Sovnarkom.

Although Makarova later feigned surprise at what happened next, she must have hoped when she left the receipt with Gliasser that it was headed to Gliasser's bosses at the Sovnarkom. Her wish came true several weeks later, when the Sovnarkom issued an order "propos[ing] to the Mossoviet that it review all *lubok* literature and remove from sale all previous publications of the former Sytin, Morozov, Siziakov, Leukhin, and other firms not answering to the demands and goals of contemporary socialist proletarian culture." When word of the Sovnarkom decree first trickled into the office, Makarova later wrote, "everybody ran around the Print Department as before the arrival of a Gogolesque 'auditor,' ceaselessly repeating, 'Sytin, Council of People's Commissars, Sytin, Council of People's Commissars,' and so on. Only then," she claimed, "did I understand matters had taken a serious turn." Makarova immediately informed her bosses that she had shown the receipt

to Gliasser, initiating the process that led to the embarrassing decree. Furious, Makarova's bosses fired her on the spot. Makarova made her relationship to the Revolution into the centerpiece of her campaign to get her job back. The "crime" for which she bore her punishment" was, in her words, that she "forgot the old Russian saying and threw trash out of the izba."⁹⁶ Of the fact that the Mossoviet employees' committee refused to hear her case, she observed, "even in the time of the old regime, they gave the accused a chance to say a word in her own defense."⁹⁷ She must have been delighted to learn that the investigator assigned to her case characterized her as "not a bureaucrat of the old times, but a true, principled responsible worker."

The resolution of Makarova's case, however, hinged on a different aspect of her behavior that day when she noticed the pornographic titles, one that also amounted to an attempt to bring the Revolution to work and was common enough during the revolutionary period that it acquired its own name: "testing" [*ispytanie*]. As the investigation revealed, Makarova had not simply aired her objections to selling pornography to her bosses and asked them to cancel the order; instead, she repeatedly "tested" them over the course of the day—a fact she did not deny, though she objected to the use of the term "testing," which evidently carried negative connotations. After her immediate superior expressed surprise at her ability to get worked up over lascivious books in the throes of revolution, Makarova brought the list of titles being sold to the Maimed Veterans Union to a higher official in her department. In this encounter, Makarova initially said nothing, silently presenting the receipt to her boss for his signature. Just as he was about to sign it, she allegedly interjected that she "would not lift a finger" to release this literature into the world and only then stated her objection. This boss sent her to the Print Department's director, Angarskii. In his office, she said nothing at all about the pornography, gave Angarskii the order slip "as if for signing," and then when he asked where the signatures of his subordinates were, grabbed the slip back and left the room. As she later explained it: "...when the director arrived, I approached him with the

96. Ibid, l. 5.

97. Ibid, l. 9.

order in hand ...I just wanted to know how the director related to this. The director looked at the order and asked where is the permission, and I said it was not signed and I took the order and returned to my desk.” Makarova’s bosses called this an act of “testing.”

To learn more about “testing,” let us examine another instance of it, from the director of a neighborhood supply warehouse in the city of Tambov named Chernyshev. One afternoon in September 1919, while at work, Chernyshev was approached by Comrade Frolov, whom he knew, and who worked in an unspecified military capacity. Frolov demanded that Chernyshev release cigarettes from the warehouse; Chernyshev refused, on the grounds that the warehouse had just recently been “sealed” in advance of its transfer to a different institution. Disgruntled, Frolov left the warehouse—only to return with a convoy of armed men. When Chernyshev still refused to release the cigarettes, Frolov placed him under arrest. The two briefly argued about whether Frolov had the right to arrest Chernyshev or not (both men were armed, but Chernyshev backed down first).⁹⁸ Brought before Frolov’s commander, Chernyshev again explained that the warehouse was sealed and nothing could be released. The commander affably replied that they had not known about the sealing. The matter with the cigarettes could be forgotten. Besides, what he really needed were some storage trunks:

I said we did not have any, and then he said it was awful for him to go about in such bad boots, and I again replied that we did not have any boots, moreover I informed him that according to the order from the Military-revolutionary council no. 10000 I could not give anything to him even if I did, as you, as a member of military command, have the right to acquire these things in your own supply department. Then the commander said to me that he had only wanted to test whether I would release the cigarettes but he did not need them and he found that I was correct not to release them and declared me free.⁹⁹

98. Frolov was also armed. Chernyshev argued that, in the absence of an explicit order for his arrest, Frolov’s general order empowering him “to arrest” was not valid

99. GARF f. 4390, op. 4, d. 68, l. 65. The shift from third to second person is original.

Chernyshev was willing to allow that testing might occur legitimately. He even provided, in his complaint to the Commissariat of Government Control, a definition of legitimate testing: “that is, how well or badly I know my duties.” After “thinking this all over,” however, Chernyshev “came to the conclusion that it was not testing that was done to me” in the legitimate sense he described, “but simply that I was arrested for refusing to release cigarettes.” As Chernyshev shrewdly observed, a system in which “all the institutions that ask us for goods and are refused” begin “arresting me or other members of the [warehouse] collegium will damage our work and will be an insult to the party worker,” which Chernyshev himself was. “I ask for the widest possible investigation,” Chernyshev concluded, and that “those who arrest party workers just to test them be held responsible.”¹⁰⁰

As Chernyshev sensed, he had been tested twice in his encounter with Frolov: once sincerely, and once insincerely. The form of testing he was willing to consider as legitimate—the testing of his knowledge of his duties—had been performed insincerely, to his mind, by Frolov and his commander. It had been tacked on as a cover for the more sincere test, which had also been the illegitimate one. This was the test not of whether Chernyshev knew his duties, but of whether he was willing to compromise them. As Chernyshev himself suggested, this latter form of testing flourished precisely in the context of uncertainty so vividly on display in the warehouse during his encounter with Frolov. In that encounter, Frolov and Chernyshev had traversed a veritable continent of questions about authority and property in the new regime: who had the authority to claim stocks of material goods? Where did this authority inhere: in regulations? In a person? An ideology? On what grounds could one arm of the state block the acquisition of goods from another? Who had the power to arrest officials for malfeasance? This was the Revolution at work. Standing in a neighborhood warehouse in Tambov, Frolov and Chernyshev marinated in their suspicions, their numerous uncertainties, born of the fluid structures of revolutionary authority and of the very project of socialist management.

100. Ibid.

Testing also bore this doubled quality in Makarova's case: a test of an individual riding atop a test of duties, limits, and rules—in this instance, rules surrounding pornographic literature and the content of socialist culture. Much as in Chernyshev's case, Makarova's testing of her bosses played out in an atmosphere of doubt, fragments of which emerge in the testimony of her most senior boss, the director of the Mossoviet Print Department, Angarskii. In Angarskii's telling, when the senior officials at the Department first reviewed the order placed by the Maimed Veterans' Society, well before Makarova had even seen the document, they themselves immediately raised questions about its contents. Neither man "had anything against the sale of pictures and oracles," but they "held back the portion relating to the pornographic books from fulfillment, guided in this instance by an order from a special commission" established in the Print Department, responsible for reviewing book titles. According to Angarskii, this was when Makarova inserted herself into the matter, taking the order from its file and beginning her series of "tests" on her bosses. Meanwhile, the special commission continued its "major, albeit unseen work on reviewing all the literature of the Moscow book market," separating out what "should not be sold in Soviet stores" and what should be held back for filling out library collections. Of the Sytin holdings, "the Commission found it possible to allow the selling off of oracles, *pismovniki*, and *sonniki*, proposing that no danger would come from this, all the more as the sale would occur not from the soviet but from the Sytin firm," meaning those who encountered the literature would associate it with a capitalist press rather than the socialist Print Department. After these decisions had been reached, however, the Print Department struggled with whether they had made the right choices. It subsequently ordered the Sytin firm to pay a fine just for having held on to the pornographic literature.¹⁰¹

Even with friends like Gliasser, Makarova did not get her job back, and the Mossoviet employees' union refused to hear her case. In a letter to the Mossoviet Presidium, Angarskii relayed that when he asked her why she had shown him the receipt and then taken it away,

101. *ibid.*, I. 12.

she replied “that she wanted to test—would I sign the order or not.” Makarova disputed this language, claiming that she “just wanted to know” Angarskii’s attitude to the titles. But this, Angarskii argued, was a cynical trap: “I did not sign it, but what with a mass of work, I might very well have—why then after all was it necessary to test me.” According to Makarova’s testimony, when she first told Angarskii that she was responsible for the attention of the Sovnarkom, “instead of hearing me out as he should have, he screamed at me, calling my deed a denunciation, meanness, vileness, those sorts of names.” This, too, Makarova vehemently disputed:

Even a small child should be able to understand that if I had wanted to make a denunciation, then I probably would have concerned myself with ensuring that there was a resolution of one of the collegium members on the piece of paper, and on it, had I so desired, there could have been not just one resolution, but all three.¹⁰²

Makarova invoked her failure to collect her bosses’ signatures on the order slip as evidence of the sincerity of her test, to prove that she truly did “just want to know” what they thought of questionable books. In so doing, however, she laid bare the ruse’s full potential: had she wanted, Makarova’s test could have caught them all.

As the highly-charged interaction between Angarskii and Makarov indicates, fears of denunciation ran high in the revolutionary workplace. The threat of gossip, “intrigue,” denunciation, and arrest by the Cheka loomed at work, as elsewhere, in multiple respects. Occasionally, coworkers sought to intimidate each other with direct threats of arrest: in one instance, Karl Lander, the Deputy Commissar of Government Control and an old Bolshevik, allegedly screamed at the director of the Bureau of Complaint, his subordinate, for repeating at work that Lander told him Lenin was displeased with the Bureau’s work. Lander called the Bureau head, Aptekman, into his office on a Saturday in a rage, insisting that in fact, he had said precisely the opposite, that Lenin was dissatisfied with the Commissariat as

102. Ibid, l. 5.

a whole, not just with the Complaints Department. When Aptekman disputed Lander's recollection, he later reported, "Comrade Lander in a very high tone and expressions I found offensive informed me that he viewed my entire manner of action as gossip and bureaucratic intrigue and that he would not let it end at this and that for these kinds of things people are shot."¹⁰³ Comrade Alskii, Deputy Commissar of Finance and another old Bolshevik, threatened another Government Control official when the latter insisted he had the right to inspect the accounts of the Communist Party, particularly its holdings in foreign currencies and "old" monies of the Empire, usage of which was sharply restricted.¹⁰⁴

Threats of denunciation and arrest could come from many sources besides one's coworkers, of course. Finding oneself arrested due to "personal score-settling" was so common that it turned into a popular tactic of self-defense among the imprisoned, who demanded the right to learn the name of their denouncers. Formally, the Bolsheviks banned anonymous denunciations and complaints in the early fall of 1918, while encouraging such communications in a signed form. The Sovnarkom instructed its Press Department to announce the mounting of a complaint box at the Troitskie Gates of the Kremlin, "where petitions, complaints, and declarations can be directed without envelopes or stamps. Anonymous letters and complaints," it added, "will not be reviewed," though in general this was not true: anonymous complaints were reviewed no different from signed ones, but if inspectors determined not to take action on the case, they could dismiss it "as anonymous." As witnessed in Chapter 1, in the revolutionary era, by contrast to later periods, the regime did not simply make itself available to these sorts of communications, qua the "privatization" of state resources; it actually took shape around them. The review of popularly-generated materials about other subjects consumed enormous manpower inside the state and spurred the creation of a far-reaching investigative apparatus.

103. GARF f. 4390, op. 1, d. 59, l. 1.

104. GARF f. 4085, op. 28, d. 20, l. 69. Perhaps because employees of Government Control were more accustomed to handling reports of malfeasance, both of these instances come from them; in both instances, as well, the person making the threat is a senior official and Party member, against a junior, non-Party employee.

The ever-present threat of arrest also affected the state as a workplace, spilling in to both the substance of official business and patterns of sociability among staff. Losing employees to arrest was a real concern for revolutionary workplaces, for all sorts of reasons. Not only did an arrest draw unwanted attention to the associates and business of the detainee, it also deprived offices of employees, whose salaries—it was decided in the fall of 1918, as the Red Terror got underway—would nevertheless have to be paid until they were released or sentenced. Most important, arrested employees consumed a great deal of time. This was because in many cases, offices assumed the burden of “guaranteeing” arrested employees.

Nowhere are the extraordinary burdens that weighed on workplace relationships in the revolutionary era more visible than in the practice of guaranteeing, which involved independently investigating the circumstances of the employee’s arrest; determining in which prison the employee was being held; making the determination that it was worthwhile to petition for the employee’s release; if the decision was made to go forward, determining how to wage a defense; and finally, conducting correspondence with senior officials in one’s own organization, the Cheka, or a powerful individual asking for a colleague to be freed. Initially, workplaces did not bear this burden alone. They were shared, in particular, by building committees, as witnessed in the arrest of a Comrade Shaternikov, whose building committee and employer—the railway inspectorate at the Commissariat of Government Control—decided to work together to free him. “Per your order from October 30,” read a report on Shaternikov’s arrest authored by one of his coworkers at the railway inspectorate, “I went to the very places connected with the arrest of Comrade Shaternikov in order to investigate his statement and the present situation” of his case. Upon his arrest, Shaternikov himself sent a letter to his workplace, explaining the circumstances of his arrest and asking for help getting freed; his office in turn seems to have contacted to the central administration of the Commissariat asking that something be done to “clarify” his fate.¹⁰⁵ According to

105. GARF f. 4390, op. 1, d. 146, ll. 39, 43.

Shaternikov's letter, agents of the Cheka arrested him after a meeting of his building committee, which he chaired, ended at around one-thirty in the morning. Earlier, Shaternikov tried to fire the building's porters, one of whom objected and notified their union, which sent representatives to the meeting to lurk in a physically threatening way at the back of the room. Shaternikov ordered them to leave, but they refused. When the meeting ended, he was approached by agents of the Cheka and charged with refusing to let building employees participate in building meetings.¹⁰⁶ At the Commissariat's behest, an inspector from Shaternikov's office conducted an investigation, which entailed visiting Shaternikov's apartment building to speak with the building committee and meeting with the Piatnitskii neighborhood Cheka collegium, which had him arrested. The investigation "supported the accuracy of Comrade Shaternikov's statement," and so it was decided that the building committee members, also eager to see him released, "should unite their attempts to free him with those of the Commissariat."¹⁰⁷

Workplaces began advocating on behalf of their employees as soon as their employees began getting arrested. Shortly after the regime arrived in Moscow, as the Cheka became active in the city, Bonch-Bruevich's mailbox filled up with petitions inquiring after arrested coworkers and offering to "guarantee" these colleagues if they were freed.¹⁰⁸ In May 1918, the "employees' collective of the Rumiantsev Museum" asked for "the release of their workers Zinaida Nikolaevna Bochkareva and Evdokiia Vasilievna Iureva on bail to the responsibility of the collective," employing a common formulation of the time whereby one's colleagues stood as guarantee for the freed person.¹⁰⁹ When the architecture professor A.I. Sobolevskii was arrested, also in May 1918, his institute petitioned Bonch-Bruevich

106. Ibid, l. 39.

107. Ibid, l. 37. Ultimately it emerged that someone involved in the inquiry knew Comrade Bogoliubov, a member of the RKP(b) Central Committee, and it was decided to "make an immediate request that he inquire into freeing Com. Shaternikov." l. 38.

108. Sometimes the Cheka released people on the condition that they remain in Moscow. Many people, not just workplaces, asked for friends' and loved ones' release "on their personal guarantee," meaning that the petitioner would take responsibility of the detainee fled or committed some further offense.

109. GARF f. R130, op. 2, d. 97, l. 10.

using precisely the same language.¹¹⁰ Over time, workplaces began conducting their own investigations into the circumstances of arrest. Much as in Shaternikov's case, the arrest of another employee of the Commissariat of Government Control in Vologda, A.V. Reine, spurred an inquiry conducted by someone from Reine's office, who spoke with officials at the prison where Reine was held and "left with the firm conviction that the arrest of Com. Reine occurred most likely due to a mistake. By the way," the coworker added, "I was able to clarify that during the October Revolution Comrade Reine commanded the patrol that arrested Tereshchenko"—someone presumably involved in Reine's arrest.¹¹¹ (What Reine's co-worker actually learned, then, was that Reine's arrest was the opposite of a mistake—it was score-settling.) The Vologda office then sent its dossier to Karl Lander, Deputy Commissar, in Moscow, who immediately petitioned the VChK for Reine's freedom.¹¹²

The proffering of guarantees and other inquiries on the part of the arrested was treated as part of official business. Lander, for instance, distinguished between petitions he made as Deputy Commissar of Government Control and those he made simply as an important personage in the regime, by using stationary with just his name and title on it for the latter, and official Commissariat stationary for the former.¹¹³ The expectation that workplaces would concern themselves with the arrest of their employees was well enough established that in the fall of 1918, the Commissariat received an unsolicited letter from "an unwilling participant in the arrest of one of your employees," asking that it "take energetic measures to free him."¹¹⁴ Moreover, the benefit was understood to extend to an employee's entire family. In a little less than a month during the summer of 1920, V. Avanesov, the new Deputy Commissar of Government Control, received two separate requests from employees asking him to free members of their immediate families. In both cases Avanesov complied.

110. *ibid.*, l. 7.

111. *Ibid.*, l. 44.

112. GARF f. 4390, op. 1, d. 146, l. 45.

113. *Ibid.*, l. 28.

114. GARF f. 4390, op. 1, d. 146, l. 41. The employee, Dmitriev, was arrested in an ambush at the home of the letter-writer. The letter-writer, arrested "on a denunciation that has already been shown to be a lie," was freed a day later, but Dmitriev, arrested by chance but as it happened, a principled anarchist, remained in prison.

Employees also asked the Commissariat to learn the names of their denouncers on their behalf.¹¹⁵ Ultimately, the work of advocacy actually became official business.¹¹⁶ Not long after seizing power, the Bolsheviks banned both notaries and lawyers from practicing their crafts, foreclosing the possibility of using such services for the goal of personal defense in case of arrest. Petitions were accepted only from party members, family members—and co-workers.¹¹⁷

5.3 “An ‘Economy’ of Expenditures”: The Business of State

Walking one morning in September 1919 near the Nikitskie Gates, an off-duty inspector at the Commissariat of Government Control witnessed a fight break out around the cluster of women who sold milk in front of a building on Malaia Nikitskaia Street every day. Apparently, the building’s janitor had marched to the front of the line, presented a dish, and demanded free milk from the women, on the grounds that every day, “it fell to him to clean up the sidewalk after the milk had been sold and thus, the milk he demanded was in fact payment in kind for his labor.” The rest of the crowd waiting to buy milk loudly needed the janitor, as they knew that “they would pay for the milk given to him, as the sellers usually explain the reason when milk prices rise,” and in this instance, the reason would be him. The *dvornik* walked off, but returned moments later with a broom, which he

115. GARF f. 4390, op. 4, d. 68, l. 26. The employee, Manuilov, need not have bothered, as his denouncer, a member of the local Ispolkom, revealed himself without delay and stood by his story that Manuilov had attempted to block land reforms and openly characterized himself as an opponent of Soviet power. It is useful to note this episode as a counter to the practice of denunciation as characterized by Gross in interwar Poland: while denunciations in the revolutionary era were often “rooted in personal enmity,” this need not prevent them from being political at the same time.

116. Compare this to the campaigns against experts in 1929-1930, during which, as Sheila Fitzpatrick notes, the “main institutional response to the arrests” on the part of VSNKh, employer to many of those targeted, “was an embarrassed, intimidated silence.” Arrested employees were rarely repudiated publicly but they were also not defended; more often than not, their names were “simply crossed out on personnel lists without explanation or comment.” Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Ordzhonikidze’s Takeover of Vesenkha: A Case Study in Soviet Bureaucratic Politics,” *Soviet Studies*, vol. 37, no. 2 (April 1985), pp. 153-172, here p. 157.

117. *MChK: Iz istorii Moskovskoi chrezvychainoi komissii 1918-1921* (Moscow, 1978), p. 48.

used to “sweep the sidewalk in precisely the place where the sale of the milk was going on, of course with the goal of getting rid of the sellers and the buyers, as payback for the fact that they prevented him from getting free milk.” The off-duty controller, listening in on the conversations of the gathered public, learned that the “exact same blackmail was going on at Arbatskaia Square as well.”¹¹⁸

At the heart of the Revolution was a rethinking of the relationship between labor and compensation. Attempts to implement some new relationship between work and reward unfolded as a matter of state policy and popular action, and they can be witnessed in a variety of spheres—including within the state itself, where efforts began in the summer of 1917 to raise salaries at all ranks on a dramatic scale. Contemporary observers and early historians of the era commented on the campaigns of officialdom to improve its lot, which were understood at the time as greed. Officials claimed they needed higher salaries to match the spiraling costs of everyday life in an inflationary era, but as one economist noted in 1918, the salaries of state officials in the previous year rose almost twice as fast as prices. In his study of the economic effects of the First World War, the liberal economist S.N. Prokopovich demonstrated that, after the first year of war, when prices indeed surged ahead of wages, for the rest of the war, the growth in wages of municipal employees actually outpaced growth in prices, as illustrated with a chart: ¹¹⁹

	Prices	Wages
1 July 1914	100	102
1 July 1915	131	119
1 July 1916	185	215
1 January 1917	---	256
1 July 1917	248	512

118. GARF f. 4390, op. 4, d. 68, l. 51.

119. S.N. Prokopovich, *Voina i narodnoe khoziaistvo* (Moscow, 1918).

Following an initial swell in 1916, the émigré historian Nikolai Astrov subsequently argued wages shot ahead of prices between January and July 1917, pumped up by the same “revolutionary excitement which had entirely overwhelmed labor en masse.”¹²⁰ Indeed, Astrov astutely noted, “municipalities [i.e. city administrations] pass[ed] through the process of ‘democratization’” with no less enthusiasm than their counterparts in factories. The effects of that enthusiasm included elements of upheaval particularly attuned to the rhythms of office accounting, such utter lack of respect for the “normal balance between revenue and expenditure,” with the result that “budget deficits and cash shortages became an alarming feature of municipal finance.” But they also included more general features of revolutionary unrest. “The committees of workmen and of junior employees which sprang up after the Revolution completely disorganized the routine of municipal offices and enterprises,” Astrov recounted, “and ceaselessly presented fresh demands for increases of salary and wages.” Inspired by the activities of workers in industry, state employees “insisted that the municipalities should show an example, and create ‘normal’ conditions for labor in the offices and enterprises of the town.”¹²¹

The search for “‘normal’ conditions of labor” inside the office persisted after the October Revolution. Like the norms created to allocate furniture, household goods, and domestic space, state workers sought a normalized salary that they referred to as an “existence minimum” or living wage. Part of a language of necessity taking shape in all manner of institutions, as they embarked on the shared, general effort to define the parameters of human need in a socialist economy, the term “existence minimum” was also used by industrial laborers under the Kolchak Government in Siberia.¹²² In the bureaucratic setting, the phrase commonly occurred in discussions about when a different set of norms—those governing

120. Astrov, *op.cit.*, p. 300. Comment on prices, however—as they would appear to be official prices, meaning that the price data does not include swelling on the black market of both price and scale of use, more and more people turning to it in late 1916, early 1917. Real price data would likely be higher, thus showing a smaller gap between price and wages.

121. *Ibid.*

122. Jonathan D. Smele, *Civil war in Siberia: the anti-Bolshevik government of Admiral Kolchak* (Cambridge, 1996), pp. 358-360. The term does not exist in Vladimir Dal’s *Dictionary of the Live Great Russian Language* (1863) but is a fixed phrase in Soviet-era and contemporary dictionaries.

the acceptance of bribes by state officials—had been violated. As a report by a government control team about building committees observed in 1919, all across Moscow, the committees flagrantly forged permissions to acquire goods, accepted bribes to assign living space, and took other illicit “collections.” They violated the one norm of government service, it was claimed, because a different norm—that of the existence-minimum—had already been broken. “The total impossibility of receiving through labor one’s *ekzistenz-minimum* of human sustenance [*chelovecheskoe sushchestvovanie*],” the government controllers explained, “inclines not just the building committees toward these activities.”¹²³ Two years later, after the Sovnarkom launched a campaign against bribery, the employees of a Petrograd branch office of Rabkrin called a meeting to discuss their efforts on the campaign, which their Moscow bosses had recently deemed inadequate. The group acknowledged that they did not know how to define bribery. Since instructions from the center did not include a definition, they decided to start with “the idea that the understanding and nature of the occurrence called ‘a bribe’ differs greatly depending on the circumstances.” A bribe could be “open or hidden.” In connection to the development of trade under the New Economic Policy, new forms of bribery had also come into being.

Life, in this respect, has defined the understandings of bribery in place until this point and has created new forms. At the same time, in light of the unavoidable, sharp questions about the battle against bribery, which is growing, there is the supposition that the bribe depends on the existence minimum [*prozhitochnyi minimum*] and if this is so, then we must not forget that by its very nature, bribery is varied and that in various measures, guilt can be deepened and reduced. There is a form of bribery that is an evil, professional, regular matter out of a narrow, self-enriching and egotistical drive to enrich oneself no matter what, and there is a form of bribery that is chronic in nature, a sickness,

123. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 381, l. 165.

and there are those bribe-takers who fall into this sphere due to bad luck, due to need, to support themselves and to feed their families.¹²⁴

As early as 1802, Imperial laws distinguished between rich and poor bribe-takers, prescribing mercy toward those who accepted bribes out of need rather than avarice.¹²⁵ In resurrecting an established notion of guilt, however, the Petrograd Rabkrin office also summoned a new concept, the existence minimum, to argue not simply that accepting bribes could be justified in cases of need, but that accepting bribes could be justified when the state, as an employer, failed to meet its obligation to its workers.¹²⁶

For the first several years of Soviet power, the material conditions of state labor were oriented around a system of payments in kind known as *paek*, accompanied by money wages. Due to the rapid inflation of the currency, the monetary wages were a less meaningful form of compensation; to receive monetary payments alone was a marker of low social or professional standing. Those who received only monetary compensation from their jobs might still, particularly in the first year or so of Soviet power, receive some form of *paek* through the local systems of rationing developed during the First World War, but this was rarely enough to survive. Over the course of the following years, the *paek* system took shape within individual institutions, according to rules and standards of payment fixed periodically by all-Republic bodies such as the Sovnarkom and VSNKh. In its fullest ex-

124. GARF f. 4085, op. 28, d. 196, l. 20.

125. Janet Hartley, "Bribery and Justice in the Provinces in the Reign of Catherine II," in *Bribery and Blat in Russia: Negotiating Reciprocity from the Middle Ages to the 1990s* eds. Stephen Lovell, Alena Ledeneva, and Andrei Rogachevskii (St. Martin's Press: New York, 2000), pp. 48-64, citation p. 49. Catriona Kelly makes a similar point in the same volume, "Self-Interested Giving: Bribery and Etiquette in Late Imperial Russia," pp. 65-94.

126. Before the Revolution, the Imperial Ministry of Government Control regularly received petitions from employees experiencing various forms of economic need: tuition for the education of children, or an employee's sudden death, and the need to support his orphans. Because remuneration for state employment was broken down into three categories—salary, food or table, and rent or apartment—it is easy to see these additions to an individual employee's earnings, and communications about them were handled separately from his regular pay. In nearly identical language, petitions from ministerial branch offices across Russia, for example, requested "the release of means for the education of children," supported by receipts and testimonials demonstrating fees and the inadequacy of salaries, and the Ministry's agreement to similar requests the previous year. GARF f. 4390, op. 2, d. 8, l. 9. Such petitions included information not only about the employees, their rank and time in service, but also about their families, whether they were married, and how many children they supported. Nearly identical petitions dating from April 1918 can be found at l. 41, from Kursk, l. 42, from Kiev, l. 43 from Kaluga, l. 44 from Kazan, l. 45 from Irkutsk, and so on.

pression paek was awarded in three categories, depending on the nature of a person's labor and their place of employment. "Red army paek" was the most generous and ranked as the "first category"; the "second category" was reserved for those who performed heavy physical labor or served in the Cheka, among a handful of other important positions. Recipients in these two categories obtained both a wider variety and a greater quantity of goods than those in the third category of paek, awarded to people employed by the state but engaged in non-physical labor—the vast majority of state employees. Paek was the critical factor in determining where people went to work; institutions that could muster strong packages had an easier time recruiting skilled workers than those that could not.¹²⁷ In some cases, where one worked mattered more than what category one's labor fell into: among office workers, "Sovnarkom paek" became the gold standard for compensation packages, even at institutions that were not the Sovnarkom. A party official named M. Generalov, recently hired by Narkomfin, backed out of the job when he received neither the apartment nor the "Sovnarkom paek" he was promised, evidently received by other members of Narkomfin's senior management.¹²⁸

Offices could also make their own determinations about which of their employees would receive the various levels of paek. In February 1921, in an internal report on paek sent to the Commissar of Finance, the director of the Central Budget and Accounting Administration explained that the Bureau divided its workers into three categories: the first group was made up of "irreplaceable, responsible, and qualified workers" who performed the most "difficult and important" work over long hours; next came senior workers who would be hard, but not impossible, to replace, followed by less senior workers with unique

127. Narkomfin, virtually all of whose employees fell into this category, struggled throughout the civil war to gain access to a higher category of paek, especially for its tax workers and employees at Gokhran, whose work could be classified as physical and without which recruitment had proven impossible—why, after all, accept a job requiring manual labor at third-category paek? Finally in April 1921, with the advent of the New Economic Policy and the rising importance of financial labor, Narkomfin successfully placed an order with the Central Committee of the Union of Soviet Workers, the chief union of state administrative employees, to "move Narkomfin employees from the third soviet group to the industrial section [the second category]." VTsIK supported the shift, and tax workers and cashiers were even to be assigned to the first category. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 345, l. 42.

128. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 408, l. 302.

qualifications. All of these employees technically fell into the third category of laborers, and they all received paek; how much they received, however, was determined by their ranking inside the office, with accommodation made for the size of their family.¹²⁹ A higher quality of paek was also bestowed on employees within the Commissariat who, due to the nature of their work, faced temptation to participate in illicit acquisition or exchange, or who could otherwise expect regular exposure to “market psychology.” In the case of tax workers, a Narkomfin report argued, “it is necessary to create conditions that will secure their productivity at work. This means good material conditions,” without which, the report warned, “one cannot count on success, especially if one takes into account that the activity of the tax workers is very closely connected to the speculative market with its psychology of easily accessible profits.”¹³⁰ A similar argument was made around workers in the first hotels opened to foreigners in 1921. “The management will have to make special agreements with the employees on the norming of their duties and special bonuses. They should receive food and paek as the service of foreigners demands great self-possession, understanding, and the like.”¹³¹

Paek bestowed meaningful material benefits on those who received it. In the city of Riazan, a Government Control group reported, “workers in soviet organizations” generally lived better than the rest, enjoying access to cheap cafeterias that served only them, the chance to acquire hard to find foods such as sugar and cream through the local supply committee, on top of their paek, “while the local population is deprived of all kinds of products.”¹³² But it was not a panacea. The renowned writer Fedor Sologub fought his way onto the rarefied rolls of “literary paek,” awarded to just 25 writers in all of Petrograd, trudging back and forth for months between his home there and the offices of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment in Moscow before receiving his first package in September 1920—thanks only to the intervention of Vladimir Lenin himself, apparently,

129. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 1926, l. 19.

130. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 382, l. 28.

131. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 377, l. 75.

132. GARF f. 4390, op. 2, d. 276, l. 39.

to whom Sologub addressed lengthy complaints.¹³³ A year later, however, Sologub “again decided to inconvenience” Lenin. Apparently, the literary paek was not all it had cracked up to be: “the writers’ paek, which I receive and have received since September 1920, grows ever more scant,” Sologub reported, before launching into a precise description of the quantities of salt, flour, tobacco, and matches he had received—“that is, nothing to eat.” Sologub and his wife lived off the proceeds from selling their possessions and Sologub’s earnings at literary evenings, the most recent of which, as Sologub recounted in painstaking detail, amounted to 85,000 rubles “which was quickly exchanged for one pound of sugar at 20t[housand], one pound butter at 20t, 4 bottles of milk at 10t, shoe repair at 25t, 4 pounds bread at 10t. I burden your attention with all this data because I think that you, while knowing the high mortality rates, could with difficulty imagine how the life of a writer, even one with a great name, takes shape.”¹³⁴

For workers who either did not receive paek, or received the lowest category of supply, cafeteria lunches and an increasingly worthless money salary were not enough to make ends meet. Nikita Okunev, a Moscow office worker who kept a diary during the Revolution, assiduously noted his earnings and expenses alongside his musings about the tsar’s fate and lachrymose “farewells to the best two decades” of his life. In July 1918, Okunev reported, he earned 800 rubles and spent a minimum of 60 rubles a day “for a modest life, without a servant, without wine, without snacks, nothing new, no Chaliapin, no guests.”¹³⁵ To fill in the difference, Okunev’s wife and daughters sold possessions and things they made at the Sukharevka market; one daughter in particular had discovered a talent for the business, and while Okunev felt guilty sending his women out, as he put it, he recognized that he possessed no such gift. The commonness of this remedy led the Mossoviet, in its general order on

133. GARF f. R130, op. 29, d. 48a, l. 1. From this oversight, and the fact that the writers K. Balmont and Kusevitskii had both been approved for foreign passports while Sologub’s application languished, he concluded “it is obvious that the authorities relate to me differently than to others, although I have never spoken out against them....”

134. *Ibid.*, l. 6.

135. Okunev, *op.cit.*, p. 207. A big fan, Okunev did occasionally spot Chaliapin on the street, excitedly recorded in his diary.

private trade of April 14, 1920, to forbid “individuals who work for soviet institutions and industries and their families” from engaging “in any trade at all.”¹³⁶ Stopgap measures improved the quality of life of particular individuals, but they could not address “the difficult conditions of life, which lower the ability to work,” as Narkomfin’s Information Section put it: “hunger, poor nutrition, the absence of trams, going on foot to collect information from all ends of Moscow, often to no end due to the reorganization of institutions...cold in the work space [circled by the reader], cold in the apartments, exhaustion in connection with these conditions, susceptibility to illness, illness preventing attendance at work, and so on.”¹³⁷ A group of “theses on the supply question” prepared by I.I. Doroshenko “from the perspective of a poor NKF worker” proposed a more radical solution:

The situation with provisions and fuel in Russia, especially in Moscow, is unusually difficult and threatens catastrophic consequences. The situation of the soviet employee, and of us, workers in finance-control affairs, who are not connected to the privileged categories of paek.../metalworkers, rail workers, employees of the Ch.K. and the like/ is such that exhaustion of the organism and mortality from hunger, cold, and illness, and flight to places with grain, has taken on the character of a public disaster. Work has stopped.

In light of all this the workers of the Moscow regional congress of workers in finance-control affairs call up the authorities to...abolish the system where some workers receive privileges over others in the distribution of paek. ...a continuation of this situation will be a disaster.¹³⁸

Even at the comparatively well-supplied VSNKh, Monisov discovered in an audit of the timber industry, the basic dearth of supplies had brought work to a standstill. “We arrived around noon” to the timber offices, Monisov recalled, “and found no one there. It

136. *Kommunisticheskii trud*, no. 28, April 23, 1920.

137. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 159, l. 15.

138. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 345, l. 51.

turned out there was no heat and the ink froze, and so workers came in at 10 and left at 11, and did an hour [of work]. You can imagine what an impression this made on the auditors, if at the Main Timber Committee the ink has frozen due to cold, what is going on elsewhere in Moscow[...]"¹³⁹

These were the conditions in which state employees faced, as one put it, “the eternal dilemma...either literally to die of hunger, or, risking one’s life, to speculate.” For the slightly better-positioned, the émigré I. Rapoport observed, there was also “a third way”—neither starvation nor speculation, but “*zloupotreblenie po sluzhbe*,” a catch-all term for crime on the job. “Along this path have traveled the vast majority,” Rapoport mused. “L’appetit vient en mangeant.”¹⁴⁰ Stories also circulated, real or invented, of those who made the opposite choice, attempting to live only on their legal allocation. A. Gurovich, an inspector at VSNKh before he emigrated, recounted that one his coworkers, the chemical engineer L. Karpov, who directed the chemical department at VSNKh until his death from typhoid in 1921, “did not use the services of the ‘bagmen’ on principle.” Karpov and his wife allegedly refused “any kind of illegal acquisitions, living exclusively on their paek distributions, which was not much: half a pound of bread each day, five pounds of beets, eight pounds of potatoes, one pound of rice and fifteen or so herring a month. (Special paek for ‘soviet workers’ did not yet exist...)”¹⁴¹ The literary critic Kazimierz Wyka, writing in Poland at the end of the Second World War, recalled a similar choice at work under the harshly restrictive economic conditions of the German occupation. “Technically there might have been a question—eat within the law and die, or find some way to survive despite the regulations. But no one seriously considered the former,” Wyka wrote, and so interests rapidly shifted to the latter—the “how” of eating outside the law. Out of this choice and the behaviors crafted to answer it, Wyka believed, a new “economic psyche” was born.¹⁴² Here

139. NIOR f. 369, kart. 397, d. 14, l. 69.

140. *ibid*, p. 103.

141. *Arkhiv russkoi revoliutsii*, op. cit., vol. 6, p. 323.

142. For Wyka, because the “choice” imposed by the Germans was in fact “fictional,” and known to be so by all who suffered through the occupation, a specific sort of decay set into to economic mores under the Germans, a special cynicism about laws and regulations that, he warned, if not curbed immediately by the

we will examine the “how” of malfeasance in the revolutionary era for clues to the practices, and perhaps the “economic psyche,” of state employees, in an economy that was at once sharply constricted and freewheeling, buffered by scarcity and the ideological imperative to destroy capitalism.

In Russia as elsewhere in Europe during the First World War, the increased state control over the economy brought with it questions about what constituted an acceptable level of profit for private enterprises, particularly those benefiting from state contracts for military provisioning. A sense that profits had become exorbitant and traditional business ethics had crumbled was widely held among members of Russia’s political class.¹⁴³ Narratives of the October Revolution authored by émigrés who worked for Whites reliably point to the unquenchable thirst for profit of Russia’s own merchant class as a chief cause of the underfunding, and ultimate collapse, of the anti-Bolshevik movement.¹⁴⁴ In this, too, Russia could have resembled the other combatants, who sweltered in what R.H. Tawney calls the “tropical” economic climate of the post-war. Inflation, Tawney observes of the British case, spurred a “merry-go-round” of speculative exchange, while the end of the war brought with it an end to obligatory state controls on economic activity. “The cheerless winter of conversion-costs and fixed commissions suddenly melted into the spring of a profit-makers’ paradise. The gambling instinct, balked or dormant during the war, reawoke all the keener for its temporary hibernation.”¹⁴⁵

The drivers of change were quite different in Russia, but the resulting economic climate was not necessarily any less tropical. The end of private property itself drew near; meanwhile state control did not dissipate, it tightened—but the nature of the state itself, and of the economy in the absence of private property, was altered in ways that could only

post-war authorities, would have dire consequences. Kazimierz Wyka, “The Excluded Economy,” in *The Unplanned Society: Poland During and After Communism* (New York, 1992), p. 25.

143. Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution* op.cit., p. 20.

144. General B. Kazanovich, “Poezdka iz Dobrovolcheskoï armii v ‘Krasnuiu Moskvu,’ May-July 1918,” April 23 1922. *Arkhiv russkoi revoliutsii* vol. 7, pp. 196-197.

145. R.H. Tawney, “The Abolition of Economic Controls, 1918-1921,” *The Economic History Review*, vol. xiii, (1943), pp. 15-16.

be guessed it. By all accounts, the atmosphere grew tropical indeed. Wading into the business of provisioning for the Kremlin, the Imperial industrialist Monisov found the waters populated by “sharks [who] were not satisfied with big profits, who sought millions, for example the proprietor of the Pushkin cooperation openly boasted, ‘I will not make do with earnings less than 100 million in gold from Soviet Power, and when I get that sum abroad I’ll close the shop.’”¹⁴⁶

In this florid economic climate, an older ethos of doing business, its strictures already loosened by the opportunities of war, encountered the new task of state management in a socialist economy. Exotic new species of deceit blossomed in the wilds of socialist allocation, while more familiar incarnations, like bribery and embezzlement, drew new life. Few statutes governed who, precisely, counted as a state employee—and thus who could be charged with crimes on the job—before 1923. The regulations that were eventually fitted into the 1923 criminal code made getting convicted of a crime on the job easier than ever.¹⁴⁷ Two overarching modes of *zloupotreblenie* or crime on the job within the state

146. NIOR f. 369, kart. 397, d. 14, l. 14. No matter what one’s predictions for the future, it was a moment ripe for gambling—so ripe that some thought even Lenin might want in on the game. While traveling the Ukrainian border to supply the Kremlin cooperative, Monisov was approached by an “old acquaintance from the trade business” who had heard of Monisov’s connection to the new regime and, together with some foreign bankers, wanted to make Lenin an offer. They proposed to pay hard currency for “the whole mass” of “valuable stocks,” shares in confiscated oil companies, railways, and municipal bonds that had been seized by the regime and declared worthless at Russia. They were prepared to pay current prices for the papers on the Stockholm market—where all of these shares, worthless inside Russia, continued to trade. Monisov relayed the offer to Lenin through Bonch-Bruevich, but Lenin allegedly turned it down, saying, “How can I allow an operation on that basis, I am certain that the all those stock papers will never have any value whatsoever.”

147. In general, the legal scholar A.A. Zhizhilenko wrote in 1923, the code recognized the difficulty of “precisely fixing in law” the many possible ways in which employees might violate their duties; much was left to the sphere of the “disciplinary, rather than judicial organs” for this reason. Equal expansiveness was given to the definition of a “public official.” The Soviet code abandoned the Imperial distinction between the “responsible” senior employee, who could more culpable for wrongdoing than the junior “employee” according to the provisions of the 1903 criminal code. “The evolution of state and administrative life,” Zhizhilenko observed, “forces us to consider every tiny screw in the state mechanism as necessary to the general tasks of state.” For that reason, Zhizhilenko explained, the Soviet code treated every employee as equally responsible for his or her actions, “no matter how small their work...typists, copyists, couriers, are all responsible employees.” Moreover, one did not have to be an employee of the state in order to be charged with malfeasance in office. “It is usual for [a criminal] code to give a definition of a state employee and article 105 does this,” Zhizhilenko noted. According to the terms of the 1923 code, this status was enjoyed not only by those who occupied jobs “in the sphere of public-legal relations that arise between a state and citizens,” but also “in that sphere which goes beyond the public-legal relations of this type, but which is connected to certain tasks undertaken by the state in general.” A “public official” was a person who occupied a job “in a state institution, in a state enterprise, in an organization or unified body which is given rights and powers by law, and performs

emerged. Few instances of wrongdoing were entirely one or the other; these two modes were rather two ends on a spectrum of malfeasance. The first mode involved “doing a bad deal.” Bad deals were those due to which the treasury suffered an economic loss, although formal rules may not have been broken. The genre of bad deals would not have been new to the revolutionary era, but its scale and technique was greatly expanded. The second mode involved the “capitalization of the non-market,” in which the treasury suffered no particular loss as a result of a given transaction, but formal rules of conduct were violated, and the privileges of access were commoditized. Under this rubric fell the familiar crime of bribery as well as more novel charges, such as “separatism”—failing to adhere to central allocation orders—in the management of material resources.

Both the phenomenon of bad deals and that of capitalizing the non-market involved a blending of the market with the non-market. The bad deal evoked and relied on notions of value and “economy” as frugality inherited from the capitalist world. Take, for instance, a bad deal made by the director of the Railway department of the People’s Bank, V.V. Ptukha. While still in Petrograd, Ptukha purchased a “limousine” from a citizen Orokhovskii for the “transport of valuables” between bank locations and railway depots. Upon learning that his department would be moving to Moscow, Ptukha announced that he would sell the limousine, as it would be “too unwieldy for Moscow and thus inconvenient.” A colleague advised him to purchase a truck as a replacement, but instead, a few weeks later, Ptukha turned up with an awkwardly-configured RAF. His colleagues protested that a truck would much better suit the department’s needs, and Ptukha promised to think about it, but in the meantime asked the department mechanic to look over the RAF and let him know what he thought of it. The mechanic thought it was terrible: the horn made no sound, the steering column was impossible to turn, and the motor lacked an on-off switch. Both Ptukha’s chauffeur

certain general state tasks.” As the provision made clear, “office” could mean warehouse, stockroom, or factory floor. “Workers in supply, distribution, production and preparation” were all public officials, as were those in “non-state institutions or enterprises” that possessed “rights or duties supplied by the state.” A. A. Zhizhilenko, *Dolzhestnye (sluzhebnye) prestupleniia (st.st. 105-118 ugovnogo kodeksa)* (Moscow, 1923), pp. 4, 5, 10.

and the mechanic advised against buying the RAF and Ptukha agreed with them, they later testified, “but then he said, all the same we have to take it, as he had already paid 2,000r on it.”¹⁴⁸ At this point, the chauffeur began to suspect that a “dark deal” [*temnaia pokupka*] was afoot. He told two inspectors inside the department, who looked into the sale, and also concluded that the RAF was a lemon. Indeed, they actually quantified just how much of a lemon the RAF was, assessing its value at no more than 10,000 rubles—against the 30,000 Ptukha had agreed to pay it.¹⁴⁹ Ptukha’s crime was that he “overpaid,” the report concluded. “Upon reviewing the accounts, the representatives of control cannot but draw attention to the incorrect application to the Treasury of a loss of 20,000r.” The controllers did not pursue the allegations of a “dark deal” with the RAF’s mysterious seller, but they did demand that he repay 20,000 rubles to the treasury.¹⁵⁰ According to the industrialist Monisov, when he was working at the Commissariat of Government Control and struggling to come up with a system for evaluating job candidates who had been “recommended” to him, Felix Dzerzhinsky, the head of the Cheka, proposed the following principle: “if it turns out that due to a recommendation, the *Soviet treasury suffers a loss* ... the person who recommended them will be held responsible.”¹⁵¹

Not all bad deals negotiated by state agents were intentional, of course, and many of the employees who ended up losing the state money had tried to work conscientiously. Often those caught up in bad deals, purposefully or not, had broken no rules, a perverse inversion of Rigby’s apt characterization of the Soviet state as a “task-achieving” rather than “rule-applying” entity. Rules surrounding the proper usage of the Republic’s many surrogates for paper currency, for example, barely existed; the regulations on file, such as

148. GARF f. 4390, op. 1, d. 204, l. 3b.

149. Naturally, other irregularities presented themselves in the course of the investigation, including the fact that Ptukha had lied about paying just 2,000 rubles in deposit for the RAF. In reality he had paid the whole sum of 30,000 rubles on the spot, to a seller who immediately fled for Ukraine and whose identity could not now be verified. Additionally, Ptukha required his chauffeur to drive him to and from his home in the suburb of Pushkino, despite the fact that Pushkino had a train station and indeed, why must he live so far from Moscow in the first place.

150. *ibid.*, l. 5.

151. NIOR f. 369, kart. 397, d. 14, l. 101. Italics mine.

they were, changed rapidly to keep pace with inflation. It was easy to take advantage of this situation, and inflation schemes were among the most common sort of bad deal.¹⁵² The combination of rapidly-changing rules and slow communications, however, made fertile ground for simple confusion. Here too, the principle of treasury losses was applied. When Narkomfin discovered that a branch office in the Tver region had been treating old loan papers, which were supposed to be discounted, as equivalent to their full face value in cash, it initiated criminal proceedings against the branch office—not because it had broken the rules around surrogates, but because, due to the fact that it had broken the rules, the Treasury had suffered a loss of 350,000 rubles. When it was subsequently established in August 1920, after an exhaustive review of the branch office’s accounts, that “the Treasury suffered no monetary loss as a result of the release of the above-named obligations,” the regional Narkomfin authorities asked whether they should proceed with the matter in the courts, as previously ordered, or whether the matter could now be considered closed.¹⁵³

As an internal Rabkrin report observed, precisely the mechanism by which the regime sought to fight crime on the job—through agencies of control—more commonly enabled and expanded malfeasance. Ports and railway depots handling imports and exports, the report explained, were by September 1921 observed by “almost all the control organs of the Republic, including the criminal and river militias, Rabkrin, representatives from all sorts of organs of the Cheka, including the [regional Chekas], the [transportation Chekas], and others.” Agents of control actually outnumbered dockworkers, a waste of manpower, source of confusion, and situation that in the end, the reviewer determined, “not only does

152. Monisov wrote that when he worked at the Kommunist cooperative, he often “witnessed the following: a certain person takes a big advance, holds it for 10-15 days, and then returns, giving back the money in full to the very kopeck, and crying about how he was not able to make any deals, and instead just spent his own personal money on his travels.” Once Monisov himself gave an old merchant he knew in Gomel an advance of several hundred thousand rubles that the merchant returned, unspent, two weeks later, claiming there was nothing to buy. Only from a clerk also on the buying trip did Monisov learn that “[h]aving received the money, the Gomel merchant did not even consider buying anything, but instead immediately began speculating in currency; at that time the ruble of one day could be turned into r1 25k [one ruble 25 kopecks] the next, if not one and a half....the course of the soviet ruble in that way began to function as a black market for such combinations.” Ibid, l. 16.

153. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 187, l. 218.

not improve matters but on the contrary, increases the incidence of crime on the job and theft.”¹⁵⁴

Malfeasance required the cooperation of others, often colleagues who may also have been, as we have seen, daughters, brothers-in-law, or friends. State offices naturally served as focal points for coordinating these activities, providing them with telephones, transportation, staff, and even bookkeeping services. This symbiosis between official and unofficial work adhered to virtually every institution. But some institutions were overtaken by it. This was the case at Tsentropechat, the state agency responsible for the distribution of printed matter, which, according to reports, became little more than a shell for the unofficial work of its employees before its dismantling in 1921. Tasked with carrying “periodicals, rush correspondence, and secret packets” all across the Republic, Tsentropechat was created during the Civil War, when the regular postal service broke down. So important were the documents and periodicals it carried that its agents were provided with special talons allowing them to ride military trains and commandeer whole cars, carrying printed matter across the front lines and into “friendly” foreign territories.¹⁵⁵ At its peak, Tsentropechat’s transportation department employed more than 850 runners, traveling “from the center to the periphery, often even going abroad.”

“By the very nature of their work,” the Rabkrin report observed, “agents travel in all directions, going to the very borders of the RSFSR.... Truly, being people whose job it is to never be in one place, they can use their work position for desertion, undoubtedly for speculation, and it is wholly possible for the goal of counterrevolution.”¹⁵⁶ As the investigation discovered, Tsentropechat hosted a lucrative supply business that ran in parallel to its official mission of delivering printed matter. By spreading one carload of printed material out over three railcars, they obtained three times the space—extraordinarily valuable space, given the state of rail transport at the time—to fill up with goods for the return trip, sold

154. GARF f. 4085, op. 28, d. 259, l. 52.

155. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 21, l. 293. The Rabkrin inspector who led the investigation into Tsentropechat was none other than Monisov.

156. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 17, l. 10.

back in Moscow or along the way. The funds for buying goods out on the road also came from Tsentropechat's coffers. "From the books," the inspectors wrote, "it is obvious that the departing agents were given various sums ranging from the comically small 30,000 rubles and more significant figures all the way up to two million for the purchase of provisions for employees."¹⁵⁷ There was some dispute as to what generally happened next. One version of the report claimed the "sums were never returned"—meaning they were embezzled; another version claimed that "almost always, these sums were returned less the expenditures on the trip"—meaning that they themselves were speculated as currency.¹⁵⁸ Tsentropechat indignantly fought the charges but to no avail: all but its local distribution offices were dissolved and the task of improving the distribution of printed matter across the Republic given to Comrade Trotsky.

If one end of the malfeasance spectrum involved breaking no rules but losing the state money, the other centered on actions that lost no money but broke the rules. Also spoken of as the "capitalization" of what were supposed to be non-markets—allocation systems that depended on need rather money—this form of malfeasance included crimes such as bribery and related actions that commoditized state powers. One of the most widespread forms of "capitalizing" the non-market occurred in the housing sector. Most people paid almost nothing in rent and utility charges. What they paid for instead, according to a Narkomfin report on currency problems, was access, in the form of bribes to housing department agents and building committees. "In the millions that are paid in Moscow for access to rooms and apartments, one can see a 'capitalization' of rents," even in their formal absence.¹⁵⁹ Here too, the targets and agents of bribery schemes included not just individuals or households but also institutions, as when an employee of the Fifth State Typography informed representatives from the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs that the printing of its booklet of foreign flags could not be sped up—unless, of course, the Commissariat "was willing to pay the

157. *Ibid.*, l. 294.

158. *Ibid.*, l. 294; GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 17, l. 10.

159. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2763, l. 10.

engraver for his labor as he performed it,” in which case “the question could be resolved much more quickly.” The Commissariat reported the incident to the Cheka on the grounds that its request, “based on the real needs of a whole row of institutions, should be fulfilled in the general order and not by means of separate agreements with one person or another.”¹⁶⁰ Institutions were also seen as potential agents of bribery and other crimes on the job. In the city of Tambov, a Cheka surveillance report (*svodka*) read in 1920, “several speculative bands have been exposed, as have criminal activities on the part of several senior employees of various organizations and even criminal work of entire institutions, such as Proput, with threads running all the way back to Moscow.”

The official term used to describe crimes on the job that involved whole institutions was “separatism,” or the allocation of goods in a way other than what central orders specified. “We are accused of the fact that major thefts are occurring at the warehouse,” an anonymous letter from an employee of the fuel warehouse in question to the Moscow branch of Government Control read in 1918, “in which both workers and security guards take part. We are accused of separatist activities, going against the orders of the center....To our great misfortune and shame, there is some truth to these claims.”¹⁶¹ Just like loss-making, however, separatism was everywhere. In its most robust expressions, it presented as theft. But it was also woven into distribution activities in more subtle ways—ways that involved not breaking rules so much as supercharging documents, transactions, and deals with an additional “interestedness.” As one memoirist, employed before his emigration at a state trust, wrote, “there is not a single budget, document, or paper that does not conceal someone’s live private interest,” it was necessary only to “know where to look.” The result was a “huge ‘economy’ of expenditures, about which the center does not know and cannot know: to send people to verify the work at all the factories is not possible and in the end, these people are also just people and want to eat.”¹⁶²

160. GARF f. 4085, op. 28, d. 259, l. 21.

161. TsAGM f. 2435, op. 1, d. 83, l. 24.

162. *Arkhiv russkoi revoliutsii*, vol. 2, p. 103, giving , Stephen Kotkin’s argument in “The State: Is it Us? Memoirs, Archives, and Kremlinologists,” an early voice.

And yet, the people who worked in the Soviet state were not just people, the same as people everywhere—or at the very least, they were not the same as the people who had come before. These people were something new, as it appeared to those who spent time with them and wrote about the experience. Memoirs of the state during the revolutionary era contained a requisite taxonomy of the many kinds of people who could be found there. As if the authors had recently come ashore on a new continent, the experience of working inside the revolutionary regime and encounters with its servants seemed sufficiently exotic to merit their own nomenclature. “Among the employees, there are three groups,” read one. “First, the mass of low-level chancellery workers, then the middle and upper ‘responsible’ worker specialists, and finally, the communists, setting the tone for the whole concert.” The mass of chancellery workers were “rather grey,” and many were female: the most common specimen of the bunch was the “sovietskaia baryshnia.” Undisciplined and marginally literature, the soviet demoiselle nevertheless, this observer recognized, “supported the entire system of soviet bureaucratism: without them it would be impossible to write papers, or send them, or give orders, or set budgets and the like.” Interspersed among them were also “true, dedicated laborers,” but these, especially if they possessed special skills, tended to advance rapidly into the upper ranks. The upper ranks were topped “by communists, in both the center and the localities, and under them, the spetsy,” or specialists, who varied greatly “in both social quality and level of experience,” hailing from the bureaucrats, industrialists, and free professions of the old regime.¹⁶³

Another writer expected that “the great majority of workers” at his new job “would be party communists” or affiliated with other socialist parties. “This opinion existed in Moscow more generally,” he explained, but it was mistaken. The most dominant group among the lower ranks was instead the baryshnia, followed close after by the “young people, former accountants, clerks, bookkeepers, or students...” who had their own occupation, “dragging themselves along the hallways and flirting,” their own diet, “khalva and nuts,”

163. *Arkhiv russkoi revoliutsii*, vol. 2, p. 101.

and their own obsessively-pursued leisure time activity: trying by all means possible to acquire theater tickets. A bit higher up were the “former ministerial bureaucrats,” who came to work not simply because of material need, but also out of a “longing for the work to which they were accustomed, which had consumed more than one decade in their lives.” Finally, there were the intelligentsia, who made up the larger segment of the mid-level employees and a portion of the upper ones. Among the intelligentsia, there were the “romantic types, who saw service in an enemy citadel as a type of adventure.” There were those who were “indifferent to everything on earth except their own well-being, as well as dark figures, attaching themselves to the Bolshevik chaos so as to steal as much as they could in its shadow.” And then there were those among whom the author counted himself: “specialists who wanted to preserve a matter close to them, or who, like me, wanted to soften the regime.”¹⁶⁴

Such taxonomies were not stable. They shifted along with the changes in the employees themselves, which were perceived to be extensive. After joining the regime, it was reported, “the romantics soon despaired,” seeing that they now lived not in a world of adventure, but of the “most common and quotidian bureaucratic prose. They turned their dreams either to flirting, as the place was rich in baryshnia, or to... adventures of a more greedy character.”¹⁶⁵ Those who entered service in the expectation of turning a profit found it “easy, given the disorder.” Speculating on advances, trading in nationalized goods, squeezing taxpayers—the possibilities were endless. What was more surprising, this writer insisted, was how many more besides those who entered service intending to ended up treating the state as a business. “This form of enrichment did not make squeamish for a moment even people of the utmost honesty [*poriadichnost*], whom just a year earlier, it would never have occurred to anyone to doubt.” The great change, then, was two-fold: it occurred not simply in the people themselves—gone to work for the Bolsheviks, engaged in behaviors that, just one year earlier, would not have crossed their minds—but also in the way it was

164. Ibid, p. 102.

165. *Arkhiv russkoi revoliutsii*, op.cit., vol. 6, p. 316.

necessary to view these people, whom just one year earlier no one would have thought to doubt.¹⁶⁶

Real life stories of similar transformations were common, tales of colleagues whom one had no reason to doubt, until they skipped town. In September 1918, Karl Lander, the Commissar of Government Control, supplied an agent with a mandate to travel to Petrograd in order to “arrest and return to Moscow the senior controller Nikolai Nikolaevich Kotelnikov, accused of “illegally receiving 80,000 rubles of state money and embezzling 20,000 rubles of this.” Over the previous year, Kotelnikov had risen through the ranks from second assistant to the director of his department, which dealt with social aid organizations, to senior controller and deputy director of a department in charge of liquidating all such organizations. He had been hired because of his extensive work with the Red Cross. His boss signed an order for 10,000 rubles made out to him for work, which he altered to read 80,000. Notations in the accounts indicated that such forgeries had occurred before. “From all this it is obvious,” the report on him read, “that Kotelnikov pulled off the forgeries exclusively because he enjoyed great authority among the employees of the department and the trust of its director, and he used this situation, not calling up doubt when he requested blanks and account books to take home with him.”¹⁶⁷

People lived on the edge of this choice. They lived with regrets. One day in July 1919, just before closing time, a substitute cashier at a bank department received a payment of 300,000 rubles from a clerk.

Receiving the money, I put it straight into a bag without counting it and in view of the fact that it was too late to bring it to the committee [to which it was being paid] as it was already five o'clock, I went straight to my apartment where, after a little while, I got some papers I needed for work out of my briefcase, and was surprised at how many packets of money there were.

166. *ibid*, p. 317.

167. GARF f. 4390, op. 1, d. 146, l. 31, 32.

Only at this point, when he was already at home by himself, did the cashier, A.A. Galli, decide to count the money, discovering there had been “a huge mistake”—not that he, Galli, had taken a big bag of money home with him, but rather that the clerk had given him three million rubles instead of 300,000. “Not wanting to misuse the money of the laboring people I immediately telephoned the bank” and related what had happened. And now it fell to Galli to ponder what might have been. Three days after the clerk’s big mistake, Galli penned a letter to the directors of the Moscow bank branch seeking a monetary reward for his sacrifice. “I address myself to the bank administration with a request,” Galli wrote, “that it value according to its worth my act of honesty and take into account my family situation as the sole breadwinner of a family unable to work, leaving shortly for the ranks of the red army.”¹⁶⁸ Galli’s request was sent to the bank’s legal department for consideration. It found that while there was “no juridical basis for Galli to receive such a reward and that in this situation he behaved just as any honest citizen should,” his action was sufficiently rare “given the general fall in the sense of moral duty at the present time” and his family situation sufficiently “heavy” to merit “some sort of reward for services rendered to the treasury,” which the Malyi Sovnarkom could issue legally.¹⁶⁹ At no point was Galli upbraided in the printed record for taking home with him an enormous bag of cash.

Where capitalist boomtowns and ports along the Mississippi were plagued by confidence men, the capital of early Soviet socialism was peopled by anti-confidence men.¹⁷⁰ Thieves and “tricksters” abounded, to be sure, but far more numerous were those who found themselves engaged in crime on the job willy-nilly, who saw an opening and faced a choice. It was easy, after all, to take bags of cash home. It took no special mastery of bureaucratic protocols or careful forgeries of bills of credit; the forgeries, as was witnessed in the previous chapter, were generally more “trustworthy” in appearance than the authentic bills.

168. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 191, l. 47.

169. *Ibid.*, l. 49.

170. See Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The World of Ostap Bender: Soviet Confidence Men in the Stalin Period,” *Slavic Review* vol. 61, no. 3 (Autumn 2002), pp. 535-557, for a contrasting view.

Imperial society had weakly developed mechanisms of credit and trust, which grew even weaker during the Revolution.

The experience of the Revolution inside state institutions brought virtually all those who worked in them within sight of this choice at one moment or another. How people would choose was hard to predict. Monisov, who has served as a guide to so much of this chapter, encountered many people in the course of his audits, and as happens when thinking back on those with whom our paths have crossed, he wondered what had happened to those people and ruminated on their fates. He wrote about a controller, a former soap maker and talented specialist, recommended to him for an investigation by a senior Party member. They had been together during an apartment search in which a trove of foreign currency was found; the target of the search offered a “major sum of money” and some diamonds to one of the inspectors, Monisov’s subordinate, but this inspector, “a simple worker for whom a hundred rubles was a whole existence, refused in the name of the revolution.” Meanwhile it turned out that the controller, Monisov recalled, “had insinuated himself into the investigation” with the purpose of deceit, which Monisov foiled. “I do not know how he ended,” Monisov mused, “in Butyrki where they sent him for his help with the review. Probably he goes about Moscow today as a Gogol-nepman or is cooling off at some dacha outside of Moscow. Or maybe he has been sent as an unemployed worker to relax or take the cure at some first-class resort.”¹⁷¹

Monisov himself, at any rate, was a different man after ten years of service in the Soviet state. You could see the change in him, he wrote, through his things. Despite several invitations and against the prediction of Felix Edmundovich Dzerzhinsky himself, Monisov did not join the Party and continued to practice his devout Christian faith. He recalled the dramatic encounter, the one time he and Dzerzhinsky fought, he claimed, when the latter asked him to investigate the overcrowded Moscow prisons. Monisov refused on the grounds that he was not a Party member, and could not investigate what he did not “understand”—

171. NIOR f. 369, kart. 397, d. 14, l. 101.

those arrested for political, rather than criminal, offenses. Dzerzhinsky allegedly replied, “you have done so much for the RSFSR with all your soul, I thought that you would ask if not today then tomorrow to be taken into the Party.”

No, Feliks Edmundovich, I replied. I am too old to be made into a communist...and if you want to know the truth, I curse you communists every night as I go to bed, and every morning as I wake up, for depriving me of my capital, my buildings, my comfort and that of my family. I would be relaxing at some foreign resort right now and instead, in my old age, I am traipsing out on investigations, exhausting my physical strength and ruining my nerves. I wear a little old jacket and a coat full of holes because you, my boss, a soviet minister, go about in winter and summer in a coat full of holes. How would I look next to you, in my expensive beaver-fur coat, which by the way my family has saved for me, but must sit even in the deepest frost wrapped up in naphthalene instead of keeping me warm?¹⁷²

Hearing this, Dzerzhinsky supposedly agreed with Monisov that it would be best not to send him on the prison review, but he wanted Monisov to know that “this open conversation will remain between us” and he had “not lost any measure of trust” in him. “There is your ‘terrible Dzerzhinsky’ for you!” Monisov concluded from the experience. “The same ‘terrible Dzerzhinsky’ who freed very many people from prison at my request and kept them from getting shot. They are walking about Moscow and the whole RSFSR even today and blessing his ‘terrible’ name.”¹⁷³ As for Monisov’s property—his capital, his buildings—in truth, he wrote, he was far too busy at work to notice when they were seized. “I kept the buildings for two or three years” after the Revolution, Monisov explained. “And then, in violation of the decrees, they were municipalized. But at this point I was already in Moscow and employed in responsible posts in soviet work, having renounced all that was in the past,

172. *Ibid.*, l. 106.

173. *Ibid.*, l. 107.

I became simpler [I was simplified] and as part of this I did not even lodge a complaint about the incorrect actions of the Petrograd Soviet.”¹⁷⁴

174. *Ibid.*, l. 11.

Conclusion: Closing the Revolution?

In 1921, the Soviet Republic lurched from the programs of state-building and economy described here and subsequently known as “war communism” to a disjointed and grudging toleration of market activity under the New Economic Policy. Something about the juxtaposition of these two material regimes—the one so insistently brash and novel, the other so apparently familiar, a retreat—has long seemed to demand a very particular kind of explanation: which one was real? The measures by which reality should be assessed have shifted over time: which one was Lenin’s true vision and testament? Which one did the people want? The answers to these questions seem always to come with high stakes, stretching tentacle-like, backwards and forwards from the spotty declarations of 1921 that overturned grain seizures and relinquished monopolies on trade. If the NEP was the real socialism, if it was what Lenin or the people (workers) wanted, did it then constitute an “alternative” to what came later, to the First Five-Year Plan and all it entailed? But if the NEP was indeed real, then why the trauma of the four years leading up to it? Why, that is, did war communism happen? Through the filter of what followed, war communism takes shape as either a policy deployed sincerely in pursuit of socialism, backed by ideological conviction, or one driven by exigency, backed by a pragmatic or, more narrowly, economic motive.

Both sides of this choice, long a dominant filter on the revolutionary era, require subscribing to various additional assumptions: about the coherence of war communism and the NEP as distinct programs, about how power worked in the emerging dictatorship, and

about the very possibility of separating out a motive of economic exigency from political ambition or ideology in the revolutionary era. The conceptualization of the economy as a bounded entity, and of the economic as distinct from the political or the social, is itself, Timothy Mitchell demonstrates, a product of historical conjuncture. In the Western world, Mitchell argues, it grew out of the colonial experience and the vast scholarly edifice it produced. Mitchell's account makes little mention of the contributions of Marx or Marxism to the emerging distinctiveness of "the economy" as an object of developmentalist attention, but the admonition to treat the relation between the economy and other spheres of activity as a question, rather than fixed bond, still applies. Rather than attempting to elevate ideology over exigency or to separate out political aspirations from economic need, the aim of this work has been to highlight the recasting of what constituted the economy during the revolutionary era.¹⁷⁵ Was housing an economic good or a right? If it was a right, who enjoyed it, and who got to decide? This was the work of the housing departments and of all those who lived in revolutionary cities. Meanwhile Gokhran, Gorprodukt, the Petrokommuna, and numerous other bodies set out to divine which objects remained subject to the laws of the market, and which ones should be removed from economic exchange and distributed according to different, as yet uncertain principles. This project has cut a very small window onto a wide horizon for future research.

This dissertation ends just as the influence of the New Economic Policy began to be felt in the spheres of property, value, and state structures that have been our focus here. This influence can be glimpsed not only in the possibilities for economic life opened up by the NEP and in popular and official efforts to discern its meaning for the future of socialist practice, but in efforts to assess its meaning for the revolutionary past. This, as we have seen in Chapter 2, was the question that citizenness Tikhobrazova posed to the Petrograd author-

175. The temptation to choose one or the other, economy or politics, remains strong. See the arguments for the primacy of economic factors in the Great Break made by Oscar Sanchez-Sibony and Andrew Sloin in introductory comments to a special issue of *Kritika*, vol. 15, no. 1, on "Stalinism and the Economy." Oscar Sanchez-Sibony and Andrew Sloin, "Economy and Power in the Soviet Union, 1917-1939," *Kritika* vol. 15, no. 1 (Winter 2014), pp. 7-22.

ities upon returning to the city after an absence of several years, during which Petrograd lived through the whirlwind of dispossession: having missed out on the whirlwind, having stored her household possessions in a warehouse where they remained safe and whole, could Tikhobrazova return to enjoy her things as if nothing had happened? The laws of seizure by which so many people lost their personal effects had now been amended; the whirlwind was brought to a close. Tikhobrazova's case was important and troubling precisely because it invited reflection on whether it was possible to end the whirlwind without reversing the Revolution.

The same problem—how to put an end to the elemental redistribution of space and things, how to reintroduce or officially recognize elements of market exchange and valuation, how to build a state capable of managing these tasks, without at the same time overturning the Revolution itself—cropped up again and again, in the center and the localities, as the NEP came into effect. In August 1921, a plenipotentiary in Siberia named Pavlunovskii wrote to Moscow that the “new course of Soviet politics,” intended to put an end to chaos of “redistribution,” as he put it, was paradoxically making it more difficult to govern the local population, divided “into two meaningful segments: the kulaks and the poor.” For the past several years, Pavlunovskii explained, “the poor of the Siberian countryside have been surviving off the redistribution” of goods and property. With the sudden change in policies, “they are not supposed to” participate in such redistribution any longer, Pavlunovskii wrote, “but they do not accept this, and they continue to implement this redistribution, namely the requisitions, confiscations, and the like, which we can call economic banditry.”¹⁷⁶ Where in the previous period “the battle of the poor with the kulaks occurred in an orderly fashion and under our control, namely the poor joined the *prodotriady* and with the help of the communist cells implemented *razverstka*, requisition, and

176. The evocative name that Pavlunovskii eventually settled on for the phenomenon was “red banditry,” significant because, as he tried to convey to the Cheka in Moscow, it made clear that banditry in Siberia was not oppositional, it was in fact an “outgrowth” of the regime’s own policies and the “class contradictions” of the region. His letter was part of a large file in Lenin’s directorate dedicated to understanding the efflorescence of banditry in 1921-22, especially in the border regions.

confiscation,” now, “in the new period, this battle of the poor with the kulaks flows outside of our organizational influence.”¹⁷⁷ Having legitimated the whirlwind of dispossession as the material form of Revolution, Soviet authorities now faced the task of delegitimizing it, of separating out the Revolution as something distinct that could move forward into a new practice of material life.¹⁷⁸

It is possible that this question was posed most sharply in the realm of movable goods, where the basic practice of requisition, confiscation, and redistribution was most deeply ingrained and powerfully tied to the experience of revolution itself. But it was felt in other spheres of material life, as well. In the built environment, the new emphasis on “khozaschet”¹⁷⁹ or “economic cost accounting” appeared on the surface to extend the most recent policies of local housing departments, which, in recognition of the disastrous ruination wrought in the past four years, protected the spatial rights of inhabitants who could demonstrate that they had maintained their buildings without the involvement of municipal authorities. An unexpected side effect of the municipalization of built space had been its utter degradation: without the promise of secure habitation rights, few residents were willing to invest their own money or labor in their houses; meanwhile, municipal authorities lacked the manpower and supplies to maintain the vast urban plant themselves. By all accounts the program to protect the habitation rights of residents who maintained their own buildings had succeeded—so much so that in February 1922, the Mossoviet ordered the program be extended. In order to “battle the catastrophic and progressive destruction of residences by drawing the wide circles of the population into the administration and direction of buildings,” the Mossoviet ordered that “all possible cooperation” be shown by municipal and

177. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 2560, l. 93.

178. For more on this effort, see Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (MIT, 2008).

179. This translation is Alan Ball’s. The term took on meaning in practice; it signified the new expectation that state enterprises—while still owned by the state—would be responsible for their own budgets, as well as finding their “own customers and suppliers (state or private).” Alan Ball, *Russia’s Last Capitalists: The Nepmen, 1921-1929* (Berkeley, 1987), p. xxii. Khozaschet meant greater awareness of profits and loss.

neighborhood authorities to those residents wishing to avail themselves of a new option, to be known as a “housing association.”

Housing associations transferred full material responsibility for apartment buildings onto their residents, but their meaning for the many other dimensions of living space cultivated during the revolutionary era remained unclear. Did housing associations assume the responsibility, or privilege, of allocating space within their buildings as well? Could they be said, in any sense, to collectively own their buildings? These were the questions confronted in the spring of 1922, when no. 12, 4th Tverskaia-iamskaia Street declared its intention to form just such a housing association. For the past four years, the residents of no. 12 4th Tverskaia-iamskaia explained, they “protected this building, as state property entrusted to them, and they took these duties onto themselves with success.”¹⁸⁰ They attached receipts attesting to the major roof repair they had funded on their own.¹⁸¹ These receipts demonstrated a pattern of care for the building, they asserted, but also a shared experience endured by the residents that they believed, now that the rules were changing, gave them some sort of stake in the building—a right to this piece of “state property entrusted to them.” The residents secured a testimonial from their *kvarthoz* stating that in the winter of 1919-1920, “when there was heavy frost, and pipes began to freeze and burst all across Moscow,” the residents “by their own strength stopped the freezing despite the fact that the master-plumber [they] invited refused to come to work.”¹⁸² Now that the prospect of forming a housing association stood before them, the residents of no. 12 4th Tverskaia-iamskaia jumped at the chance.

But their desire conflicted with another process unfolding at the same time in the built environment: the race, as buildings peeled off into “associations,” and as the land grab continued, unabated, among state institutions, to “assign” buildings to particular institutions or bodies. Beginning in 1921, the Sovnarkom formed a special “commission for the

180. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 243, l. 16.

181. *Ibid.*, l. 17.

182. GARF f. 4085, op. 22, d. 243, l. 20.

clearing of Moscow,” whose work was focused on consolidating particular spaces in the hands of particular institutions.¹⁸³ At the meetings of the commission, talk was of nothing but “assignments” [*zakreplenie*] attaching space to institutions; despite the lack of legal force behind it, assignment seemed to hold out the promise of secure tenure or possession that had so far been elusive in the revolutionary practices of inhabitation, even among state institutions that could all reasonably claim a status as caretakers of state property. The craze for assignment spread out beyond the central state apparatus into the local administrations, such that in early 1922, when the Krasno-presnenskii neighborhood where no. 12 4th Tverskaia-iamskaia was ordered to reduce the stock of buildings for which it was materially responsible, it nevertheless sought to retain a small pot of built space, “assigned” to it, for the vague purposes of “economic exploitation.”

Initially, the Krasno-presnenskii housing authorities sought to have more than 900 buildings “assigned to the neighborhood for economic exploitation.” Indeed, an inspector later wrote, “the Neighborhood Soviet at first thought even to expand this figure, but soon it became clear, that the Neighborhood Soviet had overestimated its strength,” and the figure was reduced to just 35.¹⁸⁴ How did the neighborhood determine which 35 buildings would be “assigned” to it, available for its economic exploitation? “Buildings that have been destroyed or half-destroyed” in the previous four years, the residents of no. 12 4th Tverskaia-iamskaia complained, “are eagerly given by the neighborhood to collectives of citizens. But buildings that have been preserved, such as this one, the neighborhood does not want to give to collectives.”¹⁸⁵ The very thing that had allowed the residents to remain in their homes during the revolutionary period—their willingness to maintain it—was now what made it appetizing to the neighborhood soviet, and took it out of their hands. They might have had the right to form a housing association, but the local housing department

183. An incomplete list of the minutes of the Sovnarkom’s Commission on Clearing Moscow would include GARF f. 4085, op. 1a, d. 231, GARF f. 4085, op. 1a, d. 368, GARF f. 4085, op. 1a, d. 383 in the files of Rabkrin, and RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 123 in the files of Lenin’s directorate of the Sovnarkom. I was unable to locate the primary depository of the Commission’s papers within the Sovnarkom’s archive at GARF.

184. *Ibid.*, ll. 6, 11.

185. *Ibid.*, l. 17.

still had many levers of control over their building. On the argument that the local housing authorities sought to “maintain a more live and regular connection between the Department and assigned buildings by means of periodic oral and written reports,” the neighborhood housing department sent a “commandant” to the building. He terrorized the residents, “screaming and stamping his feet at the residents, even at a very old citizeness, and calling himself the *khoziain* of the building, and threatening arrests, and so forth.”¹⁸⁶ In addition, the housing department sent a note to the labor department, claiming that the building was settled “almost entirely by merchant-speculators.” (In fact, the residents noted, they were nearly all “of the laboring element.”)¹⁸⁷

Churning beneath this back-and-forth and many others like it, well into the NEP, was the perennially destabilizing undercurrent of propertylessness, the impossibility of knowing who had or could keep what. This revolutionary innovation in the management of the built environment held firm in the new era. The residents earnestly tried to follow the rules. They cited multiple decrees from the updated housing codes: the Sovnarkom decree of January 23, 1922 ‘on the responsibility of citizens and the administrations of institutions for preserving the spaces they occupy’; another Sovnarkom decree from August 8, 1921, creating the position of building administrator. “Putting these two decrees together,” as the Sovnarkom itself had surely not bothered to do, “one can see that commandants are to be named only for buildings occupied by institutions”; the new laws of building administration, ambiguous as they were, demanded the interpretation of the residents themselves.¹⁸⁸ The housing department blocked the building’s request to form a housing association, but as the residents’ petition makes clear, the new phenomena of the NEP in the built environment—“assignment,” housing associations, the potential for economic exploitation of space—introduced little clarity into the status of buildings as objects of use and rights. Possession grew no more secure, and arguments about space continued to take shape, only now around the meaning of

186. *Ibid.*, l. 24.

187. *Ibid.*, l. 17.

188. *Ibid.*, l. 29.

the revolutionary legacy. “It would seem,” the residents of no. 12 4th Tverskaia-iamskaia concluded, “that the housing authorities should given a proper value to the labor of citizens,” expended in the defense of the built environment over the past four years, “but they refuse.”¹⁸⁹

The shift to more open market exchange had a deep impact on methods of assessing value as well, albeit one that was not universally felt, at least not initially. In December 1921, after the execution of many of Gokhran’s official appraisers, Narkomfin’s collegium resolved to hand the entire job of valuation at Gokhran over to the Revolutionary Military Soviet of the Republic (RVSR), rather than opening it directly to domestic or foreign markets. Value remained a matter of state security, thus in the early days of 1922, the collegium ordered Gokhran to “use the apparatus of the RVSR for the mobilization, account, and evaluation of all valuables in the Republic.”¹⁹⁰ Other branches of Narkomfin, however, began to change their practices around the same time. Market value, perhaps, appeared more potent or dangerous when attached to the talismans of the bourgeoisie, like diamond rings and silver tea sets. At a meeting of the Finance Commission of the Party’s Central Committee, proposals were made to open a “bureau for the regulation of trade in the RSFSR,” to perform a detailed study of “market prices for all products from the largest possible number of points within the Republic,” and “to study the influence of various government measures on the free markets and the like.”¹⁹¹ Shortly thereafter, the tsarist finance official Nikolai Kutler presented the Party Finance Committee with a project of great interest on “methods of determining prime cost,” one in a long string on the topic under the Committee’s review.¹⁹² Economists at Narkomfin also greeted the return of the annual market in Nizhnii-Novgorod with great enthusiasm, viewing it as an opportunity to “observe the financial-economic relationships that are created between various participants in exchange, and the new forms of credit, calculation of prices, and mutual accounting between buyers

189. Ibid.

190. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 472, l. 6.

191. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 6609, l. 7.

192. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 6609, l. 15.

and sellers” that occurred there.¹⁹³ A group of currency department employees gathered to discuss “the meaning of the Nizhegorodskaia fair for research from a financial-economic point of view” rushed to stress that the market “will little resemble the old Nizhegorodskaia fair, just as the new Russia little resembles pre-revolutionary Russia.” This essential difference, they claimed, would be reflected in their program of study, which would investigate phenomena specific to the present moment, such as the “moneyless accounting”, “the politics of trusts and price formation,” and the relationship between the wholesale prices available to state organs as opposed to other bodies, alongside the more traditional indices of wholesale prices.¹⁹⁴

But attempts to disaggregate the emerging market from the state, to identify the “influence of various government measures on the free markets,” as the Party Finance Commission desired, were stymied by the regime’s tendency to cloak market activity in great secrecy, which flourished amid the expanded possibilities for back-door dealings made available by the NEP. The confluence of these two factors presented stubborn challenges to efforts to isolate and measure value, even as opportunities for market exchange grew more plentiful. This was the outcome of an attempt led by the Moscow Consumer Society, a major force in Muscovite commercial life at the beginning of the NEP, to purchase a shipment of canned meat from an independent French merchant by the name of Veiler. Though sponsored at the highest levels of the Commissariat of Foreign Trade (NKVT), the deal with Veiler nearly came apart over a lack of consensus as to the official exchange rate for the French franc, which various departments of the Soviet state endeavored to keep secret from one another.¹⁹⁵ During his negotiations in Moscow—as Veiler, a Russian associate of his named Liubovich, and the NKVT agent sat in a room together—the NKVT agent contacted

193. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 6374, l. 1.

194. *Ibid.*

195. The phenomenon of government agencies competing against one another for privately-held resources, driving up prices and furnishing private sellers with enormous profits in the process, was illuminated at the very start of NEP, in the aftermath of the first Nizhegorodskaia market described above. Rabkrin devoted an extensive report to the problem, GARF. F. 4085, op. 28, d. 271. The report seems to have been blocked, however, by an unknown party; at any rate, its author was mysteriously instructed not to complete it, an instruction he chose to ignore, believing it important to lay out what had gone wrong.

the head of Gosbank, Sheinman, to learn the official Soviet course for the franc. Sheinman allegedly replied that “the official course was 40,000 rubles to the franc, but in actuality we are buying at 65,000-70,000 rubles to the franc.” At that moment “citizen Liubovich, who was with Veiler, declared with disbelief that this was not true, that he himself on that very day had just sold Gosbank francs for the price of 110,000 rubles to the franc (he had personally conducted negotiations with a member of the collegium).” Liubovich announced that he could verify this price “with documents and he took full responsibility for his words.” Naturally, “this whole story with the actual price of the franc” put the NKVT agent “in an awkward position in front of Veiler, and the entire deal had to be redone without recourse to the Gosbank prices”—that is to say, NKVT was able to seal the deal only when it abandoned the official exchange rate set by the Government Bank.¹⁹⁶ Curiously, no one seems to have seriously investigated the possibility that Liubovich, the bystander, was an inside man planted by Veiler to secure an advantageous exchange rate from Soviet authorities. Instead, Lenin’s aide Gorbunov ordered the GPU to draw up “*kharakteristiki*” on the Soviet trade agents responsible for the flub.

Finally, the New Economic Policy inaugurated a surge in activity within Narkomfin itself. Having atrophied during the previous four years, beginning in 1921 Narkomfin launched initiatives to rebuild a tax collection apparatus that drew expressly on “former” finance employees as well as new ranks of “workers.” It also began for the first time to feel the effects of a new influence over its ranks—that of the Communist Party. The Ministry of Finance was among the first to resume work under Bolshevik command, but it was among the least likely to be staffed by actual Bolsheviks. Narkomfin’s indifference to party membership as a primary hiring criterion was concisely conveyed in its response to a notice it received from the Central Committee in August 1920, advertising the existence of “students who have completed the Communist University” and asking how many of these students

196. RGASPI f. 5, op. 1, d. 75, with citations here from l. 7. In his capacity as director of Gosbank, Sheinman also attempted to block the publication of “bulletins on the foreign exchanges,” despite general consensus that such information should be made public. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 472, l. 70.

it would like to hire. The chancellery dutifully sent the notice around to the departments, and several replied enthusiastically.¹⁹⁷ Most, however, declined the offer. The Budget Department replied that it required “people experienced in budget affairs,” and would thus be unable to offer the graduates a position.¹⁹⁸ The accountants only wanted people with “theoretical and practical preparation in accounting.” Gokhran replied that it was looking for five accountants, two chancellery workers and three inspectors, and “if there are students with those qualifications,” it would take them. A whole string of others claimed to have no openings.¹⁹⁹ In the end, Narkomfin asked the Central Committee for 30 students—10 for the provinces and 20 for desk jobs in Moscow.²⁰⁰ “Your communication was too late, comrades,” the Central Committee wrote back.²⁰¹ By the time Narkomfin replied, all the graduates had been snapped up.

Beginning in the spring of 1922, Narkomfin’s deputy commissar for the past several years and main liaison to the Party, A.O. Alskii, launched a new initiative to attract staff to the Commissariat. Alskii aimed to search out “previous finance workers to enable their return to finance institutions,” and hoped to “popularize finance questions among the wide ranks of the workers and peasants.” Most of all, however, Alskii and his colleagues called upon the Party to “strengthen finance organs with party forces, sending energetic comrades for work in them, even those lacking in finance preparation, but possessing organizational or administrative skills.”²⁰² Together with Sergei Izmailov, another young party who had spent the past three years at Narkomfin, Alskii tried to get the Central Committee to issue a circular he wrote calling on the Party to support Narkomfin, writing to Stalin and others for help. He was advised that the circular lacked in “party spirit” and advised to try again, with the result that Alskii composed a new document to Stalin musing on the benefits to

197. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 259, ll. 4, 9. The Mint wanted as many as possible to help run its overheating printing presses, and the Instruction-Inspection department, responsible for communications with provincial offices, was eager for bodies to send to far-flung locales.

198. *Ibid.*, l. 10.

199. *Ibid.*, ll. 13-17.

200. *Ibid.*, ll. 18, 19.

201. *Ibid.*, l. 21.

202. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 550, l. 10.

be derived from putting workers to the task of tax collection.²⁰³ Finally, the circular came up for discussion at the Central Committee, though to Alskii's dismay it was set aside on the grounds that "even without this one too many circulars have been issued in the name of the CC."²⁰⁴ In May, Narkomfin's collegium sought to present a list of "comrades essential for work at Narkomfin" before the Orgbiuro; Alskii spent the better part of the summer travelling between Narkomfin's regional offices, shifting their directors from one office to another, all the while requesting confirmation of his decisions with the Orgbiuro, thus strengthening the Commissariat's Party bonafides at the same time as it increasingly turned to economists and officials from the former times for help with the restoration.²⁰⁵

The Revolution was not stable; it was constantly being updated in meaning and practice, not simply through changing political platforms and policies, but through the continual assessment and reassessment of people's lives and the roles and attitudes they had taken on during those earlier years. Beginning in early 1922, all employees of Narkomfin were asked to record their services and attitudes to the Revolution in autobiographical form. The short "personal questionnaires" they were already required to fill out included pointed questions about activities during the major turning points of the Revolution: a list of dates that consisted at first of just February and October 1917, but as time went on, expanded to include March 1921 (the Kronstadt uprising) and various dates in 1905. The new format, by contrast, required employees to tell the story of their whole lives and the place occupied by the Revolution in them.²⁰⁶ Many entries began with notes about childhood, dead parents, dashed hopes for education. Also in 1922, biographical information began to recur in abbreviated form in other personnel documents—the *kharakteristiki*, "attestations," and "work evaluations" that filled out employment files from then on. Assessments were made by party cell leaders and Narkomfin staff of their colleagues' attitudes, relationships

203. Ibid, l. 15.

204. Ibid, l. 13.

205. RGAE f. 7733, op. 1, d. 472, ll. 33, 71.

206. Interestingly, in the small sample of files available to me, biographical notes appeared only in those belonging to non-party employees. The records of established party members employed at Narkomfin such as Fridrikh Zemit, A.O. Alskii, and Boris Bazhanov did not contain such records.

with coworkers, “initiative,” “restraint,” “loyalty,” “political literacy,” and other personal qualities.

There was no one quality that guaranteed a stable tenure at Narkomfin during the 1920s. The only constant was the operation of the Revolution as a touchstone and the desire to draw it, ten years later, into the minutiae of institutional business and individual lives. Significantly, many of the employees whose files are considered here were removed from service in 1928 and 1929 under various clouds of suspicion.²⁰⁷ The one-time head of the tax department, N.A. Dobrosmyslov, was awarded a gold watch in June 1923, in recognition of his “energetic and highly useful activity” over five years of service, during which he personally answered Lenin’s directive to create a tax apparatus that was “fast and cheap.” Shortly thereafter, the most incredible rumors began to appear in Dobrosmyslov’s file: that he was a tsarist general, that he owned a dacha, that he descended from the nobility. He weathered the onslaught, despite a well-documented reputation as a condescending boss whose comportment was better suited to a “tsarist ministry” than a Soviet office. While acknowledging his general “tactlessness” and utter absence of “theoretical baggage,” his final review by the party cell in December 1928 determined that “Dobrosmyslov, having worked in the financial apparatus from the first day of the Revolution, put a deal of energy and strength into the organization of the tax apparatus,” sufficient to merit a gentle release from service “onto pension.” Others found a sharper eye turned back onto their revolutionary activities. Sergei Kistenev, head of the Department of Special Questions, was revealed as a nobleman and a saboteur. His possession of an income of 5000 rubles on the eve of the October Revolution, first revealed in a questionnaire from 1922, was subsequently heavily underlined, and he was “purged in the first category” in 1929.²⁰⁸ A review sent to the

207. The men discussed here were born in the 1870s or early 1880s and worked in the Ministry of Finance or a related field before the Revolution, becoming department heads after it. The exceptions to this were Alskii, Zemit, Bazhanov, and several other prominent party members employed at Narkomfin during the transition to NEP, who seem to have left in the mid-1920s—Alskii and Zemit for posts in different institutions, Bazhanov, as is well known, for his escape via a post in Uzbekistan. Boris Bazhanov, *Vospominaniia byvshego sekretaria Stalina* (France, 1980).

208. Bazhanov prepared Kistenev’s party attestations in the mid-1920s. II. 23, 24. The chief reasons for his dismissal, his file stated, were “statements against communist leadership,” most likely referring to his

staffing office of the Central Committee characterized Stanislav Pekarskii, who created the Commissariat's system of communications with provincial offices, as well-versed in "organizational work, and a hard worker, trying to remake himself from an old specialist into a soviet worker," but failing, stuck in his bureaucratic ways.²⁰⁹ In recognition of his work in "breaking the strike," however, Pekarskii was "purged in the third category," which left him the "right to work in a technical position." Finally, there was Iakov Shebanov, a senior instructor in the Organizational Department, who was deemed in his work review a "typical specialist [spets]." Shebanov, it was said, was the rarest specimen of all: a "man on whom the Revolution seems to have left almost no expression, and who has not changed in the least in his psychology."²¹⁰

opposition to state funding of industry in the First Five-Year Plan, and his support for the now-traitorous economist Pavel Genzel, whose writings for Narkomfin feature in Chapters 3 and 4, and who defected to the United States in the late 1920s, ultimately settling in Evanston as Paul Hansel, an economics professor at Northwestern University.

209. RGAE f. 7733, op. 18, d. 6644, ll. 35, 33, 39.

210. RGAE f. 7733, op. 18, d. 9799, l. 31. The last document in Shebanov's file is a self-assessment requesting the right to continue working in the field of finance, specifically in banking.

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