The Bolsheviks took power in October 1917 both promising and expecting to swiftly and completely restructure the tsarist state and reorganize rural life. They soon discovered just how difficult these missions would be. Obstacles to their goal of reshaping the Russian countryside—and the state apparatus they would use to remold it—were more intractable than the Bolsheviks first believed. Sophisticated and well-meaning state officials had been confounded for decades by the challenges of modernizing Russia’s agrarian economy. Before October 1917, the Bolshevik Party had encouraged the breakdown of order in the countryside and the disintegration of the decrepit, bureaucratized apparatuses of the Old Regime and the Provisional Government. Immediately after taking power, however, Bolshevik leaders realized that they would have to protect or reconstitute much of the old administration in order to govern the country. During the chaotic first three years of the Revolution, the new government was pieced together spontaneously amidst social upheaval and war. Mistrusted tsarist-era officials were put to work, voluntarily or not, on behalf of Soviet power, side by side with impatient Bolshevik radicals. The result was frustrating for professional revolutionaries unschooled in the complexities of running a state. In the words of one Bolshevik, “Rank-and-file party members assumed leadership positions” in the newborn party-state. “But none of us had any experience. We had to learn our ABCs.”

This chapter on the years of revolution and Civil War (1917–20) briefly outlines several important themes explored in depth in the remainder of the study, which treats the years of the New Economic Policy (NEP) (1921–29), including
issues surrounding the clash between two central Bolshevik ideals: overcoming rural backwardness and building socialism. The People’s Commissariat of Agriculture (Narkomzem RSFSR) inherited the decades-old mission of modernizing peasant agriculture. In the first three years of Soviet power, Narkomzem attempted to manage the most extensive land reform in history, to ameliorate the poor productivity of peasant farming by reorganizing production to eradicate inefficiencies, to introduce modern technology, and to set up “socialist farms.” Amid the social turmoil of the general post-revolutionary breakdown, how did the Bolsheviks manage to create the machinery of state? How did state interests competing for influence over the rural economy fare in their political struggles, and why? Focusing on the Commissariat of Agriculture, this chapter discusses the problems of state formation in the context of great disruption during the first three years of the new regime. Instead of disappearing, as revolutionaries had originally predicted, the Soviet state emerged larger and more coercive than the imperial state, just as Alexis de Tocqueville observed about republican France after the French Revolution.

During the Civil War, the Commissariat’s staff was frustrated by a Bolshevik Party leadership that, in light of their struggle for survival, did not consider the recovery of agricultural production in the militarized economy a priority. Desperation bred improvisation as the Bolsheviks groped for whatever tools were handy. By various means, they recruited unpopular but experienced tsarist functionaries and specialists to staff their ministries in Moscow and in the provinces. Indeed, large chunks of the old regime’s ministerial structures were simply dragged, renamed but essentially intact, across the revolutionary divide to serve the new regime. Within the Commissariat of Agriculture, many of these holdover experts quietly maintained a dedication to using the state to “rescue” what they regarded as an underproductive and largely ignorant village population from the medieval farming methods that had handicapped rural Russia for so long. From its establishment in October 1917 to the introduction of the NEP in March 1921, however, the new Commissariat of Agriculture and its local branches were marginalized in the new party-state as infant state organizations battled for scarce resources in an economy flattened by war and social chaos.

**Land and Agriculture before 1917**

Only in the context of the imperial government’s inability to ameliorate rural conditions—and its obsession with rapidly increasing the productivity of the agrarian economy relative to Russia’s industrial neighbors in Europe—can we fathom the agrarian situation the Bolsheviks inherited in October 1917. Before the Great War, Russian imperial agencies in charge of raising the productivity of peasant agriculture faced great difficulties in their self-appointed mission to overcome rural economic underdevelopment. Those agencies—including the
The weak position of these agencies was particularly paradoxical since agriculture still provided twice as much of the national income than industry. Furthermore, the largest source of foreign trade income—over 70 percent—derived from the export of agricultural products. Indeed, while Russia was the least industrially developed of the great European powers, it was the world’s leading exporter of grains and many other agricultural resources before World War I. As a result of favorable weather and farmers’ gradual (though uneven) adoption of improved technology, harvests increased between 1895 and 1913 by between 2.1 percent and 2.4 percent per year and yields were also gradually improving in the decades before the war. The Russian historian A. M. Anfimov, among others, has noted that these statistics mask weaknesses, however. Every year Russia exported a much larger proportion of its total harvest than other countries. An examination of production per capita demonstrates that Russia lagged behind the other major exporters, Canada, the United States, and Argentina. In other words, for Russia to maintain its high level of exports, domestic grain supplies had to suffer, and indeed consumption was relatively low. The number of livestock per person, for example, declined for the empire as a whole and in the important Black Earth and Volga Regions in particular. In the Central Producer Region, a hub of agricultural production that suffered from endemic overpopulation, output of grain and sowings per capita in 1913 were lower than at the turn of the century.

Agricultural specialists intent on the reconstruction of Russian peasant farming in the early twentieth century noted that the agricultural sector remained fragile in crucial respects. As political and scientific elites understood, agrarian Russia remained economically quite far behind its industrialized Western neighbors. Indeed, this “relative economic backwardness” (including a major technology lag) in comparison with more productive Western economies is what the historian Alfred J. Rieber has identified as one of Russia’s “persistent conditions” that form a restrictive framework within which Russian political elites and reformers have had to shape policies for centuries and that have limited their choices. Rieber points to a connected web of factors, including higher mortality rates, lower incomes, and a large technology gap in addition to “low crop yields and an underdeveloped commercial life caused by harsh climate, poor soil, and remote location from the world’s major trade arteries” that left Russia at a comparative disadvantage to Western Europe. He goes on to note that impulses to radically reform the economy also posed great risks for the state, including the chance of popular rebellion, dependence on foreign powers, and dissatisfaction among local elites. At the turn of the twentieth century, growing
international tensions rendered this relative backwardness even more alarming to Russia’s leaders.

This discussion of Russia’s relative economic underdevelopment should not be understood as an argument that the peasantry needed or deserved to be “civilized,” “uplifted,” or “mobilized” against their will for the purposes of increasing the total output of produce (or for other reasons), though some Russian politicians and agricultural specialists made this case. Nor does this book argue that peasant culture was somehow barbaric or unworthy of respect, or that the peasantry behaved irrationally and was incapable of taking care of itself.

Although agriculture provided much of the country’s domestic income and foreign trade revenue, Russian output lagged badly behind its Western European neighbors’ output throughout the late imperial and early Soviet era. On the eve of the war, Russian agricultural production per capita was on par with Spain and Serbia. Grain yields per hectare were only about one-third of yields from farms in Great Britain or Belgium, one-half of those in France or Germany, and barely one-quarter that of farms in Denmark or Netherlands. These relative proportions remained essentially constant throughout the 1920s. With a less developed transportation infrastructure and industrial capacity than Western industrial nations, Russia’s leaders might instead have compared the country’s economic progress with that of Italy, Portugal, or the Habsburg Empire. Instead, befitting their self-image as a great power, Imperial (and, later, Soviet) leaders strove to match the performance of the economies of England, Germany, France, and the United States.

On the eve of World War I, 139 million people lived in the empire, and Russia remained the most populous country in Europe. About 82 percent of them lived in the countryside. Ninety-seven percent of the rural population was classified as peasants. Most agricultural production—nearly 90 percent—occurred on lands held by peasants rather than on large estates. Peasant farmers owned over 90 percent of the horses, cows, and pigs. Output on the peasant holdings was poorer than that on the larger private holdings. Russia’s farming population lived mostly in small settlements, few of which numbered more than two thousand people. The average size of Russia’s villages was thirty to forty families (about two hundred people), but size varied widely. The household (dvor) was the basic unit in the village, and there were just over twenty-one million households in Russia in 1916. The average peasant household was made up of 5.67 people in 1916, and the number of households was increasing. The growing number of households, and their smaller average size, worried officials dedicated to raising productivity, because smaller households on average produced less marketable surplus.

In accordance with peasant customary law, the household held the right to the land. The family owned property jointly. Most agricultural land worked by
peasants was held in repartitional communes (the mir or obshchina). The commune had broad responsibility for deciding what was to be planted and when, as well as how land would be regularly redistributed among the member households. The commune oversaw the use of meadows, pastures, forests, and land unsuitable for use. Farmers used some land, such as pasture, communally. Each household also had a garden plot (usad’ba) to grow vegetables for family use.

A distinguishing characteristic of agriculture in European Russia was the three-field fallow system of farming that prevailed on most communes. The three-field regime had been abandoned or was disappearing in nearly all of Europe by 1914 (especially its northern and western regions), but predominated in Russia until the 1929 collectivization of agriculture, particularly in the major grain-producing regions. Under this planting system, farmers divided the village fields into three parts. They sowed one field in the fall with wheat or rye; the second was planted in the spring with barley, rye, oats, or beans; and the third was fallow. Thus, at least one-third of the available arable land was unproductive in any given season as the soil was replenished with nutrients depleted by the previous crop. Indeed, agricultural specialists—and that part of educated society concerned with agrarian affairs—that hated three-field farming (together with the commune itself) as an extremely inefficient, even medieval, relic in comparison with multifield or crop rotation systems that had brought rapidly growing yields and labor productivity to western European farms at that time. (Of course, these areas of Europe also enjoyed superior soils and climate.)

Crop rotation, considered by experts to be one of the most important solutions to problems caused by three-field farming, was rare in Russia before World War I. In a crop rotation regime, rather than let a fallow field rest for a year, farmers would avoid soil exhaustion by alternating the sowing of various types of crops in order to replenish the soil’s nutrients and preserve its fertility. In 1916, however, less than 2 percent of the total arable land in Russia was under crop rotation. It was practiced almost exclusively in the Central Industrial Region, the West, and the Northwest. In grain-growing regions, such as the Central Black Earth region, only 3 percent of arable land was under crop rotation.

Communes further divided fields into sections that were again divided into long and widely dispersed strips (a phenomenon known as cherespolositsa) depending on the quality of the land. The commune distributed the scattered strips among the households, depending on need. From the peasant community’s perspective, the distribution of farmland on this basis achieved a degree of equality in holdings allotted to each household; from the perspective of agricultural specialists, it sacrificed productivity and left farmers vulnerable to famine in the wake of major crop failures, which struck Russia in 1890–93, 1906–8, and 1910–11. In many regions, peasants’ holdings, sometimes made up of dozens of strips, were scattered across large areas, a situation that drained the time and energy of farmers. The borders between strips alone took up 7 percent of all Rus-
sia’s arable land, according to a study in the mid-1920s. The large quantity of strips created another barrier to increasing production, one that was often more serious—the distance between the household and strips in far outlying fields. Farmers spent a great deal of time traveling to remote parcels to sow, weed, fertilize, and reap the harvest of each strip. Government specialists concentrated on diminishing the negative consequences of strip farming, such as the reduced ability to manure, the increased costs of production, and the difficulties inherent in transporting tools, animals, and harvests back and forth to the village.

In addition to railing against three-field and strip farming, agricultural specialists noted that Russian farming suffered from other idiosyncrasies long left behind in Western Europe, including primitive tools, seeds that were not properly chosen or cleaned, crops that were harvested late, and fields that were not tilled on time in the autumn. Compared to Western Europe, the introduction of technology to the Russian village was greatly delayed. According to a 1910 census, Russian peasants possessed ten million wooden plows as compared to only four million of the far superior iron plows. Iron harrows were also scarce. Mechanized farming, including the use of threshing and reaping machines, was almost unheard of on peasant farms. Farmers still harvested with the sickle and scythe, and threshed with chains or the primitive hand-held flail. Russian peasants only rarely employed mineral or chemical fertilizers.

In most of the empire, the cultivation of technical crops also lagged. Technical crops, produced primarily for reprocessing by industry (and sometimes known as industrial crops), included plants grown for their oil, such as sunflower, flax, and hemp; those used for their fiber, such as cotton, flax, and hemp; sugar beets; and other nonfood crops such as tea, tobacco, and hops. Before the revolution, most such crops were grown on large private estates. Some, such as cotton, oil seed, and hemp, were grown primarily by individual peasants. Industrial crops comprised 4 percent of gross agricultural production before the war. Nonetheless, before 1914 Russia was one of Europe’s leading exporters of industrial crops and their byproducts. In the Northwest, West, and Central Industrial Regions, for example, it was very profitable to grow flax (which would be spun into linen), and a large percentage of peasant households did so. The government exported over three million poods of flax fiber to Europe, satisfying more than 80 percent of the demand of European industry.

Resource Shortages

Severe underfunding of state organizations dedicated to providing aid to peasant farmers created frustration among agricultural professionals eager to improve the efficiency of agriculture. A 1914 publication of GUZiZ (Gosudarstvennoe upravlenie zemleustroistva i zemledeliia, at that time the equivalent of the imperial Ministry of Agriculture) sounded a common complaint in assessing the reasons
for Russian agriculture’s poor performance: “Almost until the end of the last century, the population had not received agronomic aid in any serious measure, either from the government or from the local institutions [zemstvos], and was left in this regard almost completely to its own devices.”

Indeed, before 1905, government spending on the technological modernization of peasant farming was minimal. Not until 1894, in the wake of the 1891–92 famine, was the first agriculture ministry (the Ministry for Agriculture and State Domains) even established. This birth date can be compared with the significantly earlier dates for the creation of separate agricultural ministries in Western states, particularly in France and Prussia (early in the nineteenth century), England (1860), and the United States (1862).

The tsarist government allocated several times more money for social control and police functions than for financial, agronomic, and educational assistance to the land-working population. The focus of the state’s policies remained keeping the countryside under control rather than assisting it. The sharp, and long overdue, increase in spending during the Stolypin reforms of the final years before the war, a thirty-one-fold increase in the four years from 1908 to 1912, suggests desperation rather than commitment.

Agronomists argued that the resources provided to it by the Council of Ministers compared very unfavorably with the budgets of ministries of agriculture in Austria-Hungary and Prussia: “However large by their absolute measure, expenditures on land reorganization are relatively very small.” Moreover, agronomists noted in 1914 that most of this new money went to aid for the small minority of farmers who had separated from the commune during the Stolypin reforms, especially in the Ukraine and in the southern reaches of the empire. Concentrated mainly in the zemstvos, programs to assist the great majority of the communal Russian peasantry continued to be funded poorly, though total zemstvo budgets doubled between 1905 and 1914. Indeed, complaints about state neglect of agronomic assistance to farmers were a common refrain among land officials and specialists between the 1891 famine and the collectivization of agriculture in 1929.

Agronomic Assistance

Pre-war agronomic aid efforts became the programmatic and institutional fore-runners for the Soviet Commissariat of Agriculture’s activities between 1921 and 1929. Soviet aid programs would follow many of the patterns established by the tsarist zemstvo agronomic aid network. A consequence of the state’s paltry funding was that not until 1905 had local agronomic organizations begun to be established and joined formally in a network of uchastkovye punkty, local agronomic stations, the institutional equivalent of the American extension service offices. This network became the key link in the zemstvo’s agronomic aid system; by the final pre-war years, land reorganization and agronomic programs...
were being transferred by the government entirely out of the Ministry of Agriculture’s hands into the jurisdiction of the zemstvos. The typical agronomic point was attached to the uezd (district) zemstvo. It was headed by an agronomist who organized lectures, exhibitions, and reading circles while managing a model field, a small library of agronomic literature, and an equipment-lending station. The network of agronomic aid stations grew rapidly after 1905. In 1906 there were only 10 local agronomic organizations in 2 uezds, but by 1913, 1,447 had been established in 335 uezds. Despite the expansion, each agronomist was responsible for 100 or more communes and several thousand farms, an enormous territory that forced these specialists to devote the majority of their time to the nearest villages. Furthermore, most agronomists were concentrated only around Moscow and in the western borderlands.

The mission of the agricultural assistance network was essentially educational and targeted the peasants who remained inside the confines of the commune. Zemstvo agronomists insisted on providing assistance to the communal peasantry, not exclusively to the consolidators, as the Stolypin reforms intended. Zemstvos tried to show that the productivity of peasant farming could be raised inside the parameters of the commune, not only on separated homesteads. The Ministry of Agriculture, intent on implementing the Stolypin reforms’ emphasis on “individualization”—that is, supporting individual farmers who had separated from the commune onto consolidated plots—thus conflicted with the zemstvos’ desire to aid the communal peasantry.

By 1912, the agronomists’ preferred method of increasing the productivity of communal agriculture was to locate the most innovative farmers, the risk-takers or “pioneers” in each village who were willing to listen to suggestions and ideas about new types of technology or practices and try them out on their own farms. Neighboring peasants would then witness the positive results of innovations undertaken by the pioneers, and gradually an entire commune would elect to switch to more efficient practices. Agronomists were confident that within the commune at least some of the risk-taking peasants could farm productively and efficiently, in line with the agronomic principles they espoused. This approach of cultivating a “peasant elite” in each commune was later adopted by agronomists during the Soviet period and endorsed by the People’s Commissariat of Agriculture.

It is important to note that agronomists were very skeptical of and often sharply critical of peasants’ traditional modes of farming. They regarded their mission to be the education of farmers about new (i.e., better) ways of thinking about their own labor and land, while reducing farmers’ dependence on “superstition.” In fact, before the war many of these specialists made little progress in persuading peasants to adopt the farming practices they considered superior.

The agronomists were unsuccessful partly because of their own inexperience and youth. But a large part of the failure to persuade peasants must be ascribed to specialists’ insensitivity to traditional peasant farming practices and lifestyle.
The Suspension of Agronomic Aid in World War I

Elements of Russia’s World War I experience had a profound impact on agriculture in the countryside, which is briefly explored here. In light of Russia’s major military setbacks, food shortages, and territorial losses almost from the beginning of the conflict in 1914, defending the motherland became the government’s prime concern. Although rural overpopulation did provide some buffer against the effects of the drainage of labor into the army and harvests did not decline until 1916, the conflict nevertheless disrupted agriculture as people, supplies, and machines were redirected to the war effort.

The Ministry of Agriculture saw its role transformed, and this new role would dominate the ministry’s activities for more than six years, throughout the period of the Great War, the Provisional Government, and the Civil War. Rather than remaining an organization devoted to improving the technological level, organization, and output of agricultural production, the Ministry of Agriculture, now suddenly funded with all the resources it needed, was transformed into a branch of the army, responsible for procuring foodstuffs for the imperial army and the cities. Similarly, zemstvos became part of the state infrastructure dedicated to supporting the war effort. In 1915, the Ministry of Agriculture introduced fixed prices for grain purchased by official procurement agencies. In the agriculture ministry the new government established a chancellery of plenipotentiaries for purchasing grain (glavnoupolnomochenyi po zakupke khleba) and a section for collecting food supplies and fodder for the army. In 1915 the autocracy created the “Special Council for discussing and coordinating food supply,” headed by Minister of Agriculture A. V. Krivoshein, who was removed as head of the Ministry of Agriculture in August 1915. The Ministry of Agriculture was ordered by the Council of Ministers to buy grain at fixed prices from peasants, landowners, or cooperatives. The government set low purchase prices that reduced incentives for peasants to sell to the state. In light of the failure of this policy, in November 1916 the tsarist state established a grain levy.

Wartime prerogatives meant that the government suspended most of the ministry’s (and the zemstvos’) agronomic aid, educational and veterinary assistance, and land reorganization activities. Many agricultural specialists were drafted or became part of efforts to requisition grain, fodder, livestock, and other supplies for the army. Agronomists were also asked to care for soldiers’ families and supervise the rationing of foodstuffs. Many specialists resented these wartime measures. “Agronomists left in the rear were used in war management and gradually became alienated from their own duties” as large proportions of their time and energy were consumed by clerical and organizational duties they considered peripheral to their training and experience. Educational activities, so important for the long-term success of agronomic innovation among communal farmers, were cut back drastically. Some prominent agronomists including V. N. Vargin, former provincial agronomist of the Perm zemstvo, argued that
specialists must be allowed to go back to their normal duties. Agronomists also understood that their activities requisitioning food often left them very unpopular with the peasant population. This unpopularity continued under the Provisional Government, when some agronomists on food committees were threatened, and even murdered, by peasants.34

A Precarious Transition: From Ministry to People’s Commissariat (October 1917–January 1918)

When Nicholas II abdicated on March 2, 1917, the Provisional Government inherited the same complex of problems—economic, military, bureaucratic, urban, and agrarian—that toppled the tsar.35 By adopting many of the same approaches as the imperial government, the Provisional Government established elements of continuity while ensuring its own failure. In the realm of the critical matter of food supply policy, on March 25 the Provisional Government instituted a grain monopoly. Farmers were ordered to turn over to the state all grain beyond a certain amount at a fixed price. Nevertheless, the state’s administrative weakness in the provinces rendered it impossible to secure the food it needed.

On April 21, 1917, the Provisional Government created a hierarchy of “Land Committees” under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Agriculture. The Main Land Committee was established in Petrograd and local branches were formed in each province and in most districts. These committees were charged with collecting data and making land reform proposals to the Constituent Assembly. It was in the Main Land Committee, together with the still-functioning Departament zemledeliia, that the major work on land reform was conducted between April and October, and here that the nation’s leading agrarian specialists were gathered.

Although most of the personnel employed in the Imperial Ministry of Agriculture remained in place following the transfer of power, the Provisional Government replaced the top leaders in the tsarist ministries. After replacing the leadership, the new heads of the agriculture ministry formed commissions with sweeping powers that bypassed the regular bureaucratic channels in an effort to make substantial progress toward resolving the “agrarian problem.” Special commissions to draft legislation on land reform and other pressing matters, located mostly in the Department of Agriculture, were formed to bypass the old ministry. In the Ministry of Agriculture alone, twenty-four different commissions were set up to scrutinize the details of land reform.36 The sheer number of organizations naturally caused extensive conflicts in jurisdiction, not only among the three aforementioned categories of organization, but among the ministries themselves. For example, in the summer of 1917 five different ministries—food, agriculture, interior, finance, and war—which did not coordinate their assign-
ments, all dealt with food questions. Imprecise, overlapping, and parallel juris-
dictions limited the effectiveness of government efforts to contend with the
quandaries plaguing agriculture and food supply.

The processes of the fragmentation of elites and society had led to a divided
and impotent government, splintered political parties, and a peasantry that in-
creasingly insulated itself from state intervention. The catastrophic and unpop-
ular war effort that had so deeply eroded faith in the Romanov government
among the civilian population and the elites also challenged popular faith in the
Provisional Government. The policies of the Provisional Government on agrar-
ian matters were undermined by political factors such as the weakness of the
government, its inability to take concrete action, and the bureaucratic morass of
competing administrations. The tsarist failure to address the issue of land reform
left the Provisional Government with an impossible legacy, including increased
peasant radicalization, a legacy of village distrust for the state, and rural collec-
tivism and loyalty to indigenous institutions strengthened in the absence of local
state authority.

The People’s Commissariat: In the Beginning

Once the Provisional Government had been toppled, a new, symbolic language
of revolution underscored the Bolsheviks’ conviction that they were severing all
ties with the discredited imperial past. After seizing power on October 25, 1917,
one of the Bolshevik Party’s very first measures was to establish a new executive
branch of government, which they called the Council of People’s Commissars
(Sovnarkom). With Lenin as its chair, the Council of People’s Commissars re-
placed the Provisional Government’s Council of Ministers, itself a structure in-
herited from the Old Regime. In Lenin’s words, the very name Council of
People’s Commissars “smelled terribly of revolution.” In the same vein, the
Bolsheviks considered the names People’s Commissar and People’s Commiss-
sariat to be symbols of a revolutionary new order. These new apppellations re-
placed the terms minister and ministry, which were too closely associated with
the corrupt administration of the Old Regime. Although the Provisional Gov-
ernment had used the term commissar to refer to some agents of central power
posted in the provinces, the Great French Revolution clearly served as the new
regime’s inspiration. In the words of one eyewitness, the term people’s commis-
sars should “bear witness to the fact that the commissars were plenipotentiaries
of the revolutionary people.” Officials also quickly replaced the tsarist term de-
partament (department) with the more neutral (to the new rulers’ ears) upravle-
nie (administration).

The People’s Commissariat of Agriculture of the RSFSR was born of the
same law that created the Council of People’s Commissars. Unlike some com-
missariats, which were headed by an agency at the national level, the Commis-
The Council of People’s Commissars did not establish an all-union ministry of agriculture. In fact, an all-union Commissariat of Agriculture was not created until the beginning of the forced collectivization drive in December 1929.

The primary features of the tsarist ministerial system had appeared between 1801 and 1835, and these structural parameters were inherited and largely preserved by the Bolshevik state builders. In 1802, Alexander I created a uniform ministerial structure that included the central ministries themselves, each with one head, the minister, and his deputies; an advisory council, or kollegia (collegium), that served as a cabinet to the minister; a secretariat or chancellery; various specialized departments (departamenty) within the ministry that could be created and dismantled regularly as needs arose; and a hierarchy of provincial and subprovincial levels. This system provided a large amount of flexibility and continuity, as the personnel and office staff complement could change frequently without disabling the ministry itself. It also enabled ministries to commit specialists to specific problems. As Tocqueville, with his interest in continuity between regimes, would have expected, each Bolshevik commissariat borrowed from this basic structural pattern: people’s commissar and his deputies, collegium, secretariat, specialized departments, and provincial sections.

The Narkomzem of the Russian Republic was the strongest of the republican commissariats of agriculture, and it served as the de facto all-union Commissariat, a fact befitting the Russocentric nature of the new government. The people’s commissar represented the Commissariat in the Council of People’s Commissars. Over the course of 1917 and 1918, provincial, district, and most volost’ (rural district) soviets established a land section (zemel’nyi otdel or zem’motdel for short). These were the departments within the soviet devoted to agricultural and land reform matters that served as local branch offices of the central Commissariat. By late 1918, the Commissariat of Agriculture was one of the largest state agencies in the country, with about 1,150 employees in its Moscow offices.

Despite revolutionaries’ aspirations to make a clean break with the past, the new leaders of the Commissariat inherited much across October’s revolutionary divide. Among the legacies of the imperial Ministry of Agriculture (Ministerstvo zemledeliia) was the very name of the organization. The title of the Bolshevik agency, Narodnyi komissariat zemledeliia (literally, the People’s Commissariat of Land Working) had a rather antiquated, nineteenth-century ring, and inaccurately reflected the scope of the agency’s duties. The name Narodnyi komissariat sel’skogo khoziaistva (the Commissariat of the Village Economy, the other term used for agriculture) would more precisely have defined the organization’s broadly conceived mission, which encompassed much more than just “land working.” The Commissariat’s assignments included the management of...
forestry, animal husbandry, veterinary medicine, land amelioration, and handicraft production. The appellation is a clear indication, however, of how closely land, the peasantry, and agriculture were tied together in the outlook of most Russian elites.

The Bolshevik Party immediately charged the Council of People’s Commissars with purging each of the old ministerial apparatuses of “hostile” officials and transforming the ministry into an asset of the socialist regime. In its original incarnation, Sovnarkom comprised fifteen people’s commissariats, including agencies responsible for justice, social security, foreign affairs, war, trade, and so on. Most of the revolutionary government’s ministerial structures—including the Commissariat of Agriculture—mimicked very closely those of their overthrown predecessors. The task of making old ministries work for the new regime was much more easily designed than accomplished, however. Much of the process of state formation in these first years is a story of frustrated ambitions, resistance among officials, and the hasty bypassing or co-opting of unruly or disorganized bureaucracies.

Foundations and Mission

The quickly evolving social and legal situation in the countryside during 1917 and early 1918 shaped the context in which the Commissariat of Agriculture tried to carry out its assignment. The Bolsheviks had inherited the food shortages and peasant rebellions that had plagued the tsarist and provisional governments. On October 25, 1917, as one of the new regime’s first acts, the Second Congress of Soviets passed the Decree on Land, the first legislative cornerstone of the Bolsheviks’ agenda for socializing rural Russia. The land decree forever abolished all private property in land, forbidding its rental, mortgage, purchase, and sale. The state confiscated all land from its owners without compensation. Land was controlled by “the people” and passed to the tenure of those who worked it. Simultaneously, the law prohibited farmers to hire labor, thereby banning its “exploitation.” The regime nationalized all mineral, forest, and water resources of importance, while local waterways and forests were transferred to peasant communal control under the regulation of local land committees and peasant soviets. The law stipulated that lands requiring intensive cultivation, such as estates containing orchards, vineyards, or cattle and horse farms, were not to be divided. Instead, they were to be taken over whole by the state or by peasant communes. Peasant communes were to divide land in an egalitarian way based on labor or consumption norms, and communes would periodically redistribute it, depending on the traditional determinants of population fluctuations and land fertility. The law gave peasants the right to choose the type of land tenure they wanted (excepting private property), whether communal, collective farm, or separated homesteads.
The second fundamental piece of land legislation, the Law on Socialization, was adopted by the All-Russian Central Executive Committee (VTsIK) on January 28, 1918. The Law on Socialization contained passages that, more explicitly than the Land Decree, encouraged the creation of large collective and state farms (kolkhozy and sovkhozy), while reiterating the Land Decree’s major points. In its most important article, the January law declared that the Socialist Revolutionary (SR)–dominated land committees no longer would oversee land redistribution, as the Land Decree had ordered. Instead, this task passed to the land sections of the soviets. On paper, the Bolsheviks controlled the soviets’ land sections, though they were in reality largely beyond Moscow’s influence.

In fact, these laws simply ratified ex post facto the massive, peasant-led “black repartition,” which was the spontaneous communal redistribution of land that had been in progress for months across most of European Russia. The black repartition set the social stage on which the Commissariat undertook its tasks between 1917 and 1920. During the repartition, gentry and church lands were taken over and redistributed by the peasantry. In the years before World War I, the Stolypin land reforms had encouraged significant numbers of peasants in some regions to work the land outside the redistributitional commune in consolidated plots. This land could be a khutor, a homestead in which all of a household’s arable land (including fallow and household gardens) was concentrated in one place outside the village, or in an otrub that concentrated only plowed land in one place outside the village, but the farm buildings, house, and garden plot remained in the village. During the black repartition, however, nearly all the homesteads (otruba and khutora) created during the Stolypin reforms were reabsorbed by neighboring communes, and their lands redistributed among all the commune’s families. Local state officials could do nothing to direct the spontaneous black repartition.

Narkomzem’s activities—and indeed all the actions of the party-state in this period—must be discussed in the context of these upheavals of 1917–18. One of the Commissariat’s primary and extraordinarily difficult tasks during these first three years (and, indeed, throughout the 1920s) was to reverse the regression in total agricultural output that resulted from the black repartition and wartime destruction. Once rural inhabitants had seized the land and divided it among themselves, the Bolsheviks quickly understood that this massive land seizure was a mixed blessing. Despite the hopes of the peasantry and many revolutionaries, the wholesale redistribution of estate, church, state, and Romanov family land failed to solve the underlying problems that had beset the peasant economy for generations. Observers realized that the seizures did not eliminate land hunger, three-field farming, strip farming, or the large distances between strips. Indeed, the land redistributions further entrenched all these problems, since repartitional communes reabsorbed the separated homesteads, many of which had managed to establish crop rotation regimes and eliminate strips. Those house-
holds with too little land before the revolution generally received tiny additions, averaging about one-third to three-quarters desiatina per capita. In fact, from the perspective of the Commissariat of Agriculture, an important negative consequence of the black repartition was a dramatic upsurge in subsistence farming. The peasantry sharply cut back surplus production intended for the market as “leveling” of landholding and draft animal ownership resulted from redistributions at the commune level. The so-called middle peasantry (seredniaki) grew as a proportion of the rural population as extremes of poverty and wealth were reduced. The number of “wealthy” (kulak) and “poor” (bedniak) peasants decreased. Large private farms that had produced for the internal market and for export before the October Revolution were also divided up among the communes’ many households, further reducing production. Bolshevsk wartime requisitioning policies further exacerbated these tendencies toward leveling and subsistence farming.

In these difficult conditions, then, Sovnarkom charged the Commissariat of Agriculture with the formidable task of making the overwhelmed peasant economy productive again. This project involved several related activities that combined attempts to modernize the “backward” rural economy with efforts to “socialize” it. Sovnarkom set out three main assignments for the Commissariat (and its local land sections). The Commissariat was to provide agronomic aid to the small-farm economy; coordinate and oversee the distribution of seeds, equipment, tools, and expertise to the struggling peasantry; and carry out land reorganization (zemleustroistvo), through which specialists would attempt to eliminate many aspects of traditional communal production that the Soviet government considered “ancient” and wasteful, including strip farming, the three-field fallow system, and the large distances between strips. Surveyors and agronomists also tried to introduce crop rotation. Importantly, and in a more utopian spirit, the state also intended for land organizers (zemleustroiteli) to organize and administer collective farms and state farms. Thus, the Commissariat of Agriculture’s job was to help realize the Bolshevik vision of a productive and socialist countryside. During the brutal wartime conditions, these tasks were, for all intents and purposes, impossible to carry out as the regime directed nearly all its resources to winning the war.

The primary goal of land reorganization during the first half of the war (1918–mid 1919) was to organize socialist forms of production. Commissariat leaders were mainly charged with setting up state-sponsored collective farms. At the end of 1918, Lenin came out against the forced collectivization of agricultural production, which had made very little progress in any case. During the second half of the period (mid 1919–20), the party’s new emphasis on conciliating the middle peasant (seredniak) dictated that, although collective farms were the ultimate goal, peasants must not be forced to join collectives, and traditional communal production would remain the basis of small-scale agricultural pro-
duction. Although land reorganization personnel undertook many purely technical tasks (surveying, assessing land, measuring and marking boundaries), the project was not politically neutral in nature. The regime undertook to support a larger political and social agenda, in this case, the creation of socialist villages. Until 1920, the government legislated that the noncoercive, gradual creation of collective farms was one of Narkomzem’s main assignments.

The Commissariat organized several types of production collectives during the Civil War, though the results were very limited. Three came under the general rubric of collective farms. First was the *kommuna*, the most collectivized form of production. In the kommuna, all members shared all the production, housing, equipment, property, and animals. Kommuny attracted the poorest peasants, who would be guaranteed food and shelter and, since they had few possessions, would have to sacrifice little to the collective upon enrolling. A less extreme alternative was the *artel’,* which was not well defined. The artel’ usually was based on collective marketing of products, not collective production. Land was controlled jointly, though each household kept its own household plot. The most important farming implements and draft animals became the property of the artel’. Households received a share of the harvest based on the amount they contributed upon entry. The final type of collective production established by Commissariat land reorganizers in this period was the TOZ (association for the joint cultivation of land). These collectives were often artificial, existing only on paper. Usually all or part of the land of the TOZ was owned jointly and divided communally, but livestock and equipment (except for the largest farming implements) were maintained by individual families. The collective distributed income based on individual holdings.

Sovkhozy were set up on large former estates, monastery lands, or experimental fields. Land officials considered it inefficient to divide up estates that had been planted with crops that required intensive cultivation. Prime candidates for conversion into sovkhozy included estates containing orchards and large commercial gardens, or estates that grew crops in need of special technical expertise or equipment. In addition, the regime created large-scale grain, meat, and milk “factories.” Sovkhozy usually paid laborers a monthly wage, a feature that offended the sensibilities of many revolutionaries who opposed the use of hired labor.

**Creating a People’s Commissariat**

How did the Commissariat’s leaders try to organize the new agency to carry out their ambitious missions? The Commissariat’s officials faced the daunting challenge of establishing their authority within the new Moscow government and among the peasantry in the villages of Soviet Russia. These were difficult ventures, since the institutions of state had to be created in conditions of widespread
social chaos. Indeed, as one leading official later recalled, at first Narkomzem had no real program, possessing instead little more than a “central idea,” to take over the tsarist ministerial apparatus and to write fundamental legislation.\textsuperscript{55}

Not surprisingly, the Commissariat of Agriculture’s first year was enveloped in the confusion that permeated the government. The dislocation caused by the World War (and later by the Civil War, which began in May 1918) as well as urban and rural unrest, greatly magnified the Commissariat’s difficulties.\textsuperscript{56} Moreover, just as in other state agencies, severe shortages of manpower and material resources hindered the establishment of an effectively functioning ministry. As Miliutin, the first chief of the Commissariat later recalled, during the first weeks “there was no centralized organization; all communications and all the work were conducted in Smolny,” the Petrograd girls’ school where Sovnarkom was headquartered. The “office” of the Commissariat consisted of exactly one table and two shelves set up in one corner of the single room that housed the Sovnarkom secretariat. Scarcity of (among other things) staff, paper, and even ink precluded all but the simplest work. The Commissariat’s allotted credits were quickly exhausted paying minimal wages to a few secretaries who worked frantically for several bureaus simultaneously.\textsuperscript{57}

On November 15, 1917, Sovnarkom decreed that each commissariat should take over the Petrograd offices of the ministry it had superseded and then begin operating with the remaining personnel of the old ministry. Coinciding with this takeover of the old ministry offices, however, was a short period of “sabotage,” which is how the Bolsheviks labeled the passive and active resistance to the Bolshevik takeover by employees of the former Provisional Government’s ministries. Government employees all over the country, fearful of the new leadership and encouraged by their unions, went on strike against the new regime. Many teachers, telegraph operators, and postal workers refused to work, as did white-collar workers in banks, municipal offices, and industrial enterprises. In the Ministry of Agriculture’s offices, revolutionary leaders faced immediate boycott. Employees hid or destroyed maps, equipment, census reports, and statistics. Leading officials in every ministry made every effort to slow the communist takeover of the affairs of state, and this sabotage created bitterness toward “bourgeois specialists” that lingered among many Bolsheviks.\textsuperscript{58} The Right Socialist Revolutionaries, who had long identified themselves as the “peasant party,” also tried to interfere with Bolshevik control of the agriculture portfolio. Under the Provisional Government, they had controlled the Ministry of Agriculture (which had been in SR hands since April 1917) and the land committees, and they stridently opposed the Bolshevik seizure of power.\textsuperscript{59} Right SR resistance and the brief strike by white-collar workers slightly hindered, but did not halt, the Bolshevik expulsion of most Right SRs from the Commissariat.

In mid-November 1917, after a period of negotiation, the Bolsheviks struck a deal whereby their allies of convenience, the Left SRs, would take charge of five
commissariats. On November 17, the Left SRs, who had broken with the SR Party over the Bolshevik seizure of power, agreed to assume control of the Commissariat of Agriculture. Lazar Kolegaev became the new People’s Commissar of Agriculture. Thus, the Commissariat’s Bolsheviks began a short and uncomfortable period of “cohabitation” with the Left SRs. Inevitably, both the Right SRs and the Bolsheviks attacked Kolegaev during his short tenure. In a Right SR newspaper, N. Ia. Bykhovskii lashed out at Kolegaev in an article entitled “The Destruction of the Ministry of Agriculture.” He denounced Kolegaev for dismantling the Land Committee’s fifteen commissions and subcommissions, staffed by the country’s leading agricultural experts, which for over a year had been drafting land reform proposals for the upcoming Constituent Assembly. Bykhovskii lamented that work on agrarian reform had continued unabated in the Land Committee through the tumultuous year 1917 only to be terminated in November by this “defector” from his own party. Now, he went on somberly, former Ministry of Agriculture buildings are deserted, and “silence reigns where until recently there has been life.” Simultaneously, the Bolsheviks attacked Kolegaev from the Left for failing to make a clean break with the SR-dominated organizations of the Provisional Government.

The fact that the Bolsheviks granted the agriculture portfolio to the Left SRs further emphasized that land affairs were not among the communists’ top priorities. Instead, the military, the secret police (Cheka), the Commissariat of Food Supply (Narkomprod), and the Bolshevik Party organization, each with its own extralegal and plenipotentiary prerogatives, would serve as the Bolsheviks’ real instruments of power.

In March 1918, the Left SRs resigned from Sovnarkom, protesting the ratification by the Fourth Congress of Soviets of the Brest-Litovsk peace treaty with Germany. The Left SRs believed that the treaty conceded defeat by an imperialist aggressor. They also objected to several Bolshevik policies, including the forced requisitioning of farm produce by the food supply detachments (prodtstriady), the class warfare preached by the Committee of Poor Peasants, and the policy of favoring collective agriculture. (By summer the Left SRs and Bolsheviks would break off relations over the agrarian question.) Kolegaev’s departure from Narkomzem in March allowed the Bolsheviks to consolidate their control over agricultural affairs. The communists achieved control of the Commissariat of Agriculture several months later than most other branches of the economy.

For the first time since November 1917, a Bolshevik took over as People’s Commissar of Agriculture. A. P. Sereda (1871–1933) served as chief until, like many government leaders, he collapsed from exhaustion at the end of the Civil War. Sereda brought Bolsheviks into the collegium, which was the cabinet of the people’s commissar. The son of a railroad official, Sereda worked in zemstvos before the revolution. A Bolshevik of long standing, he entered the party in 1903. One source has him working as a zemstvo statistician, a notoriously radical
profession, for close to twenty years before 1917. Like most Bolsheviks active in party life before World War I, he had been in and out of prison several times, convicted of various political crimes under the tsarist government. Sereda’s three years as People’s Commissar of Agriculture marked the high point of a largely uneventful party career.

Inheritances

Lacking a well-conceived plan, the Commissariat was more a product of improvisation in these early years. Skittishly and slowly, structures melded, often cracking apart again. The weakened remnants of the old regime stood side by side with the newly born, but still poorly established, institutions of the new order. A cohesive, long-term strategy was impossible to develop. This hodgepodge of structures was a result of the Left SR leadership’s reasonable desire in the fall of 1917 and spring of 1918 to use the old ministerial machinery for the time being, rather than creating new institutions from scratch. The result, however, was confusion. The proliferation of overlapping organizations was a major contributor to the disordered state of affairs.

Upon his appointment as Secretary of the Commissariat, V. N. Meshcheriakov, one of the only high-ranking Bolsheviks in the Commissariat, dubbed Narkomzem “an SR nest” and an impenetrable “organizational mishmash.” When Meshcheriakov wrote to People’s Commissar Kolegaev begging for help in navigating the maze of overlapping sections, the commissar could only reply, “Right now no one knows how the Commissariat is organized.” He continued, “Almost nothing existed; everything had to be created anew.” In spite of his frustration—or perhaps because of it—Meshcheriakov greatly understated the degree to which the Bolsheviks borrowed from the old in creating the new.

In early 1918 three organizations with varied objectives operated nearly independently under the umbrella of Narkomzem. All had roots in, and borrowed the bulk of their staffs from, pre-revolutionary agencies. The first set of institutional scaffolding absorbed by the new Commissariat included the official structures of the new organization, the People’s Commissariat of Agriculture, especially the Current Land Policy Section (OTZP), which drafted policy and directed activities. This section became the core of the new Commissariat. Responsible for organizing and directing local land committees (and those soviet land sections that had been created by this time), OTZP drafted the 1918 Law on Socialization. The second hierarchy was the Provisional Government’s Main Land Committee, which continued to work on land reform as a subdivision of Narkomzem, retaining its entire cohort of agricultural specialists. Its many commissions were headed by luminaries such as N. D. Kondrat’ev, N. P. Makarov, and others, many of whom had sympathized with non-Bolshevik parties in 1917 and before.
The third organizational hierarchy was composed of the structures of the old Ministry of Agriculture itself. Significantly, the Bolshevik leadership temporarily left the former Ministry departamenty of agriculture and forestry intact. The Commissariat also preserved specialized sections that corresponded to various branches of the village economy. These specialized divisions, which had been key sections in the tsarist ministry, remained in place during the Civil War, though they were fairly inactive. During the Civil War, these holdover sections served as the home base for the bulk of the Commissariat’s most important non-communist specialists. When the war ended, they would emerge as the nerve center of the Commissariat.

The central administration of Narkomzem continued to be built in an ad hoc manner well into 1919, and legislation did not define formal structures, lines of authority, institutional responsibilities, or jurisdictions until at least that time. According to one eyewitness, ties among the three autonomous parts of the agricultural administration in those days were not institutionalized, but rather were based purely on haphazard and informal personal connections.  

Although the staff was able to accomplish a small portion of its tasks, Sovnarkom simply ignored or postponed the matter of establishing many of the Commissariat’s operations. Indeed, most sections, including divisions dealing with agronomic aid, animal husbandry, experimental stations, and model farms, existed only on paper. The section for expanding the amount of territory under seed, for example, which was responsible for supplying farmers with quality agricultural equipment and seeds, had access neither to equipment nor to seeds. Of the Commissariat’s many divisions, only the Current Land Policy section worked relatively well during 1918. In other words, only that part of the Commissariat involved in designing policy functioned (even if weakly), not those involved with its implementation. Indeed, this phenomenon pervaded the nonmilitarized segments of the Soviet economy. More prosaically, part of the difficulty in establishing normal operations in the Commissariat of Agriculture in 1918 can be attributed to purely physical factors. In Moscow, the Commissariat’s fifteen main divisions were spread over at least fifteen different buildings, “scattered and uneconomical.” In the fall of 1918, Turchaninov was appointed to a committee charged with reorganizing the Commissariat. The course of his research took him all over Moscow searching for several of the offices.

The Commissariat’s weakness bred frustration among the more ambitious of its cadres, who saw the organization as a vehicle for immediately remaking rural Russia. Sections and subsections of Narkomzem sprang up like mushrooms to meet concrete crises as they attracted the attention of the collegium, then disappeared just as quickly. Narkomzem was more an “adhocracy” (in the words of Henry Mintzberg) than a real bureaucracy. Under the circumstances, Meshcheriakov wrote in retrospect, “It was physically impossible to have a general plan.”
During 1918, the Commissariat leadership tried to operate in a more normalized way. The new leadership began to simplify or disband certain (but far from all) agencies closely tied to the Old Regime. They eliminated the overlapping jurisdictions of several organizations that had originally merged to form the Commissariat. Leaders formally liquidated two of the three former agricultural organizations. Nevertheless, although it abolished the Main Land Committee, for example, the Commissariat absorbed whole many of its subsections. Many sections of the old apparatus, Lenin reasoned, could adjust to the new order since their tasks were purely technical. In the meantime, the collegium divided the former Departament zemledeliia of the old Ministry of Agriculture into three sections that would remain among the Commissariat’s most critical for the next eleven years: those responsible for land working, experimental affairs, and education.

Party leaders quickly realized that the Soviet government had inherited, for better or worse, numerous structures and practices that were duplicates of the Provisional and imperial governments. Judging by an organizational chart alone, it would have appeared to the outside observer that the imperial Ministry and Bolshevik Commissariat were nearly identical. Nearly every section created by the Commissariat’s new leadership had parallels in the ministries of the previous regimes. Directly descending from sections within the tsarist Ministry were Commissariat divisions devoted to agricultural aid, research and experimental stations, land reorganization, veterinary and forest affairs, land improvement, agricultural economics and statistics, and education, as well as technical matters such as accounting and bookkeeping.

Furthermore, much of the bureaucratic practice and material culture remained the same. The Commissariat used many of the same paper forms as the agriculture ministries of the imperial and Provisional Governments. Sometimes the words “Ministry of Agriculture” were simply crossed out and “People’s Commissariat” was scrawled above them, though busy officials usually had no time for such prettifying. The Ministry of Agriculture’s seals appeared on official documents throughout the war years. The appellation “People’s Commissariat of the Ministry of Agriculture” was even used at times in official correspondence through 1918. The bureaucratic language of the Imperial administrative machine also proved difficult to discard. Minutes of meetings were reported in the same way as the tsarist ministry: in the first column listed the issue “heard” (slushali); the second column recorded what the meeting resolved (postanovili). In classic Russian bureaucratic tradition, nearly every document had to be signed by two people. A. G. Shlikhter, briefly the people’s commissar of agriculture in November 1917, was disgusted by the ubiquitous presence of specialists trained in the tsarist period. On at least one occasion, he derogatorily referred to the Commissariat as “Narkomzemstvo.” Such were the grotesque reminders for many Bolsheviks of the tsarist legacy in the new party-state. These
continuities are not surprising; yet, for revolutionaries expecting radical change, they could be both shocking and disillusioning.

Moreover, much to their annoyance, revolutionaries-turned-officials began to realize that the business of tackling urgent problems often became swamped beneath what they called “vermicelli,” the annoying minutiae of petty problems concerning staffing, budgets, and complaints that preoccupy any large bureaucracy. “Endless masses of unrelenting, whining requests” coursed through the bureaucracy, deluging the Commissariat’s leadership. Most Bolsheviks had long hated “bureaucracy,” both in the concrete and in the abstract, and having taken over a gigantic, ungainly one, they were, on one hand, constantly provided with fresh reasons for their antipathy, and on the other, forced to try to tame the beast they had captured.

“Holdover” Cadres

The absorption of large sections of the old government apparatus meant that, more so than most other commissariats, the Commissariat of Agriculture employed large numbers of so-called holdovers, or technically trained experts and administrators who had worked in state offices before the revolution. (The holdovers will be discussed in detail in later chapters.) Narkomzem was not the only commissariat to retain a large number of holdovers in its Moscow headquarters. Nevertheless, the proportion of holdovers in the Commissariat of Agriculture was the highest total of any major economic agency. Suffice it to note here that at the end of 1918, holdover employees still comprised nearly 59 percent of all Narkomzem officials, compared with 23 percent in the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs, 46 percent in Internal Affairs, and 48 percent in the Supreme Council of the National Economy (Vesenkha). The proportion remained essentially unchanged until the end of the Civil War, declining slowly over the course of NEP. Most of these holdovers had served in upper or mid-level positions in the tsarist or Provisional Government ministries of agriculture or food supply. Many of those employed in the Moscow offices were from the provincial zemstvo “third element”—agronomists, land reorganizers (the two largest agricultural specialties), statisticians, or economists. As one Narkomzem section director argued, the recovery of agriculture would be possible only with the large-scale participation of well-trained and experienced experts in agricultural and land sciences. Experienced tsarist cadres proved to be valuable resources during this transitional stage, and they would remain essential to the Bolsheviks through the 1920s. Nevertheless, suspicion lingered among some of the party leadership and rank and file of potential “sabotage” by holdover technical specialists.

There are several explanations for the relatively high number of former tsarist officials in the Commissariat between 1917 and 1920. First, the Commis-
sariat of Agriculture had a precursor in the imperial and Provisional governments. When the Commissariat of Agriculture absorbed sections of the old ministry, it was natural for ministry employees simply to stay in the same jobs, even to sit at the same desk in the same office, if the new bosses allowed. Moreover, despite its many tasks, Narkomzem was not a politically influential ministry. The directors of more politically sensitive institutions, such as the Commissariat of Foreign Affairs and the Commissariat of Nationalities, were more eager to evict the living remnants of the Old Regime. These agencies retained far fewer holdovers.\textsuperscript{80} In addition, many of the Commissariat’s functions were highly technical, and only persons with specialized training could handle them. Few Communist Party members had such advanced training.

Holdovers were a subset of the so-called \textit{sluzhashchie} who comprised the great majority of the commissariat’s personnel. This term referred to white-collar workers or “employees,” as the term is most often translated, most of whom had occupied administrative, scientific, and technical positions before the revolution.\textsuperscript{81} Many Bolsheviks questioned the loyalty of these white-collar employees, who were not classified either as peasants or as industrial workers. Most commissariats contained between 70 percent and 80 percent sluzhashchie throughout the 1920s.\textsuperscript{82} Moreover, Narkomzem’s cadres contained very few Bolshevik Party members. Of 1,150 staff members in late 1918, only 21 were members of the Bolshevik Party, a lower proportion than in any other commissariat.\textsuperscript{83} Considering that in the first year after the October Revolution the ministerial bureaucracies drew heavily on Bolshevik Party officials for staff, it is revealing how few of these cadres ended up in Narkomzem. In late 1918, only 2 percent of the Commissariat’s staff were party members, compared with about 9 percent at the Commissariat of Health, 10 percent at Internal Affairs, and almost 47 percent at Foreign Affairs.

The Dictatorship of Food Supply over Agriculture

The agriculture commissariat’s activities between 1918 and 1920 cannot be discussed in isolation from the wartime conditions that affected every aspect of the economy and governance at the time. During the Civil War, the Bolsheviks subordinated the agronomic, veterinary, and land reorganization assignments of Narkomzem to the supply of the war effort, the feeding of the cities and the army, and the reconstruction of industry and transportation. The system of “war communism,” as the measures of the wartime period were labeled after the conflict had ended (they were called “communism” during the war), kept the Commissariat on the periphery of economic life.\textsuperscript{84} The regime nationalized nearly all enterprises of every size. To combat the overriding economic problem—the shortage of food—the party leadership instituted a grain monopoly, a so-called grain dictatorship under the Commissariat of Food Supply. The Provisional
Government had also decreed such a monopoly but had not been able to enforce it. Under the Bolsheviks' grain dictatorship, the free market in produce was abolished as local food brigades moved into villages and seized surpluses, which often were only enough for a household’s survival, or which included seed for planting the following spring.

Although war communist agrarian policies were in some senses “emergency” measures intended to deal with the consequences of the crises facing the regime, they were by no means exclusively emergency measures. As late as the final months of 1920, the permanent outlawing of market transactions as “speculation,” the eradication of private trade, the obligatory turning over of peasant harvests to the state, the notion that the village contained a stratum of exploiting capitalist kulaks who had to be controlled and weakened, the belief that ultimately agricultural production would have to be socialized, and the permanent hegemony of the working class in its relationship with the peasantry were all regarded as essential elements of the socialist economy and society that the Civil War was being waged to create.65

Along with the disruption wrought by war and rural upheaval, two other related factors explain why the Commissariat of Agriculture remained a neglected stepchild inside the party-state. Fierce power struggles among government agencies erupted, and there was a debilitating shortage of knowledgeable personnel, especially in the localities, despite the proportion of holdover staff. Interministerial conflict permeated the Soviet government during the war communism period (and later) as new agencies battled to secure their turf. As was the case inside the imperial government, interagency battles suffused every area of the economy, including transport, industry, and labor supply.66 Moreover, like its imperial predecessors, the Soviet state apparatus was by no means free from internal conflict. During the war, the Commissariat was relatively impotent within the Council of People’s Commissars. The forced requisition of food marginalized Narkomzem as an economic or political force. Compared with other state agencies involved in the agricultural economy, the Commissariat remained a weak competitor for power, resources, and personnel. The Commissariat’s fragile position was directly related to the military and food-supply situation during the war. The regime’s short-term need became the expropriation of agricultural production, superceding assistance to farmers or the modernization of their technique and methods of production.

The Commissariat of Agriculture’s leadership was unhappy with its agency’s political insignificance, which was reflected in its partial dismemberment by other, stronger economic ministries. In the first year, the jurisdiction of Narkomzem was regularly reduced as other agencies clipped off and digested a number of its departments and assignments. Two very powerful state economic administrations—the Commissariat of Food Supply and Vesenkha—did most of the clipping. Vesenkha’s role as the economic supercommissariat allowed it wide latitude to consume the economic functions of other agencies. What is
most interesting here is just how angrily Narkomzem’s leaders expressed their frustration to Lenin and the Bolshevik leadership. Even four years later, when Meshcheriakov recalled his relations with the giant of the war communist economy, his fury was palpable. As he put it, the “imperialists at Vesenkha decided that Vesenkha alone was the economy; and [they] thereafter began systematically to gobble up piece after piece of Narkomzem.” An incensed Meshcheriakov complained angrily that the Commissariat of Agriculture had to waste valuable energy attempting to stave off takeover attempts—“amputations” as he put it—by “greedy” institutions. He concluded, “This pilfering ended in the complete defeat of the Central Commissariat of Agriculture.”

During the war, the party leadership considered the Commissariat of Agriculture’s tasks just the first stage in a process, the ultimate goal of which was to provide food to the cities and the Red Army during the war. Two goals that were compatible in theory—to improve the productivity of peasant farming, and to supply urban areas and the military with food—fundamentally conflicted in practice. Seizures of surplus grain from the villages by Narkomprod’s food brigades led peasant families to abruptly reduce the amount of land under seed, growing only enough to feed themselves. Narkomzem leaders protested heavy taxes on meat to the Central Committee, observing that “the food commissariat is writing decrees that force the peasant to slaughter his cattle” to sell meat to pay taxes. The economist L. N. Litoshenko’s later recollection of food supply brigades’ wartime methods summarizes the combination of antipathy and moral outrage at the food supply commissariat’s wantonness: “There is no statistic to calculate the endless quantity of tears, suffering, the deprivations of a last possession and of life itself which befell the unlucky sackmen [peasant grain traders] in the memorable winter of 1919–20. . . . In the Russian north, you cannot find one village where there were no victims of the food monopoly and of the primitive struggle for bread and life.” Amid a continual military crisis, the Politburo decided to provide the food supply commissariat all the work force, materials, and police authority it requested. This support often was provided at the expense of funding for the activities of the agriculture commissariat and other nonmilitary sectors. Considering the wartime emergency, it is notable that Narkomzem’s cadres, including its political leadership, were at times less than accommodating to the party’s demands that the entire economy be bent to the task of winning the war. Meshcheriakov noted, for example, that Narkomzem was repeatedly foiled in its attempts to create a general all-Russian plan for distributing machine tools, seeds, and other goods. Narkomprod was not cooperative in establishing a plan. “All that is important to the food supply commissariat is to get more grain.”

In wartime, party leaders chose the food supply commissariat’s no-nonsense methods of forced seizures and quick results over the Commissariat of Agriculture’s approach of slowly encouraging increased production with agronomic ed-
ucation, land reorganization, and the distribution of tools and seeds. The regime regarded the former approach as absolutely necessary during the war, while the latter demanded time, patience, trained personnel, and a massive influx of equipment, staff, and seeds into the rural economy. Amidst a decimated economy, prolonged military actions, and devastated industry and transportation systems, the government lacked all these resources and could not count on obtaining them soon. Food supply brigades required hardened, dedicated loyalists, willing to employ violence against perceived class enemies to save the revolution. No technical training was necessary. With irony, Meshcheriakov labeled this state of affairs “the dictatorship of food supply over agriculture.”

In 1920, a leading Narkomprod official urged the merging of the food and agriculture commissariats into a “Narzemprod,” charging with condescension that the Commissariat of Agriculture was preoccupied with agronomy without due consideration of state needs. For its part Narkomzem simultaneously accused the food commissariat of ignoring the needs of agriculture. The enmity between these institutional rivals lasted into the early 1920s, as leaders of both agencies continued to urge the suppression of the other.

Thus, heated infighting within the state apparatus began early, as agencies competed to define their roles—and to defend their institutional niches—within the framework of a suddenly nationalized and largely militarized economy. Amid the hostilities, the Commissariat of Agriculture was an organization under siege. During the war, sheer survival as an independent organization was perhaps its major achievement.

**A People’s Commissariat without Food Supply**

In their efforts to strengthen their institution, the Commissariat’s leaders faced two further, related obstacles: a critical shortage of staff, and their personnel’s very difficult living conditions. In the provinces, land officials and specialists were few and far between. The lack of trained agronomists and surveyors rendered local agricultural assistance problematic. The Commissariat of Agriculture (like the Bolshevik Party generally) lacked specialists and managerial personnel familiar with agriculture and the village economy, especially posted to uezds and villages. Complaints about the shortage of agricultural specialists were common. The Narkomzem leadership insisted, to no avail, to the Central Committee and Sovnarkom that the agency needed two or three times more specialists than were available even for its minimum assignments. It is useful to contrast the number of people in Narkomprod’s food requisitioning armies with the number of agricultural specialists. In December 1920, while there were fewer than ten thousand agricultural specialists in the country, there were more than sixty-two thousand members of the food armies.

To some extent the shortage of experts was a legacy of the small number of schools for training agrarian technicians in the imperial period. As a result of the
demand for specialists created by the Stolypin reforms, there was a huge leap in
the number of agricultural specialists turned out by Russian schools between
1905 and 1914. The number of agronomists rose from five hundred to more than
ten thousand. Nevertheless, the number still lagged far behind what the Min-
istry of Agriculture and zemstvos considered necessary. By the eve of the revolu-
tion, only about fifteen thousand state employees in the agriculture sector
possessed a higher or secondary education.

Specialists who survived World War I and remained in Russia during the
Civil War years witnessed the drastic worsening of living and working conditions
of Moscow’s Narkomzem staff. Of course, these conditions created problems for
all but the most prosperous state agencies, not only for the Commissariat of Agri-
culture. The chaos in which local experts worked did not abate. As the winter
of 1919 approached, skyrocketing inflation made wages inadequate even for the
bare necessities. Years later, N. Turchaninov, the head of the General Affairs
subsection, recalled the extreme difficulties of the Commissariat’s staff in
Moscow. “In the dining rooms, kasha was considered the height of prosperity,
and people fought over a scrap of bread, becoming enemies for life. . . . All the
attention and thoughts of the majority of people at this time focused on ques-
tions of food.” People clamored for jobs in Narkomzem in order to get their
hands on the miserly rations and “meager social security” to which civil servants
had access. They thereby temporarily eluded the brutal process of “natural se-
lection” taking place on the streets. Things did not begin to improve among
Narkomzem’s Moscow employees until 1920.

Some employees were able to shop their skills to other economic organiza-
tions, quitting Narkomzem to find better pay or working conditions. An official
in the Central Finance Section complained that beginning in 1919 trained offici-
als abandoned work because of inadequate material support. “Because of diffi-
cult work and insignificant salaries, employees flee from serving in the section.
. . . It is essential to take measures toward improving the life of employees in
terms of food and salary in order to stop the mass exodus of employees from the
section. We cannot do constructive work without some security.”

An official pointed out the discrepancy between salaries and work condi-
tions of Narkomzem staff and the employees of other, more prestigious organi-
izations. “Officials are hungry, shoeless, and naked. They long to go where they
have the opportunity to be fed and clothed. There are ministries and certain
agencies where officials, and especially specialists and high-ranking white-collar
employees, are given incomparably more salary than in Narkomzem. They also
have food and everything needed for existence in satisfactory quantity and, in
some places, in abundance. Narkomzem’s officials are fleeing to those
places.”

Low salaries, difficulty getting access to food, and equipment shortages often
compelled surveyors and agronomists to leave their professions for jobs in other
sectors of the economy. Some specialists joined construction enterprises. Others returned to school to get further education, often in another field. Berzin pointed to the material insecurity in which surveyors and land reorganizers had to labor as the primary obstacle to the timely completion of land reorganization. Since they earned so little, surveyors had to secure other sources of income to supplement their “beggarly” budgets. Some used their skills to set up their own farms. Others became itinerant shepherds, venturing from household to household trying to find employment, reliant on villagers. One official observed, “morale is eroded when an agent of the state is dependent on that population to whom he goes in the name of the state.”

Volost’ land sections also faced shortages of properly operating equipment in spite of the state’s efforts to supply it. The Saratov provincial land section was able to provide each agronomist with only one-quarter of a pencil and three or four pieces of paper to last for six months. Specialists had to use unreliable maps of communal land holdings that dated from as far back as the 1870s. The job of Narkomzem officials was further complicated as the Army began requisitioning not only foodstuffs, but also horses, draft animals and, worst of all for local activities, trained personnel (often the most experienced) when the military situation deteriorated. Schools for training agrarian specialists were closed. Experts died of war-related causes or emigrated. Many, of course, simply refused to work for the Bolsheviks, regarding the regime as corrupt or illegitimate.

Narkomzem also had to compete for specialists with other economic commissariats. The party believed that without a strong and effective food supply commissariat, the regime, together with society as a whole, would collapse. When the Army demobilized agricultural experts, as they did in late 1917/early 1918 (albeit temporarily) and again in 1920, the food supply commissariat usually snatched them up, with the Central Committee’s approval. During the war the Central Committee and Sovnarkom strengthened the food supply commissariat at the expense of other agencies. They shifted valuable workers from other organizations, including Narkomzem, to the food supply commissariat’s jurisdiction. As Lenin put it in June 1918, “We decided to rob all commissariats to strengthen the commissariat of food supply in emergency fashion for two to three months, because otherwise we might die.”

The State Regulation of Agriculture

Just as the war was winding down, the party leadership endorsed a plan emanating from the Commissariat of Food Supply designed to assert more state control over the activities of peasant farmers in the name of combating the food crisis. In a series of articles in Pravda in September 1920, V. V. Osinskii, the deputy people’s commissar of food supply, introduced a policy which he called Gosregulirovanie sel’skogo khoziaistva, or State Regulation of Agriculture. In Decem-
ber, a revised version of the policy was accepted by the Eighth All-Russian Congress of Soviets and later that month by Sovnarkom.

The state regulation plan was inspired in part by the catastrophic condition of agriculture in the waning months of the war, together with the realization among Bolsheviks that collective farms could not provide the answer to the crisis of production. Most of the party leadership had come to understand that the government could not afford to supply and maintain hundreds of scattered and poorly functioning collective farms. As Lenin understood well, growth in the number of these farms had stagnated. Those that continued to exist were not faring well, nor were they popular with the farming population. The hope that collective agriculture would appeal to a wide cross section of the peasantry in the near future was abandoned. The new plan would focus on forcing peasants to produce more within the confines of their traditional communes.

Collectivization was forced upon an unwilling peasantry early in the wartime period. The party and Narkomzem encouraged coercion and some land department personnel were ruthless. In December of 1918, however, Lenin had openly declared that the forced collectivization of agricultural production, a process that was supported by many personnel in the local soviets and Committees of the Poor, must stop. Lenin declared that moving too quickly would alienate the middle peasant, needed by the Bolsheviks as an ally in the class struggle against the kulak. The middle peasant, Lenin insisted, must be convinced that the Bolsheviks were his benefactor and that joining a collective farm would be beneficial. The Narkomzem leadership endorsed Lenin’s gradualist position. During the second half of the wartime period (mid 1919–late 1920), the party’s new emphasis on conciliating the middle peasant dictated that peasants must not be forced to join collectives; rather, production by the household within the parameters of the traditional peasant commune should remain the basis of small-scale agricultural production.

Having made this plea for patience, however, Lenin conceded that in the long run, wide-scale collective production was the only vehicle by which Russia could escape its long-term agricultural crisis. Lenin asserted that ultimately peasant agriculture would have to be socialized, though this should be done without reliance on coercion. Narkomzem and the Bolshevik Party perceived and advanced collective farming as the ultimate ideal, at least for the long run. February 1919 represented the peak of the government’s collectivist orientation. That month’s statute “concerning socialist land reorganization and measures for the transition to soviet agriculture” declared that individual farming was dying out. The law gave agricultural collectives, including sovkhozy and cooperatives, priority in funding, technical assistance, and land allocation. Since the “unavoidable” transition to collective production was underway, such favoring of collectives was deemed an inevitability. “All forms of individual land tenure should be regarded as transitory and dying away,” read the crucial passage.
Thus, until 1920, the government legislated that the noncoercive creation of collective farms remain one of Narkomzem’s main assignments.

The hope that collective agriculture would appeal to a wide cross-section of the peasantry in the near future was all but abandoned by the fall of 1920. The new “State Regulation” plan, which its designer Osinskii called a “Great Campaign in the village,” would fall back upon certain elements of coercion, forcing peasants to produce more within the confines of their traditional communes.

Osinskii summarized his plan: “The principal factor in the socialist reconstruction of agriculture is the compulsory regulation of agricultural production as a whole. [This] regulation will penetrate deeper and deeper and will develop into state organization of production.” A collegium member of the food supply commissariat argued that peasants were state employees who labored, after all, on state land. The policy of state regulation stated that Narkomzem should set up a national sowing plan that would determine which field peasants should devote to which crops. Narkomzem offices in Moscow would pass the plans down to the provincial, then district, then volost’ level. From the volost’, each household would receive a quota detailing which crops, and in what quantity, it would produce for market. Sowing according to the quota would be compulsory, though each household would retain use of a small household plot for their own use. The primary goal was to compel farmers to plant fields that they had abandoned during the war years. Osinskii openly rejected Narkomzem’s tactics of persuasion, calling the policy a “militarization” of agriculture that would entail “the transition away from agronomic volunteerism to state interference.”

The policy also was intended to raise the quality of agricultural practices and raise average yields per acre. It focused on forcing villagers to adopt two farming practices: plowing fields in the fall for the spring sowing (na ziab) and plowing the fallow field in April instead of June. The coercion of peasants, completely without consultation, to farm in a certain way as a solution to grain shortages is an important feature of this period.

The project was unsuccessful. Even had the gradual introduction of the New Economic Policy in 1921 not destroyed the premises upon which it was based, the plan was fundamentally unworkable. With the war abating such ideas found little support among the scientific and political leadership of the Commissariat of Agriculture. Most of the Narkomzem collegium and specialists viewed the plan on state regulation as foolhardy and overly ambitious state intervention. A program by which Moscow dictated quotas for twenty million peasant households, Narkomzem argued, could not possibly succeed. Indeed, agronomists had never attempted to force peasants to do anything, and doing so was not accepted agronomic practice. Narkomzem official Nikolai Bogdanov noted, for example, that forcing peasants to undertake these practices was “completely unrealizable both psychologically and technically.” It was not laziness that prevented farmers from doing so in the first place, it was the shortage of live-
stock and time. Economic stimuli, not coercion, were truly necessary, Bogdanov argued. Osinskii, on the other hand, had no patience for agronomists’ fondness for long periods of education.

**A Subculture of Expertise**

During Narkomzem’s wartime marginalization, several aspects of the organization’s culture remained peripheral to the food requisitioning and establishment of collective farms that dominated the agency’s agenda. What I call a subculture of expertise, touting the application of science rather than coercion to the problems of peasant agriculture, germinated beneath the dominant culture. With the end of the war and the launch of NEP, this subculture would emerge.

This subculture had its roots in the imperial agricultural ministries, particularly in the tsarist Department of Agriculture, where many of the Commissariat’s most important holdover specialists had worked. The Department of Land Working, a division of the Ministry of Agriculture and State Domains, was where Russia’s best specialists in the agronomic and veterinary sciences had been concentrated. It served as the scientific research nucleus of the agriculture ministries, studying problems of the agricultural economy and then drafting legislation to accelerate the development of its various branches. Many tsarist ministries had established such departamenty as divisions to which they delegated the concrete work of data collection, statistical work, and other professional research.

Incubated in specialized agricultural agencies in the tsarist period, the Commissariat of Agriculture’s subculture of expertise quietly matured amid the many specialized structural units established between 1918 and 1920. Despite enduring several reorganizations in this period, the Commissariat of Agriculture’s structures retained several defining features that would become the foundation of the NEP-era organization. A law of June 10, 1919, for example, reorganized Narkomzem into four primary sections—Land Reorganization, Agriculture, Forestry, and General Affairs. Each was composed of several highly specialized subsections headed by a trained expert rather than a generalist administrator. Small subunits concentrated on specific agricultural questions. Leaders reasoned that an agronomic or sheep-breeding subsection of a provincial land section could be best run by someone with at least a minimum of practical experience and training.

On one hand, this practice illustrates the growing specialization inside the Commissariat. What is more important, however, is that such an organizational scheme demonstrates the confidence of many—but not all—Bolsheviks that nonparty specialists could both professionally and loyally manage agricultural matters at the central and local levels. This conviction would become central to Bolshevik strategy beginning in 1921. Many party leaders recognized that, in
light of the country’s extraordinarily deep agricultural uncertainties, the regime needed experts both in the field and in administration. The principle represented an important change in approach from the imperial administration of agriculture, a situation in which generalist, nonspecialist bureaucrats supervised departments staffed by specialists. In the imperial administration, “experts were inferior both organizationally and socially,” and were to be used only when called upon by their generalist bosses.\textsuperscript{116}

From their perspective, some expert holdovers in the Commissariat of Agriculture believed that the revolution offered the chance to reorganize the administration of agriculture along these specialized (and ultimately more “progressive”) lines. For many of the Commissariat’s specialists the U.S. Department of Agriculture acted as a model. A 1919 publication of the Commissariat’s Agricultural Scholarly Committee expressed glowing admiration for the scientific orientation of the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the leading role of its specialists.\textsuperscript{117} The sentiments expressed in this publication represent a veritable manifesto of the subculture that would emerge strongly in 1921. The U.S. Department of Agriculture, the authors observed, “is divided into as many sections as there are specialties in agriculture. A specialist in the corresponding branch of agricultural knowledge leads each of these sections. Scientific establishments such as laboratories, offices, museums, and so on, are under their leadership. The Department of Agriculture annually publishes reports that clearly display its creative work. These publications are based entirely on the strictly scientific research of vital phenomena that Washington’s Department of Agriculture undertakes.” The “graphic example” of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, with its specialized subdivisions, was the model for the Commissariat of Agriculture’s 1919 reorganization.

Russian specialists candidly displayed their admiration, indeed their envy, for the relative generosity with which the American government funded and supplied the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The authors contrasted this American largesse with the miserly allotments of Russian governments, past and present, since the current Commissariat and the tsarist Ministry were both woefully underfunded.\textsuperscript{118} They also admired the “high cultural level” and agricultural literacy of American farmers, again contrasting them with Russian villagers. Russian experts also noted the good roads and railroads that linked the American department’s branch offices with nearby cities. In a telling remark illustrating a view shared by many of the Commissariat’s specialists, the publication notes that the Soviet Scholarly Committee hopes to see achieved what the American agency had accomplished: “Without exaggerating one can say that the Washington Department of Agriculture recreated the methods of farming and enriched the country” [emphasis mine], and these words can be taken as a mission statement for the Commissariat of Agriculture’s specialists.
The authors declared openly that without generous state assistance, experimentation and other work in the agricultural sciences could not continue. Therefore, “the primary role in the creation of experimental matters in Russia belongs to the government. Without the state’s help it cannot develop.” Hidden during the wartime emphasis on food requisitioning and creating new types of collective production, a desire for the state to help specialists continue offering assistance to the communal peasantry lay just under the surface.

While acknowledging the extreme administrative frailty of their organization during the war, the authors pursued their comparison with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. In an obvious reference to the food supply commissariat’s roving food brigades invested with extralegal powers, Narkomzem specialists complained that the People’s Commissariat of Agriculture, like the American Department, “does not have at its disposal efficient plenipotentiaries.” The American agency’s “influence is based on moral interaction with the population. This interaction is manifested in spoken and press propaganda about scientific and practical ideas, by demonstration, and by extending broad assistance and advice to anyone who requests it.” Narkomzem’s specialists drew attention to their self-proclaimed moral authority, reminiscent of the traditions of the Russian intelligentsia. Like the leadership of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, they were convinced that success in increasing agricultural production could be achieved only through science and persuasion.

Yet, there was a major problem with this admiration of American achievement. Reaching the level of the American extension services was simply impossible considering the country’s financial situation and competing prerogatives. Indeed, the ambition was almost guaranteed to engender disappointment. Constant comparisons of Soviet Russia to advanced western nations by Bolsheviks and experts alike created a structural frustration that would be difficult to overcome.

Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that “anyone who reads the letters that passed between the Intendants and their superiors or subordinates cannot fail to be struck by the family likeness between the government officials of the past and those of modern France.” He added that not only the personnel and institutions, but even the internal bureaucratic terminology of the Old Regime was similar to that of post-revolutionary, republican France. Despite their obsession with the French Revolution, Russia’s revolutionary rulers had perhaps not read Tocqueville’s cautionary tale about the persistence of the old-regime state. If they had, they might have learned quite a bit.

The Russian state during the nineteenth century was in many ways weak, administratively circumscribed, and understaffed. Typical of many land empires, it neglected provincial administration and distrusted its own personnel stationed outside the capitals. Nevertheless, Russia had grandiose aspirations of effecting a social revolution that would strengthen its geopolitical position.
Such great power ambitions emerged even stronger in 1917 with the new Soviet state, whose social modernization program was even more extravagant. Having inherited much of the social structure, administrative personnel, bureaucratic structures, and great power aspirations of old regime Russia, the Soviet leadership dreamed, as Tocqueville wrote of the French revolutionaries, of making “use of the central power . . . for shattering the whole social structure and rebuilding it on lines that seemed to them desirable.” Tocqueville could never have anticipated, however, that the new regime would add a volatile force to the mix—the drive to build a socialist countryside.

An investigation of the period between 1914 and 1920 raises several issues that form a backdrop for the rest of this study chronicling the dilemmas radiating from the Commissariat’s efforts to peacefully “reorganize” the Soviet countryside in the 1920s. The foundation of the People’s Commissariat of Agriculture was laid, often in unexpected ways, under the Old Regime and in the first years after the Bolshevik revolution of October 1917. The Commissariat inherited much across the revolutionary divide, despite the hopes of more idealistic Bolsheviks who expected a complete break with the discredited past.

Acting out of desperation during wartime, Russian governments relied on coercion to acquire agricultural produce to feed the cities and army. Historians have demonstrated elements of continuity between the Russian Imperial, Provisional Government, and Soviet Civil War policies regarding the problems of wartime food supply. In all three cases and with varying degrees of success, the state implemented measures calling for the compulsory delivery of grain by peasant producers. Governments tended to regard the countryside instrumentally, as a producer of commodities to be turned over to the state for its use; the peasantry was the subject of state action. Agricultural assistance agencies were transformed into part of the wartime food procurement apparatus. Some leading officials in the Ministry of Agriculture embraced this new role. Yet many agricultural specialists resented the new procurement duties, considering them to be detrimental to what they regarded as their real mission, to teach farmers to raise the productivity of communal agriculture. In each case, agricultural assistance programs were neglected in the interest of procuring foodstuffs. In wartime, the food procurement bureaucracies gained the upper hand; land and agriculture administrations were frustrated. During the early Bolshevik period, conflict between two methods of approaching the countryside was manifested in intense bureaucratic struggles between the Commissariat of Agriculture and the Commissariat of Food Supply.

The Soviet state was bequeathed a peasant economy composed of farmers entrenched in their communes, employing the traditional modes of organization, tools, and methods that Russian state modernizers had considered severely inefficient and unproductive. Although general agricultural output per capita slowly rose over the two decades before World War I, state officials remained
concerned about lingering weaknesses in production relative to Western countries, which they attributed to a combination of rural overpopulation, soil exhaustion, poorly developed markets, ineffective technology, inefficient organization of farming, and the peasants’ own stubbornness. In addition, Commissariat officials became heirs to a legacy of comparative economic backwardness, understanding that Russia occupied a relatively challenging position in the world, struggling to become an industrial power while lagging in important ways behind advanced Western economies. The Bolsheviks also inherited a sprawling ministerial apparatus, with most of its structures and much of its personnel intact.

This legacy was received in sharply contrasting ways. Pragmatists were pleased that experienced people could support the Commissariat’s assignments. Some Bolsheviks, however, were hostile to the leftover personnel, almost none of whom were communists and many of whom had belonged to or sympathized with noncommunist political parties. It is one of the great paradoxes of the Bolshevik revolution that the new regime was fully committed to using the power of the state to oversee the massive reconstruction of the social and economic spheres, yet it remained at the same time deeply suspicious of the bureaucracy that lay at its disposal.

The roots of the agronomic aid effort were shallow thanks to underfunding and the brief period of time that agronomic aid programs fully functioned before the war. In times of crisis, a government could bypass them fairly easily, though they were never completely uprooted. During the Civil War, the Bolshevik Party marginalized efforts to rescue communal and individual (as opposed to state-organized collective) agriculture as they focused on the forced procurement of foodstuffs for supplying the army and cities. Within the Council of People’s Commissars, Narkomzem occupied an ineffective position in relation to agencies that had been assigned more power and authority in the wartime economy, especially the food supply commissariat. Party leaders set aside the task of raising the productivity of the small peasantry through the distribution of tools, seeds, and agronomic knowledge in order to support the more immediate tasks of prevailing in the military struggle, acquiring food for soldiers and urban dwellers, and establishing a “communist” economy. As a result, the agriculture commissariat received minimal funding (most of which was dedicated to the nearly impossible task of establishing a network of socialist farms). And, not surprisingly, frustration built among professionals with aspirations to teach and transform the peasantry, both during World War I and the Civil War. After the Civil War, one official of the Commissariat of Agriculture recalled “the gaping abyss . . . , the unforgettable, incredible lack of harmony between the Commissariat’s very diverse assignments and the workforce and money allocated to fulfill them.”123
Rarely discussed by policymakers during the Civil War was any formulation of measures to assist with the overwhelming majority of the peasants who lived in traditional communes. Many agricultural specialists regarded the incompetence of Narkomzem during the war as an indication of the extent to which the Bolsheviks neglected assistance to the communal peasantry in this period. Although policy deemphasized the immediate, forcible establishment of collectives by the end of 1918, the gradual creation and maintenance of a collective farming sector remained a major assignment of Narkomzem until mid-1920. B. N. Knipovich, the leading Narkomzem statistician, noted that the establishment of collective farms was felt by the Commissariat’s staff to be their “central task.” Indeed, as late as September 1920, Sereda sent a circular to provincial land departments scolding them for paying insufficient attention to setting up collective farms. Referring to the 1917–20 period, Knipovich wrote in 1921: “Sometimes it is even pointed out that Narkomzem concentrated all its attention on creating collective farms and state farms, which occupy only 3 percent of the land, leaving the remaining 97 percent without attention.” Knipovich’s words echo those of many pre-revolutionary agricultural specialists who despaired of the state’s failure to devote adequate resources to modernizing communal farming. Similarly, reminiscent of agronomists during World War I, many agricultural specialists seem to have resented the agency’s weakness and the regime’s abandonment of agronomic aid efforts during the Civil War. Overall, the approach to the countryside during the 1914–20 period became an important and lasting legacy for the post–Civil War Commissariat of Agriculture. This wartime legacy was difficult to shed.

In spite of their marginalization during the war, the specialized subsections of the Commissariat that functioned poorly during the war demonstrated remarkable resilience, serving as the nerve center of the organization once the regime began to introduce NEP in March 1921. The end of the war and the gradual introduction of NEP provided reasons for new, if guarded, optimism to specialists in the shadow subculture of expertise, a subculture that would emerge stronger in 1921. NEP rhetoric would provide a new atmosphere of civil peace with the villages. The Commissariat would become an institutional foundation of the new—and problematic—political alliance (smychka) between the proletarian dictatorship and the peasantry.

Thus, the Commissariat of Agriculture’s mission to cultivate a Soviet countryside in the 1920s—a mission much more complex and ambitious than that of tsarist agricultural aid programs—brought forth unexpected and powerful tensions and conflicts, as did NEP itself. The Commissariat serves as an example of the extraordinary challenges the new Soviet state faced as it attempted to come to terms with the great majority of the population. The fortunes of Narkomzem in the 1920s, in many ways the prototypical ministry in the state machinery, became a litmus test for the prospects of the NEP. As went the Commissariat of Agriculture in the 1920s, so went NEP.