CHAPTER 4

None Dare Call It Resistance?
Coping, Opposition, and
the Soviet State

No shepherd, real or spiritual, ever watched his flock with more solicitous, a more jealous eye than that with which the Kremlin stands guard over the souls of its human charges.

George F. Kennan, 1967

Lately . . . hostile elements have been spearheading sabotage efforts, making use of produce shortages. In the city of Irkutsk, on December 29, 1946, an anti-Soviet flier was discovered in a number of movie theaters and stores. It was printed with a specially prepared stamp depicting a New Year’s tree with the caption: “Long live a new year of hunger and new promises by the power of the Soviets!”

Party svodka, January 1947

In all societies and cultures, famines and food shortages elicit a whole spectrum of popular responses. In their early stages, famines also tend to increase grievances against the existing political order, since hungry and disgruntled citizens are more likely to take issue with government policies and voice their dissatisfaction. But as famine progresses and hunger takes its toll on the body, resistance tends to wane, as people reserve their use of energy to essential tasks aimed at survival. For this reason, famines can be politically expedient. In 1921–22, the Bolsheviks made use of the famine to carry out unpopular antireligious measures and to essentially subordinate the peasantry. In 1932–33, the famine broke down resistance to collectivization, allowing for increased control and exploitation of the peasantry by the state.

N. Ganson, The Soviet Famine of 1946–47 in Global and Historical Perspective
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But the idea of “resistance” as a frame of scholarly inquiry has stimulated contentious debate among historians. According to Anna Krylova, in adopting resistance as a paradigm, Western scholars have created a Stalinist man that “seems to embody and encode contemporary agendas, anxieties, and moral imperatives.” In the process, they have created a unified and static liberal subject removed from Soviet space and time. Krylova asserts that the liberalism of the Soviet individual is essentially a construct that must be acknowledged as such and deconstructed in order to achieve historical accuracy. Chipping further away at the idea of a liberal subject, Jochen Hellbeck views individual dissent within the framework of the “Soviet Revolution” rather than “in distinction to the ruling order.” He suggests that the cost of demonstrating open dissent was too great: it could lead to “self-marginalization and atomization” for the individual. On the basis of a handful of diaries, Hellbeck asserts that people with grievances against the system sought to suppress them and longed “to overcome their painful separation from the collective body of the Soviet people.” In short, even those with dissenting thoughts were affected by the system, sometimes to the extent that they perceived themselves as bourgeois or dangerous to the collective.

The nature of the available sources further complicates matters. Soviet historians have widely employed svodki, or official (Party or state) summaries of popular moods, as a window into society, often in order to analyze resistance to the Soviet government. While these documents, which were classified until the fall of communism, provide a wealth of information on Soviet society, some historians have claimed that the uncritical use of svodki has exaggerated the level of actual resistance in the 1930s. Mark Tauger applies the same criticism to OGPU reports, which he suggests exaggerate the extent of resistance because Soviet authorities uncovered the most unfavorable phenomena in society. Generalization from these documents, he insists, underestimates the degree to which people had adapted to the Soviet system.

Though couched in novel terms, this scholarly discussion is hardly new. In 1952, a polemic in the journal Soviet Studies between A. Nove and R. Schlesinger on the topic of the collective farm system covered much of the same ground. While the two scholars argued about the extent of material benefits of the kolkhoz order for Soviet peasants, the dispute essentially came down to the question of coercion: How coercive was the collective farm system? This argument is essentially an inverse image of today’s debate, which asks not how coercive the Soviet system was but how coercive the people considered it to be (and how they reacted to it). Tauger, a critic of the resistance paradigm, points out that “harvests were larger in the years after natural disasters and crop failures (1933, 1935, 1937), indicating that many peasants