Abstract: Coming to Terms With the Village: Stalin's Death and the Reassessment of Rural-Urban Relations in the Soviet Union

In August 1953, the Soviet writer Tikhon Semushkin was sent by Pravda to the countryside to report on the current state of the kolkhoz village. In this article, we use Semushkin’s unpublished travel diaries to study elite perceptions of the countryside and patterns of identity construction in the period of the interregnum between Stalin’s death and the confirmation of Nikita S. Khrushchev as head of the Communist Party. We analyse how in 1953 Soviet citizens reconsidered their place within Soviet society and how the writer acted as a chronicler and participant in this process. Semushkin’s notes prove that regardless of the revolutionary imperative of the Soviet project, the mental framework defining the rural population’s place within a broader social context and ideas about peasant backwardness survived through the political turning points of the early 20th century. However, while narrative conventions from the late Imperial period lived on in depictions of the countryside, the end of Stalinism also induced a gradual reassessment of rural-urban relations. In showing how Stalin’s death shattered established certainties of social belonging and patterns of thinking about the village, we argue that the interregnum was not only a political episode, but also a period of individual and collective searching for orientation at all levels of Soviet society.

Keywords: Soviet Union, Agriculture, Kolkhoz, T. Z. Semushkin, 1950ies

Introduction

In August 1953, five months after Stalin’s death, the Soviet Union’s leading newspaper Pravda commissioned Tikhon Z. Semushkin (1900–1970) to prepare a report on the current state of the Soviet village. Semushkin, a famous writer at the time, left Moscow on 28 August and spent three weeks travelling around the Moscow, Penza, Tula and Riazan’ Regions, an area with an agricultural character since Imperial times and a reputation for being poor and undeveloped. During this journey, Semushkin produced eight notebooks of detailed accounts about life in the countryside and the rural economy. Yet, while the writer kept his diary with the future report in mind, Pravda never published an article by him on the kolkhoz village, nor did Semushkin himself turn his notes into a piece of journalism or literature. According to his granddaughter Elena N. Balashova, Pravda’s...
chief editor told Semushkin to refrain from preparing his report after the writer had presented him with a piece of bread consisting mainly of chaff. The editorial board also warned Semushkin not to publish his material elsewhere.\(^1\) Apparently, Semushkin did not aspire to release an account of his travel either during the Thaw period or later, when Soviet writers discovered the village as a locus of literature.\(^2\) In 1980, ten years after the writer’s death, the diaries were handed over to the Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts (Moscow).\(^3\) An attempt to publish them by Semushkin’s daughter Lidiia T. Mil’skaia was never realized, so that the diaries have remained unknown to the public.\(^4\)

Semushkin’s notebooks are a fascinating snapshot of the immediate aftermath of Stalin’s death, depicting Soviet society in a moment of bewilderment, fear and hope. Meticulous descriptions of the villages he visited and of meetings with rural elites and lower ranking farm workers document the conditions of work and life in the countryside. At the same time, Semushkin’s diaries reveal the expectations and emotions arising from the dictator’s death and the perceived sudden openness of the country’s future. Being aware of the political significance of the moment, the local population were eager to make their voices heard beyond the villages. Similar to what has been shown for the late Imperial and early Soviet periods,\(^5\) they tried to use the visit by an ‘outsider’ to convey their needs and interests to the ruling elites. In addition, the diaries show how the journey challenged Semushkin’s ideas of the Soviet state and its achievements. Unexpectedly for the writer, interaction with lower ranking officials and rural dwellers forced him to engage with questions of social justice and his own role in promoting the Soviet cause. A document of Soviet autobiographical writing, the diaries prove the power of the revolutionary narrative in Soviet citizens’ attitudes towards themselves and the world around them. At the same time, they confirm that this narrative was subject to permanent reinterpretation and scrutiny.\(^6\)

In this article, we use Semushkin’s diaries to study elite perceptions of the countryside and patterns of identity construction in the period of the interregnum between Stalin’s death and the confirmation of Nikita S. Khrushchev as the head of the Communist Party. We analyse how, after the dictator’s passing away, Soviet citizens reconsidered

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1 Interview with E. N. Balashova, 1 June 2015. Elena Nikolaevna Balashova (born 1959) is Semushkin’s granddaughter, currently working at the Institute of Russian History of the Russian Academy of Sciences. The authors learned about Semushkin’s travel diaries thanks to her kind assistance.

2 Semushkin’s later texts concerned the Russian far North. In 1961, he published a collection of short stories *Meetings in Noril’sk (Noril’kie vstrechi)* and in 1956 the short story *Flight to the Arctic (Polet v Arktiku)*.

3 RGALI, f. 2891, d. 54, 55, 56, 57.

4 Lidiia Tikhonovna Mil’skaia (1942–2006) was Semushkin’s daughter from his first marriage, herself a specialist in the European Middle Ages, who worked at the Institute of History and later the Institute of General History of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. She was mentioned in the last lines of Semushkin’s notes. E. N. Balashova states that she herself saw Mil’skaia’s introduction to Semushkin’s travel diaries. However, we were unable to locate the text.

5 HERZBERG Gegenarchive.

6 HELLEBECK Revolution on My Mind.
their place within Soviet society, and we look at how Semushkin acted as a chronicler and participant in this process. Situating his writings in a larger tradition of elite thinking about the village from the late Imperial until the end of the Soviet period, we will demonstrate that regardless of the revolutionary imperative of the Soviet project, the mental framework defining the rural population’s place within a broader social context and ideas about peasant backwardness survived through the political turning points of the early 20th century. Yet, the change in the political coordinates in 1953 also affected how members of the Soviet elite tried to come to terms with the poverty and misery that defined the majority of villages in Soviet Russia. Thus, while narrative conventions from the late Imperial period lived on in Soviet depictions of the countryside, the end of Stalinism also induced a gradual reassessment of rural-urban relations. In showing how Stalin’s death shattered established certainties about social belonging and patterns of thinking about the village, we argue that the interregnum was not only a political episode, but also a period of individual and collective searching for orientation at all levels of Soviet society.

Semushkin’s Journey in the Context of the Interregnum

The moment of Semushkin’s travel was one of uncertainty and optimism at the same time. Five months after Stalin’s death, the dictator’s closest allies ruling the country agreed upon the need for a change in Soviet politics. Among the most important steps taken immediately were the release and rehabilitation of citizens accused of complicity in the Doctor’s Plot and an amnesty for prisoners followed by the return of more than a million Gulag inmates over the next few years. After the removal of the head of the secret police Lavrentii P. Beria in June, the party leadership turned towards economic questions. The Soviet village that had vanished from the centre of political attention during the period of terror and war once more became a political concern. At the convention of the Supreme Soviet in early August 1953, Georgii M. Malenkov, head of the government, outlined a new approach to agriculture which was embedded in a broader plan to enhance the production of consumer goods. The measures suggested included an increase in the prices paid to rural producers, improved supply of farms with specialists and technology, and a slight deregulation of household farming, which represented an important share of the rural population’s income. The Law on the Agricultural Tax adopted on 8 August reduced tax levels for individual household plots in order to raise the rural population’s income and stimulate agricultural production. The Central Committee plenum on agriculture convened at the initiative of Nikita S. Khrushchev in early September supported the move towards improved incentives for rural producers. At the same time, it paved the way for extensive agricultural development, which soon moved to the centre of Soviet agricultural policies, most notably in the Virgin Land campaign.

7 Fitzpatrick On Stalin’s Team, chap. 9.
8 Dobson Khrushchev’s Cold Summer.
9 Pravda (9 August 1953), pp. 1–4.
10 Zasedaniia Verkhovnogo Soveta SSSR (piataia sessiiia) 5–8 avgusta 1953 goda, pp. 315–323.
11 McCauley Khrushchev and the Development of Soviet Agriculture, 40–78.
The attention paid to agricultural modernization had been foreshadowed by the elites’ populist turn in the immediate aftermath of World War II. As many villages had entered a state of autarky and agricultural performance was modest, concern about the rural regions had become an important issue while Stalin was still alive. Mirroring the government’s simultaneous attempts to regain control over the countryside, literature showing the potential success of collective farming was in great demand. In 1952, Valentin Ovechkin, in a series of contributions to the magazine *Novyi mir*, published his story *District Weekdays* (*Raionnye budni*), in which two provincial party officials and a kolkhoz chairman argue about ways to fulfil grain delivery quotas. In this work, which was partly re-published in *Pravda* in July 1953 and included in a collection of Ovechkin’s stories about the kolkhoz village that same year, incompetent officials and administrative pressure were identified as the reasons for low agricultural productivity and a lack of incentives among farm workers. A similar narrative was developed in Vladimir Tendriakov’s *The Fall of Ivan Chuprov* (*Padenie Ivana Chuprova*) published in 1953. Vladimir Soloukhin’s *Vladimir Country Roads* (*Vladimirskie Proselki*) from 1954 featured young kolkhoz managers who were deeply concerned about their farms’ results and tried to raise the motivation of their workers.

The plan to feature an eyewitness report on the countryside in *Pravda* testifies to the high priority given to the improvement of agriculture after Stalin’s death. The newspaper’s chief editor Dmitrii T. Shepilov maintained close ties with the party leadership. Being present at the meetings of the Praesidium, he was well informed about most upcoming political decisions. In July 1953, Shepilov, a graduate in agricultural economics, was even assigned to prepare Khrushchev’s speech on the state of agriculture for the upcoming Central Committee. Hence, when in August Semushkin was asked by *Pravda*’s chief editor to write about the countryside, this was clearly motivated by the government’s increased interest in agricultural questions and the wish to promote this policy shift amongst the Soviet public.

Obviously, Semushkin was not a random choice. In 1953, the well-known representative of socialist realism was at the pinnacle of his fame. Born in 1900 in Staraia Kutlia, a village in the region of Penza, Semushkin had worked as a rural school teacher, before he became a student of pedagogy at Moscow State University in 1921. During the 1920s, he participated in the first Soviet expeditions to Chukotka peninsula in the Russian Far East, where he stayed until the early 1930s. In 1984, Soloukhin’s story was included in a collection of early Soviet village prose: *Derevenskii Dnevnik*, pp. 3–20.

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12 *Smith* Works in Progress, chapt. 2.
13 *Dunham* In Stalin’s Time, pp. 225–238.
14 *Ovechkin* Ocherki o kolkhoznoi zhizni; *Ovechkin* Na perednem krae. On Ovechkin and his impact on Soviet village prose under Khrushchev, see *Dunham* In Stalin’s Time, pp. 231–234; *Brudny* Reinventing Russia, pp. 46–56.
15 In 1984, Soloukhin’s story was included in a collection of early Soviet village prose: *Derevenskii Dnevnik*, pp. 3–20.
16 *Fitzpatrick* On Stalin’s Team, p. 229.
17 *Shepilov* The Kremlin’s Scholar, pp. 282–286.
chi language, the writer actively promoted the consolidation of national consciousness through cultural policies, a key instrument of the “Soviet affirmative action empire”. In 1948, Semushkin was awarded the Stalin Prize, second degree (50,000 roubles) for *Alitet Goes to the Hills* (*Alitet ukhodit v gory*), a novel about the state’s attempts to modernize the indigenous population of Chukotka in the early years of Soviet power. After receiving the award, Semushkin enjoyed the lifestyle and privileges of the Soviet elites. According to his granddaughter, he possessed a car and a summerhouse in the prestigious village of Peredelkino near Moscow and spent much time in luxury resorts in Yalta on the Crimean peninsula at the end of his life. However, Semushkin did not write any major masterpiece after *Alitet*, and his later novels remained unfinished.

The fact that Semushkin was chosen for the report instead of a *Pravda* correspondent mirrors the widespread use of writers as ‘spokesmen’ for the regime in the postwar period. According to the writer’s notes, when instructing him about the trip, Shepilov encouraged him: “Go, take a look at these straw-covered crooked huts that, unfortunately, are not very different from Nekrasov’s, look at how these people live.” Assigning the task to one of the most honoured writers of the time, the newspaper’s editors sought to grant the report credibility and authority. Semushkin was suited for the mission for a number of reasons: decorated with the highest awards and a member of the Communist Party since 1952, he clearly belonged to the privileged and loyal stratum of the Soviet intelligentsia. Moreover, he had already distinguished himself in depicting the peripheries of Soviet society. Semushkin therefore seemed to be a reliable candidate to produce a text that would transmit to the Soviet reader the government’s new approach to the countryside.

**Redrawing the Line Between What Was Sayable and What Was Not: Encounters With Local Society**

Although the article would not be his first experience of journalistic writing, Semushkin felt insecure about the task. Given the forthcoming plenary meeting of the Central Com-

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19 Martin Affirmative Action Empire, p. 167.
21 Semushkin’s novel was published in 1947 in the magazine *Oktiabr’*. That same year it appeared as a book which was highly appreciated by Soviet critics. Guseva Dve sud’by; Cherniak Put’ k vozrozhdeniu; Guseva “Alitet ukhodit v gory”. In 1949, the novel was turned into a movie by Gorkii Kinostudio (Moscow), directed by Mark Donskoi. In 1948, the novel appeared in English, translation by B. Isaacs.
22 Interview with E. N. Balashova. 14 June 2016.
23 Dunham In Stalin’s Time, p. 27.
24 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 4.
25 Semushkin’s articles on “cultural work” in Chukotka were published from the beginning of the 1930s. See for example Semushkin Shkola na Chukotke. In this period he also became a member of the editorial board of the magazines Znamia and Ogonek. See Semushkin Alitet, p. 18. In 1938, Semushkin visited Chukotka for the last time. In the following year, he published *Chukotka*, a book about the first school in Chukotka, which was run by Russian teachers. Semushkin Chukotka.
mittee of the Communist Party, he assumed that Soviet rural-urban relations would be fundamentally reassessed now that Stalin was dead: “It feels like in our country a straight discussion is about to start about the fact that in agriculture we have come to something so bad that we cannot go any further.”

For Semushkin himself, however, the mere idea of preparing the report lacked any sense, as the catastrophic state of Soviet agriculture was widely known anyway: “Isn’t that the worst sort of mockery? And above all: to what ends? Whom do we want to fool? Ourselves? Strange.” The writer doubted that a straightforward report would even be welcome. Yet, the Pravda staff did not seem to share such concerns: “Everybody was like: ‘Go ahead, just write’ [Davai, pishi].”

It soon appeared that gathering information was not an easy task. Although the institutions and party functionaries of the Stalinist period were still in power, expectations of change were ubiquitous. As the future of the country was unclear, anxiety remained a constant feature of everyday life. Stalin’s passing away was experienced by many as a deep crisis of orientation. Although his reign had created unseen human suffering, particularly in the countryside, the public image of the dictator was undisputed, especially after the country’s victory in World War II. Stalin’s illness and subsequent death caused a wave of rumours and fear among the population. The return of Gulag prisoners and widespread dread of violence and crime added to the general sense of insecurity and uncertainty. In this context, speaking publicly about the village was considered to be a potential risk to one’s own professional status or personal well-being. Semushkin’s encounters with the local population were therefore marked by a complex combination of suspicion, hope and trust.

For local authorities, Semushkin’s visit constituted a particular challenge. Since the writer travelled by order of the highest press organ in the country, he could not easily be denied access to the information he was asking for. However, worried that the writer would show their administration in a bad light, party functionaries displayed an “organic fear of the media”, which had been very common among high-level bureaucrats during the Stalinist period. As Semushkin noted, local officials eagerly tried to be on good terms with journalists. Benefiting from the party secretary’s insecurity, the Pravda correspondent in Riazan’ had a car with a driver at his disposal, while his colleague in Tambov seemed to be the third most powerful person in the region. Semushkin also realized that his own status as a Pravda representative affected the behaviour of party officials. In a district of Tambov region, party secretary Agrippina K. Titova, who ap-

26 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 3.
27 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 7.
28 This has been shown with regard to Orthodox believers. HUHN Glaube und Eigensinn, pp. 301–309.
29 DOBSON Khrushchev’s Cold Summer, pp. 37–43.
30 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 24.
31 The roots of this fear can be found in the self-critique (samokritika) campaigns that started in 1928. The cases were often initiated by newspaper articles. NÉRARD Piat’ protsentov pravdy, pp. 80–101.
32 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 55, l. 17.
33 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, l. 44.
peared strict and rigid in a phone conversation that Semushkin happened to witness, immediately put on a smiling face when she saw his documents.\(^{34}\)

The fact that Semushkin openly looked for authenticity that was not filtered by the need to tell success stories added to the general sense of unease among local authorities. When at the very beginning of the trip Semushkin presented his travel plans to Aleksei N. Larionov, first secretary of the Riazan’ region, the latter reacted with suspicion. Larionov, who would surface at the centre of a scandal about meat and milk production some years later,\(^{35}\) was generally keen to have control over the information that was transmitted to the party leadership in Moscow.\(^{36}\) During their meeting, he asked Semushkin to change his itinerary. Instead of the region Spas-Klepiki, according to Larionov “not a typical one”,\(^{37}\) he advised that the writer visit Putiatino. Although this had not been his intention, Semushkin agreed to go to some places that initially had not been on his route.\(^{38}\) In another case, Semushkin was able to defend his travel plans against the attempts by two local party secretaries who wanted to prevent him from reporting about the poor state of village life in their region. The functionaries persuaded the writer to see the collective farm Stalin, a showcase of agricultural progress in Konobeevo District in the east of the Moscow Region. However, well-informed about the area, Semushkin successfully insisted on paying a visit to the Molotov farm, where he learned that kolkhoz workers had not received their salary for 14 years.\(^{39}\)

At times, local authorities welcomed Semushkin’s appearance as a chance to promote change, correctly interpreting it as an indicator of the ruling elite’s growing interest in the countryside. Accordingly, they tried to use the writer’s visit to establish contact with the higher authorities and, as Semushkin noted with some surprise, “to unburden themselves” (dushu otvesti).\(^{40}\) Thus, the party secretary of the district of Pronsk and the director

\(^{34}\) RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, l. 17.

\(^{35}\) In 1959, Larionov promised to surpass the target of the plan for milk and meat production. The region delivered 150,000 instead of 50,000 tons of meat to the state. However, Larionov’s experiment was damaging for the region’s agriculture, so that in 1960, Riazan’ did not even achieve a ‘usual’ result. Larionov committed suicide after the Central Committee launched an investigation. Agarev Tragicheskaia avantura.

\(^{36}\) KIHEVNIUK Regional’naiia vlast’ v SSSR, p. 35.

\(^{37}\) Larionov’s intervention does not necessarily mean that he did not want Semushkin to see a poorly performing district. He might have also referred to the mixed economic profile of the Spas-Klepiki district, which included agriculture as well as peat extraction. However, it is obvious that Larionov was keen on exercising control over the writer’s itinerary.

\(^{38}\) RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 31.

\(^{39}\) RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 55, ll. 69–86.

\(^{40}\) Thus, Semushkin describes a conversation with the party secretary in Tambov, Aleksei M. Shkol’nikov, who mentioned that the head of the Regional Executive Committee had produced false reports about agriculture in the region:

T.S.: “You know, I am a Pravda representative, and you perfectly understand that all this is off the record, not for print.”

A.Sh.: “I know. I just wanted to unburden myself.”

T.S.: “But you did not dare to have such a conversation when the great Master [Stalin – the authors] was still alive?”

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of a local Machine Tractor Station (MTS) “hurried to show and talk to me about everything without any fraud or eyewash [ochkovitatel'stvo].” Eager to demonstrate the population’s modest living standards, some of Semushkin’s correspondents shared their hopes for a general improvement in rural life. The writer interpreted their behaviour as a clear sign of the diminishing impact of mistrust and fear that had reigned among lower ranking functionaries during the Stalinist period: “There is already a new wind blowing, something one could not have expected before from party members; they just feared to deviate from the traditions that existed during the period of Stalin’s cult of personality [period kul’ta lichnosti Stalina].”

Uncertainty was also common among managers and workers. During a meeting with MTS staff, the writer felt a general reluctance to enter into an open conversation. Insecure about what was appropriate to disclose to the guest from Moscow, the participants looked uncomfortably at the party secretary who was present as well: “They were educated to shout that in their region things were fine, when they were actually going bad. They had learned to throw dust in people’s eyes and to use numbers in order to prove what was in fact false. For these things, they were not punished, whereas they would pay with their head for production failure and for missing the plan.” Yet another element seemed to explain the anxiety of Semushkin’s correspondents even more than Stalinist behavioural patterns. In several cases, the workers’ economic dependency on the collective farm, through which they got access to animal fodder and other materials for their private plots, kept them from sharing information. Being asked for his name, a kolkhoz worker replied: “They’ll eat me, the bosses, and then I won’t get any straw.” Similarly, rural dwellers who frankly mentioned urgent village matters when talking with Semushkin alone were unwilling to speak in the presence of their immediate superiors. Thus, a peasant was hesitant to tell Semushkin how much he earned while the chairman of his collective farm was sitting next to him. In the end, the chairman himself informed A.Sh.: “It was completely different back then. I would not even have talked like this to myself.”

RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 56, ll. 41–42.

41 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, ll. 61–62. This quotation proves the presence of a gradual assertion of the expression “cult of personality” in Soviet discourse. While it became a massive phenomenon only after N. S. Khrushchev’s speech at the 20th Party Congress in 1956, it was already serving as a means to distance oneself from Stalin’s policies in the months right after the dictator’s death. Dobson Khrushchev’s Cold Summer, p. 33; Markwick Thaws and Freezes in Soviet Historiography, p. 174.

42 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, ll. 93–95.

43 The private plot was at the centre of the arrangement between the Soviet state and the rural population. Kolkhoz workers were granted the right to farm a small piece of land and to keep a small amount of cattle. These “subsidiary plots” (lichnye podobnye khoziaistva) accounted for a significant share of rural income and Soviet agricultural production until the late Soviet period. Hedlund Private Agriculture.

44 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 121.
the writer about the salary: 45 labour days – an amount so small that at first Semushkin mistook the yearly rate for a monthly income.\textsuperscript{45}

Semushkin travelled in a time of contingency. In August 1953, the certainties of the Stalinist period regarding how to behave in public started to disappear without any immediate replacement. Even though he was dispatched from Moscow, Semushkin depended on the willingness of provincial functionaries to cooperate. While the members of “Stalin’s team” generally agreed about the problematic situation of Soviet agriculture and the need for reform, local authorities remained afraid of being held responsible for the miserable state of the rural economy. Yet, while many tried to conceal modest agricultural performance and poor living conditions, some welcomed the writer’s visit as an opportunity to make their own interests known among the ruling elite. Semushkin’s conversations with party functionaries and the rural population thus reflect the deep sense of confusion which Soviet citizens of all social backgrounds, including the writer himself, experienced during the months following Stalin’s death. The announcement of forthcoming changes in agrarian policy during the Supreme Soviet meeting in August had created some space for public discussion of the village. However, as the new outlook for agricultural policy and the future of the country as a whole remained unclear, many Soviet citizens felt uncertain about the dividing line between what was sayable and what was not.

\textbf{Privilege and Power: The Rural Class Society}

Semushkin’s journey was an encounter with the contradictions of Soviet life. Officially, the Soviet project was meant to bring an end to inequality, which was condemned as a feature of capitalism. However, even though social mobility had reached high levels during the early years of Stalinism, a socialist class society evolved over the years. Unlike in free-market economies, money was not crucial for the consolidation of social differences in the Soviet Union. Rather, non-monetary assets, such as one’s position within the political hierarchy or the economic sector of employment, decided one’s social rank.\textsuperscript{46} When in August 1953 Semushkin visited the rural regions to the east of Moscow, he witnessed the process of social stratification in the rural society. Although Soviet elites had been deeply concerned about social differences, presenting collectivization as a means to overcome class conflict in the village, inequality was a defining feature of rural life in 1953 that could hardly be overlooked.

As elsewhere in the Soviet Union, living standards, privilege and power were strongly correlated. Given the permanent shortage of consumer goods and low nutritional standards, clothing and access to food were obvious indicators of personal well-being in the years after the war.\textsuperscript{47} Semushkin identified a clear hierarchy with party secretaries at the top, followed by minor party functionaries, managers, white-collar workers and – far down the pyramid below – collective farm workers and MTS employees. Larionov, head

\textsuperscript{45} RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 80.
\textsuperscript{46} \textsc{Filtszer} Privilege and Inequality.
\textsuperscript{47} \textsc{Zubkova} Privychka k bednosti. For the early Soviet period, see \textsc{Lubina Sovetskaia povsednevnost’}. 
of the Riazan’ regional party committee, appeared to Semushkin to be a person “heavy [plotnyi], engorged [sytyi] and well-dressed by one of the Kremlin’s tailor’s workshops in Moscow”\(^48\). Clothes also distinguished the second party secretary of the Penza Region, Boris B. Breivo, who was dressed “irreproachably” (bezukoriznenno): “It is the same Moscow tailor who provides party secretaries with blazers. Everywhere the same look.”\(^49\) In contrast, the appearance of MTS employees was marked by poverty. Semushkin described them as “dirty and grimy people” wearing shabby, worn-out jackets (vatniki).\(^50\) In an MTS near the small town of Zadonsk, the mechanics even looked “worse than prison inmates”\(^51\)

With regard to food consumption, Semushkin discerned similar gradations. After a meeting with rural school teachers in Pronsk, he noted that they were supplied with enough food and “even sugar”,\(^52\) something that was almost unknown in many other localities he passed through during his journey. Paradoxically, in Semushkin’s view, bread was a luxury item in many rural regions, forcing actual grain producers to buy bread at high prices.\(^53\) Shortages were fairly common and the bread that the writer was offered reminded him of “clay” (glina) or “putty” (zamazka).\(^54\) Mirroring a widespread trend to replace bread with potatoes in the postwar period,\(^55\) an old female kolkhoz worker complained that “greens are coming out of my throat” from eating potatoes.\(^56\) In contrast, Semushkin was served ham and eggs for breakfast by the head of the Regional Executive Committee Kuz’ma V. Ryzhkov,\(^57\) which was a symptom probably of both Ryzhkov’s privileged status as well as his wish to hide actual procurement problems.

Ordinary members of collective farms ranked lowest in rural society. Semushkin heard a lot about the economic strategies and informal arrangements used by collective farm workers to ensure survival.\(^58\) As he was told by the editor of a local newspaper in Riazan’, during the winter families received a cow from one of the animal farms in the region, which they took into their huts so as to have some heat from the animal.\(^59\) In another place, peasants slept inside (and not on top) of their stoves, because they were short of firewood.\(^60\) Being paid poorly, if at all, rural families relied on the production of veget-

\(^{48}\) RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 28.
\(^{49}\) RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 56, l. 3. Indeed, it was common for Soviet party officials to have their suits custom-made at special tailor’s shops. LEBINA Sovetskaia povsednevnost’, pp. 128, 162–163. In a more general sense, being well-dressed was regarded as an element of socialist culture (kul’turnost’). ZHURAVLEV/GROMOV Moda po planu, pp. 85–88.
\(^{50}\) RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 65.
\(^{51}\) RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, l. 87.
\(^{52}\) RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 58.
\(^{53}\) RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 88.
\(^{54}\) RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, l. 123 and d. 55, l. 80.
\(^{55}\) ZUBKOVA Privychka, p. 95.
\(^{56}\) RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 55, l. 79–80.
\(^{57}\) RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 55, l. 42.
\(^{58}\) LÉVESQUE Sham Peasants.
\(^{59}\) RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 55, ll. 15–16.
\(^{60}\) RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, l. 79.
ables and animal produce on their plots. However, household farming was strictly regulated by the Soviet state. After taxes on private revenues had been increased in the Stalinist period, maintaining their private plots and livestock became an unbearable burden for many: “It turns out that you work for the kolkhoz and the tax”, a carpenter complained to Semushkin. Another source of income was the money that family members earned from seasonal work in industrial plants or other non-agricultural employment, a practice that had been widespread among peasants since the Imperial period. Twenty years after collectivization, living in the countryside was risky, while agriculture continued to be far from a showpiece of Soviet socialism.

For Semushkin, these social differences had little in common with the egalitarian spirit of the Soviet project. Paralleling the image of the apparatchik who enjoyed all kinds of material privileges in Ovechkin’s *District Weekdays*, Semushkin described in detail the status markers of the local elites. In Riazan’ Region, he met the chairman of a kolkhoz who possessed a *Pobeda* automobile and a well-furnished, spacious house with a telephone, radio and piano. Although the writer himself was responsive to middle-class values, whose promotion was part of the “Big Deal” between the regime and society after the war, clichés about the privileged classes under the Tsarist regime played an important role in his notes. While Semushkin’s mood was badly spoiled when his English toiletries bag got stolen during the journey, the material wealth of the local elites moved him to anger. The writer compared the kolkhoz chairman’s prosperity with that of a manager on a noble estate, and described the flat of another farm director as “philistine” (*meshchanski obstavlennaia*). For Semushkin, it was obvious that, in terms of justice, the kolkhoz system ranked lower even than the pre-revolutionary rural order, as Soviet farm managers were “not even able to provide workers with that which is most essential: food”. Semushkin was not the only member of the privileged classes who took offence at the poverty and inequality in the countryside. In one case, the comparison between the Tsarist and the Soviet village was drawn by a party secretary, whose comment paralleled Semushkin’s own reflections: “People live in a situation that is worse than any *barshchina*. It is just scandalous!”

Semushkin’s interest in even the smallest details of provincial everyday life highlights his deep sense of bewilderment at the gap between official discourse and actual living

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61 NOVE Rural Taxation in the USSR; Zubkova Poslevoennoe obschestvo, p. 66.
62 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 84.
63 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, l. 90.
64 BURDS Peasant Dreams and Market Politics.
65 Thus, in the beginning of the short story, Viktor S. Borzov, first party secretary of the region, returns from a spa resort. The Borzovs’ lifestyle epitomizes the middle-class values featured in postwar Soviet literature. When the second party secretary Petr I. Martynov comes to visit, Borzov’s wife wears a silk blouse. Martynov also notes the piano in the living room, next to which a Siberian (pedigree) cat lies asleep. OVECHKIN Ocherki o kolkhoznii zhizni, pp. 11, 20.
66 On the “Big Deal,” see Dunham In Stalin’s Time.
67 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 56, ll. 39–40.
68 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 55, l. 34.
69 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 55, ll. 43–44.
conditions. Although he had known before his trip that the Soviet village was impoverished, he was stunned by the actual misery as well as the extreme differences in living standards between social groups. To Semushkin, this stratification of rural society was incompatible with socialist notions of justice. Trying to assess the situation, he drew upon stereotypical ideas from the pre-revolutionary period. Yet using the diachronic comparison with that time, Semushkin did not apply these stereotypes to develop a narrative of revolutionary progress, but rather to point at the failures of the Soviet state. His diaries can thus also be read as an early example of criticism by Soviet intellectuals. Apparently, the myth of the “socialist transformation of agriculture”, which would be publicly challenged by a small group of historians around Viktor P. Danilov after Khrushchev’s secret speech (albeit soon silenced), was scrutinized as early as 1953.

**Zemliak or Barin? Social Identity as a Moral Dilemma**

Semushkin was a product as well as a promoter of the Soviet project. A writer of peasant origin who had been honoured with the highest award in Soviet literature, he embodied the social mobility of the previous decades. While industrialization in the early 1930s had triggered the rise of a new elite from mainly proletarian and peasant backgrounds, ties between lower and upper strata severed as social change slowed down. As a typical member of the Soviet intelligentsia, Semushkin benefited from the system of privileges that underpinned the solidification of social stratification. During his trip, the writer enjoyed conveniences, such as a nice room in the hotel of the Riazan’ Party Committee or a meal in a canteen that was actually closed. It even seems that Semushkin became accustomed to the fact that his driver spent the nights in the car or that in one place another person had to vacate his hotel room for Semushkin. However, deprived of access to the highest social circles, Semushkin was also a supplicant, depending on the assignment of goods and services by state agencies. During his trip, a telegram from his daughter informed Semushkin that he was about to receive a two-bedroom apartment in Moscow. Fearing that the flat could be given to another person, meaning he would have to remain in his communal apartment, Semushkin hastened to get back home: “I was so happy that I did not even eat in the Obkom canteen…”

Travelling through the countryside, Semushkin realized the complexity of his own social identity. To his surprise, he was not an unknown person in the region. A kolkhoz library in the region of Riazan’ possessed five well-worn copies of his book, and in the small town of Belinskii in the Penza Region, where Semushkin gave a public lecture, it appeared that almost everyone in the audience had read his novel. For the rural population, Semushkin symbolized a link between themselves and the higher echelons of

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70 The collectivization myth was revived almost immediately after N. S. Khrushchev’s fall, see MARKWICK Thaws and Freezes in Soviet Historiography, pp. 183–184.
71 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 56, l. 15.
72 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 55, l. 39.
73 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 13.
74 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, ll. 133–134.
power: “How may we not read our fellow countryman [zemliaki]?”\(^{75}\) In the Tula region, a group of rural women hoped that Semushkin would inform the government about their misery: “You see Malenkov every day, so tell him about us.”\(^{76}\) Yet, not everybody believed that Semushkin would take the risk of writing frankly about what he saw. Remembering the culture of acclamation during the Stalinist period, one person questioned whether open debate would be really appreciated: “I worked 200 labour days, but they gave me only 30 kilograms [of wheat – the authors]. Live and don’t grieve [zhivi ne tuzhi]. But you wouldn’t write about that, would you?”\(^{77}\)

Semushkin’s social background was an important issue not only for the people he met. Interacting with Soviet citizens much poorer than himself, the writer started reflecting on his own position within Soviet society. Although in his diary he complained about low food quality or snarled about the absence of water and a sewing system in a garage, the writer felt pity and even responsibility for the rural misery. After a meeting with collective farm workers, Semushkin noted: “I was ashamed that I was better dressed, that I used my own car to visit them, that like a barin I had come to them from the city to talk with them about their unhappy and disgusting life. Moreover, their fathers gave their lives to save the Motherland. And I was ashamed that I could not help them at all.”\(^{78}\) The fact that peasants lived so poorly caused some emotional discomfort for the writer, all the more because many of them had been soldiers during the war. Using the term barin (‘gentleman’) to talk about himself, Semushkin expressed a feeling of guilt about social fragmentation and inequality, which so clearly contradicted the egalitarian spirit that he believed was constitutive of the Soviet project.\(^{79}\)

For the writer, the miserable state of the countryside proved that the collectivization campaign had been a failure. In his diaries, the local population appear as victims of the Stalinist leadership’s unjustified wish to industrialize the country at any price. Confronted with the fact that by village standards he enjoyed many advantages, Semushkin did not perceive his belonging to the Soviet elites as a privilege but rather a moral problem. Several times in his notes, the writer included himself in the imagined community of the reckless nomenklatura which valued ideas higher than humans: “From our experiments the peasant has physically and mentally suffered so much that it is painful to look at him.”\(^{80}\) “How long will we continue to experiment on these humble [bezropotnye] people?”\(^{81}\) Confronted with the realities of the village, Semushkin asked himself whether he was advancing the right cause. The writer, who had earned fame for his optimistic descriptions of

75 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, ll. 4–5; d. 56, ll. 38–39.
76 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, l. 129.
77 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, l. 125.
78 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, l. 116.
79 Interestingly, Semushkin also used the word barin in his diaries when he mentioned the local writer Nikolai Virta, author of the novel Alone (Odinochestvo) about the 1921 peasant uprisings in the Tambov region. Virta had been awarded the Stalin Prize several times (in 1941, 1948, 1949 and 1950), so his social position was comparable with that of Semushkin. RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, l. 20.
80 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 55, l. 18.
81 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 55, l. 8.
the Soviet civilizing mission in Chukotka, suddenly felt insecure about the success in promoting progress: “We, the avant-garde of the new society, became bureaucrats putting our muzhik in such a desperate condition.”

Semushkin’s notes are a telling example of how ambiguous social identities were in the late Stalinist period, when individuals performed different social roles integrating seemingly contradictory world-views. For the rural population, the writer obviously represented the ruling elite. Through him, it seemed they could convey their concerns to the Soviet leadership. For Semushkin, who was a typical social climber of the Stalinist period, his social identity was less clear. Even though he had a peasant background, he did not show any affinity for the rural way of life, nor did his diaries contain any reflections about the fact that he was actually born in the region he was visiting. This clearly indicates the split between city and village after the traumatic experience of collectivization. Successfully adapting to the challenges and conveniences of urban life, previous peasants were eager to separate themselves from their rural origins. It seems, however, that Semushkin was not fully comfortable with his new social position. Having received the highest honours, he understood that his reputation and material well-being depended on the goodwill of higher ranking authorities. His loyalty to the Soviet leadership was not unambiguous, though. As poverty was not an openly discussed topic in the Soviet Union, by taking notes Semushkin implicitly positioned himself as an advocate of the rural population and applied a strategy that was reminiscent of the pre-revolutionary educated elites: for these, commitment to the peasantry had served as proof of their own moral integrity, while they were enjoying at the same time opportunities for upward social mobility. Initially meant as preparation for his Pravda article, Semushkin’s diary writing thus might also be seen as an attempt to cope with the moral dilemma that evolved when the writer realized that he was undeniably among the lucky beneficiaries of Stalin’s dictatorship.

**Nationalist Sentiments and the Reframing of Rural Backwardness**

Semushkin’s notebooks stand in a long tradition of elite writing about the countryside going back to Aleksandr Radishchev’s *Journey from Saint Petersburg to Moscow* from 1790, in which the philosopher depicted the misery and hardships of peasant life in the Russian Empire. Radishchev’s work was well known among the Soviet intelligentsia. In a prestigious edition produced by the Academy of Sciences in 1935, Radishchev, who had been arrested and exiled to Siberia after his book first appeared, was memorialised as the “an-

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82 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, l. 132.
84 During the early 1930s, due to collectivization, famine and rising employment opportunities at Soviet construction sites, more than 12 million peasants left the rural areas of the USSR. See Fitzpatrick Stalin’s Peasants, pp. 80–102. On the appeal of urban identities for former peasants and even collective farm workers, see ibid, pp. 262–264. See also Hellbeck Revolution on my Mind, pp. 165–222.
85 Zubkova Privychka, pp. 97–99.
86 Clowes/Kassow/West Between Tsar and People; Kotsonis Making Peasants Backward.
cestor (pervenets) of Russian revolutionary thought.” Public interest in the peasantry had reached a peak in the decades after the end of serfdom, when peasant culture was embraced as a foundation of Russian national identity. At the turn of the century, the empire’s elites engaged in a discourse about peasant backwardness, inferring that the rural population had to be uplifted for the sake of national success.

Regardless of the revolutionary imperative of the Soviet project, the connection of nationalism, populism and progressivism lived on well into the late 20th century. Semushkin shared the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia’s admiration for the peasantry while at the same time referring to ideas of civilisational progress. The contrast between the destructive impact of Soviet politics on the countryside and the rural population’s ability to survive and resist was a constant topic in his diaries. As in populist writings of the late Imperial period, a positive attitude towards the peasantry and an urban sense of superiority were closely linked. Moreover, “Russocentric populism”, which was actively promoted by the Soviet government in the postwar period, left a visible trace in Semushkin’s diary entries: “Here it smells of the Russian spirit [pakhnet russkim dukhom]”, the writer commented on tilled fields in the Riazan’ Region. Semushkin attributed some rare signs of agricultural flourishing not to the policy of the state, but the “Russianness” of the population: “The Russian people is really great, despite their lack of culture.” In order to make sense of the situation in the countryside, Semushkin even appealed to the prominent idea of the Russians’ ability to cope with sorrow and harm that had informed Western travel writings since the early modern period: “They can bear everything and even make fun of their own suffering.”

Manifold references to canonical Russian writers reflect Semushkin’s embeddedness in a broader discourse about the village that was rooted in the late Imperial period and reactivated under Stalin’s rule. Several times in his notes, Semushkin mentioned 19th-century poet Nikolai Nekrasov, whose depictions of the village as a poor and backward place featured prominently in postwar Soviet mass culture. Discovering that in many villages peasant houses had roofs of rotten straw, Semushkin noted: “Nekrasov’s village in a socialist state. What a disgrace!” In Tarkhany (Lermontovo), the native village of Mikhail Lermontov in the region of Tambov, Semushkin was shocked by the bad condition of the cattle after the winter: “They [the cattle – the authors] were extremely thin; dung was frozen to their backs. The situation was disgusting. I think that not even in

87 Materialy k izucheniiu Puteshestviia iz Peterburga v Moskvu, p. 11.
88 FRIERSON Peasant Icons; KOTSONIS Making Peasants Backward.
89 BRANDENBERGER National Bolshevism, p. 215.
90 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 44.
91 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 73.
92 POE “A People Born to Slavery”.
93 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 86.
94 BRANDENBERGER National Bolshevism, pp. 223, 245.
95 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 11. Pravda’s chief editor Shepilov had made the same connection when he asked Semushkin to go to the countryside, where the houses looked like Nekrasov’s. RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 54, l. 4.
Lermontov’s time was there anything like that.” In a similar way, Semushkin mentions Lev Tolstoi. After a visit to the writer’s house in Iasnaia Poliana, Semushkin states that the “muzhiks in his times did not live worse than today.” Surprisingly, one of the most prominent and popular “peasant” poets, Sergei Esenin, is mentioned only once in Semushkin’s diaries (“the straw villages of Esenin’s Rus”). The absence of Esenin may be explained by his romantic depiction of the village and his praise of the archaic peasant lifestyle, which was not compatible with Semushkin’s rejection of the pre-Soviet past. Following the revolutionary narrative, Semushkin associated the “old times” with misery and decline. Yet, like the comparison between present and pre-revolutionary village life, references to literary authorities served to put even more emphasis on the profound failure of rural transformation under Soviet power.

Semushkin’s comments about rural backwardness were informed by Imperial categories, juxtaposing a Russian core with the non-Russian peripheries. Drawing on his earlier experiences in the north, Semushkin used Chukotka, which like other regions in the north-east had long been depicted as “backward”, as a standard to evaluate the achievements of Soviet power in central Russia. To Semushkin’s own surprise, however, reality contradicted the notion of a clear hierarchy between a progressive Russian centre and its underdeveloped non-Russian margins. Rather, Russian peasants seemed to be even more backward than the Chukchi. Having met a woman who went to a quack to heal her son, he noted that “even among the Chukchi, shamanism is already disappearing, and here, not far from Moscow, the old savagery is about to reappear”. Amazed by the low living standards that he found in a peasant house in the region of Tula, Semushkin claimed that the “Chukchi did not live worse in the worst time of their history”. A local party secretary in Tambov shared Semushkin’s impression that the countryside was barred from civilisational progress. Born in Siberia, he told the writer that he had never expected living conditions in central Russia to be worse than in his native region. Another party official warned that the government’s focus on the peripheries was at the expense of the Russian heartland: “We are gathering and thinking: well, we need to lift up the periphery [podnijat’ okrainy]. But what about us? We may end up in a situation, in which anything or anybody will be left for uplifting.”

Detailed records about Semushkin’s conversations with local authorities prove that the idea of Russian supremacy, which the government had actively promoted during the

96 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 56, l. 35.
97 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, l. 131–132.
98 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, l. 104.
99 In the early 1920s, Soviet sailors from Vladivostok wrote about Chukotka: “We may not even talk about any element of culture in the life of the Turukhan indigenes.” See Slezkine Arkтиcheskie zerkala, p. 160. Chukchi, together with many other nationalities, were ranked in a list of “culturally backward nationalities” compiled in the early 1930 by the People’s Commissariat of Education. See Martin Affirmative Action Empire, p. 167.
100 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 55, l. 24.
101 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, l. 115.
102 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 56, l. 92.
103 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, l. 79.
Stalinist period and used to mobilize the nation during the war, prove that the Stalinist government had been successful in implementing the myth of Russian supremacy across the different social groups and places in the USSR. It was quite common for members of the local elites to describe the non-Russian population as selfish and culturally backward. Thus, the writer was told that Tatars suffer from trachoma, that they do not want to join the army, “behave awfully when in a hospital” and that they do not want to work for the kolkhoz. Anti-Semitic stereotypes were similarly widespread and often referred to by Semushkin’s conversation partners. The head of the local executive committee Petr V. Gurov called MTS director Abram Ia. Chutkov “a good Jew (who) even went to war”, recalling widespread rumours that Jews eluded battle by evacuation to the rear area often labeled as “Tashkent front” during World War II. In another case, a party secretary from the Tula region mentioned the case of a kolkhoz chairman who could not get into a sanatorium even though he suffered from tuberculosis: “Moscovites, and Jews especially, go to sanatoriums as if they are going to a resort”, he continued, echoing a widely held conspiracy theory according to which Jews had taken over political power to exploit the Russians.

Semushkin’s notebooks reveal dominant parameters that determined elite perceptions of the countryside and the rural population at the end of Stalin’s rule. They permit a glimpse into “elite nationalism”, showing that Russian chauvinism and anti-Semitic clichés provided a cognitive framework for local elites to assess public affairs and explain injustice in the distribution of goods and privileges. Moreover, based on Semushkin’s travel journals, one can see a striking continuity in the elites’ means of coming to terms with the village. Compassion, a feeling of cultural superiority and sympathy for the modesty of the “simple people” merged with the remarks of his correspondents as well as the writer’s own reflections. Appealing to the idea of peasant backwardness, local elites and Semushkin himself adhered to narrative patterns that had emerged long before the 1917 Revolution. Ideas of backwardness and the “Russianness” of the rural population survived through the political turning points of the early 20th century, shaping elite consciousness even more than three decades after the end of the ancien régime.

104 Brandenberger National Bolshevism, pp. 43–62.
105 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 56, ll. 25, 26, 45, 46.
106 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 55, l. 45.
107 Mitrokhin Russkaia partiia, p. 70–72.
108 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, l. 80.
109 RGALI, f. 2891, op. 1, d. 57, ll. 61–63.
110 Mitrokhin distinguishes between “people’s nationalism” and “elite nationalism”, which was common among Russian workers and peasants who got career promotions during the purges, entered the ruling class and struggled with the “old guard”, among whom Jews, Latvians and Caucasians played an important role, over access to higher positions. Mitrokhin Russkaia partiia, pp. 43–45, 60–61.
Conclusion

For contemporaries, Soviet rural-urban relations seemed to be at a turning point in 1953. Semushkin’s travel journals portray society amidst a moment of change, when citizens from all social backgrounds reconsidered the hierarchies of Soviet society and their own position therein. They reflect the hopes and fears that arose in the aftermath of Stalin’s death, while at the same time foreshadowing some of the main themes of Soviet discourse in the decades to come. The diaries are a testimony to the relations between the state and the rural population. The villagers’ reactions to Semushkin’s visit show that, on the one hand, the Soviet administration had been successful in integrating the countryside into a broader political and economic framework: rural dwellers were aware of the major political events in the country; they had read Semushkin’s books, and they exhibited political agency, trying to use the writer’s visit to pursue their own interests. On the other, by depicting crisis and decline, as well as the uncertainties over the right way to address these, the diaries illustrate the shortfalls of rural modernization under Soviet rule. Two decades after collectivization, the Soviet village was in a pitiful state, which could hardly be whitewashed. Collective farm workers lived poorly, farming techniques were outdated, tractors and other machinery rare and often broken, the cattle plagued by a lack of fodder and epidemics.

Stalin’s death had an impact on how Soviet elites tried to come to terms with the village. Semushkin’s diaries were informed by long-established elite ideas about the rural regions and their inhabitants. At the same time, they reflect the writer’s deep bewilderment and dismay at the misery and inequality beyond the cities. Contradictory emotions went along with this interplay of temporality and continuity. Semushkin sought to reconcile his privileged position as a member of the intelligentsia and his rejection of the state’s agrarian policy with his populist empathy for the rural population and an urban sense of cultural superiority. Following the conventions of Soviet discourse, he used the pre-revolutionary period as a negative point of reference. In contrast to the prevalent revolutionary narrative, however, he compared the current state of the countryside to the Imperial village to illustrate his deep disillusionment at the Soviet promise of progress. In this regard, Semushkin’s diaries mark a major transition in Soviet discourse: while the socialist promise of a bright future was already losing its appeal, the past – and in particular the rural past – had not yet acquired the positive image it would have in the late Soviet period.

While it is not possible to find out the real reason for Semushkin’s failure to publish his report, other examples of contemporary writing on the Soviet village provide helpful information to address this question. It has been shown that in the 1940s and 1950s, following the spirit of socialist realism, scientists highlighted the prospects of Soviet socialism and presented a future village in the making. Literature depicting the new administrative elite in the countryside also backed the official promise of the approaching advent of socialism. Semushkin’s notes contained little that could have been used in favour of such an approach. If the story about his visit to the Pravda office is true, the editors, hav-

111 Haber Soviet Ethnographers.
ing seen the inedible piece of bread, might have feared that the writer would violate the agreement between the state and writers whereby literature should serve to popularize the dominant values and political principles.

The chronology seems to confirm this interpretation. While Semushkin was still on his journey, the Central Committee Plenum on agriculture took place in early September 1953. During the Plenum, Khrushchev, who had been appointed First Secretary of the Communist Party, established himself as the promoter of agricultural modernization. *Pravda* published the decision of the Plenum and the text of Khrushchev’s speech a week later. In this context, a report about the actual state of the village might have appeared untimely. What was needed now was an enthusiastic acclamation of the prospects of collectivized agriculture, which occupied a central place in the tale of Soviet progress. Violating the “Big Deal”, Semushkin’s appalling details about rural life therefore became subject to the “regime of knowing silence” that characterized Soviet society after the end of Stalinism.

Semushkin’s diaries anticipated the nexus between populism and Russian nationalism that would become more prominent in the late Soviet period. In the 1960s, the idea that the intelligentsia owed a debt to the “people” was revived, and the village again became a source of identity for members of the educated urban elite. Soviet families turned to Christianity, secretly baptized their children and spent vacations in the countryside. During the Brezhnev period, “village prose” mourning the decline of the Russian village and upholding conservative values was at its height, while the government in a quite literal sense promoted the idea that a debt had to be repaid to the countryside. In March 1974, the Central Committee and the Council of Ministers decided upon the *Further development of agriculture in the non-Black-Earth zone of the RSFSR*. Billions of roubles were assigned to develop rural regions in Russia hit by agricultural crisis and rural-urban migration. The Brezhnev administration openly appealed to the intelligentsia’s nationalist sentiments, presenting the programme as a confession of guilt: after the Russian village had given so many resources to the Soviet state, it was now time for compensation. Containing elements of these later developments, Semushkin’s 1953 diaries are therefore not only a fascinating source for the writer’s individual experience and the ambiguous meaning of the village for Soviet elite identity. They also shed light on a more general trend, namely the transition from the future to the past as a major point of reference in Soviet agrarian discourse.

112 *Brudny* Reinventing Russia, pp. 50–52. On economists’ changing attitudes to Soviet agriculture, see Serge Alymov’s contribution in this issue.
113 *Pravda* (13 September 1953), pp. 1–4; *Pravda* (15 September 1953), pp. 1–6.
115 VAIL/GENIS 60-e, pp. 267–280.
116 *Razumavlova* Pisateli-“derevenschiki”.
117 Kompleksnaia programma razvitiia Necherernozemia, p. 6. For the decision, see p. 30–44.
118 *Brudny* Reinventing Russia, pp. 102–103.
Abbreviations

RGALI Russian State Archive of Literature and Arts, Moscow.

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SEMUSHKIN, TIKHON Shkola na Chukotke, in: Krasnaia Nov’ (1931), 5-6, pp. 193–205.


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