

Scandal in Riazan

Networks of Trust and the Social Dynamics of Deception

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In the final months of 1960, the Soviet political establishment was rocked by one of the most notorious data-fixing scandals in the country's history. The scandal erupted around a huge fraud in Riazan, an agricultural region to the immediate southeast of Moscow. While statistical deception was a relatively common feature of Soviet bureaucratic life, the debacle in Riazan was not easily brushed aside. For much of the previous two years, under its charismatic first secretary, Aleksei Larionov, Riazan had been at the center of a national campaign to drive up meat production. The announcement, a year earlier, on 16 December 1959, that Riazan had tripled its annual yield of meat to a remarkable "three annual plans" of 150,000 tons, had been greeted with a Soviet-style media frenzy. National newspapers had led with front-page articles celebrating "Riazan's Victory" and the "Achievement of the Third Plan," while brochures on the Riazan story were printed in large runs and translated into the languages of the USSR's fellow socialist states. Riazan's glory, however, was to be short-lived. Investigations in the autumn of 1960 revealed that the state's statistical reporting in 1959 had consisted of a tissue

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In this article, I have dropped the final soft sign from Riazan to improve readability, except in transliterations from Russian.

of lies: the true volume of meat production in Riazan that year had been a meager 60,000 tons, barely a third of the figure trumpeted in the press. Inquiries also showed that the make-believe figures circulated in 1959 had been concocted by Larionov himself, along with a team of leading officials from the regional party committee. It would prove particularly damaging to the authorities that the fraud could not be written off as the work of “criminal” miscreants. In fact, no criminal charges were pressed in Riazan. Far from being the illegal actions of wayward individuals, the fraud drew in the ordinary party apparatus and was carried out by loyal party functionaries, most of whose prior careers had been beyond reproach.

The fallout from the Riazan scandal was far-reaching. On 22 September 1960, on the eve of his dismissal as regional first secretary, Larionov committed suicide. A month later, Khrushchev sent a “note” to the Presidium that drew broader lessons from the affair.¹ Khrushchev also gave the green light to a string of investigations in other regions, which in the months leading up to the 22nd Party Congress, triggered the largest purge of regional first secretaries in the whole post-Stalin era. The scale and systemic nature of the fraud in Riazan also turned attention to the culpability of leading figures in Moscow. Among the most celebrated victims of the scandal were the former Central Committee secretary Averkii Aristov and his colleague, the veteran secretary and co-author of the Secret Speech Petr Pospelov, both of whom were sacked. Nor was Khrushchev’s own reputation left unscathed. The Soviet leader had lent his credibility to the Riazan campaign, making a much-publicized visit to the province in February 1959 as the bid for the 150,000 tons got underway, then hosting a glitzy reception for Riazan officials at the Kremlin in November. When he was himself deposed in October 1964, the arch-organizers of the coup, Leonid Brezhnev and Mikhail Suslov, cited the Riazan Affair as testimony to Khrushchev’s recklessness. “[The] Riazan Affair—[that was] your fault,” Brezhnev charged. “We all well remember,” Suslov joined in, “how [Khrushchev] sang the praises of that window-dresser [*ochkovtiratel*] and adventurer Larionov, who proposed to fulfill the three-year plan for meat in one.”²

The Riazan scandal raises larger questions about the Soviet political system. Falsification was a fact of life for Soviet officialdom. In periods when the country was headed by a “voluntarist” leader, such as Khrushchev, intent

¹ N. S. Khrushchev, *Stroitel'stvo kommunizma v SSSR i razvitie sel'skogo khoziaistva* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1963), 4:167.

² *Nikita Khrushchev: 1964, Dokumenty* (Moscow: MDF, 2007), 225, 227, 229, and 245, 259.

on meeting extraordinary targets in record time, pressures on officials to over-report were stepped up.³ Yet even by the standards of the Khrushchev era, the scale of fraud in Riazan was unusual. Not only did the region produce barely a third of its meat target, but the scam lumbered the province's collective farms with almost 350 million rubles of debt. Moreover, in promising that Riazan would produce 150,000 tons in 1959 and 200,000 tons in 1960, Larionov was, through the "ratchet principle," in effect binding the region to yet higher and even more unsustainable yields in the future. Why would this politically loyal and experienced group of regional officials, led by Larionov, be willing to commit themselves to such plainly unfeasible long-term targets?

Two answers are normally given to this question. One focuses on the sheer might of individual party leaders such as Khrushchev and Larionov in forcing their pet projects on servile party bureaucrats who lacked the strength of will to oppose them.⁴ The second emphasizes the ideological climate of the period. In the grip of millenarian fervor, as Soviet leaders promised to oversee the elimination of criminality, the withering away of the state, and a meteoric rise in agricultural yields, officials sublimated the ideological enthusiasm of their political masters into statistical illusions. The onset of the Riazan campaign early in 1959 indeed coincided with the launch of Khrushchev's super-ambitious Seven-Year Plan, which envisioned near-utopian targets in all branches of the economy.⁵

Here I propose an alternative approach. I suggest that the calamity in Riazan could not have happened through brute force or ideological pressure alone. The deception was channeled through a network of long-standing relationships at the heart of the regional political system. It was this network, which had evolved over a decade and had supported more modest forms of cheating earlier in the 1950s, that propelled the Riazan scam to such heights. To highlight the role played by the Riazan network, I compare Riazan with a second region, Kirov, in some respects an identikit replica of Riazan. Like Riazan, Kirov was a medium-sized agrarian region that supplied the capital city of Moscow with farm produce. As with Riazan, Kirov was headed by a regional autocrat, Aleksandr Pcheliakov, who hounded subordinates in a

³ Stephen Shenfield, "Pripiski: False Statistical Reporting in Soviet-Type Economies," in *Corruption: Causes, Consequences, and Control*, ed. Michael Clarke (London: Pinter, 1983), 245, 253–54.

⁴ Aleksandr Agarev, *Tragicheskaia avantiura: Sel'skoe khoziaistvo Riazanskoi oblasti 1950–1960 gg. A. N. Larionov, N. S. Khrushchev i drugie* (Riazan': Russkoe slovo, 2005); A. V. Sushkov, *Prezidium TsK KPSS v 1957–1964 gg.: Lichnosti i vlast'* (Ekaterinburg: UrO RAN, 2009), chap. 5.

⁵ See Shenfield, "Pripiski"; and Alec Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR*, 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), 328–29, 346.

high-profile bid to make his region the national leader in meat production. Yet in Kirov levels of deception were modest. I trace this result to the different structure of political relationships in Kirov. There, as I show, the core political network was smaller and more tentative and personal ties among officials were far weaker. Accordingly, officials were less willing to take the risk of lying on one another's behalf. The article suggests that events of significance to the wider political system—such as the suicide of a regional leader, the firing of senior Moscow-based politicians, and a fundamental *volte-face* in governmental policy—were the outcome of processes that were “embedded” in the structure of personal relations at the regional level.⁶

To grasp how strong personal ties affected levels of fraud in Riazan I draw on the concept of trust. On the face of it, the notion of trust is not well suited to conditions in Riazan in the 1950s. Hierarchical and coercive relations of the kind found in Riazan are not normally thought of as conducive to trust. Neither is direct evidence of trust relationships in this period easy to come by.⁷ The concept of trust does, however, provide a comparative perspective which enables us to make sense of developments that are otherwise hard to explain. Trust refers to a reasoned expectation that another person will cooperate in a particular matter in circumstances that I cannot anticipate. For it to count as trust, the *reasons* for this expectation are significant: most often, they are grounded in a mutual desire to maintain an ongoing personal relationship.⁸ Yet to make sense of trust, another aspect of the concept needs to be highlighted. In any relationship, if the interests of both parties are perfectly aligned there is little need for trust; at most, one would require coordination. Trust enters the picture only when the trusted person may be tempted to defect—the “raw payoff” of doing so may be higher—but chooses not to.⁹ Trust is tested through action, and acting on trust must involve

⁶ For a parallel argument that economic outcomes may be “embedded” in “ongoing social relations,” see, most famously, Mark Granovetter, “Economic Action and Social Structure: The Problem of Embeddedness,” *American Journal of Sociology* 91, 3 (1985): 481–82, 485–87, 504. On the major change in policy that resulted from the Riazan Affair, see Oleg Khlevniuk, “The Economy of Illusions: The Phenomenon of Data Inflation in the Khrushchev Era,” in *Khrushchev in the Kremlin: Policy and Government in the Soviet Union, 1953–1964*, ed. Jeremy Smith and Melanie Ilić (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2011), 179–81.

⁷ As a cognitive phenomenon—an assessment of someone else's motivations—trust is rarely if ever observed directly. Accordingly, most empirical work on it comes from laboratory and field experiments, which clearly cannot be replicated in historical settings.

⁸ Broadly speaking, there are two reasons for this. First, trust is most likely to be self-sustaining when it is mutual; by definition, most ongoing personal relationships fulfill this criterion. Second, the epistemological challenges of assessing the motivations of another person are less onerous when the parties to a relationship know each other well.

⁹ For an excellent discussion, see Michael Bacharach and Diego Gambetta, “Trust in Signs,” in *Trust in Society*, ed. Karen S. Cook (New York: Russell Sage, 2001).

genuine *risk* to the truster. On the face of it, the temptations for members of Larionov's circle to let him down must at times have been strong. After all, he wanted them to engage in extremely high-risk activities—instigating non-goods transactions—that could have landed them in big trouble. Yet all remained loyal to him; some did so even after Larionov's own position had become completely untenable. The reasons they did so are grounded in their relationships with Larionov, relationships that in most cases stretched back over a decade. It was on the basis of these relationships that Larionov prodded them into ever more risky ventures, ventures that would eventually climax in the Riazan fiasco.

Scandal in Riazan

Riazan in the late 1950s was a medium-sized agricultural region in the central economic zone with a population of 1.46 million, two-thirds of whom lived in the countryside. On becoming first secretary in September 1953, Khrushchev began, at a series of agricultural conferences and at private receptions with Larionov, to laud the potential of the region. Khrushchev was drawn to Riazan for two reasons. One was its geographical position as a “goldmine in the Moscow hinterland,” from which it could become a “rich store of food for the workers of the industrial centers of the country, especially Moscow.”¹⁰ The other was the close symmetry between Larionov's and Khrushchev's own position on agriculture. Larionov soon distinguished himself as one of the most ardent advocates of Khrushchev's maize campaign and of Khrushchev's credo that the Party should play a direct role in matters of economic administration.¹¹

One reason why Riazan rose to early prominence was the rapid rise in milk yields from the region's *kolkhozes*, which more than doubled from 1953 to 1955.¹² “Milk,” Larionov would proudly announce to a meeting of *kolkhoz* chairs at the time, “is the stamp, the face, of our region.”¹³ Despite this, some time toward the beginning of 1956, the central government's attentions began to shift toward meat production, and the leadership in Riazan was not slow to follow suit. “At present,” Larionov would declare to an *obkom* plenum at this time, “the most important and decisive thing for the

¹⁰ Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (RGASPI) f. 17, op. 56, d. 2110, ll. 10–11. Most of the archival materials in this section (f. 17, op. 56–57) are from speeches made at regional party plenums, party conferences, and convocations of the party *aktiv*. This particular reference is from a speech by Larionov, who in turn cites a series of statements by Khrushchev.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, op. 56, ll. 22, 64; l. 41; op. 57, d. 2243, l. 96.

¹² *Ibid.*, op. 56, d. 2110, ll. 10–11, 20.

¹³ *Ibid.*, op. 56, d. 2125, l.1.

working class is meat.”¹⁴ Achieving an unplanned increase in meat yields at short notice was not an easy matter, however. The primary means of doing so was the “socialist obligation,” an ad hoc commitment by a local producer or party organization to a sudden over-the-plan increase in production. Shortly after a private reception with Khrushchev at the Kremlin, at the 20th Party Congress in February 1956, Larionov committed his region to a “socialist obligation” of 30,000 tons of meat by the end of the year, more than double the previous year’s total.¹⁵ According to official figures, Riazan fulfilled its socialist obligation, delivering 36,800 tons.¹⁶ The new emphasis on meat, however, came at the expense of an unexpected drop in milk production.¹⁷ In 1957, there was a rebalancing of priorities as meat production grew more slowly while milk yields again soared, and the following year Riazan was crowned as the top milk-producing region in the USSR.¹⁸

The cusp of 1958/59 was an important moment in Khrushchev’s proposed trajectory for the Soviet economy. Impatient with the slow tempo of the sixth five-year-plan (1956–60), Khrushchev reacted to high-level opposition to his upward revisions of the plan by ditching it altogether and opting for a new hyper-optimistic seven-year plan, which was to commence in 1959 and run until 1965. Driving the agricultural part of the plan was Khrushchev’s goal that the USSR catch up with the United States in the production of milk, butter, and, especially, meat. On the eve of the new plan, Khrushchev turned to Riazan as a standard bearer for his policies. This was an obvious choice. Khrushchev had already collaborated with Larionov and knew him well. More significantly, for the Soviet Union to catch up with the United States in meat consumption, its level of production in this area would have to rise threefold. Here Riazan had already shown the way. From 1953 to 1958, productivity in milk in the region had exactly tripled. All that was needed was for Riazan to do the same with meat.¹⁹

Rather inconveniently for Khrushchev, on 30 December 1958 the Riazan party conference agreed to a “modest” socialist obligation of one and a half plans, 75,000 tons of meat, for 1959.²⁰ Shortly after the conference, Larionov

¹⁴ Ibid., op. 57, d. 2234, l. 54; op. 56, d. 2111, ll. 18, 135.

¹⁵ Ibid., op. 56, d. 2110, ll. 10, 20; d. 2111, ll. 9, 14, 135; d. 2112, ll. 132, 138; d. 2124, l. 6.

¹⁶ Ibid., op. 57, d. 2234, l. 50.

¹⁷ Ibid., op. 56, d. 2125, l. 141.

¹⁸ Ibid., op. 57, d. 2234, l. 50; Agarev, *Tragicheskaia avantiura*, 18, 64, 144.

¹⁹ Agarev, *Tragicheskaia avantiura*, 18, 22–23, 94–95; Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (RGANI) f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, l. 48 (f. 13, op. 1, contains files, largely reports and transcripts of meetings, from the Russian Bureau of the Central Committee).

²⁰ The new seven-year plan had stipulated a quota of 51,000 tons for 1959, marginally more than the 48,400 tons returned the previous year. In the following year, this figure of 51,000

phoned Khrushchev with the news. Three days later, one of Khrushchev's most trusted agents, the head of the RSFSR Bureau agricultural department, and one of the key figures in Khrushchev's victory over the anti-party group in 1957, Vladimir Mylarshchikov, arrived in Riazan with a special request, purportedly from Khrushchev, that the obligation be increased to "three plans," 150,000 tons, a "difficult but necessary and honorable step" that would help enable the USSR to "catch up with the United States." The idea of the "three plans" was taken on by Larionov and announced at a conference of regional agriculturalists on 3 January; six days later, the obligation appeared on the front page of *Pravda*. When a buoyant Khrushchev made a personal visit to Riazan on 12–14 February 1959, he declared that he was "particularly pleased to hear" that the region had "pledged itself to increase meat production by three times this year," thereby forging the way for the USSR to match its arch-rival, the United States.²¹

Progress on the ground was anything but smooth. The declaration of the "first plan," originally intended for June, had to be delayed by almost two months. By 1 October, the region was still 25,000 tons short of the meat required for the "second plan." In the event, and somewhat suspiciously, 26,300 tons of meat materialized in the first ten days of the month, and the second plan was declared on 13 October.²² By this stage it was apparent that the region simply did not have the cattle to achieve the "third" plan. In view of Larionov's "socialist obligation" to Khrushchev, however, he pressed on, now resorting to full-blooded Stalin-era tactics in his bid to extract meat from the farms "at all costs."

To accomplish this goal, Larionov set up a "meat commission," headed by the obkom secretary V. P. Zenin, now anointed "meat secretary," and including other leading regional officials, such as the head of the meat and milk administration at the Sovnarkhoz, G. P. Shval'b, and the chair of the regional trade department, N. M. Brusnichkin, who were given license to circumvent the ordinary party apparatus and, in effect, to requisition livestock directly from farms and individual citizens.²³ "The districts were obliged to hand over [the cattle], everything was done by means of threats and fear," recalled the first secretary of the Skopinskii raikom, F. S. Ponomarev. "From 7 until 22 December [1959], we had one long St. Bartholomew's Night [massacre], [the tons was to count as "one" plan. See RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, l. 9; and Agarev, *Tragicheskaiia avantiura*, 64.

²¹ Agarev, *Tragicheskaiia avantiura*, 23–26, 52, 61; Sushkov, *Prezidium TsK*, 167.

²² RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, ll. 7–8, 51, 98, 102; Agarev, *Tragicheskaiia avantiura*, 75–79 (unless otherwise stated, where archival and published references are both given, they refer to different original sources).

²³ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, ll. 48–49, 54, 80; Agarev, *Tragicheskaiia avantiura*, 81–82, 152.

meat commission] would phone at four or six in the morning and tell us to give them more meat.” “This band did everything to ensure the plan was fulfilled,” recounted the obkom secretary I. V. Gusev, “they would call the raikom secretaries at 11:00 at night and demand that they deliver 600 tons of meat by 9:00 the following morning.” “The meat commission,” confessed one of its members, Shval’b, “was really just a screen. We would arrive at 7:00 in the morning and stay on until nightfall. If any of the raikom secretaries began to pose problems, there would be pressure.”²⁴

Out-and-out coercion appears to have been the order of the day not only in the implementation of the “third” plan but also during the deliberations stage in October.²⁵ The proceedings of an emergency meeting of district first secretaries in October were recounted by the first secretary of the Shilovskii district, M. V. Tsyplakov:

How did all this work? Very simple. First [Larionov] works on the bureau members [and raikom first secretaries] Kabanov and Ponomarev, then he invites [the rest of the raikom first secretaries] and begins. “Kabanov will you fulfill the plan?” “We will! We won’t let you down!” “Spasskii district, how about you?” “We will!” And so what could the rest of us rank-and-file secretaries do? Then they start calling out names. “Sharkov”—says he will, “Tsyplakov”—“yup, we’ll do it!” “Miroliubov—yes, us too....” That’s how it was. At no point was a raikom secretary asked how he would fulfill the plan, the question just did not arise.²⁶

Given the coercive nature of these proceedings, defying the obkom would have required an almost foolhardy show of courage. “Was it possible to object?” asked one anonymous letter writer. “Doing so would have meant opposing the Central Committee, Khrushchev, and the obkom ... you might as well have signed your own resignation letter ... only then to be branded a coward, a panicker, a counterrevolutionary [*kontra*], kicked out of the Party, and doomed to life without a job.”²⁷ Although the most visible expression of this command system was the meat commission under Zenin, its coercive methods appear to have drawn their inspiration directly from Larionov. The head of the accounting administration of the Riazan office of the Ministry of Finance, Ganiushkin, recalled how, when he raised the question of deception, Larionov threatened “to pick me up by my pants and throw me out of the window.” The raikom secretary V. N. Zigalenko summed up the prevailing sense of apprehension across the region with the following

²⁴ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, ll. 48, 53, 54, 99.

²⁵ For Khrushchev’s claim, see Agarev, *Tragicheskaia avantiura*, 61; also see 51.

²⁶ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, l. 52.

²⁷ Agarev, *Tragicheskaia avantiura*, 90; RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, l. 66.

image: “Recently there has emerged the theory of the ‘six hooks.’ This means that if the obligations are not fulfilled, then each and every one of the obkom secretaries, along with the head of the oblispolkom, would be strung up and hanged [on hooks secured to the ceiling of Larionov’s office].”²⁸

According to the head of the regional branch of the trade union, G. L. Taranov, by the beginning of 1960 Larionov began to “lose all restraint” (*raspoiasalsia*).²⁹ At a time when his meat commission was scouring the region for the last vestiges of livestock for the 1959 campaign, Larionov signed up for a hopeless obligation for 1960 of 200,000 tons of meat in order to bring the region into line with levels in the United States. It appears to have been during this period that Larionov’s drinking problem worsened. As the head of the regional KGB, S. G. Oleinik, would later describe them, these “obligations were nothing but the fantasy of a drunkard.”³⁰ As his region headed for disaster, Larionov either stayed away from work or, on the days when he came in, would be found lost in a drunken reverie by the early afternoon. By midsummer, the leaks about fraud and data inflation in Riazan became hard even for the all-powerful Riazan obkom to suppress. By mid-September, when the member of the RSFSR Bureau Pospelov phoned the obkom bureau to pave the way for Larionov’s dismissal, it appeared that Larionov had single-handedly plunged the whole province into an orgy of deception and into the costly, anarchic, and ultimately futile slaughter of hundreds of thousands of cattle.³¹

Channels of Deception I: The Raikom Secretaries

The Riazan Affair was given an extended airing at a two-day emergency meeting of the RSFSR Bureau of the Central Committee on 2–3 December 1960, at an extended session of the Central Committee Presidium on 16 December, and at an extraordinary convocation of the Riazan obkom plenum on 6 January 1961. On 10 December, the de facto head of the RSFSR Bureau, Aristov, prepared a sanitized account of the affair as a “note” to the Presidium which was subsequently distributed to all regional party secretaries across the USSR. Aristov’s letter was a carefully orchestrated exercise in damage limitation designed to defend Khrushchev’s reputation and to argue

²⁸ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, ll. 36, 49; RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, l. 54. For a second reference to these “hangings,” see Kagakov’s speech in RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, l. 40: “It was indicated that should the obligations for meat not be fulfilled they would screw special hooks into the ceiling of Larionov’s office, from which all the obkom secretaries and the oblispolkom chair would be hanged.”

²⁹ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, l. 43.

³⁰ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, l. 55; Agarev, *Tragicheskaia avantiura*, 124.

³¹ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, ll. 75, 79.

that “two plans” had indeed been fulfilled.³² On 4 January, Aristov’s RSFSR Bureau issued a separate resolution on the Riazan scandal ahead of the obkom plenum, scheduled to take place two days later. As with Aristov’s note to the Presidium, one of the primary purposes of the resolution was to present a face-saving version of the affair, this time by pinning as much of the blame as possible on the “meat commission” and its chief malefactor, Zenin.³³

Although laying the blame on the “meat commission” suited the central authorities, officials in the region knew better. They drew attention to the fact that fraud in Riazan had become a “system,” one that had fully enveloped the region’s rank and file. “In every district there was falsification and deception; this was an entire system,” asserted the obkom ideology secretary S. G. Iakimov at the RSFSR Bureau meeting early in December.³⁴ “At the obkom they gathered functionaries from the consumer cooperatives, the regional trade department, the agricultural administration, the state statistical agency, in a word *everyone*,” reported the first secretary of the Shilovskii raikom, Tsyplakov. “The most terrible thing,” concurred the head of the Statistical Administration, Ganiushkin, “was that drawn into the orbit of falsification was a wide circle of officials, starting with the kolkhozniks but moving on to salespeople at the village general stores, kolkhoz accountants, and even newspaper reporters.” Underlining this point, Aristov, who attended the plenum of 6 January, conceded that Moscow had received signals, including a very convincing one about suspicious goings-on in the Zapozhkovskii district. “Refuting it, however, was a letter signed by all the raikom secretaries, the raikom chair, the kolkhoz chairs, secretaries of party organizations, in a word about 60 people.... They signed, confirming that this was a slander, that it was all wrong. How could we not believe, when so many comrades had signed?”³⁵

Although the system of governance in Riazan was coercive, force alone cannot explain why hundreds of people, most of whom were several steps removed from the obkom, took the considerable risk of fabricating receipts,

³² Sushkov, *Prezidium TsK KPSS*, 173, 175–76. Much of the following discussion, which paints a rather different picture from the one presented in Aristov’s communique, is based on verbatim transcripts of the RSFSR Bureau meeting (RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 790) and of the Riazan plenum (RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421), and on a number of separately compiled but highly detailed reports and written testimonies submitted to the RSFSR Bureau ahead of its 2–3 December meeting (also f. 13, op. 1, d. 790).

³³ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, l. 4. On the significance of Aristov’s compromise formulation of 4 January, which sought to differentiate the “self-sacrificing labor” of the collective farmers from the “criminal” schemes of some members of the regional leadership, see Khlevniuk, “Economy of Illusions,” 176.

³⁴ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 790, l. 51.

³⁵ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, ll. 13, 36, 52 (italics mine).

tampering with inventories, and colluding in large-scale fraud. To make sense of the events in Riazan, we need to go beyond the gloss placed on them by the central authorities, whose face-saving position was that Riazan had completed “two plans” (i.e., 102,000 tons) by mid-October, at which point the all-powerful meat commission had pressed officials to lie and deceive “for the third plan.” In fact, as the RSFSR Bureau’s independent commission convincingly demonstrated, around 40,000 of these 102,000 tons had been *bought*, often at highly inflated market prices, and often beyond the borders of Riazan itself. Apart from Aristov, the most senior politician at the meeting of the RSFSR Bureau on 2–3 December 1961 was D. S. Polianskii, a full member of the Central Committee and, since May 1960, a full member of the Central Committee Presidium (i.e., the Politburo). As Polianskii openly acknowledged at the meeting—contradicting what only a week later would become the official line—“in fact [Riazan] truly submitted 60,000 tons, and for the rest [i.e., 40,000 tons] it wasted state funds to the tune of 300 million rubles.” “It is clear,” Polianskii went on, “that in Riazan *there was no second plan, let alone a third.*”³⁶ Along these lines, I suggest that if we are to understand better the dynamics of data inflation and why so many officials were drawn to it, it is more helpful to look at the campaign not chronologically or by “plans,” but by *types of deception*.

Three main forms of deception were practiced in Riazan in 1959. The first involved buying up additional meat and cattle on secondary markets and submitting it as Riazan’s own. Procurement agents roamed neighboring regions, and even the markets and high-street shops of Moscow, in search of “meat for the plan.” In total, the RSFSR Bureau commission estimated that 39,500 tons of meat were purchased in this way at a cost of 237 million rubles.³⁷ These purchases were clearly not in the spirit of the campaign for meat. “Not only are they very expensive and incur heavy losses for our collective farms, but they do not lead to a net increase in the overall amount of food for the state,” admitted the head of the oblispolkom, G. P. Bobkov, in May 1960.³⁸ Although they ran against the spirit of the meat campaign, such purchases were, formally speaking, permissible under law. Buying up meat in this way was allowed under existing legislation, and all purchases were processed through the formal accounting system. Although the practice

³⁶ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, ll. 72, 107 (italics mine). This is significant since it shows that at least one full member of the Presidium (and probably others) knew that Khrushchev’s face-saving position, repeatedly affirmed over the next month, that “two plans” had been fulfilled, was in fact a lie. See also *ibid.*, ll. 26, 65.

³⁷ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, ll. 11, 14, 21, 27.

³⁸ RGASPI f. 17, op. 90, d. 2422, l. 125; and see op. 91, d. 2421, l. 44.

was not ideal, those who participated in the purchasing of meat did not run a high risk either to themselves or to their line managers.

The second main form of agricultural fraud involved cattle that had been placed for “reassignment” (*na perederzhku*).³⁹ This practice drew on an RSFSR Council of Ministers resolution of August 1959 that allowed for cattle that were scrawny or underfed at the time of formal submission to the state procurement agency to be weighed but then kept at the farms and fattened up for delivery at a later date when they could yield more meat. The weight of the cattle on the census date was to count toward the plan for that year, while the additional weight put on after that date would be included in the following year’s plan. But the system was abused. Originally capped at 10,000 tons, the amount of cattle reassigned in Riazan rose in 1959 to 31,200 tons. The RSFSR Bureau investigation discovered that in some cases the weight of the cattle was fully double-counted, and in others the cattle placed for reassignment were invented and did not in fact exist. Placing cattle *na perederzhku* involved a certain amount of risk for those involved, especially if the cattle were fabricated with the use of false receipts. However, regional officials often cited the August 1959 resolution authorizing the “reassignment” and appeared to take this as a sign that what they were doing was in fact legal.⁴⁰

The most dangerous form of deception and the one that involved the highest level of risk were the so-called “non-goods transactions” (*bestovarnye operatsii*).⁴¹ Under existing rules, as a spur to production regions were allowed to allocate half of their over-the-plan meat directly to the local population, normally through the consumer cooperatives. In Riazan, however, most of this meat was not passed on to the population but resold by the cooperatives back to the kolkhozes and sovkhozes, which in turn resubmitted it as “new” meat to the procurement agencies, thus creating a potentially never-ending cycle of resubmitted meat. Non-goods transactions were especially worrying to the authorities, because they entailed out-and-out fraud by a ring of officials within the state apparatus. For the non-goods transactions to work effectively, they required the active connivance of farms, procurement agencies, consumer cooperatives, trading organizations, retail outlets, and accounting offices; and they always involved the drawing up of “fake receipts” for nonexistent meat.⁴²

³⁹ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 790, l. 1.

⁴⁰ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, ll. 4, 12–13, 18; RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, ll. 1–2, 21, 71–72.

⁴¹ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, ll. 13, 14, 62. They were also sometimes referred to as “fictional transactions” (*fiktivnye operatsii*): RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, l. 5.

⁴² RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, ll. 13, 22–23, 63; RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, l. 5, 13–14.

Table 1

Five Districts in Riazan Province with the Highest Volumes of Non-Goods Transactions in 1959

District	Meat submitted toward the obligation for 1959 (tons)	Part consisting of non-goods transactions (tons)
Sasovo	10,090	2,129
Spasskii	8,023	1,800
Shilovskii	7,471	1,035
Riazan	9,041	766
Skopinskii	6,521	613

Source: RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, l. 14.

For these reasons, non-goods transactions were sometimes referred to as a type of “pure deception” (*priamoi obman*).⁴³

The RSFSR Bureau commission calculated that non-goods transactions in Riazan in 1959 accounted for 16,800 tons, but this is most likely an underestimate.⁴⁴ *Bestovarnye operatsii* were taken sufficiently seriously that an inquiry was carried out into their extent and distribution across the region. The districts with the highest levels are given in Table 1.⁴⁵

Closer examination reveals that these districts had one thing in common: their leaders constituted the spine of the regional political system. All had known Larionov for years, had been cultivated and promoted by him, and could be regarded as members of his ruling circle. Over the previous five years, it had been to N. N. Kabanov (Sasovo), P. A. Marfin (Spasskii), M. V. Tsyplakov (Shilovskii), V. N. Zigalenko (Riazan), and F. S. Ponomarev (Skopinskii) that Larionov had turned to win approval for new “socialist obligations,” to kick-start agricultural campaigns, and to lead the drive for meat. In turn, all five occupied the top seats among district first secretaries in the regional party hierarchy, while three—Kabanov, Zigalenko, and Ponomarev—were members of the obkom bureau.⁴⁶

⁴³ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, l. 13. They were also known as “pure cheating” (*priamye pripiski*), see *ibid.*, l. 26.

⁴⁴ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, ll. 23, 26.

⁴⁵ Also see RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, ll. 36, 99; RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, l. 84; Agarev, *Tragicheskaia avantiura*, 78.

⁴⁶ Kabanov and Zigalenko had been candidate members of the obkom bureau since the early 1950s and full members since July 1957; Ponomarev had been elected a candidate member in 1957. For more on their leading roles, see RGASPI f. 17, op. 56, d. 2111, ll. 7–8; op. 56, d.

The structural importance of this group to Larionov and his agricultural campaigns was exemplified by the role of N. N. Kabanov. Kabanov had been a long-standing player in district level politics, having held prominent positions, first as head of the raisspolkom and then as first secretary, in the Zakharovskii district from 1943. With Larionov's approval, Kabanov joined the obkom bureau as a candidate member in 1952 and by the end of the decade had become one of his most reliable allies. "Kabanov was held up as a model raikom secretary," I. I. Aturin, the secretary of the Riazan Knowledge Society, reflected; "his method of work was widely described in the press and presented as an example for others to follow."⁴⁷ It was also to Kabanov that Larionov turned when he sought a local leader who could reliably dissemble on behalf of the meat campaign. At an obkom plenum in January 1960, Kabanov boasted that his Sasovo district had submitted 2,700 tons in 1958, had just totted up 10,293 tons in 1959, and was now relishing the prospect of meeting its obligation of "around 14,000 tons" in 1960. "No sooner has the tractor ploughed a furrow," commented the head of the regional KGB, Oleinik, sarcastically, "than [Kabanov] claims he has finished the sowing."⁴⁸

In return for his clear strategic dependence on Kabanov, Larionov extended his unwavering protection and support. With Larionov's endorsement, Kabanov was made a Hero of Socialist Labor in December 1959 and, unusually, was given leave to attend the meeting that month of the full Central Committee in Moscow. "Kabanov was more involved in this business than anyone, and all the time he was held in high esteem," Oleinik recounted. Whenever Kabanov was in trouble, Larionov immediately came to the rescue. "The members of the plenum will know," Oleinik noted, "that the first anonymous letters to the Central Committee which I had to deal with came from [Kabanov's] Sasovo district. But when I asked Larionov for permission to look into this, he refused, and in fact I was the one who suddenly came in for some stick at the obkom bureau." Similarly, when an inspector from the State Statistical Administration discovered irregularities in Sasovo, Kabanov reported the matter straight to Larionov, who had the inspector fired.⁴⁹

Larionov's relationships with the five raikom first secretaries in Table 1 varied, but all were characterized by high levels of mutual dependence. In any district where non-goods transactions had become widespread, Larionov

2112, l. 1; op. 57, d. 2234, ll. 1,183; op. 91, d. 2421, l. 52; and RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, l. 98.

⁴⁷ RGASPI f. 17, op. 90, d. 2434, l. 11, 118; Agarev, *Tragicheskaia avantiura*, 184.

⁴⁸ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, ll. 27–28, 44; Agarev, *Tragicheskaia avantiura*, 149.

⁴⁹ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, ll. 27–28, 37; Agarev, *Tragicheskaia avantiura*, 148–49.

was highly reliant on the district first secretary to hold each link in the long chain of district-level collusion together. Consider the example of another of the five, F. S. Ponomarev, who had been first secretary of the Skopinskii district since 1949, a year after Larionov's own appointment as obkom first secretary. On 8 April 1960, an instructor from the procurement office in the Skopinskii district, Aleksei Evtiukhin, wrote two letters, one to the Party Control Commission and the other to Khrushchev himself, noting how at the beginning of that year he had observed a scenario relating to the meat campaign that was "just out of Ostap Bender":

Through the network of village general stores they have bought and sold [the meat], exchanged papers, given out assignments; the accountants have been off to the state bank and back; in short all is ready, the collective farms have fulfilled the plan, the village stores have registered a turnover of over a million rubles and profits of over 160,000, and all this has been done in a matter of three to four days. [All is fine apart from one small detail.] What about the meat? Where is the meat?⁵⁰

Within five weeks, Ponomarev had organized a crushing response. At a general meeting on 13 May, at which he assembled 43 participants, he got 13 speakers, including collective-farm chairs and heads of local councils to paint Evtiukhin as a drunkard and moral degenerate. Presumably on Ponomarev's orders, the speakers were plied with confidential and disparaging information on Evtiukhin's own past which they now shared with their audience. All called for Evtiukhin's immediate expulsion from the Party. Ponomarev also played a lead role in gathering over 60 signatures from local dignitaries denying Evtiukhin's claims and asserting that the man was a slanderer. In the face of all this pressure, Evtiukhin took fright and backed down. Ponomarev's boldest intervention, however, would come later. When Evtiukhin's allegations eventually made their way to Moscow, the Central Committee's investigators summoned Ponomarev to the capital. "When this affair blew up," Larionov's replacement as first secretary, K. N. Grishin, informed the Riazan obkom, "Ponomarev declared at the Central Committee that there was no cheating, that the cattle for the plan were there, that the situation was under control and, in the name of the district party organization, he assured the Central Committee that all was in order ... [but then] it turned out that Ponomarev was a liar who lied at every turn."⁵¹

⁵⁰ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, l. 4; Agarev, *Tragicheskaia avantiura*, 127 (these materials refer to the same source).

⁵¹ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, ll. 5, 18; RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, l. 184; Agarev, *Tragicheskaia avantiura*, 130–34.

In any district with a high volume of non-goods transactions, there was a chance that the fraud might unravel, given that the webs of deception were by their nature quite widely spread. In such districts, Larionov depended on the first secretaries to hold these circles of collusion together. Yet even beyond this upper tier of five first secretaries, there was a second layer of around a dozen raikom secretaries whom Larionov sponsored and on whom he relied for his strategic objectives.⁵² If we look at the 18 raikom secretaries who belonged to one or another of these two groups, we observe a remarkably low level of turnover among them between 1956 and 1960. Indeed, of the 18 identified in 1956, 15 were still in post in May 1960.⁵³ For all Larionov's bluster, he was surprisingly unwilling to get rid of this corpus of district first secretaries. Furthermore, despite the fear in which he was supposedly held by his subordinates, Larionov was reluctant to resort to the traditional weapons of party punishment—the reprimand or severe reprimand—against them. As he would proudly declare to Mylarshchikov and the whole obkom in January 1959, over the previous five years not a single party functionary under him had been reprimanded.⁵⁴ By contrast, Larionov rewarded his district first secretaries generously, in July 1957 promoting no fewer than four—an unusually high number—to the obkom bureau.

This continuity of cadres is significant, for the mass fraud of 1959 grew out of earlier frauds, many of which had been perpetuated by the same raikom-level officials. “It was from about 1954–55,” recalled the obkom secretary Gusev, “that these dishonest schemes, this cheating of every kind, these false accounts, began to flare up, first in one district, then in another.”⁵⁵ “The deception of the party and state evolved into an entire system,” concurred a high level report, signed by all members of the Riazan obkom bureau, in November 1960, “one that would become implanted in the districts. Eventually it would assume a large scale with meat and cattle, but it *began with the obligations for milk*.”⁵⁶ “All this became possible,” agreed the first secretary of the Riazan gorkom, N. M. Pakhomov, “because over

⁵² These were leaders whom Larionov had consistently elevated and endorsed over a period of about five years. They were Ryzhnikov (Rybnovskii district), Tarasov (Shatskii), Protasov (Pronskii), Egorov (Starozhilovskii), Pushkarev (Miloslavskii), Pronin (Erakhturskii), Makeev (Mozharskii), Kagakov (Novoderevenskii), Rogova (Putiatinskii), Susliakov (Mikhailovskii), Taranov (Zheleznodorozhnyi), Chumakova (Sovetskii), and Susanov (Oktiabrskii). See RGASPI f. 17, op. 56, d. 2110, ll. 1–2; d. 2111, ll. 7, 50, 138; d. 2112 l, 1 (e); d. 2126, l. 40; op. 57, d. 2234, ll. 1, 183; and d. 2243, l. 1.

⁵³ Ibid., op. 90, d. 2422, l. 1; op. 91, d. 2421, ll. 1, 3, 59.

⁵⁴ Agarev, *Tragicheskaiia avantiura*, 45, 48.

⁵⁵ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, l. 17.

⁵⁶ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, ll. 28 (italics mine), 56; RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, l. 21.

a long period, beginning in 1954, the regional party organization ... has supported precisely those who have engaged in illegality and cheating.”⁵⁷ The obkom secretary Gusev agreed: “The deception really got out of hand not in 1959 but in 1956.”⁵⁸ No study of the trajectory of fraud in Riazan in the mid-1950s was undertaken at the time, and none is now realistically feasible. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that although the fraud in milk production was given an impetus in 1954, it would peak in 1956–57, at the time that Riazan was competing for the mantle of national milk champion.⁵⁹ It was widely understood that many of the incumbent district secretaries had been involved in the cheating; indeed, according to Aristov, even the squeaky clean M. I. Ryzhnikov, from the Rybnovskii district, had tacitly admitted his involvement. “About Ryzhnikov they say that [in his district] too, in 1956–57 there were similar cases [of falsification] with milk. We have spoken to him about it, and he does not deny it.”⁶⁰ The continuity of raikom first secretaries was significant because these officials were the chief conductors of the mobilization campaigns and those ultimately entrusted with holding the district networks of deception together. Khrushchev had turned to Riazan to accomplish the “three plans” in meat because the region had supposedly already notched up “three plans” in milk. In fact, however, the “three plans” in milk were themselves a mirage.

It is tempting to think that the compliance of the raikom secretaries was based entirely on a calculus of their own short-term interests, but this is to underestimate the personal bonds they had formed with Larionov. Early in the morning of 15 September 1960, seven party officials met at the small hall of the obkom and drove to a wood 15 kilometers outside Riazan, on the road to Moscow. By this stage, Larionov’s position had become hopeless. Only two days earlier, Pospelov had phoned the obkom to make arrangements for his removal. The seven officials nonetheless assembled in secret to put together a direct appeal to the Central Committee that Larionov be reprieved. Such a clandestine action posed a great risk to the group, and indeed, on account of it its members would later come to be dubbed in some quarters as a “faction” and an “anti-party group.” Although, after considerable soul searching, they decided against going to Moscow, it was telling that the gathering consisted entirely of district party first secretaries.⁶¹

⁵⁷ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, l. 56.

⁵⁸ Ibid., ll. 48, 53.

⁵⁹ Ibid., ll. 59, 75–76, 113.

⁶⁰ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, l. 60.

⁶¹ Ibid., ll. 34–35, 40–41, 49; RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, l. 85; Agarev, *Tragicheskaia avantiura*, 161.

Channels of Deception II: Peers and Superiors

The practices of mass deception observed in Riazan in 1959 hinged on relations of mutual dependence between Larionov and a subgroup of raikom secretaries. With origins reaching back to the relatively innocent violations of the early milk campaigns, these relations had deepened over time. Through incremental promotions, this group now constituted the main power artery of the regional political system, and it was through this artery that the most egregious forms of deception, the non-goods transactions, were pumped through to the localities. Larionov's long-term relationship with these raikom first secretaries was the single most distinctive feature of the power system in Riazan. These ties, however, constituted only one aspect of Larionov's overall network. Larionov also had ties to peers at the obkom and to powerful leaders in Moscow. These lateral and upward ties would prove indispensable in providing cover for Larionov's allies in the districts when things went wrong.

At the obkom Larionov's closest relationship was with the chair of the Meat Commission, V. P. Zenin. A man with little formal education, Zenin had first caught Larionov's eye when, as chair of the Mozharskii district executive committee, in the spring of 1950, he had made an impassioned speech on the need to activate the region's procurement organizations during agriculture campaigns.⁶² In June 1954, with Larionov's endorsement Zenin rose to the influential post of obkom agriculture secretary. On taking office "Zenin brought," in the words of the secretary of the Spasskii district, Marfin, the "spirit of procurements to the obkom."⁶³ Zenin's arrival also signaled a more lax approach to standard auditing practices. The first secretary of the Riazan gorkom, Pakhomov, recalled: "It was his very first phone call [as obkom secretary], at the end of June [1954], when he told me to include three days of the July production figures in the June figures, as the region had not yet fulfilled the half-year plan."⁶⁴ Other informants in the Riazan investigations also dated the rise in systematic massaging of statistics to Zenin's arrival as obkom secretary in 1954.⁶⁵ The most damning indictment, however, concerned Zenin's role in starting up the most serious form of deception, the non-goods transactions, which was the subject of the following exchange at the December 1960 meeting of the RSFSR Bureau:

⁶² Agarev, *Tragicheskaia avantiura*, 121–22.

⁶³ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, ll. 29, 35. This point was also made by the deputy chair of the regional executive committee, Maslov, who lamented that "little attention was paid to agricultural production and too much to procurements" (*ibid.*, l. 46).

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, l. 22.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, ll. 17, 21, 29; RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, l. 57.

Aristov: Again, I ask: How was it that receipts were issued for nonexistent meat?

Shval' b: This system started long ago. The districts were told to calculate how much meat was bought up at the market by the hospitals, children's homes, and other organizations. By chance, I happened to be present at a conversation between Brusnichkin and Zenin, and I heard how Zenin issued the order for this. I knew that all this was illegal.... There was a decision of the obkom that around 8,000 tons of meat be passed on to the cooperative societies for "reprocessing" and "local requirements." It was Zenin who personally issued the procurement orders for this.⁶⁶

Any official who probed into Zenin's role in stoking up data inflation was stopped in his tracks by Larionov. When, for example, the obkom secretary Gusev and the first secretary of the Riazan gorkom, Pakhomov, warned Zenin not to press officials into cheating, Zenin went straight to Larionov, who unwaveringly stood by him. Efforts by Zenin's critics to appeal directly to Larionov were also of little use: "We speak, we argue, and then there is mutual protection" (*pogovorim, porugaemsia, a potom semeistvennost*), Gusev complained. For his part, Larionov had also become dependent on Zenin. In the early summer of 1960, Larionov went on holiday to Karlovy Vary, from where he wrote to Zenin: "One letter has left me deeply troubled. I am speaking about the 150,000 tons and the 20,000 tons we owe on the *perederzhka*. In this matter, you know, I rely above all on you." Larionov's faith in Zenin was such that later on in the year, as he fell ill and missed work from excessive drinking, he allowed Zenin to run the obkom bureau and to sign its resolutions. What had begun as an instrumental relationship acquired affective qualities. On the night of his suicide, Larionov phoned Zenin: "I wish you all the best. Remember, I have faith in you, you are a worthy person."⁶⁷

Long-standing ties also bound Larionov to figures in Moscow. Riazan may have benefited from natives of the province who now occupied positions of influence in the capital.⁶⁸ More significant, however, appear to have been Larionov's personal connections to two other Soviet leaders. Larionov's ties to Aristov, according to one account, went back at least to 1952, when Aristov

⁶⁶ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, ll. 99–100; also l. 63.

⁶⁷ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, ll. 18, 22; RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, l. 57; Agarev, *Tragicheskaia avantiura*, 140, 163.

⁶⁸ See RGASPI f. 17, op. 56, d. 2125, ll. 123–24. One must be careful here. Ironically, one of the most powerful Riazanites in Moscow from the late 1950s on, Frol Kozlov, would play a crucial role in unraveling the Riazan scandal. See, for example, RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, l. 60.

came to Larionov's rescue after criticism from Stalin.⁶⁹ Certainly, the two had cooperated closely at the RSFSR Bureau of the Central Committee, which Aristov had in effect headed since 1957.⁷⁰ Larionov's ties to Khrushchev were also strong. The Riazan leader had attended a series of one-on-one meetings with Khrushchev over a number of years and had acted as Khrushchev's mouthpiece on agricultural matters at major events such as the 20th Party Congress. For his part, Larionov regularly invoked Khrushchev's authority as the 1959 campaign got underway. "At small-scale meetings," S. S. Kagakov, the first secretary of the Novoderenskii raikom, recalled in 1961, "Larionov would repeatedly stress that [the third plan] was necessary not only for him personally but for N. S. Khrushchev, not only for the domestic but also for the foreign policy of the USSR."⁷¹

Throughout 1959, Larionov would frequently have cause to cash in on these connections. One use to which they were put was to loosen budgetary constraints on the province. According to Zenin, when he and Bobkov visited the chair of the RSFSR Council of Ministers, Polianskii, in Moscow, requesting permission to increase the amount of meat that was to be re-tabulated, "Polianskii *cleared our request with Khrushchev*, and we received permission for a *perederzhka* ... of 31,200 tons."⁷² Larionov's Moscow connections were also handy when it came to easing the financial burdens on the region, given that much of the meat for the plan was being purchased, often at very high prices, on secondary markets.⁷³ Larionov's ties were most crucial, however, when it came to deflecting the attentions of central auditing agencies from the region. Two examples stand out. First, in the spring of 1959 an inspection by the USSR Ministry of Agriculture uncovered cases of deception on 11 state farms in Riazan. Officials from Moscow then revealed that a large number of receipts had been issued at the meat-processing plant on a single day and that some had been faked. "But no sooner had the report been filed," Aristov stated, "than Larionov, [K. F.] Chachin [second secretary of the obkom], and Zenin were off to Moscow." As a result of their lobbying, the investigations were immediately halted.⁷⁴ A second example occurred in mid-October 1959. The deputy head of the RSFSR Statistical Administration, N. Rozov, grew suspicious that Riazan had managed to submit around 26,000

⁶⁹ Sushkov, *Prezidium TsK*, 169. More broadly, on the significance of Larionov's long-term ties with the Central Committee apparatus, which went back to the late 1940s, see Khlevniuk, "Economy of Illusions," 173.

⁷⁰ RGASPI f. 17, op. 56, d. 2112, ll. 2 (g), 62; op. 90, d. 2434, l. 9.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, op. 91, d. 2421, l. 40; op. 56, d. 2110, l. 10.

⁷² Agarev, *Tragicheskaiia avantiura*, 113 (italics mine).

⁷³ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, ll. 46–47; also see Agarev, *Tragicheskaiia avantiura*, 150.

⁷⁴ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, l. 13.

tons of meat in under ten days. When two officials from the state statistical department were dispatched to Riazan on 15 October, Zenin phoned Rozov's office to protest; this was followed up by an approach from Larionov who "in a more categorical form demanded that the officials be recalled"—as indeed they were.⁷⁵

It was normally on such occasions, when it came to accepting Larionov's word, that the language of "trust" (*doverie*) came to the fore. As P. Semenov, the deputy head of the RSFSR Agricultural Department, recalled: "any efforts by [my] department to establish the true state of affairs was viewed by the obkom and personally by Larionov as distrust [*kak nedoverie*] of the oblast party organization."⁷⁶ References to trust also surfaced in Larionov's interactions with Aristov. At the postmortem on the Riazan Affair at the RSFSR Bureau on 3 December, the head of the department of party organs, Mikhail Efremov, unexpectedly sprang an attack on Aristov: "You failed to respond, and instead defended Larionov. Whenever the discussion touched on Larionov, you somehow comported yourself differently. How quickly you rose to defend him, how [quickly] you took his every call, and how you always took everything on trust." Aristov's response was telling: "There is no denying my guilt in failing to act on these signals, for I trusted Larionov [*doveril t. Larionovu*]."⁷⁷

Expressions of mutual belief were also evident in Larionov's relations with Khrushchev. "We believe in this [obligation of 150,000 tons] without any hesitation," Larionov declared to Khrushchev during the latter's visit to Riazan in February 1959, "and we ask you to believe us." "The people of Riazan will not retreat from their position, the obligations will be fulfilled at any price, we will be true to our word," Larionov vowed at the Kremlin reception in October, to which Khrushchev replied: "We believe you." "I know Larionov as a serious and thoughtful person who would never take on unrealistic obligations," Khrushchev declared once the "third plan" had been registered in December 1959.⁷⁸ Indeed, it was in terms of honoring his personal obligation to Khrushchev that Larionov came to frame the whole 1959 meat campaign. "When we said [to Larionov]," Chachin recalled, "that we simply do not have the resources to fulfill the third plan, we got one answer—we must fulfill the plan at any price. When we pointed out that, in handing over light and young cattle we would be destroying our reserves, still the answer was the same—we have to fulfill the plan; after all, we gave

⁷⁵ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, ll. 45–46.

⁷⁶ Ibid., ll. 19, 6–7, 46.

⁷⁷ Ibid., ll. 110, 117.

⁷⁸ Agarev, *Tragicheskaiia avantiura*, 73, 96, 113, 114.

our word [*esli dali slovo*].”⁷⁹ For his part, Khrushchev opened his attacks on the recent scandals in January 1961 not with a condemnation of fraud and data inflation but with a treatise on how unfulfilled “socialist obligations” in effect constituted the *real* deception of the state: “We have a good communist tradition: if you take on an obligation, you see it through. True Soviet people do not make blind promises.... And yet this is what some of [our] comrades [have done].... Who needs obligations that cannot be fulfilled? Surely *this is the real deception* of the party and of the people [*ved’ eto zhe obman partii i naroda*].”⁸⁰

The punishments meted out to the main culprits of the Riazan Affair within the region were surprisingly mild. Although five leading officials were expelled from the Party, and a number received reprimands, none were prosecuted.⁸¹ The leniency of the punishments reflected the delicate balancing act that the center had to perform in limiting the fallout from the affair. The culprits were so deeply embedded in the regional political network that fully rooting them out would have required a mass purge, something that the post-Stalin leadership was no longer willing to countenance. One, albeit indirect, manifestation of the depth of allegiance to Larionov within the region was the turnout at his funeral. The event, at which over 300 wreaths were laid, was attended by thousands of mourners including, reportedly, all the raikom secretaries and a good portion of the obkom elite; indeed, so many turned up at the funeral that traffic in the city had to be stopped.⁸²

Skeptics might argue that the key political relationships in Riazan were too hierarchical and coercive to involve real trust. “If neither party to a relationship had any power to withdraw from the relationship,” Cook, Hardin, and Levi contend, “their necessary mutual reliance would be sufficient to explain their cooperation and neither would need to trust the other.”⁸³ But this is to take too sweeping a view of trust. Most theories accept that trust exists *with respect to certain matters* or *to do certain things*. There were many officials who were locked in relations of dependence on Larionov. The extent to which he could trust them, however, varied depending on *what exactly he wanted them to do*. Most likely, those he could approach to speak in public in support of “socialist obligations” fell into a relatively large group. By contrast,

⁷⁹ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 793, l. 74.

⁸⁰ *Plenum Tsentral’nogo komiteta Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo soiuza 10–18 ianvaria 1961 g.: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Gospolitizdat, 1961), 589–91 (italics mine).

⁸¹ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 2421, ll. 6–8, 16, 42, 66–67, 182–84.

⁸² Agarev, *Tragicheskaiia avantiura*, 164, photograph on 112.

⁸³ Karen S. Cook, Russell Hardin, and Margaret Levi, *Cooperation without Trust?* (New York: Russell Sage, 2005), 54. Similarly on 55 they write, “If I have no power to withdraw from our relationship, you do not need to trust me.”

those he could ask to instigate and coordinate elaborate schemes of deception involving high-risk non-goods transactions were fewer in number. These were people—members of Larionov’s core network—with whom he had established long-standing relations of mutual dependence. For their part, some—such as Zenin and the raikom secretaries who met in the Riazan forest—continued to support Larionov and to take risks on his behalf even after his position had become completely hopeless, evincing what some commentators refer to as a form of “non-calculational trust.”⁸⁴

To highlight the significance of Larionov’s network, I now compare Riazan with another region, Kirov, where the pressures of the meat campaign were no less pronounced and where the regional leader, Aleksandr Pcheliakov, was, if anything, more coercive than Larionov. In Kirov, however, the network around Pcheliakov was narrower and more tentative than its counterpart in Riazan. Without such a network, Kirov’s officials were far less inclined to engage in the high-risk types of fraud that were so prevalent in Riazan.

Kirov

Much like Riazan, Kirov was a medium-sized, predominantly agricultural region, to the northeast of Moscow, with a population of 1.84 million, just under three-fifths of whom lived in the countryside. At the time of the Riazan scandal, the first secretary in Kirov was Aleksandr Pcheliakov, who had taken over the region eight years earlier, in 1952. For much of 1959, Kirov was locked in a head-to-head battle with Riazan for the position of national meat champion. Indeed, in the second quarter of 1959, it was Kirov, ahead of Riazan, that was awarded the prestigious Red Banner for agriculture by the RSFSR Council of Ministers. However, Kirov’s declaration, on 20 October, that it had delivered 60 percent more meat than at the equivalent stage the previous year was no match for the dramatic news of the “second plan” from Riazan days earlier, and the Red Banner for the third quarter was duly presented to Riazan.⁸⁵ By this stage, the rivalry with Riazan and the other frontline agricultural regions had become an obsession for Pcheliakov. Kirov began the following year, 1960, with a hastily agreed and superambitious set of “socialist obligations” of 130,000 tons of meat. Then, in midstream, at the April 1960 obkom plenum, Pcheliakov with no prior consultation,

⁸⁴ For an excellent discussion, see John M. Darley, “Commitment, Trust, and Worker Effort Expenditure in Organizations,” in *Trust and Distrust in Organizations: Dilemmas and Approaches*, ed. Roderick M. Kramer and Karen S. Cook (New York: Russell Sage, 2007), 134–39.

⁸⁵ RGASPI f. 17, op. 89, d. 1752, ll. 94–95. This file contains the minutes of the Kirov obkom plenum of June 1959.

raised the obligation to 180,000 tons of meat. "We agreed on 130,000, but it turned out," recalled the obkom secretary Liamov, "that we were not as 'revolutionary' as Pcheliakov." "Even had we slaughtered all our cattle, we would not have reached the figure of 180,000 tons," agreed Ob"edkov, the chair of the oblispolkom. "Pcheliakov was just fixated on Riazan. He refused to listen to us and, as it turned out, he did so in vain." "Comrades have properly criticized me for initiating the exaggerated and unrealistic obligations last year," Pcheliakov would later concede, "but it was hard to restrain myself when Kostroma was going for 3 ... plans, Gor'kii for 2.6, Tula for 3, and Riazan for 2 or 3."⁸⁶

Given the pressure from Pcheliakov and the apparent connivance of the center, many district leaders in Kirov undoubtedly massaged their production figures. An RSFSR Bureau resolution in early 1961 reported that no fewer than 19 of the 28 districts in Kirov had engaged in "padding, deception, and fraud" in 1960. The spread of statistical falsification across Kirov would never rival the levels in Riazan, however. In 1959, the region delivered about 97,000 tons of meat to the state. Of this, approximately 37,000 tons were bought from the population. While not entirely in the spirit of the campaign, the buying up of cattle had been directly authorized by Khrushchev and involved relatively little risk to those involved. By contrast, levels of the two more risk-laden forms of data inflation, the *peredezhki* and the *bestovarnye kvitantsii*, were low. A Central Committee team concluded that 3,100 tons of meat were submitted *pod vidom peredezhki* at the end of 1959, ten times less than the figure in Riazan. The statistic for *bestovarnye kvitantsii*, under 1,000 tons, was even more modest and amounted to less than one-fifteenth the official estimate in Riazan.⁸⁷ Pcheliakov indeed perhaps deserved some sympathy when he asserted, in the full glare of a hostile obkom audience in February 1961, that "with the exception of two to three cases of the issuing of non-goods receipts ... *there were no pripiski and there was no deception of the state in our region in 1959.*"⁸⁸ By some accounts, it was with the adoption of the grandiose socialist obligations for 1960 of 130,000 tons that the pressure for outright falsification in Kirov was stepped up. However, the most reliable reports on non-goods receipts indicate that at the period of greatest pressure, the first six months of 1960, these amounted to no more than 895 tons of

⁸⁶ Ibid., op. 91, d. 1787, ll. 34, 37, 49, 111. This file, extensively used in the following section, contains the minutes of, and supporting materials for, the key Kirov obkom plenums of 1 and 12 February 1961.

⁸⁷ Ibid., ll. 72–74, 110.

⁸⁸ Ibid., l. 110 (italics mine).

meat—that is, still less than one-tenth of the levels in Riazan.⁸⁹ Indeed, even by comparison with regions *other than Riazan*, the volume of *perederzhki* and *bestovarnye kvitantsii* in Kirov appears to have been relatively small.⁹⁰

Despite the heavy downward pressure on officials at all levels in Kirov to achieve extraordinary targets for meat production, they were less willing to take the risk of resorting to statistical deception than were their counterparts in Riazan. One reason the campaign for meat in Kirov did not escalate into the mass fraud observed in Riazan was not that Pcheliakov was insufficiently autocratic or coercive, but that he was *too* much so. For any act of statistical distortion to stand a serious chance of success, it required the complicity of a large circle of people fulfilling complementary but interconnected functions. Fraud and deception on the scale witnessed in Riazan depended on a belief among its instigators that they could count on others in their circle to cover up for their misdeeds. Such belief was unlikely to exist unless it rested on relationships, built up over time, in which mutual accommodation and exchange had hardened into a pattern of reciprocal obligations. Yet through his actions—which included the bullying, sacking, and expulsion of a fast-moving stream of regional officials—Pcheliakov in effect prevented these long-standing relationships from forming. While getting rid of opponents and expelling them from the region may have helped Pcheliakov maximize his short-term goals, it did little to broaden the network of officials who might take the risk of lying, fabricating, and distorting on behalf of the regional drive for meat.

Despite his autocratic tendencies, Pcheliakov could not have carried out the meat campaign on his own. At the obkom and in the raikoms he was forced to rely on a thin base of strategically located “clients” and “agents” to coordinate and supervise his military-style agricultural offensives. “At the end of every month, every quarter, and even more so at the end of the year, the whole apparatus of the agricultural department and the department of party organs [at the obkom] would ‘sit’ by the telephones and demand that the schedule [*grafik*] for the delivery of milk, meat, eggs, and wool be adhered to with whatever means they had at their disposal,” recounted the second secretary Shatalin. Pcheliakov entrusted the coordination of these

⁸⁹ Ibid., l. 74; RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 805, ll. 2, 4, 7, 11, 15, 33.

⁹⁰ A report on “gross violations of procurements” of 1 November 1960 showed that the *perederzhki* in regions that were not even among the frontrunners of the agricultural competitions of 1959, such as Kurgansk, Voronezh, and Krasnodar, exceeded those in Kirov almost threefold (RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 790, ll. 1–2). As Pcheliakov would later proclaim, again with a certain ring of truth, “We [did do this] but in other oblasts the *perederzhki* were far worse” (RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 1787, l. 111).

campaigns to two figures, the obkom secretaries Zakhvataev and Bulatov.⁹¹ Much like Zenin in Riazan, both were old-school Stalinist procurement agents who believed in achieving their goals through maximum pressure and force. “At times,” Shatalin lamented of Bulatov, “he launches into Red Guard assaults. But he should not resort to these methods of donning a Chapaev hat, with a saber in hand, slashing and hacking at everything.”⁹²

At the raikom level, too, Pcheliakov had a couple of secretaries on whom he could depend. At a meeting of heads of raikom party organs departments, he boasted that these two, Brysov and Chemodanov, were each worth at least five ordinary raikom first secretaries “For some reason Pcheliakov does not criticize all the raikom secretaries; he has his favorites, Brysov and Chemodanov, on whom he always heaps praise and around whom he creates a halo of blamelessness,” contended the secretary of the Novoviatskii raikom Kiselev.⁹³ Brysov, in particular, performed a role not dissimilar to that of Kabanov in Riazan. The raikom secretary, Tveritnev, recalled how so-called “consultations” with raikom secretaries in Kirov took place: “I would like to say something about the obkom bureau’s style of work. They issue an assignment, they set out the figures, then we [the raikom first secretaries] convene and they say: ‘Let’s consult.’ Most people are quiet. Brysov then begins to speak. Before we know it [the bureau’s initiative is presented as] a ‘proposal of our party raikoms.’”⁹⁴

While Pcheliakov was relatively tolerant of this small band of “client” secretaries, his working relationships with the majority of officials in his region were starkly confrontational. “If you expressed your own view at the bureau,” recalled the head of the oblispolkom, Ob”edkov, “and that view differed from Pcheliakov’s, you would get a sharp rebuff: ‘You [ty], got up on the wrong side of the bed this morning, did you?’ ‘Reached an understanding with someone have you?’ ‘So, we have an opposition here, do we?’”⁹⁵ Among his obkom bureau colleagues, Pcheliakov’s bluntness was legendary. “You really know how to get at a person” (*Vy masterski umeete plevat’ cheloveku v dushu*), the obkom secretary Liamov remarked on one occasion.⁹⁶ Pcheliakov’s impatience with his immediate obkom bureau colleagues, however, paled by comparison

⁹¹ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 1787, ll. 22, 37, 122. Bulatov was subsequently transferred by Pcheliakov to the post of first deputy chair of the regional executive committee as part of a bid to unseat the chair, Ob”edkov.

⁹² Ibid., l. 46; op. 56, d. 1675, ll. 261–62; op. 89, d. 1751, l. 179; op. 91, d. 1787, l. 33.

⁹³ Ibid., op. 58, d. 1800, ll. 78, 148.

⁹⁴ Ibid., op. 91, d. 1787, ll. 31, 23, 39.

⁹⁵ Ibid., l. 86.

⁹⁶ Ibid., l. 55. For other examples of caustic attacks on his peers, see *ibid.*, ll. 37, 48, 88, 114, 123; and op. 89, d. 1751, ll. 187–89.

with his treatment of the raikom first secretaries. At one obkom plenum in the late 1950s, Pcheliakov proposed to hear the explanations of the raikom secretaries whom he had criticized in his opening report. "But as they spoke," Verushkin, the head of sector at the RSFSR Bureau, commented in a review, "Pcheliakov began to interrupt them and to throw in long-winded retorts. He broke into the speech of the secretary of the Kil'mezskii district, Zhandarov, 9 times, to that of the secretary of the Darovskii district, Pivovarov, 15 times, and to the report of the secretary of the Podosinovskii district, Vinokurov, 17 times. Judging by the stenogram, these interruptions took up most of the session."⁹⁷ Those raikom secretaries who chose to put up a fight were subjected to mini-inquisitions. One example was Pcheliakov's assault on the newly appointed first secretary of Novoviatskii district, Kiselev. In a spirited response to what he termed "destructive criticism," Kiselev reasonably pleaded that a more differentiated approach to agricultural plan targets be adopted.⁹⁸ Kiselev's response earned a "firm rebuff" from Pcheliakov: "Look, comrades, at the non-party address of Kiselev. . . . You, Kiselev . . . dare to step up to the tribune at the obkom plenum and to . . . slander [us] members of the bureau. Is this really worthy of a party person?" Pcheliakov's remark was a cue to other members of the obkom to tear Kiselev's reputation to shreds. Two weeks later the hapless Kiselev was sacked.⁹⁹ Reviewing this case the following June, the Central Committee official Verushkin noted:

Pcheliakov decided to devote his closing address to an "annihilation" [*raznosu*] of Kiselev. Kiselev responded that such a "slating" [*prorabotka*] hardly encourages criticism. . . . After this, Pcheliakov took the floor and, characterizing Kiselev's contribution as demagogic and unparty, invited others to join in. The plenum was reopened and seven officials trooped in to censure Kiselev's behavior . . . the way in which Kiselev was corrected, the repeated discussion of his speech, was wrong, there was really no need to do it like that.¹⁰⁰

"No sooner had you discovered that a raikom secretary had an uncharitable thought about you, or that they had said something about you,

⁹⁷ Ibid., op. 89, d. 1751, ll. 119–20.

⁹⁸ Specifically, Kiselev argued that since his district was especially close to the Kirov town center (it was practically a suburb of the town), it was especially hard to persuade collective farmers to deliver their produce to the state, given that the urban kolkhoz market was so near. See *ibid.*, op. 58, d. 1800, ll. 77, 147, 156.

⁹⁹ Ibid., op. 89, d. 1751, l. 121; op. 58, d. 1800, ll. 148–58.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., op. 89, d. 1751, ll. 120–21.

than you would have your eye on them,” Pcheliakov was told by Shatalin at the February 1961 plenum.¹⁰¹

Pcheliakov was not merely hot-tempered and vindictive. He acted on his grievances by dismissing officials, sometimes en masse. As the first secretary of the Kirov gorkom, Moshchakov, put it to Pcheliakov: “under your leadership five to seven members of the bureau have been fired at any one time.”¹⁰² “Let’s have a look at all the people who have tried to criticize Pcheliakov, and see where they are now,” suggested the head of the Red October Collective Farm Prozorov, at the February 1961 plenum. “They are all gone! And among them, it must be owned, there were some pretty decent people.”¹⁰³ According to a report submitted to Khrushchev in February 1961, under Pcheliakov “six obkom secretaries were replaced without sufficient reason ... [as were] three chairs of the regional soviet of people’s deputies.”¹⁰⁴

As was vividly illustrated by the rates of turnover among the raikom secretaries, Pcheliakov was yet more brutal in his dealings with them. In 1954–55 in a region with 42 districts, 40 raikom first secretaries were replaced, 40 heads of ispolkoms, 51 second secretaries, 103 party secretaries of MTSs, and 83 MTS directors. A good number were replaced for relatively trivial reasons, such as poor short-term results or even for being away from their office when Pcheliakov came to visit unannounced.¹⁰⁵ The high rate of turnover continued unabated for the rest of the 1950s. From 1956 to 1959, a further 42 first secretaries were replaced, as well as 52 second secretaries, 34 raikom heads, and 58 raikom deputy chairs.¹⁰⁶ As a result, in 1959, 40 percent of district first secretaries and second secretaries and half of ispolkom heads had been in post for no more than a year. In some districts, such as Belokholunitskii, no fewer than 13 secretaries had been dismissed in the previous three years, including 3 first secretaries and 2 raispolkom heads.¹⁰⁷ “I would come back from a break,” the oblispolkom chair, Ob’edkov, would report, “and lo and behold, four raispolkom chairs had vanished. Such high replacement rates were no good for confidence ... as people just did not know from where the next blow would come [*ne znaesh’ otkuda tebia stuknut*].”¹⁰⁸ The impact on cadre morale was compounded by what a Central Committee

¹⁰¹ Ibid., op. 91, d. 1787, l. 123.

¹⁰² Ibid., op. 89, d. 1751, l. 191.

¹⁰³ Ibid., op. 91, d. 1787, l. 120.

¹⁰⁴ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 805, l. 6; RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 1787, l. 85.

¹⁰⁵ RGASPI f. 17, op. 56, d. 1675, ll. 252–53. Until 1959, there were 42 districts in the region, but as part of the administrative reorganization of 1960, this was reduced to 28.

¹⁰⁶ RGASPI f. 17, op. 89, d. 1751, l. 19.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., ll. 110–11.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., op. 91, d. 1787, ll. 37–38; also see l. 85.

official termed Pcheliakov's "administrative itch," which had led to party reprimands being imposed on 24 first secretaries.¹⁰⁹ High turnover and a scattershot approach to party penalties did not foster faith in Pcheliakov, nor did it afford raikom officials the space to build secure or lasting relationships with those around them.

Neither of Pcheliakov's dependents at the district level, Brysov or Chemodanov, fulfilled the structural role that had been performed by Larionov's raikom associates in Riazan. Although both had been in the region for some years (Brysov had been raikom secretary since Pcheliakov's appointment in 1952), neither was promoted to the obkom bureau or had a major role in regional politics. Furthermore, although Pcheliakov praised Brysov and Chemodanov, there is no evidence that he enjoyed informal ties with them. In this respect, one of the main lines of Pcheliakov's defense had, again, a strange ring of truth to it. "I had no 'sons' and 'stepsons.' The last nine years have shown that. I had *no special ties with anyone, there were no family ties, there really was nothing of the sort* [*net nikakoi semeistvennosti, nichego net*]."¹¹⁰

When it came to implementing campaigns, Pcheliakov was unable to draw on a durable network of ties across the province. Instead, he and his immediate circle relied predominantly on coercion to achieve their ends. As Pcheliakov would declare at the meeting to approve the new obligation of 180,000 tons: "Those who are not with us are against us."¹¹¹ As in Riazan, Pcheliakov issued threats to back up the procurement campaign.¹¹² Unlike his counterparts in Riazan, however, Pcheliakov showed a steely resolve to act on his threats. Indicative of this was his knee-jerk response to the unraveling of the meat campaign in the summer of 1960. When the first allegations of deception in Kirov began to surface in the capital, Pcheliakov reacted by blaming officials from two districts, purging one district of all its senior party officeholders and issuing severe reprimands to those from the other; in both cases, he urged the regional procurator to "press criminal charges."¹¹³ When a national scandal around Kirov broke in December with the publication of the article "Kar'eristy" (Careerists) in *Sel'skaia zhizn'*, Pcheliakov's response again was to divert the opprobrium onto the region's district-level party secretaries.¹¹⁴

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., l. 79.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., l. 51 (my italics).

¹¹¹ Ibid., l. 119.

¹¹² RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 805, ll. 1–2; RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 1787, l. 66.

¹¹³ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 805, ll. 27–32, esp. 29, 32.

¹¹⁴ See "O stat'e 'Kar'eristy' opublikovannoi v gazete 'Sel'skaia zhizn'' 1 dekabria 1960 goda," RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 805, ll. 24–26.

Pcheliakov's ties with those around him were imbued with suspicion and distrust. A report from the Party Control Commission to Khrushchev commented that "Pcheliakov sought to revive the illegal methods of 1937–38" by ordering that the head of the regional KGB have the "phone conversations of an obkom secretary and of an executive official tapped and [that he] arrange that certain obkom officials be shadowed and secretly photographed."¹¹⁵ Even those close to him he did not fully trust. According to the second secretary Shatalin, "Pcheliakov exudes distrust; he displays an excessive caution and even suspiciousness toward certain members of the obkom bureau, toward regional and district leaders."¹¹⁶ Even trusting his two closest companions was hard for him, and he instantly disavowed them when the region was hit by crisis. "My greatest blunder," Pcheliakov confessed at the 1 February 1961 plenum, "was to have trusted Comrades Zakhvataev and Bulatov."¹¹⁷

Pcheliakov's relentless victimization of his subordinates had two major effects. First, despite the enormous pressure on them to achieve the socialist obligations for 1959 and 1960, the ties binding Pcheliakov to his colleagues were too fragile, and those linking raikom secretaries to their peers were too transient and unstable, to merit the major risks involved in serious fraud. As a result, the volume of retabulations and non-goods transactions in Kirov was small. Second, even the relatively limited cases of fraud and data inflation in Kirov gave rise to numerous "defections" from within the province. In Riazan, where the networks of trust had formed over a long period, Larionov was held in high regard and affection by many of his colleagues, even after his death. By contrast, those around Pcheliakov harbored contempt for him. Already unpopular in the region, his efforts to divert the stream of complaints and anonymous letters from Kirov to the Central Committee were in vain. In 1960, the Central Committee received 5,281 complaints from the region, a large share of which were about Pcheliakov's leadership. "Hundreds of letters on your unsuitable [*negodnyi*] style [of leadership] have come to the Central Committee," Efremov reported back to Pcheliakov, "workers and Communists are showing their distrust in you."¹¹⁸ Furthermore, whereas the main impulse to uncover fraud in Riazan came from outside the province, Pcheliakov's opponents from within Kirov began to organize their own internal inquiries into *pripiski* well before the center caught wind of it.¹¹⁹ Unlike Riazan—where, to the last, Larionov had his defenders—in Kirov no one would stand

¹¹⁵ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 805, ll. 6–7.

¹¹⁶ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 1787, l. 122.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, ll. 8–9.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, l. 129.

¹¹⁹ RGANI f. 13, op. 1, d. 805, ll. 1–3, 18–19, 33–35.

up to speak on Pcheliakov's behalf. Instead, Pcheliakov's former colleagues, such as the recently sacked Zakhvataev, now lined up to turn their venom on him.¹²⁰ His fate was sealed by a brief attack by Khrushchev at the January 1961 Central Committee plenum and by a *Pravda* editorial on 30 January. In contrast to the Riazan plenum the previous month, whose treatment of Larionov had been quite ambiguous, the Kirov plenum on 12 February was one-sided and resembled in its treatment of Pcheliakov the systematic *prorabotki* that he had earlier visited on his opponents.¹²¹

Networks of Trust and the Social Dynamics of Deception

Given the immediate legacy of mass, state-sponsored violence and the widespread experience of denunciations and personal betrayals, ambient levels of trust within Soviet society in the mid- to late 1950s were probably very low.¹²² More than in most industrial societies, Soviet citizens were unlikely to have trusted people they did not know well, and even close relationships were often blighted by high levels of suspicion and mistrust. Projecting this broad model of social breakdown onto every area of Soviet life would be an error, however. As cumbersome and dysfunctional as it often was, the enormous apparatus of the Soviet state did not function on force and coercion alone.¹²³ Buried within it there were important pockets of cooperation. On occasion, this cooperation may have been fueled by ideological conviction or reinforced by institutional incentives. Arguably the most important ingredient underpinning cooperation among officials was the existence of informal, noncontractual relationships, resting on mutual obligations. The origins and strength of these obligations varied widely. On the whole, however, it is likely that relationships of this kind were prevalent throughout the Soviet system of administration. One reason for this was that for the majority of officials the cultivation of such relationships was not a luxury but a necessity. To meet their targets or to achieve major policy goals, officials had to break rules and take risks. Given the elaborate nets of auditing and mutual supervision, the risks officials took were rarely ones they could take on their own. If they took

¹²⁰ RGASPI f. 17, op. 91, d. 1787, l. 80.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, ll. 3, 23, 76, 80, 113–14, 129.

¹²² For a view of the Stalin regime as an “experiment in distrust,” see Russell Hardin, *Trust and Trustworthiness* (New York: Russell Sage, 2002), 98, 111, 150, 190; for the argument that “totalitarian” regimes such as Stalin’s thrive on “the socialization of distrust,” see Patrick Watier and Ivana Markova, “Trust as a Psychosocial Feeling: Socialization and Totalitarianism,” in *Trust and Democratic Transition in Post-Communist Europe*, ed. Markova (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 26, 39, 45.

¹²³ For a fuller discussion of this topic, see Yoram Gorlizki, “Structures of Trust after Stalin,” *Slavonic and East European Review* 91, 1 (2013): 119–46

risks by themselves, they were bound to fail; most often, they had no choice but to take risks together. It was this ever-presence of risk, and the necessity to share risks, that qualifies the social bonds that emerged among officials as ones of trust.¹²⁴

At an abstract level, one could argue that relations of trust in the Soviet Union emerged in response to, and as a form of insurance against, the high levels of uncertainty in the Soviet system, an uncertainty that stemmed from a capricious leadership and an economy marked by huge information asymmetries. Here there are parallels with empirical research on how markets characterized by high levels of uncertainty are more likely to give rise to relations of trust.¹²⁵ In the Soviet system, uncertainty was not restricted to particular markets but was pervasive. Against this backdrop, however, the personal willingness of individual politicians to place their trust in others could vary considerably. In this article, we have considered two regions whose leaders occupied opposite poles on an imaginary spectrum. The first leader, Pcheliakov, had no choice but to give discretion to a small number of “clients” to affect his interests; his willingness to do so, however, was extremely limited. In general, his tendency was to sack officials and to shunt the blame onto others when things went wrong. In Riazan, the situation was different. Here rates of turnover were low. Over more than a decade, Larionov had forged long-standing relationships with a circle of subordinates who occupied strategic positions in the regional power system. Notwithstanding the considerable power inequalities, relations of trust were possible. As three scholars of trust have observed: “there is room for trust in the analysis of power relations where there is some degree of mutual dependence and thus the powerful

¹²⁴ On the centrality of risk and risk-taking to modern understandings of trust, see Niklas Luhmann, “Familiarity, Confidence, Trust: Problems and Alternatives,” in *Trust: Making and Breaking Cooperative Relations*, ed. Diego Gambetta (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 95; and Piotr Sztompka, *Trust: A Sociological Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), x, 29–31. Not all forms of risk taking involve trust. According to some, such as James Coleman, trust situations are a “subclass of those involving risk ... in which the risk one takes depends on the performance of other actors” (quoted in Sztompka, *Trust*, 31). Hardin takes a stronger line, arguing that to count as trust the risk-taking needs to be grounded in an ongoing personal relationship. Hardin thus discounts the notion of “swift” or “instant” trust (*Trust and Trustworthiness*, 80–81).

¹²⁵ Most famously, the work of Peter Kollock showed that if uncertainty over a particular commodity, such as rubber, is high, actors are more likely to abandon anonymous market exchange for personal long-term exchange relationships. Such actors would be more likely to continue trading with a particular partner, even if offered a better price by someone else (Peter Kollock, “The Emergence of Exchange Structures: An Experimental Study of Uncertainty, Commitment, and Trust,” *American Journal of Sociology* 100, 2 [1994]: 314–15, 321, 326).

must take the interests of the powerless into account.”¹²⁶ I have suggested that with members of his core network, Larionov fostered relations of mutual dependence which, over time, became encrusted with bonds of personal loyalty. For all his threats and bluster, Larionov never sacked or punished a member of this circle; instead, he encouraged and promoted them. In return, Larionov became increasingly dependent on members of this group to lie and fabricate on behalf of the meat campaign. I have suggested that it was the spread of reciprocal obligations of this kind that enabled the Riazan calamity to happen.

Comparative analysis can help us interpret and make sense of the events in Kirov, Riazan, and other Soviet regions where fraud became endemic in the late 1950s. Although some trust relationships were dyadic, for the most part they operated within larger networks of such relations, which are sometimes referred to as “networks of trust.”¹²⁷ Karen Cook, Eric Rice, and Alexandra Gerbasi argue that “networks of exchange” are more likely to become “trust networks” under conditions of high pressure and risk.¹²⁸ The late 1950s was very much such a period of “high pressure and risk” in Soviet agriculture. The nature of the networks that were generated, however, varied from region to region. Unlike their counterparts in Riazan, raikom secretaries in Kirov had little incentive to develop relations of trust with their regional first secretary: most often, their only reward for doing so was to be rebuked or shouted at, and to know that in the event of plan failure they would carry the can. Kirov serves as a good example of a limiting case in which “one actor is so much more powerful than the other as to have no need to take account of the other’s interests,” so much so that he can get rid of him at will. Under such circumstances, writes Henry Farrell, “power asymmetries are so extreme that trust is driven out.”¹²⁹ By contrast, in Riazan, the first secretary Larionov cultivated long-term relationships and

¹²⁶ Cook, Hardin, and Levi, *Cooperation without Trust*, 54. The authors go on to argue, in a way that fits the Riazan case quite well, that in the context of power asymmetries “the more powerful party may be able to trust the less powerful party more . . . than the less powerful party can trust the more powerful. Indeed, this is an important way in which power is advantageous” (ibid., 55).

¹²⁷ To distinguish them from the larger set of “ordinary” social networks, “networks of trust” are characterized by *strong* ties, normally ones involving risk. See Charles Tilly, *Trust and Rule* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 5–6, 36, 41.

¹²⁸ Karen S. Cook, Eric R.W. Rice, and Alexandra Gerbasi, “The Emergence of Trust Networks under Uncertainty,” in *Creating Social Trust in Post-Socialist Transition*, ed. Janos Kornai, Bo Rothstein, and Susan Rose-Ackerman (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 196.

¹²⁹ Henry Farrell, “Institutions and Midlevel Explanations of Trust,” in *Whom Can We Trust? How Groups, Networks, and Institutions Make Trust Possible*, ed. Karen S. Cook, Margaret Levi, and Russell Hardin (New York: Russell Sage, 2009), 131. Another, more famous—and more extreme—example is that of Stalin. On this point, see Gorlizki, “Structures of Trust,” 128–29.

built up strong ties of mutual dependence with a circle of district and regional secretaries. It was along these ties and through these relationships that the falsification and deception in Riazan were channeled. I have argued that it was the variety in the resulting networks of trust in Kirov and Riazan that best accounts for the contrast in the type and volume of fraud in the two regions.

To grasp the role of networks of trust within the broader Soviet system, it is important to distinguish them from another type of informal cooperation based on ongoing personal relations, *blat*. As it emerged in its Soviet form in the 1930s, *blat* was largely a strategy of personal consumption through which individuals gained access to scarce goods and services such as foodstuffs, consumer durables, health care, and higher education.¹³⁰ Normally about the “common people,” *blat* involved relations that were in Alena Ledeneva’s words, “horizontal, non-hierarchical, compassionate, and warm.”¹³¹ Where it did spill over into the broader economy, *blat* tended to be deployed on the margins, in small plants and in small quantities, as a corrective, in Joseph Berliner’s account, to the “priority system.”¹³² By contrast, trust networks of the kind described in this article grew precisely in those areas designated as strategic priorities by the state, where pressures on officials were at their most intense and at their most relentless. Buried within the state apparatus, networks of trust formed in policy fields that, as in the Riazan case, were crucial to the current goals of the regime. It was for this reason that deception of this kind was so potentially embarrassing, for it pointed to frauds lodged in the very heart of the state.

The terms “trust” and “trust networks” normally have positive connotations. They are associated with social cohesion and with individual qualities such as loyalty, allegiance, and personal responsibility. More broadly, trust is sometimes thought of as a social good, one associated with high levels of social solidarity and economic achievement. Most famously in this vein, Robert Putnam has argued that trust is a subtype of “social capital” that can lead to high levels of “civic engagement, reciprocity, and collective well-

¹³⁰ See, most notably, Alena V. Ledeneva, *Russia’s Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking, and Informal Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 22, 28–32; and Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Blat in Stalin’s Time,” in *Bribery and Blat in Russia*, ed. Stephen Lovell, Alena V. Ledeneva, and Andrei Rogachevskii (Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan, 2000).

¹³¹ Ledeneva, *Russia’s Economy of Favours*, 43, 52. Goods obtained through *blat* were normally secured, Ledeneva goes on, “in modest volume, with discretion” (*ibid.*, 167).

¹³² As Joseph S. Berliner wrote: “One of the principal effects of *blat* is to direct resources which the state would prefer to go to high-priority enterprises into the hands of lower-priority enterprises. Thus *blat* operates in a direction opposite to that of priority awareness” (*Factory and Manager in the USSR* [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957], 205 [italics mine]; see also 194, 200–1).

being.”¹³³ Yet Riazan provides an example of a different kind of trust, one whose consequences were anything but positive. From a cursory examination of the comparative literature on deception and malfeasance this should perhaps come as no surprise. Earlier studies have shown that, to quote Granovetter, “certain crimes, such as embezzling, are simply impossible for those who have not built up relationships of trust that permit the opportunity to manipulate accounts.” Granovetter goes on: “fraud [is] most efficiently pursued by *teams*, and the structure of these teams requires a level of internal trust . . . that usually follows preexisting *lines of relationship*.”¹³⁴ The Riazan case falls into a broader category of cases where the “internal functionality of trust” (for members of the network) was at odds with the “external functionality of trust” for the broader society as a whole. As with Enron, Arthur Anderson, and the Mafia, this was a type of trust whose “internal moral bonds [were] used for externally amoral purposes.”¹³⁵ Indeed, in re-enacting the high-pressure policies of Stalinism and in imposing utopian goals, Khrushchev may have created conditions that were particularly conducive to socially deleterious forms of trust of this kind. Recent longitudinal research on a 20-year period, from the early 1940s to the early 1960s, indicates that the incidence of the most high-risk forms of fraud in the Soviet Union, such as *bestovarnye operatsii*, peaked in the year of the Riazan scandal.¹³⁶ It was against this backdrop that the events in Riazan crossed, in the words of one commentator, “some limit of tolerance.”¹³⁷ Unfortunately, we have little reliable cross-sectional data on levels of cheating throughout the USSR in 1959–60. The evidence we do have, however, suggests that even by the exaggerated standards of the mid-

¹³³ Robert D. Putnam, *Making Democracy Work: Civic Traditions in Modern Italy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 167–70, 177. For powerful critiques of Putnam’s understanding of trust, see Hardin, *Trust and Trustworthiness*, 83–84; Cook, Hardin, and Levi, *Cooperation without Trust?* 87–90; and Margaret Levi, “Social and Unsocial Capital: A Review Essay of Robert Putnam’s *Making Democracy Work*,” *Politics and Society* 24, 1 (1996): 46–48, 51–52.

¹³⁴ Granovetter, “Problem of Embeddedness,” 491–92; and see 499, 501 (italics mine).

¹³⁵ Sztompka, *Trust*, 113–15. Indeed, rather than viewing Enron and Arthur Anderson as examples of “breakdowns in trust,” what is in some ways particularly interesting about them is the high levels of internal trust that kept them together. For a different view, see Roderick M. Kramer and Karen S. Cook, “Trust and Distrust in Organizations: Dilemmas and Approaches,” in their *Trust and Distrust in Organizations*, 13.

¹³⁶ Mark Harrison, “Forging Success: Soviet Managers and Accounting Fraud, 1943–1962,” *Journal of Comparative Economics* 39, 1 (2011): 49, 52–53. Although Harrison does not use the term *bestovarnye operatsii*, his category of “carousel schemes” is almost exactly co-terminous with it. I have stuck with *bestovarnye operatsii* in part because it is the term that Soviet officials themselves used and in part because the term “non-goods transactions” better captures the high degree of risk, and hence the need for trust, involved in operations of this kind.

¹³⁷ Harrison, “Forging Success,” 46.

Khrushchev era, levels of fraud in Riazan were unusual.¹³⁸ In Riazan in 1959, a toxic mix of unfeasible targets set by a willful leader and social ties that were allowed to spread, over a decade, to form a full-fledged network led to outcomes such as the mass slaughter of cattle, the repurchasing of meat at vastly inflated prices, and outright theft from the state, with disastrous social consequences.

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¹³⁸ On the difficulties of estimating cross-sectional levels of fraud, see Harrison, "Forging Success," 53–56. Despite this, various sources, and in particular the near-crippling levels of regional debt, indicate levels of deception in Riazan that, even in all-union terms, were exceptional.