The violence and horror of Soviet forced collectivization has always remained something of a mystery, if only because of the scale of the state-inspired violence. Viola shows clearly in this fine monograph that the victims did not passively accept their fate. She details with great precision the multiple strategies that rural people used to defend themselves and their property against the agents of forced collectivization. These strategies included, in the official terminology, “squandering,” that is, the sale, consumption, or destruction of animals, grain, and equipment that were to be seized without compensation by the collectivizers; “self-dekulakization,” by which peasants divided their farms among family members, sold land and property, or, in various other ways, including flight, tried to change their class profile; petitions to the government and denunciations of local officials; the group defense of friends and neighbors accused of being kulaks; and acts of violence ranging from arson and murder to threats and intimidation.

The author, however, tells two somewhat divergent stories. In the first, which predominates in chapters one and two, she stresses the persistence of peasant culture and cites from the literature of peasant studies. In these chapters, she counterpoises the government’s view of its contest with the peasants as “The Last and Most Decisive Battle” (the title of Chapter one) with the peasants’ own image of collectivization as “The Mark of the Antichrist” (the title of Chapter two). This latter categorization is uncomfortably close to the official view of peasants as backward, religiously superstitious, and incapable of making a go of modern farming without the help of trained managers. Throughout the 1920s, government observers promoted this image of peasants in the press. By juxtaposing these two extreme views of collectivization, the author lends credence to the official cliché.

The great virtue of the book, however, is that the author’s story is more complex, showing how rational the peasants’ responses actually were. She describes what the authorities called “squandering” as peasant “self-help.” She writes that, “Although often cloaked in muzhik vestments, peasant self-help was neither irrational nor the emanation of a backward peasantry. It was, rather, logical, political, and humane” (68). Most interesting is her description of rural oppositional groups—perhaps evidence for the existence—albeit beleaguered—of the civil society that Russia is often alleged to have lacked.

The inventory of peasant actions that emerges is remarkably innovative and, in some respects, urban. “Self-dekulakization” resembled the adoption of proletarian identities by individuals from other social groups who sought to maximize their opportunities and minimize their risks, a process that had continued throughout the 1920s. Nor were acts of retaliation and collective support of threatened friends and neighbors
necessarily the work of people who saw collectivization as the apocalypse. Viola explains that “the overwhelming majority of terrorist attacks involved peasants or their relatives seeking vengeance against an established local activist responsible in some way for their repression” (128). Letters and petitions to the leaders can be interpreted as a traditional mode of peasant action, but the government had sponsored and coached this activity for a decade. Not even the villagers’ defense of local churches and church bells was necessarily a sign of peasant traditionalism. The novelty of the assault on rural life elicited diverse responses.

The author blends the two views of peasant opposition in her conclusion. She refers to “a peasant rebellion against the Stalinist state” and cites the importance of apocalyptic rumors; but she also notes that peasant resistance “was shaped by an agency and political consciousness that derived from reasoned concerns centered largely on issues of justice and subsistence, and supplemented by retribution, anger, and desperation” (235). Some of the confusion seems to stem from her determination to view peasants as acting “in a very real sense, as a class” (235). This approach leads to a search for a single class culture and to a propensity to portray rural people as the kind of “primitive rebels” that historians such as Hobsbawm have located in the more distant past.¹

The class analysis also leads to a problem of agency. To say that “The collectivization of Soviet agriculture was a campaign of domination that aimed at nothing less than the internal colonization of the peasantry” echoes the theories of some Soviet industrializers, but it also obscures the extent to which social mobility within rural communities was a part of the process (44). Nor is it wholly reasonable to lump the peasantry together and claim that “they too had a Manichaean view of the world, theirs draped in the language of apocalypse rather than class war, in which the town and Communism represented Antichrist on earth and it was the duty of all believing peasants to resist the collective farm, the tool of the Antichrist” (44). Although some peasants undoubtedly saw the struggle this way, it is difficult to believe that this view predominated among the resisters, even after the government’s purge of rural elites and the movement of some rural people into the bureaucracies of party and state. After all, more than half the rural inhabitants of the country aged nine to forty-nine were literate in 1926, and ties between villages and urban centers were often complex and close.

The idea of a traditional peasantry was dear to Soviet policymakers, and they clung to it in the face of much contrary evidence. This book helps to undermine that stereotype, despite the author’s occasional inclination to the contrary.

Jeffrey Brooks
Johns Hopkins University