Mark B. Smith, 'The life of the Soviet worker'

***The Oxford Handbook of Modern Russian History*,**

ed. Simon Dixon (OUP, online 2016; hard-copy publication pending)

More than any other Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev had something of the worker about him. Sometimes labelled a peasant at heart, with his obsession with maize and his earthy wit, Khrushchev was certainly born in the countryside. But he moved to the city and became a skilled metalworker; he joined the party as an industrial recruit during the civil war; and he was promoted through the hierarchy of the party bureaucracy thanks to the affirmative action that favoured the industrial proletariat during the first five-year plan.

Khrushchev's manners, enthusiasms, successes, his unpredictable rise, the crises that conditioned him – up to a point, the very trajectory of his biography – were inseparable from those of the ordinary Soviet worker. It was during the Khrushchev era that the Soviet Union belatedly became a majority urban society; soon after that, industrial labour displaced all other groups to become the statistically dominant section of the Soviet workforce. In power, Khrushchev reformed the political economy of the USSR sufficiently to transform many workers' living standards. His own perceptions of justice, equality, and popular material improvement, monstrously refracted as they might have been by his participation in Stalin's terror and by his own privileged existence at the top of the Soviet elite, converged, in important ways, with the moral economy of the Soviet worker.

What happened after 1953 to Soviet workers – primarily full-time factory workers, but those in other working-class occupations too – was thus as important as what happened before. But what happened before was the creation of a whole new sense, historically unparalleled, of what it meant to be a worker. The Soviet Union was the workers' state, and while historians have often emphasized the exploitation of the working class during and after Stalinism, worker culture, broadly defined, nevertheless coloured the whole of the Soviet experience. Workers were always celebrated. They were at the centre of the most transformative Soviet project of all, Stalin's industrial revolution of 1928-41. During especially the first half of that revolution, workers benefited from specific privileges and from affirmative action, though they also suffered the dreadful misery of rapid industrial change. Many in the Brezhnev generation, born in the decade or so before 1917, started their careers as workers before gaining an industrial higher education and entering the ranks of the technical intelligentsia. Later in Soviet history, many such men and women, who had been formed by working class culture, could be found higher in the ruling order.

Capable, at a stretch, of remembering what it was like to be a worker, such people had nevertheless risen out of the working class. For this lucky minority, the workers' state offered a ladder into the technical and administrative elites. For those who remained, by the post-Stalin era, it offered a workers' standard of living that was much closer to that of the bosses than in capitalist economies. But it did not offer a framework in which Soviet working class consciousness could solidify. Many historical investigations have sought to resolve a related paradox. For a large phalanx of leading labour historians writing in the 1970s and 1980s, the Russian working class in 1917 was

so aware of its own class interests and so capable of projecting them in the wider social and political arena of national life that it accomplished the historic achievement of the Russian Revolution. Yet by the 1930s, Soviet workers had lost their sense of belonging to a class that could systematically take collective action to enhance its own interests. Why was this? Perhaps it was a consequence of Stalinist repression and thus working class atomization – and perhaps, or perhaps not, this process dated back to the revolution and civil war. Perhaps it was a result of the mass influx of peasants into the cities, undermining conventional self-understandings of worker identity. Or perhaps workers played the game according to the rules of material advance that Stalin laid down, making rational calculations to serve their own self-interest rather than that of their class as a whole: perhaps they took the chance when it came to rise out of their class rather than to improve their lot alongside their fellow-workers.[1]

Lacking its own representation and its own unmediated voice, the Soviet working class atrophied. In some ways it was exploited and repressed. But Soviet workers, as individuals, families and working collectives, remained at the centre of the Soviet project. After 1953, they enjoyed a timeless heyday of modest material advances and moral certainties, marked by the sense that society respected at least some of their basic values and would do so forever.[2] But this sense was not shared by all Soviet workers, and lifestyles (and in all probability attitudes) varied by industry, skill level, and region. And the heyday faded as shortages became increasingly difficult to endure, especially in the provinces, and then it ended, as Gorbachev's reforms suddenly destroyed the comforts

[1] See Stephen Kotkin's elegant historiographical summary in *Labor History* 32:4 (1991): 604-20.
[2] Cf. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006): where the focus is not workers.

that remained. A positive worker identity, but not a coherent class consciousness, survived through to *perestroika*, and helped to sustain the dynamic of Soviet history.

The decline and fall of the Soviet working class, 1917-53

It all started so well. The Bolsheviks took power in October 1917 thanks to the support of a radicalized working class, especially in the bigger cities. As a result, the political mythology of the Soviet Union from start to end derived in substantial measure from the heroism of the working class.

In 1917, skilled workers in Petrograd and Moscow, those who were the most aware of their class identity, led the struggle for workers' control, and for collective wage bargaining across ever larger units of the working population. As 1917 went on, workers and Bolsheviks converged on the most revolutionary of paths. Women played their part. Fundamental to the street protests of the February Revolution, they were incorporated into the labour movement as the revolutionary year progressed. Male workers took seriously women's workplace grievances but had no time for gender as a broader issue: feminism was bourgeois, and the position of women in the movement was decisively subordinate. Factory committees and soviets were naturally masculine arenas, where decisions were taken by acclamation and the workers with the loudest voices and the most fearsome presence carried the day. Gender differences fed into the iconography of

the workers' revolution. One of its most enduring symbols was the burly, red, unshiftable blacksmith, lit by the sun, gatekeeper of the future workers' state.[3]

It became clear very quickly that the workers' state would not be an arena of working class power. The working class of the revolution started to come apart during the civil war. As Petrov-Vodkin showed in his 1920 painting of an echoing cityscape at the back of *Our Lady of Petrograd, 1918*, the population of the great cities had fallen dramatically. Petrograd itself saw a decline from 2.5 million residents to 700,000 between 1917 and 1920.[4] Many workers returned to their villages, diluting class identity, endangering their mutual understanding with the Bolsheviks. By the end of the civil war, the Bolsheviks still wanted to build a workers' socialism, but they had to rebuild the economy first; they had to raise productivity and reinstitute labour discipline. It was at the Tenth Party Congress in 1921 that they introduced the New Economic Policy and a way of doing politics that was formally less receptive to dissent. In order to attain their goals of a workers' state governed by the ethics of socialism, therefore, Lenin and the ruling circle agreed to introduce shop floor relations that would undermine working class organization and autonomy.

In this sense, an original sin had been committed. The immediate interests of the workers diverged from their new masters', a process that accelerated during the 1930s when the Stalinist elite effectively smashed the remnants of working class consciousness. Yet the Soviet leadership could never depart, and perhaps it never wanted to, from one of the revolution's ultimate logics, the elevation of the workers. This was, after all, the

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[3] S.A. Smith, *Red Petrograd: Revolution in the Factories*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 195; Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997).

[4] Diane P. Koenker, 'Urbanization and deurbanization in the Russian Revolution and Civil War', *Journal of Modern History*, 57:3 (September 1985).

workers' state. All sorts of people enjoyed the capitalist-style good life in the 1920s, arguably at the expense of the workers. But a raft of careful rhetorical strategies placed workers at the heart of Soviet life. From the earliest part of the Soviet era, citizens were invited to construct their own identities, to ascribe themselves to classes, to write their own biographies.[5]

It was in this context that industrial relations settled down during the NEP after a rash of strikes in 1920 and 1921. Perhaps workers were exhausted and hoodwinked, perhaps they were sufficiently class conscious to make appropriate use of their unions and to press their interests within the boundaries of the possible. Perhaps they were prepared to accept a trade-off: in exchange for abandoning working class involvement in politics, they accepted an improving standard of living, diminishing their class identity in the process.[6] Workers' sense of themselves as a class was probably also undermined by the conflicting demands of their urban and rural selves (many workers continued to spend time in their native villages). On the Soviet periphery (especially) ethnicity added further complexity to the mix.[7] Trade unions had certainly been weakened – undermined by the logic that going on strike put one in opposition to the requirements of the workers' state, and thinned out by the removal of practical functions, including some of the

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[5] Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1999); Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia', *Journal of Modern History* 65:4 (December 1993).
[6] Kevin Murphy, *Revolution and Counterrevolution: Class Struggle in a Moscow Metal Factory* (New York and Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2005; cf. Diane P. Koenker, *Republic of Labor: Russian Printers and Soviet Socialism, 1918-1930* (Ithanca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005) and William J. Chase, *Workers. Society, and the Soviet State: Labor and Life in Moscow, 1918-1929* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 293; for the trade-off, Simon Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-1924: Soviet Workers and the New Communist Elite* (London: Routledge, 2008).
[7] Chris Ward, *Russia's Cotton Workers and the New Economic Policy: Shop-Floor Culture and State Policy 1921-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 32; Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Baku Commune, 1917-1918: Class and Nationality in the Russian Revolution* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972).

administration of welfare payments – but in some industries, they retained the respect of their members.

The first five-year plan (1928-32) marked the onset of Stalinism. In crude economic terms it amounted to breakneck industrialization, urbanization, and agricultural collectivization, bringing all the premature death and misery to workers and peasants that one might expect from a speeded-up industrial revolution. Stalinism was a ruthlessly extractive political economy which viciously subordinated the living standards of workers (and much more, of peasants) to the promise of a *soi-disant* socialist order, and ultimately a communist utopia. It also sought to entrench the elite, the boss class in the factories, party and local soviets: though in Stalin's ideology-obsessed ruling circle, many of whose members continued to live relatively modestly, this seems to have been a secondary consideration, or an intermediate necessity. Workers faced a horrible reality: their society cared nothing for them as individual human beings, and valued them instead as mere units of production.

And these units were to be replicated on a mass scale. Cities were built out of nothing, gargantuan industrial plants were constructed on barren steppe, existing factories and workers' districts grew until they were unrecognizable. The flood of peasants caused a 'ruralization of the cities'. In little more than a decade, workers had increased by almost three times as a sector of the population; 12 per cent in 1928, they were 32.5 per cent in 1939. The industrial workforce doubled between 1928 and 1932; the number of construction workers rose by four times. The impact on workers' living standards was catastrophic. Wages fell rapidly during the first five-year plan, in contradistinction to what the plan had laid down. True, wages improved for a spell in the middle 1930s. But

wages only reflected part of the terrible impoverishment wreaked by industrialization; in Leningrad, a well provisioned city, workers' consumption of meat dropped 72 per cent and fruit by 63 per cent between 1928 and 1933. Fatal workplace accidents were widespread. The welfare provisions that had been introduced after the revolution were puny in the face of this onslaught. Some of them, notably unemployment benefit, were eliminated altogether.[8]

The workers' world turned upside down. This was the result of deliberate disruption on the epic scale: during the cultural revolution (1928-30), youth thumbed its nose at experience. At the same time, central planning, charged with creating economic order, instead unleashed chaos. Dealing with chaos was the workers' new reality. Labour exchanges should have methodically matched workers to vacancies, but many workers simply downed tools and followed the rumour of better paid work, better conditions, and better housing, travelling hundreds of miles on the off chance. Or they fled misery, trouble, and episodes of unemployment. Peasants left their villages in huge numbers, running away from collectivization, spurning even the best jobs in a new *kolkhoz* for what they deemed a better chance in a factory. In Magnitogorsk, a tent city grew up around the emerging steelworks on the empty steppe. On Turksib, a prestige railway

[8] Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia* (London: Methuen, 1985); for workers' percentages: Donald Filtzer, 'Stalinism and the Working Class in the 1930s' in John Channon, ed., *Politics, Society and Stalinism in the USSR* (London: Macmillan, 1998), 171; for Leningrad: Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 214; Lewis H. Siegelbaum, 'Industrial Accidents and their Prevention in the Interwar Period', in William O. McCagg and Lewis Siegelbaum, eds, *The Disabled in the Soviet Union: Past and Present, Theory and Practice* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 85-118.

project in the Kazakh republic, men and women desperate for work turned up at the site and were hired without reference to the proper procedures.[9]

As Wendy Goldmam has shown, women workers underwrote industrialization. By 1935, 42 per cent of the industrial workforce was female. They worked in industries, such as construction, which had been closed to them under capitalism, though they often found themselves confined to certain roles and skill levels, so a form of sex segregation remained. Women's unpaid domestic labour helped to pay for this industrial revolution, in effect releasing capital that could be invested in industrial expansion. The chaos unleashed by breakneck industrialization, combined with the strict penal code by which it was formally governed, ensured that a reserve of labour was required to keep the system fluid: very often, this reserve was provided by flexible but geographically tied women. Industrial and social policy seemed to play with women's aspirations; some of the helpful welfare measures that had been introduced in the 1920s were rolled back in the mid-1930s, especially with the introduction of a pro-natalist family agenda.[10]

The other side of chaos was repression. This could amount to outright violence, as in the crushing of strikes and rebellions, such as at Teikovo, in Ivanovo *oblast'*, in 1932. Or repression might consist in implied violence. In December 1938, for example, workers who left their jobs could be prosecuted; the following month, if they were twenty minutes late for the start of the work day, they had to answer to the criminal law. In 1940, the

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[9] Gabor T. Rittersporn, 'From Working Class to Laboring Mass: On Politics and Social Categories in the Formative Years of the Soviet System' in Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Ronald Grigor Suny, *Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class, and Identity* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 1994), 271; Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995); Matthew J. Payne, *Stalin's Railroad: Turksib and the Building of Socialism* (Pittsburgh, PA; University of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), 126.

[10] Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin's Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) 1, 279, 281; M.J. Ilic, *Women Workers in the Soviet Inter-war Economy: from 'Protection' to 'Equality'* (Baingstoke: Macmillan, 1999).

laws were tightened further. And repression could be pernicious: in 1932, internal passports were introduced, formally, at least, making it more difficult for an urban worker to up sticks and tramp off to find better work in a different town (for peasants, it was even worse). For Donald Filtzer, *everything* about Stalinist industrialization was repressive. It was the elite and workers in conflict: it wilfully destroyed working class solidarity. Wage differentiation set worker against worker. Robbed of recognizable class consciousness, Filtzer goes on, workers resisted in ways that reflected their very atomization. They worked slowly or carelessly, chatted too much or took too many breaks. In a sense this was resistance; in another sense, it was a reconfiguration of shop floor culture. This reconfiguration depended on the reduction of unemployment, eliminating one of the great working class horrors (levels had run at 10 per cent during the NEP). And it changed the way that workers exercised control over the processes of production. Before, this control had been a product, for example, of the workplace *arteli*, self-organizing groups of workers, which recruited new labour as well as helping with such things as the housing of their members. Such explicitly organized groups were inimical to Stalinism, which eliminated them, but the workers informally retained some of the functions of autonomy: management was unable systematically to regulate factory life because of the chaos that the industrial revolution had unleashed.[11]

Even in the midst of immiseration, workers were thus able to extract some control over their lives. Yet conditions which so damaged basic standards – sanitation, nutrition, safety – were only one half of workers' experience. The other half was an extraordinary enhancement of their formal status and their ability to construct a sense of who they were.

[11] Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization: the Formation of Modern Soviet Production Relations, 1928-1941* (London: Pluto, 1986).

The problem was that this did not enhance workers as a class; it enhanced them as individuals, and some more than others. Some of the same processes of positive discrimination that had applied in the early years of Soviet power were dramatically amplified during the first five-year plan. Sheila Fitzpatrick describes how workers were promoted through the ranks, especially during the cultural revolution, when the regime encouraged aggressive rhetorical assaults on 'bourgeois' specialists. Those with the right proletarian credentials were fast-tracked into institutes of higher technical education, appointments in factory management, senior engineering roles, and positions in the Komsomol and party.[12] In November 1929, the quota for working class entry to industrial educational institutes was shifted upwards to 70 per cent. In 1933 and 1934, 65 per cent of the students at these institutions had a worker heritage. But social mobility took people out of the working class, gave such ex-workers new 'class' interests, and set in train the stratification of society that would be more apparent after the war. In any case, pro-worker affirmative action largely ceased in 1935. By 1938, only 44 per cent of students at industrial institutes were working class. Soviet workers made up a smaller proportion of party members, falling from 40.9 per cent of the party in 1933 to 18.2 per cent in 1941.[13]

In 1929, shock workers arrived on the scene. The title and some associated material advantages were awarded to better performing workers. By the summer of 1931, two-thirds of workers enjoyed the designation. While Donald Filtzer puts forward evidence that the remainder expressed their dislike and anger, Hiroaki Kuromiya argues that the shock worker principle created new networks of support for the Soviet project

[12] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
[13] Kendall E. Bailes, *Technology and Society under Lenin and Stalin: Origins of the Soviet Technical Intelligentsia, 1917-1941* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 193, 196; Rittersporn, 'From Working Class to Laboring Mass', 271.

that eclipsed and then dismantled the opposition that it prompted.[14] Shock-work most likely elevated the status of the Soviet worker as a symbol and of some Soviet workers as individuals, rather than of the working class as a class. Later, in August 1935, coalminer Aleksei Stakhanov hewed fourteen times the target for his shift. In an initially uncertain sequence of steps, the regime seized on the achievement and used the Stakhanovite label to reward norm-busting workers, often young men in priority industries. During the period through to the war, as many as a third of trade union members were Stakhanovites. Once awarded a high-end separate apartment, or a new motorcycle, or other material inducements, top Stakhanovites would become part of the high culture of the Soviet workplace, participating in an ongoing ritual of special conferences and festivals that constantly displayed the significance of the proletarian achievement. But for their leading Western historian, Lewis Siegelbaum, the top echelon of the Stakhanovites was not a workers' aristocracy, but 'part of the highest stratum of Soviet society'. They transcended their status as workers. 'Never before,' Siegelbaum argues, 'had workers been the object of such attention and adulation.' Yet Stakhanovism further differentiated wages, forcing lower-level workers to work harder to earn an adequate wage, often on piece rates, subduing the workforce as a whole.[15] Inevitably, Stakhanovites infuriated some of their co-workers. At the moment when workers were extravagantly celebrated in national culture, the working class was losing further coherence.

After the Germans invaded, many workers who were not drafted into the army were required to remain in their factory, back in the rear, subject to a still tougher regimen of working practices. Others, who lived in territory more directly threatened by

[14] Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Stalin's Industrial Revolution: Politics and Workers, 1928-1932* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 320, 121.
[15] Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism,* 148, 170, 178, 180; cf. Filtzer, 'Stalinism and the Working Class', 178.

the Nazis, were forced to evacuate, complete with their plant, to new locations further east. Hatred of the enemy and determination to defend the motherland kept productivity high: workers played their part in the Soviet industrial triumph of the Second World War. The experience strengthened ethnic rather than class ties (and Russianness was especially celebrated).[16] And they were still finding their own individual way to survive gross material desperation. Not all workers embraced the shift to the even greater self-sacrifice which the regime required for victory. In September 1941, officials noted that groups of textile workers in Ivanovo *oblast'* had downed tools before the end of the working day, with the intention of protesting against their ten-hour shifts; a rash of incidents amounted to a 'strike mood'. Other workers continued the illegal tramp to new factories, running away from difficulties or towards a better opportunity. A tough 1944 decree re-targeted the 'deserters'.[17] Yet out of the mass destruction of the war came a new approach to industrial labour.

The late Stalinist era (1945-53) occasioned very significant changes, though the evidence is contradictory. Dense archival research has proved that ordinary workers' living conditions in many cities were unspeakable: malfunctioning sanitation, no domestic water, feeble local infrastructure, desperate overcrowding. Crime was rife. Meanwhile, most of the draconian Stalinist labour code remained intact. Young workers suffered especially. Many had lost close relatives during the war; some were orphans. Their crude training programmes amounted even to indentured labour. Yet the war still

[16] For the economy, see John Barber and Mark Harrison, *The Soviet Home Front, 1941-1945: A Social and Economic History of the USSR in World War II* (London: Longman, 1991); for Russian identity, see Geoffrey Hosking, Rulers and Victims: The Russians in the Soviet Union (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), ch. 6.
[17] B.N. Kazantsev and A.N. Sakharov, *Trudovye konflikty v SSSR, 1930-1991: Sbornik statei i dokumentov* (Moscow: RAN, 2006) 277, (doc. 26); 280 (doc 28).

changed everything. It had created expectations, however transient, that sacrifice deserved reward; it reminded all kinds of citizens, including many officials, that the promise of the revolution must now be renewed; and its physical destructiveness was so great that new policies were needed simply to rebuild industry and allow basic urban life to go on. The end of rationing in 1947 was often remembered as a populist measure. Legal changes of 1951 were a faint harbinger of the gentler labour code that is associated with Khrushchev. Work attendance was now no longer formally connected to the disbursement of welfare benefits. Most striking of all, a housing construction programme got under way, and significant numbers of workers were rehoused in better conditions.[18]

The Soviet worker's heyday of mixed comforts, 1953-91

Although some essential foundations of social reform were laid between 1945 and 1953, the life of the Soviet worker still reached a nadir during late Stalinism. Stalinist government remained arbitrary, uninterested in the fate of individual workers, and thus incapable of adequately alleviating the catastrophic impact of the war on their living standards. For all the complexity of periodization, 1953 was a great disjuncture, leading to de-Stalinization, which redefined the relationship between the newly normalized application of power and the fate of individually respected citizens. In 1956, the year of

[18] Donald Filtzer, *The Hazards of Urban Life in Late Stalinist Russia: Health, Hygiene, and Living Standards, 1943-1953* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism: Labour and the Restoration of the Stalinist System after World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); E. Iu. Zubkova, *Obshchestvo i reformy, 1945-1964* (Moscow: Rossiia Molodaia, 1993); Mark B. Smith, *Property of Communists: The Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev* (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010).

the secret speech, the labour code was greatly lightened. It was no longer a criminal offence to move of one's own volition to a new job, and the aggressive punishments for workplace infractions were shelved. Trade unions became more substantial. The right to work was more obviously protected, as managers could no longer sack workers so easily.[19] More generally, the social rights that were laid down most extensively, but during the Stalin years meretriciously, in the 1936 constitution, started to gain meaning. The most dramatic change in workers' lives came about because of the mass housing programme. While the origins of this epochal social reform lay in the Second World War and late Stalinism, the programme only took off in the mid-1950s, after Khrushchev had decided that it should. He claimed in December 1963 that 108,000,000 Soviet citizens had improved their housing conditions since 1954; and it was certainly true that Soviet per capita construction towered over that of all other European countries between 1957 and 1963.[20] With the programme focused on the cities, and with much new housing formally owned by industrial plants, workers disproportionately benefited.

The result of this was a highly imperfect equalization of living standards. 'Obsessing about equality' (*uravnilovka*) had been rejected as a principle during the early years of Stalinism. By contrast, an egalitarian ambition and ethic was crucial to the development of policy during the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years, notwithstanding the ongoing formal rejection of 'petty equalization', and the corruption and declining social mobility of late socialism. It was a complicated and untidy process, but one which gave a very distinctive quality to Soviet working class life between the 1950s and 1980s. Over the two decades from 1956 the difference between higher and lower wages fell, the

[19] Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization: The Consolidation of the Modern System of Soviet Production Relations, 1953-1963* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), ch. 2.
[20] Smith, *Property of Communists*, 102-4.

lowest wages rose disproportionately, and incomes for higher groups (excluding their additional privileges) often remained steady. The ratio of average wages among the top ten per cent to the bottom ten per cent fell from 8:1 to 5:1; the income of ITR employees was 166 per cent that of workers in 1955, but only 127 per cent in 1973. On the one hand, this was the improvement of workers' conditions, and on the other it was the 'proletarianization' of some ITR jobs.[21] On a micro scale, the gap between workers and their bosses in any given factory was smaller than in capitalist countries. Workers, trade union officials and management at certain favoured plants all enjoyed access to some of the same privileges; at the Kirov Metal Works in Leningrad, the polyclinics had a high reputation, and so a worker there might have enjoyed easier access to good healthcare than a manager elsewhere. True, workers in certain industries retained their privileges. In 1975, a coal miner still earned more than double the wages of a textile worker, and 1.7 times the average wage. Nevertheless, the shift towards greater equality was deliberate. Khrushchev-era reforms increased the minimum wage, part of the wider programme of making workers' living standards a priority, and subsequent wage reforms in the 1960s and 1970s further narrowed the gap between higher and lower earners. Thus the director of an industrial trust earned eleven times the minimum wage in 1960, but 6.5 times the minimum in 1975 (admittedly, he also enjoyed many non-monetary privileges and the benefits of his profitable connections).[22]

Workers retained their cachet in the workers' state. They were at the centre of the utopian aspirations of the Khrushchev era. At the completion of one construction project,

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[21] Murray Yanowitch, *Social and Economic Inequality in the Soviet Union: Six Studies* (White Plains, NY: M.E. Sharpe, 1977), 23-5, 30-1.
[22] Blair A. Ruble, *Soviet Trade Unions: Their Development in the 1970s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 105, 85, 78.

and before starting the next, the main heroic worker in the film *The Heights* (*Vysota*, dir. A. Zarkhi, 1957) promises to build a Soviet industrial cityscape that will be visible 'from Mars'. Even during the Brezhnev period, workers continued to be coopted into participation in the vanguard of the socialist project. A member of the Saratov intelligentsia, born around 1950, remembered in 2002 that during late socialism she had 'sincerely wanted' to join the party, 'but conditions were such that they picked party members from among workers. I never was a worker. I have nothing against physical labour, but nowhere could I write on an application that I had been a proletarian.'[23] Meanwhile, the privileges of workers in climatically extreme zones, especially the Far North and Far East, were entrenched. People travelled there in their hundreds of thousands to triple their pay. Conditions were arduous. Facilities were often crude. In Bratsk, in Siberia, thirty thousand workers moved on from the hydroelectric plant between 1966 and 1970, one third, apparently, because of poor quality housing and childcare.[24] They did not fear unemployment. Neither did workers in conventional factories in more ordinary places, where shop floor discipline suffered and payment incentives were inadequate to prevent the uncontrollable growth of the second economy. But in 1962, the population faced price rises on basic goods, and workers believed they were worst affected.

Women workers remained central to the industrial project, not least because of their combined domestic and factory duties. In both arenas, women were subordinate, and subordination in one reinforced subordination in the other. They made a disproportionate contribution to the ranks of the low paid and badly skilled. Yet they might be glamorized;

[23] Donald J. Raleigh, ed., Russia's Sputnik Generation: Soviet Baby Boomers Talk About Their Lives (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2006), 80.
[24] Ruble, *Soviet Trade Unions*, 102.

the film *Mum got Married* (*Mama vyshla zamuzh*, dir. Vitalii Mel'nikov, 1969) shows female building workers sunbathing in their underwear. In other contexts, women were valorized. Female workers on one of the signature construction projects of late socialism, the Baikal-Amur Railway (BAM), were described in heroic terms in media profiles. The gap between representation and reality was wide, or perhaps cultural representations of all types made female workers vulnerable; many women left the BAM worksite prematurely, and cases of sexual abuse and verbal bullying, and this in the 1970s and 1980s, were legion.[25] It did not seem much advance on 1917. Seventy years after the revolution, the life-cycle of the Soviet worker had reached a dead end.

If Soviet workers were central to the success of the revolution in 1917, they were part of the problem by the 1980s. As they had done since the 1930s, workers exercised personal autonomy in ways that could be inconsistent with high productivity and thus with the grander goals of the Soviet project. During late socialism a lax shop floor culture was exacerbated by excessive time spent moonlighting and queuing. Andropov's anti-corruption drive and Gorbachev's *perestroika* were both, in part, responses. But the latter was the bluntest of reform programmes. Many workers sensed this: that they were at risk of losing a social system that in important ways had served them well. Finally, some of them found their voice. Miners struck in the summer of 1989. Their demands were inconsistent with the trajectory of Gorbachev's economic policies. They wanted better wages and working conditions, and a measure of control over the workplace, at the expense of the central ministries. Although the latter demand suggested something of Gorbachev's decentralizing vision, the miners, like many other workers, voiced mistrust

[25] Christopher J. Ward, *Brezhnev's Folly: The Building of BAM and Late Soviet Socialism* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 77.

of the government.[26] Their failed intervention was the last episode in the mythology of the Soviet working class.

Cultures of working class life

The discussion so far has focused on work and living standards, broadly defined. Yet from its earliest days, the Bolshevik regime announced its determination to eliminate illiteracy and to create a revolutionary culture that specifically fostered, rather than excluded, the working class. Founded in 1917, the Proletkult was charged with making existing forms of high culture more accessible to a proletarian audience, and making it easier for workers themselves to participate in the creation of cultural forms. The Proletkult limped on to 1932, but was really a phenomenon of the revolutionary period.[27] Other organizations, such as the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers, were also associated with the mission. This was a fundamentally optimistic vision of the possibilities of working class life, but it was replaced by a top-down approach to cultural production during the Stalin period, albeit one founded on the accessible aesthetic of Socialist Realism.

Workers' clubs and palaces of culture were established to give workers the chance to socialize and be socialized in relative comfort. In 1925, 450 workers' clubs were located in Moscow Region. The clubs, which were generally associated with a particular

[26] Jonathan Aves, 'The Russian labour movement 1989-91: the mirage of a Russian Solidarność', in Geoffrey A. Hosking, Jonathan Aves, and Peter J.S. Duncan, *The Road to Post-Communism: Independent Political Movements in the Soviet Union, 1985-1991* (London: Pinter, 1992), 139-40.
[27] Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: the Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990).

factory, had their own book collections and served as venues for film shows, amateur dramatics, dances, and ideological instruction. White collar employees had access to the clubs, but it seems that up to 60 per cent of members in the 1920s were manual workers.[28] Meanwhile, the 'likbez' movement sought to eliminate illiteracy. By the outbreak of the Great Fatherland War, huge strides had been made towards this goal, and primary education had been largely universalized. In the 1920s and 1930s, illiterate workers went to evening classes after long factory shifts. This facilitated other elements of working class socialization in the period: participation in party and trade union meetings. John Scott, an American worker in Magnitogorsk in the 1930s, described his co-workers' participation in official culture, but also pointed to the other side of worker leisure in the labourers' barracks where he lived: 'Work was finished for the day, supper was on the stove, it was time for a song. And they sang! Workers' revolutionary songs, folk tunes, and the old Russian romantic lyrics. A Tartar worker sang a couple of his native songs. A young Ukrainian danced.'[29]

One part of working class culture was thus constructed by the Soviet project, with or without the input of workers; the rest was the spontaneous product of working class life, as it always had been. Writing about the 1920s, Diane Koenker draws attention to an official workers' identity, which posited the existence of a 'total proletarian', who actively engaged in the Soviet project and who perceived his interests as congruent with those of his factory and the wider economy, and a workers' version of worker identity, which accepted some of these nostrums together with 'political disaffection, materialism,

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[28] John Hatch, 'Hangouts and Hangovers: State, Class and Culture in Moscow's Workers' Club Movement, 1925-1928', *Russian Review* 53:1 (1994), 98-100.
[29] John Scott, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel* (Bloomington & Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1989 [1942]), 41.

consumerism, hooliganism, selfishness, drinking, swearing, fighting, and bullying of women by men.'[30]

Consumerism was central to working-class culture, official and self-defined, throughout the Soviet period. Even when shortages were especially acute, the cultural system invited workers to consume all kinds of goods. In the 1920s, when the NEP legitimated conspicuous consumption in a way that Soviet ideology before and after could not tolerate, certain consumer goods – appropriate books, bicycles, decent but not showy clothes – were explicitly labelled socialist.[31] By the Stalin period, public culture lauded curtains, tablecloths, and lampshades: the accompaniments of cultured and comfortable domestic living, something that was impossible to attain in a workers' barracks. Yet even aspiring to own such items and to live in such a way was to buy into the vision of cultured life, to aim to attain *kul'turnost'*. But *kul'turnost' w*as not just for workers, it was for everyone, and becoming cultured might have enhanced workers' citizenhood, but it also helped to displace their sense of class.

Later, when Khrushchev talked of the transition to communism, consumption – the achievement of material plenty – was half of what he meant. The mass housing programme was at the core of this vision. Much of consumption culture was therefore associated with the home. While workers benefited in large numbers, they did not do so specifically because they were workers. Television became an increasingly significant part of working-class home life, perhaps more than for other social groups. 'The whistle blows. Your working day is over. The day's labour is finished, and the evening's relaxation begins,' wrote a Soviet commentator in 1965, '[…] six to eight hours of TV

[30] Koenker, *Republic of Labor*, 314.
[31] Koenker, *Republic of Labor*, 184.

programming awaits you. At work you are stern and reserved, but now you will laugh like a child'.[32] Here the worker's home life seems more important than his life at work, an improbable reversal on the heroism of 1917, and precisely symptomatic of the breakdown of class solidarity. Moreover, the new housing microdistricts that dominated Soviet cities from the 1950s were populated by people of different 'classes', and class feeling rarely had a chance to cohere in particular neighbourhoods or streets.[33]

Domestic culture divided into masculine and feminine spheres more sharply in working class than in other urban households. Working-class women had the heaviest double burden of all urbanites. In a sociological study undertaken during late socialism, women from families of unskilled labour spent a daily average of four hours 51 minutes doing housework, queuing for goods, and undertaking other domestic-related tasks, making their working day last nearly twelve hours. On average, their husband's total working day (shop floor plus domestic demands) was more than two hours shorter. The differential between men's and women's total working contributions narrowed further up the skill level of the working class, and converged still closer among the managerial stratum, but the demands on women were always the greater. Similarly, working class households seem to have taken decisions about domestic consumption that were less favourable to women. Families from the engineering-technical intelligentsia (ITR) would probably (by no means definitely) have had higher incomes than families of workers, but that alone could not account for the following differences in spending habits. In a study of 1967, 20 per cent of worker families owned fridges, but 56 per cent of ITR families did; 57 per cent of worker households had washing machines, compared to 82 per cent of

[32] Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire that Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2011), 201.
[33] Smith, *Property of Communists*, ch. 3.

ITR; and for vacuum cleaners, the figures were 11 per cent and 37 per cent. Plainly, a cultural difference forced a disproportionate number of working class women to spend their late afternoons making repeat visits to shops, their evenings cleaning floors the hard way, and their Sundays washing clothes by hand.[34]

Men, meanwhile, often possessed a formidable array of DIY skills; they might be able to fix up a room to provide sleeping and living quarters for three generations of their family, not to mention the family pets.[35] Male working class sociability often revolved around drink and bad language and deliberately excluded women. If male workers had gathered in simple taverns in the 1920s, by late socialism their descendants met in the yards of blocks of flats, with vodka glasses perched on the bonnet of someone's Zhiguli (though often the bonnet was up, as advanced car maintenance was another expected accomplishment of those male workers who owned an automobile). Men took disproportionate advantage of the increase in leisure hours and wages to follow other hobbies. For instance, new stadiums were built in Soviet cities from the 1950s on; spectator sport became more popular, and male workers were particular enthusiasts. Coal miners across the union were fans of the football club Shakhter Donetsk.[36]

Another feature of increased access to leisure was new opportunities to go on holiday. The 1936 constitution laid down the right to rest, something mocked by a group of school cleaners from Velikie Luki who wrote to Molotov in 1937: 'We, the cleaners, don't see any of this rest, because most of us are working all hours in order to feed

[34] Yanowitch, *Social and Economic Inequality*, 173, 43.
[35] As I myself witnessed in Moscow in 1999. For the phenomenon more generally, see Susan E. Reid, 'Communist comfort: Socialist Modernism and the Making of Cosy Homes in the Khrushchev Era', *Gender and History* 21:3 (2009): 465-98 (477).
[36] Robert Edelman, *Serious Fun: A History of Spectator Sports in the USSR* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 189.

ourselves and our children.'[37] Nevertheless, an infrastructure of sanatoria and resorts was under construction from the 1930s. People accessed this through their trade unions, and among those who lacked special connections, workers enjoyed as much chance as anyone else to go on holiday, either singly or *en famille*. Soviet vacations had particular qualities, which derived ultimately from ideology. For example, they were often designed to provide health remedies that would in turn maximize economic productivity. In 1970, 26 per cent of vacations took place in sanatoria, where attention to healthcare was very serious.[38]

Of course, many of these characteristics were shared in slightly different configurations by other Soviet 'classes'. Vacationing without one's spouse in a Soviet 'rest home', a common experience in the USSR after 1953, famously offered all kinds of chances for extra-marital adventuring, quite possibly with a member of the intelligentsia or the higher management. Even someone as steeped in intelligentsia life as Iurii Trifonov, the great novelist of Moscow life during late socialism, was a passionate fan of spectator sports. Thanks to television and the mixed neighbourhoods that were characteristic of Soviet cities, where people of different classes lived together, all kinds of people were drawn to watching football. Men and women from factory and university alike could enjoy the cinema, though cheap tickets and screenings in workers' clubs made it particularly accessible to workers.[39] Especially during the second half of the USSR's

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[37] A.Ia. Livshin et al (eds), *Pis'ma vo vlast', 1928-1939: zaiavleniia, zhaloby, donosy, pis'ma v gosudarstvennye struktury i sovetskim vozhdiam* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2000), 380 (document 222).
[38] Diane P. Koenker, 'The Proletarian Tourist in the 1930s: Between Mass Excursion and Mass Escape', in Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (eds), *Turizm: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), 119-40; Diane P. Koenker, 'Whose Right to Rest? Contesting the Family Vacation in the Postwar Soviet Union', *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 51:2 (2009): 401-25.
[39] Robert Edelman, *Spartak Moscow: A History of the People's Team in the Workers' State* (Ithaca , NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2009), 260; Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time*, 80-1.

existence, it can be difficult to draw consistent analytical distinctions between the life of the Soviet worker and the lives of other Soviet urban dwellers. Many leisure pursuits were more national than class-based. People of all classes owned dachas and sought out encounters with nature; in the hugely popular film *Moscow Doesn't Believe in Tears* (*Moskva slezam ne verit*, dir. Vladimir Menshov, 1979) people of various classes, from workers to factory management, in time settings varying from the 1950s to the 1970s, enjoy the same nature-based pursuits and share a common idiom of sociability. Beyond the shop floor, then, did the life of the Soviet worker in mature Soviet society only differ from that of other citizens by degree, rather than by kind?

The moral economy of the Soviet worker

For sure, the class identities of most Soviet citizens unified as the decades went on. In particular, the structure of the Soviet economy was causing some conventionally working class and ITR jobs to converge. Nevertheless, the intellectual and the worker remained quite distinct. 'There was no contact whatsoever between workers and intellectuals,' writes Geoffrey Hosking in his survey of Russian nationhood in the USSR: 'they lived in different intellectual and moral universes.' A pupil at a sought-after school in Saratov that specialized in English language instruction remembered in 2002 that 'the families of only two pupils' in her class 'didn't belong to the so-called intelligentsia and were workers.' She herself was the daughter of a professor. In Ufa in 1970, it was reckoned that 72.5 per cent of intelligentsia fathers had children who entered intelligentsia professions, while

59.1 per cent of worker fathers had worker children.[40] So if workers were a discrete community, did certain attitudes identify it?

If the intelligentsia were interested in ideas, did the workers simply want to earn a crust? Certainly, some of the most innovative of historical research has suggested that workers were motivated by the need to make a living.[41] In a sociological survey published in 1965, 29.7 per cent of workers with up to four years' schooling, and 26.2 per cent of those with five or six, thought that 'any work is good if it pays well'.[42] The more education that a citizen had, the more he or she valued other features of their work. But even for those workers who had a conscious sense of their skills, and who took pleasure in their labour and in their sense of their own relative position in the workforce, self-worth was closely related to capacity to earn. In 1989, an electrician who worked in the mining industry in Donetsk remembered earning 'good money' during the previous thirty years, which had funded considerable (and gender-enlightened) consumption: 'When I got married, my wife began buying new things for the home: furniture, a refrigerator, a TV set, a washing machine, vases and crystal ware. We needed more money, so I decided to change my job and come to the mine.'[43]

Yet one of the deepest wellsprings of working class action during 1917 was the acute desire to live in a 'dignified' and 'honourable' way. Workers did not rise up simply for more bread. Steve Smith's research on Petrograd workers concluded that their sense of their own exploitation was more moral than economic: 'their treatment as "things" and

[40] Hosking, *Rulers and Victims*, 297; for the oral history, see Raleigh, ed., *Russia's Sputnik Generation*, 91; for Ufa data: Yanowitch, *Social and Economic Inequality*, 117.
[41] In her extremely influential corpus of writings, Sheila Fitzpatrick places this motive within a wider universe of ideology. See also Mark Edele, *Stalinist Society 1928-1953* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
[42] Mervyn Matthews, *Class and Society in Soviet Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 1972) 137.
[43] Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Daniel J. Walkowitz, eds, *Workers of the Donbass Speak: Survival and Identity in the New Ukraine, 1989-1992* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1995), 47.

not as "people"' drove them to organize for revolution. For Smith, therefore, workers' interests went far beyond that which could be crudely measured by their material circumstances.[44] This perhaps helped to create one of the most durable of working class attitudes: a commitment to equality and social justice (which yielded concomitant material benefits).

Stalinist industrialization was explicitly predicated on the assumption that equality was harmful, since Stalin declared that it was in 1931. Differential wage rates, socialist competition, shock work, Stakhanovism: all of these set up an unevenly provisioned workforce, and an unequal industrial society. The aim was to boost incentives to productivity and discipline, and perhaps deliberately to fracture the working class and to secure the advantages of the ruling elite. Nevertheless, many workers remained committed to equality as a principle. The Stalinist regime played on their feelings in a populist fashion during, especially, the cultural revolution and the great terror, encouraging the 'baiting' of specialists and the denunciation of bosses. But the commitment was consistent. 'Genuine demands for egalitarianism are observed [by some workers],' noted a party report on Smolensk in 1928. 'Those who demand this maintain that the entire evil lies in unequal pay [and that] a man receiving a high salary can afford more than all the rest'. The growing equality that characterized Soviet society after 1953 – marked most famously by the housing programme, conceived and executed in a spirit of relative equality – showed an alignment, albeit partial and imperfect, between the moral economy of the worker and the aspirations of the party and government.[45]

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[44] Smith, 1983, 94 and passim; also S.A. Smith, 'Workers against Foreman in St Petersburg, 1905-1917' in Siegelbaum and Suny, eds, *Making Workers Soviet*, 136.

[45] For workers and the terror, see Wendy Z. Goldman, *Terror and Democracy in the Age of Stalin: The Social Dynamics of Repression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); for the party report,

Equality was connected to fairness. The commitment to elementary justice had a pre-modern flavour, deriving as it did from the Russian village and timeless notions of *pravda*. In the early Soviet period, many workers trusted the party to deliver justice. The sense that the party was betraying the social justice to which the Russian working class was historically committed caused a number of strikes during the 1930s, notably the Teikovo events of 1932.[46] Later, when the working class had less consciousness of itself and its shared commitments, the notion of fairness remained important. Take the furious responses to Khrushchev's price rises of summer 1962. A KGB report of 2 June showed how workers from various towns and cities were calling for strikes and uprisings in response to this attack on their living standards. In Donetsk, the KGB noted: 'a paper was stuck to a telegraph pole with the message: "We have been and are being duped. We will struggle for justice."' In Novocherkassk, a huge demonstration in response to the price rises was shot down by the authorities. One of the reasons why matters got so far out of hand was the insensitivity of the director of the Budennyi Electric Locomotive Construction Factory in his meeting with striking workers; he made little of their concerns about the disproportionate effect that the higher prices would have on workers rather than on engineers and management. In a flagrant rejection of elementary justice, he even seemed to mock them.[47]

From the 1950s, rights started to assume some kind of practical meaning in Soviet society. To generalize, rights probably meant different things to workers than they did to

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Kuromiya, *Stalin's Industrial Revolution*, 244; for equality in housing, Smith, *Property of Communists*, 130.

[46] Jeffrey J. Rossman, *Worker Resistance under Stalin: Class and Revolution on the Shop Floor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

[47] For the KGB reports: Kazantsev and Sakharov, *Trudovye konflikty*, 324 (doc. 51), 319 (doc. 49); for Novoberkassk, Samuel H. Baron, *Bloody Saturday in the Soviet Union: Novocherkassk, 1962* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), ch. 2.

the intelligentsia. The rights that workers wanted were social rights, such as the right to housing and pensions. By contrast, small numbers of dissident intellectuals took great risks to try to shame the regime into granting the human rights, with a focus on political and civil rights, that its constitution promised. Dissident trade unions and worker groupuscules dedicated to social rights were still fewer. They included the Association of Free Trade Unions, founded in January 1978, and the Working Group for the Defence of Labour, Economic and Social Rights in the USSR.[48]

Workers thus used rights in a systemic way, employing the social rights talk that flooded into Soviet public culture during and after the Khrushchev years. They were not dissidents. But the evidence we have suggests that other citizens did the same, for example in the way that they invoked their rights when petitioning the authorities about their problems. The expansion of welfare rights helped all classes; collective farm workers, for example, became eligible for pensions in 1964. Nevertheless, it is likely that social rights chimed with many working class concerns, and at certain times, workers called in their rights with particular force; in June 1962, in the wake of the price rises, the KGB noted about Moscow: 'On Sirenevyi bouleveard, a flyer was posted up with the appeal to workers "to struggle for their rights and for the reduction of prices".' Arguably, the expansion of welfare rights particularly benefited workers. It was characteristic that the rhetoric that heralded the pensions reform of 1956 was all about reapportioning 'the property of the workers'.[49] Much of the Soviet world of welfare was dispensed within the company town, the huge plant complex, which might provide housing, and which, via

[48] Linda J. Cook, *The Soviet Social Contract and Why it Failed: Welfare Policy and Workers' Politics from Brezhnev to Yeltsin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 73-4; Mark B. Smith, 'Social rights in the Soviet dictatorship: the constitutional right to welfare from Stalin to Brezhnev', *Humanity* 3:3 (2012; forthcoming).
[49] *Trudovye konflikty*, 319 (doc. 49); *Sotsial'noe obespechenie*, 1956: 5-6, 1.

one's trade union, regulated access to vacations, social security, pensions and the like. Although these goods were for everyone, the company town – the physical manifestation of enterprise paternalism – was the worker's territory, and he remained committed to it even after the Soviet collapse.

Hard headed and practical, workers adopted the language of the regime – they 'spoke Bolshevik' – when it helped them to get what they wanted. It seems unlikely at any stage of Soviet power that they were locked inside a totalitarian discourse from which they could not escape. They made sense of notions of socialism, dignity, equality, justice and social rights, all of which, in particular ways – ways that changed over time and were contingent on circumstances – were inextricable aspects of the Soviet project. Yet there were some constants, at least in the way that people made sense of their own ideas. Even at the end of the Gorbachev period, many workers still expressed their desires within what they understood to be the core and original tenets of the party. A retired miner from Donetsk who had never been a party member looked back on his career in 1989, musing, 'In the past the party united ideologically-minded Communists, the followers of Lenin. After the death of Lenin, it became a group of rascals.' He went on: 'I am a genuine Bolshevik, in my soul. I know for sure that there are very few genuine communists now.'[50]

Institutions evolved that locked such instincts, where they existed, into the stability of the Soviet order. The mission of trade unions was to support the long-term interests of workers, which by official definition coincided with those of party and government. In the short term, unions connived in subordinating their members'

[50] 'Speaking Bolshevik' is Kotkin's groundbreaking formulation. For the retired miner: Siegelbaum and Walkowitz, eds, *Workers of the Donbass Speak*, 51-2.

immediate goals in the quest for higher productivity. But they also offered welfare. And when the behaviour of an individual boss conflicted with socialist norms, the union could take the side of a worker and defend him or her in an industrial dispute – not in a strike, but in a workplace commission.

For all the ambiguity of their status, trade unions were institutions which tied workers more closely to the Soviet project. They did not foster class solidarity: that was a phenomenon that did not much survive the 1930s. Yet the Soviet Union remained the workers' state. It always placed the heroic worker at the centre of its pantheon, and ultimately provided workers with many of the goods that they wanted, however shoddy or inadequate, as well as a measure of moral satisfaction. The Soviet system functioned and survived as it did because the workers, emasculated as they might have been, accepted the programme. Some accepted it by default, others with a measure of enthusiasm. Hardly any welcomed the end of the Soviet Union. They would all face a desperate post-Soviet tomorrow.

Further reading

- Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism: Labour and the Restoration of the Stalinist System after World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

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- S.A. Smith, *Red Petrograd: Revolution in the Factories*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983)