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**EVERYDAY LIFE HISTORY OF THE SOVIET LABORER,  
1920s-1930s**

**By**

**Brianna Lee Hutchins**

**An Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment**

**of the Requirements for Honors**

**in**

**The Department of History**

**The School of Arts and Sciences**

**Rhode Island College**

**2023**

**EVERYDAY LIFE HISTORY OF THE SOVIET LABORER,  
1920s-1930s**

**An Undergraduate Honors Project Presented**

**By**

**Brianna Lee Hutchins**

**To**

**The Department of History**

**Approved:**

*Peter B. Brown*

**Project Advisor**

**May 5, 2023**

**Date**

*Peter B. Brown*

**Chair, Department Honors Committee**

**May 5, 2023**

**Date**

*Elisa Miller*

**Department Chair**

**May 5, 2023**

**Date**

## **Thesis Abstract**

This thesis provides a comprehensive view into the daily lives of the Soviet Proletariat in the 1920s and 1930s. Both negative and positive outcomes of the policies implemented during this period are discussed regarding the growth and experiences of the working class. The discipline of everyday life history is explored and applied to this socioeconomic group. Work, education, home life, family structure, gender roles, and standard of living are the main subsets of daily life examined in this thesis. Through the research presented here, one can conclude that the Soviet Communist Party considered itself an urban vanguard creating a proletarian serving state and would maintain this narrative regardless of its contradictory policies. The proletariat was, due to difficult living conditions, an incredibly resourceful and enduring population that valued its culture and traditions.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **An Introduction of the Soviet Proletariat**

The evolution of the industrial working class in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union remains a distinctive chapter in international labor history. This thesis will aim to address the early evolution of the Soviet working class from the dawning of the Soviet Union leading up to the outbreak of World War II. This will be done by the examination of the everyday life of the proletariat, from where laborers lived, whom they lived with, what they ate, where they worked, and how gender affected these categories.

During the late Tsarist period, Russia began its industrial revolution, and hastened to catch up to the West. Industry in Russia, though, began earlier, in the 1400s. Later, Peter the Great built iron mills in the Ural Mountains primarily for weapons production and utilized forced labor, namely serfs, to work in these factories. The serf factory labor force evolved into the later Tsarist and Soviet proletariats. In the 1750s Empress Elizabeth blocked merchants from owning factories and allowed only the nobility to own them. This was ill-advised, as the nobility had no concept of business management, debt, or economics in general and so the nobility's slothfulness and extensive amount of debt hindered innovation and production. Thus, there was little in the way of a Western-style entrepreneurial class managing industrialization into the early nineteenth century. The abolition of serfdom beginning in 1861 helped foster late Tsarist industrialization and even the Soviet experiment.

Prior to the Bolshevik Revolution, the industrial workforce was transitioning from serfdom to non-forced labor. Once in power Soviet Marxist-Leninist ideology removed religion from the state, fought against the systemic inequalities of capitalism, mistreatment of non-Russians in the non-Russian and Western areas of the former Tsarist Empire, and colonialism.

The ideology initially combatted government ranking systems in order to create a leveled society for the rising proletariat.<sup>1</sup> The Communist regime was created theoretically to serve the proletariat (the working class). The Soviet regime offered itself as a better alternative to Western Civilization, aiming to provide the necessities to its workers so that they may lead more fulfilling lives without fear of unemployment, low wages, and other exploitative practices. Socialism as a Soviet construct began as a push against the bourgeois nature of capitalistic individualism, and the Party vehemently saw the need to convert private property and enterprise into collectivized public property. The Party promoted a culture of collectivism amongst the peasantry and the working class.<sup>2</sup> The Party thought of itself as a vanguard, comprised of urban men. Party leadership was fearful of foreign attack against the Soviet Union, a fear which was prevalent throughout the 1930s.<sup>3</sup>

During the Revolution, the Bolsheviks enacted War Communism, or military communism in which the Bolsheviks exerted full authoritarianism to win the Russian Civil War [1918-21]. The implementation of War Communism let the Bolsheviks take over the economy, feed the Red Army, and keep themselves in power. Above all, the goal was to ensure that the regime had enough grain, even going so far as to threaten peasants at gun point to secure their grain. This created conflict within conflict, not only the Reds versus the Whites but amongst the peasantry, some of whom were for the revolution but all of whom were against their grain being seized. Desperate to maintain control so as to secure the revolution, the Bolshevik government

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<sup>1</sup> Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, Mark D. Steinberg, *A History of Russia*, 8th ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 594.

<sup>2</sup> Tatiana Klepikova, "Privacy As They Saw It: Private Spaces in the Soviet Union of the 1920-1930s in Foreign Travelogues," *Zeitschrift für slavische Philologie* 71, no. 2 (2015): 357, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43974656>.

<sup>3</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, New York; London: Oxford University Press, 1999, 15-17.

implemented this seizure of peasant surplus or *prodrazverstka*, a ban on private manufacture, and a ban on private trade.<sup>4</sup> The Revolution aimed to eliminate class but could not feasibly raise all of the peasantry and proletariat so they essentially “downgraded” the nobility, imposing the sanctions of war communism and future collectivization upon all citizens.<sup>5</sup> To explain, the aim was not to bolster the wealth of the working classes in order to create a nation of elites but rather to create a workers’ nation in which there was no wealth disparity or nobility.

In the aftermath of the November 7, 1917 Bolshevik coup d’état and the Russian Civil War, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, or Soviet Union for short, came into being (1922) as a means of granting territorial equality to non-Russians and of creating a new state. The Soviet leaders wanted to save the Soviet Union and its working people from the “terrors of capitalism” that they believed would have kept them enslaved to the upper class of landlords, nobles, and bourgeoisie.<sup>6</sup> The main premise of the new regime was to create a proletarian state run by the Communist Party supposedly in service to the Soviet working class. Russian revolutionary Leon Trotsky had postulated that as the Soviet Union established a workers’ state through a violent social revolution, only a political revolution was now necessary for the future. This alleged political revolution would be to remove any obstacles that were in the path of developing the planned economy that the Communist Party had in mind.

A concept known as *partiinnost*, or party-mindedness, was promoted to the public for Party members to do what was best for the Party and for the state. By living in accordance with party-mindedness, one was considered to be a good Soviet citizen, a comrade doing one’s part in

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<sup>4</sup> Alec Nove, *An Economic History of the U.S.S.R.* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Penguin Books), 1992, 46-82.

<sup>5</sup> Klepikova, “Privacy As They Saw It,” 358.

<sup>6</sup> Prof. Brown, Department of History, Rhode Island College, informed me that by 1913 one-half of the Russian nobility (*dворянство*) had completely lost its land (April 24, 2023).



bringing the Bolshevik's utopian vision to fruition. *Partiinost* is usually associated with Party members although by extension one could say that it applied to non-Party members as well.

Industrial workers profited most from the Bolshevik Revolution, such as the *vydvizhentsy*, who were a special group of workers. These workers were provided with further opportunities for advancement and administrative jobs, although this movement is mainly associated with the 1930s. In order to achieve the proletarianization of society, the Communist Party had to spur Soviet industrialization, whereby the "peasants of yesterday become the workers of today."<sup>7</sup>

In the decades following the Bolshevik Revolution and the birth of the Soviet Union, the government implemented a variety of changes that had direct impact on the working class. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet Union encountered both successes and challenges due to the policies created by the Communist Party, and they affected the working class quite significantly. The New Economic Policy, or "NEP," and those who most greatly benefitted from it were called "Nepmen." This was the mixed economic policy of the Soviet Union from 1921 to 1928, and it allowed a total of eighteen private enterprises each of which employed from two hundred to one thousand workers from 1924 to 1925.<sup>8</sup>

During the First Five Year Plan and after, wages were kept low to encourage industrial development through capital accumulation, although this situation left the laborers at a disadvantage due to the funds they received being insufficient for living costs. Resources were mainly focused on production of capital goods, which meant that these resources were not reserved for consumption by the workers. This process led to shortages and a lowering standard of living. Due to this product strategy, a minimal number of consumer products were actively

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<sup>7</sup> Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 594.; Kendall E. Bailes, "Stalin and the Making of a New Elite: A Comment," *Slavic Review* 39, no. 2 (1980): 286-89. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2496791>;

<sup>8</sup> Nove, *An Economic History of the U.S.S.R.*, 86.

available for purchase in stores. In order to supplement this, the Soviet government enacted measures to present an illusion of well-being and prosperity. The shops windows were arranged strategically to hide the empty shelves within. Pyramids of food products were created in the displays, with items such potato, chicken, *stolichny* salad, and vegetable salad smothered in mayonnaise to hide the lack of freshness of the produce.<sup>9</sup> The low wages made such purchases challenging as it was. The low supply of consumer goods meant low supply and subpar quality of urban housing for workers. What was built quickly reached capacity with the great influx of the working population from the countryside to such urban spaces in order to support the very industries the Soviets were redirecting supplies to develop.<sup>10</sup>

In the 1930s, Stalin directed his efforts into creating a “fantasy state” based on his own interests. Social mobility was reduced, as was geographic mobility for many proletarians. Ever since the October Revolution, severe dictatorial control was in full force and Stalin’s dictatorial rule aimed to further strengthen government control. Schools began to have more examinations, stricter uniforms, and more disciplinarian-minded teachers. Scaled worth in terms of service and competency were reintroduced. The concept of *uravnilokva*, or levelling of wages, was to a marked extent rejected, although not entirely.<sup>11</sup> This policy was partially a reversal of the 1920s, which promoted liberation of gender and class through utopian ideals of a perfect society run by the working class.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Darra Goldstein, *The Kingdom of Rye: A Brief History of Russian Food* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2022), 9.

<sup>10</sup> Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 594.

<sup>11</sup> “A Dictionary of Sociology,” Encyclopedia.com, March 21, 2023, accessed April 10, 2023. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/social-sciences/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-pressreleases/levelling>.

<sup>12</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams, Utopian Vision, and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press), 1989, 246.

The Soviet Union created policies with the intention to create a bright future. However, there were immediate and prolonged adverse effects on the working class due to the nature of these policies, leading to a certain disillusionment as one moves from 1928 onwards. Some of these dissatisfactions included the fall of the consumer standard of living. It was difficult as an individual to purchase the necessary items not collectively provided at one's workplace without the excess income to do so, especially during goods shortages. Living circumstances were quite cramped as urban environments saw people crowded into small apartments with little to no privacy, generating nervousness. Additionally, in family units both husband and wife, unlike during NEP, needed to work to support the family. Safety for these workers was also an issue, especially in factories where most city-dwelling laborers were employed. Many of them were unaccustomed to the din and motions of powerful, chugging machinery, along with the daily, non-seasonal routines of factory life in contrast to the seasonal routines of agricultural life and its different time trajectories.<sup>13</sup>

Overall, the two most pervasive challenges for the Soviet working class in the decades between the creation of the USSR and World War II were shortages and declining purchasing power and, in the countryside, collectivization and famine. The Soviet government announced numerous policies throughout those two decades (the 1920s and 1930s), making promises to their people that were not always kept. Such promises included having ample necessities provided to the proletariat. One can focus solely on such broken promises, but there are also many instances of improvement to the quality of Russian proletarian life. The proletariat enjoyed guaranteed industrial employment, no layoffs, and no firings. There was worker participation on

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<sup>13</sup> Nove, *An Economic History of the U.S.S.R.*, 96-115, 149.

factory advisory and planning councils, meaning the employees had input on how their workplaces and production were managed.

These challenges paint a bleak picture of what Soviet life was like for the working class. However, although obstacles can be difficult not to focus on, in the case of the Soviet Union in the 1920s-1930s, there were plenty of positives to be had. The economy was constantly in a process of growth and stabilization. A welfare state was established, in which Soviet citizens were allotted free medical care. Additionally, the government subsidized the most basic foods with workers at their enterprises being given small allotments of foodstuffs at times as well, and also having free or reduced-cost lunches. The emerging welfare state guaranteed free health care, job preservation, several educational options, and pensions. In the realm of employment, workers were given vacation and travel days and maternity leave.<sup>14</sup> The utopian ideal was to provide citizens with cradle-to-grave security, guaranteeing housing, employment, medical care, pensions, and education. In the 1920s, the government state planning committee known as Gosplan deduced that wages were to be used to provide for the basics of clothing, foodstuffs, and goods.

Although never explicitly stated, government policy believed that Soviet workers were entitled to a subsistence minimum wage. Wages, though, for Soviet planners were but one part of a guaranteed product mix of benefits for the Soviet citizen and were not necessarily regarded as a primary element of economic entitlements.

Leading up to WWII, in the late 1930s, the Soviet Communist Party consisted of about fifty-percent laborers, twenty-percent peasants, and thirty-percent intelligentsia.<sup>15</sup> These figures

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<sup>14</sup> Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 594.

<sup>15</sup> Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*, 589.

demonstrate the main supporters of the party were in fact proletarians and highlights the urban bias of Marxist ideology.

Although there were setbacks, the 1930s were also a time of immense growth in nearly every aspect of Soviet society in both the Russian and non-Russian union republics. There were new opportunities for skilled and unskilled laborers across the Soviet Union, especially in cities and factories. There was sharp growth in the accessibility to technical education, which allowed countless workers to be trained in specialized roles and fields. There were new opportunities for social mobility for both men and women, something that was harder for men and virtually impossible for women prior to the birth of the USSR. In addition, there was increased physical mobility, with a heightened ability to migrate from rural to urban areas (mainly peasants fleeing collectivization), the installation of widespread public transit, and even the introduction of cars into Russia. There was a new mindset amongst many in the working class and in its many strata, one of optimism and positivity as they were finally benefitting from changes made by their government. There were opportunities to become more involved in the governmental process by joining the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (the CPUSSR).

Working class consciousness strengthened even more, especially through the Stakhanovite Movement. There had been a failure in the Soviet Union to meet coal quotas in 1934 and the early half of 1935. In September 1935, Alexei Stakhanov was a thirty-year-old Russian miner who cut one hundred and two tons of coal, or fourteen times the normal shift production. This led to Stakhanov being hailed as a labor hero, and inspired a movement of Stakhanovites, or particularly driven workers, and Stakhanovism, a labor method in which

individuals were rewarded for taking initiative and achieving more than what was requested.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, individual workers were motivated to be more productive. During this movement, labor competition led to some rise in labor productivity, thus strengthening (if one is to believe official pronouncements) the working class and the USSR. Although there were negative effects of the policies implemented by the USSR throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet working class experienced immense growth and change in nearly every aspect of everyday life.<sup>17</sup>

Everyday life history focuses on what may be considered by some the most mundane aspects of history. Some may not consider this sector of history worthwhile to focus on in such minute detail and prefer to study the grand scheme of things, the stories of countries, politicians, and large-scale events. However, it is arguable that one cannot fully understand or appreciate the history of a nation without knowing the “average” persons who inhabit it. The history of everyday life allows historians to capture the fundamentals of an individual or group of people, focusing on ordinary peoples’ experiences and narratives. By doing so, one can find similarities and differences that together create patterns and characterize people’s culture and their lifestyles. Of course, a country’s different historical events and laws are quite important. However, the masses who populate that country are who give it life, who work the land, who produce and consume its resources. Without the people, there is no nation, no motivation to grow, no essence of life. Thanks to the opening up of the Soviet Archives, Russians, former Soviet republics, and Western scholars have been enabled to obtain an unvarnished look at Soviet everyday life history previously denied. Besides native scholars living inside the former Soviet Union, the most

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<sup>16</sup> Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity In the USSR, 1935-1941*, E-book, (Cambridge, [U.K.]: Cambridge University Press, 1988), <https://hdl-handle-net.ric.idm.oclc.org/2027/heb05420.0001.001>. 63-7.

<sup>17</sup> Nove, *Economic History of the U.S.S.R.*, 226-34.

widespread research of everyday life in the Soviet Union has been done by North Americans and Europeans. This reality means the information collected will have been garnered by someone with a Western lens. In some cases, this situation can lead to biases.<sup>18</sup>

The proletariat class was arguably the life blood of the Soviet Union. Without a proletariat, there would be no reason to revolutionize. There would be no need for the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to form that proletarian-centric society. The utopian ideals of collectivization and distribution of goods would be replaced by something vastly different, a society not centering the working class, not having any industry to speak of, and maintaining dramatically separate socioeconomic classes. In short, without the working class, there would have been no dream of or reasoning to create a workers' state. These people had their own wants, needs, lives, and convictions. Many self-identified as peasants-turned-workers, with one migrant as quoted saying, "at the factory I call myself a worker, but in the village—at the village assembly—I call myself a peasant."<sup>19</sup> Where the Soviet working class lived, what workers ate, where they worked, how they traveled, what their families looked like, and more characterized the sort of people that they were. Everyday life histories can hold up critically to view the achievements and shortcomings of utopianism.

In order to compose this body of work, extensive research was conducted using a variety of resources including, but not limited to, academic journals, secondary source books, and primary source journals and diary entries. All sources utilized were in the English or French languages, and any sources originally written in other languages required translation. Academic

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<sup>18</sup> Lewis H. Siegelbaum, "The Late Romance of the Soviet Worker in Western Historiography," *International Review of Social History* 51, no. 3 (2006): 472, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44582969>.

<sup>19</sup> Siegelbaum, "The Late Romance of the Soviet Worker," 473.

journals reviewed include *Kritika*, *Cahiers du monde russe*, and *Slavic Review*. Authors of particular note are Lewis H. Siegelbaum, Wendy Goldman, and Sheila Fitzpatrick. Each of these authors have written vast collections of Soviet history and are the forerunners in this area of historical research. Multiple library databases were meticulously combed, especially the Rhode Island College Adams Library and the Brown University library database BruKnow. Such in-depth research has provided the information needed to draw the conclusions and insights included in this thesis.

This thesis provides the reader with a comprehensive understanding of the everyday life of the Soviet laborer by examining a set of key topics commonly included in everyday life histories. The type of labor and the education preceding and coinciding with this employment are investigated. In addition, city living, apartment and home life, and family structure of the working class is detailed. Furthermore, the standard of living and the consumer are considered. Women and gender roles are also topics that area provided great attention in this thesis. There are interconnecting themes of utopian ideals juxtaposed with stark realities that appear throughout the thesis. The challenges and successes of the Soviet proletariat are illuminated, and the reader can discover what truly makes the characteristics and culture of a socioeconomic population.



## Chapter 2

### Education of the Soviet Laborer

Every country values education, even more so in the Soviet Union where it was essential to have a well-educated and highly ideologically motivated working class. The Soviet Union had specific ideals in mind when creating its schools. Accordingly, the optimal Soviet school should provide students with a general education and not be specialized, as the Soviets believed that such practice prematurely limited the occupational options for the student in the future. In these general education schools, the goal was to equip students with a wide variety of industrial and technical skills to apply to future jobs and to expose students to other disciplines. There were, of course, technical schools in the Soviet Union. In the 1920s Soviet educational theorists believed that if all children attended such general schools with similar programs, they would receive equal opportunities for the future, regardless of their socioeconomic status.<sup>20</sup>

#### Education

As in most other areas of Soviet society, there were committees and organizations dedicated to the educational system. At the top was the *Narkompros* (People's Commissariat for Education), the pan-national bureau responsible for running the Soviet public school system. The *Narkompros* had three basic principles through which it directed its administrative efforts. First, there was allegedly to be equal opportunity for students of all social classes. Second, the government was to provide universal secondary-level general education for the masses. The children of proletarian and peasant backgrounds were highly favored in order to educate them

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<sup>20</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union 1921-1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), 5-7.

and give them the same opportunities as children of landowners, Soviet officers, and the intelligentsia. Last, *Narkompros* aimed to create a continuous, educational scale in which higher education could be achieved in whatever form that it might take, be it specialized training in a technical institute, at a university, or through correspondence school. The intelligentsia, that is the intellectuals, academics, and politicians who had their own interests in how the educational system should operate, supported *Narkompros*. The intelligentsia, especially those who were professional educators, wanted *Narkompros* to enact statutes directly supporting higher education and scientific fields. It essentially asserted that if these needs were not met, then the academicians would no longer be supportive of *Narkompros*. The academicians believed that *Narkompros* would heed their interests, because they believed these were also the national interests, so it would not be advisable to ignore them as that would look like *Narkompros* did not care for national interests. In response to this assertion, Commissar of Education Anatoly Lunacharsky cautioned in a 1933 article that the intelligentsia was attempting to manipulate the government into catering to the intelligentsia's whims over the needs of the proletariat.<sup>21</sup>

Another group with educational stakes was the Komsomol (All-Union Leninist Young Communist League), a large organization for young people from their early teens into early adulthood in which membership was mandatory. Part of the Komsomol's mission was to address workers' education for young people. The Komsomol was concerned with educating a young, rising proletariat, and used several methods. For instance, the Komsomol aimed to promote proletarian interests by increasing trade-training and therefore opportunities for upwards socioeconomic mobility and broadening technical know-how and expanding industry.

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<sup>21</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 63, 86.

Additionally, the Komsomol combined this specialized vocational training with “discrimination” to benefit working-class students so that they specifically had access to technical courses.<sup>22</sup> For instance, students in university were questioned as to their class of origin, with many students needing to prove that they originated from the working class. By interrogating students on socioeconomic status, the Party could ensure that students born in the labor class were prioritized and that the educational system continued to pander to the proletariat.<sup>23</sup>

The Soviet Union offered a variety of educational opportunities as part of its utopian vision to have an educated proletariat and the accessibility of students of acceptable social backgrounds to achieve this goal. Alongside the progressing industrialization of the Soviet Union, it was important to the government that the peasantry move into industrial and white-collar employment, while receiving some form of learning in the process. This goal extended to the entirety of the working class as well and encompassed both men and women. In 1923-24, about thirty-eight percent of all higher education students in the Soviet Union were female. This figure dropped to twenty-eight percent in 1928; however, this decline is proportionate to the drop in enrollment in the later 1920s. There had been a student purge in 1924, in order to replace children of merchants and former landowners with hired labor, or to remove any student who was politically and socially undesirable for the regime’s plan of an educated working class. In addition, the majority of students in medical and/or pedagogical schools was under age twenty-three. More than fifty percent of this population of under-twenty-three-year-olds were women.<sup>24</sup> These women were less likely to be party members, but they were members of the working class

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<sup>22</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 63.

<sup>23</sup> Merle Fainsod, *Smolensk under Soviet Rule* (Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 343-44.

<sup>24</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 97-108, 180.

which gave them an advantage for admission and demonstrated the effectiveness of increasing the accessibility of higher education to less fortunate members of the population.

Naturally, there were setbacks in the Soviet educational system. There was no uniform system implemented throughout the 1920s or the 1930s. There was no standardization of material or testing, and teachers were apt to experiment, with some incredibly rare reports of religious catechism teachings.<sup>25</sup> Teaching such religious material would be considered in direct opposition to Soviet doctrine, although Soviet ideological indoctrination in schools was heavily catechistic in nature. Following the Russian Revolution, teaching religion was outlawed, priests were killed, and churches were shut down. The extreme and violent expulsion of religion makes these inconceivable, albeit rare, reports even more vexing. From the 1920s onwards, there were many opportunities for training inside factories. There was internal *vydvizhenie*, or the inside promotion of skilled factory workers to positions of foreman and other superiors where they could then become engineers and technicians. These workers had the opportunity become *praktiki*, who were workers that acquired on the job training and were raised to administration or specialist positions without attending secondary school or having any higher education. It is through this method that most industrial specialists achieved their positions. The practice of *vydvizhenie* contributed the majority of specialist personnel in the industrial workforce.<sup>26</sup>

The first five-year plan (1928-1932) significantly expanded education and the promotional factory-trained specialists, and further broadened the number of apprenticeship schools to provide the industry with new sets of skilled laborers. However, these aspirations did

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<sup>25</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility*, 40.

<sup>26</sup> Kendall E. Bailes, "Stalin and the Making of a New Elite," 286.; Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 202.

not quite go according to plan as many apprenticeship school attendees chose to pursue further education and went on to work in offices and administrative positions, thus opting out of factory work. The two largest changes stemming from the first five-year plan regarding education are as follows. First, working-class students were forced to become technically-oriented, allowing the Soviet Union to avoid a problem confronting the West. At this time, Western countries were beset by an imbalance of too many white-collar workers, for instance lawyers, with too few civilians becoming engineers. To become an engineer, one had to attend an institute or a university and therefore become a white-collar worker. However, in the Soviet context the word “engineer” was broadly used. Due to the possibilities of on-the-spot and other technical training in a factory, the distinction between white- and blue-collar workers in a Western sense was blurred. The Soviet Union believed this imbalance was also causing political conflict in the West, because there were too many non-working-class intellectuals. This was one other factor impelling the Soviet Union to train its working class in technical trades, as it ensured that the expanding industrial network could continue to grow- with an increasing supply of skilled laborers. A related outcome of the first and subsequent five-year plans was that the Soviet Union was also intending to use technical factory training to create Party and government elites in the form of managers and higher-ranking officials. The Party intended to create this future elite through worker recruitment. Bolstering education would ideally boost Party membership, regime solidity, and social stability. Becoming a party member and becoming educated were the most effective ways to climb to elite status in the Soviet Union, and such educated party members were exactly the sort of people desired for the Soviet elite.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 202-05.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, there were new upward mobility options through factory classes and apprenticeship schools, such as a *zavod-VTUZ*, or “factory university”. *Zavod-VTUZs* were characterized by an integration of higher education institutes with specific factories in combination with practical work. In the late 1920s, the Central Committee of the Communist Party allowed factories to give themselves the title of *zavod-VTUZ* and award students diplomas and degrees.<sup>28</sup> Not only students or factory workers attended *zavod-VTUZ* classes, but clerical employees as well. By finishing the lowest level of *zavod-VTUZ* courses, students desiring further education were endorsed with training, seen as adjacent to attending of seven years of standard schooling. The *zavod-VTUZ* program allowed individuals to further their education and specialize in certain fields. Students who went elsewhere generally went to vocational *tekhnikum* schools after the completion of *zavod-VTUZ* coursework, while adolescents who did not attend *zavod-VTUZ* classes could also enroll in a *tekhnikum*. The proletariat gained more laborers due to the educational opportunities offered by *zavod-VTUZ* directly in the factories.<sup>29</sup>

## Work

In January 1930, a group of proletarians known as the 25,000ers, or the *dvadtsat' piatitsyachniki*, composed of factory workers, shock workers, and Civil War veterans, were sent to spur the collectivization of Soviet farms. These men were hailed as heroes of the Soviet Union

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<sup>28</sup> I. Froumin and Y. Kouzminov, “Common Legacy: Evolution of the Institutional Landscape of Soviet Higher Education,” in: eds. J. Huisman, A. Smolentseva, I. Froumin. *25 Years of Transformations of Higher Education Systems in Post-Soviet Countries*, Palgrave Studies in Global Higher Education, (New York City: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52980-6\\_2](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-52980-6_2).

<sup>29</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 202.

and known as the “best sons of the fatherland” for their work in collectivizing agriculture.<sup>30</sup> Seventy-thousand total factory workers volunteered for this cause, but only twenty-five thousand were sent. Komsomol members and Communist party members were also accounted for participating. The goal of this massive agricultural collectivization project was to ensure that the farms could be responsible for mass levels of production to support the Soviet Union as a collective. There was an overwhelming level of resistance from the peasantry, which was expressed through poor cooperation, sluggishness, and other forms of passive resistance. The 25,000ers were engaging in coercion as existing Party units, GPU (State Political Directorate) troops, and other efforts were insufficient against resistance. Despite this, the 25,000ers collectivization efforts were successful and the group retreated in 1932, having set up proletarian outposts on the farms to ensure their smooth operation and to help further eliminate resistance to collectivization.<sup>31</sup>

Factories produced massive quantities of heavy industry products. There would often be a surplus of product, which is counterintuitive when one considers the shortages of goods faced by the average citizen. However, this surplus can be explained by the fact that the masses of products being produced were not intended for Soviet consumers. The surplus as referenced here is “social surplus” (i.e., the “leftovers”), or the economic difference between what is produced and what is purchased and can be divided into three different categories. The largest amount of surplus was used solely for expansion in which the surplus was directed back into its original industry to generate more products. Second, some surplus was funneled into maintaining the

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<sup>30</sup> Lynne Viola, *The Best Sons of the Fatherland: Workers in the Vanguard of Soviet Collectivization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), accessed April 10, 2023, ProQuest Ebook Central, 3-4.

<sup>31</sup> Viola, *The Best Sons of the Fatherland*, 210-18.

power of the state, i.e., distributing surplus goods and surplus funding to prisons, the Party police force, and the army. The last section of surplus was used in the areas of society that supported all citizens, such as healthcare, education, culture, and more.<sup>32</sup> Essentially, net profits from industries (after overheads for utilities, machinery maintenance, and wages) were plowed back for further enterprise expansion and purchases of machinery. Such capital expenditure was conducted not to raise workers' wages or invest in light industry, which produced consumer goods.

Magnitogorsk, a city created from scratch during the first five-year plan, is a Russian city in the Ural Mountains that has been an industrial factory hub since the Stalin era. In the early 1930s, industry was steadily growing in Magnitogorsk with workers learning new skills, training in new specialist jobs, and overall becoming more effective.<sup>33</sup> By 1938, Magnitogorsk was producing over five thousand metric tons of steel each day, in addition to other materials. Only a decade before, the city was but a town of roughly a few hundred livestock herders. Although Magnitogorsk started out in the first Five Year Plan, the late nineteen thirties saw an increased industrial boom for the city, with working-age young people from all over the Soviet Union and from the countryside flooding into the area to work. Most of these youths' time was spent laboring in factories under crude conditions. However, some young workers were able to enjoy their spare time engaging in recreational games and music with comrades. The Soviet

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<sup>32</sup> Marcel van der Linden, *Western Marxism and the Soviet Union: A Survey of Critical Theories and Debates Since 1917* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 170.

<sup>33</sup> John Scott, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel*, ed. Stephen Kotkin, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 258.



government tried to provide cultural amenities for the city, but these amenities could not compete with those found in Moscow or Leningrad.

With World War II looming and then erupting, from 1938 to 1945 production at Magnitogorsk increased greatly in order to supply the war effort. The Soviet Union's defense budget doubled and then some during those years. The Red Army (supplied by the working class) tripled in size from two million in 1938 to between six and seven million in 1941. Magnitogorsk and other newly created industrial centers made this defense effort possible. Railroad construction knit factories, cities, and military bases closer together. Unfortunately, the war exacerbated shortages for the civilian population, office workers, and teachers who not only suffered a reduction of the few existing consumer goods but also faced a dearth of food in their workplaces, with bread and other food items reallocated to the military. Often, individuals caught up in this ordeal resorted to the black market and bootlegging to survive. However, especially skilled workers were lucky enough to receive better rations.<sup>34</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The Soviet Government decisively crafted the educational system to further its goal of creating a massive skilled working class. By trying to ensure that all working-class children had equal educational opportunities, the regime taking different avenues, it was providing that the population were learned and ready for the workforce. Students could attend a "regular" school and then enter the workforce, or they could receive training and classes at factories. Once a part of the work force, there were a few limitations on whom could work where. There were several

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<sup>34</sup> Scott, *Behind the Urals*, 253-54.

categories excused from joining the labor force. They were people under the age of eighteen (minors), and people accepted into universities. Another group was disabled individuals, although there were work opportunities for people with disabilities. Mothers eight weeks before and after childbirth, and mothers with children under the age of eight if absolutely no one else could care for the children were also excused. Men above the age of forty-five and women above the age of forty were also exempted.<sup>35</sup> These limitations demonstrate that the majority of the proletarian population was expected to work. The workers' production was controlled according to the production stipulations of Gosplan and five-year plan directives. Entering World War II, production of heavy industry goods in support of the war effort increased, while food production was cut, leading to a shortage of food stuffs. Soviet ideological indoctrination was unavoidable, as Soviet values were promoted in the educational system and workforce making these values universal and even quite popular, while other viewpoints were not taught or shown by the media.<sup>36</sup> The proletariat was educated in a strategic way insofar as its education prepared it to be good obedient Soviet men and women who were ready to enter the industrial workforce.

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<sup>35</sup> Judith Grunfeld, "Women's Work in Russia's Planned Economy," *Social Research* 9, no. 1 (1942): 27, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40981832>.

<sup>36</sup> Jeffrey J. Rossman, *Worker Resistance under Stalin: Class and Revolution on the Shop Floor* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 12. Accessed April 13, 2023, ProQuest Ebook Central.

## Chapter 3

### The Urban Proletariat

#### City

Under Stalin, there was a goal of socialist reconstruction in major cities, especially Moscow. From the Civil War and into the 1930s, there was an overhaul of any evidence of pre-Soviet culture from Moscow, other major cities, and elsewhere. Churches and cathedrals such as the Cathedral of Christ the Redeemer in the mid-1930s were destroyed. Tsarist Byzantine eagle symbols were dislodged from the Kremlin and replaced with the Communist Party hammer and sickle.<sup>37</sup> Besides aesthetic changes, there were changes to the city structure and overall function. This is due, in part, to the mass influx of people relocating from rural areas to cities to work in factories. The city of Moscow was divided between the main city and an *oblast'* (province). The *oblast'* was complete with its own executive, administrative apparatus, and budget, which in turn meant that Moscow was a regional economic and administrative force.

A few key issues arose during socialist reconstruction. There was no urban planning involved, poor cooperation with the workers manning construction, and a neglect of the expectations held by the Soviet proletarian population.<sup>38</sup> These expectations were that the spatial needs of the urban proletariat would be kept in mind as far as population size as a whole and individual spatial needs. There was no concrete urban planning until 1935, when a course of action was developed. The government was to begin with urban planning, which included outfitting Moscow with public parks and wooded areas for cleaner oxygen and recreation. Some aspects taken into consideration were the needs of the city population, the city as a territory,

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<sup>37</sup> Timothy J. Colton, *Moscow: Governing the Socialist Metropolis* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1995), 262-65.

<sup>38</sup> Colton, *Moscow*, 252-253.

adding power, transmission, and utility plants, maintaining sanitation, and preventing fires.<sup>39</sup>

These were all in response to observing unfavorable issues that had been plaguing cities such as Moscow.

The infrastructure in Soviet cities, such as Moscow, was incredibly poor. There was a distinct lack of roadways, especially paved roads. The main roadways remained unpaved for decades, even into the 1960s.<sup>40</sup> Most Soviet citizens did not own personal vehicles. Private ownership of means of transportation was frowned upon and thought of as bourgeois. The emphasis was upon the public including transportation. There was a slowly increasing number of cars throughout the 1920s and 1930s, almost always reserved for high-ranking government and Party officials, but the roads were not kept up to compensate for more traffic. There was a distinct lack of gas stations conveniently available, so it was difficult to keep a car fueled if one did own a vehicle. Car owners required services to keep their cars maintained; however, the Soviet Union lacked such services. This was typically Soviet in the sense that production was good, but maintenance was poor. Therefore, individuals with cars needed to resort to other means to keep them in working order. People who knew how to perform repairs or possessed the proper car parts traded such services in exchange for appliances, education for their children, necessary medications, and miscellaneous favors. This sort of transactional exchange continued even after mass car ownership began in the Soviet Union in the 1960s, but on a lesser scale. The introduction of automobiles into the Soviet Union may have played a role in the disillusionment of the proletariat towards the government, as the automobile industry was poorly managed.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Colton, *Moscow*, 272-78.

<sup>40</sup> Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Cars for Comrades. The Life of the Soviet Automobile* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 172.

<sup>41</sup> Siegelbaum, *Cars for Comrades*, 251.

Some high-end cars were secretly imported for the *nomenklatura* and were highly unaffordable to a member of the working class. The cars that were manufactured in the Soviet Union and available for proletarian purchase were poorly crafted, displaying a thinly veiled class inequality. Luckily, cars were not the most necessary commodity because there was public transit, mainly in the form of railways, busses, tramways, and by the mid-1930s, the Moscow Metro (subway).

In Gennady M. Andreev-Khamiakov's memoirs, he recalls when he and his comrade Neposedov were travelling in Neposedov's car in the late 1930s. The car died suddenly, and the men took several guesses as to which car part had malfunctioned, checking the carburetor, the motor, and finally deciding that the gas pump was the problem. Neposedov cleaned the pump and put it back, to no avail, which greatly vexed him. Neposedov became angered, ranting that "It [the gas pump] acts as a valve, but what the devil for, if there's another valve? However, if they put it in, that means it must be necessary, machines don't have superfluous parts." The men decided to toss out a random "ball" that Neposedov found in the pump, and the car began to run to which Neposedov exclaimed that clearly, "not everything in technology has its use."<sup>42</sup> This anecdote demonstrates the difficulties that Soviet car owners faced, and the tendency of Soviet cars to break down. Neither Neposedov nor Andreev knew exactly how to fix the car and were only able to do so by troubleshooting. This was a common experience for car owners in the Soviet Union.

There are several key conclusions to be drawn from examining Soviet city living. The state saw both the human inhabitants and physical aspects of Moscow to be completely malleable, substances to be molded to the Party's whims. Additionally, re-design efforts such as

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<sup>42</sup> Gennady Andreev-Khomiakov, *Bitter Waters: Life and Work In Stalin's Russia: a Memoir* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), <https://hdl-handle-net.ric.idm.oclc.org/2027/heb01798.0001.001>. PDF.

removing Tsarist iconography and replacing it with grand Soviet symbolism displayed a focus on self-aggrandization and the aesthetic priorities of the Soviet state. Much of the new Soviet infrastructure in Moscow built under Stalin to replace old Tsarist architecture was built mainly for self-celebration and thus focused as much on visuals as infrastructure.

### **Apartments & Home Life**

City-dwelling Soviets lived in communal apartment-style housing known as the *kommunalka*. These communal apartment buildings were state property and therefore maintenance fell under state responsibility. The buildings were not well-cared for. The government instead sent enforcers who essentially policed the apartments and imposed the residential permits that were required to reside in such spaces. It was a situation in which this policer would live amongst the residents or close enough nearby in order to keep watch.<sup>43</sup> There was such a major crisis in providing enough housing that the government was unable to secure housing for all of its urban citizens. There was an extreme overcrowding issue, which led to many generations of a single family sharing one small apartment. In this instance, there would be one family per room, with different sections of said room separated by curtains or hung sheets. The furniture in these rooms was often primitive, with not enough beds, usually one chair if any at all, and rarely a wardrobe with any storage of clothing, dishes, or other paraphernalia being kept in trunks.<sup>44</sup> Many of these apartments had shotgun hall layouts, meaning that one went down a corridor with several rooms on each side of it. This practice was common in communal apartments as many of the buildings once belonged to pre-Soviet elites whose homes were then sub-divided into apartments.

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<sup>43</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 46.

<sup>44</sup> André Gide, *Retour de l'URSS suivi de retouches à mon retour de l'URSS* (Paris: Gallimard, 1936/1937).

Other individuals lived in dormitories and barracks, also sharing these spaces with others. There was such an overflow that many people lived in corridors and corners of other people's apartment buildings. These corner dwellers would have slept on the floor of the kitchen or in another common area. It was not uncommon to see beds, or rather cots, lining hallways. There was a minor group of privileged individuals which was fortunate enough to have its own private apartment, but this was highly uncommon amongst the majority of the proletariat. There were barracks and dormitory-style living arrangements as well. American worker John Scott wrote in detail about the barracks in Magnitogorsk, in which he witnessed a shortage of women resulting in the young workers in the barracks being unmarried and who lived in terrible living conditions. The barracks were overcrowded and from Scott's Western perspective, there was nowhere to consummate a marriage or engage in any sexual activity regardless unless one wanted to do so outside or in the packed rooms.<sup>45</sup> However, Russians were not squeamish nor shy about intimacy, and engaged in sexual activities with other people in the room. Privacy was a concept that did not exist in the Soviet Union, and there was no word for "privacy" in the Russian language until the 1970s.

Students resided in dormitories consisting of somewhat large, unfinished rooms. These rooms had iron beds and nightstands, usually with only a single lightbulb hanging from the ceiling in the middle of the room to provide some semblance of lighting. Many beds were jammed together in an attempt to house as many students as possible. The notion of personal space was foreign and lacking. There was running water in some of these facilities, although not

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<sup>45</sup> John Scott, *Behind the Urals*, 40-41.

many, and the running water that was available was faulty and ill-maintained. There were constant infestations of pests, such as bedbugs and cockroaches.<sup>46</sup>

Throughout the 1930s, urban living conditions failed to improve. In 1930 in Moscow, the average living space allotment was 5.5m<sup>2</sup> per person and by the end of the decade, that number had decreased to 4m<sup>2</sup> per person. Some areas were lower than Moscow, with the average space being 3.4m<sup>2</sup> per person in Krasnoiarsk in 1933. There was extensive population growth, and the Soviet government did not compensate insofar as infrastructure, meaning that the railroads were not maintained so there was further deterioration in roads as more people flooded in, with no repairs being done. Furthermore, public transport was not bolstered to support the increase of users. Moscow had never truly staggered the working hours of the laborers, so there was extreme traffic with a mass influx of people traveling to and from work at the same time each day. There were crowded busses and tramways with people jammed together with no personal space, excess shoving, pushing, swearing, body odor, and general unpleasantness. There was a plan developed in 1935 to build sixteen new thoroughfares through Moscow, but only the ones in the low-density areas of the city were truly pursued.<sup>47</sup> The water and plumbing systems were not improved, there was not an increase in consumer supplies, and the power system was not adjusted to compensate for the greater amount of power being drawn to support more people stuffed into buildings that were already over capacity.<sup>48</sup>

There were several unfortunate commonalities that could be observed within the standard Soviet communal apartment complex during the 1930s. Aside from the *kommunalki*, there were situations of a family or a couple of families living in one apartment room, divided by curtains.

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<sup>46</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 46-50.

<sup>47</sup> Colton, *Moscow*, 518-24.

<sup>48</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 51.



There remained two to three generations living in an apartment divided by curtains. The walls that did divide apartments were thin, so even that left residents feeling exposed as sound traveled easily.<sup>49</sup> Residents would store food by hanging it out the windows as it was so cold outside that the food kept. The buildings had communal toilets, washing facilities, and cooking areas that were to be shared by the inhabitants of the building and the hallways were filled with heaps of laundry to be done. The laundry was cleaned by boiling the clothing in pots in the kitchen, along with potatoes and cabbage. There was little heating to be had and no running water or proper sewage built in apartment buildings specifically meant to house workers until 1937.<sup>50</sup> The later sewage and water pipes were buried in concrete walls and flooring. Urban quality of life was less than ideal, especially when considering that the influx of workers from rural to urban spaces was often for a “better” life and more working opportunity. If the overcrowded, nervous nightmare of city living was better than living in rurality, this gives one the opportunity to infer how miserable countryside living had become.

The city of Moscow was the Soviet Union’s prized trophy-city, lauded as a hub of progression and opportunity, of work and culture. However, once inside the city, many became disillusioned as the reality of life became clear and the necessary amenities such as water, supplies, and cleanliness were lacking. There were no showers in apartments until the late 1950s, early 1960s when individual apartments were finally introduced. There was no such thing as privacy in urban Soviet spaces. Privacy was such a foreign concept that the word did not even translate into the Russian language. Sharing apartments, living in corners, sleeping in hallways, and all in such close confinement led the Soviet proletariat to become a rather nervous people.

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<sup>49</sup> Klepikova, “Privacy As They Saw It,” 371.

<sup>50</sup> Fitzpatrick, *Everday Stalinism*, 47, 51.

City-dwellers possessed frayed nerves and became excessively argumentative. The number of people per apartment was up to the authorities, not the people living in the apartments as they were assigned and had to take what little space was given.<sup>51</sup> One can postulate as to the sorts of physical and mental effects that this lifestyle could have on people and the increasing detriments that could occur to one's psyche. This style of living condition was detrimental to the overall quality of life, which led to Soviet citizens being incredibly irritable and prone to lash out at a moment's notice. This phenomenon went so far as to inspire literature, such as Mikhail Zoshchenko's *Nervous People: and Other Satires*. Zoshchenko short narratives in which he observed both nervous behavior and other characteristically Soviet behaviors (sullenness, excitability, grouchiness) through a satirical lens.<sup>52</sup> The people observed in this literary piece are incredibly irritable, going so far as to exhibit behaviors of what can only be described as flying-off-the-handle.

Foreigners who visited the Soviet Union described the urban living spaces quite negatively, and were appalled by what they saw and experienced. In his 1927 diary visitor Walter Benjamin stated that "Bolshevism has abolished private life," in reference to the absence of privacy resulting from the living conditions that Benjamin observed during his visit to Moscow.<sup>53</sup> Benjamin was in Russia to learn more about the Soviet situation and to write an essay for a magazine (*Die Kreatur*) about his observations. Observations from other travelers staying in communal apartments noted that by living in communal flats, one automatically knew everything about their neighbors because they all shared the same living spaces, bathrooms, and

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<sup>51</sup> Klepikova, "Privacy As They Saw It," 358-68.

<sup>52</sup> Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Nervous People and Other Satires*, ed. Hugh McLean (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1975), 141-324.

<sup>53</sup> Walter Benjamin, "Moskau," In *Die Kreatur*, (Berlin: Lambert Schneider, 1927).

kitchens. One doorbell would have sometimes as many as fourteen names listed, so whoever answered the bell would learn about their neighbors' guests and their business.<sup>54</sup>

### **Family Structure**

There was an attempt by the Soviet government to structure nearly every aspect of society. Structuring the perfect proletariat to ensure the Soviet utopian vision meant starting in the home, not only with the type of dwelling but with the families or family who inhabited said dwelling. The Soviet government had several goals when creating the concept of an ideal Soviet family unit. These aims included addressing the issues presented for single mothers, combating child neglect, and providing intervention for women desiring escape from unsafe relationships or marriages. In the 1920s, there was a move towards making social and sexual relations more equal, with one stipulation being to create distinctions between the level of formality sexual relationships held. From this movement arose the Soviet Russian belief that the act of sex was of the same gravity as shaking hands. The state aimed to eliminate separation of society from the state entity and by doing so to become more involved with the personal lives of citizens and to inject more transparency about the government's involvement.<sup>55</sup> However, this meant that the state was also more complicit in the failure of its goals due to its disclosure to the public of its direct involvement with the public's personal lives.

There was a changing attitude towards free love and women's liberation entering the 1920s. When crafting the bases for Soviet society, the Bolsheviks pushed for freedom of the individual, starting with granting the freedom of divorce. The 1918 Family Code stated that a marriage could be annulled by request of either spouse and that there were no specific grounds

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<sup>54</sup> Klepikova, "Privacy As They Saw It," 353, 370-71.

<sup>55</sup> Lauren Kaminsky, "Utopian Visions of Family Life in the Stalin-Era Soviet Union," *Central European History* 44, 1 (2011): 89-90, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41238388>.

necessary to request a divorce. The administration ZAGS, or *Zapis' aktov grazhdanskogo sostoianiia*, was essentially a registry where one could register births, deaths, marriage, and divorce. The ZAGS was also a physical location, a room, in which couples could get married. ZAGS granted divorces if both parties agreed upon the terms but if the couple did not agree, they would go to court. These disagreements included but were not limited to alimony and child support and/or custody.<sup>56</sup>

These new divorce laws were of great relief to many Soviet women, although a source of anxiety for others. Divorce was no longer a privilege that only the wealthy could afford, now, divorce took about one to two weeks to obtain if both parties agreed. For women trapped in abusive relationships with alcoholic and violent husbands, this expansion of women's rights was an immense relief. However, for women who had always looked to their husbands for money and survival, this new norm was nerve-wracking. Luckily, the new Soviet woman was expected to work and ideally could support herself without a husband. The women who had lived in the pre-Soviet era were understandably apprehensive, as their way of life was changing before their eyes.<sup>57</sup>

In addition to marital practice, the state also became more involved with controlling reproduction and family planning. In November 1920 abortion was legalized by the Commissariats of Health and Justice. The government administration did not support abortion and did not believe in it but realized that it would occur regardless of legality. Thus, free abortions by licensed professionals were legalized to protect the health and safety of the women

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<sup>56</sup> Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution. Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 102-03.

<sup>57</sup> Alexandra Kollontai, "Communism and the Family," *Komunistka*, No. 2, 1920, In *Selected Writings of Alexandra Kollontai*, trans. By Alix Holt, (Allison & Busby, 1977), 1.

seeking them. However, it was still illegal to obtain an abortion from an unlicensed individual. The People's Commissar of Health at this time was Nikolai Semashko, whose rhetoric was that abortion was not a human right and it was ideally a temporary act of legislation. Semashko postulated that once the Soviet Union improved the standard of living, abortions would no longer be necessary because women and families would then be able to comfortably support a child.<sup>58</sup>

Although abortion rights were granted to women in the beginning of the decade, it was not until the later 1920s that contraceptives became a topic of legislative discussion. Abortion had become a contraceptive method to a certain extent, and proletarian women were seeking better preventative measures. At the 1927 Kiev Conference of Midwives and Gynecologists it was deduced that, although there was stigma surrounding contraceptives with many believing that they were "evil," contraceptives arguably outweighed the alleged evils of abortion. Although contraception was deemed vital for women, hospitals (as everywhere else), lacked resources and therefore placed women at differing levels of priority. Women with medical conditions were prioritized first and then healthy women. Women with preexisting children were slated last, as officials saw them as already being mothers and thus were somewhat prepared for another child.<sup>59</sup> The logic behind allowing abortion and divorce was that it would assist men and women in building a stronger family unit and create lasting marriages and having children they could provide for, all while steadily increasing the proletarian population.

When creating a proletariat in which men and women were both meant to work, in addition to slowing growing the working class, the state had to consider what to do for children once they were born. In theory, the state would provide childcare options and the children would

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<sup>58</sup> Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, 255-56.

<sup>59</sup> Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, 258.

be cared for by collective society. An essay published in 1920 in *Komunistka* by Alexandra Kollantai states that “Communist society takes care of every child and guarantees both him and his mother material and moral support. Society will feed, bring up and educate the child.” This sentiment demonstrates this idea of collective care by the community that was preached by the Party. In order to combat the fears of mothers regarding balancing work and children, Kollantai assuages women that the “worker-mother” cannot see their children as “yours and mine,” but know that there are only the children of Russia’s proletariat, “our [the working class] children.” This essay is evidently propaganda meant to convince women of the Soviet Union’s new paradigms of working women and mothers, while the family becomes consumers who work rather than producers who make their food, clothes, and household goods at home.<sup>60</sup>

In the mid-1920s, although the population of female laborers was still somewhat small, there were not enough daycare or primary schools to compensate for the childcare needed for the children of female workers. There were limited allotments of childcare money and financial aid awarded by the state, which only assisted in preschool childcare with these minute financial awards. In the 1930s, the number of working women had increased greatly. In 1937 women workers comprised forty percent of industrial workers, seventy-two percent of healthcare positions, eighty-seven percent of the educational staffs, thirty-four percent of commerce, and twenty-one percent of construction jobs. This high contrast was because there were intentional prohibitions made to exclude the majority of women from heavy labor jobs in an attempt to protect them from harm. However, childcare options had not improved substantially, and

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<sup>60</sup> Kollantai, “Communism and the Family,” 6-8.

proletarian family incomes had dropped consistently with the lowering of real wages.<sup>61</sup> This circumstance decreased compensation by the state regarding both wages and child support, and placed difficulty on the families. With both mother and father working long hours, preschool childcare was often left to elder family members, above all to the proverbial grandmother (*babushka*) who lived in the communal apartments with her family unit.

In June 1936 abortion was prohibited once again. This served to increase the present burden on single women and families. The reasoning of the government in this situation was that since there were high divorce rates, larger populations of working women, homelessness, and general familial instability, then prohibiting abortion would strengthen the family unit.<sup>62</sup> This approach was highly counterintuitive. There were higher divorce rates for a number of reasons, but one such reason was that men and women were not staying in situations that did not work for them or that were unsafe. As for instances of homelessness, there are naturally countless situations as to why the individual could have left their housing. Regardless, there were massive housing shortages and overcrowding of the apartments that did exist, combined with rural rootlessness with people moving to cities en masse, so it is also a problem for the state to address. If one was concerned with familial instability, adding a child to care for would logically only serve to add more stress to the family as issues of childcare and support would arise, which as aforementioned, also was not helped by the state. This reversal of abortion rights demonstrates that the state often worked in the context of Soviet goals for the ideal proletarian class, without grasping how it would affect the members of the proletariat. The Soviet government did not take

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<sup>61</sup> Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, 299-301, 312-13, 316.; Melanie Ilič, *Women Workers in the Soviet Interwar Economy [1917-1941]*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan London, 1999), 26-36.

<sup>62</sup> Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, 296-97.

accountability for its implicit responsibilities of what areas would need to be supported when abortion rights were revoked.

## **Conclusion**

It is evident that there was a strong shift in the Soviet state's values from the 1920s to the 1930s. A strong socialist family was ideal in the 1920s in which husband and wife were both hard workers and were able to construct the Soviet dream. On the contrary individual freedom was replaced with a "repressive strengthening" of the family unit in the 1930s when the government tried to enforce the traditional Western nuclear family unit upon the Soviet proletariat.<sup>63</sup> Strong government was emphasized, and yet the Party remained portraying itself as having a truly socialist vision. The government exerted stricter control over family structure after a decade of advancing the dream of freedom of the individual and free love with the rights of divorce and abortion. Even though the Soviet government essentially did a full reversal of policy, it maintained that its reasoning for doing so was to strengthen the Soviet Union and the working class. By strengthen, however, the state meant multiple and repopulate through the assertion of the nuclear family and the promotion of childbirth.

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<sup>63</sup> Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, 338.



## Chapter 4

### Consumption

#### Standard of Living & The Consumer

The standard of living for the Soviet working class was subpar, but it also was not static. When comparing the 1920s to the 1930s, there are several changes to the workers' way of life and its relationship to how state policy unfolded. The 1920s saw a series of edicts promoting socialist equality, whereas by the mid-1930s, there was a reversal of the socialist equality rhetoric contained in these dicta. By the mid-1930s there was a reduction of both social and physical mobility as fewer people migrated to urban centers. A regimen of an increased number of harsher examinations and more homework in schools took place, along with the addition of uniforms, more rigid schedules mimicking workers' rigid working hours, stricter teachers, and greater discipline in the classroom.<sup>64</sup> These alterations reflect not only the changes happening in the educational system but also in other areas of society, with control over the proletariat tightening and working hours, policies, and living standards becoming more austere. In 1928 one needed to complete an estimated twenty-six hours of work to purchase the weekly essential foods not provided by state programs to feed a family of four people. After the introduction of the five-year plans, the amount of work hours required to provide the same basic diet increased throughout the 1930s.<sup>65</sup>

The five-year plans along with universal nationalization led to more government interference with matters of supply and demand, mainly through increasing the prices of

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<sup>64</sup> Edmund Nash, "Purchasing Power of Workers in the Soviet Union," *Monthly Labor Review* 94, no. 5 (1971): 39, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41838278>.

<sup>65</sup> Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams*, 246.

consumer goods. This situation was not comparable to Western ideals of consumer goods and pricing because the ruble was not a floating currency, its value was arbitrarily set by the government, and over time benefitted price setting by manufacturers and other producers to the detriment of individual purchasers. The concept of “consumer” and “consumer culture” by this point had evaporated. This meant that laborers had to work longer hours to purchase the same amount of goods, and learn to defer expectations.

Workers were protected by the state to a certain extent as they received free or reduced rate lunch provided at their workplaces, in addition to food rations issued once or twice a month. Wages were in reality subsistence payouts to buy the necessities in part compensated by government subsidized transportation in urban spaces and other government emoluments. From 1928 to 1937, the amount of non-agricultural workers increased from 13.77 million to 26.53 million workers, causing total wages paid in the Soviet Union to increase from 63.2 billion rubles in 1928 to 113.3 billion rubles in 1937. However, the wages themselves dropped seven percent, and workers were paid less even though consumption and the number of factory workers had skyrocketed.<sup>66</sup>

There was a notion of light industry, which was any production meant for consumers. The Soviet government dictated that heavy industry was far more important to the economy than light industry. The regime did not want the Soviet Union to become a consumerist nation like the capitalist nations with their “fetishes” of consumption that Lenin warned about. As a result, light industry could not meet consumer demands because it was severely downgraded by the

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<sup>66</sup> Robert C. Allen, “The Standard of Living in the Soviet Union, 1928-1940,” *The Journal of Economic History* 58, no. 4 (1998): 1079. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2566851>.

government. Even when ordinary people and workers went to shop for food and goods not already provided, they were often in low supply — if available at all — and were poorly made, with food not fresh or of high quality. The main food items that people were purchasing were rye bread, potatoes, butter, sugar, milk, and eggs and beef, the latter too often being in short supply. Other commodities sold included cotton shirts, wool suits, dresses, nylon stockings, and leather shoes in addition to non-clothing items like soap and cigarettes.<sup>67</sup> The major cities, unlike smaller urban areas — never mind the countryside — had reasonable supplies of the above items, although most of these items were relatively costly and often hard to procure.

The standard of living for people with disabilities in the Soviet Union was an entity of its own. Socially, people with disabilities were often stigmatized, looked down upon, and overall treated rather negatively. People with disabilities were considered less than whole persons by Russian Soviets. The closest translation to the word used to describe people with disabilities in the early Soviet Union is “invalid,” a word which today is not commonly used due to its negative connotations.<sup>68</sup> The Soviet Union addressed disability through the study of defectology, or the academic discipline under which individuals studied to learn to teach children with disabilities. This approach pertained to the education of those who were deaf or hard of hearing, blind or vision impaired, had speech impediments, or mental disabilities.<sup>69</sup> Mentally disabled adolescents were sent to specialty training schools where they took part in therapeutic workshops and learned

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<sup>67</sup> Nash, “Purchasing Power,” 39-45.

<sup>68</sup> “Soviet Attitudes toward Disability and the Lasting Effect on Nagorno Karabakh,” Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust (HART UK), May 15, 2020. <https://www.hart-uk.org/blog/soviet-attitudes-toward-disability-and-the-lasting-effect-on-nagorno-karabakh/#:~:text=Historically%2C%20disabled%20peoples%20have%20been,lived%20under%20the%20iron%20curtain.>

<sup>69</sup> William O. McCagg and Siegelbaum, eds., *The Disabled in the Soviet Union: Past and Present, Theory and Practice*. (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1989), 39.

farming in a manner that they could execute. After schooling, these teens would be sent to “psychoneurological boarding schools” which were so unstimulating that the students stagnated and lost much of what they had learned in the prior programs. The practice of defectology was altered by the early 1930s. The previous pedagogical separation between mental and physical disabilities was decreased, and there was more emphasis on the social value of getting all children through school regardless of whether they had a disability or not.

In addition, the development of plans for wheelchair accessible apartments was begun by the Leningrad Institute of Prosthetic Research. This program is one of the exceedingly few measures taken to improve daily accessibility. The Soviet regime did not see the value in disabled individuals because of its belief that these individuals were not as “useful” in regard to productivity, and therefore did not prioritize the needs of such individuals. Meagre disability pensions were doled out, and employment rates were low for both those whose were born or became disabled. Most women with disabilities remained unemployed.<sup>70</sup> Any further assistance to them would have been considered cost ineffective. The Soviet Union never subscribed to eugenic teachings and practices, unlike in Germany and the United States at this time. The Soviet government saw disability more as an issue to handle through educational remediation with the afflicted individual rather than as a societal problem demanding the medical marginalization, even elimination, of the disabled individual.

Outside of the educational system, the standard of living for those with disabilities was also impacted by workplace conditions. Most disabilities resulting from the workplace occurred due to injury on the job, unsafe working conditions, or unhygienic working conditions. Soviet

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<sup>70</sup> McCagg and Siegelbaum, *The Disabled in the Soviet Union*, 202, 205, 221.

workers often were quite indifferent and often did not exercise the utmost caution on the job. This attitude stemmed from an ingrained sentiment that they had no responsibility to safeguard public property in which they had no personal stake. According to hygienists who examined working conditions, the cause of such injuries or conditions resulting from unhygienic workplaces was due to a few main causes. First, poor living conditions greatly affected the workplace, as did alcoholism and any familial issues occurring in the home such as marital disputes or abuse in the home that may cause lack of focus or preexisting injuries. In addition, the factories had poor lighting and extremely hot temperatures, high humidity rates, and an excessive accumulation of dust. Often, there was not enough equipment in these factories, so they were crowded as multiple workers were working on the same machine. The machines often were old and poorly maintained, which often led to malfunction and break downs. Not enough breaks were given to workers. According to health and technical inspectors, there were frequent and abundant violations of safety codes and factory rules by workers. In addition, the carelessness of countryside folk who were now working in the factories with little experience in such environments led to further safety violations.

As the number of laborers increased across the industries, the number of accidents increased. Throughout the 1920s there was a consistent increase of mining accidents due to failure to shore up mine shafts properly, insufficient ventilation, serial injuries, and deaths on the job. The state conducted research on which section of the population was receiving the most work accidents and where, the impact physical labor had on fatigue leading to such accidents, and the intensity of the resulting disabilities. It was discovered that most workplace accidents occurred among nineteen- to twenty-three-year-old men working second shift, with more incidents among those who had only worked in the industry for under two years. There were

minimal workplace injuries involving female workers, mostly because there were more women working menial jobs than factory labor-intensive positions involving machinery.<sup>71</sup> This inconsistency of injury between men and women workers demonstrates the lack of gender equality in blue-collar work, because it was mainly men being hired for heavy labor. Women were more likely to be sequestered into light industry and white-collar work.

The life expectancy for people in the USSR increased from the 1920s to the 1930s. From 1925-27, the life expectancy in the USSR for men was 41.9 whereas women's life expectancy was 46.8. This number increased to 44.0 for men and 49.7 for women in 1938-39. Approximately sixty percent of excess deaths, meaning deaths not of natural causes, in the Soviet Union were male.<sup>72</sup> This is logical, as previously stated there are more workplace injuries and related deaths involving male workers than female workers.

## **Food**

Prior to the birth of the Soviet Union, Russia and other Soviet territories had a long history of farming and even food-gathering. Bread and salt were staples in the peasant diet, with grains farmed for breads and hot cereal. Rye was farmed in such abundance that the regions of Northern and Central Russia specifically were known as the "kingdom of rye."<sup>73</sup> Salt was used to cure meats and fish but also to create brine for pickling. The type of salt used for these processes

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<sup>71</sup> McCagg and Siegelbaum, *The Disabled in the Soviet Union*, 93-96.

<sup>72</sup> Massimo Livi-Bacci, "On the Human Costs of Collectivization in the Soviet Union," *Population and Development Review* 19, no. 4 (1993): 749, 752.  
<https://doi.org/10.2307/2938412>.

<sup>73</sup> Goldstein, *The Kingdom of Rye*, 9.

was usually rock salt or crystallized lake and sea salt.<sup>74</sup> Fermented food products and alcohol were also a large aspect of the diet. Mead, kvass (fermented rye and barley or wheat and rye), and beer were common drinks. Vodka was produced in excess, as it was much quicker to make, while wines and spirits were mainly imported.<sup>75</sup> Although, during the birth of the Soviet Union to ensure success and strong revolutionaries, the Soviet government kept up the dry laws enacted in 1914 by the Imperial Government. This prohibition was officially kept up until 1925 but was not effective whatsoever against the widespread alcohol consumption amongst the peasantry and the proletariat due to exorbitant quantities of moonshine, or *samogon*, being produced. In Skopin, a small town in Ryazan *oblast* in Russia, in Spring 1918 approximately twenty-five million poods (Russian pounds) of grain was converted into moonshine. Additionally, in February 1919 in the same location five thousand poods of grain were converted into moonshine per day, to give an example of local moonshine production gone overboard. The peasants did not want to ship the grain they produced to the cities, so they chose to distill it into alcohol for both protest and personal gain of moonshine.<sup>76</sup> Naturally, this only served to increase drunkenness amongst the rural peasant population.

Popular flavors found in the diet included fermented fruits and vegetables, whole grains, mushrooms, horseradish, and garlic. Dairy was a major food group, with milks and substances such as sour cream and the fermented milk product kefir. The Russians had been making a form of non-dairy oatmilk from rye, buckwheat, and oats for over one thousand years. These foods

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<sup>74</sup> R.E.F. Smith, *Bread and Salt: A Social and Economic History of Food and Drink in Russia*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 5-29.

<sup>75</sup> Smith, *Bread and Salt*, 74-88.

<sup>76</sup> Helena Stone, "The Soviet Government and Moonshine, 1917-1929," *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique* 27, no. 3/4 (1986): 359-61. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20170117>.

and drinks continued to be important nutritional sources of workers' diets once the Soviet Union was established. However, there was a group of Soviets who were food purists, who firmly argued against seasoning and stimulants such as coffee and alcohol, as they believed ingesting these substances was gluttonous and bad for nutrition. These ascetics were also against smoking. These beliefs did not reflect mainstream thought, however, and these substances were still consumed by the vast majority of the Soviet population.<sup>77</sup>

Following the Bolshevik Revolution and subsequent birth of the Soviet Union there were extensive food shortages. However, during the NEP, the food situation was greatly improved. It is during these early Soviet years that countless state dining halls began to be spawned. The regime promoted these communal dining halls and state cafeterias as a better alternative to traditional dining in the home. The argument supporting communal dining was that it would ensure better rationing of food supplies, better quality control, and prevent the wasting of time and money. Private restaurants were shamed as wasteful and "bourgeois," whereas communal dining was affordable, provided (ideally) nourishing meals for the entire family unit, and encouraged socialization. In addition, communal dining meant that food would be a smaller portion of the consumer budget, as it was in part provided by the state.<sup>78</sup> However, the communal dining system became another case of idealistic vision meeting harsh reality. The social and economic collapse following the Revolution made it difficult to exact the ideal form of the state dining hall. There was immense underfunding, a lack of trained workers, and terrible infrastructure making every aspect of creating the halls difficult. Women generally did not

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<sup>77</sup> Musya Glants, Joyce Toomre, eds, *Food in Russian History and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 185.

<sup>78</sup> John Komlos, "On the Biological Standard of Living in Russia and the Soviet Union," *Slavic Review* 58, no. 1 (1999): 75, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2672988>.



support the dining halls, as they preferred to traditionally home-cook the meals for them and their families. This created a gendered aspect to these public dining halls because they were an attempt to create further gender equality by allegedly liberating women from the kitchens. In actuality, most women and their husbands still preferred that women cook at home.<sup>79</sup> The public food was often of poor quality and highly unappetizing, in comparison to a home-cooked meal.

The mid-1920s saw a reversal of the state sentiment to remove women from the kitchen. By 1924, the farm production had recovered but there were still shortages of fresh, purchasable food in stores which led to a rise in canning what was produced in personal gardens to preserve it. The sugar industry was also growing steadily at this time, which made canning even more widespread and easy since sugar is used as a key preservative in canning. Canning was considered a “progressive” process as it was adapted from Western culture. This process of canning in the home combined with a widespread fear amongst Soviet citizens that raising children to eat in state dining halls would dissuade them from learning to cook or even one day start a family. These fears of young people not growing up traditionally eating and doing laundry at home (as numbers of public laundromats were growing) would lead to fewer marriages and children. Therefore, there was a shift in attitude. Cooking columns began to be published in papers about what dishes good Soviet wives should be preparing for their families. The instructions were to feed children a diet of milk, cream, eggs, and fruits and vegetables, but this was not attainable due to the inaccessibility of these food stuffs not being fully stocked in stores. There were fanciful recipes listed in these columns, but they required ingredients that were not available and time that working women did not possess. These sentiments of strengthening families and raising children traditionally were juxtaposed by the equally prominent movement

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<sup>79</sup> Glants, *Food in Russian History and Culture*, 163-78.

by the regime to convert proletarians from living in the classic nuclear family unit to living in communal family styles (i.e., the communal apartments).<sup>80</sup>

As to be expected, several issues were present in various aspects of nutrition and the food industry. There were extensive food and supply shortages, famines affecting crops, and malnutrition. Drunkenness and alcoholism were also prevalent issues. The erratic spring and summer climate of the Soviet Union negatively affected the health of crops and thus the internal product supply, the markets, storage, and transportation of food stuffs.<sup>81</sup> There had been mass malnutrition during the Civil War. During the NEP era, the government attempted to taper any residual malnutrition from the enduring effects of the war by feeding the citizens highly caloric foods and concentrates. Foods with soybean bases were offered in the state dining halls in the mid 1920s, but workers refused to eat them because they were non-traditional, tasting and smelling incredibly different to what they were used to. There were countless cookbooks published containing high caloric recipes that were traditional peasant and working-class meals, but with larger amounts of animal fat and alternative ingredients, indicating that protein was in short supply.<sup>82</sup> Traditional recipes took time, which as aforementioned most laborers did not have much of. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, women were being shifted back into the kitchen, although not removed from work. This shift was a reinforcement of the traditional societal expectation that part of women's gender roles was being in the kitchen in addition to working. The form of cooking most characteristic of Soviet food culture was *tomlenie*, or a slow-cooking way of combining steaming and braising either vegetables or meat. Stoves with extremely high internal temperatures were utilized to prepare foods that were baked, roasted,

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<sup>80</sup> Glants, *Food in Russian History and Culture*, 179-81.

<sup>81</sup> Smith, *Bread and Salt*, 360.

<sup>82</sup> Glants, *Food in Russian History and Culture*, 190.

boiled, and/or poached. Foods baked without fats were called *pudovye*. One may have prepared *priazhenye* or pan-fried foods on stove tops.<sup>83</sup>

As previously stated, workers were provided free lunch subsidized by the state. At first, these workers went to state dining halls for these lunches. Dining halls hired unskilled proletarian workers who did not know how to cook, gave bad service, had poor manners, and were indifferent to customer concerns. The kitchens were dirty and riddled with flies, cockroaches, and lice, resulting in the consumers eating unsanitary and revolting food. “American style” dishwashers were introduced in these halls in the late 1920s but they were ineffective, often broke down, and were not maintained as most workers disliked them, and besides, there was an absence of spare parts to repair them. From 1929 to 1933, these worker meals started being produced mainly in food factories and delivered to other factories at lunch time in thermos bottles or another similar container. Unsurprisingly, the delivery services were also poor, food being mixed into a gross slop in the thermoses going cold before even arriving. In 1933, the Soviet government discontinued the thermos method and attempted to create cafeterias in each factory, so that transport of food via thermoses was not necessary.<sup>84</sup> Again, the dishwashers that were available worked poorly, and the attitudes of those working in food service were negative and indifferent to quality, so it is a reasonable assumption that these thermoses were not cleaned well.

## **Conclusion**

As in other areas of Soviet legislation, programs and regulations were implemented in attempts to progress but resulted in regression. The programs created to promote equality met

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<sup>83</sup> Goldstein, *The Kingdom of Rye*, 34-37.

<sup>84</sup> Glants, *Food in Russian History and Culture*, 183.

with backlash from the populace, stemming from traditional sexism, from a practical standpoint, and simply from the desire to cling to the life that proletarians knew. The proletariat did not appreciate every change that was made by the Soviet Union, as many of the changes did not serve to improve the quality of life. Soviet policies were based on utopian ideals, and beneficial in theory because ideally the population would not need to worry about where to find its next meal, would not need to direct all its energy into child rearing, and could focus solely on working and existing. Unfortunately, the reality of the matter was that the food provided in factories and public dining halls was just short of inedible and was no substitute for a home-cooked meal. To expand upon this, the ever-changing expectations of women made women's quality of life complicated as the state encouraged them to join the workforce and "escape" the kitchen, only to have a change of heart and decide that these women needed to do both. The internal resistance from the workers wanting to eat homecooked meals and purchase the necessary goods to make that happen was complicated by the lack of products on shelves. As far as the standard of living as a "consumer" went, one could become easily frustrated if the state promised to provide necessary items to live and wages to purchase any necessities not included in these provisions, especially when these wages were not enough to afford said products. To exacerbate the situation, the products for purchase were of poor quality. Yes, the government made the efforts to provide the proletariat with its survival needs, but the regime did not provide the proletariat with comforts or quality, which left the working class wanting.

## Chapter 5

### The New Soviet Woman

#### Gender Roles and Women in the Workforce

Women's work roles historically were dictated by pronounced patriarchal structures and genderless work conditions into the Soviet period, although there were serious, sustained efforts to provide some semblance of equality. During the NEP, women entering the Soviet labor force mainly went into the textile and sewing industries. These trades were traditionally feminine and had historically been considered women's work. Even as women began to enter more traditionally masculine trades, such as mining, machinery, and metal works, the sewing and textiles industries remained nearly entirely female. This segregation of the sexes in industry remained apparent in heavy industry throughout the 1920s, and remained under thirty percent in the heavy industrial workforce from 1923 to 1930.<sup>85</sup> This was merely one way in which women were segregated into certain fields of the workforce. This is one way to illustrate how women were segregated or restricted in certain fields of the workforce.

There was some protection of female workers in Tsarist Russia, focused on preserving the women's wellbeing by prohibiting women from nighttime employment and from dangerous, physically demanding jobs. However, these restrictions were difficult to enforce because of resistance from working women and due to lack of adequate supervision in these occupations. This utilization of protection as a tool to achieve workers' equality would manifest itself in the encouragement of women to join traditionally male fields. Caveats were tacked on to prevent night work and extreme physical labor, pushing women towards light labor, textiles, jobs in the

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<sup>85</sup> Goldman, *Women at the Gates*, 12, 14, 283.

medical service and healthcare industry, education, and white-collar work. The protective laws made it more costly to hire women because they were not allowed to work as many hours, so there were not as many women hired in the 1920s. This would change in the 1930s because laws shifted away from protection and more towards boosting the number of workers in the force to equal amounts of men and women. The late 1930s saw a fear of foreign conflict as Hitler rose to power, so there was a push to induct women into the workforce to offset sending men to war.<sup>86</sup>

Even though there was regulation of women's working hours and prohibition of night work, not everyone followed these rules throughout the 1920s. Women were still employed at night, and sometimes there were more women working at night than men. Some employers still had women working overtime. The state made other legal provisions for women's work, specifically relating to maternity and to menstruation. Prior to World War II, maternal welfare provisions were made but not closely enforced by factories. Soviet women knew their rights but would not always assert them because of the threat of firing or pay reduction, both actions that could be gotten away with due to sexist attitudes and the 1930s policies to push women back into the home anyway. There were provisions made for women's menstruation because the State was concerned for women's reproductive health and was fixated on increasing reproductive rates, as the State feared that the population would not grow at a sustainable rate. The State worried about women lifting heavy loads, but Russian Soviet women argued that working class women were used to hard work and labor, and that employed labor was no different. It was mostly "injurious" positions that women were not allowed to work in, specifically in trade work and places with

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<sup>86</sup> Ilić, *Women Workers in the Soviet Interwar Economy*, 26-36.

tobacco exposure or where poisonous substances were used. These policies were implemented as part of Stalin pro-natal policy, and all stem from the regime's frenzy to ensure reproduction.<sup>87</sup>

Much of Soviet gender roles were based on Soviet psychotheory. Early Soviet psychologists determined that personality develops through four main factors: biology, social environment, social training, and self-training. Biology is typically defined as being the genetic makeup of the individual and who one's birth parents were. Social environment refers to where geographically the person grew up, what social setting one was raised in, and the values of that society encompassing family, friends, peer groups, and colleagues. Training means what home training the child had and what lessons one's parents instilled into oneself. Self-training is how the individual taught oneself. Essentially, this theory of four factors states that all individuals are born with the potential to develop through socialization so therefore it is important to guide that socialization to provide said individual with Soviet values. In comparison to the West, whose rhetoric generally was that personality was highly dependent on biological factors, the Soviet Union's psychologists theorized that personality was most dependent on social learning. However, when it came to discerning among the personalities of men and women, the Soviet Union elevated biology as a factor and downplayed the social environmental influence because the regime wanted to reinforce the idea that men and women were treated equally and given the same chances to succeed in the Soviet Union. Therefore, human personality was seen as overall influenced by social environment except when it came to gender because that did not align with the Soviet's propaganda that their citizens were given equal opportunities regardless of sex.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> Ilić, *Women Workers in the Soviet Interwar Economy*, 95, 77, 128-33.

<sup>88</sup> Lynne Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman. Sex Role Socialization in the USSR* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 203-04.

The issue with Soviet psychotheory regarding personality and gender roles is that there is a dissonance between pedagogy and psychology. Published pedagogical writings about gender roles were not based in psychology but rather spewed popular traditional societal assumptions made about men and women. These pedagogical writings promoted such traditional values under the guise of psychology because there was a fear that the new sex equality promoted by the regime would alienate traditions, cause the feminization of men and the masculinization of women, and subsequently the birth rate would decline. Rhetoric began to emerge telling women that unless they became mothers, they were not real women.<sup>89</sup> For instance, in the 1930s sociologist Igor Bestuzhev-Lada argued that by increasing women's productivity in the home and by increasing productivity in factories, the participation of women in the work force would be lowered and these women would be able to focus more on childcare. The fear of the masculinization of women and the feminization of men was that they would be bad parents, the divorce rates would raise, and the birth rate would lower. These factors also influenced these writings encouraging traditional gender roles based on phony psychology.<sup>90</sup>

From the early to mid 1920s, three psychologists from the Soviet Union's Institute of Socio-Economic Problems proposed a set of four different approaches to sex roles. These psychologists were N. Zakharova, A. Posadskaya, and N. Rimashevskaya. The first proposed category was *patriarchal*, which is the most Western. This approach was based on so-called natural laws that women should be mothers and uphold the family, while men were protectors and provided for the family. This approach argued that women did not belong in the workforce so that women could be pushed back into the home and deter divorce. The second approach was

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<sup>89</sup> Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman*, 205-06.

<sup>90</sup> Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman*, 3-11.



*demographic*, which promoted shortened working hours for women and extended maternity leave to keep women out of the workforce to ensure reproduction and boost the population. The third was *economic*, which argued that women were not good contributors to the Soviet economy because they had to take care of their families and so were not productive, and therefore should be kept out of production. The final approach to sex roles was *egalitarian*, which argued that the problems that were allegedly stemming from having women in the workforce were simply a result of changing the societal structure to Communism. Once men and women settled into the new workforce structure and attempts by the regime to promote sexual equality, gender roles would quietly settle into the traditional status quo.<sup>91</sup>

The commonality amongst these psychologists' theories and approaches to gender roles was the vehement desire to exclude women from the work force. This doctrine contains a great contradiction. On the one hand, there is publicizing the official aim of the Soviet government to promote equality between the sexes, have the Soviet woman be a part of the workforce, create public dining halls to relieve women of kitchen duties, and to raise the future generation of proletarians. On the other hand, there is the reality of allowing firm pedagogy under the guise of phony psychological theory arguing for women to be confined to the home fulfilling her traditional roles of mother and wife and sustaining both the population and the nuclear family unit.

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<sup>91</sup> Attwood, *The New Soviet Man and Woman*, 207-12.

## Women and the Sexual Revolution

A sexual revolution in the Soviet Union occurred throughout most of the 1920s. Politician Alexandra Kollontai theorized and wrote at length about sexual revolution in the early 1920s. Kollontai preached that marriage and sex were personal activities and could be handled at the individual's discretion, whereas motherhood was a social concern. Mothers were responsible for the birthing and nursing of their offspring, but once this stage of the child's life was complete, the mother was now able to direct her motherly instincts towards all Soviet children. In this way, women are expected to not only be mothers to their children but to the children of the U.S.S.R..<sup>92</sup> Abortion was legalized by the Soviet Commissar of Justice N.A. Semashko and the Commissar of Public Health M. Kurskii in November 1920. Many women sought abortions due to economic reasoning, as many felt that the wages were not enough to fully provide for their children although it was allegedly the responsibility of society to care for children. Other reasons for seeking abortion included escaping abusive relationships, being unmarried, or not feeling ready to have children.<sup>93</sup>

In a state claiming to be the epitome of progression, it was impossible to avoid matters of sexual activity. The older population at the time looked on the new Soviet young adults with disdain for their free love and sexual proclivities, although they were equally sexually active in private. The public perspective of the new Soviet man and woman was that a *komsomolet* (male

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<sup>92</sup> Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement In Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), <https://hdl-handle-net.ric.idm.oclc.org/2027/heb04545.0001.001>, PDF, 355.

<sup>93</sup> Susan Gross Solomon, "The Demographic Argument in Soviet Debates over the Legalization of Abortion in the 1920's," *Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique* 33, no. 1 (1992): 59, 61, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20170808>.

Young Communist League worker and student) should satisfy his desires and that a *komsomolka* (female Young Communist League worker and student) should accept the boy who pursues her because to resist is bourgeois. To the youth, practicing sexual abstinence in general was bourgeois. Many youths did not believe in love and considered sexual activity purely physical and prioritized satisfying such needs over settling down in marriage. For a girl to wait until marriage to engage in sexual acts was thought of as waiting for her “property owner,” and was of course, bourgeois. In Gumilevsky’s *Dog Alley* (1929), it was written that love was “all bourgeois goods, petty bourgeois business.”<sup>94</sup>

Unfortunately, there were predatory men who took advantage of the new revolutionary ideals to hide their nature as sexual predators and ironically the laws in place to protect women left them vulnerable to these types of men. Legalized abortion and lifting of divorce restrictions meant less responsibility for impregnating a woman because in the male’s mind, the woman could simply get an abortion theoretically sponsored by the state. There were, of course, private abortions conducted as well.<sup>95</sup> In 1929, a poll of young girls yielded statements from Soviet girls that men were depraved skirt-chasers who only wanted one thing from girls. There were reports of men tricking girls as young as twelve and sixteen years old into engaging in sexual intercourse by giving the girls alcohol and through false promises of marriage.<sup>96</sup>

The late 1930s saw the movement towards gender equality abandoned. This occurred because of a censoring of education in which later generations of Soviet women were barred

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<sup>94</sup> Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement In Russia*, 359-60.

<sup>95</sup> Gregory Carleton, *Sexual Revolution in Bolshevik Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), 27-35.

<sup>96</sup> Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement In Russia*, 361.

from learning about prior liberative legislation and teaching that the nuclear family unit was peak socialism and liberation.<sup>97</sup> By 1936 there was a total reverse from the ultra-liberal ideals of individual freedoms. Rising rates of divorce, women in the workplace, churning homelessness, and accounts of familial instability made the government want to strengthen the nuclear family unit. Abortion was outlawed once more. The “strengthening” of the family unit in the latter half of the 1930s was incredibly aggressive, fully abandoning social gender equality, despite the Soviet Government still portraying itself as the peak socialists. Subsequent generations of Soviet women were cut off from learning about their prior liberation, so the future Soviet woman would believe that her reality of reversed ideals was true liberation and peak socialism.<sup>98</sup>

From 1934 to 1941, there was a movement of “wife-activists” comprised of thousands of wives of engineers, factory managers, army officers, laborers, and Stakhanovites to improve society. The goals of this movement were to improve public health and to educate the population on *kul'turnost*, or “culturedness,” social consciousness, and politics. These wives undertook several projects to achieve this goal, including organizing educational events and cleaning factory workshops and dormitories. This movement of public displays reinforced the 1930s Soviet Party ideals of women as maternal and caring, as these women were wives of laborers and officials and not workers themselves.<sup>99</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The Soviet government publicly claimed to support equality between the sexes, and although there were progressive policies regarding gender equality implemented, many actions in

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<sup>97</sup> Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, 343.

<sup>98</sup> Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution*, 296-97, 337-43.

<sup>99</sup> Rebecca Balmas Neary, “Mothering Socialist Society: The Wife-Activists’ Movement and the Soviet Culture of Daily Life, 1934-41,” *The Russian Review* 58, no. 3 (1999): 397-401. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2679413>.

the 1930s dictate otherwise. The women were used by the Party as a collective to portray whatever vision that the regime had at the time.<sup>100</sup> During the sexual revolution, policies were created legalizing abortion and easier divorce, which increased women's rights and freedoms. However, men attempted to use these new laws to their advantage and use women and young girls for sexual acts. Sex was greatly de-stigmatized, and it became adjacent to the everyday act of shaking hands.

Women were "welcomed" into the workforce with countless caveats as to what times they could work and what sort of positions they could hold. Soviet proletarian women were burdened with being full-time workers and mothers to both their own children and to the children of the community. To be a new Soviet woman was to do it all, to embody every role that was expected, and to do it without complaint as it was considered a woman's duty to the country. Like any worker, a woman's value was based also on what she could produce: a child.

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<sup>100</sup> Amy E. Randall, "Legitimizing Soviet Trade: Gender and the Feminization of the Retail Workforce in the Soviet 1930s," *Journal of Social History* 37, no. 4 (2004): 967. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3790074>.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

Although there were negative effects of the policies implemented by the USSR throughout the 1920s and 1930s, the Soviet working class experienced immense growth and change in nearly every aspect of everyday life. The Soviet Party considered itself an urban vanguard, a driving force in creating a utopian vision of a proletariat-serving state. The Communist Party of the U.S.S.R. implemented countless policies towards this goal, based on Soviet Marxist-Leninist ideology. This ideology included but was not limited to the removal of religion, the great fight against the perceived injustices and inequalities of capitalism, and the creation of a workers' state. Throughout the 1920s, progressive laws were passed such as those in favor of sexual and gender equality and women's liberation. Women were shuttled into the workforce and out of the home, to become the working Soviet woman. In the 1930s, many progressive acts would come to be reversed. Abortion was disallowed, and women's roles in the home were reemphasized with vigor. Although there was a reversal in policy, the Party maintained that everything was done for the good of the people and for the visions of the regime for the perfect Soviet society.

Throughout each chapter, this thesis has highlighted the stark realities in contrast with the Party's utopian ideals. Though urban laborers were essentially guaranteed housing, it was obscenely overcrowded. People shared rooms, living in hallways, and dwelled in corners. There was no such thing as privacy, and subsequently the urban proletariat was a highly irritable population. Furthermore, food was to be provided in communal dining halls, hypothetically easing the burden of cooking in the home. Alas, the food was revolting, the dining halls were riddled with vermin, and the service was less than desirable with customers and workers usually greeting one another with negativity and short tempers.

Not all was negative in the U.S.S.R., however. Education was widely available in a multitude of formats, ranging from general schooling, to university, to trade schools, and to education in the workplace. One was guaranteed employment in a factory with wages meant to purchase what was not already provided by the state. Although the communal apartments were cramped, it was a place to live and shelter without concerning oneself with affording to pay for lodging. While the rights of women were apt to change, women received maternity leave and menstrual care. Women were employed and could sustain themselves without a husband, something women in many Western nations could not say. There was freedom of divorce, a sense of free love, and a frankness regarding the most basic aspects of human life. The new Soviet population was not ashamed of engaging in sexual intercourse outside of marriage and viewed it as a part of themselves and their basic needs.

Everyday life history is an extraordinarily important subdiscipline of the field of history. It often goes overlooked in Western educational classes, and yet it proves so fruitful in understanding the history of a people and of societies. One cannot study a society with a regime that considered itself the forefront in the creation of a society built for laborers without examining the laborers themselves. The culture of the Soviet proletariat consisted of brutal honesty, bluntness, nervousness, hard work, and persistence. The Soviet government claimed to have the workers' best interests at heart, yet its actions proved otherwise. There are few, if any, reports of intense, widespread protest from the working class, and it begs the question of why? One can postulate that it is the hope of the working class for a brighter future. The workers entered the Bolshevik Revolution in the hopes of a state in which they would not need to worry about basic human needs, and in which the working class could thrive. There were numerous plans and policies, i.e., the NEP, several five-year-plans, and individual laws implemented that

promised a better economy and a better tomorrow for the Soviet Union. The results would not come quickly, and it was arguably the hope that the proletariat held that allowed them to continue in the face of consistent disillusionment that some had with their government. Another reason why there was not any possibility for widespread labor protest was the sheer repressiveness of the Soviet government.

There are several ways in which this research might be continued, and a slew of questions which may be posed but not answered. Research into the Soviet Union, let alone the proletariat, can be distorted by one's Western historical and political lens. A Westerner raised in capitalism researching a socialist-communist country may harbor preconceived notions and will not grasp a purely Soviet understanding in its entirety, although there is much Western scholarship rising above this obstacle. It is valuable to educate oneself on societies that are socially and economically structured quite different from one's own society. One may find that people, regardless of origin, have the same needs, if not wants, that variations in socio-cultural environment and social structure do exist, that they can impinge upon the individual and one's responses, and that communities are not to be judged based upon the over-generalized actions of their rulers.



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