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# Introduction: Workers and Socialist States in Postwar Central and Eastern Europe

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The essays in this special issue by Jack R. Friedman, Sándor Horváth, Peter Heumos, and Eszter Zsófia Tóth, reflect a growing interest in the social history of industrial labor and industrial communities in postwar Central and Eastern Europe. While they approach their subjects in different ways and employing distinct methodologies, the essays suggest how the history of the working class and its relationship to postwar socialist state formation across the region might be rethought. They illustrate how the protracted construction and consolidation of socialist states in the region was negotiated on an everyday level by working-class citizens, and that this was a dynamic process in which state projects interacted with a variety of working-class cultures, that were in turn segmented by notions of gender, skill, generation, and occupation. The essays all demonstrate, in their different ways, how working-class Eastern Europeans were not simply acted upon by the operation of dictatorial state power, but played a role in state formation across the region. This role was characterized by an ambiguous relationship between workers and those in power who sought legitimacy by claiming that their states represented the interests of the “working class.” Yet the policies those in power pursued often confronted working-class communities directly in Czechoslovakia, Hungary, and Romania, as these essays suggest. This produced a complex relationship characterized by consent, accommodation and conflict that varied from locality to locality, state to state, and from period to period.

The collapse of socialist states at the end of the 1980s removed many of the practical obstacles to the writing of critical histories on the relationship between the state and the working class in Central and Eastern Europe, though it did, temporarily, impose new barriers to such work. Most practically, the archival materials generated by the institutions that governed workers during the postwar period—those of the ruling parties, the enterprises, local authorities, police forces, and trade unions—became available to researchers. Furthermore, the political constraints on writing social histories of industrial labor, given the role that mythical notions of the “working class” and the “labor movement” played in the claims to legitimacy of the regimes, disappeared with them. At the same time, however, across the region the antisocialist climate that followed the events of 1989 and the rejection of working-class politics that it brought in train created an intellectual climate that was profoundly hostile to the writing of working-class history.

Despite these obstacles some researchers began to write industrial workers

into the histories of the region's socialist dictatorships, especially marked in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Linguistic barriers to research by outsiders were considerably fewer in the GDR than for those wishing to work on other Central and Eastern European socialist dictatorships. Furthermore, the collapse of the GDR and the subsequent reunification of Germany created a situation in which relatively good access to the source base and institutional funding enabled the writing of a generation of critical social histories of the East German dictatorship.<sup>1</sup> Some of this work addressed the social history of industrial workers, focusing on the industrial relations of GDR enterprises, patterns of working-class protest, and, to a lesser extent, the micropolitics of conflict within the labor process.<sup>2</sup> In other countries progress has been much more uneven; often workers have only entered as actors into accounts of the marked explosions of popular protest that punctuated the histories of the socialist dictatorships across the region. Even here our knowledge of working-class participation in protest and the motivations behind it is patchy; while a relatively large amount has been written on the events in East Germany in 1953, and not surprisingly on working-class protest in socialist Poland, we still only know a relatively small amount about what lay behind industrial unrest in Czechoslovakia in 1953, the extensive participation of industrial workers in the Hungarian Revolution in 1956, or the Romanian Revolution in December 1989.<sup>3</sup>

When one moves away from the spectacular moments of outright regime collapse to examine the complex patterns of protest, even more questions are raised. One of the central themes of the research on workers in the German Democratic Republic has been one of how, beneath the surface of apparent political quiescence, conflict in the workplace frustrated many of the attempts of the state to mobilize the workforce behind its own economic policy goals.<sup>4</sup> For Poland, Pdraic Kenney has shown how the creation of the socialist dictatorship at the end of the 1940s occurred against the background of substantial working-class protest that the emergent regime had to accommodate and channel in order to consolidate its authority. Kenney's work has pointed out the need to integrate this history of protest into a close analysis of the role of working-class culture in providing workers resources that enabled them to negotiate state policies, or which motivated workplace protest. In subsequent work on the gendering of working-class protest in socialist Poland, Kenney has expanded his argument to suggest that an understanding of the relationship of workers to the socialist state is impossible without a thoroughgoing analysis of its connections to the cultures of working-class communities.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, the implications of this work suggest two things. First, that there is benefit to be gained from a shift of focus away from the moments of outright crisis or of regime collapse and toward an examination of the considerable conflict that characterized working-class communities and workplaces outside those moments. Second, it necessitates a shift away from histories of moments of protest towards an attempt to explain what was happening on an everyday level in these workplaces and communities.

This, furthermore, suggests that analyses of protest need to be situated in a

more complex constellation of reactions to the policies of the region's socialist rulers; a constellation generated by a complex dynamic of consent, accommodation and appropriation as much as by resistance. Kenney's analysis of the construction of the Stalinist state in the workplace suggests this strongly for socialist Poland.<sup>6</sup> Such conclusions have become a more general theme of research on workers during the late 1940s and early 1950s as well. The need for a rooting of analyses of the relationship between workers and the early socialist state in the history of the everyday in workplaces and working-class communities has been a central theme of my own work on the Hungarian case.<sup>7</sup> These arguments are taken up by the contributors to this special issue. Peter Heumos's discussion of the social context in which socialist work movements were embedded socially in early socialist Czechoslovakia demonstrates that workers' responses were not only highly differentiated, but were often characterized by considerable ambiguity.

Yet the articles that are contained within this special issue do much more than simply confirm historiographical trends, but advance the debate in two important respects. First and perhaps least significantly, they point to the need for a shift of focus away from the obvious sphere of the industrial workplace in histories that seek to examine the shifting relationships between workers and the socialist state. To some extent, work on the early socialist period has begun to do this, but only in a highly limited fashion; Katherine A. Lebow's research on consent and opposition among the first residents of the Polish new city of Nowa Huta raises question about resistance and patterns of popular leisure outside the workplace.<sup>8</sup> Many of the contributions to this issue suggest that there is much to be gained by doing this more systematically and considering spheres of contestation between socialist rulers and workers that have hitherto been regarded as much less obvious. Jack R. Friedman examines the official autobiographies submitted to party assessors during examinations of the "political reliability" of party members, showing differences between the Romanian regime's official characterization of the labor movement and the realities confronted by workers in the Jiu Valley mining region. Sándor Horváth uses the new Hungarian city of Sztálinváros to interrogate the clash between official discourses of urban, socialist life and the popular working-class cultures present in the city's construction, revealing how popular leisure, city pubs, and other public places became contested spaces. An examination of everyday life outside the workplace, especially in the home and consumption, form a central part of Eszter Zsófia Tóth's article, based on life-history interviews with women who were members of a prize-winning socialist work brigade in a Budapest factory. While the other articles focus on the early years of and Central and Eastern European socialism, she addresses the later era of "consolidated socialism" between the 1960s and the end of the 1980s, examining how official discourses of work, the home, and consumption were ambivalently appropriated or rejected by the brigade members.

Second, all of the articles suggest ways in which the history of the socialist state itself might be rethought through a focus on the experience of political in-

tervention in working-class lives. In so doing, they point to ways in which working-class history is well equipped to pose a challenge to much of the established thinking on Central and Eastern Europe's postwar experience. Questions of the power and hegemony of "totalitarian" states have dominated interpretations of this experience, leading observers to neglect the degree to which state socialism was a social experience.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, the focus of much historiography on issues of state power and of Soviet imposition has led to the relative neglect of explorations of the socialist state as a social actor and as part of Central and Eastern European societies. Industrial workers were crucially bound to the process of state formation and reformation as it proceeded, and they were so bound at several different levels. Working-class histories of the kind presented in this special issue suggest how a social history of socialist states in the region might therefore be approached.

In efforts to legitimize their authority socialist regimes presented themselves as the "vanguard" of the working class. During the early postwar years when popular-front governments dominated the states of the region and it remained unclear whether overt socialist dictatorship would emerge, the Communist parties that would later form the nucleus of those dictatorships deployed a formula of "peoples' democracy," which described "democracy" as a process through which hierarchies of class would be broken down. Crucial to this project was, at least, the outward support of the "working class." A Communist journalist for a Hungarian provincial newspaper admitted in August 1945: "a unified working class is the key to our reconstruction and to our democracy."<sup>10</sup> At the same time that Communist parties depended on outward expressions of working-class support for their political legitimacy, they sought to reform workers' attitudes to demonstrate "discipline" and support for the goals of the party. This entailed the support for new methods of working, support for payment-by-results systems of remuneration, and discipline in the workplace. The representatives of the regime justified this with statements like "every worker must accept that the country has become their homeland, every strike of their hammer now is for their welfare."<sup>11</sup> In the climate of penury that followed the end of the Second World War, the outward conformity of workers to the goals of Communist parties could not be secured. In industrial communities across the region, failure to guarantee the supply of food provoked protest. As the value of money wages was reduced to nothing, factories in communities like the Hungarian industrial city of Győr were rocked by endemic work stoppages.<sup>12</sup>

Behind such conflict lay a more profound clash between the impact of Communist attempts to reform working-class cultures and the values and expectations that were rooted in such cultures across the region. Despite the cautious strategies Communists pursued within the sphere of formal politics, many of their policies in factories, mines, and on construction sites were adapted from those pioneered in the Soviet Union. While, as much of the historiography of the Soviet working class has shown, many of these measures provoked considerable conflict and produced outcomes unintended by their rulers, the imposition of such policies formed a central plank in the eventual constitution of a

Soviet working-class identity shaped during the rapid industrialization of the 1930s.<sup>13</sup> Eastern and especially Central European workers had powerful preexisting working-class cultures, values, and aspirations which clashed sharply with notions underpinning Communist party attempts to reshape those workers in their own image. Peter Heumos shows how this conflict emerged soon after the Second World War in Czechoslovakia, much as it did in Hungary and Poland. As Communist parties abandoned the popular-front formula of the 1940s to concentrate on the construction of overt dictatorship, these conflicts and their inherent contradictions did not disappear in the region, but adapted to the labor policies and industrialization drives of the 1950s.

The contradiction at the heart of the Communist project for Central and Eastern European workers was apparent in the distinctions between official idealizations of working-class life and realities workers confronted. These contradictions became particularly acute and painfully visible in times of crisis for the regimes: in East Germany during the June events of 1953; in the wave of strikes that followed the currency reform in Czechoslovakia at the same time; in the Poznan' events in 1956; and as demonstrated by the extensive working-class participation in the Hungarian Revolution that autumn. As the regimes of the region moved out of the phase of construction and into that of consolidation, this contradiction underpinned the problems of the relationship between the socialist state and industrial workers in Poland that eventually culminated in the crisis of 1980–1. Yet, as these essays show, the contradiction was visible on an everyday level before the eruption of substantial popular protest.

Socialist states at various times attempted to paper over this central contradiction by promoting a mythologized view of unified, class-conscious workers inheriting a progressive tradition of labor-movement activism which scarcely fitted realities of working-class political activism prior to the advent of the socialist era. Jack R. Friedman, in his study of the autobiographies collected by the Romanian Communist Party during the verification campaigns—effectively purges of members—that accompanied the construction of overt dictatorship in the country, explores an aspect of the production of this myth on an everyday level. He shows how coercion deployed by the party forced working-class party members to rewrite their own autobiographies around the ideological tropes embodied in the party's own construction of its own, and the labor movement's, past.

Both official myths of the “working class” and hegemonic working-class cultures privileged specific worker identities—mostly the skilled, urban, male elite—and marginalized others: women, rural commuters, and the young. As the workforce expanded during the forced industrialization drives that followed the creation of overt socialist dictatorship during the early 1950s, the patterns of exclusion and inclusion inherent in discourses of the working class framed patterns of social conflict.<sup>14</sup> Such discursive constructions of what the “working class” was had powerful consequences for everyday practice, as Sándor Horváth shows in his study of the cultural practices of residents of Sztálinváros, the largest single investment project of the country's first five-year plan. Horváth focuses not only

on how culturally ingrained notions of what constituted urban and rural shaped conflict and cultural practice among workers, but also how they were inherent to the postwar socialist project itself in Hungary. Thus, it was not merely about the integration of former rural dwellers from agriculture into the ranks of the industrial working class, but it was also about a project of eradicating traces of cultural practice the regime regarded as rural, and replacing them with those identified as urban. Hardly surprisingly, Horváth demonstrates that this project was unsuccessful; far from creating a homogeneous community of urban workers, it instead allowed hierarchies and thus inequalities between workers to reproduce themselves in new circumstances.

All but one of the pieces focus on the first decades of socialist rule, when states attempted ambitious processes of outright social transformation through the extension of political control and forced industrialization drives that aimed at the creation of “a society based on productive labor.”<sup>15</sup> They focus less on the period of consolidation that occurred in the second half of the 1950s when the climate of political restriction was relaxed in most of the region and when the dictatorships began to refocus their social and economic policies on the improvement of the living standards of households. Research to date has recognized that the realm of cultural practice across Central and Eastern Europe was transformed in this period by phenomena such as the rise of a distinctive socialist consumerism, the transformation of the urban housing stock, and the penetration of certain aspects of western popular culture into the region.<sup>16</sup>

Though the study workers in the region engaging these phenomena has barely begun, Eszter Zsófia Tóth’s oral history of a group of working-class women in the Budapest suburbs is suggestive of the ways in which both socialist consumerism and the transformation of the housing stock during the 1960s and 1970s were negotiated. Her work also points to central continuities with periods of “socialist construction” during the 1950s in two important respects. By concentrating on working-class women, she shows how the experiences of groups excluded and underplayed by official myths about working-class culture experienced everyday life under state socialism. Her work provides compelling evidence of the reproduction of hierarchies of gender in both the workplace and in industrial communities. Second, she shows how, prior to the collapse of the region’s socialist regimes in 1989, such myths of official discourse had become ever more divorced from reality.<sup>17</sup>

In examining the history of everyday life in workplaces and industrial communities, these essays both fill gaps in our knowledge of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe and suggest ways in which working-class history might contribute to a rethinking of the history of the region in the postwar era. Though they do not present a definitive picture of the experiences of workers in postwar Central and Eastern Europe, they suggest future directions for research to take. Only some states of the region are reexamined, and within them only certain kinds of industrial communities. Future studies will undoubtedly point to additional issues of workers’ lives under state socialism and uncover still more diversity. But these essays do fully demonstrate the importance and the potential

of the social history of workers in refashioning our understanding of state socialism in Central and Eastern Europe.

## NOTES

1. For overviews of this work see Corey Ross, *The East German Dictatorship: Problems and Perspectives in the Interpretation of the GDR*, (London, 2002); Mary Fulbrook, *Anatomy of a Dictatorship: Inside the GDR*, (Oxford, 1996); the essays in Konrad H. Jarausch, ed., *Dictatorship as Experience: Towards a Socio-cultural History of the GDR*, trans. Eve Duffy, (Oxford, 1999), and Richard Bessel, & Ralph Jessen, eds., *Die Grenzen der Diktatur: Staat und Gesellschaft in der DDR*, (Göttingen, 1996).

2. Peter Hübner, *Konsens, Konflikt und Kompromi?: Soziale Arbeiterinteressen und Sozialpolitik in der SBZ/DDR 1945 bis 1970*, (Berlin, 1995); Peter Hübner & Klaus Tenfelde, eds., *Arbeiter in der SBZ-DDR*, (Essen, 1999); Jeffrey Kopstein, *The Politics of Economic Decline in East Germany, 1945–1989*, (Chapel Hill, NC, 1997); Andrew Port, “When Workers Rumbled: the Wismut Uprising of August 1951 in East Germany,” *Social History*, 22.2 (May 1997), 145–173.

3. For one distinguished attempt to analyze the meaning of mass popular protest in Central and Eastern Europe, see Gregorz Ekiert, *The State Against Society: Political Crises and their Aftermath in East-Central Europe*, (Princeton NJ, 1996); on the events of 1953 in the GDR see Gareth Pritchard, *The Making of the GDR 1945–1953: from Anti-fascism to Stalinism*, (Manchester, 2000), 194–224; for Poland, see Roman Laba, *The Roots of Solidarity: A Political Sociology of Poland’s Working-Class Democratization*, (Princeton, NJ, 1991); for Hungary in 1956 see Bill Lomax, *Hungary 1956*, (London, 1976), and for Romania in 1989, see Peter Siani-Davies, *The Romanian Revolution of December 1989*, (Ithaca, NY, 2005).

4. See the items cited in note 2 above; for a useful analysis of the role of workers in the GDR in the later socialist period, see Jeanette Z. Madarasz, *Conflict and Compromise in East Germany, 1971–1989: A Precarious Stability*, (Basingstoke, 2003).

5. For Kenney’s work on the late 1940s in Poland, see Padraic Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland: Workers and Communists, 1945–1950*, (Ithaca, NY, 1997); for the extension of his analysis, see Padraic Kenney, “The Gender of Resistance in Communist Poland,” *American Historical Review*, 104.2 (April 1999), 399–425.

6. Kenney, *Rebuilding Poland*, 189–334.

7. See especially Mark Pittaway, “The Reproduction of Hierarchy: Skill, Working-Class Culture and the State in Early Socialist Hungary,” *The Journal of Modern History*, 72.4 (December 2002), 737–69; Mark Pittaway, “The Social Limits of State Control: Time, the Industrial Wage Relation and Social Identity in Stalinist Hungary, 1948–1953,” *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 12.3 (September 1999), 271–301.

8. Katherine A. Lebow, “Public Works, Private Lives: Youth Brigades in Nowa Huta in the 1950s,” *Contemporary European History*, 10.2 (May 2001), 199–219.

9. Mark Pittaway, “Control and Consent in Eastern Europe’s Workers’ States, 1945–1989: Some Reflections on Totalitarianism, Social Organization and Social Control,” in Clive Emsley, Eric Johnson, & Pieter Spierenburg, eds. *Social Control in Europe, 1800–2000*, (Columbus OH, 2004), 343–67.

10. Tibor Magyar, “A feladatok előtt,” *Dunántúli Szabad Nép*, (5<sup>th</sup> August, 1945), 1.

11. Miklós Vass, “Munkafegyelem,” *Szakszervezeti Közlöny*, (1<sup>st</sup> August, 1945), 10.

12. “Tiltakozó sztrájkjal és éles kifakadásokkal válaszolt Győr munkássága a nagy meglepetést keltett pénzügyi intézkedésekre.” *Dunántúli Szabad Nép*, (20<sup>th</sup> December, 1945), 2.

13. Donald Filtzer *Soviet workers and Stalinist industrialization: The formation of modern Soviet production relations, 1928–1941* (London, 1986); Hiroaki Kuromiya *Stalin’s Industrial Revolution: Politics and Workers, 1928–1932* (Cambridge, 1988); Lewis H. Siegelbaum *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935–1941* (Cambridge, 1988); Lewis H. Siegelbaum & Ronald Grigor Suny, eds., *Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class and Identity*, eds., (Ithaca, NY, 1994); Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, 1995); Kenneth M. Straus *Factory and Community in Stalin’s Russia. The Making of an Industrial Working Class* (Pittsburgh, 1997); Sheila Fitzpatrick *Everyday Stalinism. Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford, 1999).

14. I explore many of these themes for Hungary in Pittaway, “The Reproduction of Hierarchy.”



15. Mark Pittaway, *Eastern Europe, 1939–2000* (London, 2004), Chapter 4.

16. Ina Merkel, *Utopie und Bedürfnis. Die Geschichte der Konsumkultur in der DDR*, (Köln, 1999); Patrick Hyder Patterson “The New Class: Consumer Culture under Socialism and the Unmaking of the Yugoslav Dream, 1945–1991” (PhD. Diss., The University of Michigan, 2001); Susan E. Reid & David Crowley, eds., *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Postwar Eastern Europe*, (Oxford, 2000); Timothy W. Ryback, *Rock Around the Bloc: A History of Rock Music in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Oxford, 1990).

17. There is very little research to date on the role of workers in the events of the 1980s across the region. For studies which contain some stimulating suggestions, see Michael Burawoy & János Lukács, *The Radiant Past: Ideology and Reality in Hungary’s Road to Capitalism*, (Chicago, 1992); Linda Fuller, *Where Was the Working Class? Revolution in Eastern Germany*, (Urbana, IL, 1999); Anikó Eszter Bartha, “The Disloyal ‘Ruling Class’: the Conflict between Ideology and Experience in Hungary,” in Peter Hübner, Christoph Kleßmann, eds., *Arbeiter im Staatsozialismus: Ideologischer Anspruch und soziale Wirklichkeit*, (Köln, 2005), 141–62.