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THE WORLD OF RUSSIAN LABOR

To understand how and why the experiences and characteristics of women workers were different from those of men we must begin with the world that men and women inhabited together, with the collective experience of the Russian working class in the process of its formation. In so doing, we must be cognizant of the distinctive features of Russian industrialization. Despite many important parallels with Western industrial development, Russia’s industrialization proceeded at its own pace through the tangled landscape of its own traditions and culture.

Industry became a significant component of the Russian economy long after industrialization and its social and political consequences had drastically changed many parts of the West. In the middle of the nineteenth century Russia was poor and backward, her economy agrarian, and her social structure semifeudal. The land was owned by the state and a small landowning gentry and tilled by enserfed peasants who constituted the great majority of the population. Such industry as there was existed mainly to satisfy the state’s military needs. Russia’s ignominious defeat in the Crimean War was a shocking demonstration of the West’s industrial and technological superiority, and the Russian autocracy was forced to acknowledge that Russia could not maintain her position among the major European powers without a comparable industrial base. Thus, in 1861 the autocracy emancipated the serfs, to create a free and mobile labor force in the first step toward stimulating industrial
development. In the ensuing decades industry, and with it an industrial work force, grew rapidly, if fitfully. By 1914 there were roughly 3 million workers in a population of approximately 170 million people.¹

There are no models of harmonious industrialization. The metaphor of revolution speaks for the dislocations inherent in the transition from agrarian to industrial society. In the Western European countries that made this transition over long periods of time, in some cases over two centuries, the entire society adjusted, however painfully, to changing economic forces. Russia's industry, however, grew rapidly in the crevices of an edifice not designed to accommodate it. The speed and concentration of industrial development in a society that remained otherwise overwhelmingly agrarian produced a singular disequilibrium between the old and the new and gave to Russia's emerging working class its particular characteristics.

For almost a century students of Russian labor have wrestled with the problem of defining the Russian working class, which differed in so many ways from its European and American counterparts.² While other nations drew heavily on peasant populations in the early stages of their industrialization, Russia was unique in the degree to which the path between agrarian life and factory life was traversed in both directions at once. Until the twentieth century the majority of factory workers were peasants who worked in the factory during the dormant agricultural seasons and returned to the land for planting and harvesting. The male factory worker frequently left elderly kin, wife, and children behind to care for the land during his seasonal work in the factory. Even workers who eventually abandoned the land to live year round within the factory radius, who married in the factory or brought their families with them from the village, often returned to the village for the important rituals of their lives—births, deaths, christenings, and the numerous holidays in the Russian religious calendar. The larger portion of their work lives and incomes may have derived from the factory rather than the land, but their identity, their emotional commitments, and an important part of their social lives remained in the countryside. By the early years of the twentieth century, the number of second- or third-generation workers with no ties to the countryside—known as hereditary workers—increased. But the rapid growth of the industrial labor force from the 1890s to 1914 could not have occurred through the utilization of only the labor of hereditary workers, and new peasant recruits were constantly nourishing the factory's growing appetite for working hands.

What, then, were Russian workers? Were they, for example, peasants who happened to work in the factory? Or were they proletarians in the classical sense of the word,


that is, industrial wage earners, possessing neither capital nor tools? Although both alternatives have had enthusiastic proponents among historians, more recently a new perspective has emerged which perceives the Russian working class as a special hybrid with few analogues in other countries that had undergone industrialization. For we do not have sufficiently reliable statistics to ascertain with any precision the proportional relationship of hereditary workers to workers with strong peasant ties. We can only say that the small but growing contingent of fully assimilated workers existed side by side with workers who still defined themselves as peasants or who had ambivalent and vacillating identities, depending on the degree of physical contact and emotional attachment to their peasant roots, as well as on their experiences in the factory.

Whatever the degree of transformation from peasant to proletarian Russian workers may have achieved, regional bonds were strong and persistent among them. The peasant’s decision to seek factory work was influenced, first, by the capacity of the land to support life and, second, by the availability of factory work among other wage-earning options. Although the numbers of peasants in the late nineteenth century who could sustain themselves by agriculture alone diminished steadily throughout the Empire, agrarian conditions as well as the distribution of factories varied considerably from region to region, and peasants who worked in factories were preponderantly, if not exclusively, from the same provinces throughout our period.³ The factory itself helped to perpetuate regional homogeneity by actively recruiting groups of workers from the same village or locality. Workers who ventured alone from village to factory gravitated toward their fellow villagers when they reached their destination. In a buyer’s market, where the demand for work far exceeded the supply of jobs, finding work without help of contacts could be humiliating and difficult.

One worker who tried it described his experiences in the city of Ekaterinoslav in the 1890s:

Usually the job seekers gathered at the factory gates in the early morning and at lunch time, waiting for the factory administrators, whom they would ask for jobs. The seekers almost always exceeded the number of jobs. . . . The bosses, feeling in command of the situation, would speak to no one, or worse—when the applicants gathered at the gates in crowds of a hundred or more, the bosses, for their own amusement, would order the watchman to pour water on them.⁴

It is not surprising that job seekers preferred to avoid such humiliation by utilizing their regional connections. The same Ekaterinoslav worker related, “It seems that in this business many of my countrymen were very useful. . . . Although I did not know them personally, they had been acquainted with my grandfather and grandmother or were related to them in some way. They tried to help me in every way.”⁵

To be sure, for some workers, mainly the highly skilled, occupational bonds would gradually replace village allegiances. The skilled St Petersburg worker, for example, who acquired his skills through a long and sustained apprenticeship in a city factory, felt himself to be very different from his recently arrived fellow villagers and preferred the company of other urbanized St Petersburg workers. But for most, seeking work through fellow villagers was only the first important link in a chain that reinforced the workers’ ties to their rural origins. Workers tended to cluster with their fellow villagers for long periods of time, sometimes for the whole of their work lives, to live, to eat, and to entertain themselves.⁶

Work contracts reflected the worker’s peasant ties. Generally, they were drawn up twice a year; one work period

⁵. Ibid., p. 22.
ran from the autumn, after the harvest, to Easter, and the second ran from Easter to July, the month of the greatest exodus back to the fields. Within these contractual periods, the working day was long and arduous. Many factories ran twenty-four hours a day, and night work was a standard feature in the worker's life. In 1885 the government passed a law prohibiting night work for women and for children under the age of seventeen in certain industries. The night shift was defined as 10:00 P.M. to 4:00 a.m., and consequently it only minimally mitigated the arduous day for the worker. A workday of sixteen to eighteen hours was common until it was reduced by law to eleven and a half hours in 1897. These gains were offset by the employer's virtuosity in devising ways to add to the length of the working day. The least offensive was obliging workers to clean their machines before leaving the factory after the work shift had allegedly ended. Another more onerous practice was to require overtime work, sometimes unpaid. In the formal sense, overtime was a voluntary option, but few workers could refuse without risking their jobs. According to the law of 1897, the amount of overtime had to be written into the contract and paid. Most often observed in the breach, this law in any case left workers who were paid piece rates unprotected even by a legal fiction.

The most ingenious and widespread method of bringing down the worker's real earnings was the system of fines. In principle, fines were levied to penalize workers for infringements of factory discipline, to impose external constraints on a labor force that had not yet internalized the imperatives of industrial productivity; in practice, they ate into wages and assaulted the worker's dignity. Fines began with the workday. Most factories were built like walled fortresses, guarded by watchmen and surrounded by gates that opened only to swallow up or disgorged their human contents at the beginning and end of each shift. A St Petersburg patternmaker writing in the 1890s relates:

Order at the factory was strict... Let us begin with the enormous metal gates which, like a clock mechanism, slammed shut in the morning at the beginning of the workday and again after lunch. If you did not run in on time, the heavy gates would rattle to a close before your very nose—and then you had to wander about for half a day, losing a ruble as a fine for tardiness.8

Fines for tardiness could cost the worker a significant portion of the daily wage. But tardiness was only one form of “truancy,” as it was called. There was a more inclusive category of fines: for absence due to illness not verified by a doctor's report, absence for drunkenness, for unauthorized holidays, for marriages, births, and deaths, absences to care for ailing family members, and, for women workers, absences for taking time out to feed nursing infants. Fines were built into the production process, often for conditions beyond the worker's control. Many factories set impossibly high production quotas for full payment of wages and made deductions for the uncompleted work. Workers were fined for damaging or losing tools, for not creating perfect products from shoddy materials. By law, fines were to be clearly defined and enumerated in the so-called workbook given out to the worker with the contract, but it was not unusual for factories to impose fines for infringements never mentioned in the books. As a factory inspector noted, “It would actually be hard to imagine a worker who could meet all the demands set for him, who would not be subject to fines and deductions no matter what his effort and skill.”9

Management's contemptuous attitude toward workers was expressed in fines imposed for disobedience, insolence, bad language, immoral behavior, and bad character. When

7. For studies of labor legislation in prerevolutionary Russia, see: A. N. Bykov, Fabrichnoe zakonodatel'stvo i razvitie ego v Rossii (St Petersburg, 1909); F. C. Giffen, "Prohibition of Night Work for Women and Young Persons," Canadian Slavic Studies, 2 (1969); V. Ia. Lavrov, Tsarism i rabochii vopros v Rossii (1861–1917 gg) (Moscow, 1972); V. P. Livinov-Filanski, Fabrichnoe zakonodatel'stvo i fabrichnaya inspeksiya v Rossii (St Petersburg, 1900).


the government suggested that fines for “rudeness and disobedience” be eliminated, employers claimed that this would “undermine discipline and deprive factory owners of the means to maintain and enforce order and respect for stewards of their establishments.”

Humiliation was a daily experience for workers. At many factories, they were rudely searched as they entered and left the factory premises, allegedly to prevent theft. Equally degrading were physical and verbal abuse and the absence of what was called “polite address.” The Russian language, like other European languages, has a polite form of address used in formal situations and to superiors, and a familiar form used to address intimates, children, servants, and animals. Workers were obliged to address supervisory personnel in the polite form (на вы), while they themselves, as a matter of course, were addressed in the familiar (на ты)—a practice which they felt to be demeaning, a vestige of the former master-serf relationship.

Russian factories, large and small, technologically primitive or sophisticated, were notorious for neglecting the workers’ health and safety. While knowledge of advanced industrial safeguards, processes, and machinery was available to and understood by Russian industrialists, they frequently preferred outmoded and physically demanding hand processes because labor power was plentiful, and it was cheaper than investment in machinery. With monotonous regularity factory inspectors deplored working conditions: the noxious fumes or dust in certain industrial processes aggravated by inadequate ventilation; the hazardous overcrowding of machinery on the factory floor; the primitive toilet facilities that created foul-smelling and unhygienic environments. In addition to health and safety hazards in the factory, disease of all kinds spread rapidly and easily within the factory enclosure. Yet, like all of Russia’s poor, workers had little access to medical care. In the countryside, local governments lacked the resources to provide

the rural population, agrarian or industrial, with regular professional medical personnel, not to speak of hospitals and medication. In cities, where doctors were more plentiful and medical services of better quality, workers could rarely afford to take advantage of them.

In 1866, in response to recurrent cholera epidemics, the government issued an edict requiring factory owners to provide one hospital bed for every one hundred workers. Subsequently, countless “obligatory rulings” were enacted by the local arms of the central bureaucracy, which, on paper, set reasonably high standards for medical care. But there were no provisions for enforcing these rulings. Twenty years after the first edict, factory inspectors found that medical care for workers was a fiction. Whether a factory worker had access to minimal first aid, diagnosis, and medicine or hospital care for enduring illness continued to depend entirely on the factory owner’s benevolence. In the Central Industrial Region, where factory owners had a stronger tradition of paternalistic concern for workers than elsewhere, some form of medical care was more common, although properly trained doctors were rarely available on a regular basis. Usually workers were treated by a “feldsher,” a kind of paramedic whose expertise was often barely greater than the patient’s. St Petersburg factories were scandalously derelict in providing medical care. By the turn of the century only one large factory employed a doctor on a regular basis; he received patients two hours daily, which meant, of course, that he was not available to treat accidents that occurred in his absence. Among 668 Moscow factories in 1904, only 246 had outpatient clinics, and of these only 170 had fully trained doctors.

Venereal disease, especially in the cities, was a grave social and medical problem, for workers served as an effective transmission belt back to the countryside. Both diagnosis and treatment were woefully lacking, as the following description


of a factory medical examination in the 1890s indicates; the worker-narrator tells how the workers were examined for venereal disease before their periodic pilgrimages back to the country:

The examinations were made primitively and coarsely and can hardly be said to have yielded results. When we went to collect our earnings at the bookkeeper’s office, a doctor was waiting there. We lined up, pulled down our trousers, and showed the necessary part of our bodies to him. He poked around with a pencil, conveyed the results of his “examination” to the bookkeeper, and if we were clean we were given our pay. Certainly at the plant there were many workers with venereal disease, but I do not know of a single case discovered by that doctor during the examinations.\(^{12}\)

Before 1903 only 28 percent of Russian workers were covered by some kind of accident insurance; like medical care, the provision of accident benefits and pensions was at the discretion of the individual factory owner. The fortunate workers whose employers joined private insurance companies were nonetheless poorly remunerated for temporary or permanent disability. Payments were so low that, as one observer remarked, they were less than the selling price of a medium-sized cow.\(^{13}\) In 1903 the government passed an accident insurance law for industrial workers. It did not cover workers at state factories or in transport, construction, and agriculture. Workers who lost the ability to work because of an injury incurred on the job were entitled to two-thirds of their wages. A factory owner who could prove that an accident was the result of the worker’s “malicious intent” or “carelessness” was relieved of all financial obligation, and while the worker could appeal through the courts, this was a long, costly process which few could afford.

That workers tolerated this array of indignities—filthy, overcrowded, and dangerous workplaces; insecurity; and humiliating treatment—speaks for their low self-esteem, reinforced by the hard economic facts of life in a market glutted with working hands. It is important to keep in mind that at whatever stage workers were in the transformation from peasant to proletarian between 1880 and 1914, the legacy of serfdom weighed heavily upon them. Many adult workers in the 1880s and 1890s had lived their formative years as serfs. By the turn of the century far fewer workers had endured serfdom directly, but expectations of oppression and habits of servility were not easily obliterated in one generation.

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The worker’s home was rarely a refuge from the factory. In rural factories workers sometimes lived in their native villages. But most rural factories were obliged to provide housing for their workers and, as more workers abandoned the land at the outset of the twentieth century, for workers’ families as well. Factory owners were as reluctant to invest in housing as in safe, hygienic workplaces. In the 1880s one factory inspector reported enthusiastically that several factories in the Central Industrial Region had constructed small, individual stone houses for married workers, each with a chicken coop and a small kitchen garden. They were no worse than the average peasant dwelling—better, indeed, than many—and the workers were pleased with them. The inspector therefore assumed that factory owners would be inspired to house workers in this fashion in the future.\(^{14}\) Contrary to his optimistic prediction, this kind of living arrangement remained an anomaly.

The majority of factory dwellings in rural areas and small towns consisted of barracks, which were, in the words of Maxim Gorky, “like the dwellings of prehistoric peoples.”\(^{15}\) Barracks usually contained several large rooms, crammed

\(^{12}\) Kanatchikov, p. 44.


\(^{14}\) Peskov, p. 88. See also, F. P. Pavlov, \textit{Za desiat’ let praktiki (otrysk vospominanii, vpechatlenii i naznacheni i iz fabrichnoi zhizni)} (Moscow, 1901), pp. 57–58.

\(^{15}\) Quoted in N. K. Druzhinin, \textit{Uslugi byta rabochikh v dorovolitsionnoi Rossii (po dannym kudishchestvikh obshchestv)} (Moscow, 1958), p. 86.
full of wooden bunks either freestanding or in tiers. Workers frequently slept in their beds in shifts. Bedding was rare, and workers slept on hay or on their own clothing. There was no other furniture, no toilet or washing facilities. Ventilation was similarly remarkable for its absence. A communal kitchen for the entire barrack population might be placed on one floor or in a separate hut. In the most fortunate circumstances, married workers and their families were housed in rooms apart from single workers, several families to a room. One observer, commenting on an especially lavish barrack, which boasted a communal kitchen on each floor as well as toilets consisting of a hole in the cement, noted that there as elsewhere "the family's life, even its most intimate aspects, goes on under the gaze of others. In the best cases the beds of a married couple are surrounded by curtains. The children, including adolescents, sleep together without distinctions of sex and age.”

Worse yet than barracks were barns built by the workers themselves, which were, in the opinion of one factory inspector, "more like dog kennels or chicken pens than like dwellings for human beings." To be housed at all, however badly, was still an improvement over the conditions in some factories, notably in the textile industry, where workers worked, ate, and slept by the side of their machines. Factory owners made a virtue of this arrangement, claiming that the workers were, after all, "village people who have not yet lost their country habits and attitudes; they view sleeping on the loom as reminiscent of their own homes.”

In cities, workers had greater choice in housing. But since most workers could not afford public transportation, they lived mainly in factory slums close to the factory. A typical factory neighborhood in St Petersburg was described as an entire forest of factory chimneys, throwing out clouds of black smoke obscuring the already grey Petersburg sky. The factory buildings, houses, streets, and bustling crowds of people were covered with a thick layer of soot. From everywhere rushed the massive rhythmical sounds—the rattle of huge rollers, the penetrating clank of iron bars, the heat of steam hammers which shook the earth... and above all these sounds in the air hung the uninterrupted hum of huge steam boilers lying on the ground like giant caterpillars.

In neighborhoods like this, which were similar to factory districts earlier in Europe, workers lived according to their means: in a room shared with many others, a small corner of a kitchen rented from a family of workers who could not afford to keep an entire apartment for themselves. Even in private apartments, sharing a bed was the norm. A worker from Moscow of the 1890s described his quarters in the following way:

My room and board was not far from the factory in a huge stinking house populated by haulers, cabbies, and day-laborers. We were fifteen men renting the apartment as a collective. Some were bachelors, others had wives in the countryside who looked after the land. I was put in a small dark room without windows—in other words, a closet. It was filthy and stuffy, full of cockroaches and bugs and smelled acutely of “humanity.” In this closet stood two wooden cots. My fellow villager and guardian slept on one, and his son and I on the other.

The housing situation deteriorated further in the twentieth century. Rents began to escalate in the 1890s and continued to rise thereafter. In St Petersburg, for example, although the number of apartments doubled between the

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17. Peskov, p. 89.
21. Ibid., p. 10.
1860s and 1900, the number of inhabitants per apartment increased by the expedient of the “corner habitation,” the subdivision and resubdivision of apartments, tranforming every available space into sleeping quarters. In 1904 two-thirds of single workers and two-fifths of married workers lived in such “corners,” and conditions were similar in Moscow and other cities.  

The nadir of living accommodations was the flophouse, which emerged on a fairly large scale in the late 1870s. Subsidized by charitable organizations and designed to provide cheap night shelter for the temporarily homeless, by 1910 flophouses had become a permanent institution, often housing people for long periods of time. In St. Petersburg they provided 6,200 beds and, entirely against city ordinances, in fact housed many more people than the number of beds. Filthy and overcrowded, the flophouse was a breeding ground for recurring typhus and cholera epidemics.

The highest priority in the urban worker’s budget was housing, and within the limits described, the quality of housing improved as income rose. But even the highly skilled worker had difficulty making ends meet. From the 1880s to the outbreak of World War I, nominal wages rose considerably, but the cost of living rose faster. In 1910 budget studies showed that a family in St. Petersburg required 600–700 rubles per year to purchase basic necessities, yet the average wage of metalworkers, one of the best paid sectors of the labor force, was 516 rubles per year, and in the lowest-paying industry, food processing, the average was 268 rubles. The wage scale and the cost of living were higher in St. Petersburg than in other cities, but the relationship of one to the other was similar throughout the Russian Empire. The fundamental characteristic of the worker’s budget was disequilibrium. Most workers were in debt all their lives.

Normally, the rural factory, far from town facilities, ran a shop which sold basic provisions. The shops were profit-making enterprises for the factory owners, who took advantage of their captive consumers to charge inflated prices for products of poor quality. Workers bought provisions on credit, and their debts were deducted from their wages, another mechanism for keeping them indebted to the factory. The high prices and poor quality of food in the shops, the burden of eternal indebtedness, often made the company store the first target of looting and destruction during periods of labor unrest.

Unmarried workers attempted to cope with the problems of survival by forming living and eating collectives, known as artels. Artels were frequently composed of workers from the same village or region. As quantity and quality of food were determined by the wages of the artel’s members, there was a division within village groupings into workers whose earnings were roughly equivalent. Workers in artels ate noticeably better than those who fended for themselves, but, as a serious student of workers’ lives commented, the workers’ diet consisted of “an excess of carbohydrates, insufficiency of fat, and protein starvation.” The daily fare and communal dining habits of a worker’s artel were described as follows:

At 11 A.M. every day, as soon as the bell for dinner rang, we ran eagerly to the apartment and immediately sat at the table on which already steamed an enormous basin of cabbage soup. All fifteen of us ate from a common bowl with wooden spoons. Bits of meat floated in the soup. First we gobbled the liquid, and as it disappeared we waited tensely for the signal. Someone tapped a spoon on the rim of the bowl and pronounced the awaited “go to it!” Then the race for the few floating bits of meat began. The most adroit got the most meat.


24. See M. Davidovich, Peterburgskie tekstil’nye rabochie (Moscow, 1919). For workers’ wages as well as other aspects of the workers’ standard of living, see also Iu. I. Kir’ianov, Zhiznennye uroveni’ rabochikh Rossii (Moscow, 1979), and E. E. Kruze, Polozhenie rabochego klasa Rossii v 1900–1914 gg (Leningrad, 1976).

25. Druzhinin, p. 68.
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ability to scratch out one’s name and read a simple text. A worker’s account pithily sums up the cultural ambience of a St. Petersburg factory neighborhood in the 1890s:

The entire working-class population of Smolensk tract lived in crowded, filthy, and primitive conditions. The city government extracted huge taxes from the workers, but completely ignored their well-being. Throughout the tract there were many taverns, beer halls and churches, but not a single cultural establishment. For 60,000 people there were only two shabby theatres.29

Little wonder, then, that alcoholism was endemic among workers:

Twice a month on Saturday payday, our artel became the scene of a wild debauch. Some workers, upon getting their wages, went directly from the factory to the tavern and the saloon; others, more dandyish, came home to change clothes. But everyone would return home late at night or on Sunday morning morose, sullen, frequently battered, and with hangovers.30

A great problem among the peasantry as well, alcoholism was more clearly observable among workers clustered in the factory ghettos. The dislocations inherent in the transition from agrarian to industrial life, the wrench from daily concourse in kinship circles, and the aridity of the worker’s environment were blamed for the widespread consumption of vodka, primarily by male workers. But workers’ alcoholism was the alcoholism of the poor. One observer, irritated by the moralistic judgments made by the upper class, noted that the workers’ absolute expenditure on alcohol was actually quite small: “This undermines the opinion that workers would be in clover if only they did not drink. With the sum of money they spend on vodka, you cannot buy much clover.”31

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27. See David Ransel, ed., The Family in Imperial Russia (Urbana, Ill., 1978).
29. Kanatchikov, p. 79. See also Pavlov, pp. 77–79.
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If the soil of factory and city life was barren of the nutrients necessary to preserve traditional family life and familiar relationships and recreations intact, the steady two-way flow between factory and village provided at least intermittent relief. It is no wonder that workers clung to the village long after it had ceased to play a significant part in their economic survival. Peasant diversions, transplanted to the new environment, may not have survived with their original vigor, but surely continued to palliate the workers' hardships and disorientation in the factory. Young people must have courted, sung, and danced in the barracks courtyard as they had in the village. The church, perhaps declining in the power to succor, remained a significant element in the lives of many. Yet, over time, some features of factory life became appealing substitutes for what was lost. Workers returning to the village were reported to display proudly their German accordions, their city fashions and dances, and their new urban sophistication. While in the main illiterate or semiliterate, workers increasingly surpassed their peasant kin in the ability to read and write, and a new world of possibilities began to take shape with literacy. However powerful the sway of rural habits, tastes, and commitments on Russian workers, however incomplete their proletarianization compared with workers of the West, factory life was molding a new identity. Their growing intolerance for the bleak and wretched conditions of factory life attest to an emerging sense of their collective interests and of their worth as workers.

The history of Russian workers' attempts to improve their lives in the face of tenacious resistance has something in common with the history of all industrializing countries, for the reluctance of government and industry to ameliorate the workers' condition was not unique to Russia. Russian social and political traditions, however, created special obstacles to the formulation of workable solutions to the problems of the burgeoning working class.

For centuries Russia's autocracy had been the sole source of legislation in every area of life. The theoretical justifica-

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tion for unfettered autocratic rule was that the tsar was an independent force, a stern but benevolent master whose task it was to stand above society's contentious elements in order to reconcile them. The elements beneath the tsar that constituted society, however, were not equal to one another. The landowning class was meant to execute the tsar's will over the peasantry and to be, like the tsar, a stern and benevolent master. If the landowner erred in his obligation to dispense benevolence as well as discipline, the serf had no right to insubordination, but did have the right to appeal to the ultimate arbitrator, the tsar. The assumptions that governed the relationship of tsar and landowner to peasants were applied wholesale to workers. Given their ties to the land, it was argued, workers did not constitute a separate class for which it was necessary to alter the traditional hierarchy or to legislate separately. This argument was undermined by growing and persistent labor unrest. The autocracy's goals then came into conflict with one another: how to maintain the traditional hierarchy, support and encourage industry, and at the same time, assuage workers' discontent. Balancing these goals was a precarious business, but in principle (and increasingly in practice) the government grudgingly acquiesced to legislation in favor of workers; it did so in part because it perceived the demands of workers to be just, and in part because of the hope that economic concessions would prevent the translation of economic into political discontent. Industrialists, on the other hand, generally opposed concessions to the workers which threatened their purses or their control of the worker. Neither the tsar's dilemma nor the conflict between government and industry were resolved.

But, until 1905, they were in perfect accord on one point: workers should not be allowed to take autonomous and collective action in their own defense, nor should they partici-

pate in the debates over the legislation considered to protect them. All effective forms of workers’ self-help and expression, including the strike, were forbidden and punishable as crimes. Nonetheless, in the absence of legal channels for peaceful settlement of grievances, the Russian workers’ only recourse was to withhold their labor. From the 1870s workers engaged in strikes at the risk of severe punishment—loss of job, exile, or prison terms at hard labor. Strikes ranged from isolated spontaneous outbursts of rage against low wages, fines, living conditions, illegal firings, and other abuses, to longer and more organized protests demanding substantive changes in industrial relations. From the 1890s strike activity, encouraged by socialist agitation, increased to such an extent that the government was forced to modify its prohibition against workers’ associations, hoping to do so, however, without relinquishing its age-old paternalistic authority. In the early 1900s government agents were empowered to create workers’ associations designed to give workers carefully controlled and limited scope for the expression of their economic grievances. This curious experiment, known disparagingly as police socialism, was, predictably, popular with workers and irritating to industrialists. Before long, the government, too, had second thoughts and brought an end to it. In 1904, however, the government permitted a similar workers’ association to be formed in St. Petersburg under the guidance of a priest, Father Gapon. This time workers’ aspirations overran the confines of the government’s intentions. At a particularly sensitive moment—with opposition to the tsar growing over the shoddy prosecution of the Russo-Japanese War and in the middle of a strike of major proportions in St. Petersburg—the workers of the Gapon organization mounted a massive demonstration. On January 9, 1905, a huge contingent of workers and their families came before the tsar’s palace with a petition for redress of grievances. The tsar’s troops opened fire on the peacefully assembled workers, an event aptly called Bloody Sunday. It unleashed the revolution of 1905.

In October of 1905, workers of all varieties—artisinal, industrial, and intellectual—erupted in a massive Empire-wide general strike described by Lenin as the dress rehearsal to 1917. The strike demands of 1905, fulfilling the autocracy’s worst fears, went far beyond bread-and-butter issues as workers joined with other elements in society whose discontent had long festered in the oppressive social and political climate of tsarist Russia. This dramatic expression of opposition to the status quo provoked, among other things, a grudging acknowledgment on the part of autocracy and industry that Russia’s workers, whatever their ties to the land, whatever their degree of illiteracy, ignorance, and naïveté, could no longer be pacified by dilatory policies and paternalistic, half-hearted legislation. The inchoate working classes were coalescing into an independent force that had to be recognized for its potential disruptive power if not for its human needs.

In the first chaotic months of the 1905 revolution workers formed hundreds of unions. Recognizing the inevitability of workers’ participation in the issues that affected their lives, the state soon granted legal status to workers’ organizations. Further, a legislature was created, the first in Russia’s history, and although the franchise was limited, it gave the newly formed political parties that spoke for workers a public forum. Neither unions nor the legislature, however, were destined to play the same important role in Russian workers’ fate as they did in the West. The ebb and flow of legal and autonomous activity was compressed into little more than one decade and, at that, under deteriorating conditions. Once the revolutionary fervor of


34. For the 1905 revolution, see Laura Engelstein, Moscow, 1905: Working Class Organization and Political Conflict (Stanford, 1982); Solomon M. Schwarz, The Russian Revolution of 1905 (Chicago, 1967); Scharf, “Petersburg Workers in 1905.”
1905 waned, and state and industry no longer felt threatened by acute unrest, they reverted to traditional postures. Militant workers, who participated in unions and strikes, remained vulnerable to loss of job, blacklisting, administrative exile, and prison. The combination of obstruction and harassment and persistently adverse economic conditions sapped the vitality of the strike movement, unions, and political activity. True, in the interrevolutionary years, government and industry attempted to hammer out their differences on the labor question. Committees of government representatives and industry met independently and jointly, proposed and counterproposed. Since their fundamental perspectives and the attendant dilemmas had not seriously changed under the impact of the events of 1905, the results were minimal. The Russian worker remained overworked, ill-fed, badly housed, poor, and insecure.35

In 1912, workers once again turned to the strike as the most effective expedient for gaining control over their lives.36 The outbreak of World War I interrupted the revitalized strike movement as it did all aspects of Russian life, and for awhile held workers’ discontent in abeyance. But the dislocations and economic privations of the war were especially trying for workers. Their rage and discontent found more radical, direct, and satisfying release, first in the February Revolution of 1917, which destroyed the tsarist order, and then in the October Revolution, which initiated a radically new era in social, economic, and political relations.

* * *


In the foregoing account I have outlined the broad social and economic forces that shaped Russia’s factory work force and that provided workers with a framework of shared experiences and characteristics. Within this framework, however, there were significant differences among workers, which, however blurred, overlapping, and complex, we must unravel to make sense of the distinction of gender that will preoccupy us in the following pages. With due regard for the perils of oversimplification, I will attempt to structure the differences among workers in a rough hierarchical order according to the degree of skill they possessed.

The highly skilled worker was at the top of the hierarchy. As institutionalized vocational training in tsarist Russia was in its infancy, most workers learned their skills on the job through long periods of apprenticeship. Literacy, whether a prerequisite for or a consequence of skill, was very high among skilled workers. Skilled workers earned relatively high wages and could afford a more comfortable life within the limits described earlier. Equally important, they commanded respect from management, for they were hard to replace and were therefore not easily threatened with insults, fines, or firing. Less-skilled workers respected them as well, for their literacy and sophistication, their competence and control over the work process. The skilled workers’ bonds to the peasant village, already weakened through long apprenticeship, were often severed as these workers developed a sense of pride and identification with occupation and, with more money, leisure, and literacy, a more comfortable assimilation into the factory or urban environment. Those who had lived in the city for a long time were often indistinguishable from other lower-class urban dwellers. They wore their shirts with starched collar tucked into neatly pressed, narrow trousers, and “on holidays some even wore derby hats. . . . They carried themselves solidly with a sense of their own worth, swore only indoors under great pressure or on payday when they got drunk—some not even then.”37

37. Kanatchikov, p. 17.
The greatest proportion of workers were unskilled or semiskilled. They did poorly paid jobs that required neither literacy nor long training. Competing with similarly illiterate and unskilled peasant job-seekers, they were easily replaced and consequently had little leverage with management. For the most part, unskilled workers retained lively connections to the countryside, sending a large portion of their meager wages to kin in the village, returning to the land for seasonal work and for recreation. Rewarded with neither decent wages, pride in the work process, nor respect, with one foot in the factory and one in the peasant world, the unskilled worker was more likely to have an amorphous and vacillating sense of identification with the factory than the skilled worker.

While all industries required a range of skilled and unskilled labor, heavy industries, especially metal processing and engineering, employed a far greater proportion of Russia’s skilled workers. Skilled workers were a minority among the largely unskilled and semiskilled workers in light industry and were employed mainly to maintain and repair machinery. Thus, despite some mingling of the skilled and the unskilled in factories as well as in their neighborhoods and taverns, the differences of skill and its concomitants—literacy, urbanization, competence, and sophistication—were profoundly internalized by workers themselves. A skilled worker left an account of his visit to a textile factory in the 1890s, which he undertook as if he were conducting an anthropological expedition, complete with a “disguise” to help him pass unnoticed among the natives. His graphic description underscored the gap he perceived between his own milieu of skilled, urbanized workers and that of the unskilled textile workers:

The whole crowd of lads and girls reminded me of a village in the provinces. The girls were striking for the color of their attire, which was completely different from city wear . . . and the lads wore their trousers tucked into high boots . . . grey homespun shirts cinched at the waist with raggedy belts. Others simply wore rags tied around their bare feet.38

Another skilled worker recalled more succinctly that workers in light industry seemed to him “to be another race of workers.”39

Women workers were a “race” within a “race,” as it were, a special subcategory on the lowest rungs of this hierarchy. The female contingent of the Russian industrial labor force underwent significant alterations in the period under consideration. It grew in absolute size and in proportion to the male labor force, which in itself speaks of important changes in the peasant world from which women came and in the factory world which accepted them, indeed sought them out. The characteristics we have singled out to describe the entire work force changed for women workers as well: literacy, relationship to the land, urbanization, accumulated work experience. Yet, throughout our period women remained exclusively among the unskilled and semiskilled workers. Further, they were confined mainly to jobs in light industry, for it was only in the last years of tsarist Russia that they joined the ranks of unskilled labor in heavy industry. In other words, gender transcended all other distinctions among workers to keep women in a special place within the factory world.

The strength and tenacity of gender to influence the woman worker’s destiny is something of a chicken-and-egg problem, requiring that we sort out carefully the interaction of tradition and cultural legacy with changing economic and social forces, the interplay between palpable physical determinants, such as the double burden of wage work and domestic responsibilities, and the psychological influences of the work experience itself. We must look as well outside the factory into the values of the larger culture which be-

queathed to factory owner and male worker alike an attitude of condescension to women and to the responses of women workers to the subordinate status which they shared with women of all classes. As a woman worker lamented in 1908: “We women have two burdens. At the factory we serve the boss, and at home the husband is our ruler. Nowhere do they see the woman as a real person.”

40. Tsentral’nyi Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv v Leningrade (hereafter TsGIA), f. 150, op. 1, d. 154, l. 139 (Stanok tekstil’shika [1908], no. 1).

2

PEASANT WOMEN AND THEIR WORK

Most women workers in Russia began life as peasants. They abandoned traditional agrarian life, as did men, because the land would no longer support Russia’s burgeoning population in the decades after the emancipation of the serfs. Although the underlying impulse to leave the land was the same for men and women, the woman came to the factory according to a rhythm that was governed by her sex and her role in the peasant household and economy. She came with different life and work experiences, different expectations and aspirations, which tempered her experiences as a factory worker and marked them off in significant ways from those of her male counterpart. We must, therefore, briefly examine the life of the peasant woman, her status in the family and the community, and more specifically, her place in the peasant economy: the work that women had traditionally performed in the countryside and how it changed during the period under consideration.

The core of peasant life from which all relationships radiated and which determined values, obligations, rewards, and behavior was land. And land was a male attribute. Although the land was not the private property of any individual male, the right to the land devolved from father to son or, in the absence of sons, to other male relatives. Similarly, the homestead, kitchen garden, farm implements, and domestic artifacts were the collective property of the household and passed indivisibly from one generation of males to the next. Women had rights only over their dowries, which