

Stalin's Antiworker "Workerism", 1924–1931*

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Summary: This article sketches the background of the development of the "workerist myth" in the Soviet Union in the period 1924–1931. From 1924 onward workers were subjected to mounting pressure to increase productivity and tighten discipline, against the background of the great debate on how to transform the Soviet Union from an agrarian country into a country with a powerful industrial sector as rapidly as possible. Between 1928 and 1929 a vigorous antiworker campaign was launched in the Soviet Press, which in just a few months in the winter of 1929–1930 was transformed into a workerist campaign, glorifying the exemplary shock workers as "enthusiastic builders of socialism". This myth was used on the domestic as well as on the external front, and meant the ascent to power of the Stalinist elite and the definitive breakthrough of a "national socialism". It also marked the end of trade unionism as such.

INTRODUCTION

Between 1928 and the beginning of 1930 the image of workers in Soviet journals and newspapers evolved in a most peculiar way. By mid-1928 an antiworker campaign had begun which was so violent as to make Menshevik *émigrés* think it could only be explained by assuming that a class of "capitalistic" industrial leaders had regained control of Soviet factories.¹ Using isolated cases and stories often inconsistent with official statistical data – as someone still dared to note – workers were represented as loafers, self-seekers (*shkurniki*), thieves, drunkards, absentees to be fired and insulted in every way. It was their fault if, because of a "decline in labor discipline", industry did not fulfil its plan. It was thus necessary to resort to harsh measures in order to set things right.²

* This essay was presented at the conference "State and Labor in the 1930s", organized in Naples in January 1993 by the Istituto Italiano per gli Studi Filosofici and the Università di Napoli "Federico II".

¹ See the issues of *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik* that appeared in 1928–1931, in particular the articles by A. Iugov and S. Schwarz, as well as the latter's *Labor in the Soviet Union* (New York, 1952). Mensheviks fell into the same ideological trap to which the opposition had succumbed: once socialism was ruled out, their minds automatically turned to "capitalism". They were thus blind to other possible developments.

² There had actually been a decrease not in productivity but in the growth in productivity, a normal phenomenon given the "law" of diminishing returns. Apart from trade union publications and some of those by the NKT, all the Soviet press participated in the campaign. The *Torgovo-Promyshlennaia Gazeta* (TPG, the organ of the VSNKh), the

The first change occurred in early 1929. The antiworker campaign continued unabated, newspapers such as the *Komsomolskaia Pravda* continued to be at its forefront and harsh antilabor legislation was passed in its wake. Yet a new formula emerged in which those guilty of weakening labor discipline were “the new recruits coming from the countryside”, while inside factories a bitter struggle was going on between a politically conscious vanguard, the shock-workers (*udarniki*), who wanted to “build”, and the “backward masses” who tried to resist their efforts. Mid-1929 saw the introduction of more antilabor legislation, but the antiworker campaign subsided (although it never disappeared). It was replaced by articles extolling the development and success of mass socialist emulation (*sorevnovanie*).

The conclusive turnabout came in the winter of 1929–1930. But for a minority of “active class enemies” who had sneaked into factories and were at times able to corrupt their more backward companions, workers were now presented as heroes, builders of socialism.³ This mythological construction – the use of the term “myth” is not accidental – was crowned in 1931–1932 by the publication of two exemplary stories, that of the Filippov family and that of Kalmykov, a Magnitogorsk worker, which met with considerable success in the West.

Thus, in just a few months, a vicious antiworker campaign had been completely transformed into a glorification of yesterday’s drunkards and loafers, even though a category of “malicious disorganizers of production” continued to exist and complaints about “high” – the quotation marks are entirely justified – rates of labor turnover (*tekuchka*) and absenteeism (*progul*) did not cease. What was the background to this remarkable evolution?

THE EVOLUTION OF LABOR CONDITIONS, 1924–1931

1924–1927

By the mid-1920s there were almost two million Soviet industrial workers, most of whom worked in the 1,900 or so nationalized factories. Another 500,000 or so were employed in the construction industry. Hourly wages had just returned to their 1913 levels, while monthly wages were still 20 per cent lower than in 1913 because of the shorter working day.

As the 1929 censuses of the working class were soon to show, the mass dismissals which accompanied the introduction of the NEP and

Komsomolskaia Pravda and authors like Tol’stopiatov, Kallistratov, Kheinman and Kraval’ distinguished themselves in this campaign.

³ See B.L. Markus, “K voprosu o metodakh izucheniia sotsial’nogo sostava proletariata”, *Istoriia proletariata*, 2 (1930), pp. 15–64. This is perhaps the key Stalinist text on the working classes of the first half of the 1930s.

which were used for social and political "engineering" meant that the factory experience of these workers, especially skilled ones, dated from the pre-revolutionary years, when industrial workers had numbered about 2.5 million. However, this physical continuity could not conceal the traumatic political, psychological and behavioral fractures caused by the national and civil conflicts of 1917–1922.

These workers were far from being a homogeneous mass. National, local, age and sex differences were compounded by a further general distinction, mirroring the current work organization. This was definitely "pre-scientific". It saw a more or less stable nucleus of skilled and semiskilled workers coexist inside factories with a mass of day laborers (*vremennye*). The latter accounted for about 60 per cent of those hired, and more than 80 per cent in the case of unskilled labor, a fact alone sufficient to explain the "high" turnover rates already decried in the 1920s.⁴

As in pre-revolutionary times, both groups had strong ties with the countryside. In 1926, for example, 57 per cent of Moscow's working-class families and 42 per cent of those in Leningrad were sending someone to work in the fields. Paradoxically, at least from the standpoint of the prevailing theories, in many traditional working-class areas skilled "thoroughbred proletarians" owned more land than unskilled laborers. In the Urals, for example, they owned twice as much as newly hired greenhorns.⁵

From 1924 onward these workers were subjected to mounting pressure to increase productivity and tighten discipline in the workshops. The background to this was the great debate on how to transform an agrarian country, which the Soviet leadership felt was hostile and incapable of guaranteeing the survival of the new state in the conflict-ridden post-war Europe, into a country with a powerful industrial sector as rapidly as possible.⁶

⁴ The data I have used in this essay are drawn mostly from journals like *Ekonomicheskoe obozrenie*, *Partiinoe stroitel'stvo*, *Statisticheskoe obozrenie*, *Statistika truda*, *Trudy TsSU*, *Vestnik statistiki*, *Vestnik truda*, *Voprosy truda*; from various editions of *Trud v SSSR*; from the yearbooks published by the VSNKh in the 1920s; from the 1929 working-class censuses (A. Rashin, *Sostav proletariata SSSR* (Moscow, 1930)); from documents published in the central and regional series of *Industrializatsiia SSSR, 1926–1941*; from the collections of state, party, VSNKh, VLKSM, and trade union laws and decrees, etc. An excellent overview of the conditions among Soviet workers at the end of the NEP can be found in S. Zagorsky, *Wages and Regulations of Conditions of Labour in the USSR* (Geneva, 1930). Data on the workforce and on the evolution of its structure can be found in *Izmeneniia v chislennosti i sostave sovetskogo rabocheho klassa* (Moscow, 1961), and O.I. Shkaratan, *Problemy sotsial'noi struktury rabocheho klassa* (Moscow, 1970).

⁵ See N. Gimmler (Sukhanov), "K kharakteristike rossiiskogo proletariata", *Sovremennik*, 4 (1913), p. 321; R.E. Johnson, *Peasant and Proletarian* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1979); I. Kvasha and F. Shofman, "K kharakteristike sotsial'nogo sostava rabochikh SSSR", *Puti industrializatsii*, 1–2 (1930); and the 1929 censuses mentioned above.

⁶ A. Erlich, *The Soviet Industrialization Debate, 1924–28* (Cambridge, Mass., 1960).

This pressure at first took the form of the “rationalization drive”, launched at the beginning of 1924 and followed by a campaign for a “regime of economy” (*rezhim ekonomiki*). The official aim – the return to 1913 production standards – suggests that the ideas behind it were initially of a traditional, managerial and “capitalistic” kind.⁷

A wide and composite front supported this policy. It ranged from the “old”, “bourgeois” specialists, who regarded it as a return to the common sense of bygone days, to the majority of the party’s factions, the sole exception being the Workers’ Opposition, harshly repressed in 1921–1923. Of course, everybody had their own motives: the “Right” and the center, which wanted to avoid a confrontation with the peasants, favored a policy whose goal was industry’s *internal* “accumulation”; the industrial “Left”, keen to build rapidly and on a large scale, supported any policy that increased the likelihood of this.⁸ It may be added that in the eyes of its adherents, Marxist economics, which saw in the extraction of surplus value from workers the only possible source of accumulation within industry, also justified the pressure put on workers.

Against this background, and for the first time since 1920, Soviet industrial leaders discussed a formal proposal to use forced labor to develop distant regions. The proposal was made in 1925 by Piatakov, a leader of the Left opposition and the state industry deputy, to its chairman, Dzerzhinskii, who also headed the OGPU and was then siding with the “Right”.⁹

Trade unions were the only official power to resist rationalization. But when compared with other state bureaucracies, Soviet trade unions were even then, at the peak of their power, only a minor force, with just 20,000 people working in their central apparatus in 1924. This weakness would suffice to explain their swift defeat, which was also favored by a deep political and psychological frailty. Soviet trade unions were in fact trapped by ideology (what has been said of Marxism also applied to many of their leaders) and, above all, by confronting “their own” state. They were thus its easy prey, especially since by collaborating with the state – often reluctantly – the unions lost face in the eyes of workers and were thereby deprived of their natural support.

This was all the more so since the effects of the rationalization drive inside the workshops soon made themselves felt. Between 1923–1924

⁷ *K probleme proizvoditel'nosti truda. Sbornik statei i materialov*, 1–3 (Moscow, 1924–1925). The drive to rationalization started after a VSNKh investigation into what workers actually did on the job. Preceded by two other investigations ordered by Piatakov in 1920–1921, it was inspired by the literature on scientific management. Thus scientific management, whose importance has at times been overstated, did influence moves to increase pressure on workers.

⁸ See my “Building the First System of State Industry in History”, *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, XXXII (1991), pp. 539–580.

⁹ “Ia prosil by poruchit' GPU”, *Sovetskie arkhivy*, 4 (1991), pp. 71–75.

and 1926–1927, for example, while labor turnover continued to hover at around 100 per cent, the number of days lost per worker in industry fell from 12.77 to 9.24 (7.2 of them for unjustified reasons). Detailed internal rules – which had not existed so far – were introduced in most large workshops, and by the end of 1927 5 per cent of the workforce was being fired each year for unjustified absenteeism and disciplinary violations alone.

Meanwhile, workers' productivity began to grow much faster than wages (which continued to increase up to the end of 1927). Productivity rose 46.5 per cent between 1924–1925 and 1925–1926 and jumped another 39 per cent in the following year. Industrial accidents followed the same pattern, increasing by around 50 per cent in just one year (from 33.8 per thousand workers in the third quarter of 1925–1926 to 49.6 in the fourth quarter of 1926–1927).¹⁰

Of course, such phenomena provoked increasing discontent among workers. As Tomskii, the most important trade union leader, observed, this manifested itself in a wave of spontaneous strikes often directed against the unions too. Party leaders, who understood the situation well, responded in two ways: on the one hand by increasing repression in the workshops (at the beginning of 1926, for example, "special sections" were opened in many factories);¹¹ and, on the other, by looking for and creating a new stratum of privileged supporters in industry.

1928–1931

In December 1927 the 15th Party Congress marked the final defeat of the opposition and the launching of the Stalinist offensive. This was carried out under the banner of an ideology based on extreme voluntarism and by resorting to the maximum possible administrative pressure, of which Stalin was presented as both the physical embodiment and the master.¹² The offensive had several targets. The first and most important were the peasants, who constituted about 80 per cent of the Soviet

¹⁰ The data on industrial injuries and dismissals are drawn from *Voprosy truda*; those on absenteeism, morbidity and number of days worked are from G. Polliak, "Rabochii god i proguly v promyshlennosti", *Ekon. obozrenie*, 7 (1926). See too V. Il'inskii, "Rabochii god v promyshlennosti SSSR", *Stat. obozrenie*, 2 (1929), and Zagorsky, *Wages and Regulations*.

¹¹ See the special OGPU report on the reactions of workers to the *rezhim ekonomiki* in Rossiiskii Tsentri Khraheniia i Izucehniia Dokumentov Noveishei Istorii (RTsKhIDNI), fond 17 (Central Committee), opus 87, delo 200a. See also D. Corneli, *Il redivivo tiburtino* (Milan, 1977), p. 31, and N. Werth and G. Moullec, *Rapports secrets soviétique* (Paris, 1994), pp. 185–207.

¹² I have discussed these ideological developments in "G.L. Piatakov (1890–1937): A Mirror of Soviet History", *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, XVI (1992), pp. 102–166. For an interpretation of the great offensive see M. Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System* (New York, 1985).

population. Stalin personally directed operations.¹³ A second was the party itself, which Stalin aimed to tame and transform. Exile, deportation and cases like the Smolensk affair¹⁴ were used to encourage members to bow to the wishes of the new master (*khoziain*), as Stalin was then called in party circles.

A third target of Stalin's offensive was the industrial world: Among its victims were the "bourgeois" specialists, who found it difficult to conform to the new priorities (to maximize output from existing factories and to build as many new ones as possible and as quickly as possible) and doubted their wisdom. The new leadership responded by fabricating another "case", this time one of sabotage in foreign pay. This was the famous Shakhty affair, which exploded almost at the same time as the Smolensk affair and opened the door to the persecution of several thousand "untrustworthy" engineers and technicians of the old school. This persecution certainly aimed to break the "old" specialists,¹⁵ but it also aimed to impose a new model of industrial administrator and a new style of command. This model was that of the "commanders of production", people quite different from the usual "managers".¹⁶ As a resolution of the Central Committee stated, there was no place for people who did not "exercise their authority energetically enough".¹⁷

¹³ Given the connections between Soviet workers and the countryside, the fact that the state was once again resorting to the sort of terror that characterized the pre-NEP period was immediately known and much resented inside the shops. See for example my "Collectivisation, revoltes paysannes et politiques gouvernementales à travers les rapports du GPU d'Ukraine de février-mars 1930", *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, XXXV (1994), pp. 437–631.

¹⁴ The best contemporary reflections on the party at the end of the 1920s were Rakovskii's *The Professional Dangers of Power (Letters to Valentinov, August 1928)*, republished in his *Selected Writings* (London, 1980). The Smolensk party leaders were found guilty of corruption and sexual degeneracy (see M. Fainsod, *Smolensk under Soviet Rule* (Boston, 1989; 1st ed. 1958), pp. 48–50). Their punishment – they were demoted to industrial work – spurred workers to protest since, as they said, "industry is not penal servitude". This punishment indicated the real sentiments of an elite which was soon to resort to a "workerist" ideology. As Arturo Labriola wrote (*Au de là du capitalisme et du socialisme* (Paris, 1931), p. 13), "il n'est pas de classes de gens où la haine du travail manuel soit plus vive que parmi ces éléments d'origine ouvrier [I would say "popular" in general] nouveaux venus aux délices de promulguer des décrets et de rédiger des circulaires."

¹⁵ The Shakhty affair has attracted the attention of Western scholars, who have tended to interpret it as a struggle between political power and technocratic ambitions. See K. Bailes, *Technology and Society under Lenin and Stalin* (Princeton, 1978) and N. Lampert, *The Technical Intelligentsia and the Soviet State* (London, 1979). A letter from Rozengol'ts to Ordzhonikidze in 1928–1929 shows that to Bolshevik leaders sabotage meant attitudes more than actual crimes. See RTsKhIDNI, fond 85. (Ordzhonikidze), op. 1/sekr., d. 91.

¹⁶ I believe that, as a rule, the term "manager" should not be used to refer to Soviet industry's administrators, particularly in the 1930s.

¹⁷ *KPSS o profsoiuzakh* (Moscow, 1957), pp. 287–302. On these new bosses see Gladkov's *Tsement*. It is also probable that Stalin, who was adopting many policies associated with

The main target of the offensive inside the factories were the workers, however. And if the renewed campaign to increase productivity and tighten discipline could be seen as a continuation of the rationalization drive, in many respects its ideology soon started to differentiate itself from the previous "traditional" one. In 1928 the most evident of these differences was the now decidedly cruder, even hysterical, antiworker and antiunion rhetoric referred to in the introduction. A government commission was set up to investigate the "decline in labor discipline" which was being denounced as industry's main problem.

In fact, official data showed a quite different picture. In 1927–1928 labor turnover rates had actually decreased by a few per cent. Above all, under the impact of ever tighter rules and controls, the number of days lost per worker for justified and unjustified causes (the most widely used indicator of labor discipline in Soviet industry) fell from 2.0 and 7.2 respectively in 1926–1927 to 1.9 and 5.7 in 1927–1928, a total of 6.14 in 1928–1929, and 1.5 and 4.0 in 1929. The commission maintained that discipline was becoming worse, however, and elaborated the theory mentioned above that "newcomers from the countryside" were responsible for this. But in 1927–1928 the percentage of these workers in the total workforce actually declined, and women, young workers and the urban unemployed still accounted for most of those hired. Moreover, Russian industry had always recruited in the countryside and in 1926–1927, when the proportion of newcomers from rural villages had been much higher, no one felt the urge to protest against a decline in labor discipline.

One is therefore justified in asking what lay behind such unfounded "theories" and complaints. They did, of course, prepare the ground for the introduction of the new antilabor legislation devised to ease the task of Soviet industrializers. But this legislation was also, and perhaps above all, a prophylactic measure in view of the expected repercussions inside industry of the war against the countryside (and thus against Soviet peasant-workers in general) which the Stalinist elite had officially declared in early 1928. In particular, even if it is true that the massive influx of peasants into the factories had not yet begun by 1928, everyone knew that this would be an inevitable result of forced industrialization. And everyone knew the attitude these peasants took toward the government's policies. As Frumkin, the Russian NKZEM deputy, stated in a letter to the Politburo on 15 June 1928, "but for a small minority of poor peasants, the countryside is against us". Moreover, the Bolshevik leadership was already experiencing quite real troubles with discipline in the army, whose young peasant recruits immediately reacted to Stalin's

Trotsky, wanted to show that he was following his own line, and that he thus chose to attack specialists, whose defense had made Trotsky highly unpopular in party circles.

1928 volte-face (the army had also anticipated the persecution of “old” specialists, getting rid of the majority of former tsarist officers in 1924–1925).¹⁸

The 1928–1929 antiworker campaign was therefore an attempt to safeguard the regime from the consequences of its own policies. It was based on theories already expounded by Stalin in 1919. Then, facing the mass recruitment of peasants into the army, Stalin had noted that “the peasants will never fight for socialism, never! [. . .] They will never voluntarily fight for communism. Hence our task [. . .]: how to push these elements to fight”. Two years later, during the debate on the trade unions, he added that “democratic” methods were required in dealing with the working class because it was, unlike the army, a socially “homogeneous entity”. Implicit in these words was the theoretical justification for resorting to other, “military” methods if this “homogeneity” were lost (it must be noted that in practice, if not in theory, coercion was already widely used against workers, whose historically strong links to the countryside have already been mentioned).¹⁹

The other novelty of the 1928 antiworker campaign, at first less visible than its rabidity and crudity, was its being accompanied by new ideological, leftist overtones as well as by demagogic measures often taken to counter the opposition’s censure of these antilabor policies. The best known of these measures was the introduction of the seven-hour day, celebrated at the 15th Party Congress as a great working-class achievement but whose actual development pointed in an altogether different direction.

In the first factories chosen to take part in the experiment, which was to be accompanied by a process of “work condensing”, labor accidents increased 37.5 per cent in six months. This led to an explosion of discontent among workers already offended by the switch to three seven-hour shifts six days a week (instead of five eight-hour days split into one or two shifts, plus a half day on Saturday).²⁰ Furthermore, it was precisely in these factories that the first shock brigades of the new generation were born, generally at the initiative of factory hierarchies

¹⁸ A. Romano, “‘Contadini in uniforme’ e potere sovietico alla metà degli anni Venti”, *Rivista storica italiana*, CIV (1992), pp. 730–795; M. Kun, *Bukharin. Ego druz’ia i vrugi* (Moscow, 1992), p. 229.

¹⁹ On the 8th Party Congress (1919) see “Stenogramma zasedanii voennoi sektsii”, *Izvestiia TsK* (1989), pp. 135–190. The Stalinist leadership of the 10th Army was accused of generously using whipping and corporal punishment to discipline its “proletarian” soldiers.

²⁰ See Tol’stopiatov’s report to the 8th Trades Union Congress (December 1928), *Stenotchet* (Moscow, 1929), p. 332; Fainsod, *Smolensk under Soviet Rule*, pp. 306ff.; D. Maizel’, “Rezultaty perevoda predpriatii na 7-chasovoi [. . .]”, *Voprosy truda*, 3 (1930); Gosplan SSSR, *Trud v SSSR, 1926–30* (Moscow, 1930), p. xi; NKT SSSR, *Trud v SSSR k XVI part. s’ezdu* (Moscow, 1930), p. 102; A.P. Finarov, “Perevod promyshlennykh predpriatii na 7-chasovoi [. . .]”, *Istoriia SSSR*, 6 (1959), pp. 101ff.

(*po initsiative administratsii*).²¹ These brigades were usually composed of young workers, and the VLKSM (Communist Youth League) was their other great sponsor (its Central Committee proudly quoted industrial administrators as saying: "those first brigades, made up of young workers, organized themselves when the mass of the workers did not support the rationalization drive at all. Only the *komsomoltsy's* honest attitude toward work enabled us to carry out stop-watch analysis.").²²

We are dealing here with the crucial problem of the participation of part of the Soviet urban youth in the Stalinist assault, a participation linked both to the appearance of the new ideological overtones already mentioned as well as to the Stalinist elite's search for support inside factories. In fact, Moscow blessed the role of the VLKSM. The 15th Party Congress, for example, spoke of the VLKSM as the promoter of new, rationalizing initiatives. And Stalin offered many of its activists, often treated with scorn by old skilled workers and engineers, both a role and a career, making good his promises by increasing promotion from the ranks and raising the quotas for young people of working-class origins in higher education. At the same time, the better elements were contented with a leftist rhetoric which suited their ideal aspirations.

These phenomena became evident in the fight against the trade unions (then siding with the "Right"), the third target of the Stalinist assault on industry. The attack was launched in December 1928 at the 8th Trades Union Congress. It was led by Lazar Kaganovich, who relied particularly on the young VLKSM "enthusiasts" mobilized against the "union bureaucracy" under the banner of slogans echoing the syndicalist ones used at the beginning of the century.²³ Yet even though, according to Tomskii himself, trade unions were unpopular with both workers, who did not trust them, and the factory directors, who were dissatisfied with union collaborationism,²⁴ these trade unions proved to be a harder nut to crack than expected. In fact, the first assault resulted in a complete defeat for the Stalinists. Tomskii was re-elected president. The union bureaucracy was thus the sole Soviet bureaucracy to defeat Stalin, a fact not without significance.

²¹ The following collections of documents contain many references to the beginnings of shock work and the opposition of older workers to it: *Politicheskii i trudovoi pod'em rabocheho klassa SSSR* (Moscow, 1956), pp. 101–102, 214; *Sotsialisticheskoe sorevnovanie na predpriiatiakh Leningrada* (Leningrad, 1961), pp. 7, 31, 36; *Pokoleniia udarnikov* (Leningrad, 1963), pp. 8, 36–37; *Marsh udarnikh brigadov, 1921–41* (Moscow, 1965), pp. 38, 153–157, 204; *Sotsialisticheskoe sorevnovanie v SSSR* (Moscow, 1965), pp. 48–49; *Industrializatsiia SSSR, 1929–32*, p. 502.

²² *Ibid.* The VLKSM went as far as defending the role of informers inside factories who had been attacked by the unions (*Koms. Pravda*, 28 July 1929; *Trud*, 30 July 1929; *Sots. vestnik*, 15, 19 August 1929).

²³ Vos'moi S'ezd professional'nykh soivzov SSSR (10–24 Dekabria 1928g), *Stenotchet* (Moscow, 1929); L. Marcucci, "Il primato dell' organizzazione. Biografia politica di L.M. Kaganovič" (Dottorato di ricerca, Università di San Marino, 1992).

²⁴ Lampert, *The Technical Intelligentsia*, p. 110.



Figure 1. "Let us fulfill our coal obligation to the country" (Poster by G. Klucis, 1930. Collection IISG)

In the following months; however, the state and its "master" were to take their revenge in the form of a thorough purge of both the central union council and the NKT.²⁵ The purge soon extended to the leadership of individual unions and that of the factory committees (*zavkomy*). In the latter case, it went hand in hand with the development of emulation and shock work, which was resisted by a number of factory committees – including the Putilov – which thus became the target of the VLKSM's fury.²⁶

In these conditions, the party purge, launched in the same period and leading to the expulsion of about 100,000 party members, hit inside the factories those communist union men who had sided with Tomskii. They were now accused of doing too little to counteract the "backward tendencies" of workers and of opposing emulation (not by chance, a VLKSM Central Committee report complained of the hostility of party cells within factories). Since these communist union men had been the party's main pillar in the workshops, this must have caused a crisis within the party, but one soon obscured by the order – made at the end of the year – to mass recruit workers for the party.²⁷ Nonetheless, in 1929 the party's industrial structure did undergo a significant transformation, which led to the selection of new leading groups. And even official directives, those issued in April on party purges for example, clearly showed the principles which were to animate this selection in spite of the leftist rhetoric then prevailing. The communist administrators (*kommunisty-khoziaistvenniki*), who were enforcing the line on labor discipline and proved to be "true commanders of socialist industry", were to be defended at all costs because the "*natural tendency (stikhiia) of workers and the party was to try to direct the purges against them*" [italics added].²⁸

The direction in which the Soviet leadership was moving emerged even more clearly in the Central Committee resolutions and labor laws of the period, which were largely based on the report of the commission on labor discipline mentioned above. January saw the reintroduction into the factories of the principle of personal and authoritative direction (the *edinonachalie* of the years of militarization), which had been

²⁵ On Tomskii's 1929 removal see F.M. Vaganov, "Razgrom pravogo uklona v VKP(b), 1928–30", *Voprosy istorii*, 4 (1960).

²⁶ R. Krivitskii, "Sots. sorevnovanie", *Ekon. obozrenie*, 5 (1929); *Industrializatsiia 1926–28*, pp. 401ff.; *Sots. sorevnovanie na predpriatiiakh Leningrada*, p. 85; *Politicheskii i trudovoi*, pp. 214ff.

²⁷ On the methods employed to "recruit" workers see G. Iastrerov, "Rost proletarskogo iadra", *Partiinoe stroitel'stvo*, 3–4 (1930); "Postanovlenie TsK o dal'neishei rabote po regulirovaniu", *ibid.*; A. Dmitriev, "Opyt massovoi verbovki", *ibid.*; "Ukrepnenie riadov partii", *ibid.*, 11–12 (1930); V. Riakobon', "Partiia i ee rezervy", *ibid.*, 3–4 (1930); K. Mezhol', "General'nyi smotr' riadov partii", *ibid.*, 10 (1930); and F. Ruzel', "Rost partii za dva goda", *ibid.*

²⁸ I. Kosior, "Chistka partii i khoziaistvenniki", *TPG*, 28 April 1929.

mitigated during the NEP by the so-called “triangle” of director, party and union leader. In February a Central Committee resolution listed the qualities required of the new industrial leaders: those foremen and engineers able to take the initiative and “strictly impose labor discipline; to be models of discipline themselves, and to demand unconditional discipline from their subordinates” were “good”.

In March a new law again extended the powers of factory hierarchies: they could now punish workers without first consulting the unions. At the same time, tougher penalties were introduced for violating disciplinary codes, dismissals were made easier, and Labor Exchanges (the institutions then regulating employment) were required to blacklist workers dismissed for absenteeism or for violating disciplinary codes. In the meantime, the very idea of the “triangle” began to be denounced in the press.²⁹

In May and June the Politburo and the Sovnarkom took the decisions which instituted forced labor. In doing this they followed some of the recommendations made in Piatakov’s 1925 report. The new “system of mass utilization of the labor of criminal detainees”, which put those sentenced to three years or more into the hands of the OGPU, was in fact at first intended “to colonize our northern lands and to exploit their riches”.³⁰

In August, new harsher internal rules were introduced in state factories. But, for three reasons, the crucial month was September. First, social security was reformed. The reform aimed to “co-ordinate it with the needs of industrialization”. Benefits were cut; the number of recipients was reduced by raising the required length of service (*stazh*) and by excluding those of “alien” social origins and members of peasant families (*dvor*), i.e. the great majority of laborers and seasonal workers;

²⁹ In March the VSNKh newspaper opened a column, “Za edinolichnoe rukovodstvo fabrikoi-zavodom”, devoted to its criticism. The “triangle” remained a fictitious embellishment up to the end of 1935, when the situation briefly changed because industrial cadres were purged.

³⁰ O. Khlevniuk, “Prinuditel’nyi trud v ekonomike SSSR”, *Svobodnaia mysl’*, 14 (1992), pp. 73–84. In the years that followed, the forced labor system developed into a multifold phenomenon and included the OGPU GULag camps, which held a few hundred thousand prisoners by the mid-1930s; the NKVD “labor colonies”; mass *corvées*, involving millions of peasants each year; and the villages of the 1.8 million peasants who were “dekulakized” in 1930–1931 (*spetspereselentsy*) which, despite a very high mortality rate and mass escapes reaching figures unheard of in the times of serfdom, continued to have about one million inhabitants throughout the decade because of new arrivals. See the various articles by V.N. Zemskov, especially his “GULag (istoriko-sotsiologicheskii aspekt)”, *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia*, 6–7 (1991), pp. 10–27 and 3–17; A. Graziosi, “The Great Strikes of 1953 in Soviet Forced Labor Camps”, *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, XXXIII (1992), pp. 419–445. On *corvées* see Karl-J. Albrecht’s memoirs, *Le socialisme trahi* (Paris, 1943). A German communist and a protégé of both Clara Zetkin and Münzenberg, Albrecht became a senior Soviet official before returning to Germany and collaborating with the Nazis. One should be circumspect in using his memoirs.

the lists of disabled workers receiving a pension were redrafted, and many of them – in Moscow about 30 per cent – were reclassified in order to deprive them of their pensions.³¹

Secondly, after "bitter arguments" and, again, under the banner of a leftist "discourse" – slogans like "the liquidation of bureaucratism" were used – trade unions were forced to adopt a line summed up by the slogan "face to production". Tomskii's prophecies and fears were thus realized. Only a few months before, at the 8th Trades Union Congress, he had warned that "they want to reduce us to small and ineffective political sections (*politotdely*) fighting only to increase productivity and labor discipline" (Tomskii clearly had 1920 in mind, when Trotsky was the most ardent supporter of such policies). A process started in previous years thus came to its conclusion. From one angle, as Moshe Lewin has noted, turning their "face to production" for the unions meant turning their back on the workers. From another, those very unions became powerless inside the factories, a situation soon denounced by the NKT.³²

Thirdly, in September the powers of the industrial cadres were once more extended.³³ In those same months, a new investigation of the attitudes of industrial administrators was carried out. In a similar inquiry held in 1923 those heading the "good" list were "communists", followed by "Soviet people", defined as those who were "on good terms with the trade unions" (as early as 1923, however, internal documents stated that the principal obligation of industrial leaders was to "the working class as a whole", i.e. to the state). At the end of 1929 the best administrators were those willing to carry out the new policies and to build "Soviet style", who were devoted to industrialization and emulation, faithful to ideological campaigns and, above all, capable and ready to use an iron hand to enforce labor discipline. It was noted with satisfaction that foremen promoted from the ranks and without formal education (*praktiki*) and newly promoted, generally young workers (*vydvizhentsy*) showed the greatest zeal in applying a "harsh Soviet line" in the field of labor discipline, even if – it was conceded – this led them to have the "most difficult relationships" with the workforce.³⁴

³¹ *Kpss o profsoiuzakh*, p. 376; *Trud k XVI*, pp. 60ff.

³² Lampert, *The Technical Intelligentsia*, pp. 112ff.; Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System*, p. 226; a NKT comment to this effect is related in Zagorsky, *Wages and Regulations*, p. 25. Workers said similar things: see Lampert, *The Technical Intelligentsia*, pp. 14, 112ff.; Fainsod, *Smolensk under Soviet Rule*, pp. 306ff.

³³ See I. Tol'stopiatov, "Usilit' bor'bu za truddistsiplinu", *Voprosy truda*, 8 (1929).

³⁴ For the 1923 survey see Lampert, *The Technical Intelligentsia*, pp. 27–28; the 1923 Central Committee papers in the Trotsky Archives, T 2964; S.A. Kheinman, "K kharakteristike sostava kadrov promyshlennosti SSSR", *Ekon. obozrenie*, 12 (1929), 1 and 2 (1930). Workers sometimes murdered or maimed this kind of cadre. The phenomenon was widespread enough to be given a name, *bykovshchina* (in November 1928 a *Skorokhod* worker, Bykov, shot his newly promoted foreman; see *Sots. sorevnovanie na pred. Leningrada*, p. 315). In the following years the already extensive powers of industrial

These laws resulted in a tripling in the rate of dismissals for absenteeism and violations of labor discipline. In 1928–1929, for example, the rate of dismissals for the workforce as a whole reached 17.5 per cent. Among metalworkers it was as high as 20 per cent. Thus the “theories” which spoke of the “thoroughbred proletarians” of the metalworking industry as a bulwark of Stalinist policies inside factories were once again disproved. In later years, the rate of dismissals continued to grow, reaching 30 per cent in 1929–1930 and the almost unbelievable figure of 3 per cent a month in 1934.³⁵ The rate of industrial accidents also rose sharply: there were 225 accidents per thousand workers in 1928–1929. In 1930 the publication of such data was discontinued, but throughout the decade senior officials and Soviet journals repeatedly pointed to their “colossal growth”.

The huge increase in hiring (and firing) meant labor turnover increased too, hitting the 150 per cent mark among industrial workers in 1930 (in the construction industry rates were higher). Possibly because workers had to go to the factories in order to eat in the canteens, absenteeism grew much more slowly, peaking at 8.46 days per worker in 1932 and practically disappearing in the following years when very harsh laws were passed to combat the phenomenon.³⁶

The crucial factor in the deterioration of working conditions was, however, the collapse in the value of real wages, which had just reached their pre-1913 level by the end of 1927. The introduction of rationing and the volatility in the supply of rationed goods, which often were not to be had, make it very difficult to estimate the fall in real wages. It is reasonable to assume that by the end of 1929 real wages were 20–30 per cent lower than at the beginning of 1928. State loans alone absorbed 1.5 per cent of wages in November 1927 and 6 per cent one year later. According to most Western estimates, by 1931–1933 real wages were around 50 per cent of their pre-war level. It is likely that they were well below this figure at times. Recently, Riutin’s 1932 manifesto was published, the last of the opposition manifestos to appear. It claimed that in 1932 wages were a quarter of those in 1926–1927.³⁷

administrators were progressively strengthened in order to increase the effectiveness of coercion on peasant workers. They thus became true serf-superintendents (*prikazchiki*), acting on behalf of the new lord of the country.

³⁵ On dismissals see note 10 as well as L.M., “Naem rabochei sily”, *Statistika truda*, 8 (1929); I. Kallistratov, “Trudovaia distsiplina”, *Statisticheskoe obozrenie*, 10 (1929); A. Zaromskii, “Na bor’bu s tekuchest’iu”, *Voprosy truda*, 9 (1930); and *Industrializatsia 1929–32*, pp. 382–383.

³⁶ For data on industrial injuries and absenteeism see note 10. On labor turnover see *Trud v SSSR, 1934* (Moscow, 1935), pp. 140ff.; *Trud v SSSR, 1936* (Moscow, 1936), pp. 95ff.; *Industrializatsia 1929–32*, pp. 439ff.; and *Industrializatsia 1933–37*, p. 421. Despite official complaints, Soviet industrial cadres soon began to appreciate the significance of labor turnover and to use it to select a “convenient” workforce by getting “rid of elements not willing to work with fervor” (in TsPKP, *Otchet 1921 g.* (Bakhmut, 1922), pp. 206ff.).

³⁷ The figures for wage levels in 1928 are drawn from official statistics (*Trud 1930*, p. xxii for wages); Schwarz, *Labor in the Soviet Union*; and J. Barber, “The Standard of Living

As a consequence of the mounting pace of the attack on labor conditions, the growing resurgence of worker resistance which had started in 1924–1925 reached its peak at the end of the 1920s. "Old" skilled workers were the soul of this resistance.³⁸ But because of the exceptional degree of repression, both political and more general (including sackings), this did not last long.

As regards the nature of this resurgence, there is an almost total and extraordinary coincidence between all kinds of sources. The letters received at the time by the *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik* (the publication of the Mensheviks in exile), the *Biulleten' oppozitsii* (Trotskyite), and by *Trud* (the trade union newspaper, which continued to publish material indicative of the mood of both the workers and the union cadres up to the fall of 1929), tell a story quite similar to that we can read today in the OGPU reports on workers' attitudes. We already knew about the reports from Smolensk, which spoke of a substantial increase in the number of labor disputes in 1929. New ones are now being released, enriching an already familiar picture with new details.³⁹

The overall impression is that this resurgence was more a reaction to aggression than the expression of real vitality. It is as though workers wished primarily for peace, perhaps to recover from the tragedies of 1914–1922, and reacted in the way they did only when no other choice remained. As long as possible, however, they responded directly, collectively and repeatedly – thus resisting, in the literal sense of the word, the assault launched against them by the state. Obviously, this resistance was strongest where this assault was at its most intense.⁴⁰ Quite

of Soviet Industrial Workers", in C. Bettelheim (ed.), *L'industrialisation de l'URSS* (Paris, 1981), pp. 109–122. For the comments of foreign workers see my "Foreign Workers in Soviet Russia, 1920–40", *International Labor and Working Class History*, 33 (1988), pp. 38–59; and "Visitors from Other Times", *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, XXIX (1988), pp. 161–180 (an expanded, combined version of these two essays was published in A. Graziosi, *Industria e stato in Unione Sovietica, 1917–1953* (Naples, 1993)). See also "Platforma soiuza marksistov-lenintsev (gruppa Riutina)", *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, 11 (1990), p. 168 and "Collectivisation, revoltes paysannes" for data on the actual food rations given to workers in Ukraine in 1930. For the effects of this fall in real wages see Strumilin's study on the civil war years, which in this were so similar to the 1930s: *Zarabotnaia plata i proizvoditel'nost truda v 1913–22* (Moscow, 1923).

³⁸ This fact, reported by several Soviet sources including *Istoriia rabochikh Moskvy* (Moscow, 1983), pp. 206ff., is confirmed by Western studies such as those by J. Barber, "Soviet Workers and the State, 1928–41", *Crees papers* (1980), and H. Kuromiya's *Stalin's Industrial Revolution. Politics and Workers, 1928–32* (Cambridge, 1988). Also OGPU reports on the workers' mood confirm this point. See for example those which can be found in RTsKhIDNI, f. 17 (Central Committee), op. 85s, dd. 213, 307, 311.

³⁹ On the OGPU reports in Russian archives see J.P. Depretto, "L'opinion ouvrière (1928–32)", *Revue des Etudes Slaves*, LXVI (1994), pp. 55–60; N. Werth, "Une source inédite: les svodki de la Tchèque-OGPU", *ibid.*, pp. 17–27.

⁴⁰ I.P. Ostapenko, "Iz istorii proizvodstvennykh soveshchaniï", *Voprosy istorii*, 6 (1958); *Industrializatsiia 1926–28*, pp. 405–406. See S. Kuznetsov, "Massovaia rabota-na nerperryvku", *Partiinoe stroit.*, 1 (1929) on the uninterrupted working week; see also *Trud k*

significantly for the argument of this essay, it centered on shock work and emulation, which incarnated the new ideological, “workerist” developments: in both police reports and letters to newspapers we read of skilled workers repeating the charge that shock work is “bondage for the workers and prosperity for the administration”.⁴¹

It was fast becoming so in a new sense, as the result of a rapid and interesting evolution which started in 1929. Used at first to prepare the ground for cutting rates and thus the province of an “elite” consisting mostly of young workers (in September 1929 Leningrad’s metalworking factories had 335 brigades with 3,000 members, for example), shock work soon proved its flexibility as a tool which could be used to invalidate labor laws.⁴² Shock work was thus extended to the great majority of the workforce, with methods reminiscent of those employed to collectivize “100 per cent”.⁴³ In December 1929 the number of shock workers was estimated at 330,000. In January 1930 a “Leninist levy” recruited approximately 1.5 million more in just a few weeks. At the end of the year about half the workforce belonged to the “movement”; the figure reached 62 per cent twelve months later. The nature of shock work was thus radically transformed. Its main purpose was no longer to set records and rates, but, *via* its generalization, to get an almost complete control over the workforce (whose behavior, within certain limits, always remained beyond control of course) and to enable both labor legislation and labor practices to be invalidated (it must be kept in mind that “voluntary” and thus unrecorded pledges, e.g. to work overtime, now affected more than half the workforce).⁴⁴ From one point of view, shock work and emulation should therefore be considered another step in the pyramid of forced labor from 1930 (see note 30).

As the data on the explosion of shock work imply, the brutality of repression, the new antilabor measures and the officials willing and able to apply them rapidly brought an end to the short-lived resurgence of

XVI, pp. 17–18. There are some beautiful letters from Moscow workers in *Sots. vestnik*. See for example 23, 5 December 1929.

⁴¹ See note 22. Material on the opposition to shock work of skilled workers and old foremen (who had often once been skilled workers) may also be found in *Pervyi s'ezd udarnykh brigad. Sbornik dokumentov* (Moscow, 1959), pp. 39, 40, 69, 80, 112, 143, 158, and in *Politicheskii i trudovoi*, p. 215.

⁴² In the summer of 1929 *Trud* repeatedly denounced the fact that hazardous occupations, until then either forbidden or protected, were now becoming “a matter of heroism”; holidays became working days for the sake of industrialization; whole shifts had to carry on working “voluntarily” until they had met their “pledges”, etc.

⁴³ “Proverka vypol'neniia reshenii TsK”, *Partiinnoe stroitel'stvo*, 7–8 (1930).

⁴⁴ In 1930 the NKT (*Trud k XVI*, p. 20) denounced the fact that workers were working in “factories, shops and yards that would be closed were labor protection legislation to be respected” and that conditions were worse in heavy industry and on new building sites. In Magnitogorsk, for example, shock workers worked twelve hours a day, without a break, and often froze to death (J. Scott, *Behind the Urals* (Bloomington, 1973); S. Frankfurt, *Men and Steel* (Moscow, 1935), p. 74, for Kuznetsk).

workers' resistance, which was also undermined by the collapse of real wages. Therefore, I believe it is possible to state that in spite of, even because of, the workerist rhetoric that prevailed, the final months of 1929 saw a ruinous defeat of Soviet workers. It was a defeat paid for by the collapse in both living standards and working conditions; by cultural and psychological displacement and disorientation; by the loss of both status and social and legal protections; by the establishment within factories of an "intolerable climate of abuse" (in the words of one leftist union cadre); by the elimination of the best workers;⁴⁵ and, above all, by the definitive corruption of what was left of the organizations built by the workers of the Russian empire over many decades, and by the destruction of the historical memory of these same workers.⁴⁶

In the following decade, the development of "building" and the achievement of the desired results soon brought the "acute" stage of Stalinist workerism to an end. In the winter of 1930–1931 measures were taken to ban the promotion of workers from the workbench and to suppress the workers' communes (which by June 1930 had 16,000 members in Leningrad alone, mostly young workers who supported the abolition of *vy* and refused to wear ties and shake hands, etc.).⁴⁷

Although workerism did not disappear, the virulent antiworker language of previous years regained its former significance. Turnover now substituted absenteeism as both its main theme and the justification for enacting new antilabor legislation, but, as in the case of absenteeism, rhetoric falsified reality. Given the crisis provoked by Stalinist policies, turnover rates were actually quite low, in both absolute terms and in comparison with those in other industrial economies, such as that of the United States. Annual rates of labor turnover never exceeded 200 per cent in industry, and stabilized well below 150 per cent after 1932 (and below 100 in 1934). Nevertheless, as in the years of militarization, turnover became symbolic of the "criminal" behavior of workers, whom

⁴⁵ Among workers "who had made 1917" and had stayed in the factories, this defeat was borne with a feeling of shame for the consequences of their own efforts. See for example A. Ciliga, *Dieci anni dietro il sipario di ferro*, 1 (Rome, 1951), p. 77.

⁴⁶ Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System*, pp. 38ff., 302ff., has spoken of "deculturation, criminal behaviors, unpalatable countercultures", etc. One should add to this an explosion of sectarianism and popular religious movements, confirmed by some recently published archival documents (see N. Werth, "Le pouvoir soviétique et l'église orthodoxe", *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, XXIV (1993), pp. 41–106). This general picture, strengthened by new research being carried out in Russian archives, fits the official Soviet data published in the 1920s and after 1956 and casts serious doubts on some of the 1970s and 1980s Western scholarship on the Soviet working classes (surveyed by Leo van Rossum, "Western Studies of Soviet Labour During the Thirties", *International Review of Social History*, XXXV (1990), pp. 433–453).

⁴⁷ *Sots. sorevnovanie na pred. Leningrada*, p. 318; I. Kolomichenko, "Sozdanie traktornoi promyshlennosti", *Istoriia SSSR*, 1 (1957), pp. 80ff.; Kuromiya, *Stalin's Industrial Revolution*.

Lazar Kaganovich from the Donbass was again calling “tramps, bums, and loafers” in April 1933.⁴⁸

At the same time, the already present, if veiled, racism of the 1920s toward workers from the countryside (*derevenshchina*) exploded before a workforce which was now essentially *derevenshchina*. The phenomenon was more overt in the East and its dimensions are easily assessed by reading the “industrial novels” of the 1930s, where the mass of sluggishly working unskilled laborers is often compared to “a pack of criminals [. . .] whom it is necessary to bring to trial, to deprive of bread, to use as forced labor”, or is loathed because of its “Asiatic” nature, while “never again shall we be Asia, never, never, never!” Not without reason, Trotsky wrote in his 1935 journal that the dialogues between workers and bosses featured in these novels would have been unthinkable “in any cultured capitalist country”.⁴⁹

Workerism remained a weapon of the Stalinist arsenal, however, brushed up now and then, most notably in 1935–1937, during the fight against the industrial bureaucracy of the NKTP (Commissariat of Heavy Industry). But it was then an essentially propagandistic element, whose grasp upon workers had grown weaker and weaker. Two examples may suffice to illustrate the point. The first is that of the miner with his pneumatic drill, popularized by a famous picture of those years and later by Stakhanov (Figure 2). It was presented as being “symbolic” of workers who actually hated those very drills, which, as early as the 1920s, they had smeared with excrement (to use the words of one senior Soviet official).⁵⁰ The second example is provided by the very official biographies of the “labor heroes”. As the *Biulleten' oppositsii* had already noted in the 1930s, far from being skilled workers from working-class origins, Stakhanov, Gudov, Busygin *et al.*, for whom “reading came mighty hard”, were representatives of the most naive and primitive layer of the much scorned and recently urbanized peasants. All had broken the machines entrusted to them, had been fired for indiscipline and absenteeism and, once famous, had stopped working, as even Ordzhonikidze, the commissar of heavy industry, had complained in 1936 and as skilled workers had denounced when it was still possible to speak up.⁵¹

⁴⁸ I believe that even the best Western historiography gave too much credit to these complaints, perhaps because it hoped to detect in them a proof of workers' resistance.

⁴⁹ I. Erenburg, *Il secondo giorno* (Rome, 1945), p. 42; V. Kataev, *Time, Forward!* (Bloomington, 1976), p. 332; *Trotsky's Diary in Exile, 1935* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976) and *Moscow News*, 29, 29 July 1990. In 1920s novels like Nikandrov's *Ruda* one could instead read: “Yes, we are the *derevenshchina* [. . .] the ‘dark ones’ [. . .] Every day we walk 10 miles to the factory, not because we need to work, but because we are greedy [. . .]” At the 8th Trades Union Congress (p. 31) Tomskii had invited skilled workers to understand that newcomers too were “workers, with their own inner life”.

⁵⁰ *SSSR na stroike*, 3 (1931); *K probleme*, 3, p. 60; Trotsky Archives, T 922–923.

⁵¹ I. Goudov, *Le destin d'un ouvrier soviétique* (Moscow, 1978); A. Stakhanov, *Rasskaz o moei zhizni* (Moscow, 1937); *Labour in the Land of Socialism, 1st Stakhanovite Conference* (Moscow, 1936); *Istoriia rabochego klassa Sibiri, 1917–37*, p. 248; *Biul. oppositsii*, 47 (January 1936).



Figure 2. "A group of miners from the mine 'Central – Irmino'. In the middle A.G. Stakhanov" (Photograph from Semen Gershberg, *Stakhanov i stakhanovtzi* (Moscow, 1981))

Workerism also remained one of the main features of the Stalinist leaders' public countenance, designed to show off their proletarian origins, their promotion from the ranks, their concern for the people's well-being. In his *Life and Destiny* – possibly the best Soviet book on World War II – Grossman left us a remarkable description of workerism. When speaking with workers, his Guetmanov, a regional party secretary, always began by asking whether there were delays in the payment of wages and goods in the stores, if heating worked properly. Older workers saw in him a servant of the people, who knew how to treat superintendents and local leaders [. . .] Everybody realized his origins were working class [. . .] But as soon as he was back in his office [. . .] only his duties to the state mattered: Moscow's worries were his sole worries [. . .] In his office, laughter and jokes were not allowed and nobody spoke of hot water in apartment buildings or of plants in the factories. Tight plans were approved, norms were raised, new housing projects were postponed.⁵²

THE IDEOLOGICAL BUILD-UP

The 1928–1931 workerist campaign was therefore an ideological operation, myth building in the literal sense. The myth it produced, and the propaganda apparatus which accompanied it, were used at first on the domestic front. Later on, they were directed toward the external front too, partly because their effectiveness within the USSR rapidly declined, at least among workers on whom other myths, like that of sabotage and saboteurs, or the cult of Stalin, seemed to have a better grip.

⁵² V. Grossman, *Vie et destin* (Paris, 1980), p. 467.

This myth building accompanied the definitive ascent to power in 1928–1930 of a new ruling elite, the “Stalinists”. Being a composite group, they held several ideologies which shared, however, at least two common traits. The first was characteristic of the ideologies for their own consumption, the other, of those reserved for the “masses” (the two sets of ideologies were not of course unrelated). Voluntarism, the cult of power, of the state and of its leader, and contempt for subordinates formed the basis of the first set. The other set was founded – as Lewin has observed – on the conscious production of myths “to mobilize and discipline the (lower) party officials and the people, and in fact to bring them to heel”.⁵³ The first of these myths was of course the cult of Lenin, launched against his will and inflated into enormous proportions against the will of his widow in 1924. Lewin mentions four more myths: the kulak menace, the saboteurs in foreign pay, foreign conspiracy, and that of Stalin the infallible, which crowned the whole construction. I propose to include workerism in this list.

THE WORKERIST MYTH

The workerist myth, whose genesis and initial steps were linked – as we have seen – to the role assigned to youth, newly promoted workers and the VLKSM, reached its peak at the beginning of 1930 with mass emulation and the shock worker “builder of socialism”. It then became the bright solution to a serious ideological problem. It was in fact difficult and embarrassing for a regime claiming to be socialist and for an elite educated in the way it was to “build” while continuing to use the antilabor rhetoric of the rationalization drive, let alone that of the 1928–1929 antiworker campaign.

The myth was based upon a relatively simple mechanism which proved to be its major strength in the West. We could call it the mechanism of “deductive reasonableness”. Theories and expectations widely shared by the Left were used as its basis and a “reality” coherent with these was imagined. The workers thus became the “enthusiastic builders of socialism”, and the presumed difficulties in recruiting labor in the early 1930s were thus explained by Stalin himself: in the USSR there is no “primitive accumulation”; rather, thanks to collectivization, peasants enjoy life and do not want to leave the countryside.⁵⁴

Such reasoning led the Left in the West, which was unfamiliar with Soviet realities but recognized the theories behind the proposed “reality”, to find such “reality” almost automatically convincing. And the obstacle represented by the undeniably coarse features of the Stalinist myths was

⁵³ Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System*, p. 100.

⁵⁴ I. Stalin, “Nuova situazione, nuovi compiti dell’ edificazione economica” (June 1931), in *Questioni del leninismo* (Moscow, 1946).

easily surmounted on account of their conforming to what the Left expected and on account of the comfort they provided for its hopes.

The success of the workerist myth was also secured by what could be called its "material basis". I am thinking here of two phenomena. The first was the attack upon the "bourgeois" specialists. We know that their persecution paved the way for the selection of a much harsher industrial hierarchy. But the fact that engineers of "bourgeois" origins were indeed persecuted, and under the banner of leftist slogans, did not fail to create a certain confusion. The second phenomenon was the "mass" promotion of workers. Actually, because of the technological level and the work organization prevailing in Soviet factories, as well as the ideology of the Bolshevik elite, promotions from the ranks had been common before 1927 too (and even before 1917). By 1924, for example, more than 80 per cent of foremen at Moscow's AMO Works were former workers at the plant.

What changed in 1928 was the emphasis put on the phenomenon and its coinciding with the acute need for a large number of new cadres created by the hunt for the "bourgeois" specialist and by industrialization. From 1928 to 1929 the percentage of communist workers promoted "in the field" increased from 5–6 to 12 per cent. From 1929 to 1933 between 80,000 and 90,000 administrative positions were occupied by former industrial workers in industry alone. In 1934, for example, half of the AMO's foremen were former workers promoted after 1928.⁵⁵

The effectiveness of the myth's main mechanism was also helped by the repeated publication of a number of isolated facts and exemplary stories which "proved" what was being claimed. As with the alleged decline in labor discipline, these examples generally contradicted Soviet official statistics. Also because of this, the publication of these official statistics was discontinued or, better still, went underground (since the regime needed information, data were now published in booklets with a limited, secret circulation and sometimes surfaced in specialized journals and publications).

Lastly, there was the artistic production of a propaganda that presented a "reality" which fitted both myths and ideology. Intended particularly for the West, it was thus of a decent technical level. The best-known case is perhaps that of the journal *SSSR na Stroi*, with its English, French and German editions, which will subsequently be examined in greater detail.

ITS SOURCES

Seeking origins is always a difficult and ambiguous undertaking, the more so when ideologies are involved. As Bloch noted, to find the germ

⁵⁵ *K probleme*, 3, p. 34; Ruzel', "Rost partii za dva goda"; M. Advienko, "Sdvigi v strukture proletariata", *Planovoe khoziaistvo*, 6–7 (1932); *Trud v SSSR*, 1936, pp. 307ff.;

of something is different, for example, from assessing the causes and the context which permitted its development. Such an undertaking remains an interesting and rewarding one, however, because we already have a few objective checks and others will surely emerge from the exploration of Russian archives. I will proceed by discussing, one by one, the main sources of the workerist myth.

One is, of course, the social-democratic workerist tradition, especially the German one. The idea that once in power workers (and union men) would be promoted to key economic and administrative positions was, for example, part and parcel of the socialist movement's original heritage.

A second, more particular, source was the workerism of the syndicalist Left and of those movements sponsoring "proletarian culture" which were born at the beginning of the century.⁵⁶ One could refer to the flourishing number of youth movements, or to the many "worker poets" with their confused intellectual luggage, including Nietzsche, avant-gardism, and the cult of youth and action. The most important stream was, of course, represented by the French and Italian revolutionary syndicalism of Labriola and Sorel, with its well-known links to Mosca's and Pareto's theories, as well as to other turn-of-the-century cultural trends; with its religion of direct action, by which the working-class vanguard anticipates and unleashes the assault of the "backward masses"; with its cult of the supposed virile and warlike virtues of the *soldat du travail*;⁵⁷ with its elitist "heroism" and its antibureaucratic aggressiveness, directed – not without reason – against social-democratic parties and union bureaucracies.

The theory of myths then developed by Sorel (probably under the influence of Pareto's *residui* and *derivazioni*) is of even greater interest from our point of view. For Sorel, myths were instruments through which the elite, in this case the working-class vanguard, mobilized the masses. The links between these ideas and Russian social democracy, especially Bolshevism, have been studied by Jutta Scherrer.⁵⁸ One can point, in general, to the close relationship between Bolshevism and voluntarism (the Mensheviks, Martov and Plekhanov in particular, judged Bolshevism to be an idealistic-voluntarist movement which, as such, could not be considered Marxist even before 1917). But the direct channel through which Sorellian ideas, including those about myths, entered Bolshevik culture was represented by Left Bolshevism.

V.Z. Drobyzhev, "Rol' rabochego klassa v formirovanii komandnykh kadrov promyshlennosti", *Istoriia SSSR*, 4 (1961); Kuromiya, *Stalin's Industrial Revolution*.

⁵⁶ I believe that these roots help to explain the attraction of the Stalinist "workerism" of 1928–1931 on many Western academics in the 1970s and 1980s, and particularly those with a "New Left" past.

⁵⁷ See Z. Sternhell, *Ni Droite, Ni Gauche* (Paris, 1983), pp. 39, 44, 88–90, on the Cercle Proudhon and, in particular, on Edouard Berth, who later joined the Communist Party.

⁵⁸ J. Scherrer, *Georges Sorel en Russie*, in J. Julliard (ed.), *Georges Sorel et son temps* (Paris, 1985).

This group, whose direct and indirect contribution to the birth of Stalin's cult has already been remarked on by Roy Medvedev,⁵⁹ was formed in 1908–1909 by Bogdanov, later the founder of the Proletkult (the movement for proletarian culture) and of the Socialist Academy; by Lunacharskii; the future Commissar of Education and the Proletkult's godfather in 1917; and by Gorky, who – as we shall see – was to provide the direct link with the mythological construction of the late 1920s and early 1930s. Their circle included people like Gastev, the Russian "working-class poet", whose hymns to the factory's bells, cement and steel recalled those sung at the same period by Oswald Spengler.⁶⁰

These people, who entered into furious polemics with Lenin, considered the issue of myths an essential one. These myths, derived from Sorel (Lunacharskii edited the Russian edition of Labriola's book dedicated to Sorel), were then conceived as spontaneous creations of the masses which it was the vanguard's duty to "crystallize" in order to make it possible to use them to mobilize the same masses which had produced them. With this aim in mind, three "myths" were proposed before 1914: that of work and of machines (Bogdanov); that of the proletariat as demiurge of the new society; and that of socialism as humankind's new religion, whose god was humankind itself, in a collective sense. The last two were largely the creations of Gorky and Lunacharskii (the former even wrote a novel, *Ispoved'*, to illustrate them).

World War I greatly influenced the features the workerist myth was to assume. It changed everything, gave new life to the avant-gardist ideologies and militarized them. New, special, elite shock troops were born in every country. The young men who formed them nurtured generic, extreme ideologies, which later had different political evolutions. Futurism sang the "anti-bourgeois" virtues of the Italian Arditi. Their song, "Giovinezza" (Youth), was to become the official fascist anthem. Russian futurists (whom, despite critical remarks, Lunacharskii loved because "they were young and youth is revolutionary"⁶¹) sang instead of the virtues and youth of the *udarniki* detachments, born in the war, used by Trotsky in the civil war and introduced inside factories in the years of militarization.

Fourthly, there was Lenin. Even before the war he was harshly critical of the Left Bolsheviks, whom he attacked – often unreasonably – in *Materialism and Empiriocriticism*. After 1917 he reserved his criticism

⁵⁹ R. Medvedev, *Lo stalinismo* (Milan, 1972), p. 191.

⁶⁰ In 1936 Gastev was in charge of preparing cadres for the Stakhanovite movement (K.E. Bailes, "Gastev and the Soviet Controversy over Taylorism", *Soviet Studies*, 3 (1977)). Spengler's 1918 hymns to cement, steel and men of steel were commented on in the USSR by G.L. Piatakov, "Filosofia sovremennogo imperializma", *Krasnaia Nov'*, 7 (1922), pp. 182–197.

⁶¹ G. Spengel, *Gli intellettuali sovietici degli anni Venti* (Rome, 1979), pp. 24ff.; S. Fitzpatrick, *The Commissariat of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 1970).

for the Proletkult movement, denouncing its dangerous “reveries”.⁶² In fact, like Trotsky, Lenin did not believe in the existence of a working-class culture in the high sense of the term. For them, there was only one culture, and workers had to master it before being able, in the future, to produce a new and more sophisticated civilization – not as workers, but as citizens of the new, socialist society.

Lenin shared, however, the idea of a society organized like a large factory, and had what could be called a simplistic view of the working classes. For him, “true” workers were those who behaved in the “right” way, namely in the way expected of them. If their behavior changed, as happened within a few months of the October Revolution, this was not accounted for by changes in their actual situation. Workers behaving in certain ways were, quite simply, no longer considered workers. Political and psychological phenomena were thus “mechanically” linked to social changes, ruling out the possibility – discussed among others by Marx – that the same people could say and do different things in different “material” circumstances, and that the same social group could react in “schizophrenic” ways. Typical of this way of thinking were Lenin’s reflections on the working-class “declassment”, caused, he claimed, by the civil war (a phenomenon which took place – if at all – only in a “cultural” sense, since – as the 1929 worker censuses show – the 1918–1921 factories were inhabited mostly by “old” workers).⁶³ As typical were his thoughts on the 1921 Donbass. Here mistakes had been made, Lenin wrote, because local leaders believed they were dealing with “real” workers, and had therefore asked them the wrong questions in the wrong ways (the implication was that since they were not “true” workers, other, presumably “military”, methods were necessary – and in fact used, despite what Lenin thought). From this viewpoint, one could say Lenin was a source of both Soviet workerism and the anti-workerism which had been its corollary since the beginning.⁶⁴

Fifthly, Left communists were a source of the workerist ideological construction. They were a group of “petit-bourgeois intellectuals” who – as Lenin sarcastically noted – loved to call themselves “proletarian communists”. As early as 1919, at the 8th Party Congress, they had sided in the military opposition with what could be called “proto-Stalinist populism”. For them, socialism was marked by the active participation of workers in economic and social building, and they were extremely

⁶² Spendel, *Gli intellettuali sovietici*, pp. 17, 21. In 1913 Lenin called Lunacharskii a charlatan and claimed Gorky and Lunacharskii’s ideology was “something unbelievably confused, contorted and reactionary”.

⁶³ M. Gilbert, “K voprosu o sostave promyshlennykh rabochikh v gody grazhdanskoi voiny”, *Istoriia proletariata SSSR* (1934), pp. 208ff. and (1935), pp. 143ff.; Shkaratan, *Problemy*.

⁶⁴ As Vittorio Foa reminded me, *What is to be done?* contained a great deal of scorn and contempt for workers.

suspicious of trade union bureaucracy. They were also convinced – as Bukharin wrote in 1919 (in 1929 he was to reach the opposite conclusion) – that social origins were an important guarantee of correct behavior. It was thus necessary to “saturate” the economic apparatus with worker-administrators.⁶⁵

In 1918 Left communists also believed that once the economy was nationalized, and the foundations of socialism thus laid, it would be “natural for workers to work according to established norms, because of both their professional honor and their sense of civic responsibility. Those who refuse to do so will be either conscious or unconscious saboteurs of socialism. Their comrades will punish them harshly.” In fact, these “self-seekers” (the terms were those of 1928) were to be considered on a par “with the strikebreakers of the capitalist past”.⁶⁶

We can catch here a glimpse of the sources of an interesting phenomenon, the convergence – permitted by an ideological interpretation of reality – of what Vittorio Foa has called the two souls of the socialist tradition: the workerist, according to which workers' interests define those of society in general, and the statist, which deems that workers cannot have any interests without the state or any interests which oppose those of the state. Once this state was defined as the working-class state it became possible even for “proletarian communists” to justify the acceptance of total statism (we are the state; the state is us, *my -eto gosudarstvo*; *gosudarstvo -eto my*, was to be a slogan of the “Left” in the years of militarization).

Sixthly, there was the reality and the ideological production of the civil war. The extreme brutality then characterizing the behavior of peasants, soldiers and workers convinced many Bolshevik leaders (who, like the Whites, were actually responsible for comparable, if different, acts of cruelty) that they were acting in an underdeveloped, “Asiatic” country. This conviction paved the way for the “realization” – which matured in the following years – that their primary task was to “civilize” a beast-like population which could be reined only through harshness and cunning.⁶⁷

The civil war's ideological production was a collective effort in which many collaborated: Rykov, who proposed the institution of the Order

⁶⁵ Shock work, *vydvizhenstvo* and the attack on the unions were a mockery of these good intentions. This helps to explain why more than a few leftists fell for the new Stalinist policy at first.

⁶⁶ N. Bukharin (and G. Piatakov), *The Economics of the Transition Period* (1919), reprinted in *The Politics and Economics of the Transition Period* (London, 1979); N. Osinskii, “O stroitel'stve sotsializma”, *Kommunist* (Moscow), 1 and 2 (1918).

⁶⁷ Even Rakovsky, possibly the best of the old Bolsheviks, spoke in 1920 of the necessity to treat peasants with “an iron rod”. On the methods employed see M. Wehner, “Krest'i-anskoe soprotivlenie, golod i reaktsiia pravitel'stva, 1921–22”, to be published in *Cahiers du monde russe*.

of the Red Banner of Labor (on the model of the military one); Gastev, possibly the inventor of the title of “Labor Hero”; and above all Trotsky, who was the real soul of the civil war and thus of its “discourse”. In 1920, during militarization, he created, for example, the bulk of the rhetoric – both workerist and antiworker – which was to resurface in a new climate and with a new spirit in 1928–1929.⁶⁸ This is well known, of course, and has already been commented on by both Deutscher and Carr.⁶⁹ Equally well known is the fact that the behavior of real workers, so much different from that of the “true” workers of theory, was soon the source of bitter disappointment to the supporters of militarization, who were thus led to introduce harsher and harsher measures.⁷⁰

Less well known perhaps is how extensive antiworker measures were as early as 1920–1921. It was in September 1921, for example, after the beginning of the NEP, that Piatakov created in the Donbass what could be termed the Soviet industrial administrators’ “ideal standard”. His decree (*prikaz*) no. 304 listed the principles which were to be the basis of the repressive treatment of labor in the 1930s. They included direct command over part of the labor force, still organized in a Labor Army; complete control over the hiring and firing of free workers as well as over their supplies, a control which had previously been exercised by the trade unions; the introduction of piecework in kind (*naturdel'shchina*) and of blacklisting; and handing over responsibility for discipline and appointments to the administration, thus emasculating the unions.⁷¹

A seventh source of the workerist myth were the Bolshevik leaders of working-class origins who came from the Donbass. Most belonged to the local Russian and Jewish minorities. In 1918 they led the eastward

⁶⁸ See Trotsky’s writings in *Sochineniia*, XV, *Khoziaistvennoe stroitel'stvo* (Moscow, 1925) (some are reprinted in *How the Revolution Armed*, 1–3 (London, 1979–1981)). Trotsky spoke of the necessity to “organize emulation in detail” (thus pointing to *sorevnovanie*’s lack of spontaneity since its very beginning; see too Lenin’s article “How to organize *sorevnovanie*”). Trotsky also defended the extension of *edinonachalie* within industry, maintaining that factories should be directed by people with powers similar to those of “military commissars”. He threatened to shoot “labor deserters”; requested the state of siege in the mines in the Urals, where workers did not behave like “true” proletarians. He was ready to “uncover” plots in order to introduce harsh antilabor measures, and he published articles with titles anticipating the antilabor measures of 1928–1929, such as “How to fight absenteeism”, “Fighting against labor desertion”, and “On labor discipline”.

⁶⁹ I. Deutscher, *Il profeta armato* (Milan, 1956), pp. 694ff., and E.H. Carr, *La rivoluzione bolscevica, 1917–23* (Turin, 1964), p. 635.

⁷⁰ Something similar had already happened in the Red Army, where tsarist officers often behaved better than volunteers. See O. Figes, “The Red Army and Mass Mobilization”, *Past and Present*, 129 (1990), pp. 168–221; and 8th Party Congress, “Stenogramma zasedanii voennoi sektsii”.

⁷¹ In TsPKP, *Otchet 1921 g.*, pp. 294ff. See also my “At the Roots of Soviet Industrial Relations and Practices: Piatakov’s Donbass in 1921”, to be published in *Cahiers du monde russe*, XXXVI (1995).

retreat in the face of the German invasion, and clashed bitterly with Menshevik workers, Cossacks and Ukrainian peasants. This retreat ended in Tsaritsyn, where these men met Stalin, became his convinced followers, and formed Voroshilov's famous 10th Army. This became the breeding ground for a number of Stalinist cadres and distinguished itself through its anti-intellectual populism and its workerist rhetoric as well as the harshness it employed not only in dealing with peasants and workers but even its own soldiers (in 1919, using words similar to those of the 1930s, Voroshilov denounced the "backwardness" of the peasants and workers, which transformed them into "hirelings" of the "Ukrainian kulaks", who were then in rebellion against Soviet power). Yet even though "the whip ruled supreme" in the 10th Army, its commanders participated in the 1919 military opposition, forming an alliance with Left communists against Trotsky's "bourgeois" regulations and collaborators (judged the real danger by a Left that was blind to the much more primitive whip of its allies).⁷²

Under Stalin's control this very group organized the plot to remove the Trotskyite Piatakov from the Donbass in 1921. The episode is interesting because in order to achieve their aim the Stalinists employed, for the first time, an ideological mixture of workerist populism, with evident streaks of Makhaevism, combined with appeals to the offended honor of other bureaucracies (union, party and state), stirred up against the arrogance of Piatakov's economic apparatus, which was indeed overbearing, oppressive and rude.⁷³ From this point of view, the anti-Piatakov campaign of 1921 set a model which, in more refined forms and with some variations, was to be used in two other crucial developments in Soviet history: the Shakhty affair of 1928 and the Stakhanovism of 1935–1936, both of which also began in the Donbass.⁷⁴

Another source of Stalin's "workerism" was Shliapnikov and his Workers' Opposition. In early 1924, at the 13th Party Congress, Shliapnikov made a speech on which, I believe, Stalin relied heavily to further his aims in the years that followed. Shliapnikov's speech was critical of the new-born Trotskyite opposition (something which, I think, made Stalin's mind click), caustically recalling its recent enthusiasm for the

⁷² 8th Party Congress, "Stenogramma zasedanii voennoi seksii".

⁷³ Quite interesting from this point of view are the papers of the Politburo commission headed in 1922 by Ordzhonikidze, in RTsKhIDNI, fond 85, op. 23, d. 1–12. See also my article quoted in note 71.

⁷⁴ A large part of the country was transformed into a huge NKTP company town. In a letter written to Ordzhonikidze after a tour in the Urals in 1933, Piatakov noted that "the city soviet, the governing bodies of the provinces (*raiony*), the trade unions, the militia, the GPU, the GOSBANK, the courts, etc." were housed in buildings owned by the NKTP and lived on its allowances. "In fact, the director (of the factory) decides arbitrarily to give or not to give. This leads to conflicts" (in RTsKhIDNI, fond 85, op. 1/sekr., d. 136). This helps us understand the scope of the animosity Stalin could utilize in his assault on the NKTP in 1935–1937.

repression of the Workers' Opposition. Shliapnikov then deprecated the party's social composition, pointing to the fact that workers were in the minority, and a diminishing one at that. Being himself a prisoner of workerism, Shliapnikov demanded efforts be made to recruit as many production workers as possible in order to redress the situation. He saw in their presence a guarantee of party democracy, which he identified with an increase in rank-and-file activism. He also demanded militants be free to criticize party leaders and the publication of the personal files of party members, which he proposed to discuss in party meetings.⁷⁵

Stalin, who was already pursuing his own process of party "building", seized the occasion of Lenin's death to meet these demands in his own way. Thanks to the "Lenin levy" (a measure to which Lenin was opposed), thousands of "production workers", without any political education, were recruited into the party in just a few weeks. As V.M. Smirnov noted, these were people "who did not even know who Clemenceau was". But the idea behind the measure was precisely to use these uncultured "masses" against the old politicized nucleus of a party which Stalin wanted to change from a political organization into a machine fit to administer state power and to organize the population (for the sake of precision, one should say that Stalin only accelerated a transformation already under way). Shliapnikov's criticisms and proposals were, I believe, in part responsible for the fact that this line was implemented within the framework of workerist-populist ideologies.

The intellectual currents and groups of the first half of the 1920s linked to the Proletkult movement were also a source of Stalin's peculiar workerism. Of particular significance were the united front of Proletkult-Left futurists, the *Napostovtsy*, named after the title of their journal and pursuing an "energetic, harsh, proletarian" literature, and their "leftist, sectarian, nihilist" avant-gardism, to use the words of one Italian scholar.⁷⁶ We know that both Lenin and Trotsky criticized these movements. But if little could be done against Lenin, after 1923 the attack on Trotsky, with his aristocratic manner and his penchant for high culture, was an open one. Of course, Stalin was ready to protect, and utilize, those who were fighting his own battle, so that even these otherwise marginal movements contributed to the ideological coloring of the attack launched in 1928. It must be added that among the militants in these groups (in the LEF above all) there were a few professionally serious, competent people, who fought dilettantism within their own ranks too and had a real passion for photography. They were later to become some of the ablest photographer-propagandists of the 1930s.

The tenth source considered here is Willi Münzenberg. This man, his

⁷⁵ A. Shliapnikov, "Nashi raznoglasii", *Pravda*, 18 January 1924.

⁷⁶ Spindel, *Gli intellettuali sovietici*, p. 35.

prodigious activity, its importance for the construction of Soviet ideology as well as for the communist international movement, are too important and extraordinary to be summed up in few lines.⁷⁷ It must suffice here to recall his connections with the pre-war youth and "proletarian" movements, symbolized by his friend Max Barthel. (Another "worker poet", and the author of hymns to machines and pounding pistons which recalled those of Gastev, Barthel was one of Münzenberg's principal collaborators in the propaganda work among intellectuals. In the late 1930s Barthel seems to have embraced Nazism.⁷⁸) It is also necessary to recall the foundation in 1921 of the *AIZ* (*Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*) and *Sowjet Russland im Build*, in connection with the experience of the International Workers' Aid (the international communist relief organization for famine victims). These were prototypes of Soviet propaganda journals in the 1930s and later, and provided them with technical and artistic expertise and a number of contributors.

Finally, there was Stalin himself. As we have seen, he knew that peasants were to be coerced, and he could not ignore the traditional bond between Soviet workers and the countryside, nor its unavoidable strengthening in a period of rapid industrialization. Like other Bolshevik leaders, with the possible exception of a few leftists, he also knew that there were things that could be done, but not said, and considered "whoever believes in words to be an idiot", as Trotsky bitterly remarked to Ordzhonikidze. Since as early as his indirect polemics with Lenin on party recruitment in 1922, Stalin also knew that the party, as it was, was not fit to be used as an instrument of personal power, and had therefore to be reformed. Since the beginning of 1924, and perhaps even before (as his proposal to expand the Central Committee by opening it to cadres of proletarian origins attests), he had also realized that populism was an ideal tool for this purpose, a tool, moreover, which fitted his and his followers' strong dislike of intellectuals and specialists (this helps explain why the party "proletarianization" began before workerism was officially launched). Above all, in the 1920s Stalin was waging his battle for personal rule. He was thus ready "to listen" (one of his most remarkable qualities) to anybody who could help him, the more so when what was being said suited him, as it did in the case of the Proletkult or Shliapnikov.

⁷⁷ B. Gross, *Willi Münzenberg* (East Lansing, MI, 1974); H. Gruber, "Willi Münzenberg. Propagandist for and against the Comintern", *International Review of Social History*, X (1965), pp. 188-210 and "Willi Münzenberg's German Communist Propaganda Empire", *Journal of Modern History*, 3 (1966). Recently a conference devoted to Münzenberg and his work was held in France.

⁷⁸ I was unable to locate his autobiography, *Kein Bedarf an Weltgeschichte. Geschichte eines Lebens* (Wiesbaden, 1950). In the late 1930s Barthel published books like *Deutsche Männer in roten Ural* (1938) and *Kaukasisches Abenteuer: Deutsche Bauern in Russland* (1941) in Germany.

ITS FABRICATORS

Only archival research will be able to establish how, when and by whom the workerist myth was actually fabricated. A provisional answer can already be offered using recently published archival material, though. This material suggests there were four main groups of fabricators.

The first was formed by some of the leaders of the Left opposition. They were of two kinds. On one side there were those who, progressively disillusioned by the defeats of the early 1920s, which culminated in the German defeat in October 1923, convinced themselves that the “working class” had been seriously defeated for a long time (*vserez i nadolgo*) both inside the USSR and on the international front. From this perspective, the failure of the pilgrimage made by opposition leaders to Soviet factories in September 1926 was, for many, the final step in an evolution which, following disenchantment with workerism, led to the reduction of socialism to *planisme* (Sternhell’s “socialism without workers”). As Rakovskii wrote, they started to believe that bureaucracy, the state and the party were the only vital, active forces still existing in the USSR and that in order to “build” it was necessary to side with them. (Such thoughts, linked to the experience of the civil war, were shared by most of the top leaders, however. Dzerzhinskii, for example, who was then siding with the Right, considered workers “a dead weight” on the road to socialist construction.)

Such ideas implied the need for ideological fodder for the “passive masses”. However, these people, though convinced of the desirableness of such ideological fodder and contributing something to it, proved to be more useful for their administrative rather than for their ideological talents (Piatakov is a good example).

Thus it was a second group of leftists, more versed in handling ideology, which supplied Stalin with ideas – though unwillingly at first – and helped him – consciously now – to systematize ideological construction in the 1930s. One can point to Radek’s accusations in 1927, to which Stalin listened attentively. Radek criticized the reliance on bourgeois specialists (Radek mentioned a few names which were later among the principal culprits of the 1930–1931 trials). He also argued that too much room was being given to a “right-wing”, corrupt union bureaucracy (which the “Left” also hated because of its links with the gangs which beat up and harassed the opposition in 1926–1927). Radek also criticized the inadequate consideration given to the “mass involvement of workers in the industrialization drive”. Thanks to Gorky’s good offices Radek, whose extraordinary cynicism is attested by his letters of 1928–1929,⁷⁹ soon became one of Stalin’s most listened to advisors, both in ideological and in foreign policy matters.

⁷⁹ Radek’s letters are in RTsKhIDNI, fond 85, op. 1/sekr., d. 79. I quote from them in my “G.L. Piatakov (1890–1937): A Mirror of Soviet History”. In previous years Radek

The second group of fabricators was formed by Gorky and his entourage. Gorky had judged the war a catastrophe threatening the very existence of the Western culture which he valued as humankind's greatest achievement. This was especially true in backward Russia, with its "Asiatic" masses.⁸⁰ As Emma Goldman reports, the experiences of 1918–1919 had strengthened his conviction that the masses of the tsarist empire were too brutal and brutish to build socialism. Power therefore had to be kept in the hands of an elite willing and ready to employ even the harshest repressive measures.⁸¹ But repression was not enough. Ideology too was needed, and thus the organization of intellectual groups capable of producing it, working side by side with this elite. It is reasonable to believe that such reflections laid the foundations for a re-elaboration of Gorky's concept of "myth". From being a spontaneous product of the masses, which the "proletarian" vanguard only had to refine and to use, it became something consciously produced for the masses.

The evolution of the perception of the masses by the Bolshevik elite which was discussed earlier laid the foundation for Gorky's *rapprochement* with the new regime as early as 1918–1919 (he had judged the unleashing of the popular beast in 1917 to be Bolshevism's greatest crime, and he appreciated the "iron rod" soon used to keep those same "Asiatic" masses at bay).

In the 1920s, as a peculiar *émigré*, he continued actively to participate in Soviet intellectual life. The decisive turn came at the end of the decade, however, with his triumphal return to the USSR. Gorky then became perhaps Stalin's most influential advisor on cultural matters. He invented "socialist realism", among other things, and he was prodigiously active in constructing "myths" which were to help the Stalinist elite in the radical transformation of Soviet society.⁸²

It is perhaps possible to maintain on the basis of, among other things, a long letter to Stalin in November 1929 that Gorky invented mass shock work as a re-elaboration of the myth of the "proletarian builder" he had envisaged before the war. Confirming the attention that Soviet propaganda always paid to the reaction of the West, Gorky's letter began by complaining that Western press coverage of Soviet realities was bleak because of the violent antiworker campaign being conducted by the Soviet press. "Western workers", Gorky continued,

cannot learn anything about the Soviet revolutionary-cultural progress, the industrialization's success, our workers' enthusiasm [. . .] It is therefore necessary to

had been an enemy of German trade unionism, whose "conservatism" he judged to be one of the main obstacles to revolution.

⁸⁰ D. Steila, "The Experience of the War in the Reflections of Left Bolshevism", to be published in *Cahiers du monde russe*.

⁸¹ E. Goldman, *Living My Life* (New York, 1970), pp. 730ff.

⁸² Even the then current definition of the aims of literature – "literature must promote the construction of the socialist society" – showed that intellectuals were now considered "builders" of myths for the masses.

arrange for a more objective coverage of current events. Negative reports must be balanced by positive reporting [. . .] *The press should keep reminding itself and its readers that socialism is being built in the USSR not by sloppy individuals, hooligans and raving morons, but by a genuinely new and mighty force – the working class* [italics added].

Gorky then proposed creating a special column to be included in newspapers. It was to have an illuminating title – “*National (or Socialist or Cultural) Construction*” [italics added] – devoted to reporting, week by week, progress in implementing the Five-Year Plan. Lastly, he advised Stalin to involve former Trotskyites in this.⁸³

Stalin’s inner circle was the third fabricator of the workerist myth. In discussing the Donbass group, we have commented upon some of its characteristics, a certain “Makhaevite” populism included. Its hostility to the *socialisme des intellectuels* and to intellectuals in general was grounded in its quest for power and in its preference for subordinates of a similar disposition rather than in theoretical considerations. Coming close to Arturo Labriola’s reflections upon leaders from working-class origins, the exiled Trotsky recalled how in the 1920s he could almost touch with his fingers “beyond the ignorance, narrow-mindedness, stubbornness and hostility of the single individuals, the social traits of people in a privileged class, highly sensitive, highly perspicacious and full of initiative in everything which concerned their interest”.⁸⁴ This combination of an inclination for populist postures, leftist rhetoric and an ambition for power was, I believe, among the main sources of the ideological options of the late 1920s and of their extraordinary cynicism.

Fourthly, there was Stalin himself, and particularly his “cunning”, which – as is well known – he valued highly. It is also well known that he thought a “single tsar” was needed to control and “outfox” peasants (and therefore workers in a time of rapid industrialization and urbanization), and that he was the only man capable of successfully playing this role. In order to realize his ambitions, the Stalin of the 1920s was ready to do anything, including listening to “good advice” from all quarters.

ITS FOREIGN USE

As we have already seen, the West played an important role in the birth of the workerist myth, which was created partly because of considerations given to the regime’s “external” image. The *SSSR na stroike* is a good illustration of what was done for the West. The magazine, which, in its first leading article, maintained that “pictures must serve

⁸³ An English translation of Gorky’s letter has been published in *Political Archives of the Soviet Union*, 2 (1990).

⁸⁴ *Moscow News*, 29, 29 July 1990.

the country not in a haphazard, unsystematic way, but systematically and according to the plan", was – again – a child of Gorky's mind. It was established through the assistance of Münzenberg (who, according to his wife's memoirs, knew he was feeding a myth). A former Trotskyite, Piatakov, was chosen to run it.

Entrusted at the same time with organizing the industrialization drive, Piatakov gave the magazine its *planiste* character.⁸⁵ He chose to present as reality what the plan was supposed to achieve. One can perhaps argue that this blurring of the distinction between reality and what one wished to build (and believed was being built) was one of the "sincere" roots of the magazine's hypocrisy. In fact, at least in the earliest issues, this hypocrisy also took the form of new, modern factories, with their geometric lines and huge glass windows and in whose large, rational and spotless spaces neatly dressed workers were sporadically to be found working.

Soon, however, another trend also materialized. It was much more ideologically charged, and characterized by what could be called "vulgar" workerism. Since the beginning, the most revolting hypocrisy was reserved for rural events, expressed in portraits of happy, smiling, collectivized peasants.⁸⁶ They were the works of Shaiket, later the author of the famous picture of the young, beautiful worker with a large wheel, which was to be used over and over again in later years. Other photographers and artists like Osup, Alpert and Rodchenko worked with him. They were talented people who in the 1920s had been members of leftist movements, the LEF in particular, as well as the official portraitists of the Bolshevik elite.

Thanks also to their talent, the reality, i.e. the myth, built up in the pages of the *SSSR na stroike* was to enjoy a spectacular success in a West pushed by the 1929 crisis into believing that other systems worked, and that other solutions were possible (more difficult to explain is the fact that the pictures used to help build that myth, a rather simplistic one by the way, have been treated in the West as innocent images even in recent years). Three famous examples, representative of the conscious construction of a mythological image of workers' lives, will suffice to illustrate this more ideological trend. The first is the series "24 Hours in the Life of the Filippov Family" (Alpert, 1931), published by both

⁸⁵ In a sense, with *SSSR na stroike* Piatakov was continuing a family tradition, though on a much larger scale. At the beginning of the century his father, one of Kiev's wealthiest industrialists, used to publish volumes devoted to his factories. They contained many illustrations of machines, chimneys, and housing projects, etc., but none of workers. See for example *Mariinskii sveklosakharnii zavod* (Kiev, 1909).

⁸⁶ V.E. Bonnell, in "The Peasant Woman in the Stalinist Political Art of the 1930s", *American Historical Review*, XCIII (1993), pp. 55–82, reaches conclusions that are sometimes not too far from, but less explicit than, mine. "The Potemkin Village" is the title of a chapter in S. Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants* (Oxford, 1994).

the *AIZ* and *SSSR na stroike*. It was also shown in many exhibitions in a Western Europe stricken by crisis and unemployment, where the portrait of this model working-class family from the Moscow Krasnyi Proletarii Works “created a sensation”. Yet, as Münzenberg’s wife recalled, the “Filippov story”, as these images of happiness, well-being and hope in a bright future were soon nicknamed, was “positively macabre”. It seems that even many senior Soviet officials resented such a cynical falsification of an all too tragic reality, and they bitterly commented upon it. Among them, the Filippovs became the Soviet version of the Potemkin villages.

The second is “The Giant and the Builder” or the “Kalmykov Story” (again by Alpert, 1932). This was the story, always presented as exemplary (“Kalmykov is not an exception” was written in the captions), of an illiterate peasant lad who arrives in Magnitogorsk and in just eighteen months becomes a great builder, a skilled worker, and a party leader honored with the Order of the Red Banner of Labor, etc. Of course it was all fiction, starting with the pictures of the clean, white tents with spotless linen where Kalmykov first lived (abandoned railroad cars and holes dug in the ground were the reality) and ending with images of the lives of the 832 workers (out of well over 100,000, including those subject to forced labor) who, according to Soviet official data, were promoted in Magnitogorsk in 1931–1933.⁸⁷ Incidentally, the pictures promoted a rather petit-bourgeois lifestyle. In this sense, they anticipated the ideological, reactionary turnaround of the mid-1930s: the wife serving her husband, who waited under a potted palm in the dining-room of their new apartment until dinner was ready; a well-dressed Kalmykov on his way to the bank in order to deposit some of his high wages, etc.

The third example is the special issue which appeared in 1933 and was devoted to the construction of the Belomor canal. Edited by Gorky and Rodchenko, it aimed to prove the redeeming value of forced labor. It was followed by a book; but, in the years that followed, such an embarrassing theme was abandoned. Speaking of redemption, it is worth remembering that, starting in 1931, the entrances to the GULag camps were often surmounted by an inscription taken from Stalin’s speech to the 16th Party Congress in 1930 (the year in which workerism peaked): “Labor is a matter of honor, of glory, of valor and of heroism”. Its tones were strongly reminiscent of German slogans soon to come.

This list of examples could easily be extended. One could include the special issue devoted to lumbering, which appeared in an attempt to counter the campaign launched by the American Federation of Labor

⁸⁷ L. Ginzburg, “Bol’nye voprosy orgnabora”, *Voprosy truda*, 7 (1932); I.V. Antipova, “Iz istoriia sozdaniia Magnitogorskogo [. . .]”, *Istoriia SSSR*, 5 (1958); *Iz istorii Magnitogorskogo metallurgicheskogo kombinata. Sbornik dokumentov* (Cheliabinsk, 1965). Even Ordzhonikidze spoke of atrocious conditions during his visit to Magnitogorsk.

against the use of forced labor to produce this key Soviet export. Or the images of miners with their "beloved" drills, an example referred to earlier. But I hope our case has already been adequately proven.

SOME CONCLUDING REMARKS

It could be claimed that the evolution of the Bolshevik elite between 1917 and 1929 can also be measured by the progressive liquidation of what could be called social, "rights-claiming" socialism in favor of state "building" socialism.⁸⁸ The difference between the legislation of 1917–1918, which anticipated some of the aspects of the social state in the most advanced European countries of the twentieth century, and the antilabor laws promulgated at the end of the 1920s is a good yardstick of this process.

This liquidation took place under an array of ideologies which, born out of the initial statism of the Bolsheviks, their disillusion, *planisme*, cynicism, etc., served the ambition to build in the state, "national" (imperial) sense of the term. However, the Bolsheviks' initial ideology simultaneously created the need to produce ideology "for the masses" which was somehow linked to "rights-claiming" socialism.

Interestingly enough, none of the many leftist critics of the Soviet experience, such as Menshevik *émigrés*, Trotskyites or members of other, internal oppositions, realized the danger represented by this wish to "build". Their attention was concentrated instead on *nepmeny*, kulaks, and on every other possible source of "capitalistic" degeneration. Thus, partly because of the weakness of the Marxist theory of the state as a simple "agent" of social classes, very few opponents looked to that state, which was soon to devour them. One of those who did was V.M. Smirnov, a left-wing communist ridiculed by both the Left and Right. As early as the mid-1920s he maintained that the appearance of a state above classes (*nadklassovoe gosudarstvo*) represented the greatest danger in the USSR, and defined as "national-socialist" the positions of those who, like the Stalinists, identified the state with the working class.

In this rapid evolution toward "national-socialism" (quotation marks are appropriate because the USSR was never a nation state), the "rights-claiming", social side of the initial ideological background survived longest inside working-class organizations and in the institutions, such as the NKT, which they controlled. It was no coincidence that the NKT was much hated by the leaders of Soviet industry. If it is true that the Soviet trade unions of the 1920s were bureaucratic, corrupt organizations, prisoners of the contradictions of their relationships with their "own" state, and agents of political repression inside the shops, it is nonetheless also true that the continuity with the pre-1917 period survived longer

⁸⁸ Obviously the former "builds" too, but not in the sense understood by the latter.

inside these unions than in any other Soviet institution, including the party. They continued, that is, to be unions. Actually, because of the intensity of the political repression to which they were subjected whenever they showed a taste for independence, they were, in a sense, an example of very traditional, moderate trade unionism, trying simply to defend wages and to implement provisions of the Labor Code, to negotiate workers' transfers, to push for more funds for housing and for industrial safety.

This is confirmed by complaints made in the 1920s by industrial leaders, who resented the "continuous conflicts" with factory committees and their interference in operational decisions. This trade unionism waged its final battle against "socialist emulation". The 1930s was a new world, dominated by a "building" fever which infected even the political police. The pre-eminence of state- and building-"socialism" became absolute.

The transformation of the trade unions after 1929 was part of this picture. The "face to production" line led, as Tomskii rightly foresaw, to the death of trade unionism as such. Trade unions continued to exist of course, but they were a new organism and the break with their past history was definitive. In 1930 it became their duty to "form, educate and discipline" millions of new workers.⁸⁹ It was a huge task, implying the growth of union bureaucracy (which was also caused by the extraordinary increase in the size of the workforce) and giving this bureaucracy a new role (one quite untraditional for unions). Actually, however, the duty to "educate and discipline" soon became the province of other bodies, including those responsible for producing the myths discussed earlier. The growing trade union apparatus was thus left without well-defined functions and rendered powerless inside the shops. In fact, after the 9th Trades Union Congress in 1932, seventeen years were to pass before a similar congress was convened. In January 1933 Ordzhonikidze could state that "one cannot make out what union organizations are doing inside factories".

During the ensuing debate a solution emerged which Piatakov, now Ordzhonikidze's deputy, summed up: the trade unions are to be helpers (*pomoshchiki*) inside the shops (i.e. they were to help the administration, support its policies, etc.), and "masters" of workers' lives outside them. In other words, they had to tend the needs of workers, administering what was left of the social state outlined after the Revolution. In 1934 the disbanding of the NKT and the transfer of its functions to trade unions confirmed them in this role.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ *Trud* XVI, p. 4.

⁹⁰ Ordzhonikidze is quoted by Lampert, *The Technical Intelligentsia*, p. 117; Piatakov's 1930s ideas on the role of the trade unions can be found in his speeches to the NKTP Soviets in 1934–1935.