

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Introduction: Primitive Accumulation and Socialism

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## Abstract

In this dossier, Marx’s concept of primitive accumulation is applied to socialist development in the Soviet Union, China, and Romania, three countries in which socialist revolution occurred before the full development of capitalism. The introduction profiles the ideas of Evgenii Preobrazhensky, the Soviet theorist and left oppositionist, who first applied Marx’s concept to the problems of socialist development, and was executed under Stalin in 1937. Preobrazhensky advanced the idea of “primitive socialist accumulation”, a process that would fund industrialization by extracting surplus through planned, non-coercive transfers from market-based and state sectors. Preobrazhensky’s ideas sparked debates within communist parties over collectivization and the tempo of development. The introduction and articles in the dossier point the way towards future comparative research, suggesting that the processes of primitive capitalist and socialist accumulation shared painful similarities.

In the last section of *Capital*, Volume I, Karl Marx introduced a concept he termed “primitive” or “original” accumulation to understand the historic transition to capitalism. In this dossier, Wendy Goldman, Jacob Eyferth, and Alina Cucu break new ground in applying Marx’s concept to socialist development in the Soviet Union, China, and Romania, three countries in which socialist revolution occurred before the full development of capitalism. Their articles emerged from a conference, “Toward a Global History of Primitive Accumulation”. Organized around the centuries-long process that transformed peasants into waged workers, the conference was the first to bring together scholars of capitalism and socialism to use Marx’s concept to explore and compare primitive accumulation under both systems.<sup>1</sup> Marx originally used the concept to explain the transition from feudalism to capitalism in England, although he noted that it could be applied to economic development in other countries as well. The concept, taken up by successive generations since Marx, has had an enormous impact on both academic scholarship and revolutionary

<sup>1</sup>“Towards a Global History of Primitive Accumulation”, co-sponsored by the International Institute of Social History, Carnegie Mellon University, and the University of Pittsburgh, Amsterdam, 9–11 May 2019.

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debates over socialist development. Lev Trotsky and the left opposition, including the Soviet theorist Evgenii Preobrazhensky, repurposed the concept to address the challenges of development in the world's first socialist society. Their ideas sparked the great Soviet economic debates of the 1920s, which split the Communist Party and ended with the murderous political repression under Stalin in the 1930s.

In the academy, Marx's concept had its greatest impact among scholars of capitalism, where it produced vigorous (although less deadly) debates and competing schools of thought. Historians argued over the relative contributions of external trade and internal class struggle to feudal collapse and the transition to capitalism. Later, some made further linkages between trade and class, highlighting the role of shipping, ports, and transport workers. Sociologists, exploring the impact of Western capitalist hegemony on other regions, mapped the "world system" that emerged. Some expanded Marx's definition and time frame, arguing that primitive accumulation continued even within developed capitalist economies, part of an ongoing process by which people were stripped of the practices of subsistence that undermined their subordination to waged labor. Others emphasized the contribution of transatlantic slavery, whereby human beings themselves were transformed into commodities to be bought and sold. Feminist scholars built on Marx's concept to include reproductive labor, specifically, the reconfiguration of the household in the transition to capitalism and contributions of women's paid and unpaid labor to capital accumulation.<sup>2</sup> The concept, first developed by Marx a century and a half ago, proved to have astonishing longevity and explanatory power for understanding capitalism. Yet, as the three articles presented here demonstrate, the concept can also be used to illuminate the historical trajectories of socialist countries, which also proved subject to repression and violent upheavals spurred by the state's need to accumulate surplus for development. The impetus to industrialize was only heightened by the fact

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<sup>2</sup>Examples of this voluminous literature include: on debates over transition, see Rodney Hilton (ed.), *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* (London, 1978); Maurice Dobb, *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* (New York, 1947); Ellen Meiskins Wood, *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London, 2002); T.H. Aston and C.H.E. Philpin, *The Brenner Debate: Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre Industrial Europe* (Cambridge, 1985). On dispossession and the commons, see Peter Linebaugh, *Red, Round Globe Hot Burning: A Tale at the Crossroads of Commons and Closure, of Love and Terror, of Race and Class, and of Kate and Ned Despard* (Oakland, CA, 2019). On value created by transport workers, see Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (New York, 1987). On global connections, see Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (New York, 2000); Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World Economy in the 16th Century* (London, 1975); David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford, 2003). On slavery and capitalism, see Eric Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2021); Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman (eds), *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia, PA, 2018); Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York, 2015); Edward Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York, 2014). On reproductive labor and the household, see Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body, and Primitive Accumulation* (New York, 2004); Bridget Hill, *Women, Work, and Sexual Politics in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford, 1989); John Gillis, *For Better, For Worse: British Marriages, 1600 to the Present* (Oxford, 1985); Belinda Bozzoli, "Marxism, Feminism and South African Studies", in William Beinert and Saul Dubow (eds), *Segregation and Apartheid in Twentieth Century Africa* (New York and London, 1995).

that revolution occurred in predominately peasant countries that had yet to undergo a full transition to capitalism. Each of the three articles presented here explore the sources of accumulation under socialism and its impact on politics, consumption, and the household. Combining political economy and social history, they extend the boundaries of Marx's concept, applying it in ways he could never have foreseen: to rethink the history of socialism, a system first envisioned by Marx as an alternative to the depredations of capitalism.

### **Karl Marx and Primitive Accumulation**

In Marx's writing on the emergence of capitalism, he sought to understand the process by which wealth, which existed from time immemorial, was turned into capital, the basis of a new system of waged labor and commodity production. For thousands of years, merchants had accumulated wealth along ancient trade routes and great landowners exacted tribute from the peasantry. Yet, despite wealth and trade, capitalism, as a system, did not exist. How did this new system come into being? Marx introduced the idea of a "primitive accumulation" that was not the result of an already established mode of production, but rather, its starting point. He posited that money and commodities can only be transformed into capital when their owners, eager to increase the sum of values they possess, are able to buy other people's labor power. Yet, this buying and selling of labor power, central to capitalism, can only occur after laborers are dispossessed from the means of production, including land, tools, and commons, and forced to sell their labor power as a commodity like any other. "The so-called primitive accumulation", Marx explained, "is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production". Thereafter, capitalists would rigorously enforce this separation between the producer and their means of subsistence, and reproduce it on an ever widening scale. In other words, capitalism begins with a process of forcible dispossession, emancipating laborers from the fetters of feudalism and artisanal guilds, to create a proletariat, people with nothing to sell but their labor power. These new freedmen, robbed of their own means of production, are forced to become "sellers of themselves".<sup>3</sup> Once waged labor became the dominant form of organizing production and generating profit, primitive accumulation would be supplanted by modern capitalist accumulation.

According to Marx, primitive accumulation assumed its "classic form" in England, and unfolded differently in other countries in varying orders of succession. In England, the rise of Flemish wool manufacturers prompted landlords to drive out the peasants and enclose the land to create sheep walks. Later, the sale of church and crown lands created new waves of forcible evictions. The commons – forests, pastures, rivers – essential to peasant survival, were privatized. A rising group of commercial landlords consolidated the holdings of small proprietors and tenants into large farms, reducing the smaller producers to day laborers, waged workers, and beggars. These expropriations were violent, bloody, fiercely resisted, and enforced by the

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<sup>3</sup>Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1 (Chicago, IL, 1906), Part VIII, pp. 784–848, quotes p. 786.



**Figure 1.** Presidium, Ninth Party Congress of the Russian Communist Party (bolshevik), 1920. Seated from left: A. Eunikidze, M. Kalinin, N. Bukharin, M. Tomsky, M. Lashevich, L. Kamenev, E. Preobrazhensky, L. Serebriakov, V. Lenin, and A. Rykov. Of the ten revolutionaries pictured here, eight became members of the left or right oppositions; six were executed between 1936–1938 during the Terror, and two committed suicide.

Courtesy of: <http://visualrian.com/ru/site/gallery/#850828>, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=42774783>

state through law. As peasants were turned en masse into homeless paupers, the state criminalized vagabondage. Public whipping, imprisonment, amputation of ears, enslavement for “idleness”, forced labor in chains, branding, removal and enslavement of children, iron rings of identification, and execution were standard punishments meted out to those without work. The new “free” proletariat, in Marx’s words, was “tortured by laws grotesquely terrible into the discipline necessary for the wage system”. Dutch, Spanish, French, and British colonies, founded on forced labor and slavery, generated great wealth for the emerging system. The British textile mills, Caribbean sugar plantations, and rubber tapping stands of the Belgian Congo, were all living proof of Marx’s vivid phrase that “capital comes dripping from head to foot, from every pore, with blood and dirt”.<sup>4</sup>

### Preobrazhensky and Primitive Socialist Accumulation

Many people – even those who study socialist states or work within the larger Marxist tradition – do not know that the concept of primitive accumulation was debated

<sup>4</sup>Marx, *Capital*, pp. 787, 806–808, 809, 834. An enormous literature is devoted to the process of proletarianization and dispossession in various countries and settings.

furiously in the Soviet Union in the 1920s. Marx never expected his concept to apply to socialism, yet it was here, in the world's first socialist society, that Evgenii Preobrazhensky, a young Bolshevik economist, first theorized "primitive socialist accumulation" as a necessary step in Soviet economic development.<sup>5</sup> Born in Russia in 1886, Preobrazhensky joined the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party as a teenager and, like many other revolutionaries in the tsarist era, suffered repeated arrests and exile. He became a candidate member of the Central Committee in 1917, and led the party organization in the Urals during the October revolution. In 1918, he co-authored with Nikolai Bukharin, a Bolshevik theorist and economist, *The ABC of Communism*, a popular explication of the Party's 1919 program.<sup>6</sup> The young authors, who later presented opposing strategies for Soviet development, were initially closely aligned. From the earliest years after the revolution, Preobrazhensky was pre-occupied with the difficulties of building socialism in a predominantly peasant country. He was initially an idealistic, enthusiastic proponent of War Communism, a Civil War policy based on wages in kind, free state services, and grain requisitioning to feed the Red Army and the cities. Inspired by what appeared to be a rapid revolutionary transition to a moneyless economy, he praised the Commissariat of Finance for rapidly printing money, devaluing the currency, and thereby shooting "the bourgeois order in its rear".<sup>7</sup> Lenin, concerned by rising peasant opposition to grain requisitioning, took a less starry-eyed view of War Communism as a grim wartime necessity rather than an admirable leap into socialism. After the Civil War, he encouraged the Party to abandon War Communism in favor of the New Economic Policy (NEP), which retained state control of large-scale industry, but also ended grain requisitioning, encouraged peasant households to market grain above a tax paid to the state, legalized small business, and stabilized the currency. NEP provided a solution to peasant discontent, balancing peasant access to a free market with a steady urban food supply and the restoration of a ruined economy. The state's need for surplus, later termed primitive socialist accumulation by Preobrazhensky, would subsequently prove central to the political debates within the Soviet Union and every socialist state that followed.

<sup>5</sup>I am deeply indebted in this section to Don Filtzer's unpublished paper, "E.A. Preobrazhenskii's Theory of 'Primitive Socialist Accumulation' as Immanent Critique of Stalinist Industrialization", presented to conference, "Towards a Global History of Primitive Accumulation", and "Introduction", in E.A. Preobrazhensky, *The Crisis of Soviet Industrialization: Selected Essays* (New York, 1979), pp. xi–liii. See also, George Haupt and Jean-Jacques Marie, *Makers of the Russian Revolution* (Ithaca, NY, 1974), pp. 191–201; Mikhail M. Gorinov, "Forward", in Richard B. Day and Mikhail M. Gorinov (eds), *The Preobrazhensky Papers: Archival Documents and Materials, Volume I: 1886–1920* (Leiden and Boston, MA, 2014), p. xviii. Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/preobrazhensky/1921/fromnep/biog.html>; last accessed 18 January 2022.

<sup>6</sup>Nikolai Bukharin and Evgeny Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism* (The Communist Party of Great Britain, 1922). Available at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1920/abc/index.htm>; last accessed 18 January 2022.

<sup>7</sup>Quoted by Richard B. Day, "Preobrazhensky and the Theory of the Transition Period", *Soviet Studies*, 27:2 (April 1975), p. 199. From Preobrazhensky's 1920 pamphlet, *Bumazhnye den'gi v epokhu proletarskoi diktatury* (*Paper Money in the Age of Proletarian Dictatorship*), translated and reprinted in Day and Gorinov (eds), *The Preobrazhensky Papers*.

Despite his infatuation with War Communism, Preobrazhensky, too, soon acknowledged the need to create a stable financial system and repair relations with the peasantry. He never, however, fully reconciled with NEP, which he believed favored wealthier peasants, small business owners, and traders at the expense of workers, poorer peasants, and the socialist state sector. In *Ot NEPa k sotsializmu* (*From NEP to Socialism*), he began to develop the idea of primitive socialist accumulation as he strategized how to shrink the rural free market sector through pricing incentives for commercial crops and loans to boost grain sales to the state.<sup>8</sup> In 1923, alarmed at difficulties in the economy and within the Party, Preobrazhensky helped author the “Platform of the 46”, a detailed exposition of the recommendations of Trotsky and the left opposition. According to the Platform, the state faced a deepening economic crisis rooted in its failure to plan comprehensively, invest more strongly in industry, boost production of manufactured goods, and thereby purchase more grain from the peasants. The Platform blamed the Party’s misguided policies on its lack of democracy and open debate.<sup>9</sup>

In 1924, Preobrazhensky wrote what was to become his major theoretical work, later published as *Novaya ekonomika* (*The New Economics*), to analyze the nature of the new Soviet system and “the basic laws of its development”.<sup>10</sup> In examining the Soviet transition to socialism, he introduced the concept of “primitive socialist accumulation”.<sup>11</sup> Consciously drawing his methodology from Marx’s *Capital* Volumes I–III, he defined the fledgling economy, with its weakly developed industrial base, as a mixed “commodity-socialist system”, a hybrid in which socialized industry confronted “22 million peasant households, together with craft and artisan industry”. These two antithetical systems – one based on state industry and waged workers, the other, on the free market and peasant households, private traders, and small business owners – were propelled by different laws or forces. The state socialist sector was guided by planning or what Preobrazhensky called the “law of primitive accumulation”, while the petty commodity sector was driven by profit or the “law of value”. The struggle for dominance between these two laws or forces defined the Soviet economy.<sup>12</sup>

Throughout *The New Economics*, Preobrazhensky repeatedly insisted that primitive socialist accumulation was *not a policy* but a theoretical analysis of the economy.

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<sup>8</sup>Day, “Preobrazhensky and the Theory of the Transition Period”, pp. 205, 209–212; Chih-Ming Ka and Mark Selden, “Original Accumulation, Equity, and Late Industrialization: The Cases of Socialist China and Capitalist Taiwan”, *World Development*, 14:10–11 (1986) point out that there is nothing inherently socialist about state loans and price setting, which were also employed by capitalist Taiwan after World War II, pp. 1296–1298.

<sup>9</sup>The text of the “Platform of the 46” appears in E.H. Carr, *The Interregnum* (London, 1969), pp. 374–380, and is reproduced at <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/document/ilo/1923-lo/ch02.htm>; last accessed 18 January 2022.

<sup>10</sup>E. Preobrazhensky, *The New Economics* (Oxford, 1965), p. 77.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 83 n1 attributed the term to V.M. Smirnov, a fellow member of the left opposition; Filtzer, “E.A. Preobrazhenskii’s Theory of ‘Primitive Socialist Accumulation’”; E.H. Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution, 1917–1923*, vol. 2 (London, 1969), p. 382; Carr, *Socialism in One Country 1924–1926*, vol. 1 (Harmondsworth, 1970), p. 223. Carr notes the term was first used by Trotsky at the Twelfth Party Congress in 1923.

<sup>12</sup>Preobrazhensky, *The New Economics*, pp. 63, 160, 55, 64.

His policy prescriptions, which he planned to publish later, would be based on this analysis. In Preobrazhensky's view, if socialism was to triumph, the socialist sector would need to expand by realizing an absolute increase in production and a relative increase in relation to private production from one year to the next. To finance this expansion, the state would need a socialist accumulation fund for investment based on the appropriation of "surplus production" (known under capitalism as "surplus value" or profit) from both the state and market sectors. Primitive capitalist accumulation had drawn on the "nutrient base" of petty household production, and the young, impoverished Soviet state, which began socialist accumulation "at a level below zero" would have to follow suit. He formulated the following principle: the more economically backward a socialist country and the weaker its capitalist inheritance, the more it would need to rely on the appropriation of surplus production from pre-socialist forms of economy.<sup>13</sup> In short, through some combination of taxation, pricing, and incentives, peasant agriculture and working-class industry would have to serve a basis for financing Soviet industrialization.

Preobrazhensky did not anticipate the alienation of surplus to affect workers or peasants negatively. He hotly rejected the imputation that he sought to finance the expansion of the state sector simply by setting higher state prices for consumer goods. Rather, he argued that growth itself – the development of industry, increase in labor productivity, and mechanization of agriculture – would raise incomes for workers and peasants and, at the same time, lower prices. As the industrial base expanded, consumer products would become cheaper and more plentiful. Creative state planning could provide additional sources of accumulation, including differential charges for railroad freight, variable interest rates for state and private sectors, replacement of private middlemen by a state trade apparatus, stronger state control of foreign trade, and taxes on kulaks, private traders, and small capitalists who hired labor. Primitive socialist accumulation was the necessary prelude to price reduction and improvement in living standards.<sup>14</sup>

Preobrazhensky offered numerous ideas for increasing the state's accumulation fund, but he never advocated a transference of surplus that involved violence or hyper exploitation of either workers or peasants. His conception of primitive socialist accumulation rested on state planning, pricing, incentives, regulation of trade and tariffs, loans, and credit; in short, "the entire sum of conscious and semi spontaneous tendencies in the state economy directed toward the expansion and consolidation of the collective organization of labor". Nor did Preobrazhensky envision forced involuntary collectivization, grain requisitioning, or steep cuts in real wages. Although he recognized the need to expand the state sector as quickly as possible, he imagined that the transformation of peasant household production into large-scale socialized agriculture would be "incredibly prolonged and slow", taking up to thirty years. In the meantime, the most promising approach to encourage peasants to pool their land and resources, cooperate, and socialize production was to manufacture and make available agricultural machinery. The long term process remained unclear. As Preobrazhensky freely admitted, "*no one knows or can know*, in concrete terms,

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 116–118, 226–227, 64, 78–82, 124.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 89–105, 110, 229–230, 249, 251, 253, 254.

how the peasant economy will be transformed [. . .].<sup>15</sup> Eventually, the development of socialism would create a new society where the soul-killing division of labor would be eliminated, the line between managerial and unskilled work would disappear, and the surplus created by laboring people, rural and urban, would be used to bring education, art, and science to all. None of this, however, was possible in an industrially undeveloped country where the majority of people devoted long hours to manual labor. In his final analysis, “only the rapid growth of industry and a rapid increase in the productivity of labour” could “hasten our progress” and turn workers into “the real leaders of the state and industry”.<sup>16</sup>

By 1925, the left opposition was defeated, and Preobrazhensky’s promised second volume of *The New Economics* never went to press. The Party continued to endorse NEP.<sup>17</sup> The left opposition revived a year later under Trotsky’s leadership, but was defeated again in 1927. Trotsky and his leading supporters, including Preobrazhensky, were expelled from the Party and exiled. Two years later, Preobrazhensky and other left oppositionists, optimistic about the first Five-Year Plan and heartened by Stalin’s alleged “left turn”, rejoined the Party.<sup>18</sup> Preobrazhensky became the deputy chair of the planning commission in Nizhegorod district. Yet, he continued to harbour doubts. Preobrazhensky had identified the challenges of primitive socialist accumulation, but Stalin had implemented a very different solution. In 1931, Preobrazhensky published an analysis of the Great Depression, *Zakat kapitalizma* (*The Decline of Capitalism*), which was also a veiled critique of the first Five-Year Plan.<sup>19</sup> In 1932, he became a leader of the Commissariat of Light Industry, but in January 1933, he was again expelled from the Party, arrested, and exiled to Kazakhstan for heading a clandestine “counter-revolutionary” group of former Trotskyists. The political roller coaster continued. Within a year, he was readmitted to the Party, but forced to recant his views at the Seventeenth Party Congress, the so-called Congress of the Victors in 1934. In his

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 146, 233, 59, 225–226, 223, 234–235.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 188, 189; Filtzer, “E.A. Preobrazhenskii’s Theory of ‘Primitive Socialist Accumulation’”, from Preobrazhenskii, “Sotsialisticheskie i Kommunisticheskie Predstavleniia o Sotsializme”, pt. 1, *Vestnik Kommunisticheskoi akademii*, 12 (1925), p. 71.

<sup>17</sup>On the debates of the 1920s, see Alexander Erlich, *The Soviet Industrialization Debate, 1924–1928* (Boston, MA, 1960); Roy Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism* (New York, 1989), pp. 116–136, 143–183; Day, “Preobrazhensky and the Theory of the Transition Period”, pp. 209–215.

<sup>18</sup>M.M. Gorinov and S.V. Tsakunov, “Evgenii Preobrazhenskii. Tragediia Revoliutsionera”, *Otechestvennaya Istoriia*, 2 (1992), p. 89; Filtzer, “E.A. Preobrazhenskii’s Theory of ‘Primitive Socialist Accumulation’”, p. 4.

<sup>19</sup>From Filtzer, “E.A. Preobrazhenskii’s Theory of ‘Primitive Socialist Accumulation’”, see *Zakat kapitalizma* (Moscow, 1931); *The Decline of Capitalism*, translated and edited by Richard B. Day (Armonk, NY, 1985). See Richard B. Day, *The “Crisis” and the “Crash”: Soviet Studies of the West (1919–1937)* (London, 1981), pp. 229–247 on the connections between *Zakat kapitalizma*, the unpublished work, and the Stalinists’ reaction to them. M. Mekler, “Obshchii krizis kapitalizma i bor’ba dvukh sistem v svete teorii Preobrazhenskogo”, in G.K. Roginskii (ed.), *Zakat kapitalizma v trotskistskom zerkale (o knige E. Preobrazhenskogo, “Zakat kapitalizma”)* (Moscow, 1932), pp. 52–58; and K. Butaev, “K voprosu o material’noi baze sotsializma”, *Problemy ekonomiki*, 1 (1932), p. 9. Preobrazhensky’s analysis was shared by many, including Rakovskii and the Menshevik exile newspaper, *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik*. A summary of these arguments appears in Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization*, pp. 35–44.

speech, noteworthy more for its double meaning than its required self-abasement, he said:

As you know, neither Marx nor Engels [...] visualized just how village life would be revolutionized. You know that Engels tended to the view that it would be a rather long revolutionary process. What was needed was Stalin's remarkable far-sightedness, his great courage in facing the problems, the greatest hardness in applying policies.<sup>20</sup>

Preobrazhensky's obligatory obeisance implied that Stalin not only broke with Marx and Engels, but introduced a speed and brutality to collectivization that neither Marx nor Engels had ever countenanced or even imagined. After his recantation, Preobrazhensky was appointed deputy head of the central planning–finance department of the Commissariat of State Farms. He remained in this post until December 1936, when he was arrested, along with thousands of other former oppositionists, amid the heightening Terror. In his interrogation by the NKVD, Preobrazhensky confessed to participating in a counter-revolutionary group of unrepentant Trotskyists in 1932. He admitted that the group had opposed the Party for its mismanagement of the first Five-Year Plan, unrealistic industrial targets, brutal collectivization, attack on living standards, and insistence on ideological conformity. In addition, he admitted to meeting with former oppositionist comrades after 1934, failing to inform the Party, and therefore struggling “against the policy of the Central Committee and the leadership of the party”. In a closed session on 13 July 1937, the Supreme Court took a mere ten minutes to pronounce Preobrazhensky guilty; he was executed the same day. In 1988, after Gorbachev came to power and the country undertook a stunning re-examination of its past, the Supreme Court rehabilitated Preobrazhensky. In 1990, the Party declared the charges of counter-revolutionary activity that justified his expulsion to be a fabrication and posthumously readmitted him to its ranks.<sup>21</sup>

### The Soviet Union, China, and Romania

Preobrazhensky was the first to identify the problem that every socialist leadership that subsequently came to power would struggle to solve: how to finance industrial development. In the articles that follow, Goldman, Eyferth, and Cucu use Marx's concept of primitive accumulation and Preobrazhensky's insights into mixed commodity-socialist systems to analyze the challenges of post-revolutionary

<sup>20</sup>As quoted by A. Nove, “Introduction”, in E. Preobrazhensky, *The New Economics*, p. xv.

<sup>21</sup>Filtzer, “E.A. Preobrazhenskii's Theory of 'Primitive Socialist Accumulation'”; Gorinov, Tsakunov, pp. 91–92, 95 (n. 94), quote on p. 91; Preobrazhensky's interrogation of 27–31 December 1936, Tsentral'nyi Arkhiv Federal'noi Sluzhby Bezopasnosti Rossiiskoi Federatsii, R-34944, t. 1, ll. 33–39ob. I am grateful to Donald Filtzer, Mikhail Gorinov, Sergei Tsakunov, and Richard B. Day for providing a copy of this document. On rehabilitation, see “O Tak Nazyyaemoi 'Kontrevoliutsionnoi Trotskistskoi Gruppe Smirnova I.N., Ter-Vaganiana V.A., Preobrazhenskogo E.A., i Drugikh,” *Izvestiia TsK KPSS*, 6 (1991), pp. 71–89. Available at: [https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Преображенский,\\_Евгений\\_Алексеевич](https://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Преображенский,_Евгений_Алексеевич); last accessed 18 January 2022.

development in the Soviet Union, China, and Romania, rural countries characterized by peasant household production and small industrial sectors. Emphasizing the impact of accumulation on peasants, workers, and women, they explore how revolutionary leaders, who initially sought to avoid the brutality of capitalist primitive accumulation, found themselves reprising many of its features.

Goldman argues that the convulsive political, social, and economic events of the Stalin era, most often analyzed separately, can be connected through the pressures for accumulation. She treats Preobrazhensky's ideas historically as an alternative strategy to NEP as well as a contemporary analytical tool for understanding socialist accumulation. Looking at the tumultuous decades of the 1920s and 1930s, she links forced collectivization and its consequences to the subsequent Terror and mass repressions. She argues that the decision to requisition grain in 1927 triggered an unanticipated social and economic crisis. Peasants reduced their sown areas, leading, in turn, to the hasty decision to collectivize. Fierce peasant resistance produced a drop in the food supply, which resulted in price inflation, a fall in real wages, famine, women's mass entrance into the labor force, and passportization. Despite the self-congratulatory tone that permeated the 17th Party "Congress of the Victors" in 1934, party leaders were badly shaken by events. The Kirov murder heightened fears of political opposition amid the seething social discontent of workers and peasants. Against a looming threat of war, repression targeted ever-widening sectors of the population. The conflicts of the 1920s between Preobrazhensky's law of primitive socialist accumulation and Bukharin's commitment to NEP ended with a third approach, later termed "Stalinism", which ultimately buried both the left and right oppositions. While state violence continued in various forms until Stalin's death in 1953, the class relations forged in the 1930s remained the basis of the Soviet system until its collapse. What started as an ill-conceived reaction to a grain crisis in 1927 became, by the end of World War II, a "model" of socialist development for peasant-based countries around the world.

As Eyferth explains, China's early revolutionary development roughly followed the Soviet model. After the revolution in 1949, the US blockade forced China to rely on its internal resources for development. Chinese leaders confiscated and redistributed landlord holdings to peasant households, nationalized large-scale industry, and prohibited private trade of key commodities like grain and cotton. They launched their first Five-Year Plan in 1953 but left agriculture in the hands of private peasant households. Yet, after the state failed to meet its planned targets, Party leaders opted, after sharp debate, for wholesale collectivization. State accumulation rates increased steeply with the adoption of the Great Leap Forward in 1959, and China, like the Soviet Union, experienced a famine costing millions of lives. Eyferth argues that the surplus extracted from the peasantry provided the basis for primitive accumulation, although the intensity and duration of extraction far surpassed any prescription of Preobrazhensky.<sup>22</sup> A household registration system, similar to Soviet passportization,

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<sup>22</sup>Ka and Selden agree: "The collectivized peasantry bore the brunt of original accumulation, a pattern which continued into the early 1980s", Ka and Selden, "Original Accumulation, Equity, and Late Industrialization, p. 1301.

controlled migration into the cities.<sup>23</sup> Eyferth reveals the heavy burden socialist accumulation placed on peasants, and women in particular. The cotton textile industry, a cornerstone of the country's industrial development, became the single largest source of income in the Mao years. The state paid the peasants poorly for the cotton they produced, exported and sold fabric on the world market for comparatively high prices, and then ploughed the difference into infrastructure and industrialization. Peasants, however, did not receive enough cloth through their allotted rations to cover even the minimum required for bedding and clothing. And while Preobrazhensky argued for state accumulation through an increase in labor productivity and mechanization, Eyferth demonstrates that peasant women were forced to compensate for what the state extracted through hand spinning thread and weaving cloth from cotton gleanings, scraps, and waste. They worked, he notes, in their "stolen time" after long hours in the fields while their husbands and children slept. Their productivity increased, but it was their unremunerated, unmechanized reproductive labor that made export and industrial development possible.

Cucu, focusing on Romania, conceptualizes primitive accumulation as a centuries-long process that persisted across the systemic divides of neo-feudalism, capitalism, and socialism. Landlords and the state accumulated capital through dispossession and appropriation of peasant surplus. In the nineteenth century, the state drew on persisting feudal labor relations to support its entrance into the international grain market. The "incoherent development policy" that followed during the interwar years continued to finance accumulation based on unequal exchange with the peasantry. The socialist state again used the peasantry to fund industrialization in the 1950s. In a process Cucu terms "postponed proletarianization", rural households, too poor to survive solely on small plots or collective farm remuneration, sent family members into the cities to work for wages. The rural areas absorbed the costs of social reproduction by providing food, shelter, and other necessities to families, while urban employers, both private and state, paid below-subsistence wages to rural commuters. This system, which impoverished both waged workers and peasants, proved beneficial to accumulation under capitalism and socialism.<sup>24</sup> When the Romanian Communist Party came to power after the war, it replayed many of the debates that split the Bolsheviks in the 1920s. Collectivization began in 1949, yet, despite the adoption of the Stalinist model in 1952, the process dragged on until 1962. Both industry and commercial agriculture grew, but too slowly to provide significant benefits to either the urban or rural population. The price of manufactured goods remained high, and peasants had little incentive to market their produce. Marked disparities of wealth and services between rural and urban areas persisted into the 1980s.

<sup>23</sup>Sam Kee-Cheng, "Primitive Socialist Accumulation in China. An Alternative View on the Anomalies of Chinese 'Capitalism'", *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 52:4 (2020), notes that workers' real wages also stagnated from 1952 to 1978, pp. 705–708. See also Chris Brammell, *Chinese Economic Development* (London, 2009).

<sup>24</sup>Similar patterns prevailed in South Africa. Black migration into cities, controlled by the apartheid state, allowed private companies to pay below subsistence wages to urban waged workers who left their families in the rural Bantustans. See John Higginson, *Agrarian Origins of South African Apartheid, 1900–1948*, (Cambridge, 2014); Harold Wolpe, "Capitalism and Cheap Labour Power in South Africa: From Segregation to Apartheid", in Beinert and Dubow (eds).

Romania seemed to linger for decades in the state of mild crisis that first alarmed Preobrazhensky in the 1920s.

The articles contribute to a historically based understanding of the processes first theorized by Marx for capitalism and by Preobrazhensky for socialism. Goldman emphasizes the similarities between capitalist and socialist primitive accumulation in peasant dispossession, state control of itinerancy, violence, and extraction from the laboring classes. In her temporal framework, she hews closely to Marx's definition, namely "the so-called original accumulation, therefore, is nothing else than the historical process of divorcing the producer from the means of production". She argues that Soviet primitive accumulation was largely complete by the end of the 1930s. Due to the drop in the food supply produced by collectivization, it was financed mainly by workers in the state sector at the expense of living standards. Eyferth conceptualizes primitive socialist accumulation as a process of extreme extraction from the peasantry. Although he does not explicitly address its beginning or end dates, he argues that the process was synonymous with the transfer of resources from agriculture to industry, or what Preobrazhensky termed "the nutrient soil of petty household production". Cucu employs the broadest conception, finding little difference between primitive accumulation under a variety of systems, or, for that matter, between primitive and modern capital accumulation. Postponed proletarianization and the continuing importance of wages to peasants and rural holdings to workers are critical to her longer view.

All three authors expand the idea of primitive accumulation well beyond the analysis of Marx and Preobrazhensky in their focus on social reproduction, the household, and women's unremunerated contribution. Goldman identifies the urban food shortages created by peasant resistance to collectivization and the consequent fall in real wages as central to women's decisions to enter the waged labor force. Their employment served as a key source of accumulation allowing the state to hire two workers for the price of one, slow peasant migration to the cities, and realize considerable savings on the construction of urban housing and infrastructure. Eyferth demonstrates that women's unremunerated hand spinning and weaving clothed their families and enabled the state to exchange cloth for machinery on the global market. Cucu focuses on continuities in the state's reliance, across multiple systems, on the household's inventive and desperate combination of farming and waged labor. The costs of social reproduction, she shows, were born by the village, enabling both the state and private employers to depress wages and accumulate surplus.

Taken together, the articles illustrate Preobrazhensky's principle that socialist development in industrially backward, predominately peasant countries required extraction from urban workers and rural commodity producers. They also demonstrate that despite Preobrazhensky's hopes, accumulation weighed heavily on the producing classes. Within both classes, women played a central role as family configurations were forced to adapt to the strains of accumulation. For peasants, this meant the break up of the household as the main unit of production in favor of larger commercial entities like collective farms and continuing disparities in wealth between urban and rural households; for workers, falling or stagnant wages; and for women, entrance into waged labor, and the assumption of additional unremunerated

work. In all three cases, migration patterns altered gender roles and family configurations.

### Primitive Accumulation in Comparative Perspective

The articles point the way toward future comparative research, suggesting that the processes of primitive capitalist and socialist accumulation shared painful similarities. The Soviet Union and Great Britain came to be seen as the “classic” cases of developmental transitions. In both, the dispossession of the peasantry and transition to waged labor created massive social upheaval and resistance. In response to the poverty and itinerancy created by dispossession, both countries passed laws to control population movement and criminalize vagabondage and beggary. Anti-vagrancy and poor laws, domestic passports, work and residency requirements, and registration became key tools in policing. In the Soviet Union, such laws averted the slums of British towns, and later, those of the Global South, but in neither country did they address the desperation of the dispossessed. In both countries, the labor of workers, women, and peasants (and in the case of Britain, slaves) created the surplus to fuel industrialization. Labor struggles over appropriation as well as recurring crises of over and underproduction, central to capitalism, stubbornly persisted under socialism. And massive violence accompanied the transformation in both systems.<sup>25</sup>

Yet, capitalist and socialist primitive accumulation also differed. Capitalism in Great Britain and the West emerged over several hundred years; in the socialist countries profiled here, state planners engineered the transition to an industrial economy in a far shorter period of time. In the West, colonial plunder, trans-Atlantic slavery, enclosure, and extreme exploitation of waged labor financed a chaotic, market-driven transition. Under socialism, the most painful social costs were more compressed in time, and the state planned production, prices, and wages. Some form of collectivized agriculture in the Soviet Union, China, and Romania enabled the state to direct products for export and to provision an expanding waged labor force. In capitalist countries, poor and middling peasants and farmers were the first to be dispossessed and their small holdings consolidated into large corporate commercial farms reliant on machinery and seasonal labor. In the Soviet Union, China, and Romania, the vast majority of peasant households remained on the land and their holdings were consolidated in collective farms that eventually used machinery for large-scale production. The wealthier peasants, not the poorer, were dispossessed. In addition to peasant production, the increase in the numbers of waged workers, restricted consumption, women’s waged and reproductive labor, and increases in productivity all provided essential sources of accumulation. In contrast to capitalism, industry and land under socialism were not privately owned, the ruling class was not defined by

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<sup>25</sup>On the features of “classical socialism”, see Janos Kornai, *The Socialist System: The Political Economy of Communism* (Princeton, NJ, 1992), chs 3–15. On urban slums, see Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (New York, 2006). On criminalization of vagabondage and poor laws, see Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 2006); Paul Slack, *The English Poor Law, 1531–1782* (Cambridge, 1995); A.L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England, 1560–1640* (London, 1987).

its ownership of the means of production, and individuals were unable to accumulate or invest private capital.

There were other differences between primitive capitalist and socialist accumulation as well. Slavery and its attendant horrors played a critical role in the transition to capitalism, enriching British colonies and producing cheap food (sugar) and cotton to feed and clothe an emerging proletariat.<sup>26</sup> Primitive socialist accumulation was accompanied not by slavery but by a burgeoning system of labor camps. But while the labor of slaves provided an undeniable contribution to capitalist development, the economic value of socialist prison labor is a matter of dispute.<sup>27</sup> Capitalist accumulation realized vast growth through sugar, a food grown and processed by slaves and used to feed an emerging proletariat. No similar food emerged in the socialist countries to reconfigure the global economy or feed the workers. On the contrary, as a result of peasant resistance to collective farming, the Soviet Union, China, and Romania all experienced food crises and shortages. Under socialism, and in the Soviet Union in particular, women entered the labor force to supplement male wages at rates not seen in the capitalist West until the 1970s. Under capitalism, privately owned corporations and their managers fought with workers and unions over the rate of accumulation; under socialism, the forces were reversed: unions became a lever of state accumulation while managers often overspent the wage fund in an effort to retain and incentivize workers to meet planned targets. Under capitalism, the state used regressive taxation to fund education, infrastructure, and social services; under socialism, the state widely expanded and funded these same benefits by appropriating surplus directly through planned pricing and wage policy. While social differentiation existed in both systems, the disparities of wealth and poverty proved far smaller in the Soviet Union, Maoist China, and Romania than in capitalist countries.

Violence under capitalist and socialist primitive accumulation also differed. Flogging, branding, exile, hanging, starvation, amputation, indenture, slavery, torture, and the workhouse were central to the development of capitalism in Europe and its colonies, and these forms of extreme mass violence lasted over 300 years. In the socialist countries, violence of accumulation took the form of exile, mass repression, execution, and political terror, but was concentrated in a much shorter period. Many critics of socialism continue to equate socialism with Stalinism and its most brutal years. Unlike capitalism, which has largely sanitized its violent origins, socialism is still tarnished by its association with Stalinism and primitive accumulation.

In comparing primitive accumulation among socialist countries, it is clear that despite the influence of the “classic” Soviet model with its emphasis on heavy industry, restricted consumption, and collectivization, socialist practice embraced a multiplicity of paths toward development.<sup>28</sup> Soviet policy, promoted after World War II as a model for other socialist countries, began in reality as a hasty and ill-conceived

<sup>26</sup>Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York, 1985); Beckert, *Empire of Cotton*; Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*.

<sup>27</sup>The labor camps included many older, disabled, or weakened prisoners who were incapable of work. In 1937–1938, the camps were so overwhelmed by prisoners, they were unable to feed or clothe them. See Oleg Khlevniuk, *The History of the Gulag: From Collectivization to the Great Terror* (New Haven, CT, 2004).

<sup>28</sup>On African socialism, for example, see Priya Lal, *African Socialism in Postcolonial Tanzania: Between the Village and the World* (Cambridge, 2017).

effort to quell working-class discontent through short-term grain requisitioning. Peasant reaction then propelled the state toward “total (*sploshnaia*)” collectivization, which, in turn, created its own torrent of unintended consequences. Many socialist countries consciously sought to avoid the worst effects of this erstwhile model. In Romania, although the Stalinist faction triumphed in 1952, neither the tempo of collectivization nor industrialization was particularly rapid, and neither workers nor peasants made strong gains in their standard of living. Indeed, the Romanian example embodied Preobrazhensky’s early warnings about the shortcomings of NEP, namely as an economic arrangement unable to sustain sufficient growth to raise production, lower prices, and increase living standards. At the same time, Romania escaped the abrupt violence of Soviet collectivization. The Chinese state, led by Mao, initially replicated the Stalinist model, establishing collectivization, unfavorable terms of trade with the peasantry, compulsory sale of grain, and restricted consumption.<sup>29</sup> Yet, its policy changed sharply after the establishment of trade relations with the United States in 1979 and extensive market reforms in the 1990s. Many state-owned enterprises were privatized, loans simplified, and profits soared. The state, however, continued to control what Lenin called the “commanding heights” of industry, enforcing a steady transfer of surplus from the market to the state sector, which, as Preobrazhensky stressed, is not ruled by the profit motive.<sup>30</sup> Although Preobrazhensky never envisioned a market sector as industrially advanced, unregulated, and exploitative as China encourages today, the idea of a planned state transfer from the market to the state sector was central to his ground-breaking theory of socialist development.

Of the three countries profiled here, China is the only one that is still ruled by a Communist Party and considers itself socialist. The same question that animated the great Soviet debates of the 1920s now stands before China’s leaders: which sector will triumph over the other in the transition to a developed economy? Will state-owned industries eventually predominate over private capital, will they be democratically controlled and directed toward, in Preobrazhensky’s words, “production for the sake of consumption by the workers”?<sup>31</sup> Almost a century after Preobrazhensky’s execution, the Chinese Communist Party is employing his strategy of sectoral transfer. The context, of course, has radically shifted. The private sector in China, built on an intense exploitation of labor, realizes profits unimaginable to Preobrazhensky, and his strategy has been excised from his larger, humane vision of socialism. The future of the global struggle between production for profit and democratically-controlled production for humanity’s collective welfare still hangs in the balance.

<sup>29</sup>Cheng, pp. 704–705.

<sup>30</sup>Joshua Freeman, *Behemoth: The History of the Factory and the Making of the Modern World* (New York, 2018), pp. 270–313.

<sup>31</sup>Cheng, pp. 704–711; Preobrazhensky, *The New Economics*, pp. 72–73.