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Two and a Half Centuries of Labor History: St. Petersburg/Petrograd/Leningrad

ISTORIJA RABOCHIKH LENINGRADA. Vol. 1: 1703-FEVRAL' 1917. Edited by *S. N. Valk, V. S. Diakin*, et al. Vol. 2: 1917-1965. Edited by *A. R. Dzeniskevich, V. M. Koval'chuk*, et al. Leningrad: "Nauka." 1972. Vol. 1: 555 pp. 3.14 rubles. Vol. 2: 460 pp. 2.82 rubles.

The Leningrad branch of the Institute of History has produced an impressively thorough (though far from exhaustive) two-volume study of the factory workers of St. Petersburg. The collective effort of twenty-one authors, the volumes must have involved several years of dedicated labor, including the time that has gone into earlier monographs by some of the authors, which they draw upon heavily in several of the seventeen chapters.

There are, unfortunately, numerous weaknesses and even distortions for which the authors should be called to account. Predictably, they grow exponentially in the second volume, and by the last four chapters (1928-65) they vastly outweigh the positive features. Yet on balance, this is a work of scholarly value. Although it must be read cautiously and critically, its appearance should be welcomed by students of the Russian labor movement.

The two opening chapters, encompassing the century from the founding of St. Petersburg to 1800, contain useful if not very controversial information. With justification, the authors stress the predominantly military character of Petersburg industry and the impact of militarization on the recruitment, composition, and treatment of its still relatively small and undifferentiated labor force. Direct and crude forms of compulsion set the tone in both recruitment and labor discipline; serfdom and the barracks characterize the industrial life of the period. The author of chapter 1 refutes the exaggerated claims of earlier Soviet historians regarding the proportion of the labor force that was freely hired (that is, by voluntary contract), and shows that most workers, even in the small private sector, worked in the capacity of soldiers or serfs. Accordingly, the characteristic form of protest against existing conditions was flight. The author of chapter 2 provides evidence that the use of freely hired labor in private industry did increase in the last decades of the century, but is less than convincing in his claims that there was sufficient change to justify the identifica-

tion of a new social formation ("pre-proletariat"), which engaged in new and significantly more advanced forms of protest before the nineteenth century.

The expansion of privately owned industry and the growing dominance of freely hired labor in the first half of the nineteenth century provide the leitmotif of the third chapter. At the same time, the author quite properly stresses the theme of "dual" exploitation: most "free" workers were simultaneously serfs, and suffered concurrently from the abuses of a young and unregulated industrial capitalism and a centuries-old condition of serfdom. Resistance to this dual exploitation was expressed in the coexistence and interpenetration of two corresponding forms of protest, described here as the "struggle against the feudal-serfdom yoke" and the conflict between labor and capital. However, one must approach with caution the suggestion that the incidents of labor unrest that occurred in and around St. Petersburg in the late 1850s were "strikes" in any modern sense or that they had a significant political coloration.

It is only in the 1870s, which form an important part of I. A. Baklanova's well-researched chapter on the years from 1860 to the early 1890s, that we encounter unrest of sufficient proportions, planning, and persistence to carry the burden of the concept "labor movement." The labor unrest of these years is treated in some detail and, on balance, with accuracy. No new evidence is provided for the traditional but still unconvincing contention that the unrest of the seventies was more forceful and disciplined among metal workers than among textile workers, a conclusion that should be reserved for the beginning of the twentieth century. The author's discussion of the interaction in the seventies between radical *intelligenty* and Petersburg workers, while brief and very familiar, is presented judiciously. Generous credit is given to the populist contribution to the development of radical views within a small but highly active segment of industrial workers, although ahistorical terminology such as *narodnicheskie oshibki* stubbornly persists. Baklanova's account of the small Marxist-oriented circles of the 1880s and early 1890s adheres closely to the picture presented in R. A. Kazakevich's useful monograph of 1960.

A lengthy eighty-four-page chapter covers the years from the mid-1890s to the eve of Bloody Sunday. These are the years when, paradoxically, St. Petersburg took on many of the characteristics of a modern urban industrial center while impoverished peasant migrants came to constitute an enormous proportion of the laboring population. The debate over the relation between these two phenomena and over its political implications dates back to contemporary Marxist-Populist polemics. Similar issues continue to play an important but very muted role in recent Soviet historiography and are cautiously raised in this chapter. On the whole, the authors lean in the direction of granting the persistence of significant working-class ties to the countryside, but fail to draw any interesting conclusions about the effects of this situation on the character of

the labor movement, except to invoke it as a pseudo-explanation of the rise of "Economism."

Economism, unfortunately, continues to be treated most tendentiously. It is introduced (together with "tailism") in a confused and anachronistic manner to explain the relatively weak influence of the *Soiuz bor'by* on St. Petersburg workers in 1897, while the alleged success of Economism (simplistically equated with "trade-unionism") among the workers is attributed to the "petty bourgeois" illusions of recent peasant recruits (*vcherashnie krest'iane*). Much of the discussion of Economism is based on two or three pages of *What Is To Be Done?* The recent contributions of Wildman and Frankel are totally ignored. In this chapter, and indeed throughout the book, the simplistic equation "peasant origins = petty bourgeois illusions" is pulled out of the hat whenever a short-order explanation is needed for working-class attraction to a vast range of non-Leninist tendencies, be they trade unionism, Gapon's *Sobranie*, Menshevism, or the S.R.'s. The possibility that close peasant origins might under certain circumstances contribute to working-class militancy is never taken seriously.

On certain narrow but interesting issues the chapter is expressly critical of previous Soviet scholarship. Traditional estimates of the number of participants in the major textile strike of 1896 are revised drastically downward on the grounds that they are based on uncritical acceptance of exaggerated claims in the contemporary radical press. Particularly noteworthy is a critique of the standard view that fines were still making a major dent in the take-home pay of Petersburg workers at the turn of the century, and there is a brief attempt at a sociopsychological explanation of the rise of working-class resentment of fines at a time when their use was declining. Also of interest is the description of the militant, quasi-political strikes of the spring and summer of 1901, which are explicitly presented as having developed in the absence of strong Social Democratic leadership.

The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of Gapon and his *Sobranie*. Since Gapon is depicted as nothing more than an ambitious adventurer, the author has difficulty explaining his mass support, and is forced to fall back on feeble, mechanical explanations. Predictably, Gapon attracted mainly the most backward, unskilled workers (such as the *putilovtsy*, who reappear in a subsequent chapter as the "revolutionary vanguard" of 1912-14) and their wives!

In the next chapter the story of Gapon and Bloody Sunday is resumed with greater precision and much more generosity. U. A. Shuster acknowledges that both Bolsheviks and Mensheviks were taken unawares by the degree of worker support for Gapon in January 1905. Whereas the author of the previous chapter was quick to equate Gapon with Zubatov, Shuster implies that Social Democrats were *misled* by the very same assumption. In general, his descrip-

tion of the dramatic events of January 9 seems accurate and balanced; the procession is depicted as an authentic expression of the mood and aspirations of the mass of Petersburg workers.

Shuster's generally plausible treatment of the growth of revolutionary sentiment among Petersburg workers in 1905 tends to break down whenever the question of Bolshevik influence becomes central, as in his treatment of the electoral campaign for the Shidlovsky commission or his unsupported claims regarding the mass appeal of the resolutions of the Bolsheviks' April congress. On the other hand, he does not shrink from presenting evidence from which it may at least be inferred that the infatuation of the local Bolsheviks with the tactic of immediate armed uprising blinded them at times to the novel opportunities that were being generated spontaneously from within the labor movement, and he is lucid in his presentation of their initial reluctance to accept the Petersburg Soviet as an independent, nonparty organization of the working class. Regrettably, Shuster allows no role for Trotsky in his otherwise adequate discussion of the Soviet. (Nor will Trotsky appear in the chapters on 1917, but we meet him in 1912 striving for the "unification of all enemies of Marxism," and in the fall of 1919 pleading that Petrograd be abandoned to the Whites!)

E. E. Kruze's chapter on the years of "revolutionary upsurge" (too broadly defined as encompassing the years 1910–14) closely conforms to the picture presented in her 1961 monograph. In discussing the size and composition of the Petersburg labor force in 1912–14, she calculates that the number of factory workers had reached nearly 230,000 by 1913, an increase of some 70,000 since 1908. She fails to indicate that the figure of 70,000 is *net*, which suggests that the actual number of new peasant recruits was even greater than she acknowledges, especially in light of the high rate of disease and mortality among Petersburg workers. Kruze stresses, with reason, the incredibly rapid politicization of this mass of recent recruits during the great upsurge of 1912–14, years when the temporary stability attained under Stolypin had clearly broken down in the capital. She is accurate in arguing that it was the Bolsheviks who succeeded in gathering the fruits of this breakdown, but ignores the extent to which the Bolsheviks' successful interaction with the spontaneous labor movement (especially in its legal forms) constituted a serious departure from earlier party assumptions. Haimson's important study of this period (*Slavic Review*, 1964–65) is not even mentioned.

A knowledge of changes in the composition of the Petrograd working class during the war years is essential in identifying who the workers were who precipitated the February Revolution. In his chapter on that period, I. P. Leiberov shows that the Petrograd working class expanded by 150,000 persons (or 62 percent) between January 1914 and January 1917. (That these are net

figures is again ignored.) More important, the vast majority of the new workers were in the city's great engineering works, where the work force expanded by 136 percent, to a total of nearly 240,000. The main source of fresh recruits (50 to 75 percent according to the author) were new peasants from the countryside, followed by women and adolescents from Petrograd who lacked previous factory experience. By Leiberov's conservative estimates, the new recruits constituted some 45 percent of the total factory population, but the figure had to have been much larger in the rapidly expanding defense industries. Leiberov concludes in somewhat muddled and contradictory fashion that they quickly melted into the milieu of more experienced, politically conscious workers, but also that they joined with the "labor aristocracy" to provide a social base for Menshevik, S.R., anarchist, and Black Hundred organizations. None of this is documented or presented analytically. Such passages illustrate that Soviet labor historians, despite a new and commendable willingness to raise questions about the social psychology of the working class, have yet to develop systematic and convincing methodologies for relating social background to political attitudes.

In this and his subsequent chapter on the February Revolution, Leiberov is relatively (though not always scrupulously) fair in his treatment of the more radical, internationalist elements of the non-Bolshevik left, and at times is even critical of Bolshevik leadership (see especially pp. 521–22 and 535 of vol. 1). But he facilely invokes the presence of a "gigantic petty-bourgeois" wave of workers to explain Bolshevik weakness in early 1917 and he underestimates the pre-April moderation of many Bolshevik leaders.

The pivotal chapter on March–October 1917 (most of it by Z. V. Stepanov) exemplifies both the strengths and weaknesses of these volumes. Stepanov writes openly about the strength of the Mensheviks and S.R.'s, relative to the Bolsheviks, in the early spring. He correctly traces the shift of working-class allegiance toward the Bolsheviks and their slogans, which began to emerge in April and accelerated thereafter. But the historical dynamics that underlay this process are barely examined. The shift is presented in a much too linear manner, without any real sense of the volatile and precarious character of working-class allegiances in the heady atmosphere of 1917, and with inadequate attention to the multiple crosscurrents of opinion that swept the Bolshevik Party (and he thereby gives inadvertent support to the common Western image of a monolithic, ultraconspiratorial party). Although we are told that the Petrograd workers followed a "complex" path from February to October, in most of this chapter the path is staked out much too neatly. Parts of the chapter would have benefited immeasurably by drawing on the work of Alexander Rabinowitch.

The book concludes with a series of chapters that purport to tell the story

of the Petrograd/Leningrad working class from 1918 to 1965. It may well be that a specialist in Soviet history would find more of value in these chapters than the present reviewer. I was impressed by some of the statistical information on the changing size and composition of the labor force during the periods of "war communism" and NEP, by refreshingly direct discussion of the decimation and *deklassirovanie* of the ranks of experienced, proletarianized, and Bolshevized workers in the course of the Civil War, and by allusions to temporary Menshevik and S.R. successes among demoralized workers in the summer of 1918. There is also a brief but rather frank discussion of the labor unrest that preceded the Tenth Party Congress in 1921. The NEP period is presented in terms of the gradual rebuilding and re-education of the Leningrad working class, which to a great extent is again obliged to replenish its ranks from among the peasantry. There is also an interesting and ever so slightly embarrassed discussion of the displacement of poorly qualified women workers by returning veterans of the labor force in the early 1920s.

The discussions of postrevolutionary party history have few such redeeming features. The sins of Trotsky, Zinoviev, and the rest are paraded before us in conventional manner, while Leningrad workers dutifully support the correct positions in intraparty disputes. The name of Stalin is scrupulously avoided, although many of these "correct" positions were, of course, his. Occasionally there are admissions of shortcomings in minor aspects of official labor policy, and it is demonstrated (but depicted as regrettably unavoidable) that the real wages of Leningrad workers fell somewhat during the first Five-Year Plan before recovering during the second.

How does one weigh the balance of a thousand pages of impressively detailed information on the history of Petersburg workers over 260 years? No review can possibly do justice to the richness of the data about their material situation, social composition, cultural life (a couple of dozen thin but useful pages), and struggle for emancipation under conditions of incredible adversity. Yet when all is said and done, the book must be seen as less than a success. There are excellent sections, unquestionably; but time and again, just when the reader's expectations have been heightened by a series of lucid and informative paragraphs, some absurdity will be dragged in through the back door of *partiinosť*. There is much to commend in this enormous work, but it falls far short of what it might have been and of what its informed and talented authors are capable of doing.