

WOMEN AT THE GATES

GENDER AND INDUSTRY
IN STALIN'S RUSSIA

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Introduction

In the annals of industrialization, the Soviet experience is unique in its whirlwind rapidity. The vast transformations that shook Western Europe over centuries – proletarianization, industrialization, urbanization – were in the Soviet Union telescoped into a mere decade. The working class grew at an unprecedented rate, changing in size and social composition. Even more striking was the critical role of women: in no country of the world did they come to constitute such a significant part of the working class in so short a time. In 1930 alone, 473,000 women entered industry, more than four times the number of new women workers in 1929, to be followed by 587,000 more in 1931. Between 1929 and 1935, almost 4 million women began to work for wages, 1.7 million of them in industry. More women took jobs in industry than in any other sector of the economy. By 1935, 42 percent of all industrial workers would be women. In 1932 and 1933, women were the only new source of labor for the developing economy.¹

Not only did women pour into the labor force in record numbers, they also flooded industries that had traditionally been dominated by men. They crossed the older lines of sex segregation that had persisted in Soviet industry through the 1920s, entering new industries such as machine building and electrostations as well as expanding branches of older industries such as mining, metallurgy, and chemical manufacture. They filled newly created jobs and older jobs previously held exclusively by men, working mainly as unskilled and semiskilled labor. As women undercut the strict hierarchies of skill and gender within the factories, they forced male workers to reexamine their ideas about skill, “masculine” and “feminine” work, and the role of women in the workplace.

¹ *Trud v SSSR. Statisticheskii spravochnik* (Moscow: TsUNKhU Gosplana, 1936), 10–11, 25. These figures include all women in industry: workers, apprentices, and others.

Many historians have written about workers in Soviet industrialization, but few have specifically considered women.² Western historians of labor in the 1930s have concentrated instead on the relationship between workers and the state, on mapping policy, on labor legislation, on the clash of interests among workers, managers, and Party officials in the factories, and on the great shock work and Stakhanovite campaigns for production.³ More recently, historians have shown a growing interest in workers' social identities as older "*kadrovye*" workers, new peasant migrants, and youth, and in their relationships to the uniquely "Soviet" beliefs, lexicon, and worldview that shaped their lives.⁴ Russian historians have produced numerous carefully researched accounts of working-class growth and accomplishment during industrialization. The Party's ideological insistence on the centrality of the working class impelled historians to focus on labor, but it also constrained their questions and conclusions.⁵ As a result, Russian historians today show a strong allergic reaction to those privileged categories, such as labor, that once dominated Soviet historiography. Despite their differences, however, Western and Russian labor historians have almost unanimously agreed that women merit but a few

² Among the few books on women workers in the 1930s are Melanie Ilic, *Women Workers in the Soviet Interwar Economy: From "Protection" to "Equality"* (London: Macmillan, 1999); Alistair McAuley, *Women's Work and Wages in the Soviet Union* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1981); Michael Paul Sacks, *Women's Work in Soviet Russia: Continuity in the Midst of Change* (New York: Praeger, 1976); G. A. Prutsenskii, A. P. Stepanov, and B. I. Eidel'man, *Voprosy truda v SSSR* (Moscow: Gosizdat Politicheskoi Literatury, 1958); *Sovetskie zhenshchiny i profsoiuzy* (Moscow: Profizdat, 1984).

³ See for example, R. W. Davies, *The Soviet Economy in Turmoil, 1929–1930* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization: The Formation of Modern Soviet Production Relations* (Armonk, N.Y.: M. E. Sharpe, 1986); Hiroaki Kuromiya, *Stalin's Industrial Revolution: Politics and Workers, 1928–1932* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Solomon Shwarz, *Labor in the Soviet Union* (New York: Praeger, 1951); Lewis Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935–1941* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Kenneth Straus, *Factory and Community in Stalin's Russia: The Making of an Industrial Working Class* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997).

⁴ On working-class identity, see David Hoffman, *Peasant Metropolis: Social Identities in Moscow, 1929–1941* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1995); Lewis Siegelbaum and William Rosenberg, eds., *Social Dimensions of Soviet Industrialization* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1993); Lewis Siegelbaum and Ronald Suny, eds., *Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class, Identity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).

⁵ *Rabochii klass – vedushchaia sila v stroitel'stve sotsialisticheskogo obshchestva, 1927–1937*, tom 3 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Nauka," 1984); A. M. Panfilova, *Formirovanie rabocheho klassa SSSR v gody pervoi piatiletki, 1928–1932* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 1964); O. I. Shkaratan, *Problemy sotsial'noi struktury rabocheho klassa SSSR* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Mysl'," 1970); A. I. Vdovin and V. Z. Drobizhev, *Rost rabocheho klassa SSSR, 1917–1940* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Mysl'," 1976).

pages of text, a brief index entry, and perhaps a short paragraph of statistics. In no sense, moreover, did such limited efforts at inclusion change the larger narrative of the creation of the Soviet working class.

This book makes women's experiences central to the great industrialization drive in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. It reconceives the formation of the Soviet working class by recovering the role of women and analyzing its larger implications for capital accumulation, wages, workers' mobility, and the proletarianization of the peasantry. It uses gender not simply to fill a descriptive gap or to add a missing piece to a largely completed puzzle but rather to rearrange the puzzle itself. The text covers the period from the October 1917 revolution through the second five-year plan (1933–1937), focusing primarily on the first five-year plan (1929–1932), a time of wrenching transformation. It examines the sex segregation of Soviet industry, the urban and rural upheavals that propelled women into waged labor, the mass Party campaigns to recruit women to work, the state's plans to "regender" the economy, conflicting interests within the planning process, and social relations between male and female workers.

The grand deployment of women and the rapid pace were not the only features that distinguished Soviet industrialization from its Western equivalents. The Soviet state committed itself to gender equality, to the abolition of the "free" market as a determinant of wages, prices, and the allocation of labor, and to the substitution of planning for profit as the driving force of industrial transformation. Yet despite these differences, women's experiences with industrialization under capitalism and under socialism share some striking similarities.⁶ Although this book explores the Soviet experience, its perspective is informed by a wider study of women in the development of capitalism in Europe and America. The comparison

⁶ On gender and industrial capitalism, see, e.g., Ava Baron, ed., *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); Mary Blewett, *Men, Women, and Work: Class, Gender, and Protest in the New England Shoe Industry, 1780–1910* (Chicago and Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1990); Kathleen Canning, *Languages of Labor and Gender: Female Factory Work in Germany, 1850–1914* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996); Dorothy Sue Cobble, ed., *Women and Unions* (Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 1993); Judith Coffin, *The Politics of Women's Work: The Paris Garment Trades, 1750–1915* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996); Thomas Dublin, *Transforming Women's Work: New England Lives in the Industrial Revolution* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994); Laura Frader and Sonya Rose, eds., *Gender and Class in Modern Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996); Alice Kessler-Harris, *Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982); Sonya Rose, *Limited Livelihoods: Gender and Class in Nineteenth-Century England* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1992); Leslie Tentler, *Wage-Earning Women: Industrial Work and Family Life in the United States, 1900–1930* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Deborah Valenze, *The First Industrial Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

between the Soviet Union and the West raises important questions about the causes, structures, and cultural tenacity of women's subordination across economic systems. For example, in what ways were women's opportunities expanded under a system that self-consciously professed gender equality? Was the planned, socialist development of industry free of the labor market segmentation and occupational segregation that were so marked under capitalism? Did male workers under capitalism and socialism react differently to the introduction of female labor? To what extent is women's traditionally subordinate economic position linked to profit, the free market, and capitalist forms of organization? These questions are of interest to all students of proletarianization and industrialization, those complex processes that first rent England in the eighteenth century and that continue to transform entire continents today.