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0521780640 - Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin's Russia

Wendy Z. Goldman

Excerpt

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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.<sup>1</sup>

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.

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

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Many historians have written about workers in Soviet industrialization, but few have specifically considered women.<sup>2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup> 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).

<sup>3</sup> 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).

<sup>4</sup> 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).

<sup>5</sup> *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).

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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.<sup>6</sup> 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

<sup>6</sup> 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).

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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.

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*Guarding the Gates to the Working Class:  
Women in Industry, 1917–1929*

In the 1920s, the male labor force poured in from the countryside and began to replace women in production. This frequently occurred under the banner of “rationalization,” but in fact, one group was laid off and another hired. S. Gimmel’farb, planner and labor expert<sup>1</sup>

Women fared badly in the mass layoffs on the railroads. When men and women held the same job, women were the ones to be laid off. There was a definite tendency to lay off women whose husbands were working.

1929 report on union work among women employed on the railroads<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the 1920s, a poor peasant woman named Zaminskaia was abandoned by her husband. Left to fend for herself and her two children, she went to the city in search of work. She tried to register at the labor exchange, which dispensed both jobs and unemployment benefits, but was told she was eligible for neither. “You must first work six months for wages,” an official explained. Feeling increasingly hopeless, she ran from one state agency to another, from the Department of Labor to the local soviet to the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspectorate. She heard the same story from every official. Without previous work experience, she could not register to work. Finally she wrote a despairing letter to *Rabotnitsa*, a journal for women workers. “I am sick and I am starving,” she noted. “I have appealed everywhere.”<sup>3</sup> Zaminskaia was typical of thousands of women (and men) who sought to enter the waged labor force throughout the 1920s. She found that jobs were few, unemployment was high, and the Communist Party and unions favored and protected

<sup>1</sup> S. Gimmel’farb, “Likvidatsiia Bezrabotnitsy v SSSR i Problema Kadrov,” *Problemy ekonomiki*, 1931, nos. 4–5: 30.

<sup>2</sup> GARE, f. 5474, o. 10, d. 342, “Sostoianie Profraboty Sredi Zhenshchin na Zakavkazskom Zheleznodorozhnom Transporte,” 30.

<sup>3</sup> Letter cited by M. Gal’perin, “Uskorit’ Utverzhenie Zakona o Priniiatii na Uchet Birzh Truda Oudinokikh Zhenshchin,” *Rabotnitsa*, 1930, no. 21: 19.

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those unemployed workers who had previously worked for wages. Was Zaminskaia a worker? She fiercely wanted to be. Should she have been entitled to the same privileges as an unemployed union member? Her experience raised a profound political question: Who defined the working class? Who held the keys to the gate that separated the dispossessed from the proletariat?

Throughout the 1920s, the definition of "proletarian" was strongly contested by a variety of social groups. In a state that proudly and self-consciously defined itself as a "dictatorship of the proletariat," the definition of a worker was linked, ideologically and materially, to numerous privileges. It determined who would receive unemployment compensation, preference in hiring, and union membership, all important and eagerly sought material advantages. The question of who qualified as a "worker" was thus critical to peasants, housewives, employed union members, unemployed union members, and those who needed a job but had never worked for wages. The Communist Party, too, had a real interest in defining and understanding the category of "worker," for in its view, it was axiomatic that a person's class position ultimately determined his or her consciousness, behavior, and interests. The Bolsheviks' victory in 1917, as well as their ability to retain state power, depended on the support of a staunch cadre of experienced, class-conscious workers. The questions of who had made the revolution, who would benefit directly from socialism, and who could be trusted to be a reliable mainstay of the regime's policies were not idle theoretical musings. Such questions took on an added urgency in a country that was overwhelmingly peasant. The answers would determine the strength of support for the new socialist state and, ultimately, whether it would survive.

The composition of the working class was in large part a consequence of how the Bolsheviks chose to define it and the policies they promoted. Until 1930, when a sharp labor shortage forced the Party to broaden its understanding of the working class, its definition of "worker" was quite narrow. The Party's understanding of the "working class," in an ideological, administrative, and symbolic political sense, was never synonymous with the poor, the dispossessed, the oppressed, or the disenfranchised. Although impoverished and miserable, the "working class" was not "the wretched of the earth." The worker was not a peasant, a simple toiler, or a member of the laboring mass; according to Marxist theory, the peasantry had little inherent interest in socialization of the means of production or industrialization. The worker was not female, though the Party recognized both practically and politically that thousands of women labored as domestic servants, laundresses, or landless laborers and in textile mills, chemical and tobacco plants, and other branches of industry. The Party held specific criteria for a worker: he was removed from the

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customs, beliefs, and worldview of his peasant forebears; he had severed his ties to the land; and he depended solely on a money wage. He was a “hereditary” worker whose parents had also been workers. He held prerevolutionary *stazh* (seniority) and industrial skills. The worker could be expected to support and benefit from socialism, not simply because he was poor but because of his particular relationship to the means of production. O. I. Shkaratan, the well-known Soviet labor historian, called this worker, the “*kadrovyyi, promyshlennyi rabochii*” or the “*chisty proletarii*,” the rank and file industrial worker or the “pure proletarian.”<sup>4</sup> The “*kadrovyyi* worker” represented not only thousands of real workers but also an idealized projection of the Bolshevik political imagination. From the Bolshevik perspective, this “pure proletarian” made the revolution and stood to benefit immediately and directly from the socialization of the means of production in a way that the peasantry, the intelligentsia, and the petty bourgeoisie did not. Thus the “pure” or “*kadrovyye*” proletariat provided the only real, reliable social base of the new revolutionary order.

By 1921, however, the actually existing working class was hardly the idealized projection of the Bolshevik imagination.<sup>5</sup> Making up only a small minority within a largely peasant country at the beginning of World War I, the working class was even smaller by the end of the civil war. With the collapse of industry, the destruction of the railroads, and the disintegration of trade, the working class contracted sharply.<sup>6</sup> Between 1917 and 1920, industry lost 30 percent of its workforce and 40 percent of its men.<sup>7</sup> Thousands of the Party's strongest supporters were killed in the civil war. As Shkaratan has demonstrated in his careful study of the composition of the working class, by 1920 the ranks of the working class were filled with women, urban traders, small shopkeepers, former tsarist

<sup>4</sup> O. I. Shkaratan, *Problemy sotsial'noi struktury rabochego klassa SSSR* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo “Mysl’,” 1970), 246, 261. For an excellent discussion of the meanings of class, see Lewis Siegelbaum and Ronald Suny, “Class Backwards? In Search of the Soviet Working Class,” in their collection *Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class and Identity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1994).

<sup>5</sup> Numerous historians have noted this problem. See, e.g., Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed: Trotsky, 1921–1929* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), 7; Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Bolsheviks’ Dilemma: The Class Issue in Party Politics and Culture,” in *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1992), 17–19, and “The Problem of Class Identity in NEP Society,” in Fitzpatrick, Alexander Rabinowitch, and Richard Stites, eds., *Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1991), 12–18; Moshe Lewin, “The Social Background of Stalinism,” in *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 258–60; Elizabeth Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1997), 44–45.

<sup>6</sup> *Rabochii klass – vedushchaia sila v stroitel'stve sotsialisticheskogo obshchestva, 1921–1927*, tom 2 (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo “Nauka,” 1984), 28.

<sup>7</sup> Shkaratan, 203.

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bureaucrats, and ex-peasants – all “class aliens” in Bolshevik phraseology. According to A. Anikst, the head of the labor market department, “an entire layer of half workers” filtered into the factories during the civil war.<sup>8</sup> No one was more morbidly attuned to this problem than the Bolsheviks, for if class determined consciousness, what possible support could the newly victorious regime expect from a working class composed not of *kadrovye* workers but rather of a motley, declassed collection of desperate individuals dreaming of former privilege and small business?

The Party was anxious to preserve the *kadrovye* workers, to expand their numbers, and to protect them against an influx of peasants, women, and declassed individuals in search of work. Shkaratan, reflecting the Party's early perspective, notes with marked relief that “thanks to the regulating activities of the state, streams of peasants from the countryside did not adversely affect the composition of the working class” after the civil war.<sup>9</sup> The “regulating activities of the state” also ensured that men would replace women. Thousands of women workers were summarily dismissed from industry and transport after the civil war. Others, widowed by war, “freed” by the new revolutionary divorce laws, or abandoned, like Zaminskaia, by their husbands, desperately sought to enter the waged labor force for the first time in order to support their families. They crowded the courts and labor exchanges, petitioned the Central Control Commission, the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate, and local soviets in search of alimony, wages, and support for their children. Advocates for women spoke about their plight in the labor press, women's journals, and Party newspapers throughout the 1920s and early 1930s.<sup>10</sup> Working-class and peasant women, assisted by the Zhenotdel (the women's department of the Party) and by women's activists within the unions, sought to broaden the Party's definition of the worker and to open the working class to the needy and the poor. The struggle over the “right to work” was waged throughout the 1920s among the unions, male workers, peasants, women, and the Party. Each of these groups doggedly pursued its own interests. The unions sought to protect their members, male workers maneuvered to maintain their monopoly on skilled positions, peasants and women aimed to break into the labor force, and the Party tried to mediate among these interests while maintaining its primary commitment to workers – male, skilled, *kadrovye* – as its main bulwark of support.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 200.    <sup>9</sup> Ibid., 257, 259.

<sup>10</sup> See Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 101–44, 214–54, 296–337.

<sup>11</sup> On the struggle over employment, see Wood, 151–61; Douglas Weiner, “‘Razmychka?’ Urban Unemployment and Peasant In-Migration as Sources of Social Conflict,” in Fitzpatrick et al., 144–55.



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This chapter explores this contested arena. Focusing on the experience of women, it provides a structural overview of women's industrial-labor-force participation in the period from World War I to the beginning of the first five-year plan, paying particular attention to the gendered nature of Russian/Soviet industry both horizontally (by skill and wage) and vertically (by industrial branch and occupational sector). Concentrating on the impact of World War I, the civil war, and the New Economic Policy (NEP), it examines how each of these upheavals affected gender segregation and the role of women within industry. It analyzes the impact of Party policy on women's prospects for employment and promotion and considers how union and Party officials understood the concept of skill. Finally, it traces the development of state policy toward the labor market in the context of the Party's fears about the "purity" and "contamination" of the working class.

**Women's Employment: 1914–1928**

Russian industry began to grow rapidly between 1885 and the beginning of World War I, producing a small but stable working class permanently based in the towns. By 1914, almost 25 million out of a population of 139.3 million (or 17 percent of all Russians) lived in towns and cities. By 1917, approximately 18.5 million Russians had some relationship to waged labor. About 3.6 million worked in large-scale industry, 1.7 million in transport, 1.25 million in construction, another 1.25 million in small industry, and 4.5 million in agriculture. The mining and oil industry was the largest single employer, with 872,900 workers, followed by textile, with 724,000, and metal and machine production, with 544,100. Metal and machine production and the state-owned defense and railroad industries had all grown rapidly during the war, employing a total of 1,184,200 workers mostly in large plants and factories by 1917.<sup>12</sup>

Women were a significant part of Russian industry almost from its inception. By 1885, they comprised 22 percent of the factory workforce. They held even larger shares of the textile (37 percent), paper (36 percent), and tobacco industries (47 percent). The majority (80 percent) of women who worked for wages, however, were either servants or landless agricultural laborers based in the villages. Only 13 percent of waged women worked in industry or construction. Yet over time, both the number of women workers and their percentage of the industrial labor force

<sup>12</sup> V. P. Danilov, *Rural Russia under the New Regime* (London: Hutchinson, 1988), 38; A. I. Vdovin and V. Z. Drobizhev, *Rost rabochego klassa SSSR, 1917–1940* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Mysl'," 1976), 68–70.

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grew steadily. Rose Glickman writes, "From 1885 to 1914 the salient feature of the history of women workers was the slow but steady increase not only of their absolute numbers in the labor force but of the percentage of their representation in the total as well. . . . Whether the total labor force increased or diminished, whether industry flourished or declined, the proportion of women in factories rose relentlessly."<sup>13</sup>

The expanding deployment of women was motivated largely by the search for profits. One factory inspector's report noted that throughout the country, factory owners were endeavoring to reduce their wage costs by "replacing men with women." Factory managers turned to women as a cheap source of labor, and following the adoption of child labor laws in 1882, they used women to replace children as well. Women were the fastest-growing group in the labor force: by 1914, more than half a million women constituted almost one third of the total number of factory workers. Slowly having gained a predominant position in the textile industry, they represented by that year more than half of Russia's textile workers. And after 1900, especially in regions where there were few textile mills, women had also begun filtering into industries previously reserved for men.

Women workers, like men, became ever more firmly established in cities, retaining fewer ties to the villages and peasant life. Casual and episodic labor gave way to steadier work. More women remained in the factories even after they married and had children. In her pioneering study of Russian factory women, Glickman notes that by the early twentieth century, a growing segment of women was as firmly established in the factories as men. These women workers were "as fully proletarian, as stable in the factory, as it was possible to be in tsarist Russia." Glickman argues that while women had fewer skills and less *stazh* than men, they also had weaker ties to the village. By certain criteria, women workers could thus be considered even more "proletarian" in their identities than their male counterparts.<sup>14</sup>

During World War I, women's share of the labor force jumped significantly as women replaced men who were mobilized for the army. Shkaratan estimates that 20 percent of the industrial working class was drafted into the army and that by 1917 fully half of all workers were "new" to the factories.<sup>15</sup> According to the 1918 census, women's share of industrial jobs increased from 31.4 percent in 1913 to 45 percent in 1918. Their percentage increased in every industry, though their gains were greatest in the traditionally male metal industry, where their share tripled.<sup>16</sup> While many women did first enter factories during the war years, they were not

<sup>13</sup> Rose Glickman, *Russian Factory Women: Workplace and Society, 1880–1914* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1984), 74–75, 76; Shkaratan, 229, 192.

<sup>14</sup> See discussion in Glickman, 84–104. <sup>15</sup> Shkaratan, 219–20.

<sup>16</sup> G. Serebrennikov, "Zhenskii Trud v SSSR za 15 Let," *Voprosy truda*, 1932, nos. 11–12: 59, 60. The 1918 census covered thirty-one *guberniias* in European Russia. Serebrennikov offers figures for 1913, 1917, and 1920, all years unavailable in *Trud v SSSR*.