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978-0-521-11373-1 - The Hazards of Urban Life in Late Stalinist Russia: Health, Hygiene, and Living Standards, 1943-1953

Donald Filtzer

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The Hazards of Urban Life in Late Stalinist Russia

This is the first detailed study of the standard of living of ordinary Russians following World War II. It examines urban living conditions under the Stalinist regime with a focus on the key issues of sanitation, access to safe water supplies, personal hygiene and anti-epidemic controls, diet and nutrition, and infant mortality. Comparing five key industrial regions, it shows that living conditions lagged some fifty years behind Western European norms. The book reveals that, despite this, the years preceding Stalin's death saw dramatic improvements in mortality rates thanks to the application of rigorous public health controls and Western medical innovations. While tracing these changes, the book also analyzes the impact that the absence of an adequate urban infrastructure had on people's daily lives and on the relationship between the Stalinist regime and the Russian people, and, finally, how the Soviet experience compared to that of earlier industrializing societies.

Donald Filtzer is Professor of Russian History at the University of East London. His previous publications include *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism: Labour and the Restoration of the Stalinist System After World War II* (2002), *Soviet Workers and the Collapse of Perestroika: The Soviet Labour Process and Gorbachev's Reforms, 1985–1991* (1994), and *The Khrushchev Era: De-Stalinization and the Limits of Reform in the USSR, 1953–1964* (1993).

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*Health, hygiene, and living standards,
1943–1953*

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University of East London



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Preface and acknowledgements

Thomas Kuhn, in his pathbreaking book, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, notes that prevailing scientific paradigms determine how, or even if, we observe specific phenomena. One of the examples he uses to illustrate this is that of the motion of a heavy object tethered to the end of a chain:

Since remote antiquity most people have seen one or another heavy body swinging back and forth on a string or chain until it finally comes to rest. To the Aristotelians, who believed that a heavy body is moved by its own nature from a higher position to a state of natural rest at a lower one, the swinging body was simply falling with difficulty. Constrained by the chain, it could achieve rest at its low point only after a tortuous motion and a considerable time. Galileo, on the other hand, looking at the swinging body, saw a pendulum, a body that almost succeeded in repeating the same motion over and over again ad infinitum. And having seen that much, Galileo observed other properties of the pendulum as well and constructed many of the most significant and original parts of his dynamics around them.¹

I was reminded of this a few years ago when I came across an article in the *Guardian* newspaper in Britain on the water crisis faced by the Chinese city of Shanghai. The city's rapid industrial expansion had brought with it almost irremediable pollution to its main river, the Huangpu. Although the people in charge of ensuring the safety and purity of the city's drinking water insisted that it was perfectly clean, the *Guardian's* reporter noted that, "A glass of Shanghai water is tinted a faint yellow, smells of chlorine and tastes like something you'd rather not swallow – most people boil it, or buy bottled water." The city was seeking alternative sources, in the first instance from the Yangtze, but this was unlikely to solve the problem. "The trouble is," said the article, "that China's environment is being ruined so quickly that even a glass of water from the mighty Yangtze may soon not be much of an improvement."²

¹ Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971), pp. 118–19.

² *Guardian*, November 11, 2004, G2 section, pp. 2–4.

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Preface and acknowledgements

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Had I come across an article like this some years earlier I probably would have given it no more than a fleeting glance, and perhaps passed over it completely. What changed my perception was one of those archival accidents that periodically make historical research worthwhile. Chapter 3 of my book *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism* contained a brief discussion of workers' housing conditions and health care, and I had been spending some time trying to find additional information in order to develop this work further. Quite by accident in the files of the USSR Ministry of Health I came upon a report by the city of Leningrad State Sanitary Inspectorate, in Russian the Gosudarstvennaya sanitarnaya inspektsiya, or GSI. Now, at that time I had never even heard of the State Sanitary Inspectorate and I have no memory at all of why I decided to order this report. When I opened it, however, it proved to be a revelation, for it contained the most detailed, even minute, descriptions of the state of Leningrad's urban environment: which streets and houses had sewerage and water supply and what kind of condition these were in; the state of hygiene in its hairdressing salons, hotels, markets, and public canteens; sanitary conditions in its hospitals; and the physical condition of its school children and teenage workers. In all the years I had been studying Soviet labor history, including a great deal of research into living conditions, I had never come across anything so rich in detail – nor anything that quite so forcefully drove home to me how little I actually knew about the real conditions in which workers and their families carried out their daily lives. Having had the privilege of living in the former Soviet Union during the Brezhnev and Gorbachev eras I had direct knowledge of just how bad Soviet toilets were, but I had no idea that for the better part of the twentieth century most Soviet citizens did not have a toilet, or running water either.

This was clearly a source of information that deserved following up. I soon realized that the state sanitary inspectors of every oblast' and city filed annual reports with the All-Union GSI in Moscow. Few of these from the late Stalin years have been preserved in the archives – just a handful of sample reports from a few cities for random years – but the archives for the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, or RSFSR, contain reports from a large range of Russian localities if not for every postwar year, then for enough years to make it possible to trace their progress longitudinally over time.

And so back to Thomas Kuhn and Shanghai's water supply. After reading several of the GSI reports and deciding that this was a research topic well worth pursuing I, too, had a "paradigm shift." I began to notice water, sewage, and urban sanitation in the news virtually everywhere. Much of the coverage focuses on China, whose environmental problems

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are particularly pertinent, because in some ways they reflect those experienced by the Soviet Union during the 1930s and after the war. But China is not alone. The need for proper sanitation and clean water affects almost half the world's population – and this when we are well into the twenty-first century. Oxfam and similar charities now sell Christmas gifts via which you donate a toilet or a water supply to a needy village on behalf of yourself or a friend. Nor is it as if the history of these problems has been underresearched. A little digging reveals a vast historical literature on the misery of life in Victorian cities in Britain, Germany, France, and the USA. From contemporary writers such as Mike Davis we learn that this history is constantly being recreated as capitalism forces millions of people the world over into shanty towns and slums, slums that are not holdovers from some previous phase of underdevelopment, but new accretions of a new and brutal form of capitalist urbanization.³

In terms of my own work, one of the things the GSI reports did was allow me to contextualize two other types of information I had been gathering, namely local data on postwar infant mortality and Central Statistical Administration (TsSU) household budget surveys on workers' consumption. It was from mining these three types of sources that I was able to compile the material for the present book.

This book as it eventually emerged serves as a sequel to my book on workers during late Stalinism, and ideally the two should be read together. Unlike *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism*, it deals not with the situation across the entire USSR, but only with industrial regions in the RSFSR which had not suffered extensive damage during World War II. I explain the reasons for selecting these particular regions in the Introduction. As I elaborate there, *The Hazards of Urban Life* analyzes in great detail the conditions under which people lived, but the nature of the sources used has meant that it rarely deals with real human actors. Nor does it discuss in any great detail the political, economic, and social context of the late Stalin period. For these I refer the reader to the available social histories of late Stalinism by Elena Zubkova, V. F. Zima, Juliane Fürst, and my own *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism*.

Like all research projects, this one would never have seen the light of day but for generous assistance from a long list of people and institutions. Most of the research was financed by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK. The British Academy gave me an overseas conference grant in 2006 to allow me to attend that year's conference of the American Association for the Advancement of Slavic Studies, where I presented a

³ Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006).

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preliminary research paper on infant mortality. The School of Social Sciences, Media and Cultural Studies at the University of East London funded further research visits to Russia during the summers of 2006 and 2008; for assistance with these I am particularly grateful to Gavin Poynter, Andrew Blake, and Haim Bresheeth.

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Elizabeth Brainerd kindly shared with me references and anthropometric data she has collected on the postwar period. Thanks to the material she provided I realized that one of the central discussions in Chapter 4 was based on faulty data and I was able to excise it from the manuscript.

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Chris Burton introduced me to the field of the history of Soviet medicine and has effectively been my mentor in this area. He tutored me in how to locate and interpret the appropriate sources, was available to answer boundless questions, and read and commented on the book's manuscript, as well as most of the preliminary working papers that served as drafts of its various chapters.

Michael David, a person of unique talents as both a practicing physician and historian of Soviet medicine, patiently answered an endless list of medical questions and gave a careful reading of Chapters 4 and 5, together with a detailed set of corrections and advice on interpretation.

Bob Davies read a very early version of the second part of Chapter 4 and offered valuable guidance on how to develop the material and how to put it into its longer-term historical context.

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Juliane Fürst kindly invited me to contribute an article to her edited collection on late Stalinism, which gave me the chance to work up and think through the early results of my research.

Wendy Goldman read the manuscript with a fine-tooth comb and, with her usual perspicacity, laser-like analytical insight, and fair-mindedness, provided a lengthy and well-grounded agenda for corrections and revisions.

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Dan Healey, together with Chris Burton and Fran Bernstein, invited me to present an early version of my work on water supply and river pollution, some of which I revised for part of Chapter 2, at a conference they organized in 2005 on “The Science, Culture and Practice of Soviet Medicine.”

Karen Anderson Howes copy-edited my previous book, *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism*, and was quite simply the best copy-editor I’ve ever worked with. I did not have the chance to acknowledge her then, but feel I have the right to do so now because she has also copy-edited this book – and has done an equally wonderful job.

Gijs Kessler gave helpful advice on the use and interpretation of the Central Statistical Administration household budget surveys. He also read and commented on an earlier version of what became the second half of Chapter 4. And if that were not enough, he shouldered the lion’s share of the burden of co-organizing (together with Wendy Goldman, Simon Pirani, and me) a conference on recent approaches to Russian and Soviet labor history at the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam in 2005, where I first presented this material. He then did the same when we produced a collection of articles from that conference.⁴

Natasha Kurashova has been putting up with the late Stalin period for rather a long time now. There is not a single part of my research that she has not discussed with me over and over again, and she has been a boundless source of encouragement and inspiration, not to mention a bottomless well of tolerance when the writing was not going very well.

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⁴ Donald Filtzer, Wendy Z. Goldman, Gijs Kessler, and Simon Pirani, eds., *A Dream Deferred: New Studies in Russian and Soviet Labour History* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008).

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Joel Tarr kindly read Chapters 1 and 2 and offered detailed comment on how best to revise them.

Stephen Wheatcroft, who probably knows more about the Central Statistical Administration household budget surveys than anyone, went through them with me in considerable detail, showed me how I could most effectively process the data, and pointed me in the direction of additional sources.

Some of the material in Chapter 2 appeared originally in the article, “Poisoning the Proletariat: Urban Water Supply and River Pollution in Russia’s Industrial Regions During Late Stalinism, 1945–1953,” *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, no. 26 (2009), pp. 85–108. An earlier version of the second half of Chapter 4 appeared as the article, “The 1947 Food Crisis and Its Aftermath: Worker and Peasant Consumption in Non-Famine Regions of the RSFSR,” in Donald Filtzer, Wendy Goldman, Gijs Kessler, and Simon Pirani, eds., *A Dream Deferred: New Studies in Russian and Soviet Labour History* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), pp. 343–83. I am grateful to the editors of *Acta Slavica Iaponica* and to Peter Lang for their kind permission to use this material here.

And so to end with the usual caveat. Without the help of those listed here (and those whom I might have forgotten) what may be good about this book would not have been quite as good, or indeed not good at all, but for what is not so good I alone carry the can.

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Terms and abbreviations

ASSR	Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
BGSO	“Be Ready for the Sanitary Defense of the USSR” (“Bud’ gotov k sanitarnoi oborone SSSR”). Badge earned by school children after completing a course on sanitation, first aid, and disease control in case of war and enemy attack.
FZO (pl., FZO)	factory training school (<i>shkola fabrichno-zavodskogo obucheniya</i>), a three- or six-month training school for “mass” trades
garbage	used interchangeably with “rubbish” and “trash” to refer to solid, non-fecal waste
<i>glavk</i> (pl., <i>glavki</i>)	chief administration, a subdivision of a ministry
Gosplan	State Planning Commission (Gosudarstvennaya planovaya komissiya)
Gossaninspektsiya	State Sanitary Inspectorate (Gosudarstvennaya sanitarnaya inspektsiya), or GSI
GSI	<i>see</i> Gossaninspektsiya
GSO	“Ready for Sanitary Defense of the USSR” (“Gotov k sanitarnoi oborone SSSR”). Badge earned by civilians and older school children after completing a course similar to, but slightly more rigorous than, the BGSO.
Gulag	Chief Administration of Camps, more generally used as the name for the system of MVD labor camps
hinterland	As used in this book, those cities and regions that were not under German occupation during World War II and/or did not experience major battlefield damage.

	It is roughly equivalent to the Russian term <i>v tylu</i> , which means “home front” or “in the rear.”
IMR	infant mortality rate, calculated as deaths of infants under one year of age per 1,000 live births
<i>kolkhoz</i> (pl., <i>kolkhozy</i>)	collective farm (<i>kollektivnoe khozyaistvo</i>)
Komsomol	Communist Youth League, formally known as the All-Union Leninist Communist Union of Youth
militia	police (<i>militsiya</i>); the regular police force, as distinct from the secret police
Minzdrav	Ministry of Public Health (Ministerstvo zdravookhraneniya)
MOH	Medical Officer of Health (England and Wales)
MVD	Ministry of Internal Affairs (Ministerstvo vnutrennikh del), in charge of the system of labor camps (Gulag) and police (militia)
norms	individual output quotas for workers on piece rates
oblast’ (pl., oblasti)	region, roughly equivalent to a province
<i>orgnabor</i>	organized recruitment of workers
ORS (pl., ORSy)	Department of Workers’ Supply (Otdel rabochego snabzheniya)
OSI (pl., OSI)	public sanitary inspector (<i>obshchestvennyi sanitarnyi inspektor</i>). During World War II, a lay sanitary inspector, usually appointed by a workplace collective, to assist sanitary physicians and sanitary inspectors with health education and the enforcement of hygiene and health measures.
Procuracy	Public Prosecutor’s Office
procurator	public prosecutor
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (Rossiiskaya Sovetskaya Federativnaya Sotsialisticheskaya Respublika)
RU (pl., RU)	trade school (<i>remeslennoe uchilishche</i>) under the Ministry of Labor Reserves, a two-year training school in skilled trades
rubbish	<i>see</i> garbage

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SES (pl., SES)	sanitary-epidemic center (<i>sanitarno-epidemicheskaya stantsiya</i>); took over many of the local inspection functions from the State Sanitary Inspectorate after 1951
skip	in British English, a large container used by multiple households to hold garbage until collected
slops	(Russian <i>pomor</i>) liquid wastes other than sewage, such as common kitchen wastes
SSSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soyuz Sovetskikh Sotsialisticheskikh Respublik)
SU RSFSR	Statistical Administration of the RSFSR (Statisticheskoe upravlenie RSFSR)
trash	<i>see</i> garbage
TsSU	Central Statistical Administration (Tsentral'noe statisticheskoe upravlenie)
VTsSPS	All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (Vsesoyuznyi tsentral'nyi sovet professional'nykh soyuzov)
ZhU (pl., ZhU)	trade school (<i>zheleznodorozhnoe uchilishche</i>) to train skilled workers for the railways; equivalent to an RU

The notes use standard abbreviations for Russian archive references, which consist of five elements:

1. The abbreviation of the archive name (the full names of the archives are given in the bibliography).
2. f. = *fond*, or holding. These generally correspond to a particular institution or major subdivision of an institution, for example, the USSR Ministry of Health, an industrial ministry, or a specific trade union.
3. op. = *opis'*, or inventory. The *opisi* are the primary subdivisions of a *fond*. Sometimes the *opisi* represent subdivisions or departments within an organization; some *fondy* simply divide the *opisi* chronologically.
4. d. = *delo*, or file. These are the actual folders containing the documents.
5. l. = *list*(v), or sheet(s). Russian archives give files sheet numbers, rather than page numbers, since a file almost always contains many different documents, each of which had its own separate pagination when it was originally written.

Thus a typical reference will be something like this: GARF, f. 9226, op. 1, d. 636, l. 52, 53. The document will be in GARF (State Archive of the

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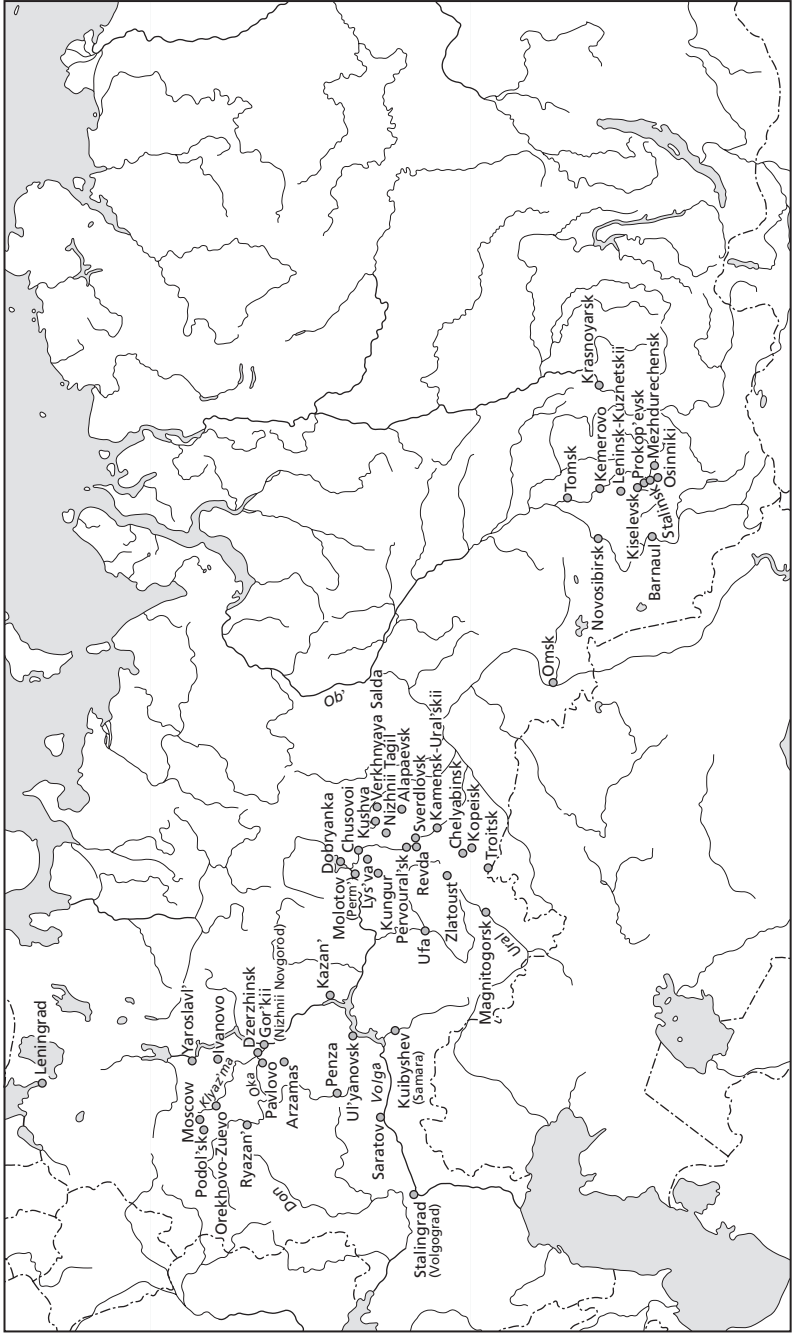
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Russian Federation), *fond* 9226 (State Sanitary Inspectorate of the USSR Ministry of Health), *opis'* 1, *delo* 636, *listy* 52, 53.

The State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF) has two reading rooms. The central reading room, Reading Room 1, holds files from administrative divisions of the former USSR. Reading Room 2, in a different location, holds files for administrative divisions of the RSFSR. Documents from Reading Room 2 always have the letter “A” before the number of the *fond*. Thus: GARF, f. A-482, op. 47, d. 4941, l. 11, where *fond* A-482 is the Ministry of Health of the RSFSR. In the notes I have followed the practice used in most Russian books of giving the single letter “l” when referring to multiple sheets; thus, for example, “l. 10–14” indicates sheets 10 through 14.

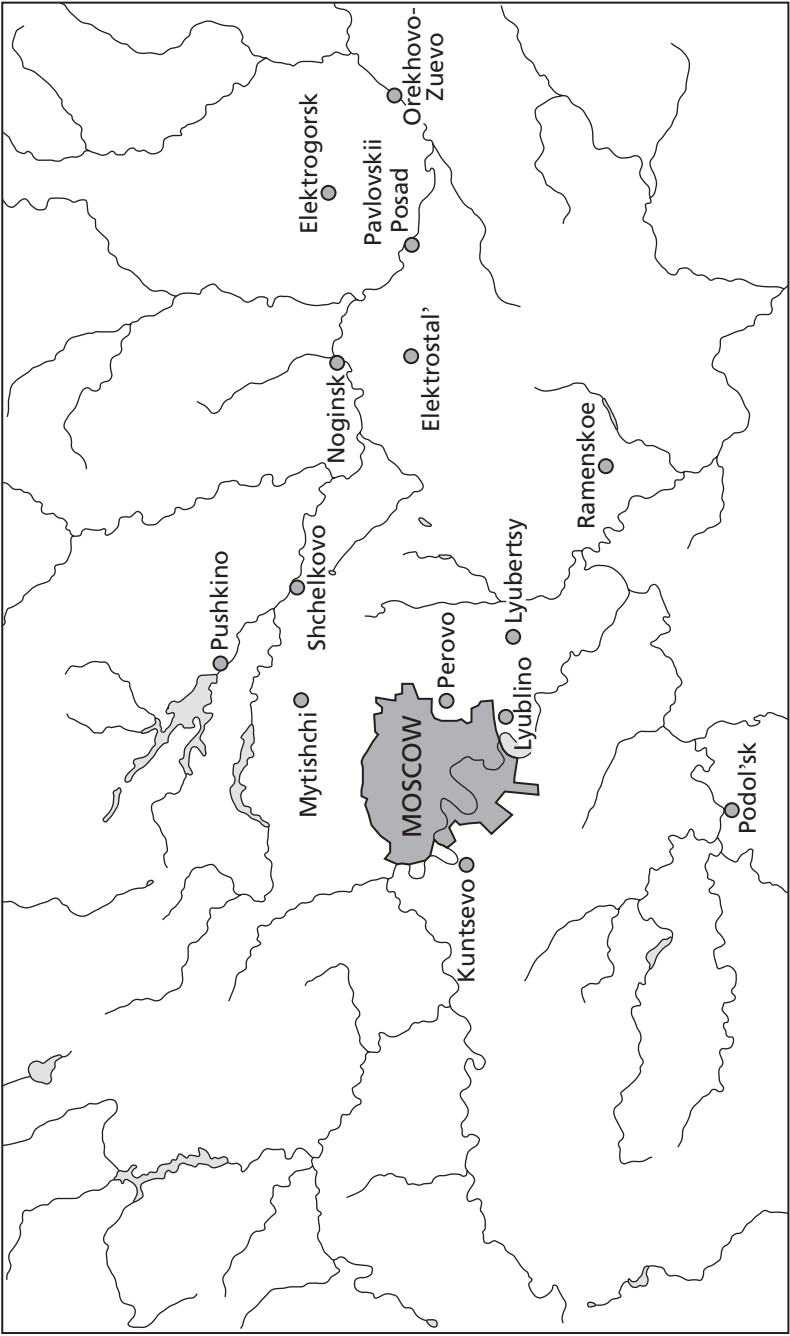


1 Map of the regions covered in the book, from Moscow in the west to Kemerovo oblast' in Western Siberia



2 The Volga and Kama River networks

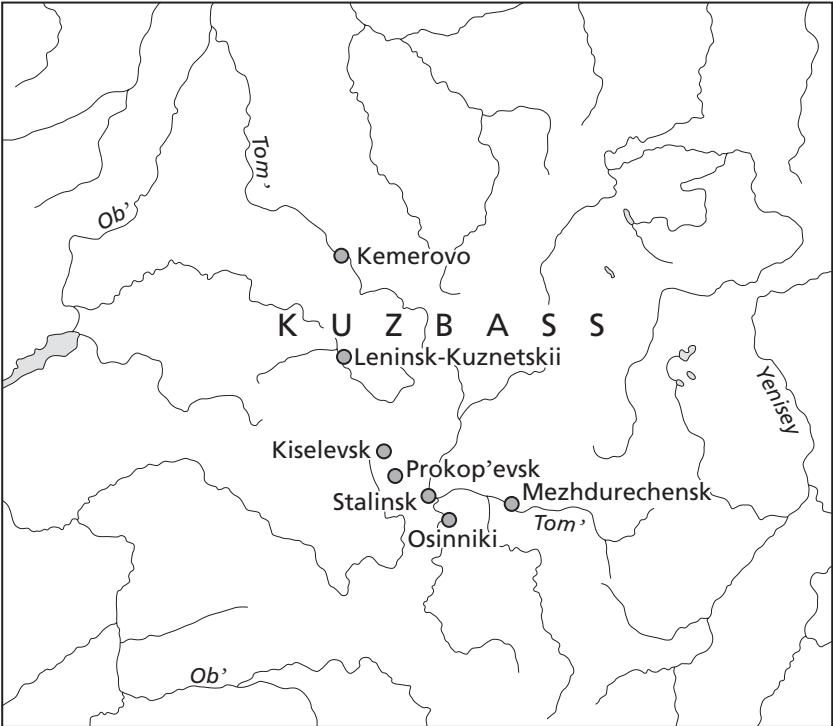
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3 Moscow and Moscow oblast'



4 The Urals and its major rivers



5 The Kuzbass and the River Tom'