Introduction

"The Russian is a bad worker compared with the advanced peoples," wrote Lenin in 1918. "The task the Soviet government must set the people in all its scope is – learn to work."[1] Coming six months after the Bolsheviks had assumed power, Lenin's injunction was a nearly desperate response to the revolutionary disintegration of industry that had begun before the October Revolution. But it also expressed a fundamental tenet of Bolshevik ideology: The qualities required to overthrow tsarism and the rule of capital – qualities the Russian proletariat had displayed in abundance in 1917 – were not the same as those necessary to construct the socialist order.[2] Wresting control of the means of production from the capitalists and the state that served their interests required cadres who could channel the masses' antipathy into insurrectionary action; building socialism was an altogether different – and far more complex – task.

Socialism, Lenin asserted, could be built only on the foundations of large-scale machine industry. What distinguished the "advanced peoples," what had made them advanced, was their achievement of a high productivity of labor in the context of large-scale industrial production. Learning to work meant just this – introducing and adapting techniques of organization,

[1] V. I. Lenin, "Ocherednye zadachi sovetskoi vlasti," in *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed. (hereafter *PSS*) 55 vols. (Moscow: Partizdat, 1959–65), 34:187.

[2] This point has been made by Philip Corrigan, Harvie Ramsay, and Derek Sayer, *Socialist Construction and Marxist Theory: Bolshevism and Its Critique* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978), 27–47. Also Carmen Sirianni, *Workers Control and Socialist Democracy: The Soviet Experience* (London: Verso, 1982), chap. 4.

administration, and production that were pioneered in the most advanced capitalist countries. Having captured state power and expropriated the expropriators, the proletariat would have to learn how to beat capitalism at its own game. Just as capitalism had superseded the feudal mode of production by generating higher levels of productivity, so "capitalism . . . will be decisively beaten when socialism creates a new much higher productivity of labor."[3]

For nearly seventy years, the Soviet government has pursued this goal with unfailing commitment. In the course of this time, quite a few models of organizing work and stimulating production have been advanced. This book is about one of them.

Half a century ago, in the midst of the long, drawn-out Great Depression that gripped the capitalist world, news came from the Soviet Union of astonishing feats of labor productivity. First in coal mining and then in other fields, Soviet workers reportedly were achieving remarkable results by applying new techniques of their own invention. The extensive publicity accorded to these feats spawned a nationwide effort to emulate them, an effort that was to involve virtually every industrial enterprise and extend beyond industry. This was Stakhanovism,[4] named after the miner Aleksei Stakhanov, who on the night of August 30–1, 1935, hewed 102 tons of coal, or fourteen times his quota.

Stakhanovism was most obviously about productivity, about making the most of working time to achieve the maximum output with available technology. This, the economic aspect of Stakhanovism, attracted immediate attention in the West. Correspondents such as the *New York Times*'s Walter Duranty described Stakhanovism as "a new speed-up system," "what is known in American industry as 'rationalization,' based on the principle of specialization."[5] The French daily *Le peuple* noted that it "is not anything other than what is already known under the name of rationalization," something that "capitalism has already endowed us . . . to perfection."[6] And according to another

[3] Lenin, *PSS*, 34:189–90; also "Velikii pochin," in ibid., 39:21.
[4] The term "Stakhanovism" is used throughout this study in preference to "Stakhanovite movement" because the phenomenon was more diffuse, and contradictory, than its movement aspects.
[5] *New York Times*, Nov. 10, 1935.
[6] *Le peuple*, Jan. 7–8, 1936.

Times correspondent, Stakhanovism was supplying the "steady pushing" that the average Russian worker, "lazy and inefficient" by American standards, required.[7]

Such initial condescension notwithstanding, Western assessments of Stakhanovism's economic effectiveness generally have been positive. Alexander Baykov, a pioneer of Soviet studies in Britain, wrote in his general survey of the Soviet economic system that "the records of Stakhanov workers were not due to any increased physical effort, but to a thorough understanding of a production process by experienced, highly skilled, imaginative and enterprising workers." Their achievements were based on "a new approach to the division of labor and the utilization of working time" that "sharply raised the production results per unit of labour and time employed."[8] This view was echoed by other British scholars, such as Geoffrey Barker, Maurice Dobb, and Rudolf Schlesinger.[9] More recently, Alec Nove has characterized Stakhanovism as a "means of dramatizing and publicizing a necessary change" – that is, the raising of production quotas or norms – which "no doubt . . . had a positive effect on productivity."[10]

However, there have been exceptions. Joseph Berliner, writing in the mid–1950s, took an agnostic position, arguing that "A clear demonstration of the net positive and negative results of that dramatic movement has not yet been presented by western students, and perhaps never will be because of its numerous peripheral effects."[11] Far more negative was the assessment of Solomon Schwarz, who contributed several articles on Stakhanovism to the emigré Menshevik journal *Sotsialisticheskii vestnik* (The Socialist Herald). Noting the excessive haste and waste

[7] *New York Times*, March 8, 1936.

[8] Alexander Baykov, *The Development of the Soviet Economic System* (Cambridge University Press, 1948), 337.

[9] See G. R. Barker, *Some Problems of Incentives and Labour Productivity in Soviet Industry* (Oxford: Blackwell, n.d.), 76–84; Maurice Dobb, *Soviet Economic Development Since 1917* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966), 467–78; and Rudolf Schlesinger, *The Spirit of Post-War Russia* (London: Dobson, 1947), 19, 23.

[10] Alec Nove, *An Economic History of the USSR* (London: Lane, 1969), 232–3.

[11] Joseph Berliner, *Factory and Manager in the USSR* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957), 273.

induced by Stakhanovite periods, Schwarz concluded that Stakhanovism exacerbated the lack of proportionality among different enterprises and sectors of the economy, thus intensifying the planlessness of the entire system. "Stakhanovism," he wrote in his classic study, *Labor in the Soviet Union*, "soon became a euphemism for the utter straining of every bit of energy" that "brought the internal organization of work in the plants to a virtual state of crisis" in 1936–7.[12]

A more elaborate critique of Stakhanovism along these lines can be found in Donald Filtzer's analysis of Soviet production relations in the 1930s. Filtzer argues that Stakhanovism led to serious disruptions of production, a deterioration in quality, an overtaxing of machinery, and increased stoppages and breakdowns. Whatever "benefits" resulted from the speedup and greater intensity of labor were negated by Stakhanovism's disruptive effects. Increases in productivity that others had attributed to the movement were rather the result of the "thoroughgoing modernization" of Soviet plant that had occurred previously and that "brought in its wake further improvements in the technical organization of production."[13]

If Stakhanovism had such a negative impact on productivity and overall economic performance, why, it could be asked, did Soviet authorities promote it with such vigor? Filtzer asserts that Stakhanovism served an important political function. Like shock work, the characteristic mode of labor mobilization during the First Five-Year Plan (1928–32), only to a greater extent, Stakhanovism "allowed the regime to create a privileged caste of industrial workers."[14] This argument has a long lineage. It goes back to Trotsky's *Revolution Betrayed*, which was published in 1937. For Trotsky, Stakhanovites comprised a labor aristocracy whose high wages and privileges were a constant source of irritation to the mass of Soviet workers. "In scope of inequality in

[12] Solomon Schwarz, *Labor in the Soviet Union* (New York: Praeger, 1952), 193–7.
[13] Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization: The Formation of Modern Soviet Production Relations, 1928–1941* (Armonk, N.Y.: Sharpe, 1986), chap. 7.
[14] Ibid., 205.

the payment of labor," he wrote, "the Soviet Union has not only caught up to, but far surpassed, the capitalist countries."[15]

Essentially the same point was made by Albert Pasquier in his dissertation on Stakhanovism, which was also published in 1937. "The principal aspect of the Stakhanovite movement," he wrote, "is not so much technical as social," that is, "the creation of a privileged category of workers."[16] The means of fostering such a category was the progressive piece-rate system of wages, according to which the amount a worker received for each item (piece) rose once the standard output level or norm was superseded. A subject of considerable discussion and experimentation during the First Five-Year Plan, the *progressivka* flourished in the second half of the 1930s, when some 40 percent of all workers on piece rates were subjected to it. More than a decade later, Isaac Deutscher saw the expansion of progressive piece rates and the abolition of food rationing in 1934–5 as responsible for "inequality inside the working class . . . much greater than in any other country." Stakhanovism, in which "the piece wage has achieved its supreme triumph, . . . made Russia an almost classical country of a labour aristocracy."[17]

But why was the "regime" intent on doing this? Trotsky assumed it was a case of "a troubled conscience." "Local ruling groups" shared privileges with Stakhanovites in order to "escape from their isolation." Stakhanovites thus became part of the "reserve for the replenishment of the bureaucracy."[18] Another motive has been imputed by Robert Conquest. In his view, "the probable ulterior purpose was to prevent the development of working class solidarity."[19] This was the same strategy, according to Reinhard Bendix, that Communist authorities pursued in East

[15] Leon Trotsky, *The Revolution Betrayed* (New York: Merit, 1965), 124–5.
[16] Albert Pasquier, *Le Stakhanovisme: L'Organisation du travail en URSS* (Caen: Robert, 1937), 109.
[17] Isaac Deutscher, *Soviet Trade Unions: Their Place in Soviet Labour Policy* (London: Royal Institute of International Affairs, 1950), 107–9, 113–14.
[18] Trotsky, *Revolution Betrayed*, 125.
[19] Robert Conquest, *Industrial Workers in the USSR* (New York: Praeger, 1966), 54.

Germany during the early 1950s. Such a strategy was "characteristic of Communist rule," constituting "the fulcrum of its managerial practice and ideology."[20]

This brief survey of the ways Stakhanovism has been understood in the West reveals that, despite the variety of interpretations and emphases (as well as the ideological perspectives that informed them), a common core of assumptions has existed. Summarily stated, they are as follows:

1. Stakhanovism was the product of a strategy developed by the "regime," which had a clear idea of what it wanted to do and proceeded to do it.
2. Stakhanovism was directed primarily if not solely at workers and represented the apogee of Soviet Taylorism and a corresponding emphasis on material at the expense of moral incentives.
3. Stakhanovites were a clearly defined stratum of the working class, analogous to Western labor aristocracies.

In the course of my research, I found that each of these assumptions lacked empirical support. I discovered that Stakhanovism was far more complex than it has been portrayed in both Soviet and Western literature. Far from being merely a device – part of "Stalin's totalitarian formula for industrialization," as Merle Fainsod's highly influential text described it[21] – it was an amalgam of practices that both impinged on and were subjected to appropriation by different groups and institutions. It did consist of efforts by central political authorities to extract greater productivity from workers, but this was only part of what Stakhanovism entailed. It was also aimed at disciplining managerial and engineering-technical personnel who had become adept at ignoring, circumventing, or interpreting in their own self-serving ways instructions from above. In this respect alone, Stakhanovism was fundamentally different from Taylorism, which sought to increase managers' powers. If anything, managerial authority was *inversely* proportional to the emphasis given to Stakhanovism by higher authorities. Finally, and most suggestive of the dynamics of Stakhanovism, it involved the varied re-

[20] Reinhard Bendix, *Work and Authority in Industry: Ideologies of Management in the Course of Industrialization* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 351–433.

[21] Merle Fainsod, *How Russia Is Ruled*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press 1965), 109.

sponses of both workers and their immediate bosses to these state initiatives.

In other words, Stakhanovism was not exactly what it was supposed to be. As initiatives came down from above, they were transformed such that Stakhanovism came to be something less and also something more than was originally foreseen or officially sanctioned. It was not that the writ of the "regime" stopped at the factory gates, but that what went on beyond them had a profound effect on the formulation and modification of that writ. The raising of labor productivity to a first-order priority – itself a response to ongoing socioeconomic processes – evoked not only enthusiasm and resistance, as Soviet and Western historians respectively assert. Maneuvering and accommodation were at least as much present. These responses inflected Stakhanovism and may be said to have constituted the politics of productivity. If productivity is defined as output per fixed unit of working time, then the struggles over the means of raising output and the ways of deflecting or minimizing the burdens associated with this effort were its politics.

This conceptualization of Stakhanovism owes as much to labor historians and sociologists working outside the Soviet field as it does to recent developments within it. In particular, I have been impressed by the approach to labor history that sees it not merely as the history of a single class, but in relational terms. I take as axiomatic that work itself simultaneously involves several dimensions – economic, political, ideological, and cultural – and that its performance is subject to contestation, negotiation, and accommodation.

This is not to suggest that an identity or even family resemblance can be established between the politics of productivity in the USSR and in advanced capitalist countries. If such politics can be found in virtually every postfeudal society, each has played by different rules. Most obviously, in capitalist societies, the polity and economics are separated, as are the state and individual corporate apparatuses. Of course, productivity is often a vital concern of the state, but its involvement typically takes the form of intervention and adjudication within a formally autonomous civil sphere. In the Soviet Union (and other state socialist countries), politics at the point of production necessarily involves the state. Not only is the state effectively the only em-

ployer, but since profit is not the driving force for increasing productivity, it is the state that must introduce or at least choose mechanisms that will achieve this end. Moreover, the absence of legally constituted independent representation among workers and managers delimits and shapes politics at the point of production. But as this study will show, it does not eliminate such politics altogether.

These general considerations hardly begin to address the specificities of the party/state under Stalin and its relation to the working class, in whose name it claimed to rule. Previously, Western historiography conceived of the Stalinist state in essentially mechanistic terms – as a system of apparatuses, transmission belts, and control levers constructed on the authoritarian foundations of Bolshevism and designed to atomize the Soviet population and exercise total control over it. While still current, this totalitarian model has been subjected to much criticism in the past two decades. In scrutinizing the genealogy of the Stalinist system, both Moshe Lewin and Stephen Cohen have concluded that there was no straight line connecting it to Bolshevism. Rather, they have emphasized the decisive break that occurred in the late 1920s and that involved the suppression of much that had been part of Bolshevism's discourse.[22] Sheila Fitzpatrick has been instrumental in contextualizing Stalin's revolution from above by placing on the historical agenda the Cultural Revolution and the opportunities it provided for workers' upward social mobility. Her work on the First Five-Year Plan period and that of other social historians has seriously undermined "the idea of untrammeled political voluntarism" and the perspective whereby "the society–state relationship is seen entirely in 'we–they' terms – as an inert and unsuspecting society subjected . . . by ruthless men who have gained unrestricted control of the political apparatus."[23]

[22] Moshe Lewin, *Russian Peasants and Soviet Power: A Study of Collectivization* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1968); idem, *Political Undercurrents in Soviet Economic Debates* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1974); and Stephen F. Cohen, "Bolshevism and Stalinism," in *Stalinism: Essays in Historical Interpretation*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1977), 3–29, reprinted in idem, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History Since 1917* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 38–70.

[23] Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Editor's Introduction," in *Cultural Revolution in*

If society was less passive than the totalitarian model implies, the party/state was less monolithic and efficient. In his dissection of the "Soviet technostructure," Kendall Bailes demonstrated the persistence throughout the 1930s of tensions between production specialists and political authorities as well as divisions within each camp.[24] J. Arch Getty, relying heavily on the Smolensk Party Archive, has documented the chaotic state of party and governmental affairs in the Western Region. He interprets this chaos as both a cause and a constituent part of a center–periphery struggle, which he has termed "the politics of implementation."[25] These themes figure prominently as well in the work of Gabor Rittersporn.[26]

But if not the totalitarian model, then what? Certainly not the free play of social forces within a public sphere secure from state repression by the rule of law. As one critic of the revisionist trend within Soviet historiography has asserted: "Totalitarianism did capture a definite aspect of Stalinist society, namely, the 'total claim' of the regime on its population, sanctioned by coercive forms of rule and accompanied by a distinctive repertoire of political demands." Even if the claim often could not be cashed in, "the *aspiration* was in itself fundamentally important."[27]

This point has been most fully developed by Moshe Lewin. For him, what emerged in the course of the First Five-Year Plan was an authoritarian state that became "the sole initiator of action and controller of all important spheres of life." Society as a whole

Russia, 1928–1931, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 7; and Jerry Hough, "The Cultural Revolution and Western Understanding of the Soviet System," in ibid., 244. See also essays by Fitzpatrick, Gail Lapidus, and Susan Solomon in the same volume.

[24] Kendall E. Bailes, *Technology and Society under Lenin and Stalin: Origins of the Soviet Technical Intelligentsia, 1917–1941* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978).

[25] J. Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933–1938* (Cambridge University Press, 1985). For the "politics of implementation," see p. 199.

[26] See especially, Gabor T. Rittersporn, "L'Etat en lutte contre lui-même: Tensions sociales et conflits politiques en URSS, 1936–1938," *Libre*, no. 4 (1978): 3–38; idem, "Société et appareil d'état sovietiques (1936–1938): Contradictions et interferences," *Annales E.S.C.*, 34, no. 4 (1979): 843–67.

[27] Geoff Eley, "History with the Politics Left Out – Again?" *Russian Review* 45 (1986): 385–94. Emphasis in the original.

became etatized. At the same time, however, the low level of Russian cultural and material life continued to have a strong influence on – indeed, "contaminated" – the state. "The 'crusaders' themselves got trapped in some of the least modern, most orthodox and nationalistic elements of their tradition." The cities, swollen with peasant immigrants, became "ruralized"; the party, assuming direction over the administration of the economy, became "economized"; the intelligentsia, swamped by the graduates of crash courses and the epigones of a simplified and dogmatized Marxism, became "less intelligent"; workers, more than doubling in number in the space of five years, became less skilled.[28]

It is this dialectical appreciation of the state–society relationship that informs the present study. However, in place of "contamination," which seems too pejorative, we might substitute a military metaphor (in keeping with Soviet political discourse), that of interpenetration. The state penetrated society by incorporating virtually every initiative and organization within the regime. In the sphere most relevant to our concerns, the traditional, peasant-derived work unit, the *artel*, was replaced by brigades; brigade leaders, vested with administrative powers, substituted themselves for artel elders; production-comrades courts, worker and peasant correspondents, and auxiliary organs of the police and courts functioned as disciplinary bodies; trade-union-sponsored clubs and dramatic societies and classes organized by engineers' and managers' wives saw to workers' cultural needs. At the same time, by being incorporated into the state, by participating in its procedures, the masses in some sense defined what that state was. They may not have made the rules, but they often were in a position to interpret them and necessitate their remaking. They certainly were not in a position to exercise freedom of expression, but they could be outspoken. They were not the ones screaming for efficiency, but they could

[28] Moshe Lewin, *The Making of the Soviet System: Essays in the Social History of Interwar Russia* (New York: Pantheon, 1985). The two key essays are "Society, State and Ideology During the First Five-year Plan" (pp. 209–40) and "The Social Background of Stalinism" (pp. 258–85), both of which have been published previously. See also the fascinating introduction, "Social Crises and Political Structures in the USSR."