

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

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As the first densely researched and vividly argued social history of Soviet women workers in the 1930s, Goldman's monograph fills a long-standing gap in the existing historiography. Until the early 1990s, due to the lack of access to archives in the former Soviet Union, researchers were completely dependent on published sources, such as journals, newspapers, memoirs, and monographs. In these circumstances, too often researchers reiterated the Soviet image of themselves as the creators of the first planned economy in history. The totalitarian school of history credited the Stalinist state with possessing an uncanny degree of efficiency, as well the power to enforce compliance from every level of party and state organizations. Thus Soviet scholarship claimed that by the 1930s the state had solved the 'woman problem', by instituting wide-ranging affirmative action policies. As a result Soviet women were highly educated, fully employed, and enjoyed unprecedented professional success in every field of human endeavour.⁽¹⁾ Western scholarship argued to the contrary that when the Bolsheviks abolished the Zhenotdel in 1930, it signaled the repudiation of all feminism whether of the Marxist or liberal variety. While women were employed in industry and agriculture in unprecedented numbers, they were relegated to inferior positions, and rarely advanced to positions of power in either the Soviet government or the Party. At the same time retrograde social policies were instituted such as the ban on abortions, and the valorization of the role of woman as the mainstay of the nuclear family. They were responsible for both the professional success of the husband and the socialist upbringing of the children. Soviet women were yoked to a double shift that spelled the end to all feminist dreams and utopias.⁽²⁾

Naturally, there were exceptions to this line of argument and both Sheila Fitzpatrick and Roberta Manning have argued that during the 1930s the Stalinist state attempted to promote women to administrative positions in the collective farms, and encouraged them to pursue professional rather than matrimonial success.⁽³⁾ And Richard Stites, in his work, asserted that after the death of Stalin, a commitment to women's emancipation resurfaced as component of the Soviet ideology.⁽⁴⁾ But by and large, very few scholars have undertaken any detailed investigations into the social history of women in the 1930s. Most of the recent scholarship is more interested in evaluating the symbolic importance of the 'New Soviet Women', than in exploring the historical conditions that she actually inhabited.⁽⁵⁾ Finally, historians of Soviet industry and labour have overwhelmingly ignored the gendered dimension of Stalinist industrialization and the subsequent feminization of the workforce as an important historical phenomenon.⁽⁶⁾ To date very few detailed works have been published that have utilized archival documents to analyze the recruitment of women during the

First Five-Year Plan.⁽⁷⁾ And far from seeing this as epiphenomenal, Goldman argues that the mobilization of women to industry was a crucial factor that facilitated both the accumulation of capital, as well as the creation of the infamous coercive labour legislation of the 1930s.

The strength of the volume lies in the fact that instead of positing two undifferentiated and unitary subjects – that is, the Soviet state and Soviet women – Goldman explores the politics of local and central organizations that played a role in formulating policies towards women. At same time she marshals a variety of women's voices including those of workers, feminist activists, economists, and other policy makers, and in the process breaks down the polarized image of the Soviet state and society. Goldman's monograph forms a natural corollary to her earlier pioneering work, in which she argued that the failure of the Bolsheviks to recreate the patriarchal family along democratic lines was due as much to the conservatism of Russian women, as it was to the traditional values that the state espoused.⁽⁸⁾ While the Party was rapidly coming to the conclusion that the traditional family structure, based as it was on unpaid female labour, provided the cheapest way to raise Soviet children, the lack of institutional support forced proletarian and peasant women to rely on the contributions of husbands and fathers. The material reality of the 1920s led to a revision of the Bolshevik policy of liberating women from the patriarchal family.

Goldman shows that during the NEP era, as demobilized soldiers returned from the war front, they replaced women workers in various trades and industries. Female joblessness was further exacerbated by the fact that factories and state agencies radically decreased spending on childcare institutions and communal dining halls thus making it harder for women to obtain gainful employment. Women workers were concentrated in the lowest paid jobs requiring the least skills, and these were usually clustered in the textile and other light industry. Labour exchanges routinely discriminated against them, and women were paid less than men for fulfilling the same labour quotas. While trade unions explained the wage differential by referring to women's lack of skills and training, they were rarely sent for advanced training or even hired as apprentices. Unions sought to protect the existing unequal gender status quo on the factory floor. Despite the entreaties of the Zhenotdel, the Party refused to champion the women's cause in industry, as it struggled to maintain the purity of an all-male urban proletarian base.

With the onset of the First Five-Year Plan, the Party continued to underestimate the value of female labour. Goldman explains that the Party policy of excluding women and non-proletarian workers from the work force slowed the rapid mobilization of labour required for the successful fulfillment of the First Five-Year Plan. In January of 1930, in the face of bitter protests from female activists, the Party eliminated the Zhenotdel, arguing that the rapid improvement of women's status under communism eliminated the need for special attention. While the Party sought to channel women's activism to fulfilling the new goals of rapid industrialization, it destroyed the very organization that might have facilitated its production goals. During this period, soviets, trade unions and factory management proved incapable of mobilizing and utilizing women in a planned and effective manner.

But if in 1928 women held 28.6 percent of industrial jobs, with the onset of First Five-Year Plan women workers flooded Soviet industry in unprecedented numbers and by 1935, women constituted 42 percent of all industrial workers. Goldman's book explores the key reasons for the unprecedented influx of women workers to industry and details the complex interactions of the Party, VTsSPS (All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions), and the Commissariat of Labour (NKT), as they tried to integrate the new workers. Although the collectivization of agriculture was intended to produce a steady supply of cheap food for the industrial worker, the actual process led to disastrous harvests and food shortages. As the state was unable to control the rising prices, it was forced to institute rationing and socialize the retail trade. Government efforts in these areas served to accentuate rather than ameliorate the situation, as cooperatives failed to adequately service consumer demands. Similarly, planned purges of wreckers in the food trade did little to lessen the scarcity of food supplies and consumer goods. As wages fell and prices rose, working class women from urban areas, as well as peasant recruits, streamed into heavy industry and found jobs in socialized dining, education, healthcare and administration in order to sustain their families. From the Party's point of view, the employment of urban women compensated for the falling wages of male workers and obviated the need to

build new housing, and invest in the development of urban services that the additional in-migration of labour would have required. According to Goldman 'Women due to their strategic placement within the working-class family, made an enormous contribution to capital accumulation and investment in industrialization.' (p. 105)

At the same time that the real wages fell, the Soviet economy, in the throes of the First Five-Year Plan, developed an enormous appetite for labour that could not be filled by the existing cadres of skilled male workers. As demands for new workers poured in from every branch of industry, NKT was unsuccessful in formulating a coherent policy to recruit women to industry or train them for new jobs. Instead, the flow of women workers to various industries was unplanned, chaotic, and proceeded on an ad hoc basis. As the NKT failed to provide clear guidelines, individual enterprises and trades bypassed the incompetent labour exchanges and hired the wives, widows, and teenage children of workers in a desperate attempt to reach their quotas. Workers brought female family members to work, and more frequently women themselves appeared at factory gates and construction sites. By late 1930, even though the Party and the NKT had begun to realize that women were a valuable labour resource that was politically more reliable than disgruntled recruits from the countryside, it failed to draft a comprehensive plan that would address the issues of female employment, training and education, and the socialization of household labour in an equitable manner.

Ignoring the suggestions of feminist activists from the KUTB (Committee to Improve the Labour and Life of Working Women) that were located in local soviets, the central planners divided the economy by gender and established -dominated sectors in the service industries where the pay was low. In branches of heavy industry such as metallurgy, machine building, and construction, while women made rapid gains, they were equally segregated. This central policy of creating blocs of exclusively female workers had an adverse effect. In areas, where skilled male workers were replaced by women these policies exacerbated existing deep-seated male prejudices against women workers. Despite Party injunctions to hire more women in heavy industry, factory management continued to hire women for the jobs requiring fewest skills, often in areas entirely unrelated to production, such as haulage, repair, and cleaning. Managers did not want to train women to take on skilled work, and promotions were far and few. On the factory floor, male co-workers harassed female employees, both physically and sexually, creating hostile and threatening work situations. And with the abolition of the Zhenotdel, there was no other institution that could take up the issue of inequality in the workplace.

By 1932-33, during the inception of the Second Five-Year Plan, women comprised almost 100 percent of the incoming workers and by 1936, 75 percent of the new workers were women. According to Goldman, during this period the authorities were able to institute a draconian system of labour legislation because of the availability of women workers. She argues that the Party was able to create the punitive passport system, slow down rural migration to the cities, and purge the working class of undesirable non-proletarian elements, because it could rely on the existing reserves of female labour. As a result, urban women were recruited in increasingly larger numbers, both in traditionally female-dominated industries such as textiles, as well as in heavy industry such as lumber, metal and machine production. According to Goldman, while women were over-represented in poorly paid and unskilled positions, they were also to be found in well-paid skilled positions in various branches of industry.

In conclusion Goldman argues that both socialist development in the Soviet Union, and capitalism in Western Europe, resulted in a similar sexual division of labour where women were overwhelmingly to be found in positions that were low-waged. While this finding does not surprise us, Goldman in an interesting twist makes a counter argument: that the Party in the 1930s, contrary to received wisdom, did function as a champion for women's issues:

For a brief period, the Party's campaign to involve women, the growing need for skilled labour, and the feminism of the women's activists came together to create new and vast opportunities for hundreds and thousands of women workers. (p. 282)

The Party made efforts to enroll women in technical training programs, and institutes of higher education. The Party replaced men with blocs of skilled women workers, and even facilitated women's entry into management position. Finally, in an effort to control and revitalize factory management, women workers were encouraged to speak publicly about problems in the workplace.

Goldman's competent analysis of women's testimonies about their horrendous work experiences forms the most fascinating section of the book. The Party's efforts were neither sustained, nor were they disinterested, but nonetheless, they resulted in the creation of affirmative action policies that helped publicly renegotiate the status of a hitherto disadvantaged minority. One wishes that Goldman had gone further in analyzing the paradoxical goals and policies of the Party that simultaneously improved the status of women even as it forestalled the establishment of gender equity in the workplace. Her nuanced paradigm will provide new insight into the history of women under Stalinism. This volume will be of great interest to students of Russian history as well as women's studies, and the archival references will be an invaluable starting point for future scholars. One wishes that the author had included a complete bibliography in the text.

Notes

1. Chirkov, P. M. *Reshenie zhenskogo voprosa v SSSR 1917-1937gg* (Mysl; Moscow, 1978).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See for example, Janet Evans, 'The Communist Party of the Soviet Union and the women's question: the case of the 1936 Decree 'In Defense of Mother and Child'', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 16:4 (1981), 757-75; Mary Buckley, *Women and Ideology in the Soviet Union* (University of Michigan Press; Ann Arbor, MI, 1989).[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Middle-class values and Soviet life in the 1930s', in Terry Thompson and Richard Sheldon eds, *Soviet Society and Culture* (Westview Press; Boulder, CO, 1988), pp. 20-38; Roberta Manning, 'Women in the Soviet countryside on the eve of World War II, 1935-1940', in Beatrice Farnsworth and Lynne Viola, eds, *Russian Peasant Women*, (Oxford University Press; Oxford & New York, 1992), pp. 206-35.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Bolshevism and Nihilism, 1860-1930* (Princeton University Press; Princeton, 1978).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. Victoria Bonnell, *Iconography of Power* (University of California Press; Berkeley, 1997); Lynne Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman: Women's Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity, 1922-1953* (St. Martin's Press; New York, 1999); Susan Reid, 'All Stalin's women: gender and power in the Soviet Art of the 1930s', *Slavic Review*, 57:1 (1998), 133-73, on 172; Choi Chatterjee, *Celebrating Women: Gender, Festival Culture, and Bolshevik Ideology. 1919-1939* (University of Pittsburgh Press; Pittsburgh, 2002).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Lewis Siegelbaum and Ron Suny, eds, *Making Workers Soviet: Power, Class, Identity* (Cornell University Press; Ithaca, 1994); Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (University of California Press; Berkeley, 1995).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Thomas Gregory Schrand, 'Industrialization and the Stalinist Gender System: Women Workers in the Soviet Economy, 1928-1941' (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 1994); Melanie Ilic, *Women Workers in the Soviet Interwar Economy. From 'Protection' to 'Equality'* (St. Martin's Press; New York, 1999).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (Cambridge University Press; Cambridge, 1993).[Back to \(8\)](#)

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