

Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism: Labour and the Restoration of the Stalinist System after World War II. By *Donald Filtzer*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2002. xviii + 276 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, tables. Cloth, \$60.00. ISBN 0-521-81503-7.

Reviewed by Wendy Goldman

The Soviet people celebrated *Den' Pobedy*, or "Day of Victory," on May 9, 1945, amid massive devastation. Factories, farms, mines, and industrial complexes lay in ruins. The Germans had laid waste to houses, water lines, roads, railroads, electrical grids, power dams, schools, and hospitals. They killed between twenty-four million and twenty-six million people, orphaned millions of children, made refugees of millions more. On the eve of victory, the Soviet population was traumatized, ill, and malnourished. An entire generation of young men lay dead. And the core of state industry faced a labor shortage of at least one million workers. Rapidly deteriorating relations with Western capitalist countries ensured that the Soviet Union would receive no aid; even supplies of food and medicine were cut off. The extent of the war devastation was greater than anyone in the West comprehended, and, in fact, the injured red bear made every attempt to conceal the severity of its wounds from the hostile eyes of its former allies. Yet by 1948, heavy industry regained its prewar production level; light industry and agriculture followed by 1950. By 1952, real wages had risen 25 percent above their prewar level (p. 42). And by 1953, the year Stalin died, Soviet industry employed almost 75 percent more workers than before the war (p. 16). How did the Soviet leadership achieve what can only be considered an economic miracle? How did they mobilize a hungry and exhausted people to defer consumption and shoulder the painful burden of reconstruction? This is the subject of Donald Filtzer's path-breaking book.

Concentrating on labor policy and workers, Filtzer uses an impressive array of published and archival sources to describe a period that is still largely unknown to Western researchers. Filtzer's book is the first to reveal the grimy underside of Stalin's great economic achievement, to document and describe how Party leaders mobilized and reconstituted a new labor force to rebuild industry, to explore the use of prison labor,

young “indentured” workers, and other forms of “unfree” labor. The first labor history of the postwar years, the book is packed with new and important findings about the generation that reached adulthood after the war.

As the war came to an end, many Soviet citizens hoped that victory would bring a loosening of authoritarian control. Filtzer dwells briefly and gently on those cherished hopes: peasants yearned for freer markets, the intelligentsia for more creative freedom, workers for a more prosperous life, which had been so long deferred. These hopes, however, were dashed once Soviet leaders adopted an economic strategy of rapid capital accumulation and investment in heavy industry. With no aid forthcoming from abroad, Soviet leaders were forced to keep consumption levels low and defer production of consumer goods to acquire the capital needed for reconstruction. Coal mining, metallurgy, and construction, the basis of an industrial economy, were the sectors most in need of workers. Here the worst conditions prevailed: the work was arduous, dangerous, and dirty; the housing abysmal. “Cleaner” industries, like machine building, could attract and keep workers freely. But these core sectors were forced to rely heavily on coercion.

Skillfully marshalling extensive statistical evidence, Filtzer demonstrates how the Soviet leadership mobilized an exhausted population to rebuild their devastated country. According to his findings, coercion played a key role. The Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) employed 1.7 million unwaged prisoners on their own economic projects, “lent” 500,000 more to various enterprises, and deployed about two million German and Japanese prisoners of war and internal Soviet exiles. According to Filtzer’s calculations, prison labor under MVD control constituted about 20 percent of the industrial labor force (p. 23). The labor-recruiting organization, *orgnabor*, signed up millions of new workers on five-year contracts, which were illegal to break. Between 1946 and 1952, 4.2 million teenagers were mobilized into training schools in the factories through the Ministry of Labor Reserves, a wartime holdover. Although they were supposed to be housed, fed, and clothed, they were not paid. After the training period, they were assigned to work in various enterprises for a four-year term. *Orgnabor*, supplemented by the labor reserve schools, provided industry with almost nine million workers. Filtzer concludes that postwar reconstruction relied “to an extraordinary degree” on prison or “indentured” (contracted) labor, and the core industries were especially dependent on these sources.

This was the direct result of a policy “of virtually breakneck accumulation” (pp. 39–40). Were labor-school trainees and prisoners “profitable”? Filtzer believes not. Although trainees and prisoners received no wages, the costs of camp administration, high labor turnover, and low labor productivity offset their coerced contribution. In Filtzer’s view, the camp system in particular was a drain on economic recovery.

While Filtzer’s statistical contribution is invaluable, the most moving sections of his book are the descriptive ones. Using a wide range of archival material from the Ministry of Health, factories, unions, the Procuracy (a legal monitor and state prosecutor), and various industries, he depicts the conditions that workers faced every day: on the job, in the dormitories and barracks, and in the stores. The years 1946 and 1947 were particularly difficult. The famine of 1946 killed almost million people. The ensuing ration cuts, undertaken in an effort to conserve the food supply, consigned millions more to malnutrition. The struggle for survival, according to Filtzer, sapped the working class of energy to protest or organize in behalf of its own interests. Although consumption levels rose steadily after 1948, life remained hard. The Germans had destroyed entire cities, and housing stock was badly depleted. People lived in hastily erected dormitories without heat, light, or running water. There was an acute shortage of all consumer items: medicines, textbooks, drinking mugs, sheets, towels, utensils, soap. Tuberculosis, chronic stomach ailments, and skin diseases were endemic. Harsh criminal sanctions against theft, absenteeism, lateness, and job changing, adopted during the war, remained in force. These laws were gradually repealed between 1948 and 1951, but millions of workers and peasants were still sentenced to long years in the camps in these years. The laws were so unpopular that they engendered protest in the Procuracy, the very agency designed to enforce them. Local officials widely colluded with workers in flouting them. Filtzer notes with bitter humor that these were the years when repression was “democratized” (p. 27).

Filtzer has produced a meticulously researched study essential for anyone interested in the relationship between economic development and political democracy. A short review cannot possibly do justice to all its findings. One of Filtzer’s most important conclusions, however, is that the pain of the postwar years left an indelible mark on the consciousness of young workers and resulted in “a profound alienation from the regime,

which the regime itself could do little counter” (p. 155). These young workers lacked the *frontoviki’s* (front-line soldiers’) deep identification with Soviet power and the victory over fascism. By the time Stalin died, Soviet leaders recognized that their society suffered from “a deep crisis of morale” (p. 157), a crisis that leaders from Khrushchev to Gorbachev would try, and fail, to solve within the limits of socialism.

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