

Russian Labor History At the AHA

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The range of approaches that fall under the rubric of Russian labor history were well represented at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association, held in San Francisco, December 27–30, 1983. Two sessions in particular crystallized important aspects of current research in the field. The first, “Socialist ‘Counter-revolutionaries’ in the Aftermath of the Russian Revolution,” dealt with a major tradition, the history of Russian socialism. But the papers broke new ground in studying non-Bolshevik socialists in the period after the October revolution. Jane R. Burbank of Harvard University, compared two leading socialist intellectuals in “Martov and Chernov: Theory and Practice of the Socialist Opposition, 1917–1923.” Despite the Marxist perspective of Martov and the populist orientation of Chernov, both leaders shared a view of Bolshevik rule as a temporary phenomenon and devoted their energies to refining their critiques of the Bolshevik revolution. Both intellectuals stressed, in the same vague, undefined, and ineffective way, the “creative role of the masses.” A second paper, “The Mensheviks under Attack: June–September 1918 and the Transformation of Soviet Politics,” by Vladimir Brovkin of Princeton University, carefully examined the sources of the socialist opposition. Brovkin’s paper traced the growth of worker unrest and opposition to Bolshevism, emphasizing that by June 1918, the prospect of a Menshevik-SR victory in the coming Soviet Congress elections was very real. It was the threat of opposition from the socialists rather than the bourgeoisie that turned the Bolshevik party toward the direction of force. Finally, Marc Jansen of the International Institute for Social History in Amsterdam, discussed the rise and fall of the Soviet Far East Republic. Here from 1920 to 1922 existed an “independent” socialist republic, but Jansen stressed that the territory was always perceived as a temporary buffer state between Red Russia and Imperial Japan, that the SRs and Mensheviks enjoyed only token political power there, and that when the Japanese threat diminished by 1922, the Bolsheviks, bolstered by considerable indigenous support, incorporated the Far East Republic into the Russian Socialist Federated Soviet Republic.

Comments by Paul Avrich of Queens College, CUNY, commended all three papers for their high level of scholarship and stressed by way of elaboration two

major themes. One was the importance of the Civil War in general as a critical period in Soviet history. In particular, he suggested that the months from October 1917 to June 1918, before the beginning of armed conflict between Red and White, might better be treated as a distinct period. The second point was the problem of the "dilemmas of power" faced by socialists in and out of power during the Civil War. The dilemma faced by non-Bolshevik socialists was to steer a narrow course between a White victory, which prospect they abhorred, and a continuance of Bolshevik one-party rule. But Avrich stressed also how the exigencies of civil war forced Bolsheviks to abandon their ideals as well, in the name of power, and suggested in conclusion, that a "cheerful outcome" of the period was impossible to envision.

The second session on Russian labor, "Skilled Workers and Revolutionary Conjunctures in Russia," represented the trend in the field toward the study of workers and the working class directly, without the mediation of political parties. (See Ronald Suny's essay in this journal, no. 22, Fall 1982, for a survey of work in this area.) A paper by Heather Hogan, of Oberlin College, on "Russian Metal Workers and Their Union," focused on the composition of the St. Petersburg Metal Workers' Union from 1906 to 1914. Her argument attempted to link the radicalization of the union with a changing membership, but stressed that the radical new members in the years 1912-1914 were not inexperienced and hotheaded youths, as was claimed by leading Mensheviks at the time, but rather skilled, mature workers in technologically advanced plants, frustrated by political repression and by technological change within their industry. Diane Koenker, of the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign), and William G. Rosenberg, of the University of Michigan, extracted the experience of skilled workers from their larger study of strikes, in "Skilled Workers on Strike, 1917." They suggested that skilled workers were most notable for striking less toward October, when the number of semiskilled strikers was increasing. They also argued that skilled workers may have affected the strike movement in less obvious ways than mere participation, by influencing the general discourse of labor relations and by interacting with less skilled workers in plants or districts with heterogeneous worker populations. In the context of the Stalin Revolution, Lewis Siegelbaum, of Michigan State University, examined "The Making of Stakhanovites, 1935-36." In describing two groups of these model workers, an elite and a larger group whose special status was less secure, Siegelbaum suggested how fluid were the concepts and function of Stakhanovism within the plant setting; Stakhanovism could be a means of extracting more work from the labor force, and a method for social mobility, but it was also an arena of negotiation and compromise among workers, managers, and state officials.

In her comments, Victoria E. Bonnell of the University of California at Berkeley, discussed generally the attributes of skilled workers in Russia, and then offered specific comments and suggestions on each of the papers. Questions and comments from the large audience echoed Bonnell's plea for more research on the questions of skill in the Russian context, with an emphasis on "getting inside the factory door" in order to understand the processes going on that motivated skilled workers to act in the ways described in the three papers.