H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Kenneth M. Straus. *Factory and Community in Stalin's Russia: The Making of an Industrial Working Class.* Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997. xiv + 326 pp. $55.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8229-4048-7.

Reviewed by Laura D. Phillips

Published on H-Russia (January, 1999)

Any scholar who attempts to emulate E.P. Thompson's achievement in *The Making of the English Working Class* carves out no small task for himself. In his recent monograph, self-proclaimed apprentice Kenneth Straus nonetheless attempts to do just that by reconceptualizing working-class formation in Russia in light of Thompson's methodology--that is, he attempts to understand class formation as a process.

Concentrating on the experience of workers in Moscow's Proletarskii district, especially those of the Hammer and Sickle Steel Plant, Straus draws broader conclusions about class formation in the 1930s. He argues that Russia's traditional labor market had been a dual market. On the one hand, established workers constituted a stable labor force; on the other, a disparate group of subaltern workers (peasants, women, and youth) moved in and out of the labor market according to economic and seasonal imperative. This dual market, characteristic of pre-revolutionary Russia, persisted through the NEP years, when labor surpluses precipitated mass unemployment for subaltern workers.

According to Straus, it was only during Soviet Russia's transition to mass-production industries in the First and Second Five-Year Plans that a labor deficit facilitated the formation of a homogeneous industrial working class. In the 1930s, established workers, peasant migrants, women, and youth became integrated into a more equitable, socially-stabilizing labor market. With opportunity for advancement and stable participation in the industrial workforce now open to "established" and "subaltern" workers alike, working-class consciousness in the 1930s finally coalesced around the idea of inclusiveness, rather than focusing on perceived oppositions between workers and enemy classes, or between workers and the state.

For Straus, the critical years in this process were 1930-32, when the inversion in the labor market created a demand for labor well exceeding supply. In 1931, Joseph Stalin's "Six Conditions" speech further legitimated social leveling among workers by calling for an end to specialist baiting, and by stipulating that henceforth pay for labor was to be based on equity, not on a worker's social origins or job tenure. The dislocation char-

acteristic of the first Five-Year Plan (FYP), says Straus, was followed by steady economic growth from 1933-1940, in part because "new construction was halted, production targets were lowered, and enterprises were instructed to undertake some reduction of staff through layoffs" (p. 134). Still, the first FYP's imprint remained: the dichotomy between "newcomers" and "established workers" had disappeared, and class inclusivity had become a more important theme than class struggle (pp. 204-205).

In the course of his study, Straus discusses the many ways in which he believes disparate groups of workers became integrated into a cohesive industrial working class. For example, the labor demands of the first FYP necessitated fundamental changes in worker training. Training methods inherited from NEP (primarily apprenticeship and the FZUs), had never been a means of mass instruction: they were male-dominated, exclusionary, and allowed established workers to control the acquisition of skill. In contrast, the deficit of labor that arose during the first FYP was addressed by training entire work crews at one time. It suddenly became possible for many subaltern workers--who had been denied jobs or marginalized into seasonal work in the 1920s--to gain qualifications in just a few years. Another source of worker integration in the 1930s was the work brigade. By cooperating in brigades, laborers could regularize their work routine. The work brigade, Straus concludes, allowed Soviet workers to help define what the working class "could legitimately be asked to produce" and it protected them from the regime's forays into "storming," shock work, and Stakhanovism (p. 180).

Straus nicely demonstrates factory directors' early realization that class war disrupted production on the shop floor, and he describes their many efforts to retain a viable workforce. From 1928 to 1932, the task of production was doubly complicated by the labor deficit and by the slow pace of state-sponsored housing construction, which lagged pitifully behind the construction of new factories. Directors who wanted to keep their workers found themselves compelled to provide for their workers' basic needs: the provision of housing, special stores with deficit goods, daycare, heath care, and the like all came to be centered in the factory. In Straus's view, construction of communal homes during the first FYP was particularly important. In replacing the old workers' barracks with communal homes, Red Directors provided housing for the entire working-class family, an important precondition for bringing an end to seasonal peasant migration and with it, an end to Russia's traditional dual labor market.

Straus makes a very thoughtful contribution to historical literature on the working class in the 1930s, but this monograph has its peculiarities. Most obviously, the title of the work asserts its relevance to "Stalin's Russia," while the text itself concentrates overwhelmingly on the first two FYPs. The attention Straus devotes to the 1940s and 1950s is quite sparse and readers should not expect the work to be informative about those years. More significantly, there is an uneasy tension between Straus's effort to make broad generalizations about working-class formation in Soviet Russia and his concentration on a few major factories in Proletarskii district. While there is no inherent harm in combining these two goals, here the effort seems strained and Straus's links between the two levels of analysis do not flow easily.

Most worrisome, the reader may be forgiven for wondering whether Straus's argument was proven before he began. In Chapter One, Straus tells us that "the 'continuity question' ultimately cannot be resolved historically," and that it is his "assumption" that the first FYP "marked the most radical and fundamental of historical discontinuities" (p. 18). In this light, how significant is it when he later asserts that "a mass, urban, proletarian lifestyle or culture" took shape for the "first time in the history of Russia and the Soviet Union" during the first FYP (p. 231)?

To be sure, "proletarian culture" did not mean the same thing to the state or to workers in 1932 that it had meant in the 1890s, in 1917, or in the 1920s. But the history of the Russian working class cries out for more careful, systematic comparison before we throw the baby out with the bath water. For example, as evidence of greater inclusivity in the 1930s, Straus cites the 1936 constitution, which "redefined" peasants and intellectuals as "laboring classes"--in other words, as "insiders" rather than "outsiders" in the Soviet system (p. 241). But if constitutional standing is evidence of inclusiveness, might not Straus have pointed equally well to the 1918 constitution, which counted peasants among "toilers" and women as citizens? Further, since Straus acknowledges that women and peasants continued to be segregated into certain occupations, it is not so clear that there was a fundamental change in the status of these subalterns in the early 1930s, despite their improved chances for employment and upward mobility.

Despite these reservations, Straus's work gives scholars of the Soviet working class much food for thought. The concept of Russia's dual labor market and Straus's contention that its demise led to increased social cohesion in the 1930s-40s provides a very useful framework for further research. Further, his emphasis on the efforts of Red Directors adds to our knowledge about the many mediators sandwiched between state and society in Stalin's Russia. We therefore should not find undue fault if this work does not match the mastery of Thompson.

Citation: Laura D. Phillips. Review of Straus, Kenneth M. *Factory and Community in Stalin's Russia: The Making of an Industrial Working Class.* H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2715