

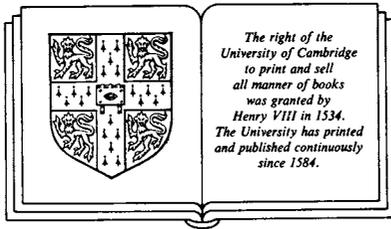
# RUSSIA'S COTTON WORKERS AND THE NEW ECONOMIC POLICY

Shop-floor culture and state policy 1921–1929

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge

New York Port Chester Melbourne Sydney

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK  
40 West 20th Street, New York NY 10011-4211, USA  
477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia  
Ruiz de Alarcón 13, 28014 Madrid, Spain  
Dock House, The Waterfront, Cape Town 8001, South Africa  
<http://www.cambridge.org>

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First published 1990  
First paperback edition 2002

*A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Ward, Chris.

Russia's cotton workers and the New Economic Policy:  
shop-floor culture and state policy. 1921-1929 / Chris Ward.  
p. cm. -- (Soviet and East European studies: 69)

Bibliography.

Includes index.

ISBN 0 521 34580 4

1. Cotton textile industry -- Soviet Union --  
Employees -- History -- 20th century.  
2. Soviet Union -- Economic policy -- 1917-1928.

I. Title. II. Series.

HD8039.T42S659 1989

331.7'67721'0947--dc20 89-7287 CIP

ISBN 0 521 34580 4 hardback

ISBN 0 521 89427 1 paperback

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# Introduction

Imagine yourself catching a train at the Iaroslavl' station on an April day in 1924. Soon the line would take you out of Moscow's noise and confusion and very shortly a new pattern of human activity would start to become familiar. Sometimes nearby, sometimes in the middle distance, small villages scarcely touched by the modern world would appear: clusters of squat cabins, the more substantial decorated with elaborate fretworks hanging from their eaves, tributes to the centuries-old skills of long-forgotten Chinese craftsmen. Peasants – the men bearded and dressed in high boots and belted cotton shirts, the women modestly hidden behind brightly coloured shawls contrasting vividly with the brown, green and white of the sodden land – would be attending to the season's work, repairing the ravages of the northern winter and marking out their little strips for the spring sowing amongst the last stubborn scallops of snow. Figures bent over the hoe, weathered faces to the barren soil, a physical attitude born of economic necessity unaltered throughout Russia's centuries: *krest'iane* – 'those who bear the cross'. Only rarely would someone be walking with a horse.

By midday, as the train left 'calico Moscow' far behind, cut through the low undulations of the Moscow heights, branched east at Aleksandrov and rattled on, first through Vladimir province and then into the recently created Ivanovo guberniya, another sight would become commonplace – vast cotton factories, their tall chimneys silhouetted against the skies of the Central Russian Plain, slowly disgorging black smoke into the clear air. Occasionally, as the tracks curved towards them – at Iur'ev-Pol'skii, Nerl' and Teikovo – sheer red-brick walls would flash by, not a stone's throw from the carriage window. More often than not they would remain on the horizon, huge and enigmatic, brooding over a sliver of water caught by the declining sun, invariably some tributary of the Volga.

The Baranovs, Konovalovs and Morozovs had vanished forever, but their mills, now renamed in the spirit of the times – Red Dawn, Red October, Freedom, Communist Vanguard; their arched entrances bedecked with red bunting or surmounted by a crude hammer and sickle – remained firmly in place, solid monuments to industrial capitalism. Cotton mills had always utilized free labour, long before Alexander II's reforms of the 1860s, and the industry's success had little to do with Witte's late nineteenth-century drive towards modernization and imperial greatness. Rather, the entrepreneurs who built their huge factories in St Petersburg and the Central Industrial Region (CIR) and drew in labour from the surrounding countryside – or, in the case of the Imperial capital, from distant provinces – owed their prosperity to mass demand, much like their west European counterparts. Thus whatever qualms there might be about the legitimacy of Lenin's revolution in terms of the level of capitalist development under tsarism, here was an industry which was clearly the product of private initiative and market forces patterned on the model of development familiar to Marx.<sup>1</sup> It is here, if nowhere else in Russia, that the forces of production created by international capitalism fell into the hands of men dedicated to socialist transformation. This was their inheritance; of all sectors of the young Soviet economy, it was one of the largest, oldest and most highly-mechanized branches of factory production.

But although built in the British manner, equipped with British machinery – and until recently managed by expatriates from Oldham, Bury and Manchester – the mills' uniform architecture concealed another, less tangible legacy: the social diversity of the workforce. By late afternoon the shifts would be changing all over Russia. In these rural districts it would be hard to tell the difference between departing workers and peasants in the fields. Many would be walking home, alone or with a relative or a friend, to silent hamlets and cottages five or six miles away where the rest of the family had spent the day busy on the farm. They would not be indoors until long after nightfall. Others would be chatting in small groups, delaying their return to noisy, over-crowded barracks. A few of the younger ones might be reading a newspaper. Up the line at Kostroma and Iaroslavl', south to Vladimir, or to the west in Smolensk and Tver', men and women would be spilling out of the big gates and thronging the muddy thoroughfares, their clothes and manners a mixture of the provincial dweller and the rural immigrant, peasant blouses mingling with shabby suits and leather caps. Most of the workers' districts would be

<sup>1</sup> See O. Crisp, *Studies in the Russian Economy before 1914* (1976), pp. 13, 44–5.

tumbles of wooden houses, nineteenth-century accretions on the body of these ancient towns. To the south-west, in Ramenskoe, Egor'evsk, Orekhovo-Zuevo, Shchelkovo, and north-east in Ivanovo-Voznesensk – the 'Russian Manchester' – the crowds would wear a different aspect, less varied. Here several generations had worked, lived and died amongst the monotonous squalor characteristic of purely industrial settlements. Only in the odd corner would you still find traces of the original Russian village. But in distant Leningrad, where mills were jumbled in with palaces or tucked behind broad, tree-lined avenues which once housed the flower of the old middle classes, or in the capital, where some were located no more than half an hour's walk from the Kremlin, chattering girls, gauche young lads, old men and middle-aged women would soon be indistinguishable from the heterogeneous metropolitan masses crammed into trams, shops, bars and cafes.

Just prior to our imaginary train journey Lenin had died. At the very last, before paralysis stilled his pen and stopped his tongue forever, he seems to have been at his wit's end. Advancing towards socialism turned out to be just as difficult for the new regime as maintaining absolutism had been for the old. Although the Revolution was now an accomplished fact, bureaucracy, the bane of successive reformers for more than a century, displayed an uncanny ability to transmogrify the most iconoclastic marxist into a boorish *chinovnik*, destroying all hopes of administrative efficiency, let alone Soviet democracy. As the country began to settle down, the dream of a principled leadership firmly linked to a conscious, disciplined, revolutionary working class dissolved into thin air. Lenin was obliged to admit that apart from the peasantry, no easily identifiable social group had survived the holocaust of revolution and civil war intact – and least of all Russia's tiny proletariat.<sup>2</sup> 'Where and how we must now reform ourselves, adapt ourselves, reorganize ourselves so that after the retreat we may begin a stubborn move forward', he said in his last sombre speech late in 1922, 'we still do not know'.<sup>3</sup> Some nine months earlier at the eleventh party congress delegates listened to his first announcement that the 'retreat' was at an end; the New Economic Policy (NEP) did not appear to be helping workers, yet the seemingly contradictory need to appease the countryside remained paramount. The message of conci-

<sup>2</sup> 'Permit me to congratulate you', jeered Shliapnikov in 1922, 'on being the vanguard of a non-existing class': cited I. Deutscher, *The Prophet Unarmed, Trotsky: 1921–1929* (1970), pp. 14–15.

<sup>3</sup> Cited E. H. Carr, *The Interregnum 1923–24* (1969), p. 13.

liation towards the peasantry was repeated at the fourth Comintern congress in November and reiterated in his last but one public utterance a week later.<sup>4</sup> Thereafter he had little to offer.

Nevertheless, Lenin is to be credited with having had the courage to give up his dreams and embrace the methods of *laissez-faire* economics in order to preserve the regime. Lenin's 'forced retreat' into NEP, announced at the tenth party congress in 1921, was above all a pragmatic measure. The successful conclusion of the civil war coincided with the threat of a third revolution, typified by the Tambov rising and the Kronstadt revolt. Years of disruption had reduced the economy to a state of *primaeval* barter, overlaid since 1918 by the tribute system of War Communism. Where there was nothing to buy and no stable currency, farmers had no reason to produce surpluses, so the state fed the army and what was left of the urban population by taking grain by force. After 1921 peasants were allowed to enjoy their property with relatively little central interference. Taxes in kind, later in money, replaced forced levies and farmers disposed of their surplus as they saw fit. Experiments in communal agriculture were all but forgotten and total collectivization receded to the status of a future hope to be realized at some indeterminate time when peasant wishes harmonized with regime aspirations. For industry – almost all of which remained nationalized, unlike the trade and retail sectors – the categorical imperative was the satisfaction of consumer demand, which in Russia meant peasant demand. This would simultaneously stimulate food production by making available commodities for the peasants to buy and bring about a revival of urban life by re-establishing the exchange of goods between town and countryside. Two words encapsulate the means and ends of NEP: *smychka*, the 'link' between the world of the town and that of the village, was to be effected by *khozraschet*, the application of commercial principles to industry in order to guarantee efficiency and sensitivity to the market.

Lenin's prognoses for NEP and those of his associates require no further elaboration here. It would be pointless to try to replicate the work done by many others on the intra-party struggle, and inappropriate in a study attempting to address quite different problems. It is enough to record that in one obvious way NEP worked. Most people are agreed that, on the whole, by 1926 Russia had regained the ground lost since 1913. More interestingly, the policy injected into Soviet life a dynamism which, until very recently, has never been allowed to

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

re-appear, and it raises the possibility that there may have been an alternative – some other variant of socialism – to the tragic course subsequently adopted.

In this brief interlude, lasting from 1921 until Stalin's collectivization drive of 1929, cotton was to play an important role. Economic commentators, trade union leaders and party and state officials were united in their recognition of the industry's importance. In the early months of NEP an authoritative publication from the Council for Labour and Defence (STO) stated quite plainly that 'the products of cotton mills are the basic means of exchange between town and countryside'.<sup>5</sup> M. O. Braginskii, a long-standing member of the central committee of the textileworkers' union and a prolific writer on textile affairs, made the same point in 1926; mills must increase output, improve quality and restructure their internal organization in order to satisfy the peasants.<sup>6</sup> Even in 1929 propagandists were still concentrating on the vital importance of cotton: 'Increases in output, improvements in quality, reductions in costs, these strengthen and unify the *smychka* between the working class and the poor and middle peasants . . . Decreasing output, falling quality, rising costs, these weaken the *smychka* and have a detrimental effect on grain deliveries'.<sup>7</sup>

Because cotton was an important element in the *smychka*, operatives stood at the point of intersection between politics and economics. When the exchange of goods between town and countryside was disrupted and the stability of the regime threatened, pressure was brought to bear on the workforce, and this is what forms the subject of this book. It is the contention of this study that looking at the varieties of work and the diversity of workers' lives can help us to appreciate the extent to which operatives could deflect aspects of policy with which they disagreed, were obliged to accept and implement policy, or acted back on policy makers and made them think again. Thus we can not only explore the experience of NEP for workers and the ways in which power was handled by its recipients, we can also see whether power could actually be transmitted when the regime felt it should be. For these reasons, the ways in which policies were designed and the role played by managers, the party and intermediate strata in the textileworkers' union will receive far less attention than will the story of what happened when they reached the shop floor.

<sup>5</sup> *Na novykh putiakh. Itogi novoi ekonomicheskoi politiki, 1921–1922gg*, vyp. 3 (1923), p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Trudy pervogo vsesoiuznogo s'ezda po ratsionalizatsii v tekstil'noi promyshlennosti, 19–24 maia 1926 goda* (1926), p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> V. A. Buianov, *Tekstil'shchiku, o trudovoi distsipline* (1929), p. 6.