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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Women Workers in the Soviet Interwar Economy. From 'Protection' to 'Equality' by Melanie Ilic

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as a product of Russian neo-imperialism. As Marples points out, Russia has moved much further in the direction of democracy and the market than Belarus has, and could well be used as a source of influence against what they see as the baneful influence of President Lukashenka. The West, too, should perhaps not be so quick to sever the links that have been built up. What is needed is an appreciation that neither a market economy nor a liberal-democratic political system can be built overnight. This book helps us to understand that, although sharing a similar starting-point, the various states that emerged from the Soviet Union are having to struggle with the legacy in their own way.

Finally, I draw attention to signs that the book was prepared in some haste—which is a pity. Thus, what took place in 1988 was the 19th Party Conference of the CPSU, not of the CC CPSU (p. 47); the Belavezha agreement did not ‘formally end the Soviet Union’ (p. 61)—that happened close to the end of December 1991 when the USSR Supreme Soviet met for the last time to dissolve itself; and it is hard to square the statement that ‘not a single airline from [Western Europe] has seen fit to commence a service to Minsk’ with the previous sentence that refers to a daily service by Lufthansa, which happens to be a flight from Frankfurt (p. 121). But despite these and other typographical errors, the book is a sound introduction, which combines a clear factual account with pertinent questions on a new country that is at best overlooked, at worst deliberately shunned.

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RONALD J. HILL

Melanie Ilić, *Women Workers in the Soviet Interwar Economy. From ‘Protection’ to ‘Equality’*. Basingstoke: Macmillan and New York: St Martin’s Press, 1999, ix + 241 pp., £45.00.

THE QUESTION OF FEMALE WORKERS’ PROTECTIVE LEGISLATION in the interwar period extends its ramifications into many fields. The issue is located within contemporary moral, ideological and scientific discourses as well as within the economic development of the Soviet Union. This is further complicated because the interwar period is fragmented into divergent moments: the revolution, the civil war, the NEP and the two five-year plans; from the rule of the country by the Bolsheviks until Stalin’s consolidated power. Ilić’s study endeavours to identify the aims and scope of the protective laws for women workers throughout the 1920s and 1930s. She also attempts to chart women’s attitudes toward both the formulation and the application of official labour policy, administered by the People’s Commissariat of Labour (Narkomtrud) and the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (VTsSPS). The evidence gathered in state archives, women’s magazines and memoirs by Soviet and foreign workers clearly demonstrates a gradual trend from the protection of the ‘weaker sex’ toward de facto equality of male and female workers.

In the years that followed the October revolution, scientific research and the general experimental and pro-active legislative climate fostered a debate about women’s welfare in the workplace. It was based on conceptions of measurable physical and biological differences between men and women, rather than on moral issues (as in the 19th century). Research showed women more prone to illness in certain environments. Much research quantified the occurrence of miscarriages, infant mortality and the disruption of the menstrual cycle, especially in young women. The data served to establish parameters as to where and how women should be employed without prejudice to their health and reproductive functions. The rationale behind the research was to expand the scope of female employment by introducing changes to the working environment rather than restricting the number of occupations acceptable for women. The argument was also made that the best way of protecting women was to raise their skill level (p. 35). Women were therefore encouraged to join literacy programmes and technical schools.

Two labour codes (*Kodeks Zakonov o Trude*) were introduced. The first appeared in December 1918, and a revised version in 1922 was to have Union-wide application in the newly created USSR. They detailed the rights and obligations of the Soviet labour force, including entitlement to labour protection. The labour code was not fully revised again until 1978. The Bolsheviks had very little time and money to invest in publications to make the newly acquired rights broadly known. Furthermore, during the chaotic period of the civil war, it was difficult to enforce the new rules. Economic circumstances often undermined the work of inspectors. This caused widespread infringement of the law. Research conducted in the scientific institutes nevertheless continued to document the need to protect female workers. Some of the most important legislative innovations were the establishment of monthly menstrual leave, paid maternal leave before and after birth, and the restriction of certain areas of work especially injurious to women's health and reproductive functions, such as tasks involving harmful industrial substances or underground work.

The first five-year plan, initiated in 1928, marks a watershed of sorts. First, the centralised thrust for industrialisation transformed the employment context. After an unemployment crisis (which affected women most seriously), a general shortage of workers augmented the demand for skilled as well as unskilled female labour. This provoked increased flexibility in the application of the law. Second, the imminence of war precipitated the need to form a female labour force qualified to take over men's jobs if the need arose. Contradicting earlier research, a number of scientific commissions reported in 1928 that women were better suited than men to certain restricted occupations, rather than more vulnerable (p. 94). The evidence met the country's economic needs. Ilić argues that amendments to the law merely sanctioned what was the reality of working conditions, where previous legislation had never really been enforced (p. 130). Records indicate that women were hired on the same terms as men, in violation of the protective law.

The debate around issues of protection and equality is complex. Throughout the period, the stereotype of the woman worker was both reinforced and challenged in protective labour laws. Many female workers felt that legislation giving women special status on the basis of their biological difference could hinder their rights and encourage existing prejudice. Measures such as 'menstrual leave' outline the potential conflict inherent in legislation based on women's reproductive functions; women became less desirable employees because they were considered weaker, and a burden to industry, which had to adapt. It was also said that the restriction of certain activities excluded women from skilled—and therefore better paid—employment. Protection was therefore viewed by some as detrimental to the 'woman question' in general. Some women refused to take advantage of protective measures.

The 1936 constitution declared women's equal citizenship; it contended that the 'woman question' had been resolved along with the achievement of socialism. In the work sphere, this claim was supported by the proliferation of technology, which rendered some tasks less physically demanding, and therefore appropriate for women. The 1930s were a period of great opportunity for many female workers, who were then able to acquire skills previously reserved to men, and work in better paid employment. On the other hand, female workers were deprived of some protective measures, such as the ban on night and underground work. By the late 1930s women formed over half the new recruits in industry, as new groups of women entered paid employment. They constituted about 40% of all paid workers, and infiltrated traditionally male domains (p. 36). Yet very little was planned to relieve them from the 'double burden'.

The legislation and its enactment are meticulously discussed under the following headings: Maternity; Hours of Work; Provisions for 'Menstrual Leave'; Weights and Loads; Restricted Occupations; Underground Work. This allows the author to recapitulate and clarify her argument following different paths. However, in this context of monumental social reorganisation, transition to a centralised economy and remapping of workers' identities, Ilić has largely

evacuated the social and the political from her argument, and therefore failed to theorise the state-society relationship. This is where this study can be disappointing. The transition from the protection of female workers to gender-blind employment appears to be grounded solely in the economic contingencies of two systems (Bolshevism and Stalinism), which are laconically defined by the same words: paternalistic and pro-natalist (pp. 7 and 56). The study does not significantly consider women's work in terms of broad ideological trends or other global indicators of change, such as demography, family structure, standard of living, geographical and social mobility, socio-political mobilisation, etc. The book is nevertheless the most comprehensive study on the topic of women's protective legislation in the Soviet interwar period.

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ANNIE GÉRIN

Jeremy Smith, *The Bolsheviks and the National Question, 1917–23*. Basingstoke: Macmillan and New York: St Martin's Press, 1999, xvii + 281 pp., £45.00.

SMITH'S STUDY OF EARLY SOVIET POLICIES towards the non-Russian nationalities is written with Richard Pipes's *The Formation of the Soviet Union*, first published in 1954, very much in mind. It is in its way a commentary on Pipes's work. It does not seek to dispute the factual aspect of Pipes's account of how the Soviet borderlands were brought under Bolshevik control, but it does contribute a body of factual material which tends to undermine Pipes's understanding of the motivation behind Soviet policies towards the nationalities. Whereas Pipes believed that there was nothing to be commended in these policies, that they were driven by purely tactical considerations, Smith's contention is that they evolved under a variety of influences, an important one being the intention to promote, rather than to deny, national distinctiveness.

Smith provides a number of instances in which the young Soviet state tried to foster the interests of the nationalities. These include the steps taken to reverse the tsarist policies of settling Russian colonists in Central Asia on lands formerly occupied by the indigenous Moslem peoples. Admittedly, as Smith points out, the policy was implemented only to a limited extent, but by 1923 some 7000 Moslem families had been resettled on former Russian land in Turkestan. Efforts were also made by the Soviet authorities to provide education for national minorities in their own languages, and to extend the provision for them of schools, libraries, literacy clubs and cultural events.

Moreover, encouragement was given to the formation of cadres of national communists, and the Soviet leadership was prepared to allow the recruitment into the national communist parties of former members of nationalist organisations. Thus, in 1919 members of the Jewish parties the Bund and Poale Zion were encouraged to join the Communist Party. In 1920 the Borotbists were admitted into the Ukrainian Communist Party and in the same year the Azerbaijani Hummet became the nucleus of the Azerbaijani Communist Party. Negotiations with the Armenian Dashnaks in 1921 to reach a similar arrangement, however, did not come to fruition. The Georgian nationalists were not co-opted into the local party organisation, and this was to lead to difficulties in Georgia in 1922 which became a bone of contention between Lenin and Stalin.

One of the most interesting aspects of Smith's research is the new light it sheds on the attitude towards the nationalities question of the leading political figures of the time: Lenin, Stalin and Trotsky. Contrary to the belief of previous writers on the subject that Stalin was the arch-centraliser while Lenin took a more liberal approach which was shared by Trotsky, it emerges that Stalin was originally the one who was sceptical about bringing all the nationalities into a closer union, and was reproached for this by Lenin. However, by 1922, when Stalin was