

Final Report:

Workers' Dissent in a Workers' Paradise?

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My one-month-and-a-half research at OSA had the goal to study Soviet worker-dissidents who were active in the USSR since the late 1970s. These worker-dissidents tried to found small independent trade unions, which were harshly repressed by the authorities. When I wrote my research proposal, I had a few preliminary ideas and hypotheses in mind, which were contradicted by the archival research. I started from the idea that, if the Cold War was considered a Manichean conflict between good and evil, Soviet labor dissent got probably neglected in the Western press. After all, dissidents were mostly seen in the West as intellectuals, not as workers.¹ Moreover, a previous research done by Svetlana Zakharova on OSA holdings showed that the gender-female question, for example, was largely excluded by the dissident movement, because of a stress on civil/political/human rights, and on heroic, male dissidents.² Furthermore, I imagined that labor dissent in the USSR must have used, if not a Marxist/Communist terminology, at least a terminology coming from Socialism and from the workers' movement, and this might have not be welcomed in the Western press.

In the light of the many precious sources which I consulted at OSA, however, I can now largely reconsider my initial hypothesis. Of the 42 boxes which I consulted, the most relevant are 300-80-1:760 and 761, because they are two boxes specifically dedicated to Workers-Dissidents. One first fact I found out is that labor dissent in the USSR was a small movement. To give one example, the independent trade union SMOT never claimed to have more than a few hundred members, and possibly a few thousand sympathizers (the difference which the Polish union Solidarity, which gained 10 million members in one year, is striking). In this, worker-dissidents were similar to intellectual dissidents, that is, they were an active, "noisy" minority. One more similarity is that worker-dissidents

¹ Marshall S. Shatz, *Soviet Dissent in Historical Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

² Svetlana Zakharova, "Gendering Soviet Dissent: How and Why the Woman Question Was Excluded from the Agenda of Soviet Dissidents," MA Thesis, CEU, Budapest, 2013.

produced a lot of written material, and actively sought the attention of the foreign media. My most interesting finding regards precisely the role of the Western media, trade unions and political parties. In reality, the British and American media gave attention to Soviet labor dissent, because it exposed one crucial inconsistency of the Soviet system. This inconsistency, in a sense, became a Cold War discursive tool. Trade unions from many Western countries also seemed to support Soviet working-class dissent (cases of pro-Soviet Western trade unions turning a blind eye on the issue or siding with Soviet authorities seem to have been a minority). Support from Western politics came from a large spectrum. While rightists/conservatives criticized this Soviet inconsistency as one of the many aspects of a flawed ideology, those Leftists who supported Soviet labor dissent (like the British Eric Heffer and many others) did so precisely out of a sense of consistency. As they clearly stated, Soviet workers deserved the same rights enjoyed by workers in Western countries. Labor repression in the USSR could only discredit the political left and the labor movement even of Western countries.

The four boxes dedicated to trade unions (300-80-1:754, 755, 756 and 757) were less relevant, because they mostly contain material on official Soviet trade unions (which obviously were not independent from the state; free unions arose exactly in opposition to these state bodies). Their most interesting material comes with the perestroika, and at the turn of the 1990s. The sources show that in the last years of the USSR independent trade unions became a larger, more important actor in the country's life (the sources also document their evolution in the first years after 1991).

The box on uprisings (300-80-1:180) was also less relevant, because it mostly contains material on well-known workers' uprisings like the ones in Novochoerkassk and Vorkuta.³ The box on proletarian internationalism (300-80-1:728/1) contained virtually no relevant material. The two boxes on peoples' complaints (300-80-1:255 and 256) are useful as a background, because they show that Soviet

³ V.A. Kozlov, *Massovye bezporiadki v SSSR pri Krushcheve i Brezhneve (1953 – nachalo 1980-kh gg.)* (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2009); Erik Kulavig, *Dissent in the Years of Khrushchev. Nine Stories about Disobedient Russians* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002); Samuel H. Baron, *Bloody Saturday in the Soviet Union. Novochoerkassk, 1962* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001); Anastasia Felcher, "A Massacre under Khrushchev: Novochoerkassk Shooting on Screen, on Air, and on Banners," <https://osaarchivum.org/blog/a-massacre-under-khrushchev-novochoerkassk-shooting-on-screen-on-air-and-on-banners;>

workers flooded authorities and the press with complaints on workplaces, housing, and shortages. The official Soviet sphere accepted some of these complaints, but it did not succeed in addressing the systemic faults which were behind them. Klebanov and other worker-dissidents, in fact, underlined that they turned to dissident activity because official channels did not solve toilers' problems. Similarly, the three boxes on the standard of life (300-80-1:262, 263 and 264) provide a useful background, because they show many workers were unsatisfied with their standard of living. The three boxes on dissidents (300-80-1:292, 293 and 294) do not contain much on labor dissent. This confirms the widespread view of dissidents as intellectuals, and also suggests that those who collected the sources saw labor dissent as something different from the general movement. The two boxes on anti-Soviet statements (300-80-1:44 and 45) contain little relevant material. Apart from the two boxes on Workers-dissidents (300-80-1:760 and 761), the second most relevant collection for my research was that with the biographical files (300-85-13). I consulted 23 boxes from this collection (2, 3, 23, 39, 68, 93, 110, 125, 126, 142, 158, 186, 187, 201, 207, 209, 211, 215, 233, 237, 254, 278, 282). My methodology was to look in the biographical files for the recurring, most important names which I found in the boxes on Workers-dissidents. These biographical files are extremely interesting and fascinating, because they shed light on the personal, individual stories of many workers-dissidents. While some (like Klebanov and Pohyba) were manual laborers, others (like Skvirskii or Morozov) had intellectual professions (mathematicians, pedagogues, jurists, etc.). This shows that the intellectual/labor dissent divide was not clear-cut. Comparing their life stories also shows the many political/ideological shades of workers-dissidents. Among them I found the Ukrainian Mykola Pohyba, who consistently used class language in his writings; the Marxist philosopher Petr Egides; and Valerii Senderov, a believer and member of the far-right organization NTS.⁴ The evolution through time of some of these figures is also engaging. One case in point is that

⁴ Benjamin Tromly, "The Making of a Myth: The National Labor Alliance, Russian Émigrés and Cold War Intelligence Activities," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 18/1 (2016): 80–111; Benjamin Tromly, "Émigré Politics and the Cold War: The National Labor Alliance (NTS), United States Intelligence Agencies and Post-War Europe," *Contemporary European History* (2019); David C.S. Albanese, "'It Takes a Russian to Beat a Russian': the National Union of Labor Solidarists, Nationalism, and Human Intelligence Operations in the Cold War," *Intelligence and National Security* (2017).

of Valeriia Novodvorskaia. A pedagogue, she was one of the founders of SMOT in 1978, but between the 1980s and 1990s she became a right-wing Liberal.

My overall judgement of the OSA holdings on the topic of labor dissent in the Soviet Union is really positive. Apart from the abundance of relevant material (which may allow me to write a few research articles, if not a book), I argue that the collections I consulted lend themselves to engaging interpretations on Cold War ideologies, discourses, and on Cold War archives. The interest of the West (and of RFE-RL in particular) is certainly an important result of my research. However, I argue that my research and the sources I used can be the starting point for more reflections on history and sociology of labor after the end of the USSR. The widespread grievances of Soviet workers (but also the fact that few of them organized independently), may explain the evolution of labor and trade unions in the past few decades of Russian history.

Appendix

- 300-80-1:760 and 761 - Workers-dissidents
- 300-80-1:754, 755, 756 and 757 – Trade unions
- 300-80-1:180 – Uprisings
- 300-80-1:728/1 - Proletarian internationalism
- 300-80-1:255 and 256 - People's complaints
- 300-80-1:262, 263 and 264 – Life standard
- 300-80-1:292, 293 and 294 – Dissidents
- 300-80-1:44 and 45 - Anti-Soviet statements

Bio-files

- 300-85-13:2 – Egides
- 300-85-13:3 – Agapov(a)
- 300-85-13:23 – Baranov

- 300-85-13:39 – Borisov
- 300-85-13:68 – Volokhonskii
- 300-85-13:93 – Grimm
- 300-85-13:110 – Egides
- 300-85-13:125 and 126 – Ivanov, Ivanchenko
- 300-85-13:142 - Klebanov
- 300-85-13:158 – Kuvakin
- 300-85-13:186, 187 – Marchenko
- 300-85-13:201 – Morozov
- 300-85-13:207 – Nekipelov
- 300-85-13:209 – Nikitin, Nikolaev
- 300-85-13:211 – Novodvorskaia
- 300-85-13:215 – Orekhov
- 300-85-13:233 - Pohyba
- 300-85-13:237 – Poplavskii
- 300-85-13:254 – Rusakova, Sytinskii, Satter
- 300-85-13:278 - Senderov
- 300-85-13:282 – Skvirskii