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The Hazards of Urban Life in Late Stalinist Russia: Health, Hygiene, and Living Standards, 1943-1953

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Donald Filtzer has added another major book to his long and impressive contribution to the study of Soviet history. It is a formidably detailed analysis of urban living conditions during the late Stalinist period, from the closing stages of the Second World War to the death of Stalin in 1953. While it bears Professor Filtzer?s unmistakable mark, it is also something of a new departure. Filtzer made his name as a historian of Soviet labour in a sequence of books that runs from the Stalin to Gorbachev periods. Making meticulous use of whatever were the best sources available at the time ? he had completed the research for three of these books before the archival goldrush of the 1990s ? he constructed in each monograph careful analyses of such issues as the structure of the labour market, wages, the operations of the industrial enterprise, working and living conditions, and the lot of women workers. This empirical robustness is matched by ideological conviction. On the eighth line of *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization*, Filtzer declares: ?The analysis here is Marxist?.(1) That theoretical scaffolding holds up his entire *oeuvre*, though at varying levels of intrusiveness. The student who has reached the end of *Soviet Workers and the Collapse of Perestroika* encounters an injunction to ?Seize the Time? (the time being that which followed the Soviet collapse, one of ?massive promise and potential, such as humanity has not seen for over three-quarters of a century?).(2)

That promise has evaporated. Little rhetoric can be found in *The Hazards of Urban Life*, where both the

historical picture and the mood of the historian seem unrelievedly dark. The Marxist political economy is less emphasized, though the basic argument about Stalinism, rooted in Marx, remains the same. *The Hazards of Urban Life* is Filtzer?s second book about the late Stalinist period. His first was a history of workers, published in 2002, and he enjoins us in the introduction to the newer book to see the two as companions.(3) This second book is about the standard of living, somewhat scientifically conceived, of ordinary people in the hinterland cities of that part of the Soviet Union that might be characterized as European Russia. By ?hinterland?, Filtzer means here the cities that were not directly damaged by fighting or bombing during the war. And in defining ?standard of living?, Filtzer acknowledges at the outset that this is a history without human characters. There are, indeed, no people in *The Hazards of Urban Life*, just city populations. But Filtzer is being disarming. He might have eschewed that genre of archival sources that allows historians of the USSR to spice their analyses with individual life stories and illustrative anecdotes, and his story is in some ways more compelling for it, especially in his superb first three chapters. These cover sanitation, water supplies and hygiene, while the last two chapters, which are denser, explore nutrition and infant mortality. Filtzer interprets his evidence to show that the standard of living was even lower than was previously thought, sometimes almost unimaginably low. As is often the case, a sad story makes good reading.

Late Stalinism is one of the periods of Russian history that has been attracting scholars, especially doctoral candidates, in their droves. Professor Filtzer?s two books on the period make a good claim to be the outstanding contribution by a Western specialist to our understanding of late Stalinism. Until the 1990s, late Stalinism seemed to lack defining controversies or historical colour. There was nothing in these eight years that could possibly generate the disputes that revisionist historians ignited about the causes and consequences of 1917, or the angry exchanges about the continuities between Leninism and Stalinism that the Cold War made so urgent. When the archive opened, however, historians crafted lines of debate. How exactly did the Second World War change the Soviet Union? Did the war create a reformed version of Stalinism? Might 1945 (or 1941?5) be as important a turning point as 1953 (or 1953?6)? Did some of the reforms associated with the years of de-Stalinization actually begin during late Stalinism?

Filtzer perhaps engages with these questions less explicitly than other historians; to some extent, his consistent Marxism and startlingly well-focused descriptions allow him to rise above the fray. But he still has a set of answers, and they make a congruent whole with the interpretation of Stalinism that he published in 1986 in his first book about Soviet workers. For Filtzer, the explanation is about class. The October Revolution was an inspirational event and the triumph of the Russian proletariat. Yet this same working class was obliterated by the Stalin Revolution (or counter-revolution) that began with the first five-year plan in 1928. Stalin?s elite ? reinforced by many workers promoted into industrial management ? viciously exploited the working class and the peasantry. In order to ?extract the surplus? in a sustainable way and thus to maintain its dominance and privileges at the continued expense of the rest of society, Stalin?s new ruling class had to destroy the capacity of workers to identify themselves as a homogenous social unit that was capable of formulating a political position and protesting collectively. The political economy of Stalinism, and the police who made it possible, broke the bonds that tied the working class together. They atomized the working class. What resulted was not socialism, but another chapter in the story of class repression. Stalinist planning had as little in common with socialism as it had with capitalism; its mistreatment of the population, together with its bureaucratic inadequacy, made the Stalinist command economy repressive and actually ?planless?. While this process was partly reversed during the Second World War, it was vigorously pursued once more between 1945 and 1953. The pressure might have lightened somewhat at the end of the 1940s, but late Stalinism was a still more aggressive assault on the working class than 1930s Stalinism. Stalinism was not reformed by the experience of the Second World War, and its anti-working class character continued to inform policy long after Stalin?s death. I have no doubt reduced Filtzer?s argument, which he makes with powerful consistency and an emphatic empirical grip. Even so, the archive is so enormous, and the experiences it presents are so fuzzily various, that no historical scheme can envelope it.

In *The Hazards of Urban Life*, the picture of workers? lives is still bleaker than in *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism*, though the basic argument remains the same. The work of 2002 has a broader conspectus. In it, Filtzer discussed the famine of 1946?7, rationing, housing, health, young workers, labour discipline, and

conditions inside the industrial enterprise. He drew on wide sources, headlined by more than two dozen archival collections (funds, or *fondy*) and numerous factory newspapers, in order to make a good claim to have written an account of Soviet workers between 1945 and 1953 that is both broad and sufficiently detailed. If here he cast a wide net, in the latest book he has sunk a deep and narrow bore. *The Hazards of Urban Life* is the fruit of Filtzer?s intense and intensive encounter with seven archival funds held at Moscow?s two branches of the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF in the Russian acronym), and at the Russian State Archive of the Economy, which is located in the same building as GARF?s principal depository. These are the collections of: the Ministry of Public Health of the USSR; that ministry?s State Sanitary Inspectorate; the Ministry of Labour Reserves of the USSR; the Statistical Administration of the USSR?S Russian republic (RSFSR); the Ministry of Public Health of the RSFSR; the Central Statistical Administration of the USSR; and the Ministry of Transport. Filtzer has also read widely in associated and often highly complex published sources, such as the writings of Stalin-era epidemiologists. The result is more descriptive than in his earlier books. His systematic and fluent presentation of his findings is in the first instance a report of conditions in Soviet hinterland cities between 1943 and 1953; Filtzer?s deliberate strategy is to incorporate most of the explicit argument and interpretation at the end, in the conclusion. If the book is still a Marxist one, it is one from which the scaffolding has been removed, and theoretical justifications are presented with a lighter touch. Nevertheless, the direction of the analytical description is unmistakable and relentless, especially for those who have read his earlier books.

The book might lack personal stories, but it draws a vivid picture of misery in the late Stalinist city. Filtzer?s faceless masses walk up and down flights of stairs and cross filthy streets to get water from standpipes, they suffer an absolute shortage of soap and a broken sanitation system, they endure hunger and disease, they lack the promised bathhouses: the book makes clever structural connections between failures of planning, lack of cleanliness, exhaustion, illness, and low productivity. Filtzer explores in immense detail some of those areas of life, such as sanitation, which other historians have been too fastidious to handle. He describes post-war cities that lacked any proper sewage facilities, with excrement everywhere, in which a lack of clean water and hot water wrecked people?s days and nights. These cities are more shockingly miserable places than we have understood up to now.

Filtzer?s ability to draw the dots between different aspects of late Stalinist society, economy and politics allows him to explain, for instance, why the Stalinist system was prone to pollute rivers in certain ways. While the overarching argumentative framework is deliberately light, the insertion of such rigorous argumentative cameos always anchors the description in consistent analysis. Similarly, Filtzer inserts his familiar points about the Stalinist command economy, such as the tendency of the profit-and-loss accounting system to ensure that industrial enterprises acted in their own interests rather than in those of the wider plan, with cumulatively disastrous results, to explain particular problems with urban water supply. In his chapter on hygiene and public health, he goes into fearsome detail simply to describe what typhus is, but chains his description to the bigger point: that Stalinist public health policy was indifferent to people?s quality of life; it merely aimed to prevent epidemics and reduce levels of disease so that people would not be so ill, and die in such numbers and so young, that the economy failed to reinforce the system of rule.

In the second half of the book, the focus shifts from the urban environment to detailed studies of nutrition and infant mortality that rely on a very elaborate presentation of statistics. The level of detail is extraordinarily impressive, but its accumulation reduces the readability of the book. Nevertheless, Filtzer succeeds in making clear the connection between diet and the inner workings of late Stalinism. Poor nutrition made workers physically incapable of achieving the levels of productivity that the plan required; physiology rather than survival strategies or collective action made them literally slow down. Similarly, his chapter on infant mortality is so careful and detailed that it is can scarcely be challenged. By the end of the book, Filtzer has completed a holistic interpretation of living standards in the late Stalinist hinterland city. With very precise attention to the evidence, he shows how poor sanitation (the subject of the first chapter) fostered the gastrointestinal infections that caused high infant mortality (the subject of the last chapter), and how the fall in both indexes from 1951 was most likely the result of public health campaigns, especially concerning personal hygiene, that had been launched some years before.

As Filtzer is writing about hinterland cities, he can show that these dreadful conditions were caused not by wartime destruction but by the malevolence of the Stalinist elite, repressing the working class ever more fiercely in order to restore their post-war power and guarantee their ?extraction of the surplus?. But does research on hinterland cities really show this? On the one hand, such cities offer far from a scientific ?control?; they might not have suffered direct wartime destruction, but their economies were still wrecked by the war. They were thrown off balance by complex, conflicting economic claims; they were subject to dreadful shortages, to the terrible overcrowding that followed the influx of evacuees, and to appalling neglect of infrastructure. All of those problems were as much the consequence of the war as they were of the pure Stalinist system. Of course, war and Stalinism cannot be analytically disentangled: but that is the point. On the other hand, some aspects of these cities? economies recovered particularly quickly. housing construction was much more rapid in the hinterland than it was in areas that had been subject to destruction, though there was great variation and many exceptions.(4) Housing construction was relatively high during these years, and late Stalinism established the basis for the major programme that was launched later in the 1950s. Yet Filtzer?s argument cannot explain this. Nothing could be less reasonable than asking Filtzer to consult more archival sources, and he has shown indisputably how bad life was in late Stalinist cities; but material in other funds makes the picture more blurred and varied. Take Filtzer?s point that the growth in provision of gas in the urban housing stock was largely confined to Moscow. Examination of documents that are more directly tied to this topic than Filtzer?s suggest that ?gasification? was more widespread, and even reached the hinterland.

Meanwhile, Filtzer?s use of comparative history raises questions which the book does not answer. By positioning the Soviet case developmentally, on an historical arc of urbanization, he argues that even in the late 1940s and 1950s, Soviet urban life was decades behind Britain and Germany, even according to such basic indexes as the provision of sanitation and hot water. But what about comparisons that have the same chronological frame as Filtzer?s book, comparisons with other parts of Europe and Japan in the 1940s and 1950s? How bad was water supply in Brno, or sanitation in the most squalid parts of Glasgow, or infant mortality in Kyoto between 1945 and 1953? The long-range developmental comparisons contain an implicit teleology and fit with the rhythms of Marxism; they might or might not be misplaced, but they are not sensitive to contingency. One could make very provisional comparisons of hinterland cities in different countries, which would throw at least a little light on the extent to which the dreadful conditions that existed in Soviet cities were indeed the result of the elite going to war against the working class.

Filtzer?s characterization of Stalinist society relies on an assumption that the Stalinist elite was united. But this does not seem right. After all, a history without individual people cannot reflect the contingencies, disputes and ambitions that help shape individuals? actions. The behaviour of local leaders ? the bosses of Filtzer?s hinterland cities ? is indeed consistent with Filtzer?s ideas about the ?planless? economy and vicious, selfish accumulation at the expense of ordinary workers. But his arguments cannot explain the existence of what might be considered ?enlightened officials?: that minority of professionals and bureaucrats based in Moscow and republican capitals who designed the social policies that were grounded in an explicit desire to fulfil the promise of 1917 and pay back the sacrifice of 1941?5. Such officials took seriously the

war?s rhetorical re-legitimation of the Soviet project. Much of the recent literature is preoccupied with seeking out how the work of these officials prefigured and made possible the reforms of the Khrushchev era. (5) Filtzer does not engage with this debate; the conclusions he draws from his class analysis do not really make such an engagement possible.

Moreover, Filtzer?s conception of Stalinism has long depended on the notion of ?atomization?: a totalitarian dynamic which placed ordinary people in repressive vertical relations with authority rather than in horizontal ties with members of their own class. Workers thus distrusted those around them, and were left to rely on themselves to get the things they needed in the economy of terror and shortages. In this latest book, Filtzer has acknowledged that our knowledge of people?s survival strategies (6) undermines the notion of ?atomization?: it is better, he contends, to talk of ?molecularization?. But this witty mouthful does not explain how the regime sought to co-opt the energies of the population (to the extent that those energies existed) for the sake of projects that satisfied both individual aspirations and wider social and economic needs. The ultimate goal was indeed the entrenchment of the Stalinist system, but post-war Stalinism was sufficiently different from pre-war Stalinism for the process to become collaborative as well as coercive. A notable example is the expansion from 1944 of the scheme by which credits were provided for those citizens who wished to build their own house. Society was indeed fractured after the war, as Elena Zubkova?s work suggests, but it seems schematic to introduce rigid state-society divisions, or indeed models based on class, to describe it.(7) People cooperated and quarrelled across all kinds of faultlines.

Nevertheless, there is a magnificence about Filtzer?s achievement in *The Hazards of Urban Life*. Most of its empirical detail, and many of its conclusions, cannot be challenged. It stands right at the front of writing on late Stalinism ? but it is strangely old-fashioned. Few researchers are now drawn to Soviet history by a commitment to the politics of the Left. More often they are attracted directly by the historical problem of how to explain modern dictatorship or indirectly by the charms of Russian culture. Objectively speaking, Professor Filtzer?s convinced approach has dated. But anyone who disagrees with his conclusions will only make a case by working as hard and as long in Russian archives as he himself has done. In research on the socio-economic history of late Stalinism, Filtzer is the vanguard.

Notes

1. Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization: the Formation of Modern Soviet Production Relations, 1928-1941* (London, 1986), p. 1.Back to (1)
2. Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and the Collapse of Perestroika: the Soviet Labour Process and Gorbachev?s Reforms* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 224.Back to (2)
3. Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Late Stalinism: Labour and the Restoration of the Stalinist System after World War II* (Cambridge, 2002).Back to (3)
4. Mark B. Smith, *Property of Communists: the Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev* (DeKalb, IL, 2010), p. 38.Back to (4)
5. See for example the essays in *Soviet State and Society under Nikita Khrushchev*, ed. Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith (Abingdon, 2009).Back to (5)
6. As defined in such major works as Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times: Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (New York, NY, 1999).Back to (6)
7. Elena Zubkova, *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions and Disappointments, 1945-1957* (Armonk, NY, 1998).Back to (7)

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