

Wendy Z. Goldman. *Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin's Russia*. Cambridge University Press, 2002

Drawing on a rich array of published and archival documentation, Wendy Goldman's study analyses the struggle between women and the Soviet state and ruling party to determine who joined the Soviet proletariat during Stalin's first five-year plan, and what it meant for those who did so. The gates in the title are the factory gates and also the metaphorical gates guarding entry to the Soviet working class. The story of the book is of segregation, discrimination, and prejudice. Prejudice stemmed from above and below. From below, men resented the intrusion of women into the workplace, preferred them to be shut away in clearly defined subordinate spheres and roles, and abused them when they overstepped the mark. From above, party leaders and government officials stereotyped working women as ignorant, unskilled, politically passive, and potentially disloyal, and so were initially reluctant to see them as a solution rather than a problem.

Starting from the 1920s, Goldman documents how these attitudes evolved under the pressure of rapid industrialisation. The confluence of official policy with male attitudes in society persisted while labour remained abundant. During the 1920s public-sector industry and construction were able to grow mainly by re-employing the predominantly male former proletarians previously dispersed by the economic collapse of 1917 to 1921. The vast acceleration of job creation at the end of the 1920s, however, compelled rethinking. Recruiting female workers to urban employment eventually became an official priority for several reasons: women who were already in urban families were seen as more politically and socially reliable than male workers fresh from the increasingly hungry and embittered countryside; they did not require costly re-housing; against the prevailing stereotype and despite generous maternal entitlements, women proved more stable and more productive employees than their male counterparts in many occupations.

In fact the year on year growth of female employment between 1928 and 1935, although highly variable, was steadier than the still more volatile series for growth of total and male employment and, by implication, for recruitment of male employees of rural origin.

The path chosen by official policy was not to integrate men and women in the work force but to re-segregate them in a new way. Goldman shows how whole branches of the public sector were redesignated for predominantly or exclusively female employment so as to free men for work in heavy industry and engineering. This policy was not popular and met with some resistance. The line between planning and administered chaos was thin, sometimes invisible. To the extent that the policy worked one may speculate, however, that at least the conflicts it provoked were temporary; a policy of forced integration might well have resulted in a more protracted war of attrition by men against women in the workplace.

Goldman shows first, therefore, that the gates to the working class were pushed over for a while and women were massively recruited, but in a regulated way rather than freely. Second, as the thirst for workers abated in the mid-1930s the gates were re-erected by means of new mechanisms of control and selection: piece rates, rationing, controls on absence and quitting, and passports.

The book's story has a texture that is richer than a short review can easily convey. In particular there is a lively social history of women's party and workplace organisations and their waning voice. Transcripts, press reports, and anecdotes are woven skilfully into a seamless narrative that the reader can only admire.

Here and there the weaving is too skilful, with the effect that significant problems may be overlooked. One is the source of official policies that stereotyped and discriminated against women; these can potentially be explained in several different ways. Male party and government officials may have behaved in that way because they were part of society and shared the same prejudices as other men. Alternatively,

even if lacking prejudice themselves, they may have tried to accommodate prejudice for the sake of production, making everyday concessions to the patriarchy of the workplace so as to lessen conflict in the short term and soothe the injured pride of established male workers. Official prejudice, if that is what it was, can also be understood in different ways. It may have been instrumental to maintaining a male domination in society from which the officials benefited as men. Alternatively, it may have been instrumental to solving either an allocation problem or a political problem for them: if an attribute of individuals such as loyalty or productivity is valuable but hard to observe and is thought to be correlated with gender, it may be privately efficient to select by gender although a price may be paid later in lost social integration. Thus official behaviour can be interpreted in several different ways that are not distinguished in the book's narrative.

Another aspect that may be respectfully questioned is the poetic unity of the story, which appears artificial in places. That there were such gates to the working class and that they were then torn down works as both image and history. That they were then re-erected is also a nice image that gives closure to the story. But as history it is questionable. Of the mechanisms that, according to Goldman, rebuilt the gates the introduction of internal passports belongs to this story, certainly. But piece rates, rationing, and new controls on absence and quitting are more to do with other stories, especially that of the concurrent famine in the countryside which Goldman neglects as context. Even the success in stemming the flow of peasants into the factory that she attributes to the new passport regime was at least as much a result of rural post-famine recovery as of new rules.

The subtitle reference to "Stalin's Russia" is over-general; little in the book relates to years later than 1932. Also to be regretted is the lack of a bibliography.

Regardless of such reservations this is a fine book. Its story is interesting, original, and important. Diligently researched, carefully presented, and excellently written, it deserves to be widely read.

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