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Workers in Forests: Social Identity and Labour Motivation in Timber Industry of Karelia in 1917-1928

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Nowadays Russian historical science tries to find new methods and research fields in the process of overcoming problems of the Soviet-Marxist historical heritage. One of these attempts is concerned with elaborating some alternative research approaches for changing stereotypes of Soviet Marxism in the field of working class history. One of such changes consists in the attempt to use socio-cultural reconstruction of Soviet social being. This article is dedicated to studying labor relations during the first decade of the Soviet period (1917-1928) on the example of timber industry of Northwestern Russia and Karelia. The main problem for researching is: what was a real social image and labour motivation among first Soviet timber workers? The article was created mainly based on the archive documents from the National Archive of Republic of Karelia.

Keywords: timber industry in Karelia, working class history, social self-identification, labour motivation.

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Introduction

The social-economic and political processes occurred during the last decades in Russia effected the process of studying working class history. And one of the most important problems of the research is the question about the social nature of workers in the Soviet State and disputes about its nature after revolution, about the place of working class in a social structure of the soviet society. One of the total debate progresses was

the understanding of complexity and diversity of the object.

And nowadays historians in Russia have some expectations for using socio-cultural “reconstruction” of a social being by means of cultural practices. And the main problem here for researchers also abroad is to show how subjective presentations, thoughts, abilities, intentions of individuals are realized in the space of the possibilities, which is limited by

the objective conditions (Brained E., 2010). It is especially important to understand it while one tries to interpret the achievements in the field of working history, which now includes many unexpected aspects of labor activity and positions of workers.

At the same time probably the most important problem among these aspects is the labour morality of society that has a great importance for economic progress increasing to capacity of the labour and well-being of the population. Some economists believe that labour morality is a fourth factor of production after the known three – land, labour and capital. In modern foreign historiography this aspect is also one of the most popular subjects for dispute (Bessen J., 2012). The regulations of labour morality usually include motives and satisfaction of a worker in a labour process.

Materials and Methods

The motivation for a labour consists of two basic components: a level of labour discipline and some element of creativity in the working process. The attitude to the labour, as any complex notion, includes many different aspects. The empirical signs allowing to give it operational interpretation could be: absences, coming late to work, breaches of the labour agreement and rules of the internal routine, faulty work, drunkenness and larceny during working process.

U. Chase has defined the labour discipline as “a broad variety of production peculiarities and relations to the working process such as: well-timed receipts on a work, honest execution of work, valid attitude to equipment, materials and products of the labour; accurate execution of controlling personnel’s instructions; the minimum absence on the work”. One should also remember that it is not so easy to shift any clear boundary between free and unfree labour in the context of Soviet reality of the 1920-1930-s

(Brown C., 2010). And a female aspect of such kind of labour could be a separate subject for research (Weinstein B., 2006) but in this paper it was only chalked out.

Results

The European North of Russia was always one of the largest regions of the country with timber resources. For the local population who lived in the stern natural and climatic conditions timber very often was the main source of the existence: place for living, the source of building materials, firewood and food. Although some modern authors abroad think that history of relations between people and woods could be interpreted more complicated (Kirby K., 2012). According to the traditional way of life local rural population the European North of Russia for a long time had here some necessary skills for logging and floating. Before the revolution in 1917 lumbering was realized seasonally and by recruiting of workers occurred by conclusions of contracts between logging organizations and businessman from one side and artels of woodsman from the other.

The chronological frames chosen for the current project cover the period of the first Soviet decade and include such historical events as the advent to power of Bolshevik Party, Civil war, New Economic Policy. With beginning of realization of the first five-year plan in the period of Industrialization also began the formation of the Soviet logging enterprises in 1929. Since that time, equally with attraction of the seasonal workers in the timber industry constant personnel of workers was created and one could name this period like a Soviet proto-industrialization though this term is still polemized (Marfany U., 2010). It means that a new type of a Soviet worker appeared with new solely “Soviet” motivation to the labour. The most specific feature of this period was that in 1917-1928 the main labour force in the process

of logging was a local peasantry, that had their own “rural” relation to the forests having little common with presentations of Soviet authorities about the rates and directions of the development of timber resources in the region.

The first economic actions of the Soviet authorities were connected with the Decree-law “On the land”, in which was proclaimed that “all resources of the earth: ore, oil, coal..., as well as wood and water are national property and could be used only for exclusive use state”. According to this Decree the private property for forests was annulled and also was declared that forestry must be realized “in the interests of the commonwealth” (Decree-laws of Soviet authorities, 1957, P. 17-20). Actually for new authorities at this moment the exploitation of forests was the problem of economic survival, because they need to solve the problem fuel crisis in the situation of Civil war. Though for Russian peasant understood that the definition of “commonwealth” itself was connected with a notion of “communal interest” implied the natural right of peasants for forests that were used by them for economic survival during long times. As a result the annulling of private property for forests was perceived by peasantry as a possibility for uncontrolled logging wood for selling. Thereby at this period the labour motivation was concerned with communal needs of Karelian peasantry in wood.

However these labour motives of peasantry for felling wood were not acceptable for new authorities. In January 17-28, 1918 in Petrograd the All-Russian congress of land committees was held and it debated the Main law about socialization of land. This law stipulated equalizing using of land among peasants, including woods. The 5th article of Soviet Decree “On socialization of land” (February 19, 1918) runs: “The disposal of subsoil, woods, waters and natural forces are given, according to their ranks, to district, regional and federal Soviet authorities under control of

the latter...” (NARK. F. R-249. Inv. 1. F. 1/22. L. 15). In March of 1918 the Land Committee of Olonetskaja province (Gubzemelkom) began to realize these decisions and pointed that all private woods must be taken under guard to prevent self-willed chopping of peasants. All the moneys previously earned by peasants in the process of logging wood also must be given to Gubzemelkom.

These resolutions met protests among peasantry of Olonetskaja province. During the period of March-April 1918 they decided to defeat the nationalization of peasant’s plots of wood lands, which was, actually, imposed upon by new authorities. Peasants demanded money brought for logging wood and also marked that they could not agree with the Law on abolition of private property for peasantry woods, because these woods were the only treasure for them.

Moreover, when in Autumn in 1918 the labour conscription for wood harvesting was started, peasants of Avdeevskaja volost decided not to recognize Soviet rule and declared the following: “...Soviet rule, as treat us against our will and as leading us to death, we could not recognize and also will not obey all its directions that are not good for our interests...” (NARK. F. R-249. Inv. 1. F. 1/7). Thus, during this period in conditions of general famine and devastation the main labour motive for Karelian peasantry was material incentive (reception of “timber” money) as the only one clear labour motivation for local rural population who for a long time lived and survived due to wood trade.

Following realizing the labour conscription for wood harvesting among local population did not give any positive result, because people, actually, were not concerned with forced labour without economic interest. The problem was not solved even when in 1918-1919 the Interim rules for distribution of wood for local needs were realized, which simplified getting timber

raw materials for locals their own terms and mitigated punishments for logging timber without permission.

Moreover, in the conditions of devastation fuel wood crisis worsen relations between townspeople and rural population. Peasants who had supplies of firewood refused to sell it to town dwellers. According to the opinion of the head of the Pudozhskiy wood committee in December 1919 this situation was deplorable, because firewood were stocked mainly by well-off peasantry who did not want anything from the town that could be exchanged for firewood, but working-class from towns had to sell the last cloth just to buy firewood. At that time the only one motive for successful labour was providing with foodstuffs. From the report of a woodward of Kenozerskoe forestry in May 24, 1919 follows that in Kenozerskoe and Pochezerskoe forestry abject poverty and need of bread resulted in starvation of local population when people had to eat only straw.

Then after the conclusion of the Civil war Soviet authorities began to pay more attention to timber concession. However, this form of economic measures was not so effective, because foreign businessmen and Soviet authorities could not very often come to an agreement. At the same time the interference of foreign concessionaires in the sphere of the economic relations between Soviet power and workers of timber industry created the field for competition between a traditional model of Soviet labour “motivation-enforcement” and a model of material incentive. These apprehensions somewhat were justified and about them in its report “About timber concession on the north of the European Russia” spoke V. I. Lenin: “We were spoken that concessionaries will create exclusive conditions for their own workers. They will bring for them best cloth, best footwear and best provision. This will be their propaganda amongst our workers that must

endure a lot of deprivations and will endure it for a long time” (The Soviet timber economy, 2005, P. 42). At the same time Lenin considered the policy of concessions as a policy of continuation of a war between socialist and capitalist camps.

In this war Soviet rule continued traditionally to resort to the forced types of labour motivation. One of such kinds of methods of labour “stipulation was “penalized timber squads” that began to form in February 1921 according to the regulation of the Olonetskiy executive committee. Under the regulation nationals who did not fulfill the State plan of stocking wood must be assigned to the Committee of labour deserters. That is extremely significant that for the purpose of convoy and supervision of these “deserts” the Committee assigned 20 Red Army soldiers. So, one could see that on this stage of economic development of Soviet State an inefficiency of militarization of labour in the timber industry became obvious.

In 1920-1921 the main problem of social, economic and political life in Karelia was fulfillment of plans of food and timber allocations. The attempts of resolving these problems by means of punishments and intimidation only worsened the situation. Since the beginning of 1921 in a connection with a provision crisis in Soviet Russia transportation of food to Karelia actually ceased. Local population, who did not earn anything in lumbering, left this work.

Important changes in stipulating labour motivation of timber workers must be realized in the result of resolutions of the 10th Congress of Russian Communist Party that considered abnormality of a form of relationships between town and country existed in that period when peasantry (the main labour force in lumbering) was in unprofitable conditions of life and working in comparing with town workers. In the Soviet history this was the beginning of, so called, New Economic Policy (NEP), which implicated some elements of capitalism in Soviet economic policy

and of course should have produced new forms of labour stipulation.

However, practically the main incentive for intensification of production sphere in timber industry was remained compulsion and frightening, which hardly could be called as an effective method of labour motivation. According to the sentence of Olonetskiy revolutionary tribunal in December 22, 1921: nationals of Povenetskiy uyezd shirked working in State lumbering during Winter of 1921 must be taken to work in Povenetskiy regional timber enterprise. In a case of evasion from this work they must be sent to compulsory working to the railway station Segezha (Murmanskaja railway) at the disposal of the Timber department of Povenetskiy regional Committee for the period of three months. Such kind of measures, various mobilizations and assessment of peasants and workers of Karelia with special labour tax revolted population. Slender income forced peasants to leave work in lumbering.

The following development of new economical relations effected forming of new self-perception of timber workers of Karelia and construction of new elements of their labour motivation. From the information report of Karelian regional department of SPA (State Political Agency – in 1922-1923 Soviet intelligence service) in July 23, 1923 about the situation in timber industry: “... The attitude of workers to the Soviet rule and RKP(b) (Communist party) is benevolent, to the policy of NEP – is strained and to merchants – is hostile, because of rise of market prices...” (NARK. F. P-3. Inv. 1. F. 266. L. 7-9). From this report one could learned that workers were displeased with scanty earnings and its belated delivery. As a result workers tried to leave work. It is obvious that in this period workers in timber industry began to realize themselves as a separate social force with specific interests and means of its realization.

The system of material stipulation that was formed in lumbering at that time along with positive moments more and more emphasized social antagonism between proletariat and peasantry who worked in timber industry. In sawmills delivery of wages for workers was timely and in terms of money. At the same time in lumbering peasants in maximum could earn only 30-35 pounds of flour. As a result peasantry got payment with delay (NARK. F. P-3. Inv. 1. F. 494. L. 57-60). These circumstances affected labour motivation and general political feeling of peasants. From reports of SPA about anti-Soviet attitudes among workers of the timber industry one could learn that Soviet intelligence service stressed that such kind of attitude was typical not for “the main proletariat of Karelia”, but for seasonal workers and peasants (NARK. F. P-3. Inv. 2. F. 178. L. 18-19).

Unequal social and economical conditions between workers and peasants working in one industry repeatedly underlined on nonpartisan peasant conferences held during that period. Particularly, peasants very often complained about better housing conditions, social security (social insurance, eight-hour working day) and material welfare of workers. From their point of view, peasants had nothing of it: “...If a peasant went to lumbering and then got ill, he would never be provided with anything, if he was killed or disabled by a tree, he would also get nothing...” (NARK. F. P-3. Inv. 1. F. 630. L. 5).

Duality of social image of timber workers at that period was determined also by different vision of labour motivation for proletarians and peasants. On peasantry conferences well-off peasants stressed that the Soviet rule is a rule only for proletarians, because peasants were oppressed during all the period of Soviet rule: “...a proletarian do not pay duties, but a peasant pays it on penalty of arm. The State creates timber trusts only to press peasants and to give

them low salaries, etc...” (NARK. F. P-3. Inv. 1. F. 630. L. 5). Karelian peasants also pointed that before the Revolution it was easier to negotiate with separated manufacturers and contractors than with new authorities. They traditionally complained about administration of timber enterprises that had higher salaries and consisted of contractors of the old regime who were “skilled” in red tape. Peasants also lamented low salaries in lumbering, which was delivered belated and therewith was paid in kind (expensive, inferior and useless goods for peasants).

Proletarians’ salaries in sawing production were paid although more stably, but in general figures were rather low. In 1924-1925 an average earning in sawing production in Karelia was: in January, 1924 – 31 rubles, in February – respectively 36, in March – 40, in April – 33, in May – 33, in June – 38, in July – 38 (NARK. F. P-3. Inv. 1. F. 489. L. 15). It is remarkable, that comparing with other industries (mining, food industries), with Onezhskiy plant etc. an average earning in timber industry was lower. It may sound ironic, but the number of timber workers was much bigger than in other industries and the importance of timber industry was essential for the economical development of the region.

We should also remember that scantiness of salaries in lumbering was aggravated by the growth of prices for foodstuffs. For example, in 1925 in lumbering of the State steamship company in Kemskiy uyezd bucking of 1 sazhen (measure of length = 2.34 metres) of firewood cost 60 kopecks and in the pre-revolutionary period it cost 60-70 kopecks. As a result, with a glance of eight-hour working day, two workers had time to buck only 2 sazhen of firewood. So, the earnings of a worker was equal to the same in pre-revolutionary period, but prices for food were increased in Soviet time for 200 per cent in comparing to the previous period. It is especially

deplorable fact if we will take in the account that this scanty earnings were given to women and youngster girls who were mainly engaged in bucking wood, because men worked in shipment, where they had higher earnings (NARK. F. P-3. Inv. 1. F. 632. L. 62-63).

Low earnings and obvious disinterestedness of timber workers in the results of their labour resulted in the increase of worker’s absences. The administration of timber enterprises tried to struggle against it with rigorous measures (penalties, removals from plants etc.), but it did not give any positive effect. Moreover, workers considered it as “punitive measures” of administration that consisted of “the old-regime specialists”.

Low salaries and hard living conditions led not only to absences, but also to systematic drunkenness among workers. For example, in April, 1925 at timber enterprises Nb. 37 and 38 workers’ celebration of Easter resulted in carousal that ended in knifing and severe wound of one of the workers (NARK. F. P-3. Inv. 1. F. 632. L. 8). Such kinds of incidents occurred at other timber enterprises as well. Worker’s disinterest in the results of their labour also resulted in sloppy work, in overly attitude to subjects of labour and even in cases of stealing.

Social contradictions were exhibited not only between peasants who were previously worked in lumbering and proletarians who worked in sawmills in relatively better conditions. Conflict situations in labour relations were also observed between workers and administration of timber enterprises. For the social self-perception of timber workers at that period it was typical to be in opposition to administration of enterprises, which was taken as antagonistic class for proletarians. Therewith, difference in material stipulation of workers and office employees became the main reason of a social conflict. In Informational summary of SPA and governing body of Karelia

about the situation in timber industry February 15, 1924 pointed to low salaries of workers who were paid with a delay, had bad living conditions and rude administration's treatment. The hardest financial position was for workers in lumbering who had scanty salary and it incited them to advancement of categorical demands: to rise salaries for 50-60 % under the threat of strike (NARK. F. P-3. Inv. 1. F. 494. L. 42-44).

Discussion

This problem was repeatedly discussed at conferences of Communist Party. In materials of the Third Karelian Party conference it was marked that, for example, from 150 employees of Kemskiy branch of Severoles it was hard to find 5 proletarians. It was also marked that among employees one could find big bureaucrats and former (old regime) policemen. It was also mentioned that so called "specialists" could not be considered as so, because "they could not distinguish deal board from firry board. Meanwhile, conflicts between administration and workers could be eliminated with supreme effort (NARK. F. P-3. Inv. 1. F. 211. L. 11). The situation was complicated by following: workers had no trust in "old" specialists, because of their "classism" and also did not believe in "new" specialists for the reason of their theoretical and practical incompetence. At the same time specialist's salary was significantly bigger than workers had and delivered without delays. Employees of timber enterprises had also some benefits workers did not have. This conflict situation became sharper especially when the administration turned out those who worked at enterprises for a long period and then became invalid (NARK. F. P-3. Inv. 1. F. 675. L. 25).

It is interesting that such kind of contradictions between workers and administration were explained in documents of SPA. In memorandum of Karelian SPA about the situation in timber

industry in Autumn, 1927 pointed, that during 1927 totally 96 cases of worker's resentment were fixed and 76 of them (79.2%) were referred exactly to complains to the administration. The main reason for such a situation, from SPA's point of view "...was concealed in the fact that social composition of administration was mainly qualified (specialists) who officially contact with workers and in overwhelming majority are alien element for proletarians..." (NARK. F. P-3. Inv. 2. F. 178. L. 18-19).

However, timber worker's attitude to their labour environment was basically not "proletarian", but "peasant" because in majority they were rural people. For example, according to the documents, in January, 1925 there was discontent among workers of all timber enterprises for the reason of accordance of some advantages to kulaks (wealthy peasants) in a situation of distribution of plots woods. The same peasant consciousness became apparent also in labour motivation of timber workers in Olonetskiy uyezd. They expressed their resentment about low salary and delays in its pay-out and said the following: "...We work only because authorities demand taxes and seed loan, but considering absence of other earnings and in case of appearance of other jons we will leave this work and move to another place..." (NARK. F. II-3. Inv. 1. F. 675. L. 25).

That is extremely significant that the interpretation of the social image of timber workers from local authorities' point of view was also contradictory. For example, in survey of political, economical and social situation in Pogotskaja volost in May, 1925 particularly pointed: "...population considers themselves as peasantry, but solely lives on lumbering and a peasantry farm depend on earnings from lumbering and floating. As a result this population could not be considered as peasants in complete sense of this notion..." (NARK. F. P-3. Inv. 1. F. 632. L. 14).

The peasant nature of timber industry of Karelia in the middle of the 1920s was also reflected in seasonality of worker's occupation on timber enterprises. The report of Karelian regional Committee of Communist Party in May-June, 1924 marked the lack of labour force on wood floating works resulted in 60 percent of local timber floaters and 40 per cent of those arrived from Onezhskiy uyezd of Archangelsk province. At the same time importation of floating workers from Karelia was necessary, because during the period of haymaking the local peasantry did not worked in wood floating.

Conclusion

However, at this period the process of forming constantly working personnel of timber industry enterprises began, but this process was realized rather slowly.

So, during the period of New Economical Policy the social image and labour motivation of timber workers started to change, but this historical experiment was interrupted by Stalin's industrialization when the economical motivation for efficient labour was replaced in a definitive way by the system of social emulations and State pressure.

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**Рабочие в лесах:
социальная самоидентификация
и трудовая мотивация
в лесной промышленности Карелии
в 1917-1928 годах**

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Сегодня российская историческая наука находится в поиске новых методов и исследовательских полей, преодолевая проблемы исторического наследия советского исторического наследия. В частности, выработка неких альтернативных исследовательских подходов для преодоления стереотипов советского марксизма в области истории рабочего класса. Одно из таковых изменений заключается в попытке использования социально-культурной реконструкции советского общественного бытия. Данная статья посвящена изучению трудовых отношений на протяжении первого десятилетия советской власти (1917-1928) на примере лесной промышленности Карелии. Основная исследовательская проблема заключается в следующем: какова была реальная самоидентификация и трудовая мотивация среди советских лесных рабочих? Статья создана преимущественно на базе архивных документов Национального архива Республики Карелия.

Ключевые слова: лесная промышленность Карелии, история рабочего класса, социальная самоидентификация, трудовая мотивация.

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