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Response to Boris Mironov, 'The Russian proletariat as cannon fodder in 1917'.

This short and provocative article claims to debunk Soviet mythologies of Russia's working class, but in so doing it perpetuates an alternative mythology of an undifferentiated, ill-educated and violent working class that were effectively marionettes dancing to the command of the political elites. Prof. Mironov (BM throughout) explains the prominence of the Bolsheviks among the urban working class as a triumph of the most radical and most aggressive rhetoric; in BM's vision, the working class was manipulated into massive sacrifice by the machinations of a professional revolutionary body. These conclusions disempower and dehumanize the urban working population. This response will problematize the methodologies and sources utilized by BM, looking in particular at the temporal frame of analysis and the choice of and engagement with primary sources. I argue that if we are to interrogate working class motivations, stimuli and reflexes, we need to do so in reference to specific individuals at specific times, and we need to frame our conclusions based on the constraints of the available primary sources.

Given BM's stated determination to deconstruct old Soviet notions of class, I was surprised by his choice of terminology, and indeed by his failure to deconstruct class categories. The decision to refer to Russian workers collectively as 'the proletariat' whilst simultaneously debunking Marxist conceptions of class strikes me as a little perverse. While the term 'proletariat' has a long etymology stretching back to its use in the Roman context, still for the modern reader the proletariat is usually a term used to describe a self conscious and mobilized working class- in fact, the very thing that BM argues that Russia lacks in 1917.

While acknowledging that workers were diverse, BM does not discriminate between different workers, or give any indication of which particular groups

within urban working society he is referring to. As Victoria Bonnell expressed so elegantly way back in 1983, workers incorporated a diverse array of different occupations, all with a multitude of socio-economic and cultural shapes.[1] Are we to assume that the internal reflexes and motivations of a skilled metalworker were shared with those of a printer, or a domestic servant, or a shop assistant, or a prostitute, or a flower seller, or a seamstress? Gender and generation, origins and occupation, all are elided in this analysis into a single undifferentiated mass. The internal life of any one individual is a place of deep uncertainty, but if we cast our assertions out towards a large and extremely diverse social group, any pretence of commonality or immediate comparability is lost.

BM makes much of the Russian workers' links to the villages- he asserts that worker identity, behavior and culture were defined by their peasant origins and heritage. He says that 'the majority had one foot in the town and industry, and the other foot in the village and in agriculture.' This is a well established position. The implications for the relationships between urban and rural space have been robustly contested however.[2] First, we need to disaggregate urban workers. Some workers were indeed newcomers with closer ties to rural than to urban life, but others were born of workers, or were migrants who had assimilated fully into urban life. Second, other scholars have argued that the rural origins of many of Russia's workers in themselves facilitated self-organization and political activism in ways that directly contest BM's representation of 'dark people'.[3] Finally, one cannot make assumptions about the internal or indeed external life of an individual based on his or her ties to rural space. BM relates workers' political demands and proclivity towards violence to rural communes and *samosud* practices in the villages. Links of this nature are tenuous at best, and can only be evaluated by close interrogation of specific cases at specific times. A range of scholars have compellingly argued that by the early twentieth century

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[1] Victoria E. Bonnell, *Roots of rebellion: Workers' politics and organisations in St. Petersburg and Moscow 1900-1914* (Berkeley, 1983)., pp. 21-25.
[2] See for example the careful study presented in Evel G. Economakis, *From peasant to Petersburger* (New York, 1998).
[3] See for example Nikolai V. Mikhailov, "The collective psychology of Russian workers and workplace: Self-organisation in the early twentieth century," in *New labor history: Worker identity and experience in Russia, 1840-1918*, ed. Michael Melancon and Alice K. Pate (Bloomington, 2002).

there was increasing porosity between urban and rural spheres, and that the rural population were increasingly drawn into the public sphere.[4] Young men were increasingly likely to have some degree of basic literacy, and literacy rates were markedly higher in urban contexts. A number of scholars have used *volost* courts to show how rural lower class residents engaged actively and meaningfully with State structures.[5] The First World War and the mass mobilization that accompanied it accelerated the interconnectivity of the village population with the outside world.[6] This diverse scholarship all emphasizes the heterogeneity of the rural population, and challenges assumptions about 'inherent' rural behaviors and practices.

In 1986, Reginald Zelnik appealed for scholars to explore and understand workers' material and cultural worlds.[7] A whole generation of scholars tried to answer that call, and in so doing made significant contributions to our understandings of working class life. The methodology of many scholars has been to focus on specific groups within the working class, on a particular aspect of their cultural or material intersections, and to concentrate on a specific temporal framework. BM largely bypasses the outcomes of this scholarship in this essay. He proposes that historians need to move beyond the study of social groups' actions and external factors, and to instead focus on their internal motivations, stimuli and reflexes. This call to explore individuals' internal

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[4] See for example Andrew Verner, "Discursive strategies in the 1905 Revolution: Peasant petitions from Vladimir province," *Russian Review*, no. 1 (1995) ; Jeffrey Burds, *Peasant Dreams and Market Politics: Labour migration and the Russian Village, 1861-1905* (Pittsburgh, 1998).; A. Retish, *Russia's Peasants in Revolution and Civil War: Citizenship, Identity, and the Creation of the Soviet State, 1914-1922* (CAmbridge, 2008).

[5] See for example Gareth Popkins, "Code versus custom? Norms and Tactics in Peasant Volost Court Appeals, 1889-1917," *Russian Review* (2000) ; J. Burbank, *Russian peasants go to court: Legal Culture in the Countryside, 1905-1917* (Bloomington, 2004).; Corinne Gaudin, *Ruling Peasants: Village and State in Late Imperial Russia* (2007)., ch.

[6] Scott J. Seregny, "Zemstvos, peasants, and citizenship: The Russian adult education movement and World War I," *Slavic Review*, no. 2 (2000) ; Joshua A. Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian nation: Military conscription, total war, and mass politics, 1905-1925* (DeKalb, 2003)., p. 19.

[7] S. I. Kanatchikov, *A Radical Worker in Tsarist Russia - The autobiography of Semion Ivanovich Katatchikov*, ed. Reginald E. Zelnik (Stanford, 1986)., introduction.

spheres is always methodologically challenging.[8] Some scholars have made credible attempts at interrogating urban workers' internal lives, but with the proviso that their frame of reference remains extremely focused and specific. [9] Without a substantial evidence base and a close focus, historians risk constructing individuals' internal worlds to conform to their own expectations.

BM simultaneously demands a tight focus on 1917, which apparently precludes engagement with the range of scholarship exploring workers' social, political and cultural milieu, but at the same time draws on material from across the early twentieth century. Demographic data, which BM draws on throughout this piece, can be revealing of broader trends and patterns, but it is a very blunt tool when trying to evaluate and interpret individuals' experiences and actions, since the nature of such sources bypass individual experience. A further constraint in our attempts to penetrate working class internal lives is the demands of temporality. We need to situate ourselves not only according to them, but also according to the moment in which they operated. Was the internal life of an urban worker the same in 1906 as in 1916? Was it the same in April 1917 as in November 1917? One can speculate that individuals' self representations, and their situation of self relative both to the political and to the socio-cultural environment, is fluid and dynamic, and reflects the particularities of the moment.

The public sphere has always provided us with the most accessible evidence for lower class lives- individuals' interactions with state apparatus and with public associations, their choices of leisure activities and dress, their spending and reading habits, and their external manifestations of religious faith, are all to some extent trackable, traceable and measurable.[10] Access to individuals' private

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[8] I discuss this question in reference to interrogating the mental health of exiles in Sarah Badcock, *A prison without walls? : eastern Siberian exile in the last years of tsarism* (Oxford, 2016)., pp. 149-157.

[9] See, for example, Mark D. Steinberg, *Proletarian imagination : self, modernity, and the sacred in Russia, 1910-1925* (Ithaca, N.Y. ; London, 2002).

[10] See for example *Cultures in Flux: Lower class values, practices and resistance in Late Imperial Russia*, ed. Stephen P. Frank and Mark D. Steinberg (Princeton, 1994); Anthony E. Swift, "Workers' theater and "proletarian culture" in prerevolutionary Russia,1905-1917," in *Workers and intelligentsia in late Imperial Russia: Realities, representations, reflections*, ed. Reginald E. Zelnik, Workers' theater (California, 1999).; Page Herrlinger, "Orthodoxy and the

sphere, including their self representation, faith, feelings and motivations, are always elusive. Ego-documents, offering insights into individuals' private or intimate spheres, are hard to come by, and are often heavily mediated by either the constraints of the period in which they were written, or by the cultural and literary parameters in which the individual wrote. BM draws on a couple of these accounts, Timofeev and F.D. Bobkov. Each first person account presents the author's reconstruction of his world, and cannot be used singly to imply a more general experience. There are a plethora of alternative accounts, each of which must be taken on its own merits.[11]

In the absence of personally curated documents, historians can draw on third person accounts, often produced by 'outsiders', that is, by those outside the immediate sphere of the subjects we seek to interrogate. BM draws on these extensively, and apparently uncritically- we have Maurice Paleologue reflecting on what he saw and understood of lower class Petrograd's residents, the publicist and philosopher V.V. Rozanov's assessment of the 'base people', the Minister of the Interior P.A. Durnovo's insights into the motivations of lower class Russians, and Maxim Gorky's searing fictional depiction of Sormovo workers. These four accounts in their different ways tell us something about the authors themselves, but trying to extrapolate any substantive understanding of lower class lives from these accounts is reductive.

BM alleges that the Russian proletariat was prone to deviant criminality. BM's evidence for this rather disturbing assertion is to present statistics showing that workers were disproportionately represented in those convicted of crimes. These statistics do not reveal innate proclivities among urban workers towards crime. They can be interpreted in a multitude of ways. Higher police presence in

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experience of factory life in St. Petersburg, 1881-1905," in *New Labor History: Worker Identity and Experience in Russia, 1840-1918*, ed. Michael Melancon and Alice K. Pate, Orthodoxy (Bloomington, 2002); Sergei L. Firsov, "Workers and the Orthodox Church in early twentieth century Russia," in *New Labor History: worker identity and experience in Russia, 1840-1918*, ed. Alice K. Pate and M. Melancon (Bloomington, Indiana, 2002).

[11] The best known account of all in English is Kanatchikov. An interesting translation of Ivan Chugurin's memoirs was published in 2011. (James D. White and V. Sapon, "The memoirs of Ivan Chugurin4," *Revolutionary Russia*, no. 1 (2011))

urban centres meant that in urban space more illegal acts were possible, reportable and detectable. The statistics may indicate that the penal system discriminated against lower class Russians. BM draws on the work of Joan Neuberger to argue that it was 'very difficult to disassociate hooligan elements from workers in times of strike and demonstrations, both in 1905-1906, and in 1912-1914.' But Neuberger's work was all about the ways in which lower class urban Russians were represented in the boulevard press- she did not try to suggest that these press constructions were a true reflection of the actions and motivations of lower class urban dwellers.[12]

BM goes on to link these criminogenic tendencies to the absence of stable family structures among urban workers. We know that gender and generational imbalances existed among the urban lower classes, and we know that factory workers' children experienced even higher rates of infant mortality than rural children.[13] We cannot however use evidence of this nature to leap to the conclusions that the absence of traditional family structures led to moral degradation, because there is no evidence to substantiate such a claim.

BM asserts that workers' literacy rates and general cultural levels were extremely low. This in itself is contested in some scholarship.[14] BM goes on to argue that low levels of literacy and culture precluded workers from understanding political discourse, or from consciously engaging in political processes, and that this political illiteracy left workers vulnerable to manipulation by political elites, most notably by the Bolsheviks in 1917. This question of what ordinary people understood of politics in 1917 is far from straightforward. I have argued in earlier work both that when campaigning in villages, political activists engaged with the population in language that they understood.[15] The only thing we can be certain of is that we do not, finally, know

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[12] J. Neuberger, *Hooliganism. Crime, culture and power in St. Petersburg, 1900-1914* (London, 1993).
[13] See for example R. L. Glickman, *Russian factory women* (Berkeley, 1984)., pp. 123-130.
[14] See for example, Jeffrey Brooks, *When Russia learned to read: Literacy and popular literature, 1861-1917* (Princeton, N.J., 1985)., p. 33.
[15] Sarah Badcock, "Talking to the people and shaping revolution: The drive for enlightenment in revolutionary Russia," *Russian Review* (2006) ;

what ordinary people as a whole made of politics in 1917. We do however know that some parts of the urban working class engaged meaningfully and constructively in the political process.

On page 5, BM asks ironically that if the majority of workers in the capital did not have a socialist worldview, what then could be said of the provinces? I can make a couple of comments to respond to this question, which will also serve as a conclusion to this piece. I conducted some research on urban workers in Nizhegorod province during 1917, with particular emphasis on Sormovo, a highly organized and politicized large industrial complex in Nizhegorod province. The Sormovo workforce was diverse, but a significant proportion of workers there were actively engaged in political processes. Sormovo workers' organisations were self confident, conscious and relatively wealthy. Some workers exhibited behavior consonant to a developed socialist consciousness; some workers engaged in acts of arbitrary violence and disorder; some workers may have exhibited both behaviours simultaneously. Individuals' motivations, behaviours and actions are often unpredictable and contradictory. The political activism and consciousness that I have some evidence for were not of course a reflection of all the workers in Sormovo, and they certainly did not apply to the province's urban workers more generally.[16] Generalisations even about the outward behavior of urban workers are reductive and unhelpful. I do not have the evidence available to enable speculation about workers' internal worlds.

[16] Sarah Badcock, 'Politics, Parties, and Power: Sormovo Workers in 1917' in D. Fitzler, W. Goldman, G. Kessler and S. Pirani (eds.) *A dream deferred: New studies in Russian and Soviet Labour History* (Bern, 2008), pp. 69-94.

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