

# Stakhanovites: Examining History through Gender and Propaganda

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## History

On August 31, 1935, Aleksei Stakhanov, a 30-year-old miner at the Central Irmino Mine in the Donets Basin hewed a record-setting 102 tons of coal during his six-hour shift, a yield 14 times his quota. The feat appeared in *Pravda* and the unknown, illiterate miner became a celebrity sensation both in the Soviet Union and abroad. In his honor, the title “Stakhanovite” was bestowed upon workers and peasants who set production records or mastered their assigned tasks. In November 1935, shortly after Stakhanov’s achievement, Stalin organized a gathering of these exceptional workers, the First All-Union Conference of Stakhanovites, and delivered the keynote address, which helped to define the movement. He said Stakhanovism sprang from below “at an unparalleled speed, like a hurricane,” primarily thanks to young people with culture and technical knowledge, people who “learned to count not only the minutes, but also the seconds.”<sup>1</sup> Stalin believed Stakhanovism would serve as the link between socialism and communism and willingly overlooked the hierarchical nature of the new privileged worker system by calling the need to equalize material conditions a “petty bourgeois conception of socialism.”<sup>2</sup> Ideally all workers would labor to the best of their ability and receive all they needed...there would be no quotas or rations because those values would vary with each person. Stakhanov’s example was glorified and held up to the Soviet masses. His persona even drifted overseas to New York, appearing alongside other Soviet heroes on the country’s giant mural at the 1939 World’s Fair and also popping up in a Broadway play, *Iron Men*, which centered on the exploits of a Stakhanovite gang of steel workers.<sup>3</sup> Men and women like Stakhanov were made into “postcard heroes and cultic ideals of kitsch, models for youth, and paragons of virtue.”<sup>4</sup> The Soviet government’s penchant for deifying the worker

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<sup>1</sup> All Stalin quotes are from his “Speech at the First All-Union Conference of Stakhanovites, November 17, 1935,” accessible online at <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/stalin/works/1935/11/17.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “Huge Steel Statue Tops Soviet Center,” *The New York Times*, May 17, 1939, 20; Brooks Atkinson, “The Play,” *The New York Times*, October 20, 1936, 30.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1900*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 71.

makes one wonder how accurately Soviet memoirs and biographies reflected actual societal conditions. What does the construction of propaganda reveal about a culture? Gender theorist Joan Wallach Scott asserts that “political economy provided the terms by which relations of production and sexual divisions of labor were established and contested.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, one must also ponder the ramifications of the Stakhanovite movement on women. What impact did this government-sanctioned opportunity to enter the economy have on the lives of Soviet women? Answers to these questions will be sought by examining Stakhanovism and its legacy through the ways in which it was portrayed in the accounts of three prominent Stakhanovites: Pasha Angelina, Dusya Vinogradova, and Illarion Yankin, juxtaposed with current scholarship and articles from the Western media. Stakhanovism provides fertile ground for the examination of gender and propaganda, studies which subsequently yield insights into economics, politics, and social relationships.

### **Stakhanovite or Stakhanovite’s Wife?**

Soviet women found themselves at a difficult crossroads in the 1930s. Stakhanovite reforms emphasized technology and often took place within heavy industry, consequently gendering them predominately male, yet party ideology stressed equality between the sexes. Female Stakhanovites outnumbered male Stakhanovites only in traditionally domestic industries, such as confections, leather, and textiles, but they also challenged conventional gender roles by infiltrating traditionally patriarchal domains.<sup>6</sup> The Soviet government heavily played up the victories of its female workers; their stories constitute a solid chunk of the propaganda, even though Western historians have only sparingly examined this demographic. Within the Stakhanovite movement, women faced varied definitions of the ideal socialist woman. The competing classifications spawned from the two somewhat contradictory roles women played: Stakhanovite and Stakhanovite’s wife.

Female Stakhanovites were highly enthusiastic, independent wage earners who sought to maximize their own productivity and contributions. In contrast, Stakhanovites’ wives, often known as *obshchestvennitsy* (public-spirited women), were driven by two primary beliefs: they were subordinate to their husbands, and they should donate their free time to the factory, farm, or field in displays of voluntarism. Stakhanovites’ wives cultivated dependent relationships – she relied

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<sup>5</sup> Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 163.

<sup>6</sup> Mary Buckley, *Mobilizing Soviet Peasants: Heroines and Heroes of Stalin’s Fields*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 245.

on him for monetary support, while he relied on her to fulfill domestic needs. Her main obligation was to uphold her husband's status and enhance his productivity.<sup>7</sup>

This dependency was antithetical to Marxist ideology, but authorities eventually reconciled some of the disparity. Official doctrine admitted that the ideal female role was that of active worker, but conceded that being a Stakhanovite's wife constituted an excellent second choice.<sup>8</sup> Its emphasis on voluntarism drew women out of the home in a socially useful way, while their work within the home could be portrayed as an active contribution to society. The Stakhanovite's wife might be seen as a transitory figure, preparing the male for the total loss of his domestic caretaker; the woman's volunteering efforts would increasingly pull her away from the home, necessitating a more egalitarian division of household chores. Women were not only comrades and workers, but also symbols and supporters of male achievement; the ideal Soviet wife, confined to the home and warmly maternal, was almost the polar opposite of the hard *Bolshevichka* of earlier times.<sup>9</sup> For the most part, regular women workers disliked women Stakhanovites, presumably because they dominated the limelight, hoarded materials, and created raised expectations.<sup>10</sup> The Stakhanovites' wives, however, helped female Stakhanovites on occasion, with childcare arrangements for instance, and the women also assisted Stakhanovites of both sexes in their quests to become more cultured by guiding the workers' selection of clothing and furnishings. Interestingly, the premium Stalin placed on culture, *kul'turnost*, also emphasized the importance of retail saleswomen; excellent vendors were considered to be Stakhanovites in their own right and accordingly rewarded.<sup>11</sup>

### **Benefits and Drawbacks of Stakhanovism**

Although they had the government's official support, many Stakhanovite women faced opposition, not only from men, but also from their female peers. These women showed resiliency in the face of adversity, never abandoning their dreams or record setting labors despite encountering many obstacles. Gossip and resentment were rampant; by striving to improve, Stakhanovite women were perceived to have inappropriately put themselves above others, disturbing the collective good. For instance, four of the eight women who worked under Mariia

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 269.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 278.

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Evans Clements, *Bolshevik Women*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 276.

<sup>10</sup> Rosalind Marsh, "Women Writers in the 1930s: Conformity or Subversion?," *Women in the Stalin Era*, Ed. Melanie Ilic, (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 182.

<sup>11</sup> Amy Randall, "Revolutionary Bolshevik Work: Stakhanovism in Retail Trade," *Russian Review* 59 (July 2000): 425-441.

Demchenko, a record-breaking sugar beet picker and the paradigm of the Soviet “New Woman,” quit because they envied the fact that Mariia alone enjoyed all of the rewards for their collective efforts.<sup>12</sup> Women Stakhanovites were humiliated, baited, and bullied by local authority figures, endured the sabotage of machines, animals, land, and homes, and weathered threats of physical violence. Ol’ga Peunkova, a Stakhanovite milkmaid who had vowed to procure 5,500 liters of milk in 1936, had two prize-winning cows murdered; veterinary surgeons found needles lodged in their hearts, which had apparently been placed in the cows’ feed three weeks earlier when Peunkova was attending a conference in Moscow.<sup>13</sup> Sometimes fertilizer was removed from female farmers’ plots, their lands were vandalized with un-decomposed manure, their homes were burned down, and some women Stakhanovites were even savagely beaten or killed. While male Stakhanovites also undoubtedly suffered numerous indignities, women most likely bore the brunt of society’s wrath because their performance in the workplace not only broke norms and inspired envy, but also called into question deeply entrenched gender roles.

With all of the evident deterrents to becoming a Stakhanovite, the incentives inherent with performing norm-breaking work must have been equally, if not more, powerful for Soviet citizens. First and foremost, Stakhanovite workers received financial incentives as a reward for their greatly increased output. For instance, coal workers, like the great Stakhanov himself, were paid based on the amount of material they produced or harvested per shift and they also frequently accrued bonuses. The additional funds may have been particularly appealing to women, who traditionally earned less than men. Stakhanovites also enjoyed better living conditions than their peers did, reaping benefits like larger apartments, relatively luxuriant consumer goods such as clothes and record players, and even preferential selection of food.<sup>14</sup> Education was a major motivation, with its promise of socio-economic mobility; schooling was likely a particular draw for women, whose access to higher education was typically even more limited than men’s. Many famous Stakhanovites like Pasha Angelina, a record-setting tractor driver, and Mariia Demchenko subsequently graduated from agricultural academies in Moscow or Kiev. Stakhanovites also traveled frequently to special meetings and conferences and received a bevy of prestigious decorations and awards. For instance, in 1936, 367 Stakhanovites received the Order of Lenin while 582 were granted the Badge of Honor.<sup>15</sup> The government also afforded these men and

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<sup>12</sup> Buckley, 139.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 145.

<sup>14</sup> For an example of the material benefits of Stakhanovism, readers may wish to consult the image of Pasha Angelina’s apartment found in Buckley, 230.

<sup>15</sup> Buckley, 237.

women special vacations and entry into politics as delegates to the congresses of the Komsomol and Soviets. Headlines announcing Stakhanovite feats made them de facto celebrities, although the writings of women like Pasha Angelina suggest that their industry was not motivated by a desire for fame, but rather that their new, elite status was simply a not so unpleasant side effect.<sup>16</sup> The autobiographies of Angelina and Illarion Yankin and the biography of Dusya Vinogradova, while almost certainly ghostwritten and propagandized, still provide interesting examples of the pros and cons of Stakhanovism for women and illustrate the messages and lessons that the Soviet government wanted to impart on its citizenry. If the authorities were somewhat confused over the appropriate roles for women, it is no wonder that the women themselves struggled with their identities and gender expectations.

### **Pasha Angelina, Tractor (and Gender) Pioneer**

Praskovia Nikitichna (“Pasha”) Angelina was one of the archetypical female Stakhanovites, the leader of the first all-female tractor brigade, “the socialist Cinderella supreme,” and “the most celebrated and highly decorated labor hero in Soviet history.”<sup>17</sup> Born poor on a *kolkhoz*, Pasha grew up to receive the Order of Lenin and the Hero of Socialist Labor award, the Soviet Union’s most prestigious civilian honor. Her autobiography is a celebration of her upward mobility, but as denoted in its title, the “most important thing” was that she rose *with* the people, not *from* the masses as individualistic Americans were apt to do.<sup>18</sup> Pasha “speaks Bolshevik” by spouting off party doctrine within the biographical narrative, railing against evil kulaks, taking potshots at the believability of the American media, and bashing the American-made Fordson tractor.<sup>19</sup> Pasha’s story also showcases the downfalls of Stakhanovism as she recalls “somebody kept spreading vile rumors about me, and ‘God-fearing’ old women, egged on by the priest, would spit whenever they saw ‘shameless Pasha’ in her overalls behind the wheel of the tractor.”<sup>20</sup> Coworkers teased her and even her friends told her that women did not belong on tractors. This gender shortsightedness inspired Pasha to begin her all-female brigade, which was supported by the head of the Machine Tractor Station

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<sup>16</sup> For detailed coverage of the pros and cons of Stakhanovism, see Buckley, Chapters 6 and 9.

<sup>17</sup> Pasha Angelina, “The Most Important Thing,” *In the Shadow of Revolution: Life Stories of Russian Women from 1917 to the Second World War*, Eds. Sheila Fitzpatrick and Yuri Slezkine, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 305; Stites, 71.

<sup>18</sup> Angelina, 306-307.

<sup>19</sup> See page 16 of Fitzpatrick’s “Introduction” to *In the Shadow of Revolution*. “Speaking Bolshevik” refers to a phenomenon by which Soviets tried to project the aura of an ideal citizen by imbibing and reciting party beliefs and attitudes.

<sup>20</sup> Angelina, 312.

as a fulfillment of Bolshevik policy. Ironically, Pasha and her fellow female Stakhanovites were often dependent on men to get them started in industry or to teach them how to operate new equipment. The first time Pasha's brigade drove to the fields, they were met by a crowd of angry women who shouted at them, "'Get out of here! We're not going to allow women's machines on our field! You'll ruin our crops!'"<sup>21</sup> Pasha's subsequent comment that all the women later became friends is easily chalked up to a bit of Soviet embellishment, but the anecdote about the angry masses is significant and reflective of legitimate societal tensions regarding "proper" vocations for women. The ill will culminated with a personal attack on Pasha; she was run down on her bicycle (by "kulak sons") after speaking at a national conference and seriously injured. She had just met Stalin in Moscow and had vowed to him that her tractor brigade would best their current world record and plow 1,200 hectares per tractor in 1936.<sup>22</sup> The personal promise reflects a Stakhanovite tendency to feed into and reinforce the cult of personality; Stalin was deified as the eager workers yearned to please their beneficent ruler. Stalin was also traditionally portrayed as having inspired the extraordinary feats completed by the Stakhanovites – just being around him apparently made workers aspire to greatness. Pasha's autobiography concludes on a happy note, as Soviet publications were wont to do in the era of socialist realism, with Pasha recovering her health and returning to the fields, her all-female brigade beating their quota and then forming a network of cadres, and "all Soviet people becoming one big happy family."<sup>23</sup>

Pasha's tale is particularly valuable from a gender standpoint, because she infiltrated a predominately male domain, tractor driving, and broke with traditional conceptions of appropriate female occupations. Pasha showed that women did not have to be confined to the home; they could exert themselves in the village and excel according to criteria praised by the regime. Her record-breaking performances illustrated that women could perform as well as men and made people question the automatic dominance of men, which was fostered by the widespread Soviet belief in the inferiority of women. Elizabeth Wood explores the negative conception of womanhood in *The Baba and the Comrade*, contrasting the *baba*, an illiterate, superstitious, and backward female figure with her foil, the comrade, an ideal citizen, to illustrate the quandary that Russian women found themselves in during the early days of NEP.<sup>24</sup> The lower social status of women

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid, 313.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, 317.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 320.

<sup>24</sup> The New Economic Policy (NEP) was issued in 1921 by Vladimir Lenin. Intended to allow the USSR to recover from years of war, NEP permitted limited private ownership. Joseph Stalin abandoned the policy in 1928.

was reflected in popular Soviet proverbs like “I thought I saw two people, but it was only a man and a baba.”<sup>25</sup> For Pasha Angelina to not only enter a masculine field, but to excel at it and outperform male workers in the public sphere was nothing short of revolutionary. In another one of her autobiographies, Pasha even made the case that women could teach men a few things about driving tractors; one *kolkhozniki* actually requested that Pasha and her all-girl brigade come out to instruct their squadron of male drivers.<sup>26</sup> The socialist competition inherent in Stakhanovism may have had the unintended effect of aggravating gender relations. Pasha and her cadres served as role models for other women, teaching them how to drive tractors, further encouraging the expansion of women into the public domain, and fracturing the perception of traditionally male and female roles. Pasha’s writings spoke often of following her dreams; her example and instruction likely helped countless other Soviet women to chase their own aspirations. Finally, while Pasha named her parents, siblings, and children in her narrative, her (possibly divorced?) husband’s name is notably absent. This omission is reflective of the attitudes of female Stakhanovites: their memoirs were about them and their accomplishments. They felt no obligation to pay lip service to their spouses. The high wages earned by women Stakhanovites also provided them with financial independence, which would have been important to Pasha, especially if she was indeed a divorcée.

### **Dusya Vinogradova, Textile Worker and Bolshevik Ideologue**

Like Pasha Angelina, Dusya Vinogradova won widespread recognition and acclaim for her feats as a Stakhanovite. Though her efforts in the textile field held fewer ramifications for gender than Pasha’s conquest of the tractor, Dusya’s biography is an excellent example of the Soviet tendency to inculcate party doctrine into every publication and therefore helps illustrate how the government wanted to be perceived by its people. Introduced as a 21-year-old textile worker, so beloved that “all young people call her friend,” Dusya deserves the title Miss USSR, not in the “dubious and transient fame of a Miss Europe...but only in the Soviet sense of the word; her fame and popularity are founded on her creative work.”<sup>27</sup> Echoing Stalin, the narrative’s emphasis is placed on the science and method behind improvements and, also like Stalin, it continually critiques capitalism, arguing that the worker never exerts his full strength and energy in a capitalist society since he is merely a slave to his employer. The perks of

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<sup>25</sup> Elizabeth Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997), 17.

<sup>26</sup> Buckley, 257.

<sup>27</sup> Friedrich, G., *Miss U.S.S.R.: The Story of a Girl Stakhanovite*, (New York: International Publishers, 1936), 1.

Stakhanovism are showcased for public consumption: Dusya embodies material well-being with her two-bedroom apartment, kitchen, closet overflowing with expensive clothes, and salary of 800 rubles per month. She calls work a “joy” and broke records by monitoring 216 looms at once, aided by a team of 12 assistants. Dusya’s pay increased in proportion to her ever-escalating productivity. She is repeatedly characterized as child-like, dainty, slim, and light-footed, yet she never tires because she obeys the “line of march,” a Stakhanovite method that maximizes efficiency by requiring her rounds to continue in an orderly fashion – checking one machine after another, even if a thread snaps elsewhere. Dusya is portrayed as cultured and ladylike, inviting her biographer, Friedrich, to tea. She is also steadfastly devoted to Stalin and optimistic about the future, musing that “some professor or another will become a Stakhanovite and invent a way to make you go on living forever.”<sup>28</sup> Friedrich relates an anecdote about a Red Army officer, Michael Koroskin, who penned Dusya a letter of admiration, confessing that, “I see your photo in the papers, read about your records, and this inspires me to tackle my task of mastering military technique with still greater enthusiasm than before, to defend our fatherland, the U.S.S.R., which has given birth to people like you, Dusya!”<sup>29</sup> The tale concludes with the assertion that Stakhanovism is only possible under the Soviet system and that Stakhanovites were responsible for boosting the Soviet Union’s 1935 production levels to two and a quarter times what they had been in tsarist Russia.<sup>30</sup>

Dusya’s biography is interesting in several respects. Like Pasha, she “speaks Bolshevik,” occasionally appropriating Stalin’s words as her own, seemingly always the consummate Communist. Her barbs directed at capitalism and Western Europe reflect the political and ideological tensions of the time and the descriptions of her opulent lifestyle illustrate all of the rewards and none of the costs inherent with Stakhanovism. Indeed, not only is Dusya never subjected to the malice Pasha suffered, but Friedrich actually depicts her as being one of the most popular women in the country. Her biographer also constantly emphasizes Dusya’s feminine attributes, characterizing her as young and dainty; this portrayal highlights how easy Stakhanovism is while simultaneously engendering stereotypes about women as delicate and child-like. Dusya’s refined tea party also makes her seem cultured, one of the key traits of Stakhanovites, according to Stalin. Generally, a very appealing picture is painted of Stakhanovism, likely in the hopes of inspiring other Soviets to overproduce, and also to project a state of prosperity to the outside world, especially to their much-maligned capitalist rivals.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 21.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, 35.



Dusya admits that a dozen colleagues contributed to her record-breaking endeavor, but those girls' roles are downplayed as Dusya alone enjoys the bulk of the privileges. Like Pasha, Dusya attained financial security, managing to not only provide for herself, but also for her retired mother. The closing statistic regarding increased production also illustrates a Soviet tendency to portray Stakhanovism as an unequivocal success; contemporary historians have articulated a much more muddled legacy.<sup>31</sup> The most interesting part of the narrative from a gender standpoint is the excerpted letter from Koroskin. The fact that a rugged army officer idolized a young girl like Dusya turns societal norms upside down. Whether or not the letter is authentic or part of the propaganda in the publication is irrelevant; granting a woman that degree of admiration, even in fiction, is significant because the masses will read an empowering story about a woman who was so remarkable that her life inspired battle-hardened, weary soldiers. Koroskin's reference to the U.S.S.R. as a "fatherland" is also interesting, as it contrasts the "motherland" conceptions of Russia that often motivated members of the armed forces.

### **Illarion Yankin, *Notes of A Stakhanovite***

Illarion Yankin, and his autobiography, *Notes of A Stakhanovite*, provide an example of Soviet propaganda from the male and "heavy industries" perspective. Yankin, a miner, worked his way up from entry-level jobs to operating the pneumatic drill. He worked piecework and had a secret ambition to become highly skilled. Yankin remembers that his crew leader took his success as a "personal affront" and was annoyed when drillers attempted to improve their techniques.<sup>32</sup> Yankin speculates that his boss probably learned his craft slowly (back when capitalists controlled the mines!) and consequently resented how quickly techniques could now be picked up. He also relays tales of sabotage – "wreckers" set a fire in his mine that put it out of commission for two years. Yankin discusses how he made suggestions to streamline crews; a little extra elbow room vastly increased production capabilities. He always brought his suggestions to management, feeling that keeping quiet indicated that one cared nothing for the nation.<sup>33</sup> Yankin was asked to forgo a vacation to do scientific research at another mine and approached his wife to ask if he should accept. To his surprise, she told

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<sup>31</sup> See Lewis Siegelbaum's *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) for a detailed discussion of the economic pros and cons of Stakhanovism. Although written before the dissolution of the USSR and the opening of the archives, most still consider it to be the preeminent work on the topic.

<sup>32</sup> Illarion Pavlovich Yankin, *Notes of a Stakhanovite*, (Moscow: Foreign Languages Pub. House, 1950), 8.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, 17.

him to forget the vacation and get back to work; Yankin's wife serves as an ideal representation of a Stakhanovite's wife, as she put her husband's success before her own comfort and desires. On his trip, Yankin meets Semivolos, a fellow accomplished miner, and is inspired to create a new technique utilizing two drills instead of one, boosting his productivity by an astonishing 894%! An interesting gender component comes into play when Yankin discusses females who served as muckers during World War II. Although Natalia and Tatiana were eager to continue working, their boss told them they needed to rest after they had each unloaded 18 train cars, exceeding their quota by six. Yankin's narrative does not ever mention male Stakhanovites being restricted in their attempts to work; in fact, the men were seemingly always encouraged to try and break records. Yankin continued his ascent in the working hierarchy, winning the Stalin Prize and the Order of Lenin, becoming an engineer and eventually a mining executive.

*Notes of a Stakhanovite* again follows the pattern of a Soviet Horatio Alger tale, with a poor boy from nowhere rising up the employment ladder thanks to his tenacity and willingness to experiment. Like Pasha Angelina, Yankin's ascent to the top was not without its obstacles. He saw sabotage firsthand and experienced the reluctance of middle-level management to accept the costly experimentation endemic to Stakhanovism, a phenomenon that has been echoed in Western scholarship's hesitancy to portray the movement as an economic boom. Yankin's individualistic boasts of increased productivity, like Dusya's, downplayed the efforts of the two timberers that trailed him throughout the shift, yet his conference with Semivolos spoke of a brotherly cooperation and friendly socialist competition. The treatment of the female Stakhanovites shows that although strong women were physically up to the challenge, their efforts to shine were sometimes hindered by restrictions imposed by male management.

### **Soviet Portrayals in the American Media**

Soviet propaganda clearly attacked Americans and capitalism while highlighting the benefits of the socialist system; therefore, as expected, an examination of the treatment of Soviets in the American media yields the reverse phenomenon. Historians will realize bits and pieces of both perspectives are valid and that the truth, in all likelihood, lies somewhere between the two viewpoints. The bias or spin itself is also noteworthy as it indicates much about how the society in question would like to be perceived.

Mining pioneer Aleksei Stakhanov graced the cover of *TIME* magazine on December 16, 1935.<sup>34</sup> The corresponding article, "Russia: Heroes of Labor," is

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<sup>34</sup> Readers may view a copy of the original cover online at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,755449,00.html>.

replete with instances of oppression under the Stalinist regime, such as operators being shot for sabotage if their machines broke. The circumstances of Stakhanov's record are examined, and *TIME* highlights the fact that the Soviet hero just drilled continuously while others did the "propping and panting."<sup>35</sup> It also points out that one of communism's main talking points – the evil capitalist "speed-up," which exhausts and exploits workers – seemed to bear a close resemblance to current conditions in Russia. The article goes so far as to say that the Russian proletariat recognized that Stalin had forced piecework on them and was now bent upon pushing the speed-up, disguised as Stakhanovism. Like the Soviet articles, the exposé alludes to instances of sabotage, such as the incident at Mine 206 in Chelyabinsk, where Engineer S. Plotnikov was so vexed at the "uppishness" of the local Stakhanovite gang that he ordered his fastest workers to dig into an extremely dangerous pit, which subsequently collapsed and killed them. The article cites Stalin on numerous occasions, highlighting the fact that he perceived Stakhanovism as a stepping-stone to advance from socialism to communism. However, according to *TIME*, the "spunky Russian workers, like the spunky Russian kulaks before them, have started shooting;" they would not passively accept Stalin's maneuverings.<sup>36</sup> *TIME* also commented on the gender situation in the Soviet Union, musing that girls with "strong legs" tried to work four looms instead of two to earn increases in pay, but that in reality the women were tired, yearned for more food, and certainly did not radiate the same joy and enthusiasm for their jobs that Dusya Vinogradova had exuded.

A follow-up article in *TIME* on March 9, 1936, "Russia: Stuck-Up Stakhanovites" took an even harsher view of the Soviet labor movement. The impetus for the commentary was that the Young Communists, previously the pride and joy of the Soviet Union, felt scorned by Stalin and his new infatuation with the Stakhanovites. The Young Communists reportedly scoffed at the pampered and "stuck-up" Stakhanovites, charging that one young mechanic was fêted so much that he actually worked less than ten days a month. They even alleged that icon Dusya Vinogradova, the "young Juno of the Soviet Textile Trust who makes amazing platform boasts of the scores and scores of Soviet looms she is able to tend simultaneously" was being followed by Soviet cinema directors who "beseech[ed] her to realize that, with her obvious talents as a highly emotional actress, she [wa]s wasting herself in Stakhanovism and should go on the Soviet

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<sup>35</sup> "Russia: Heroes of Labor," *TIME* Magazine, December 16, 1935, accessible at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,755449,00.html>

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

screen.”<sup>37</sup> The snarky article reassured Americans that their ideology and lives remained superior to those of their Russian counterparts.

### **Legacy of Stakhanov in the East and the West**

After a few years of record-breaking, Aleksei Stakhanov left the mines and was put in charge of the government’s department for encouraging socialist competition in 1941. His name retained its symbolic significance and, although most of his later years were spent out of the limelight, he was periodically trotted back out for the masses on special occasions. Stakhanov was awarded the Hero of Socialist Labor award by Brezhnev in 1970 and periodically gave speeches in mines during the 1970s, until his death in 1977.<sup>38</sup>

Since 1935, historians have debated the legitimacy of Stakhanov’s stunt. A 1985 article in the *New York Times*, commemorating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Herculean accomplishment, alleged that the push for the record had been carefully orchestrated by the Communist Party, a top-down approach at odds with the Soviet assertion that the movement arose from the masses.<sup>39</sup> Historian Roberta T. Manning postulates that the Soviet Press sought to create the impression that crops had not failed in 1935 by stressing individual Stakhanovite achievements and developments in regions that did not experience a crop failure, such as the Ukraine.<sup>40</sup> The mine authorities tapped Stakhanov, a hard-working but unknown miner, to set the record which could serve as an inspiration and an example to the downtrodden Soviet people. To help Stakhanov in his pursuit, the pattern of work was changed so that he did not have to shore up the tunnel as he dug; he was trailed by two timberers, and the chief of the mine’s party organization himself held a flashlight for him. Even with these accommodations, the feat “was still impressive, especially with the unreliable jackhammers of those days.”<sup>41</sup> R.W. Davies and Oleg Khlevnyuk, however, disagree with the emphasis on government collusion, arguing that at the time of the record, Stalin had been away on vacation. No memos had transpired between him and Moscow, so the duo posits it is

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<sup>37</sup> “Russia: Stuck-Up Stakhanovites,” *TIME* Magazine, March 9, 1936, accessible at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,770085,00.html>.

<sup>38</sup> Theodore Shabad, “Stakhanov, a Soviet Miner, Is Dead; Name Was Byword for Hard Work,” *The New York Times*, November 6, 1977, 44.

<sup>39</sup> Serge Schmemmann, “In Soviet, Eager Beaver’s Legend Works Overtime,” *The New York Times*, August 31, 1985, 2.

<sup>40</sup> Roberta T. Manning, “The Soviet Economic Crisis of 1936-1940 and the Great Purges,” *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*, Eds. J. Arch Getty and Roberta T. Manning, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>41</sup> Schmemmann, 2.

unlikely that the Soviet government directly organized Stakhanov's attempt.<sup>42</sup> Interestingly, Thomas T. Read, agreed with the Soviets that the feat was possible, but pointed out that there was no way to adequately haul away that much coal.<sup>43</sup> The inability to deal with the hewed product appears to affirm that the feat's primary value was its ability to inspire and captivate the Soviet people.

Western scholars have also questioned the success of the Stakhanovite movement at large. Did these few overachievers really increase production? Mary Buckley points out that although output levels for the Soviet Union did rise after 1935, there were many factors to consider. Tensions in the countryside became more stabilized and the weather improved, at the same time that individual Stakhanovites like Pasha Angelina labored diligently. Buckley ultimately feels unable to reach a conclusion, but suggests that if Stakhanovism did make a difference, it was unlikely to be significant. Most peasants were not Stakhanovites and the ideological, social, and political impacts likely trumped economic ones.<sup>44</sup> Davies and Khlevnyuk similarly suggest that improvements may have been made at the microlevel, but that advances were negated "in part or whole by upheaval in the regularity with which supplies were available and in production planning generally."<sup>45</sup>

Lewis Siegelbaum discusses the tensions between the workers and recalcitrant managerial and engineering personnel. The latter were often "reluctant to accept high plan targets or individual record setting that might interfere with continuously increasing production on the part of the enterprise as a whole."<sup>46</sup> Superiors judged a manager on his group's total aggregate output and the experimental component of Stakhanovism often meant wasted products, lost time, and damaged machinery. Consequently, many managers preferred to see steady effort rather than the up and down gambling style practiced by the Stakhanovites. Interestingly, some historians have linked the worker-manager instability wrought by Stakhanovism to increased charges of wrecking and sabotage; someone had to be blamed for the economic lags that occurred after supplies were exhausted from periods of Stakhanovite frenzy. Current scholarship suggests that most conflicts occurred between workers and managers, adding a hierarchical element to the mix and refuting the prevalence of the worker-to-worker violence described in the December 1935 edition of America's *TIME* magazine. Manning maintains that the

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<sup>42</sup> Davies, R.W., and Oleg Khlevnyuk. "Stakhanovism and the Soviet Economy." *Europe-Asia Studies*, 54, (2002), 878.

<sup>43</sup> "Life Has Become More Joyous," [Foreword to the *Soviet Sketches* Collection], Moscow: Co-operative Publishing Society of Foreign Workers in the U.S.S.R., 1936), 29.

<sup>44</sup> Buckley, 308, 313.

<sup>45</sup> Davies and Khlevnyuk, 894.

<sup>46</sup> Siegelbaum in Manning, 138.

“economic problems of 1936-1941 and the Great Purges were inexorably linked.”<sup>47</sup> Ironically, these ties may have also helped to ultimately temper the purges; Soviet leaders finally reined in the terror out of fear of creating even more issues for the troubled economy. By 1942, journalists began noting that there was a managerial revolution with trained executives forming a new privileged class and that Stalin’s interest in Stakhanovism had wavered after World War II.<sup>48</sup> The Stakhanovite movement may have lost its physical identity to some degree, but its symbolic and social connotations lived on. Stakhanovism survives today in the “regular glorification on television or in the press of ‘*udarniki*,’ workers who have achieved extraordinary feats,” although its legacy is probably strongest in “the predilection of Soviet managers for what is known as ‘*shturmovaniye*,’ achieving short-term outbursts of high production by generating mass enthusiasm and propaganda hoopla.”<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusions

The Stakhanovite movement is a complicated period in Soviet history because it served as an important crossroads for society; Stakhanovism, examined primarily through gender and examples of propaganda, yields insight into the ideological, social, political, and economic ramifications it wrought upon the Soviet Union. Socialist ideology gave women entrance into the workplace and independent wages, but Stakhanovism celebrated their presence and provided valuable, safe space for Soviet women to take on new, traditionally male vocations. Although women workers received many perks from employment, female Stakhanovites also faced stark opposition; the resistance they met reflected the public’s reluctance to challenge deep-seated gender roles. Both Soviet men and women suffered under the repressive regime of Stalin, but female-friendly Stakhanovism did help to imbue important skill sets and begin a vital dialogue about appropriate roles for the “New Soviet Woman.” Gender enmeshed with propaganda as Soviet publications portrayed Stakhanovite men and women as heroes, glorifying their hard work and holding them up as examples for the masses. Political grudges were also incorporated into the propaganda, as both the Soviet and American governments sought to make their nations and people appear superior, usually at the expense of the opposing ideology. Contemporary historians debate the effectiveness of the Stakhanovite movement, highlighting the fact that economic changes were perhaps the least momentous of its many implications. Scholars will likely never have accurate statistics on the numbers of Stakhanovites

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<sup>47</sup> Manning, 140.

<sup>48</sup> “New Leaders Seen Rising in Russia,” *The New York Times*, September 6, 1942, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Schmemmann, 2.

in Russia or figures on how they fared in the Purges, but valuable new sources will likely be unearthed as archives are opened and more closely examined. The fact that issues like appropriate female roles in the public versus private spheres and propaganda use by nations are still pertinent topics of discussion in contemporary society serves as a testimonial to the importance and pervasiveness of the central concerns of Stakhanovism, positing sound rationale for its further study.

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