Old Age and Work in the Soviet Union

The purpose of this panel, as I understand it, is to subject to critical scrutiny an assumption that is still quite often held (despite the best efforts of social historians over the past thirty years or so): namely, that old people in the ‘modern’ world have, as a result of urbanization, rationalization and mandatory retirement, lost the authority and economic agency that they once enjoyed in an ill-defined ‘traditional’ age.

Whatever view one takes of this narrative of decline, it has a certain plausibility when we turn to a society that was brought into being by a youth-affirming revolution and that regularly waged war on various ‘remnants of the past’. In addition to all its publicly avowed hostility to the ‘old’ world, the Soviet regime also set in motion, and mercilessly drove forward, social and economic forces that might seem to have undermined the position of the older generation.

Yet here too we can contest the notion that modernization necessarily disadvantages the elderly. It is certainly true that periods of revolutionary social and economic transformation (such as 1917-1932 and 1989-2000) are hugely difficult for older generations. It is also hard to deny that the lot of many old people in the USSR, especially in the first three decades of Soviet power, was a miserable one; we do not need to look too far to find appalling personal histories of hardship and suffering. But this is by no means the full story, for two main reasons. First, if life was hard for old people, that is not necessarily because they were old: life was hard for the great majority of the population. Second, the Soviet period should be viewed not as a continuum of undifferentiated social crisis but as a period that saw immense social and demographic changes. Many of these had important effects on the life patterns of old people and on their opportunities for economic participation and agency.

To take only the most obvious change: in 1900 there were no old age pensioners, but by the end of the century there were about 30 million. In the twentieth century, Russia came to fulfil one of the most important criteria for a modern state: it not only exacted money, resources and service from the population but also handed back in more or less systematic fashion some of the resources it claimed. As elsewhere, old people comprised one important category of potential beneficiary. But twentieth-century Russia started from a very low base. In tsarist Russia, provision for old age was unimpressive on paper and hopelessly inadequate in practice. The assumption was always that the underprivileged elderly would be taken in by their families or communities, but by the late imperial period there were large numbers of people who had no family or community
to fall back on. The largest single occupational group at risk was men in the lower ranks of the army who had seen out their term of service; it was not until 1912 that they were covered by pension legislation.

The Soviet state soon proclaimed its determination to rectify the situation, making promises of universal coverage that could not be fulfilled and were soon ‘temporarily’ withdrawn. The early 1920s saw a wave of legislation on various aspects of social insurance. What Soviet society lacked at this time was an old-age pension as such, or indeed any sense that a citizen fallen on hard times might be entitled to state support independent of the kind of work he or she performed. Pensions were granted in three cases: invalidity, workplace accident, and loss of breadwinner. Old age was covered only as a category of invalidity. If, say, a sixty-five-year-old metalworker wanted to receive a pension he had to prove: first, that he was physically incapable of work; second, that this incapacity resulted from old age rather than some other cause; third, that he had worked for at least eight years in the factory.

In due course, the lack of an old-age pension was felt to be unsatisfactory; not primarily out of concern for the well-being of older workers, but rather to free up jobs in certain key industries. The first proper old-age pension was granted to textile workers in 1928. It was gradually extended to other favoured categories of workers. Statutory old-age pensions were also introduced for professions such as teaching and medicine; these were not age-dependent, but rather were payable on completion of a fixed term of service. A further category of benefit recipient was the ‘personal pensioner’, an individual who had distinguished him- or herself by especially valuable service to the Soviet state.

As can readily be seen from this complex and discriminatory system of benefits, the Soviet Union remained a place where citizenship and entitlement to benefits depended on gainful work activity. The guiding assumption of public discourse in the 1920s and 1930s was that invalids and the aged should be found gainful work appropriate to their reduced physical capacities. How exactly such people were to be redeployed in the workforce was a question that spawned much discussion. By the 1930s, invalidity was fully integrated into Marxist-Leninist theory: it was deemed to be a ‘dialectical’ concept whose content would change in line with evolving socio-economic conditions. Unlike the West, where the upper limit of a useful working life was alleged to be no higher than forty, in the Soviet Union citizens retained their sacred human right to toil into much later stages of their lives. Here a critical role was allotted to organized medical assessments of work capacity. In the 1930s, these were not merely to provide a yes/no assessment of an individual’s ability to work, but to conduct a thorough medical examination and make informed recommendations of where that individual might usefully be put to work. The importance of these issues for Soviet society was confirmed by the commissioning of specialized research. In Leningrad in 1932, by decree of the USSR Council of Ministers, two new academic institutes were set up on the basis of the existing Medical Examination Bureau: a Research Institute for the Study and Organization of the Labour of Invalids (LITIN) and a Research Institute for Medical Labour Examination (NIVTE). These two institutions (which fused in 1935 under the name of NIVTE) together produced numerous studies of those medical conditions most likely to afflict the Leningrad workforce. They
also devoted considerable attention to the question of age-related changes in human physiology, their aim being to avert premature ageing in as many cases as possible.

The task of Soviet applied medicine was, in the words of the institute’s director, ‘to return people to active and creative working life’. This was the only adequate compensation for disability; to turn people into mere pensioners, recipients of state charity, would rob them of full participation in Soviet society. At the same time, it was recognized that invalidity was increasingly becoming synonymous with old age. The institute, with an annual capacity of 60,000 patients, found that 64 per cent of male invalids, and 70 per cent of females, were 50 or over. The task of the institute was to help these people find gainful and rewarding employment even after their physical powers had begun to wane. In practice, however, this objective was not easily achieved. If older workers were classified as invalids, they were almost invariably demoted, with a consequent loss of earnings. The alternative placements they were offered might well be inappropriate, not to say humiliating: a highly skilled carpenter with arteriosclerosis might become a watchman, a qualified electrician a toilet or cloakroom attendant. As a result, skilled workers were highly unwilling to leave their jobs even when their health was severely weakened.

It is hardly surprising that real provisions for invalids in the workforce did not match Soviet rhetoric. Managers of factories in the 1930s were desperate for high productivity and fast results, and so had no inclination to waste resources making special arrangements for the less able-bodied section of the workforce. They also had no time to equip more than a few of their workers with skills that would make them useful even after the passing of their physical prime. Many workers over the age of 50 who were beginning to suffer from age-related affictions had no option but to struggle on as before, even if their heart, lungs or nervous system were no longer up to the job. But all that did not change the fact that old age had gained new prominence in the language of occupational medicine. An article in the fifth in-house bulletin of the NIVTE for 1935 proposed that older workers be seen not as disabled but as differently abled. Close observation at the workplace revealed not only the obvious fact that old people had less physical strength and endurance than their younger comrades, but also that they ‘apply their lesser strength differently, they switch between work and rest differently, they move from one kind of movement to another differently; an old man works not only at a slower tempo but in another, distinctive rhythm’. The physical makeup of the older worker should be seen not in static anatomical terms, but rather with a view to the functions that it could discharge.1 The medical interest in older workers went beyond bio-mechanical assessments to the compilation of extensive case histories and work biographies. Another paper of 1935 sought to extract a generalized biographical profile of the older worker from the data that had been collected. These senior members of the workforce were likely to have started work early (at twelve or thirteen), to have come from good proletarian stock, to have shown consistently high ‘activity in acquiring knowledge’, to have taken part in illegal pre-revolutionary worker circles, and to have striven to raise their qualifications at every available opportunity; they were in general dedicated to their work

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1 Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv naucho-tekhnicheskoi dokumentatsii Sankt-Peterburga, f. 368, op. 1-1, d. 5, ll. 13-14.
and committed to passing on their know-how to the younger generation. The old person could thus be an exemplary, not just an acceptable, Soviet worker.

The same point was made repeatedly in less specialized publications of the 1930s. One of many exhortatory stories of the time was that of a ninety-six-year-old former Red Partisan and collective farmer who had recently moved to Moscow, where he was given a room and a 125-ruble pension, but even so refused to give up work, finding employment as a watchman across the road from where he lived. By the middle of the 1930s ‘pensioner’ had become a perfectly respectable identity for a Soviet person to adopt, and it implied age and seniority rather than disability. As a Pravda editorial of 15 October 1934 had it, ‘Tomorrow’s pensioner is today’s toiler’.

Dicta such as this were increasingly accompanied by recommendations that social security be made friendlier to the older worker. The pension system that had taken shape as a result of numerous staggered pieces of legislation from 1929 to 1932 consisted of four basic categories. First came pensions for invalidity, old age, and loss of breadwinner. Next came pensions ‘for completion of service’ (za vyslugu let): these were initially (in 1929) awarded to personnel in various branches of the education system, but were soon extended to doctors, veterinary practitioners, and a number of other professions. The third category of beneficiary was ‘heroes of labour’, while the fourth was ‘personal pensioners’, who as a rule had distinguished themselves by lengthy participation in the revolutionary movement or by outstanding achievements in the fields of art, science and scholarship, and technology. The coherence of the ‘pensioner’ concept for the Soviet mindset was demonstrated by the first calls to pull together the dozens of relevant decrees and create a ‘single, clear pension law’.

By the 1930s, then, old people were established in the discourses of social policy and applied medicine as valid (even valued) members of the workforce. In large part, however, this rhetoric served to obscure the inadequacy of social security provision. For, while the body of legislation grew further in the 1930s, it did not form a coordinated pensions ‘system’, and it remained highly discriminatory. In most cases, ‘pensioners’ were not particularly old, but rather war or labour invalids. And the numbers were never

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2 Serebrennikov, ‘Professional’nyi marshrut starikov (Predvartitel’noe soobshchenie’), Tsentral’nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv nauchno-tekhnicheskoi dokumentatsii Sankt-Peterburga, f. 368, op. 1-1, d. 4, ll. 13-14.


4 A useful collection of legislative acts is R. Kats and N. Sorokin (eds), Pensii po sotsial’nomu strakhovaniiu, Moscow, 1935. More detail on personal pensions can be found in Polozhenie ob obespechenii personal’nymi pensiiami lits, imeushchikh iskluchitel’noe zaslugi pered republikoi, Moscow, 1932, and Kratki spravochnik o personal’nym pensiiakh, Moscow, 1934.

enormous in the prewar period. In 1941, only 200,000 people received pensions, and OAPs accounted for only 5 per cent of these.6

No substantial change occurred until 1956, when to much fanfare a new pensions law was unveiled. This reform had three main rationales. First, to eliminate the unmanageable complexity of the existing set of several hundred relevant decrees. Second, to raise the miserably low ceiling for state pensions that had been fixed in the 1930s. Third, by offering more comprehensive coverage, to make pensions part of the post-Stalin social contract. Pensions were no longer to be needs-tested; older workers did not any more need to prove loss of work capacity to start drawing their pension.7 Although the system was far from universal (it notably left out collective farm workers, who were finally included by further legislation in 1964), it quickly brought a transformation in levels of social provision. By 1960 over 20 million Soviet citizens received state pensions, nearly 6 million of them for age and service.

What did a pension mean in real economic terms? From the 1930s to the 1950s pensions were tied to earnings, but capped at a level that condemned to poverty pensioners without additional sources of income. The assumption of the social security system was that people would continue to work until they were no longer able to do so. On the eve of the 1956 reform, the maximum pension was below the minimum wage. Although the reform undeniably improved the lot of benefit recipients, pensions were very low even in the late Soviet period, especially for collective farm workers. Many elderly rural people in the 1960s had to make do with the minimum pension of 12 rubles a month; it was not until the end of the 1970s that the average pension went above the officially defined threshold of poverty. Even in the late 1980s it appeared that most pensioners lived below the poverty line.8 Mervyn Matthews has listed several poverty-generating factors in the late Soviet pension system: the low minimum levels (especially for collective farm workers); the lack of top-up schemes for those people who had not worked long enough in state jobs to qualify for the full pension; the fact that the system was based on service record, not on need (which meant, for example, that pensioners with an unusually large number of dependants would struggle to get by); the fact that no account was taken of inflation or ‘illegal price mechanisms’.9

In one sense, however, the Soviet pensions system was extremely generous: it set the low pensionable ages of 60 for men and 55 for women (even lower in certain lines of work). These age thresholds were set at a time when the Soviet state was trying to outdo the West by instituting the most enlightened social security system in the world. It is worth remembering also that life expectancy was only 44 when the ages of 60 and 55 were first

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7 For the landmark pension law of 14 July 1956 and its subsequent refinements, see Sotsial’noe obespechenie v SSSR: Shornik ofitsial’nykh materialov, Moscow, 1962.
9 M. Matthews, Poverty in the Soviet Union: The Life-Styles of the Underprivileged in Recent Years, Cambridge, 1986, pp. 48-9. Matthews does, however, point out that significant progress was made in the 1970s: the number of people not covered at all by the pension system fell from 2 million in 1970 to only a few thousand in 1980 (p. 117).
established in 1928. Largely as a consequence of this, Russians (Soviet and post-Soviet) do not automatically leave the workforce when they reach pensionable age. There is a strong Soviet tradition of continuing to work for at least a few years after drawing your pension. In Russia ‘pensioner’ does not necessarily mean ‘retired person’.

Before 1956 very few Soviet citizens would have been tempted to make such an equation. As we have seen, the implicit assumption of the Stalinist social security system was that people would work until they were physically incapable of doing so. The significance of the 1956 pension law was not only that it instituted a purportedly comprehensive pensions system, but also that it set pensions high enough for Soviet citizens to leave the workforce before they became incapacitated. In fact, the terms of the 1956 reform were such as to dissuade all but the most determined from staying on in the labour force. The maximum pension was fixed at 120 rubles, and only workers in high-priority sectors were allowed to keep a portion of their earnings on top of that. Sure enough, in the short term the law acted as a powerful disincentive to carry on working. In Leningrad, for example, 70 per cent of pensioners continued working over the period 1950-56, but after the introduction of the new law that figure fell to 24 per cent. But this rationale of the pensions legislation did not remain fixed. Rather, it signalled the start of a twenty-five year period where the regime struggled to devise the pension policy that would best suit its designs. A new law of August 1964 made staying on in work more advantageous by allowing working pensioners to claim half of their pension as well as their salary (up to a maximum of 200 rubles per month); in some cases (in specific regions and branches of industry) the proportion of the pension paid in such cases reached 75 per cent. In 1970, yet another pension reform made delayed retirement an even more attractive option. Now many working pensioners were entitled to the whole of their pension, and the ceiling for pension and salary combined was raised to 300 rubles per month. The Soviet Union was facing a labour shortage and needed to encourage its senior citizens back to work. And for the most part it succeeded. In 1956, before the pension reform of that year had taken effect, the proportion of working pensioners was 59 per cent. This proportion then reached its lowest in 1962 (9.2 per cent) before rising steadily through the 1970s and reaching about one-third at the end of the Soviet period.

The relationship between pensions and work was a difficult issue for Soviet social policy. On the one hand, state support for older citizens was a significant part of the social contract, an element in the universal social security system that the Soviet regime had supposedly always wanted to institute. Yet, on the other hand, work was the prime value, and the major source of individual self-worth and of social value. The press discussion between May 1956, when the draft pension law was first published, and July 1956, when it was passed by the Soviet government, bears witness to the resulting tension in policymaking. In general, state policy tended over the following years back towards the traditional objective of keeping people at work. Social gerontologists in the 1960s and

10 V.E. Gordin, Chem starost’ obespechim, Moscow, 1988, p. 31.
1970s observed that 80 or 90 per cent of pensioners retained work capacity. The question was how to make work attractive for them. Financial incentives were not enough on their own. Suitable work placements for pensioners were also important. If older workers were found gainful employment, this would be good for the Soviet economy and good for the pensioners’ self-esteem. Two-thirds of pensioners remained in their former jobs, but often with a reduced workload. But the state could clearly have been doing more to accommodate them. Among the requests most frequently heard from older workers were: a shorter working day; a choice of work more suited to physical capacity and intellectual interests; improvement in living standards; more respect to be shown from workplace administration and the younger generation at work. There is strong evidence that many non-working pensioners could have been lured out to work if they had been offered shorter hours. But the Soviet state was always reluctant to offer flexible work arrangements of this kind.

The average length of work life after retirement was around five years. Soviet people approaching pensionable age were more acutely aware of the drawbacks of retirement than of its benefits: they saw clearly the problems of material hardship, physical decline, the loss of social prestige and purpose, feelings of loneliness, an increased share of household chores, boredom. Even though the experience on average turned out to be not as bad as feared (especially with regard to health), a degree of social participation was found to be essential to psychological well-being in old age.

Several factors underlay older people’s decision to stay on (or not) in the work force. The first was the state of their health (in studies of the late Soviet period, this was most often given as the reason for retirement). The second was their family situation. If the other family members were earning enough to support themselves, and if the old person’s services were required for child care, garden plot cultivation, or some other household task, then work after taking one’s pension became only a remote possibility. The final factor in an older person’s decision to work, and one that became more significant in the post-Soviet period, was the availability of suitable paid employment. In Soviet times many pensioners were put off work by the impossibility of obtaining flexible work arrangements. In the 1990s, however, they were often lucky to find any work whatsoever.

As I hope to have indicated, the treatment of older members of the workforce in Soviet policy and practice was often ambivalent and never static. Pensions legislation and its interpretation on the ground varied according to the resources available and the priorities of economic planning. And even when the figure of the Soviet old-age pensioner became

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firmly established in legislation and public discourse, this pensioner was by no means detached from paid employment. If we look at the *longue durée* of the Soviet period, it is hard to make the case that old people were consistently marginalized in workplace relations.

The economic significance of older people in Soviet society is even more inescapable when we turn away from the workplace to the household. One of the central ironies of Soviet history is that a regime adopting a militant modernizing agenda did so much to entrench ‘traditional’ social patterns. For all the talk of state provision for the disadvantaged, pensions and health care were usually inadequate, and responsibility for old people was in practice thrust on their children. In the Soviet system, home help was supposed to be organized through district departments of social security. A few day care centres were set up. But these measures were not carried out very thoroughly, and in any case Soviet citizens were somewhat reluctant to deliver themselves into institutional care. There was a slight increase in the number of homes in the postwar years, but the increase in no way matched demand, and the condition of the homes, and the quality of their personnel, often left much to be desired.\(^\text{17}\) In the 1980s and 1990s, the number of old-age homes declined, as did the number of their occupants. The health care system was known to discriminate against the elderly, who were far from being top priority in resource allocation. More encouraging signs are not entirely absent. In recent years there have been reports of new initiatives to support old people, many of them at the local level, and some of them involving a mixture of state, municipal and private funding. In many cities and localities old people are offered a range of benefits: free meals, household goods for those who cannot otherwise afford them, free transport, and so on.\(^\text{18}\) Yet the provision of more expensive services – home help and social workers, not to mention care homes – remains pitiful for the most part.

In the second half of the Soviet period, however, a virtue was made out of necessity. The relative weakness of institutional provision was presented as a strength: as evidence that the Soviet system, unlike the western, did not push older people into a ghetto. The exceptionally close everyday relationship between parents and grandparents was held to be a feature that distinguished Soviet society from industrialized societies in western Europe. The warmth and intimacy of intergenerational relations had by the 1960s become a point of pride for ‘mature socialism’. Individual material benefit, the development of the personality, and the health of the collective were combined in a neat dialectical manoeuvre. The old folks took over what was, according to early Soviet policy on the family, to have been the role of the socialist state by providing basic socialization for their grandchildren, and they received support from their children in return.

Yet by the early 1960s there were troubling signs that these relations were becoming less intimate. The proportion of old people living alone was steadily growing, largely due to the increased availability of housing (and especially separate flats). In 1959, 2.9 million old people were living alone (30.9 per cent), in 1970 – 5.0 million (35.2 per cent), and in


In 1979 – 6.9 million (43.9 per cent). In 1970, moreover, there were nearly ten times as many elderly women on their own as men (this extreme imbalance was due to the devastating demographic effects of the war). And nor was filial piety always the norm. In postwar legal journals (always a good, if oblique, index of social change), there was talk of making children legally responsible for the support of their elderly parents. Surveys of the 1960s showed that a steady majority of urban families preferred to have their older generation nearby but not in the same household. ‘Proximity at a distance’ (blizost’ na rasstoianii) was the operative phrase. There had been a marked fall in family size between the census of 1939 and 1959, especially in rural areas (the rural average was 3.9 in 1959, the urban average was 3.5). By 1979, the nuclear family accounted for 65.8 per cent of urban households in the RSFSR (and 67.5 per cent of rural households).

Even so, the role of Soviet pensioners in the household remained extremely significant. Older Soviet people performed much more than their fair share of household tasks. As a survey of the second half of the 1960s demonstrated, older workers in large cities did five or six hours more housework per week than young couples. Older men, for example, did more housework than they had earlier in their lives. According to late Soviet data, 65 per cent of Leningrad families with children under twelve used a babushka as a childminder. The weakness of the service sector and the continued underprovision of labour-saving devices ensured that running the household and raising children remained an extraordinarily time-consuming and exhausting business. Yet, with the premium placed on education and technical expertise, young adults were likely to spend more time developing their careers than ever previously. For this reason, they were calling on their own parents to help more than ever before – even when their parents worked themselves. And the older generation was mostly willing to help, as its own educational opportunities and career prospects were much more limited. Grandparents, according to the authors of the 1960s survey, were often guided by a markedly non-urban set of values: ‘habits, traditions and patterns formed in a semi-subsistence economy – including the concept that domestic labour is an extraordinarily important source for providing for the family, the habit of working with one’s hands, etc. – survive for a long time on urban soil’. And anyone familiar with the post-Soviet garden plot boom might well conclude that these habits and patterns are still substantially intact more than thirty years later.

But the participation of older people in the household went even further than housework and child care. According to late Soviet research, about two-thirds of working pensioners provided material support for their children, while only 5 per cent received such support from the younger generation. This pattern seems to have remained remarkably intact in

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20. The point had been the subject of a query in Sotsialisticheskaia zakonnost’, 1950, 4, p. 63, where it was explained that children could not be forced to pay for the maintenance of their elderly parents.
22. L. Gordon and E. Klopov, Man after Work, Moscow, 1975, chap. 3.
the Soviet period. Pensions may have been low, and may have fallen substantially in real terms since 1990, but in some regions they did not decrease as much as wages. And of course a pension was still guaranteed by the state, while paid employment was not always to be had.

**Conclusion**

Although the Soviet old age pensioner took several decades to become an established identity in Soviet society, it proved to be powerful and enduring once it arrived. In a Soviet and post-Soviet context, ‘old-age pensioner’ did not connote marginalization and economic disempowerment, for several reasons. First, the fact that, especially after the 1956 reform, pensions were not a negligible contribution to household budgets. Second, the fact that many older people continued to work even after drawing their pension. Third, the substantial non-monetary economic contribution that pensioners made to their households. Fourth, the enormous demographic weight of the pensioner population and their loud political voice. For all that the post-Soviet era has been a time of traumatic uncertainty and impoverishment for many elderly Russians, old people have also shown themselves, thanks to the well-developed sense of entitlement they developed in the last three decades of the Soviet era, to be the most determined and vocal political generation in contemporary Russia.