



SEVENTEEN MOMENTS IN SOVIET HISTORY

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YEAR OF THE STAKHANOVITE

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Subject essay: Lewis Siegelbaum

On August 31, 1935, Aleksei Stakhanov, a thirty-year-old miner working at the Central Irmino Mine in the Donets Basin, hewed 102 tons of coal during his six-hour shift. This amount represented fourteen times his quota, and within a few days of the feat was hailed by Pravda as a world record. Anxious to celebrate and reward individuals' achievements in production that could serve as stimuli to other workers, the party launched the Stakhanovite movement. The title of Stakhanovite, conferred on workers and peasants who set production records or otherwise demonstrated mastery of their assigned tasks, quickly superceded that of shock worker. Day by day throughout the autumn of 1935, the campaign intensified, culminating in an All-Union Conference of Stakhanovites in industry and transportation which met in the Kremlin in late November. At the conference, outstanding Stakhanovites mounted the podium to recount how, defying their quotas and often the skepticism of their workmates and bosses, they applied new techniques of production to achieve stupendous results. They called for the general adoption of these techniques via socialist competition and, to bursts of applause, thanked

Comrade Stalin for, as Stakhanov put it, “the happy life of our country, the happiness and glory of our magnificent fatherland.” Many referred to their increased earnings, which, thanks to the progressive piece-rate system according to which output above the norm was remunerated at higher rates of pay, reached dizzying heights. Some indicated what sort of consumer goods they would buy with their earnings. Stalin captured the upbeat mood of the conference when, by way of explaining how such records were only possible in the “land of socialism,” he uttered the phrase, “Life has become better, and happier too.” Widely disseminated, and even set to song, Stalin’s words served as the motto of the movement.

The Stakhanovite movement thus encompassed lessons not only about how to work but how to live. In addition to providing a model for success on the shop floor, it conjured up images of the good life. Many of the same qualities Stakhanovites were supposed to exhibit in the one sphere — cleanliness, neatness, preparedness, and a keenness for learning — were applicable to the other. These qualities were associated with *kultur’nost’* (“culturedness”), the acquisition of which marked the individual as a New Soviet Man or Woman. Advertisements for perfume in the journal *Stakhanovets*, articles about Stakhanovites on shopping sprees, photographs of Stakhanovites sharing their happiness with their families, newsreels showing them driving new automobiles — presented to them as gifts — and moving into comfortable apartments all symbolized *kultur’nost’*. Wives of male Stakhanovites had an important part to play in the movement as helpmates preparing nutritious meals, keeping their apartments clean and comfortable, and otherwise creating a cultured environment in the home so that their husbands were well rested and eager to work with great energy. It was also important to demonstrate that Stakhanovites were admired by their comrades and considered worthy of holding public office. In a broader sense, Stakhanovites represented fitting subjects for stories that contrasted the harsh, oppressive past (either pre-revolutionary or, in the case of peasants’ stories, pre-collectivization) with the prosperous present and the even-more-prosperous and happy future. Stakhanovites (or ghost-writers) often constructed such narratives as testimonials to Stalin’s wise (“genial”) leadership and the achievements of Soviet socialism.

Notwithstanding the enormous publicity surrounding Stakhanovites and their achievements, they were not necessarily popular. Even before the raising of output norms in early 1936, workers who had not been favored with the best conditions and consequently struggled to fulfill their norms expressed resentment of Stakhanovites by verbally and even physically abusing them. Foremen and engineers, only too well aware that “recordmania” and the provision of special conditions for Stakhanovites created disruptions in production and bottlenecks in supplies, also on occasion “sabotaged” the movement. At least that was the accusation made against many who often served as scapegoats for the failure of the Stakhanovite movement to fulfill its promise of unleashing the productive forces of the country. Nevertheless, the Stakhanovite movement continued into the war and even enjoyed something of a revival in the years after the war when it was exported to eastern Europe.



1936

Abolition of Legal Abortion

Childhood under Stalin

Creation of the Ethnic Republics

The Great Terror

Pilots and Explorers

Popular Front

Rebuilding of Moscow

Rehabilitation of Cossack Divisions

Second Kolkhoz Charter

Stalin Constitution

Upheaval in the Opera

Year of the Stakhanovite

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