

Whether viewed from the perspective of the emerging technical intelligentsia or from the viewpoint of Soviet workers, the Soviet workplace in the years immediately following WWII differed dramatically from both the regime's ideal communist model and from the tumultuous, frenetic enterprises of the 1930s. Duskin and Filtzer agree that the postwar regime sought an unprecedented level of control over the Soviet workforce as it confronted what Filtzer calls the "twin crises" of political and economic reconstruction in the aftermath of World War II. They also exploit newly available archival information (though at dramatically different levels, discussed below) to explore the Soviet workplace from the above respective points of view. Taken together, these two works provide a thorough enrichment of our insight into the specific conditions of Soviet industry during the period of "late Stalinism."

Duskin's basic thesis is that the regime deliberately cultivated the technical intelligentsia as a "new elite" to lead the restoration of order and discipline in Soviet factories. He asserts that such a restoration was necessary because the war had produced "twin curses" of "labor force deskilling and production disorder." To compensate for the poorly skilled workforce, Soviet leaders chose to shelve such 1930s-style ideological imperatives as specialist-baiting and emphasis on "praktiki" (workers without formal education promoted to managerial positions). Duskin challenges other scholars' conclusions that Politburo and industrial ministries often had conflicting positions regarding the use of technical specialists. He argues instead that high-ranking Party officials strongly and consistently supported the "rationalization" of Soviet industry that demanded increased reliance on the technical intelligentsia. In return, the generation of technical specialists that came to lead Soviet industry in the late 1940s and early 1950s worked hard to reconstruct Soviet industrial capacity and supported the Stalinist political system. Duskin concludes that, by the 1970s, the technical intelligentsia came to dominate both the industrial and political elite of the USSR, a notion in keeping with the ideological vision of scientific socialism, but one with fatal consequences for the Soviet regime.

Because of their technical training, "scientific" emphasis, and fundamental belief in the sound nature of the Soviet system, Duskin asserts, the technical specialists who dominated the Brezhnev hierarchy were inclined only toward minor changes or reforms, never toward a significant alteration of the system. At the same time, those specialists working below the uppermost levels of politics developed a professional ethos that inspired them to meet world standards in the scientific resolution of problems facing Soviet industry. This, in turn, led to a craving for contact with Western specialists and for information from outside the USSR. Taken together, this conservative resistance to reform and frustrated desire for outside information undermined the long-term stability of the USSR.
In contrast to Duskin’s brief survey of the technical intelligentsia who dominated industrial supervision after the war, Filtzer provides an in-depth, meticulously documented story of the workers they supervised. Significantly, Filtzer reaches many of the same conclusions as Duskin, though approaching the issue from the opposite side of the social spectrum. Filtzer argues that the Stalinist regime had to “resurrect the institutional foundations” on which it had been built in the 1930s as it confronted the economic devastation of the postwar USSR. Those foundations, of course, were heavy industry, mining, construction and defense. Postwar Soviet society, Filtzer asserts, had “different goals” from the regime’s. But the wartime devastation coupled with the food crisis of 1946-47 dashed the population’s hopes for any evolution of normalcy and led the regime to pursue an unprecedented level of control over the labor force—a level of control that effectively eroded most distinctions between slave and free labor.

Filtzer builds a convincing argument that the regime’s reliance upon young, unskilled, unwilling laborers in its core sectors of coal mining, construction and the steel industry combined with the abysmal working and living conditions of the postwar years to produce a demoralized and apathetic working class that retreated into intimate circles of family and friends. With very few exceptions, workers were occasionally able to obtain redress of individual grievances, but not able to take collective action to articulate concerns. Filtzer paints an appalling picture of the food, housing and medical care crises faced by the USSR’s working class population in the aftermath of the war. Based almost exclusively on archival and other primary sources, Filtzer’s description of postwar devastation reveals truly abominable conditions. Those conditions were worsened by the regime’s policy of suppressing consumption by Soviet workers in order to direct capital into reconstruction efforts, by corruption and by the favorable treatment accorded to members of the technical intelligentsia in the course of reconstruction. As a result, Filtzer concludes, those workers who were too young to have fought developed a dramatically different view of Stalinism and Soviet life from that of their elders. For the young, Stalinism did not equate to “terror or heroic sacrifice,” but to a level of “despair and hopelessness” that would confront Stalin’s successors and ultimately undermine the Soviet system. That despair manifested itself in the widespread worker flight from assigned jobs in the core sectors, the circumvention of orders from the center by industrial managers, and the lack of effort by the procuracy and other officials to enforce the regime’s draconian laws. Only the gradual increase in the Soviet standard of living after 1948 prevented the collapse of social order.

Filtzer’s stark portraits of the 1946-47 food crisis, the abysmal housing and health care issues of the “attenuated” recovery from 1948 to 1952, the profound alienation of younger workers and the failure of the repressive apparatus to coerce compliance with Stalinist laws are the most significant achievements of this book. He shows how the regime drove the workers who were its ideological raison d’être into a quiescent sense of powerlessness and apathy. Most important, the younger cohorts of those same workers, who should have become the fundamental pillar of postwar Soviet society, became instead “profoundly alienated” from the regime.

While the two works cover the same time period, they do so in significantly different fashion. Duskin’s work is based primarily upon secondary sources, supplemented with archival material from the Russian State Economic Archive (RGAE) and the