Boris B. Gorshkov  

This important volume, a lightly revised version of Gorshkov’s dissertation, addresses an issue that historians of Russia have largely – and inexplicably – ignored. Industrial child labor throughout the world has been the subject of innumerable studies, yet no monograph on the phenomenon in Russia had appeared since 1927. Gorshkov thus fills a great gap in the historiography. At the same time, this is a work not just of labor history, but touches upon changes in the Russian family, the growth of civil society, the process of Russian legislation, and the very nature of the autocracy itself.

The book’s first chapter examines the prehistory of child labor in Russia before widespread industrialization. Children began productive activity at the age of five and gradually undertook more important and strenuous activities until they transitioned into adulthood in their mid-teens. Children did not generally produce more than they consumed, but all sectors of state and society considered their labor a necessary learning experience that prepared them for adult life. The use of children in manufacturing dates from the early 1700s, and most observers saw it in a positive light. When regulations mentioned child labor, it was often with the provisos that children should only perform labor commensurate with their age, and that their employers should teach them a trade. The first decree limiting child labor, specifically work between midnight and six in the morning for those younger than twelve, was promulgated in 1845.

Those rules came about because, with the beginnings of industrialization, it was apparent that factories were utilizing children in roles that were not at all pedagogical but purely economic. The second chapter examines the parameters and effects of industrialization on child labor. Gorshkov concludes that children under sixteen constituted between nine and twelve percent of the workforce. Children were hired for reasons that were both cultural – traditional
attitudes about work as life training as well as a desire to keep the family unit together in one workplace – and economic. The latter motives were not only industrialists’ wishes to replace more expensive adult workers with children, but also workers’ desires to maximize the entire family’s labor. Children worked similar hours as adults, often in dangerous auxiliary positions, such as darting among spinning machines to piece together broken pieces of yarn, but for only a fraction of adult wages. They were much more prone to injuries than adults were, and factory conditions more negatively affected their health.

A growing consciousness of these negative effects led to efforts for more systematic regulation of child labor, and labor in general. In his third chapter, which examines debates about proposed legislation through the 1870s, Gorshkov maintains that concerns about child labor drove the first round of proposals about labor law in general, the Shtakel’berg commissions formed in 1859. These discussions, which wound up in 1866 with no legislation passed, were primarily between bureaucrats and industrialists. Most, but not all, government figures desired wide-ranging labor legislation, while industrialists were unanimously and, in Gorshkov’s view, effectively opposed. Another, ultimately more successful, round of discussions began in 1870. By this time, the effects of the Great Reforms produced a much wider range of opinions, as a nascent civil society entered the debate. As the decade passed, a consensus developed for state intervention, as the question became not whether to regulate, but to what degree (e.g., age and hour limits). There was also broad agreement on the need for more schooling for young workers: “The idea of child labor as a form of education was yielding to the idea of sending children to schools for an education” (p. 124).

These discussions resulted in Russia’s first comprehensive labor law in 1882, which banned employment of children under twelve and limited the hours and job descriptions for those between twelve and fifteen; it also set up a factory inspector system to enforce these regulations and required some educational opportunities for minor workers. This began a process of steadily progressive and, Gorshkov concludes, successful labor legislation that continued through the end of the empire.

Gorshkov has done a great service in presenting this information, and his arguments are usually persuasive. However, that is not to say that he conclusively proves them. The major problem with this volume is that its primary source base is not wide and is generally secondary. Gorshkov certainly consulted Russian archives, but not extensively. This is especially a problem in the third chapter, concerning the debates over labor legislation between 1859 and the end of the 1870s. Gorshkov asserts that the legislative process was not as autocratic as historians have often suggested, and that during the 1859–