THE URBAN LANDSCAPE IN WORKERS' IMAGINATION*

My delight was beginning to turn into depression, into some kind of inexplicable terror before the grandiose appearance and cold indifference of my surroundings...

The new, bright-colored, spacious Mytishchensk factory... was pleasant to look at from every angle. And the roar of its mighty Herculean whistle, with which the trumpets of hosts of archangels could not compare, resounded through the distant meadows and forests, frightening the animals and awakening the shabby, gray villages from their deep, centuries-old slumber.

—Semen Kanatchikov.1

For as long as cities have existed, human beings have used contradictory images of the city to symbolize and judge human civilization. From Babel to "Babylon on the Hudson," cities have represented human power, invention, vitality, and community, but also arrogance, sin, cruelty, and violence. These two faces of the city have recurred so often in so many literatures as to suggest a universal anxiety about the results of human society.2

In Russia's developing industrial cities at the start of the twentieth century, many viewed the city as both a vital and sinister place, including the many workers who recorded their thoughts in writing. For Marxists and liberals alike, a "conscious proletarian" was supposed to see the city as a place of dynamism, enlightenment, social struggle, and progress (especially in contrast

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to the dark, passive, and tradition-bound countryside). As one Marxist literary critic stated confidently in 1914, in reviewing the newly published *Pervyi sbornik proletarskikh pisatelei*, proletarian writers "clearly see and understand that the modern city is an arena of struggle, the seething center where the liberating armies gather, struggling for a new world."*3 In fact, most workers, before 1918, who put their thoughts about the city into writing, including those who considered themselves Marxists, did not see the city so "clearly." They expressed a deeply ambivalent view of the city, if not outright hatred.

Workers' judgments about city life were influenced by their everyday experiences: by the opportunities and stimulation the city afforded them as well as by their intimacy with harsh conditions of urban life and work. Subjective experiences also shaped their views of the urban landscape: traditions of peasant antiurbanism; discourse in the popular press about modern city life; literary images of the city they encountered as they became more literate and well-read; the ideological values they acquired as they became politicized.

But workers' views of the city were not simply shaped by various influences—workers also deliberately manipulated the image of the city to express ideas and values. For the city was both the physical place where workers lived and labored and a usable image, a symbolic landscape with which they could express feelings and judgments about many other things: about the social order, human relationships, and the whole of their lives. This article explores the images workers invoked in writing about the urban, industrial landscape—images of the city, factories, and machines—as expressions of their views on the modern city but also as vehicles of intellectual, aesthetic, and moral expression.

Some of the more politicized worker-writers, armed with the modernist aesthetics of Marxism, made every effort to voice an appreciative urbanism. But even here we see doubt and ambivalence. An example is the poem "V gorode" by the well-known Bolshevik worker-poet Mikhail Gerasimov. The poem begins (and these are the lines most often quoted by Soviet literary historians) by subverting the conventional pastoral terms that pervaded nineteenth-century poetry:

> Into gardens of iron and granite,
> Into alleys of stone buildings,
> I went entwined with spring
> To the festive call of factory whistles.

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