Shock Work, Stakhanovism, and Working Class Identity in Central Asia

Abstract: While Central Asia was seen as a wasteland of “backwardness” in the 1910s, it had become a collection of politically significant nations within the USSR only a few decades later. This paper argues that the productivity campaigns of the Soviet Union were essential in expanding opportunities for the indigenous in Central Asia. The shock work campaign of the late 1920s offered objective criteria of productivity and enabled the formation of an indigenous working class. In the mid-1930s, some Central Asians even distinguished themselves as “Stakhanovites,” or hyper-productive workers who were recognized as national heroes.

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In the creation of the “homo sovieticus” race, the Soviet state formulated criteria for an ideal citizen and defined means by which this status could be attained. One such means was productivity, which was trumpeted as an opportunity for poor, obscure, but hard-working citizens to ascend the social ladder and achieve national acclaim. During the shock work movement of the late 1920s, as well as later in the Stakhanovite campaign of 1935-6, the enthusiastic and hyper-productive worker came to be equated with a national hero. The qualities that defined a worker-hero, moreover, were not exclusive on the basis of nationality, ethnic origin, or previous way of life; at least in theory, this ideal was equally attainable to natives of Central Asia as it was to ethnic Russians.

Were these qualifications for success, in reality, accessible to ethnic minorities? Did the universal language used by the state reflect an aim to resolve ethnic inequalities? And if so, to what extent did new, productivity-based criteria for the ideal citizen open opportunities for marginalized ethnicities?

One approach to these questions is to examine the increased opportunities induced by productivity campaigns in Central Asia, the region often regarded as the most “backward” in the Soviet Union. Although Central Asians were labelled, as a group, as “unproductive” workers in the early years of the Soviet Union, the shock work campaign offered natives the opportunity to distinguish themselves individually for remarkable efforts in the workplace. Stakhanovism further expanded the recognition available to Central Asians; those who managed to set new productivity records in industry or agriculture were celebrated as worker-heroes.

Thus far, there has been little historical investigation into Stakhanovism in Central Asia. Stakhanovism, a predominantly industrial movement, may seem irrelevant to Central Asia, where industry remained sparse in the mid-1930s. Stakhanovism, however, also comprised an agricultural component; rural Stakhanovism flourished in the Soviet Union, including the underdeveloped areas of Central Asia. The “socialist competition” that characterized agricultural component; rural Stakhanovism flourished in the Soviet Union, including the underdeveloped areas of Central Asia. The “socialist competition” that characterized the agricultural branch of Stakhanovism, furthermore, was comparable in intensity and ubiquity to that of the coal mines in Ukraine and western Russia.
Paralleling the increase in opportunities for indigenous laborers was the rise of a working class in Central Asia. In the early years of the Soviet Union, there was little, if any, class consciousness, or specifically worker identity, among the Kazakh nomads and Turkmen peasants. Historian Matthew Payne argues in his book *Stalin’s Railroad* that shock work created a cohesive working class among the native population, both transforming the identity of indigenous workers and encouraging society’s acceptance of native workers as valuable members of the proletariat. Stakhanovism continued this trend, rewarding zealous indigenous workers with comfortable living conditions, honorific titles, and even acclaim on a national level. In the interest of realizing a Marxist social order, the state, by distributing the rewards of Stakhanovism, sponsored the emergence of an indigenous working class. As a consequence, Central Asians could participate in the Soviet class structure and further their prospects of becoming celebrated workers.

While it seems that the Soviet central government did intend to level the opportunities available to various ethnicities, and to integrate the Central Asian nations as near-equal entities in the USSR, there were practical barriers to this fulfillment. Both ethnic Russians and indigenous Central Asians resisted attempts at indigenization of the workforce. Furthermore, deficient supplies, as well as unfamiliarity with technology and production methods to which ethnic Russians were accustomed, disadvantaged Central Asians in productivity competitions. The indigenous population of the Soviet Union, clearly, faced a greater number of obstacles, whether intentionally contrived by Russian co-workers or as an indeliberate consequence of the region’s distance from the central government. Arguably, however, even if Central Asians never achieved precise equality of opportunity with ethnic Russians, Stakhanovism and its precursor, shock work, provided the indigenous with revolutionary prospects for improvement.

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

Central Asia, characterized by low productive output and the absence of a working class, seemed to be mired in “backwardness” at the advent of the USSR. To remedy this underdevelopment, Soviet leaders launched modernization drives in Central Asia in the early 1920s. One of these efforts was an affirmative action program, *korenizatsiya*, that intended to tap the latent productive potential of indigenous peoples by granting them greater preference in employment. The Kazakhstan party Krai Committee, for instance, lobbied and secured commitments for at least 50% of workers on the Turksib Railroad, the largest industrial project in Central Asia, to be from the native population. The vast majority of natives, at the outset, however, were not qualified for industrial labor, and officials often resorted to hiring those with little experience or promise. Forced affirmative action quotas aroused much resentment among Russian workers, who felt undervalued and sacrificed, despite their higher competence, by systematic preference for natives. The natives, for their part, often felt threatened by the overwhelming rush to integrate them into the Soviet Union, which they feared might estrange them from their cultural roots.

Rampant illiteracy and lack of experience with skilled work impeded much of the progress expected from *korenizatsiya*. Official resolutions to hire Central Asians proved largely unsuccessful; natives, although employed, continued to occupy the “lowest rung of productive usefulness” and were subject to ever-present racism fueled by Russian workers’ perception of Central Asians as “superfluous and unproductive.” In some cases, the natives were abused or punished for their failure to meet productivity standards; food, for instance, was withheld from the indigenous on the pretext of underproduction. Other historians have defended the intentions of the Soviet Union to uphold the socialist doctrine of universal equality for all its citizens. The state did not sanction discrimination, and even treated ethnic violence as treason; it dismissed, incarcerated, and made “counterrevolutionary” charges against racist managers and leaders of pogroms. Although there were no institutional systems of discrimination, the “indigenous communities did not enjoy the same career opportunities as their European counterparts.” In spite of benign intentions on the part of the state, the stark underdevelopment in Central Asia inhibited the formation of a respectable working class.

As the Soviet Union was eager to pursue the communally-oriented ideals of the Bolshevik Revolution, work was emphatically collective in the 1920s. Productivity was measured on a group level, and hiring native workers, whose unfamiliarity with industrial work would likely hurt the net efficacy of the team, was often seen as antagonistic to the goals of a given workforce. With the emergence of

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individual-oriented measures of productivity, first in shock work and later in Stakhanovism, however, the Central Asian worker could be judged by his own productive merit, an objective and improvable measure, rather than confounded as a suboptimal keg in the machinery of a group.

PRELUDE TO STAKHANOVISM: SHOCK WORK

“Shock work,” concomitant with the First Five-Year Plan, emerged in the workplace as a means by which individual workers could distinguish themselves for their outstanding productivity. Historian Lewis Siegelbaum defines shock work as “particularly arduous or urgent tasks”12 rewarded by the state in order to encourage “socialist competition” among workers. Shock work was the first step in recognition of the worker as an individual, albeit within the greater socialist collective; outstanding feats of shock work could be traced back to a single worker, who could be praised and celebrated. Shock work, in addition, established a more objective measure by which workers could be evaluated; biographical details, including ethnic origin, were subordinated to quantitative levels of output, by which historically disadvantaged workers could distinguish themselves.

This paper will propose that shock work was the first link in the chain of opportunity gradually extended to Central Asian workers. It will draw on the research of Matthew Payne, a key historian of Central Asia, who, through his studies of Kazakh workers on the Turksib Railroad, concludes that shock work was vital to the creation of a native working class and the integration of Central Asians into the Soviet system.

Payne first establishes the dismal conditions confronting Kazakh workers before the spread of shock work. Native Kazakhs were not accepted as legitimate workers by their Russian counterparts, blamed for any discipline problems on their teams, and labeled as hopeless employees who were impossible to teach, despite proving themselves to be, in reality, just as productive as others in their positions.13 Against this historical context, Payne declares shock work to be a resounding success: it ended the social alienation of the Kazakhs, contributed to their cultural awareness, and ultimately facilitated their integration in the USSR.14 Moreover, shock work encouraged the development of working class identities, even among the indigenous population. Kazakhs were able to partake in an edifying proletarian identity, once workers became classified as “ordinary” versus “shock,” as opposed to the old categories of cadre, peasant, and Kazakh.15 Payne describes instances of Russian shock workers taking on Kazakhs as personal protégés, teaching them Russian and mentoring them in the operations of the workplace.16 As their once-disadvantageous ethnic backgrounds were normalized by the objective standards of shock work, indigenous workers could increasingly view themselves as part of a proletariat, and thus, as part of Soviet society.

Historian Niccolo Pianciola cautions against an overly optimistic view of shock work; if productive work was a welcome refuge for discouraged nomads, it was only because the state had destroyed their economic base and lifestyle, and left them no other option for survival.17 The Soviet campaigns of collectivization and sedentarization in the 1910s led to rampant disappearance of livestock in Central Asia, epidemics and starvation, and violence against the natives.18 While Pianciola concedes at the end of his article that most Kazakhs had been integrated in the Soviet state apparatus through employment, education, and administration by the late 1920s, he concludes with a firm reminder of the injustices and assaults against the natives’ economy.19 Was the development of a native working class worth the devastation of thousands of Central Asians’ livelihoods?

By no means does Payne assert that shock work justified the earlier forced settlement and collectivization of Central Asia, or that it was a panacea for the plight of every Kazakh, but he still considers it an important first step in the process of obtaining greater equality. Payne indeed acknowledges the state’s failure, in several cases, to suppress violence toward Kazakh workers, in addition to the high indigenous turnover rate that persisted, especially due to language-based discrimination.20 Numerically, the shock work campaign fell short of approaching equality for native workers; for instance, only seven of forty-seven attendees of Turksib’s First Shock Worker Conference were Kazakh, a disproportionate amount compared to the 50% quota for natives on the Turksib workforce. While this low representation from the indigenous population is disappointing, and reveals an incompleteness of ethnic equality, it is simultaneously sanguine, proving both that Central Asians were capable of achieving the status of shock worker and that the state was willing to accept them as such. It now remained, in order to achieve a more complete equality, only to expand the degree to which the indigenous were represented in the class of worker-heroes.

Despite the continued obstacles faced by Central Asians, and the memory of devastation induced by the state, Payne’s verdict remains: shock work was a monumental step towards greater opportunity for native workers. Before their consolidation into a working class, the indigenous were dismissed as useless and backwards. Even if shock work may not have warranted the state’s coercion of the previous decades, it still encouraged Russians’ acceptance and regard of Central Asians as legitimate, productive members of society, an equality that may not otherwise have arisen towards the indigenous nomads. The positive outcomes of shock work, moreover, are not annulled by the tragic policies that preceded them. The formation of a native working class, instead, allowed the former nomads access to the Soviet system, in which they began to use the rhetoric of class struggle to edify themselves, as well as to aggrandize their communities and nations.
STAKHANOVI sm AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE CENTRAL ASIAN PROLETARIAT

If shock work created the native Central Asian working class, then Stakhanovism cemented it. Workers who had gained experience in the shock work movement of the late 1920s were increasingly absorbed into the greater Soviet proletariat, and some were even able to distinguish themselves by their productivity. As it was often left to individuals to decide their class identity, natives were, at least in theory, free to identify with the working class. Soviet historian Sheila Fitzpatrick admits that certain attributes, such as occupation, restricted the options in choosing one’s class, but nationality was a neutral factor, neither barring nor imposing a class identity. Socioeconomic criteria, including workers’ backgrounds, ceased to be requisites for admission into the “elite” working class of the USSR, which became increasingly within reach of the indigenous.

Stakhanovism introduced further objective criteria for success, which were not restricted by ethnic origin, geographic location, or former occupation; it also lionized workers for their individual achievements, rather than the overall productivity of a workforce. This pivot in orientation from collective to individual standards of productivity was incited by the sweep of “recordmania” through the Soviet Union in the years 1935 and 1936. The campaign of record-breaking that characterized Stakhanovism is considered by some historians to be both a planned exhibition of model workers “from above,” and a spontaneous manifestation of workers’ desire to distinguish themselves. In order to promote ambition in the workplace and attachment to the regime, it seemed more efficient to attribute a record to the efforts of a single, relatable individual, rather than to a faceless workforce. In this way, the Soviet Union offered specific, living embodiments of personal loyalty to the state. The shift to individual measures of productivity did not, however, necessarily contradict the socialist ideology of the Soviet Union; the two ostensibly diverging trends were reconciled, as the state construed each record as an advancement that would benefit the collective, and insisted that the support of the community was, in essence, responsible for any individual’s accomplishments.
Tapping Productivity

As the standards of productivity, and those of an ideal Soviet citizen, were revised to depend on the skill and eagerness of an individual, members of historically disadvantaged groups could increasingly attain distinction. Stakhanovism enabled indigenous workers, for instance, to prove themselves objectively, supported by the quantitative records of their production. These new opportunities for recognition provide a refreshing contrast to the 1920s, in which natives attempted in vain to convince a prejudiced team of their value in contribution to the net output of a group. Stakhanovism, furthermore, became an “indicator of loyalty” to the state; one could prove his commitment to the Soviet Union through a willingness to work and improve his skills and prospects. Many Central Asians capitalized on this opportunity to exhibit their allegiance and competence. As a result, citizens across the USSR began to recognize the working class in Central Asia as a valuable force capable of contributing to the well-being of the nation.

There were, however, existing prejudices and conditions that rendered productive standards more elusive for indigenous workers, and Stakhanovism cannot be said to have opened opportunities in Central Asia to the same degree as it did in Russia proper. We will first explore several trends that encumbered Central Asian productivity and which may explain the low representation of Central Asians in the Stakhanovite “class,” before looking at the successes attained by indigenous Stakhanovite workers.

Stakhanovism, first of all, coincided with the campaign of kulturnost, or “culturedness,” which became a principal criterion of the New Soviet Man or Woman. Workers, and especially Stakhanovites, were expected to adhere to a certain degree of “culturedness,” which pertained to dress, manners, hygiene, and participation in “cultural activities,” such as Soviet ballets, operas, and literature. While “culturedness” did not explicitly reference ethnic or national origin, it contained notes of Russian superiority, since ethnic Russians were construed to be the bearers of culture, in a forest of indigenous “backwardness.” Many of these same associations of Russianness with culture were preserved in the connection between culture and Stakhanovism.

According to Stalin, Stakhanovites were “people with cultural and technical knowledge.” This “cultural knowledge,” however, was defined to be the “antithesis of Asiatic backwardness,” which incorporated, albeit implicitly, an accusation of native inferiority in the culture and productivity campaigns. The title “Stakhanovite” itself, and its association with a national “hero,” was also tinged with a hint of ethnic exclusion; Siegelbaum explains that the characterization of a “Stakhanovite” as bogatyry, literally “hero” or “Hercules,” had a “significant Russo-specific connotation,” as bogatyry were the heroes of Russian folk epics and defenders of Kievan Rus. Not only did the key terms of “culture,” “modernity,” and even “Stakhanovite” connote preference for ethnic Russians, but there were also practical obstacles for an indigenous worker to become a Stakhanovite. Siegelbaum proposes that Stakhanovites were set apart not by particularly exceptional skills, but by the opportunity to demonstrate abilities not uncommon to the top workers in a given field. He details the case of Stakhanov himself, who was provided with ideal conditions in order to complete his famous record; Stakhanov was given a continuous supply of compressed air and wood, as well as several “proper” assistants, which forced various workers into inconvenient and abnormal shifts. Stakhanov was even quoted as expressing surprise at having been selected to break the record for coal hewing, since other miners had been equally qualified to perform his feat, he says, if they too had been handed optimal conditions.

It would have been impossible for unassisted workers to compete with the records of those who had been “set up” by an entire administration team. There were, furthermore, certain qualities that increased the likelihood of being selected as a record-breaker; Siegelbaum enumerates literacy and party membership among the traits that favored “promotion” to Stakhanovite status. Both of these characteristics were scarce among Central Asians, who were not generally considered productive or competent workers, and did not fit, in appearance and habits, the image of the archetypal Russian proletarian projected on propaganda. Certainly, korenizatsiia gave preference to indigenous workers in many cases, but the Soviet government was, most likely, not secure enough to risk its Russian citizens’ disapproval if it had elevated too many natives to the highest positions of national honor. As is patent in many instances of policy-making, and especially in the delimitation of the Central Asian republics, the Soviet Union chose the path it considered would provoke the least resistance from its citizens. In this case, it may have been “safer” for the state to celebrate a vast majority of ethnic Russian Stakhanovites, who could be admired and emulated by all Soviet citizens.

The low count of Stakhanovites from Central Asia can alternatively be explained by unpreparedness, and, finally, inability, of the natives to merit Stakhanovite status and compete with their Russian counterparts. The Kazakhs, for instance, had only recently been settled and had no prior organized work experience; they were uncomfortable with sedentary, and especially industrial, life and could not reasonably have been expected to rank consistently among the most productive workers in the entire Soviet Union. Inadequacy of supplies, in addition, including lighting by which to study, was a widespread problem throughout the Soviet Union in the 1930s, obstructing productivity in all parts of the empire. It is not unlikely that the outskirts would suffer an even greater neglect of supplies than would the administrative and cultural centers of the USSR, thereby disadvantaging the population in border regions.
Although Central Asians may not have had the most favorable opportunities to be recognized as Stakhanovites, there are still many examples of successful native Stakhanovites in the region. Historian Mary Buckley reports on the success story of a farmer from Kyrgyzstan, Saty Tokombaev, who rose to the status of Stakhanovite and was credited with an extraordinary grain harvest for his district in 1936. This rural Stakhanovite served as a paragon of social mobility and worker initiative, having started as a refugee in China, and having become an indispensable agrarian leader and the chair of a successful kolkhoz.

Coal mining Stakhanovite Illarion Yankin, in his diary Notes of a Stakhanovite, also presents an optimistic view of Central Asian Stakhanovites. Yankin is equally enthusiastic in his praise of distinguished Stakhanovites from Central Asia, such as Khaidin from Kazakhstan, as with those from western Russia. He also lists Kazakhstan as one region in a list of equals that collaborated on improving Soviet productivity as a whole, at a conference in which workers shared the particular insights and methods that had developed in each of their regions. In one anecdote, Yankin expresses delight at finding the Turkestan miners productive, competent, and appreciative of the intricacies of their work. He further reports on the “communal spirit” that pervaded the indigenous working community, a promising sign of modernity and progress for Central Asia.

Although Yankin speaks of overcoming Kazakh “primitiveness,” he refers to the former underdevelopment of Central Asia only as a historical fact, which he implies has no bearing on the proven competence of indigenous fellow workers or the cooperation of Soviet nations. It is unthinkable to Yankin, and thus likely to other Stakhanovites inspired by Yankin’s example, to consider a past condition as a basis for superiority over native workers. Although he notes that ignorance of drill mechanisms persisted in Kyrgyzstan, Yankin only hopes that he and other workers will be able to help their fellow workers overcome this barrier and access their productive potential, from which the entire Soviet Union would benefit.
**Tapping Productivity**

Yankin was a fervent communist and supporter of the state, to which he owed his success as a Stakhanovite, and he therefore cannot be taken to represent the ideas of all, or even most, Soviet citizens. Yankin, however, also cannot be dismissed as a completely anomalous and inauthentic “brainwashed” creation of the government. Stakhanovites were a real class of people in the Soviet Union, who were inclined to adopt the rhetoric, but also the beliefs, of the ideology of productivity and its consequences, including ethnic equality. In addition to the tangible benefits of hyper-productivity, such as higher wages, bonuses, and special access to services and goods, Stakhanovism also held the promise of a better, more joyous life that was attractive to many, especially formerly poor, disadvantaged, and obscure, workers.46 Archetypal Soviet men and women were “happy, smiling, and jubilant” and many personal accounts of citizens at the time report partaking in these ideals. Just as historian Mary Buckley cautions against the interpretation that all peasants were resentful of socialist developments in the 1920s and 1930s, and instead suggests that many rural workers were benefactors and supporters of collectivization,48 we must similarly acknowledge that the Stakhanovite mentality circulated, at least to some extent, in Soviet society. Historians reveal that the behavior of shock workers, for one, including both their level of productivity and their acceptance of natives, gradually became expected of all workers.49 If Stakhanovism developed out of shock work, then the “multiplier effect” of shock work may also have diffused Stakhanovite ideals, including happiness for all citizens and the “friendship of peoples,” to the Soviet population at large.

Beyond even the ideal “friendship of peoples,” the Soviet state attempted to engineer a *homo sovieticus* “ethnicity,” which would, in theory, eliminate any reference to the old concept of nationality. In an attempt to diminish nationality-based divisions, the Soviet Union constructed a “fictive kinship”,50 “Stalin’s tribe”51 contained citizens loyal to the integrity of their work and to the Soviet system, regardless of their former racial labels. This “Soviet ethnicity” promised a “rebirth” of its constituent members, and emphasized the “blood relationship”52 of Stakhanovites to leaders such as Stalin and Ordzhonikidze, the Commissar of Soviet Heavy Industry, who served as father figures to devoted Soviet workers. The ethnic “criterion” of loyalty to the state helped indigenous workers to overcome their former alienation, and also allowed them access to material success, societal acceptance, and even national recognition. Exploitation of this new “ethnicity” did not, however, necessitate abandoning one’s national heritage. In fact, racial identity remained strong in many Central Asian nations, enabling these states eventually to become independent after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The proposed “Soviet” ethnicity, then, did not replace national heritage, but rather served as a rewarding, parallel ethnic identity, “achieved” through work.

**STAKHANOVISM AND WOMEN**

Interestingly, the opportunities created by Stakhanovism for the indigenous population have a striking parallel with the prospects it opened for women. Women, similar to Central Asians, were considered “backward”53 and in need of special encouragement from Zhenotdel, the Women’s Department of the Party, to tap into their dormant productive potential. Stakhanovism, finally, provided an outlet for this potential, as women encountered the opportunity to establish themselves as Stakhanovites and become celebrated worker-heroes.54 Stakhanovism’s focus on both women and Central Asians, which were considered to be the “underdeveloped” sectors of Soviet society, illustrates the broader trend of the productivity campaigns to develop working class consciousness in various historically neglected groups.

The Soviet state perceived a dire need for Central Asian women, in particular, to develop their productive potential. The indigenous of Central Asia did not have a strong concept of class identity, so gender was here substituted for class in the Marxist rhetoric of past exploitation and future equality.55 It thus became necessary to “liberate” the oppressed “class” of Central Asian women from the “bourgeois” patriarchy and cultivate their development as a proletariat. The first step in integrating these women into the working class was to draw them out of their traditional roles; to this end, the Soviet Union launched an unveiling campaign, called *hujum*. Historian Douglas Northrop, in his book *Veiled Empire*, concludes that unburdening Central Asian women from the veil, and its symbolic implications, was one of the highest priorities of the Soviet state in Central Asia.56 The Party even labelled those who opposed or resisted *hujum* as “enemies of the state,” and punished them accordingly in the *proverka*, or “verification,” general purge of 1928-9.57

*Hujum* was closely linked to the productivity campaigns, as unveiling was considered to be conducive, and even necessary, for increased productivity. The workplace, conversely, was often the main fount of opportunity for women’s advancement; Northrop credits factory workers with notable support of *hujum*, and suggests that the Soviet work environment promoted equality by recognizing outstanding women workers.58 Women, especially in agriculture, came to be lauded as shock workers and Stakhanovites. In fact, the peasant “equivalent” of Alexei Stakhanov was Mariia Safronovna Demchenko, a woman who came to represent the ideal rural worker.59

One prominent female Stakhanovite in Central Asia was Mamlakat Nakhangova, a poor peasant schoolgirl who led a cotton-picking effort among her classmates.60 Mamlakat was honored with medals, invited to committees and conferences, and even sponsored on trips to England and America.61 Perhaps even more extolled than many ethnic Russian or male Stakhanovites, Mamlakat was celebrated as having overcome the hardships of poor Tajik village life with her enthusiasm for work alone.
THE CENTRAL ASIAN WORKING CLASS: REAL OR IMAGINED?

The consolidation of Central Asians into an alleged “working class” seems to have facilitated their integration into the Soviet Union. Payne, however, introduces the complication that the Kazakh workers who came to constitute the indigenous proletariat maintained “dual identities” as state-sponsored workers and as Kazakhs who had been estranged by the same state. If the indigenous were not sincere in assuming working class identities, can they still be considered a proletariat?

Historian Sheila Fitzpatrick further compounds the uncertainty surrounding an indigenous working class. She substantiates that the Bolsheviks “found themselves obliged to invent the classes” that Marxism supposes; the Soviet Union, in this way, was all too eager to capitalize on any evidence of an indigenous working class, even if it could not reasonably be said to have existed. Central Asian workers, on the other hand, may have been just as alacritous in declaring themselves “proletariat,” recognizing the benefits of the state sponsorship that accompanied this title. Allusions to a Central Asian working class, then, may have been nothing more than a reflection of the interests of both the state and indigenous workers in presupposing the existence of a native proletariat. Even if indigenous workers did not subscribe to the proper ideology of the Bolshevik proletariat, they still were employed in mass quantities, with the help of korenizatsiia, and acquired, albeit initially through coercion, work experience, knowledge of techniques to improve their productivity, and acquired, ultimately, the means for self-sufficiency. Central Asians, many of whom had been wandering nomads in the 1910s, were transformed, through shock work and Stakhanovism, into models of productivity in the 1930s. The quantity of indigenous workers employed, their productive achievements, including the completion of the Turksib Railroad, and their occasional elevation to the status of Stakhanovite, regardless of their internal convictions, is evidence enough to conclude the existence of a Central Asian working class by the end of the 1930s.

CONCLUSION

In only a few decades, Central Asia was promoted from the atavistic wasteland to which Russians “will go as masters” to its place in the litany of legally equal nations of the Soviet Union. In the words of one Stakhanovite, Alexander Chutkikh, “Central Asians, many of whom had been wandering nomads in the 1910s, were transformed... into models of productivity in the 1930s.”

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Shock work and Stakhanovism did not, however, afford indigenous workers with the same opportunities as they did ethnic Russians. Tension remained between the former colonizers and their “backwards” neighbors in Central Asia, and the region was deprived of the resources necessary to afford its workers with equal chances for success. But while Stakhanovism and shock work did not erase centuries of brewing inequalities, they did open a promising array of opportunities, and constituted a remarkable push towards ethnic equality. During the mid-1920s in Central Asia, “the indigenous working class was tiny” compared to the vast indigenous majority in the population. In the early 1930s, the Turksib Railroad workforce included 7,000 native Kazakhs, out of 25,000 total workers, which furthermore comprised 8.2 percent of the technical staff and 8.7 percent of the white-collar workforce. By the late 1930s, there were numerous examples of indigenous workers, including Khaidin of Kazakhstan, Mamlakat of Tajikistan, and Tokombaev of Kyrgyzstan, who seized upon productive work as a means to rise from their previous position as undeveloped nomads and soar to the status of national Stakhanovite heroes. Productivity, ultimately, served as an attainable standard by which Central Asian workers began to establish themselves as legitimate, valuable members of the Soviet Union.
Tapping Productivity

Endnotes

[5] Ibid. 92.
[7] Ibid. 70.
[8] Ibid. 77.
[14] Ibid. 236.
[18] Ibid. 165. 167. 177.
[19] Ibid. 191.
[22] Ibid. 43. 71.
[23] Payne. Stalin's Railroad. 244.
[28] Ibid. 153.
[29] Ibid. 152.
[31] Ibid. 79.
[32] Ibid. 69-71.
[33] Ibid. 69.
[34] Ibid. 173. 174.
[37] Buckley. 197.
[38] Ibid. 83.
[39] Ibid.
[41] Ibid. 41.
[42] Ibid. 68.
[43] Ibid. 71.
[44] Ibid. 68.
[45] Ibid. 72-3.
[47] Buckley. 81.
[48] Ibid. 324.
[50] Siegelbaum. Stakhanovism. 150.
[51] Ibid.
[52] Ibid.
[53] Buckley. 254.
[54] Ibid. 67.
[57] Ibid. 189.
[59] Buckley. 67.
[60] Ibid. 82.
[61] Ibid.
[63] Fitzpatrick. 29.