

THE KITCHEN MAID THAT WILL RULE THE STATE:
DOMESTIC SERVICE AND THE SOVIET REVOLUTIONARY PROJECT,

1917-1941

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This dissertation examines domestic service during the first two decades of the Soviet regime as a symbol of revolutionary transformation, as gendered politics of labor, and as experience. In spite of the strong association between domestic service and exploitation, the Soviet regime did not ban or shun paid domestic labor; it turned domestic service into a laboratory of revolutionary politics, to ultimately embrace it as an essential part of socialist economy. At the center of the study lies the trope of the kitchen maid that will rule the state – a misquote from Lenin that turned into a call for transformation addressed to “victims of tsarist oppression,” particularly women. During the first decade after the revolution, transformation implied gaining proletarian consciousness. Domestic servants were to overcome their servile mentality and become workers by developing awareness of their labor rights, engaging in union activities and inscribing themselves into the revolutionary narrative. With the onset of the

industrialization campaign in the late 1920s, domestic workers were to be transformed once again, this time to join the ranks of industrial workers. The state mobilized domestic workers along with housewives into production, and it nurtured an expectation that paid domestic labor would disappear in the near socialist future. However, once the foundations of socialism were announced to have been laid in 1934, paid domestic labor was proclaimed an important part of socialist economy. Domestic workers were to become skillful and reliable executors of state goals in the home: raising Soviet children, attending to socialist households, and providing workers with rest. At the same time, the older, emancipatory rhetoric of a domestic worker reinventing herself as a production worker retained strong resonances in popular culture. The ambiguous position of domestic service in the Soviet Union stemmed from the contradiction between the rhetoric of women's emancipation and the gendered vision of labor that defined housework as women's work. Beyond charting the history of domestic service in the Soviet Union, this dissertation seeks to question widespread assumptions about the inherent connection between modern domestic service and capitalism, and contribute to a global conversation about the place of paid domestic labor under socialism.

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Once I got close to defending my *kandidatskaia* dissertation, I came to realize that there was a lot more I could do with the topic if only I could get more training. I was very lucky to meet Maria Cristina Galmarini-Kabala who helped me navigate the dark waters of the US graduate school admission process and who has been a friend and a role model (*starshyi tovarishch*) ever since.

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Introduction

Good riddance!
We'll train every cook
so she might
manage the country
to the workers' gain.¹

These lines from Vladimir Maiakovskii's 1924 epic poem *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin* express the narrator's reaction to the inglorious flight of former nobility from the Soviet country, marking the creation of one of the Bolshevik revolution's central tropes – the kitchen maid that will rule the state. In the poem the kitchen maid stood for the most exploited, the most disenfranchised laborers of tsarist Russia that would replace the former elites in running the state once the Bolsheviks had transformed them to conscious workers. Yet, for Maiakovskii the kitchen maid's transformation went beyond acquiring access to institutions of governance. As she traveled through Maiakovskii's work, the kitchen maid turned into a symbol of the opportunities for self-reinvention the Soviet state had to offer the formerly oppressed. "Every kitchen maid [is] a poet" was the central argument of his 1926 public lecture "How to write poetry."² This statement was a declaration of his belief in the power of the revolutionary regime to unlock creative potential even among its most backward. Maiakovskii's vision was in line with the works of Karl Marx, who argued that in communist society one could express him/herself in an endless number of ways, from fishing to engaging in literary criticism.³

¹ Vladimir Mayakovsky, "Vladimir Ilyich Lenin," in Dorian Rottenberg, trans., Vladimir Mayakovsky 1893-1930 (Moscow : Progress Publishers, 1967), 143.

² Vladimir Mayakovskii, "Kak pisat' stikhi," in *Polnoie sobraniie sochinenii*, T.30 (Moskva: GIHL, 1961), 162.

³ Marx wrote: "in communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, society regulates the general production and thus makes it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticise after dinner, just as I have a mind, without ever becoming

Maiakovskii's kitchen maid was also a direct reference to one of Vladimir Lenin's most important texts – the seminal article “Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?” which he wrote in late September-early October of 1917, just several weeks before the party's acquisition of power. Demanding inclusion of conscious workers and soldiers into the government after the February Revolution had overthrown the autocracy, Lenin wrote: “We are not utopians. We know that an unskilled laborer or a cook cannot immediately get on with the job of state administration.” Noting that he agreed with members of other parties that unskilled laborers and cooks were not yet ready to run the government, he demanded that “training in the work of state administration be conducted by class-conscious workers and soldiers, and that this training be begun at once, i.e., that a beginning be made at once in training all the working people, all the poor, for this work.”⁴ The statement contained a promise of future opportunities and growth for the wretched of the earth with the unskilled laborer and its female companion—the cook being the most wretched of them all. While in Maiakovskii's poem the promise to teach every kitchen maid is not presented as a quote from Lenin, the audience's familiarity with Lenin's texts made it easy to connect the poem and the 1917 article, and infuse “Lenin's kitchen maid” with new meaning. Lenin's acknowledgement that cooks were not yet ready to participate in running the state transformed into the statement that they had the right and obligation to do so.

The years following the publication of *Vladimir Il'ich Lenin* in 1924 saw an explosion of images of “Lenin's kitchen maid.” It occupied a particularly prominent

hunter, fisherman, herdsman or critic.” Karl Marx, “The German Ideology,” accessed December 12, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1845/german-ideology/ch01a.htm>

⁴ Vladimir Lenin, Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power, accessed December 12, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1917/oct/01.htm>.

place in the campaign to mobilize and transform women with its most famous representation in the 1925 poster “Every Kitchen Maid Should Learn To Rule The State” (Fig.1). The poster depicts a working class woman wearing a red kerchief pointing to a government building. The caption reads: “Do not sit in the kitchen at home/ Go to the elections to the soviet/ The female worker used to be in the dark/ Now she is in the soviet deciding things.” Here the kitchen maid represents all Soviet women. She is both the addresser and the addressee of the message, the “conscious female worker” and the one who is still hiding in darkness. Participation in the elections is both an obligation and a privilege she has as a worker in the workers’ state. Moreover, by claiming that they are using a direct quote from Lenin with the top caption reading “‘Every Kitchen Maid Should Learn To Rule The State’. Lenin” poster artists Makarychev and Raev turn the obligation into a sacred commandment. This poster has become the most recognizable representation of the early soviet effort to create a New Soviet Woman that would be emancipated from the drudgery of the household work, develop class consciousness and actively participate in politics. It also immortalized “Lenin’s kitchen maid” as a symbol of women’s emancipation.



Fig. 1. Poster 'Every Kitchen Maid Should Learn to Rule the State', Il'ia P. Makarychev, 1925. www.neboltai.org



Fig.2. Lenin and the Female Worker ("In the Soviet Country Every Kitchen Maid Should Learn to Rule the State," Lenin), artist unknown, 1926. *After Perestroika: Kitchenmaids or Stateswomen* (Independent Curators International, 1994), 8. The poster illustrates the increase in the number of women in the party, city soviets and among union leadership as well as the growing number of state canteens and crèches between 1922 and 1925.

Yet, the "kitchen maid" was not only a metaphor. For hundreds of thousands of Soviet women working as a kitchen maid or a nanny or hiring one were realities of everyday life. For thousands of labor and legal experts, judges and union activists, paid domestic labor was a phenomenon to be studied and regulated and domestic workers were backward proletarians to be uplifted and disciplined. According to the census, there

were 460,687 domestic workers in the Soviet Union in 1926.⁵ By 1937 their number had risen to 512,761.⁶ This was twenty years after the Bolsheviks came to power and three years after Iosif Stalin had announced that the foundations of socialism had been laid.

This dissertation examines domestic service during the first two decades of the Soviet regime as a symbol of transformation, as gendered politics of labor, and as experience. The evolving meaning of “Lenin’s kitchen maid” who stood for dismantling of old class and gender hierarchies serves as a window into the continuities and ruptures in the understanding of emancipation, equality and justice. The kitchen maid as a symbol had an amazing history over the first decades of Soviet power while the standing and meaning of domestic labor changed dramatically. The shifts in policies regulating paid domestic labor and their interpretation by multiple actors: domestic workers, employers, union activists, judges and various state institutions – show how new class and gender hierarchies were created (and old hierarchies were recreated) and contested. The dissertation draws attention to the salience of labor as a gendered category to the formation of these hierarchies. It argues that domestic labor was a symbolic battleground for what it meant to be a female worker.

This is the first study that attempts to write the history of domestic service during the two formative decades of the Soviet state. This is not to say that existence of domestic workers has been unknown to historians of the Soviet Union. On the contrary, nannies, cooks and maids regularly appear on the pages of history books and articles. The first

⁵ Rebecca Spagnolo, “When Private Home Meets Public Workplace: Service, Space, and the Urban Domestic in 1920s Russia,” in *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside*, ed. Christina Kiaer and Eric Naiman (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 230;

⁶ *Vsesouznaiia perepis’ naseleniia 1937 goda: obschiie itogi. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2007), 136. These are official numbers which are most likely lower than the real number of women (and men) working in domestic service.

framework that scholars used to approach paid domestic labor is “privilege.” In *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times. Soviet Russia in the 1930s*, Sheila Fitzpatrick argues that having servants was one of the many privileges communist officials and Soviet intelligentsia had under Stalin. She acknowledges that even for dedicated communists hiring domestics did not pose an ideological problem.⁷ Tacit acceptance of domestic service for the elites was part of “the Great Retreat” – a retreat from revolutionary values and rehabilitation of bourgeois lifestyle in exchange for loyalty of the new elites. Here, Fitzpatrick builds on the seminal work of Nicholas Timasheff who, following Stalin’s former comrade and main critic Lev Trotskii, argued that Stalin had betrayed the revolution and created a hierarchical bureaucratic regime that served not the needs of the working class but those of the new elites.⁸ Using existence of paid domestic labor as evidence of “the Great Retreat” Fitzpatrick echoes Trotskii himself, who mentions domestic servants several times in his book *The Revolution Betrayed* to emphasize the embourgeoisement of Stalin’s elites and his failure to liberate women.⁹ Sarah Davies’s work on popular resentment against the new privileged classes in the 1930s complements Fitzpatrick’s analysis of Stalin’s elites. Davies argues that domestic workers were “most exposed to the glaring differences in lifestyle between rich and poor” and uses a letter written by a group of domestics to illustrate how the lower classes protested against the new elites.¹⁰

⁷ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times. Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford University Press, 1999), 99-10.

⁸ Nicholas Sergeyevitch Timasheff, *The Great Retreat. The Growth and Decline of Communism in Russia* (E.P. Dutton & Company: New York, 1946).

⁹ Leon Trotsky, “*The Revolution Betrayed: What is the Soviet Union and Where is it Going?*” Accessed December 12, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/trotsky/1936/revbet/index.htm>

¹⁰ Sarah Davis, “Us against Them”: Social Identity in Soviet Russia, 1934-41, *Russian Review* Vol.54 No.1 (1997):88.

While Trotskii, Timasheff and Fitzpatrick maintain that existence of domestic service was a sign of embourgeoisement of Soviet elites under Stalin, scholars Vladlen Izmozik and Nataliia Lebina argue that corruption of the Bolsheviks was a process that started right after the revolution. In their micro study of three elite apartment complexes in Leningrad in the 1920s, they interpret employment of domestic servants as markers of privilege and symbols of power.¹¹ Rebecca Spagnolo also explains persistence of domestic service by formation of the new elites in the late 1920s, along with socio-economic factors such as a large-scale migration of peasant women into cities and Bolsheviks' failure to liberate women from housework.¹² Spagnolo's larger argument is that even though the Bolsheviks enacted unprecedented laws that aimed to protect domestic workers from exploitation, in reality nannies and maids remained poor, overworked, and miserable, to a great extent due to the economic difficulties the Soviet state was facing.

The second area of scholarship in which domestic workers appear if not as main protagonists then in supporting roles is literature on the Soviet family.¹³ Cantriona Kelly notes that Soviet working middle-class mothers were often compelled to hire nannies for their children because the state did not provide them with adequate child-care facilities and the wide-held belief that small children would be better-off at home.¹⁴ As in prerevolutionary times, nannies substituted mothers as main caregivers and

¹¹ Vladlen Izmozik, Nataliia Lebina, *"Zhilishchnyi vopros v bytu leningradskoi partiino-sovetskoi nomenklatury," Voprosy istorii 4 (2001): 109.*

¹² Rebecca Spagnolo, "When Private Home Meets Public Workplace," 231.

¹³ An exception to the rule is Steven A. Grant, *The Russian Nanny Real and Imagined. History, Culture, Mythology* (New American Publishing, LLC, 2012). The book mostly focuses on the prerevolutionary period with only a few pages dedicated to Soviet nannies.

¹⁴ Cantriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 346.

companions.¹⁵ Several works on family life in the Soviet Union emphasize the emotional ties between children and their nannies. Peasant nannies (or sometimes even women from the former privileged classes) become agents of alternative culture in the homes of the Soviet elite: they introduced children to Orthodoxy, sang them traditional songs and shared with them stories that did not correspond to the official Soviet narratives. Orlando Figes even goes as far as to argue that nannies served as “a moral counterweight to the household’s ruling Soviet attitudes.”¹⁶

All these works that touch on paid domestic labor in the Soviet Union (except for Spagnolo’s piece) share one underlying premise: domestic service was something illicit, something that remained behind the closed doors of upper-class apartments. Davies states that domestic workers were “barely mentioned in the official press or statistic.”¹⁷ Fitzpatrick notes that “there was little public discussion of domestic servants in the 1930s and still less of their exploitation by employers.”¹⁸ Although she mentions several cartoons on domestic service published in the country’s leading satiric journal *Krokodil* in 1939, she fails to contextualize these publications, simply stating, “the taboo on public discussion of servants was partially lifted in the late 1930s.”¹⁹ Kelly argues that in the 1930s “[d]omestic service was mentioned only in a negative context.”²⁰ It appears that at least in the 1930s paid domestic labor was a grey sector, merely tolerated by the state as a

¹⁵ Ibid, 408.

¹⁶ Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia* (New York: Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt and Company, 2008), 47- 48; Catriona Kelly, *Children’s World*, 337, 367; on the role of nannies in the Soviet families in the 1950s, see Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia’s Cold War Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 40-41, 175.

¹⁷ Sarah Davis, “Us against Them”, 88.

¹⁸ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 99.

¹⁹ Ibid., 100.

²⁰ Catriona Kelly, *Refining Russia: Advice Literature, Polite Culture, and Gender from Catherine to Yeltsin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 292.

necessary evil while it could not provide Soviet women with crèches and public laundries or as a reward for the elites for their loyalty.

This perceived illicitness of paid domestic labor in the Soviet Union coupled with traditionally marginal status of domestic servants in most societies led me initially to conceive of my project as the first to “give voice” to the “mute and forgotten.”²¹ Yet, a careful examination of Soviet publications and archival collections made it clear that Soviet domestic workers were neither “mute” nor “forgotten.” Rather than marking a grey zone that nobody spoke of, paid domestic labor was an object of an intense debate during the formative decades of Soviet history. Regulation of paid domestic labor was widely discussed in the Soviet press and throughout multiple state institutions. Maids and nannies were ubiquitous in Soviet literature and film. By mid-1930s paid domestic labor was officially embraced as an integral part of the socialist economy. The kitchen maid that was learning to rule the state became one of the central symbols of the Soviet project of transforming women and other backward citizens into active participants in the building of socialism. Archival collections as well as Soviet newspapers were full of testimonies of domestic workers as well as activists who worked with them. I began to read these materials not merely as documentary repositories but as congealed forms of the revolutionary regime’s transformative agenda. The Soviet state actively sought out domestic workers in order to mold them into exemplary Soviet citizens and used the image of the domestic worker as a powerful symbol of female oppression and emancipation. The variety of texts and images created in the process were an essential part of revolutionary politics.

²¹ Historian John Burnett first called Victorian domestic servants “mute and forgotten” in his collection of working class autobiographies John Burnett, “Introduction,” in *Useful Toil: Autobiographies of Working People from the 1820s to the 1920s* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 1994), 127.

The institutions central to the revolutionary history of domestic service in the Soviet Union were labor unions. Once the Bolsheviks came to power they invested great effort in suppressing and co-opting the independent workers' movement that had existed in Russia. There were several stages of this subjugation of the labor unions: the creation of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions that became the coordinating organ for all union activities (1918); the party discussion about the role of labor unions in the Soviet state that reaffirmed their position as the "transmission belts" of the party (1921); the "turn to production campaign" that officially reformulated the role of labor unions as mechanism of labor mobilization for state needs (1929); a series of reorganizations of state unions and removal of the old leadership (1930, 1934); the disbanding of the People's Commissariat of Labor and making the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions its successor thus finalizing unions' transformation into institutions of labor regulation and welfare provision (1933). Thus, Soviet labor unions were state institutions. They followed the party line. At the same time, they also participated in discussions about what this party line regarding the labor issues should be. When the decision was made, there was still room for interpretation and contestation at different levels: from the union's central committee, to regional (republican) union organizations, to local committees.

Three consecutive unions were to recruit domestic workers so that they were incorporated in the revolutionary project of building socialism: the Professional Union of People's Food Service and Dormitory Workers (Narpit) (1918-1930), the Professional Union of Workers of City Enterprises and Domestic Workers (PUWCEDW) (1930-1934) and the Professional Union of Workers of Housing Services (PUWHS) (1934-1947).

Their collections form the core of the source base of this dissertation. The documents of their central committees are preserved at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF). The Central State Archive of Saint Petersburg (TsGA SPb) contains the collections of the Leningrad Narpit organization (1920-1930). The Central Archive of the City of Moscow (TsAGM) holds the files of the Moscow PUWCEDW organization (1930-1934). The State Archive of Perm Region (GAPK) has preserved documents of the Molotov PUWHS organization. These collections contain voices of multiple actors: union leadership and representatives of other institutions arguing over regulations of paid domestic labor, local union administrators and rank-and-file activists debating their strategies and tactics of making domestic workers conscious proletarians and union members, domestic workers speaking up at meetings and employers responding to their domestics' complaints.

Narpit collection at the State Archive of the Russian Federation also contains the materials produced by the Commission on the Study of the History of Professional Movements in Russia (Istprof) – a non-academic historical commission that was set up by the union to write and archive its own history as means of fostering a union identity and preserving sources for future historians. Istprof commissions were created in every labor union and testify to the centrality of history for the Soviet revolutionary project. Union activists were to raise their class consciousness through collecting materials and writing revolutionary histories of their unions, while other workers, including domestic workers, were to develop a sense of belonging to the Soviet project by reading and listening to these narratives. Istprof materials were meant not only for the contemporary tasks of identity building – they were to be preserved for posterity, memorializing the

role of labor unions in the creation of the first socialist state. This orientation towards the future explains why the Soviet state was so invested in documenting the lives of domestic workers.

Published materials such as didactic brochures, journal and newspaper publications, as well as works of literature and film comprise this study's second group of sources. These materials were also produced as part and parcel of revolutionary politics. Yet, even though it is ultimately the party that sets the frames of all discussions in the Soviet public sphere, the people who took part in them cannot be dismissed as duped or co-opted or simply as "representatives of the state." Soviet writers and film directors created a variety of representations of domestic workers and their employers. While they followed the party line they also produced it by creatively engaging with the official discourse and transforming it. Published sources just like archival documents provide us with the understanding of the evolution of the Bolshevik leadership's visions and intentions as well as the way these visions and intentions were appropriated and reworked by institutions and individuals. This approach helps make sense of the fact that, within a year after the height of the state repressions, we see the publication of two telling pieces. First, the didactic brochure "What Has the Soviet Power Given to the Domestic Workers" written by the head of the Professional Union of Workers of Housing Services, which emphasizes the importance of paid domestic labor for the socialist project. Second, a novella by a popular Soviet writer *The Kitchen Maid* that denounces domestic service as a practice that corrupts both the employer and the worker.

The vibrant discussion about domestic service, the dissertation argues, was fundamentally a discussion about gender. Existing studies have emphasized the centrality

of the woman question to the Soviet revolutionary project. Yet, historiography on women's and gender history of the Soviet Union overwhelmingly focuses on the questions of family roles and reproduction: abortion, divorce, alimony and regulation of sexuality loom large in the studies of Soviet gender relations.²² Studies of women's labor almost exclusively deal with work outside the home.²³ The history of housework is brief and follows a simple narrative. The Bolsheviks presented the liberation of women from kitchen drudgery by providing families with services of public cafeterias, crèches, and wash-houses as one of the regime's main tasks and major achievements. However, limited resources and contradictions in the Bolshevik understanding of the woman question led to a sizeable gap between emancipatory rhetoric and realities on the ground. As a result, women were saddled with the double burden of employment outside the home and household chores.

To complicate this narrative this dissertation engages with the question of the meaning of housework and the place of the home in relation to the state project of building socialism. Lenin famously called household labor "the most unproductive, the

²² On the history of Soviet family, see, for example, Elizabeth Waters, "The Modernization of Russian Motherhood, 1917-37," *Soviet Studies* 1 (1992): 123-135; Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); David L. Hoffman, "Mothers in the Motherland: Stalinist Pronatalism in Its Pan-European Context," *Journal of Social History* 34.1 (Fall 2000): 35-54; On sexuality, see *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997); Dan Healey, *Homosexual Desire in Revolutionary Russia: The Regulation of Sexual and Gender Dissent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Frances Lee Bernstein, *The Dictatorship of Sex: Lifestyle Advice for the Soviet Masses* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007); Dan Healey, *Bolshevik Sexual Forensics: Diagnosing Disorder in the Clinic and Courtroom, 1917-1939* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009).

²³ Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Koenker, Diane P. "Men against Women on the Shop Floor in Early Soviet Russia: Gender and Class in the Socialist Workplace," *American Historical Review* 100.5 (1995): 1438-64; Melanie Ilic, "Biding Their Time: Women Workers and the Regulation of Hours of Employment in the 1920s," in *Gender in Russian History and Culture* Ed. L. Edmondson (Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 139-157; Amy Randall, "Legitimizing Soviet Trade: Gender and Feminization of the Retail Workforce in the Soviet 1930s," *Journal of Social History* 37:4 (Summer 2004): 965-990; E. Thomas Ewing, "Maternity and Modernity: Soviet Women Teachers and the Contradictions of Stalinism," *Women's History Review* Vol. 19, No. 3 (July 2010): 451-477.

most barbarous and the most arduous work a woman can do.”²⁴ The leading Bolshevik thinker on the questions of family and women’s emancipation Aleksandra Kollontai unequivocally stated that household chores “are of no value to the state and the national economy, for they do not create any new values or make any contribution to the prosperity of the country.”²⁵ Yet, as this dissertation will show, domestic work could be many things, from degrading drudgery to the source of professional identity and pride. Throughout the first decades of the Soviet regime, Soviet citizens were struggling to make sense of the role domestic labor was to play under socialism. While in the 1920s the significance of housework was acknowledged tacitly through the emphasis on hygienic and rational housekeeping in the state propaganda of socialist living, in the late 1930s household labor was openly recognized as an essential element of socialist economy.

The discourse on paid domestic labor shaped and was shaped by the experience of domestic workers and their employers. As Joan Scott has persuasively argued, experience is a phenomenon constructed within an ideological system.²⁶ It does not exist as a pre-linguistic given, but can be traced only through the mechanism of the constitution of the subject of experience. This approach allows us to see the dialogical relation between ideology and subjectivity, in which “[t]he individual operates like a clearinghouse where ideology is unpacked, personalized, and in the process the individual remakes himself

²⁴ Vladimir Lenin, *Tasks of the Working Women’s Movement in the Soviet Republic*, accessed December 12, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/sep/23a.htm>.

²⁵ Aleksandra Kollontai, *Communism and the Family*, accessed December 12, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/kollonta/1920/communism-family.htm>

²⁶ Joan Scott first emphasized the embeddedness of experience in symbolic systems in her seminal essay “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis.” Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *Theory and Method in Women’s History* 91.5 (1986): 1603 and developed her argument in the article on the uses of experience as a category in historical scholarship. Joan W. Scott, “The Evidence of Experience,” *Critical Inquiry* 17.4 (1991): 773-97

into a subject with distinct and meaningful biographical features.”²⁷ As Igal Halfin has shown, Soviet subjectivities were constituted along class lines, appropriating the trope of “worker,” “peasant,” and “intelligent.”²⁸ Halfin, however, does not consider the gendered nature of these categories.

This dissertation contributes to the discussion on Soviet subjectivity by conceptualizing the self of a female domestic worker. Soviet activists conceived of the emancipation of women not only in terms of employment opportunities and lessening the burden of household chores, but as a profound identity change, a transformation of the “baba” (peasant woman) into a “comrade” – a conscious Soviet citizen.²⁹ The Bolshevik leadership was highly suspicious of women, especially peasant women, as backward. Domestic servants who were, for the most part, recent migrants from the countryside became the symbol of greatest backwardness in Soviet cities. Special programs aimed at developing their “proletarian consciousness” through education, and political mobilization were part and parcel of the greater Bolshevik project of creating a new and perfect modern subject, the New Soviet Person.³⁰ The New Soviet Person was not, however, gender-neutral. Soviet educational activities along with other forms of propaganda instilled in Soviet women particular ideas about what it meant to be a woman in the Soviet state. Using domestic workers as a case study, this dissertation shows how

²⁷ Jochen Hellbeck, “Everyday Ideology: Life during Stalinism,” accessed December 12, 2016, <http://www.eurozine.com/articles/2010-02-22-hellbeck-en.html>

²⁸ Igal Halfin, “From Darkness to Light: Student Communist Autobiography During NEP,” *Jarbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 45.2 (1997):226-236.

²⁹ Wood, Elizabeth, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000); Lynn Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman: Women’s Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1999);

³⁰ On the New Soviet Person, see Lynne Attwood and Catriona Kelly, “Programmes for Identity: The ‘New Man’ and the ‘New Woman,’” in *Constructing Russian Culture in the Age of Revolution: 1881-1940*, ed. Catriona Kelly and David Shepherd (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); David Hoffman, *Stalinist Values*, 45-56.

the conflict between the emancipatory thrust of the revolution and the traditional view of gender roles in the Soviet Union affected the lives of hundreds of thousands of women working in domestic service and employing household help. These contradictions could be both liberating and oppressive for women.³¹ While the Soviet regime provided domestic workers with educational opportunities and employment outside domestic service, it reinforced the notion that housework was a woman's domain that was secondary to "productive labor" outside the home.

Domestic service in the Soviet Union encompassed a variety of arrangements between those who provided services and those who received them. There were girls and women working in other people's homes in the countryside. Following an established tradition, peasant families sent their daughters, often as young as six or seven, to the homes of wealthier neighbors as child-minders. They would come back to their families once they were old enough for agricultural labor.³² Before agriculture was collectivized in the 1930s, there were a significant number of female agricultural laborers (*batrachki*) who in addition to working in the field did some work around the house. In the cities, along with typical live-in cooks and nannies, people hired day laborers, cleaners, and laundresses to help with some specific household tasks and paid them by the hour. There was a certain number of live-out domestic workers as well as women would look after a neighbor's child for some extra cash. Some families also chose to bring in poor relatives

³¹ Here I build on the work of Anna Krylova and Elena Shulman, who argue that there was a spectrum of models of Soviet womanhood. Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: a History of Violence of the Eastern Front* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Elena Shulman, *Stalinism on the Frontier of Empire: Women and State Formation in the Soviet Far East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

³² Lora Olson, "Svetlana Adon'eva, *Sovetskie krestianki (polovozrastnaia identichnost': struktura i istoriia)*," *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 117 (2012), accessed December 12, 2016, <http://magazines.russ.ru/nlo/2012/117/l6.html>. Olson and Adon'eva describe the prerevolutionary tradition but it was clearly alive during the first decades of the Soviet power. I interviewed a peasant woman who from age 7 to age 12 worked as a nanny in a neighboring village in the late 1940s.

that would help them around the house. Another group of domestic workers were political prisoners, special settlers and later prisoners of war who worked in the homes of Gulag employees. Many of them were men who served as orderlies for male Gulag administrators.³³ Men made up a significant segment (if not the majority) of domestic workers in Central Asian Republics, for example, due to the restrictions Islam put on women.³⁴ All of these forms of domestic service remain outside the scope of this dissertation because they were not discussed within general debates about paid domestic labor. I focus on live-in female workers who, for pay or just for food and a place to sleep, cooked, cleaned, looked after children in urban homes.. These were the “typical” domestic workers (*domrabortnitsy*) of the 1920s-1930s. These were the kind of domestic workers that state official imagined when they drafted state policies regulating paid domestic labor. Numerous representations of domestic service in popular culture reflected these type of arrangements.

This dissertation studies domestic service against the background of changing discourses on women and socialist living. In order to analyze continuities and ruptures in the functioning of domestic service in the Soviet Union, the chapters are structured chronologically as well as thematically. This approach allows me to write the story of paid domestic labor as part of a larger historical narrative and to emphasize the

³³ On employment of Gulag prisoners as domestic workers see Anna Applebaum, *Gulag: A History* (Anchor Books, 2009), 266-267. The state made several attempts to stop the practice of hiring prisoners. An order forbidding communists to employ special settlers as domestic workers “*Perechen’ ‘meropriiatii po provedeniiu v zhizn’ v Aldanskom raione reshenii direktivnykh organov po voprosu o spetspereselentsakh,’ razrabotannykh chlenom VKP(b) O.L. Ryvkinym i sotrudnikom OGPU Sidorovym. 27 avgusta 1931 g.,’ Politb’uro i krest’ianstvo: Vysylka, spetsposeleniie. 1930-1940. Kniga 1* (Moskva: Rosspen, 2005),” accessed December 12, 2016, <http://istmat.info/node/46825>; an order forbidding employment of prisoners of war for personal needs by camp administration and other prisoners “*Postanovlenie VTsIK i SNK SSSR No.46 ob utverzhdenii proekta postanovleniia VTsIK i SNK SSSR ‘Polozheniie o voennoplennykh,’*” accessed December 12, 2016, <http://doc20vek.ru/node/337>.

³⁴ Rabkor Mongin, “*Domrabortnitsa – Uzbek,*” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*, 5 (1927): 8.

connection between the changes in the discourse on domestic service and socio-economic and political shifts in the country as a whole.

Chapter One outlines how the Bolsheviks tried to make sense of domestic service during the first decade of Soviet power. While initially Marxists thinkers had little interest in paid domestic labor, domestic servants' active participation in the First Russian revolution of 1905 made them visible for the Russian revolutionary parties, including the Bolsheviks. In their eyes, creation of several domestic servants' unions and a set of strikes earned servants a place in the proletarian family. While the Bolsheviks perceived domestic servants as allies in the struggle against tsarism, the place of paid domestic labor in the Soviet state was more ambiguous. For a decade, Soviet labor experts tried to understand what domestic service was, how to categorize it and measure its value. It is in this period that domestic servants were reimagined as women – female domestic workers, reinforcing the vision of housework as women's domain. Another set of questions was related to employers and the relationship between employment of household help and class. While during the first years of the Soviet regime employment of domestic servants was represented as exploitation, by the end of the decade the emphasis shifted towards the good Soviet citizens who hired domestic help out of need rather than out of laziness. Yet, women who had servants remained suspect of failing to fulfill their role as mothers and wives.

Chapter Two examines how the meanings of domestic services ascribed to it by various institutions and individuals affected the everyday lives of domestic workers and their employers. It analyzes the debates around domestic workers' rights, legislation that regulated paid domestic labor and conflicts between domestic workers and employers.

Initially, domestic workers, like all other laborers, were covered by the Labor Code. The problem was that norms set by the Labor Code were very difficult to enforce. The Professional Union of Workers of People's Food Services proposed to tighten regulations even further, but the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions opted for a law that deprived domestic workers of some of the rights other workers had, including the right for overtime pay, while nominally keeping the 192-working-hour maximum. Both domestic workers and employers used the ambiguities and contradictions of the ever-changing laws in order to win their cases. While in the earlier period the absolute majority of cases were resolved in domestic workers' favor, decisions in the later period reflected the growing tendency of the courts and legal experts to sympathize with the employer. The exceptions were cases that involved domestic workers' right to reside in the former employer's premises after the termination of the contract. Long-standing sexualization of domestic service made the courts hesitant to evict women who, once unemployed and homeless, would succumb to prostitution.

Chapter Three analyzes the ways union activists strove to turn backward domestic servants into conscious domestic workers through union work and cultural enlightenment. Many of the activists believed that domestic workers possessed a special kind of servile subjectivity – a “lackey's soul” that developed due to their proximity to petty-bourgeois employers, lack of contact with the proletarian masses and the unproductive nature of their work. Moreover, most domestic workers were peasant women whom the Bolsheviks considered to be particularly backward. Since Narpit was to cater to the interests of a variety of workers in the service sector, the “peculiarity” of domestic workers posed a set of problems. On the one hand, they had to be included in

joint activities with other workers in order to overcome their isolation and “special psyche.” On the other hand, their “difference” and perceived backwardness called for special treatment within separate union committees. To overcome these differences between domestic and other workers the union introduced a program of cultural enlightenment that was meant to develop domestics’ understanding of their role as workers in a workers’ state. In order to foster a sense of belonging to the revolutionary project among domestic workers, union activists worked on creating a historical narrative that would include servants as revolutionary actors. All of these efforts to transform servants into workers did not promise a way out of domestic service but emphasized the need for domestic workers to work on themselves for the sake of becoming better proletarians.

Chapter Four deals with the changes the turn to industrialization brought to domestic workers (1928-1934). While during the NEP era official discourse emphasized domestic workers’ belonging to the proletariat: with the country’s reorientation toward industrial production, they were increasingly treated as women rather than workers. Along with housewives they constituted a “labor reservoir” for the industry. Domestic workers were to be retrained to become “real” workers. Active recruitment of domestics into the industry and the service sector created new opportunities for them. Still, many women continued to work as domestics. Those who remained in service were expected to participate in socialist competition but as union activists rather than domestic workers. The emphasis on activism rather than labor as the main contribution to the state along with valorization of industrial labor rendered housework irrelevant for the task of building socialism. Moreover, there was a growing anticipation of the disappearance of

domestic service as a sector. Against this background domestic workers had to struggle to receive the privileges they felt they were entitled to as workers in the state where one's access to many necessities depended on one's place in the hierarchy of labor.

The fifth chapter concerns the place of domestic service in the years between the "Congress of Victors" that announced that the foundations of socialism had been laid and the start of the attack of Nazi Germany on the Soviet Union (1934-1941). It shows how etatization of the home legitimized domestic labor as contribution to socialism. Domestic workers were now not simply working for their employers' families - they were working for the state. Their employers' leisure became a prerequisite for productive work in factories and institutions, the wellbeing of the children in their care was a matter of national security and proper maintenance of employers' homes was a prerequisite for durability of the state's housing stock. The goal of the labor union was now to train domestic workers to be professional and disciplined. The relationship between domestic workers and the employers were also reconfigured. While the former were to be the state's eyes and ears in the secluded space of the home, the latter were to act as managers, rewarding or disciplining the worker. Yet, in spite of the turn to professionalization of domestic service, in popular culture there was a continuing rendition of the older, emancipatory narrative of the domestic worker reinventing herself as a "real" worker in the industry.

The dissertation concludes with an epilogue that traces the history of domestic service after the Nazi Germany's attack on the Soviet Union until the collapse of the Soviet regime. It ends with the early post-Soviet period that saw the invalidation of much of the Bolshevik design in terms of domestic service and women's emancipation.

Chapter 1: Defining Domestic Service.

“(T)he extraordinary productiveness of modern industry, accompanied as it is by both a more extensive and a more intense exploitation of labour-power in all other spheres of production, allows of the unproductive employment of a larger and larger part of the working-class, and the consequent reproduction, on a constantly extending scale, of the ancient domestic slaves under the name of a servant class, including men-servants, women-servants, lackeys, etc.,” wrote Karl Marx in his seminal work *Capital*. Marx went on to argue that introduction of machinery in factory work had led to the proliferation of “modern domestic slaves” who, according to his calculations, outnumbered workers in textile factories and in mines (or in textile factories and metal industries) taken together.³⁵ Marx’s argument that the development of capitalism leads to an increase in the number of domestic servants was soon forgotten and replaced by anticipation of their extinction once households are completely modernized, but his dismissal of servants as “domestic slaves” outside of the proletariat nevertheless had a lasting effect: it predetermined their exclusion from Marxist theory and politics far into the future.

Invisibility of domestic servants to Marxists in general and Bolsheviks in particular did not, of course, mean that paid domestic labor was an insignificant sector of fine-de-siècle Russia’s economy. According to the 1897 census, 1,555, 987 individuals worked as domestic servants (lackeys, maids, cooks, nannies) and 162,071 were employed as house servants (doormen, yard-keepers, night watchmen) in the Russian

³⁵ Karl Marx. *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*. (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co, Ltd, 1906), 448-449.

Empire.³⁶ Servants were a significant segment of the population in big cities. In 1900, domestic and house servants made over fifteen percent of Saint-Petersburg population (12.6 percent and 2.8 percent respectively).³⁷ Although their number probably decreased with the onset of the First World War, servants remained a sizable group of laborers when the Bolsheviks came to power in October 1917.

The Bolsheviks were equipped with preciously few guidelines about how to build the socialist future and once in power had to improvise within the blurry boundaries set by Marxist ideology and Russian reality. The former stated that domestic service was residue from a previous state of historical development, which implied that the profession had no future in the revolutionary society. The latter made clear that domestic servants were a substantial group of toilers that had earned their membership in the working class if not by the nature of their work, then by their participation in the Russian revolutionary movement and the exceptional oppression they had suffered under the tsarist regime. The former called for socialization of housework making paid domestic labor irrelevant. The latter made this call impossible to realize due to lack of resources. The former promised a classless society in which any exploitation of man by man in the form of private employment was impossible. The latter was ridden with social tension.

These tensions between egalitarian ideals and persistent class and gender inequalities and how the Bolsheviks tried to make sense of them during the formative years of the Soviet state is the subject of this chapter. While elimination of exploitation

³⁶ *Raspredeleniie rabochikh i prislugi po gruppam zaniatii i po mestu rozhdeniia na osnovanii dannykh pervoi vseobshchei perepisi naseleniia. Pervaia vseobschaia perepis' naseleniia Rossiiskoi imperii, 1897. Pod. red. Troinitskago* (Sankt-Peterbug: *Paroviiaia Tipo-Litografiia* N.L. Nyrkina, 1905), 5.

³⁷ Timur Iakubovich Valetov, "Chem zhili rabochiie liudi v gorodakh Rossiiskoi imperii kontsa XIX – nachala XX v.," in *Sotsial'naia istoriia: ezhegodnik-2007*, accessed December 12, 2016, <http://www.hist.msu.ru/Labs/HisLab/BOOKS/art003.pdf>

and women's emancipation from household drudgery remained the "party line", the gendered vision of labor and the home perpetuated the existence of paid domestic labor. I argue that it is in the early Soviet period that domestic service became a women's issue rather than a class issue. By reimagining domestic servants (*prisluga*) as female domestic workers (*domrabortnitsa*) and masters and mistresses as Soviet workers who needed help in their homes, paid domestic labor was removed from the discourse of class struggle.

These processes were neither contested, nor homogenous. In the first section of this chapter I chart the way European Marxists and Russian progressive intelligentsia conceptualized domestic service before 1917, emphasizing the critical role the First Russian Revolution of 1905 in turning servants into workers in the public imaginary. Even though at this point women were an absolute majority in domestic service, Russian Marxists saw domestic workers as exploited laborers with revolutionary potential rather than women. However, once the Bolsheviks came to power they became more ambivalent about the nature and place of domestic service in the new society. Their efforts to conceptualize and categorize paid domestic labor is the focus of the second and third sections of the chapter. The second section deals with period of War Communism (1918-1921) while the third one analyzes efforts to make sense of domestic service in the times of the New Economic Policy (1922-1928). While during the first period the need for paid domestic labor was in question, the second one saw the creation of a Soviet female domestic worker. Parallel to categorizing domestic workers, the Bolsheviks had to conceptualize their employers. The chapter concludes with the examination of the Bolsheviks' gradual acknowledgement of the "need" to have a servant against the background of fears of *embourgeoisement* of the party and the working class.

The real novelty of the Bolshevik regime in regards to domestic service was the emergence of the state not only as a regulator but as a point of reference. Already in the first years of the Soviet state, the question of usefulness of female domestic labor for the socialist project lay at the heart of the discussion. Multiple institutions that were involved in categorizing the population, drafting legislation, and supervising its implementation were creating a hierarchy of labor that was structured along class and gender lines.

White Slaves

When the Bolsheviks came to power in 1917, there was little in the existing Marxist texts that would directly address the question of paid domestic labor. Karl Marx acknowledged domestic workers' place in the working class but dismissed them as "ancient domestic slaves under the name of a servant class." As British historian Carolyn Steedman has argued, Marx considered servants' labor to be insignificant for his analysis, following seventeenth and eighteenth-century labor theorists in whose writings "the domestic servant was understood to perform work that was not work." John Locke saw servants not as economic actors in their own right but as an extension of their employers' capacities, their extra "hands." In the works of Adam Smith, a domestic servant served as an example of nonproductive labor – labor that does not create material commodities. Marx followed Smith in his commodity-centrism in the definition of labor, arguing that since services did not, unlike commodities, exist as material objects separate from the worker, they were meaningless for the analysis of capitalism, which was defined by capitalist production of commodities.³⁸

³⁸ Carolyn Steedman, "The Servant's Labour: The Business of Life, England, 1760-1820," *Social History* 29 (2004):1-5.

It is not surprising then, that Marx's disciples, such as Karl Kautsky, Viktor Chernov and Vladimir Lenin also only briefly touched upon servant question in their writings. In *The Agrarian Question*, Kautsky emphasized independence of the modern proletariat from its employers outside the workplace, which set them apart from the proletariat of the old days who belonged to their master's household not only as employees but also as human beings. This independence was one of the factors that determined the "socialist direction" of workers' struggle against their exploiters.³⁹ It implied that domestics, who did not have such independence, were a kind of "backward" proletariat unsuited for organized class struggle for socialism.⁴⁰ For Kautsky, contemporary domestic service was a residue from the feudal past, a form of serfdom or slavery.⁴¹ Lenin supported Kautsky's position, arguing that since domestic servants had not yet created a "socio-democratic proletarian movement" they could not be considered to be part of the "modern proletariat."⁴²

There were only a handful of exceptions to the rule. For instance, Viktor Chernov, the founder of the Socialist-Revolutionary party called for the inclusion of domestic servants into the proletariat as early as 1900.⁴³ Clara Zetkin, a prominent German Marxist and a dedicated women's rights activist, demanded in her article "The Servant Girls' Movement" that conscious workers support domestic servants and lead them in their struggle. Applauding the formation of a "servant girls' movement" in Germany, she called servants "the most exploited, downtrodden and subjugated strata of the female

³⁹ Karl Kautskii, *Agrarnii Vopros* (Sankt-Peterburg: *Tipografia tovarishchestva „Obshestvennaia Pol'za"*, 1906), 7.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 15

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 40-41

⁴² Vladimir Lenin, "The Agrarian Question and the "Critics of Marx," accessed December 12, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1901/agrarian/iv.htm#v05fl61h-146>.

⁴³ Vitkor Chernov, "Tipy kapitalisticheskoi agrarnoi evolutsii," *Russkoie Bogatstvo*, 4-6 (1900):8-11.

proletariat”, “pariahs” even among other proletarians. Even though Zetkin talked about the servant *girls*’ movement, she framed the servant question within the broader context of “the revolutionary struggle of the proletariat for the liberation of work” rather than the women’s question.⁴⁴ Chernov and Zetkin’s positions were quite marginal and did not lead to a Marxist reconceptualization of domestic servants as workers.

Absent from Marxist theoretical works, domestic servants occupied a significant place in public discussions of late imperial society. Although there was nothing particularly Russian in the issue—the “servant problem” was being widely debated across fin-de-siècle Europe—it had its specificity. As Catriona Kelly argues, “attitudes to servants in Late Imperial Russia were closer to those prevailing under the ancient regime in France than to attitudes obtaining in, for instance, Britain of the day.”⁴⁵ Suspicious towards capitalism and market relations, Russia’s upper classes saw loyalty rather than a labor contract as a legitimate foundation for master-servant relations. Both conservative and progressive circles worried about servants’ morale. While conservatives blamed excessive liberties of the new times for its degradation, the progressive intelligentsia decried the negative effects of servants’ dependency on their masters’ will. This second approach had a much stronger hold on Russian minds than Kelly allows it to because it was connected with a long-established critical tradition aimed at the Russian institute of serfdom and its legacies.⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Clara Zetkin, “The Servant Girls’ Movement,” in *Clara Zetkin: Letters and Writings*, eds. Michael Jones, Ben Lewis BA (London: Merlin Press, 2016), 8-13.

⁴⁵ Catriona Kelly, “Who’ll clean the boots now? Servants and social anxieties in late imperial St Petersburg in Europa,” *Europa Orientalis* 16:2 (1997), 26. She also suggests that these archaic attitudes could be one of the reasons why paid domestic labor existed after the revolution but it seems that, having influenced the Bolsheviks’ understanding of the problem, they could hardly be the reason for the persistence of domestic service.

⁴⁶ Angela Rustemeyer, *Dienstboten in Petersburg und Moskau 1861-1917: Hintergrund, Alltag, soziale Rolle* (Stuttgart: Steiner, 1996), 179-181

Unlike other European countries, Russia had only recently abolished serfdom. Before 1861, most Russian servants had been serfs, a status that for the “progressive society” was not much different from that of a slave. There were no specific laws that regulated domestic service leaving this sphere to the repulsive traditions of servitude. Serfdom remained a constant point of reference in the discussions of paid domestic labor with proponents of better treatment of servants calling for an end to “the damned legacy of serfdom.”⁴⁷ Serfdom, in turn, had a long history of being equated with slavery by Russia’s anti-serfdom thinkers, most famously by “the father of Russian socialism” Alexander Hertsen. In his seminal work *My Past and Thoughts*, Hertsen notes that the debilitating effects of serfdom are most obvious in the moral degradation of household serfs.⁴⁸ According to this genealogy of domestic service, which rooted it in serfdom—a Russian form of slavery—a “progressive” vision of domestic service in Russia developed along the same lines as Marx’s interpretation of servants as a “class of ancient domestic slaves.” With the spread of Marxism in the Russian empire in the last decades of its existence, these two strains of reasoning converged, reinforcing each other. The trope of a servant-slave they created was appropriated by a wide spectrum of progressively minded members of society, from the constitutional democrats to the Bolsheviks.

Even though domestic service was the largest employment for women outside of agriculture in the fin-de-siècle Russia, the question of paid domestic labor was largely absent from prerevolutionary discussion on women’s rights. As Richard Stites put it, the servant question remained a blind spot for Russian feminists: “Some appeared to be more

⁴⁷ GARF. F.6861, op.1, d., 40, l.8. L. Georgichev. “Otgosok,” *Pridneprovskii Krai*, February 2, 1905,3.

⁴⁸ At the same time he talks about his childhood affection to the servants in the house. Aleksandr Hertsen, *Byloe i dumy* (Moskva: GIKhL, 1958),53-61.

interested in tranquilizing their domestic servants than in bettering their lot; others saw the labor of servants as a device for freeing educated women for professional work.”⁴⁹ This is especially striking since domestic service was the largest employment sector for Russian women outside of agriculture. Out of 1,555,987 domestic servants 1,288,797 were women.⁵⁰ The liberal feminist discourse on domestic servants mostly centered on the question of prostitution. According to prerevolutionary statistics former maids and nannies made up almost half of registered prostitutes – 45.5 percent.⁵¹ A fallen maid, seduced by a member of the master’s family, was a common trope in prerevolutionary literature, Lev Tolstoy’s novel *Resurrection* being just one example.⁵²

The events of 1905 forced the progressive intelligentsia to develop a more sympathetic attitude towards servants. Following a shooting by troops at a crowd of peaceful workers who came to petition the tsar, protests, strikes and violent clashes swept the country. Russian middle and upper classes were astonished to see a comparatively successful wave of protests and strikes among domestics in several urban centers that culminated in the creation of several servants’ unions.⁵³ The social-democratic press, including first legal Bolshevik newspapers *Bor’ba* and *Novaia Zhizn’*, extensively covered domestic servants’ protests. The correspondent of *Novaia Zhizn’* was pleased to announce that the domestic servants union “decided to join their brothers, the workers, on

⁴⁹ Richard Stites, *The Women’s Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860-1930* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978), 223.

⁵⁰ *Raspredeleniie rabochikh i prislugi*, 5.

⁵¹ Aleksandra Kollontai, *Sotsial’nyie osnovy zhenskogo voprosa* (Sankt-Peterburg: Tovarishchestvo „Znaniie“, 1909), 146.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 162.

⁵³ On the union movement among domestic servants, see Rebecca Spagnolo, “Serving the Household, Asserting the Self: Urban Domestic Servant Activism” in *The Human Tradition in Imperial Russia*, ed. Christine D. Worobec (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009), 141-154.

the path of struggle for liberation.”⁵⁴ Though short-lived (as most unions formed in the turbulent years of 1905-1906 were), these organizations made domestic servants’ problem more visible for the “progressive” audience, making maids and lackeys legitimate members of the proletariat. Moreover, some observers emphasized the fact that the first strikes of domestic servants in the history of mankind happened on the territory of the Russian Empire, the most “backward capitalist state”, making it “a major new phenomenon in the class struggle of Russian proletariat.”⁵⁵ This phenomenon could be seen as evidence to support Lev Trotskii’s theory of permanent revolution, which argued that backward countries such as Russia could be in the vanguard of the world revolutionary movement.

Responding to domestic workers’ activism, both liberal feminists and Social Democrats tried to win them over. For example, in the city of Kharkov the local chapter of the Women’s Union decided to form a special committee that would work on the servant question. In response to this initiative, Social Democrats called their own servants’ meetings so that the servants could formulate their demands independently from their employers.⁵⁶ Both liberal and socialist champions of women’s emancipation built on the existing trope of white slavery but also emphasized domestic workers’ womanhood. In her brochure *White Slaves*, liberal writer Ievgeniia De-Turzhe-Turzhanskaia in addition to the question of low pay, exploitation and disrespectful treatment addressed the challenges domestic servants faced as women: inability of wet-nurses to see their own

⁵⁴ GARF. F.6861, op.1, d.41, l.47. “Po telefonu iz Moskvy,” *Novaia Zhizn’*, November 16, 1905, 2.

⁵⁵ GARF. F.6861, op.1, d.41, l.25. VI.D. “K zabastovke prislugi,” *Russkiiye Vedomosti*, 1905, October 26, 4.

⁵⁶ Rochelle Goldberg Ruthchild, *Equality and Revolution: Women’s Rights in the Russian Empire, 1905-1917* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010), 53.

children, sexual abuse and the burden of raising an illegitimate child.⁵⁷ Writer and playwright Lidiia Lenskaia drew attention to discrimination of female cooks who were paid less than their male peers.⁵⁸ Prominent Russian Social Democrat Aleksandra Kollontai considered the fate of “white slaves” in her book *The Social Basis of the Woman Question*. Assessing the share of former domestic servants among prostitutes, she concludes that although there are some economic factors that push them into the streets in higher number than female factory workers, the real reason for the disproportional numbers is their insufficient intellectual and moral development compared with female factory workers tempered by class struggle. Even if poverty forces a female worker to sell her body she will still have more inner strength to resist than “an isolated, domestic servant, deprived of the invigorating awareness of comradely community and solidarity.”⁵⁹ In these writings, the servant question is situated within the larger issue of women’s emancipation. This, however, did not mean that domestic servants began to be viewed exclusively as female. Social Democrats continued to appeal to “domestic servants, male and female.”⁶⁰

It is possible that growing awareness of the needs of domestic servants as a special category of workers among European social democrats also contributed to Bolsheviks’ interest in paid domestic labor. The turn of the century witnessed the formation of a number of domestic servants’ organization in countries with a strong socio-democratic movement, such as the Stockholm Maidservant’s Association in

⁵⁷ Ievgeniia De-Turzhe-Turzhanskaia, *Belye Nevol’niki (Domashniaia prisluga v Rossii)* (Smolensk, Parovaia tipo-lit. Ia.N. Podzemskogo), 8.

⁵⁸ Lidiia Nikolaievna Lenskaia, *O prislugy. Doklad, chitannyi vo 2-om zhenskome Klube v Moskve v fevrale 1908 goda* (Moskva: Tipografiia Nol’de, 1908).

⁵⁹ Aleksandra Kollontai, *Sotsial’nyie osnovy zhenskogo voprosa* (S. Peterburg, 1909), 147.

⁶⁰ Vladimir Nevskii, *Domashniaia prisluga* (Petrograd: Priboi, 1917), 3.

Sweden or the Union of Domestic Workers in Austria. Some European social democrats specifically addressed the question of paid domestic labor. It is likely that at least some domestic servant activists had contact with their conscious peers abroad. A 1905 police report stated that representatives from Saint Petersburg's domestic servants attended a domestic servants' conference in Finland, an event that could very well have served as a meeting ground for Russian and better organized Finnish and Swedish maids.⁶¹ Such "conscious" behavior of servants in Russia and abroad testified to their "proletarian" nature. After all, it had been the absence of a "socio-democratic proletarian movement" that made them unworthy of being part of the working class in the eyes of Lenin.

By the time the Bolsheviks launched *Pravda* as their main mouthpiece in 1912, domestic servants had secured their place in the workers' family: *Pravda* published several pieces on the plight of "free slaves – proletarians of the kitchen." In 1913, it published an article titled "Labor and Life of Domestic Servants" signed by a prominent Bolshevik agitator Klavdia Nikolaeva, a future editor of the main Soviet women's magazine *Rabotnitsa* and a former nanny. Acknowledging the life of domestic servants was no different than that of serfs fifty years earlier, she called for women in service to demand better working conditions, since they were, like other female workers, "children of one family of workers and [their] demands should be the same."⁶² When the February Revolution reinvigorated protest movement among domestic servants all news outlets

⁶¹ GARF. F. R6861, op.1, d.33, l.21. P. Dorovatskii. *Soiuz Narpit. Ocherk istorii leningradskoi organizatsii 1905-1918 gg.* On the Swedish organization, see Joy K. Lintelman, *I Go to America: Swedish American Women and the Life of Mina Anderson* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2012), 50-53.

⁶² GARF. F.6861, op.1, d.79, l.4-6.Kl. Nikolaeva, "Trud i zhizn' domashnei prislugi," *Pravda*, February 17, 1913.

associated with the Russian social democrats covered it as an integral part of workers' struggle.⁶³

Even though the Bolshevik press accepted the proletarian nature of domestic servants without much difficulty, it also acknowledged their peculiar place in the workers' family. As an anonymous contributor to another Bolshevik newspaper *Zvezda* wrote in 1911, "Domestic servants are numerous but the least protected layer of the proletariat that finds itself in the most degrading working conditions. At the same time it is also the most backward element that has a long way to go in order to develop its class consciousness and [is currently] making no claims for a better life."⁶⁴ The proletarian family clearly had its hierarchies: sisters, or female workers, were to look up to brothers, i.e. male workers, while younger siblings, such as domestic servants, were to follow their older siblings, industrial workers. Thus female domestics, who by the end of the nineteenth century made up the overwhelming majority of the trade, occupied the lowest position in the hierarchical structure of the working class.

This special status turned domestic workers into the ultimate victims of the tsarist regime. "Domestic workers, male and female, are probably living in conditions that are worse than those of any other workers", wrote Vladimir Nevskii, an esteemed revolutionary who had just returned from exile in Siberia to head Bolshevik propaganda in the army after the February revolution.⁶⁵ Domestics worked longer hours than any factory worker, received the lowest pay, suffered from constant abuse and humiliation and had no place to call their own, while even a *batrak*, a poor agricultural worker, had

⁶³ See, for example, GARF. F.6861, op.1, d.99, l.7 "*Pervoe sobranie domashnei prislugi*," *Vpered*, March 12, 1917, 2; l.6 "*Mitingi i sobraniia*," *Izvestiia moskovskogo soveta rabochikh deputatov*, March 31, 1917, 4; l.22 "*28 marta...*," *Sotsial-Demokrat*, March 31, 1917, 3-4.

⁶⁴ GARF. F.6861, op.1, d.79, l. w/o number "*Domashniaia prisluga*," *Zvezda*, April 23, 1911.

⁶⁵ Vladimir Nevskii, *Domashniaia prisluga* (Petrograd: Priboi, 1917), 3.

his own corner to rest his head in peace after the day's work was done. In his agitation brochure, Nevskii, posing as a domestic worker, called for his brothers and sisters to unite in a professional organization in order to fight for better working conditions, since "workers and soldiers" had already "won freedom" for them to do so. Even though domestics were "ignorant and intimidated," they understood that the road to a better future had been opened for them. The list of demands was similar to those proposed by domestic workers in 1905-1906: a ten-hour workday, overtime pay, regular days off, health insurance and respect from employers. As the most oppressed and therefore, the most backward, domestic servants were an object of special care of their more advanced siblings. "Don't be afraid of your illiteracy and backwardness compared to other workers, they will develop you, they will teach you to understand everything that seems incomprehensible to you," stated an article in *Sotsial-Demokrat*, calling for domestics to join the newly established union.⁶⁶ The struggle for the right of domestic servants was to take its course while their older proletarian brothers took care of bigger questions—questions of political power.

It is in this context that Vladimir Lenin wrote his famous article "Can the Bolsheviks Retain State Power?" in which he suggested that once educated, a domestic servant should be allowed to participate in governance. The domestic servant was an ally in revolutionary struggle. The domestic servant was a member of the working class but did not possess the class consciousness of a factory worker. Nevertheless, she or he had potential to develop one once she or he joined the proletariat. The domestic servant was mostly a woman – a female cook, a maid or a nannie but could also be a man – a lackey, a cook or a bellboy.

⁶⁶ GARF. F.6861, op.1, d.99, l.28 "Ko vsem tovarischam..." *Sotsial-demokrat*, April 1917, 2017,3.

Lenin wrote the article several months prior to his party's successful move to overthrow Russia's Provisional Government. Once the power was theirs, Lenin and other Bolsheviks faced a new challenge – the challenge of building a new type of society. What would be the place of the domestic worker in the state of the dictatorship of the proletariat?

Between Work and Nonwork: Domestic Service under War Communism

On January 2 1918, just two months after Lenin's party came to power, the Bolshevik daily newspaper *Sotsial-Demokrat*—the official organ of the Moscow party committee—published an article titled “White Slaves.” The author of the text, a certain Sav. Vallakh (most likely Savelii Vallakh, the brother of a prominent Bolshevik and future Soviet diplomat Maxim Litvinov-Vallakh), condemned the way domestic servants were treated in post-revolutionary Russia by not only bourgeois families but also “so-called democrats.” Stating that a domestic servant was a “laborer like all others”, he demanded immediate introduction of an eight-hour workday for this professional group and creation of labor committees for servants similar to those that existed in factories for workers. Such measures, according to Vallakh, would stimulate “self-activity” among servants who were yet to develop “class-consciousness and methods of class struggle.”⁶⁷ Vallakh's article recycled the tropes of the pre-revolutionary period: domestic servants who were slaves to their masters, and proletarians lacking class-consciousness who needed the help of the new government to protect their rights and develop their minds.

Vallakh's proposition was partly realized in the first Soviet Labor Code of 1918 that mandated an eight-hour workday for all Soviet laborers, including those privately

⁶⁷ GARF. F.6861, op.1, d.99, l.124 Sav. Vallakh, “Belyie rabyni,” *Sotsial Demokrat*, December 20, 1917,1.

employed by individuals. The inclusion of domestic service in the general category of labor posed a new set of questions that stemmed from the nature of labor relations established by the Code. The Labor Code of 1918 was part of the system of War Communism that was introduced in 1918 for both ideological and practical reasons. Nationalization of industries, extraction of agricultural “surplus” from peasants for centralized distribution to urban dwellers and military personnel, labor duty and military-style labor discipline were measures that simultaneously aimed at transitioning to socialism and mobilizing resources to win in the Civil War that started soon after the Bolsheviks’ takeover. The founding principle of the Labor Code was that labor was a duty to the society and the state. Those who were not engaged in “socially beneficial labor” were to be conscripted for public works.⁶⁸

Was domestic work really “labor” (*trud*), and, if it was, what was its social value? This question concerned all women engaged in housework, paid or unpaid. In the article on Communist Saturday clean-ups (*subbotniki*), Lenin stated: “a woman continues to be a domestic slave because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery, and wastes her labor on barbarously unproductive, petty, nerve-racking and stultifying drudgery.”⁶⁹ This vision of the domestic sphere as fundamentally unproductive and degrading rendered paid domestic labor meaningless to the state. That did not mean that the Bolsheviks envisioned a world with no cooking or laundry. Building on the ideas developed by August Bebel in *Woman and Socialism*, they believed that under socialism domestic work would be socialized

⁶⁸ *Kodeks zakonov o trude 1918 goda*, accessed December 12, 2016, http://www.hist.msu.ru/Labour/Law/kodex_18.htm.

⁶⁹ Vladimir Lenin, “A Great Beginning. Heroism of the Workers in the Rear ‘Communist Subbotniks,’” accessed December 12, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1919/jun/19.htm>.

and, consequently there would be neither housewives nor housemaids. In the meantime, as long as there was still need for additional labor in households, members of former privileged classes could be used to substitute hired help, as suggested by Petrograd military commissar Boris Pozern.⁷⁰

The unproductive and debilitating character of housework also posed a question of the domestic servant's social allegiance: if his or her labor could not lead to development of a proletarian consciousness was a he or she really a worker? Despite the social democrats' pre-revolutionary rhetoric that welcomed domestic servants as younger members of the workers' family, domestics were first included in the category of *sluzhashchie*, a term that can be translated as non-manual or non-productive laborers. This category included salary earners who did not work in industry, ranging from janitors to doctors. *Sluzhashchie* occupied an ambiguous position in the Soviet social hierarchy: they were not exactly antagonistic to the new regime since they were wage earners, but they were not proletarians. *Sluzhashchie* received lower rations under War Communism, were at a disadvantageous position when applying to university and in general suffered from distrust of the country's new leadership.⁷¹ The decision to classify domestics as non-proletarian non-productive laborers shows the uncertainty about the nature of domestic labor that was located in the household—the site that in the early Soviet period the Bolsheviks viewed as a source of backwardness and petty bourgeois opposition to the new regime.

⁷⁰ Natalia Lebina, *Entsiklopediia banal'nostei. Sovetskaia povsednevnost': kontury, simvoly, znaki* (Sankt-Peterburg: Dmitrii Bulganin, 2006), 136.

⁷¹ Sheila Firzpatrick, "Ascribing Class: The Construction of Social Identity in Soviet Russia." *The Journal of Modern History*, 65 (1993), 751.

This uncertainty was even more obvious in the way the Bolsheviks tried to regulate domestic service within the system of War Communism that, among other things, included labor mobilization for all Soviet citizens to perform “socially beneficial labor.” The amount and kind of tasks to be performed for the state depended on class, gender and the utility of the labor for the Soviet state. How useful was the labor of domestic servants? According to the decree on labor conscription of servants issued in August of 1920, only members of the domestic workers’ union who were taking care of children under three years of age or those employed by a worker commune of not less than ten people were included into the category of “laboring elements.”⁷² That implied that all other domestic servants were not engaged in “socially beneficial labor” and were to be mobilized for public works.

Certain groups of employers were able to challenge the category of “socially beneficial labor” imposed by the state and prove that their servants were in fact engaged in productive labor and should not be conscripted. In a lengthy correspondence with the Committee for Labor Conscription, the Administration of State Academic Theaters managed to prove that actors and actresses could not perform their professional duties in the theater without hired help. The original argument made by theater administration, which stated that because of their professional obligations actors spent little time at home and could not take proper care of their apartments and children, did not convince the Committee. Finally, the Committee agreed that servants working for theater employees

⁷² “*Postanovleniye NKT ot 31 avgusta 1920 g. ‘O poriadke privilecheniia k trudovoi povinnosti prislugi i o vospreshchenii zameny grazhdan, privilekaemykh k ispolneniyu trudovoi povinnosti drugimi litsami,’*” accessed December 12, 2016, <http://istmat.info/node/42473>. Similarly, Red Army soldiers received financial support for relocation of family members, including their wives, children, dependents and nannies for the children under the age of five. “*Prikaz ot 2 iyunia 1920 g. No.950 ‘Ob ob’iavlenii pravil ob udovletvorenii putevym dovol’sstviem voennosluzhashchikh,’*” accessed December 12, 2016, <http://7law.info/ussr/act8u/r205.htm>.

were to be excluded from conscription but only if they helped with performing “artistic duties,” “sewed costumes, helped the actors dress for the performance, etc.,” and only if the performer “absolutely needed a servant.”⁷³ Only in that case servants’ labor was deemed “socially beneficial” and they were entitled to food rationing cards like other “laborers.”

Those domestic servants whom the state considered to be engaged in publicly beneficial labor were included in the group defined as those “working at factories and offices” (*rabotaiushchikh v predpriiatiakh i uchrezhdeniakh*) and were to provide additional services for the state after fulfilling their job obligations. According to the “Instructions on the implementation of sewing conscription,” they were required to sew a quarter of an item of clothing per day, while housewives who kept house without a servant were expected to sew one half and those who had a servant were equated to “non-laboring elements” and were to sew a full item of clothing per day.⁷⁴

Decrees on labor conscription allow us to see important trends that would continue to shape policies regarding paid domestic labor and women’s emancipation more broadly. First, the foundation of the Soviet state domestic work was viewed as a woman’s responsibility. If a housewife had a maid she was not fulfilling her duties as a homemaker and thus she “owed” her labor to the state. Second, the labor performed by servants was more “socially beneficial” than the same kind of work done by homemakers: the housewife had to provide twice as much additional labor for the state as did a domestic servant. Domestic workers were by definition female and were to perform

⁷³ RGALI. F.649, op.1.d.136, l.10, 18. *Perepiska*.

⁷⁴ ‘*Postanovleniie Glavnogo Komiteta po vseobshchei trudovoi povinnosti. O poriadke provedeniia trudovoi povinnosti po poshivke bel’ia ot 16 dekabria 1920 g. (Instruktsiia)*,’ accessed December 12, 2016, <http://istmat.info/node/41443>. Mobilization of housewives and servants for sewing, of course, itself testifies to the Bolsheviks’ gendered vision of labor.

“women’s work” – sewing. Waged labor had a privileged position over non-waged labor because, in keeping with Marxist ideology, the former was the only path to developing class-consciousness and therefore was one of the central components of women’s emancipation. Third, the decree on conscription of servants emphasizes the privileged position of motherhood and communal living. Only mothers with young children and workers’ communes could legally hire domestic help. While there would be little discussion about paid domestic labor and communal living, needs of Soviet mothers would be continuously used for justification of paid domestic labor in Soviet society.

Labor conscription regulations also showed the hierarchy of labor that would structure Soviet policies and social relations throughout the existence of the Soviet state. Domestic service was socially useful only to the extent that it freed up the labor of those who were professionally and politically valuable to the state. During the initial years of the Soviet state, the Bolsheviks did not yet see a comfortable home as a prerequisite for productive labor, hoping to satisfy toilers’ basic needs in state institutions. Moreover, “state rationing, public dining halls, free food for children, and wages in kind all supported the optimistic assessment that household labor would soon vanish.”⁷⁵

However, instead of leaping into communist paradise, the country’s leadership had to deal with the disastrous effects of the Civil War and War Communism on the economy. The solution was to dismantle the system of War Communism and introduce a set of measures named the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1921-1928). Requisition of agricultural surplus was replaced with an agricultural tax, private capital was allowed to fund small and medium-sized businesses, private trade was reintroduced, labor

⁷⁵ Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917-1936* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 6.

mobilization was abolished, and employment became voluntary. One of the consequences of this partial return to market relations was social differentiation and formation of an entrepreneurial stratum – Nepmen whose wealth became especially problematic against the background of rapidly growing unemployment. Socialization of housework was postponed until better times and the Bolshevik state had to find a place in the new reality for the category of laborers that instead of disappearing was becoming more and more visible in Soviet cities – domestic servants.

Categorizing Paid Domestic Labor under NEP

“Are domestic workers *sluzhashchie* or workers?” That was the first question that was asked at the meeting of domestic servants organized by one of the Leningrad Narpit (the Professional Union of Workers of People’s Food Services) local committees in March 1927.⁷⁶ The question was an important one since the topic of the meeting was social benefits for domestic workers. Domestic workers were categorized as *sluzhashchie* by social insurance offices until 1925. The classification posed a problem for unemployed domestic workers because *sluzhashchie* had to have three or more years of employment to qualify for unemployment benefits.⁷⁷ In 1926 the Central Committee of Narpit successfully lobbied for new regulations that would classify servants as workers of manual labor so they would only need to work for one year to get the benefits. The change in the legislation, however, did not simplify things for all domestic workers: many local insurance centers either continued to demand proof of three years of employment from domestic workers until at least 1927, as the protocol of the meeting in

⁷⁶ TsAGM. F.4493, op.1, d.71, l.5. *Protokol*.

⁷⁷ GARF. F. 5452, op.12, d.7, l.26. *V presidium VTsSPS*.

Leningrad shows. The issue of unemployment benefits was just one of the many aspects of the Bolsheviks' attempts to conceptualize and categorize different forms of labor, including domestic service, according to Marxist understanding of socio-economic relations.

The introduction of the New Economic Policy created a set of new challenges for the Bolsheviks. Rehabilitation of certain elements of the market economy at this time called for increased attention to the rights of its potential victims.⁷⁸ Moreover, as one scholar has noted, “NEP was a period in which those in power were forced somehow to come to terms with complex social and cultural residues of pre-revolutionary Russia, implicitly at odds with ongoing goals of building a socialist or communist order.”⁷⁹ The new state was facing resurgence of old social and power relations that in the eyes of its creators could jeopardize the revolutionary project. It was also the time to redefine the proletariat—an urgent task since depopulation of the cities during the war caused a rapid decline in the number of industrial workers. Those who started to come back to urban areas when the economic situation in the cities began to improve could well be contaminated by the petty bourgeois attitudes of the countryside.⁸⁰ The line between peasantry and proletariat was more ambivalent than ever and had to be redrawn. To overcome this ambivalence the Bolsheviks engaged in “detailed Marxist analysis of

⁷⁸ On these two trends in discussions of the new Family Code see Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*, 185-253.

⁷⁹ William G. Rosenberg, Introduction to *Russia in the Era of NEP: Explorations in Soviet Society and Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 3.

⁸⁰ Lewis H. Siegalbaum, *Soviet State and Society between Revolutions, 1918-1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 26.

Soviet society” and developed a sophisticated system of occupational and class classification.⁸¹

What was domestic servants’ place in the Soviet social hierarchy? They were clearly toilers, but were they really workers? These categories were no meaningless bureaucratic exercise: the category to which you were ascribed determined your rights and obligations, your working conditions and food rations, your past and your future.⁸²

In 1920, the Union of House Workers (*soiuz domovykh sluzhashchikh*) that was supposed to cater to the interests of domestic servants was dismantled and domestics were transferred to the Professional Union of Workers of People’s Food Services (Narpit).⁸³ The original title contained the word ‘*rabotnik*’, which could be translated as an ‘employee’ or ‘salary earner,’ rather than ‘*rabochii*’, which means “worker.” At the Fifth All-Union Congress in 1923, the representative of the “communist fraction” Ignat’ev proposed to replace the term *rabotnik* with *rabochii*, arguing that when the union was first created it brought together laborers, some of whom could not quite relate to the term “worker,” but since then “we have lived through a long epoch” and “our psychology has been reborn.”⁸⁴ The renaming of the union implied that all its members were now workers.

Domestic servants were now officially part of the proletarian family as “workers of household labor” (*rabotnitsy domashnego truda*) or “domestic workers” (*domashnie*

⁸¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, “The Problem of Class Identity in NEP society,” in *Russia in the Era of NEP*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick et al (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991): 12.

⁸² On the notion of “ascribing class” in early Soviet society, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Ascribing Class.”

⁸³ The union’s original name *Soiuz Rabotnikov Narodnogo Pitaniia* was changed to *Soiuz Rabochikh Narodnogo Pitaniia* by a special resolution of the union’s congress in 1919 to emphasize its proletarian credentials: the word ‘*rabotnik*’ means a working person while the word ‘*rabochii*’ (worker) had a more proletarian connotation. “*Postanovleniim Vtorogo Vserossiiskogo s’ezda*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*, 5 (1919): 3.

⁸⁴ TsGA SPb, F. R-4487, op.6, d.14a, l.273. *5yi Vserossiiskii s’ezd Narpit*.

rabotnitsy). The new name signified the change of the servants' social status. In fact, they were not servants anymore, but workers living in the workers' state. At the same time, their position became much more gendered. Even though the Russian word *prisluga* (servant/servants) is grammatically feminine, it is a collective noun that can be used to refer to both women and men. The new term *domashnaia rabotnitsa* or *domrabotnitsa* (female domestic worker) was strictly feminine. Thus the occupation became proletarian but at the same time explicitly feminized.

The term *domashnii rabotnik* (male domestic worker) also existed but it was mostly used to describe publicly employed men working to maintain apartment buildings. Moreover, while for women employed as household help their labor was the basis of their claim for membership in the working class, male domestic workers were perceived as an aberration. In 1927 the journal *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* (Worker of People's Food Services) published an article entitled "*Domrabotnitsa – Uzbek*" ("The Female Domestic Worker – An Uzbek Man"). The reader could immediately see the discrepancy: the word "*domrabotnitsa*" was feminine, while the word "*Uzbek*" (Uzbek man) was masculine. For those, who missed the pun the author makes the message clear: "This title - "*domrabotnitsa – uzbek*" will surely shock the comrades. We are all used to the idea that it is women who work in domestic service, not men. True, in old Russia there were cases, when men sometimes replaced women in doing housework, but that happened only in households of despotic landlords, inveterate woman-haters or officers, whose batmen substituted for nannies. That was a long time ago and is long gone."⁸⁵ The article that described male domestic servants in the Central Asian republic of Uzbekistan sent a clear message: men working as domestics are backward. In the Soviet state housework was for

⁸⁵ Rabkor Mongin, "*Domrabotnitsa – Uzbek*", *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*, 5 (1927): 8

women only. Men should be doing productive work outside the home. Thus, while before the revolution domestic service was an occupation for those of an inferior class as well as those of an inferior sex, in Soviet society domestic labor was a woman's lot.

The new meaning of paid domestic labor was articulated by a prominent Soviet poet and writer, Vera Inber in a short story *Domestic Worker Ivanova* (1926). "According to her working conditions," wrote Inber, "Ivanova is an artisan (*kustar'-odinochka*). [...]. But, being an artisan, Ivanova is not a servant. She does not serve, she works. Her job is to produce a certain commodity such as dinner, or cleaning, or laundry. Then she is free."⁸⁶ Here Inber predates Western feminist conceptualization of housework as productive labor. However, for Inber, Ivanova's new status as a female worker comes not from the nature of her labor but from the relationship with her employer. When "comrade Ivanova" needs to go to a union meeting, she goes to "comrade mistress" for a consultation on the dinner question. They deliberate and decide that "comrade mistress" comes home from her own meeting half an hour early while "comrade Ivanova" goes to the meeting half an hour late so that both of them can fulfil their social and professional obligations. For Inber, being a domestic worker meant being equal to the employer.

The new term 'domestic worker' was also to signify the break with the pre-revolutionary past, to emphasize the discontinuity between the meaning of paid domestic labor before and after the October revolution. As Z.A. Bogomazova, author of two brochures for domestic workers/ union activists, lamented that both employers and "domestic workers themselves" failed to see the difference between the new term and "the old nickname." The brochures were published by the All-Union Central Council of

⁸⁶ Vera Inber. "*Domashniaia rabotnitsa Ivanova*," in *Sobranie sochinenii*, Vol.2 (Moskva: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1965), 107.

Trade Unions as guidance for Narpit activists in their efforts to organize domestics and transform them into conscious proletarians. To see the “huge difference” between being a domestic servant and a domestic worker one just needs to “recall the life of “servants” before the October revolution and the difference would be obvious for everybody.”⁸⁷ She went on to explain that “before the October Revolution domestic workers lived like serfs, with no rights and no protection. Masters considered their ‘servants’ to be their property that belonged to them completely, with no private life and no personal wishes.” But “the October Revolution destroyed slavery. The state of workers and peasants, revising labor conditions for all laborers, noticed the humiliating conditions of the “servants” and took steps to give them equal rights to those of workers, when possible, and to protect them with labor laws.”⁸⁸ No matter how well some of the old employers had treated their servants they were still exploiters because there had been no legal way to control their demands. Even though there were many employers who mistreated their domestics in the Soviet state and the difference between a servant of the old regime and domestic workers of today was not obvious to some domestics, they had to nevertheless reject the past completely and embrace their new identity as workers in a workers’ state.

Thus, domestic servants were no longer servants: they were female workers. Yet, while the problem of finding the proper place for hired domestic help had been solved, another equally important question remained: how could one understand who was a domestic worker and who was not? Again, it was not a trivial question because the status of a domestic worker made one eligible for modest but vital benefits of being a member of the proletariat, such as a trade union membership card or registration at the labor

⁸⁷ A.Z. Bogomazova, *Domashniaia Rabotnitsa* (Moskva: Knigoizdatel'stvo VtsSPS, 1928), 5.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

exchange. That, in turn, implied disability and unemployment benefits no matter how small, preferences in receiving job offers through the labor exchange and having a union representative support your case if there was a conflict with the employer. In the times of high unemployment, especially among women, these were serious advantages. Defining who was and who was not a “real” domestic worker was not a simple task.

The first challenge was to disentangle work and family relations. According to Soviet labor legislation, a labor contract was mandatory in all cases, even when a laborer worked for a family member. Exceptions could be made only for immediate family: husband, wife, father, mother, or siblings. If the laborer insisted on having a labor contract even when being employed by immediate family members, he or she was entitled to have it.⁸⁹ But how would a union representative know that these contracts were signed in earnest and not just to trick the state into receiving the privileges that came with the status of a waged worker? Narpit was constantly concerned with the question of non-laboring elements infiltrating the union.⁹⁰ One of the solutions was to have a “collective” of domestic workers from the same area to testify to the fact that the candidate was really employed as a nanny or a maid.⁹¹

The opposite situation, when a poor female relative could be exploited as a domestic, was also a problem. A special instruction issued by the union’s central committee stated that while immediate family (husband, wife, father, mother, sister) could not be “domestic workers,” more distant relatives could and should be protected as

⁸⁹ V. Miliutin, “O sotsial’nom strakhovanii,” *Voprosy truda* 3 (1923):86.

⁹⁰ See, for example, “Itogi plenuma TsK Narpit,” *Trud*, 1927, June 25, 2.

⁹¹ TsGA SPb. F.R-4497, op.9, d.28, l.223. *Stenograficheskii otchet 8go gubs’ezda Moskovskogo otdela profsoiuza Narpit 15-21 ianvaria 1926.*

workers.⁹² “Pay special attention to the exploitation of servants disguised as relatives,” read a brochure received by the labor union official in Iakov Protazanov’s 1925 comedy *The Tailor from Torzhok*. The film tells the story of a young tailor Petia Petel’kin and his girlfriend Katia, who works as a domestic servant in the house of a wealthy merchant Semizhilov. Although it is not obvious from the film whether Katia really is Semizhilov’s niece as he claims when the union official stops by, the movie script makes it clear that Katia is “an orphan from the countryside, niece of a local rich man Semizhilov.”⁹³ Even though Katia’s escape from the grips of her cruel uncle happens mostly due to Petia’s good luck in winning the state lottery rather than an intervention from the labor union, *The Tailor from Torzhok* was the first Soviet film to raise the issue of the exploitation of domestic servants in general and abuse of female relatives working as household help in particular.

Not surprisingly, many “employers” objected to such limits of their “family.” A mother of two from Leningrad wrote a letter to the local union cell requesting that the girl looking after her children be removed from the list of domestic workers since they were second cousins.⁹⁴ It is impossible to say whether or not that was a case of familial help or an attempt to trick the union. Union activists often complained that employers intimidated their maids and nannies into saying they were relatives, in order to avoid the responsibilities that came with hiring a domestic worker.⁹⁵ In any case, the fact that many families continued to argue that women working in their homes were cousins, nieces or just “relatives” and thus could not be “domestic workers” shows the contradiction

⁹² GARF. F.5452, op.9, d.6, l.1. *Instruktsia TsK Profsoiuza Rabochikh Narodnogo Pitaniia i Obschezhitia SSSR*.

⁹³ RGALI. F.631, op.3, d.1, l.2. V.K. Turkin. *Zakroishchik iz Torzhka*.

⁹⁴ TsGA SPb, F.R-4497, op.1, d.9, l.32, 2 *gruppkomy Volodarskogo raiona*

⁹⁵ Grigor’eva. “Ne tol’ko zimoj, no i letom,” *Trud*, 18 (1926):14.

between the legal interpretation of the family promoted by the union and the popular understanding of familial relations and the role of women's labor within the extended family.

The situation became even more complicated when the exploited domestic was an immediate family member. In a letter to the union journal *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*, a union activist and domestic worker Avdeeva from Nal'chik complained that she had seen cases when women working for sisters were often exploited more than those working for a stranger. She wanted to know if in such cases the union could allow the working sister to join it. The legal expert's response was somewhat confusing: although according to Chapter Two of the Order of the People's Labor Commissariat issued on February 2, 1923, immediate relatives could demand a labor contract and in this case they were subject to the Labor Code and the law regulating the work of domestic servants, immediate relatives of employers could not join the union.⁹⁶ So, even though these women were legally working for wages and were considered domestic workers, they could not become Narpit members and receive the benefits that came with the membership card.

The difficulty of locating household work within the Soviet system of labor relations and the absurd results its regulation can create was an object of reflection in contemporary culture. In a short story "The Grimace of NEP" (1927) by the popular satirist Mikhail Zoshchenko, a man gets on a train accompanied by an elderly woman. The woman is carrying their heavy luggage while the man gives her orders in a bossy and disrespectful way. People on the train get agitated and accuse the man of abusing his

⁹⁶ "Spravochnik narpitovtsa," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*, 8 (1926):23; "Otvety i Voprosy," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*, 11 (1929):25

domestic servant. In the eyes of other passengers such mistreatment of a servant was “the grimace of NEP.” However, it turns out that the woman is not a servant but the man’s mother. Having realized their mistake, the passengers apologize and the couple continue their journey.⁹⁷ The short story makes clear the difference the status of a worker gave in the Soviet state: a worker was protected by the Labor Code and public opinion while a female member of the family was not.

The social background of women applying for membership in the union as domestic workers was also a dilemma. Many women from the former privileged classes turned to domestic service as the only possible way to earn a living. Could former merchants’ wives or noble ladies join the proletariat by becoming domestic workers? The answer was again unclear. The decisions varied from case to case. The former landlady from the Tambov province Bertneva was expelled from the union, while the former princess Obolenskaia was allowed to stay. Perhaps the fact that Berneva’s husband and son had been shot as “counterrevolutionaries” weighed the scales against her.⁹⁸ The possibility of redemption through labor, as in the case of Obolenskaia, was less likely but still possible. A script for a silent movie that for some reason was never shot, tells a story of two female friends of unspecified privileged background. While the first friend Irina struggles after her husband dies, Sofia, married a director of one of the trusts, and enjoys a luxurious life in a spacious apartment. After a chance meeting, Sofia takes her old friend in as a maid. Inexperienced and nostalgic for the past at first, Irina gradually learns to be a worker with the help of a new friend—a “conscientious” domestic worker

⁹⁷ Mikhail Zoshchenko, *Grimasa Nepa*, accessed December 12, 2016, <http://ostrovok.de/old/classics/zoshchenko/story026.htm>

⁹⁸ TsGA SPb. F.R-4497, op.9, d.28, l.451. *Stenograficheskii otchet 8go gubs"ezda Moskovskogo otdela profsoiuza Narpit 15-21 ianvaria 1926.*

Annushka. Even though the ending of the script is missing, it is safe to say that in spite of her questionable background, Irina transforms herself through labor and is welcomed by the workers' family in the person of her new friend Annushka.⁹⁹

A separate set of issues concerning the status of women working in other people's household arose in the countryside. Bolsheviks considered *batraks*, landless agricultural laborers hired by peasant families, to be a separate social group. *Batraks* were not peasants but proletarians, Bolsheviks' main allies in rural areas. *Batraks* were expected to join the All-Russian Union of Land and Forestry Workers and serve as a vanguard of the revolutionary forces in the countryside. Yet, Soviet administrators as well as Soviet economists were having trouble figuring out whether a hired woman tending pigs as well as children was a *batrachka* (a female agricultural laborer) or a domestic worker. It was also unclear which union was supposed to "represent" these women.

Once the decision was made that the woman was indeed a domestic worker eligible for joining the union, the lawmakers and union activists were to grapple with problem of defining *what kind of* domestic worker she was. Was she a housemaid, a nanny, a cook or a maid of all works? Again, these were not trivial questions because finding the right category for the domestic worker was essential for determining her skill-category (*razr'ad*), according to which her salary was to be calculated. The system made sense for industrial workers who received their categories based on the skills they had gained through training or experience. Before the revolution, the category of domestic service included a variety of "professions": nannies, chambermaids, cooks, lackeys and doormen. These categories continued to exist in the Russian language throughout the

⁹⁹ RGALI. F.2648, op.1, d.239, ll.1-16. *Stsenarii nemogo fil'ma bez nazvaniia*.

1920s, even though labor contracts increasingly used only two of them: nanny and domestic worker, the latter meaning “maid of all works.”

Nevertheless, until the union gave up on the idea of using skill categories for domestic workers in 1926 altogether, union officials tirelessly worked to find an objective way to measuring skills of a domestic worker. The wage scale was drafted by the union central committee and then approved by the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions. The earliest version of the wage scale for domestic servants was sent out to regional union organizations in the spring of 1922. The Central Committee took pains to categorize domestic labor based on the skills required to perform certain tasks. Thus, male and female cooks (*povar* and *povarikha*) who “perform the work of highest professional art, are theoretically trained for cookery and have years of practical experience” and therefore are assigned to the sixth category – the highest category available for domestic workers. A maid of all works (*prisluga za odnu*) that performs the duties of a cook and a housemaid belongs to the fifth category. Cooks that are familiar with “average cooking” and possessing practical experience of less than three years belong to the forth category, as do “dining-room maids” (*stolovaia gornichnaia* or *belaia gornichnaia*) and waiters (*offitsiant*), who “lay the table and serve meals, coffee, tea, [and] should be familiar with table setting”¹⁰⁰. Housemaids (*vtoryie gornichnye*) whose responsibilities included cleaning the premises and clothes as well as preparing baths, qualified for the third category. The lowest position in the hierarchy—the second category—was occupied by kitchen maids (*posydomoiki* or *kuchonnyie rabochie*), who prepared food for cooking and washed dishes, and doormen (*shveitsar*), who helped

¹⁰⁰ The word “waiter” here clearly replaces the pre-revolutionary term footman (*lakei*) for male servant. The word *lakei* became derogatory, as was the term *lakeistvo* that meant servility.

visitors put on and take off their overclothes.¹⁰¹ These categories allude to grand houses staffed with housemaids and footmen and seem completely out of place with the post-Civil-War reality of Russian cities. Perhaps this wage scale was informed by the pre-revolutionary understanding of domestic service and the need to make sense of the illusive nature of housework rather than by actual practices in Soviet homes.

Paradoxically, the most common type of domestic worker—the nanny—was absent from the list, as nannies, as well as wet-nurses and governesses, were originally ascribed to the union of educational workers. The erroneousess of this decision became clear within the next few years. The later version of the wage scale included nannies who looked after children and washed children's clothes. Even though the document stated that the job required child-minding skills, it occupied a relatively low position in the hierarchy: a nanny looking after children under the age of two qualified for the fourth category, while those minding older children were included in the third category. The later version of the list also did not contain any male domestic workers; by 1925, no one could imagine a man in service. Another innovation was the effort to take into consideration the amount of work done by the domestic: the skill category of housemaids and maids of all works depended on the number of rooms in the household and members of the family.¹⁰²

This approach, when the skill categories were assigned according to the number of tasks performed and the number of rooms and members of the family serviced, rather than any kind of qualifications eventually replaced the lists of skills a domestic was expected to have for certain categories. According to one of the wage scale introduced in

¹⁰¹ TsGA SPb, F. R-4487, op.6, d.16, l.60. *Tsirkuliar* No.51.

¹⁰² TsGA SPb, F. R-4487, Op.8, d.9, l.55. *Tarif*.

June 1925, which was developed for domestic workers by the union kitchen maids, nannies and housemaid working in the house with not more than two rooms were assigned to the lowest, second category. Every extra room brought the housemaid an additional step in the labor hierarchy – up to the fifth category with those having to clean five or more rooms. A maid of all works working for a family of three or less started with the third category, with her rank growing with the number of rooms and people. The highest category a domestic worker could hope for was the seventh (out of seventeen existing categories).¹⁰³ Counting the number of rooms and family members was, of course, easier than evaluating a cook's skills. This change also showed the state's failure to find a meaningful way to capture the essence of housework and evaluate its value. In 1926 the union would give up on the idea of a tariff system altogether, leaving it for the employers and workers to negotiate pay as long as it was more than a minimum wage set by the state.

Can a Bolshevik Have a Servant?

The attempt to categorize domestic labor was not only the question of how much a domestic worker should earn but also how much an employer could pay. This issue was part of a larger question of defining the employer. If there were no servants in the Soviet state, could there be masters and mistresses? In the Bolshevik moral order employment of laboring hands, whether in agriculture or in a workshop, automatically put you on the wrong side of the barricades in the fight for the communist future. Any kind of private employment was by default exploitation because it implied working for somebody else's private profit and alienation from the fruits of your labor. But what about household

¹⁰³ TsGA SPb, F. R-4487, Op.73, d.1, l.1. *Tarifnaia razbivka dlia domrabotnits.*

help? What was the place of the employer of a domestic worker in the class hierarchy?

And most importantly, could a Bolshevik have a servant?

The end of the Civil War with its universal labor mobilization, in addition to the rehabilitation of certain elements of market economy under the New Economic Policy, normalized paid domestic labor as just one of the many kinds of private employment. At the same time, many rank-and-file party members felt confused about these changes that seemed like a step back on the path to communism. As Eric Naiman has put, it “the era of NEP was a profoundly *anxious* time” when many dedicated Bolsheviks felt nostalgia for the uncompromising times of the Civil War and openly criticized the inequalities created by the partial rehabilitation of market relations.¹⁰⁴ In this context, the presence of domestic servants who had historically been a powerful symbol of inequality, a manifestation of exploitation of the lower classes by the upper classes, in the homes of both Nepmen and party members seemed to testify to the “encroachment of capitalism” and “*embourgeoisement* of the party.” These anxieties manifested themselves in the discussions about domestic service.

In the first years after the end of the Civil War, persistence of domestic service was described as one of the ugly faces of the New Economic Policy. An article in *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* explained to its readers: “The New Economic Policy has come, a new bourgeoisie has been created, and they need servants. ... Now nepmen make their servants work from early morning into late night and their wages are left-overs from the nepmen’s table. Domestic workers are serfs of their masters are nepmen who make

¹⁰⁴ Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 6.

them cater to their every whim.”¹⁰⁵ The only employers that were depicted in numerous cartoons and stories about exploitation of domestics were Nepmen or *sluzhashchie*. They used every opportunity to exploit their workers: overloaded them with chores, denied them adequate rest and pay, humiliated and abused them. The union’s job was to “bridle” employers and protect the rights of domestics.¹⁰⁶



Fig.3 “Domestic worker and the Doctor,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 10 (1925):13. The doctor is an “old intelligentsia” type easily recognizable by his beard and glasses. In the background the mighty hand of the court is taking the labor inspector who failed to punish the doctor for exploitation of his domestic worker.



¹⁰⁵ “Vospominaniia domashnei prislugi,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*, 3 (1923): 19.

¹⁰⁶ “Krasnodar. Organizatsia domashnei prislugi,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*, 3 (1923): 18.

Fig.4 “Underground domestic workers,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 12 (1925): 32. The cartoon was accompanied by a poem about a certain chairman of the land committee Bazilov who hid his domestic workers from the union representative in the basement. Even though by the nature of his work Basil is a *sluzhashchii*, the cartoonist clothes him in peasant boots and shirt, making the figure read as a wealthy peasant – a kulak.



Fig.5 “Chairman of the state insurance company Lipatkin pays his domestic worker in installments,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 12 (1925): 33. *Sluzhashchii* Lipatkin is portrayed as a Nepman emulating a prerevolutionary landlord.

Gradually, high-ranking officials, union workers and party members began to appear in the role of exploiters as well. Ideological concepts had to be adjusted to the realities of life that were obvious from the statistical information. According to a 1926 survey of 75,518 employers, workers and *sluzhachshie* made up to 60.2 percent of employers (in Moscow 77.8 percent were *sluzhachshie* and 7.5 percent were workers), professionals and craftsmen made 13.2 percent, merchants and individuals with non-laboring income hired only 16.6 percent of domestics, with ten percent remaining

uncategorized.¹⁰⁷ Worker-correspondents regularly reported on the crimes committed by administrators and Soviet officials against their domestic workers.

The main culprits, however, were most often not the officials themselves but their wives. In the public trial of exploiters of domestic servants initiated by one local union cell and covered by the union newspaper, there were two groups of delinquent employers: “big and small nepmen” and “high-ranking officials” (different administrators, accountants, etc.) who hired domestic servants because of the “lordly inclinations of their wives.”¹⁰⁸ From the position of the worker-correspondent, hired help in the homes of Soviet *sluzhaschiie* was a deviation and happened in those families in which women failed to perform their role in the household. Women employers were often called ‘*baryn’ki*’ – a derogative from the word ‘*barynia*’ used by peasants and servants to address their mistresses before the revolution. In a short story published in *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania*, two domestics discuss their employers. One works for an “old burzhui” and the other one works for a “high-ranking official, a communist.” However, both of them “work like in the old days.” While the wife of the communist goes to theatres and cinemas her servant works day and night with no insurance or union membership.¹⁰⁹ Representations of women who had hired help as bourgeois informed the way these women were treated by Soviet institutions in real life. Employment of a maid could be used as an argument against reinstatement in political rights or as grounds for denial of right of a wife to receive property in the case of divorce.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ GARF. F.5452, op.12, d.7.l.48. *V presidium VTsSPS*.

¹⁰⁸ “*Sud nad ekspluatatorami domashnei prislugi*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 8-12 (1923): 22.

¹⁰⁹ “*Razgovor dvukh domashnikh rabotnits*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 3 (1925): 10.

¹¹⁰ Golfo Alexopolous, *Stalin's Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens, and the Soviet State, 1926-1936* (Ithaca: Cornell, 2003), 243; Wendy Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution*, 196.



Fig.6 “How They Make Skeletons,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 8(1925): 12. The mistress is literally shifting the burden of household responsibilities onto the shoulders of her maid.



Fig.7 “Union, get rid of the purse-proud passenger,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 2(1926), 13. The mistress gets a “free ride” at the expense of her servants.

The uneasiness Russian communists felt about domestic service was described well in an early Soviet short story *Prisluga* (Servants) by Iefim Zozulia written in 1922. The protagonist, a progressive young man, Gorlov, hires a village girl Tania, who at first

strikes him as naïve and direct, as a live-in domestic. He treats her according to his progressive beliefs: eats with her at the same table even though he finds her vulgar manners disturbing and lets her go to evening courses every day. However, it turns out that Tania never goes to school and uses her time off to hang out with her friends. Moreover, she tells him that she wants to leave him because he is poor and gave her no gifts for Christmas. Frustrated and angry, Gorlov fires Tania, full of regret for “changing the style of life he had acquired in the revolutionary years.”¹¹¹ Zozulia clearly did not see how the contradiction of domestic service which his protagonist calls “voluntary slavery” could be resolved: “No matter how you treat them nothing works out!” exclaims Gorlov after his final conversation with Tania.¹¹²

The pronoun “they” could be interpreted not only as referring to “domestic servants” but to peasant women in general. While Gorlov and the professional union provide Tania with ample opportunities to better herself, she rejects them. Moreover, it turns out that Tania comes from a wealthy peasant family with a good “*snariad*” – a chest with dowry waiting for her in the family peasant house. *Snariad* symbolizes Tania’s embeddedness in the backward peasant culture: in the 1920s experts on peasant life believed the practice of collecting items for a girl’s wedding chest to be an obsolete, irrational tradition detrimental to peasant economy because such storage of resources was “unproductive.”¹¹³ It is clear that Tania has no intentions to change her ways and plans to come back to the backward village life. Only greed motivates her to take a job in the city.

¹¹¹ Iefim Zozulia, “*Prisluga*,” in *Sobranie sochinenii, Vol.1 (Moskva-Peterburg: Krug, 1923)*, 100.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 98. This short story never appeared on the trade union lists of books recommended for Soviet domestics.

¹¹³ *Demograficheskaia modernisatsia Rossii, 1900-2000*. A.G. Vishnevskii Ed. (Moskva: *Novoe izdatel'stvo*, 2006), 36.

The presence of a backward, greedy peasant girl poses a threat of contamination of Gorlov's home with petty bourgeois ideas of domesticity.

Bolsheviks' discomfort with the persistence of domestic service even among their own ranks is obvious in the post-civil war party discussion which led to a secret order "On fighting with excesses and criminal use of official position among party members" in 1923. Although no official ban on employment of household help by Bolsheviks existed, for many party members it was a sign of *embourgeoisement*. "Can a communist have a servant?" asks a worker-correspondent V. Klishko in his submission to *Rabochaia Gazeta* (Workers' Newspaper) in 1924. "A young communist and his wife finally have their 'heir'. Since they do not want to give up their work in the trade union they hire a wet nurse, a young woman from a village. She feeds the baby, looks after him, cooks meals for the young couple, brings water, chops firewood, does the laundry, etc. We get into an argument: does he have a right to have a servant?" Klishko is torn. On the one hand, as a Communist, he sees domestic service as a form of exploitation (the word is repeated several times in the letter) and thus it seems logical that a communist should not be allowed to have a servant. If parents are too busy with their party work, they could leave the baby in a children's home to be raised by the state, he argues. However, in the second part of the letter he takes a step back and admits that it is a "debatable question" and a communist could in fact hire household help under certain conditions. Regretting that "in the provinces many party members exploit their servants and that brings discontent among non-party comrades," he argues that "it would be good if members of the party, in their free time, taught their servants to read and engaged them in public work, the Komsomol, the Women's section and the party, explained to them the meaning

and goals of these organizations.” Klishko is confused whether the problem is in the practice of hiring household help itself or in the way masters treat their servants. In other words, he cannot decide whether domestic service is pure exploitation or individual employers make it exploitive by not following Soviet laws. Klishko is unable to solve this puzzle himself so he leaves it to the superior authority—the party cell—to decide the matter.¹¹⁴

Klishko was not alone in his belief that the decision of whether a Bolshevik could have a maid should be made by the party. According to a publication in the major party newspaper *Pravda*, the Central Bureau and the Control Committee of the Communist Party of Belorussia ruled that those members of the Bolshevik party who wished to hire a domestic had to receive permission from their party cell. The permission could be granted only in cases when all adult family members were involved in “productive or public work the nature of which prevented them from taking care of their children and household.”¹¹⁵ This hierarchy of labor was similar to the one that structured labor conscription laws under War Communism. Employment of household help had to be justified, although the rules became much more lenient. Unlike actors and actresses of the Malyi Theater who could receive permission to hire a servant only if they could prove that she was helping them to perform their professional duties, the need to take care of children and the household was a valid reason for a party worker to hire a maid. Here the value of domestics work was measured by the utility of the labor she freed up—a trend that would become more and more prominent in the way the Bolsheviks understood domestic service.

¹¹⁴ RGASPI. F. 610, op 1, d. 48, ll.130-131. *Mozhet li k"ommunist imet' prislugu?*

¹¹⁵ “*Diskussii na mestakh*,” *Pravda*, December 30, 1923, 8.

By the mid-1920s, the question of whether or not a communist could have a servant was replaced by the discussion about the Bolshevik way of treating one. The “right way” was often defined through negative examples. A worker-correspondent complained that in his village domestics were exploited “not only by kulaks but, what is especially upsetting, by conscious Soviet and party workers.”¹¹⁶ One of the professional union activists went so far in his denunciation of mistreatment of domestics by the Bolsheviks as to claim that “75% of exploiters” were members of the party and suggested that those guilty be expelled from its ranks.¹¹⁷ Some local party cells indeed took mistreatment of domestics as a serious violation of Bolshevik ethics, like in the case of Irina Ignat’eva, a student at Leningrad Agricultural Institute and a party member since 1920. Her daughter’s nanny was not registered with the union, ate separately from employers and slept in the kitchen. The party cell of the Institute expelled Ignat’eva for “noncommunist behavior” in her treatment of “a proletarian”—the nanny.¹¹⁸ This focus on the proper way of treating a domestic servant normalized the practice of having one.

So how was a Bolshevik to treat a domestic? In her letter to *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* domestic worker Mandrygina told the readers how her life changed when she left her previous employer—a merchant—and started working for party members. They signed a labor agreement and “brought” her to the union and to the Komsomol.¹¹⁹ Another article describes the “comradely relationship” between employers and domestics at the Comintern dormitory. According to the local union cell representative, domestic

¹¹⁶ “*Neobkhodima’a rabota*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 9 (1925):6.

¹¹⁷ TsGASpb.F.4487, op.1, d.28/2, l.427. *Stenograficheski otchet 8go gubs’ezda Moskovskogo otdela profsoiuza TsK Rab Narpit i obshchezhitia SSSR 15 ianvaria 1926 – 21 ianvaria 1926*.

¹¹⁸ The district control commission overruled the decision, though, arguing that Ignat’eva was an active worker in the collective. TSAIPDSPb. F.568, op.1, d.17, l.33. *Protokol №11 zasedaniia Petrogradskoi kontrol’noi komissii Petrogradskogo raiiona ot 7 iulia 1924 g.*

¹¹⁹ “*Partiitzy pomogli domashnei rabotnitse*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 10 (1925): 11.

workers live in the families of party members “like in their own families”: “they drink tea, have lunch and dinner together at the same table with the employers.” As a result, domestics have time and desire to attend evening courses and have become active in public life.¹²⁰ These publications did not question the legitimacy of domestic service, but emphasize the importance of a “comradely relationship” between employer and domestic. This relationship was, however, not equal: the domestic worker is by definition in need of guidance and it is the employer’s responsibility to bring her the fruit of Soviet enlightenment. These positive examples were published in the *Narpit* journal and therefore were not accessible to the broader public. These stories were written for domestic workers rather than for their employers. Their goal was to construct domestic service as a non-antagonistic labor relationship and ease domestic workers and union activists’ frustration with exploitative practices.

Growing awareness of the fact that not all domestic servants were employed by Nepmen and not all employers were exploiters led to a more subtle approach to the question of measuring the value of paid domestic labor. This value was defined by the social status of the employer. “We think that we should divide domestic servants into two categories because we cannot have everyone employing a domestic servant in one category,” argued union activist Berezin at the Fifth All-Russian *Narpit* Congress in January of 1923. “If our union worker had to have a domestic servant according to objective circumstances, we cannot treat him as we treat a Nepman who lives off his unregulated profits.”¹²¹ The distinction Berezin suggested was to be the foundation in the differentiation in domestic workers’ salaries: “Nepmen” were to pay more while “union

¹²⁰ A. Servo, “*Vtiagivaiem rabotnits v obshchestvennuu rabotu*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 4 (1929): 13.

¹²¹ TsGA SPb, F. R-4487, op.6, d.14a, l.266. 5yi Vserossiiskii s’ezd *Narpit*.

workers” were to pay less. Berezin’s colleague from Kharkov suggested to make an even more nuanced gradation, taking into account that certain Soviet officials earned way more than set by the highest, seventeenth category and had to be treated differently than those Soviet officials earning significantly less.¹²² A delegate from Astrakhan’ completely rejected the idea of making “Soviet, party and cooperative workers” a privileged category. Moreover, he argued that those of them “who go about in automobiles” with their wives “who do not even know the alphabet” but have “plump hands” should pay more than a Nepman who could be “just a trader,” “living from day to day.”¹²³

Following the discussion at the congress, the union’s central committee proposed a scheme according to which domestics’ wages were determined solely based on their employers’ income and social background. The All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions rejected the proposal and made Narpit come up with a more sophisticated system that would consider domestic workers’ workload as well as their employers’ social background and salary.¹²⁴ For example, according to the wage scale issued in 1925, domestics employed by workers and *sluzhashchie* could ask only two thirds of what those working for traders and representatives of “free professions” (scholars, artists, etc.) were entitled to receive. For example, a housemaid cleaning four rooms in the home of a Soviet administrator was to receive 22 rubles, while a housemaid with the same amount of work in the house of a singer could count on 36 rubles.¹²⁵ There seems to have been no discussion about whether or not it was fair that two domestic workers performing the

¹²² Ibid., l.273.

¹²³ TsGA SPb, F. R-4487, op.6, d.14a, l.276. *5yi Vserossiiskii s’ezd Narpit.*

¹²⁴ S. Tarasov, “O tarifnoi rabote sredi domrabortnits,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 3-10 (1924):8.

¹²⁵ TsGA SPb, F. R-4487, op.73, d.1, l.2. *Tarifnaia razbivka dlia domrabortnits.*

same exact work in two different household were to receive significantly different wages only because their employers had different social background. This decision also contradicted the notion that the value of domestic's work was defined by the usefulness of their employers' labor to the state: if one followed this line of reasoning, a nanny in the home of a Soviet official would be more valuable than a nanny working for a craftsman's family, because it freed up more socially useful labor of her employer. Here, the logic of social justice was different: working for a socially alien employer was by definition exploitation and the extra money he or she had to pay was both a compensation for the suffering for the worker and a punishment for the employer. In the case in which both the worker and the employer were on the side of the Revolution, the domestic worker was a friendly helper for those who were overburdened by their professional and public responsibilities and household chores.

By 1926 the idea of setting a normative wage of domestic workers according to the income or social status of their employers was rejected. Domestic workers were to negotiate their monthly pay based on the minimum wage set by the state. Income and social status of the employer remained the basis of the social insurance tariff system. Employers were divided into three groups: workers and *sluzhashchie* with an income below a certain limit set by the state, those who earn more than the limit and "others." The first group paid a minimum fee for their servants' insurance while the last one paid the maximum one.¹²⁶ The number of groups, the specific amount one had to earn to be categorized and the size of the fee would change over time but the fundamental approach would remain the same: those who make more pay more for their domestic workers.

¹²⁶ GARF. F.5452, op, 13, d.130, l.24-25. *Pravila o sotsial'nom strakhovanii lits zaniatom v domashnem khoziaistve*. 27 iunia 1929 g.

Conclusion

In 1929 Mikhail Zoshchenko wrote a short story titled “The Nursemaid.” It describes an episode from the life of a couple – the Farforovs. Both Seryoga Farforov and Madame Farforov work “in production” and make good money. So, once they have a baby, an economically feasible solution is to hire a nursemaid for the child. “Otherwise, of course, they wouldn’t have hired one. They did not understand such aristocratic customs,” notes the narrator.¹²⁷ The Farforovs find an old woman who seems perfect: she is “middle-aged and fairly terrifying to look at” and, having no life of her own, spends her days taking the baby for a walk. However, the idyll does not last for long: member of the Farforovs’ housing committee Tsaplin sees the nursemaid with the child begging on the street. At first, Tsaplin, accuses the Farforovs of either not paying their nanny or making her beg, therefore constituting “a definitely alien stratum in our proletarian house.”¹²⁸ The nursemaid is called in and it becomes clear that she uses the baby to beg “to make a little extra.” The Farforovs are outraged and kick the nursemaid out, with Madame Farforov stating that her behavior “is offensive to us in the highest degree” and Tsaplin declaring the nanny “the alien stratum in our proletarian house.”

Although it is the nursemaid who is declared “the alien stratum,” the story makes clear that the problem lies not only with the nanny being a bad Soviet domestic worker. As Tsaplin explains to the Farforovs, “With all her roots she goes back to the distant past when gentry and subordinate slaves got along together. She became reconciled to that life

¹²⁷ Mikhail Zoshchenko, *The Nursemaid, Nervous People and Other Stories* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), 181.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 183.

and does not see anything shameful in being a beggar or taking handouts.”¹²⁹ Thus, the nursemaid deserves if not compassion, then understanding and, perhaps, help to overcome the legacy of the past. Another source of the problem is the Farforovs themselves. While the narrator emphasizes that they did not understand such “aristocratic customs” as hiring servants, it is exactly this discrepancy between the Soviet “beliefs” and non-Soviet practices that makes them the main culprits. Even the last name – the Farforovs that can be literally translated as “the Porcelains” – signals their belonging to the bourgeois domesticity. The Farforovs share the responsibility unequally: the wife is first and foremost to be blamed for the desire to shift the burden of childcare to another woman. It is not by accident that, while her husband is called by his first name – Seryoga, she is referred to as “Madame Farforova” – a form of address that emphasizes her lordly pretensions. Her choice to hire a nanny is dictated not by her determination not to deprive the state of her “socially useful labor” in production but by mercantile motivation to save money.

In the 1920s domestic servants occupied an ambiguous position: as workers they were allies but as servants they were aliens. Even though by the mid-1920s employment of household help was “rehabilitated,” it still remained a dubious practice that could be seen as a sign of *embourgeoisement*. Domestic servants became workers but still carried the stigma of peasant backwardness. Moreover, the utility of their labor was unclear. They could hardly be considered professionals because they did not possess any particular skills. They worked in a highly suspicious sphere of the private home and therefore were likely to be contaminated by its petty bourgeois ideology but could also contaminate it by their own backwardness.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 184.

Yet, domestic workers were still workers. As workers they were objects of state care and protection through unionization and labor legislation. Their “backwardness” made them especially vulnerable to exploitation they could not fight due to underdeveloped class consciousness. Therefore, when it came to protection of domestic workers’ rights the state had two objectives: to foster their “self-activity” and “proletarian consciousness” through unionization and protect them by introducing and enforcing adequate legislation.

Chapter 2: Regulating Paid Domestic Labor

In the fall of 1925 the monthly journal of the People's Commissariat for Labor *Vorposy Truda* (Questions of Labor) published an article entitled "The Labor Contract of the Domestic Worker and Her Right to Living Space". The anonymous author of the piece analyzed recent court decisions in cases of Muscovites suing to remove their former domestic workers from their premises. In the first case a certain P. – a party member living with his family in a two-room apartment of 288 square feet – was unsuccessfully trying to reverse a court ruling that gave his smaller room of 60 square feet to his former domestic worker Zh. The ground for the decision was the fact that while working for P., Zh. joined the housing cooperative – a house managing organization of tenants – which made her eligible for her own living space in the apartment building. In the second case, a "laboring family" of eleven sharing a five-room apartment of 980 square feet went all the way to the Supreme Court in order to evict their former domestic servant Ya. Even though Ya. had signed a written labor contract that stated that she was to vacate the premises within two weeks after termination of the contract relations, the court took the side of the defendant. The judges were not swayed, even by the fact that Ya.'s family owned two houses in a neighboring village, one of which they rented out as a vacation home.

According to the article, cases in which the court supported domestic servants' right to live in the apartments of their former employers, even when such decisions decreased the amount of living space beyond sanitary norms, were becoming increasingly common. The author admits that the mere fact that the decisions were not legally justifiable was not the problem, if they were made in the "spirit of proletarian justice"

rather than according the “letter of the law”. The rulings, however, could be explained neither by “common sense” nor by “class principles” of the Soviet justice system.

Although it was understandably difficult for a “proletarian” court to throw a female worker out on the street, which could force her to take up prostitution, “protecting the interests of one given female worker should not come into conflict with the interests of the laboring masses.” Allowing the domestic worker to stay in the home of her former employers might cause conflict and petty fighting that would negatively affect the atmosphere in the building: in both cases the plaintiffs argued that living with their former domestic workers was impossible because of their “obnoxious behavior”.

Moreover, such court rulings would discourage employers from legally registering their maids and nannies with the housing committees and the labor union. While a few domestic might improve their housing conditions, many more would suffer as a result of their unregistered status and might succumb to prostitution. Exceptions were to be made only in special cases, when, for instance, the domestic servant was an orphan. Even then, accommodation in the home of her former employer was to be temporary. The author of the article warned the courts against substituting “the class line” in their argumentation with “the good wish of equalitarianism” (*dobroe zhelanie uravnitel'stva*).¹³⁰

The cases described in the article expose how the problematic status of paid domestic labor affected the lives of domestic servants and their employers in the first decade after the revolution. These cases show that Soviet courts tended to interpret the relationship between a private employer and an employee as unequal and exploitative. Therefore, it was only logical for the courts to side with the exploited – the domestic

¹³⁰ M., “*Trudovoi dogovor domashnei rabotnitsy i ee pravo na zhiluiu ploshchad'*,” *Voprosy Truda* 4 (1925):75-78.

worker – even when “the letter of the law” suggested otherwise. However, already in 1925 such a position was not unambiguous, as the criticism of the journal article makes clear. The rights of an individual domestic worker often came into conflict with what union leadership believed to be the needs of domestic workers as a proletarian group. The cases also show that domestic workers as well as their employers were actively defending what they perceived to be their right under Soviet law. While the domestic workers took preliminary steps to secure their position by joining the housing cooperative or signing the labor agreement, the employers showed persistence in their quest for justice and living space, bringing the suit all the way to the Supreme Court.

Domestic workers’ “right to living space” was just one of the contested questions regarding domestic service under NEP. In this chapter I will trace the development of the early Soviet policies on paid domestic labor and analyze how these policies were implemented to resolve labor conflicts between employers and domestic workers and struggles over living space. Regulations in these two areas reflect the specific problematic nature of paid domestic labor in early Soviet society: the difficulty of regulating labor within individual households, and domestic workers’ dependence on the employer for housing. Analysis of debates about regulation of paid domestic labor and actual cases brought by domestic workers and their employees to the union and the courts will not only give a better understanding of domestic workers’ unclear place in early Soviet society, it will also illuminate the contradictory development of Soviet notions of justice and legality.

The first question Soviet legislators, labor inspectors, rates and disputes commissions, and judges had to answer was how to regulate labor in the home. The

initial approach of imagining the home as a site no different from the shop floor and applying the general labor code to domestic labor created more problems than it solved. Introducing a special law on domestic labor that limited some of the rights of domestic workers was fraught with contradictions and caused discontent among domestic workers as well as rank-and-file union activists, putting into question the whole notion of domestics' belonging to the working class.

The second issue central to regulating domestic service in the Soviet society was the question of class. According to the concept of "revolutionary justice" introduced by the Bolsheviks after the revolution, the judges (and other authorities) were to act based on the "feeling of justice" rather than formal laws.¹³¹ Their decisions were to express the "class interests" of the "proletariat" and facilitate the revolution.¹³² In practice this approach meant privileging those plaintiffs or defendants who had proletarian credentials. The dominant narrative that presented domestic workers as the most backward of the proletarians and therefore the most exploited and in need of state protection not only encouraged Narpit rates and disputes commissions and judges to side with domestic workers, it also raised the expectations of the domestic workers. Raised expectations, in turn, led to more conflicts with employers and, ultimately, high levels of unemployment among domestic workers. High unemployment meant discontent but also an extra burden on the state for social support, since unemployed domestic workers were in need of financial assistance and living space.

¹³¹ On emotions and "revolutionary justice," see Pavel Vasilyev, "Revolutionary Conscience, Remorse and Resentment: Emotions and Early Soviet Criminal Law, 1917-1922," *Historical Research* 90. 248 (2017), forthcoming.

¹³² Jane Burbank, "Lenin and the Law in Revolutionary Russia," *Slavic Review* 54.1 (Spring, 1995):34.

The promises of the first proletarian state clashed with the realities of the New Economic Policy. Lack of resources to support vulnerable groups such as unemployed and homeless domestic workers created a situation of competition and conflict between multiple soviet institutions and individuals that were involved in drafting legislation and enforcing it. The main player in regulating domestic worker was the Professional Union of Workers of People's Food Services (Narpit). Narpit was one of the numerous professional unions in the Soviet state that grew out of the pre-revolutionary workers' movement, but during the 1920s it lost most of its independence and turned into an element in the system of state population management.¹³³ The main objectives of unions during NEP were protection of their members' rights and their education in the "proletarian spirit." All unions were top-down organizations, with a Central Committee in Moscow sending directives to organizations on the republican, regional, and city levels and reporting to the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions in Moscow. Primary union cells existed in all labor collectives and were responsible for daily union activities. Unions were voluntary organizations with many of their daily operations dependent on volunteers, but they also included a set of professional activists who were paid for managing the work of the union. All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions worked closely with the People's Commissariat of Labor (1923-1933): its main responsibilities were regulation of the labor market, development of labor legislation, and overseeing the welfare system. One of the intentions of this chapter is to emphasize the disunity and

¹³³ Scholars are still debating at what point Soviet labor unions became completely incorporated by the state. While Viktor Nosach maintains that, in spite of the increasing pressure from the state, the unions were able to protect workers' interests until 1930, Simone Pirani argues that the unions were completely coopted by the state by the fall of 1923. Viktor Nosach, *Professional'nye soiuzy Sankt-Peterburga (1905-1930)*, (Sankt-Peterburg: SPBGUP, 2001), 159; Simone Pirani, *The Russian Revolution in Retreat, 1920-1924: Soviet Workers and the New Communist Elite* (London: Routledge, 2008), 159.

multiplicity of actors involved in creation of domestic service as a discourse and a practice in early Soviet society.

The later sections of the chapter analyze the discussions in the Soviet press and with Narpit regarding the protection of domestic workers' rights in Narpit rates and disputes commissions, courts of conciliation organized by the People's Commissariat of Labor and labor sessions of people's courts. Such an approach has its limits since cases discussed cannot be seen as statistically representative and do not provide exhaustive information on how people made these decisions and justified them. Nevertheless, the discussions themselves show the spectrum of opinion on the matter and illuminate the way domestic service was understood by different individuals and institutions. Another issue with these sources is that the voices of the actors are mediated. Yet, the mere fact of filing complaints and fighting for what the sides in conflicts saw as their "rights" is a manifestation of agency and a sense of entitlement. When they do come through, voices of domestic workers and employers that came in contact with the early Soviet legal system testify to the power of Soviet ideology to shape identities that enabled even very marginal groups such as domestic workers to claim membership in the Soviet community and the rights and privileges that came with it. At the same time, employers also relied on the legal discourse and their belonging to the Soviet body politic to support their positions.

Regulation Paid Domestic Labor: Legislation

"Servants' labor in Soviet Russia is protected the same way labor in factories is. Labor laws are binding for all employed laborers without distinction, be they spinners,

weavers, Soviet *sluzhashchie*, clerks in private shops, lathe operators or servants.”¹³⁴

These opening lines of the brochure “What should a domestic servant’s employer know and what should a domestic servant know. Rights and obligations in clear explanations” published in 1924 by the Moscow Soviet exemplify the attitudes towards paid domestic labor in the early years of NEP. Servants were laborers and therefore their rights were to be protected the same way the rights of industrial workers were. The very first clause of the Soviet Labor Code of 1922 explicitly stated that it applied to all individuals working for pay, including those employed in private households.¹³⁵ Therefore, domestic servants were entitled to a labor contract (to be registered with Narpit), eight-hour work day with extra pay for overtime, a weekly day off, paid vacation time (two weeks a year), two-weeks’ notice before termination of the contract, and a labor book. In addition, the employer was to provide a live-in servant with three meals a day, living space with light and heat (which could be the kitchen) and two sets of working clothes: two dresses, two aprons, two kerchiefs and a pair of shoes a year. The employer had to pay insurance contributions and a special “cultural duty” – two percent of the servant’s salary, which was supposed to be spent on the “cultural activities” of the union. All domestic servants were to be registered with the Labor Exchange. Duties of the servant were limited to doing their work “carefully, conscientiously and honestly”. Although the brochure said that domestic servants “were required to” (*dolzhny*) join the labor union, pay union fees and attend meetings, it was more of a moral imperative than a legal one: as A.M. Volgin argued, domestic servants had to join the union because “the professional union fights for

¹³⁴ A.M. Volgin, *Chto dolzhen znat’ nanimatel’ prislugi i chto dolzhna znat’ prisluga. Prava i obiazannosti v obshche-poniatnykh raz’iasneniiakh*. (Moskva: Izdatel’stvo komissii pomoshchi detiam pri presidiume mossoveta, 1924), 7.

¹³⁵ “Kodeks zakonov o trude RSFSR 1922 goda,” accessed December 12, 2016, http://www.hist.msu.ru/Labour/Law/kodex_22.htm

the rights of workers and female workers and every toiler can find protection in the union.”¹³⁶

The Professional Union of Workers of People's Food Services (Narpit) was the main institution in charge of regulating paid domestic labor. It was originally created by the workers of communal dining under War Communism but once the system was dismantled with the introduction of NEP, the union enrollment fell from 144,226 in 1921 to 17,000 in 1922 and it had to reinvent itself as a union of service workers employed by private enterprises: hotels, restaurants and bars.¹³⁷ Domestic servants that were transferred to Narpit from the dismantled Union of House Workers in 1920 were at first a small and neglected minority. The dwindling of membership in the early years of NEP motivated the union leadership to recruit a new constituency in order to maintain itself as a union. The results were impressive: the number of domestic workers in the union grew from just 3,480 in 1923 to 147,130 in 1927, making them the largest professional group represented.¹³⁸

In spite of domestic workers constituting half of Narpit membership, the union did not position itself as a “domestic workers’ union.” The share of materials dedicated to the questions of domestic service published in the union journal *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* or the time spent discussing paid domestic labor at union meetings was never close to reflecting the statistical importance of maids and nannies. Domestic workers

¹³⁶ A.M. Volgin, *Chto dolzhen znat' nanimatel' prislugi*, 25.

¹³⁷ TsGA SPb. F.R-4487, op.6, d.14a, l.18. *5yi Vserossiiskii s"ezd Narpit. 2 iavaria 1923.*

¹³⁸ The numbers of domestic union grew throughout NEP as follows: in 1923 there were 3,480 domestic workers, in 1924 - 23,715, in 1925 - 54,725, in 1926 - 92,423, in 1927 - 147,130. By 1925 domestic made up 43,5 percent of Narpit members (not including unemployed domestic workers – members of the union) and by 1926 their percentage increased to 56 percent (including unemployed domestic workers – members of the union). *“Narpitovka k des'atiletiiu Oktiabria,” Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*, 10 (1927), 2; TsGA SPb. F.R-4497, op.9, d.1, l.112, *O rabote sredi domrabochnits*; TsGA SPb. F.R-4497, op.8, d.1, l.211. *Otchet TsK Narpit.*

were poorly represented in administrative positions and union leadership.¹³⁹ The Central Committee regularly admonished local organizations for ignoring the needs of domestic workers.

Although not all local Narpit organizations were equally dedicated to the cause of fighting for the rights of domestic workers, those that did take up the challenge engaged in it with proletarian zeal. In line with the argument of the Moscow city soviet brochure discussed above, local activists strove to provide as much protection for their labor rights as those of industrial workers. The problem was, of course, that domestic servants labored in individual households that were much harder to control compared to shop floors in factories or even privately owned commercial enterprises.

Local organizations took initiative and implemented different strategies to pressure employers into compliance with the Labor Code. For example, Narpit's cell in Koz'modem'iansk organized meetings for employers to discuss the working conditions of their servants. The logic behind these meetings was to develop a standard set of terms for domestic workers' labor contracts, thus creating a kind of a collective bargain agreement similar to the ones workers had at enterprises. This practice, however, was not approved by the Central Committee that stated that working conditions were to be discussed on a case-by-case basis and confirmed in a labor contract.¹⁴⁰ The Central Committee was much more in favor of a different tactic used by local organizations to intimidate employers - public trials of exploiters.¹⁴¹ In addition to fees and/or a public

¹³⁹ The opportunities and challenges of a union career for a domestic worker will be discussed in Chapter 3.

¹⁴⁰ *"Profsoiuznaia khronika. Narpit," Trud*, June 5, 1925, 3.

¹⁴¹ The practice of public trials was not limited to public humiliation of employers. Local cell in Minsk organized "political trials" of domestic workers that failed to pay their union dues while one of the local committees in a small town of Artemovsk organized a public trial of those union members who skipped

labor sentences, the convicted party lived through a humiliating procedure of having to admit his or her guilt in front of an audience of union representatives and domestic workers and possibly have the “crime” covered by local newspapers.¹⁴²

Employers, however, were not always easily intimidated. A certain P.V. Dashkevich received a letter from the local Narpit cell stating that he was to dispatch (*komandirovat*) his domestic worker Ustinova to the union meeting. In case Ustinova missed the meeting, he would be “held responsible.” Most likely Dashkevich was not the only employer of a domestic servant in the area to receive such a summons, but he could have been the only one who was bold enough to respond to it with a letter saying that whether or not Ustinova went to the meeting “was her own private business” and he bore no responsibility for her actions because she was “a free person.”¹⁴³ This rhetorical swordplay between Dashkevich and the local union cell testifies to the strained nature of the relationship between Narpit and employers but also to the readiness of employers to resist union demands they considered to be ungrounded.

No matter how hard the union tried to intimidate employers, it proved to be extremely difficult to monitor what was going on in private households and to ensure that domestic workers’ rights were respected. Moreover, the pressure that came from the union often worsened the situation: employers hid their workers from the union or fired them when they became too demanding, only to replace them with new girls from the countryside.

meetings. “*Bol’she pokazatel’nykh sudov*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 7 (1925):11; Rabkor Ya. B., “*Pokazatel’nyi sud nad passivnymi chlenami*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 7 (1929):25

¹⁴² Examples of such public trials were described in the union journal: “*Sud nad ekspluatatorami domashnei prislugi*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 8-12 (1923): 22, A.Volgin, “*Pokazatel’nyi sud nad nimatelem domrabotnitsy*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 8 (1929):21.

¹⁴³ TsAGM. F.4489, op.1, d.13, l.25. *Gr. Dashkevich P.V.*

The norms of the Labor Code were clearly not providing domestic workers with enough protection and therefore a separate regulating domestic service was needed.

Already in 1923 the Narpit Central Committee drafted regulations of employment and remuneration of domestic servants. Basically, the regulations reiterated the rights domestics had under the Labor Code, adding some clauses that further limited the rights of the employers, such as a total ban of night work.¹⁴⁴ Thus, the proposed regulations not only guaranteed domestic servants the same rights as other toilers, but also put them in a privileged position. In the eyes of the union, the fact that domestic workers were employed in the nonproductive, debilitating domestic sphere made them entitled to extra protection by the socialist state.

The regulations did not get any traction until 1925, when in June of that year the People's Commissariat of Labor presented its version of a law on domestic service. The text of the new law did not entail any radical propositions but clearly aimed at increasing the pressure on the employer thus following the logic of the earlier Narpit proposition. To a great extent, it confirmed existing union practices: the employers had to sign a written labor agreement within a week after the domestic starts her work that specified the tasks to be performed, the number of family members to be serviced, salary and other essential details, give her a paid day off every week, etc. It also contained a special clause that mandated the employer to treat the worker with respect (but not the other way around) and give her the same food as other family members. This clause that reproduced the pre-revolutionary servant organizations' demand for respect hints at the persistent understanding of domestic service as an unequal relationship. The employer was, by default, inclined to exploit and disrespect the servant while the way the servant treated

¹⁴⁴ TsAGM. F.4487, op.5, d.1, l.228. *Proekt ob'azatel'nogo postanovleniia.*

the employer was not seen as an area to be regulated.¹⁴⁵ One could speculate that the People's Commissariat of Labor's solidarity with the position of the union, and sympathy to the plight of domestic workers, was influenced by the experiences of the People's Commissar of Labor Vasilii Shmidt, an old union activist and the son of a kitchen maid.¹⁴⁶ Narpit Central Committee supported the draft of the regulations and it was sent for approval to a special committee that included representatives of the People's Commissariat of Labor, the People's Commissariat of Health Care, the People's Commissariat of Justice, Narpit, the Women's Section of the Communist Party, and the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions.

The discussion on the new regulations did not go smoothly. The All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions found the first draft unsatisfactory and returned it to the People's Commissariat of Labor. Among other things, the chair of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions Mikhail Tomsky criticized the "stupid" clause that guaranteed "food of the same quality" for domestics as the food of their employers, stating that servants did not need to eat truffles or kosher food. Tomsky also suggested that employers were given the right to demand medical examination of domestic workers while no testing of employers' health was discussed. In his criticism of the proposal Tomsky often spoke in the first person when talking about the needs of the employer. For instance, criticizing the clause that gave the right to the pregnant domestic worker to stay in the home of her former employer for five months (two months before and two months after pregnancy, and an additional month to the discretion of the new mother), Tomsky remarked sarcastically: "Within five months I will have five pregnant servants who will

¹⁴⁵ "Regulirovaniie truda domashnikh rabotnits", *Trud*, June 12, 1925, 3.

¹⁴⁶ O.L. Zorina, "Istoricheskii ocherk k 120-letiiu Vasiliia Shmidta," accessed December 12, 2016, http://www.solidarnost.org/thems/profsoyuznyj-arhiv/profsoyuznyj-arhiv_3534.html.

show up with their babies.”¹⁴⁷ Thus, even though Tomsky was a long-term union activist, his personal loyalties appeared to be with the employer, rather than with the domestic worker.

It is also telling that the clauses to first come under attack were the ones that were rooted in domestic servants’ historical quest for respect. Their mere presence in the law suggests the continuity between the prerevolutionary servants’ organizations and Narpit. Even though the majority of those who stood at the origins of the domestic servants’ movement in Russia were no longer in Narpit, there were still certain individuals in the unions’ leadership who had been organizing domestic workers since 1917. One of them was Maria Karpovna Borisova – a former domestic servant, one of the founders of the Union of House Workers in 1917 and since 1920 member of Narpit Central Committee and the head of the union’s labor protection committee. It is difficult to evaluate Borisova’s involvement in the discussion, especially since the law was drafted not by Narpit but by the People’s Commissariat of Labor, but it is impossible to imagine that Narpit Central Committee was not consulted regarding the new regulations. Yet, these clauses were laughable in the eyes of people like Tomsky. Since most the employers’ were good Soviet citizens like Tomsky himself, they could be trusted to have a comradely relationship with their domestic workers. Therefore, there was no need to protect domestics’ dignity. Moreover, prerevolutionary prejudice against servants as promiscuous and potentially posing a health threat to employers as well as post-Civil War fears of contamination by petty bourgeois values that peasant women represented seemed to inform Tomsky’s views. Following the initial clash with Tomsky, Narpit had to

¹⁴⁷ GARF. F.5452, op.9, d.87, l.161. *Zasedaniie presidiuma VTsSPS ot 21 oktiabria 1925 goda.*

compromise on these matters while getting ready to fight for clauses that the union leadership considered to be crucial for protecting domestic workers from exploitation.

The first issue was the working hours. The draft proposed by People's Commissariat of Labor contained three options of regulating domestic workers' workday. The first one limited the number of monthly workhours to 192 but allowed these hours to be distributed as the employer saw fit, which was no different from the general norm set by the Labor Code. The second option entailed that working hours were specified in the labor contract. The third option set the maximum length of working-day to ten hours. Narpit was in favor of the first option.¹⁴⁸ The 192 per month formula made it to the law, but because the law did not require overtime pay for extra work unless it was specified by a labor agreement, domestic workers easily ended up working much more than 192 hours a month without extra compensation. In other words, domestic workers lost the eighth-hour workday – one of the major achievements of the Soviet working class. Having a monthly limit of workhours without a clause mandating overpay was an outrageous contradiction that was never publicly justified once the law had been passed.

The clause created a great deal of confusion in legal practice. For instance, Kiev labor session of the people's court denied any kind of overpay to domestic workers, arguing that it was already included in the monthly salary unless the contract explicitly stated otherwise. For domestic workers it often meant that they were getting the same amount of money no matter how many hours they worked, making their work hours unlimited. Leningrad courts followed the opposite line of reasoning: they tended to award maximum compensation to the domestic worker that was calculated on the basis of the total amount the employer spent on the domestic worker a month rather, that is monetary

¹⁴⁸ "Regulirovaniie truda domashnikh rabotnits," *Trud*, June 12 1925, 3.

remuneration plus the costs of room and board.¹⁴⁹ These contradictions testified to the Soviet states' helplessness in regulating the domestic sphere the way it regulated other workplaces but also its readiness to compromise on its ideals under the pressing realities of NEP.

Another contested matter was dismissal pay. Narpit's proposal, supported by All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, Women's Section and People's Commissariat of Justice, suggested that in case of dismissal employers were to pay former domestic workers compensation: a month pay if the contract was terminated earlier than specified by the labor agreement and a two-week pay if the length of contract relations had not been specified. This time, however, People's Commissariat of Labor opposed the clause on the grounds that it put domestics in a privileged position compared to other workers who were entitled to dismissal pay only if the employer had not given them a two-week notice or if they had been drafted into the military and its amount was limited to a two-week salary.¹⁵⁰ Narpit protested, noting that in other aspects the proposed law discriminated against domestics and it was only fair to give them at least some privileges considering their disadvantaged position.¹⁵¹ The clause did not make it to the final version of the law.

The most disputable point, however, was the clause that required employers to have a written labor contract with their domestics. The contract was to be registered either with Narpit or with the People's Commissariat of Labor. Narpit leadership argued

¹⁴⁹ On debates regarding overtime pay for domestic servants, see A. Liberman, "*O voznagrazhdenii domashnikh rabotnits za sverlhurochnuiu rabotu*," *Voprosy Truda* 7-8(1928):134-135; Pik, "*O trude domashnikh rabotnikov*," *Voprosy Truda* 3-4(1929):147-148.

¹⁵⁰ GARF. F.5452, op.9, d.87, l.156. *Dokladnaia zapiska*.

¹⁵¹ GARF. F.5452, op.9, d.87, l.157. *Zaklucheniie OTE po spornym punktam Proekta NKT ob usloviakh truda domashnikh rabotnits*.

that registration of the labor agreement had a “psychological effect” that helped prevent “enslavement” of domestic workers.¹⁵² Registration as a mechanism of control over this category of laborers was vital because they were “the most backward in their development” and the “nature of their work” made it difficult for them to resist their employers.¹⁵³ What was crucial, though, was that an individual agreement, if registered with the union, had the same legal status as a collective labor contract and failure to comply with its terms was a criminal offense. An employment book or an unregistered contract did not have such legal status and could not be used in court.¹⁵⁴ While People’s Commissariat of Health Care and Women’s Section of the Communist Party supported Narpit’s position, People’s Commissariat of Labor and All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions argued that the requirement to register labor contracts would overburden People’s Commissariat of Labor and provide no real way to monitor the working conditions of domestics.¹⁵⁵ The final version of the law did not require labor contracts for employment of domestic workers at all: an oral agreement was enough. Instead, a domestic worker received an employment book that included personal information about the domestic worker and the employer, the kind of works to be performed, the number of family members, the length of the workday, the day off and the salary. The employer received a copy of the employment book, while the third one was supposed to be kept by the local Narpit union.

The new law “On the Working Conditions of Workers Hired to Fulfill Housework (domestic workers) and Personal Service for the Employer and His Immediate Family”

¹⁵² GARF. F.5452, op.9, d.87, l.100. *Osoboie mnenie TsK Narpit.*

¹⁵³ GARF. F.5452, op.9, d.87, l.158. *Zamechaniie TsK k projektu postanovleniia sovnrakoma ob usloviakh truda domrabtnits.*

¹⁵⁴ “*Trudovye dogovory ili raschetnye knizhki?*” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 3 (1925):10

¹⁵⁵ GARF. F.5452, op.9, d.87, l.173. *Osoboie mnenie vedomstv.*

was enacted on October 8, 1926.¹⁵⁶ It signaled an important shift in the interpretation of domestic service. Domestic workers were no longer entitled to special protection from the state. Even though their labor had been regulated by the Labor Code, the union had been pushing for acknowledging domestics' vulnerable position and introducing more effective measures to discipline the employers. The new law put an end to these efforts. Moreover, domestic workers were put into disadvantaged position compared to other workers. The comparison with the privately employed agricultural laborers (*batraki*) is revealing since the latter, also privately employed by individual households, were entitled to a mandatory labor agreement. While *batraki*'s employers were wealthy kulaks and had to be disciplined, employers of domestic workers no longer appeared to be exploiters. By making the terms and conditions of domestic workers' labor to a certain degree a private matter to be resolved by the employer and the maid, the Soviet state effectively removed itself from regulating the private sphere: if not completely, then to a much greater extent than it had aspired to remove itself before.

The law on domestic service was criticized at home and abroad. It was one of several laws introduced in 1925-1926 that tailored to the needs of particular categories of workers whose labor was considered too peculiar to be regulated by the Labor Code that was mostly written for industrial workers. Among those categories were agricultural workers (*batraki*), seasonal workers, craftsmen working at home (*kvartirniki*) and domestic workers. All these laws worsened the position of workers whose labor they regulated in comparison with the rest of "toilers". Even though labor authorities

¹⁵⁶ For the full text of the law see "*Dekret ot 8 fevralia 1926 goda ob usloviakh truda rabotnikov po naimu, vypolniaiushchikh na domu u nanimatel'ia (domashniie rabotniki) raboty po lichnomu obsluzhivaniiu nanimatel'ia i ego sem'i*," accessed December 12, 2016, http://www.libussr.ru/doc_ussr/ussr_2816.htm

positioned these laws as a way to make legislation more nuanced and therefore more workable it took pains to rationalize them. Moreover, these changes did not go unnoticed by Bolsheviks' political enemies, including exiled Mensheviks in Berlin who published a critical evaluation of the new laws in their journal *Socialist Messenger*. People's Commissariat of Labor responded to the article in *Voprosy Truda*, arguing that the new laws in no way abandon "the achievements of the working class."¹⁵⁷

Having lost the battle, Narpit had to justify the new law to its members, both domestic servants and union activists. A separate law for domestic workers that put them in a worse position than other Soviet laborers was difficult to reconcile with the notion that domestics were "part of the working class, and like other workers are its bone of the bone and flesh of the flesh."¹⁵⁸ People's Commissariat of Labor issued several brochures for Narpit activists to explain why there was a separate law for domestics other than the Code of Labor laws. One such brochures entitled "Labor of Domestic Worker" started by explaining the difference in working conditions of domestics and factory workers: while the latter performed a specific set of tasks in a specific period of time, the responsibilities of the former were much harder to regulate because they depended on many factors within the household. The author of the brochures ridiculed the "smartasses" who believed that those who hired personal help had to adjust to the existing labor laws. In the Soviet Union, he argued, the majority of employers were workers or *sluzhaschie* whose wives also worked and had no one to look after the children. Moreover, the Labor Code, created mostly for factory workers, did more bad than good for domestics. Since it was so

¹⁵⁷ V. Schmidt, "Nash otvet sotsialisticheskomu vestniku," *Voprosy Truda* 4(1926):9-11.

¹⁵⁸ A. Bensman. *Trud domashnei rabotnitsy* (Moskva: *Voprosy truda*, 1926), 4.

demanding, employers chose to ignore it altogether.¹⁵⁹ As another brochure explained, the objectives of the new law were to stimulate employment of domestics and clarify the rights and obligations of both employers and domestic workers.¹⁶⁰

These arguments did not seem to be convincing for many Narpit activists who flooded the union journal *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* with complains about the outcomes of the new law. Without a mandatory labor agreement, the union “had no rights” over the relationship between the domestic and her employer. The consequences were twofold. First, the union had fewer mechanisms to protect domestic workers from “exploitation”. As a result, it was harder to recruit domestic workers to join the union and collect union fees, which led to diminishing union resources.¹⁶¹ The journal responded with a series of articles that, without questioning the feasibility of the new law, discussed the new challenges it created for union work and suggested ways to deal with them. Even though the new law did not require employers to sign labor agreements it was the job of union activists to do whatever it took to convince the domestic worker to demand a written contract. These contracts were to be drafted so that they would guarantee at least some pay for overtime work and dismissal pay.¹⁶²

In general, the new strategy was to compromise. For instance, Maria Borisova who was now Narpit’s main commentator on domestic service suggested that when a domestic worker had her day off on Sunday, she could still cook meals for the day in the morning. The logic was simple: the domestic worker would have to eat herself during the day and she could not expect her employers to cook for her, so it made sense just to

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., 8-14.

¹⁶⁰ N.I. Bykhovskii, *Kak okhranaetsa trud domashnikh rabotnits* (Moskva: *Voprosy truda*, 1928),3.

¹⁶¹ *Profrabotnik*, “Pis’mo nizovogo rabotnika,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 1(1927):8.

¹⁶² S. Tarasov, “Novyi zakon o domashnikh rabotnitsakh,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 3(1926):7.

prepare a meal for everyone in the morning. This compromise would not do any injustice to the domestic worker because “she has nowhere to go in the morning anyway.”¹⁶³

When assigning union work to a domestic worker, the local cell was now to consider the needs of the employer.¹⁶⁴

Not only should the union be less demanding of the employer, activists were to remind domestics about their professional responsibilities: employers would not fire a qualified, reliable domestic worker without some serious reasons.¹⁶⁵ The union journal launched a culinary advice column for domestic workers because, by improving domestics’ qualifications, they would increase their chances of keeping their jobs.¹⁶⁶

While previously all the information in *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* was dedicated to matters of union work, now domestic workers could find information on “how to wash dishes”, “how to preserve flower” or “how to light a stove.”¹⁶⁷ Most importantly, domestic worker were to remember that most employers were working people themselves. Even though there were employers of the “old-regime type,” they could not “change the overall picture of the conditions of domestic workers in a workers’ state,” where most families hired help “not out of luxury but out of need.”¹⁶⁸

In June of 1927 the journal published a two-page article “How to Behave at Work”. Its author, Maria Borisova, argued that many domestic workers had brought unemployment upon themselves: in case of a slightest argument with their employer they would slam the door and leave, threaten employers with punitive actions by the union in

¹⁶³ M. Borisova, “O rabote sredi domashnikh rabotnits,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 11(1926):7.

¹⁶⁴ M. Borisova, “Kak vybirat’ delegatku,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 2 (1927):9.

¹⁶⁵ Professionalist, “Otvét tovarishchu profrabotniku,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 1(1927):9.

¹⁶⁶ “Nasha tribuna,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 2(1927):7.

¹⁶⁷ “Sovety domrabotnitse,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 3(1927):11.

¹⁶⁸ Professionalist, “Otvét tovarishchu profrabotniku,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 1(1927):9.

case of a minor disagreement or use their union obligation as an excuse for sloppy work at home. Once they lose their job they expect the union to provide them with employment outside domestic service – a desire that was understandable but absolutely unrealistic under the conditions of the extremely high unemployment rates of the NEP period. The article concluded with biographies of women who successfully combined domestic service with union work for more than three years.¹⁶⁹

The article was followed by responses of individual domestics and summaries of collective discussions of the piece by local Narpit cells. There was obviously a lot of disagreement on the matter. While some active domestic workers agreed with Borisova and talked about their own positive relationships with employers, others argued that no matter how hard a domestic worker worked, once she took extra responsibilities at the union, her life would become unbearable because of the workload and the resentment of her employers.¹⁷⁰ The bottom line of the discussion was similar to the one in the article on housing quoted in the beginning of the chapter: if an individual domestic worker demanded too much she would get fired making it worse not only for herself but for other domestic workers.

Archival evidence suggests that the discussions about the responsibilities of domestic workers and those of the union at the local level were quite heated. For example, after a lecture on the role of professional unions at the meeting of Leningrad group committee No.1 that was attended by eighty-five domestic workers, women accused the union of doing nothing about the fact that they got fired for attending

¹⁶⁹ M. Borisova, "Kak nuzhno vesti sebia na rabote," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 3(1927):6.

¹⁷⁰ "Pis'ma domashnikh rabotnits," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 6 (1927):10-11; "Obsuzhdaem statiu t. M. Borisovoi," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 8 (1927):9; "Kollektivnoie obsuzhdeniie statiu tov. Borisovoi," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 7 (1927):9; "Kak dolzhna rabotat' domrabotnitsa," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 9 (1927):3-2.

meetings and they complained about their lack of protection compared to workers in factories. At least eight domestic workers spoke up. In response, the presenter and probably a local union functionary Vorobiev stated that most domestics got along fine with their employers before they joined the union, but, once they did, they started “to hassle” and “abuse their [membership in] the professional organization”. Moreover, they would demand official summons from the union to be sent to employers before every meeting, but then they would use those summons as an excuse to go somewhere else.¹⁷¹ Union membership empowered domestics, though not always the way Narpit wanted it to.

Domestic workers also criticized other aspects of the new law. For instance, a certain Komarova, after having listened to the presentation on the new law at the union meeting, asked whether domestics had the right to demand medical examination from their employers, if the law gave the right to employers to demand medical examination from domestic workers.¹⁷² In general, judging by the number of questions recorded in protocols, domestic workers that did come to union meetings were very engaged in the discussions about the new law and the changes it brought.

The negative reaction to the law was caused by the official discourse that had been emphasizing domestic servants’ belonging to the working class and equating their right with that of other workers. Less than ten years after the Bolshevik takeover, at least some Soviet domestic workers learnt to see themselves as workers in a workers’ state and took the state to task for its failure to treat them as such. Negative attitudes toward the

¹⁷¹ TsGA SPb. F.R-4489, op.1, d.50. l.4-5. *Protokol obshchego sobraniia domrabotnits 1go grupkoma soiuza Narpit ot 10 fevralia 1926 g.*

¹⁷² TsGA SPb. F.R-4490, op.1, d.65. l.11. *Protokol delegatskogo sobraniia domashnikh rabotnits pri vtorom grupkome.*

new law were, of course, much more common among domestic workers who had been in some contact with the union and Narpit activists than they were among nannies and maids who ignored or were unaware of Narpit activities. As we will see in the following sections, even those domestics who had not been interested in joining the union turned to it in the situations when they felt they had been treated unjustly.

Protecting the Domestic Servant: Labor Conflicts

In 1926 Moscow Narpit organization surveyed five hundred domestic workers about their working and living conditions. The results were presented to the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions: 50.8% did not have labor books, 13.4% did not have any days off, 36.6% did not have breaks during the day, 30.8% did not have paid leave, 20% did not receive working clothes. What was most disappointing to Narpit, however, was the fact that only 1% of the domestic workers surveyed had approached the union for help. The author of the brief article on the survey in the national newspaper *Trud* (Labor) concluded that domestic workers did not know their rights and were afraid of losing their jobs if they went to the union.¹⁷³ A similar survey conducted two years later by People's Commissariat of Labor in Moscow, North Caucasus, the Ural, Samara and Saratov regions found a slight improvement in the working conditions of domestic workers but noted a high number of conflicts between domestics and their employers after termination of employment contracts.¹⁷⁴ Domestic servants were willing to put up with certain violations of their rights while they were employed, but once they were dismissed they

¹⁷³ "Domashniaia rabotnitsa eshche ne znaiet svoikh prav," *Trud*, January 3, 1927, 3.

¹⁷⁴ Pil'man "Usloviia truda domashnikh rabotnits," *Voprosy Truda* 5 (1928):93-95.

turned to authorities to get compensation for overtime, unused vacations and days off, or to avoid deductions for broken household items.

Before the introduction of the law on domestic service in February of 1926 domestic workers could either take their complaints to local Narpit rates and disputes commissions (*rastsenochno-konfliktnaia komissii* or RKK), labor sessions of people's courts or district labor inspections of the People's Commissariat of Labor. There are no statistics available that show which percentage of the arguments was resolved in Narpit, by labor inspectors, or in court, but anecdotal evidence suggests that domestic workers were more likely to take their grievances to the union. Narpit was often the only organization a domestic worker would encounter while working in a private home. Especially in big cities Narpit worked hard to develop a network of delegates that would go from door to door, looking for unregistered domestic servants, inviting them to union meetings and taking note of their working conditions. Even though only a small fraction of employed domestics became active union members, many more would come to their local union for help once their contract was terminated, and they did not receive the remuneration they had expected. Narpit actively promoted itself as an organization that protected the rights of domestic workers. As the 1924 brochure stated, a domestic worker was "required" (*obiazana*) to report to the union any cases of conflict. Then it was up to the local Narpit organization to settle the case or take it to court.¹⁷⁵

Most cases brought to Narpit accused employers of not paying all the money they owed their domestics upon termination of contract relations. A survey of complaints submitted to Narpit rates and disputes commissions in Leningrad shows that domestic workers rarely asked for specific amounts of money but mostly complained about unfair

¹⁷⁵ A.M. Volgin, *Chto dolzhen znat' nanimatel' prislugi i chto dolzhna znat' prisluga*, 26.

dismissal, long hours, low pay and verbal abuse and wanted “help according to the law,” as a certain Anna Kartseva concluded.¹⁷⁶ While domestic workers probably had little knowledge about specific clauses of the Labor Code, those who filed complaints about their former employers did feel entitled to what they believed to be fair treatment and saw the union as their ally. Once domestic workers came to the local Narpit cell, they were interviewed by a union representative about their labor conditions. In many instances, the case against the employer became aggravated by facts of violation of laws regulating paid domestic labor: failure to pay insurance fees or provide the worker with a weekly day off –violations that were not the initial concern of the domestic worker. In some instances interrogation by a union representative uncovered episodes of physical abuse. While most of the time the only reason a domestic worker was seeking help was her desire to get the money she had earned, the union often decided to pursue the case further, bringing criminal charges against the employer for violating the Labor Code or the Criminal Code. Thus, domestic workers’ demands at the RKK sessions were to a great extent formulated by Narpit activists, who believed that the women did not have sufficient knowledge of their rights and therefore it was the union’s job to represent them. While in theory the job of the RKK was to serve as a neutral body that would resolve a conflict between two parties, Narpit activists saw themselves as representing the interest of the domestic worker.

The situation was complicated by the fact that in the cases involving domestic workers there was often little evidence to support either party other than their own words. Protocols of Narpit rates and disputes committees give a general understanding of how these hears took place, what kind of narratives the parties created and how Narpit

¹⁷⁶ TsGA SPb. F.R-4490, op.1, d.3, l.51 *Zaiavlenie*.

representatives made their decisions. A fifteen-year-old nanny Kondrashova had been working for Fania Raigorodskaja for four months when her employer unexpectedly fired her on November 11, 1923. Kondrashova lost no time filing a complaint with the union on November 13, and three days later her case was heard by Narpit RKK. In the initial complaint, Kondrashova stated that she had been working for the Raigorodskaja family for four months, worked “a lot”, did not receive anything other than two “dirty skirts” and heard a lot of “dirty words.” Now they had kicked her out so she was asking to “consider her case.”¹⁷⁷ Perhaps responding to the committee’s questions, Kondrashova described her responsibilities: minding the child, washing his clothes, washing the floors and buying groceries and her working hours (from nine in the morning till ten or eleven at night). When asked about the payment she received, Kondrashova claimed to have received one dress, underwear, an apron and stockings. However, she could not remember how much money she had received from Raigorodskaja. Kondrashova stated that Raigorodskaja had been rude to her and threatened to beat her up if she did not leave.

Raigorodskaja’s story was, however, quite different. She stated that Kondrashova was first brought in by her father who asked Raigorodskaja to take her in “as a member of the family,” because her own mother had been beating her. Raigorodskaja, seeing that the girl did not have “underwear, nor shoes” took her in “out of pity.” After four months Raigorodskaja instructed Kondrashova to go back to her father and tell him to register her with the labor exchange, so Raigorodskaja could officially pay her. Upon returning from her family visit, Raigorodskaja stated, Kondrashova declared that she would take her to court if she “said anything to her.” Raigorodskaja also claimed that she had given Kondrashova several dresses and a pair of boots. At the end of her statement

¹⁷⁷ TsGA SPb. F.R-4490, op.1, d.3, l.6. *Zaiavleniie gr.Kondrashovoi.*

Raigorodskaiia reminded the committee that she was a student at the University of Forestry and her husband was a manager at a food storage facility.

Both Kondrashova and Raigorodskaiia appear to have a good understanding of the situation. The mere fact that Kondrashova within days filed a complaint with Narpit shows that she had known where to look for protection or at least someone in her immediate circle did. Most likely, it was her father who was not asked to speak at the meeting but was clearly there: he signed the documents for the illiterate Kondrashova. Raigorodskaiia tried to play the card of a benevolent woman taking pity on a poor girl who had been abused by her own mother. At least in her care, the girl had clothes and was not beaten. She also emphasized the fact that she and her husband did not have any shady sources of income and served the state.

The protocol of the hearing does not justify its decision, but the RKK clearly did all it could to get the nanny compensated for her work. Kondrashova was awarded full pay for the four months she had worked for Raigorodskaiia, according to the tariff for a maid of all works, as well as money for overtime work, and compensation for dismissal – two weeks' pay. The clothes and money she had received was to be considered compensation for extra work. Raigorodskaiia was required to pay the money in full within three weeks. Even though Raigorodskaiia did her best to show her and her husband's respectability, she was not a proletarian, while her domestic worker was.¹⁷⁸

The essence of the class approach as Narpit activists understood it is evidence from the case of Anna Kartseva who worked for the family of Semion Kirsner. Anna did everything about the house without any set working hours and received a meager

¹⁷⁸ TsGA SPb. F.R-4490, op.1, d.3, ll.7-8. *Zasedanie RKK pri vtorem ob'edinennom komitete Narpit 16 noiabria 1923.*

compensation that was “impossible to live on.” No clothing or any other form of compensation was mentioned. However, since Semion Kirsner was an unemployed member of the garment workers union, he was absolved from paying the dismissal fee (the weeks’ pay) and was allowed to pay the salary he owed to Kartseva in installments.¹⁷⁹ Unlike in the previous case, when the employers were *sluzhachshie* and therefore RKK’s sympathy was with the domestic worker, this was a conflict between two proletarians and the committee treated the situation accordingly.

While in most cases it was the employer, who was under scrutiny, the outcomes of the RKK hearing could be influenced by the domestic’s questionable class allegiances as well. A certain Sergeeva claimed to have been a domestic worker for the family of Vera Efremova for about a year. She received some sort of compensation for her work from time to time as a “handout” and had no insurance. Moreover, on days off Efremova made her “go for a walk” for the whole day, thus making her spend her meager earnings on food. When Sergeeva finally decided to quit, she did not receive the money she believed her employer owed her. Efremova, in turn, stated that Sergeeva was not a domestic worker but a tenant whom she sometimes hired to do extra work for her, work she had always paid for. A domestic worker would have been an unaffordable luxury for Efremova whose husband was a Red Army soldier.

Both women had recruited witnesses to support their cases. The chair of the housing committee had testified that, indeed, there had been no evidence in his books that Sergeeva was a domestic worker – she was registered as “unemployed.” Moreover, he had seen Sergeeva trading apples and stated that she was known as a “business woman” (*delovoi zhenshchinoi*). A witness for the plaintiff, however, reminded the chairman of

¹⁷⁹ TsGA SPb. F.R-4490, op.1, d.3, l.51 *Protokol*

the housing committee that Efremova was quite a business woman herself – she had a stall at the local market. Another witness for Sergeeva stated that, even though she was Efremova’s tenant, she worked for Efremova and had often expressed a desire to find a more stable job. In response to this, a witness for Efremova argued that Sergeeva did not seem like a person looking for a job. Instead, she was trading apples, for which she had been arrested by police.

The narrative strategies chosen by the sides of the conflict revolved around the question of class. While Sergeeva tried to present herself as a domestic worker exploited by her bourgeois employer – an owner of a stall at the market, Efremova and her witnesses emphasized the fact that it was Sergeeva who was the non-laboring element, trading apples without a license and even getting picked up by police. Efremova, on the other hand, was a respectable wife of a Red Army soldier who could not even think of such a luxury as having a servant. In the eyes of the RKK, though, both women had questionable reputations. Since Sergeeva, according to the resolution, failed to provide sufficient proof of her employment as a domestic worker, the case was forwarded to the labor session of the people’s court.¹⁸⁰

These three examples show the centrality of the question of class to decision making in cases involving domestic workers, something of which most participants of the hearings were keenly aware. While these cases exemplify a spectrum of possible decisions, the overwhelming majority of conflicts were resolved in domestic workers’ favor. Even when domestics quit on their own accord, they were often granted dismissal pay. The committee rarely asked for any evidence supporting claims for overwork. The

¹⁸⁰ TsGA SPb. F.R-4491, op.1, d.11, l.76 *Protokol rastsenochno-konfliktnoi komissii 3go obiedinennogo komiteta Narpit Volodarskogo raiona 30 maia 1924.*

bias of Narpit rates and disputes committees is obvious from the available data on their resolutions. In Moscow out of a total of 132 conflicts considered in the first three months of 1923, “five were sent over to a people’s court, while the rest were resolved in the domestic workers’ favor.”¹⁸¹ Out of twenty eight conflicts between domestic servants and employers resolved in Tula in 1923, twenty three were settled in domestic workers’ favor with “a fee” that went to the union’s mutual benefit fund while the other five went to the Labor Inspection for further clarification.¹⁸² The latter report shows that in the early 1920s the union RKK served not only as a mediator in the conflict, but as a judicial authority that could impose fines. These fines were not an approved union-wide practice, but a local-level initiative.

The skyrocketing level of unemployment among domestic workers prompted the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions to launch a special investigation into the activities of Narpit rates and disputes commissions. The results of the inspection that found some “deviations and abnormalities” in their work were publicized in the union journal *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*.¹⁸³ As one of the contributors noted, the aggressive style of union representatives intimidated employers who often refused to come to the union for a mediation session because the tone of the discussion set by the union made it impossible to reach an agreement.¹⁸⁴ Another worker correspondent complained that most domestic workers misunderstood the purpose of the rates and disputes commission and saw them as a mechanism that would help the worker get what she wanted rather than a tool that would facilitate reaching an agreement. The worker correspondent,

¹⁸¹ “Moskva. Chto sdelano soiuzom za tri mesiatsa,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 4-5(1923), 17.

¹⁸² E. Fal’kov, “Rabota sredi domashnei prislugi. Tula,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 2 (1923): 9.

¹⁸³ O razreshenii konfliktov s nanimateliami domrabotnits,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 10 (1925): 24.

¹⁸⁴ Churakov, “Kak provodit’ konflikty,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 9 (1925): 3.

though, blamed peasant women for this “unhealthy approach”: all they wanted was to get as much money as they could before going back to the village for the summer, thus creating an “unfavorable atmosphere” for “domestic workers – true proletarians.”¹⁸⁵

Many Narpit activists, however defended the position of the union. They did not want to go too easy on employers and leave the domestic worker with a feeling that they were not completely on her side. As a certain Vasin wrote to the union journal, “if she [domestic worker] loses her case then she, meeting a friend on the way back from the local cell, might complain [...] and thus creates a negative attitude towards the union.”¹⁸⁶ Narpit leadership saw mediation between employers and domestic servants not only as a way to protect the rights of the workers but also as a recruitment tool for the union.¹⁸⁷

Regulations of employment and remuneration of domestic servants that Narpit drafted in 1923 stated that “all kinds of conflicts and arguments that arise on the matters of domestic servants’ dismissal, payments, etc. shall be resolved by the conflict committee of our union. Conflict commission at the People’s Commissariat of Labor is the ultimate authority.”¹⁸⁸ Thus it was of crucial importance for Narpit not only to be the institution that would regulate conflicts between domestic workers and employers, but also to be able to implement the “hard line” against the latter to increase its appeal to domestics.

Such approach did not satisfy the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions and the People’s Commissariat of Labor. In order to pacify the employers and decrease unemployment among domestics, they suggested creation of special courts of conciliation under the auspices of the People’s Commissariat of Labor. According to the clause

¹⁸⁵ Rabkor Roman, “RKK pri gruppovykh komitetakh,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 8 (1925): 21.

¹⁸⁶ Iv. Vasin, “O rasbore konfliktov,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 11 (1925): 7.

¹⁸⁷ “Usilit’ rabotu sredi domashnikh rabotnits,” *Trud*, 1925(124):3.

¹⁸⁸ TsAGM. F.4487, op.5, d.1, l.228. *Proekt ob’azatel’nogo postanovleniia*.

introduced in the draft of the law regulating paid domestic labor, People's Commissariat of Labor was to create special arbitration organs and develop a procedure for arbitration of conflicts between domestic servants and employers. This work was not exactly new for People's Commissariat of labor, since even before the adoption of the 1926 law, labor inspectors had to deal with large numbers of complains coming from domestic workers. In some Moscow districts these complaints made up thirty percent of the total number of requests received by the district labor inspection.¹⁸⁹

For Narpit, the loss of the privilege to resolve conflicts between domestic workers and employers was a heavy blow. The law of 1926 left the People's Commissariat of Labor and the courts in charge of resolving conflicts regarding paid domestic labor. Now the first step for a domestic worker unhappy about her employer was to go to one of the courts of conciliation of People's Commissariat of Labor. It had to process the complaint within five days, which made it a much faster procedure than a hearing at a people's court. The parties were encouraged to come to an agreement, and if they did, it gained the same power as a court ruling. If the parties refused to agree, the case went to a people's court.¹⁹⁰ The intention of the law was twofold. First, it would stop the practice of domestic workers going straight to a labor session of people's courts and overburdening the court system with petty disputes over only a few rubles. A court hearing also took longer than a negotiation session at the court of conciliation and made it difficult for the domestic worker to follow all the procedures and attend all the hearings. What was even more important, a court of conciliation was also intended as more "employer-friendly" institution than rates and disputes commissions at local Narpit cells. Narpit's role was

¹⁸⁹ "Primenenie zakonov o trude k otdel'nym gruppam rabotaiushchim po naimu," *Voprosy Truda* 11(1925):83.

¹⁹⁰ N.I. Bykhovskii, *Kak okhraniatsa trud domashnikh rabotnits*, 47-48.

limited to advising the domestic while she was preparing for the hearing or representing her during the hearing. Simply put, Narpit was demoted from being the “judge” to being a “lawyer.”

Even though the new procedure was introduced in February of 1926, it took about a year of organizational work to set up courts of conciliation for domestic workers. In the meantime, Narpit rates and disputes committees were still accepting domestic workers’ complaints. Although most cases were still resolved in domestic workers’ favor, Narpit RKK were now less inclined to award them with all possible compensations. For example, in the case of certain Nalimova, RKK refused to award her with compensation for overtime and unused days off because she was not able to provide sufficient evidence to support her claims. When Nalimova petitioned the local soviet to override the decision, the soviet upheld the RKK’s ruling.¹⁹¹ While in 1923 the RKK took the domestic worker’s word as sufficient evidence to award compensation, by late 1926 it was no longer enough.

Domestic worker’s word was not sufficient even in cases when the employer was unquestionably “bourgeois” as in the case of David Dashevskii that made it all the way from the people’s court in Moscow to the Workers’ and Peasants’ Inspectorate (a supervisory institution that accepted complaints from the population). In 1927 Dashevskii’s domestic worker Zimina filed a suit against him stating that she had received no days off and no monetary compensation for more than a year even though they had agreed on 15 rubles per month. Dashevskii, in turn, claimed that Zimina did not work for him but was allowed to stay in his house as the former nanny of his children once they no longer needed her services. Moscow People’s Court only partially satisfied

¹⁹¹ TsAGM. F. R-4490, op.1, d.75, l.49. *RKK pri 2m grupkome Narpita. 8 dekabria 1926.*

the worker's demands. Even though Dashevskii was a Nepman (a co-owner of a private business) and had previously been found guilty of speculation, the court decided that there was no proof that there had been an agreement and that Zimina was denied days off. Zimina was awarded the minimum pay set by the law – 10 rubles per month, and no compensation for days off.¹⁹²

By 1927 People's Commissariat of Labor finally took over resolution of conflicts between domestics and employers. Resources were still limited, so local branches of the People's Commissariat of Labor could only dedicate a few hours of manpower to the matter. For example, domestic workers of Leningrad could only file their complaints between nine and eleven o'clock in the morning on Mondays and Tuesdays.¹⁹³ Such brief consultation hours made it quite difficult for domestics to submit their requests. The difficulties were exacerbated by the general confusion regarding what kind of labor conflicts were to be resolved through mediation and which were to go straight to court.¹⁹⁴ Still, those domestics who made it to the hearing were likely to have the issue resolved on the spot: for instance, out of 600 claims processed by the Kiev court of conciliation in 1927, eighty five percent were settled without taking cases to court.¹⁹⁵

Yet, the idea of examination of claims as a form of finding a compromise between a domestic worker and her employer rather than a procedure that would allow the restoration of justice and the punishment of the guilty party remained problematic. As a certain Pik wrote to *Voprosy Truda*, it was the duty of the labor inspector who chaired the

¹⁹² GARF, F. R-374, op.18, d.84, l.15-16. *Delo po obvineniiu Dashevskogo v neuplate deneg domashnei rabotnitse.*

¹⁹³ TsAGM. F.4487, op.10, d.68, l.52. *Vsem grupptomam domrabotnits.*

¹⁹⁴ On the early Soviet labor court system, see Artem Ivanov, "Sudebnyi por'adok razresheniia trudovykh sporov v 20-e gody XX veka: opyt pravovogo regulirovaniia," *Obshchestvo: politika, ekonomika, pravo*, 3(2011):171-178.

¹⁹⁵ Pik, "O trude domashnikh rabotnikov," *Voprosy Truda* 3-4(1929):149.

court of conciliation to make sure that all the workers lawful claims were satisfied, while making any kind of concession to the employer at the expense of the worker was unthinkable. Therefore, the whole idea of having courts of conciliation for domestic workers suing their employers was ridiculous: such matters were to be settled in people's courts.¹⁹⁶ Another contributor to *Voprosy Truda*, a certain S. Zh., suggested transferring conflicts involving domestic workers from courts of conciliation under the auspices of the People's Commissariat of Labor back to special rates and disputes commission at Narpit. The article was followed by an afterword from the editors that warned against such a solution that would lead to "excessively harsh treatment of employers who in most cases are workers and *sluzhashchie*."¹⁹⁷ Unlike courts of conciliation at the People's Commissariat of Labor, Narpit rates and disputes commission were not a neutral third party, but an integral part of the union – a representative of the domestic worker.

The shift in the treatment of domestic workers' complaints was part of a wider reconceptualization of paid domestic labor. By mid-1920s domestic service was no longer an inherently exploitative institution. Thus, domestic workers lost their status of exploited backward proletarians that needed special protection from the Soviet state while employment of hired household help was no longer an unambiguous sign of *embourgeoisement*. Therefore, a conflict between an employer and a domestic could not be solved with a crude class approach. Moreover, the meaning of the class approach itself changed. If in earlier cases it meant making sure that the rights of an individual domestic worker were upheld, by 1926 it meant protecting the perceived needs of domestic workers as a group, even if it meant impinging on the rights of individual workers.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 148-149.

¹⁹⁷ S.Zh. "Soglasitel'nye komissii po sporam dlia domashnikh rabotnikov," *Voprosy Truda* 4(1928):59-62.

Sheltering the Domestic Servant: The Housing Question

According to the study conducted by Moscow Narpit organization in 1926, over ninety percent of the five hundred women surveyed were live-in domestics. 48 percent of them lived in the same rooms as their employers, 35.3 percent lived in common areas and 16.7 percent had their own room.¹⁹⁸ Having a roof over the head was an important perk that came with the job in the situation of the acute housing crisis that plagued Soviet cities, but once the live-in domestic worker was dismissed, she became not only unemployed, but homeless. Domestic workers' homelessness posed a problem on two levels. Firstly, provision of housing for laborers was a widely publicized goal of the Soviet government and its fulfilment had a political dimension. Secondly, a homeless domestic worker was seen as a potential prostitute. Therefore, finding a home for a sick, pregnant or simply unemployed domestic worker was a task that had not only to do with bettering conditions for an individual worker, but with fulfilling the promises of the Revolution.

The initial approach was to pressure the employer into taking some of the responsibility for living conditions of their former domestics. At the Fifth Narpit Congress that took place in January of 1923, a representative from Tver' claimed that they enforced the decree issued by the local labor department stating that domestic workers could be evicted only "on a common basis," that is, only after a court ruling.¹⁹⁹ That meant that if a domestic worker quit her job or was fired but refused to leave, the former employer had to go to court and get an eviction order, which was not a guaranteed

¹⁹⁸ GARF. F.5452, op.12, d.7, l.49. *V presidium VTsSPS.*

¹⁹⁹ TsGA SPb, F. R-4487, op. 6, d.14a, l.220. *5yi Vserossiiskii Siezd Narpit.*

outcome. The Moscow Narpit board decided that domestic workers were to have the right to stay in their former employer's apartment until they found another place of work.²⁰⁰ Neither the Tver' nor the Moscow Narpit organization took into consideration the needs of employers or their "class origin," ascribing them to an "exploitative class" by the sole fact that they had a servant.

By 1925 such radical measures fell out of favor with the unions' central committee. The union informational letter issued in April of 1925 called the practice of forcing employers to house domestic workers after termination of contracts "beyond reasonable possibility." The letter reminded local organizations that bullying employers into signing labor agreements "till domestic worker's death" or writing loan guarantor letters for them as well as imposing unreasonably high union fees, made employers eager to replace unionized domestic with recent arrivals from the countryside and avoid contact with the union altogether. This, in turn, caused high unemployment among domestic workers. Although the letter mentioned in passing that some of the employers' families lived in difficult conditions, sharing a single room, and called for special consideration of the financial circumstances in the cases when employers were "workers and *sluzhashchie*," the main argument against excessive pressure on employers was its negative effect on domestics' job security.

The "employer-friendly" approach was codified in the law of 1926. It did not contain any special clause that specified living standards for domestic workers, tacitly legalizing the practice of keeping servants in common areas. It also limited the length of domestic worker's stay in the former employer's home after termination of her contract.

²⁰⁰ TsGA SPb, F. R-4487, op.8, d.1, l.102. *Protokol No.10 zasedaniia moskovskogo gubotdela n\soiuza.*

Once the labor contract was terminated the domestic worker had to vacate the premises within two weeks.

Even though the law was unequivocal about this limitation, domestic workers and union activists did their best to find a way around it. Without violating the law itself, domestic workers, union activists and judges were able to maneuver within the limits set by the convoluted rules and regulations that affected domestic workers' right to keep their living space after termination of the labor contract. The first loophole Narpit legal experts found within a month after the publication of the law was the eviction procedure. Although the law of 1926 unequivocally stated that the domestic servant could stay in her former employer's premises no more than two weeks after termination, according to the Soviet Civil Code, no one could be legally evicted against their will without a court ruling.²⁰¹ Therefore, the domestic could refuse to leave while the court was deciding her fate. As it was stated in the legal advice column in the union journal *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*, the employer could ask the domestic worker to leave immediately, but if the worker refused to, the employer could file a suit in court no sooner than two weeks after the dismissal.²⁰² Then it was up to the court to decide whether or not the domestic worker had to move out. The court could and often did find grounds for letting the domestic workers stay in the apartments or apartment buildings where they used to work, as in the case of domestic worker Korabliova.

In her speech at the Moscow Narpit meeting, Korabliova condemned the new law that limited domestic workers' stay in their former employers' apartments to two weeks and shared her story of successfully overcoming the legal obstacles in getting herself a

²⁰¹ O. Baikov, "Zhilishchnye usloviia domashnikh rabonits," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 1925 (5):3.

²⁰² "Voprosy i otvety," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 1926 (2):24.

home. When Korabliova lost her job she came to the chair of the housing cooperative to apply for membership – a move that could help her secure some sort of housing in the building.²⁰³ However, the chair refused to accept her application stating that “we do not take in homeless people [*besprizornye*]”. For Korabliova the refusal was not only a personal insult, more importantly, it was a denial of domestic workers inclusion in the revolution: “Why are we homeless? – she asked her audience. - We were also in the ranks, we also dethroned the idol.” She argued that such treatment of domestic workers was both “painful” and “difficult,” asking for compassion for domestics, who had trouble finding both work and housing in the times of high unemployment, while simultaneously reminding her audience about their proletarian dignity and contribution to the revolutionary cause. She also appealed to the class approach of Soviet social justice, stating that in a big house with so many people “with big pockets” who had “bedrooms and dining rooms” there had to be a place for a female worker, noting that she had been working diligently before she lost her job. Korabliova attributed her difficulties to the new legislation that limited the length of domestic worker’ stay in the home of her previous employer to two weeks. Despite the fact that the law clearly stated that she had to leave, Korabliova was successful in securing two rooms in the basement. As she told the meeting, she searched the apartment building for extra space, found two empty rooms in the basement, padlocked their doors and went to court. After three separate hearings

²⁰³ Housing cooperatives were established in 1921 as associations of principle tenants that were collectively responsible for management and maintenance of their buildings. In return, housing cooperatives had the right to rent out the premises, collect rent, hire and fire maintenance staff, file for eviction of unwanted tenants. Every tenant over 19 years of age who had not been disenfranchised was eligible for membership in the housing cooperative. On Soviet housing cooperatives, see Elena Kirillova, “Petrogradskiiie zhiltovarischestva v nachale 1920-kh gg: organizatsiia, sostav i “klassovaia liniia” gorodskikh vlastei,” *Novyi Istokicheskii Vestnik* 37 (2013):72-97; “Sovetskaia zhilishchnaia politika v gody nepa: kvartirnyi vopros i domovoie samoupravleniie v Petrograde-Leningrade,” *The Soviet and Post-Soviet Review* 43 (2016):5-35; Matsui Yasuhiro, “Housing Partnerships, ZhAKTy, or Housing Trusts? A Study of Moscow’s Housing Management System, 1917-1937,” *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 26 (2009):109-139.

(perhaps, she or the housing cooperative had to appeal to higher instance courts), Korabliova received the two basement rooms.²⁰⁴ There is no information on how the court explained the decision, but Korabliova herself suggested a whole spectrum of justifications: her own honest labor, domestic workers' participation in the revolution, the Soviet state's obligation to distribute living space along class lines and human compassion for a working woman in difficult circumstances.²⁰⁵

Korabliova's story could have been significantly less dramatic if she had not made a mistake of applying for membership in the housing cooperative only *after* she was fired. Since 1925 domestic workers who had been living in the same apartment building for three years or more could join the housing cooperative – a practice Narptit encouraged.²⁰⁶ Membership in the cooperative made domestics eligible for living space of their own: in return for maintaining the building, housing cooperatives had the right to distribute and redistribute living space. On May 28, 1925 the Supreme Court even issued a special explanation that stated that if a domestic worker was a member of the housing cooperative she retained the right for living space in the premises of her former employer even after her dismissal. The law of 1926 that limited the length of domestic worker's stay in her former employers home to two weeks did not affect the ruling that was confirmed on August 2, 1926.²⁰⁷ Thus, membership in the housing cooperative became another loophole domestic workers actively used to secure housing upon termination of

²⁰⁴ TsGA SPb, F. R-4487, op.9, d.28, l.301-302. *Stenograficheskii otchet 8go gubsiyezda Moskovskogo otdela profsoiuza TsK Narpti 15 ianvaria 1926-21 ianvaria 1926.*

²⁰⁵ In her speech, Korabliova combines two strategies of self-representations that, according to Golfo Alexopoulos work on early Soviet petitions was used by Soviet people in order to demonstrate their worthiness: "demonstrating their proletarian origin and working-class achievements" and "making a claim of hardship". Golfo Alexopoulos, "The Ritual Lament: A Narrative of Appeal in the 1920s and 1930s," *Russian History/Histoire Russe*. 1-2(1997):117.

²⁰⁶ "Domashniie rabotnitsy v chleny zhiltovarishestva," *Trud*, June 12, 1925, 3; "Zhilie domovym rabochin," *Trud*, October 29, 1927, 4.

²⁰⁷ "Sud. Domashniaia rabotnitsa i zhilploshchad," *Trud*, February 23, 1928, 6.

their contract, even when they had to go all the way to the Supreme Court, as in the case of domestic worker Shilobreeva.

Shilobreeva found a job as a domestic worker with the family of a certain Sh. in 1922. In 1924 she joined the housing cooperative as a “member without a right to the separate living space.” In 1927 she stopped working for Sh., but refused to vacate the premises. Sh. filed for Shilobreeva’s eviction with the people’s court. After several hearings the court issued an eviction order. Yet, the prosecutor of the Supreme Court appealed against the ruling of the people’s court. The final decision of the Supreme Court maintained that, since there is no such category as a “member without a right to a separate living space” in the cooperative’s charter, Shilobreeva, who has been member of the housing cooperative since 1924, was entitled to a living space as any other member. Therefore, she had the right to remain in her former employer’s quarters until the housing cooperative was able to provide her with a room of her own.²⁰⁸

Only in 1929 did the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions and Narpit Central Committee challenge this decision.²⁰⁹ Although the article in *Trud* that covered the dispute did not explain the position of the union leadership, most likely it was based on the assumption that the fear of losing part of their living space to their domestic stopped many employers from properly registering their household help. That, in turn, made domestic workers more vulnerable to abuse. Domestic workers themselves seemed to be indifferent to the affect their actions had on their peers: they were actively using the

²⁰⁸ Markin, “Domrabotnitsy imeiut parvo na zhilploshchad’, esli on chlen zhiltovarischestva,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 7 (1928): 21

²⁰⁹ “VTsSPS o prave domashnikh rabotnits na ploshchad’ nanimatel’,” *Trud*, September 7, 1929, 6

opportunity to get a place of their own by joining housing cooperatives and claiming their living space.²¹⁰

While the law of 1926 offered domestic workers less protection compared to other workers, there was one sphere in which it put domestic in a privileged position – access to the Homes of Mother and Child. The first version of the 1926 law drafted by the People's Commissariat of Labor allowed pregnant domestics to stay in their employer's premises for four months.²¹¹ Narpit Central Committee proposed to increase the time in the case of pregnancy to two months before delivery, two months after and an additional month with some small pay.²¹² The clause was, however, struck down by Tomsy, the chair of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions. According to the final version of the law, pregnant and sick domestic workers had to leave their employer's premises within two weeks after their contract is terminated. After that they were to be admitted to a Home of Mother and Child automatically.

To the surprise and indignation of the union, special instructions issued by People's Commissariat of Health in 1927 did not contain the word “automatically” stating instead that live-in domestic workers were to be offered *priority* placement at Homes of Mother and Child. Narpit tried to protest the phrasing, arguing that it did not guarantee admission and therefore contradicted the law of 1926, but to no avail.²¹³ The People Commissariat of Health clearly did not want to put itself on the line for not complying with instructions that guaranteed admission to the Homes of Mother and

²¹⁰ For two more cases of domestic workers retaining their living space, see Obertreis Julia, *Tränen des Sozialismus. Wohnen in Leningrad zwischen Alltag und Utopie 1917-1937* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag Köln, 2004), 333-335.

²¹¹ “Regulirovanie truda domashnikh rabotnits,” *Trud*, June 12, 1925, 3.

²¹² GARF. F.5452, op.9, d.87, l.158. *Zamechaniia TsK k projektu postanovleniia Sovnarkoma ob usloviakh truda domrabntits.*

²¹³ “Lechebnaia pomoshch' domashnim rabotnitsam,” *Trud*, June 10, 1926, 5.

Child, while it was clearly impossible to accommodate all the needy. There was much confusion about the instructions and perhaps resistance to them at the local level. The Moscow Health department, for instance, refused to take in domestic workers who did not have their own housing.²¹⁴ Perhaps local healthcare authorities were worried that domestic workers, who had nowhere to go, would end up staying for unspecified amount of time.

In any case, domestic workers had a formal privilege in admittance to Houses of Mother and Child, as well as hospitals.²¹⁵ The latter privilege applied only to critically ill domestics who needed in-hospital treatment. Those domestic workers, who had picked up a contagious disease that could be treated on an outpatient basis, did not qualify. The Narpit central committee petitioned to Soviet authorities to provide these women with housing at the expenses of the state, but received no response.²¹⁶ These privileges came not from domestic workers' status as backward workers that needed extra protection, but from their status as women. Motherhood was a woman's obligation to society and the state and therefore it was the state that took on the extra responsibility for it.

The other responsibility that the state took on regarding domestic workers that it did not necessarily provide to all workers had also to do with the Bolsheviks' ideas about womanhood, in particular – female sexuality. Narpit activists lobbied for special dormitories for unemployed domestic workers, arguing that domestics' vulnerable position contributes to the embarrassing phenomenon of sex commerce in Soviet cities:

²¹⁴ *"Beremennye domashnie rabotnitsy dolzhny obespechivat'sa pomescheniem v domakh materi i rebenka," Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 10 (1928):24

²¹⁵ The first version of the 1926 law drafted by the People's Commissariat of Labor sick domestics allowed domestics to stay in their employer's premises for two months. The final version of the law limited the stay to two weeks.

²¹⁶ *"Posobiia i zhilishcha bol'nym rabotnikam narpita," Trud*, January 6, 1927, 2; *"Zhilaia ploshchad' dl'a bol'nykh domrabotnits," Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 2 (1927):24.

“More backward [than other women], mostly without relatives in the cities, they easily end up in the street, and that is a slippery slope,” warned one of the contributors to the union newspaper.²¹⁷ Sexualization of domestic servants had a long tradition in European culture.²¹⁸ A maid turned prostitute – seduced by her master or another servant and thrown into the streets – was a common trope in imperial Russia that survived into the Soviet period. In the 1926 silent film “Prostitute,” which tells a story of three women who had to sell their bodies to feed themselves under the cruel conditions of NEP, the experienced prostitute – Man’ka – is a former maid who had fallen prey to her mistress’s son. While the other two heroines manage to get their lives together, Man’ka ends up in the STD clinic.

The connection between domestic service and prostitution was a topic of a great concern for Soviet authorities. A secret report Narpit central committee prepared for the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions included a separate section entitled “Housing conditions and prostitution among domestic workers.” Quoting prerevolutionary studies and data on the situation in Western Europe that showed that former servants made up a significant percentage of prostitutes, the author of the report argued that since domestic servants’ working conditions often made them turn to prostitution, the most reasonable solution would be to provide domestic servants with rooms in special dormitories.²¹⁹

Yet, dormitories were often seen as a source of problems themselves. In response to the petition from the Narpit Central Committee in June of 1926, People’s Labor Commissariat noted, that creation of special dormitories for domestic workers led to

²¹⁷ M. Iuchnevich, “K mezhdunarodnomu dn’u rabotnitsy,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 1-2 (1924):8.

²¹⁸ See, for example, Lucy Delap, *Knowing Their Place: Domestic Service in Twentieth-Century Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 173-205.

²¹⁹ GARF. F.5452. op.12. d.7, l.27-29. V *presidium VTsSPS*.

“unhealthy activities” – a statement the union leadership agreed with.²²⁰ What was meant by the “unhealthy activity” becomes clear from a special report presented by a member of the Narpit Central Committee Bogdanov at the Meeting of the Central Soviet on Battling Prostitution in November of 1926. He stated that if domestic workers were provided with a dormitory but not with work, the place would turn into a house of ill repute. He suggested that unemployed workers be provided with some kind of manual tasks and the length of their stay limited to night hours.²²¹ The reputation of dormitories for domestic workers as bawdy houses is ironic because the fear that unemployed and homeless maids and nannies would turn to prostitution was one of the main reasons for their creation in the first place. It also testifies to the strong discursive connection between domestic service and prostitution, as well as vulnerability of domestic workers.

Although the need for dormitories for unemployed domestic workers was widely discussed, very few were actually built. Narpit – one of the poorest unions – could not afford to subsidize housing for unemployed servants, so in 1925 its central committee petitioned the People’s Labor Commissariat to build a network of special dormitories for domestic workers.²²² However, Narpit’s initiative fell on deaf ears and its local organizations had to deal with the problem on their own. Some were able to raise funds and provide small numbers of domestics with housing. For example, in 1926 a local organization in Nikolaiev (Ukraine) organized a dormitory that could host ten domestic workers.²²³ With the help of the city soviet, Narpit in Kazan was able to provide thirty-

²²⁰ TsGA SPb, F. R-4487, op.9, d.2, l.65 *Otvet NKT SSSR na khodataistvo TsK po voprosu ob organizatsii dl’a bezrobotnykh domrabotnits obshezhiti*.

²²¹ GARF. F.5452, op.10, d.48, l.9 *Protokol No.12 zasedaniia tsentral’nogo soveta po bor’be s prostitutsiei*.

²²² “Zhilishchnye usloviia domashnikh rabotnits,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 9 (1925):24.

²²³ Rabkor M. Novak, “Obshchezhitie dlia domashnikh rabotnits,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 5(1926):17.

five unemployed domestics with beds in a special dormitory.²²⁴ The biggest dormitory for domestic workers with 149 tenants was opened in Moscow in 1928.²²⁵ Of course, such small institutions could not do much to alleviate the problem of homelessness among unemployed domestic workers.

Conclusion

Even though the law was resented by union activists and domestic workers and there were several attempts to amend it throughout the next three decades, during the 1920s it remained the most progressive law that regulated paid domestic labor in the world. Even in Austria, where domestic workers received some benefits from the welfare state, they had significantly fewer rights. For instance, they were not covered by unemployment insurance and there was no law that protected the rights of domestic servants with children.²²⁶ Thus, the Soviet domestic workers were the most protected among their peers worldwide.

Even though the promises of Soviet legislation were far from realities on the ground, the discourse did increase domestic workers' expectations. Moscow section of Narpit complained that some unemployed domestic servants rejected the jobs offered to them at the Labor Exchange, "due to their excessive requirements" such as "individual rooms" or "salaries higher than the norm." They also refused to perform public works.²²⁷ These "excessive requirements", high numbers of complaints coming from domestic

²²⁴ Rabkor Z-viy, "Otkryli obshezhitie dl'a domashnikh rabotnits," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 5 (1927):16.

²²⁵ Ye. Labas, "Zaidem v obshezhitie domrabotnits," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 10 (1928):17.

²²⁶ Jessica Richter, "What is domestic service anyway? Producing Household Laborers in Austria (1918-1938)," in *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers*. Eds. Dirk Hoerder et al. (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2015), 489.

²²⁷ "Profsoiuznaia khronika. Narpit," *Trud*, June 5, 1925, 3.

workers to Narpit, the People's Commissariat of Labor and the courts, as well as domestic workers' active struggle for housing should not only serve as evidence for poor working and living conditions of many Soviet domestic servants, but also testify to the ability of the Bolshevik discourse to empower those who had previously been on the very bottom of the power structure, encouraging them to act.

The discussion about the rights and obligations of domestic workers shows some important features of the early Soviet understanding of justice. First and foremost, the rights of workers "toilers" and especially those belonging to the working class were a priority. Initially, it meant that it was not as important to follow the letter of the law as to have the decisions in the spirit of proletarian justice. That meant that in the conflict between a worker and a non-worker any state institution was expected to be on the side of the proletarian. Even when a domestic worker had no way to prove overtime work, she would be awarded compensation (unless her employer was a worker himself).

Still, there was often a conflict between the rights and needs of individual workers and what could be understood by various Soviet authorities as the needs of the working class. The confrontation between Narpit and the People's Commissariat of Labor over the law regulating paid domestic labor did not develop out of competition for resources or the desire to avoid responsibility, although there was some institutional logic behind each position: Narpit needed the money that came as a fee for labor contracts, while People's Commissariat of Labor did not want to overburden itself with the extra work of registering contracts. There were conceptual conflicts too. These two organizations had different understandings of what it meant to protect the rights of workers. While Narpit, as a professional organization of domestic workers, tried to make sure that an individual

nanny or kitchen maid got a maximum compensation for her work, People's Commissariat of Labor was concerned with how these decisions would influence the rate of unemployment among domestic servants and the burden it placed on the Soviet social security system. By the end of the NEP era the second approach clearly became the order of the day, shaping the labor policies of decades to come.

This change also signified a shift in the conceptualization of paid domestic labor in the Soviet state. Domestic service was not as inherently an exploitative institution anymore. While some employers could mistreat their domestics, the sole fact of having a maid or a nanny did not make one an "exploiter." Similarly, working in domestic service did not automatically make one a victim that was to receive special protection by the Soviet state. Although many Narpit activists, judges, and domestic workers continued to argue for domestic workers' special rights (without overstepping the boundaries set by the law), domestic workers were not legally entitled to special privileges. The All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions and People's Commissariat of Labor deliberately rejected Narpit's propositions that put domestic workers in an advantaged position compared to other workers, opting for the opposite approach of giving them fewer rights. The only sphere where the Soviet state was ready to take on extra responsibilities for domestic workers (housing and admission to the Homes of Mother and Child) had to do not with domestics' status as the most backward of the proletariat, but their womanhood. Thus, domestic workers were increasingly defined as woman rather than workers.

Chapter 3: Servants into Workers

To celebrate the fifth anniversary of the October revolution, the Narpit journal *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* published a letter from a “worker of domestic labor,” Dvenkina from a Belorussian town of Gomel’ entitled “Then and Now.” After describing her suffering under the old regime, Dvenkina states that even though she still works as a domestic, things are not the same: “Now I am a free worker that sells her labor and knows that she is protected by proletarian laws. I feel myself human now and an equal among equals. As soon as the evening comes, I go to school to study, to a union meeting or to a concert. [...] I have been elected delegate, I go to conferences where they discuss questions I had no idea about before. They ask for my advice on how to organize Soviet economy and I feel myself an important person.”²²⁸ Dvenkina is an ideal worker: she is independent of her employer, knows her rights, studies, tries to be more cultured, and is actively involved in union work. Naturally, she is invited to participate in running the state as all other worthy citizens. Although she admits that she is not that useful for her country yet, because she is “not developed,” she is clearly a model to be followed by thousands of other “workers of domestic labor.”

As much as Dvenkina was a role model, she was also an exception. Most domestic workers neither went to concerts nor studied, were hesitant to join the union, let alone to become delegates, and did not appear to be interested in running the state. From the point of view of the Bolshevik leadership, they lacked class consciousness. At the Third All-Russian union meeting, which took place after the transfer of domestics to Narpit in 1920, the delegates agreed that the most urgent task regarding the newly

²²⁸ Dvenkina, “Ran’she i teper’,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 9-12 (1922): 24.

incorporated group of female workers was to “reeducate them in the general proletarian (*obscheproletarskii*) spirit.”²²⁹ That was no easy task, since servants were a peculiar kind of laborers. “Their working conditions, the dependency on the employer create a special psyche” and “due to dispersion their class consciousness is either totally absent or embryonic,” wrote a Narpit activist from Krasnodar.²³⁰

Fostering of the proletarian spirit among domestic servants was part of a state effort to create a New Soviet Person – a conscious Soviet subject who was ready to sacrifice individual needs for the sake of the collective.²³¹ The search for the ways to create this new subject was the primary concern of the Bolsheviks.²³² “Control of the living environment, education, and inculcation of the practice of working on oneself” were the primary tools of fostering the new subjectivity.²³³ However, this approach to refashioning was not universal since the Bolsheviks believed that members of different classes initially had different kinds of selves (or none at all). As Jochen Hellbeck has shown in his study of Soviet diaries, unlike a bourgeois self that had to be dismantled in order to become Soviet, the lower classes were not thought to possess a self prior to becoming proletarian.²³⁴

Domestic workers were a special case. Firstly, they occupied a liminal position between workers and non-proletarian *sluzhashchie*. The nouns *sluzhashchie* and *prisluga* derive from the verb *sluzhit'* (to serve) which carried a stronger connotation of

²²⁹ “Tret’ii Vserossiiskii S’ezd Rabotnikov Narodnogo Pitaniia i Obschezhitia,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 9-7 (1920): 4.

²³⁰ E. Borzyk, “Organizatsia domashnei prislugi,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 3 (1923):18.

²³¹ David L. Hoffman, *Stalinist Values: The Soviet Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 45-56.

²³² Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburg: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000), 14.

²³³ David L. Hoffman, *Stalinist Values*, 45.

²³⁴ Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), 73-75.

dependency to the employer, be it an individual or the state, than the verb *rabotat'* (to work). Servants could in fact already possess a type of self colloquially known as “lackey’s soul” (*lakeiskaia dushonka*). Having lost their dignity due to their subordinate position and contaminated by the bourgeois values of their employers, they embraced their submissive status, looked up to their masters and treated the “common” people with disdain. A servile lackey was a common trope in prerevolutionary literature. Lackey Ipat and prince Peremet’ev’s lackey in Nikolai Nekrasov’s seminal poem *Who is Happy in Russia* and lackey Iasha in Anton Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* were the primary examples. In his 1917 brochure “Domestic servants,” Bolshevik propagandist Vladimir Nevskii wrote: “remember, comrades, that we [domestic servants] are now often not treated as people and when one wants to offend someone he would say ‘he behaves like a lackey, he has a lackey’s soul.’ And how can we not have such a soul, if the only thing we see in our lives is hardship, need and contempt.”²³⁵

Secondly, during the first years of the Soviet state domestic service became fundamentally feminized. Not only did women become the absolute majority of domestic servants in the early Soviet period, domestic labor, both paid and unpaid, was explicitly designated as women’s work. Moreover, a domestic servant – the proverbial Lenin’s kitchen maid that became the poster child for the Bolsheviks’ solution to the “women’s question” began to symbolize all Soviet women and their path to emancipation. The discursive feminization of domestic labor had serious implications for the way state institutions treated domestic workers. The progressive intelligentsia had traditionally

²³⁵ Vladimir Nevskii, *Domashniaia prisulga* (Petrograd: Priboi, 1917), 14.

viewed women as superstitious, illiterate and backward.²³⁶ The Bolsheviks were especially distrustful of peasant women and most domestics came from the countryside. Many others came from former privileged classes. Therefore, in spite of domestic workers' proletarian status they were to be regarded with suspicion.

Finally, domestic servants could neither benefit from the healthy influence of a workers' collective since they worked in private homes nor develop a proletarian understanding of their labor because, as Lenin famously stated, household work was considered debilitating, rather than a source of proletarian identity. In addition to the technical difficulty of organizing a group of workers scattered around individual homes, turning backward domestic servants into conscious Soviet workers posed a special challenge in terms of developing appropriate refashioning techniques.

This chapter discusses how Narpit dealt with this challenge. Its activists chose three avenues to turn servants into workers: "union enlightenment" (*profprosvescheniie*) – teaching domestic workers to be active and responsible members of Narpit, "cultural enlightenment" (*kul'tprosvescheniie*) – raising proletarian consciousness through literacy training and organization of appropriate cultural activities and creating a sense of belonging to the revolution by writing a revolutionary history of domestic servants. I argue that in the 1920s, Narpit was optimistic about the ability of the Soviet regime to turn even backward people with spoiled psyches (lackey's souls) into a New Soviet Person, which led to serious investment into developing a nuanced approach to proletarian refashioning of distinct groups of laborers.

²³⁶ On the discourse on women's "backwardness", see Elizabeth E. Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 15-16, 21-15.

An analysis of the Bolsheviks' attempts to create a new type of subjectivity inevitably raises the question of its effectiveness. Available sources allow me to reconstruct the ways Narpit activists tried to mold domestic servants into conscious workers, but they provide limited evidence about how domestic workers themselves reacted to these efforts. They also tend to concentrate on successes rather than failures. The lack of sources on actual individuals makes it difficult to analyze the extent to which domestic workers could internalize the new identities offered by the union. The several individual cases discussed in the chapter only provide a glimpse into the issue of domestic workers' subjectivities.

Union Work as a Path to a New Life

In 1923 Maria Petrovna Brand, a 41-year-old widow of peasant origin, joined the Leningrad section of Narpit as a “domestic worker-laundress” (*domrabortnitsa so stirkoi*). In less than a year she was elected delegate for her group committee to work with other domestic workers.²³⁷ She dutifully attended delegate meetings on labor protection and the work of International Red Aid, struggle against illiteracy, and the importance of the union journal. She was especially pleased with the report on the Communist International which she found very easy to follow and asked for more reports “like this.”²³⁸ The archive holds a list of thirty nine domestic workers in her charge with her comments on why they would have to miss the upcoming union meeting, written in clumsy handwriting with multiple spelling errors.²³⁹ To share her experience, Brand even contributed a piece to her group committee's wall newspaper. “I am very happy that I received the honor of

²³⁷ TsGA SPb. F.R-4490, op.1, d.22, l.22. *Anketa*

²³⁸ TsGA SPb. F.R-4490, op.1, d.22, ll.3, 5, 6. *Protokoly delegatskikh sobranii*.

²³⁹ TsGA SPb. F.R-4490, op.1, d.22, l.18. *Spisok domrabortnits*.

working as a delegate to improve the *byt* and life of domestic workers,” wrote Brand.

“Over a brief period of time we have made a step forward. It was not long ago that masters let drive at their domestic workers with fists. You should know, comrade domestic workers, that the union will know what to do with those fist-fighters, because it is watching carefully over the life of domestic workers, especially those group committees that are close to domestic workers will not let them hurt us, just you, domestic workers, should not forget about your protector - the union.” These four sentences might not strike the reader with their eloquence or style but they were a major achievement for Brand who had never been to school and had taught herself to read and write. She proudly signed the article “domestic worker Brand” emphasizing her belonging to the group of workers she was addressing. She was one of them but at the same time she was already better than them because she was a delegate.

In May of 1924 Brand was elected to participate in the Fifth Narpit Leningrad regional conference. As a representative of domestic workers she thanked the union for the care: “Comrades, you are big scholars, you know so much, you are like a needle and we like a thread will live and develop and even the devil will not scare us!” Her concluding “Hail Narpit! Hail Lenin!” was drowned in the applause.²⁴⁰ Brand, however, did not want to limit herself to simply delivering a scheduled speech. When an argument broke out between two delegates she took the floor again, siding with one of the participants whom she compared to a popular Orthodox saint John of Kronstadt. She also chastised the union leadership, “brothers and sisters,” for infighting which made it

²⁴⁰ TsGA SPb. F.R-4487, op.7, d.16, l.74. *5yi gubernskii s'ezd Narpit.*

confusing for simple workers like her. She reminded the conference that the enemies were the “*burzhui*” that were destined to die “like rats from powder.”²⁴¹

Only six months later, though, Brand herself picked a fight with one of the union functionaries. At the next Leningrad regional meeting, after a brief description of her success in bringing twenty-three domestic workers to the union she turned on to a certain Lyzik, whom she accused of being rude to her when she had approached him with a request. “We do not need such Lyziks, we need real comrades because we, domestic workers, are poorly educated and illiterate,” she fumed. “While in Moscow Asian women – I haven’t seen myself, my comrades have told me – took the cloths off their eyes when they saw Lenin, we, women here, whose eyes are open do not need to have those Lyziks covering our eyes with dirty cloths.” She ended her indictment with “Hail Third International! Hail Narpit!”²⁴²

Brand’s complaint was picked up by Ignatov – representative of the Narpit Central Committee at the conference. He made a brief speech on the importance of respectful treatment of workers by union administration, admitting that what happened to Brand was unacceptable.²⁴³ Even though Ignatov did not mention anyone by name, Lyzik felt he needed to respond. Stating that he barely remembered talking to Brand, he argued that anyone working for sixteen-eighteen hours a day like he was could make a mistake, and it was absolutely inappropriate to make such accusations at the conference. His words, however, were interrupted by comments from the audience. Ignoring the chairman’s call for order, delegates loudly expressed their disapproval – a rare occasion at the usually orderly regional conferences. A suggestion from one of the delegates to

²⁴¹ TsGA SPb. F.R-4487, op.7, d.16, l.200. *5yi gubernskii s’ezd Narpit*.

²⁴² TsGA SPb. F.R-4490, op.7, d.18, l.60. *Stenograficheskii otchet 6yi gubernskoi konferentsii Narpit*.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, l.73.

place Lyzikov on a blacklist was greeted with applause.²⁴⁴ Even though the audience eventually quieted down and the conference continued, Maria Brand was probably in a good mood on her way home – she, a simple domestic worker, had won a fight against a union functionary.

The archive does not reveal what happened to Brand after this incident. Perhaps she got a job somewhere outside of service and moved to a different union – there was a hint on that in her last speech when she mentioned doing laundry at a children’s daycare center. Like thousands of other domestic workers, she was hard to track down. What makes her story important is the way it illustrates the power of the union to engage and transform domestic workers. Brand found it worth her time to attend meetings and do “union work” after her workday as a domestic was over. Her speeches at conferences were an odd mix of the “Bolshevik language,” religious imagery and traditional proverbs. The union leader was an Orthodox saint, while comrades were brothers and sisters. The Bolsheviks were the needle and domestic workers were the thread – a comparison traditionally used to describe relationship between husband and wife. She was familiar with the Soviet narrative of emancipation of the “backward women of the East,” to which she referred to emphasize her own cultural superiority vis-à-vis “Asian women.” Her claim to illiteracy functioned simultaneously as a plea for help and a potential shield that protected her from too strict a judgement of her actions. Most significantly, Brand felt empowered enough to not only deliver a ceremonial “thank you” speech at a union conference but to speak up on her own accord in a union discussion and even denounce a superior. For Brand, Narpit was the central site of her transformation from a backward servant to a conscious domestic worker.

²⁴⁴ Ibid., ll.310-311.

Unionization of domestic servants was the core component of early Bolshevik policy on paid domestic labor. By bringing a domestic to the union, Narpit could hope to wrestle her from the grasp of her bourgeois employers and thus protect her “embryonic” proletarian consciousness from their dangerous influence. The ambitious of the plan were not easy to fulfil since domestic servants were scattered throughout the cities, hesitant to come to meetings, or even register with the union in the first place.²⁴⁵ They routinely lied to union representatives, pretending to be visiting relatives or lodgers. Employers were often openly hostile to Narpit activists, protecting their homes from what they saw as an intrusion in their private matters. Narpit also suffered from endemic shortage of human and material resources.

In spite of all these difficulties, in 1922 Narpit launched a recruitment campaign targeted at domestic servants. Every local union cell was to compile a list of domestics in its area with the information provided by housing authorities and the labor exchange. Based on these lists, Narpit activists were to go door to door looking for servants, evaluating their working and living conditions and recruiting them into the union.²⁴⁶ Although not everything went smoothly, most organizations were able to recruit a significant number of servants. If in 1923 the Narpit had about forty thousand members who were mostly restaurant and hotel employees, by April 1926 it had about two hundred thousand members with over half of them being domestic workers.²⁴⁷ In absolute numbers, domestic workers’ membership increased from 3,480 Narpit members to

²⁴⁵ The countryside was not under Narpit jurisdiction. Privately employed household help in villages was to be taken care of by the Union of agricultural and forestry workers (*Vserabotzemles*).

²⁴⁶ TsGA SPb. F.R-4487, op.6, d.1, l.367. *Instruktsia o vziatii na uchet i vovlechenii v soiuз Narpit domashnei prislugi*. 16 iul'ia 1922.

²⁴⁷ TsGA SPb. F.R-4497, op.9, d.1, l.112, *O rabote sredi domrabochnits*.

147,130 by 1927.²⁴⁸ While union statistics should be taken with a grain of salt, since local organizations did not always submit relevant numbers, either because they wanted to exaggerate their success or simply because women came into and left domestic service so frequently it was impossible to keep track, this testified to some significant successes.²⁴⁹ Even if we assume that a certain percentage of these unionized domestic were “dead souls” – having received the membership card they could have never set foot into the union or could have quite service altogether, it was still an impressive increase.

Having recruited such a significant number of new members, it was of vital importance to keep the newly unionized domestics mobilized. Only if they attended meetings, evening courses and other educational activities, could they become conscious domestic workers rather than remain backward domestic servants. Once domestic workers joined the union they were to elect district delegates that would “maintain contact” between the union and the workers: help new servants find their way to the union, inform the union if they see any violation of domestic workers’ rights, and pass on the information about meetings. The meetings were to include reports on domestic servants’ working and living conditions.²⁵⁰ Both of these important components of union work – election of delegates and organization of meetings – turned out to be not only much more technically difficult than the union had anticipated, but also ideologically problematic.

²⁴⁸ “Narpitovka k des’atiletiiu Oktiabria,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 10 (1927): 2.

²⁴⁹ Narpit Central Committee admitted that they had no idea how many domestic servants there were in the Soviet Union because they were impossible to track. In their 1927 report to the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, the Central Committee used data from the 1897 census. GARF. F.-5452, op.12, d.7, l.30. V *presidium VTsSPS*.

²⁵⁰ TsGA SPb. F.R-4487, op.6, d.1, l.367. *Instruktsia o vziatii na uchet i vovlechenii v soiuz Narpit domashnei prislugi*. 16 iuliia 1922.

The first challenge was to create an organizational structure that would foster the development of a proletarian consciousness among domestic workers. The smallest units of the union were the “local committees” (*mestkom*) and the “group committees” (*grupkom*). They united members of different professions working at the same enterprise or in the same area. Could domestic workers simply join existing committees? On the one hand, domestic workers were clearly different from other workers in their “political, professional and cultural development.” They were often characterized as “detached from the general mass [of workers],” “uncultured” and “inert in public life.” Therefore, the argument went, they needed separate local committees that would cater to their special needs.²⁵¹ Moreover, skilled workers complained that domestics often outnumbered other union members in local organizations and, as a result, union activities were geared towards their interests while skilled workers were neglected.²⁵² A separate local committee for domestic workers was said to allow more contact with rank-and-file members and a more opportunities for them to become activists.²⁵³ On the other hand, separating domestics from other workers undermined the whole idea of integrating them into the proletarian family.²⁵⁴ As one contributor to the union journal stated, “having studied [domestic workers’] psychology” he had no doubts that separate local committee would create “dangerous one-sidedness and tear them from the masses.” It could also lead to *tsekhovshchina* – craft identification or solidarity built on occupational specialization rather than belonging to the working class, which the Bolsheviks had

²⁵¹ N. Stepanov, “*Mestkomy domrabotnist*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 7(1925):4.

²⁵² Ya.R. “*Organizatsionnoie postroenie mestkomov*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 9(1925):5.

²⁵³ Sak. “*Neobkhodimy gruppovyye komitety*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 9(1925):5.

²⁵⁴ N. Stepanov, “*Mestkomy domrabotnist*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 7(1925):5.

deemed a dangerous deviation that undermined the unity of workers, substituting class consciousness with a “craft mentality.”²⁵⁵

This dilemma was a manifestation of a larger question of dealing with the diversity of the Soviet population, especially its gendered aspects. As Elizabeth Wood has shown, there was a fundamental contradiction between the belief that women were different from men and therefore had special needs and the fear of separatism that could threaten the unity of the working class.²⁵⁶ Narpit activists argued that domestic workers had a “special psyche” that distinguished them from other members of the union, even female janitors or kitchen maids in private enterprises. Therefore, they required a special approach that eventually led to separating them from other members of the union. At the same time, this separation could lead to creating an even bigger distance between domestic servants and the working class by fostering a craft-based identity rather than a proletarian one.

Initially, the Central Committee was in favor of mixed committees for domestic and other workers.²⁵⁷ The Sixth All-Union Congress of Narpit in 1925 declared separate organizations for domestic workers unacceptable. The exception was made for apartment buildings that had more than two hundred domestics. In that case separate local committees could be formed “as an experiment.”²⁵⁸ However, in big cities such as Moscow and Leningrad where domestics were especially numerous, local organizations opted for separate organizations for domestic workers or special activities for this group

²⁵⁵ Rabkor, “*Mestkomy domrabotnits*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 10(1925):6.

²⁵⁶ Elizabeth E. Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 2-3.

²⁵⁷ TsGA SPb. F.R-4487, op.7, d.1, l.38. *Resolutsia 3go plenuma TsK po voprosu o rabote sredi domrabotnits*.

²⁵⁸ TsGA SPb. F.R-4487, op.8, d.1, l.51. *Protokol zasedaniia presidiuma TsK Narpit*.

of union members.²⁵⁹ The discussion lasted for several years. What seemed to have tipped the scale in favor of separate organizations for domestic workers was the introduction of the new law regulating paid domestic labor in February of 1926 that put domestics into a disadvantaged position compared to other workers. As a result, it became problematic to hold meetings on labor rights of Soviet workers – the core of Narpit’s enlightenment work – for domestics together with other workers. The information letter issued by the Central Committee in September of 1926 included a recommendation to have “some sort of separation” for domestic workers.²⁶⁰ Finally, in the early 1928 the union Central Committee ordered the creation of local committees for domestic workers only in all Narpit organizations. Moreover, the resolution of the Third Central Committee plenum suggested creation of a separate domestic workers’ section within the union – an initiative that was realized in the early 1930s within the Professional Union of City Workers and Domestic Workers.²⁶¹ The decision led to a significant increase in the number of domestic workers’ local committees – from fifty-eight to ninety-nine by 1929, although some organizations, especially in small towns, continued to service domestics within mixed local committees.²⁶²

The organization of separate local committees for domestic workers exacerbated the problem of domestics’ insufficient involvement in union activities. That was a burning issue on two levels. At the organizational level, Narpit needed thousands of domestic workers’ delegates that would monitor rank-and-file members. The original recommendation of the Central Committee was to have one delegate per five domestics

²⁵⁹ “Chto reshil Moskovskii gubs”ezd,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 11(1927):19.

²⁶⁰ TsGA SPb. F.R-4487, op.9, d.1, l.112. *Vsem Tsentral’nym, respublikanskim pravleniiam.*

²⁶¹ Bogdanov, “Iz resheniia tretiego plenuma TsK,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 1(1928):5.

²⁶² “Tsentral’nyi komitet otchityvaetsa,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 3 (1929):1-2.

although later the ratio was increased to one to ten. She was to regularly visit her charges, make sure their employers did not violate labor laws, inform domestics about upcoming meetings, convince them to attend evening classes, recruit new members to the union and report on her activities at least once in three months.²⁶³ Without an adequate “*aktiv*” (a core group of activists), Narpit simply could not handle such large numbers of individual workers scattered around the city.

Moreover, many members of the union felt that activists who had worked in domestic service themselves had a better understanding of the needs of domestic workers, were more motivated to fight for their rights, and found it easier to communicate with them. The Moscow regional organization required that up to seventy percent of activists were to come from among domestic workers so the number would correspond to their percentage in the union – a goal that was never fulfilled.²⁶⁴ As one contributor to the union journal argued, only if the chair of the local committee had lived a life of a domestic, she would know how to defend their interests. The fact that she had no education was irrelevant.²⁶⁵ Another activist went so far as to argue in her letter to *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*, that all local committees that had a majority of domestic workers had to have a former domestic worker as the chair rather than a professional union activist – a position that the journal’s editors characterized as “absolutely mistaken.”²⁶⁶

²⁶³ GARF. F.5452. op.9, d.99, l.10. *Instruktsia delegatki domrabotnits.*

²⁶⁴ TsGA SPb. F.R-4487, op.9, d.28, l.326. *Stenograficheskii otchet 8go gubs’ezda Moskovskogo otdela profsoiuza Narpit 15-21 ianvaria 1926.*

²⁶⁵ “Vybirajte stoikikh zhenshchin v mestkom domrabotnits,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 1 (1925):16.

²⁶⁶ Novak, “*Predsedatel’nitsa mestkoma dolzhna byt’ riadovoi rabotnitse,*” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 2 (1922):7.

On the ideological level, the lack of domestic workers' involvement threatened the whole project of their proletarian refashioning. Unions, as Lenin famously wrote, where "an indispensable 'school of communism' and a preparatory school that trains proletarians to exercise their dictatorship, an indispensable organization of the workers for the gradual transfer of the management of the whole economic life of the country to the working *class* (and not to the separate trades), and later to all the working people."²⁶⁷ The need to stimulate the feeling of belonging to the working class as a whole was especially important for domestic workers who were isolated from other laborers and could be under the influence of their bourgeois employers. Union work was essential for developing their class consciousness along with skills they would need for "running the country." As one domestic worker wrote in her contribution to the union journal, "I have become conscious and now work in the union – that is what work as a delegate has given me. My experience makes me call to female workers: try to become delegates. That will open a path to a new life."²⁶⁸

"A path to a new life" could indeed come in the form of *vydvizhenie* (promotion).²⁶⁹ An activist could be promoted to a full-time position in the union and even party membership. N'ura Makarova, an active member of the union since 1923, in 1925 was elected chair of the local union committee and recommended for party

²⁶⁷ Vladimir Lenin, "'Left-Wing' Communism: an Infantile Disorder," accessed December 12, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1920/lwc/ch06.htm>

²⁶⁸ M. Novak, "*Rabotnitsy, staraites' stat' delegatkami*," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 10 (1925):11. Domestic workers' delegate meetings played a similar role to delegate meetings at the Women's Section – as a site of acquiring the Bolshevik language. On the Women's Section delegate meetings, see Elizabeth Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade*, 85-93.

²⁶⁹ The term was originally introduced into Western scholarship to describe upwardly mobile workers mostly in the context of the first Five-Year plan. Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union, 1921-1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979). The term and practice of *vydvizhenie* as a reward for dedicated public work for underrepresented groups was already developing in the 1920s.

membership.²⁷⁰ A secretary of the local union committee and a party member since 1925, Aranovich also began her career as an active domestic worker.²⁷¹ These women could indeed claim that they were participating in “running the state.” Their “paths to a new life” were celebrated in publications in the union journal. A role model for domestics was Mariia Karpovna Borisova. She had worked as a servant for 15 years under the old regime and was one of the founders of the domestic servants’ union in 1917. She joined the Bolshevik party in 1919 and by mid-1920s was a member of Narpit Central Committee and an expert on the union’s “domestic service” question.²⁷² In 1927 Narpit claimed to have five thousand domestic workers – delegates, 341 members of local committees and thirty five former domestics among union leadership at the regional level.²⁷³

The majority of active domestic workers, however, did not make a union career. The union leadership often hesitated to promote domestic workers to full-time positions because their level of political education remained lacking. In Minsk, the union could not find a qualified candidate to fill a position at the local union committee out of more than a thousand domestic workers. As a result, the job went to a man.²⁷⁴ Ten years after the revolution, only three women in the union’s Central Committee had experience in domestic service. All three of them had been professional union activists since 1917.²⁷⁵

²⁷⁰ “Domrabotnitsa N’ura,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 9 (1925), 11.

²⁷¹ “Vydvizhenki Moskv,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 1 (1926), 14.

²⁷² “Rabotnitsy – chleny Tsentral’nogo Komiteta,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 3 (1926):4.

²⁷³ “Narpitovka k desiatiletii orkiabria,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 10 (1927),2.

²⁷⁴ Rabkorka Burilova, “Otvét na statiu t. M. Borisovoi,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 6 (1927):10.

²⁷⁵ “Rabotnitsy – chleny Tsentral’nogo Komiteta,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 3 (1926):4

In 1929, while domestic workers made up sixty three percent of union members, they occupied less than eight percent in leadership positions at the regional level.²⁷⁶

Unlike full-time union workers, rank-and-file activists had to juggle domestic service and union responsibilities. Employers were often unhappy about their worker being a delegate and found an excuse to fire her. In the situation of extremely high unemployment among women, these female workers had trouble finding another job. As Mariia Borisova, the member of Narpit Central Committee that oversaw domestic service, noted there was a great number of active domestic workers but their activism was threatened by increasing unemployment.²⁷⁷ Some activists even demanded that employers should not be allowed to fire delegates.²⁷⁸ However, although some employers did dismiss their domestics for simply wanting to attend evening classes, union work could affect the way a domestic worker performed her professional duties. In group committee number 14 in Leningrad, seventy-five active domestic workers were responsible for organizing 1,130 domestic workers. That means that they had around fifteen charges to look after – three times the number initially recommended by the Narpit Central Committee.²⁷⁹ Although the report presented the number of active domestic workers as an achievement, it is clear that these women were overburdened with union work.²⁸⁰ Although the Central Committee tried to warn local organizations

²⁷⁶ "Za luchsheie obsluzhivaniie domrabotnits," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 15 (1929):4.

²⁷⁷ TsGA SPb. F.R-4487, op.9, d.28. l.240. *Stenograficheskii otchet 8go gubs"ezda Moskovskogo otdela profsoiuza Narpit 15-21 ianvaria 1926.*

²⁷⁸ TsGA SPb. F.R-4487, op.9, d.28. l.247. *Stenograficheskii otchet 8go gubs"ezda Moskovskogo otdela profsoiuza Narpit 15-21 ianvaria 1926.*

²⁷⁹ A. Pronchuk, "Rabota 14 grupkoma v Leningrade," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 4 (1927):10.

²⁸⁰ In another published piece from the same group committee, it stated that they elected one delegate and for every ten domestic workers. A. Gronchuk, "Aktivnaia rabotnitsa," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 7(1927):19.

against assigning domestic workers delegates excessive workloads, there was often no one else to count on.²⁸¹

Furthermore, active domestic workers began to expect the union to promote them to a full-time union position or find an eight-hour job outside domestic service – an expectation the union could not fulfil. A domestic worker Maria Novak wrote a letter to the union newspaper describing her “hopeless situation”: her employer had kicked her out and her peasant mother would not take her back unless she “left the union and the Komsomol.” Novak emphasized the hardships of domestic service for the “dark, exploited” servant she had been and the wonders of the “new life” as a union and Komsomol member. She promised to become a good union activist and an agitator in the village because she was familiar with “peasant life” and it was easy for her “to approach the peasant masses.” She concluded her letter with the statement that the union had to help her find some kind of work, “at least as a dishwasher in a cafeteria” so she could continue her education.²⁸²

In her letter Novak creatively used ideological clichés and a conventional “darkness-to-light” narrative to justify her right for the union’s help. She distanced herself from the backward “peasant masses” and made it clear that she had outgrown domestic service as well – the union and the Komsomol had transformed her and she was neither a backward peasant nor a “exploited” maid. This change gave her the right to demand help from the state. The letter, however, should not be interpreted as a purely manipulative move on her part. To use Igal Halfin’s words, Novak “did not only manipulate class discourse for [her] own interest,” she was “also in turn manipulated by

²⁸¹ “Vnimaniie delegatke,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 9 (1927):1.

²⁸² M. Novak, “So’uz, pomogi aktivnoi domrabotnitse,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 9 (1925), 20.

it.”²⁸³ In other words, it is possible that she had internalized the revolutionary language and became a Soviet citizen. Novak’s dedication to Narpit’s cause is evident from the fact that she continued to contribute articles on union life in the town on Nikolaiev in the next two years, including a piece on the transformative experience of being a delegate.

The extent to which Novak identified with her position of a conscious union member and a worker-correspondent is also suggested by the fact that only half a year after she wrote the letter to *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* asking for help in finding employment, she wrote another piece in which she stated that even though the union had to do its best to help an activist get a job outside of domestic service, a domestic worker had no right to demand it. She found such demands “unacceptable” and called for the union to “actively fight” them.²⁸⁴ She also wrote an article chastising domestic workers for covering up for their employers, declining to testify for others in case of a labor dispute and missing meetings to please their employers.²⁸⁵ By that time she had already become one of the five students her local Narpit organization sent to attend a workers’ university – an educational institution that prepared workers for university education.²⁸⁶ She had transformed from being a domestic worker to an “expert” on domestic workers.

Again, Novak was probably an exceptional case for the 1920s when Narpit had very limited opportunities to promote active domestic workers. In any case, for many other domestic workers, the union became not “the school of communism,” but rather, the school of Bolshevism. While it is unlikely that her active involvement in union life turned her into an ideal subject that was ready to run the state in a communist utopia,

²⁸³ Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light*, 37.

²⁸⁴ Novak, “Bol’noi vopros aktivnykh domashnikh rabotnits,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 3 (1926): 6.

²⁸⁵ M. Novak, “Neosnovatel’nyie zhaloby,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 8 (1926): 13.

²⁸⁶ M. Novak, “Kaki a popala na rabfak,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 2 (1926): 11.

Novak had probably acquired the aspirations to become one. Even though the scale of the domestic workers' involvement into union activities was, of course, never up to the level Narpit was hoping, for those women who did find it rewarding to attend meetings and become delegates, activism became an important component of their new proletarian identity and sometimes a mechanism of upward mobility.

Making domestic workers cultured

Initially union work was mostly focused on educating domestic workers about their labor rights and the advantages of union membership. According to the Narpit Charter adopted in the summer of 1923, protection of its members' economic and legal rights and improvement of conditions of their labor and everyday life was the union's priority. Raising their cultural, professional and political level, development of class consciousness, and participation in institutions of Soviet power took second place, as listed in the Charter.²⁸⁷ Protocols of domestic workers' meetings and wall newspapers in Leningrad show that initially Narpit agitation was centered around labor rights and the importance of union membership. Domestic workers who attended the meetings seemed to be quite engaged: the protocols show that lecturers received a lot of questions regarding labor agreements, the eight-hour workday, and dismissals. All fifteen delegates present at a meeting of domestic workers-delegates in one of the Leningrad districts wanted to sign up for the labor protection committee ignoring the options of volunteering for the tariff, cultural, or cooperative committees.²⁸⁸

²⁸⁷ TsGA SPb. F.R-4487, op.6, d.1, l.225. Ustav Vserossiiskogo Professional'nogo soiuza Narpit.

²⁸⁸ TsGA SPb. F.R-4489, op.1, d.41, l.4. *Protokol delegatskogo sobraniia domrabortnits.*

However, already at the third plenum of Narpit Central Committee in 1924, the union leadership carried a resolution that stated that the union could only achieve its goals if its activists “combine organizational work with cultural work.”²⁸⁹ This increased attention to “cultural work” among domestic servants was part of the Bolshevik “cultural revolution” that took central stage in the revolutionary struggle of the NEP era after the question of “culture” drew attention of Lenin, who dedicated some of his last works to the necessity to educate the masses.²⁹⁰ For Lenin, educating the masses included teaching them to read and write, respect science, do away with religious superstitions, and maintain a clean house and a clean body. This civilizing dimension of the Bolshevik cultural project, as Michael David-Fox has argued, led to a paradox: “because those most in need of aid were the most obviously removed, the revolutionary vanguard had the least foothold among them; hence the raising up, it was taken for granted, had to come from above and from without.”²⁹¹ Thus, domestic servants who were not only viewed as the least developed among the proletariat but as being in the closest proximity to the class alien bourgeoisie and intelligentsia, were subjected to the top-down cultural enlightenment program of the union.

The first target of Narpit’s cultural program was mass illiteracy among domestics. While reading had been important to late-nineteenth-century intelligentsia as a central tool of enlightenment, after the Revolution it acquired special significance. As Lenin

²⁸⁹ TsGA SPb. F.R-4487, op.7, d.1, l.38. *Resolutsia 3go Plenuma TsK po voprosu o rabote sredi domashnikh rabonits.*

²⁹⁰ On the Bolshevik cultural revolution, see the discussion in the Russian Review: Michael David-Fox, “What is Cultural Revolution,” *Russian Review* 58, 2(April 1999):181-201; Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Cultural Revolution Revisited,” *Russian Review* 58, 2(April 1999):202-209; Michael David-Fox, “Mentalite or Cultural System: a Reply to Sheila Fitzpatrick,” *Russian Review* 58, 2(April 1999):210-211; *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928-1931*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1978).

²⁹¹ Michael David-Fox, “What is Cultural Revolution,” 191.

famously argued, “An illiterate person stands outside politics, he must first learn his ABC.”²⁹² Bolshevik believed that they could dramatically decrease the number of illiterate adults in less than a decade, turning the printed word into the most effective ideological medium between the party and the population. Common print culture was to become the binding material for the diverse population of the Soviet Union, inculcating the Soviet people with common, socialist values.²⁹³ Although efforts to combat illiteracy had been made since the Bolsheviks came to power, it was in the spring of 1923 that a four-year plan to liquidate illiteracy by the tenth anniversary of the October revolution was announced.²⁹⁴

According to the plan of the campaign, the initial efforts were to be focused on trade union members. They already possessed higher literacy level than other segments of the population and were easier to organize than non-unionized laborers. Moreover, their status as workers gave them priority treatment under the regime that sought to foster cultural development of the proletariat for both ideological and utilitarian purposes: a literate worker was easier to politicize and more productive in the workplace than his illiterate comrade.²⁹⁵ Although it was soon clear that the plan to eradicate illiteracy even among unionized workers within several years was unrealistic, literacy training remained an integral party of unions’ cultural work throughout the decade.

²⁹² Vladimir Lenin, “The New Economic Policy And The Tasks Of The Political Education Departments. Report To The Second All-Russia Congress Of Political Education Departments October 17, 1921,” accessed December 12, 2016, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1921/oct/17.htm>

²⁹³ Stephen Lovell, *The Russian Reading Revolution. Print Culture in the Soviet and Post-Soviet Eras*. (London: Macmillan, 2000), 21.

²⁹⁴ Charles E. Clark, *Uprooting Otherness: The Literacy Campaign in NEP-Era Russia* (Selingsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2000), 29-30.

²⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 74.

Narpit was not an exception. Local cells were mobilized to organize literacy training for its members. The training had two stages. After learning their ABCs at evening courses for the illiterate, students were to continue their education at courses for semi-literate that offered more training in reading, writing, arithmetic, and political education. Like most other unions, Narpit's efforts were seriously hindered by rapid growth of the union owing to large-scale migration of peasants into cities. By 1926, Moscow Narpit organization had thirteen thousand members – domestic workers. Six thousand out of the thirteen thousand joined the union in 1925, ninety five percent of them being recent migrants from the countryside.²⁹⁶ Most of these women could neither read nor write. Representative of the Narpit organization in Yaroslavl' complained at the union plenum that out of five hundred domestics registered with the local organization seventy four percent were illiterate.²⁹⁷

Educating so many students required facilities, textbooks, stationary and teachers – things that Narpit, being one of the poorest unions, was unable to provide. Even in Moscow, domestic workers had to study using three textbooks for twenty students.²⁹⁸ In addition to the daunting numbers of illiterate domestics, they were much more difficult to mobilize compared to factory workers because they were dispersed. Domestics would often have to make long trips after a day of hard work to get to class. If a domestic worker wanted to attend a union literacy school, she often had trouble getting time off from work since employers were not particularly accommodating and sometimes openly hostile to their servants' desire to learn even though the law required a weekly evening-

²⁹⁶ "Domashniaia rabotnitsa i soiuz," Trud, January 15, 1926, 4.

²⁹⁷ "Otchet o tret'em plenumе tsentral'nogo komiteta soiuzа," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 1-2(1924):23.

²⁹⁸ TsGA SPb. F.R-4497, op.9, d.28, l.321. *Stenografizheskii otchet 8go gubs'ezda Moskovskogo otdela Narpit 15 ianvaria 1926 g.*

off for domestics' studies.²⁹⁹ Literacy training was taking such a toll on Narpit's financial and human resources that its central committee unsuccessfully petitioned the Chief Committee for Political Enlightenment to take over the program.³⁰⁰ Finally, Narpit was able to sign a contract with the "Down with Illiteracy" Society (a public organization established by the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment to raise funds and mobilize volunteers for the state's educational effort) and by end of 1927 had almost three hundred literacy schools.³⁰¹

In spite of the difficulties, literacy training remained the central component of Narpit's cultural work. The union journal *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* regularly published letters from domestic servants who had experienced the transformative power of literacy. "I used to be very religious," wrote domestic worker Bezmoshchuk, "but when I graduate from the literacy school I became a different person."³⁰² The title of the piece "The School Opened My Eyes" was most likely given to it by the editor, but the trope of illiteracy as a malady of blindness was pervasive.³⁰³ "Once Blind – Now Able to See," one contributor summarized the experience of graduating from a literacy school.³⁰⁴ In a letter entitled "From Darkness to Light" domestic worker Popova tells the readers how she suffered before the revolution, living in "dark, damp and cold rooms" that almost made her blind. Now, "thanks to the revolution" she lives in a "light room."

²⁹⁹ Sheikin, "Tormozy v likvidatsii negramotnosti," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 8(1925):6.

³⁰⁰ "Vazhneishie resheniia s'ezda Narpit," *Trud*, March 10, 1927, 3.

³⁰¹ "Narpitovka k des'atiletiiu Oktiabria," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 10 (1927): 2; On the "Down with Illiteracy" Society, Charles E. Clark, *Uprooting Otherness*, 41-71.

³⁰² P. Bezmoshchuk, "Shkola otkryla mne glaza," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 1925 (7):9.

³⁰³ The equation of education with light and ignorance with darkness was not an invention of the 1920s. The proverbial saying "Learning is light and ignorance is darkness" dates back to the work of the eighteenth-century military commander Aleksandr Suvorov who advocated better education and training of soldiers. Bruce Menning, *Train Hard, Fight Easy: The Legacy of A.V. Suvorov and His "Art of Victory,"* *Air University Review* 1 (1986), 79.

³⁰⁴ G. Levchenkov, "Byli Slepnye – Stali Zriachimi," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 1927 (5):15.

Moreover, she can now read and has learnt about communism thanks to the “dear leader Vladimir Ilich.” Since then her life has become even “lighter” (*svetlee*).³⁰⁵ In Popova’s letter inability to read is equated with a physical disability – blindness—from which she is magically cured by the power of Lenin’s teachings. Such letters were to be read at union meetings to encourage illiterate domestics to take up evening classes.

Texts about the joys of reading were often accompanied with photos of domestics writing at a school desk or at a blackboard, reading newspapers or magazine (or just holding them). In one of such pictures, a peasant-looking woman Sof’ia Bassanskaia is sitting next to her ten-year-old daughter, both holding an open journal³⁰⁶. The caption announces that Sof’ia and her daughter have both graduated from a literacy school. The message of the photo is twofold. On the one hand, it shows that an illiterate woman is like a child and it is the state-sponsored school that helped her to become an adult and a full member of society. On the other hand, it glorifies the opportunity the new regime offers for the younger generations, by utilizing the trope of “kitchen maid’s children” dating back to the 1887 circular “On Limitation of Grammar School Education” (*O sokraschenii gimnazicheskogo obrazovan’a*). In 1887 Tsar Alexander III introduced monetary requirement (*denezhnyi tsenz*) for secondary education and excluded children from lower classes from elementary and secondary schools even if their parents could pay for it. Even though the law did not mention female cooks, stating that its purpose was to limit access to education for “children of coachmen, lackeys, [male] cooks, laundresses and small shopkeepers” it became known as the Circular on kitchen maids’ children’ (*Tsirkuliar o kukharkinykh detiakh*). “Kitchen maid’s children” appeared in late imperial

³⁰⁵ Domrabortnitsa Popova, “Ot mraka k svetu,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 1925 (1):13.

³⁰⁶ “Domestic worker Sof’ia Bassanskaia,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 5 (1926): 19.

discussions on education as a synonym of the children of the lower classes.³⁰⁷ After the revolution “kitchen maid’s children” symbolized the injustice of the Tsarist regime and its conscious attempts to keep the lower classes from education.³⁰⁸



Fig. 8 “Domestic worker Sof’ia Bassanskaia and her ten-year-old daughter Maria have graduated from the literacy school (Mariupol’),” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 5 (1926): 19.



³⁰⁷ See, for example, “Kukharkinin deti,” *Russkoie Slovo* 1912, January 31, accessed December 12, 2016 <http://starosti.ru/article.php?id=30420>; Vladimir-Volynskii, “Kukharkiny deti,” *Russkie Vedomosti*, 1913, July 12, accessed December 12, 2016, <http://starosti.ru/article.php?id=37415>.

³⁰⁸ “Kitchen maid’s children” as well as the statement “that every kitchen maid must learn to rule the state” were included in the collection of proverbial expressions and literary quotes published in 1955. N.S. Ashukin, M.G. Ashukina, *Krylatyie slova. Literaturnye tsitaty. Obraznye vyrazheniia* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennoie izdatel’stvo khudozhestvennoi literatury, 1955), 289-290, 244.

Fig. 9 “Nanny with a child reading a journal.” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 9 (1927): 3.



Fig. 10 I.I. Podskrebaiev, “Nanny and child listening to the radio,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 12 (1927): 14. Soviet children are in good hands – an educated nanny will help the state to raise conscious Soviet citizens.

Having taught domestic workers basic literacy skills, Narpit was also concerned with how their charges were using them. Union activists were worried that instead of taking advantage of this opportunity to better themselves, they would start reading religious texts or meaningless entertainment literature. Some Narpit educators complained that domestic workers preferred novels to serious ideologically or professionally useful publications, while others were alarmed by the fact that employers gave their servants “outmoded” and even “dangerous” books.³⁰⁹ These fears were a manifestation of a general anxiety of union activists about their ability to remodel domestic workers “special psyche” that was produced by domestics’ ambiguous class position and close relationship with their “bourgeois” employers. Perhaps domestic workers could slip back into being domestic servants.

³⁰⁹ RGASPI. F.610, op. 1, d. 154, l. 106. *Domashnie rabotnitsy tanutsa k novoi zhizni*; Z.A. Bogomazova. *Kul’turnaia rabota sredi domashnikh rabotnits* (Moskva, Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoie izdatel’stvo, 1929), 25-26.

Yet, it was important to encourage domestics to read more by providing them with engaging reading material. The main platform for such publication was the union journal *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania*. Since 1925 almost every issue included some material for domestic servants rather than union activists: letters from peers, didactic short stories and poetry, often in the form of traditional humorous versus - *chastushki*. These materials were to be broadly used for cultural work by local cells: short stories could be turned into skits, while poems were recited or sang to a tune.³¹⁰ Some issues would have a special rubric “Domestic worker’s page” that could include “discussion pieces” and responses to them. The journal also published portraits of domestics who had successfully completed literacy school or had been active in her local union cell or artistic photo sketches that portrayed domestics at work: a nanny minding children or a cook litting the stove.



Fig. 11 Domestic worker washing dishes after dinner. *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 6 (1927): 10.

³¹⁰ “Nedochety zhurnala,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 5 (1928): 13.



Fig. 12 “Domestic worker washing the table after cooking dinner,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 10 (1927): 21.

A typical didactic short story written for domestic workers is *Katiusha on Vacation* published by *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitannia* to promote “*smychka*” – a closer relationship between town and country. Domestic workers who came from villages often went back to the countryside during late spring and summer months to help their families with agricultural work. The union viewed these seasonal domestics and those women who went to their families to spend their month-long vacation as ideal agitators. As newly refashioned proletarians with strong ties with the countryside, they were to bring the revolution to their home villages. Before the start of the collectivization campaign the main focus was political mobilization of peasants and propaganda of the New Everyday Life – a Bolshevik concept of modern living with the new standards of domestic rationality and hygiene. *Katusha on Vacation* is built around a contrast between a young domestic worker Katusha – well dressed, with a neat haircut and a white face “used to good soap” and her peasant family members, poorly dressed, “dirty with dust and sweat”, living in a poor, depressing hut. Katusha brings presents for her family – new clothes and soap and newspapers, magazines and books for the local Komsomol cell. She

holds a meeting for the local youth, tells them about life in the city and explains that former servants are now domestic workers “whom the union has educated, and now they run the state and hold important posts.” Even though her whole family lives in the village Katusha is a “cut-off slice” (a person detached from her roots, living on her own), she is suffocating among peasants, feels very different from them and wants to go back to the city.³¹¹ She has been transformed and there is no way back for her. The story is written in simple, accessible language with a literary touch.

Authors writing for *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* utilized the “kitchen maid’s children” trope to emphasize the suffering of domestic servants under the tsarist regime. A short story, “A Page from the Past of a Kitchen Maid” by a certain “domestic worker Zoia” is a message from an old domestic servant to young domestic workers. Zoia worked as a maid for a wealthy family but was seduced by the master’s son. When she became pregnant, her employers threw her out. After four years of begging, she landed a job as a kitchen maid in another wealthy house. Her new mistress took Zoia’s daughter as a playmate to her own child. Allowed to sit in the corner of the room when the tutor prepped mistress’s daughter for entrance exams to the secondary school, Zoia’s daughter became obsessed with studying. She was determined to pass the examination and become a student. However, when she came to the school she was told that “secondary school is not for kitchen maid’s children.” The girl fell into depression and died a year later. “How lucky you are, domestic workers that you do not have to suffer as we did,” concludes the author.³¹²

³¹¹ Bulatov, “Kat’usha v otpusku,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 7 (1927): 14-15

³¹² Domrabortnitsa Zoia, “Stranichka iz proshlogo kukharki,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 6 (1925): 20-21.

The union journal *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* also published lists of recommended literature that in addition to brochures on the rights of domestic workers included short stories and even novels by contemporary Soviet and foreign writers as well as Russian classics. For instance, domestic workers were encouraged to read Anton Chekhov's *Sleepy* – a tragic story of a teenage peasant nanny who is so exhausted by the chores that she murders the baby in her charge. The story was “also recommended for reading out loud” at union meetings.³¹³ In a novel *Lina* by the Austrian writer Herminia Zur Mühlen, a maid is so depressed by her life in service she commits suicide.³¹⁴ The literature on the list served a clearly didactic purpose of convincing the readers that no other state is or has been as dedicated to protection of domestics' rights as the Soviet Union.

Stories about the suffering of domestic servants abroad added a global dimension to Soviet domestic workers' transformation. Like other workers, Soviet domestics were to be part of the global revolutionary process. *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* regularly published articles on the working conditions and professional movement of domestic servants abroad.³¹⁵ Most often than not, the main thrust of these publications was criticism of social-democratic parties and labor unions. Narpit members were also encouraged to donate money for striking workers in Europe.³¹⁶ In an article featuring active domestics - members of the union, a Soviet German Olga Bekker “dreams of

³¹³ “Chto chitat’?” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 5 (1927): 24.

³¹⁴ “Chto chitat’?” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 8 (1927): 24.

³¹⁵ Czechoslovakia, “S’ezd domashnei prislugi,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 4-5 (1923): 15; Bolgari’a, “Iz zhizni so’uza obschestvennoi i chastnoi prislugi,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 4-5 (1923): 16; Charles Eshli, “Domrabortnitsy v Anglii,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 4 (1927):14; “Polozhenie domrabortnits v Germanii,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 7 (1929): 1.

³¹⁶ “Domazhnie rabotnitsy – angliiskim rabochim,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 7 (1926): 23; “Soznatel’nost’ domashnikh rabotnits povyschaetsa,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 3 (1927): 17.

seeing her sisters in Germany as free as she is.”“I wish I could go to Germany if only for a day, - often says Bekker, - to tell my sisters what we, former slaves, have achieved in our USSR! Maybe I could make a few hundred workers communists.”³¹⁷

Many publications aimed at domestic workers focused on antireligious propaganda and fighting superstitions. A short story “Nanny Mar’ia” published in *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* describes a tragic death of a religious nanny who has put up with abuse from her employers in the hope of a reward in her afterlife. She refuses to challenge her employers’ authority by joining the union because all power comes from god. She is finally left to die in the cold basement of her employers’ house.³¹⁸ Here the trope of the obedient servant that rejects freedom is reworked to emphasize the role of religious prejudice in the persistence of the “lackey’s soul” phenomenon. Not only Orthodox Christianity but also elements of popular religion alarmed union activists. As one of them lamented, many domestics even after living in the city for several years held on to their “prejudice, superstitions, ignorance, faith in ‘wise women.’”³¹⁹ A contributor to the union journal reported that in the city of Kazan’ a union member took up fortune-telling and set up her business in her room at the dormitory for unemployed domestic workers which was a sign of local organization’s failure to conduct cultural work.³²⁰

Wall papers produced by local Narpit cells were another educational tool for teaching domestic workers how to read and write. They had similar content as *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* but with a strong emphasis on local stories. For example, in June of 1924 Leningrad labor inspection investigated the case of a certain Ginzburg who had

³¹⁷ “Vydvizhenki – domashnie rabotnitsy,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 5 (1927):8.

³¹⁸ Komarova, “Nan’ka Mar’ia,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 6 (1927):12.

³¹⁹ “Domrabotnitsa – zhertva babkia,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 7 (1929): 20.

³²⁰ “Net kul’traboty,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania*, 12 (1928): 24.

been exploiting her servant Belousova. In addition to common violations of the labor code such as unlimited work hours and failure to pay full salary, Ginzburg made Belousova rub her feet. During the investigation several of Ginzburg's former maids came forward, testifying that they too had been forced to perform this humiliating massage.³²¹ This story became the central piece of the wall newspaper of the group committee that oversaw the case. Even though Ginzburg had violated several labor laws, the article focused on the foot massage. While long work hours and low pay were an infringement on domestic worker's rights, the humiliating procedure of rubbing feet of the employer was an insult to her dignity.³²² The demand for respect for domestic workers' dignity was the central topic of many other publications. For instance, a publication in another wall newspaper denounced an employer who demanded that she was to be addressed "*barynia*" (my lady), made her domestic worker carry her umbrella and tie her shoelaces, and fed her with buckwheat while mistress's dog was given meat.³²³ Overall, the wall newspapers of the Leningrad group committees from 1924 preserved by the archive show that questions of everyday life and labor rights dominated the conversation. Realization of labor rights was depicted as a path to consciousness. As one of the contributors to the wall paper stated, thanks to the work of the union "domestic workers start feeling that they are cared about, and start catching up with female workers on the shop floor."³²⁴

In addition to literacy training, some local Narpit organized "circles" – an educational organization somewhere in between a club and a school. The most common

³²¹ TsGA SPb. F.R-4489, op.1, d.8, l.28. *Zaklucheniie po delu*.

³²² TsGA SPb. F.R-4487, op.6, d.16, l.64. *Kopii stenykh gazet 1go gruppoma*.

³²³ TsGA SPb. F.R-4487, op.9, d.41. l.22. *Po grecheskomu prospektu*.

³²⁴ TsGA SPb. F.R-4487, op.6, d.16, l.85. *Kopii stenykh gazet 2go gruppoma*.

were political literacy and sewing “circles” or sometimes a mixture of the two. Such a combination was not unique for Narpit: educators were encouraged to use the sewing circle as a way to attract women to union clubs and reading rooms where they could be educated while they were sewing.³²⁵ The choice of a sewing class as a way to appeal to female workers was, of course, based on the assumption that sewing was a natural vacation for women. Their labor was also used for the needs of the union. In Leningrad, domestic workers sewed curtains, lamp shades, costumes for the drama club and even uniforms for pioneers.³²⁶ Domestic workers found sewing classes attractive because they saw it as an opportunity to learn a marketable skill or at least to sew themselves a couple of new outfits.³²⁷ A worker correspondent from Samara reported that several of the domestic workers attending sewing classes were also saving up to buy a sewing machine and become dressmakers.³²⁸

Other “circles” included choir singing, theater, political education, first-aid, and even shooting. In big cities like Leningrad and Moscow, Narpit had its own clubs that hosted “circles.” It is difficult to say how many local organizations organized such “circles” and how well attended they were but *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* often published reports from local organizations celebrating “graduation” of another group of domestic workers from the first-aid group or the success of a Narpit theater group.

Theater seemed to be especially appealing to domestic workers. To celebrate the tenth anniversary of the October Revolution, a domestic worker Yablochkina wrote a

³²⁵ N. Evreinov, *Sostoianie i zadachi kul'turno-prosvetitel'nykh aboty professional'nykh soiuзов* (Moskva: Knigoizdatel'stvo VTsSPS, 1929), 83. A similar practice in village reading rooms is described in Charles E. Clark, *Uprooting Otherness*, 149.

³²⁶ Andreeva, “*Chto dala mne shkola kroiki i shit'a*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 5 (1926): 18.

³²⁷ E. Filippova, “*Kaki a nauchilas' kroit' i shit'*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 5 (1926): 18.

³²⁸ Poliaeva, “*Kak domrabortnitsa mozhет vydvnut'sa*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 3 (1929): 17.

play “Chasing the Union Membership Card” that humorously portrayed women who pretended to be domestic workers in order to receive advantages of union membership.³²⁹ A Kharkov union activist, Braginskii, wrote a four-act play about two domestic workers who successfully sued their employers for exploitation. The play concluded with domestic workers singing “The International.”³³⁰ Another popular play that was often staged by domestic workers’ theater collectives was “Whirlwind from the Kitchen,” by a second-rank Soviet writer Boris Bezdomnyi. It tells the story of a domestic servant who decides to join Narpit. Once a union member, she demands an eight-hour workday, days off, and a separate room. Even though the employers try to negotiate by offering a raise in salary and piano lessons, she refuses stating that she needs free time to attend union meetings and read books. The employers have to agree.³³¹ In 1927 Moscow Narpit club’s production of “Whirlwind from the Kitchen” received third prize in the all-Moscow contest of union theater groups.³³²

An important element of Bolsheviks’ cultural work among population was propaganda on personal hygiene.³³³ Although lectures on this topic at Narpit meetings were not as common as discussions of labor rights, when they were offered domestic workers responded with great interest. A lecturer on sexual hygiene invited by one of the local cells in Leningrad to speak to domestic workers had to answer questions including whether or not ectopic pregnancy existed, why women had discharge and back pains, why there was no passion during intercourse and how such lack of passion affected

³²⁹ “Kak proshel nash iubilei,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 12 (1927): 18.

³³⁰ GARF. F.R-6861, op.1, d.17, ll. 1-9. *P’esa Braginskogo B.M. “Prislugi.”*

³³¹ Boris Bezdomnyi, *Vikhr’s s kukhni* (Moskva: Teatral’noie izdatel’stvo, 1926).

³³² “Podgotovka k desiatiletiu Oktiabria,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 9(1927):2.

³³³ On the political dimension of the state campaign for personal hygiene, see Tricia Starks, *Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008).

woman's health.³³⁴ Following a lecture on "protection of maternity and infancy", domestic workers' questions ranged from whether or not to swaddle the baby to why it was legal to have an abortion.³³⁵ The choice of topics deemed appropriate for domestic workers derived from their place in the Soviet society as women. Even though many of them were nannies and therefore looking after children was their professional responsibility, nothing in the documents suggests that they were part of any kind of "professional training." Domestic workers were addressed as current or future mothers whose duty was to take care of their body and their children in a rational, hygienic way.

Joining a "circle" or attending an evening literacy program required a certain commitment. The majority of unionized domestic workers participated in union activities from time to time, coming to meetings and concerts when their busy schedule allowed or simply when they felt like it. Local organizations sometimes tried to pressure domestic workers to be more dedicated union members. In Minsk, Narpit staged a public trial for a domestic worker who was not active in the union; in Dnepropetrovsk – for a domestic worker who refused to study.³³⁶ These coercive measures were an exception rather than the rule. While domestic workers were suspect for developing a "special psyche" that was to be transformed into "class consciousness," under the conditions of NEP they were mostly perceived as victims of socio-economic circumstances that needed to be protected from bourgeois influence of their employers as well as exploitation.

Lenin's Kitchen Maid

³³⁴ TsGA SPb. F.R-4490, op.1, d.116, l.1. *Protokol obshchego sobraniia domrabotnits 2go gruppkoma.*

³³⁵ TsGA SPb. F.R-4489, op.1, d.50, l.2. *Protokol No.1 obshchego sobraniia domashnikh rabotnits 1go gruppkoma.*

³³⁶ K. Nikitina, "God raboty mestkoma"; Rabkor Narpitovets, "Vecher likvidatsii negramotnosti v klube," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 3 (1927):17.

Lenin and his alleged call to kitchen maids loomed large in the enlightenment campaign among domestic workers. Narpit activists did not fail to see the relevance of the slogan “Every kitchen maid should learn to rule the state” to the life of domestic workers. As the Zhenotdel representative stated at a meeting of domestic workers of Volodarskii district in Lenigrad: “The slogan of our genius teacher and friend comrade Lenin ‘Every kitchen maid should learn to rule the state’ should become a commandment for all domestic workers.”³³⁷ A careful reading of the union journal, *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*, shows that Narpit activists had been using Lenin’s kitchen maid to address the question of bringing domestic servants to the union and protecting their rights before Maiakovskii reinvented Lenin’s kitchen maid as a symbol of women’s emancipation in his 1925 poem “Vladimir Il’ich Lenin.” An article by a certain Fal’kov from Tula published in early 1923 already contains a reference to Lenin. Having described the difficulties local Narpit organization had to overcome to recruit domestics to the union and make their employers sign labor contracts, Fal’kov concludes: “Thus, we are fulfilling Lenin’s slogan [that] ‘every servant (*prisluga*) must know how to run the government.”³³⁸ Tellingly, there is nothing in the article about educational activities for domestic servants other than a brief mentioning of a plan to open a literacy school. In 1923 teaching domestic workers about their rights was the main tool of raising their consciousness.

The popularity of Maiakovskii’s 1925 poem triggered an outpouring of texts that urged domestic workers to respond to Lenin’s call. Protocols of union meetings of domestic workers show that Narpit activists took pains to familiarize domestics with

³³⁷ TsGA SPb. F.R-4491, op.1, d.11, l.64. *Protokol obshchego sobraniia domrabotnits Volodarskogo raiona 9 iuliia sego goda.*

³³⁸ E. Fal’kov, “Tula. Rabota sredi domashnei prislugi,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 2 (1923): 9.

Lenin's commandment that spoke directly to them. Lectures on "Lenin, the party and the female worker" were delivered with speakers bringing special attention to "Lenin's words that every domestic worker should learn to rule the state."³³⁹ Members of the Moscow Narpit drawing club created their own representation of the Lenin's quote. The poster depicts Lenin speaking from a tribune with giant heads of three smiling women in kerchiefs in front of him. The poster was intended for celebratory demonstrations and was featured on the cover of the first issue of the union journal of 1926.³⁴⁰



Fig. 13 Poster on the cover of the union journal. "Every Kitchen Maid Must Learn How to Rule the State," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 1 (1926): Cover.

Lenin's kitchen maid became ubiquitous in publications about domestic workers. In an article entitled "Working by Lenin's Commandments" worker correspondent L. states that while only a year ago it was impossible to make domestic workers come to a union meeting, now they are actively involved in union's life. She also notes that the number of women delegates at the latest Narpit All-union congress was significantly bigger than at the previous one. She concludes: "This is a great achievement. It shows that

³³⁹ TsGA SPb. F.R-4489, op.1, d.41, l.1. *Protokol obshchego sobraniia domrabotnits* 13 ianvaria 1925.

³⁴⁰ *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 1 (1926): Cover.

we are really working by Il'ich's commandment, who said that 'every kitchen maid must learn to rule the state.'"³⁴¹ Another contributor pleaded domestic workers not be late for classes arranged by the union, asking rhetorically: "Don't you know the Vladimir Il'ich's commandment that 'every kitchen maid must know how to rule the state?'"³⁴² A domestic worker correspondent, Berlovich, having described active participation of domestic workers in a regional union conference, even concluded that "in Soviet Russia even a kitchen maid is really starting to take part in running the state."³⁴³

A brochure *Domestic Worker* published by the All-Union Council of Trade Unions in 1928 opened with "greetings to domestic workers from Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaiia." Lenin's widow, in her speech dedicated to the All-Women's Day in 1925, is quoted to call for special attention to the needs of domestic workers, stating that due to isolation it was difficult for them to "become conscious." "For a good reason did Vladimir Iliich say in his famous phrase that 'in Soviet Russia every kitchen maid must learn to rule the state.'"³⁴⁴ Whether or not Krupskaiia actually said that is unclear – the speech is absent from all the published or archival collections. Perhaps the author of the brochure – an educational activist A.Z. Bogomazova – did hear Krupskaiia speak in 1925 and reconstructed her words using the imagination of an experienced propagandist. In any case, Lenin's kitchen maid seemed to be a powerful symbol for Bogomazova. She used it again to conclude her next brochure *Cultural Work Among Domestic Workers*: "The more seriously and attentively our activists study methods and organization of work [...] the quicker the cultural level of the masses of

³⁴¹ Rabkor L. "Rabota po zavetam il'icha," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 1 (1925): 13.

³⁴² Rabotnitsa Kataeva, "Ne opazdyvaite!" *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 1 (1925): 14.

³⁴³ Rabkorka-domrabotnitsa Berkovich, "Odin-tri," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 6 (1925): 8.

³⁴⁴ Z.A. Bogomazova, *Domashniaia rabotnitsa*, 3.

domestic workers improves, the sooner we will fulfil Ilich's commandment: 'In the Soviet state every kitchen maid must learn to rule the state.'³⁴⁵

The kitchen maid as a symbol of the struggles of the downtrodden had an international dimension. A piece "Bolshevik Kitchen Maid (A Letter from London)" published by the All-Union Council of Trade Unions newspaper *Trud* tells a story of a female cook Jane Baker – a "representative of the most slave-like and poorly organized professions." Jane had lived a miserable life in a home of a wealthy Londoner, until she heard a powerful speech on the suffering of domestic servants at Hyde Park. Realizing that she did not want her son to grow up a slave, she quit her job and went to work for a suffragette. Later on she joined the Labor Party but was quickly disappointed with its politics and is now an active member of the International Red Aid – a social service organization under the auspices of the Communist International. She reads communist newspaper *Workers' Weekly* and sells postcards to collect money for arrested communists. Even though she is not a member of the communist party, "there is no doubt that the next day after the revolution she will take her post."³⁴⁶ In other words, once a true socialist revolution overthrows the pseudo-democratic regime, Jane Baker – a kitchen maid would be running the state.

Lenin often appeared in letters from domestic workers published by *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*. As Choi Chatterjee has argued, "rank-and-file women workers in the Soviet Union used their attachment to the person and the public memory of Lenin to

³⁴⁵ Z.A. Bogomazova, *Kul'turnaia rabota sredi domashnikh rabotnits* (Moskva, Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoie izdatel'stvo, 1929), 68.

³⁴⁶ Ye.D. "Kucharka-bol'shevichka", *Trud*, March 7, 1926, 2.

demonstrate their loyalty to the Bolsheviks.”³⁴⁷ Women would tell stories of their chance meeting with the great leader or describe their personal transformation once they got acquainted with his ideas. While few if any domestic workers could claim that they had met Lenin, his alleged call for kitchen maids to study and take part in running the country created the feeling of a personal relationship between Lenin and every domestic worker. “I am only sixteen years old but I know that I will fulfil Lenin’s commandment, I will study and attend classes in the youth club,” wrote domestic worker Anna Burilova in her contribution to the union journal.³⁴⁸ By responding to Lenin’s call to study domestic workers like Burilova could show that they too worthy of being full-flung members of the Soviet collective.

The kitchen maid’s transformation into a symbol of women’s emancipation was part of the greater propaganda campaign that portrayed Lenin as an advocate for women’s needs launched by Bolshevik women activists who were involved in the work of the party’s women’s section – Zhenotdel. Zhenotdel activists used the burgeoning Lenin’s cult to legitimize their work by portraying Lenin as having special interest in the “woman question.” His work was widely cited by advocates of party’s greater attention to the special needs of Soviet women as women.³⁴⁹ Thus, Lenin’s promise to educate every kitchen maid so that she could run the government, rescued from the oblivion by Vladimir Maiakovskii, turned into one of the most popular slogans of the early Soviet efforts to liberate women. In a similar way, Narpit activists appropriated Lenin’s slogan

³⁴⁷ Choi Chatterjee, *Celebrating Women: Gender, Festival Culture, and Bolshevik Ideology* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2002), 77.

³⁴⁸ Anna Burilova, “Soiuz pomog,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 4 (1925): 21.

³⁴⁹ Choi Chatterjee, *Celebrating Women*, 73-76.

to emphasize the need for greater attention to the plight of domestic workers and create a sense of belonging to the revolutionary project among them.

Writing Domestic Workers' Revolutionary History

When domestic worker Korabliova argued for the right of domestic workers to have their own living quarters at Moscow regional Narpit conference in 1926 she appealed, among other things, to domestic workers' participation in the revolutionary events: "We were also in the ranks, we also dethroned the idol."³⁵⁰ Although Korabliova did not claim that she herself took part in overthrowing the tsar, she argued that other domestics did, thus making all maids and nannies part of the great revolutionary project. Domestic servants' revolutionary history made them legitimate members of the working class and Korabliova's statement was a reminder for everyone who thought otherwise.

The study of history was a major component of Narpit's effort to transform domestic servants into workers. It served two purposes: integrating domestic workers into the transformative narrative of the revolution and helping them imagine themselves as revolutionary actors. The history of domestic workers' movement that Narpit activists wrote in the 1920s was part of the greater narrative of the revolution but was also different from it. Unlike the mainstream foundational narrative that centered around the "Great October Revolution of 1917," the revolutionary history of domestic workers focused on the events of 1905 – the First Russian revolution. The difference suggests the variability of the revolutionary master narrative as it was linked to various constituencies.

³⁵⁰ TsGA SPb, F. R-4487, op.9, d.28, l.301. *Stenograficheskii otchet 8go gubsiyezda Moskovskogo otdela profsoiuza TsK Narpiti 15 ianvaria 1926-21 ianvaria 1926.*

As Frederick Corney has shown, writing “correct” revolutionary history and establishing the story of the October Revolution as a genuine proletarian revolution enacted by historically minded masses was one of the major ideological tasks of the Bolshevik regime.³⁵¹ Earlier events of 1903-1917 served as a pre-revolutionary pedigree, portraying October, as Corney writes, “as the culmination of an organic revolutionary movement within the Russian Empire, directed by a conscious revolutionary agent – the coherent and inspired Bolshevik party.”³⁵² Thus, though the story of October was central to the Bolshevik interpretation of Russian history as the foundational narrative of their state, preceding decades remained an important component of what Yael Zerubavel has called “the master commemorative narrative,” which she defines as “a broader view of history, a basic ‘story line’ that is culturally constructed and provides the group members with the general notion of their shared past.”³⁵³ In the early Soviet case the master commemorative narrative served as one of the pillars of a class identity for an “imagined community” of the proletariat. The pre-1917 events were of special significance for the Soviet professional unions that in the 1920s were struggling to maintain their identity as workers’ organizations. For them, it was the formation of the first Russian labor unions during the revolutionary events of 1905 was the foundational event.

In November of 1920 The Fifth All-Union Conference of Labor Unions established the Commission on the Study of the History of Professional Movements in Russia (Istprof). In June of 1921 it sent out a letter to all labor unions’ central committees that explained the urgency of writing the history of Soviet labor unions and ordered the

³⁵¹ Frederick C. Corney, *Telling October: Memory and the Making of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

³⁵² *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁵³ Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 6.

creation of Istprof commissions in all unions: “Considering the extreme importance of studying the history of professional union movements in Russia for solving its current problems as well as for preparation of conscious union cadres, the Secretariat of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions suggests that all professional unions pay serious and adequate attention to studying the history of the union movement and collecting its materials.”³⁵⁴ From now on all union organizations were required not only to send two copies of all their published materials to the Istprof headquarters in Moscow but to “take drastic and energetic measures to preserve their archives and search for local materials and archives of the union movement (official and private) from the prerevolutionary period.” Thus, Istprof as a historical endeavor was conceived as a tool to solve contemporary issues of training “conscious union cadres.” By mobilizing the past for the needs of the present, Istprof hoped to place the unions and its members within the Marxist historical trajectory.

In January of 1922 Narpit Central Committee sent out a circular letter that announced the creation of a commission that would be studying union history. The letter noted that there was a lot of work to be done since at the moment the Central Committee had no historical materials.³⁵⁵ The central task was to write a unified revolutionary history of Narpit as a workers’ union that would include all different labor groups that constituted the core of its membership: waiters, male cooks, maintenance workers and domestic workers.

Most of the texts produced by the Narpit Istprof section were written around 1925 to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the First Russian Revolution. One of the

³⁵⁴ As quoted by Iurii Konstantinovich Milonov in *Rabochii klass i raboch’e dvizheni’e v Rossii: istoria i sovremennost’*. Ed. A.V. Buzgalina, D.O. Tchurakova, P.Shul’tze (Moskva: Slovo, 2002), 288.

³⁵⁵ TsGA SPb. F.R-4487, op.6, d.16, l.27. *Tsirkuliarno*.

challenges in writing domestic workers into its history was that more often than not Narpit historians had little to say about domestic servants before the 1920s: there had been no trade union activity in their region or, perhaps, no sources to tell about it. In order to explain the absence of the most numerous members of the union in its history the authors employed the Marxist concept of class consciousness. According to certain Dubovichev, author of the Narpit history in the city of Odessa, domestic servants “being the most dispersed and culturally backward element in comparison to other workers, constantly under close supervision of their employers and exploiters of different ranks, were incapable of comprehending and making sense of their position and thereby remained outside of the workers’ movement.”³⁵⁶

To compensate for this absence in the pre-1917 part of the narrative some of the Istprof historians decided to focus on the successes of unionization of domestic servants in Soviet Russia. The history of Yaroslavl domestics begins in 1923 when local Narpit organization started recruiting them into the union. Home visits, union meetings and even a public trial of a Nepman charged with exploitation and physical abuse of his maid – all these activities, according to the author of the Narpit history in Yaroslavl, “showed to domestics not in word but in deed that the union is truly striving to protect their interests and the authority of the union began to grow.”³⁵⁷ Thus, domestic servants were still connected to the revolutionary past as beneficiaries of the revolutionary present. The proletarian consciousness they had lacked twenty years ago was now awakened.

³⁵⁶ GARF, F. R.6861, op.1, d.21, l.1. Dubovich, *Istoriia vozniknovenia i deiatel'nosti professional'nogo so'юза Narpit v g. Odesse v 1904-1923 g.*

³⁵⁷ GARF, F. R.6861, op.1, d.33, l.138. *Kratkaia istoriia organizatsii Yaroslavskogo Gubernskogo Otdelenia Vserossiiskogo Professional'nogo So'юза Rabotnikov Narodnogo Pitaniia.*

Yet, some regional organizations could boast a more exciting history of domestics' involvement in the revolutionary activity of 1905. Those were organizations in large urban centers such as those in Moscow, Leningrad or Iekaterinoslavl' (Ukraine). Narpit historians in those organizations were able to produce much more detailed accounts of domestic servants' revolutionary history. They followed a more or less unified schema that emphasized the continuity between servants' struggle for rights under tsarism and the work of Narpit activists in the 1920s.

A mandatory component of all histories of domestic workers' movement was a detailed description of their labor under the old regime, as "to construct a barrier between the new beginning and the old tyranny is to recollect the old tyranny."³⁵⁸ *The Outline of the History of the Leningrad Organization, 1905-1918* reproduced a proclamation to domestic servants published in 1905 in *Novaia Zhizn'* that opened with a statement that "Life is hard for all workers, but our life is harder than that of many others."³⁵⁹ The first section of the 1930 article *On the Legal and Economic Status of Domestic Servants and the Revolutionary Movement among Them in 1905* told the readers about domestics' terrible working conditions, poor housing, physical and sexual abuse. All these aspects of exploitation were illustrated with excerpts from pre-revolutionary newspapers.

In all the narratives pre-revolutionary domestic workers were portrayed as exploited, illiterate, and backward. Only the sweeping events of 1905 woke them from their slumber. Seeing factory workers unionize and act, domestic workers slowly began to "comprehend their position" and think about collectively protecting their own interests. "Revolutionary escalation of 1905 stirred up the most backward part of the proletariat –

³⁵⁸ Paul Connerton, *How Societies Remember* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 10.

³⁵⁹ GARF, F. R.6861, op.1, d.33, l.24. *Ocherk po istorii Leningradskoi organizatsii*.

domestic workers”, stated the *Outline of History of the Leningrad Organization, 1905-1918*. Authors of this text acknowledged that certain organizations of domestics existed before 1905 but dismissed them as self-help groups for privileged well-to-do servants that did not include “the masses” and did not participate in the revolutionary events.³⁶⁰ Only certain manifestations of worker’s solidarity deserved to become part of the grand commemorative narrative – those that in the eyes of the narrator were ‘revolutionary’. Beneficiaries of the old regime, including well-to-do domestics that served in aristocratic homes – the servile “lackeys”, were not.

The demand for regulation of domestics’ labor was the defining feature of those servants’ organization that Narpit historians saw as revolutionary. Detailed chronological accounts of meetings, strikes, proclamations and demands constituted the bulk of the narratives. The revolutionary period of 1905 was followed by the time of reaction. Like many other unions, organizations of domestics fell apart, unable to resist the anti-labor measures of the state. The author of the *Page from History of the Yekaterinoslav Organization* gave a more nuanced explanation for the collapse of the domestic servants’ union. He argued that not only absence of a strong organization but weak connection between different kinds of domestics, mostly between village girls who had just arrived in the city and did not participate in the protests and the “more developed” city dwellers prevented domestics from forming a workable union.³⁶¹ In other words, peasant women did not possess the class consciousness that was necessary for creation of a successful revolutionary organization.

³⁶⁰ GARF, F. R.6861, op.1, d.33, l.3. *Ocherk po istorii Leningradskoi organizatsii*.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, l. 73.

The Page from History of the Iekaterinoslav' Organization was limited to the story of 1905-1906. Most of the Narpit histories went all the way into the Great October and beyond, making the First Russian Revolution just the starting point of the great revolutionary project. However, descriptions of domestics' involvement in the events of 1917 were much more limited than of their activities in 1905-1906 and mostly came down to the general statements about domestics' support of the revolution. This very modest portrayal of servants' participation in the Revolution of 1917 seems to be an adequate representation of historic reality: there was little activity among domestics 1917 if compared to 1905. At the same time, this imbalance signified the importance of the First Russian Revolution for the union movement, collective memory and identity of its member.

It is hard to say to what extent these historic narratives were accessible to soviet domestic workers. There is no information on how these articles were distributed. Most likely, the bulk of their readership was union activists which corresponded to Istprof's goal of preparing "conscious union cadres." The main source of 'historical knowledge' and the main tool of constructing collective memory for rank-and-file members of the union was the union magazine *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*. To commemorate the revolution of 1905 it published a series of documents from the Leningrad Istprof collection: a list of demands made by St. Petersburg domestics, a description of a joint meeting of domestic servants, janitors and other personnel from one of the newspaper articles, a proclamation that describes terrible working and living conditions of servants (the same proclamation that was reproduced in the history of the Leningrad organization) and a brief description of the reaction of the bourgeoisie to the protests, their attempts to

stop their servants from participation in strikes.³⁶² All of these materials were presented in a strictly documentary mode – as objective scientific facts. A photograph of the Neva embankment with crowds of people gathering for a demonstration not only made the story more ‘documentary’ in nature but also put it in the wider context of the all-Russian revolutionary movement.



Fig. 14 “1905 in Leningrad. On the Neva Embankment,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 12 (1925): 12.

The collection also included two drawings with captions that told one particular episode of domestics’ struggle against exploitation. Police officers come to disperse a meeting of female servants. Having been kicked out of the premises they go to the public steam bath where they draft their demands. This episode was mentioned in the Leningrad history and the general history of the labor movement of domestics, mostly for its “ingenuity” rather than its significance.³⁶³ Although it was not the most important meeting in the events of 1905 in the magazine publication, it gained symbolic significance. It was an act of defiance to the state’s authority and moments of revolutionary unity.

³⁶² “Domashnaya Rabotnitsa v 1905 g.,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 12 (1925): 21-22.

³⁶³ GARF, F. R.6861, op.1, d.33, l.25. *Ocherk po istorii Leningradskoi organizatsii.*

The story, unlike the rest of the documentary material in the collection, was visual. It was told through two drawings: the first one depicted agitated women in a room with a policeman and the second one portrayed naked women in the steam bath, one of them on top of a table, making a speech. The lack of photographs from the period that would document servants' participation in protests and strikes, undoubtedly, limited visual imagery available for the magazine editors. The decision to substitute drawings for photographs was probably partly a response to these limitations - the only drawings *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* usually published were cartoons mocking nepmen and other exploiters. At the same time drawings together with the episode, they added an emotional dimension to the cold scientific facts. Since many union members were semi-literate these drawings could help them understand and relate to the story. Nakedness of the women in the second picture was completely asexual: there were just contours of bodies. After all, the audience they were painted for was overwhelmingly female. This nakedness symbolized the “naked truth” of suffering and revolutionary protest.

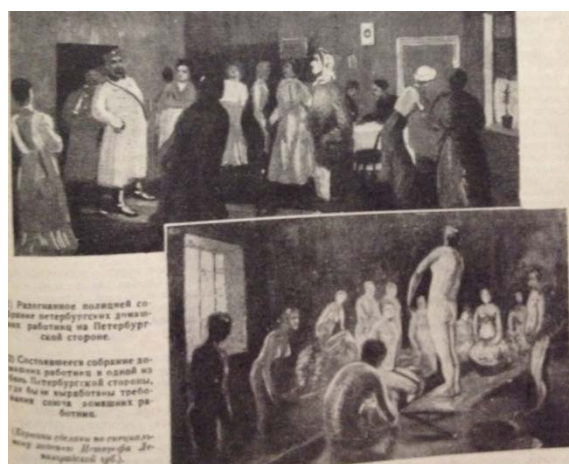


Fig. 15 “Police officers talking to domestic workers of the Petersburg district of Saint Petersburg;” “The meeting of domestic workers in one of the steam houses in the Petersburg district where they drafted the demands of the domestic workers’ union,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 12 (1925): 21.

To make the revolutionary narrative of 1905 more personalized the magazine published individual stories – reminiscences of real people as well as works of fiction. As scholars of autobiographical memory have noted, “reminiscing is a fundamental process for establishing our sense of self and our relationships with other.”³⁶⁴ Soliciting and then publishing the reminiscences of rank-and-file members of the union brought individual and collective memory together, making them shape each other in a way that was different from how evenings of collective remembering did. A domestic worker (or perhaps a former domestic worker and now a full-time union activist) that submitted her reminiscences to the union newspaper publicly claimed the revolution, first and foremost for herself, but also for other domestics whose experience her writing was supposed to reflect. She was the living embodiment of the revolution but she was also speaking for domestic workers as a group, as part of the revolutionary proletariat. A former maid told the readers of *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* about a ‘strike’ of domestics in a small town in Belarus. While organizing the strike her comrades realized that one of the maids was a snitch so they decided they had to use “terror” and beat up the traitor.³⁶⁵ Mostly of the story, however, is about exploitation, not about protesting or organizing. In fact, all the author had to say about the revolution of 1905 were a few clichés and nothing on the role of domestic servants in it.

The small number of domestics’ reminiscences published can be explained by the fact that very few of those who participated in the events of 1905 were still in the union. Moreover, not all of the stories former servants were eager to share fitted the ideological

³⁶⁴ Robyn Fivush, Catherine Haden, and Elaine Reese, “Remembering, recounting, and reminiscing: The development of autobiographical memory in social context,” in *Remembering our past: Studies in Autobiographical Memory*. Ed. by David C. Rubin. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 342.

³⁶⁵ N. Garelik, “1905 v gorode Minske (Vospominania domashnei rabotnitsy),” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 2 (1926): 23.

framework. For example, in the draft of an autobiographical story by a former chef, Ivan Zudin, preserved in the Istprof collection, a significant chunk of the text is spent on the role of his master – a landlord and his progressive friends played in educating him about the revolution and helping him become a revolutionary himself. This part of the story, however, was cut out of the version published in *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*.³⁶⁶ The servant was supposed to be awakened by the proletariat, not progressive landlords.

While there were very few domestic workers – members of Narpit who were willing to share stories of 1905, fictional characters were to fill the gap. Several short stories were published in *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* and a few more came out in volumes by contemporary Soviet writers.³⁶⁷ The short stories were not limited to the First Russian Revolution but incorporated a wide range from events in the Bolshevik Revolutionary teleology: the events of 1917 and the Civil War. These pieces of fiction were the ‘ideal’ personal stories, describing the past not necessarily how it was but how it ought to have been. To a great extent their plot structures mirrored the ‘historical’ narratives but added a personal touch. The protagonist is always a female. Her proletarian conscience is awakened by a male – a worker, a soldier, or a male servant.³⁶⁸ She then immediately understands that he was “one of us” which is a sign of her developing proletarian consciousness. Soon he ‘converts’ her into the revolution. The maid often

³⁶⁶ GARF. F.R6861, op.1, d.66, l.39. *Vospominania o revoliutsionnom dvizhenii ofitsiantov, povarov, sluzhaschikh traktirnykh povedeni, domashnei prislugi Kostromy, Nikolaeva, Rostova-na-donu i drugikh gorodov v 1905-1905 gg.*

³⁶⁷ Short stories, published in collected volumes: N. Gladyshev, “K svoim,” in *K Novoi Zhisni: Sbornik iz zhizni truzhenits* (Moskva: Izdatel'stvo VTsSPS, 1926), 69-84; M. Volkov, “Osada,” in Mikhail Volkov, *Dubie. Rasskazy*. (Moskva: Zemlia i fabrika, 1924).

³⁶⁸ Several scholars have noted that in the 1920s revolution was represented as hyper-masculine. This way these male characters were an embodiment of the revolution. On revolution and gender see Orlando Figes, Boris Kolonitskii, *Interpreting the Russian Revolution: The Language and Symbols of 1917* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 110; Eliot Borenstein, *Men without Women: Masculinity and Revolution in Russian Fiction, 1917-1929* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

helps at a crucial moment in the struggle with the counterrevolutionary forces: hides secret documents or pours hot water on the “whites” attacking the house. To emphasize the place of sacrifice as an integral part of the revolution there could be some drama: in the short story the handsome doorman Vanya dies in the hands of his beloved maid Zina, whom he has recently introduced to the world of underground revolutionaries.³⁶⁹ But the triumph of the Revolution is inevitable and so is the change in the life of domestics: “From a miserable slave the domestic servant after the October revolution turned into a woman citizen, building on par with men the magnificent building called socialism!”³⁷⁰

These narratives, whether they were “objective” union histories, personal reminiscences or fictional stories emphasized domestic workers’ belonging to revolutionary history. One of their purposes was to foster proletarian consciousness among domestic servants, and another to legitimize domestic servants as part of the Soviet proletariat in the eyes of other workers.

Conclusion

“I am afraid that my letter will seem boring to the readers but I am still asking the editors to publish it because I think it will be useful for our readers, especially if it is read by members of the local committees or delegates at the meetings of domestic workers,” wrote domestic worker Burtseva from the Tambov province in her letter to the union journal *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*. Until 1924 she was ignorant: she could barely read and did not know what Narpit was. She was not aware that she “had the right to study and take part in running the state”. What was worse, under the influence of her employers and

³⁶⁹ S. Lyudina, “Vospominaniia domashnei rabotnitsy,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 10(1925):17-18.

³⁷⁰ “Domashnaia rabotnitsa v proshlom i nastoyashem,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 3 (1926): 2.

because of her ignorance she cursed the new regime and wished for the old times to come back. “I had no idea, what the Soviet power means for me and what I, a domestic worker, mean for my state,” wrote Burtseva. But when in 1924 she learned about the union she realized that she was “guilty towards Soviet power” for being ignorant. She joined the union, learned to read and write and is now a member of the board of the Narpit regional organization and a delegate to the city Soviet. Burtseva is an embodiment of Lenin’s promise – a domestic worker who is now taking part in “running the state.” Her story is a quintessential darkness to light narrative. It is also presented as a model for other domestics to whom it should be read at meetings.

Tellingly, there is nothing in the letter on Burtseva finding employment outside domestic service. Although some other publications did talk about domestic workers moving into union position or getting a job in a state cafeteria, there was no union support for helping domestics acquire a new profession. Neither was there a call to abolish domestic service even though it was still very much connected with the embourgeoisment discourse. As Sheila Fitzpatrick has noted, Bolshevik ideology initially implied that “the highest aim of an individual worker should presumably be to raise the level of his ‘proletarian consciousness’ rather than to improve his social status.”³⁷¹

Domestic workers were to acquire a new self while in service.

As domestic worker Dvenkina, quoted in the beginning of the chapter, noted in her letter she was not as useful as she could be for the Soviet state because she was not yet fully “developed.” For Dvenkina, her usefulness for the state was determined by her consciousness, not her labor. The centrality of labor in personal identity in the Soviet Union that Stephen Kotkin has showed in his study of 1930s Magnitogorsk, is much less

³⁷¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and Social Mobility in the Soviet Union*, 4.

pronounced if we look at the construction of identity for domestic workers in the 1920s.³⁷² Instead, class consciousness and engagement in Bolshevik politics define a Soviet (domestic) worker. Moreover, there was a fear of *tsekhovschina* – a craft-based identity. The absence of labor in the evaluation of “usefulness” of domestic workers becomes even more obvious when juxtaposed to the lengthy explanations of its role in socialist economy in the 1930s.

³⁷² Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 150.

Chapter 4. Domestic Workers into “Real” Workers.

In October 1929 the All-Union Congress passed a resolution to add a supplementary sheet for domestic workers to the union journal.³⁷³ Later on it was transformed into a newspaper *Domashniaia Rabotnitsa* (Domestic Worker) that came out three times a month between March and December during the 1930s.³⁷⁴ It had been two years since the country had embarked on an ambitious Five-Year Plan of forced industrialization. The New Economic Policy with its market elements had been curtailed: private businesses of Nepmen were shut down and agriculture was being collectivized. Labor relations were to be transformed with the introduction of socialist competition for the largest contribution to the building of socialist economy to replace capitalist competition for profit. The country was shaken by the first wave of purges that aimed to cleanse Party and Soviet institutions from alien elements that had penetrated them during NEP. The union leadership was under assault and the whole system of Soviet professional unions was being reconfigured. The party had intensified its efforts to transform the population into New Soviet Men and Women through new socio-cultural initiatives.

It is in this context the editorial board of *Domashniaia Rabotnitsa* chose to publish a “letter from a domestic worker” entitled “How can I become useful to society?” as a central piece of the first issue and called for responses from its readers. Such thematic discussions were a common practice in Soviet press, including Narpit publications. They started with a somewhat provocative publication and the editors’ call

³⁷³ “O nashem zhurnale,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 10(1929):21.

³⁷⁴ “Vykhodit s marta,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 10(1930):1.

to “rank-and-file domestic servants and delegates as well as low-level union workers” to join the conversation.³⁷⁵ Local union cells organized readings and discussions of the article and sent their reports, which often included names of individual domestics and what they had to say on the issue, to the journal or newspaper. The editors selected reports for publication making sure that different opinions were presented. The discussion ended with an article written by one of the union leaders that drew “correct” conclusions to the discussion. These discussions mobilized domestics around burning issues of their lives, gave them an opportunity to speak up but at the same time provided them with ideologically correct guidelines.

The piece selected for *Domashniaia Rabotnitsa* started with a question: “As a member of Narpit I ask the editors to explain if a domestic worker can be useful for the Soviet state.” The author complained that everyone was participating in socialist competition but “who am I going to compete with? With my girlfriends? For the best clean-up or the best laundering of my mistress’s clothes? What will it do for the Soviet state?” She also had other questions: “Can I join the brigades [to go to the village to aid with collectivization or to clean institutions from the enemies of the Soviet state]? What do I understand in the work of an institution or a Soviet? In what way can I be useful for the club or the Komsomol?” The author could not find a place for herself in the new projects of industrialization and collectivization, stating that her labor was “the worst.” She concluded that the only thing the future held for her was marriage to “the first man” she came across.³⁷⁶

³⁷⁵ “*Obsujdaem stat’u t. M. Borisovoi,*” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 8 (1927): 9

³⁷⁶ GARF, F.5452, op.14, d.136, l.101. *Kak mne stat’ poleznoi obschestvu.*

The following issues published several responses to the letter. A certain Raisa Golubeva from Moscow warned domestic workers against marriage. In Golubeva's opinion, a married woman was still a servant—this time to her husband. Instead, Golubeva advised domestics to follow her example and start learning a valuable skill: to sew, knit, embroider or make hats. This way they could become truly independent and no one would ever mockingly call them “nannycomplex” (*nan'trest*) or “kitchencomplex” (*kukhtrest*) again.³⁷⁷ Domestic worker Chugunkova was even more critical. She argued that there was so much a domestic worker could do: organize socialist competitions for best attendance of union meetings or mastery of literacy. Soviet power had given domestic workers the opportunity to attend clubs, join public organizations and participate in the work of city Soviets. The letter concluded with a call to all domestic workers who were unsure about “how to be useful for their state and their class” to join the Komsomol.³⁷⁸

The original “letter” was signed by a “Maria Ivanova” from Leningrad. However, the salary slip preserved in the archive showed that an honorarium of ten rubles for the article went to a certain Popeliukher—most likely, a low-ranking journalist or a union activist contracted to write a piece for the newspaper.³⁷⁹ Even though “Maria Ivanova” was a fake (and it is impossible to say who wrote the responses), the questions the “letter” brought up were very real. The decision of the editorial board to start a discussion on the usefulness of paid domestic labor for the Soviet state was not simply a way to mobilize domestic workers for the new state goals but an attempt to respond to the crisis

³⁷⁷ GARF, F.5452, op.14, d.136, l.31. *Nado vyuchitsa drugoi rabote.*

³⁷⁸ GARF, F.5452, op.14, d.136, l.31-32. *Nepravda – rabota dlia vseh naidetsa.*

³⁷⁹ GARF, F.5452, op.14, d.136, l.40. *Vedomost' na gonorar po No.1 gazety "Domashniaia rabotnitsa" za 1930 god.*

among domestic workers who rejected domestic service—a tendency that had existed since mid-1920s but reached an unprecedented scale during the first years of industrialization.

In the following chapter I will analyze the opportunities and challenges of the First Five-Year plan for domestic workers. I argue that during the first years of industrialization the domestic worker was reimagined at the bottom of the social ladder. Paid domestic labor was portrayed as the first step to “real” work outside the home. On the one hand, the new policy of mobilization of domestic workers into industry and the service sector created new opportunities for women employed in domestic service. On the other hand, it rendered housework meaningless for the socialist project.

“We do not want to be slaves forever”

In April 1928 *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* published a letter from a certain Tamara Popova from a small town of Naro-Fominsk titled simply “Letter from a domestic worker.” The letter responded to an earlier publication that proposed to cancel unemployment benefits for domestic workers who refused to take new jobs in domestic service. According to Popova, there was nothing surprising about women who had been working in private homes looking for other options. A domestic worker had trouble receiving permission from her employers to attend evening courses and union meetings, had to cater to all her mistress’s whims and was constantly threatened with dismissal. Moreover, the sole fact that she was a domestic worker made her a joke in the eyes of others because she would never have a chance to do anything else. “A domestic worker like any other person wants a better life, to have a household of her own and get

married,” wrote Popova. But marriage is also not an option because “she has nothing” and is “underdeveloped” (*nerazvita*). Therefore, instead of teaching domestics workers how to be better nannies or cooks, the union should provide them with marketable skills and help them “find a new path in life.”³⁸⁰

Popova’s letter received a range of responses from other domestics and union activists. Some criticized Popova for excessive pessimism and unrealistic demands. Domestic worker- delegate from Vitebsk A. Rusakova argued that unemployed domestics who refused to go back into service were irresponsible and gave a bad name to all domestic workers. Since there were not enough jobs for everyone in the industry, domestic workers were to do their job well so that their employers would allow them to study in the evenings. The end goal was to become “good union workers.” Rusakova also mocked Popova for expecting the union to find her a fiancé.³⁸¹ Domestic worker Shapiro from Baku noted that the picture Popova had painted was too bleak: while there were women who had been domestic workers for several decades and could not see a way out, the Soviet power had provided domestics with multiple opportunities to better themselves through education and participation in voluntary organizations and union work.³⁸² Nanny Serdiuk disagreed that paid domestic labor was “degrading.” She argued that the problem resided in the fact that most nannies were uncultured and had little knowledge of child-rearing. She proposed to provide them with professional training, noting that such courses existed abroad. Having improved their qualifications, nannies would enjoy their work much more.³⁸³

³⁸⁰ Tamara Popova, “*Pis'mo domashnei rabotnitsy*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 4(1928):22.

³⁸¹ A. Rusakova, “*Ne delo soiuz – dobyvat' zhenikhov*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 7(1928):19.

³⁸² Shapiro, “*Ne nado unyvat'!*” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 8(1928):23.

³⁸³ Nania A. Serdiuk, “*Nuzhny kursy dlia nian'*,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 9(1928):20.

Others, however, supported Popova's position. Domestic workers were naturally "drawn" to productive work outside domestic service because only in the industry they could study, participate in public life, join the party and be useful for their country.³⁸⁴ Domestic worker G. Shamarina suggested that those women who had worked in domestic service for two or three years would be offered a different job so they could "freely participate in the construction of socialism."³⁸⁵ A letter from Petrozavodsk revealed that there was a generational divide in discussing the issue: "older" domestic workers disagreed with Popova, while the "younger ones" supported her. The worker-correspondent who reported on the debate concluded that young domestics were to do what they could to study while at the same time remaining realistic about their current employment situation.³⁸⁶

The discussion in *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* closed with a contribution from Mariia Borisova, member of the Central Committee responsible for the work among domestics. She used her authority to trash Popova's arguments. Borisova accused Popova of failing to "appreciate the freedom that the working class has won" and to understand that the Soviet state needed a "new domestic worker." Although Popova did not unpack what she meant by a "new domestic worker" she seemed to imply that a "new domestic worker" was not motivated by her individual interests but by interests of the Soviet state. A "new domestic worker" will not quit domestic service once she has received her union membership card and collect unemployment benefits while waiting for a job in the industry. Borisova noted that finding employment was not Narpit's responsibility. The

³⁸⁴ Rapoport, "Soznatel'nuu domrabortnitsu – na proizvodstvo," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 8(1928):22.

³⁸⁵ G. Shamarina, "My dolzhny borot'sa za nashi prava," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 8(1928):22.

³⁸⁶ Rabkorka domrabortnitsa, "Luchshe zhuravl' v rukakh, chem sinitsa v nebe," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 9(1928):20.

only way for a domestic worker to have a better life was doing her job properly and being active in the union.³⁸⁷

The immediate context of the debate over Popova's letter was the growing number of unemployed domestic workers that strained Narpit financial resources. The Central Committee published the following statistics: between 1926 and 1928 Narpit membership growth was 38 percent (from 228,196 members as of the first of October 1926 to 314,632 members as of the first of October 1928), including 10,559 employed workers in the service industry, 15,656 employed domestic workers, 11,940 unemployed workers in the service industry and 48,307 unemployed domestics. Unemployment among domestic workers became the biggest concern of the union. Although Narpit officials laid the blame mainly on employers who were quick to dismiss a worker who had joined the union and replace her with a more timid newcomer from the village, there was also a growing concern with infiltration of the union with "alien elements" that were joining the union for the sole purpose of getting a membership card and enjoying the privileges that came with it.³⁸⁸ According to Mariia Borisova, there were three types of imposters: women who pretended to be domestic workers and had their friends or relatives register them as a favor, "absolute alien elements" who were representatives of "alien classes," and "persistently unemployed" domestics (*zlostnye bezrabortnye*) who refused to take jobs in domestic service and lived off unemployment benefits. These imposters had to be purged.³⁸⁹

At a deeper level, the discussion was not about unemployment but about the place of paid domestic labor in Soviet society and the meaning of the Revolution for domestic

³⁸⁷ M. Borisova, "Otvét na pis'mo tov. Popovoi," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 12(1928):9.

³⁸⁸ "Tsentral'nyi komitet otchityvaetsa," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 3(1929):1.

³⁸⁹ M. Borisova, "O soiuзnom chlenstve domashnikh rabotnits," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 2(1929):12.

workers. Popova's starting point was her feeling of inferiority. Domestic labor was degrading. Domestic worker was "underdeveloped." Yet, Popova did not call for dismantling the hierarchy of labor that placed household work on the bottom of the ladder. Neither did she ask to improve working conditions for domestic workers. What she wanted was her own emancipation as an individual, an opportunity for her and other female workers like her to be given skills that would allow them to find "a new path in life"—that is, to leave domestic service. Popova's letter and the following debate raised a whole set of questions. Could domestic work be rewarding and serve as a source of professional satisfaction and pride? How valuable was paid domestic labor for the building of socialism? What was the goal of the state as represented by the union, to ensure decent working conditions for domestic workers or provide them with a way out of domestic service? What did emancipation mean for a domestic worker, to have a chance for social upward mobility or to better herself by becoming a more conscious member of the working class? These were the questions that lied at the heart of the debates about domestic workers' desire to leave domestic service.

Even though these debates came to the forefront during the transition from NEP to industrialization, questions related to domestic workers' transfer into industry or the service sector came up throughout the 1920s. During the question and answer session at the Sixth Leningrad Conference of Narpit in 1924, one of the participants asked the Central Committee representative what the union position was regarding cases where domestic workers used their union membership card to get a priority job placement in the service industry. The response was somewhat ambiguous. While Narpit could not forbid a domestic worker to move into "productive work", regional organizations were to

“regulate the labor force”. The Central Committee recommended handling the problem on a case by case basis.³⁹⁰ The question testifies to the fear that in the times of high unemployment “productive” jobs (which meant not only jobs in the industry but also in the service sector) would go not to “real workers” but to domestic workers who were not only less qualified but also less proletarian. At the Eighth Moscow Narpit Conference, responding to a question from the audience “Why are domestic workers not being sent to enterprises?”, chairman of the Central Committee Popov stated that the union could not promote domestics into waitressing while there were “qualified” waiters who were still unemployed.³⁹¹ Even though they were not articulated explicitly, anxieties about domestic workers taking away jobs from real proletarians informed these discussions.

“Why do domestic workers go to work at factories and plants?” asked another participant of the Moscow Narpit conference.³⁹² It is unclear from the question whether its author wanted to understand why domestic workers would want to leave service, why enterprises would take them or why the union would allow it. In any case, it showed the confusion among Narpit activists about the fluidity of domestic workers as a professional group. In a contribution to *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia*, worker correspondent Krutilina complained that activists in her local cell could not agree on what to do with domestic workers who did not want to be domestic workers anymore. While some argued that the union should “fight” this phenomenon, others believed that they should support domestics in the search for work outside domestic service.³⁹³ An activist from Kharkov suggested that there were two types of domestic workers who wanted to leave service:

³⁹⁰ TsGA SPb. F.R-4497, op.7, d.18, l. 42. *Stenograficheskii otchet 6oi gubernskoi konferentsii Vserossiiskogo profsoiuza Narpit. 10 oktiabria 1924.*

³⁹¹ Ibid., l.152.

³⁹² Ibid.

³⁹³ Rabkorka Krutilina, “*Tiaga k obshestvennoi rabote*”, *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 11(1926):8.

those who joined the union only in order to receive benefits and those who had become so developed culturally that could not accept the limitations private employment imposed on their activism.³⁹⁴ Another Narpit activist blamed the new law regulating domestic service for deterioration of domestic workers' labor conditions. As a result, "domestic workers demand positions as carriers, workers in a factory, menial workers in a wine warehouse, in a cafeteria, etc."³⁹⁵ The official response of the Central Committee in this early phase of the discussion as expressed in the articles by Mariia Borisova was that Narpit was not to discourage domestic workers from leaving domestic service but also remind them that it was not the responsibility of the union to find jobs for them.³⁹⁶

Narpit, however, did help some domestic workers find jobs outside of domestic service. Transfers to institutions of public foodservices – mostly cafeterias were used as a reward for the most deserving domestics. For example, domestic worker Utochkina got a job as a waitress at a cafeteria because of her "energetic honest work and activism"³⁹⁷. Sometimes the union could find employment for its members in other sectors as in the case of 19-year-old union and Komsomol activist Maria Shushanova who got a job at a hosiery factory³⁹⁸. A group of domestic workers received janitorial jobs for their involvement in public work so that they could have more free time for their activism.³⁹⁹ To the disappointment of the union leadership some former domestics promoted to jobs outside of service immediately forgot their responsibilities as union activists. In the town of Seredina-Budy the union rewarded four domestics with positions in the local cafeteria

³⁹⁴ B.B., "Rost bezrabotitsy i domashniie rabotnitsy," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 12(1926):5.

³⁹⁵ Profrabotnik, "Pis'mo nizovogo rabotnika," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 1(1927):8.

³⁹⁶ M. Borisova, "O rabote sredi domashnikh rabotnits," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 11(1926):7; M. Borisova, "Kak vybirat' delegatku," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 2 (1927):9.

³⁹⁷ "Na puti k aktivnoi profrabote," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 5 (1927): 8

³⁹⁸ "Vydvizhenki – domashnie rabotnitsy," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 5 (1927): 8

³⁹⁹ Khlobokova, "34yi mestkom," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania*, 5 (1925):21.

for their dedication to union work, hoping “that they would become even more active”. However, as soon as the women got their new jobs they stopped attending union meetings altogether.⁴⁰⁰ For these domestics, union activism was a strategy for upward mobility that became useless when they achieved their goal—a job outside of domestic service. At the same time, using jobs outside of domestic service as a reward for activism, Narpit only further delegitimized paid domestic labor, making it an occupation for women who had not yet deserved to do “productive work.”



Fig. 16. “Domestic worker-delegate Pankevich promoted to the position of cafeteria manager,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 12 (1929):20.

Domestic workers were cognizant of their unprivileged position. The secret report produced by Narpit for the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions in December of 1927 named mass refusal of domestics to accept jobs in domestic service as one of the central reasons for growing unemployment among them. According to the report, out of eight thousand unemployed domestic workers in Moscow only fifteen hundred were registered with the domestic service section at the Labor exchange. The rest chose to register as unskilled laborers with other sections. Authors of the report explained

⁴⁰⁰ “Nekhotoshii konets horoshego nachala,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 1 (1927): 9

domestic workers' refusal to work in service by their desire to free themselves from dependency on their employers and their increased cultural level, which made paid domestic labor unsatisfying.⁴⁰¹

Domestic workers' refusal to take jobs in domestic service became an object of concern even for security service. Secret police (OGPU) reports from 1930 stated that domestic service section at the Labor exchange was a site of discontent. Unemployed women protested being sent into service and demanded jobs in the industry. Allegedly, on May 17, 1930, a notice appeared at the Labor exchange calling to reject jobs in service because "there is no more exploitation." The anonymous author of the notice invited unemployed domestics to come to the union meeting at the local Narpit organization. OGPU reported calls to organize alternative meetings if the union failed to find jobs outside of service for their members—i.e. domestic workers. "We do not want to be slaves forever," one of the women was reported to say.⁴⁰² Another OGPU summary listed the following statements made by domestic workers at the Moscow Labor Exchange: "Demand to be sent into industry, we do not have to be servants forever, Soviet power says that a woman is not a slave but now we are turned into slaves"; "Lenin said that every kitchen maid must learn to rule the state but now we are slaves, no one considers our needs, they make us work for sixteen hours. We should collectively refuse to work as domestic workers and demand to be sent into industry"; "There must not be any servants in the thirteenth year of the Revolution."⁴⁰³

⁴⁰¹ GARF. F.5452, op.12, d.7, l.32-33. V *Presidium VTsSPS*.

⁴⁰² "Spetssvodka No.25 SOU OGPU i INFO OGPU o faktakh otritsatel'nogo kharaktera po promyshlennym predpriiatiam i rabochim raionam na 25 maia 1930 g.," in "Sovershenno sekretno": *Lubianka Stalinu o polozhenii del v strane (1922-1934)*, Vol.8. (Moskva: Institut Rossiiskoi Istorii RAN, 2008), 289-293.

⁴⁰³ "Spravka INFO OGPU ob jtritsatel'nykh momentakh i nastroiienii zhenskoi chasti naseleniia goroda i derevni, 25 avgusta 1930," in "Sovershenno sekretno," 1406.

Just like Tamara Popova, who wrote a letter to *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* asking the union for help finding “a new path” for domestics, the women who protested at the Labor Exchange believed domestic service was fundamentally degrading. Domestic workers were “servants” and “slaves.” Unlike Popova, however, they seemed to be calling into question legitimacy of domestic service in the Soviet state. For them, paid domestic labor was incompatible with the Revolution. Ironically, domestic workers’ desire to get jobs “in the industry” was in line with the official discourse of the First Five-Year Plan that lionized industrial labor. Narpit had failed to turn domestic servants into workers equal to other proletarians because domestic labor had never been seen as “productive.”

New Path with a New Union

In February 1929 the Ukrainian Narpit organization held its regular All-Ukrainian congress. At the Congress, perplexed Narpit activists found out that the Central Committee had petitioned the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions to have domestic workers who at that time made up 75 percent of union membership transferred to the Union of Communal Workers. Ukrainian organization protested and demanded a union-wide discussion of the issue.⁴⁰⁴ In the following year the voice of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions—the newspaper *Trud*—published several articles criticizing Narpit leadership, especially for their inability to improve the situation with domestic workers. By mid-1930 it became clear that Narpit would merge with the Union of Food Industry Workers, while domestic workers would be transferred to the Union of

⁴⁰⁴ GARF. F.5456. op.12, d.20, l.189. *Vypiska iz protokola No.102 zasedaniia presidiuma TsK SRKK ot 1-2 iiulia 1930; “Otstuplenie pered trudnost’ami obsluzhivaniia domrabotnits?” Trud, February 17, 1929,1.*

Communal Workers. The latter, however, were not excited about the prospect of incorporating such a troublesome category of workers. Union Central Committee stated that domestic workers “have nothing to do with communal services” and “mostly cook rather than clean, wash, etc.” and therefore should join the Union of Food Industry Workers.⁴⁰⁵ The All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions decided otherwise, and in September 1930 domestic workers were transferred to the Union of Communal Workers. However, only a few months later, in winter 1931, the Union of Communal Workers was dismantled and domestic workers were transferred to the newly created Professional Union of Workers of City Enterprises and Domestic Workers (PUWCEDW).

Reorganization of Narpit and the Union of Communal Workers was part of the political struggle between party and union leadership. The official reason for breaking down big unions was the need to increase their efficiency in managing specific production processes in different sectors of the economy. The political rationale for the decision was to replace old union leadership with new, less experienced and less independently-minded cadres after the chair of the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions Mikhaik Tomskii was declared guilty of “rightist deviation” along with Stalin’s opponents Nikolai Bukharin and Aleksei Rykov.⁴⁰⁶ Under these circumstances domestic workers were a pretext rather than a reason for reorganization. What is clear, however, is that they were seen as a burden by any union organization.

The new union was to cater to the interests of diverse groups of laborers: maintenance workers, hairdressers, firefighters and domestic workers. The latter formed the largest professional group of one million five hundred thousand members with its

⁴⁰⁵ Aleksei Ionov, “*Dvadtsat’ tri soiuza ili shestnadtsat’?*” *Trud*, July 20, 1930, 2.

⁴⁰⁶ Viktor Nosach, Nina Zvereva, *Rasstrel’nyie 30-e gody i profsoiuzy* (Sankt Peterburg: SPbGUP, 2007), 109.

own section at all union levels. Creation of a separate section for domestic workers, the Central Committee stated, was by no means a return to *tsekhovschina* (craft-based identity) but a way to improve their work among domestics.⁴⁰⁷ The goals of this work were listed in the section's statute: "to mobilize domestic workers in order to liquidate illiteracy and semi-literacy, conduct a detailed study of their labor to be used as a base for activities aimed at recruitment of this group of workers into production."⁴⁰⁸ Protection of domestic workers' labor rights was mentioned in the very last clause that read as an afterthought: old union leadership was accused, among other things, of privileging certain "backward groups" among workers over the needs of the working class as a whole. In the new rhetoric "backwardness" stood for demands for better working conditions.⁴⁰⁹ Only politically "underdeveloped" workers could ask for better conditions for themselves when the working class as a whole demanded sacrifice for the world-historical goals of the First Five-Year Plan. This shift in the emphasis from protection of the workers' rights to the questions of labor optimization, fulfillment of production plans and improvement of workers' professional qualification was part of a greater change in the Soviet trade union system.⁴¹⁰

Another important context for the new goals of the union was the campaign to mobilize women into the industrial labor force that was launched in November 1931.⁴¹¹ The ambitious Five-Year Plan had created a labor shortage, and the state turned to

⁴⁰⁷ E., "Za novye kadry dl'a sotsialisticheskoi promyshlennosti," *Rabochii gorodskogo khoziastva* 1(1931):16.

⁴⁰⁸ GARF. F.5456, op.20.d.1.l.42. *Polozhenie o seksii domrabotnits v soyuze rabochikh gorodskikh predpriyatii i domrabotnits.*

⁴⁰⁹ Viktor Nosach, Nina Zvereva, *Rasstrel'nyie 30-e gody i profsoiuzy*, 117.

⁴¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴¹¹ On the "five-Year Plan for Female Labor," see Wendy Goldman, *Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin's Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), chapters 4 and 5.

women. Domestic workers' section was a "reservoir" that would provide the labor force for the industry while domestic workers along with housewives from proletarian families, were to become the "labor reserve for the industry."⁴¹² In the materials of the campaign for the introduction of women's labor into the industry, housewives and domestic workers were often mentioned side by side, as a unified object of the state program. This implied that both categories were not yet part of the construction of socialism, even though domestics were officially "workers."

The goal of the newly created PUWCEDW was to turn domestic workers into "real" workers—workers who could be used in "productive" sectors of the socialist economy. But how was this transformation to be achieved? How to provide the industry with female workers that were a "finished product" rather than "raw material", as one of the union activists put it?⁴¹³ What were the criteria that could be used to evaluate whether a domestic worker was ready to be a "real" worker?

The most important criterion was "political development." The majority of domestic workers had come from the countryside, had "no idea about the politics of the day" and sometimes had "unhealthy psychology," as one of the Moscow PUWCEDW activists noted.⁴¹⁴ A contributor to a wall paper (*stennaia gazeta*) at a local organization in Moscow called for thorough Marxist-Leninist education for domestic workers in order to root out their "petty proprietary attitudes" and make them suitable for working at socialist enterprises.⁴¹⁵ Just like its predecessor Narpit, PUWCEDW put a lot of emphasis on the transformation of domestic workers into conscious Soviet subjects. During NEP,

⁴¹² "Za novyye kadry dlya sotsialisticheskoi promyshlennosti," *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khozyaistva* 1 (1931):16.

⁴¹³ GARF. F.5456, op.20.d.15.l.70. *Protokol 3go kraievogo plenuma SRGP i DR ot 15go iyunia 1931.*

⁴¹⁴ TsAGM. F.2633, op.1, d.2, l.114. *Tretii Plenum gorkoma SRGP i DR. 25 apreliia 1932.*

⁴¹⁵ TsAGM. F.2633, op.1, d. 38, l.23, *Za marksistko-leninskoie vospitaniie domrabochnits.*

however, the union did not have to make any particular decisions based on one's "level of political development." The situation changed when the union was required to transfer the "most developed" domestics to industry. Under the pressing conditions of industrialization, PUWCEDW needed a way to measure individual domestic worker's readiness for "productive work."

The consensus on what would be a good marker of domestic workers' level of proletarian consciousness was not hard to find based on the earlier Narpit experience in using promotion into industry as a reward for activism. One's "political development" was to manifest itself through participation in public work. The first All-Union Congress ruled to have "the best [domestic workers] who have proved themselves in public work" mobilized for productive work in the industry.⁴¹⁶ According to the Regulations on the study of labor groups issued by PUWCEDW issued in 1931, "public work" included participation in union meetings, attendance of literacy courses and being a delegate—activities that had been the core of union work among domestic workers during NEP.⁴¹⁷ Soon, however, the emphasis shifted to initiatives that were closely associated with the First Five-Year Plan, such as subscription to state loans, agitation for collectivization in the countryside, and especially participation in socialist competition.

State loans as a means of budgetary replenishment had been widely used by the Bolshevik government since the early years of NEP. Initially, subscription for such loans was voluntary and advertised as a savvy way to invest one's savings or a chance to win a hefty sum of money. In the 1925 agitation film "Tailor from Torzhok," a tailor Petia Petel'kin and his girlfriend domestic worker Katia realize that the public bond they

⁴¹⁶ GARF. F.5456, op.20.d.1.l.46. *Vsem organizatsiam SRGP i DR.*

⁴¹⁷ GARF. F.5456, op.20.d.1.l.48. *Polozheniie po izucheniiu proizvodstvennykh grupp.*

purchased had won ten thousand rubles. The movie ends with them enjoying their new outfits and a caption stating that their dreams have come true. Their dreams do not appear to have any political dimension: they are just a hard-working couple that has become wealthy by a stroke of luck. There is no evidence that Narpit leadership considered agitation for subscription to be part of their work among domestic workers until August 1927 when the first “state bonds for industrialization” were issued. The loan was accompanied by a mass campaign that unlike earlier ones stressed its political importance rather than its profitability for the individual. The subscription mechanism also changed from individual purchase of the state bond to collective subscription by installments, with monthly payments being withheld from the workers’ paychecks.⁴¹⁸

This mechanism was, however, impossible to implement among privately employed domestic workers. Therefore, Narpit had to look for other means to encourage domestic workers to subscribe, combining arguments that would speak to domestics’ interests as a particular group of workers with political claims. As one of the contributors to the *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* argued, domestic workers were particularly interested in financially supporting industrialization because it would create more jobs outside the home for women already in the city, while fewer newcomers would arrive from villages to compete for them because they would be satisfied with their life in the countryside. The article concluded with an appeal to domestic workers’ proletarian consciousness: “We turn to domestic workers and say: do not lag behind the rest of the working class; you are proletarians just like workers in factories and plants! Sign up for the loan! Show us that you are conscious members of the union and support Soviet

⁴¹⁸ Vasilii Viacheslavovich Strakhov, “Vnutrennie gosudarstvennyie zaimy v SSSR kontsa 1920-kh-1930-e gody,” *Vestnik Riazanskogo Universiteta im. S.A. Esenina* 19 (2008):5-6.

power!”⁴¹⁹ *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* regularly published optimistic reports about domestic workers’ active participation in the loan subscription campaign. For example, domestic workers in the Ukrainian city of Kharkov were reported to spend more than eleven thousand rubles on state loans for industrialization. One of them even won ten thousand rubles.⁴²⁰ At the same time, some contributors noted that domestics were still “lagging behind” other workers.⁴²¹ When domestic workers were transferred to PUWCEDW, subscription rates became one of the key indicators that were used to evaluate the work of local union organizations among domestic workers.

Participation in collectivization of agriculture was another way domestic workers could show their dedication to building socialism. Domestic workers’ “close connection with the countryside” made them, in the eyes of union activists, natural agents of Bolshevik change in the village. Just as during NEP they were expected to facilitate the *smychka* (a union between peasants and workers) by spreading the Bolshevik word among their friends and relatives, with the beginning of collectivization the union began preparing domestics as experts in agriculture and agitators for the Party’s new course. “Out of every vacationer we should make an agitator for improvement and the collectivization of agriculture,” stated one of the contributors to the union journal.⁴²² Agitation, however, was not enough. Extraction of resources from the countryside for the needs of industrialization required domestic workers’ labor. “Collective farms need

⁴¹⁹ A.A., “Domashniie rabotnitsy, podpisывaies’ na zaem,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 11(1928):25.

⁴²⁰ Domrabotnitsa Vasilyeva, “Domashniaia rabotnitsa vyigrala des’at’ tysach rublei,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 3(1928):19.

⁴²¹ Rostovets, “Sredi domrabotnits podpisuku provodit’ na domu,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 10(1928):10.

⁴²² A. Drabovich, “Chto delat’ v otpusku,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 10 (1929): 18.

cooks!” the short-lived newspaper *Domashniaia Rabotnitsa* called to its readers.⁴²³

Arguing that there would be fewer and fewer jobs in domestic service in the city, union activists encouraged domestic workers to return to the countryside and work in canteens and crèches to be organized for collective farmers. Lenigrad’s Naprit organization even launched courses that were to prepare domestic workers for their new jobs.⁴²⁴ PUWCEDW leadership in Nizhnii Novgorod proposed to retrain domestic for managerial positions in agriculture, such as brigade leaders, heads of milk firms and even kolkhoz chairs.⁴²⁵

In the early years of collectivization unemployed domestic workers were simply assigned to work for collective farms at the Labor Exchange. These assignments were described as a temporary measure and women were promised jobs in the industry after they had worked their term in the countryside. According to the secret police reports, though, these assignments were extremely unpopular with domestic workers, who protested this forced mobilization to collective farms and demanded jobs in industry instead.⁴²⁶

Once domestic workers were transferred to PUWCEDW, they were expected to volunteer at collective farms on the weekends or during vacation time, taking part in sowing and weeding campaigns. For instance, Kharkov organization reported to have sent 605 domestic workers to the collective farm for twelve days to weed sugar beets.⁴²⁷

⁴²³ GARF. F.5452, op.14, d.136, l.102. *Kolkhozam nuzhny povarikhi!*

⁴²⁴ TsGA SPb. F.R-4497, op.13, d.66, l.1-4. *Spiski zhelaiushchikh obuchat’sa na kolkhoznykh kursakh. Mart 1930.*

⁴²⁵ GARF. F.5456, op.20.d.15, l.81-82. *Resolutsiia kraikoma SRGP i DR o razvertyvanii raboty sredi domrabotnits.*

⁴²⁶ “Spravka INFO OGPU ob jtritsatel’nykh momentakh i nastroiienii zhenskoi chasti naseleniia goroda i derevni, 25 avgusta 1930,” in “Sovershenno sekretno”, 1406

⁴²⁷ GARF. F.5456, op.20.d.12.l.17. *Shestoi rashyrennyi plenum SRGP i DR.*

The problem was, among other things, that such trips to the countryside interfered with employers' schedules.⁴²⁸ The union had to prioritize. In Donetsk, a local organization resolved that all domestic workers be sent to collective farms for crop harvesting, except those whose employers—both husband and wife—were working in the coal mining and metallurgical industries.⁴²⁹ Thus, the position of the employer in the hierarchy of labor affected the way his or her domestic workers could contribute to building socialism.

Volunteer work at collective farms or urban daycare centers, subscription to state loans, collection of utility waste, and even attendance of literacy schools—all of these activities were to be conducted in the form of socialist competition. During the First Five-Year Plan socialist competition was introduced to replace “capitalist competition” for profit. Workers' collectives were to compete with each other for fulfilment of their labor goals out of political conviction and sincere desire to contribute as much as they could to building socialism. Winners of socialist competition were awarded honorary certificates and flags, had their names added to an honors board, and received gifts such as a bust of Lenin or tickets to the theater. Socialist competition was central to Soviet labor politics after NEP.

It is telling that the first question the fictional author of the letter to *Domashniaia rabotnitsa* “How can I become useful for the society?” asked was about socialist competition. Could domestic workers compete for the best performance of their professional obligations as cleaners, nannies and cooks? “We do not need to compete for the best clean-up or laundry,” explained one of the responses to the article. Instead, socialist competition among domestic workers was to focus on literacy training, union

⁴²⁸ TsAGM. F.R-2633, op.6, d.22, l.12. *Protokol obschego sobraniia SRGP i DR ot 25 iunია 1933.*

⁴²⁹ GARF. F.5456, op.20.d.127.l.21. *Protokol No.3 zasedaniia presidiuma Don. Obkoma SRGP i DR ot 3 sentiabria 1933.*

activism and participation in state campaigns.⁴³⁰ This approach was further institutionalized by the resolution of the first congress of PUWCEDW which stated that “socialist competition and shock work among domestic workers and workers employed in private enterprises [were] to be aimed at raising their cultural level, liquidating illiteracy and semi-literacy, providing them with production and technical knowledge, engaging them in political life and thus fulfilling Vladimir Ilych’s slogan “every kitchen maid must learn to rule the state.”⁴³¹ The resolution made clear that intensification of domestic workers’ labor would not contribute to the production plans of the country. While everyone was supposed to be making pledges to fulfil and over-fulfill production norms, domestic workers’ labor was rendered irrelevant to the goals of the First Five-Year plan. At the same time, not taking part in socialist competition meant not being part of the Revolution. Isolated in their kitchens, domestic workers were in danger of never learning to perform “socialist labor.” Therefore, they were to be mobilized through socialist competition.

Already in 1930 Narpit started to organize domestic workers in brigades. They were to keep a check on the work of literacy school, agitate for labor agreements between domestics and their employers and oversee the fulfilment of domestic workers’ labor rights. Local organizations were to compete for “the best provision of services for domestic workers.”⁴³² By 1931, however, once domestics were transferred to PUWCEDW the focus shifted from protection of domestic workers’ rights to their mobilization for numerous campaigns. Although, according to union reports, some domestic workers’ brigades were gathering information on the number of labor

⁴³⁰ GARF, F.5452, op.14, d.136, l.31-32. *Nepravda – rabota dlia vseh naidetsa.*

⁴³¹ GARF. F.5456, op.20, d.2, l.15. *Protokol soveschaniia delegatov 1go Vsesoiuznogo siezda SRGP i DR.*

⁴³² “Za novyie formy raboty sredi domrabortnits,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 1 (1930):15.

agreements between domestics and employers, the majority were mobilized for collection of scrap metal, subscription to state loans, or to work on collective farms. Just like brigades at industrial enterprises, domestic workers' collective signed socialist competition agreements in which they pledged to fulfil specific obligations. Some of them even announced themselves "shock work brigades" and strove to over-fulfill the plan. Socialist competition was to be organized at all levels: regional and local PUWCEDW organizations signed socialist competition agreements in which they pledged to increase the number of members covered by labor agreements or set a plan for educational activities. Individual domestic workers could declare themselves shock students at literacy schools.

Successes (and sometimes, but much more rarely, failures) of socialist competition among domestic workers were covered extensively. *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khoziaistva* published reports on group committees or individuals that had been awarded for their active involvement in the state campaigns. For instance, local committee of domestic workers No.122 in Moscow was featured in the September issue of the journal in 1932. Out of 225 domestic workers assigned to the committee, 168 were union members, 174 were studying, 50 were members of various "circles," 196 had subscribed for the state loan, 176 were members of consumer cooperatives. Its activist had brought to the union 24 new members. The committee had organized lectures, excursions and lectures for its members. The committee had been awarded a bust of Lenin, while eight activists were awarded individual prizes.⁴³³ Activists received their share of fame in union wall papers. Karpova, a "shock worker in union work," had been working in domestic service for seven years. She had become fully literate and was now attending

⁴³³ "Moskva," *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khoziaistva* 9 (1932):27.

political education courses and taking part in a drama circle. For her work in the utility waste collection brigade she was awarded 25 rubles, 20 of which she used to take out a state bond.⁴³⁴



Fig. 17 “Local committee of domestic workers No.122, Moscow,” *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khozaistva* 9 (1932):27.

It is impossible to evaluate the scale of domestic workers’ involvement in state campaigns. PUWCEDW reports amounted to a collection of numbers meant to show the superiors that the organization was doing its job of mobilizing domestic workers. When union representatives at any level attempted to evaluate work that was being done, they tried very hard to find a balance between showing that domestic workers were participating in building socialism and therefore were as worthy as other workers and stimulating union members to be more active. As one of the union activists put it at the conference of domestic workers of Moscow Frunze district, “Our domestic worker is also taking part in building socialism but not enough and sometimes without understanding that it is our duty as a union to reeducate our members who have just come from the countryside, to teach them to understand that they also should participate in all campaigns

⁴³⁴ TsAGM. F.2633, op.1, d.38. l.14 *Sbor utilia premiruiet luchshikh.*

initiated by the government and the party.”⁴³⁵ It is likely, that the successes of state campaigns among domestic workers described in articles in union magazines and reports to the Central Committee had very little to do with the lives of majority of nannies and cooks. More importantly, whether they were participating in campaigns—be it subscription to the state loans or utility waste collection or joining volunteer organizations like the International Red Aid (MOPR), Union of Societies of Assistance to Defense and Aviation-Chemical Construction of the USSR (OSOAVIAKhIM) or Down with Illiteracy Society—none of them were contributing to socialism as laborers. None of these activities were directly connected with domestic service as an occupation. The centrality of these “extra” activities in the conceptualization of domestics’ contribution to the First Five-Year Plan made clear that domestic labor as such was not valuable for the Soviet state. In order to be really useful for their country they had to become “real” workers.

“Give way to domestic workers,” “Make cadres out of domestic workers,” “Woman domestic worker—to industry”: these slogans were the order of the day for the domestic workers’ section of PUWCEDW. Local organizations were to develop special transfer programs. In some cases they signed agreements with enterprises, in others, they organized retraining courses that would allow domestic workers to receive a new profession. For instance, during the last year of its operation one of Leningrad Narpit organizations had 62 domestic workers sign up for training to become sales clerks, 150 for culinary courses, and 345 for construction courses. The organization also planned to

⁴³⁵ TsAGM. F.2633, op.11, d.11, l.30. *Protokol No.2 konferentsii domrabotnits Frunzenskogo raiona ot 28 oktiabria 1932.*

open kolkhoz courses to train domestics for positions at collective farms.⁴³⁶ The number of domestic workers transferred to the industry was to be reported to the Union's Central Committee.

The choice of careers available for domestic workers, however, was quite limited. The union was to provide retrained domestics for those enterprises that required a "female labor force."⁴³⁷ Judging by the statistics that regional union organizations submitted to the Central Committee in their annual reports, the majority of former domestic workers ended up in the public service sector (public dining, city maintenance services), textile and clothing industries, or as semi-qualified workers at construction sites. This recruitment pattern was a manifestation of what Wendy Goldman calls the regendering of the labor force—resegregation of the socialist economy by gender and from above.⁴³⁸

It is difficult to evaluate the numbers of domestic workers "handed over to industry" (*peredany na proizvodstvo*), as the statistical data is not clear. The Central Committee reported that in 1931 out of 96,703 women registered by the union 12,912 were transferred, while regional organizations claimed to have sent over to the public service sector of industry one tenth to a quarter of their domestics.⁴³⁹ It seems plausible that many more found jobs outside domestic service on their own. A report from Nizhnii Novgorod, for instance, stated that while the union sent 263 domestics to the industry "in

⁴³⁶ TsGA SPb. F.R-4497, op.13, d.66, l.1-4. *Spiski zhelaiushchikh obuchat'sa na kolkhoznykh kursakh. Mart 1930*; d.71, l.1-3, 48-53, 108. *Spiski*.

⁴³⁷ GARF. F.5456, op.20.d.1.l.40. *Polozheniye i struktura sektora massovoi raboty TsK soyuza rabochikh gorodskikh predpriyatii i domrabotnits*.

⁴³⁸ Wendy Goldman, *Women at the Gates*, 144.

⁴³⁹ GARF.F5456, op.20.d.23.l.59. *V VTsSPS dokladniiia zapiska*. The numbers for 1932 are about the same – 10,593 women transferred. GARF.F5456.Op.20.d.53.l.42.

an organized manner” 648 women “left individually.”⁴⁴⁰ According to official data published by GOSPLAN, the number of women employed in domestic service decreased dramatically in the early 1930s, from 527,000 in 1929 to 206,000 in 1936.⁴⁴¹ The editors of the statistical volume *Women in the USSR* that published these numbers commented that this change in the proportion of laboring women in domestic service (from 16% to 2.4%) was a move of female workers from a less productive to a more productive sphere.⁴⁴² However, these numbers become suspect when one considers the results of the 1937 population census, which estimated the number of domestic workers in the Soviet Union to be 512,761.⁴⁴³ Even though hundreds of thousands of women left domestic service for employment in the public sector, they were immediately replaced by newcomers from the countryside. As a regional organization in Bashkiria reported, the transfer of domestics had no “negative effect” on working families because of a constant flow of female collective farmers and day laborers (*batrachki*) from the village.⁴⁴⁴

This special note on the “negative effects” of domestics’ recruitment “on the working family” was not accidental. Instructions sent out by the Union’s Central Committee required local cells to report on “negative effects” of domestics’ recruitment to the industry on “working families”. “Negative effects” meant situations when the female employer had to quit her job and become a housewife after her maid had left.⁴⁴⁵ To avoid these “negative effects,” a Leningrad union cell arranged for priority transfer to the industry of those domestics, whose employers did not have high professional

⁴⁴⁰ GARF.F5456, op.20.d.23.l.18. *Otchetnyi doklad Nizhegorodskogo krayevogo komiteta soyuza RGP i DR*

⁴⁴¹ *Zhenshchiny v SSSR. Statisticheskii sbornik* (Moskva: TsUNKhu GOSPLAN V/O Couzorguchet, 1937), 52.

⁴⁴² *Ibid.*, 11.

⁴⁴³ *Vsesouznaiia perepis' naseleniia 1937 goda: obschie itogi. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov* (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2007), 136.

⁴⁴⁴ GARF. F.5456, op.20.d.67.l.52. *Bashkiria*.

⁴⁴⁵ GARF. F.5456, op.20.d.67. l.57. *Sektor kadrov TsK souza SRGP i DR*.

qualifications or were unemployed.⁴⁴⁶ Another solution, proposed by the First All-Union Conference of Domestic Workers was to remove domestic workers from “non-laboring elements” and send them to working families.⁴⁴⁷ Under the conditions of forced industrialization the old paradox intensified: the more women were drawn into the work force the more acute the need for household services became. Even though there was significant state investment into factory kitchens and crèches, public services did not meet the demand. The solution was to emancipate urban women with professional qualifications at the expense of migrants from the villages who constituted the majority of household help. The latter had to “serve their time” as domestic workers and then move up on the social ladder to become “real” workers.

In official rhetoric, the step “from the kitchen to the factory bench” represented the final stage of domestics’ emancipation by making them “real” workers. The story of Olga Myasnikova—a former domestic worker and now a driller and a shock worker at a factory—published in the union journal *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khozyaistva* in 1932, ends with the triumphant statement: “There is no Olga, a domestic worker, anymore. There is Myasnikova, a female worker; Myasnikova, a shock worker; Myasnikova, a fighter.”⁴⁴⁸

To the surprise of union activists, some domestic workers refused to leave service. Most of them did not have any place to live and if the enterprise did not provide them with housing it made more sense to stay with the employer’s family. Others did not find the pay appealing. According to the report from Leningrad, two domestic workers refused to take a job at the textile factory because living on the salary offered would be a

⁴⁴⁶ GARF. F.5456, op.20.d.67. l.29. *V TsK souza SRGP i DR.*

⁴⁴⁷ GARF. F.5456, op.20.d.103.l.59. *Resoliutsiia po dokladu Narkomtruda SSR t. Ozerskoi o vnedrenii domrabortnits v proizvodstvo.*

⁴⁴⁸ Bernikova, “Sverlovshitsa Mesnyakova,” *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khozyaistva* 2 (1932), 32.

struggle, while as domestic workers they had free room and board.⁴⁴⁹ The fact that local unions were to report on such cases shows that women who preferred domestic service to working in the industry were seen as a problem. Domestic labor was not a contribution to building socialism and therefore those who chose it over productive labor at enterprises were putting selfish considerations before the country's needs.

Daily Struggles

While tens of thousands of PUWCEDW members left for the industry, many more remained in domestic service. Their ambiguous position as workers privately employed by individual families with their labor not contributing to the building of socialism had particular consequences for them in the context of new policies brought about by forced industrialization. The three main areas that shaped the life of domestic workers and their interaction with the union were introduction of ration cards for groceries and consumer goods, creation of the internal passport system and the “turn to production” in labor politics that prioritized labor mobilization over labor protection.

In December 1928 the Politburo sanctioned industrial centers to introduce ration cards for bread thus legalizing de facto existing practices local administrations had been using to alleviate bread shortages for over a year. The rationing system quickly spread to other types of goods laying the foundation for the state-sanctioned hierarchy in consumption.⁴⁵⁰ The two main factors defining one's place in the hierarchy were one's relationship to the industry and place of residence. Industrial workers were on the top of

⁴⁴⁹ GARF. F.5456, op.20, d.67, l.29. *V TsK SRGP i DR v sector kadrov.*

⁴⁵⁰ For the most comprehensive analysis of the state rationing system, see Elena Osokina, *Za fasadom “stalinskogo izobilii”: Raspredeleniie i rynek v snabzhenii naseleniia v gody industrializatsii. 1927-1941* (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2008).

the hierarchy followed by workers employed by non-industrial enterprises or in the service sector. White-collar workers and dependents—non-laboring members of workers families—received the smallest rations. The majority of the country's population—peasants and the disenfranchised (*lishentsy*)—were completely excluded from the system. Those living in Moscow and Leningrad received more goods than those living in small towns.⁴⁵¹

Neither the Narpit nor PUWCEDW archival collections hold any instructions concerning distribution of ration cards to domestic workers. However, rationing started to come up repeatedly as one of the major concerns for domestics in protocols of union meetings and publications in union press starting in 1929. For instance, domestic workers complained that those among them employed by disenfranchised families could not get ration cards.⁴⁵² In the spring of 1929 Narpit Central Committee petitioned the state authorities to have domestic workers receive ration cards individually rather than being included in ration cards of their employers as dependents, which seemed to have been the initial decision.⁴⁵³ It was indeed a paradoxical situation: domestic workers were workers, members of a professional union with all rights and obligations that came with this status. Yet, they were treated as dependents, on par with minor children, pensioners and unemployed housewives. At the same time, the argument could be made that their employers provided for them, and therefore the former were to receive the groceries needed to feed them. It is unclear whether or not any decisions regarding ration cards for domestic workers were made at the nation level, but there were some made by local authorities. In May 1932 the Moscow City Council ruled that only those domestic

⁴⁵¹ Elena Osokina, *Za fasadom "stalinskogo izobil'ia,"* 123-125.

⁴⁵² GARF, F.5452, op.14, d.136, l.91. *Kakoi dolzhna byt' gazeta.*

⁴⁵³ "Iz deiatel'nosti TsK," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania*, 6 (1929):24.

workers who were union members would receive ration cards for groceries.⁴⁵⁴ On the one hand, the instructions showed that domestic workers were workers rather than dependents of their employers. On the other hand, Moscow Soviet was clearly manipulating domestic workers into joining the union—a requirement that did not apply to any other Soviet workers.

Using rationing as a tool to discipline domestic workers and, even more so, their employers was a common practice among local PUWCEDW organization. A union committee in the Krasnaia Presnia district of Moscow instructed housing committees not to give ration cards to those domestics who did not re-register their labor agreement with the union.⁴⁵⁵ Domestic worker-delegate Zhiltsova complained at the union meeting that the local committee provided domestic workers with consumer goods only when they had a labor agreement. That was clearly an illegal requirement because labor agreements were not mandated by the law and therefore many employers refused to sign them.⁴⁵⁶ Chair of the local committee in Baumanskii district Konstantinov instructed housing committees not to give domestic workers ration cards if their employers had not paid the dues set by their labor agreements. After the practice was criticized by the local newspaper *Moskovskii Rabochii*, the instructions were annulled and Konstantinov was reprimanded by the city organization.⁴⁵⁷ All of these instructions that tied ration cards to labor agreements were meant to motivate domestics to pressure employers into signing labor agreements and paying fees in order to improve their working conditions, but were in fact hurting domestic workers who were left without ration cards.

⁴⁵⁴ TsAGM. F.2633, op.1, d.36, l.9. *Obsheie sobranie chlenov seksii domrabotnits.*

⁴⁵⁵ TsAGM. F.2633, op.5, d.27, l.3. *Protokol zasedaniia predbiuro seksii domrabotnits Krasno-Presnenskogo raiona ot 22 maia 1933.*

⁴⁵⁶ TsAGM. F.2633, op.1, d.33, l.39, *MK uchastkov 124 ot 21 ianvaria 1932.*

⁴⁵⁷ TsAGM. F.2633, op.2, d.2, l.27, *Protokol presidiuma Baumanskogo RK SRGP i DR ot 4 sentiabria 1934.*

The problem of rationing cards regularly came up at domestic workers' meetings, even when the scheduled topic had nothing to do with procurement. When a speaker came to deliver a talk on the importance of education for domestic workers to a union meeting in Moscow's Krasnaia Presnia district, he had to fight back against criticism of the rationing system that did not provide domestics with consumer goods. In his concluding remarks he chastised domestic workers for their low level of consciousness, arguing that only "an illiterate person who does not understand our achievements" could complain about domestics not receiving enough goods.⁴⁵⁸ At another meeting of domestic workers in Moscow women expressed dissatisfaction with the fact that they paid for membership in a cooperative but could not get any goods because there was no store. To solve the problem they demanded a closed store that would sell consumer goods only to domestic workers.⁴⁵⁹ Such a request should not appear odd since by that time the majority of workers were receiving goods through the system of closed distribution centers with each category of laborers assigned to a specific store.⁴⁶⁰ Domestic workers were only asking for what other workers had.

The rapid growth of the urban population during the first years of industrialization placed a heavy burden on the rationing system. By 1932, when the cities became flooded with peasants looking for bread while the countryside was struck with famine and the labor market became saturated it was clear to the country's leadership that rural-urban migration had to be put in check. In December 1932 the Central Executive Committee enacted regulations for the introduction of internal passports. Moscow, Leningrad and

⁴⁵⁸ TsAGM. F.2633, op.5, d.28, l.61. *Sobranie domrabortnits ot 27 sentiabria 1932.*

⁴⁵⁹ TsAGM. F.2633, op.1, d.33, l.140. *Sobranie domrabortnits.*

⁴⁶⁰ Elena Osokina, *Za fasadom "stalinskogo izobilii,"* 150

Kharkiv were the first cities to undergo passportization, which was soon implemented in all Soviet cities and towns.

Passportization of major Soviet cities was used to purge “alien elements,” such as former kulaks and the disenfranchised, convicted criminals and members of the underworld, as well as recent migrants who came to the cities “exclusively for personal benefits.”⁴⁶¹ In order to receive a passport and registration at the place of residence (*propiska*), one had to obtain proof of employment and proof of residence from the housing committee. To raise the level of vigilance, PUWCEDW called to domestic workers to assist the police in detecting “alien elements” during the passportization campaign.⁴⁶² Most local organizations in Moscow organized special domestic workers’ brigades. Thanks to the assistance of domestic workers, stated one of the articles in the union journal, “it was determined that the instigator of all fights in the most quarrelsome apartment of house number 16 on Leontievskii Alley, was a dekulakized *edinolichnitsa* [individual peasant farmer].”⁴⁶³ Such a description of the accident makes it highly plausible that domestic workers were instigated to report on the woman by a personal conflict rather than political convictions, though a combination of both was possible.

Domestic workers, however, were not only to be assistants in the passportization campaign – they had to receive passports themselves. Already in September 1932 PUWCEDW started a revalidation of domestic workers’ union membership cards in major cities.⁴⁶⁴ Although the official purpose of the revalidation was to improve union

⁴⁶¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 120.

⁴⁶² TsAGM. F.2633, op.6, d.22, l.46. *Protokol. Soveschaniie chlenov buro seksii domrabotnits MGK Leninskogo raiona ot 23 fevralia 1933.*

⁴⁶³ Shermazanov, Ianiushkin, Iezhkina, Krovatkin, “*Sovetskii passport ne dolzhen popast’ chuzhdym elementam*,” *Rabochii gorodskogo khoziastva* 1(1933):2.

⁴⁶⁴ GARF, F. 5456, op.20, d.65, l.21. *Vsem respublikanskim, kraievym i oblastnym komitetam.*

statistics and get rid of “dead souls”—domestic workers that were listed as union members but were not employed in service anymore—during the campaign local organizations were instructed to look for those who had escaped from collective farms, as well as “former people.”⁴⁶⁵ The undesirables, even if they were really working in service, were purged from the union and subsequently from the city. Domestic workers seemed to be aware of the possible outcomes of the procedure. Union activists complained that domestics often refused to come to the local committee for revalidation because of the rumors that domestic workers were getting deported from Moscow as part of the passportization campaign.⁴⁶⁶ Although revalidation of union membership and passportization were two separate procedures, both had the same objective: removal of “alien elements.”

In January of 1933 *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khoziastva* published an article titled “Soviet Passports Should Not End up in the Hands of Alien Elements.” It criticized the way PUWCEDW had handled revalidation of union membership of domestic workers in Moscow. “[W]here do domestic workers come from?” asks the article. If only 30 percent of re-registered domestics have “connection with the countryside,” as union statistics states, does that mean that the rest are urban dwellers? The authors of the article found these numbers suspicious. Could it be that those who claim to have no connection with the village are in fact “kulaks’ wives and daughters?” Almost three thousand domestic workers were not re-registered. Is it really because they do not work in service anymore or because they fled the city out of fear of being unmasked? To conclude, the authors call for “mobilization of all union members for detection of class alien elements among

⁴⁶⁵ GARF, F. 5456, op.20, d.66, l.30. *Informatsia o roste profchlenstva.*

⁴⁶⁶ TsAGM. F.2633, op.5, d.1, l. 104. *Protokol No.6 zasedaniia presidiuma raikoma SRGP i DR Krasno-Presnenskogo raiona ot 14 ianvaria 1933.*

domestic workers.”⁴⁶⁷ There was nothing new about depicting domestic service as a back door through which “alien elements” crept into the working class. What was new, however, was the level of punishment for such undesirables. If in the 1920s a woman was denied membership in the union she could continue working in service without any consequences, passportization of city dwellers meant that domestic workers excluded from the union would be purged from the city and possibly deported to the Gulag.

Revalidation of union membership, organization of socialist competitions and other campaigns left little time for what had been the main type of work that Soviet labor unions had been doing—i.e. protection of workers’ rights. Curtailing NEP did not immediately end discussions of domestic workers’ problems. On the contrary, Narpit was extremely concerned with deteriorating labor conditions in domestic service caused by the decreasing numbers of labor contracts. For instance, in Moscow 73.3 percent of domestics worked with contracts in 1925. The number went down to 45.3 percent in 1926 and reached 34.6 percent in 1927.⁴⁶⁸ Employers were still to comply with the law on domestic service but its provisions put workers in a worse position compared to the norms set by labor contracts the union had been enforcing before 1926. A large-scale survey of over eleven thousand domestic workers showed that even those minimum norms set by the law were constantly violated by employers. Domestic workers often did not know about the existence of the law and could not stand up for their rights.⁴⁶⁹

To change the situation, Narpit Central Committee demanded mandatory contracts for all domestic workers, a state maximum of working hours, minimum wage,

⁴⁶⁷ Shermazanov, Ianiushkin, Iezhkina, Krovatkin, “*Sovetskii passport.*”

⁴⁶⁸ GARF. F.5452, op.11, d.85. l.11. *O dogovornoj rabote soiuzo Narpit sredi domashnikh rabotnits. Dokladnaia zapiska.*

⁴⁶⁹ GARF. F.5452, op.13, d.196, l.20-21. *Ob usloviakh truda domashnikh rabotnits.*

adequate housing and at least two nights off for domestic workers who want to study.⁴⁷⁰

The All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions initially insisted that most of these conditions could be negotiated with employers individually and recorded in labor contracts but eventually spoke in favor of a new law. The debate continued throughout 1928 and 1929 and culminated in a draft decree that mandated a labor contract and a minimum wage. It also required employers to receive permission from the local Narpit organization to dismiss a domestic worker who was a delegate or member of the local committee.⁴⁷¹

Parallel to the discussion of the new law there was an upsurge in publications about physical and sexual abuse of domestic workers and cases of suicide. A 1929 publication in *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* claimed that beating and rape of domestic workers had become “a mass phenomenon.” The majority of the perpetrators were *sluzhaschiie* (white-collar workers), many of which were Party members.⁴⁷² The publication was probably Narpit’s response to the suicide of an eighteen-year old Sulyga who worked for a people’s judge and Party-member Baron in the city of Kharkov.⁴⁷³ The case was covered by *Trud*, a major newspaper issued by the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions. A few months later *Trud* published another article on exploitation of domestic workers. A fifteen-year-old Gubanova was regularly raped by her employer, a railroad man Lavrent’iev. Only when Lavrent’ev’s wife found out about her husband’s

⁴⁷⁰ GARF. F.5452, op.13, d.130, l. *Resoliutsia po dokladu Narodnogo Komissariate Truda*.

⁴⁷¹ GARF. F.5452, op.13, d.196, l.1-2. *Proekt postanovleniia*.

⁴⁷² Astramovich, “Usilim zaschitu domrabortnits,” *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 4 (1929):16

⁴⁷³ “S blagoslavleniia muzha narsud’i,” *Trud*, January 20, 1929, 3.

unfaithfulness and fired Gubanova without paying her for her work did the domestic worker go to court.⁴⁷⁴

These publications were meant to support the call for a new law regulating domestic service. At the same time, they shifted the attention from the structural problem of paid domestic labor—unlimited workhours and meager pay, lack of free time and job insecurity—to unworthy individuals who commit crimes within the field of criminology rather than labor protection. This shift in emphasis happened within the bigger framework of the self-criticism campaign that was part of the Party purge of the late 1920s. Casting the blame for shortcomings of the system on individuals was one of the distinctive features of the campaign that, among other things, sought to explain the difficulties the country was facing after elements of capitalism were abolished with the end of NEP.⁴⁷⁵

All these publications came to a halt in 1930 with the dismantling of Narpit. Although the resolution of the first All-Union PUWCEDW conference stated that the “current period in the country’s economic development” required a new law regulating domestic service that would obligate employers to sign labor agreements, the 1926 law was never amended.⁴⁷⁶ The newly created PUWCEDW refocused its efforts from labor protection to labor mobilization—a trend that was characteristic of the state unions in 1930-1931.

That did not mean that the union did not take any interest in the labor conditions of domestic workers. At the level of local organizations the union was still a place to talk

⁴⁷⁴ “Barin,” *Trud*, August 16, 1929, 4.

⁴⁷⁵ Fransua-Ksav’er Nerar [Francois-Xavier Nerard], *Piat’ protsentov pravdy: Razoblachenie i donositel’stvo v Stalinskom SSSR, 1928-1941* (Moskva: ROSSPEN, 2011), 117-120.

⁴⁷⁶ GARF. F.5456, op.20.d.103.l.59. *Resoliutsiia po dokladu Narkomtruda SSR t. Ozerskoi o vnedrenii domrabotnits v proizvodstvo.*

about everyday problems domestic workers were facing. Domestics could receive counseling when going to court. Local activists would inspect domestic workers' working and living conditions, especially when there was a "signal" coming from a neighbor or another domestic. The union was also responsible for assigning disability pensions.⁴⁷⁷

These activities, however, received minimal attention in the union press. Even wall papers at local committees appear to have focused exclusively on the socialist competition and state campaigns. Employers were mostly absent from the pages of *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khozaistva*. If they were mentioned at all it was only in the context of domestic workers' education: not all employers gave domestics enough time off to study. All other problems in the relationship between domestic worker and employer seemed not to exist.

Conclusion

In 1934 the Komsomol literary journal *Molodaia Gvardiia* (Young Guards) published what was destined to become the most influential work of socialist realism in literature: a novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*. It tells the story of Pavel Korchagin, a young Komsomol hero of the Civil War. Even though the novel was autobiographical, the author Nikolai Ostrovskii chose to improve proletarian credentials of the book's protagonist by making him the son of a kitchen maid working for wealthy Polish

⁴⁷⁷ According to the orders "On social insurance" (June 23, 1931) and "On Temporary Disability Provision" (January 28, 1932) privately employed workers' disability payments equaled half of their salary if they were not members of a union, two thirds of their salary if they were union members but had been employed for less than a year and two thirds of their salary for the first twenty days of unemployment and the whole salary for the rest of the period. The system, though quite generous if compared to insurance available to domestic workers in other countries, emphasized domestic workers' place on the bottom of the labor hierarchy, with industrial workers with continuous length of employment receiving their full salary from the first day of illness. TsAGM. F.2633, op.6,d.1, l.18. Postanovlenie.

landowners, utilizing the trope of the “kitchen maid’s children.”⁴⁷⁸ Later on, he marries a working girl Taia Kutsam. Taia starts off as a domestic worker, then works as a dishwasher, becomes a delegate of the women’s section, then a member of the city Soviet and eventually joins the party. At the end of the novel she works at a factory and is a member of a factory committee. Her way is a woman’s version of Korchagin’s path. “Taia is taking my path to the party,” states Korchagin.⁴⁷⁹

How the Steel Was Tempered is a perfect collection of ideological clichés of the early years of industrialization. It includes a child of a kitchen maid that is a natural ally of the Bolsheviks and a kitchen maid who is taking part in running the state. The difference between Korchagin’s wife and “Lenin’s kitchen maid” is that Taia is not a domestic worker any more. While representations of “Lenin’s kitchen maid” in the 1920s focused on domestic workers’ participation in elections to the city Soviet or their activism within the union, the kitchen maid of the early 1930s is not a kitchen maid anymore. She is a factory worker.

Such anticipation of the approaching end of domestic service permeates discussions about domestic service during the last years of the First Five-Year plan. At the First All-Union Conference, PUWCEDW chair Aleksandra Motova stated that the union’s main goal when it came to domestic workers was to train them for productive labor within the shortest possible time because in the near future domestic service as a sector of economy would be “liquidated.”⁴⁸⁰ Such attitudes resonated with many other

⁴⁷⁸ In fact, Ostrovskii’s mother was a housewife who for at least some period of time had a servant of her own. Tatiana Andronova, *Slizkom malo zhilos’... Nikolai Ostrovskii. Biografia* (Moskva: Gosudarstvennyi – Gumanitarnyi tsentr “Preodoleniie” imeni N.A. Ostrovskogo, 2014).

⁴⁷⁹ Nikolai Ostrovskii, *Kak zakalialas’ stal’* (Perm: Permskoie knizhnoie izdatel’stvo, 1982), 350.

⁴⁸⁰ GARF, F. 5456, op.20.d.3.l.181. *Pervvyi vsesoyuznyi s’ezd RGP i DR. Veчерnee zasedanie 14 apreliia 1931.*

union activists. As one participant in the regional PUWCEDW plenum in Nizhnii Novgorod argued, “domestic workers should not exist.”⁴⁸¹ There was no need to pass a law on domestic service for the “current period in the country’s economic development” because the “current period” was just a time of quick transition to socialism with its factory-kitchens, public laundries and crèches. Domestic service seemed incompatible with the whole idea of socialism—a notion that would very soon be revisited.

⁴⁸¹ GARF, F. 5456, op.20.d.15 l.71. *Protokol 3go kraievogo Plenuma SRGP i DR ot 15go iyunia 1931.*

Chapter 5: In the Land of Victorious Socialism

In 1934, only three years after the chair of the Professional Union of Workers of City Enterprises and Domestic Workers Aleksandra Motova declared that domestic service as a sector of the economy would be liquidated, union journal *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khozaistva* published an article entitled “‘Kitchen Maid’ – In the Ranks of Builders of Socialism.” The article starts with a comparison between the domestic worker-employer in the past and the present. If before the revolution servants were exploited and purposefully held in the dark by their masters, Soviet employers – members of working families in which both husband and wife had jobs – and domestic workers were comrades. The author went on to describe domestic workers’ duties in the home: they were responsible not only for children and the homes of their employers, but also, crucially, for “creating the best conditions for their leisure and comfort...the basis for their labor productivity in the industry and Soviet services.” “Big, important state responsibilities lay on the shoulders of modest domestic workers that participate on an equal basis with all other proletarians in the state building, in building socialism in our country”, - concluded the author.⁴⁸²

The article was followed by several others that argued for the importance of domestic workers’ labor for the socialist economy. “The domestic worker is an equal builder of the new society, just like workers in any other profession”, - stated one of the contributors.⁴⁸³ An editorial explained that those who believed that domestic service was “a dying kind of labor,” and that all domestics should seek the first opportunity to get a

⁴⁸² V. Gast, “Kukharka v ryadakh stroitelei sotsializm,” *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khozyastva* 1 (1934): 17.

⁴⁸³ “Stranitsa rabotnitsy,” *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khozyaistva* 2 (1934): 7.

job in the public sector, were guilty of “oversimplification that smelled of leftism.” While in the “historical perspective” paid domestic labor would indeed disappear, it would not disappear “today or tomorrow.” Moreover, “the labor of domestic workers under the conditions of increasing cultural needs, would become more and more important and significant.”⁴⁸⁴

These changes in rhetoric regarding paid domestic labor were happening against the background of one of the central political events of the 1930s – the Seventeenth Party Congress also known as “The Congress of Victors” held in January-February of 1934. The Congress celebrated the completion of the First Five-Year Plan and set the goals for the Second one. Those goals included liquidation of capitalist elements in Soviet economy, thus turning country’s “mixed economy” into “socialist economy.” That, consequently, would mean the end of labor exploitation and exploitative classes and elimination of all contradiction between the remaining classes – the proletariat and the peasantry (with the intelligentsia being a “layer”). In 1936, with the ratification of the new constitution, Stalin announced that the goals had been achieved.

To prove that the changes in the economy had indeed happened, the statistical volume *USSR – the Country of Socialism*, published in 1936, included data that showed that 99.96 per cent of workers and white-collar workers were employed in the “socialist economy.” The editors, however, found it necessary to add a footnote to the table entitled “workers and *sluzhashchiye* employed in socialist economy” that stated that “domestic workers working for workers, *sluzhashchie* and collective farmers, were included into the

⁴⁸⁴ “*Im nado pomogat,*” *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khozyaistva* 7(1934): 14.

number of workers employed in socialist economy.”⁴⁸⁵ On the one hand, the footnote legitimized private employment of household help as an integral part of socialist economy. On the other, it showed the ambiguous position paid domestic labor occupied in a state that claimed to have ended exploitation and built a classless society: if domestic workers’ belonging to socialist economy had been unproblematic the footnote note would have been unnecessary.

Why was paid domestic labor, which had long been associated with inequality and exploitation, reimagined as a legitimate and even “important” component of socialist economy in mid-1930s while other forms of private employment such as employment of agricultural laborers (*batraki*) were outlawed? This chapter argues that etatization of the home as a site of both cultural and economic production for the needs of the state legitimized domestic labor, both paid and unpaid, as a contribution to the building of socialism. This reevaluation of the home happened within three major frames. The first was the growing significance of housing as a symbol of the rising standard of living of Soviet laborers. In this context, the domestic worker was a reliable house manager responsible for the maintenance of an apartment that belonged not so much to the individual family, but to the state. The second was the need to improve labor productivity. In this context, the home was a place of rest that enabled a working couple to regain their strength with a bowl of well-cooked soup in the evening and healthy sleep in a clean bed so that in the morning, they could go back to the factory to perform another labor feat. Within this frame the domestic worker was an experienced cook and cleaner.

⁴⁸⁵ *SSSR strana sotsializm (Statisticheskii sbornik) (Moskva: TsUnKhU GOSPLANA SSSR i V/O SOUZTORGUCHET, 1936), 201.*

The third was natalism. The home was where the Soviet children were raised to be healthy and dedicated Soviet citizens and the domestic worker was a professional nanny.

The increased role of the home in the 1930s came into conflict with the state's need of women's labor outside the home. Bolsheviks' gendered vision of labor (that implied that housework was women's work), as well as the hierarchy of labor that placed "productive" work outside the home over "nonproductive" domestic work, perpetuated gender and class hierarchies, which was used to legitimize paid domestic labor. Men and urban women working outside the home had the privilege to transfer the responsibility for housework to peasant migrants or women from other marginalized categories.

Reconceptualization of domestic service as part of socialist economy raised a new set of questions. If domestic labor was of such importance for the state how could the quality of domestic workers' labor be maintained? If employers were not exploiters anymore but senior comrades, how should the relationship between employers and domestic workers be reimagined? What was the role of the state? What would happen to Lenin's kitchen maid: would she remain a kitchen maid, albeit a well-trained, professional one, or could she still hope to become a 'real worker'? This chapter explores the way the state, domestic workers and their employers engaged with these questions. It also shows that in spite of the emphasis on professionalization of domestic service, the older narratives of the kitchen maid's emancipation through waged labor outside the home were still dominant in the late-1930s literature and film.

The Soviet Home as the Site of Socialist Reproduction

“Under the guidance of the party of Lenin and Stalin the Soviet people have plowed all of the Soviet land, erased parasitic classes from the face of the earth, liquidated exploitation, [and] rooted out the reasons for exploitation of man by man,” stated the chair of the Professional Union of Workers of Housing Services (PUWHS) Aleksandra Motova at its second all-union congress in November of 1939.⁴⁸⁶ In other words, since all Soviet laborers were working within socialist economy for the benefit of the Soviet state, exploitation of any kind of laborers was no longer possible. But what did it mean for the one hundred thirty seven thousand domestic workers who made up over forty percent of the union that took over domestic workers after the PUCWDS was dismantled in 1934? How was their relationship with employers to be understood? The head of the domestic workers’ section in Moscow Kalinina responded to these questions in her speech at the third Moscow city plenum in no equivocal terms: “We often hear domestic workers saying ‘we are impossibly exploited by our employers’, etc. It is true that there are still individual employers that take advantage of their domestic workers’ labor. But there are no more exploiters.” Therefore, “every domestic worker should feel responsible for the work she is trusted with.”⁴⁸⁷

The domestic worker was not simply working for a private family anymore – she was working for the Soviet state. By including domestic labor into socialist economy, Soviet authorities made the home the site of reproduction essential to socialist economy. That did not mean that domestic work received equal status to productive work in factories and at construction sites. Instead, the new place of domestic service did elevate household work from “drudgery” to labor. It also rendered irrelevant the boundary

⁴⁸⁶ GARF. F.5456, op.23, d.2., l.12. *Stenogramma vtorogo vsesoiuznogo s’ezda profsoiuzov rabochikh zhikishchnogo khoziaistva.*

⁴⁸⁷ TsAGM. F.2633, op.1, d.2, l., 117. *Tretii Plenum gorkoma SRGP i DR. 25 aprelia 1932.*

between public socialist economy and private household economy. Thus the line between serving the needs of an individual family and performing public work became blurred. These shifts had a significant impact on the way the Soviet state treated domestic workers and their employers.

The first most tangible sign of the new status of paid domestic labor was the reconfiguration of the space of the home. Soviet architects began to design apartment buildings that included special rooms for domestics. Experts did not question the need for the extra room. Rather, they discussed how many square meters were appropriate for a servant's room and whether or not to build a separate service entrance.⁴⁸⁸ "A normal apartment intended for one family has a relatively small kitchen, an efficiently constructed hallway and a room for a domestic worker," wrote professor of architecture Ia. Ginzburg in 1937. Acknowledging the need to build apartments that would house several families since the state did not have the resources to provide every family with an individual home, he noted that in such cases accommodating domestic help would be a challenge because it was impossible to have three separate rooms for three domestic workers.⁴⁸⁹ For Professor Ginzburg, a domestic worker in every working family was a given. In reality, of course, not every housing unit constructed in the 1930s had rooms for servants, but many houses designed for the elite did. Apartment buildings with rooms for domestic workers were built in most if not all major Soviet cities. These complexes were not temporary dwellings – they were made to last. So was domestic service.

⁴⁸⁸ Steven Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2013), 62-64.

⁴⁸⁹ Ia. Ginzburg, "Arkitektura zhilogo doma," *Trud*, August 15, 1937, 4.

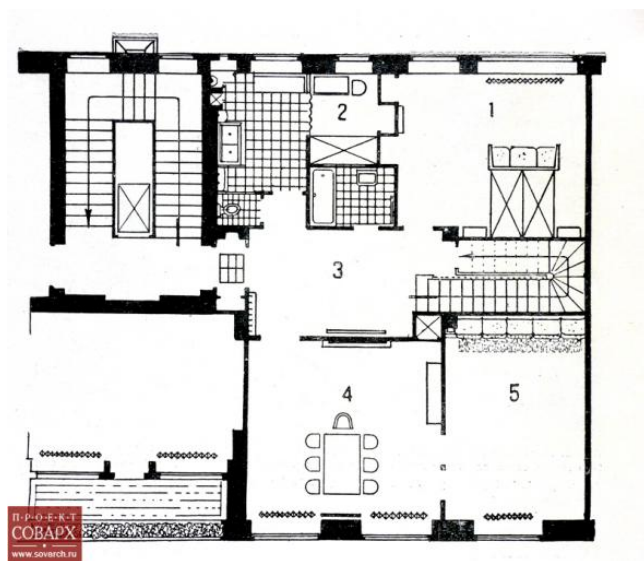


Fig. 18. Floor-plan of a two-room apartment in the First House of Lensoviet (Lenigrad, 1932-1934) 1 – bedroom, 2 – domestic workers' room, 3 – entrance room, 4 – dining room, 5 – cabinet. Design – 1931. www.sovarch.ru

Reconfiguration of space was not limited to redesign of apartment buildings. The distinction between private spaces of individual homes and public spaces was reimagined. Domestic workers were increasingly viewed as responsible not only for the apartments of their employers but also for public spaces: kitchens in communal apartments, public stairways and surrounding grounds. Moscow PUCWDS organization launched a contest for the cleanest apartment, cleanest public spaces, and best supervision of renovations of apartment buildings.⁴⁹⁰ In Tiflis, domestic workers competed for the best clean-up of public stairways.⁴⁹¹ Domestic workers were to make sure that water and electricity were used efficiently, take part in neighborhood clean-ups and collect utility waste. The role of domestic workers in preserving state property was embraced at the highest level: in his speech at the first All-Union PUWHS conference the chair of the All-

⁴⁹⁰ TsAGM. F.2633, op.1, d.65, l.19. *Protokol zasedaniia presidiuma Gorkoma SRGP i DR ot 10 iunია 1934.*

⁴⁹¹ GARF. F.5456, op.20, d.192, l/119. *Otchet resul'tata proverki raboty Tiflisskogo PPRGP i DR.*

Union Central Council of Trade Unions Nikolai Shvernik emphasized the need to engage domestic workers in maintaining the housing stock and the drainage system.⁴⁹² In addition to being responsible for the preservation of facilities, domestic workers were encouraged to provide their services to the families in their neighborhood. According to a Moscow union report, domestic worker Porel' supervised a children's playground, while domestic worker Gusarova organized trips to the zoo and the countryside for the children in her building.⁴⁹³

By taking care of residential buildings, domestic workers ensured that their employers – “*sluzhashchie* and engineers” – could properly rest in their homes. Thus, the domestic worker was taking care of housing *for* her employer. At the same time, domestic workers were to fight “predatory treatment of housing facilities, of socialist property.” Although it is unclear who those irresponsible residents who mistreated state property were, it seems quite possible that they could be the people the domestic was working for. In that case, she was protecting socialist property *from* her employers or other residents. In the Soviet Union where most of the urban housing stock belonged to the state, even when domestic workers were looking after the rooms and apartments that were occupied by their employers' families, they were still taking care of state property. Representations of domestics as conscious workers who monitored the way residents treated state housing appear as early as 1928. In a scene in the movie *House on the Trubnaia Street*, two men are shown splitting firewood in a hallway of a residential building. The camera zooms in on the flooring and the damage being done to it by the axes. All the other residents look at the two men resentfully but choose to go back to their

⁴⁹² GAPK. F. R-470, op.1, d.50, l.22. *Otchet o poezdke na 1yi vsesoiuznyi s'ezd PRZhKh.*

⁴⁹³ TsAGM, F.2633, op.3, d.21, l.71. *Rabota profsoiuza.*

apartments so that they do not get hurt by the wooden chips or in case the stairway collapses. The noise attracts the attention of domestic worker and union activist Fenia who shames the men, reminding them that “chopping wood in hallways is not allowed.” Although they ignore her, it is clear that it is the conscious domestic worker who is the only resident that understands the importance of taking care of the housing stock.

Such emphasis on domestic workers’ role in maintaining state buildings should be viewed against the background of the Bolsheviks’ attempt to modernize the communal system in Soviet cities. Improvement of housing conditions and forced development of communal services were an integral part of the industrialization drive and were important in two respects. First, improvement of living standards had a positive effect on workers’ labor output. Second, since the beginning of the Soviet state, housing held high symbolic value. Decent housing was an important component of Bolsheviks’ promise to the working class. While it was the obligation of state institution to construct new houses and provide maintenance crews, it was a duty of every Soviet citizen to treat state property with care. In this context the domestic worker held a dual position. On the one hand, she was to be a responsible resident as any other Soviet citizen. On the other hand, she was a worker, a member of the Professional Union of Workers of Housing Services, and taking care of state property was her job.

Since the home of employers was now a unit of socialist economy, labor relations were also to be transformed. As one domestic worker-activist put it at a union meeting, “domestic workers should work the same way workers at enterprises do.”⁴⁹⁴ Like other workers across the country, domestics were to engage in socialist competition. While initially socialist competition among domestics was limited to public activities such as

⁴⁹⁴ TsAGM. F.2633, op.11, d.11, l.1. *Protokol ot 9 ianvaria 1934.*

utility waste collection or subscription to state loans, by 1934 their professional services became the object of socialist competition. Domestic workers could compete for maintaining cleanest rooms or cleanest kitchens.⁴⁹⁵ For domestics working in the homes of shock workers, the union organized separate socialist competitions to provide “exemplary service”. Domestic workers of those special families were to compete for “the cleanest apartment”, “best care for children” or simply for “exemplary service.”⁴⁹⁶ Domestic workers were to become invisible helpers that created conditions for superhuman production feats of shock workers in the industry. Another form of socialist competition promoted by the union was competition between domestic workers and their employers. An article entitled “Exemplary service for shock worker!” describes two such cases. In the first, domestic worker Makarova took on the obligation to provide her employer Tul’chinskaia with “exemplary service,” while Tul’chinskaia promised to give her time to attend classes and engage in union activities. In another family, even children joined the socialist competition: the Vogizbakh brothers took on the obligations “to keep clean and wash our hands before meals, do homework assigned at school, obey our nanny (comrade Chernousova) and help her liquidate her illiteracy.”⁴⁹⁷

This brief report on the competition between employers and domestic workers sheds light on the role of employers – they were to help domestics become better Soviet citizens as well as making sure that they did their job well. Unlike in the 1920s, employers were now trusted with evaluating the work of their domestic workers. In 1934, *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khozaistva* published a letter from a certain Astasheva in which

⁴⁹⁵ TsAGM. F.2633, op.1,d.38, l.16. *Nashi geroi za chistotu v obshchitiakh i domakh.*

⁴⁹⁶ TsAGM. F.2633.op.3.d.21.l.50. *Itogi massovogo pokhoda im. 17go parts”ezda po Dzerzhinskomu raionu SRGP.*

⁴⁹⁷ “Udarniku – obratsovoye obsluzhivaniye,” *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khozyastva* 2 (1934), 17.

she praised her seventeen-year-old domestic worker Soboleva for her commitment and hard work: she was never rude to her employers, always took good care of kids, and volunteered to do extra housework. The employer was so pleased with Soboleva that she “awarded” her with a skirt and a blouse at the joint meeting for domestic workers and employers dedicated to the women’s day.⁴⁹⁸ The original publication caused some backlash with one of the contributors blaming the article for “idealizing relationship between domestic worker and her employer,” and wrongly equating a private employer with an administrator at a state enterprise.⁴⁹⁹ Yet PUWHS embraced the practice of awarding domestic workers on behalf of their employers at union meetings. While in the 1920s gifts from employers to domestic workers were considered to be degrading because they emphasized the power of the employer to show his or her benevolence, in contrast to the regulated salaries prescribed by the labor contract, now these gifts were reimagined as “*premirovaniie*” – bonus payment that workers at enterprises received for exceeding production norms. The use of such production language signified that housework was an integral part of socialist economy.

The mixture of production language and narratives of loyalty are present in the recommendations employers wrote to nominate their domestic workers for the award. A certain doctor Zeidlin wrote to the local PUWHS cell in the city of Molotov in 1938:

I consider it necessary to note the good work of Nastia Azova at the eighth of March celebration. For almost two years she had served our family as a domestic worker and had shown exceptional honesty and diligence, as well as consciousness and commitment in regards to her responsibilities in doing the housework. Over this time she had acquired our complete trust and we see her as part of the family. Her work makes it possible for us, research workers, devote all

⁴⁹⁸ Lunina, “*Peredovye domработnitsy Kineshmy*,” *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khozaistva* 7 (1934): 15.

⁴⁹⁹ “*Im nado pomogat’*,” *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khozaistva* 7 (1934): 14.

our time and energies to our direct responsibilities, and for our daughters [she makes it possible] to study without being distracted by housework.⁵⁰⁰

Zeidlin praises Azova for honesty, diligence and dedication – qualities that would be characteristic of a good servant across time and space. At the same time Azova is conscious (*soznatel'naia*), a quintessential Soviet term that signals belonging to the vanguard of Soviet citizens. Zeidlin writes that she regards Azova as part of the family – a statement that just ten years before would have been mocked as an attempt to mask exploitation by presenting it as a quasi-familial relations. Yet now such statements were in line with the official discourse that praised employers for treating their domestics “as family.” Most importantly, Azova contributes to the Soviet economy: thanks to her taking over the housework her employers can perform their duties to the state in full capacity and their children are preparing to join the workforce with no distraction. Domestic workers’ role in raising the new generation of Soviet citizens was also a reason to celebrate their achievements. The Solntsev family decided to award their nanny Sakharova with a bonus that equaled a monthly pay of forty rubles, because “she looks after the seven-and-a-half-months-old Galochka Solntseva with great love and therefore justifies our trust in her performing the greatest task – taking care of the most precious thing in our socialist Motherland, our children.”⁵⁰¹

Both Azova and Sakharova received their awards at a union meeting dedicated to the celebration of the All-women’s Day, as hundreds of thousands of other female workers across the country. However, while the awards for the former came from their unions or enterprises, the dress, skirts and money bonuses were sponsored by their employers – individual families. These rewards for outstanding service were not limited

⁵⁰⁰ GAPK. F.R-470, op.1, d.57, l.155 *Kharakteristika*.

⁵⁰¹ GAPK. F.R-470, op.1, d.57, l.156 *Kharakteristika*.

to clothes and money. The brochure “What has the Soviet Power Given to the Domestic Worker,” published in 1937 to celebrate the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution, included several examples of employers helping their domestic workers out as a reward for their faithful service. After seven years of being a domestic worker, Frosia Golub was now a dental student. “For her good and honest labor” her former employers allowed her to stay in their apartment until she graduated. “Comrade Isaikina” had been a reliable domestic worker so when she became pregnant her employers decided to let her stay so she could work and take care of her child. Several employers were praised for providing their elderly domestics with room and board after retirement.⁵⁰² Thus, if the home was the reproduction unit similar to production units at factories, the employers were administrators that could celebrate a good worker with a “bonus” or a “reward.” It took much longer, however, to delegate them the authority to punish the “bad” ones.

The question of discipline among domestic workers first came up in the early 1930s. At that time the Soviet state made its first attempt to tighten labor laws in order to have a greater control over labor distribution.⁵⁰³ Among other things, the new law (the decree of 18 January 1931 ‘On Malicious Disorganizers of Production) made absenteeism grounds for dismissal. Although the law did not apply to domestic workers, the PUCWDS Central Committee was concerned with domestics who left their jobs without notice and suggested that they were to be tried at comrade courts for violation of labor discipline. Local organizations were also to launch a propaganda campaign that

⁵⁰² Aleksandra Motova, *Chto dala sovetskaia vlast' domashnei rabotnitse* (Moskva: Profizdat, 1937), 17, 23.

⁵⁰³ Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization* (Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1986), 111.

would explain to domestic workers the importance of their labor for their employers – “fighters for the industrial and financial plan.”⁵⁰⁴ The campaign, however, did not get momentum. For almost a decade employers were not allowed to voice their complaints about the work of their domestics in public.

The difficulty of articulating grievances against domestic workers are obvious from the letter of the head of the party study center at the “Red October” Factory in Molotov. She had been called upon by the local PUWHS cell to settle accounts with the domestic worker she had dismissed. In over four pages the party worker described the escapades of her nanny Zyrianova. After two months of good work, Zyrianova found a female friend Zinka. Together with Zinka she would go out, drink and meet men. After the celebrations of the 7th of November – the anniversary of October revolution, Zyrianova came home so drunk she spent the whole night sleeping in the bathroom. What was worse, she started stealing from her employers and the neighbors. When the employer finally confronted her and asked her to leave, Zyrianova slapped her in the face and walked out with some of her employer’s clothes. The employer explained that she had put up with Zyrianova for so long because she was a party member and it was embarrassing for her that she could not get along with a domestic worker. She was ready to come to the union and explain the situation once she found another nanny for her children or have a union inspector in her home. “What I find strange, - she wrote in conclusion of her rather emotional letter, - is that a domestic worker can do whatever she wants and there is no discipline for her.”⁵⁰⁵ Zyrianova’s employer was probably not alone

⁵⁰⁴ GARF. F.5456, op.20, d. 52. l.194. *Protokol No.56 zasedaniia presidiuma TsK SRGP i DR ot 14 sentiabria 1932.*

⁵⁰⁵ GAPK. F.R-470, op.1, d.57, l.11-14. *Ob’asnitel’naia zapiska.*

in her dissatisfaction with their domestic workers' misconduct. However, the official Soviet discourse allowed no space for such complaints.

The situation changed on December 12, 1940, when the official organ of the Supreme Soviet newspaper *Izvestiia* published a letter to the editor signed by five professional women from Yekaterinburg: an engineer, a librarian, an accountant, an editor and a doctor. The letter opened with the stories of two families. In the first one, the domestic worker went shopping for herself in the morning and her employer – an engineer and a mother of two – had to find another person who would look after the kids. As a result, the mother was late for work. In the second one, the nanny would leave the children in her charge alone in the apartment and even beat them. When the employer – a doctor and also a mother of two – attempted to reason with her she would threaten to leave. The authors of the letter complained that such irresponsible behavior of their domestic workers jeopardized the productivity of their professional lives. The situation had become even more difficult since the introduction of the new labor law that penalized employees for missing work and undue tardiness with heavy fines and even correctional labor sentences.⁵⁰⁶ The authors of the article argued that even though in the Soviet Union a domestic worker was not a house slave, as was the case in capitalist countries, and could choose any job outside the home, as long as she was working for a family of her employer she had to “feel responsibility to society for her labor.” While there were many responsible workers who were “attentive to the production needs” of their employers, many others had no idea what labor discipline was. The union had failed to instill a sense

⁵⁰⁶ “On the Transfer to the Eight-Hour Working Day, the Seven-day Work Week, and on the Prohibition of Unauthorized Departure by Laborers and Office Workers from Factories and Offices. Decree of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet, 26 June 1940,” accessed December 12, 2016, <http://www.cyberussr.com/rus/uk-trud-e.html>.

of responsibility in their members, choosing to ignore the problems of employers. The authors of the letter proposed that domestic workers were mandated to have labor books that would track their work history, including the reasons for dismissal. The letter concluded with a call to the union and the Komsomol to improve “political and educational work” among domestic workers.⁵⁰⁷

Three weeks later *Izvestiia* published a follow-up piece to the letter that presented abstracts from readers’ responses. “Group committees for domestic workers played quite a positive role when it was important to teach petty bourgeois and old-regime intelligentsia how to treat a soviet citizen employed privately. Today many group committees take up a wrong attitude, protecting idlers and breakers of labor discipline from justified demands of Soviet intelligentsia, of mothers some of which maybe used to be domestic workers themselves,” stated one of the responses. “We have to suffer from people whom we pay for helping us in earnest,” wrote an NKVD employee from Leningrad. A woman from Kharkiv noted that when employing a domestic worker, a mother wants “a friend in the house [who would be] dedicated to the family.”

The editors noted that there were many letters from employers about positive experiences with domestic workers but none of them made it into the article. The focus of the publication was different. “What should we do to make sure that every domestic worker works diligently and does not call any trouble to the mother?” ask the anonymous editors. They reject solutions suggested by the readers such as labor books, incorporation of the time spent in domestic service in official length of employment and fines for breaking labor discipline. They also disagree with a certain Abramenko who argues that

⁵⁰⁷ Ie. Starikova, O. Panova, A. Il’ina, Ie. Iantovskaia, L. Sukhonosova, “*O domashnei rabotnitse*,” *Izvestiia*, December 12, 1940, 4.

“the profession of the domestic worker has become obsolete.” Neither do they support the position of several domestic workers who have responded to the original publication by blaming employers for violation of labor rights. The solution to the problem, according to the editors is “political, educational and cultural work among domestic workers.” The failure of domestic workers to do their job is the failure of the union to do theirs.⁵⁰⁸

Even though *Izvestiia* editors sarcastically noted that nobody from Professional Union of Workers of Housing Services bothered to respond to the letter, the publication in the country’s major newspaper, of course, did not go unnoticed by the union leadership. Following the publications in *Izvestiia*, the Central Committee of the union issued a special resolution in which they admitted that the accusations were valid. There was no limit to domestic workers’ “right” to quit their jobs and the union had failed to instill in them a sense of discipline and responsibility for their work. The solution proposed by the union was threefold. First, local organizations had to reregister all domestic workers and employers to make sure that there was no one outside the union’s sphere of control. The second step was to organize a series of lectures and seminars on child-rearing, domestic hygiene and the rights and responsibilities of domestic workers. Individual domestic workers were to report on their work in the home of their employers as well as public work at union meetings. The third component was to change the legislation regulating paid domestic labor. Even though the law of 1940 had no mention of domestic service at all, the 1938 “On Measures for the regulation of labor discipline, improvement in the practice of state social insurance, and struggle against abuses in that matter” contained a clause that stated that the work of privately employed domestic workers was to be regulated by a separate set of rules. According to the Resolution, the

⁵⁰⁸ “*Eshche o domashnei rabotnitse*,” *Izvestiia*, December 30, 1940, 4.

union Central Committee had submitted a relevant proposal to the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions several weeks prior the first publication in *Izvestiia*.⁵⁰⁹

Although the union Central Committee's documents have been lost and it is impossible at this time to say what, exactly, the union was proposing, the whole conversation around paid domestic labor suggests that domestic workers were to be brought in line with the tightening of labor discipline.⁵¹⁰ It seems that the campaign in *Izvestia* was to pave the way for a new law on domestic service. All-Union registration of domestic workers and employers – the first step of the program proposed by PUWHS – was scheduled the end of spring – beginning of the summer 1941. All employers were clear arrears in insurance payments and “cultural charges” (a fee that was to finance union's cultural work among domestics) and illiterate and semi-literate domestic workers were to sign up for school. Local organizations were to report on the results of the registration by July 15, 1941.⁵¹¹ The attack of Nazi Germany in June of 1941, however, made these plans irrelevant.

Reinvention of the home as a unit of socialist economy and the relationship between the domestic worker and the employer as that of an employee and a manager added a different spin of the issue of domestic workers' labor rights. Having reviewed the state of union work among domestics in Moscow in 1938, PUWHS central committee noted that the organization had not been paying sufficient attention to domestic workers' labor. Along with violations of laws on employment of minors, failure to provide sufficient maternity leave and weekly days off, the committee listed high rates of on-the-

⁵⁰⁹ GAPK. F.R-470, op.1, d. 46, l.31. *Postanovleniie Presidiuma TsK PRZhKh “O sostoianii trudovoi distsipliny I o kul’turno-vospitatel’noi rabote sredi domashnikh rabotnits” ot 25 dekabria 1940 g.*

⁵¹⁰ On the labor laws of 1938-1940, see Donald Filtzer, *Soviet Workers and Stalinist Industrialization*, 233-253.

⁵¹¹ GAPK F.R-470, op.1, d.46, ll.46. *Postanovleniie presidiuma TsKPRYhKh ot 18 marta 1941 g.*

job injuries for domestic workers. They were said to account for a quarter of all sick leaves among domestics. To improve the situation, the Central Committee suggested that local unions recruit a public inspector from among domestic workers for every fifty women and one inspector for every twenty teenagers in service who would check on domestic workers' labor conditions and organize special lectures on labor safety. The lectures were to cover topics such as working at heights, lightening stoves, and lifting weights.⁵¹²

Unlike in the 1920s, state interest in domestic workers' labor conditions was not framed as a question of labor rights. It was rather formulated as a state concern for its labor resources. The same resolution that called for improvement of domestic workers' living and working conditions suggested "comradely control" over sick domestic workers in their homes that guaranteed that they were following doctor's recommendations.⁵¹³ That was a common practice that allowed the state to facilitate the speediest recovery of the worker as well as unmask simulators. The state needed domestic workers to perform reproductive labor in the Soviet homes and had a stake in their well-being.

This did not mean that the union did not protect domestic workers in the cases of obvious exploitation or abuse. PUWHS organization in the city of Molotov claimed to have inspected living and working conditions of 428 domestic workers in 1937. In several cases the union forced the employers to pay the wages they owed to their domestics, others were fined for violating labor laws regarding employment of minors.⁵¹⁴ A pregnant domestic worker could find assistance in the case of dismissal and get

⁵¹² GAPK. F.R-470, op.1, d., 42, l.136-137. *Postanovleniie va'ezdnogo presidiuma TsK RzhKh ot 21 sentiabria 1935 g.*

⁵¹³ Ibid., 136.

⁵¹⁴ GAPK. F.R-470, op.1, d.50, l.52. *Protokol obshegorodskogo sobraniia chlenov PSRZhKh ot 22 avgusta 1937 g.*

reinstated.⁵¹⁵ However, these conflicts did not receive the attention that they did in the 1920s. When violations of domestic workers' rights were mentioned, they were referred to as "arguments and misunderstandings."⁵¹⁶ The union was to simultaneously better labor conditions of domestic workers and improve the quality of their service to employers, discipline employers for violating labor laws and punish domestic workers for violating labor discipline. The results of the union work were to be reported at joint meetings of domestic workers and employers.⁵¹⁷

One more aspect that defined labor relations in the 1930s was the constant search for wreckers and double-faced agents of the "opposition." Although there is no direct evidence that would shed light on whether or not domestic workers received specific instructions to spy on their employers, domestic workers, all Soviet workers across the country, were encouraged to be on guard. At the city meeting of domestic workers and janitors of the city of Molotov in April of 1937, a special report was dedicated to the question of vigilance. The audience was reminded about the capitalist encirclement, the infiltration of the party by the enemies, and the need to keep one's eyes open.⁵¹⁸ Domestic workers attending a political reading group were reported to be discussing a widely circulated article by the head of Leningrad NKVD Leonid Zakovskii "On some methods and tricks of foreign intelligence services and their Trotskyist-Bukharinist agents."⁵¹⁹ The article emphasized the role of conscious Soviet citizens in detecting

⁵¹⁵ GAPK. F.R-470, op.1, d.56, l.13. *Protokol zasedaniia presidiuma Sverdlovskogo obkoma PRZhKh ot 16 maia 1938 g.*

⁵¹⁶ Aleksandra Motova, *Chto dala sovetskaia vlast' domashnei rabotnitse*, 23.

⁵¹⁷ GAPK. F.R-470, op.1, d., 42, l.136-137. *Postanovleniie va'ezdnogo presidiuma TsK RzhKh ot 21 sentiabria 1935 g.*

⁵¹⁸ GAPK. F. R.470, op.1, d.50, l.118 *Protokol obshchegorodskogo sobraniia domrabotnits i dvornikov g. Molotova za 21 apreliia 1937.*

⁵¹⁹ Aleksandra Motova, *Chto dala sovetskaia vlast' domashnei rabotnitse*, 21.

wreckers and spies.⁵²⁰ A former Soviet engineer Valentina Bogdan left a detailed account of how talks about vigilance affected the nanny of her daughter, Davydovna. Coming back from one of the union meetings she enjoyed so much, Davydovna told her employer that they had discussed how “we maids and nannies could help the Soviet state fight its enemies.”⁵²¹ The union agitator had told domestic workers about their colleague who received an apartment as a reward for informing on her employers who had allegedly been in correspondence with Trotskii. She was said to have provided the NKVD with half-burnt letters that were used as evidence.⁵²²

Domestic workers, however, were not only potential informants. They were potential wreckers and spies. In a short story for children “Inapt student,” a family of a “military worker” hired a domestic worker Niura. Niura had good recommendation letters and appeared very experienced and hardworking. The only problem was that she was illiterate. Even though the employers were a bit surprised that the women still could not read twenty years after the revolution, as good Soviet citizens and employers they assigned their fourteen-year-old son Serezha to teach her the alphabet. Niura turned out to be a surprisingly inapt student – she would immediately forgot everything she had been told. However, one day when Serezha came home early from school he caught a glimpse of what looked like Niura reading. Serezha was a good pioneer and immediately realized that something suspicious was going on. He pretended to have left the house and then

⁵²⁰ Leonid Zakovskii, “*O nekotorykh metodakh i priemakh inostrannykh razvedovatel’nykh organov i ikh trotskisto-bukharinskoi agentury*,” in *O metodakh i priemakh inostrannykh razvedovatel’nykh organov i ikh trotskisto-bukharinskoi agentury* (Moskva: Partizdat TsK VKP(b), 1937).

⁵²¹ Valentina Bogdan, *Mimikriia v SSSR: Vospominaniia inzhenera, 1935-1942 gody*. As cited in Steven A. Grant, *The Russian Nanny*, 180.

⁵²² Steven A. Grant, *The Russian Nanny*, 181.

returned just in time to catch the “domestic worker” reading his father’s work papers. Thanks to the boy’s vigilance, Niura, who turned out to be a foreign spy, was arrested.⁵²³

Both the domestic worker and the employer had to be on guard. The seemingly private space of the home was no way outside of politics. As any other unit of socialist economy it was to be guarded from wreckers, be they foreign agents or irresponsible citizens. At the same time, the home often felt out of the grasp of state institutions. Domestic workers were uniquely positioned to “see and hear” what others could not. Thus, keeping eyes open for potential enemies of the state became as important, if not moreso, as for those working on enterprises.

Mastering the Technique of the Job

In the article “‘Kitchen Maid’ – In the Ranks of Builders of Socialism,” the author, having listed domestic workers’ responsibilities, asks the reader: “Can an uncultured, illiterate woman cope with such complicated tasks?” The answer is obvious: “Of course not.” Therefore, the union has two major goals: liquidate illiteracy among domestic workers and “improve their qualifications.”⁵²⁴ Providing domestic workers with basic education had long been one of the union’s priorities. It was part of the nation-wide drive against illiteracy as well as a tool for fostering servants’ new proletarian identity. Professional training for domestics however, although not an entirely unfamiliar area of union work, acquired a new meaning with the context of etatization of the home.

The idea of organizing culinary and child-rearing courses for domestic workers that would improve their skills as cooks and maids was first discussed during the NEP

⁵²³ Zilver, “Nesposobnaia uchenitsa,” in *Byt’ na-cheku!* (Moskva: Izdatel’stvo tsK VLKSM Molodaiai Gvardiia), 54-58

⁵²⁴ V. Gast, ‘*Kukharka v ryadakh stroitelei sotsialism’*.

era. The intention behind the courses was not to provide better services for employers for the employers' sake but to decrease the number of dismissals in the times of growing unemployment. As one of the contributors to *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* noted, most domestic workers came from the countryside and were unfamiliar with ways of life in the city. They needed help mastering urban household work. By organizing culinary courses the union would help domestics get an advantage over recent newcomers from the village and keep their jobs.⁵²⁵ However, union resources were limited and the plan to turn domestic workers into qualified personnel never took off under NEP.

Forced industrialization under the First Five-Year plan brought about increased attention to education. Along with literacy classes, political education, and general education, a growing number of Narpit organizations were developing vocational training programs for domestic workers. The objective for the latter, however, was now in line with the plan to mobilize women into industry rather than to improve their chances to remain employed in domestic service. The courses were intended to prepare domestic workers for becoming 'real' workers. Course plans preserved in the archives show that most local organizations anticipated their domestics to go into the service industry. For instance, in the city of Vyatka, domestic workers could attend a 100-hours-long course and learn to "evaluate the quality of groceries, purchase and preserve foodstuffs, cook according to sanitary norms, clean and wash the dishes" as well as improve their political literacy by learning about such topics as "how our party is built, the revolution of 1905, the World War, February and October, the essence of the Soviet power"⁵²⁶. The

⁵²⁵ P. Prokov'eva, "Domrabortnitsam nuzhna pomoshch'," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 2 (1927):5-6.

⁵²⁶ GARF, F.5452, op.12, d.159, l.11-13. *Programma kursov kulinarii dlia domrabortnits*.

Leningrad cell offered four different programs for domestics: cooking, food hygiene, merchandise and materials knowledge and applied arithmetic.⁵²⁷

The union journal reported that the courses in Leningrad that took place every Friday between eight and eleven o'clock in the evening were very popular among domestics, with fifty women accepted into the program in spring of 1928.⁵²⁸ There is, however, no comprehensive statistics available to evaluate how many domestic workers actually attended these courses. Housework in the homes of their employers was demanding enough and left little time for domestics to come to class on a regular basis. The union also faced organizational challenges. The acclaimed culinary courses in Leningrad, for example, did not have any practical component: domestic workers were expected to master cooking by listening to lectures.⁵²⁹

Ideally, the knowledge and skills domestics acquired at these courses could be used outside of domestic service as well as improve their employment opportunities while it took a few years for the industrialization drive to end unemployment. Even when it came to such a non-industrial skill as cooking, there was an implicit connection with the service industry rather than housework. For instance, in Nizhniy Novgorod domestic workers received hands-on training at the local factory-kitchen.⁵³⁰ Theoretically, once they had reached a certain level of professional competence, they could take up jobs at the enterprise. Such an approach confined domestic workers to the service sector that in the Soviet hierarchy of labor would always come second after the 'real' industry.

⁵²⁷ Ibid., I.18-21.

⁵²⁸ V. Sonkin, "Vecherniie kursy dl'a domashnikh rabotnits v Leningrade," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitania* 3 (1928):18.

⁵²⁹ TsGA SPb. F.R-4497, op.11, d.41, l.1. *Protokol No.10 organizatsionnogo zasedaniia domrabotnits po voprosu organizatsii kulinarnogo kruzhka*. 20 ianvaria 1928.

⁵³⁰ Ivanova, "Spasibo za uchebu," *Rabochii Narodnogo Pitaniia* 11(1928):33.

By the end of the First Five-Year plan? the connection between domestics' education and their future employment became muted and union leadership began to frame training for domestic workers as improvement of "domestic workers' qualifications."⁵³¹ Domestic workers were increasingly referred to as representatives of a "profession" who, on the one hand, demanded respect just like any other laborers, while on the other hand were to satisfy the professional requirements of their jobs. An evaluation of the work conducted by the Moscow PUCWDS domestic workers section, published in *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khoziastva*, praised the organization for domestics' involvement in utility waste collection and subscription to the state loan, but noted the absence of work aimed at "professional development of domestic workers."⁵³² Another contributor to the union journal complained that while domestic workers' involvement in public work had received a lot of attention, there had been no discussion about their "professional improvement." The increased significance of domestic worker's labor to the building of socialism made it of crucial importance that she "master[ed] the technique of her job." The author did not reject the idea of using the skills a domestic worker acquired through training outside of domestic service, acknowledging that she could become "a qualified worker in the fields of child-rearing, public catering or nursing." However, the emphasis was on training domestics to provide better services for their employers.⁵³³

It is telling that child-rearing headed the list of possible careers for a domestic worker. In line with the pro-natalist tendencies outside the USSR, Soviet leadership was growing increasingly concerned with reproduction and childraising. In 1935 the Central

⁵³¹ TsAGM, F.2633, op.3, d.21, l.18. *Predsedateliu grupkoma.*

⁵³² A. Blok, *Luchshie aktivistki*, *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khoziastva* 7(1934):15.

⁵³³ 'Im nado pomogat'.

Committee of the Communist Party issued a Resolution “On liquidation of child neglect and homelessness” that increased parents and guardians’ liability for their children. It was followed by the infamous “Decree on Prohibition of Abortion” that included a range of policies that were intended to increase the birth rate: ban on abortions, a system of material aid for women with children and increased support for childcare facilities. It also made divorce more difficult to obtain and introduced harsher punishment for fathers who failed to make their alimony payments.⁵³⁴ The pro-natalist thrust of the 1930s manifested itself in the increased attention to the child-rearing functions of the domestic worker who was refigured as a nanny. She was responsible not only for the physical well-being but also for the moral upbringing of children in her care, raising them to be proper Soviet citizens.

The problem was that domestic workers themselves were citizens with questionable ideological credentials. While there had been a long tradition among Russian pre-revolutionary elites that glorified peasant nannies as a link between their children and “the people” some Soviet educational activists expressed concern with the elements of “backward” village culture these women brought into Soviet homes.⁵³⁵ In his speech at the First All-Union meeting of PUCWDS in April of 1931 representative of the Friend of Children Society warned the meeting that “backward” domestic workers from villages led children “in the opposite direction” to where Soviet school was going.⁵³⁶ In

⁵³⁴ On Soviet pro-natalism see David L. Hoffman, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917-1941* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003), 97-105. On the importance of child-rearing, see David L. Hoffman, *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914-1939* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2011), 168-180.

⁵³⁵ On the nanny as an romanticized link between the upper classes and the common people, see Steven A. Grant, *The Russian Nanny*, 310.

⁵³⁶ GARF. F.5456, op.20.d.3.l.158. *Pervvyi vsesoyuznyi s"ezd RGP I DR. Veчерneye zasedaniye 14 apreliya 1931.*

the article entitled “Do you know what your child is doing?” the author complained that nannies raised children as they pleased without any knowledge about “how to deal with a child, how to instill cultural skills in him.”⁵³⁷ Educator Bogomazova reminded the readers of her brochure on cultural work among domestics about the “public importance” of antireligious propaganda among nannies because a religious nanny “raises children in her own way.”⁵³⁸ A certain D. Iurov who published a book on antireligious work suggested using talks on childrearing with titles such as “Why one should not beat or scare children,” “How to entertain [children] reasonably,” or “Why should one raise children without religion and superstitions” to draw domestic workers – “the least cultural laboring women” – into discussion about religion and show its role in enslavement of women.⁵³⁹

In addition to their cultural backwardness, nannies had little knowledge of appropriate methods of child-rearing. As one union activist from Minsk complained at a domestic workers’ meeting, some nannies were neglectful of their charges or resorted to physical punishment.⁵⁴⁰ The chair of domestic workers’ section in Moscow Kalinina noted that there had even been some cases of children’s death due to improper care. She lamented that a typical nanny treated the child in her charge “like a thing, for which she is temporarily responsible.” The domestic worker had to understand that children were “our

⁵³⁷ “Znayete li vy, chto delayet vash rebyenok?,” *Rabochii Gorodskogo Khozyaistva* 6 (1934):7.

⁵³⁸ Z.A. Bogomazova. *Kul’turnaia rabota sredi domashnikh rabotnits*, 53.

⁵³⁹ D. Iurov, *Antireligioznaia rabota shkoly s roditel’ami* (Moskva, Leningrad: Gosudarstvennoie izdatel’stvo, 1930), 54. The author of the brochure does not seem to be interested in how nannies influenced their children. His goal is to raise the cultural level of domestic workers and nannies.

⁵⁴⁰ GARF. F.5452, op.12, d.154, l.23. *Protokol otchetnogo sobraniia domashnikh rabotnits Mestkoma* No.2 ot 8 apreliia 1928 (Minsk).

future cadres, our future generations, builders of our Soviet country” and it was her duty to “bring [the child] up properly, take care of it properly and treat it responsibly.”⁵⁴¹

The solution to the problem was training. The domestic worker had to be taught how to be a good care-taker. Unlike in the case of cooking classes, education about child-rearing was initially not envisioned as a course. Instead, the union organized lectures and seminars on childcare and child nutrition within the framework of their regular meetings with domestics. While culinary courses were offered to a limited number of students who had to sign up for the course and attend it on a regular basis, lectures on child-rearing were theoretically targeting all domestic workers and were to be implemented on a much larger scale. For example, to celebrate the Seventeenth Party Congress, Moscow PUCWDS organization took on the “socialist obligations” to have three thousand domestic workers attend child-rearing courses.⁵⁴² In the first nine months of 1935, Moscow organization claimed that 5,447 domestic workers took part in seminars in child-rearing and take courses in healthcare.⁵⁴³

At first, there seem to have not been any clear guidelines from the central committee on what it meant to be a qualified nanny. Lectures on childcare covered a wide range of topics, depending on local initiative. In 1935, however, the PUWHS central committee suggested that its domestic workers’ section together with People’s Commissariat of Healthcare and People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment develop a “minimum of mandatory knowledge in child-rearing and sanitary house maintenance for

⁵⁴¹ TsAGM. F.2633, op.1,d.2, l., 116-117. *Tretii Plenum gorkoma SRGP i DR. 25 apreliia 1932.*

⁵⁴² V. Gast, ‘Kukharka v ryadakh stroitelei sotsialism’.

⁵⁴³ GAPK. F.R-470, op.1, d., 42, l.135. *Postanovleniie va’ezdnogo presidiuma TsK RzhKh ot 21 sentiabria 1935 g.*

domestic workers” and have not less than fifty percent of domestics pass a respective examination.⁵⁴⁴

The guidelines sent out to all regional PUWHS organizations included “lectures on communist education” and the “sanitary minimum” itself. Lectures on communist education covered such topics as “domestic servants under capitalist and domestic workers in the USSR,” “the role of the domestic worker as an indirect contributor to the growth of employers’ labor output,” “taking good care of socialist property,” as well as labor laws, social insurance, union membership and the goals of the Third Five-Year plan. The sanitary minimum included such topics as the negative influence of dust on human health and the importance of ventilation, the appropriate levels of light and heat in a home, ways to combat dampness and vermin, contagious diseases and proper care of the sick, quality of goods and cooking techniques. Domestic workers were to be taught to wash their hands and cut their fingernails, take care of their skin and hair, and take preventive measures against venereal diseases. A separate set of questions within the minimum had to do with child-rearing. The domestic worker was to know how to properly wrap the child and avoid diaper rashes, how to use hot-water bottles, douches, and Vaseline, how to organize the free time of a preschooler and prevent diarrhea.⁵⁴⁵

What is striking about the educational program for domestic workers is its emphasis on hygiene with very limited consideration of questions of child development. = Scholars have long noted the centrality of hygiene to the Bolshevik revolutionary project.⁵⁴⁶ At the metaphorical level, obsession with cleanliness expressed the anxieties

⁵⁴⁴ Ibid., I.137.

⁵⁴⁵ GAPK F.R-470, op.1, d.46, ll.32-33. *Tematika lektsii, besed po kommunisticheskomu vospitaniiu, zakonodatel'stvu, i sanitarno-tekhnicheskomu minimumu dlia domrabortnits.*

⁵⁴⁶ Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public*; Tricia Starks, *The Body Soviet*.

about ideological purity of the early Soviet society and the fear of contamination. At the level of social and political practices, hygienic standards were form of population control that became increasingly important with the growing sense of impending war in the 1930s. The Soviet state needed healthy citizens that would not only build new factors under the next Five-Year plan but would also be strong enough to defend their socialist motherland.

The close link between hygiene and Soviet pronatalism explains the constant slippage between domestic workers' position as professional caretakers and as mothers in union documents regarding childrearing training. Domestic workers' motherhood had been an object of attention since the 1920s. The fate of pregnant domestic workers and domestics with children was one of the central themes in Narpit's struggle for their rights for housing and priority admission into hospitals and Home of Mother and Child. Some Narpit committees even held lectures on motherhood and childrearing for domestic workers but unlike those organized in the 1930s, they were aimed at domestic workers as mothers rather than nannies.⁵⁴⁷ Domestic workers' professional function, which became much more pronounced in the 1930s, did not overshadow their role as mothers or future mothers. "Every domestic worker has to gain some experience not only in order to raise the child of her employer but also to remember that having become a mother she will have to raise her own children properly," stated the head of the domestic workers' section in Moscow Kalinina.⁵⁴⁸

It is unclear to what extent the sanitary minimum was enforced. Union reports routinely noted low level of domestic workers' attendance of union activities. It seems unlikely that the union was ever able to reach anything close to the target of fifty percent

⁵⁴⁷ TsGA SPb. F.R-4489, op.1, d.50. l.2. *Obshcheie sobranie domashnikh rabotnits 1go grupkoma*, 25 ianvaria 1925.

⁵⁴⁸ TsAGM. F.2633, op.1,d.2, l., 116-117. *Tretii Plenum gorkoma SRGP i DR*. 25 apreliia 1932.

of domestic workers taking an exam. Most likely, local organizations were able to have several lectures on topics from the list. It is impossible to say how domestic workers reacted to such lectures. One Moscow nanny, a certain Shkiriatoa was reported to say about the training in child-rearing: “I used to only care that the child would not cry and never paid attention to his questions but now I understand that you should watch the child and listen to what he says because this is how he develops, by listening to the correct answer, if the child is moping about that means that we, domestic workers, are not keeping up [with the demands of the job].”⁵⁴⁹ In any case, the intention to create such a “qualification exam” for domestic workers implied that domestic labor had become a field of professional expertise with its particular value for the state.

The Radiant Path?

In Veniamin Kaverin’s seminal novel *The Two Captains* the protagonist describes his friends’ nanny as “very good, with recommendations, fat, clean, with forty years of experience.” She wears a white apron, a bonnet and believes that her job was the most important one in the world. She is skeptical of the modern “scientific” approach to childrearing but the happy employers believe her to be a “professor of nannies.”⁵⁵⁰ Throughout the novel she is referred to as a “learned nanny.” Kaverin’s inversion is ironic: the nanny that does not have much education and is clearly connected with the backward past through her apron, bonnet and an old chest with trinkets is the “learned nanny” preferred by a Soviet intelligentsia couple. What Kaverin’s “learned nanny” and

⁵⁴⁹ TsADM. F.2633, op.1, d.50, l.36. *Po gorsektsii domrabortnits.*

⁵⁵⁰ Veniamin Kaverin, *Dva kapitana* (Moskva: OMLA-PRESS *Obrazovanie*, 2004), 323.

the ideal domestic worker of the late 1930s propaganda materials have in common is that they are professionals working for respectable Soviet families.

While in earlier representations of domestic service the maid is always an unfortunate woman breaking her back for petty-bourgeois exploiters and her emancipation is one of the central themes (*Tailor from Torzhok*, *House on the Trubnaia Street*), the late 1930s witnessed the appearance of very different representations of domestic worker–employer relationship. In the first Soviet family comedy *The Foundling* (1939), domestic worker Arisha is a lead-footed middle-aged woman with a distinct village accent. The bead neckless that is too tight and the numerous hairclips make her look infantile. In spite of Arisha’s excessive talkativeness and stupidity, her employers – a respectable Soviet family – treat her with endless patience. Arisha’s character, introduced for comic relief, is in no way a “Lenin’s kitchen maid” – there is nothing about her involvement in public work or desire to become “a real worker.” Neither is Margarita L’vovna in the music comedy *The Spring* (the film came out in 1947 but the first version of the screenplay was completed in June of 1941). She works for a renowned woman-scholar whom she lovingly calls Arinushka. Margarita L’vovna is a dignified old maid who wears an old-fashioned jabot and reads Dostoievskii on the trolley. When Margarita L’vovna finds out that her suitor - a sleazy manager – is after her room rather than her love she consoles herself in the arms of her employer and friend Arinushka.



Fig. 19 Arisha (Rina Zelenaia) in *The Foundling*, 1939



Fig. 20 Margarita L'vovna (Faina Ranevskaya), *The Spring* (1947)

Such representations of domestic service, however, were surprisingly few. In spite of the fact that the state policy on domestic service shifted towards professionalization, Soviet literature and film continued to reproduce the emancipatory narrative of a backward domestic worker freeing herself from the drudgery of housework that was rooted in the discourse of the First Five-Year plan. In the first Soviet musical comedy *Jolly Fellows* (1934) the female protagonist Aniuta (played by Stalin's favorite Liubov'

Orlova) works for a pretentious wealthy young lady who aspires to be a singer, while it is actually her maid who has a great voice. After a series of lucky coincidences, Aniuta joins a band under the leadership of a former kolkhoz shepherd and becomes a famous singer. The film has no openly ideological component: the relationship between the maid and the mistress is limited to bickering over preparations for dinner and Aniuta realizes her dream due to luck rather than hard work, yet the viewer still recognizes employer's petty-bourgeois nature in her excessive make-up, her mannerism and uncomradely treatment of her domestic worker. Domestic service is depicted as something fundamentally unsoviet.

While Anna's story was fictional and apolitical, the pages of Soviet newspapers and journals were filled with stories of domestic workers freeing themselves from the kitchen drudgery by becoming "real workers" in factories. One of such examples was Marfa Fomina, a Stakhanovite at Dzerzhinskaia factory in Leningrad, whose profile was published by one of the leading newspapers *Trud* to celebrate achievements of Soviet women. An illiterate teenage girl Fomina first came to Leningrad in the spring of 1931 and started working as a nanny. Six years later she was awarded the Order of the Red Banner of Labor for her outstanding work at the factory and heard Stalin speak at the All-Union Stakhanovite conference. At the moment of the interview she was getting ready for the All-Union Komsomol conference and had just been admitted to a university. In her free time Fomina went to the theater and did sports.⁵⁵¹ In just a few years a backward peasant girl Fomina had become an exemplary Soviet citizen who not only made outstanding contributions to socialist economy but also met the cultural expectations of the regime. Productive labor in a workers' collective had made this

⁵⁵¹For example, "Kak izmenilas' moia zhizn'!" *Trud*, March 8, 1936, 2.

transformation possible – the transformation that could never be achieved in the confines of a private kitchen. In similar stories published in the central journal for women *Rabotnitsa* former maids confessed to readers how they “had always dreamt of working at a factory.”⁵⁵² Once in a while newspapers would present reports on successful transfer of domestic workers into “production.”⁵⁵³ Thus, the promise of transformation that lay at the core of the Lenin’s kitchen maid metaphor remained salient throughout the decade.

Biographies of a domestic worker turned production hero culminated into the seminal music comedy *The Radiant Path* (1940). It told the story of an illiterate nanny Tania Morozova (Liubov’ Orlova), who was working for a petty-bourgeois mistress. While the mistress spent her days either lying in bed or drinking tea with her girlfriend, Tanya took care of the baby and does the housework. Luckily for Tania, the local party committee secretary Mariia Sergeievna took note of the girl. She persuaded Tania to attend evening classes and eventually brought her to the factory. With the support of Mariia Sergeievna and other fellow workers, Tanya brought a production record. In recognition of her achievements she was awarded with a state order. She became an engineer and a deputy of the Supreme Soviet and found personal happiness with an engineer who used to be the object of her mistress’s affection. Tanya was also completely transformed as a person: a clumsy, dirty peasant girl was now a self-confident, stylishly-dressed modern woman. Even her name changed: she was not Tania anymore, but Tatiana Ivanovna with the full name and patronymics signaling her respectable status in the Soviet society.

⁵⁵² “Ob’azatel’stvo vypolneno s chest’iu,” *Rabotnitsa* 34 (1937):7.

⁵⁵³ “Domashniye rabotnitsi na proizvodstve,” *Trud*, December 24, 1938,3.

The narrative starts in 1930, during the first years of Stalin's industrialization, and ends with the opening of the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition in 1939, thus summarizing the decade. Tania's story, originally inspired by the Vinogradovs sisters who set several records in textile production, epitomizes the opportunities Stalin's industrialization had given to women. Tanya's path from a nanny to a Stakhanovite and Supreme Soviet deputy is the fulfilment of Lenin's promise that in the land of Soviets even a kitchen maid will be able to rule the state. Domestic service is presented as the first stepping stone of a working woman's career but also something to be left behind.



Fig. 21 In one of the final scenes of *The Radiant Path* (1940), Tania Morozova (Liubov' Orlova) looks into the mirror to see her life unfolding in it. Looking at herself as an illiterate nanny, she sings: "A country girl was working as a servant // always covered with ash, ash was even on her nose. // Neither a grey-haired magician, nor a young fairy, // but a middle-aged comrade gave me advice."

The association of domestic service with the historical past is also present in another powerful film of the epoch – the drama *Dream* that was meant to glorify sovietization of western Ukraine after its "unification" with its eastern counterpart in

1939 (the movie was filmed in 1941 but because of the war its premiere was postponed till 1943). It tells the story of Anna Kolehko, a part-time waitress in a restaurant and a servant for an owner of a boarding guest house in western Ukraine in the times of Iusef Pilsudskii. Anna, like her Soviet counterpart Tania Morozova, leaves her village for a better life in the city. She seems complacent with her lot and even helps the local police to arrest an underground revolutionary Tomash. It turns out that the man is a close associate of her brother, a worker at a local factor and a union activist. Tomash escapes and Anna meets him again and falls in love. Although initially dismissed by her brother and Tomash as a stupid ‘*telka*’ (literarily – female cow, a slang expression similar to the English ‘chick’), she starts developing political consciousness through personal experiences of mistreatment by her employers. After Anna is dismissed she contemplates becoming a prostitute but then decides to join the son of her mistress – a talented engineer who is unwanted in capitalist Poland – and walk to “Russia,” a country with big cities and new factories. One the way they get arrested, but Anna refuses to identify Tomash who is held in prison. Eventually, Anna makes it to the Soviet Union and becomes a factory worker. In the final scenes of the film Anna comes back to her home town after “the dream of generations had come true and the lands of Ukraine were unified” under the Soviets. She delivers a speech to the cheering crowds. Even her former mistress is impressed that “the common village girl” has “so many words.” The former maid turned factory worker and agitator represents the promise the Soviet power has for the oppressed.

In both *The Radiant Path* and *Dream*, domestic service appears to be out of sync with the effort to professionalize domestic service. The ambiguity of paid domestic labor

is even more salient in Vasilii Grossman's novella *The Kitchen Maid* (1936).⁵⁵⁴ The novella opens with an introduction of Anna Sergeievna - a wife of a successful economist. Although she loves her husband, Anna Sergeievna finds her life of a housewife "impossible": while she has an education and used to work at a factory she is now "a kitchen maid." Having contemplated a divorce, Anna opts for a different solution that will free her from the "yoke of household chores" – she hires a kitchen maid. Mar'ia Shevchuk has been living a sad life of a Ukrainian peasant woman: her husband was a drunkard and an abuser and eventually left her with a disabled son. When Maria felt sick the boy was taken into an orphanage and got lost in the institutional chaos. Grief-stricken, Mar'ia left the village and hired herself out as a kitchen maid.

Maria's arrival brings immediate changes to Anna Sergeievna's life, but not the ones she has hoped for. From the very beginning, Anna senses the ambiguity of the situations: she frees herself from the hated housework only to enslave another woman. The advice on how to "handle" Mar'ia that comes with her recommendation letter, makes her feel like an animal tamer who is about to deal with "an alligator or a wild bear." She is also sad that she gives the activities through which she has expressed her love for her husband into the hands of another woman. Although she is now free from housework, Anna Sergeievna hesitates to seek employment. Moreover, her neighbors with whom she used to be on friendly terms now view her as an exploiter, or so she feels. "It makes them angry that I do not work, have no children but have a servant," she tells her husband whose only solution to her problem is to move to the special housing for engineers.⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵⁴ Vasilii Grossman, "Kukharka," in *Neskol'ko pechal'nykh dnei: Povesti i rasskazy* (Moskva: Sovremennik, 1989), 66-105.

⁵⁵⁵ Ibid., 76-77.

Mar'ia also feels uncomfortable in her new home. Moscow frightens her and she distrusts the people. She gets in fights with other women in the communal kitchen. The only way she can find some piece of mind is by going through her old chest with the tokens from her past. Her position as a domestic worker makes her unpopular with some of the neighbors who think her to be a "backward" peasant with a "lackey's soul." Even though Mar'ia is officially a domestic worker, they see her as a servant. The only person who seems to be sympathetic to Maria is an old female worker Il'inishna who understands that the kitchen maid is just a victim of her "backward psychology." Mar'ia, however, resents the old woman and her confidence. In a way, Il'inishna is Mar'ia's antithesis: although they are both laboring women, Il'inichna "feels at home everywhere: at the factory, at home, in a story, on a tram, confident in her strength and *usefulness* [emphasis – A.K.]."⁵⁵⁶ Although Mar'ia is a hard worker, her job as a kitchen maid gives her neither respect, nor confidence.

After yet another scandal in the kitchen Anna Sergeievna's husband decides to fire Mar'ia whose presence makes him feel "like an American slave owner." Unexpectedly for Mar'ia, she suddenly finds support from other women in the apartment. While one of the neighbors lets her live in her room, Il'inichna arranges for her to start working at the factory. Although at first Mar'ia is overwhelmed, she quickly feels at home in the shop and masters her new job on the assembly line. At a factory meeting she finds out that she is in line for training that will move her up on the professional ladder. She grows close with her neighbors at the communal apartment who enjoy sharing their stories of the first workday. Productive work at the factory transforms Mar'ia in many ways: she even goes to the hairdresser and gets her first haircut. With her peasant braids

⁵⁵⁶ Ibid., 76.

that fall on the floor at the hairdressers' she leaves her dark, joyless, unproductive past behind. When Mar'ia comes to the kitchen to celebrate her first paycheck she sees her former employer making a salad. While Mar'ia has found a new, productive life, Anna Sergeievna has failed to find a job or leave her husband, and has remained a kitchen maid.

The original title of the novella *A Common Story* (*Obychnaia istoriia*), which emphasized the scale of the transformations happening in the Soviet Union, was replaced with *Kitchen Maid* (*Kukharka*) to make a more direct reference to Lenin's famous phrase. Although Grossman's narrative is a rendition of the canonical darkness to light narrative that is present in many contemporary publications about former domestic workers, his novella stands out in the way it treats domestic labor. It shows how the "comical and savage relationship that have remained only in this one small sphere in the life of a huge country" – domestic service corrupts both the maid and the mistress.⁵⁵⁷ Moreover, a housewife catering to her husband's whims is no different from a hired kitchen maid. Only in productive work outside the home can women find personal happiness that stems from their usefulness to society. Grossman's novella illuminates the paradox of using the Lenin's kitchen maid metaphor in the late 1930s: if it symbolizes the emancipatory powers of the regime and the promise of liberation for the oppressed, who does it address after the foundation of the socialist system is announced to have been built? Who are the oppressed in Stalin's Soviet Union? For Grossman, the oppressed were women working inside the home.

The tension between the emancipatory promise of Lenin's kitchen maid and representations of domestic workers as a disciplined, professional care taker grew as the

⁵⁵⁷ Ibid., 73.

decade closed. In June 1941, while Mikhail Romm was doing the final edits to *Dream*, the leading women's magazine *Rabotnitsa* (*The Female Worker*) published a full-page article entitled "The Domestic Worker."⁵⁵⁸ Unlike publications in union journals which spoke to domestics and union activists, this article was aimed at a much wider audience – the women of the Soviet Union. The author started with a question: "What business is it of the state how well a domestic worker works for a private employer?" Her answer was straightforward: "Bad work of a domestic worker can do a lot of damage to the state". Domestics are to take good care of "socialist property", look after small children and make the homes of their employers comfortable so that the latter could go to work fully rested. A good Soviet domestic worker should be respectful and dedicated to work, sincere and modest in her behavior. Briefly mentioning the need to protect the rights of domestic workers, the article concentrated on their responsibilities for the employers and the state.⁵⁵⁹ The author said nothing about former domestics who found jobs in the public sector. On the contrary, the article praised those maids and nannies who had been working in the same families for ten or fifteen years. Their activities outside the home were limited to cross-country running and choir singing. The only way out of domestic service that the article mentioned was marriage. After two decades of revolutionary politics, it seemed, the Soviet domestic worker had once again become a domestic servant – the servant of the employer's family and of the Soviet state.

Conclusion

⁵⁵⁸ A. Ashmarina, "Domashnyaya rabotnitsa," *Rabotnitsa* 8 (1941): 19.

⁵⁵⁹ The article was part of the larger campaign for labor discipline of the late 1930s that introduced a number of punitive laws meant to battle lateness, absenteeism and quitting.

The state sent contradictory messages about the place of domestic service in the country of “victorious socialism”. On the one hand, it continued to sound Lenin’s promise that after the revolution every kitchen maid would be able to rule the state. Domestic service was only the first step in a woman’s career that had to lead to “real” work in the public sector. On the other hand, numerous publications argued that paid domestic labor was an important component of the socialist economy. This new trend appeared alongside other changes in family politics that constituted a “conservative turn”. The new policies reemphasized women’s role as mothers and house keepers. This, however, did not mean that there was a single vision of Soviet womanhood.⁵⁶⁰ Based on the analysis of the state’s ambiguous treatment of paid domestic labor, I suggest that the spectrum of Soviet femininity was a manifestation of the paradox that became especially acute by mid-1930s: the contradiction between the belief in the need to emancipate women from their traditional roles in the household in order to make them into conscious Soviet subjects, and a deeply gendered vision of the society. The emancipatory thrust of the revolution continued to promise women realization of any of their ambitions, be it the radiant path from a kitchen maid to a Supreme Soviet deputy or a transformation of a Komsomol girl into a combat pilot. At the same time, the conservative turn of the mid-1930s increased the pressure to maintain a “cultured” Soviet home with well-tended children and impeccable white sheets – a responsibility that fell entirely on women. Professional household help, though doomed to disappear in the distant communist future, became an integral part of the socialist economy.

⁵⁶⁰ Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat*; Elena Shulman, *Stalinism on the Frontier of Empire*.

Epilogue.

Nazi Germany's attack on June 22, 1941 disrupted the flow of regular life in the Soviet Union. Immediately after the war started, Professional Union of Workers of Housing Services (PUWHS) began to mobilize its members for the war effort. In July of 1941 the Central Committee issued a decree that called all regional organizations to set up short-term medical training for domestic workers, female workers and wives of male workers in the housing services.⁵⁶¹ It was followed by an order to promote domestic workers, housewives and "female youth" for the work in housing services.⁵⁶² Those who remained in service together with housewives were to be mobilized to sew, mend and wash clothes for the Red Army soldiers.⁵⁶³ Along with janitors and maintenance workers, domestic workers were called upon to protect the housing stock from fires caused by air raids.⁵⁶⁴ In February of 1942 the union Central Committee issued a decree that called for a campaign among housing service workers, domestic workers and housewives for maintaining apartments, houses and public spaces "in exemplary order."⁵⁶⁵ While taking care of both private and public spaces had been one of domestic workers' official responsibilities since the mid-1930s, the orders that encouraged their promotion, along with unemployed housewives, into the "real" jobs of nurses and maintenance workers as well as the call for voluntary "female work" of sewing and doing laundry reflected the

⁵⁶¹ GARF. F.5456, op.23, d.4, l.94. *Protokol No.53 zasedaniia prezidiuma TsK PRZhKh ot 3 iulia 1941.* Leningrad organization claimed to have trained 256 domestic workers for sanitary patrol and 12 domestic workers received training as medical nurses in 1941. GARF. F.5456. Op.23, d.10, l.48. *Dokladnaia zapiska.*

⁵⁶² GARF. F.5456, op.23, d.4, l.96. *Protokol No.54 zasedaniia prezidiuma TsK PRZhKh ot 8 iulia 1941.*

⁵⁶³ GARF. F.5456, op.23, d.4, l.134. *Protokol No.59 zasedaniia prezidiuma TsK PRZhKh ot 16 sentiabria 1947.* PUWHS organization in Georgia claimed that in the first five months of 1942, domestic workers worked for 270 "man-days" (*chelovekodnei*) in military hospitals, doing laundry, cleaning and helping at the kitchen. GARF. F.5456. Op.23, d.11, l.29. *V TsK soiuz RZhKh.*

⁵⁶⁴ GARF. F.5456, op.23, d.4, l.112. *Protokol No.58 zasedaniia prezidiuma TsK PRZhKh ot 15 avgusta 1947.*

⁵⁶⁵ GARF. F.5456, op.23, d.12, l.42. *Postanovlenie TsK soiuz RZhKh ot 11 fevralia 1942.*

ambiguous status of domestic workers who were again treated like women rather than workers.

The scale of union mobilization of domestic workers was limited first and foremost by the fact that the number of women working in domestic service decreased significantly, from 126,000 domestic workers registered with the union in 1941 to 8,000 in 1942.⁵⁶⁶ Many domestic workers replaced men who had gone to the front in factories and other work. Others remained out of the union's reach in the territories occupied by Nazi Germany. Others returned to the countryside. Union membership declined. According to the PUWHS statistics, as of January 1, 1942 there were 4619 domestic workers in Moscow. 3441 of them were members of the union.⁵⁶⁷ In 1943, only 1989 out of 3005 domestic workers were union members.⁵⁶⁸ The situation was probably worse in other cities since Moscow PUWHS organization had been relatively successful in recruiting domestics.

Those girls and women who did stay in domestic service had to deal with the uncertainty of their status in the wartime society. Like in the times of the First Five-Year Plan, the most crucial aspect of their position was access to the state distribution system. Unlike in the early 1930s, there was no all-union rationing standard so local city soviets came up with their own regulations. As PUWHS Central Committee complained in its report to the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions, food rationing cards classified domestic workers were in the "dependents" group or those of *sluzhashchiie* even though

⁵⁶⁶ GARF. F.5456, op.23, d.12, l.6(ob). *Otchet o rabote TsK ghjfsioiua RZhKh za period s 1 iulija 1941 po 1 ianvaria 1943.*

⁵⁶⁷ GARF. F.5456, op.23, d.6, l.57. *Kvartal'nyi statisticheskii otchet. Dokladnaia zapiska.* However, by the end of 1944 Moscow organization claimed to have raised the membership significantly: to 2,587 members out of 3411 domestic workers registered with the union. GARF. F.5456. Op.23, d.36, l.3. *Otchet Moskovskogo komiteta profsoiua RZhKh za 1944 g.*

⁵⁶⁸ GARF. F.5456, op.23, d.20, l.44. *Otchet MK obl komiteta profsoiua RZhKh za 1943 g.*

they were officially workers.⁵⁶⁹ In the instructions for distribution of rationing cards issued in 1941 in Leningrad, domestic workers were included in the group “dependents” along with pensioners, invalids, and self-employed individuals.⁵⁷⁰ Dependents received half of the ration workers did. In the city of Molotov that during the war experienced an influx of evacuees, employers initially included domestic workers in the list of dependents when applying for food rationing cards at the place of work. The local PUWHS organization, however, objected and demanded that domestic workers received their rations through the union. With permission of the city soviet, PUWHS introduced a distribution system that required employers to sign labor agreements with their domestic workers in order to receive food rationing cards.⁵⁷¹ In another industrial city in the Urals, Cheliabinsk, domestic workers were denied food rationing cards if they were late with their union membership dues or if their employers had not paid their fees.⁵⁷² This lack of consistency in the way domestic workers were classified for food rationing testifies to the fact that more than twenty years after the revolution paid domestic labor continued to occupy an ambiguous position between work and non-work. The union tried to use domestic workers’ vulnerable position to improve its own financial situation by imposing illegal requirements for receiving rations.

With dwindling resources that came with the decline in membership, mobilization of experienced union leadership to the front, and the chaos of evacuation from Moscow to Ufa in 1941 and the return to Moscow in 1942, the union was struggling to keep things

⁵⁶⁹ GARF. F.5456, op.23, d.19, l.12. *V sekretariat VtsSPS.*

⁵⁷⁰ *Pravila i instruktsii po vydache i uchetu prodovol'stevnnykh i promtovarnykh kartochek po g. Leningradu* (Leningrad: tip.No.1 im. Volodarskogo, 1941), 3.

⁵⁷¹ GARF. F.5456, op.23, d.10, l.52(ob)-53. *Informatsiia o rabote Molotovskogo Obl.Soiuza RZhKh ot 1 ianvaria 1942.*

⁵⁷² GARF. F.5456, op.23, d.17, l.89. *Stenogramma zasedaniia 5go plenuma TsK RZhKh ot 12 apreliia 1943.*

together. Yet, even in the times of war, the PUWHS Central Committee urged local organizations not to leave domestic workers to their own devices. The registration of domestic workers and their employers that was initially planned for July of 1941 was carried out in 1943-1944, after the Red Army went into the offensive. The goal of the registration was to collect overdue fees as well as return the workers to the unions' orbit. Although many local organization did not have the means to properly organize domestics, big industrial cities in the rear such as Sverdlovsk did manage to arrange group meetings, with lectures on the international situation and child-rearing.⁵⁷³ These efforts reflected the union's desire to return to the prewar "normalcy."

After the war was over, PUWHS set about organizing domestic workers with renewed effort. In May of 1946 it launched a new registration campaign. Local organizations were once again to recruit domestics to the union, organize lectures on hygiene and child-rearing, mobilize them for union work, raise the level of their services to the employers and promote the best to the industry.⁵⁷⁴ After PUWHS was dismantled in 1948, the Professional Union of Workers of Communal Services (PUWCS) took over domestic workers. PUWCS continued the work among domestics following the prewar blueprint. For instance, domestic workers group committee No.1 in the city of Gor'kii reported to have carried out the following work between November 1951 and July of 1952: elected 20 activists; conducted 102 home visits to check on the working conditions of domestic workers; organized 10 general meetings, 2 dance evenings (attended by 222 people), 8 lectures (attended by 913 people), 4 excursions, 3 theater trips, 5 concerts and

⁵⁷³ GARF. F.5456, op.23, d.19, l.41. *Orvet o rabote mestnogo komiteta domrabochnits g. Sverdlovsk za period 1 ianvaria 1943- oktiabr' 1943.*

⁵⁷⁴ GARF. F.5456, op.23, d.97, ll.164-165. *Protokol No.87 zasedaniia prezidiuma Moskovskogo obkoma profsoiuza RZhKh ot 27 dekabria 1946; d.210, l.51, Otchet Moskovskogo Oblastnogo komiteta profsoiuza RZhKh.*

1 picnic; sent 27 domestic workers to junior high and high school and three domestic workers to college.⁵⁷⁵ A domestic workers' "circle" from the capital of the Republic of Georgia Tbilisi took the first prize in the All-Union contest of amateur talent groups.⁵⁷⁶ However, judging by the paucity of such reports in the archival collection it appears that cultural work among domestic workers occupied a peripheral position in union work. What was of importance for PUWCS was statistical accounting for domestic workers and the fees the employers were to pay. Only toward the end of Stalin's epoch, discussions about improving work among domestics by addressing their "special needs" began to appear on the PUWCS agenda. In early 1953 organizations in big cities such as Moscow were allowed to have separate group committees for domestic workers.⁵⁷⁷

The urgency of dealing with domestic workers was determined by that fact that once the country started to recover from the war, domestic service began to grow. In Moscow, the number of domestic workers increased from 3,411 in 1944, to 5,781 in 1947, to 6,531 as of January 1, 1948 to 7,247 as of July 1, 1948.⁵⁷⁸ The influx of rural migrants into postwar cities was to a great extent caused by the famine that struck the country in 1946-1947. In 1952 there were 29,192 domestic workers registered by the union in Moscow 16,240 of which were union members.⁵⁷⁹ Starting from 1951, privately employed chauffeurs were also to register with PUWCS.⁵⁸⁰

⁵⁷⁵ GARF. F.5456, op.19, d.1054, l.113-114. *Spravka proverki gruppkoma No.1 ot 8go iulia 1952 g.*

⁵⁷⁶ GARF. F.5456, op.19, d.1325, l.177. *Sed'moi plenum TsK profsoiuza RKKh 7 apreliia 1953 g.*

⁵⁷⁷ GARF. F.5456, op.19, d.1328, l.162. *Vypiska iz protokola No.90 zasedaniia Presidiuma TsK profsoiuza ot 13 iavaria 1953 g.*

⁵⁷⁸ GARF. F.5456, op.23, d.144, l.9. *Otchet Moskovskogo oblastnogo komiteta profsoiuza RZhKh za 1947 g.*

⁵⁷⁹ GARF. F.5456, op.19, d.1044, l.115. *Protokol No.84 zasedaniia presidiuma TsK PRKK ot 18 noiabria 1952 g.* In 1955 there were 38,664 domestic workers registered in Moscow, 33,495 of them were members. GARF. F.5456. Op.19, d.1907, l.124. *Presidiumu TsK profsoiuza RKKh.*

⁵⁸⁰ GARF. F.5456, op.19, d.1046, l.4. *Postanovleniie prezidiuma TsK PRKKh ot 28 dekabria 1951 g.*

In spite of the growing numbers of domestic workers after the war, there was virtually no discussion about paid domestic labor in the post-war public space. Occasional unproblematic domestic workers characters in theater and film, such as Margarita L'vovna in *The Foundling* (discussed in Chapter 5) or Lusha in Sergei Mikhalkov's drama *Il'ia Golovin* (1949) only underlined this absence.⁵⁸¹ One could argue that more important tasks of rebuilding the country after a devastating war overshadowed "minor" issues such as the status of domestic workers but that did not have to be so. As I have shown in Chapter Four, it was not the case when the country embarked on the world-historic mission of building socialism in the 1930s.

There were two factors that conditioned the silence on the question of paid domestic labor in the Soviet Union. The first one was the contradiction between the promise of women's emancipation of "Lenin's kitchen maid" and the increasing gender conservatism of the post-war era that manifested itself in a new set of legal measures: imposition of a "bachelor tax" on childless men and childless married women, introduction of a more complicated and expensive divorce procedure, and creation of a new legal category of "single mother" who had no right to claim paternity for her children. The second factor was the growing popular resentment of the elites and their privileges. As a certain Sherstiuk wrote in a letter to the leading Soviet newspaper *Pravda* after Stalin's death, Soviet officers were receiving all kinds of bonuses while

⁵⁸¹ The Sergei Mikhalkov wrote the ideologically timely play *Il'ia Golovin* in the middle of the campaign against formalism in Soviet culture. An elderly domestic worker Lusha appears as the "voice of the people," a source of authenticity in the house of the main character – composer Golovin who had been corrupted by "formalism" but finally returned to writing music for the people. Segei Mikhalkov, *Il'ia Golovin* (Moskva, Leningrad: *Iskusstvo*, 1950).

their “wives, even those who have a profession do not work and have servants.”⁵⁸²

Sherstiuk would have been even more surprised if he had known that the Soviet state subsidized employment of these “servants.” According to the order issued by the People’s Commissariat of Defense in September of 1945, Soviet officers received a month subsidy of 300 rubles for hiring a “civilian servant” (*vol’nonaemnaia prisluga*) if for some reasons they did not want the services of a military orderly. The goal of the order was to relieve officers from “personal domestic matters” so they could focus on their professional duties.⁵⁸³ The use of the prerevolutionary term “servant” (*prisluga*) signified a turn away from the egalitarianism that was imbedded in the Soviet term “domestic worker.”

The growing numbers of domestic workers along with relative liberalization of the atmosphere after Stalin’s death gave a new impetus to the discussions about paid domestic labor. Union leadership was expressing concern with the low level of domestic workers’ membership, in some regions as low as twenty five percent.⁵⁸⁴ Starting from late 1953, PUWCS Central Committee Plenums debated questions of cultural work among domestic workers as well as adequate protection from exploitation. Representatives of local organizations became vocal about the difficulties they faced in bringing to justice high profile employers who violated labor laws and abused their domestics.⁵⁸⁵ Many complained that neither employers, nor domestics, nor even union

⁵⁸² “*Svodka poluchennykh redaktsiiei Pravdy pisem o nedochetakh slozhivsheisia na praktike sistemy zarabotnoi platy i o narusheniakh printsipa oplaty po trudu*,” accessed December 12, 2016, <http://www.alexanderyakovlev.org/almanah/inside/almanah-doc/1007434>

⁵⁸³ “*O vvedenii shtatnykh ordinartsev dl’a generalov i ofitserov Krasnoi Armii. Prikaz NKO ot 8 sentiabria 1945 g.*,” accessed December 12, 2016, http://bdsa.ru/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=729&Itemid=125

⁵⁸⁴ In Kirov region, only 25.4% of the 1335 domestic workers registered with the union as of October, 1952 were members. GARF. F.5456, op.19, d.1350, l.38. *Dokladnaia zapiska*.

⁵⁸⁵ GARF. F.5456, op.19, d.1326, l.299. *Stenogramma plenuma VIII Plenuma TsK profsoiuza 1953 g.*

activists were aware of the existence of the special law on domestic service. Moreover, more and more voices began to question its relevance and called for new regulations.⁵⁸⁶

While most discussions focused on the ways the union could improve its work among domestic workers, some activists questioned the very existence of paid domestic work under socialism. Some radical voices (mostly from the Leningrad organization) called for a complete ban on private employment of house help or at least an age and education limit so that young girls with high school degrees did not waste their labor on “walking dogs.”⁵⁸⁷

Domestic service also became an object of reflection in the Soviet press and works of art. Topics covered by the Soviet press ranged from the influence of religious nannies on children to the neglect of domestic workers safety in the homes of employers.⁵⁸⁸ A plethora of tropes about domestic work in Soviet fiction and film, from dignified elderly housekeepers to sassy village girls as domestic workers, and respectable members of intelligentsia to corrupt Soviet functionaries as employers, fleshed out the problematic nature of domestic service.

⁵⁸⁶ GARF. F.5456, op.19, d.1326, l.158. *Spravka*. The question of drawing a new law was raised at the level of the All-Union Central Trade Union Committee but no law was drafted. GARF. F.5456, op.19, d.1610, l.517. *Stenogramma 3go s'ezda profsoiuza ZhkhKh ot 12-14 apreliia 1954 g.*

⁵⁸⁷ “Dog walking” as a symbol of wasted labor of young women and bourgeois inclinations of their employers was a recurring trope in the debates about domestic service. See, for example, GARF. F.5456, op.19, d.1676, l.164. *Stenograficheskii otchet obkoma profoiuza RZhKh. Tretia Leningradskaia oblastnaia konferentsiia ot 26 fevralia 1954 g.*

⁵⁸⁸ One of the most resonant cases was a tragic death of a teenage domestic worker, killed by a naked wire in the small town of Surazh covered by influential *Literaturnaia Gazeta*. Her employer, a chief accountant and a party member was sentenced to two years in prison. P. Il'ashenko, “*Prestupleniie v Surazhe*,” *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, September 27, 1956, 2; “*Po sledam vystuplenii 'Literaturnoi Gazety*,” March 28, 1957, 2. The case became a starting point of a debate about the legal responsibility of employers to guarantee domestic workers' safety. I.I. Slutskii, *Retsenzia*. A.B. Sakharov, *Ugolovno-pravovaia jkhra bezopasnosti uslovii truda v SSSR*. M.: Gos'urizdat, 1958, accessed December 12, 2016, <http://www.law.edu.ru/doc/document.asp?docID=1128526>. On the dangers of the influence of religious domestic workers see S. Shatrov, “*U mamy net schastlivoi sorochki*,” *Krokodil*, 26(1956):4-5.

Although there is no direct statistical data on the numbers of domestic workers in the late Soviet society it appears that their numbers began to decrease in the 1960s. By the 1970s, employment of live-in house help became a practice limited to the most privileged segments of the population. There were multiple reasons for this shift. First of all, the burden of housework was slightly alleviated for working women. In 1956 Khrushchev introduced a universal pension system for workers and *sluzhashchie* that made it possible for elderly women to retire at the age of fifty-five. Many of them took on the responsibilities of raising grandchildren – a step the state actively encouraged.⁵⁸⁹ Those working mothers who did not have grandparents available could send their children to crèches and kindergartens—the number of which was slowly but steadily increasing. Greater availability of household appliances like refrigerators and washing machines made housework somewhat easier. The state also promoted the idea of service bureaus that would provide citizens with professional helpers to be paid by the hour although it is unclear how popular they were. Furthermore, things changed for the young women coming from the countryside. By the 1960s the Soviet economy began to experience labor shortage that only worsened in the following decades.⁵⁹⁰ Thus, a young girl coming from a collective farm could easily find jobs in sectors other than domestic service and enjoy better job security and personal independence. Evidence suggests that the majority domestic workers in the last decades of the Soviet Union were elderly single women. Representations of domestic workers in popular culture overwhelmingly focused

⁵⁸⁹ Mariia Romashova, “‘Defitsitnaia’ babushka: sovetskii diskurs starosti i stsenarii starenii,” *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 133(3/2015), accessed December 12, 2016, <http://www.nlobooks.ru/node/6297>

⁵⁹⁰ Aleksandr Shubin, “SSSR v apogeie: kak my zhili,” *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* 52 (2/2007), accessed December 12, 2016, <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2007/2/sh2.html>

on the difficulty of getting one, with the satirical journal *Krokodil* joking: “The baby was neglected – the parents were too busy fussing over the domestic worker.”⁵⁹¹

In 1987, at the height of Perestroika’s attempt to reinvigorate the Soviet project, the State Committee of Labor and Social Issues passed a Regulation on labor conditions of individuals privately employed by citizens. The new law introduced mandatory labor contracts which were not required in the 1926 law. Other than this measure that had been on the union agenda for decades the new regulation did not resolve any of the existing contradiction of private employment of household help, the most important being the forty-one-hours work limit with the employers right to distribute those hours in the way they saw fit, thus making the workday unlimited. Moreover, none of the provisions that were meant to ensure domestic workers’ protection and educational opportunities made it to the new law: the employer no longer had to provide the domestic with working clothes, give her an extra evening off for public activities or let an underage domestic attend evening school. The law said nothing about domestic workers’ right to be admitted to hospitals or to stay in the employers’ premises after the termination of the contract.⁵⁹² Even though some of these changes were a reflection of the new tendencies in paid domestic labor, the overarching premise of the new law was to remove the state from the domestic sphere, living as much as possible to be negotiated between the worker and the employer in a socialist state. Housework was becoming a private matter – a tendency that would characterize post-Soviet Russia.

The last years of the Soviet regime saw a critical engagement with “Lenin’s kitchen maid” as a remainder of failed promises of the Revolution. In the 1990 lithograph

⁵⁹¹ T. Konstantinov, “Uzelki na pam’at’,” *Krokodil*, 23 (1965):11.

⁵⁹² *Polozhenie ob usloviakh truda lits, rabotaiushchikh u grazhdan po dogovoram*, accessed December 12, 2016, http://www.businesspravo.ru/Docum/DocumShow_DocumID_33877.html

“Every Kitchen Maid Must Be Able to Rule the State,” Soviet conceptual artist Oleg Vasiliev juxtaposes portraits of unknown Soviet individuals to a giant statue of Lenin. As art historian and curator Margarita Tupitsyn writes, “(t)his enforced viewing of official positions at the high point of achievement, and the relegation of the kitchen to the bottom of the hierarchy, forcefully predetermined the destiny of women in the Soviet Union and programmed every female to strive towards goals established by the state.”⁵⁹³

Almost twenty years later, post-Soviet/Israeli artist Sergei Sychenko offers a different take on “Lenin’s Kitchen Maid” in a 2009 caricature “Every Kitchen Maid...” The title itself suggests that the slogan has become such a cliché that the first two words are enough for the audience to recognize it. In the picture, a middle-aged voluptuous woman is standing in front of the stove, holding a serving spoon while her head continues a row of heads of Marxist classics from a poster on the wall. Unlike Vasiliev’s work that exposes the failures of the Soviet state to deliver on its promise of women’s liberation, Sychenko’s work ridicules the promise itself.

⁵⁹³ Margarita Tupitsyn, *After Perestroika*, 18.

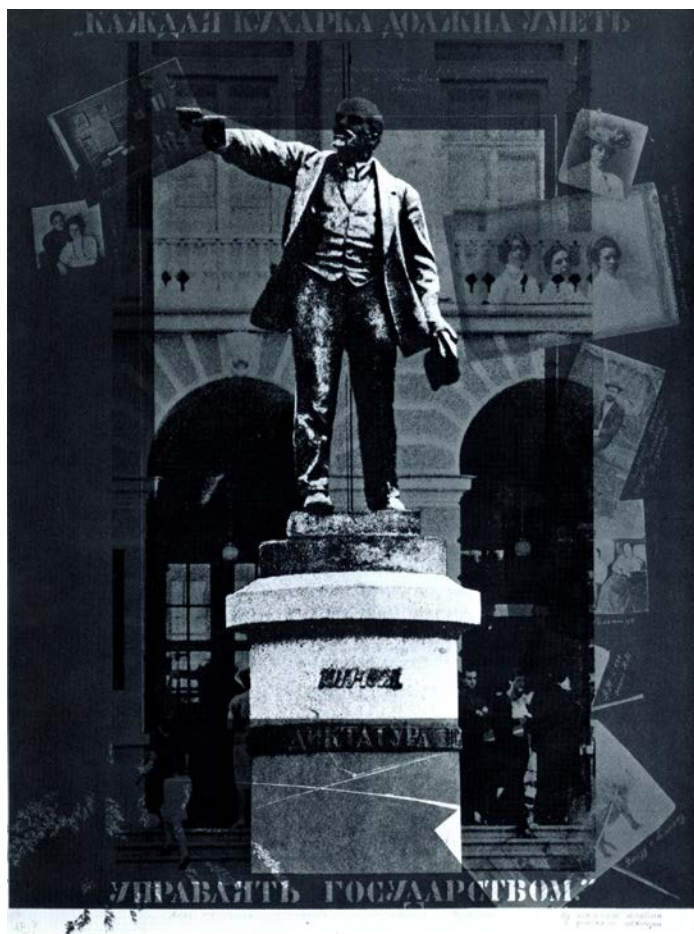


Fig.22 Oleg Vasiliev, Every Kitchen Maid Must Be Able to Rule the State, 1990. Lithograph. After Perestroika: Kitchenmaids or Stateswomen. Independent Curators International, 1994, 58.



Fig.22 Sergei Sychenko, Every Kitchen Maid...2009, <http://caricatura.ru/art/sychenko/url/poster/sychenko/149/>

Today there is renewed attention to the question of domestic service in Russia and other post-Soviet and post-socialist countries. It has gained political importance in the context of these states' inclusion in the global "care chain" as both sending and destination countries for migrant domestic workers and the overall growth of the private domestic and caregiving sector due to the collapse of the socialist welfare system and growing inequality. These changes have only recently become an object of scholarly attention. In 2015 the Center for Independent Social Research (Saint Petersburg, Russia) organized the first conference on domestic workers in post-socialist Central Eastern Europe and former Soviet Union.⁵⁹⁴ While researchers have largely focused on the effects of neoliberalism and global capitalism on paid domestic labor it could be useful to explore the legacy of socialism in the functioning and understanding of paid domestic labor in the region.⁵⁹⁵ Scholars of Russia as well as researchers working on domestic labor elsewhere assume that inequality and exploitation so characteristic of paid domestic labor are associated with capitalism while socialism remains its default alternative.⁵⁹⁶

⁵⁹⁴ Domestic Workers in the Countries of Central Eastern Europe and Former Soviet Union: Postsocialist Migrations and Inequalities. April 24-26, 2015. Conference proceedings. Saint Petersburg, 2015, accessed December 12, 2016, <http://cistr.ru/files/DOMESTIC-WORKERS.pdf>.

⁵⁹⁵ One of the first examples of such scholarship in South Asia is Minh T.N. Nguyen's book on domestic service in contemporary Vietnam in which she, among other things, studies the ways "the socialist practices and principles" shape domestic service today. Minh T.N. Nguyen, *Vietnam's Socialist Servants: Domesticity, Class, Gender, and Identity* (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁵⁹⁶ Contributors to the most recent edited volume on the history of paid domestic labor *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers* who touch on the socialist periods in the histories of Poland and Yugoslavia do not problematize the relation between paid domestic labor and socialism: Majda Hrženjak's section "Domestic Work during the Socialist Period in Former Yugoslavia" focuses on Slovenian women working as domestics *outside* of socialist Yugoslavia, while Marta Kindler and Anna Kordasiewicz, writing on domestic service in Poland, spend one paragraph on domestic workers in socialist Poland which boils down to the statement that "[c]ommunist approaches to domestic work were ambivalent." *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers*. Edited by Dirk Hoerder, Elise van Nederveen Meerkerk, and Silke Neunsinger. (Leiden: Brill, 2015). Majda Hrženjak, "Slovenian Domestic Workers in Italy: A Borderlands Care Chain over Time," 129-131; Marta Kindler and Anna Kordasiewicz, "Maid-of-all-Work or Professional Nanny? The Changing Character of Domestic Work in Polish Households, Eighteenth Century to the Present," 168.

There is also a growing push to improve domestic workers' working and living conditions globally coming from international labor organizations. The introduction of international standards for domestic work with twenty three states ratifying the 2011 Convention concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers (189th International Labor Organization Convention) has been widely acclaimed as an important step to secure household and caregiving workers' rights on par with other workers.⁵⁹⁷ The International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tabaco and Allied Workers' Association (IUF) is trying to reach out to household workers in different parts of the world, including the former Soviet countries. Yet, it would be instructive to consider the early Soviet experience in regulating paid domestic labor to evaluate the opportunities worker-friendly laws in this area give to domestic workers along with the limitations they set. The Soviet case shows that while legislation does have the potential to provide some degree of social security for domestic workers, state regulations of employment terms cannot resolve the contradictions imbedded in domestic service—contradictions that stem from gendered hierarchy of labor.

Throughout the seventy years of Soviet history the intensity of discussions about paid domestic labor fluctuated but domestic workers and their employers were never left to their own devices. The place and meaning of domestic service in the Soviet Union as a contentious topic gained prominence every time the Soviet system was being reconfigured, from the NEP era to the times of Perestroika. As this dissertation tried to

⁵⁹⁷ C189 - Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189). Convention concerning decent work for domestic workers, accessed December 12, 2016, http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::p12100_instrument_id:2551460

show, the discussion about domestic service were fundamentally about the place of women in the Soviet society and the meaning of their “emancipation.” In the 1920s it meant acquiring class consciousness without challenging their place in the labor hierarchy. During the first Five-Year Plans emancipation implied upward mobility within the boundaries set by the state program of industrialization. In the late 1930s an emancipated woman was the one that served the state no matter where she worked, on the shop floor or in the home that itself had become a kind of an auxiliary shop of the state industrial machine. During the “Thaw” all these paths to emancipation were brought to light and reconsidered. In the times of Perestroika, the state took a step back from regulating paid domestic labor effectively leaving women to fend for themselves since they had already been emancipated whatever that meant.

At the heart of the debates about domestic service was the question of value of domestic labor for socialism. The understanding of the value changed over time and so did the meaning of women’s emancipation. While policies on domestic labor sometimes took a 180 degree turn, the fundamental contradiction that shaped them remained the same. The emancipation of women was impossible without freeing them from the drudgery of the kitchen. Someone, however, was to cook, clean and mind the children. The utopian visions of collective housekeeping proved unrealistic and were discarded. State limited efforts to create public institutions that would allow families to outsource some of their basic chores such as cooking and washing to cafeterias and laundry facilities did not question the fact that significant part of the household labor was to be done in the home. And it was to be done by women. Thus, the gendered vision of work came into conflict with the emancipatory promise of the Soviet regime for women. This

contradiction continued to generate ambivalence regarding the place of paid domestic labor in the Soviet Union.

“Lenin’s kitchen maid” has outlived the Soviet system. It remains a popular metaphor with a multiplicity of meanings. For Russian liberals it stands for the absurdity of the Bolshevik regime and its misguided calls for lower classes’ participation in government. For left-leaning intellectuals it holds a promise of democratic governance that was or was not fully realized in the Soviet state. The gendered nature of the symbol is, however, hardly reflected upon, while hundreds of thousands of women are struggling to balance gainful employment with the societal expectations to cook, clean, and take care of children.

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