

# LABOR IMAGE OF THE RUSSIAN WORKER IN THE LATE XIXTH – EARLY XXTH CENTURIES (CASE STUDY OF THE MINING AND METALLURGICAL URAL REGION)

## IMAGEN LABORAL DEL TRABAJADOR RUSO A FINALES DEL SIGLO IX - PRINCIPIOS DEL SIGLO X (ESTUDIO DE CASO DE LA REGIÓN MINERA Y METALÚRGICA DE LOS URALES)

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Yuriy D. Korobkov <sup>1</sup> \*; Svetlana A. Krivonogova <sup>2</sup> ; Maxim V. Popov <sup>3</sup> ; Ilya O. Koldomasov <sup>4</sup> ;  
Olga R. Kabirova <sup>5</sup> ; Svetlana S. Velikanova <sup>6</sup> ; Oksana P. Chernykh <sup>7</sup> .

1. Nosov Magnitogorsk State Technical University, Russia. n.kyakkinen-56@yandex.ru
2. South Ural State University, Russia. kr\_svt@mail.ru
3. Nosov Magnitogorsk State Technical University, Russia. maxim\_popov@hotmail.com
4. Nosov Magnitogorsk State Technical University, Russia. koldomasov@inbox.ru
5. Nosov Magnitogorsk State Technical University, Russia. kabirova.olga2012@yandex.ru
6. Nosov Magnitogorsk State Technical University, Russia. vss200975@mail.ru
7. Nosov Magnitogorsk State Technical University, Russia. cherry-100@yandex.ru

\* Corresponding author: Yuriy D. Korobkov, e-mail: n.kyakkinen-56@yandex.ru

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### ABSTRACT

Interest in Russia's working class, its labor behavior, and ethics has quickened in historical and social science in the past few years. One of the main industrial areas of Russia is its Ural Region – the Urals – where one can find the oldest and largest metallurgical plants in the country. That is why the current research deals with the Ural workers' labor image, that is, their labor ethics and attitude to work in the late XIXth-early XXth centuries. The general scientific methods of analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction are utilized to fulfil the study's aims. Having analyzed a wide range of sources, we have come to the following conclusions: the Ural workers' labor image in the late XIXth century was a controversial combination of positive, pragmatic motivation for work, on the one hand, and widespread poor-quality and low-productive labor, as well as laziness and careless attitude to work, on the other hand. Since these features of the Ural workers' labor ethics, in general, are typical of the Russian working class as a whole, they can be considered an inseparable part of the Russian national mentality and should be taken into account while working out modern labor development strategies.

**Keywords:** the Ural workers; labor ethics; labor behavior; production discipline; development strategies.

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## RESUMEN

El interés por la clase obrera de Rusia, su comportamiento laboral y su ética se ha acelerado en las ciencias históricas y sociales en los últimos años. Una de las principales áreas industriales de Rusia es la región de los Urales, los Urales, donde se pueden encontrar las plantas metalúrgicas más antiguas y más grandes del país. Es por ello que la presente investigación se ocupa de la imagen laboral de los trabajadores de los Urales, es decir, de su ética laboral y actitud ante el trabajo a finales del siglo XIX-principios del XX. Los métodos científicos generales de análisis y síntesis, inducción y deducción se utilizan para cumplir con los objetivos del estudio. Habiendo analizado una amplia gama de fuentes, hemos llegado a las siguientes conclusiones: la imagen laboral de los trabajadores de los Urales a fines del siglo XI era una combinación controvertida de motivación positiva y pragmática para el trabajo, por un lado, y mala calidad y mano de obra poco productiva, así como la pereza y la actitud descuidada hacia el trabajo, por otro lado. Dado que estas características de la ética laboral de los trabajadores de los Urales, en general, son típicas de la clase trabajadora rusa en su conjunto, pueden considerarse una parte inseparable de la mentalidad nacional rusa y deben tenerse en cuenta al elaborar estrategias modernas de desarrollo laboral.

**Palabras clave:** los trabajadores de los Urales; ética laboral; conducta laboral; disciplina productiva; estrategias de desarrollo.

## INTRODUCTION

Interest in Russia's working class, its labor behavior and ethics has quickened in historical and social science in the past few years, particularly in view of contemporary socio-economic reforms. The contradictory and complex nature of the development of modern Russian society objectively enabled the scientific thought to study Russia's reformatory processes and their components from a historical perspective point of view. One of the most important tasks in studying this complex issue is to analyze the peculiarities and real state of labor ethics of the Russian worker as the vital part of and the basis for the successful implementation of any reformatory plans. Nevertheless, being a high-priority item both in sociological (Bazhov, 1986; Koznova, 2021) and historical research (Voskoboynikov, 2020), labor ethics of Russian workers is still insufficiently studied in many regions of the Russian Federation, including the Urals. In this regard it seems justifiable and logical to analyze labor ethics of one of the leading groups of the Russian working class, particularly the Ural metal workers during the period of Russian reforms in the late nineteenth – early twentieth centuries.

However, a number of historians, like R. Popov, I.H. Ozerov, and A.N. Mitinsky, 'closed' the topic as completely studied (Khakamada, 1999; Korobkov, 2010; Kozyreva, 2005). This conclusion is fair enough in relation to such aspects as the quantity, ethnic and social composition, placement of workers, level of their wages and duration of a working day. As for the condition of labor ethics, its study began before the Revolution of 1917, and during the Soviet period it was not considered at all. That is why further study in this field, based on a wider range of sources, interdisciplinary approach and modern scientific methods, seems promising and interesting.

The solution to this problem is complicated due to lack of consistent assessment of the leading traits of the Russian national character, including its labor qualities. As early as in the middle of the nineteenth

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century A. Shchapov, K. Kavelin and Y. Samarin pointed out such drawbacks of the Russian national character as laziness, and inability to work continuously and in an orderly manner. A. Pypin and N. Kostomarov saw these shortcomings as a cause of the unsuccessful attempts to reform Russia according to the western model (Lazarev, 1988). Their opponents considered it defamation of the God-bearing people. The followers of the opposing view are still writing about diligence as the most important virtue of Russian peasants, about their ability to work with joy, finding the meaning of life and happiness in labor (Martsinkovskaya, 1994). Such views were characteristic of Soviet social science as well. Throughout the entire Soviet period, the view of workers as the most advanced social class, the doer and creator of material wealth, whose high-quality and efficient work builds the foundation of a humane and fair social order, was widely communicated and prevalent in science and ideology. However, this position of official propaganda and historiography differed from the actual labor practices. In this context, an analysis of the Ural workers' labor ethics appears quite logical and reasonable.

## **METHODS**

Labor ethics, like any complex concept, is multifaceted. For the Russian context, it is traditionally defined as a wide range of production characteristics and attitudes towards labor, such as timely arrival at work, conscientious performance of one's job, respectful attitude towards the equipment, materials and products of work, execution of supervisors' and management personnel's instructions, and low absenteeism rate. The study of these aspects of labor ethics has been carried out with the aid of a wide range of sources: correspondence between various state authorities and the police, reviews from the Ministry of Internal Affairs and its local bodies, materials of the Metal Industry Department, the Ural Mining and Metal Industry Administration, and the Council of the Ural Mining and Metal Manufacturers Congress, minutes of board meetings and general meetings of Trade unions and Soviets, decisions of factory committees, letters of workers and production managers, and complaints and petitions of the Ural workers.

Along with the general scientific methods of analysis and synthesis, induction and deduction, the methodological toolkit is based on social history, history of everyday life, mentality history, sociology, cultural studies, and social psychology. Out of historical methods, the most efficient ones for the present research are the historical-comparative and the historical-typological methods. The former enables a comparative study of changing events and phenomena while the latter allows to reveal the changes in the behavioral patterns and lifestyles of people employed in industry. The treatment of the Ural workers' adaption practices to the changing labor conditions predetermined the importance of the historical-systemic approach. Out of the set of interdisciplinary methods, the conception of mind 'archaization' is of interest. It testifies to the reproduction of ancient (outdated) behavioral patterns in emergency situations, which blocks modernization. Besides, the local folklore material, like proverbs and sayings popular in various factory villages, which were actively collected by the Ural researchers at the end of the nineteenth century, can serve as a source of information on labor ethics.

## **Hypothesis**

On exhaustive study of historical documents, one can claim that respect for work and for working people, the priority of diligence and rejection of laziness, dependency and parasitism were characteristic features of the Ural workers' labor ethics in the late nineteenth century. The metal workers' 'peasant origin' accounted for that kind of attitude towards reality. Up to 1807, peasants

assigned to an industrial facility prevailed among the Ural workers. In this connection, the opinion that labor values were subsidiary to Russian workers and they were unable to work in a good and honest manner appear too categorical. The conducted analysis of proverbs about work gives grounds for disagreement with that disputable conclusion. According to A.I. Lazarev, proverbs, legends and songs depict an unselfish and uneasy soul of a worker, who is seeking to be useful to people, to forge steel stronger than damask, to make a cast iron chain which is like a living being, to reveal the mystery of the underground deposits so that they open up to people (Medvedeva & Vas'kina, 2011).

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The workers' aspiration and desire to work, the value they attached to honest work are also mentioned in many other documents. Thus, in April, 1885, the workers from the city of Izhevsk asked for an opportunity to honestly and independently earn their bread, for support of their highly moral and noble aspiration to work in the area where they had been born and brought up and which they had got used to (Mironov, 1999). Similar requests for an opportunity to earn for a living honestly were conveyed in petitions dated 20 September 1896 from the workers of Votkinsk plant (Mitinsky, 1909). In September, 1917, some workers from Orenburg even demanded an increase in the amount of work in order to improve their labor productivity.

The ethnographers studying various mountain areas of the Urals in the late nineteenth – early twentieth centuries found out that the Ural workers, as a rule, had more favorable living conditions and better nourishment than the workers from the industrial centers in the European part of Russia. However, these were achieved through huge additional labor effort and greater exploitation by the owners of enterprises.

It was no accident that until 1917 opinions on an 8-hour working day differed among Urals workers. Along with the demand for its introduction, there were requests to preserve 12- or even 24-hour shifts. The mass character of such moods was confirmed by the assessment of the Ural Metal Industry Department in December 1905. According to it, 'in many cases a worker would even prefer a 24-hour working day within a 2-shift pattern or a 12-hour working day within a three-shift pattern, so he could go hay making or to the forest within the following 24 hours in order to maintain his household' (Popov, 1874).

It should be noted that serfdom did not destroy the workers' aspiration for quality and conscientious work, responsible attitude towards work and production process, and the desire to improve them. Thus, in November, 1873, the masters of Dobryanka plant appealed to the plant executives with the request not to use spoiled cast iron and mill products in the process of recasting, since such materials do not do any good but, on the contrary, do harm to the quality cast iron in the furnace (Russian State Historical Archive. Fund 1291). During the revolutionary periods, the Ural workers also tried to change the situation in their industry for the better. They had high hopes for starting up small handicraft enterprises, and also tried to establish control over the production process. For example, in May, 1917, despite the fact that the administration of one of the Ural plants had left the enterprise, putting obstacles for production, the workers still managed to provide perfect order and continuous operation of the plant regardless of mass strikes and rallies in the region. Some workers believed that industrial unrest would soon go down, production would stabilize, and a new life would begin. In 1917, many administrations underlined the negative effect of the widely spread practice of holding rallies during working hours. This practice led to decrease in production and its disruption.

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At the same time real labor practices of the Ural workers give us many opposing examples. Contemporaries and researchers of living conditions in the mountain areas of the Urals noted such traits of the workers' behavior as restrictionism, low labor discipline (absence from work and lateness for work were a mass phenomenon at the plants of the region), low qualifications, low-quality work, hard drinking and theft. According to E. Demidov, up to 1861 the masters of Nizhny Tagil plant worked little and badly. In March, 1863, S.G. Stroganov pointed at a great number of holidays and at the masters' work evasion.

Numerous proverbs, lyrics and stories about poor, low-quality, and dishonest work hint at the mass proportions of this phenomenon. Their texts contain curses and ideas that labor has a detrimental effect on a working man, contributes to their premature aging, illnesses, disintegration of family and friendly relationships (Russian State Historical Archive. Fund 1291).

In the early twentieth century this situation remained practically unchanged. Many managers said that the Ural workers were lazy, unconscientious, dishonest, untidy and undisciplined; they wanted to reduce their working hours on Saturdays and before holidays. The administration of mountain districts and some 'neutral' observers estimated that the low quality of the work force in the Urals slowed down the process of the local industry technical reconstruction in the late nineteenth – early twentieth centuries. The situation was aggravated by the low level of general development and culture of the Ural workers.

The list of crimes committed by workers characterizes the state of labor discipline at the Ural plants in the early nineteenth century. Statistical data and analysis of documents defining internal work regulations at a plant (rules, instructions, terms of employment contracts, wage and payment books) point to the following basic violations of labor discipline at that time: 1) insubordination, rudeness, insolence, violence, hard drinking, quarrels; 2) loss of and damage to the officials' property; 3) absenteeism, being late for work, unauthorized departure from work, dereliction of duty; 4) theft, fraud (Russian State Historical Archive. Fund 37. Inventory 64. Dossier 1597). At the turn of the nineteenth – twentieth centuries the situation did not improve. Workers kept violating the established order. The plants managements' claims to their workers came down to the following: 1) lateness for work or unauthorized departure from work; 2) unsafe behavior on the plant premises while working with fire 3) nonobservance of cleanness and order; 4) shouts, swearing, quarrels and fights at work; 5) insubordination; 6) being drunk at work; 7) gambling at work (playing cards, pitching pennies etc.) (Russian State Historical Archive. Fund 37. Inventory 64. Dossier 1597). The mass character of low production discipline of the Ural workers is confirmed by the excessive staff of various controllers (superintendents, masters, overseers, supervisors, etc.), who monitored the abidance by the rules and regulations. The fact that the workers were unprepared and unwilling to change their mentality is confirmed by their complaints about tightening rules and orders. In their opinion, the slightest fault inevitably led to judicial prosecution, and then to fines and other penalties (Russian State Historical Archive. Fund 37. Inventory 64. Dossier 1597). The main violations of labor discipline were recorded in the safety documents as well. In particular, in the instructions aimed at accident prevention at Nizhny Tagil plant in 1890 the following cases were mentioned: failure to comply with the instructions of one's immediate supervisors, willfulness, work on broken equipment and with unfit tools, carelessness and negligence in the production process, poor technological discipline; being drunk at work was mentioned as particularly intolerable.

According to R. Popov, it is 150 years of almost slavery in the Ural industry that had a most negative

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influence on the quality of the work force and their attitude to work. There was no point in work when the workers knew that their work would not be appreciated at its true value. Naturally, they tried to work as little as possible. Even in technical works, where the payment was higher and at some plants was paid on a piece-rate basis, if the workers were convinced that the work was to be done under compulsion, by order, and not of their own free will, the work was rarely carried out in the right amount and almost always at additional costs: a worker either burned a large amount of coal, or allowed a significant waste in cast iron, etc (Khakamada, 1999).

Theft was one of the typical phenomena at the Ural enterprises. According to R. Popov, ‘everyone stole: the manager stole, the controllers stole, the person responsible for transportation stole telling stories about ships with cargo that sank in the river, so the workers also stole. The latter could not help stealing, though, having such low wages... On average as much as 5% of the output was stolen from the plants, which, with regard to the amount of production, meant dozens of thousands rubles’ losses’ (Khakamada, 1999). Moreover, as the manager of the Ufa mountain region mentioned in 1907, theft was ‘considered valor’ among workers. A serf worker could never reconcile the fact that the fruits of his work were appropriated by others. He believed ‘in all fairness’ that part of the factory output was owed to him, since he was the immediate producer. A different method of re-distribution was perceived as wrong. That is why stealing of factory output was not considered by workers as a crime. To steal an axe from one’s colleague was a crime, because the axe was bought with the money the worker had earned themselves. However to take the same axe at a Machine Tool Works was not a crime, since it was made with the worker’s own hands. An honest worker could never steal something that belonged to another worker; whereas he took the factory property without hesitation. This belief was rooted in serf workers and peasants and, having transformed into ‘the collective unconscious’, was passed from generation to generation. ‘An extra income’ from theft of the plant product turned into a stable everyday occurrence, which the authorities had to take into consideration. There is no statistical data that allows to estimate the real scale of this phenomenon, though.

During the revolutionary periods labor discipline was at its lowest, as well as labor productivity. That was due to the overall unstable situation in the country and the workers’ understanding of freedom as permissiveness and impunity.

Multiple factors, such as mismanagement, bribery, malfeasance, and negligence on the part of administration, had a detrimental effect on the state of the Ural workers’ labor ethics. All this was typical in the Urals and had a significant impact on the workers’ psychology. The scornful attitude of the plant administration towards their workers, their reluctance to listen to the workers’ opinion and disrespect of their human dignity also influenced their production motivation. A typical situation of this kind is described in a Zlatoust plant worker’s letter in July, 1917: ‘The management personnel eradicated every initiative, and it was the desire to have one’s own house and the happiness of hearth and home that forced us to humbly endure the slavery, slacking one’s work and witnessing the production being destroyed...’ (Russian State Historical Archive. Fund 48; Yi et al., 2020).

This problem shaped not only low labor motivation and indifference to the production process, but also a life philosophy of fatalism and submissiveness. The Ural writer P. Bazhov described the situation as follows: ‘A worker, worn out after over 20 years of work, saw that his effort caused no change, no improvement either at the plant or in his life’ (Temnitsky, 2015).

One of the main factors shaping the workers’ labor ethics in the region was religion, namely the

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Russian Orthodox Church, which clearly distinguished between the spiritual and the material, did not convert business success into socially approved behavior and played down the sphere of labor, setting it apart from supreme values. Since success at work and moral achievements belonged to different dimensions, the violation of economic laws was not considered to be an unforgivable sin.

## CONCLUSION

In general, the labor image of the Ural worker is contradictory. The respect for high-quality work and professionalism coexisted with the low level of production culture and a small number of highly skilled professionals. The peculiarity of the labor ethics of the Ural workers manifested itself in their selective attitude towards work for their master as opposed to work for themselves. This attitude was characterized by a minimal effort in the former instance and by high-quality, diligent work in the latter. In this connection one cannot say that Ural workers completely lacked diligence or hard work, in fact, they were rather selective in their attitude to work, in accord with the dichotomy ‘we’ – ‘they’ and for the reason that working at a plant, they could hardly provide for their families.

The analysis of opinions on the labor morale of the Ural workers shows that they were viewed as bad workers not because they had low qualifications, but because they failed to work systematically, methodically, or thoroughly, trying to make as little effort as possible. These observations are supported by other sources. Our analysis of the proverbs confirms that labor in Russia was not the highest goal pleasing to God. 84 out of 193 Russian proverbs dealing with work point to meaningless, low-quality, careless work in a slipshod manner, and laziness. Being the basis of life, labor was aimed at satisfying the current, elementary family-household needs, the needs for rest and spiritual and moral development. In this regard, the desire for wealth and expansion of the household was not an incentive to work. This material gives ground for conclusions not only about labor values but also about the mental basis for labor ethics of Russian workers, which correlate with such peculiar features of the Russian national character as the dualism of the Russian soul, lack of sense of proportion, trust in sheer luck and miracle, protraction of work, the ability to take and lose interest soon, nonchalance, carelessness, and squander.

A number of modern scholars point out that many elements of traditional pre-revolutionary labor ethics survived into the Soviet period (Tyazhel'nikova & Sokolov, 2004). The influence of traditional labor ethics on Soviet workers' behavior was revealed in the situation when Soviet leaders attempted to continuously use the mobilization labor rhythm. It resulted in mass disregard of socialist competition by the administration and workers of Soviet enterprises.

A similar situation existed in labor relationships in Russia at the end of the XXth century. Opinion polls show that in the early 1990s in Russia the work force mainly consisted of workers with a high degree of social and professional fatigue, malformed moral standards, low consumption demands, and ambition for high pay for little effort (Van der Linden, 2000; Barkova, O2020).

Many of those traits define the behavior of modern Russians as well. Pre-revolutionary and modern Russian researchers' opinions are confirmed by their foreign colleagues. Foreigners who lived in Russia in the XIXth century often mentioned lack of organization and inability to see things through as typical Russian traits of character. The modern Japanese researcher S. Khakamada concluded that traditions of diligence and self-control in Russia had been weak and that the approach to work was of a mobilization character. ‘Having started work, Russians can fulfill it with enthusiasm; but in general,

work for them is nothing more than an act of violence' (Zabolotny et al., 1997).

Thus, the labor image of the Ural workers, formed at the beginning of the XIXth century, mainly remained unchanged until 1917. Some of its traits (e.g. mobilization approach to work, differentiated attitude towards work, work for the sake of eventual rest, low labor discipline and production culture, and theft) were typical of the Soviet and post-Soviet worker as well. In our opinion, these traits can be included into the national mental space.

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