

**The Withering Away of the Danger Society:  
the Pensions Reforms of 1956 and 1964 in the Soviet Union<sup>1</sup>**

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By the Brezhnev era, the Soviet dictatorship had eliminated many social risks and dangers and minimized the worst consequences of others. Elaborate social policies had been put in place which ameliorated the risks associated with work and unemployment, old age, the loss of a breadwinner, childbirth, and ill health. Indeed, popular memory of that period suggests a risk-free zone, by comparison with the chaos and anxiety of the 1990s. “I wouldn’t want to continue living as we had in the 1970s,” commented a research scientist from Saratov in 2002, “although everything was planned out like nowhere else, perhaps, on earth. I knew, for instance, that when I turned 40 I’d be given a table clock, at 50 a crystal vase, at 60 a 20-ruble raise, and that my pension would be 140 rubles. I knew exactly what to expect until I died! Now I’m not certain about anything and that’s just fine [laughing]. That’s life!” (Raleigh 2006: 153).

Yet a few decades earlier, life could hardly have been less predictable. A long sequence of wartime and revolutionary violence ran from at least 1905 to 1945, profoundly destabilizing all aspects of existence. Stalinist “modernization” generated many of the same risks and dangers associated with the process in other parts of Europe and beyond, but Marxist-Leninist ideology and Stalinist politics rendered them yet more disruptive and more deadly. Mass urbanization in the 1930s rested on the collectivization of agriculture, folded into which were mass hunger, the liquidation of the kulaks, executions and resettlements, and the elimination of peasant culture. Industrialization was by design so rapid that living and working conditions were extremely perilous. Life in many places was thrown off balance by the great terror. Despite the promises made in the 1936 constitution to build a vast welfare system, people generally had no choice but to fend for themselves, and social rights, in an

arbitrary dictatorship, meant little. Even if Stalinism started to modify itself between 1939 and 1941, what might be termed the “danger society,” defined by mass disruption and death, returned with the Nazi invasion.

Between the end of the Second World War and the onset of Brezhnev’s leadership nearly twenty years later, the Soviet Union shifted from being a society defined by danger to one characterized by predictability, equipped with the capacity to measure social risks and to make expert-based judgements about them. This article illustrates that point by discussing the pensions laws of 1956 and 1964. These laws increased, simplified and regularized a range of social payments, and amounted to one of the major welfare reforms of Soviet history.

Pensions were not only improved for the elderly, but also for invalids and those who had suffered the loss of their breadwinner, so the laws amounted to a more thorough reform of the benefits system than the term “pensions” usually implies. This article suggests that these reforms were characteristic of a wider transformation in the Soviet Union, which might be conceptualized as “the withering away of the danger society” after 1953 and to a much more limited extent after 1945. The history of social policy in the USSR shows that Stalinism in its basic sense did not survive Stalin’s death. By moving the object of social policy to the immediate and rights-based improvement of individuals’ lives, Khrushchev fundamentally reformed one sphere of the Soviet system. In these general terms, this article’s argument aligns with that of the most wide-ranging historian of social policy of the Soviet 1950s and 1960s, G. M. Ivanova (Ivanova 2011). It presents material which empirically complements recent research on post-war Soviet welfare, including works on healthcare, orphans, veterans, and housing, and works which are more general but are focused on a single locality (Romanov and Iarskaia-Smirnova 2008, Burton 2000, Green 2006, Edele 2008, Fiesler 2006,

Smith 2010, Vashchuk 1998).<sup>2</sup> Aside from the research of Ivanova, work on the pensions reforms of 1956 and 1964 tends to be folded into studies which are chronologically broad or are based on a relatively narrow range of sources (Degtiarev 2003, Barenberg 2000).<sup>3</sup>

Focusing more tightly and using archival as well as published sources, this article seeks to explain the Khrushchev-era pensions laws in the context of risk and danger. Scholars have often described welfare states as mechanisms designed to alleviate social risks (Zutavern and Kohli 2010). They have traced the emergence of a statistical understanding of risk and have shown how it underpinned the actuarial frameworks of insurance (Hacking 1990). By extension, such an understanding facilitated mutual aid societies, state-run programmes of workers' insurance, and, in the twentieth century, the welfare state (Metz 1987, Clark et al 2010). This article demonstrates that, in the USSR, the level of danger in society had been falling since the last years of Stalin, especially since the end of the 1940s, and that official and expert understandings of social risk changed in the Khrushchev era. This environment, which in very general terms fitted with a common post-war European tendency, facilitated the reform of pensions. In the USSR, however, the language of risk was seldom deployed explicitly. For the most senior officials, the danger of not introducing social reform – of inciting unrest such as the riots in East Germany in 1953 and in Novochoerkassk in 1962 – was more pertinent than the risk calculations that determined actual levels of pensions. And for the population at large, the language not of risk but of danger, associated as it was with personal fears and moral panics, was comprehensible and common. During the late Stalinist years (1945-53), moral panic focused on marginal social groups which were comprised, not coincidentally, of conspicuous targets of welfare officials. By the mid-1950s, a different moral anxiety – about moral hazard – was more common. Soviet citizens shared with the

dutiful inhabitants of other societies a dislike of being asked to bear risks which freeloaders did not have to carry. Underpinning all of this was the core rhetorical and legal foundation of Soviet welfare reform: the (problematic and complex) appeal to justice and social rights (Smith 2012). In terms of social policy, this made possible the shift from the danger society to a particular variant of the modern, calibrated, risk society, from the chaos and cruelty of Stalinism to the predictable way of life of the Brezhnev years.

### **From the danger society to the risk society, Soviet-style**

The Stalinist dictatorship was always arbitrary in its treatment of individuals. Never valuing its citizens for the sake of their humanity, the Stalinist regime always focused on goals which transcended the human scale. It was preoccupied with the forced-pace and lethal construction of socialist industrial society at the expense of individuals, whose mass destruction was inherent to the project. This ethic dominated Stalinism all the way through to 1953, but after 1945, during the late Stalinist era, state practices changed. So while the dictatorship remained arbitrary – any kind of civil, political or social right was derisory, a figment of the imaginations of the framers of the Stalin constitution – social policies nevertheless assumed a more beneficent character.

This happened for reasons of necessity. During the 1930s, breakneck industrialization required severe reductions in living standards, while victory in the war also came on the back of mass sacrifice. But different challenges existed in the late Stalinist era: the Soviet Union

had to recover before it could move forward again. The social system did not regain its pre-war dynamism; notwithstanding the increase in the size of the Gulag population, and sporadic episodes of fierce repression, there was no re-run of the great terror of 1936-38; society in this sense became less dangerous, and the “danger society” started gradually to wither away. Yet the legacies of war contained profound dangers of their own. The war had created mass homelessness, orphaned millions of children, caused countless families to lose their breadwinners, made the elderly more vulnerable, turned cities more unsanitary, and imposed impossible burdens on the healthcare system. Donald Filtzer has shown in great detail just how dreadfully bad conditions were in cities which had not even suffered one iota of direct wartime damage (Filtzer 2010). For the Stalinist economic system to recover after 1945, for workers to be able to possess the most basic health and housing that allowed them to do their jobs, unprecedented investment in welfare was required, simply to return to the very low pre-war standards of living. The results were scarcely impressive in terms of international comparison, but they amounted to the rudiments of a housing programme, a great expansion in the reach of healthcare, and larger networks of care (however poorly run) for orphans and wartime invalids.

Following victory, Soviet citizens reinterpreted the dangers that they faced. They made careful judgements about the dangers of disease and malnutrition. But the closed character of Soviet society and the rumour mill of the early Cold War generated all kinds of sometimes irrational fears (Johnston 2011, 160-5). In this atmosphere of anxiety, some groups which were the targets of social policy were considered dangerous by the popular imagination.<sup>4</sup>

Mass homelessness and neglect of children had created a social crisis both during and after the Second World War (Kucherenko 2010). Nevertheless, the spectre of large numbers of destitute or uncontrolled children was not something alien to Soviet citizens. Memories were fresh of the legions of runaway children created by the Civil War, who were such a fixture of the urban landscape during the 1920s (Ball 1994). Children's lives had been catastrophically disrupted in the decade of breakneck industrialization. Mass arrests had caused unlimited damage and distress to the children of the terror's victims (Frierson and Vilensky 2010). The problem of victim children had thus never gone away, but the Soviet system consistently failed to protect them, and in some cases they moved from being the target of poorly executed social policy to the target of penal policy. It is perhaps unsurprising that they were seen as a source of danger after 1945 (Fürst 2008). On 26 March 1950, in a typical case, a ninth-grade boy from Leningrad stabbed to death one of his classmates and injured three others. On 16 June, in the suburbs of Ufa, two fourteen-year-old boys set upon an eleven-year-old called Nikolai, who was collecting berries. They beat him to death with a stick and threw his body in the river. On 9 September in a small town in Rostov *oblast'* (province), four boys, all born in 1936, raped a ten-year-old girl called Anna. One Moscow headmaster demanded a police presence in his school. The deputy minister of State Security blamed head-teachers, personal tutors (*klassnye rukovoditely*), class teachers and Komsomol organizers for not paying enough attention to their charges. The social policies designed to prevent such worst-case results had patently malfunctioned. In 1950, the police caught 12,000 runaways from children's homes. These youths sustained themselves by crime, as they had also done when they were institutionalized.<sup>5</sup>

While the war created new hopes for a better future, it also led to all kinds of social dislocation, unhappiness, and, indeed, repression (Zubkova 1998). Famine struck in 1946-7 (Zima 1996). Nearly all Soviet citizens experienced this wave of danger, though small numbers of especially privileged people were able to escape its harshest effects.<sup>6</sup> But by the end of the 1940s, the worst, for most people, was over. According to data gathered by Rachel Green, there were 191,193 children in orphanages in the Russian republic of the USSR (RSFSR) in 1941, 381,568 in 1949, and 245,539 in 1953. Similarly, the number of runaways from children's homes peaked in 1948 at 30,093, and had fallen to 5,574 by 1955 (Green 2006: 23, 43). Soviet society was normalizing after its own fashion; the danger was becoming less acute.

Social policy reflected and reinforced this apparent normalization. Acute demographic imbalances resulting from the war had made the position of mothers of multiple children and widowed mothers especially vulnerable. A typical resolution of the Moscow Soviet on 12 March 1956 aimed to improve how benefits were dispensed to these groups; it followed a similar initiative across the RSFSR on 13 February.<sup>7</sup> But by then the expenditure on such benefits was already in decline. In Moscow, the cost of funding payments to these two groups of mothers was just under 20 million rubles in 1945; in 1950, it was just over 40 million; by 1955, it had fallen to 39 million; it was 25 million in 1959, and only 11 million in 1960.<sup>8</sup>

Even in the most unpromising arenas, meanwhile, the danger society was withering away. Very large numbers of people continued to live in "special settlements," in a kind of internal exile. These numerous settlers had experienced the danger society at its most dreadful, following transportation from their homes (Viola 2007). The purpose was violent

exclusion from Soviet society, but once a settlement had been established, it assumed an economic function. In turn, the settlers became prey to the kind of social risks that characterized life elsewhere in the Soviet Union. And as a more stable attitude to the necessity of social policy developed, new welfare measures resulted. In October 1949, the all-union Ministry of Internal Affairs (MVD) proposed the construction of a 600-place home for disabled special settlers in the Yakutsk autonomous republic. This was for “the 524 incapacitated and elderly single people among the special settlers, who because of their physical condition cannot be used even for light work and for whom the possibilities of living independently have gone.”<sup>9</sup>

The language, however, reveals that the target of social policy had not moved at all. Even if some officials before 1953 were already starting to develop policy proposals more in tune with the ideals of the Revolution, the aim of the late Stalinist welfare measures that were enacted was still to improve production and to consolidate the dictatorship. Necessity simply forced the ruling order to pursue its target less aggressively than it had done in the 1930s. After 1945, late Stalinist government might have been obliged to construct more houses, train more doctors, and provide more places in orphanages. But it was not obliged to launch major reforms in these areas – those reforms came after 1953 – and it did not have to touch at all certain areas of welfare policy. And so the pensions reforms of 1956 and 1964 did not have their origins in the late Stalinist era. An official from Leningrad *oblast'* commented in May 1956: “Discussions about pensions legislation have been ongoing for several years. We have been undertaking major work for the last three years.”<sup>10</sup> In other words, the traceable origins of the pensions reform lay in the period immediately after Stalin’s death in March 1953. Of course, spending on pensions (to the disabled and to dependants who had lost their

breadwinner) grew after 1945 in order to cope with the post-war emergency, but this was more of a one-off sequence of relief than a hard-wired social policy. The social security budget in Moscow in 1945 was 493 million rubles, in 1950 it was 678 million, and in 1955, 888 million. But in 1959, following the 1956 legislation, it was more than 3.1 billion.<sup>11</sup> In all senses, the danger society withered decisively only after 1953, and especially 1956. This double post-war disjuncture (1945 and 1953-6) contrasts with the simpler postwar trajectory of the Western welfare states discussed by Martin Lengwiler and Kirsi Eräeranta in this volume. The early Khrushchev era brought social disruptions of its own, but these were of a different type from what had gone before. Even though the release of Gulag inmates caused problems with crime (Dobson 2009: ch. 4), these can scarcely be compared with the situation immediately after the war.

By the mid-1950s, the spectre of Leninism was eclipsing the danger society, including its international dimensions. “We live in the age of atomic energy, which the enemies of peace want to turn against humanity,” wrote one member of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1956. “But there is something in the world that is more powerful than the thermonuclear bomb. It is the life-affirming ideas of Leninism. They bring to people not death, but life, not destruction, but creation, not rapacious competition, but fraternal solidarity.”<sup>12</sup> At the height of the Khrushchev era, in 1961, the new Party programme combined detailed commitments to raising living standards with renewed emphasis on such utopian aspirations as communal lifestyles, the expansion of leisure, and the arrival of communism within twenty years. As the Khrushchev era came to a close, the journal *Social Welfare* editorialized: “On earth, a new life, happy and free, is being built, a life about which people have been dreaming for eternity [izvechno].”<sup>13</sup>

Notwithstanding the utopian atmosphere, it became more possible to evaluate social risks realistically in a society less infested by danger. Sociologists and other social researchers played an increasingly important role. In the Khrushchev era, sociology re-emerged as an academic discipline, or at least sociological concerns were newly important in related disciplines; they had been sidelined since 1924. Although their work had to fit within a Marxist-Leninist framework, and the range of topics open for analysis was relatively narrow, sociologists worked critically on labour questions (Simirenko 1967: parts 4 and 5). Drawing on opinion polls and other evidence, they analysed labour turnover, leisure time, and the balance of the working day. The incentives which governed worker behaviour were implicitly and even explicitly addressed (Weinberg 1974: 59-65; Zdravomyslov and Iadov, 1965). Meanwhile, research on family budgets ultimately led to the establishment of minimum levels of provision (Matthews 1986: 19). Both locally and centrally, a progressive technocracy of experts capable of disagreeing with each other was by the early 1960s developing social policies for the Far East of the country (Vashchuk, 1998: 85-6). Risk was managed in a particularly self-conscious way by the administrators of public health. Senior medical officials argued in the late 1950s that the principles of prophylaxis which were so central to Soviet healthcare were being effectively observed.<sup>14</sup>

For Ulrich Beck, modernization generated risks, “ecologically, medically, psychologically and socially”: risks were inherent to industrial and post-industrial society. Risks might not have been new to humanity, but the dominant large-scale and globally-transmitted risks of the second half of the twentieth century were precisely caused by industrial modernity, with attendant problems of reflexivity: those who made calculations

about risk lacked perspective, because they could not do so from outside the phenomenon that had created it (Beck 1992). Taken as a whole, Beck's book, first published in 1986, might throw light on the end of the Soviet period and the years that followed it, but it seems to describe a world unlike that of the Khrushchev era. The Soviet Union between the mid-1950s and mid-1960s was dominated by a particular ideological approach which both paid attention to citizens' immediate material needs and insisted that they look forward to the impending communist future. In such a context – the self-conscious transition from one great historical stage to the next – Beck's problem of reflexivity dissolved. (For the calculation of risk amid an entirely different and gloomier but equally self-conscious understanding of the future, in the Federal Republic of Germany in the 1970s, see Martin Geyer's contribution to this volume.)

The capacity to evaluate risk in Khrushchev's USSR seemed reasonably acute. In 1958, the Main Administration of State Insurance (*Gosstrakh*), founded in 1921, was restructured for the first time (Rogers 1986). Identifiable risk existed in the very structures of this society. The conventional view is the opposite. Peter L. Bernstein writes in his popular history of risk, "When the Soviets tried to administer uncertainty out of existence through government fiat and planning, they choked off social and economic progress" (Bernstein 1996: 12). This is of course partly true. But Andrew Jenks points out that a "high tolerance for risk" made possible the spirit of inventiveness ("without the need for financial incentive") that underwrote the Soviet space programme of the Khrushchev era, and that a culture of risk was inherent to Soviet industry, culture and technology in these years (Jenks 2012: 119-21). The expertise to interpret large-scale risks existed in a new way. Planning had become more plausible, at least when compared with the "planless" chaos of the 1930s planned economy.

But risk is also an ideological construction, interpreted in different ways in different places. For ideological and pragmatic reasons, but also because the Soviet capacity to perceive and manage risk had changed, one of the big targets of social policy was, by 1956, pensions.

### **The pensions laws and the rewriting of risk**

Together, the pensions laws of 1956 and 1964 amounted to one of the most significant reforms of the Khrushchev era.<sup>15</sup> They were designed to reduce the impact of risks associated with old age, invalidity, and the death of a family breadwinner – in the jargon of the policymakers, “to guarantee material provision” for these sections of the population.<sup>16</sup> The 1956 law extended pensions provision into new sectors of the urban economy, clarified and streamlined the whole system, and greatly increased the level of benefits, while the 1964 law brought state pensions into the collective farms, whose workers had not been able to claim them before. Pensions were entirely funded by the state. The effect was pronounced. In 1955, social insurance spending per blue- or white-collar worker was 192.5 per cent of the 1940 level, but in 1957 it was 345.3 per cent (Kozlov et al 1958: 16). The total social insurance budget was 17.9 billion rubles in 1950, 71.65 billion in 1960, and 171.07 billion in 1970.<sup>17</sup> There were four million pensioners of all types in 1940, 18.55 million in 1960, 23.86 million in 1965, and 40.12 million in 1970.<sup>18</sup> This was both a qualitative and quantitative change in Soviet life: while some of the technical practices associated with the calculation of Soviet benefits applied in earlier periods too (Madison 1968), the fundamental principles of social rights and universality announced a new departure.

The first and most widespread category of pensions was for the elderly. All urban factory workers and white-collar workers were eligible. Men had to be sixty and to have completed at least twenty-five years' service, women to be five years younger and to have worked five years fewer. Some groups were granted privileges. These included those who worked in especially arduous conditions, underground, for example. Men in this category could retire at fifty following twenty years' service, women at forty-five if they had worked for fifteen years. Another example of "special privilege" was women who had given birth to five children and brought them all up to at least age eight: they could retire at fifty after fifteen years of paid work. The 1956 law increased pensions, simplified the formulae upon which payments calculations were based, and introduced a greater measure of equality, while paying lip service to condemning that Bolshevnik bugbear, a "fixation upon equality for its own sake" (*uravnilovka*). Those workers who had earned up to 350 rubles per month would receive the same after they retired, while those who had earned more than 1,000 would receive half their salary. The minimum possible pension was 300 rubles, and the maximum was 1,200.

Second were invalidity pensions. The law rationalized and enhanced these benefits, placing would-be claimants at the mercy of a special "medical-labour" commission (*vrachebno-trudovaia ekspertnaia kommissiia*, or *VTEK*), and entrenching the system by which invalids were divided into three groups, depending on the seriousness of the disability. The commissions, which contained medical and trade union representatives as well as personnel from the local industrial and soviet administrations, were required to adjudicate benefits not only for the victims of industrial accidents and diseases caused by occupational

environments, in which cases claimants would expect pensions in line with their salary and job status, but also for people who had never been able to work.

Third were the pensions awarded to dependants who had lost the family breadwinner. Among the many categories of dependants were children, siblings and grandchildren below a certain age, parents and spouse if they were above the age of sixty, and grandparents if their surviving children (i.e. the lost breadwinner's parents) were unable to support them. Again, the payments calculations were subject to many different variables but were broadly in line with the principles that governed other types of pension. Wartime veterans and other servicemen were considered a separate group but were still dealt with by the new law. Yet one enormous group, collective farm workers – up to half the national workforce – was entirely excluded.

Policymakers justified the exclusion of collective farm workers from the 1956 law on the grounds that peasants had adequate coverage from mutual aid funds in their villages (and that they could draw on their personal plots, which facilitated subsistence and whose excess could be sold at market, a resource unavailable to urban dwellers). While the culture of the traditional peasant commune had been systematically dismantled during collectivization, elements of the old arrangements, inspired by the active ethics of communal responsibility, survived in a partially bureaucratized form. People were protected in old age and in case of disability by mutual funds to which they had directly contributed and in whose administration they had a say. According to new model rules for the RSFSR introduced in January 1958 and proudly announced in the Bulletin of the International Social Security Association, “The mutual aid society provides assistance in case of accident, sickness, pregnancy or permanent

disablement (sic). It also provides assistance for orphans; treatment at watering places in sanatoria; prosthetic appliances for the disabled; post-natal service; and assistance for the war disabled, dependants of soldiers killed in the war, and those of collective farmers called up for military service.”<sup>19</sup> These funds were truly capable of sustaining old people’s homes, claimed a deputy chairman of the Council of Ministers (RSFSR), citing an example from Krasnodar region (no doubt to the surprise of Krasnodar peasants).<sup>20</sup> It was claimed that pensions provision existed in all the region’s collective farms in 1962. Collective and state farms in the region (*krai*) had worked at particularly high levels of production over the past decade, considerably outstripping the performance of 1953. As a consequence, wrote a leading local welfare official, “over the last year, the collective farms of the region could, at the expense of social funds, build a whole row of schools, nurseries, kindergartens, hospitals, clubs, old people’s homes, and also set aside large sums for pensions provision.” They had invested just over 7.3 million rubles in the fund in 1959, and this had risen year on year to almost 19 million in 1963. That year, payments were made to 146,365 pensioners.<sup>21</sup> Even if that were true, coverage more generally in the Soviet countryside was shaky and uneven (and the conditions in homes for the elderly and disabled were universally acknowledged, outside published writings, as atrocious). In the era of impending communism, a more reliable state fund was required to minimize the effects of social risk in the Soviet village. From January 1965, when the July 1964 law came into effect, payments would instead come out of the central social fund.<sup>22</sup> What the new legislation did was to create a “united system” out of what had hitherto been ad hoc and fragmented arrangements, and funded it better.<sup>23</sup>

If the 1956 law drew its justification from the Bolshevik Revolution, and stated so in its opening paragraph, the 1964 law explicitly looked ahead to the construction of

communism. It was in the context of the transition to utopia that the Soviet state possessed resources to extend pensions to peasants. The law was simpler than that of 1956, not least because it effectively applied to one core occupation. Pensions were lower than in towns; the minimum pension was only one-third of that envisaged in the 1956 law. But the scope of provision, to the elderly, invalids of various types, and those who had lost the family breadwinner, was in principle similar.

Experts claimed that both laws facilitated the equal treatment of citizens. “In contradistinction to Tsarist insurance laws and present-day pensions acts in capitalist countries, state social insurance in the USSR applies to all blue- and white-collar workers without exception,” wrote a leading official in the welfare bureaucracy of the RSFSR in 1956. “It does not depend on the character of the work – permanent, temporary or seasonal, or on the place of work – in state or cooperative institutions, social organizations or in a private citizen’s home, or on the means of payment – by the hour, by piecework, and so on.” He went on: “Pensions are provided to blue- and white-collar workers independently of race, nationality, sex.”<sup>24</sup> Growing universality implied the expansion of rights, and the language of rights was very common (Smith 2012). Investing social rights with real meaning signalled the decline of the danger society. Typically, one official argued: “This right guarantees Soviet citizens the possibility of calmly fulfilling their labour and military duties without anxiety for their material wellbeing in the future – in old age, or in the case of loss of the ability to work.”<sup>25</sup>

The level of danger at the Soviet workplace was apparently subsiding. True, worker disaffection, culminating in strikes, such as in Gori in December 1961, underscored how poor

conditions often were. But they were improving. In 1966, 632,500 people suffered workplace injuries, and 5,744 of them were killed: this was a seven per cent decline on the previous year. Policymakers were forced to reflect on workplace safety as a quantifiable social risk that was related not just to the fate of individuals but to the economy as a whole, two factors seen as indivisible. The industrial injuries of 1966 caused 12.2 million working days lost and a round billion in welfare payments (Ivanova 2011: 146-51). Injured workers received pensions regardless of whether the incident that caused the injury was their fault. But if the factory administration was to blame, the worker received additional support. This culpability clause was not entirely novel, but officials claimed that the new law greatly increased the number of such payouts. The payments did not only improve the living conditions of workers robbed of the ability to work through no fault of their own, but they were also designed to encourage factory managers to promote a safer working environment. In so doing, the procedure “fulfil[led] one of the humane functions of our state – fighting for the health of workers, for the creation of the very best working conditions.”<sup>26</sup>

This was, after all, the workers’ state. Workers would remain the favoured beneficiaries of welfare, even in a welfare system that had become universal in its pretensions. They outranked wartime veterans, thanks not least to the rhetorical status of labour in the workers’ state. “Naturally,” commented one official, “the pension for underground work will be higher [than for military service].”<sup>27</sup> This caused resentment among veterans. One miner from Sverdlovsk, who had been called up and badly injured at the front, wrote to the consultative pensions commission in March 1956 that his 1200 ruble wage before enlistment generated a 300 ruble pension. A workmate had not served in the army but had continued to work underground during the war, where he was subsequently

injured; his uninterrupted and extended period of labour service drew him a pension of 900 rubles.<sup>28</sup> Later, when public culture drew on the Great Fatherland War as much as the Revolution to legitimize the Soviet project, policy changed; by the Brezhnev era, the growing status of veterans and their ability to organize themselves ensured that their access to welfare would improve vis-à-vis that of other groups, including workers (Edele 2008).

Under Khrushchev, the distinction between worker and veteran derived from an ideological judgement and was a matter of policy. But in other areas, policymakers inadvertently attributed value to one group or another. As a result, the benefits system generated unintended and sometimes inappropriate consequences. Unintended consequences are constants of welfare reforms, and the reactions of ordinary people and officials to them reveal some of the basic prejudices upon which their understanding of social policy is based.

Anxiety existed that the 1956 legislation was blunt: that it ameliorated one form of risk at the expense of another. Interest groups and concerned officials debated the point in the run-up to the approval of the law. “A teacher, blind from childhood, has been working for 15-20 years, and she will get nothing,” argued one official from the Society of the Blind, “and next to her is another teacher who lost her eyes in a domestic accident. She will receive a pension.”<sup>29</sup> Here the case seemed clear: the consequences of the two types of risk were equally terrible, and the levels of welfare benefits should reflect this. Similarly, should the state protect the family of an absconding father in the same way as it protected a family where the father had died? A welfare official from Kalinin *oblast'* explained the problem.

Let's say that a father abandons his children. By law, he must pay maintenance. But what if a father dies, and the mother does not make a claim for maintenance, because she's proud, or because she's reasonably off? The father is dead, and maintenance has not been settled on the children, and will not be. How is this possible? The children must not suffer!<sup>30</sup>

Meanwhile, the relationship between social policy and the camps of the Gulag rebounded, unintentionally, on work opportunities for the blind, deaf and other disabled people. A bureaucratic infrastructure existed to draft disabled workers into appropriate jobs and to provide them with adequate training. The Moscow city soviet claimed in July 1958 that it had overfulfilled its plan to place these workers by 112.8 per cent, and its plan to train them by 129.8 per cent.<sup>31</sup> At the same time, the Soviet government also insisted that camp prisoners worked; even as political prisoners were being rehabilitated, ordinary people seemed keen that convicted criminals made the appropriate contribution with their labour (Hardy 2012). A factory workshop in Gor'kii *oblast'* that produced medical brushes and that was staffed by the blind was undercut by cheaper production in a labour camp. Hospitals and clinics shifted their orders accordingly.<sup>32</sup> The livelihood of the blind workers was potentially put under strain. For some disabled workers, the result could be the loss of their job, and their recategorization as a higher level invalid. But if they thought that this change would formally entitle them to live in "invalids' houses", they might be disappointed. The number of places was inadequate, only 3,150 for the whole of Moscow in 1960.<sup>33</sup> Such victims were scarcely touched by the issue of moral hazard, a notion which throws further light on the unintended consequences of Khrushchev's reforms and in particular on its ethical core: the value of work.

### **After moral panic: moral hazard**

An unintended but widely recognised consequence of risk management is moral hazard. This arises when measures that reduce the risk associated with certain actions enable or encourage people to engage in behaviour which is no longer dangerous to themselves but may incur costs for others. Moral hazard has been widely invoked to help explain financial crises, such as that of 2008, which might result when poorly regulated bankers and financiers speculate with other people's money (Krugman 2008). But it is also a way of explaining how incentives operate in economies with substantial welfare states, perhaps especially during periods of high unemployment (Parker 1992): "welfare queens" and benefits cheats can also be seen as creatures of moral hazard.

Soviet officials and ordinary people expressed some of the same concerns about moral hazard as their counterparts in capitalist countries. Excessively reducing social risks distorted incentives and encouraged immoral behaviour, went the claim. Such talk shows that Soviet and Western welfare systems operated some common state practices and generated some common social attitudes. But the Soviet moral hazard debate did not simply reflect the kind of unintended consequences of benefits policy that applied everywhere else; it also spoke to one of the central preoccupations of the whole Soviet project: the moral value of work, and especially the work of the industrial working class.

Saving up for a rainy day might have a bourgeois ring to it, but Soviet public culture encouraged citizens to do so. A well-known poster of 1950 shows a self-satisfied man turning round in the driver's seat of his new car and announcing the virtues of putting money aside in a state savings bank account. In the late 1950s, one-third of all new housing construction was of individual houses that were owned as "personal property" (*lichnaia sobstvennost'*) and financed by cheap state loans. The situations in which the houses were built, and the people who built them, were very varied, but this system depended on large numbers of people putting money aside and making regular loan payments. From the 1960s, the construction of individual houses was increasingly sidelined as an element of public policy; their function in the urban housing economy was replaced by cooperative apartments, which were financed, though not constructed, in an analogous manner (Smith 2010: ch. 3).

If people could save up, questions about the justice of benefits payments were bound to arise. Was it fair that those who had put money aside should be subsidized in dark times or old age by those who had been prudent? This issue is universal in welfare states, but the lionization of labour gave it a distinctive tint in the Soviet Union. Evidence from the national consultation that preceded the introduction of the 1956 law illustrates this. A party member wrote to Khrushchev that any decoupling of benefits payments from wages would be "unfair" and would "not reflect the opinion of the basic mass of workers."<sup>34</sup> A woman wrote from Komi to point out that women whose lengthy work record was interrupted because of childbirth or other reasons should not receive the same pension as women who had started work much later in life (but who had the same number of consecutive years' service before retirement).<sup>35</sup> Writing to the Central Committee, a Moscow academic noted that the draft law as it stood would generate resentment, because workers wanted pensions precisely in line

with their earnings: “Explaining to a worker who earned, let’s say, 930 rubles [per month] why he receives an identical pension to his comrade who earned 800 rubles and who worked in the same conditions and in the same factory shop will be impossible.”<sup>36</sup> Workers in the Rossel'mash factory in Rostov, meanwhile, expressed the concern that someone who had never worked before, but who had worked for exactly five years until retirement day, could expect a reasonable pension, but another worker who had worked solidly for sixteen years, but who was not receiving a wage at the moment of retirement, could get nothing. Another source of concern was the case of a sixty-year-old worker who had worked for forty-five years, and his neighbour who had only worked for twenty-six. “Why do they want me to be on the same footing as him?” the longer-serving worker asked. The official who had attended this and other meetings with ordinary people called this “a constant question” which deserved proper consideration.<sup>37</sup>

On the issue of moral hazard, welfare officials were thus broadly in line with popular opinion, and forcefully defended the principle that a worker’s pension was determined by the labour he had expended. The post-Stalin Soviet authorities engaged in a public discussion about the unintended consequences of the amelioration of social risk in a much more dynamic and open way than the attempts by Nazi film makers, analysed by Andreas Killenin in this volume, to promote public enlightenment. In the midst of this discussion, and agreeing with typical public sentiment, welfare officials cast doubt on the special privileges of some workers in the Far North. They received very high wages, long holidays, the right to enjoy frequent and quite extended visits to sanatoria and holiday resorts in temperate zones of the USSR, and the right to large pensions taken from an early retirement age. The deal was designed for the likes of a welder working permanently outdoors in Noril'sk, where the

winter temperature might be minus fifty and the sky dark in the middle of the day. It was a way of attracting people to work in the exceptionally harsh frontier zones of Stalinist and post-Stalinist industrialization. The point about moral hazard arose when the principle of favourable treatment for those who worked in these places was reduced to an absurdity. One official from Murmansk claimed that a schoolteacher could obtain a pension on the grounds of period of service after twelve-and-a-half years' work, that is, in his early thirties.<sup>38</sup>

Consistent with its praise for the ethics of labour, the party and government castigated the benefits cheat, and the lax bureaucratic regulation that made his existence possible, under Stalin and Khrushchev alike. A Moscow city government order of April 1950 whose primary purpose was to crack down on incompetent finance officials (*schetovody*) listed examples of people effectively defrauding the social budget. There was the woman from the capital's Stalinskii district who wrongly claimed pensions for both her dead husband and for her son, killed at the front; another woman, this time recorded as coming from the Baumanskii district, who received both a pension and a wage for her husband. The dishonest claimants and the failed officials alike were named and shamed.<sup>39</sup> In February 1951, the head of the social security department of Moscow's Oktiabr'skii district demonstrated the point with reference to a notional citizen, Ivan Ivanovich Kuznetsov, a permanent fixture at the local welfare office, and "a kind man," who "says that he can never refuse anyone." She went on:

And this Kuznetsov is always drunk, terrorizes his family, and receives monthly extraordinary assistance from Mosgorsobes [The Moscow municipal social security office]. Why show pity to such people? The man is young, why does he not get

himself a job? The district would set up any kind of job for him, but he doesn't want to work.

It would be better, she argued, to direct benefits away from the likes of Kuznetsov and towards more deserving groups, such as the families of those killed during the war, and “especially” those who had been seriously injured in battle.<sup>40</sup>

Precisely the same point was made by a welfare official who worked at the Moskabel' factory in Moscow, at a meeting of colleagues from across the city in 1964. This time, though, the undeserving claimants included manipulative veterans.

I want to say something more about invalids of the Fatherland War and invalids of labour. We have another category of people who shamefully [abuse] their status, who go into institutions and enterprises and ask for money. [...] When you clarify what's going on, they turn out to be people who have already not been working for twenty years. That such a category of person still exists brings shame on us and we must fight it.<sup>41</sup>

In 1964, it seemed that it was still too easy to commit benefit fraud. One contributor to the specialist press pointed out that it was much more difficult to forge lottery tickets, whose payouts were trivial, than pensions books, which might allow a cheat to access many thousands of rubles.<sup>42</sup>

These officials were sure, therefore, that they had the ethical and professional standing to evaluate the consequences of social risk for individual citizens. In 1966, the head of Moscow's Lublinskii district social security office pointed out that many elderly parents came to the capital to live with their children, sometimes in accommodation so cramped and overcrowded that it was too small for the parents formally to be allowed to register with the authorities (though they might not have been allowed to register anyway). Even if they were advised by the pensions authorities to seek residence registration, generally they did not, either fearing that for one or another reason registration would be refused, or because of a generalized reluctance to engage with the registration authorities. They self-consciously took the gamble that they would not need welfare payments, so they did not take the risk of seeking formal permission to live in Moscow. But if their health deteriorated and their family could not cope, the social security office would tend to regard their case sympathetically, as an "exception." "[A]nd there are very many such exceptions," commented the Lublinskii representative. "We cannot leave people completely without money, completely without kopecks, although they have come to live with their children. Not every child is so [ideologically] conscious [*soznatel'nyi*] as to feed the elderly." Another example was "domestic workers," often elderly nannies, brought in from a village to help look after an infant. For such a person to get their papers in order could be a complex task, requiring multiple witnesses to attest to current and former employment. Or they might misplace their papers. In short, arguably through little fault of their own, they might not be able to make a plausible case to the welfare authorities. "We must believe these people," the Lublinskii district official insisted: they must be exceptions too. He went on to give the classic counter-argument against the moral hazard problem. "If one person in a hundred is a crook [*zhulik*], then why should the other ninety-nine suffer? We have to believe these people."<sup>43</sup>

The argument against the problem of moral hazard was thus practical: the immoral actions of the minority had to be overlooked if no one was to starve. But the argument was also ethical. N.A. Murav'eva, the Minister of Social Welfare (RSFSR), argued that while some people would go on working forever if they could, others would retire after five or ten years if they could manage it – and sometimes they did. These were “people who try to use Soviet legislation for their own mercenary ends.” But “we must count more on the level of the consciousness of the Soviet person.” This meant trusting the moral majority of the party-minded and the ideologically convinced; she called the elderly workers who did not want to retire “patriots of the Soviet motherland.” But it also meant rehabilitating those who had fallen short: educating malefactors in the proper ways of Soviet life.<sup>44</sup> The possibility of redemption was always at the heart of Soviet morality, even at its most perverse in the Gulag (Barnes 2011), and it in some sense softened the worst consequences of social risk. In the end, getting a pension would liberate a Soviet citizen from anxiety about risk. He or she would now serve the Soviet project in a new way: as a grandmother looking after the children, as a senior party member, as a person enjoying the modicum of leisure that should exist in a society looking towards utopia. In this context, the expansion of pensions and other benefits was not just conceived as a mechanism for managing social risk, for helping those who could no longer help themselves, for making payments to the unfortunate or the elderly. It was also a way of creating undreamed-of prosperity: of lifestyles that pointed towards a transition to communism. The blind composer Ivan Popkov was, at the age of forty-eight, two years away from receiving a pension of 700 rubles. “It will allow me to work exclusively on creative concerns,” he enthused, “and I hope to complete my unfinished suite on Chinese themes.”<sup>45</sup>

**\*\*\* SECTION BREAK \*\*\***

A self-reinforcing stereotype suggests that Russians – before, during, and after the Soviet period – have had little capacity to make calculations about risk. In a survey of 17,446 young adults aged between seventeen and thirty that was conducted between January and March of 1961, 0.7 per cent – the bottom category – stated that the “strongest” characteristic of Soviet youth was realism. (The top return was patriotism, cited by 32 per cent of respondents [Grushin 2000: 179].) In other words, according to this sample, hardly any of this generation defined themselves as strictly rational decision-makers. There is youthful recklessness, cultural baggage and self-deprecation here. But there is also the context of Khrushchev’s communist transition. What was realistic about an age whose public culture announced the elimination of the housing shortage in a decade, of the overtaking of the material wealth of the United States within twenty years, of the construction of communist utopia by 1980? Even those things that really happened in 1961, such as Iurii Gagarin’s conquest of space, had an unreal quality about them.

Yet Soviet officials started to think differently about social risks during the Khrushchev era. The ideological pressures that would culminate in the publication of the third party programme in 1961 forced them to consider the fate of individual citizens in a new way. No longer could the most acute social risks be dismissed as the collateral damage of socialist modernity, the necessary cost of the most painful of modernization programmes.

Instead, they were something to be minimized wherever possible by a complex sequence of well-resourced social reforms whose basis in a defensible system of social rights marked one of the decisive shifts from the Stalinist to the post-Stalinist dictatorship. The pensions laws of 1956 and 1964 exemplified this transformation. Yet for all Khrushchev's promises of communism, the reformers were faced with the unintended consequences that flowed from the value placed by Soviet society on its central moral precept, the labour of the working class. This value continued to resist absolute equality, even as communism apparently beckoned. "The more a person has worked," editorialized *Social Welfare* upon the publication of the 1956 decree, "the greater will be his privileges, the higher his pension."<sup>46</sup> Thus while the Soviet welfare system was characterized by some of the same dilemmas as Western welfare states, Soviet ideology resolved them in a highly characteristic way. Still, the fact that these dilemmas existed at all was a result of the target of Soviet social policy moving once and for all towards the wellbeing of the individual citizen. However imperfect the new welfare reforms, they required a more predictable society for their very existence. They grew out of the withering away of the Soviet danger society. For all the ironies of moral hazard and the challenge of unintended consequences, what followed was the Soviet eternity of the long 1970s,<sup>47</sup> in which social certainties seemed more striking than social risks.

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**Archives**

GARF: Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiskoi federatsii (State Archive of the Russian Federation)

TsAGM: Tsentral'nyi arkhiv goroda Moskvyy (Central Archive of the City of Moscow)

**Endnotes**

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<sup>2</sup> There is a growing literature on Soviet housing, but Smith 2010 is one of the few works to analyze it as precisely a welfare measure.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Alan Barenberg for sending me his very useful thesis.

<sup>4</sup> Though Robert Dale argues that Leningrad citizens did not fear that returning veterans were brutalized: Dale 2010, 228-34.

<sup>5</sup> All these cases are cited in the following correspondence: Zubkova and Zhukova 2010, 307-310: doc. 101: N.A. Korolev (deputy Minister of State Security, USSR, to I.A. Kairov, Minister of Education, RSFSR, 15 May 1951).

<sup>6</sup> For the experience of the local nomenklatura, see Leibovich 2008.

<sup>7</sup> TsAGM f. [archival fund] 1937, op. [opis<sup>1</sup>, inventory] 1, d. [delo, file] 89, l. [list, folio] 18: Moscow gorispolkom resolution no, 14/34 12 March 1956 (RSFSR decree: 13 February 56 no. 207).

<sup>8</sup> TsAGM f. 1937, op. 1, d. 13, l. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Zubkova and Zhukova 2010, 383 and 387: docs. 126 and 132.

<sup>10</sup> GARF) f. A-413, op. 1, d. 2793, l. 26: Comrade Kas'ianova at RSFSR pensions convention, 17 May 1956.

<sup>11</sup> TsAGM f. 1937, op. 1, d. 13, l. 1. "Expenditure on pensions and benefits for invalids of the Fatherland War...."

<sup>12</sup> *Sotsial'noe obespechenie* [Social Welfare], 1956: 7: 6.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 1964: 11: 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Bulletin of the International Social Security Association*, 1958: 3: 98.

<sup>15</sup> The Law on State Pensions of 14 July 1956, and the Law on Pensions and Benefits for Members of Collective Farms of 15 July 1964. The text of the pensions laws can be found in numerous Soviet-era publications, including Zakharov and Piskov 1972: 179-93 and 269-73.

<sup>16</sup> *Sotsial'noe obespechenie*, 1956: 7, 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR, statisticheskii ezhegodnik*, Moscow: TsSU, 1958: 906; 1960: 848; 1970: 734.

<sup>18</sup> *Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR, statisticheskii ezhegodnik*, Moscow: TsSU, 1959: 796; 1965: 602; 1969: 592-3; 1972: 570.

<sup>19</sup> *Bulletin of the International Social Security Association*, 1958: 10-11, 538-9.

<sup>20</sup> GARF f. A-413, op. 1, d. 2793, l. 245. Maslov at RSFSR pensions convention, 19 May 1956.

<sup>21</sup> *Sotsial'noe obespechenie*, 1964:10, 5-6.

<sup>22</sup> For some statistical examples of the transition from one set of arrangements to the other in the Soviet Far North, see GARF f. A-413, op. 1, do. 4005, l. 30: L. Lykova (Minister of Social Welfare, RSFSR) and I. Fadeev (Minister of Finance, RSFSR), report to Central Committee and Council of Ministers (RSFSR), July 1965.

<sup>23</sup> *Sotsial'noe obespechenie*, 1964:12, 8.

<sup>24</sup> *Sotsial'noe obespechenie*, 1956: 5-6, 23.

<sup>25</sup> GARF f. A-413, op. 1, d. 2793, l. 17. Comrade Ivanov at RSFSR pensions convention, 17 May 1956.

<sup>26</sup> *Sotsial'noe obespechenie* 1956:9, 22.

<sup>27</sup> GARF f. A-413, op. 1, d. 2793, l. 205. Comrade Aralov at RSFSR pensions convention, 19 May 1956.

<sup>28</sup> GARF f. 7523, op. 45, d. 56, ll. 22-22ob.

- <sup>29</sup> GARF f. A-413, op. 1, d. 2793, l. 13. Comrade Ivanov at RSFSR pensions convention, 17 May 1956. Cf. the general point made by L. Lykova, Minister of Social Welfare (RSFSR) about pensions for those who were disabled from birth: GARF f. A-413. op. 1, d. 4005, l. 12: Lykova to Central Committee, 12 April 1965.
- <sup>30</sup> GARF f. A-413, op. 1, d. 2793, l. 34. Comrade Shelygov at RSFSR pensions convention, 17 May 1956.
- <sup>31</sup> TsAGM f. 1937, op. 1, d. 102, l.1 Moscow City Soviet resolution no. 42/10, 18/7/58.
- <sup>32</sup> GARF f. A-413, op. 1, d. 2793, l. 16. Comrade Ivanov at RSFSR pensions convention, 17 May 1956.
- <sup>33</sup> TsAGM f. 1937, op. 1, d. 34, l. 2. Note signed by deputy head of Department of Social Welfare of the Moscow City Soviet Executive Committee, 10 June 1960.
- <sup>34</sup> GARF f. R-7523, op. 45, d. 52, l. 16. Letter of A. Kalinin, 31 May 1956.
- <sup>35</sup> GARF f. R-7523, op. 45, d. 50, l. 20. Letter of R.M. Abriazhanskaia, 28 May 1956.
- <sup>36</sup> GARF f. R-7523, op. 45, d. 52, l. 29. Letter of V.V. Karavaev, 1 June 1956.
- <sup>37</sup> GARF f. A-413, op. 1, d. 2793, ll. 39-40. Comrade Andreev at RSFSR pensions convention, 17 May 1956.
- <sup>38</sup> GARF f. A-413, op. 1, d. 2793, ll. 121-2. Comrade Stepanov at RSFSR pensions convention, 17 May 1956.
- <sup>39</sup> TsAGM f. 1937, op. 1, d. 43, l. 25. Order (*prikaz*) 1 April 1950 no. 15.
- <sup>40</sup> TsAGM f. 1937, op. 1, d. 55, l. 8. Comrade Kaliuzhnaia at Moscow city conference of social security professionals, 14 February 1951.
- <sup>41</sup> TsAGM f. 1937, op. 1, d. 219, l. 38. Comrade Furtov at Moscow conference of social security professionals, 20 February 1964.
- <sup>42</sup> *Sotsial'noe obespechenie*, 1964: 10: 8.
- <sup>43</sup> TsAGM f. 1937, op. 1, d. 259, ll. 45-6. Comrade Shul'man at Moscow conference of social security professionals, 2 March 1966.

<sup>44</sup> GARF f. A-413, op. 1, d. 2793, l. 131. N.A. Murav'eva at RSFSR convention on pensions, 17 May 1956.

<sup>45</sup> *Sotsial'noe obespechenie*, 1956: 7: 8.

<sup>46</sup> *Sotsial'noe obespechenie*, 1956: 7: 3.

<sup>47</sup> The notion of eternity in late Soviet socialism has been most acutely captured in the scholarly literature in Yurchak 2006.