

Context Note: The situation for Urban Residents and Industrial Workers, 1932-1933

As Stalin's genocidal policies were decimating the countryside, urban residents and industrial workers were experiencing severe housing shortages and suffering from varying degrees of malnutrition, hunger and starvation.

After consolidating power in the mid-1920s, Stalin set in motion his massive industrialization program. All industry would be run by the state, and agriculture would be industrialized as well, via collectivization. To bring about this unprecedented transformation, four hundred new industrial plants were built during the first Five-Year Plan (1928-1932) in Ukraine alone, some on a massive scale. Among the most impressive were huge steel and aluminum plants, the Kharkiv tractor factory, and the Dnipro hydroelectric plant – the largest in Europe at the time. By the end of 1932, all agricultural production and most industrial production in Ukraine had been moved from Soviet Ukraine's control to that of Moscow.

Ukraine's rural residents left the countryside in large numbers to work in the new industrial centers. The urban population nearly doubled between 1920 and 1933, resulting in crowding and housing shortages in the cities and nearby industrial sites. This problem was at best met with rapidly, shoddily assembled apartment buildings, but just as often, workers had no choice but to devise for themselves minimally functional shelters and huts on the outskirts of the cities. Soviet industrial statistics stated that in 1930, the standard living space per person was less than 3.6 cubic meters (Rassweiler, p.150). At the construction site of the Dnipro Dam, the crowded and unsanitary conditions created significant health issues that medical care was inadequate to address. Outbreaks of smallpox, typhus, and other diseases further weakened workers and their families and increased mortality. In 1929, the Soviet state instituted food rationing, which became increasingly restrictive through the Holodomor years.

Stalin repeatedly warned of the threat of an imminent attack on the USSR by outside capitalist powers and exhorted workers to perform to their utmost in the name of war mobilization. Whiting Williams, whose photos appear in this Directory, quotes miners that he first met in 1928 asking him when the US would attack the Soviet Union. The authorities' calls to patriotism and pride served to distract from the Soviet Union's ongoing failure to meet the basic needs of the proletariat. The average worker was surviving on wages that were decreasing in buying power throughout the period and that could hardly buy a warm coat, let alone supplement hunger rations. Furthermore, anyone rightly or wrongly accused of some form of negligence could lose their all-important food ration cards or housing, be blacklisted from all employment, or even exiled to remote labor camps in the Gulag.

Although numerous strikes and other disturbances occurred during this period, workers more often responded to the grinding poverty and unfulfilled promises by engaging in more passive forms of resistance. Theft at the workplace, frequent changing of jobs, and decreased productivity were widespread.

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