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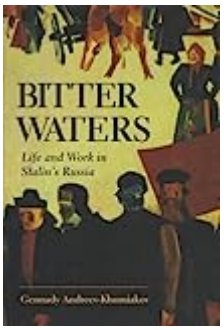


**Gennady Andreev-Khomiakov.** *Bitter Waters: Life and Work in Stalin's Russia.* Boulder: Westview Press, 1997. xxi + 195 pp. $32.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8133-2374-9; $30.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8133-2390-9.

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## Provincial Russia in the 1930s

Gennady Andreev-Khomiakov's career as a journalist was temporarily suspended in 1927 when the Soviet authorities sentenced the teenager to ten years in a labor camp for "counterrevolutionary activities." He pursued his writing career again only after the war's end as a refugee in West Germany. This newly translated memoir was originally published in 1954 and is one of Andreev-Khomiakov's many writings addressing his experiences in the Soviet Union. It begins with his early discharge from a labor camp in 1935 and ends with his evacuation from Moscow in the fall of 1941. The portrait he provides of daily life, politics, economy, and labor in the second half of the 1930s and the beginning of World War II is invaluable for professional historians and non-specialists alike. It differs from the majority of 1930s memoirs, particularly those intelligentsia memoirs recounting the fear, uncertainty, and drama of the late 1930s Purges. Andreev-Khomiakov's memoir focuses on the less dramatic, if no less authentic, everyday lives of bureaucrats, workers, and peasants as they experienced the realities of "building socialism" in Stalinist Russia. His story is not a simple one.

The tone of the memoir is established at the outset when Andreev-Khomiakov recalls the alienation he experienced the day of his release from a labor camp in Siberia. After boarding a train to set off on his new life, he peered through a window to find himself marveling at two young girls amid others on the platform. Despite his newfound freedom, Andreev-Khomiakov was overcome not by a sense of joy, as he had imagined during his years of confinement, but rather by a profound lack of comprehension of the seeming contentment of those around him. He poignantly asked: "How could they [the girls] laugh? How could all these people walk around conversing and laughing as if nothing unusual was happening in the world, as if nothing nightmarish and unforgettable stood in their midst. Did they really know nothing, truly not sense the barbed wire and the man with a rifle at their backs? (p. 3)."

Andreev-Khomiakov addresses this incongruity implicitly throughout his memoir as he illustrates the multiple realities that existed in the 1930s. Although Andreev-Khomiakov himself condemns the Soviet system, his memoir underscores that the individual perceptions of

and responses to it were not uniform. Neposedov, Andreev-Khomiakov's boss, supported the regime's emphasis on technology and central planning, and he bustled about in the factory, "constantly fired up and in motion" (p. 11). In contrast, Andreev-Khomiakov's coworker, Nina Mikhailovna, appeared relatively indifferent to the system and took advantage of the inefficient and wasteful factory work schedule to read the novels she enjoyed (p. 82). The engineer, Kolyshev, did not embrace the system, but did not reject it either. Because he did not believe it could be changed radically, he utilized his position within it to show compassion and to help others preserve an "inner decency" (p. 99).

Andreev-Khomiakov offers a unique perspective on the similarly uneven effects of the Soviet experiment on regions beyond major urban centers. Stigmatized due to his past, he moved in search of work from a steppe town to a regional hub, and finally to a provincial town. In his travels, Andreev-Khomiakov suggests that some people indeed knew very little, or nothing at all, of various policies, campaigns, and the purges. According to Andreev-Khomiakov, "Events far away in the regional capital, in Moscow, and in other big cities seemed to bypass" life in the rural steppe town (p. 9). As a result, the town's inhabitants kept the same basic routine that had existed before the October Revolution. They "worked at their jobs during the day, and in the evenings they visited each other, gossiped good-naturedly, sat over tea, bared their souls in long conversations," and played cards (p. 9).

Although the Party and state campaigns for socialist competition, shock work, and Stakhanovism exerted a presence in the provincial locale three hours away from Moscow, the author observes how little these campaigns affected actual labor practices. He also argues that relatively few Party members were employed in the factory and its central board in Moscow, and that Party members (but not necessarily Komsomol members) exercised "no particular influence" on people's activity (p. 130). Nor did the Great Purges directly affect Andreev-Khomiakov and others who lived and worked in the provincial sawmill town or its surrounding countryside. According to him, "The violence was occurring far away somewhere, at some inaccessible height," and no one in his factory of five hundred was arrested (p. 42). The memoir illustrates the haphazardness of the Soviet regime's experiment and underscores that the Communist Party and the state were not all encompassing.

Readers interested in central planning will find Andreev-Khomiakov's view of the economy particularly engrossing. As director of two different factory-planning departments in the 1930s, he provides many colorful details of "the Plan" in practice. Andreev-Khomiakov argues that the introduction of planning in the timber industry led to chaos, environmental damage, shortages, and waste. In addition to less overall production, Andreev also discusses the contribution of centralized planning to the persistence and expansion of a dual economy, in which the unplanned sector allowed the planned economy to continue to operate.

He and his factory colleagues repeatedly resorted to unofficial middlemen to procure essential supplies virtually impossible to obtain through sanctioned channels. Similarly, the sawmill directors provided much-needed timber to organizations and industries, outside of any official plan. In return, they received various food products and manufactured goods, such as women's shoes, which they then disbursed to workers. Although these transactions were not part of the Plan, such barter activity enabled industries to realize some of the Plan's projected goals. Moreover, supply of scarce goods to workers gave them more incentive to fulfill their work duties.

In addition to providing ample evidence of the inadequacies of central planning, Andreev-Khomiakov describes how planners and bookkeepers tried to compensate. He and his coworkers frequently violated the Plan by manipulating accounts and forging vouchers to meet the factory-laborer needs overlooked by the Plan and the trade unions. For instance, Andreev-Khomiakov falsified an account entry that allowed the day-care center at the sawmill to style itself as a "representative." This fiction enabled it to obtain desperately needed provisions under the legitimate rubric of "costs for representation" (p. 91). In Andreev-Khomiakov's words, the myriad problems with the planned economy required that most people operate "not according to the Plan, but according to a freakish 'dialectical combination' of the planned and unplanned, in essence by constant violation of the Plan" (p. 72). Despite recognizing the functional and material benefits of these strategies, he forces the reader to simultaneously confront the possibility that the constant scheming and manipulation of the planned economy led to debilitating effects on people's morale, visibly manifested in outbursts, melancholia, and drunken episodes.

Andreev-Khomiakov's observations about planning are mirrored in his remarks about domestic trade. Although he notes a relative improvement in the material conditions of the country from approximately 1935 to 1938, the author emphasizes the existence and impor-

tance of the unofficial domestic trade sector. For example, when he and his boss were in danger of running out of fuel, they resorted to buying gas from an unofficial seller–a labor-camp inmate who drove a fuel truck for the NKVD. His memoir also highlights the regional inconsistency of material conditions. Food products and manufactured goods were more plentiful in the cities than in the towns and villages.

This unevenness ironically meant that "pushy wives went to Moscow, bought clothes and shoes there, and sold them in [Andreev'-Khomiakovs] town at speculators' prices" (p. 43). And yet, despite his resentment and frustration with the situation, Andreev-Khomiakov admires the "enterprising women," for they turned a profit and performed an essential service (p. 43). After 1938, when apparently "product shortages became even worse in the provinces," people took even more "trips to Moscow" to procure basic items (p. 100). His descriptions illustrate the paradoxical effects produced by the limited growth of official retail trade combined with persistent scarcity, and the ways in which the comparatively better availability of goods in Moscow may have fostered unofficial and illegal trade in the provinces.

Andreev-Khomiakov's nuanced reflections concerning the contradictions imbedded in common problems extend to his own situation as well. As much as Andreev-Khomiakov suffered from and disliked the Soviet system, he also found himself using it to his advantage. Unfairly fired from his job because of his tainted past, Andreev-Khomiakov nevertheless benefited from the 1936 Stalin Constitution and related labor laws, and he managed to overturn his improper discharge. Similarly, when his sawmill was threatened with imminent closure because of a decision by the Council of People's Commissars to reallocate timber supplies, Andreev-Khomiakov's superiors called upon the very same governmental body for a short-term solution–permission for the sawmill to pursue its own logging. Subsequently thwarted in their new logging efforts by actions of the Meat and Milk Production Trust, Andreev-Khomiakov and his boss appealed to the arbitration bureau of the Council of People's Commissars for compensation and won a partial victory. Ironically, the Council of People's Commissars both contributed to the sawmill's problems and helped provide it with temporary recompense. Despite his constant criticism of the Soviet system, Andreev-Khomiakov demonstrates the ways it could simultaneously offer protection and opportunity.

According to the memoir, the contradictions of the Soviet system undermined its credibility and legitimacy. Nonetheless, even though many people were unhappy with the existing state of affairs, the system persisted. Andreev-Khomiakov raises the question that many scholars have sought to answer: Why? His answer enriches our debate. In his opinion, "fear was not the primary obstacle" (p. 131). Rather, people lacked a clear alternative and did not have coherent answers as to how to do things differently. In addition, there was no leader or group around whom people could unite. Without unity, and without a vision for reforming the system, Andreev-Khomiakov proposes that the regime could not be rejected wholesale, especially given the public awareness of the growing German threat as the decade unfolded.

Andreev-Khomiakov's memoir will provoke discussion about the nature of the Soviet system rather than provide facile answers. It joins a growing body of literature that offers a window on ordinary people's experiences of Soviet life in the 1930s, including two recently edited collections, *Intimacy and Terror: Soviet Diaries of the 1930s*,[1] and *A Revolution of Their Own: Voices of Women in Soviet History*.[2] The introduction by Ann E. Healy does a fine job of placing the memoir in historical context and her footnotes provide helpful information for the non-specialist. As a result, readers of this review should find Andreev-Khomiakov's memoir a highly useful, personal, and accessible source with which to introduce students to everyday life in the Stalinist Soviet Union.[3]

Notes

[1]. Ed. Veronique Garros, Natalia Korenevskaya, and Thomas Lahusen, *Intimacy and Terror: Soviet Diaries of the 1930s* (New Press, 1995).

[2]. Ed. Barbara Alpern Engel and Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck, *A Revolution of Their Own: Voices of Women in Soviet History* (Westview Press, 1998).

[3]. Other texts that depict everyday life and are used in survey classes include: Zara Witkin, *An American Engineer in Stalin's Russia: The Memoirs of Zara Witkin, 1932-1934*, ed. Michael Gelb (University of California Press, 1991); John Scott, *Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel* (Indiana University Press, 1989); and Victor Kravchenko, *I Chose Freedom: The Personal and Political Life of a Soviet Official* (Transaction Publishers, 1989).

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