

SOVIET NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS; LIMITS OF EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATIONS

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A. Introduction, which Model of Analysis?

The importance of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or voluntary associations has frequently been emphasized and examined by Western social scientists in the century and a half since de Toqueville underlined their role in the »New World«. Voluntary associations are often referred to as one of the pillars of modern democratic systems (Almond & Verba, 1965; Kornhauser, 1960; Pestoff, 1977; Truman, 1951; and Verba & Nie, 1972).

Some authors argue that the organizational capacity of a population is closely related to several of the factors generally associated with the industrial revolution and urbanization in Western societies (Stinchcombe, 1965) or with the complexity and level of economic development of a society (Truman, 1957 and Rokkan, 1966). However medieval society is also noted for a vast array of associations, guilds, estates, etc; although of a corporate nature. Other social scientists maintain that, historically speaking, voluntary associations have played a prominent part in ancient societies which were less complex than our own politically and economically, including tribes on the American plains and communities in Oceania and parts of Africa (Andersson, 1971). Organizations of mutual protection played an important role during the period from 1100 to 1700 as instruments of individual and collective change and improvement for freeman and then for serfs according to *Hartman* (1911).

These two somewhat contradictory perspectives concerning the development of Western NGOs suggest that voluntary associations must have been present in prerevolutionary Russia, and that there first should have been a flourishing of occupationally related NGOs associated with the rapid industrialization after the revolution and then of leisure or free-time NGOs related to reductions in the work week. However, even an unambitious survey of the literature on Soviet NGOs is bound to end in frustration as a result of an almost complete absence of scholarly interest in or empirical studies of Soviet voluntary associa-

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tions. This poverty of documentation stands in contrast to sweeping generalizations about Soviet NGOs that appear in many scholarly works. Such a situation hinders academic progress in a field deserving serious attention.

The limitations facing the student of Soviet NGOs can perhaps be surmounted from a somewhat different perspective. *Tarschys* raises the problem of which model is most fruitful for studying Soviet political agenda (1978). He maintains that Soviet studies can be roughly divided into three categories according to their perspective or model of Soviet politics; i.e. totalitarian, pluralist, or bureaucratic. It is evident that the study of Soviet NGOs, or the lack thereof, is closely associated with the totalitarian model of Soviet politics. According to this model Soviet society is a controlled system and the Party or its political leadership constitutes the most interesting object of study. In the »dictatorship of the proletariat», NGOs merely function as »transmission belts» and are under the control of the Party. This view of Soviet society and Soviet NGOs not only precludes the empirical study of Soviet voluntary associations, but in extreme cases even denies their very existence. *Kornhauser* (1960), for example, has referred to Soviet society as an atomised society which lacks all independent social infrastructure; i.e. a society where no secondary organizations exist to mediate between the rulers and the ruled. According to this point of view Soviet voluntary associations are simply seen as an extension of the State. The assumptions of the totalitarian model have led to the situation where scholars who do not *a priori* share this view of Soviet society are nevertheless constrained by the limitations of the totalitarian interpretation. *Skilling & Griffiths* fail to include Soviet NGOs in their book on *Interest Groups in Soviet Politics* (1971). Trade unions are conspicuously absent, while party officials, the secret police, the armed forces, the managerial elite, economists, writers and the legal profession are all discussed.

This dearth of information renders difficult, if not impossible, any attempt to describe or examine the role of Soviet NGOs according to the parameters of one or the other of the three analytical models suggested by *Tarschys*. Furthermore, it condemns to failure any effort to evaluate which of the three models would best convey the form and essence of Soviet NGOs. The notes below are therefore far from satisfactory in terms of their descriptive content, and even less so in terms of their analytical content. Nevertheless, if the limits of scientific empirical knowledge about Soviet NGOs are going to be extended a start must be made somewhere.

B. Soviet Non-Governmental Organizations

General literature on Soviet NGOs is not only scarce, but practically non-existent. *Swanson* is one of the few writers to treat this subject (1974). He

notes that NGOs in the Soviet Union are commonly referred to as »public organizations«. Their study is made difficult by a rather fluid definition between the party, the state and the public sector. However large growth of public organizations during the 15 year period, 1958—73 justifies their examination. In the mid-60s there were 66 million workers in trade unions, 20 million youths in Komsomol, 43 million workers in cooperative associations, millions more in other voluntary societies, 17 million adults in amateur organizations, etc. (Swanson, 1974).

Swanson maintains that NGOs serve several crucial functions in Soviet society that would normally be associated with the »integrative sub-system« in Parson's functional model of political systems (see Lipset & Rokkan, 1967). Since Parson's model attributes these functions to »associations« and »the public«, it seems likely that Soviet NGOs have certain analytical similarities to their counterparts in the West. In fact Meister maintains that voluntary associations operate more clearly as integrative structures in socialist than in Western societies (1976). Swanson mentions the opportunity for millions of Soviet citizens to participate directly in the society's institutional life. Such participation facilitates an individuals' identification with the system as a whole and provides experience which helps socialize him or her. Furthermore, participation in NGOs results in the dissemination of organizational skills. Finally, NGOs are essential adjuncts to the daily functioning of society.

Swanson also notes that Soviet public organizations can be considered voluntary organizations in a functional sense since members receive no payment for services rendered, while paid officials in such organizations are not state servants since their salaries are generated internally. But there is probably a large extent of overlap between the Party and the leadership of public organizations in socialist societies (Meister, 1976). All public organizations must benefit the society at large and are considered agencies for the transformation of Soviet socialism into communism; something which according to Swanson leads to an over-politicization of Soviet NGOs (See also Meister). As such, Soviet NGOs correspond more closely to »instrumental-expressive associations«, rather than purely instrumental or purely expressive associations in Gordon & Babchuk's typology (1959).

Swanson argues that there are three basic types of Soviet organizations which could be considered NGOs. They include; a. mass public organizations, b. amateur organizations, and c. public organs. An elaboration of this typology would place the Communist Party, trade unions, cooperatives, youth, sports, defense, cultural, technical and scientific organizations in the mass public organizations category. A further distinction can be noted between the Communist Party, trade unions, the cooperatives and Komsomol, on the one hand, and the remainder of the organizations on the other hand. The latter are normally referred to as »voluntary societies« or »branch public organizations«

because they work in close association with the various branches of the economy. Often their aims involve, directly or indirectly, participation in the economy. Scientific or technical societies, for example, strive to improve the productive forces of the country by running on a voluntary basis, the *Dom Tekhnika* (Technical Houses) and people's universities found in most cities in the Soviet Union.

The second basic type of NGOs in the Soviet Union is made up of amateur organizations. They have a broad range of specific functions and are numerically prolific. In 1961 there were 2.5 million such organizations with approximately 17 million members. Members are elected by fellow citizens, who do not themselves participate in the organization. The elected members pay no dues. Amateur organizations deal with local problems and have a highly decentralized organization structure. Each of these local organization has specific functions; for example, housing committees to promote home safety, good housekeeping, maintenance and repairs of apartment buildings, general financial reviews, etc; parent committees to promote education-orientated activities; anti-social behavior committees; and public controllers or inspectors who visit retail stores to ensure the maintenance of retail laws and protect the consumers' interests.

The third basic type of Soviet NGOs is comprised of public organs. They are similar to amateur organizations, but they have no formal members, and of course pay no dues. Participants are selected or appointed by managers of state, soviet, and public organizations to perform specific tasks. Public organs, in the form of »councils», »bureaus» or »public sections» are attached to an administrative department on an *ad hoc* basis. They provide advice related to the special knowledge or skills necessary to carry out a given task, and then are dissolved.

C. The Industrial and Political Setting of Soviet Trade Unions

There is a broad consensus that Soviet trade unions differ markedly from Western trade unions. Whereas these differences often lead to normative conclusions, comparative empirical examination of the subject should attempt to account for differences in historical developments and the environment in which these trade unions operate. The functions and role of Soviet trade unions can no more readily be described and studied by applying Western values and standards, than Western trade unions could be understood completely out of context. In terms of the third-world situation, Landsburger suggests that trade unions which embody Western concepts of competition and group conflict might be out of context in rapidly developing countries (1973: 377).

There are two central aspects of Soviet trade unions that must be kept in mind when studying their role or functions. The first concerns the historically

retarded, but intensive development of the Soviet working-class, which provided the organizational base of trade unions. The second concerns the role of trade unions in planned economies, which, almost by definition, differs from the role played by unions in liberal capitalist or mixed economies.

There was »an extraordinary growth in the scope and activity of voluntary associations and interest groups [associated with] the continued growth and diversification of each economy in the West» (Rokkan, 1966). The assumed relationship between industrialization/urbanization and the proliferation of voluntary associations is perhaps most evident when considering trade unions. Industrialization implies the demise of feudal production relationships, not only legally, but also in practice.

Feudalism continued longer in Russia than perhaps any other country in Europe. *Kuczynski*, in a comparative study of the growth of the working class in several Western nations comments on the distinctiveness of the Russian working-class (1967). Classifying Czarist Russia as a militaristic feudal imperialist state, he maintains that bountiful remnants of feudal production relationships including serfdom, both in industry and agriculture, influenced the development of individuals as well as the whole of Russian society and its state well into the 20th century. The unique combination of feudalism and pockets of monopoly capitalism led to an uneven and heterogeneous development of the Russian working class; something that precludes its comparison with working-class and trade union developments elsewhere. *Berner's* study of the Russian Worker corroborates this view and also throws some additional light on the development of the working class in the USSR (1976). Near the turn of the century 97 million of Russia's 126 million citizens were engaged in agriculture. Of the 10 million wage-earners only 1.5 million were employed in the factory, mining or railroad industries. The table below shows the growth of the Russian working-class during the 60 years from 1913 to 1973.

Table 1. Size of the Russian Working-Class (in millions).

| Year | Workers | Year | Workers |
|------|---------|------|---------|
| 1913 | 11.0 | 1940 | 23.7 |
| 1922 | 4.6 | 1950 | 28.7 |
| 1928 | 8.7 | 1960 | 45.9 |
| 1932 | 17.8 | 1973 | 69.1 |

Berner argues that a new Soviet working-class began to develop in the 1930s, with the initiation of the first 5-year plan and industrialization, but that it was recruited by and large from farmers and peasants who were familiar

with urban-industrial life. *Brown* discusses the need of training and indoctrinating these new workers (1966). »Farmers, farmers and more farmers«, according to *Berner*, could only become a real working-class after a few generations. Force and violence were necessary to discipline it and to teach it how to adjust to industrial and urban life. This contention is certainly open to discussion; however, it seems likely that trade unions in the Soviet Union have seen worker discipline as one of their prime functions ever since the first five-year plan. Even today this function is implicit in trade union directives about workers' contributions to production and »socialist competition« (*Tarschys*, 1977; *Brown*, 1966). *Brezhnev's* message to the 16th Congress of the Central Confederation of Soviet Trade Unions (CCSTU) in March 1977, invited them »to reinforce the discipline of work« (*Le Monde*, 23/3-77). Other evidence suggests that discipline, in particular absenteeism and/or alcoholism, are still major problems in the Soviet Union (*Brown*, 1966).

A second major factor related to the setting or environment of Soviet trade unions that distinguishes them from trade unions in the West is their role in a planned economy, i.e. their political role. The concepts of labor market or market forces are alien to the philosophy of socialist economic planning. Central to any planned economy is the idea that wages and the distribution of manpower are too important to be left to market forces, and must be established centrally. Such an economy emphasizes planning in every aspect; labor resources, training, job choice and placement wages and prices, etc. By definition there is no unemployment, but only unoccupied people or people in need of placement (*Brown*, 1966). There is, however, an unspecified amount of unplanned mobility and a problem of work-force turnover. One study cited by *Brown* indicates that unplanned mobility was primarily due to wages (14 %), working conditions (17 %), living conditions (16 %), leaving the city or region (25 %), education or pensions, etc (18 %), or other reasons (9 %).

Another important aspect of the Soviet planned economy is the function attributed to the trade unions for increasing productivity. In *Berner's* study, the local collective agreement was introduced by a commitment on the part of the workers, through their trade union to meet the state plans goal, to increase plant profits and to increase production; and elsewhere both the workers and administration commit themselves to ensuring that productivity increases faster than wages in order to avoid inflation. In more general terms a central task of Soviet trade unions is the mobilization of the masses for the creation of the material-technical base of communism and the material welfare and culture of the working people (*Brown*, 1966 & *Tarschys*, 1977).

The Soviet wage system is composed of base rates and premiums. Base rates are centrally determined; but the extent to which trade unions actually participate in an agreement on wages through collective bargaining is somewhat obscure. Base rates are established for the lowest wage grades in each

industry. Schedules exist which indicate the percentage increase for higher grades. The CCSTU issues a handbook containing rules for the allocation of jobs and workers by wage grades (Brown, 1966). Local collective agreements include base rates, schedules and premiums (Berner, 1976). The latter seem most amenable, within limits, to collective bargaining between trade unions and managements. Trade unions are responsible for controlling that the wage system is properly administered (Berner, 1976) and in this sense can actively defend the interests of their members. However, the actual setting of wage levels, if not entirely beyond the scope of labor-management negotiations, is not considered in any sense a legitimate subject for labor disputes (Brown, 1966). Disputes over new collective agreements are classified »non-actionable» labor disputes, and are not therefore settled locally.

»Actionable» labor disputes concern complaints against the violation of rights, including abuses of workers' rights by managements; violation of discipline by workers; misunderstandings as to legal obligations and rights, difficulties in applying standards on wages, safety, and the like; illegal discharges, etc. Brown's study cites an impressive catalogue of examples (1966). The Soviet machinery for settling »actionable» grievances, in existence since 1922, is based on a three-level system. At the lowest level there is a joint »rates and conflict commission» at the shop or floor level. At the next level, a factory committee made up of trade union and factory management officers exists for the entire factory. The Local People's Courts function as an instance of final appeal in labor disputes.

Strikes or »collective work stoppages», as they are known in Soviet literature, are not illegal, but they are considered extreme measures for resolving grievances, and are officially frowned upon. If workers walk off the job both the trade union officials and the management are considered at fault or derelict in their duties. Brown cites several examples of collective work stoppages and demonstrations, which normally lead to a fast solution of grievances (1966).

It is obvious that the industrial and political setting of Soviet trade unions differs greatly from the environment in which Western trade unions operate. These differences in setting must be kept in mind when comparing the functions of Soviet and Western trade unions. However, in spite of these differences there are some similarities. These will be dealt with in greater detail in section E. However, before doing so the special role of Soviet agricultural trade unions will first be considered.

D. Soviet Agricultural Trade Unions

Potichnyj's study of *Soviet Agricultural Trade Unions, 1917—70* (1972) is the most detailed examination of Soviet NGOs currently available. Agricultural

trade unions are normally weak and late in developing in most Western countries. (See von Blanckenburg on W. Europe, OECD; 1962 and Pestoff on the USA, 1972 & 1974). The markedly different industrial and political setting of Soviet trade unions has helped give agricultural trade unions a vanguard position rather than the backward role they traditionally occupy in the West.

Already in 1917 Lenin hoped to organize everyone who was exclusively, or mainly, or even partly engaged as a hired worker in any agricultural enterprise. Stalin, in the *Peasant Question* (1925) deplores the lack of wide non-Party peasants' action groups in the countryside that could link the Party with the tens of millions of toiling peasants. During the period of collectivization agricultural unions provided some protection of agricultural laborers in Kulak enterprises. Batraks (landless peasants) were recruited from 1923 onward and by 1928 comprised nearly one-fifth of total members in agricultural unions. However, many of them later left the union voluntarily, since they said it did not offer ample protection from Kulaks, who discriminated in their employment against trade union members. Others eventually became Kolkhozniks themselves, and no longer qualifying as wage-earners, could not retain trade union membership.

A rough approximation of membership in agricultural trade unions can be seen in the table below.

Table 2. Agricultural Trade Union Membership, 1917—70.

| Year | Agriculture | Forest | Year | Agricultural & Forest Union | |
|--------|-------------|----------|------|-----------------------------|----------|
| 1917 | 557 | n.a. | 1925 | 497,636 | (75.4)** |
| 1918 | 2,462 | 1,968 | 1926 | 922,300 | (69.5)** |
| 1919 | 18,557 | 15,037 | 1931 | 2,049,600 | (40.4)** |
| 1920 * | 140,000 | | 1956 | 5,159,000 | |
| 1921 | 659,000 | | 1967 | 13,864,000 | |
| 1923 | 249,000 | (95.5)** | | | |

* amalgamation of agricultural land forestry workers' unions

** estimated degree of organization

Throughout the entire period there have been several politically and economically motivated changes in the definition of who could become a member. Such changes were initiated by the Party and not the agricultural trade unions. The same holds true of the number of agricultural trade unions, which has varied from two to one, to fifteen, to two, to one and so forth. The setting up of new unions or amalgamations of old ones often served the political interests of the state. However it would be incorrect to maintain that agri-

cultural trade unions are merely an appendage of the state and Party, or to claim, as does *Kornhauser*, that Soviet society is an atomised society which lacks all independent social structure and secondary organizations. The post-Stalin period provides evidence of the contrary. The most interesting example stems from the 1958 decision to liquidate the Machine Tractor Stations (MTS) and the fate of the MTS union members. The initial decision to dissolve the MTS in 1958 and to sell their tractors and machines to the Kolkhozes implied both a change of employer for MTS employees and a change in trade union status. This decision was keenly discussed at numerous MTS meetings, where arguments were often raised in favor of safeguarding the trade union rights, level of earnings, and benefits of the MTS workers being transferred to the Kolkhozes. They maintained that the trade union services and protections should be transferred with them, while it was evident that the Kolkhozniks, who were not wage-earners, but who would be working in the same brigades, would want to join a union to obtain the same benefits. Not granting the Kolkhozniks the right to join a union would divide the kolkhozes into two groups.

In the end the ex-MTS workers were able to retain their membership in the agricultural workers' trade union. This is perhaps one of the clearest examples of organized pressure and its influence on the Party in recent years. This leads Potichnyj to conclude that trade unions are potentially not only a channel of direction and control from above, but also a conduit for communication and pressure from below. Party leadership is not immune to such pressure, especially when it does not overstep the bounds of order (1972: 128). Elsewhere he maintains that in the post-Stalin period Soviet trade unions have been transformed from their traditional role of »transmission belts« from the Party to the masses. They now enjoy certain rights to direct social welfare and labor relations in order to facilitate their role as shock absorbers or buffers between the Party and government on one side and the workers on the other (1972: 34). The articulation of demands by the MTS workers for the right of trade union membership also bears witness to the value or importance attached to such organizations by its own members. Agricultural trade unions have become a buffer that facilitates communication between both partners, but prevents a direct clash of interests.

Given the present state of our empirical knowledge, it is impossible to know whether or not other trade unions, other mass public organizations, or other Soviet NGOs have functioned, are functioning or are increasingly able to function as the agricultural trade unions were in this situation. We are simply unable to carry out full scale empirical investigations on the role of Soviet trade unions given the intellectual limitations imposed on us by the totalitarian model. The scarce evidence available from efforts to penetrate the prejudices of this model strongly contradict it and suggest that only further empir-

ical investigations will improve our understanding of the role of NGOs in Soviet society. Given the scanty nature of the empirical evidence on this subject the following comparison can at best be considered tenuous, and is at worst like a blindman describing an elephant by examining its various limbs.

E. Comparisons Between Soviet and Western NGOs

Soviet NGOs and trade unions in particular differ markedly from Western NGOs. They are moulded by the environment in which they operate, and Soviet society is totally different from Western society. Nevertheless there are some general similarities in functions or roles of NGOs in both types of societies. The primary function of NGOs in both types of societies would clearly place them in the integrative sub-system, according to *Parson's* scheme. They integrate and activate their members in the society by giving them the opportunity to participate directly in institutional life. Such participation contributes to an identification with the system as a whole. NGOs also have certain pattern maintenance functions in both types of societies, since participation provides experience which helps socialize members. Soviet NGOs also have quite explicit educational functions normally associated with other institutions of pattern maintenance such as schools and the family in the West. Overt socialization through secondary organizations is an exception rather than a rule in Western NGOs (see Pestoff, 1977, ch. 5). The role of Soviet NGOs in goal attainment is somewhat more obscure. The assumed division between articulation (interest organizations) and aggregation (political parties) has been challenged in recent studies of Western parliamentary multi-party systems (see Elvander, 1972). The evidence concerning the functioning of Soviet NGOs is too scanty to warrant comment. However, Soviet NGOs have a well defined function of mobilizing the citizens for voluntary contributions toward socialism and building communism. Finally the clearest general difference between Soviet and Western NGOs can be found in the adaptive sub-system or the economy. In particular Soviet trade unions are attributed functions that normally would be considered contrary to independent trade unions in the West. They are supposed to ensure and increase workers' contribution to production. It is not difficult to see that this function conflicts with the role of protecting the interests of their members, normally considered their primary function in Western societies.

Turning from the general role of NGOs to the more particular case of trade unions, where more evidence is available, the following preliminary comparisons can be made. Concerning wages, which are often seen as the most fundamental interest of trade unions in the West, there is little if any similarity between the roles of Soviet and Western trade unions. In part this is due to

the obscurity of the function which trade unions have in collectively bargaining and in determining wages. Of course the situation is far from uniform in the West. The trade union movements in some European countries strive for centralized bargaining which is coordinated between all economic sectors. In the USA local collective bargaining takes precedence and centralized and industry-wide bargaining is an exception to the rule. Obviously, if increased information were available, it might be possible to note greater similarities between Soviet and some European trade union movements and greater differences between the Soviet and American trade union movements.

Concerning production and work discipline, which appear to feature as a more central function of Soviet trade unions than wage conflicts, again there is little similarity between Soviet and Western trade unions. However commitments on the part of many Western trade union movements to ensure the industrial peace and prevent wild strikes are not so far removed from the role of Soviet trade unions, in terms of their productive efforts, as to exclude all similarity. Lindroth has suggested that the importance of Swedish labor market organizations to the national economy carries with it an implication of increasingly becoming a part of the state apparatus (1975).

A comparison of the role of trade unions in health and safety matters suggests the greatest similarities of functions between Soviet and Western trade unions. However, as this role is less evident to theoreticians than practitioners of trade unionism, the importance of this function may not always be appreciated. It could be maintained that workers' health and safety are at least as important a matter as wages, regardless of who controls the means of production, the state or private companies. Soviet trade unions have traditionally played an important role in the enforcement of health and safety regulations at the local level. The powers recently granted to local trade union representatives in Sweden to stop production where local safety conditions warrant are quite similar to those held by Soviet trade unions. Where such matters are regulated by local collective bargaining rather than national legislation, this process is of course much slower; but even in the USA there has been an increase in the attention paid to health and safety.

Finally, the social welfare functions of Soviet trade unions seem to far outstrip those carried out by their counterparts in Western countries with well developed social welfare systems. But in countries which lack comprehensive social welfare legislation, local collective bargaining typically includes a vast array of social service functions relating to housing, insurance, vacations, etc. Even in Western countries where well-developed social welfare systems are characteristic, certain social services are maintained, in part as an inducement for membership. Unemployment insurance in Sweden is one example. In fact it might be argued that a minimum of social services is necessary in any system where closed shop legislation does not exist, if trade unions are going to main-

tain high levels of organization. In this respect both Soviet and Western trade unions are quite similar. Obviously, in both systems these social services are secondary to more fundamental functions performed by trade unions.

F. Conclusions

A brief survey of the literature on Soviet NGOs combined with a rejection of the totalitarian approach to the study of Soviet politics bring us rapidly to the limits of our current knowledge. Yet such a review raises many unanswered questions and emphasizes the need for further empirical investigations. However, if we are going to undertake serious academic investigations that aspire to analyse the role and functions of Soviet NGOs we must surpass the *a priori* limitations of much of the earlier academic writings in this field. Only after the completion of several studies, similar to Potichnyj's which include many examples of mass public organizations, trade unions, cooperative associations, amateur organizations, and public organizations, can we claim to have sufficient empirical data for a full-fledged analysis of Soviet NGOs and a comparison with NGOs in other countries. Until such time as we succeed in extending the limits of empirical investigations we will be strait-jacketed by a lack of empirical documentation and a research perspective which precludes the fruitful study of Soviet NGOs.

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