Traktoristka: Representations and Realities

On 8 March 1930 the front page of the industrial newspaper, *Za industrializatsiyu*, carried a cartoon picture with the caption 'Dva mira … i dve molodosti' (Two worlds … and two youths). The picture is divided into two. On the left side, a young woman is sitting smoking a cigarette. She appears tired and haggard, and is slumped with her elbows resting on a table on which there is a spilt glass of wine. There is an empty seat next to her, but in the background a well-dressed man, with top hat, monocle and cane, is seen walking away. This is in stark contrast to the picture on the right side, in which we see a joyful young woman, head held high, driving a tractor. On the same day, the front cover of *Izvestiya* also carried a line drawing of a smiling woman seated at the steering wheel of a tractor. In this picture the wheels of the tractor are crushing the vestiges (the pots and pans) of the '*staryi byt'* (old way of life).

These images provide a clear indication of the Soviet government's intention to recruit women to the drive to modernise agricultural production in the 1930s. By the end of the decade, the female tractor driver had become both, in reality, a celebrated shock-worker and Stakhanovite heroine, personified by Pasha Angelina and Mariya Demchenko, and, in cultural representation, a cinematic icon, played by Marina Ladynina in Ivan Pyr'ev's popular film *Traktoristy* (1939).[1]

Representations

The publication of these drawings on 8 March – International Women's Day – was symbolic. This day provided the annual focal point on which women's achievements were recognised and, indeed,

celebrated, as well as providing the Soviet state with the opportunity to reiterate publicly its commitment to women's liberation and sexual equality.[2] However, it is important to remember that such talk about women was not confined to International Women's Day. As one of many examples, the woman tractor driver was also celebrated in June 1930 in the homely *Zhenskii zhurnal* (Women's Journal) with a photo of an Uzbek woman cranking a tractor as part of her training course, and with a poem entitled 'Na traktore'.[3]

The year 1930 is also significant. From an official perspective, by 1930 women's liberation and sexual equality were not some far-off goals towards which the Soviet Union was working. They were now, in fact, declared achievements of the Soviet regime, symbolised and signified by the closure in January 1930 of the Communist Party's Women's Department (the *Zhenotdel*) as having fulfilled its purpose.[4] Soon after, the Soviet government began its well-publicised campaigns to recruit women en masse to the industrialisation drive.

Also important to remember here is the fact that 2 March 1930 had seen the publication in *Pravda* of Stalin's article entitled 'Dizzy with Success: Problems of the Collective Farm Movement'. In this article Stalin berated local officials for their over-zealous actions and attitudes in the first few months of the collectivisation drives, which had met with widespread resistance by the peasantry. As Viola has noted, peasant women had been at the forefront of resistance during the collectivisation campaigns.[5] The article was supposed to mark a new relationship between the state, the peasantry and the collective farms. The tractor, it was later proclaimed, was to play a decisive role in the transition to collective farming. Songs were written about tractors, and tractors, as we have already seen, began to appear in cartoon pictures and on posters, in poems and on film.[6]

The Soviet government now adopted and endorsed the image of the *traktoristka* as the symbol of its self-proclaimed progressive policies in relation to the agricultural sector. Bonnell has traced this transformation in the representations of peasant women in the political posters of the 1930s.[7] She has indicated that,

> Out of 106 political posters relating to agriculture between 1930 and 1934 that include images of women, 37 (35 per cent) depict women behind the wheel of a tractor. An occasional poster in 1929 had incorporated images of female tractor drivers, but the connection between women and tractors was heavily emphasized only from 1930 onward.[8]

Such socialist realist images and the plentiful press reports about the achievements of women tractor drivers, coupled with popular imagination and personal testimony, would have us believe that the Soviet countryside of the 1930s was awash with smiling, kerchiefed peasant women driving tractors. Pasha Angelina declared in her reminiscences, for example, 'how fortunate it was that a woman tractor driver was a rarity in 1931 and not in 1941.'[9]

Yet, despite a number of factors – the rhetoric of equality (which was subsequently reinforced in the 1936 Constitution); the mass mobilisation of female workers into the paid labour force;[10] and the mechanisation of agricultural production in the 1930s[11] – women tractor drivers were little more evident on the Soviet rural landscape by the end of the decade than they had been at the beginning. The image of the woman tractor driver, it could be argued, served less as a mirror, reflecting the reality of women's working lives in the countryside, than as a symbol of Soviet ambitions and achievements. It acted, therefore, as a metaphor for the Soviet Union's commitment not only to women's emancipation (however this was interpreted) but also to economic progress (however this was measured) in the 1930s.

Recruitment

The first campaigns to recruit women as tractor drivers were activated as part of the proposals and responses to the drafting of the first five-year plan in the late 1920s. In the spring of 1930, Pasha Angelina was the first woman on her collective farm to be recruited as a tractor driver. Not all regions of the country, however, were so quick to respond to these new opportunities for women. For example, archival reports (detailing meetings about the deployment of women's labour during the first five-year plan) suggest that in some regions of the Russian republic, it was being argued that women should be recruited as tractor drivers, but only after a significant number of men had been trained for this job.[12] A couple of years later, however, coinciding with a renewed and active recruitment drive, it was argued that although attempts should be made to employ women more widely in animal husbandry, they should also be trained for mechanised work, especially as tractor drivers.[13] Yet progress towards this end remained slow, or even non-existent in some areas. At a meeting about women's employment in January 1933, one of the speakers pointed out that in ten collective

farms recently surveyed there were no women tractor drivers at all, and that women's labour was badly organised on the collective farms.[14]

This was clearly not the case in all regions of the country. In a brief autobiographical sketch printed in the popular women's magazine, *Rabotnitsa* (The Woman Worker), Tolmacheva, from the village of Maslyanino in Novosibirsk *oblast'*, noted how she had started to train as a tractor driver in November 1930. Her family had joined a collective farm during the collectivisation drive in the previous year. She had married, but was soon abandoned by her husband. She had never even thought of becoming a tractor driver before these events. She was barely literate and had to study very hard. Nevertheless, she completed the four-month training course successfully, and worked as a tractor driver for the next few years before moving on to further training.[15]

A more active and organised campaign to recruit women as tractor drivers was initiated from February 1933, after Stalin's much-publicised pronouncement at the First Congress of *Kolkhoz* Shock-workers that peasant women had become a great force on the collective farms (*zhenshchiny v kolkhozakh – bol'shaya sila*).[16]

There appear to be no official statistical data relating to the numbers of women employed as tractor drivers in Soviet agriculture in the early 1930s. Manning, in her study of women in the Soviet rural economy in the late 1930s, has compiled a table to provide estimates of the numbers and relative proportion of women employed as tractor drivers. She includes one set of figures for 1930, but the remainder of her data relates to the period from 1935 to 1948.[17] Further data are available, especially for the early 1930s, but these do not always present a consistent picture. Chirkov states that there were only 14 women tractor drivers in the whole of the Soviet Union in 1926. This number had risen to 18 000 in 1932, and to 57 000 in 1937.[18] Bil'shai states that there were only 7000 women tractor drivers working on the collective farms in 1933,[19] which, as Oja has noted, was the figure announced by Stalin in his report to the Seventeenth Party Congress in 1934.[20] A further contemporary report states that 'in the Ukraine at the three-months' preliminary courses for the spring-sowing campaign there were trained 16 893 *kolkhoz* women, including 6 136 tractor-drivers and field cultivators'.[21] The vast majority of women tractor drivers were young women up to 25 years of age.[22]

As can be seen from Table 6.1, these data can be supplemented with statistics for the second half of the 1930s taken from official Soviet sources.

Table 6.1 Number and proportion of women tractor drivers, tractor brigade leaders and combine-harvester drivers, 1935–39

Date	Total number	Number of women	Women (%)
end 1935:[a]			
tractor drivers	482 099	*18 802*	3.9
combine drivers	29 830	*1 164*	3.9
1 January 1936:[b]			
tractor drivers			4.0
tractor brigadiers			0.7
combine drivers			6.3
1937 census:[c]			
tractor drivers	746 970	40 842	*5.5*
tractor brigadiers	57 783	716	*1.2*
combine drivers	90 510	6 831	*7.5*
end 1937:[a]			
tractor drivers	685 016	*46 581*	6.8
combine drivers	82 413	*6 233*	7.6
1939 census:[d]			
tractor drivers	807 859	40 850	5.1
tractor brigadiers	97 691	1 697	1.7
combine drivers	131 226	11 406	8.7

Figures in italics are author's calculations.
Sources:

[a]*MTS vo vtoroi pyatiletke* (Moscow, 1939) pp. 95–8. Data exclude state farms. This source also provides a detailed statistical breakdown according to republic, *krai* and *oblast'*.

[b]I.A. Kraval', *Zhenshchina v SSSR* (2nd edn) (Moscow, 1937) p. 173, 'women in MTS'.

[c]*Vsesoyuznaya perepis' naseleniya 1937 goda: kratkie itogi* (Moscow, 1991) p. 121. This source also provides a statistical breakdown according to urban and rural employment.

[d]*Vsesoyuznaya perepis' naseleniya 1939 goda: osnovnye itogi* (Moscow, 1992) p. 107. This source also provides a statistical breakdown according to urban and rural employment, as well as detailed data for each republic.

In addition to tractor drivers, as can be seen from the table, women also worked as drivers and assistants on combine-harvesters. It has been estimated elsewhere that there were 25 000 women working with combine-harvesters on 1 July 1939, 8000 of whom were drivers.[23]

It is evident also that, despite the directive from Chernov, the People's Commissar for Agriculture, to increase the recruitment of women tractor drivers, many more women trained as tractor drivers than were actually able to take up work in this occupation. For example, the agricultural newspaper, *Sotsialisticheskoe zemledelie*, reported in 1936 that at the Shchuchanskii Machine Tractor Station (MTS) in Chelyabinsk *oblast'*, 34 women had completed training courses to become tractor drivers in 1934, 29 had completed the

courses in 1935, and 28 in 1936. Yet, of the 91 successful trainees, only nine were actually working as tractor drivers in 1936.[24]

In the later 1930s there were deliberate attempts to train women as tractor drivers so that they would be able to take the place of men in the event of war. Yet, by the end of the decade, of the estimated 130 000 women trained as tractor drivers, in the summer of 1940 only 64 000 (fewer than 50 per cent) were actually employed in this task.[25] In Kazakhstan, of 4000 women trained for work as tractor drivers, only 2000 were actually working as such in 1941. Similar situations were reported for other regions, and local agricultural and Komsomol organisations were blamed for not taking sufficient care in the training of female cadres for mechanised work.[26] This situation, as Attwood has pointed out from her analysis of the peasant women's magazine, *Krest'yanka*, persisted during the early stages of the war.[27]

Although the absolute numbers of women employed as tractor drivers increased substantially in the second half of the 1930s, these tens of thousands of *traktoristky* must be viewed in comparative perspective. Firstly, there were hundreds of thousands of men employed in this work, and, secondly, there were many millions of women employed in non-mechanised, labour-intensive tasks in Soviet agriculture.[28] Women were far more likely to be engaged in looking after livestock or as casual workers than in the driving seat of a tractor.

Anecdotal data provide a supplement to these statistics and offer further evidence of the geographical spread of the *traktoristka*'s employment, as well as the existence of women-only tractor brigades. For example, the extensive lists of commendations to *traktoristky* published in the national newspapers in the mid to late 1930s show that women were employed as tractor drivers throughout the Soviet Union. They were employed not only on the many collective farms in the Russian republic, but also on *kolkhozy* in the expansive grain producing regions of the Ukraine and Belorussia, in the Urals and the Central Asian republics.

The *traktoristka*'s commitment not only to her work, but also to her right to work, often in difficult circumstances, is reflected in the formation of women-only tractor brigades in many regions of the country. Pasha Angelina became the brigadier of the first Soviet women's tractor brigade in 1933. While it remains unclear whether the formation of women-only tractor brigades resulted from a genuine desire of women to work in solidarity with each other, or was more simply the inevitable outcome of their marginalisation within this male-dominated sphere of employment, the *traktoristka*'s determination to

prove herself equal to, or better than, her male colleagues can be regarded as a definitive act of feminist defiance.

Tractor production and research

As I have noted elsewhere, the planned recruitment and actual employment of women as tractor drivers in the 1930s attracted the attention of the Soviet scientific research institutes.[29] Before examining the conduct and findings of their experiments in more detail, it is worth noting some of the factors that influenced the research with regard to tractor design and production.

In the 1920s and early 1930s, the Soviet Union was largely dependent on the import of foreign tractor designs, such as the Fordson from America. Pasha Angelina records that her first tractor was a Fordson. She found it heavy and clumsy to operate; in addition, it consumed great quantities of fuel.[30] The Soviet Union started to manufacture its own tractor designs from the late 1920s, at the Putilov works in Leningrad, for example. Then, from the early 1930s, the Soviet Union embarked on the mass production of tractors at the famous Stalingrad, Khar'kov and Chelyabinsk factories.

In very broad terms, two different types of tractors were available in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. The Stalingrad and Khar'kov works originally specialised in producing tractors supported by wheels (such as the STZ and KhTZ models), of the type illustrated in the newspaper cartoons. At the time, these were the most common type of tractors and were manufactured in large numbers. One renowned early model was called the 'International'. A second type of tractor, like the one photographed for the article in *Zhenskii zhurnal*, ran on caterpillar tracks. In fact, one of these designs was actually named 'Katerpillar'. Presumably, it was this type of tractor, such as the 'wonderful' ChTZ, 'the highest class industrial tractor',[31] manufactured at the Chelyabinsk factory, which was more easily converted to tank production during the second five-year plan in preparation for the Second World War.[32] The different types of tractors operated at a variety of speeds and capacities.

The ongoing plans to mechanise Soviet agriculture resulted by the mid-1930s in wide-ranging debates among enterprise leaders and industrial planners over the best type of tractor to manufacture. Hundreds of thousands of tractors were required. In reality, despite their easier conversion to military operation, caterpillar tractors were heavier and more complex in their design and construction.[33] The

Stalingrad tractor factory began to produce the STZ-3 caterpillar tractor from 1935.[34]

Pasha Angelina welcomed the new Soviet designs for tractors, 'not only because they were our own make, but because they were much more reliable, simpler and more economical than the Fordsons, which were quickly supplanted'.[35] Although the Soviet Union had virtually ceased to import tractors by the early 1930s, it is unlikely that their domestic designs were any less cumbersome than the outdated American and European models they had previously relied on. The Chelyabinsk factory, for example, was equipped to produce caterpillar tractors weighing ten tons, although most Soviet designs weighed either three or five tons. It is unlikely, also, that the foreign models were swiftly supplanted. The production of Soviet tractors was hampered by many of the factors that plagued the industrialisation process during the first and second five-year plans. These can be identified as: competing production goals which resulted in inadequate capital investment and the under-funding of new industrial plants, the supply of poor quality raw materials, labour shortages and turnover, and evident deficiencies in the manufacturing process.[36]

The immediate concerns of the scientific researchers were not the shortcomings of the industrialisation drive, however, but the suitability of the various designs of tractors for female drivers. The most extensive study of the use of female labour as tractor drivers was conducted by I.I. Okuneva and Ye.Ye. Shteinbakh. Okuneva and Shteinbakh worked at the biophysics laboratory of the State Scientific-Research Institute for the Protection of Labour in Moscow during 1930 and 1931.[37] For field trials, scientists in Moscow worked in conjunction with researchers at the Saratov Institute, which conducted research into work-related illnesses. An observational expedition was mounted in several state farms in the lower Volga region during the summer harvest in 1930. This preliminary observation, however, proved too brief and involved too few participants for the researchers to reach any definitive conclusions. In addition to these trials, the Institute for the Protection of Motherhood and Childhood in Moscow conducted separate tests under laboratory conditions, and more extensive observational field trials were planned.

Observational research was conducted with different models of tractors and in a variety of working environments. Further experiments were conducted in a laboratory setting to determine the physiological effect on women of their use. Laboratory experiments were designed to measure the level of vibration caused by the tractor's motion. Special

machines ('vibrographs' and 'cyclographs') were constructed for the experiments. The particular focus of the experiments was on the jolting caused during the ignition process and the constant level of vibration resulting from the seating arrangements of the tractor.

The laboratory experiments looked particularly at the designs of the Soviet-manufactured tractors, the 'International' (15–30 horse power) and the 'Katerpillar' (mostly 25–30 horse power), as well as the 'Oil'-Pul'' (OilPull) and 'Kletrak'. It was found that the 'Katerpillar' tractor ran much more smoothly with a lower level of vibration in all three gears. Both the seat and the body of the tractor were subject to much less motion with this design.

The aim of the research was to investigate the likely physiological impact on women that would result from their use of mechanised equipment and from their promotion to skilled work in agriculture as tractor drivers. The researchers aimed to identify the optimum conditions for the *traktoristka*'s employment, without excluding women altogether from this area of work. The particular concern here was with the shaking movement of the tractor on women's bodies, and especially their reproductive organs and menstrual cycle.

It is clear from this (and from similar studies) that the researchers viewed women first and foremost within the broader context of their actual and potential roles as mothers, and as contributors to both the reproductive and productive process. In so far as *traktoristky* were concerned, the research aimed to maximise the potential for women's employment in the mechanised processes of agricultural production without threatening their vital role in the process of reproduction. This is clearly highlighted by the fact that, despite the recognition that women are generally physically smaller than men, there appears to have been no discussion at this stage of the research about the possibility of reducing the overall frame size and dimensions of the tractor to make the machines more easily accessible to women's operation – so that women would be able to reach the starter mechanism and gears without stretching, for example. In reality, few of the *traktoristky* employed in the 1930s were mothers, largely because it was virtually impossible to combine the responsibilities of childcare with the long working days and absences from home required by the job.[38]

Legal restrictions and working conditions

The early findings and recommendations of the scientific research were reflected in the statute books. The People's Commissariat of Labour

introduced a decree 'on the working conditions of women tractor- and lorry-drivers' on 9 May 1931. This decree required women to undergo a medical examination before entering training courses and stated that they should work predominantly with caterpillar tractors if these were available. Women were to be given priority of access to tractors with mechanised ignition. The decree stated that fully trained *traktoristky* were to undergo monthly medical examinations, and that those working on wheeled tractors without soft spring seats were to be transferred to alternative work for three days during menstruation.[39] The proposals by the trade unions in 1935 to extend the duration of menstrual leave to five days and to prohibit altogether the employment of women on wheeled tractors do not appear to have been enshrined in law.

Discussions on the conditions of work for women tractor drivers continued into the mid-1930s. In the summer of 1936, *Sotsialisticheskoe zemledelie* ran a series of articles on this topic, and offered a voice to women's own concerns. In one article 'on the labour protection of women tractor drivers', the newspaper's special correspondent Pomerantsev reported that Tat'yana V. had petitioned the director of her collective farm for money to buy overalls.[40] She claimed that the traditional style of female peasant dress – a wide skirt, scarf and padded jacket – was not suited to the requirements of driving a tractor. Women also argued that the textiles they were supplied with should protect them from the cold and dust. Pomerantsev sought advice from Sofiya Ivanova Osipova, a well-known Ukrainian researcher into questions of the physiological impact on women of agricultural labour. In terms of the physical design of tractors, Osipova pointed to problems that affected all drivers, not just women. In addition to the problems of seating arrangements, which had been noted by other researchers, Osipova complained that tractor drivers were offered no protection from the sun or rain. Pomerantsev obviously considered these issues to be more important than the peasant women's own complaints over the supply of protective clothing.

Inevitably, the discussion returned to the seating arrangements, especially those on wheeled tractors. Metal seats were generally considered to be too hard and cold. Women found them uncomfortable, but were only laughed at if they complained. *Traktoristka* 'K' complained that the seating arrangements on the 'Universal' tractor made her hands go numb and her spine ache. It was pointed out that the redesign of seats was important not only for working mothers, but also for all women tractor drivers. Pomerantsev complained that Okuneva and Shteinbakh's research had been too limited and had focused too

narrowly on the designs of only two particular tractors. Their recommendations for changes to seating arrangements had not paid sufficient attention to the specific needs of women drivers. In reality, their recommendations for changes to seats had not reduced the impact of the tractor's motion and vibration on the driver.[41]

Pomerantsev highlighted the proposals for alternative seating designs: one by a Ukrainian designer, Rivin, who recommended that a rubber ring and padding should be added to the metal seat; and one by Lazarenko, from the Kiev Institute of Labour Physiology, who recommended the addition of an upholstered cushion to the seat. Pomerantsev argued that such designs could easily and quickly be introduced at little cost, and that they would be of immense benefit to women tractor drivers.

Pomerantsev's concerns were raised again a few weeks later in an article that also reiterated some of the women tractor drivers' own complaints.[42] This article stressed the need for making tractor driving not only more comfortable but also safer for women. The article argued that the failure to implement changes to seating arrangements on tractors was holding up the recruitment of women to training courses.

In the following month, a subsequent article argued that delays in implementing the recommendations for seating arrangements on wheeled tractors were causing problems not only with recruitment, but also with the retention of trained women tractor drivers.[43] Chernov had ordered all MTSs to implement the changes by 1 September 1936. No longer would a *traktoristka* be required to sit on a hard seat! Further changes, the article argued, would also be necessary. A soft seat would not protect the *traktoristka* from the rain, for example – protective covers would have to be supplied. Jacks would need to be provided for lifting heavy loads, and special funnels would need to be fitted to tractors to protect the drivers from potentially harmful fumes. The only detail that remained to be resolved was how these changes were to be paid for.[44]

Efforts to improve the design and construction of tractors, and to make them safer and more comfortable for women to drive, continued into the following year, but, evidently, were not always successful. Despite Chernov's order, not all MTSs enacted the various recommendations. *Sotsialisticheskoe zemledelie* reported in February 1937 that two MTS directors in the Chelyabinsk *oblast'* 'forgot' about the new requirements when they serviced their tractors ready for the spring, with the result that no suitable tractors were available for women drivers. Seats were not upholstered for women and, furthermore, overalls and

protective footwear were not available either. More progress appears to have been made in the construction of weatherproof hoods for the tractors, and the fitting of 'ejector' pipes to extract the fumes.[45] These latter moves would have been as much benefit to men as they were to women. Complaints about the lack of suitable clothing for women tractor drivers continued into the following year.[46]

Reactions and responses

The sight of a woman driving a tractor was not often welcomed in the Soviet countryside. The type of harassment which urban women workers faced in entering industrial employment was witnessed also in the agricultural sector. Women had to work hard to overcome resistance not only from male colleagues and supervisors, but also, and indeed especially, from other female collective farm workers. Traditional prejudices prevailed and persistent efforts on the part of the *traktoristky* were required to dismantle them.

Pasha Angelina describes in detail the 'maiden voyage' of 'the first woman's tractor team in the Soviet Union':

> All of us were in high spirits … None of us, of course, was sure that everything would run smoothly from the very first, but we would not allow any gloomy thoughts to mar that festive occasion …
>
> Suddenly, something unforeseen and terrible happened. On the outskirts of the village a crowd of angry women met us. They barred our road and shouted in chorus, 'Turn back! We'll allow no female machines on our fields. You'll spoil the crops!'[47]

Angelina was clearly shocked to be met not with male *kulak* resistors, but women whom she worked alongside on the collective farm. These women initially threatened violence, but were won over by the tractor brigade's driving and ploughing skills. Some of the protestors later became tractor drivers themselves. Angelina added that 'when we moved on to the next collective farm the same thing happened. The women nearly beat us up, and two of our girls were locked up in a cellar.'[48] Despite this evident hostility to female tractor drivers, a couple of years later, Pasha Angelina promised Stalin that she would organise ten more women's tractor brigades. She was awarded the Order of Lenin in 1935 for her outstanding work in this area and she became a much-celebrated heroine of labour.[49]

A similar level of hostility faced 20-year-old Anna Prosyanova when she began training to drive a combine-harvester. She reported in

Krest'yanka that she was one of the first to graduate from her course in the spring of 1934. During the next year, however, she worked only nine or ten days as a combine-harvester driver. She was told (by those who were identified only as 'class enemies') that 'this is not women's work. Women should milk cows and raise children, but not work on machines.'[50] Anna soon proved that she was capable of working as well as men in this occupation. She soon began to outdo the men and was declared a *stakhanovka*.

The support of the local collective farm director and MTS officials, as was the case with Pasha Angelina, was crucial to the *traktoristka's* success. More often, it is likely that local officials and co-workers obstructed the work of the *traktoristky*, by denying them the auxiliary support they needed to go about their work effectively, or more simply by denying them the opportunity to keep their tractors in a good state of repair, or even the fuel to run them in the first place.[51] The prejudice and obstruction faced by women tractor drivers resulted partly from the conditions of their work, which required the *traktoristky* to work for long hours away from home, and even to stay overnight in the fields, sometimes with male colleagues. In many popular perceptions, an air of immorality surrounded the job.[52]

Tractor troubles

In addition to the statutory regulations and the equally restrictive outright prejudice against women driving tractors, in the 1930s there are a number of other possible structural explanations as to why the *traktoristka* experienced difficulty in fulfilling the task for which she had been trained. Despite the ambitious plans for the production of tractors by Soviet industry, there were evident shortfalls and delays in their output, partly resulting from uncertainties and disagreements over tractor designs. Throughout all sectors of the Soviet economy and not only in the 1930s, men were given preferential access to, and priority in, working with mechanised equipment; tractors were no exception. Bridger, for example, has argued that during the 1930s 'where technology was introduced it was placed firmly into the hands of men'.[53] In some cases, even where tractors were readily available, shortages of fuel and spare parts for their upkeep and repair restricted their oper-ation.[54] Not all of the tractors that were manufactured were maintained in a good state of repair. The numbers of tractors manufactured, there-fore, does not necessarily provide an accurate indicator of those that

were actually operational. For example, tractors were not always adequately sheltered during the winter months. The cost of their repair placed a heavy financial burden on the local MTS and required the time and attention of a skilled mechanic.[55] Not all tractors available through the MTS, therefore, were in a fit state of repair to be driven. Women were often called upon to drive tractors only when the numbers of male drivers fell short of immediate requirements.

In contrast to the many tasks undertaken by women on the collective farms, which were considered part of the regular 'labour day' system of payments, tractor driving was more highly remunerated.[56] Anyone employed as a tractor driver was more likely to be officially classified (in the census, for example) as a 'worker' rather than as a 'peasant'. As an example of skilled work in agriculture, tractor driving offered an opportunity for vocational, geographic and social mobility. Peasants who had experience as tractor drivers had an increased likelihood of finding work in the rapidly expanding urban industrial centres.[57] Familial responsibilities and long-standing tradition, however, tied women more closely to the village. The structure of employment in tractor driving, and more broadly in the Soviet agricultural sector, provides further evidence for women's well-documented marginalised and lower status in the Soviet waged economy, as well as the prescriptive and gendered definition of the Soviet working class as masculine.

Role models

In a recent article about Soviet 'civic-minded women', Schrand has employed Straus's phrase of the 'wager on the cultured' to describe the elevation of elite workers by Stalin in the Soviet Union in the mid-1930s:

> The wager on the cultured, which eventually led to such developments as the Stakhanovite movement, created a privileged class of skilled workers and technicians. The Stalin regime valued these elite workers and experts not only for their expertise and productivity, but also for their capacity to serve as role models.[58]

As we have seen in the introduction to this chapter, the *traktoristka* served as no less of a role model than the industrial shock-worker, the *obshchestvennitsa* and the Stakhanovite in the 1930s. The *traktoristka* was lauded in the press and honoured with rewards and medals, especially from the mid-1930s. Women were represented in even greater

numbers at the Second Congress of *Kolkhoz* Shock-workers in February 1935. As with the 'heroes of labour' in other sectors of employment, however, women tractor drivers were often derided by their colleagues and were sometimes subject to physical attack.[59]

One of the earliest union-wide campaigns among *traktoristky* was organised in 1935 to encourage women tractor drivers to harvest at least 500 centners (hundredweight) from each hectare of crop. The achievements of the women 'Five Hundreders' were celebrated at the Kremlin in November 1935. Mariya Demchenko, a record-breaking sugar-beet harvester from the Ukraine, as its inspiration, spoke of her part in the campaign. Stalin praised the *traktoristky* as both heroines of labour and markers of equality in agricultural labour.[60]

During 1936 Pasha Angelina organised another union-wide campaign among women tractor drivers, this time of 'socialist competition' to encourage further increases in agricultural production and labour productivity. One thousand two hundred and twenty women's tractor brigades and over 20 000 individual *traktoristky* took part in the campaign. The results of the campaign were celebrated at an all-union meeting of women's tractor brigades in Moscow in February 1937. Fifty-three brigades and 113 individual women were given awards at the meeting. Stalin spoke of the weakening of the old, tsarist patriarchal social order in the countryside as women were now free to work independently of their fathers and husbands. *Sotsialisticheskoe zemledelie* reported on the successes of various regional women's tractor brigades and celebrated the achievements of individual *traktoristky* in a series of articles.[61] The campaign was hailed a success not only because of its record-breaking economic achievements, but also because it had provided an example and inspiration for other young women.[62]

By the end of the 1930s these role models were appealing to other women to join them. Pasha Angelina initiated another mass recruitment campaign to attract women to tractor driving. As husbands and brothers swapped their tractors for tanks and went off to war, Angelina (now a representative at the USSR Supreme Soviet) spoke at the Eighteenth Party Congress in March 1939 on behalf of her fellow *traktoristky*. She made the patriotic call to young women to begin to study how to drive tractors and to help in the defence of the homeland.[63]

In the Ukraine, plans were made to recruit 53 400 women as tractor drivers, partly by offering encouragement and support to young women already on training courses. Two-month training courses were introduced, women with incomplete training were recalled, and 1280 women were reported to have been recruited to these in the

Dnepropetrovsk region alone. One report went so far as to claim that 'they worked no worse, and now and then even better than male tractor drivers'.[64] In accordance with the recommendations of the research institutes, local officials were called upon to ensure that wheeled tractors were furnished with upholstered seats so that they would be more comfortable and less harmful for women to drive. This, it was stated, could be achieved with little added expense because the materials could be found locally.[65]

War and post-war recovery

The Soviet Union's entry into the Second World War in 1941 had a profound impact on the structure of the labour force, and particularly the employment of women. Having been recruited as a reserve army of labour in the 1930s, women now worked genuinely as such during the war years, taking the places of men in all spheres of work. The agricultural sector was particularly badly hit by labour shortages, as Beatrice King clearly recognised:

> There were collective farms left without any able-bodied males. The women just stepped in. An increasing number took over the responsibilities of chairman of a collective farm. They learnt to drive tractors and over a million of them became skilled at the job. They worked combine-harvesters. They ploughed and sowed.[66]

Further contemporary evidence of the desperate state of Soviet agriculture after the outbreak of the Second World War and of women's eager and easy adaptation to their new-found positions of responsibility on the collective farms is provided by Maurice Hindus. Hindus has pointed out that, as men were called away to the front, 'women found themselves in charge of the new large collective farms. Not enough of them had learned to operate the tractors, combines, and other modern implements.'[67] Throughout the country, young women in particular readily volunteered for training to work mechanised equipment and as specialists in agricultural production. They helped to make the 1942 harvest a much needed success:

> In 1941–42 out of 370,426 tractor drivers that were newly trained, 173,794 were women, mostly girls. The others were chiefly boys below military age. Of the 80,577 combine operators, 42,969 were women. Tens of thousands of women became expert mechanics of farm machinery. And 1942 was a banner year in Russian agriculture.[68]

The early years of the war saw an increased proportion of women employed in mechanised tasks in agriculture. According to one contemporary Soviet source, the proportion of women tractor drivers increased from around only 4 per cent at the beginning of 1940 to 45 per cent in 1942, and the proportion of women working as brigadiers in tractor brigades rose from 1 to 10 per cent. There was an increase also in the proportion of women working as drivers, including on combine-harvesters.[69] It has been estimated in addition that 'by 1943, well over half of the USSR's tractor and combine drivers were women'.[70]

The return of soldiers from the front after the end of the war did not necessarily mean that women immediately lost their wartime jobs, and this was especially the case in the agricultural sector. Men deserted the villages in their thousands to seek work in the newly industrialising urban centres.[71] Women became the mainstay of the agricultural labour force and many began to work with mechanised equipment. King has estimated that in 1946 'there were 254,000 women working as leaders of tractor teams, tractor drivers and harvest-combine operators'.[72] It is also probable that as men did return to the collective farms they would have sought employment in the most lucrative and skilled jobs that offered both status on the *kolkhoz* and the potential to transfer to industrial work. The competition between women and men for such jobs is reflected in the fact that the numbers and proportion of women employed as tractor drivers fell sharply in the period of post-war recovery. Manning has estimated that there were only 36 136 women employed as tractor drivers by 1948, and they con-stituted just 5.9 per cent of those working in this job.[73] The numbers and proportion of women tractor drivers in the Soviet Union contin-ued to decline after Stalin's death in 1953.

It is important to remember also that the period of post-war reconstruction in both agriculture and industry did not in itself always run smoothly. Pasha Angelina has noted that, on returning to the machine parks at her native village after the war, 'of the tractors nothing but the frames were left, the ploughs had all the bolts knocked off, and all the other implements were broken'.[74] It is left to the reader to imagine how the mechanised equipment on the collective farms had either been destroyed outright or had been dismantled so that the spare parts could be used for repairs and new constructions to aid the war effort. With an air of resignation, Angelina noted 'it would be wrong to say that we started with repairs. In fact, the teams were obliged to organize something in the nature of a tractor assembly plant.'[75]

Conclusions

This study of women tractor drivers has highlighted some of the tensions between Soviet socialist realist representations and women's lived experience in the 1930s. The *traktoristka* was glorified and praised in popular culture and the public sphere. Yet, in reality, the working lives of women tractor drivers were complicated by battles for professional recognition and they were often met with resistance in the course of their training and everyday working lives.

The *traktoristka* was faced with a whole range of prejudices, sometimes articulated by other peasant women, as well as practical obstacles, and these often proved difficult to challenge and dismiss.[76] This prejudice, a characteristic feature of patriarchal cultures, undoubtedly had its foundations in gendered notions of women's social and reproductive roles. Such perceptions of sexual difference persisted in the 1930s despite the findings of scientific research and the examples set by the women tractor drivers themselves of their physical capabilities and physiological capacities. As was witnessed in other sectors of the economy, then, technological innovation in agriculture did not always provide the opportunity for women's promotion in the labour force. Here, too, despite the official endorsement of a wholly different image, women's skills were largely only called upon when male labour was in short supply.

Notes

1 See L. Attwood (ed.), *Red Women on the Silver Screen* (London, 1993).
2 On International Women's Day celebrations, see C. Chatterjee, 'Soviet Heroines and Public Identity, 1930–1939', *Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 1402, October 1999.
3 'Chachvan ei bol'she ne nadenet nikto', *Zhenskii zhurnal*, no. 6, June 1930, p. 1.
4 On the closure of the *Zhenotdel* see, W.Z. Goldman, 'Industrial Politics, Peasant Rebellion and the Death of the Proletarian Women's Movement in the USSR', *Slavic Review*, vol. 55, no. 1, 1996, pp. 46–77.
5 L. Viola, '*Bab'i bunty* and Peasant Women's Protest During Collectivisation', *Russian Review*, vol. 45, no. 1, 1986, pp. 23–42.
6 Ye. Gol'berg, 'Pasha Angelina', *Krest'yanka*, nos. 34–35, 1937, p. 19.
7 V.E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley, California, 1997) ch. 3.
8 Ibid., p. 106.
9 P. Angelina, *My Answer to an American Questionnaire* (Moscow, 1951) p. 37.
10 See M. Ilič, *Women Workers in the Soviet Interwar Economy: from 'Protection' to 'Equality'* (London, 1999) ch. 3.

11 M.F. Oja, 'From *Krestianka* to *Udarnitsa*: Rural Women in the *Vydvizhenie* Campaign, 1933–1941', *Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 1203, 1996, p. 6, points out that 'the tractor itself was a symbol of the wonderful new life that Stalin's wise guidance had brought to the peasants'.
12 GARF, f. A-390, o. 3, d. 1260, l. 17ob: 'Pyatiletnii plan vnedreniya zhenskogo truda v narodnoe khozyaistvo RSFSR'.
13 GARF, f. A-390, o. 3, d. 1655, l. 3: 'Perspektivy zhenskogo truda' (1931).
14 GARF, f. A-390, o. 3, d. 1863, ll. 5ob, 6ob.
15 Tolmacheva, 'Kolkhoznaya zhizn' dala mne schast'e', *Rabotnitsa*, nos. 5–6, 1938, p. 22.
16 See A. Malukhina, 'Zhenshchiny v kolkhozakh – bol'shaya sila', *Sotsialisticheskaya rekonstruktsiya sel'skogo khozyaistva*, no. 3, 1938, pp. 24–36, and Oja, op. cit., pp. 5–6.
17 R.T. Manning, 'Women in the Soviet Countryside on the Eve of World War II', in B. Farnsworth and L. Viola (eds), *Russian Peasant Women* (Oxford, 1992) p. 220.
18 P.M. Chirkov, *Reshenie zhenskogo voprosa v SSSR (1917–1937 gg.)* (Moscow, 1978) p. 144.
19 V. Bil'shai, *Reshenie zhenskogo voprosa v SSSR* (Moscow, 1956) p. 143.
20 Oja, op. cit., pp. 24, 44n41.
21 B. Papernova, 'Woman in Socialist Construction: on Equal Terms with Man', *Soviet Cultural Review*, no. 2, 1933, p. 29.
22 I.A. Kraval', *Zhenshchina v SSSR* (2nd edn) (Moscow, 1937) p. 173. See also Malukhina, op. cit., p. 32.
23 Yu.V. Arutyunyan, *Mekhanizatory sel'skogo khozyaistva SSSR v 1929–1957 gg*. (Moscow, 1960) p. 59.
24 'Zabota o traktoristkakh', *Sotsialisticheskoe zemledelie*, 17 July 1936.
25 Arutyunyan, op. cit., p. 60.
26 I. Kurov, 'Vsem traktoristkam – rabotu po spetsial'nosti!', *Krest'yanka*, no. 2, 1941, p. 4.
27 L. Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman: Women's Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity* (London, 1999) p. 95. See also the cover of this book, which reproduces a detail of a Soviet poster depicting a woman tractor driver.
28 Malukhina, op. cit., cites the figure of 18 million women working on collective farms in 1938.
29 Ilič, op. cit., pp. 108–9, 139–42.
30 Angelina, op. cit., pp. 20–1.
31 Gol'berg, op. cit., p. 19.
32 On the conversion of tractors to military use, see R.W. Davies, *Crisis and Progress in the Soviet Economy, 1931–1933* (London, 1996) pp. 170–1.
33 'Kakie gruzoviki stroit' na traktornom zavode?', *Za industrializatsiyu,* 24 December 1935.
34 There were numerous reports about tractor production in the Soviet press during 1935, and in other years. See, for example, 'Podgotovka k vypusku traktora STZ-3', *Za industrializatsiyu*, 22 July 1935.
35 Angelina, op. cit., p. 21.
36 Davies, op. cit., passim. This source also provides statistics for the production of tractors during the first five-year plan, see pp. 524–5.
37 I.I. Okuneva and Ye.Ye. Shteinbakh, 'O primenenii zhenskogo truda na traktorakh', *Gigiena, bezopasnost' i patologiya truda*, no. 7, 1931, pp. 3–15.

38 Manning, op. cit., p. 219.
39 *Ob usloviyakh truda zhenshchin-traktoristok i shoferov na gruzovykh avtomashinakh*, *Izvestiya Narkomtruda*, nos. 14–15, 1931, p. 277.
40 V. Pomerantsev, 'Ob okhrane truda traktoristki', *Sotsialisticheskoe zemledelie*, 27 June 1936.
41 Ibid.
42 'Zabota o traktoristkakh', *Sotsialisticheskoe zemledelie*, 17 July 1936.
43 'Zabota o kadrakh traktoristok', *Sotsialisticheskoe zemledelie*, 8 August 1936.
44 Ibid.
45 For examples, see the various reports in *Sotsialisticheskoe zemledelie*, 8 February 1937 and 9 February 1937.
46 O.F. Radyushkina, 'Voprosy, kotorye nado reshat' do vesny', *Sotsialisticheskoe zemledelie*, 9 February 1937.
47 Angelina, op. cit., pp. 25–6.
48 Ibid., p. 28.
49 Gol'berg, op. cit., p. 19. See also Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman*, pp. 94–5.
50 'Stakhanovka sel'skogo khozyaistva', *Krest'yanka*, no. 25, 1935, p. 5.
51 Manning, op. cit., p. 219.
52 Ibid.
53 S. Bridger, *Women in the Soviet Countryside: Women's Roles in Rural Development in the Soviet Union* (Cambridge, 1987) p. 14.
54 Davies, op. cit., p. 415, states that, 'the oil shortage haunted the Soviet economy throughout 1933 … In Ukraine, kerosene for use as tractor fuel was in such short supply the tractors frequently had to cease operations.' He cites GARF, f. 5446, o. 27, d. 50, ll. 211, 215.
55 See, for example, the various reports in *Sotsialisticheskoe zemledelie*, 6 February 1937 and 8 February 1937.
56 For a brief comment on women's earnings, see I. Asarov, 'Pridanoe', *Sotsialisticheskoe zemledelie*, 9 February 1937.
57 On male peasant out-migration in the 1930s and men's privileged access to mechanised equipment in work on the collective farms, see also Manning, op. cit., p. 211.
58 T. Schrand, 'Soviet "Civic-Minded Women" in the 1930s: Gender, Class, and Industrialization in a Socialist Society', *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 11, no. 3, 1999, p. 142. The term is reminiscent of Stolypin's pre-revolutionary agricultural reforms, which placed a 'wager on the sober and the strong'.
59 On 'resistance from below' to 'female agricultural Stakhanovites', and the possible rape of women tractor drivers, see Manning, op. cit., pp. 219–21.
60 'Priem kolkhoznits-udarnits sveklovichnykh polei rukovoditelyami partii i pravitel'stva', *Pravda*, 11 November 1935.
61 'Rastet armiya zhenshchin-traktoristok', *Sotsialisticheskoe zemledelie*, 9 February 1937.
62 'Soveshchanie luchshikh traktoristok Soyuza', *Sotsialisticheskoe zemledelie*, 12 February 1937.
63 Kurov, op. cit., p. 4. See also, 'Molodye patriotiki, uchites' upravlyat' trakotorom!', *Pravda*, 1 April 1939.
64 Kurov, op. cit.
65 Ibid.

66 B. King, *Women in Post-war Russia* (London, 1947) p. 12.
67 M. Hindus, *Mother Russia* (London, 1943) p. 386.
68 Ibid., pp. 386–7. Hindus does not cite the source for his statistical data.
69 N. Voznesenskii, *Voennaya ekonomika SSSR v period otechestvennoi voiny* (Moscow, 1948) pp. 92–3.
70 Bridger, op. cit., p. 16.
71 See, for example, ibid., p. 17.
72 King, op. cit., p. 16.
73 Manning, op. cit., p. 220. See also Arutyunyan, op. cit., p. 296.
74 Angelina, op. cit., p. 77.
75 Ibid.
76 For a critical assessment of peasant women's resistance to change, see Oja, op. cit., pp. 34–6.