Would Trotsky Wear a Bluetooth?

Josephson, Paul R.

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

Josephson, Paul R.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/2819

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=57608
On an unseasonably hot summer day in 2002, I visited a lumber mill in Arkhangelsk Province, Russia. It was lunch break, and the gang saws were silent. The mill owner wanted to show me the quality of his finished products, so he rousted the workers from their break. They appeared in sandals and shorts; most of them did not wear shirts, and no one had goggles, ear protection, or hard hats. They turned on the saws, and chips began to fly. When they learned that I was an American, out came the vodka, too, and we had several toasts to the quality of the finished moldings and wood frames. I wondered whether Russian regulations permitted work in that attire and with that beverage, and if safety regulations dating to the Soviet era, many of which were still in force, were that lax.

My research and teaching have enabled me to visit factories, mills, and power generators of various sorts. Their size, noise, steam, and smoke awe, and the people who operate them intrigue me with their matter-of-fact attitude toward the dangerous machines around them. I dedicate this book to the workers in factories under socialism in the hopes that I have described well the world they knew. In particular, I dedicate it to workers, intellectuals, and policy makers who support collective bargaining and have tried to make workplaces safer. My brother, Erik Josephson, who tends the subway tracks in New York City, worries about safety, equity, and justice, and he wears a Bluetooth device to communicate with his comrades.

As for big technologies, for me the bigger, the more intriguing, especially hydroelectric power stations and nuclear reactors, but also mills of various sorts. Over the years I have gained entry to the Chernobyl-type RBMK reactor in Visaginas, Lithuania, including its spent fuel storage basins thanks to Sasha Bolgarov and Andrei Sitnikov, and also spied dry-cask storage of spent fuel rods above ground tended by black-uniformed private guards armed with high-powered assault rifles in Wiscassett along the Atlantic Coast ("Maine’s prettiest village"). I have warmed myself by the F-1, the first Soviet reactor, then still operating within the Moscow city limits, and toured the reactors of Obninsk,
Chernobyl, and Seabrook, New Hampshire. I have taken my students to the Wyman Dam in central Maine, and I have been told by armed guards with raised rifles to back away when I tried to walk along the top of Grand Coulee Dam on the Columbia River in Washington. In some facilities, I have been invited to participate in the production process and was not alienated from my labor. In a meatpacking plant in Severodvinsk I was allowed to operate the hot-dog-making machine. In a brewery in the same town, my students and I learned about the beer-making industry and sampled the product.

I am enamored of mills that transform some part of nature into a product for consumption, and Maine—like Arkhangelsk Province—is full of them. My Colby students and I have driven three hours in a blizzard down east to the Atlantic salmon fish farm in Machiasport. The proprietors met us with a five-course salmon dinner. The sounds, smells, and colors of the processing facility made an impression on the students, especially the guts vacuum cleaner. Other students have been to the SAPPI pulp and paper mill not far from Skowhegan and to the FMC plant in Rockland, which makes carrageenan out of seaweed.

All of these experiences led me to write this book on technology and socialism. A number of friends and colleagues have kindly offered critical comments on this book, and I would like to thank them. I am deeply grateful to the anonymous reviewer of the manuscript for this book. He or she read carefully, with exacting standards, and insisted on a number of important revisions. Julia Vangart offered suggestions for chapter 1; Elizabeth Wood offered guidance on chapter 7; and Charles Armstrong, Peter Ditmanson, Walter Hatch, and “CW” Kim helped me better to understand technology in North Korea. Johan Schot and Ruth Oldenziel provided intellectual stimulation for my thinking about technology generally, not only about technology in East Central Europe. Ruth and Sven also kindly opened their home on the Amstel River to me many times, and I know they would have let me stay with them had I needed to request political asylum if Obama lost the presidential election. Malgosia Magurzek and Dagmara Jajesniak-Quast have been tolerant of my efforts to learn about big technology in Poland. Ana Khladnik asked me to think about “grayness” yet again. Pal Germushka, József Sisa, and Kinga Rethy have shared their very good sense of the Hungarian experience with me. Dobrinka Parusheva and Katya Nikova introduced me to Bulgaria and listened to my ideas about Dimitrovgrad. Karl-Erik Michelsen, based on his studies of forestry, nuclear power, engineering, and technology transfer, always patiently explains his notions of the place
of technology in the modern world. Hakon With Anderson patiently insists on considering all sides of any question, and through his hospitality he is an example to us all. Jonathan Coopersmith provides the proper levity to scholarship, and his only fault—a large one admittedly—is that he does not like Bartok.

Students and faculty at Pomor State University gave me the opportunity during my sabbatical to compare Soviet and western technology in a systematic fashion, although at first they were confused by the more spontaneous style of the American professor. Aleksei Feldt and Mikhail Suprun in the history department there stand at the forefront of excellent scholarship and teaching. Alexander Beliaev, Sergey Borsky, Olga Deriaeva, Katya Boikova, and all of Severodvinsk assisted in welcoming me to that nuclear shipbuilding city. There I learned about the construction of floating nuclear reactors. Students at Colby College challenge me to refine my ideas about technology by astute comments about my neo-Luddism. My Colby department colleagues help make teaching and writing compatible. Bob Brugger at the Johns Hopkins University Press provided extremely valuable comments on how to expand the scope of my study and increase its rigor. The editors of History and Technology and Slavonic and East European Review kindly permitted me to republish large parts of previously published articles as the foundations of chapters 4 and 5, respectively.

My thanks to Colby College, the Fulbright Program, the Tensions of Europe Project, and the Davis Center for Russian Studies at Harvard University for providing an intellectual home, financing, or both.

My thanks to my colleague Margaux Leonard for preparing the index.

My deep gratitude to Allan Gamborg and the Gamborg Gallery in Moscow, Russia, for permission to use the prints in this book, and for helping me in my search for Soviet art depicting industrialization and socialist progress.

As always, Roberto Clemente and Willie Stargell inspired me with their modesty, dedication to the task at hand, and humility. Hooper and Blues finally recognize the importance of fences; small-scale, democratic technologies do work. Isaac and Cathy have somehow managed to tolerate my early mornings and long trips, usually let me back into the house without a fight when I return, and generally provide me with a summer construction budget.

Finally, I am delighted to have had the opportunity to write this book in three locations, in each of which friends, colleagues, and family contributed to an engaging intellectual environment: Arkhangelsk, Russia; Cambridge, Massachusetts; and Waterville and Vinalhaven, Maine.
This page intentionally left blank
Would Trotsky Wear a Bluetooth?
Lipa Grigorevich Rojter (1910–94), “Woman at Work,” 1932, xylograph. The joys of socialism enable the female and male labor to stride forward, overcoming all obstacles, on the way to building an urban, industrial future. Courtesy of the Allan Gamborg Gallery, Moscow, Russia.