

# Bergleute in der Endphase der Sowjetunion und in der unabhängigen Ukraine

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## The Donbas Miners' Movement in the Very Late Soviet Era: An Historical Perspective

In July 1989, miners went on strike throughout the Soviet Union's far-flung coalfields. This was big news at the time. The unfolding of glasnost and perestroika hitherto had provoked little response from workers in contrast to the Moscow-centered intelligentsia, and neophyte nationalists in the Baltic, the Caucasus, and Western Ukraine. Suddenly, class issues were thrown into the mix, and the western media accommodated by sending correspondents and film crews to parts of Russia and Ukraine rarely visited in the past.

I arrived in Donetsk, towards the tail end of the strike, as part of a motley crew of scholars, videographers, and college students who had been assembled in Pittsburgh by an unemployed steelworker to take advantage of a recently launched sister-city exchange program. Thus began my acquaintance with the "city of coal and roses", its mines, and miners. It was, at first, a rather uncomfortable experience. More than once I and my colleagues were mistaken by miners for "from the western media" ("Eto BBC, da? Washington Post?"). A labor historian whose work then focused exclusively on the 1930s, I had managed to limit my acquaintance with Soviet workers to libraries and archives. They, my subjects, were all deceased and as far as I was concerned, that was just fine. In Donetsk by contrast, I was persuaded to interview on camera miners – both active and retired – members of their families, neighbors, managerial and engineering-technical personnel, trade union officials, and even the proverbial man (or, more often, woman) in the street. From such interviews, a rather dramatic meeting of the Kuibyshev and Panfilov mines' trade union council filmed by our crew, and footage of the strike itself obtained from Donetsk television, an hour-length documentary film was made.<sup>1</sup> It remains an effective device for teaching about that particular time and place.

I returned to Donetsk twice, in 1991 and 1992, to do more interviewing. In the course of those years and for a few that followed, I wrote quite a bit about the miners' movement. Some of it was journalistic and included an attempt to expose the strong-arm tactics of the AFL-CIO's Free Trade Union Institute; some masqueraded as oral history; and some was a

1 *Perestroika from Below*, dir. Daniel Walkowitz (Pastime Productions, Icarus-First Run, 1990).

combination of several genres.<sup>2</sup> The fact that with the exception of a few articles all were collaborative suggests the degree to which I was unsure of going it alone as I ventured into and remained within the contemporary. Some time later in the 1990s, hoping to catch up with what had happened in the interim, I returned to the subject of the miners' movement, but still unsure of the status or quality of my work and whether it was sufficiently "historical", published it in a rather obscure journal of Communist studies and transition politics.<sup>3</sup> Thereafter, I more or less abandoned attempts to keep up to date, publishing only one article of a general nature, a "ten-year retrospective" on "labor" in post-Soviet Russia.<sup>4</sup> In the meantime, a rich, extensive literature on the miners' movement had been produced by sociologists and political scientists well disposed toward labor if not the solutions proffered by the movement itself. However, for reasons that may have had to do with the greater political salience of the Russian movement, most of it focused on the Kuzbass and Inta regions rather than the Ukrainian Donbas.<sup>5</sup>

It is now more than fifteen years since the events of 1989 first brought the miners' movement to the world's attention and me to the Donbas. This is long enough to have developed an historical perspective about what happened then and subsequently, although the passage of time alone is not and never can be sufficient. In revisiting this terrain, I have discovered the need to revise some of my earlier formulations partly in response to previously overlooked or new ones and partly because subsequent developments have thrown into relief the peculiarities of the period with which I previously have dealt. My framework of analysis is the interplay between agency (usually associated with choice, spontaneity, and indeterminacy) and circumstances or structure (recurring patterns of thought and behavior that limit

- 2 See, for example, Lewis H. Siegelbaum: 'We Haven't Seen Perestroika': Behind the Soviet Miners' Strike, in: *The Nation*, October 23, 1989, pp. 451–56; Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Daniel Walkowitz: The A. F. L.-C. I. O. Goes to Ukraine, *The Nation*, November 2, 1992, pp. 502–06; Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Daniel J. Walkowitz: 'We'll Remain in This Cesspool for a Long Time': The Miners of Donetsk Speak Out, in: *Oral History Review* 1/2 (1992), pp. 67–86; Theodore H. Friedgut and Lewis H. Siegelbaum: The Soviet Miners' Strike, July 1989: Perestroika from Below, in: *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies* 804 (1990); Lewis H. Siegelbaum and Daniel Walkowitz: *Workers of the Donbas Speak: Survival and Identity in the New Ukraine, 1989–1992*, Albany 1995.
- 3 Lewis H. Siegelbaum: Freedom of Prices and the Price of Freedom: The Miners' Dilemmas in the Soviet Union and Its Successor States, in: *The Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 4 (Dec. 1997), pp. 1–27.
- 4 Lewis H. Siegelbaum: The Condition of Labor in Post-Soviet Russia: A Ten-Year Retrospective, in: *Social Science History Journal* 4 (2004), pp. 637–665.
- 5 The literature is too extensive to cite here. The most prolific of research projects has been the „Russian Research Programme“ based at the Institute for Comparative Labour Studies, University of Warwick, under the directorship of Simon Clarke. For a list of its publications updated only to January 1997 see <[www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/compladstuds/russia/publications.htm](http://www.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/compladstuds/russia/publications.htm)>. For a partial exception to the Russian focus of research on the miners, see Stephen Crowley: *Hot Coal, Coal Steel: Russian and Ukrainian Workers from the End of the Soviet Union to the Post-Communist Transformations*, Ann Arbor 1997. Mention also should be made of the Moscow-based freelance labor journalist, Renfrey Clarke, who provided timely analyses of flashpoints to on-line lists such as Johnson's Russia List and Greenleft Weekly.

agency) with an appreciation for the overlapping if not fluid character of these dual determinations.

### **Samokritika of an Historian**

As Charles Maier has written with respect to the dissolution of East Germany, “a reading of the events of 1989 (...) suggests (and not just in a trivial tautological sense) that political action in its own right first beckons and then certainly succeeds only when long-term conditions permit”. The reverse, he notes, is also the case: “the same events reveal that political activity, at least if pursued with stamina and persistence, helps shape in turn the causal environment critical to its own success”. In other words, “the year 1989 confirms that historical analysis must rely continuously on working out this reciprocal interaction”.<sup>6</sup> Recognizing the usefulness of this observation, it is incumbent on the historian to specify the mechanisms that make an environment “causal”.

Let us begin by examining the agents of political action and the environment within which they acted. At the most basic level, the miners' movement could not have existed without the presence of at least three factors: lots of miners, a general feeling among them of having lost ground, and the perception among activists that circumstances favored taking their grievances beyond normal channels. As of 1989, some 1.2 million people were employed in coal mining in the Soviet Union of whom nearly two-thirds were involved directly in production. Despite the increased importance in recent decades of nuclear power, natural gas and other sources of energy, coal remained a significant component of the Soviet fuel balance. Indeed, just as the Soviet Union had overtaken the United States as the world's leading producer of crude steel and other quintessentially industrial materials by the 1970s, so even earlier it surpassed the US and all other countries in coal tonnage.

But so what? These were indices of industrial prowess of a bygone era, part of what Maier (again) referred to as the “romance of coal and steel”, that reached its apogee in the 1930s and 1940s.<sup>7</sup> Think of the giant smelting plants in the American heartland, think of Stakhanov and Magnitogorsk. Through the 1950s the integrated steel mill was a worldwide industrial status symbol, the basis of Western Europe's post-war industrial reconstruction, but by the 1970s this was no longer the case. The simultaneous decline of coal in the West was even more precipitous. In the Ruhr, mining which had employed 500,000 people in the mid 1950s was the occupation of only 128,000 in 1977; in France, there were only 43,000 miners by 1980 compared to 320,000 in 1960; and in Britain during those twenty years, the workforce was halved while output dropped from 200 million tons to 130 million.<sup>8</sup>

6 Charles S. Maier: *Dissolution: The Crisis of Communism and the End of East Germany*, Princeton 1997, p. xv.

7 *Ibid.*, pp. 97–102. See also Maier: *Consigning the Twentieth Century to History: Alternative Narratives for the Modern Era*, in: *American Historical Review* 2 (2000), pp. 807–31.

8 Maier, *Dissolution*, p. 100; L.A. Gordon, E.V. Klopov, and I.S. Kozhukhovskii (eds.): *Krutoi plast: Shakhterskaia zhizn' na fone restruktirizatsii otrasli i obshcherossiiskikh premen*, Moscow 1999, p. 49.

“Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation (...) All old-established national industries (...) dislodged by new industries.” Marx and Engels would have understood quite well what was happening during these painful decades of restructuring.<sup>9</sup> By contrast, the centrally planned “socialist” economies of Eastern Europe stuck to what they knew best, continuing to “pump iron” in Maier’s felicitous phrase. Think Nova Huta. This strategy involved little social uprooting or displacement; it was more like staying in place.

The problem was that the more these economies integrated themselves with the capitalist “globalizing” economies via trade and credits for investment, the more the romance of coal and steel doomed millions of workers to “a subsidized system of ‘outdoor relief’ or job subsidies”.<sup>10</sup> The 1980s was the decade in which (thanks to Margaret Thatcher’s unyielding hostility to subsidies of any kind except those targeting entrepreneurs) Britain divested itself all but a handful of the 170 mines that had employed more than 180,000 workers as late as 1984;<sup>11</sup> at the same time, coal extraction in the United States relocated to the non-unionized, open-pit mines of the western states. The result was a more than twofold increase in output per worker but a halving of the mining workforce. The similarities between the Pittston strike in Virginia with the more or less simultaneously occurring Soviet miners’ strike are – notwithstanding expressions of mutual solidarity – superficial. The former was essentially a strike against the company’s radical departure from what had been standard employment and benefit practices;<sup>12</sup> the latter was precipitated by the failure of the state to change anything except its rhetoric.

In March 1990 Ted Friedgut and I wrote that “it was not fear of the disruptive effects of economic reform that drove the miners to strike, but rather anxiety that perestroika was passing them by”.<sup>13</sup> I now would argue that this statement as well as our formulation of “perestroika from below” was insufficiently nuanced and exaggerated the extent to which miners and other workers identified with the agenda and policies of Mikhail Gorbachev. It flattened multiple possibilities into dichotomies such as the friends and foes of change, pro- and anti-perestroika factions, and reformists and “hard-liners”, formulations that were fairly common in western discourse then and for some time thereafter. It denied the possibility that what was at stake was not whether change was possible or even the speed with which it was to occur, but rather the direction of change and who would control it.

9 Lewis S. Feuer (ed.): Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Basic Writings on Politics and Philosophy, Garden City, Anchor 1959, pp. 10–11.

10 Maier, *Dissolution*, pp. 102–05.

11 Emma Wallis: *Industrial Relations in the Privatised Coal Industry: Continuity, Change, and Contradictions*, Aldershot 2000.

12 Richard A. Brisbin, Jr.: *A Strike Like No Other Strike: Law and Resistance During the Pittston Coal Strike of 1989–1990*, Baltimore 2002.

13 Friedgut and Siegelbaum, *The Soviet Miners’ Strike*, p. 11. See also *Perestroika from Below: The Soviet Miners’ Strike and its Aftermath*, in: *New Left Review* 181 (May/June 1990), p. 12 wherein we argued that „For many leaders of the strike committees the strike was a conscious effort to extricate perestroika from the clutches of their immediate bosses, who were widely perceived as having blocked or distorted its thrust.“

To say as we did – with rather alarming confidence – that “the outbreak of the strike was the result of frustrated expectations” was to presuppose that expectations among this particular segment of Soviet society had been raised in the first place. There was some basis for this assumption, namely the results of a sociological survey among 216 Donetsk miners that seemed to indicate that frustrated expectations were “the primary cause”.<sup>14</sup> But I now am moved to wonder who was putting whom on, that is, whether miners were simply engaging in the standard practice of subalterns of presenting a public transcript to authorities, witless sociologists, and other scholars.

Did miners ever believe that the perestroika about which Gorbachev and his fellow Communist reformists talked incessantly would improve their lot? There is little evidence to support an affirmative answer to this question. To be sure, the early declarations issued by the miners' strike and workers' committees in July and August 1989 made mention of “all possible support for economic perestroika” and the like.<sup>15</sup> But such formulations might equally support the contention that, much like nationalists in the Baltic republics and Armenia, kooperativshchiki and party bosses transforming themselves into petty (and not so petty) capitalists, miners were appropriating the language of perestroika for purposes of protective coloration.

Why though would they have needed protective coloration? This brings me to the third of the three factors cited earlier. More than four years after Gorbachev had become general secretary, the Soviet Union was in a state approximating Yeats' evocation of the Second Coming: things were falling apart and the center was not holding. The rapid expansion of heterodox protest movements and the unwillingness (or failure) of the state to reign them in may well have been part of the causal environment in which the miners' movement emerged. However, it still was not clear how long this situation would last. Recent events in Tbilisi no less than the sorry fate of worker protests under Gorbachev's predecessors – including the massacre at Novochoerkassk in 1962 and the rough treatment received by the Donetsk dissidents Vladimir Klebanov and Alexei Nikitin during the Brezhnev era – suggested that state repression was not out of the question.<sup>16</sup> In short, what may have persuaded miners in the Donbas to join a strike begun elsewhere, only to suspend it after a few days, was that the state had not cracked down (...) but might if pushed too far. By the same token, it is possible to argue that the greater audaciousness of demands advanced during the second all-Union strike in March-April 1991 as well as the strike's more obviously political and pro-

14 Ibid. The survey data appeared in *Izvestiia*, 12 August, 1989 and was cited by Donetsk gorkom first secretary Ignatov in *Vechernyi Donetsk*, 16 August 1989.

15 L. N. Lopatin (ed.): *Rabochee dvizhenie Kuzbassa, sbornik dokumentov i materialov*, aprel' 1989 – mart 1992, Kemerovo 1993, p. 94.

16 See Samuel H. Baron: *Bloody Saturday in the Soviet Union: Novochoerkassk, 1962*, Stanford 2001. On Klebanov (born 1932) see *Human Rights in Ukraine*, Kharkiv Group for Human Rights Protection on Nikitin (born 1937), Kevin Klose: *Russia and the Russians: Inside the Closed Society*, New York 1984, pp. 29–98.

tracted nature reflected a greater awareness on the part of strike leaders (at least) of the state's progressive weakness of resolve, authority, and command over resources.<sup>17</sup>

If our understanding of the movement as pro-perestroika was too simplistic, then our assessment of the strike's outcome seems hardly sustainable. What the strike accomplished was the setting up of strike/workers' committees at the enterprise, city, and regional levels. These organizations paralleled the pre-existing trade union, municipal/soviet and party bodies, essentially usurping their authority.<sup>18</sup> Eventually, much of their personnel and energy were transferred to the Independent Miners' Union (NPG) which held its inaugural congress in October 1990 in Donetsk. The NPG was the main organizational force behind the second all-Union miners' strike and remained thereafter the prime institutional site of the miners' movement. After the breakup of the Soviet Union, it subdivided into separate Russian, Kazakh, and Ukrainian entities.

The very existence of the strike committees and the NPG goes a long way towards explaining how, if not why, the miners' movement survived beyond the initial strike of 1989. Occupying interstitial/intermediary space between officially-approved and illegal bodies, they were analogous in this respect to the myriad of political movements thrown up by the reform process, some with a nationalist orientation and others speaking in the name of the environment and democracy. As fundamentally class-based organizations free of (and largely hostile towards) Communist influence, they also were illustrative of an extraordinary moment in Soviet history. Despite its teleological implications, the best term to describe this moment would be "transitional".<sup>19</sup> While labor and its representation were no longer under Communist control, the rule of capital had yet to assert itself. What this meant was that workers' real and symbolic power was unusually strong. Persisting throughout the 1980s in Poland, such a situation was considerably more brief in the case of the USSR and most other east European countries. With the obvious and important exception of demonstrably worsening material conditions, it was the best of circumstances for workers and their collective representation. Workers were heroes of their own and others' narratives, and the very unusualness of this situation accounts to a large extent for (what in retrospect clearly was) the exaggerated optimism exuded by the movement (...) and shared by many commentators.<sup>20</sup>

17 Stephen F. Crowley and Lewis H. Siegelbaum: *Survival Strategies: The Miners of Donetsk in the Post-Soviet Era*, in: Siegelbaum and Walkowitz, *Workers of the Donbass Speak*, pp. 65–66; Lewis Siegelbaum: *Labor Pains in the Soviet Union*, in: *The Nation*, May 27, 1991, pp. 693–94.

18 One of the leading strike committee activists noted, with not a little bravado, that in the course of and immediately following the strike, they „took on themselves the functions of prosecutor, police, municipal authorities, welfare agencies, trade unions, political parties [and] supply departments.“ Yuri Boldyrev: *Stachkomy i nezavisimyi profsoiuz – Sotrudnichestvo i sopernichestvo*, unpublished manuscript (1992) cited in Crowley and Siegelbaum, *Survival Strategies*, p. 69. See also Paul Christensen: *Russia's Workers in Transition: Labor, Management, and the State under Gorbachev and Yeltsin*, Dekalb 1999, p. 82.

19 On the perils of „transitology“ see Valerie Bunce: *Should Transitologists be Grounded?*, in: *Slavic Review* 1 (Spring 1995), pp. III–27.

20 The relatively extended period of worker self-confidence and even exuberance in Poland was undoubtedly assisted by contacts with the Catholic Church and intellectuals. It was forecast in Andrej Wajda's

## Who (or What) is to Blame?

In October 2000 at a conference commemorating the tenth anniversary of the founding of the Independent Miners' Union, Iurii Boldyrev, one of Donetsk's best-known activists, offered a provocative explanation for the impetus of the miners' movement. "The strike arose in 1989", he asserted, "not by popular initiative, but by Gorbachev's permission. It was planned and carried out by the KGB which had been involved in a bitter internal struggle. One faction triumphed and organized the strike." To substantiate his claim, he referred to two KGB agents, dressed in civilian clothes, whom he saw on the night of July 21–22 leading the crowd that "had begun to disperse as the strike was winding down". Boldyrev, speaking to fellow (former) activists, concluded that as "the Soviet system collapsed, it gave birth to monsters. We and you were one of those monsters. This system decided for us whom we would become".<sup>21</sup>

The propensity to cast blame when things are perceived to have gone wrong or expectations of improvement, emancipation, or deliverance have been disappointed is as widespread as it is understandable. When hope or "social authority" has been vested in others, the urge to recast them as manipulative, deceitful, or otherwise "false" is almost overwhelming. In recent years, as the plight of miners and their industry in both Russia and Ukraine has worsened, many culprits have been identified. Power-hungry politicians in Kiev, former enterprise directors corrupted by their elevation to national office, the World Bank, nationalists based in Western Ukraine, Jews, former miner-activists who used their experience in the movement as a stepping stone to careers in politics and/or business, the miners themselves who lacked the necessary "culture" or "maturity" to know whom to support or what to do, and, of course, the communist system that so ill-prepared them – the list is as long as it is depressing to contemplate.

Boldyrev's interpretation of the movement in which he had played such a prominent role might be seen in this light. The notion that Gorbachev and a(n unnamed) faction of the KGB manipulated the strike of July 1989 seems fairly ludicrous. Implying that miners were incapable of organizing themselves and exercising judgment about what they wanted to do, it is in the tradition of casting the people as naive and witless before "dark forces". Nevertheless, it is a refreshingly de-romanticized view of the strike, and implicitly raises the question of whether that movement spawned by the strike could have sustained itself for more than two years without the assistance of outside forces.

Boldyrev's remarks were actually cited by a Moscow-based historian who notes the near immunity from prosecution of strike leaders. Was this, he asks, the consequence of their "exalted social authority" or "the presence in the political leadership of the country of significant forces who had an interest in the development of radical forms of protest by the miners"?<sup>22</sup> The suggestion that some sort of alliance or at least compatibility of interests

film, *Man of Marble* (1977), and celebrated in the sequel, *Man of Iron* (1981).

21 Quoted in D. A. Levchik: *Zabastovochnoe dvizhenie shakhterov 1988–1991gg.*, in: *Sotsiologicheskie issledovaniia* 10 (2003), pp. 112–13.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 113.



existed between strike leaders and the forces of law and order might be more compelling had the former's escape from prosecution been unusual. But the anti-strike laws of 1989 and 1991 were far from unique in lacking teeth. If the miners' movement did indeed have allies, let us look elsewhere.

One of the oddest things about the movement in Donetsk at least during the period discussed here is that both the city's strike committee and the NPG conducted their business from offices provided by the regional production association, *Donetskugol*.<sup>23</sup> What seems anomalous in North American labor terms (imagine General Motors accommodating the United Automobile Workers Union in its headquarters on Woodward Avenue in Detroit) can be explained by the deep mutual dependency between management and labor forged by their shared subordination to authorities at the "center" of the administrative-command system. Of course, the NPG represented a challenge to the authority of the pre-existing Union of Workers in the Mining Industry and its monopolistic control over the distribution of goods and services. But from *Donetskugol's* standpoint, accommodating the insurgent NPG did not necessitate breaching agreements with the old union, and the division of labor between the two unions actually made strategic sense in dealing with the center. For their part, miners acting through their strike committees or councils of labor collectives (STKs) criticized and even replaced individual managers and directors. But others who evidently did a better job of prizing resources from the center to distribute among miners and their families were praised and revered. What Sarah Ashwin found to be the case in the Kuzbass mine she studied, namely that miners considered the mine administration part of the labor collective and vice versa, was no less evident in Donetsk.<sup>24</sup>

This, then, was not a struggle of workers against bosses any more than it was between labor and capital. From the perspective of the miners and their movement the enemy in the largest sense was "the system" that extracted from miners their labor and its fruits and returned to them less than they deserved. In 1989, Boldyrev had referred to it as "ministerial feudalism"; others simply called it "communism".<sup>25</sup> If, so it was believed, the system (or, alternatively, "the center") did not take so much but rather left more for the mines to sell on the market, the mines wouldn't need as much from the state. Miners described this happy, market-based alternative as the key to the "normal life" they were seeking. They typically called it "capitalism".<sup>26</sup>

23 This was in one of the more solid structures on Artem Street, Donetsk's main thoroughfare. The same arrangement prevailed in the far northern Russian coal-mining city of Vorkuta according to Michael Burawoy and Pavel Krotov: *The Economic Basis of Russia's Political Crisis*, in: *New Left Review* 198 (1993), p. 62.

24 Sarah Ashwin: *Russian Workers: The Anatomy of Patience*, Manchester 1999. Ashwin refers to this relationship as „alienated collectivism“. Others, including myself, have characterized it in terms of enterprise paternalism.

25 Interview with Yuri Boldyrev, August 19, 1989; also: *The Nation*, Oct. 23, 1989, pp. 451–52. Boldyrev was chairperson of the Gorki mine's strike committee at the time.

26 See Daniel Walkowitz: 'Normal Life': The Crisis of Identity Among Donetsk's Miners, in: Siegelbaum and Walkowitz, *Workers of the Donbass Speak*, pp.159–84; Crowley, *Hot Coal, Cold Steel*, pp. 19–24, 196–200.



It would be unfair to characterize this perspective as naive, not because miners were so inexperienced in theorizing alternatives to what they knew so well, but because so many other sectors of Soviet society shared the same beliefs. Indeed, the view that the state had to get out of the way of appropriating and redistributing resources, dictating prices, and demanding sacrifices has a very familiar ring and was by no means confined to Soviet citizens. What distinguished, indeed animated, the miners' movement was a particularly fervent belief in the two classically socialist claims to recompense – entitlement through labor and need – even while it associated these claims with capitalism.<sup>27</sup>

If the miners' belief in the inherent value of their labor derived from their erstwhile role as heroes of socialist construction, then their identification of the market as the mechanism for realizing that value signified the delegitimization of the Soviet state's redistributive power. Calls for "free" markets/prices also testify to the appeal of neo-liberal ideas in the context of an ideological void. It will require ethnographic investigation to know whether miners obtained their ideas about markets primarily from proselytization by "democrats", the media's sudden saturation with images of prosperity abroad, or simply their own reversal of Soviet propaganda's shibboleths.<sup>28</sup> It is important though not to assume that miners were passive in receiving others' ideas or that their leaders were dupes of others' agendas.

As I have noted elsewhere, the movement's demands on the state were logically inconsistent: on the one hand, increasing subsidies, and on the other, granting financial independence for the mines; on the one hand, access to markets to sell coal, on the other, the exemption from the market of services and goods historically provided by the mines.<sup>29</sup> But we need not assume that the inconsistency stemmed from the undue influence on the movement of either mining directors or the liberal intelligentsia. The miners themselves could have wanted subsidies and market access for their product because they were convinced they deserved both. They also believed, not without reason, that in the prevailing circumstances their negotiating power had never been greater and might never be as great again.

At a meta-historical level, the causal environment for the articulation of these demands was the breakdown of the re-distributional functions of the centralized state – itself a product of the opening that perestroika gave to alternative mechanisms. The demands themselves and actions taken in support of them helped "shape in turn the causal environment critical to [their] own success", or at least the course that the movement took. For nothing else can quite explain why workers in other occupations were so hesitant and for the most part ultimately unwilling to join the miners' movement than that they regarded satisfaction of the miners' demands in zero-sum terms. In this manner, cause and effect, structure and agency operated in tandem, each creating the conditions for and limitations on the other.

27 For an elaboration of this point, see Siegelbaum, *Freedom of Prices*, pp. 13–15.

28 For some suggestive ethnographies see Caroline Humphrey: *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism*, Ithaca 2002; and Bruce Grant: *In the Soviet House of Culture: A Century of Perestroikas*, Princeton 1995.

29 Siegelbaum, *Freedom of Prices*, pp. 6–7, 13–14.

The politicization of the movement – that is, the articulation of overtly political demands – seems in this light less the consequence of its radicalization than the recognition of the dangers of isolation and the need to generalize the basis for protest. But “articulation”, “recognition” and other attributes of agency can take us – or them – only so far. The collapse or overthrow of the “system”, which appeared so unlikely in 1989, rapidly became conceivable as the entire economy and the outlying republics spun out of the center’s control. The further incapacitation of the Soviet state and the dramatic rise in Russia of an alternative source of political power in the form of Boris Yeltsin and Democratic Russia became the environment that “caused” the miners’ movement to initiate its second all-Union strike in 1991. That action in turn complicated the state’s ability to deal with other challenges. Gorbachev’s agreement to transfer jurisdictional authority over the mines to respective union republics was thus far from an insignificant concession. At least for the miners it symbolized as nothing else the dismantling of “the system” which had reared them and which they blamed for their plight.

### **What Time is it?**

Writing shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Michael Burawoy and Pavel Krotov asked “what happens to a command economy when the party disintegrates and the centre no longer commands?” Their answer, based on their acquaintance with the production association Vorkuta Ugol’ and its thirteen constituent mines, was that certain tendencies within state socialist economies become intensified. They focus on three: preexisting supply monopolies are strengthened; lateral exchanges in the form of bartering increase; and, due to management’s overriding interest in problems of supply and barter rather than regulating work, and “the autonomous work organization necessary for adapting to shortages”, worker control over production expands. Because the old relations of production remained essentially in place and because the “driving force behind the strategies of enterprises and conglomerates [a.k.a. production associations – LS] is the of profit through trade”, Burawoy and Krotov characterized the transition through which the Soviet Union was passing in its last years and which continued into the post-Soviet era as “the rise of merchant capital”. Just as historically merchant capital tended to preserve rather than dissolve pre-existing systems of production, so, they argue, “in Russia the expansion of trade has conserved rather than dissolved the Soviet enterprise”.<sup>30</sup>

The notion that the Soviet enterprise might have survived the collapse of the Soviet Union is probably less strange than that an important feature of Europe’s transition from feudalism to capitalism might reappear in late twentieth-century Russia. Of course, the point was “not to argue that Russia is returning to the past but to problematize Russia’s road

30 Burawoy and Krotov, *Economic Basis*, pp. 52–54. Their notion of the historical role of merchant capital is derived from Maurice Dobb: *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, London 1946, and Paul Sweezy et al: *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism*, London 1978.

to a radiant (capitalist) future”.<sup>31</sup> That road was problematic in reality because the rule of capital did not fill the vacuum created by the removal of central Soviet ministerial control (Boldyrev’s “ministerial feudalism”). As Burawoy noted several years later, “instead of begging the party to organize material supplies, now enterprises begged the central bank or local government for cheap credit”.<sup>32</sup> The main “beggars” were enterprise directors who retained support of the labor collective so long as they were effective in bartering for/delivering the goods. Privatization was, in this sense, beside the point. Nominal owners of their enterprises, workers in many cases remained dependent on the strong boss (*khoziain*, *vozhd*) and the stronger the better. It is in this sense that the Soviet enterprise and the paternalistic relations between managers and workers that were fostered in the Soviet era intensified in the early post-Soviet years.<sup>33</sup>

This is not the place to determine whether Burawoy and Krotov’s historical analogy works equally well for all sectors of the post-Soviet Russian economy. It is possible that because the amount of capital needed for productive investment and renovation was prohibitively high in the case of coal and the future of the industry was so uncertain that mining management was particularly prone towards the pursuit of subsidies and reliance on bartering. Whatever the case, the argument they make is no less compelling when applied to newly independent Ukraine. There, arguably even more so than in Russia, the absence of radical economic reform left the old Soviet economic system intact and provided an enormous incentive for workers and enterprise directors to cooperate in extracting resources from the center.

This united front represented the most formidable challenge to the Ukrainian government’s exercise of the prerogatives of state power. In the case of the coal industry, that front took on a regional dimension. Both the Independent Miners’ Union of Ukraine (NPHU) and the Donetsk City Strike Committee joined with the production association heads and mine directors to defend the industry and the region in which it was dominant against the Kravchuk administration in Kyiv. Such a regionalist stance inevitably caused problems for the NPHU with its more nationalist L’viv-Volinsk branch located in the western part of the country, but this internal division was more than compensated by the support of other occupational groups in the Donbas.<sup>34</sup>

31 Burawoy and Krotov, *Economic Basis*, p. 64.

32 Michael Burawoy: *From Capitalism to Socialism: The Odyssey of a Marxist Ethnographer, 1975–1995*, in: *International Labor and Working-Class History* 50 (1996), p. 94.

33 See Simon Clarke: *Privatisation and the Development of Capitalism in Russia*, in: Simon Clarke et al. (ed.): *What About the Workers? Workers and the Transition to Capitalism in Russia*, London 1993, pp. 216–19; Petr Bizyukov: *The Mechanism of Paternalistic Management of the Enterprise: The Limits of Paternalism*, in: Simon Clarke (ed.): *Management and Industry in Russia: Formal and Informal Relations in the Period of Transition*, Aldershot 1995, pp. 99–125; Crowley, *Hot Coal, Cold Steel*, pp. 15–16, 155–56; Ashwin, *Russian Workers*, pp. 74–78, 124–25.

34 One scholar recently has written that the political demands put forward by the miners in June 1993 „enjoyed full support from both coal mining trade unions, mine managers and other industrialists, all the Donbas-based political parties and movements (from the Liberals to the Communists), local government officials, mass media and the majority of the region’s population.“ Vlad Mykhnenko:

The demand for regional autonomy that emerged in the course of 1992–93 had a variety of impulses, among them linguistic and cultural. But for the production associations and mining directors it was the economic component – especially the right to contract directly with Russian suppliers and customers and to import supplies duty-free – that was of utmost importance. Such did merchant capital give “rise to mercantilist politics, seeking protection, favorable terms of trade, taxation and so on”. In Russia, the “powerful political lobbies [created] to uphold the system of subsidies and credits” included the Civic Union and the Federation of Independent Trade Unions of Russia (FNPR). In Viktor Chernomyrdin, himself an oil and gas executive, the “directors’ lobby” had a friend in the prime minister’s office.<sup>35</sup> In Ukraine, the point man was Efim Zvyagil’skii.

Zvyagil’skii had served from 1979 as director of the Zasiad’ko mine, transforming it into one of the region’s most profitable enterprises and making him something of a legendary figure in Donetsk. So successful was he in taking advantage of opportunities presented by perestroika that Zasiad’ko’s workers remained on the job during the 1991 all-Union strike rather than jeopardize what he had gained for them in supplies, services, and amenities. In November 1992 he left the mine’s administration to become Donetsk’s mayor. Ironically, Zasiad’ko was the first mine to be shut down by a strike in June 1993 that soon engulfed the entire region. Zvyagil’skii, elevated temporarily to the position of deputy prime minister, was instrumental in bringing the strike to an end to the general (though not universal) satisfaction of strike leaders and rank-and-file miners.<sup>36</sup>

Fallout from the strike included the resignation of Kravchuk’s prime minister, Leonid Kuchma, and his temporary replacement by none other than Zvyagil’skii. The referenda on Kravchuk’s government demanded by strike leaders did not take place but instead both parliamentary (Verkhovna Rada) and presidential elections were scheduled for 1994. Opposition candidates with their economic base in the heavy and extractive industries and their geographical base in Eastern Ukraine made significant gains in the parliamentary elections in March; the narrow defeat of Kravchuk by Kuchma in June also represented a victory for these same interests.<sup>37</sup>

Or so it seemed. In fact, the capture of the state by the “wild eastern” Donbas “clan” was only partial and temporary. Zvyagil’skii, the archetypal nomenklatura capitalist, was charged

From Exit to Take-Over: The Evolution of the Donbas as an Intentional Community, Draft paper for Workshop No. 20, European Consortium for Political Research Joint Sessions of Workshops, 13–18 April 2004 Uppsala, Sweden, p. 27. Available at <[www.essex.ac.uk/espr/events/jointsessions/paperarchive/uppsala/ws20/Mykhnenko.pdf](http://www.essex.ac.uk/espr/events/jointsessions/paperarchive/uppsala/ws20/Mykhnenko.pdf)> (accessed 19.8.2004).

35 Burawoy and Krotov, *Economic Basis*, p. 65; Rick Simon: *Labour and Political Transformation in Russia and Ukraine*, Aldershot 2000, pp. 118, 137–38.

36 Simon, *Labour and Political Transformation*, pp. 150–54. The course of the strike, post-Soviet Ukraine’s most volatile, can be followed in the daily press. See for example *Delovaia Ukraina* (Kyiv), *Zhizn’* (Donetsk), *Vechernyi Donetsk* (Donetsk), and *Novosti i sobytia* (Donetsk). It was judged „the most successful contentious collective action of the Donbas protest movement“ by Mykhnenko, *From Exit to Take-Over*, p. 27.

37 T. Kuzio: *Kravchuk to Kuchma: The Ukrainian Presidential Elections of 1994*, in: *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 2 (1996), pp. 117–44.

with corruption and fled the country for Israel in 1994.<sup>38</sup> Soon after the presidential election, Kuchma replaced Donetsk personnel with those from his native Dnipropetrovsk region in central government positions. The next two years were characterized by a complex reshuffling among the Donetsk elite. New commercial ventures emerged, structured around energy trading and the buying up of metalwork companies that had failed to pay their energy bills. These maneuvers were accompanied by fierce struggles that included a series of spectacular contract killings.

But in addition to a shift of regional power away from the Donbas and elite conflict within it, something else was happening. Within a few years of having achieved extraordinary, even hegemonic power in the Donbas sufficient to rock political authorities in Kyiv, the miners' movement was fast fading into insignificance. This was mainly because the industry it had so successfully defended was literally crumbling. Between 1990 and 1995 as demand dwindled and the cost of producing coal rose perilously close to import prices, output declined from about 145 million to 65.6 million tons. Most of the subsidies received from the state had gone into paying (back)wages and maintaining services, so that there was little productive investment. Even more than in the 1980s, working in the mines of the post-independence Ukrainian Donbas comprised "a subsidized system of 'outdoor relief' or job subsidies". It also had become even more dangerous, with literally thousands of people killed on the job.<sup>39</sup>

In October 1994, President Kuchma launched his "western" policy of price and trade liberalization, strict monetary control, and accelerated privatization. He also brought in the World Bank to assess the condition of and prospects for the coal-mining industry. The World Bank's recommendations for closing "unviable" mines, selectively investing in others, and transferring resources out of the industry and even the area were reminiscent of the Thatcherite solution to which British miners had been subjected a decade earlier.<sup>40</sup> The romance of coal clearly was over.

The slashing of subsidies to the mining industry, justified by the government as an anti-inflationary measure, had the predictable effects of mounting wage arrears and a new cycle of protests. Strikes in February 1996 were massive, recalling those of July 1989 and 1993 but without bringing significant concessions. Protests of a more extreme kind – including the

38 He returned to Donetsk after his case was dismissed in 1997 and as of 2003 was still a member of parliament. For additional details about his business interests, see Kerstin Zimmer: *The Old Industrial Region Paradigm Re-visited: Donetsk Oblast' (Ukraine) throughout the 1990s*, in: *Regional Studies Association Conference: Reinventing Regions in a Global Economy*, Pisa, Italy, April 12–15, 2003, pp. 7, 12 at <[www.regional-studies-assoc.ac.uk/events/pisa03/zimmer.pdf](http://www.regional-studies-assoc.ac.uk/events/pisa03/zimmer.pdf)> (accessed 19.8.2004, cited with author's permission).

39 T. B. Reshetilova et al.: *Ugol'naia promyshlennost' v razvittii proizvoditel'nykh sil Ukrainy*, Moscow 1997, p. 98; International Energy Agency, *Energy Sector of Ukraine. 1996 Survey*, Paris 1996, pp. 157–58; Boris Dodonov: *Can Trade Unions Protect Ukrainian Miners' Rights?*, in: *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, Prague, Czech Republic RFE/RL (Un)Civil Societies 36 (4 September 2002), pp. 1–4 at (accessed 15.7.2004).

40 For details see Siegelbaum, *Freedom of Prices*, pp. 17–22; Simon, *Labour and Political Transformation*, pp. 159–64.

blocking of rail and road traffic – followed, provoking the arrest and prosecution of the leaders of the Donetsk City Strike Committee. “From then on”, writes Vlad Mykhnenko, a scholar and native son, “wildcat strikes, spontaneous hunger strikes and pickets became a daily occurrence in the Donbas”, accompanied more occasionally by “clashes with police, collective suicide threats and several committed protest suicides”.<sup>41</sup> The increasing desperation – and isolation – of the miners’ movement reflected the downward spiral of mine closures, out-migration of workers, and increasing anomie among the remaining population.

Kuchma’s 1999 re-election gambits of granting “free economic zone” status to Donetsk oblast’ and establishing “priority development territories” throughout the Donbas were quite successful in garnering votes. But the main beneficiaries were a new class of owners, less tied to the paternalistic practices of the old and more intricately connected to national sources of financing and property management. Their new commercial ventures consisted of vertically integrated, so-called financial industrial groups (FIGs) for which “the coal industry [is] purely (...) a source of cost-cutting opportunities for the more lucrative export-oriented metalworking industry”.<sup>42</sup> It thus would appear that at least two of the features identified by Burawoy and Krotov as characteristic of the “merchant capital” phase of the post-Soviet Russian economy – lateral (as opposed to vertical) exchanges, and the maintenance of welfare functions to sustain a workforce left in control of the production process – began to wither in Ukraine as the twentieth century drew to a close.

If this is so, what is in store for the miners of the Donbas and their movement? One rather pessimistic scenario is a replication of the situation in which, according to David Kideckel, Romanian miners have found themselves since 1989. In his view, rather than post-socialist, the term that best characterizes the social system and values that have come to dominate not only Romania but a good deal of East-Central Europe is “neo-capitalism”. This he defines as the reworking “of basic capitalist principles in new, even more inegalitarian ways than the Western model from which it derives. Like neo-serfdom”, he continues, in the so-called “long sixteenth century”, neo-capitalism involves the re-working of a Western prototype so as to establish a dependent hinterland in Central and Eastern Europe. As with neo-serfdom, under neo-capitalism the pace and extent of class differentiation exceeds the western experience. When capitalism was first extended east, the numerically dominant peasants were never granted the social benefits that came to characterize western capitalism and no strong middle class ever emerged. Under neo-capitalism we again see how narrow elites have been able to appropriate public resources and prevent their transparent, equitable distribution.

41 Vlad Mykhnenko: *State, Society and Protest under Post-communism: Ukrainian Miners and Their Defeat*, paper for the Political Studies Association – UIC 50<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference, 10–13 April 2000, London, pp. 17–19 at <[www.psa.ac.uk/cps/2000M.R.htm](http://www.psa.ac.uk/cps/2000M.R.htm)> (accessed 20 August 2004). For more on suicides, see *Suicides in Donbas attributed to economic hardships*, in: RFE/RL Poland, Belarus and Ukraine Report 26 (1999), p. 1 at (accessed 19 August 2004).

42 Zimmer, *The Old Industrial Region Paradigm*, pp. 10–12.

The consequences for workers are grim. Their “jobs and wages decline both absolutely and relative to the cost of living”, and they become either “degraded supplicants or (...) alienated antagonists”.<sup>43</sup>

Whether it makes more sense to conceive of the miners of the Donbas and their collective representation as confronted by forces analogous to fourteenth-century Western Europe or sixteenth-century Eastern Europe, clearly theirs has not been an easy lot since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Of course, much the same can be said for the overwhelming majority of other workers. What distinguished the miners, however, was not extraordinary privation but rather their sustaining of an “independent” movement determined to create a “normal life” for themselves and their families. Now increasingly demoralized and numbering no more than 400,000, they probably no longer have what it takes to continue to do so.

43 David A. Kideckel: *The Unmaking of an East-Central European Working Class*, in: C. M. Hann (ed.): *Postsocialism: Ideals, Ideologies and Practices in Eurasia*, London 2002, pp. 114–16.