White Rose Research Online

eprints@whiterose.ac.uk
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk
Universities of Leeds, Sheffield and York

Deposited via The University of Leeds.

White Rose Research Online URL for this paper:
https://eprints.whiterose.ac.uk/id/eprint/246777/

Version: Accepted Version

Article:
Hornsby, R. (Accepted: 2026) Building Communism: Student Construction Detachments in the Soviet Union, 1950-80s. Labor History. ISSN: 0023-656X (In Press)

This is an author produced version of an article accepted for publication in Labor History, made available via the University of Leeds Research Outputs Policy under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC-BY), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

Reuse
This article is distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence. This licence allows you to distribute, remix, tweak, and build upon the work, even commercially, as long as you credit the authors for the original work. More information and the full terms of the licence here:
https://creativecommons.org/licenses/

Takedown
If you consider content in White Rose Research Online to be in breach of UK law, please notify us by emailing eprints@whiterose.ac.uk including the URL of the record and the reason for the withdrawal request.

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS
University of Sheffield
UNIVERSITY of York

Title of article

Building Communism: Student Construction Detachments in the Soviet Union, 1950-80s

Author(s) name(s)

Professor Robert Hornsby

Affiliation for each author (university, place)

University of Leeds

Manuscript ID CLAH

Unknown

Email address (for each author; please identify the corresponding author)

r.hornsby@leeds.ac.uk

Full postal address (for each author)

Robert Hornsby, School of History, Michael Sadler Building, University of Leeds, West Yorkshire, LS2 9JT

Date of Submission:

05.10.2026 (final text)

Date of Acceptance:

27.09.2026

Autobiographical sketch

Robert Hornsby is Professor of Modern European History at the University of Leeds. He has published monographs with Cambridge University Press and Yale University Press, with a third book (on the post-Stalin Komsomol) scheduled for publication in 2028 with Oxford University Press, and has published articles in refereed journals including *Past and Present*, *Europe-Asia Studies*, *Journal of Contemporary History*, *Social History*, *Cold War History*, and *Contemporary European History*.

Acknowledgements (if any)
None

Funding details (if any)
None

Disclosure statement (if any)
None

Keywords (minimum 4, maximum 7)
Soviet, Communism, Construction, Youth, Students, Volunteers

Abstract (maximum 220 words, a single paragraph)

For three decades, from the late 1950s onwards, ever-growing numbers of Soviet students were mobilised to participate in construction work during the summer holidays. Student Construction Detachments laboured on myriad projects, from erecting and refurbishing schools and sports facilities through to building giant hydroelectric dams. In doing so, participants' labour served a variety of social and political purposes, beyond simply building. Initially framed in strictly ideological terms – as a means of moulding young participants through exposure to labour in the common good – in time, this became a sphere in which economic, rather political, impacts came to be prioritised by those in charge. Nonetheless, many who participated found real meaning in their work, even if this was not necessarily rooted in ideological considerations.

Building Communism:
Student Construction Detachments in the Soviet Union, 1950-80s

'You have to understand, this will not be like going to your mother-in-law's to eat pancakes'[1]

In the summer of 1959, a total of 339 Physics students from Moscow State University (MGU) headed out to northern Kazakhstan to work on 20 different construction projects, erecting living quarters, cattle sheds, a rabbit hutch and two hen-runs.[2] Soon winning the backing of political elites and the media, the Moscow students' initiative then spread around the country, and the Student Construction Detachment (SSO) burst into life as a socio-economic phenomenon. Already by the summer of 1962, around 10,000 students from Moscow, Leningrad and Kyiv volunteered, working on 128 different sites around the country.

What started as something of a free-wheeling, authentically grassroots affair steadily took on more concrete structure and regime oversight with the passing years, including a formal charter and year-round personnel for planning projects, recruiting volunteers and securing resources. In the summer months (sometimes referred to as the 'construction semester'), students were to be found dotted around the USSR renovating or building everything from schools and hospitals to sports facilities, railway lines and hydroelectric dams. By 1966, there were more than 100,000 SSO participants; by 1972 there were over 500,000 of them, working on over 13,000 projects. In 1977, almost 750,000 Soviet students participated in SSOs, whose remit by then included over 30,000 building projects across the country. By the middle of the 1980s, the movement's continuing expansion finally stalled as it approached 900,000 annual participants, with its collapse following soon after as the country embarked u

pon perestroika. In its scale, the work undertaken by the SSO movement was unmistakeably huge. Comprehensive figures are hard to come by, but internal Communist Youth League (Komsomol) reporting claimed that SSOs completed over one billion roubles worth of work in 1972 and were closing in on 2 billion roubles worth in 1981.[3]

The Komsomol and its members already had some considerable pedigree when it came to construction work. In October 1920, Lenin had emphasised the important role to be played by young communists in rebuilding their country's shattered economy after years of destruction and upheaval, insisting that labour devoted to the common cause was the prime route to making young men and women into communists.[4] The subsequent Stalin era also saw Komsomol members mobilised in large numbers for a variety of showpiece construction projects, like the Moscow metro and the new industrial town of Magnitogorsk (Neumann, 2013 and Bernstein, 2017). Perhaps most famously, in the summer of 1932, a team of several hundred Komsomol activists arrived at the banks of the Amur river in the Far East of Russia to begin clearing land, draining swamps, and founding the streets around which today's town of Komsomol'sk-na-Amure stands. Young communists were also close to the forefront of the mammoth reconstruction effort that followed the Second World War. In November 1943, for example, the Komsomol Central Committee pledged to despatch thousands of members to restore ruined coal mines in the Donbass region of Ukraine after its liberation from Nazi occupation, while more than 30,000 young Belarussians went to Minsk to help rebuild their republic's ruined capital at war's end (Desyaterik, 1969).[5]

The three decades that followed Stalin's death, in 1953, would also see the Komsomol and its members engaged in a plethora of building work outside of the SSO framework. The

construction of the leviathan Baikal-Amur Railway (BAM) from 1974 onwards was to be the most heralded of all Komsomol 'shock projects' (Ward, 2009), but it was nonetheless one of many. In the first instance, then, the SSO movement represents a case study within the wider socio-economic phenomenon of the Soviet regime drawing on youth labour for construction purposes. Nonetheless, in some important respects, SSOs were also a discrete facet of that broader trend. First, these were not time-limited mobilisations to meet specific exigencies, but an on-going process that ran (and grew) for three decades. They were also distinct in being organised around a very specific social constituency: students. Where other mobilisations tended to draw on volunteers with some background in construction, the participants here were most often would-be mathematicians, teachers, linguists and more, working in the summer holidays between years of academic study.

Drawing on archival documents from multiple former Soviet republics, as well as regime media and first-hand accounts of SSO work, this article focuses first on the ideological rationale around SSO activity, and then on the practical realities and outcomes. Most importantly, we see here the multiplicity of purposes that Komsomol members' labour served within the Soviet power structure. In the case of Student Construction Detachments in particular, labour was intended to advance social cohesion along several axes, and to foster greater personal investment in the Soviet socio-political order, along with its international entanglements.

Beyond the above, there are three further points to highlight. Firstly, the Student Construction Detachment phenomenon showcased the fact that the Komsomol's role within the Soviet system was evolving, albeit *sotto voce* for the most part, with economic and social responsibilities steadily supplanting 'ideological upbringing' of youth in some important

respects. Second, the vast number of students signing up for volunteer construction work, and the huge array of projects they undertook, did not necessarily indicate the great success story that political authorities habitually claimed; the SSO phenomenon also reflected, obscured and even exacerbated a range of important problems within the Soviet system. Lastly, while we know that the likes of *subbotniki* (volunteer work days to which citizens were intermittently expected to contribute) were often met with disdain and resentment on the ground, the SSO movement was a sphere in which many participants found real significance on a personal level, even though that tended not to be framed in overtly ideological terms (Golechkova and Chagadaeva, 2021).

A School of Communism

'For us, the construction semester was a real school of communist upbringing'.[6]

In April 1956, Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev addressed a Komsomol-sponsored conference of young workers in the construction industry and lambasted those youths who felt that they were 'too educated' for physical labour, insisting that such a notion 'must be condemned, ridiculed, and banished', before adding the reassuring note that 'we know our young people are not afraid of cold weather'.[7] The experience of such work could indeed be one that tested the mettle from the very outset. Many former SSO participants, for example, later described how even reaching their allocated worksites – plenty of which were literally thousands of kilometres away from home – involved days-long train journeys, followed by time on a boat or a plane, then hours spent on the back of a truck, and maybe also kilometres of trekking through wilderness, before finding only the most makeshift of accommodation waiting for them (Sushchinskaya, 2018).

Construction detachment members typically worked hard – often labouring from morning to night, with only occasional days off – and they were sometimes far from the nearest settlement of any kind. Most were young men, but plenty of women did participate. Although not exclusively so, work tended to be somewhat gendered, with female participants more likely to be involved in matters like cooking for the rest of the team, and keeping living quarters tidy, or else undertaking lower skilled work like stripping and sanding wood, while men did joinery and plastering, operated heavy machinery, and more (Kuzmin, 2021). For all the hardships they faced in the performance of such labour, however, plenty have described an alluring existence of working in nature alongside good friends, swimming in rivers and hiking in forests, with evenings spent by a campfire singing along to someone on the guitar, playing chess or coming up with entertaining skits (as well as suffering omnipresent midges and mosquitoes in various parts of the country) (Kuzmin, 2021).

The SSO movement was, as I demonstrate below, intended to serve an array of social, political and economic purposes. This remained the case throughout, from the 1950s to the 1980s, though the evidence indicates that Soviet authorities' thirst for relatively cheap and flexible labour would become the key driver in time. The rationale most consistently and explicitly foregrounded by the Communist Party and Komsomol, was that of 'moulding' the young generation into becoming the communists of the future through extended engagement in labour dedicated to the common good. In this connection, scholars have noted increasing regime anxiety in the post-Stalin years about educated youth in particular disdaining the kind of proletarian labour that theoretically served as the bedrock for Soviet power (Tromly, 2014). Supposedly 'gilded youth' and their mollycoddling parents, were repeatedly chastised in the

Komsomol press and elsewhere.[8] This, though, was just one of several fundamental concerns about the young generation. Proliferating points of contact with Western cultural products – such as clothes, music and movies – were similarly a source of anxiety for their ideological impact on post-war youth, who were often perceived by Soviet officialdom as worryingly naïve to the malign influences that emanated from such encounters with the bourgeois world. More broadly, the USSR was also part of a far wider trend of the post-war world in which political authorities in developed countries of all stripes fretted that the young generation had 'gone soft' or else was showing alarming signs of moral decay.

Importantly, however, Komsomol higher-ups of the mid-1950s were also very aware of growing frustration among grassroots members – many of whom would be greatly energised by Khrushchev's promise of an ideological reset, or 'return to Leninism', following the end of unadulterated Stalinism. Classified materials compiled ahead of the XII Komsomol congress in March 1954 showed an organisation whose lower levels were rife with resentment at the blizzard of resolutions and paperwork that emanated from above.[9] In his speech at the XX Communist Party congress in February 1956 Komsomol boss Aleksandr Shelepin conceded that there was still too much of a 'parade mentality' about Komsomol work, that too many young people were frustrated by the organisation's bureaucratic mentality, and asserted that youth should instead be pushed toward practical affairs in order to help raise the material and cultural level of society.[10] Shelepin was very much aware that more eager members were growing disenchanted by perceived Komsomol inactivity, with some questioning what they actually did as members, other than pay dues.[11] The dramatic expansion of Komsomol membership – as the organisation's fundamental purpose shifted from serving as a small vanguard of only the most ideologically committed youth, to an organ of mass socialisation – prompted similar complaints about the apparent dilution of ideological vigour. Activists at

MGU, for example, questioned whether many new recruits really understood the meaning of being in the Komsomol, and blamed the higher organs for allowing the grassroots to lose its way politically.[12]

An early Khrushchev-era bid to harness the apparent ideological value of labour took the form of a 1958 attempt to legislate that young people could only enter university after first spending a year in the workplace. This, though, met with considerable resistance and never really got off the ground (Courmel, 2009). Nonetheless, the Virgin Lands scheme that had begun back in 1954, and saw hundreds of thousands of young people volunteer to head out to Siberia and Kazakhstan to open up new lands for agriculture, had made apparent that there was plenty of appetite among youth to make their own contribution to the Soviet project. Indeed, Sergei Pavlov (who would become head of the Komsomol in the late 1950s) recalled during the glasnost years that 'the Virgin Lands breathed new life into the work of the Komsomol…taking it from paper matters to real work' (Aksiyutin, 1989, p. 202). While it is important here to add the caveat that, in reality, 'paper matters' and bureaucracy remained a central feature of Komsomol affairs until the very end, Pavlov's remarks were not simply those of a washed-up bureaucrat idealising his younger days.[13] While other attempts to mobilise society would meet with rather mixed results, and typically faded before too long, SSOs would continue and grow for more than a quarter of a century.

The SSO movement also offered young people valued opportunities for *romantika* – a concept that roughly approximated to a combination of adventure, challenge and comradeship (Vail' and Genis, 2013). One volunteer later recalled that she had not cared what work would be assigned to her team, but only wanted to head out deep into the unknown, while another

described his great disappointment at finding out that his brigade would be staying in (ostensibly more comfortable) barracks rather than tents (Kuzmin, 2021, p. 143). Mobilising young people for labour activity, then, was not simply an exploitative 'top down' policy direction serving regime wants and needs. During the Khrushchev years in particular, there was still plenty of ideological enthusiasm at the grassroots level, and this was matched by some distinctly utopian thinking at the highest levels (in particular, imagining that mobilisation of society for a wide range of public duties would be the force which eventually brought about the withering away of the state as the arrival of communism neared).

From the authorities' perspective, construction detachments also represented an excellent means of managing participants' free time in such a way as to prevent them from drifting into more undesirable directions – such as heavy drinking, hooliganism and listening to Western radio broadcasts – when seemingly idle during the holidays (Tsipursky, 2016). As a Sverdlovsk Komsomol review of work in higher education institutes noted: 'labour is one of the key forms of youth upbringing work. The political maturity of every young person is assessed above all by their attitude to labour'.[14] In a 1962 report on the growing number of Komsomol members in Armenia not in work or study, for example, it was soon asserted that 'it tends to be those who do not work who commit criminal acts and hooligan behaviours'.[15] Similarly, when the Urals State University (UrGU) Komsomol leadership was criticised for its members' apparent political passivity, regional bosses made clear the direct link they saw between students' lack of public work and escalating problems of drunkenness, amoral behaviour, and pessimism in several university faculties.[16]

Komsomol reports on youth construction activity confidently asserted that such work provided valuable life lessons and 'built personal qualities in youth, inculcated morals and a sense of public duty'.[17] Such discourse about SSO work as a 'school of communism' was a staple. Indeed, one former participant from Karelia recalled that parents of 'difficult' teenagers would sometimes beg for their children to be enrolled in SSOs in the hope that it would straighten them out (Shleikin, 2013, p. 249). Reports from the 1960s emphasised that volunteers were expected to live according to the Moral Code of the Builder of Communism – a set of precepts on how to conduct oneself that was a centrepiece of the XXII Party congress in 1961 – and to provide an example to others by being at all times tidy in appearance, modest in conduct, friendly with local workers and active in cultural work. Drinking alcohol and playing cards, for example, were in some quarters considered a sufficiently serious breach of discipline to be expelled from one's detachment (with potentially serious consequences to follow).[18] How frequently detachment leaders chose in practice to overlook such infractions, whether because offenders were friends or because detachments simply needed all of the labour they could access, is impossible to know. In fact, with news of SSO participants' great deeds regularly featured in the youth media, as well as district and town-level festivities when detachments departed and returned, and occasionally celebrated in show piece events like a 1966 rally at the Kremlin, they also served to communicate messages to Soviet youth more broadly about how to be a Soviet citizen. In that sense, participants also represented a new youth vanguard fit for mass emulation.

The evidence nonetheless makes clear that by no means all of those who undertook volunteer construction work were appropriately shaped by the experience. Plenty of participants were expelled from their detachments and sent home each year over disciplinary matters. Also, as the MGU Komsomol ruefully noted in the mid-1960s, it was often not possible to maintain the

enthusiasm and energy of summer work throughout the rest of the year. Even those who were active student builders during the holidays could revert to being politically disengaged once back in their university dorms. One report from MGU, for example, named four students who returned from construction work and promptly spent all of their earning on 64 bottles of vodka, dedicating themselves to consuming the whole lot over the course of the following month.[19] A former SSO supervisor also recalled drinking, fighting and even 'free love' taking place at his construction site, until he managed to arrange more appropriate recreation opportunities (which included creating a dormitory library and persuading some writers to visit and give talks) (Shleikin, 2013, p. 182).

Strikingly, few former participants in SSO work have since framed their experience with reference to the construction of communism. It feels important in this respect to point out that the opening quotation of this section is taken from an official Komsomol report, which would have been expected to reproduce the authorities' discourse. Instead, plenty of accounts – especially retrospective ones from the years following the Soviet collapse – rooted the significance of their efforts in notions of patriotism rather than ideology. One volunteer, for example, later recalled that 'the future of the country was more important for us than any kind of troubles in daily life' (Titaev, 2018, p. 94). Another, from the city of Saratov, went even further, expressing the view that construction detachments were 'the best possibility to prove yourself, to build the country with your own hands and to feel yourself part of some great and unbelievably important affair' (Kuzmin, 2021, p. 7).

No less important, many of those who have since provided reminiscences about SSO work have spoken of the experience as being among the happiest and most fulfilling times of their

life (Kuzmin, 2021). It is important to note in this context that those who have left recollections of their time with SSOs have tended to be among the participants who felt most positive about the experience (this is also true of Komsomol memoir material more broadly). With this point in mind, we can say that such recollections might well have represented the lived reality for the individuals in question, albeit with perhaps a certain amount of elision and nostalgia for one's salad days thrown in, but not necessarily for everyone who participated, especially since the day-to-day realities could clearly be challenging. Like many others, Vladimir Arkhipenkov, from Smolensk, wrote of how SSO work had given him 'a ticket to life' as he learned skills and made enduring friendships (Novikov, 2011, p.77). Lyudmila Panina described her experience of SSO work in 1967 and 1969 simply as 'fantastic and unforgettable' (Kuzmin, 2021, p. 216). This represents a notable contrast to the much-resented *subbotniki* of the same era. Others made lifelong friends – in Russia at least, plenty of former participants still hold regular reunions today – and even found love: Tatyana Bakshit, for example, recalled that three couples from her construction detachment later married (Kuzmin, 2021, p. 163).

It is worth noting that SSO participants were not volunteers in the sense of the work being unpaid. Indeed, there were also a number who participated not entirely of their own accord, as recruitment targets steadily increased over the years, meaning Komsomol officials at the ground level could face pressure to drum up the necessary number of students.[20] This was, of course, an underlying theme of mass volunteering and giving throughout the Khrushchev era and beyond, including activities like citizen policing units, volunteer labour days and donations to various solidarity funds, with some responding eagerly, others doing so with a certain amount of resigned grumbling, and a few having been overtly pressured into action. In the case of SSOs, however, the archival and memoir evidence suggests that those joining under duress

were rather few in number. It seems likely that this was in large part a product of the material rewards on offer.

Money was a theme that authorities tended not to trumpet in this respect, and it seemingly was rarely a key motivation for early volunteers (Gerasimova, 2019, p. 272), but it came to matter more as the years passed. Data on earnings accrued by Ukrainian detachments from Lviv during 1966 show one team with members earning an average of 7.8 roubles per day, while another (which presumably managed to get more work completed) pulled in an average of 9.8 roubles per person per day.[21] By the mid-1970s payment for SSO work was increased to ensure that participants earned at least 50% of the average wage for the work in question.[22] At a time when there were relatively few legitimate ways for students to earn money to top up meagre stipends, which genuinely afforded little more than a breadline existence in many cases, construction volunteers could earn enough over the summer to cover much of the academic year ahead.

Even those who would later frame their SSO experience primarily in terms of patriotism and making a contribution to the greater good were also liable to remember the money. As V.I Fedorov, an SSO participant and former Komsomol official from the Perm region later described it, this was 'big work, necessary work, and to be honest, remunerative work!' (Neganov, 2018, p. 646). In her interview with Donald Raleigh, 'Natalya P' recalled that for students from poorer backgrounds there was some considerable competition to take part in student construction brigades because the money was so good (Raleigh, 2006, p. 107). In his 'getting to know me' book released on first becoming President, Vladimir Putin also wrote that he had earned 'fantastic money' during a month and a half spent on construction work in Komi as a young man (Putin, 2000, p. 30). However, by the 1980s, the KGB was sufficiently

concerned about the 'moral climate' in some Student Construction Detachments that it was working to expand the number of undercover agents deployed in this milieu. One subsequent conclusion insisted that the emphasis on offering material stimuli for participation was ultimately preventing construction detachments from becoming a proper school of communist labour – instead making them simply a way to earn money in the summer.[23]

Alongside exerting positive ideological influence on young people, SSOs were also used to help strengthen social cohesion. In the first instance, this could be seen in regard to relations between different national groups of the USSR: perhaps the single most significant fault-line beneath Soviet communism. As in Yugoslavia, where the Tito regime of the 1940s and 1950s brought together for construction work young Serbs, Bosnians, Croats and others in order to help heal bitter tensions leftover from the extensive ethnic violence of the war years, Student Construction Detachments aimed to strengthen bonds between the Russians, Georgians, Lithuanians, Kazakhs and others who participated (Baković, 2015).

To facilitate blossoming friendship, areas and enterprises receiving Komsomol volunteers were expected to organise gala celebrations for their arrival and departure and to publicise their achievements in the local media.[24] Perhaps most notable in regard to different Soviet national groups was the all-union detachment named in honour of Yuri Gagarin, and based out of his hometown in the Smolensk region of Russia (renamed from Gzhatsk to Gagarin after the cosmonaut's death in 1968). One former SSO official recalled that the detachment was 'definitely a brotherhood of union republics, not in words but in deeds', with camps holding days in honour of different Soviet republics each weekend, showcasing their cuisine, music, dances and more (Novikov, 2011, p. 65). Similarly, a Latvian propaganda piece on life in the

BAM zone eulogised about how volunteers there spoke to each other in 8 different languages, but there were 'no arguments about national roots, or the shape of eyes…, they talked of how Azeri speech was so melodic, of how Ukrainians sing so beautifully' insisting that 'it was worth going so far just to learn these things' (Bondarevs, 1985, p. 359).

In addition to grassroots bonds between participants, the SSO movement also represented a way to manifest narratives about fraternal support between Soviet peoples. Estonian Komsomol reports from 1968, for example boasted of student detachments from the likes of Moscow, Riga, Rostov, Baku, Dushanbe, Karaganda, and Ashgabat active in their republic that year, working on 70 different building projects.[25] One former SSO participant and official later recalled of his time labouring in Kazakhstan that 'many different nationalities stood shoulder to shoulder, developed comradeship, respect and mutual help' (Sushchinskaya, 2018, p. 159). Of course, what many Russians in particular understood in that context was not always perceived the same way by other peoples of the Soviet Union, many of whom were highly attuned to any hints at Russian (or Slavic) seniority or Russification that might accompany incoming student builders.

Most prominent in this respect was the way in which detachments were mobilised in response to the Tashkent earthquake in summer 1966 (see below). The national dynamic of Komsomol efforts to reconstruct the Uzbek capital was illustrated by the fact that SSO teams despatched from the likes of Kyiv, Lviv, Luhansk and Dnipro rebuilt a city district that was henceforth known (according to Komsomol reports) as 'Ukraine'.[26] After young people from across the USSR had participated in a three-year drive to rebuild the city, a subsequent history of the Uzbek Komsomol proclaimed an immense 'feeling of gratefulness for their brotherly support'

(Yusupov, 1985, p. 273). Official coverage and reports were, of course, expected to deal in such platitudes, and it is far from clear how ordinary people in Tashkent felt, not least since construction teams apparently pulled down much of the surviving built heritage as they remade it into a modern Soviet city (Muzafari, 202, p. 110).

As with other instances of what were presented by political authorities as manifestations of friendship between Soviet nationalities, there is an element to which we might think of such work not simply in terms of fraternal benevolence, but also as 'Sovietising' with (mostly) urban Slavs reshaping distant corners of the country according to directions from Moscow (Pohl, 2014). At various sites there were occasional tensions and culture clashes between incoming builders and locals, with the former sometimes perceived by the latter in a colonial context (Bahovadinova, 2018, p. 279). Detachment members from the Chechen-Ingush and Kabardino-Balkaria Komsomol organisations were noted in KGB reports to have developed hostile relations that ended in group fights with locals in Altai krai: something which also happened with a number of Georgian youth volunteers in Komi. KGB informants among SSOs in the early 1980s reported Estonian youth working on a construction site in Western Siberia singing anti-Soviet songs and refusing to mix with Russian, Uzbek and Chuvash youth at the site.[27]

We might also connect Student Construction Detachments to wider questions of social cohesion via the context of writing the young people of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras into broader Soviet narratives of heroism and sacrifice. One of those who volunteered for work at Tajikistan's Nurek Dam, for example, later spoke of feeling there that his own destiny was connected to that of the whole country, and his place in society was confirmed as a result of such labour (Bahovadinova, 2018, p. 277). In fact, heroics in labour were increasingly parcelled

together with great deeds in war and revolution by the 1960s. Volunteering for construction projects – whether near or far – was presented as a service to the motherland which could merit mention alongside the most celebrated icons of the Soviet pantheon, like Nikolai Ostrovskii, Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya, and Yuri Gagarin. The 'construction semester' in 1980 was explicitly linked to the thirty-fifth anniversary of victory in the Great Patriotic War, with propaganda slogans such as 'From military heroics to labour heroics!' making explicit the link of valour across generations.[28] Discourse on the Komsomol-led construction of the massive VAZ car plant in the Kuibyshev region during the 1970s declared that 'VAZ is our Dneproges, our Komsomol'sk, our Magntika' (Rybakov, 1974, p. 354).[29] Conversely, in terms of chronology, when the new Volgograd hydroelectric power station, which had begun life as a Komsomol tent city, commenced operation in 1961, the cosmonaut German Titov attended the grand opening as guest of honour and announced to those present that 'there shall come a time when Komsomol tents will be erected in the cosmos' (Yaskovets, 2009, p. 21).

This was also a sphere in which the Komsomol was able to champion its own historic deeds as an organisation, linking the achievements of contemporaneous communist youth with those of their celebrated forebears. The 1979 season of student construction work, for example, was dedicated to celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Virgin Lands campaign, including lots of public celebrations with surviving Virgin Landers, describing the latter's efforts as 'the first page in the biography of our Student Construction Detachments'. In Ukraine that year, the Komsomol held celebratory meetings with veterans of the SSO movement, including those from the very first cohorts, honouring them with awards and exchanging reflections on the movement's evolution. By 1984 the SSO movement's quarter-century was widely marked, including celebratory meetings between contemporary student construction volunteers and those of earlier decades, with the year's 'construction semester' also used to mark the sixtieth

anniversary of Lenin's name being attached to the Komsomol (it's full title being the 'All-Union Leninist Communist Union of Youth').[30]

Alongside bolstering social cohesion within the USSR, student construction work was also harnessed to reinforce ties between youth of the European socialist bloc. Regimes throughout the camp during the post-Stalin years came to place growing significance on the need to strengthen grassroots friendship and co-operation between their peoples as a foundation on which long-term stability and prosperity could be based (Applebaum, 2015). As one report on a party of Soviet volunteers who went to Yugoslavia to help build a highway along the Adriatic coast stated: 'road building helps to create solidarity'.[31] By the later part of the 1960s this notion was amply reflected in the growing volume of international exchanges of youth construction teams. Tallinn Polytechnic, for example, was by 1969 doing exchanges of construction detachments with Prague Higher School of Economics and with Budapest Technical University, and looking to find new partners in either Bulgaria or the GDR, while Tartu State University operated exchanges with Debrecen State University and with Krakow State University.[32] In 1970, the Lithuanian Komsomol sent volunteers for work on the construction of an atomic energy plant in East Germany and a new Fiat car plant in Poland. [33] In 1971, it sent almost 270 members out to fraternal countries of the bloc to participate in construction projects for two to three weeks, accompanied by local media propaganda in host countries on Soviet good will and fraternal support.[34]

Internal Komsomol documents were entirely explicit in presenting such exchanges as a valuable means of 'strengthening friendship' and 'propagandising the achievements of mature socialism' among youth elsewhere in the bloc.[35] Official data showed that between 1966 and

1970, a total of 13,604 members went abroad to participate in student construction exchanges. Between 1970 and 1974 that figure almost doubled, reaching 26,090: a clear indication this was deemed a successful enterprise.[36] Outgoing Komsomol volunteers were expected to tell their hosts about Soviet achievements in fields like education and labour, to explain Soviet domestic and foreign activity, and generally to showcase the best of Soviet youth. In turn, Soviet hosts were supposed to learn about the 'revolutionary, military and labour traditions' of allied states. Such interaction was described by Komsomol officials as both a vital means of fighting against Western anti-communist propaganda aimed at Eastern Europe and as a means of raising Soviet youth 'in a spirit of proletarian internationalism'.[37]

While Komsomol officials regularly insisted that working 'shoulder to shoulder' with comrades from other parts of the socialist world represented a vital means of building proletarian internationalism, this was not always the case in reality.[38] Participants typically laboured and lived cheek-by-jowl, eating together and spending long evenings sat round campfires, singing songs and talking. These were conditions in which authentic and enduring friendships could and did spring up. Nonetheless, as other scholars have already noted, grassroots friendship with young people from other parts of the socialist camp could still prove problematic at times, from the Soviet regime's perspective in particular (Applebaum, 2015). For example, Yuri Masyukov described how his detachment spent the summer of 1968 working alongside Czech and Slovak comrades, discussing at length the latest developments of the Prague Spring – realising, for example that there was really nothing anti-Soviet in the reformists' 'Two Thousand Words' manifesto that was so bitterly denounced in the Soviet media – and then feeling mortified on behalf of their new friends when Warsaw Pact forces invaded their homeland toward the end of that same summer (Kuzmin, 2021, p. 164).

Of course, practical experience on the ground did not always point to bonds being formed. One team of students from Kyiv went to Czechoslovakia to help build roads in the summer of 1966 and got plenty of work done during their two-week sojourn, but noted that they laboured almost in isolation, and hardly encountered any locals at all whilst in situ. Teams of students who went from universities in Kharkiv to projects in both Czechoslovakia and Hungary that summer reported exactly the same thing.[39] A party from Czechoslovakia who found themselves labouring on a Soviet collective farm absolutely hated the experience. After their first week of moving rocks and concrete, the group complained that they were 'very tired' and began to refuse further work, with one of the Czechs declaring the whole exercise a tyranny that was 'not a student detachment, but a concentration camp'. Soviet hosts, in turn, complained at apparently 'negative impacts' that these guests brought with them, lamenting that they habitually stayed up late drinking, openly displayed Western cultural influences, and criticised Soviet international activity.[40] Such encounters could also expose outsiders to some of the underwhelming realities on the ground inside the Soviet Union. In 1978, for example, an international detachment including Soviet, Bulgarian, Hungarian, East German and Polish youth at Bratsk hydroelectric station reported having lost over 60% of working time during their first ten days because jobs and resources had not been correctly prepared in advance.[41]

The ideological remit of SSO work also stretched beyond the borders of the European socialist bloc at times. Many of the students from the Global South studying in Soviet higher education institutions who did not want to (or could not) return to their home countries during the summer break tended to be pushed toward participating in student construction work instead, in order to keep them busy (Krasovitskaya, 2013). In 1979, for example, there were among SSO

participants at least a few people each from Rwanda, Ethiopia, Benin, Vietnam, Peru, Venezuela, Algeria, Palestine, Iraq, India, Chile and more.[42] Principally intended to help engender a sense of solidarity with anti-imperialist struggles elsewhere in the world, and thus to embed a suitably internationalist worldview among Soviet participants, these encounters could also prove ineffective and even backfire at times. KGB reports from 1984, for example, noted that some of the 12,000 foreigners at work on Komsomol construction projects around the country that year were proving disruptive. Some were apparently engaging in illegal trade by selling off all manner of foreign goods, while others brought transistor radios on which they openly listened to foreign broadcasts. Such behaviours were said to be going without a suitably strict response specifically because the offenders in question were foreign, and therefore any attempt to subject them to formal discipline offered the potential for unwanted diplomatic complications.[43]

Meeting targets

Without question, the vast Komsomol membership – the total enrolment climbed from around 18 million at the time of Stalin's death to over 40 million in the early 1980s – came to represent an increasingly important source of labour for the Soviet regime to draw upon. In February 1956, for example, the Communist Party called on young communists across the country to help develop industry and agriculture in Siberia, and as many as 500,000 young people were soon setting off to build power stations, metallurgical works, coalmines, chemical and synthetics industries, oil refineries and railroads.[44] The 1960s then saw Komsomol volunteers working on construction of the giant VAZ car plant at Tolyatti, as well as building enormous

hydroelectric dams at the likes of Bratsk, Volgograd, and Sayanogorsk (Tuguzhenkova, 2008, Kalinovsky, 2018).

By the 1970s, requests 'from above' (most often from the Communist Party or government ministries) for volunteers were sometimes wholly unambiguous in stating how important Komsomol labour had become. When the Ministry of Energy and Electrification asked that the Komsomol put out a call for volunteers for the construction of a new energy complex at Ekibastuz during April 1976, officials were, in private communications, blunt in stating that 'this is a huge job without a workforce. Tens of millions of roubles are involved each year. Without the wide participation of young people and the VLKSM (Komsomol) this crucial task cannot be resolved'.[45] The same ministry wrote again in January 1977 asking for volunteers for various projects in Smolensk *oblast'* , including construction of an atomic energy plant, noting that a shortage of workers on site meant that production targets were being missed and rising energy demands in the region therefore could not be met.[46] That same month also saw appeals for the Komsomol to send members to help build a tractor factory in Taganrog, a plastics factory in Stavropol (with the request signed by local Party boss M.S. Gorbachev), a hydroelectric plant in Krasnodar, and more besides.[47]

The continual growth of the SSO movement has to be understood within this wider picture. We have already seen that the ideological benefits accrued (from a regime perspective) were not necessarily compelling in reality. The evidence suggests that the driving force behind the continual expansion of the SSO movement soon became the inverse of that seen in Tito's Yugoslavia. Instead of prioritising the ideological 'moulding' of young people, the Komsomol (and presumably also the Communist Party, which supervised and directed it) came to value

the apparent economic benefits of such work most of all. This tension between ideological and economic motivations generally did not have tangible impacts on the ground outside of the continued expansion of the movement, but it arguably did speak of a system shedding its revolutionary impulses as the decades wore on. In fact, one might posit that this shift toward a more materialistic (rather than ideological) motivation on the authorities' part ultimately brought them into sync with participants. In the first instance, this shift reflected a wider evolution in the Komsomol's raison d'être, as it steadily became more 'business-oriented' across the post-Stalin years, seeking to expand income streams and make growing contributions to regime economic plans. Nonetheless, although SSO contributions were clearly substantial by any measure, they were also problematic. Perhaps most importantly, while the output data showed tremendous amounts of construction work racked up, this ultimately represented a continuing reliance on the kind of cheap and inefficient labour that characterised extensive growth, rather than the intensive growth through increased efficiency that the Soviet economy badly needed by the 1960s.[48]

As the 1976 request for the Komsomol to send volunteers to Ekibastuz touched upon, the post-Stalin years were a time in which labour shortages were increasingly starting to bite inside the USSR (Filtzer, 1992). Nowhere was this truer than in the construction industry: a point that was perhaps not entirely unrelated to the curtailment of previous reliance on the forced labour of gulag inmates. School construction offered a clear example of the problem. A 1953 education reform that decreed a minimum seven years of schooling for all Soviet children ultimately meant that the country needed almost twice as many schools as it already had.[49] Money was allocated for this, but school construction targets were nonetheless missed badly in many places: figures for 1954, for example, showed only 44% of the plan being fulfilled in Russia; 37.5% in Moldavia and only 18.2% in Kyrgyzstan (Ivanova, 2018, p. 80). Much of this was

down to inability to meet the labour needs involved, especially in rural areas. Once Khrushchev launched his ambitious bid to overcome the country's crippling housing shortage within a decade, during the second half of 1957 (Smith, 2010 and Harris, 2013), the situation only worsened in regard to demand for workers in construction.

Some of the construction projects that the Komsomol got involved in were local and relatively small, such as erecting housing blocks, cultural centres and summer camps, but others were truly vast undertakings. By the 1960s and 1970s, Komsomol volunteers were participating in such critical tasks as the development of new oil and gas fields around Tyumen and Tomsk, the construction of the BAM railway in Siberia, the opening up of the Arctic North (Prishchepa and Bycherov, 2021), and the digging of vast new irrigation networks, and gas pipelines for Central Asia. More and more clearly, the economic role of the Komsomol was moving to the fore. By 1972, one Komsomol textbook informed readers that 'the key task today is mobilising youth for successful fulfilment of the ninth five-year plan' (Minailov, 1972, p. 5).

From the authorities' perspective, one great strength of Komsomol involvement in the construction sphere – aside from the huge scale of the potential labour pool – was the fact that it presented a flexibility and quickness rarely possible in the deeply bureaucratic process of Soviet labour allocation. The best example to cite here lay in the response to the earthquake that flattened much of central Tashkent near the end of April 1966. The youth newspaper *Komsomol'skaya pravda* promised the next day that there would be a 'quick and intensive' drive to overcome the consequences of the quake.[50] Taking responsibility for rebuilding housing, children's facilities and transport infrastructure in the city, the Komsomol Central Committee called on regional and republican branches to encourage their best members to

volunteer, and within days dispatched over 1,700 young builders to Uzbekistan. Soon it was proudly reporting on Komsomol members flowing into the city from all parts of the USSR, with volunteers from universities in Russia, Ukraine, Belorussia and elsewhere immediately vying with one another in labour contests as they fought to rebuild the Uzbek capital.[51] By mid-October, the Ukrainian Komsomol alone had sent over one thousand young construction workers to Tashkent.[52]

Ability to move quickly was not the only benefit of Komsomol labour. Unlike regular workers, Student Construction Detachments did not necessarily need accommodation waiting for them on arrival. As the quote from Nikita Khrushev at the opening of this article shows, there was even a certain amount of revelling in tough conditions: a discourse that suggested hardships encountered would be the making of those involved. Calls for young people to volunteer for construction work in Karelia, for example, were explicit in framing the work as an opportunity to test one's mettle in the harsh conditions of northern Russia.[53] Some of those organisations seeking to draw upon Komsomol labour were, in private communications, quite open that regular workers either did not want to come to far-flung parts of the country, or else turned out on arrival to be unsuitable. In 1962, for example, a letter came in to the Komsomol Central Committee from the Communist Party organisation in remote Magadan (a former hotspot of Gulag forced labour) bemoaning the fact that a small population and hard living conditions in the region meant they were always short of workers, duly asking the Komsomol to send 3,000 volunteers.[54] Tellingly, the letter added that many non-Komsomol workers who came to the region to work each year turned out to be 'drunks, slackers and others of low moral character' who often proved a bad influence in the workplace – Komsomol volunteers were described as much preferable.[55] The reasons for this are not hard to discern. Commonplace infractions that blighted the Soviet labour force but were habitually overlooked by bosses keen not to lose the

personnel they had, such as absenteeism, theft and workplace drunkenness, could have much more serious consequences in the hands of Komsomol authorities. Offences such as turning around and heading home without permission – presumably a perpetual temptation in hard conditions especially – could result in a formal reprimand or even expulsion for a Komsomol member, which might well have lifelong impacts (not least, expulsion from one's place of study, followed thereafter by dashed aspirations for prestigious careers, foreign travel and more). Indeed, even failing to meet one's work targets could be subsequently reflected in a character reference that might harm future prospects for work or study (Mishenin, 2009, p. 156).

In reality, Komsomol labour also featured plenty of the failings seen elsewhere in the Soviet economy. Over the years, multiple reports claimed that many members were doing work 'in name only'. In 1961, for example, *Komsomol'skaya pravda* informed readers that a Komsomol construction brigade in Tajikistan was guilty of systematically filing false data on plan fulfilment.[56] Student Construction Detachments' work in the Chuvash SSR saw instances of mass drunkenness, theft of funds, and data inflation (falsifying output figures), as well as brawls, refusals to work, and the theft of 30 tonnes of cement.[57] There were also rampant inefficiencies, such as the party of students sent to work on the construction of Moscow's ring-road (MKAD), where 800 volunteers were dispatched for a job that needed 400 pairs of hands at most (Gerasimova, 2019, p. 269). Local Party and construction bosses at the Nurek dam project in Tajikistan were often hard pressed to figure out what to do with the large pool of unskilled labour arriving on Komsomol orders, often with little or no construction experience (Bahovadinova, 2018, p. 283). In fact, one former SSO participant recalled of his detachment that it was practically only the foreman who had ever held an axe in his hands before, while

another who was assigned to a team building a rural school admitted that ‘none of us had any experience or skills’ (Kuzmin, 2021, p. 41).

Even worse, the ready availability of low-cost labour from other parts of the country may also have enabled authorities in likes of Tajikistan (where education and skill levels were generally lower) to avoid spending money and time on training up local people for such work (Bahovadinova, 2018, p. 287). Worst of all, the dissident Andrei Amalrik recalled of his period spent in internal exile on a collective farm in the Tomsk region that student construction teams which visited were not only unproductive but also did such poor quality work that, in one instance, a cowshed they had built promptly collapsed and killed a milkmaid (Amalrik, 1971, p. 176).

Although participants typically did some initial safety training, it is worth bearing in mind here that construction was distinctly dangerous work – especially with inexperienced comrades felling trees with chainsaws, using heavy construction machinery and more. Unsurprisingly, then, former participants have described both serious accidents and near misses. In 1973, more than 550 SSO participants were sent home for breaches of safety regulations (and we can only guess how many others escaped punishment for such breaches) (Sushchinskaya, p. 160). In fact, plenty of members of Student Construction Detachments would be killed in the course of their work. The former SSO regional supervisor Vladimir Arkhipenkov recalled years later that ‘unfortunately, one or two people died each season – sometimes more’ (Novikov, 2011, p. 77). Other first-hand accounts, however, have suggested that it was not one or two, but tens of volunteers who died each year (Sushchinskaya, 2018, p. 160). Figures from 1984 also show

several hundred volunteers hospitalised that year: some with infectious diseases, but most with injuries.[58]

Although rooted in the mass volunteerism that was a hallmark of the Khrushchev years, the SSO movement kept on growing long after his forced departure from the Kremlin. This was a reflection not of any substantial continuation of Khrushchev-era utopian thinking about volunteerism, but of the fact that the movement helped to resolve pressing labour needs. One of Leonid Brezhnev's signature policy areas – rural uplift – drew especially heavily on Komsomol labour. Outlining plans for Komsomol volunteers to build 10,000 rural schools and a further 8,000 clubs and houses of culture, in 1966 Brezhnev told young communists that 'the village, like never before, now needs young hands and youthful energy' (Brezhnev, 1966, p. 11). Work done by SSOs in 1967, which apparently included building 250,000 square metres of rural housing space, 110 clubs for young people, laying 5,600 km of electricity lines, 3,300 km of telephone lines and 75 km of railway lines was thus described in official Komsomol publications as a 'jubilee gift to workers of rural regions' (Desyaterik, 1969, p. 235).

SSO members did more than just construction work. Students from Moscow Energy Institute, for example, spent five summers in Siberia connecting farms and population centres up to the electricity grid, and erecting over 2000 km of electricity lines to around 15,000 homes and enterprises (Desyaterik, 1968, p. 188). Aside from their building work, Belarussian students in the north of Kazakhstan during summer 1963 gave over 300 lectures (on politics, science and literature) and over 250 concert performances, as well as organising tournaments for locals in football, basketball and swimming.[59] An all-female detachment of students engaged in motorway construction in Sverdlovsk *oblast'* in 1970 also gave basic medical training to locals

in their free time.[60] In this context, we see the Komsomol being deployed to cover more and more gaps in Party and state provision with the passing years.

At the end of the 1960s the Komsomol began one of its biggest mobilisation drives, entitled 'Komsomol – to the rural school'. Announced on 11 March 1969, the Komsomol Central Committee demanded that every Komsomol primary organisation help strengthen the material-technical base of rural schools in order to fulfil the aim of achieving universal middle education for all Soviet youth, erecting or refurbishing school buildings and collecting supplies like library books. As ever, official figures from the ensuing campaign are fragmentary, but they are nonetheless instructive. N.N. Nabalova shows that in Western Siberia alone the years 1969-70 saw Komsomol teams build 59 schools from scratch, put another 79 into operation and carry out renovation works on a further 582 schools. Additionally, they built almost 600 'sports squares', 400 specialised classrooms (such as photography darkrooms and science laboratories) and 250 youth camps (Nabalova, 2013, p. 36). The Belarussian Komsomol Central Committee reported in January 1971 that its members who participated in the campaign the previous year built 72 new schools and refurbished 207 existing ones, and erected 300 sports squares.[61] A subsequent history of the Uzbek Komsomol claimed similarly impressive figures for the year 1973, stating that its members had helped build 250 school buildings, 560 boarding houses and 946 student dormitories (Yusupov, 1985, p. 309). It is of course important to retain a certain scepticism about the accuracy of such figures, since there were also problems of data inflation in this sphere, as touched upon above. Nonetheless, if even a fraction of this work is scaled up to an all-union level, it becomes clear both how important this Komsomol labour was becoming, and how far provision of such work had moved toward the centre of its purpose as an organisation.

While this evolution was undoubtedly driven from above, it does not necessarily have to be read solely in terms of exploitation. While many had bucked against Khrushchev's abortive attempt to force young people to spend time undertaking manual labour before they could be admitted to higher education, there nonetheless was an appetite for opportunities to gain practical labour experience (and to earn money). Sociological surveys of youth attitudes (Grushin, 2001) conducted during the early 1960s showed that many members believed developing young people's vocational skills and qualifications – rather than simply guiding their political upbringing – should be one of the key priorities of the Komsomol. In that respect, SSOs offered opportunities that were genuinely valued by many (if not necessarily all). Yuri Ponomarev looked back on his own time serving in SSOs with pride, noting that he had learned multiple trades – including carpentry, plastering, decorating, and masonry – in just three years (Shleikin, 2013, p. 220). It is worth adding in this context that plenty of those who participated in detachments as students would later go on to build careers in construction, sometimes rising to very high rank in the process.

Naturally, this opening up of new career horizons did not prove to be the case for all SSO participants. One group of 600 Belorussian Komsomol members returned early from construction work in Khabarovsk thoroughly disenchanted that promises made to them had not been fulfilled, complaining that they had all wanted to gain professional skills but only 107 actually acquired a trade (others were left doing only the most low-skilled manual labour, such as excavation work).[62] From the much-heralded construction of Bratsk hydroelectric power station, complaints came in during 1963 that Party officials on site were essentially exploiting the volunteers rather than supporting them – sometimes underpaying them, failing to show an

interest in either Komsomol political activity or vocational training, and even encouraging spirit drinking on occasion.[63] There were similar complaints from volunteers in Karelia, insisting that they were not being taught or trained as promised because site bosses' interest was focused only on meeting plan targets.[64] This tendency, I argue, was by no means restricted to site bosses.

Conclusions

According to one former official, somewhere in the region of 14.5 million young people participated in Student Construction Detachments between the late 1950s and the mid-1980s (Sushchinskaya, 2018, p. 176). After reaching a peak of over 850,000 participants in 1983, the movement began to shrink: steadily at first and then dramatically (dropping back to 300,000 participants by 1989), as the Komsomol itself headed toward an inglorious end amidst the wider Soviet collapse. A decade and a half after that, however, came a rebirth, as the Russian Student Detachments were founded with considerable patriotic fanfare in February 2004. By 2009, the fiftieth anniversary of the first SSO's founding was celebrated with, among other things, a grand Kremlin reception for former SSO volunteers, while the building of Moscow State University's Physics Faculty was adorned with a commemorative plaque as the birthplace of the historic movement. By 2019, with the Putin regime's Soviet-era nostalgia hitting new heights, the sixtieth anniversary was marked with several days of celebratory events and another grand reception at the Kremlin, with SSO veterans from across the former USSR in attendance. Clearly, then, authorities and participants alike continue to perceive something of value in this sphere, long after the Soviet ideological mission has died.

As we have seen, the labour performed by Student Construction Detachments served an array of important purposes within the Soviet system, from plugging gaps in regime provision and bolstering social cohesion through to giving young people the chance to develop skills, earn money and make lifelong memories. The initial ideological rationale for the SSO movement – centred on the performance of collective labour in the common good as a means to make youth into the communists of tomorrow - was never entirely compelling in practice, but came to ring increasingly hollow with the passing years, as economic outcomes became the highest priority on an organisational level. This, though, does not seem to have had substantial impact on participants. Plenty of volunteers engaged with real alacrity, and many have since recalled their endeavours with considerable fondness and pride, even if this was not necessarily rooted in ideological commitment to the communist project.

Ultimately, the SSO movement helped facilitate a continuing reliance on reduced-cost and low-skilled labour that covered over, rather than fixed, fundamental weaknesses of the Soviet economy. In terms of the wider Soviet system, this theme firstly offers a snapshot of a regime that was in some important respects fumbling toward modernisation but nonetheless also struggled to shed older attitudes and approaches. Lastly, we also see that there were spheres in which many Soviet citizens, and by no means only communist zealots, engaged with regime activity during the post-Stalin years in ways that felt meaningful to them both at the time and still today.

[1] *Pravda*, 13.04.1956. Remark taken from Nikita Khrushchev's address to an April 1956 Komsomol conference for young volunteers preparing to travel to Siberia for new building projects.

[2] Gerasimova (2019) notes that, although students from the Physics Faculty at MGU ultimately received the plaudits, others from Gor'kii, Leningrad and Voronezh had also forwarded similar initiatives around the same time.

[3] Central State Archive of Public Organisations of Ukraine, Kyiv (hereafter TsDAGO), f. 7, op. 20, d. 2226, l. 1.

[4] This speech at the III Komsomol congress would go on to become one of the foundational Komsomol documents, translated into dozens of languages and reprinted in huge quantities over the ensuing years.

[5] According to Vladimir Semichastnyi (2002, p. 24), who became Komsomol first secretary for Donetsk *oblast'* just before the end of the war, Komsomol brigades there managed to open for exploitation 60 basic mines and 350 shallow mines within two years.

[6] NARB, f. 63, op. 22, d.12, l. 15. Remark taken from a post-trip report by a group of Belorussian Komsomol members returning from work in Kazakhstan during 1963.

[7] *Pravda*, 13.04.1956.

[8] See, for example, *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 15.01.1954.

[9] One communication from the Kyrgyzstan, for example, complained first that the Central Committee in Moscow paid more attention to expanding the membership roll than to anything else, and then added that the 'bureaucracy and paper matters come above all from the Central Committee'. RGASPI, f. m-6, op. 12, d. 65, l. 48.

[10] Centre for Documentation of Social Organisations of Sverdlovsk Oblast, Ekaterinburg (hereafter TsDOOSO), f. 4811, op. 31, d. 2, ll. 1-16.

[11] See Russian State Archive of Modern History, Moscow (hereafter RGANI), f. 5, op. 33, d. 4, ll. 41-44.

[12] Division for Preservation of Records of Socio-Political History of Moscow Oblast, Moscow (hereafter TsAOPIM), f. 6083, op. 1, d. 137, ll. 32-33.

[13] Aside from his extensive involvement in the staging of the 1980 Moscow Olympics, Sergei Pavlov was steadily nudged further from the centre of political power across the 1970s and 1980s, ending his career as ambassador to Burma before being forced into retirement under Yuri Andropov.

[14] TsDOOSO, f. 407, op. 1, d. 18, l. 25.

[15] RGANI, f. 5, op. 31, d. 198, l. 5. As of January 1962, the report claimed, seven per cent of Armenian Komsomol members (a figure representing over 12,000 people) were in such a position.

[16] TsDOOSO, f. 61, op. 16, d. 59, ll. 2-4.

[17] See, for example, TsDAGO, f. f. 7, op. 20, d. 2226, l. 1.

[18] See, for example, NARB, f. 63, op. 22, d. 12, l. 4.

[19] TsAOPIM, f. 6083, op. 1, d. 58, l. 10.

[20] A 1978 review of SSO recruitment practices in Ukraine, for example, found that a number of Higher Education Institutes there had 'breached the principle of voluntary participation'. TsDAGO, f. 7, op. 20, d. 2226, l. 2.

[21] TsDAGO, f. 7, op. 20, d. 154, l. 3, l. 32.

[22] RGASPI, f. m-1, op. 81, d. 4, ll. 72-73.

[23] Lithuanian Special Archive, Vilnius (hereafter LYA), f. 1-k, op. 18, d. 189, l. 105.

[24] Estonian State Archive, Tallinn (hereafter ERAF), f. 31, op. 137, d. 2, ll. 447-450.

[25] ERAF, f. 31, op. 137, d. 2, l. 1.

[26] TsDAGO, f. 7, op. 20, d. 136, l. 32.

[27] LYA, f. 1-k, op. 18, d. 189, ll. 105-108.

[28] TsDAGO, f. 7, op. 20, d. 2481, ll. 11-13.

[29] The construction of the Dnepr hydroelectric dam, and the towns of Komsomol'sk-na-Amure and Magnitogorsk were famous achievements of the 1920s and 1930s.

[30] TsDAGO, f. 7, op. 20, d. 3405, l. 2.

[31] RGASPI, f. m-1, op. 30, d. 276, ll. 29.

[32] ERAF, f. 31, op. 109, d. 61, ll. 7-8.

[33] LYA, f. 4421, op. 25, d. 34, ll. 1-32.

[34] LYA, f. 4421, op. 25, d. 96, ll. 1-2.

[35] See, for example, LYA, f. 4421, op. 33, d. 98, l. 3.

[36] RGASPI, f. m-6, op. 17, d. 571, l. 4.

[37] See, for example, LYA, f. 4421, op. 25, d. 34, l. 2.

[38] See, for example, TsDAGO, f. 7, op. 20, d. 2226, l. 62.

[39] Nonetheless, it is worth noting that the end-of-trip report for the first group considered the whole affair a success and recommended that such exchanges be expanded further. TsDAGO, f. 7, op. 20, d. 150, ll. 1-5; 30-33.

[40] TsDAGO, f. 7, op. 20, d. 150, ll. 34-38.

[41] TsDAGO, f. 7, op. 20, d. 2226, l. 62.

[42] TsDAGO, f. 7, op. 20, d. 2223, ll. 82-83.

[43] LYA, f. 1-k, op. 18, d. 189, l. 106.

[44] *Pravda*, 10.4.1956, p. 2.

[45] Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History, Moscow (hereafter RGASPI), f. m-1, op. 81, d. 41, l. 25.

[46] RGASPI, f. m-1, op. 81, d. 113, l. 31.

[47] All of the above requests can be found in RGASPI, f. m-1, op. 81, d. 113, ll. 1-101.

[48] Elie and Hardy (2015) note that use of prisoners for labour in construction was also increasing again during the 1960s and 1970s, after being much-reduced following Stalin's death.

[49] See, for example, *Izvestiya*, 12.04.1953.

[50] *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 27.04.1966, p. 2.

[51] *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 28.04.1966, p. 2.

[52] TsDAGO, f. 7, op. 20, d. 135, l. 55.

[53] National Archive of the Republic of Karelia, Petrozavodsk (hereafter NARK), f. 779, op. 50, d. 36, ll. 2-3.

[54] On the basis that nearly all those who went to work in Magadan soon left, the Komsomol Central Committee declared itself unable to support the request. RGANI, f. 5, op. 31, d. 229, ll. 1-4.

[55] RGANI, f. 5, op. 31, d. 229, l. 1.

[56] *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 20.04.1961. The article in question asserted that the Tajik Komsomol Central Committee was 'trying to avoid noticing such deception, rather than trying to uncover it'.

[57] LYA, f. 1-k, op. 18, d. 189, ll. 107-108.

[58] TsDAGO, f. 7, op. 20, d. 3398, l. 6, l. 137.

[59] NARB, f. 63, op. 22, d. 12, l. 11.

[60] TsDOOSO, f. 5852, op. 1, d. 45, ll. 27-28.

[61] NARB, f. 63, op. 19, d. 32, ll. 8-14.

[62] *Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 13.01.1957.

[63] RGASPI, f. m-1, op. 31, d. 51, ll. 48-49.

[64] NARK, f. 779, op. 44, d. 9, l. 14.

References

Aksiyutin, Yu. (Ed.). (1989). *Nikita Khrushchev: materialy k biografii* [Nikita Khrushchev: Materials for a Biography]. Moscow, Russia: Izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury.

Amalrik, A. (1971). *Involuntary journey to Siberia*. Newton Abbot, UK. Readers Union.

Applebaum, R. (2015). The Friendship Project: Socialist Internationalism in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia in the 1950s and 1960s. *Slavic Review*. 74 (3), 484-507. https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.74.3.484

Bahovadinova, M. (2018). The "Mobile Proletariat": the Production of Proletariat Labor on a Soviet Construction Site'. *Labor History*, 59 (3), 277-294. https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656X.2018.1428726

Bakovic, N. (2015). No one here is afraid of blisters or work!': Social integration, mobilization and co-operation in Yugoslav youth brigades. The example of Čačak region brigades (1946-1952). *Hungarian Historical Review*, 4 (1), 29-55.

Bernstein, S. (2017) *Raised under Stalin: Young Communists and the Defense of Socialism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Bondarevs, P. (Ed.). (1985). *Ocherki istorii leninskogo kommunisticheskogo soyuza molodezhi latvii* [Sketches from the History of the Leninist Communist Union of Youth of Latvia]. Riga, Latvia: Avots.

Courmel, L. (2009). The scientist, the pedagogue and the Party official: interest groups, public opinion and decision-making in the 1958 education reform. In M. Ilič and J. Smith (Eds). *Soviet State and Society under Nikita Khrushchev* (pp. 66-85). Basingstoke, UK: Routledge.

Desyaterik, V. ed. (1969) *Tovarishch Komsomol, tom 1* [Comrade Komsomol, volume 1]. Moscow, Russia: Molodaya gvardiya.

Desyaterik, V. (Ed.). (1968). *Komsomol i vysshaya shkola: dokumenty i materialy s"ezdov, konferentsii tsentral'nogo komiteta VLKSM po rabote vuzovskogo, Komsomola* [The Komsomol and the Higher School: Documents and Materials of Congresses and Conferences of the VLKSM Central Committee on University Komsomol Work]. Moscow, Russia: Molodaya gvardiya.

Elie, M. and Hardy, J. (2015). Letting the beasts out of the cage: parole in the post-Stalin Gulag, 1953-73. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 67 (4), 579-605. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2015.1030357

Filtzer, D. (1992). *Soviet Workers and De-Stalinization: the Consolidation of the Modern System of Soviet Production Relations, 1953-1964*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Gerasimova, O. (2019), *"Ottepel", "Zamorozki" i studenty Moskovskogo universiteta* [The Thaw, Frosts, and Students of Moscow University]. Moscow, Russia: AIRO.

Golechkova, O. and O. Chagadaeva, O. (2021). Subbotniks: from the great to the meaningless (the evolution of the Soviet labour phenomenon), *Labor History*, 62(2), 148-165. https://doi.org/10.1080/0023656X.2021.1877264

Grushin, B. (2001). *Chetyre zhizni rossii: v zerkale oprosov obshchestvennogo mneniya* [The Four Lives of Russia: As Reflected in Questions of Public Opinion]. Moscow, Russia: Progress-Traditsiya.

Harris, S. (2013). *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Ivanova, G. (2018). *Sovetskaya shkola v 1950-1960-e gody* [Soviet School in the 1950s and 1960s]. Moscow, Russia: Moskovskoe vremya.

Kalinovsky, A. (2018). *Laboratory of Socialist Development: Cold War Politics and Decolonization in Soviet Tajikistan*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

Krasovitskaya, T. (Ed.). (2013). *"Vozvratit' domoi druz'yami SSSR…": obuchenie inostrantsev v sovetskom soyuze 1956-1965* [To Return Home as Friends of the USSR: Foreign Students' Studies in the Soviet Union, 1956-65]. Moscow, Russia: Mezhdunarodnyi Fund 'Demokratiya', 2013.

Kuzmin, N. (Ed). (2021). *Prisnis' mne taigoi… studencheckie stroitel'nye otryady Saratovskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 1967-70* [Come to Me in a Dream, Taiga… Student Construction Brigades of Saratov State University, 1967-70]. Saratov, Russia: Izdatel'stvo saratovskogo universiteta.

Minailov, V. (Ed.). (1972). *Pervichnaya komsomol'skaya organizatsiya: dokumenty, materialy s"ezdov, konferentsii komsomola, tsentral'nogo komiteta VLKSM (1918-1971)* [The Primary Komsomol Organisation: Materials of Congresses and Conferences of the Komsomol Central Committee (1918-1971)]. Moscow, Russia: Molodaya gvardiya.

Mishenin, S. (2009). 'Udarnye Komsomol'skie stroiki na ob"ektakh ministerstva putei soobsheniya SSSR v zapadnoi sibirii, 1965-1991' [Komsomol Shock Construction Projects at Ministry of Railways Construction Sites in Western Siberia, 1965-1991]. Izvestiya Altaiskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta, 63 (3), pp. 155-158.

Nabalova, N. (2013). 'Uchastie studencheskikh stroitel'nikh otryadov zapadnoi sibirii v programme "Komsomol – sel'skoi shkole"' [The Participation of Western Sineria Student Construction Brigades in "Komsomol to the Rural School"], *Omskii nauchnyi vestnik*, 116 (2), pp. 35-38.

Neganov, S. (Ed.). (2018). *Permskii Komsomol: sbornik dokumentov, vospominanii i ocherkov, po istorii Komsomola v Permskoi krae k 100 letiyu VLKSM* [Perm Komsomol: A Collection of Documents, Memoirs and Sketches on the History of the Komsomol in Perm Krai]. Perm, Russia: PermGASPI.

Neumann, M. (2013) *The Communist Youth League and the Transformation of the Soviet Union, 1917-1932*. London, UK: Routledge.

Novikov, S. (Ed.). (2011). *Tak eto bylo: Smolenskii Komsomol 70-80 godov v vospominaniyakh sovremennikov* [How It Was: The Smolensk Komsomol of the 1970s-80s in the Memories of Contemporaries]. Smolensk, Russia: Rusich

Pohl, M. (2014). From White Grave to Tselinograd to Astana: The Virgin Lands Opening, Khrushchev's Forgotten First Reform. In Kozlov, D. and Gilburd, E. (Eds.). *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s*, (pp. 269-307). Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Prishchepa, A. and Bycherov, D. (2021). Istoria issledovaniya i osvoeniya Yamal'skogo regiona studencheskimi stroitel'nymi otryadami SSSR (1950-1970-e gg) [History of the Exploration and Development of the Yamal Region by Soviet Student Construction Brigades (1950s-1970s)]. *Voprosy istorii*. 3, 192-199.

Putin, V. (2000). *First Person: An Astonishingly Frank Self-Portrait by Russia's President*. London, UK: Hutchinson.

Raleigh, D. (Ed.). (2006). *Russia's Sputnik Generation: Soviet Baby Boomers Talk about Their Lives*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Rybakov, V. (Ed.). (1974) *Shagai vpered, Komsomol'skoe plemya: ocherki Kuibyshevskogo Komsomola* [Step Forward: Komsomol Tribe: Sketches from the Kuibyshev Komsomol] Kuibyshev, Russia: Kuibyshevskogo izdatel'stva.

Semichastnyi, V. (2002) *Bespokoinoe serdtse* [Restless Heart]. Moscow, Russia: Vagrius.

Shleikin Yu. (Ed.). (2013) *Komsomol Karelii v litsakh* [The Karelian Komsomol in Character Sketches]. Petrozavodsk, Russia: Izdatel'stvo Ostrova.

Smith, M. (2010). *Property of Communists: The Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev.* DeKalb: IL: Northern Illinois University Press.

Sushchinskaya, A. (2018). *Dobrovol'tsy – komsomol'tsy. Kollektivny portret VLKSM* [Komsomol Volunteers. A Collective Portrait of the VLKSM]. Moscow, Russia: Veche.

Titaev, V. and Naumova, E. (2018). *Rodnoi komosmol (k 100-letiyu VLKSM)* [Beloved Komsomol (for the 100th Anniversary)], Saratov, Russia: Saratovskii sotsial'no-ekonomicheskii institute REU.

Tomic, I. (2022). From peasants to builders of socialism: the mobilisation of young workers in socialist Yugoslavia, 1945-65. *Europe-Asia Studies*. 74 (7), 1147-1165. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668136.2022.2097648

Tromly, B. (2014) *Making the Soviet Intelligentsia: Universities and Intellectual Life under Stalin and Khrushchev*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Tsipursky, G. (2016). *Socialist Fun: Youth, Consumption and State-Sponsored Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1945-1970.* Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Tuguzhenkova, V. (Ed.). (2008). *Vsesoyuznye udarnye komsomol'skie stroiki v Khakasii (1963-1986)*[All-Union Komsomol Shock Projects in Khakas, 1963-86]. Abakan, Russia: Khakasskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo.

Vail', P. and Genis, A. (2013). *60-e:mir sovetskogo cheloveka* [The Sixties: World of the Soviet Person]. Moscow, Russia: AST.

Ward, C. (2009) *Brezhnev's Folly: The Building of BAM and Late Soviet Socialism*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press.

Yaskovets, G. (2009). *Pamyat' dlinoyu v zhizn': ot VLKSM do SKP: zapiski byvshego komsomol'skogo rabotnika* [A Lifelong Memory: From the Komsomol to the SKP: Notes of a Former Komsomol Worker]. Volgograd, Russia: Izdatel'.

Yusupov, E. (Ed.). (1985). *Komsomol Uzbekistana: problem, poiski, resheniya* [The Uzbek Komsomol: Problems, Searches, Solutions]. Tashkent, Uzbekistan: Esh gvardiya.