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Lifeworld of Soviet Engineers of 1930s as Presented in the Investigatory Records: A
Historiographic Analysis

Abstract

The article assesses heuristic capabilities of investigatory records for reconstructing the lifeworld of Soviet engineers of the Stalin industrialization period. "Lifeworld" is a concept used in researching communities and detailed by phenomenologists A. Sch?tz, P. Berger and T. Luckmann. It is a structure that consists of the following interrelated elements: a system of values shared by every member of a particular community (in this case, the technical intelligentsia); norms of community life and everyday practices based on them; system of notions and mental attitudes. Thus, lifeworld is reality as experienced by one person in cooperation with other persons. Inventories of items belonging to Soviet engineers and seized incidental to their arrest are of importance for reconstructing the world of things. Apart from objects indicative of professional activity (such as sets of drawing instruments), we find there some costly items and positional goods, which were well beyond the reach of the redneck

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masses: a car received as a reward from the People's Commissar of Heavy Industry; cameras, gramophones, radio phonographs, some brought from business trips abroad, some of domestic production. These things are consistent with certain practices, such as get together parties, trips and picnics away from town, photography. Documentary photographs are a type of data from archival investigatory files to be used to describe some structural elements in the life of Soviet industrial elite. Comparative analysis of photographs from late 1920s and those from mid-1930s allows for the following conclusions. Soviet engineers of late 1920s resembled American engineers, well-groomed, well-dressed, businesslike and confident. Soviet engineers of mid-1930s dressed in simple and inexpensive clothing and had a proletarian look about them. This deliberate simplicity of dress belied their craving for the expensive and positional goods we find in the inventories. This peculiarity in the life-world of Soviet engineers of late 1930s can be explained as an attempt to reproduce ascetic tastes of the party nomenclature, as well as to close the social gap between the industrial elite and the redneck masses, if only outwardly.



Keywords

Sources, archival documents, 1930s, Soviet society, engineers, status symbols, Soviet daily routine, interpretation of sources.

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