# In Search of the Workers' Paradise

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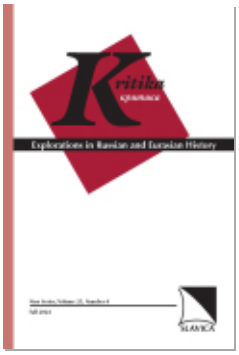

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# In Search of the Workers' Paradise

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Journalism, it is said, is "the first rough draft of history." But what if that draft is repeated over and over again, from one decade to the next, to the point where history and journalism become indistinguishable? Such has been the case with the Soviet Union rendered as "the workers' paradise." American and British newspapers started referring to Soviet Russia as such soon after the Bolshevik Revolution to mock the grandiosity of Soviet Communists' ambitions. Thereafter, it served to highlight the deceptiveness of communist propaganda and as an ironic commentary on the country's shortcomings. It continued to appear unevenly in the Western press for the remainder of the Soviet period and was applied as well to "Red" China, Czechoslovakia, East Germany, North Korea, and other communist-dominated states.

What follows is an attempt to explain the origin, potency, and longevity of the "workers' paradise." An exercise in linguistic historical analysis, it seeks to answer several related questions. Where and when did the phrase originate? Why did it catch on so extensively in the middle decades of the 20th century? And why, despite the widely acknowledged abandonment by Soviet authorities of workerist rhetoric in the post-Stalin decades, did it persist right up to the present? This inquiry relies heavily on one of those digital resources that facilitates historians' research—Newspapers.com, "the largest online newspaper archive" containing some 25,000 newspapers from throughout the Anglophone world.[1] I conducted searches of "workers' paradise," "workingman's paradise," and "working man's paradise" (sometimes with quotation marks and sometimes without them), "Soviet

[1] For other examples of recent historical research dependent on this kind of resource and its implications for the historical profession, see Heidi J. S. Tworek, "Digitized Newspapers and the Hidden Transformation of History," *American Historical Review* 129, 1 (2024): 143–47, and the other five articles that compose the AHR History Lab in the same issue. It has proven beyond the scope of this article to consult equivalent search engines for newspapers in other languages.

paradise," and "communist paradise," with additional forays into "utopia," and at least one other otherworldly location.

Before proceeding to the substantive questions, it is worth addressing some methodological considerations that arise from this kind of exercise. As noted in 2013, ever since the "digital turn" in humanities scholarship arrived with the new millennium, "commentators have warned of the dangers of what might be termed 'keyword blinkers,'" that is, "arriving directly at a source and bypassing its wider context."[2] That context might include "the development and movement of ideas and discursive formations," central to the pursuit of cultural history, as well as variations in the structure, readership, and degree of hybridity of newspapers. Also, perhaps counterintuitively, keyword searching not only does not replace the need for extensive reading but on the contrary, "by reducing the time spent searching through irrelevant articles, … increase[s] opportunities for close textual analysis."[3]

Employing digital access to a wide range of Anglophone newspapers and the keyword functions such access affords, this article traces the use of "workers' paradise" across the seven decades of Soviet power as well as before and since in a broader, global context. In tracking this phrase across time and space, this research does not utilize NLP (natural language processing), PCA (principal component analysis) algorithms, or any of the other sophisticated computational techniques of which I have only the most tenuous grasp. The article does, though, pay careful attention to the tone and valence of textual utterances and their role in shaping and reflecting political orientation. In doing so, it identifies three intended meanings of the phrase "workers' paradise": the aspirational, the hyperbolic, and the ironic or denigratory. The article's primary concern is with the third, which closely corresponds to its usage in reference to the Soviet Union. The other two are discussed mainly in relation to the phrase's temporal origins in pre-Marxian socialism and its association with the establishment and expansion of European settler communities.

The first mentions of the paradise the Bolsheviks allegedly were building came shortly after the October Revolution and seemed inspired by fear of the bacillus infecting other countries. One account by a British subject

[2] Bob Nicholson, "The Digital Turn: Exploring the Methodological Possibilities of Digital Newspaper Archives," *Media History* 19, 1 (2013): 61. See also Adrian Bingham, "The Digitization of Newspaper Archives: Opportunities and Challenges for Historians," *Twentieth Century British History* 21, 2 (2010): 229–30.

[3] Nicholson, "Digital Turn," 67; Avery Blankenship and Ryan Cordell, "Word Embedding Models and the Hybridity of Newspapers Genres," *American Historical Review* 129, 1 (2024): 148.

who spent several months in a Soviet prison, ostensibly for illegally entering Soviet Russia, was typical. "It seems singular that the Bolshevik propaganda, which paints the country as a working man's paradise, should be so widely accepted by a significant element in various countries," wrote H. V. Keeling. A reporter for the *London Daily Express* wrote from Berlin along the same lines in May 1919 that "Bolshevism … is a very live and real danger. It promises the workers' paradise around the corner, which is never realized." Readers could take some comfort from Sir Paul Dukes's widely reprinted tales of his escapades as a spy for British Intelligence published two years later. Dukes contrasted the Bolsheviks' boastfulness with their oppressiveness. "Bolshevik propaganda," Dukes wrote, [is] "designed to depict Soviet Russia as a worker's paradise," but, contrary to its self-description as "the dictatorship of the Proletariat, … the Russian people, the Russian workers, call it among themselves the dictatorship over the proletariat."[4]

Meanwhile, reports of starvation in the land of the Bolsheviks moved at least one provincial American newspaper to wag its finger at their supporters closer to home. Under the ironizing headline of "A Soviet Paradise," the *Dayton Daily News* asked, "Is this the I.W.W. [Industrial Workers of the World] paradise that the people of America have had pictured to them?"[5] Soon enough, the same newspaper found some American workers who, exposed to the IWW's visions, had joined William ("Big Bill") Haywood in settling the Autonomous Industrial Colony of Kuzbas in Siberia. It was the "bail jumper" Haywood who allegedly had "originated the idea of a 'workers' paradise'" and made it "so alluring" that 67 men and women "sold everything they had in the United States and sailed away to the Utopia, … the Land of Promise.'" But instead of "pretty homes and attractive surroundings," they found "filth … everywhere." "'Workers' Paradise' Is Bitter Disillusionment to Americans Lured to Haywood's Colony," echoed a St. Louis newspaper.[6] No evidence of any luring was ever produced, but the colonists saw fit to push back in their newspaper (conveniently digitized by

[4] "Jail Life under Soviet Rule Pictured by Briton Who Was Tried and Sentenced by Bolsheviki," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, 26 September 1920, 97; H. [sic] J. Greenwall, *London Daily Express*, cited as "Teutons Prefer Life of Bolshevism Rather Than Terms of Peace," *San Antonio Evening News*, 12 May 1919, 2; "Soviet Regime Doomed, Says Paul Dukes, British Spy, Who Spent Last 11 Years in Russia," *Herald* (Rock Hill, SC), 12 April 1921, 6; see also "British Spy, Eleven Years in Russia, Declares That Soviet Regime Is Doomed," *Atlanta Journal*, 12 April 1921, 8.

[5] "A Soviet Paradise," *Dayton Daily News*, 23 April 1920, 6.

[6] "A Workers' Paradise," *Dayton Daily News*, 22 March 1923, 6; *St. Louis Star and Times*, 23 April 1923, 6.

the Library of Congress) against the "many false statements … published in the American press."[7] Soon enough, rising unemployment in the Soviet Union presented an irresistible opportunity for British and American newspapers to smirk about the "Utopian Dream-Republic of Bolshevik Russia" and the "country that was to have been a paradise for working people through the government's taking over and operating the principal industries."[8]

Then came the first of the gifts that the so-called paradise would continue giving throughout the following decade—ex-communists who, having experienced the "workers' paradise," returned home to express their disillusionment. In 1929, Panait Istrati, a Romanian novelist dubbed "the Maxim Gorky of the Balkans" because of his working-class origins and leftist politics, published an account of his extensive travels in the Soviet Union which he called "The Confessions of a Loser."[9] In it, Istrati poured out his disgust at "this height of banditry and terror[, which] found its perfect expression in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, under the regime of the so-called 'Dictatorship of the Proletariat.'" The book's only mentions of "paradise" were in descriptions of the Livadia Palace and Simferopol′ in Crimea, and the Caucasus, but that did not stop one American paper from describing Istrati's confessions as "a bomb" thrown into the ranks of the author's erstwhile comrades. Under the headline of "Unmasking the Workers' Paradise," the review contrasted "the proletariat paradise the workers of the world have been led to believe exists in Soviet Russia" with "the reality" of "banditry and terror."[10]

By the time Andrew Smith published his memoir, *I Was a Soviet Worker*, about the three years he spent at Moscow's Elektrozavod, the workers' paradise had become a canard ensconced in anticommunist rhetoric. Smith, a Hungarian immigrant to the United States and a member of the American Communist Party, traveled to the USSR in 1932, as he put it, "to visit the Workers' Paradise, to see how the Russian workers and

[7] See *Kuzbas: A Bulletin Devoted to the Affairs of the Industrial Colony Kuzbas* 2, 3 (1923), reproduced at https://hdl.loc.gov/loc.ndlpcoop/mtfxtx.wkm0082. The bulletin was rather defensive in tone, acknowledging hardships and including a resolution passed unanimously by the American Section of the All-Russian Mineworkers' Union of Kemerovo on 21 June 1923 that declared "it … untrue that Russian conditions were misrepresented to members joining the Kuzbas Colony … or deceived or swindled in any way" (15).

[8] *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 17 June 1924, 5; "A Workers' Paradise?," *Santa Maria Times*, 28 March 1927, 2.

[9] *Spovedania unui învins (Rusia Sovietica)* (Bucharest: Cugetarea, 1929), https://ro.wikisource.org/wiki/Spovedania_unui_%C3%AEnvins.

[10] *Pasadena Post*, 11 October 1929, 4.

peasants were building up Socialism." The phrase is encountered only once more in the book, when Smith's wife says to him after a waitress in a *stolovaia* had presented them with soup "the colour of dishwater" and with a smell that was "indescribable," "Andrew, why don't you eat? You are in the workers' paradise."[11] But it—the phrase, not the soup—must have been indelible, for here is the "capsule review" that *Foreign Affairs* published in 1936: "Two communists return disillusioned after three years in the workers' paradise."[12]

Probably nobody did more to spread the gospel than the communist-sympathizer-turned-rabid-anticommunist, Eugene Lyons. In his account of the six years spent as UPI's Moscow correspondent (1928–33), Lyons deployed "utopia" rather than paradise as the chief motif. The dystopic awareness he detailed in *Assignment in Utopia* was neither sudden nor easy. After all, as he commented in an aside, "who can estimate the pain and frustration that have gone into those books of communists who came to their Russian utopias and found them unacceptable!" For all those afflicted with "disappointments and intruding doubts," there remained a contingent in every nation "of professional interpreters of Russia who have made it their life's career to maintain appearances for the U.S.S.R. as Utopia-in-construction."[13] Lyons's subsequent career entailed pouring out venom against those he considered soft on communism. It was crowned by his 50-year "balance sheet" of Soviet communism irresistibly titled *Workers' Paradise Lost*.[14]

In between and in succeeding decades, the false promise of paradise did yeoman's work for the anticommunist cause. On 8 December 1936, a Dr. Marion J. Bradshaw delivered a lecture at the local YWCA in Bangor, Maine, titled "Russia—the Workers' Paradise?" The local paper reassuringly headlined its coverage of the lecture the following day "Russia Is Not Worker's Paradise, Says Bradshaw." As the good doctor explained, the reason was not because the country did not "belong to the working man, but

[11] Andrew Smith, *I Was a Soviet Worker* (London: Robert Hale & Co., 1937), 15, 28–29.

[12] *Foreign Affairs* 14, 4 (1936): 721. The review of the book in the *Los Angeles Times* boldly asserted that Smith's "charges of inefficiency and bureaucracy must be weighed against the claim that Russia is the worker's paradise" (15 March 1936, 49).

[13] Eugene Lyons, *Assignment in Utopia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1937), 96, 636; see also 164. For comparative assessments of foreign correspondents, see Peter G. Filene, *Americans and the Soviet Experiment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); James William Crowl, *Angels in Stalin's Paradise: Western Reporters in Soviet Russia, 1917–37* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1982); and Sally J. Taylor, *Stalin's Apologist: Walter Duranty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990).

[14] Eugene Lyons, *Workers' Paradise Lost* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1967).

because it is not a paradise."[15] Toward the end of the decade, the *Journal Times* of Racine, Wisconsin, pointed out that "There is no bargaining—collective or otherwise—not in the land that communists like to call the 'worker's paradise.'"[16] Then came Edmund Ruzanski's sensationalist account of the five years he spent in the "Worker's Heaven." An American engineer of Polish origin, Ruzanski claimed to have been "tricked into becoming a spy for Stalin's GPU" after arriving in Leningrad in 1931. Readers were treated to salacious details about "the degradation and official prostitution of women, the destruction of family life … and the debasement of children."[17]

The theme of the credulous worker who travels to the advertised workers' paradise only to experience drudgery, disappointment, and even unemployment became more prominent in the 1930s when the fear of Soviet communism's appeal reached new heights. Data from Newspapers.com is suggestive. If in the 1920s American and British newspapers mentioned the workers' (or working man's) paradise a total of 598 times, then in the following decade, that number rose to 1,052, an increase of nearly 76 percent. Several factors can be cited here, some more obvious than others: the near-decade long Great Depression that deprived millions of gainful employment; the expansion of Soviet propaganda efforts, often channeled through communist parties in the West, that aimed at "Showcasing the Great Experiment"; at least some moderately positive accounts by Western visitors who were objects of Soviet "cultural diplomacy"; increasing ideological tensions associated not only with the Stalinist purges but also the rise of fascism in Central and Eastern Europe; and, more subtly, "the new imaginary geography" of the Soviet Union that served to strengthen identification with that country among its citizens and audiences abroad.[18] Under the circumstances, concern that the USSR might be perceived as even just a little bit better than one's own country inspired its representation as a false paradise or dystopia.

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[15] *Bangor Daily News*, 9 December 1936, 6. Bradshaw was a professor of religion at the Bangor Theological Seminary and an ordained minister in the Disciples of Christ Church. For a brief biography, see https://www.ahsalumnifoundation.org/dr-marion-j-bradshaw.html.

[16] *Journal Times*, 30 January 1939, 6.

[17] "My Five Years as a Red Spy in Russia," *Detroit Evening Times*, 22 December 1940, 90, and 29 December 1940, 68.

[18] Michael David-Fox, *Showcasing the Great Experiment: Cultural Diplomacy and Western Visitors to the Soviet Union, 1921–1941* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). For some suggestive arguments about how imaginary geographies enhance identification with a country, see Emma Widdis, *Visions of a New Land: Soviet Film from the Revolution to the Second World War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 76–81, 136–41.

Parenthetically, it is worth noting that American communists and other Soviet sympathizers in the West could invoke the workers' paradise to suit purposes diametrically opposed to anticommunists' rhetoric but in ways similar to theirs. This included the *Daily Worker*, which in 1931 reported on the "rosy word picture" that the president of Indiana's Butler College had painted after a trip to Europe "of living conditions of the workers in America" above an item the *Indianapolis Star* had published the previous week. The two pieces appeared under the headline "Baby Starves to Death in Indiana," below which, in a slightly smaller font, was printed "Prof. Lauds U.S.A. as Workers' Paradise." But along with the ironic, the *Daily Worker* occasionally gave space to the aspirational or anticipatory mode, for example, covering a speech in New York by Anna Louise Strong, the associate editor of the *Moscow Daily News*, in which she stated, "The Soviet Union is not a workers' paradise—not yet. Socialism is not built in a day and not without constand [sic] struggle."[19]

Others, who were favorably disposed toward the USSR, objected to the sarcastic use of the phrase. In 1934, J. W. Fretton, the secretary of the Friends of the Soviet Union, a voluntary society founded in Britain four years earlier, complained in a letter to *Hull Daily Mail* about its presentation of "untruths" and "ridiculous assertions" with regard to the Soviet Union. "None of our speakers," Fretton wrote, "declare that the U.S.S.R. is a workers' paradise." The workers of that country, he insisted, "are making great sacrifices in the Socialist construction of one-sixth of the earth in order that a firm basis shall be laid for a classless society at the end of the Second Five-Year Plan."[20] And, even in 1940 in the midst of the Soviet-Finnish War, one R. A. Thompson of Petersburg, Virginia, dared to object to an editorial his local paper had published ("From a Phoney Paradise") by asserting that "most of us realize that the Soviet Union is not a 'workers' paradise' (not yet)," but "why always select the most derogatory news about Russia?"[21]

If World War II brought about a lull in references—sarcastic and otherwise—to the workers' paradise, the Cold War revived and geographically expanded them. As Ralph McGill, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, noted in 1946, "All through Middle Europe, the Soviet soldier saw—in Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, and even in Romania and Bulgaria—that the real workers' paradise was outside the Soviet Union."[22] But after

[19] "Baby Starves to Death in Indiana," *Daily Worker*, 12 September 1931, 3; "Anna Louise Strong, Moscow Daily News Co-Editor, Tells of Soviet Achievements," 1 November 1933, 6.
[20] *Hull Daily Mail*, 30 November 1934, 15.
[21] *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, 18 January 1940, 8.
[22] "New Ideas Go Back to Russia," *Atlanta Constitution*, 22 July 1946, 6.

"Middle Europe" became "Eastern"—it got to experience the workers' paradise from hell. When in June 1953, the *New York Times* covered protests in Czechoslovakia against the devaluation of that country's currency, a cartoon depicting devaluation shaking a worker free of his savings and labeled "Worker's Paradise" accompanied the article.[23] "Cheating Is Rife in 'Workers' Paradise,'" blared one British paper in 1954, referring to the Hungarian People's Republic. Two years later, in the wake of the popular uprising in that country, London's *Daily Telegraph* boldly declared that "the lie of the 'workers' paradise' has been exposed."[24] And on it went. Red China, "once styled a 'workers' paradise' by the Communist rulers," exhibited "appalling labor and living conditions," which proved to one New York daily that its paradise was "not so heavenly."[25] The Prague Spring of 1968 prompted headlines such as "Trouble in Paradise."[26]

One occasionally could encounter a dissenting voice, such as in London's leftish *Observer*. In early 1959, after noting that the "years of boasting about the Soviet Union being a workers' paradise had led to the Western assumption that it was a slaves' hell," the newspaper's editors insisted that "it was becoming clear that Khrushchev's Russia was on the edge of becoming an affluent society."[27] But when in 1984, Princeton University's Stephen Cohen dared to write a column under the heading "U.S. Gets Skewed Vision of Soviets," readers of the *Los Angeles Times* let him have it. "If there were any justice," one wrote, "Cohen would be sentenced to life in the Soviet workers' paradise." Another observed that "Cohen sounds much like the poor deluded soul who returned from a visit to the Soviet Union saying 'I have seen the future and it works.'"[28]

We are back where we started. The "poor deluded soul," the muckraking American journalist Lincoln Steffens, had visited Soviet Russia for three weeks in March 1919. Reviewing a new biography of Steffens in 2011, the political commentator Kevin Baker wrote that he "became one of the first of that sad little band of Western intellectuals who fell head over heels for the Soviet Union. Unlike most of them, he did not deny the stories of atrocities leaking out of the workers' paradise. Even

[23] *New York Times*, 14 June 1953, E7.

[24] "Cheating Is Rife in the 'Workers' Paradise,'" *Coventry Evening Telegraph*, 19 October 1954, 19; "Hungary Back under the Heel," *Daily Telegraph*, 23 January 1957, 6.

[25] "Workers' Paradise," *Honolulu Advertiser*, 10 July 1952, 4; "China's Workers' Paradise Proves Not So Heavenly," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 18 July 1952, 11. See also "Workers' Paradise Notes," *New York Daily News*, 4 October 1961, C13.

[26] *New York Daily News*, 19 July 1968, 39.

[27] "Russian Prosperity around the Corner," *Observer*, 1 February 1959, 5.

[28] *Los Angeles Times*, 21 May 1984, 21.

more chilling, he simply believed them necessary to bring about the great changes to come."[29]

It may not be "chilling," but, curiously, neither Baker's review nor the biography he reviewed cited a remark by Steffens to the effect that Soviet Russia was a workers' paradise. For that matter—and this already may have become apparent—even when claiming that Bolshevism, Big Bill Haywood, Lenin, or Stalin had touted the workers' paradise, the articles containing such information never bothered to include a quotation. Why not? I wondered. Could it be that they never made such statements? Could the workers' paradise have been a bourgeois invention? Try as I might, I could not find any explicit references to it in Marx's and Engels's oeuvres. On the contrary, sifting through the classics, one comes across nearly the opposite. Not for nothing did Marx and Engels distinguish their "scientific" approach to socialism from that of others they deemed "utopian."

As for their Soviet adherents, mentions of a workers', Soviet, or communist paradise are rare indeed. One of the few occurred in late 1920 at the Eighth Congress of Soviets when Grigorii Zinov′ev, then head of the Petrograd party organization and chairman of the Communist International (Comintern)'s Executive Committee, reminded delegates: "For three years Soviet Russia was occupied—*not* with constructing the soviet communist paradise, but—with fighting for our existence, fighting so that the head would remain on the shoulders of worker-peasant Russia.… We were forced to deny the most elementary demands of democratism."[30]

Was Zinov′ev acknowledging that the Bolsheviks had reneged on their promise to construct "the soviet communist paradise" because the civil war had intervened? Or was he recycling the language used by the Bolsheviks' critics, who had warned that proletarian revolution in a country as economically and culturally "backward" as Russia was a fool's errand? Perhaps, as suggested by the following remarks, he was being intentionally ambiguous:

> On the eve of the October revolution, many of us believed that Russia's transformation into a commune state would proceed with much quicker steps than what actually happened. We didn't take into account, first, that there would be a long and burdensome period of war; further, we didn't take into account all the rigidity, all the difficulties that stood before us, since there was not and there could not have been

[29] Kevin Baker, "Muckraker's Progress," *New York Times*, 13 May 2011, Sunday Book Review, 29. The biography is Peter Hartshorn, *I Have Seen the Future: A Life of Lincoln Steffens* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2012).

[30] Quoted in Lars Lih, "Lénine et le message des bolcheviks: Une enquête historique," unpublished manuscript (2022), 197.

> any ways or means that would have given us the possibility ahead of time to calculate how quickly would come about the transformation of old Russia into a commune state. That was something we could only learn through experience.[31]

Some of Zinov´ev's hesitancy can be explained by citing a Soviet classic from the same year, *The ABC of Communism.* As Nikolai Bukharin and Evgenii Preobrazhensky wrote in their introduction to this work,

> We have already said that it is wrong to manufacture a programme out of our own heads, and that our programme should be taken from life. Before the time of Marx, those who represented working-class interests were apt to draw fancy pictures of a future paradise, without troubling to ask themselves whether this paradise could ever be reached, and without seeing the right road for the workers and peasants to follow.[32]

It is that "right road" that gives pause. Soviet communists often resorted to the path metaphor. But what was at journey's end? In the absence of evidence of their explicit mention of "paradise," it is safe to conclude that the quotation marks around the term were inserted by their detractors as rhetorical, intended to ridicule those naifs in the West who, despite ample evidence of Soviet and other ruling communist parties' deceptiveness and oppression of their working classes, persisted in their naïveté. It is common to label such deceptiveness as "propaganda," meaning false or misleading statements. But Soviet and other communists did not have a monopoly on manipulativeness; the "workers' paradise," when so used, also was a form of propaganda.

None of this is meant to deny that successive Soviet leaders invoked brighter futures, repeatedly spoke of improvement, and encouraged (or mandated and policed, in the case of Stalin) representations in the visual arts and literature of the good life available to one and all under socialism. Stalin's announcement at the All-Union Conference of Stakhanovites in November 1935 that "life has become better, comrades, life has become happier" as well as its adaptation in music and film can be considered the apotheosis of these efforts.[33] They signaled, as the late Katerina Clark

[31] Lih, "Lénine et le message des bolcheviks," 198. Lih also paraphrases a speech Zinov´ev gave in April 1921, viz., "What kind of communist paradise could there be if Russia had to be looted in order to serve the front?" See Lars T. Lih, *What Was Bolshevism?* (Leiden: Brill, 2024), 264.

[32] N. I. Bukharin and E. Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism*, at https://www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1920/abc/intro.htm.

[33] I. V. Stalin, *Sochineniia*, ed. Robert H. McNeal (Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press, 1967), 1 (14), 92. I am thinking in particular of the A. Aleksandrov song "Zhit´ stalo

perceptively observed, "two orders of reality, ordinary and extraordinary," and the blurring of "the boundaries between fiction and fact."[34]

The ritualized celebration of Soviet workers' triumphs, an easy target for derision, persisted to the end of the USSR and the disintegration of the bloc. But what of the slogan/promise itself? If not indigenous to Marxism or Soviet communism, whence did it originate? Bukharin and Preobrazhenskii were not wrong in attributing the "fancy pictures of a future paradise" to pre-Marxist socialists. As E. P. Thompson makes clear, the Owenites, in particular, inherited the strong chiliastic current that ran through both "Wesleyan emotionalism" and Joanna Southcott's "shadowy Utopia." Robert Owen "threw the mantle of Joanna Southcott across his shoulders" in 1820, and, promising to "*let prosperity loose on the country*," offered "no less than 'Paradise'" in his communities.[35]

Heightened expectations that go unfulfilled can provoke despair among the deluded and *Schadenfreude* among nonbelievers. And the English fourth estate expressed plenty of such mirth in succeeding decades. The Chartist Feargus O'Connor's National Land Company scheme at Lowbands near Gloucester, founded in 1847, seems to have been an irresistible target. Intending to convert industrial workers into self-sustaining rural dwellers by distributing land, tools, seed, and everything else they needed, O'Connor found that the allottees required additional infusions to prevent starvation. Even while conceding that the recipients "again held to the faith that their estate is really the working-man's paradise which it has been represented to be," a local newspaper pronounced it "a disappointing and melancholy failure."[36] With the withering away of Chartism in the 1850s, some looked abroad with hope. According to a Yorkshire paper, these were "men who indulge most frequently in … repining and who, by the way, are very seldom model members of that hard-working class whose lot in England they so loudly deplore." For them, "the

luchshe" ("Life Has Become Better"), with words by V. Lebedev-Kumach from 1936, and *Radiant Path*, the film from 1940 directed by G. Aleksandrov.

[34] Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 146–47.

[35] E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1980), 405, 422–26, 865–66.

[36] "A Day at the Lowbands," *Gloucester Journal*, 4 December 1847, 3. Reprinted in *Manchester Weekly Times and Examiner*, 24 December 1847, 3. The Chartist Land Company was declared illegal by an Act of Parliament in 1851. See https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Former_Chartist_cottage_in_Mill_Lane,_Lowbands_-_geograph.org.uk_-_1528390.jpg.

United States of America have always been held up as the workingman's paradise."[37]

Despite such sourness, the United States continued to exert its pull on working-class Britons. And why not? As one could read in the upstart *New-York Times*, America was "the workingman's paradise" for all those seeking "to escape from … degrading tutelage and rise into the position of free agents, and full-grown men, with room for all their faculties to work and grow." "It is part of the happiness of America, the working-man's paradise, that labor should be more highly paid and more difficult to retain than in England," the *Charleston Daily Courier* pointed out two years later in 1859.[38] Such exultant descriptions peppered American newspapers from Massachusetts and Pennsylvania to California throughout the following decade and beyond.[39] Indeed, its comparatively high wages, at least for white men, made the United States an attractive destination for European workers well into the next century, warranting the repetition of such encomia as "the wage-worker's paradise" and "the Best Place in Which Man Works."[40]

Soon the United States had competitors. Here, for example, is an ad placed in a provincial English newspaper in 1893 by H. Hickman of Bridgwater seeking to recruit passengers:

> Manitoba! Canada!! The Golden West!!! The fertile wheat country … All Young Farmers, Servants, and others wishing to succeed and be independent in life should go to Manitoba, the working-man's paradise. Plenty of work, excellent wages. Young farmers, housekeepers, servants, etc. in immense demand at high wages. 160 acres of land and a cash bonus of 2£ 2S to each settler.[41]

At least for the British, though, "far-off Australia" loomed large. It was "a veritable working-man's Paradise" where, for everyone who exercised proper thrift, comfort, if not luxury, was to be had.[42] Within Australia,

[37] *East Riding Times*, 8 August 1856, 5.

[38] "A Word of Counsel to Intelligent Working Men," *New-York Times*, 10 November 1857, 4; "Ocean Steamship Lines," *Charleston Daily Courier,* 4 June 1859, 2.

[39] *The Pittsfield Sun,* 16 March 1865, 4; *Daily Evening Express* (Lancaster, PA), 26 June 1868, 2; *Sacramento Bee*, 13 April 1868, 2.

[40] Walter J. Ballard, "Low Wages in Great Britain," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 December 1909, 8; John Coleman in the *Chicago Tribune*, 6 August 1905, 35. Coleman expressed what was often implicit in other exultant articles by adding, "The worker who cannot be happy in America should try working in other countries for a little time."

[41] *Western Gazette* (Somerset, UK), 21 April 1893, 8. The ad ran weekly on Fridays for at least five successive weeks.

[42] *Devon and Exeter Gazette*, 29 January 1891, 4.

Victoria received the most praise. It was a "utopia realized, where workingmen rule," "high wages being combined with cheap food, cheap transportation and leisure and amusement." In Queensland, too, according to the Bishop of Rockhampton, for "a man … who was steady, … had got a good head on his shoulders, and … was determined to do his best," paradise was available. "Australia is the best country in the world," an ANZAC soldier wrote back to the home country after spending seven years abroad. "Sunshine, freedom, opportunities it cannot be approached.… It is the honest truth when I say Australia is God's own country and the working man's Paradise."[43]

At the same time, hyperbolic claims about the empyrean nature of certain cities, neighborhoods, and even individual stores started popping up all over, a practice that continued for several decades. They included: Bankstown, NSW, Australia ("the soundest district round Sydney for the land investor"); San Francisco ("the greatest of all friends to the poor man … with "taxes … so low … one hardly notices them"); Chicago (a city that "makes labor history and makes it fast"); Astoria, Oregon (with "fewer idle men than any place in the country"); Dayton, Ohio (because the National Cash Register Company had a "worldwide reputation as a factory worker's paradise"); Butte, Montana ("probably the wealthiest little city in America today … boast[ing] the highest average wage disbursement per capita in the world"); Glickman's Clothing Store ("The Working Man's Paradise") in Portland, Oregon; and Arbaugh's, "Lansing [Michigan]'s Greatest Store" where "The Basement is a Working Man's Paradise on Saturday," to list but a few.[44] Some of this was local boosterism, some crass advertising, and some expressions of wistful envy.

As late as 1943, one could come across a "workers' paradise" located on an island in the Gulf of Mexico that an airplane parts manufacturing company based in Cleveland, Ohio, leased so that its hardworking "associates"

[43] *Galena Weekly Republican*, 17 May 1890, 6; "A Worker's Paradise in Far Off Australia," *Independent-Journal* (Ottawa, KS), 26 March 1891, 4; "The Workingman's Paradise," *Surrey Times and County Express*, 26 February 1897, 3; "Australia Best, Tamworth Soldier's Opinion—The Working Man's Paradise," *Northern Daily Leader*, 5 January 1918, 5. For a strongly dissenting viewpoint, see "Is Australia the Workingman's Paradise?" *Los Angeles Times*, 31 July 1919, 18. New Zealand also figured as a workers' paradise. See, for example, *Winnipeg Tribune* 16 April 1921, 14; *Croydon Advertiser*, 9 June 1939, 6. In 1947, though, a former mayor of London reportedly called the country a "workers' paradise for loafers," and was asked to leave. *Herald Express* (Torquay, Devon), 14 June 1947, 3.

[44] See, respectively, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 March 1919, 4; *Democrat* (Wichita, KS), 8 April 1888, 5; *Chicago Tribune*, 30 August 1903, 4; *Morning Astorian*, 10 July 1906, 2; *Dayton Herald*, 9 April 1909, 1; *Buffalo Times*, 19 February 1917, 4; *Oregon Daily Journal*, 14 December 1917, 6; and *Lansing State Journal*, 27 June 1919, 12.

could spend their vacations there, all expenses paid.[45] "As late as" because it becomes increasingly difficult to find such pulpy gesticulations after the 1930s. That is because, I would argue, as the Soviet Union came to assume the role of the workers' paradise in Western anticommunist discourse, the sincerity of any such characterizations, whether applied to the USSR or elsewhere, became increasingly difficult to sustain.

Let us return to the initial object of our inquiry. World War II inspired one spectacular mobilization of the paradise-as-hell syndrome applied to the USSR. In 1942, the Nazis' Central Propaganda Office (Reichspropagandaleitung) under Josef Goebbels organized a traveling exhibition of "trophies" looted from the occupied territories in the east. It displayed, among other things, a reconstructed Russian village containing wax figures clothed in rags and living in wooden shacks with thatched roofs; an impoverished district of Minsk, described as full of "cave dwellings" (*Wohnhöhle*), located "next to the opera house"; and "poverty, misery, decay, hunger, and need wherever one looks." The exhibition toured Vienna and Prague, and then between 8 May and 21 June Berlin's Lustgarten, where some 1.3 million people visited it. Millions more likely saw the short propaganda film about the exhibition, which was called *The Soviet Paradise*.[46]

The Soviet paradise was a slightly different category in that it referred to a specific country as opposed to "workers," which carried a more universalistic implication. Nevertheless, the term found its place in anticommunist rhetoric. The "communist paradise" did, too, especially in the postwar years when communist parties ruled eight different European countries, North Korea from 1948, China after 1949, and several former French colonies in Southeast Asia soon thereafter. However, as demonstrated in Table 1, which presents a crude index of frequency of mentions in American and British newspapers of the three terms by ten-year

[45] "Firm Leases War Workers' 'Paradise,'" *Courier-Journal* (Louisville, KY), 9 February 1943, 9. The firm was the Jack and Heintz Co. The "associates" (aka workers) were at their jobs for 12 hours a day, 7 days a week. See also the advertisement for the Furniture Warehouse that ran in the *Baltimore Sun* and the *Evening Sun* from February to September 1942.

[46] Vasilich, "Vystavka 'sovetskii rai' v Berline: Kak promyt´ mozgi umnoi natsii," 11 April 2019, *Vasilich's Blog*, https://www.stena.ee/blog/vystavka-sovetskij-raj-v-berline-kak-promyt-mozgi-umnoj-natsii. For the 48-page brochure of the exhibition, see *Das Sowjet-Paradies: Ausstellung der Reichspropagandaleitung der NSDAP. Ein Bericht in Wort und Bild* (Berlin: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1942) at https://germanpropaganda.org/soviet-paradise-exhibition/. For excerpts in English translation, see German Propaganda Archive, Calvin University at https://research.calvin.edu/german-propaganda-archive/paradise.htm. For the 12-minute film (in German with Portuguese translation), see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKwtU6QPOpo.

Table 1

**Frequency of Mentions of "Communist Paradise," "Soviet Paradise," and "Workers' Paradise" in American and British Newspapers, 1935–74** (accessed via newspapers.com)

| Years | Communist paradise | Soviet paradise | Workers' paradise |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1935–44 | 126 | 267 | 1,347 |
| 1945–54 | 2,396 | 1,793 | 8,131 |
| 1955–64 | 3,193 | 903 | 9,289 |
| 1965–74 | 1,230 | 702 | 5,726 |

periods beginning with 1935, "workers' paradise" consistently outpaced the other two terms.[47]

The citations were overwhelmingly ironic and continued to be utilized as such for the remainder of the Soviet period. Their frequency created the impression of authenticity, quotation marks becoming optional. Something of the same legerdemain happened with respect to other pithy phrases such as describing communist sympathizers as "useful idiots," and predicting that "the capitalists will sell us the rope with which to hang them." They were widely attributed to the Soviet Union's founding father until 1987, when the *New York Times*'s William Safire "tied himself in knots" looking among Lenin's works before concluding they were apocryphal.[48] Stalin received the same treatment. His supposed remark that "a single death is a tragedy, a million deaths is a statistic," so redolent of the dictator's cynicism, also lacks authoritative documentation.[49]

How, then, did the paradises—workers', Soviet, and communist—fare in the post-Soviet years? Judging from the statistics in Table 2, they have been progressively fading away. Along with the disappearance of the Soviet Union, references to it as a paradise declined precipitously. The "communist paradise," still fictively present in North Korea and with less plausibility in China, did considerably better. Interestingly, citations of the "workers' paradise" continued at a high rate throughout the 1980s and 1990s, and even into the new millennium. That they peaked in 1989 (at over 1,000 mentions) strongly suggests the irresistibility of irony in depicting the events of that year in communist Eastern Europe.

[47] https://www.newspapers.com/. The index is crude because an indeterminate number of mentions refer to places other than the Soviet Union or other communist-dominated countries.

[48] William Safire, "Useful Idiots of the West," *New York Times,* 12 April 1987, Sec. 6, 8, 10.

[49] See, for example, Terrence Maitland, "Gulag Three 'an Extraordinary Epic,'" *Boston Globe*, 11 June 1978, F20.

Table 2

**Frequency of Mentions of "Communist Paradise," "Soviet Paradise," and "Workers' Paradise" in American and British Newspapers, 1980–2019** (accessed via newspapers.com)

| Years | Communist paradise | Soviet paradise | Workers' paradise |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1980s | 828 | 283 | 6,454 |
| 1990s | 369 | 55 | 3,616 |
| 2000s | 342 | 27 | 2,167 |
| 2010s | 156 | 10 | 838 |

But as the use of these sobriquets declined and the specter of their referents' revival grew less plausible, the paradises that journalists invoked tended to become less smirky. To illustrate, the article that David Remnick published in 1990 about an event that had occurred in Novocherkassk in 1962 bore the predictable headline of "Massacre in Workers Paradise." But already in 1995, Alessandra Stanley could refer not unsympathetically to "Wistful Russians Toast[ing] Old Days of Certainty" as "longing for … the lost Communist paradise."[50] And when, in July 2023, Milan Kundera's obituary appeared in the *New York Times*, it described him, not inappropriately, as the author of "mordant, sexually charged novels that captured the suffocating absurdity of life in the workers' paradise of his native Czechoslovakia." Not inappropriate because part of the frisson of the novels was to depict upstanding Czechoslovak communists in this manner.[51]

Still, some journalists could not resist reverting to the bad practices of the past. The *New York Times*'s opinion columnist Brett Stephens, for example, reacted to Tucker Carlson's notorious interview with Vladimir Putin, which occurred just days before Aleksei Naval´nyi's death, by revisiting "the early days of the Soviet Union" when "sympathetic Western journalists and intellectuals … would file reports about productive collectivized farms, happy factory workers and kindly comrades in the Kremlin." Who would bear the weight of his opprobrium? Yes, that "muckraking American journalist," Lincoln Steffens, "after his visit to the worker's paradise in 1919."[52]

Once again, we return to the beginning. There, it will be recalled, I suggested that journalistic repetitions could bleed into history. The case

[50] "Massacre in Workers Paradise," *Washington* Post, 17 December 1990, https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/1990/12/18/massacre-in-workers-paradise/b0da3023-bba2-4512-ae0d-a2d72acf3d35/; *Miami Herald*, 31 December 1995, 19A.

[51] *New York Times*, 12 July 2023, A1.

[52] Bret Stephens, "Putin and His Enablers Should Be Held Responsible for Navalny's Death," *New York Times*, 16 February 2024, https://www.nytimes.com/live/2024/02/20/opinion/thepoint#navalny-putin-death.

I want to examine here in the conclusion is the one that first alerted me to the prominence and faultiness of the "workers' paradise" locution. It is a book about Finnish North Americans recruited in the early 1930s by the Finnish-language communist press and the Soviet Karelian Technical Aid Committee (KTA) to lend their skills to the development of the Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. Based mainly on the "life writing" of the migrants—their letters, diaries, and memoirs—it follows them, as I described the book in my largely favorable review, "from their recruitment and departures to their first impressions of Karelia, their housing, health and hygiene, working and leisure activities, children's upbringing, and the Great Terror of the late 1930s to which, as ethnic Finns inhabiting territory adjacent to a hostile foreign power, they were particularly subjected." The author, Samira Saramo, "is an excellent guide," I added, and "there is much here that is both intellectually engaging and emotionally moving."[53]

The book is flawed, however, by its reliance on the trope of "socialist utopianism." To be sure, Finnish migrants had established settlements in British Columbia and Drummond Island, Michigan, based on socialist principles like those that had fueled New Harmony, Indiana, and La Réunion, Texas, among others. But whether "the dream of Karelia as a workers' paradise … can be seen as a continuation of their North American utopianist tradition" is dubious.[54] Instead of seeking utopia/paradise and being driven there by "fever"—an unfortunate metaphor that casts migration as irrational or worse, pathological—why not accept the genuineness of the feeling that, in the words of one memoirist, "there would be an opportunity to work for a better life with a good chance of success"?[55]

The book offers no evidence of Soviet propagandists promising utopia because there is none. Rather, they offered the immigrants a chance to help build socialism, an impossibility in the minds of anticommunists and therefore tantamount to a utopian vision. Saramo quotes from a memoir

[53] Lewis H. Siegelbaum, "Review of Samira Saramo, *Building That Bright Future: Soviet Karelia in the Life Writing of Finnish North Americans*," *International Review of Social History* 68, 1 (2023): 179–81. On Soviet xenophobia supplanting the "Piedmont Principle" by the mid-1930s and its deleterious effects on borderland peoples, see Terry Martin, *The Affirmative Action Empire: Nations and Nationalism in the Soviet Union, 1923–1939* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 311–19.

[54] Samira Saramo, *Building That Bright Future: Soviet Karelia in the Life Writing of Finnish North Americans* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022), 24–25.

[55] Saramo, *Building That Bright Future*, 48. For use of the fever metaphor in relation to migration to Siberia from elsewhere in the Russian Empire, see Lewis H. Siegelbaum, "Paradise or Just a Little Bit Better? Siberian Settlement 'Fever' in Late Imperial Russia," *Russian Review* 76, 1 (2017): 22–37.

that did refer to the workers' paradise. The memoirist recalled an encounter in Sweden with disgruntled American returnees among whom was "an angry man" who yelled at the KTA recruiter: "Some paradise! Some utopia! Everything you told us was a pack of lies!" But another returnee spoke up for the recruiter, saying, 'He didn't lie to us … He told us it wouldn't be easy … He promised no paradise. We just didn't listen." How was it, then, that "into the 1950s and well beyond that" migrants who managed to return to North America "still strongly believed … that the Soviet Union was a workers' paradise"?[56] The answer is that they did not, unless they had been reading the newspapers cited above and somehow missed their ironic intent.

This search for the workers' paradise has identified three "moments" in the history of English-language journalism. The first emerged in connection with utopian socialism in the early 19th century and lent itself thereafter to application to far-off lands and specific locales where labor was scarce and wages high. The second dates from the years immediately following the October Revolution. It reached its pinnacle in the 1930s, when the contrast between the Soviet Union's dynamism and the sluggishness of capitalist economies was at its greatest. The third moment coincided with the onset of the Cold War to which it contributed. The second and third moments' chief characteristics are irony and sarcasm. All assertions and suggestions of the Soviet origins of the term are erroneous and often were inspired by anticommunist malevolence. That they still occur, albeit with less frequency, is a measure of the staying power of that mindset.

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[56] Saramo, *Building That Bright Future*, 43–44, 162.