

# 6

## No Country for Young Men: Encountering Neoliberalism in Transnational Corporations

‘She’s my friend, but she’s a workhorse; she’s no beauty! But that’s the way I like her. If anything happens to her, it won’t matter so much.’ Petr, a slim, careful man in his late twenties, strokes the bonnet of his Lada Samara sedan as he says these words. We have just inspected some road damage to the chassis and front wing that had occurred while Petr had been driving home from the transnational (TNC) car factory, an hour away across treacherous roads. In the poor winter visibility he had hit an object on the road, probably a rusted exhaust part from another car. In turn this had severely damaged one of the wheels of Petr’s car, ‘which was hanging by a thread in any case’.

Petr had called Sergei, the underground factory foreman. Sergei had organized a recovery truck to tow Petr home. Petr remarks:

Only 2000 roubles for the recovery. Really that’s quite cheap. The first one I phoned wanted five. That’s when I realized I was out of my depth and needed Sergei’s help. His ‘Qashqai’ breaks down all the time. It’s a real lemon that he was tricked over. But because of that he knows all the ‘evacuators’ around here. [...] now I get a decent wage I can afford little misfortunes [*neschast’e*] like that. Not like Nikita and his rust bucket.

Petr's talk reveals much in terms of his interpretation of his 'new' life since joining the car plant in 2011, two years after I first met him. Now he is 'earning', as he puts it, as opposed to drawing a survival wage in one of the town enterprises. As a result he has been able to build a small buffer of savings for life's 'misfortunes'. Petr is money-minded in a responsible way. He worked hard to pay off a small mortgage on his one-room flat and always tries to buy 'the best' for his young child, born in 2012.

Sergei and Petr worked together in 2009 in the underground glazing workshop described earlier. Although Petr talks of 'leaving that world behind', it is clear that the network of confrères extends through time; even better earners like Petr rely on an extended network of one-time work-mates, especially when there is an automobile emergency. In fact his relationship with Sergei and Nikita is more of a long-standing friendship. This is reflected in his joking mention of Sergei's car as a 'Qashqai'—actually a very beaten-up 1990s Lada. British-built Nissan Qashqai jeeps were heavily marketed and advertized on television in Russia as a status car, indicative of the achievement of social mobility into the (lower) ranks of the new middle class. Petr's ironic joke is a claim to his retaining 'in' status in the group of friends from the underground factory. They use such language play to articulate genuine desires for the material trappings and status associated with the ownership of a 'Jap' car, as well as a simultaneous suspicion of both the motives of an individual with such aspirations (somehow less manly, more liable to 'get above his station'). These are precisely the sentiments expressed when Katya bought a foreign vehicle and her brother began to use it. Nikita (eventually back working in the cement works in 2012) also abortively owned a fatally rusted Lada. There is a long history of unspoken and guilty desire associated with foreign cars in Russia (see Siegelbaum 2011: 4). In addition, there is the continuing association of high-status vehicles with the 'ruling' class and those that have seemingly undeservedly gained access to material riches (*ibid.*: 5). Car ownership of any kind remains a political and class-ridden issue.

Clearly, car ownership speaks to issues around the display of working-class masculinity, but in this chapter it is the car as the emblem of uneasy social mobility that is the focus. Choices about what kind of car to own, whether to use credit to buy it, whether it is Russia-built or 'foreign',

whether to learn from others how to maintain it or pay a stranger—all these forks in the path of becoming a vehicle owner are statements of intent and interpretation by others, particularly men in a person's social circle. In Izluchino, conversations about cars between men serve to dramatize aspects of social class mobility and immobility, aspirational fantasies that remain inaccessible and stubborn retrenchments of classed identities that bespeak an uneasy relationship with the 'desired' 'Western' car as status symbol and object of labour in the Volkswagen, Volvo and Peugeot-Mitsubishi TNC factories which assemble them.

While the core of this chapter is the story of Petr's move from the local factory job—via underground glazing workshop in the informal economy, to working-class 'aristocracy' in the automotive factory—in parallel I trace debates about car ownership in his circle of confrères. These are seemingly laid-back comments, but which are actually razor-sharp judgements about seemingly insignificant details of ownership and skill made over beers in garages and flats. The chapter returns to the masculine world and follows two groups of workers, the first of which, represented by Petr and Slava, are broadly understood as seemingly accepting of the neoliberal challenge of working on themselves to become flexible subjects of Russia's harsh neocapitalist order (cf. Kideckel 2008). These are mainly the younger workers employed by the new TNCs such as Samsung and Volkswagen. The transition from Soviet-type enterprise, management and labour habitus is tracked as these male workers, unlike those in previous chapters, try to 'make the grade' in regimes of labour relations and production norms very different from those even in seemingly similar Russian enterprises. The second group examined here are those remaining in lower-paid employment in Izluchino, represented by Nikita. What price does the first group pay for better wages, better 'prospects' and a 'habitable' space in the new globalized Russian economy? While there are positive stories of social mobility and betterment, there is also a persistent narrative of stress, illness and discontent. Finally, there is the hint of the beginnings of realization that exploitation comes in different forms. Despite the higher salaries and 'shiny', high-tech facilities, the neocapitalist blue-collar production space of the multinationals is just as fraught a space for carving out habitability as the moribund Soviet factories these workers have left behind.

## Workhorse Cars Reflecting Their Owners

‘Workhorse’ to describe the practical necessity of car ownership and use is apt. Cars in Izluchino need to be tough to cope with the poor and largely unmetalled local roads; to withstand the weight of supplies and equipment used for local informal work; to survive the harsh climate of hot summers and freezing winters. When Sasha’s Lada Priora got a smashed wing as we drove the summer country roads, the cost of repair and loss of use was a real risk to his livelihood. There are also the risks associated with ownership in Russia— theft regardless of the car’s worth; risks associated with parking on the street— what if one of the many drunk or inexperienced drivers runs into your car parked precariously on the corner of the overcrowded yard? Small accidents like this happen all the time: Petr’s car got rear-ended just parked outside his flat; Andrei’s hubcaps and wind-screen wipers were stolen from his car parked underneath his first-floor balcony window.

Just to give a taste of what a ‘working’ car might have to put up with, we can introduce a named vehicle— ‘Gavriusha’— as an informant in ‘her’ own right. Gavriusha<sup>1</sup> was the affectionate name given to Nikita’s 1990s Lada owned from 2010 to 2012 until her rusted sills meant that parking on the street invariably led to flooding of the whole interior after rainfall. Gavriusha had been used as an informal taxi by her previous owner— the interior was in a poor state of repair by the time Nikita bought her for 100,000 roubles (\$3300). As a ‘working’ car she had an expensive stereo radio system so that the driver could while away the nights spent waiting for fares on the cold town square. At some point she had been used to transport dairy products and processed foods when the previous owner had worked informally as a delivery driver. Nikita never could get rid of the smell of sour milk from the car (which competed with the smell of damp and cigarette smoke). The transporting of passengers and goods over the recommended weight limit of the car often meant that

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Gavriusha’ is a proper name often given to pet animals and was popularized in a Soviet cartoon featuring a pet cow. It both indicates a tender zoomorphizing of the car in its owner’s eyes, but also relates to the rough, work-like role the car plays.

suspension systems and springs suffered damage and the car's handling was affected, but the problem was not repaired.

Whether for earning informally as a taxi driver, transport for moonlighting jobs and trade of goods, or just a marker of appropriate adult and bread-winning masculinity, the car remains a necessity for habitability of any kind. This is understood unambiguously by all in Izluchino, young and old, male and female. More revealing is the difference in attitudes, particularly between men in the same social circle, regarding the merits of ownership of a 'banger' (a very cheap car requiring frequent repairs) and the necessity of attendant skills to do repairs oneself. As Lewis Siegelbaum has amply demonstrated, car ownership in socialist societies became increasingly important for defining self and class. Even as cars increased in quality and accessibility, they remained objects of 'relative scarcity' and were invested with particular symbolic value 'because of the lengths to which aspirant and real owners would go to obtain and maintain them' (Siegelbaum 2011: 2). More than any other consumer object, the car came to represent the particular forms of socialist consumption (Siegelbaum 2008). Scarce yet desirable, practical and useful yet difficult to maintain, cars retain the aura of objects of desire that require reserves of patience and the cunning use of networks to obtain and keep.

In the postsocialist context, differences in attitude between younger and older workers towards cars have increasingly become linked to changing ideas about time value, adaptability to 'new' production contexts requiring 'self' discipline (such as conveyor work at the TNCs). In addition there is the ever-present symbolizing in car ownership of more and less worthy forms of masculinity and the dilemma of foregoing consumption in the present for the sake of ownership of 'better' forms of vehicle transport in the future. This is best illustrated by two parallel debates in different social circles of informants—those in Nikita's group who openly criticize his purchase of 'Gavriusha' and those in Sasha's group who see his frequent change of car ownership as echoing his inability to remain in permanent employment. The physical mobility ownership is linked to 'mobility' in a wider sense, valued both positively (e.g. willingness to adapt to the Western demands of the TNC production lines in Kaluga) and negatively: the charge of being a 'flyer'—a person who can't knuckle down and stick at a permanent job.

First, we return to Sasha. For a short time, Sasha had owned a Korean-built jeep but had soon sold it on, partly due to the cost of upkeep, but also because of the social opprobrium from family, friends and confrères. As Uncle Lyova says, shaking his head: 'A foreign car like that is a cap that doesn't fit him [*ne po Sene shapka*]. Why is he trying to be something that he isn't?'

The Korean jeep seemed perfect at first. I travelled with Sasha as he used it for all kinds of practical purposes. Like ownership of any car the jeep was inseparable from Sasha's self-interpretation and interpretation by others as a breadwinner and as a suitable masculine working-class self-resourcing person. This was the 'prestige' enjoyed by his father and others, but linked to ownership of a resource that could be leveraged—practical transport. However, quickly it became evident that, unlike Petr's cautious and parsimonious perspective on car ownership, Sasha's car marked him out as a miscalculating risk taker—like a gambler who does not know when to quit, or an impulsive drinker who lacks self-control.

The first 'misfortune' was when the turbo needed replacing and Sasha had to drive to the next region to source the parts. This meant losing a day's work. Then the local mechanic that he had found through his acquaintances turned out not to know how to make the repair properly. In the end after a series of costly repairs, Sasha sold the car on for a loss. This confirmed his father's prior comment on a 'cap that doesn't fit him'.

For those around him, Sasha's 'extravagant' abortive ownership of the jeep mirrored his lack of self-discipline when it came to staying the course in formal work. 'He's fine until the first misfortune and then it seems like he can never get over it,' said one person. 'His work history is like his car history—he is enthusiastic until it "breaks" and then he gives up and gets another one.' A friend commented: 'Instead of dealing with the conflict he'll leave. Like with his car. In seven years he's changed his car many times. You need to look after it. Just like with work. It's hard and you need to sort out the faults, and instead of changing himself he tries to change his environment (*sredu*).' By 2014 these criticisms seemed vindicated in the minds of Sasha's friends and relatives when he had seemed to have completely given up on formal work for informal taxi driving, but now in a humble and rusty 1990s Lada.

## Drinking to 'Gavriusha': The Profit and Profligacy of Car Ownership

Around the same time as Sasha is leaving dreams of his jeep ownership behind, Petr, his then-girlfriend and soon-to-be wife Julia and I are discussing the meaning of car ownership. Petr had said that to have a car was 'advantageous' or even 'profitable' (*vygodno imet' mashinu*). What had he meant by this? Julia takes up the theme.

It shows you are more than just another bloke with no prospects around here. Sure it is just transportation (*peredvizhenie*), like Petr said, but it shows your own advantage too (*svoiu vygodu*) among others. He's not a man without a car now. When cars really appeared ten years ago I remember how it started to be that cars became associated with higher-paid men.

[Petr cut in quickly:]

But that's not really the case now. You don't *have* to have a lot of money to keep up a car if you are willing to learn, use the internet, ask people how to fix it. Look at your car [indicating me]—you took the carburettor apart didn't you? Now Lada's don't have them anymore and people are losing this skill. Also, there is the flexibility in terms of time, even with a cheap car. Sure I will spend time learning how to keep it up, but that's an investment. And then, when I travel to the Broiler Plant I can choose to go by works bus or my own transport. It is much more convenient by car. It is a lot easier to get there by car than on the bus—I can leave home later. And come home earlier though it has no effect on work time—eight to five every day. But by bus I have to get to the stop by 6:50 am. But in my own car I leave at 7:15. That's nearly 40 minutes extra at home. Tea is not free at work, with the car I can stop off and buy it in a shop, or bring a thermos or teapot to work. That's at least ten roubles a day on provisioning I can save by investing in my own transport. Of course in other ways the canteen at work is advantageous (*vygodno*): 70 [roubles] for a four-course meal. That's soup (*rassolnik*), meat, pasta, half a cup of sour cream, salad, and a dessert, two pieces of rye bread, and coffee. It's a dinner that really makes up for the low pay.

This was 2011, two years before Petr went to work for the TNC, but already clear themes of parsimony, calculation, as well as work- and personhood-related flexibility are reflected in the meanings of car ownership. At that time Petr owned the same Lada Samara as when he later began commuting much further than the Broiler Plant to the automobile assembly line outside Kaluga.

Around the same time, Nikita, Petr, and their *tusovka* are celebrating the purchase of Gavriusha with a party in the *DeKa*. Petr's choices about car ownership mark him as a 'careful', future-orientated worker, willing to defer gratification and calculate long- and short-term costs and benefits of ownership as well as present his car use as indicative of flexibility for the sake of formal work opportunities. Nikita presents quite the opposite, at least in Petr's eyes. This contrast presents itself at the party when the following conversation—*in vino veritas*—takes place after our first 'outing' in Gavriusha:

*Me:* Nikita, you need to be lighter on the gas pedal or the radiator will boil over again.

*Nikita:* I can't help it. I love her, you know. I'm just so smitten.

*Petr:* You can't love your car. You'll find out later why. Only now do I understand with time that I am allowed to love my car. You already allowed others to drive Gavriusha, so she isn't your love. It's like a prostitute. On the other hand, if you don't let us, we won't be able to judge her. A woman with experience, you could say. [*everyone laughs*]

*Nikita:* I am the second or third owner of my Gavriusha and that's it. [*all laugh*]

*Petr:* What are you saying? I am just kidding, I want you to be glad ... but you haven't understood us ... We are happy you bought the car, but you are not paying attention to the right thing [*ne tuda smotrish*]. I am glad you got a car after all, but you haven't yet really understood [*osoznaesh*] that you have a car.

Petr goes on to explain more clearly that ownership of the car entails responsibilities and planning, as well as 'enjoyment'. Behind the male banter comparing ownership and use to promiscuity and cuckolding lies a rather hard criticism of Nikita by Petr: he isn't yet 'man' enough for ownership of such a 'demanding' mistress; after all, on his first out-



ing with me, the radiator had boiled over, provoking further sexually metaphoric joking at his expense. Petr, now speaking less harshly, but perhaps even more pointedly criticizing Nikita's profligacy and lack of circumspection, describes how since Nikita lives with his parents it is less unfortunate that he had been 'tricked' into buying a 'lemon' [*razvaliukha*]<sup>1</sup>—a car with many ongoing and difficult-to-fix faults. It is easy to be spontaneous and give in to one's desires when one is backed up by the bank of mum and dad. Petr cannot hold back now, and while Nikita's inebriation means that he perhaps does not fully take in the criticism, the line of argument is clear enough to the other half dozen partiers still awake at 4 a.m.:

*Petr:* Spontaneity is always tempered by the brain. You see a car you like, check it out, talk to the owner, come back, talk to you friends—your *friends*; and then you don't make an offer, you ask how much they want. I can't believe you did this without thinking and planning. Don't you admit that in reality you won't really get behind the wheel for three months until you can get your full licence and fix the chassis?

*Nikita:* Yes, I know. [sheepish and suddenly sobering up]

*Petr:* But I know you will [drive it illegally] and that will fucking be it when the cops take it away.

*Nikita:* I can admit more. Maybe I won't even ever drive it. I might not pass the medical.

*Petr:* Don't give me that crap. You only won't pass it you don't really want to. A 'father' [of the car] cannot think of his health. He just needs to have the desire and will to do something. Look at Zhenya [also present]: he didn't cheat or pay a bribe, even though they wanted him too. He passed his test through hard work and application.

Sure enough, within six months, after finding the repairs too costly to make and despite passing his test, Nikita sold the car on as scrap. This 'waste' of precious resources reinforced the view of Petr that Nikita was unwilling to 'adapt' to economic necessity. Whereas for Nikita, the more instrumental attitude of Petr to cars marked him out in a negative way as part of the 'new' aspirational group of workers who did not value ownership for its own sake.

## The TNC Car Plants: New Labour Horizons Expanded or Narrowed?

Since the new opportunities for higher-paid blue-collar employment in Kaluga in the automobile plants, masculinity for Petr and others has increasingly become linked to ‘appropriate’ modes of working-class ‘propriety’; the attitude towards car ownership is just one such symbolic example. Petr’s criticism of Nikita’s ‘type’ closely echoes that of the women in the previous chapter: such men are ‘infantile’ and lack the self-will to adapt and change according to circumstances (cf. Kay 2006; Ashwin 2000 on ‘male feminization’). However, even after many men from the social group of young people have gone to work for the best-paying TNC car plant, a tension remains in terms of active and sometimes symbolic debate (the latter through consumption and saving choices) between friends as to the merits of ‘self-work’ and striving, versus the kind of choices made by Sasha involving more autonomy and a rejection of the new production opportunities. But to do justice to the complexity of that debate it is necessary to describe in some detail the huge impact of the arrival of car companies in the regional capital on the employment choices of these younger men.

In the early 2000s a number of pioneering TNCs—brewers, confectioners and others—came to Kaluga because of its good transport links to Moscow and lower production costs. The vacuum cleaner effect of Moscow on wealth throughout the Russian Federation cannot be overstated; the disparity between development, opportunity and wealth in the ‘core’ (a world megacity of more than 12 million) and the ‘periphery’ that stretches from Moscow Region to Kamchatka, thousands of miles to the east, is staggering even to the Russians themselves. Since the late 1990s Kaluga has certainly benefitted from being in a goldilocks zone of close proximity to the capital, but far enough away to lower average wages and production costs. In 2012 the ‘border’ with Moscow city suddenly became closer still as a large corridor along the Moscow–Kiev highway was incorporated into the city, having formerly belonged to Moscow Region. Now Kaluga Region borders Moscow City itself. At the same time economic and human development indicators for the Region

continue to show Kaluga as a ‘middling’ overall.<sup>2</sup> For example, in the official statistics for 2012, there is a telling disparity between average incomes in the Region (around the average for European Russia) and a much higher level of Gross Regional Product per head (5th position out of the 19 federal subjects in the Central Federal District containing Moscow and Moscow Region).<sup>3</sup> The ambivalent effect of Kaluga’s pro-business policies on the fortunes of workers can be illustrated by various reports on the number of workers still ‘commuting’ (i.e. spending weeks at a time in poor accommodation like Polina in the previous chapter) to Moscow for work. This figure is in the mid-tens of thousands.

In 2003, Kaluga Region reduced property taxes and simplified customs procedures for international companies relocating there. A number of ‘industrial parks’ were created in the region. These were outside cities but close to highways where the regional administration invested in and prepared ‘bespoke’ sites in advance of the arrival of international concerns. This is clearly explained in a carefully worded yet revealing English-language report by the governor Artamonov in 2008, which also announced the arrival of Volkswagen, among others: ‘When investor gets a land plot it is already connected to electricity, gas and water lines, as well as a road [...] we focus our efforts on creating an attractive investment climate and improving our laws so that they are favourable for business activities and capital protection.’<sup>4</sup> In 2014, a Moscow economics professor commented that in terms of foreign investment the ‘creation of a powerful cluster of automobile manufacturers in the Kaluga Region is perhaps the only success story in recent years.’<sup>5</sup> But he then warned that this success was a zero-sum game that could not be replicated throughout Russia: ‘The problem is that Kaluga is a very specific example of when regions vie for foreign manufacturers who are attracted by the promising Russian market and the government encourages localized production. The region is an example of (a) a powerful new industrial cluster

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.undp.ru/documents/NHDR-2013.pdf>. 2013 data for Human Development Indices.

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b13\\_14p/IssWWW.exe/Stg/d2/10-02.htm](http://www.gks.ru/bgd/regl/b13_14p/IssWWW.exe/Stg/d2/10-02.htm). Gross Regional Product per head figures for 2011.

<sup>4</sup> <http://russiasregions.com/kaluga.html>. Webpage no longer available.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.themoscowtimes.com/opinion/article/davos-and-russias-regions/493564.html>

appearing practically from scratch that is (b) comprised almost entirely of foreign businesses.'

In 2010, a new cohort of workers has just been taken on at the car plant near Kaluga. This intake includes Slava, a mutual acquaintance of Nikita and Petr, in his early twenties. Slava is extremely guarded about his new job. Why would that be when almost all the other informants are not? In our first few encounters he and his girlfriend give little away to the others. Perhaps they are worried about the envy of others; after all, Slava is now earning in a prestigious blue-collar job, relatively speaking. But it can't just be the money. Although some of the men have recently been earning less than half his wage and Slava is no doubt reluctant to hurt their feelings, he can't be earning more than 18,000 roubles (\$800) a month after a relatively lengthy probationary period. By contrast those at the Cement earn around 14,000 (\$470). Petr at the Broiler, as a more skilled 'technician', earns the same as Slava. It is only later, after 2012, that it could be said that car plant workers are significantly better paid. Perhaps it is just Slava's personality and that of his partner Marina. It was she who had given him the 'shove' into applying. They rent a relatively expensive flat attached to one of the industrial zones out of town. It would be a pain to get to the bus stop located on the main road for the works bus. Why do they rent at all when others put up with living with parents or in-laws? Why not wait? Because Marina is like that. She wants to get ahead, is the answer.

With hindsight then it is easy to see why Slava is guarded. Even in this friendly group, the sense of 'getting above one's station' is keenly felt, just as the more 'upwardly mobile' people frequently, if with relative good nature, repeat Petr's insightful characterization of Nikita's 'type' (as in Chap. 3) as 'needing physical work and belonging to a traditional collective without understanding why'. Later (2014), after Petr himself has been working at the car plant for a few years, he repeats the substance of his previous assessment of Nikita's work 'mentality': 'He has to work, but doesn't know why, certainly not towards a directed aim. That's just the way he is and he is happy in himself. Nikita just has to spend all his pay even before he gets it.' This restatement of Petr's earlier position is in response to Slava talking about feeling trapped by the well-paid conveyor job. But it is almost as if now, with the benefit of hindsight, Petr and Slava have some secret admiration, as much as scorn, for Nikita's 'easy-

come-easy-go' attitude. And this is related to Slava's (and to a lesser extent Petr's) anxiety in talking about the car plant work.

Another multifaceted factor contributes to this anxiety: the absolute novelty of foreign employers, managers and relatively high-tech production lines. Sasha's experience at one of the car plants—described in Chap. 2—is indicative of the shock to the individual of the time and productivity demands on Russian workers used to Soviet-style production regimes and practices. Coupled with more general cultural differences, Slava and Petr feel perpetually tested by the new plant and therefore reluctant to discuss it, even with close friends. After taking as much as risk with employment as those escaping into the informal economy, what if those going to work for the Germans, French, Swedes and Japanese—the 'Romanians',<sup>6</sup> come back as failures? It took over a year of Petr working at the plant before I was really able to discuss it openly with him. At first I had to make do with Slava's limited talk.

Along with an ongoing sense of novelty, strangeness, and the sense of being tested is the reciprocal and endemic suspicion and distrust of all things foreign among the Russian men, young and old alike. The watchfulness appears mutual. The first crack in Slava's armour was his surprise at the cultural difference of management. Instead of shouting and swearing, the foreign supervisors were always calm, if insistent and demanding. The usual stereotype of Russian inscrutability was reversed and projected onto the Germans and others (such as Slovak lower-level supervisors). Working for and with foreigners was a major milestone, not only in Slava's working life, but in terms of his and his family's life experience. It was 'weird' in a way he struggled to articulate, but given the formerly semi-closed defence industry status of Izluchino, not difficult to understand. Added to this was the sense that this shiny and relatively prospective work might disappear as soon as it had magically arrived. This also added to Slava's and Petr's reticence. 'Don't look a gift horse in the mouth' is a Russian saying too.

Soon, Slava admitted that one reason he was wary was the overly formal way that his work contract had been set up; even as a probationer

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<sup>6</sup> 'Romanian' was the derogatory generic term for 'inferior' foreigners, including Italians, French and German managers at a variety of TNCs. 'Amerikosy', approximating 'Yanks', was reserved for the British and Americans without distinction.

he had had to sign an agreement not to disclose to third parties any business practices at the plant. This he took seriously when being questioned by a foreign researcher. Secondly, for the first year or so, Slava's pay was not particularly higher than that in the town. Just as elsewhere, a significant proportion of salary was paid as a 'bonus'. But unlike in his previous experience in Izluchino in 'Soviet-style' factories, the supervisors at the car plant had no qualms about withholding or 'fining' workers their bonus for what would be considered relatively minor infractions elsewhere. Subsequent talks with Slava and Petr picked up further on this point (discussed in the next section).

Anxiety was also heightened by the disparity in production relations between the foreign plant and the inheritor businesses like the Cement and Steelpipe in the town. Coercion was felt in a completely 'new' and unnerving way by Petr and Slava. They were fundamentally disturbed by the 'indirect' nature of the more Taylorist, compartmentalized and highly organized production regime. This took time getting used to, but unlike Sasha, they stuck to it and with time were able to articulate more and more of what they felt to be 'weird'. What was normal Russian management practice was conspicuously absent at the European and Asian plants: minimal oversight, lack of forward planning, a lot of slack followed by 'storming' to meet deadlines with a nice bonus for the whole team at the end regardless of quality. Instead, as Slava sheepishly admitted, 'they really know how to get every ounce out of you all the time, every day, from the start to the end of the shift'. It turned out, as his soon-to-be-wife Marina articulated, 'he's not trying to avoid talking about the conveyor; he's just completely exhausted!' Marina and Slava were seen less and less at the *DeKa* parties. A fit young man of 24, Slava would collapse into bed at home after his shift and fall asleep in front of the television.

## Breaking One's Back for the 'New Deal'

It is a long time before I see Slava again. It seemed he had disappeared from the social group entirely. But at the end of summer all the car plants have a furlough period when they retool. In 2012, at the end of August, Slava and his wife, as well as Petr and others, have a barbeque at a vil-

lage plot outside town. By this time, Petr too has started working for the TNC. This occasion is where Slava's feeling of being hemmed in really comes to the fore. Now Slava has been promoted to foreman on the conveyor. After the independent trade union had instigated industrial action at the plant and in supplier plants, a collective wage agreement had been signed resulting in better wages and conditions. Yet Slava looks ever more like a haunted man. As the women busy themselves with putting children to bed and clearing away, a group of men gather round the fire some distance away. Stumbling over his words with a pained look into the fire, Slava keeps talking—somewhat in awe—of the mortgage he's taken out on the new-build Kaluga flat and his new 'physical' realization that he is now 'tied' to the foreman's job permanently. Petr, just a conveyor worker, but also destined for a more specialized role, uses the word 'trap', but leaves it unclear whether he refers to the mortgage or the higher-paid foreman's role.

Slava continues:

It's difficult to swallow. I took on the foreman's job, but I just can't really push people around like I am supposed to. I needed the promotion to get the mortgage—Marina isn't working while the kid is small. But now, it's kind of like I am surprised that I can't give it up.

Shortly afterwards, Slava and his family leave the village for their long journey home. It is left to Nikita and Petr to ponder on their friend's predicament. While Petr is sympathetic, he criticizes Slava's choice of taking on a burdensome mortgage so soon. Petr himself had saved up for years to buy a very modest local apartment before taking the 'risk' of working for a TNC. Nikita is visibly angry at Petr's balanced and calculating response:

You clearly didn't see the weld burns on Slava's arms and face. Everyone's talking about how poor the conditions really are at the plant. No better than anywhere else in reality. And yes, I was tempted by the extra 5–10 k pay a month, but then there is the commute. You look tired yourself, mate. How long do you spend on the road behind the wheel of your Lada?

Again, the topic of car ownership arises. Nikita cannot let it lie:

*Nikita:* OK, the lad will have a flat in Kaluga. And a discount or credit on a fancy foreign car that will fall apart on our roads. So fucking what? To break his back for the ‘new deal’ at the plant that they only won after the strikes? Physically that job, despite the shiny foreign plant and showers and clean overalls, is no different from mine at the Cement. And we have showers too you know. And there’s no sitting around or smoking in the back there. That’s the only plant that’ll sack you for coming in smelling of booze too!

*Petr:* Well, that would be you out on your ear after the second shift, then! [*good naturedly laughing*] At the end of the day, I still don’t know yet whether it was worth buying my flat here or in Kaluga. Both are extortionate. The prices are almost like Moscow. That’s the problem. If you live with your mum then the pay is amazing. If you have responsibilities it is no different from the Cement.

You are right about the physicality. I’ve been off sick for most of August due to my back. And the travel time, well, yes, that’s dead time regardless of whether you are in your own car or the works bus—the cost of which they take out of your pay, by the way.

Clearly, Nikita’s talk is significantly inflected by resentment, possibly envy, and some second-hand, if not inaccurate information about conditions at the plant. On the other hand his practical reasoning about the risks associated with work at the TNC and other plants is firmly shared by many others, and resembles Sasha’s views in Chap. 2. Petr’s considered position is frank in acknowledging some of Nikita’s points. In fact, as time goes on, Petr’s pre-existing health problems get worse at the plant, necessitating long and involved medical intervention. Unlike Andrei at Steelpipe, Petr’s ‘worth’ to the TNC does not amount to his employer paying for the necessary medical care.

Moving on from the long-term debates on the merits of the ‘new deal’, within the small social circle containing Petr, Nikita, Slava and others, it is possible to draw on more widely collected ethnographic material, including from semi-formal interviews with other workers, union activists, clerical workers at car plants, and publically available material. Locally, in Izluchino the opening of the car plants and other enterprise facilities was a major source of bitterness: the best and youngest workers were the most likely to leave the town’s struggling enterprises. The anxiet-



ies displayed by Slava in his new work were replicated by local businesses: it was all some trick, a sleight of hand played by the region governor to please Putin. One group of workers at Volkswagen unambiguously talked about how the Germans would suck what bone marrow was left and then relocate back to 'the Reich!' 'We're the blacks of Europe all right,' said one worker. 'Do you know how much the Slovak VW workers building the Škodas in Bratislava get paid? Twice as much as even our specialist workers! Are they any more productive? Of course not!'<sup>7</sup>

While many locals were genuinely concerned for their town because of the competition for labour, many more clearly articulated politically aware cynicism towards the companies and their government. They talked of Kaluga becoming a low-wage global outsourcing site of blue-collar labour. Once the 'honeymoon' period of workers like Slava at the plants was over, people were not surprised by the labour turnover in the foreign plants and its workers' militancy, the former even higher than in the Russian and 'Soviet' plants. These two issues, while related, need to be separated out.

As illustrated in Sasha's case, even relatively young workers could often not reconcile themselves to the increasing imperatives to self-exploit on the production line, and in more general terms, in order to work up the career ladder at the car plants. They clearly articulated frustrations at a lack of autonomy in regulating their own pace and approach to solving tasks and meeting production targets. Second was the awareness of the 'off-shoring' and state-within-a-state nature of many of the 'Special' Industrial Zones, of which VW was but one. How ironic that in some ways they resembled those 'closed' factory towns of the Soviet period, like Izluchino: gated entry, only works buses in and out; significant monitoring and searching of staff entering and leaving (workplace theft was immediately a problem); heightened labour discipline (alluded to earlier in terms of summary dismissal for even smelling of alcohol).

Those of a more reflective nature went further: weren't these little fiefdoms of Germany, France and Japan like colonies in the Third World? Extracting surplus value to be shipped back home? 'And we're not even up

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<sup>7</sup>It should be noted that the cars produced in Russia are for the domestic market. However, this does not negate the point about exploitation made by workers.

to the standard of Brazil!’ said another worker. ‘They even get better pay in VW’s Anchieta factory that makes Passats near Sao Paolo.’ Multiple generations of Marxist–Leninist education had not gone entirely to waste—even the less educated could readily join the dots to spell ‘exploitation’ and ‘proletariat’. The result was the same problem of labour ‘churning’ that Sasha was a vivid example of and which was bemoaned by entrepreneurs at every turn. Except that in VW it was worse. A candid and relatively balanced local news report highlighted this after a third shift was taken on and union activity increased in response to the large numbers of agency contract workers. The German HR manager commented:

I have never seen such churning of labour as in that factory. Since I arrived we’ve lost 600 workers in six months. And of these around 60% left of their own accord. The ones forced to leave were due to infractions of labour discipline, alcohol. At first I was surprised but now I get it. Many people who come to work from the edges of Kaluga and worked previously in agriculture or construction. Many were unaccustomed to work in three shifts and on the conveyor. Therefore the majority of those quitting left in the first two months.<sup>8</sup>

While, the German HR manager’s account is partial (his reference to the lack of worker experience in factory work is disingenuous at best), it is revealing of the problems in ‘churn’ due to differing cultural and moral norms of production, which have been discussed in detail earlier.

A more polemical piece, entitled ‘The Path of the Blue-collars’, appeared in the national business weekly magazine *Expert* in the same year (2011).<sup>9</sup> The main message was the familiar line that Russians are unsuited to the disciplined demands of the ‘shiny’ globalized factory. The journalist found ‘sad faced’ and downtrodden workers there. The author implied that they were ungrateful for the wonderful opportunity the benevolent Germans had provided for this provincial city. The author bemoaned the lack of technical preparation of young people in the vocational education sector as well as the inability of Russian firms to act as suppliers to the factory. Nowhere does the author address the issue of labour turn-

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<sup>8</sup><http://www.kp40.ru/news/kp/14731/>

<sup>9</sup><http://expert.ru/expert/2011/02/tropoj-sinih-vorotnichkov/>

over. Interestingly, a representative of the International Metalworkers' Federation associated with the local independent union at the Kaluga plant took the time to make a substantive response to the article: 'I don't really get this position: creatively describing the glum, gloomy people without even trying to find out what is actually happening at their workplace.' After describing some issues with safety at the plant that the union had highlighted, the IMF representative continued:

So, the main problem is as always, the [quality of the] "people"? [...] I will make no mention of the fact that the huge pay of the [auto] workers (about 20,000 roubles) is lower than the average for Kaluga Region in large and medium sized enterprises. That's not the problem, the people are.

How many times can the liberal cliché of undisciplined Russian workers be repeated at the same time as refusing to even ask about how things are at the factory?<sup>10</sup>

The undeniable fact of relatively uncompetitive, or, as informants sometimes said, 'stingy' wages, especially when deductions for work-clothes, transport and canteens were taken into account, no doubt added to the attraction for workers of the new active militant union at the car plants. MPRA (Interregional Trade Union of Auto Workers) is affiliated to the IndustriALL Global Union which represents 50 million workers in 140 countries in the mining, energy and manufacturing sectors. MPRA originated in the Ford Leningrad region and Tolyatti avtoVAZ factories in 2006 and was the main Volkswagen union in Russia from 2008. In Kaluga it quickly became the dominant union in the plants, leading negotiations on behalf of the workers. In 2012 the union was able to mobilize enough workers to push management into a collective bargaining agreement and a reduction in temporary and agency labour, including at peripheral suppliers.

Elsewhere I have written with Sarah Hinz on the campaigns and success of MPRA in Kaluga (Hinz and Morris forthcoming 2016), and much of the detail of the union activities is beyond the focus of this book. However, a few points that arose in the collection of material on the union are perti-

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<sup>10</sup><http://expert.ru/forum/expert-articles/11078/>

ment to some of the themes around workers' values and a moral economy of work more widely. Slava and Petr had not joined the union, yet had benefitted from its work. Their paternalistic expectations of a union echoed the older generation's understanding of industrial relations and were a source of frustration to the new union. In 2013, Hinz and I conducted a number of long interviews with local union activists. In response to my surprise about their active and open use of social media they responded by talking about the need to show that the union 'is working'. People pay their dues and want a 'return on their investment'. Like in Soviet times they expect material support from the union. 'We don't want to be like the "yellow" [traditional Soviet] unions so our compromise is to try to show the work we are doing.' Throughout the interviews the activist had the air of a rather put-upon parent.

Petr's initial job status as an external 'agency' worker at the TNC put him at the heart of the dispute's concerns. He was on a waiting list with numerous hoops to jump through before being transferred as a permanent worker with the normal legal rights, benefits and pay. Sickness time off was one such issue to overcome, particularly as Petr's health problems got worse. In addition it was necessary to have the 'right attitude' and get in with the 'right' people to make sure one's name progressed up the list towards the coveted status of permanent employment instead of agency worker. Talks with other workers and union activists underlined the 'harsh physical demands' of conveyor work. A major problem in terms of inflexibility was that unlike in Russian companies, there was no conception of 'optimization' of labour, by which informants meant that if a person can't cope with the conveyor work (heavy lifting labour) they could be tried out in a different part of plant. The attitude at the car plants was much more 'disposable' towards less fit workers.

## **Final Reflections on 'Habitable' Labour Values and the Value of Labour**

This chapter ends with the contradictory, yet resolutely moral, perspectives of the main informants as, by different degrees, they make efforts to 'adapt' themselves as blue-collar persons to the ever changing 'demands'

of production in the globalized labour market of Kaluga Region. There is no neat tying of the various young men's fates with the discovery of clearly habitable niches of labour.

Nikita remains at the Cement, despite the 'tempting' promise of higher pay at the TNC car plants. He continues to come back home sweaty, dirty (despite the shower block at work) and exhausted. We drink a bit, chat a bit, but often, like Slava, he falls asleep in front of the television. At 28, the wear and tear of labour is starting to tell on him. People are starting to mistake us for being the same age, yet I am nearly 14 years his senior. He looks to Petr with a modicum of envy, but also disagrees with his prudence and his way of absorbing everything that comes along, the good and ill fortune. Eventually Petr bought a foreign car, a second-hand one. Petr lovingly nursed it. By contrast, Nikita continues his vehicular profligacy, buying a series of expensive yet defective motorcycles. Referring to Slava's and Petr's patience and stoicism, he demurs as to their virtues. Using a vivid metaphor—the disused clay pits in the town are full of rubbish and the lorries bring the dripping clay from further afield to the brick kilns now—Nikita says:

It's not like you're raw clay, is it? They can't just keep making you in to whatever they want. [...] The way I look at it is that some of these guys who go to the car plants are hypnotized [*zakodirovalsia*].

The metaphor of hypnosis is interesting, but is based in a specifically Russian context. The alternative medical process of 'encoding' [*kodirovanie*] is used to treat alcoholism. Nikita here likens willingness to become compliant to the needs of the new plant with alcoholics who can't moderate or kick the habit themselves and require quack treatment. As a result of what, in Nikita's view, is their misunderstanding of the worth of the reward on offer, they have become effectively like zombies. Partly by virtue of his family support, his 'pig-headedness' and his satisfaction with his lot at the Cement, Nikita remains at the 'greedy' Moscow-run plant. As Filipp his friend comments: 'They take a lot from you there, Nikita. Muscovites are like that. But we're generous spirits here in Izluchino. How else could anything get done in Russia?'

Petr, on the other hand, while equally well articulating the sense of unfair exploitation and inadequate remuneration in his labour at the TNC, is more accommodating, more accepting of his lot. His position and interpretation is practical, commonsensical. In the most positive light it can be seen as striving for betterment, for mobility and for long-term sustainability of his household. Certainly that is the moral justification that is internalized. But it remains to be seen how sustainable such a position is, given ongoing health problems and the ‘contingent’ risks for these workers:

The claims they make are nearly total on a worker, it is exhausting. But how else did they get to be the best car maker?

With the economic downturn intensifying in 2014 after international sanctions against Russia, TNCs experienced numerous shutdowns due to the drop in demand. The permanent workers like Petr lost nearly seven weeks of work in the autumn and winter of 2014, but still got paid two-thirds pay for the stoppages. Having experienced this downturn, Petr’s position changed slightly, especially as he saw those around him, including Slava, struggle on this reduced wage:

It’s certainly made me think. It is like the agency contract I was on before. In theory you could be working for the company, but only get zero hours a week. Like now—no shift unless you are permanent. But what if you’ve got a mortgage, like Slava?

It’s more than ironic that while the plant can vary how much it pays us, including nothing to the contractors, those with debt obligations can’t do the same. Things like paying your debts is talked about not only in terms of a legal obligation (in Russia we even can’t get a passport if we renege) but also in terms of a moral obligation—to not pay one’s debts is still viewed by many people as immoral.

So on the one hand it is immoral for us to have flexibility in paying our debts, but there is morality in having flexible working contracts where in the end I can be employed full-time, but suddenly have seven week’s less work.

Slava, by contrast, could reflect only in awe and almost disbelief, even while climbing the slippery career ladder at the car plant:

Everything is so structured that you don't have time to think about it. 15 minute break and then straight back to work. The system itself squeezes you [*szhimaet*]. Everything is counted, down to the last lost bolt on the conveyor!

But the last words must go to Vladimir, a friend on the edge of the *DeKa* social group. He had a higher education and worked as a marketing executive in one of the local firms. Nonetheless, his perspective is striking:

For a worker who experienced local factories before, some of these conditions are experienced as enslaving [*kabal'nym*]. Somehow it's not good what they are doing at the car plants; they are like robots. They took all our good specialists away, don't pay them well; it's a myth that they get well paid. What do they get for being worked like slaves there? [...] It is part of the process of globalization processes and inevitable [*neotvratimiy*]. But what they are doing is sticking spokes in to the wheel from every angle. One day the wheel will come off.

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