Introduction

The Problem and the Context

In childhood's golden times,
Everyone lives happily—
Effortless and lighthearted
With fun and joy.
Only we don't get to run and play
in the golden fields:
All day the factory's wheels
We turn, and turn, and turn . . .

N. A. Nekrasov, "Children's Cry"

THE PASSAGE FROM NEKRASOV'S POEM captures the harsh realities of child labor in nineteenth-century Russian factories.[1] Child industrial labor outraged many great writers of the era, including Anton Chekhov, Maxim Gorky, and Fyodor Dostoevsky.[2] A late nineteenth-century observer wrote that in order "to see the conditions of children in the mines, one needs to enter the machine plant, or the lamp workshop, where the atmosphere is suffused with the smell of gasoline used for lamps, which causes headache and nausea. Inside [the mine] one can see an entire chain of small boys, moving around the gasoline lamps, wiping and fueling them."[3] Child labor also drew the attention of great contemporary artists and painters, such as V. E. Makovskii and Il'ya Repin.

Regardless of the hardship involved, children in Russia, as elsewhere,

labored in industries of all types. The extent of children's employment suggests the enormous role children played in the development of the Russian industrial economy. Children made up a surprisingly large segment of the industrial labor force. Most working children were rural residents who came to industrial areas with their parents or relatives or were recruited in the countryside by employers. A few were urban children of poor families or inmates of foundling homes. Throughout the country, industries usually employed children in unskilled and auxiliary tasks. In sugar plants, they worked inside boilers, scaling and cleaning them. In mines, children fueled kerosene lamps and carried mining equipment. On occasion, children even performed tasks normally done by adult workers. In the textile industry, for instance, children commonly assisted adult workers by carrying bobbins and cleaning equipment and floors but also sometimes worked as spinners and weavers.

In the mid-nineteenth century, the average number of children aged sixteen and under employed in industry accounted for about 15 percent of all Russia's industrial workers, varying in individual businesses, however, from 0 to 40 percent. With the rapid development of the economy during the following decades, industry's reliance on child labor intensified. Industries remunerated the labor of children they employed at one-third the lowest rate of the typical adult male worker. The children's workday lasted for twelve and even more hours. Deprived of their childhood, factory children learned early on all the responsibilities and grievances of adult life. They shared all burdens with their parents and became an important element of the family economy. Because of the hardship involved, by the late nineteenth century, child labor had become a matter of serious concern for many governmental officials, reformers, and intellectuals.

Historians of industrialization in England, France, Germany, and North America have produced a very rich body of sometimes controversial studies about child factory labor.[4] They range from accounts that portray child factory labor as the worst evil spawned by nineteenth-century capitalist modernization and view children as its victims to studies that emphasize the Industrial Revolution's positive implications

for children's lives.[5] Perhaps the grimmest picture in modern scholarship of child abuses during industrialization appears in James Walvin's study of childhood in England. According to Walvin, "children were beaten awake, kept awake by beating and, at the end of the day, fell asleep, too exhausted to eat."[6] In his seminal *Making of the English Working Class,* E. P. Thompson claims that "exploitation of little children . . . was one of the most shameful events in [British] history."[7]

In contrast, a few historians offer more favorable assessments of child labor during industrialization.[8] They maintain that working conditions for children during the Industrial Revolution were no worse and in many cases even better than those before industrialization or those that existed in the countryside. Clark Nardinelli, for instance, suggests that the exploitation of children did not originate in the Industrial Revolution but in the countryside. Indeed, according to Nardinelli, the new job options created by industrialization and the competitive labor market offered children opportunities to escape the even heavier exploitation at home in cottage industries or in agriculture. "Industrialization," Nardinelli writes, "far from being the source of the enslavement of children, was the source of their liberation."[9] Nevertheless, most recent studies of child labor find Nardinelli's hypothesis questionable and objectionable. They concur in the older view and offer pessimistic evaluations of the Industrial Revolution's impact on child labor. For example, Nardinelli's argument has been questioned by economic historians from Cambridge University who have insisted that the Industrial Revolution indeed led to the harsh exploitation of child workers.[10]

The employment of children in late nineteenth-century Russian factories, an issue no less compelling than in other industrializing countries of the time, remains largely unexplored. Despite the wealth of literature on the workers' movement in general, only a few historians have addressed child factory labor. Merely descriptive and empirical, late imperial studies of child labor explored the issue without any analytical or methodological framework. Their authors tended to replicate large citations from published and unpublished primary sources. Among several late imperial studies of child factory labor, E. N. Andreev's book stands

out as the most significant and coherent publication, although it too is largely a collection of unprocessed primary sources. Most, if not all, late imperial scholars were highly critical of children's industrial employment, which they portrayed as morally unacceptable and even outrageous in its consequences.[11] V. I. Gessen's two early Soviet-era monographs (both appeared in 1927), with all the limitations of the period's priorities, agendas, and methodologies, remain to this day the only the major Russian-language investigations of the topic.[12] Highly critical of capitalism, Gessen emphasized the harsh exploitation of children in imperial-era industries and alleged a general lack of state concern for children's welfare. The harsh exploitation certainly occurred, but as this study will show, the question of state concern is much more complicated.

Although some English-language histories of labor in Russia mention the issue of children's industrial employment, more often than not in passing, no books or articles have appeared that subject this important aspect of industrial labor to scrutiny in its own right. In his studies, Reginald E. Zelnik notes the persistence of child labor in imperial Russia's factories. His *Labor and Society in Tsarist Russia* outlines the tsarist government's early legislative efforts to constrain children's employment in industries, and his *Law and Disorder on the Narova River,* which analyzes the 1872 Kreenholm strike, provides an account of conditions for working children at the Kreenholm cotton mill.[13] Michael Melancon's *Lena Goldfields' Massacre* provides valuable data about underage gold-mining workers in Siberia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.[14] Aside from these studies, which serve to introduce the question, the child industrial labor issue remains a virtual blank page in English-language historiography of Imperial Russia.

This study attempts to fill that page. It investigates child industrial labor in Russia from the late eighteenth century until the outbreak of the 1917 revolution and addresses two main questions. First, in view of the reality of widespread and traditional use in the countryside, what impact did industrialization have on child labor? Second, what did child industrial labor signify in economic and social terms? Tracing the origins, extent, and dynamics of child labor, as well as the social background of

employed children, the study examines the causes of child labor during industrialization. It examines child laborers' workday, wages, and working conditions and analyzes the malign impact factory labor had on their health. It also draws attention to how the harsh realities of child industrial labor influenced contemporary attitudes toward and sparked debates about the issue. It shows how these debates affected tsarist social legislation and, finally, evaluates the legislation's effectiveness. In more general terms, this book explores imperial Russia's labor and economic history and in doing so opens up new perspectives for comprehending late tsarist society.

One of this study's major hypotheses is that during the second half of the nineteenth century, the widespread, intensive industrial employment of children, with resulting exploitation and decline of health, produced a sharp transformation of attitudes about child labor, from initial broad acceptance to condemnation. Originally popularly accepted as an appropriate means of apprenticing children, child factory labor in fact had a deleterious effect on children's life and health. As awareness of this harsh reality grew, increasing state and public concern about working children helped form new approaches to the issue that resulted in legislative regulation of children's employment, education, and welfare. All these developments provided an important foundation for general social legislation in Russia during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a broad topic that requires much more attention than it has received.

The data, analysis, and interpretation that comprise this study constitute a social history of child industrial labor. At the same time, it is rather more than that. The early sections of this book discuss Russian society's attitudes—especially of the peasantry but also of educated, entrepreneurial, and administrative elements—toward childhood and the roles of children in the household and surrounding work areas. Later sections trace these attitudes into Russia's burgeoning factory and urban environment. In Russian historiography, the whole question of childhood in imperial times, it is worth mentioning, has hardly been raised, much less exhausted, with the exception of aspects of education. Soviet

childhood has been the beneficiary of wider scholarly attention. Even so, precisely because of the absence of commentaries about childhood during the imperial era, some misconceptions have arisen on the issue. For example, on the basis of modernist interpretations, Catriona Kelly believes that the idea of childhood began to receive "unprecedented attention" in public and state discourse from the 1890s.[15] Perhaps awareness of childhood increased as time went by, but my findings suggest that, although historians have been largely unaware of this, society had a clear vision of childhood and its problems long before the end of the century, as reflected in legislative debates about child labor laws, education, and welfare. This study attempts to provide a context for studies that cover a later period. After all, the very concept of childhood acquired its basic features during the entire late imperial era.

The analysis offered here of state and society's discursive responses to a growing awareness of the threat that factory labor posed to children's lives and health constitutes an exploration into the realm of Russia's civil society. The history of the legislation that resulted from this state-society interaction is as yet either unknown or little noted, as any excursus through existing historical literature reveals. Perhaps of equal significance is the way that the legislation originated—in a distinctly interactive process among state officials at virtually all levels and society, as both officialdom and society responded not only to perceived violations of humane norms but to workers' objections and demands. Through strikes and other forms of protest, workers made known their plight and gave testimony to inquiring officials. All of these aspects raise many questions about scholars' approach to late tsarism and its allegedly purely autocratic habits.

For scholars of child labor, as for students of labor history in general, sources and their reliability remain a crucial problem. Therefore, whenever possible I have tried to integrate and balance all available evidence. The book utilizes a wide array of surviving primary documents, as well as published sources, governmental materials, laws, and secondary studies. It incorporates data from many previously unpublished archival documents, published memoirs, and the era's periodical publications.

Published sources include government reports and reports of factory inspectors, health records, labor statistics, business reports, and journalistic accounts. Most of the sources used for this study do not come directly from children themselves, who all too often left no contemporary record of their outlook and experiences. Consequently, this is a study of child workers' experiences as seen through the eyes of adult contemporaries. It is also unavoidably affected by the morals, perceptions, and biases of today's world, including this author. What in fact the working children of that day thought about themselves and their labor in the factories is an almost closed book. Perhaps they were not as miserable as we might assume. Doubtless, in the way of children everywhere, they were often happy and playful despite all the burdens imposed upon them. They hardly saw themselves as exploited victims of advancing capitalism, but rather as young persons helping their families, or achieving independence and self-reliance, or attaining a working trade for the future, or even all of the above. The following chapters strive to provide at least a glimpse into the realities of working children's lives.

The study begins with an exploration of traditional perceptions of children and childhood and analyzes child labor in the countryside—in agriculture, in domestic industries, and in state industries. Traditionally, the use of children in productive labor had been widely accepted, particularly among the lower social classes. The initiation of children into some kind of work was viewed as a form of upbringing and education aimed at preparing them for adult responsibilities. The extent of child labor depended on the economic condition and size of the family. Most families in preindustrial Russia depended for economic survival on the labor input of all family members with the exception of very little children and those unable to work. At this point, let me emphasize that the economic conditions of individual families influenced only the intensity of child labor, not the fact of children's engagement in productive activities. The types of labor assignments for children differed in accordance with the individual child's gender and age.

Initially, the state concurred in the popular view that children's involvement in productive labor served as an education and apprentice-

ship for adult occupations. Long before the nineteenth century, the apprenticeship of children had been an established and entirely legal practice. With the purpose of helping children "learn a profession," the government sanctioned sending thousands of urban and rural children to state and manorial factories. Reality, however, often differed from intentions. Alongside apprenticeship or even instead of it, many entrepreneurs employed children for regular work, over long hours and even at night. The government undertook some fragmentary measures limited to certain industries and factories in its first timid attempts to cope with the abuses of child labor. The most important legislative act was the 1845 law that prohibited nighttime work for children under the age of twelve. For the most part, however, the early laws lacked uniformity and were quite specific: they aimed only at concrete situations. Thus, by the mid-nineteenth century, the starting point of heavy Russian industrialization, child productive labor had been a widespread traditional and legalized practice, welcomed by most social classes and supported by state laws.

During the late imperial period, Russia witnessed rapid industrialization. The accelerating tempo of the capitalist economy created a massive demand for semiskilled and unskilled labor. This was complemented by rapid population growth and changes in the rural economy after the 1861 reform, both of which led millions of rural residents to seek factory work. Because of the broad popular acceptance of child labor as a means of education and apprenticeship and because of the dependence of most families on the labor of all family members, parents were willing to send their offspring to new factories when the opportunity arose. Simultaneously, manufacturers viewed children as more adaptable than adults to the new factory regime (work hours and discipline) and more capable of learning to work with new machinery and technology. The conjunction of these factors made children an important source of industrial labor. With economic expansion, the absolute number of children employed in factories grew rapidly, although their proportion to adult workers remained stable. As in other industrializing countries, most children in Russia worked in the textile industry, in particular in cotton processing.

The exhausting industrial environment and long work hours had a

sharply negative impact on the health of working children. In fact, factory employment led to their outright physical decline. Unlike labor in traditional agriculture and cottage industries, where work was usually conducted under parental supervision, labor in the new mechanized factories subjected children to the rapid pace of machinery and exposed them to moving belts, shifting parts, intense heat and noise, and hazardous conditions associated with dust and the use of toxic chemicals. In addition to general illnesses caused by the new industrial environment, children were quite prone to work-related injuries. The number of such injuries heavily exceeded the incidence among adult workers.

The increasing ill health among factory children and its potential consequences aroused concern among many statesmen and public activists. There was intense public debate about child labor, which often resulted in legislative proposals to regulate child labor. The appeal for child labor protection laws initiated by state and local bureaucrats produced an important discussion of industrial labor among state officials, industrialists, academicians, and reformers. During the early 1860s, the government organized various commissions to inspect and review existing factory legislation in order to work out new provisions. Ultimately, these provisions came together in a first legislative proposal. In 1860–61 this proposal went to provincial governments and industrialists' associations for review and discussion. The ongoing discussion about child labor reform broadened lawmakers' perceptions of the entire phenomenon of child labor. As time went by, the usually unrealized legislative approaches became more and more complex. For instance, later initiatives addressed such issues as children's education and welfare, which had been entirely absent from previous versions. Debates about children's employment in industry during the 1860s and 1870s produced little significant legislation. Nevertheless, these discussions lay an important conceptual foundation for laws of a decade or so later that aimed at regulating child labor and promoting children's education and welfare. Equally important, the debates facilitated the actual introduction of these laws.

In addition, by giving publicity to child-related questions, the debates about child factory labor opened up a new issue in Russian public

commentary—the issue of childhood. Childhood became a subject of public discussion and began to receive increasing attention from state institutions; legislators; public groups, including philanthropic societies; and individuals. From the early 1870s, the discussion of childhood became increasingly politicized and was used by various interest groups for their own political or economic agendas.[16]

Starting with the introduction of the 1882 law, the state progressively restricted children's employment in industry and introduced compulsory schooling for working children. It is not commonly realized that the late imperial decades witnessed an unprecedented degree of children's participation in social and political activities such as labor protest and strikes. This involvement in many cases led to their entry into radical political movements.

This study of child labor contributes to an already existing rich scholarship on the labor movement and workers in Russia. Generally, most historians who have paid special attention to the issues of factory labor and workers have been of a leftist inclination.[17] Consequently, Marxist and similar methodological approaches have dominated the scholarship: social categories other than class and the relations among classes have been absent. Marxist-oriented scholarship has made enormous contributions but has also omitted important aspects of the labor experience. In recent decades, some studies have gone beyond class relations by exploring labor issues in relationship to gender, scholars reminding us that the abstract category of class in fact represents individual men and women.[18] In this new approach, gender relations and politics are as important as class for understanding labor issues. Taking gender-oriented labor history as its inspiration, this study offers age as a category of analysis and explores working children as a social group that has its own important distinctive cultural and socio-psychological features.

An understanding of the experience of factory children can deepen our knowledge of Russia's labor history, its industrialization, and its evolving legislative approaches, thereby shedding new light on governance in late imperial Russia. This approach suggests a new interpretation of child productive labor, showing how the transition from the

preindustrial to the industrial economy influenced the practice and the extent of child labor. It also contributes to a new understanding of the "preindustrial" concept of childhood. In addition, it suggests a new understanding of late imperial Russian state and society and the relations between them, especially as regards society's participation in the processes of imperial lawmaking. This study proposes a new way of viewing and interpreting the developmental dynamic of Russian society and shows how this dynamic influenced the late imperial Russian state.

Finally, this book offers an excursus into the history of a problem that still plagues many societies today. According to the International Labor Organization, 218 million children worked in industries and agriculture in 2004. About 126 million of them were employed in hazardous work. This study will, I hope, provide some historical perspective on child labor and state efforts to eliminate it. The lessons drawn from history and the insights gained may prove useful for contemporary policy makers in developing their strategies to cure this social disease.