

# Ukrainian Labor and Siberian Oil in the Late Soviet Empire<sup>1</sup>

Alexander Etkind, Yevhenii Poliakov, and Bohdan Shumylovych

**Abstract:** *The development of oil and gas fields in West Siberia was a major event in late Soviet history. Exporting Siberian oil and gas, the Soviet Union secured its financial solvency, received food supplies, and deferred the collapse for two decades. First privatized and then re-nationalized, the same fields have provided the means of survival for the post-Soviet Russian Federation. In this article, we submit that the discovery and early development of these gigantic assets was an imperial affair. Many workers and managers of Siberian oil and gas fields arrived there from distant Soviet lands that had had experience with oil, such as Ukraine, Azerbaijan, Tatarstan, and Bashkiria. While some of these workers were individually recruited, many others came to Siberia as the members of institutional units that kept their allegiances to their homelands. Working in shifts, they pursued a difficult compromise between the centralized channels of profit-seeking and culturally specific patterns of earning and spending. Based on archival work in West Ukraine and interviews with the former Ukrainian “shifters,” this essay explores the changing rules of this imperial practice. The relevant ministries in Moscow, some of them led by ethnic Ukrainians, boosted the Ukrainian contribution when the oil and gas production in West Siberia was coming into crisis. Later, the early post-Soviet privatization minimized the*

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay was prepared in the framework of the project, “Resources of Demodernization: Fossil Energy and Human Capital in the Political Economies across Eastern Europe,” financed by the Research Council of the European University Institute in 2015–2018. We are immensely grateful to Mikhael Pustovoyt for his help in launching this research. In Ivano-Frankivs’k, Viktor Vintoniak, Igor Tsebenda, and Volodymyr Eshkilev gave invaluable support. Julie Fedor provided much-needed feedback and help in preparing this essay for publication.

*institutional involvement of Ukrainian business. Contributing to the imperial turn in Soviet Studies, this essay documents the immense gains and terminal risks that are intrinsic to a resource-based imperial economy.*

In early spring of 1980, Nikolai Mal'tsev, Soviet Minister for Oil Industry, got an unexpected telephone call: he was invited to attend a meeting of the Politburo, an event well above his level. As a result of that meeting, thousands of construction workers and oilmen from Ukraine and other European parts of the Soviet Union would find themselves in the Siberian marshes. Their labor was voluntary, contract-based, and relatively well-paid. Sometimes their work led to permanent migration, but it was mostly based on "shifts," which entailed flying in and out every two weeks, 4,000 kilometers, back and forth across Eurasia.

Combining oral history with close reading of documentary sources, this essay follows the Siberian adventure of West-Ukrainian workers in the 1970s-'90s. In 2017–2018, we interviewed 15 former oilmen in Ivano-Frankiv'sk who were involved in the shift work in Siberia. We also talked to local geologists, some of them professors at the Ivano-Frankiv'sk University of Oil and Gas. Senior Ukrainian journalists shared with us their memories and documentation about the Ukrainian shift work in Siberia. Relying on our new and multifaceted sources, we have come to the following reconstruction of these significant but forgotten events.

## **Oil for Food**

The most powerful body of the Soviet empire, the Politburo's decision-making was not subject to any limits. At the meeting in March 1980, about a dozen members, most of them well into their seventies, discussed the situation regarding the food supply of the enormous country. Grain shortages were a chronic problem for the socialist land, which was far more successful with oil industry than with agriculture. Since the collective farms failed to produce enough grain, a solution was found in buying it from the farmers of the capitalist West. Exchanging oil for grain became the strategy for