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Revisiting the Type of Economic System in the USSR*



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Abstract. The article characterizes the type of economic system of the Soviet Union. In the authors' view, modern historiography has reached the impasse trying to address the issue. The overwhelming majority of researchers recognize that the USSR economic system was socialist, with all the attendant “positive” and “negative” aspects. The article proposes to characterize the type of economic system of the Soviet period through the analysis of correlation of important production factors such as labor and capital. This analysis is based on data of the USSR input-output balances of the national economy in the 1970–1980s. This source is introduced into scientific parlance for the first time; previously, it belonged to the category of “confidential”. In order to address the issue of the USSR type of economic system, the authors refer to the content of the tables containing data on common indicators of national economy during 1980–1986,

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the proportion of direct and materialized labor in total labor costs for 1975–1985, and the ratio of the number of the Soviet workers involved in mechanized and manual labor for 1975–1985. The data presented in tables reveal a major gap between industries in terms of labor costs and capital ratio: the share of capital was larger in industry; in agriculture it did not exceed half of total labor cost. In general, the level of direct labor costs in material production sectors of the USSR was slightly higher than the level of capital expenditure. Another important indicator which characterizes the type of economic system is the authors' description of the ratio of manual and mechanized labor in the national economy. In industry and construction the share of those who worked with machines and mechanisms comprised about 2/3 of the total number of workers, whereas in agriculture it did not exceed 1/3. These statistics help move forward in the formulation and resolution of the issue of the USSR type of economic system. However, the issue itself remains open.

Key words: USSR economy, USSR socio-economic system, input-output balances of the national economy.

The peculiarity of the present interpretation of the USSR economic system by social science consists in the increased attention to the underreported in modern historiography characteristics of the Soviet type of economic management. The scientific literature views the development dynamics of the national economy, changes in sectoral proportions of the economy, spatial distribution, enterprise performance; the system of the five-year planning, economic reforms, the history of economic ideas, etc. are examined. A series of the USSR macroeconomic characteristics is also a focus of attention [1; 11; 12; 15; 18; 20]. The understanding of the Soviet history is developing in multiple directions, some of which have quite a long-standing tradition. The first direction was cultivated during the Soviet era. It is well-known and is associated with

the presentation of the country's history as a series of ongoing stages of building socialism. The second was formed abroad in the Russian emigration research centers (for example, in the Munich Institute for the Study of the History and Culture of the USSR) and the Sovietology centers in the United States and Western Europe. This approach involved the search for the negative aspects in the Soviet socialism; it has not developed any new conceptual landmarks. This approach was backed by modern Western historians [10; 13]. The third direction is the search for the new explanations of the USSR–Russia history. In that context the idea was expressed about the history of the USSR as a country that is developing towards state capitalism. Ideas about the role of state capitalism in the history of the country were for the first time conceptually formulated by V.I.

Lenin. Since 1918 he constantly addressed the inevitability of capitalism “to a certain extent” and the idea that it should be used “especially by deflecting it towards the direction of state capitalism”. In fact, in Lenin’s understanding, the Soviet government in the early 1920s involves state capitalism combined with proletariat dictatorship. Without state capitalism (this “vestibule” from a material, economic and production standpoint) Lenin could not see the way to socialism. Until the mid-1920s the idea of building state capitalism in the USSR was a subject of quite heated debate, but since 1925 the idea about the formation of the system of state capitalism in the economy of the Soviet Russia ceased to exist. Nevertheless, in the world of social thought of the 1930–1980s the common idea that the USSR was the country of state capitalism was still present. Since the mid-1930s the proponents of L. Trotsky and foreign authors (E. Goldman, T. Cliff, J. Schumpeter, etc.) wrote about the transition (deformation) of the Soviet system to state capitalism. Their ideas mostly included critical assessments, linking the process of the Soviet state capitalism development with the establishment of “a new class of state capitalists” and the exploitation of the USSR workers (see, for example, T. Cliff “State capitalism in Russia”, 1947). A new wave of evidence of the capitalist nature of the Soviet economy is

related to the development in the 1970–1980s of a world-systems approach by I. Wallerstein and the influence of this theory. Wallerstein’s world-systems approach, A. Callinicos’s concept of state capitalism, P. Taylor’s, Ch. Chase-Dunn’s and P. Binns’s developments argue that state socialist countries were part of the world economic capitalist system [6; 7; 17; 19; 21]. At the beginning of the 21st century Russian historiography also gives arguments about state capitalism in the USSR [14; 16].

However, in the vast majority of works on socio-economic history of our country there is no reference to the issue of the USSR economic system. The socialist nature of the USSR economic system is recognized by default, taking into account all the attendant “positive” and “negative” aspects. The trend of the Russian historiography to depart from a political-economic view of the processes of the country’s economic development is not accidental – lack of attention to such subjects is connected with the political situation, lack of interest of the main political forces in the reconsideration of the existing political-economic patterns of interpretation of the Soviet economic system.

However, in our view, the objective of reaching a new level of consolidated studies of the Soviet type of economy is extremely important in terms of scientific and practical significance of the post-

Soviet transformations. Claims about the socialist nature of Russia's socio-economic system in the period of the Soviet Union, about the non-capitalist character of capital assets, lack of market mechanisms, classic financial tools, etc. (and, hence, gaps in exploring these issues) hamper the development of Russian social science, increasing its gap from the world research trends.

In the last decade, the authors of the article have done the work on studying the agricultural system of the Soviet Russia of the 1930–1980s [2; 3; 4]. The conducted research led to the conclusion on the capitalization of the Russian village of the 1930–1980s: the processes of capital accumulation, the increasing role of this factor compared to other factors of production, especially to direct labor. The latter was revealed according to the aggregate of Soviet statistics such as the cost of agricultural products (calculated on the basis of direct labor costs and capital for production). The study of capitalization processes of the village has demonstrated the different role of economic structures in this process. The state has approbated different capitalization and defarming schemes through the state structure (state owned farms, machine-tractor stations), and the collective-farm system played the pivotal role in the processes of initial capital accumulation in the country.

Accomplished within collective-farms, the type of exploitation based on public responsibility resulted in a large-scale “milking” of agriculture. The change in the village structure, when state owned farms come to the fore in terms of capital value and the mount of the manufactured products (that occurred in the 1970–1980s), indicated the accelerated process of state capitalism formation in agriculture. Occurring economic changes led to the social restructuring of the village, the formation of new social classes. On the basis of economic and legal parameters, the authors have described the class structure of the agricultural society as a five-class society with the presence of classes of proto-bourgeoisie, managers, intellectuals, aristocracy of the working class and proletariat. Analysis of the agricultural system of Russia in the 1930–1980s has helped arrive at a conclusion about the formation of state capitalism in the Russian village.

The purpose of this article is the introduction into scientific parlance of previously unused sources, which would serve as an important tool in the implementation of new approaches to the analysis of the USSR economic structure. The objectives are to test the sources which help reveal the correlation of factors of production in the Soviet economic mechanism (primarily, direct labor and

capital). This refers, primarily, to the balances of the national economy as well as to the input-output economic balances¹.

Input-output balances of the national economy are of great importance for the historians. An input-output balance (input-output method) is an economic-mathematical balance model which characterizes cross-sectoral production correlation in the economy. It describes the correlation between the output of one sector and production costs of all participating sectors required to ensure this output. Input-output balance was produced in money and kind and represented a table which reflected the process of formation and use of Global Social Product (GSP) by industry breakdown. The table demonstrated the cost structure for each product and the structure of its distribution in the economy [5].

The origins of this method date back to the works of Soviet economists and statisticians of the 1920s. The theoretical basis of the input-output method was developed by V. V. Leont'ev in Berlin. The Russian version of his article entitled "Balance of the Soviet national economy"

¹ The history of the development of the input-output method in the USSR is described in the article: Beznin M.A., Dimoni T.M. Istochnikovye vozmozhnosti balansov narodnogo khozyaistva v kontekste izucheniya sotsial'no-ekonomicheskoi istorii SSSR (pilotnoe issledovanie) [Possibilities of using balances of the national economy as a research source in the context of studying social and economic history of the USSR (a pilot study)]. *Vestnik Vologodskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Seriya: Gumanitarnye, obshchestvennye i pedagogicheskie nauki* Vologda State University Bulletin. Series: Humanities, social and pedagogical sciences], Vologda, 2016, no. 1/16, pp. 6-11.

was published by the journal "Planned economy" in no. 12 in 1925. The scholar showed that the coefficients which reflect the correlation economic sectors are quite stable and can be predicted.

The first input-output balance was produced in the USSR in 1959 by the Central Statistical Administration of the USSR (TsSU USSR) by the Department of input-output balance under the direction of M. R. Eidelman. It was the world's first performance input-output balance in physical terms (by 157 products) and performance input-output balance in value terms (by 83 economic sectors)². Balance data were partially published in 1961³, and the document was fully declassified in 2008⁴. The first plan input-output balances in value and physical terms were produced in 1962. Later, this practice was extended to the republics and regions. According to the 1966 data, input-output balances were produced by all Union Republics and economic regions of the RSFSR. Soviet scientists created the groundwork for wider application of input-output models (including dynamic, optimization, physical-value, inter-

² Russian State Economics Archive. F. 1562. Op. 41. D. 1430.

³ *Narodnoe khozyaistvo SSSR v 1960 godu: stat. Ezhegodnik*. TsSU SSSR [USSR national economy in 1960: statistical yearbook. TsSu USSR]. Moscow: Gosstatizdat, 1961. Pp. 103–151.

⁴ V.L. Sokolin, Chairman of Interstate Statistical Committee of the Commonwealth of Independent States, commented this in his speech at the International Scientific Conference "Input-output balance – history and prospects": "I don't know why M. Eidelman classified it previously". Moscow, April 15th, 2010.

Table 1. Key indicators of the national economy balance in 1980–1986 (in then-current prices)

Indicator	1980	1981	1982	1983	1984	1985	1986
GSP, billion rubles	1079	1123	1237	1293	1346	1384	1426
Final social product, billion rubles	535	565	607	638	666	684	701
Manufacturing of production means (1st unit), billion rubles	678	697	791	825	860	886	923
Manufacturing of commodities (2nd unit), billion rubles	401	426	446	468	486	498	503
National generated income, billion rubles	462	487	524	548	570	579	587
Including:							
remuneration	225	236	248	258	264	272	284
surplus product	237	251	276	290	306	307	303
National generated income per capita, rubles	1741	1818	1940	2012	2074	2084	2096
National income spent on consumption and accumulation, billion rubles	454	478	513	536	559	569	576
Including:							
consumption fund	345	365	379	393	407	419	428
accumulation fund	109	113	134	143	152	150	148
National income spent on consumption and accumulation per capita, rubles	1710	1785	1900	1968	2032	2049	2056
National wealth (excluding land, mineral resource and forest value) at the year-end, billion rubles	2732	2913	3127	3330	3537	3738	3933
All fixed assets (including live-stock) at the year-end, billion rubles	1747	1857	1975	2101	2236	2373	2516
Including:							
fixed production assets	1158	1237	1322	1411	1505	1600	1695
fixed non-production assets	589	620	653	690	731	773	821
Material production costs, billion rubles	617	636	713	745	776	805	839
Including:							
costs of material and supplies (raw materials, supplies, fuel, etc.)	542	536	628	654	678	697	723
depreciation*	75	80	85	91	98	108	116
GSP materials-output ratio, kopeks per 1 ruble of GSP:							
including depreciation*	57.1	56.7	57.6	57.6	57.6	58.2	58.8
excluding depreciation*	50.2	49.5	50.8	50.5	50.3	50.4	50.7
* depreciation, including written-off value of fixed assets							
Source: Key input-output balance indicators of the national economy: statistical yearbook. Moscow, 1987, p. 7.							

regional models, etc.). Part of the balance data was published in restricted circulation (for official use only)⁵.

The most general basic indicators of the balance of the national economy over the 1980s are presented in *Table 1*. They characterize GSP, the manufacturing of production means and commodities, national income, fixed assets, material costs and GSP materials-output ratio. All these characteristics are important for the study the type of economic structure of the society.

One of the parts balance data was labor costs input-output balance, which represented an economic table in which the process of production manufacturing (or service delivery) and the correlation between economic sectors were expressed in labor costs. The labor cost input-output balance data helped determine the total costs of direct and materialized labor on the production of individual products (service delivery) and establish the correlation between these costs by each economic sector separately. Materialized labor costs indicators by each economic sector were identified on the basis of direct labor costs data of a particular sector, which were distributed in proportion to the use of the products of this sector in other economic sectors. Each row of the labor costs input-output balance table

showed the distribution of direct labor costs for product manufacturing of a particular sector between other sectors consuming the production of the former, as well as for final consumption and gross capital formation. If we consider balance data vertically, the same labor costs are as well the costs of past labor, embodied in products used by different sectors in intermediate consumption. In addition, direct labor costs are displayed vertically in each column. At the end of the table each group of sectors included a sum of direct and materialized labor costs for product manufacturing in each sector (aggregate labor costs). The main source of information for producing the labor costs input-output balance were data from input-output balance and labor statistics⁶.

Let us consider one of such sources characterizing important aspects of the completion of the capitalization process in the USSR at the end of the existence of the “socialist” type of economic management (*Tab. 2*).

Data from the table characterize the dynamics of the share of direct and materialized labor costs in the total labor costs in a relatively short period of time – the last decade before perestroika. They are calculated according to the USSR labor costs input-output balance. This calculation, as shown by the note

5 *Osnovnye pokazateli balansa narodnogo khozyaistva: stat. sbornik* [Key input-output balance indicators of the national economy: statistical yearbook]. Moscow, 1987.

6 Azriliyan A.N. (Ed.) *Balans zatrat truda, mezhotraslevoi* [Labor costs input-output balance]. Bol'shoi ekonomicheskii slovar' [Big economic dictionary]. Moscow, 1997.

Table 2. Proportion of direct and materialized labor in total labor costs for 1975–1985 according to labor costs input-output balance of the USSR* (as a percentage of total labor costs)

Industry (sector)	1975		1980		1985	
	Direct labor costs	Materialized labor costs (direct)	Direct labor costs	Materialized labor costs (direct)	Direct labor costs	Materialized labor costs (direct)
Total in production industries	59.9	40.1	60.3	39.7	60.4	39.6
Including:						
Industry	43.1	56.9	45.0	55.0	45.0	55.0
including:						
power engineering	49.1	50.9	48.3	51.7	48.9	51.1
oil and gas industry	13.9	86.1	13.0	87.0	11.8	88.2
coal mining	50.8	49.2	52.2	47.5	53.8	46.2
ferrous metallurgy	40.8	59.2	41.2	58.8	41.5	58.5
non-ferrous metallurgy	44.8	55.2	47.7	52.3	47.5	52.5
chemical and petrochemical industry	47.8	52.2	47.1	52.9	45.5	54.5
mechanical engineering and metalworking	66.2	33.8	65.4	34.6	66.1	33.9
forest, woodworking and pulp and paper industries	56.9	43.1	58.3	41.7	58.7	41.3
construction and building materials industry (including glass and porcelain and pottery industry)	53.6	46.4	53.1	46.9	53.8	46.2
light industry	44.3	55.7	45.5	54.5	45.6	54.4
food industry	13.5	86.5	15.4	84.3	15.4	84.6
Construction	77.4	22.6	79.3	20.7	79.7	20.3
Agriculture and forestry	73.9	26.1	72.1	27.9	72.4	27.6
Transport and communications	82.8	17.2	82.6	17.4	82.5	17.5
* The calculation of labor costs input-output balances is produced on the basis of the indicators of input-output performance balances of in then-current prices. Source: Key input-output balance indicators of the national economy: statistical yearbook. Moscow, 1987. P. 21.						

to Table 2, on the basis of the indicators of input-output performance balances of in then-current prices. According to these calculations, the ratio of direct and materialized labor in total labor costs in all sectors of material production appears very stable over the decade under analysis, with only slight deviations of the direct

labor costs in 1975, the indicators of 1980 and 1985 vary around the share of 60% and direct materialized labor costs – around 40%. The situation varies dramatically for main groups and sectors of material production. The situation in industry for the past decade is the following: a small increase in the share of direct labor costs,

from 43% in 1975 to 45% in 1985, and a respective small decline in the share of materialized labor in the total labor costs – from some 57% in 1975 to 55% in 1985. The calculation reflects a marked predominance of direct materialized labor costs over direct labor costs in industry.

Within industry the trend is rather diverse: from the absolute predominance of direct labor costs (in mechanical engineering in 1985 its share was 66%, in construction and building materials industry and coal mining – 54%) to prevailing materialized labor costs (in 1985 in oil and gas industry its share was 88%, in food industry – 85%, in ferrous metallurgy – 58%, in chemical and petrochemical industry – 55%). In some industrial sectors the share of direct and materialized labor costs was approximately equal: in 1985 in power engineering – 49 and 51% respectively; in non-ferrous metallurgy 48 and 52%.

The situation in construction, agriculture and forestry, transport and communications was specific. At the beginning of the decade and at its end, direct labor costs prevailed accounting for 75%–80% of the total labor costs.

Of course, the described tendency needs to be connected with other characteristics in order to solve political and economic problems, in particular to study the type of economic system. Therefore, we will refer to the problem

of the ratio of the number of workers involved in mechanized and manual labor (*Table 3*).

Data from the table show that in the country's industry of the 1970–1980s, the share of workers involved in work with machines and mechanism, as well as automation device maintenance, approached 50% of the total number of workers, and in the middle of the 1980s this share rose to over 50%. If the number of workers engaged in machine and mechanism repair and setting-up is taken into account, this share amounted to more than 60% in the 1980s. The share of workers involved in manual labor in industry fell from 42% in 1975 to 35% in the mid-1980s; in other words, by the end of the Soviet period only about 1\3 of industrial workers were involved in manual labor (both on and off machines and mechanisms). Balance indicators for the calculation of the ratio of the number of workers involved in mechanized and manual labor highlighted another industry – construction, where the share of manual labor over the decade (1975–1985) also considerably decreased and approached the 50%-point.

A completely different situation is reflected in agriculture in terms of the same indicators. First of all, the proximity of the characteristics of the shares of manual and mechanized labor in collective farms and state farms should be noted: the

Table 3. Ratio of the number of the USSR workers involved in mechanized and manual labor (1975–1985) (according to one-time surveys, %)

Economic sector	Total number of workers	Including workers engaged in		
		work with machines and mechanism, as well as automation device maintenance	manual labor (on and off machines and mechanisms)	machine and mechanism repair and setting-up
Industry				
1975	100	45.7	41.5	12.7
1982	100	48.8	37.4	13.8
1985	100	51.0	34.9	14.1
Agriculture				
Collective farms				
Crop husbandry				
1982	100	23.6	75.2	1.2
1985	100	25.5	73.3	1.2
Animal husbandry				
1982	100	23.5	73.9	2.6
1985	100	28.3	68.5	3.2
Collective farms				
Crop husbandry				
1975	100	24.9	75.1	-
1982	100	27.0	71.2	1.8
1985	100	28.5	69.8	1.7
Animal husbandry				
1975	100	17.7	78.8	3.5
1982	100	19.4	76.9	3.7
1985	100	23.6	72.4	4.0
Construction				
1975	100	36.8	59.9	3.3
1982	100	38.8	57.4	3.8
1985	100	40.0	56.4	3.6

Source: Key input-output balance indicators of the national economy: statistical yearbook. Moscow, 1987. P. 118.

share of the former varies around 70–80%, the latter amount to 20–30%. The underlying dynamics is the growing share of mechanized labor and, respectively, the reducing share of manual labor. The gradual and slow pace of the process should be noted. In collective farms, the share of mechanized labor in animal husbandry at

the end of the reporting period exceeded the mechanized nature of crop husbandry, but in state farms in 1975 and in the middle of the 1980s, that share was less than the former. A very small share of labor costs of repair and setting-up of machinery in agriculture exponentially less than the corresponding indicator in industry. Thus,

it can be noted that mechanized labor in the USSR becomes predominant only at the end of the Soviet period and only in the industrial sector. Most agricultural workers were involved in manual labor. This is evident from the ratio of occupational groups of agricultural workers. In 1970, there were 1 837 000 tractor drivers and other machine operators in the RSFSR agriculture and the number of crop husbandry workers, forage workers and workers without a qualification totaled 4 346 000 people, the number of milkmaids and other personnel mainly engaged in manual labor – about 2.5 million people; in 1979, the number of tractor drivers, combine and machine operators in the RSFSR agricultural plants amounted to 2 250 000 people, and the number of crop husbandry workers mainly engaged in manual labor – to 2.7 million, in animal husbandry – approximately 2.4 million people⁷.

The materials of the USSR input-output balance of the national economy for the end of the Soviet period suggested in the article provide a reasoned approach to speculating about the role of major production factors – labor and capital –

with new historical and economic data. The level of socio-economic development of our country in the 1970–1980s can now be assessed using the calculations of direct and materialized labor costs, rather than by a “rough” estimation. The study of the methods of producing such calculations, of the comparison with the shares of manual and mechanized labor in production and with data on capital depreciation etc. deserves serious further research. Of course, the type of economic system is characterized not only by the ratio of the factors of production. It is also determined by other economic parameters: methods of regulation, types of marketability, mechanisms of workforce mobilization, etc. When it comes to social and economic system, for capitalized economy it is important to determine the type of property relations, peculiarities of enforcement of the right of ownership. These factors were more relevant in the so-called state ownership in the USSR, which only “disguised” the possession, disposal and use of means of production by a particular social class which became a source of post-Soviet Russian classic bourgeoisie.

⁷ *Itogi Vsesoyuznoi perepisi naseleniya 1970 goda. T. VI. Raspredelenie naseleniya SSSR po zanyatiyam* [1970 All-Union Census of the Soviet Union. Volume 6. Distribution of population by occupation]. P. 28. *Russain Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF)* [State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF)]. F. A-374. Op. 39. D. 6129. L. 28 ob.

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