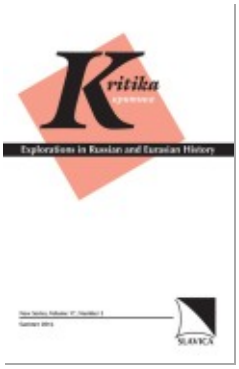
Socialist Consumption and Brezhnev's Stagnation: A Reappraisal of Late Communist Everyday Life



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Socialist Consumption and Brezhnev's Stagnation

A Reappraisal of Late Communist Everyday Life

Anna Ivanova

Boris Belge and Martin Deuerlein, eds., *Goldenes Zeitalter der Stagnation? Perspektiven auf die sowjetische Ordnung der Breznev-Ära* (The Golden Age of Stagnation? Perspectives on the Soviet System in the Brezhnev Era). 329 pp. Tübingen: Routledge, 2014. ISBN-13 978-3161529962. €59.00.

Paulina Bren and Mary Neuburger, eds., *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*. 432 pp. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012. ISBN-13 978-0199827671. $33.95.

Natalya Chernyshova. *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*. 280 pp. London: Routledge, 2013. ISBN-13 1138182929. $51.95.

In a survey conducted by the Levada Analytical Center in Russia in January 2014 among a sample of 1,600 urban and rural citizens, participants were asked which economic system they found more attractive: one based on state planning and distribution or one based on private property and the market. More than half preferred state planning.[1] In another survey conducted by the same agency in March 2015, people were asked whether they agreed that it would be better if everything in Russia remained as it used to be before

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[1] "Luchshaia politicheskaia i ekonomicheskaia sistema," 24 February 2014 (http://www.levada.ru/24-02-2014/luchshaya-politicheskaya-i-ekonomicheskaya-sistema).

perestroika. The majority answered positively.[2] These figures illustrate the well-known phenomenon of nostalgia about the Soviet past, which is widespread not only in today's Russia but also in other postsocialist countries. Indeed, following the aspirations for Western democracy, demands for change, and rejection of socialist practices in the late 1980s and early 1990s, many citizens of the postsocialist countries were hit by the material difficulties of their new life, grew disappointed in market values, and began to look backwards. A careful study of this period and its practices can help us reconstruct the image of everyday socialism and better understand the reasons for its collapse as well as the subsequent nostalgia. The consumer culture approach combined with new archival documents, oral interviews, and media materials appears to be an efficient tool for the fulfillment of this task.

Historians' interest in the problematization of consumption dates back to the 1980s and reached its peak in the 2000s. The reason for this interest, according to Frank Trentmann, one of the founders of the history of consumption, is "historians' turn away from an older male, production, and class-oriented vision of social democracy," replaced by "the attention to the politics of everyday life, family and gender."[3] One of the first such projects was "Consumer Cultures in Historical Perspective," directed by Victoria de Grazia in 1991–93, whose results were published as a collection of essays.[4] The aim of the book based on material from the 19th and 20th centuries was to show how Western societies think about and use goods and how goods shape identities. Later Lizabeth Cohen, Frank Trentmann, Matthew Hilton, and Leora Auslander, to name just a few, used the lens of consumer culture to study the formation of modern citizenship.[5] For example, Cohen argued that with the rise of mass consumption in postwar American society, improving one's well-being became a citizen's duty, since personal consumption was seen as essential to national prosperity.

In its early stages, the consumption approach was seen as useful mainly for the study of Western modernity and modern capitalism. The traditional view

[2] "Rol′ 'perestroiki' v istorii strany," 22 April 2015 (http://www.levada.ru/22-04-2015/rol-perestroiki-v-istorii-strany).

[3] Frank Trentmann, "Beyond Consumerism: New Historical Perspectives on Consumption," *Journal of Contemporary History* 39, 3 (2004): 373–401.

[4] Victoria de Grazia and Ellen Furlough, *The Sex of Things: Gender and Consumption in Historical Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

[5] Leora Auslander, *Taste and Power: Furnishing Modern France* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996); Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Frank Trentmann, *Free Trade Nation: Commerce, Consumption, and Civil Society in Modern Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic* (New York: Knopf, 2003).

had it that since the production of goods in the socialist states was centralized, shortages were constant, and governments were not interested in looking into and satisfying citizens' demands, socialist citizens were not "real" consumers.[6] Later on, however, the consumer culture approach was also applied to the study of socialist societies. The first socialist country to be studied as a consumer society was the German Democratic Republic (GDR).[7] The scholars who looked at the Eastern Bloc tried to determine whether one could talk about a consumer culture in a state-planned economic environment with a lack of consumer choice. Studies showed that the politics of consumption in socialist countries was not so different from that of the capitalist world: for example, Susan Reid, who was the first to study the consumer culture of the USSR, found that for the Soviet government of the 1960s the development of fashion or production of household appliances was as important as it was for the West, since the USSR was concerned about promoting socialist modernity.[8] Further study of socialist consumption covered such topics as cars, rock 'n' roll, and luxury as well as the development of fashion, tourism, and private space in Eastern Europe, among other topics.[9]

Thus scholars who currently study socialist consumer culture continue to oppose the traditional view on consumption in the Second World, which asserted that socialist citizens were not real consumers because they had no choice. The authors of two of the three books under review here, Natalya

[6] Examples of the "traditional" approach can be found in Ferenc Fehér, Agnes Heller, and György Márkus, eds., *Dictatorship over Needs: An Analysis of Soviet Societies* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984); and Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996).

[7] The first studies within this framework were Ina Merkel, "Consumer Culture in the GDR, or How the Struggle for Antimodernity Was Lost on the Battleground of Consumer Culture," in *Getting and Spending: European and American Consumer Societies in the Twentieth Century,* ed. Susan Strasser, Charles McGovern, and Matthias Judt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 281–99; Katherine Pence, "From Rations to Fashions: The Gendered Politics of East and West German Consumption, 1945–1961" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 1999); and Jud Stitziel, "Fashioning Socialism: Clothing, Politics, and Consumer Culture in East Germany, 1953–1971" (PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 2001).

[8] Susan Reid, "Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev," *Slavic Review* 61, 2 (2002): 211–52.

[9] Lewis Siegelbaum, *Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008); Siegelbaum, ed., *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Sergei Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity, and Ideology in Soviet Dnieprope trovsk, 1960–1985* (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2010); Yukka Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne: Common Luxury and the Ideals of the Good Life in Stalin's Russia* (Oxford: Berg, 2003); Djurdja Bartlett, *FashionEast: The Spectre That Haunted Socialism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010); Anne Gorsuch and Diane Koenker, eds., *Turizm: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006).

Chernyshova and those included in the collection of essays edited by Paulina Bren and Mary Neuburger, emphasize that they want to go beyond the perception of socialist consumption as just a pain for consumers who suffered from shopping lines and low-quality products or as useless attempts of socialist countries to imitate Western consumer patterns. Instead they examine the phenomenon of socialist consumption as a phenomenon in its own right. The third volume under review, the collection edited by Boris Belge and Martin Deuerlein, does not focus specifically on socialist material culture: its topic is the Brezhnev era in general, which, however, according to Chernyshova was a time of triumph for Soviet consumers. In the introduction to their collection Belge and Deuerlein also point out that they want to avoid the traditional view of Brezhnev's time as a period of stagnation; instead they want to thoroughly study all the peculiarities of that era; as we will see, consumption appears among its characteristic features.

The collection edited by Bren and Neuburger fits together with the series of collections on everyday life of Cold War Eastern Europe edited by Susan Reid and David Crowley.[10] Indeed, both editors of the present collection and some of its authors contributed to the Reid/Crowley volumes. Bren and Neuburger point out that their focus here is consumption in the Socialist Bloc, not consumerism, and they have a good reason for this choice: consumerism is usually associated with US society, and the editors do not want to add "Western teleology" (5) to the study of socialist societies. They claim that "the history of the region should not be defined by 'Western' narratives of the consumer experience, or by 'modernization theory' that assumes all societies develop along the lines of a familiar American consumerist model" (7). Thus Bren and Neuburger do not want to see consumption under communism as a failure, whether in reference to the West or to its own stated Marxist ideals. Instead they want to show procurement, distribution, production and use of modern goods in Eastern Europe as part of a broader history of global consumption. For example, they demonstrate clearly that the socialist attention to consumption in the 1950s and 1960s was a natural part of the European postwar recovery. Furthermore, to the socialist governments the ability to provide abundant consumption for their citizens was a "primary signifier of progress" (13), just as it was for their counterparts in the West. The 15 essays in the collection are organized on a thematic basis: the topics

[10] Susan Reid and David Crowley, eds., *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Crowley and Reid, eds., *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (Oxford: Berg, 2002); Crowley and Reid, eds., *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2010).

include consumer elites, production and retailing, gender, the black market, and state-generated critiques of consumption.

The first part of the collection describes the social stratification under state socialism. The authors of the essays in this section study groups of socialist societies endowed with privileges in access to consumer goods. In Bren's article an unusual privileged group is presented: Czechoslovak "hustlers." These were mainly young people engaged in the illegal activity of exchanging Czechoslovak crowns for *bony*, substitutes for foreign currency used to purchase the most sought-after goods in a chain of limited-access stores called Tuzex. These people, as Bren shows, became rich and powerful because of their underground activity, since a great number of Czechoslovaks who did not have legal access to Tuzex used an illegal way to get there by buying *bony* from hustlers. Bren argues that the existence of the second economy was central to late communist consumption, and thus people such as hustlers became almost as powerful as the party elite and a kind of a role model for late socialist citizens. Kate Brown and Kacper Poblocki describe more "traditional" representatives of the socialist elite. In her fascinating piece (expanded later to a book) Brown compares what she calls "utopian zones of privilege" (60): that is, cities created around nuclear weapons factories in the USSR and in the United States.[11] Her argument is that for both countries it was important to provide reliable and carefully selected scientists responsible for the production of nuclear weapons with a high standard of living; for their part, the residents of these special communities were ready to give up some of their civil rights and freedoms in exchange for this standard of living. Moreover, according to Brown, these cities are a good illustration of the general inequality characteristic of both the USSR and the United States: a typical Soviet socialist city closed to collective farmers and a typical American suburb where racial minorities were unwelcome represented the same principle of privileged consumption for the elites. Poblocki also talks about "distinct correlations between the urban processes on both sides of the Iron Curtain" (81) based on his analysis of the social conflict between rich and poor city dwellers in postwar Poland.

In the second part of the collection the authors show how strategies of production and retailing, which are usually regarded as Western, functioned in socialist countries. Neuburger demonstrates that the production of cigarettes in Bulgaria was no less "capitalist" than manufacturing in the United States. The Bulgartabak enterprise used marketing, design, and branding to promote its products, which became extremely popular all over the Socialist Bloc.

[11] Kate Brown, *Plutopia: Nuclear Families, Atomic Cities, and the Great Soviet and American Plutonium Disasters* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

Neuburger's main argument is that "Bloc market and state monopoly of commodity exchange actually enabled productive and consumer success" (111). Patrick Hyder Patterson argues in his article that department stores usually perceived in the historiography as a "vehicle for the creation of capitalist cultures and values" (116) were at the same time a natural part of socialist consumption. Rossitza Guencheva analyzes the operation of a Bulgarian state institution charged with the "enrichment of the assortment of goods" and shows how the government, represented by the experts of this state institution, both tracked and shaped consumer desires by trying to "engage customers in an active, creative relationship with the material world that would supplement their passive consumerism" (152). The section of the book concerning gender issues is probably less consistent than the others: two out of three essays presented in this section, an essay about the evolution of Yugoslav cookbooks (Wendy Bracewell) and the coffee black market in the GDR (Katherine Pence), concern gender only tangentially, and only the third essay deals directly with the role of women in general consumer policies and experiences in socialist Romania (Jill Massino).

In the section on the black market, Narcis Tulbure and Karl Brown each draw attention to unusual aspects of the second economy in the socialist bloc. Tulbure writes about the production and sales of adulterated and homemade alcohol, a key component of Romania's underground sector, while Brown makes a case study of a Hungarian engaged in illegal commerce: he illegally slaughtered pigs at a state farm to satisfy local peasants' requests for festive occasions and sold them wood stolen from state forests. As with the Czechoslovak "hustlers" described in Bren's contribution, such "pig killers" became rich and important in socialist Hungary. Malgorzata Mazurek analyzes what she calls the key characteristic of socialist citizens as far as consumer practices are concerned: resourcefulness. A remarkable feature of Mazurek's study is that she takes two families as case studies and looks at their everyday life during both the socialist and the postsocialist periods: she found in the archive sociological materials about the families, then supplemented it with personal interviews.

The last part of the book is dedicated to an important question of the relation between proclaimed socialist values and real everyday practices. It contains a very interesting piece by Tamas Dombos and Lena Pellandini-Simanyi. The authors used interviews to show how people in Hungary perceived growing prosperity and consumption in the 1970s while socialist propaganda emphasized such values as social equality and the fight against consumerism. For their study these researchers chose three groups of people:

former members of the socialist elite, former workers, and those engaged in illegal commercial activities (such as Bren's hustlers or Karl Brown's "pig killers"). The authors show that people with different social backgrounds see this ambiguity differently. According to Dombos and Pellandini-Simanyi, only those who used to belong to the official elite are aware of the contradiction: since they shared socialist values, their prosperity during socialist times appears to be a problem for them. They try to justify it with various arguments, for example, by saying that they were mainly interested in cultural life, not material goods. Former workers also share the public discourse about consumption. Since they were not rich during socialism, however, they still say they shared the idea of prosperity as a goal: "for them the essence of socialism as a workers' state meant precisely that the regime provided access for workers to consumer goods, … consumer opportunities were experienced by them as an entry into 'decent' society" (340–41). Finally, the "second economy" actors also see no contradiction between socialist propaganda and real life under socialism, but for another reason: they acknowledge that they were relatively rich during the socialist period, but they did not share socialist values, so for them conspicuous consumption under socialism is not a problem at all. Brigitte Le Normand also writes about harmonizing consumer culture with socialist values, using the example of inequality in housing distribution in socialist Yugoslavia, while Mark Keck-Szajbel shows how the Polish press and even government officials concerned about preventing social unrest because of the shortages in Poland paradoxically encouraged Polish citizens to "take advantage of foreign abundance" (377): that is, to shop in the GDR while traveling there.

The collection by Bren and Neuburger looks at consumption in all the socialist countries except the USSR (the latter is considered only in Kate Brown's comparative chapter). Though the editors do not explain this in their volume, they probably omitted Soviet practices intentionally, since in the majority of studies the Soviet Union represents the entire socialist universe, while other parts of the Bloc remain neglected. Bren and Neuburger's "gap" is well filled by Natalya Chernyshova's book. She studies socialist consumption based on the material of the Soviet 1970s, arguing that the Brezhnev period was a time of abundance and growing individualism: the majority of urban dwellers already lived in their own apartments furnished with good furniture, wore fashionable clothing, and used modern household appliances. She analyzes this "golden age" of Soviet consumption through the lens of public discourse, everyday practices, and people's perceptions.

Like Susan Reid, Chernyshova views Soviet consumer culture as part of the socialist modernization project. She begins by drawing a picture of the

political and economic aspects of consumption in the 1970s and arguing that the prosperity of the population was one of the major goals of Brezhnev's government. She also analyzes the economic reforms of Soviet Prime Minister Aleksei Kosygin, carried out in the mid-1960s, which introduced some elements of the market economy to the USSR. Chernyshova argues that even though those reforms made little difference to overall economic growth, they encouraged the increased output of consumer goods in the coming years. She states that key features of that period included growth in the import of consumer goods and the introduction of progressive forms of retail trade, such as self-service and sociological studies of consumer demand. She emphasizes that consumer shortages in the Brezhnev era mainly concerned nonessential goods, which made this phenomenon quite different from the shortages of the Soviet 1930s. In discussing the quality of Soviet goods, Chernyshova echoes Larissa Zakharova in her study of Soviet policies toward fashion in the 1960s.[12] Chernyshova admits that not infrequently the ideas, plans, and models of Soviet production were not realized or were realized in a flawed way and did not reach the final customers but argues that this is not a reason to neglect the significance of the plans themselves. They can show us how official institutions tried to respond to consumers' implicit pressure.

In her second chapter, Chernyshova describes the ideological debates on the meaning of consumption in the USSR (which are related to the question of discrepancy between values and practices raised in the last section of Bren and Neuburger's collection). Using the media, party documents, prose, and cinema of the period, she demonstrates the ambiguity of the public discourse: on the one hand, consumerism was presented as a dangerous phenomenon, but on the other, steady improvements in the material well-being of citizens were presented as the Party's main goal and the value of fashion in public discourse was growing, as was the number of goods presented as necessities for every Soviet citizen (such as cars or television sets). Chernyshova offers a good illustration of this ambiguity in her analysis of Soviet cinema in the 1970s: while a movie often sought to condemn consumerism, its presentation of modern comforts was "a powerful advertisement for consumer modernity" (77).

Apropos of Soviet shopping in the 1970s, Chernyshova emphasizes the importance of the growing popularity among consumers of luxury items, such as rugs or fur coats. She argues that the pattern of buying things changed significantly in the 1970s compared to the 1960s: for example, Soviet consumers of the Brezhnev era sometimes bought new things not because

[12] Larissa Zakharova, "Dior in Moscow: Taste for Luxury in Soviet Fashion under N. S. Khrushchev," in *Pleasures in Socialism*, 95–120.

the old ones had broken but because they had become outdated; the idea of rational shopping (buying only what was necessary and not following "false needs" created by advertising, as was allegedly the case under capitalism) was still promoted in Brezhnev's time, but as Chernyshova points out, the very notion of what was rational changed over time. For example, according to two Soviet surveys, a cassette player, considered a rare item in the 1960s, came to be viewed as an essential possession in the 1970s (83).

An important, fourth chapter of Chernyshova's book concerns growing inequality in Soviet society. Like Paulina Bren and Karl Brown in Bren and Neuburger's collection, she shows that, besides "traditional" elite groups such as the nomenklatura or intelligentsia, there emerged a new class of consumers represented by people who became rich thanks to the "second economy," including waiters and shop assistants. She also reveals a large generational gap in the 1970s, when the consumer values of young people were often not understood or accepted by the older generation.

The last three chapters of Chernyshova's book are case studies of the consumption of three types of goods: clothing, furniture, and household appliances. She shows how Soviet people's expenditures on clothes grew during the 1970s, how following fashion trends became mainstream behavior, and how *fartsovchiki* (black marketeers) became an "authority" on clothing. Talking about furniture, Chernyshova again brings attention to the difference between the cultures of the 1960s and the 1970s: during the Khrushchev era the government promoted rational uniformity of people's apartments, while in the Brezhnev era uniformity was criticized and apartments were supposed to be beautiful and unique. This in turn led to another peculiarity of the 1970s: the interior appearance of one's apartment became a sign of social differentiation. As far as home appliances are concerned, their production and use had been encouraged in the USSR since the end of the 1950s, but the characteristic feature of the Soviet 1970s, as Chernyshova points out, was that people were no longer satisfied with just any kind of home technology; they wanted specific brands, "exercising choice and agency as consumers" (200).

One of the merits of Chernyshova's study is that it specifically focuses on the Brezhnev era, which has not yet become a very popular academic field. Scholars of the postwar USSR usually prefer more dynamic eras, such as the Thaw or perestroika. Chernyshova manages to show this period in a dynamic perspective and gives us a new, thoughtful, and rich vision of it as a golden era of Soviet consumerism. The collection of essays edited by Boris Belge and Martin Deuerlein also aims at giving a new interpretation to this era and challenging the term "stagnation" usually applied to it. The editors

note that this term was introduced by Mikhail Gorbachev as a political gesture he used to underline the shortcomings of his predecessors' rule and the need for his own reforms. According to Belge and Deuerlein, the political and pejorative term "stagnation" should not prevail in academic analysis of the period, precisely because the Brezhnev era saw the highest level of material well-being ever experienced by Soviet citizens. The editors suggest instead the use of such terms as "normality," "stability," and "hyperstability," which in their view highlight the regime's aim to preserve the status quo as an end in itself.

Belge and Deuerlein aim at incorporating the Soviet 1970s in the context of the transnational postwar period. In doing so, they echo not only Bren and Neuburger but also a recent collection of essays edited by Diane Koenker and Anne Gorsuch that interpret the socialist Sixties as part of the global Sixties.[13]

The ten essays in the Belge and Deuerlein collection are divided into three sections: the politics of memory and projects of the future; international integration and regionalization; and the borders of hyperstability. These topics seem too broad and do not always correspond to the articles in each section. Thematically the contributions might as well be grouped as urban history, Soviet art, and the dissident movement. Indeed, three pieces in the volume represent case studies of socialist cities (a lens similar to that of Kate Brown's essay in Bren and Neuburger's collection), three essays examine various forms of the Soviet dissident movement, and two investigate Soviet art of the 1970s.

Stefan Guth studies the city of Shevchenko in Kazakhstan, built around a nuclear plant in the 1960s. Shevchenko was situated in the desert next to a uranium deposit and was meant to be a model city with unlimited cheap energy provided by the plant, comfortable houses for young specialists, and abundant provision of material goods. It was also supposed to symbolize the victory of Soviet man over nature (being built in the desert) and the friendship of peoples (uniting Russians and Kazakhs). Just as Kate Brown wrote in her study of the Soviet "closed" city Cheliabinsk-40, Guth argues that Shevchenko was very much part of the trend of global technological projects of that time. What also puts the city of Shevchenko in a global context is that it imported Western technology and at the same time generated interest and respect abroad as an advanced technological project.

[13] Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker, eds., *Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013). The Belge and Deuerlein collection also fits into the academic pattern of reinterpreting the "stagnation" period: see, e.g., Edwin Bacon and Mark Sandle, *Brezhnev Reconsidered* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

Esther Meier also picked as her subject a city built around a new Soviet technological project: Naberezhnye Chelny, built in the 1970s in the Tatar Republic together with the giant truck factory Kamaz. Meier focuses on the engineers of the plant as key actors in these new Soviet cities (echoing Guencheva from Bren and Neuburger's collection, who underlines the key role of Bulgarian quality experts in the production of goods and the importance of the mesolevel approach to the analysis of late socialist society). Meier argues that projects such as the Kamaz plant served as vehicles of social mobility for Soviet citizens, especially for ethnic minorities: Tatars, in the case of the Kamaz factory.

Ivo Mijnssen writes about the city of Tula, with a focus on the meaning of its World War II past. In 1976, Tula (200 km south of Moscow) was awarded the title of a "hero city" for its role in the defense of Moscow against the Nazis in 1941. Mijnssen argues that the state used war memory as a means of mobilizing Soviet citizens in the context of ideological crisis: by reminding people about the heroic feats of their predecessors, government authorities sought to instill a sense of guilt in city residents and make them work harder for the sake of the country. At the same time, the title of a "hero city" created expectations among the residents that they would receive privileges in terms of the supply of material goods. Moreover, as he awarded Tula the title, Brezhnev confirmed that their expectations were justified: he promised the inhabitants that more apartments would be built and more commodities would be available in stores. These promises were not kept, and Tula remained a "second-rate" city: to buy basic material goods, its residents had to travel to Moscow. Comparing the example of Tula with the above-mentioned Shevchenko, Naberezhnye Chelny, and Cheliabinsk-40, we can identify the priorities that guided the Soviet government's distribution of material goods: citizens who participated in producing important commodities for the country deserved a better supply than those who lived in a city of military glory; functionality turned out to be more important than symbols.

Tobias Rupprecht's subject is similar to Meyer's. He studies the role of experts—Soviet academics engaged in area studies, South America in particular—in government decision making in the late USSR. Ada Raev investigates the Soviet (mainly Moscow) visual art underground of the Brezhnev period, examining its paradoxical status between official and unofficial spheres, while Ingo Grabowsky shows how Soviet pop music sought to incorporate Western trends in response to audience demands but came under pressure from state censors.

Evgeniy Kasakow analyzes the phenomenon of the Soviet left-wing dissident movement, claiming that, unlike the human rights activists who had a lot of contacts in the West and thus more publicity, left-wing groups remained in the deep underground, mainly unaware of one another and of how to promote themselves. Moritz Florin poses a question of whether there existed a dissident movement in the Soviet periphery, using the example of Kyrgyzia: he states that although there were no anti-Soviet groups proper there, the Kyrgyz government elite as well as the local intelligentsia could sometimes behave in a way that ran counter to decisions made in Moscow, which made those groups an opposition of sorts to the state center. Malte Rolf also studies the relationship between the Soviet center and a national republic; he uses the example of Lithuania to show how the early Soviet policy of "indigenization" followed by the oppression of Lithuanian national identity in the 1970s provoked local opposition to the center and eventually contributed to the dissolution of the USSR.

The concluding essay by Klaus Gestwa concerns a broader question of whether the origins of perestroika can be found in the Brezhnev period. Gestwa challenges Jörg Baberowski's statement that there had been no crisis before perestroika, since people did not have a sense of a crisis and it was Gorbachev himself who "created" a crisis to justify the necessity of radical reforms.[14] Gestwa shows that the presentiment of trouble had been felt since 1968 and became acute in the early 1980s, when even in state-censored journals authors pointed to signs of approaching crisis. Even if Gestwa agrees with Belge and Deuerlein that the Brezhnev years were a time of "normality" when the USSR developed as a typical industrial society, he argues that the peak of material abundance was reached in the mid-1970s. After that, the level of well-being declined, and the gap between demand and labor productivity widened. Gestwa also argues that this crisis can be seen as a variation on the crash of postwar abundance that was earlier experienced in Western countries as a consequence of the oil crisis of 1973 and entailed the end of Fordism. Gestwa's main conclusion is that the Brezhnev regime sought to maintain a sense of stability even as the first signs of crisis appeared; because of this policy the Soviet government failed to adapt to changing reality, which later led to the regime's fall.

All three books under review give us a lot of new and rich material for the study of socialist everyday life. The intention of all the authors and editors to revise the Cold War paradigm and to view late socialist society as an inherently important phenomenon—neither better nor worse nor secondary

[14] Jörg Baberowski, "Criticism as Crisis, or Why the Soviet Union Collapsed," *Journal of Modern European History* 9, 2 (2011): 148–66.

with regard to modern Western societies—is, of course, praiseworthy. The evidence collected and analyzed in the works under review enables the authors to strongly suggest that the processes and practices of socialist countries were part of the trend of global postwar development and thus to transnationalize the history of the Eastern Bloc. In the period from the 1960s to the 1980s, socialist regimes aimed at responding to the consumer demands of their citizens (and not just to provide them with basic goods), while the citizens evolved as modern consumers; both governments and people were not too dissimilar from their Western counterparts. The volumes also show that the socialist countries had some of the same problems faced by modern capitalist countries, such as social inequality and overexploitation of natural resources.

It seems, however, that an approach based on seeking similarities between the two systems has its limitations. In challenging the traditional view that socialist governments treated their citizens in a radically different and harmful way, only occasionally opting for a crude imitation of some Western practices, scholars tend to assert two things. The first is that socialist societies were not very different, or were even similar to, the societies of the First World; the second is that they did not imitate Western practices but rather internalized them, or sometimes reached the same result in a way parallel to that followed by the West. This view, however, overlooks two important questions. First, it understates the well-known cult of the West, both among citizens and governments of socialist countries. Even if scholars are right to suggest that the Second World was not secondary to the First and did not just imitate the latter, the questions of why people from socialist countries were so anxious to get access to Western goods and why socialist regimes fought so hard to keep up with the West are still relevant.[15] What the cult produced was not necessarily a copy of Western ways and items—it could be something of its own—but one should not ignore the sense of being secondary to the West shared by the people and the governments of the socialist world.

A second problem of the paradigm presented in these volumes is that as the authors endeavor to show the similarity of the socialist world to the Western one, they tend to undervalue the differences. Perhaps the most interesting (if trivial) question in the study of socialist everyday life is whether those regimes managed to achieve something really new and useful and whether socialist citizens were in some respects happier than their Western

[15] The importance of the West for the Socialist Bloc is discussed in György Péteri, ed., *Imagining the West in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2010). See also Alexei Yurchak's concept of the "Imaginary West" as an important part of the late Soviet system of values in *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

counterparts. The authors of the volumes under review emphasize that in the 1960s and 1970s socialist citizens already had a lot of consumer choice and thus became truly modern consumers, even if their choice was more limited than in the West. But if we accept the Baudrillardian paradigm of criticizing contemporary consumerism as exhibiting excessive consumer choice, we might ask whether the socialist model with its absent or limited consumer choice had an advantage over Western societies. Of course, as the authors compellingly show, at the time people complained about shortages and criticized the authorities for the limited choices, but in the framework of nostalgia they now often criticize excessive variety as well. Thus one may ask whether today's disappointment is only the effect of nostalgia and of disillusionment with the new life people had dreamed about, or whether the socialist consumer model of the planned economy without "superfluous" consumption in fact had its own merits.

Another example of an "invention" of the Eastern Bloc may be the consumer practices of the second economy. They are usually seen as an oasis of a market economy inside a planned one or a sign of something wrong with the latter. As some of the contributors of the volumes under review reveal, however, people often remember this phenomenon, too, with nostalgia, claiming that it created a feeling of community, while the market economy creates "an impersonal, global and corporate" atmosphere (Bren and Neuberger, 253). The need to use "charm and sociability" and a wide network of friends for everyday shopping, which according to Chernyshova made Soviet shopping rather a collective practice (as opposed to Western shopping, which was a triumph of individualism) (92), is appreciated by many ex-socialist citizens throughout the former bloc. So one may ask: was the second economy in socialist countries a successful type of knowhow created by the socialist model (even if unintentionally)? These perhaps provocative questions cannot, of course, depreciate the value of the volumes under review but only show that late socialist societies still remain a promising field of study.

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