

EVERYDAY LIFE PERSPECTIVES ON WORK, HOME, AND “THE SOVIET” FROM ESTONIA TO KYRGYZSTAN: *An Introduction*

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Laura L. Adams and Gulnara Aitpaeva were codirectors of the project “The Soviet in Everyday Life.” Funding for this project came from the Open Society Foundation's International Higher Education Support Program. The authors would especially like to thank Oleksander Shtokvych for his kind and staunch support.

The articles in this special section are the result of a three-year (2010–2013) teaching enhancement project “The Soviet in Everyday Life Past and Present,” funded by a Regional Seminar for Excellence in Teaching grant from the Open Society Foundation's Higher Education Support Program. The project proposal was written by a group of social scientists from Kyrgyzstan and the United States (Laura Adams, Gulnara Aitpaeva, Serguei Oushakine, and John Schoberlein) who had been working in Soviet and post-Soviet space for decades and who were concerned about particular trends in higher education throughout the post-Soviet world. Specifically, we had noticed that when undergraduate teaching materials dealt with the Soviet period at all, they tended to characterize it in simplistic and politicized terms (“empire”/“totalitarian”/“gulag” or, conversely, “modernization”/“integration with the world through Russian culture”). Instructors had little in the way of primary source materials that would stimulate their students to analyze the period for themselves, to understand the diversity of Soviet life, or to critique prevailing discourses about what Soviet society was.

We were also concerned with the role of the Soviet past in scholarship and in the broader societies as well. There was little recognition in the social sciences that the recent Soviet past should be studied for its influence on the present, and scholars trained in the Soviet era or the 1990s expressed little interest in theoretical approaches such as postcolonialism and postsocialism. Furthermore, in history departments in Russia and elsewhere instructors were still working within the theoretical

frameworks of the late perestroika period, with little or no knowledge of recent developments in theory or research even within Russian academia. Outside of Russia, the approach tended to focus on the Soviet period only in relation to national history, and there was little focus on the Soviet experience as a whole. In many places the attitude seemed to be that the Soviet legacy is transparently understandable and has no need of further research or scholarly analysis or, worse, that each country has its own Soviet experience that is amenable neither to theorizing nor to comparison. However, these attitudes did not match the gaps we all saw and studied between official discourses and individual experience, between official and collective memories of the Soviet era. Thus in our project “the Soviet” was treated not as a backward-looking topic but rather as a concept that we need in order to understand post-Soviet societies today.

The project brought together an international group of about a dozen senior faculty with more than twenty junior faculty and advanced PhD students with the goal of enriching the teaching and research activities of the participants through a series of group seminars and individual activities related to the broad theme of “the Soviet in everyday life.” Participants were recruited mainly from departments of anthropology, cultural studies, history, philosophy, and sociology. With the aims of encouraging comparative work and getting a more diverse picture of Soviet and post-Soviet everyday life, we sought out scholars who were from any country of the former Soviet Union or Mongolia, and we tried to bring in Russian scholars from outside of Saint Petersburg and Moscow. The main requirement for participation was a clear research and teaching interest in some aspect of “the Soviet,” as well as an interest in using everyday life approaches to stimulate methodological innovation in their own work. Our group aspired, in a limited way, to conduct a collective “archaeology” of Soviet everyday life starting from the present: examining how practices and institutions continue to be fundamentally shaped by the Soviet period. We conducted ethnographic research and collected primary source materials (documents, photos, video, oral histories) from different parts of Soviet and post-Soviet space in order to provide a thicker, richer description of the Soviet past against which contemporary society is often contrasted. You can see our collection of these materials designed as teaching modules at the project’s website “The Soviet in Everyday Life.”¹

One of our first steps as a group was to explore what connects the Soviet experience across a diversity of geographical, temporal, and social locations, without a priori defining what was interesting or important about everyday life in relation to “the Soviet.” It was in the nature of the project to let answers to this question emerge, struggle with each other, and evolve over the course of three years of ongoing reading and discussion. It was not an easy process finding common ground and, to be sure, our answers will forever be partial and incomplete. Here we would just like to lay out a few of the intellectual twists and turns we took along the way in order to put the articles in this thematic section into the broader context of debates about what was particularly Soviet about everyday life in the USSR and after.

¹ <https://sites.google.com/site/sovieteverydaylife/>.

During the first year or so of the project, we settled on three main thematic focal points that we considered essential to the Soviet/post-Soviet experience: disjuncture (across time, space, and social groups), mobility (both social and physical movement), and the making of Soviet persons (identity, morality, education). These three focuses encompassed nearly all of the participants' research projects and many projects included more than one of these themes. From there, a much narrower thematic emerged that you can see in the participants' research presented here: the meanings of work and home/family in various social and historical contexts. In order to see how we got from year one to the final product, we need to explain a bit about how we engaged with the existing literature in our group discussions.

In thinking about how the Soviet experience looked from the point of view of ordinary people, a lot of scholars have focused on retrospection, generational memory, and nostalgia as an alternative to a triumphalist discourse that dismisses the often positive experiences that Soviet people had of their state and society (Boym 2001; Oushakine 2000, 2007; Ries 1997; Yurchak 2006). Certainly we examined these works in our discussions, but we became more interested in two other concepts that seemed key to understanding the Soviet experience: things and space. Looking at objects and spaces drew our attention from mentalities to practices. It gave us a way around starting from the question of "what's inside people's heads?" and instead allowed us to focus on the question of "what do people do/make?"

Many of the historians in our group were already well-versed in the sociology of things (as exemplified by Gerasimova and Chuikina 2004; Gurova 2004, 2008; Kopytoff 2006; Lemon 2009; Reid 2002; Ries 2009). We found that we got a lot of analytical leverage by focusing on objects and their uses, not just because of the peculiarities of production and consumption of goods in Soviet society but also because of the senior faculty's strength in visual analysis (Leibovich 2005; Leibovich and Shushkova 2004; Orlova 2004; Oushakine 2010). Along similar "materialist" lines, we found ourselves very interested in studying spaces and places, both urban and rural. This spatial focus of everyday life studies begins with de Certeau (1984), of course, but also ties in to the expertise of our senior faculty members in studying how people use places (Aitpaeva 2006; Aitpaeva, Egemberdieva, and Toktogulova 2007; Darieva, Kaschuba, and Krebs 2011; Darieva, Glick Schiller, and Gruner-Domic 2014; Egemberdieva and Aitpaeva 2009). We used the cities where our group gathered for our seminars (Yerevan, Tbilisi/Batumi, Bishkek/Balykchi) as urban laboratories for our examination of what "the Soviet" means today. Grounding our discussions in theory about spaces and places (Alexander, Buchli, and Humphrey 2007; Humphrey and Skvirskaja 2009; Low 1996; Tacoli 1998; Zavisca 2003) and taking guided tours given by local scholars, we explored the ways that history lives on today through markets, museums, architecture, ruins, and place names.

These questions about the use of space and the production, consumption, and transformation of things closely linked to another debate that has a long tradition in scholarship on Soviet society: the question of the private sphere. "Did you know that Russian has no word for privacy?" was a common refrain heard by Russian language students of my generation, and the fascination with the implications of

Russian (lack of) privacy has carried over into more serious discussions of the formation of subjectivities and civil societies (Kharkhordin 1999; Weintraub and Kumar 1997). We discussed the excellent and inspiring work done on *byt* and *kommunalki*, for example, but we found that some of these arguments about Soviet everyday life lost their power when transported beyond Moscow and Leningrad (Boym 1994; Crowley and Reid 2002; Kiaer and Naiman 2006; Kozlova 2005; Shlapentokh 1989; Utekhin 2004). Private housing, for example, was quite common in Soviet Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and many of the statements about Russian culture and subjectivity that we found in the existing literature did not have universal applicability across Soviet regions.

Instead, we found that our discussions about the private/public divide increasingly revolved around questions of institutions (such as schools and workplaces) and the formation of Soviet individuals, an idea that we punned (in Russian, at least) into the concept of (*пуб*)личность. This concept became definitive for our project because it brought together “things” and “space” with our discussions about the importance of properly understanding formal and informal networks and the individual/collective dynamic in Soviet and post-Soviet societies (Ashwin 1999; Dezer 2003; Ledeneva 1998, 2006). To the extent that we do look at the private/public divide in our work, the scholars in our group found less evidence of the totalitarian hypothesis (the penetration of the state into private life) than of the penetration of family, personal life, and intimate networks into the public sphere through the workplace (Diatlenko 2013; Dimke 2012a, 2012b; Golubev 2012; Kotkina 2013; Rebrova and Chashchukhin 2013; Shagoian 2010, 2012; Skubitskaia 2012). In the end, as you can see in the three articles presented here, the ideas that really seemed to stick were the ways that boundaries were negotiated among individuals, families, and larger collectivities through the material mediation of space and objects and the ways that informal practices knit the public and private spheres together (cf. Dezer 2003).

All of these themes come together in Olga Smolyak’s article on the practice of “working for yourself.” Smolyak provides us with an intriguing lens through which we can understand the nature of work/home and collective/personal boundaries in Soviet everyday life. She brings the themes of mobility and the making of persons together by arguing that we can learn a lot about Soviet social space by mapping and interpreting the informal practices of using, creating, and repurposing objects from or in the workplace. Based on oral history interviews with people who had worked in provincial Russian cities during the 1970s–1980s, Smolyak’s richly interpretive text takes us beyond ideas of workplace theft (of time and/or materials) as a tactic of resistance and shows how constructive practices of solidarity, equality, and pleasure were embedded in the “biography” of the objects she studies.

Eeva Kesküla delves into the world of Estonian mining communities to explore the evolving relationship between the mining company and its employees in the wake of workplace reforms brought about after European integration. Although the miners are largely Russians and the mining company officials are largely Estonian, the story here is not framed in terms of ethnicity but rather in terms of kinship and

its incompatibility with the “Western” workplace. She brings together the themes of disjuncture in practices and the problematic mobility of business norms in a valuable contribution to the existing body of literature on Soviet mining dynasties (e.g., Ashwin 1999).

Jeanne Féaux de la Croix’s piece on work in Kyrgyzstan brings together all three themes of disjuncture, mobility, and the making of persons. She explores the changing relationships between individuals and collectives through the context of work: What is good work? What is meaningful work? For whom and for what do we work? And how does work relate to identity and personhood? She explores these issues through profiles of three people she encountered in the course of her ethnographic fieldwork, providing us with a rich picture of a range of lifeworlds in a rural context. “The Soviet” inevitably comes up in all these stories about everyday life, confirming its existence in the present tense as Féaux de la Croix evocatively ties together these threads of past and present.

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