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In the opening ceremonies to the Sochi Olympic Games in 2014, intricately choreographed dance routines depicted an idealized view of Russian life, from the lyricism of a tsarist ball to the throbbing tempo of rapid industrialization. A celebration of cosmonaut Yury Gagarin's 1961 space flight was followed by a parade of vintage cars and brightly clad *stiliagi* (hipsters) dancing in the street. These images of happiness, abundance, and fashion offer a romanticized portrayal of rising living standards in the Soviet Union during the post–World War II period. In reality communism, in both theory and practice, had a thorny and ambivalent relationship with consumerism. This is the topic explored in *Communism and Consumerism: The Soviet Alternative to the Affluent Society*, edited by Timo Vihavainen and Elena Bogdanova. In several framing chapters, Vihavainen grapples with the question of consumption in Marxist theory and Communist Party documents, while Olga Gurova, Larissa Zakharova, and Bogdanova consider how Soviet citizens shopped and acquired goods by other means, how they thought about their role as consumers, and how they expressed their dissatisfaction with the products and services available.

The chapters in this volume reveal complex and dynamic attitudes toward consumption in the Soviet Union that differed sharply from consumerism in the West. The authors convincingly demonstrate that the issue of consumption created a significant dilemma for both the Communist Party and the population. For the state, consumption "was damned and rehabilitated several times during the Soviet period" (p. 86). Yet it is the human side of consumption that comes most vividly to life in the volume. As Bogdanova states:

> Being a Soviet consumer was not easy. You could not just go shopping in order to get everyday goods for yourself and your family. You needed time and patience to stand in queues. You need the right contacts to get hold of goods which were difficult to obtain and in short supply. You needed to know when goods would be delivered and the rules of trade, so as to be able to find what you wanted. Dealing with shop assistants and customer service authorities sapped your strength. Everyday consumption became something more than simply consumption. (p. 136)

Ultimately, the authors examine contestation around consumption. These tensions were most in evidence after World War II when the moral and political superiority of the Soviet Union became bound up with demonstrating economic superiority manifested in an abundance of consumer goods. This goal was unachievable. Vihavainen foreshadows a major theme of the book in the preface, stating, "In fact, the inability to fulfill the needs of consumers would become a major factor in destroying the Soviet regime" (p. xi).

The volume builds upon an important strand of scholarly inquiry focused on centrally planned economies and consumerism. In their Marxist critique of Soviet power, Hungarian scholars Ferenc Fehér, Agnes Heller, and György Márkus (1983) argue that the Soviet system was characterized by a specific relationship between the one-party state and the population—a relationship defined by the "dictatorship of needs." In this system, the party claimed to know the public's economic and social needs, largely without reference to the desires of average people. Instead, the state controlled consumer demand in order to bolster its own authority. By "dictating needs," the party prevented the public from engaging in consumption independently, from making choices beyond the purview of the state. Economics thus served politics, and consumption became highly politicized. Katherine Verdery (1996) echoes this line of analysis in her book *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?*. Verdery highlights the entanglement of economic and political power that shaped production and consumption in socialist states. Because the state was committed to redistributing wealth across society, its legitimacy depended upon the provision of consumer goods. Yet the role of the consumer as potentially autonomous, possessing the power of independent choice, threatened to undermine the system. Private accumulation could diminish state authority. Verdery shows that that "the very definition of 'needs' became a matter for resistance and dispute" (1996:28). The failure to provide "quality, ready availability, and choice" became a political problem for all socialist states (27). In late socialism, the black market and private exchange satisfied the desire for more consumer choice in the short term, propping up the dysfunctional system of state production. Yet these compensatory consumer practices eroded the regime's legitimacy in the long run.

Vihavainen develops this scholarship by examining the deep ambivalence of the Soviet regime toward consumption—ambivalence rooted in the association of consumerism with the acquisition of goods and services that are not strictly "necessary." Throughout the regime's lifespan, Soviet leaders puzzled over how to use Marxism-Leninism to achieve abundance without inadvertently cultivating a "consumerist mentality" in the population (p. xii). Vihavainen sees this as a fundamentally moral problem. How could the proletariat embrace a materialist philosophy while striving "to keep his soul above material things" (p. 29)?

In his first chapter, Vihavainen offers an intellectual history of consumption as viewed through a Russian and Soviet lens, ranging from utilitarianism to Russian Orthodoxy and Maksim Gorky's socialist realism. Vihavainen illustrates a moralizing strain of Marxist-Leninist ideology intimately related to consumption. For Marxists reacting against capitalism due to moral indignation toward bourgeois lifestyles, the rise of capitalist society in the West had promoted individualism and led to a spiritual decline. While the Bolsheviks acknowledged that consumption is inevitable, they had a higher purpose in mind: “Human growth, the full development of the personality, indeed, was considered the real ultimate goal of social development, material things were just a means to that end” (p. 47). However, the party was bedeviled by how to achieve immaterial goals through a materialist philosophy. Ideology offered a temporary solution. In the 1930s Stakhanovite workers labored mightily for the glory of the Soviet Union, rather than for material benefit. However, this level of ideological fervor was difficult to maintain in the following decades when the public expected higher living standards.

Ultimately, persistent shortages, poor quality goods, limited choice, and generally lower living standards than those in the West eroded the Soviet regime’s legitimacy. Consumer desires were suppressed, but at great cost. As Vihavainen summarizes, “It is hardly an overstatement to say that, for a long time, Soviet Communism achieved a remarkable degree of success in its struggle against consumerism. However, at least to some degree, this was the kind of success that nobody wanted or envied. When the Soviet project came to an end, it was found that the system had created a situation in which for many people in rural areas there were simply no prospects of a better life” (p. 49). Reflecting on the regime’s demise, Vihavainen argues that the “inability to fulfill its promises concerning material prosperity” contributed to the downfall of the Soviet system (p. 52). Indeed, Vihavainen attributes present-day nostalgia for the Soviet period as a longing for the world of values that the regime cultivated—the moral realm of anticonsumerism—rather than for the actual lifestyle of Soviet citizens. In the closing chapter, Vihavainen uses interview data to investigate the concepts of *intelligentnost’* (the cultivation of the intellect) and *meshchanstvo* (philistinism). Vihavainen argues that these concepts not only denote a level of education but also imply moral categories. For example, the *intelligent* is associated with self-restraint, interest in nonmaterial aspects of life, culturedness, spirituality, and sociability. *Meshchanstvo* is related to bad taste, vulgarity, and poor morals, as well as conspicuous consumption and displays of wealth, practices that have been rampant—and a source of disillusionment—in the post-Soviet period (pp. 151–156).

The most compelling parts of the book delve directly into how Soviet citizens practiced consumption, often in ways that defied Marxism-Leninism and forced policy adaptation by the Communist Party. Three chapters illustrate how Soviet citizens responded to the party’s imagined future of abundance, even as they navigated the day-to-day reality of scarcity and limited choice and occasionally resisted the party’s control of consumption.

Gurova and Zakharova focus on clothing as a consumer good that typifies these tensions. Gurova demonstrates how ideologies of consumption changed significantly from 1917 to the post-Soviet period, revealing diverse approaches to managing consumption in the USSR. The 1917 revolution embodied a rejection of tsarist-era social differentiation through clothing. For the Bolsheviks, clothes should be functional; fashion was viewed as “alien as well as frivolous and even worthless” (p. 71). The Communist Party’s message shifted in the 1930s as the regime moved away from revolutionary asceticism. The Soviets instead promised to outcompete capitalism by producing an abundance of consumer goods. Gurova cites a pivotal 1935 speech by Joseph Stalin in which he stated:

> Some people think that Socialism can be strengthened by achieving the material equality of people on the basis of a poor life. It is not true. This is the petty-bourgeois view of Socialism. Actually, Socialism can win only on the basis of high efficiency of labor, which is higher than the efficiency under Capitalism, and on the basis of the abundance of products and consumer goods, on the basis of the rich cultural life of each member of our society. (p. 73)

This ideological reinterpretation popularized the concept of culturedness (*kul'turnost')*, allowing for growing interest in creating a comfortable life. During the 1950s and 1960s "consumption became a potent political force in the peaceful competition between the Soviet Union and the West" (p. 76). In the late 1960s, in order to maintain social stability, the Soviet state encouraged an implicit social contract. Gurova characterizes the contract as "an agreement between the party and the middle class: the middle class supported the Soviet authorities in exchange for financial security, readiness to turn a blind eye to the black market, and promise of a good life" (p. 78). However, the promise of ever-improving living standards was in tension with the norm of "dematerialization." Gurova describes the state's dilemma, stating "the aim of the Soviet state was to create a socialist post-materialistic world in which there would be consumer goods in abundance signaling the success of the socialist economy to the rest of the world, through these goods would not be of excessive significance to the individual" (p. 78). In the 1970s and 1980s people used their personal style to express new identities—identities that often implicitly challenged the regime. The embrace of personal style led to a service industry to fix poor quality goods or remake them into more stylish garments, an "ideology of repair" that would persist into the post-Soviet period.

Zakharova focuses more narrowly on the 1950s and 1960s when Nikita Khrushchev vowed to "overtake and surpass the United States." She brings together a diverse array of data sources to paint a detailed picture of clothing consumption in post-WWII Soviet Union, including government reports on prices and consumer behavior, studies by Soviet economists, data on family expenditures, and other archival material. Soviet economists worked diligently to develop a "'rational norm' of clothing consumption" (pp. 86–87). However, this emphasis on consumers' "reasonable needs" paid little attention to quality, style, or fashion. The result was the production of goods that no one wanted to purchase. Zakharova quotes an unnamed official who stated that "the task of providing all the population with the most fashionable clothes cannot be imposed on industry because the communist society has as its aim the satisfaction not of all the needs, but only the reasonable needs" (p. 88). In fact, the logic of plan dictated continuity in production as more efficient than constant adaptation of the production line to meet changing consumer preferences.

The planned economy created a variety of challenges for consumers. Complaints demonstrate that shortages of clothing were a persistent problem. Zakharova also points out that, given the plan, producing large-sized clothing was inefficient since it demanded more supplies, leading to a proliferation of small sizes in the shops. Shortages generated a variety of consumer responses: the creation of informal distribution networks, speculation and reselling, and the use of unregistered tailors and seamstresses. The state responded with efforts to promote Soviet fashion through Houses of Clothing Design. The state also increased access to dressmakers but still attempted to limit the number of patterns available to consumers. While consumers' work-arounds were technically illegal, "in reality, instead of prosecuting such activity the state had to encourage it because it played an important role in providing consumers with clothes and in this way covered the deficiencies of the state system" (p. 93). The dysfunction of the plan both inspired and required consumers to engage in creative strategies to bypass the official system.

Interest in foreign fashion led to brisk business for *fartsovshchiki*, who bought items from foreign visitors for resale, notably during the 1957 Festival of Youth and Students in Moscow. Zakharova argues that through these behaviors consumers were becoming autonomous from official Soviet fashion. She concludes that "the dream of Soviet economists of egalitarian consumption was very far from real Soviet consumer practices. The differences in how and what to consume were determined by inequalities in resources and ways of accessing scarce goods" (p. 107). It was the Communist Party's ineffective approach toward consumption that ultimately contributed to differentiation in fashion.

In a fascinating chapter that brings together ideological and practical aspects of consumption, Bogdanova investigates Soviet citizens' dissatisfaction with the products available and their efforts to defend their interests through consumer complaints submitted to newspapers and other venues. Complaints were one of the few legitimate means for consumers to express their unhappiness and possibly gain redress, even if the act of complaining "displayed the paternal model of dependence of the citizens on the authorities, which was an organic part of the idea of Soviet social structure" (p. 114). The complaints are vivid and engaging, containing valuable details about consumer tribulations. Bogdanova charts the tremendous variety of complaints, from shortages of basic goods to sudden changes in the styles produced, such as the "abrupt change from [shoes with] round to pointed toes" (p. 122). Bogdanova quotes a complaint that states, "The canteen staff at the Gostinyi Dvor and Passazh department stores allows abuses to take place in the sale of juices and mineral water" (p. 134). One can only imagine the nature of the abuse! Complaints not only served as an outlet for consumers' displeasure; they also were important signals to Soviet officials about problems related to consumption. In fact, it was Vladimir Lenin who originally ordered that complaint books be placed in every Soviet establishment (p. 127). Bogdanova asserts that complaints were classified and analyzed and then used to influence planning and production.

To be successful complaints had to be couched in a certain language. Bogdanova argues that consumers recognized the pragmatic need to adopt official Soviet language. The complaint writer "tried to use a system of symbols comprehensible for both sides" (p. 115). This task could be challenging as the complainant endeavored to simultaneously point out a particular problem without calling into question the communist system as a whole. Many consumers' complaints were in response to a system in which "the retailer is always right" (p. 117). This attitude privileging sellers over buyers, Bogdanova argues, reflects the Marxist-Leninist approach to consumption as a potentially negative category in which personal desire undermines the collective good. In a system not designed to cater to their demands, consumers compete to purchase scarce goods and sellers have no need to provide good service. Those writing complaints also were strategic about where they directed their petitions, addressing officials at higher levels and in the party organs. Letters to newspapers also were a popular strategy; as Bogdanova notes, "a complaint which had been published in a newspaper signaled that the problem was now part of the political discourse" (p. 127). Complainants used a variety of strategies to make their concern more credible: portraying their problem as part of a more general issue, justifying the complaint by citing their own social status as a veteran or engineer, or by appealing to the authority and good will of the recipient. Above all, the person making the complaint needed to show his or her loyalty to the Soviet model.

Bogdanova does not tell us how many of these complaints were ever addressed or resolved, an impossible task. More significant is that these complaints reveal the cracks in a communist system that promised abundance but produced scarcity. Most poignant are the many complaints that Bogdanova cites referring to the state's commitment to provide for its citizens. These missives ask some version of the question "Why does the state not take care of us?" (p. 133). Consumers were left feeling bereft that their needs had not been met even as the party struggled to define just what "need" meant during its seven decades in power.

The contributors to *Communism and Consumerism* reveal that the Communist Party's ambivalence toward consumption was at the heart of its legitimacy dilemma. In the end, the Soviets were never able to make consumption "safe" for socialism. Instead, unfulfilled consumer desire became a problem for the regime that grew dramatically over time. Few would have predicted the role of an issue like access to fashionable clothing in the demise of the USSR, but this volume makes a compelling case that the contradictions of materialism are effectively illustrated by patterns of consumption. Unexpectedly, the volume also helps us reflect on consumerism in the West where "everyday consumption" also has become "something more than simply consumption." The line between what we acquire, what we believe, and who we are is a challenge in both systems.

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