

From Blue Jeans to Checkered Bags: Women's Role in the Creation of a Soviet Consumer Culture

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Defended 7 April 2023

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Introduction

In the 1950s, a woman in Moscow winks at a shoe shop clerk who slides her a pair of fashionable, supposedly out of stock shoes in exchange for an under-the-table fee. In the 1960s, a Soviet woman with a sewing machine runs a side business repairing or refashioning damaged or poor quality clothing within her social circle. In the 1970s, a group of female friends with similar clothing sizes buy fashionable items collectively and rotate them between group members at a time when Soviet manufacturing made it too difficult for each young woman to purchase a set of clothing on her own. In the 1980s, a worker at a USSR state factory sets aside a bottle of vodka from the production line every day and brings it home to her family to resell on the side. In the 1990s, groups of women travel every weekend to neighboring countries, such as Turkey or China, to fill their checkered suitcases with consumer goods and resell them back in their Russian villages.

These vignettes all represent a few of the real experiences of Soviet women over the course of the USSR. In each of these cases, shoppers were forced to go the extra mile in order to acquire the items they required. The Soviet experience differed greatly from, for example, their rival counterparts in America during the same time. The 1950s began the introduction of modern consumerism in the United States, with the rise of TV dinners, fad diets, and self-service.¹ Commercials advertising the newest and cheapest products were abound on television, radio, magazines, newspapers, billboards, and so on. Shopping in America was dominated by the principles of convenience and plenty, and was designed to cater to the increasing individualism of the American zeitgeist. Women shopped for groceries alone, and in fact it was often a place for them to experience brief solitude and independence.² The female shopper of the household

¹ Deutsch, Tracey. 2010. *Building a Housewife's Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. ProQuest Ebook Central. 62.

² Deutsch, 2010. 68.

often had a usual local grocery store which she visited weekly and where she could normally find everything that she needed for her family. Decisions on what to buy were based on personal taste and budgeting; in short, the products available to a particular shopper were determined by the amount of physical money which she had to spend. The emergence of chain stores streamlined this process even further, in the American factory tradition, by creating a simple path for shoppers to follow: entering the store, browsing products themselves at their leisure, and purchasing whatever was in their budget to buy. Traditional bartering and haggling of the pre-twentieth century world were cut out entirely, and there came to be an “inescapable individualism” to American shopping.³ Not so was the case in the Soviet Union.

Run by a central, planned economy and staunchly anti-capitalist government which failed to make good on their promises of unlimited, egalitarian consumption, the Soviet people were in many cases left to fend for themselves. Having a high enough salary to purchase goods was not enough: if the state did not manufacture them at the right time and in the right quantities, they would not be available for purchase. Despite the anti-capitalist utopia which the Soviet state attempted to impose, the Soviet people still had desires and needs for consumer goods, from fashionable coats all the way down to basic foodstuffs. Though the Soviet Bloc has not historically been seen as a consumer society, modern scholars have been reconsidering this classification, and some sources now identify the USSR as an anti-capitalist consumer culture. “The absence of a capitalistic system of exchange in the Soviet Union [...] should not discourage us,” writes Natalya Chernyshova, one of the leading proponents of the Soviet consumer culture theory, “as it was aptly substituted by other means of facilitating commodity flows, such as exchange of favors and *blat*, bribes and rations, closed shops and canteens for the Party and

³ Deutsch, 2010. 15.

cultural elites, and barter in shortage goods.”⁴ Anthropologist Katherine Veredy concurs with Chernyshova, writing that “since [the state] would not supply what people needed, they struggled to do so themselves, developing in the process a huge repertoire of strategies for obtaining consumer goods and services.”⁵ Indeed, although statistics from this time cannot capture the full extent of the Soviet economy, it is clear that more was going on beneath the surface, and that it was in fact networks of social connections which kept the Soviet consumer economy afloat.

However, one essential element of this social economy has been overlooked, and that is the leading role of women. The shoppers, the store clerks, the repair women, the shuttle traders— all of the above were women using their social connections between each other to make sure that they and their families had all of their essentials. “The Soviet consumer was a dynamic and skillful social operator,” Chernyshova writes, “not a loner browsing boutiques or department stores at her leisure.”⁶ With the Soviet push for gender equality in the workforce, women were faced with the “second shift,” the responsibility of using their connections to acquire essential goods for their families on top of the work assigned by the state. Even more so than in the streamlined shopping system of the United States, Soviet women had to reach deep into their social connections and find clever workarounds for the shortage of the state. Over the next few chapters, this thesis will argue that the Soviet Bloc was not, in practice, anti-consumerist. However, instead of being run on capital, the currency of the Soviet economy were social connections. Furthermore, these social connections, which were the lifeblood of Soviet consumption, were facilitated by women as both providers and purchasers, making them the foundation of the Soviet economy from its inception to its collapse.

⁴ Chernyshova, Natalya. 2013. *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*. N.p.: Routledge. 12.

⁵ Veredy, Katherine. 1996. *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 27.

⁶ Chernyshova, 2013. 93.

Historiography

There has been no shortage of studies into the Soviet economy, with publication dates spanning from contemporaries of the Soviet Union to present day. These topics are often tackled from different perspectives, such as economic history, political history, and cultural history, however there is often little overlap between them. For example, there have been many studies of the Soviet economy taken from an economic history perspective which looks at the Soviet economy from the top down, investigating the ways in which the political system of the Soviet Union impacted the economic decisions. Naturally, there is a decent amount between the economic and political history of the Soviet Union, since the political system of the USSR was founded on the economic ideology of communism. There is also a good amount of research done on the overlap between political and cultural history in the Soviet Union, which looks at how the people of the Soviet Union responded to state practices, such as censorship laws, the secret police, and major political developments during the course of the Soviet Union. However, there is much less research done which looks at the overlap between economic and cultural history, that is, how people navigated the day-to-day of the Soviet economy. Questions about consumer culture in this era are rarely the focus of a piece of research, however there are some scholars who have analyzed the Soviet era from this perspective.

When it comes to the study of consumer culture in the Soviet Union, one of the highest leading scholars in the field is Natalia Chernyshova. Chernyshova's manuscript, *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*, is the most thorough published overview of Soviet consumer culture, and is highly cited by most other scholars looking to research this subject. Chernyshova's argument is that, although it goes against common understandings of the Soviet Union and of consumer culture, the USSR was in fact a consumerist-driven society. Her research

is focused specifically on the Brezhnev era, from 1964 to 1985, yet it provides a very detailed analysis of consumerism during this period, with statistical data as well as personal anecdotes to make her argument. Another significant source of scholarship comes from the book *Communism and Consumerism: The Soviet Alternative to the Affluent Society*, edited by Timo Vihavainen and Elena Bogdanova. This book contains an anthology of publications from a variety of scholars, although some come from Vihavainen and Bogdanova themselves. As an anthology, these publications each have their own thesis which relate back to the central study of communism and consumerism. The most relevant chapters in this book are Olga Gurova's "The Ideology of Consumption in the Soviet Union" and Larissa Zakharova's "How and What to Consume: Patterns of Soviet Clothing Consumption in the 1950s and 1960s." Gurova's article explores the perspectives towards consumption in the Soviet Union over the course of its existence, breaking it down into four phases and explaining the developments in each one. This paper is more descriptive than argumentative, but offers an important background of understanding for the study of Soviet consumption. Zakharova's paper, using clothing consumption as a case study, explores consumerism of a variety of items from a very up-close angle, using data to make her argument that the Soviet people had to use creative solutions for shopping. As opposed to Gurova's high level analysis, Zakharova's research focuses much more on individual cases and personal anecdotes, making these two papers good compliments of one another.

In terms of studies of consumerism in modern day Russia and post-Soviet states, Graham Roberts is at the top of the leading scholars. His 2016 book, *Consumer Culture, Branding and Identity in the New Russia: From Five-year Plan to 4x4*, explores how consumer culture has changed in Russia from the Soviet period as opposed to today. One fascinating case study, for example, examines the opening of the first McDonalds in Moscow, which resulted in long

queues forming at the doors reminiscent of the Soviet era. Roberts' 2017 book, *Material Culture in Russia and the USSR: Things, Values, Identities*, takes a closer look at the Soviet period and the social value that items had during that time. The most relevant case study from this period looked at the social value of blue jeans, from smuggling to counterfeiting. Though his analysis into Soviet consumerism is not quite as thorough as Chernyshova's, his books do provide relevant supplemental information, especially his deep dive into the history behind blue jeans in the Soviet Union. Another rich source analyzing Soviet consumption in the 1990s is Irina Mukhina's *Women and the Birth of Russian Capitalism: A History of the Shuttle Trade*. This monograph argues for the leading role of women in the shuttle trade of the 1990s, a significant development in Soviet consumption during the transition period. While the focus of this book is on the time period of *perestroika* specifically, Mukhina also mentions ways in which women were leaders in Soviet trade and consumerism prior to the 1990s.

Many primary sources for this topic are difficult to access, due to geographic, linguistic, or simply accessibility barriers. This particular topic is based on a lot of personal accounts which might not necessarily be recorded in archives, and accounts which are kept in archives are mostly written in Russian, oral histories conducted in Russian, and/or not available digitally. However, some primary sources relevant to this topic are available in the United States. For example, the women's magazine *Rabotnitsa* has been cited by a number of sources as it is helpful for demonstrating the ways in which consumption affected the everyday lives of Soviet women. Fortunately, a Russian website published an online archive of *Rabotnitsa* magazines, and although the text is written in Russian, cartoons, advertisements, and sewing templates can be universally understood. Another valuable source for information is the Soviet History archive of primary sources by Michigan State University. This database provides English translations of

primary sources broken up by time period and by theme. This archive contains several Soviet news articles, including from investigative journalists who set out to study shortages, blue jean counterfeiting, or the black market themselves. The 1959 Kitchen Debate between US Vice President Richard Nixon and Soviet Chairman of the Council of Ministers Nikita Khrushchev is another helpful primary source. This impromptu debate allows for a direct contrast between the consumer ideologies in the United States versus in the Soviet Bloc.

In addition to Soviet sources, there are also available primary sources from an American perspective. The *New York Times* newspaper, for instance, keeps an extensive and easily accessible archive of past issues, including from the very beginnings of the Soviet Union up until its collapse. These articles have the disadvantage of being written from the perspective of another country, and a rival country at that, with motivations to portray the Soviet economy as weakly as possible. However, they allow for contemporary views into the Soviet economic system, albeit with a degree of separation. Likewise, the Central Intelligence Agency published a 1964 report on Soviet consumption in direct comparison with the United States. These documents are now publicly accessible and include detailed statistics of the various levels of consumption for certain items. However, in addition to being filtered through an American perspective, these documents are only able to measure the surface level of Soviet consumption, and as will be discussed in this thesis, the social economy of the Soviet Union had several hidden layers underneath the standard planned economy.

Due to the nature of this thesis, personal accounts are an important part of being able to understand the everyday experience of Soviet consumption. One way of accessing these personal accounts is through memoirs of women who lived throughout the Soviet Bloc, such as Svetlana Alexievich's *Secondhand Time*, Kapka Kassabova's *Street Without a Name: Childhood and*

Other Misadventures in Bulgaria, Lea Ypi's *Free: A Child and a Country at the End of History*, and Slavenka Drakulic's *How We Survived Communism & Even Laughed*. *Secondhand Time* is an especially valuable source, as Svetlana Alexievich collects full transcripts of conversations she has with different people throughout the Bloc. Each author of the above books provides relevant and specific anecdotes of their own experiences relating to material culture. However, to supplement this, I conducted my own primary source interview with Professor Ilya Tsvankin, who grew up in Moscow and could provide his own perspectives on the culture of consumerism during this time. These primary source accounts, combined with the research gathered from other sources, together explore the nature of material culture during the Soviet era.

It is important to note here that these sources come from across the Soviet Bloc, from Moscow to Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Bulgaria. Especially in recent times, scholars have been fighting against the idea that the Soviet Bloc was a monolith, and instead argue that each country in the Bloc had its own individual culture and history. In the introduction to her ethnography, Katherine Verdery writes that "no socialist country was 'typical'; each had its specificities, and each shared certain features with some but not all other countries of the bloc. To assume that conclusions drawn from one will apply to all would be unwise." However, she continues by saying that "material from any of them can nevertheless raise questions that might prove fruitful elsewhere."⁷ This is something I have encountered in my research as well. For example, interviewees from Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria reported much less severe shortages than what, at times, plagued Moscow or other parts of Russia, however, ideas of paying with personal connections and black market importations appeared across all different parts of the Bloc. Therefore, this thesis will be studying the general culture of consumerism which united the Soviet Bloc, instead of concentrating on the intricacies of any particular subcommunity, be it a

⁷ Verdery, 1996. 11.

city, province, or entire country. Although each country has its own culture, history, and relationship with the ideology of communism, the similar shortages and consumer conditions of this time allowed for the creation of a uniting consumer culture, with certain shared practices across the Bloc.

I. Consumer Culture

In order to understand the ways in which consumer culture reared its head in the Soviet Bloc, it is imperative to first establish an understanding of what consumer culture is and what its core tenants are. Gary Cross, Professor of Modern History at Pennsylvania State University, has made the claim that of all the “isms” which defined the intellectual battlefield of the twentieth century— be it *capitalism*, *communism*, *socialism*, *marxism*, *totalitarianism*, and so forth— the ideology of *consumerism* won out over all other ideologies despite never having “any formal philosophy, no party and no obvious leaders.”⁸ In short, Cross’s argument is that it is the natural instinct of all people, when faced with riches and items which others possess instead of them, to desire those items regardless of their learned ideology.

So how have we defined consumerism? Within different contexts, the term “consumerism” has been used in ways which suggest different meanings. Consumerism has been used to mean high or increasing levels of consumption, materialism, as well as “addiction to consumption or the belief that consumption is the meaning of life.”⁹ Gary Cross’s working definition of consumerism is “the belief that goods give meaning to individuals and their roles in society.”¹⁰ Scholars have also argued for a distinction between “consumer culture” and “consumer society.” While the idea of a consumer culture has a strong ideological backing, a consumer society is commonly defined by economists as a society in which the supply of consumer goods meets or exceeds demand. In a consumer society, the preoccupation is not on the ability to produce goods, but rather on the ability to persuade the members of that society to

⁸ Vihavainen, Timo, and Elena Bogdanova, eds. 2015. *Communism and Consumerism: The Soviet Alternative to the Affluent Society*. N.p.: Brill. X.

⁹ Vihavainen, 2015. 1.

¹⁰ Cross in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. XIII.

buy them. The methods of persuasion used to encourage shoppers to buy the manufactured products constitute the cultural elements of consumer culture.¹¹ While a consumer society produces consumer goods, a consumer culture produces consumers of goods. It is worth mentioning, however, that different scholars have used varying definitions for these terms, and some may not even make a distinction between a consumer society and a consumer culture. For these scholars, they argue that being that in any society in which the production of goods exceeds demand (ie. a consumer society) it will be necessary for the society to use persuasion tactics to encourage consumers that the goods are worth buying (ie. a consumer culture). The opposite is also true, that societies would only need to use persuasion tactics to encourage customers to purchase products if the supply exceeded the demand, therefore their argument states that the difference between the ideas of consumer society versus culture is negligible, because neither could exist without the other. The thesis will be focused on the 1950s and onwards, a time in the Soviet period in which production of goods steadily ramped up to substantial levels. For the purposes of this thesis, a consumer society will refer to a society capable of mass-producing goods, while a consumer culture will refer to a consumer society in which those mass-produced goods take on additional social meaning beyond their usage value.

Consumerism has seen multiple iterations throughout its existence. Historically, consumerism has been seen as simply having “an interest in acquiring produced goods.”¹² By this definition, scholars have claimed that consumerism began in the eighteenth century, although it is just as possible to trace it back much further, even to the Roman desire for imported Egyptian, Persian, and Chinese goods during the height of the Empire. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly true that colonialism and industrialism created the basis for true, modern

¹¹ Roberts, Graham H. 2016. *Consumer Culture, Branding and Identity in the New Russia: From Five-year Plan to 4x4*. N.p.: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. 2.

¹² Vihavainen, 2015. 1.

consumerism, one in which class is defined by wealth rather than the other way around, and in which that wealth is displayed through consumption. Historian Peter N. Stearns claims that in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a second distinct stage of consumerism was born with the help of increased product diversity, new forms of advertising, and availability. According to Stearns, this new era of consumption was defined by assigning an “emotional significance of acquisition” to buying products, “perhaps filling the void left by social change which had made self-fulfillment at work less and less possible.”¹³ However, styles of consumption have been in such flux lately that certain scholars such as John Brewer are hesitant to label societies from before the 1950s and 1960s as “consumer cultures,” because of a significant change in post-war consumption.¹⁴ In recent years, this area of study has been dubbed Consumer Culture Theory (CCT), which examined the connections between “consumer actions, the marketplace, and cultural meanings.”¹⁵ CCT lies in the overlap between economic and cultural studies, and is one of the frameworks through which this study of Soviet consumption will be conducted.

Development of Soviet Consumption

Researcher Olga Gurova in her paper “The Ideology of Consumption in the Soviet Union” identifies four distinct periods of Soviet consumer ideology. The first era began in 1917, in the year that the Bolshevik Revolution replaced the old bourgeois monarchy with the Soviet government, and continued throughout the 1920s. Gurova marks this period as being defined through State criticism of consumer behavior in pre-revolutionary times, especially the way that luxury goods were used as markers of status and wealth. The Soviets rejected this practice,

¹³ Stearns in Vihavainen, 2015. 1.

¹⁴ Chernyshova, 2013. 10.

¹⁵ Roberts, 2016. 6.

believing that with the abolition of class no one should use material goods to claim superiority or higher social standing over another. The next stage of consumption came in the second half of the 1930s, during which, Gurova argues, consumerism was “rehabilitated,” and that possession of material goods in and of itself was permitted. During this time, the first boost of consumer goods took place, although it was quickly squashed back down by the beginning of the Second World War and the reimplementation of wartime rationing. However, by the 1950s and 1960s, desire for consumption had returned in full swing. The 1950s marked the birth of a new form of consumer culture in the United States, and as information bled over to the Soviet Union, the desire to copy patterns of Western consumption, that is, the ability to purchase any desired goods, was growing. These desires only increased in the oncoming decades, and the 1970s and 1980s were defined by demands from the Soviet people to be able to consume like the West did, and to have access to individual style and taste.

However, early Soviet consumerism differed greatly from its later incarnations. In fact, from a state ideological perspective, it was not a consumer culture at all. A consumer culture relies on giving deeper symbolic meaning to goods rather than evaluating them at their mere functional level, and the Bolsheviks fought directly against this exact principle. “According to the new revolutionary doctrine of taste,” Gurova writes, “material goods should be purchased for their practical functions, not their symbolic functions.”¹⁶ Clothing, for instance, should be “functional and rational” rather than symbolic.¹⁷ The rationale behind this ideological shift was the belief that assigning symbolic value to goods ended up “replacing the social importance of a person with the social importance of things”¹⁸ The Russian word for “thing” (*veshch*) became surrounded with negative connotations, and Soviet magazines warned about the dangers of the

¹⁶ Gurova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 70.

¹⁷ Gurova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 71.

¹⁸ Gurova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 70.

ideology “*veshchizm*,” which the Soviet women’s magazine *Rabotnitsa* referred to as “a serious illness.” *Rabotnitsa* further warned that “complications arising from it entail family discord, the collapse of friendships; they turn a person into a stranger in his collective; render his thoughts and feelings primitive, and destroy his character.”¹⁹ Consumerism was not merely a condemnable ideological concern, it was a life-ruining disease. The Soviets “actively condemned an individual’s desire to obtain more things than was necessary in a functional sense,” especially if the items in question had come from pre-revolutionary times; to hold on to pre-revolutionary items was to hold on to pre-revolutionary values.²⁰ Ironically, this ideology in practice assigned great symbolic meaning to pre-revolutionary items. For example, a pre-revolutionary fur coat from a bourgeois family could not be seen simply as a device for keeping the wearer warm, but rather as a symbol of the despised “Old World.” By assigning so much importance to eradicating symbolic value to material goods, the Soviet state was actually implying an entirely different symbolic value to these items. Despite official state ideology against consumption, the Soviet Union had at least one leg firmly planted in consumer ideology from its very beginning.

It wasn’t until the 1930s, however, that a consumer society really began to emerge. The state shifted its position to not being necessarily anti-*consumerist*, simply anti-*exploitation*. The ideological argument therefore claims that capitalistic consumerism is inherently exploitative, but that Soviet socialism could create a non-exploitative way of consumption, one in which the symbolic value of things did not hold control over people. “Socialism, as compared to capitalism, is also concerned with the abundance of goods,” Gurova writes, “however, unlike capitalism, the individual should be free from the oppression of consumer goods.”²¹ And yet,

¹⁹ Chernyshova, 2013. 54.

²⁰ Gurova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 70.

²¹ Gurova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 70.

given that all production decisions were made from the top down, manufacturers and state economists did not often take the needs and desires of customers into consideration.

Manufactured goods are often grouped into two categories: Group A and Group B. Group A refers to industrial goods not meant for individual consumption; for example, railways, power plants, agricultural machinery, and so forth, are all considered “Group A” products. Group B refers to goods that are designed for individual use, such as household appliances, clothing, and food. The Soviets placed a tremendous amount of significance on collectivization and felt that they were lagging behind industrially, so in the beginning stages of Soviet manufacturing a heavy, heavy priority was given to Group A over Group B products. At the same time, the state implemented the New Economic Policy, which dissolved the private trade center and supposedly replaced it with collective shops and industry. Jukka Gronow, sociologist and author of *Caviar With Champagne*, cites that between 1928 to 1929, 4100 private shops were closed, however only 3700 cooperatives and 1900 state-owned shops were opened to replace them. Because of this oversight in planning, the 1930s began with a “strict rationing of all the main foodstuffs.”²² “In the early 1930s, during the final years of collectivization and the First Five-Year Plan,” Gronow writes, “there was virtually nothing to buy in shops.”²³

Collectivization also banned any individuals from becoming sellers; the state was intended to be the only seller, and the people all customers. Beginning in December of 1935, historian Julie Hessler claims “unincorporated artisans were barred from manufacturing clothes, linens, hats, leather shoes, and notions, as well as leather saddles and harnesses and any goods made out of non-ferrous metals; suppliers were forbidden to sell independent artisans the raw materials for such goods.” In addition, “private individuals were no longer permitted to rework

²² Gronow, Jukka. 2003. *Caviar with Champagne: Common Luxury and the Ideals of the Good Life in Stalin's Russia*. N.p.: Berg Publishers. 98.

²³ Gronow, 2003. 3.

food or other agricultural products for resale.”²⁴ These restrictions would remain, and have massive implications for black market operations during the Krushev and Brezhnev years.

Slowly, however, it was brought to the attention of Stalin and other state officials that in order to prove that the USSR was a successful alternative to capitalism and the Russian monarchy, they needed to produce consumer goods. Unfortunately, since directives were given from the top down, the state produced not what was necessary but instead what they considered worth producing. To prove that the Soviets provided for their citizens better than ever before, the state began to order the production of luxury goods, which previously had only been accessible to the aristocracy. Gronow calls these goods “Soviet kitsch,” and defines them as “mass-produced, cheaper copies of finer, expensive goods which had the aura of luxury because they had been consumed— or the Bolsheviks believed they had been consumed— by the former Russian nobility.” The goal of these goods was to demonstrate that under communism, “the ordinary Soviet worker has access to a standard of living that was earlier restricted to members of the nobility or rich bourgeois.”²⁵ In and of itself, the production of these goods proves the consumerist nature of the early Soviet Bloc, given that physical products were imbued with great social meaning which in this case represented the alleged economic domination of the Soviet system over previous models.

Yet at the same time as luxury goods were being manufactured, the most basic day-to-day goods had been completely forgotten, since the top down economy was run through trial and error. The Soviet Trade Minister at the time said himself that “no one bothers about small items of consumption like habersasher’s goods, buttons, manchette buttons, clothing hangers, etc.”²⁶ Foodstuffs, too, were poorly managed by the state. Chernyshova notes that “in the 1930s, scarce

²⁴ Gronow, 2003. 100.

²⁵ Gronow, 2003. 33.

²⁶ Gronow, 2003. 69.

goods had meant bread, meat, milk, butter, and vegetables, as well as shoes, clothes, pottery baskets, thread, needles... to name a few.”²⁷ In the mid to late 1930s, “many regions were suffering from serious shortages of food. Yet, at the same time, the Soviet Government and the Party started to worry about mass production of champagne,” Gronow writes.²⁸ Soviet kitsch continued to push the propaganda that “every Soviet worker lived like an aristocrat,” while meanwhile “the country was in a perpetual state of deficit, lacking basic necessities such as bread.”²⁹ In addition to not being necessary, most luxury goods were still inaccessible to the vast majority of the population, many of whom had lost their private sector jobs and were struggling to find the money for basic foodstuffs. In the end, most of those who purchased Soviet kitsch luxuries were members of the new Soviet Aristocracy, those who had special connections to the state. A strange dichotomy formed, in which the USSR produced seemingly an abundance of largely inaccessible luxury goods, and yet hardly any regular consumer products; even in the early periods, shortages and surpluses found a way to paradoxically coexist.

Eventually, as the 1930s progressed, useful products did manage to reach regular shops. Though famine continued to plague rural and provincial parts of the USSR, “new shops were opening” and “consumers were beginning to see foodstuffs, clothes, and household items available for sale” by the middle of the decade, stores began to see “shoes, suits, hats, kettles, cups, glassware, chocolate, cheese, sausages, and even champagne” arriving from warehouses “For the first time,” Gronow writes, “state factories and industrial plants were manufacturing consumer goods and novelties, rather than just heavy industry.” But with the arrival of consumer goods came the arrival of the Soviet queue. Accessing these goods “involved hours of standing

²⁷ Chernyshova, 2013. 80.

²⁸ Gronow, 2003. 6.

²⁹ Gronow, 2003. 36.

in line and purchasing restrictions,” which would only cement themselves into Soviet culture by the 1950s.³⁰

Conditions improved only to immediately collapse once more. Though many scholars of economic history agree that there was “a high point of consumer comfort in the mid-1930s,” the apparent improvements “rapidly deteriorated again at the end of the decade.” Even before the start of the Second World War, which forced the country to revert back to industrial, Group A manufacturing and strict rationing, poor harvests and the financial instability of the early period meant that “the country seemed to be on the verge of an economic crisis.”³¹ Fortunately for the Soviet economy, the heavy industrial focus of “the Soviet command economy was best suited for military purposes. Its preferences were determined by the central authorities and the consumption of the masses remained a very low priority until the late 1950s.”³² The war took a significant toll on both the Soviet people and Group B production, and the latter half of the 1940s was dedicated solely to recovery before any advancement could take place in the 1950s.

The Spread of Consumerism

Was the Soviet Bloc a consumer society? Was it a consumer culture? The answer, perhaps surprisingly, is yes to both. In order to be a consumer society, it is necessary for the nation in question to produce enough manufactured goods so that the availability of goods is not called into question. There is no doubt that the Soviet Bloc suffered from shortages during its lifetime; images of queue lines wrapping around blocks with the hopes of getting into a shop are some of the most recognizable images of the Soviet Union to exist. However, Natalya Chernyshova argues that in the Soviet Union, particularly the Brezhnev era of the 1970s, shortages and

³⁰ Gronow, 2003. 3.

³¹ Gronow, 2003. 3.

³² Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 31.

surpluses paradoxically existed hand in hand. Chernyshova refutes what she calls the “myth of total shortages,” that is, the idea that all goods were subject to shortages during the Soviet Bloc. Nikita Khrushchev argued this same point against then Vice President Richard Nixon during the 1959 “Kitchen Debate.” At the US Embassy in Moscow, Nixon and his associates reconstructed a model of a typical American kitchen to show off to the Soviets. As Nixon gestures to a dishwasher, Khrushchev replies “we have such things.”³³ Khrushchev rebukes Nixon’s attempts to impress with household appliances by telling him that “the Americans have created their own image of the Soviet man. But he is not as you think. You think the Russian people will be dumbfounded to see these things, but the fact is that newly built Russian houses have all this equipment right now.”³⁴ Though Khrushchev exaggerates the extent to which these appliances populated the homes of the Russian people, he confronts the notion— popular both then and now— that everyday Soviets lived in a technological dark age.

Chernyshova and fellow scholars also point to the fact that while shops lacked essential products, at the same time there were entire factory warehouses filled with unsellable products. How could this paradox exist? During the early stages of Soviet consumption, with every ounce of energy focused on heavy industry, the state never had a chance to discover what Soviet shoppers needed or wanted, and since all manufacturing orders came from the top down, Soviet shoppers could hardly voice their desires. State economists responsible for designing production quotas more often than not simply guessed the styles and quantities of products which consumers needed. It was this “hyper-centralized planning” which Chernyshova states “created the twin phenomena of shortages and piles of unwanted merchandise.”³⁵ Beginning especially in the

³³ Nixon, Richard, and Nikita Khrushchev. 1959. *The Kitchen Debate– Transcript*. U.S. Embassy, Moscow, Soviet Union: Central Intelligence Agency.

³⁴ Nixon, and Khrushchev. 1959.

³⁵ Chernyshova, 2013. 21.

1960s, consumers became more selective about what they purchased and “refused to buy a growing number of unattractive coats, dresses, shoes, plates, tables, and so on.”³⁶ Soviet and American sources both kept track of this shift. On March 4, 1960, the *New York Times* published an article by Max Frankel which stated that “Soviet planners warned today that the Soviet consumer is becoming choosy and increasingly unwilling to gobble up goods that reach store shelves.”³⁷ Later that same week, on March 7, 1960, the *New York Times* published a second article in which they stated that the USSR had “come a good distance from the post-war period of sharpest shortages when Soviet consumers were glad to find anything on which to spend their rubles in Soviet stores.” The article claimed that “since Soviet industry is geared to produce in accordance with a plan, rather than in accordance with the consumer’s whims, stocks of unsold merchandise are piling up in Soviet warehouses.”³⁸ On paper, it seemed like Soviet production quotas were being met, but they were being met with the wrong products. It wasn’t that the Soviet Union *couldn’t* produce goods, rather that they didn’t know *what* to produce. Chernyshova writes that “shortages had existed in the 1930s, and they still existed in the 1970s, but they were qualitatively something else entirely.”³⁹ In this new phase, basic items needed for survival, such as simple foodstuffs, were available, and shortages shifted to affecting consumer products of cultural value, such as desirable clothing and more sophisticated food. However, since the USSR was still capable of mass-manufacturing products, as seen by the warehouses of unsold overstock, its economy remained that of a consumer society.

Chernyshova offers another example with the case study of crockery sales in the year 1964. Within the first half of the year, sales increased from the previous year by 9.2 million

³⁶ Chernyshova, 2013. 25.

³⁷ Unknown Author. 1960. “Choosy Soviet Consumers.” *New York Times*, March 7, 1960, 28. TimesMachine.

³⁸ Frankel, Max. 1960. “Soviet Consumers Becoming Choosier.” *New York Times*, March 4, 1960, 1,6. TimesMachine.

³⁹ Chernyshova, 2013. 29.

roubles, while at the same time an estimated 21.5 million went unsold.⁴⁰ Why? As Brezhnev pushed to increase consumer good manufacturing, the Soviet Union still ran under a planned economy, therefore Party economists were the ones choosing what would be manufactured instead of shoppers. The results were more often than not surpluses of products which nobody wanted to buy, while at the same time shortages of the products which people did want to buy. So while images of seemingly endless queues for the chance of acquiring shortage goods are indicative of life in the Soviet Union, so too should images of warehouses filled with unsellable Soviet products be. Although it was not always the case, by the 1960s or the 1970s by the latest, the Soviet Union met most agreed upon economic standards for a consumer society.

Piles of unsellable merchandise in part led the State to advertisements, the key indicator that a consumer society had become a consumer culture. The goals of these advertisements were twofold: to persuade shoppers into buying the surplus goods and to dangle over their heads the promises of shortage goods. In a *New York Times* article from March 24, 1968 titled “The Adman Cometh,” wrote that “managers of the Soviet Union’s expanding number of restaurants, beauty salons, dry cleaning shops, and other service facilities now find that they can no longer rely on having to fight off crowds at doors but, on the contrary, must take steps to attract customers.”⁴¹ The article printed two examples of Soviet advertisements, one for jewelry and one for an electric razor. The author, Raymond Anderson, is correct in the assertion that advertisements did exist in the USSR. For instance, in the 1950s the women’s magazine *Rabotnitsa* began using the back cover as a space to print product advertisements. In 1952, the magazine printed advertisements for toothpaste, shoulder bags, and shoes in three sequential issues. However, Anderson’s *New York Times* article also notes that “the great majority of Soviet newspapers and

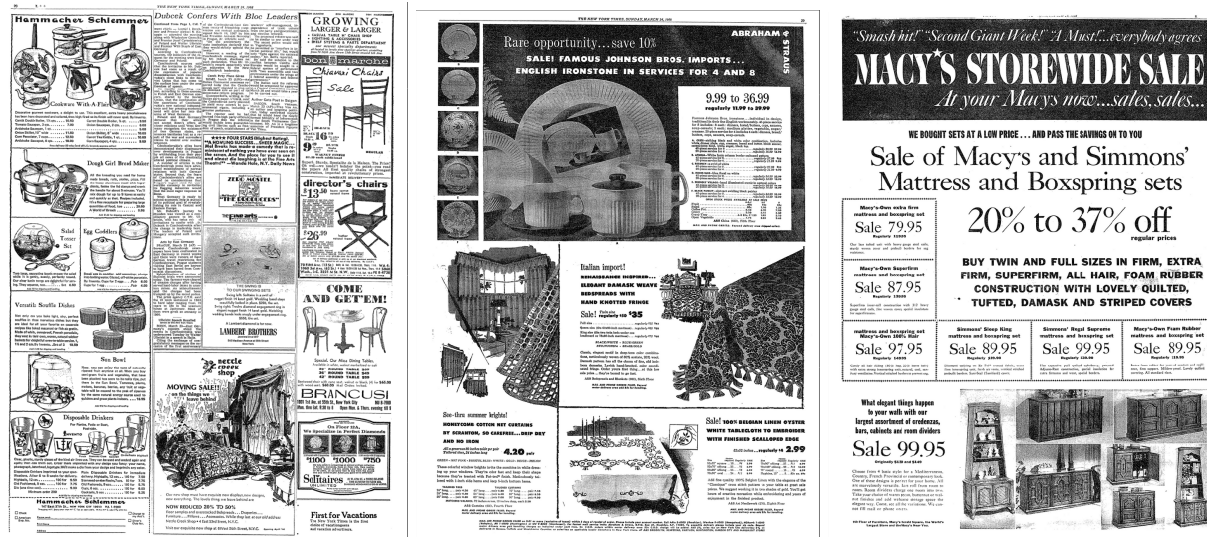
⁴⁰ Chernyshova, 2013. 25.

⁴¹ Anderson, Raymond H. 1968. “The Adman Cometh.” *New York Times*, March 24, 1968, 212. TimesMachine.

magazines do not carry advertising,”⁴² which can be easily seen simply by comparing the single advertisements in *Rabotnitsa* to the *New York Times* page from which this article came. The *Times* is filled with advertisements scattered amidst its articles so that they are unavoidable, while *Rabotnitsa* has, at most, one advertisement on the back cover. Below are the three back-cover *Rabotnitsa* advertisements, taken from three sequential issues, while underneath are a selection of three pages of the *New York Times*, all taken from the same March 24, 1968 issue in which “The Adman Cometh” was published. The three pages were selected at random from a much larger selection of advertisement-filled pages, with some advertisements taking up entire pages or two-page spreads and others being intermixed with articles.



⁴² Anderson, 1968.



Figures 1-6: [from left to right, top to bottom] Advertising in Rabotnitsa versus the New York Times

Despite this difference, the idea that there were no advertisements in the Soviet Bloc is also incorrect. In 1955, an American by the name of Clifton Daniel living in Moscow wrote in to the *New York Times*, claiming that an article had falsely stated that there was no advertising in the Soviet Union. Daniel wrote that the *Times* correspondent's eyes “must have been fixed on the chessboards at the Soviet-American match. Otherwise he would have seen the electric signs in Moscow advertising tomato juice, tea, insurance, taxis, and savings banks.” Daniel further claims that he will mail in “a dozen advertisements from those papers— ads for everything from pencils to washing machines,” although if they were ever sent these advertisements were not reprinted in the *New York Times*.⁴³ Though advertising did not exist nearly to the same extent that it did in the United States, to say that it did not exist at all in the Soviet Bloc would also be false.

The second role of advertising was what scholars such as Timo Vihavainen and Olga Gurova label as “consumer pornography,” which refers to printed advertisements for products which did not exist. For example, “numerous different kinds of cheeses and sausages” appeared

⁴³ Daniel, Clifton. 1955. “Advertising In The Soviet Union: Letters to the Times.” *New York Times*, September 25, 1955, 38. TimesMachine.

on billboards and magazine advertisements, “although in reality none were available in lards parts of the Soviet Union.”⁴⁴ Chernyshova argues that these false advertisements “amidst chronic shortages may seem perverse,” but that “scarcity was ‘compensated’ by images of abundance in advertising.”⁴⁵ The *New York Times* noticed this discrepancy as well, such as in the article from February 21, 1962 which observed that the Soviet Union was facing criticism for “advertising goods that were unavailable and for giving misleading descriptions of products.”⁴⁶ However, the presence of the advertisements nevertheless demonstrates that Soviet advertisements were used to create a communist consumer culture meant to placate the population through visual stimulation rather than physical consumption, regardless of the validity of these items. These images existed to entice consumption, or in cases where that was not possible, to enchant with the idea of theoretical consumption, both of which encouraged object fetishism, a trait indicative of consumer culture.

Chernyshova also notes that the term “consumer society” has been historically linked with a capitalistic, free market system, and by those standards the planned economy of the Soviet Union could not fit under this label. However, Chernyshova refutes this point, by arguing that inherently linking the idea of a consumer society with a capitalistic system is a gross oversimplification. Her argument, besides the shortage/surplus coexistence, is that regardless of the planned economy, Soviet consumers treated goods in much the same way as they would be in a consumer society. A “consumer society,”⁴⁷ Chernyshova argues, describes “the kind of social order where consumer goods have numerous social meanings that extend beyond their economic value, and where consumption, with its environments, discourses, attitudes, and practices, is an

⁴⁴ Gurova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 37.

⁴⁵ Chernyshova, 2013. 45.

⁴⁶ Bart, Peter. 1962. “Advertising: Soviet Copy Is Mostly Solemn.” *New York Times*, February 21, 1962, 74. TimesMachine.

⁴⁷ Here it is worth mentioning that what Chernyshova refers to as a “consumer society,” others might find interchangeable from a “consumer culture,” depending on their particular ideology.

important part of the social fabric.”⁴⁸ This, of course, was true in the case of the Soviet Union. A number of products, especially Western imports or Western replicas, came to represent status, wealth, social connections, or the idea of freedom represented by the presumption of being able to freely consume. For example, washing machines in the Soviet Bloc and surrounding communist states were quite scarce. Most washing had to be done by hand with bleach, an often very painful task which took up at least an entire day. Being able to afford a washing machine became seen as a symbol of privilege, since it alleviated the painful and time-consuming task of doing laundry by hand. Yet most washing machines which made their way into the Soviet Bloc were of very poor quality, and would either break after a few washes or never function at all. However, even these nonfunctioning washing machines were still kept on display in apartment buildings, since they maintained their symbolic value as status symbols. The fact that they were so expensive “became a reason to buy one,” Slavenka Draculic writes, since they served “to prove that you were earning enough, that your social status was high enough, so you could afford household appliances.... A washing machine became a symbol of prestige, and it was good for women, even if it really wasn’t meant to ease their lives in the first place.”⁴⁹ These items were valued for their social meaning instead of their functional value, meaning that the prestige of broken washing machines was a manifestation of Soviet consumer culture.

London economist and sociologist Dan Slater defines consumer culture as “involv[ing] an aestheticization of commodities and their environment: advertising, packaging, shop display, point of sale material, product design etc.”⁵⁰ Slater’s argument points to another key element of consumer culture, that is, that symbolic value is equally or exceedingly significant as functional value. In other words, the message or idea which an object symbolizes is in a consumer culture

⁴⁸ Chernyshova, 2013. 12.

⁴⁹ Drakulić, Slavenka. 1993. *How We Survived Communism & Even Laughed*. N.p.: HarperCollins. 49.

⁵⁰ Roberts, 2016. 3.

just as important or even more so than the object's ability to function or benefit the user in some way. A good example of this phenomena comes from the ideological value placed on jeans in the late Soviet Bloc. Blue jeans, the American-born fashion, were so prevalent in Western media that for Soviet youth they became the defining image of the West, and of the perceived freedom that came from access to consumer goods. Wearing jeans in the USSR meant having privileged access to Western markets, foreign trips, or special connections to closed shops and backroom sales.⁵¹ Young people especially were willing to pay high prices for black market imports of the coveted pants; in 1970 a pair of black market jeans could sell for 150 to 200 roubles, a price higher than the average monthly salary of a factory or office worker.⁵² However, when the Soviet Union began to produce Soviet jeans of their own they were not met with the same appreciation. Soviet jeans were of a poorer quality, but more importantly being produced in the Soviet Union meant that they lost their symbolism of the West. Therefore, even as blue jeans were available domestically, Soviet youth continued to seek out imported jeans, a striking example of the way in which value came not from the items of clothing themselves, but rather from the symbolic value they carried. Journalist Lew Kuklin commented on the hierarchy of jean culture in a 1979 article titled "Knights of the Jeans Culture" for the Soviet newspaper *Zvezda*. In it, he wrote,

"The first, highest or 'deluxe' class includes those who are lucky enough to wear genuine American, 'stateside' jeans with the labels 'Lee,' 'Levi's' or 'Wrangler.' These jeans aren't sold in stores, and they carry such prestige that their price on the black market has already approached 200 rubles! The second class of schoolchildren consists of those who wear blue jeans that have been manufactured under license somewhere in Malta or Finland. Their going price is lower than that of the American jeans— 50 or 60 rubles. Finally, in the third and lowest class of human material are those unlucky ones who have to be content with Indian,

⁵¹ Roberts, Graham H., ed. 2017. *Material Culture in Russia and the USSR: Things, Values, Identities*. N.p.: Bloomsbury Academic. 156.

⁵² Roberts, 2017. 157.

Polish, Bulgarian or, God forbid, Soviet-made jeans. These jeans are readily available, but they afford no prestige whatsoever to their wearers.”⁵³

As part of the black market, resellers would sometimes buy the unwanted Soviet jeans at a discounted price, disguise them with rivets and fake labels, and resell them as supposedly Western imported jeans.⁵⁴ Though the quality of the actual product remained the same, the value and desirability increased exponentially with the addition of Western labels as the pants were given a new symbolic meaning.

Ultimately, the significance of wearing blue jeans in the Soviet Union was that they represented access to coveted Western goods. This phenomena applied to any Western imports, not just blue jeans. An article published in *The Guardian* in 1979 wrote that “Western tourists... often are accosted by young Russians ready to give almost anything to be allowed to peel off and keep the jeans the visitors may be wearing.”⁵⁵ Indeed, Soviet youth from around the country and the Bloc in general desperately sought out Western goods, either from tourists directly or from black market smugglers. “Economic value as such was of little consequence,” Chernyshova writes, “but the social message conveyed by an object ... determined its value outside of the official system of economic exchange.”⁵⁶ Professor Ilya Tsvankin, who grew up in Soviet Moscow, recalls that “for many people in Moscow— in the Soviet Union— it was important to have some nice things, and that were made in the West. [It] increased their image.” Wearing western clothing, for example, demonstrated that the wearer had privileged access to international travel or valuable social connections with people who did. Some Western items did have a higher quality to Soviet goods which might make them appealing, however Professor Tsvankin claims that “mostly it was just a sign that you traveled to the West yourself, which was

⁵³ Kuklin, Lev. 1979. “Knights of the ‘Jeans Culture.’” *Zvezda*, October, 1979, 188-195. Seventeen Moments in Soviet History.

⁵⁴ Roberts, 2017. 163.

⁵⁵ Roberts, 2017. 155.

⁵⁶ Chernyshova, 2013. 12.

very uncommon at the time, or you had some access to things from the West.”⁵⁷ In another instance, a speculator and underground businessman identified as Misha explained in a 1977 interview for *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* that to make money, “he buys Soviet-made T-shirts for 3 rubles each, and an artist partner stencils the trademark of a West German firm on them. The two then package them in cellophane bags and sell them usually outside state commission stores—for 10 to 15 rubles apiece.” Misha even “boasted that one woman customer told him she nearly had a heart attack in her excitement over the chance to buy a bag with a foreign trademark,” even though the trademark had been drawn on by hand by Misha and his business partner.⁵⁸ Near the end of the article, the author and interviewer Iurii Shchekochikhin reflected on Misha’s success by writing that

“Certainly one reason that speculators like Misha can find such a ready market for their wares is that so many of our stores offer only outmoded and unattractive goods. When I asked Misha what goods are in the greatest demand among young people, he listed jeans, denim suits, tapered shirts, T-shirts, tote bags and records. The extent of the demand for such items can be gauged by the fact that on the black market a pair of jeans may sell for as much as 200 rubles and a tapered shirt for 40. Yet the fact that Misha’s entire production operation is housed in a small, one-room apartment suggests, at least, that our state industry and trade might meet the demand for such items with relative ease.”⁵⁹

This reflection in and of itself demonstrates the dual existence of the Soviet consumer culture and consumer society. First, Shchekochikhin notes the high demand for consumer goods by examining the price-gouging of black market products and especially the desire for items with Western logos even when those logos are fake, demonstrating the consumer culture. Additionally, Shchekochikhin himself notes that the state should have the capacity to meet these consumer demands “with relative ease,” demonstrating the consumer society.

⁵⁷ Tsvankin, Ilya. 2023. Interview by author. Colorado. February 17, 2023.

⁵⁸ Shchekochikhin, Iurii. 1977. “Imitation: A Dialogue About Prices and Values.” *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, August 10, 1977, 38.

⁵⁹ Shchekochikhin, 1977.

Sometimes, the valued item in question had no functional value whatsoever, and yet it was revered for its social value. Lea Ypi tells the story of the time when her mother bought an empty Coca-Cola can from one of her coworkers. The can, being empty, had no functional value whatsoever, yet despite that Ypi's mother "spent the afternoon deliberating with my grandmother about where to put it and, since it was empty, whether to adorn it with a fresh rose from the garden. They had decided that though the rose was an original idea, it would distract from the aesthetic value of the can, and so they had left it bare, on top of our best embroidered cloth."⁶⁰ Along similar lines, Slavenka Draculic heard from friends living in the USSR that "plastic bags were much in demand, especially with labels, because women there carry them as handbags."⁶¹ Items which would quite literally be discarded as junk in the United States and similar Western countries were treated as luxury products in the Soviet Bloc simply for carrying the marker of having been made in the West.

The exchange of imported goods most often took place through barter rather than through currency, meaning that despite being a significant part of the Soviet consumer sphere, it was virtually untraceable by state and international economists. Many Soviet citizens had little faith in their currency, and oftentimes it would not be accepted in foreign countries due to its instability. Instead, Soviet travelers smuggled out "universal currency" items, that is, items that had universal functional value, and converted them to the local currency or bartered them for goods. These items were often food luxuries, such as "bottles of vodka, tins of caviar, coffee."⁶² Ironically, some of the biggest participants in smuggling were the most privileged Soviet class, the ones who were able to travel abroad and represent the country. Athletes, chess players, ballet dancers, musicians, and so forth, all of whom were lauded by the USSR as the ideal Soviet men

⁶⁰ Ypi, Lea. 2022. *Free: A Child and a Country at the End of History*. N.p.: W. W. Norton, Incorporated. 56.

⁶¹ Drakulić, 1993. 189

⁶² Chernyshova, 2013. 97.

and women, “took advantage of championships abroad to buy or barter consumer goods.”⁶³ The Soviet newspaper *Vechernii Leningrad* (*Evening Leningrad*) published an article about a former athlete who took a job as a hotel bellboy in order to connect with tourists and barter for their luggage items.⁶⁴ In another instance, ballet dancer Maïia Plisetskaia recalled her dance company eating dog food on a trip abroad, in order to save their actual earnings and provisions for buying Western goods to bring home to their families. A colleague of Plisetskaia told her that her reasoning was that “[when] I’m eating a salad, I feel like I’m chewing a shoe for my son.”⁶⁵ The social prestige of Western clothing affected everyone, however, Ilya Tsvankin recalls that those who were most drawn to status clothing were “especially women,” who would “always try to get clothes which are made in the West,” or appeared so. “People noticed things like that,” Professor Tsvankin continues, “if you’re wearing things bought in the West then it increased your— well, at least people paid attention to it. It was immediately obvious that you had access.”⁶⁶

People living through the Soviet period were aware of the grip that consumerism had on society even in the moment. Elena Yurievna, a woman who grew up during the Soviet Union, argued this point in conversation with Svetlana Alexievich.

“And the cult of consumerism... People don’t fall asleep thinking of anything lofty, instead they mull over how they didn’t buy this or get that. Do you really think that this country fell apart because people learned the truth about the gulag? That’s what people who write books think. People... Regular people don’t care about history, they’re concerned with simpler things: falling in love, getting married, having kids. Building a house. Our country fell apart from the deficit of women’s boots and toilet paper, because of the fact that there were no oranges. It was those goddamn blue jeans! Today, the shops resemble museums.”⁶⁷

⁶³ Chernyshova, 2013. 95.

⁶⁴ Chernyshova, 2013. 94.

⁶⁵ Chernyshova, 2013. 97.

⁶⁶ Tsvankin, 2023.

⁶⁷ Alexievich, Svetlana. 2017. *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*. Translated by Bela Shayevich. N.p.: Random House Publishing Group. 82-83.

Writers and journalists likewise vocalized their concerns in regards to the increasing consumer mentality in the Soviet Union. In Lew Kuklin's 1979 article on the "Knights of the Jeans Culture," he laments the way that materialism has eroded the spiritual soul of the Soviet people. "In the early, difficult days following the Revolution, material goods were plainly scarce, but the spiritual goods that the young Soviet government put into circulation were astonishing," he writes, however "today, when every normal young person has a realistic opportunity to obtain an education at any level, spiritual ignorance should be regarded as an antisocial phenomenon. Such ignorance is a threat to society wherever it occurs."⁶⁸ Kuklin's laments about the decay of the lofty ideals of the early USSR contrast with the material reality of the Soviet Union: people both needed and wanted consumer goods. Ultimately, Kuklin concludes his article by writing that "while no one with any economic common sense would deny the importance of material incentives, I think that, in emphasizing the material, we sometimes lose sight of our lofty spiritual guideposts."⁶⁹ Though at odds with the Soviet philosophy which forsook the need for consumer goods, Party members, social commenters, and ordinary people all observed the increasing consumer culture taking root in the Bloc.

Consumption was, undoubtedly, an essential part of what Natalia Chernyshova labeled as the social fabric of Soviet culture. Waiting in queues with other prospective shoppers, seeking connections in stores to gain access to products, buying or selling on the black market, goods used in bribery, bartering, the economy of favors, and so on, are all examples of the ways in which Soviet consumption required a significant amount of social work. Alongside the standard, planned economy was the so-called second economy, run entirely by social connections and

⁶⁸ Kuklin, Lev. 1979. "Knights of the 'Jeans Culture.'" *Zvezda*, October, 1979, 188-195. Seventeen Moments in Soviet History.

⁶⁹ Kuklin, 1979.

oftentimes functioning by consumer desires much like a capitalistic economy would.⁷⁰ The planned economy of the Soviet Bloc did not, in fact, reduce or eliminate consumption or consumer desires, but rather it encouraged the creation of a more social form of consumer exchange. “The peculiarities of the command economy and the constraints of ideology,” Chernyshova writes, “meant that consumption required more mental and social effort than it did in the consumption-accommodating Western economies, and so consumer goods always had amplified material and social, in addition to ideological, meaning in the Soviet Union.”⁷¹ Across four decades, a Soviet system was created which was not actually less consumerist than the American one but rather was distinct in the way that it was run via social connections instead of capital.

⁷⁰ Chernyshova, 2013. 12.

⁷¹ Chernyshova, 2013. 12.

II. Social Networks

If the Soviet Union was indeed a consumer culture, it certainly functioned very differently from consumer cultures in, for example, the United States. Without the support of their governments for a free-market system, the citizens of the Soviet Bloc took matters into their own hands, using their personal connections to acquire scarce items, bartering, purchasing from black markets or black market sellers, and buying scarce goods for entire community networks. Layered underneath the planned economy was the second, secretive economy run by the people and through the social networks created between them. Natalia Chernyshova argues that the difficulty of obtaining goods “was not so much in the financial (in)availability to buy goods as in gaining access. Access to material provision depended, at various times, on political allegiance, position in the labor force, and social status.”⁷² This chapter argues that the ways in which the Soviet consumer economy functioned were through social connections and interpersonal networks rather than a reliance on capital.

The Second Economy

In the Soviet Bloc, the “second economy” referred to any purchases or exchanges taking place outside of the standard Soviet state-run shops. This could refer to women reselling clothing items in workplaces, buying goods directly from factory workers who would put certain products aside instead of sending them off to state stores, or acquiring items from the black market. Katherine Veredy expands this list to include “workers who drove black-market taxis in their off hours, construction crews that borrowed tools and supplies from their work site to build houses for themselves and their friends, clerks in stores who held goods under the counter to sell to

⁷² Chernyshova, 2013. 12.

someone who had given them a gift or bribe or who was a friend or relative.”⁷³ The image below represents the prevalence of the Second Economy in Soviet culture. Published in the *New York Times*, the cartoon shows a statue of the ideal Soviet man and woman on the right, holding the iconic hammer and sickle together and representing the image of the model society which the Soviet state sought to put forward. Meanwhile, behind the statue is a kiosk selling black market hammers and sickles to an eager group of buyers. This cartoon represents the dichotomy between the ideal and the actual Soviet society; while in principle the Soviets were expected to remain anti-materialist model workers, the reality was that the population was purchasing their desired products through the second economy left and right.



Figure 7: The ideal Soviet man and woman versus the reality of black market buying

⁷³ Verdery, 1996. 215.

Weekly marketplaces or flea markets were an ideal place for people to exchange shortage goods without the watchful eye of the state. In 1981, journalist Vil Dorofeev investigated black markets in the town of Krasnodar for the Soviet publication *Literaturnaia Gazeta*. Dorofeev accompanied a local resident to one of what he claimed are many of the city's "unofficial flea markets" and recorded his experience.

"It was an ordinary workday, but the place was thronged with customers. I was struck by the abundance and variety of scarce goods that were being offered: everything that was unavailable in Krasnodar and Novorossiisk stores. One old crone had enough toilet soap and other scarce goods for sale to fulfill a medium-sized store's daily sales plan. Another seller broke open a fresh factory carton filled with cellophane-wrapped toothbrushes in assorted colors. Everything cost at least twice as much as it would have cost in the stores, but there was no use haggling. When I protested paying a ruble and 50 kopeks for a bar of toilet soap, the crone told me: 'Everything costs what it costs. If you don't like it, don't wash.'"⁷⁴

Dorofeev's initial goal in this investigation was to uncover shortages in the Soviet Union, however he found that while these items were perpetually out of stock in the official state-run shops which he frequented, they existed in abundance at unofficial marketplaces, flea markets, and second hand shops. Dorofeev noted in the conclusion of his article that these flea-market merchants were "well stocked with goods that obviously had never found their way to store shelves," and asked himself "how do consumer goods bypass stores and get to flea markets without anyone's noticing?"⁷⁵ The answer which he uncovered was that due to the lack of faith in the Soviet market system, a significant number of consumer goods were sold directly through black market means and the second economy.

One of the most prevalent aspects of the Second Economy was the withholding and direct reselling of factory goods. "Say you were a person who worked for an alcohol factory,"

⁷⁴ Dorofeev, Vil. 1981. "Investigation of a Shortage: In the Presence of an Absence." *Literaturnaia Gazeta*, March 25, 1981, 12. Seventeen Moments in Soviet History.

⁷⁵ Dorofeev, 1981.

Professor Ilya Tsvankin explains, “[you] would bring back home almost every day bottles of vodka or some kind of wine ... just take them from [the] office.” His fictionalized individual is based on a true story, and Tsvankin recalls the way that this person “would use some of them [bottles of alcohol] and then he would sell some of them to friends.”⁷⁶ It was not at all uncommon for factory workers to smuggle certain items or sometimes raw materials out of factories with them. During his experiment, Vil Dorofeev was able to find everything he needed from the flea market— items which he had tried and failed to buy from the city’s official grocery stores— except for detergent and shampoo. One of the sellers told him that because they were “locally produced goods” he would have to look for them at the “black hole.” As it turned out, the “black hole” was a hole in the side of the Krasnodar Fat and Oil Combine, a soap and detergent factory. A shift had just ended and employees were stepping in and out of the factory, so Dorofeev and his companion stopped “the first man who came by” and told him that they needed soap. “The man immediately said he would get us a box for five rubles— he wouldn’t deal in smaller quantities— and disappeared back through the hole in the wall. Twenty minutes later he returned lugging a heavy box full of soap.” Dorofeev reported. After acquiring the soap, the two of them decided to push the limits of their experiment.

“My companion suggested we carry our experiment with theft a bit further, so he stuffed his pockets full of soap bars wrapped in newspaper. We dragged the nearly full soapbox back to the plant’s railroad siding where some cars were waiting to be loaded, and then we proceeded to cross the plant grounds and walk out the main gate. Although my companion’s pockets were conspicuously bulging and we were obviously strangers, no one bothered us, including the watchman at the wide-open main gate.”⁷⁷

Dorofeev had discovered an essential element of the second economy, that is, the direct theft of factory goods to be resold before they reached stores. Likely, the guards were willing to look the

⁷⁶ Tsvankin, 2023.

⁷⁷ Dorofeev, 1981.

other way because they, too, were receiving a cut of the resale profit, another link on the chain of social exchanges which stood in between the factory production and the final product use.

Instead of being sent to state-run shops and being sold through the standard economy, more often than not goods were stolen and resold by individuals directly from factories.

Factory products could be resold within the worker's social circle, and raw materials could be delivered to unregistered handicraftsmen. Unregistered handicraftsmen were a direct result of nationalizing all commerce and banning private enterprises from the Soviet mainstream economy. With the state as the only provider of goods, if and when people wanted something that wasn't being manufactured by the state they sought out an individual who could make it for them, an unregistered handicraftsman or "domestic personal sewer."⁷⁸ To function, these sewers and craftsmen often required an aforementioned chain of individuals in cooperation: factory workers to smuggle raw materials, black market sellers who could connect the dots between the supply and the demand, and buyers to commission the craftsmen. For instance, a journalist named Iurii Shchekochikhin wrote a 1977 article for *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* interviewing a young reseller named Misha. After having success selling t-shirts, Misha and his business partner began selling canvas tote bags with the Marlboro logo drawn on. Misha told Shchekochikhin that "for a box of candy, a young woman they know stitched up the bags for them at her garment factory" and then traded them to him.⁷⁹ The success of unregistered handicraftsmen was dependent upon social connections from all different walks of life. Undoubtedly, this manifestation of the second economy certainly was successful. Studies conducted in Leningrad between 1984 and 1986 found that at least 34 per cent of the city's population purchased products from "private persons."⁸⁰ Though the state's central planning could not provide for the

⁷⁸ Zarakova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 90.

⁷⁹ Shchekochikhin, 1977.

⁸⁰ Chernyshova, 2013. 94.

demand of the people, citizens of the Soviet Bloc found alternative pathways to acquiring their sought-after goods.

The second economy was also highly active within state-run shops. Factory workers were not the only ones putting products aside for underground trade, in fact, much of the exchange took place between shopkeepers and their clients. Often, certain items would be set aside and only sold under the table to customers who had a special arrangement made with shopkeepers. An inspection in Moscow uncovered “more than 1,200 different types of sought-after goods being withheld and hidden in the back of the stores for personal gain.”⁸¹ Chernyshova offers the example of two women at the Moscow shop *Smena*, who sold about thirty-two raincoats under the table in just a few days.⁸² Officially, those items were not in stock. Unofficially, however, individuals with the right social connections to sales clerks or shopkeepers could gain access to a hidden stock of items for purchase. These sales were made entirely through social connections and were impossible to be counted as official sales as a part of the economy, unless they were uncovered through raids by the secret police. Another place for unregistered sales were secondhand shops, which happened to be a convenient place to launder smuggled or illegally made goods. Items in secondhand shops are essentially untraceable, allowing both sellers and buyers to have plausible deniability about the origins of their items. Therefore, during Sunday markets it was commonplace for “thousands of people [to sell] new clothes, shoes, and knitted wear products in Leningrad and Moscow at the market meant for second-hand goods.”⁸³ These exchanges through the second economy were not counted as transactions in the Soviet state reports on the economy because they did not take place through official channels, and therefore

⁸¹ Chernyshova, 2013. 152.

⁸² Chernyshova, 2013. 152.

⁸³ Zarakova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 93.

analyses of the Soviet economy made consumption appear much lower than in actuality. For example, the Central Intelligence Agency in 1969 reported that,

“Total consumption per capita in the USSR in 1955 was about one-fourth of that in the US. Personal consumption per capita— that is, total consumption excluding health and education— was a little less than one fourth of that in the US. Since 1955, consumption in the USSR has grown faster than in the US, but total consumption per capita in 1962-63 was still not quite one-third of that in the US, and personal consumption was less than 30 percent.”⁸⁴

However, these reports are based entirely on statistics from the official economy, that is, everything sold through official state shops. These estimates did not— and by the very nature of these transactions could not— take into account the degree of consumption which took place through the second economy. Another of Svetlana Alexievich’s contacts told her that “there wasn’t much you could buy at the store in those days, you had to procure everything by other means. Through connections. Through friends and friends of friends.”⁸⁵ The official economy was only half of the story of consumption in the USSR.

Bartering, Bribery, and *Blat*

Shortage goods were worth more than their functional value, and in the Soviet Union they could often be used as a second form of currency. These products were exchanged through the barter-based economic system of *blat*. Zakharova describes *blat* as “a system of personal relations,” because at the core was the need to have contacts within a social circle with goods or services to exchange.⁸⁶ Professor Ilya Tsvankin, who grew up in the Soviet Union, defines it in a simpler way: “*blat* is getting access to something because you know somebody, somebody who has direct access to those goods or services.”⁸⁷ For example, imagine that Shopper A got her

⁸⁴ Central Intelligence Agency. 1964. *A Comparison of Consumption in the USSR and the US*, US Government Documents. N.p.: Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

⁸⁵ Alexievich, 2017. 221.

⁸⁶ Zarakova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 91 footnote 15.

⁸⁷ Tsvankin, 2023.

hands on a rare product, such as coffee, but what she really needed were a pair of winter shoes which due to shortages she was unable to find in her size. In her social circle is Shopper B, who owned a sewing machine which could make the shoes and wanted to trade her for the coffee. In order to get the materials for the shoes, Shopper B would have to contact Shopper C, who worked at a government factory and would be able to smuggle out necessary materials, which would require identifying Shopper C's needs and possibly going through more contacts in order to meet them. *Blat* could be much more complicated: sometimes it could be conducted between two individuals but other times both members would have to reach deep into their social circles in order to make the trade. Contacts could be "basically anyone along the supply chain: stock houses, or [...] the stores themselves," but according to Ilya Tsvankin, "these [were] mostly people who work[ed] in stores,"⁸⁸ often selling elusive foodstuffs as well as non-food items. Naturally, factory and retail workers were significant in terms of *blat* exchange, but other professions were valuable contacts as well because of their interactions with people of all different social statuses and careers. Chernyshova mentions that "thanks to their extensive clientele," some of the most beneficial contacts were "hairdressers, beauticians, masseurs, and bath-house workers," as well as dentists, doctors and physicians, bartenders, nursery workers, and other professions which received a lot of social circulation.⁸⁹ If a dentist "could maintain a combination of personal and business contacts" with a shop clerk at a shoe department, the dentist could connect the clerk with one of her patients, a TV mechanic in need of winter boots. The mechanic could receive special access to shoes, the shop clerk was guaranteed a future of TV repairs, and the dentist could call in favor from both parties for being the one to connect them.⁹⁰ In this way, *blat* created social connections not based on class, and it was able to

⁸⁸ Tsvankin, 2023.

⁸⁹ Chernyshova, 2013. 93.

⁹⁰ Chernyshova, 2013. 111.

“transcend[...] social boundaries” since “every social group was involved in it.”⁹¹ This kind of exchange, according to Ilya Tsvankin, was “very common back in the Soviet Union,”⁹² and even people who did not want to participate in *blat* often “felt they had little choice.”⁹³ As a result of shortage conditions, “Soviet consumers continued to resort to other ways of ‘getting’ (and not simply buying) clothes, as they had done in the 1930s.”⁹⁴ Alisa Z, who gave her first person account to Svetlana Alexievich, mentioned taking pride in her small collection of books, which “came from the underground, through some major connections.”⁹⁵ A *New York Times* article written by Philip Taubman describes this system of exchange as “a huge underground economy in which ‘blat,’ the influence or connections to get things done, is far more valuable than money.”⁹⁶

Blat could also function as a tool for bribery and social advancement. Alexander Porfirievich explains that during the Soviet period vodka was more valuable than cash because “You can buy anything with vodka. You can use it to pay the plumber and the electrician, too.” “Otherwise,” he continues, “they won’t even come.”⁹⁷ Not only was vodka a more acceptable payment than cash because of its universal value, but even more so it was often expected to be offered as a bonus in exchange for services. Without the vodka or other item with standard functional value, as Porfirievich says, the repairman would not even bother to come. These methods of exchange all existed as a part of the second economy, so while they were equally essential to the functioning of the Soviet economy, they were also unable to be traced or measured as a part of the formal economy; *blat* became its own unofficial form of currency.

⁹¹ Chernyshova, 2013. 92.

⁹² Tsvankin, 2023.

⁹³ Chernyshova, 2013. 92.

⁹⁴ Zarakova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 90.

⁹⁵ Alexievich, 2017. 483.

⁹⁶ Taubman, Philip. 1986. “Russia’s ‘Blat’ Market Thrives by Moonlight.” *New York Times*, November 30, 1986, 206. TimesMachine.

⁹⁷ Alexievich, 2017. 127.

Paying With Personal Connections

Often, highly desirable Soviet goods were unavailable in state shops, and prospective buyers had to use outside connections in order to acquire them. However, even in cases when an item did exist in shops, it was often still necessary to have an “in” with one of the shopkeepers in order to purchase the items in question. Katherine Verdery writes that participants in the second economy “might manipulate state goods to sell on the side,” for example, “by saving scarce goods to sell to special customers, who tipped them or did some important favor in return.”⁹⁸ Anna Ilinichna, who spoke of her experience growing up in the Soviet Union with Svetlana Alexievich, stated that “we were used to getting everything through connections: from subscriptions to the World Classics Library to chocolates to tracksuits from the GDR. Being friendly with the butcher so he would save you a piece of meat.”⁹⁹ One shopper recalled an instance in which she “spotted an under-the-counter transaction in a shoe shop” and decided to seize the opportunity to form a beneficial connection. She informed the sales clerk “with a smile and a wink” that she was also interested in the shoes and would be willing to pay the clerk a fee in order to access those closed products. As a result of this interaction, over the next few years “the girl rang Andreeva up every time the shop received a batch of fashionable footwear, and Andreeva paid her for this service.”¹⁰⁰ The sales clerk in this story kept a separate stock of valuable items which she would only sell to the people she had an agreement with, and without that agreement the items were functionally out of stock. These items were often in very high demand and therefore there would be very few if any products which made it to the store front after the reserved items were sold to the sales clerks’ connections, therefore regardless of production rate having a connection at a desired shop was critical for being able to acquire

⁹⁸ Verdery, 1996. 27.

⁹⁹ Alexievich, 2017. 92.

¹⁰⁰ Chernyshova, 2013. 92.

desired goods. The image below is a cartoon drawn by B. Smenov in 1974, known as *Invisible Hats*. The cartoon is accompanied by a poem written by S. Smirnovskii called “The Fighting Pencil,” which approximately translates to

“The instance when hats are always sold out
Can last forever in this store
Until the director of the store is fired
The invisible hats will appear.”

The image depicts a shopkeeper leaning out the window with a sign which reads “NO HATS,” while a delivery van brings in a brand new shipment of hats. On the right side of the image, existing the store, are a group of invisible people wearing the hats. This cartoon represents a version of how connections are required to acquire goods: as soon as an item arrives in stock, the sales clerk sells them to his “invisible” clients on the side, so even though the supply is being actively replenished, the items are still unavailable to the general public.



Figure 8: “Invisible Hats”; under the table dealings in Soviet shops

This image captures the essence of the need for social connections when shopping; no matter when the factory made its latest delivery, without a special connection with the shopkeeper the hats would always be out of stock. As Chernyshova argues, “the ability to develop and maintain a wide circle of friends and acquaintances was, therefore, an important consumer asset as much as anything else.”¹⁰¹ A poll conducted in the early 1980s found that almost half of respondents claimed that “connections with ‘useful’ people were important to succeed in life.”¹⁰² Shopping in the Soviet Bloc was not as simple as selecting desired goods from a store, instead, Soviet shoppers “took the initiative to adapt [shopping at state-operated shops] to their needs— for instance, by persuading sales clerks to hold back high-demand goods for them— and to supplement it by acquiring things imported by individuals rather than official trade organizations.”¹⁰³ In many cases, physical currency was not enough to be able to purchase an item, and social relationships were necessary to pay for goods as well.

In addition to the regular state operated stores, “closed shops” also existed to cater to the Soviet elite. These were places in which social connections were necessary not only to purchase shortage items, but also to simply be able to enter in the first place. “Closed shops” were exclusive to well-placed members of the Soviet Party, the secret police, as well as “the Soviet army and navy, railway workers and industrial workers based at plants with military objectives.”¹⁰⁴ These shops began as a way of ensuring that the connected Soviet elite did not suffer from the same nationwide shortages during dire points of rationing during the 1920s and 1930s, and although they were “officially forbidden” after the end of rationing, continued to exist well into the 1980s. In order to gain access to these shops, prospective shoppers first needed to

¹⁰¹ Chernyshova, 2013. 93.

¹⁰² Chernyshova, 2013. 93.

¹⁰³ Chernyshova, 2013. 99.

¹⁰⁴ Gronow, 2003. 123.

rise to a position within the Soviet Party; in a way it was similar to a Costco membership, if instead of a Costco card you needed specially written permission from the government. However, those outside of the Party's inner circle could potentially buy these products secondhand from resellers. In terms of valuable social connections, "those who serviced the elite and thus had access to privileged shops and warehouses were especially important," since it was possible to smuggle items out of specialty shops and resell them to the general population. However, any kind of "well-informed friends" might be able to "point in the direction of a promising and little-known outlet or facilitate access to a 'closed' shop," or otherwise be of assistance in shopping.¹⁰⁵ Lea Ypi remembers that these connections could spread into larger networks, for example, if a friend, neighbor, or colleague "did not have what we were looking for or if they could not help with whatever we needed, they offered substitutions or recommended another family who might be able to help."¹⁰⁶ In Ilya Tsvankin's words, the way to acquire items in the Soviet Union was to "just know somebody who has access to goods... it all depends on who you know."¹⁰⁷ These connections could come from all different places, for example, "maybe you went with this person to high school or accidentally met him or her somewhere... in most cases it was pretty random. Unless you belonged to that privileged group of say bureaucrats and *apparatchiks* [member of the communist aparat] who all had access to those goods and services." In short, if a Soviet consumer was hoping to gain access to any of the many items unavailable on regular store shelves, "you just [had to] know a few people who had access to certain things so you knew that if you need[ed] one of those things you could go back to those people."

¹⁰⁵ Chernyshova, 2013. 93.

¹⁰⁶ Ypi, 2022. 53-54.

¹⁰⁷ Tsvankin, 2023.

Despite the explicit elitism and social stratification exemplified in the “closed shops,” Natalia Chernyshova argues that “paradoxically... consumption also worked as a mechanism of social cohesion, a kind of ‘social glue.’”¹⁰⁸ When the people realized they could not rely on the state to provide what they needed, nor could they rely entirely on themselves to acquire everything on their own, they found that the only choice they had was to rely on each other. In other words, “in conditions of shortage, reliance on personal contacts to obtain desired goods meant that members of very different social and occupational groups were connected through complex informal networks that centered on common acquaintances working in the retail system or other points of goods and services distribution.”¹⁰⁹ For better or for worse, in order to check out at a Soviet sales counter, shoppers needed both the money for the product and an in-store connection to provide it for them.

Shortages and Social Shopping

Although undesirable products were filling factory warehouses, Soviet shops still suffered from a lack of desirable products. Larissa Zakharova notes that “there were shortages of wool and silk fabrics, knitted wear, wool coats, fur coats and raincoats, wool suits and trousers, fur hats, underwear, and leisure shoes,” and that when they did reach the shops, “all these goods were sold out within a few hours of their arrival.”¹¹⁰ Elena Yurievna, who grew up in the Soviet Bloc, described her experience with queueing and shopping to Svetlana Alexievich, writing that

“We were meeting and even surpassing production quotas, but somehow the stores were completely empty. Where was our milk? Our meat? I still don’t understand where it all went. Stores would run out of milk within an hour of opening. After noon, the sales clerks just stood there behind clean, empty display cases. The only things on the shelves were three-liter jars of birch juice and

¹⁰⁸ Chernyshova, 2013. 111.

¹⁰⁹ Chernyshova, 2013. 111.

¹¹⁰ Zarakova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 89.

packages of salt, which were always wet for some reason. Canned sprats. And that was it! If they put out salami, it'd be sold out in seconds. Hot dogs and pelmeni were delicacies.”¹¹¹

Although consumers did not drive the production of goods like a market economy might, shops occasionally left “control sheets” (*kontrol'nye listy*) in which customers could anonymously share their concerns in the hopes of being heard. One of these control sheet authors wrote that “suits for tall persons are practically non-existent in Moscow shops. One can find them very seldom and when available there are only cheap types. It's necessary to start the supply of suits, sizes 6 and 7, not only in orders, but also in reality. I have been visiting shops since mid-December, and I could not buy a suit.”¹¹² Another wrote that “sellers say that boots arrive once every three years. There is a demand for every day,” while yet another complained that “there is no women's underwear in the shop. This is disrespectful to women.”¹¹³ One shopper asked “why are there no short coats of good quality, except Astrakhan ones? The demand is clear.”¹¹⁴ A customer satisfaction poll run in 1969 Moscow found that “only 54 per cent of customers were happy with the selection of men's shirts, although, according to pollsters, the shop was filled with them.” Shortage issues were even worse in the provinces, for example in 1970 Ukraine where pollsters found that “2,200 out of 4,680 customers who came to buy a shirt left without making a purchase, despite the shelves in the shop being ‘packed with shirts.’”¹¹⁵ However, the items which were in stock were described by one British tourist to the Soviet Union as “*brak*” or junk, and that “only readily available goods are those that nobody wants.”¹¹⁶ A common saying among shoppers at the time was that “there are lots of goods, but there is nothing to buy,” because more often than not, the few coveted items which people sought out

¹¹¹ Alexievich, 2017. 79-80.

¹¹² Zarakova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 89.

¹¹³ Zarakova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 90.

¹¹⁴ Zarakova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 89-90.

¹¹⁵ Chernyshova, 2013. 139.

¹¹⁶ Chernyshova, 2013. 17.

were exactly the ones that were always in shortage.¹¹⁷ These persistent shortages created the process of social shopping, in which shoppers bought items not only for themselves, but also out of social obligation to others.

As a result of shortages a psychological drive emerged which led to “spontaneously buying lacking goods quickly after they were put on the counter,” even when those lacking goods were unnecessary.¹¹⁸ Like Elena Yurievna mentioned above, “stores would run out of milk within an hour of opening,” because when people came across a valuable product like milk, they immediately swept it up both for themselves and for their connections.¹¹⁹ “People bought instinctively, hoping to find a use for the acquired item later,”¹²⁰ Zakharova writes, and in many cases these goods were picked up with someone else in mind. One Soviet shopper recalled a time in which she waited in a queue for several hours in the rain, however once she made it into the store the products she had been waiting in line for were already sold out. To make up for the loss, she instead “purchased in bulk everything that was available ... in the hope of later bartering them for something she might need or could use.”¹²¹ In an account given by a woman who had grown up in the Soviet Bloc just after its fall, she recalled that “Mama would buy everything she could (back then, we would say “procure” rather than “buy”) and stash it away for a rainy day.” She goes on to describe the way that shopping changed from the queueing, spontaneous shopping, and black market purchasing of the Soviet Union after its collapse by saying that “now we go to the markets and stores like they’re museums,” meaning that in her experience, shoppers in modern Russia are able to take their time and browse goods at their leisure.¹²² In both the US

¹¹⁷ Chernyshova, 2013. 139.

¹¹⁸ Zarakova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 94.

¹¹⁹ Alexievich, 2017. 79-80.

¹²⁰ Zarakova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 94.

¹²¹ Mukhina, Irina. 2014. *Women and the Birth of Russian Capitalism: A History of the Shuttle Trade*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. Accessed March 11, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central. 32.

¹²² Alexievich, 2017. 203.

and the USSR, when the female shopper of the family went to the store, she would buy things by considering the needs of herself and her family members. In the US, those shopping needs were usually confined to the nuclear family. In the USSR, however, “when a shopper chanced to come upon a sale of sought-after goods, she had to remember the needs of her relatives, friends and colleagues; those people might take offense at failure to do so.”¹²³ Soviet shoppers were forced to think of their entire social network when considering what to buy, because it represented deep “care and friendship” to remember the needs of others “at the critical and often stressful moment of obtaining valued goods.”¹²⁴ For example, Slavenka Drakulic recalled how “to bring a cake for dessert when you are invited for a dinner— a common gesture in another, more affluent country— means you invested a great deal of energy to find it if you didn’t make it yourself. And even if you did, finding eggs, milk, sugar, and butter took time and energy.” From Drakulic’s perspective, the very fact that items took significant effort to acquire made them “precious in a very different way from if you bought it [the cake] in the pastry shop next door.”¹²⁵ Buying goods for others could be a mechanism of making or maintaining social connections, or the products could be tools to barter for favors, a topic which will be discussed in greater detail down the line.

Not only did Soviet shoppers consider the needs of their extended circle of living family and friends, but they also at times considered the needs of their future generations. In many cases, “...expensive items and durables were often bought in advance for children as a kind of dowry while they were still very young. Some parents thought it wise to seize an opportunity to buy a useful piece of furniture or a rug when it became available instead of waiting for the time when the need actually arose.”¹²⁶ Sometimes, goods were bought with the intention of being

¹²³ Chernyshova, 2013. 87.

¹²⁴ Chernyshova, 2013. 88.

¹²⁵ Drakulić, 1993. 15.

¹²⁶ Chernyshova, 2013. 125.

consumed years into the future, and sat around unused for ages until the time came. One of the interviewees for a 2009 survey “recalled her husband buying furniture in hopes of being allocated an apartment at some future time and placing it, still in its packaging, in the corner of their room, where it stood for several years.”¹²⁷ Goods which were bought spontaneously as described above would often be “set aside... ‘for a gift’ or until the time was right.”¹²⁸ Shortage goods were bought out almost immediately after they became available because every shopper had an entire social circle of other people to consider. In this way, the act of shopping for oneself and for others was not just a mechanism of obtaining useful products, but also a mechanism of creating and maintaining social connections and kinship bonds between people existing under the shared condition of Soviet shortages. This form of shopping demonstrates one of the ways in which Soviet consumption was driven through its social connections; in the Soviet Bloc, no one ever really shops alone.

Life in the Queue

Outside of the highly publicized Space Race, possibly the most recognizable images from the Soviet Union were of shopping queues. Although “queuing could be mind-numbingly slow,” it was far from a passive process and could require “combing the stores for necessary goods, traveling to another town, staying up all night, or seizing an unexpected opportunity to purchase something valuable.”¹²⁹ A *New York Times* article from May 13, 1969 captured a snapshot of what the experience of waiting in the queue might seem like.

“In Podarki, a gift store on Gorky Street, about 100 women were waiting patiently the other day for a new shipment of wicker handbags to go on sale. About 4 P.M. the yellow and tan bags were brought out of a storeroom and the women began

¹²⁷ Gerasimova, Ekaterina, and Sofia Chuikina. 2014. “The Repair Society.” *Russian Studies in History* 48, no. 1 (December): 66.

¹²⁸ Gerasimova et al., 2014. 66.

¹²⁹ Chernyshova, 2013. 89.

shoving their way to the counter. The lucky ones succeeded in getting a bill from a harassed salesgirl, rushing to a cashier's window, paying 10 rubles (\$11) and then returning with a receipt to pick up a handbag. Some women stood in the line for an hour, but the handbags were sold out by the time they got to the counter."¹³⁰

Lea Ypi, who grew up learning to navigate queues from her mother, offers a similar account of waiting in a queue, although in her experience items could be left in line to hold the symbolic place of the shopper so that they were able to join multiple queues at once. "There was always a queue," she writes, "it always formed before the distribution lorry arrived. You were always expected to join, unless you had befriended the shopkeeper. That was the general rule."¹³¹ Ypi continues by saying that "anyone was allowed to leave the queue so long as they found an appropriate object to replace them during their absence. It could be an old shopping bag, a can, a brick, or a stone." However, there was an unspoken social rule that "once the supplies arrived, the object left to act as your representative immediately lost its representative function. It did not matter if you had left a bag, can, brick, or stone in your place. The bag was just a bag; it could no longer be you." Ypi once asked during her training of queue navigation "why we had to leave a stone in the cheese queue so we could join the kerosene queue to leave a can there, since nothing was happening in either of them." It was then that she learned that "queues could go on for an entire day, and sometimes the night, or several nights, and it was essential to let shopping bags, kerosene containers, or appropriately sized stones take on some of the representative functions that would otherwise have to burden their owners." In Kapka Kassabova's experience, "if you actually wanted to buy something, you signed up at the shop and joined a waiting list. Then a few weeks or months later, you snuck out to the store in the dead of night, to queue up as they unloaded furniture from trucks, and fought tooth and nail for your precious bookshelves." The

¹³⁰ Gewertzman, Bernard. 1969. "Soviet Shoppers Spend Years in Line." *New York Times*, May 13, 1969, 17. TimesMachine.

¹³¹ Ypi, 2022. 52.

process required action, she says, because “just because your name was on a list, it didn’t guarantee anything.”¹³² Navigating a queue was an active, social process in order to be successful.

The images below help to conceptualize what it was like to wait in a queue. Often they were extremely crowded and queue members would be packed together. Often, prospective shoppers would clamor to the front of the line to see what product the queue was for. Fights might break out, as seen in the top right image, over arguments about items representing a queue patron. “In the very rare cases in which the system broke down,” Ypi recalls, “fights erupted and queues turned nasty, brutish, and long. People fought bitterly over stones that looked similar”¹³³ Customers might loom over each others’ shoulder in an attempt to inspect products, as seen in the bottom left. This was a very different world from the solitary American housewife, browsing the aisles alone and at her leisure.



*Figure 9-10: The reality of queueing
(continues on next page)*

¹³² Kassabova, Kapka. 2009. *Street Without a Name: Childhood and Other Misadventures in Bulgaria*. N.p.: Skyhorse. 105.

¹³³ Ypi, 2022. 53.



Figure 11-12: The reality of queueing

On average, shoppers had to wait in three separate queues before they could successfully purchase a product. The article *Retailing in the Soviet Union* provides a simplified perspective on the process of waiting in a queue.

“Upon entering the store, the urban customer typically finds a line of people before him. In due time it is his turn. Often with a cold, unsolicitous tone, the sales clerk inquires of his needs. If the customer finds something that suits him, all he can do at this stage is to ask the price and permission to exchange the goods. He then leaves the salesclerk (without the merchandise) and enters a new line in front of the *kassa* or cashier. Here he pays the cashier the ruble amount of the price just, quoted to him by the salesclerk, and in return receives a receipt (*chek*). With his receipt in hand, the shopper moves to a third line. After turning in his receipt to the *kontroler*, he finally receives his package. Unless the typically crowded Russian store is empty, this means he has had to queue up three times before being able to walk out with his purchase. The Russians call this the “*kassa* system.”¹³⁴

What did people do during these long and tedious queues? A *New York Times* article from May 13, 1969, cited an article from the Soviet economics magazine *Voprosky Ekonomiki*, which claimed that “the Soviet population wasted about 30 billion man-hours a year in shopping— the equivalent ... of a year’s work for 15 million men.”¹³⁵ A subsequent sociological study from the early 1980s found that prospective shoppers in the Soviet Union “spend between 30 and 40 per

¹³⁴ Goldman, Marshall I. 1960. “Retailing in the Soviet Union.” *Journal of Marketing* 24, no. 4 (April)

¹³⁵ Gewertzman, Bernard. 1969. “Soviet Shoppers Spend Years in Line.” *New York Times*, May 13, 1969, 17. TimesMachine.

cent of their total time queuing to buy consumer goods.” In the mid-1970s, Soviet shoppers spent “30 billion hours per year ... searching for goods and queuing to buy them,” a figure which rose to 37 billion hours per year by the mid-1980s.¹³⁶ Given the amount of time that people spent waiting in line, the queue itself must be considered as a significant social space. Originally intended to be a solo in-between space, the queue became a significant space in its own right for people from different walks of life to socialize. People, and primarily women, gathered in shared spaces with strangers of similar life experiences. Queues were not silent, according to Ilya Tsvankin “people did talk while in queues, not just about the items they were waiting for, about anything.”¹³⁷ In fact, Kapka Kassabova recalled that “strangers talked feverishly in shop queues,”¹³⁸ and Elena Yurievna remembered “the arguments in queues.”¹³⁹ According to Lea Ypi, “behaving respectfully in the queue or joining forces to uphold queuing standards could mark the beginning of lasting friendships. A neighbor you met in the queue or a friend you made while sharing supervisory duties would soon become someone to whom you turned in all kinds of adversity.”¹⁴⁰ Navigating a queue required social skills, and occasionally con-artistry. Chernyshova recalls an instance in which “one female profiteer specializing in shortage foods from the Moscow GUM invested in a couple of crutches to guilt-trip the crowds gathered for the morning opening of the store to let her enter first.”¹⁴¹ Whether for better or for worse, the Soviet queue often could not be navigated solitarily.

Like products, spots in the queue, which represented the promise of certain products, could be gifted or traded like currency. For bigger and more durable products, such as refrigerators, washing machines, and some furniture sets, prospective buyers might be given a

¹³⁶ Chernyshova, 2013. 89.

¹³⁷ Tsvankin, 2023.

¹³⁸ Kassabova, 2009. 155

¹³⁹ Alexievich, 2017. 99.

¹⁴⁰ Ypi, 2022. 53.

¹⁴¹ Chernyshova, 2013. 89.

paper queue card instead. The numbered card represented their spot in line, and unlike the physical queues, these queues might last years. In fact, by the time an individual reached the front of the queue, they might have already acquired the product from another source and no longer needed the original item they had been in line for. “Such a card, a valued possession in itself, could be given to a relative, friend, or colleague,” Chernyshova writes. Ypi’s recollection is of a similar experience, in which the family shopper would turn to their neighbors “if you needed someone with whom to swap food vouchers, since you might have built up a stock of some items but run out of others.”¹⁴² Just like scarce goods could be traded through the process of *blat*, coupons representing the opportunity to buy a product without a line could be equally valuable exchangeable commodities. Regardless of whether physical or conceptual, navigating a queue often required and always at least benefited from interpersonal socialization.

From the outside, the Soviet Bloc did not seem to align with the more prominent consumer cultures of the west, however, beneath the command economy was a deep and rich community of consumer goods exchange organized by connections from the people. Whether it be through making personal connections with shopkeepers, buying goods from the black market or directly from factories, navigating Soviet queues, or shopping for a network of people, the underground consumer sphere was teeming with social bonds which kept the “second economy” alive.

¹⁴² Ypi, 2022. 53.

III. Women's Work

As the functional Soviet economy did indeed run on social connections, it begs the question of who those connections were between. Who sold black market items? Who acquired items? Who repaired them when they fell apart? The answer, in the great majority of cases, was women. In most households, women were the ones in charge of waiting in queues and acquiring essential goods, and at the same time 76 percent of employees involved in “trade, restaurants, supply, and procurements” were also women. Women were the ones who primarily “sold domestic goods and food in the open markets,” as well as heavily participating in the black market.¹⁴³ Therefore, in the majority of these essential social exchanges, women were the leaders on both sides of the aisle, creating the social currency which ran the Soviet economy.

Manufacturing Neglect

Though the Soviet Union branded itself as an egalitarian society between the sexes, items which were essential for women, such as menstrual products, were routinely overlooked when it came time for the state to send out manufacturing notices. Slavenka Draculic recalls the way she began a speech about the fall of communism by saying

“I have just come from Bulgaria... and believe me, women there don't have either napkins or Tampaxes— they never had them, in fact. Nor do the women in Poland, or Czechoslovakia, much less in the Soviet Union or Romania. This I hold as one of the proofs of why communism failed, because in seventy years of its existence it couldn't fulfill the basic needs of half the population.”¹⁴⁴

Even state planners from decades prior had noticed this problem of neglect. In an article published in the Soviet newspaper *Nedelia* in 1962, investigators attempted to find women's

¹⁴³ Mukhina, Irina. 2014. *Women and the Birth of Russian Capitalism: A History of the Shuttle Trade*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. Accessed March 11, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central. 6.

¹⁴⁴ Drakulić, 1993. 124.

clothing in state-run shops and found it to be a massive challenge, one which revealed how all of the problems of the Soviet economic system primarily affected women. “When we had made the rounds of nearly ten stores,” the investigators found, “it became clear that the attempt to buy ordinary stockings, not to mention elastic or sheer ‘non-run’ stockings, would hardly end successfully.”¹⁴⁵ Next, they headed to a lingerie store which should have been guaranteed to carry stocking, however when they asked to see a size-45 pair, the store clerk told them that “there are seldom any, and when we have them they sell out before noon.” By the end of the day, the investigators were unable to find new stocking and instead turned their attention towards repairing old ones instead. “We set out for the hosiery repair shop,” they reported, “but we had barely come near it when we saw a long line. Even the month it takes for an order to be filled does not stop the women. The 83 centers for mending runs are literally overloaded with work.” Here, we see the ways in which all of the problems with the Soviet economy directly targeted women: the inability to find necessary goods in stores, and the inefficiency of state-run repair shops. These challenges ensured that if women wanted to access consumer goods, they would have to search for them through the second economy or hand make or repair them themselves. *Nedelia* was one of the few Soviet magazines which resisted state propaganda as much as possible, and so the authors of the article were able to conclude and publish that from their investigations, “state planning committees and economic councils frequently do not take women’s demands into consideration.”¹⁴⁶

Fashion was another sector in which, despite the clear demand from female consumers for quality and on-trend articles of clothing, was often ignored as unimportant. The author

¹⁴⁵ Unknown Author. 1962. “It Is Difficult To Be Beautiful.” *Nedelia*, September 9, 1962, 4-5. Seventeen Moments in Soviet History.

¹⁴⁶ *Nedelia*, 1962.

identified as A. Levashova¹⁴⁷ wrote in a 1971 article for the Soviet publication *Pravda* that long skirts and coats were coming into fashion, as could be seen by the fact that “more and more often now one can see women wearing long skirts in the theater and long coats on the street.”¹⁴⁸

Although Levashova notes that “garment makers could manufacture them of higher quality and better design,” she observes that the garments she sees worn on the street “are still generally homemade articles.” Despite this seemingly apparent discrepancy between supply and demand, Levashova points out that “the trade outlets intend only in 1972 to order about 20 percent of women’s clothing in maxi lengths.” She claims that “the main barrier here is psychological. Should we make fitted or loose trousers, long or short skirts and coats? These are questions that no one undertakes to decide until the woman in the street sets the style.”¹⁴⁹ This article proves two conditions of the Soviet consumer-sphere: first, that Soviet fashion was determined by what women chose to wear and manufacture themselves, and second, that the state manufacturing took no interest in learning what these fashion preferences were or in manufacturing the desired items though it was entirely within their means to do so. Despite claims of egalitarianism, the needs and desires of women were never truly taken into consideration by Soviet state manufacturing.

During the 1959 Kitchen Debate, Nixon and Khrushchev went back and forth about the differences in capitalist versus communist perspectives towards ease and housework. Nixon, gesturing towards a dishwasher, tells Khrushchev and their audience that “this is our newest model. This is the kind which is built in thousands of units for direct installations in the houses. In America, we like to make life easier for women.” Khrushchev replies by telling Nixon that his “capitalistic attitude toward women does not occur under Communism.”¹⁵⁰ Whether an

¹⁴⁷ A. Levashova may be short for Alla Levashova, one of the Soviet Union’s leading fashion designers, however the details of her identity are not explicitly mentioned

¹⁴⁸ Levashova, A. 1971. “Fashion and Economics.” *Pravda*, May 9, 1971, 2. Seventeen Moments in Soviet History.

¹⁴⁹ Levashova, 1971.

¹⁵⁰ Nixon, and Khrushchev. 1959.

ideological statement or a consequence of the planned economy's failed efforts to manufacture necessary goods, Soviet women lived under an ideology which did not prioritize ease or convenience. "It was not that the state hated women and, therefore, didn't produce machines that would make their lives easier," Draculic argues, "but rather that there were so many other problems to solve, things to produce.... Women just had to be patient, had to understand the vision of the great revolutionary plan, a vision in which their needs— what with Ideology, Politics, and Economics— were nowhere near the top."¹⁵¹

Who Does the Shopping?

Although jumping into a queue spontaneously could occur regardless of gender, it was most common for regular shopping trips to be performed by women. Kapka Kassabova notes that from her experience in the USSR, "shopping, like most unpleasant things except fixing leaky cars and tiling bathrooms, was a woman's job,"¹⁵² and Slavenka Draculic refers to the "generally known fact that women wait in long lines for food."¹⁵³ Ilya Tsvankin recounts how Soviet youth often lived with their parents until they were married and in both cases the women in the household did the shopping, so in his experience "my wife and my mom did most of the shopping." Waiting in a queue was not gender specific, however while Ilya Tsvankin might decide spontaneously to wait in a twenty to thirty minute queue "a couple of time per week," to his recollection "my mom and my wife Olga, they did it probably more times a week, I would say four or five."¹⁵⁴ Longer queues, the ones which could last for hours, were most commonly filled with women. Ilya Tsvankin's explanation for this was that "males usually had more demanding jobs and didn't have as much time. Most women were also working, but historically

¹⁵¹ Drakulić, 1993. 46-47.

¹⁵² Kassabova, 2009. 97.

¹⁵³ Drakulić, 1993. 124.

¹⁵⁴ Tsvankin, 2023.

they did a lot more shopping than the men.”¹⁵⁵ In short, women were most often the ones responsible for standing in queues more frequently and for longer periods at a time as opposed to their male counterparts, a job as critical and demanding as any other. Slavenka Draculic, for example, remembers how essential it was for young girls to learn the skills of acquiring shortage goods, “since their future family depended upon knowing how to find things in spite of shortages.”¹⁵⁶ It was the responsibility of women to understand the complex social space of the Soviet queue, and other methods of acquiring scarce goods. Without this work, families would have gone hungry and unclothed.

At the same time, while all genders and ages could participate in *blat*, as the primary shoppers of the household, women were frequently the leaders of this exchange on both sides. 86 percent of the employees involved in banking and insurance were female, as well as 68 percent in communications and 64 percent in state administration and public organizations. Therefore, if you needed something expedited or a special favor, you would have to make a special payment to the woman behind the front desk. In addition, Chernyshova claims that it was a “routine operation” for women to trade and resell goods at their places of work, and sometimes “even more exotically in women’s toilets at workplaces.”¹⁵⁷ *Blat* was an exchange which most often functioned entirely through exchanging goods and services, without the need for capital. In order to participate in the elusive Soviet consumerism, women were the ones who had to be actively aware and conscious of their social circle and how to use those connections to their benefit.

Scholars have remarked upon the idea of the “second shift,” that is, the idea that in the modern economy women were expected to participate both in the labor force and be responsible for household tasks, such as cleaning, cooking, child-rearing, clothing repair, and so forth. In

¹⁵⁵ Tsvankin, 2023.

¹⁵⁶ Drakulić, 1993. 69.

¹⁵⁷ Chernyshova, 2013. 95.

Soviet countries, this idea has been expanded into a “triple burden,” in which women were responsible for day jobs in the labor force, household duties, as well as participating in state-organized activities. In the Soviet Bloc, the early retirement age meant that household labor was delegated to both mothers and grandmothers, sometimes reducing the “triple burden” down to a double, but nevertheless remaining “heavily feminized.” Katherine Veredy argues that the “feminization of food lines” resulted “partly because the tasks were considered women’s work but also because pensioners were disproportionately female, owing to the sex imbalance in the elder age groups.”¹⁵⁸ Nevertheless, the essential task of acquisition lay disproportionately on women, of various age demographics.

Individual and Community Craftsmanship

Since the state was often unable to meet the production needs or desires of the people, many took matters into their own hands. The Soviet government produced what researcher Olga Gurova describes as “consumer goods of questionable quality,”¹⁵⁹ and oftentimes at least a portion of the manufacturing process was by default placed on the consumer, who was expected to repair or repurpose dysfunctional products. Because of this, the Soviet government launched what was called the “Repair Strategy,” in which they encouraged the Soviet people to repair old items rather than waiting for new ones to appear in stores. The Soviet magazine geared at female workers, *Rabotnitsa*, published a segment called “Repair Workshop” (*Masterskaia peredelok*) encouraging their audience to hold on to damaged items in order to repair them, or find some other purpose for them. The magazine wrote “all these [coats, jackets, children’s wear] will come in handy. If you can sew at least a little, try to make vests out of them, and if you cannot sew,

¹⁵⁸ Veredy, 1996. 65.

¹⁵⁹ Gurova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 81.

then use them to start leaning.”¹⁶⁰ *Rabotnitsa* encouraged their repair strategy by regularly publishing sewing templates and guides near the back of their issues, which readers at home could copy to make their own clothes from various upcycled fabrics. The writers of the magazine believed that “every young girl ... should learn to cut and sew so she can make herself a summer dress, a sarafan, a blouse, a little dressing-gown, in short, and be independent making some simple clothes,” arguing that “every woman regardless of her occupation always wants to be well dressed, to dress her children with taste. It can be simply achieved when you know how to do most things yourself.”¹⁶¹ Slavenka Draculic, who grew up in former Yugoslavia, describes the way in which her mother implemented the repair strategy from women’s magazine guides, writing that

“In our house there was an old closet where my mother would stockpile cloth, yards and yards of anything she could get ahold of— flannel, cotton, pique, silk, tweed, cashmere, wool, lace, elastic bands, even buttons.... She would copy a blouse or a skirt from pattern sheets from *Svijey* (World), the only magazine for women, and sew it on my Grandma’s Singer sewing machine. Every woman in my childhood knew how to sew, and my mother insisted that I learned it too. By the age of five I knitted my first shawl and embroidered a duck with ducklings that she still keeps. Later on, she let me use a sewing machine under her supervision, and by the age of fifteen I was making my own dresses, not because it was a woman’s duty, but because it was the only way to be dressed nicely.”¹⁶²

Passed down between generations of women, the knowledge and skills of how to repair or repurpose clothing became an essential skill to have in a society which did not guarantee adequate accessible clothing.

Because of the frequent shortages of decent clothing, magazines like *Rabotnitsa* acknowledged that the only way to acquire necessary clothing was by making it from scratch, a task that was almost always expected of women. In Kapka Kassabova’s experience, because

¹⁶⁰ Gurova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 81.

¹⁶¹ Zarakova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 96.

¹⁶² Drakulić, 1993. 29.

essential clothing items were sometimes unavailable in stores, “my mother became, early on, an expert tailor. She made most of our clothes, and her own.”¹⁶³ They were not the only magazine to encourage self-repair, and the “do it yourself” ideology existed for more than just clothing. In the late 1950s, for example, table lamps became the latest and most popular home decor trend. Several women’s publications, including the books *Poleznye Sovety* (*Handy Hints*) and *Domashniaia Entsiklopediia* (*The Domestic Encyclopedia*), as well as the magazines *Sdelai sam*, *Nauka i zhizn’*, *Krest’ianka*, and *Rabotnitsa* published guides on how women could make these items at home. These guides were also published for other items, such as “racks for footwear and hats, coat hangers, lampshades, mini shelves, a dish rack, a lamp, a mailbox, a chaise longue, a toiletry case, a hold-all, a shower, a mop, a window-cleaning tool, a thermos, and a pan trivet.” Women’s guides also existed explaining “how to fix furniture, clothing, footwear, various household items, sinks, commodes, electrical devices, and an apartment in general, and how to make glue out of flour and mend ladders in stockings.”¹⁶⁴ These practices were done simply out of necessity; when consumer goods were not available for purchase, most often the expectation fell on the women to create or upcycle those products from existing material.

The Soviet government took some measures to aid the implementation of the “Repair Strategy,” although the strategy in and of itself treated the symptoms of lack of quality products rather than the core of the issue. Government-operated “repair shops” for “shoes, watches, clothing, and home appliances” began to open and were intended to repair broken items so that their owners did not need to seek a replacement which was not guaranteed to exist.¹⁶⁵ In the 1960s and 1970s, thousands of repair shops operated throughout the country, and in the year

¹⁶³ Kassabova, 2009. 96.

¹⁶⁴ Gerasimova et al., 2014. 64.

¹⁶⁵ Gurova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 80.

1970 alone clothing repair shops accounted for 30,000,000 rubles of revenue.¹⁶⁶ Even in cases when shops were run by the government, access to working products required the interference of an additional person. Shortages made it infeasible for Soviet shoppers to be able to replace an object, even something which modern capitalist consumers would consider as simple as stockings or pantyhose, and so instead they required the know-how and repair skills of another craftsman. However, the surveys completed in the article titled *The Repair Society* concluded that state-managed repair shops “did not, however, perform outstanding work,” and only “partially offset the failures of production.”¹⁶⁷ Investigators for the Soviet newspaper *Nedelia* found that repair shops were overflowed, and even simple repairs to tights or pantyhose could take over a month to be completed in an official repair shop.¹⁶⁸ Therefore, many people in the Soviet Bloc were forced instead to take their damaged goods to friends, acquaintances, or associates who would repair the items for them. Lea Ypi recalled seeing “several pairs of shoes wrapped in newspaper” on the floor of her neighbor, Murat’s, apartment, because he “still did repairs in his spare time.”¹⁶⁹ Sewing was one of the most common forms of household repair since it was the simplest and least expensive, and sewing also happened to be most commonly left up to women as well. Ilya Tsvankin recalls how “women would repair other people’s items if some women were more skilled at this than others.”¹⁷⁰ Slavenka Draculic recalls overhearing a conversation between a friend and her mother. Draculic’s friend, Vesna, had a pair of panyhose with a tear in them, and she wanted to throw them away. Her mother responded by arguing “but, Vesna, what a shame, these panyhose are still good to wear around the house. I’ll take them to a repair lady to be darned.”¹⁷¹ When an item was past the point of repair, women learned how to

¹⁶⁶ Gerasimova et al., 2014. 64.

¹⁶⁷ Gerasimova et al., 2014. 64.

¹⁶⁸ *Nedelia*, 1962.

¹⁶⁹ Ypi, 2022. 236.

¹⁷⁰ Tsvankin, 2023.

¹⁷¹ Drakulić, 1993. 179.

be creative with their repurposing. With most consumer goods so scarce and difficult to acquire, it would be a waste to throw something away when it could be repurposed to fit some other use. Draculic's friend Vesna told Draculic about how every time she tried to get rid of a torn pair of panyhose, her mother would try "to 'save' it, to repair it, to fill a cushion with it, tie a garbage bag or filter home made juice— she can find tens of different uses for old stockings or pantyhose."¹⁷² The ability to think of ways to extend an item beyond its intended use was a skill just like any other, and whether an item was repaired or repurposed, these techniques were also taught within families and essential clothing repair skills would also be passed between generations.

Repair had different meanings in the Soviet Union. It might refer to fixing physical malfunctions or defects with certain products, or it might be intended to repair the "symbolic defects of their design."¹⁷³ As discussed in the previous section defining consumer culture, Western jeans were often valued more for their label than for their actual function, therefore "repairing" jeans often meant taking Soviet-produced jeans and disguising them as Western jeans. This also could be outsourced to friends or acquaintances with the skills to do so, and on the flipside "the ability to produce a proficient imitation of a status symbol was an important social skill."¹⁷⁴ Most of the skills required for clothing repair and upcycling (sewing, crocheting, knitting, weaving) were historically associated with women, and so young people looking for ways to improve their clothing did so with the help of their mothers, sisters, tailors, and anyone else who knew how to use a sewing machine."¹⁷⁵ Sewing machines were a significant community-builder, since lack of access meant that people often had to share a single machine.

¹⁷² Drakulić, 1993. 179.

¹⁷³ Gurova in Vihavainen and Bogdanova, 2015. 80.

¹⁷⁴ Gerasimova et al., 2014. 70.

¹⁷⁵ Chernyshova, 2013. 134.

Once again, even the ability to repair clothing often relied on social connections in order to get the work done. The tedious tasks traditionally delegated to women— shopping for groceries, repairing clothing and textiles, and so on— not only had higher stakes in the Soviet Union, but were accomplished with nothing but the knowledge, innovation, and skills of women.

Shuttle Trading of the 1990s

Perestroika began in 1985, and by 1991 the Soviet Union was officially dissolved. However, the transition from a planned to a market economy would hardly be instantaneous, and many of the social and cultural elements of Soviet shopping would carry over in various manifestations. This transition period, for example, gave birth to the post-communist practice of shuttle trading, somewhat similar to black market imports during the USSR. Shuttle traders, also known as *chelnoki*, “a Russian word for the rapid-flying shuttle in the weaving loom,” or “shop tourists,” operated in the so-called gray-market, since the practice of shuttle trading was neither technically legal nor illegal.¹⁷⁶ With the fall of the Iron Curtain, traders were able to visit neighboring countries and bring back goods to resell in Russia with much more ease, and with the official economy struggling through the transition, shuttle trade dominated. A *New York Times* article from 1996 wrote that “an estimated 10 million Russians ... make their living flying between Russia and Turkey, southern Europe, Poland, China, and South Korea buying low-quality goods to resell in the huge, chaotic street markets that have mushroomed all over the Soviet Union,” and also that “it is estimated that a quarter to a third of all Russian consumer goods are brought into the country by shuttle traders— a \$10 billion import business.”¹⁷⁷ Modern scholars such as Irina Mukhina, professor of Soviet history, now estimate that those numbers

¹⁷⁶ Stanley, Alessandra. 1996. “Russian Traders Go Abroad For Some Serious Shopping.” *New York Times*, November 9, 1996, 1,6. TimesMachine.

¹⁷⁷ Stanley, 1996.

were closer to nearly 30 million participants in the mid-1990s, in a trade that provided “75 percent of all the consumer goods in the Russian market” as well as “20 billion US dollars annually nationwide.”¹⁷⁸ These figures can only be estimated, however, due to the amount of trade which was done through barter, meaning that the exact amounts exchanged cannot be traced. With the value of the rouble in flux and unreliable, *chelnoki* would take goods with a known market value, such as “canned food, photo cameras, watches, vodka, and other ‘deficit’ items” to neighboring countries, where they would exchange those items for consumer goods which were desired in Russia and bring them back home for resale.¹⁷⁹

The *chelnoki* were not just predominantly female, they were *overwhelmingly* female-led. Of the estimated 30 million people participating in shuttle trade, approximately 80 percent were women.¹⁸⁰ “Among the leading causes,” Mukhina writes, “was massive female unemployment” during the transition period, which pushed women to look for other ways to support their families.¹⁸¹ Anna Ilinichna for example recalled that “in order to survive, I had to start traveling to Poland with big bags of light bulbs and children’s toys. The train car would be full of teachers, engineers, doctors...all of them with bags and sacks.”¹⁸² This female-led enterprise also did not merely supplement the Russian economy at this time, it was the “backbone of Russian consumer trade.”¹⁸³ At a time when post-Soviet economies were struggling to stay afloat and people were to a large degree left to fend for themselves, *chelnoki* provided the country with “70 percent of all clothing and fabrics, 30 percent of imported fish and processed and raw meat, 50 percent of color TV sets, and 80 percent of VCR players.”¹⁸⁴ Elena Yurievna, who lived through the

¹⁷⁸ Mukhina, Irina. 2014. *Women and the Birth of Russian Capitalism: A History of the Shuttle Trade*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. Accessed March 11, 2023. ProQuest Ebook Central. 4-5.

¹⁷⁹ Mukhina, 2014. 60.

¹⁸⁰ Mukhina, 2014. 72.

¹⁸¹ Mukhina, 2014. 39.

¹⁸² Alexievich, 2017. 101.

¹⁸³ Mukhina, 2014. 5.

¹⁸⁴ Mukhina, 2014. 4-5.

transition and the shuttle trade period, recalled that “the shuttle traders had already brought it all over: electric kettles, telephones, furniture...refrigerators...Mountains of goods materialized out of God knows where. ‘I have a Bosch washing machine.’ ‘I bought a Siemens TV.’ Every conversation was sprinkled with words like ‘Panasonic,’ ‘Sony,’ ‘Philips’.”¹⁸⁵ Essentially, the everyday women of Russia took the running of the entire consumer economy into their own hands, making necessary items available in cities and provinces throughout the post-Soviet world. Mukhina argues that these traders “facilitated the transition to the market economy in Russia,” doing so by “offering consumer goods in high demand to a society starved of basic necessities.”¹⁸⁶ The image below represents the extent to which shuttle trade dominated, by showing a train car packed with the iconic checkered bags of the *chelnoki*, as well as any other plastic or tote bags that they could find use for. The sheer number of bags in this single train should suggest how critical these imported items were to sustaining Russian consumer exchange.



Figure 13: checkered bags of the chelnoki fill the train alleyway on the return from Turkey

¹⁸⁵ Alexievich, 2017. 101-102.

¹⁸⁶ Mukhina, 2014. 11.

Today, the efforts of *chelnoki* are acknowledged in post-communist countries with statues erected to honor the work that they did in keeping their countries and communities afloat. The images below represent two memorials to the *chelnoki*; the one on the left is located in Belgorod, Russia while the one on the right is located in Yekaterinburg. These statues both show one male and one female trader pulling suitcases of merchandise behind them. Although the efforts of *chelnoki* are being acknowledged, the makers of these statues still find it challenging to depict the women in the leading and dominant roles, organizing the trade and reselling essential items to female shoppers back in Russia. The women in these statues are depicted as equal to, or even standing behind, their male counterparts, instead of the true positions which they had in leading the shuttle trade. Olga Karimova, who lived through the shuttle trade transition, recalled that “Our women are forced to be stronger than our men. They travel the world with their giant checkered bags. From Poland to China. Buying and selling. Carrying the weight of their entire households, the children and old folks, too. Plus their husbands. Plus the entire nation. It’s hard to explain this to an outsider. Practically impossible.”¹⁸⁷ Though the full significance of women during this time has yet to be fully acknowledged, those who know the history of the shuttle trade movement will remember that an entirely female-led trade organization based around social connections and barter saved the struggling post-Soviet world from destruction in the 1990s.

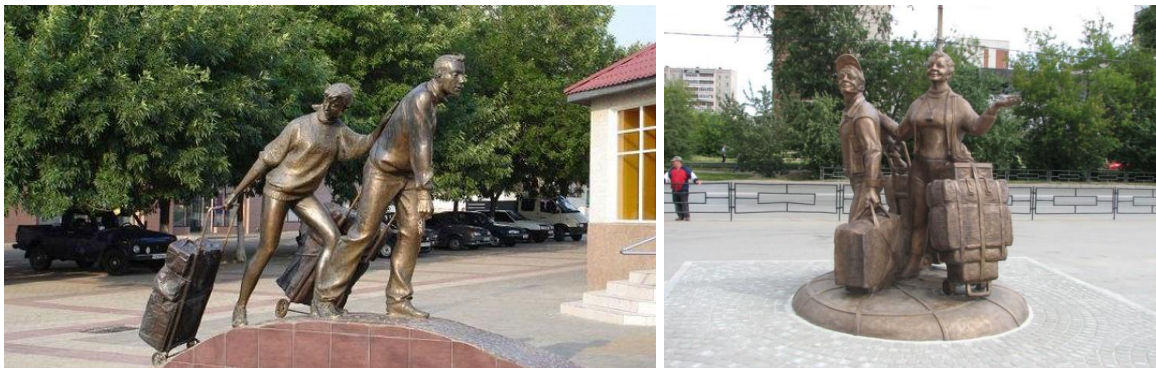


Figure 14-15: monuments recognizing the *chelnoki* in Russia

¹⁸⁷ Alexievich, 2017. 102.

Conclusion

It may appear that collectivism and consumerism were at odds with each other during the Soviet period, and although this was true in many cases, the Soviet people devised ways to combine collectivist teachings with consumerist desires and bring the seemingly contradictory ideologies together. Former Soviet citizen Mariia Arbatova reflects on the ways in which these ideologies came together in the mid-1970s. At this time, the supply of seasonal fashionable items was relatively low while the demand was high; for example, in a poll conducted of women from ages nineteen to twenty nine, 75 percent answered that they would “buy a new coat once a new fashion had firmly set in” while six percent would go a step further “rush to get a new one at the first signs of a new trend.” Only 19.3 percent of the women polled responded that they were “totally indifferent to fashion,” and so the majority of young women faced the challenge of contending with their fashion-forward desires as well as the inaccessibility of many fashionable items.¹⁸⁸ Mariia Arbatova recalls the way in which her group of female friends dealt with this discrepancy: buying clothing as a group and sharing them between each other. Due to the inaccessibility of fashionable items, it was infeasible for each woman interested in fashion to have her own wardrobe of the latest desirable items, so instead groups of female friends would share a closet, rotating items between them. “In their world,” Chernyshova writes, “consumerism and communalism went hand in hand.”¹⁸⁹ This solution shows a fascinating combination of seemingly conflicting ideologies, yet it also demonstrates the social reworking of the Soviet economy in which consumers were “increasingly enmeshed in a complex network of goods circulation that did not necessarily involve a simple trip to a shop.”¹⁹⁰ State control did not in actuality dissuade consumerism, rather, it led to a combination of consumerist desire with

¹⁸⁸ Chernyshova, 2013. 153.

¹⁸⁹ Chernyshova, 2013. 122.

¹⁹⁰ Chernyshova, 2013. 99.

collectivist teachings to create an entirely unique form of collectivist consumerism, one which could only exist in a communist space like the Soviet Bloc.

The consumer sphere of the Soviet Union was much more layered than that of capitalist societies, out of pure necessity. Though communism and consumerism may seem at odds, evidence suggests that both concepts were able to coexist in the socially-driven second economy of the Soviet Bloc. “The peculiarities of the command economy and the constraints of ideology, in fact, meant that consumption required more mental and social effort than it did in the consumption- accommodating Western economies,” Natalia Chernyshova writes, “and so consumer goods always had amplified material and social, in addition to ideological, meaning in the Soviet Union.”¹⁹¹ Though research has been done into this area of study, the role which women played in the social connections of the Soviet social economy have often been overlooked. Very few monographs on Soviet consumer culture explore the extent to which women and the social connections between them kept the second economy alive throughout the Soviet period. Women, whose basic needs were the most neglected in the Soviet period, found ways to support themselves and their family through clever solutions and interdependence. Without their labor, neither the primary nor the second Soviet economies would have been able to function. Slavenka Drakulic writes in her memoir *How We Survived Communism and Even Laughed*, that “every mother ... can point to where communism failed, from the failures of the planned economy (and the consequent lack of food, milk), to the lack of apartments, child-care facilities, clothes, disposable diapers, or toilet paper. The banality of everyday life is where it has really failed, rather than on the level of ideology.”¹⁹² Indeed, research into Soviet consumption has repeatedly pointed to the idea that women were both the most affected by the shortage

¹⁹¹ Chernyshova, 2013. 12.

¹⁹² Drakulić, 1993. 18.

economy, and the drivers of the social economy. If the Soviet system was a ship, it wasn't so much that the women who participated in these Second Economy practices were aiming to keep the ship afloat, rather, they were just trying to keep the passengers onboard from drowning. Research indicates in this regard that, though often overlooked, the contribution of women in particular to the creation and survival of the Soviet consumer culture cannot be understated.

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Image Citations

- Figure 1: Unknown artist, full-page advertisement, *Rabotnitsa*, 1952 issue no. 7, back cover
http://nozdr.ru/biblio/j/rabot#arxiv_zhurnala
- Figure 2: Unknown artist, full-page advertisement, *Rabotnitsa*, 1952 issue no. 8, back cover
http://nozdr.ru/biblio/j/rabot#arxiv_zhurnala
- Figure 3: Unknown artist, full-page advertisement, *Rabotnitsa*, 1952 issue no. 9, back cover
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- Figures 4-6: Unknown artist, advertisement, *New York Times*, March 24, 1968
- Figure 7: Nicule Asciu, “Russia’s Blat Market Thrives by Moonlight,” *New York Times*, November 30, 1986. <https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1986/11/30/662186.html?pageNumber=206>
- Figure 8: B. Smenov, “Invisible Hats,” *Red Tape From Red Square*, 1974. <https://soviet.history.msu.edu/1980-2/underground-economy/underground-economy-images/#bwg196/989>
- Figures 9-12: Unknown artist, “The Lines to the Store Were a Kilometer Long— Memories From the USSR [trans.],” *Gazeta*, <https://gazeta.ua/ru/p/562465/2>
- Figure 13: Viktor Klushin, “Russians after shopping in Turkey,” *TASS*, 1995. <https://www.rbth.com/history/332676-russian-markets-chelnoki-traders>
- Figure 14: Taras Kostenko, “Shuttle Trade,” Belgorod, November 2007.
- Figure 15: Unknown Artist, “Shuttle Trade,” Yekaterinburg, July 2009.

Thank you to the members of my defense committee, Dr. Matthew Gerber, Dr. Sarah Wilson Sokhey, and especially to my primary research advisor, Dr. Erin Hutchinson, for their guidance in creating this thesis.

Thank you also to Katlin Risen for being my research and writing partner throughout this process, and to Hailey Jensen for being the first and last person to listen to all of my brainstorming, ideas, and timeline.

Last but not least, thank you to my parents, Paul and Diana Sava, whose stories of growing up in communist Romania are what inspired me to want to write this thesis.