

Everyday Life Under Communism

Special Issue

Everyday Life Under Communism: Practices and Objects*

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Why should we consider the everyday life of ordinary citizens in their countless struggles to obtain basic consumer goods if the priorities of their leaders lay elsewhere? For years, specialists of the Soviet Union and the people's democracies neglected the history of everyday life and, like the so-called "totalitarian" school, focused on political history, seeking to grasp how power was wielded over a society that was considered immobile and subject to the state's authority. Furthermore, studies on the eastern part of Europe were dominated by political scientists who were interested in the geopolitics of the Cold War. The way the field was structured meant that little attention was paid to sociological and anthropological perspectives that sought to understand social interaction.¹

In the 1970s, pioneering work on everyday life under Communism was undertaken in the field of social history, the rapid expansion of which was tied to a growing focus on revisionism. Moshe Lewin at the University of Pennsylvania and Sheila Fitzpatrick at the University of Chicago were among the first to initiate this shift in Soviet studies by examining history "from below." Meanwhile, through studies of the informal economy and identity construction, anthropologists and sociologists working on Central and Eastern Europe demonstrated the importance

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1. Frederic J. Fleron and Erik P. Hoffmann, eds., *Post-Communist Studies and Political Science: Methodology and Empirical Theory in Societology* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993).

of favor trading and resourcefulness to the way Communist regimes functioned.² The opening of the Soviet archives in the early 1990s, along with easier access to Eastern Europe and thus to testimonials and memories, uncovered sources that confirmed earlier hypotheses: citizens of the Eastern Bloc were not the “blind puppets” or “helpless victims” of dictatorial regimes; rather, they developed a whole host of tactics and ruses in their daily lives that allowed them to either accommodate or resist the regime, to either help shape its norms or circumvent them altogether.

From a quantitative perspective, the historiography of the 1990s was largely dominated by work written in English and German on the Soviet Union and the German Democratic Republic. Historians of the everyday life of these countries used the work of Michel de Certeau and Alf Lüdtke as their theoretical and conceptual framework.³ The appeal of Lüdtke’s project lay primarily in its micro-approach,

2. Dieter Cassel and Ulrich Cichy, “The Shadow Economy and Economic Policy in East and West,” in *The Unofficial Economy: Consequences and Perspectives in Different Economic Systems*, eds. Sergio Alessandrini and Bruno Dallago (Brookfield: Gower, 1987), 127-46; István R. Gábor, “The Second (Secondary) Economy,” *Acta Oeconomica* 22, nos. 3-4 (1979): 291-311; Gregory Grossman, “The ‘Second Economy’ of the USSR,” *Problems of Communism* 26, no. 5 (1977): 25-40; Grossman, “The Second Economy in the USSR,” in *The Underground Economy in the United States and Abroad*, ed. Vito Tanzi (Lexington: Lexington Books, 1982), 245-69; Christopher M. Hann, *Tázlár: A Village in Hungary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Hann, *A Village Without Solidarity: Polish Peasants in Years of Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985); Aron Katsenelinboigen, “Coloured Markets in the Soviet Union,” *Soviet Studies* 29, no. 1 (1977): 62-85; János Kenedi, *Do It Yourself: Hungary’s Hidden Economy* (London: Pluto Press, 1982); Gail Kligman, *The Wedding of the Dead: Ritual, Poetics, and Popular Culture in Transylvania* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); Maria Loó, *The Second Economy in Marxist States* (New York: Saint Martin’s Press, 1990); Patrick Michel, *La société retrouvée. Politique et religion dans l’Europe soviétisée* (Paris: Fayard, 1988); Steven L. Sampson, “The Informal Sector in Eastern Europe,” *Telos* 66 (1985-1986): 44-66; Sampson, “The Second Economy of the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe,” *The Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Sciences* 493, no. 1 (1987): 120-36; David Stark, “Bending the Bars of the Iron Cage: Bureaucratization and Informalization in Capitalism and Socialism,” *Sociological Forum* 4, no. 4 (1989): 637-64; Katherine Verdery, *Transylvanian Villagers: Three Centuries of Political, Economic, and Ethnic Change* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983); Janine R. Wedel, *The Private Poland: An Anthropologist’s Look at Everyday Life* (New York: Facts on File, 1986).

3. Michel de Certeau, *L’invention du quotidien*, vol. 1, *Arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990); Alf Lüdtke, ed., *Histoire du quotidien* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 1994); Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism: Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times, Soviet Russia in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Anne E. Gorsuch, *Youth in Revolutionary Russia: Enthusiasts, Bohemians, Delinquents* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2000); Jukka Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne: Common Luxury and the Ideals of the Good Life in Stalin’s Russia* (Oxford: Berg, 2003); Julie Hessler, *A Social History of Soviet Trade: Trade Policy, Retail Practices, and Consumption, 1917-1953* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004); Juliane Fürst, ed., *Late Stalinist Russia: Society Between Reconstruction and Reinvention* (London: Routledge, 2006); and Juliane Fürst, *Stalin’s Last Generation: Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

with its attention to the concerns of individuals and their relationship to power. It was important to study and understand how ordinary citizens participated in the implementation and preservation of dictatorial regimes. Individual experiences, grasped in their diversity, made it possible to understand the many possibilities determined by the available resources within particular social structures. As for the historiography in French, it was marked by the pioneering work of Sandrine Kott on everyday life in the GDR, which drew on Marcel Mauss's notion of the gift and the counter-gift as a means of understanding the mechanisms that shaped East German society.⁴

Meanwhile, in Russia, the first work done on everyday life during the Soviet period was influenced by Fernand Braudel's notion of "material civilization," as popularized by Aron Gurevich and Iurii Bessmertnyi, Russians specializing in Western countries.⁵ In their view, this notion made it possible to conceptualize the relationships between political, religious, social, and economic institutions in addition to lifestyles, "mentalities," and daily practices. The structures of everyday life were thus understood as ordinary practices determined by people's material environment and living conditions (housing, food, clothing, etc.) on the one hand and, on the other hand, by values, fears, hopes, and so on. What mattered was grasping the "spirit of the age," which meant that the individual was lost in the crowd.

This dual appropriation of Braudel's approach—first by Russian specialists of Western history, then by Russian historians of the Soviet Union who discovered Braudel through their colleagues' work—resulted in a static, descriptive, and largely unproblematized history of ways of life that was unconnected to the major events of twentieth-century history. This history, which was similar to the ethnography of lifestyles that Russians call *kraevedenie* and tends to be anecdotal and limited to enumerating routine and repetitive acts, met with considerable popular success. It detailed what the Soviets ate and wore, where they lived, and what they did with their time. These books, which flooded the market, used the word "everyday" in their titles and discredited this field of research for many years. At the same time, in Eastern Europe and particularly Bulgaria, the new historiography of everyday life drew heavily on the collection and publication of autobiographies, memoirs, and private archives, making it possible to consider the past from a new perspective.⁶

4. Sandrine Kott, *Le communisme au quotidien. Les entreprises d'État dans la société allemande* (Paris: Belin, 2001); Michel Christian and Emmanuel Droit, "Écrire l'histoire du communisme. L'histoire sociale de la RDA et de la Pologne communiste en Allemagne, en Pologne et en France," *Genèses* 61, no. 4 (2005): 118-33; Vincent Dubois et al., eds., "Jeux bureaucratiques en régime communiste," special issue, *Sociétés contemporaines* 57, no. 1 (2005); and Jean-Paul Depretto, "Pour une histoire sociale de la dictature soviétique," *Le Mouvement social* 196, no. 3 (2001): 3-19.

5. Nataliia L. Pushkareva, "Istoriia povsednevnosti: predmet i metody," in *Sotsial'naia istoriia. Ezhegodnik 2007* (Moscow: ROSSPEN, 2008), 9-54.

6. For example, see Ivan Elenkov and Daniela Koleva, *Detstvoto pri sotsializma: politicheski, institutsionalni i biografichni perspektivi* (Sofia: Riva, 2010).

The gradual arrival in Russia and Eastern and Central Europe of works by Western specialists of the Soviet Union (including translations) and the training of Eastern Europeans in the West led these various approaches to converge. The work of Elena Osokina, Elena Zubkova, Igor Narsky, and Sergei Zhuravlev suggested an approach that viewed everyday life as directly related to the economic and political activity of the state and endorsed the study of the “production and reproduction of real life” in all its dynamism and upheaval.⁷ Within this perspective, which suggests the influence of Lüdtke’s project, individuals are simultaneously objects and subjects: as the targets of political decisions, they react to these measures by actively adapting to new situations, inventing tactics to avoid the political forces imposing themselves from above. This research endeavors to avoid presenting Soviets as the “unwitting” spectators of historical events. Historical change and continuity are examined in relation to individual practices. In other words, this approach to the history of everyday life is written from both the “top” and the “bottom,” for it is in the interaction between political decisions and the responses of ordinary citizens that daily life appears in all its complexity as a constantly evolving phenomenon. This kind of history seeks to emphasize the forms through which the Soviets sought to appropriate the socio-economic and political framework of their daily lives and, in so doing, constantly transformed it.

As the 1990s progressed, the Stalinist period and the first half of the twentieth century in general increasingly retained the attention of scholars interested in the Soviet Union. Everyday Soviet life was seen as a history of repression, rationing, privation, famine, “survival strategies,” control, and social stratification. It was intimately tied to the campaign for Soviet culturedness (*kul'turnost'*), meaning the inculcation of proper manners and taste, which began in the second half of the 1930s. In these years, the regime recognized the legitimacy of consumption, notably through slogans proclaiming that life “became better and gayer” with the introduction of luxury consumer goods (Soviet champagne, caviar, chocolate, perfume, etc.), which were nonetheless accessible only to groups that the regime considered privileged.⁸

A historiographical split then occurred within the American revisionist school, pitting “neo-traditionalists” against “modernists.” The former group, primarily inspired by the work of Fitzpatrick, emphasized the persistence of tsarist structures in Soviet society: petitions, denunciations, patron-client relationships, *blat* (supposedly “useful” personal connections, allowing for the exchange of goods and services), the assignation of social status, and the mystification of power. The “modernists” sought to show that Communist Bloc countries had experienced a form of modernity

7. Elena Osokina, *Za fasadom “stalinskogo izobiliia.” Raspredelenie i rynek v snabzhenii naseleñiia v gody industrializatsii, 1927-1941* (Moscow: ROSSPÈN, 1998); Elena Zubkova, *Poslevoennoe sovetskoe obshchestvo: politika i povsednevnost', 1945-1953 gg.* (Moscow: ROSSPÈN, 1999); Sergei Zhuravlev, “Malen'kie liudi” i “bol'shaia istoriia”: *Inostrantsy moskovskogo Elektrozavoda v sovetskom obshchestve 1920-kh – 1930-kh gg.* (Moscow: ROSSPÈN, 2000); and Igor Narsky, *Zhizn' v katastrofe: Budni naseleniia Urala v 1917-1922 gg.* (Moscow: ROSSPÈN, 2001).

8. On the latter issue, see Gronow, *Caviar with Champagne*.

comparable to Western societies. Planning, social protection, expert participation in politics, surveillance, and both individual and collective discipline were presented as typical characteristics of the modernization process.⁹

The 2000s were marked by an increase in studies devoted to Communist Europe and a shift in historical interest toward the post-Stalinist thaw and the Brezhnev era, both of which benefited from the contributions of transnational history. Transnational history brought an end to the debate between “neo-traditionalists” and “modernists,” since by studying the connections and intersections between different countries, it was easier to discern their similarities and differences. Soviet society’s timid opening to the external world in the wake of Nikita Khrushchev’s policy of “peaceful coexistence” encouraged scholars to consider the transfer and circulation of ideas, actors, goods, and practices within the Communist Bloc and between Eastern and Western countries. Reforms aimed at improving the Soviet people’s material conditions in addition to competition with the West initiated new forms of consumption and leisure, which made it necessary to continually redefine and find new descriptions for the meaning of “Socialist” as opposed to “Capitalist.”¹⁰ Recent research on World War II has also looked at the impact of the circulation of foreign goods on social dynamics, wartime experiences in occupied territories, and the home front, as well as individual experience.¹¹ A twofold

9. The most notable works representing the latter approach include: Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Peter Holquist, *Making War, Forging Revolution: Russia's Continuum of Crisis, 1914-1921* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); and David L. Hoffmann, *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity (1917-1941)* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). On this historiographical debate, see Michael David-Fox, “Multiple Modernities vs. Neo-Traditionalism: On Recent Debates in Russian and Soviet History,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 54, no. 4 (2006): 535-55.

10. David Crowley and Susan E. Reid, eds., *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Crowley and Reid, eds., *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc* (Oxford: Berg, 2002); Crowley and Reid, eds., *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2010); Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Eleonory Gilburd and Larissa Zakharova, eds., “Repenser le Dégel: versions du socialisme, influences internationales et société soviétique,” special issue, *Cahiers du monde russe* 47, nos. 1-2 (2006); Polly Jones, ed., *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinisation: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era* (London: Routledge, 2006); Nadège Ragaru and Antonela Capelle-Pogăcean, eds., *Vie quotidienne et pouvoir sous le communisme. Consommer à l'Est* (Paris: Karthala, 2010); Sergei I. Zhuk, *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity, and Ideology in Soviet Dnepropetrovsk, 1960-1985* (Baltimore and Washington: The Johns Hopkins University Press and the Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2010); Larissa Zakharova, *S'habiller à la soviétique. La mode et le Dégel en URSS* (Paris: CNRS Éditions, 2011); and Anne E. Gorsuch, *All This is Your World: Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

11. For an overview of new approaches, see Alain Blum et al., eds., “L'Union soviétique et la Seconde Guerre mondiale,” special issue, *Cahiers du monde russe* 52, nos. 2-3 (2011); Masha Cerovic et al., eds., “Sortie de guerre. L'URSS au lendemain de la Grande Guerre patriotique,” special issue, *Cahiers du monde russe* 49, nos. 2-3 (2008); and Rebecca

movement has thus been at work, one that seeks to go beyond both the East-West divide and the split between the Soviet Union and the people's democracies. In this way, new historiographical trends have attempted to reconfigure the space in which the past is conceived. In the wake of the European Union's enlargement, the Communist past of the people's democracies is increasingly integrated into a common European past and considered as one phase in their shared history. These developments mean that it is no longer possible to think in terms of a "bloc," encouraging rather a more nuanced analysis and increased attention to the variety of experiences of everyday life.

Yet the majority of works discussed above were primarily interested in practices that constituted social relations, power relations, and the daily lives of those who inhabited Communist countries. Only very rarely were objects considered to play a full-fledged role in everyday life.¹² Thus, this special issue of the *Annales* is situated halfway between the study of practices, the relevance of which is well established for the history of daily life, and the more recent study of objects. It seeks to establish new perspectives by emphasizing the mediating role of objects in everyday social interactions. They can then be viewed, in their materiality, as the technical stakes of social life: they elicit actions, while consumer practices constantly reconfigure and modify their initial purposes in relation to new circumstances and occasions for interaction.¹³ Individuals appropriate objects, the value and social prestige of which are constantly redefined. Objects also establish hierarchies between individuals. They are like magnifying glasses that allow us to see moments, sensibilities, and changing social configurations on a daily basis.

Indeed, the distribution of objects as rewards was central to the social policies of Communist countries. Following the October Revolution, the distribution of noble and bourgeois property among workers and Bolshevik leaders at all levels, which was part of an urban campaign for housing redistribution, lent concrete meaning to the reversal of social hierarchies and confirmed the right of the neediest citizens to oppress those who were once the most privileged within the latter's own apartments, which were now transformed into communal residences.¹⁴ The

Manley, *To the Tashkent Station: Evacuation and Survival in the Soviet Union at War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009).

12. Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Siegelbaum, *The Socialist Car: Automobility in the Eastern Bloc* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011); and Olga Gurova, *Sovetskoe nizhnee bel'e: mezhdru ideologii i povsednechnost'iu* (Moscow: NLO, 2008).

13. For an overview of this approach, see Bernard Conein et al., eds., "Les objets dans l'action. De la maison au laboratoire," special issue, *Raisons pratiques* 4 (1993), and particularly Michel de Fornel, "Faire parler les objets. Perception, manipulation et qualification des objets dans l'enquête policière," *ibid.*, 241-66. This article draws on James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979). See also: Jean-Pierre Warnier, *Construire la culture matérielle. L'homme qui pensait avec ses doigts* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1999); Marie-Pierre Julien and Céline Rosselin, *La culture matérielle* (Paris: La Découverte, 2005).

14. Larissa Zakharova, "Le 26-28 Kamennostrovski, les tribulations d'un immeuble en révolution," in *Saint-Pétersbourg. Histoire, promenades, anthologie et dictionnaire*, ed.

appropriation of objects originating from “capitalist” countries modified social relations and resulted in new forms of interaction. The authorities established a hierarchy of consumer goods in which objects produced abroad were considered more valuable than local goods. This hierarchy found concrete expression in the creation of depots for rare goods, which were reserved for the elite, called “special distributors.” In this way, objects participated in the stratification of society, playing the role of symbolic markers. Their accumulation, however, could also be used as the basis for an accusation of corruption or betrayal of Communism’s moral beliefs against bureaucrats who fell from grace. Though the regime promised material abundance, the limits and characteristics of luxury remained fluid and transient, which explains society’s contradictory attitudes toward consumption.

The articles by Elena Zubkova and Nathalie Moine examine practices and forms of destitution and enrichment in daily life. Soviet beggars found themselves in an ambivalent situation. The authorities wanted to exclude them from the future Communist society, but, incapable of solving the begging problem, they simply concealed it from the 1930s until the mid-1950s so as not to contradict the USSR’s image as a prosperous state—even as they made it impossible to devise any form of welfare policy towards them. The launch of a program aimed at solving the begging problem in the second half of the 1950s led to a debate in the press, which exposed the contradictions between the official discourse and social reality. Alongside expressions of indignation and compassion for war heroes, who were extolled in propaganda even as they were often reduced to poverty, there emerged the stereotype of the “professional” beggar who grows rich by living a parasitic life and refusing to contribute to building a “shining future” through conscientious labor. While, for some, World War II meant disability and therefore extreme poverty, others profited from it by acquiring Western goods. As Moine demonstrates, growing rich by pillaging the defeated enemy met with no moral condemnation. On the contrary, the authorities encouraged Soviets in occupied territories to seize consumer goods and send them to the USSR. Yet this opened a breach in the world of Soviet consumption, and the authorities found themselves confronted with the unforeseen economic, social, and cultural consequences of an influx of foreign goods: the black market, distribution of goods at the local level through patron-client relationships without central oversight, embezzlement, social tension, the exposure and intensification of social hierarchies, and, finally, youth fashion, which was quickly stigmatized as *stiliagi* (from the Russian word *stil*, or “style”).¹⁵

How objects are used is inseparable from culture, insofar as it betrays consumers’ tastes and preferences, which are hierarchical—even if Communist states were officially very concerned with offering all citizens access to culture. Cultural heritage proved problematic to the extent that the regime felt compelled to distinguish progressive revolutionary culture from decadent bourgeois culture. In Bulgaria, the

Lorraine de Meaux (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2003), 473-505; Zakharova, “Dvenadtsat’ stul’ev dlia diktatury proletariata,” *Rodina* 8 (2000): 57-61.

15. Mark Edele, “Strange Young Men in Stalin’s Moscow: The Birth and Life of the Stiliagi, 1945-1953,” *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 50, no. 1 (2002): 37-61.

“Sovietization” of culture studied by Antonela Capelle-Pogăcean and Nadège Ragaru expressed a shift in repertory (Soviet and national works replaced “Nazi” or American art), as well as changes in audiences, viewing practices, and bodily postures in cinemas and theaters. Yet such entertainment venues lent themselves poorly to becoming places where codes of self-presentation and “good (Socialist) manners” for viewing plays or movies could be elaborated: bodies ultimately proved resistant to efforts to manage leisure time and cultural activities. Narsky’s essay presents a mirror image of Capelle-Pogăcean and Ragaru’s study. It shows how fragments of prerevolutionary cultural practices survived into the Soviet period and forcefully reemerged in post-Soviet Russia. He studies diary writing, which historiography has often associated with the “disciplining” of individuals by the Stalinist regime specifically encouraging the practice.¹⁶ Yet by granting particular attention to the objects of these practices—notebooks, photographs, and drawings, which were often slipped inside diaries and memoirs—Narsky demonstrates that, on the contrary, the graduates of tsarist women’s colleges who had become Soviet citizens kept diaries (as did their daughters) that still respected early twentieth-century styles.

Narsky also emphasizes the importance of direct communication within families. This conclusion contradicts the image of the Soviet Union as a society that had been reduced to total silence, even within the most intimate of spaces, due to omnipresent surveillance.¹⁷ Larissa Zakharova, on the other hand, shows how long-distance communication was not self-evident for Soviets under Stalin, less because of mail censorship or wiretapping than because access was difficult and communication tools and services were unequal. If objects, simply because they are present in one’s surroundings, are capable of eliciting action, they are also resources that can trigger a social dynamic. Conversely, distance from “social” objects can make mobilizing for action more difficult. Thus, workers on the big Stalinist building projects or kolkhoz farmers, who knew that the nearest mailbox was located some ten kilometers from their homes, engaged in very little long-distance communication and tended to live in communities that were closed in upon themselves. The perception of objects—in this instance, communication tools—thus depended on the type of activity with which they were associated, such as communication services and networks. In places where services and networks were better developed, telephones and mailboxes afforded greater opportunities. Moreover, defective services and equipment also offered opportunities for action, notably in the form of complaints demanding that services function properly and that resources be fairly allocated.

16. Véronique Garros et al., eds., *Intimacy and Terror: Soviet Diaries of the 1930s* (New York: The New Press, 1995); Brigitte Studer et al., eds., *Parler de soi sous Staline. La construction identitaire dans le communisme des années 1930* (Paris: Éditions de la Maison des sciences de l’homme, 2002); Igal Halfin, ed., *Language and Revolution: Making Modern Political Identity* (London: Routledge, 2002); and Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

17. For example, see Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin’s Russia* (London: Allen Lane, 2007).

Similarly, Małgorzata Mazurek addresses the everyday inequalities and the search for justice that were exacerbated by shortages of consumer goods in Socialist Poland. The struggle against the black market was waged in the name of Communist morality and the just distribution of food resources, but this discursive rationalization masked interethnic conflicts and even a degree of anti-Semitism. In practice, the authorities used the Stalinist supply system as their model: rather than allocating goods impartially, they followed a highly hierarchical method of distribution, in which privileges were traded for political loyalty.¹⁸ The corrupt civil servants who ran the state business—the new “profiteers”—have often been cited as the reason for this discrepancy between egalitarian discourse and actual stratification, as well as for the shortages and supply problems. Yet the imaginary association of salesmen with “thieves” allowed the leadership to deflect conflict and discontent and thus keep them under control—until the 1980s when individualism finally won the battle against the morality of the Socialist welfare state.

Consumption and, more generally, the material world thus constituted a true challenge for Communist regimes. The consumerist aspirations of East European citizens prevailed over the ascetic ideal, and the authorities felt compelled to respond to this, particularly during the Cold War, when the quality of everyday life became a stake in the competition between regimes.¹⁹ While cultivating the myth of material abundance and future equality, the authorities wielded power by distributing goods and resources on the basis of social status. This resulted in tensions and contradictions that undermined the legitimacy of the Communist project: in economies afflicted by chronic shortages, consumer goods assumed great symbolic importance, which differed considerably from their role in market economies.

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18. On this kind of “contract” between the Stalinist regime and the Soviet middle classes, see Vera S. Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middle Class Values in Soviet Fiction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

19. Susan E. Reid, “Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev,” *Slavic Review* 61, no. 2 (2002): 211-52; Reid, “Who Will Beat Whom? Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4 (2008): 855-904.