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SOCIOCULTURAL MINORITIES

Edited by VYTIS ČIUBRINSKAS and JONAS MARDOSA

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*Forever, until it Was no More*. Princeton, Oxford: Oxford University Press), teigiančių, kad dauguma žmonių Sovietų Sąjungoje tikėjo sovietine sistema ir rėmė pagrindinius jos principus. Tačiau šie klausimai turėtų būti skirti kitiems autoriams ir

nagrinėjami kitose knygoje. Šioje knygoje G. Smidchenas padarė tai, ko siekė – parodė, kad „Dainuojanti revoliucija“ – tai ne tiesiog graži metafora, bet raktas, paaiškinantis neįtikėtiną neprievartinio trijų Baltijos šalių pasipriešinimo sėkmės fenomeną.

*Ainė Ramonaitė*  
Vilniaus universitetas

**Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964–1985.** Neringa Klumbyte, Gulnaz Sharafutdinova (eds.). Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012. 260 p.

When teaching topics on Eastern Europe, I often face the difficulty of finding good literature to give my students a profound idea about what everyday life and conditions were like during the Soviet era. I always end up using chapters – often written by historians – that with a somewhat predictable glance to the future attempt to explain the Soviet past in terms of the Soviet dissolution. Being an anthropologist, it torments me that past events thus are analyzed with the wisdom of hindsight. Another issue that surfaces in such historic overviews is the focus on failure. Indeed, there seems to be an underlying agenda to explore all of the things that were ‘wrong’ with the Soviet regime, and thus implicitly to celebrate the victory of liberalism. While such literature has some justification as we try to understand subsequent events, it leaves no space for what we could call ‘the Soviet experience(s)’. I was therefore more than pleased to read Neringa Klumbyte and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova’s edited volume on the era of late socialism. It offers exactly what I have been missing in class: Soviet life analyzed in its own right

and complexity, with the authors neither making attempts to explain ensuing historic events nor pointing out certain Soviet ‘failures’. Thus, we are provided with a Soviet ‘dwelling experience’ – a term originally coined by Tim Ingold in his phenomenological exploration of the world, here adapted to express my experience when reading Klumbyte and Sharafutdinova’s volume.

The book consists of an introduction, an afterword, and eight chapters written by scholars from a variety of disciplines: anthropology, history, sociology, political science and Russian studies. It focuses on an era that otherwise has received little attention – the period under Leonid Brezhnev (1964–1985). This era is viewed as *sui generis* within the larger Soviet experience, as it was characterized by relative stability, prosperity, and a focus on dialogue and moral upbringing. The volume has two interconnected objectives. Firstly, it aims to offer an alternative perspective on the USSR by avoiding viewing it as the binary opposite of the ‘normal’ West. Thus, it actually stresses the normality of the Soviet regime by exploring the rich and diverse features of everyday life. Secondly, rather than emphasizing the differences between liberalism and socialism, the volume investigates their similarities. After all, two regimes striving to convince their citizens

that they possess the 'correct' ideology and promote the 'right' form of livelihood ultimately make use of many of the same instruments when doing so.

Through their analysis of late Soviet society, the editors and authors do not accept the idea of 'stagnation under Brezhnev'. Their focus instead is on exploring citizens' options for living fulfilling lives under the Soviet regime, and they view these options *in their own right*. Consumption is thus not seen as a longing for the West, but as a way of expressing one's Soviet citizenship. Humor is not a repressed form of resistance, but a way of envisioning oneself as a moral citizen of the Soviet Union. Discos are used to celebrate the national homeland. Football becomes a field of individuality, and yoga one of agency. These examples underpin the very question the editors ask: What happens if we stop viewing people who lived in the late Soviet era as repressed, in opposition to the regime or living in endless shortage, and move on to exploring how they expressed agency, individualism and creativity in everyday life – these all being integrated features of a Soviet personhood? This question is not posed as such in order to deny the existence of shortage or resistance, but in order to view other integrated aspects of the complex Soviet life so often neglected and unheard of in the literature. The front cover seems to capture such a picture of everyday experience, showing people sitting on and grouped around a bench on a shopping street surrounded by children, a man lighting a cigarette, no one seeming to be in a hurry. Unfortunately, I could not find any information about the cover – the exact place of the picture, the year it was taken, who the photographer was, its copyright information or anything like that. A qualified guess is that it was taken on what is currently Laisvės Alėja in Kaunas, Lithuania in the late 1960s. But this remains a guess.

The topics dealt with by the authors vary a great deal and follow no apparent structure. One might think of the volume as being a bouquet of flowers of various shapes and colors. To suit my own taste, I will, when discussing the chapters in this review, group them together according to the themes I traced in the book. I have categorized them using the following headings: 1) 'Middle-class and individual expressions'; 2) 'Literature-based analyses of life in the USSR'; and 3) 'The twins: socialism and liberalism'.

I readily admit that there are various other options available for grouping the volume's chapters – for example, by focusing on gender roles, having a pure middle-class focus or by focusing on moral upbringing. Thus, my groupings are just one way of interpreting and reading connections into the book's chapters. In the sections below I will explore these groupings further.

The chapters I have placed under the heading of 'Middle-class and individual expressions' offer an impression of everyday life, consumption and various ways of expressing one's individual self as a citizen in the late Soviet era. Anna Paretskaya argues in Chapter 2 that, contrary to popular opinion, a middle class was not absent from Soviet society. 'Middle class' should here not only be understood in terms of consumption, but also in terms of lifestyle choices as well as perceptions and expressions of one's individuality. Paretskaya goes on to argue that today's Russian middle class is not a product of reforms made over the last 15–20 years, but of the seeds of individualism planted in the Brezhnev era. The Soviet middle class surfaced not only through increased consumption, but also through a broader acceptance and even encouragement of individualism and creativity in the post-Stalin years. The middle class is thus

inherently linked to expressing individuality and taking responsibility for one's own destiny, as people live through what Paretskaya refers to as an old Russian saying: 'Everyone is a blacksmith of his own happiness'. I know the same saying exists in my home country of Denmark, where it is used by right-wing parties to stress the individual's responsibility to take control of his own destiny, and thus lessen pressure on the welfare state. I have no doubt that the same saying can be found in many languages – which questions the statement that it is an old *Russian* saying. This in fact supports the very premise of the volume: that 'Soviet' and 'liberalist' ideals may be much more closely intertwined than is commonly assumed.

The following chapter by Sergei I. Zhuk analyzes patterns of consumption in the late Soviet era by exploring how discotheques emerged in the Soviet space. These were not copies of similar entertainment offerings present in the West, but were created and cultivated to express national and Soviet sentiments. In discussing the case of Ukrainian discotheques, Zhuk emphasizes how the music followed Soviet ideology but was intertwined with national feelings for the homeland. The latter fact was actually more disturbing for the KGB than the discos' supposed Western resemblance.

Freedom, individual choices and liberal behavior are discussed further in Chapters 5 and 6, written by Larisa Honey and Robert Edelman respectively. While Honey focuses on yoga and alternative practices in the late Soviet era, Edelman analyzes football fans' preferences for certain teams. While dealing with largely different subjects, both chapters explore areas of everyday life where the Soviet citizen could navigate a free space to follow personal preferences and obtain a degree of self-fulfillment.

All of the authors with chapters in 'Literature-based analyses of life in the USSR' deal, in one way or another, with literature available to the Soviet people, and the works chosen often provide a moral and humorous commentary on Soviet life. Literature held a mirror up to readers in which they could see a reflection of their own lives.

Humor is dealt with in two chapters, one by Neringa Klumbyte, who explores the links between humor and moral citizenship in Lithuania, the other by Olga Livshin, who deals with the subjects of humor, sexuality and emasculation by focusing on the work of the Soviet writer Yuz Aleshkovsky. While taking different paths – Klumbyte's piece analyzes the popular Lithuanian magazine *The Broom* while Livshin's provides a literature review of a specific author – both chapters look at the underlying ways Soviet life, citizenship and conditions were conceptualized. This was done by creating recognizable and humorous stories and anecdotes that Soviet people could relate to – thereby creating a particular 'Soviet laughter'. While Klumbyte's chapter is a remark on the moral upbringing of the people, Livshin's focuses on the impossible demands placed on the Soviet male, which often ended up depriving him of his very masculinity.

Gender is further discussed by Benjamin M. Sutcliffe in his chapter on I. Grekova's novel *The Hotel Manager*. The novel scrutinizes women's position during the Soviet era, with family life and careers its central subjects. Suffocating marriages, male alcoholism, and the realization and liberalization of women's potential through work are presented through the improbable story of Vera, a woman who, after a disappointing marriage, ends up with both a prestigious job and the love of her youth as she turns 60. A broad Soviet readership could relate to the different as-

pects of her life, with readers recognizing in her tale their own hopes, dreams, difficult marriages and domestic problems. The novel was so popular that it was pilfered from libraries, Sutcliffe states.

My last subgroup, 'The twins: socialism and liberalism', consists of one chapter and the afterword. In these pieces the particular focus is on the similarities of the two Cold War regimes. The chapter by Kate Brown offers a comparison of 'closed' nuclear towns in the USSR and the USA: Chelyabinsk in the Urals, and Richland in the east of Washington state. Brown refers to these as 'twin cities', because living in a closed nuclear town created similar experiences. On the one hand, town inhabitants were a part of a thriving community with well-paid jobs, community housing, good schools and a low crime rate. On the other hand, they pursued secret lives, as no outsider was supposed to know about these places or the kind of work carried out there. Reportedly, a wrong question asked by a curious wife in Richland would result in an entire family disappearing overnight, as security agents constantly checked on the inhabitants and listened to their phone conversations. While enjoying good everyday conditions and pursuing a middle-class lifestyle – if not higher middle class – people were left to worry about saying or doing something that could see them expelled from the community. This was the case in both places. Ironically, while the US government feared that it had created a socialist community by providing so many public goods, on its side the USSR feared that the abundance in Chelyabinsk would inspire capitalism. The idea of 'twins' is

again explored in the afterword, where Dominic Boyer, on a more abstract and philosophical level, writes about the Battle of the Titans. As much as they wish to, he concludes, socialism and liberalism will never get rid of each other. As scholars, he impels, we have a task at hand: to move away from the singular frame of reference and start thinking about the plurality of ways in which socialist and liberalist ideologies existed and still exist – and the myriad ways in which they are interlinked. Boyer asks, is socialism really a vanishing feature in our world, or is it time to shift the scholarly focus from postsocialist to neosocialist studies?

*Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964–1985* takes you on a journey in which different aspects of everyday life are investigated. The variety of themes, as well as the vastly different backgrounds of the authors, makes it difficult to find a particular focus, as we are taken from gender issues, to nuclear power plants, football games, discotheques, yoga practices and other ordinary or particular sites of the late Soviet experience. This broad variety might stem from very practical considerations: to find scholars that do in fact pursue this line of late Soviet research, and to include them. Or, it might be a scholarly endeavor: to look at all areas of late Soviet society in order to find aspects of middle-class life, individuality, creativity and agency. The volume is surely worth reading and will appeal to a broad audience drawn from various disciplines, as the plurality of subjects will ensure that the reader will find something of particular interest and use.

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