

Watching Television and Emotional Commitment in the Late Soviet Union

by Kirsten Bönker

Abstract

As a popular consumer good, television transformed Soviet households' material culture and lifestyle. It interconnected time and space in a new way and helped to constitute the Soviet audience as 'emotional communities'. It did so by providing a specific entertainment culture that supported the regime's claim of guaranteeing a decent lifestyle to many groups of Soviet society. Oral history interviews reveal that people's representations of Soviet television are a still persistent source of emotional commitment to the former Soviet life.

Key words: television, late Soviet Union, emotional bonding, post-Soviet nostalgia, oral history interviews.

“I sincerely believed to live in the best country, everything [was] fine.” Georgii, who frankly admitted that he has thought this way in Soviet times, was born in Leningrad in 1953 and raised in the family of an established scientist. He also confirmed his perception of Soviet TV¹ contents insightfully: “I believed that everything [he aimed at TV broadcasts] was true.”²

In an interview in 2010, Georgii was asked to talk about his TV watching habits during the Soviet period of his life. I take his remarks as a starting point to explore Soviet television's capacity to evoke an emotional commitment among viewers towards their Soviet life. Thus, I am interested in affirmative as well as rejecting emotions that were stimulated by watching television and that potentially contributed

to the cohesion of the Soviet society or challenged it.³ This question ties into the much

3 Emotions constitute a highly complex phenomenon and unsolved interdisciplinary problem incurring competing and sometimes even opposite answers to the question of how to explore them. Historians find it difficult to detect them beyond their linguistic, discursive or symbolic representations. Based on a predominantly social-constructivist approach, historical research mostly does not differentiate between the inner self and the outside representation of emotions. This means that historians more or less disregard emotions as a psychological state of mind that may exist without language. The obvious reason is that we have no or at least only few sources to analyze emotions in past times apart from their external representations. For similar pragmatic reasons I will explore here the emotional setting in the course of watching television on the basis of oral history interviews. Therefore, I tend to the social-constructivist approach in order to trace, on the one hand, how the respondents retrospectively represent their emotional state watching Soviet television. On the other hand, I aim to relate these emotional attitudes to the socio-cultural factors possibly shaping and framing them. For this purpose, I draw on the concept called 'media culture of emotions' ('Medien-Gefühlkultur'). In my understanding, the term describes a process of emotional commitment that referred to the socio-political subtext of the TV program representing the Soviet way of life. Thus, the 'media culture of emotions' was immediately entangled with an officially routinized and socially accepted popular culture. Cf. Rüdiger Schnell, *Haben Gefühle eine Geschichte? Aporien einer History of Emotions*, Teil 1, Göttingen: V&R, 2015, pp. 15–59; Ulrich Saxer, Martina Märki-Koepp, *Medien-Gefühlkultur: Zielgruppenspezifische Gefühlsdramaturgie als journalistische Produktionsroutine*, München: Oelschläger, 1992; Knut Hickethier, “Das Fernsehen der DDR”, *Wie im Westen, nur anders: Medien in der DDR*, ed. Stefan Zahlmann, Berlin: Panama-Verlag, 2010, pp. 119–130, here p. 123, 128.

1 When speaking of “Soviet TV”, I refer to different interest groups and actors that influenced television programs: the professional groups such as journalists, editorial staff members, artists, producers, directors, anchor people, presenters and technical staff, on the one hand, and representatives of party and state organs trying to impinge on the programming on the other hand. This is, however, far from a sharp differentiation between the fields of action and interests, as many people belonged as party members e.g. at least to two spheres.

2 Georgii is higher educated, but currently works as a minor public employee in St. Petersburg. Like his father he was a member of the Communist Party. The interview was conducted by Elena Bogdanova in September 2010 in St. Petersburg.

broader discussion on how to explain the durability of the Soviet Union during the 1960s and 1970s until perestroika. Georgii's interpretations raise questions about the role of television in this context. Like in capitalist Europe, television became part of everyday life from mid-1960s on. My thesis, that I try to outline here, is that many people felt entertained by Soviet television broadcasts and thus engaged with a new Soviet popular culture which was not least shaped by the medium. Television constituted a dynamic force within the field of new materialism, mass consumption, and the demand for extended leisure time.⁴ Kristin Roth-Ey has demonstrated that early TV enthusiasts envisioned the new medium bringing back 'truth' into Soviet society after Stalinism and shaping the New Soviet Man. However, the search for 'cultural authority' turned out to be much more ambivalent than TV producers initially thought.⁵ The Communist Party developed its own demands for cultural education towards the medium, whereas the audience perceived TV more and more as the most important medium of entertainment. The viewer letters to Central TV provide insight into the audience's preferences: Most viewers just wanted to relax and to get into a good mood watching television at home.⁶

4 Susan E. Reid, "Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Krushchev", *Slavic Review* 61, 2002, pp. 211–252; David Crowley, Susan E. Reid, "Introduction: Pleasures in Socialism?", *Pleasures in Socialism. Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc*, eds. David Crowley, Susan E. Reid, Evanston/Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2010, pp. 3–51.

5 Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War*, Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2011, pp. 223–280; see also Simon Huxtable, "The Problem of Personality on Soviet Television, 1950s–1960s", *VIEW. Journal of European Television History and Culture* 3, 2014, 5, pp. 119–130.

6 Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time*, p. 201; Kirsten Bönker, "Dear television workers...": TV consumption and Political Communication in the Late Soviet Union", *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 56, 2015, 2–3, pp.

Roth-Ey argues that the idea of a self-sufficient and superior Soviet media culture became "a life-and-death exercise in self-defense". She suggests that the Soviet Union "lost the cultural Cold War", as it failed to establish an attractive media empire.⁷ I would be more cautious about this interpretation of media cultures as binary black boxes. Exchanges of television programs among the socialist states, between eastern and western TV stations, broadcasts of common features within the transmission range of *Intervision* or live link-ups between *Eurovision* and *Intervision* let us suppose that cross-references and amalgamations prospered across the Iron Curtain.⁸

Based on a sample of 80 interviews covering practices of watching television in the late Soviet Union,⁹ this article focuses on the

371–399.

7 Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time*, pp. 7, 23.

8 Cf. Katalin Lustyik, "From a Socialist Endeavour to a Commercial Enterprise: Children's Television in East-Central Europe", *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism*, eds. Anikó Imre, Timothy Havens, and Katalyn Lustyik, New York and London: Routledge, 2013, pp. 105–122; Thomas Beutelschmidt, Richard Oehmig, "Connected Enemies? Programming Transfer between East and West during the Cold War and the Example of East German Television", *VIEW. Journal of European Television History and Culture* 3/5, 2014, pp. 60–67; Yulia Yurtaeva, "Intervision: Searching for Traces", *VIEW. Journal of European Television History and Culture* 3/5, 2014, pp. 23–34; Heather L. Gumbert, "Exploring the transnational media exchange in the 1960s", *VIEW. Journal of European Television History and Culture* 3/5, 2014, pp. 50–59; Michael Meyen, *Denver Clan und Neues Deutschland: Medienutzung in der DDR*, Berlin: Christoph Links Verlag, 2003; about Poland: Patryk Wasiak, "The Great Epoque of the Consumption of Imported Broadcasts: West European Television Channels and Polish Audiences during the System Transition", *VIEW. Journal of European Television History and Culture* 3/5, 2014, pp. 68–78.

9 For more details see my forthcoming book *Brave New World? Watching TV and Political Communication in the Late Soviet Union*, Lanham/MD: Rowman & Littlefield/Lexington Books, 2018. The sample comprises 48 women and 32 men born between 1929 and 1965. Women are overrepresented for pragmatic reasons, because they were much more willing to be interviewed. Most of the interviews were conducted by experienced Russian sociologists and

“ordinary” TV viewer.¹⁰ The interviews were conducted between 2010 and 2012 in a phase of increasing nostalgic outlooks on the Soviet past. The sample does not thoroughly represent the social structure of European Russia. Instead it drew on a variety of ideal types.¹¹ People with higher education are overrepresented in relation to the Soviet populace, because they tend to offer a greater variety of viewing habits and to assess TV content in a more differentiated way than people with less education.¹²

First, I will give a quick overview of the phenomenon of nostalgia that we encounter in the interviews. Second, I will outline how

historians. The guideline was applied in a flexible way to react to the topics the respondents touched upon. The questions should stir the interviewees to think of earliest memories of television and then to look back on concrete practices and changes during her or his life. This kind of “interview of remembrance” refers to: Gabriele Rosenthal, *Erlebte und erzählte Lebensgeschichte: Gestalt und Struktur biographischer Selbstbeschreibungen*, Frankfurt a.M., New York: Campus, 1995, pp. 70–98; Roswitha Breckner, “Von den ‚Zeitzeugen‘ zu den ‚Biographen‘: Methoden der Erhebung und Auswertung lebensgeschichtlicher Interviews [1994]”, *Oral History*, ed. Julia Obertreis, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2012, pp. 131–151.

¹⁰ “Ordinary” refers to people who did not enjoy access to the elites’ system of distribution. They were defined by their lack of formal political power. The notion “regime” refers to official representatives of organizations such as the party, government, trade unions etc.

¹¹ For the ideal types of viewers, I follow Michael Meyen’s approach to GDR television audience. He identified five ideal types: the compliant, the affirmative, the indifferent, the reserved and the subversive one. Cf. Michael Meyen, *Einschalten, Umschalten, Ausschalten? Das Fernsehen im DDR-Alltag*, Leipzig: Leipziger Universitäts-Verlag, 2003, pp. 98–109.

¹² The majority of the respondents were urban dwellers, although rural areas are well represented. During the Soviet era, they primarily lived in the cities and counties of Moscow, Leningrad, Kuibyshev (Samara), Rostov on Don, Yaroslavl, Irkutsk, and Kemerovo. All levels of education were included, but academics (64% among women, 70% among men) constitute the majority of respondents. The interviewees belonged to different social groups and differed in their purchasing power, privileges, and social networks.

watching TV became part of leisure practices. In the third part I will take up a perspective on television’s capacity to familiarize societal topics, ideas, and values by engaging in the discourse of the ‘good Socialist life’. Although it especially does so in the field of entertainment and popular culture, television was not devoid of political potential. I will argue that television became a force that decisively shaped the ‘politics of pleasure’¹³ by choosing entertainment topics with everyday relevance. This means that television was able to create meanings and interpretations on which viewers could negotiate. I track Stuart Hall’s interpretation according to which television could be a source of social consensus. One should not paint a harmonious and uncontested picture of Soviet popular culture. However, my point is that Soviet television at least suggested interpretations that could be accepted by viewers without necessarily fully agreeing. I give more emphasis to the idea that television refers to broadly familiar interpretation frameworks in order to have made ‘ordinary’ viewers to go along with them.¹⁴ Certainly, the frameworks of interpretation in a Soviet-style society were much straighter than in liberal systems. But Soviet television, nonetheless, opened up a variety of interpretations from hegemonic to oppositional readings. The turn to less overt and less violent control after Stalin’s death changed the rules of communication. It went hand in hand with the search for

¹³ I borrow this term without fully adopting the cultural studies’ suggestion of a hegemonic order that is contested by ‘oppositional’ popular pleasure. See the discussion in *Politik des Vergnügens: Zur Diskussion der Populärkultur in den Cultural Studies*, eds. Udo Göttlich, Rainer Winter, Köln: Halem, 2000.

¹⁴ See Stuart Hall, “Die strukturierte Vermittlung von Ereignissen”, *Grundlagentexte zur Fernsehwissenschaft: Theorie – Geschichte – Analyse*, eds. Ralf Adelman et al., Konstanz: UVK, 2001, pp. 344–375, 357.

more pleasure and joy, with the cultural thaw, and with the pressing question how to balance individual and collective 'Soviet' interests.¹⁵

Interviews, Commitment, and Post-Soviet Nostalgia

Oral history interviews are not an easy type of source, especially as the interviewees may tend towards nostalgia.¹⁶ However, interviews stimulate the respondents to update memories by entangling temporal and spatial layers of the Soviet past with current perceptions. Although nostalgia differs from contemporary contentedness, the respondents' narratives may reveal the communicative foundation of the society. They give us a notion of how the interviewees attribute sense to their past Soviet lives by contextualizing their memories.¹⁷

15 See the articles in *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc*, eds. David Crowley, Susan E. Reid, Evanston/Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2010; Oksana Bulgakowa, *Cine-Weathers: "Soviet Thaw Cinema in the International Context"*, *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s*, eds. Eleonor Gilburd and Denis Kozlov, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013, pp. 436–480; *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*, ed. Polly Jones, Abingdon: Routledge, 2006.

16 Nostalgia is a phenomenon that involves different groups of agents from within and outside the respective society. For a conceptualization with regard to former socialist societies see the instructive book of Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, p. xviii. Boym conceptualized nostalgia as consisting of two narratives, the reflective and the restorative one. The restorative strategy seems to have preponderance in contemporary societies of former bloc states. Nostalgia is a somehow ubiquitous phenomenon in all former socialist states. For nostalgia in contemporary Russia see recently Ekaterina Kalinina, "Multiple faces of the nostalgia channel in Russia", *VIEW. Journal of European Television History and Culture* 3/5, 2014, pp. 108–118. With regard to nostalgic TV consumption in the Czech Republic: Veronika Pehe, "Responses to *The Thirty Cases of Major Zeman* in the Czech Republic", *VIEW. Journal of European Television History and Culture* 3/5, 2014, pp. 100–107.

17 See for the effect Cold War chronotopes still have today: Alaina Lemon, "Sympathy for the Weary State? Cold War Chronotopes and Moscow Others", *Com-*

Further, Soviet television has itself interlaced different time layers and dimensions of space. From its beginnings in the mid-1950s, viewers perceived television as having opened a "window to the world", as some respondents put it.¹⁸ Current television complicates these layers even more by rerunning Soviet features today. In this context, the interviews reveal self-perceptions, individual practices, motives, and interpretations on TV watching and media use.

Georgii's statements on the credibility of Soviet television contradict long established arguments claiming that television did a great deal to destabilize Socialist states.¹⁹ And indeed, new research on Socialist mass media takes another track: Some researchers have recently underlined socialist television's capacity to attract viewers.²⁰ Historian Paulina Bren explains the great popularity of Jaroslav Dietl's TV series by showing how they manifested the normalization of daily life. They had become the CSSR's "shared common places" during the 1970s and 1980s and were symbols of the "banality of normalization".²¹

parative Studies in Society and History 51/4, 2009, pp. 832–864.

18 With special regard to the evening news program *Vremia* (Time): Christine Evans, "A 'Panorama of Time': the Chronotopes of *Programma Vremia*", *Ab Imperio: Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space* 2, 2010, pp. 121–146.

19 Cf. Kurt R. Hesse, *Westmedien in der DDR: Nutzung, Image und Auswirkungen bundesrepublikanischer Hörfunks und Fernsehens*, Köln: Wissenschaft und Politik, 1988.

20 Meyen, *Denver Clan*, chapter 4; Heather L. Gumbert, *Envisioning Socialism. Television and the Cold War in the German Democratic Republic*, Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2014, pp. 135–159; Sabina Mihelj, "The Politics of Privatization: Television Entertainment and the Yugoslav Sixties", *The Socialist Sixties: The Global Movement in the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and Cuba*, eds. Anne Gorsuch and Diane Koenker, Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2013, pp. 251–267.

21 Paulina Bren, *The Greengrocer and his TV: The Culture of Communism After the 1968 Prague Spring*, Ithaca, NY and London: Cornell University Press, 2010, pp. 202–206.

The banality of normal life, one could argue, was the downside of the new consumerist lifestyle with its privatized leisure practices.²² It was the seed of emotional commitment towards the socialist regimes, because television opened up a place for negotiation between TV program-makers, journalists, artists, and the party elite.²³ Although most of the TV staff became party members until the 1970s, the negotiations crisscrossed the lines of political control as television provided new media logics that were more difficult to control.²⁴

Georgii's narrative very well represents the retrospective affirmation to the lost Soviet state that often disregarded aspects of control and repression.²⁵ Today, Russian state television circulates representations of the Soviet social life via Soviet crafted serials and films. Thus, it is television, in particular, that keeps Soviet signs, interpretations, values, and emotions current.²⁶ This kind of circulation reminds us not to presuppose that television destabilized the political regime and to draw a continuous

line from a westerly supposed incredibility of television as a source of information from our western perspective to its would-be rejection as a pleasure-giving entertainment medium. Apart from the audience living on the Soviet periphery most viewers had no access to foreign TV programs that might have disturbed Soviet media representations. Even listening to foreign radio stations like *Radio Liberty* should not be supposed to be a practice of media use that necessarily generated criticism on the Soviet way of life.²⁷

Leisure Time and the Spread of Television

Television substantially changed the Soviet lifestyle. Recent research strongly suggests that the consumer culture of the 1960s and 1970s became a cohesive factor that rather held the regime and society together instead of destabilizing it because of the deficiencies of the consumer society.²⁸ Small family apartments as well as technical household equipment such as refrigerators, vacuum cleaners, radios, and TV sets became symbols of the improving quality of life for many people after the late 1950s.²⁹ During the 1960s however, TV sets had constituted more or less luxury goods, before they lost their aura of singularity as former Soviet TV viewers indicated. Many of the respondents reported that TV sets

22 Lifestyle, notions of personality, individuality, and consumption gained an intrinsic relationship since Khrushchev had promised to catch up with the USA. See Larissa Zakharova, *S'habiller à Soviétique: La mode et le Dégel en URSS*, Paris: CNRS Ed., 2011; Anna Paretskaya, "A Middle Class without Capitalism? Socialist Ideology and Post-Collectivist Discourse in the Late-Soviet Era", *Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964-1985*, eds. Neringa Klumbytė and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013, pp. 43-66.

23 See Christine Evans, "Song of the Year and Soviet Culture in the 1970s", *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 12/3, 2011, pp. 617-645.

24 Dana Mustata, "Television in the Age of (Post-) Communism: The Case of Romania", *Popular Television in Eastern Europe During and Since Socialism*, eds. Anikó Imre, Timothy Havens, and Katalyn Lustyik, New York, London: Routledge, 2013, pp. 47-64; Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time*, pp. 236-268.

25 See for a critique of historiography updating Cold War tropes and being blind to emotional ascriptions to the state Lemon, "Sympathy for the Weary State?".

26 With regard to post-Soviet TV: Elena Prokhorova, "Challenging Nostalgic Imagination: The Case of Dmitry Astrakhan", *The Slavic and East European Journal* 48/3, 2004, pp. 421-437.

27 See Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time*, p. 174; Kirsten Bönker, "'Muscovites are frankly wild about TV: Freizeit und Fernsehkonsum in der späten Sowjetunion', 'Entwickelter Sozialismus' in Osteuropa: Arbeit, Konsum und Öffentlichkeit", eds. Nada Boškovička, Angelika Strobel, and Daniel Ursprung, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2016, pp. 173-210, 198-201.

28 Cf. Ekaterina Emeliantseva, "The Privilege of Seclusion: Consumption Strategies in the Closed City of Severodvinsk", *Ab Imperio: Studies of New Imperial History and Nationalism in the Post-Soviet Space* 2, 2011, pp. 238-259, esp. 238-244; Natalya Chernyshova, *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*, London, New York: Routledge, 2013.

29 Reid, "Cold War in the Kitchen," p. 219.

were among the first purchases of young couples after the late 1960s.³⁰

Watching television had long been a rather urban practice, because TV sets were much more common in urban areas than in the villages. Many interviewees remembered well that they first watched TV when visiting relatives in the cities. The respondents claimed that in the countryside watching TV remained a joint social practice of family, friends, and neighbors until the early 1970s. Thus, most of the Soviet people had access to television since the late 1960s. Statistics counted one TV set per seven persons in 1970, one per four persons in 1980, and one per 3.2 persons in 1988. They spread in a similar way in the GDR or West Germany.³¹ However, televisions were among the commodities that Soviet customers most often returned for warranty to the retailers.³² Notwithstanding these technical problems, viewers and TV staff were fascinated by the transmission speed of the new medium: "Political information entered our domestic life as if we ourselves had been involved", cheered a viewer on the occasion of Khrushchev's visit to the United States in 1959. This TV consumer even described the medium as having evoked pride

30 Boris Firsov, "Srednego zritel'ia net", *Zhurnal'ist* 12, 1967, pp. 42–45, 43; Bönker, "Muscovites are frankly wild about TV", p. 181.

31 *Narodnoe khoziaistvo 1922–1972*, Moscow: Statistika, 1972, p. 314; *Narodnoe khoziaistvo SSSR v 1988 g.: Statisticheskii ezhegodnik*, Moscow: Statistika, 1989, p. 119; Stephan Merl, "Staat und Konsum in der Zentralverwaltungswirtschaft: Rußland und die ostmitteleuropäischen Länder", *Europäische Konsumgeschichte: Zur Gesellschafts- und Kulturgeschichte des Konsums (18.–20. Jahrhundert)*, eds. Hannes Siegrist, Hartmut Kaelble, and Jürgen Kocka, Frankfurt a.M. and New York: Campus, 1997, pp. 205–241, 227.

32 Alone 31 % of the annual production of colour televisions and 25 % of black and white sets were claimed under warranty in 1987. See the statistics of the ministry of trade: RGAE (Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Ekonomiki), f. 465, op. 1, d. 4510 (1988), ll. 6–14. These rates had changed little since the 60s. I am much obliged to Stephan Merl for providing me with these data.

among the audience watching all the historical events of the year.³³

The broadcasting time rose quickly: Since 1955 TV aired daily in Moscow and Leningrad. In the mid-1950s, viewers received two programs in big cities. They could watch three programs in the capitals from 1965. A fourth program and regular color television were aired since 1967. TV stations also spread quickly. There were only nine stations in 1955, but in 1960 already 84, 1965 121, reaching an amount of 131 in 1975, all providing a nationwide TV coverage.³⁴

Starting from mid-1950s, Soviet sociologists demonstrated that TV consumption had become an integral part of the socialist way of life.³⁵ People watched more and more television while the TV program steadily expanded. This was not least due to the fact that the party gradually included television in its propaganda strategies from the mid-1960s.³⁶ The 1977 constitution let Soviet citizens explicitly perceive cultural consumption as a legitimate demand to the new Soviet lifestyle. It granted them the right to rest and to leisure, as well as the right to enjoy cultural benefits (Article 41, 46). The Soviet state was supposed to ensure this by "developing television and radio broadcasting".³⁷

Contemporary Soviet audience studies already observed in the mid-1960s that television especially attracted the less educated.

33 GARF (Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii), f. 6903, op. 1, 1933–1970 gg.: Sekretariat predsedatel'ia i otdel kadrov, d. 612, 1959: Stenogramma zasedaniia obshchestvennogo soveta telezritelei pri tsentral'noi studii televideniia, ll. 4–5.

34 Aleksandr Ia. Iurovskii, *Televidenie – poiski i resheniia: Ocherki istorii i teorii sovetskoi telezhurnalistiki*, Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1983, pp. 41–43.

35 Boris Firsov, *Televidenie glazami sotsiologa*, Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971, p. 105.

36 Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time*, pp. 208–222.

37 Cf. <http://www.constitution.org/cons/ussr77.txt> (accessed 1 September 2014).

However, respondents of all social groups described “entertainment” and “rest” as television’s prime functions.³⁸ Many viewers eagerly strove to schedule their work days not to miss interesting programs and repeatedly demanded more entertainment programs.³⁹ From the beginning, watching practices severely depended on gender as well as on the professional and educational background of the viewers. Both sexes spent about half of their leisure time more or less concentrated in front of the TV set. Especially for men, watching TV became a more and more absorbing practice, whereas women more often watched TV while doing housework. In the mid-1970s working men watched about 10, in 1986 14.5 hours per week. In contrast working women spent only 3.5 hours every week in 1965 and 10.7 hours in 1986 in front of the screen.⁴⁰ Moreover, the better educated the people, the smaller the scale of TV consumption. Especially men favored watching TV to reading newspapers or books from the 1970s onwards.⁴¹ People in villages watched more programs than the urban population from the late 1960s because of the lack of leisure activities.⁴²

38 Firsov, “Srednego zritel'ia net”, p. 44.

39 GARF, f. 6903, op. 10, 1952-1970 gg.: *Otdely pisem, d. 46, 1963, Obzor pisem telezritelei ob uluchshenii programm Tsentral'nogo televideniia, podgotovlennyi nauchno-metodicheskim otdelom, ll. 3, 7; GARF, f. 6903, op. 1, d. 612, 1959, l. 23.*

40 Boris T. Kolpakov, Vasilii D. Patrushev, *Biudzhetny vremeni gorodskogo naseleniia*, Moscow: Statistika, 1971, p. 212; Leonid A. Gordon, Eduard V. Klopov, Leon A. Onikov, *Cherty sotsialisticheskogo obraza zhizni: Byt gorodskikh rabochikh vchera, segodnia, zavtra*, Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Znanie, 1977, pp. 59–66, 149–150.

41 Rosemarie Rogers, “Normative Aspects of Leisure Time Behavior in the Soviet Union”, *Sociology and Social Research* 58, 1974, pp. 369–379; Gordon, Klopov, Onikov, *Cherty sotsialisticheskogo obraza zhizni*, p. 151; Firsov, “Srednego zritel'ia net”, p. 43.

42 Rozalina V. Ryvkina, *Obraz zhizni sel'skogo naseleniia: Metodologiya, metodika i rezul'taty izucheniia sotsial'no-ekonomicheskikh aspektov zhiznedeiatel'nosti*, Novosibirsk: Izdatel'stvo “Nauka” Sibirskoe otdelenie, 1979, pp. 215–216.

TV programs had the power to integrate people with different backgrounds. Like radio but in contrast to the press, television was more likely to form a nationwide audience that could access the same information and entertainment services. My sample of ethnic Russian interviewees shows two important aspects: First, the memories of the respondents reveal a tendency towards pop-cultural homogenization as people often mentioned the same films and series regardless of their educational background. But the interviews also make clear that media usage and the evaluation of media contents remained socially diverse until the end of the Soviet Union.

TV Consumption as a Source of Emotional Commitment

The TV set became the symbol of a retreat into privacy in all socialist states. The interviews demonstrate how people made use of the opportunity to reshape their private space by means of TV. Essentially, hardly anybody perceived him or herself as a “victim” of propaganda. On the contrary, some described the perception of Soviet TV programs very enthusiastically. Others stressed that they were able to acquire a critical media competence because of the social milieu they were embedded in. The conversations with family and friends became part of the ‘normalization’ in which viewers basically accepted TV’s representations of the ‘normal life’ in series, late night or game shows. This ‘normalization’ was a political process sustaining the socio-political order.⁴³

43 See for a more differentiated argumentation Bönker, *Brave New World?* (forthcoming 2018) and for a similar argument Neringa Klumbytė, “Political Intimacy: Power, Laughter, and Coexistence in Late Soviet Lithuania”, *East European Politics and Societies* 25/4, 2011, pp. 658–677.

TV changed the mixture of private and public spheres, of private and public communication strategies. The new experiences of sound and images, of bridging the gap between space and time, of bringing public affairs to private homes gave TV viewers the opportunity to inscribe personal meanings to the acquired information. The regime set the ideological framework for these interpretation processes, although it was not able to fully control them. Viewers could simply turn off their TV sets. However, most of them did actually not do that, as *Liudmila* described representing many women: “Coming back home, you turn on the TV set; while you are running and taking care of your housekeeping, you are always keeping an eye on the telly.”⁴⁴

Even those of my interviewees who presented themselves as critical media consumers never basically rejected Soviet television. *Elena* recalled it as a “source of information” adding that “it was a small window showing the world.”⁴⁵ Many narratives demonstrate that people had felt more entertained in Soviet times compared to Russian television today. The retrospective construction of Soviet TV consumption is certainly influenced by current watching practices. However, the merging of different time layers might be understood as the way the respondents come to terms with their Soviet media usage. In the light of the current media situation most of the respondents offered ambivalent, partly very positive, partly very critical assessments of Soviet TV’s entertainment and information services. Those, who saw themselves as criti-

cal-reserved Soviet media users, distinguished between news, documentary features, and entertainment programs. With regard to entertainment, they clearly tended to dismiss today’s programs in comparison to the Soviet one. They described the development of the last twenty years as “*Americanisation*” and commercialization. In their view these characteristics clearly denoted a deterioration of television’s entertainment qualities. The academic *Iurii*⁴⁶, whom I quote as a representative of this standpoint, was very interested in this topic. He remarked:

Television, surely, was not like ours [i.e. today’s], not independent, but purer. [...] But the Russian language was flawless. What you sometimes hear today is terrible. [...] Of course, mass media have changed. Not to grumble and to be discontent – what is possible today, that was not possible in the Soviet Union, of course, including bad things. This is in the first place. In the second, certainly, let’s say, regarding the television as the most far-reaching mass media, I regret the loss of certain substance [...], if you wish a fine aesthetic content. They aired artistic productions that, in contrast to today, in most cases also offered further information and food for the mind. [...] And, indeed, all, who prefer more substance and thoughtful things, could no longer count on television. One probably has to get used to it. Because when I traveled to the West for the first time, I turned to television there. I was overwhelmed then by the 20 channels, whereas we had only 3 or 4, I don’t remember. But I then already saw that you also could actually watch nothing there. Although I did not understand the language, I understood that it was some crock of shit. And we very strongly and very well adopt this crock of shit with the western style of mass media.... The mass media have changed. Some infor-

44 The interview was conducted by Elena Bogdanova in St. Petersburg in November 2010. *Liudmila* was born in 1942 in Leningrad and received mid-level education.

45 The interview was conducted by Elena Bogdanova in St. Petersburg in November 2010. *Elena* was born in 1961 in Leningrad and graduated from university.

46 Interview with *Iurii* (born in 1938, Leningrad) by Elena Bogdanova, October 2010.

tion that could be broadcast today was taboo in the Soviet Union.⁴⁷

Rather compliant, content, and partly indifferent viewers often criticized the amount of advertising today. Others, like *Liudmila*, who was also a content, compliant Soviet viewer, complained about ubiquitous violence on television today. Many of the respondents – even some of the critical and reserved ones – grasped Soviet TV as a representative of a superior Soviet popular culture in contrast to western representations.

The feeling of being rather well entertained in Soviet times supposedly had a consensus-building impact on what was the good Soviet lifestyle. Television framed potentially politicizing depictions of western-style consumption or utopian promises of Soviet consumption in films or documentaries. This new politicization of leisure time went hand in hand with the promise to live a good and cultural life in the future USSR.⁴⁸ The regime benefited from the fact that it was easier to provide media products than consumer goods. The interviews reveal that television supported viewers' common appreciation of Soviet films, thus evoking a predominantly affirmative emotional commitment to the Soviet life – at least retrospectively. Even if this kind of commitment does not necessarily imply a positive assessment of the political system, TV played a vital role in propagating the Communist utopia of abundance. Some respondents confirmed the rise of an "imagined community" based on an attractive vision of the future.⁴⁹ TV

47 Interview with a male respondent (born in 1938, Leningrad, higher education), October 2010.

48 See with regard to the CSSR, Bren, *The Greengrocer*, pp. 173–174.

49 Only recently, Graeme Gill argued that the Soviet regime tried to gain legitimacy and to generate a collective identity by making people believe in the coming of a golden age. See Graeme Gill, *Symbols*

seemed to have 'normalized' this metaphoric promise of a coming paradise.⁵⁰ It influenced at least less critical, rather content, or even compliant viewers who enjoyed television as a medium of entertainment. Such a media user was *Svetlana Vladimirovna*. Born in 1947, she received mid-level technical education, and still lives in Samara, formerly Kuibyshev. When asked if any communist utopias were broadcast, she affirmed that the medium told the viewers: "It will be like that, we will rear the calves and everyone will eat meat."⁵¹ She found the narrative of future affluence convincing. Soviet films appealingly represented what she called "our future normal life". She was not the only one to mention that she also loved to watch imported films from western capitalist states. Looking back to the past, the respondents did not interpret these films as beyond reach but embedded them in their everyday imagination, so that they might have even become a positive symbol of the new Soviet lifestyle. This effect is interesting as Nikita Khrushchev's proclamation to overtake America made consumption a central factor in legitimizing the Soviet regime. From then on, private consumption practices belonged to the core themes on which the Soviet regime invited people to communicate.⁵²

All this becomes even more comprehensible if we consider the regime's cultural policies. After Stalin's death, Soviet propaganda urged a shift towards new emotional qualities of the

and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics, Cambridge: University Press, 2011, p. 4.

50 Bren argues that screening produced 'imagined communities': "This cult of the television serial produced a nation that regularly sat down in front of the small screen." Cf. Bren, *The Greengrocer*, pp. 122–129 (quote p. 129).

51 The interview took place in September 2010 in Samara.

52 Stephan Merl, "Konsum in der Sowjetunion: Element der Systemstabilisierung?", *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 58, 2007, pp. 519–536; Reid, "Cold War in the Kitchen".

Soviet way of life. These partly very normative demands became influential starting in the late 1960s.⁵³ Private emotions became a new matter of public interest. This was especially due to the fact that the regime recognized television's power to evoke a good mood and an affirmative commitment among viewers towards their Soviet life. Christine Evans draws our attention to the late-night talk show *Ot vseï dushi* (*From the Bottom of My Heart*). First aired in 1972 and hosted by Valentina Leont'eva, a still warmly remembered star of Central Television, viewers identified the show with conveying the "Soviet way of life" and deciphered its emotionality. Represented by Leont'eva's face and her distinctive voice, the show shaped an "emotional community" in front of the screens, as Evans calls it.⁵⁴

Conclusion

As a popular consumer good, television transformed Soviet households' material culture and lifestyle. People spent an increasing amount of time in front of the screen. Television became a distinctive part of changing communication practices within the private realm, as well as between people and the regime. People gained new opportunities to

shape their private lives, to discover personal emotions and relationships. Television interconnected time and space in a new way and helped to constitute the Soviet audience as 'emotional communities'. All of this made many people ascribe positive meanings to their 'Soviet' lifestyles. People's investment in the private sphere bolstered the regime. Oral history interviews show that positive memories of former Soviet life are no rarity today. They prompt us to consider the affirmative ascriptions bearing witness to former cohesive factors within Soviet society. The stability of the social and political setting in the Brezhnev era may have derived to a great extent from these stable 'emotional communities' molded in front of the TV screen.

Shortly before the Russian-Ukrainian crisis evolved, Ukrainian historian Katerina Khinkulova argued that today's Russian television culture is still much more shaped by traces of the Soviet popular culture than the Ukrainian. As the main reason she stated different attitudes towards the past. Whereas the Russian TV is much more nostalgia-driven and clings to an idea of a high-quality Soviet TV culture including predominantly films and formats of the 1970s, the latter followed western trends of reality TV to become part of a "West European" popular culture.⁵⁵ These trends tell us much about TV producers' perception of their audiences and the political settings. They also witness the persistent Russian thinking about a superior Soviet popular culture in contrast to western mass culture. Many of my respondents would have agreed with this.⁵⁶

However, today's highly complex interplay

53 Deborah A. Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev's Russia*, New York: Peter Lang, 2007; Neringa Klumbytė, "Soviet Ethical Citizenship: Morality, the State, and Laughter in Late Soviet Lithuania", *Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964-1985*, eds. Neringa Klumbytė and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013, pp. 91-116; Larisa Honey, "Pluralizing Practices in Late-Socialist Moscow: Russian Alternative Practitioners Reclaim and Redefine Individualism", *Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964-1985*, eds. Neringa Klumbyte and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2013, pp. 117-142.

54 See the intriguing piece by Christine Evans, "The 'Soviet Way of Life' as Way of Feeling: Emotion and Influence on Soviet Central Television in the Brezhnev Era", *Cahiers du Monde Russe* 56/2-3, 2015, pp. 543-69.

55 Kateryna Khinkulova, "Hello, Lenin? Nostalgia on Post-Soviet Television in Russia and Ukraine", *VIEW. Journal of European Television History and Culture* 1/2, 2012, pp. 94-104.

56 See for more Bönker, *Brave New World?* (forthcoming 2018).

of producers' perceptions of the audience, the expectations of the viewers towards the program, the financing of the TV stations, interests of advertisers etc. could not directly be linked to 'ordinary' citizen's historical experiences and consciousness without further ado. Nevertheless, the interviews reveal that people's representations of Soviet television are a still persistent source of emotional commitment to the former Soviet life. Soviet viewing habits are regularly updated, because Russian television steadily repeats Soviet films and series. This strategy surely nourishes nostalgic yearning for the allegedly Soviet cultural and probably even political superiority.

It is worth noting that even retrospectively critical and reserved viewers reveal an affirmative emotional attitude towards Soviet lifestyle. They at least did not simply identify media content with false propaganda. As television was embedded in a complex communication structure, we could not conclude from watching practices that it became a coffin nail of the Soviet regime. On the contrary, it provided a specific entertainment culture that supported living together, of the political, economic, and

social order to concrete figures presented on the screen. It thus not only shaped specific Soviet lifestyle to many groups of Soviet society. Television tended to reduce complex questions of the regime's claim of guaranteeing a decent Soviet chronotopes but also specific Soviet lifestyles.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kirsten Bönker is currently interim Professor of History of Modern Societies at Bielefeld University. From 2014 she was interim Professor of Modern East European History at the Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg and at Bielefeld University. She received her PhD from Bielefeld University in 2007 and completed her post-doctoral habilitation in 2017. Her research interests include the history of mass media, political communication and the public sphere, the history of consumption and money, urban history and Cold War history.