

Pop and Politics in Late Soviet Society. Final remarks

by Peter Collmer

More than ten years ago, Alexei Yurchak published his influential study about late Soviet socialism.¹ In Yurchak's narrative, the persistence of the Soviet system after Stalin's death largely relied on a series of inter-related paradoxes that undermined and at the same time stabilized the system. The ongoing formal reproduction of the system was accompanied by internal "displacements": The more the dogmatic forms of the authoritative discourse were reproduced and ritualized since the 1950s, the more this discourse was detached from socialist realities, making room for alternative, less controllable interpretations of Soviet life. As long as Soviet people duly participated in the formal reproduction of the system, they were allowed to explore new creative ways of thinking and expressing themselves. Thus, being within and simultaneously outside the official discourse became a "dominant mode of living during late socialism".² This mode of living cannot be understood in simple terms of support or opposition; it was rather characterized by the dissolution of binary categories and by a multilayer relationship with the system.

What makes Yurchak's interpretation of late Soviet socialism interesting for this publication is the fact that it can be referred to as a theoretical framework for discussing Soviet pop. The above articles conceptualize post-Stalinist Soviet popular culture as a set of cultural practices that were attractive to many Soviet citizens even if – or just because of the fact that – they did not fully correspond with the demands of the system. They covered a vast field of everyday activities and forms of self-rep-

resentation (fashion, music, dance, mass literature, leisure activities, gestures, manners of speaking etc.), mostly inspired by the global spread and imitation of American and British lifestyles since the 1950s. Pop cultural practices were not necessarily directed against the Soviet party-state complex, but they were not entirely controlled by it either, appealing especially to young people as a sphere of freedom and sometimes subversive self-reassurance.

Following Yurchak, Soviet pop could be seen as an alternative approach to socialist reality enabled by the "performative shift"³ of the authoritative discourse. As performing loyalty gained importance over being loyal, new ways of identity building became possible. In such an understanding, Soviet pop culture was a context where people had the chance to express their thoughts, feelings and attitudes without being restricted to the literal reading of a petrified ideology. However, the relation between the officially promoted way of life and the manifestations of a new, grass-root-driven popular culture remained complicated and subject to a continuous process of negotiation.

While analyzing different aspects of Soviet popular culture, most articles of this publication take Yurchak's narrative into consideration, some of them even explicitly discuss the scopes – and the limits – of its explanatory power. They all shed light on ambivalences and paradoxes that become visible when studying Soviet pop. In this context, the "paradoxicality" of the Soviet system does not only refer to obvious inconsistencies or contradictions of late Soviet socialism; it also

1 Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005.

2 Ibid., p. 288.

3 Ibid., pp. 24-26.

points to new complex forms of “normal life”⁴ that developed in a specific process of social and cultural modernization.

Paradox normalities

The two first contributions focus on fundamental tensions that characterized Soviet life and culture after Stalin’s death in 1953. In his text on the Thaw period, *Gleb Tsipursky* deals with the fact that post-Stalinist authorities eased ideological constraints while at the same time exerting symbolic and physical violence against certain cultural practices that seemed to express an extreme devotion to western culture. Focusing on the example of the “stiliagi” (“style-obsessed” young people) and western-like fashion, the author shows how, since the 1950s, the boundaries of acceptable youth behavior were constantly challenged, negotiated and redefined. *Danijela Lugarić Vukas* points to the concurrent living within and outside the system. A close reading of the poetry of the two famous Russian bards Bulat Okudzhava and Vladimir Vysotskii illustrates how, for most Soviet people, resistance and loyalty merged into a complex attitude towards the authoritative discourse – a discourse whose literal claims and meanings were increasingly met with indifference.⁵

Most articles are, in one way or another, concerned with paradoxes resulting from the multifaceted western influences on Soviet life. *Irina Mukhina* shows that being close to the west or having easy access to western

products did not necessarily result in a westernization of Soviet identities. Her contribution about consumerism in Soviet port cities during the 1970s and 80s (including the case of “Baba Mania”, an old woman receiving illegal goods from sailors and reselling them in Novorossiisk) suggests that close intercultural contact did not blind Soviet people, but rather sharpened their critical view on the west and the quality and usefulness of its products. Analyzing youth cultures in eastern Ukraine during the international détente of the 1970s, *Sergei I. Zhuk* demonstrates the striking fact that cultural westernization fostered the process of russification on the peripheries of the Soviet empire. Professional Russian media, Russian urban culture and the Russian language played a key role in making western popular culture available to the Soviet youth in the province.

Other texts exemplify the paradox situation that western-inspired technologies and cultural practices sometimes contributed or even consciously were used to strengthen the socialist system. *Kirsten Bönker’s* article on TV consumption in late Soviet society shows how the massive spread of TV sets in the Soviet Union after the late 1960s made it possible to integrate a diverse audience into an emotional community “in front of the screens”. TV programs presented a positive version of Soviet normality. By doing so, they promoted a new appealing Soviet popular culture and sustained the cohesion of Soviet society rather than – as claimed by previous research – destabilizing it. This is remarkable, taking into account that early Soviet TV makers, as shown in *Kristian Feigelson’s* contribution, did not have a clear understanding of the impact of the new medium. One example of how Soviet TV could turn western influence against the west is given in *Isabelle de Keghel’s* article

4 For the concept of “normal life” and “normalization” see for example Kirsten Bönker’s article in this volume.

5 However, the literal reading of the authoritative discourse did not completely lose its importance. According to Sergei Zhuk’s text in this volume, personal diaries written by young Soviet people in provincial Ukrainian towns during the 1970s and 80s suggest that their interpretation of the world was still heavily influenced by official ideology.

on the popular television series “Seventeen Moments of Spring” (1973). The Brezhnev-era series about a Soviet spy who mingles undercover with the Nazi leadership during the Second World War has certain features of a socialist James Bond movie. It draws the audience’s attention to foreign threats and reproduces official images of the capitalist enemy within the framework of the Cold War.

A number of articles elucidate the ability of late Soviet society to integrate antagonistic impulses and to create new complex normalities. In his text about the “invasion of Estonian music” in the Soviet Union after the mid-seventies, *Aimar Ventsel* shows how an informal profit-oriented music industry emerged within the centrally controlled socialist economy. Popular Baltic musicians who acted as a substitute for western pop stars throughout the Soviet Union were given opportunities to pursue economic interests and to manipulate official regulations. *Boris Belge’s* article about Soviet composer Alfred Schnittke (1934-1998) illustrates how, during late Soviet socialism, traditional elite culture and popular culture could merge into something new, into a “third direction” of cultural production that bridged the gap between traditional labels and tried to be “serious” and “popular” at the same time. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, this specific form of integration lost its formative context and disappeared again.

Finally, on a more abstract level, the paradoxes and antagonisms of Soviet society are discussed in *Tatjana Hofmann’s* analysis of “Ostrov Krym”, a novel by Vasilii Aksenov (written in 1979). Aksenov’s Crimea is conceived of as a place between the worlds, an island where pre-revolutionary Russian, Soviet and European traditions come together. Referring to Bakhtin, Hofmann speaks of a semantical space for different, even antagonis-

tic “cultural voices”. Their interplay points to one of the fundamental historical tensions that characterized both Tsarist and Soviet Russia’s relations with the west – the simultaneity of admiring and rejecting western culture.

In view of the above, one of the obvious contributions of this publication consists in re-considering and further illustrating the ambivalences, tensions, and inconsistencies of late Soviet society. However, most articles also show that the citizens of the late Soviet Union did not necessarily experience their environment as fragmented or inconsistent. The study of popular culture in particular makes clear that the coexistence of various influences, fashions, consumer habits and tastes was part of “normal” Soviet life.

Conclusions

By focusing on specific periods of time, geographical areas, cultural practices and leisure activities, the articles of this volume complement the already known, many-faceted picture of Soviet popular culture since the 1950s. They look at Soviet pop in the context of global trends in (youth) culture after the war and challenge narratives of a relatively uniform, gray and immutable way of life in the Soviet Union.

The articles shed new light on Soviet people’s agency. It becomes evident how the worldwide emergence of pop culture influenced cultural life in the Soviet Union as well and provided ordinary Soviet citizens with inspirations and opportunities to explore new forms of acting and expressing themselves. In this context people were pushing the limits of what was officially acceptable and contributed to re-defining cultural and political norms. At the same time, the discrepancies of everyday life

in the Soviet Union encouraged individuals to develop strategies of “navigating the system”, to take advantage of the offerings and deficiencies of the system and to build their own coherent living environment.

In general, the well-researched chronology of cultural negotiation processes since Stalin’s death⁶ becomes manifest also in this volume. During the early Thaw period (1953-56), the authorities allowed for a relaxation of ideological control and new ways of cultural expression such as wearing western-like clothing. Gleb Tsipursky’s text illustrates how the Kremlin, in his attempt to build a socialist version of modernity, returned to an anti-pluralistic policy in the mid-1950s, stigmatizing alleged excesses of fashion-conscious young people. The early 1960s saw a renewed tendency to more openness that was reflected for example in a certain de-politicization of TV production. A “turn toward militancy”⁷ followed under Brezhnev by the end of the decade. Isabelle de Kegel demonstrates how film production under Brezhnev partly fell back to Stalin-era patterns. The relaxation of international tensions in the 1970s enabled a cultural rapprochement with the west and, as shown in Sergei Zhuk’s article, made audio and visual information from capitalist countries more and more available even in provincial cities of the Soviet Union.

The articles confirm the usefulness of certain theoretical perspectives for the study of Soviet popular culture. The idea of an “Imaginary West” can help understand the complex relationship between Soviet popular culture and its western sources of inspiration.⁸ As shown

by several authors, “western” stimuli that influenced Soviet cultural life usually did not emanate directly from the west but from a distorted image of the western world that developed in Soviet society after the war. This image of the west remained anchored in Soviet ways of thinking, feeling and longing, thus revealing more about living in the Soviet Union than about the west. It thereby becomes clear that Soviet pop did not just imitate a foreign model. Within the contact zone between the Soviet empire and the west, it rather constituted a new context based on entangling cultural influences. It drew on processes of cultural transfer and translation and contained numerous transnational references.⁹

Researchers often concentrate on the cultural settings of Moscow and Leningrad. In contrast, some of the above articles show that cultural life in the urban centers was not representative for the entire Soviet Union. For example, Irina Mukhina points to the fact that residents of small port cities had a different understanding of western lifestyles. They usually did not associate the consumption of western goods with resistance or subversion (as was more often the case in the capital cities) but conceived of them as a means of improving their social status within Soviet society. In this context it becomes obvious that the “west” was not imagined in an identical way throughout the Union. An unrealistic, glorified image seems to have developed within urban centers, in close correlation with people’s desires and tastes. However, direct confrontation with the real west could disenchant its imaginary facade, reassuring Soviet identities.

If it is common to look at Soviet pop against

6 Cf. for example Gleb Tsipursky, *Socialist Fun: Youth, Consumption, and State-Sponsored Popular Culture in the Cold War Soviet Union, 1945-1970*, Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2016, p. 15.

7 Ibid.

8 See for example Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*,

pp. 158-206.

9 For the concept of the “contact zone” see Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone”, *Profession*, 1991, pp. 33-40.

the background of the Cold War and its “cultural front”, some of the above articles demonstrate that new forms of cultural expression also had their important economic dimensions. As shown in the texts of Aimar Ventsel, Irina Mukhina and others, the growing popularity of pop stimulated self-reinforcing dynamics of consumerism, black or grey markets and an intertwining of official institutions and informal profit strategies.

In the overall picture, this publication joins recent research in arguing that many facets of Soviet pop culture, even if inspired by the western “class enemy”, contributed to stabilizing rather than destabilizing the Soviet system.¹⁰ Popular cultural practices, shared tastes and new media such as television in particular facilitated the formation of emotional communities whose loyalty toward the Soviet system could be influenced by satisfying selected consumer needs, by offering good entertainment and by using innovative technology to promote the promise of a bright socialist future.¹¹ In conjunction with the “performative shift” of the authoritative discourse, Soviet pop culture afforded Soviet citizens new opportunities

to socialize with each other, to interpret their lives and to express themselves within a centrally controlled environment. In this sense, a successful Soviet version of pop could reduce the explosive power of people’s longing for the (imagined) west.

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10 Regarding the stabilizing effects of new consumer practices in the 1970s see for example Natalya Chernyshova, *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*, London, New York: Routledge, 2013.

11 Regarding the potential of television for building up emotional communities see for example Christine Evans, “The ‘Soviet Way of Life’ as a 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.