

Popular culture is a multifaceted, global phenomenon and has become a new research field in the last decade.¹ The term popular culture can have many different meanings, but it does imply a certain temporal context: first and foremost, it refers to the musical and artistic output of American and British society from the 1950s on, which rapidly spread to different regions of the world – including the “Eastern bloc” – through a process of cultural transfer. It is associated with such attributes as freedom or subversion, accessible to broad sections of the population, and offers lifestyles that can be adopted or adapted informally and without commitment and which therefore – at least to some extent – remain beyond the reach of political control. The articles in this volume do ask how Soviet society did change from the late 1950s on, when the state at times retreated to a *laissez-faire* position and so allowed new areas of cultural activity to emerge. Popular culture embraces here (urban) songs, dances, light reading (pulp fiction), the entertainment stage (such as cabaret and musicals), cinema, television, radio, sports, leisure activities, fashion (such as jeans and trainers, as well as hairstyles), styles of behavior, gestures, emulative postures (e.g. of cinema stars), speech patterns, jokes, narrative styles, mass graphics etc. Thus, popular culture has a much stronger link with the everyday experiences of ordinary people than is the case with what might be considered culture in an elitist sense. And a global phenomenon such as “Beatlemania” would not have been possible without the technology

1 *Handbuch Popkultur*, eds.. Thomas Hecken, Marcus Kleiner, Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2017; A companion to popular culture, ed. Gary Burns, Chichester, West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2016, *Hochkultur für das Volk? Literatur, Kunst und Musik in der Sowjetunion aus kulturgeschichtlicher Perspektive*, eds. Igor V. Narskij, Jörn Ketterath, München: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2018.

for reproducing both sound and images. The issue of popular culture also raises questions of consumer habits, medialization and entertainment culture. Popular culture reflects concepts of order, patterns of interaction and shifts in mass culture through the media, consumer goods or cultural transfer. From this point of view, it is possible to analyse processes of negotiation or loyalties between state and society – as well as cultural practices – that point to hegemonic concepts, distinction or integration.

The first official Soviet Rock festival took place in March 1980 in Tbilisi, the capital of the Georgian SSR (*Vesennye ritmy*, Tbilisi-80). The winner of the festival’s competition was the group *Mashina Vremeni* (The Time Machine) from Leningrad. The journalist Artem Troitsky wrote about the event:

“The songs performed by The Time Machine are neither wild nor soapy along the lines of ‘Why did you stand me up?’ The group abhors amplified, heavy, metallic style of playing (one wonders whether the loudness is there to compensate for lack of talent?) (p. 65) [...]

But songs with political and social messages have always been central to The Time Machine.

The group invites its audience to look closer at the world around them, at themselves, at their friends. In praising noble, good things and deeds, they urge listeners to fight evil and anything that interferes with the people’s happiness. (p. 66)”²

Troitsky’s article was first published in the Soviet magazine *Klub I khudozhestvennaia*

2 Winner of the national pop festival award in Tbilisi 1980, group Time Machine (*Mashina Vremeni* with frontman Andrei Makarevich). Artem Troitsky, “New Leader on the Soviet Pop Scene”, *Sputnik* 8, 1981, pp. 62-66. (Originally published in *Klub I khudozhestvennaia samodeiatelnošt’*, here p. 66. [Original translation from Sputnik.]

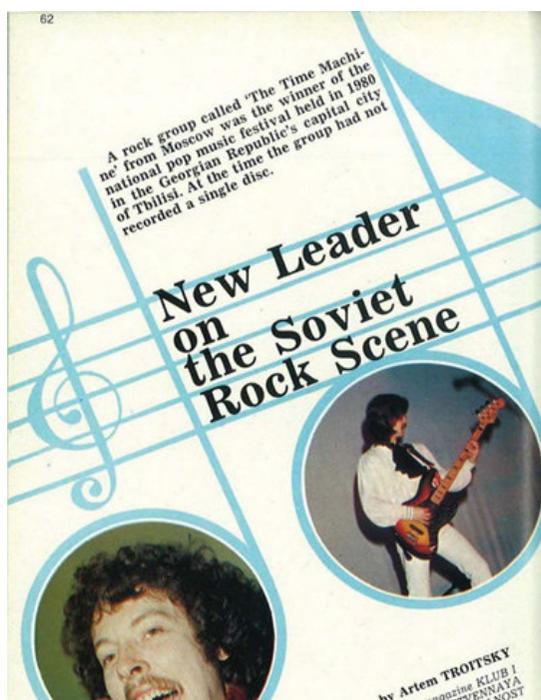


Figure 1: "New Leader on the Soviet Rock Scene". Article written by Artem Troitsky in *Sputnik*, August 1980, reporting about the Tbilisi festival.

samodeiatelnost', later translated into English and published for a foreign audience in *Sputnik, Digest of the Soviet Press*. The author wrote important books about Soviet pop culture,³ and what is interesting: he was himself one of the organizers of the Tbilissi festival.

We can assume that there were official frames how to write about such a unique event. So when reading Troitsky's article, the audience got to know not only news in the field of Soviet mass culture, but also official values, transmitted by party or state institutions and checked by censors before getting published. Troitsky wrote about the band, its members like Andrei Makarevich and their music, but how he did it says a lot about official norms in the late Brezhnev period: implicitly the loudness,

3 Artemy Troitsky, *Tusovka: who's who in the new Soviet rock culture*, London: Omnibus Press, 1990.

wildness and the whole style was criticized and slightly tolerated, which tells the reader that there existed another understanding of culture. The short quotes give an idea how pop culture was officially regarded in the late Soviet Union before Perestroika, where culture was part of state politics and seen as a top down process.

According to Marxist-Leninist ideology there existed two different, antagonistic understandings of culture. In the Soviet encyclopedia of 1973 this distinction was explained. First a bourgeois understanding of culture was explained, which had due to the Soviet perspective a bad impact on youth and elites as it was nihilistic, a counter-culture and liked to resist authorities.⁴ On the other hand, the Marxist definition of culture regarded it as a mirror for the human development. The target was the creation of a new man (*formirovanie novogo cheloveka*)⁵ with high educational standards, mores, good behavior and wide knowledge. In the context of the 1980 festival, a dissolution of this polarized understanding of culture gets visible, even though the critique tries to rely on still defined normative standards. The festival itself was marginalized and took place without a broader audience. But official cultural institutions had at least to accept the wish of young people and other members of the Soviet society for pop and rock culture. Thus Tbilissi 1980 can be regarded as a turning point in Soviet cultural politics, even though changes took place in a grassroot manner long before.⁶

Already in the late Stalin period, in the years after the Second World War, the phenomenon

4 *Bol'shaia sovetskaia encyklopedia*, Moscow: Sovetskaia Encyklopedia 1973, 3. ed., t. 13, p. 595.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 596, column 1775.

6 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. 9.

of the *Stiliagi* (style hunters) occurred.⁷ There are no reliable numbers how many young people tried to be different from norms and propaganda by dressing stylish, listening to western music, hanging around in Gorkii street in Moscow and performing unusual dances in that time. Supposedly there were only a few, small, marginal groups in urban places, mostly young men. However, in the reception of the Soviet past this juvenile subculture became a myth, not least via the music film *Stiliagi* from 2008.

The influence of Rock 'n' Roll on Soviet culture was observed by foreign journalists. Klaus Mehnert, born 1906 in Moscow,⁸ was a German expert for the Soviet Union. As a member of an official German delegation accompanying chancellor Konrad Adenauer, he visited Moscow in 1955. He walked around and listened to normal people. After his return to West Germany, Mehnert produced a 90 minutes radio feature based on his talks to Muscovites.⁹ Beyond political comments he talked about the daily life and moods of the people. During his walks in Moscow he visited a *Park Kul'tury* (it was not Gorkii park), a leisure place with sport facilities, a dance floor and kiosks. Mehnert made some unexpected findings. First he listened to a waltz from Isaak Dunaevski (1900-1955), the famous composer who had died recently.¹⁰ He met citizens singing *Shirokaia moia strana*, a patriotic hit from the 1930s¹¹. "And suddenly there were

sounds of contemporary dance rhythms" Mehnert told in the feature, "similar to jazz music from the 1930s, a well-known melody. I listened to 'In the Mood' from Glenn Miller." He went to the conductor looking for the name of the music piece. The title written on the notes was "Satirical Song" composed by Ostrovskii. But it was indeed "In the Mood", only hidden as a parody. This episode shows how official rules could be undermined by tricks like trivializing the "bourgeois" culture, using Aesopian language in literature or discrediting objects of desire which could be shown in such a way at the same time.

A real fanal for the new politics after the repressive Stalin regime was the World Youth Festival taking place in Moscow 1957.¹²

The international meeting of young people from all over the world was a showcase for the political change under Khrushchev. It resigned from obvious political propaganda for the socialist model. Instead, slogans for peace and mutual understanding were the motto of the two weeks meeting. Visitors were impressed by the peaceful atmosphere in festival Moscow, the sport and folklore presentations, the happenings on the streets, the opportunity to meet people from many Soviet republics and different countries.¹³ Officials made many efforts to show a proper city (cleaning it in advance from prostitutes, criminals and beggars), a perfect organization and the achievements of the Soviet system in times of the cultural cold war. But they could not influence the reception nor the consequences

7 Mark Edele, "Strange Young Men in Stalin's Moscow. The Birth and Life of the Stiljagi. 1945-1953", *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 50, 1, 2002, pp. 37-61; see also the cartoons from Krokodil on <http://www.coldwarjazz.org/stilyagi>.

8 He died in 1984.

9 "Wiedersehen mit der Sowjetunion". Radio feature from Klaus Mehnert, Germany 1955. Private holding of the author.

10 Matthias Stadelmann, *Isaak Dunaevskij, Sänger des Volkes: Eine Karriere unter Stalin*, Köln: Böhlau 2003.

11 The song about the Fatherland was composed

for the popular movie *Cirk* (Circus) in 1936, the composer was as well Isaak Dunaevskii.

12 Pia Koivunen, "The 1957 Moscow Youth Festival. Propagating a new, peaceful image of the Soviet Union", *Soviet state and society under Nikita Khrushchev*, ed. Melanie Ilic, London: Routledge, 2009, pp. 46-65.

13 Leo Weismantel, *Tagebuch einer skandalösen Reise*, Jugendheim: Weltkreis Verlags GmbH, 1959.



Figure 2: Article in the women's journal Rabotnica, March 1957, announcing the upcoming International Youth Festival in Moscow.

of the event. In the west, the Youth Festival was regarded as part of communist policies. In Switzerland for example, visitors coming back by train were “expected” by angry Swiss citizens, beating on the travelers who dared to cross the iron curtain.¹⁴ All Youth Festivals organized by the World Federation of Democratic Youth had a socialist connotation and were perceived as a mega event in the communist part of the divided world.

Important waves of global popular culture such as new fashion trends, Rock ‘n’ Roll,

¹⁴ Unpublished paper from Nadine Steinmann, Bern 2017.

the Beatles, Hippies, Rock, Disco, Punk or Heavy Metal entered the Soviet Union quite promptly and inspired Soviet artists to create new cultural forms themselves. The children or members of elites who could travel to eastern bloc countries, tourists, journalists or diplomats imported tapes, discs, magazines, pictures, films, fashion or their own experiences. Beneath such personal cultural transfers regions or cities on the border of the Soviet Union like Lviv in Western Ukraine, Estonia or port cities were gates for trends and products coming from the near abroad.¹⁵

Recent research has come up with many propositions of how to define “pop culture”. John Storey gives a good survey about different approaches.¹⁶ He distinguishes between:

- (1) a quantitative approach, defining relevance by numbers and empirical data. But this might not explain the meanings and not any mass phenomena has the same relevance.
- (2) an approach focusing on the definition of high culture, fixing a hierarchy of a superior and inferior culture. This scheme means at the same time a typology for classes. And it neglects that cultural production and meanings are not ahistorical or fix, but shift through different times. An example is the perception of Shakespeare or Charles Dickens as popular writers and today part of a high culture.
- (3) an approach that sees pop culture as mass culture, only for economic purposes and

¹⁵ Wiliam Jay Risch, “Soviet ‘Flower Children’. Hippies and the Youth Counter-Culture in 1970s L’viv”, *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, 3, 2005, pp. 565-584; Wiliam Jay Risch, *The Ukrainian West: culture and the fate of empire in Soviet Lviv*, Cambridge, Mass. 2011; Sergei I. Zhuk, *Rock and roll in the Rocket City: The West, identity and ideology in Soviet Dnepropetrovsk, 1960-1985*, Washington, D.C: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2010.

¹⁶ John Storey, *Cultural theory and popular culture: An introduction*, Harlow: Pearson/Longman 2009 (5th ed.).



Figure 3: Moscow Youth Festival 1957: Official photo published by Leo Weismantel, who participated in the event.

mass consumption. This connotation is often used with a traditional connotation that mass culture is American culture and goes together with processes of Americanization since the 1950s. The new American way of life seemed more exciting than the well-known every day culture. Popular culture configured as a collective dream world and mutated as such to a form of escapism.

(4) an approach that understands pop culture as folk culture, coming from the people and understood as authentic.

(5) an approach following Antonio Gramsci, seeing pop culture as a concept of hegemony, an interdependence between resistance and incorporation or at least (6) as culture of industrialization and urbanization.

Which approach is making most sense always

depends on questions, targets, sources and methodologies.

For the Soviet context, John Fiske's understanding of pop culture is of special interest. Fiske develops a theoretical framework in order to better understand culture as a social process:

Culture making (and culture is always in process, never achieved) is a social process: all meanings of self, of social relations, all the discourses and texts that play such important cultural roles can circulate only in relationship to the social system. [...]

Popular culture is made from within and below, not imposed from without or above as mass cultural theorists would have it. There is always an element of popular culture that lies outside social control,



Figure 4: “Hipi”. Article in the Lithuanian magazine *Mokslas ir gyvenimas* (Science and life), 1967, mentioning hippies for the first time.

*that escapes or opposes hegemonic forces. Popular culture is always a culture of conflict, it always involves the struggle to make social meanings that are in the interests of the subordinate and that are not those preferred by the dominant ideology.[...] Popular culture is made in relationship to structures of dominance. This relationship can take two main forms – that of resistance or evasion.*¹⁷

Fiske provides a definition of pop culture as part of culture as such, a culture as practice. It is not only about phenomena, actors, forms, aesthetics, trends, fashions, traditions, performances, medialization, marketing and politics, but allows insights in society. Pop culture relates to different forms of culture in

¹⁷ John Fiske: *Understanding popular culture*, London: Routledge, 2006, pp. 1-2.

a society, is part of a larger understanding. Structures like the relation between leadership and society, the different groups in a society, mechanisms of integration or marginalization, the production of social meanings, counter positions to state politics and escapism from it can get visible with Fiskes definition.

In the Soviet Union, pop culture was a counterpart to the official mass culture. Since 1934, the latter had been based on the paradigm of socialist realism which ended earlier cultural experiments, for example those associated with the notion of *proletkul't*. What is more, till the breakdown of the Soviet Union we find a distinction (and strict hierarchy) between high culture, such as classical ballet, literature or classical music and

mass culture. A similar understanding of “high culture” can be seen in the first theoretical texts about mass culture, written by Horkheimer and Adorno.¹⁸ In his American exile Adorno could study new forms of mass culture which he described as pure consumption, profit oriented, an industrial product which supports conformity instead of individualism. His ideal was high culture understood as art whereas mass culture was only entertainment and completely depoliticizing. Adorno criticized the homogenization of taste, opinions and political thinking by mass cultural products.

The contributions to this volume shed light on different aspects of Soviet popular and mass culture. Gleb Tsipursky, the author of the book *Socialist fun*¹⁹ gives insights in the Thaw period where the so called cultural cold war tried to influence the societies of the “others”. Even though Soviet people were fascinated by the real or imagined west they also appreciated their genuine cultural stars like the famous bards Bulat Okudzhava and Vladimir Vysotskii, as Danijela Lugarić Vukas’ contribution shows. Irina Mukhina asks for consumer practices and shows the importance of port cities as market places. Sergei I. Zhuk opens insights into popular culture in Soviet Ukraine, Kirsten Bönker and Kristian Feigelson describe the meaning of Soviet TV as a new media since the 1960s. Isabelle De Keghel explores a famous Soviet TV series (*Seventeen Moments of Spring*), Aimar Ventsel deals with Estonian popular culture. Boris Belge and Tatjana Hofmann both look on more classical cultural products, the music of the famous composer Alfred Schnittke and the literature from Vasilii Aksënov.

18 Max Horkheimer, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung: Philosophische Fragmente*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1969.

19 Tsipursky, *Socialist Fun*.

For the future we need a better understanding of the exchange processes who are too often regarded as one sided from the west to the east. But if we look at the time period before the Second World War we have an exchange other way round as well.²⁰ To understand adaptations, impulses, traditions, inventions and translations inspired by new trends the concept of contact zones from Mary Pratt²¹ could be useful as well, as we avoid a container thinking of culture in clear cut boxes. The political debates about culture in the Soviet Union and the role of official institutions, responsible persons and controversies have also to be researched in the future.

The articles published here were originally presented on a conference about pop culture in 2013 at the University of St. Gallen. It is a contribution to the steadily growing field of popcultural studies who too often still focus on western Europe. We find a lot of pop culture in Eastern Europe as well which is unfortunately often unknown in the west like popular TV series, cartoons, famous singers and music groups with their own rock stars. Main questions were the following:

How did Soviet society change from the late 1950s on, when the state at times retreated to a laissez-faire position and so allowed new areas of cultural activity to emerge? What trends were there, and who set them? How was taste discussed, and how did fan-based communities come into being? What was the relationship between the new cultural dynamics and the discourse of ideology and the politics of identity? Was Soviet popular culture an expression of subversion and protest? Did it tend to break down the system,

20 Birgit Menzel, Ulrich Schmid, “Der Osten im Westen. Importe der Populärkultur”, *Osteuropa* 57, 5, 2007, pp. 3-21.

21 Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone”, *Profession*, 1991, pp. 33-40.

or rather to exert a stabilizing influence? How did popular culture influence people's lifestyles and leisure activities? How can processes of cultural transfer – such as between east and west – be described? What autonomous developments took place?

We thank all authors for their contributions. Our thanks goes as well to the Center for Governance and Culture in Europe (GCE) at the University of St. Gallen, Prof. Ulrich Schmid, Dr. des. Sandra King-Savic, Prof. Michael Dobbins, Prof. Julia Richers, Samir Malek-Madani and the editorial board of the open access online journal Euxeinos.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carmen Scheide is Assistant Professor at the University of Bern. From 2012 to 2016 she was the Executive Director of the Center for Governance and Culture in Europe at the University of St. Gallen. Her main research fields are Russian, Soviet and Ukrainian history in the 19th and 20th century. She published books and articles about gender politics in revolutionary Russia, how the Great Patriotic War was remembered by individuals in the Soviet Union, space culture and is preparing a book about the entangled microhistory between central Ukraine and South-West Germany due to the Second World War. In 1999 she finished her dissertation and in 2010 her habilitation at the University of Basel.