

# Soviet Port Cities and Consumerism in the 1970s and '80s

by Irina Mukhina

## Abstract

Being close to the west did not necessarily result in a westernization of Soviet identities. The case of Soviet port cities illustrates that during the 1970s and 80s, close intercultural contact and easy access to western goods sharpened people's critical view about the west, and the quality and usefulness of its products for Soviet everyday life.

**Key words:** consumerism, port cities, black market, fashion, identity, intercultural contacts.

In 1983, Konstantin Chernenko gave a speech about the "political naiveté" of Soviet youth who fall prey to enemies' attempts "to exploit the specific features of youth psychology for its own ends." Predictably, he referred to the western popular culture, and especially music, that he believed was "corrupting" the young minds of the communist state. Chernenko called on the youth to develop "a strong immunity" to western fashions, and he despaired over how much of this bourgeois culture was already circulating in the Soviet Union. The call was primarily aimed at the *Komsomol*-aged youth of the capital cities who were deemed especially vulnerable to this corrupting influence of the West.<sup>1</sup>

The culturally dominant cities of the Soviet Union were indeed important to the consumption of western pop culture.<sup>2</sup> Yet these capital cities were also unlike many smaller towns for at least two reasons: the residents of the former were more exposed

to foreign tourists and journalists than anywhere else in the country, and most of the Soviet trade representatives, diplomatic corps, and international journalists were recruited from among Muscovites or resided in Moscow. Thus, any location other than a large city might reveal alternative patterns of Soviet consumption and people's exposure to western products, and the study of Soviet consumerism needs to consider simultaneously the diversity of consumer nightmares and consumer utopias that existed across the Soviet Union.<sup>3</sup> Novorossiysk, a case study for this project, demonstrates such a

<sup>3</sup> The terminology of consumer utopias is derived from Kate Brown's study of Soviet "gated communities" (closed cities with residents working for the top-secret military industries). Brown argues that "these communities were so attractive – such consumer utopias, in fact – that residents gave up important rights and freedoms in order to live in them" (p. 50). There was no shortage or deficit of anything in these places, and they were a substantial rather than a marginal phenomenon in the narrative of Soviet consumption. Kate Brown, "Utopia Gone Terribly Right: Plutonium's 'Gated Communities' in the Soviet Union and United States," *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*, eds. Paulina Bren and Mary Namburger, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 49-67. In contrast, Ekaterina Emeliantseva, writing about a different closed city of Severodvinsk, concluded that regarding "consumer goods such as clothing or furniture, the situation was not much better [in Severodvinsk] than everywhere else." See Ekaterina Emeliantseva, "The Privilege of Seclusion: Consumption Strategies in the Closed City of Severodvinsk," *Ab Imperio* 2, 2011, pp. 238-259, here p. 257.

<sup>1</sup> The protocol of the June 1983 Central Committee meeting on ideology, as published in *Komsomol'skaia Pravda*, 9 July 1983.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994; Thomas Cushman, *Notes from Underground: Rock Music Counter-culture in Russia*, New York: State University of New York, 1995; Hilary Pilkington, *Russia's Youth and Its Culture: A Nation's Constructors and Constructed*, London: Routledge, 1994, Alexei Yurchak, *Everything was Forever, Until It was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005.

departure from the mainstream narrative. Its residents indeed craved western goods and appreciated them, and they had relatively easy access to them in this small Soviet consumer utopia. Partially for this reason, the residents' understanding of western fashions and styles and the choices that they made in acquiring them were distinct from their counterparts in capital cities.<sup>4</sup>

Based on extensive oral history fieldwork and research in various port administration archives, my study investigates the role of port cities in the Soviet Union as magnets of change and cultured spaces shaped by cosmopolitanism and consumption. It demonstrates that Soviet consumers of the 1970s were far from unfortunate victims of massive shortages. Even if expensive, western clothing and styles were available to most residents of capital cities and port towns, thus shaping their tastes, their sense of style, and their personal aspirations. Specifically, the ports of Novorossiysk, Batumi and others created perfect loopholes through which material objects passed in surprisingly substantial numbers. Sailors brought enough foreign clothing to meet the needs of those port town residents who could afford it on the black market. People employed by port authorities and those who bought foreign goods exemplified the lifestyle and outlooks that many beyond the boundaries of these port towns aspired to achieve.<sup>5</sup>

This influx of goods played an important role in shaping popular attitude to consumption. In the Soviet Union, the consumption of foreign-

made goods – any goods that were labeled as made in places other than the USSR – was deeply “sacramental” in the 1960s, '70s and '80s. That is, these objects symbolically represented the west and its values of consumerism and style. Moreover, though it is beyond the purpose and the scope of my work to prove or disprove any direct links between the consumption of western culture and goods and the demise of the Soviet system, western goods were often presented as symbols of rebellion against the system, and they were coveted for this reason. In just a few examples among many, Olga Gurova asserts that underwear was a battlefield between the state and the man; Susan Reid writes that “consumption choices could, and did, articulate resistance”; and Ekaterina Emeliantseva acknowledges that in the existing scholarship the vision of the consumption of western culture as subversive or opposing the regime is dominant, if not mainstream.<sup>6</sup>

Partially, the material objects that were integral to this sacramental consumption were dispersed through capital cities' channels. But many of them entered by means of imperfectly controlled port towns' border crossings, and sailors in particular were important players in channeling the goods. Yet ironically, precisely because of the greater-than-average availability of foreign goods, especially clothing, the port town residents became non-sacramental consumers and shifted away from the patterns of “the center.” While no precise date for the change can be

4 The project relies heavily on interviews (oral history) and utilizes local archives and newspapers as well.

5 The Ministry of the Merchant Marine (Morflot) as well as the Shipbuilding Ministry of the Soviet Union employed thousands of workers; some sailed abroad and many more did not, but a job in Morflot made foreign goods more readily available for all.

6 See, for example, Olga Gurova, *Soviet Underwear: Between Ideology and Everyday Life / Sovetskoe nizhnee bel'e: mezhdru ideologii i povsednevnost'iu*, Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2008; *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, eds. Susan E. Reid, David Crowley, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000; Ekaterina Emeliantseva, “The Privilege of Seclusion: Consumption Strategies in the Closed City of Severodvinsk,” pp. 238-259.

identified, by the early 1980s people came to have relatively little concern for the intrinsic meanings of the goods. As a matter of fact, the analysis of interviews of sellers and buyers in Novorossiysk demonstrated no direct correlation between consumption of “made in” clothing and interest in western pop culture, i.e. those who craved jeans did not necessarily want to listen to *The Beatles* (or even knew of them!). For port town residents at large, the craving for particular western attire was not necessarily an act of admiration of western values; instead, it was a manifestation of their social status (whether real or self-proclaimed) and a sense of fashion that was deeply embedded into realities of their daily lives. As such, much like their western counterparts, my respondents wanted better, more beautiful, and more reliable products that met their sense of fashion, style, and taste.<sup>7</sup>

The port towns saw an abundant, even if clandestine, supply of foreign clothing that was transported by the workers of Soviet cargo fleet; indeed, it was a well-established and clearly recognized reality of life. The sailors who went to *zagranka* (abroad) were a privileged group by all means. In port towns in particular, nearly all young men aspired to such a career, and nearly all young women hoped to marry a sailor (even though most ships left home for six months at a time). This profession presented a unique opportunity in the Soviet Union to see the world and experience other cultures. But this idyllic opportunity for encountering exotic places was always closely intertwined with more

mundane and practical reasons for joining the crew. Sailors found nothing dichotomous or incompatible in this, and remarkably, contrary to all others who sold foreign goods, such profits or activities did not diminish the sailors’ romantic (even if idealized) reputation for masculinity, honor, and success. “I’d truly seen the world,” one sailor recalled. “We went from the Black Sea through Dardanelles into the Mediterranean to the ports of Egypt, Syria, Yugoslavia (near Dubrovnik), and from there we took off across the Atlantic to the Caribbean, to Cuba.” This sailor added that “seeing the world and making a profit was important,” and he made a profit not only on clothing (very few could buy much because the wages were paid in *bonny*, or cash-equivalent coupons that could be used in specialized stores in the Soviet Union) but other items as well. Sea shells, postcards, calendars, and plastic bags that he received virtually for free were popular among friends, and whatever was not given out as gifts could be sold for one to five rubles a piece.

The mechanism for this clandestine trade had its unwritten rules. Typically, there was a lot of camaraderie among the sailors, and the novices received advice on what to bring with them to various countries for exchange or resale. Peers eagerly shared their “contacts” abroad, and once a person joined the crew, the competition was minimal. Most sailors acknowledged that this was largely because the market was far greater on both sides of the encounter than what the sailors could possibly saturate. But there also existed a strict hierarchy of what and how much each and every person could bring. The hierarchy was based on the rank of the person, and the volume and value of goods was closely monitored. If a sailor overstepped a certain barrier and was perceived as greedy by his

<sup>7</sup> See, for example, a discussion of consumer revolution by Natalya Chernyshova, in “Consumer Revolution? Society and Economy in the Soviet 1970s,” presented at the *ASSEES Annual Convention*, 2010; also Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Public and Private Life of The Soviet People: Changing Values in Post-Stalin Russia*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989.

peers, he almost always ended up “accidentally” being discovered by customs officials or the port administration. One now retired captain explained that turning someone over to the officials was not betrayal but precaution; irrational acts threatened the reputation and thus profits of the entire crew. This is not to say that there was no freedom of choice at all; in fact, sailors managed to smuggle a full range of products from clothing to medicine to exotic animals. But the safety of the crew remained a top priority on all occasions. “This is the reason why,” the retired captain added, “here [in ports] kitchen talk was aimed not at poking fun at Soviet leaders. Instead, people shared tips on how to drug exotic parakeets so they can be hidden in socks during the border crossing yet survive the ordeal.”<sup>8</sup>

The preferred channels of distribution were almost always informal. Even though there were consignment shops (*komissionki*), most sailors preferred to use them sparingly. Not *komissionki* but *babushki* were the most important distributors in this economy. A story of one woman (now deceased) is indicative of this process.<sup>9</sup> Unlike her friends with no connections to the business, she intentionally cultivated her image of *babushka* (she was 65+ when she did the most business), and eventually Baba Mania, as most people called her, became a powerhouse in this trade.

8 The quote is from an interview with Aleksandr D., conducted by the author in Novorossiysk in 2007.

9 Several informal interviews were conducted with Baba Mania and her friends and relatives. The interviews spanned over the course of nearly fifteen years. The first interview with Baba Mania took place in August 1997 and we continued over several meetings (she died in July 1998). The relatives, including her sister (to be mentioned later), carried on with our informal conversations until the passing of Baba Mania’s sister in 2007 and stepsister in 2012. Interviews also included former sailors of all ranks who went abroad between 1972 and 1982. The collection of interviews for this group is on-going.

Baba Mania received sailors in her two-room apartment, which she shared with her sister and brother-in-law. The system was similar to some of the elite clubs of the present day. A sailor’s background was closely scrutinized for reliability and financial security (there was an interest in building a regular clientele base rather than taking in someone who only sold an item or two occasionally). Then “an insider” had to recommend that person, and after that the sailor received the address of “the contact”, i.e. Baba Mania, and an acceptable time to bring goods. Baba Mania was cheerful and welcoming and seemed to befriend everyone. She always had a bottle of vodka on her kitchen table and a smile to accompany it. But she was the final judge of what was taken in and how much one could charge for their goods. Baba Mania mostly took in high-end clothing, while the rest was either discarded as unsellable (to be distributed to friends as gifts) or was passed onto an extended network of lower-key sellers who took in what was too problematic to sell and of no interest to Baba Mania. *Tekhasy* (jeans), Italian shoes, leather boots, and dress shirts were her favorite items because they were in highest demand and yielded highest profits. Kids’ clothing ranked relatively low on her list of priorities; it was too expensive and not long-lasting enough for most consumers (an average T-shirt cost 15-25 rubles, and since kids grow, it could last only a couple of seasons at most). Baba Mania was careful not to overcharge and marked up the goods by no more than ten percent. Nonetheless, Baba Mania’s profit margin came to 500-600 rubles monthly, nearly ten times her official retirement benefit and a substantial amount by all means.

Her distribution channels were analogous to her system of acquiring goods in the first place. Potential buyers from among the

acquaintances were invited to see the goods in the apartment, and the most reliable and regular customers could even place orders for specific goods. But for things that did not sell to *svoi* (insiders), Baba Mania had to go to the open-air markets and seek buyers there. In order to avoid the charges of speculation (a criminal offense in the Soviet Union), she never took more than one item with her, and even if caught selling that item, she always managed to plead innocence. Needless to say, most *militsonery* knew her well and relied on her services, though there were always loners who were incorruptible and who wanted to uphold the system and socialist values at all cost. Overall, as several respondents reported, *babushki* were much more reliable as distribution channels for sailors than consignment shops, and most goods that did not circulate among family and friends passed through their hands. “Newcomers” and “youngsters” went to shops with their goods, but there was always a desire to find a “contact” like Baba Mania. In this particular town, as Baba Mania remembered, there were about a dozen women like herself, and then a wild range of petty sellers (or speculators, the term she used with a degrading tone) who did not have regular clientele and did not last long in the business. The business came with its share of risks (“though only the greedy ones got prison terms,” commented Baba Mania); nonetheless, the benefits were substantial as well. Aside from direct financial considerations, these women acquired so many “contacts” among various groups of people that they could even make transactions that involved property or high-deficit socialist commodities which ranged from vacation passes to cars.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> This system was reminiscent of “blat” as presented in Alena Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favor:*

A widow herself (like all other “important” women), Baba Mania had her sister’s and her brother-in-law’s opinions to consider, not the least because they shared the apartment. Her sister was a hard-core communist who never criticized party decisions and supported the system to her last breath. She even insisted that the scarcity of some goods and the imperfect distribution system was one of the best achievements of the system that taught people to depart from *veshchism* (obsession with material goods) and embrace eternal values of kindness, mutual support, and intellectualism. Ironically, these views did not prevent her from buying foreign clothing that her sister had access to, and the explanation was often rather trivial. She either liked the design of strawberries on a particular shirt, or the color was “cute,” or something similar. Consistently, this woman and many other respondents emphasized that they wanted quality clothing that was both durable and appealing. This woman shunned Soviet undergarments for herself and preferred to see her grandchildren wear colorful dresses and trousers in colors that did not fade after a few washes. But she never once saw her purchases as being in any way contradictory to her internalized values of Soviet communism. In this way, the consumption for Baba Mania’s sister (and many others in port cities, for that matter) was not linked to a sense of westernization but to people’s sense of quality and esthetics. This correlates to the scholarship that critiques current mainstream research on socialist production and consumption for concentrating on the quantity of goods and their apparent shortages. The consumers were more sophisticated than they are commonly credited with, and they were not pushed or

*Blat, Networking and Informal Exchange*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

forced into buying only what was available to them. Even if the selection was not endless, the sailors attempted to match their goods to the tastes of their customers and did not offer a selection of random items. They worked hard to keenly pick designs and fashions of the day.<sup>11</sup>

Most of my respondents also did not see their consumption as linked to the black market. For the majority of the Soviet population, access to western fashions was possible only by tapping into the black market, or *fartsovka*. People who were associated with the black market, *fartsovshchiki*, resold items that they acquired from western visitors for astronomical prices. People who worked in the service sector, especially in hotels, and tour guides were regularly drawn into the business. Yet if *fartsovka* by definition included the “worship of the West” (*zapadopoklonstvo*) and the rebellion against the regime, then the consumption of the port towns was a different phenomenon, which bordered *fartsovka* only in marginal ways.<sup>12</sup> The buying of made-in clothing in port towns, though indicative of people’s fascination with specific brands and styles, coexisted with their support for the system without any contradictions. Moreover, residents of these towns did not necessarily demonstrate an interest in western pop music or in disseminating “forbidden” literature (either nationalistic for minorities, critical of the regime, or from the list of banned western authors).<sup>13</sup> Looking back at their experiences,

the respondents shared the notion that their consumption was “the process of adding to, not subtracting from our outlook,” or the process which integrated their support for what the Soviet system had to offer with a strong interest in consuming foreign goods. One respondent, for example, was puzzled to hear a suggestion that there existed a link or some sort of connection between her near obsession with western goods and opposition or negative feelings towards the Soviet state. “I really wanted those foreign brands,” she reported.

*And I was fortunate enough to buy a new coat from Italy in late '70s, and then dress shirts for myself, from West Germany I believe, and some shirts for my kids, I think from the same place. These were not cheap at all, like I paid 100 rubles for leather boots and about 20 rubles a piece for two kid-sized T-shirts. My own dress shirts were something like 45 rubles. I made only about 120 rubles a month then and had to borrow from relatives to make those purchases. But it was worth every penny (kopeika), and I was ready to give up anything for those outfits. I loved how we looked, and the quality, style and designs were all outstanding. I loved how this clothing made me feel – special, privileged in some ways, at least not worse off than all those wives of sailors. Did I wear this clothing because it had something to say against the Soviet system? That’s nonsense. I was a true patriot of my motherland. I loved the Soviet Union, especially the pioneer camps. They were fun; you sort of got a three month paid vacation if you worked there. And my kids were there as well. If given a chance, I would go back to Soviet days in a blink of an eye.<sup>14</sup>*

11 See, for example, Rossitza Guentcheva, “Material Harmony: The Quest for Quality in Socialist Bulgaria, 1960s-1980s,” *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*, eds. Paulina Bren and Mary Neuberger, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, pp. 140-168.

12 For a specific discussion and use of this terminology, see Dmitrii Vasiliev, *Fartsovshchiki: Kak delalis' sostoianiia: Ispoved' liudei "iz teni"*, Sankt-Peterburg: Vektor, 2007.

13 For further discussion of the latter, see, for ex-

ample, Sergei Zhuk, “Popular Culture, Identity, and Soviet Youth in Dniepropetrovsk, 1959-84”, *Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies* no. 1906, 2008.

14 From an interview with the author, Lena P., born in 1953, interviewed in Novorossiysk in 2004.

Over and over again the same sentiment was shared by people of different backgrounds in the small port towns when they recalled their lives in the Soviet 1970s. Though reported years after the events (more on this later), such comments were more than passing remarks suitable for the study of subjectivity and nostalgia. The tapping into the black or grey market was such a commonplace experience for these people that it made the binaries of official and unofficial, legal and illegal, rebellious and loyal meaningless or at least highly challenging to use in assessing their remarks. The two worlds were not polar opposites but formed an integral part of the same core that shaped these people's lives.

Furthermore, an interesting insight was provided by another respondent who moved from Moscow to the Black Sea coast in the mid-1970s. Then a young woman, Sasha wanted to come across as "modern" (*sovremennaia*) and cherished everything that seemed to go with that term. But what she found in her new hometown was quite different from her experiences as a Muscovite. She recalled: "In Moscow I could buy recordings and listen to ABBA at any time but I had to tailor my own flared pants, whereas here I could buy foreign-made flared pants at any time but no one cared to listen to ABBA." Sasha also shared her observation that at times, the display of foreign fashion knew no boundaries or sense of moderation. All too often she saw people pile up clothing that did not match just because they could afford it, and she sympathized with a foreign visitor to the Soviet Union who was shocked to see many a young man in "baggy Bermuda shorts in gaudy colors that began at

Though this project is still in its developing stages as of 2012, it was envisioned some fifteen years ago, and the first set of interviews took place in 1997. Several key informants have passed away since then. All other quotes from interviews as well.

his knee and reached a crescendo of bad taste with clashing shirt."<sup>15</sup>

Overall, there was sufficient supply and demand of western goods to create a steady flow of goods. While the precise volume of trade is hard to calculate, the widespread availability of certain products, especially textiles, was hard to miss.<sup>16</sup> Thus, well before the Soviet production of such items, women routinely showed off their mohair and crimplene clothing. Crimplene is a type of polyester which became fashionable and commonplace in the Soviet Union. All of it was imported through illegal channels in the 1970s in the form of "cuts" (*otrezy*), or one to two meter pieces of fabric. The cuts were used to tailor dresses and skirt suites. Crimplene had both esthetic and practical advantages; it came in a variety of designs and was wrinkle-free and easy to wash. One meter of crimplene went for 30 rubles, and most skilled tailors needed about 1.25 meters for a dress or two meters for a skirt suite. Mohair is a type of textile made of Angora goat wool (not to be confused with more high-end Angora rabbit wool). Mohair was typically used for hats, scarves, and sweaters, and in combination with highly popular flared trousers (*briukiklesh*), any piece of clothing made from mohair made one into a true fashionista.

Anecdotally, every woman had a crimplene

15 Lois Fisher, *Survival in Russia: Chaos and Hope in Everyday Life*, Westview Press: Boulder, CO, 1993, p. 9.

16 Some indirect insight might be gained by looking at the number of ships that docked at an average port. Thus, Novorossiysk dates its post-WWII operations from 1963 (the piers were in too bad of a shape to support much business prior to 1963). It started with 162 ships annually in 1965 and expanded to over 400 ships, both domestic and foreign, that docked at the port after the new pier was completed in 1978. In post-Soviet times, the port changed its status to one of the most significant outlets on the Black Sea and has an average capacity of over 4,000 ships per annum.

dress and a mohair hat, or at least a popular perception was such that the two products were widely available to consumers who could afford such textiles, and this is at the time when the Soviet light industry did not produce either fabric at all. Indeed, every respondent in port towns reported that they had both in their possession, oftentimes more than one item made of each textile. The same was true of a highly popular Lurex, though it became commonplace in port towns only by the end of the 1970s. Fabrics and textiles with metallic yarn, or Lurex, became a point of obsession that once again came with a high price tag for consumers. Overall, though this clandestine market “was rather limited in scope and technically illegal” and did not provide all the consumer goods, it nonetheless had the potential to create a significant flow of some products, esp. specific items of clothing.<sup>17</sup> The consumption patterns of port towns were more complex than the empty shelves in state stores, and the emphasis on the latter might obscure or simplify the reality of everyday life under late socialism. Instead, the circulation of goods became a normal part of life for port town dwellers, and they learned to aptly navigate the system and successfully combine the various forms and avenues of consumption.

The residents enjoyed wearing western clothing and drinking Pepsi (the first Pepsi factory opened in the port town of Novorossiysk in 1974) but they seemed to be oblivious to and ignorant of any subculture or the message of resistance per se. The “golden youths” of Moscow could have listened to Bing Crosby and Louis Armstrong and worn T-shirts with Stars and Stripes and “US Army” logos on

them, but no equally open signs of resistance were evident in small towns.<sup>18</sup> A particular fascination with foreign goods was directly linked to people’s sense of what represented their success and position in the society. This, of course, was in no way unique to port towns. In a state of self-proclaimed equality for all, there was little room for expressing one’s social status. Social classes did not cease to exist, unlike what the Soviet people were assured, and the gap between the have and have-nots reached down to all layers of society by the 1970s and 1980s. The party elites always enjoyed special access to goods and facilities that distinguished them from the rest of the population. But for the population at large, which was becoming increasingly stratified, there were few avenues to express their social position and distinguish themselves from peers. Housing was distributed by the state and property was not privately owned, and thus the housing situation could not be improved or changed even with greater-than-average financial resources. In short, property ownership could not function as a sign of one’s social status. Cars, refrigerators, TV sets and other valuables were “sold” according to a distribution system and not purchased at will. Thus the only true outlet for visibly asserting one’s social position was clothing, which was priced on a black market out of all proportion to incomes precisely because it represented more than a way to cover one’s body. Aesthetic and practical considerations played a role (western clothing by all means looked more appealing than Soviet-produced attire), but one’s sense of personal worth and status that was vested into clothing was crucially important as well.

17 Quote from Svetlana Barsukova, Vadim Radaev, “Informal Economy in Russia: A Brief Overview,” *Economic Sociology* 13/2, 2012, pp. 4-13, here p. 5.

18 Alan Ball, *Imagining America: Influence and Images in Twentieth-Century Russia*, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2003, pp. 183-185.

A Soviet proverb exemplified this obsession with fashions when it proclaimed that “you judge a person first by his clothing and later by his intelligence.” Though in its deeper meaning the proverb was meant to downplay the importance of looks (which only mattered in making that first impression) and elevate the importance of intelligence (which with time revealed the true worth of a person), many misjudged it to mean that looks and first impressions were more important than any other attribute of human life. This was especially true of younger people of the 1970s, many of whom thought that “clothing gave young people status, prestige, and self-confidence.”<sup>19</sup> If clothing and consumerism were markers of personal and collective identity, then those markers were deeply social and socially ingrained into the fabric of everyday life.<sup>20</sup> Most consumers of western brands and clothing wanted to be like the people around them or better off in order to be embedded into their social milieu, not to oppose it. The same mentality persisted into the present day. In order to be accepted, one has to own a handbag of a particular designer or wear shoes with the acceptable minimal price tag. And even though specific costs and boundaries shifted depending on the layer of the society (the higher up the more expensive), the clothing, that proverbial first impression, nevertheless was and continues to be valued as status symbol.

Needless to say, retrospective accounts, like all memoirs and interviews, tend to be idealized, romanticized, and tainted by at least a hint

of nostalgia for those good old days. The new challenges of life in post-Soviet Russia displaced many people; for those who learned to navigate the system so masterfully, “the end of communism meant more loss than gain when suddenly the rules of the game, in which they had been so proficient, radically changed. [...] the new game was much more impersonal, global, and corporate, while networks of family and friends were no longer paramount to the functioning of the system”<sup>21</sup> (as a side note, Baba Mania was reduced to poverty by this “new game”).

Nonetheless, these realities do not take away from a more general observation of consumption in the Soviet Union of the 1970s and 1980s. Historian John Bushnell wrote that “throughout the 1960s and 1970s Soviet society developed spontaneously and dynamically, with a booming second economy, [...] and an increasingly complex and heterogeneous urban population.”<sup>22</sup> Though the original context of the statement refers to the rise and flourishing of youth subculture, the same would equally apply to the consumption patterns of the ever-growing number of port town residents. The volume of foreign goods that passed through port towns was so substantial that it made them almost mundane, or at least readily available. While to some residents these foreign goods in fact represented rebellion and freedom, to many more the “made-in” goods acquired added value only in the context of and in relation to socialist reality. The consumption was global and local at once, and foreign goods that circulated in small towns had less sacramental meaning attached to them than was the case

<sup>19</sup> Fisher, *Survival in Russia*, p. 11.

<sup>20</sup> For the discussion of consumption under socialism as part of one’s individual or collective identity, see *Style and Socialism: Modernity and Material Culture in Post-War Eastern Europe*, eds. Susan E. Reid, David Crowley, Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2000.

<sup>21</sup> Bren, *Communism Unwrapped*, p. 142.

<sup>22</sup> John Bushnell, “An Introduction to the Soviet Sistema: The Advent of Counterculture and Subculture,” *Slavic Review* 49/2, 1990, pp. 272-277, here p. 276.

for major cities. Even when residents of port towns craved foreign clothing, they did not demonstrate the behavior associated with it. As Baba Mania commented, “cities are for culture, but small places like ours are where you can buy everything; here we have it all.”

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