

## **“The Birth of a Consumer Society: Consumption and Class in the USSR, 1917-1953”**

Julie Hessler (University of Oregon)

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Davis Center for Russian Studies, Harvard University

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On February 22, as a part of the Historians' Seminar Series, Julie Hessler, Assistant Professor in Twentieth-century Europe at the University of Oregon, presented a paper entitled “The Birth of a Consumer Society: Consumption and Class in the USSR, 1917-1953”.

Hessler received her Ph.D. from University of Chicago. Her research interests are reflected in her publications: "Postwar Normalization and its Limits in the USSR: The Case of Trade," *Europe-Asia Studies* (May 2000); "Cultured Trade: The Stalinist Turn to Consumerism," in Fitzpatrick, ed., *Stalinism: New Directions* (Routledge, 2000); "A Postwar Perestroika? Toward a History of Private Enterprise in the USSR," *Slavic Review* (fall, 1998). Julie Hessler is currently writing a comprehensive history of trade, consumption, and the black market in the Soviet Union from the 1917 revolution through Stalin's death in 1953.

Hessler began her presentation by explaining that the subject of her presentation, consumption and the roots of Soviet consumerism, is an offshoot of a broader project she has been working on for many years now. It is a history of domestic trade from the 1917 revolution through Stalin's death in 1953, including both the invention and evolution of a socialist retail system and the ups and downs of private trade. She emphasized that she likes to call her work a social history, not because it isn't also concerned with politics, institutions, and economic history, but rather because those are to be expected in a history of Soviet trade; what is unexpected is the fact that she tries to provide a detailed portrait of how consumers interacted with the retail structure: how their buying patterns were shaped by the general condition of the economy, and how they were affected by social class, by their consumer values, and by circumstances in trade.

One of the central arguments of a book manuscript she had just finished, and one that informed her talk, is that every aspect of the consumer economy was molded by a cyclical pattern of crisis and recovery. At one level this is quite banal, since we all know that the revolutionary period, the collectivization years, and World War II, and the famines that followed each, were times of crisis, but since very few historians treat the first half of the Soviet era in its entirety, the internal connections between these three periods have not been emphasized and explored.

Instead of conceptualizing 35-year period of analysis in terms of a dichotomy between Lenin and Stalin, as most Western historians do, much less "the construction of socialism" vs. "developed socialism," as most Soviet-era scholars did, or even "Stalinism" or "classical socialism" vs. NEP, a *sui generis* period of reform, as economists and economic historians often have, the speaker suggested that the significant division is between "crisis socialism" and a normalization mode. Three times, the economy cycled into, and out of, a specific crisis formation. This crisis formation was characteristic of Soviet socialism in its formative decades, but it was no *more* characteristic than the techniques for economic recovery, which she argued were unexpectedly consistent across the decades and more closely linked to Soviet leaders' vision for the consumer economy than crisis socialism ever was.

These two modes of socialism, in terms of retail organization, meant limits on purchases of basic foodstuffs and other goods classed as "articles of primary necessity," generally through a socially-differentiated rationing system. It meant the extreme centralization of supplies, which ceased to operate along contractual lines and instead, at least for the most important classes of commodities, were structured around direct governmental allocations; and in conjunction with the state's efforts to monopolize and direct all major commodity flows, it meant a clampdown on the remnants of the private sector (mostly concentrated at the outdoor markets). However, against crisis socialism, the retail organization of the normalization periods was quite different. Then (whether in 1921, 1931-35, or 1946-48), distribution functions shifted back from the workplace to the shop. Access to goods became independent from an ascribed social status, and money once again became the primary determinant of who could obtain what. Supplies of one product after another reverted from centralized allocations to the mechanisms and

institutions of wholesale trade. Finally, the retail system was expected to pay for itself -- which tended to bring with it, in the normalization periods, an increasing emphasis on luxury trade. One should note that there were many important commonalities between the two, such as repression, but the differences were certainly important, too.

The oscillation between crisis and recovery/economic growth maybe be observed in relation to consumption habits and consumers' experiences. There, the cyclical pattern essentially meant the difference between survivalism and rising expectations. Hessler presented some empirical data to illustrate this point concerning, e.g., clothing, shoe consumption; food; breakdown of expenditures; private sector in purchases; private sector in income. The source of the data graphs is the single most important class of sources she have found for the study of consumption, namely household budget studies. They were carried out annually (and quarterly, monthly, etc.) by the Central Statistical Administration, and also (though somewhat less consistently) by the All-Union Central Council of Trade Unions (VTsSPS). They are now publicly available, though the results were not published between 1928 and the 1950s.

While noting that these studies had many the flaws, such as the Soviet government's relatively undifferentiated approach to social class, esp. after 1930 (e.g. TsSU statisticians neglected to study several occupational groups, most of which numbered among the poor: *kustar'* artisans, house servants, cab drivers, etc. and focused overwhelmingly on the accepted social classes, workers, peasants, engineers and managers (ITR), and white-collar employees.) or problems connected to self-reporting, she concluded, nevertheless, that since the sources of error did not change much from the time the surveys were initiated to the end of the Stalin period, household budget research can provide a reasonably accurate portrait of long-term consumption trends on the part of the core urban occupational groups. They are more reliable than estimates based on purely theoretical models, which have hitherto been the norm in discussions of Soviet consumption.

One should not see the beginnings of a "consumer society" in any of the crisis periods. Where we have to look for that is the recovery phase of each economic cycle, when consumption both expanded and diversified, at fairly rapid rates. In the remaining part of her presentation Hessler focused on the more specific themes, concerning consumers, consumption habits, consumerism, and class, from four different angles: how much people consumed; who consumed what; and the relationship between consumption and trade.

The Soviet standard of living has been the subject of a heated debate. The dominant interpretation was that Stalinist industrialization had come at a severe cost to Soviet citizens, whose standard of living did not recover until the late 1930s (in the more positive versions) or the 1950s (in the negative ones). However, Hessler pointed out that these conclusions relied on questionable assumptions. To obtain *per capita* consumption estimates for purchased goods, scholars took the nominal value of purchases and deflated that value by the rate of inflation. The numbers chosen to represent both prices and the evolving price index thus had enormous ramifications, and it is clear that some of their numbers were flawed. When economic historians have corrected for this and similar problems, they have tended to produce more optimistic assessments of consumption trends in the prewar era.

What do the budget studies tell us about this debate? Focusing on the industrial working class, the speaker discussed a few items of consumption less conducive to quantification, including a category monitored with particular interest by the Soviet regime--cultural and leisure consumption: visits to the cinema or theater; subscription to a library; books, newspapers, and journals in the home. Here, data collection shifted from the 1920s, when newspapers and libraries were the focus of investigations of citizens' exposure to printed matter, to the 1930s, when investigators wanted to know how many people owned and had read particular books. By 1935, 18% of all working-class households owned Stalin's *Voprosy leninizma*, while *Tikhii Don* and *Evgenii Onegin* led the list of what people had read (in Moscow, 57% of working men had read Sholokhov's epic). Similarly, if in the 1920s, we learn that working-class households (not individuals) made an average of 1.87 trips to the cinema a month, in 1935, the question was how many people had seen a specific set of films. The results are certainly intriguing for an assessment of Soviet culture: a staggering 62% of all workers and their family members had seen *Chapaev* by November, 1935. Here, more than in any other respect, we see the makings of a mass consumer culture before World War II.

One way of assessing the long-term development of consumption is to see whether the proportion of various expenditures shifted in ways that one would predict with increasing prosperity. In West Germany, after World War II, food dropped from 46% of working-class budgets in 1950 to 36% a decade later, while clothing,

furniture, health, and leisure expenditures increased. Michael Wildt used these changes to chart an experiential history of the "economic miracle" from the scarcity and want of the immediate postwar period to a "consumer society" fifteen years later. Compared with the 7% of household expenditures that went to leisure and entertainment even at the start of Wildt's study, Soviet workers lagged considerably behind - despite the fact that they paid next to nothing in rent. 1937 brought a return to normalcy in some areas, but it was not until 1952 that such elastic items of the budget as vacations and spas rose, or that food dropped back. Furniture purchases never returned to the 1927 rate.

The speaker made it clear that this discussion is not meant to be conclusive. It should, however, make one skeptical of revisionist claims that consumption grew dramatically in the decade after 1928. Certainly, as we have understood for decades, it rebounded after the debacle of 1929-33. Nothing in the budget investigations, however, indicates a significant increase over the NEP consumption levels until after World War II. Then, the increase is genuinely impressive, since it was achieved in a matter of just five years after the end of rationing in 1947.

The speaker then turned to the question of consumption and inequality and the social distribution of goods. She mentioned a scholar who had a fellowship at the Davis Center last year, Elena Osokina, and who has in the past few years repeatedly drawn Soviet historians' attention to the inequalities inherent in Stalinist distribution. Osokina initially focussed on the organization of food rationing in the early 1930s, which, as she demonstrated, codified a consumption hierarchy; it ensured that how much food citizens had to eat and what kind of clothes they had to wear corresponded more closely to their position in the official hierarchy than to their cash income or physical needs. Hessler argued that social stratification is a major area of inquiry for the study of Soviet consumption and that with regard to the question -- how social disparities translated into material disparities -- statistical sources once again have a story to tell. The real social division with the greatest significance for consumption was, not surprisingly, the division between urban and rural dwellers. And it is evident that residence played an enormous role in defining consumers' horizons, whether we consider the differences among republics or the difference between Moscow and virtually everywhere else. Nor did this gap narrow over time; in fact, Moscow's share of the total goods increased significantly between 1933 and 1951, and in 1955, the Soviet Union's five largest stores alone, all located in either Moscow or Leningrad, made fully 1.2% of the country's sales. As is the case the world over, residence in the major metropolitan areas automatically conferred access to a wider variety of goods than provincial consumers normally had available.

The historical literature has suggested that the material distance between social classes likewise widened over time. Dunham argued that at the end of World War II, the Soviet government tacitly entered into what she termed the "Big Deal" with its new managerial elite, according to which educated and upwardly-mobile citizens were co-opted by guarantees of material comfort. The implication was that the deal was cut at the expense of non-elite social groups. Hessler remarked that she is currently unable to assess this claim with respect to the material divide between urbanites and peasants, mainly because the Second World War remains such a question mark. Peasant consumption trends did not develop in tandem with urban wage- and salary-earners'; World War II, like the civil war before it, occasioned a massive transfer of wealth from city to country. Without household budget data, it is impossible to gauge how much of this transfer was offset by the 1921-22 and 1946-47 famines, but a book by Z. V. Atlas, one of the principal architects of the 1947 monetary reform, provides oblique evidence that many peasants held onto their gains through the postwar famine. Atlas observed that before the war, the aggregate money income of villagers had been only 26% of the nation's total, but the village was the source of approximately 53% of the money exchanged for new rubles in December, 1947. That "disproportion," as Atlas portrayed peasants' relative prosperity, was reversed only by the state's confiscation of savings during the monetary reform. Between 1947 and Stalin's death, peasant incomes lagged far behind those of urban workers, and so did their purchase of basic manufactured goods. In those years, clearly, reconstruction and recovery brought a widening urban-rural gap. However, with regard to the gap between workers and managers, Hessler said that she could state with some confidence that it did not widen after World War II. Rather, it narrowed quite substantially as workers' consumption expanded more rapidly than their bosses' did. This also began to happen in the later 1930s -- the previous normalization period -- just as it did in the later 1920s, under the NEP. From the quite striking inequalities of the 1930s, workers effectively achieved parity by 1952. The same was true not just of clothing, but of the majority of the household budget. Even with respect to such typically class-segmented items of consumption as books and newspapers (a middle-class consumer item) and alcohol (the working-class item *par excellence*), the difference in consumption amounted to little more than a ruble per month. With regard to the 1930s, a working-class subject

interviewed by the speaker recalled, for example, feeling a very strong animosity towards her schoolteacher in the late 1930s on the grounds that the teacher's fur collar identified her as part of the elite, and Sarah Davies's work on popular perceptions of the "*verkhi*" vs. the "*nizy*" underscores this point. By the early 1950s, however, many of the differences had evaporated as the income gap between even an unskilled worker and a technically or university-educated engineer or manager had narrowed to a mere 25%. This is not, of course, to say anything about the much thinner stratum of best-selling authors, ballet dancers, and *nomenklatura* elites, whose perquisites appear to have increased in the decade following the war.

Turning to the question of how Soviet citizens used consumer goods to project a particular social image, Julie Hessler noted that the opportunity for self-fashioning was much more limited in the USSR than in the advanced capitalist countries today. The range of available goods was limited, to begin with, and during most of the Stalin period, citizens' finances led them to consume according to the slogan, "as many as possible, as cheap as possible." This began to change, however, in such periods of economic growth as the mid-1920s, the late 1930s, and the period following 1948.

Consuming subcultures began to emerge, the most well-known example being the postwar "*stiliagi*" -- roughly the equivalent of the British "mods." Garnering attention as a new cultural phenomenon as early as 1949, *stiliagi* were defined by their consumption choices and personal style: these were young men with long hair who wore exotically-patterned neckties, wide-shouldered jackets, and rubber shoes, and who had amassed impressive record collections of forbidden jazz. In a real sense, the *stiliagi* heralded the advent of an individualistic, self-expressive approach to consumption characteristic of the consumer societies of the postwar West.

More relevant to mass consumption than pirated jazz records or zoot suits were a number of inexpensive luxuries that slowly filtered into the working-class milieu. Discussing these goods, the Finnish sociologist Jukka Gronow has dated their mass production and marketing to the 1930s, arguing that by the end of that decade, "Democratic luxury -- or it might be better to speak of plebeian or common luxury instead -- was an essential part of the everyday life of the Soviet people." Given the precipitous drop in living standards at the end of the NEP, Hessler thinks that very many workers enjoyed champagne, caviar, or perfume in the 1930s, or that what we see is a newly democratized consumption regime instead of the socialist economy's belated entrance into the vacuum left by the demise of private industry and shops. Nonetheless, she said that Gronow is on to something. The goods that he classes as plebeian luxuries -- champagne, flowers, cognac, cakes, perfumes, crystal glasses and vases, amber necklaces, and fur hats, that is, the full range of "welcome gifts for women" -- were indeed publicly endorsed by the regime in this period, began to enter the mass market, and, as he maintains, "preserved their status throughout several decades of Soviet history." If the Soviet Union's production of such "common luxuries" was sharply criticized by Trotsky in the late 1930s for representing a retreat from the commitment to satisfy basic needs, these goods were genuinely within reach of many working-class households, at least for special occasions, fifteen years later. By purchasing them, or the tablecloths, lampshades, and curtains that Vadim Volkov has identified as symbols of the Stalinist good life, lower-class consumers could begin to project a new, "cultured" or middleclass, identity in the decade following World War II. The speaker's final example of consumption as an identity strategy dates from the 1930s; it concerns the peasant migrants to the big towns. David Hoffmann has described the continuation of peasant culture even in Moscow in the early 1930s, but though migrant girls still liked to congregate and sing folk songs in the shanty-town outskirts of the capital, they also tried to acquire a "city" look.

Concerning the question where people obtained goods -- the relationship of consumption to trade -- Hessler remarked that in the historiography of Western Europe and the United States, histories of consumption have often been framed around the changing channels through which consumers acquired goods. Russia and the Soviet Union have not received as much attention as other countries in the expanding comparative history of commerce, in part because of the special conditions of Soviet trade. More generally, the well-known peculiarities of Soviet retailing -- the dominant role of the state in organizing distribution, the severe restrictions on private trade, the trade sector's chronic shortages, even the reluctance to replace the *kassa* system with self-service shops, which occurred in Western Europe in the 1950s and 1960s -- may have obscured the respects in which the development of Russian and Soviet trade conformed to a standard pattern. Here, too, shops gradually became bigger and more cost-efficient, prices more transparent, novel wares introduced, and tastes increasingly homogenized across class, ethnic and regional divisions. Some of these developments resulted from policy-makers' conscious efforts to modernize retailing on an American model; in the mid-1930s, when the Soviet government sent delegations to Western Europe

and the United States to study retailing, they concluded that the British experience was irrelevant as a model since British trade remained a "realm of petty shopkeepers." The same could be said of most continental European trade of that time. This is not to say that the leadership's interest in rationalization meant that "Americanization" proceeded with any great speed. As late as 1956, the vast majority of rural shops still employed just one person, and the overall average of 1.59 employees was scarcely an impressive increase over the 1913 average of 1.32.

However slow the modernization of Soviet trade, the surprise in the budget studies is just how important the small-scale and inefficient vestiges of the private sector continued to be to citizens' consumer-goods purchases after 1928. The fragmentary information presented by the speaker on managerial-class and white-collar consumption suggests that these groups spent a higher percentage of their incomes at the market, not less. What emerges from all of the budget studies is that expenditures at the free market rose substantially at the end of the NEP, despite the disappearance of private shops; that they matched the government's retail statistics only in 1935, the year of a major price hike; and that the private sector absorbed fully 81% of all consumer-goods expenditures during the Second World War.

Without a doubt, the large role of market trade had an effect on Soviet consumer culture, preserving a traditional, face-to-face culture of exchange in the face of the bureaucratized modernity of the Soviet shop. Markets were also something of a carnival: a place where a consumer could lose himself or herself in the crowd and where official values were turned on their head. Hessler cited her favorite image of the market from the Stalin era, where one might run into a Lenin impersonator, plying postcards of himself on the weekends, while spending his weekdays modeling for the flourishing art industry of Lenin busts. This, in itself, was a very important harbinger of consumer society: during the recovery periods, the drudgery of shopping was partially offset by newfound pleasures of shopping, and the market was the chief place where this happened through the end of the Stalin years (and, in fact, later).

In her conclusion, Hessler highlighted some major points concerning long-term consumption trends, based on the analysis of household budget studies. While she acknowledged that her analysis could not be called conclusive, findings would appear to support the older view of an economic *recovery* in the 1930s, rather than revisionist view of "exceptionally rapid growth." On the other hand, "exceptionally rapid growth" is exactly what Hessler believes occurred in the five years before Stalin's death. Perhaps her most important point concerns the relationship between consumption and inequality, since it goes against arguments by Trotsky, Dunham et al. Every recovery period (middle 1920s, mid- to late 1930s, 1948-53) served to diminish the material distance between the major urban social classes. There exist some caveats, e.g. maids, *kustari*, etc. were left out; or the fact that segmentation by employer (large state-sector vs. small cooperative sector) persisted and increased. Still, by early 1950s, this was probably one of the most egalitarian societies, in terms of distribution of material goods, in the modern world.

Hessler ended with a comment about the fact that social history field has moved in the cultural direction in the past 15 years. In some ways, this has done valuable things for us (e.g. subjectivity - though conclusions may be questionable, questions have enriched field). However, her plea, although it may sound like a throwback to the 1970s, is for historians to take advantage of the quantitative data that the opening of the archives has made available, as quantitative research can serve as a useful corrective to a purely qualitative, not to mention discursive, approach.