

**ELEMENTAL MATERIALISM:
OBJECTIFYING POWER AND SELFHOOD IN THE LATE USSR, 1961–1991**

by

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Abstract

This dissertation explores the link between materiality and individual and collective selves in late Soviet society. Focusing on material objects ranging from space rockets to heritage buildings to weightlifting equipment to TV sets, it argues that material objects in late socialism were key elements in the organization of the Soviet historical and spatial imagination. They embodied various, often contrasting social techniques and understandings of time and space, and acted as material coordinates of the Soviet self.

The central concept of this dissertation is elemental materialism, by which I mean a culturally rooted recognition of the power of matter and things to shape human bodies and selves, a prominent feature in the Soviet system of signification which regulated the production of meanings on daily basis. Soviet elemental materialism was a social reaction to pre-ideological experiences of daily life, including entangled assemblages of bodies, objects and physical space which exercised a social agency that did not originate from the dominant Soviet ideology. It was a set of spontaneous and situational cultural forms which gave Soviet people ways of making sense of the social agency of things. At the same time, my research historicizes Soviet things and material space in their spontaneity and affectivity as actual agents of historical change in the late USSR on a par with people, social institutions, and ideologies. By tracing the biographies of Soviet things and spatial constructions, I demonstrate how the material world of late Soviet period determined people's habitual choices, social trajectories, and imaginary aspirations.

This research contributes to several key debates in Soviet history including how the Soviet state fashioned its citizens into subjects, and how Soviet people embraced and questioned the dominant paradigms of selfhood. My study of social reactions to the recognition of the power of things over people – that is, elemental materialism of Soviet society – contributes to a better understanding of cultural logic of late socialism. In a broader context, my research contributes to the debates on how we as historians should conceptualize the role of objects in history.

Preface

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, A. Golubev. The fieldwork reported in Chapters 2, 3 and 6 was covered by UBC Ethics Certificate number H13-02595. All figures are used with permission from applicable sources. Portions of the Chapter 1 are used with permission from Alexey Golubev and Olga Smolyak, “Making Selves through Making Things: Soviet Do-It-Yourself Culture and Practices of Late Soviet Subjectivation,” *Cahiers du monde russe* 54, no. 3–4 (July-December 2013): 517–541. Only my contribution to the co-authored article is used in this dissertation. A version of Chapter 2 has been published as Alexey Golubev, “Time in 1:72 Scale: Plastic Historicity of Soviet Models,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 17, no. 1 (Winter 2016): 69–94.

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List of Abbreviations

CPSU	Communist Party of the Soviet Union
d.	<i>delo</i> , file
f.	<i>fond</i> , collection
GTO	Soviet physical culture training programme “Ready for Labour and Defence of the USSR”
Gulag	Main Administration of Corrective Labor Camps
KASSR	Karelian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (1923–1940), (1956–1991)
KFSSR	Karelian-Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic (1940–1956)
Komsomol	All-Union Leninist Young Communist League
l.	<i>list</i> , page
NARK	National Archive of the Republic of Karelia
NEP	New Economic Policy, 1921–1928
NGO	Non-governmental organization
op.	<i>opis'</i> , inventory number
RSFSR	Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic
TASS	Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union
TRIZ	Theory of Inventive Problem Solving
TsGA SPb	Central State Archive of St.Petersburg
TsGAIPD	Central State Archive of Historical and Political Documents of St. Petersburg
UFO	Unidentified flying object
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republic
VTsSPS	Central Council of Trade Unions

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Introduction

Elemental Materialism in Soviet Culture and Society

...the instinctive, unconscious materialist standpoint adopted by humanity, which regards the external world as existing independently of our minds.

Vladimir Lenin,
Materialism and Empirio-Criticism¹

The Soviet Official as Materialist

In the Soviet system of centralized management that encompassed all spheres of life from economy to culture, any official position implied a multitude of responsibilities and corresponding skills. A local Communist Party secretary, for instance, had to deal with a range of issues, including implementing production plans in factories and farms under their jurisdiction, renovating infrastructure, distributing housing, overseeing the distribution of an assortment of goods in local stores and ensuring the quality of communal services, preventing crime, enforcing labor safety, and multiple others. Not surprisingly, the normative image of a Soviet official was that of an all-around expert, almost a polymath. Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet leader from 1964 to 1982, stressed this in every plenary report at Communist Party congresses,² and official literature regulating the training of party and administrative cadres never stopped emphasizing that a Soviet official had to be qualified in political and economic issues, industry and technology,

¹ V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*. Vol. 14 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1962), 61.

² For example: L. I. Brezhnev, "Otchyotnyi doklad TsK KPSS XXIII siezdu KPSS," in *XXIII siezd KPSS. Stenogr. otchet*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Politizdat, 1966), 70, 90–91; L. I. Brezhnev, "Otchyotnyi doklad TsK KPSS XXIV siezdu KPSS," *XXIV siezd KPSS. Stenogr. otchet*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Politizdat, 1971), 122–126.

group management and individual psychology, Soviet ethics, and multiple others spheres.³

Finding themselves in the center of all political, social and cultural processes in late Soviet society, low-level Soviet officials had to cope with huge information flows. They had to make sense of them in order to react to developments under their jurisdiction, but also to report the current state of affairs to higher authorities.⁴ The centralized system of state management, of which they were the foundation, immersed them in the fabric of Soviet everyday life and forced them to carry out never-ending interpretation and summarizing. In doing this, Soviet officials acted, to a certain extent, like anthropologists, observing Soviet society in its miniscule forms and incorporating their observations into texts; that is, official documents.⁵ In fact, “the study of humans” – a dictionary definition of anthropology – was part of their job description, since only a good knowledge of the communities under their supervision could help them effectively build socialism at the ground level of Soviet society. *Kommunist*, the official journal of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (hereafter CPSU), on numerous occasions declared that, in order to fulfill their professional obligations, Soviet officials and managers had to “study people” around them, so that, as one of its articles explicated, they “knew how to influence people depending on individual psychological peculiarities, mindset, character...”⁶ A Soviet theorist of management wrote that officials in the USSR were in charge of “enlightenment [of people under their control], had to be attentive to people, to immerse oneself in their concerns and interests...”⁷ and an official publication

³ A. Pershin, “Avtoritet rukovoditelii,” *Kommunist*, 1 (1971), 69–79; A. Kandrenkov, “Zabotlivo rastit kadry,” *Kommunist*, 9 (1976): 67–74; A. Pelshe, “O trebovatel'nosti i distsipline,” *Kommunist*, 2 (1980), 18–32; Yu. A. Rozenbaum, *Podgotovka upravlencheskikh kadrov* (Moscow: Nauka, 1981), 31–44, 48–54; “Leninskiie printsipy podbora, rasstanovki i vospitaniia kadrov (vmesto Vvedeniia),” *Kadry – reshaiushchaia sila partiinogo rukovodstva* (Moscow: Mysl, 1984), 3–20.

⁴ The role of local-level party organizations and administrative bodies in informing the Soviet leadership of everyday realities and popular opinions has been discussed in a number of works. See, among others, Ronald J. Hill and Peter Frank, *The Soviet Communist Party* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1986), 83–87.

⁵ This comparison was inspired by Carlo Ginzburg’s famous analogy between inquisitors and anthropologists: Carlo Ginzburg, “*The Inquisitor as Anthropologist*,” in Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, translated by John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 156–164.

⁶ S. Kosolapov, “Trudovoi kollektiv: zabota o npravstvennom zdorovie,” *Kommunist*, 13 (1976): 66.

⁷ Rozenbaum, p. 37.

of the CPSU's Central Committee on party cadres emphasized that a party official had to be "sensitive to people, to their needs and demands..."⁸

Due to the nature of their socio-political position and their job requirements, Soviet rank-and-file officials in many instances pursued the same agenda as I have in this work – to understand the people of late socialism and social change in their communities. Their will for knowledge about Soviet personhood was quite pragmatic, since Soviet officials were supposed to enlighten and educate people into proper socialist subjects;⁹ yet in order to achieve this grand goal of building socialism – the making of the New Soviet Person – they first had to understand the "human material" at their disposal.¹⁰ Of course, they had an overarching paradigm of dialectical materialism, a philosophy based on the writings and interpretations of Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels and Vladimir Lenin, that provided them with the officially sanctioned conceptual framework to make sense of their surrounding reality. But as spontaneous and accidental anthropologists they had to deal with vibrant material – the fabric of Soviet everyday life – that escaped the schemas of Marxism-Leninism. Reading the reports of Soviet low-level officials as anthropological texts – that is, as interpretations based upon observations – is particularly inspiring for research aiming to historicize Soviet selfhood, since their observations and interpretations captured Soviet people in their immediate interactions with their social and material environment. In the language of Soviet bureaucratic reports, this interaction was always complex. Not only were people depicted as agents of socio-economic processes, but objects of the material world were also interpreted as their active participants:

⁸ "Leninskiie printsipy podbora," 6.

⁹ On the making of the 'new Soviet person' as an explicitly formulated project of Soviet authorities, see: K. M. Bogoliubov and F. P. Petrov, eds., *KPSS o formirovanii novogo cheloveka: sbornik dokumentov i materialov, 1965-1981* (Moskva: Politizdat, 1982); Hill and Frank, *The Soviet Communist Party*, 76–79. See also: Catriona Kelly, *Refining Russia: Advice Literature, Polite Culture, and Gender from Catherine to Yeltsin* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2001); Boris Firsov, *Raznomyslie v SSSR i Rossii (1945–2008): Istorii, teoriia i praktiki* (St.Petersburg: EU SPb Press, 2008).

¹⁰ Yuri Olesha's term coined in a 1929 short story, in which his character desired to "reconstruct the human material, to totally re-engineer the new world": Yuri Olesha, *Izbrannoie* (Moscow: Pravda, 1983), 277. The national corpus of the Russian language (<http://ruscorpora.ru>) shows that this phrase was routinely used in late Soviet texts.

Motor transport inflicts losses on collective farms. This is caused by the low use factor, falsification of figures and over-expenditure of fuel... A tractor Belarus of the farm Medvezhyegorskii stood idle a whole day while there was a complicated situation with the transportation of the potato harvest and fodder at the farm (*a 1963 report of the Ministry of Finances of Karelia*).¹¹

The grounds of logging sites and sawing facilities are swamped in bark, wood chips and other wood wastes that have not been removed for several years. Merchantable lumber is therefore stocked on top of these waste products which represent a significant fire threat. Fire clearances between stocks of unprocessed wood, lumber, administrative buildings and sawing facilities do not meet the normative requirements. Sawing facilities do not have water supplies for fire protection; telephone service is inoperable during nighttime (*a 1974 report of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Karelia*).¹²

A serious obstacle on the way to achieving the goal of educating a [Communist] person... is represented by insufficient infrastructure [материальная база, literally a ‘material basis’] and often by unskilled and incomplete use of already existing sports grounds, dance floors, public halls, parks, social and cultural centers (‘kultprosvetuchrezhdenie’), propaganda rooms (‘krasnykh ugolkov’), sports and leisure equipment (*a 1975 information letter of the Karelian regional committee of the Komsomol*).¹³

Scholars of Soviet history have long noted that the desire to conquer and exert full control over the material world – natural and man-made alike – was one of the founding pillars of Soviet ideology and culture from 1917 to 1991.¹⁴ Yet Soviet low-level officials spent much of their work time dealing with the surprises, difficulties and obstacles created by the stubborn resistance of infrastructure, equipment and/or natural phenomena to Soviet government planning. Tractors and trucks stood idle and thus “inflicted losses”

¹¹ National Archive of Republic of Karelia (hereafter NARK), f. R-2359, op. 1, d. 2/14, l. 12.

¹² NARK, f. R-690, op. 11, d. 514/2393, l. 43–44.

¹³ NARK, f. P-3, op. 26, d. 140, l. 4.

¹⁴ Katerina Clark, *Moscow, the Fourth Rome: Stalinism, Cosmopolitanism, and the Evolution of Soviet Culture, 1931-1941* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), esp. p. 136–168.

on companies and regional economies; the waste of industrial enterprises created hazards for people and tangible assets; while insufficient or poor infrastructure interfered in the process of educating and disciplining Soviet teenagers. In order to explain why all this could happen, the language of Soviet official documents in these and innumerable other instances turned nearly animist: material objects were represented not only as the setting for or tools of human actions, but rather as co-participants – sometimes assisting, often resisting – in socio-economic processes.

Of course, human agency is implied here: in all three excerpts quoted above, mismanagement by certain people in charge is nodded at. The use of the passive voice is symptomatic in this respect (“territories... are swamped,” “wood wastes... have not been removed”). Yet equally symptomatic is the fact that the specific culprits in these situations were not named. For officials dealing, for example, with a complicated economic situation at a Soviet collective farm it was important that, at this specific point in time, trucks and tractors stood idle or spent too much fuel. Meanwhile, their colleagues inspecting logging sites were concerned that the piles of wood waste and the overly dense storage of lumber created fire hazards. The language of their reports implied a certain level of social agency of material objects, because the difficulties that Soviet officials dealt with were caused by a material world that resisted the will of the party and the government. The national swamp reclamation campaign (мелиорация) that lasted from the mid-1960s to the mid-1980s provides numerous examples. In 1975, inspectors of the Karelian Regional Committee (hereafter *obkom* after its conventional Russian acronym) of the CPSU reported that reclamation works near Petrozavodsk lagged behind schedule because loamy soil choked up the drainage ditches, and two out of three excavators had broken down.¹⁵ A correspondent of the specialized journal *Gidrotekhnika i melioratsiia* used similar terms to report why hydroengineering works in Southern Ukraine failed to meet the planned deadlines: “sometimes an excavator breaks down, and

¹⁵ NARK, f. P-3, op. 26, d. 211, l. 84–88.

then dump trucks stand idle; other times dump trucks get stuck on their way, and then excavators stand idle.”¹⁶

Such explanations can be discarded as naïve, and it is, indeed, easy to build a cause-and-effect relationship that would explain such situations as derivative of the systemic shortcomings of the Soviet planned economy, in which a lack of competition and motivation caused the production of low quality commodities, including equipment, and was thus the root of the problems mentioned above. Yet I suggest that it might be equally productive to think of Soviet officials as “situational materialists,” for whom such a grand scheme of things was of abstract interest. What was actually important for them was that equipment broke down and thus affected production plans, local industrial waste accumulated in and around living areas and created different hazards, and untamed urban landscapes produced social deviations. They needed to react to numerous surprises generated by Soviet realities and they needed to do it both quickly and with the resources at hand. Their language operated not with people and things taken separately, but with assemblages of humans, material objects, and the natural and man-made landscapes. The language of Soviet official documents routinely defined people through the objects of the material world, and objects were interpreted as encapsulating social relations and tensions, concepts and emotions.

To rephrase, in their efforts to understand Soviet people and society, Soviet officials appeared very materialist, and not necessarily in the Marxist-Leninist meaning of this term. When they wrote, occasionally or in passing, of Soviet society in terms of assemblages between people and things, this made them in some respects closer to Sergei Tretiakov’s productivist agenda,¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s social analysis in *A Thousand Plateaus*,¹⁸ Bruno Latour’s actor-network theory,¹⁹ or the social research of

¹⁶ Ye. Tret’iakov, “Pioner brigadnogo podriada,” *Gidrotekhnika i melioratsiia*, no. 5 (1980): 14.

¹⁷ Sergei Tretiakov, “The Biography of the Object,” *October*, no. 118 (Fall 2006): 57–62. The work was originally published in 1929 in Russian as “Biografiia veshchi.”

¹⁸ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

¹⁹ Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

new materialists.²⁰ Of course, it is important not to exaggerate the analogy between the Soviet official, on the one hand, and anthropologists or critical theorists, on the other. After all, to “study humans” was an important, but rather secondary obligation of the former in contrast to the latter. Neither did they pursue a critical political agenda. But the “vibrant matter” of Soviet reality, to use Jane Bennett’s term, found its manifestation in their reports or official correspondence, as well as in the local and regional-level mass-media and in the everyday talk of Soviet citizens. When Soviet officials sounded like “vulgar materialists”²¹ as in the 1975 report quoted above that explained the root of criminality through the absence of leisure time infrastructure, they did so because they were confronted with innumerable situations in which people and things acted in relationships that are difficult to separate.

A relevant question to ask at this point is to what degree scholars of Soviet history should value knowledge produced by the people who belonged to the culture under study and thus did not have the privilege of an outside perspective, and who also had a clear ideological bias in their observations and interpretations.²² To a certain degree, this question resonates with scholarly debates on the importance of non-academic knowledge systems for our understanding of social reality. These debates emerged as a reaction to the recognition that scholarly knowledge itself is never an innocent descriptive tool, as it encapsulates and enacts political and social agendas.²³ They were further spurred by the

²⁰ Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Diana H. Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham [NC]; London: Duke University Press, 2010).

²¹ While the original German term, *Vulgärmaterialismus*, was coined by Friedrich Engels in the nineteenth century, Soviet philosophers actively employed it to discredit what they saw as ‘easy’ and ‘naïve’ explanations of social processes as directly derivative from matter. See, e.g., A. D. Makarov, A. V. Vostrikov and Ye. N. Chesnokov (eds.), *Dialekticheskii materialism* (Moscow: Izd. VPSH pri TsK KPSS, 1962), 97.

²² This question is particularly relevant if we take into account that post-WWII American scholarship institutionalized distrust of Soviet official information in the discipline of Soviet studies. For example, on the struggle of America’s Soviet experts with Soviet official data, see David C. Engerman, *Know Your Enemy: The Rise and Fall of America’s Soviet Experts* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 101–105.

²³ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971); Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Bruno

acknowledgement that indigenous systems of knowledge, despite having being dismissed for decades as naïve or primitive, have their own orders of sophistication and can deepen our understanding of social – and even natural – processes.²⁴ What I want to take from these debates is an understanding that the particular attentiveness of Soviet official documents to interactions between people and their material environment is not necessarily an artefact of the naivety or ideological bias of their authors. As I try to show in this dissertation, the elemental materialism of late Soviet society was an important part of its cultural logic and thus regulated the everyday production of meanings. It influenced the ways in which Soviet people made sense of the world that they populated and tried to change.²⁵ Echoing Bill Brown, the author of “things theory,” I want to ask: “Can’t we learn from this materialism instead of taking the trouble to trouble it?”²⁶ What exactly I want to learn from Soviet officials, journalists and ordinary citizens, these spontaneous and elemental materialists, is their recognition of the actual ability of Soviet objects and material environments to organize social life and thus to become co-participants of the historical process.

Defining Elemental Materialism

Elemental Materialism as a Research Object

The term elemental materialism first appeared in Friedrich Engels’s *Anti-Dühring* as “naturwüchsiger Materialismus.”²⁷ The primary motivation of Engels in this work was to discredit philosophical idealism and its temptations for the socialist movement that he personified with Eugen Dühring, a notable German critic of Marxism. Tracing philosophical predecessors of Karl Marx’s materialist dialectic back to ancient Greece, Engels argued that “the philosophy of antiquity was primitive, spontaneously evolved

Latour and Stève Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton University Press, 1986).

²⁴ Arun Agrawal, “Dismantling the Divide between Indigenous and Scientific Knowledge,” *Development and Change* 26, no. 3 (1995): 413–39.

²⁵ I am grateful to Serguei Oushakine for advising me to use the term “elemental materialism” as a replacement for the more reductionist “spontaneous materialism” or patronizing “naïve materialism.”

²⁶ Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 1 (October 1, 2001): 3.

²⁷ Friedrich Engels, *Herr Eugen Dührings Umwälzung der Wissenschaft* (Zürich: Berlags-Magazin, 1886), 129.

materialism. As such, it was incapable of clearing up the relation between mind and matter.”²⁸ His drafts preserved a more expanded definition of ancient philosophy as

the whole original spontaneous materialism which at its beginning quite naturally regards the unity of the infinite diversity of natural phenomena as a matter of course, and seeks it in something definitely corporeal, a particular thing, as Thales does in water.²⁹

The common English translation of “naturwüchsiger Materialismus” is “spontaneously evolved” or “spontaneous materialism,” as in the quote above. The canonical Russian translation is “стихийный материализм,” that is, “elemental materialism.” This translation includes a reference to the foundational question of pre-Socratic philosophy: its attempt to find the originating principle of nature in one of the classical elements (Engels mentions Thales who championed water as the primary element). In this form, the term elemental materialism became standard in Soviet histories of philosophy as the earliest stage of materialist thinking.³⁰ What Soviet philosophers omitted was that another form of elemental materialism was all around them: a culturally rooted recognition of the power of matter and things to shape human bodies and selves, a prominent feature in the Soviet system of signification which regulated the production of meanings on a daily basis. It was elemental in the sense that it dealt with the pre-ideological experiences of daily life and with the entangled assemblages of bodies, objects and physical spaces that exercised social agency but did not originate from the dominant order of ideology. Soviet elemental materialism was a spontaneous reaction to “the suddenness with which things seem to assert their presence and power,”³¹ as well as to the stubbornness with which they do it. Elemental materialism was a set of spontaneous and situational cultural forms which gave Soviet people ways of making sense of this social agency. The side effect was that in many

²⁸ Friedrich Engels, “Anti-Dühring. Dialectics of Nature,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works*, Vol. 25 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 128.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 467.

³⁰ M. I. Ananieva et al, *Dialekticheskii materialism* (Moscow: Mysl, 1989), 47.

³¹ Brown, “Thing Theory,” 3.

cases it made them – in Engels’s words – “incapable of clearing up the relation between mind and matter.”

Elemental Materialism as a Method

This dissertation is about Soviet elemental materialism; it traces different cultural forms through which people of late socialism conceptualized and problematized the subject-object relation in their particular historical conditions. At the same time, I want to take seriously my own call to learn from the culture I study. That is why this dissertation is itself, to a certain degree, elementally materialist in its research methodology. I am trying to historicize Soviet things and material space in their spontaneity as actual agents of historical change in the late USSR on a par with people, social institutions and ideologies. My use of the concept “elemental” is meant to stress the fact that things were the basic structural elements of the Soviet (and not only the Soviet) social order. A focus on things, on their ability to organize societies and human bodies in ways which are not reducible to social structures and discursive meanings can account for a more complex understanding of historical change in the late USSR.

My research methodology is partially inspired by the Soviet elemental materialism that I discovered in my sources, but academically it draws on the rich legacy that critical studies of the body and material culture have created in the social sciences. These studies have challenged scholarly representations of “a world of actors devoid of things,”³² and offered various ways of conceptualizing and interpreting the role of materiality and material objects in social processes: as the objectification of social meanings,³³ as frameworks of significations on par with language,³⁴ as socially active objects, which are animated by the passage through the social fabric and which stitch it together by their

³² Bernward Joerges, “Technology in Everyday Life: Conceptual Queries,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 18, no. 2 (1988): 220.

³³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1984); Daniel Miller, *Material Culture and Mass Consumption*, Social Archaeology (Oxford: Blackwell, 1987).

³⁴ Boris Arvatov, “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question),” trans. Christina Kiaer, *October* 81 (July 1, 1997): 119–28, originally published in 1925; Brown, “Thing Theory”; Serguei Alex. Oushakine, “‘Against the Cult of Things’: On Soviet Productivism, Storage Economy, and Commodities with No Destination,” *The Russian Review* 73, no. 2 (2014): 198–236.

trajectories,³⁵ as regulators of people's social behavior,³⁶ and as social agents in their own right.³⁷ While I follow many of the insights proposed in these studies, particularly influential for me were the approaches of two notable figures of the Russian avant-garde, Sergei Tretiakov and Viktor Shklovsky.

In 1929, Tretiakov, addressing Soviet writers and journalists in a collection published by the Left Front of the Arts, attacked the persistence of old, pre-revolutionary forms of writing which, he argued, prevented Soviet literature from catching up with the pressing and immediate tasks of socialist transformations in the USSR. His main object of attack was the classical novel centered on the life trajectory of its protagonist, a genre whose forms were so burdened with the novel's roots in the bourgeois social order that their reproduction in socialist literature petrified and annihilated its transformative potential:

[T]he novel based upon the human hero's biography is fundamentally flawed and, currently, the best method for smuggling in the contraband of idealism... I came up against this in my own practice when I wrote the bio-interview *Den Shi-khua*, the biography of a real person whom I followed with the highest possible degree of objectivity... Despite the fact that a substantial number of objects and production processes have been incorporated into the narrative, the figure of the hero is distended. Thus, this figure, instead of being conditioned by these objects and influences, begins to condition them himself.³⁸

Tretiakov notes here that the old literary form imposed on him its own reductionist logic, and he is terrified to discover that he is no longer in control of his own text. In a way, he describes "the death of the author," a basic postmodern notion that the form of

³⁵ Bronislaw Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea* (LaVergne, Tenn.: Malinowski Press, 2008), first published in 1922; Tretiakov, "The Biography of the Object", first published in 1929; Igor Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–91.

³⁶ Latour and Woolgar, *Laboratory Life*; Bruno Latour, *The Making of Law: An Ethnography of the Conseil d'Etat* (Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA: Polity, 2010).

³⁷ Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms*; Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

³⁸ Tretiakov, "The Biography of the Object," 60.

writing has its own politics which cannot be reduced, and sometimes are directly contradictory, to the author's intended content.³⁹ Yet Tretiakov is not interested in deconstruction or critical analysis; he wants to reach "the highest possible degree of objectivity" in his understanding and representation of social change, and so he suggests a radical solution: instead of novels based on biographies of real or fictional characters, Soviet writers had to start producing "biographies of the object":

The compositional structure of the "biography of the object" is a conveyer belt along which a unit of raw material is moved and transformed into a useful product through human effort... The biography of the object has an extraordinary capacity to incorporate human material. People approach the object at a cross-section of the conveyer belt... People's individual and distinctive characteristics are no longer relevant here. The tics and epilepsies of the individual go unperceived. Instead, social neuroses and the professional diseases of a given group are foregrounded.⁴⁰

The focus on the object is, in other words, important because it provides a new perspective that allows people to "appear before us in a new light and in [their] full worth."⁴¹ The biography of the object helps us to better understand human society, because objects do, indeed, condition people; ignoring the object would be "smuggling in the contraband of idealism." While none of my chapters is a biography of a particular Soviet object in the sense of Tretiakov's factography,⁴² I owe to him the idea that writing about Soviet scale models, or heritage buildings, or hallways of apartment blocks can be a productive form of social history. The focus on Soviet objects helps to avoid easy and often forced schematizations of historical material that might be provoked by the use of

³⁹ Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, by Roland Barthes, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 142–48; Michel Foucault, "What is an Author," in *Language, counter-memory, practice: selected essays and interviews*, by Michel Foucault, ed. Donald F. Bouchard (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1977), 113–38; Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998).

⁴⁰ Tretiakov, "The Biography of the Object," 61.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 62.

⁴² On factography, see: *October*, no. 118 (Fall 2006), a special issue *Soviet Factography*, ed. by Davin Fore.

even the most productive categories of social analysis, such as gender, ethnicity, nation, consumption, and others.⁴³ For example, the history of hallways and basements of Soviet apartment blocks that I trace in the second part of my dissertation can provide insights into how some of the social divisions and conflicts in the late USSR were linked with the urban landscape of late socialism. These conflicts had a concrete material basis, in addition to more abstract divisive social factors, such as income level, education, or family history. Being a man or a woman of late socialism – that is, performing one’s masculinity or femininity – could require not only body rituals and discursive practices, but also checking in, or conspicuously avoiding, a certain register of places which, in turn, could vary substantially from one social group to another.⁴⁴ Another example: a history of scale models of aircrafts, ships and ground vehicles in the USSR (chapter 2) can be written as a history of a particular hobby, but can also suggest the importance of their collections for the organization of the Soviet and post-Soviet historical imagination. Tracing the social trajectories of things is about seeking nuances and details in the grand scheme of economic, social and political change. Yet for history as a conjectural discipline, to use Carlo Ginzburg’s term, it is details – trivial and unimportant as they might seem – that “provide the key to a deeper reality, inaccessible by other methods.”⁴⁵

Elemental Materialism as a Writing Technique

For Sergei Tretiakov and many other representatives of the Soviet avant-garde, most importantly the documentary filmmaker Dziga Vertov, interest in the material side of social life translated into attempts to exclude to the maximum extent the authorial presence in their own works. But not for all: Viktor Shklovsky, another leading figure from their cohort, was skeptical that Tretiakov’s factographic writing or Vertov’s cinematographic montages of Soviet everyday life could attain “the highest possible

⁴³ Later, a similar idea to use the social biographies and trajectories of objects as a method of social and cultural analysis was offered by the American anthropologist Igor Kopytoff: Kopytoff, “The Cultural Biography of Things.”

⁴⁴ This form of the cultural negotiation of gender is discussed in Serguei Oushakine, “‘Chelovek roda on’: znaki otsutstviia,” in Serguei Oushakine, ed., *O muzhe(n)stvennosti* (Moscow: NLO, 2002), 21–23.

⁴⁵ Carlo Ginzburg, “Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method,” trans. Anna Davin, *History Workshop*, no. 9 (April 1, 1980): 11.

degree of objectivity.” While Shklovsky shared their ideas on the importance of things and matter in the organization of social life, he criticized the representational techniques of his fellow avant-gardists as completely ignoring the fact that the medium – the written word (Tretiakov) or cinema (Vertov) – is never neutral to the message.⁴⁶ “I want to know the [identification] number of the locomotive lying on its side in Vertov’s film,” wrote Shklovsky in one of his works, using the example of a filmed steam engine to demonstrate the artistic conventionality inherent in any representation, even in those claiming an absolute objectivity.⁴⁷

Shklovsky’s response to the realization that “the medium is the message”⁴⁸ was to turn this conventionality from a liability into an asset: to use things in the complexity of their social lives as a way of organizing one’s narrative – as a literary device, or a technique of writing. His most lasting contribution to the field of literary analysis has been the idea of defamiliarization (остранение), coined in his early work “Art as Technique” (1917). Defamiliarization is a technique in which an author represents a common thing or a typical situation in a strange way (estrangement is an alternate translation of this term) that challenges its conventional understanding. Using examples from Leo Tolstoy’s prose, Shklovsky shows how this technique helps to create a much more nuanced and fresh outlook on the world:

Habitualization devours work, clothes, furniture, one’s wife, and the fear of war... And art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ On the Soviet avant-gardist debates about the relationship between things and representational techniques see Serguei Oushakine, “‘Ne vzletevshii samolioty mechy’: O pokolenii formalnogo metoda,” in Serguei Oushakine, ed., *Formalniy metod: Antologiya russkogo modernizma. Tom 1* (Moscow, Yekaterinburg: Kabinetnyi uchenyi, 2016), 1–14.

⁴⁷ Viktor Shklovsky, “Kuda shagaiet Dziga Vertov?” in Oushakine, ed., *Formalniy metod*, 194.

⁴⁸ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964). The comparison belongs to Serguei Oushakine: Oushakine, “‘Ne vzletevshii samolioty,’” 12.

⁴⁹ Viktor Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” in *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, ed. Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 12.

What Shklovsky writes for art is applicable to social analysis as well. For example, a common experience in many Soviet families in 1989 was watching tele-séances of Soviet psychics Anatoly Kashpirovsky and Alan Chumak, who claimed paranormal abilities to remotely heal their audiences through the TV screen. Many explanations of this phenomenon refer pejoratively to obscurantism and the stupidity of Soviet television audiences. But what if we look at these tele-séances as rituals taking place in the home environment and involving an interaction between material objects (TV sets, bottles and jars with fluids) and people's bodies? This act of defamiliarization complicates commonplace interpretations of these séances as a "zombification" of Soviet television audiences and provokes questions as to what degree the Soviet television network exercised social power that cannot be reduced to the directives of the Communist party and government (chapter 6). Looking at Soviet things "as if for the first time" can serve as a device to resist the "habitualization" of historical knowledge and to challenge commonplace truths that too often disguise the politics of knowledge. What can come as a result might be a more nuanced and balanced understanding of the process of historical change in the late USSR.

The specificity of working with historical sources is that quite often their authors leave out details that seemed unimportant to them. Many of my steam engines are without identification numbers. Yet there is another important thing that I learned from both Tretiakov and Shklovsky: that the focus on objects should not be a goal in and of itself. Its goal is, instead, to make people "appear before us in a new light and in [their] full worth."⁵⁰ For this work, writing about the material environment of late socialism is a method and a technique to better understand the Soviet people: their selves, their social lives and their interactions with power.

Materiality, Heteroglossia and Soviet Selfhood

In the previous section I mentioned that since the turn of the 2000s, materiality has become an increasingly important category of academic research, offering new

⁵⁰ Tretiakov, "The Biography of the Object," 62.

epistemologies, ontologies and political agendas. Among historians, the materialist turn has challenged anthropocentric views of historical processes and offered interpretative frameworks in which things and matter are treated as capable of facilitating historical change, rather than being simply passive objects of human will. The history of science and technology was quick to acknowledge that objects were instrumental in the process of scientific and technological change;⁵¹ social and cultural histories soon followed, interpreting humans and objects as co-participants of the historical process.⁵²

The response to this material turn in the field of Soviet history was uneven: while studies of the early Soviet period produced novel research which inspired materiality studies of other regions and periods,⁵³ historical inquiries into the role of material objects in late Soviet socio-cultural change were more limited. Studies of consumption⁵⁴ and housing⁵⁵ in the post-Stalinist era have enriched our knowledge of its material world, but their overall emphasis is on official politics, and they employ a predominantly top-down

⁵¹ Bruno Latour and Stève Woolgar, *Laboratory Life: The Social Construction of Scientific Facts* (Princeton University Press, 1986); Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1987); M. Norton Wise, "Mediating Machines," *Science in Context* 2 (1988), 77–113.

⁵² Leora Auslander et al., 'AHR Conversation: Historians and the Study of Material Culture', *The American Historical Review* 114, no. 5 (1 December 2009): 1355–1404.

⁵³ Victor Buchli, *An Archaeology of Socialism* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Nikolai V. Ssorin-Chaikov and Olga Sosnina, eds., *Dary Vozhdiam = Gifts to Soviet Leaders* (Moskva: Pinakoteka, 2006); Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2008); Emma Widdis, "Sew Yourself Soviet: The Pleasures of Texture in the Machine Age," Marina Balina and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style* (London; New York: Anthem Press, 2011), 115–132; Emma Widdis, "Faktura: Depth and Surface in Early Soviet Set Design," *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema* 3, no. 1 (2009): 5–32.

⁵⁴ Susan E. Reid, "Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev," *Slavic Review* 61, no. 2 (2002): 211–252; Susan E. Reid, "Khrushchev Modern: Agency and Modernization in the Soviet Home," *Cahiers du monde russe* 47, no. 1/2 (2006): 227–68; Susan E. Reid, "Who Will Beat Whom? Soviet Popular Reception of the American National Exhibition in Moscow, 1959," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 9, no. 4 (Fall 2008): 855–904; Lewis H Siegelbaum, *Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Natalya Chernyshova, *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁵⁵ Christine Varga-Harris, "Forging Citizenship on the Home Front: Reviving the Socialist Contract and Constructing Soviet Identity During the Thaw," in *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*, ed. Polly Jones (London: Routledge, 2006), 101–16; Lynne Attwood, *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia: Private Life in a Public Space* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010); Mark B. Smith, *Property of Communists: The Urban Housing Program from Stalin to Khrushchev* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010); Steven E. Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street: Mass Housing and Everyday Life after Stalin* (Washington, D.C.; Baltimore, Md: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

approach to history. Their authors emphasize the international aspects of both Soviet consumption and housing, placing them in the framework of Cold War confrontation. The favourite story in the studies of both Soviet consumption and housing is the so-called 1959 “kitchen debate,” when Richard Nixon and Nikita Khrushchev confronted each other at the opening of the American National Exhibition in Moscow and engaged in an argument about whether consumer goods, rather than nuclear weapons, should serve as a measure of progress. The focus of these works is primarily on Soviet consumption and housing as state projects with the corresponding competitive and didactic implications: consumption as a measure of socialist progress, housing as enlightenment, and vice versa.

Studies of materiality in the late USSR have thus been an integral part of the much bigger and more traditional scholarly field: studies of official Soviet politics. This is reflected, in particular, in the titles of works on Soviet consumption and housing, as most of them use the names of Soviet political leaders for purposes of periodization. Overall, these studies have created one of the most dynamically developing fields in the history of the post-Stalinist era: the problem of socialism as a form of modernity and of the specific ways in which it was materialized in socialist objects and embodied in socialist subjects. They have immensely contributed to our understanding of state politics in late socialist societies. The reverse side of this tendency is that the scholarship of consumption and housing in the late USSR is only marginally interested in social autonomy and the agency of Soviet things and space. The latter are represented as the medium that the Soviet authorities used to shape modern, disciplined and cultured citizens. Yet this medium had its own message that too often interfered with what the Soviet authorities wanted it to deliver.

Writing about and from the perspective of elemental materialism in the late USSR offers an opportunity to trace and describe the social power of things, especially their relationship with Soviet selfhood. While the representational aspect of Soviet material culture (socialist modernity made manifest) is important for my research, my dissertation also aims to contribute to another important field of historiography of the Soviet Union:

studies of Soviet subjectivity and selfhood. By subjectivity, I understand the ideological construction of individuality – a subject as an effect of the work of structures of power. By selfhood, in turn, I understand the personal and cultural misrecognition of one’s bodily, emotional and discursive heterogeneity and fragmentariness – misrecognized as the unity of the self.⁵⁶ Starting with Stephen Kotkin’s *Magnetic Mountain*,⁵⁷ the questions of how the Soviet state fashioned its citizens into subjects, and how Soviet people embraced and questioned the dominant paradigms of selfhood, and designed their own ways of self-fashioning, have been addressed by such scholars as Oleg Kharkhordin,⁵⁸ Jochen Hellbeck,⁵⁹ Igal Halfin,⁶⁰ Alexei Yurchak,⁶¹ Emma Widdis,⁶² Lilya Kaganovsky,⁶³ Serguei Oushakine,⁶⁴ Anna Krylova,⁶⁵ Evgeny Dobrenko,⁶⁶ Anatoly Pinsky⁶⁷ and others. This burgeoning scholarship also generated a vibrant discussion of

⁵⁶ This understanding is based on Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser and Michel Foucault: Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press, 1977); Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation),” in *Lenin and philosophy, and other essays*, by Louis Althusser (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 127–93; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977).

⁵⁷ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

⁵⁸ Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley, Calif: University of California Press, 1999).

⁵⁹ Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind: Writing a Diary under Stalin* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

⁶⁰ Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Igal Halfin, *Red Autobiographies: Initiating the Bolshevik Self* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2011).

⁶¹ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁶² Emma Widdis, “Socialist Senses: Film and the Creation of Soviet Subjectivity,” *Slavic Review* 71, no. 3 (October 2012): 590–618.

⁶³ Lilya Kaganovsky, *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade: Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity Under Stalin* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008).

⁶⁴ Serguei Oushakine, “The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat,” *Public Culture* 13, no. 2 (2001): 191–214.

⁶⁵ Anna Krylova, “The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, no. 1 (2000): 119–46; Anna Krylova, “Soviet Modernity: Stephen Kotkin and the Bolshevik Predicament,” *Contemporary European History* 23, no. 2 (May 2014): 167–92.

⁶⁶ Evgeny Dobrenko, *The Making of the State Reader: Social and Aesthetic Contexts of the Reception of Soviet Literature* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997).

⁶⁷ Anatoly Pinsky, “The Diaristic Form and Subjectivity under Khrushchev,” *Slavic Review* 73, no. 4 (December 1, 2014): 805–27.

what it means to study subjectivity and selfhood in the Soviet context.⁶⁸ Historical studies of subjectivity and selfhood is one of the fields in which the current historiography of the USSR is at the forefront of history as an academic discipline. These studies operate within the general postmodern scheme of a decentered and fragmented subject, recognize that any historical form of selfhood is unstable and always requires work to maintain it, for example, through writing or rituals, and identify subjectivation as a form and effect of power.

While particular methods, techniques and objects of research in the scholarship of Soviet selfhood and subjectivity vary from scholar to scholar, the general *modus vivendi* in this field is logocentrism.⁶⁹ In studies of the post-Stalinist period, one particular and influential example is Alexei Yurchak's *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*. Yurchak draws on J. L. Austin and Judith Butler to build a discursive model of the late socialist selfhood which reproduces itself through the repetition of certain speech acts. His main argument is that the people of late socialism combined the mastery of performance of the Soviet authoritative language with trickster skills to employ official language forms to express new meanings. It was this combination that, according to Yurchak, constituted the historical specificity of "the last Soviet generation."⁷⁰

This dissertation employs the same conceptual model of selfhood as a fragmented, unstable and performative phenomenon, and the problem of language (as structure) and speech (as performative acts) in constituting Soviet subjects is immensely important for my argument. After all, when I discuss elemental materialism as a cultural recognition of the power of things, I deal with the cultural logic of late socialism that became manifest

⁶⁸ Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck, "Rethinking the Stalinist Subject: Stephen Kotkin's 'Magnetic Mountain' and the State of Soviet Historical Studies," *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas*, Neue Folge, 44, no. 3 (January 1, 1996): 456–63; Eric Naiman, "On Soviet Subjects and the Scholars Who Make Them," *The Russian Review* 60, no. 3 (July 1, 2001): 307–15; Aleksandr Etkind, "Soviet Subjectivity: Torture for the Sake of Salvation?," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 1 (2005): 171–86; Choi Chatterjee and Karen Petrone, "Models of Selfhood and Subjectivity: The Soviet Case in Historical Perspective," *Slavic Review* 67, no. 4 (December 1, 2008): 967–86.

⁶⁹ The works of Emma Widdis and Lilya Kaganovsky mentioned above are two important exceptions, but both address the Stalinist period.

⁷⁰ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 21–24, 295.

in its discursive production. But this is where I also divert from many of the studies of Soviet subjectivity and selfhood. I treat the discursive field of late socialism as a heteroglossia, a term that I borrow from Mikhail Bakhtin to denote the multitude of co-existing cultural languages.⁷¹ My main argument in Chapter 1 is that elemental materialism became reflected in the language of Soviet productivism, which, in turn, was just one cultural language (or, in terms of Michel Foucault, one of many discursive formations) in the discursive complexity of late Soviet culture.

Bakhtin stressed the social nature of heteroglossia as “a multiplicity of social voices and a wide variety of their links and interrelationships (always more or less dialogized).”⁷² In the late socialist era, this multiplicity possibly found its most clear manifestation in the poetry and performance of Vladimir Vysotsky (1938–1980), one of the most famous cultural figures in the USSR.⁷³ Vysotsky was famous simultaneously for his criminal songs, romantic ballads (such as those about mountain climbing), dissident songs (“Wolf Hunt”), patriotic songs about World War II, poems that parodied official discourses, and translations from other cultures (the musical “Alice in Wonderland”). Any straightforward attempt at answering the question of who the speaking subject of Vysotsky’s poetry is would immediately transform into a quantitative enterprise (how many subjects?). Social heteroglossia immerses speaking subjects into a mix of discourses, each of which constitutes them in a certain way. This discursive heterogeneity of late socialism produced a cultural milieu in which being a Soviet person could be associated with multiple “doings,” to use Harvey Sacks’s phrase.⁷⁴ Vysotsky’s

⁷¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, by Mikhail Bakhtin, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 259–422.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 263. Bakhtin was primarily interested in the study of the novel as a genre, but his specific interest to the novel grew from his general interest in cultural polyphony: “The novel... makes of the internal stratification of language, of its social heteroglossia and the variety of individual voices in it, the prerequisite for authentic novelistic prose” (*Ibid.*, 264.).

⁷³ In 2008, Vysotsky was voted in the top 50 in *Name of Russia*, a Russia TV channel’s project modelled after BBC’s *100 Greatest Britons* (ranking was based on television and Internet polls) and aimed to identify the most famous historical personality in Russia. In the early stage of the project, Vysotsky’s name was second to only Joseph Stalin. See Svetlana Bocharova, “Zemlia to imeni Stalin,” *Gazeta.Ru*, 7 July 2008, http://www.gazeta.ru/politics/2008/07/07_a_2776363.shtml, accessed 5 July 2015.

⁷⁴ Harvey Sacks, “On Doing ‘Being Ordinary,’” in John Maxwell Atkinson and John Heritage (eds.), *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 413–429.

talent was, among other things, in the stylization of various Soviet discourses for the lyrics of his songs. Official discourse, in turn, is always seeking to suppress heteroglossia; Bakhtin spoke of “generative forces of linguistic life, forces that struggle to overcome the heteroglossia of language, forces that unite and centralize verbal-ideological thought...”⁷⁵ Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck described exactly this phenomenon in their studies of Soviet autobiographies and diaries, respectively: one’s appropriation of the official Stalinist discourse which, on a practical level, translates into the most vigorous self-fashioning work to make oneself into a loyal and useful Communist subject.⁷⁶ Yet while the official discourse hierarchically structures social heteroglossia, it is never able to fully suppress “the multiplicity of social voices.” This is what Judith Butler emphasized when she wrote that “inadvertently produced discursive complexity undermines the teleological aims of normalization.”⁷⁷ If the subject is “a linguistic category, a place-holder, a structure in formation” and “the linguistic condition of its existence and agency,” that is, if the subject works as an abstract symbolic site that an individual occupies in the course of subjectivation,⁷⁸ then the multiple cultural languages of late socialism could not but provide various, sometimes directly conflicting trajectories of subjectivation and, consequently, diverse means and strategies of expressing and performing one’s Soviet self.

Scholarship of the material turn as well as the attentiveness of Soviet official documents to interactions between people and their material environment – the observation with which I started my dissertation – suggest that this picture is even more complex. People’s selves are always a result of material, in addition to linguistic, production. Viktor Shklovsky’s personal involvement in the Russian revolution, when he commanded a squadron of armoured cars during the February 1917 overthrow of the Tsar, made him particularly sensitive to this fact:

⁷⁵ Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” 270–271.

⁷⁶ Halfin, *Terror in My Soul*; Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*; Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*.

⁷⁷ Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), 93.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 9–10.

It is the machine that changes the man more than anything else...
Subways, cranes and cars are human prostheses...
Drivers are measured by the horsepower of the engines they operate.
An engine of more than forty horsepower annihilates the old morality...
We should not forget the car's contribution to the revolution...
You, cars, sloshed the revolution like foam into the city [of Petrograd].⁷⁹

All these insights suggest that a historical description of Soviet selfhood as a list of immanently Soviet features or as a phenomenon derived exclusively from language is an *a priori* incomplete and particular enterprise. It is, perhaps, more productive to understand such a reconstruction as a description of repetitive, culturally reproducible and materially specific situations, in which the people of late socialism recognized themselves as Soviet persons. This self-recognition was, of course, never complete, but had to be performed again and again in a never-ending process of responding to power's incessant calling of its subjects into social being. To rephrase it in Michel Foucault's terminology, the understanding of Soviet selfhood that I want to suggest in this dissertation implies a description of specific historical conditions – in their materiality, affectivity and, of course, discursive framing:

I don't believe the problem can be solved by historicising the subject as posited by the phenomenologists, fabricating a subject that evolves through the course of history. One has to dispense with the constituent subject, to get rid of the subject itself, that's to say, to arrive at an analysis which can account for the constitution of the subject within a historical framework. And this is what I would call genealogy, that is, a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc. without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout history.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Viktor Shklovsky, "Zoo, ili Pisma ne o liubvi," in *Zhili-byli*, by Viktor Shklovsky (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel, 1964), 130–131.

⁸⁰ Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews & Other Writings, 1972–1977*. Ed. by Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 117.

For Foucault's historical study of subjectivity, domains of objects are equally as important as discourses and knowledge; not surprisingly, his *Discipline and Punish* is preoccupied with the modern "set of material elements and techniques that serve as weapons, relays, communication routes and supports for the power" to subjugate humans.⁸¹ Indeed, given the social vitality of objects and their potential to act as a politically disruptive force ("We should not forget the car's contribution to the revolution"), it is only natural that any form of power seeks to materialize itself. For Louis Althusser, this was the essence of the state's ideological apparatuses:

[An individual's] ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject... [T]he subject acts insofar as he is acted by the following system (set out in the order of its real determination): ideology existing in a material ideological apparatus, prescribing material practices governed by a material ritual, which practices exist in the material actions of a subject acting in all consciousness according to his belief.⁸²

This dissertation is, therefore, about the objectification of both Soviet selfhood and power, because the social existence of one was impossible without another. The material world of late socialism could repeatedly fail the authorities in their attempts at its rational transformation, and officials and intellectuals could be genuinely scared by affective assemblages of Soviet people and objects that exercised unexpected and potentially disruptive social agency. Yet Soviet materiality could not provide any space that was continuously autonomous from power structures. In chapter 5, for example, I show how Soviet bodybuilders were excluded from the official sport system and forced to occupy the basements of apartment blocks, where they exercised semi-legally and were subject to persistent criticism in the Soviet press. Then in the late 1980s some of them came out from their basement gyms to perform as Team USSR, while others beat-up punks,

⁸¹ Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, 28.

⁸² Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)," 169–170.

hippies, metalheads, and similar youth who dressed and behaved in conspicuously Western, non-Soviet manners. The marginal location of bodybuilders in the Soviet social space was not translated into social marginality – quite the opposite, the Soviet basement gym revealed an ability to produce citizens loyal to the regime even in situations where the regime misrecognized this loyalty as a threat and opposed it through its sport officials.

In the end, one of the most important questions of my research is why Soviet meanings proved so resistant to the political and cultural changes related to the collapse of the USSR in 1991. Or, put differently: why did post-Soviet social and cultural structures so often resemble their Soviet predecessors? If the succession of economic and socio-political changes caused by perestroika, liberalization and the ultimate collapse of the Soviet state was so radical, then what is it that makes contemporary Russian society of the 2000s and 2010s again and again reproduce the cultural and political forms that it inherited from its Soviet past?

But maybe this question should be rephrased in a radical way. Perhaps, it is actually the crisis of conventional *forms* of describing post-Soviet societies that forces both participants and observers of the recent political changes in Russia to interpret it as a reincarnation of the late USSR? After all, Karl Marx's famous saying in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* that "history repeats itself... first as tragedy, then as farce" draws from the analysis which shows that it is not socio-economic structures that remained unchanged ("repeated themselves") from the reign of Napoleon Bonaparte to that of his nephew – they actually changed. What lagged behind were political and cultural forms that provided Louis-Napoleon with an interpretative framework to mobilize French public opinion in his favour.⁸³ Could it be that the persistence of Soviet meanings, in a similar fashion, is not an intrinsic property of modern post-Soviet states and societies, but rather an artefact of politics – including the politics of knowledge and representation? Thinking about it with and through Soviet elemental materialism might

⁸³ Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. (New York: International Pub., 1981).

provide some insights on the latter question, and I explore it in the concluding sections of my chapters.

Material Coordinates of the Soviet Self

In order to investigate the tenacious, yet elusive link between Soviet materiality and selfhood, my dissertation looks at different ways in which material objects of late socialism came to embody and negotiate different and often contrasting social understandings and techniques of time and space in the final three decades of the Soviet Union. I focus on those material objects which, in the specific late Soviet historical context, pushed Soviet people to occupy different positions vis-à-vis historical process and social space. In other words, I am interested in the objects that served as temporal and spatial coordinates in Soviet society, because it was at the center of these coordinates that Soviet people found their selfhood.

This approach determines the structure and composition of my dissertation. The first three chapters explore the link between material objects and the different temporalities of post-Stalinist Soviet society. In Chapter 1, I look at the productivist language of late socialism as a discursive framework which inspired and produced Soviet elemental materialism and was itself inspired and reproduced by it. Productivist language linked a vision of the grand Soviet future with technological objects and sought a rational social organization along industrial production and scientific progress. It abducted the imagery of Soviet factories, machines, vehicles and space rockets, immersed it into the hermetic space of visual and textual representations, and used it to secure, for the Soviet symbolic order, the position of the USSR at the cutting edge of technological progress. In this discourse, technologies and technological objects secured the possession of the present and future of human history for Soviet society, as well as ensured the superiority of the USSR in its competition with the Western bloc. The perceived might and transformative agency of Soviet technological objects made them affective for the Soviet public and they became translated into distinctive discursive practices – vernaculars of the Soviet

techno-utopianism – that sought to transform the Soviet material world, but in fact represented rigorous forms of self-making.

Chapter 2 explores the scale model hobby in the USSR, focusing on models as objects that made manifest the historical imagination inherent in Soviet techno-politics. Models, especially when assembled in collections, challenged Marxist interpretations of history and helped structure Soviet historical imagination along national lines. As with their prototypes discussed in Chapter 1, scale models were also affective, but in a different way, due to their ability to showcase Soviet industrial and technological capabilities and to stand as a synecdoche for historical progress. The miniaturization of history in its particular technocentric and national understanding made models performative in J. L. Austin’s understanding of this term, as they organized history into a spectacle for the educated and quintessentially male gaze of Soviet model enthusiasts.

Chapter 3 turns to other types of material objects that were capable of performing history: timber buildings associated with cultural heritage and historical ship replicas. The last three decades of the Soviet Union evidenced a fast growth in the number of heritage sites related to traditional wooden architecture. This chapter examines the museumification of old architecture as a process that reflected and stimulated the nationalist understanding of Soviet history in its Romantic interpretation. In particular, I show how wood, a traditional building material, became a symbol that objectified the “deep cultural roots” of Soviet society and served, due to its very texture, as a living witness of its authentic history.

The second part of my dissertation moves from the temporal to the spatial coordinates of Soviet selfhood. In Chapter 4, I look at the mass housing program launched by the Soviet leadership in the late 1950s from the perspective of urban planning. I am interested in the transit spaces of new socialist neighbourhoods, focusing in particular on the hallways of Soviet apartment blocks. Designed as utilitarian spaces for the fast passage of people from home to work to leisure activities, they revealed an ability to accumulate people and connect them in various ways, which Soviet authorities and intellectuals often interpreted as threatening to the public good. The Soviet hallway

established different affective regimes of Soviet people's interactions with urban space and provoked some of the hidden social conflicts of late socialism that became reflected in socially dominant structures of the Soviet self.

Chapter 5 continues the exploration of the marginal urban spaces of late socialism, but from a slightly different perspective, as it examines the peculiar phenomenon of basement bodybuilding in the late USSR. Driven by the transnational imagery of the cultured male body as a muscular body, some Soviet people turned to weight-lifting equipment with its power to help achieve muscle gain. At the same time, the failure of Soviet bodybuilding to become part of the official sport system led to its social marginalization, which became reflected in social topography: most Soviet professional and amateur bodybuilders had to exercise in semi-legal, self-equipped gyms located, as a rule, in the basements of apartment blocks. While the Soviet press repeatedly denounced basement bodybuilding as, potentially or actually, a criminal activity, for most people who engaged in it, it was a form of acquiring strength, health, self-assurance, and – through it – social agency, which they interpreted as loyalty to the dominant symbolic and political order.

Finally, Chapter 6 investigates how the television set as a material object changed the Soviet domestic space and Soviet selfhood. I deliberately focus on the material form in addition to the content of television in order to argue that its very inclusion in the Soviet home instigated new forms of identity performances that cannot be reduced to the content of television programs, but can rather be traced to the physical nature of television as a medium of mass communication. Focusing, in particular, on the phenomenon of paranormal séances broadcast on Soviet television in 1989, this chapter explores the various ways in which Soviet television audiences discovered that the television set had a power over their bodies and selves, as well as looks at different forms of social reaction that this discovery caused in late Soviet culture.

This dissertation is based on a broad variety of published and unpublished sources. In order to combine both central and regional perspectives on my subject, I have done archival research in the National Archive of the Republic of Karelia (NARK after its

Russian acronym) in Petrozavodsk, the Central State Archive of St. Petersburg (TsGA SPb after its Russian acronym) and the Central State Archive of Historical and Political Documents of St. Petersburg (TsGAIPD SPb after its Russian acronym). Due to the broad scope of my research, I did not focus on one particular collection, but instead examined collections of documents of various official Soviet organizations, including local and regional cells and committees of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, governmental agencies and ministries, and public organizations such as housing committees and hobby groups based in Palaces of Young Pioneers. Not all of them were used in my thesis as it gradually shifted towards intellectual and material history, but this rich body of archival sources was extremely important, especially at the initial stage of my research, in helping me formulate my research questions. Other unpublished sources include oral history interviews and email correspondence with people who were engaged in the practices that I discuss in this dissertation.

Soviet periodicals are another major source of this work; given my focus on the material side of life in the USSR, I was particularly interested in amateur science and technical magazines such as *Tekhnika-Molodiozhi* [Technology to Youth], *Modelist-Konstruktor* [Modeler-Designer], *Nauka i zhizn* [Science and Life] and others. They combined top-down and bottom-up approaches to content creation, as their readers contributed many of the materials appearing in them. In addition, I used a large number of books published by central and regional Soviet presses. The postwar Soviet Union was covered by an extensive publishing network, which, in theory, was under the strict control of the Communist authorities. In practice, however, the sheer size of this network created a structural disjunction between its official – strategic – mandate to contribute to the socialist cause and the local – tactical – agendas of editors, managers, and authors of numerous Soviet presses who were engaged in their own dialogues and disputes. This was how books on such topics as bodybuilding, romantic nationalism, and even paranormal phenomena were published in the USSR. Treating these texts anthropologically, as sources into Soviet systems of meaning, helped me understand historical forms of interaction between Soviet society and its material world.

In the end, the main advantage of following Soviet objects in their passage through social space, in their interaction with people, and in their representation in texts and visual aesthetics is the opportunity to see society in its spontaneous forms. Some of these forms were influenced by dominant ideological narratives, some of them reflected the global experience of modernity and modernization, and yet others represented – in Vladimir Lenin’s gloss – “the instinctive, unconscious materialist standpoint”⁸⁴ adopted by Soviet society to deal with the unpredictable and resisting – but also flexible and manageable – materiality around them. By examining the interaction between Soviet people and things, this dissertation aims to show, albeit fragmentarily, how the material world of the late Soviet period shaped and influenced people’s habitual choices, social trajectories, and imaginary aspirations.

⁸⁴ Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 14, 61.

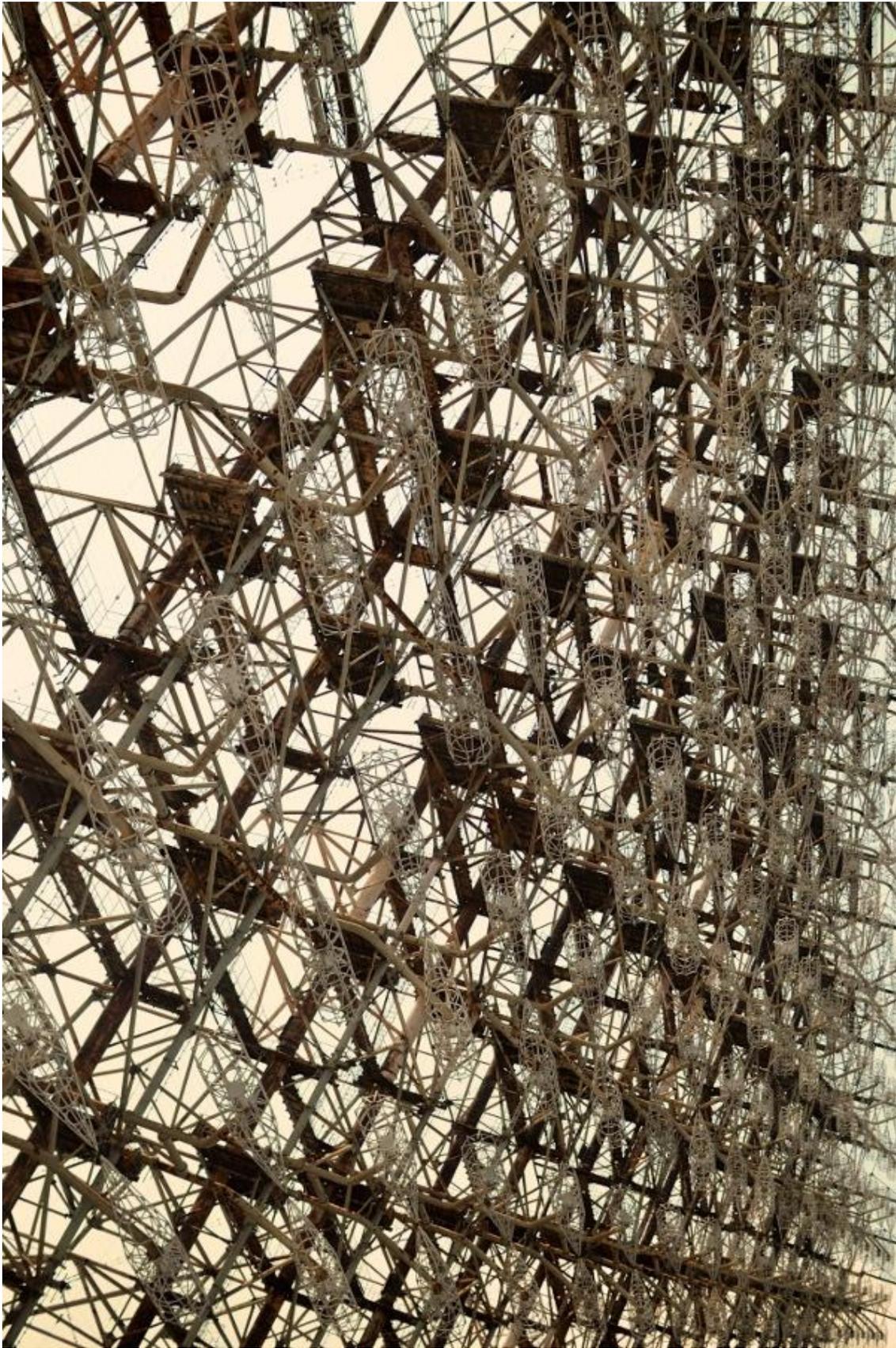


Figure 1. An antenna of a ballistic missile early warning radar in Chernobyl, Ukraine.
Photograph © 2015 Eriks Bredovskis.

Chapter 1. The Soviet Man as a “Master over the Material World:” Techno-Utopian Visions of the Soviet Future

Our path: from a dawdling citizen through the poetry of the machine to the perfect electric man. Revealing the souls of machines, enthusing the worker with the lathe, the peasant with the tractor, the driver with his engine, – we bring creative joy to every mechanical labour, we join men with machines, we educated the new men.

Dziga Vertov, *We: Variant of a Manifesto*¹

The émigré Soviet historian and philosopher Mikhail Heller titled his 1985 historical inquiry into “the formation of Soviet man” as *Cogs in the Wheel*.² This mechanistic metaphor aimed to underline Heller’s main argument that the entire course of Soviet history was shaped by “a planned, concentrated and all-encompassing attack of unparalleled intensity” carried out by the Soviet state in order to “turn human beings into cogs.”³ Heller’s main argument was that the entire Communist leadership, from Vladimir Lenin to Konstantin Chernenko, the Soviet leader at the time he wrote *Cogs in the Wheel*, intentionally orchestrated this manufacturing process. It was from this perspective that Heller described “the formation of Soviet man” as a thoroughly designed project which had been meticulously implemented since the earliest days of the Bolshevik regime; on

¹ Dziga Vertov, *We*, originally published in 1922, here quoted from: Richard Taylor, *The Politics of the Soviet Cinema 1917–1929* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 125.

² Mikhail Geller, *Mashina i vintiki: Istoriia formirovaniia sovetskogo cheloveka* (London: Overseas Publication Interchange Ltd, 1985); English translation: Mikhail Heller, *Cogs in the Wheel: The Formation of Soviet Man* (New York: Knopf, 1988).

³ Heller, *Cogs in the Wheel*, 259–261.

one occasion he referred to the Communist leadership as “the creator” and Soviet state institutions as “tools,” bringing demiurgic implications into his historical explanation.⁴

The historical imagination in *Cogs in the Wheel* is a good illustration of what Jacques Derrida called a secrecy effect,⁵ that is, a cultural tendency to explain political developments as the result of secret planning by the government and, consequently, to emplot and write history as the uncovering of this planning.⁶ This conspiratorial form of historical imagination not only disregards historical transformation in Soviet Russia over the course of seventy years, but is also counterfactual. Heller manipulated some of his sources when, for example, he attributed to Stalin a statement that “Soviet man should consider himself a mere ‘cog’ in the gigantic wheel of the Soviet state,” or when he claimed that the term “cogs” was commonly used by another Soviet leader, Nikita Khrushchev.⁷ The only time Stalin used this metaphor, according to verifiable historical evidence, was to emphasize the indispensability, rather than the interchangeability, of Soviet people: “If only one of these ‘cogs’ gets loose, all is finished.”⁸ In addition, Stalin’s use of the metaphor of machine was that of a tool, rather than an all-absorbing entity: in his lectures at Sverdlovsk University titled “The Foundations of Leninism,” Stalin repeated commonplace Marxist views that “[t]he state is a machine in the hands of the ruling class...”⁹ Neither did Khrushchev use the term “cogs” in his speech at the 22nd

⁴ Ibid., 89. Heller’s section on the Soviet language is introduced with the opening line from the Gospel of John (John 1:1): “In the beginning was the Word,” which, coupled with his argument that Soviet leaders, in particular Vladimir Lenin, were the authors of the new Soviet language, adds to these demiurgic implications.

⁵ Jacques Derrida, “‘To Do Justice to Freud’: The History of Madness in the Age of Psychoanalysis,” trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 2 (January 1, 1994): 245.

⁶ Karl Popper, “The Conspiracy Theory of Society,” in *Conspiracy Theories: The Philosophical Debate*, ed. David Coady (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2006), 13–16; Eva Horn, *The Secret War: Treason, Espionage, and Modern Fiction*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 82–100.

⁷ Heller, *Cogs in the Wheel*, 6.

⁸ Iosif Stalin, *Sochineniia*, Vol. 15 (Moscow: Pisatel, 1997), 232. It was the speech at the victory celebration in the Kremlin on June 25, 1945.

⁹ Josef Stalin, *Works*, Vol. 6 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953), 117. Stalin’s phrase of state as a “machine in the hands of the ruling class” is a direct quotation from Lenin’s 1919 lecture delivered at the same Sverdlovsk University and titled “The State”: “The state is a machine for maintaining the rule of one class over another.” Vladimir Lenin, *Selected Works*, Vol. 3 (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 250.

Party Congress, as Heller implies,¹⁰ or elsewhere in officially published speeches or writings.¹¹

Not only was the metaphor of people as “cogs in the wheel” extremely rare in Soviet official language, but just the reverse; the official Soviet writing on the “new Soviet man” – those texts that became the foundations of Soviet pedagogy, cultural policies or quotidian party work – emphasized that the socialist state “not only provided working masses with an unlimited access to spiritual wealth, but also made them immediate creators of culture.”¹² The official Soviet ideal of man was that of an “all-round and harmoniously developed person... that combines spiritual wealth, moral purity and physical perfection.”¹³ According to the main ideologist of the late Soviet era Mikhail Suslov, “the formation of the Soviet person” was possible only as a result of “creative work by and practical cooperation between philosophers and psychologists, historians and sociologists, jurists and pedagogues, specialists in the fields of ethics, aesthetics, literature and art.”¹⁴ As such, it was much closer to the Renaissance ideal of the all-round person, “mastering the passions within himself and making out of his own life a work of art,” as Slavoj Žižek defined it,¹⁵ rather than the dystopian vision of people in the totalitarian society of George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, which is the most quoted book in *Cogs in the Wheel*. Heller’s attempt to prove that Soviet leaders were engaged in an intentional and planned campaign of dehumanizing the Soviet population seems especially fallacious if one takes into account the theory and practice of Soviet education

¹⁰ Nikita Khrushchev, “O Programme Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuz. Doklad tovarishcha Khrushcheva,” *XXII Siezd Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuz. Stenograficheskii otchet*. Vol. 1 (Moscow: Politizdat, 1962), 148–257. Heller quoted a phrase from p. 167 as Khrushchev’s alleged definition of “cogs;” it was just pure fabrication: Heller, *Cogs in the Wheel*, 6.

¹¹ The only reported use of this metaphor by Khrushchev was at a meeting with Soviet writers and artists in May 1963, the minutes of which were reproduced in an underground journal two decades later: *SSSR, Vnutrennie protivorechiia*, 6 (1982): 192.

¹² Leonid Brezhnev, “Otchyotnyi doklad TsK KPSS XXIV siezdu KPSS,” in XXIV siezd Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuz. 30 marta – 9 apr. 1971 g. Stenogr. otchet. V 2-kh t. T. 1 (Moscow: Politizdat, 1971), 114.

¹³ “1961 Program of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union,” in *Programmy i ustavy KPSS* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1969), 199.

¹⁴ Mikhail Suslov, “Vysokoie priznanie i otvetstvennost,” in *KPSS o formirovanii novogo cheloveka. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov (1965–1981)* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1982), 619.

¹⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London; New York: Verso, 2008), xxiv.

with its emphasis on the development of creative skills among students or the ultimate rejection of Anton Makarenko's militarized approach to education.¹⁶ While Soviet ideologists openly acknowledged that the making of the new Soviet person was a vital part of their political agenda, a “cog” is hardly a suitable term to describe the official understanding of an ideal Communist personality.

The easiest way to deal with this contradiction would be to dismiss Heller's account as a purely political statement aimed at discrediting Soviet historical experience. Instead, I want to suggest that *Cogs in the Wheel* represents an interesting entry point to discuss Soviet heteroglossia – that is is, the discursive complexity of late Soviet culture – as a historical phenomenon. Heller operates with two ostensibly different discursive regimes of Soviet culture, making use of one to criticize the other. His account of Soviet society is framed in concepts and arguments typical for a Marxist critique of capitalist societies in which the machine stood for the highest form of alienation and cogs for people alienated from humanity¹⁷ and which was a standard critique of capitalism in Soviet political philosophy.¹⁸ A graduate of the Faculty of History of Moscow State University, Heller was deeply immersed in this Marxist critique of capitalism. It is therefore hardly surprising that he employed its concepts and imagery to represent the Soviet state as a

¹⁶ Lev Vygotsky's influence, in particular, was notable throughout the entire Soviet period, both through his own writings and the work of his former students such as Aleksei Leontiev, Alexander Luria or Lidiia Bozhovich, who became prominent psychologists and theorists of education in the USSR. See Alex Kozulin, “The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology: Vygotsky, His Disciples and Critics,” in *American Psychologist* 41, no. 3 (1986): 264–274. Heller claimed that Makarenko's theories of education reflected Soviet attempts at dehumanizing education *par excellence* (Heller, *Cogs in the Wheel*, 124); what he however failed to mention was a sharp criticism of his pedagogy by Nadezhda Krupskaya, as well as by Soviet education officials whom Makarenko himself quoted as saying that “The proposed [by Makarenko] system of educational process is a non-Soviet system”: Anton Makarenko, *Sobranie sochinenii v 5 tomakh. Tom 2* (Moscow: Pravda, 1971), 228.

¹⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, vol. II (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 216; Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1991).

¹⁸ Klara Shvartsman, *Etika... bez morali (kritika sovremennykh burzhuznykh eticheskikh teorii)* (Moscow: Mysl, 1964); Vasilii Gromeka, *Nauchno-tekhnicheskaia revoliutsiia i sovremennyi kapitalizm* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1976).

dehumanizing machine and Soviet people as cogs,¹⁹ thus turning the Soviet authoritative language (with its critique of capitalism) against the source of its production.²⁰

The second discursive regime that was targeted for criticism in *Cogs in the Wheel* is what I hereafter call the productivist language of Soviet culture. In many cases, when Heller claimed to engage with the facts of the Soviet socio-political reality, he actually criticized facts of the language – that is, statements and documents that were produced as meaningful in this particular discursive regime. In one case, Heller quotes a productivist slogan of Sergey Tretiakov, a prominent figure of the Soviet avant-garde, who advocated that literature and art should acquire a practical role in social transformation: “The worker in art must stand side by side with the scientist as a psycho-engineer and a psycho-creator.” This, coupled with his quoting of Stalin’s famous reference to Soviet writers as “engineers of human souls,”²¹ gave Heller a rationale to claim that the entire Soviet history, from the very moment the Bolsheviks took power in Russia, was an immense project of social engineering aimed at creating a society which would work like a machine, and would be accordingly easily manageable. Heller’s was an analysis that extrapolated one particular discourse to the entirety of Soviet history. It is by disguising the productivist language of Soviet culture as the Soviet social reality that Heller produced a plausible – despite its ahistoricity and counterfactuality – genealogy of Soviet man. While Heller is undeniably biased and often inaccurate in his interpretations of Soviet history, his account provides one important observation: together with social or political facts, he also criticizes a wide-spread tendency of Soviet officials and intelligentsia to define individual and collective selves through things.

This chapter examines the relationship between the productivist language of “the machine and the cogs” (the original Russian title of Heller’s book) and the technologies of the self that it invoked in late Soviet society. I examine here how this language

¹⁹ For an earlier Marxist critique of the Soviet regime which employed similar imagery of the Soviet state as a dehumanizing machine turning people into cogs, see Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Study* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 84–85.

²⁰ On the language of socialist dissidents as the inverted official language, see Anna Wierzbicka, “Antitotalitarian Language in Poland: Some Mechanisms of Linguistic Self-Defense,” *Language in Society* 19, no. 1 (March 1, 1990): 1–59; Oushakine, “The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat.”

²¹ Heller, *Cogs in the Wheel*, 217.

provided Soviet society with a set of metaphors and concepts to understand the course of human history as the process of technological change as well as provoked widely shared cultural fantasies of total control over the material world. It is the least material of my chapters, as – unlike my following chapters – it is not based on a particular object or material, but is important for my understanding of how human-matter interactions were conceptualized and reflected in the cultural logic of late socialism. The ubiquitous character of the cultural language of productivism was noted by Serguei Oushakine, who suggested that the Soviet economy should be historically characterized as an economy of storage rather than of shortage. The overstocking of commodities – but also of the means of production – was not simply a sign of its ineffectiveness (an assessment which implies that surplus-oriented economic liberalism is taken as a universal economic model), but rather an indication of a different set of socio-economic rules and principles that produced the Soviet economy as a specific historical phenomenon. These rules and principles can be traced back to early Soviet theorists of industrial production like Aleksei Gastev²² and Alexander Bogdanov²³ as well as to the avant-gardist ideas of Soviet Productivists such as Boris Arvatov who sought to modernize Soviet everyday life through a new industrial design.²⁴ Dziga Vertov’s writings and documentaries reflected both the ideology and the aesthetics of Soviet Productivism with machines acting as models for men and factories representing a superior form of the organization for social life. Whereas Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (UFA, 1927) or Charlie Chaplin’s *Modern Times* (United Artists, 1936) represented machines as dehumanizing and alienating people from society and from themselves, for Vertov machines had to show the “path from a

²² Aleksei K. Gastev, *Kak nado rabotat’* (Moscow: Ekonomika, 1972), originally published in 1921. On Gastev, see Rolf Hellebust, *Flesh to Metal: Soviet Literature and the Alchemy of Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

²³ Alexander A. Bogdanov, *Vseobshchaia organizatsionnaia nauka (tektologiya)*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Ekonomika, 1989), originally published in 1922. On Bogdanov, see Nikolai Kremontsov, *A Martian Stranded on Earth* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

²⁴ Boris Arvatov, “Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question),” trans. Christina Kiaer, *October 81* (Summer 1997): 119–128. On Arvatov and other Soviet Productivist theorists and practitioners, see Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Mass.; London: MIT Press, 2008).

dawdling citizen through the poetry of the machine to the perfect electric man.”²⁵ In his *Enthusiasm: Symphony of Donbass* (Ukrainfilm, 1930), machines orchestrated and choreographed the movement of people, transforming them from scattered individuals into a powerful collective; the factory became an art object that created new, perfectly socialist forms of social life.

The language of productivism with its tendency to imagine and organize society around machines was engaged in a complex relationship with economic processes and agents: it simultaneously described and constituted them. Despite its seemingly pragmatic and apolitical character, this language produced and was produced by the Soviet ideological order maintaining a specific “representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real condition of existence,” in Louis Althusser’s definition of ideology.²⁶ As such, it was an authoritative (and officially sanctioned) discursive regime, but unlike the official language of *Pravda* or similar Soviet publications, its production was deregulated and delegated to individuals for whom “speaking productivist” was in no way a ritualized activity, but rather provided the means of building and expressing their true ideals and visions of the future. In addition, the productivist language of Soviet culture had no particular centers of production: examples of productivist speak can be found from Nikita Khrushchev’s memoir to Soviet popular magazines to specialized technical writing to grassroots pedagogic theories. Its seeming non-involvement with the language of official Soviet ideology entailed the misrecognition of the fact that productivist language immersed its speakers in fantasies of subdued material reality, ranked Soviet people in accordance to their relationship to the production process and mastery over things, and created moral panic when certain Soviet people engaged in relationships with presumably mean and unworthy objects instead of sublime ones.

²⁵ Quoted in Taylor, *The Politics of the Soviet Cinema 1917–1929*, 125.

²⁶ Althusser, Louis. “Ideological State Apparatuses,” Althusser, Louis. *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972, p. 163ff.

Machines as the Measure of Men

The late 1950s and early 1960s saw a revival of the productivist language forged in the 1920s. When Nikita Khrushchev ruled out the inevitability of a military conflict between the socialist and capitalist blocs at the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956, and instead suggested that socialism would out-compete capitalism peacefully,²⁷ this placed Soviet technological objects into a very different plane of historicity in comparison to late Stalinism with its focus on the applied military use of technologies. For the officials and educational theorists of the post-Stalinist era, inspired by early Soviet techno-utopianism, the national mastery of technology was a way to secure the position of the USSR at the cutting edge of technological progress, a goal that inherently implied the possession of the present and future of human history.²⁸ Soviet visual aesthetics were quick to reflect this changed relationship between Soviet people and technological objects.

Around the mid-1950s, Soviet illustrated magazines such as *Ogoniok* or *Rabotnitsa* underwent a notable shift in terms of their spatial poetics. Before, in the late Stalinist era, the dominant form of representing Soviet people in their imagery was to show them in visually closed spaces as parts of self-organized and self-sufficient collectives. Soviet illustrated magazines of the late 1940s and early 1950s placed multiple photos and pictures of school, college and university students, colleagues at the workplace or, more generally, people united by participation in a common activity (for example, elections).

²⁷ Nikita Khrushchev, "Otchetnyi doklad TsK KPSS XX siezdu partii," *XX siezd KPSS. 14–25 fevralia 1956 g. Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1956), 34–36.

²⁸ This belief found a reflection in an impressive body of writing on the role of Soviet youth in the "scientific-technical revolution." For an annotated bibliography, see V. G. Bylov and I. G. Minervin, eds., *Molodiozh i nauchno-tekhnicheskii progress* (Moscow: INION RAN, 1985). For scholarly discussion of these beliefs, see: Julian Cooper, "The scientific and technical revolution in Soviet theory," in Frederic Fleron, ed., *Technology and Communist Culture: The Socio-Cultural Impact of Technology Under Socialism* (New York: Praeger, 1977): 146-179; Harley Balzer, "Education, Science and Technology," in James Cracraft, ed., *The Soviet Union Today: An Interpretive Guide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 233–243; Mark Lipovetsky, "Traektorii ITR-diskursa," *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, no. 6 (2010): 213–230. Of course, this was not a uniquely Soviet feature. For the link between technical education and the visions of national development in other national contexts, see Gabrielle Hecht, *The Radiance of France: Nuclear Power and National Identity after World War II* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1998), 23–26; Andrew Hartman, *Education and the Cold War: The Battle for the American School* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

The idea of a panoptic collective was expressed in bodily positions, which were oriented to each other; there was usually a figure that acted as a leader, as a symbolic and physical centre of the collective groups; and such photos and pictures almost always had someone who was speaking while others listened carefully. Mutual gazes, an orientation towards each other, collective emotions shared by groups – all these constructed representations of Soviet collectives in late Stalinist illustrated magazines as a Panopticon where the composition of images implied that everyone could (and should) observe other members of the group and were in turn observed by them – not necessarily to watch for hidden enemies, but rather to reinforce each other’s positive Soviet identities.²⁹ On the level of visual representations, for any Soviet person there was only one Lacanian mirror – namely, another Soviet person.

Beginning in the mid-1950s, this trend underwent significant changes with a notable increase, in quantitative terms, of industrial scenes at the expense of group images at the focal points (cover and back pages as well as color inserts) of Soviet illustrated magazines. The death of Joseph Stalin in 1953 and subsequent de-Stalinization reforms, greatly accelerated by Nikita Khrushchev’s famous de-Stalinization speech at the 20th Party Congress in 1956, heralded a discursive shift in the ways Soviet official discourse sought to define its subjects. This discursive shift affected all spheres of cultural production, including illustrated magazines, in which representations of production came to symbolize the unstoppable movement towards Communism. Material objects related to the process of production became that new mirror which reflected a new, post-Stalinist Soviet subject on the level of visual representations (Figure 2).

²⁹ See a similar argument based on the analysis of socialist realism paintings in: Jan Plamper, “The Spatial Poetics of the Personality Cult: Circles Around Stalin,” Dobrenko, Evgeny, and Eric Naiman (eds.). *The Landscape of Stalinism: The Art and Ideology of Soviet Space* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), 19–50. On the building of postwar Soviet society as a process of self-containment within the Soviet Union’s own borders, see also: Gorsuch, Anne, *All this is your World. Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 26–30.

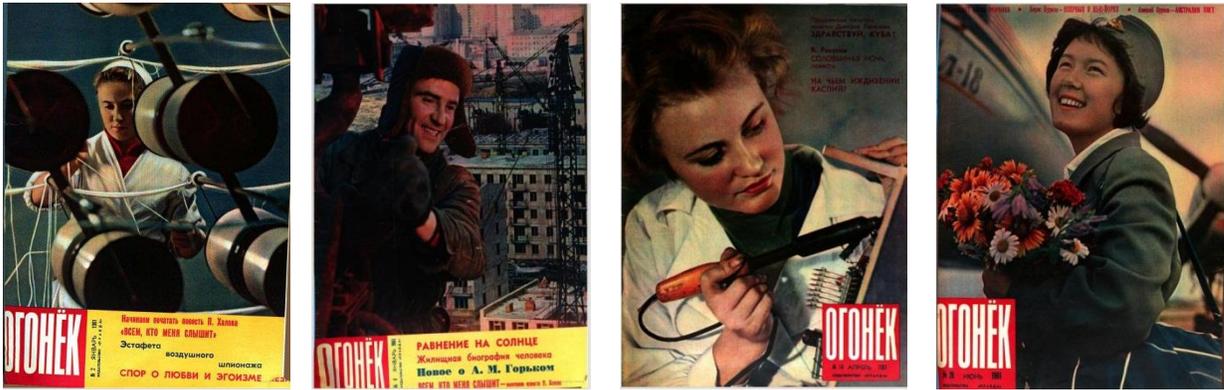


Figure 2. People and material objects from the 1961 issues of *Ogoniok*, the leading Soviet illustrated magazine.³⁰

The people represented on the cover images of the Soviet illustrated magazine *Ogoniok*, shown above, objectified their Soviet identities by interacting with the grand material world of production. The visible materiality of post-Stalinist *Ogoniok* amassed images of tools (e.g., a weaver’s loom or a soldering iron in the first and thirds images, respectively), building equipment and sites (as in the second image), and machines (an Ilyushin Il-18 turboprop airliner in the fourth image). Like the fashion system of Western magazines described by Roland Barthes,³¹ these images of production, when placed in the hermetic and endlessly repeating space of a Soviet illustrated magazine, lost a concrete material connection between signifiers (images) and the signified (those exact people and places depicted on them), forming instead their own system of meanings. The actual functionality of any given tool in the images above was unimportant; what mattered was that they helped express ethnic and gender equality, the enthusiasm of the builders of a new socialist world, Soviet youth, experience, and professionalism. Once these technological objects were appropriated by Soviet visual aesthetics and stripped of their practical applicability and hence of their very materiality, they acquired a historicity not unlike those that German historian Reinhart Koselleck has identified in social and political concepts.

³⁰ From left to right: *Ogoniok*, no. 2 (1961): cover page; *Ogoniok*, no. 4 (1961): cover page; *Ogoniok*, no. 14 (1961): cover page; *Ogoniok*, no. 26 (1961): cover page.

³¹ Roland Barthes. *The Fashion System*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1983, originally published in 1967.

In his research on the history of concepts, Reinhart Koselleck pioneered an approach that aimed to overcome teleological understandings of history by identifying and interpreting different “planes of historicity” in historical texts; that is, certain interpretations of the past, understandings of the present and, most importantly, visions of the future, which were encapsulated in the uses of social and political concepts. According to Koselleck, political debates and struggles over concepts were extremely important historically because it was not their lexical meaning that was at stake, but rather different visions of the future that opposing political groups invested in them.³² In a similar way, objects of production that were represented in post-Stalinist visual aesthetics encapsulated all three temporal dimensions: they emphasized the revolutionary enthusiasm of the 1920s and the First Five-Year Plan and silenced the experience of the panoptic Soviet society of the mid-1930s to the early 1950s;³³ they interpreted the present as the time when the material basis for communism was being laid; and finally, they offered a vision of the future which promised communism as a result of unstoppable technical progress.

A strong cultural link forged in the Khrushchev’s era between technological objects and their perceived historicity that went far beyond their actual functionality greatly affected cultural understandings of the socialist body and selfhood. In a kind of reversal of Protagoras, machines came to be the measure of socialist people. As the illustrations from *Ogoniok* above show, the visual aesthetics of this period routinely defined people through affective assemblages with technological objects. Introduced by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the concept of the affective assemblage emphasizes the complexity of connections between people and objects in the production of social agency. Arguing against ontologies that interpret the social world as a hierarchically ordered structure of discrete elements, Deleuze and Guattari suggested that many, if not most, social

³² Reinhart Koselleck, “Modernity and the Planes of Historicity,” and “Begriffsgeschichte and Social History,” in Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 9–25, 75–92.

³³ See a similar argument as applied to the theater of this period in Stephen Bittner, *The Many Lives of Khrushchev’s Thaw: Experience and Memory in Moscow’s Arbat* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 75–76.

phenomena cannot be reduced to their constituting elements. Instead, they should be treated in their complexity, as inseparable entities that are always something more than the sum of their components, and where social agency is derivative of their very linkage, a grouping that is inherently affective.³⁴

The newly-found affectivity of Soviet machines, with their ability to define human bodies and selves, can be illustrated through notable changes in the aesthetics of gender after the mid-1950s – an aesthetics that sought to redefine the female body through its assemblages with technological objects. Beginning at that time, Soviet artists and writers working in the genres of popular science and science fiction created multiple representations of women taking part in the socialist conquest of outer space. These representations rejected Stalinist-era ideals of female domesticity, and extended women’s physical abilities to the abilities of machines, of which women were depicted as equal operators with men.³⁵ Women of such representations were consequently engaged in the socialist conquest of national, international and outer space, thereby overcoming all sorts of natural and social limits. For example, a 1961 painting by prominent Soviet artist Aleksandr Deineka, entitled *Conquerors of Outer Space* (Figure 3), conspicuously downplays the gender differentiation among the staff of an imagined Soviet space launch facility. With only one exception (a telescope observer), women are portrayed wearing unisex work clothes, and the posture of the central female figure is ostensibly utilitarian: she and her male co-worker act as add-ons to the rocket they are presumably assembling. Even compositionally, they repeat the shape of its tailplane. The focal objects of this painting are rockets: one of them occupies the central position in its composition, while another turns “conquerors of outer space” into spectators observing its launch, and both displace the gaze of the painting’s audience from female bodies, allowing for a brief cultural interruption of the conventional “ways of seeing” in which “men act and women

³⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 4–8.

³⁵ For a similar conflict between Stalinist and post-Stalinist understanding of the femininity in domestic (rather than outer) space see Victor Buchli, “Khrushchev, Modernism, and the Fight against Petit-Bourgeois Consciousness in the Soviet Home,” *Journal of Design History* 10, no. 2 (January 1, 1997): 161–76. On the understanding of the femininity in Stalin’s era see Vera Dunham, *In Stalin’s Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976).

appear.”³⁶ In the logic of this and numerous other representations of the socialist conquest of outer space, rockets and other similarly affective technological objects guaranteed gender equality by transforming Soviet people into laboring bodies and by fusing these bodies with machines.

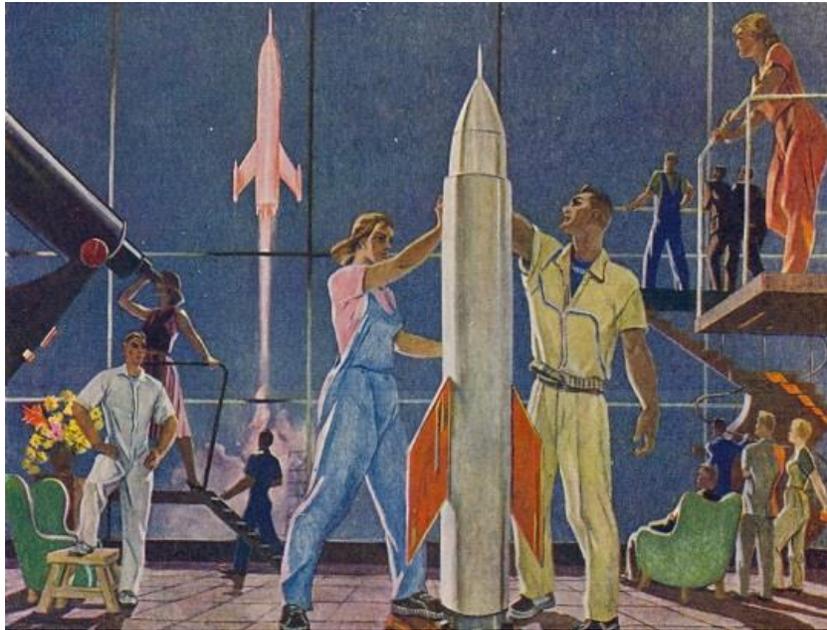


Figure 3. Aleksandr Deineka, *Conquerors of Outer Space*, 1961.

The Soviet space program that triumphantly burst into the Soviet public consciousness with the launch of Sputnik-1 in October 1957 made rockets and other space technologies the most prominent objects for encapsulating the long historical time of socialism. Yet the socialist body-machine complex was not limited to them.³⁷ As in the illustrations from *Ogoniok* (Figure 2), other technological objects possessed the ability to define people as proper socialist subjects. Writing for the Soviet youth magazine *Smena* (Next generation) in June 1956, several months after Khushchev’s de-

³⁶ John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: BBC; Penguin Books, 1972), 47.

³⁷ On the body-machine complex see Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 3–21.

Stalinization speech, a director of one Moscow's technical college appealed to Soviet youth:

Immense goals are set for the Soviet people in the Sixth Five-Year Plan [1956–1960]. In these years new types of machines, lathes, presses, devices and equipment will appear. Our factories will require thousands of highly qualified metal workers, millers, turners, engineers, and specialists of many other qualifications.³⁸

Both rhetorically and ideologically, this appeal equated Sovietness (“for the Soviet people”) with the mastery of technologies and called on *Smena*'s readers to define their future professional selves as derivative of machines in order to secure uninterrupted socialist development (a reference to the Sixth Five-Year Plan). It was through this world of modern technological objects that official discourses created an image of Soviet society as a progressive, technocratic and industrialized nation comprised of rational socialist subjects. School education, mass media and the state network of hobby groups (*kruzhki*) promoted an obsession with these objects as a characteristic feature of the Soviet person. Popular scientific and technical writing mounted a discursive support of it, as in the following example from a technical magazine for amateur engineering and model design:

If you are seriously interested in space engineering and exploration, if you have chosen your life path from a model rocket to a spaceship – remember that this is a long and demanding path.³⁹

In this particular example, as in the quote from *Smena* above, material objects – “a model rocket” and “a spaceship” – act as the reference points between which Soviet teenagers were encouraged to build their biographies as well as the building blocks from which socialism was to be constructed. Characteristic of the Soviet cultural language of

³⁸ B. Soskin, “Doroga v zhizn,” *Smena*, no. 13 (1956): 15.

³⁹ Yu. Stoliarov, “Kosmos v rebiachih glazakh,” *Modelist-Konstruktor*, 7 (1978): 2.

productivism, these examples reveal its persistent tendency to imagine society around machines.

The examples above also bring to the surface a certain ethos inherent in the productivist language of Soviet culture regarding the interaction between Soviet people and their material environment. This ethos represented the Soviet person as a creative subject, a representative of the species *homo creativus*. Soviet ideology interpreted creativity as a necessary trait for a socialist personality. Starting with Lenin, who argued that “vital, creative socialism is a creation of the popular masses themselves,”⁴⁰ Soviet philosophers, political writers and activists amassed writing in which they argued that an ability to create new meanings and new things was a characteristic feature of people living in a socialist society,⁴¹ while the Soviet press characterized manual labour with the same terms used to describe the creative activities of artists, poets and composers.⁴² This ideological definition of the Soviet subject as a “creative” personality implied human mastery over the material world, and it is hardly surprisingly that, for example, Soviet technical magazines – one of the primary sites where productivist language was reproduced – appealed to their readers as the generation of “creators and explorers.”⁴³

“Creation” in the Soviet context implied a Promethean vision of the transformative human role in a world waiting to be transformed.⁴⁴ This vision implied a particular version of the normative Soviet person as a self-aware, rational and free actor capable of manipulating and reconfiguring matter in any possible way. The technocratic,

⁴⁰ V. I. Lenin, *Polnoie sobranie sochinenii*. Vol. 35 (Moscow: Politizdat, 1962), 57.

⁴¹ See examples of such writing in the 1970s and early 1980s: M. T. Iovchuk and L. N. Kogan (eds.), *Dukhovnyi mir sovetskogo rabocheho* (Moscow: Mysl, 1972); D. M. Aptekman, *Formirovaniie ateisticheskoi ubezhdennosti rabocheho klassa v razvitom sotsialiticheskom obshchestve* (Leningrad: Izdvo LGU, 1979), esp. p. 27; T. I. Snegiriova, *Dukhovnaia kultura razvitogo sotsialiticheskogo obshchestva* (Moscow: Nauka, 1981), esp. pp. 125–127; N. D. Kosukhin, *Tekhnicheskoe tvorchestvo rabocheho klassa v SSSR* (Moscow: Znanie, 1982).

⁴² Anna Paretskaya, “A Middle Class without Capitalism? Socialist Ideology and Post-Collectivist Discourse in the Late-Soviet Era,” Neringa Klumbyté and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova (eds.), *Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964–1985* (New York: Lexington books, 2013), 46–50.

⁴³ “Uchit’ tvorchestvu!” *Modelist-Konstruktor*, no. 1 (1978): 1–3, 25; Yu. Gerbov, “Pokoleniie tvortsov i iskatelei,” *Modelist-Konstruktor*, no. 10 (1982): 3–4, 32; D. Filippov, “V edinom stroiu,” *Tekhnika – Molodiozhi*, no. 11 (1977): 2.

⁴⁴ Prometheus was an important symbol of the official Soviet culture and ideology: for example, a youth-oriented Soviet publisher *Molodaia Gvardiia* published under this title, starting since 1966, an almanac with biographies of famous (at least in the Soviet system of coordinates) people.

productivist language of Soviet culture found expression in the cultural fantasies of Soviet intellectuals who dreamt of the complete subordination of the material world to the human will. Perhaps, its most perfect example was Genrikh Altshuller's grand attempt at creating a system of creative innovation to accelerate both technological and societal evolution.

Vernaculars of Soviet Techno-Utopianism

Genrikh Altshuller (1926–1998) was a prominent Soviet inventor who is best known in the former USSR as the author of the Theory of Inventive Problem Solving (hereafter referred to as TRIZ after its Russian acronym). Altshuller started working on a universal algorithm that would simplify technical inventions in the late 1940s, published early works on it the mid-1950s, and developed it into a comprehensive theory of invention with a methodological apparatus and a growing number of enthusiasts in the 1960s.⁴⁵ He was also a theorist of pedagogy and a science fiction writer. Altshuller founded his theory of invention on the premise that, in order to solve a technical problem (that is, to make an invention), an inventor should first identify an internal contradiction inherently present in any technical object or system. The ideal solution to the problem would then be to re-format the technical system so that the contradiction is removed, but without the addition of any further mechanisms or parts.⁴⁶ In other words, TRIZ approached technical objects and the material world as “infinitely flexible (неограниченно изменяем)],⁴⁷ as always possessing a hidden potential for their more effective usage, and as fully subordinate to the human will, given that people had the necessary skills to see technical contradictions and find solutions to them.

⁴⁵ Zinaida S. Vasyleva, “Soobshchestvo TRIZ: Logika i etika sovetskogo izobretatelia,” *Etnograficheskoe obozrenie*, no. 3 (2012): 29–46.

⁴⁶ Genrikh S. Altshuller, *Algoritm izobretenii* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1973); Genrikh S. Altshuller and Aleksandr B. Seliutskii, *Krylia dlia Ikara: Kak reshat izobretatelskie zadachi* (Petrozavodsk: Karelia, 1980); Genrikh S. Altshuller, *Naiti ideiu* (Novosibirsk: Nauka, 1986).

⁴⁷ Altshuller, *Naiti ideiu*, 185.

In 1964, Altshuller had a rather lengthy correspondence with the brothers Strugatsky, whose works would soon become part of the Soviet literary canon. In one of his letters he claimed:

Since my childhood, at all stages [of my biography], science fiction determined my life. It is a kind of religion. Of course, I am not a fanatic and admit that one temple can serve to worship different gods. As for myself, I prefer prognostic science fiction, when it is used not as a literary device, but in order to look into the future, as precisely and as far as possible.⁴⁸

For Altshuller, himself a prolific science fiction author under the pen name G. Altov, science fiction was inseparable from his theory of invention. One of its postulates was that inventions and, consequently, human progress are hampered by the psychological inability of people to see solutions to technical problems, or even to perceive technical problems per se as an obstacle to be overcome. Science fiction was, in his theory, necessary in order to develop the professional vision of an inventor – a vision which could easily identify problems and find solutions to them. As one of his regular co-authors claimed, “It is impossible for an inventor to acquire advanced professional thinking without reading science fiction regularly.”⁴⁹

The reason why science fiction was important lay in the fact that it could teach its audiences to treat materiality as flexible and subordinate to the human will. When Altshuller and his followers established TRIZ groups all over the USSR, the work in these groups included writing or, at least, reading science fiction, so that students would learn to see technological things in their potential flexibility and changeability.⁵⁰ One such group in Petrozavodsk had regular training sessions during the 1980s in one of local clubs; watching science fiction films, imagining non-existent objects and creatures, and enacting scenes from the communist future were compulsory activities for its students.⁵¹

⁴⁸ “Pismo G. Altova ANu, 21 apreliia 1964,” in Svetlana Bondarenko and Viktor Kurilskii, eds., *Neizvestnyie Strugatskiie. Pisma. Rabochiie dnevniki. 1963-1966 gg.* (Moscow: AST, 2009), 170–171.

⁴⁹ Aleksandr Seliutskii, *Derzkiie formuly tvorchestva* (Petrozavodsk: Karelia, 1987), 175.

⁵⁰ B. Zlotin, A. Zusman, *Mesiats pod zvezdami fantazii* (Kishinev: Lumina, 1988), 48.

⁵¹ NARK, f. R-3665, op. 1, d. 9/154, l. 4–6. See also Vasilyeva, *Soobshchestvo TRIZ*, 34.

Altshuller's own writing is illustrative in this respect: for example, in his unfinished novel *The Third Millennium* (1974), the female protagonist achieves such a perfect unity with technologies of the day that she literally penetrates through the walls of a spaceship she was instructed to seize, whereas the technological skills of another female character allow her to assemble and disassemble her spaceship while it is flying through the atmosphere of Jupiter.⁵² Science fiction allowed for the visualization of this relationship between people and machines that lay at the basis of TRIZ and was, in essence, symbiotic: people relied on technologies to pave the way to communism, but to do so they had to change themselves into creative, technologically literate personalities. Soviet productivist language provided Altshuller and his audience, mostly Soviet scholars and engineers, with the necessary symbolic vocabulary to express and perceive the idea that the path to building a communist society is charted through the creation of machines and tools that would extend the capabilities of human bodies and selves. But the appropriation of this language could not be innocent, given the inevitable link between language and selfhood.

Altshuller's quest for more inventive means to accelerate technical progress led him to develop by the 1980s another theory called the Theory of Creative Personality Development.⁵³ Dissatisfied with the perceived rigidity and lack of inventiveness among the Soviet engineering cadre, Altshuller argued that, in order to build the material basis of the communist future, every Soviet person should be trained from early childhood in creative thinking – that is, in the skill to treat the world as flexible and subordinate to human imagination:

We know that developed socialism would be unimaginable without universal literacy. More years will pass, and a society will emerge in which every person will be able to solve the most complicated intellectual tasks. This will probably be regarded as an obvious necessity:

⁵² Genrikh Altov, "Tretiye tysiacheletie," in *NF: Sbornik nauchnoi fantastiki*, vol. 14 (Moscow: Znanie, 1974), 5.

⁵³ Altshuller, *Naiti ideiii*, 173–185; Genrikh S. Altshuller and Igor M. Viortkin, *Kak stat geniem* (Minsk: Belarus, 1994).

after all, is it possible that under Communism the summits of intellectual creativity would be available only to a small group of people?⁵⁴

Having emerged in the 1950s as an algorithm for solving industrial production tasks, by the 1980s TRIZ had transformed into a system that sought to re-model, first of all, Soviet people, and only then machines. While TRIZ encapsulated and expressed cultural fantasies of fully subdued materiality, it demanded vigorous self-fashioning from its followers in pursuit of these fantasies. Practical courses of TRIZ were framed in the rhetoric of technological invention, but structurally, they were built as psychological training aimed to teach their students to “overcome a psychological inertia and a fear to think creatively.”⁵⁵ The promise of mastery over the material world acted, in a way, as bait to lure Soviet people to imagine themselves as creative socialist subjects and invest their personal time in techniques of self-making. Zinaida Vasilyeva in her ethnographic research on TRIZ in post-Soviet Russia quoted a teacher at a TRIZ school who claimed that, of all the children who took its courses, only students from non-religious families tended to graduate, an indirect indication that its inherent materialism suggested ideological forms of imagining one’s selves that were incompatible with religious beliefs.⁵⁶

TRIZ was a prominent vernacular of Soviet techno-utopianism that defined socialist selfhood through its relationship with the material world. One’s belonging to the collective of Soviet people was relatively marginal for this definition; what really mattered was one’s skills to see technical systems and objects as flexible and ready to subdue themselves to their creator’s will. Since its vocabulary was based on the understanding of technological objects as encapsulating long historical time, mastery of technologies became a key factor for socialism to occupy its place as the next, more progressive, stage of human history. Training sessions in the Petrozavodsk school of TRIZ took place under a large poster reading “The history of human civilization is the

⁵⁴ Altshuller and Seliutskii, *Krylia dlia Ikara*, 3.

⁵⁵ NARK, f. R-3665, op. 1, d. 9/154, l. 1–9, quote on l. 5.

⁵⁶ Vasilyeva, *Soobshchestvo TRIZ*, 35.

history of inventions!”⁵⁷ This understanding of technological progress as the essence of personal and social development pushed enthusiasts of TRIZ to argue in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the socialist economy was gradually collapsing around them, that a national adaptation of TRIZ in education and industry would allow for a rapid and effective re-invigoration of state socialism.⁵⁸ But while they continued speaking their dialect of Soviet productivist language, other less rational forms of interaction with the material world captivated audiences around them. Following the Baku pogrom in January 1990, Altshuller, a Jew, had to flee with his family from Azerbaijan to Petrozavodsk. In the post-Soviet period, associations and schools of TRIZ gradually moved to position themselves as, first of all, personal and career counselling services, and only secondarily as technical consulting services.⁵⁹

This story is not much different from what happened with another vernacular of the Soviet productivist language – the discourse of Soviet technical do-it-yourself magazines. These magazines were immensely popular in the entire late socialist era, but the peak of their popularity, if judged in terms of monthly circulation figures, coincided with perestroika. One of them, *Modelist-Konstruktor* [Modeller-Designer], had an impressive circulation which grew from 140,000 copies in 1966, its launch year, to 1,800,000 copies in 1989, its peak year. As for similar do-it-yourself magazines, in 1989 their figures for monthly circulation were 1,777,000 copies for *Iunyi Tekhnik* [Young Technical Designer] and 1,555,000 copies for *Tekhnika – Molodiozhi* [Technology to Youth].

The first issue of *Modelist-Konstruktor*, a cult magazine of Soviet amateur engineering, appeared in January 1966. Its very first editorial address promised to the magazine’s readers that

⁵⁷ NARK, f. R-3665, op. 1, d. 9/154, l. 1.

⁵⁸ Aleksandr B. Seliutskii, ed., *Pravila igry bez pravil* (Petrozavodsk: Karelia, 1989), 3–6; Yuri Dral’, “Rezultaty obiazatelno budut,” *Narodnoe obrazovanie*, no. 3 (1990): 45–49; Leonid Shub, “Fantaziia v upriazhke ili dialektika dlia vzroslykh: (O razvitii tvorcheskogo voobrazheniia doshkolnikov),” *Detskaia literatura*, no. 4 (1991): 48–50.

⁵⁹ See, for example, the website of the Russian TRIZ Association: <http://ratriz.ru/>, accessed December 18, 2015. One of its sections targets a teenage audience with the following slogan: “Do you want to be lucky in life? Do you want to learn how to solve any problem? Do you want to be an interesting person for your friends? Do you want to study easily and pleasantly? Then learn TRIZ!”

the magazine will tell you how to build... real small airplanes, helicopters, motor gliders, which will take you to the sky. As for future conquerors of the ocean, *Modelist-Konstruktor* will... supply them with the blueprints and technical characteristics of yachts, catamarans, motor boats... Car and bike fans will find on the magazine's pages detailed materials about amateur designs of sport models and personal cars...⁶⁰

The magazine fulfilled its promises: in the following decades it published hundreds of blueprints and instructions of how to produce virtually everything with one's own hands, ranging from light aircraft with motorcycle engines to holiday rafts made of truck tires. *Modelist-Konstruktor* was not the only cultural venue that popularized amateur engineering in the USSR. Starting in 1963, *Katera i Yakhty*, a specialized periodical⁶¹ for amateur boat- and yacht-building, published hundreds of designs ranging from small riverboats to ocean-worthy yachts. Beginning in the 1960s, another widely circulated technical magazine, *Tekhnika – Molodiozhi*, started popularizing home-built cars. In 1966, its editorial board organized the first Soviet exhibition of amateur cars,⁶² an event that became regular during the 1970s and 1980s.⁶³ *Radio* published electronic circuits and blueprints that could be used to assemble sophisticated electronic devices or to repair virtually everything produced by the Soviet radio-electronic industry. Apart from periodicals, from the 1960s to the 1980s books were published, in the hundreds of thousands copies that advised how to build summer cottages (*dachas*), cars, boats and electronic appliances.⁶⁴ From the early 1970s until 1991, the central Soviet television broadcast a TV show called *Eto vy mozhete* [You can make it], which introduced to a

⁶⁰ *Modelist-Konstruktor*, 1 (1966), back side of the front cover.

⁶¹ In 1963 only one issue was published, since 1964 it was published bi-annually, since 1967 quarterly and since 1969 bimonthly, reflecting the growing interest to amateur boat and yacht building.

⁶² Z. Fomina (dir.). *Novosti dnia / Khronika nashikh dnei*, no. 45 (Studiia dokumentalnykh filmov, 1966).

⁶³ "Molodost plus umenia," *Za ruliom*, no. 12 (1967): 17–18; V. Demchenko, "Marsh-parad v 3000 kilometrov," *Za ruliom*, no. 2 (1972): 18; O. Iaremenko, "Serioznye samodelki," *Za ruliom*, no. 12 (1982): 12–13.

⁶⁴ K. N. Kurdenkov, *Suda: stroim sami* (Moscow: Sudostroeniie, 1964); B. S. Ivanov, *Elektronika svoimi rukami* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1964); V. M. Gesler, *Avtomobil svoimi rukami* (Moscow: DOSAAF, 1970); G. M. Novak, *Katera, lodki i motory v voprosakh i otvetakh: spravochnik*. Moscow: Sudostroenie, 1977.

multi-million television audience different amateur designs ranging from kitchen appliances to cars and small aircrafts.

Like TRIZ, Soviet technical magazines aimed to shape the Soviet subject as master of the material world. They published blueprints of a car to be made of plywood⁶⁵ and an electric generator mounted on a kite to provide electricity during tourist trips;⁶⁶ the combination of bearings, metal pipes and plastic could be used to make virtually anything ranging from a velomobile (a bicycle car) to boat engines to gliders to tractors to all-terrain vehicles to snowmobiles.⁶⁷ There was virtually no technical equipment or home appliances that Soviet amateur engineers could not theoretically assemble using the innumerable circuits and instructions published in Soviet technical magazines and the basic radio components sold in Soviet stores. The list ran right up to computers⁶⁸ and even, albeit humorously, a time machine.⁶⁹ Soviet materiality as it was represented through this discourse was, indeed, flexible: in late Soviet culture, any given thing could become anything else and thus *a priori* performed the function of raw material even if it was brand new. The very first editorial of *Katera i Yakhty* explained why the magazine would publicize do-it-yourself practices by appealing to its audience: “We are far from believing that everyone involved in sailing as tourism or sport should build a yacht or a motor boat by himself. One can use an [industrially] produced vessel. But what

⁶⁵ “Valga-Kombi: avtomobil iz fanery,” *Modelist-Konstruktor*, no. 8 (1980): 4–8 and a colour inset between pp. 8 and 9.

⁶⁶ “Pokhodnaia elektrostantsiia,” *IuT dlia umelykh ruk*, no. 3 (1980): 1.

⁶⁷ Velomobiles: “Vita – lastochka velomobilei,” *Modelist-Konstruktor*, no. 7 (1976): 24; K. Bavykin, “Velomobil,” *Iunyi tekhnik*, no. 8 (1977): 41–48; boat engine: A. Katushenko, “Pedalnaia lodka,” *Iunyi tekhnik*, no. 5 (1977): 78–80; gliders: V. Bugrov, “Deltaplan kluba Vympel,” *Modelist-Konstruktor*, no. 11 (1977): 27–29 and no. 1 (1978): 7–8; “OKB Deltaplan,” *Modelist-Konstruktor*, no. 10 (1982): 12–16 and the color inset between pp. 16 and 17; tractor: “Mini-traktor: ot skhemy do pakhoty,” *Modelist-Konstruktor*, no. 2 (1982): 4–5; all-terrain vehicle: “Amfitrak ‘Ob’,” *Modelist-Konstruktor*, no. 4 (1978): 14–16; snowmobile: “Chuk i Gek – snegokhod,” *Modelist-Konstruktor*, no. 1 (1978): 9–10.

⁶⁸ *Modelist-Konstruktor*, nos. 2–3, 5–7 (1987); *IuT dlia umelykh ruk*, nos. 2–8 (1988).

⁶⁹ The film *Ivan Vasilyevich Changes Profession* plays on this: in the end of the film when the time machine breaks and its inventor is unable to return Tsar Ivan the Terrible back from the twentieth century into the sixteenth, he hurries to the electronics store to buy certain basic radio components, of which, as we learn, the time machine is made.

enthusiast [of sailing] would refuse the pleasure of remaking [*peredelat*] it in his own taste?”⁷⁰

The very spirit of Soviet do-it-yourself culture thus implied that human ingenuity should not be limited by the material resources at hand; instead, the only limitation was the human imagination — hence the many different methods to “develop” and “stimulate” imagination which became popular in the discourse of Soviet amateur engineering.⁷¹ Drawing on the passivity of matter, this discourse created an illusion that Soviet subjects, by immersing themselves in do-it-yourself culture, would become in this process self-aware, rational and free actors capable of manipulating and reconfiguring matter in every possible way.⁷²

The mastery over materiality suggested by the discourse of amateur engineering was a cultural fantasy, just as it was in Altshuller’s writings. Publications on how to make complex things with one’s own hands acted as traps that lured people into established patterns of subjectivation due to their seemingly pragmatic, apolitical and deideologized character. The emphasis of Soviet technical magazines on the conquest of Soviet space with the help of homebuilt cars, yachts, motorboats and planes is symptomatic in this respect. While thousands of people read about them, few actually ventured to build them, judging by the fact that even national exhibitions of homebuilt cars or planes never gathered more than several dozens of vehicles,⁷³ a miniscule quantity compared to the scale of the Soviet Union. Amateur engineering could not overcome the problem of infrastructure, especially when it came to airfields or ports, which were ill-suited for private aircrafts or yachts; besides, their owners were often forbidden to use these state-

⁷⁰ “K chitateliam,” *Katera i Yakhty*, no. 1 (1963): 3.

⁷¹ R. Nudelman, “Vooobrazheniie po pravilam,” *Iunyi tekhnika*, no. 1 (1968): 58–59; D. Bilenkin, “Vooobrazheniie – sila,” *Iunyi tekhnika*, no. 6 (1977): 78–80.

⁷² While Soviet women’s magazines focused on domestic space and the female body, their discourse with its infinitely repeating advice on how to reuse or remake old things brought the same connotations: the idealized Soviet subject through do-it-yourself practices had to perform mastery over the material world. In other words, their relationship to materiality was framed in similar terms of mastery. See Alexey Golubev and Olga Smolyak, “Making Selves through Making Things: Soviet Do-It-Yourself Culture and Practices of Late Soviet Subjectivation,” *Cahiers du monde russe*, Vol. 54, no. 3–4 (July-December 2013): 517–541.

⁷³ “Avtofestival-82,” *Modelist-Konstruktor*, 12 (1982), inlet between pp. 16 and 17; “V nebe Tushino – SLA,” *Modelist-Konstruktor*, nos. 3, 4, 5 (1988).

owned facilities.⁷⁴ Enthusiasts of homebuilt cars had to struggle with a shortage of spare parts, a situation that plagued the Soviet car market during its entire existence.⁷⁵ As a result, homebuilt yachts and cars were something more typical of the Soviet collective imaginary than the real Soviet landscape. The extensive circulation of Soviet technical magazines and the popularity of the TV show *Eto vy mozhete* secured a wide distribution of images of modern-looking garage-built vehicles, aircrafts and ships. Amateur engineering was something to be looked at and read about; that is, it was a discursive field that turned the materiality of self-made things into a spectacle and that totalized the scattered experiences of their producers into a governing text with a dominant idea, that of human mastery over space:

Sometimes we receive questions asking why the magazine *Tekhnika – Molodiozhi* organizes collective trips of amateur cars through dozens of Soviet cities. Does [Soviet] industry produce cars of poor quality? This is not the case. The romantic aspirations of young masters to build a car of their own using plastic and aluminium, an amphibious car capable not only of driving, but also of sailing, should be supported. This is also a search for new discoveries.⁷⁶

This short excerpt from an article by the editor-in-chief of *Tekhnika – Molodiozhi* highlights several key points of the techno-utopian vernacular of Soviet technical magazines. It associated amateur engineering with the romanticism of exploration — or, if put in Foucault’s terms, with the will to knowledge,⁷⁷ that gnostic drive that defined people involved in this culture as subjects of knowledge, as explorers who, in the course of exploration, would fashion themselves into conquerors of land (homebuilt cars), water

⁷⁴ *Katera i Yakhty*, no. 2 (1975): 30; V. Kondratiev “Idei novyie, problemy staryie,” *Modelist-Konstruktor*, no. 2 (1990): 3.

⁷⁵ Lewis H. Siegelbaum, *Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2008), 244.

⁷⁶ Vasilii Zakharchenko, “Molodoie dykhaniie veka,” *Nauka i zhizn*, no. 5 (1978): 79.

⁷⁷ See, e.g.: Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality. Vol. 1: An Introduction* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976), esp. the part *Scientia Sexualis*, pp. 53–73.

(yachts and motor boats) and air (small aircrafts).⁷⁸ The discourse of amateur engineering worked all the more effectively, since in most cases this conquest of the elements was imaginary: to use a metaphor, Soviet technical magazines “abducted” the actual practice of building vehicles in garage conditions and travelling in them. This was then represented to their readers as texts and images, constructing them as one large audience joining this effort to conquer nature and to transform it with travel from a wilderness into a landscape.⁷⁹ The discourse of amateur engineering worked by seducing readers into imagining themselves at the steering wheel of a motor boat or a car reaching into an otherwise inaccessible wilderness, driving a propeller sleigh through Arctic plains, observing the landscape from a light aircraft, or touring the countryside in a motorhome. This discourse needed the actual practices of building cars, boats or planes only inasmuch as they provided examples to be incorporated into its corpus in order to make it more convincing and tempting – in other words, in order to create a desire to make things with one’s own hands.

Given the bottom-up approach to content creation in Soviet technical magazines (nearly all of their designs were initially developed by readers for themselves and then successful solutions were shared through the journal), it is hardly surprising that the producers of the Soviet discourse of amateur engineering misrecognized the cultural fantasy of subdued materiality for reality. In the late 1980s, enthusiasts of do-it-yourself culture unsuccessfully argued – in a logic similar to that of the advocates of TRIZ – that amateur engineering could become a nation-wide basis for small businesses that would re-invigorate the socialist economy.⁸⁰ As the Soviet socio-economic model collapsed, the audience of this particular vernacular of the Soviet techno-utopianism shrank to, perhaps, the actual number of amateur engineers in Russia. The monthly circulation of *Modelist-*

⁷⁸ Readers of Soviet technical magazines were also offered to conquer the space, although in an indirect manner: by observing the night sky, playing space-related games or constructing replicas of spaceships, both existing and from the imagined future. See: *Modelist-Konstruktor*, no. 10 (1973): 30-31, 41; *Modelist-Konstruktor*, no. 4 (1974): 46; *Modelist-Konstruktor*, no. 7 (1974): 18–19.

⁷⁹ On the role of travel in the transformation of nature into a landscape, see: Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller, eds. *The World Beyond the Windshield: Roads and Landscapes in the United States and Europe* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2008), esp. “Introduction” by Christof Mauch and Thomas Zeller, pp. 1–13.

⁸⁰ See, e.g., V. Kopyev, “Paradoksy uspekha,” *Tekhnika – Molodiozhi*, no. 5 (1989): 2–4.

Konstruktor fell from 1,800,000 copies in 1989 to 5,150 in 2010, while another technical magazine, *Katera i Yakhty*, transformed into a modern illustrated magazine focused on consumption. Yet their discourse has its post-Soviet afterlife, as it can be recognized in statements claiming that the technological advances of modern industrial states have been achieved via the application of methods or technologies borrowed from TRIZ or amateur engineering magazines.⁸¹ One typical statement argues that

in the Soviet era, Japanese people subscribed to such Soviet journals as *Modelist-Konstruktor*, *Tekhnika – Molodioshi*, *Iunyi Tekhnik*, and patented all our ideas and inventions. This is how they built their prosperity.⁸²

Since Japan is routinely perceived in Russia as a model state in terms of economic development achieved through technological progress, it is not surprising that the people who associate themselves with the Soviet discourse of amateur engineering interpret its present as the desirable, but failed, Soviet future: what Japan represents now is how the USSR could have looked if their discourse had been taken seriously by the state authorities. Similarly, enthusiasts of TRIZ associated the technological and social progress of the West and the stagnation of late Soviet society with the application and non-application, respectively, of TRIZ methods.⁸³ These beliefs are a logical outcome of their misrecognition that various dialects of techno-utopianism were more effective in producing Soviet subjects than marketable commodities.

⁸¹ See, e.g., articles and forum threads related to a popular myth that Japanese technological advances were based on solutions from *Modelist-Konstruktor* and other Soviet technical journals: <http://teron.ru/index.php?showtopic=174437> (Teron.Ru), <http://www.newsland.ru/news/detail/id/530110/> (Newsland), <http://news.drom.ru/Subaru-Outback-2008-9338.html> (Drom.Ru), <http://nmm.ru/blogs/NoNaMe-Y/copy-paste-po-sovetski/page8/> (Noname.Ru). I myself on several occasions heard similar statements in dialogues and public lectures which involved former Soviet technical specialists.

⁸² A comment by a user Rumato to the article: Ievgeniia Shtefan, “Iaponiia gotova mirno dogovoritsia s RF to Kurilam,” *Newsland*, 24.09.2009, available at: <http://www.newsland.ru/news/detail/id/414574/>, accessed December 20, 2015.

⁸³ Genrikh Altshuller et al, *Teoriia i praktika resheniia izobretatelskikh zadach* (Kishinev: Vsesoiuznyi institut TRIZ, 1989), 56.

TRIZ and amateur engineering demonstrate the importance of material objects for the cultural definition of proper Sovietness, both in terms of individual and collective selves. At the center of this definition stood mastery over space achieved through technological objects; through this mastery these objects were key to the national possession of the future, which endowed them with their own historicity. Victor Shklovsky wrote as early as 1922 that “subways, cranes and cars are human prostheses;”⁸⁴ mastery over these and other technological objects brought with them a promise of the spatial and temporal extension of Soviet selves. In post-Soviet political discourses, this historicity turned grand technological objects associated with Soviet techno-utopian visions into nostalgic objects.

Conclusion

On July 2, 2013, a Russian rocket Proton-M carrying three satellites for the Russian navigation system GLONASS burst into flames in the first seconds after the launch. The leading opposition newspaper *Novaya gazeta* responded to this event in its next issue by placing a caricature by Pyotr Sarukhanov showing a group of primitive people dancing with spears in a circle around a rocket (Figure 4).

⁸⁴ Shklovsky, “Zoo, ili Pisma ne o liubvi,” 130–131.

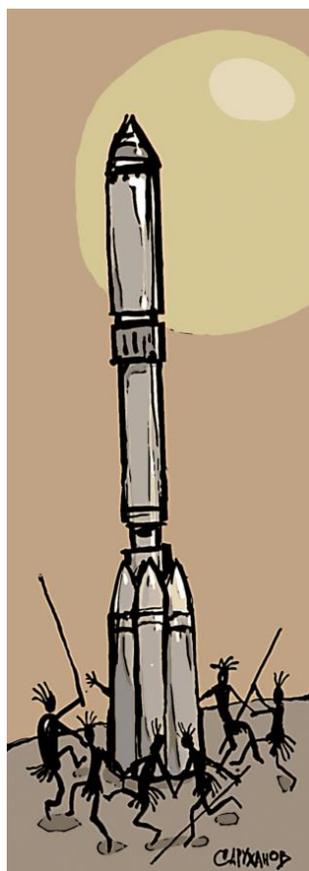


Figure 4. Pyotr Sarukhanov, a caricature on the current state of affairs of the Russian space program.⁸⁵

Sarukhanov's image plays on the contrast between two incompatible historicities: one archaic, embodied in the black figures that, in an undeniably racist metaphor, personify the Russian engineering cadre, and another progressive, encapsulated in the slim silhouette of a space rocket. For the Russian public with its cultural expertise in Soviet texts and imagery, this image represents a reference to the visual aesthetic of the post-Stalinist era with its emphasis on body-machine assemblages (cf. Aleksandr Deineka's *Conquerors of Outer Space* in Figure 3). But whereas Soviet bodies and selves lived up to the challenges of their technological objects, the irony of Sarukhanov's image capitalizes on the perceived inability of post-Soviet bodies and selves to enter into affective assemblages with the grand technological objects of the Soviet era. In public

⁸⁵ *Novaya gazeta*, no. 72 (July 5, 2013): 24.

debates these objects regularly become a measure of contemporary Russian people, society and the state, usually to emphasize their inadequacy and pettiness in comparison to ambitious visions of the conquest of space and time embedded in Soviet-era technologies. Following the 2009 accident at the Sayano–Shushenskaya power station (built in the 1970s and still the largest power plant in Russia), when 75 people died and the national power supply was disrupted, a journalist of *Novaya gazeta* wrote:

[This disaster] has brought to the surface the most vital lesson for us, so vital that there is nothing more important. For a nation that still launches rockets into space, the most vital task is to revive the following reflex: at the sight of an unfastened bolt to put a screw on it and then regularly check and secure it with a wrench.⁸⁶

The author of this excerpt openly claims that Russia as a nation has a future only if it masters anew the skills demanded by its technological objects. This statement is informed by productivist language, now in its post-Soviet variation, as it defines the revival of the national body through a restored mastery over the advanced infrastructure and vehicles that allow for the control of Russian national space and, consequently, time. In fact, productivist language can be recognized in much of the political criticism of the current leadership of Russia. Yulia Latynina, one of the staunchest liberal critics of Vladimir Putin’s government, described her trip to the leading Russian producer of rocket engines, NPO Energomash, in terms of an incredible progress that abruptly stopped in 1991. She then attacked the ruling government, claiming that it never stood up to the promises of these technologies, leaving their potential unrealized, and thus betrayed the future of the Russian nation:

I was watching these absolutely fantastic engines. I was present during an engine test. I was looking at the engineers who were testing them, and I saw that all of these engineers were

⁸⁶ Aleksei Tarasov, “Inzhener ne dolzhen presmykatsia pered finansistom,” *Novaya gazeta*, no. 111 (October 7, 2009), available online at <http://www.novayagazeta.ru/politics/43216.html>, accessed December 20, 2015.

older than 60. In the meantime, young [specialists] keep on leaving [Russia]. And then you understand that this is, in fact, our last chance [to remain competitive internationally].⁸⁷

Latynina and, indeed, many critics of the Russian government from both right and left deploy Soviet-era visions of technological grandeur to define the Russian national body (emphasized by the obligatory use of the first person plural “we”) as losing or already lacking vital connections to the material world of advanced technologies. Whereas for Mikhail Heller, a humanist, the main fault of the Soviet regime was in its desire to turn people into “cogs” of the Soviet system-as-machine, contemporary critics of Russian authorities routinely employ productivist language to accuse them of unwillingness or inability to adapt Russian society to the challenges and potential of machines that it inherited from the Soviet past.

⁸⁷ Yulia Latynina, “Kod dostupa,” *Ekho Moskvy*, broadcast on June 19, 2010, a transcript available online at <http://echo.msk.ru/programs/code/688747-echo/>, accessed December 20, 2015.



Figure 5. A World War II-themed diorama with plastic models. 1:48 scale. Photograph © 2015 Sergei Rogov.

Chapter 2. Time in 1:72 Scale: The Plastic Historicity of Soviet Models

A scale model of Lenin's car will be a perfect addition to your school's technology corner or Soviet history room.

An article from a Soviet technical magazine¹

It is a grand attempt to overcome the wholly irrational character of the object's mere presence at hand through its integration into a new, expressly devised historical system: the collection.

Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*²

When the Soviet government ordered the construction of the national exhibition center in Moscow in 1935, it was initially conceived as a showcase of Soviet agriculture and was named, accordingly, the All-Union Agricultural Exhibition. Two decades later, with the dawn of the space era and the rapid industrialization and urbanization of Soviet society, this focus on agriculture no longer seemed relevant and, in 1959, the exhibition center was renamed the Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy. As part of this re-orientation of the Soviet national exhibition, a pavilion that had previously been devoted to bog peat was renamed *Young Technical Designers (Iunye tekhniki)* and started featuring the craftsmanship produced by schoolchildren's extracurricular hobby groups (*kruzhki*) and centers of young technical designers (*stantsii* and *kluby iunyh tekhnikov*), such as hand-built vehicles and agricultural equipment, scale models of ships and planes, and designs of existing and future space crafts.

¹ *Modelist-Konstruktor*, no. 6 (1969): 5.

² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1999), 204–205.



Figure 6. The Young Technical Designers pavilion at the Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy in Moscow, early 1980s. A Soviet-era postcard.³

The allocation of a special pavilion at the Soviet national exhibition to “young technical designers” highlighted the importance that Soviet education officials gave to the extracurricular activities of school-age children. The Department of Extracurricular Education was established within the People’s Commissariat of Education of Soviet Russia as early as November 1917; in 1952, the Council of Ministers of the USSR passed a resolution that introduced common organizational and teaching standards for extracurricular clubs and centers; and over the course of the following decades palaces and houses of Young Pioneers, centers of young technical designers, school hobby groups and other forms of extracurricular activities sprang up all over the Soviet Union.⁴ In 1988, there were 464,384 extracurricular clubs and centers in the Soviet Union, or

³ Source: <https://pastvu.com/p/54041>, accessed December 22, 2015.

⁴ M. B. Koval, *Stanovleniie i razvitiie sistemy vospitatelnoi deiatelnosti vneshkolnykh ob’iedinenii*: Doctor of Sciences in Education Dissertation. Moscow, 1991; M. A. Zaitseva, “K voprosu o roli uchrezhdenii vneshkolnoi rabory v vospitanii sotsialnoi aktivnosti starsheklassnikov v 50–80-e gg. XX veka,” *Yaroslavskii pedagogicheskii vestnik*, 1 (2009): 90–94.

roughly four times the number as in 1950. The official statistics claimed that seven and a half million schoolchildren attended them, with technology-related clubs and groups being the most popular (2,132,659 children).⁵ According to the 1989 Soviet census, the number of schoolchildren (ages 7 to 17) in the USSR exceeded forty-five million,⁶ which means that approximately one in every six Soviet school-age children attended extracurricular activities at any given time. Given the high turnover rates in them, the proportion of Soviet students who at some point in their education enrolled in hobby groups was likely to be considerably higher, particularly in urban centers at the expense of rural districts.⁷

The development of extracurricular technical activities pursued a pragmatic function: the incorporation of their labor into the productive forces of the Soviet economy. The idea to spread technological literacy among schoolchildren was, in fact, borrowed from late imperial pedagogy; in particular, from the works of Evgenii Medynskii, a prominent theorist of extracurricular education who continued to work under the new authorities.⁸ In the course of the 1920s and especially the 1930s, it became increasingly associated with one's civil obligation to serve the national cause, whether in peace or wartime.⁹ The *Young Technical Designers* pavilion reflected a further, post-Stalinist development in the political fantasy of schoolchildren's contribution to the

⁵ A. A. Romanov, A. I. Shuvalov, "Genezis klubno-kruzhkovoi raboty v pedagogicheskoi praktike Rossii," *Psikhologo-pedagogicheskii poisk*, 1 (2007): 117.

⁶ Itogi Vsesoiuznoi perepisi naseleniia 1989 goda. Tom 2. Vozrast i sostoiianie v brake. Chast 1 (Minneapolis : East View Publications, 1992), 11.

⁷ M. A. Koshev, *Istoriia i problemy kulturno-tekhničeskogo razvitiia rabochikh kadrov narodov Severnogo Kavkaza v 60-e - nachale 80-kh godov* (Maikop: [s.n.], 1994), 91. Writing about mostly rural Northern Caucasus in the 1960s, the author speaks of the "beggary state" of schoolchildren's technology groups in the region.

⁸ Ye. N. Medynskii, *Vneshkolnoie obrazovanie, ego znachenie, organizatsiia i tekhnika*, 4th edition (Moscow: Nauka, 1918). See esp. Chapter I (p. 9–17) on the general importance of extracurricular education and Chapter XIII (p. 241–251) on museums and technical exhibitions. The first edition was printed in 1913.

⁹ See Scott W. Palmer's discussion of the role of OSOAVIAKHIM and its predecessors in the propaganda of aviation in the early USSR: Scott W. Palmer, *Dictatorship of the Air: Aviation Culture and the Fate of Modern Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 103–124. Lev Kassil and Maks Polianovskii's well-known book *The Street of the Younger Son* (1949, awarded the State Stalin Prize of the 3rd Degree in 1950) explicitly linked its protagonist's hobby activities in aircraft modelling and his wartime heroism: Lev Kassil and Maks Polianovskii, *Ulitsa mladshego syna* (Moscow: Detskaia literatura, 1949).

national economy, which was also prominently featured in educational theory¹⁰ and – hardly surprisingly – Soviet teen science fiction.¹¹ On the official level, Leonid Brezhnev in his speech at the XVIth Congress of the Komsomol emphasized that the latter should “develop the scientific and technological creativity of working youth” as a prerequisite for the evolution of socialism into communism.¹²

The dreams of Soviet enthusiasts of extracurricular technological activities never came true: as later publications bitterly noted, nearly all of their technical innovations were wasted through inefficient bureaucratic management.¹³ Yet due to their inclusion in the Soviet politics of technology and hence the political process, schoolchildren’s hobby groups and centers were also engaged in symbolic production, which had a more profound effect on Soviet society. The official stance behind extracurricular activities promoting science and engineering to children was not only pragmatic, but also pedagogical and disciplinary. By engaging technologies both in theory and practice, Soviet children were expected to use their leisure time as an investment not only in their own future, but also in the socialist progress of their state.¹⁴ For example, a panegyric article published in a Soviet technical magazine and dedicated to an enthusiast of extracurricular technical education said that his “deserved reputation” came from his persistent effort to turn “mischievous boys into socially useful people.”¹⁵ A theorist of school education argued in an article in the flagship journal *Soviet Pedagogy* that engaging technology-related extracurricular activities helped schoolchildren become

¹⁰ The specialized journal Polytechnic Education (Politekhnikheskoie obucheniiie) was established in 1957 and renamed School and Industry (Shkola i proizvodstvo) in 1960.

¹¹ In Vitalii Melentiev’s futurist *33 Marta*, published in 1957, Soviet high school students from 2005 operate advanced agricultural equipment, and in Kir Bulychev’s series of novels, *Priklucheniia Alisy*, the protagonist, a teenage girl from the Communist Earth of the late 21st century, works on cutting-edge scientific experiments. Vitalii Melentiev, *33 marta. 2005 god* (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo det. lit-ry, 1957); Kir Bulychev, *Sto let tomu vperiod* (Moscow: Det. lit-ra, 1978).

¹² Leonid Brezhnev, “Rech na XVI s’ezde VLKSM,” in Leonid Brezhnev, *Leninskim kursom: Rechi i stat’ii*. Vol. 3 (Moscow: Politizdat, 1972), 32.

¹³ “V nogu so vremenem,” *Modelist-Konstruktor*, 3 (1988): 2–3; “Fakel gorit... no kakim plamenem?” *Tekhnika – Molodiozhi*, 3 (1990): 2–3; Koshev, *Istoriia i problemy kulturno-tekhnikheskogo razvitiia*, 91.

¹⁴ N. Bulatov, “Sozdaniie detskikh tekhnicheskikh stantsii,” in V. Iakovlev, ed., *Smena komsomola: Dokumenty, vospominaniia, materialy po istorii VPO (1917 – 1962 gg.)* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1964), 134–135.

¹⁵ V. Bezrodnyi, “Imia emu – pedagog,” *Modelist-Konstruktor*, 3 (1970): 7.

responsible persons with “serious interests” in working and engineering occupations; it eventually led to “the formation of moral consciousness” and “proper” adulthood.¹⁶ Linking national and personal development, extracurricular hobby groups were part of Soviet techno-politics, a concept that Gabrielle Hecht developed in order to conceptualize “hybrid forms of power embedded in technological artefacts, systems, and practices.”¹⁷ In Soviet education theory, extracurricular activities were meant to bolster the technological and industrial progress in the USSR and to ensure that children were raised as disciplined and patriotic Soviet citizens. The link between Soviet techno-politics and extracurricular activities made young Soviet hobbyists subjects to the ideological process. What is more important for this chapter is that it also transformed the material objects of these activities into ideological objects endowed with political and historical meanings.

The most common activity in technology centers and clubs – which, as previously mentioned, encompassed millions of Soviet schoolchildren – was the construction of models of historical and contemporary ships, planes and vehicles. This focus on modelling existing vehicles in the extra-curricular activities of the late socialist era marked an important difference with similar activities of the Stalinist era. Young Pioneers from the 1920s to the 1950s mainly built actual flying, sailing or driving machines, albeit in miniature. Resemblance with actual vehicles was entirely optional.¹⁸ Late socialist hobbyists built those, too, but their focus was increasingly on miniature replicas that were designed exclusively for display. This transition was facilitated by the post-war development of plastics technologies, as their use allowed Soviet manufacturers to organize industrial production of scale model kits. But the transition was not only a technological one, as materiality of models was closely tied to discourse and ideology. The shift of focus to static replica models immersed late Soviet enthusiasts of modelling

¹⁶ Vladimir Gurin, “Tvorcheskii trud kak sredstvo formirovaniia nravstvennogo soznaniia i povedeniia starsheklassnikov,” *Sovetskaia Pedagogika*, 7 (1980): 52–57, quotations on p. 54.

¹⁷ Gabrielle Hecht, “Introduction,” in Gabrielle Hecht, ed., *Entangled Geographies: Empires and Technopolitics in the Global Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011), 3. For a more detailed discussion of techno-politics as a strategic usage of technologies to reach certain political goals, see Gabrielle Hecht, *The Radiance of France*, 15–17.

¹⁸ N. Babaev and S. Kudriavtsev, *Letaiushchiie igrushki i modeli* (Moscow: Oborongiz, 1946).

into a particular historicity that stressed divisions and hierarchies on the basis of nation, rather than class. It suggested that the Bolshevik revolution was not so much a rupture as a continuity and established a genealogical succession from the medieval East Slavic states to Muscovite Russia, the Russian Empire, and the Soviet state. Finally, the making of historical models was premised on explanations of history that favored great men at the expense of the toiling masses, thus prioritizing an elitist perspective over an egalitarian one.

The argument that historical knowledge in the Soviet Union employed national, if not nationalist, discourses alongside internationalist and class-based ones is anything but new: David Brandenberger and Kevin M. F. Platt traced the turn to nationalist interpretations of Soviet history to the late 1930s when the Soviet leadership searched for new models of popular mobilization in a complicated international context and with a European war looming on the horizon,¹⁹ and Richard Stites, among many others, showed how this tendency intensified multifold during World War II.²⁰ What I want to add to this discussion is an exploration of some of the quotidian and materialist mechanisms through which this national perspective of Soviet history departed from the framework of official cultural production, obtained a broader audience and became encapsulated in material objects and their collections. The incorporation of this national perspective of history in the activities of children's technology groups and centers made it particularly convincing, since it was marketed to its audience not directly, but rather as a by-product of the seemingly pragmatic activity of obtaining new skills in handicraft and engineering. Although historical materialism remained the explicit basis of school and university education until the collapse of the USSR, state-funded hobby activities were the sphere in

¹⁹ David Brandenberger and Kevin M. F. Platt, "Introduction: Tsarist-Era Heroes in Stalinist Mass Culture and Propaganda," in Kevin M. F. Platt and David Brandenberger, eds., *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006), 3–16; David Brandenberger and Kevin M. F. Platt, "Terribly Pragmatic: Rewriting the History of Ivan IV's Reign, 1937–1956," in *Ibid.*, 157–178.

²⁰ Richard Stites, "Soviet Russian Wartime Culture: Freedom and Control, Spontaneity and Consciousness," in *The People's War: Responses to World War II in the Soviet Union*, ed. Robert W. Thurston and Bernd Bonwetsch (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 171–86.

which Soviet schoolchildren encountered material assemblages and mastered historical narratives that prioritized nations over classes and great personalities over masses.

Affectivity of models and their collections – their ability to showcase Soviet industrial and technological capabilities and to stand as a synecdoche for historical progress – was important in the production and circulation of the Soviet Union’s national historical imagination at the grass-roots level. Re-emerging again and again in various locations in the USSR, this historical knowledge was all the more persuasive, since it was produced in a decentralized way: Soviet schoolchildren acquired it from enthusiasts of modelling and engineering, older peers, and technical literature, as well as produced it themselves, literally with their own hands. Modern cultures commonly interpret machines and technologies as symbols of historical progress and national prowess;²¹ and their scale models – planes and ships small enough to fit on bookshelves and on tables – allowed for miniaturization and domestication of this symbolism, in Soviet culture and elsewhere. This process was even more complex, since, as I argue in the last section of this chapter, historicities were performed by scale model collections themselves, which organized history into a spectacle for the educated and quintessentially male gaze of Soviet model enthusiasts.

This chapter is based on such sources as amateur technical magazines and literature, which published blueprints and provided advice on hobby model building; boxes and instruction of scale model kits; interviews and correspondence with Soviet-era modelling enthusiasts; and archival materials. Among Soviet technical magazines, there was a popular sub-genre of do-it-yourself magazines such as *Modelist-Konstruktor* [Modeler-Designer] and *Iunyi Tekhnik* [Young Technical Designer] targeting an amateur, almost exclusively male audience, including children and teenagers. It was this audience – boys and teenagers attending technology groups, and adult men, mainly with a college or university degree in sciences or engineering – that provided the absolute majority of recruits to modelling. Close reading of these magazines gives us an insight into those forms of historical imagination which escaped academic writing or school textbooks, but

²¹ Michael Adas, *Machines as the Measure of Men: Science, Technology, and Ideologies of Western Dominance* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1989).

which became encapsulated in the activities of a many million-strong army of Soviet modelling enthusiasts, both young and adult, and in the objects they produced.

Censoring Objects of Modelling

There are two principal ways of making a scale model: from an industrially produced kit or from scratch, using blueprints, historical description and photographs.²² The first way is labour saving, but the variety of models is limited by what the market offers. The second way requires much more labour, time and skill, and the making of such a model by children is usually possible only under the supervision of an experienced hobbyist. However, the variety of vehicles that can be imitated is virtually unlimited. As a result, plastic models made from kits formed the bulk of private collections in the Soviet Union, both among children and adults hobbyists, while custom built models were made and then exhibited in school hobby groups, centers of young technical designers and Palaces of Young Pioneers.

“Not only people are part of history; machines and vehicles are, too,” wrote the Soviet technical journal *Modelist-Konstruktor* in 1969 in one of its numerous articles which called on Soviet teenagers to immerse themselves in the hobby of model making.²³ This logic, in which the making of models was understood as part of historical knowledge, made the assortment of scale model kits in stores or blueprints in journals subject to tacit censorship. The USSR-designed model kits featured exclusively Russian and Soviet ships, aircrafts and vehicles, such as the battleship *Potyomkin* and the cruiser *Avrora*, various makes of such aircraft as the *MiG* or *Tupolev*, and Soviet battle tanks. It was possible to buy kits from East German, Czechoslovakian or Polish manufacturers, but their range of products was dominated by models of Soviet vehicles, and the absolute majority of the blueprints for scale models in *Modelist-Konstruktor* were those of Russian or Soviet vehicles. Finally, the activities in state-sponsored clubs and hobby

²² Industrially produced scale model kits appeared with the introduction of plastic injection technologies in model-making in the mid-1930s and, after World War II, enjoyed steady growth; prior to this all models were custom built: Brett Green, *Modelling Scale Aircraft* (Oxford and New York: Osprey, 2012), 4–6.

²³ A. Tarasenko, “Relikviiia trudovogo podviga,” *Modelist-Konstruktor*, 5 (1969): 4.

groups for children were focused almost exclusively on custom-built models of Soviet ships and aircrafts.²⁴

This apparent exclusion of non-Soviet technological objects from the activities of Soviet modellers was somewhat shattered when, beginning in 1977, Soviet factories started producing kits designed in England. This story provides a particularly good illustration of the importance with which Soviet ideologists endowed scale models as objects of historical knowledge. In the mid-1970s, the British model kit manufacturer *Frog* (famous, among other things, for making 1:72 one of the standard scales for aircraft modeling) was going out of business, and the USSR Ministry of Light Industry entered into negotiations with its parent company, Dunbee-Combex-Marx, to purchase the injection molds used for industrial production of plastic model kits. From the very beginning, Soviet negotiators refused to buy models of those aircrafts or vessels which belonged to the Central powers (World War I) or the Axis powers (World War II).²⁵ This decision reduced their choice to 120 models, which beginning in the late 1970s were produced in various locations in the USSR, from Moscow to Tashkent. Most were models of British and U.S. aircraft and ships of the interwar and World War II periods.²⁶

The Soviet side insisted on a barter deal to repay the cost of purchased equipment with manufactured model kits. Dunbee-Combex-Marx established Novo, a UK-based company that packaged and distributed kits supplied from the USSR. The international marketing of Soviet-built model kits was similar to products made by Western manufacturers: pseudorealistic representations of battle scenes involving the model's prototype on the cover, its full name and basic technical specifications, a brief development and operational history, and detailed assembly instructions. The marketing of the same model kits domestically for Soviet consumers followed a very different, much more simplistic and utilitarian pattern, as the illustration below demonstrates.

²⁴ NARK, f. R-2323, op. 1, d. 63a, l. 27–28; d. 162, l. 74.

²⁵ Richard Lines and Leif Hellström, *Frog Model Aircraft 1932-1976: The Complete History of the Flying Aircraft & the Plastic Kits* (London: New Cavendish, 1989), 126–127, 195–197, 206–209; Sergey Svinokov, “Neizvestnaia Novo,” *M-Hobby*, 4 (1995): 44–46.

²⁶ Russian enthusiasts of the USSR-produced ex-Frog scale models created an online encyclopedia Novokits.Ru which provides detailed information on all models purchased by the Soviet Union from Frog and their production and marketing in the USSR: <http://www.novokits.ru/>, accessed on 9 September 2014.



Figure 7. *Left*: Box cover designs of USSR-produced models of Gypsy Moth biplane; *right*: Box cover designs of USSR-produced models of the Fairey Barracuda. *Top*: Designs of kits produced for West European markets under the Novo Brand, ca. late 1970s; *bottom*: Design of kits produced for the domestic Soviet market, ca. late 1970s and 1980s. The kits themselves were identical. Courtesy of Novokits.Ru.

With rare exceptions, ex-Frog model kits of Western planes and ships were sold in the USSR in an anonymous form, without information about the specifications or history of their prototypes. The Gypsy Moth biplane of the 1920s (left in Figure 7) was sold in the Soviet market as a “trainer biplane,” while the World War II-era Barracuda bomber (right in Figure 7) was marketed simply as an “aircraft model kit.” Under the same generic name of an “aircraft model kit” the Soviet retail trade offered dozens of other models of British and American planes; the famous World War II-era British Supermarine Spitfire and Hawker Hurricane fighters were sold as a “frontline fighter plane” and a “fighter plane,” respectively. *HMS Hero* was sold as a “destroyer,” *HMS Torquay* as an “anti-submarine ship,” and *HMS Royal Sovereign* as a “battleship.” In addition, the UK-designed kits available in Soviet stores provided neither historical notes

about their prototypes nor decals (pictures imitating national identification marks) nor painting schemes.

In other words, many models of foreign ships and aircrafts were stripped of their identity and historical background and marketed as objects of purely functional value, which was emphasized by the obligatory phrase on the boxes “Designed for the technical creativity of children aged 10 and up” and generic box cover images without national colors. An assembled model represented a piece of unpainted plastic with no identification signs and no name: an object of technical design, not of history. What could sometimes pierce the silence about a model’s historical prototype was its operational history in the Soviet armed forces. Model kits of U.S. Curtis P-40 and Bell P-39 fighter planes, which were supplied to the USSR during World War II under the Lend-Lease Agreement, included both names and a brief description of their service with the Soviet air force. The assembly instructions for the P-39 started with a short historical reference to the Soviet ace Aleksandr Pokryshkin, who flew this aircraft, his rank and awards, and his official score of 59 enemy planes. It also provided decals and advice on a painting scheme for it.²⁷

Even when made anonymous, the ability of models to encapsulate historical and ideological meanings led to several cases in which production was suspended or stopped altogether. The *Daily Telegraph* mentioned in one of its April 1985 issues that the Soviet newspaper *Komsomolskaia Pravda* had launched a campaign against the production and sale of Soviet models of British Harrier jets and Vulcan bombers used by NATO forces, even though they were produced without identification marks and in unnamed boxes. The campaign resulted in their suspended production.²⁸ One of my informants shared similar stories that circulated among Soviet enthusiasts of scale modelling. For example, production of the model of the F-4 Phantom in Minsk was suspended after an article in a local newspaper decried the use of this plane by the U.S. Army in Vietnam and asked

²⁷ This was a tendency rather than a strict rule: both Spitfires and Hurricanes, for example, were supplied to the USSR under the lend-lease agreement, but their models were produced anonymously; in contrast, the Avro Lancaster, which was never imported to the USSR, was sold under its own name.

²⁸ An excerpt from the *Daily Telegraph*, 13 April 1985, reproduced in Lines and Hellström, *Frog Model Aircraft 1932-1976*, 135.

how its model could be produced in the USSR. In another case, the head of a toy factory in Sukhumi, a World War II veteran, allegedly attempted to destroy the mold for a model of the DH Sea Venom, which he mistook for the World War II German Focke-Wulf 189.²⁹ Although these stories are hard to verify, their widespread circulation among Soviet hobbyists is symptomatic: they revealed the materialist logic that associated models with historicities that could be appropriate or inappropriate in the Soviet cultural context. Scale models made manifest the historical imagination inherent in Soviet techno-politics. This imagination demanded that the national perspective of technological progress – which, for some, meant downplaying its other, “foreign,” histories – be highlighted to inculcate a sense of national pride in Soviet youth. An examination of the fetishism given to detail in Soviet scale modeling as a hobby provides another vantage point on the historical meanings that models offered for appropriation and internalization by their enthusiasts.

The Fetishism of Detail

Due to the same cultural logic, which resulted in the above-described tendency to strip models of Western machines and vehicles of their historicity, the advice in literature or at hobby groups on how to assemble models of Russian or Soviet ships, planes or ground vehicles was just the reverse: to immerse oneself in the history of the model’s prototype, to gather as much historical information about it as possible, and to build it in complete accordance with the original design and coloring scheme. Fetishization of detail dominated the activities of young Soviet hobbyists. The standard guide for model ship hobby groups, Sergey Luchininov’s *Iunyi korablestroitel* [Young Shipbuilder], demanded that its participants should learn how to “make in the precise scale important equipment such as bits, mooring chocks, anchors, capstans, port holes, steering wheels, lights, [as well as] to sew sails if the model represents a sailing ship.”³⁰ Among model aircraft hobbyists it was not unusual that students thoroughly and in detail reproduced the

²⁹ Letter from Oleg Kasatkin to the author, 9 September 2014.

³⁰ Sergey Luchininov, *Iunyi korablestroitel* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1955), 4.

interior of the pilot's cabin, which in many cases remained invisible once the construction of the model was completed.³¹ The painting scheme and decals were also supposed to represent a particular moment in the prototype's history – not a generic plane but, ideally, a plane with the tail number of a prominent pilot, in the colors and camouflage of his regiment. Advocates of modelling as a mass hobby argued that such a model makes history palpable and bridges the gap between famous historical figures and school-age kids. This logic was explicated by a prominent Soviet enthusiast of modelling in his report of the 1975 All-Russian competition of school-age modellers:

Most of the models which participated in the competition copied Soviet planes. It is excellent that school-age modellers are encouraged to build [such models]. When building a replica model, a schoolboy nearly touches its designers and the aces who shot down enemy planes...³²

It was details that transformed models from objects of technological design into objects of history, and in the process immersed Soviet hobbyists into the national historical discourse. After all, any model is first and foremost a sign, with its prototype serving as the signified. In semiotic theory it would belong to icons, a category of signs introduced by Charles Peirce in which the relationship between a signifier and signified is based on visual likeness. When stripped of details, like most models built between the 1920s to the 1950s as small flying or sailing machines or like the anonymous copies of Western planes and ships sold in the USSR, their signified was abstract planes and abstract ships, the products of technological progress *par excellence*. In contrast, details located a model in a concrete point in history, thus endowing it with a particular historicity. In Luchnininov's book for "young shipbuilders," the appeal to make models in precise detail in order to achieve the utmost likeness to their originals was placed next to a requirement that "young shipbuilders" should also master firm knowledge in history

³¹ Letter from Andrei Krumkach to the author, 28 October 2014.

³² Sergei Malik, "Bolshoi smotr aviamodelizma," *Modelist-Konstruktor*, 1 (1975): 47.

when building models of Russian or Soviet ships.³³ All Soviet guides and books on model ship building started with extensive sections on the history of Russian and Soviet seafaring.³⁴ This link between detail and history was repeated in other modelling hobbies. The following advice from the authoritative 1989 aircraft modelling guide *A Plane on the Table* features the same logic which linked historical knowledge with the fetishism of detail,³⁵ so encouraged among young modellers:

When you are choosing a plane for modelling, it is desirable to have, in addition to detailed blueprints, as much information as possible: the name of the chief designer and of the production facility, technical specifications, characteristic features, the period in production, what changes were implemented during its years of service, and so forth. The most complete information can be found in specialized [modelling and aviation] journals, such as *Modelist-Konstruktor* or *Krylia Rodiny* [Wings of the Motherland]... They often publish feature articles about certain types of planes with detailed blueprints. If the plane is military, they also describe its operational history, famous pilots who flew it and their achievements. Yet as a rule, in order to make this picture complete other sources should also be consulted, including magazines, photographs from newspapers, books, and memoirs. All materials related to the chosen plane should be stored in one folder.³⁶

Fetishism of detail – thoroughly nourished in hobby groups – called for no less than the creation of an archive of historical knowledge at home.³⁷ In the quotation above, this

³³ Sergey Luchininov, *Iunyi korablestroitel* (Moscow: Molodaia Gvardiia, 1955), 4. The author refers to the Russian circumnavigation of 1819–1821, the participants of which were among the first explorers to sight the ice shelf of Antarctica; this sighting was framed in terms of the “discovery” of the Antarctic continent by later Russian and Soviet historians.

³⁴ Luchinov, *Iunyi korablestroitel*, 7–47; I. A. Maksimikhin, *Kak postroit model korablia: posobiie dlia uchashchikhsia* (Leningrad: Gosuchpedgiz, 1956), 5–16; A. I. Dremluga and L. P. Dubinina, *Iunomu sudomodelistu* (Kiev: Radianska shkola, 1983), 3–9, 21–37.

³⁵ My discussion of the fetishism of detail in modelling hobby is inspired by the well-known debates about the fetishization of facts and documents in the discipline of history, such as: Edward H. Carr, *What Is History?* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001); Keith Jenkins, *Re-Thinking History* (London: Routledge, 1991); Alun Munslow, *Deconstructing History* (London: Routledge, 2006).

³⁶ Oleg Lagutin, *Samoliot Na Stole* (Moscow: Izd-vo DOSAAF SSSR, 1988), 5.

³⁷ On the archive of knowledge and its ideological implications, see Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge; and the Discourse on Language* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1982), 79–131; Antoinette M Burton, *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University

advice is neatly visualized through the didactic suggestion to use separate folders for the storage of materials related to each model. Short historical notes on the prototype's service in the Russian or Soviet armed forces, which were supplied with assembly instructions in kits, served as entry points to this archive, but they only provoked a desire for knowledge about everything related to the history of the model's real prototype. To satisfy this desire, modellers were advised to turn to "specialized journals... magazines, photographs from newspapers, books, memoirs, etc.," and to copy relevant materials to "one folder," thus reproducing in their apartments a particular section of the grand historical archive. The structural elements of this archive were neither classes nor productive relations, as would have been implied by historical materialism, but technological objects, their designers and prominent users and operators.

There were different means by which modellers were expected to further explore this archive. Supervisors of modelling groups in the Palaces of Young Pioneers and centers of young technical designers organized trips to airports, sea ports or military bases, where their students encountered real technological objects and their operators. Meetings with World War II veterans and historical lectures by supervisors were also obligatory activities in state-run modelling clubs. Several such events were typically held in the course of an academic year.³⁸ Modellers were also advised to read specialized and popular technical magazines and literature. The author of the book quoted above referred his readers, in particular, to *Modelist-Konstruktor* which provided accurate blueprints for models, but always supplemented them with patriotic or at least didactic episodes from their operational histories. For example, in 1982 *Modelist-Konstruktor* started publishing a series of blueprints of models of historical fighter planes, which continued into 1983 and 1984, and covered the period from World War I to the Vietnam War. The articles gave a comparative overview of major national designs produced in a certain period

Press, 2005); Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009). It is curious that modellers sometimes explicitly recognize that their collections can be interpreted as an archive of knowledge, as in the following quote which refers to a collection of armored vehicles: "My brother's archive of armor is well known in the Internet": "Kto kak nachinal: istoriia hobbi," *Diarama.Ru*:

<http://www.diorama.ru/forum/viewtopic.php?f=10&t=4220&start=40>, accessed on 21 October 2014.

³⁸ NARK, f. R-2323, op. 1, d. 63a, l. 68–69; d. 126, l. 75, 87.

showing how technological innovations introduced by one manufacturer provoked a wave of changes among all air powers. However, the detailed blueprints were provided only for those aircrafts which were designed or at least used by the Russian or Soviet air forces, and the articles always provided episodes from their operational histories featuring prominent aces and the plane's contribution to the national war effort. The first article in this series discussed early fighters of World War I. Since the Russian Empire had failed to develop a national fighter aircraft by its outbreak, the author focused on the French Morane-Saulnier G, which had been supplied to the Russian army before the war. The article opened with a story of the aerial ramming—the first in history—of an enemy plane by the Russian aviator Petr Nesterov flying a Morane-Saulnier G, which made it possible to include this plane in the pantheon of Soviet aviation history.

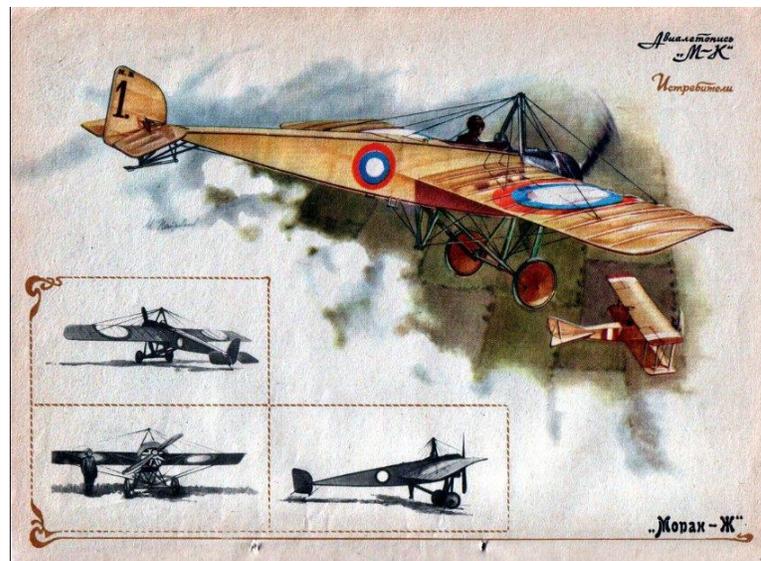


Figure 8. Illustration from *Modelist-Konstruktor* for the feature article about the Morane-Saulnier G showing Pyotr Nesterov's attack on an Austro-Hungarian plane in 1914.³⁹

The modellers who aspired to build this plane were given only one painting scheme and one set of identification signs – those of the plane which belonged to Nesterov on his last flight (Figure 8). To supplement the young hobbyists' archive of historical

³⁹ *Modelist-Konstruktor*, 1 (1982): color insert between pp. 16 and 17.

knowledge, the article quoted praise from Russian imperial newspapers: “So the fight in the air has commenced. And the person who blazed this trail was the Russian hero, the owner of the wreath of glory for the [first in history] loop, Pyotr Nikolaevich Nesterov.” The article took for granted that its hero, Pyotr Nesterov, was an imperial officer and a noble, a representative of the class to which the Bolshevik revolution was most hostile, and that his attitude to the “First World Imperialist War” was that of dignity and patriotism determined by his class origins. In the article, he is quoted as allegedly giving a vow: “I give you the word of honour of a Russian officer that this Austrian will cease flying,” something that could hardly be farther from the Bolsheviks’ “revolutionary defeatism” and “struggle for the transformation of the imperialist war into a civil war” as represented in Soviet history textbooks.⁴⁰ As the first article in a series which traced the evolution of fighter aviation to the third-generation jet fighters, it also created a historical continuity between the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union by tracing the genealogy of contemporary Soviet aviation to its imperial Russian predecessor, thus implicitly undermining the idea of the Bolshevik Revolution as a radical rupture with the pre-revolutionary era.

This tendency was even more visible in ship modelling: numerous publications on models of ships of Kievan or Muscovite Russia and the Russian Empire emphasized the inventiveness of Russian shipbuilders, their use of cutting-edge technologies and innovations, the valour of Russian sailors in all of Russia’s wars at sea and the pre-eminence of Russian seafarers in the exploration of the world’s oceans. The same emphasis can be observed in the activities of state-run hobby groups: there was a compulsory requirement for their supervisors to lecture their students on the history of the Russian navy from “ancient times.”⁴¹ This emphasis on historical continuity

⁴⁰ A. M. Pankratova, ed., *Istoriia SSSR: Uchebnik dlia 10 klassa srednei shkoly* (Moscow: Uchpedgiz, 1952), 138–174; S. A. Seraev, ed., *Istoriia SSSR: Epokha sotsializma* (Moscow: Prosveshcheniie, 1973), 11–13, 32–35; A. P. Averianov et al, *Novaia istoriia, 1871–1917: Uchebnik dlia 9 klassa srednei shkoly* (Moscow: Prosveshcheniie, 1987), 228–229, quotation on p. 228. For a discussion of Soviet textbooks as part of the Marxist-Leninist master narrative, see James V. Wertsch, “Narratives as Cultural Tools in Sociocultural Analysis: Official History in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia,” *Ethos* 28, no. 4 (2000): 524–525.

⁴¹ NARK, f. R-2323, op. 1, d. 162, l. 74.

extending beyond the October Revolution lured Soviet hobbyists into imagining Soviet history in de facto primordialist terms in which Soviet equalled Russian, and national history was explained as a linear and progressive development from the Middle Ages on. In at least two cases the authors of books on model ship building mentioned to their multiethnic Soviet audience that the Slavs of Kievan Rus were “our ancestors.”⁴² The box of the model kit of the Russian frigate Oryol (the model was produced throughout the 1980s) had the following text:

The history of shipbuilding dates back to ancient times. The naval craft of the Slavs had many original features which distinguished them from the shipbuilders of the Mediterranean. Slavs built ladyas which were equally fit for river and sea journeys. They were steady on waves and had good maneuverability. Ladyas served for many centuries as the largest commercial and naval ships. In the seventeenth century Russia started building warships. In 1668, in the village of Dedinovo at the influx of the Moscow River into the Oka, a double-decked, three-masted sailing vessel was built. It was 25 meters long (similar to a ladya) and 6.5 meters wide. The ship was named the Oryol [Eng. eagle]. It was armed with six-pound and three-pound guns. It was the first Russian warship.

The reference to Slavic ladyas, which occupied half of this short historical note, was quite out of place in pragmatic terms, on the box of a model of a very different vessel; instead, its message was a symbolic creation of a continuous linkage from the “ancient times” through the seventeenth century to the 1980s, when the model became available for Soviet hobbyists. The silences of this text are also symptomatic, because this note, while emphasizing the technical details of the Oryol, failed to mention that Dutch shipbuilders played an important role in its design and construction.⁴³ As insignificant and short as this historical note on the box of a model kit was, it encapsulated and reproduced a historical narrative which operated in terms of nations and accompanying

⁴² Luchinov, *Iunyi korablestroitel*, 7; Dremluga and Dubinina, *Iunomu sudomodelistu*, 21.

⁴³ V. N. Krasnov, “Sudostroenie i morekhodstvo v dopetrovskoi Rusi,” in Yu.M. Baturin *et al*, eds., *Institut istorii estestvoznaniia i tekhniki im. S. I. Vavilova. Godichnaia nauchnaia konferentsiia. 2010* (Moscow: Ianus-K, 2010): 482.

concepts such as national pride, which was reflected in the praise of ladyas' seafaring qualities. The ubiquity of such texts in the activities of modelling enthusiasts created a many million-strong army of Soviet citizens who learned, in a casual and non-centralized manner, to envision and interpret Soviet history as a continuation of the Russian nation-building project.

In the Soviet context, the roots of this phenomenon to “praise all things Russian” dated back to the mid-1930s, when Soviet leaders adopted a Russocentric stance in their interpretations of scientific progress – a change which itself had its genealogy in the late imperial era.⁴⁴ It was, however, in the post-Stalinist period that this tendency became independently (re)produced at the grass-roots level owing to the general de-centralization of Soviet society. Articles in technical journals, specialized literature on modelling, and supervisors of modelling hobby groups alike encouraged young and adult modellers to acquire or borrow from libraries books about the histories of prominent ships, aircraft and ground vehicles published in runs of hundreds of thousands of copies by such presses as Voenizdat, which specialized in military histories, and Sudostroenie, which specialized in naval histories. State modelling clubs also purchased such literature to lend books to their students.⁴⁵ The urge to construct their models in to the tiniest and most authentic detail lured modellers into the consumption of historical narratives that glorified the Russian and Soviet war effort and celebrated technological progress. The discourse on modelling created, as part of its archive of historical knowledge, a library on the history of technology, which placed technological objects and their famous designers and operators at the heart of the historical process.

In military histories and histories of ships or aircraft, which were strongly associated with modelling, the fetishism of detail reached its apogee. Authors provided maximum information on their development history, technical specifications, and modifications; compared them with similar designs of their time; and meticulously described their

⁴⁴ Ethan Pollock, *Stalin and the Soviet Science Wars* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2006), 7; Palmer, *Dictatorship of the Air*, 32–36.

⁴⁵ NARK, f. R-2323, op. 1, d. 162, l. 86.

operational histories, including minute-by-minute battle accounts.⁴⁶ Fetishization of a model's detail entailed fetishization of historical detail; both lured enthusiasts of modelling into imagining the historical process as a progressive development driven by the genius of engineers and the valour of military commanders, sailors, or pilots – in other words, the users and operators of technological objects.⁴⁷ Models captured their prototypes not in the relations of production, but at some moment of “consumption” (hence the advice to paint model fighter aircrafts in the colours and identification marks of famous aces). Their representations in the Soviet popular archive of historical knowledge reflected them not in their circulation through social space, but rather frozen at some, presumably most glorious, episode of biography (Figure 8). Scale models thus confirmed and reinforced the historical alienation of labour in the production of technological objects by emphasizing the process of their consumption.⁴⁸ The explanatory logic they brought to the Soviet historical imagination was conspicuously nationalist and non-Marxist, which is particularly evident if one looks further at the historicities that scale models produced when accumulated in collections.

Historicities of Scale Model Collections

Among the characters in Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, both the flâneur and the collector are engaged in a never-ending search for rare, curious, and decaying objects. They, however, have different, if not divergent, interests. The flâneur is seeking things which were denied a place in history; his curiosity is provoked by historicities forgotten and discarded. In contrast, the collector is interested in objects that belong to one particular historical system, which is the collection itself. This is how the collector participates in cultural production, for the collections are the sites in which historicities are materialized and thus preserved and transmitted through generations. Together with

⁴⁶ See, e.g., R. M. Melnikov, *Kreiser Variag* (Leningrad: Sudostroenie, 1983).

⁴⁷ Cf. with Gabrielle Hecht's discussion of the historical discourse produced by French technocrats: Hecht, *The Radiance of France*, 21–22.

⁴⁸ Alf Hornborg, “Technology as Fetish: Marx, Latour, and the Cultural Foundations of Capitalism,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 31, no. 4 (July 1, 2014): 119–40.

narratives, collections are the cultural forms through which history (both past and future) is imagined and controlled.⁴⁹

Collections of scale models were, perhaps, less common in the Soviet Union than collections of stamps, postcards or coins, but they still enjoyed enormous popularity. Palaces of Young Pioneers and clubs of young technical designers boasted large collections which were built by several cohorts of schoolchildren. While the majority of home collections represented a dozen or two amateurishly assembled plastic models, usually unpainted, without decals and with visible traces of glue,⁵⁰ there were also plenty of enthusiasts who created extensive and elaborate collections of models showing an extreme level of resemblance to their originals. Unlike beginner modellers who were satisfied with whatever assortment of model kits they found in stores, these hobbyists engaged in searches for rare kits, and their demand created lively grey markets around Soviet toy stores in major Soviet cities, where one could buy model kits unavailable in the Soviet retail trade, including kits of foreign manufacturers imported by tourists, diplomats or sailors.⁵¹ When no kits were available, such modellers turned to wood, plastic, textile, cardboard and other basic materials, and plunged into original or reconstructed blueprints, historical photographs and textual descriptions.⁵² Since building models from scratch required an intimate knowledge of the prototype's tiniest details, as well as advanced building skills and special tools, they often formed amateur modelling clubs to share knowledge and instruments. Such clubs usually operated during evening

⁴⁹ Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, 204–205. See also: Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1993), 151–166; James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 215–251; Susan Pearce, ed., *Interpreting Objects and Collections* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1994); Kevin M. Moist and David C. Banash, *Contemporary Collecting: Objects, Practices, and the Fate of Things* (Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2013).

⁵⁰ See an Internet discussion of late Soviet-era personal experiences in collecting scale models: “Kto kak nachinal: istoriia hobbi,” *Diarama.Ru*: <http://www.diorama.ru/forum/viewtopic.php?t=4220>, accessed 21 October 2014.

⁵¹ Interview with Igor Zhmurin, Petrozavodsk, 7 June 2014, author's personal archive; letter from Oleg Kasatkin to the author, 25 October 2014; letter from Andrei Krumkach to the author, 28 October 2014; “Plasticart-4. Grazhdanskiie samolioty SSSR,” NNM.RU: http://nnm.me/blogs/chubakka08/plasticart-4_grazhdanskiie_samolety_ssr/, accessed 22 October 2014.

⁵² NARK, f. R-2323, op. 1, d. 63a, l. 28; “Zapishite moi adres,” *Modelist-Konstruktor*, 6 (1969): 13.

hours on the premises of state-funded children's clubs.⁵³ They also posted classified ads in newspapers and journals offering to exchange blueprints and other data on models' prototypes with modellers from other Soviet regions.⁵⁴

Such a level of engagement in the modelling hobby changed the relationship between the enthusiast and his objects of modelling. An engaged enthusiast never sought just "any" model, since the creation of a model that resembles its original in the tiniest possible detail was an incredibly time- and labor-intensive process, which sometimes included a search of archival materials and interviews with former designers and operators, and could take months or sometimes even years to complete.⁵⁵ Any collection, private or public alike, follows a certain classificatory scheme.⁵⁶ A rare modeller, however, started compiling a collection with a preconceived classification in his head. As a rule, models themselves suggested this scheme to him. A 1989 interview of *Modelist-Konstruktor* with the supervisor of a technical center for schoolchildren in Kotelnich, a small town in central Russia, praised the center's collection of models and explicated its logic:

At first, boys produced single models, such as a dreadnought or a moon rover, a walking excavator or a dredge. So much labor invested in each of them!... But how to preserve the materialized products of children's labor?... This is when the supervisor had the idea to use these models to create a children's museum. Yet would it be correct if this collection would have a model of an eighteenth-century metallurgical plant, but would not reflect the development of Soviet metallurgy nowadays? Or a model of the first electric engine in the world without a story about the history of electricity?⁵⁷ This is why [the supervisor] decided

⁵³ Letter from Oleg Kasatkin to the author, 25 October 2014; letter from Andrei Krumkach to the author, 28 October 2014.

⁵⁴ For examples of such classified, see *Modelist-Konstruktor*, 6 (1969): 13; *Modelist-Konstruktor*, 2 (1970): 19, 27; *Modelist-Konstruktor*, 2 (1973): 32.

⁵⁵ S. Pavlov, "Uvlecheniie na vsiu zhizn," *Kryliia rodiny*, 12 (1970): 26.

⁵⁶ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London: Verso, 1996), 87–89; Stewart, *On Longing*, 161–163.

⁵⁷ The author here refers to an electric motor built in 1834 by Moritz von Jacobi, a German physicist and engineer, in Königsberg. Von Jacobi was later employed by the Russian Academy of Sciences, which gave Soviet historians of science and technology regard this invention as belonging to history of Russia.

that they should address a certain branch of Soviet industry or a type of Soviet military technology only as an assemblage in historical progression.⁵⁸

The move from an object to a collection is represented here as driven by historicities inherently present in the objects of collecting. In the article, the modelling enthusiast describes his drive to create a museum of scale models as quite literally caused by their longing not to be exhibited alone.⁵⁹ A model, when taken alone, was indeed a “materialized product of children’s labor,” but as an object of display in a “children’s museum” it abhorred a vacuum around itself and demanded a collection. Due to the semiotic nature of a scale model, their collections stood for a fragment of the real world (“a certain branch of Soviet industry or a type of Soviet military technology”), but their very incorporation into a collection created a different system of signification in which it was possible for models of World War I planes to stand next to jets of the Cold War era, or for the Sputnik to be placed alongside not-yet-existent, but already modelled space probes and crafts of the future (Figure 9).

⁵⁸ Modelist-Konstruktor, 1 (1989): 2.

⁵⁹ Jean Baudrillard argues that this is typical for any collectable object: “This is why owning absolutely any object is always so satisfying and so disappointing at the same time: a whole series lies behind any single object, and makes it into a source of anxiety.” Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 86.

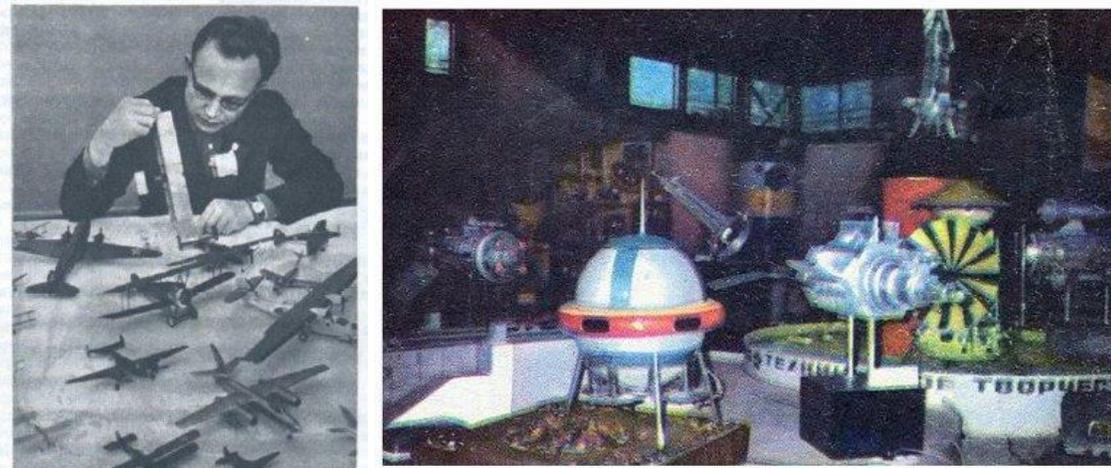


Figure 9. Soviet private and public collections of scale models. *Left*: scale models of Soviet aircrafts of Leonid Ugryumov (1970).⁶⁰ *Right*: scale models of imagined future Soviet space crafts of the Rostov-na-Donu Palace of Young Pioneers (1981).⁶¹

The inclusion of an object in a collection comprises two actions: first, the object is decontextualized from its original environment and, second, it is recontextualized in a collection. Most collections, therefore, exist as systems in which meanings are produced internally, through the interplay of differences between objects of collecting. It is more complicated with scale models, since they, unlike most other objects of collecting, have no prior circulation as commodities or technological objects, but are intentionally created as representations of real, usually historical, objects. In this respect, scale models exist on the border territory between Saussure's and Peirce's semiotics. They are incomplete without other models, that is, without a collection, which can therefore be described as a Saussurean paradigm.⁶² Not surprisingly, the most typical story among modelling enthusiasts about how they got into this hobby starts with an accidental purchase or present of a model, which triggered the interest in modelling and led to the purchase of new model kits and the creation of their first collection.⁶³ To put it in Jean Baudrillard's

⁶⁰ *Krylya Rodiny*, 12 (1970): 26.

⁶¹ *Modelist-Konstruktor*, 2 (1981): back cover.

⁶² Susan M. Pearce, "Objects as meaning; or narrating the past," in Pearce, *Interpreting Objects and Collections*, 19–29.

⁶³ Interview with Igor Zhmurin, Petrozavodsk, 7 June 2014; "Kto kak nachinal: istoriia hobbi," *Diorama.Ru*: <http://www.diorama.ru/forum/viewtopic.php?t=4220>, accessed 21 October 2014.

words, “the need to possess the love object can be satisfied only by a succession of objects, by repetition.”⁶⁴

Yet the lack of their own history prior to inclusion in a collection prevents models from creating a hermetic world, in which objects of collecting acquire their meanings exclusively through interaction with each other. Without biographies of their own, models abduct the biographies of their prototypes and stand as icons – in Peirce’s typology of signs – of them; in addition, unlike with most other types of collections, the classification scheme of a scale model collection is never based on the properties of models themselves: they are arranged according to the properties and specifications that their prototypes possessed, such as country of origin, operational history, type of hull or propulsion, and so forth. The decontextualization process, therefore, can never be completed, since the work of a model collector is that of a shuttle, perpetually moving between the object he is manufacturing or possesses and historical information about the actual vehicle. That is why a scale model is never an ideal or completed object: as a hobbyist acquires new knowledge and the skills of his discipline, old models are often remade in better detail, replaced with new ones which are deemed more authentic, or just removed from the collection.

In this sense, scale models are never passive objects with a “subjective status,” of which Baudrillard speaks in his analysis of “the system of collecting.”⁶⁵ They urge modelling enthusiasts to embark on a never-ending search for historical details pertaining to military and technological history, which is understood in national terms, since the country of origin and operation is a major classification rubric in the hobby of modeling. Models simultaneously encapsulated and generated the imagination of Soviet history as a continuous development from the early East Slavic states to the USSR and further into the communist future (models of non-existent space crafts), and their collections added a performative aspect to it. With sailing vessels standing next to steamships and piston aircrafts next to jets on the same shelf, scale model collections performed historical progress by showing technological change for the eyes of modelling enthusiasts and their

⁶⁴ Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*, 86.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

audience: both predominantly male, educated and willing to comprehend history as a process of nation-building. Tony Bennett in “The Exhibitionary Complex” pointed out how architectural scale models – “the miniature ideal cities” – subordinated urban space to the “white, bourgeois, and ... male eye of the metropolitan powers.”⁶⁶ In a similar manner, collections of scale model vehicles established a visual dominance over history interpreted as a historical continuum driven by technological progress and the struggles of major world powers, among which Russia/Soviet Union was thought of as occupying a leading position. This is how, for example, a visitor to the museum of the S.M. Kirov Submarine School in Leningrad described his experience of the museum’s collection of scale models:

[The museum was located] in a long red brick building which had served as naval barracks before the [Bolshevik] revolution. Every submariner dreams of visiting its rooms. For they contain not only the history of the submarine school, but of the entire [Soviet] submarine fleet. Model submarines – from the very first one built in the Baltic Shipyard in 1866 to modern nuclear submarines, unique historical documents...⁶⁷

The author then mentions in the same paragraph the Russian submarine *Tiulen*, which sank four and captured two enemy ships in 1916, and the Soviet submarine *Volk* of the early 1920s, before discussing the heroism of Soviet sailors in World War II. The collection performed this historical continuity by bringing together imperial Russian and Soviet submarines before the eyes of the author-as-spectator; model submarines as displayed objects suggested a difference in details, but the similarity in substance, which was “the history... of the entire [Soviet] submarine fleet.” In this particular case, scale models were assisted in the making of this continuity by another material object – the pre-revolutionary building of the barracks of the Imperial Russian Navy, in which the museum was located. The collections are performative in J. L. Austin’s understanding of

⁶⁶ Tony Bennett, “The Exhibitionary Complex,” *New Formations*, no. 4 (Spring 1988): 96.

⁶⁷ Viktor Oliinik, *Radi zhizni na zemle* (Moscow: DOSAAF, 1988), 433.

this term,⁶⁸ because they materialize the very categories of historical time that they portrayed and call their audience into social being. When the author of the abstract above wrote that “[e]very submariner dreams of visiting [the] rooms” of the museum with its scale model collection, he did not write about the mental state of all Soviet sailors – he described the effect that this collection exerted on himself. Appreciating the power of the collection after it had called him into being, he was that exemplary Soviet submarine sailor, always male, most likely of Slavic origins, well trained and educated to operate complex machinery, aware of his historical roots going back through the flames of the Civil War and World War II to the Imperial Russian Navy.

Conclusion

James Clifford linked the collection and modern selfhood, speaking of collections as “the assemblage of a material ‘world,’ the marking-off of a subjective domain that is not ‘other’.”⁶⁹ Yet since he was preoccupied with the genealogy of collecting, he interpreted it as mainly a reflection of the modern self, an artifact of subjectivation forces. If we look at scale models and their collections synchronically, the effect is apparently bilateral: they not only objectify ontologies and classifications for any given culture but also produce responsible citizens by performing history as national and progressive. In this respect, the scale modeling hobby was not a mere artifact of Soviet techno-politics: scale models were its active producers and participants materializing the Soviet technocratic historical imagination and luring people into understanding history as a linear process reduced to scientific and technological progress.

The obsession with detail moved scale models from the domain of private possession into the domain of the spectacular and hence the public. In the Soviet Union, the exemplary manifestation of this process was regional and national competitions of scale models among schoolchildren attending extracurricular hobby groups. The winners were determined by the authenticity of their models, and the authenticity was interpreted as

⁶⁸ J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

⁶⁹ Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 218.

whether a scale model was constructed in accurate detail or not. Moreover, the winning models from all over the USSR were often exhibited in the pavilion *Young Technical Designers* at the Exhibition of Achievements of the National Economy in Moscow or in other central spots of the Soviet exhibitionary complex, such as the Moscow Palace of Young Pioneers or even the Kremlin,⁷⁰ an ultimate move from someone's private possession into the public visual domain. Any model was, from its earliest stage of existence as a kit or a set of blueprints, a potential object for display. This potentiality found its realization in collections of scale models, thus preventing them from becoming merely objects of possession. Scale models consumed the private time of their enthusiasts to produce social perceptions of historical time and a spectacle of history. The fetishization of detail – a necessary condition for models to become objects of display – interpellated a modeller, in James Clifford's gloss, as a "good," rather than "obsessive," collector, the one whose relationship to the object was regulated by social rules and socially acceptable emotions.⁷¹

In the last years of *perestroika* and in the first years after the collapse of the USSR, modelling as a hobby blossomed, now that its enthusiasts finally received unrestricted access to the products of Western manufacturers and new private manufacturers emerged all over the ex-USSR. Modellers acquired a voice which was no longer mediated by Komsomol censors. At first it was in the form of the magazine *M-Hobbi*, founded, published and read by enthusiasts of the scale modelling hobby, and later in Internet forums and social networks. Around them, critical perspectives of Soviet history dominated the post-Soviet cultural field. Yet surrounded by collections of Russian and Soviet planes, ships and ground vehicles, modellers produced nostalgic narratives, where the object of nostalgia was the Soviet-era visions of historical continuity and progress – or, in Reinhart Koselleck's term, "a past future," which was betrayed by the collapse of the USSR. A 1996 editorial in the *M-Hobbi* argued that

⁷⁰ *Modelist-Konstruktor*, 7 (1981): back cover.

⁷¹ Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 218–219.

products of Ukrainian [scale model] companies arouse an equal (if not greater) interest in the Russian market than products of their more renowned Western counterparts. This is hardly surprising: after all, Ukrainian companies choose Soviet vehicles as the prototypes of their models. The vehicles that were designed, produced and operated in combat by our ancestors who at that time were not yet ordered to divide themselves into Russians and Ukrainians.⁷²

The referential function of models turns out to be capable of overcoming not only a temporal rupture, but also the territorial dismembering of the USSR. Models heal a lost geographic unity by embodying an imagined historical community and continuity (a reference to Soviet prototypes built and operated “by our ancestors”). For post-Soviet modelling enthusiasts, collections became a medium which materialized this historical imagination and rendered the territorial collapse and temporal rupture of 1991 as non-natural and contrary to the logic of historical development that found its manifestations in scale model collections.

The 1990s were a decade of unprecedented historical pluralism in Russia, with critical assessments of Soviet history by Russian liberal historians and organizations, such as Memorial, translations of works by Western apologists of totalitarian interpretations of Soviet history, and widely publicized revisionism of Viktor Suvorov. With national pride under fire from many sides, scale modelling turned out to be one of the forms of historical imagination in which this emotion found its refuge. To use Slavoj Žižek’s insightful observation, in a culture characterized by the absence of one dominant master narrative, where a set of narratives co-existed as counter-narratives to each other, “the things... themselves believe in [people’s] place.”⁷³ Enthusiasts of scale modelling organized regular competitions and hosted permanent exhibitions in their clubs, which often shared space with local military and patriotic clubs, teams of diggers searching for the remains of missing Soviet soldiers and wartime equipment (*poiskoviki*), and clubs of historical re-enactment. For example, the museum of the Petrozavodsk Palace No. 2 of Children’s Arts and Crafts has an exposition which has been created since the early

⁷² “Editorial,” *M-Hobbi*, 3 (1996): 1.

⁷³ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London; New York: Verso, 2008), 34.

1990s and which combines World War II-era weapons and military equipment found by local diggers, wax figures in historical uniforms of the Imperial Russian and Soviet Army, and collections of models of historical vehicles ranging from the early twentieth to the turn of the twenty-first century (Figure 10).



Figure 10. The Museum of the Petrozavodsk Palace no. 2 of Children's Arts and Crafts. *Left*: diorama showing a scene from World War I; *center*: collection of scale models of historical armored vehicles and a fragment of a World War II-themed diorama; *right*: collection of scale model aircraft. Photographs by the author, June 2014.

The ontologies and classifications encapsulated in this and numerous other collections reproduce the historical logic that emerged in the Soviet cultural context. In a similar way, although modeling magazines and guides are no longer published by state-run presses, they follow the same principles of exclusion as their Soviet predecessors did, with non-Russian/Soviet models largely marginalized unless they had a strong connection to Russian military history, as in the case of Nazi Germany's armored vehicles or NATO aircraft.⁷⁴ It is hardly surprising, therefore, that since the mid-2000s, after having been largely neglected for over a decade, the modelling hobby as an

⁷⁴ A. M. Sevastianov, *Volshebstvo modelei: Posobiie dlia sudomodelistov* (Nizhny Novgorod: Nizhpolygon, 1997); Nikolai Polikarpov, *Modelnyie khitrosti: Posobiie dlia modelistov* (Moscow: Tseikhgauz, 2006).

organized state-sponsored activity has experienced steady growth.⁷⁵ The recent revival of patriotism as a dominant social discourse requires objectification, and scale model of Soviet ships, aircrafts and vehicles are a perfect medium for performing patriotism and historical continuity, both in public and private space. In fact, one can argue that they had never stopped performing this continuity and in this way foreshadowed – among numerable other factors – national reassertion as a pressing social demand in early-twenty-first century Russian society.

⁷⁵ Aleksandr Leontovich and Boris Rudenko, “Vozrozhdeniie NTTM prikhodit v shkolu,” *Nauka i zhizn*, 6 (2004): 40–41; Boris Rudenko, “Krug chistoi vody,” *Nauka i zhizn*, 10 (2006): 49–51.

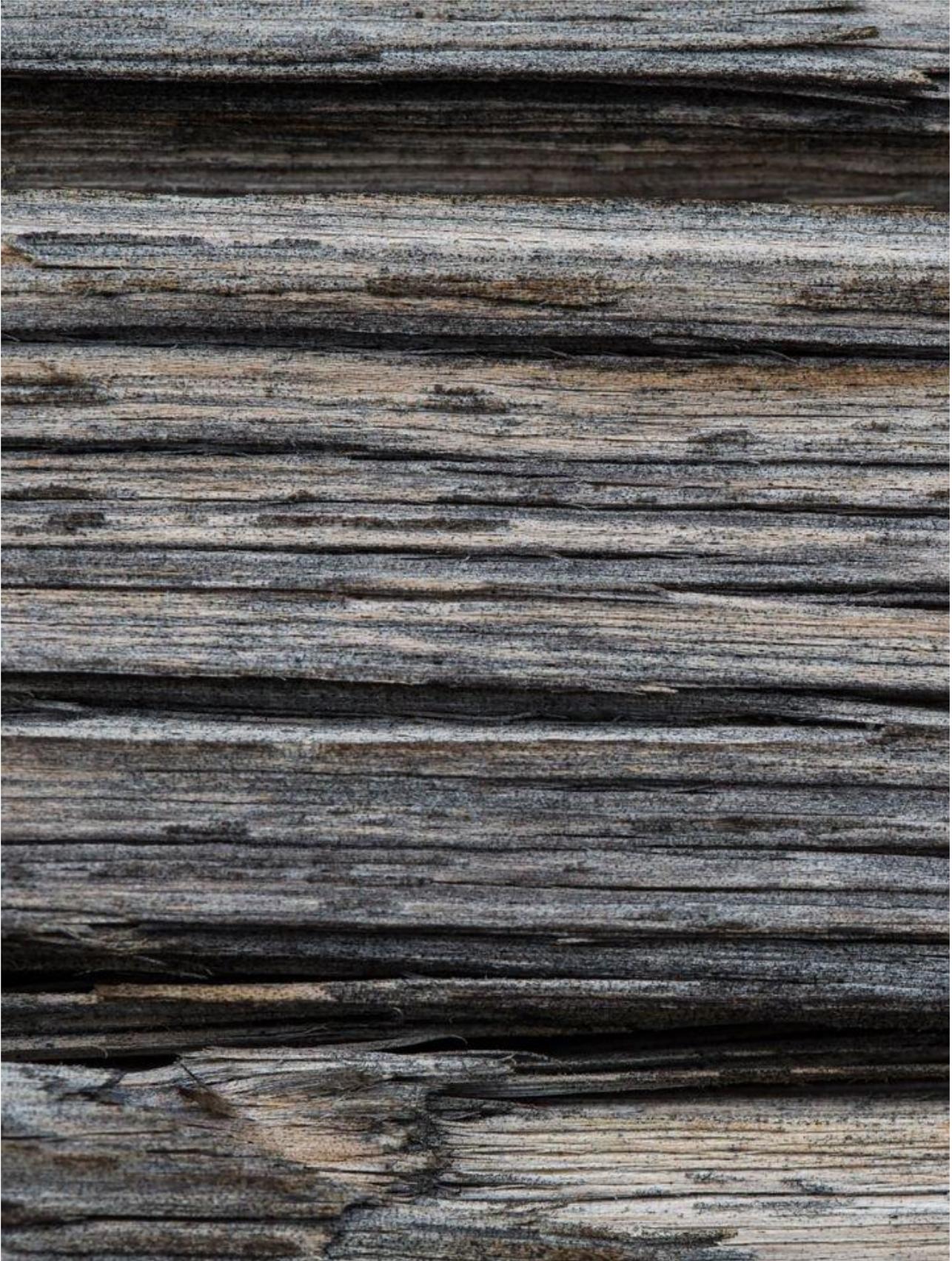


Figure 11. Texture of log walls of an early-twentieth-century house from the White Sea coast of the Republic of Karelia. Photograph @ 2015 Ilya Timin.

Chapter 3. “A Wonderful Song of Wood”: Heritage Architecture and the Search for Historical Authenticity in North Russia

The architecture of peasants’ houses, as well as their tools, everyday objects, design, and other forms of folk art, have preserved much of what emerged in far more remote times, what is rooted in the deep foundations of feudalism, what goes back to the cradle of the ancient ethnic cultures of the [Soviet] people.

Aleksandr Opolovnikov, *Museums of Wooden Architecture*¹

Superficially, two of the UNESCO heritage monuments in Russia – the Narkomfin Communal House in Moscow and Kizhi Pogost in the Republic of Karelia – are the absolute opposite of each other. The Narkomfin House (Figure 12, left) epitomizes the early Soviet approach to architectural planning. For Soviet Marxist architects and urban planners of the 1920s and 1930s, the city was a space intended to organize a new social life. Their writing and practice sought to transform urban space in ways that would allow for new social relations to emerge. Moisei Ginzburg (1892–1946), a theorist of Soviet Constructivist architecture, reflected this transformative social approach to architecture in the design of the Narkomfin house (1930). With its minimized private space and in-built service facilities, including daycare and a canteen, the Narkomfin House had to act as a “social condenser” (a term coined by Ginzburg in 1928), that is, as a material form that aggregated people into collectives and forged new forms of communal life.² In contrast, Kizhi Pogost (Figure 12, right) is an architectural complex consisting of two eighteenth-century wooden churches and an octagonal bell tower built in 1862. It is also the core exhibit of an open-air museum of wooden architecture that was established after World

¹ A. V. Opolovnikov, *Muzei dereviannogo zodchestva* (Moscow: Stroizdat, 1968), 9.

² Victor Buchli, *An Archaeology of Socialism* (Oxford: Berg, 2000), 64–76.

War II to collect, preserve and display objects of North Russian village architecture. Whereas the Narkomfin House embodied the understanding of history as a vibrant, present and active process, the museum of Kizhi represented an attempt to capture and freeze it in a historical landscape. The Narkomfin House sought to materialize the socialist future in concrete and glass. Kizhi Pogost objectified the national past in wood. Yet there is a deep connection between these two objects. The architectural preservation effort in the postwar USSR encapsulated in the open-air museum of Kizhi drew extensively on the theory of early Soviet Constructivist architecture. Its main ideologist, the restoration expert of Kizhi Pogost and the first designer of the museum of Kizhi, Aleksandr Opolovnikov (1911–1994), was a student of Ginzburg.



Figure 12. Soviet architectural contrasts. *Left*: The Narkomfin Building, 1930s. Photo by Robert Byron. *Right*: Kizhi Pogost, 1969. Source: Ministry of Culture of the Russian Federation; kulturnoe-nasledie.ru.

As the Soviet leadership turned to nationalist interpretations of Soviet history, a trend that emerged in the 1930s and intensified multifold during World War II,³ this change required objectification in architecture. As a result, the postwar period saw a growing effort on behalf of architectural preservation. The foundation for a changed state politics of architectural preservation was laid with decrees in 1947 and 1948 that expanded the list of heritage objects in the USSR and imposed a legal responsibility for their proper maintenance on regional authorities. The de-Stalinization reforms also greatly intensified the scale of museumification of old buildings and other structures. In 1960, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) Council of Ministers passed a resolution establishing a national register of buildings and structures, recognizing designated buildings and structures as officially protected monuments and further expanding the practice and coverage of architectural preservation.⁴ Titled “On the further improvement of the protection of monuments of culture in the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic” (No. 1327 of 30 August 1960), it included a list of several thousand buildings and structures, mostly churches.⁵ The list grew almost every year, and in the course of the last three decades of the Soviet Union, the landscape of late socialism became punctuated with tens of thousands of buildings, including churches, that became officially recognized as objects of historical and cultural heritage.⁶ This process was

³ David Brandenberger, *National Bolshevism: Stalinist Mass Culture and the Formation of Modern Russian National Identity, 1931-1956* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002); Kevin M. F. Platt and David Brandenberger, eds., *Epic Revisionism: Russian History and Literature as Stalinist Propaganda* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006); Richard Stites, “Soviet Russian Wartime Culture: Freedom and Control, Spontaneity and Consciousness,” in *The People’s War: Responses to World War II in the Soviet Union*, ed. Robert W. Thurston and Bernd Bonwetsch (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 171–86.

⁴ On the regulation of architectural preservation in Soviet legislation, see: L. I. Livshits, “Istoriia zakonodatelstva v oblasti okhrany i restavratsii pamiatnikov kulturny,” L. I. Livshits and A. V. Trezvov, eds., *Restavratsiia pamiatnikov istorii i iskusstva v Rossii v XIX–XX vekakh. Istoriia, problemy: Uchebnoe posobie* (Moscow: Alma Mater, 2008), 51–72. See also Catriona Kelly, “From ‘counter-revolutionary monuments’ to ‘national heritage,’” *Cahiers du monde russe* 54, no. 1 (2014): 131–164.

⁵ “Postanovlenie SM RSFSR ot 30 avgusta 1960 g. No. 1327 ‘O dalneishem uluchshenii dela okhrany pamiatnikov kulturny v RSFSR,’” accessed through the online database of legal information Konsultant Plus: <http://base.consultant.ru/cons/cgi/online.cgi?req=doc;base=ESU;n=3268>, accessed December 1, 2015.

⁶ The official register of “objects of the historical and cultural heritage” of the Russian Federation currently includes over 140,000 items. Its online version provides detailed description for 120,000 of them: <http://kulturnoe-nasledie.ru/>, accessed December 1, 2015.

followed by a related one in which old buildings and structures from abandoned villages were disassembled, moved, and restored in specially designated areas to create open air museums of heritage (usually wooden) architecture. The map below shows major open air museums established in the USSR after World War II (Figure 13); according to a Polish museologist, by 1990, their total number had grown to 58.⁷



Figure 13. A schematic map of major open air museums established after World War II in the Soviet Union. Designed by the author. Sources: Opolovnikov, *Muzei dereviannogo zodchestva*; Kulturnoe-nasledie.ru.

This chapter examines the museumification of old architecture in the post-World War II USSR as a process that reflected and stimulated the nationalist understanding of Soviet history in its Romantic interpretation. Focusing on North Russia, where vernacular architecture survived better than elsewhere in the USSR due to late modernization, I show how wood, a traditional building material in local communities, became a symbol of the “deep cultural roots” of Soviet society. Recent scholarship in the studies of socialist materiality has enriched our knowledge of how socialist regimes

⁷ Jerzy Czajkowski, “Muzeiam pod odkrytym nebom – 100 let,” N. A. Nikishin and O. G. Sevan, eds., *Muzevedenie: Muzei-zapovedniki* (Moscow: NII Kultury, 1991), 10–26.

sought to objectify their understanding of modernity and visions of historical progress in such materials as plastic, concrete, iron, and glass.⁸ This chapter seeks to add wood to this register of materials that was instrumental in the objectification of socialism; as a material, wood, due to its very texture, could serve as a living witness of its authentic history.

Whereas the Soviet Marxist architecture of the 1920s and 1930s understood history as a vibrant process and sought to contribute to its making with new material forms, the postwar architectural preservation movement sought to transform history into visual pleasure through spatial constructions. The paradoxical nature of this situation lay in the fact that Soviet preservationists borrowed the rhetoric and methodology of Soviet constructivist architecture. For both, the search for authentic architectural forms was the essence of their activities. But whereas Soviet Marxist architects such as Ginzburg argued that architectural forms had to serve a new function; namely, the organization of the material conditions of social life (hence his call to Soviet architects to “realize [their] design from the inside out”⁹), for Soviet enthusiasts of architectural preservation the forms with which they worked were devoid of any functions other than performing history. This translated into an effort to find the primordial, ideal aesthetic system allegedly inherent in wooden vernacular architecture and cleanse surviving objects of any later accretions. In a statement used in the epigraph to this article, Aleksandr Opolovnikov argued that traditional wooden architecture “preserved much of what... goes back to the cradle of the ancient ethnic cultures of the [Soviet] people.”¹⁰

The architectural preservation movement, which existed both in the Soviet center and the periphery, was intrinsically connected to the struggle for social power in post-World War II Soviet society. Stephen Bittner and Catriona Kelly have shown in their

⁸ Rolf Hellebust, *Flesh to Metal: Soviet Literature and the Alchemy of Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Eli Rubin, *Synthetic Socialism: Plastics and Dictatorship in the German Democratic Republic* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Krisztina Fehérvári, *Politics in Color and Concrete: Socialist Materialities and the Middle Class in Hungary* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013); Julia Bekman Chadaga, *Optical Play: Glass, Vision, and Spectacle in Russian Culture* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2014).

⁹ Moisei Ginzburg, “Novye metody arkhitekturnogo myshlenia,” *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, no. 1 (1926): 3.

¹⁰ Opolovnikov, *Muzei dereviannogo zodchestva*, 9.

research on architectural preservation in Moscow and Leningrad, respectively, how heritage architecture gave Soviet urban intelligentsia the social power to define the historical imagination by appealing to national memory as an essential, materialized phenomenon. While many Soviet urban planners and officials were still eager to produce new socialist forms of social organization through architecture, growing preservation activism among Soviet intellectuals after World War II, and especially beginning in the mid-1950s, complicated any large-scale reconstruction or demolition of heritage architecture. Using the postwar legislation on architectural preservation, as well as diverse institutional opportunities such as letters to newspapers or public hearings, heritage architecture enthusiasts became a force to be reckoned with in late Soviet architectural planning.¹¹

The campaigns in Moscow and Leningrad were spearheaded by “old intelligentsia,” – that is, people whose families had lived in these cities for several generations. At stake for them was their immediate lived space. It was different in the Soviet provinces where an architectural preservation movement also sprouted up in the late 1940s and further developed in the post-Stalinist era. The people whose work lay in the foundation of open air museums of wooden architecture, such as Aleksandr Opolovnikov and Vyacheslav Orfinsky in North Russia or Sergei Balandin in Siberia, came from regional urban centers, such as Petrozavodsk and Irkutsk, or from other Soviet regions. Their desire to protect heritage architecture, driven by romantic nationalist forms of historical imagination, led them to extrapolate the perceived historical authenticity from buildings to their residents. The focus on the authentic architectural form translated into the artificial archaization and exoticization of North Russian communities.

The geographic focus of this chapter is the Republic of Karelia, a region in the north-west of Russia. Between 1940 and 1956 it was officially known as the Karelian-Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic and was a full member of the Soviet Union on a par with the Russian Federation, Ukraine, Estonia and other Soviet republics. Unlike in the other

¹¹ Bittner, *The Many Lives of Khrushchev's Thaw*; Catriona Kelly, “Socialist Churches: Heritage Preservation and ‘Cultic Buildings’ in Leningrad, 1924–1940,” *Slavic Review* 71, no. 4 (December 1, 2012): 792–823; Kelly, “From ‘Counter-Revolutionary Monuments’”.

members of the Union, however, its title nation was an ethnic minority in the republic: in 1937, the share of Karelians in its population was 29.3%, a percentage that has only fallen since then.¹² As a result, its leaders were concerned with the search for national symbols that could represent Karelia on the national stage and justify its quasi-statehood. The historical landscape of North Russia was one particular resource to which they resorted, empowering in the process Soviet enthusiasts of architectural preservation.

Lyrical Landscapes of Socialism

One of the essays in György Lukács's *Soul and Form* (1911), "Longing and Form," begins with a discussion of the persistent link between German, French and Italian landscapes, on the one hand, and different forms of longing that dominated in their respective national literatures, on the other. In trying to describe this connection, Lukács engaged with the very complex issue of the relationship between landscape and literary production. German landscapes, he claimed, "have something nostalgic, something melancholy and sad about them; yet they are homely and inviting." In the context of the history of German literature, such landscapes informed the writing of "poetic songs of longing." It was very different, he argued, with the landscape of Southern Europe:

[T]he landscape of the South is hard and resistant... A painter once said: "It has already been composed before you ever get into it." And you cannot enter into a "composition", you cannot come to terms with it, nor will it ever give an answer to tentative questions. Our relationship to a composition – to something that has already taken form – is clear and unambiguous, even if it is enigmatic and difficult to explain: it is that feeling of being both near and far which comes with great understanding, that profound sense of union which yet is eternally a being-separate, a standing outside. It is a state of longing. In such landscapes the great Romance poets of longing were born, they grew up in it and they became like it themselves: hard and violent, reticent and form-creating.¹³

¹² Irina Pokrovskaja, *Naseleniie Karelii* (Petrozavodsk: Karelia, 1978), 50.

¹³ György Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1974), 91–92.

The relationship between a landscape and literary production is for Lukács mediated by affects that vary from one national geography and cultural tradition to another. That landscape is not merely an object of social construction, but is itself an important factor of social change – not least by providing forms of symbolic response to the modernization processes of the last two centuries – has been a popular subject in recent scholarship.¹⁴ What Lukács also notes – an observation that he applies to Southern Europe, but which can be extrapolated to many other cases, including North Russia – is that a landscape might offer its observers a certain persistent composition: a combination of elements accepted as inherent for this particular landscape. It is a well-known argument that landscape is constructed by the observer’s gaze.¹⁵ Lukács suggests that a landscape, in turn, can provoke a certain gaze by providing a combination of formal elements—an inherently present composition.

If conceptualized in terms of a visual effect, North Russia confronted observers with a landscape that had resisted late imperial and Soviet attempts at modernization. For the tsarist authorities of the late imperial period, North Russia remained a low-priority area until World War I when the Murmansk Railway providing a connection between central Russia and the Arctic coast was hastily built.¹⁶ In 1920, when Karelia attained a degree of self-government, its leadership, which was composed mainly of Finnish émigré communists, tried to justify its autonomy by offering it as a model of balanced regional modernization. When their effort failed to achieve rapid industrialization, Karelia became a testing ground for the use of Gulag labour with the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal.¹⁷ Yet all these modernization efforts remained rather superficial in terms of their visible impact on North Russian landscape. North Russia’s scarce population was

¹⁴ See, for example, Christopher Ely, *This Meager Nature: Landscape and National Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009); Tricia Cusack, *Riverscapes and National Identities* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2010).

¹⁵ John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1990); Thomas Greider and Lorraine Garkovich, “Landscapes: The Social Construction of Nature and the Environment,” *Rural Sociology* 59, no. 1 (1994): 1–24.

¹⁶ Lars Elenius et al, eds., *The Barents Region: A Transnational History of Subarctic Northern Europe* (Oslo: PAX, 2015), 183–186.

¹⁷ Nick Baron, *Soviet Karelia: Politics, Planning and Terror in Stalin’s Russia, 1920–1939* (Routledge, 2012).

scattered over vast swaths of territory in a large number of small villages: for example, in Karelia, according to the 1933 census, the rural population of some 250,000 people was distributed among 2,700 villages over an area of 147,000 square km.¹⁸ The geographic and economic marginality of local communities meant that wooden vernacular architecture was predominant in the region with the exception of a few local urban centers, most prominently its capital, Petrozavodsk, a city with a population of 70,000 in 1939 that grew to 200,000 by the mid-1970s. As for the natural landscape, most of North Russia is covered by the taiga and has a large number of lakes, rivers and bogs that formed during the retreat of glaciers in the end of the last Ice Age, with Karelia alone having over 60,000 lakes and 20,000 rivers.

To many observers, the North Russian landscape suggested a persistent composition that linked together tender northern vegetation, omnipresent water surfaces, and wooden buildings of the pre-revolutionary age, such as churches, chapels, and log cabins. This composition became the dominant theme of local artists; in the postwar era, landscape painting became the staple product of artists of the Petrozavodsk art school, such as Boris Pomortsev, Sulo Juntunen, Tamara Yufa, and many others. A 1973 survey of art in the autonomous republics of the Russian Federation singled out “lyrical landscapes” as the dominant genre of Karelian artists. When describing Boris Pomortsev’s landscapes (Figure 14), its author, Viktor Vanslov, a prominent Soviet theorist of aesthetics, wrote that “Karelia reveals itself before the spectators’ eyes as a wonderful land of silence and poetry.”¹⁹

¹⁸ Pokrovskaja, *Naselenie Karelii*, 59. The area is indicated according to the entry “Karelian ASSR” in the first edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia (1937).

¹⁹ Viktor Vanslov, ed., *Izobrazitelnoe iskusstvo avtonomnykh respublik RSFSR: Albom* (Moscow: Khudozhnik RSFSR, 1973), 155–157, quote on p. 156.



Figure 14. Boris Pomortsev's landscapes. *Left: Subbotnii den' [Saturday], 1961. Right: Probuzhdenie [Awakening], 1977.* Source: Museum of Fine Art of the Republic of Karelia, ZhK-87 KP-1365 (left) and ZhK-317 KP-8363, reproduced by permission.

Pomortsev's *Saturday* (left in Figure 14, 1961) depicts an old wooden sauna on the shore of a placid lake surrounded by a coniferous forest; his later *Awakening* (right in Figure 14, 1977) is a painting of the Churches of the Transfiguration and of the Intercession on the island of Kizhi in Lake Onega, one of the most recognizable symbols of Karelia that I will discuss in the next section. Both images reflected the lyrical gaze provoked by North Russian landscape, and Vanslov's inclusion of Pomortsev and his fellow Karelian landscape painters in the encyclopedia of Soviet Russian art heralded the cultural acceptance of this landscape that blended together natural and allegedly archaic architectural elements as a socialist landscape. The framework of northern nature, water, and wooden architecture became recognized as the dominant form of visual portrayal of Karelia, in particular, and North Russia, in general. The landscape paintings of Soviet artists made the north Russian resistance to modernization into a virtue rather than a fault: Karelia was portrayed as a place in which local communities had preserved authentic folk traditions that had been lost in more urbanized regions ("Karelia... as a land of ... poetry"). The lyricism of the landscape became synonymous with the historical authenticity of its people. In contrast to the narratives of the prewar accelerated

industrialization, archaic elements in architecture, as well as in social relations, were no longer something to struggle against.

The double movement from the inherent composition of the North Russian landscape to persistent forms of its cultural representations and back to the cultural production of local communities, now understood as an extension and a natural part of this landscape, was reflected in a documentary film that the Radio and Television Broadcasting Commission of Karelia commissioned in 1968 as a “calling card” for the republic. The film was entitled *The Land of Karelia* [Земля Карельская], and was directed by Yuri Rogozhin on the basis of a screenplay by Vladimir Danilov, both from Petrozavodsk. The official annotation of the film described it as a “film about the past and future of Karelia” that shows it “through the eyes of a man who was born and raised here.”²⁰ The entire film’s narrative revolved around a small village in Karelia (it remained unclear, perhaps intentionally, if it was Russian or Karelian) on the shores of an unnamed lake; its plotline follows the boat trip of two local residents who departed at dawn as a ten-year-old boy and girl, were shown halfway through the film at midday as a young couple, and returned home at dusk as an old man and woman. Short scenes with major landmarks of the republic – including wooden churches, Stone Age rock carvings, the Kondopoga Pulp and Paper plant, and one of the local hydropower stations – served as brief interruptions in this plotline that also included detailed scenes of traditional crafts with a particular focus on boat building.

On the surface, *The Land of Karelia* features a number of allusions to Alexander Dovzhenko’s masterpiece *Earth* (1930), beginning with the title (both use the same Russian word “zemlya”), but also with a celebration of a new harmonious unity between people and nature and a particular attention to the material foundations of national character.²¹ Yet Dovzhenko’s film brought together the old and the new to show how the latter supersedes the former in an inevitable class conflict; Rogozhin’s film, in contrast, lauded the historical succession of traditions and praised cultural continuity. *Earth* is

²⁰ National Archive of the Republic of Karelia (hereafter NARK), f. R-785, op. 1, d. 94a/529v, l. 1.

²¹ George Liber, *Alexander Dovzhenko: A Life in Soviet Film* (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 106–113.

based on the materialist understanding of history as social struggle; *The Land of Karelia* documented the petrification of history and its monumentalization in an archaic landscape. An internal review of the Radio and Television Broadcasting Commission, which was part of the formal approval process and thus reflected the intentions of the patron (government of Karelia), rather the actual content of the film, emphasized the film's focus on the organic connection between the archaic history of Karelia and its more industrial present: "The beauty of this place stems from its certain patriarchal character and nicely matches with features of Soviet Karelia's today..."²² In fact, as the editorial script of *The Land of Karelia* shows, "features of Soviet Karelia's today" occupied less than 10 percent of the entire film with the rest devoted to the filming of Karelian nature, lakes, traditional crafts, old wooden buildings and structures, as well as local residents who were portrayed in an intimate unity with this idyllic landscape:

Early morning. The camera is located on a hilltop from which we can see a lake sparkling in the sun's rays. A small village is visible on a far shore. Waves are washing on rocks. A boy is sitting on a rock. A small sauna on the lakeshore with a little quay leading into water. [cf. Boris Pomortsev's *Saturday* in Figure 14] The boy pushes a boat with a fair-haired girl off the quay. The boat is moving through the lake. The boy is sitting on the stern with a steering ore in his hands. The girl is rowing.²³

Industrial scenes were only a disguise for a film that claimed that the specificity and identity of the region and its people were more about a close connection to an unspecified (and hence mythological) past than to the allegedly foreseeable communist future or even the socialist now. The film's total length, 350 meters, was standard for a 16 mm film reel used by Soviet television, with only 23 meters devoted to industrial and urban scenes and landscapes, despite the fact that, by this time, the urban population of

²² NARK, f. R-785, op. 1, d. 94a/529v, l. 25.

²³ *Ibid.*, l. 34–35.

the republic (490,516 people) greatly prevailed over the rural (222,935 people).²⁴ The director was only partially honest when he claimed that *The Land of Karelia* represented the region “through the eyes of a man who was born and raised here.” The film, indeed, incorporated the male gaze with its tendency to dominate the landscape, to employ aerial perspectives through frequent scenes shot from hilltops – the kind of vision generally associated with the quintessentially male occupation of a pilot.²⁵ Yet this gaze hardly belonged to a native of these shores. The search for historical authenticity in this film, and elsewhere in post-World War II Soviet cultural production, was part of what William Connolly calls a modern “drive to mastery” over nature and populations, a peculiar form of domination that seeks to transform a natural landscape into “a set of vistas for aesthetic appreciation”²⁶ – even as forms of aesthetic appreciation and appropriation could be suggested by the landscape itself. After all, for local residents “a small sauna” is a utilitarian rather than aesthetic object. The aestheticization as well as museumification of wooden vernacular architecture were products of the metropolitan claims for finding historical authenticity in the local landscape in order to establish symbolic control over the northern Soviet regions as a large lyrical landscape, a mythological past of the Soviet people – disregarding its heterogeneous ethnic composition, a controversial history of forced labor, harsh climate, vast distances, and rocky terrain that resisted acculturation.²⁷

The lyricism of the North Russian landscape, with its persistent combination of taiga nature, lakes, and old wooden buildings, informed the restoration efforts and writing of the architectural preservation movement enthusiasts who consistently emphasized “the

²⁴ The population figures are from the 1970 USSR Census, available at Demoscope.Ru, http://demoscope.ru/weekly/ssp/rus70_reg1.php, accessed December 8, 2015. The editorial script is stored in the National Archive of the Republic of Karelia: NARK, f. R-785, op. 1, d. 94a/529v, l. 32–41.

²⁵ The areal perspective was also characteristic of much of Karelian landscape painting, for example, Boris Pomotsev’s 1975 *Nad Onego* (Above Lake Onega).

²⁶ William E. Connolly, “The Order of Modernity,” in *Democracy, Pluralism and Political Theory*, by William E. Connolly, ed. Samuel A. Chambers and Terrell Carver (London, New York: Routledge, 2008), 281.

²⁷ For authenticity as a form of political and colonial domination, see Michelle Mawhinney, “Marx, Nature, and the Ethics of Nonidentity,” *Rethinking Marxism* 12, no. 1 (2000): 47–64; Paige Raibmon, *Authentic Indians: Episodes of Encounter from the Late-Nineteenth-Century Northwest Coast* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

organic connection” between local nature and traditional architecture.²⁸ Soviet architectural preservation, in fact, developed over the postwar period into a process of maintenance and construction of lyrical landscapes for the aesthetic pleasure of urban audiences. The next section will examine its ideology and practice using the creation of an open-air museum of wooden architecture on the island of Kizhi as a case study.

Aleksandr Opolovnikov’s Making of Kizhi

The island of Kizhi on Lake Onega is home to one of Russia’s largest and most famous open air museums of wooden architecture. The museum’s center is Kizhi Pogost, which acquired the status of a protected “cultural and historical monument” in 1920, although the local parish was allowed to use its churches for religious service until 1936. While the churches avoided any damage during World War II, immediately after its end, in 1945, the government of the Karelian-Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic decided to fund large-scale reconstruction work to secure the survival of the site.²⁹ Motivating the postwar restoration effort was the desire of regional authorities to transform Kizhi into a museum open to the public. As a notable and well-known architectural monument, Kizhi was deemed the most suitable object to embody and perform Karelian locality as well as to use it educationally to foster the formation of a regional identity among the local population.³⁰ Not surprisingly, as early as 1946, the Karelian-Finnish government committed to a long-term plan according to which the island of Kizhi would in the future

²⁸ Vyacheslav Orfinskii, *V mire skazochnoi realnosti: Dereviannaia arkhitektura Karelii* (Petrozavodsk: Karelia, 1972), esp. the chapter “Unity;” A.T. Belyaev, B. A. Gushchin and V. A. Gushchina, *Gosudarstvennyi istoriko-arkhitekturnyi i etnograficheskii muzei-zapovednik Kizhi: Putevoditel* (Petrozavodsk: Karelia, 1973), 8, 16.

²⁹ NARK, f. R-2916, op. 1, d. 1/10, l. 2; d 5/47, l. 99; d. 7/60, l. 43, 47.

³⁰ *Ibid.* Another prominent example was the Finnish epos *Kalevala* by Elias Lönnrot. It was largely based on folklore of northern Karelian areas, and in the postwar period the government of the Karelian-Finnish SSR used its genealogy to claim *Kalevala* as a common Karelian-Finnish epos: Takehiro Okabe, “Negotiating Elias Lönnrot: Shared Soviet-Finnish National Symbol Articulated and Blurred, 1945–1952,” *Nordic Historical Review*, special issue “Language and Border between Scandinavia and Russia” edited by Alexey Golubev, Antti Räihä and Aleksandr Tolstikov, no. 2 (2015): 129–149. On the educational use of heritage objects in Soviet postwar tourism, see Anne E Gorsuch, *All This Is Your World: Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 26–48; Diane P. Koenker, *Club Red : Vacation Travel and the Soviet Dream* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 128–166.

accommodate “a collection of monuments to local autochthonous architecture.” According to this conception, notable objects of wooden architecture would have to be relocated to Kizhi from all over Karelia.³¹

Apart from didactic considerations, the regional quest for historical authenticity included an important political component: as mentioned earlier, after World War II, the authorities of Soviet Karelia were seeking ways to legitimize their republic’s status as a full member of the Soviet Union despite the fact that Russians were an ethnic majority there. As one of the measures, they lobbied the Soviet government to allow the resettlement of Ingrian Finns who had been forcibly deported from the Leningrad region to Siberia and Kazakhstan during the 1930s. Thanks to this effort, some 21,000 Ingrians moved to Karelia during 1948–49 before the campaign was shut down during the Leningrad Affair, the largest post-World War II political cleansing.³²

Architectural objects were just as important as people for the making of regional specificity because they could act, if conceptualized in proper terms, as material evidence of Karelia’s primordial history. In 1947, the Karelian-Finnish government hired two Moscow architects to take a tour of Karelian villages “in order to survey, register, measure, and photograph monuments of architecture and objects of folk design [народное творчество], so that urgent measures could be taken for their preservation.”³³ One them was Aleksandr Opolovnikov. Born into a noble family in the Ryazan Governorate, Opolovnikov received a degree cum laude from the Moscow Architectural Institute in 1939. He defended his graduation work under the supervision of Moisei Ginzburg whose Marxist theory of architecture was discussed above.

Opolovnikov’s career went in a very different direction from that of Ginzburg. He became one of the leading practitioners and theorists of the Soviet architectural preservation movement, engaging in numerous preservation and restoration projects in

³¹ NARK, f. R-2916, op. 1, d. 1/10, l. 2; d. 1/16, l. 30; Aleksandr Opolovnikov, *Restavratsiia pamiatnikov narodnogo zodchestva* (Moscow: Stroizdat, 1974), 19.

³² Leo Suni, “Ingermanlandskie finny: Istoricheskii ocherk,” in Eino Kiuru, ed., *Finny v Rossii: istoriia, kultura, sud’ba* (Petrozavodsk: Izd-vo PetrGU, 1998), 4–25; David Brandenberger, “Stalin, the Leningrad Affair, and the Limits of Postwar Soviet Russocentrism,” *The Russian Review* 63.2 (2004): 241–255.

³³ Museum of Kizhi, KP-2670. Buildings plans and sketches from this expedition are also stored in the archive of the museum: KP-314; KP-5992/1–3; KP-5993/1–3; KP-274/1–30.

north Russia. After his expedition to Karelian villages in 1947, Opolovnikov was hired by the government of the Karelian-Finnish SSR to carry out its program of preservation, restoration and collection of heritage wooden buildings. His first assignment was the restoration of the Assumption Church in Kondopoga during the summer of 1948. The next year, Opolovnikov was appointed the chief restoration expert in Kizhi and became responsible for its development into an open air museum of wooden architecture. In 1951, he supervised the relocation to Kizhi of a nineteenth-century house and a barn, the first two objects in the museum's collection. In 1955, in the atmosphere of post-Stalinist liberalization, he developed a large-scale expansion project of the museum and personally supervised the relocation of twenty-four objects from various locations in Karelia.³⁴

The historical landscape of North Russia, perceived aesthetically (as lyrical) rather than socially (as archaic), obviously informed Opolovnikov's politics of restoration. The materials from his field trips to villages in Karelia include not only schemes and plans of surviving heritage buildings, but also general plans of the surrounding landscape. For example, his 1954 plan of the former Muromsky Monastery on Lake Onega, from which the fourteenth-century Church of the Resurrection of Lazarus was moved to Kizhi island, shows (apart from the church itself) surrounding log buildings, trees, a lake shore and even boats moored to a shore (Figure 15). His planning of the open air museum in Kizhi emphasized an aesthetic unity of architecture and landscape,³⁵ and in his writing he reiterated that

an architectural monument is not just the building itself standing in isolation of its surroundings. The concept of an "architectural monument" also includes its landscape: both natural and man-made. The landscape is an integral part of the aesthetic impression of the monument and **shapes our perception of it** [emphasis added] in one way or another. This leads to a conclusion that when we plan restoration works on [an architectural] monument, we should somehow preserve and in individual cases even restore its surroundings. And one

³⁴ Museum of Kizhi, KP-5713/1, 2; KP-5714.

³⁵ Ibid.

more important conclusion... Any restoration project should include... a protective zone and a landscaping zone [зона благоустройства территории] restricted for new construction.³⁶



Figure 15. A general plan of the former Muromsky Monastery. Aleksandr Opolovnikov and N. A. Savin, 1954. Source: Museum of Kizhi, KP-271/1. Reproduced by permission.

To satisfy the political demand of the KFSSR authorities for primordialist narratives and objects, Opolovnikov developed his theory of architectural preservation as the museumification of an historical landscape. His basic definition of an open air museum was “a collection of architectural monuments that are exhibited in the background of a typical [for this region] natural landscape.”³⁷ His conception of the Kizhi museum consequently developed into the creation of such a landscape so that its didactic and political potential would be easily available to local audiences (regular ferry trips between Kizhi and Petrozavodsk, the capital of Karelia, had already been established by

³⁶ Opolovnikov, *Restavratsiia pamiatnikov*, 202.

³⁷ Opolovnikov, *Muzei dereviannogo zodchestva*, 6.

1948).³⁸ The use value of vernacular architecture was nullified as it became first and foremost a sign of history designated for visual consumption. The lyricism of the northern landscape underwent a political translation that turned local communities into exotic reservations of the traditional primordial culture of the Russian and Karelian people. “The Russian North [in general] and Karelia [in particular] are a huge and unique sanctuary of the people’s wooden architecture that has emerged historically in a natural way,” wrote Opolovnikov in his volume on the Kizhi museum.³⁹ This approach, which conflated history and nature and treated architecture in aesthetic terms as part of the natural landscape, inevitably brought Opolovnikov’s making of Kizhi into conflict with practices of North Russian vernacular architecture.

By the late 1940s, the churches of Kizhi represented an architectural palimpsest: in the 1820s their eighteenth-century log walls had been covered with planking and domes sheathed with iron; in the 1880s, they were also painted (Figure 16).⁴⁰ These changes reflected both the regional architectural fashion as well as the desire of parishioners to distinguish visually their churches from the surrounding landscape. When Opolovnikov designed his restoration program of Kizhi Pogost he discarded these changes as “eclectic” and “ahistorical” and prepared an ambitious project that included their removal in order to “restore” the original look of the church.⁴¹

³⁸ NARK, f. R-2916, op. 1, d. 5/47, l. 57.

³⁹ Aleksandr Opolovnikov, *Kizhi*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Stroizdat, 1976), 10.

⁴⁰ Igor Melnikov, ed., *Muzei-zapovednik Kizhi. 40 let* (Petrozavodsk: Scandinavia, 2006), 48.

⁴¹ NARK, f. R-2916, op. 1, d. 5/47, l. 99; d. 7/60, l. 43.



Figure 16. A 1947 sketch of the southern façade of the Church of the Transfiguration before Opolovnikov’s restoration project. Source: Museum of Kizhi, KP-267/6. Reproduced by permission.

These measures unavoidably lead to dramatic changes in the appearance of Kizhi Pogost undoing late tsarist-era renovations that Opolovnikov argued reflected the class oppression of the genuine people’s culture:

Local “do-gooder” nobility and clergy dressed the Church of the Transfiguration in a then-fashionable attire of planking painted in garish bright yellow, while the wood shingles of the domes were replaced with cold and lifeless iron... And a wonderful song of wood – eternal, gentle and exciting – was shut down; the texture and beauty of log walls was completely erased; the charm of wooden shingle domes was gone. A unique creation of Onega Lake architects lost its genuine magic character and became similar to ordinary village churches of the later age.⁴²

⁴² Opolovnikov, *Kizhi*, 100.

Opolovnikov's argument played on a perceived contrast between the authentic nature of the monument as "genuine architecture" of the common people⁴³ and the attempts of nineteenth-century bourgeoisie and clergy to strip the Kizhi Pogost of its authentic character and subdue it to their class interests. Opolovnikov's hostility to architectural ornamentation as something disguising the authentic architectural forms was apparently borrowed from the constructivist theories of his teacher, Moisei Ginzburg, whose *Style and Epoch* (1923) famously called for the cleansing of excessive architectural ornamentation:

Architectural monuments laid bare and cleansed of their glittering and superficial attire appeared with all the fascination and unexpected sharpness of an artistic asceticism, with all the power of a rough and austere language of simple, uncluttered architectural forms.⁴⁴

The cleansing of wooden architecture of both natural and man-made accretions became the main focus of Opolovnikov's activities (Figure 17), and through his published works became part of the theory and practice of architectural restoration in the USSR.⁴⁵ His 1975 work on the restoration of wooden architecture emphasized (literally, with the use of a bold font) the restoration of buildings to their original form as the fundamental task of his discipline, an approach that interpreted all later changes as "distortions:"

The first and most important task in developing the theoretical foundations of restoration [as a scholarly discipline] is the analysis and complex understanding of the nature, essence and specificity of later distortions to monuments of people's architecture. The problem of distortions and accretions is thus the key and main problem in the methodology of

⁴³ Ibid., 101.

⁴⁴ Moisei Ginzburg, *Style and Epoch*, transl. by Anatole Senkevitch, Jr. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1982), 114.

⁴⁵ On Opolovnikov's contribution to his discipline, see his personal entry at the Russian Society for Preservation of Historical and Cultural Monuments (VOOPIK): http://www.voopik.ru/keeper/detail.php?ELEMENT_ID=2129, accessed December 4, 2015.

restoration and at the same time remains the most notable stumbling block on the pathway to the reconstruction of genuine masterpieces of wooden architecture.⁴⁶

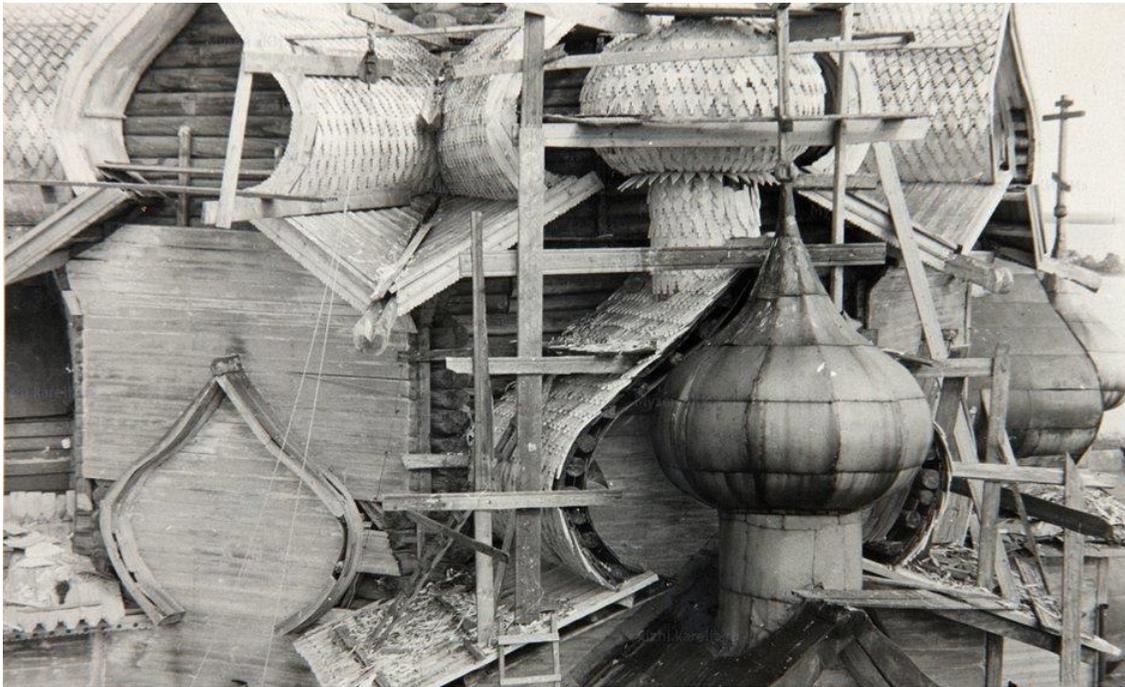


Figure 17. Restoration works of the Church of the Transfiguration, between 1956 and 1959. The upper side of the image shows restored parts of the church with wooden shingles and unpainted log walls; the lower side of the image shows the pre-restoration interior of the church with iron-covered domes and painted planking. Courtesy of the Museum of Kizhi.

Yet Ginzburg's and Opolovnikov's similar rhetoric in regards to form should not be misinterpreted as a similarity in their politics. Ginzburg sought to build new communalism and called on his fellow architects to be "not a decorator of life, but its organizer." Form was important for him as long as it reflected a certain function; his *Style and Epoch* draws extensively on industrial design as exemplary in this respect.⁴⁷ In contrast, Opolovnikov, an expert responsible for the production of a historical landscape through the creation of an open air museum, worked with very different functions of

⁴⁶ Opolovnikov, *Restavratsiia pamiatnikov*, 62.

⁴⁷ Ginzburg, *Style and Epoch*, the quote on p. 113, the section on industrial design on p. 76–93.

architecture. Churches and houses of the Kizhi Museum had to perform the historical authenticity of the Karelian-Finnish republic.

The fact that these churches and houses, as objects of vernacular architecture, were designed and redesigned to perform their particular functions was disregarded, since the official ideology was extremely hostile to religion and strove to reform the patriarchal organization of life in rural communities. Opolovnikov, consequently, appealed to wooden architecture as a medium that had preserved the cultural forms originating in Russia's pre-capitalist period. In his interpretation, these forms embodied an alleged past communalism of the Russian people that had fallen prey to the capitalist development and class oppression of nineteenth-century tsarism. Whereas Ginzburg wanted socialist architecture to overcome social alienation, for Opolovnikov old wooden architecture served as a means to overcome historical alienation by bridging the gap between the past and present community of the Russian/Soviet people. This belief can be seen in the curious combination of his reverence for the eighteenth-century churches of Kizhi Pogost with a very mixed, if not straightforwardly negative, attitude to its third object, the 1874 bell tower:

The bell tower was built not in the traditions of the people's architecture, but according to a project designed "in an artificial style" by an eparchial engineer... It means that its architecture is not only subdued to the petrifying [мертвящий] canon of the official conservative Orthodoxy, but also embodies general aesthetic norms of that time's dominant culture: eclecticism and a pseudo-national ethos [псевдонародность]. The decline of architecture is seen in every single detail [of the bell tower].⁴⁸

After two pages of harsh criticism Opolovnikov condescended to grant the bell tower the right to exist: "an integral part of the [Kizhi] architectural ensemble... that reminds us, even if very approximately, of the silhouette and general appearance of the original [eighteenth-century] bell tower."⁴⁹ In other words, for him the only value of the current

⁴⁸ Opolovnikov, *Kizhi*, 87.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 88.

bell tower was mimetic, owing to its resemblance to the original bell tower that had been demolished in 1872 due to its dilapidated condition.

As mentioned earlier, Opolovnikov was hired in the late 1940s by the Karelian-Finnish government as an intellectual from the Soviet metropole whose professional expertise could add weight to its claims for regional specificity. This positionality gave him the power to determine what the authentic architecture of North Russian communities was and was not. Yet this power was not uncontested. When Opolovnikov and other enthusiasts of North Russian historical heritage started their campaign for its preservation and restoration, this campaign—supported and funded by the government of the Karelian-Finnish republic—included a struggle against low-level bureaucrats who had prioritized rationality over historical heritage and who were often tempted to demolish old buildings to cut the financial burdens that the latter incurred.⁵⁰ The situation became only more complicated after the Twentieth Party Congress in 1956, when Nikita Khrushchev denounced Stalin’s “personality cult,” and the post-Stalinist leadership revived, to a certain degree, early Soviet techno-utopian visions of rationally built socialist spaces that implied the demolition of old structures. As Steven Bittner noted in his study of Moscow’s Arbat neighborhood, “Khrushchev saw [in the heritage architecture of Moscow] remnants of old Russia that were incompatible with the stature of the new.”⁵¹ The dominant discourse of socialist construction still routinely implied the purge of the old pre-revolutionary meanings and structures, and the perceived value of “national antiquities” did not necessarily provide immunity for heritage buildings from persecution by local bureaucrats, as well as from sheer neglect.⁵² Last but not least, in July 1956 the status of Karelia was downgraded from a full member of the USSR to an autonomous republic of the Russian Federation.

At the same time, Khrushchev-era liberalization of cultural life in the Soviet Union provided heritage architecture enthusiasts with opportunities to defend their de-facto

⁵⁰ Opolovnikov, *Restavratsiia pamiatnikov*, 51–52; Svetlana Vorobyeva, “Ne utrait’ pamiat’,” *Kizhi*, no. 6 (2011): 4.

⁵¹ Bittner, *The Many Lives of Khrushchev’s Thaw*, 140.

⁵² Catriona Kelly, *St. Petersburg: Shadows of the Past* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 288–289.

romantic nationalist understandings of Soviet history and challenge—albeit implicitly—the modernist approach to urban development adopted by the Soviet government beginning in the mid-1950s. To justify their claims for the power to define the Soviet historical imagination, Soviet preservation experts appealed to the very material of their objects, wood, as a witness to the authentic history of Russia.

Accretions of History

In justifying his main thesis that the essence of preservation and restoration activities lay in the removal of all later accretions, Aleksandr Opolovnikov repeatedly appealed to the aesthetic qualities of wood. His 1974 textbook of architectural preservation includes a lengthy discussion about the properties of wood that goes beyond its physical qualities and focuses instead on its ability to organize “the rhythm” and “tectonics” of architecture:

The unity of [architectural functionality and aesthetic properties of] wood is particularly outstanding in the tectonics of a log building – in a steady rhythm, as in epic songs, of heavyweight log tails... in slim and soft vertical lines of axe-cut corners that trim the building’s silhouette; in the plastic structure of walls enlivened with small windows; in the overall color composition of the building with its picturesque palette of half-tints and shades...⁵³

Both “rhythm” and “tectonics,” as used in this fragment, are borrowed from the theory of Soviet Constructivist architecture: “rhythm” is another tribute to Moisei Ginzburg,⁵⁴ while the term “tectonics” is borrowed from Alexei Gan, whose writings mentioned tectonics as one of three basic elements of the new social architecture. Understood as a dialectic relationship between people and their material world, tectonics implied the interrelatedness of social and material forms that Constructivist architects,

⁵³ Opolovnikov, *Restavratsiia pamiatnikov*, 27.

⁵⁴ Ginzburg’s first book was titled “Rhythm in Architecture”: Moisei Ginzburg, *Ritm v arkhitekture* (Moscow: Sredi kollektionerov, 1923).

artists, and designers were supposed to embody in their works and thus to contribute to social progress.⁵⁵ “Tectonics is... an explosion of the [material’s] internal essence,” wrote Gan in his 1922 manifesto, concluding: “Constructivism without tectonics is like painting without color.”⁵⁶

The use of Constructivism’s vocabulary had several important implications for the Soviet architectural preservation movement. First of all, it provided them with a conceptual apparatus to justify their preservation activities. Dealing with buildings that had lost their original functions, such as churches, houses for extended peasant families, sheds and mills, Opolovnikov had to build a model that explained their historical importance through an aesthetic system allegedly inherent in North Russian vernacular architecture. His analysis of numerous heritage buildings in Karelia and elsewhere in North Russia led him to the conclusion that, by the early nineteenth century, local masters had created and consciously employed a “system of artistic methods” [“арсенал художественно-выразительных средств”] that fully realized the expressive potential of wood as a construction material.⁵⁷ Moreover, the borrowing of Constructivist vocabulary with its focus on the dialectic of material and social forms gave Opolovnikov an opportunity to link this system to a society free of social conflicts that allegedly had existed in North Russia thanks to its geographic and political marginality prior to the tsarist oppression of the nineteenth century:

The tsunami of the Mongol invasion that enveloped almost all of Russia missed the North. Here, the fire of Russian statehood and national culture was never extinguished. While the succession of the original traditions of Russian culture dating back to Kievan Rus was interrupted, if not destroyed [elsewhere], in the North this culture and its traditions survived in their purity.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Kristin Romberg, “Alekssei Gan’s Constructivism, 1917–1928,” a PhD Dissertation (Columbia University, 2010), 148–173.

⁵⁶ Alekssei Gan, “Konstruktivism,” in Serguei Oushakine, ed., *Formalnyi metod: Antologiya russkogo modernizma*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Kabinetnyi uchenyi, 2016), 852.

⁵⁷ Opolovnikov, *Muzei dereviannogo zodchestva*, 16.

⁵⁸ Opolovnikov, *Kizhi*, 14.

In this logic, the heritage architecture of Karelia was a witness to an authentic and genuine people's history of Russia in its entirety. The historical importance of the churches of Kizhi Pogost was that they represented an exemplary expression of this aesthetic system, a kind of glossary that could be used to understand the original language of Russian culture. The texture of wood offered, in turn, the basic structural elements of this language that, when combined, merged into "a wonderful song of wood." This approach to architectural preservation was understandably hostile to later accretions, clearly prioritizing the antiquity and authenticity (be they real or imagined) of old wooden buildings over the meanings, and contexts, of their use in local communities. The product of an aesthetic and political position of Soviet metropolitan intellectuals, it valued indigenous architectural forms as long as they blended into the landscape with the unpainted grey and brown colors of their log walls. To put it in another way, for Soviet restoration experts – and for Soviet authorities and their public via the authoritative discourse of these experts – old buildings were important as long as they performed authenticity and traditionalism, thus objectifying the much-sought-for historical depth of modern Soviet society. Any "non-natural" and "non-authentic" elements, such as plaster, paint, iron and wallpaper, as well as exquisite carved ornamentations that local residents had increasingly used since the nineteenth century, were then interpreted as annoying interruptions into this performance of Russian authentic historical culture: something like the darkened layers on Old Russian icons that concealed original paintings and had to be removed.

In fact, the restoration of Kizhi Pogost to its original state was accompanied in a very similar process by the restoration of icons that had been confiscated from Karelian churches in the interwar period.⁵⁹ In 1945, the same year that the government of the Karelian-Finnish SSR passed a resolution to restore Kizhi Pogost and transform it into a museum, it hired two experts of the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow to inspect and evaluate the republic's collection of icons.⁶⁰ One of them, Vera Briusova (Svetlichnaia), was later invited to prepare a detailed plan and budget for their restoration; submitting

⁵⁹ NARK, f. R-2916, op. 1, d. 3/32, l. 54.

⁶⁰ NARK, f. R-2916, op. 1, d. 1/16, l. 25.

her funding application in 1948 to the Karelian government, she justified the historical importance of this work:

These monuments [icons] are products of the richest creative imagination and the supreme mastery of artists of the local independent school. Their restoration will reveal an immense picture of autochthonous art... Adding any elements during restoration is completely prohibited, because every monument [icon] represents a genuine masterpiece that has its own artistic value.⁶¹

Briusova's emphasis on locality (expressed in this short excerpt in three synonymous adjectives—"local," "independent," and "autochthonous," or "местная", "самостоятельная" and "самобытная") was a direct reference to the political demands of local authorities. As such, it represented an artificial historicization of Soviet local and regional identities that translated into an ever more rigorous search for the historical authenticity of the Soviet-era administrative structures, such as the Karelian-Finnish republic.⁶² It positioned icon painting in the domain of regional folk culture as opposed to religious or national high culture. It also justified the return of some of the icons to the churches of Kizhi Pogost as they were placed there as objects of "autochthonous art" rather than sacred objects. As with the painted planking of the churches in Kizhi that were stripped to reveal the texture of their log walls, later layers were removed from icons to recreate their authentic aesthetic form. Briusova described this process in technical terms as "the removal of old darkened varnish from icons and their re-varnishing."⁶³ This authenticity of icon painting had never been important in religious worship; just the reverse, icons were regularly renovated by adding new layers on top of

⁶¹ NARK, f. R-2916, op. 1, d. 3/32, l. 63.

⁶² Olga Ilyukha and Yuri Shikalov, "Kartina mira na stranitsakh uchebnikov finskogo iazyka dlia nachalnykh klassov karelskikh shkol 1920-1940-kh godov," *Vestnik filiala Severo-Zapadnoi akademii Gosudarstvennoi sluzhby v Vyborge* (Vyborg, 2010): 267–95; Victoria Donovan, "'Going Backwards, We Stride Forwards': Kraevedenie Museums and the Making of Local Memory in North West Russia, 1956–1981," *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, no 7 (2012): 211–30; Victoria Donovan, "'How Well Do You Know Your Krai?' The Kraevedenie Revival and Patriotic Politics in Late Khrushchev-Era Russia," *Slavic Review* 74, no. 3 (2015): 464–83.

⁶³ NARK, f. R-2916, op. 1, d. 3/32, l. 63.

previous ones or completely repainted. It was the Soviet search of historical authenticity that reinterpreted these layers as the dirt of time that concealed primordial Russian culture.⁶⁴

The borrowing of Constructivist vocabulary in architectural preservation politics had one more implication that became increasingly visible in the post-Stalinist period. Constructivist theory reflected the active social program of its authors such as Ginzburg and Gan, and their desire to reform society; the terms “rhythm,” “tectonics” and “texture” all implied the transformative character of the new social architecture. As a result, the application of these terms to the vernacular architecture of North Russia could not remain purely academic and descriptive. While Opolovnikov and other experts of heritage architecture argued that only the uncovered texture of wood was capable of expressing the authentic character of Russian culture preserved through the local historical landscape, these claims clashed with local meanings and practices related to housing. In the postwar communities of Russian Karelia, it was quite typical to use painted planking for the external walls of log houses, and plaster, wallpaper and modern furniture for their interiors.⁶⁵ On the one hand, this was an obvious borrowing of new tendencies in urban housing. On the other, it was a particular indigenous form of working with landscape, as painted planking offsets a building from its surroundings, while interiors with modern wallpaper and factory-built furniture represent an optical intervention into the everyday visual experience of rural communities that are dominated by the persistent combination of water, northern vegetation, and the bleak colors of unpainted wooden surfaces. Yet for Soviet architects, local residents of Karelian communities had to be saved from their perceived loss of historical authenticity, a task all the more important as they now designated North Russia “a sanctuary” of traditional folk culture. In a logic that clearly originated from the theory of constructivist architecture, yet had little in common with its emancipatory moment, architectural

⁶⁴ In Soviet literature, this search for historical authenticity – often at the price of a conflict with official authorities – became the main motif of Vladimir Soloukhin’s 1968 novel *Black Board*, published in English translation as *Searching for Icons in Russia*: Vladimir Soloukhin, *Searching for Icons in Russia* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1972).

⁶⁵ Vera Taroeva, *Materialnaia kultura karel (Karelskaia ASSR)* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1965), 195–198.

preservation experts called on Karelian villagers to cleanse their houses of these eclectic elements that, in their view, provoked the misrecognition of one's true authentic self. Opolovnikov's 1981 book *Wooden Russia*, for example, condemned the use of wallpaper in contemporary North Russian houses by appealing to the aesthetic system that he uncovered in pre-nineteenth-century wooden architecture:

Earlier, people never hung wallpaper in their houses: Russian peasants always had an acute and expert sense about the natural beauty of wood as an architectural material, the beauty of the most common, simple things. And what wallpaper can match the natural texture of unpainted wood, with the dark stripes of its core, the rhythm of knots, the smooth yet slightly coarse surface! A floor assembled from broad half beams, the powerful, non-disguised setting of log walls, plank benches along the walls...this all creates a stalwart, steady rhythm of accentuated horizontal lines.⁶⁶

Aesthetic elements of traditional architecture – “natural texture of unpainted wood,” “dark stripes of its core,” and “rhythm of knots” – are represented here as an interface between the materiality of architecture and genuine selves. From this perspective, the use of wallpaper leads to a loss of physical contact between people and wood, with its appealing, affective texture, a situation regarded as highly undesirable. Another preservation expert, Petrozavodsk architect Vyacheslav Orfinskii, wrote in 1972:

The early twentieth century saw the decline of [North Russian] folk architecture, when its genuine beauty escaped again and again from the ornamental nets of small architectural details that imitated fashionable forms of urban architectural styles of that time... Isn't it a genuine, although never recognized, tragedy of an entire generation of folk architects?.. Having lost the Ariadne's thread of century-long traditions, folk masters wandered off the road and got lost.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Alexander Opolovnikov, *Rus' dereviannaia: Obrazy russkogo dereviannogo zodchestva* (Moscow: Detlit, 1981), 31.

⁶⁷ Orfinskii, *V mire skazochnoi realnosti*, 5–6.

A native of Petrozavodsk, Orfinskii grieves here not only the loss of authentic architectural traditions in Karelian communities, but also the alleged inability of their inhabitants to comprehend this loss and realize how their neglect of “century-long traditions” damages the historical succession of Soviet society. It is, however, most harmful for themselves (“a genuine tragedy of an entire generation...”).⁶⁸ His authoritative discourse denied local communities the right to assign their own meanings to domestic and communal space and pushed him to create in the 1980s a separate academic discipline: *etnoarkhitekturovedenie* (studies of ethnic architecture). Its aims combined scholarship and activism, including the production of a full register of wooden heritage buildings in North Russia, the development of theoretical foundations for the use of folk architectural traditions in modern architecture, and public outreach to local communities.⁶⁹ In 1997 it became institutionalized with the establishment of the Research Institute of Theoretical Problems of Folk Architecture, which received a double affiliation at the Petrozavodsk State University and Research Institute of Architectural and Urban Theory (Moscow), with Orfinskii as its head.⁷⁰

Identities under Sail

In addition to vernacular architecture, the documentary *The Land of Karelia* mentioned above focused on another material example of archaic historical time as allegedly preserved in the lyrical landscape of Karelia: wooden boats. In a region with approximately sixty thousand lakes, including the largest two in Europe (Lakes Ladoga and Onega), as well as a long White Sea coast, water has always been the center of economic life in the region. Until recently, locally caught fish have been a staple food for

⁶⁸ Needless to say, the interpretation of new tendencies in the vernacular architecture of North Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a “decline” is contested by some scholars. See, e.g. Olga Sevan, *‘Malye Korely’: Arkhangesl’kii muzei dereviannogo zodchestva* (Moscow: Progress-Traditsiia, 2011), 152–153.

⁶⁹ Irina Ye. Grishina, “Etnoarkhitektura: Printsipy issledovaniia,” *Uchenye zapiski Petrozavodskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, no. 5 (March 2009): 7–13.

⁷⁰ “Polozheniie o nauchno-issledovatel’skom institute istoriko-teoreticheskikh problem narodnogo zodchestva,” Petrozavodsk and Moscow, 1997.

Karelians and North Russians.⁷¹ As a result, boats have been an integral part of the North Russian historical landscape. In *The Land of Karelia*, the sailing of a boat around an unnamed lake – its unnamed passengers gradually aging over the course of the film – is used to tie together various episodes from the life of republic. The boat was more than just a narrative device, however. One of the lengthiest episodes in the film shows, in detail, the process of boat building. The voice-over narration reads:

There is no town or village in Karelia which is not located on a lakeshore. And every single one of them has its own boat builder with his unique pattern and secrets... And every master passes his skill to someone who comes to succeed him. Isn't this the source of the workmanship embodied in the monuments of wooden architecture of recent centuries that have survived to our age? Looking at the perfectly-shaped domes of wooden churches, one can't help marvelling at the supreme skills of their anonymous architects.⁷²

As the narrator read this text, the footage showed close-ups of the boat building process. Images of an axe, a saw, and a plane turned into pictures of logs and planks, then into a delicate silhouette of a boat, and, finally, into the domes of the Church of St. Paul and St. Peter in the village of Virma on the White Sea coast. In the film's logic, the succession of historical traditions acquired a concrete material dimension in woodwork. Wood was the medium that secured the succession of traditions and established a physical connection between the people's true, authentic past and the socialist present. Moreover, as history became embodied in the lyrical landscape, the cultural understanding of wood in late socialism made it a mediator between people and their material environment.

Modern urban cultures often appeal to wood as an affective material due to its texture and correspondent haptic experience. For example, it is quite common for contemporary home design to use wood with its “nostalgic” structures and narratives to help urban dwellers overcome their alienation from nature. Krisztina Fehérváry, who

⁷¹ Roza F. Nikolskaia, *Karelskaia kukhnia* (Petrozavodsk: Karelia, 1986), 4, 13–36.

⁷² NARK, f. R-785, op. 1, d. 94a/529v, l. 38–39.

writes about the politics of various construction materials in socialist Hungary, noted that beginning in the 1970s, many Hungarian families turned to the use of wood for apartment interiors (a feature inspired by vernacular architecture) in order to create “heterotopic spaces” in pre-fabricated concrete apartment blocks that invoked the feelings of national belonging and closeness to nature. “Wood was highly prized for its ability to humanize and warm the interior of concrete panel apartments,” she writes.⁷³ The same period saw the increased popularity of organicist architecture in Western Europe, North America, and Japan with its emphasis on the use of wood. One of its primary advocates, the Japanese architect Tadao Ando, stressed the ability of wood to link the old and the new as well as invoke the feeling of one’s own authenticity: “In these times of appreciation over the crisis of our earthy environment and the deterioration of our spiritual culture, it is important that we seek a new beginning – through new understanding of our environment and in a new appreciation of forests and the culture of wood.”⁷⁴

In the specific historical conditions of North Russia, the ability of wood to perform historical continuity and authenticity through its very haptic qualities reinforced an historical imagining in which archaicness was the *genius loci* of the region. The architectural preservation movement, with its ideological center in the museum of Kizhi, was one manifestation of this imagination. A revival of wooden boat and shipbuilding was another example of how people in the late socialist period used wood to position themselves vis-à-vis national historical time as its worthy successors. In Karelia, this revival has been associated with the club “Polar Odysseus.”

“Polar Odysseus” was established in 1978 in Petrozavodsk by a group of amateur yachtsmen who initially wanted to pool together their financial and labor resources to repair and redesign a factory-produced fishing boat, turning it into a leisure vessel.⁷⁵ This was a familiar practice in late socialism: the state-published amateur shipbuilding journal

⁷³ Fehérváry, *Politics in Color and Concrete*, 142.

⁷⁴ Quoted in David Pearson, *New Organic Architecture: The Breaking Wave* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001), 137.

⁷⁵ Interview with Viktor Dmitriev taken by the author, June 7, 2014, Petrozavodsk. In the author’s personal archive.

Katera i iachty (Motorboats and Yachts) had a monthly circulation of 135,000 copies by the early 1980s; it widely publicized imagery of Soviet people using home-built boats to travel.⁷⁶ Yet in the case of “Polar Odysseus,” this gnostic drive to master space through travel acquired a historical dimension when, during one of their travels in the White and Barents Seas in 1982, members of the club encountered the wrecks of old Pomor⁷⁷ ships. Over the next two years, yachtsmen from Petrozavodsk used sailing expeditions in the White Sea to examine technologies of vernacular boatbuilding in local Pomor communities (Figure 18).⁷⁸



Figure 18. Members of the club “Polar Odysseus” examining a Pomor fishing boat in the village of Niukhcha in Karelia, 1984. Courtesy of “Polar Odysseus.” Reproduced by permission.

1987 became the turning year for “Polar Odysseus,” when it transformed from an amateur yacht club into a heritage shipbuilding club with the construction of the *Pomor*,

⁷⁶ Alexey Golubev and Olga Smolyak, “Making Selves through Making Things: Soviet Do-It-Yourself Culture and Practices of Late Soviet Subjectivation,” *Cahiers du monde russe*, Vol. 54, no. 3–4 (July-December 2013): 526–533.

⁷⁷ Pomors is a name for the Russian population of the White Sea coast that had lived there continuously since the twelfth century. Their traditional economic activities were fishing, sea mammal hunting, sea trade with Norway and boatbuilding.

⁷⁸ Interview with Viktor Dmitriev.

a replica of the *koch*, a type of ships that Pomor communities used along the Arctic coast (Figure 19). In 1989, members of the club sailed on the Pomor to the Svalbard archipelago, a frequent destination of Pomor hunting expeditions between the late seventeenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁷⁹ The following winter, they built three more replicas of historical ships, this time medieval Russian *lodyas*: the *Vera* (Faith), the *Nadezhda* (Hope) and the *Liubov* (Love). In the summer of 1990, these replica ships sailed from Petrozavodsk through the Volga–Baltic Waterway to the Black Sea and then through the Mediterranean Sea to Jerusalem. In the summer of 1991, another *lodya*, the *Sviatitel Nikolai* (St. Nicholas), built the previous winter sailed around Scandinavia to the North Sea. Meanwhile, the *Pomor* was transported by steamships along the Arctic coast to the Chukchi Sea, from where its team sailed to Alaska in a symbolic gesture that retraced an old trading route to Russian America.⁸⁰ These days, “Polar Odysseus” has a fleet of twenty-four replicas of various historical designs.

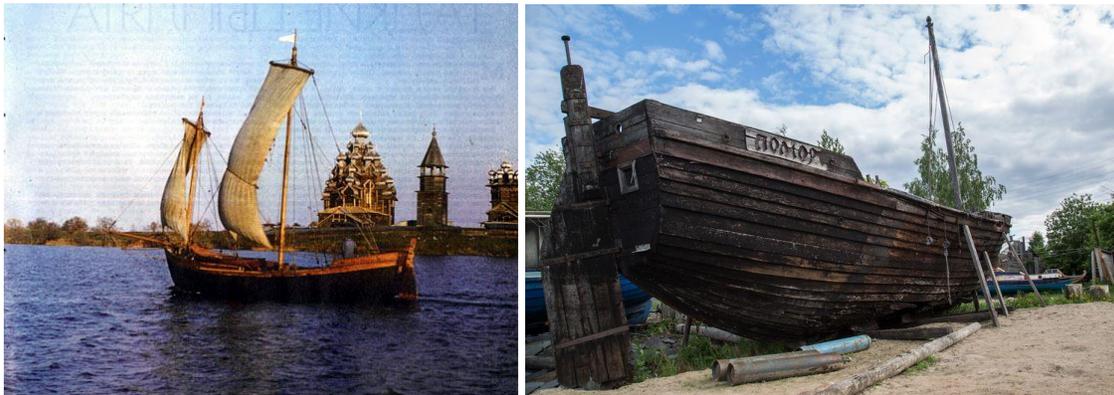


Figure 19. The Pomor. *Left*: the *Pomor* passing by the Kizhi Pogost during its maiden trip in 1987. Source: *Vokrug Sveta*, no. 6 (1989): 21. *Right*: The *Pomor* currently undergoing a refit. Note the absence of a keel, a useful feature for Arctic seafaring that allowed the vessel to be hauled on land or ice sheets. Photograph © 2015 Ilya Timin. Reproduced by permission.

⁷⁹ Grigorii Temkin, “Za kormoi 2000 mil,” *Vokrug Sveta*, no. 5 (1987): 1–6; Viktor Georgi, *Put’ na Grumant* (Petrozavodsk: Karelia, 1991).

⁸⁰ Stanislav Zaitsev, “Kak otkryt’ Ameriku,” in M. A. Beznin, ed., *Tot’ma: Istoriko-kraevedcheskii almanakh. Vyp. 1* (Vologda: Rus’, 1995), 334–372. The author of the article was a member of the 1991 expedition of the Pomor; in 1992 the expedition reached Vancouver where he tragically drowned while the ship was moored near the Vancouver Maritime Museum.

In 2014, when I interviewed Viktor Dmitriev, the current president and one of the original founders of the club, wood was one of the central topics of our conversation. For Dmitriev, wood was a medium that connected him with the maritime traditions of North Russia; it allowed for the reconstruction of both regional and national history. Yet historical reconstruction was more than a goal in itself: to travel along the historical routes of North Russian merchants, hunters and pilgrims was just as important. Born in 1946 and a physicist by education, Dmitriev's original hobby was technical invention, which included arms and space technologies. Fully employed as a plasma physics engineer, he initially treated yachting as just another way to spend summer vacations. But as his sailing took him to various historical places in North Russia, Dmitriev felt an increasing urge to archaize his ships to fit the historical landscape around him. In 1980, with other club members, he first remade a standardized fishing boat into a schooner and then spent several years studying the vernacular shipbuilding of Pomor communities.⁸¹

Dmitriev's work on wooden ships was a form of self-making as vigorous as autobiographic writing was for the Stalinist subjects studied by Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck,⁸² if with an axe and other woodworking tools instead of a pen. His appropriation of the Pomor identity is symptomatic in this respect, as his family came to Karelia after the Bolshevik revolution. Yet, while lacking a direct genealogical linkage with the Pomors, Dmitriev created material objects that forged this linkage and made him an heir of their maritime culture. His transformation into "one of the last Pomor shipbuilders of the twentieth century," as the official website of "Polar Odyssey" represents him,⁸³ was a complex self-fashioning, in which interaction with wood and North Russian landscapes in their very materiality were important. A 1989 publication about the *Pomor* in the popular geographic journal *Vokrug Sveta* (Around the World) quoted Dmitriev saying "wood itself will suggest how to build [the ship],"⁸⁴ a reflection on the vernacular shipbuilding practices that, in an absence of blueprints, relied on an

⁸¹ Interview with Viktor Dmitriev.

⁸² Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*; Halfin, *Red Autobiographies*.

⁸³ "Dmitriev Viktor Leonidovich," available at <http://polar-odyssey.org/sea-club/prezident.html>, accessed December 12, 2015.

⁸⁴ Viktor Georgi, "Belomorskaia petlia," *Vokrug sveta*, no. 6 (1989): 20.

interaction between a shipbuilder and his material. This interaction transformed logs and boards into a vessel; in a dialectical way, it also transformed a Soviet professional physicist who designed spaceships, even if as a hobby, into an enthusiast of heritage shipbuilding who in 1990, well before the disintegration of the USSR, undertook a pilgrimage to Jerusalem on a replica of a medieval Russian vessel. It was the texture of wood that preserved and demonstrated the essence of authentic architecture for Opolovnikov and of shipbuilding for Dmitriev (“wood itself will suggest how to build”). The work of a preservation expert or a shipbuilder was, consequently, in helping wood to reveal its inherent abilities to perform historical authenticity and continuity. To hide it behind other surfaces, as residents in local communities did with their houses, was to break this continuity.

Architectural preservation and historical shipbuilding represented, both in writing and practice, two instances of Soviet elemental materialism. Their enthusiasts appealed to the very texture of wood to maintain and perform historical continuity. Wooden buildings and structures transformed North Russia into a lyrical landscape in a kind of a symbolic acceptance of the failure of modernization in the region. They allowed for its inclusion in the pantheon of socialist spaces as a landscape of the ancient, uninterrupted and authentic history of the Russian people. At the same time, the resistance of this landscape to modernization informed a political agenda of historical architecture and shipbuilding. Their enthusiasts sought to preserve and revive wooden structures and technologies in order to perpetuate the allegedly authentic historic character of the region. By the turn of the 1990s, wood became the main symbol of North Russia as a mythological place that had preserved, against all odds, the old folk culture of the Russian people.

Conclusion

In June 2013, mass-media in the Republic of Karelia circulated an image of 84-year-old Orfinskii, by then a full member of the Russian Academy of Architecture and Construction Sciences, as he rushed to stop the demolition of a 1936 wooden building in

Petrozavodsk. During World War II, Petrozavodsk experienced massive destruction of its prewar architecture and civil infrastructure, and this building located on the central city street (Lenin Avenue) was a notable survivor of the prewar age. It was used for various government offices, including the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs of the Karelian-Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic, and had housed a children's clinic since 1960 (Figure 20). In April 2001, the building was partially destroyed by fire. Reconstruction was stalled due to lack of funding, and there were two more fires in 2003 and 2006. Despite the pitiable state of the building, the municipal authorities insisted that, as an architectural monument (official status had been granted to the building in 2000), it had to be restored to its authentic form. In June 2013, the owner of the building, desperate to turn it from a liability into an asset, brought an excavator and started illegal demolition works (Figure 21). When news reached Orfinskii, he rushed to stop the destruction of the building, which was the moment a camera caught him (Figure 22).



Figure 20. Building of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs of the Karelian-Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic, ca. 1940s.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Karelia. Istorii i sovremennost v dokumentakh i fotografiakh (Petrozavodsk: Karelia, 2000), 76



Figure 21. Illegal demolition works in Petrozavodsk, 16 June 2013. Photograph @ 2013 Mikhail Meshkov, Gazeta-licey.ru. Reproduced by permission.



Figure 22. Vyacheslav Orfinskii runs to prevent the demolition of the 1936 building. 16 June 2013. Photograph @ 2013 Natalia Meshkova, Gazeta-licey.ru. Reproduced by permission.

The interference of Orfinskii and, perhaps more importantly, of the Minister of Culture of the Republic of Karelia, Elena Bogdanova, stopped the demolition.⁸⁶ As of late 2015, the former building of the Karelian-Finnish People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs remains in its half-destroyed state in the very center of the city, its charcoaled walls covered with tarpaulins. In its present condition, it is hardly a monument of architectural heritage, but rather a monument to regional preservation activism that successfully deploys Soviet-era understandings of old wooden architecture as the core foundation of a regional identity in order to defeat the profit-making desires of local businessmen. More importantly, it demonstrates an absolute priority of architectural form over function in the heritage preservation politics in Russia. While still employing the rhetoric of Soviet Constructivist architecture, the post-Soviet preservation movement was unable to suggest any other justification for its activities than that of the historical authenticity of forms. Devoid of any social content, its politics are more concerned with hollow walls than with their use in social life. The same, in fact, happened with Constructivist architecture over time. When post-Stalinist Soviet architects turned to Constructivist architecture in search of inspiration, and borrowed some of its ideas for the Soviet mass housing program launched in the late 1950s – a topic of my next chapter – they capitalized on forms developed by Moisei Ginzburg, Aleksei Gan and other early Soviet Constructivists, but discarded their social agenda.⁸⁷ The current debate about the restoration of the Narkomfin House is focused on its preservation as part of the Moscow architectural landscape, as a monument to the history of Soviet architecture, just like the wooden churches and buildings of North Russia.

The figure of Orfinskii hurrying to stop the demolition of an old wooden building, while two only marginally interested residents of Petrozavodsk look on, is also symbolic in another sense. While Soviet and post-Soviet architectural preservation discourse sought to re-invent local communities, eventually it exerted a much greater influence on

⁸⁶ For a journalistic account, see Natalia Meshkova, "Sovershenno prestuplenie," *Internet-Journal Litsei*, June 16, 2013, available at <http://gazeta-licey.ru/culture/5662-sovershenno-prestuplenie-video>, accessed December 10, 2015.

⁸⁷ Yulia Karpova, "Designer Socialism: The Aesthetic Turn in Soviet Russia after Stalin" (PhD, Central European University, 2015), 15–16, 125–126.

its producers than on the target audience. The failure of recent measures to revive traditional ways of life and architectural forms in Karelian villages is a particularly illustrative example. Since 1995, a team of Russian and Finnish architects and ethnographers has been working on an ambitious project to preserve the Northern Karelian village of Panozero as an architectural monument and as a living community devoted to traditional ways of life. Funding from the Juminkeko Foundation (Finland) was used, in particular, to revive domestic weaving, boatbuilding and sauna building. Trained by Finnish and Petrozavodsk specialists and working on newly imported equipment, the residents of Panozero were paid for performing traditional crafts for tourist groups.⁸⁸ In a 2006 interview for the local TV Channel GTRK Karelia, Orfinskii argued that “what is happening in Panozero is not only the restoration of exemplars of traditional architecture, but also the maintenance of the centuries-long lifestyle of northern Karelians,”⁸⁹ revealing that the drive for the museumification of the North Russian landscape, when applied consistently, is capable of transforming into objects not only buildings, but also people.

Yet these measures could not stop out-migration from the village and, between 2002 and 2013, the population of Panozero dropped from 89 people to 52, reflecting the rural flight also experienced elsewhere in North Russia. Orfinskii, after all, could not conceal his disappointment that local residents were much less enthusiastic about the preservation of their village than were urban enthusiasts from Petrozavodsk and Finland, and called on “the [Russian] state and society” in order to “help Panozero residents to preserve life in this ancient Karelian land.”⁹⁰ A Petrozavodsk journalist expressed this disappointment in a more straightforward way writing that “[external] connoisseurs of traditional culture and ancient life style find in Panozero indigenous beauty and charm, which,

⁸⁸ Markku Nieminen, “Mezhdu proshlym i budushchim,” in Aleksei Konkka and Vyacheslav Orfinskii, *Panozero: Serdtse Belomorskoii Karelii* (Petrozavodsk: Petrozavodsk State University Press, 2003), 6–18; Aleksandr Yaskeliainen, “Predposylki vozrozhdeniia derevni: Plotnitskie kursy i kontseptsii restavratsii panozerskikh domov,” in Konkka and Orfinskii, *Panozero*, 291–308.

⁸⁹ “Vesti. Karelia,” *GTRK Karelia*, June 27, 2006.

⁹⁰ Vyacheslav Orfinskii, “Rodnik karelskoi kul'tury,” in Konkka and Orfinskii, *Panozero*, 313.

unfortunately, most local residents fail to see.”⁹¹ The project to revive Panozero created new cross-border connections between heritage enthusiasts in Karelia and Finland, but did not manage to connect their visions with the practices of local populations. This indifference was also true in the Soviet era when local residents often set abandoned houses and entire villages on fire, destroying the North Russian historical landscape and subverting preservation discourses that sought to transform them into natural extensions to this landscape.⁹² Arson, as well as accidental fires in abandoned heritage buildings, has occasionally occurred in the post-Soviet era as well, most notably at the former building of the Karelian-Finnish People’s Commissariat of Foreign Affairs.⁹³

Having failed to revive rural communities in accordance with their supposedly traditional life style and architecture, the conservation movement in contemporary Russia was more successful in mobilizing its own ranks – that is, the educated urban class. Every year, several dozen people from Petrozavodsk travel to the museum of Kizhi and stay for the entire tourist season from May to October, dressing up in traditional peasant dress from the Onega Lake region and performing traditional crafts, whereas residents of surrounding villages largely ignore this practice unless it implies monetary rewards.⁹⁴ The wooden shipbuilding school at “Polar Odysseus” attracts young urbanites from Petrozavodsk and St. Petersburg, most of them university students, but hardly any contemporary Pomors from the still surviving villages along the White Sea coast.⁹⁵

There are at least two non-governmental organizations in Moscow and St. Petersburg, “Obshchee delo” (“A Common Goal”) and “Verenitsa” (“Cavalcade”), that

⁹¹ Sergei Kulikov, “Komu nuzhny karely?” *Stolitsa na Onego*, available at <http://www.stolica.onego.ru/articles/168616.html>, accessed on December 10, 2015.

⁹² “Pamiatniki istorii i kultury – vsenarodnoe dostoianie,” *Leninskaia Pravda* (Petrozavodsk), April 17 (1980): 3; “Perspektivy ‘neperspektivnoi’ derevni,” *Leninskaia Pravda* (Petrozavodsk), July 6 (1980): 2; “Vesti. Karelia,” *GTRK Karelia*, September 4, 2015.

⁹³ “V kraiu pogibshikh vepsskikh dereven’,” *Finugor.Ru*, October 12, 2011, available at <http://finugor.ru/news/v-krayu-pogibshih-vepsskih-dereven>, accessed on December 10, 2015; “Politsiia predpolagaet, chto istoricheskoe zdanie v Sortavala podozhgli,” *Karelinform.Ru*, January 17, 2014, available at http://karelinform.ru/news/society/44859/politsiya_predpolagaet_chno_istoricheskoe_zdanie_v_sortavala_podozhgli, accessed on December 10, 2015.

⁹⁴ ““Ozhivshaia ekspozitsiia’ muzeia Kizhi: Delo mastera boitsia,” *Kizhi*, no. 10 (2013): 7.

⁹⁵ Interview with Viktor Dmitriev.

pool the financial contributions, labor and equipment of educated metropolitan residents willing to travel to North Russia in the summertime to participate in the restoration of its wooden churches. Both NGOs actively publicize their activities through the use of social media, public conferences, and documentaries. In Aleksandr Pasechnik's 2014 documentary *The Arc* (*Kovcheg*, produced by "Obshchee delo"), one of its activists explains the rationale behind his efforts: "If the [North Russian] village keeps on living, then the state [of Russia] will keep on living."⁹⁶ The restoration of old wooden churches is thus interpreted as a revival of local communities and, through them, the healing of the national body. The Soviet quest for historical authenticity has produced persistent forms of identification that became influential among the educated urban population as nostalgia for ancient architectural forms, for affective interaction with wood, and for lost cultural traditions.

⁹⁶ Alexander Pasechnik, dir., *Kovcheg* (Obshchee delo, 2014).



Figure 23. Stairs of a 1974 apartment block in St. Petersburg. Photograph © 2015 Anton Golubev. Reproduced by permission.

Chapter 4. When Spaces of Transit Fail Their Designers: The Social Antagonisms of Soviet Stairwells and Streets

For a Soviet person, an entranceway door is something fouled, scratched, painted with disgusting red in towns or withered light blue in villages, and oftentimes entirely rotten.

Andrei Konchalovsky, *Sublime Deception*¹

I believe that political power also exercises itself through the mediation of a certain number of institutions which look as if they have nothing in common with the political power, and as if they are independent of it, while they are not... All teaching systems, which appear simply to disseminate knowledge, are made to maintain a certain social class in power; and to exclude the instruments of power of another social class.

Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate*²

Scholars of Soviet history confront a major imbalance in the ways various segments of Soviet urban space are covered in the primary and secondary literature. The personal accounts of people who lived in the late socialist era provide us with a wealth of information about communal and one-family apartments in Soviet urban centers, the main streets and squares of Soviet cities, sites that attracted intellectual or non-conformist publics (such as the café Saigon in Leningrad), and heritage or modern neighbourhoods. Studies of late socialist urban space have largely focused on the same

¹ Andrei Konchalovsky, *Vozvyshaiushchii obman* (Moscow: Sovershenno sekretno: 1999), 62–63.

² Noam Chomsky and Michel Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate: On Human Nature* (New York: New Press, 2006), 40.

objects of Soviet urban space.³ At the same time, many important spaces of late socialism have been omitted from this picture. For example, little research has been done on the Soviet dormitories, workers' barracks, or multi-apartment wooden houses that were extensively built from the 1910s to the 1950s as "temporary" housing, but are still in use today. These types of housing were far from marginal: as late as 1990, after more than three decades of a large-scale housing campaign in the USSR, there were still seven million people living in dormitories, two million in barracks and sixteen million in "temporary" housing without basic utilities.⁴ Given that the Soviet government began phasing out these types of housing in the late 1950s, these figures had apparently been bigger in the previous decades. Small provincial towns and so-called urban settlements (*posiolki gorodskogo tipa*), as well as Soviet garrison towns in the USSR, Eastern Europe and Mongolia, are other examples of missing sites in our understanding of late Soviet urban space.⁵ Even such urban spaces as post-Stalinist residential apartment blocks and neighborhoods that have been extensively depicted and discussed in primary accounts and in the secondary literature have their blind spots: most importantly, stairwells (*pod'ezd*) and basements (*podval*), as well as their adjacent spaces and infrastructure, including yards, garages and city parks.

This bias has an apparently social nature. We know about those segments of Soviet urban space that were planned, built and populated by people who possessed a cultural voice. In other words, the Soviet urban world that we know is the world of Soviet officials and intellectuals. The door of a private apartment, for example, is tacitly present

³ On Soviet communal apartments, see: Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994); Ilia Utekhin, *Ocherki kommunalnogo byta* (Moscow: O.G.I., 2001). On the most up-to-date research on Soviet modernist housing in the post-Stalinist era, including a detailed historiography, see: Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street*; Christine Varga-Harris, *Stories of House and Home: Soviet Apartment Life during the Khrushchev Years* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2015).

⁴ A. S. Senyavskii, *Rossiiskii gorod v 1960-e – 1980-e gg.* (Moscow: Izd-vo MGU, 1995), 204.

⁵ German scholars have done remarkable research on Soviet garrisons stationed in East Germany, but their focus has been on interpreting the repressive aspects of the Soviet military presence in Eastern Europe as occupation. A social history of Soviet garrison towns has yet to be written. See: Volker Koop, *Zwischen Recht und Willkür* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1996); Silke Satjukow, *Besatzer: »Die Russen« in Deutschland 1945–1994* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008); Ilko-Sascha Kowalczyk and Stefan Wolle, *Roter Stern über Deutschland: sowjetische Truppen in der DDR* (Berlin: Ch. Links Verlag, 2010).

in all current debates about public and private spheres in the post-Stalinist USSR as the default border on which the state has always encroached in order to expand its surveillance and control over citizens' lives.⁶ Yet, although this dichotomizing function of the apartment door was characteristic of the Soviet educated class, it was not socially universal. The stairwells and basements of Soviet apartment blocks, as well as their adjacent territories and related infrastructure (such as parks and garages), were colonized by people, mostly of working-class backgrounds, who regarded them as spaces of their own. They were important sites of social interaction and conflicts, community building, and of premarital and extramarital sex. That they are disregarded in primary accounts and scholarly narratives is a result of the marginality of their populations in terms of cultural voice.

For the famous Russian film director, Andrei Konchalovsky, for example, the entranceway door of a Soviet apartment block was “something fouled... and often entirely rotten,”⁷ because his social position as a post-Soviet intellectual entailed a certain politics of aesthetics that expressed itself in this disgust of Soviet spaces of transit. Soviet stairwells, yards and streets provoked different affective responses among different social groups. For Soviet and post-Soviet intelligentsia, as I show in this chapter, negative affects such as disgust and fear were caused by the incapacity of these spaces to act in a strictly functionalist manner, by their failure to provide the unobstructed passage of bodies in Soviet urban space. Stairwell landings and dark archways attracted diverse groups of people; spending their leisure time in these spaces, these groups challenged attempts by the state bureaucracy and intellectual elites to rationally organize Soviet society both in spatial (urban planning) and temporal (leisure activities) terms. In turn, the people who occupied Soviet spaces of transit developed very different emotional bonds to them. In this chapter, I argue that on the cultural level

⁶ Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia*, 279–354; Susan E. Reid, “The Meaning of Home: ‘The Only Bit of the World You Can Have to Yourself,’” in *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia*, ed. Lewis Siegelbaum (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 145–70; Brian LaPierre, *Hooligans in Khrushchev’s Russia: Defining, Policing, and Producing Deviance during the Thaw* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012), 59–95.

⁷ Konchalovsky, *Vozvyshaiushchii obman*, 62–63.

this situation was reflected in the different affective regimes in which people co-existed with Soviet stairwells, yards, streets and similar spaces. Konchalovsky's inclusion as a prominent Russian intellectual in the production of cultural knowledge allowed for a universalist claim ("for a Soviet person...") that disguised social antagonisms generated by Soviet spaces of transit and extrapolated from one particular affective regime – that of disgust and fear – to the "common knowledge" of Russian culture.⁸

This chapter offers a topographic shift in studies of late Soviet society. It starts with the well-known story of the mass housing program launched by the Soviet leadership in 1957, but instead of looking at its main feature, one-family apartments that became one of the main symbols of de-Stalinization in the USSR, it examines the transit spaces of new neighbourhoods, focusing in particular on the stairwells of Soviet apartment blocks. It then draws attention to the specific social practices that one's position in marginalized urban spaces provoked. Finally, it examines the social dynamics that rendered stairwells as one of the dark spaces of late socialism and marginalized their populations. Here, I follow one of Michel Foucault's main theses in his famous debate with Noam Chomsky; namely, that all systems of knowledge have their politics that serve to "maintain a certain social class in power; and to exclude the instruments of power of another social class."⁹ The archeology of Soviet stairwells and streets that I undertake by looking at their traces in written and visual sources aims to show the politics of Soviet spaces of transit and their involvement in the production of Soviet bodies and selves.

Exposition: The Soviet Stairwell

In November 1955, the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party and the USSR Council of Ministers passed a joint resolution. Entitled "On the elimination of excesses in design and construction," the measure marked a radical shift in Soviet housing policies. Instead of Stalinist Empire style, which was characterized by a focus on the exterior

⁸ See Nigel Thrift's discussion of how affects are an integral part of urban landscapes and politics: Nigel Thrift, "Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect," *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* 86, no. 1 (January 1, 2004): 57–78.

⁹ Chomsky and Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate*, 40.

luxury of a small number of new buildings at the expense of mass housing, the state now reoriented its urban policies towards the large-scale industrial production of apartment blocks. In the next few years, a uniform design of five-storey apartment blocks was introduced, tested and declared standard for the pan-Union construction program. Within the next several decades, the entire USSR was covered with tens of thousands of new apartment blocks of the same modernist and utilitarian design, known informally as *khrushchevki* after Nikita Khrushchev, the Soviet leader between 1956 and 1964 and the initiator of this mass housing program (Figure 24). New designs soon followed. By the turn of the 1970s, apartment blocks of nine storeys and higher (standardized designs 1-515, 1-528, II-18/9 and others) displaced *khrushchevki* from the housing programs in larger Soviet cities, although five-storey apartment buildings of various designs, including modified *khrushchevki*, remained the staple architectural product in small Soviet towns until the end of the Soviet Union.¹⁰ Thanks to this program of large-scale housing construction, between 1956 and 1966, nearly half of the Soviet population moved to better housing at the state's expense.¹¹ The state-funded construction program continued at similarly impressive rates in the following years: between 1966 and 1980, an additional 162,000,000 people, or three-fifths of the Soviet population, moved to better housing.¹²

¹⁰ N. P. Bylinkin and A. V. Riabushin, eds., *Sovremennaiia sovetskaia arkhitektura* (Moscow: Stroiizdat, 1985), 77–108.

¹¹ “Direktivy XXIII s’ezda KPSS po piatiletnemu planu razvitiia narodnogo khoziaistva SSSR na 1966–1970 gody,” *XXIII s’ezd Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuz*, 26 marta – 8 aprelia 1966 goda (Moscow: Politizdat, 1966), 324.

¹² V. A. Golikov, ed., *Sovetskii Soiuz: Politiko-ekonomicheskii spravochnik* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1982), 223. Not all of them moved to *khrushchevki* – there were other, although less wide-spread, types of new housing, which included elite housing (“obkomovskii doma”), cooperative housing and detached houses in rural areas.



Figure 24. New apartment blocks in Moscow, ca. 1963. Source: Pastvu.com.

The various modernist designs of residential apartment blocks in the USSR had one principal feature in common – in order to maximize the share of residential space, Soviet architects reduced to a minimum the area of their public zones including stairwells, corridors, and landings. For example, *khrushchevki* were five floors high, with four or more entrances each leading to a stairwell. The stairwell led residents and visitors to five tiny landings (roughly two meters wide and less than one meter long) with four entrances to individual apartments. There were also landings between each two floors; these served to connect two flights of stairs between floors (Figure 25). The stairwells divided new Soviet apartment blocks into horizontal sections (known in Russian as “pod’ezd”) that were only connected to each other through the yard. Later apartment block designs in the USSR had slightly more spacious public places and apartments, but kept this general tendency of dividing them into narrow, non-interconnected stairwells.



Figure 25. Stairwell of a 1959 khrushchevka in Petrozavodsk. *Left*: entrance stairwell. *Center*: landing of the fifth floor. *Right*: landings and flights of stairs. Photograph © 2015 Alexei Marakhatanov.

The ostensibly utilitarian nature of public spaces in the new apartment blocks was a remarkable feature of post-Stalinist mass housing and a conscious choice of Soviet officials and architects. Professional and public debates of the 1950s and 1960s on the mass housing program explicitly rejected (or, more exactly, indefinitely delayed to the distant Communist future) the constructivist idea of “commune houses” which implied the communal use of facilities for cooking, dining and leisure time and reduced private space to individual bedrooms.¹³ Instead, new apartment blocks were designed to accommodate as many individual apartments as possible at the expense of corridors, stairwells and other public spaces. This did not herald the rejection of communalist values and ideals in the planning of Soviet cities. While discarded at the scale of separate apartment blocks, these ideals became projected to larger city units known as microdistricts (*microraiion*). Microdistricts had been the primary structural elements of Soviet urban planning since the late 1950s, combining residential dwellings and public

¹³ Natan Osterman, “O zhilishche budushchego,” *Sovetskaia arkhitektura*, Vol. 19 (1970): 68–79; Stephen E. Harris, “Soviet Mass Housing and the Communist Way of Life,” in *Everyday Life in Russia: Past and Present*, ed. Choi Chatterjee et al. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 184–185.

service buildings. Reflecting a rationalist approach to the planning of Soviet people's out-of-work time, the microdistrict as a concept of urban planning was, in a way, a commune-house expanded to the size of a neighbourhood.¹⁴ In Soviet urban theory, its libraries, cinemas, clubs, sport facilities, cafes and other "cultural facilities" took the responsibility of filling up the leisure time of both under-age and adult Soviet citizens, acting as sites for community building and as forms of Communist education.¹⁵

Meanwhile, such non-living spaces as the stairwells of apartment blocks, their yards and other adjacent territories were planned on exclusively utilitarian principles to ensure the effective passage of people to and from their apartments. To summarize, new microdistricts were meant to modernize Soviet society by immersing Soviet citizens into a modern lifestyle with individual living space and rationally organized public spaces. In many cases, they were symbolically built in place of the ramshackle barracks of Stalin's era as a gesture visualizing the state's adoption of a new, citizen-oriented model of socialism.¹⁶

Beginning with Oleg Kharkhordin, scholars of the post-Stalinist Soviet Union have argued that the mass housing reform, when Soviet people moved en masse from communal to new individual apartments, did not herald the supremacy of the private sphere over communal values in the USSR. Instead, new housing became a frontier where the Soviet authorities sought new, more discreet and decentralized forms of social control.¹⁷ This was all the more true for the social infrastructure of new microdistricts

¹⁴ The connection between the concepts of early Soviet "commune-houses" and microdistricts is particularly visible in the bold and ambitious, albeit never realized, Arctic architecture projects of 1960s–1980s of Aleksandr Shipkov who envisioned apartment complexes the size of entire town districts: Rena Sheiko, "Dom v Zapoliar'e," *Iunost*, no. 7 (1976): 90–94. Stephen Harris briefly discusses this connection in his book on Soviet mass housing: Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street*, 192–208.

¹⁵ Zhan Toshchenko, *Sotsialnaia infrastruktura: Sushchnost i puti razvitiia* (Moscow: Mysl, 1980), 22–25, 100–119;

¹⁶ See a contemporary representation of this logic in Chelkash, "Novaia statuiia v Moskve," *Krokodil*, no. 36 (1957): 7.

¹⁷ Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia*, 279–303; Reid, "Cold War in the Kitchen"; Reid, "The Meaning of Home"; Deborah A Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev's Russia* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007); LaPierre, *Hooligans in Khrushchev's Russia*, 59–95.

that were designed to “promote ideological and educational work at the local level.”¹⁸ At the institutional level, this new regulatory effort found its manifestation in the local housing management offices (“ZhEK”) established by decree No. 322 on 25 March 1959 by the USSR Council of Ministers, “On measures to improve the usage and maintenance of state-owned residential housing.”¹⁹ Housing management offices were first of all responsible for the maintenance of apartment blocks and the related infrastructure of their microdistricts. At the same time, from the very beginning their functions included the governance of social order in Soviet urban communities.²⁰ As organizations that dealt with most aspects of people’s out-of-work time, housing management offices were the Soviet state’s representatives in the most private corners of Soviet people’s lives. The Deputy Minister of Housing and Utilities of the RSFSR from 1972 to 1981, Vladimir Ladygin, had every right to claim in his memoir that “[f]rom birth to death, each Soviet person’s life was under the careful supervision of the ministry [of housing and utilities] and its structures in every city and settlement.”²¹

Unfortunately for the advocates of the Soviet housing-as-enlightenment project, this picture was largely idealized. Understaffed, underfunded and often inefficiently run, local housing offices could barely cope with the magnitude of the task of keeping apartment blocks and public spaces of Soviet microdistricts properly maintained. Soviet authorities consequently solicited the active and voluntary participation of residents in maintaining these public spaces. This participation was institutionalized in the form of residents’ committees (*domkom*) established in 1959.²² A 1968 joint resolution of the RSFSR Council of Ministers and Central Council of Trade Unions (VTsSPS) prompted apartment blocks residents to form such committees and obliged ZhEKs to seek close

¹⁸ Galina Shilova, *Ideino-vospitatelnaia rabota po mestu zhitelstva v sovremennykh usloviakh i puti eio sovershenstvovaniia*. Dr. Sc. in History Thesis. Academy of Social Sciences of the CPSU Central Committee, 1984.

¹⁹ Postanovleniie Sovmina SSSR ot 25.03.1959 No. 322 “O merakh po uluchsheniiu ekspluatatsii i sokhraneniuiu gosudarstvennogo zhilishchnogo fonda,” in *Sobraniiie postanovlenii SSSR*, no. 11 (1960), article 75.

²⁰ Smith, *Property of Communists*, 116–121.

²¹ Vladimir Ladygin, *Prostoi sovetskii chelovek (vospominaniia spetsialista)* (Tula: OOO TRK “Arsenal”, 2001), 201.

²² Postanovleniie prezidiuma VTsSPS ot 16.10.1959 “Ob obshchestvennykh domovykh komitetakh v gosudarstvennom zhilishchnom fonde RSFSR. Moscow: Izd-vo VTsSPS, 1959.

cooperation with these committees. The resolution stressed, in particular, that this alliance had to address “the conditions of apartments, buildings, stairwells, elevators, equipment, and adjacent spaces.”²³ Soviet mass media actively advertised the cooperation between ZhEKs and domkoms as a precondition for clean and “cultured” communal living in apartment blocks. In the Karelian republic, this cooperation was among the favourite stories on the local television channel and radio station;²⁴ in Leningrad, local Komsomol organizations urged their members to actively contribute to it;²⁵ and the pan-Union mass-media circulated stories of the miraculous transformations of urban neighbourhoods into green and safe oases through popular initiative under the caring supervision of the ZhEKs.²⁶

Despite all these measures, as new microdistricts sprang up all over the USSR, the Soviet authorities and those responsible residents who internalized the official logic of the rationally organized urban environment found themselves in the uneasy position of being a contender for, rather than a hegemon of, Soviet urban space. Although Soviet urban planners assigned stairwells a purely utilitarian function of transitory spaces between one’s private apartment and public facilities for cultured leisure, these spaces soon acquired their own temporary and permanent residents. As a result, the last decades of the Soviet Union saw a remarkable relationship between stairwells and similar utilitarian public spaces, on the one hand, and certain groups of the urban population, on the other. This symbiosis challenged official moral norms and sincerely scared the more educated and disciplined parts of Soviet society because it threatened to engulf Soviet youth, its future generations.

²³ Postanovleniie Sovmina RSFSR, VTsSPS ot 9.08.1968 No. 548 “Ob usilenii roli domovykh komitetov v upravlenii gosudarstvennym zhilishchnym fondom,” in *Sobraniiie postanovlenii RSFSR*, no. 15 (1968), article 75.

²⁴ As judged by the transcripts of the TV program *Evening Petrozavodsk* (Vechernii Petrozavodsk) and several local radio programs: NARK, f. R-785, op. 1, d. 53/287, l. 8–11; NARK, f. R-785, op. 1, d. 53/293, l. 94, 206.

²⁵ The Leningrad obkom of the Komsomol, in particular, promoted it through its movement *Komsomol Projector* (Komsomolskii prozhektor). Central State Archive of Historical and Political Documents of St. Petersburg (hereafter TsGAIPD SPb), f. K-598, op. 25, d. 49, l. 117–118; f. K-598, op. 25, d. 64, l. 1–4.

²⁶ K. Barykin, “Zelionye Cheriomushki,” *Ogoniok*, 40 (1973): 14–15; “Na strazhe obshchestvennogo poriadka,” *Novosti dnia* (newsreel), no. 3 (January 1973).

Sex on Stairs

In a Soviet-era joke, a Parisian woman complains that, when she invited a Soviet man for a romantic outing, he tried to have sex with her on the stairs of her hallway.²⁷ In another joke, a Russian man explains why the stairwell of an apartment block is the best place to have casual sex: stairs neutralize the height difference between lovers, while an inability to properly finish intercourse can be disguised by pretending to hear an approaching neighbour.²⁸ In yet another joke from the post-Soviet era, a professor of engineering walks in on his daughter having sex with one of his students in the stairwell of their apartment block. The clumsiness of the situation is overcome when the student presents his professor with a mathematical challenge dealing with male and female anatomical differences.²⁹

Archival documents, studies of sexual and everyday life in the USSR, and Soviet and post-Soviet fiction show that these jokes reflected an actual phenomenon: the common use of public places for sexual relationships in conditions where one's personal housing failed to provide privacy (teenagers living with parents in small apartments), when hotel staff demanded an official marriage certificate to rent a room to a couple, and when the harsh climate made outdoor sex problematic during much of the year. In Petrozavodsk during the early 1970s, for example, residents of the district Pervomaisky regularly turned to the police with requests to cleanse their houses of couples having sex in stairwells and nearby garages, on the grounds that local children "often become unwilling witnesses of loose behaviour of drunken men and women."³⁰ Stephen Harris mentions at least one similar case in his book on post-Stalinist housing.³¹ Scholars of sex in the USSR such as Adrian Geiges and Tatiana Suvorova, Anna Rotkirch, Igor Kon and some others mention stairwells and other similar urban spaces – basements, garages and city parks – as common sites for premarital sex for youth and extramarital sex for

²⁷ Reproduced in: Viktor Kanetskii, "Vampuka. Nekotorym obrazom drama," *Zvezda*, 3 (1989): 12.

²⁸ Reproduced in: *Intimnye anekdoty* (St. Petersburg: OOO Diamant, 1996), 25, 125.

²⁹ A Russian website specializing in humor dates it as the early 2000s: <http://www.anekdot.ru/id/-10018836/>. The plot, however, does not differ much from Soviet-era jokes.

³⁰ NARK, f. R-1799, op. 8, d. 3/16, l. 43–44.

³¹ Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street*, 205.

adults.³² Mark Popovsky, a Soviet emigrant who in 1985 published a book about sex in the USSR, featured Soviet stairwells as the most important dating site for people who were not officially married; to emphasize their importance, he quoted one of his respondents: “We [Soviet people] are born in stairwells, make love in stairwells, and die in stairwells.”³³ Even still prudish early-perestroika era Soviet cinematography could not avoid this theme: in Karen Shakhnazarov’s *The Courier* (1986), based on his 1982 novel, two protagonists trying to start their sexual lives fail to find privacy in a city park and their friends’ apartments, and end up in the basement of an apartment block, only to be scared off by a vigilant neighbour before intercourse takes place (Figure 26). Dictionaries of Russian slang recorded at least two special terms for a sexual intercourse in the stairwell of an apartment block: “periscope sex,” a metaphor implying the necessity to stay alert for possible intrusions, and “biathlon.”³⁴

³² Adrian Geiges and Tatiana Suvorova wrote a separate chapter “Intimate relationships... Where?” on topographies of Soviet sexual life in their book: Adrian Geiges and Tatiana Suvorova, *Liubov- vne plana: (sex & perestroika) : intimnaia zhizn i polozhenie zhenshchin v SSSR* (Moscow: Sobesednik, 1990), 77–86. Igor Kon had a similar chapter, “Housing question,” in his monograph on the history of sex in Russia: Igor Kon, *Seksualnaia kultura v Rossii: Klubnichka na berezke*, 3rd ed. (Moscow: Vremia, 2010), 268–271. See also Anna Rotkirch, “The Man Question: Loves and Lives in Late 20th Century Russia” (Helsinki: University of Helsinki - Department of Social Policy, 2000), 261; Natalia Lebina, *Muzhchina i zhenshchina: telo, moda, kultura. SSSR – ottepel* (Moscow: NLO, 2015), 115.

³³ Mark Popovsky, *Tretii lishnii: On, ona i sovetskii rezhim* (London: Overseas Publications, 1985), 129–134, quotation on p. 129. The unnamed respondent apparently rephrased Guy de Maupassant’s famous saying about the bed: “The bed comprehends our whole life; for we were born in it, we live in it, and we shall die in it” (from the short story “The Bed”).

³⁴ Tatiana Akhmetova, ed., *Russkii mat: Tolkovyi slovar*. 2nd edition (Moscow: Kolokol-press, 1997), 14, 112.



Figure 26. Young lovers and a vigilant neighbour in the basement of an apartment block. A still from *Kur'er* (dir. Karen Shakhnazarov, 1986).

It would be wrong to extrapolate from such evidence to the whole of Soviet sexual life, or to use it, as Popovsky did, for any simplistic conclusions about the totalitarian suppression of sex in the USSR. What this evidence actually shows is that the stairwells of Soviet apartment blocks possessed properties that were directly opposite to those assigned to them by Soviet urban planners. In other cultural and historical contexts marginalized groups made similar uses of spaces designed for public transit and leisure. George Chauncey's book about gay life in New York before World War II examines the role of vibrant metropolitan spaces in the making of urban homosexual culture in the United States, and James Green suggests that parks, plazas, and beaches were central to the emergence of male same-sex encounters in Brazilian cities.³⁵ Like the streets of New York and the parks of Rio de Janeiro, instead of acting as merely transitory spaces for people circulating between their apartments, jobs and facilities for leisure and recreation, Soviet stairwells revealed an ability to accumulate people and connect them in various and diverse ways.

³⁵ George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Makings of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 131–267; James N. Green, *Beyond Carnival: Male Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century Brazil* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

Apart from providing shelter for young people exploring their sexuality, stairwells acted as sites for unofficial grassroots sexual education. Igor Kon, in his cultural history of sex in the USSR, described the repeated failures of Soviet advocates of sexual education to institutionalize it in any mass form.³⁶ Two educators, Dmitry Isaev and Viktor Kagan, wrote as early as 1979 that a lack of this education drove teenagers together in stairwells, quoting one of their informants: “It is only in the stairwell that we can discuss important sexual questions.”³⁷ As the gathering places for Soviet youth, stairwells facilitated the circulation of knowledge about sexual life, suggested roles and models of sexual behaviour, offered stimulants, such as alcohol and drugs, and provided sexual partners. Isaev and Kagan described what can be called the Soviet stairwell’s capacity for the vertical organization of urban juvenile communities, in which the circulation of knowledge – but also of sexual partners – was facilitated by communication between teenagers of different age groups and social backgrounds. For Soviet sexual enlighteners this facilitation was understandably dangerous, since it challenged the dominant model of monogamous sexual behaviour in officially registered marriages and the regulated conditions of the spousal bed.³⁸ But in doing this, stairwells and other similar public places provided Soviet people with the resources to practice sexualities which were alternative to the dominant norm.

In Vladimir Vysotsky’s unfinished *Novel about Girls* (1977), there is an episode describing a basement-like gallery that, in the daytime, was used by law-enforcement officers to practice prone shooting. Soft floor pads were placed on the floor for their convenience, and this allowed for the gallery’s nocturnal repurposing into a venue where “lewd women” (*гулящие женщины*) had group sex with “young, tipsy boys trembling from excitement and exhibitionism.” The novel’s protagonist had his first sexual experience in this place; he later learned that not all girls came to this place voluntarily:

³⁶ Kon, *Seksualnaia kultura v Rossii*, 297–321.

³⁷ D. N. Isaev and V. E. Kagan, *Polovoe vospitanie i psikhogigiena pola u detei* (Moscow: Meditsina, 1979).

³⁸ *Ibid.*

There were other times; there were others, very young girls. They were pulled into the shooting gallery by force; they had sex because of fear and then wept, and Kol'ka [the protagonist] felt pity for them.³⁹

Anna Rotkirch's study of sexualities in Soviet and post-Soviet times quoted several similar stories. One of the sections of her study, which is aptly titled "In the cellar," deals with the memoir of a man born in 1960 into a suburban workers' family in Leningrad. His description of his first sexual encounter was very much like that of Vysotsky's protagonist:

I was about 15 years old... I was friends with my classmates, but also with guys who were 3-5 years older than me. My first close meeting with a woman took place in a cellar. My elder brother had brought some girl. Together with his friends we got drunk and then everybody fucked her. Around the tenth turn was mine. I was very nervous, standing in line. The older friends calmed and encouraged me. You won't even have to do anything, they said. Just take off your pants...⁴⁰

The same respondent mentions an episode in which he had sex with another girl at an unfinished construction site – another ubiquitous place in the late Soviet urban landscape. Upon realizing that this was his partner's first sexual experience, he protected her from his friends who had already lined up outside of their shelter anticipating an opportunity for casual sex, which would undoubtedly take the form of group rape. Later, according to his claims, this girl nevertheless became immersed in this culture of teenage sexual promiscuity.⁴¹ Viktor Pirozhkov, a scholar of late Soviet juvenile delinquency, linked urban public places, such as stairwells, basements, attics and parks, with "line-up love" (*liubov v ochered'*), the author's euphemism for sex between one girl and several partners taking turns.⁴² Even Soviet sexologists had to admit the existence of these forms

³⁹ Vladimir Vysotsky, *Sochineniia*. Vol. 2 (Moscow: Lokid, 1999), 473–474.

⁴⁰ Rotkirch, "The Man Question: Loves and Lives in Late 20th Century Russia," 211.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 213–214.

⁴² V. F. Pirozhkov, *Zakony prestupnogo mira molodiozhi: Kriminalnaia subkultura* (Tver: Priz, 1994), 10.

of sexuality. In 1979, the Soviet pediatric journal *Pediatriia* published an article on sexual deviance among children and teenagers based on a study of a group of 23 boys and 57 girls between 5 and 16 who had been treated for “clinical forms of sexuality.” It discovered that 19 teenagers (“children of the pubertal age” in the authors’ words) from the study group had two or more lovers and 11 had at least once engaged in group sex. As an explanation of this behaviour that was contradictory to every norm of socialist sexuality, the authors claimed:

These sexual relations should be considered as part of the teenagers’ collective behaviour which is regulated by moral norms of the groups [to which the teenagers belonged] that are contradictory to social moral principles... Forms of sexual activity practices by the teenagers [under study] are primarily determined by “group moral norms.” This leads to sexual debauchery with easy consent to casual sexual relations, group sex and even occasional homosexuality.”⁴³

Soviet sexologists, at least in theory, avoided putting the blame for “sexual debauchery” on a specific girl or boy, and instead interpreted alternative sexualities not as individual peculiarities, but rather as social phenomena derivative of the particular conditions in which some Soviet teenagers were immersed. Premarital sexual contacts, teenage promiscuity and group sex – all of these had social roots in the moral norms of the groups that emerged on the margins of Soviet society. As other sources show, these margins had a specific topographic location in Soviet urban space, belonging to its dark public places. Stairwells, basements and garages stood in a metonymic relationship to those forms of sexual behaviour that were disapproved of by Soviet official discourse, partially because of the normalization of sexual violence, but most importantly because they also provided resources for non-normative sexualities. But as such, these non-normative forms of sexual behaviour were only part of broader social practices that, from

⁴³ D. N. Isaev, B. Ye. Mikirtumov, and Ye. I. Bogdanova, “Seksualnyie proiavleniia v klinicheskoi kartine pograniichnykh nervno-psikhicheskikh rasstroistv v detskom i podrostkovom vozraste,” *Pediatriia*, no. 3 (1979): 39–43, quotation on p. 42.

the perspective of Soviet officials and intelligentsia, threatened not only the reproductive health, but more importantly, the entire social health of the Soviet nation.

Containing the Stairwell

In 1990, a regional Soviet studio released a short documentary, *A Stairwell* (dir. Tatiana Vasilieva). The film started with the director interviewing a group of teenagers who gathered every evening on one of the stair landings in her multi-storeyed apartment block in Sverdlovsk (now Yekaterinburg). The interview was done in 1988 and, for the next two years, the filming crew traced the biographies of these teenagers, as nearly all of them, one after another, ended up in youth detention centers or prisons. The last part of the documentary was filmed on the same stair landing in 1990. The group of teenagers was still there, but its composition had changed dramatically: only one remained from 1988. Yet there was a lot in common between these two groups: behaviour, clothes, body language, ways of speaking, as well as antagonism with their more “civilized” neighbours and the police (Figure 27).⁴⁴



Figure 27. A group of teenagers in the stairwell of an apartment block in Sverdlovsk. *Left*: 1988; *right*: 1990. Still images from *Pod'ezd* (dir. Tatiana Vasilieva, studio Sverdlovskaiia, 1990).

⁴⁴ Tatiana Vasilieva, dir., *Pod'ezd*, a special issue of the newsreel *Sovetskii Ural*, no. 5 (1990).

In the documentary, the lives of Soviet teenagers rotate around the stairwell. It is here where they come every night; it is here where they return from youth detention centers. The director presses them to reveal why the stairwell is so appealing to them, and their confused and disconnected answers eventually converge into the explanation that it is the only place where they do not feel socially alienated. “We have nowhere else to spend our nights,” concludes one of the film’s subjects at one point.

The stairwell of Vasilieva’s film represents both a material and a social environment that produced deviance in late Soviet society. She avoids conventional explanations of juvenile crime, such as failures in educational work or negative peer influence; in fact, she does not offer any direct causal explanations for why most of the teenagers filmed in the first part of her documentary ended up in the Soviet penitentiary system. The connection between the Soviet stairwell and the Soviet prison in the film is spatial: one’s physical presence in the stairwell is followed by one’s imprisonment and then by the return to the stairwell. Teenage bodies represented in this film are derivative of the dark and marginal urban spaces of late socialism.

The most recent and detailed English-language study of social deviance in the post-Stalinist USSR, Brian LaPierre’s, *Hooligans in Khrushchev’s Russia*, interprets Soviet hooliganism of this period as a product of the new classificatory and regulatory policies introduced by Soviet leaders in an attempt to move from coercive methods of social engineering to more discreet and self-regulatory forms of social control. LaPierre’s central argument is that Soviet hooliganism was produced and reproduced on a daily basis when “Soviet citizens (both official and ordinary) interacted with, evaluated, and applied interpretive labels to the small-scale social niches around them.”⁴⁵ LaPierre explains deviance and petty crime as the interplay of social and power relations; his study is therefore primarily an exploration of how Soviet society was policed – in the name of order and progress – in the 1950s and 1960s.

This perspective has proven extremely productive in deepening our understanding of the interaction between society and power in the post-Stalinist USSR. Yet, following my

⁴⁵ LaPierre, *Hooligans in Khrushchev’s Russia*, 9.

research agenda to look at Soviet officials as accidental anthropologists, I suggest that we should complement LaPierre's structural and discursive explanations with those interpretations that Soviet officials and citizens used themselves to make sense of disorderly behavior among their compatriots. Their perspective might account for a more complex picture of how social deviance was produced and negotiated in the USSR. LaPierre mentions references to the "West's intrigues" and "relics of the (bourgeois) past," which were, indeed, a commonplace explanation of hooliganism in Soviet official rhetoric and criminal law.⁴⁶ At the same time, official reports and especially daily talk were dominated by other, materialist interpretations which linked social deviance to the material conditions of life in Soviet urban areas. Soviet officials and citizens were all too aware that hooliganism did not occur in an abstract social space. City parks, streets, yards, stairwells and apartments were the places where Soviet citizens experienced and witnessed petty crimes and encountered their traces: broken phone booths, carbonated water machines and lamps, destroyed vegetation, graffiti on the walls and spittle on the floor. The Soviet hooligan had multiple faces and flexible definitions, as LaPierre convincingly shows, but there was still one certainty about his origins which was reflected in Tatiana Vasilieva's *A Stairwell*: he (in the Soviet context, hooliganism was practiced as a form of masculinity⁴⁷) spawned from ordinary Soviet people in the dark urban places of socialist cities and towns.

It is therefore notable that the launch of the anti-hooligan campaign in the mid-1950s coincided not with the 1953 amnesty of Gulag prisoners, but rather with the launch of the mass housing program. Its materialist logic that the modern conditions of life in new apartments, houses and neighbourhoods would produce a new, modern, cultured and disciplined Soviet subject had a reverse side: it made many Soviet people – officials and ordinary citizens alike – strongly believe in a firm link between disorderly space and deviant behaviour. Authorities at all levels were overwhelmed with complaints from the residents of new neighbourhoods that shared one common message – that the unexpected

⁴⁶ Ibid., 19–20. For primary sources, see N. A. Belyaev and M. D. Shargorodskii, eds., *Kurs sovetskogo ugolovnogo prava (chast obshchaia)*, vol. 1 (Leningrad: Izd-vo LGU, 1968), 192–196.

⁴⁷ LaPierre, *Hooligans in Khrushchev's Russia*, 12.

ability of their spaces of transit to accumulate people, rather than to pass them unhampered, had a dangerous consequence: the potential transformation of local youth into deviant subjects.⁴⁸ Residents of a new apartment block in Leningrad's Vyborgsky District explicated this logic at their meeting in May 1968 when they demanded the cancellation of plans to construct a new parking area instead of a sports club in their yard:

The parking will occupy the area designated for children's sport facilities... We don't want our children and children from the adjacent apartment blocks to idle around in the street and stairwells – they should engage in useful activities.⁴⁹

A 1973 study of juvenile delinquency in the Republic of Karelia prepared for the regional Communist Party committee (*obkom*) claimed the same “idling around... in one's community” (*nichegonedelaniie... po mestu zhitelstva*) as its main cause. In order to reduce the juvenile crime level, its authors suggested that special countryside camps be organized which would negate the influence of “the street” on teenagers who tended to invest more time there than engaging in “socially useful activities.”⁵⁰ Responding one year later to this suggestion, party officials from the Pudozhskiy raion (district) of Karelia reported that they had organized a “military and sport camp” based in a local military garrison, with its daily routine “arranged to resemble the daily routine in the Soviet Army.”⁵¹ A 1976 survey of the activities of the Kondopoga Club of Young Technical Designers by the Karelian Komsomol committee praised the work of its kart racing section, because its supervisor was particularly successful in attracting teenagers from “stair landings,” as well as “controlling their school progress, communicating with

⁴⁸ Russian archives store a literally innumerable number of residents' complaints which linked disorderly urban space and juvenile delinquency. For example, the executive committee of the Vyborgsky district council in Leningrad collected hundreds of complaints each year. For complaints of 1967, see: Central State Archive of St. Petersburg (hereafter TsGA SPb), f. 148, op. 7, d. 555a. For complaints of 1979, see: TsGA SPb, f. 148, op. 9, d. 435.

⁴⁹ TsGA SPb, f. 148, op. 7, d. 647, l. 28.

⁵⁰ NARK, f. P-3, op. 26, d. 56, l. 1–7.

⁵¹ NARK, f. P-3, op. 26, d. 56, l. 58–61.

parents,” and, finally, pushing them to pursue technology specialities in technical schools.⁵²

The materialist understanding of the power of “the street and stairwells” to transform Soviet teenagers into delinquents offered Soviet officials and responsible citizens a similarly materialist solution: to extract them from the stairwell and move them to facilities where they would be under the strict supervision of someone endowed with authority. If stairwells were so effective in claiming the bodies and souls of Soviet teenagers, then the latter had to be relocated – by force, if necessary, as party officials from the Pudozhsky raion of Karelia implied in the report cited above – to another material and social environment that would shape their bodies and souls in more appropriate ways. Not surprisingly, one of the most popular forms of extra-curricular educational (*vospitatelnaia*) work among Soviet teenagers both in secondary and professional schools was tourist trips to cultural venues, heritage places, and sites related to Soviet military history – an idea dating back to Soviet pedagogical discourses of the 1920s and 1930s.⁵³ Trips to the “sites of revolutionary and military glory of the Soviet nation,” in particular, were regarded as instrumental in the upbringing of Soviet youth, since they provided a material environment that stimulated more socially responsible forms of identity performances than those provoked by one’s immediate living conditions. If repeated on a regular basis, such trips were supposed – according to the theory and practice of Soviet education – to make Soviet teenagers good socialist subjects.⁵⁴

In these and many other examples, Soviet officials and ordinary citizens did not differentiate between the material and social aspects of deviant behaviour among Soviet teenagers. Acting as spontaneous materialists, they recognized the power of stairwells and other public places to grant Soviet teenagers a negative social agency – negative, of

⁵² NARK, f. P-779, op. 62, d. 107, l. 33.

⁵³ Koenker, *Club Red*, 54–59.

⁵⁴ For Soviet theory on “education through space,” see, for example: Pavel Istomin, *Turistskaia deiatel'nost' kak sredstvo vospitaniia sotsialnoi aktivnosti starsheklassnikov*. Cand. Sc. dissertation in education. Research Institute of General Problems of Education of the USSR Academy of Pedagogical Sciences, 1978. For practice, see: NARK, f. R-1799, op. 8, d. 3/19, l. 74–80; NARK, f. R-3665, op. 1, d. 3/75, l. 1–4; NARK, f. R-2032, op. 2, d. 26/298, l. 15–16.

course, from the perspective of Soviet authorities. Peer influence and the peculiar moral norms of marginal groups were often referred to as the force transforming Soviet teenagers into deviant subjects, but the materiality of Soviet stairwells, basements and streets was just as important. Walls and the darkness of stairwells protected youth from the adult gaze, the central heating offered them shelter from the elements, and landing stairs made for crammed, but relatively uncontrolled communication and the creation of spaces for interaction. Stairwells were, in other words, breeding grounds for the social agency of Soviet teenagers.

Gilbert Ryle suggested in *The Concept of Mind* that ways of thinking, emotional response and behaviour stand in a certain relationship to one's position in physical space:

The statement 'the mind is its own place', as theorists might construe it, is not true, for the mind is not even a metaphorical 'place'. On the contrary, the chessboard, the platform, the scholar's desk, the judge's bench, the lorry-driver's seat, the studio and the football field are among its places. These are where people work and play stupidly or intelligently.⁵⁵

Soviet officials and intelligentsia, to a certain extent, would most likely concur with Ryle's statement in that, in their class logic, they recognized the stairwell, the basement and the street as places that defined – and not merely reflected – one's social position vis-à-vis the cultural norm. This drove the public effort to purge the transitory spaces of Soviet towns and cities of their unwelcome residents. The latter, devoid of a cultural voice, responded to this effort with the only means available to them – with those literally at hand.

Traces on the Walls

The 1988 criminal drama, *A Criminal Talent* (*Kriminalnyi Talant*, dir. Sergei Ashkenazi), starts as an investigation into a series of crimes committed by a young woman who has recently migrated to Leningrad. As the plot progresses, however, an

⁵⁵ Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (London: Routledge, 2009), 38.

ordinary criminal investigation gradually transforms into an investigation of the material conditions in which such migrants – young unqualified labourers in a huge Soviet metropolis – have to spend their lives. In *A Criminal Talent*, the Soviet cinematographic eye discovers marginal urban areas with their exploited and voiceless populations. Following its protagonist, a high-ranking officer of the Leningrad public prosecution department, the camera shows us dark and inhospitable spaces that destroy the aspirations, hopes and dreams of their new residents. The latter are seemingly unable to transform or even challenge these spaces of socialist alienation; the only impact they have on this urban environment is in the form of traces: graffiti on the walls and posters in the rooms of their factory's dormitory (Figure 28).

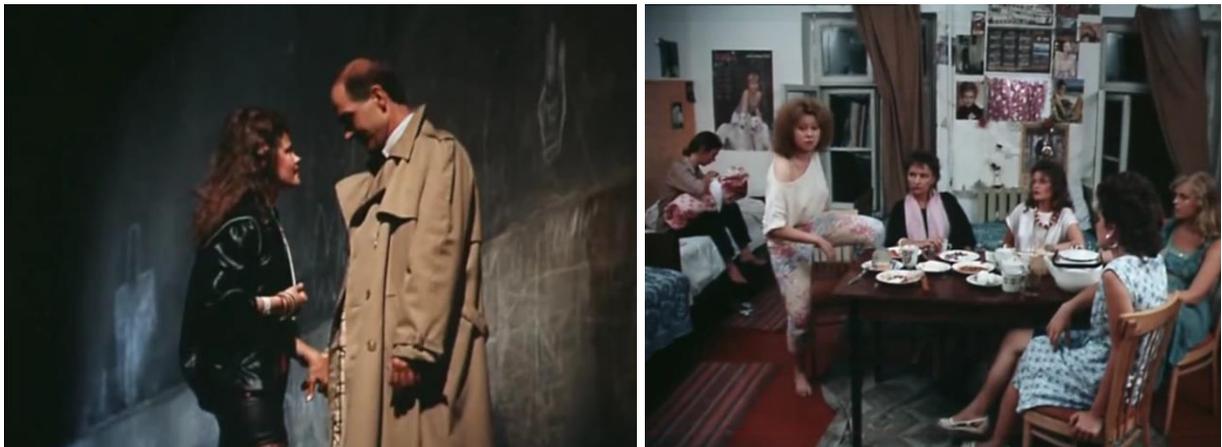


Figure 28: Urban Leningrad in *A Criminal Talent* (1988, dir. Sergei Ashkenazi). *Left*: graffiti on the walls of a workers' dormitory in Leningrad. *Right*: posters on the walls of a dormitory room shared by six female factory workers.

A Criminal Talent reflected the humanist momentum of perestroika cinematography in its attempt to understand how broad swaths of Soviet society became voiceless and marginalized. This is the main way in which it differs from the original novel on which the film is based, Stanislav Rodionov's 1979 *A Criminal Talent*, which avoids any

discussion of the antagonist's social roots in late socialist city life.⁵⁶ The same humanist momentum – to give voice to marginal urban groups – can be seen in Tatiana Vasilieva's *A Stairwell*, discussed above, in Juris Podnieks's famous documentary *Is It Easy to Be Young?* (1986, Rīgas kinostudija), and in, *The Twelfth Floor*, one of the most remarkable projects of perestroika-era television. *The Twelfth Floor* was a talk show broadcast in 1986 and 1987 and built as a dialogue between high-ranking Komsomol and government officials, on the one side, and Soviet teenagers, on the other. The latter were filmed on a stairwell – a clear reference to the omnipresence of teenage groups in Soviet stairwells. The Soviet TV critic Sergei Muratov referred to *The Twelfth Floor* as one of the key landmarks in the history of Soviet television and particularly emphasized that the stairwell itself became a catalyst of social antagonism revealed by the program:

The “stairwell,” a group of teenagers who infiltrated the back entrance of one of Moscow's “houses of culture” (to which they previously had been refused entry), behaved defiantly, sought scandal, and fired aggressive questions at the bureaucrats they invited to the show-bureaucrats whose responses seemed programmed in advance. The “stairwell” itself quickly assumed the role of an actor in the program.⁵⁷

Perestroika-era cinematography and television exposed the link between urban powerlessness and voicelessness, and in doing so brought into the open public debate about what Soviet people had known for decades as common sense and what Soviet low-level officials and educators reflected in their writings. Petty criminality and the overall despondency of life in Soviet suburbs had a palpable material foundation in broken street lamps, graffiti on building walls, dark stairwells, damp basements, teenage bodies smelling of cigarette smoke and alcohol, their aggressive postures, and physical assaults. This material foundation was, in turn, derivative of the very structure of late socialism.

⁵⁶ Stanislav Rodionov, “Kriminalnyi talant,” in Stanislav Rodionov, *Kriminalnyi talent: Povesti* (St.Petersburg: Interlast, 1994), 387–590. In comparison with the film, the setting of the novel is largely limited to the prosecutor's office.

⁵⁷ Sergei Muratov, “Soviet Television and the Structure of Broadcasting Authority,” *Journal of Communication* 41, no. 2 (1991): 172.

Juris Podnieks voiced this perspective in *Is It Easy to Be Young* through one of his characters who says: “Yes, we are dirty, ragged, creepy, but we are your children, and you created us like this with your duplicity and lies... Society produced us, and now it’s trying to brush us aside.”⁵⁸ What these perestroika-era films and documentaries also showed is that the Soviet working-class and marginalized urban groups, although devoid of a cultural voice and political power, still retained social agency. They struggled for the appropriation of Soviet public spaces, with that struggle taking very tangible material forms, most characteristically that of vandalism.

Contemporary and historical accounts of Soviet modern neighbourhoods describe in detail the impact of these deviant groups on the urban environment, in general, and stairwells, in particular. Residents of a new apartment block in Leningrad complained at a meeting in 1968:

The struggle against drunkards and thieves is carried out poorly. Sometimes they are not punished at all. Nobody is held responsible for the damage to and destruction of the green vegetation – the beauty of our city. Streets are poorly lit; many stairwells are not lit at all; bulbs are missing on many stair landings.⁵⁹

The poor illumination of streets and stairwells mentioned above was most likely a product of the intentional destruction of lights by disorderly youth. This is how, for example, a correspondent of the official magazine *Sovety narodnykh deputatov* explained the ramshackle appearance of many Soviet apartment blocks despite the incessant efforts of local authorities to maintain them in proper order:

Look into the stairwells of even recently built apartment blocks. Today, one can hardly call them new. It is not the fleeting time that left here sorrowful traces of decay, but human

⁵⁸ Juris Podnieks, dir., *Legko li byt' molodym?* (Rīgas kinostudija, 1986).

⁵⁹ TsGA SPb, f. 148, op. 7, d. 647, l. 31.

irresponsibility. It is sad to see stairwells with walls scribbled by unknown scribes, with stolen bulbs, with broken lamps.⁶⁰

This abstract also refers to another omnipresent feature of Soviet stairwells and other public places: graffiti on walls.⁶¹ The walls of Soviet stairwells were routinely scribbled with carved and painted messages, often with obscene vocabulary. Intermediate landings were commonly used as smoking places, and cigarette butts, together with spittle and litter, were another common spectacle in stairwells. Finally, among Soviet teenagers there was a special method of decorating ceilings that completely destroyed their whitewash. This method employed matches that were lit and then immediately stuck into the whitewash forming, as they burnt, a small black stain with a charcoaled match hanging from its middle; various patterns could be made using a matchbox. Soviet satirical cine-magazine *Yeralash* featured this method in one of its issues which showed an elementary school student teaching it to an extraterrestrial visitor (Figure 29); in reality, charcoaled ceilings were a widespread problem for the managers and residents of Soviet apartment blocks.



Figure 29. A vandalized UFO. Still images from Issue 54 of *Yeralash* (1986). *Left*: an extraterrestrial visitor learning to use matches. *Right*: charcoaled ceiling of a UFO, looking similar to many ceiling in stairwells and elevators of Soviet apartment blocks.

⁶⁰ Andrei Troitskii, "Sud'ba pochina," *Sovety narodnykh deputatov*, no. 5 (1987): 61. The author later became a well-known writer in the genre of criminal novel, actively exploiting the imagery of marginal socialist and post-socialist urban spaces in his writing.

⁶¹ On the history of Soviet graffiti, see John Bushnell, *Moscow Graffiti: Language and Subculture* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1990).

Outside of their apartment blocks, in the public places of their microdistricts, Soviet citizens evidenced similar “traces of decay” left by “human irresponsibility.” For a Soviet aviation engineer commissioned in 1966 to Cuba as part of the Soviet technical assistance program to the new revolutionary regime, the lack of urban vandalism was so impressive that he wrote about it in his diary: “Phone booths [in Havana] are located near taxi stands. No surveillance, and yet the phones are in a complete order (I am recalling vandalized Soviet phone booths).”⁶² Phone booths were one of the favourite objects of destruction in Soviet cities and towns: in 1983, for example, the newspaper *Sovetskaia Latvia* reported that in Riga in 1982, hooligans destroyed or stole 7,200 microphone inlets and 1,700 receivers, and smashed 1,800 square meters of glass in phone booths.⁶³ Street vending machines selling carbonated water were another such object of destruction. In 1979, a resident of the apartment block on 17/1 Friedrich Engels Street in Leningrad sent the following complaint to the city newspaper *Leninskaia Pravda*:

Under our windows, there are carbonated water machines, which disturb our peace during evenings and nights. As the month of May approaches, shivers of horror go through our veins. Here is one example that occurred yesterday, overnight into 16.06.1979. At approximately 12.40 am, a group of ten drunken teenagers – and with an additional half-liter bottle of vodka in their hands – came to the machines. And what they were doing is hard to describe. They hit it with flying kicks, broke all glass cups, then there was a sound like a police whistle, and they ran away, but soon returned and started it all over: flying kicks and obscenities. Then they went to the shoe repairman’s booth and decided to break glasses in it... Can I ask for whom these machines are installed? In mornings, drunkards [*khanygi*] use them to ease a hangover, and in evenings and nights – well, I described you the events of one night, and there are so many similar nights ahead, this is just a nightmare!.. With such a neighbour as the carbonated water machine, one just wants to go outside and cry out: Help! No peace and no life.⁶⁴

⁶² Unpublished diary of Rostislav Rokitienskii, entry 3311. I am grateful to Vladimir Rokitienskii for sharing his father’s diary.

⁶³ Reproduced in: *The Current Digest of Soviet Press* XXXV, no. 33 (1983): 16.

⁶⁴ TsGA SPb, f. 148, op. 9, d. 435, l. 54–55.

This emotional letter inadvertently provides insight into the parallel affective regimes of interaction with urban space. For a law-abiding citizen with a family and exhausting work schedule, the nightly noise of shattered glass and metal under his windows was connected to feelings of fear and anxiety. Symptomatically, the author of the letter sees the root of his misfortunes in the carbonated water machines themselves, or more precisely in their ability to attract deviant adults and teenagers. It is machines that he calls “neighbours” and it is they that “disturb our peace.” His main request was to move these machines “to the vegetable market across the street where they won’t disturb people and will work at full capacity.”⁶⁵ It was affective assemblages of teenage bodies, on the one hand, and stairwells, streets and other urban spaces of transit with their ability to accumulate these bodies, on the other, that terrified those Soviet citizens who embodied the social norm and thus acquired social voice – for example, by expressing their fears and disgust of their urban environment in letters to newspapers or debates at residents’ meetings. As with any modern state, the Soviet Union had its politics of aesthetics, which was built around the dichotomy of cleanliness and dirt, with the former being associated with progress, rationality and high morality, and the latter with regress, social deviance and danger.⁶⁶ Acting from this aesthetic position, Soviet officials and responsible citizens inevitably evaluated vandalized public property as dirty and acts of vandalism as dangerous, hence the common demands in everyday talk and pedagogical discourse to protect children from “the influence of street and stairwells.”

Yet that same affective component was very different for those people who were part of these assemblages – for children leaving black stains on the white ceilings of stairwells and elevators, for teenagers smashing glass and tearing off receivers in phone booths, or breaking stairwell lamps for better privacy for casual sex, and for adults smoking and drinking on stair landings and leaving empty bottles, cigarette butts and

⁶⁵ Ibid, l. 55.

⁶⁶ Tricia Starks, *The Body Soviet Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008). Alaina Lemon also discusses the dirt as a category of Russian modernity in relations to another marginalized group – Russian Roma people.

spittle on their floors. One of my respondents admitted that as a teenager and young adult in Leningrad during the 1970s he had participated in some of these activities. His explanation was simple: smashing glass in phone booths “was fun,” a nice form of entertainment in an otherwise boring life in the Leningrad suburbs (he was a resident of the Vyborgsky district at a time when it experienced mass housing construction).⁶⁷ Soviet writers who in 1977 assembled at the Plenum of the USSR Union of Writers to define what Soviet adolescent literature should be ended up discussing the relationship between materiality, emotionality and social deviance among teenagers. Vladimir Amlinsky, a member of the Board of the Union, suggested that there was a direct connection between the inability – or unwillingness – of teenagers to master the dominant cultural discourse (“withdrawal from the normal language” in his words) and the appeal of “night yards, stairwells,.. stuffy dance floors, aimless walks, cravings for a fight, for a meaningless conflict with anybody under any pretext...”⁶⁸ Amlinsky, in particular, recognized that the material environment of urban spaces was affective to the degree that it could define the very selves of Soviet teenagers:

Mugs are rattling in [open air] beer stands, domino tiles are clapping, a voiceless guitar is thrumming dully... And then sometimes this spiritlessness explodes in an aggression... I saw teenagers who at one moment were kind and understood normal human language, and at the next – surprising manifestations of unchildish cruelty. Saw their sincere puzzlement after committed misdeeds: “How could I do it? What for?..” Where do they come from, these teenagers in dark alleys who just an hour ago were good lads, smiled, made jokes, whistled some tune, and who are now ready to deal you a blow?⁶⁹

Amlinsky identified – although he did not name directly – the autonomy of affect from individual bodies, its material foundation in the environment of “night yards, stairwells [and] stuffy dance floors,” its ability to attach itself to people and momentarily

⁶⁷ Interview with V.G., taken by Alexey Golubev, 19 June 2014, St.Petersburg, in the author’s personal collection.

⁶⁸ Vladimir Amlinsky, “Response to Sergei Mikhalkov’s speech,” *Detskaia literatura*, no. 12 (1977): 35.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

change them from “good lads” to dangerous thugs “ready to deal you a blow.” In many ways, the comments of Amlinsky and other participants at the 1977 meeting of the Plenum of the USSR Union of Writers tacitly recognized the fragmented nature of the Soviet teenage self and the social agency of things that made up the Soviet teenager’s world. The conclusions they made from this recognition were ambivalent. On the one hand, such recognition opened up vast possibilities for the social engineering of Soviet youth through such a powerful material object as the book. On the other hand, it further underlined the dangers that Soviet spaces of transit brought for the socialist enlightenment project. Sergei Mikhalkov, the Secretary of the Union and the highest-profile participant of this discussion, encapsulated these fears and hopes in his call to fellow writers “to understand what kinds of needs bring teenagers together in yards and in stairwells, what problems are solved there, and to respond to these needs with books...”⁷⁰

Summarizing these observations, such acts of vandalizing socialist property and, to a certain degree, street violence in the late USSR, might be seen as products of a specific historical affective regime of people’s interactions with Soviet urban space. In terms of motivation in each individual case, smashing the glass in phone booths, drinking alcohol on stair landings, or charcoaling the ceiling in a stairwell was “fun,” something done in order to entertain oneself during one’s leisure time. Yet by leaving traces of their social existence in the public spaces of Soviet microdistricts,⁷¹ disorderly Soviet urban groups entered into affective assemblages with these spaces, appropriated them, made them scary for the Soviet educated public, and in this respect engaged in a conflict with the values and principles of the dominant socialist discourse on the orderly, progressive and purist transformation of social reality. The social agency of urban groups devoid of political power and cultural voice emerged from their assemblages with stairwells,

⁷⁰ Sergei Mikhalkov, “Podrostki: Problemy vospitaniia i literatura,” *Detskaia literatura*, no. 12 (1977): 21.

⁷¹ John Bushnell, for example, interprets Soviet graffiti as a product of new social stratification in post-Stalinist culture, through which new groups sought to announce their existence and to claim social space: Bushnell, *Moscow Graffiti*, 40.

basements, garages, and city parks. At stake in this social conflict was the very livability of late socialist urban space.

Conclusion

Ditmar Rozental was a Soviet Samuel Johnson; his name is associated with some of the most popular vocabularies and guidebooks of the Russian language. One of these, published in 1981, is *Government in the Russian Language*, a reference book of noun inflections in combination with the most common verbs. Each entry consists of a verb, a preposition which is used with it (if any), the case inflection of dependent nouns and one or several examples of its usage. One of its entries, the verb *беречь* (“protect”), provides an example which is curiously relevant for this chapter: “to protect children from the influence of the street.”⁷²

“The street” of this example was one of those late socialist spaces of transit which, when not countered by persistent effort on the part of authorities and society, was perceived as corrupting the young Soviet generation. The inclusion of this example in a vocabulary, a cultural product that supposedly operates with the most common and neutral meanings, betrays a social concern so deeply rooted in the dominant culture that it is no longer interpreted as something to be questioned. By the time of the publication of Rozental’s guidebook, it was part of the Soviet common sense that Soviet streets (or stairwells, or basements) were socially dangerous.

This chapter has shown how the drive “to protect children from the influence of the street” became a cornerstone of Soviet educational discourse, in general, and extracurricular activities, in particular. In Chapter 2, I discussed the constructive agenda of extra-curricular activities in the USSR: Soviet educational theorists regarded them as pedagogical tools which would teach Soviet children and teenagers values, attitudes and skills for responsible Soviet citizenship. But the network of hobby clubs, houses of Young Pioneers, and sport complexes that the Soviet authorities were incessantly developing also had another, preventive agenda to distract children from spending their

⁷² Ditmar Rozental, *Upravleniie v russkom iazyke* (Moscow: Nauka, 1981), 14.

out-of-school time “idling around in the street and stairwells.”⁷³ This didactic drive became translated into the life biographies of many children from educated families whose leisure time was occupied with music and dancing lessons, arts and crafts, sports and amateur engineering, and of course reading at home.⁷⁴ A responsible Soviet subject was one who, as a teenager, invested their free time in books, models and other socially responsible things and activities. Its antipode was someone who spent their free time in a stairwell. This logic found, perhaps, the most perfect expression in the novels and pedagogical practice of Vladislav Krapivin, a popular Soviet juvenile literature author and strong advocate of extra-curricular education. In 1961, Krapivin, an educator, established and for many years supervised the Young Pioneers’ experimental club Caravel (*Karavella*), which organized the free time of its members through fencing classes, filmmaking workshops, outdoor trips and, most importantly, the building and operation of sailing ships (hence the name).⁷⁵ As for his books, his main protagonist is a suburban teenager who challenges his material environment and its associated vices; the spatial structure of his novels is based on a contrast between the simultaneously dull and dangerous Soviet city, on the one hand, and imaginary romantic spaces, such as the sea or parallel worlds, on the other hand; most plots are organized as the protagonist’s escape into the latter. Not surprisingly, one of Krapivin’s most fervent Soviet-era critics accused his writing of nurturing social antagonism.⁷⁶

The significant absence of urban public places in the life biographies of Soviet intelligentsia is too often translated into a silence about their vibrant social lives – an observation with which I started this chapter. Many Western scholars, who sometimes evince a solidarity with Soviet and post-Soviet intelligentsia, perhaps due to their shared

⁷³ TsGA SPb, f. 148, op. 7, d. 647, l. 28.

⁷⁴ Writing in 1987, the authors of a sociological research on Soviet workers noted that children of the latter fell notably behind children from “white collar” families (*sem’i sluzhashchikh-spetsialistov*) in rates of attendance of extra-curricular activities, especially in music: A. K. Nazimova, ed., *Sovetskie rabochie v usloviakh uskoreniia sotsialno-ekonomicheskogo razvitiia* (Moscow: Nauka, 1987), 158.

⁷⁵ L. A. Krapivina, “Pionerskii otriad ‘Karavella’: Vzgliad skvoz’ prizmu desiatiletii,” *Obrazovanie i nauka*, no. 4 (2012): 128–143.

⁷⁶ Aleksandr Razumikhin, “Pravilo bez iskliuchenii, ili Prozhrachnaia zlost’ i intelligentnyie malchiki Vladislava Krapivina,” *Ural*, no. 8 (1988): 149–152. For a response to Razumikhin by one of advocates of Krapivin’s juvenile fiction, see: Valentin Luk’ianin, “Schast’e byt’ chelovekom,” *Ural*, no. 8 (1988): 152–156.

class position, reproduce this silence. For example, Caroline Humphrey in *The Unmaking of Soviet Life*, referring to Svetlana Boym's studies of late socialist spaces, wrote:

In Soviet Russia... you were either in the space of official decorum or in the nooks of domesticity. Any other space, like the stairwells or backyards of apartment blocks, was a space of alienation, belonging to everyone and no one, and often a hangout for drunks and strewn with rubbish and graffiti.⁷⁷

Humphrey here writes from an apparently aesthetic position (“strewn with rubbish and graffiti”), which can be found in abundance in Soviet official and dissident discourses alike and which disguises the social antagonism that was generated by the specific material environment of Soviet urban space. This antagonism, in turn, generates statements that dehumanize their populations in cultural and academic representations. In the example above, Humphrey refers to the stairwells and backyards of apartment blocks as “spaces of alienation” – which they were, but only for the Soviet educated public; occupying this specific social position, she then dismissively characterizes these public spaces (and their residents) as “hangouts for drunkards.” Another interesting example can be found in *Prisoners of Power* by Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, who seem to consciously play with this stereotype. Early in the novel, their protagonist, a highly educated and intelligent adventurer from a communist society of the future, is confronted by a street gang in a dark alley archway reminiscent of similar places in Soviet microdistricts. His imagination immediately transforms the gang members into apes, which allows him to massacre the entire group: “Something clicked in his brain and the people vanished... [Instead of people], dangerous animals stamped clumsily through the mud.”⁷⁸ *Prisoners of Power* and its sequels have obvious elements of a Bildungsroman, and the Strugatsky brothers' character gradually learns to deal with the antagonism

⁷⁷ Caroline Humphrey, *The Unmaking of Soviet Life: Everyday Economies after Socialism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2002), 212.

⁷⁸ Arkady and Boris Strugatsky, *Prisoners of Power* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), 43.

caused by his move from a socially homogenous environment of the Communist future into a world riven by class conflicts.

Post-Soviet culture has actively exploited the imagery of the stairwell and similar urban common places in the blossoming genres of the criminal novel and criminal telenovela. The stairwell's place as the absent signifier of Soviet and post-Soviet subjectivity allows authors writing or making films in these genres to represent it as an endless source of criminality, to populate it with social outcasts and to induce excitement and anxiety among their audience, which easily recognizes this imagery. It is hardly surprising that some of the most productive authors in this genre are highly educated and come from a very different social background than their characters.⁷⁹ Their writing reproduces and perpetuates social knowledge which – to return to Michel Foucault's argument in his debate with Noam Chomsky – acts as a form and measure in social struggle.⁸⁰

As for the stairwell itself, it has undergone a significant transformation since the collapse of the USSR. In 1977, in the aforementioned report at the Plenum of the Board of the USSR Union of Writers, Sergei Mikhalkov expressed his belief that good books were capable of reforming disorderly Soviet youth; he argued that “we should not put a lock on an entranceway door.”⁸¹ Yet, ironically, it was the mass spread of tumbler security locks and especially house intercoms in Soviet stairwells that transformed them over the last two decades.⁸² The contemporary Russian stairwell is, on average, cleaner and lighter than its late Soviet counterpart. It also lives a different social life, reflecting – as well as objectifying and influencing – new, post-Soviet social structures.

⁷⁹ Evgeny Sukhov, the author of the popular series *Ia – vor v zakone*, is a Candidate of Sciences in Geology and works as an Associate Professor at Kazan State University. Andrei Konstantinov (Bakonin), the screenwriter of the famous TV series *Banditskii Peterburg*, is a graduate of the Faculty of Oriental Studies of Leningrad State University and a professional interpreter and translator from the Arabic language. Vladimir Kolychev, another popular author of this genre, received a degree *Cum Laude* in engineering from a military academy and served as a military engineer in the Soviet and later Russian Army.

⁸⁰ Chomsky and Foucault, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate*, 40.

⁸¹ Sergei Mikhalkov, “Podrostki: Problemy vospitaniia i literatura,” *Detskaia literatura*, no. 12 (1977): 21.

⁸² See, e.g., Rosa Vihavainen, “Common and dividing things in homeowners' associations,” in Oleg Kharkhordin and Risto Alapuro, eds., *Political Theory and Community Building in Post-Soviet Russia* (London: Routledge, 2010), 139–163.



Figure 30. A Soviet barbell produced in Leningrad, ca. 1980s. Photograph © 2015 Aleksandr Osipov.

Chapter 5. Empowering Iron

Bodybuilding and Elemental Materialism in the late USSR (1962–1991)

I receive lots of letters in which young men complain that they shy away from dating girls because of physical weakness. To the authors of these letters I always successfully prescribe “iron pills.”

Georgi Tenno, “Not a cult, but culture.”¹

We also have basements. Yet we are not “getting high” in them, but rather exercising! Boxing, weightlifting – in other words, “pumping iron,” and this gives a lot to us – strength, health, self-assurance.

A Soviet teenage bodybuilder’s letter to
Komsomolskaia Pravda.²

Among the numerous waves of moral panic that overwhelmed the Soviet Union in its final years, one can be dated to two articles that appeared simultaneously in the pages of *Ogoniok* and *Sobesednik*, two of the most popular Soviet weeklies, in February 1987.³ The articles resulted from a joint investigation about youth behaviour in one of Moscow’s satellite towns, Liubertsy. These youth were reported to be enrolling in large numbers in basement gyms and then traveling in organized groups to Moscow to “beat-up” punks, hippies, and metalheads, as well as teenagers who dressed and behaved in conspicuously Western, non-Soviet fashions. In interviews, the *liubery* (they named

¹ Georgi Tenno, “Ne kult, a kultura: Zametki o kulturizme,” *Iunost*, 5 (1966): 103.

² The letter appeared in a 1987 issue of *Komsomolskaia Pravda*; here quoted as reproduced in Vladimir Kozlov, *Realnaia kultura: Ot alternativy do emo* (Moscow: Amfora, 2008), 123.

³ Vladimir Iakovlev, “Kontora liuberov,” *Ogoniok*, 5 (1987): 20–21; Aleksandr Kupriianov, “Liubertsy pri svete fonarei, ili Pasyunki stolitsy,” *Sobesednik*, 7 (1987): 10–15.

themselves after their home town) insisted that they were acting as exemplary Soviet citizens: “Hippies, punks and metalheads are a disgrace to the Soviet way of life. We want to cleanse the capital of them.”⁴ As another *liuber* wrote in a letter to a Soviet youth magazine:

I am 18. I can say without any misgivings that I love my Motherland. And I contribute to it more than many Komsomol⁵ members. Lots of maggots have multiplied like rabbits these days: fascists, punks, metalheads, rockers... That is why I fully support the *liubers* and never miss a single raid of these lads in their hunt for the shadow of the rotten West.⁶

The articles in *Ogoniok* and *Sobesednik* had a huge resonance.⁷ They were one of the earliest examples of the Soviet press tackling social conflict, a notable change from a mass media that for years had described Soviet society as conflict-free. Moreover, this conflict developed not somewhere in the Soviet periphery, but in the very heart of the USSR. Among Western-oriented liberal intellectuals who hailed Mikhail Gorbachev’s reforms, the practice of bodybuilding for the sake of street fights against conspicuously Western subcultures presented the grim prospect of a conservative revolution from below.⁸ The authors of the articles, which represented the *liubery* and other similar groups of teenage bodybuilders as a social threat, accentuated that the latter belonged to the suburban youth with a “low” educational and cultural background and even developed a conspiracy theory that cast them as a street school of some mafia-like

⁴ Iakovlev, “Kontora liuberov,” 20.

⁵ The youth organization of the Soviet Communist Party.

⁶ Quoted in: Dilan Troi, Viktor Troieubov and Margarita Pushkina, “*Ariia*”: *Legenda o dinozavre (s iskopaiemykh vremion)* (Moscow: Nota-R, 2005): 14.

⁷ See a historical discussions of the contemporary public reaction to these publications in terms of a “moral panic”: Anna Rudnitskaia, “Kuda ukhodiat liubera,” *Ogoniok*, 46 (2005): 24–25; Hilary Pilkington, *Russia’s Youth and Its Culture: A Nation’s Constructors and Constructed* (London: Routledge, 1994), 141–160; Dmitry Gromov, “‘Moralnaia panika’ kak mekhanizm razvitiia riada molodiozhnykh soobshchestv Sovetskogo Soiuz a i Rossii,” *Istoricheskaia psikhologii a i sotsiologii a istorii* 5, no. 1 (2012): 164–78.

⁸ Gromov, “Moralnaia panika kak mekhanizm,” 169.

organization,⁹ an allegation that has never been confirmed by scholars of late Soviet youth subcultures.¹⁰ Their threat to the social order was additionally underlined on the rhetorical and visual levels: for example, the illustration accompanying Vladimir Iakovlev’s article “The shady business of the ‘*liubery*’” (one of the two which triggered the panic about the *liubery*) obscured the heads of its protagonists with the headline, thereby focusing the readers’ gaze on their bodies, represented in ostensibly aggressive postures (Figure 31).



Figure 31. Opening paragraphs and image from Vladimir Iakovlev’s article “The shady business of the ‘*liubery*’.”

Yet contemporary assessment of this practice was far from uniform. A number of other influential Soviet magazines, such as *Nedelia* and *Tekhnika-Molodiozhi*, published laudatory articles about the bodybuilding gyms in Liubertsy and those regularly visiting them. The authors of these articles emphasized a different aspect of this practice, namely that local youth enrolled in these gyms in order to prepare their bodies and minds for

⁹ Iakovlev, “Kontora liubеров,” 21; N. Ivanov, “Vorkuta – stolitsa razdorov?” *Detskaia literatura*, no. 10 (1988): 16–18. It was the time when Soviet television stations broadcast the Italian TV series *La piovra* (Octopus) about the Italian mafia, which became an immediate hit in the USSR, so the Soviet public already possessed the cultural expertise to recognize these conspiratorial implications: Leonid Parfionov, *Namedni. Nasha era. 1981–1990* (Moscow: Kolibri, 2010), 169.

¹⁰ Pilkington, *Russia’s Youth and Its Culture*, 147–148; Gromov, “Moralnaia panika kak mekhanizm,” 169.

military service in the Soviet Army, in particular, and for proper Soviet adulthood and citizenship, in general. From this perspective, basement bodybuilding emerged as a socially useful, even desirable activity. One of these articles quoted a Soviet Army captain who had just returned from Afghanistan, claiming that, “They [*athletes from Liubertsy*] were my right hand in raids against jihadists.”¹¹ Another journalist went so far as to suggest that Soviet authorities should promote bodybuilding as a standard physical activity for teenagers in order to prepare them for proper Soviet manhood and citizenship, thus referring to Liubertsy as an exemplar for the entire Soviet Union.¹² Yuri Sorokin, one of the pioneers of bodybuilding in the USSR, responded to this call by publishing, in an impressive run of 365,000 copies, a book entitled *Athletic Training of a Pre-Conscription Teenager* (1990). Its cover page featured a muscular teenager with a kettlebell and a Soviet airborne force commando – the teenager’s presumed alter ego – in the background, with both figures radiating strength and self-confidence. The text instructed its teenage readers on how to develop physical and mental preparedness to properly perform national duty in the Soviet Army.¹³

For this chapter, the most important aspect in the story of young bodybuilders from Liubertsy is that all of the people participating – the athletes; the critical and the laudatory press; local municipal, party and police bodies; and Soviet Army officers – recognized the key role of material objects (the weightlifting equipment, or “iron,” as it was known among weightlifters) and the material environment (basement gyms) in the production of Soviet bodies and Soviet selves. The critics of basement bodybuilding feared that iron¹⁴ empowered working-class suburban teenagers to the degree that they could generate negative social change. A possible resurgence of normative Sovietness driven from below by an army of underground bodybuilders and weightlifters encapsulated the worst fears of Western-oriented intellectuals in the USSR. Practitioners

¹¹ Leonid Chuiko and Sergey Metelitsa, “Parni iz Liuberets,” *Nedelia*, 27 (1987): 17.

¹² Olga Bobrova, “Sportpodvaly v Liubertsakh,” *Tekhnika–Molodiozhi*, 4 (1988): 19–21.

¹³ Yuri Sorokin, *Atleticheskaia podgotovka doprizyvnik, ili Telnishka v podarok* (Moscow: Sovetskii sport, 1990).

¹⁴ Hereafter I am using this term in the same sense as bodybuilders do: as objects and equipment used to transform one’s body into a muscular form.

and advocates of bodybuilding, in turn, linked the muscular body with proper citizenship (“I love my Motherland,” in the words of the *liuber* quoted above). For them, basement gyms were a key to obtaining “strength, health, self-assurance,” the qualities which physically, by way of muscle growth, imprinted one’s devotion to national duty on the individual body. The difference between critics and advocates of Soviet bodybuilding was not in substance, but in modality: both recognized that the assemblage of iron, basements and bodies generated social agency, but differed on whether iron and basement gyms produced normative or deviant bodies and behaviours.

This chapter is a history of the assemblage of iron, basements, muscular bodies and associated social meanings in late Soviet cultural context. It starts in 1962 when bodybuilding first appeared in the USSR and traces through its three last decades how socialist bodies empowered by iron acquired social agency, how Soviet sport officials sought to regulate the social power of iron, how the concepts of health, aesthetic bodies, masculinity and citizenship were negotiated in debates over and practices of Soviet bodybuilding, and how basement gyms, while excluded from the official Soviet sport system, became social locations which produced loyal Soviet citizens. The idea of the assemblage, discussed earlier in the Introduction and Chapter 1, implies that any part of social reality, such as things, bodies, institutions, or meanings, can come into contact with any other part and produce new social effects. Therefore, despite their fluidity, assemblages are inseparable from social power,¹⁵ and an analysis of the Soviet assemblage of makeshift weightlifting equipment, semi-legal basement gyms and male bodies provides new perspectives on and interpretations of the social dynamics of power and subjectivity in the late USSR.

There is one more aspect of my interest in the late Soviet assemblage of iron, basement and bodies in addition to its offering the new perspectives on the work of power and subjectivation in the USSR. After bodybuilding emerged in the USSR in the early 1960s, leading Soviet newspapers and magazines engaged in debates as to whether the bodies and souls of Soviet bodybuilders met the criteria of normative socialist

¹⁵ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 7.

masculinity and citizenship. As I show in this chapter, at stake in these debates were the questions of whether Soviet sport authorities should deny iron and bodybuilding gyms the power to produce subjects and whether this power could help Soviet people fashion themselves in a proper way without explicit state involvement. To understand how this worked, I first give an account of the controversy created by bodybuilding in the Soviet sports milieu in the 1960s and 1970s; then place this controversy within a broader historical context of cultural recognition of the power of iron in the late USSR; and finally offer an analysis of why, despite a prominent discursive and spatial effort to marginalize bodybuilding in the Soviet Union, it still emerged as a practice which produced loyal and responsible Soviet citizens.

A Morally Dangerous and Aesthetically Dubious Activity

Historians of Soviet bodybuilding – most of whom were themselves members of the bodybuilding community – date its origins to the turn of the 1960s.¹⁶ It was then, in the heyday of Khrushchev’s Thaw and the declared return to Leninist humanism, that Soviet cultural production re-aestheticized the human body and re-emphasized its individualizing, intimate aspects.¹⁷ This Thaw-era social decentralization of social life was the historical background in which Soviet sport enthusiasts discovered bodybuilding. Ben Weider, a co-founder of the International Federation of Bodybuilding and Fitness and a key figure in the history of bodybuilding, visited the Soviet Union in 1955 trying to promote bodybuilding, only to face a lack of any official interest.¹⁸ Despite his failure, the claims of Western advocates of bodybuilding that “iron” was capable of producing aesthetically perfect human bodies did not go unnoticed by some of the people

¹⁶ Shishanov, “O razvitiu atleticheskoi gimnastiki,” 52; Sheiko, “Kratkii ocherk,” 242; Mikhail Bokov, “Kak v Sovetskom Soiuzhe poiavilis kachki,” *Furfur.Me*: <http://www.furfur.me/furfur/all/culture/176291-istoriya-kulturizma-v-sssr>, accessed 3 December 2014.

¹⁷ Igor Kon, *The Sexual Revolution in Russia: From the Age of the Czars to Today*, trans. James Riordan (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 85–90; Debora A. Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev’s Russia* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007): 51–65; Olga Gurova, *Sovetskoie nizhnee bel’io: Mezhu ideologiiie i povsednevnostiuu* (Moscow: NLO, 2008); Natalia Lebina, *Muzhchina i zhenshchina: Telo, moda, odezhda. SSSR – ottepel* (Moscow: NLO, 2014).

¹⁸ Joe Weider and Ben Weider, *Brothers of Iron* (Champaign, IL: Sports Publishing LLC, 2006), 144–149.

responsible for the development of Soviet sport. Beginning in 1962, several sport enthusiasts employed at the Central Research Institute of Physical Culture in Moscow published articles and exercises on how to develop one's musculature in order to pursue an aesthetic ideal of the perfect human body.¹⁹ By the end of the 1960s, the first books on "athleticism" and "athletic gymnastic," as bodybuilding was dubbed in Soviet sport terminology, appeared. One of them – Georgi Tenno and Yuri Sorokin's *Atletizm* – became a de-facto standard guide used in Soviet bodybuilding gyms.²⁰ The sport magazine *Sportivnaia zhizn Rossii* [The Sport Life of Russia] became the mouthpiece of Soviet bodybuilding. Despite all the waves of official criticism it kept on publishing advice and exercises on how to use iron to build one's perfect body throughout the last three decades of the Soviet Union.²¹

To a certain degree, Soviet bodybuilding was a product of the transnational nature of the Cold War era when, beginning in the mid-1950s, the Iron Curtain increasingly turned from a dividing line into an active contact zone. Georgi Tenno, the most prominent advocate of bodybuilding in the USSR in the 1960s, had served during World War II as an English language military interpreter in the Allied convoys to North Russia. In 1948, his international connections led to his arrest and trial in which he was charged with espionage activities and sentenced to imprisonment (he was an inmate with Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn who wrote two chapters about him in *The Gulag Archipelago*).²² After Tenno's release and rehabilitation in 1956, he was employed at the Central Research Institute of Physical Culture. This position gave him access to Western bodybuilding

¹⁹ Roman Moroz, "Ia – za!," *Sportivnaia zhizn Rossii*, 1 (1962): 19; Anatoly Zilberborg, "Sila, zdravie, krasota: Pogovorim o 'kulturizme'," *Smena*, no. 12 (1962): 30–31; Yuri Sorokin and Georgi Tenno, "Vaiateli tela," *Nash sovremennik*, 10 (1964): 109–111; Tenno, "Ne kult, a kultura," Georgi Tenno, "Osnovnoi kurs atleticheskoi trenirovki," *Tekhnika – Molodiozhi*, 8 (1966): 16–17. Beginning in 1962, Georgi Tenno became a regular author of the section "Atletizm" ("athleticism") in *Sportivnaia zhizn Rossii*.

²⁰ M. L. Ukran, V. M. Smolevskii, A. M. Shlemin, *Atleticheskaia gimnastika: Dlia imoshei* (Moscow: Fizkultura i sport, 1965, second edition 1968); Georgii Tenno and Yuri Sorokin, *Atletizm* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1968). References to Tenno and Sorokin's *Atletizm* as an informal bodybuilding textbook occur repeatedly in interviews and memoirs of Soviet-era bodybuilders.

²¹ Shishanov, "O razvitiu atleticheskoi gimnastiki," 52.

²² Chapters 5 "The Committed Escaper" and 6 "The White Kitten (Georgi Tenno's Tale)" in: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation, V-VII*, trans. Harry Willetts (New York: Harper & Row, 1979), 125–192.

magazines, to which the institute had a special subscription, as they were otherwise unavailable for private subscription. Tenno's job responsibilities included the translation of foreign materials into Russian either for internal use in the institute or for their reproduction in Soviet periodicals.²³ The influence of Western muscle magazines on Tenno and his colleagues later became one of the central criticisms of Soviet bodybuilding by the conservative Soviet sport press.²⁴ Bodybuilding also made its way to the USSR through Czechoslovakian, Polish and East German sport magazines.²⁵ Both Western and Eastern European magazines were usually obtained through acquaintances who travelled abroad or on the black market, and clippings from them with workout routines and photos of professional bodybuilders decorated most Soviet bodybuilding gyms. A photograph of two leading bodybuilding enthusiasts of the Soviet era, Vladimir Dubinin from Leningrad and Evgeny Koltun from Tiumen (later, both became heads of the Bodybuilding and Fitness Federation of Russia), made at some point in the 1970s in Dubinin's gym, shows these clippings in the background (Figure 32).

²³ M. L. Aptekar, *Tiazholiaia atletika. Spravochnik* (Moscow: Fizkultura i sport, 1983), 410. Ben Weider recalled in his memoir how surprised he was during his visit to the USSR in 1955 when he saw an impressive collection of bodybuilding magazines published by his brother Joe Weider at one of Moscow's sport-related institutions: Weider and Weider, *Brothers of Iron*, 145.

²⁴ A. A. Volkov, "Kulturizm ili atleticheskaia gimnastika?," *Teoriia i praktika fizkultury*, no. 1 (1966): 56; Dmitry Ivanov, "Doroga k sile – doroga truda: Po povodu uvlecheniia kulturizmom," *Sovetskii sport*, 16 March 1966: 4–5; K. S. Tsvetkov, "O kulturizme i atletizme," *Teoriia i praktika fizkultury*, no. 12 (1966): 66.

²⁵ Tenno, "Ne kult, a kultura;" Kostiv, "Chelovek-motor," 12; Dmitry Murzin, *Bibliia bodybuildinga* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2011), 211.



Figure 32. Vladimir Dubinin (left) and Evgeny Koltun in a Leningrad gym, 1970s. From Evgeny Koltun's personal archive.

While some Soviet citizens may have been enthusiastic about bodybuilding (Tenno claimed to have received thousands of letters from fellow enthusiasts),²⁶ it received a more ambiguous reception from those in the Soviet professional sport milieu. Although bodybuilding was supported by the Central Research Institute of Physical Culture and several influential sport, popular and political magazines with large circulations,²⁷ most prominently *Tekhnika – Molodiozhi* (Technology to the Youth), an analog of *Popular Mechanic*,²⁸ Soviet sport managers reacted more negatively. Early assaults on bodybuilding began with its appearance in the USSR,²⁹ and the first major wave of criticism of the Soviet young people's obsession with iron came in 1966, when a series of

²⁶ Tenno and Sorokin, *Atletizm*, 283.

²⁷ Tenno, "Ne kult, a kultura;" Anatoly Golubev, "Formula krasoty," *Molodoi kommunist*, no. 3 (1968): 122–127.

²⁸ Yuri Sorokin, "Myshtsy – chto ty znaesh o nikh?" *Tekhnika – Molodiozhi*, 8 (1965): 14–15; Yuri Sorokin, "V poedinke s gimnasticheskim snariadom," *Tekhnika – Molodiozhi*, 9 (1965): 32–33; Georgi Tenno and Yuri Sorokin, "Atletizm – sila, zdorovie, krasota," *Tekhnika – Molodiozhi*, 2 (1966): 26–27; Georgi Tenno, "Osnovnoi kurs atleticheskoi trenirovki," *Tekhnika – Molodiozhi*, 8 (1966): 16–17.

²⁹ V. Zatsiorskii, "Nam chuzhd kulturizm," *Sovetskii sport*, 23 March 1963: 3.

articles appeared in the main Soviet sport newspaper *Sovetskii sport* (Soviet Sport) and pedagogical magazine *Teoriia i praktika fizkultury* (Theory and Practice of Physical Culture), which denounced bodybuilding for its ideologically bourgeois, non-Soviet nature.³⁰

To soften the criticism, proponents of bodybuilding stopped using the borrowed terms “culturisme” (from French) and “bodybuilding” and disguised their clubs as groups and studios of “athleticism” and “athletic gymnastics,” thus pushing to the forefront bodybuilding’s genealogical relationship with pre-revolutionary Russian and early Soviet traditions of physical culture.³¹ This tactic proved fruitless: even though Tenno and Sorokin’s 1968 bodybuilding guide was published under the title *Athleticism*, it received extremely negative reviews in *Sovetskii Sport*.³² The campaign against bodybuilding intensified in the 1970s: on 24 January 1973, the USSR Sports Committee passed a resolution which instructed sport organizations to disband groups of women’s soccer, karate, and yoga, and to reorganize the work of the bodybuilding groups in order to remove “ideologically alien” elements borrowed from Western bodybuilding and make it a worthy representative of Soviet sports:

Recently, a number of physical activities that have nothing in common with the Soviet system of physical education have infiltrated from the West... [These activities] can potentially spread sport tendencies that are alien to Soviet society, and are socially harmful... Most so-called athletic gymnastics groups popularize and spread [Western] bodybuilding. The only exercises are weight training aimed at the unrestricted growth of muscle mass and artistic posing... Narcissism, extreme egoism, showing off of the so-called body culture – all this contradicts the humanism and applicable orientation of the Soviet system of physical culture and sport, which educate people in terms of collectivism, labor and political activism, [and] promote harmonious physical development.³³

³⁰ Volkov, “Kulturizm ili atleticheskaia gimnastika?”; Ivanov, “Doroga k sile – doroga truda”; Tsvetkov, “O kulturizme i atletizme.”

³¹ Tenno, “Ne kult, a kultura,” 105.

³² “Repei v konfetnoi obiortke,” *Sovetskii sport*, 15 April 1969: 4; Dmitry Ivanov, “Troianskii kon’ kulturizma,” *Sovetskii sport*, 28 September 1969: 3; 29 September 1969: 3.

³³ Quoted in: Dmitry Ivanov, “Izlom,” *Sovetskii sport*, 11 September 1977: 3.

In 1977, following an article written by 1954 world weightlifting champion Dmitry Ivanov (one of the most vocal critics of bodybuilding),³⁴ the USSR Committee of Physical Culture and Sport launched another major attack on bodybuilding when it issued a resolution, “On serious drawbacks in the work of groups of athletic gymnastics.” The resolution condemned the “perverted ideas of power-building [*razvitiie sily*], the cult of ‘the beauty of the body,’ [and] all kinds of illegally functioning groups who reduce their activities to illiterate, mindless muscle weight gain.”³⁵

Soviet critics accused bodybuilding of a fixation on muscle mass at the expense of “health and harmonious bodily development.”³⁶ For them, an uncontrolled affection for bodybuilding was dangerous, because it threatened to produce distorted and unhealthy, rather than beautiful bodies. Dmitry Ivanov described bodybuilding competitions as “panopticons of monstrosity” (*panoptikumy urodstva*).³⁷ Others emphasized that bodybuilding’s focus on muscles at the expense of other body parts (lungs, heart) and functions (stamina, coordination, blood flow) brought more harm than good and was aesthetically dubious.³⁸ The underlying criticism appears to be that bodybuilding advanced a fragmented image and understanding of the human body, in which the body consisted of muscles to be “pumped” and body shapes to be achieved.³⁹ This preoccupation with the shaping of the body challenged an older holistic way of thinking about athletes’ bodies as aspects of the socialist whole, of the collective of Soviet people.⁴⁰ This holistic corporeal imagination decried the individualistic thinking of one’s

³⁴ Dmitry Ivanov, “Izlom,” *Sovetskii sport*, 11 September 1977: 3; 13 September 1977: 3; 14 September 1977: 3. *Sovetskii sport* also published several follow-up articles: “Stolknoveniie v polzu razumnogo,” *Sovetskii sport*, 14 December 1977: 3; “Polozhit’ konets nezdorovym iavleniiam,” *Sovetskii sport*, 27 December 1977: 2.

³⁵ Quoted in: “Polozhit’ konets.”

³⁶ Tsvetkov, “O kulturizme i atletizme,” 64.

³⁷ Dmitry Ivanov, “Izlom,” *Sovetskii sport*, 13 September 1977: 3.

³⁸ Volkov, “Kulturizm ili atleticheskaia gimnastika?,” 53.

³⁹ Alan M. Klein, *Little Big Men: Bodybuilding Subculture and Gender Construction* (Albany, N.Y.: SUNY Press, 1993); Dimitrios Liokaftos, “From ‘Classical’ To ‘Freaky’: An Exploration of the Development of Dominant, Organised, Male Bodybuilding Culture” (Doctoral thesis, Goldsmiths, University of London, 2012), 104–133.

⁴⁰ Pat Simpson, “Parading Myths: Imaging New Soviet Woman on Fizkul’turnik’s Day, July 1944,” *The Russian Review* 63, no. 2 (2004): 187–211.

body provoked by bodybuilding with its fetishization of biceps, triceps and other muscles.

Dimitrios Liokaftos, a historian of Western bodybuilding, argues that from the 1940s to the 1970s, the Western spectacle of a perfect masculine body underwent a transformation from a “holistic model,” in which muscular development was seen as a derivative of more essential masculine qualities, primarily health and strength, to a new perception of normative masculinity with an emphasis on appearance. In doing this, bodybuilding facilitated a shift from manhood understood as essence to manhood understood as a set of acquired characteristics, of which visible muscularity was one of the most important.⁴¹ This new vision of the masculine body had its western critics: Liokaftos quotes an article from a 1955 issue of *Strength and Health* which renounced bodybuilding in strikingly similar language to that of its Soviet critics: “Athletic fitness and muscular coordination and superb health are completely meaningless to [bodybuilders].”⁴² Yet by the 1960s – the time when bodybuilding appeared in the USSR – the spectacle of extremely muscular bodies led to a situation in which male selfhood became strongly associated with muscularity for the sake of aesthetic impression, rather than utilitarian purposes.⁴³

Western bodybuilding magazines, which were instrumental in the development of Soviet bodybuilding at its formative stage, brought the understanding of the masculine body as an aesthetic object to the Soviet cultural milieu. That is why the counterargument from bodybuilding advocates that officially recognized sports produced “less harmonious” bodies than bodybuilding fell on deaf ears.⁴⁴ Other officially supported sports in the USSR, such as cycling or fencing, could indeed be less effective in shaping overall muscular bodies, but their emphasis on the subjugation of the body to the mind and collective interests made them much more appropriate for sports managers than bodybuilding, which turned sporting bodies into aesthetic objects. When Soviet sports

⁴¹ Liokaftos, “From ‘Classical’ To ‘Freaky,’” 119–122.

⁴² Ibid., 111.

⁴³ Wolfgang Welsch, “Sport Viewed Aesthetically, and Even as Art?,” in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life*, ed. Andrew Light and Jonathan Smith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 135–55.

⁴⁴ See, e.g., Tenno, “Ne kult, a kultura,” 101.

journalists and bureaucrats condemned bodybuilding as an “ideologically alien” sport, it was the exhibitory and narcissistic nature of bodybuilding exercises and competitions and bodybuilding’s alleged aversion to anything collective that sparked their most fervent reaction:

Bodybuilding is one of the typical products of bourgeois culture. Its ideological nature aims, first and foremost, to separate the youth from social and political activism. The man is urged to retreat into oneself, to stay inside the four walls of one’s own self.⁴⁵

The specific material conditions in which Soviet bodybuilders exercised contributed to this assessment. While early attacks on bodybuilding during the 1960s did not criminalize it, the criticisms, especially the 1973 resolution of the USSR Sports Committee, succeeded in scaring many low-level sport functionaries away from supporting it. This prevented the large-scale, centralized development of bodybuilding classes and clubs. The inability of amateur bodybuilders to gain access to public sports infrastructure led them to more private arrangements in the basements of Soviet mass-built apartment blocks.

Basements, Filthy and Clean

The previous chapter described how the revival of modernist architecture in the post-Stalinist era, combined with a new trend in urban planning to build entire residential areas as relatively self-sufficient neighbourhoods, translated into an effort to ensure an effective circulation of people between their apartments, workplaces, and places of leisure. The transitory places of new Soviet neighbourhoods such as stairwells, doorways, and streets were, consequently, planned in an ostensibly utilitarian manner. This utilitarian approach was applied to another important locale in late socialist housing: the basements of new apartment blocks. Before the mass housing campaign launched by Nikita Khrushchev in the mid-1950s, the acute shortage of urban housing led to the

⁴⁵ Ivanov, “Troianskii kon’ kulturizma,” *Sovetskii sport*, 29 August 1969: 3.

commonplace use of apartment block basements for residential dwelling units.⁴⁶ The designers of industrially produced new homes since the mid-1950s had discouraged the possibility of such a use of their basements. They had low ceilings, no windows other than for ventilation, and had been assigned a purely utilitarian function to accommodate heating, electric, sewage, and water supply infrastructure systems (Figure 33). The usage of the free basement space was delegated to local housing management offices [ZhEK]. Sometimes they allocated it for private storage units, but in most cases basements remained unoccupied and unused. It was then that marginalized Soviet youth reclaimed them as their “own space,” usually after getting the permission of housing managers, sometimes by squatting. By the 1980s, they transformed basements into scary sites for “normal” Soviet citizens – a fear reflected in late Soviet journalism which often represented basements as the site of dirt, both material and human,⁴⁷ and later encapsulated in the post-Soviet genre of crime novels in which basements and especially basement gyms were shown as the source of organized crime.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Natalia Kuksanova, *Sotsialno-bytovaia infrastruktura Sibiri (1956-1980-e gg.)* (Novosibirsk: Izd-vo NGU, 1993), 29, 139; Timothy J. Colton, *Moscow: Governing the Socialist Metropolis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 331.

⁴⁷ Rashid Nugmanov (dir.), *Igla* (Kazakhfilm, 1988); Vitalii Eremin, “Podval,” *Ogoniok*, no. 8 (1989): 22–24. On the use of basement for bodybuilding gyms, see Gromov, “Liubera.”

⁴⁸ See, e.g., Boris Sedov, *Kulturist* (Moscow: Neva, 2005); Valeriy Karyshev, *Kriminalnaia istoriia Rossii, 1989–1993. Liuberetskie. Parni iz Solntseva* (Moscow: Eskmo, 2008). See also the 2004 TV series *Parni iz stali* [Steel guys] (dir. Murad Aliev).



Figure 33. A basement gym in a Khrushchev-era apartment block which has survived mostly unchanged since the 1980s. Liubertsy, 2006. Photograph @ 2006 Dmitry Gromov.

Mary Douglas has famously suggested that “[w]here there is dirt there is [a] system. Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter.”⁴⁹ When Soviet bodybuilders moved *en masse* to basements, organizing semi-illegal gyms with makeshift equipment and decorating the walls with clippings of workout routines and posters of famous American bodybuilders, they aggravated the fears of their opponents in Soviet officialdom. For them, not only was bodybuilding genealogically rooted in capitalist ideology, but it also dragged athletes from specially allocated premises, such as stadiums and “palaces of sport” (the Soviet term for sport complexes), where they exercised under the supervision of professional trainers, into dark, stuffy and dirty basements where they trained without properly educated supervisors. In other words, Soviet bodybuilders moved from the purity and hygiene of a materiality which was ordered in a centralized manner and which was transparent to the gaze of power embodied by state-appointed trainers, into the domain of an allegedly filthy and unsanitary material environment where the norm of an ideal body was set by images of

⁴⁹ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), 36.

hypermuscular athletes from American posters, and where the power to plan, control and judge an individual's approximation to this ideal belonged to a bodybuilder's own gaze in a mirror.

Dmitry Ivanov's 1977 article in *Sovetskii sport* – “Deviation” (“Izlom”) – is remembered by Soviet-era bodybuilding pioneers as one of the most severe attacks on their sport.⁵⁰ It encapsulated the fears that bodybuilding, when practiced away from the controlled material environment of official sport infrastructure, produced deviant bodies and minds. This article opened as a journalist investigation into a criminal case in which a bodybuilder killed one man and critically injured another. In order to understand what pushed the athlete to commit these crimes, Ivanov toured Moscow basement gyms. What he found was “an extremely unhealthy bodybuilding environment,”⁵¹ where the focus on increasing one's muscle weight produced “a negative impact on character building [vospitaniie] and, consequently, on this person's entire life.”⁵² Throughout the lengthy article – published over three issues – Ivanov emphasized that it was the lack of any official guidance in these studios that was the main reason why people emerged from these basements with numerous deviancies. According to Ivanov, these ranged from damaged health, to bachelorhood and an unwillingness to have children, to a tolerance of homosexual relationships, to criminality. In the absence of proper state control in the form of a trainer's gaze, iron dangerously empowered people's bodies and produced social deviations. “How much dirt I have seen in these gyms!” exclaimed Ivanov in the last part of his article, before concluding with a recommendation to disband bodybuilding gyms and clubs and replace them with official weightlifting groups in order to save young athletes from “from the filthy, cramped basement.”⁵³

In the long run, the 1977 anti-bodybuilding campaign of *Sovetskii sport* failed to achieve its goal, and basement gyms mushroomed all over the Soviet Union. In 1988, one journalist writing on teenage bodybuilders from Liubertsy mentioned that there were

⁵⁰ Sergei Pakhotin, “Fenomen Evgeniia Koltuna, ili ‘Wundermann Anteievskoi zakalki’,” *Zheleznyi mir*, no. 1 (2005): 40–41.

⁵¹ Ivanov, “Izlom,” 11 September 1977: 3.

⁵² Ivanov, “Izlom,” 13 September 1977: 3.

⁵³ Ivanov, “Izlom,” 14 September 1977: 3.

over one hundred basement gyms in this town with a population of 165,000.⁵⁴ Liubertsy was notable for its higher-than-usual density of such gyms, but Soviet-era bodybuilding enthusiasts claimed retrospectively that semi-legal basement gyms were ubiquitous all over the USSR.⁵⁵ More importantly, the case of the *liubery* showed that Soviet bodybuilders refused to regard themselves as deviations from the Soviet social norm. Instead, they and their supporters appealed to the same vocabulary of purity and dirt as had been applied to them, but inverted it to use against visually distinct youth groups, of which they aspired to “cleanse” Soviet society. One apologetic article about the *liubery* relentlessly emphasized how clean and orderly their basement gyms were. As additional evidence it printed a photo of one of them that hid its low ceiling and featured a mirror in the background, thereby transforming the basement gym into a spacious and immaculate environment, with people passionately engaged in the empowerment of their bodies (Figure 34).⁵⁶ Some informal youth groups even called themselves “cleaners” or “janitors” in order emphasize their self-imposed social function as guardians of social hygiene.⁵⁷ While the name *liubery* did not carry this association, in both contemporary and retrospective interviews these young (or formerly young) Soviet bodybuilders also emphasized this aspect of their activities. Vladimir Iakovlev, in his 1987 article, wrote that bodybuilders again and again described themselves as using their raids to “cleanse the capital.”⁵⁸ One of Dmitry Gromov’s respondents claimed that, when encountering instances of disorderly behavior by soccer fans, *liubery* fought them in order “to restore the [public] order;”⁵⁹ and in a recent interview a former *liuber* explained the motivation of he and his friends’ raids in Moscow in a similar way:

⁵⁴ Bobrova, “Sportpodvaly v Liubertsakh,” 21.

⁵⁵ B. I. Sheiko, “Kratkii ocherk razvitiia pauerliftinga v Rossii,” *Zheleznyi mir*, 4 (2004): 242; Yuri Smolyakov, “Sportu nuzhno otdavat dushu,” *Zheleznyi mir*, 6 (2005): 32; Zinovii Kostiv, “Chelovek-motor,” *Zheleznyi mir*, 1 (2006): 11; Aleksandr Vishnevskii, “Bodybuilding – eto ne stydno,” *Zheleznyi mir*, 3 (2013): 65–66.

⁵⁶ Bobrova, “Sportpodvaly v Liubertsakh,” 21.

⁵⁷ I. Iu. Sundiiev, “Anatomiia neformalnykh ob’iedineni (tipologii i kharakteristika),” in Iu. M. Kotchenkov, ed., *Po nepisannym zakonam ulitsy...* (Moscow: Iuridicheskaiia literatura, 1991): 50.

⁵⁸ Iakovlev, “Kontora liuberov.”

⁵⁹ Dmitry Gromov, “Liuberetskiie ulichinyie molodiozhnyie kompanii 1980-kh godov: Subkultura na pereputie istorii,” *Etnograficheskoiie obozreniie*, no. 4 (2006): 28.

For us, the teens from the working suburbs, these [new subcultures] looked wild. All our brothers and fathers had served in the [Soviet] Army, worked in factories... And suddenly all these dirty, hairy ones emerged. For example, metalheads were walking through the park, shouting and smashing bottles. There was nothing about them to like... We looked normally, behaved normally. Without any whims.⁶⁰

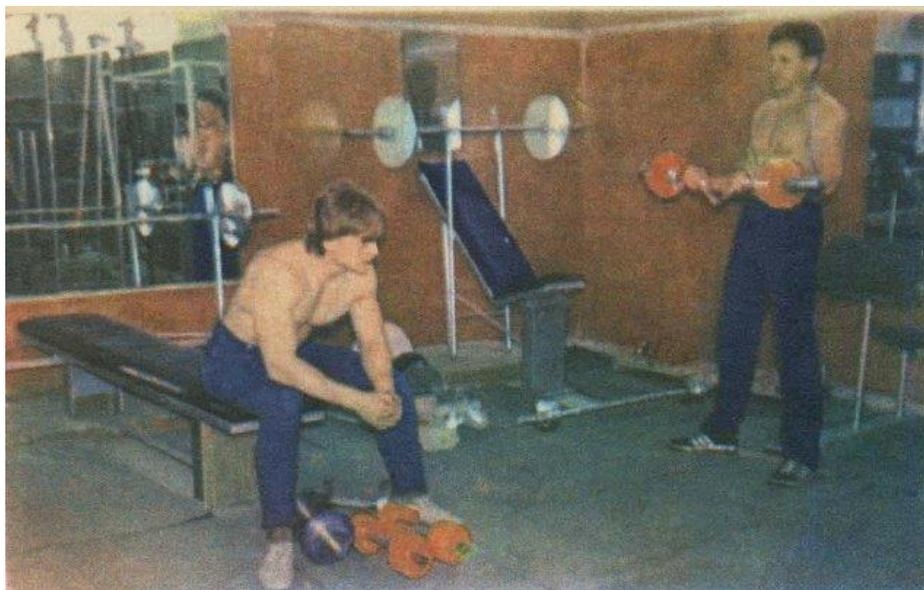


Figure 34. A positive perspective on a basement gym in Liubertsy in Soviet media.⁶¹

Late Soviet cultural production – with a varying degree of irony – also noted this tendency of the *liubery* to borrow the language of social hygiene. The musician Yuri Shevchuk, leader of the popular rock band *DDT*, ironically sang about a *liuber* who “supports the iron order... and is rescuing Moscow from foreign contagion;” and Pavel Lungin’s 1992 film *Luna-park*, inspired by the *liubery*, featured a violent anti-Semitic bodybuilding group that called themselves “The Cleaners.” The 1988 film *My name is Harlequin* [Menia zovut Arlekino] is another cinematic reflection on this working class vigilante phenomenon. In one scene, young bodybuilders from a suburb round up a

⁶⁰ Mikhail Bokov, “‘Zagasiť’ nefera s vertushki bylo verkhom krutizny’: Anonimnoie interview s byvshim liuberom,” Furfur.Me: <http://www.furfur.me/furfur/all/culture/176477-intervyu-s-kachkom>, accessed 10 December 2014.

⁶¹ Tekhnika–Molodiozhi, 4 (1988): 21.

hippie and give him an impromptu haircut so that he will look “like a normal person.” The victim recognizes this as an act of power, rather than of deviance, when he compares their actions with those of the Soviet police (*militsiia*) who had previously done the same to him.⁶² In historical perspective, the discourse of cleansing utilized by Soviet teenage bodybuilders comprised re-used and re-purposed Soviet discourses dating back not only to the era of the NEP, but especially to the cultural revolution of the late 1920s and early 1930s and the Great Purge of the late 1930s.⁶³ The *liubery* raids, in which they cut the hair of metalheads, punks and hippies, destroyed their clothes and took their accessories, also resembles those of state-encouraged groups of Komsomol activists in the 1950s and 1960s, who confronted a different, but also Western-inspired subculture of *stiliagi*, often using violent means to impose proper social norms, including forced haircuts and the slashing of clothes.⁶⁴

There were other, less violent ways in which Soviet bodybuilders performed their loyal Soviet identities and affirmed their citizenship as normative. One of them was organizing bodybuilding contests on Soviet holidays, such as Victory Day on 9 May, which symbolically attached bodybuilding to the calendar of Soviet rituals (Figure 35). Another was the advocacy mentioned above for the inclusion of bodybuilding and weightlifting in the training program of pre-conscription age teenagers to prepare them for compulsory military service in the Red Army.⁶⁵ Finally, from 1989 to 1991, after having joined the International Bodybuilding Federation, professional Soviet bodybuilders competed with their American counterparts as the “Team USSR” in four USA-USSR bodybuilding contests.⁶⁶

⁶² Valeriy Rybarev (dir.), *Menia zovut Arlekino* (Belarusfilm, 1988).

⁶³ Tricia Starks, *The Body Soviet: Propaganda, Hygiene, and the Revolutionary State* (Madison, Wis.: University of Wisconsin Press, 2008); David Hoffmann, *Cultivating the Masses: Modern State Practices and Soviet Socialism, 1914-1939* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2011).

⁶⁴ Alexei Kozlov, *Koziol na sakse* (Moscow: Vagrius, 1998), 81–82, 106–108, 219–220; Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia*, 289–290; Mark Edele, “Strange Young Men in Stalin’s Moscow: The Birth and Life of the Stiliagi, 1945-1953,” *Jahrbücher Für Geschichte Osteuropas* 50, no. 1 (January 1, 2002): 42–43.

⁶⁵ Bobrova, “Sportpodvaly v Liubertsakh”; Sorokin, *Atleticheskaia podgotovka doprizyvnikov*.

⁶⁶ Efim Berezner, “Matchi veka: SSSR–SShA,” *Kultura tela*, no. 1 (1999): 59–61.

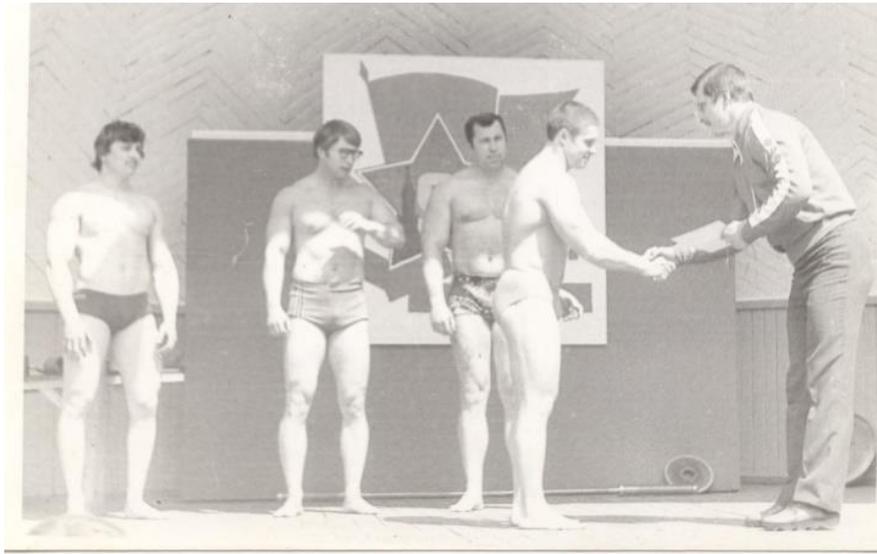


Figure 35. A bodybuilding contest in Zhdanovsky Park, Moscow, on the occasion of the Victory Day, 9 May 1985. From the personal archive of Anatoly Kluikov. Reproduced by permission.

To summarize, the official criticism of bodybuilding marginalized its enthusiasts spatially, forcing them to move to the basements of Soviet apartment blocks, and to a certain degree culturally, creating routinely reproduced patterns of representation which depicted them as balancing on the brink of criminality and deviance (encapsulated in the widely used derogatory term “kachok,” the one who “pumped himself”⁶⁷). However, it failed to marginalize them socially despite very dedicated attempts on behalf of some Soviet officials from the USSR Sports Committee and journalists like Dmitry Ivanov. Moreover, Soviet bodybuilders appropriated certain discourses of power and joined the performance of Soviet rituals. When the *liubery* transformed their bodies into weapons to restore the social order, or when teenagers in Liubertsy and elsewhere in the USSR enrolled in basement gyms to qualify for the Soviet airborne forces, even though it meant a higher chance of being sent to Afghanistan, or when professional Soviet bodybuilders rallied under the flag of the USSR in order to perform on the international arena, the biopolitical agenda in these cases was directly or indirectly inspired by power.⁶⁸ Despite

⁶⁷ The search query “kachok” in the national corpus of the Russian language: <http://ruscorpora.ru>.

⁶⁸ On biopolitics in the liberal political context, see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College de France, 1978-1979*, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008);

their marginality in Soviet urban spaces and the criticism they received from the press and from sports officials, basement gyms were anything but spaces of freedom from Soviet authoritative voices. The two following sections will explore how basement gyms became sites that produced loyal and socially active Soviet citizens. The key factor in this process, as I argue, was another material object: objects and equipment used to train and improve one's bodies, or, iron.

Iron: Medicine or Drug?

Iron and steel, its derivative, have been powerful metaphors in Soviet culture. Rolf Hellebust's *Flesh to Metal*, a comprehensive study of "the alchemy of revolution," explored in depth how the "metallization of the revolutionary body" became one of the key themes in early Soviet culture. Metal acted as a powerful symbol to describe the envisioned transition from an organic and decadent bourgeois society to the communist utopia of steel and machines.⁶⁹ This symbolism carried ostensible gender implications, since in modern cultures iron and steel, when used as metaphors, signified the transformation from organicity, with its implications of femininity, irrationality, softness, passivity and decay to metallicity and machineness, associated with masculinity, rationality, rigidity, durability, strength and hygiene.⁷⁰

In the second half of the twentieth century, iron in Soviet culture acquired an even stronger connection with health and strength through popular medical knowledge. This was primarily due to the national fame of two prominent public figures in the late USSR: Gavriil Ilizarov and Valentin Dikul. Gavriil Ilizarov (1921–1992) was a Soviet physician

Chen, *Animacies*. On biopolitics in the Soviet context, see Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1997); Eric Naiman, "Diskurs, obrashchennyi v plot': A. Zamkov i voploshcheniie sovetskoi sub'ektivnosti," in Hans Günther and Evgeny Dobrenko, eds., *Sotsrealisticheskii kanon* (St.Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2000): 625–638; Galina Orlova, "Organizm pod nadzorom: Telo v sovetskom diskurse o sotsialnoi gigiene (1920-e gg.)," *Teoriia mody*, 3 (2007): 251–270; Natalia Tamruchi, "Meditsina i vlast," *Novoie literaturnoie obozreniie*, no. 4 (2013): 134–155.

⁶⁹ Rolf Hellebust, *Flesh to Metal: Soviet Literature and the Alchemy of Revolution* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003). See also Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), 93–113.

⁷⁰ Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Judy Wajcman, *TechnoFeminism* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).

from the Siberian town of Kurgan who, in 1952, patented a frame apparatus to reduce fractures and correct bone deformities that otherwise doomed people to a life of immobility. The frame of metal rings, rods and spikes (Figure 36) revolutionized orthopedic surgery; as of now, it and its derivatives remain a preferred method of treatment for severe fractures and deformities.⁷¹ In the Soviet Union, Ilizarov and his apparatus became nationally renowned in 1968, after he successfully treated a Soviet celebrity athlete, the 1964 Olympic men's high jump champion, Valery Brumel. Brumel, who dominated high jump in the first half of the 1960s and became the American Broadcasting Company's Wide World of Sports Athlete of the Year in 1963, broke his right leg in a motorcycle accident in October 1965. Subsequent conventional treatment in the best Moscow hospitals lasted for two and a half years, but failed to heal him. With chronic osteomyelitis and the looming threat of leg amputation, Brumel travelled to Ilizarov, who at that time was still struggling for recognition of his technique. Brumel later described the treatment in his memoir:

The surgery took place a week later [after arrival]. My tibia was cut at the location of the fracture and just beneath the knee... Then it was pegged with metal spikes, which were connected with some rings and rods, and everything was fastened with screw-nuts...⁷²

⁷¹ E. Battaloglu and D. Bose, "The History of Ilizarov," *Trauma* 15, no. 3 (July 1, 2013): 257–62.

⁷² Valery Brumel, *Vysota* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1971), 39.



Figure 36. Patients of the Ilizarov institute in Kurgan wearing the Ilizarov apparatuses, ca. mid-1980s.⁷³

Less than five months after this operation Brumel walked out of the clinic without crutches and soon returned to his sport's career, although no longer as the leading athlete in his discipline.⁷⁴ Brumel's case publicized the Ilizarov technique in the USSR, and his national fame was further spurred by the international acclaim that Ilizarov gradually acquired throughout the 1980s, after having successfully treated two other celebrities: Soviet composer Dmitri Shostakovich and Italian explorer Carlo Mauri. Soviet mass-media widely reproduced images of Ilizarov's patients with shiny metal constructions around their limbs, cyborgs of a sort, whose biological shortcomings were corrected by the power of iron to heal human bodies.⁷⁵ This futuristic association with cyborgs did not

⁷³ Boris Nurvakhov, *Doktor Ilizarov* (Moscow: Progress, 1987), color inset.

⁷⁴ Nurvakhov, *Doktor Ilizarov*.

⁷⁵ S. I. Bunkov, *Khirurg Ilizarov* (Chelyabinsk: Iuzh.-Ural. kn. izd-vo, 1972); Ye. Legat (dir.), *Pozovite menia, doctor* (TsSDF, 1973); Gavriil Ilizarov, "Verit sebe," *Komsomolskaia pravda*, 4 June 1978; L. Fisher (dir.), *Apparat Ilizarova* (Tsentrnauchfilm, 1979); L. V. Gladysheva, *Kavaler ordena ulybki*

escape Ilizarov's contemporaries. Critics of his method from the Soviet orthopaedic establishment pejoratively dubbed his method a "machinist [*slesarnyi*] approach to surgery,"⁷⁶ while Valery Brumel in his second memoir described Ilizarov's clinic in Kurgan as "a strange planet populated by people with iron legs and arms."⁷⁷ A photo placed by *Nauka i zhizn*, the leading Soviet pop-sci journal, as an illustration to an article about Ilizarov (Figure 37), featured three child patients from his clinic wearing the Ilizarov apparatuses and assembling anthropomorphic figures from other Ilizarov frames.⁷⁸ The involvement of iron frames in the children's play emphasized the vitality of metal and its transformative nature. This assemblage of iron and children's bodies was affective in the sense that it enticed those reading the article and viewing the image with the promise of health. This and other innumerable domestic and international publications would call Ilizarov the "magician from Kurgan," a title perhaps inspired by his hobby of conjuring tricks, but his medical magic was apparently instrumental, stemming from his apparatuses.

(Chelyabinsk: Iuzh.-Ural. kn. izd-vo, 1982); Gavriil Ilizarov, "Zhit bez uprioka," *Komsomolskaia pravda*, 1 September 1983; Gavriil Ilizarov, "Po realnomu vkladu," *Sovetskaia kultura*, 25 February 1986, 3; Gavriil Ilizarov, "Obykvennoie chudo," *Ogoniok*, 5 (1986): 14–15.

⁷⁶ Boris Nurvakhov, *Doktor Ilizarov* (Moscow: Progress, 1987).

⁷⁷ Valery Brumel and Aleksandr Lapshin, *Ne izmeni sebe* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1980), 249.

⁷⁸ L. Grafova, "Interview: Khirurg G. A. Ilizarov," *Nauka i zhizn*, 8 (1982): 36–41, photo on p. 37.

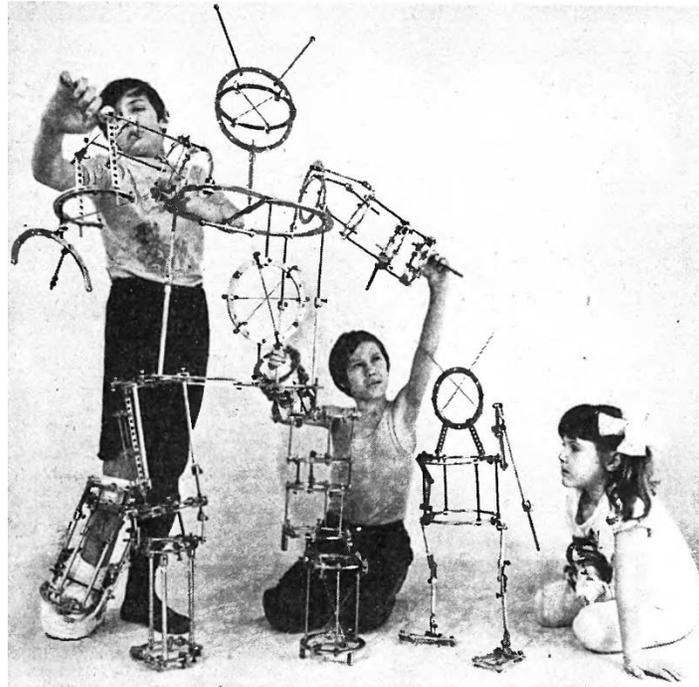


Figure 37. Vitalities of the Ilizarov apparatuses.⁷⁹

The second phenomenon which connected iron and health/strength in popular medical knowledge in the late Soviet Union was the history of Valentin Dikul (b. 1948). In 1962, the same year that the first articles on bodybuilding appeared in the Soviet press, Dikul, then a beginner circus athlete, broke his spine during a show. Facing the near certainty of a lifetime disability, Dikul developed a system of load exercises that gradually restored his physical abilities and built his physique to the degree that in 1970 he returned to work in the circus not as an aerialist, but as a strength athlete capable, at the peak of his career, of lifting a midsize *Volga* sedan.⁸⁰ “I fell in love with metal, because it saved me,” a Soviet sport magazine later quoted Dikul, “For it was, indeed, iron that saved, healed, and literally put Dikul back on his feet.”⁸¹ This experience left Dikul with the conviction that iron – that is, weightlifting equipment – could cure the most severe traumas and even congenital diseases.

⁷⁹ *Nauka i zhizn*, 8 (1982): 37.

⁸⁰ Valentin Dikul and Alexandr Eliseikin, *Razorvannyi krug* (Moscow: Sovetskii sport, 1993).

⁸¹ Ie. Velichko, “Preodoleniie,” *Sportivnaia zhizn Rossii*, no. 6 (1983): 30.

During the 1980s, his assertion that his system, which was based on the use of specially designed weightlifting equipment, might rehabilitate disabled people made him a Soviet celebrity of the same prominence as Ilizarov. Soviet magazines publicized his methods to their multi-million-strong audiences,⁸² causing a flurry of letters to Dikul from all over the USSR and – literally – a pilgrimage on behalf of those who had failed to overcome their disabilities by way of traditional medicine. In 1985, this popular obsession with his methods was featured in *Piramida*, a full-length documentary directed by A. Ivankin.⁸³ It intertwined two plotlines: Dikul's preparation and premiere of his new circus act (the lifting of the *Volga*), and the visits and letters of numerous people seeking to overcome their physical disabilities. The film, in particular, focused on a five-year old boy, Dima, born with a congenital defect causing severe locomotor impairment that left him incapable of walking or even standing. Throughout the film, Dikul is repeatedly shown using his makeshift weightlifting equipment to restore Dima's physical abilities. These and other episodes in which iron helps Dikul and his patients struggle against bodily debilitation are interwoven with reminiscences of Dikul's own story of overcoming his spinal cord trauma and with his workout routines and circus tricks using huge kettlebells, barbells and the already mentioned *Volga*. The spectacle of Dikul's exceptional strength acquired through his interaction with iron builds a promise of healing for his patients, and in the end of the film Dima is shown standing on his feet for the first time in his life and then watching, gratefully and passionately, Dikul's performance.

Both Ilizarov and Dikul developed the early Soviet mythology of the power of metal to a new level by providing the Soviet cultural imagination with numerous images of and texts about people regaining and acquiring health, strength and power through their bodily contact with iron. In both cases, the magic of iron became institutionalized: the Kurgan Research Institute of Experimental and Clinical Orthopedics and Traumatology

⁸² Velichko, "Preodoliiiie;" M. Zalesskii, "Silach nomer odin," *Znaniie-sila*, no. 8 (1983): 140–144; M. Zalesskii, "Novaia vstrecha s Dikulem," *Znaniie-sila*, no. 3 (1986): 58–63; D. Likhanov, "Fenomen Dikulia," *Ogoniok*, no. 41 (1986): 18–20; D. Likhanov, "I snova Dikul," *Ogoniok*, no. 18 (1987): 18.

⁸³ A. Ivankin (dir.), *Piramida* (TsSDF, 1985).

was established in 1971 with Gavriil Ilizarov as its director, and in 1988 [the first rehabilitation center of Valentin Dikul unclear] was founded in Moscow. The power of iron that they tamed also granted them political power: in 1989, both Ilizarov and Dikul became People's Deputies (MPs) in the USSR Supreme Soviet.⁸⁴

It was in this cultural context that Soviet bodybuilding enthusiasts, especially Georgi Tenno, equated iron with bodily and mental health. This equation became encapsulated in the term “iron pills” that Tenno coined for weightlifting equipment to show its remedial potential.⁸⁵ In his articles and the book he co-authored with Yuri Sorokin, Tenno extensively quoted letters from his readers which described miraculous transformations from disease and weakness to health and strength, including cases of full restoration from wartime wounds, tuberculosis of bones, heart defects, hepatitis, and rheumatism – all this was attributed to the nearly limitless potential of iron.⁸⁶

Dmitry Ivanov and other Soviet critics of bodybuilding recognized this power of iron (after all, Ivanov was a world weightlifting champion himself); what they attacked and official sport resolutions sought to administer was not bodybuilding exercises per se, but rather the perceived attempt to remove bodybuilding from the surveillance system of centralized Soviet sport management. If iron were a medicine, then its abuse in the basement, a dark and dirty place of socialism, could make it a dangerous drug. From the perspective of Soviet sport officials, it was precisely because of the power of iron that its use for building one's body could not be left unattended and had to be regulated. The perception of weightlifting equipment in medical terms, as having the power to heal and transform the body, explains why critics of bodybuilding tried to discredit its leading proponents as charlatans and its enthusiasts as sick people whose unhealthy, non-supervised addiction to iron led to mental disorders.⁸⁷

Alan Klein, the author of an influential ethnography of a bodybuilding community in California, argued that the desire to make the body hypermuscular and hypermasculine

⁸⁴ Aleksandr Lavrin, *Kto est kto v perestroike* (Berlin: Blaue Hörner Verlag, 1990), 55–56, 68–69.

⁸⁵ Georgi Tenno and Anatoly Zilberbort, “Sputnitsa rekordov: Snova ob atleticheskoi gimnastike,” *Smena*, no. 3 (1965): 26–27; Tenno, “Ne kult, a kultura,” 103.

⁸⁶ Tenno and Sorokin, *Atletizm*, 13, 20, 25, 54, 81, 173.

⁸⁷ Ivanov, “Izlom.”

stemmed from internal feelings of personal inadequacy (hence the “little” in the title of his book, *Little Big Men*).⁸⁸ Soviet excitement about bodybuilding, by contrast, revealed the elemental, non-Marxist materialism of Soviet culture, which implied a reverse relationship between the body, on the one hand, and the material environment of the bodybuilding gym, on the other. For Klein, an obsession with iron was an indication of “a shaky psyche,” and bodybuilding gyms acted as compensatory mechanisms for people “working out a range of personal issues.”⁸⁹ Soviet critics of bodybuilding shared this opinion on the personal inadequacy of bodybuilders, but their elemental materialism pushed them to offer a different explanation: it was not a cause, but rather an effect of iron’s abuse outside of the panoptic supervision of the state-controlled sport system. For them, basement gyms took normal Soviet citizens and transformed them into self-centered, egoistic, “pompous peacocks” (Dmitry Ivanov’s term). It is important to emphasize that critics of bodybuilding never advocated for its total ban, unlike, for instance, with karate groups, which were made illegal by the 1973 resolution of the USSR Sports Committee mentioned above. They attacked not bodybuilding exercises per se, but rather their system: the “pumping of iron” in front of mirrors in basement gyms which allegedly created a self-obsession with one’s own body, provoked a disregard for collective interests and provided no opportunity for direct intervention on behalf of the authorities. It was the belief that iron was capable of shaping human bodies and selves, shared by both advocates and critics of bodybuilding, which made their conflict so dramatic. And it was the same materialist recognition of the power of iron that, from the perspective of Soviet enthusiasts of bodybuilding, was vitally important for embodying their understanding of proper masculinity and citizenship.

⁸⁸ Klein, *Little Big Men*.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 3, see also quote on p. 203: “The biographical and observational data strongly point to the widespread (although not universal) feeling... [among bodybuilders] that they are psychologically insignificant.”

Conclusion

In the late 1980s, as I described in the beginning of this chapter, liberal journalists attacked vigilante teenage bodybuilders for their intolerance of conspicuously Western subcultures and for resorting to violence to impose social norms – in other words, for being too conservatively and aggressively Soviet. It turned out that the fears of earlier critics of Soviet bodybuilding were wrong: instead of egoists absorbed in the creation of their bodies as spectacle, basement gyms produced loyal and socially active Soviet citizens who had a strong sense of belonging to Soviet society, were eager to enforce the social norm as they understood it and sought to protect the public good through the “strength, health, [and] self-assurance” that iron and basement gyms gave them.⁹⁰ So, how did loyal and socially active Soviet citizens emerge from basement gyms? What empowered iron to give Soviet meaning to the bodies produced in basement gyms?

As I mentioned above, Soviet bodybuilding emerged in the writings of its enthusiasts as a Soviet athletic system of building the perfect Soviet body and thus was a product of Khrushchev’s Thaw with its tendency to decentralize and diffuse the articulation of power. In the context of Soviet bio-politics, one’s individual involvement in the production of power was not only discursive (‘speaking Bolshevik’ in Stephen Kotkin’s gloss⁹¹) or ritualistic (participation in Soviet mass festivals⁹²), but also bodily. The concept of “good” citizenship had been firmly connected to one’s physical fitness since 1931, when the Soviet government introduced the GTO system (GTO stands as an acronym for “Ready for Labor and Defence”) as a propaganda tool to encourage mass participation in physical culture, but also to evaluate one’s approximation to the ideal level of fitness understood as one’s ability to contribute to the public good.⁹³ Therefore, when Soviet enthusiasts of bodybuilding argued that its value was exactly in its ability to empower people’s bodies to become good citizens (especially for the military service),

⁹⁰ Kozlov, *Realnaia kultura*, 123.

⁹¹ Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 198–237.

⁹² Simpson, “Parading Myths”; Malte Rolf, *Soviet Mass Festivals, 1917-1991* (Pittsburgh, Pa.: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013).

⁹³ Susan Grant, *Physical Culture and Sport in Soviet Society: Propaganda, Acculturation, and Transformation in the 1920s and 1930s* (London: Routledge, 2013), 37–44.

their position was deeply rooted in the Soviet discursive field. “Muscles are given to man not for narcissism, but for work,” wrote Tenno and Sorokin at the very end of their 1968 bodybuilding guide, appealing to the understanding of men’s muscles as instruments;⁹⁴ they then concluded: “Iron works miracles, but will and persistence will do even more.”⁹⁵

The genuine importance of bodybuilding was, then, in the opportunities it provided for preparing one’s body for proper Soviet citizenship. Unlike the mass forms of physical culture like jogging or cross-country skiing, which were popularized in a centralized manner, bodybuilding was more effective, due to the power of iron, in transforming one’s body to comply with Soviet standards of fitness. It also did not require developed sports infrastructure, something the USSR could not boast, especially in Soviet regions. Bodybuilding provided a unique opportunity to overcome this difficulty and to build one’s Soviet body in a decentralized fashion. This had already been revealed in the basic advice of Soviet bodybuilding enthusiasts: a perfect body could be produced at home. Georgi Tenno and Yuri Sorokin, the authors of the first Soviet bodybuilding guide, emphasized that weightlifting exercises did not necessarily require specialized infrastructure, since iron transformed any quarters into a gym.⁹⁶ Basements turned out to be a convenient solution to a situation in which the public sport infrastructure was unavailable for objective or administrative reasons, but virtually any space could be turned into a bodybuilding gym with the use of makeshift equipment. The use of public sports infrastructure was beneficial, but not critical.⁹⁷

⁹⁴ Michael A. Messner, “When Bodies Are Weapons: Masculinity and Violence in Sport,” *International Review for the Sociology of Sport* 25, no. 3 (September 1, 1990): 203–20.

⁹⁵ Tenno and Sorokin, *Atletizm*, 282.

⁹⁶ Tenno, “Ne kult, a kultura,” 105; Tenno and Sorokin, *Atletizm*, 13, 47.

⁹⁷ Gromov, “Liubera;” Mikhail Bokov, “Chem i kak kachalis’ v SSSR: Rel’sy, utiugi i drugoi samodel’nyi inventar,” *Furfur.me*: <http://www.furfur.me/furfur/all/culture/176313-chem-i-kak-kachalis-v-sssr>, accessed 12 December 2014.



Figure 38. A basement gym in Liubertsy, 1980s. Courtesy of Furfur.me.

Oleg Kharkhordin argued that the de-Stalinization of Soviet society did not lead to any lesser degree of social surveillance; in fact the opposite happened, which Kharkhordin qualified as a gradual transformation from top-down surveillance of Stalin's years to "increasingly pervasive mutual surveillance in everyday life" during and after Khrushchev's period in power.⁹⁸ Bodybuilding, with its tendency to bring the male body into the domain of the visual, seems to be part of this transformation. Apart from bodybuilding contests which the critical Soviet press derogatorily, but also insightfully dubbed "pageants [konkursy krasoty],"⁹⁹ the presentation and performance of one's muscular body as an aesthetic object took the form of spending time at local beaches and wearing sleeveless shirts in summer.¹⁰⁰ These forms of performing one's masculinity reflected the complex voyeuristic space of Soviet bodybuilding gyms. A photo of a basement gym in Liubertsy (Figure 38) gives an idea of this complexity. Clippings of bodybuilders on the wall in the left side of the image acted as posters, with professional

⁹⁸ Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia*, 297–303, quote on p. 300.

⁹⁹ Volkov, "Kulturizm ili atleticheskaia gimnastika?," 54.

¹⁰⁰ Bokov, "Zagazit' nefera s vertushki bylo verkhom krutizny"; Gromov, "Liuberetskiie ulichinyie molodiozhnyie kompanii," 29; Gromov: "Liubera," 197.

Western bodybuilders providing their bodies as models and muscles as fetishes, but also acting as sources of the authoritative gaze not unlike that of Lord Kitchener from the famous 1914 British propaganda poster and its later imitations.¹⁰¹ This authoritative gaze played a similar mobilizing function, provoking the fetishism of muscles and urging those who viewed these posters to engage in the pursuit of muscle gain. When a former athlete at one of the Liubertsy gyms recalled his attempts at increasing his biceps' size, he explicitly referred to this voyeuristic logic:

At that time, my nickname was the Thin One [Khudoï]. Thin – because my biceps did not grow. I kept on pumping them with dumbbells, with barbells. Because what are the main muscles for a teen? Biceps. So that you could put on a sleeveless shirt, and everyone would see huge arms, like those of [Arnold] Schwarzenegger. [In response to a question of whether or not he envied more muscular men] When you go to the gym with someone, measure your biceps together every week and see that his grow, while yours do not... Of course, I couldn't help but envy him.¹⁰²

Apart from a reference to Schwarzenegger's biceps, this quote invokes another dimension of the Soviet bodybuilders' voyeuristic space: their drive to train their bodies as spectacle for the public gaze. In the image in Figure 37, the public gaze is reified in the poster of a young woman in the background wall (similar posters were featured in the basement gym recreated in the film *Menia zovut Arlekino*), and, in a similar fashion, the quotation above referred to its author's fantasy in which "everyone would see [his] huge arms, like those of Schwarzenegger" as a major motivating force behind his workout efforts. Images of professional bodybuilders nurtured an inferiority feeling for those possessing "insufficient" muscles, but this inferiority only made sense in a more immediate surveillance system – that of the public gaze, which promised an immediate affective punishment of one's lack of formidable muscularity. The examples above, in which the gaze belongs to a poster (Figure 38) or to the domain of fantasy (quotation of

¹⁰¹ Carlo Ginzburg, "Your Country Needs You': A Case Study in Political Iconography," *History Workshop Journal*, no. 52 (2001): 1–22.

¹⁰² Bokov, "Zagasit' nefera s vertushki bylo verkhom krutizny'."

an anonymous *liuber*), demonstrate that it was imaginary, a typical illustration of Jacques Lacan's observation about "the pre-existence to the seen of a given-to-be-seen."¹⁰³ What is important is that iron provided a remedy to this feeling of inferiority. The author of the quotation above passionately appealed to this remedy: "I kept on pumping [biceps] with dumbbells, with barbells," and his derogatory remarks about representatives of Soviet sub-cultures demonstrate that iron also empowered him not just physically, but also symbolically – empowered to transfer this feeling of inadequacy from himself to "these dirty, hairy ones":

I thought that [teenagers belonging to Western-inspired subcultures] were weak, poorly endowed by nature... In general, [they] were tadpoles; they fought only in vastly superior numbers, if they had enough courage to fight at all.¹⁰⁴

The image in Figure 38 provides an insight into one more aspect of the voyeuristic space of Soviet basement gyms. While it is not quite clear what the bodybuilder in its centre is looking at, it is likely the most common object, after weightlifting equipment, found in bodybuilding gyms: the mirror (see also Figure 34). The evaluative nature of his gaze suggests that the culture of surveillance that basement bodybuilding helped to create in Soviet symbolic space was deeper than just the mutual surveillance of which Oleg Kharkhordin speaks. In the absence of a state-appointed trainer to supervise physical activities, every Soviet bodybuilder had to become a trainer for himself. In order to practice bodybuilding, one was required to engage in voluntary and willing self-surveillance. Tenno and Sorokin's 1968 bodybuilding guide is exemplary in this respect, since a large part of the book focuses not on exercises per se, but on practices of self-surveillance, with its final section eloquently titled "You are your own mentor and trainer" [Sam sebe nastavnik i trener]. The authors insisted that all major muscles and body proportions had to be regularly measured and recorded in a personal diary, so that

¹⁰³ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Hogarth Press, 1977), 74.

¹⁰⁴ Bokov, "Zagasiť nefera s vertushki bylo verkhom krutizny'."

the athlete could keep a track of the changes in his body. “Before getting to exercises, chart the frontier from which you will start your offensive on weakness, ill-health, physical imperfection,” they wrote, using the mobilizing language of war.¹⁰⁵ The critical history of anthropology has shown how the anthropometric efforts of nineteenth-century Western scholarship were deployed as a form of state power over domestic populations and colonial people alike.¹⁰⁶ When Soviet bodybuilders were advised to engage in self-anthropometry, it represented a step from abstract centralized state power toward an intimate form of power of self-control and self-regulation. Moreover, the authors of the first Soviet bodybuilding guide suggested that athletes should “supplement anthropometry with photography,” taking regular and repeated sets of photos of themselves face forward, in profile, and from the back. A succession of such photos would “eloquently narrate the story of your achievements,” Tenno and Sorokin strove to convince their readers.¹⁰⁷ Just like with anthropometry, this advice is strikingly similar to the modern use of photography (especially in the form of the photographic archive) for the policing and classification of populations.¹⁰⁸ Creating a home archive of one’s own mug shots (“face forward and in profile”) represented the internalization of this practice: a form of self-policing of one’s own progress from physical weakness – interpreted as inability to contribute to the public good – to a perfect physical form, which guaranteed that its owner was a worthy member of the Soviet collective.

The quintessence of this regulatory effort, which turned basement gyms into sites where power was produced and athletes became loyal Soviet subjects, was the advice to keep a personal diary. Apart from one’s anthropometric record, it had to include “objective and subjective data about one’s health and labor productivity

¹⁰⁵ Tenno and Sorokin, *Atletizm*, 42.

¹⁰⁶ George W. Stocking, *Race, Culture, and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (University of Chicago Press, 1968); Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France 1977-1978*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2009); George Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: The Free Press, 1991); Marina Mogilner, *Homo Imperii: A History of Physical Anthropology in Russia* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

¹⁰⁷ Tenno and Sorokin, *Atletizm*, 45–46.

¹⁰⁸ Allan Sekula, “The Body and the Archive,” *October* 39 (December 1, 1986): 3–64; Shawn Michelle Smith, *American Archives: Gender, Race, and Class in Visual Culture* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1999); Laura Wexler, *Tender Violence: Domestic Visions in an Age of U.S. Imperialism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000).

[*rabotosposobnost*'],” such as sleep, appetite, weight, training load, and any unusual feelings.¹⁰⁹ Jochen Hellbeck, in his study of diary-keeping during the Stalinist era, showed how the diary became an important medium in the internalization of new Soviet values and meanings, thus acting as the forge of one’s Soviet self.¹¹⁰ The nature of a bodybuilder’s diary, with its intimate observations about physical development, appears to be different from the private diaries that Hellbeck analyzed, but it worked to the same end: as a performative medium, capable of bringing into being the very things being written about, the diary assisted in making oneself into a Soviet subject whose physical beauty and strength were important socially, rather than just individually. “Muscles are given to man not for narcissism, but for work,” Tenno and Sorokin wrote. They concluded: “Iron works miracles [*zhelezo delaet chudesu*], but will and persistence will do even more.”¹¹¹

What Soviet bodybuilding sceptics misrecognized as institutionalized egoism was thus a new, more subtle, discreet and modern form of self-governance of people’s bodies and loyalties. The basement was not a means to escape the authoritative gaze of the state-run sports system, but an opportunity to appropriate it, to turn oneself into the subject and object of this gaze, which found its manifestation in the practice of exercising in front of mirrors. Soviet journalists found this practice “sickening to watch” because of its seemingly narcissistic nature,¹¹² but the effects of the mirror in Soviet basement bodybuilding seem to be very different than what they feared. If it is the mirror that assembles one’s fragmented experience and gives the subject an illusion of a coherent self, as Jacques Lacan has suggested, then the reflections of bodybuilders in the mirrors of Soviet basement gyms gave them a control over their own bodies, making them their own creators, confirming their ability to move from weakness to strength, objectifying their Soviet masculinity in a strong muscular body which was ready to fight for the public good – in other words, encapsulating and reproducing everything that the Soviet

¹⁰⁹ Tenno and Sorokin, *Atletizm*, 56.

¹¹⁰ Hellbeck, *Revolution on My Mind*.

¹¹¹ Tenno and Sorokin, *Atletizm*, 282.

¹¹² Ivanov, “Troianskii kon’,” *Sovetskii sport*, 29 August 1969: 3; Ivanov, “Izlom,” 11 September 1977: 3; “Ne pokidaite nashikh rebiat,” *Sovetskii sport*, 14 December 1977: 3.

state as a biopower wanted its subjects to become. The moments when a Soviet bodybuilder saw his reflection in the mirror were the moments when basement gyms were colonized with Soviet meanings.



Figure 39. Screen of a Soviet TV set Foton. Illustration by the author.

Chapter 6. Ordinary and Paranormal: The Soviet Television Set

We are deceived by the mundanity of the television's intrusion in our life. We are willing to accept it, as we had previously accepted the introduction of matches, electric shavers, and pencil sharpeners. We solemnly install the beaming box ten centimeters away from the sewing machine and cozily cover it with a table-napkin. Now the television is like a house cat. It is ordinary. It is domesticated. It pretends to be happening as if in the past tense. And it doesn't even come to us that we are standing on the threshold of a revolution in the means of human communication which has just barely started.

*Sergei Muratov, Cinema as a Form of Television*¹

The last three decades of the Soviet Union were unusually rich in paranormal phenomena. It all started with UFOs. As early as 1961, *Pravda* and *Komsomolskaia Pravda* published the first refutations of rumors about flying saucers allegedly seen above the USSR.² Despite the refutations, news of UFO sightings continued to emerge in the Soviet press with an ever lowering degree of skepticism,³ culminating in October 1989, when TASS, the main Soviet information agency, officially released a report that “an unidentified flying object” with a crew of several tall humanoid creatures and “a

¹ Originally published as “Kino kak raznovidnost' televideniia” in *Radio i televideniie*, no. 24 and 25 (1967); here quoted from: Sergei Muratov, *Televidenie v poiskakh televideniia: Khronika avtorskikh nabliudenii* (Moscow: Izd-vo MGU, 2009), 79..

² L. Artsimovich, “Mif o ‘letaiushchikh tarelkakh’,” *Pravda*, 8 January 1961; A. Mikirov, “Est' li ‘letaiushchiie tarelki’?” *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, 8 January 1961.

³ B. Kotov, “Snova ‘letaiushchiie tarelki’,” *Pravda*, 21 July 1967; Ye. Tsvetkov, “Kto vidit marsian,” *Znaniie-sila*, no. 10 (1972): 63; Ye. Parnov, “Tekhnologiiia mifa,” *Komsomolskaia Pravda*, 28 November 1976; N. Milov, “Neopoznannoie iavleniie prirody,” *Izvestiia*, 23 September 1977; S. Korepanov, “NLO: Abonentnyi iashchik 664,” *Sovetskaia Rossia*, 12 July 1984.

small robot” landed in the city of Voronezh.⁴ But UFOs were just one of the many paranormal phenomena that haunted late socialist society. In the late 1950s, sightings of abominable snowmen (*yeti*) in the Pamir Mountains intensified to the degree that in 1958 the Soviet Academy of Sciences organized a special expedition there.⁵ While its failure to find any evidence of the living Bigfoot precluded any other official effort to find the yeti, groups of unofficial searchers kept on exploring Pamir, as well as Caucasus, Arctic taiga and other Soviet regions in search of the mysterious *homo trogloditus*.⁶ Beginning in the early 1980s, the Soviet Union experienced a steady growth of news about poltergeists arriving from many regions, which skyrocketed in late 1988 when the Soviet television broadcast the story of a poltergeist named Barabashka allegedly living in a construction workers’ dormitory in Moscow.⁷ In addition, the Soviet public in the post-Stalinist period was also well aware of paranormal activities outside of the Soviet borders. Stories about the Bermuda Triangle, the Loch Ness monster, and other mysterious creatures were reported – usually as criticism, but sometimes as hypotheses or op-ed pieces – in *Tekhnika-Molodiozhi* (which had a special rubric “Anthology of mysterious cases”), *Nauka i zhizn’*, *Khimiia i zhizn*, *Znanie-sila*, and the TV show *Ochevidnoie-neveroiatnoie*.

The same post-Stalinist period saw a dramatic rise in the number of extrasensory perception experts in the USSR. Wolf Messing and Ninel’ Kulagina were, perhaps, the two key figures that publicized telekinesis, telepathy and other forms of special psychic abilities in the 1960s more than anyone else.⁸ In the late 1960s, the Soviet press widely discussed allegedly successful experiments in telepathic communication.⁹ Official

⁴ TASS, “Proisshestviie v parke,” *Komsomolskaia pravda*, 11 October 1989; N. Varsegov, “Priparkovalis’?,” *Komsomolskaia pravda*, 12 October 1989. See also Sabrina P. Ramet, “UFOs over Russia and Eastern Europe,” *The Journal of Popular Culture* 32, no. 3 (1998): 81–99.

⁵ Sergei Obruchev, “Sovremennoie sostoianie problemy o snezhnom cheloveke,” *Priroda*, no. 10 (1959): 60–66.

⁶ Kirill Staniukovich, *Po sledam udivitelnoi zagadki* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1965); Nikolai Nepomniashchii, “Na poroge nevedomogo (Tri vstrechi s zagadochnym neznakomtsem),” in V. D. Zakharchenko, ed., *Vremia iskat’* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1990), 23–30.

⁷ A. A. Gorbovskii, *Nezvanyie gosti? Poltergeist vchera i segodnia* (Moscow: Znaniie, 1990), the story of Barabashka is described on pp. 36–38.

⁸ Boris Sokolov, *Wolf Messing* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 2010), 13–14.

⁹ Oleg Moroz, *Ot imeni nauki: O sueveriiakh XX veka* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1989), 116–127.

sources, including the third edition of the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia*, cautiously admitted the possibility that the human body could possess hidden abilities of which official scholarship was as yet unaware.¹⁰ The concept of body energy (*biopole*) acquired a particularly strong following among Soviet scholars to the degree that a special laboratory for the study of human energy was established in 1981 at the Institute of Radio-engineering and Electronics of the USSR Academy of Sciences.¹¹ The head of the laboratory, Eduard Godik, later published a memoir about this late Soviet project to scientifically study extra-sensorial human abilities, in which he wrote that their research was initiated and supported at the top level of the Soviet leadership.¹²

In this remarkably long list of mysterious phenomena that Soviet society encountered in its last three decades, it is easy to overlook the fact that the most paranormal object of late socialism was neither the UFO nor the poltergeist, but the ordinary Soviet television set. After all, only a handful of people actually claimed first-hand experience with the paranormal phenomena listed above; most learned of them indirectly, from rumors or the mass media. Yet nearly every Soviet person had a personal experience with the healing séances of Anatoly Kashpirovsky and Allan Chumak that were broadcast on Soviet television in 1989. Kashpirovsky and Chumak initially appeared on the main Soviet channel, Channel 1, with claims that they were capable of using their psychic powers to heal audiences sitting in front of their television sets. Both proved extremely popular. Kashpirovsky's séances were broadcast on prime time every second Sunday from October to December 1989; each show lasted for over an hour. Chumak's séances were shorter, lasting between eight and ten minutes, but during the summer and autumn of 1989 they were broadcast daily, with the exception of Sunday,

¹⁰ Ye. T. Faddeev, "Tak chto zhe takoie telepatii?" *Nauka i zhizn*, no. 6 (1961): 60–63; V. P. Zinchenko et al, "Parapsikhologiiia: Fiksiia ili realnost?" *Voprosy filosofii*, no. 9 (1973): 128–136; V. P. Zinchenko and A. N. Leontiev, "Parapsikhologiiia," *Bolshaia sovetskaia entsiklopedia*, 3rd ed., Vol. 19 (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1975), 192–193.

¹¹ Yu. V. Guliaev and E. E. Godik, "Fizicheskiie polia biologicheskikh ob'ektov," *Vestnik AN SSSR*, no. 8 (1983): 118–125; Yu. V. Guliaev and E. E. Godik, "Raduga fizicheskikh polei cheloveka," *Tekhnika-molodiozhi*, no. 12 (1986): 12–15. The concept of human energy was also extrapolated to entire social groups, such as nations, giving rise to popular and scholarly theories of ethnic vitalities, such as in Lev Gumelev. See: Serguei Alex. Oushakin, *The Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 79–129.

¹² Eduard Godik, *Zagadka ekstratsensov: Chto uvideli fiziki* (Moscow: AST-Press Kniga, 2010), 7–12.

early in the morning as part of the entertainment show *90 Minutes* (later renamed *120 Minutes*). In 1990, both healers disappeared from central television, but made occasional appearances on regional TV channels (Kashpirovsky also became a prominent TV figure in Poland) until 1993, when a new law was passed in Russia on public health that explicitly banned healing séances through mass media.¹³

Kashpirovsky and Chumak addressed Soviet television audiences from TV screens that showed close-up views of their faces, creating the illusion of eye-to-eye contact between the healers and viewers (Figure 39, right). Kashpirovsky spoke in a hypnotizing voice giving commands and suggestions that supposedly mobilized the “inner reserves” of people’s bodies to heal themselves. In contrast, Chumak remained silent for most of his TV shows: after a brief introduction, in which he explained that he was going to transmit his healing energy via the TV signal, he performed mesmeric passes that represented the aforementioned transmission of energy to the audience. He additionally claimed that he was capable of charging liquids with his healing energy and encouraged TV viewers to put jars of water and cosmetic creams in front of their screens. After the séance was over, the water and creams were allegedly charged with his energy and could be applied for internal and external use. As a result, accounts of how Soviet TV audiences watched Chumak’s séances routinely mention innumerable jars and other vessels with various liquids that viewers put in front of their TV screens and then used to treat various diseases (Figure 40, left).

¹³ Paragraph 43 of the Federal Law No. 5487-1 “Osnovy zakonodatelstva RF ob okhrane zdorovia grazhdan” of 22 July 1993.



Figure 40. Soviet paranormalists on the TV screen. *Left*: one of Anatoly Kashpirovsky's healing sessions on a TV set. *Right*: an audience of Allan Chumak's healing show. Still images from the documentary *Kashpirovsky protiv Chumaka* (dir. Anatoly Solonevich, Profi-TV, 2008).

In 1990 the All-Union Center for the Study of Public Opinion (VTsIOM) conducted a nation-wide poll which included the question “Do you watch the psychotherapy sessions of Anatoly Kashpirovsky on TV? If yes, how closely?” The option “I put everything aside and sit in front of the TV” gathered an impressive 57% of the answers, and an additional 30% responded that they watched them occasionally.¹⁴ A recent documentary claimed that at the peak of their fame in the latter half of 1989, Kashpirovsky and Chumak reached a television audience of roughly 150 million people, which more or less correlates with the statistical data above (according to the 1989 census, the population of the USSR at that time was 287 million people).¹⁵ In other words, the overwhelming majority of Soviet citizens took seriously – even if only for a brief moment of time in 1989 – the alleged healing powers of Kashpirovsky and Chumak, to the degree that they “put everything aside” in order to watch the healing TV séances of the two paranormalists.

Most explanations of this historical phenomenon have been centered on the personalities of Kashpirovsky and Chumak as two charlatans who found themselves in the right place at the right time. In his Pulitzer Prize-winning book *Lenin's Tomb*, David Remnick, the *Washington Post's* Moscow correspondent between 1988 and 1992,

¹⁴ Vera Nikitina, “God za godom: 1990 g.,” *Monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniia: Ekonomicheskie i sotsialnye peremeny*, no. 5 (1997): 43.

¹⁵ *Kashpirovsky protiv Chumaka* (dir. Anatoly Solonevich, Profi-TV, 2008).

compared Kashpirovsky to Rasputin as a figure coming at the end of an epoch to captivate the popular imagination by personifying everything irrational and mystical that had been previously suppressed.¹⁶ Soviet academics who in late 1989 gathered for a special conference on “telepsychotherapy,” a term that Soviet mass-media coined to refer to both Kashpirovsky’s and Chumak’s healing TV séances, also focused on the personalities of these mass healers. Some of the conference participants attributed to them actual hypnotic abilities; others argued that this duo duped their television audiences into believing obvious nonsense.¹⁷ A variation of this explanation emphasizes the gullibility of Soviet TV audiences, interpreting the Kashpirovsky-Chumak phenomenon as an exploitation of popular beliefs in bodily energy and extrasensory experts capable of controlling it. This is, for example, the interpretation of Yuri Bogomolov, a prominent Russian TV critic.¹⁸ Finally, the term obscurantism (мракобесие) often comes up as a socio-cultural explanation of the popularity of late Soviet extrasensory perception experts. Interpreted as an innate feature of Soviet culture that had survived decades of centralized enlightenment and rationality, obscurantism is credited with producing both Soviet paranormalists and their audiences by the writer and extreme left-wing politician Eduard Limonov, popular TV host Vladimir Solovyev and some of my informants.¹⁹ Being highly emotional and judgemental, this term encapsulated the affective response of the Soviet educated class to what they perceived as a grand failure of Soviet rationality.

These explanations leave largely unnoticed, despite its conspicuous visibility, another important actor in this story: the television set. Its role might, indeed, seem purely technical, since Soviet apartments had television sets before and after Kashpirovsky’s and Chumak’s TV séances, and so any direct cause-and-effect

¹⁶ David Remnick, *Lenin’s Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 256–263.

¹⁷ The minutes of the conference were published in Aleksandr Perevozchikov, *Fenomen? Sindrom? Ili...* (Moscow: Znanie, 1990), 19–47.

¹⁸ Yuri Bogomolov, *Igry v liudei po-krupnomu i na interes: Iz dembelskogo alboma teleobozrevatelia* (Moscow: MIK, 2010), 27.

¹⁹ Eduard Limonov, *Inostranets: Smutnoie vremia* (Novosibirsk: Sibirskiie ogni, 1992), 60–63; Vladimir Solovyov, *1001 vopros o proshlom, nastoiashchem i budushchem Rossii* (Moscow: Eksmo, 2010), 175–177; My interview with G. S., Vancouver, July 2014.

relationship would be far-fetched. There are, however, reasons to suggest that the role of the television set in this historical phenomenon was more than merely a medium for delivering certain content. Let us imagine an ethnographic description of the practice of watching Kashpirovsky's and Chumak's tele-séances in Soviet households. Such a description would assign this practice to the domain of healing magic, as its explicit purpose was to obtain health outside of the framework of the system of medical care. The practice itself would then be described as a ritual involving people and material objects, in which the latter allegedly possess medical powers to cure people's bodies. The most important of these objects was, of course, the television set, and in the case of Chumak's TV shows also jars and bottles with liquids that allegedly acquired healing properties after the ritual. Of course, certain conditions had to be followed for this ritual to become magical, namely the television set had to be turned on at the right time in order to show a certain set of images. But the presumable transfer of healing energy within the immediate domestic space occurred between the television set and people's bodies. The actual failure of Soviet rationality was taking place not in the television studios where Kashpirovsky and Chumak allegedly demonstrated their paranormal abilities, but in the apartments of Soviet people, who were sitting down in front of their television sets in order to get rid of their illnesses. Kashpirovsky himself admitted in late 1989, while still at the full zenith of his fame, that, "my own power is very weak. It is, first and foremost, the television effect that is at work here." Any impostor (he explicitly referred to his competitor Chumak) could act as an extrasensory perception practitioner, because all medical effects were due to "the affective power of the television screen" ("сила воздействия телеэкрана").²⁰

For this chapter, the TV shows of Soviet paranormalists are important as a symptom that gives a fresh perspective on how the television set as a material object changed Soviet domestic space and Soviet selfhood. I deliberately focus on both the content and material form of television in order to argue that its very inclusion in Soviet domestic space instigated new forms of identity performances that cannot always be reduced to the

²⁰ Perevozchikov, *Fenomen? Sindrom? Ili...*, 28–29.

content of television programs, but can rather be traced to “the affective power of the television screen.” The materiality of television that I will describe in this chapter is revealed on several levels. First, its very presence at home is material. A television set is an object of the apartment interiors, the main property of which is the permeability of its frontal surface to light. As a number of scholars have argued, this dramatically changed the materiality and temporality of the modern home, as this permeability allows the television screen to attract the attention of apartment residents by projecting images “from the outside” to the domestic space.²¹ Unlike TV images that are volatile, the presence of the set itself at home is monumental. Taken in the Soviet historical context, this presence produced a physical transformation, namely, changes in the late socialist hierarchy of domestic objects, the reorganization of the Soviet home and its accelerated transformation into voyeuristic space built along the principles of visual pleasure.

The second level is the materiality of the bodies of people watching television. Thanks to the programs that it broadcasts, the television set punctuates the day and attracts people to the living room (where, at least in the Soviet context, TV sets were most commonly installed). In doing so, it arranges people’s bodies spatially and temporally. Moreover, its influence has a physical dimension on them as well, affecting vision, weight, muscles, heart, and breath – an influence that became increasingly worrying for Soviet officials and scholars, especially pediatricians.²² But just as it could take health away, the television set could assist in regaining it: this logic is visible not only in Kashpirovsky’s and Chumak’s TV séances, but also in the extreme popularity of instructional television series, such as *Esli khochesh byt’ zdorov* (*If you want to be healthy*), *Utrenniaia razminka* (*Morning Exercises*) and especially *Ritmicheskaiia gimnastika* (*Rhythmic Gymnastics*, a Russian term for aerobics) which was broadcast beginning in 1984. These TV shows appealed to Soviet television audiences to join their

²¹ Muratov, *Televidenie v poiskakh televideniia*, 15; Anne Friedberg, “The Virtual Window,” in *Rethinking Media Change the Aesthetics of Transition*, ed. David Thorburn and Henry Jenkins (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2003), 338.

²² Boris Firsov, *Televideniie glazami sotsiologa* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971), 51–59; A. A. Ksenofontov, *A esli v sem’ie televizor... i deti?* (Moscow: Znanie, 1973).

hosts in doing fitness exercises in front of their TV screens – a performance aimed at energizing and repairing one’s bodies.²³

Finally, an analysis of the material aspects of Soviet television shows an intricate connection between the television set and Soviet selfhood. From the very beginning, Soviet scholars of television, when describing its psychic effects, extensively used the vocabulary of family relations, prosthetic devices, and mental disorders. Its everyday presence at home and its vital and vibrant materiality (the “presence effect”) often rendered it as a “family member” or “family friend.”²⁴ Its ability to momentarily transmit images and sounds from everywhere in the world prompted Sergei Muratov, a prominent Soviet theorist of television, to call it “the planetary vision and world-wide hearing of the humanity.”²⁵ Meanwhile, Soviet doctors coined a special term “telemania” for the tendency to spend vast amounts of time in front of TV screens.²⁶ The use of this vocabulary betrays the cultural recognition that the television set objectified the complex, decentralized and diffuse selfhood, made manifest this diffusion and thus problematized – in historical perspective – Soviet cultural fantasies of total control over the material world. Muratov described this destabilizing quality of the television set as the “quicksand surface of the display” [зыбкая поверхность кинескопа],²⁷ a metaphor hinting at the uncertainty of the border between the screen and the self, and implying a danger of the latter to be absorbed by the former.

While studies of Soviet television are numbered in the hundreds, if not the thousands, the absolute majority of them, including key works in this field, are focused on its content.²⁸ When it comes to the television set, an insightful observation by Mihaly

²³ A. Ivanitskii, “Esli khochesh byt’ zdorov: O sportivnykh programmakh Tsentralnogo Televideniia,” *Televideniie. Radioveshchaniie*, no. 8 (1985): 1–3, 33–34; my interview with Natalia Korkh (Efremova), West Vancouver, April 2015.

²⁴ Iraklii Andronikov, “Okno v mir,” *Ogoniok*, no. 9 (1962): 26; Margarita Khemlin, “Pro kota i pro molniiu,” *Televidenie i radioveshchanie*, no. 8 (1990): 43–45. For a deconstruction and critical analysis to the vernacular link between the TV set and family, see Roger Silverstone, *Television and Everyday Life* (London; New York: Routledge, 1994), 32–43.

²⁵ Muratov, *Televidenie v poiskakh televideniia*, 48.

²⁶ Boris Firsov, *Televideniie glazami sotsiologa* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1971), 141–157.

²⁷ Muratov, *Televidenie v poiskakh televideniia*, 46.

²⁸ For general English-language works on Soviet television, including its historiography, see: Ellen Propper Mickiewicz, *Split Signals: Television and Politics in the Soviet Union* (New York: Oxford University

Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton – made in another historical context – remains true: “researchers are not interested in how *the television* affects people but only in the effects of *programs*... The thing itself, the set that transmits the communication, is supposed to be neutral.”²⁹ Of course, it is not – as media theorists and critics show in arguments that can be very different in modality, yet are similar in the main idea, the television set, through its very presence, that is, independent of transmitted content, irrevocably changes the cultures in which it has been introduced. Theorists of early Soviet television, such as Vladimir Sappak and Iraklii Andronikov, emphasized the ability of the television to re-establish the connection between individuals and larger social entities, its potential to overcome social alienation, and its capacity to build and reinforce communities.³⁰ Sappak, as well as Sergei Muratov, also saw how it changed the spatial coordinates of the Soviet household, destroying its “petty apartment universe” [kvartirnyi mirok] by bringing in images of a larger world behind its four walls.³¹ Their perspective on the television’s potential in reorganizing the domestic space and lifestyle resonates with Marshal McLuhan’s views, who wrote that the television (together with other media) acts as a prosthesis extending human selves into space and time, securing domination over them, but also transforming the very nature of human selfhood.³²

Yet some other scholars who were interested in the materiality and immediacy of the television took issues with McLuhan and, without knowing it, with Soviet media theorists. Jean Baudrillard argued that the television set precludes any form of communication other than ideological indoctrination: “[t]he media are not co-efficients, but effectors of ideology.” For Baudrillard, if the television set offers any form of domination over time and space, this domination is essentially an ideological phantasm,

Press, 1988); Kristin Roth-Ey, *Moscow Prime Time: How the Soviet Union Built the Media Empire That Lost the Cultural Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2011). For an annotated bibliography of Russian-language scholarship, see: TVMuseum.Ru: http://www.tvmuseum.ru/catalog.asp?ob_no=7253, accessed on May 21, 2015.

²⁹ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton, *The Meaning of Things: Domestic Symbols and the Self* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 47.

³⁰ Andronikov, “Okno v mir,” 25–29; Vladimir Sappak, *Televidenie i my: Chetyre besedy* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1963).

³¹ Muratov, *Televidenie v poiskakh televideniia*, 48, 88; Sappak, *Televidenie i my*, quote on p. 13.

³² Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964).

an artefact of a one-way communication process that has no room for viewers' response and hence political struggle.³³ Later, however, Baudrillard recognized a certain autonomy of the television set from its content, describing it as "a video of another world, ultimately addressed to no one at all, delivering its images indifferently, indifferent to its own messages."³⁴ Friedrich Kittler's approach was even more radical: he completely removed ideology from his explanatory framework and accentuated the transformative agency of the media per se, in their very materiality, without the need for any external force.³⁵ The historical change that, for example, television brought with it was not determined by any particular political system, official ideology or social conditions in which this medium was introduced; the historical change was produced by television as a network of material objects, which produced its effects through humans' contact with the screen ("surface effect," in Kittler's gloss). In one of his latest interviews Kittler claimed that the technological process led to human beings becoming "a reflection of their technologies," and then added: "After all, it is we who adapt to the machine. The machine does not adapt to us."³⁶

The common denominator for these media theorists is their interest in the complex relationship between the materiality of television (independently of its content) and selfhood. This chapter makes no attempt at reconciling or hybridizing their views, but it is informed by this general understanding that the television set is not neutral, nor is it an innocent object belonging to apartment interiors. It explores the various ways in which Soviet television audiences discovered that the television set had a power over their bodies and selves, including the ability of the TV set to amend their physical characteristics, to organize households into audiences, and to instigate performances, and how this discovery was translated into the paranormal séances of Kashpirovsky and Chumak on Soviet television.

³³ Jean Baudrillard, "Requiem for the Media," in *The New Media Reader*, ed. Noah Wardrip-Fruin and Nick Montfort (Cambridge, Mass. ; London: The MIT Press, 2003), 278–88, quotation on p. 280.

³⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *America* (London: Verso, 1989), 50.

³⁵ Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1999).

³⁶ John Armitage, "From Discourse Networks to Cultural Mathematics: An Interview with Friedrich A. Kittler," *Theory, Culture & Society* 23, no. 7–8 (December 1, 2006): 36.

The Voyeuristic Revolution of Soviet Apartment Interiors

The period from the early 1960s to the mid-1980s saw the mass introduction of television sets in the USSR. According to the 1989 statistical book *Trade of the USSR* [Torgovlia SSSR], the private ownership of television sets grew from 24 per 100 families in 1965 to 103 per 100 families in 1988.³⁷ Urban areas initially dominated in the ratio of television sets per capita, but by the 1980s rural communities caught up with the city: a study of leisure time in rural areas of Tatarstan, for example, discovered that, while in 1967 only 15% of rural dwellers had television sets, by 1983 this figure had grown to 96%.³⁸

The advent of television was in many respects revolutionary for the domestic space, in the USSR and elsewhere alike. Lynn Spiegel in her study of “television in the family circle” in post-World War II America noted that the mass introduction of television sets in American culture had a profound influence on domestic interiors. The American living room became rearranged around the television set, which became the focal point organizing the American home and the leisure time of the American family.³⁹ A similar transformation occurred in the USSR, as the mass appearance of television sets in Soviet apartments reorganized their interior design. Being a high-status object of possession and a new focal point of home residents,⁴⁰ it changed the hierarchy of domestic objects by installing itself on top. Sofas and armchairs lined up in a semicircle around the TV set, accommodating apartment residents in their new capacity as television audiences and confirming the TV set’s dominant position in the Soviet apartment (Figure 41). In addition, in most households the television set exiled the radio to the kitchen, where it

³⁷ *Torgovlia SSSR: Statisticheskii sbornik* (Moscow: Finansy i statistika, 1989), 32.

³⁸ R. N. Musina, “Sotsial’no-etnicheskiie aspekty sovremennoi dukhovnoi kultury selskikh tatar,” *Etnograficheskoiie obozreniie*, 5 (1983): 90.

³⁹ Lynn Spiegel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 36–40.

⁴⁰ Ethnographic research of Russian regions noted that TV sets were often installed in the former icon corner: A. S. Kuchumova, “Krasnyi ugol. Polozheniie v prostranstve (location) kak semanticheskii priznak veshchi,” in *Russian Folklore* (Folk.Ru) at http://www.folk.ru/Research/kuchumova_krasny_ugol.php, accessed 25.03.2015. See also Andrei Stepanov, “Severnorusskaia izba: dinamika prostranstva i povsednevnyi opyt (2-ia polovina XX – nachalo XXI v.),” *Antropologicheskii forum*, no. 16 (2012): 77.

could be listened to during cooking or meals,⁴¹ and led to the increased use of books as home design objects, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

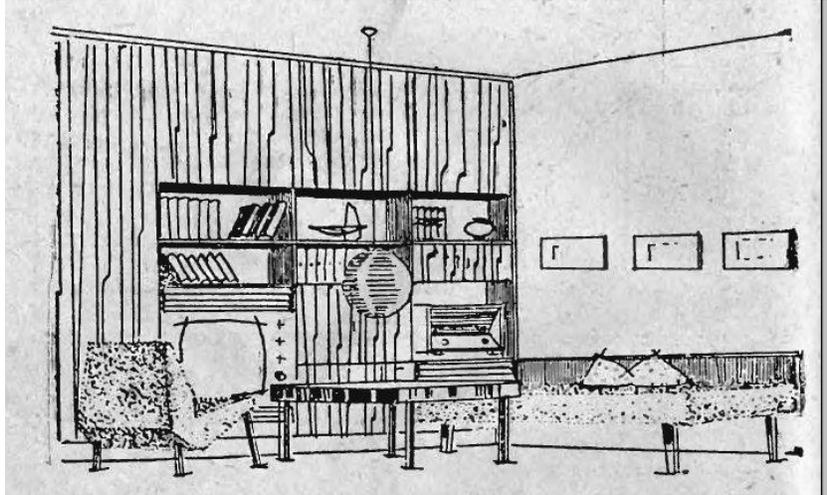


Figure 41. A sketch of a living room from a guidebook on apartment interiors with seating places organized to face a television set.⁴²

The mass introduction of TV sets in Soviet apartments was accompanied by another peculiar phenomenon that affected Soviet domestic space in the 1970s: the advent of the *stenka*, a massive floor-to-ceiling wall cabinet occupying the longer walls of the standard rectangular living rooms of Soviet standardized apartments that replaced the more rag-tag living room furniture of the Khrushchev's era (Figure 41).⁴³ Susan E. Reid, who described this dynamic, emphasized the enlightening and disciplinary state effort behind this change, and interpreted it as a modernist campaign to impose a new, socialist, hygienic and orderly lifestyle among the population where the majority were first- or second-generation migrants from rural areas. With its modern, laconic design, the *stenka* (like other modernist furniture) had to perform the modern, socialist identities of the

⁴¹ I made this observation on the basis of my analysis of Soviet-era photographs of kitchens available online.

⁴² B. M. Merzhanov, *Inter'er zhilishcha* (Moscow: Znanie, 1970), 12.

⁴³ Leonid Parfionov, *Namedni, 1971–1980* (Moscow: KoLibri, 2010), 156–157.

apartment's residents.⁴⁴ At the same time, the *stenka* and the television set launched together a spectacular revolution in Soviet domestic space.

As a particular furniture style, the *stenka* combined cabinets with solid wood and glass doors. The latter transformed it into a spectacle: proud owners of *stenkas* did their best to put into them such high-status commodities as china sets, crystalware and valuable souvenirs. In the Soviet retail trade all these items were hard to obtain due to their scarcity; the purchase of a wall cabinet and such high-status commodities as East German china sets or Czechoslovak crystalware required ingenuity, useful connections (*blat*), luck and patience. Accounts of former Soviet employers and tourists abroad are, in particular, full of stories of how these precious items were obtained and transported back to the USSR.⁴⁵ These precious china sets and crystalware were used only on the most solemn occasions several times a year; all the rest of the time they stood behind the glass doors as home exhibits: visual, but not haptic objects.

Together, the *stenka* and the television set facilitated the re-organization of late socialist living rooms in terms of visual pleasure. Of course, the construction of the voyeuristic gaze into Soviet apartments was not something new for Soviet homes. The post-World War II emphasis on domesticity among the Soviet "middle class" that Vera Dunham described in her *In Stalin's Time* was, to a considerable degree, about creating domestic interiors in which assemblages of Soviet things and bodies would create "a small, gay, and bright paradise." Since such a paradise was practically impossible to reach in the conditions of the post-war shortage of all but the most necessary consumer commodity and it was late Stalinist fiction that took the task of creating representations of domestic life in terms of visual fantasies of beautiful home interiors.⁴⁶ In a similar way, Susan Reid and Steven Harris showed how in the post-Stalinist period, being a modern socialist person acquired the meaning of possessing a modern-looking home.⁴⁷ It

⁴⁴ Susan Reid, "Everyday Aesthetics in the Khrushchev-era Standard Apartment," in Choi Chatterjee et al., eds., *Everyday Life in Russia: Past and Present* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 215.

⁴⁵ Gorsuch, *All This Is Your World*, 93–97.

⁴⁶ Dunham, *In Stalin's Time*, 41–58, quotation on p. 43.

⁴⁷ Reid, "Cold War in the Kitchen"; Reid, "Khrushchev Modern"; Harris, *Communism on Tomorrow Street*.

was household objects that performed modern socialist identities together with (and sometimes instead of) their owners by the very fact of looking modern. The performativity of Soviet interiors already implied the presence of the voyeuristic gaze, which did not belong to the apartment owners, but emerged through advice literature and fiction. Irina Kriukova, in her overview of the history of post-Stalinist interior designs described this process in spatial terms, as a transition of Soviet apartments from places where domestic objects obstructed both the gaze and people's movement to a transparent and visually enjoyable space:

[Stalin-era furniture] occupied disproportionately much space and, in addition, created the visual feeling of darkness, [and] transformed rooms into dismal corridors, into narrow crevices... The incredibly difficult work of architects, artists, designers, entire factory collectives carried out in the short span of the late 1950s and early 1960s transformed the [Soviet] domestic designs... It seemed that every piece of furniture now wanted to become less visible, to shrink its size... Horizontals and, to a lesser degree, verticals became the dominant lines; everything tended to transform into flat surfaces.⁴⁸

This change in Soviet apartments cleared the way for the transformation of their residents into television audiences; their open and glass-door cabinets added to the creation of visually enjoyable space by creating domestic displays of china sets and crystalware: miniature Hermitages of a kind. The mass production and import of television-sets and *stenka*-type furniture translated this cultural message from discourse into matter. Indoor scenes in advice literature, typical photographs of Soviet-era living room interiors, and their cinematographic representations embodied the unobstructed voyeuristic gaze in their composition, providing a standardized perspective on television sets and on the “flat surfaces” of new furniture.

There was one more important aspect in this tacit domestic revolution: the changed position of books as domestic objects. Soviet sociologists noted very early on that the

⁴⁸ I. A. Kriukova, “Dekorativno-prikladnoie iskusstvo,” in *Ocherki sovremennogo sovetskogo iskusstva*, ed. I. A. Kriukova et al. (Moscow: Nauka, 1975), 91–92.

private possession of a TV set dramatically decreased the amount of leisure time spent reading books and magazines. A sociological study of urban Soviet families carried out between 1965 and 1968 mentioned that, in families with a TV set, “television... crowds out books and magazines.”⁴⁹ At the same time, books retained their superior position in the official hierarchy of Soviet culture, and “communication with the book [obshcheniie s knigoi] as the supreme and critical form of man’s intellectual development,” as Aleksandr Tvardovsky put it at the 21st Congress of the CPSU, was vigorously promoted through all channels of official propaganda.⁵⁰ Having a good home library was thus a social convention; and as Figure 41 demonstrates, books were proudly featured in Soviet *stenkas* together with china sets and crystalware. Yet the transformation of Soviet domestic space into a site of visual pleasure and the decreasing amount of time spent with books brought about a social tendency in which books were purchased exactly to fill in domestic space, to stand as interior objects, rather than to be read. Late Soviet intellectuals often dismissively and begrudgingly described this tendency as the purchase of books “to fit the colour of the wallpaper,” that is, as a sign of vanity.⁵¹ Such dismissive statements misrecognized the fact that the possession and display of books at home was, in fact, a necessary pre-requisite for performing one’s modern socialist identity. The underlying concerns of their statements were that many Soviet citizens increasingly denied the power of books to transform their selves and instead spent an increasing amount of time in front of their TV screens. And as the Soviet television set became ordinary and domesticated, it entered into symbiotic relations not only with objects, but also with people populating the homes where it was installed.

⁴⁹ L. A. Gordon and E. V. Klopov, *Man after Work: Social Problems of Daily Life and Leisure Time, Based on the Surveys of Workers’ Time Budgets in Major Cities of the European Part of the USSR* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), 131.

⁵⁰ “Rech’ A. T. Tvardovskogo,” in *Vneocherednoi XXI S’ezd Kommunisticheskoi partii Sovetskogo Soiuz: Stenograficheskii otchiot, Tom I* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1959), 562; see also Catriona Kelly, “‘Thank-You for the Wonderful Book’: Soviet Child Readers and the Management of Children’s Reading, 1950-1975,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6, no. 4 (2005): 717–53.

⁵¹ T. Simonova, “Kopit’ znaniia, a ne izdaniia,” *V mire knig*, no. 9 (September 1985): 56.

New Rhythms of Life

In its triumphant conquest of the Soviet home in the course of the 1960s and 1970s, the television set virtually chained its viewers in front of itself. Writing in 1962, the Soviet television critic Vladimir Sappak described this process in the following way:

The TV set was purchased, and immediately started behaving very aggressively. It occupied a notable place in our rather small apartment (it was allocated the best corner in the dining room), and very soon became the foundation of all aspects of our daily routine. We watched TV shows every night. All of them. Even boring ones... The fear to miss something “really interesting,” or maybe even sensational, overwhelmed us. The magic of the “free spectacle” had a full reign over us.⁵²

This magnetism of the television set – its ability to keep people immovable in front of their TV screen – worked independently of its content, as Sappak somewhat bitterly noted. And its physical effects were very visible: the TV set became an active contributor to a new curse of late socialism: the sedentary lifestyle, which was dubbed hypodynamia by Soviet physicians. Since the late 1970s, in particular, they were increasingly worried that leisure time spent by people in front of the TV set led directly to cardiovascular disorders and extra body weight.⁵³ But the curse could also become a cure, and in the mid-1980s the Soviet television set became a witness to how some of its audiences, after having watched it rather immovably during the previous decades, stood up and started doing physical exercises in front of their TV screens. What enabled the Soviet TV set to animate its viewers was the introduction of exercise television shows.

In an article for a 1985 issue of the Soviet magazine *Television and Radio Broadcast*, Aleksandr Ivanitskii, the chief editor of the Sports Programs Bureau of the Soviet Central Television and Radio between 1973 and 1991, wrote that, beginning in 1981, his bureau had been working on new TV shows “aimed directly at improving the health of the audience.” Initially, the focus was on propaganda for a healthy life style

⁵² Sappak, *Televidenie i my*, 91.

⁵³ G. I. Kositskii, *Tsivilizatsiia i serdtse* (Moscow: Nauka, 1977), 94.

through such programs as *Esli khochesh byt' zdorov* (*If you want to be healthy*) and *Stadion dlia vsexh* (*A stadium for all*).⁵⁴ In 1984, with the introduction of the new TV show *Ritmicheskaiia gimnastika* (*Rhythmic Gymnastics*), the Soviet television engaged its viewers in a more immediate and intimate way. The show was inspired by home videotapes of *Jane Fonda Workout*, a 1982 exercise video that popularized aerobics worldwide and became known in the USSR. The Sports Programs Bureau asked the Research Institute of the Physical Culture of the Russian Academy of Science to modify aerobics for Soviet television audiences; the name “aerobics” was also dropped as too Anglophone and instead a Russian neologism, “rhythmic gymnastics,” was coined.⁵⁵ Between 1984 and 1991, thirteen episodes were filmed. Each of them was broadcast several times a week and stayed in rotation for at least several months, and sometimes for over a year.



Figure 42. Aerobic exercise in Soviet homes. *Left: Ritmicheskaiia gimnastika* on a television screen. *Right: exercising in a Soviet apartment* (a contemporary re-enactment). Still images from the documentary *Zariadka v stile disko*, directed by Olga Pautova (1 Kanal, 2015).

Both contemporary and later accounts claimed that the social effects of the new show were immense: it triggered an aerobics craze in the USSR among many Soviet women and transformed the TV set into a site of sexual desire for many Soviet men. This popular fascination with aerobics was addressed in Leonid Parfyonov’s *Namedni* and a recent short documentary on Channel One Russia devoted to the 30-year anniversary of *Ritmicheskaiia gimnastika*. Both mentioned how popular demand on everything related to

⁵⁴ Ivanitskii, “Esli khochesh byt’ zdorov.”

⁵⁵ A. V. Ivanitskii et al., *Ritmicheskaiia gimnastika na TV* (Moscow: Sovetskii sport, 1989), 3–4.

this TV show catapulted unitards and leg-warmers into women's sports fashion, led to the production of workout routines in newspapers and of vinyl records with its soundtracks, and kept the program among the most popular shows of Soviet television until the collapse of the USSR. At the same time, its hosts, clad in tight-fitting dress and performing in a very uninhibited way under disco rhythms, looked dramatically different from the otherwise purist Soviet television programming. It was only natural that the TV show was perceived in terms of visual pleasure: "Those who did not exercise gazed," and its most devoted male audiences were soldiers of the Soviet Army and prison inmates who watched it in an ostensibly voyeuristic manner.⁵⁶ There was also negative response: Ivanitskii mentioned that an early version of *Ritmicheskaia gimnastika*, which was tested at some point in the early 1980s, led to an avalanche of "letters, telegrams, and calls from furious pensioners;⁵⁷ and one of the hosts of *Ritmicheskaia gimnastika* quoted in an interview with me a letter that she received after her appearance in the TV show from a vigilant Soviet woman: "What can Natasha Efremova's bedroom positions and looks teach Soviet youth?"⁵⁸

Both negative and positive reaction demonstrates that Soviet exercise TV shows became a manifestation of new female corporeality and sexuality. The omnipresent television set brought this corporeality into every Soviet apartment and made it a social phenomenon. While it may have been triggered by Western imagery of the exercising female body (videotapes of Jane Fonda) and introduced by Soviet enthusiasts of aerobics, the television set inscribed it into many Soviet women's bodies by prompting them to stand up and exercise in front of their TV screens. The privileged position of the TV set in the Soviet home helped translate imagery into bodily practice. With television infrastructure networks permeating Soviet society, one no longer needed a gym to acquire a better body: fitness was delivered to the home, transforming Soviet apartments into fitness clubs. In the Soviet popular imagination of the late 1980s, the television set

⁵⁶ Leonid Parfionov, dir., *Namedni. 1985* (NTV, 1998); Olga Pautova, dir., *Zariadka v stile disko* (1 Kanal, 2015). Quote from the second source.

⁵⁷ Ivanitskii et al., *Ritmicheskaia gimnastika na TV*, 3.

⁵⁸ My interview with Natalia Korkh (Efremova), West Vancouver, April 2015.

substituted for a fitness trainer, and, for a short period of time in 1989, with the advent of Kashpirovsky and Chumak, it also replaced the physician.

Paranormalists on TV

Anatoly Kashpirovsky's rise to national fame began in April 1988, when the popular TV show *Vzgliad* broadcast a teleconference between its studio in Moscow and a hospital in Kiev. The actual medical background is hardly possible to recover,⁵⁹ but the story line dealt with a patient allergic to anaesthetics who had a breast tumor that had to be surgically removed. Kashpirovsky managed to convince the patient, the medical staff, and the management of *Vzgliad* that he would successfully use his hypnotic abilities to provide remote psychic anaesthetic through the TV screen. The operation took place on 31 March 1988, and several days later the multi-million strong audience of the Soviet *Channel I* saw a middle-aged man with a commanding voice who put the woman into a trance from a distance of 800 kilometers by way of a small television set installed in the operation room. The surgery was reported as a success, done without medical anaesthesia, and became a topic of discussion in major Soviet newspapers.⁶⁰ Following his newly acquired popularity, Kashpirovsky started organizing mass healing sessions in Kiev and Moscow. Later in 1988, he also appeared on Ukrainian TV in a series of five TV broadcasts which, as he claimed, were designed to help children suffering from bedwetting.⁶¹ In March 1989, Kashpirovsky was once again shown on the *Channel I* delivering remote anaesthesia from Kiev to two patients undergoing abdominal surgery in Tbilisi, a distance of over two thousand kilometers. As with the previous case a year before, the TV coverage of this teleconference was shown nationwide and generated a

⁵⁹ It has been subject to multiple speculations ever since, most recently in the TV documentary: *Kashpirovskii protiv Chumaka* (Profi-TV, dir. Andrei Solonevich, 2008).

⁶⁰ V. Shcherbachev, "Vnusheniie vmesto narkoza," *Trud*, 1988, 8 April; L. Rodina, "Bez boli, bez narkoza," *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, 1988, 10 April; S. Tutorskaia, "Gipnoz bez chudes," *Izvestiia*, 1988, 16 April.

⁶¹ Anton Morgovskii, *Anatolii Kashpirovskii... Vchera, segodnia, zavtra...* (Kiev: Molod', 1990), 6–8.

huge interest in his alleged hypnotic and psychic abilities among the Soviet public.⁶² The ground was ready for his more dramatic appearance on the Soviet TV screen.

Kashpirovsky became a Soviet celebrity of the first order after his live session in the Ostankino concert hall, the heart of Soviet television, broadcast on 27 July 1989, and six subsequent “healing séances” [seansy zdorov’ia] broadcast biweekly on Sunday prime-time from 8 October to 16 December 1989, all of them on the *Channel 1*. In between, a number of séances were broadcast by regional TV channels. Below is a summary of his first healing séance, broadcast by *Channel 1* on 8 October 1989. The show started with Kashpirovsky appearing in front of a huge auditorium in Ostankino and claiming that his “curing influence” starts its work on the bodies and minds of TV viewers from the first seconds of the program. He then read aloud a number of letters from the viewers of his previous TV show that allegedly “evidenced the effectiveness of my TV healing”:

After your séance, the post-delivery umbilical hernia from which I suffered for twelve years has disappeared. I can now sleep without pills...

I am undergoing treatment in front of the TV set. The 28-year old scars on my chest have dissolved. Blood pressure is back to normal...

I was holding my two-year son suffering from hemophilia in front of the TV set. Since then he hasn’t had any bleeding, and it has already been two months. Can it be over?..

After your séance, a tumor the size of a three-kopeck coin in the breast of my fourteen-year old daughter has dissolved...⁶³

After reading the letters, Kashpirovsky addressed the audience of Ostankino’s auditorium asking them to share their experiences of how his healing powers helped them. Several oncology patients claimed that they successfully substituted radiation and chemotherapy treatments with Kashpirovsky’s séances, and some other audience members narrated stories of how his TV broadcasts successfully treated scars, tumors, obesity, cerebral palsy, hepatitis, postinfarction complications, amyotrophic sclerosis and

⁶² V. Vrublevskaia, “Vnushaiu vam tolko dobro,” *Pravda Ukrainy*, 1989, 25 March; Stanislav Kalinichev, “‘‘Ia umeiu dat’ komandu’,” *Smena*, 14 (1989): 14–16.

⁶³ My transcript of the TV show.

many other diseases. Letters and personal accounts emphasized that the distance from Moscow did not play any role in the effectiveness of TV treatment: success stories were coming from all over the USSR.

In the second part of the TV show, Kashpirovsky moved on to address the television audience. With the camera showing close-ups of his face and soothing music playing in the background, he commanded in a deep, assured voice:

I've been giving you a suggestion for healing from the very first second that we've been communicating... The effects will be only positive... Many of you feel that your arms are moving, are lifting [by themselves]... Some of you feel pleasant flows of heat in your body. It is blood circulating. Your blood pressure is becoming normal... Your body itself will find what needs to be destroyed, what it needs to get rid of.⁶⁴

The TV show ended with Kashpirovsky counting to ten, suggesting that the TV audience “is feeling itself great” and then announcing the séance over, with his close-up view gradually dissolving into a nature scene of a mountain lake.

Kashpirovsky's appearance on the central Soviet TV channel, with its audience of over 200 million people, was a social phenomenon on a national scale. David Remnick spoke of Kashpirovsky's “cult of personality” and described packed concert halls and soccer stadiums with people desperately wishing to see their idol.⁶⁵ The Soviet press exploded with feature articles, op-ed pieces, and letters from readers addressing Kashpirovsky's spiritual powers.⁶⁶ In November 1989, the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences organized a public debate entitled *Telepsychotherapy: The Stretches of the Real*, with prominent doctors, psychiatrists, philosophers, journalists and Kashpirovsky himself, which served as a public forum to discuss the pros and cons of the hugely popular ways of healing oneself in front of the TV screen. Most participants took

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Remnick, *Lenin's Tomb*, 258–261.

⁶⁶ For example, A. Medelianovskii, “Sharlatanstvo ili panatseia?” *Argumenty i fakty*, no. 35 (September 1989): 5–6; “‘Fenomen Kashpirovskogo’: chto govoriat uchionnye?” *Sovetskaia kultura*, 1989, 28 November; I. Kharitonov, “Glaza v glaza,” *Sovetskaia Rossiia*, 1989, 26 November.

the effects of Kashpirovsky's séances on Soviet TV audiences seriously, but disagreed on whether they had more positive or negative influences.

Simultaneously with Kashpirovsky, another paranormalist appeared on the Soviet television. In spring 1989, a popular TV show devoted to amateur engineering *Eto Vy Mozhet!* [You Can Do It!] broadcast a short healing séance held by Allan Chumak, a former journalist who claimed possession of a "gift" to manipulate alleged human bioenergy. Then, during the three summer months of 1989, his short séances were broadcast during the morning entertainment show *90 Minutes* (later *120 Minutes*) from Monday to Saturday. Unlike Kashpirovsky, during his séances Chumak communicated with his television audiences only in the very beginning, when he announced that he was going to transmit his healing energy through the television network to TV viewers and that this day's séance would focus on certain disease groups: different week days allegedly addressed cardiovascular deceases, locomotor impairments, gastric deceases, and some others. He then added that those viewers who wanted to benefit from his healing energy during the entire day could put jars and bottles with water or any other drink, as well as cosmetic creams, in front of their TV screens: all this would acquire curing properties by the end of the TV show. After this brief announcement, Chumak stayed silent for several minutes (a typical show lasted between eight and ten minutes) making mesmeric gestures which symbolized the transmission of his energy through the TV network. At the end of the séance, he reiterated that the fluids placed in front of the TV screen had become a universal remedy and could be applied externally or internally throughout the day.

The public reaction to Kashpirovsky's and Chumak's TV séances tended to gravitate either to acceptance, often on the brink of reverence, or to rejection that routinely took equally radical forms, such as the labelling of these TV shows and the popular practice of watching them as obscurantist. This divide had an explicitly social nature: my analysis of the followers and critics of the Soviet paranormalists shows that the two key factors that influenced (although did not determine rigidly) one's standpoint on TV healing were education and gender. Women on average dominated in their audiences, and a higher

educational level made people more likely to dismiss the claims that Kashpirovsky or Chumak actually possessed paranormal power.⁶⁷ A typical critic of healing TV séances was an urban male intellectual; a typical adept was a middle-aged or senior woman without a university degree. As one – male and educated – Soviet journalist patronizingly described the opposing camp, “the audience of [Kashpirovsky’s] séances is dominated by a certain type of woman: with agitated looks, rusty, fatty, of a hairdresser type [парикмахерского вида].”⁶⁸ The latter took for granted the claims of Soviet paranormalists that their TV shows were beneficial for bodily health; the former rang the alarm that these shows facilitated the physical and moral degeneration of Soviet society. What united them was the firm belief that TV séances did influence people’s bodies and minds. At the Institute of Philosophy’s conference in November 1989, Kashpirovsky mentioned that his home archive held 60,000 letters from those TV viewers who reported positive effects of his séances.⁶⁹ His opponents, in response, cited the statistics of emergency room visits, as did one Moscow doctor at the same conference:

What happened after Kashpirovsky’s séance?.. By nightfall, there was a sharp increase in the number of emergency room visitors. Most of the cases were difficult: pulmonary edemas, cardiac dysrhythmias, and hypertensive crises. The death rate triples during the days of his séances! In the following three days, the doctors of the [Moscow] Polyclinic No. 23 noted a sharp recrudescence of cardiovascular diseases. The psychoneurologic dispensary had huge lines of patients with neuropsychic disturbances... Somebody has earlier said that it’s everyone’s own business whether to watch TV or not... It turned out that among adults, women with secondary-level education are most susceptible to teletherapy,.. and I want to draw your attention to the fact that the most vulnerable group to this faith cure were children... [These TV séances] are damaging not only people’s health, but also the ecology of our society’s psychic life.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ I observed the audiences of their live performances available in video records, as well as looked at the authors of laudatory and critical responses in contemporary and later publications.

⁶⁸ Perevozchikov, *Fenomen? Sindrom? Ili...*, 42.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 30. Some of these letters were reproduced in: Morgovskii, *Anatolii Kashpirovskii...*

⁷⁰ Ibid., 32–34.

The use of medical knowledge in this speech is openly politicized, as its author refers to “women with secondary-level education” and children as victims incapable of resisting Kashpirovsky’s influence as transmitted through the TV signal. This vocabulary allows him to claim the authority to dismiss the question of whether “it’s everyone’s own business whether to watch TV or not,” as rhetorical. Of course, it is not, since the television’s power is dangerous for the national body. If left unchecked, it would damage the physical and mental health of the nation, represented by a conventional reference to women and children as powerless subjects needing protection.

From this perspective, the use of the concept “obscurantism” to refer to both Kashpirovsky and his audiences was, of course, highly politicized, since it aimed to discredit in the public discourse another form of power that threatened the monopoly of the Soviet educated class on defining the Soviet national body. After all, the use of this term was genealogically rooted in the feeling of shame for one’s compatriots – an emotion that some authors expressed explicitly in the context of the popularity of these paranormal TV shows.⁷¹ In this historical context, shame produced an identification effect similar to the one that Eve Sedgwick described in *Touching Feeling*: it disrupted one’s conventional identity as a Soviet intellectual, but immediately imposed another form of identification, that of a responsible member of the Soviet public body; in Sedgwick’s own words shame makes “the double movement... toward painful individuation, toward uncontrollable relationality.”⁷² For the Soviet intelligentsia, the appearance of Kashpirovsky and Chumak on the Soviet television screen brought into their homes an undesired unity with Soviet society: not an ideal imagined and rational society regulated by productivist language, as discussed in Chapter 1, or any other official discourse, but a society that performed other, presumably irrational, individual and collective identities. This feeling frightened them, since this society refused to perform rational Soviet identities according to the values that Soviet intellectuals wanted to see as social norms. Referring to their popularity as obscurantism was a rational

⁷¹ Limonov, *Inostranets: Smutnoie vremia*, 60–63.

⁷² Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*, Series Q (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 36–37, quote on p. 37.

reaction to regain distance from “the rest of society” that the presence of the TV set in their homes threatened to violate. Sergey Muratov called television “a revolution in the means of human communication” and “a shortcut between a man and the humanity.”⁷³ The use of the term obscurantism was meant to block this shortcut, to restore the autonomy of one’s private space, and to hide the “uncontrollable relationality” that the TV set provoked by virtue of its very material presence in every Soviet home.

Let’s look more closely at the opposite camp – those who sincerely believed in the curing effects of Soviet paranormalists’ TV shows. Neither Soviet nor foreign medical scientists, have ever confirmed any actual bodily effects of these séances. Yet the fact can be hardly disputed that Kashpirovsky and Chumak received thousands of enthusiastic and grateful letters from their followers, some of which had been reproduced in print editions or read aloud during their broadcasts. In addition, people gave their personal testimonies during live TV shows of Kashpirovsky and in online records of TV shows of both healers. One can find on YouTube and similar video hosting services multiple comments on their alleged medical effects. If we put aside conspiracy explanations that all this feedback was fabricated by paranormalists themselves, or even by Soviet security services, the most reasonable explanation is that claims of actual healing were a result of translation into medical terms of some other forms of personal experience. These claims were, in other words, not accurate descriptions of one’s medical conditions, but were themselves symptoms signaling recognition of “the affective power of the television screen.” While each separate testimony can probably be explained by certain psychological factors, their sheer mass, numbering in the tens of thousands, made them a social phenomenon and an interesting historical source.

Iraklii Andronikov, a literature historian and public intellectual who was among the first Soviet scholars to give lectures on TV beginning in 1954, described the main difference between cinematography and television in terms of performance:

What makes the TV set different from the movie screen?

⁷³ Muratov, *Televidenie v poiskakh televideniia*, 79, 88.

One wonderful feature... A spectator in a cinema is an observer of the film events. A TV viewer is a co-participant, or – to be more precise – a silent participant in the events. [The TV set] addresses him, converses with him, the television events happen in his house.⁷⁴

Andronikov emphasizes the ability of the TV set to instigate performance among its audiences, to act as a force that brings its viewers into motion. In their positive or negative reaction alike, Soviet viewers recognized the power of the television to demand co-participation on behalf of the public. Writing thankful letters to Soviet paranormalists – as well as exposing one’s body to the TV screen to receive their perceived healing power – were some of the forms of this performance.

The gloss of Kashpirovsky and Chumak was full of terms such as “psyche,” “(bio)energy,” “(psychic) influence,” “gift” and others referring to beliefs in the supernatural and the paranormal. In reality, however, the Kashpirovsky-Chumak phenomenon revealed a different, much more materialist power which was part of social change in the late Soviet Union: the power of the television set. It transformed Soviet domestic space and undermined its privacy by co-opting its viewers into various forms of performance that, despite its intimate character (watching TV at home), united them into a large social entity. In doing so, it problematized – in the historical perspective – Soviet cultural fantasies of total control over the material world, as it demonstrated the power of a material object to animate people in ways contrary to those that official discourses desired.

Conclusion

In Soviet culture, books and magazines have traditionally been the medium that sought to promote promethean fantasies of the Soviet man transforming the material world around himself and becoming a better – enlightened and rational – Soviet subject in the process. Soviet discourse on reading always emphasized this self-transformational aspect of one’s engagement with books. The written word endowed the Soviet educated class with power

⁷⁴ Irakly Andronikov, “Okno v mir,” *Ogoniok*, 9 (1962): 26.

to define Soviet norms and values. The television, in contrast, revealed an ability to organize its audience along those social structures and beliefs that were downplayed on a discursive level and thus granted agency to people without cultural voice – as a Soviet journalist dismissively characterized them, to that “certain type of women: with agitated looks, rusty, fatty, of a hairdresser type.” The cultural conflict around the Soviet television set, in general, and TV shows of Soviet psychics, in particular, followed the logic of class struggle over social power.

It is hardly surprising, therefore, that the television set remains, perhaps, the most antagonistic object in contemporary Russian society. The consolidation of control over TV channels by the current political regime associated with President Vladimir Putin resulted in the widespread use of television propaganda to popularize official politics and discredit political opposition. As a result, in the critical public discourse of the last decade the private possession of a television set strongly associates with a lack of critical thinking. In turn, at least in some families, as my field observations in Russia showed, watching TV at home has become a performative act that creates an imaginary connection to the larger national body. The form is more important than the content; to recall Sergei Muratov’s quote, “A TV viewer is a co-participant, or – to be more precise – a silent participant in the events.” One of the basic political distinctions in Russia these days is drawn over the question of whether or not to connect one’s domestic space to a television network that suggests a nation-based form of collective identity, or to the World Wide Web with its numerous other imagined communities. This distinction also draws on very different historicities embodied by the TV set vis-à-vis other material objects.

Conclusions

The recent academic interest in materiality studies has been driven by two major factors. One is the epistemological potential offered by materiality-focused research on societies and cultures. In the Introduction, I discussed some of the approaches to the study of material objects and their social lives from this, epistemological, perspective. These approaches also served as the methodological and conceptual basis of my dissertation chapters. At the same time, many of the authors who offered new interpretations of materiality's role in social change repeatedly emphasized that their research and writing have an explicit political agenda. In many cases, this political agenda is, in fact, a leading force of the new materiality studies. Positioning themselves vis-à-vis the scholarship that accentuates the primary character of language and linguistic symbolism in humanities and social sciences, authors such as Michel de Certeau, Bill Brown, Daniel Miller and Jane Bennet do not challenge the main arguments of this scholarship: namely, that language is helplessly "colonized" by power relations and meanings (Michel Foucault) or that any writing has its own politics and organizes itself – often independently of its author's will – through ritualized and hence uncritically reproduced writings practices (Jacques Derrida). In contrast, these arguments serve as their launch pad when they claim materiality is resistant to hegemonic power and has emancipatory political potential.¹ The authors of recent works in materiality studies argue, in particular, that politically and analytically dominant conceptualizations of matter and things as passive objects of human will are themselves political acts structuring our understanding of the world as extremely anthropocentric and encapsulating all those power practices that also serve as the basis of racism, chauvinism

¹ For example, Michel de Certeau begins his *The Practice of Everyday Life* with an "invention" of a new language for social description, as his main claim is that the dominant analytical language cannot describe, but only "capture" the "the fleeting and massive reality of a social activity at play with the order that contains it." Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), xi–28, quote on p. xxiv. On the emancipatory political potential of materiality and material culture see also Miller, *Material culture and mass consumption*, especially the chapters "Object Domains, Ideology and Interests" and "Towards a Theory of Consumption," p. 158–217.

and orientalism.² Only defamiliarization of the material world, the political effort to “make the stone *stony*... to make objects ‘unfamiliar’, to make forms difficult...”³ (in this respect, Russian Formalists sound astonishingly contemporary to the agenda of new materiality studies) can help lead to a more egalitarian and just society.

My study of how Soviet objects and spaces substantiated individual and collective selves shows that the ability of things to materialize emotions, to objectify social understandings of the past and future, and to shape human bodies – in other words, their ability to act in a potentially subversive manner – was never left uncontested by the Soviet authorities and intellectual elite who sought to regulate, manipulate and subordinate the vibrant lives of Soviet things. The “elementalness” of matter, its unpredictability and resistance provided innumerable obstacles in the pathway of the rational social transformation of the Soviet people. The materiality of Soviet objects such as stairwells, weightlifting equipment, or television sets created hybrid social creatures whose practices were influenced not only by ideology and language, but also by the agency of things. As a result, Soviet artifacts did have their politics:⁴ while official texts claimed, beginning in the late 1960s, that Soviet society had entered a period of developed socialism characterized by the absence of any fundamental social contradictions,⁵ natural and man-made objects generated active public debates, provoked conflicts, mobilized communities and, in essence, helped produce a social and cultural diversity that challenged the social engineering efforts of Soviet authorities and intelligentsia.

Symptomatically, this effort itself was, to a considerable degree, based on the recognition of the power of things to structure and change Soviet society. Elemental materialism as a part of the cultural logic of late socialism supplied officials and intellectuals with persistent and routinely reproduced metaphors that assessed people through their mastery of professional equipment, consumption practices, and hobbies. It

² Coole and Frost, *New Materialism*; Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*; Brown, “Thing Theory.”

³ Shklovsky, “Art as Technique,” 12.

⁴ Langdon Winner, “Do Artifacts Have Politics?,” *Daedalus* 109, no. 1 (1980): 121–36.

⁵ See, e.g., G. A. Kozlov et al, eds., *Politicheskaiia ekonomiiia: Sotsializm – pervaiia faza kommunisticheskogo sposoba proizvodstva* (Moscow: Mysl, 1975), 38.

also influenced the social topography of late socialism, as it helped induce moral panics over the Soviet national body that could allegedly become corrupted by too intimate a contact with the materiality of such spaces as semi-official basements gyms or the virtual reality of the television set, but could also be healed through interaction with others at such locales as open air museums of heritage architecture, Palaces of Young Pioneers, or public gyms and stadiums. In certain ways, elemental materialism contributed to an important transformation of late Soviet society into a more inclusive social and political order through claims that such material objects and spaces as wooden churches and archaic northern landscapes were socialist by nature. Elemental materialism reconciled within the discursive field of late socialism the Prometheanism of Genrikh Alrshuller with the architectural preservationism of Aleksandr Opolovnikov, and the petrified plastic historicity of scale modeling with the voyeuristic space of basement bodybuilding gyms.

The historical agency of socialist objects originated precisely from the elementality and spontaneity of materiality, its affectivity that appealed to Soviet people and forced them to change their bodies and selves, its innate ability to produce social effects that were not anticipated by the hegemonic discourse and forced it to react and adapt. The power of things was that they acted before discourse, creating communities, performing new meanings, producing and objectifying certain regimes of knowledge – something that, for example, scale models or heritage buildings did with their enthusiasts.

It would be wrong to categorize these effects only in terms of hegemony and subversion. Studies of Soviet history have long been fascinated with these questions, especially when it comes to understanding and interpreting how Soviet people were produced as a distinct historical category. It has become a commonplace to argue that the Soviet civilization shaped Soviet people, first of all, by teaching them how to “speak Bolshevik.” Yet as my analysis of various historical forms of interaction between Soviet people and materiality shows, this process was more complex. Soviet objects and spaces interfered in the processes of subjectivation by suggesting forms of selfhood that fell out of the civilizing frameworks of the Soviet enlightening project. When Soviet

underground bodybuilders turned to weightlifting equipment to gain muscle weight or when members of the club “Polar Odysseus” searched White Sea villages for remnants of traditional boat designs, new hybrid bodies and identities were suggested by affective objects that called these people into social being as “men of iron” or the “last Pomors,” respectively. Soviet materiality acquired its historical agency through the bodies of people who were fascinated with various material objects of late socialism and for whom these objects were instrumental in suggesting and objectifying their individual and collective selves.

A social history of Soviet objects and spaces is also important for our understanding of the Soviet Union in the global context, including one of the most pressing questions in Soviet history: namely, what was the place of the USSR in the landscape of modernity? Was the Soviet Union a specifically, yet quintessentially modern state? Or did it represent a separate, socialist variant of modernity? Or has it ever been modern at all?⁶ My study of Soviet elemental materialism shows that many phenomena in late socialism were inspired, triggered or caused by the transnational circulation of objects, ideas and people. In the 1960s, when Georgi Tenno transplanted American bodybuilding to Soviet soil, he sought to exploit the potential of weightlifting equipment to produce the modern Soviet body. In the 1970s and 1980s, Soviet suburban youth found this western cultural product to be a useful technique to transform their bodies into weapons not only in order to survive with dignity compulsory service in the Soviet Army with its institutionalized abuse and harassment, but also to assert their class visions of what the proper Soviet collective body should look like. In doing so, they clashed with other, on average more educated social groups among Soviet youth whose life styles were inspired by other western subcultures, such as hippies or punks.

Meanwhile, many Soviet women of the 1980s embraced the Soviet version of aerobics inspired by Jane Fonda fitness videos and popularized by Soviet television. Soviet modelers mastered their hobby using plastic model sets designed in England.

⁶ For a detailed discussion of the problem of the Soviet Union and modernity in Michael David-Fox, *Crossing Borders: Modernity, Ideology, and Culture in Russia and the Soviet Union* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2015), 1–7, 21–47.

They also built collections that – in terms of ideology and politics – were barely distinguishable in their glorification of the national past from similar model collections built elsewhere in the First World. Soviet architectural preservation enthusiasts looked at the Skansen Museum in Stockholm as an exemplary open-air museum and even called their discipline “skansenology.” These and other transnational phenomena of the late Soviet era, such as the popularity of yoga and karate, or the search for the abominable snowman and UFOs demonstrate that transnational communication between the eastern and western blocs was never homogeneous, but was rather structured along social categories, such as class, gender and ethnicity. The concept of entangled modernities popularized by Göran Therborn is, indeed, helpful for the understanding of late Soviet society, yet we should add an important aspect to it: the divisions between modernities followed not only national and cultural, but also social borders.⁷ Gender and class mattered in Soviet society as they did in Western Europe or North America, and transnational entanglements across the Iron Curtain demonstrate that different social groups had their own understandings and practices of what it meant to be modern. Objects encapsulated and communicated across national borders these different, class-based visions and practices. In this sense, to speak of a separate Soviet modernity would mean to discard an immense diversity of social and cultural life in the USSR, and to imply that the essence of Russian history lies in its strong centralized system of government – something which often translates into the writing of Russian history as a history of its rulers.

From this perspective, a focus on objects and spaces in the Soviet context can help us make another important conceptual move. Soviet history is still routinely written and interpreted as a history of great white men. Soviet leaders remain the top choice for both book titles (with the commonplace use of such terms as Stalin’s Russia or Brezhnev’s era for the periodization of Russian history) and covers that extensively feature their photographs, portraits or posters. A material history of the USSR provides an important intervention into the ways of writing and teaching Russian history that allows us to see

⁷ Göran Therborn, “Entangled modernities,” *European Journal of Social Theory* 6, no. 3 (2003): 293–305. See also David-Fox, *Crossing Border*, 47.

other historical trends, social structures and cultural meanings. Material objects of late socialism encapsulated different and often conflicting visions of the past, present and future, structured the social landscape, and suggested various forms of navigating through it. Examining the ways they did so makes it possible to better understand Soviet society as a complex historical phenomenon that successfully avoided the persistent efforts of the ruling Communist regime to transform it into a rationally organized, disciplined, and easily controllable community.

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