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Was a Soviet Man a Socialist? The Dichotomy of Consumerist Ideals and Socialist Values in Late Soviet Society (1945-1990)

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Abstract

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A number of British and American works of the 2000-2010s are devoted to the transformation of socialist ideas and crisis of collectivist values in the Soviet society after the Second World War. The objective of this article is to define the main trends of modern Anglophone historiography in studies of the dichotomy of consumerist ideals and socialist values in late Soviet society (1945-1990). The result of this study is an arrangement of general research approaches and an identifying of new thematic perspectives in Anglophone Russian Studies concerned with the Soviet period. Researchers consider the period from 1945 to 1990 as a comprehensive and logically complete period of Russian history. The internal unity of this period consists in the evolution of the Soviet way of life and socialist values. This process was incremental and hardly reflected by contemporaries (both within the Soviet state, and abroad). British and American works of the 2000-2010s filled a significant gap in world Russian Studies: the elements of capitalist culture, which coexisted in parallel with generally accepted Soviet way of life, were identified. A special contribution of modern Anglophone researches to Russian Studies is the analysis of socio-cultural processes, which were the evidence of the deformation of socialist norms and values. For instance, the occurrence of the sense of social injustice, greater recognition that a respected profession and a profitable occupation were divergent, is not sufficiently developed in Russian historical science.

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1. Introduction

Since the 1990s Russian historical science has investigated an extensive historiographical tradition of Russian Studies, leading position in which belongs to Anglophone scientific products. Significant transformations of Russian image in American Russian Studies in 1990-2000s and decrease in



influence of totalitarian theory led to research in particular historical problems of the Soviet culture and society. A considerable number of fundamental works connected with the Soviet history and unknown to Russian readers has not yet been translated into Russian language. Systematization of methodological innovations and key thematic vectors developed in modern Anglophone Russian Studies is relevant. It is useful for studying the formation of the Soviet consumer society and the transformation of socialist values in the USSR. This article is based on representative corpus of Anglophone historiographical sources published in the 21st century. Modern Russian historiography of Anglophone Russian Studies, concerned with the Soviet consumer society, is primarily focused on works of the 1980-1990s. The interest of Russian researchers in world Russian Studies of the latest decade is unreasonably low and selective. Attempts to summarize and eliminate western research experience in the Soviet culture and society, the Soviet national identity were numerous and varied in the 1990s – the first half of the 2000s, while in the second decade of the 21st century interest in findings of Russian Studies by Russian scientists is highly specialized and applied (Trubnikova, 2015; Rogaeva, 2015). Brief analytical reviews without interdisciplinary analysis of methodological paradigms are common practice in Russian historiography of western Sovietology and Kremlinology. The objective of this article is to define the main trends of modern Anglophone historiography in studies of the dichotomy of consumerist ideals and socialist values in late Soviet society (1945-1990).

2. Results and Discussion

One of the main trends of Russian Studies is a new formulation of questions relating to the formation of ideals and reality of consumer society in the USSR as well as the correlation of collective, socialist and individual values of Soviet citizens. This research perspective can be described as a search for an answer to the question: “Was a Soviet man a socialist?” According to English and American researchers, the main evidence of the destruction of Sovietology as a science was the failure to predict the collapse of the Soviet Union (Bonnell, & Breslauer, 2003; Engerman, 2009). However, in the second half of the 1980s sovietologists stated that M.S. Gorbachev was not a political figure “from nowhere”. His reforms were the result of qualitative changes in the Soviet society: success of the Soviet education system, expanding the range of occupations, the rapid growth of the shadow economy, and, as a consequence, the emergence of new types of social activity (Walker, 1986; Duhamel, 2010; Evans, 2010).

Changes in the Soviet way of living led to the formation of new social groups with new social and economic expectations, which were in clear or latent contradiction with socialist ideals and corporate values. According to Martin Walker’s (1986) figural expression, “the country went through a social revolution while Brezhnev slept”. In the 1990s, however, Russian Studies concluded only that the international tension discharge of the Cold War era led to the delay rather than the acceleration of the tremendous changes happening in the USSR in the late 1980s (Cordovez, & Harrison, 1995; Crump, 2013). In the 2000s, English and American researches are interested in the issues of a consumer society in the USSR. Upon the unanimous opinion of western historians, consumerist ideals were developed in the 1960-1970s. In this period the famous triad “A car, an apartment, a summer cottage” was formed. This triad identified the main elements of the Soviet consumer ideal (Ageev, & Ageeva, 2015).

A number of recent studies are aimed at identifying of differences in consumer values between Soviet town residents and villagers (Wegren, 1998; Crowley, & Reid, 2002; Lovell, 2003; Heinzen, 2004; Hilton, 2011; Gorsuch, & Koenker, 2013). In the work “The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World” A. Gorsuch and D. Koenker (2013) discussed the causal link between the development of the consumer society and urbanization in the Soviet Union and Russia from the 1960s to the present. Almost simultaneously with the building of consumer society there was the migration growth from rural areas to urban ones in the USSR. It was the second wave of the Soviet urbanization.

According to the research logic of A. Gorsuch and D. Koenker (2013), Perestroika was the culmination of a long socio-economic transformation, which occurred over the decades in response to the economic problems and social tensions. It was a reaction on a rapid urbanization and industrialization. In the first half of the 1920s, only 16% of Soviet citizens lived in cities while this number more than tripled by the 1960s. From 1950 to 1984 the number of students enrolled in universities increased from 1.2 to 5.3 million people. They formed new technocratic elite with values and attitudes of the Soviet middle class (Gorsuch, 2011).

In a fascinating study “Selling to the Masses: Retailing in Russia, 1880-1930” M. Hilton (2011) analyzed how varied the set of material and social benefits was depending on different factors: development level of consumer culture and advertising, the degree of economic development and welfare of Russian society, the state policy regarding this socio-economic phenomenon. The author emphasizes the important role of consumer culture as a tool for the formation of social and gender identity, urbanization (Hilton, 2011).

We should mention the research of S. Lovell “Summerfolk: A History of the Dacha, 1710-2000” (2003). The main author’s thesis is that social and cultural phenomenon of Soviet “dacha” can be a unique reference point for Russian Studies. It is useful for the exploration of social and political transformations, “unexpected zigzags” of the position of the Soviet state and society on a private property. Historian examines in details changes took place in the Soviet collective attitudes towards “dacha” as an object of consumption - from disparaging associations with a physical idleness, bourgeois property and unproductive land use to admiration for “dacha” as a form of cultural activities related to the abandonment of ungrateful agricultural labor while maintaining the closeness to nature (Lovell, 2003).

S. Lovell stated that an actual physical embodiment of summer residences, whether a luxurious mansion or a shack, is a secondary consideration for the analysis of summerfolk’s value system. S. Lovell analyzed different cultural and historical sources of the second half of the 20th century such as architectural projects, memoirs, newspaper articles, advertisements and even the works of Russian science fiction writers. The author describes how Soviet citizens excused themselves from their urban jobs by means of “dacha”, equipped the inner, private space and created informal intellectual communities (Lovell, 2003).

The novelty of the author's interpretation and innovative approaches to the analysis of historical sources seem characteristic of the work C. Giustino “Socialist Escapes: Breaking Away from Ideology and Everyday Routine in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989” (2013). The author stressed the practical impossibility of physical human escape from the Soviet Union and focused on the so-called “socialist

escapes”. C. Giustino explained daily efforts of ordinary Soviet people to the psychological escape from over-regulation and control. The desire to assert their own individuality by means of a range of activities was in clear contradiction with socialist values. The author discusses such examples as visits to concerts, youth clubs or football matches, the purchase of car or summer cottage (Giustino, 2013).

According to C. Giustino, typical environments of “socialist escape” included beaches, resorts and other recreational facilities, children's and sports camps. In contrast to S. Lovell who associated various forms of “escape” from the Soviet public service with the development of industrialization and urbanization, C. Giustino considers striving for the realization of individual interests purely as a “socialist escape”. C. Giustino seems to exaggerate, to some extent, the impact of such kinds of “protective relaying” from the state dictatorship on discrediting corporate socialist values in the late Soviet period (Giustino, 2013).

In addition to the analysis of socio-economic transformation of the Soviet society in the second half of the 20th century, which gradually eroded the system of socialist production and socialist way of life, Anglophone researchers do not disregard a historical and cultural component of these processes (Reid, & Crowley, 2000; Reid, & Crowley, 2012; Giustino, 2013). In the context of the “new cultural” Russian history scientists try to answer the question whether the Soviet citizens were socialists “inside their souls” or not? Did they think in socialist terms? In the last two decades, the object of Russian Studies has been the Soviet media, the origin and development of youth subcultures in the USSR, the phenomenon of socialist tourism, the Soviet experience in international festivals (Satterwhite, 1992; Kiaer, 2008; Bown, & Tregulova, 2012; Maurer, & Richers, 2011; Westerman, 2011).

In the work “Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism” Ch. Kiaer (2008) analyzed the role of constructivist art methods in the formation of a socialist, utilitarian approach to objects of everyday use in the Soviet Union of the 1920s. The socialist battle-cry “Our things in our hands must be equal, comrades!” was the counter-theses to capitalist fetishization of unique products. In pursuit of this socialist claim, Soviet painters like engineers followed the principle of “practical utility” of art objects for everyday life of the new socialist society (Kiaer, 2008).

The framework for socialist construction led to the depersonalization, seriation and utility of the Soviet art and architecture as well as the design of household items produced in that period. Ch. Kiaer analyzed advertising images of biscuits, clothes, clappers and other goods. The author concluded that a tangible thing of socialist culture was intended to be the object of collective use. Thus, “the socialization of material culture” did not purport to eliminate wealth. It was based on the exclusion of personal and possessory attitudes of Soviet citizens towards material values (Kiaer, 2008).

In the work “Socialist Realisms: Soviet Painting 1920-1970” M. Bown (2012) stated that Socialist Realism as a unique phenomenon in the art of 20th century was not only a product of close public monitoring, totalitarian control and political pressure. Socialist Realism affected exhibits of the Soviet museums for more than half a century; however, it was not a static phenomenon. Socialist Realism incorporated the talent of thousands of artists in the vast and diverse Soviet Empire. According to M. Bown, trends that played a crucial role in the development of Socialist Realism is a perfect research focus if you wish to study unvoiced questions of the Soviet intellectuals, their hopes and doubts (Bown, & Tregulova, 2012).

The work “Soviet Space Culture: Cosmic Enthusiasm in Socialist Societies” (Maurer, & Richers, 2011) is undoubtedly of interest to the reader. The authors consider aesthetics and rhetoric of the “Soviet Space” as one of the major components of the Soviet national identity, a source of creative inspiration and labor enthusiasm. The rhetoric of the “Soviet Space” remains as important as ever. American researchers called the Soviet garland of victory for the exploration of outer space as a formula “the first satellite, the first dog, the first man and the first woman”. The authors analyzed this topos fixed in the representations of the Soviet ideology, art and everyday life as a sociocultural phenomenon of the “Soviet Space Age” (Maurer, & Richers, 2011).

E. Maurer and J. Richers identified three interrelated mental effects of the Soviet “space fever”: communist (the idea of the superiority of the socialist social system over the capitalist one), utopian (the fascination of “bright communist future”) and atheistic (belief in the omnipotence of science and technology). According to the authors, these identification practices are used via visual media culture in modern Russia, however, socialist utopia has given way to nostalgia (Maurer, & Richers, 2011; *Beyond the limits*, 1999).

K. Miklossy and M. Ilic (2014) study challenging and unconventional subject the historical experience of socialist competition in the USSR, its ideological origins and significance for the socialist culture in general. In the work “Competition in Socialist Society” (Miklossy, & Ilic, 2014) the authors attempted to answer the question how competitive mechanisms, which traditionally associated with market economy, were used for the purposes of state socialist construction. Command economy suggested the importance of cooperation and teamwork, rather than competition. Therefore, K. Miklossy and M. Ilic extended beyond the research of socialist competition practices and analyzed the rivalry in a wide range of the Soviet industry branches, social and cultural fields. Researchers have come to the conclusion that gradual introduction and adaptation of competitive mechanisms to the Soviet political realities, widespread competition at the microeconomic level in the last decades of the Soviet Union had an enormous influence on the degradation of socialist ways of thinking and, as a consequence, the phasing out of them (Miklossy, & Ilic, 2014).

At the same time, we do not agree with all the conclusions of the Western historians. In particular, the attractive field for discussions is the opinion on the initial inconsistency and painless eradication of socialist values, an allegation that the “Soviet dream” was the similar with the “American dream” (Raleigh, 2012; Miklossy, & Ilic, 2014). However, the acquaintance with the latest achievements of Anglophone Russian Studies allows definitely seeing and filling knowledge gaps of Russian historical science in the study of the Soviet culture and society.

3. Conclusion

Summing up, it should be noted that a number of British and American works of the 2000-2010s are devoted to the transformation of socialist ideas and crisis of collectivist values in the Soviet society after the Second World War. Researchers consider the period from 1945 to 1990 as a comprehensive and logically complete period of Russian history. The internal unity of this period consists in the evolution of the Soviet way of life and socialist values. This process was incremental and hardly reflected by contemporaries (both within the Soviet state, and abroad). British and American works of

the 1990-2000s filled a significant gap in world Russian Studies: the elements of capitalist culture, which coexisted in parallel with generally accepted Soviet way of life, were identified. A special contribution of modern Anglophone researches to Russian Studies should be called the analysis of socio-cultural processes, which were the evidence of the deformation of socialist norms and values. For instance, the sense of social injustice, greater recognition that a respected profession and a profitable occupation were divergent, is not sufficiently developed in Russian historical science.

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