BOOK REVIEWS

Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964–1985, N. Klumbytė,
G. Sharafutdinova (eds.), Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014. 256 p.
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The analysis of the Stalinist period in research into the Soviet era has
achieved the greatest results and the widest readership. This research has
taken on a significant political subtext, and keeping in mind the enormous
number of victims of the regime and the otherwise unimaginable state
intervention into people's lives, a glance at society from this era is usu-
ally related to mobilisation 'from above', and a monolithic political and
socio-economic environment. It is much more difficult to interpret Soviet
society from the late Soviet era. A monolithic framework is quite unsuitable
to describe this period. This aspect is well illustrated in the collection of
research articles compiled by the editors Neringa Klumbytė and Gulnaz
Sharafutdinova *Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964–1985*.

Several positions discussing the Soviet system's flexibility have been
established in Soviet-era research historiography. One, represented by Cold
War theoreticians or individual anthropologists, shows the multi-plane na-
ture of the totalitarian system, and its ability to insert ever-more various
socio-cultural meanings; and not just strictly handing down the Party's
ideological objectives to society, but leaving a planned space for society's
needs. Along these lines, any dynamism, or satisfaction of the needs of
the Soviet system's participants, is usually itself systemic, i.e. based on
the system's structure and mechanisms. The second position, respresented
by revisionist or post-revisionist historians, concentrates on the Soviet
system as a rather typical one, where similar interests as in any other
modern states operate, as well as conflicts of identity and other phenomena
creating social dynamics.

When separate phenomena are analysed, such as social practices in
society, or everyday Soviet life, both of the above approaches overlap
quite significantly, and even correlate. The first approach covers political
control and means of bringing various discourses under the system's
umbrella, while the second reveals the motivation and goals of internal
subjects, or the influence of external factors on internal dynamics. In other
words, the early version of monolithic totalitarianism of the totalitarianism
theoreticians Merle Fainsod or Hannah Arendt, which focused on political
control, is not effective for researching the post-Stalinist period, much

less so social dynamics, the identity of separate groups in society, their interests or strategies.

The approach taken by the authors in this study is closer, though not limited, to the first line of thinking. Much like the early totalitarianists, they consider the Soviet system a unique political-cultural system, possessing meanings not observed in other systems, and base the social or cultural dynamics on the accepted needs and permitted ideolgical-moral limits existing in the system. Clear representatives of this approach would be Alexei Yurchak and Serguei Alex Oushakine, anthropologists working in the United States. In his work on the last Soviet generation (mostly about members of the Communist Youth), Yurchak used the term 'performative shift', and demonstrated the omnipresence of routine[1] so typical of the system, when ideologically mandatory practices and a kind of rationalisation become well established, when Soviet-era actors learn to interpret the rules. However, this manoeuvring does not turn into an opposition or challenge to the system, but an integral part of the system and everyday life at the time. Oushakine presents a similar treatment of the Soviet system's flexibility, stating that even the *samizdat* so widespread in the 1960s and 1970s was for the most part not in direct opposition to the system, it simply used the same dominant discourse and its symbolic field.[2] Revisionists, meanwhile, were not inclined to over-emphasise the uniqueness of the system itself, but maintained a reserved approach to the Soviet system (e.g. the works of the researcher Sheila Fitzpatrick). According to them, Soviet society, like other societies, consisted of various groups that differed in terms of their interests and resources, constantly searching for opportunities to reach for their goals. This kind of behaviour is not completely unique historically or culturally, as certain features are adopted by one society from another, i.e. the principle of trans-nationalism applies.

On the other hand, the anthropologists and revisionists mentioned are united, in that they have made similar observations about the variety of social practices and the motives of various participants. For example, they do not accept seeing the system as a monolithic formation, which is characteristic of the already-mentioned early Cold War theoreticians. However, the ideas of Yurchak and Oushakine are not in great contrast with newer totalitarian perspective insights, even tending to refer to them, especially when they talk about the legitimisation of the political system's ideas and political control. For example, Yurchak applies the ideas of the French philosopher Claude Lefort when he writes about totalitarian society.[3]

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[1] A. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More* (Princeton, 2005).

[2] S.A. Oushakine, 'The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat', *Public Culture*, 13/2 (Spring 2001), pp. 191–214.

[3] C. Lefort, *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986).

The uniqueness of this study is that the authors manage to avoid limiting themselves to one approach, and introduce a healthy synthesis of attitudes. Not succumbing to depicting a monochromatic grey, stagnating Soviet picture of everyday life, they also examine various forms of interaction and similarities between Soviet and other kinds of societies, noticing features of individualism, citizens' participation in public life, and the issues of health, sexuality and other similar questions, paying great attention to an analysis of the consumerism of Soviet society. The authors deliberately go beyond entrenched Soviet-era research binarisms, such as *domination* and *resistance*, *socialism* and *liberalism*. They avoid the exaggerated classification of the Cold War years, whereby liberal lines of thought are seen as possible only in the West, and where the USSR can only be associated with socialist practices. They also deflect from the overly established 'stagnation' paradigm. The authors seek to show that trans-nationalism was in action in the late Soviet era, and rather autonomous spaces were becoming established where private interests, forms of entertainment and sentiments could be expressed (e.g. Robert Edelman's observation regarding fans of the Spartacus football club).[4] They demonstrate that phenomena that are adopted are not necessarily destined to be foreign. It is possible to give them a meaning in everyday life, and to adapt them to one's circumstances. At the same time, as Kate Brown's article about the 'atomic cities' of Cheliabinsk (USSR) and Richland (USA), and the uniquely common 'middle class' phenomenon being projected by the state shows, during the Cold War years, quite a number of similar phenomena emerged in completely (based on their origins) different systems.

The article by Dominic Boyer symbolically describes this book, giving an account of the constant interaction of socialism and liberalism from an ontological position, and the mutual dependence of one on the other, quite evident in tensions in Soviet-era society, where the individual's autonomy clashed with social relations and obligations. For example, the paper by Olga Livshina, which describes the case of the Russian writer Juza Aleshkovski, discloses the tensions characteristic of the Soviet intelligentsia, where alongside their obligations to the state and the propagated optimism grounded in science at the time, there was also a sense of 'anti-systemic pathos' that arose when witnessing the various absurdities in everyday life. In her article about the satirical and humorous magazine *The Broom*, Neringa Klumbytė shows that by encouraging readers to complain, and presenting various stories of ridicule based on examples involving specific people or former phenomena (e.g. leaders-masters, insufficient consumption, or roles taken in the family), the magazine in fact served not only as a disciplinary measure to uphold Soviet ethics, it also became a tool for

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[4] It would be interesting to compare the arguments of the article's author with the Lithuanian historian T. Vaiseta's remarks on the 'boredom society'.

expressing many Soviet individuals' interests, and by drawing attention to issues they considered important, it facilitated a more varied interpretation of Soviet morale. According to Klumbytė,[5] the application of satire, humour and stories not only points to moral activism, but also to ways of applying Aesopian thought, by using figurative speech, and encouraging readers to view sceptically not just the behaviour of separate citizens, but also the results of the system's failures. This kind of participation of Soviet citizens did not indicate their being beyond the system's boundaries, but served as an opportunity to interpret Soviet ethics, to find ways of having a more varied opinion, all the while formally acknowledging the set ideological requirements. Importantly, the research by these authors, as well as by Larisa Honey, Sergei I. Zhuk, Kate Brown, Robert Edelman and Benjamin M. Sutcliffe, illustrates the possibility for greater manoeuverability that appeared in the late Soviet era, a greater sense of freedom, yet at the same time not accentuating this manoeuvring as a dissident position or anti-systemic activity, which numerous other Soviet-era researchers have done. The articles presented in this collection clearly show that the system and society in the late Soviet era became more nuanced, with various niches, allowing people to make a broader interpretation of the system's requirements. Of course, some observations can be made that could have led to deeper insights on late Soviet-era society. First of all, the articles concentrate mostly on the centre and Russia, and on the western peripheries of the USSR (Lithuania, Ukraine), yet it would be very interesting to take note of the contrasts between separate USSR peripheries. Secondly, there is a greater focus on aspects of everyday Soviet life, but almost no mention is made of ethnic or national processes, which, especially in the peripheries, became increasingly obvious in the late Soviet era, and even if they are not destined to be analysed, it would be important to discern a clearer association with these processes.

It is also important to place this work in the context of Lithuanian Soviet-era research. First, one of the scientific editors of the collection, Neringa Klumbytė, also features in the Lithuanian Soviet-era field of research, keeping one foot in the local Soviet-era interpretations discourse, and also actively analysing various Soviet Lithuanian phenomena in a larger body of research. Second, unlike in Western countries, in Lithuania post-Stalinist and late Soviet-era research predominates over the early Soviet years. Research is conducted on the *nomenklatura* (Saulius Grybkauskas, Vilius Ivanauskas, Marius Ėmužis, Vladas Sirutavičius), invisible social mechanisms (Ainė Ramonaitė, Jūratė Kavaliauskaitė, Valdemaras Klumbys), the making of an atheist society (Nerija Putinaitė), routinisation (the 'boredom society',

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[5] N. Klumbytė, 'Soviet Ethical Citizenship: Morality, the State, and Laughter in Late Soviet Lithuania', *Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism 1964–1985* eds. N. klumbytė, G. Sharafutdinova (Lanham, 2014), pp. 91–117.

Tomas Vaiseta), the cultural elite (Aurimas Švedas, Vilius Ivanauskas, Valdemaras Klumbys), the 'rural change' (Violeta Davoliūtė), and so on. In Lithuania, we see Soviet-era research historiography rapidly climbing the steps of American research on the Soviet system. Over the last decade, a whole swathe of historians from the younger generation have questioned the monolithic approach to the Soviet years, typical of historians' works from the 1990s, exhibiting an obvious intolerance for this approach. Today, another divide is becoming more evident, distinguishing different approaches: could the Soviet system, as 'systemic behaviour', find room for activities directly incompatible with 'Marxist-Leninist' ideology, or were they foreign objects and a challenge to the system itself, wrecking its foundations, or were they new mechanisms that helped the Party elite maintain a sense of balance and develop the regime further? For example, according to the political scientists Ramonaitė and Kavaliauskaitė, non-systemic behaviour demonstrated the existence of a 'parallel society' (various alternative networks), and its activities in Lithuania led directly to the formation of the *Sąjūdis* national movement.[6] Meanwhile, Subačius[7] and Putinaitė[8] note that the regime had the opportunity to harness various practices that could mobilise society (e.g. ethnicity), and not just bluntly push through socialist values. However, by examining separate phenomena, this divide can be crossed. The very beneficial effect of the book being reviewed is that many of its articles show how to avoid similar binarisms. We can see the system's flexibility and the multi-faceted nature of Soviet citizens' positions at the same time, giving new meaning to the image of Soviet everyday life, *de facto* changing it as a matter of course. Yet we can also reflect that such changes and the system's own attempt at involving social practices that are far removed from its ideology created a high degree of tension in Soviet society. This brings us to research on the turning points in Soviet society in the 1980s, where alongside national processes, we can also see the complexity of the individual's relationships with the system.

Vilius Ivanauskas

[6] *Sąjūdžio ištakų beieškant: nepaklusniųjų tinklaveikos galia*, eds. J. Kavaliauskaitė, A. Ramonaitė (Vilnius, 2011).

[7] P. Subačius, 'Liminalios tapatybės Justino Marcinkevičiaus sovietmečio ly-rikoje', *XX amžiaus literatūros teorijos: konceptualioji kritika*, ed. A. Jurgutienė (Vilnius, 2010), pp. 370–391.

[8] N. Putinaitė, *Nenutrūkusi styga* (Vilnius, 2007).