

From Blue Jeans to Checkered Bags: Women's Role in the Creation of a Soviet Consumer Culture



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Introduction

In the 1950s, a woman in Moscow winks at a shoe shop clerk who slides her a pair of fashionable, supposedly out of stock shoes in exchange for an under-the-table fee. In the 1960s, a Soviet woman with a sewing machine runs a side business repairing or refashioning damaged or poor quality clothing within her social circle. In the 1970s, a group of female friends with similar clothing sizes buy fashionable items collectively and rotate them between group members at a time when Soviet manufacturing made it too difficult for each young woman to purchase a set of clothing on her own. In the 1980s, a worker at a USSR state factory sets aside a bottle of vodka from the production line every day and brings it home to her family to resell on the side. In the 1990s, groups of women travel every weekend to neighboring countries, such as Turkey or China, to fill their checkered suitcases with consumer goods and resell them back in their Russian villages.

These vignettes all represent a few of the real experiences of Soviet women over the course of the USSR. In each of these cases, shoppers were forced to go the extra mile in order to acquire the items they required. The Soviet experience differed greatly from, for example, their rival counterparts in America during the same time. The 1950s began

the introduction of modern consumerism in the United States, with the rise of TV dinners, fad diets, and self-service.¹ Commercials advertising the newest and cheapest products were abound on television, radio, magazines, newspapers, billboards, and so on. Shopping in America was dominated by the principles of convenience and plenty, and was designed to cater to the increasing individualism of the American zeitgeist. Women shopped for groceries alone, and in fact it was often a place for them to experience brief solitude and independence.² The female shopper of the household often had a usual local grocery store which she visited weekly and where she could normally find everything that she needed for her family. Decisions on what to buy were based on personal taste and budgeting; in short, the products available to a particular shopper were determined by the amount of physical money which she had to spend. The emergence of chain stores streamlined this process even further, in the American factory tradition, by creating a simple path for shoppers to follow: entering the store, browsing products themselves at their leisure, and purchasing whatever was in their budget to buy. Traditional bartering and haggling of the pre-twentieth century world were cut out entirely, and there came to be an “inescapable

¹ Deutsch, Tracey. 2010. *Building a Housewife's Paradise: Gender, Politics, and American Grocery Stores in the Twentieth Century*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press. ProQuest Ebook Central. 62.

² Deutsch, 2010. 68.

individualism” to American shopping.³ Not so was the case in the Soviet Union.

Run by a central, planned economy and staunchly anti-capitalist government which failed to make good on their promises of unlimited, egalitarian consumption, the Soviet people were in many cases left to fend for themselves. Having a high enough salary to purchase goods was not enough: if the state did not manufacture them at the right time and in the right quantities, they would not be available for purchase. Despite the anti-capitalist utopia which the Soviet state attempted to impose, the Soviet people still had desires and needs for consumer goods, from fashionable coats all the way down to basic foodstuffs. Though the Soviet Bloc has not historically been seen as a consumer society, modern scholars have been reconsidering this classification, and some sources now identify the USSR as an anti-capitalist consumer culture. “The absence of a capitalistic system of exchange in the Soviet Union [...] should not discourage us,” writes Natalya Chernyshova, one of the leading proponents of the Soviet consumer culture theory, “as it was aptly substituted by other means of facilitating commodity flows, such as exchange of favors and *blat*, bribes and rations, closed shops and canteens for the Party and cultural elites, and barter in shortage goods.”⁴ Anthropologist Katherine Veredy concurs with Chernyshova, writing that “since [the state] would not supply what people needed, they struggled to do so themselves, developing in the process a huge repertoire of strategies for obtaining consumer goods and services.”⁵ Indeed, although statistics from this time cannot capture the full extent of the Soviet economy, it is clear that more was going on beneath the surface, and that it was in fact networks of social connections which kept the

Soviet consumer economy afloat.

However, one essential element of this social economy has been overlooked, and that is the leading role of women. The shoppers, the store clerks, the repair women, the shuttle traders—all of the above were women using their social connections between each other to make sure that they and their families had all of their essentials. “The Soviet consumer was a dynamic and skillful social operator,” Chernyshova writes, “not a loner browsing boutiques or department stores at her leisure.”⁶ With the Soviet push for gender equality in the workforce, women were faced with the “second shift,” the responsibility of using their connections to acquire essential goods for their families on top of the work assigned by the state. Even more so than in the streamlined shopping system of the United States, Soviet women had to reach deep into their social connections and find clever workarounds for the shortage of the state. Over the next few chapters, this thesis will argue that the Soviet Bloc was not, in practice, anti-consumerist. However, instead of being run on capital, the currency of the Soviet economy were social connections. Furthermore, these social connections, which were the lifeblood of Soviet consumption, were facilitated by women as both providers and purchasers, making them the foundation of the Soviet economy from its inception to its collapse.

3 Deutsch, 2010. 15.

4 Chernyshova, Natalya. 2013. *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*. N.p.: Routledge. 12.

5 Veredy, Katherine. 1996. *What Was Socialism, and What Comes Next?* Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press. 27.

6 Chernyshova, 2013. 93.