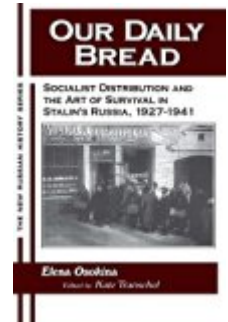


**Elena Osokina.** *Our Daily Bread: Socialist Distribution and the Art of Survival in Stalin's Russia, 1927-1941.* Edited by Kate Transchel. New York: Routledge, 2015. 288 pp. \$47.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-56324-905-1.



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The book under review is not brand new. Its first Russian edition was published in 1999 by Rosspen, one of the leading academic publishers in Russia; the English translation appeared from M. E. Sharpe in 2001; and the second Russian edition came out in 2008. Its author, Elena Osokina, who at the time of writing was a senior research fellow at the Institute of Russian History of the Russian Academy of Sciences, used an extraordinarily rich body of archival sources that gave her work a textbook status in the studies of consumption and everyday life during Stalinism. At the same time, this book is of interest not only to historians of the Soviet Union, but also to a broader audience of scholars of material culture. *Our Daily Bread* is an excellent study of social effects of commodities and their circulation, which is all the more illuminating as it examines a period of radical political, economic, and social transformations, when the ability of commodities to suggest and materialize forms of social organization became particularly visible.

The study begins with 1927, a watershed year in Soviet economic history, when the Soviet government announced a highly ambitious program of accelerated industrialization known as the First Five-Year Plan. Prior to 1927, the Soviet government had tolerated certain elements of market economy, first of all in agriculture and retail trade, as a measure to overcome the post-Russian Civil War economic and social crisis. However, the accelerated industrialization campaign required a massive redistribution of wealth from the agricultural sector to heavy industry. Market tools failed to provide the Soviet government with a lever against peasants unwilling to sell their products below market prices for the abstract needs of industrialization. This is a well-known story, which Osokina discusses in chapters 1–3 from different perspectives. We meet Soviet officials with their ideological concerns, political visions, and economic ideas; rank-and-file bureaucrats who had to meet production quotas set by the First Five-Year Plan and were ready to resort to any means in order to fulfill them; urban communities facing

food shortages and blaming the countryside for them; and, of course, Soviet peasants who bore the brunt of the Soviet government's determination to "phas[e] out the market and replac[e] it with the planned economy" (p. 8). Chapter 4 describes the climax of this confrontation between the Soviet government and independent farmers. Osokina shows here how the accelerated industrial development acquired its own momentum that demanded a fast, effective, and ruthless extraction of wealth from agricultural producers, destroyed the remaining elements of the market economy, and led to a collapse in food production and, eventually, the Soviet famine of 1932–33.

The destruction of the national market had one important consequence for the Soviet commodity: its free circulation was now replaced by two other forms of distribution. One was the state rationing system, another was the black market. This led to important social and cultural changes that Osokina discusses in the remaining six chapters of her book. The combination of the state monopoly on the distribution of commodities coupled with their shortages (beginning with bread, a basic staple of the Soviet diet) prompted Soviet leaders to introduce differentiating rationing schemes for different social groups. In chapters 5–7, in particular, Osokina shows how in the course of the early 1930s the satisfaction of consumer desires among Soviet citizens became a reward from the state. Different levels of consumer satisfaction depended on one's level of contribution to the Soviet national economy. As a result, different access to commodities acted as a kind of social topography that redefined Soviet social space on the basis of one universal factor: the intimacy of one's relation to authority. While education, occupation, or social origin did matter in one's navigation through Soviet social space, its fundamental structure was more amorphous and spontaneously forming: social distinction in the Stalinist USSR was measured in terms of symbolic distance to the authority, and this distance was materialized in the different access to commodities. Osokina

nicely demonstrates it in the appendix of her book, where she structures her rich empirical material into tables showing supply norms established by the Soviet government for different categories of its citizens. In 1931, for example, there were four categories of workers in the Soviet Union, a classification defined by their ability and willingness to meet or, better, to exceed the production quotas as well as by the importance of the factories where they were employed in the industrialization plans. The workers in the highest rationing category received 4.4 kg of meat per month, while those attributed to the next three categories received, in descending order, 2.6 kg, 1 kg, or nothing at all. Butter was rationed only to the first two categories of workers (400 and 200 gr, respectively), and eggs (10 per month)—only to the highest one. The state's position as the only legitimate provider of material welfare created a social hierarchy in which satisfaction of a consumer desire was a measure and a result of one's position within this hierarchy. The black market that Osokina examines in chapters 7 and 10 further contributed to this social change by draining economic resources from disadvantaged population groups to the people whose social position was closer to the new power vertical.

*Our Daily Bread* is, thus, an important intervention in our understanding of social change in the Stalinist USSR. Most works on consumption and material culture in the USSR focus on the Soviet government's intentional efforts to restructure Soviet society in a kind of a social engineering experiment. For example, Julie Hessler's *A Social History of Soviet Trade* (2004) approaches the period of the 1930s as the time when the state authorities adopted a new model of "cultured soviet trade" as a means to construct a more civilized, rational, and controllable society. Vera Dunhan's earlier *In Stalin's Time* (1976) argued in a similar way that during late Stalinism the Soviet state used consumption to solicit cooperation from the Soviet "middle class," whose intellectual expertise became a key resource in the technological con-

frontation with the Western bloc. These approaches have been extremely productive in our understanding of the politics of consumption in the Stalinist USSR. What we can learn from Elena Osokina's book with its focus on consumption practices is that the dramatic social changes of Stalinism were, perhaps, not just orchestrated by the Soviet government, but were also a product of a new social form of the Soviet commodity. In a very materialist logic, *Our Daily Bread* demonstrates how the world of Soviet people came to reflect the world of Soviet things that had changed dramatically with the onset of radical economic reforms based on the ideas of planned economy. Following commodities in their trajectories through Soviet social space, this book shows the work of deep social structures that shaped Soviet society in the 1930s, influenced its later evolution, and are still visible in post-Soviet societies.

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