Materiality in Late Soviet Russia

When interviewing respondents for his new book, *The Things of Life: Materiality in Late Soviet Russia*, Alexey Golubev asked them to describe a winter day in the early 1980s. This question comes in the first paragraph of the introduction, and to someone who lived in the Soviet Union then, it gives immediate access to those memories.

Perhaps this voyage into the realm of subjective experience has also affected and shaped my own subsequent reading, making it less distanced, more emotional. My memories have taken me in two separate and unreconcilable directions. One was a particularly bleak day in November 1982 when we, the bewildered eight-year-olds in our second year of elementary school, were ordered to sit the whole day in the classroom in front of the television set and watch Leonid Brezhnev's funeral. This was a rather frightening and irrational experience, though some of us dealt with it by drawing caricatures with a coffin and laughing. For this we were rebuked by our teacher, who, however, seemed as confused as we were but who wanted to show that she was still in control. This was just the first of similar episodes, as the Soviet leaders started to die one after another. I remember how nervous I was that there would again be funeral music on television, black ribbons on street flags, and a strange elderly man following me with his eyes from a big black-and-white photograph mounted on the wall. I even developed a kind of neurosis that made falling asleep at night more difficult: I imagined a dead body in the darkest corner of the room. But the second recollection was completely different. I remembered a sunny day when, together with my closest friend, Paulina, and other kids, I would run into our Moscow yard and build a snowman or a fortress, unsupervised by our mothers and fathers but under the eyes of vigilant but kind babushkas (grandmothers).[1] As it was usual then, they were sitting on the benches near the entrances to the apartment blocks and talking to each other. This carefree mood not only was about being young but also was historically precise.

These two paths of memory provoked in me a strange mixture of resentment about being subdued and nostalgia for the lost collectivity and for that late Soviet feeling of security, perhaps illusory, which contemporary parents lack. My simultaneous feelings of surveillance and freedom seemed to confirm one of the main messages of Golubev's book. According to the author, such
stories “reveal some specific historical forms of Soviet spatiality” that were “constructed and lived, hierarchical and flexible” at the same time. But most of all they were “heterogenous and multilayered” (p. 2). The main aim of The Things of Life is to look at the material conditions of late Soviet life beyond consumption and to reflect on its tangible objects and environment not simply in terms of commodities and shortages. Such diverse things as television sets, scale models, wooden buildings, stairwells, and basement gyms with all their equipment encapsulated affects and organized social life. By adding them to research, Golubev wants to enrich our understanding of Soviet subjectivity and selfhood in all its diversity of forms, norms, and oppositions. The Things of Life tells a story of how people were shaped through objects by the authorities but also of how they used them for their own ends, often in unexpected ways. It also shows how material things drew them into their realm, visualized the discrepancies within the official ideology of socialism, and made them act, sometimes contrary to the expected behavior of a good Soviet citizen.

Golubev’s book has come out almost simultaneously with another study of postwar materiality, Yulia Karpova’s Comradely Objects, which also looks at Soviet people’s belief in the “active role of objects.” Where Karpova, however, concentrates on the role of intellectuals, design professionals, artists, and experts in urban planning and their beliefs in their own abilities of “organising inert matter into proper socialist objects and furthering rational consumption and daily life,” Golubev is mostly interested in the subversive and emancipatory potential of things and how they counteract dreams of making society well-organized and easily controlled: “the material world ... could repeatedly fail the authorities in their attempts at its rational transformation” (p. 13).[2] All through the book, he shows how these objects and spaces influenced people in unexpected ways, were smuggled into the USSR, and helped those underrepresented in official texts to visualize and materialize their own claims. This is not, however, a narrative about constructing a dissident persona or planning consciously oppositional actions. Many of his heroes did not want to be on society’s margins, were not provided with any means for constructing a politically autonomous vision of themselves, and even wanted to prove that they were “good citizens.” But they became marginalized in an official discourse. This discourse was pro-egalitarian on the surface but, in fact, tried to force other social groups and classes to adapt to their official vision.

Golubev starts The Things of Life by clearly defining the methodological foundations that underlie his work. The main one is “the rich legacy” of “critical studies of the body and material culture” that include anthropological research by Bronislaw Malinowski and Igor Kopytoff, the sociology of Pierre Bourdieu, studies of the everyday by Michel de Certeau, the political theory of Jane Bennett, and work on human relationships with material things by Daniel Miller (p. 6). And, of course, Golubev also relies on the golden standard of anthropologists’ research on materialism, Bruno Latour’s efforts of “reassembling the social” (the actual name of his 2005 book) and “inquiry into the social circulation of objects on par with bodies, texts, and ideas,” and Judith Butler’s thoughts on the materiality of the body, coupled with the notion of performativity (p. 8). But although the material turn has taken the academic world by storm, it has resonated unevenly in the field of Soviet studies, where articles and books have mostly concentrated on questions of consumption and housing. And, in spite of the fact that research on Soviet materiality has contributed to the quickly evolving history of the post-Stalinist era, and specifically of socialism as a type of modernity, it has so far been integrated into traditional approaches to the study of state politics and Russian history as the history of its rulers. Golubev, however, is far more interested in how everyday and mundane things powerfully disrupt the social order by their affective sway. For con-
temporary historians of material objects, they provide a precious mine of otherwise inaccessible social structures, conflicting meanings, and collective feelings. This makes research more difficult, but its trajectories also become immensely more exciting to follow.

Among his predecessors, Golubev also mentions Donald Raleigh's, Alexei Yurchak's, and Vladislav Zubok's latest research. With these scholars, he shares a desire to go beyond a bipolar view of the late Soviet era that divided people into “dissidents” and “collaborators” and sees it as a patchwork of groups and communities, often in a state of misunderstanding or even conflict. However, he also points out that the scholarly effort to explain the multilayered structure of post-Stalinist society by intragenerational differences is not enough and a more socially informed look should be added: “biographies of things make manifest deep divides along class lines.” At the same time, Golubev wants to “avoid easy and often forced schematizations of historical material,” which happens when it is organized along “grand categories of political and social analysis, such as socialism, nation, consumption, citizenship, and others” (p. 8).

Interestingly for his critique of the privileged, Golubev also returns to earlier socialist and avant-garde theories, and not only Viktor Shklovsky's idea of defamiliarization (оstranenie), well known in Western scholarship, but also Friedrich Engels's notion of “elemental materialism” and Sergei Tretyakov's focus on the factographic, object-oriented forms of writing (Soviet writers’ “biographies of the object”). In doing this, although this is not spelled out in the book, Golubev in some ways follows his own heroes, since many of the late Soviet groups relied on earlier postrevolutionary experiences, jumping there over the head of Stalinism and the bureaucratic discourses of their own epoch. His interest in reappropriating post-1917 theories seems especially relevant in the current Russian political climate where, unlike in France, a more thorough and balanced reflection on the revolution and the pre-Stalinist period, its egalitarian aims, achievements, failures, and crimes, is discouraged and even the celebrations of its centenary passed quite unnoticed inside the country. Golubev seems to be using such early socialist ideas to counterbalance the tendency of avoiding possible conflicts in such discussions, and one would want to see that his take on these methodologies becomes a starting point of the vigorous debates about their value for present-day scholarship. The notion of “elemental materialism” also helps to place Soviet society within the global landscape of modernity and to discern between its different versions. One of the aims of The Things of Life is to define more thoroughly those traits that the USSR shared with other, non-socialist societies. Although the exalted view of technocratic progress was common to other modern(ist) countries, a certain “obsession” with material things, not as objects of consumption but as a means to transform society, was specific to Soviet socialism. For the very establishment of the USSR, labor, especially physical labor, was seen as a creative process in which amicable machines “helped Soviet people to find their true selves” (p. 25). Things turned into friends and not servants, supposedly giving people an infinite ability to transform the world. In the process, they also became more emotionally laden; or rather, they encapsulated affect.

The book is divided into six chapters, each focused on specific objects (like a television set) and/or material (like wood or iron) that are seen as part of everyday practices, for instance, television watching, scale modeling, or bodybuilding. According to Golubev, the first three chapters show temporal “coordinates of Soviet selfhood” and the last three, its spatial dimensions (p. 16). The narrative also moves from analyzing the activities of the educated class that were performed with more visibility to those of the marginalized social communities that did not belong to the official public sphere and used things and spaces to deal with their alienation. All six chapters can also be seen...
as a chronological sequence, though not very strict or rigid. It shows a vector of changes, from the early postwar practices to those of perestroika and the eve of the collapse of the Soviet Union. Each chapter also ends with more contemporary material, because Golubev is interested in why some of the Soviet practices have been so enduring and difficult to outlive, especially in Vladimir Putin’s Russia.

Chapters 1 and 2 look at the early postrevolutionary fascination with technology and creativity, which was later adopted and adapted by postwar society for its own needs. It was then that “productivist language” was developed as part of an effort to establish control over the material and social worlds—but also of breaking away from Joseph Stalin’s past. This discourse “ranked Soviet people in accordance to their relationship to the production process and mastery over things,” but it also led to moral panic when some of them “engaged in relationships with presumably mean and unworthy objects instead of sublime ones” (p. 22).

Golubev looks at some of its “vernacular” applications that became popular during Nikita Khrushchev’s ottepel’ (thaw), like the “Theory of Inventive Problem Solving” (TRIZ). Its creator, Genrikh Altshuller, with his Gulag memories, belonged to the generation of the “Thaw” and was “anti-Stalinist, but not anti-Soviet” (p. 28). Altshuller did not want to break away from the state; rather, his wish was to criticize it and rebuild it “from below” (p. 31). For Altshuller, techno-utopianism was a means to simultaneously return to the true cause of socialism but also a means to accelerate its progress, away from its earlier breaches and crimes committed under Stalin. Other examples of how earlier constructivist dreams were applied to everyday life were the amateur engineering movement; DIY magazines; and the extracurricular activities of children who were making replica models of historical and contemporary ships, planes, and vehicles. All of them were part of a cultural fantasy of the educated group, mostly male, about the “body-machine assemblages,” which was then transformed into educational practices and unconsciously appropriated by other classes (p. 38).

During the 1960s through the 1980s, scale modeling shifted attention from class to nation, creating a new historical vision. Curiously, though Western-designed kits became increasingly used for such activities, British or American planes and battleships lost their names and identities. Soviet models were much more historically accurate, and attention to detail was greatly encouraged. This “fetishism of detail” was meant to show continuity within “the national perspective of technological progress,” aligning it with not only early Soviet but also Russian imperial and medieval Slavic times (p. 48). Perhaps one can argue here that the earliest examples of such an all-encompassing attitude, which paradoxically went against the grain of criticizing the tsarist past, were already developing under Stalin, as for instance, Mikhail Allenov has shown in his analysis of visual narrative at the metro station, Komsomolskaya.[3] Golubev knows such arguments (he quotes, for instance, David Brandenberger and Kevin M. F. Platt’s work). He insists, however, that after Stalin these ideas were disseminated through more everyday objects and were internalized by much wider audiences. Because of this, they had an interesting and bizarre afterlife. Curiously, the objects have been appropriated by both Putin’s followers, who blend nostalgia for the lost country with the visions of imperialist Russia, and his opponents. The latter blame Putin for failing to realize Soviet technological potential. Both groups seem to be battling the trauma of the USSR’s disintegration. These objects were also used after 1985, supposedly for “discrediting” a Soviet society that dehumanized its members by turning them into “cogs in the wheel,” as in Mikhail Heller’s books (p. 20). Golubev shows that these techno-utopian visions lost their link to fostering human creativity and became strangely blended with another socialist discursive regime, Marxist criticism of capitalism’s alienation. This, I think, provides an in-
interesting perspective on the hidden influence of (negated) socialist ideas on perestroika and the nineties, and makes one reflect if, in fact, their subversive potential got out of the elites’ control earlier than during Mikhail Gorbachev’s times and ultimately led to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Further chapters move on from analyzing single objects and discourses around them to looking at the “socialist spaces” that they shaped. Chapter 3 reflects on the intersection of time and place and tells a story of traditional Russian wooden buildings that after the war became part of new heritage sites, the most famous being the Kizhi Pogost. During late Stalinism, a romanticized view of northern wooden architecture was used by the leaders of the new Karelo-Finnish Soviet Socialist Republic to justify its existence. After its elimination, the mission became much wider: such sites were turned into the focal point of the architectural preservation movement and were museumified in numerous open-air forms (totaling fifty-eight by the 1990s). Paradoxically borrowing from the earlier constructivism’s search for authentic designs that could be used to disseminate the socialist message, late Soviet heritage enthusiasts helped political leaders turn from a cosmopolitan view of a vibrant revolutionary present to a more retrospective and nationalist understanding of time. In the process, traditional architecture and northern landscapes were stripped by urban intellectuals of their everyday “primitive” layers and “cleansed” not only from what was perceived as bourgeois tsarist additions but also from local color patterns and life experiences (p. 74). By doing this, they looked for “deep cultural roots” that would connect the “authentic [Slav] architectural forms” to “developed socialism” (p. 64). Both of these periods were seen by their proponents, like Aleksandr Opolovnikov and Vyacheslav Orfinsky, as societies that were free from social conflicts. However, they only created new tensions between urban dwellers, who saw in such places “exotic reservations of the traditional primordial culture” and “history designed for visual consumption,” and local residents, who simply wanted to use their homes for less romantic and more prosaic everyday activities (p. 73). The latter had no wish to maintain the artificially reconstructed age-old way of life: as everyone else, they wanted to use the fruit of socialist technological progress. Golubev’s narrative has made me remember more cases of such conflicts, some of them quite complex. For instance, my own respondents have described late Soviet controversy about “indigenous” or “small” nations (korennye/malye narody). These were exoticized by the government, which simultaneously wanted to preserve elements of their culture. In the process, it clashed with young people from these communities who wished to move to big cities and lead a contemporary life.

Chapters 4 and 5 look at more of these controversies in an allegedly peaceful society. They tell an exciting story of the late Soviet “spaces of transit,” previously overlooked in research, like collectively used stairwells, basements, and yards, which “provoked some of the hidden social conflicts ... that became reflected in socially dominant structures of the Soviet self” (p. 16). In chapter 4, which is mostly dedicated to stairwells, we see how the newly constructed apartment blocks (khrushchevki), which were part of a late revival of modernist architecture, failed to become what their designers had wanted them to be: new, progressive, and rationally organized socialist spaces. Instead, they started to accumulate people and were uncontrollably occupied by diverse and less privileged communities that shared a wish to hide from the officials in relative comfort (stairwells were, for instance, centrally heated), get back their own voice and agency, and sometimes give vent to their anger. Teenagers especially got their “unofficial grassroots sexual education” there, but other groups also used them to perform alternative forms of sexuality that did not conform with Soviet social norms (p. 98). During perestroika, TV programs and films criticized such “spaces of transit” and revealed the link between disorderly
behavior, “urban powerlessness and voicelessness,” and the “structure of late socialism” (p. 205). Golubev also shows that marginalized communities that occupied stairwells were mostly catering to male needs. He describes several horror stories about individual and group rapes that occurred in these clandestine spaces, some of them with underage girls. As a girl who was afraid of dark staircases, I suddenly had an insight when reading these extremely illuminating passages into the social nature of this fear, a fear that I had previously thought irrational.

Chapter 5 tells the story of iron that helped to empower marginalized groups during the Thaw and later. Golubev looks at medical apparatuses, constructed by enthusiasts who opposed official medicine, like Gavriil Illizarov and Valentin Dikul, and Soviet bodybuilders who appropriated basements. The latter navigated between the two views of what it meant to possess a muscular male body: the picture of a good Soviet citizen who relied on the “harmonious” ideal of the classical antiquity and the contemporary Westernized image that became available as a result of “the Iron Curtain increasingly turn[ing] from a dividing line into an active contact zone” (p. 122). Curiously, they also had a rather varied picture of “the West”: to downplay American influence, they invented their own term (“athletic gymnastics”) and preferred to call themselves “culturists” (from the French), with a link to ancient Rome and Greece. Culturisme can be also seen as part of Khrushchev’s attempt “to decentralize and diffuse the articulation of power” in subtler ways than previous Stalinist “top-down surveillance” (pp. 137-38). But although not completely forbidden as some other practices, like yoga, bodybuilding failed to become part of the official sports system, was often targeted by critical campaigns, and was denounced as a criminal activity by the press. Consequently, culturists occupied a marginalized place in late Soviet “social topography,” but they were not dissidents. Although undoubtedly a part of a modernist trend at self-disciplining through the voyeuristic gaze, such practices were also very Soviet: these men performed self-surveillance and “refused to regard themselves as deviations from the Soviet norm” (p. 132). Later, such bodybuilders used their strength to beat up members of the new and more “Westernized” perestroika subcultures, like punks, hippies, and rockers, in what was seen by the frightened intelligentsia as a conservative move to fight for the Soviet way of life.

Such “waves of moral panic” are also analyzed in the final, sixth chapter, which tells the story of television during the country’s last years (p. 113). Unlike numerous studies that concentrate on the programs’ content, Golubev looks at the TV set itself, its material presence in the home, and those “affective assemblages” that it formed with the viewers’ bodies. He shows how many of the officials, medical workers, and cultural theorists of pre-Gorbachev times worried about its power to “chain” the viewers, decrease their interest in books, and harmfully influence their “vision, weight, muscles, heart and breath.” For them, it objectified their increasing concerns about the inability to bring to life a phantasy about total control and embodied a more and more “complex, decentralized and diffuse selfhood” for its audiences (p. 147). At the same time, some other theorists of Soviet television, like Vladimir Sappak and Irakli Andronnikov, saw in it a means of reestablishing community connections, bringing the greater world back to domestic spaces and counterbalancing the petty bourgeois “apartment world” created as a result of the postwar focus on domesticity and “re-organization of late socialist living rooms in terms of visual pleasure” (p. 150). The chapter ends with analysis of the increased interest of perestroika audiences in the paranormal and the programs of popular psychiatrists who hypnotized viewers through a television screen. Such shows contained a promise of healing inside one’s own home, at the time when “the Soviet national body was falling apart” (p. 159). Golubev also shows how texts about such programs, both worried and condescending, were determined by
class, education, and gender: their critics were mostly urban male intellectuals, while their viewers were perceived as older females without a university degree.

It is while reading the last chapters, however, that one begins to doubt Golubev’s idea that such conflicts always had a predominantly social nature, mostly along class lines. The message of *The Things of Life* about the clash between educated urban citizens and marginalized underrepresented communities, deprived of their “cultural voice,” is quite clear and is demonstrated through many other examples. According to the book, for instance, those who occupied stairwells were seen with disgust and fear by both the politicians and the Soviet intelligentsia. In the ensuing collision of parallel and often opposing affective regimes of contact with urban spaces, the statuses of these two groups were unequal. Socially impaired citizens tried to appropriate “spaces of transit” but could not defend themselves against accusations or show how their practices demonstrated the shortcomings of a Soviet system that failed to deliver the fruits of equality. The opposing group that condemned them as hooligans or young juvenile delinquents had control over texts and images.

The idea that it is time to deconstruct the optics that pitted educated dissidents against party officials, while simultaneously looking askance at all those who did not belong to the *literati* (mostly coming from the humanities and artistic circles), can only be hailed as a long-awaited one. Such a worldview influences contemporary Russian politics in which the confrontation between the pro- and anti-Putinists often leaves out any thought that those beyond the so-called elites even exist. Yet I think that the notion that urban educated citizens mostly had common interests with the *nomenklaturshchiki* (state party bureaucrats) seems an oversimplification. I would also question the assumption that late Soviet intelligentsia was “predominantly male” (p. 158). This group had a rather complex structure and was a mixture of conflicting beliefs and practices. And I would also hesitate to unequivocally associate law-abiding citizens with a socially privileged group. Many of them belonged to a first generation of urban dwellers and were often neither elitist nor privileged. They were former factory workers who had used, for themselves or their children, the social lifts provided by the new system of education. Or these “new citizens” were villagers who had earlier fled their hamlets during the so-called de-kulakization and went through many hardships before becoming city residents. Ultimately, the story of Soviet farmers (*kolhozniki*) who received passports only during the later years of Brezhnev’s regime makes one ask: at whose expense did urban dwellers, not only the intelligentsia but also workers and even those teenagers from the stairwells, get their “socialist resources”? Contemporary nostalgic discourses about “free” goods, like housing, that the late Soviet state allegedly gave its citizens never mention peasants as a huge group that was mostly excluded from the ranks of those who could use them.

There is also a female and feminist perspective with which, I think, *The Things of Life* has a somewhat troubled relationship, since it does not sufficiently diversify its class criticism according to gender or age. For instance, when analyzing late Soviet stairwells and mentioning cases of rape, the behavior of hooligans is subsumed to the same conflict between marginalized groups and educated elites. As a counterexample, my childhood friend, who was also afraid of staircases, came from a “marginalized” family in which her brother spent several years in prison and her stepfather had repeated interactions with law enforcement, but nonetheless her mother did what she could to shield her and remove her from this milieu. In her twenties, however, Paulina got into “bad company” who took drugs on the stairwell; she then served a seven-year prison sentence because her boyfriend, a drug dealer, framed her. Surely, a wish to control criminality in these
"spaces of transit" and its influence on young people was not just a desire of the privileged. Public staircases were places of alienation, fear, and pain not “only for the Soviet educated public,” as the author states, but also for many women and children from other social groups (p. 111).

In fact, there are so few female voices in the book that I sometimes wanted to rename it Male Materiality in Late Soviet Russia. As far as I understand, this was done on purpose, because Golubev wanted to underline the patriarchal and male-oriented values of this culture. Perhaps, this was also part of a truly laudable attempt to mind the gender differences and not to assume things about how women experienced social life. But although the book’s case studies are fascinating and greatly contribute to research on late Soviet culture, I did not often recognize in them my own experiences or the objects that constituted my life back then. Where was I, a Soviet girl of the late 1970s and early 1980s from a family of repressed peasants, workers, and engineers, among all these scale models of battleships and men of iron? Golubev greatly expands the research agenda in terms of looking at late Soviet culture through the lens of tangible objects and embodied social practices. But if I had to choose one particular material around which my own practices of “Soviet selfhood” centered and which “encapsulated” my affective responses, I would perhaps opt for textiles, unfortunately overlooked in The Things of Life. For many Soviet women, starting with the story of Singer sewing machines that gave their families an opportunity not to starve during the direst of times, like during the war, and finishing with making one’s own clothing in the era of late Soviet defitsit (deficit), this was the very fabric of life, so to speak. I can mention in this context the history of “repressed” designs and materials at a recent excellent exhibition Tkani Moskvy (The Fabrics of Moscow) at the Museum of Moscow.

Paradoxically, the book is very good at deconstructing certain gender inequalities and demonstrating hidden patriarchal “norms” to which Golubev dedicates revealing and insightful passages. He analyzes, for example, the world of scale modeling as an essentially male practice that relied heavily on a wish of educated men to subordinate various spaces and “establish a visual dominance over history” (p. 56). These practices reinforced traditional gender roles and helped men to reimage themselves as “travelers in homebuilt cars, boats, or planes, joining the ranks of mythologized Soviet explorers.” At the same time, I think that some of the practices described as “quintessentially male” were not truly such. And curiously, the stress on criticizing gender inequality sometimes makes the author underrate those elements of everyday equality that were rooted in socialist ideology, seen at its best. I do not remember, for instance, that “mastery of space was a male prerogative in Soviet culture” (p. 35). In my childhood years, I dreamt of space flights: we had books on the subject and made trips to the planetarium. Such discourses were often gender neutral. Even more: they told the stories of the female cosmonauts, Valentina Tereshkova and Svetlana Savitskaya, and encouraged girls to think that all roads were open. The main heroine of Kir Bulychev’s books (first published in 1968, several volumes of which were later turned into films) was a girl, Alisa Selezneva. Perhaps such discourses were overly optimistic. They were also difficult to reconcile with other developments, like the shameful, terrifying, and misogynistic practices of Soviet abortion clinics and maternity wards, which I only learned about later during the perestroika press campaigns. But children’s books definitely did not stress just “conquering” or “expansion.” They also concentrated on the everyday and professional lives of the cosmonauts: what they ate, how they made scientific experiments, and even how people combed their hair in zero gravity. In fact, they remind me of contemporary educational videos by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), and not, unfortunately, by Roskosmos. This can create a strange
nostalgic craving, about which one (as a historian) gets embarrassed, for the more equalitarian culture that we have lost.

It is not accidental that I rely in this review on my own firsthand experience and the pronoun “I.” It is clear to me that the author of *The Things of Life* almost certainly grew up during the period discussed in the last chapters and belonged to the criticized group, but this did not become the material for reflection inside the book. As I have stated above, one of the most interesting and pertinent questions that Golubev asks is what exactly renders the Soviet affective residue so lingering and how to make these intangible traces visible. But if we accept that this affective dynamics is still very powerful, then it clearly influences the researcher. Hence, the carefully maintained illusion of neutrality does not seem to work well in all cases. For instance, as Ellen Rutten has shown in her *Sincerity after Communism: A Cultural History*, the idea of “fervidly contrasting” two groups, “the intelligentsia, as a Westernized, urbanized, inwardly divided male force, against a genuinely Russian, pastoral, ‘whole’ female counterforce,” was already in operation among the romantics of the nineteenth century. The latter often represented themselves as morally corrupt, maintained the discourse of guilt, and simultaneously relied on rather stereotypical notions of the Other, “whether that was a woman, an idealized Russian people or a blend of both.”[4] Throughout the book, I asked myself if this worldview played a part in Golubev’s conceptualizations and if its roots were realized and deconstructed.

The question of whether a scholar’s own memories and emotions should become part of our work, especially when we write about other people’s affect and subjectivity, is of course a much debated one, both in Soviet studies and beyond. In *Everything Was Forever: Until It Was No More*, Alexei Yurchak, on whose model of anthropology Golubev partly relies, dismissed this methodological issue in just one paragraph. He stated his reluctance about letting the “authorial voice” into the text, since the multidimensionality of his own experiences included not just Soviet but also post-Soviet and American perspectives. He did not want to figure as a “native anthropologist.”[5] Neutrality for the sake of objectivity seems especially popular among scholars who lived during late Soviet times. Can this also be a way to escape from collective trauma, especially if a foreign language creates a kind of “double distance”? In my own work, I see the same dynamics in contemporary Russian visual arts where practitioners either prefer not to engage with Soviet “embodied” feelings and social norms or do it in a “neutral,” “research” form: the material seems too uncomfortable to contact directly. The paradoxical workings of trauma, however, sometimes make them adopt in their works exactly those mechanisms that they are criticizing, unconsciously identifying with the aggressor. This is why I think that a conscious effort should be made to deeply engage with a scholar’s self-reflection.

Natalya Lebina, another researcher of late Soviet materiality, belongs to a parallel anthropological tradition that shows the impossibility of excluding a researcher’s own subjective responses from his or her studies. In her recent book, she uses the pronoun “I” lavishly and consciously relies on her own and her family’s experiences. She refers to the mixture of research discourse and personal memories as a “pretty risky experiment.”[6] Such experiments need not be as controversial as Luisa Passerini’s inclusion of diary entries about her sessions with a psychoanalyst in *Autobiography of a Generation: Italy, 1968* (1988). Yet they seem essential, as Lebina shows, because she addresses Russian-speaking audiences and seeks to counteract their nostalgia and wish to block uncomfortable recollections. In recent decades, affect theory, history of emotions, trauma and memory studies, sociology and oral history, and especially ethnography and anthropology have also started to ask these questions. After a “reflexive turn” around 1986 (the year of publica-
tion of James Clifford and George E. Marcus’s *Writing Culture*), scholars have often reflected on the tensions between our academic and private personas. My concerns are echoed in the feminist works that criticized “alienated knowledge” and hierarchies of “hygienic research” devoid of personal statements (often associated with the male gaze) which should be replaced by “theorised subjectivity.”[7] Another place to search for discussions of how a scholar’s “rationality ... is secretly dependent on ... non-rational states of mind,” especially when one works with affect and other phenomena beyond language, is psychoanalysis, with its ideas of projection and (counter)transference.[8] This discipline can also provide a parallel concept of affect, which, I think, needs further conceptualization.

In fact, both Golubev’s and Lebina’s approaches seem valid and foretell exciting next steps for the field. *The Things of Life* makes a valuable contribution to research on Soviet materiality and selfhood, expanding the field and refusing to restrict it to studying political structures and discourses. By going beyond language and adding object-oriented, bodily, and affective dimensions and by reflecting on class, gender, and generational biases, it skillfully counteracts simplistic and polarizing views on the culture in the USSR. But it seems important, especially when we analyze displaced affects, in the country that had been traumatized in the past by massive repressions, that both approaches come into dialogue. It might also be that some of my criticism has been induced by *The Things of Life*’s plea for a more complex, sophisticated, and nuanced approach to late Soviet society. Its framework seems so attractive that one wants to suggest new paths for exploration. Its conclusions about new possible ways of research on the “material objects of late socialism” that “encapsulated different and often conflicting visions of the past” leaves the book open-ended (p. 167). It also makes one wish that its message is heard beyond the academy—and in Russia.

Notes

[1]. I have changed the name and some details of Paulina’s life for reasons of privacy.


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