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THE USSR IN THE COLD WAR YEARS

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I want to begin by asking how revolutionary these images from 1967 and 1977 are (please refer to 'extra lecture materials' for accompanying slides). In some senses, they *are* quintessentially revolutionary: here is the key revolution anniversary of 1917, celebrated with classic revolutionary iconography, Lenin and Marx, and with mass processions to convey unanimous support for socialism. Yet their similarity across a decade, and their regimented nature, give us pause. Is this imagery really revolutionary anymore? What happens to revolutionary imagery when it's repeated and rehearsed *ad infinitum*? And how relevant *was* the memory of revolution and Bolshevism to the Soviet Union of the 1960s and 1970s? Western commentary on such celebrations had a pretty clear answer: people participated out of obligation, not enthusiasm, and the regime couldn't even imagine new ways to represent revolution, let alone realise it in real life. These images prompt us to wonder: was the Soviet Union after Stalin still a revolutionary state? Was it still on the way to communism, or veering off course, ever more liable to be subjected to revolution in its own right?

We know now how things turned out. But does 1991 really prove that the Soviet Union could not have survived in circumstances other than the Gorbachev reforms? Rather than engaging in counter-factual history, I want instead to show today how Soviet life after Stalin became in some ways and for some of the population more liveable—and that this desire for a more normal, comfortable life was central to the regime's own, reimagined promise to the population. Yet in other ways, in making these promises and then in keeping some and failing in others, the Soviet authorities became more distant from leaping forward to communism. Ironically, it was Gorbachev's attempts to re-energise that original revolutionary ideal, which precipitated the regime's overthrow. However, one could argue that a slow-burning revolution, or at least a desire for change, bubbled under the surface of Soviet life for years before that.

So, what sort of revolution did the Bolsheviks envisage and enact, fifty (and sixty) years before these photos were taken? The socialist takeover was to be a total transformation of politics, economics, society and everyday life from day one, even if communism itself would take longer to arrive. Capitalism would be replaced by state ownership of the means of production, which was immediately realised in war communism though later reversed for a few years in the 1920s with the semi-capitalist 'New Economic Policy'. Industry was to take precedence over agriculture, though the latter was also supposed to be modernised (and, eventually, collectivised) in support of industrial growth. The proletariat would assume power, dislodging the aristocratic elite, though their interests would initially be channelled through a 'vanguard' of professional revolutionaries (most of them not proletarian) until the workers had become sufficiently numerous and politically conscious. These political-economic changes were embattled from day one, but were formally instituted soon after the events of October 1917.

But the revolution was wider, and more utopian, than that: it also meant the breakthrough to what this poster calls 'a new way of (everyday) life', and the total transformation of the population into 'new Soviet people'. The Bolshevik state in its early years was arguably the most revolutionary in the world, especially from the point of view of doing away with what this poster refers to as 'kitchen slavery': radical reforms to legislation on abortion, marriage, divorce and gender equality all brought millions of women into the workplace, while transforming



family life beyond recognition (at least in urban centres, though the village was where most citizens still lived, and its way of life remained resolutely traditional). In the early years of Soviet power, members of the artistic avant-garde participated enthusiastically in imagining new forms of architecture, clothing and communal living that would revolutionise both the outer forms and inner experience of life under Bolshevism.

Fast forward to the late 60s or 70s, and what remains of these revolutionary dreams? The party still holds a monopoly of power. The commanding heights of the economy still lie in state hands, and targets are set in the highest echelons of the party-state on the five-year plan principle. The Soviet Union is full of factories and collective farms, with no real unemployment. But instead of proletarian hegemony, a vast middle class of skilled and white collar workers has formed, largely from mass access to higher education: this is what the Soviet Union classed as an intelligentsia, though we tend in the west to use the word in a narrower, more elite sense. Migration to the city is no longer a new phenomenon: by 1960, the majority of the Soviet Union's population is already based in urban centres. Instead of the early post-revolutionary experiments with communes, the typical (though far from universal) dwelling for a Soviet family is a private, one-room apartment, often in new housing developments (*kvartaly, mikoraiony*) towards the then outskirts of cities. The family itself is no longer under siege as an idea, though the demographics of soviet society are still affected by the war: men are still in short supply, and grandmothers take on much of the childcare. Women almost universally work, but also almost universally bear the double burden of childcare and housework: a far cry from the Bolshevik war on marriage, nuclear family and kitchen slavery, though abortion and divorce remain high, if not nearly as publicly prominent as they used to be.

Walk inside that family apartment, and you might typically find shelves of books, a TV, a fridge, a wardrobe of Soviet and Eastern bloc-produced clothing. You might also find family and friends putting the world to rights over tea or vodka around the kitchen table, listening to the radio or watching TV. Come back out of the apartment, and you could pop to the shops to buy some groceries, though long queues mean it is rarely a quick or predictable process. You might even take the shiny new metro line to browse a department store in the city centre or attend a theatre or opera performance. For some unusual and lucky families, there is a car parked near the apartment. When they needed to leave the city, families might take that car—or more usually, a suburban train—to their dacha out of town, another perk available to millions of Soviet citizens. Once or twice a year, they might holiday in a state-owned spa somewhere warm (but still inside Soviet borders), such as Sochi or Crimea, usually after getting hold of a voucher from their place of work.

This post-Stalinist lifestyle that I've described was far from universal. Those who did not or could not move permanently out of the countryside, who could not acquire a residency permit for the big Soviet cities, or who were prevented by legal regulations from moving too far from the Gulag site where they had served a prison term, all found Soviet life extremely tough into the 60s and 70s. This was not quite a struggle for survival, but offered little more than hard work, poor food and bleak housing, with minimal leisure facilities and consequently high levels of drinking and 'hooliganism'. But the key point is that the 'good life' that I described here was not only lived by millions of Soviet citizens in the 60s and 70s, but became in many ways the ideal embodiment of the promises of socialism—if not, of course, the very different ideal of communism. Now, consumption—if not consumerism—was celebrated. So too was a peculiarly Soviet version of the family, private life and leisure time. And the Soviet everyman was just as likely to be a scientist, engineer or academic, as a worker or peasant. So had the middle class taken over? Was this the revolution reversed?

Trotsky famously attacked Stalinism as the Thermidor of the Bolshevik revolution, the moment when the promises of 1917 were ripped up and discarded in favour of conservatism, bureaucracy and ultimately totalitarianism. One wonders what Trotsky would have made of Moscow twenty or thirty years after his death: a much more prosperous place than in 1917, or 1937, but also a more relaxed, 'normal' one. This was indeed a retreat from the demands—and some of the utopian visions—of Leninism *and* of Stalinism, but it was not a move towards dictatorship; rather, the post-Stalin leadership has often been seen as technocratic and bureaucratic. Although many changes that took place in Soviet life after Stalin were unwelcome to these leaders, they were often rooted in the party's own reorientation of the Soviet project toward reward and toward voluntary and enthusiastic (rather than coerced) work and self-improvement.



How was this different from Soviet life under Stalin? After all, in 1934, Stalin famously proclaimed that ‘life had become better, more joyous, comrades’, and the period of ‘high Stalinism’ in the mid-1930s was celebrated with images of the ‘good life’: more plentiful food, clothing, even cars and champagne; the new freedoms of the Stalin constitution; Stalinist film musicals, such as *Volga Volga* and *Circus*. Yet alongside these images of jollity and relaxation, propaganda also solemnly celebrated extraordinary physical challenges, such as the hewing of exceptional amounts of coal in a single shift by Aleksei Stakhanov (who gave the movement for extraordinary work output its name, Stakhanovism), or risky, non-stop Arctic flights such as that undertaken by the pilot Valerii Chkalov in the late 1930s. Indeed, it was such heroes who stood the best and perhaps only chance of living the Soviet lifestyle: they were pictured wearing nice suits, and driving smart cars. This was far from a universal lifestyle: in fact, it was accessible only to those few whom the Soviet state thought had most truly earned it. This can also be seen in the contrast between the relatively luxurious private apartments doled out to high-ranking state apparatchiks, and the miserable communal dwellings of the vast majority of the population in the 30s and 40s. This disparity became especially stark after the war, and led the cultural historian Vera Dunham to describe this elite service and reward as the post-war ‘big deal’.

So the Stalinist ‘good life’ was part of a social contract that reserved its benefits only for exceptional effort and loyalty in service of the state. The less spectacular feats achieved by ordinary workers were not rewarded in anything like the same way: under Stalinism, the private apartment or car were impossible dreams for the vast majority. This was not just a matter of economic constraint; Stalinist rhetoric often emphasised the moral necessity of sacrifice for the greater good. For most of the Stalin era, the state told its citizens—and apparently truly believed—that it was living in a state of emergency, surrounded by hostile powers and needing to shore up ‘socialism in one country’ as quickly as possible: this was epitomised by the *udarnik*, or shock work movement. This made any real, mass pursuit of personal comfort practically and morally impossible. This belief that Russia—and now the fledgling Soviet Union—was existentially vulnerable was a major factor driving Stalin’s ‘Great Turn’ away from the semi-capitalist ‘new economic policy’ towards radical, rapid collectivisation and industrialisation, and five year plans, at the end of the 1920s. It was when these policies had apparently got through the worst of their initial crises (such as mass peasant resistance to collectivisation in the late 1920s) that Stalin proclaimed the joyousness of Soviet life. Perhaps he had realised that there should be at least some illusion of reward in state rhetoric, alongside the motifs of mobilisation and emergency that had driven the propaganda of the early Five Year plans. Despite this brief discursive shift, though, between the revolution and WW2, personal comforts were always decisively secondary to the world-historical task of catching up with and overtaking Soviet rivals.

The outbreak of war made this rhetoric more urgent, and more real. Finally, here was a visceral war for survival, rather than an inflated ideological conflict. It is impossible to overstate the sacrifices and heroism of the Eastern front: from the siege of Leningrad to the ferocious battles for every last building in Stalingrad. For all the horror, suffering and hardship of 1941-45, soldiers, journalists, writers and people on the home front alike often recalled feeling a deep sense of purpose and genuine willingness to do whatever it took to protect the Soviet Union—or, as many conceived of it, to defend the Russian heartland.

When Victory day dawned on 9 May 1945, it was reward enough. Yet the question of how the war’s extraordinary sacrifices would be recognised and recompensed quickly came to the fore. There was a widespread expectation that the somewhat expanded freedom of expression and religious belief permitted during the war would be preserved if not expanded. More generally, survivors of a conflict that had taken 27 million lives had pressing health and welfare needs, as well as a sense of entitlement to reward. Yet the Soviet historian Sheila Fitzpatrick has argued that ‘the return to normalcy’ took the best part of two decades: the post-Stalinist lifestyle that I described earlier was not fully established until the 1960s. The war, for all that it allowed the Soviet state to shift its focus from self-defence to self-assertion in the post-war world order, set back the (always fragile) vision of the domestic good life. This was not just post-war austerity, of a kind that we see in many other cultures immediately after the end of the conflict, but an inability to deliver even basic needs to the population. The least ‘normal’ years in this regard were the late 1940s, when even communal apartments could not be guaranteed to citizens; food supplies were catastrophic, especially in the famine year of 1946-47; and public health and sanitation in a parlous state. Much of this crisis was unavoidable, given the huge damage that the Soviet territory had suffered during the war. What was more avoidable was a new ideological campaign launched



amidst this economic and demographic crisis, the so-called *Zhdanovshchina*, intended to stamp out the limited freedoms of the war years and replace them with Stalinist dogma in science, literature and other domains. Furthermore, in the years between the end of war and the death of Stalin, the Gulag population swelled to unprecedented size (some two million in 1952) and waves of lethal terror targeted Jewish intellectuals and the Soviet medical profession, amongst other victims.

This post-war re-Stalinisation seemed to take the Soviet Union in quite a different direction from post-war Europe and America. Yet, as the historian Donald Raleigh has argued, Soviet ‘baby boomers’ did eventually emerge, and became in some ways the defining image of post-Stalinist Soviet life. So how did this shift occur? There was only very limited scope for change under late Stalinism, but occasionally policy-makers started to try to point out problems before Stalin died. For example, there was some discussion just before Stalin died of the creative crisis into which Soviet literature and film had sunk in the late 40s and early 50s. There were also some experiments with new housing construction. Yet many key parts of the Stalinist party-state remained invulnerable to criticism, or even discussion, because they had become so tightly intertwined with Stalin and his beliefs over the course of his long dictatorship.

In this sense, the death of Stalin in March 1953 presented a real opportunity, but also a real danger: what did Soviet socialism look like without Stalin? Was it viable? Lavrentii Beria was the first to realise that Stalin’s disappearance in and of itself did much to open up Soviet policy to rethinking. Although associated with the worst excesses of Stalinist terror and Gulag, or perhaps *because* he had seen them up close, Beria knew that Soviet crime and punishment needed a radical shake-up. Forced labour was no longer economically efficient; terror had proven itself to be destructive and divisive. Beria’s decision to amnesty several million criminal (not initially ‘political’) prisoners from the Gulag was undoubtedly the earliest, clearest signal of the de-Stalinization that lay ahead, though direct attacks on Stalin would take a few more years to surface. The amnesties radically downsized the Gulag—though they did not shut it down entirely—and created the huge logistical challenge of what to do with hundreds of thousands of people who needed jobs and homes but often could not return to the ones that they had had before their arrests.

The most profound consequence of Beria’s amnesties, though, was the shift to a post-terror state: what the poet Anna Akhmatova (whose own family had been decimated by terror) called the ‘vegetarian’, post-Stalin era. It was not at all that the Soviet state ceased to persecute its enemies or send them to the Gulag, but rather that arbitrary blood-letting campaigns had come to an end. Memoirs of the time evoke a sense of profound relief and relaxation and attribute it above all to this shift away from mass terror. The realisation that the state would no longer use lethal punishment against its opponents—and perhaps also that its definition of its opponents had become tighter, if no less ideological—had wide ramifications. This was especially so for the intelligentsia, to whom the consequences of speaking more freely now seemed less grave than ever before. In this way, the renunciation of Stalinist terror was crucial, though not in itself sufficient, to starting the cultural ‘thaws’ of the first post-Stalin decade.

The unravelling of the Stalinist model of coercion began in other domains too, again very quickly after the leader’s death. Georgii Malenkov and Viacheslav Molotov vied for power in the early months and years after Stalin’s death; unlike Beria’s focus on terror, their visions of the post-Stalin future focussed largely on the economy. In 1954-55, the Central Committee repeatedly debated the idea of shifting away from the Stalinist focus on heavy industry toward consumer goods production. Like the Gulag amnesties, these changes had much broader and deeper ramifications: they signalled the beginning of a long and irreversible shift from sacrifice to reward, and from emergency to normality.

While, by Western standards, the Soviet economy remained unusually focussed on heavy industry and agriculture, Soviet citizens were now celebrated as consumers en masse. They were promised better food, nicer clothing and shoes, and previously scarce goods such as fridges, televisions and cars started to become a more normal and imminently attainable aspiration for the broad population. Moreover, this consumer lifestyle was not only going to compete with that of the US and Western Europe; it was going to beat them at their own game. This point was hammered home in the so-called ‘kitchen debate’ between Nikita Khrushchev and Richard



Nixon, at the American national exhibition in Moscow in 1959. Khrushchev responded to the display of a typical Californian kitchen by telling Nixon that:

You think the Russian people will be dumbfounded to see these things, but the fact is that newly built Russian houses have all this equipment right now. In Russia, all you have to do to get a house is to be born in the Soviet Union. You are entitled to housing...In America, if you don't have a dollar you have a right to choose between sleeping in a house or on the pavement. Yet you say we are the slave to Communism.

The exchange captured how Cold War competition had moved into more intimate, personal settings, but still dealt in ideological and moral absolutes. Khrushchev was now promising the Soviet population just as nicely equipped a kitchen and apartment as in the American dream. The distinctiveness of the Soviet vision lay in its universal reach, its transcendence of class divisions: everyone in the Soviet Union could access this lifestyle, and its guarantee would be underwritten by the state, written into the post-Stalinist social contract.

Khrushchev's confidence in this kitchen kerfuffle derived, in part, from the rapid progress of the mass housing drive of the 50s and 60s, which he saw as truly revolutionary: 'to use the words of John Reed', he once said, 'we 'shook the world' with our massive program to build housing for our people.' In the 1950s and 1960s, unprecedented numbers of Soviet families moved out of communal flats and into one-bedroom apartments. These apartments were hardly luxurious or spacious; in fact, these predominantly pre-fab constructions quickly became known as 'Khrushcheby', combining Khrushchev's name with the Russian word for slum (*trushchoba*). However, the contrast to previous homes—and to the state's former disregard of the problem—was truly striking. Moving to the private apartment, perhaps more than anything else, demonstrated the difference between Stalinism and post-Stalinism: happy housewarmings across the Soviet Union symbolised the start of a new era, and a new Soviet lifestyle. It should be noted that this was still not universal: in 1965, 55% of Russian Federation citizens lived in private apartments, with considerable variations across older cities (where communal apartments were still the norm) and new settlements, where new housing was dominated by the private model. Like the post-Stalinist changes to terror and the shift to consumer goods, the drive to provide individual apartments had consequences that went far beyond its specific policy domain. The right to a personal apartment not only powerfully incarnated the state's belated recognition of good citizenship and state service, but it also conferred the right to a private life—albeit, as we shall see, subject to strict conditions.

The move away from the Gulag, and the move into the private apartment did more to de-Stalinise Soviet life than the direct attacks on Stalin that Khrushchev orchestrated in the mid-1950s and again in the early 1960s. The Soviet system could not afford to dwell on its past for long, and it certainly did not want to. Confronting the full extent of Stalinist wrongdoing was impossible, because it would have undermined parts of Soviet history and core beliefs that still underpinned the Soviet system: each time that the terror, Gulag and even the dark sides of the war were allowed to be discussed by the population, as in the Secret Speech of 1956 for example, the regime clamped down on its own initiative within months.

In fact, Khrushchev initiated de-Stalinization above all because of his own fervent wish to move forward to the communist future, unimpeded by the past. His endorsement of de-Stalinization peaked in the early 1960s—best symbolised by his personal authorisation of publication of Solzhenitsyn's Ivan Denisovich—but so too did this optimism about the future. In 1961, the same year that he orchestrated massive public discussion of terror and had Stalin's body removed from the Red Square mausoleum, he spearheaded the new Party Program. While the public discussions of the crimes of Stalinism were essentially curtailed by the late 1960s, the 1961 program's vision of Soviet life, including a detailed 'moral code for the builders of communism', held sway for many years to come, including such prescriptions as:

- Conscientious labor for the good of society: he who does not work shall not eat
- High consciousness of public duty, intolerance towards the violation of public interests
- Collectivism and comradesly mutual aid; one for all and all for one
- Humane relations and mutual respect among people; man is to man a friend, comrade, and brother
- Honesty and truthfulness, moral purity, simplicity and modesty in social and personal life



- Mutual respect in the family, concern for the upbringing of children.
- Intolerance towards injustices, parasitism, dishonesty, careerism and money-grubbing.

The year before this program emerged, Khrushchev had already upped the utopian rhetoric of the kitchen debate with his claim that the Soviet Union would achieve communism by 1980. The space race of the period further stoked this enthusiasm: the spectacular success of Iurii Gagarin and Valentina Tereshkova demonstrated the superiority of Soviet science, and thus of the system, but it also captured the sense that revolutionary dreams were becoming reality in the Soviet 60s.

This underlying, unremitting drive toward the communist future helps to explain the tensions embedded throughout post-Stalinist everyday life, which endured despite the differences between post-Stalinist leaders. Where Khrushchev promised to leap forward to communism within two decades, Brezhnev created the doctrine of ‘developed socialism’ to explain why communism had to be approached gradually and would therefore be deferred until further notice. Where the short ‘Soviet sixties’ (1961-68) are often remembered as a time of optimism, the long Soviet 70s (from the reaction to the Prague Spring to start of Gorbachev’s reforms in the mid-1980s) have usually been deemed a time of stagnation. Yet there were far more, and more fundamental, continuities between the aspirations of the two regimes than differences. None of the core post-Stalinist changes that I have talked about so far was reversed when Khrushchev was ousted from power in a bloodless coup in 1964 (becoming the first Soviet leader to leave office alive): terror did not resurface; the housing drive did not stop, and neither did the orientation towards consumer goods. Fundamentally, the Soviet system now rewarded its citizens for good behaviour, and imagined that reward in curiously similar (if morally superior) ways to its Western rivals; it also posited that its citizens would transform into good communists without coercion, albeit with considerable guidance from the state. This vision of the socialist good life flatteringly compared its rewards with those on the other side of the iron curtain, but simultaneously highlighted ideological distinctions.

What was offered to citizens in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras, then, was a distinctively socialist, still highly ideologised, vision of normality. Take life in the so-called private apartment. The apartment itself was not privately owned, and could only be individualised to a limited degree, though people engaged in a variety of creative ‘home-making’ practices. It was also built and designed in a functional way, interestingly drawing on Scandinavian design principles, rather than being intended as a cosy domestic retreat; indeed, propaganda of the time still mocked those obsessed with domestic comforts and acquisition of fripperies. Watching TV and listening to radio, as well as reading, dominated leisure time, since TV and radio had been rolled out to most Soviet homes within two decades of Stalin’s death. However, media production across the board was state-controlled and censored. Anniversary celebrations dominated schedules for weeks around the major dates and Soviet news was often staid in the extreme, though some innovations in Soviet TV proved enduringly popular, including game-shows and spy serials (such as *Seventeen Moments of Spring*). Moreover, the Soviet authorities could not entirely jam foreign broadcasts, and other socialist media provided some variety even for those who didn’t listen to VOA or BBC. There was a ‘reading revolution’ amongst the increasingly educated population, but all book production was subject to censorship to bring into line with the principles of Socialist Realism; here again, though, the Soviet authorities could not stop the spread of unofficial literature, or *samizdat*, though they did police it aggressively.

Inhabitants of private apartments were also expected to participate in a variety of communal and public activities, not least the *subbotnik*, or weekend projects to beautify their neighbourhood. Neighbourhoods also had their own ‘comrades’ courts’, to which minor local offences were routinely devolved so that bad behaviour could be publicly exposed and shamed. There were also hundreds of roving brigades, or *druzhiny*, which patrolled the streets meting out punishment for immoral behaviour, though these were more a phenomenon of the Khrushchev years than later. More generally, while the Gulag was being downsized and political convictions becoming far less common (though hundreds of disobedient and non-conformist figures were still sent to the Gulag or otherwise punished), the state got tougher on petty misdemeanours, broadening the category of ‘hooliganism’ and increasing penalties for it. Bad behaviour, such as drinking or brawling, became a more urgent moral problem, as Soviet society got closer to communism. The same was true of the revived offence of ‘parasitism’—essentially, not engaging in productive labour, as defined by the state—which was used to persecute disobedient members of the intelligentsia, including famously the poet Iosif Brodskii.



What about the workplace? Here too, a distinctive 'moral code' and complex system of reciprocity prevailed. The privileges that I mentioned earlier, such as dachas and spa holidays, were in the gift of the state. They depended on hard work (or at least, on its appearance) and good behaviour: the latter construed as not publicly questioning certain basic Soviet ideals, and participating in public rituals such as the anniversary celebrations as they were replicated in microcosm across Soviet institutions. The party thoroughly penetrated Soviet workplaces, and though people were not obliged to join, membership carried considerable powers to discipline colleagues and shape institutional policy; it also conferred significant privileges, including preferential access to scarce consumer goods such as fridges, cars, luxurious food-stuffs and foreign fashion. Like all public places, work-places were also penetrated by the KGB, though to nothing like the same extent as the Stasi in East Germany.

As for the post-war boom in higher education, which helped to produce the vast middle class that started to dominate post-Stalinist society, here too restrictions applied. Students could not escape the obligation to take classes in *diamat*, or dialectical materialism, and the curriculum was subject to significant political interference. On graduating, many students had to accept state instructions on where they would work, sometimes being assigned to jobs at the other end of the Soviet Union, though there was scope to get round this with the right contacts. Most students would also be part of the Komsomol, or communist youth league. And throughout the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras the Komsomol mobilised large brigades of youth to participate in ambitious if ultimately failed projects, such as the cultivation of the Virgin Lands in the Khrushchev era, and the construction of the Baikal-Amur Mainline (or BAM) in the 1970s, whose propaganda felt little different from that of the early Five Year plans.

In this way, the Soviet authorities remained ideologically uncomfortable with the promises that they themselves had made after Stalin's death. They celebrated the pleasures of consumption, but feared a frenzy of consumerism. Private life was de facto granted to the majority, but that privacy was ideologically uncomfortable for the regime, who intruded upon it in many different ways. Even within the walls of the private apartment, and certainly once outside it, Soviet citizens faced a barrage of propaganda discourse and mobilisational rituals. The authorities lauded education and the rapidly growing intelligentsia, but limited what they could listen to, read or watch. While granting citizens more relief and relaxation than ever before, the party also exhorted them to keep moving towards communism in their work and in their personal lives too: socialism was supposed to be lived at every moment, in every place. Were these tensions unworkable, then, or could they be held in equilibrium, potentially forever?

To some domestic observers of the Brezhnev era, the Soviet Union had not only stopped progressing towards communism, but was descending into entropy. In 1970, the dissidents Roi Medvedev, Andrei Sakharov and Valentin Turchin circulated an open letter to the government urging a political solution to economic stagnation:

Over the past decade [they argued] menacing signs of breakdown and stagnation have begun to show themselves in the economy of our country...A great mass of data is available showing mistakes in the determination of technical and economic policy in industry and agriculture and an intolerable procrastination about finding solutions to urgent problems [...] These problems demand the creative participation of millions of people on all levels of the economic system. They demand the broad exchange of information and ideas...However, we encounter certain insurmountable obstacles on the road toward the free exchange of ideas and information. Truthful information about our shortcomings and negative manifestations is hushed up on the grounds that it "may be used by enemy propaganda".

In the same year, the dissident Andrei Amal'rik also unofficially circulated his analysis of whether the Soviet Union could survive until the symbolic date of 1984, in which he observed:

Contemporary Soviet society can be compared with a triple-decker sandwich: the top layer is the ruling bureaucracy; the middle layer consists of the "middle class" or the "class of specialists"; and the bottom layer... consists of the workers, peasants, petty clerks and so on. Whether Soviet



society will manage to reorganize itself in a peaceful and painless way and survive the forthcoming cataclysm with a minimum of casualties will depend on how rapidly the middle layer of the sandwich expands at the expense of the other two.

Amalrik conceived of this crisis as destructive and dangerous, whereas the other dissident petition envisaged a chronic decay. Moreover, unlike the collective petition's demands for glasnost and democratic participation, Amalrik suggested that the Soviet middle class might actually aid the Soviet system to survive. And in fact, it is true that many Soviet citizens, especially of the middle class, did not find Soviet life as intolerable or crisis-ridden as these dissident analyses.

Private life, however the state sought to limit it in theory, was a reality for the majority of the population, and kitchen table conversations and other forms of socialising provided retreat and relief from the more heavily ideologised public sphere. The workplace itself was relatively free of the exhortations to record work productivity, which had once characterised the Stalinist economy. However, it is true that late Soviet consumers found consumption increasingly irksome. As the Brezhnev era progressed, *defitsity* in desirable food-stuffs, home-ware and fashion worsened, leading to lengthening queues and inordinate amount of potential work-time lost to standing in them.

Part of the problem was that the centrally planned economy could not rationally respond to consumer demand by being flexible with its outputs, or prices; another was that overall productivity started to decline in the early 1960s, and worsened over the next two decades. In 1983, a Siberian economist, Tatiana Zaslavskaja, presented a confidential paper on the state of the Soviet economy to her colleagues at her think-tank in Novosibirsk; leaked to the Western press soon after, the paper drew a stark picture of growth shrinking from around 7% in the mid-1960s to just 2% in the early 1980s. Her conclusion was that 'the structure of the national economy long ago crossed the threshold of complexity when it was still possible to regulate it effectively from one single centre'; however, it would take several more years before these radical suggestions would have any bearing on politics or economics at the centre itself.

Meanwhile, most late Soviet citizens responded to the declining economic situation with less drastic and more pragmatic measures. They resorted en masse to using the growing 'second economy' to get hold of what they wanted. Observers at the time often noted how important the black market was for the acquisition of most goods, and how it gave rise in turn to a huge network of *blat*, or informal contacts. One such observer, the American economist James Millar, described all these practices as 'the little deal' between the Brezhnev-era regime and population: if people steered clear of dissidence or other serious misdemeanours, and turned up to work (even if they didn't work too hard), then the authorities would turn a blind eye to 'informal practices' such as purchasing goods 'on the side' (known as *nalevo*).

This deal embedded the Soviet population, except for the small, brave minority of dissidents, in a distinctively late socialist lifestyle, one which seemed to have no clear end-point or looming crisis, despite its many failings. Indeed, a recent anthropological study of the last Soviet generation described it as believing that 'everything was forever, until it was no more'. The hollow rituals and cynicism of public life, the contrast to the greater authenticity of private life, and the failure of the official economy to deliver the regime's promises were all contradictions that Soviet citizens had to find ways to negotiate, since they seemed set to last forever. Nevertheless, when the Soviet Union did fall apart, the alienation from official ideology and its promises meant that the collapse almost immediately seemed inevitable to many people, even though they had not consciously seen it coming.

How, then, finally, did Soviet life move from the timelessness of developed socialism to the hectic events of the late 1980s and early 1990s? The historian Stephen Hanson divided the post-Stalin period into two different approaches to time. Both Khrushchev and Gorbachev took a 'revolutionary' or 'charismatic' approach to urging on the leap forward into communism, while Brezhnev took a 'rational' or more realistic approach to when (or if) this would happen. And indeed, at the start of his tenure as Soviet leader, Gorbachev famously contrasted the dynamism of his proposed reforms to the 'stagnation' of the Brezhnev years, when there seemed to have been a retreat from the goal of communism, even in official ideology itself.



Gorbachev was from a very different generation and educational background to Brezhnev, and sought to shake up the ‘gerontocracy’ that had presided over this apparent stagnation. He had been exposed to Western ideas, as had his close advisors such as Aleksandr Yakovlev and others who had spent much of late socialism in liberal think-tanks or abroad. Gorbachev would, according to his biographer Archie Brown, eventually adopt social democratic ideas of a Scandinavian type, moving away from anything recognisably socialist. Yet what Gorbachev intended to do, at least initially, was not to import new ideas into the Soviet system, but to reinvigorate its original beliefs, re-invest it with the ideological fervour that had been depleted in the Brezhnev era, and finally deliver on the hopes of 1917.

In 1985, soon after his rather startling victory in the Central Committee contest to succeed Chernenko, Gorbachev announced the intertwined policies of perestroika, glasnost and uskorenije: meaning, respectively, restructuring; openness; and speeding up (of the economy). What underlay all these policies was the desire to increase productivity and re-energise Soviet life: to better exploit the creative resources within the Soviet Union, as this poster described perestroika Glasnost would be enacted with the aim of exposing problems that were hampering growth and progress toward communism: it was constructive and intended to be ‘strengthening’. Like Khrushchev, Gorbachev also had ambitious plans that extended into morality, perhaps best captured in the disastrous anti-alcohol drive. Soviet life would undergo thorough purification, and out of it, the ideal of communism would finally be realised.

In fact, what happened was more or less the opposite. Soviet life *was* hugely energised, especially in the media, which underwent a real boom of reader and viewer interest as glasnost probed ever deeper into Soviet history, while also raising previously taboo subjects, such as sex, prostitution and drug use. While cathartic, this was hardly the kind of purification that Gorbachev had intended, though he did do a fair amount to encourage it, especially after the lethal secrecy surrounding the Chernobyl disaster and then at the 1987 Party Congress, where he urged writers and film-makers to finish off the de-Stalinization of the Khrushchev years. By the end of the 1980s, though, this obsessive ‘exposure’ had extended as far as Lenin and Leninism, contradicting Gorbachev’s re-Leninisation drive. Meanwhile the exposes of the seamier sides of life had become so widespread that they were categorised as a movement: *chernukha*, or ‘dark art’. More broadly, glasnost would eventually expose the true extent of perestroika required: not tinkering with the system, but revolutionising it. The dissidents of the early 1970s had been right. The Communist Party monopoly was lifted in 1990, after several years of moving toward more democratic political bodies such as the Congress of People’s Deputies. Meanwhile, the cautious moves toward cooperatives and incentivised forms of production in early perestroika were overtaken by rapid marketization and the crash privatisation of the early 1990s.

The historian Stephen Kotkin argued that the Soviet system’s collapse was ‘armageddon averted’: there was no revolution, no major violence or wars over territory or assets. The system collapsed through a brief and abortive coup, followed by the signing of a series of formal agreements dissolving the Communist Party and the Soviet Union itself in late 1991. Many of the former Soviet republics, such as the Baltics, reacted to these events as the end of colonial oppression, but Russia and arguably Ukraine too were left with a more profound, chronic crisis of identity. With the benefit of more hindsight than Kotkin, we might argue—as the Guardian Moscow correspondent Shaun Walker does in his recent book—that the collapse of the Soviet empire left a ‘long hangover’, now climaxing in the ‘memory wars’ in Ukraine. However, the question of the Soviet legacy, or legacies, will be dealt with more fully in the final lecture of this series, by Bridget Kendall, and so I will end here.