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Olena S. Aleksandrova, Valeriia V. Loiko & Nataliia M. Vinnikova

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Trade in the Decade Following the Collapse of the USSR

Olena S. Aleksandrova, Valeriia V. Loiko and Nataliia M. Vinnikova

In Soviet times, Moscow was a consumers' oasis in a country of rampant scarcity. Millions of workers and peasants from all the free republics met in the capital of the unbreakable Union to stock up on delicacies, foreign goods, and all the things not available in the national hinterland. As new markets with a certain degree of specialization emerged, this introduced more stringent terms of trade and other measures aimed at eliminating the negative impact of commerce on the environment and improving the sanitary condition of the area, as well as improving traffic conditions and the general appearance of the environment. The authors analyze the space of commerce during the Soviet Union's existence and after its collapse, and show how popular attitudes changed.

SOVIET SHOPPING

Markets in the pre-Soviet period were not only a place for trade but also a space where much social activity was concentrated (Aksenov, Brade, and Papadopoulos 1997). In those days, privately run markets were everywhere (Hass 2012a, b; Kostyukov 1970; Randall 2008). There were, for example,

OLENA S. ALEKSANDROVA has a PhD in Philosophy, and is Dean of the Faculty of History and Philosophy, Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University (Kyiv, Ukraine). She studies the problems of civil society, social policy and social security, as well as quality assurance in higher education. Her research project is studying the formation and development of the middle class in Ukraine and elsewhere. She is the author of more than 130 research papers in Ukrainian, Russian and English.

VALERIIA V. LOIKO has a PhD in Economics, and teaches in the Department of Finance and Economics at Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University (Kyiv, Ukraine). She studies problems of providing economic and social security, development of enterprises, and economic aspects of the national economy. She is currently in a group studying the formation and development of the middle class in Ukraine and elsewhere. She has written over 250 research papers in Ukrainian, Russian and English.

NATALIIA M. VINNIKOVA is a Doctor of Philology, and teaches in the Department of Ukrainian Literature and Comparative Studies at Borys Grinchenko Kyiv University (Kyiv, Ukraine). She studies problems of education, of internationalization, and of communication. She is currently in the research project group studying the formation and development of the middle class. She has written over 70 research publications, including two monographs and textbooks for students.

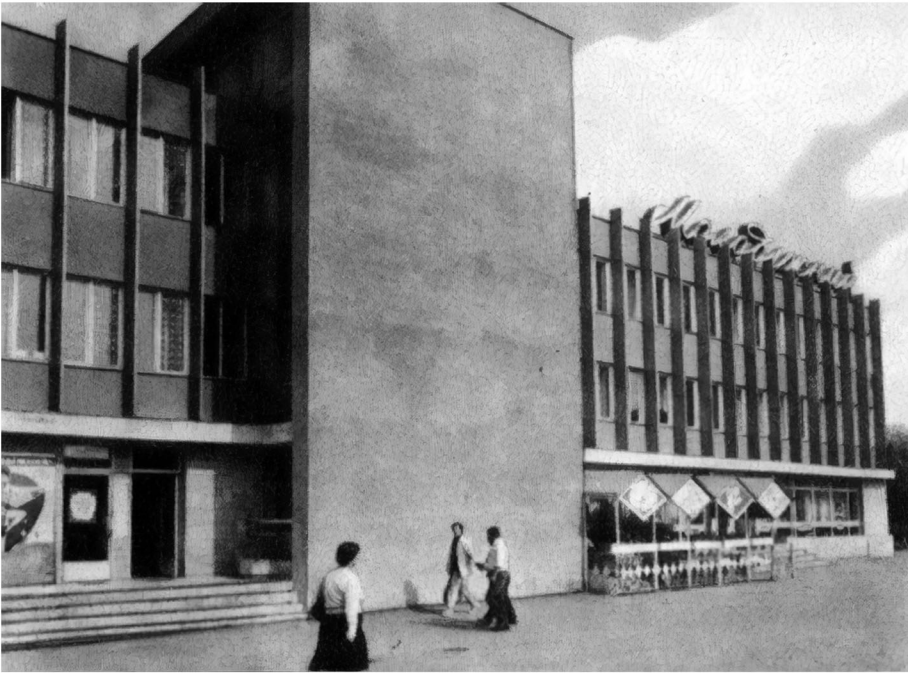


Figure 1 Food-Service Center on Prospekt Pobedy, Moscow, late 20th century. (Photographer: Yevgeniy Khaldey)

markets that arose near private factories and had names associated with the owner (Belitskaya 2018). During the Soviet period, the explosive growth in the number of residents (with the industrial development of cities) led to the development of new shopping institutions (Kembayev 2009). On Prospekt Pobedy (Moscow), in particular, the Food Services Building was erected in 1978—a three-storey building where there were a cookery shop, bar-café, dining room and the Molodezhny restaurant (Rosati 1995). Only the main facade was architecturally designed (the architect was Levina), while the other elements did not have a sufficiently thought-out architectural resolution (Kruzhilin et al. 2018) (Figure 1).

In general, the design elements can be divided into those that serve the client (functional ones; Lebanidze 2020), and those improving the conditions and aesthetics of the environment (fountains, stands with flowers and the like; Ashwin and Clarke 2003). A good example is a retail box shop where customers can keep their bags and organize their purchases (White and Feklyunina 2014). There are examples of installing a decorative fence, which dictates movement in certain parts of the market, including fences placed in combination with benches and flower beds around fountains (Aksenov 2016). An interesting solution was the tables in the trading rooms, where one could repack purchases and clinch sales (Figure 2).



Figure 2 Soviet clothing shop. (Source: Photo tour of Soviet shops and markets)

THE MOST COMMON TYPES OF GOODS IN SOVIET SHOPS

First, we will discuss here the storefronts (Davis 2001). The Showcase Department is called “Manufactured Goods” in one of the Soviet stores, with displays of plates, sets of pots, mechanical meat grinders, as well as aluminum ladles and skimmers, things which were probably found in every second Soviet apartment (Kupatadze 2012). Every house had a grinder, as cutlets were often the only dish that you could cook with the bad meat sold in stores (Melchior 2015).

There were no food processors in the USSR—it was only in the late Soviet 1970s–80s that primitive juicers, mixers and electric grinders began to appear (Hass 2012a, 2012b). For some reason, sales staff often built huge pyramids of cans of food—which were apparently considered aesthetic, or perhaps an image of plenty (Lovell 2000). Most often the canned food was fish (Tsygankov 2002). Fish was what one could regularly buy in stores across the Soviet Union: even in periods of scarcity, there were canned fish and frozen pollock on the shelves (Faddeev 2016). Fish stores also sold seaweed (Figure 3).

A distinctive habit of that era was that the meat was cut up in shops in front of the customers on a thick wooden block, just like in the market, with no sanitary safeguards in the modern sense. The meat was not hung on separate racks with free access as today, but was stacked on the seller’s counter (Vymyatnina



Figure 3 In a fish shop. (Photographer: Thomas D. McAvoy)

and Antonova 2014), which was fenced off from buyers by a glass showcase. Apparently, this was done so as to reduce theft in the store, because other means of protection like magnetic stickers or video surveillance did not yet exist.

Here, everything was in the open, so it was almost impossible to steal a pair of shoes in a box unnoticed (Samonis 1992). In general, the layout of products resembled a modern one—rows of boxes by size, and the same fitting benches. The only difference between then and now was that models of shoes were not on display, i.e. there were no samples (Kokorev 2019). Figure 4 shows collective listening to a record—the seller would put some record on a stationary player, while customers listened to it through special tubes with speakers in them. The vegetable range typical for the market of the final Soviet years was white cabbage, beets, carrots, onions (both peeled and green) and potatoes



Figure 4 *Collective listening to a record.* (Photographer: Ed Clark)

(Rosati 1994). Sometimes journalists came to the markets to do a “test for nitrates,” because in the late ‘80s this topic was one of the major concerns in daily life.

PECULIARITIES OF SELLING GOODS AND THE CUSTOMERS’ ACCESS TO THEM

In the USSR, everything was different from now: first, to get access to the goods (e.g., cabbage or onions), it was necessary to stand in a long queue, after which the seller gave you whatever came to hand. Thus simply buying vegetables illustrated the essence of the Soviet system—the acceptance of personal inconvenience so as to obtain any resource. This was so in practically all spheres of Soviet life and for all sectors of the public, from a janitor to a minister—the former fought each other in the vegetable shops, while the latter wrote denunciations of each other and might even poison people to get three-room apartments.

In Soviet times sellers often cooked up all sorts of “gray schemes,” like the mass sale of shoes from the back of the store—scarce shoes being sold without checks and two to three times as costly, rather than those “punched” at the usual price at the cashier’s (Figure 5).



Figure 5 Queues in front of shops that are opening. (Photographer: Ilya Varlamov, 1990)

In conditions of commodity shortage, collective-farm markets rescued the public a great deal. These were either covered pavilions or open rows of counters, where they sold meat, milk, vegetables, fruit, potatoes and preserves. Representatives of collective or state farms and ordinary people who grew some crops in the countryside could trade in such markets. One had to pay for the trading space, and in return the market management provided everything necessary—scales, boxes and so on. Private sellers set prices depending on demand, and then the bargaining began (Figure 6).

During the period of Perestroika (1985–89), the country's deficit began to grow, an effect of unsuccessful and inconsistent reforms. For example, in 1987, the government abolished the state monopoly on foreign commerce and so many enterprises began to send their goods abroad, to earn much more than if sold to the Soviet public (Figure 7).

Figure 8 shows the Melodya shop, where they sold discs and tapes. These shops were in those times called the Houses of Records; there were 18 of them in the Soviet Union. But this company's products were not only sold there: the records were more easily bought at the Soyuzpechat newsstands; previously it had even been fashionable to order records by mail.

CONCLUSION

By the beginning of Perestroika supermarkets had spread to all the districts of Moscow. The Soviet system thereby acknowledged the imperfections in the



Figure 6 Farm Market. (Photographer: Stena Veimena)



Figure 7 Stalls on Kolkhoznaya Square, 1990. (Photographer: Igor Gavrilov)

previous organization of commerce, as indeed Mikhail Gorbachev had done publicly in May 1985 in Leningrad. Shops were built on a standard pattern, and they tried to be located closer to the geographical center of a populated area. They were flat rectangular buildings, and nearly all of them still operate as a convenience even now: most often they house one of the discount stores.



Figure 8 *Melodya shop, 1991. (Photographer: Igor Varlamov)*

In the Soviet Union there was always shortage, the only variation being in the degree of unavailability of goods. Moscow was supplied better than most localities, of course; only some closed towns of the military-industrial complex lived better. When goods and produce became even scarcer, as in the mid-1980s, residents of the Moscow region and surrounding areas would go into the capital by train for shopping; and the famous comic riddle of that period about “long, green, smells of sausage” meant simply a train from Moscow. The system of commerce in the Soviet Union was in fact based on the lack of necessary goods. Hence the eternal queues, characteristic rudeness of the salesmen, physical struggles for whatever was “thrown out” onto the counter, embittered people regularly hanging around, trying to get hold of a scarce product through connections, etc. Not to mention the fact that even in the capital many of the products were of poor quality.

The poor standard of living universally and the scarce opportunities for personal advancement indirectly gave rise to more criminality, mortality and poverty, and a decline in life expectancy (as was indicated above by Bezpалov, Lochan and Fedyunin).

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