

## REVIEW ARTICLE

# A Deceptive Stability: New Scholarship on Postwar Soviet Society

Simon Huxtable 

Independent Scholar, United Kingdom  
[sjhuxtable@gmail.com](mailto:sjhuxtable@gmail.com)

Mie Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead: The Politics of Reproduction in the Postwar Soviet Union* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021), 328 pp. (hbk), £28.99, ISBN: 9780190635138.

Marko Dumančić, *Men Out of Focus: The Soviet Masculinity Crisis in the Long Sixties* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021), 344 pp. (hbk), \$79.00, ISBN: 9781487505257.

Juliane Fürst, *Flowers Through Concrete: Explorations in Soviet Hippieland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 496 pp. (pbk), £22.99, ISBN: 9780192866066.

Alexei Golubev, *The Things of Life: Materiality in Late Soviet Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020), 240 pp. (hbk), \$39.95, ISBN: 9781501752889.

In an essay written in 2013, Soviet historian Stephen Bittner called the wartime and post-1945 Soviet Union a ‘negentropic society’.<sup>1</sup> Countering historians who emphasised the Soviet project’s inevitable failure, Bittner argued that the Soviet Union defied the laws of thermodynamics in its capacity for reorganisation and regeneration, allowing it to survive in the face of multiple challenges. The essay was a rejoinder to those who would see harbingers of the Soviet collapse in the heterogeneous social tendencies of the postwar period. Instead, Bittner draws attention to the sources of cohesion that held the Soviet Union together through the challenges of wartime and beyond. However, Bittner intended his essay not as a general theory of post-war Soviet society, but as an observation about the integrative tendencies that kept the Soviet Union together during the Second World War and in the decades that immediately followed. So when did this alchemical potential for ‘self-organization, resilience, regeneration, redefinition, and creation of new social forms and structures’ come to an end?<sup>2</sup>

The books discussed in this review article offer ample evidence of the Soviet Union’s resilience. Covering subjects ranging from abortion to the masculinity crisis and the Soviet hippie movement to the late socialist world of objects, they show how the Soviet public created new social structures that allowed new ways of being in the world. At the same time, they show how these new forms were often constructed to mitigate the outcomes of misguided party policies and, in some cases, posed a direct challenge to the Soviet state. Thus, these four monographs clearly showcase Soviet society’s capacity for ‘regeneration’ and ‘redefinition’, but raise important questions about the long-term effect of these constant redefinitions. In the first part of this review article, I explore Soviet reproductive politics and discussions about gender, and point out the unequal burdens placed on women in processes of postwar social rearticulation. In the second part, I examine two works on the Soviet Union’s final decades which show the continued creativity of Soviet citizens, but also raise questions about the long-term durability of the Soviet project.

<sup>1</sup> Stephen V. Bittner, ‘A Negentropic Society? Wartime and Postwar Soviet History’, *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 14, 3 (2013), 599–619.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 602.

### Reproductive Politics and the Masculinity Crisis

Soviet society's powers of regeneration did not come about by magic but through painstaking work – much of it placed on the shoulders of women. The socialist woman's 'double burden' of waged and domestic labour has been much discussed; its origins can be located in Stalin's repressive pronatalist policies. Mie Nakachi's *Replacing the Dead* examines the evolution of these policies in the first decade after the Second World War and traces their deleterious social effects. The book unfolds in the interval between two crucial laws: the pro-natalist 1944 Family Law, which sought to increase the birth rate, and the 1955 legalisation of abortion, which reversed a ban in place since 1936. Faced with this briefest of summaries, one might imagine that policy moved from pronatalist conservatism under Stalin to Khrushchev-era liberalisation. But Nakachi shows that 1953 was far from a watershed – in large part because Khrushchev drafted the 1944 Family Law and blocked attempts to overturn it. Even if Khrushchev's policies had been reversed by the late 1960s, the assumptions it encoded were enduring: Soviet policy continued to view women as reproductive machines to the end of its existence.

The 1944 Family Law was a complex policy that aimed at a simple outcome: to increase the Soviet birth rate after wartime losses. Nakachi shows how Soviet citizens were enlisted into a massive state-backed reproductive project: penalties for abortion were increased, honorary titles and financial benefits for mothers improved, while men and women with 'small' families (defined in the legislation as fewer than three children) were burdened with punitive tax rates. Contradicting the sharp moralism of postwar reproductive policy in Western Europe, Soviet pronatalism did not require marriage – or even a long-term relationship – to function. Instead, the law gave a green light to men who wanted to pursue no-consequence relationships with women, whom the law forbade to seek maintenance payments or even name the father on birth certificates.

Seen purely from the point of view of maximising births, the policy seemed to make sense: wartime losses had created a sharp gender imbalance in favour of women; many would remain childless if marriage was a prerequisite. Encouraging men to father children with multiple women would therefore help the country to overcome its wartime losses. But subsequent chapters detail the negative consequences: single mothers forced to bring up children without adequate support; rising levels of illegal abortion, leading to a swathe of prosecutions; social stigmatisation of unmarried women and their children; a mess of marital and parental arrangements exacerbated by stricter divorce laws; widespread medical complications leading, in some cases, to death; and high numbers of children placed in under-resourced government care (Nakachi offers the startling figure that, in 1947, 44 per cent of children placed in state orphanages died).<sup>3</sup> By 1955, faced with ample evidence of the law's negative effects, the party re-legalised abortion as a measure to 'encourage motherhood and protect childhood' (p. 180).

Nakachi's impressive study clearly explains the complexities of reproductive policy in the late Stalin period and beyond. While the state's goal of maximising the birth rate was never explicitly queried, Nakachi shows that reproductive policies came under sustained questioning. The author gives voice not just to high-level party members but to demographers, statisticians, legal experts and doctors, and shows how experiences of Stalinist repression inhibited their behaviour. Despite the repressive climate, however, doctors continued to express concern for their patients' needs in the specialist press, advocated legal changes and in many cases carried out abortions for medical reasons. This detailed account of the nexus of political decision-making, expertise, mass media and medical practice has implications, then, not just for our understanding of reproductive health, but also for our interpretation of the late Stalinist public sphere. Although this public sphere remained tightly circumscribed, discussion of issues of public concern was possible even under Stalinist repression. This finding thus blurs the boundary between late Stalinism and the Thaw: the explosion of public debate after 1953 was merely the outward expression of ideas that had circulated in professional contexts before Stalin's death.

<sup>3</sup> Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead: The Politics of Reproduction in the Postwar Soviet Union* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2021) 117.

Nakachi's detailed study offers important insights into the centrality of reproductive politics to the evolution of post-war society. Situating the Soviet Union within a broader European context, while attuned to the specificities of the Soviet trajectory, Nakachi shows how pro-natalist policies continued to blight women even after the fall of the Soviet Union. One fascinating thread, hinted at in Nakachi's book and explored in more detail in recent scholarship, is the role of ethnicity in reproductive politics.<sup>4</sup> Women from the Soviet south tended to have larger families than Slavs, which leaders, applying racist assumptions, regarded as a threat to Soviet national identity and a potential economic problem.<sup>5</sup> Nakachi's book provides an important framework for thinking about the complexities of Soviet reproductive politics; future researchers may look to its republics to understand its uneven effects.

Nakachi's monograph largely focuses on the relationship between policy makers and the women it affected, but one can also discern a subplot about postwar masculinity. Men are conspicuous by their absence, leaving negative traces in the form of women's appeals for recognition of paternity, requests for alimony and sad stories of women left holding the baby after being tricked into sex. Such unscrupulous behaviour did not go unnoticed. After Stalin's death, journalists, artists and policy makers aired their views on the misdeeds of Soviet men. Only a decade after the triumph over Nazism (in a war which subsequently became the apex of Soviet masculinity) would the troubled fate of Soviet men become an issue of public concern.

Marko Dumančić's *Men Out of Focus* examines this 'masculinity crisis' as it played out on Soviet cinema screens from Stalin's death until the crushing event of the Prague Spring. As his monograph shows, the fate of the Soviet man, his moral outlook, his relationship to women and children, and his place within the Soviet project were dramas played out on the cinema screen as directors and screenwriters rectified decades of Stalinist silence. By the 1960s, Dumančić argues, the Soviet man was akin to the 'superfluous man' of the mid-nineteenth century – a figure whose social role now seemed unclear or even redundant. Across six thematic chapters, ranging from discussions of fatherhood and the 'fathers and sons' crisis to the eclipse of the Stalinist positive hero, Dumančić combines close textual analysis with corroborating material, including cartoons in the satirical journal, *Krokodil*, and debates within the Union of Cinematographers. The result is a nuanced and perceptive monograph which offers readers an insight into the gender norms that allowed sexual inequality to thrive.

The resonances with Nakachi's work are clearest in a chapter on Soviet fatherhood. The stories of woe detailed in *Raising the Dead* became a parade of feckless men who pressured women into abortions (sometimes using public shaming to get their way), refused to acknowledge paternity, or abandoned their families. At the same time, filmmakers attempted to remedy the destabilising effects of the 1944 Family Law by reasserting the father's role within the nuclear family. Fatherhood was revealed to be a social duty, a means of repaying one's debt to the Soviet state, a path to personal fulfilment and a route into adulthood. This reaffirmation of the nuclear family came with Soviet characteristics. Because the 1944 Family Law had caused an epidemic of single parenthood, films of the 1950s and 1960s encouraged men to take care of children they had not fathered. Soviet cinema seemed to endorse a different pattern of social reproduction to those predominant in other countries: one which required neither marriage nor blood, but only a sense of social duty and the presence of affective bonds between parent and child.

Reality lagged behind the wish, however. Soviet men – abetted by the state's policies – appeared on screen in a state of perpetual adolescence. This was a crisis with multiple causes. Young people too young to prove their mettle in war struggled to find a role; the alienating effects of modernisation seemed to leave no space for heroism; and the dethroning of the country's symbolic father in Khrushchev's denunciatory Secret Speech left a crisis of paternal authority. Marlen Khutsiev's *Lenin's Gate* (1965) is perhaps the most famous example. In a dream sequence (which so enraged

<sup>4</sup> Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead*, 182–183, 209–210; Jessica Lovett, "The Fate of the Nation": Population Politics in a Changing Soviet Union (1964–1991)', *Nationalities Papers*, online first (10 June 2022).

<sup>5</sup> Lovett, 'Fate of the Nation'.

Khrushchev that he had the film banned), one of the main characters is visited by the ghost of his father, who died in the Second World War. The twenty-three-year-old, trying to find his way in life, asks his father for advice only to be met with the response: 'I am twenty-one. How am I supposed to help you?' (p. 92)

Filmmakers hit upon a not-so-novel reason for this masculinity crisis: women were to blame. Dumančić identifies a pervasive misogyny in post-Stalinist Soviet cinema, with women depicted as materialistic and manipulative, superficial and over-sexualised. In an era where the asceticism of the Stalinist hero had given way to the 'cultured consumption' of the Khrushchev era, women became a convenient scapegoat for the ills of Soviet modernisation. Forced to accede to women's every demand, men may have been comfortable and fashionable in their well-furnished new apartments, but Soviet filmmakers depicted their existence as emasculated and spiritually empty – 'a barren wasteland of a life', as one character called it (p. 184). Women's existence, Dumančić suggests, was only justified when it involved sacrifice: they were expected to give everything for their families and to expect nothing in return. Such 'domesticated, desexualized, idealized' (p. 188) heroines were required to be the foil to their male counterparts: always the helper and never the hero. In this respect, cinema provided respectable cover for policies and attitudes that blighted the lives of Soviet mothers throughout the country's existence: sacrifice made women virtuous, but it did little to alleviate the burdens of childcare, housework and waged labour upon which Soviet economic growth depended.

*Men Out of Focus* offers a perceptive analysis of Soviet cinematic texts in the 1950s and 1960s – one which shows how discussing masculinity became a way of expressing anxiety over the direction of the Soviet project. On occasion, the book would have benefited from a closer engagement with existing scholarship and a clearer definition of key terms – strikingly, the book even avoids defining 'masculinity'. Moreover, by limiting meaning to a film's plotline rather than subtler, extra-narrative sources of meaning, the author may have inadvertently omitted examples that challenge his overall thesis. A focus on masculine embodiment, for instance, would have thrown up more carefree models of masculinity such as Kolia, the cocky, carefree protagonist of Georgii Danelia's *I Walk Around Moscow* (1964) or the androgynous Ichthyander, the half-man, half-fish of the 1962 blockbuster *Amphibian Man* (1962).<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, the monograph offers an astute reading of Thaw cultural texts that shows how the frantic discussions of gender in the 1970s and 1980s were, in fact, continuations of a broader malaise that had become apparent by the 'long 1960s'. While Dumančić makes admirable attempts to compare the Soviet superfluous men with their counterparts in Europe and the United States, the book shows that the masculinity crisis had particularly Soviet characteristics: the ideologically-saturated environment of the postwar period loaded men with responsibilities they could not hope to meet. And although the regime may have wanted to build a new Soviet reproductive machine, the behaviour of men – feckless, ideologically anchorless, sometimes violent – made that system malfunction. The effects can be seen in the two works discussed in the second half of this review article, both of which discuss the Soviet Union's final decades. Juliane Fürst's oral history of the hippie movement shows that men challenged traditional forms of masculine self-presentation, but remained trapped within a distinctly patriarchal form of masculinity. Adherents of 'free love' reimagined sex as a source of pleasure and self-discovery rather than a means of procreation, but hippie men still collected women as trophies, frowned on homosexuality and were reluctant to assume parental responsibility. Likewise, Alexei Golubev's study of late Soviet materiality hints at a continuing masculinity crisis, in which physical violence was a way of asserting normative gender roles and working-class identities against challenges by subcultural groups.

If postwar Soviet society displayed shape-shifting, negentropic tendencies, these books remind historians to ask *who* was adapting and *how*. Although postwar society favoured men by absolving them

<sup>6</sup> On new forms of spatiality and embodiment, see Lida Oukaderova, *The Cinema of the Soviet Thaw: Space, Materiality, Movement* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017); Oksana Bulgakowa, 'Cine-Weathers: Soviet Thaw Cinema in the International Context', in Denis Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd, eds., *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture During the 1950s and 1960s* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013), 436–81.

of household labour, the postwar shift from revolutionary radicalism in the public sphere to contentment in the private sphere placed masculinity in crisis. Soviet cinema suggests that men adapted to change by refusing to adapt, rejecting paternity and indulging in behaviours that endangered the party's reproductive policies. As Nakachi shows, it was women who bore the burdens of adaptation. Her final chapter, which takes the story up to the Soviet collapse, adopts a comparative approach to welfare policy which suggests that, despite the Soviet regime's progressive messages, it failed to make the 'de-familializing' steps typical of Northern European welfare states, which provided childcare facilities, contraception and labour-saving devices.<sup>7</sup> Most countries' welfare policies looked bad compared to Scandinavia, however, and it would have been interesting to hear Nakachi's reflections on recent work on women's activism under state socialism, which has suggested that socialist regimes did a better job than capitalist states in improving women's lives.<sup>8</sup> *Replacing the Dead* suggests that the Soviet Union was an outlier even within the communist bloc: it promoted equality in the workplace, but failed to create welfare structures to alleviate the twin burdens of workplace and household labour. Was it 'Soviet society' that displayed negentropic tendencies, then, or Soviet women who plugged the gaps and resolved the contradictions of the party's ill-considered policies?

### Late Socialism from the Margins

Late Soviet society, the subject of the last two works examined in this review article, displayed a fragile equilibrium. In the absence of major political upheavals, life had become more predictable, but this period of stability coincided with a wholesale disinvestment of energies from the public to the private. Historians are understandably reluctant to narrate their histories from the perspective of the Soviet collapse, but perhaps the presence of these two narrative possibilities – creativity from below in a period of stability, or social heterogeneity as a harbinger of collapse – can serve as a useful heuristic. Rather than trying to choose between one or the other, we might try to see the seeds of both regeneration and destruction, negentropy and entropy, in the Soviet Union's final decades.

It is possible to read *Flowers Through Concrete*, Juliane Fürst's superb oral history of the Soviet hippie movement, through both lenses: a story of how late Soviet society provided spaces for new kinds of community, or of a challenge to the system which portended its collapse. However, the book immediately suggests that this binary is a false choice, and that creativity and collapse were intimately intertwined. The monograph shows how the movement, which emerged at the end of the 1960s, became a 'sistema' stretching across the Baltic States, Ukraine and Russia. Fürst offers both a narrative history of the movement and a thematic analysis, taking in hippie ideology, the material economies of hippie clothing and drug culture, the meanings of madness and the role of women within the movement. Despite Soviet hippiedom's indebtedness to its US cousins, Fürst shows how the movement was indelibly marked by the social and political conditions of the country in which it existed. While that finding may not seem so remarkable, what makes the book so valuable is Fürst's astute and subtle reading of this collision of counter-cultural movement with late Soviet conditions. Almost every page contains an 'a-ha' moment, where readers relearn what they thought they knew about late socialism. Forget the dull question about hippies' 'representativeness': by probing the margins, Fürst's book prompts historians to reconsider what 'normality' really meant.

Almost inevitably, Fürst enters into dialogue with the anthropologist Alexei Yurchak, whose work *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (2006) remains a touchstone for the field.<sup>9</sup> Fürst rewrites Yurchak's account in subtle ways. Most obviously, she casts doubt on the universality of Yurchak's account by focusing on a group whose relationship to the Soviet system was very different

<sup>7</sup> Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead*, 211–15.

<sup>8</sup> Kristen R. Ghodsee, *Why Women Have Better Sex under Socialism: And Other Arguments for Economic Independence* (New York, NY: Nation Books, 2018); Zhivka Valiavicharska, *Restless History: Political Imaginaries and Their Discontents in Post-Stalinist Bulgaria* (Toronto: McGill-Queens University Press, 2021), 57–88.

<sup>9</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

from that of Yurchak's young Leningraders. In doing so, the book encourages historians to reconsider late socialism from the margins. Second, she encourages historians to rethink Soviet–foreign interactions. For Yurchak, the outside world constituted an ‘imaginary west’ that bore only a passing resemblance to the world beyond Soviet borders.<sup>10</sup> Fürst's account, in contrast, focuses on the complexity of cultural transfer, emphasising the mechanisms through which Soviet hippies were able to adapt a US phenomenon to local conditions. Most importantly, Fürst rejects what she considers an overly ‘static’ (p. 25) account of late socialism in Yurchak in favour of an account that attends to the effects of daily, reciprocal interaction between hippies, system and society. In so doing, she re-introduces a missing temporal dimension into models of late socialist society – one that sees social change not just as a punctual event-led process, but also as a gradual, iterative process characterised by friction and conflict.

Fürst's book is at its best in exploring these complex entanglements between hippies and the Soviet system. In most respects, the hippie response to Soviet norms was one of rejection. Hippies opted out of the bureaucratic and professional jobs to which many of their generation aspired, eking out an existence on the fringes of Soviet life. This dismissal of the Soviet value structure and its system of rewards diminished the authorities' hold over them: if hippies rejected careerism, a black mark in a KGB file made little difference. Fürst details some of the ways that hippies could escape from the Soviet world, if only temporarily. Their search for *kaif*, a transcendental state of getting high and feeling *alive*, constituted a refusal of the communist tomorrow in favour of pleasure today: alcohol, drugs, music, sex, meditation and religion were all part of a search for an elsewhere (mental, emotional, physical) beyond Soviet concrete. That search, and the rejection of work and party authority that it implied, constituted an intolerable threat to Soviet norms – one to which the authorities responded harshly. It was impossible to fully ‘drop out’ of Soviet life in the face of this harassment: arrests, beatings, expulsions, incarceration and forced medical treatment were common experiences, resulting in ruined lives, impaired mental health and, in extreme cases, suicide. Nevertheless, Fürst shows that even forced incarceration could serve as a practice shaping hippie selves and the wider movement: Soviet institutions moulded the hippie movement in even its most negative incarnations.

While Fürst does not shy away from the violence and coerciveness of the Soviet state, she also shows how its structures sustained the hippie *sistema*: low-paid jobs as boiler-room attendants or caretakers were guaranteed by the workers' state; canteens and low-cost housing made daily survival possible; cheap alcohol – including the hippies' favourite *portvein* – offered a ticket to paradise subsidised by the regime. And if hippies were shaped by the Soviet system, the opposite was also true: interactions with hippies changed the Soviet system. To compete with this challenge from below, Fürst argues that the regime tried to detach the aesthetics of hippiedom from its ideological tenets: long hair, rock music and jeans (whether imported or state-manufactured) had become mainstream by the 1970s as the regime tried to satisfy young people's new desires without addressing the hippies' ideological challenge.

One of the great strengths of *Flowers Through Concrete* is its astute untangling of these complex interactions between hippies and authorities. The book is valuable not just for mapping out an alternative value system that co-existed in ‘symbiosis’ (p. 35) with Soviet state and society, but for prompting historians to rethink what they thought they knew about late Soviet society as a whole. Although the book does not try to advance a general theory in the same way as Yurchak's, this rich account will nevertheless influence scholars of late socialism for many years to come. Not only does it provide an alternative chronology of late socialism that reinscribes the margins into the mainstream, but it also touches on key questions about the ideas, emotions, bodies and selves that late socialism made possible, even as authorities sought to repress alternative ways of living. It would be remiss not to mention the scale of Fürst's project, which has been a globe-trotting endeavour taking in more than 120 interviews and a dozen ‘official’ archives, plus a previously unknown corpus of texts from personal archives. This is an astonishing feat of research. Finally, this historian could not help but be moved by Fürst's

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 158–206.

self-reflexive account of the historian's craft, the relationship between author and subject, and the ways that our historical subjects have the capacity to inspire and change us.

Given that late Soviet society was exhibiting increasing instability by the 1970s, what held it together? Alexey Golubev's *The Things of Life*, an original and compelling exploration of materiality in late Soviet Russia, offers a possible answer. Arguing that material objects and shared spaces helped make late Soviet society and late Soviet selves, Golubev's account shows how Soviet experts sought to transform society through objects, and how social actors resisted and remodelled those grand modernist plans for transformation. For experts, objects held great potential: Soviet documents were 'nearly animist' in their presumption that material objects were not just tools, but 'coparticipants . . . in socio economic processes' (p. 3). In the most developed form of this materialist discourse, elites fantasised about new forms of social life emerging in dialogue with objects: by perfecting humans' relationship with technology, Soviet society would progress to the communist future. The Soviet public partly shared those assumptions: people did not simply consume objects, Golubev suggests, but invested them with agency; these human-object relationships helped constitute the Soviet self. And yet their material investments frequently defied the best-laid plans of experts, scuppering elite dreams of a harmonious relationship between humans and things, but illustrating the ingenuity of individuals in bending matter to their will.

Across six chapters, Golubev explores a wide range of objects and spaces, moving between ideology and practice as he uncovers their imputed meanings and the ways they were used. Do-it-yourself magazines, model aeroplanes, apartment stairwells, basement gyms and television sets may seem like an unrelated assemblage, but Golubev's account brings them together convincingly, focusing throughout on the widespread belief – both elite and popular – in the liberatory power of technology and machines, the role of popular media in disseminating those ideals, and – above all – the tension between elite plans and social practices. To trace those threads, Golubev draws on an eclectic range of texts, ranging from popular magazines to scale models, architectural plans to television broadcasts, but these are brilliantly harnessed to illustrate the hopes and dreams that the intelligentsia and the public invested in objects.

Golubev's approach merits comparison with Fürst's exploration of hippie materiality in *Flowers Through Concrete*. Drawing on 'thing theory', which explores interactions between humans and objects, Fürst argues that hippies aimed at 'dissolving the border between the human and his things' (p. 290) and argues that objects – especially clothes – helped make the hippie self. One suspects that Golubev would agree with this finding, and with Fürst's exploration of elite and popular discourses around objects. But while both authors explore the 'social life of things', Fürst's account – as befits her main source of oral history – is more anthropological in its focus on the processes of work that created objects and the circuits of exchange through which those objects travelled. A section on jeans shows how both Soviet manufacturers and underground speculators attempted to fill the gap between desire and availability in an economy of shortage. Hippies existed both as consumers, eager to acquire an obligatory item of hippie attire, and as entrepreneurs, using their know-how and connections to profit from their fashion sense. But clothing was not just a means of making money: it was also a platform for communicating ideas. One hippie, Vladimir Teplishev, remade everyday clothing as a way of reversing their meanings: in turning a shirt from a psychiatric hospital into a colourful blouse while leaving the shirt's origins visible, he hoped to communicate his hope for a similar transition of Soviet society into something more beautiful (p. 316). Fürst is also attentive to the less obvious implications of the hippies' relationship to objects. While hippies rejected Soviet work, figures like Sveta Markova, entrepreneur, creative visionary and couturier to Moscow's hippie movement, displayed pride in her craft and sought to manufacture well-fitting, aesthetically-pleasing items that implied a rejection of Soviet mass-produced items. In this sense, Fürst argues, hippies like Markova clung to the decidedly Marxist belief that forms of production could shape a better world.

Both authors show a keen appreciation of what Fürst calls the 'material symbiosis' (p. 291) between subcultural milieux and wider Soviet society, and are particularly attentive to the object as *poiesis*: the product of creative labour that brings something new into the world. This concern with creativity is

particularly sharply observed in Golubev's chapter on the cultural meanings of iron, which takes us to the basement of apartment buildings and the little-explored phenomenon of bodybuilding. Elites regarded the pastime as narcissistic, individualistic and detrimental to 'health and harmonious bodily development' (p. 124) and discouraged officials from allocating resources to the sport. Bodybuilders went underground, turning non-spaces in the basements of apartment blocks into gyms, using resources acquired through the informal economy to create their own equipment. Yet Golubev's chapter is not an unproblematic celebration of ingenuity from below. While the Soviet elite distanced themselves from bodybuilders, denouncing underground gyms as unhygienic and dangerous to health, bodybuilders mirrored the regime's disdain for alternative value systems by seeking to 'cleanse' social space of unwanted 'dirt' – which, in practice, meant beating up members of subcultures such as hippies. The decades-old masculinity crisis was to be resolved by refashioning the body to assert physical domination over those in the margins.

As this brief synopsis suggests, Golubev is attentive to hierarchies of class, culture and gender during late socialism. Class relations were produced, reified and reflected by different assemblages of bodies and objects in space, exemplified by elite attempts to impose their preferred configurations on the working class. One of the book's most compelling chapters shows how the stairwells of apartments allowed working-class youth to socialise in the absence of community spaces, but repelled middle-class users, who disliked dirt and graffiti, and feared becoming targets of male violence. Golubev's attentiveness to the nexus of class and gender is welcome, not only because class dynamics are often absent from discussions of late socialism, but also because he challenges a tendency to idealise the intelligentsia as the moral heart of late socialism. Instead, intellectuals (in the form of journalists and experts) are depicted as part of the socialist elite, their words and ideas promoting a vision of the future that ignored the experiences and desires of the working class.

*The Things of Life* is the latest in a series of works to use objects to reconsider Soviet ideology and its social structures.<sup>11</sup> Such an approach is significant not just for Soviet historians, and Golubev is aware that his account has consequences for historians' understanding of the 'global experience of modernity and modernization' (p. 6). In this regard, one wishes that Golubev had framed his findings with that global context in mind, rather than seeing them as specific to Soviet Russia. His account leaves the reader asking how the Soviet faith in technology differed from modernist schemes for social transformation beyond the USSR, whether gaps between elites and publics were specific to the Soviet context, and how the Cold War – hardly mentioned in the book – might have shaped these schemes in an era of transnational technopolitics.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, as an account of late Soviet social dynamics, Golubev's illuminating and ingenious account offers a new direction for historians of the late Soviet Union (and of late socialism more broadly): one which suggests that historians can go beyond examinations of consumption to consider the uses to which material objects were put, and the hopes, dreams and creative labour invested in them.

In the introduction to her monograph, Fürst laments a lack of historiographical frameworks for understanding late socialism (p. 26). The books discussed in this review article make plain some of the difficulties of formulating one: the more historians push back against the binaries that once characterised scholarship, the more paradoxical late Soviet society seems to become. Any framework needs to capture the simultaneous disengagement from the state at the same time as its structures and values continue to shape new social forms. The entropy/negentropy binary, a useful framework for the early postwar years, becomes less useful by the 1970s and 1980s: it can account for the remarkable durability of Soviet society, its capacity for regeneration, but misses the fact that those reworkings sapped the system's vital energy. By the 1980s, everything may have looked eternal but, as Yurchak argued,

<sup>11</sup> For example, Brandon Schechter, *The Stuff of Soldiers: A History of the Red Army in World War II Through Objects* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2019); Yulia Karpova, *Comradely Objects: Design and Material Culture in Soviet Russia, 1960s–1980s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2021).

<sup>12</sup> For example, Gabrielle Hecht, ed., *Entangled Geographies: Empire and Technopolitics in the Global Cold War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011).



endless ‘deterritorialization’ and ‘reterritorialization’ eroded the foundations to such an extent that it only took Gorbachev’s reforms to reveal their precariousness.<sup>13</sup>

Metaphors drawn from science, which conjure up images of inexorable natural processes, can blind us to the purposeful human activity that drives social change. One of the key virtues of these books is to highlight the labour that produced Soviet society’s deceptive stability. Postwar reconstruction would have been impossible without the toil of Soviet women as mothers, caregivers and workers – a role promoted by hard-line policies that took control over women’s bodies and by public messages asserted the proper roles of women and men. Amid such repressive policies, however, the Soviet state created spaces and provided welfare that allowed even those who rejected work outright to survive. These books foreground the continued creativity and ingenuity of Soviet society, from hippies’ self-manufactured clothing to exercise equipment fashioned from scrap metal. It is the great strength of these monographs that they allow historians to rethink post-war chronologies, to reconsider the practices and ideas that shaped society, and to understand the everyday work involved in maintaining – and, in the end, not maintaining – late Soviet society.

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<sup>13</sup> Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 291–6.