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Article Cluster Introduction: Really Existing Soviet Subjects

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‘Real Socialism,’ or ‘Really Existing Socialism,’ became the butt of numerous jokes in the 1970s commenting on the failures of the socialist state and assuming a critical distance on the part of its subjects towards communism and its goals.¹ As a critical resource for the everyday wo/man, these jokes challenged the images proliferating through the many channels of state propaganda. While the Soviet state acknowledged and addressed some of this criticism in numerous popular comedic films or satirical journals such as *Krokodil*, contemporary Western observers saw these responses as mere pressure valves that did not alter a general assessment: portrayals of the Soviet Union as a workers’ paradise were nothing but Potemkin villages, erected to cover up the mounting problems of the command economy and to misrepresent an evolving society that was marked by social immobility, hierarchy and privilege. Jokes of ‘Radio Yerevan’ and anecdotes exposing the shortcomings of ‘Really Existing Socialism’, along with emerging Human Rights activism and alternative subcultures, were seen as indicative of a crumbling belief in the socialist project. They served as proof of a public-private split; a paradigm in which Soviet subjects would participate in public rituals merely for show and speak their true minds only at the kitchen table.

¹ Misha Mel’nichenko, *Sovetskii anekdot. Ukazatel’ siuzhetov* (Moskva: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2014).

A similar vision of Soviet subjects engaging in 'double-speak' was also projected onto Stalinist society. Yet the validity of this characterization came under scrutiny in the mid-1990s when Stephen Kotkin, Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin initiated a debate about the extent to which Stalinist visions of the New Wo/Man not only made Soviet citizens adapt their ways of speaking, but also had an impact on their ways of thinking.² Anna Krylova challenged scholars in the field to desist from projecting Western notions of individuals as liberal subjects unfettered by socialization onto Soviet subjects, whose particularities would repeatedly get lost in the process.³ Critical examination of subjectivity has now become an established subgenre within the study of Stalinism: empirical studies focusing on the decades before 1953 have covered a range of groups including party officials and other members of the Soviet elite,⁴ as well as different generations and minorities,⁵ with insights from diverse vantage points such as the old, the young, the privileged and the victimized.⁶ They allow for a reading of Soviet subjectification in the 1930s and 1940s as an ambivalent, productive and enduring, if not absolute process that was thoroughly shaped by party teachings, but also strongly affected by popular interpretations.

If Stalinist subjectivities were complex and diversified, what about those evolving after Stalin's death in 1953? Aside from lingering effects of the Stalin

² Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995); Jochen Hellbeck and Igal Halfin, "Rethinking the Stalinist Subject: Stephen Kotkin's 'Magnetic Mountain' and the State of Soviet Historical Studies," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 44, no. 3 (1996), 456–463, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41052991>.

³ Anna Krylova, "The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 1, no. 1 (2001), 119–146, <https://doi.org/10.1353/kri.2008.0092>.

⁴ Jochen Hellbeck, "With Hegel to Salvation: Bukharin's Other Trial," *Representations* 107, no. 1 (2009), 56–90, <https://doi.org/10.1525/rep.2009.107.1.56>; Igal Halfin, *Terror in My Soul: Communist Autobiographies on Trial* (Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2003); Susanne Schattenberg, *Stalins Ingenieure: Lebenswelten zwischen Technik und Terror* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2002); Sandra Dahlke, *Individuum und Herrschaft im Stalinismus: Emel'jan Jaroslavskij (1978–1943)* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2010).

⁵ Anna Krylova, "Identity, Agency, and the First Soviet Generation," in *Generations in 20th Century Europe*, ed. Stephen Lovell (Basingstoke; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 101–121; Ali F. Igmen, *Speaking Soviet With an Accent: Culture and Power in Kyrgyzstan* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2012); Maria A. Blackwood, "Fatima Gabitova: Repression, Subjectivity and Historical Memory in Soviet Kazakhstan," *Central Asian Survey* 36, no. 1 (2017), 113–130.

⁶ Golfo Alexopoulos, *Stalin's Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens, and the Soviet State, 1926–1936* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003); Nanci Alder, *Keeping Faith with the Party: Communist Believers Return from the Gulag* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012); Fyodor Mochulsky, *Gulag Boss: A Soviet Memoir*, ed. Deborah Kaple, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Michael Katznelson, "Remembering the Soviet State: Kulak Children and Dekulakization," *Europe-Asia Studies* 59, no. 7 (2007), 1163–1177, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130701607136>.

period, did a distinct 'post-Stalinist' Soviet subjectivity emerge, and if so, what did it entail? Was there a new New Wo/Man of 'Really Existing Socialism'? How did she or he speak, look, act and feel? Although scholars mostly agree that there was a decisive shift either after Stalin's death or after the Second World War⁷ (or somewhere in between the years 1945–1953) such a specific reference point has been more evasive for the study of Soviet subjectivities during the tenures of Khrushchev, Brezhnev and Gorbachev. There is no similarly eponymous attribute to mark subjectivities in these periods as distinctively as does the characterization 'Stalinist'. While the general attribute 'Soviet' might never achieve the emblematic meaning of its more pointed counterpart, the fact that it is less tethered to political leadership (without, however, negating the impact of specific leaders) might make it the more useful term. Put to work in relation to the later decades of state socialism, its seeming lack of specificity opens up the search parameters to the more diffuse, yet still specific ensemble of political, social and cultural elements that came to define 'Really Existing Socialism'.

Recent years have already seen advances in this direction, with studies focused on the ideal of the individual as it was (re-)defined and diversified by Soviet elites. Polly Jones, Anatoly Pinsky and Simon Huxtable have elaborated how writers and journalists envisioned a more individualized, emotional and romantic personification of socialist values after 1953, expressed in biographical series printed by central publishing houses with a view to providing young readers with new revolutionary role models.⁸ In a marked departure from Stakhanovite heroes of the Stalin era, a diversification of everyday heroes portrayed in the Soviet press revealed an evolution in the notion of the ideal individual, which journalists tried to root in sociological research. Soviet writers and critics tried to create a new kind of desired subjectivity. During the Thaw, the new Soviet person was someone who "closely examined Soviet life and came to his or her own conclusions."⁹ The Soviet subject became a more open concept

⁷ On late Stalinism see Juliane Fürst, *Stalin's Last Generation: Soviet Post-War Youth and the Emergence of Mature Socialism* (Oxford University Press, 2010); Denis Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd (eds.), *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture During the 1950s and 1960s* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2013).

⁸ Polly Jones, "'Life as big as the ocean': Bolshevik Biography and the Problem of Personality from Late Stalinism to Late Socialism," *The Slavonic and East European Review* 96, no. 1 (2018), 144–173: 146 ff., 167 f., <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5699/slaveasteurorev2.96.1.0144>; Anatoly Pinsky, "The Diaristic Form and Subjectivity under Khrushchev," *Slavic Review* 73, no.4 (2014), 805–827, <https://doi.org/10.5612/slavicreview.73.4.805>; Simon Huxtable, "In search of the Soviet reader: The Kosygin reforms, sociology, and the changing concepts of Soviet society, 1964–1970," *Cahiers du monde russe* 64, no. 3 (2013), 623–642, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24567594>.

⁹ Pinsky, "The Diaristic Form," 813.

and was brought into dialogue not just with party dogma, but with the social realities of 'Really Existing Socialism'.

This did not mean that the ideal Soviet subject lost all normative import. After abandoning terror as a governing tool, the party (that is, the state apparatus) became more stable and expansive, making the creation of a normative subject more important to the party leadership.¹⁰ Intellectual elites were key in defining a revised ideal of a self-regulated Soviet subject. Oleg Kharkhordin's claim that the control of the individual became internalized and, thus, made the Soviet disciplinary grid "faultless and ubiquitous",¹¹ has become difficult to sustain in light of more recent research. The reigning symbolic order was 'ubiquitous' and inescapable, but while individuals reproduced it, they could also develop a critical, not quite 'faultless' subject position vis-à-vis the party.¹² Yet if subject positions could become less than 'faultless' and critical of Soviet realities, what and who defined the norms and rules that shaped Soviet subjectivities in the era of 'Really Existing Socialism'?

One of the most important interventions in recent years has come from Anna Krylova who noticed a lack of interest in individualizing discourses in the post-1953 Soviet Union.¹³ Krylova pointed to the omnipresent conception of *one* unitary Bolshevik modernity in the historiography. Contrary to Kotkin and other writers of the so-called modernity school, Krylova found that there were at least two Soviet Unions: one pre-war and another post-war. As the articles in this special issue imply, building on Krylova's observation, there were even more than just two. Krylova explicitly linked her critique of a singular Bolshevik modernity to questions of 'Soviet subjectivities': while in the first half of the Soviet Union's existence there were "under-articulated categories of identity such as individuality and the personal", the post-Stalin years gave rise to a new discourse of connecting "individual predispositions and goals with the social good".¹⁴ An immense variation of concepts and notions "of the

¹⁰ Anatoly Pinsky (ed.), *Posle Stalina: Pozdnesovetskaia sub'ektivnost', 1953–1985* (Saint Petersburg: Izdatel'stvo Evropeiskogo Universiteta v Sankt Peterburge, 2018); see also idem., "Subjectivity after Stalin: Guest Editor's Introduction," *Russian Studies in History* 58, no. 2–3 (2019), 79–88: 80, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611983.2019.1727714>.

¹¹ Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study in Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 287.

¹² Alexey Golubev, "The Western Observer and the Western Gaze in the Affective Management of Soviet Subjectivity," *Russian Studies in History* 58, no. 2–3 (2019), 198–230: 220f., <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611983.2019.1689075>.

¹³ Anna Krylova, "Soviet Modernity: Stephen Kotkin and the Bolshevik Predicament," *Contemporary European History* 23, no. 2 (2014): 167–192, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777314000083>.

¹⁴ Krylova, "Soviet Modernity," 171.

'individual' (individual'nost', individuum, individual'nyi), of the 'person/personal' (lichnost', lichnyi), of the 'intimate' (intimnyi)" proliferated, Krylova observed, along with an "apparent public preoccupation with the individual".¹⁵ Krylova's findings correlate with those of Alexander Bikbov, who has noted a decisive shift from the 1920s to the 1970s in the uses of the 'collective', the 'personal' and related concepts, with a dramatic increase in the appearance of the word *lichnost'* (person, personality) in book titles since the 1960s, outstripping the word 'state' in 1970s and 1980s. The strict class approach that had previously dominated was effectively displaced by the concept of a 'well-rounded personality', first in educational literature, then in political speeches. Precisely what a well-rounded personality and its needs constituted in a modern Soviet society could differ considerably between different disciplines, but the fact that they were discussed is nevertheless indicative of an active engagement by elites with a changed populace.¹⁶ In other words, according to Krylova and Bikbov, there were fundamental shifts in the relationship between individual and society in the years after 1953. These shifts, however, are not to be confused with a gradual de-Sovietization or alignment with Western concepts of the liberal subject, nor did they constitute a mere elite project. The re-definition of the subject as it was negotiated not only by the party or state sponsored elites, but also by different groups constituting a multi-ethnic and socially increasingly urbanized and stratified society, is yet to receive broad scholarly attention.

In 2016 and 2017, these fundamental shifts in the formation of late Soviet subjectivities were addressed at two consecutive workshops on "The Many Faces of Late Socialism" organized by Maike Lehmann at the University of Cologne. The papers covering Soviet and Eastern European history asked how a focus on the individual and subjectivity might reveal as much about the ethnic, social and generational plurality and diversity of 'Really Existing Socialism' across the 'Eastern Bloc' as it might help to pinpoint what remained and/or became distinctively 'socialist' (or 'Soviet' in the Soviet case) after 1953.

Three of the papers presented at the Cologne workshops have been collected for this special issue. All three authors chose different approaches and time frames, yet their analyses of largely non-elite groups and individuals intersect, as they each touch upon traditional markers that were central to earlier ideals of the Soviet New Wo/Man: social activism, work and letter-writing

¹⁵ Krylova, "Soviet Modernity", 184.

¹⁶ Alexander Bikbov, "Late Socialist Personhood as an Unintended Result of Governmental Reforms," unpublished manuscript. See also his *Grammatika poriadka: istoricheskaia sotsiologiya poniatii, kotorye meniaiut nashu real'nost'* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Vysshei shkoly ekonomiki, 2014).

(to the state) as a form of participation in the Soviet project. In their co-authored article Alissa Klots and Maria Romashova turn our attention to emotions as a useful category of historical analysis, particularly when it comes to understanding late-socialist individualistic discourses. They argue that managing the emotional sphere became decisive in the Khrushchev era. To some degree, Klots and Romashova's study de-centers established approaches to Soviet subjectivity by looking at what it meant not simply to 'speak Bolshevik' or have 'Revolution on [one's] mind',¹⁷ but to 'feel Soviet'. They do so for a highly understudied group of Soviet people: the elderly. Through a close reading of Soviet publications about old age and personal writings (speeches, letters, poetry), the authors examine the extent to which personal happiness was promoted in official discourse during the 1950s and 1960s. The spheres in which personal happiness could be accomplished encompassed not only private and public but also the 'in-between' spaces (in marriage, at work, or with past or present colleagues). The bridging of private and public spheres seems to have been particularly pressing for pensioners who struggled with being 'unproductive' when confined to the home. Personal happiness was located at the junction of the individual and the social, and could not be relegated to one or the other.

Alexandra Oberländer analyzes the Soviet visual regime and its many 'working faces'. In contrast to the capitalist West, workers were omnipresent in Soviet imagery. Workers prided themselves if their portraits made it into the media or the factory newspaper. However, there was a decisive shift in these portrayals from the Stalinist to later decades. The 1960s saw mounting complaints about heroic, yet monotonous depictions of workers. This led both professional and lay photographers to re-visit photographic techniques for capturing the individuality of their subjects – the ultimate goal of portraiture. This was thought to be best done while a subject was at work, a paradigm of socialist realism that remained to some degree a rule throughout the 1960s and 1970s, yet workers were increasingly depicted beyond the narrow confines of the work place. Oberländer provides a snapshot of how the photographic language of portraiture grew richer, more diverse and more pluralistic, yet by no means less work-oriented: work remained a defining frame for the New Wo/Man.

Courtney Doucette continues the discussion about diversity and specificity that shaped 'Really Existing Socialism' by analyzing the many meanings of *glasnost* (openness) for letter writers. Using a selection of 14 letters from across the Soviet Union that found their way into a hand-out for a Politburo meeting in 1988, Doucette demonstrates the intricacies of Soviet subjectivities

¹⁷ Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, chp. 5; Jochen Hellbeck, *Revolutions on My Mind: Writing a Diary Under Stalin* (Cambridge/Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2006).

by illustrating the scope of divergent takes on *glasnost*'. Despite the critical tone in the letters, they were not directed against the Soviet regime as such, but represented an active engagement with it. Contrary to an often teleological reading of the final years of the Soviet Union, Doucette lays out the extent to which *glasnost*' opened up an arena for differing perspectives, uttered by socialist – that is, decidedly not liberal – subjects, by showing how citizens conceptualized their active role in the state. Here, too, individuals cannot easily be disentangled from either their social context or the legacies of past decades. The past mattered, not only as it became subject to discussion during the reform years, but also as it shaped the forms that this discussion took.

Taken together, these three articles are a reminder that there were forms and channels of non-state communication other than jokes. In the era of 'Really Existing Socialism', individuals carved out spaces for themselves without necessarily coming into conflict with the regime. As citizens and 'really existing Soviet subjects', they continued to engage with the regime, its tenets and its policies, by opening conversations with Soviet authorities in an era usually associated with disengagement and stagnation. Yet they also actively sought answers to the question of how a New Soviet Wo/Man – that is, an individual in possession of a well-rounded personality – should speak, look, act and feel.

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