

A Social History of Soviet Trade: Trade Policy, Retail Practices, and Consumption, 1917–1953. By Julie Hessler. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004. xvi + 366 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$39.50. ISBN: 0-691-11492-7.

Reviewed by Thomas C. Owen

When Vladimir Lenin led the Bolshevik Party to power in 1917, he predicted that citizens of a socialist state would obtain the necessities of everyday life according to the high principles of justice announced by Karl Marx in *The Critique of the Gotha Program* (1875): “to each according to his work” in the aftermath of the revolution, and finally, in the truly communist utopia, “to each according to his needs.” Julie Hessler’s study of Soviet trade demonstrates not only that the hopes of the Bolsheviks turned out to be naive, as many commentators have maintained, but that the functioning of the institutions of trade revealed the political, economic, and moral failings of the entire Soviet system under Lenin and Joseph Stalin.

Hessler’s book supplements the recent work of other social historians of the Soviet Union. Most of all, this book stands as a tribute to the pioneering research of Sheila Fitzpatrick, author of *Everyday Stalinism* (1999) and Hessler’s major professor at the University of Chicago. Unprecedented in its geographic and chronological scope, Hessler’s book constitutes a genuine social history of Soviet trade. In support of her analysis of the interaction of economic policies, patterns of retail trade, and consumption, she cites a huge array of sources, many of them unavailable to researchers before the collapse of the Soviet Union: sixty-five archives in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kursk, Odessa, and Riazan; thirty periodicals; sixteen collections of published documents, ten of which appeared after 1991; a dozen Soviet statistical reports; and eyewitness accounts by Soviet citizens and foreigners. Credit reports provided material for a database of 304 businesses in the 1920s. For information on traders after 1930, Hessler drew information from 210 criminal-court cases. Five statistical and documentary appendices, too extensive to be included in the book, are available online at her Web site at the University of Oregon. Thirteen photographs show the varied social settings of retail commerce, ranging from outdoor bazaars and flea markets to the few fancy stores created in the mid-

1930s, modeled on Macy's in New York. The ten statistical tables hint at the misery of everyday life. For example, workers' annual consumption of eggs remained low (24 per capita in 1919, 94 in 1927, 3.6 in 1933, 6.9 in 1935, and 30.6 in 1938), and food costs accounted for between 43.8 and 59.0 percent of workers' household budgets between 1922 and 1937 (pp. 227, 229). Footnotes at the bottom of the page allow the reader easy access to the scholarly apparatus.

Hessler examines the various informal arrangements and subterfuges used by peasants, workers, soldiers, factory managers, and government officials to survive. These included barter, bribery, hoarding, personal influence (*blat*), resale on the black market of goods pilfered from state shops, and private trade among buyers and sellers in the aisles of the state's own department stores. To maintain productivity and reduce labor turnover, factory managers obtained food to sell to their workers. Because the most affluent institutions provided the best benefits, however, these arrangements did little to diminish social inequality. Episodes of rationing, long lines, and artificially low prices set by the state impelled factories to hire hordes of traveling purchasing agents (*tolkachi*, literally "pushers") to obtain essential supplies by fair means and foul.

The Soviet government never broke the vicious circle of illegality in trade. It employed not only judicial punishments but also arbitrary raids by detachments of Communist Party members and the secret police in vain efforts to destroy private trade. The repression not only of "parasites," "kulaks," and "speculators" but also of cooperatives that served the needs of workers and peasants caused chronic shortages. As a result, citizens resorted to illegal buying and selling to feed and clothe themselves and their families. Contempt for law, already widespread in the tsarist period, became pervasive under Soviet rule. The consequences remain apparent in the low level of legality in the post-Soviet economy. To make this connection clear, Hessler might have cited Stephen Handelman's *Comrade Criminal* (1995), a pioneering study of organized crime from the Stalin era to the early 1990s.

What of Marx's vision of socialist prosperity, egalitarianism, rational planning, and democracy in the workplace? Correctly, in my opinion, Hessler argues that militarism, the key to the Bolsheviks' victory in 1917–21, remained Stalin's favorite recourse in later economic crises. Allocation by decree achieved the regime's short-term

goals, such as forced collectivization of agriculture and rapid industrialization during the First Five-Year Plan (1928–32) and the regimentation of the economy during the emergency caused by World War II (1939–46). However, all three episodes of hypercentralization ended in a mass famine, and the moral essence of socialism evaporated in the process. Even during the war against the Nazis, Hessler notes, “the special cafeterias, restaurants, and commissaries” that catered to high officials of the Communist Party, armed forces, and state bureaucracy “proved highly susceptible to abuse,” as they served “heavily subsidized, multicourse meals.” These privileges, exacerbated by rampant “string-pulling on the part of elite wives,” inevitably “undermined the regime’s public utterances about the wartime community of sacrifice” (p. 301). Her sophisticated analysis, based on a wealth of new qualitative and quantitative data, convincingly supports the eyewitness testimonies of such diverse critics of the Soviet system as Emma Goldman (*My Disillusionment in Russia* [1923]), Bertrand Russell (*Uncertain Paths to Freedom: Russia and China, 1919–1922* [2000]), Jonas Lied (*Prospector in Siberia* [1945]), E. E. Cummings (*Eimi* [1933]), Leon Trotsky (*The Revolution Betrayed* [1937]), and Victor Kravchenko (*I Chose Freedom* [1946]).

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