

Consumption in the Soviet Union during the 1960s and 1970s: A Case Study of Daily Life[†]

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Abstract: This study examines the question whether the unfulfilled consumption demand clearly created dissatisfaction among the people in late Soviet society or not. Based on the interviews which were conducted in autumn of 2017 with the cooperation of Levada Center, this paper demonstrates that people's evaluation of the Soviet Era was not very negative. Firstly, the gradual improvement in most peoples' standard of living contributed to their general lack of focus on their dissatisfaction. Secondly, it is possible that the network and cooperation between relatives and acquaintances might engender an equal consciousness in the belonging group and play a role in reducing the stress of their unfulfilled consumption demand. Furthermore, housing allocation through the workplace and cooperatives organized among them may strengthen the solidarity. In such a case, the viewpoint of people may have become narrow, potentially making them blind to the economic disparity in the real world.

Keywords: Consumer History, Socialist economy, Soviet economy

JEL Classification Numbers: N30, N34, P20, P30, P36

1. Introduction

The collapse of the Soviet Union, which occurred in in the previous quarter of a century, was an unexpected event to many people at the time. The testimony that "I knew the Soviet Union would collapse" was afterward heard among Soviet citizens, but it is generally considered a sort of hindsight. Yurchak (2005) argued that the Soviet "system's collapse had been profoundly unexpected and unimaginable to many Soviet people until it happened, and yet, it quickly appeared perfectly logical and exciting when it began."¹ This argument is consistent with the unpredictability of the Soviet collapse and many people's acceptance of it with equanimity.

On the other hand, judging from the economy, the Soviet system, particularly in its early stages, achieved remarkable growth through its planned economy; however, people's demand for consumption increased in accordance with their income growth, and the Soviet Union was not able to sufficiently satisfy this demand. The main reasons for this is that the planned economy was a system that necessarily create shortages, and, in addition, consumption was generally downplayed in the national strategy framework. Thus, shortages and queues for products were often seen in daily life in the Soviet Union.² The people became dissatisfied with this situation, which eroded the system from the inside. This also

seems to explain why the Soviet Union finally collapsed in 1991, as well as the fact it lasted 70 years. However, this explanation that “dissatisfaction with the system accumulated for many years and eroded the foundations of the system” has not been sufficiently evaluated thus far. Did the unfulfilled consumption demand clearly create dissatisfaction among the people, or did such dissatisfaction precipitate from the bottom of people’s consciousness through an “awakening” after the implementation of perestroika? The argument of Yurchak suggests that these are both possibilities.³ This paper does not aim to answer to this question directly but rather aims to offer some clues to address it by observing people’s attitudes and satisfaction with respect to consumption. Here, based on the interviews, we consider how the unfulfilled demand was experienced in late Soviet society, which had already reached the minimum living standard.

For this purpose, we consider the determinants of people’s satisfaction/dissatisfaction regarding consumption. Of course, income (or the relationship between income and price) is the first element of such satisfaction/dissatisfaction. Although the economic growth rate had gradually slowed, the income of the nation had generally shown an upward trend under the Soviet system. On the other hand, the Soviet economic system was also generally characterized by chronic shortages of producers and consumer goods.⁴ Therefore, with respect to the satisfaction of the Soviet people regarding consumption, there are two possibilities: (1) people’s satisfaction increased with the rise in income; (2) the supply of consumer goods did not increase in accordance with the rise in income, which engendered unfulfilled purchasing power and a drop in satisfaction.

In addition, people’s satisfaction may depend on their status relative to other people’s. Specifically, it may be determined by (3) people’s perception of being absolutely poorer or richer than other people or (4) people’s viewpoint regarding “equality” or “fairness.” If we use traditional comparison of “equality of opportunity,” meaning equal opportunity to participation in competition, and “equality of result,” meaning equal distribution of a salary and gains, we can see that “equality of opportunity” was the focus of capitalism, whereas “equality of result” was the focus of socialism. Practically, the income gap among the Soviet people was relatively small due to the nationwide application a general wage rate, called a “*tariff*”; however, the authority did not solely pursue “equality of result” in reality, having recognized the negative influence of the policy on labor discipline. Hence, the notion of “equality”, which is often considered one of the most important and easily comprehensible concepts in the socialism ideology, must have varied from person to person widely.

2. Earlier research

In recent years, the consumer’s daily life has been a topic attracting attention in research on economic history. In the international arena, “The Oxford Handbook of the History of Consumption” was published in 2012, where Fitzpatrick discussed the Soviet Union.⁵ In research on Soviet history, many studies have focused on housing, clothing, and everyday life, mainly in Moscow and Leningrad (now St.

Petersburg and sometimes called Peter).⁶ Regarding the period of study, there are a notable number of publications on the 1920s and 1930s but also some studies focused on the postwar period.⁷ With respect to research only on postwar clothing, studies such as Gronov and Zhuravlev (2015), Lebina (2015a, 2015b), Zakharova (2007), Tikhomirova (2004), Vainshtein (2007), Gurova (2005), Vinichenko (2010), Bartlett (2010), and Fujiwara (2013, 2017) have examined how people acquired clothing and created Soviet fashion under general difficulties in acquiring products.

According to Chernyshova (2013), the Soviet “consumer revolution” occurred during the Brezhnev Era, and people’s standard of living consequently improved notably during this time. She devoted attention to the point at which an overall shortage did not exist and when there became a tendency toward an overaccumulation of freight, and she argued that a segment of “mature consumers” and a “new consumer culture” were born. Therefore, related to our discussion, she made the assertion that “a consumer revolution of a different kind began then, and, while this did not bring down the Soviet state, the social changes that took place over the 1970s prepared people for the transformations ahead.”⁸

Of course, some collection books⁹ and journals¹⁰ also indicate that a large number of new (to the Soviet Union) products appeared during the late period of the Soviet Union; however, as Chernyshova properly noted, accumulations of freight also coexisted with shortages in the 1970s. Given that this accumulation of freight means consumers’ refusal of ‘forced substitution’, it was a choice that made unsatisfied demand remain and different from an independent choice by consumers from the innumerable products. Hence, whether consumers making such selection can regard as “mature consumers” is room for further examination.

In connection with the “new consumer culture,” we would also like to add the following hypothesis.

Generally, when the consumer goods market grows and diversifies, much attention is devoted not to the production (company) field but to the consumption in social relations, which is traditionally called “consumer society.” However, as will be described later, distribution (consumption) through the workplace played an important role in the Soviet Union and that the enterprise was at the center of people’s lives. Therefore, Soviet society was considered to be a kind of “corporate society.”¹¹

In the next section, we examine the kinds of products that people obtained and the kinds of channels through which obtained them in the Soviet Union, based on the interviews, titled “Consumption of city inhabitants in the 1960s-70s.” The interviewees consist of 20 women over 70 years of age: 10 are Moscow residents and 10 are residents in Rostov-on-Don (hereinafter called Rostov). The interviews were conducted in October and November of 2017 by a specialist of Levada Center. The Russian transcripts were translated to English and the passages below were selected by the authors.

In order to evaluate people’s satisfaction regarding consumption until the Soviet collapse, we focused on the period of the 1960s and 1970s, where shortages of material goods existed but people enjoyed some amount of wealth. We thus selected respondents just over 70 years old (people born in 1947 were 20 years old in 1967 and 70 years old in 2017). The interviews were semi-structured and lasted approximately an hour. We also inquired about differences in their impressions between the 1960s and

1970s and their memories of childhood for the purpose of comparison.

Regarding the objects of consumption, we mainly asked about the procurement of groceries, clothing, cars, and housing. Based on conventional studies showing that women were predominantly responsible for the procurement of food and clothing,¹² we limited the interviewees to women. Of course, men might show initiative in the acquisition of a car or electric appliance (TV, radio, camera, etc.), but we excluded men from the sample of respondents because of practical limitations regarding the sample size.

In addition to age, the life conditions of the Soviet people differed greatly in terms of field of profession (i.e., industry, company) and place of residence (i.e., capital, urban, rural area). We sufficiently considered such attributes; however, we chose Moscow, the capital of RSFSR with 7,061,000 residents in 1970, and Rostov, a southern city with 788,000 residents in 1970.¹³ We must admit that it is impossible to extract the perspective of the entire Russian Republic based on the situation of only these two cities.

In the following four sections, we examine interviewee's purchasing behavior regarding groceries, clothing, cars, and housing. We then analyze the interviewee's self-evaluation regarding their living standard and satisfaction. Finally, we provide a brief conclusion.

3. Shopping behavior: Procurement of groceries

People made purchases for everyday food mostly at a publicly owned or cooperative store. Some respondents said that they bought processed food from a store and perishable food in a market; they used markets for perishable food because it was fresher or unavailable at a store.

We went to "Dieta" and "Products" on Tverskaya street...and "Bakaleya" on Okhotny ryad, stores opposite of the Mayakovskaya.... The food was from markets and Korkhoz producers. (Moscow No. 3)

- What was in the market; what was at the store?

- Well, I bought mainly meat in the market. Maybe, vegetables and fruit. (Rostov No. 9)

Once a market had appeared near, of course, potatoes and carrots—everything was from there. There were also several gastronomes on Energetic street. (Moscow No. 3)

The supply of meat was strained, and we had to go to a market sometimes. Of course, it was more expensive there. (Moscow No. 6)

Regarding accessibility, some respondents admitted that they bought everything from a store all the time, while others talked about experiencing queues. However, when we asked for details, the former respondents also explained that "having [products] available" was different from "having [products] lined up on the shelf." Usually, products arrived at the store irregularly, and the people endeavored to obtain information on the arrival of products that were "thrown away" (*brosili*).

It's a huge line.... I stood for three hours to buy some scarce things; ...the queue was even on the street.... But, frankly speaking, we have adapted. (Moscow No. 1)

- Yes, we had a grocery store near there. And there was everything, all the time.

- Everything?

- Well, how can I say it..., it does not mean that every time they were directly lined up on the shelf.

Well, [they were]¹⁴ "thrown away," what we called it.... (Rostov No. 1)

- There was a shop nearby. There was always everything....

- Always?

- It does not mean they were always on the shelf.

- Was there a queue when something was going to arrive?

- At first, a long line, about an hour; then, when I stood in line earlier, it was a little bit short, about 40 minutes. (Rostov No. 5)

Thus, the standard of the people's understating of "to be available" differs from that in capitalism somewhat. People whose workplace or home was located near the store enjoyed a good situation.

I lived in Pechatniki, and there was a meat booth, and we could buy meat for around 60 rubles there. (Moscow No. 4)

When I worked at a store [as a cleaning woman], it became slightly comfortable. (Rostov No. 9)

And across the street there was "Sputnik," a grocery store. Of course, we dived into it, well, in general. ...

- Did you have there an acquaintance seller?

- No, no... This was all in the order; queueing. (Rostov No. 6)

There were other routes through relatives, friends, or simply "acquaintances," with the most fortunate case being that their family or friend worked in the food industry.

My friend worked at the technical training college under the meat complex.... And a coupon for rations was given to her. But she did not always need it, and she offered to me. (Moscow No. 4)

We had meat every day, because my father-in-law worked in the food department of the factory. (Rostov No. 2)

Another reliable way of procuring food was through support in the workplace. In the workplace, in addition to a formal support for purveyance, the respondents may have been able to rely on their network of co-workers.

Basically, the buffet [of the workplace] helped us. And then, my husband received rations; he was in the military.... We received fish or canned meat once a month. (Rostov No. 6)

When I worked at the Institute, we had very good "orders." Even in Moscow, we did not see any of those Finnish sausages or fish, which they provided. (Moscow No. 3)

When I worked at the Central Committee, we had, of course, the buffet.... Everything was there—sausages, cheese, various kinds of fish, sturgeon. Everything.... I thought all of this was inexpensive....

And we had another buffet where we could buy food to cook at home. It was the freshest and always there when needed, and my family was at least not in poverty. I was not looking for places to buy food. (Moscow No. 9)

And then, in our Ministry, like other Ministries, there was the Foreign division... There were beautiful plastic bags and calendars.... We would take the calendar and bring it to the butcher shop.... (Moscow No. 1)

I worked at "Elektroinstrument." And we did barter: They took electric instruments from us, and [we] brought potatoes and tomatoes right from the fields of Kolkhoz. (Rostov No. 3)

In my workplace, the institute assigned a bus every Sunday, and we went to Zhdanov...for food. We went for food.... When I did not go, I asked: 'Please bring me sausages.' 'OK, I will.' Thus, we helped each other. (Rostov No. 6)

Obviously, Moscow had much better conditions for procurement in general; however, Rostov, which has a rich agricultural area and is close to the Black Sea, has a unique consumer culture.

- And from fishermen. This was sold straight from a car. (Rostov No. 2)

- We did not buy onions, garlic, carrots, potatoes...; everything was from my mother. She even had a pullet. (Rostov No. 9)

We went to Ukraine for sausages and butter... with a friend by bus; she had relatives there. (Rostov No. 2)

- And we from there [(Leningrad)], we bought a bucket and brought back a hen. Because it was cheaper there and hard to get here (laughs).

- By train?

- By airplane. [(!)] (Rostov No. 6)

These sausages were sent to us [as a barter, because] we worked [there]. (Rostov No. 8)

4. Shopping behavior: Procurement of clothing and other things

Most of the respondents spent their childhoods in the materially still poor 1950s. Therefore, their clothing basically constituted cast-offs from their parents or sisters or handicrafts.

It was terrible. My mother made a coat, she went to learn cutting and sewing, and there, she made my skirt from hers, which she had already worn out. (Rostov No. 10)

Well, she [(mother)] wore and wore it, and then, she gave it a new face, i.e., made it another thing. She bought a sewing machine [from Moscow]; her mother presented it. (Rostov No. 8)

She [(neighbor)] sewed on friendship.... I learned sewing a little. Then, my grandmother; mother's mother; taught me knitting. (Moscow No. 5)

My father came back from the frontlines, and mother sewed my sister's coat from his greatcoat. When I became a teenager, I started to wear this coat. (Rostov No. 2)

However, in the 1960s-1970s, the respondents had grown up and started to buy products by themselves from various place, such as a department store, specialized store, or atelier. Although such purchases often required the patience to stand in line, some respondents had come to enjoy fashion.

Mainly, I purchased at GUM [(State Department of Moscow)] or, when my daughter was a child, at "Detskii Mir" [(Children's World)]. I ordered especially warm cloths there.... We rushed there, stood in line, ... you know, "you stand, I leave," like that; we sometimes changed a line for each other. (Moscow No. 2)

First, there were the shops "Odezhda" and "Tkani." Everything was located nearby, and everything was there. (Rostov No. 4)

I dressed my daughter... at "Malysh" [(little boy)].... There was no abundance there,... but everything was of good quality, and almost everything was imported. I stood in line, of course. But I dressed her well. (Moscow No. 10)

At an atelier, they brought in materials obtained by themselves or bought on the spot.

In the winter, I had an artificial Astrakhan fur coat, which was sewn at an atelier... I had a great-aunt, who worked at a fur atelier. And when I worked in the Ministry of Chemistry,... there was a good atelier around the corner. I had already started to sew one piece of clothing and a coat for myself there.... (Moscow No. 1)

At the atelier, I made [a coat] at Semashko. I had a friend there; he was a famous furrier in Rostov. (Rostov No. 3)

There were special places or stores in addition to the usual stores, such as the commission store and the foreign currency shop "Berezka."¹⁵ The commission store was a place where people could take things that they do not need, and others could buy them.

At that time, somehow, my husband bought me a fur coat at the commission store. I wore this coat for a long year. (Moscow No. 8)

And I visited "Berezka" when my neighbor came from abroad; she invited me to the store. This neighbor gave me a check. (Moscow No. 1)

There was a shop across from the American Embassy.... They sold very good things. But there was a queue for all things, of course. (Moscow No. 10)

There were shops from socialist countries.... Leibniz! Oh, there was also terrible queuing!... I bought my coat; it was a German coat.... I stood there all day. (Rostov No. 5)

Well, I could take something from the commission store. It was a little bit expensive, but they were foreign products. And ... in 67 or 68..., I found this shop.... They sold things from customs. People were fined, and things were confiscated.... I found this shop, and what wonderful clothing I wore! (Moscow No. 3)

As with the procurement of groceries, there were various routes for obtaining clothing. Cooperation between relatives and friends was widely reported.

I had a friend, and she was a bookkeeper at "Detskii Mir." And she bought things for my baby. Well, sometimes, it was by additional payment, and sometimes like this.... She bought imported boots for my sweetie—why not buy them? Even I took 2 pairs!... The feet grow in the summer, so I took 2 pairs. One pair fit, and I gave the other to my acquaintance. It circulated like this. (Moscow No. 4)

Wedding dress, my cousin sewed it. She graduated from sewing school, and she was working there. (Rostov No. 8)

- In our group, there were gals. And, of course, we were already trading.

- How did you do trade?

- The gals had an acquaintance who obtained some goods. In our group, Lariska said: "Who need something? Let's go." (Moscow No. 4)

The girls were familiar with the men, who had some things. (Moscow No. 1)

Support from the workplace was also provided in various way.

The Chamber of Commerce was near our workplace, and here, products, all things in shortage were provided to us for the festival. Blouses, Finnish blouses.... On the first floor, at the hall of Goskomtrud [(State Committee of Labor)], the list of items that they would bring were posted.... [We] made a list of who wanted what. When products were brought from the Chamber of Commerce, we went down to the shop. (Moscow No. 2)

Well, a trader came there [(the army's house)] once every six months. And we, families, used to

be invited there on a holiday... (Moscow No. 6)

In many cities, there were flea markets or second-hand markets, called “*Tolchok*,” where household products and used goods were sold. In addition, they sold new non-food articles for which the size or taste did not fit the owner, and they were not subject to the crime of speculation because the resale price was the same as the fixed price. Therefore, “*Tolchok*” was not an illegal market; however, it was closely related to informal traders such as “*Spekulyant*” and “*Fartsovshchik*.” “*Spekulyant*” was a speculator that conducted illegal trade in the Soviet legislation. “*Fartsovshchik*” was rather new word that refers to “black marketers” who traded currency or products mainly from foreigners. In reality, the terms “*Spekulyant*” and “*Fartsovshchik*” had a similar criminal notion, and such people could be seen, mostly, at “*Tolchok*” or near the foreign currency shop “*Berezka*.” In addition, both the commission store and flea market were referred to as “the used market.” Therefore, the commission store in Moscow was regarded as a place where good quality, rare articles were available, while that in Rostov was simply a sort of “shop for used goods” that had items similar to those at a flea market. One informant relayed the experience of selling her belongings there.

I bought them at the "flea market." ... It was in Shakhti. You had to take a suburban train. We could not get cosmetics at that time.... All these things were sold at the flea market, hair color and cosmetics. (Rostov No. 1)

Then, it was moved out to Novocherkassk... I went there. But it was a rare event; the suburban train was always crowded.... So mainly we bought privately. (Rostov No. 10)

- Do you know if there were speculators; did you buy something from them?

- ... They offered goods at a store; then, they went to somewhere hidden; I bought something, got something. There were speculators, quite a lot of them....

- If I wanted to buy something, where could I look for them?

- They found you by themselves. They watched people, if someone wanted to buy something, seeking, they approached to you, opened something little by little like this, he had, or under his arm, jeans.... “Let's go, try them on.” ...

- Did black marketers have gold or trade dollars?

- As you like. (Rostov No. 2)

- Did you have to buy something from speculators?

- Yes, yes....

- We went to a flea market. In Taganlog, there was a flea market, also in Shakhti, and we went there. Here, I went to... Taganlog. We bought a fur coat for my eldest daughter....

- Who sold there, in Taganlog?

- Everyone! (Rostov No. 4)

- Here, I remember “Berezka” at the end of Sirenevy avenue—so may such people were

gathered. Perhaps, they were at a store... where salesmen sell something...

- Sometimes, we bought something..., basically knitted clothing.

- How did you find them; how did you come to an agreement with them?

- Well it was obvious; people walked around shops. (Moscow No. 5)

Then, we brought this sofa to a commission store and bought another corner sofa. You know, everything could be sold well at a commission store! And everything was sold at a high price! (Rostov No. 6)

As we have already mentioned, the accumulation of freight and shortages coexisted. The archive documents indicate that even imported goods sometimes remained unsold at TsUM of Moscow.¹⁶ However, shortages may be considered the “default,” on the basis of which people determined their actions for the Soviet people. The respondents often used unique terms. The term “dostali” suggests that the purchasing activity was not limited to shops. There was also a respondent who frequently used the expressions “suggested” and “from hand.”

As for the products with severe shortages, such as furniture, people had to go to reconfirm (“otmechat”) the order once or twice a month, after having registered (“zapisyvat”). There was queuing for both of them.

- Please imagine, I bought everything at a store; I had to stand in line....

- How long?

- Well, sometimes, I had to stand in line even about 2 hours. I bought from GUM. (Moscow No. 10)

Then, queuing started there... for things in shortage. Some blouse, some skirt.... We got all such things. We did not buy them but got them. There was queuing, probably we had the card on which a turn was written. And I stood in line for 3 hours in order to buy some things in shortage. (Moscow No. 1)

My mother stood in line 5 hours so as to buy my child fur coat. (Moscow No. 2)

When imported goods were “thrown away,” we could stand in line.... My mother went to “Syntetics” on Leninskii street for them and stood in line for 2 or 3 days in order to buy something. (Moscow No. 5)

I remember; it was for a long time; maybe about 3 hours, I stood in line for mohair threads—at that time, such a jacket was fashionable. And I bought them and knitted it myself. (Moscow No. 6)

Well, I wanted a carpet; it was a dream.... We bought it at a store. I stood in line for the registration.... We went [by car] to register and reconfirm. (Moscow No. 10)

Well, when we had moved [to the new flat], there was already furniture at a store, for which we had to register and reconfirm for half a year. (Moscow No. 6)

Someone suggested it to me again. (Moscow No. 4)

We contrived goods.... Thus, we got them and circulated them. (Moscow No. 3)

As is generally known, purchasing activities such as “under the counter” transactions and bribery were also widespread. The respondents talked about their experiences with such activities for purchasing clothing, sundries, and furniture. Even in deals among friends or acquaintances, an additional payment was often required, and it was not done based on simple friendship. In other words, such types of “business” or “negotiation” were so rooted in the everyday life of the people that it was impossible to definitely distinguish among legal, gray, and illegal business.

- Were there already fur boots in those days?

- I saw them. They could be obtained so-called “under the counter.” (Rostov No. 1)

It was a quite difficult—because getting something was so difficult, particularly with furniture. But, you know what they say, “connections.”

- What kind of connections helped you getting something?

-... Well, people within the military.... I just talked with the salesperson at a store; then, he said: “please go to the base at such and such time and buy there.”

- Did you have to pay additionally for it?

- Maybe, I paid at the base. They themselves had a connection with each other. (Rostov No. 6)

Well, at that time, it was generally a problem to obtain furniture. I know that we got a writing desk through my friend, whose mother worked at... a senior merchandiser of furniture.... This was a kind of direct purchase! (Rostov No. 10)

In addition, my friend got married to a captain in Vladivostok.... When he brought something [from Vladivostok], she sold it. Well, there were not only jeans but also everything. (Rostov No. 10)

This just “turned out” for me! I say, I am never to guilty for our luck. It turned out, this woman worked in our factory, and she explained to me when and where (to go).... (Rostov No. 3)

As for the means of procurement outside the hometown, the respondents shopped while travelling or living abroad. One woman brought back products after working in Prague for several years. In addition, a special salary was given for duties in depopulated areas with hard economic conditions, such as the Far North or the Far East, as a state policy, and one respondent worked there temporarily because of the economic motivation.

I bought tableware when I traveled abroad. Well, there were socialist countries. (Rostov No. 5)

From Prague? Well, certainly, wardrobe, which I wore later, and toys for the future. I brought pump shoes. (Moscow No. 9)

His parents knew that in the Far North, he could earn a good salary in good working conditions....

Yes, all of what I earned there, I spent on myself. I dressed well at that time; that's all.... (Rostov No. 5)

The respondents from Rostov also noted having the experience of shopping for clothing in distant places.

I had to go to Moscow and line up in the long line to buy a good... (Rostov No. 2)

I remember that we took a rest in Leningrad at that time, in the military sanatorium, and I bought a coat there. I think it was Finnish.... (Rostov No. 6)

Again, we bought everything by ourselves from business trips. Almost everyone went to Peter [(Leningrad)], and everyone tried to get to Leningrad by way of Moscow; I mean, you fly to Moscow by plane and go shopping, rushing to "Landa," and buy everything like shampoo, toilet paper, and napkins and ... at GUM and food at Gastronom. (Rostov No. 10)

I worked at the planning institute and also went on business trips. I travelled not only to Moscow but all around the USSR. And whenever I went on a business trip, I always bought something; I brought back boots, not only for myself, but for my sister.... I brought back by myself up to 20 kilograms, carried terrible baggage.... (Rostov No. 5)

In addition to product availability, various factors were considered when consumers chose a specific procurement route. Of course, price was an important determinant, while there were respondents who did not mind the additional payment or use of special connections to obtain products of their taste. Understandably, one motivation for people to use private connections or make clothes at home was to select what they wanted.

At the queuing line, they provided only one kind of product. Even if you did not like it completely, you had to take it there. Essentially, we took what we wanted; (pause)... we got it with additional payment. (Rostov No. 10)

The fashionable one that I wanted was sewn by my mother. (Moscow No. 3)

Because things such as shoes, underwear, and furniture are difficult to handcraft, it was more difficult to acquire them.

Yes, about underwear—this was a problem. At a store, they were not beautiful, made from calico or damask, such kind of fabric. (Moscow No. 4)

Well, basically, ...when we went to Moscow.... I said to a boss: "Vorya[(male!)], [please bring] a

brassiere for me as usual.” (Rostov No. 3)

- Where did you get underwear?

- We had democratic ones! (Rostov No. 5)

5. Shopping behavior: Cars

The distribution of cars was largely different from that of other consumer goods with respect to their allocation through workplaces. As the number of cars was not sufficient at all, some elite groups had special priority in the allocation of cars. According to Siegelbaum (2006), “aside from high-ranking party officials, this would have included members of prestigious organizations such as the Academy of Sciences and the Writers’ Union; industrial executives; outstanding artists and other recipients of honors and medals; and disabled veterans of World War II.”¹⁷ This account was also supported by our interviewees, who reported that only war veterans, the war disabled, and workers in the military and aviation industry received a car.

Uncle, brother-in-law. He was a veteran of the war; he had no feet. And he was presented the red “Zaporozhets.” I think that the car was for the disabled, but remodeled. (Moscow No. 4)

The car was called “kopeika” My father-in-law, a lieutenant colonel in the army stood in the line. He worked in the General Staff Office and stood in the line for a car.... He gave his turn to us. And we bought it for 6000 rubles. (Rostov No. 6)

- Did your family have a car?

- Father had a “Zaporozhets.” Probably from 76. He received it as a disabled. (Rostov No. 10)

They [(the workplace, i.e., military)] decided to take orders and to allocate them. There were three “Zaporozhets” and two “Zhiguli.” We did not have money for a “Zhiguli” but barely scraped together money for a “Zaporozhets.” As I remember, it cost 3000 rubles.... (Moscow No. 6)

- And we bought a “Zaporozhets.”... It was my husband’s. It was his dream.... Well, he was helped by his friend, who worked as a doctor in the hospital for the aviation industry.

- “Helped” means standing in line?

- Yes. Only like that. (Moscow No. 10)

As for the queuing for cars, there was the following interesting recollection, and we can understand that there were other channels in addition to the above-mentioned route.¹⁸

There were two people queuing. One was a criminal, and the other was not a criminal. They were always fighting each other. We had to stay overnight, and I attend this, I went out so as to bring them sandwiches.... (Moscow No. 5)

6. Shopping behavior: Acquisition of housing

Under the Stalin era, the Soviet authority utilized housing as a means to “control people’s labor and daily behaviors.”¹⁹ New construction was finally started after Stalin’s death;²⁰ however, the lack of housing was not resolved across the Soviet Union. Therefore, most respondents lived in an extremely poor house during childhood. In Moscow, all the members, except one who was raised in Siberia, had an experience of living in a communal flat, and all of them finally obtained an individual flat in an apartment complex. On the other hand, in Rostov, the housing conditions were worse. There were respondents who grown up in rental private lodgings, in a basement, or even at the barracks. Some had a toilet or a well in the courtyard, and the heating sources was the traditional “*pechka*” (fireplace). In this way, there was a notable difference in housing conditions between Moscow and Rostov.

We rented rooms in a private house, a small house with 2 rooms in the basement. (Rostov No. 2)
It was called a barracks. (Rostov No. 7)

In reality, the local government managed public housing, though housing was generally distributed through workplaces in both Moscow and Rostov.

Every last Monday was a registration day for the Committee for Housing and Domestic Issues. The [approval of] the representative was needed from the workplace where he worked, such as a Trade Union or the Party. Once he had registered there [(at his workplace)], he received a phone call from the secretary. And then, he went to the Committee. (Rostov No. 4)

My father received a one-room flat as an honorary worker of the All Union Scientific Research Institute of the Cable Industry. It was all daddy’s colleagues, as the apartment was owned by the cable institution. (Moscow No. 3)

And in one family, he worked with my father at the planning institute and received this flat like my father from the planning institute. (Rostov No. 5)

My father again received at the factory an improved communal flat on Stasovaya street. (Moscow No. 6)

My mother received a flat... from the factory, where she worked. (Moscow No. 8)

It was also difficult to get a flat, and there was long process from application to distribution.

I stood in line for 12 years and received a flat on the second floor. (Rostov No. 9)

At that time for housing, you had to receive the one that was given to you. (Rostov No. 10)

Housing acquisition was also a criterion in one's selection of workplace.

I went to work as a cleaning lady and got a flat as a cleaning lady. I worked for approximately a half year and got a room. (Rostov No. 9)

I moved from the Leningrad Electric Machine Plant to the house building complex ... in order to receive this flat. (Rostov No. 10)

However, the channel for the acquisition of housing was not limited to the channel mentioned above. There were examples of the acquisition of a house through an exchange bureau or private broker, which means that there was a system to adjust supply and demand based on people's independent activity.

When I moved to the international department, a flat was quickly given to me. At that time, there was an exchange bureau at Bannyi alley; my husband and I went there and very quickly found a flat we loved very much in Biryuevo. (Moscow No. 9)

- How did you know the rent article?

- There was such a place. The person who wanted to lend and the person who wanted to borrow came over there. ...

- Broker?

- Yes, like that. They merely stood on the street near the central market. (Rostov No. 3)

Another way to acquire a house was to participate in or move into a cooperative. Cooperative housing existed since Czarist Russia, and the Soviet government officially admitted cooperatives from the early days. Residents contributed to a fund and sometimes acquired a loan and built the cooperative house, the construction of which might last for a long time.

Then, my father gave us a donation, and we bought a cooperative apartment. (Moscow No. 4)

I soon got married, and we started to build a cooperative then. We deposited money for the cooperative apartment.... We moved in the 80s; we it build for a long time. (Rostov No. 10)

The cooperative was often built by the workplace or in the industry, and there was a case in which colleagues built the cooperative by hand while on holiday.

My friend, Tolya, helped me, because his father was a famous film engineer, and the cooperative was for the film industry.... When I explained to him that I work at the theater museum, he said: "It fits for us; we can accept you as a member of cooperative." (Moscow No. 7)

- Please wait. Why was it called "blood"?

- Because we paid money and received a rental and worked. My husband worked at the Motor

base.... The workplace did not oppose him building a house by himself, ...and when it was necessary, the workplace lent us unused vehicles, such as a dump truck or "Gazon."...

- Do you mean that they worked at a construction site on the weekend?

- Yes. And it lasted two years....

- Does this mean it was cooperative?

- Yes, cooperative. (Rostov No. 4)

A large amount of time was devoted to the theme of housing acquisition and room layouts during our interviews. This shows how houses, as a place where people rest every day and deepen family bond, have greater importance in people's lives. From such a viewpoint, the work of Reid²¹ focused on the acquisition of furniture for new flats was a significant research.

7. Class or income, overall evaluation

Regarding the respondents' evaluations of their living standards, most of the respondents reported that they were on an average level.

I can't say that we were poor. Well, everyone lived like us in our house. (Moscow No. 1)

- And do you think you were poor, middle class, or rich?

- I think we were at the same level. In those days, I say, no one... boasted of wealth. (Moscow No. 9)

I have met significantly poorer people.... However, basically everyone we came into contact with were on the same level. (Moscow No. 10)

- When you compare yourself with others, were you rich or poor?

- Normal. (Rostov No. 2)

Of course, there was a respondent who claimed that her income was higher than average, and there was a person who was not satisfied with her income.

We made this effective production system.... People from all over Russia came to us to see the experiment.... Furthermore, exports to 36 countries were also evaluated.... Then, it was around 150 rubles. (Rostov No. 3)

I did not receive a bonus. I had hourly wages.... I wanted to work as a plan formation person to get a bonus. Because expenditures had increased, I wanted the money. (Rostov No. 4)

Boys did not pay attention to me.... Who would glance at a girl wearing a coat made from a greatcoat? Naturally, she was not needed. Before, they payed attention to things. I mean if you dress poorly, you are nobody. (Rostov No. 2)

I had a friend ... I have never visited her; her mother was against having a poor friend. (Rostov No. 2)

The respondents who reported being at an average level also admitted that they had met richer people or felt regret about their income.

I had a friend whose father worked in the Ministry of the Electric Technical Industry.... Of course, their life was perfect. It bears no comparison with ours. (Moscow No. 8)

- Did you see a woman who dressed up obviously richer than you?

- Well, I had a friend, her husband worked abroad; it's related to trips abroad. Certainly, she had possibilities to live quite differently. (Moscow No. 10)

- Compared with other people, do you think you were richer or poorer?

- There were richer people than I, of course. And I was a little bit jealous.

- About what did you feel jealousy?

- A car. (Rostov No. 1)

Well, just only that manager of a salon; he dressed well; he had a car, it was cool.... Later, we were invited to his birthday party; he reserved by himself this restaurant; we even did not know that in Rostov there were such... things in shortage on the table.... (Rostov No. 10)

When we asked about the one thing they wished they had in those days, there were respondents who gave a concrete product, such as a car; however, most of the people expressed satisfaction about their material lives.

- Was there anything that you wanted so much?

- ... I wanted to wear better clothes.... I wish my husband had been a rich person and had a car. (Rostov No. 2)

You know I'm satisfied with what I had. (Moscow No. 1)

I'm glad for everything. I don't bother with much. (Moscow No. 4)

I am not a total materialist. (Moscow No. 7)

Well, in principle, I am absolutely not envious. What I wanted to have especially... and I particularly want.... If I wanted something, I tried to get it somehow. But it was not because "he has." Just only that I wanted it, or he [(husband)] wanted it. (Moscow No. 5)

The one reason why the respondents did not report having considerable dissatisfaction might be their optimistic outlook for the future based on their past experience.

I wanted a lot of things, but, anyway, I realized all of them. (Moscow No. 10)

We were poor, of course... but somehow... we did not stay in that place, did not fall into a loop; we did not think ourselves poor. (Moscow No. 3)

Because we did not know of a better period, it was a time of being young, merry, and beautiful... (Rostov No. 7)

The other possibility is that they routinely interacted with few people who were not very different from them, as indicated by the respondents.

But, in principle, everyone with whom we communicated was on the same level... In my communication circle, we were all the same in principle. (Moscow No. 10)

We had our own circle.... Maybe we were so naive, but it seems to me that everyone lived the way we lived. (Rostov No. 10)

- Please talk about a person who was definitely less well off than your family?

- Well, there was a basement with small windows in our [military] apartment house, and people lived there—a janitor or someone.... But we did not communicate with them at all.... (Rostov No. 10)

Then, we asked them to evaluate their situation based on various factors, not just material ones. Some people looked back at that time with nostalgia; others recognized that they would not like to go back to that period.

You know, people were more kind at that time. (Rostov No.1)

It was good, because it was a time of “youth.” (Rostov No. 5)

Probably people were more kind and more considerate. And regarding other things—no, I do not want to go back to that period, because we were not allowed to go abroad; I would already be bored. (Moscow No. 3)

When I was asked “which is better for you, today or those days?” I think now is better as a whole. I did not have enough money in those days, though I have everything. (Rostov No. 10)

I wished to learn. I wished to work at some institute, not as a hairdresser. Yes, I would feel differently; moreover, I would have a different status.... (Rostov No. 2)

Apart from the main subjects of this paper, interesting answers were provided about the differences between decades. Some noted that the product availability gradually increased; others claimed that shortages were gradually increased. Naturally, there was also the answer that there was little difference between the 1960s and 1970s. Considering the argument of Chernyshova mentioned above, there is room for further examination on this point.

- *What was a difference between the 1960s and 1970s?*

- *Salary was increased a little bit, and there was the possibility to take a vacation abroad. (Moscow No. 2)*

Maybe, you know, the number of black marketers was getting smaller. People who offered under the counter transactions also disappeared. (Moscow No. 4)

Still in the 60s, on Profsoyuznaya street, ... there were candies at a shop. Then, already... around the 70s, 70 plus a little — there were shortages of such things. We were not hungry, but everything became hard to get. (Moscow No. 6)

At that time, everything could be bought. In the 60s, there were even caviar and salmon. (Moscow No. 3)

When everything was available, we did not have money.... Then, general shortages occurred—that was [around] 1970.... It was a time when only a certain kind of sausage was in shortage. And then everything disappeared little by little. Cheese, sausage, it was getting worse and worse. (Rostov No. 10)

8. Conclusion

At first glance, it can be concluded that the respondents' evaluation of the Soviet Era was not very negative.

Of course, we cannot deny the general tendency of people who become a certain age to yearn after their old days. In our interviews, one respondent literally stated "I felt nostalgia," and some talked about the good feeling among the people, except for with respect to material goods.

Furthermore, it seems that the gradual improvement in most peoples' standard of living contributed to their general lack of focus on their dissatisfaction in the Soviet Era in the interviews. Of course, we cannot consider all the improvement in living conditions reported by the respondents to be reflective of the progress of society or the system, as their evaluations were also influenced by changes in their personal life stage, from the childhood when they depended on their parents to economically independent adults. However, as survey data showed, there was not a substantial gap between the relative standard of living in respondents' childhood and that in the 1960s-1970s. In other words, it may be said that the immobilization of the hierarchy in the postwar period of the Soviet Union was observed in this paper. Therefore, the total economic growth would be more likely to contribute to many people's level of satisfaction, and this indicates that hypothesis (1), which we made in the beginning of this paper, applies more to the situation than hypothesis (2).

People managed their lives by sharing information, making mutual offers of products, and creating purchasing opportunity between relatives and acquaintances even though the availability of various products was limited. It is possible that the network and feeling of solidarity between such people might

engender an equal consciousness in the belonging group and play a role in reducing the stress of their unfulfilled consumption demand, regardless of whether this connection can be ethically approved.

Furthermore, personal relationships in the workplace also allowed the respondents to gain a deep position in the network of such an “inner ring.” Apart from houses and cars, which were expected to be distributed by workplaces beforehand, various supply routes through companies were also provided for other consumer goods. For instance, there were direct “orders,” buffets, rations, arrangements for a bus to the market, barter transactions, and so on. Furthermore, coworkers’ cooperation through information exchange about product arrivals, joint purchases, and alternation in queuing united them. Judging from importance of the workplace in the society, the Soviet Union can be said to be a “corporate society,” in a different meaning from that in Japan.

Here, we want to particularly emphasize the role of the workplace in providing housing. Because housing was allocated through the workplace and some cooperatives were organized among them, coworkers are more likely to share most of their life space. In such a case, solidarity with coworkers may be strengthened; however, interest in society apart from the workplace can be diluted, and the viewpoint of people may have become narrow, potentially making them blind to the economic disparity in the real world.

Considering the instances in which respondents felt positive satisfaction, a sense of superiority to others, rather than an orientation toward equal opportunity, was also observed with respect to the acquisition of products, where the respondents wanted to have better and usually imported goods. This must be both a cause and a consequence of the actual situation of the Soviet Union not being an equal society but a hierarchical one. As for the hypotheses in the beginning of the paper, we may say that people’s viewpoint for equality (4) had less effect on their satisfaction than their absolute perception of richness (3).

Finally, the satisfaction tended to be higher among the people from Moscow than among those from Rostov. This suggests that the questionnaire in this study was limited in capturing the extent to which various citizens were advantaged in the Soviet Union. Given that some issues remain an open, consumer satisfaction in the Soviet Union requires further examination.

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Notes

¹ Yurchak (2005), p. 4.

² Queues and repairs were phenomena that were characteristic of the Soviet Union; the Russian journal “*Neprikosnovennyi zapas*” published a special feature on this in 2004, No. 2 (34).

³ Yurchak also argued that the economic failure was “not a cause of the collapse but about the conditions

that made the collapse possible without making it anticipated.” We also reserved approval/disapproval of this point for the time being. Yurchak (2005), p. 4.

⁴ Kornai (1980).

⁵ Fitzpatrick (2012).

⁶ Orlov (2010, 2015); Gronow (2003); Lebina (2015c); Glushchenko (2015); Ruga and Kokorev (2011). For farming villages, see Kostyashov (2015).

⁷ Meerovich (2016); Vas'kin (2017).

⁸ Chernyshova (2013), p. 202.

⁹ Ozkan ed. (2012); Koleva (2013); Vasil'ev (2004).

¹⁰ See *Novye tovary: Informatsionno-reklamny byulleten*, Pavil'on Vsesoyuznoi Torgovoi Palaty, M: Gostorgizdat.

¹¹ Of course, this is considerably different from the Japanese “corporate society.” In the Japanese corporate society, the company occupies the center of people’s lives, and it is often discussed in conjunction with the problem that workers commit too much to the company. Moreover, it should be mentioned that the term “enterprise” is regarded to be more suitable than “firm,” “company,” and “corporation” with respect to the production unit in the Soviet Union. There is also room for a separate examination of whether this tendency produced a middle class or whether it resulted in simple hierarchization (expansion of differences).

¹² Reid (2002); Reid (2007).

¹³ Vsesoyuznaya perepic' naseleniya 1970 goda.

¹⁴ Hereinafter, all supplements by the authors are enclosed in square brackets and the words inside round brackets show respondent’s sign in this paper.

¹⁵ For “*Berezka*,” see Ivanova (2012).

¹⁶ Tsentral'ny Istoricheskii Gorodckoi Arkhiv Moskv, F. 297 D. 922 (873) L. 12-13. In 1972, about 20% of stock of clothing was imported to Moscow.

¹⁷ Siegelbaum (2006) p. 91. Originally from Welihozkiy (1979) p.820. Materials from the Russian State Archives of Economics also indicate such priorities. For example, see RGAE F. 465, Op. 1, D. 883, T. 3, L. 80.

¹⁸ There was also a second-hand market for cars. Siegelbaum (2006).

¹⁹ Housing might have been used as a mean to regulate people in the Soviet Union. See Meerovich (2008).

²⁰ Resolution of Ministerial Meeting of the USSR of 31 July 1957 “On development of housing construction in the USSR.”

²¹ Reid (2016).

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Appendix 1. Summary of Respondents' Characters (Moscow)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
year of birth	1947	1945	1947	1946	1941	1946	1943	1940	1936	1938
age as of 1970	23	25	23	24	29	24	27	30	34	32
father	engineer of "hammer and sickle" (died in 61)	painter (refused to acknowledge paternity)	All Union scientific research Institute of Cable industry	deputy chief of somewhere	engineer	senior foreman in the "Krasnaya Ploretaria" (machine factory)	the Armenian communist party, then professor at the Philosophy university	teacher of descriptive geometry (divorced), vice-head of department in textile factory (second father)	dedicated at the front	military
mother	housewife	cleaner	housewife	nurse, then housewife	engineer	second class invalid	typist-referent at the division of the publication of the acts of Supreme Soviet	shop manager of textile industry; (mother-in-law: manager of warehouse for fruit)	the ball bearing factory	clinic assistant
herself	Ministry of Chemistry	Specialist for standardizati on (State committee of Labor)	Institute of Communication	Gravk (central board) (?)	Institute for Gauge production	house worker (communal management, engineer)	museum staff, All Theater Union (69)	bookbinder	typist in the publisher "Foreign literature" → "Problems of the world and Socialism" (two years in Prague, then under the Central Committee of Communist Party of Soviet Union)	psychiatrist
occupation	engineer of angstrom (70, divorced in 74)	head of department of standardizati on in the "Sapfir" factory(69)		Institute for Gauge production	Institute for Gauge production	Serviceman in the army (67) lieutenant-colonel, head office of air defense army	engineer (61)	engineer in the nuclear industry(61, dead in 70)	food industry	psychiatrist of the children's psychiatric hospital, then department of psychiatry in the Central Institute for workers' improvement

children (year of birth)	daughter (71)	son (73)	son	daughter (69)	daughter (72)	son (68)	daughter (64)	daughter (64)	2 daughters and son	daughter (69)
food	a store		a market, gastronomic	coupon of meat, a booth of meat complex, market	handcraft, an atelier	a store, supermarket	grocery, Elisevskii store	acquaintance, the commission	buffet	a store
clothing	GUM, TSUM, Passazh, atelier	GUM, "Detskii Mir"		TsUM, Passazh	handcraft, an atelier	atelier				GUM, English «Alaska»
refrigerator	"Cibir" (67)		"Saratov" (60) "Yuryuzan" (65)	"Polyus"		"Cibir"	"Saratov" (57) "ZIL"		"ZIL"	"Donbass", "ZVI" (69)
washing machine	no		"Malyutka" (78)	no						
car	no	no	no	Zapozhzhets (72)	Zhigiri (Kapeika) (72)	Zapozhzhets (74)	no	no	no (did not want)	Zapozhzhets (69 or 70)
housing condition	communal house (3 families)	communal house (14 m ²)	communal house (9,7 m ²) → 61 1 room flat (19 m ²)	communal house	communal house (2rooms 3rooms) →	communal house (2 families)	communal house (9 m ²) → 11 m ² → 2 (rooms)	communal house (2 rooms)	communal house (1 room) → communal house	
after marriage	Separate apartment (20 m ² + 5,5 m ²)	communal house (22 m ²) → 48 m ²)	3 rooms	cooperative (2 rooms)	communal house (1 room → 2 rooms)	2 rooms flat → cooperative (3 rooms, 50 m ²)	cooperative (2 rooms 34 m ²)	cooperative	1 room in 16th floor → 3 rooms	communal house → 4 rooms
interesting purchase			the shop that sold things at the customs						from Prague	
involvement in gray market, speculation			I did not go to "black marketer"	friend	people walked around "Verezka"		toilet			
order in workplace	yes	yes	yes	not admitted		from the army			from buffet	
most valuable thing	furniture, refrigerator	television set, toilet	Romanian bed	ring	tea set "Mimosa"				a furniture set	refrigerator, Japanese umbrella
dreamed thing	I wanted to have a suit at "Berezka", finally bought it.	I wanted to walk with high heel (the respondent had a bad foot).	a car				toilet	a plot or a small house		

