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Trust in the West or «West-Pakete» from the GDR?!
Consumption of East German Clothing by Soviet Women in the Brezhnev Era

My arguments in this essay are based on the assumption that state socialist societies were not only «modern dictatorships» and «shortage economies» as János Kornai described them but were also, in Stephan Merl’s words, «belated nationalized mass consumer societies» or, to as Ina Merkel puts it, «alternative consumer cultures» – albeit with considerable differences from capitalist societies.¹ Building on this work, I understand these differences as «value-neutral», and certainly not in the spirit of the still rather popular backwardness paradigm as «deviance from a West European norm». Starting from this premise, my essay advocates for treating the Soviet consumer in terms of categories of «availability» (such as consumption) rather than in terms of categories of «absence» (such as shortages).²

Therefore, my essay aims to counter the widespread assumption in the historiography that the trickle-down of Western fashion into the USSR undermined both consumers’ trust in Soviet goods and their trust in the «Soviet» itself during the Brezhnev era.³ Indeed, even when scholars investigate the mediated trickle-down-effect of Western goods from state socialist countries to the USSR, they reduce the symbolic rele-

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³ For the subversive influence of the trickle-down of Western goods in the USSR, see Zhuravlev, Moda and Zakhatarova, S’habiller.
vance of these state-socialist commodities solely to their «Western spirit» – and thus, interpret this as subversive for Soviet civilization.4

This led me to wonder if Soviet consumers ascribed any additional symbolic meanings to clothing and shoes from socialist countries (apart from «trust in the West»). Focusing on the GDR as my example of a socialist «source» country, I look for and analyze these meanings through the prism of trust/distrust. «Trust» is understood here as the economic basis of consumer transactions but, more importantly, I also understand trust as a historical-sociological category that can be used as an analytical tool to interpret a variety of state-society interactions in socialist countries.5 That is, by understanding trust as a historical-sociological category, one can investigate the ways in which trust has been constructed on individual, social, and power levels. In other words, I examine both the everyday dimension of trust in consumer goods and the political dimension of trust. That is, I look at the correlation of trust/distrust in things with trust/distrust in the Soviet state and the idea of socialism itself. As a result, I argue, that consumption of clothing and shoes made in the GDR, can be seen as one of mechanisms that stabilized the functioning of Soviet civilization.

This essay draws primarily on oral history interviews with women of the «last Soviet generation» and their written memoirs. My interviewees are women who were born from the late 1940s to the early 1950s. They include women who had never been to the GDR, women who went there as tourists, and those who spent several years there.6 Looking at everyday practices of both imaginary and «really existing» consumption of East German goods, I identify the channels, dimensions, levels, and functions of mechanisms for building trust. In this framework, I am interested in cultural transfer between Soviet and East German consumer cultures. That is, I understand consumer goods made in the GDR as «frontier runners» which connected the GDR and the USSR.7 Analyzing personal records, I draw on anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s concept of «thick description» to understand the daily-life universe of ordinary women, their everyday consumer practices, and the symbolic meanings which were eigensinnig

4 For the subversive influence of the mediated trickle-down of Western goods from socialist countries to the USSR, see a special issue of Labirint devoted to «Project COMECON (1949–1991): The export/import of goods and ideas», Labirint (2014) 6.


ascribed to imported items of clothing. It must be stressed here that I am primarily interested in reminiscences and narratives, and not «facts» or «how it really was». From that vantage point, I reconstruct the so-called «cultural biography» of East German clothes and shoes in the collective biography of Soviet women in the Brezhnev era, with an emphasis on the 1970s–1980s. Finally, I am interested in comparing fashion and consumer cultures in the USSR and the GDR to understand better what was specifically and genuinely «Soviet» or «late Soviet», what was characteristic of socialist states in general, and what can be seen as transnational and transpolitical.

1. Western in Form, Socialist in Content: The Consumer Habitus of Soviet Women of the «Last Soviet Generation»

In 1945, Soviet poet Sergei Mikhalkov wrote in his fable «Two Lady Friends» («Dve podrugis») that «[t]here are still families, who run down and scold all Soviet things, and who slobber over all foreign things; and at the same time these families eat Russian bacon!». In fact, this statement has become a commonplace in the historiography. Until the end of the Soviet Union one of the peculiarities of the Soviet consumer habitus was the coexistence of interiorisation of the «socialist way of life» and «Soviet materialism». Thus, the material from my interviews concurs with Alexei Yurchak's observations that representatives of the «last Soviet generation» wore Western jeans and took part in official events with equal enthusiasm. As Vladislav Zubok wrote about this generation, they did not participate in official events cynically but took a certain pleasure in them. This coexistence of two seemingly incompatible things is a special feature of Soviet baby boomers (or the generation of «grandchildren») in comparison to Soviet generations that went before and came after them. The generation of «fathers» (born before 1917) had rather idealistic views. The generation of «children» or the so-called shestidesiatniki (born in the 1930s) criticized the Soviet Union rather strongly. Their «grandchildren» or the baby boomers cared about culture, their careers, and consumption and were, simultaneously, generally well disposed towards «Soviet civilization». In comparison to all the preceding Soviet generations, representatives of the generation of great-grandchildren (born in the 1970s–1980s) were already explicitly obsessed with consumption, without participating in Soviet «ritual dances». In other words, in both Western Europe and the Soviet Union there was a change from

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<generations of a «heroic modernity»> in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century to generations of a «consumptive modernity» in the second half of the twentieth century.11

In general, «ordinary» Soviet women of the «last Soviet generation» (in other words, women who did not belong to the nomenklatura or to subcultural or oppositional formations) internalized quite deeply key notions that constituted official Soviet «good taste», such as «modesty», «rationality», «functionality», and the idea that fashion should not be a goal in itself.12 Even for those who represented themselves in my interviews as being particularly fashion conscious, everyday life was structured, first and foremost, by a strong interest in high culture (for example, visits to theatres or concerts, excessive reading etc.), by work, and by collective social practices such as organised tourism, or demonstrations. As for their economic capital (in Pierre Bourdieu’s formulation), one of my respondents recalled: «Our family wasn’t rich, of course. But we weren’t poor, either [...]»13

On the other hand, along with this rich cultural life, which was characteristic of consumers of the «last Soviet generation», there was also a strong interest in material things and forms of prestigious consumption, something that can metaphorically be called «background», or everyday, «random noise».14 A key manifestation of this Soviet materialism was the unprecedented consumer trust in so-called «imported» goods, which was combined with distrust of domestic, that is, Soviet commodities (with the exception of Soviet furs). Despite the fact that under Brezhnev Soviet light industry produced clothing and footwear in abundance, which was available for everyone at reasonable prices, ordinary consumers associated nothing but «solidness» and «quality» with these goods. Trust in their «hipness», the ability of these items to make a «fashion statement», and their «freshness of colour» was at a minimum.

Imported clothing and shoes were expensive (the price of Western clothing and shoes was artificially high) or seemed expensive by default. The fact that these goods were in scarce supply indicated that they were for privileged people and, therefore, they promised to turn the desire for social distinction into reality. However, this contradiction between «high cultural values» and «low material desires» was an apparent paradox. On the one hand, the fact that Soviet women strongly gravitated toward an ultimatum to follow fashion can certainly be inscribed into the official Soviet discourse

13 Interview with I.B. (born 1953, chemist, Iaroslavl), 15.06.2008.
14 The so-called «shortage hypothesis» presupposes the existence of a materialistic orientation, even in developing countries. See, for example, G. Gerg / R. Belk, «Crossecultural Differences in Materialism», in: Journal of Economic Psychology 17 (1996) 1, 55–78.
of fashion and consumption during the Brezhnev years. Already in the 1930s one of
the key elements of the concept of kul'turnost' was that it was obligatory to dress in the
latest fashion: a «cultured» Soviet person was understood to be «fashionably dressed».
Moreover, the Soviet clothing industry was established in the 1930s, during the first
wave of Soviet modernization. Nevertheless, the state’s ability to satisfy basic needs for
clothing continued to a central problem until the 1960s.

The second wave of modernization took place from the end of the 1950s to the
mid-1960s and culminated in the late Soviet consumer revolution. Citizens became
more prosperous but Khrushchev era was marked by debates about the legitimacy of
«fashion» in Soviet society. In the Brezhnev period these debates ended with the depo-
liticization of fashion, the definitive failure of the idea that there was a unique socialist
«culture of clothing», and the final legitimization of the word «fashion» in the official
discourse. It was officially accepted that Soviet fashion trends were quite similar to
those in the West. Then, the so-called «little deal» legitimized the material privileges
of the nomenklatura (the Soviet ruling class elite) through special distribution chan-
nels, which can be interpreted as a quasi-official return to a «petitbourgeois» system
of values – but of course one with the peculiarities of state socialism. Among other
things, the material privileges of the nomenklatura consisted of simplified and privi-
leged access to highly desirable Western clothing and shoes.

On the other hand, the Brezhnev period was marked by double standards in official
attitudes to commodities. Despite the state’s concern about fashion and material
needs, and the build-up of the world’s largest state system of fashion institutions not-
withstanding, the official Soviet fashion discourse not only morally condemned, but
also prosecuted the obsessive cult of Western consumer goods (for example, in pro-
cceedings against fartsovshchiki). However, it must be noted, that such political attacks
on Western fashion were under no circumstances an exclusively Soviet phenomenon.
These attacks can be traced back to Petrine reforms, when fashion was already a topic
debates between Westerners and Slavophiles.

The fact that «trust in the West» was an illegitimate component of official Soviet
«good taste», artificially high prices for Western clothing and shoes, and the scarcity of
these good in the Soviet trade system meant that, in contrast to buying domestic goods,
everyday practices of «obtaining» items of Western clothing were extremely energy-

16 According to V.Dunham, historians use the term «little deal» in opposition to the «big deal» (made by the Soviet state and the middleclass in the 1930s), V.Dunham, In Stalin’s Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction, London, 1990, enlarged and updated. See also J.Millar, «The Little Deal: Brezhnev’s Contribution to Acquisition Social-
17 For a good overview of the discourse of fashion and consumption in the Soviet media during the Brezhnev period see, for example, N.Chernyshova, Soviet Consumer Culture. For a comprehensive overview of Soviet fashion and consumption dis-
courses, and the state fashion organizations, which is based on a vast number of archival sources, see Zhuravlev, Moda po planu.
and time-consuming, expensive and nerve-wracking. Nevertheless, as a result of occasional trips abroad, visits to Soviet Beriozka foreign currency shops and to fartsovshchiki, and regular imaginary consumption of the «West» through feature films and mailorder catalogues, Western clothes and shoes awakened consumers’ deep-seated trust, and imported commodities turned into «commodities comrades» (consumer goods which gave the consumer exactly what they had initially promised); these became an obsessive fetish for Soviet consumers.

The highest place in the Soviet hierarchy of wished-for fashion items was undoubtedly occupied by clothing and shoes imported from capitalist countries – the so-called firmennie, or rodnaia firma. As one of my respondents recalled: «A really well dressed person was dressed in «imported» clothes and shoes, of course...»

Clothing and shoes imported from socialist countries were on the next rung in the symbolic hierarchy of important goods, followed by clothing and shoes from the Baltic states, and then by clothes that women made for themselves. Clothing and shoes of domestic Soviet provenance were at the bottom. For «ordinary» Soviet consumers, clothing and shoes made in socialist countries were less expensive and much more accessible. Unlike capitalist consumer goods, those from socialist states were initially considered examples of «all-socialist fashion» and were free of any negative or «Western» connotations in the official Soviet discourse. Nevertheless, on the level of everyday consumption they were perceived as a substitute for «real» Western things. In daily usage, the Eastern bloc countries were referred to as «our foreign lands» (nasha zagranitsa) and there was a certain informal «topography of socialist state fashion». Thus, Poland was seen as the «Paris of the Eastern bloc». The «Americas» of the Eastern bloc were Hungary with its «jeans socialism» and Yugoslavia with its so-called «socialism mit CocaCola». Thus, in the 1970s a «well-dressed» woman of the «last Soviet generation» could wear, «a Hungarian [coat], or maybe one from Yugoslavia, I don’t really remember. It was about 160 roubles, that was very expensive. My boots are made in the GDR [...]»

But how was fashion from the GDR perceived in the Soviet Union?
2. The Soviet Union and the GDR: Unequal Friends in the Realm of Fashion

On the one hand, the USSR and the GDR had a great deal in common. Both countries treated fashion as a form of «people's education», and as a state and political project. The Soviet Union and the GDR were, in the words of historian Stephan Merl, «industrial cultures of the East European command economy». That is, their consumption level was not conditioned by the level of their economic production, but was explicitly conditioned by political considerations. This was the main difference between socialist and capitalist consumer cultures. The Soviet Union and the GDR had quite similar fashion discourses and they were both «shortage economies». This meant there was one more feature which all socialist countries had in common: the wonderful collections created by the state-run Houses of Fashion coexisted with their awful implementation in mass production.24

On the other hand, despite all these similarities and the sovietization of the GDR in many other fields notwithstanding, Soviet fashion trends seemed to be far behind fashion trends in the GDR.25 It is also important to note that consumer politics in the two countries were quite different. From the Soviet point of view, the GDR, with its thriving fashion press and different types of clothes shops such as Youth Fashion and Exquisit, was the outlier in the field of fashion. As a result, despite the fact that in the Soviet Union haute couture was traditionally associated with France, rather than Germany or even East Germany, the Soviet Union had much to learn from the GDR, which the Soviet mass media pointed out.26 Apart from the official discourse, what symbolic meanings did Soviet female consumers ascribe to East German consumer goods? In other words, could their «trust in fashion made in the GDR» be reduced simply to «trust in the West», or were other things also associated with trust in East German fashion?27

3. Building Trust/Distrust Through Consumption of High and Popular Culture

In general, perceptions of the GDR in the Soviet Union were rather ambivalent. On the one hand, there was a great deal of stereotyped aversion to Germany. However, this were not the result of Soviet citizens' personal interactions with East Germans but rather, it came from consumption of East German popular culture. For example, the plots the Brothers Grimm's fairy tales seemed gruesome. The state-socialist version of the German language was quite out of favour in the Soviet Union (even in Soviet schools for children of members of the Soviet armed forces stationed in East Ger-

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24 On treating socialist fashion as part of the utopian project, see, for example, D. Bartlett, Fashion.
many); the way German sounded was associated with the Second World War. On the other hand, such aversions coexisted with Soviet citizens’ admiration for both German «high culture», for example, architecture or museums (especially if they were seen in person), and the cult figures of East German popular culture, such as the «main Indian» Gojko Mitic, the band «Puhdys» which was considered a socialist version of the Beatles, the «sandman», and so on. The GDR was also greatly respected in the Soviet Union as a country that was very developed technologically (in this respect the GDR was ahead of the other COMECON countries), and this technological superiority was also crucial for building trust in fashion that was made in the GDR.

4. «Typically German»: The Material and Technological Dimensions of Trust

Soviet fashion magazines showed fashions from the GDR from time to time. For example, the magazine Fashion of Socialist Countries (Moda stran sotsializma) regularly published pictures of East German collections provided by official reports from the fashion congresses of the COMECON countries. However, leading fashion magazines, including the Journal of Fashions (Zhurnal mod), played a rather insignificant role in helping Soviet women navigate the world of fashion. These magazines were too expensive for most consumers and, what was even more important, the sewing patterns they offered were of poor quality.

As a result, fashion magazines from the GDR such as PRAMO (the magazine’s full name is Praktische Mode or Journal of Practical Fashion but it was usually referred to in its abbreviated form) or Sibylle, which were, in principle, sold in Moscow and some other big cities, presented the fashion image of the GDR to Soviet consumers. Compared to the very expensive and ambitiously designed Sibylle, PRAMO was more popular with Soviet women, especially those who were able to sew. As one of my respondents recalled, «I began to sew at home, tried sewing patterns from Models of the Season and other Soviet magazines, but I absolutely can’t remember about it! However, I remember quite clearly, that all, really all sewing patterns from East German magazines were just ideal ones... I was quite happy with PRAMO, well, I took excellent Soviet fabrics and sewed according to PRAMO».28 In contrast to the rather imprecise patterns in the domestic Journal of Fashions, sewing patterns from PRAMO were considered prime examples of German «accuracy» and, therefore helped to build trust in East German fashion and its «practicality». In this context it was not domestic, but East German sewing patterns that became «comrades» for Soviet consumers – they gave just what they promised.

From these «technological» interactions with East German sewing patterns came symbolic meanings which were ascribed to ready-to-wear clothing and shoes from the GDR. Among these symbolic meanings were characteristics that, from the Soviet point of view, represented «typical German virtues»: «breathtaking quality», «loving attention to detail», and «practical style».

28 Interview with G.A.
Finally, there was the Soviet consumer’s trust in technological innovations from the GDR, such as the development of synthetic fabrics (for example, Dederon and Malimo). For many Soviet people the GDR was associated with «plastic things and synthetics in general». These innovations brought a highly industrially developed consumer society’s technological advances into the Soviet Union, where the chemical industry did not work particularly well with light industry.

Fashion magazines from the GDR not only offered readers perfect sewing patterns – they also introduced a new, unknown and beautiful everyday life universe to Soviet women. The illustrations in PRAMO, Sibylle, Neue Berliner Illustrierte, Für Dich, or Neues Leben brought more than East German fashion alone to Soviet consumers. This imaginary consumption produced very eigensinnige and emotional perceptions of «proper socialism». As one of my respondents recalled, «the GDR [had] proper socialism, there were no shortages».

One of the key dimensions of trust in this «proper socialism», apart from an abundance of consumer goods, was the sensuous dimension represented by East German underwear. As one of my respondents recalled: «W[e] lived in the provinces, and for us it was so that the underwear practically came exactly from the GDR... People used to say about high quality underwear things like «This underwear looks like East German [underwear]!» Indeed, tights and bras made in the GDR differed from those made in the USSR because they were so enjoyable to wear and, therefore, mediated love of the female body: «I found stockings made in the GDR especially hot! Wearing them, you walk alone and you feel like a real woman!» East Germany was much less prudish than the Soviet Union and, therefore opened a window to the world of sensuality for Soviet women – through both its material goods (such as underwear), and its popular culture, for example Soviet television broadcasts showing East German ballets at the Friedrichstadtpalast, or even stickers with images of attractive women, which were objects of fascination for nearly every Soviet young man.

5. «Trickle Down» from the «West»: Spatial and Emotional Dimensions of Trust

Along with trust in fashion made in the GDR as trust in «typical German» virtues and «proper socialism», «trust in the West» was probably the most important symbolic connotation of trust in the GDR. Firstly, this meant trust in East German clothing and shoes were seen as accessible substitutes for their capitalist «opposite numbers» (for example, Jugendmode brand jeans as a substitute for jeans with an American label).

Secondly, trust in East German fashion had the symbolic meaning of trust in the GDR as a channel for the «trickle down» from the capitalist West into the USSR. Quite
a few Soviet people were able to travel to capitalist countries but most ordinary Soviet citizens could not. However, the capitalist West was omnipresent in the everyday life universes of ordinary Soviet consumers as an «imaginary West» that not unsurprisingly was not an accurate image of the actual West. This changed in 1987, when the West German fashion magazine Burda Moden officially gained a foothold in the Soviet Union. Burda Moden was the first Western fashion magazine to be officially published in Russian and it rapidly became the most popular fashion magazine in the Soviet Union. However, the original West German edition of Burda Moden had already been omnipresent in the Soviet Union since the 1960s. Burda Moden and other Western fashion magazines and mail-order catalogues such as Otto, Quelle, or Neckermann were regularly brought to the USSR. With help from East German friends, they were read collectively, in groups rather than individually, were shared and circulated between members of labour collectives, friends etc., and in many cases have been preserved until the present day. In this way, the Soviet consumer’s «trust in the West» overlapped quite well with the typically Russian and later Soviet trust in the communities of «joint responsibility». Because of the impossibility of ordering something from these catalogues, their consumption was reduced to – or probably enriched as – explicitly imaginary consumption, which was like imaginary travel abroad. This obsession with the «West», which was generally typical of Soviet consumers, was nourished even more during visits to the GDR, where the capitalist West was omnipresent not only in its imaginary form, but also as something that really existed as West German television, West-Pakete etc.

Now I would like to turn to the «cultural biography» of the East German clothing and shoes consumed by Soviet women in the contexts of domestic Soviet and East German consumer cultures. How were the three key symbolic connotations of trust influenced by these different contexts and by everyday practices of purchasing, wearing, and preserving commodities?

6. The «Birth» of the Commodity, or «Getting» and «Obtaining» in the Soviet Union

East German clothing and shoes were in rather scarce supply in the Soviet Union, especially in the provinces. On the one hand, this automatically led to consumers’ trust in these commodities. On the other hand, it resulted in the total absence of depersonalized consumer trust in the Soviet state supply system – that is, particular people were trusted, but not the system itself. Apart from the philosophy of self-reliance, an important Soviet strategy for coping with shortages was to «count on others» – acquaintances, connections, or blat. Indeed, one of the central questions in late Soviet consumer culture was the question of where to go to «obtain» something. Acquiring

knowledge of the «secret geography of scarce goods» was a survival skill for Soviet consumers. The Soviet Trade Ministry’s chaotic planning regularly led to some regions being flooded with certain consumer goods while other regions suffered from shortages of exactly those commodities. Therefore, purchasing highly desirable East German clothing and shoes for the most part only took place occasionally, especially in the provinces.

In the context of increasing shortages, the possibility of shopping in Moscow (for example, in Leipzig, a special shop which sold consumer goods, made in the GDR) was particularly significant or rather almost existential.35 As one of my respondents remembered what she was wearing for her passport photo when she travelled to the GDR in 1972: «[I]t was a staple blouse, just to the waist and so on – we didn’t have those ones of Soviet manufacture! I bought it in Leipzig in Moscow.»36

It was also possible to purchase East German clothing and shoes both in the capital and the regions in special shops, those that served a defined and limited clientele, such as Defence Ministry retail shops or the so-called Salon for Newlyweds. As one Soviet man recalled in a post on his blog, «as a student, I made three or four applications for a marriage certificate at ZAGS with various female classmates, but I didn’t intend to create a strong Soviet family at all. We thirsted after acquiring things […] I bought a jacket [in the Salon for Newlyweds], made in the GDR […]»37

Finally, another strategy for obtaining East German goods, which was also based on personalized trust, but without spatial limitations, was penfriendship with East Germans, which was often enriched by «West parcels» (West-Pakete) from the GDR containing blue jeans or sneakers or other desirable goods.38

7. The «Birth» of the Commodity, or «Just Buying» and «Shopping» in the GDR
Everyday practices of purchasing East German clothing and shoes in the GDR itself were characterized by the Soviet consumer’s virtually unlimited depersonalized trust in the East German state supply system, which was not the case when they were dealing with the Soviet supply system. Visiting and staying in the GDR, Soviet women consumers experienced shopping in the GDR as a «small personal consumer revolution». The German Democratic Republic, a society of shortages for its own citizens, was a society of prosperity for Soviet consumers. The totally different and «foreign» East German culture of trade (as evidenced by Soviet people’s fascination with the abundance of goods, beautifully arranged and nicely wrapped packages, the aroma of freshly brewed coffee, the friendly manners of saleswomen etc.) surpassed all their initial expectations and what they had imagined, and therefore contributed to even more trust in goods made in the GDR as trust in the materialization of «proper social-

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35 See A. Tikhomirova, «V 280 km».
36 Interview with G. A.
37 Aleksei, «Svad’bi», in: http://dedushkin1.livejournal.com/61819.html, 20.06.2007. As Aleksei’s blog post indicates, applicants for a marriage certificate were given an «invitation» booklet that allowed them to shop in special shops for wedding attire.
ism». On returning to the USSR, Soviet consumers ecstatically told their friends and colleagues about their shopping experiences in the GDR, and these stories sounded very similar to those ones East Germans told about their shopping tours to West Germany.

It is important to note here that all these miracles of the East German consumer paradise were enjoyed first and foremost by those Soviet women who were able to stay in the GDR for a long time. The most numerous group of such women were the wives of Soviet Army officers, who lived in closed military garrisons all over the GDR.39

On the one hand, the Soviet leadership tried to isolate Soviet army officers and their families in the GDR and, as much as was possible, keep them from having any contact with East German citizens. On the other hand, such complete isolation was hardly possible in everyday life. For example, the very good material conditions of Soviet army officers’ lives allowed them and their families to take part in the «consumer paradise» in the GDR. So, these privileged Soviet consumers took advantage of being able to go to clothing shops to get reliable information about current fashions.40

For instance, there were fashion shops called Youth Fashion which reinforced Soviet consumers’ trust in the GDR not only as a country with «proper socialism», but also as a substitute for the capitalist West, for example, as a place where it was possible and easy to buy jeans. As for the USSR, there were no such youth fashion shops until the end of the 1980s (when it was already too late). There were also no Exquisit shops in the Soviet Union, where the most fashionable and rather expensive clothing and shoes made in East Germany were sold in limited quantities. Visits to Exquisits reinforced the trust of Soviet consumers in the GDR as a country with «proper socialism».

As one of my respondents, the wife of a Soviet army officer, recalled about Exquisit:

[T]here were mannequins in evening dresses there, a lot of evening dresses! I remember it so clearly, as if it occurred just yesterday! ...We had to take our children to school in a town called Wittenberg, and there was this Exquisit! It was a boutique with the latest fashion hits. And when it was my turn to take the kids to school, I saved up extra money and bought myself something elegant and chic, something that was impossible to find in ordinary clothing shops, even in the GDR. Well, by the way, I understood already in those times, that there were commodities that were probably hidden from us in order to sell them to their «own» people, I mean, not to the Soviets, but to East Germans. I think the clothes that were not good enough for East German women, or that were too expensive for them, well, the saleswomen from Exquisit showed us those things. Well, in the GDR they had an economy of shortages as well.41

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Thus, Soviet women consumers’ trust in East German consumer culture as trust in «proper socialism», which was initially unlimited, became relativized. After living in the GDR for some time, Soviet women identified some typical elements of the «sovietization» of the East German culture of trade, such as «hoarding» scarce consumer goods, using personal connections (blat), and so on. However, awareness of these elements of «sovietization» did not play an important role (indeed it was quite a minor role) in building the Soviet consumer’s trust/distrust of consumer goods made in the GDR. Much more crucial for the building of the aforementioned three key symbolic connotations of trust was Soviet women’s general fascination with the everyday style of life in East Germany. In general, Soviet people in the GDR felt like they were in a «Western» country, not in a land of socialist brothers and sisters.\(^4^2\)

Now I will look at the «life» of East German goods (in other words, the everyday practices of wearing East German clothing) as part of the «cultural biography» of East German commodities consumed by Soviet women in the both domestic Soviet and East German fashion space.

8. The «Life» of the Commodity, or Clothes Made in the GDR as a Medium of Social Distinction

The initial key symbolic connotations of everyday consumer trust in fashion made in the GDR were reinforced in the course of everyday practices of wearing East German things in the Soviet Union.

On the one hand, as mentioned above, these items of apparel were an important medium of distinction in «domestic» Soviet space. As one of my respondents recalled about her dress made in the GDR: «[A]s far as I remember, there was the only one of this dress in our team [at work], nobody else had such a dress! You can see the photo here – everybody is just wearing ordinary pullovers or jackets, blouses. Well, and as for colours, there were brown, light brown, and glaring yellow, this dress was very eye catching, I enjoyed it.»\(^4^3\)

However, the boundaries marking a distinction between what was «legitimate» and «illegitimate» were rather fuzzy. When ideologically sanctioned forms of «individuality» faded into ideologically frowned upon forms of «overdressing», quite often this resulted in «social disciplining». As one Soviet woman recalled about her return to the Soviet Union after a stay in the GDR: «We came back just before the school exams, and my daughter put on the suit which we bought in the GDR – a velvet one, with a skirt, in dark colours. Well, she was thrown out of the classroom! Then, I was called to go to the school to give explanations about why I dandified my daughter in such a way. I mean, my daughter was dressed very modestly, but nevertheless, her dress was in contrast with the others. And still, such hostility, such jealousy!»\(^4^4\) Such extreme con-

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\(^4^3\) Interview with I. B. (born 1953, chemist, Iaroslavl), 15.06.2008.

\(^4^4\) Interview with E. M.
trol over what pupils wore to school prevailed in Soviet schools until the end of the Soviet Union. Thus, the Soviet school quasi-conserved the repressive mode of Soviet fashion and consumption discourse, which was more typical of the 1950s–1960s, than the 1970s–1980s.

9. The «Life» of the Commodity, or Soviet Women in the GDR

Living in the GDR influenced the ways in which Soviet women understood their own social, gender, and national identities, but time spent in the GDR also had a powerful influence on the symbolic meanings of trust in East German clothes and shoes and ideas about what constituted «good taste». Clothes and shoes made in the GDR were definitely more fashion-forward than Soviet garments and footwear. As a result, Soviet women no longer trusted the clothing and shoes that they had brought from the USSR. As one Soviet woman recalled, «I brought my fur coat with the white fox collar to the GDR, it was very fashionable in the Soviet Union. Then, I had also another fur coat with a silver fox collar, it was the dernier cri, both coats were brand new! Well, in the GDR I didn’t wear them at all».

Thus, ideas about what constituted «good taste» proved to be quite different in the Soviet Union and the GDR. The Soviet habit of trying to be overdressed for any and every reason was not relevant for East German consumers. East Germans were also willing to experiment and take fashion risks, and they mixed styles in a way that Soviet consumers had never dared to try. The notion of strictly age-appropriate dress – which was self-evident from the Soviet point of view – hardly existed in the GDR, at least in the 1980s. At that time Soviet officers’ wives had mixed feelings about elderly, corpulent East German women in trousers and on bicycles; it was a shock to the way they understood femininity and masculinity. As one Soviet woman recalls, «Nobody wore dresses here! And we, we always wanted to look beautiful! When anybody went out in a skirt, then it was one of «ours», one of the Soviet women. East German women wore only trousers, without exceptions! And then, it’s curious, but I didn’t see any East German women in sleeveless overalls, and I lived there for five years!» From the Soviet point of view, the entire population of the GDR dressed in jeans and parkas.

Thus, Soviet and East German fashion notions clashed. In other words, a penchant for wearing clothes of a «Byzantine luxuriousness», or rather the historically conditioned, dandified Russian consumer mentality collided with German Protestant ethics and Prussian asceticism. Indeed, one feature of the consumer habitus of the late Soviet homo consumens consisted of a strong orientation towards conspicuous consumption. On the one hand, this can be interpreted as a component of the Russian national character. Despite the fact that since the Petrine reforms Russian fashion developed along the same lines as Western fashion (although the former was always a little bit behind), national Russian peculiarities quite noticeably came to light in the course of

45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
this development.\textsuperscript{47} For example, Russian dandies of the nineteenth century attached much more importance to expensive accessories such as diamonds or watches than their English or French «colleagues». Moreover, Russian dandies were always «overly» concerned about their appearance, an excessive concern that came from the sense that Russia lagged behind in the European fashion space. This culminated quite logically in the notorious Soviet slogan «to catch up and overtake [capitalists]».\textsuperscript{48}

On the other hand, the state-socialist shortage economy itself also created a specific type of state-socialist materialism. Because of the above-mentioned peculiarities of the Russian national character, this materialism was the more pronounced in the Soviet Union than in the other socialist countries, although it was politically rather illegitimate.\textsuperscript{49}

Nevertheless, Soviet women tried hard to accommodate their style to East German notions of stylishness. It took approximately six months in the GDR for the Soviet newcomers to assimilate to East German style. In their first months in East Germany they still wore the clothing and shoes that they had brought from the USSR (skirts, fur coats, the headscarves that elderly Soviet women used to wear), so their amused East German neighbours tried to guess how long they had been in the country: «A newcomer? A newcomer?» «Long-serving» Soviet army officers were supposed to end their tour of duty in the GDR after five years, and then it was time for new officers and their wives to arrive.\textsuperscript{50} Several months after coming to the GDR, Soviet women gradually changed their clothing style. As one of my respondents recalled, having shown me a photograph taken in the GDR, «When we came to the GDR, we immediately began to look at the East German style of dressing – these parkas and so on, we didn't want to stand out from the crowd there! On the photo, the man on the left is wearing a parka, the woman near him – a very fashionable coat, well and the woman on the right, with an umbrella – you see, she is a typical newcomer, she just came from the Soviet Union and it wasn’t yet possible for her, to purchase Western clothing».\textsuperscript{51}

Formal imitation of the East German style of dressing notwithstanding, the consumer habitus of Soviet women remained the same during and after living in the GDR. Basic ideas about what constituted Soviet «good taste», such as the above-mentioned «luxuriousness» and other notion, did not line up with the East German concept of fashion. Nevertheless, Soviet consumers’ trust in the material things made in the GDR continued to exist and resulted in the very widespread everyday practice of purchasing clothing and shoes in East Germany, but wearing them in the Soviet Union in accordance with Soviet behavioural codes of dressing.

\textsuperscript{47} For an overview of Russian fashion and clothing consumption from the eighteenth century to the October revolution see, for example, R.Kirsanova, \textit{Russkii kostiium i byt 18–19 vv.}, Moscow, 2002; C.Ruane, \textit{The Empire’s New Clothes: A History of the Russian Fashion Industry, 1700–1917}, New Haven, 2009.

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\textsuperscript{49} For Russian dandies’ conspicuous consumption, see O.Vainstein, \textit{Dendi. Moda, literatura, stil’ zhizni}, Moscow, 2006, 494ff.

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10. Conclusion

We can find clothing and shoes made in the GDR in post-Soviet wardrobes even today – Soviet consumption was never-ending consumption. As one of my respondents recalled, showing a photo of herself in a fur coat in the 2000s: «[T]his fur coat, remodelled from that fur coat, which my mom bought in the GDR in Soviet times (the white mink is a new one, and the cut is also new, there is only the black ... from the old fur coat [...]».

On the one hand, socialist society was a «repair society», characterized by regular practices of adapting and reconstructing consumer goods. Generally, even «discharged» consumer goods were not thrown away, but were preserved instead, «just in case». On the other hand, in the post-Soviet period these commodities were, and still are, part of late Soviet collective memory, and serve as the material form of nostalgia for a «normal» Soviet life and a «normal» Soviet biography.

In other words, Soviet consumers’ trust in East German commodities structured not only the consumer, but also the universe of lived experience of Soviet people. It is quite obvious that for Soviet consumers consumption of this apparel was an «escape valve» which allowed them to vent their frustration about the domestic shortage economy and barely accessible, but extremely desirable capitalist goods. Secondly, in the course of the everyday practices of consumption of clothing and shoes made in the GDR, which included the ability of East German clothes to convey the wearer’s distinctiveness, numerous meanings of «trust in the West» developed. Moreover, the political dimension of trust in the commodities made in the GDR cannot be reduced to distrust in the actual Soviet state in which consumers were living. Instead, this distrust coexisted with trust in the idealtheoretical version of socialist society. This type of hybrid trust in imported goods from Eastern bloc countries can be interpreted as one of the «trust regimes» which was responsible for the functioning of the Soviet civilization as a whole in the Brezhnev era.

52 Ibid.

Trust in the West or «West-Pakete» from the GDR?!
Consumption of East German Clothing by Soviet Women in the Brezhnev Era

The article aims to challenge the widespread assumption in the historiography that, in the Brezhnev era, the «trickle-down» of Western fashion into the USSR undermined not only consumers’ trust in Soviet goods, but also trust in the «Soviet» itself. However, the overwhelming majority of studies explicitly consider only capitalist countries the «West». These studies fail to take into account the mediated «trickling down» of the West into the Soviet Union through consumer goods imported from socialist states such as the GDR. In my article, I argue that this phenomenon can be seen as one of the stabilising mechanisms that allowed Soviet civilisation to function. Drawing primarily on oral history interviews that I conducted and memoirs written by Soviet women of the «last Soviet generation» (A. Yurchak), I identify channels, dimensions, levels and functions of trust-building in the everyday practices of both imaginary and actual consumption of East German goods. One of the key symbolic connotations of Soviet consumers’ trust in fashion made in the GDR was «trust in the West». This trust also comprised «trust in the typical German virtues» and «trust in proper socialism». The latter type of trust indicates that the political dimension of trust in commodities made in the GDR cannot be reduced to distrust in the actual Soviet state; instead, this distrust coexisted with trust in the ideal-theoretical version of a socialist society.

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