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MAX WEBER PROGRAMME

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PURCHASING CARS UNDER SOCIALIST CONDITIONS.

Luminita Gatejel

EUROPEAN UNIVERSITY INSTITUTE, FLORENCE
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Abstract

This paper gives a panoramic mapping of the infamous socialist ‘economy of shortages’ (Kornai) as it was lived and experienced by ordinary socialist citizens. It starts out by framing the general conditions under which private consumption took place in the Soviet Union, East Germany, and Romania in the last three decades of real existing socialism. Consumption issues were settled throughout the Eastern Block in the form of bargains between the state authorities and the population, in which political obedience was traded for material satisfaction. And cars were among the major assets to be distributed, especially as the amount produced could hardly cover the demand. The paper provides several examples of how the official politics of shortages dealt with this issue using politically motivated preferential distribution. In a step further, it elaborates on the inventiveness of the citizen in bending the rules of retail. These subterfuges in the shadow economy constantly challenged planned rationality and in the end wore out the ideology of official consumption.

Keywords

State socialism, Romania, the Soviet Union, East Germany, automobiles, consumption, distribution, everyday life, scarcity.

Introduction

What was socialism and why did it fall? Over a decade has passed since Katherine Verdery boldly asked this question.¹ While the existing body of research cannot yet deliver an exhaustive answer, certain more recent studies do provide information about how socialism ‘worked’.² This article is intended to be a contribution to this endeavour. It deals with private consumption in a comparative frame using examples from the Soviet Union, East Germany and Romania during the last three decades of ‘real existing socialism’. Central to my enquiry is the personal automobile, as one of the most hard to get consumer goods in the Eastern Block. The analysis is focused on the highly complicated act of buying a car under the conditions of widespread scarcity, as the process of obtaining an automobile offers a wonderful opportunity to look both into the consumption planning mechanism and into everyday life.

Chronic shortages, stiff retail quotas and bottlenecks belonged to the most prominent endemic flaws of planned economies. The accuracy of this statement is beyond any doubt, and was brilliantly illustrated by Janos Kornai and his followers.³ But whereas for them this represents the end of the journey and a crushing verdict on the failings of the socialist economy, for me it will be the starting point for further argument, as I am mainly interested in what effects this systemic shortcoming had on private consumption and on the organisation of everyday life. Both the bureaucratic apparatus and the citizens in the Soviet Union, the GDR and Romania had to cope with the defective and failing system of a planned economy. The goal of this paper is to show the intricate and sometimes obscure ways through which cars reached their future owners. Its purpose is twofold: on the one hand I seek to decipher the logic of the car distribution policy and on the other I look into the alternatives socialist citizens found to official retail. More particularly, it should illustrate how the famous ‘economy of shortages’ was lived and experienced at grassroots level.

The first two sections give overviews both of the ‘automobile revolution’ in the Eastern Block and of the historiography on late state socialism. I start my examination by looking at the official retail plans for private cars and analyse the criteria socialist planners used when distributing this scarce good. Furthermore, I turn to alternative ways of purchasing cars (both legal and illegal). Finally, I describe the very day on which socialist citizens went to pick up their longed for car after so many years of waiting and how this turned into a nerve-racking and humiliating experience. I pay special attention to the interaction between rulers and ruled when coping with widespread scarcity and on the effects these frictions had on official car distribution. Generally speaking, by emphasising the clash between planned rationality and the shadow economy or alternative markets, I want to show how state socialism delegitimized itself during the last three decades of its existence.

The socialist automobile revolution

Mass motorisation campaigns unfolded differently in the three countries. The GDR could build on a long automotive tradition. In the Volkswagen, Nazi rulers created a new consumer desire and the East German successor state could only react to these pre-existing automobile desires among the

¹ Verdery, Katherine: What Was Socialism, and Why Did It Fall?, in: Verdery, Katherine: What Was Socialism and What Comes Next, Princeton 1996, S. 19-38.

² Just a small selection: Reid, Susan E.: Khrushchev Modern. Agency and Modernisation in the Soviet Home, in: *Cahiers du Monde Russe*, 47 (2006), 227-268; Merkel, Ina: Utopie und Bedürfnis. Die Geschichte der Konsumkultur in der DDR, Köln 1999; Stitzel, Judd: Fashioning Socialism. Clothing, Politics and Consumer Culture in East Germany, London 2005; Zatlin, Jonathan R.: The Currency of Socialism. Money and Political Culture in East Germany, Washington 2007; Cioroianu, Adrian: Pe umerii lui Marx. O introducere în comunismul românesc, București 2005; Hilton, Matthew and Mazurek, Malgorzata: Consumerism, Solidarity and Communism: Consumer Protection and Consumer Movement in Poland, in: *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 42, No. 2, April 2007, 315-343; Lindenberger, Thomas: Die Diktatur der Grenzen. Zur Einleitung, in: Lindenberger, Thomas (Ed.): Herrschaft und Eigen-Sinn in der Diktatur. Studien zur Gesellschaftsgeschichte der DDR, Köln 1999.

³ The by now standard work: Kornai, Janos: The Socialist System. The Political Economy of Communism, Princeton 1992.

population. The sudden success of the Volkswagen in the Federal Republic raised the pressure.⁴ As political decision makers and the population were constantly comparing themselves with the Federal Republic, it left planners with no other option than to introduce private cars on a mass scale. The only difficulties that the producers encountered were of a practical nature: due to the lack of metal sheets during the embargo imposed on them by the West in the rising tensions of the Cold War, engineers had to resort to spectacular solutions. The perfect metal ersatz was found in a plastic fibre that was used for the chassis of the East German people's car, the *Trabant*. Together with the more luxurious model, *Wartburg*, the two cars would make the GDR, along with Czechoslovakia, the first mass motorised country in the Block.⁵

In the early Soviet Union automobiles were the most salient status symbol for the nomenklatura and Stakhanovits. This was a politically motivated gesture, to endow the new Stalinist elite with social prestige. At the same time, popular opinion placed private cars outside a socialist society envisioned as collectivist and egalitarian.⁶ Stalin's follower, Khrushchev, pioneered an alternative concept to private ownership in the form of urban car rental centres. This rental system was meant to grow to be the model for a socialist vision of a fair and economical usage of cars, but failed to be implemented on a mass scale.⁷ As such, the change to support a fully fledged private motorisation programme after 1964 came as a surprise. The motor car sector became a top governmental priority under Brezhnev. Investment programmes in the automobile industry were justified by increased consumption rates and international economic prestige.⁸ As a result, in the newborn car city of Togliatti on the Volga, up to 700,000 vehicles were produced annually, and by the beginning of the 1970s, the number of automobiles had already doubled.⁹ In sum, the Soviet Union finally reached GDR levels nearly a decade later, and after embarking on the 'Khrushchevian detour.'

Socialist Romania was a genuine late-comer to the world of the automobile, and one might even say that the new car was given to a suspicious population. In 1966 a contract was signed with the French automobile manufacturer, Renault, to purchase a production licence. The first Romanian automobile plant was constructed in close proximity to the town of Pitești where the Dacia – local versions of the Renault 8 and 12 – were to be assembled.¹⁰ The Dacia project stands for a perfect example of a motorisation plan 'from above'. Car ownership was a new phenomenon in the mid 1960s, a time when Romanian consumers were more oriented towards acquiring fewer 'mobile' goods (such as the flats being built extensively on the outskirts of towns). If there was a demand for cars, then it was scattered and very diffuse. As such, the Romanian 'national' car was at its core a political ambition of the ruling circle around Ceausescu. They were led by the ultimate goal of turning overnight an agrarian oriented society into a progressive, fully-industrialized country. In other words, Romania constitutes an interesting case of a socialist regime taking up a modernisation plan in order to catch up and overtake not only the West, but also more-developed 'brother countries'.¹¹

⁴ König, Wolfgang: Volkswagen, Volksempfänger, Volksgemeinschaft. 'Volkspunkte' im Dritten Reich. Vom Scheitern einer nationalsozialistischen Konsumgesellschaft, Paderborn 2004, 151-155; Hans Walter Hütter (Ed.): VW Käfer ... und er läuft und läuft und läuft, Bonn 2005, 28-30.

⁵ Zatlin, Currency, 206-209.

⁶ Davies, Sarah: Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror Propaganda and Dissent, 1934-1941, Cambridge 1994.

⁷ Gatejel, Luminita: The Wheels of Desire. Automobility Discourses in the Soviet Union, in: Manfred Grieger and Corinna Kuhr-Korolev (Ed.): *Towards Mobility. Varieties of Automobility in East and West*. Wolfsburg: Volkswagen 2009, 31-41.

⁸ Kosygin, A. N., Povyshchenie nauchnoy obosnovannosti planov – vazheyschaya zadacha planovnykh organov, *Planovoe Khozyaystvo* 42, no. 4 (1965), 3-10.

⁹ Siegelbaum, Lewis H.: Cars for Comrade. The Life of the Soviet Automobile, Ithaca 2008, 86.

¹⁰ ANIC (Archivele Naționale Istorice Centrale), Fond C.C. al P.C.R., Cancelarie, dosar nr. 105/1966, Stenograma ședinței Comitetului Executiv al C.C. al P.C.R. din 16. august 1966.

¹¹ Tismaneanu, Vladimir: Stalinism for all Seasons. A Political History of Romanian Communism, Berkley 2003, 170f; Alina Pavelescu, Charles de Gaulle și marile ambiții ale comuniștilor români, mai 1968, in: *Archivele Totalitarismului* 48/49 no. 3-4 (2005), 191-198, 191.

Generally speaking, the Soviet Union, the GDR and Romania each started in distinct historical circumstances, and each country was guided by divergent motivations. Nevertheless, each country witnessed similar accomplishments and, sooner or later, stumbled over the same problems, even if the accomplishments and problems occurred at chronologically different times. When motorisation plans were started, the governments could proudly point to record production numbers, cars of higher performance, and a fast growing popular culture that surrounded them. In spite of these accomplishments, motorisation figures lagged significantly behind Western levels.¹² At home, motorization plans encountered numerous problems: the rise in productivity could not keep pace with the growing expectations of the population. Mass motorisation in all three countries was soon characterized by manufacturing flaws, distribution problems and long waiting lists. It goes without saying that some local particularities prevailed, but for the argument at stake here they seem of rather secondary importance. Since shortages and deficits posed similar challenges to mass motorisation all over the Block, the three case studies will not be treated separately here.

Deals and Bargains

The effects of the automobile revolution on socialist societies can be fully understood only when taking into consideration the ample body of changes that took place from the late 1950s. Major political changes triggered social and economic adjustments that substantially transformed the Eastern Block. The famous kitchen debate in Moscow, between the Soviet leader and the American vice-president Nixon, over the superiority of either capitalism or socialism in the East-West conflict emphasised the material comfort of citizens as the ultimate proof for the viability of one or other of the two systems. What followed was a change in economic policy throughout the Eastern camp. Every new socialist leader boasted of being a better resource manager than his predecessors and promised greater material comfort to citizens. Economic investments were diverted towards an increased output of food and durables while social benefits were raised.¹³ Consumerism as such was nothing new for socialist societies¹⁴ - the novelty of the ‘consumerist turn’ of the mid 1950s was the number of people it reached and the mass production of commodities.¹⁵ This increased interest in consumption and social policy belonged also to an overall shift in the legitimacy of socialist regimes during the last three decades of their existence. Thus, in ‘the developed socialist society’ material satisfaction turned into an urgent matter that had to be dealt with on the spot and not banished into a supposedly bright and fulfilled communist future.

The first positive effect of this new policy appeared quickly. The general rise in salaries and pensions enabled better access to consumer goods. Almost overnight, products that had been out of reach for the average citizen turned into accessible acquisitions. Moving into the new apartment, rushing into the department store and driving a personal automobile to the seaside were just some of the most widespread images that came to represent this golden age of communist consumption.¹⁶ But

¹² Siegelbaum, Cars, 86.

¹³ Plaggenborg, Stefan: Konsum, in: Plaggenborg, Stefan (Ed.): Handbuch der Geschichte Rußlands. Bd. 5: 1945-1991. Vom Ende des Zweiten Weltkriegs bis zum Zusammenbruch der Sowjetunion, Stuttgart 2001, 811-821, 811; Merl, Stephan: Staat und Konsum in der Zentralverwaltungswirtschaft. Russland und die mitteleuropäischen Länder, in: Siegrist, Hannes et al. (Ed.): Europäische Konsumgeschichte. Zur Gesellschafts- und Kulturgeschichte des Konsums (18. bis 20. Jahrhundert), Frankfurt am Main 1997, 205-243.

¹⁴ On Stalinist consumerism: Gronow, Jukka: Caviar with Champagne. Common Luxury and the Ideals of the Good Life in Stalin's Russia, Oxford 2003; Osokina, Elena A.: Our Daily Bread: Socialist Distribution and the Art of Survival in Stalin's Russia, 1927-1941, Armok 2001.

¹⁵ Reid, Susan E.: Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the De-Stalinisation of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev, in: *Slavic Review*, 61 (2002), 212-252.

¹⁶ Reid, Susan E.: Khrushchev Modern, 228; Chernyshova, Natalya: From Communists to Consumers: Changes in Values, Experiences and Mentality, in: http://www.lse.ac.uk/collections/IDEAS/pdf/chernyshova_seminar_paper.doc, 14-18; Noack, Christian: Coping with the Tourist. Planned and “Wild” Mass Tourism on the Soviet Black Sea Coast, in: Gorsuch, Anne and Koenker, Diane P. (Ed.): *Turizm. The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism*, Ithaca 2006, 281-304.

the economic boom was curbed by several malfunctions of the system. After a splendid take-off, governments gave up the pretence of supplying demand and instead concentrated efforts on dealing with deficits stemming from their modernisation programmes. Waiting lists were supposed to temper the afflux, privileges for specific social and professional groups were meant to direct consumer goods towards strategic segments of the population, while overpricing policies were designed to reverse the process of making more and more durables affordable.¹⁷

But once individual consumption escaped Pandora's Box, it could not be locked up again. Consumers were not the quiet and patient partners politicians imagined them to be, and if the state would not or could not assist them, then need and desire pushed consumers to help themselves; whenever the official market could not meet the buyers' expectations, exchanges were settled on the black market. In their quest for better access to food supplies and consumer goods citizens often went off the beaten track and made their way through side roads. This led to a complicated and opaque network of illegal and semi-legal practices that contrasted the supposedly straight and well ordered system of planned economies. No wonder these hidden transactions on the side came to impersonate more and more the socialist economy per se and not the official planning process.¹⁸

Whenever late socialist times are portrayed in historical literature, descriptions such as 'little deals', 'informal consumerist pact', 'Faustian bargains', 'niche society', 'post-totalitarian society' are at the forefront;¹⁹ all of these terms have in common the notion that the social contract between rulers and ruled was a form of bargain, which promised its citizens a minimal level of welfare in exchange for political obedience. Vaclav Havel has called this the historical encounter between dictatorship and consumer society, where relative prosperity was traded for political stability.²⁰ In this bargain, consumption and the informal economy form an inseparable couple. According to David Millar, the state gave up in silence the claim of controlling all societal activity. Consequently, the rulers invited the population to take up some of the responsibilities. Small private enterprises could be opened legally, while transactions on the verge of illegality were systematically overlooked.²¹ In analyzing this state of affairs one can either proclaim the ultimate failing of planned economies to deal with the material wishes of the population, or see it as a pragmatic solution to solve problems without reforming the system. For the argument at stake here, it is more important to acknowledge that state and society were on the move, adapting to new challenges.

One of these challenges was mass motorisation. In this article I am particularly interested what happened when the 'automobile revolution' met the 'economy of shortages'. Although every citizen was entitled to a new car, production and distribution were overburdened by demand. In all the three countries production numbers reached their peak in the mid 1970s and remained more or less constant over the next fifteen years. As this problem would not be solved by increased production, the state resorted to the same solutions it applied for all other goods: queuing, overpricing and privilege. Nevertheless the case of the automobile is somewhat different from other durables, as it could not be hidden under the counter or be consumed quietly at home. Consumers would compare their cars and exchange information regarding purchase and maintenance. In addition, cars were dependent on a whole system of services to be able to function properly. For the authorities, dealing with the 'cars problem' meant addressing a much more complicated cluster of political, economic and social issues than it did when dealing with other commodities.

¹⁷ Merkel, Utopie, 224.

¹⁸ Siegelbaum, Lewis, On the Side: Car Culture in the USSR, 1960s – 1980s, in: *Technology and Culture*, 50 (2009), 1-22.

¹⁹ Millar, James R.: The Little Deal: Brezhnev's Contribution to Acquisitive Socialism, in: *Slavic Review*, 44 (1985), 694-706; Beyrau, Dietrich: Die befreiende Tat des Wortes, in: Eichwede, Wolfgang (Ed.): *Samizdat: alternative Kulturen in Zentral- und Osteuropa; die 60er bis 80er Jahre*, Bremen 2000, S. 26-37; Siegelbaum, Lewis H.: *Cars, Cars and More Cars: The Faustian Bargain of the Brezhnev Era*, in: *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres in Soviet Russia*, New York 2006, 83-103; Fulbrook, Mary: *Anatomy of Dictatorship. Inside the GDR 1949-1989*, Oxford 1995; Havel, Vaclav: *Versuch in der Wahrheit zu leben. Von der Macht der Ohnmächtigen*, Reinbek 1980.

²⁰ Havel, Versuch, 26.

²¹ Millar, Little Deal, 698.

Retailing scarcity

Every citizen older than eighteen was entitled to order a car. The order could be placed in the sales centre in the district's capital, and only one order was accepted at a time. Although the system was quite simple, it produced many complications over the years. The order was valid only if the actual place of residence was the same as the address entered on the order form. If, for instance, someone moved to another district, he might lose his place in the queue.²² This rule was introduced to discourage multiple orders. Several other regulations were enforced to temper the afflux, such as asking for a certain percent of the car price (in the late 1980s up to 50%) when registering the order.²³ All these measures were ineffective as citizens of the three countries waited in the late 1980s between eight to twelve years for a new car.²⁴ Therefore, if not enough cars were available for every applicant, the authorities wanted at the very least to grant automobiles to those citizens who were politically and economically highly relevant. The waiting list was not a 'democratic' institution - the first to come was not always the first to be served. The applicant could be either in the antechamber of happiness or be put on endless hold.

In this sense, the political elite, along with some other outstanding professional groups, such as members of the Academy of Science, Olympic champions, artists or generals, had immediate access to cars.²⁵ More unexpected is the very clear divide between centre and periphery. For the Soviet Union, cars were mainly concentrated in the western provinces and reached the highest numbers in the two metropolises of Moscow and Leningrad.²⁶ The same pattern is found for the GDR and Romania where Berlin and Bucharest were not only the political and administrative capitals but both also had the highest concentration of consumption goods per capita. This was not the result of a flawed implementation of retail criteria, but was explicitly stated in the configuration of distribution procedures. The car contingent that was supposed to be delivered towards the capitals or important industrial centres, outnumbered by far the remainder that had to cover demand in the rest of the country.²⁷

At this point, I would like to underline two traits of socialist distribution principles which remained unchanged over time and suffered no modification when moving from one country to the other: nomenklatura and urban centres (especially capitals) were consistently favoured. This decision was partially a conscious one – after all, capitals were used as 'showcases' for domestic and international visitors. But it was also an unintentional outcome of the fact that large cities had a better automotive infrastructure – gas stations, repair shops, garages – that restricted cars to densely populated areas. The privileges of the elite were partly caused by favouritism: the same group of people setting the retail numbers were also the ones that primarily received the cars. But this explanation is too simplistic, as one of the pillars of socialist social configuration was the special status of the nomenklatura.

That having been said, one peculiarity of the Soviet distribution policy is particularly striking. Veterans of the Second World War played an outstanding role in the imagery of the post-War Soviet state, since they were the most capable of framing the ideology of the winning Soviet nation in the eyes of citizens. As such, not only did veteran organisations fight from the very beginning for special material gratifications, like pensions or living space, they also had the weight to alter social policy. While in late Stalinism there was a huge gap between the official eulogy of the veteran's virtues and the concrete measures in ensuring them an acceptable living standard, several decisions were passed that granted them special benefits starting in the mid-1950s and continuing into the Brezhnev era.²⁸ According to these laws, the veteran was a key figure in the retail system of consumer goods,

²² Rossijskij Gosudarstvennyj Archiv Ekonomiki (RGAE), f. 465, op. 1, d. 1218, l. 187.

²³ Bundesarchiv Berlin (BAArchB), SAPMO, DY30/ IVA2/6.10/191, o. S.

²⁴ BArchB, SAPMO, DY30/ J IV 2/3A 3701 (Sekretariat), 21.10.1981, 14.

²⁵ RGAE, f. 465, op., 1, d. 1404 (17.10.1973), l. 61.

²⁶ RGAE, f. 465, op. 1, d. 1606, l. 65.

²⁷ BArchB, DL1/22953, o. S., 14.03.1977; SAPMO, DY30/9064, o. S., 21.08.1981.

²⁸ Edele, Mark: Soviet Veterans as an Entitlement Group, 1945-1955, in: *Slavic Review*, 65 (2006), 111-137.

especially automobiles. The small car called Zaporozhets was almost exclusively produced for veterans, including a special model for disabled persons.²⁹ Still, reality looked gloomier than the retail plans would have us assume, as only few veterans actually received a car.³⁰ In addition, making the Zaporozhets the veteran's car brought many disadvantages for the 'regular' owners, as spare parts for the car were exclusively produced for the former.³¹

In contrast, the fact that there is no GDR parallel comes as no surprise. But if we were to replace 'veterans' with 'disabled persons', the differences would not appear that remarkable. If we leave out the war and glory complex, the similarity becomes quite striking: the weakest members of society benefited from special care and attention. In East Germany, disabled persons were also favoured with regard to the distribution of personal automobiles, and a special version of the *Trabant* was designed to compensate for physical disability.³² Families with many children were also included in the same policy.³³ For Romania, no such phenomenon was known, since private cars remained restricted to the higher echelons of power much more than in the other two countries.

These two examples – nomenclatura and disabled persons – represent the two ends of the socialist welfare conception. At one end there is the most prestigious social and professional strata, and at the other, the citizens that were the most dependent on the state's benevolence. However, preferential distribution policies were not only noticeable at the outer margins of the social body. Regular workers and employees also had access to material privileges. Generally speaking, the core of socialist social policies was implemented around state companies. Apartments, for instance, were distributed in this way, and subsidized vacation tickets were handed out through the local trade unions. Several other facilities, such as kindergartens, clubs, and canteens were also financed by companies.³⁴ Access to consumer goods was also facilitated through a distribution system linked to the workplace. In this way, the personal interests of the workers and the macro-economic goals of the administration – even if not overlapping – were inseparably bound together. Using material incentives, managers tried to lure and recruit a young work force. Especially prestigious international projects like the Baikal-Amur Railroad, or the Druzhba-Pipeline would benefit from comprehensive press campaigns to convince skilled workers and university graduates to move to these far away regions. In order to make life next to a construction site more appealing, rewards outside the norm for the general population were approved for them. While other employees had to wait about eight years at the beginning of the 1980s to get a new car, workers in the last wave of socialist mega-projects would get their personal automobile within months of signing their employment papers.³⁵ Young people from the provinces particularly, would put up for a few years with the hardships of living in out of the way places in order to secure for themselves a higher living standard.

Running after material satisfaction was common enough in late state socialism. To be better off, it wasn't always necessary to move all the way out to the furthest reaches of the country. It was enough to find a job in one of the main industrial branches. In the 1970s, the automotive industry in the Soviet Union gained tremendously in reputation, so workers moving to the new automotive towns of Togliatti and Naberezhnye Chelny would be luckier than finding a job elsewhere.³⁶ In the GDR, so-called 'special industrial centres' (*Schwerpunktbetriebe*) had many more possibilities of acting as a

²⁹ RGAE, f. 195, op. 1. d. 81, l. 102f.

³⁰ Edele, Mark: Soviet Veterans of World War II. A Popular Movement in a Popular Society, 1941-1991, Oxford 2008, 211.

³¹ RGANI, f. 5, op. 64, d. 275, l. 31.

³² BArchB., DL 1/22953, o. S., 13.03.1977.

³³ BArchB, DL1/22953, o. S, 22.06.1977; 13.04. 1977; DL1/22952, o. S. 25.05.1977.

³⁴ Kotkin, Stephan: Magnetic Mountain. Stalinism as a Civilization, Berkeley 1995, 238-279; Zimmermann, Susan: Wohlfahrtspolitik und sozialistische Entwicklungsstrategie in den „anderen“ Hälfte Europas im 20. Jahrhundert, in: Zimmermann, Susan et al. (Ed.): Sozialpolitik in der Peripherie. Entwicklungsmuster und Wandel in Lateinamerika, Afrika, Asien und Europa, Wien 2001, S. 211-237, 221.

³⁵ Voronov, V./Smirnov, I.P.: Zakreplenie molodeži v zone BAMa, in: *Sociologičeskie issledovanija*, (1982), 16; BArchB, DL1/22953, o. S, 10.05.1977; 12.11.1976.

³⁶ RGAE, f. 465, op. 1, d. 1579, l. 129, d. 1581, l. 130.

provider of services and consumption goods than an ordinary company.³⁷ Ever since high Stalinism, the outstanding accomplishments of shock workers were bestowed with a life full of material bliss, but this group of workers was just a tiny minority that attained the status of heroes.³⁸ For companies to be systematically involved in the distribution of consumer goods was a later development. As a consequence, two parallel distribution systems emerged: a general one at the district or regional level and one at the company level. When retail plans were put together in the ministries, only the overall number of automobiles, washing machines or refrigerators was fixed; there was still a long way to go until they reached the consumer. That is where companies would step in. In harsh competition with each other, they appealed to the Council of Ministries for special contingents of consumption items to be used as incentives for their workers.³⁹ Prestigious companies (like the ones mentioned before) were more successful. As a result, a worker employed in a strategic economic branch would receive his car two or three years earlier than other citizens that signed on the very same day.⁴⁰

Thus, the main beneficiaries of the automobile revolution in the socialist countries were industrial workers and the urban population. But the countryside was not altogether neglected. Preferential distribution was also used to attract specialists into the villages. A separate contingent of cars was singled out to make the prospect of a position beyond the urban agglomerations more attractive to university graduates.⁴¹ Thus, most personal automobiles in the countryside belonged to the local administrative personnel or to members of the intelligentsia. Otherwise, it was also common to wait longer for a new car in the countryside.⁴² As a rule, high prices made cars out of reach for the poorly paid collective farm workers, making car density in rural areas much lower than in cities.⁴³

Although, the distribution policy for private cars institutionalized hierarchies among regions, social and professional groups and state companies, these were politically motivated decisions. It represented the way in which the authorities were trying (and partially succeeding) to make sense of scarcity. A closer look at the way in which the distribution system really functioned conveys a much more blurry picture. After Stalin's death the general tendency was to include more and more groups in the privilege system. But you can only favour the few to the detriment of others. Soon almost everyone considered themselves entitled to special treatment. At the ministries of consumption of the three countries letters asking for cars outside the line piled up. All possible reasons were invoked and any imaginable merit emphasised.⁴⁴

What we can learn from this practice is that the orderly distribution system crumbled not only because it was overburdened by demand, but also because of privilege and special regulations. Exceptions were undermining the rule. Private car consumption was becoming a matter of bargaining and not of planned rationality. Thus, privilege grew to be more and more diffuse. Everybody (individuals or institutions) was claiming favours. This does not mean that privilege disappeared, but it became much more difficult for authorities to accommodate it with the centralized linear distribution system. Moreover, granting more favours deepened the inequalities between different groups and individuals, but without a clear political motivation.

³⁷ Hübner, Peter: Reformen in der DDR der sechziger Jahre: Konsum- und Sozialpolitik, in: Boyer, Christoph (Ed.): Sozialistische Wirtschaftsreformen. Tschechoslowakei und DDR im Vergleich, Frankfurt am Main 2006, 529.

³⁸ Siegelbaum, Lewis H.: Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935-1941, Cambridge 1988, S. 210-236; Hoffmann, David L.: Stalinist Values: the Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917 – 1941, Ithaca 2003, S. 119.

³⁹ RGAE, f. 465, op. 1, d. 1581, l. 171.

⁴⁰ Hübner, Reformen, 529.

⁴¹ RGAE, f. 465, op. 1, d. 1775, l. 89.

⁴² BArchB, DL1/22953, o. S. (20.06.1977).

⁴³ S61997: Jugend im Dorf 1984, S6086: Alltagsprobleme Jugendlicher in der DDR, Zentralarchiv für Empirische Sozialforschung an der Universität Köln.; BArchB, DL 102/1940, Analyse 1970-1985, S. 57.

⁴⁴ BArchB, DL1/22952; DL1/22952; ANIC, Fond C.C. al P.C.R., Cancelarie, dosar nr. 191/1972, f. 169 (1986); f. 223 (1989).

All you can do is wait?

To wait patiently in line or to use one's social capital to reduce waiting time were not the only two options socialist citizens had at their disposal. As time passed, more possibilities to acquire a car both legally and illegally appeared. To buy a used car was one potential solution to cut the burdensome waiting time. It was an open secret that huge sums were paid for old wrecks. Not to make the real dimensions of demand visible, most buyers forged the selling price, entering smaller sums into the contract.⁴⁵ The purpose here was not to find the exact value of a car, but rather to show that in spite of regulations and control 'real' demand could not be tempered.

Selling a private car was a complicated procedure. At first this was allowed only through official car sales centres. There, a commission of specialists evaluated the car and set a price. Henceforth, potential buyers could register, after which a 'suitable customer' was picked out.⁴⁶ These stipulations were dropped in 1971 as the sales market grew spectacularly, and as employees were overwhelmed by the sheer amount of transactions. As cars were held in such high esteem, 'free' car sales – or selling outside the preview of the car lot – was an invitation for clandestine dealings, and party control committees identified several groups of individuals buying and selling used cars on a regular basis at any given time. The sellers were earning fabulous sums of money.⁴⁷

In the Soviet case, lowering surveillance was in part motivated by the general discontent among the population with the imposed status quo. This relaxation policy did not have a consensus among legislators, and dissenting voices from the lower bureaucracy brought the central authorities to reopen the discussions about this policy, but without introducing restrictions anew. After all, as local authorities were openly complaining about central decisions and citizens were generally asking for more freedom of action, to find a balance between all these conflicting interests was a hard thing to achieve. How much space was to be given to the citizens when dealing with their private possessions was not a settled thing, and instead was under constant revision. Policies went several times back and forth. A different regulation, this time from the GDR, aimed at narrowing down the possibilities of how to sell one's car, when car sales had been 'free' before. In 1972 the so-called *Anbietungspflicht* forced car owners to 'offer' cars no older than six years back to the state. Owners found a way to bend this rule by renting the car first and selling it only when the six years elapsed. When this scheme was uncovered by the authorities, this type of renting was also prohibited.⁴⁸ The cat-and mouse game kept going on.

While acquiring a used car was a complicated transaction, buying a car from an *Intershop* in the GDR was the easiest thing to do. No restrictions applied for cars purchased with foreign money, since it was in the interest of socialist governments to get hold of as much hard currency as possible.⁴⁹ East German citizen in possession of hard currency could order a local car from a catalogue and pick it up only a few months later. Furthermore, money transfers from Western countries to socialist citizens were warmly encouraged and offered them the chance to buy a car without queuing.⁵⁰ It was much more problematic for them to buy cars while working or travelling abroad. A Romanian Central Committee meeting made no secret of the fact that the authorities would rather have those citizens return with hard currency to buy local goods.⁵¹ Even without hard currency, a further way existed to

⁴⁵ As an aside, it is quite difficult as a historian to research selling prices, since real sums were only known by the two contractors. Concrete sums were mentioned only in denunciations or in the interviews I conducted. Personal communication with the author's father and the selling contract for his Dacia 1300, 2-BV-3433, dated 19.12.1985; for denunciation letters that mention prices see BArchB, DL1/22952, o. S. (25.05.1977).

⁴⁶ RGANI, f. 5, op. 66, d. 411, l. 125.

⁴⁷ RGANI, f. 6, op. 6, d. 1813, l. 138.

⁴⁸ BArchB, SAPMO, DY30/ IVA2/ 6.10/191, o. S.; DY30/ 2/3A 2598, S. 41.

⁴⁹ Zatlin, Currency, 243-285; Böske, Katrin: Abwesend anwesend. Eine kleine Geschichte des Intershops, in: Merkel, Ina (Ed.): Wunderwirtschaft. DDR Konsumkultur in den 60er Jahren, Köln 2006, 214-222, 214.

⁵⁰ ANIC, Fond C.C. al P.C.R. - Cancelarie, dosar nr. 4/1972, f. 210.

⁵¹ ANIC, Fond C.C. al P.C.R. - Cancelarie, dosar nr. 4/1972, f. 34-40.

acquire quickly a new car: in all three countries national lotteries offered the possibility to win up to 2,000 cars a year.⁵²

A further tactic to ‘cut the line’ - if you had enough patience, spare time and mechanical skill - was to build the car of your dreams in your back yard. The East German police department for car registrations was assaulted by pleas from several citizens to register their ‘new’ cars. The only problem was that the cars had been manufactured manually, and in most cases they did not correspond to an exact brand, or model. The ‘builders’ argued in favour of their cars and underlined that they complied with safety prescriptions and were fully functional. In some cases, the authorities gave in, in others they stubbornly refused to register the vehicle.⁵³ Generally speaking, tinkering was a large-scale activity in the GDR and a wide spread phenomenon in other bloc countries.⁵⁴

As the above narrative shows, socialist citizens found many ways to get hold of a desired car. Some of their actions were on the verge of illegality, while others were clever enough to ‘bend’ existing regulations. But most poignant was the state in its inconsistent consumption policy: on the one hand, officials were trying to make sense of scarcity through politically motivated preferential distribution, but on the other they were undermining this by granting free access to cars for those who possessed hard currency; they would open used car lots, but would refuse that sellers set their own price; they would decide – apparently without rhyme or reason – which backyard clunkers were ‘suited for the road’ (*fahrtüchtig*) or not. Citizens had to find their way through a jungle of conflicting policies and regulations. And, as will be shown, this did not stop when a citizen was informed that a new car awaited him at the factory lot.

A very special day

The day when a citizen receives notification that the new car has finally arrived is, indeed, one of the brightest moments in life. But this was an illusory bliss for socialist citizens. Bringing the long-awaited car home proved to be a complicated and nerve-racking endeavour, as a tragicomic report in the ‘*Literaturnaya Gazeta*’ revealed. The last day before becoming the proud owner of an automobile was a day of hurdles, and in most cases the day turned into weeks before the car was finally driven home. First, an abstruse paper-warfare commenced, leading the future owners through several offices scattered all around Moscow. Finally, the family in question reached the Southern Port, tired and annoyed. This was the place where the car from Tol’yatti would be delivered. But, in most cases, it would be terribly late, and nobody could tell when the car would actually arrive. The family could not leave the port, since absence in that fatal moment of transaction meant losing one’s place on the waiting-list. Hence, the woman in the family took a few days off and kept watch at the harbour. And when the car arrived after several more crowded and jostling moments, she could at last be driven home by her husband in their brand new car.⁵⁵

As amazing as it might seem, the fictional family depicted in the *Literaturnaya Gazeta* was more fortunate than one in the GDR, which was away working on a cruise ship when the announcement for the new car arrived at their home. Upon their return (after spending several weeks on the ship) they found another letter, letting them know that they lost their entitlement to the car. Since they did not show up at the appointed date, it was understood that they had lost interest in the car, and it was given to another applicant. This decision was taken although a relative has called the local car retail office to excuse their absence. Their indignation materialized in several letters of protest until, in the end, another car was put at their disposal.⁵⁶

⁵² Busch, Tracy Nichols: “A Class on Wheels”: AVTODOR and the “Automobilization” of the Soviet Union, 1927-1935, Georgetown University 2003, unpublished dissertation, 15; Zezina, Maria: The Introduction of Motor Vehicles on a Mass Scale in the USSR: from Idea to Implementation, in: Kuhr-Korelev/Schlinkert, Towards Automobilmism, 47; Lista de căstiguri C.E.C. în autoturisme, trim. II. 1970, in: *Scântea*, 12.08.1970.

⁵³ BArchB., DY30/IVB2/ 215, S. 61; BArchB., DY30/IVB2/ 216, S. 7.

⁵⁴ Möser, Kurt: ‘Autobasteln’: Modifying, Maintaining and Repairing Private Cars in Socialist GDR, 1970-1990. Paper Presented at the Workshop ‘The Socialist Car’, Berlin, Mai 13-14, 2008.

⁵⁵ Il’ina, Natalija: My pokupaem avtomobil’, *Literaturnaja Gazeta*, 47 (1972), 12.

⁵⁶ BArchB, DL1/22953, o. S., 03.06.1977.

Despite such good fortune, being at home and keeping to the appointed date was no guarantee either. After more than eleven year of waiting, another family was summoned to come and pick up their car. Just a few days before the actual delivery, another note arrived telling them that the production of the ordered type VAZ 2103 had ceased. A follow-up model had already gone into production, but the East German authorities could not tell when the exports from the Soviet Union would reach the GDR. All they could do for the moment was urge the buyers to have patience. This outraged the family, especially since they sold their old car immediately after the notification of the new one arrived. In this case, a written protest did not help, since they refused to take a different car type.⁵⁷

It was a completely different situation if a buyer decided, on his own, to change the brand first entered in his application. Given the time required to purchase a car, it seems natural that, after waiting so many years, not only would the consumer's taste change, but also his income level and family status. And after all, new, more fashionable car brands did appear (the Lada and the Dacia, to give just two examples). But the delivery system could not cope with such changes. When a buyer altered his initial choice, he lost his precious place in the infinite queue, prolonging the waiting time. Generally speaking, the retail system was too rigid to take special needs and wishes into consideration. Future car owners could not order extras (for example, the colour).⁵⁸ According to the logic of the day, the rules were, in fact, quite simple: keep with your first choice, take your car from the delivered contingent (irrespective of colour and extras), ignore the minor imperfections, and drive it home as soon as possible. Otherwise, the end of your wait would be postponed into an indeterminate future. But also those modest enough, or just greedy or impatient to take their car home quickly, were to suffer the consequences of their hasty decision. Several owners reported that their brand new automobiles broke down on the way home, or shortly thereafter.⁵⁹ In all cases, the automobile company refused either to repair the damage, or cover the expenses. As was stated in several reports, broken and defective cars were not the few unfortunate exceptions, but rather the rule. Whole contingents were discovered to have left the assembly line damaged.⁶⁰ Bribing the employees at the sales centres helped, but in the end it was just a matter of luck if somebody received a fully functional car or not.⁶¹

Conclusion

Like the house-warming party in the new apartment blocks, the day when socialist citizens went to pick up their cars was supposed to be a celebration.⁶² But so many misfortunes prevented them from enjoying their triumph. As this article has shown, planned economies encountered huge problems when dealing with individual consumption. Like many other commodities, automobiles were to remain scarce for socialist citizens. Therefore, the aura of privilege stuck to the lucky cars owners until the very end. The logic of the Stalinist retail system was to protect the new elite by ensuring them the best possible living conditions. Their plentiful life was to represent, in a nutshell, the future material satisfaction of communism, while the rest of the population still waited for their wishes to come true. These rather exclusive retail practices were opened up in the post war era when more and more citizens profited from the massive redistribution of wealth and income. But in spite of this upward tendency, consumption and welfare programmes reached their limits quite early on. Planned economies seemed poorly equipped to deal with concrete consumption measures. Therefore, consumption policy turned into a management of shortages.

⁵⁷ BArchB, DL1/22953, o. S., 25.05. 1977.

⁵⁸ BArchB., DL 1/22953, o. S., 13.03.1977; 16.06.1977.

⁵⁹ RGANI, f. 5, op. 67, d. 369, l. 84; Neues Leben, 12.12.1973, S. 6; BArchB, DL1/22953, o. S., 13.04.1977; 25.05.1977.

⁶⁰ RGANI, f. 5, op. 69, d. 1159, l. 15.

⁶¹ RGAE, f. 465, op. 1, d. 1028, l. 188.

⁶² Reid, Khrushchev Modern, 228.

The stiff socialist retail system could not cope with the increasingly complex everyday reality of the 1970s and 1980s. It was a long and complicated journey until a car finally reached its future owners. It was not only the burdensome waiting time, but as this article has shown, many more problems occurred on the way. And the state kept contradicting itself. Decisions that directly affected the everyday lives of citizens were under constant revision, oscillating between laissez faire and repression. Sometimes this helped citizens in need, but more often than not brought disturbance in their lives.

However, citizens learned quickly to adapt to shortages and found alternatives to standard allocations. For the amount of time invested in trifles, the efforts they squandered to obtain minor successes and the creative solutions they found, socialist citizens deserve our admiration. Tinkering or acquiring a second hand car were just two examples of their adaptability. It was not only on the grey market that they could buy cars outside the waiting lists. In part, the state was providing them with escape from the constraints of official provision, especially through the chain of shops that sold goods for hard currency. Both second economy and the exceptions provided by the state questioned the logic of official distribution. And this seriously undermined the legitimacy of the entire socialist order.

*Luminita Gatejel,
Max Weber Fellow 2009-2010*

