

révocation se traduisit rapidement par une perte d'autonomie pour les syndicats. Expulsé du Politburo en août 1930, puis relégué durant les années 1930 au poste de directeur d'OGIZ, un vaste conglomérat chargé de la publication de revues savantes et de manuels scolaires, Tomsky, quoique grandement apprécié par ses subordonnés dans ses nouvelles fonctions, subit néanmoins les attaques répétées de Staliniens. Cette campagne de diffamation affecta grandement sa santé physique et mentale. Épuisé, il capitula en 1934 lors du dix-septième congrès du PCUS. À l'image de tant de loyaux communistes, Tomsky se refusa toujours à utiliser contre le parti le formidable pouvoir politique de près de 100 000 syndicalistes-administrateurs répartis dans tous les centres industriels du pays et à rendre publique son opposition, parce qu'il croyait en la nécessité de préserver l'unité à l'intérieur du parti et voulait ainsi éviter toute division qui pourrait lui être fatale. Une telle attitude, de conclure Wynn, « tragically meant that he was not able to mount (an) effective resistance to the Stalinists. » (389)

Bien écrit, quoique truffé d'un nombre anormalement élevé de coquilles, cette monographie rappellera à plus d'un lecteur la très solide biographie d'Alexandre Shlyapnikov (une autre victime de la terreur stalinienne) par Barbara C. Allen (La Salle University) parue en 2015. L'indéniable fruit d'un labeur qui s'est étalé sur plusieurs années (comme en témoignent les 2178 notes en bas de page qui enrichissent le récit, sans l'alourdir indûment), Charters Wynn offre ici une étude définitive de la carrière d'un idéaliste dont les rêves se sont finalement évanouis et qui, en désespoir de cause, eut recours au suicide en août 1936, quelques heures seulement après avoir confessé à son fils Yury : « Je ne suis coupable de rien, mais je ne peux pas vivre sans le parti. » (364) Cette excellente

biographie amènera plus d'un lecteur, soit à tenir Tomsky responsable de son propre malheur pour avoir choisi un parti politique dont les structures et l'idéologie renfermaient en son sein les germes d'une future dictature (celle de Joseph Staline), soit à sympathiser avec le destin tragique d'un homme qui resta fidèle jusqu'à la toute fin à ses convictions – un fait plutôt inhabituel en politique. Chose certaine, personne ne pourra rester indifférent au drame dépeint par Charters Wynn avec une remarquable justesse et une indéniable objectivité. Que demander de plus?

J.-GUY LALANDE

St. Francis Xavier University

**Alexey Golubev, *The Things of Life: Materiality in Late Soviet Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2020)**

THE HISTORY OF objects, commodities, and everyday materiality has come late to Soviet history, but Alexey Golubev's new book is poised to make a major contribution to the field. In both economic and cultural history, Soviet goods have long been described almost exclusively in relation to shortages. Golubev's slim volume, featuring six chapters each with a distinct, fascinating case study, overturns that limited approach to push the field in innovative new directions. In particular, he makes two major contributions: first, *The Things of Life* adds to the growing but still small field of material culture studies in Soviet history, and second, it brings the unique circumstances of late Soviet history to material culture studies. For both audiences, Golubev convincingly argues that elemental materialism, a concept borrowed from Engels and reworked for Soviet ideology, gives Soviet material objects a particularly spontaneous form of agency that could not be governed or controlled. Instead, Soviet citizens interacted with the material world in unique

ways, out of which the human actors developed and strengthened their own sense of selfhood.

Chapter 1 explores the post-Stalin embrace of “techno-utopianism,” a tacit acknowledgement from Nikita Khrushchev in the 1950s and subsequent leaders that the new nuclear world order would involve developing technology for peaceful rather than military uses. Golubev delves into the productivist language of the time (slogans, exhortations, and mass media fantasies) that emphasized machine-forward discourse at the expense of material realities. The section on do-it-yourself engineering magazines is fascinating, as reading and talking about technology, especially by the *perestroika* era in the late 1980s, ran up against a dearth of actual material inventions. Yet Golubev avoids treating this discrepancy as the standard story of government shortages or unfulfilled promises. Rather, he finds deep meaning in the embrace of the imaginary itself. Techno-utopianism as a fantasy of (masculinized) selfhood allowed readers to imagine themselves as equally mechanized and uniquely able. Chapter 2 examines the case study of model building, which brings children’s material agency to the forefront as a theme. Although this was not a new hobby in the late Soviet era, it changed form due to increased postwar access to plastic, as well as a renewed ideological imperative to promote engineering to children. Chapter 3 turns to wood, specifically the almost fetishization of wooden heritage buildings as preservation sites. Materially, the wood in these artifacts (including churches, ships, and other objects from earlier centuries) represented a contiguous history, allowing for pre-20th century sites to become Soviet. This chapter also features some welcome geographic diversity by examining the Republic of Karelia in the Russian north. The architectural preservation movement in Karelia zeroed in on

the texture, or “haptic qualities” (82) of wooden buildings to inspire nostalgia – a welcome nod to recent work on the history of the senses.

Chapter 4 opens the second half of the book, which moves from a focus on educated elites to materiality among the marginalized. Golubev turns here to the Soviet housing boom in the 1950s that promised to create separate apartments for every family after decades of living in Stalin-era communal units. Previous historians of this boom have charted the material concerns of new apartment-dwellers seeking to decorate their private and shared spaces alike according to ideologically proper Soviet aesthetics. But Golubev instead looks at the “missing sites” (91) in this housing literature, pointing out an important class-based fact of Soviet postwar life: by 1990, an estimated 25 million people still lived in dormitories, workers’ barracks, and temporary housing that was never upgraded and lacked basic utilities. As a result, people who lived in these places found other urban spaces in which to spend their time, such as stairwells, basements, yards, garages, and city parks. Golubev calls these areas “Soviet spaces of transit” (92) and investigates their material connections to citizens’ ever-developing sense of things and of selfhood. One of the most haunting parts of the book comes in this chapter, as Golubev draws on the work of Anna Rotkirch on Soviet sexuality to position dark stairwells as cooperative agents for young men looking for sex. Although male memoirists and interview respondents minimized the violence of these episodes, one hopes future researchers will be able to find the voices of teenage girls and young women who surely experienced sex (or rape) in stairwells far differently.

Chapter 5 is the standout chapter, on subversive teenage male bodybuilding. It successfully balances the conflicting

official positions about basement gyms that developed in the 1980s – as socially threatening, on the one hand, since some young men used their brawn to intimidate others in the streets; but socially useful, on the other, as preparation for military service and general fitness for citizenship. Golubev draws on assemblage theory here to innovative effect, in arguing that the particular “assemblage of iron, basements, and bodies generated social agency.” (115) The chapter also touches on sports history, as bodybuilding was not generally welcomed in the USSR’s vast official sports complex, and class, as working-class boys and young men found such gyms especially appealing. The book closes with Chapter 6 on the television set in late Soviet culture, a material object that draws together many of the book’s themes in terms of technology, class, and citizens’ evolving sense of selfhood towards the end of the USSR’s socialist experiment. Golubev discusses a particular type of show – the televised séances that satisfied viewers’ appetite for the paranormal in the late 1980s. This example nicely demonstrates his overall argument about the agency of material objects: the television set itself appeared to conduct healing from the hosts in studio to viewers in their living rooms.

The book’s many innovations also expose it to critique. By covering such an array of case studies, for example, from DIY engineering magazines, to refurbished wooden churches, to basement gyms and other-worldly televisions, Golubev shows how elemental materialism can be used to gain new insight into parts of late Soviet culture that otherwise seem unconnected. At the same time, however, more connections could have been drawn. Golubev does not overtly link Chapter 3 back to Chapter 1, for instance, even though surely DIY rockets and DIY wooden ships were part of the same materiality network. Similarly, the

young men committing sexual violence in the stairwells of Chapter 4 are the same ones spending time tending to their bodies in basement gyms in Chapter 5; more on that connection would have been welcome. The innovation of ascribing agency to material objects, moreover, has the unintended effect of removing it from some of the book’s human actors, especially women.

The book would also have benefitted from more engagement with the multiple social and cultural contexts exerting pressure on citizens after Stalin’s death in 1953. In the chapter on model building, for example, Golubev notes that a technical journal in 1969 called on teenage boys to take up the hobby. Why then? Coming on the heels of changes to prescription laws the previous year that led to fewer 18-year-old men going into military service, was model building part of an effort to keep young men busy – and ideologically productive? Historians have written a great deal about the increasing pluralities in Soviet identities after 1953, especially for young people, who navigated a world with millions of amnestied Gulag prisoners, new non-communal housing options, newly coeducational schooling, and the increased visibility of women in public roles after the war, as well as Stalin’s political purges, decimated the male population. Golubev’s work fits very well with this wider context, but the links could have been made more explicit.

*The Things of Life* is an excellent contribution to Soviet social history for specialists as well as those outside Soviet history – who should find much of use here in how examples from socialist materiality enrich our understanding of consumption, material culture, and thing theory more broadly. Golubev demonstrates an admirable fluency with the theoretical side of this history, bringing Engels, Foucault, and Baudrillard, among others, into his case studies with ease. The

discrete chapters also lend themselves well to individual assignments in courses. It is an important book that offers new ways to think about the late Soviet era and, ultimately, the end of the USSR, with

an emphasis on a positive relationship between the material and the self, rather than only retelling a tale of shortages and scarcity.

ERICA L. FRASER  
Carleton University