

*A Social History of Soviet Trade: Trade Policy, Retail Practices, and Consumption, 1917-1953.* By Julie Hessler. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004. xvi, 366 pp. Illustrations. Tables. Bibliography. Index. \$39.50, hard bound.

This is a fine book on a complex and difficult theme. Life was never easy for most Soviet consumers but it was grindingly hard in many years between World War I and the post-World War II recovery. In a state-dominated economy the government could not escape responsibility; indeed these difficulties often arose in large part from government actions. Julie Hessler has diligently woven the history of state, society, and their interaction into a rich fabric using central and regional government and party archives, official statistics and the press, a wide secondary literature including Russian and western scholarly works and personal memoirs, and interviews.

Historians have debated whether Soviet society was ever truly “normal.” The quest for normality is one theme of this book. Hessler takes issue with the view of Elena Osokina (*Our Daily Bread: Socialist Distribution and the Art of Survival in Stalin's Russia, 1927-1941*, Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe, pp. xii-xiii) that the repression of consumption by means of discriminatory rationing was the main tendency under Stalinism. Rather, she argues, Stalinism had two modes: a crisis mode in which trade and traders were repressed while class discrimination against peasants came to the fore; and a normalization mode in which trade revived, the consumer market was restored, and provisions responded to ruble notes rather than the person offering them. Each crisis phase was sparked by a collapse on the supply side of the consumer market, usually originating in agriculture; the Bolshevik response was culturally bureaucratic and repressive, but the results were typically such that the first steps back to normalization began even before the crisis peaked. In fact, she argues, Stalin approved of non-rationed “cultured” trade and the possibility of a consumption oriented life-style for the workers but the frequency of crises rendered these an elusive goal.. On her calculation the Soviet retail market was in crisis mode from 1917 to 1922, 1928 to 1933, and 1939 to 1947, in other words for 21 of the 37 years from the Revolution to Stalin’s death. Not until the 1950s did the Soviet consumer truly enter a new era.

Three parts of the book correspond to the three great crisis periods. Within this framework Hessler dissects the alternating phases and their many aspects with great skill. She shows clearly how trade did not disappear when repressed; it was denationalized and moved from the store to the street. There is much fascinating description. When times were bad, the urban participation in trade actually increased because everyone became a seller in order to buy what they lacked most, usually food or firewood. Socialist bureaucrats failed to achieve the expected scientific, law-governed results; officials charged with fixing the objective needs of each citizen were paralysed by a flood of information, representations, and petitions. While central plans allocated food on paper, local party officials and managers charged with giving real food to real people had to search, bargain, and trade to get it, or stole it to trade it on their own account. Productive effort and budget revenues fell away.

It is not hard to understand why Soviet leaders were usually glad to put an end to rationing when they could. Hessler shows that remodelling trade on lines of consumer preference was not so easy, however. One problem was the lack of a model to follow, other than that of the distributive trades in western market economies. Another was the capacity of the economy to supply what consumers wanted, limited by its development level, planning controls and Stalin’s other objectives. Here one might add: if Stalin wanted “cultured” trade perhaps he did not want it very much, at least not enough to defend it when *other* objectives like forced industrialization and rearmament got in the way. In the late 1920s, as Hessler makes clear, he wanted these

*other* things so much that his own policies plunged the economy into retail crisis and famine. Then he had to limit the consequences so that the other things he wanted more were not, in turn, undermined by collapsing worker morale. Finally, Hessler also shows that, when normalization became possible, Stalin did not want to create market opportunities for people that he regarded as class enemies. A theme of the book, consequently, is the frequency with which he deployed the OGPU-NKVD to confiscate their theoretically legal market gains.

A possible criticism of the book is that it is uneven. The parts dealing with the Revolutionary period and Stalin's Great Breakthrough are first-rate; Hessler's analysis of NEP is notably excellent. The chapters on World War II and postwar recovery are thinner and less sure-footed. In substance the book finishes with the currency reform of December 1947 and its consequences. Regardless, Hessler has made an original and substantial contribution that should be a standard work of reference for some time to come.

Many other positive things could be said. I am sure that advanced students and established scholars will be grateful to Julie Hessler for years to come.

Mark Harrison  
University of Warwick