



EVERYDAY LIFE UNDER LATE SOCIALISM: Eastern Europe, 1960-1989

Queuing for meat, Bucharest, Romania, 1982.



[Photograph by Andrei Padele.](#)



The first wave of socialist societies came into being after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the establishment of the Soviet Union (1922), while others were founded in the aftermath of World War Two.

All were established through revolution, conquest, or annexation and reflected both the negative and positive influence of the Soviet model created under Lenin and Stalin. All employed extensive coercion and central control, yet they increased living standards, access to housing, employment, education, and medical care. Although they instituted new hierarchies, they also promoted gender equality and improved life-chances for many disadvantaged people.

BASIC CONCEPTS

COMMUNISM / STATE SOCIALISM



Socialist (also commonly referred to as communist) societies constitute a group of twentieth-century societies. Broadly underpinned by the world view of *Marxism-Leninism*, these societies share a number of distinctive features in terms of the organization of political, economic, socio-cultural and everyday life. Formulated only in the period of Stalin's rise to power after Lenin's death, the Stalinist institutionalization of Marxism–Leninism in the 1930s did contain three identifiable principles came to define all later Soviet-type regimes:

- ❖ *historical materialism* as the only true explanation for the logic of history, basically how socioeconomic development happens as a result in shifting material conditions (technology and productive capacity) and corresponding changes economy, social classes and culture
- ❖ the leading role of the communist party as the central principle of politics (*single-party system*)
- ❖ widespread nationalization of means of production, with consequent predominance of *state and collective property*
- ❖ bureaucratic organization of labor and resources and the redistribution of social wealth according to a *central plan*
- ❖ political, economic, social and cultural *modernization* through expansion of government, state-directed industrialization, social engineering ('new man') and official (socialist) culture

BASIC CONCEPTS

MARXISM-LENINISM

Marx and Lenin:

❖ *When and how does revolution happen?*

Marx's inconsistency about whether the working class revolution happens as an organic evolution in history after the capitalist stage has been reached or whether it is staged by a group of revolutionaries forcing history to go forward; Lenin's push for a revolution before Russia became a developed capitalist society

❖ *Party Dictatorship or not?*

The post-revolutionary one-party state was Lenin's adaptation; Marx was quite inconsistent on this matter, although he did affirm that the working class state would be ruled by politically enlightened intellectuals and workers



Raise higher the banner for Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin! Poster by Gustav Klutsis, 1936.

Marx, Lenin and Stalin:

❖ *What kind of communist economics?*

Both Marx and Lenin broadly supported central planning, the abolition of private property and the abolition of class distinctions, but their view on what constitutes communist economics (on how to combine rational analysis with revolutionary objectives) was rather ambivalent. Lenin's New Economic Policy in the 1920s established state-control over heavy industry, foreign trade and communications but reestablished markets for consumer goods and agriculture.

By comparison, Stalin in the 1930s promoted full economic centralization and planning based on scientific study of productive potential (Five Year Plans); forced industrialization and the creation of an urban working class through the collectivization of agriculture, elimination of private property and mass terror, and the subsequent liquidation of the rural peasantry and the urban middle class.

ASPIRATION FOR A NEW MAN



A man is a friend, comrade
and brother to a man!

B. Soloviev (1962).

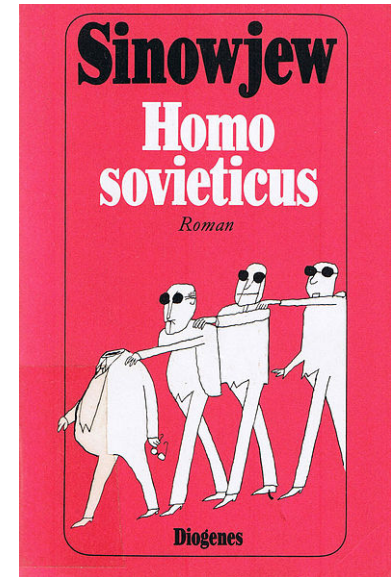
All communist parties were dedicated to building a new type of human community, which not only involved new kinds of social, cultural and economic relationships between citizens but also changed family life, gender relations, the private and everyday life of the individual, his consciousness, even his relationship to life and death.

- ❖ Attack and re-thinking of all forms of practice associated with feudal and bourgeois life and class exploitations: religion, rituals of life and death, sexuality, fashion, leisure, academic fields and practices, institutions of culture, education, economic and political life.
- ❖ Involving an effort to overcome all forms of inequality, including those based in kinship status, gender, class, and ethno-national difference.
- ❖ Goal: uniform society without lineage-based kinship structures, gender and authority relations in families or the wider society, no class or ethnic hierarchies or private property; in effect, new individuals embedded in new kinds of social relationships.

ASPIRATIONS AND RESULTS

❖ *Mixed results* because of the party's compromise and citizens' involvement. As pre-existing social relations or forms of ethics and practice proved difficult to abolish, the party co-opted and recycled interwar patterns of nationalism, class and ethnic hierarchy and patriarchy. Socialist citizens also adapted, subverted and resisted the Party's ideological control on everyday life (e.g. jokes or popular insistence that the Party fulfill its promises).

❖ *Homo sovieticus*: scholars and literary figures argued that state socialism produced a particular personality type, individuals disposed to dependence, passive expectation, self-victimization, complicity, dissimulation, self-denigration and offered them the Party's instrument of vengeance, in the form of denunciations, resulting in 'social schizophrenia,' 'doubling,' duplicity, or split self in every socialist society. Other scholars, like Katherine Verdery, have argued however that "it also encouraged subtle forms of self-making in people's own terms (e.g. consumption of forbidden Western goods, involvement in the second-economy work, absenteeism from formal jobs, participated in ethnic- or kin-based identities and rituals constitutive of self, and gave gifts not just to secure advantage but to confirm their sociality as persons and human beings."



A. Zinoviev, *Homo Sovieticus* (1986).

SHORTAGE ECONOMY



A Soviet war poster
"Don't chat! Chatting leads to treason" (1941)

- ❖ State socialist economies were redistributive systems governed not by demand for products but by the Party's planned allocation (most commonly drawn up according Five Year Plans). Materials for production and consumption were not simply available for purchase. This led to a number of practices and phenomena in all fields of economic activity:
- ❖ Inefficient central distribution
- ❖ hoarding of production materials and consumer products and under-reporting of production
- ❖ Pervasive “organized” shortage not simply of primary materials and consumer products but also information and labor
- ❖ “special kind of information society” dominated by a culture of rumor, gossip, selective secrecy, conspiratorial explanations of events, and accumulation of information as social power as well as a citizenry able to read between the lines
- ❖ Queuing, bargaining, competition for basic resources, clientelism, theft, and dabbling in the informal economy.

THE SECOND ECONOMY

Despite initial opposition to economic activity beyond the plans, communist officials eventually allowed small-scale private efforts and the functioning of an informal, unofficial or shadow economy because their inability to plan left social needs unsatisfied. Forms of such private effort included:

- ❖ food production on small plots
- ❖ after-hours repair work or construction
- ❖ typing, tutoring, unofficial taxi services, etc.

Because such private efforts overlapped with semi-legal and illegal activities, ordinary people were in a precarious relationship with authorities, often bribing them to avoid trouble or abuse.

Materials accessible in the second economy almost always originated from the first, official economy, which means that both were directly or indirectly subsidized by the government. According to Verdery, “The prevalence of second-economic activity both indicated popular resistance to the Party's definition of needs and helped to fill those needs by voluntarily lengthening the working day.”

“BLAT,” “PILE,” “DOJSCIE” - CLIENTELISM

- ❖ Endemic shortages and the second economy => the emergence of social networks built on the mutual exchange of favors (labor, consumer products, information, services etc.)
- ❖ Far from constituting resistance to state control, such activities were *intrinsic* to the functioning of socialist regimes because it allowed ordinary citizens at all social levels to do their jobs and acquire necessities. Clientelism also facilitated the party's control of labor seemingly noncoercive ways.
- ❖ As Verdery noted, “The warp and woof of socialist societies, then, consisted of vertical and horizontal relations of patronage, loyalty, and exchanges of goods, favors, and gifts.”
- ❖ The long-term presence of clientelism resulted in the introduction of words indicating ‘connections’ (Russian *blat*, Romanian *pile*, Hungarian *protekcio*, Polish *dojście*) in daily speech.



THE HOUSE WITH GHOSTS

He is just a genius for a shady business deal:
Fake names on the payroll he shows as real.
But for his unreal and illusory luck
In the jail for real he can be long stuck.

Artist: V. Kunnapp, Poet: V. Shumilin, "The Fighting Pencil" group, 1972 . Source: Irina Vinokour's [page](#).

The poster above refers to the practice of "dead souls," a term coined after the famous novel by Gogol. To reach full employment, socialist governments overstaffed many organizations. Some "entrepreneurial" persons could take care of business with much less people than they had on their payrolls and pocketed the wages of the people who were on the list only. These people usually were relatives or friends, or other trusted persons of the managers who took the money. The "dead souls" also could be people who did not work anywhere, but needed to have some working experience recorded in their papers in order to be eligible for some benefits (e.g. social security). They could work somewhere else and give all the money to the manager, or could split the money between them-- depending upon circumstances.

STATE SOCIALISM OR STATE SOCIALISMS?

- ❖ *Regime differentiation*: While state socialist systems in eastern Europe, Latin America, and East Asia shared the traits described above, it is important to remember that they were also differentiated based on previous historical and cultural legacies and the particular reforms undertaken by ruling communist parties especially after Stalin's death in 1953 and the commencement of de-stalinization.
- ❖ As Verdery notes, “most exhibited a trend toward less stringent planning and the introduction of market mechanisms, heightened material incentives, and mixed property forms. System-wide experimentation began with Khrushchev's 1956 ‘Secret Speech’ criticizing Stalin and increased as each society moved from ‘extensive’ development (mobilizing resources) to the ‘intensive’ phase (attention to productivity). Hungary and Yugoslavia introduced the most durable early reforms; those in the Soviet Union ended in the collapse of the Soviet bloc [...] As they reformed, socialist societies increasingly diverged not only from the Stalinist model but from one another, introducing path-dependent differences that became ever more marked.”
- ❖ Such reforms differentiated everyday life in socialist societies. E.g., the second economy was largest in Hungary after 1968, while it was harassed in Romania throughout the 1980s; extreme forms are reported for the Soviet Union, where entire factories ran illegal production after hours.