

Everyday Stalinism

*Ordinary Life in Extraordinary Times:
Soviet Russia in the 1930s*

Sheila Fitzpatrick

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The Magic Tablecloth

One facet of “making fairy tales come true” was particularly dear to Soviet citizens: the promise that socialism would bring abundance. This was literally an excursion into the world of Russian fairy tales, whose furniture included a Magic Tablecloth¹ that, when laid, produced an extravagant array of food and drink of its own accord. Perhaps the hope of future abundance made the scarcity of the present easier to bear. In the mid 1930s, in any case, food, drink, and consumer goods came to be celebrated with a fervor that even Madison Avenue might have envied.

For the time being, products were still scarce and of poor quality. But the Magic Tablecloth had already been laid on some tables. Communist officials and parts of the intelligentsia were the main beneficiaries; Trotsky, the old revolutionary leader now in foreign exile, saw this emergence of a new privileged class as part of Stalin’s betrayal of the revolution.² Domestically, however, the message was more complicated. For it was not only officials and members of the intelligentsia who had access to Magic Tablecloths, but also

Stakhanovites—ordinary people whose outstanding achievements had earned them rewards. In Soviet conceptualization, it was society's vanguard, not its elite, that had first access to scarce goods and services. What the vanguard had today, the rest of society could expect tomorrow.

IMAGES OF ABUNDANCE

"Life has become better, comrades; life has become more cheerful."
Stalin, 1935³

This phrase, endlessly reiterated in Soviet propaganda, was one of the favorite slogans of the 1930s. It was carried on placards at Soviet demonstrations, run as a banner headline in newspapers to mark the New Year, displayed in parks and labor camps, quoted in speeches, celebrated in song by the Red Army choir—and sometimes angrily mimicked by those whose lives had not become better.⁴ The change of Soviet orientation that it celebrates, labeled "the Great Retreat" by an American sociologist, was inaugurated at the beginning of 1935, when the lifting of bread rationing was the occasion for a propaganda campaign celebrating the end of privation and the coming of plenty.⁵

The new orientation meant several things. First, at the simplest level, it was a promise that there would be more goods in the stores. This involved a more fundamental shift away from the anti-consumerist approach of earlier years toward a new (and, in Marxist terms, surprising) appreciation of commodities. Second, it meant a move away from the ascetic puritanism characteristic of the Cultural Revolution toward a new tolerance of people enjoying themselves. All kinds of leisure-time activities for the masses were now encouraged: carnivals, parks of culture and rest, masquerades, dancing, even jazz. For the elite too, there were new privileges and possibilities.

The lip-smacking public celebration of commodities in the mid 1930s was virtually a consumer-goods pornography. Food and drink were the primary objects. Here is a newspaper's description of the goodies available at the newly opened commercial grocery store (formerly Eliseev's, and most recently a Torgsin store) on Gorky Street.

In the grocery department, there are 38 types of sausage, including 20 new types that have not been sold anywhere before. This department will also sell three types of cheese—Camembert, Brie and Limburg—made for the store by special order. In the confectionery department there are 200 types of candies and pastries. . . . The bread department has up to 50 kinds of bread. . . . Meat is kept in refrigerated glass cases. In the fish department, there are tanks with live carp, mirror carp, bream, and pike. When the customers choose their fish, they are scooped out of the tank with the aid of nets.⁶

Anastas Mikoyan, the party leader in charge of provisioning throughout the 1930s, contributed a lot to this trend. Certain goods, such as ice cream and frankfurters, particularly aroused his enthusiasm. These were new products, or products made with new technology, that Mikoyan was trying to introduce to the mass urban consumer. He used the imagery of pleasure and

plenty, but also that of modernity. Frankfurters, a kind of sausage new to Russians, derived from the German model, had once been “a sign of bourgeois abundance and well-being,” according to Mikoyan. Now they were available to the masses. Since they were mass-produced on machines, they were superior to foods produced in the old-fashioned way by hand. Mikoyan was also an enthusiast for ice cream, “very tasty and nutritious,” especially as mass-produced with machine technology in the United States. This too had once been a bourgeois luxury item, eaten only on holidays, but it would now be available to Soviet citizens on a daily basis. The latest ice-cream-making machines were imported, and exotic varieties were soon on sale: even in the provinces one could buy chocolate Eskimo, Pompa (not further identified), cream, cherry, and raspberry.⁷

Mikoyan’s patronage also extended to beverages, especially up-scale ones. “What kind of happy life can we have if there’s not enough good beer and good liqueurs?” he asked. It was a scandal that the Soviet Union was so far behind Europe in wine-growing and viticulture; even Romania was ahead. “Champagne is a symbol of material well-being, a symbol of prosperity.” In the West, only the capitalist bourgeoisie could enjoy it. In the Soviet Union, it was now within the reach of many, if not all: “Comrade Stalin said that the Stakhanovites now earn a lot of money, engineers and other toilers earn a lot.” To satisfy their rising demands, Soviet production must be sharply increased, Mikoyan concluded.⁸

New products were often advertised in the press, despite the general curtailment of newspaper advertisements at the end of the 1920s. These advertisements were not so much intended to sell goods—generally the products they touted were unavailable in the stores—as to educate the public. Knowledge of consumer goods, like good taste, was part of the culture expected of Soviet citizens, especially women, who were the acknowledged experts in the consumer field. It was a function of Soviet “cultured trade” to make this knowledge available through advertisements, instruction of customers by sales personnel in stores, customers’ conferences, and exhibitions.⁹ The trade exhibitions organized in major cities of the Soviet Union displayed goods never available to the ordinary consumer, like washing machines, cameras, and automobiles. (“That’s all very well,” said one disgruntled consumer after viewing an exhibition, “but [the goods] aren’t in the stores and you won’t find them.”)¹⁰

The didactic function of advertisement was evident in the advertisements for ketchup, another of Mikoyan’s new food products based on an American model. “Do you know what ketchup is?” was the lead sentence in one advertisement. Another explained that “In America a bottle of KETCHUP stands on every restaurant table and in the pantry of every housewife. KETCHUP is the best, sharp, aromatic relish for meat, fish, vegetables and other dishes.” “Ask for KETCHUP from the factories of Chief Canned Goods Trust in the stores of Union Canned Goods Distribution syndicate and other food stores,” the copy concluded in a burst of wild optimism (or perhaps simply imitating American copywriting conventions).¹¹

Another product that was given great play in the of educational advertising of the 1930s was eau de cologne. "Eau de cologne has firmly entered the life of Soviet woman," pronounced a popular illustrated weekly in a special feature on perfume in 1936. "Hairdressers of the Soviet Union require tens of thousands of vials of eau de cologne every day." An accompanying photograph showed a hairdresser spraying generous quantities of eau de cologne on a client's hair.¹² Rather surprisingly, contraceptives were also advertised, although in real life they were almost impossible to obtain.¹³

Clothing and textiles received almost as much loving attention as food and drink. "Moscow is dressing well," was the heading of an article allegedly by a tailor published in the labor newspaper in 1934.

Comparing the May Day celebrations, one may assert that never before was Moscow so well dressed as this year! Rarely, rarely could one meet a person in the first days of May whose suit would not have been suitable for a wedding or an evening party. A stiff starched collar was a normal thing in the columns of worker demonstrators [in the May Day march]. The women wore good suits made out of Boston cloth, cheviot, and fine broadcloth, elegant and well-sewn dresses out of silk or wool.¹⁴

Communist leaders were doing their bit to popularize the image of the well-dressed man by partially abandoning the military style of dress preferred in the 1920s in favor of civilian suits. One account gives Molotov credit for the change, another accords primacy to the Komsomol leader Aleksandr Kosarev, who "one day declared a new slogan: 'Work productively, rest culturally.' After that he always wore European clothes." Clearly, however, it was a collective project of the party leadership. A front-page photograph in the newspapers in the summer of 1935 showed Politburo members at a physical-culture parade nattily dressed in matching white, lightweight jackets.¹⁵

Communist women, still normally affecting a sober style of dress as close to men's as possible in the early 1930s, were encouraged to make similar adjustments. One Bolshevik woman of the Old Guard, invited to Moscow for a Kremlin banquet on International Women's Day sometime in the mid 1930s, recalled the last-minute instructions

that all our activists of the women's movement should appear at the banquet not in severe English suits, with sweater and tie, but looking like women and dressed accordingly. Our activists ran around Moscow as if they had been stung, putting themselves into order as instructed by Stalin.¹⁶

The change in mores was spelled out clearly in the story of Kostia Zaitsev, a coal-hewer and Komsomol activist in the south. Back in the NEP period, Zaitsev had bought a silk jacket with blue satin lapels from an old aristocrat and wore it on an evening stroll in the steppe. For this, he had received a sharp rebuke from the Komsomol cell for bourgeois degeneracy. Now, in 1934, he was not only wearing a jacket and tie, but was also the possessor of "a couple of excellent suits, an expensive watch, a hunting rifle, a bicycle, a camera, [and] a radio." He had acquired a Turkish rug for the floor of his room and painted the walls and ceiling. He had an "elegant bookstand" holding

“dozens of books.” All this was not bourgeois degeneracy, it was culture, part of Zaitsev’s self-improvement process. “Zaitsev is studying to become an engineer.”¹⁷

Entertainment

“Red Russia becomes rose-colored,” reported the *Baltimore Sun*’s Moscow correspondent toward the end of 1938.¹⁸ Luxury items like silk stockings, long considered “bourgeois,” were back in vogue in elite circles. Tennis had become fashionable; jazz and foxtrots were all the rage. The party maximum on salaries had been abolished. This was *la vie en rose*, Soviet style. To some people, it looked like embourgeoisement or “a second NEP.”

One of the signs of the times was the revival of Moscow restaurant life in 1934. This followed a four-year hiatus during which restaurants had been open only to foreigners, payment was in hard currency, and the OGPU regarded any Soviet citizens who went there with deep suspicion. Now, all those who could afford it could go to the Metropole Hotel, where “wonderful live starlets swam in a pool right in the centre of the restaurant hall,” and hear jazz by Antonin Ziegler’s Czech group, or to the National to hear the Soviet jazzmen Aleksandr Tsfasman and Leonid Utesov, or to the Prague Hotel on the Arbat where gypsy singers and dancers performed. The restaurants were patronized particularly by theater people and other “new elite” members, and their prices were, of course, out of reach of ordinary citizens. Their existence was no secret, however. The Prague advertised its “first-class” cuisine (“Blinzes, pies, and pelmeni every day. Assortment of wines”), its gypsy singers, and “dancing with lighting effects” in Moscow’s evening newspaper.¹⁹

But it was not only elite members who profited from the relaxation of mores and encouragement of leisure culture of the mid 1930s. Sound film was the new mass cultural medium, and the second half of the 1930s was the great age of Soviet musical comedy. Cheerful and fast-moving entertainment movies like *Happy-Go-Lucky Guys* (1934), *Circus* (1936), *Volga-Volga* (1938), and *Radiant Path* (1940), with catchy music in a jazzy idiom, achieved great popularity. There were even ambitious plans, never realized, to build a “Soviet Hollywood” in the South. Dancing was also in fashion, for the masses as well as the elite. Dancing schools sprang up like mushrooms in the towns, and a young working-class woman describing her cultural development mentioned that not only was she going to literacy classes, but she and her Stakhanovite husband were learning to dance.²⁰

The New Year’s holiday—complete with fir tree and Grandfather Frost, the Russian equivalent of Father Christmas—returned in this period, after some years of banishment. New Year’s was celebrated extravagantly in 1936, according to newspaper reports. “Never was there such gaiety,” was the heading of a report from Leningrad:

Finely dressed male and female workers and children gathered in the decorated and illuminated houses of culture, clubs and schools . . . The luxurious halls of the Aleksandrovskii palace in Detskoe selo [formerly Tsarskoe selo] were opened for the first time for a noisy ball, where leading workers and engineers of

the Red Triangle plant were the hosts. With games, dances, fireworks, riding on the snow in a troika with bells, the Detskoe selo park was never so lively. The music played until dawn.²¹

The new leisure culture included long-distance car races (a central feature in Ilf and Petrov's humorous novel *The Little Golden Calf*), as well as long-distance bicycle and motorcycle races: in 1934, a sound documentary film on the "heroic autorace" from Moscow to Kara-Kum and back showed how participants (and camera crew) survived six and a half days in a "waterless desert."²² The popularity of football as a spectator sport soared in the 1930s, mainly without explicit official encouragement but with the benefit of a new modern stadium in Moscow's Luzhniki district and generous funding of teams from the trade unions, secret police, and the Army.²³ Airshows were also very popular.

In the realm of amateur sport, the most publicized activities were parachute-jumping and gymnastics. Parachute-jumping turned up everywhere: in displays at airshows by professionals, in the paramilitary training conducted under the "Ready for Labor and Defence" program, in photographs and cartoons in newspapers and magazines, on the vitas of Stakhanovites, and in recreational parachute-jumping towers set up in parks of culture and rest. No doubt this sport symbolized Soviet daring and mastery of the air (or, to put it another way, the Soviet propensity, popular and governmental, for risk-taking). Gymnastics, known as physical culture, was highly visible because it lent itself to mass demonstrations, held in the summer on Red Square and elsewhere, as well as providing photographers and painters with a rare opportunity for depicting the human body. "Phyiscultura—hurrah-hurrah!" sang the sportsmen in the popular "Sportsman's March."²⁴

"Parks of culture and rest," recently opened in many cities across the Soviet Union, were intended to offer a new kind of cultured leisure to the masses. They were parks with attractions, rides, dance-floors, pavilions, and kiosks. The prototype was Gorky Park in Moscow, planned and directed by an American, Betty Glan. For the opening of the park's winter season in 1935, a banner proclaiming Stalin's slogan "Life has become better, life has become more cheerful" was hung across the gates, and more than 10,000 people arrived in the first three hours. Every foreign visitor who went to Russia visited Gorky Park and left a description of it, variously emphasizing the entertainment aspect, like Ferris wheels, bowling alleys, dance-floors, and cinemas, and the educational aspect of newspaper readings, agitational corners, and so on. (Almost everyone mentioned the parachute jump.²⁵)

A report of Gorky Park on May Day in a Soviet newspaper stuck to the basics—food and drink.

It is hard to describe how Moscow enjoyed itself in these joyous days of the May Day celebrations. . . . We have to talk about the garden of plenty behind the Manège building, this garden where sausages and Wurst were growing on the trees . . . where a mug of foaming beer was accompanied by delicious Poltava sausages, by pink ham, melting Swiss cheese and marble white bacon. . . . Walking across this square one could get a giant appetite.²⁶

Summer became carnival time under the new dispensation. Still popular, though less prominent than in the mid to late 1920s, were the parades lampooning various enemies of the revolution and Soviet state. For the eighteenth anniversary of the revolution, 3,000 eighteen-year-olds from some of Moscow's biggest industrial plants participated in a "carnival of happy youth" parade, with each district taking a separate theme and organizing its own decoration. The Sokolniki Komsomol branch invited the famous caricaturists, the Kukrinskys, to design their display, which ridiculed everything that belonged to the past. Gods, angels, and saints headed the cavalcade, followed by Adam and Eve. Monks, capitalists, and the Romanov court followed in separate trucks, and "walking self-importantly" behind were ostriches, donkeys, and bears representing "generals, counts, and so on."²⁷

For the first nighttime carnival, held in Gorky Park in July 1935 to celebrate Constitution Day, costumes and masks were obligatory, with a carnival parade and cash prizes for the best. Newspaper reports did not neglect the romantic possibilities of the mask, while also describing the variety of costumes worn: Pushkin's Onegin and Tatiana, Charlie Chaplin, Gorky's Mother, eighteenth-century marquesses, toreadors, Mark Anthony, and so on. Laughter was much emphasized: as *Krokodil* reported, carnival slogans proposed by "individual enthusiasts" included "He who does not laugh, does not eat," and "Make fun of those who fall behind!"²⁸

Despite elements of spontaneity and similarity with earlier forms of popular celebration, the carnivals of the mid 1930s were carefully scripted and staged by leading artistic figures, and the intention to invent tradition was quite explicit: "This carnival merriment must enter the tradition of the Soviet Union like the colorful national celebrations of France and Italy."²⁹ Press descriptions, as well as the recollections of some foreign visitors, stress the excitement and gaiety of the crowds during carnival. Others were less sure. "There is no doubt that they 'take their pleasure sadly,'" noted an Australian visitor to Gorky Park. "Among the many thousands there we saw scarcely a smile, though we assumed that they were enjoying themselves."³⁰

PRIVILEGE

In the future, there would be abundance; for the present, there was scarcity. The worst period of scarcity, during the First Five-Year Plan, naturally prompted the regime to make special arrangements to feed its own, just as it had done, though less systematically, during the Civil War. Communist officials became in the literal sense a privileged class in the Soviet Union.

But Communists were not the only people with privilege. A less predictable beneficiary was the intelligentsia, or at least key segments of it. This too could be traced back to the Civil War period, when at Maxim Gorky's urging special rations were established for members of the Academy of Sciences and others regarded as cultural treasures. In material terms, the intelligentsia was a relatively privileged group in the 1920s. But its privileged status in the 1930s had a different flavor. Not only was it more conspicuous, but it followed the period of Cultural Revolution, when "bourgeois specialists" had been roughly

handled. The turnaround in the first half of the 1930s was dramatic; it was evident, an emigré journal commented, that the political leaders had a new approach to the intelligentsia: "They are courting and coaxing and bribing it. It is needed."³¹

Engineers were among the first groups of the intelligentsia to receive special privileges—understandably, given their essential contribution to the industrialization drive. More surprising was the honoring of writers, composers, architects, painters, theater people, and other members of "the creative intelligentsia." The effusive honoring of writers in connection with the First Congress of Soviet Writers in 1934 established the new tone, which combined conspicuous deference to high culture with an implicit reminder to intellectuals of their obligation to serve the Soviet cause.³²

While the press was normally silent about the privileges of Communist officials, intelligentsia privileges were often proudly announced. Perhaps this was a strategy to deflect possible popular resentment of privilege away from Communists. Although it does not appear to have had that result,³³ it did imprint on popular imagination the notion that some members of the creative intelligentsia were the most fabulously privileged people in the Soviet Union. According to a rumor that every Soviet citizen seemed to know, the novelist Aleksei Tolstoy (an aristocrat by birth), Maxim Gorky, the aviation engineer A. P. Tupolev, the jazz man Leonid Utesov, and the popular-song composer Isaac Dunaevsky were all millionaires whom the Soviet regime allowed to have bottomless bank accounts.³⁴

Privilege in Stalin's Russia had more to do with access—the ability to obtain goods, services, apartments, and so on—than it did with ownership. The key factor in the emergence of an institutionalized hierarchy of access in the 1930s was scarcity, particularly the structures generated by extreme scarcity at the beginning of the decade. This critical period not only saw the reintroduction of rationing, which had its own internal differentiation, but also of various forms of "closed distribution" of goods to those in special categories. The reason for this was not ideological (the ideology of the period tended to be egalitarian and militant) but practical: there was simply not enough to go round.

Food privileges took a number of forms: special rations, special elite closed stores, and special cafeterias at the workplace. Starting in the late 1920s, senior party and government officials received special rations. The system was internally differentiated, and Elena Bonner remembers that her parents—Communists in senior jobs, her stepfather with the Comintern, her mother with the Moscow Party Committee—were on different rungs of the ladder:

Papa's [food parcel] was delivered to the house, twice a month or more, but I don't know whether we paid for it. It had butter, cheese, candies and canned goods. There were also special parcels for the holidays, with caviar, smoked and cured fish, chocolate, and also cheese and butter. You had to pick up Mama's parcels—not far away, on Petrovka. The dining room of the Moscow Party Committee was on the corner of Takhmanovsky Alley, and once a week they gave out the parcels. I often went for ours, and you had to pay. It contained butter and other items, but it was much less fancy than Papa's.³⁵

“Academic” rations for the intelligentsia returned at about the same time, with members of the Academy of Sciences the first beneficiaries. Writers came next, being allocated 400 “academic rations” in 1932; and later an additional 200 rations were allocated to artists.³⁶

The special stores for the elite were known by the acronym GORT in the first half of the 1930s. Access to them was reserved for a privileged group that included administrators working in central government, party, industrial, trade-union, planning, and publishing agencies, as well as economists, engineers, and other experts working for state agencies. These stores stocked basic foods, “luxuries” like sausage, eggs, and dried fruit, clothing, shoes, and other vital goods such as soap. Elena Bonner remembered her family buying stainless-steel cutlery there, the first she had ever seen. The GPU had its own special stores for its employees (as did the Red Army), and the GPU’s Moscow store was renowned as “the best in the whole Soviet Union.”³⁷

The network of special stores extended into the provinces, although the quality of even elite provisioning was usually worse there than in the capitals. Engineers and managers at major industrial enterprises and new construction sites were provisioned by a special network of closed stores: in 1932, there were said to be 700 closed distributors for engineers and managers throughout the country.³⁸ Outside of industry and other special networks like the military and the OGPU, provincial and district officials had their own closed stores, accessible to all those above a certain rank. Officials of rural soviets were too junior to have access, even when there was a closed store in the locality, and one of them complained bitterly about this discrimination in a letter to Kalinin.

I was in GORT, they’d brought in box-calf boots for 40 rubles a pair and I asked them to let me have one pair, but no they wouldn’t, after all they were 40 rubles. That’s appropriate for the party aktiv, . . . regardless of the fact that the party activists all have a pair of boots and some have even two pairs. . . . But they refused me, who hasn’t got any footwear, and [only] allowed me to take rubber boots selling for 45 rubles.³⁹

This complaint points up one of the strangest features of Soviet closed distribution, that goods in the special store were priced *lower* than in ordinary stores. As a general rule, the harder it was to get access to a store, the lower the prices of its goods.

Because of the food shortages and distribution problems, most people took their main meal at work in a cafeteria in the first half of the 1930s. Some form of differentiation within the cafeteria framework was common, and in large institutions the hierarchy (expressed in the quantity and quality of the meal and also the room in which it was eaten) was quite complex. Some factories had one dining room for upper management, a second for middle management, and a third for high-achieving workers (shockworkers), in addition to the cafeteria for ordinary workers and employees. In other cases, shockworkers ate with the rest of the workers but were issued extra ration cards so that they could get a double or triple helping. Foreigners who encountered these arrangements were often disconcerted or even outraged. “Probably nowhere,

save for the Eastern countries, would it be possible for the range of classes to be publicly displayed so blatantly as it was in Russia,” the Finnish Communist Arvo Tuominen commented after describing the dining hierarchies of the early 1930s. When Tuominen, who was working in the Comintern, tried to eat with his assistants in the Comintern cafeteria, “it was not considered seemly. The reproachful glances in themselves said: your place is not here, go to your own caste!”⁴⁰

In an earlier chapter, we have already noted the tendency of local officials to maintain closed distributors for themselves even when the center decreed this was no longer necessary. If there was no closed distributor, officials (and their wives) often informally enforced special-access rules on goods that came into local stores for general distribution. For example, a local store in the Western province received a consignment of textiles for shipping to the villages—but the next morning the local party committee asked the store manager to set aside 1,000 meters of cloth for officials who “do not have time to stand in line.” The same process was at work in the Far East, where an aggrieved local resident reported that “for the May Day holiday they brought wine into the cooperative store. Sinner that I am, I asked for half a liter, but they refused, no you can’t have it, that’s for the party aktiv.” The “nomenclatura first” convention was so strong that a district health department in Siberia advertised that the local pharmacy received a shipment of a particular medicament “to protect responsible workers [i.e., officials] . . . from the bites of malaria mosquitos.”⁴¹

Officials also unofficially enjoyed the prerogative of charging their own entertainment to the state in various ways. This prerogative was periodically denounced, however, as in this regional newspaper attack from 1937:

Wine flowed in a river [at the banquet for district leaders]. Some, like for example the head of the municipal economy department, Koniushenko, drank themselves into unconsciousness. That banquet cost the state 2,300 rubles, which the chairman of the district soviet executive committee obliged the financial department to pay the grocery store.

Earlier in the year, according to the same report, the district soviet chairman had held a banquet at his apartment, charging the food and drink served to the school construction budget.⁴²

The elites also had privileges involving other kinds of scarce goods, such as housing, dachas, and vacation resorts. In the 1920s, little was done to build special accommodations for the elite, and top party and government leaders were placed rather haphazardly in apartments in the Kremlin or hotels like the National, the Metropole, and the Hotel Luxe. Then in 1928 construction began on the first apartment house built specifically for high officials, Government House (immortalized by Iurii Trifonov in his novel of the Great Purges, *House on the Embankment*), which was located across the river facing the Christ the Savior Cathedral and diagonally opposite the Kremlin. This building had 506 spacious, furnished flats, all with telephones and constant hot water, along with many amenities.⁴³

New elite housing was also provided in the first half of the 1930s by turning

existing buildings into cooperatives for the use of personnel in various government agencies like the Central Committee, the OGPU, the Red Army, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Heavy Industry. The Writers' Union also got its cooperative building in a central location, as did scientists, composers, artists, and aircraft designers; engineers had their own housing cooperatives in various central locations. The Moscow Arts Theater got a house just off Gorky Street for its actors, while Bolshoi Theater personnel occupied most of the apartments at 25 Gorky Street. The Vakhtangov Theater, wealthy and blessed with powerful patrons, managed to build two well-appointed five-story houses in Moscow out of theater profits. Certain intelligentsia professions were recognized as having special professional needs that entitled them to a larger living space (measured in square meters) than ordinary citizens, a hotly contested privilege. From 1933, scientists and writers received this privilege, which was extended to artists and sculptors two years later.⁴⁴

A special building plan for apartment blocks for engineers was launched in the early 1930s. According to a plan adopted in 1932, over 10,000 apartments for engineers and other specialists were to be built over a two-year period in sixty seven cities; Moscow's allocation was ten new apartment houses with a total of 3,000 apartments. In Magnitogorsk, engineers and managers did particularly well because they inherited housing originally built for foreign specialists in the suburb of Berezhki. These were not apartments but separate two-story houses with their own gardens—an almost unimaginable luxury in the Soviet Union of these years.⁴⁵

Although some of the elite apartments were luxurious, many were modest in terms of size and amenities. Moreover, there were nowhere near enough of them to go round, especially in the capitals, and many people whose jobs and credentials qualified them as elite members remained in communal apartments. Even for those in substandard housing, however, it was normal to have a servant. The convention was that this was permissible if the wife worked. "We had a servant—even two when my daughter was small," a factory buyer told Harvard Project interviewers. "They are cheap but hard to get. I would go to a kolkhoz and select a girl—every girl is anxious to leave the hard life in a kolkhoz and move to the city—and then I would have to talk to the kolkhoz chief. He, of course, hates to lose a worker, but if you have *blat*, you will get your servant." It made excellent sense financially for the factory buyer: his wife earned 300 rubles a month as a typist (in addition to his income), and "we paid our servant 18 rubles a month, plus board and lodging. She slept in the kitchen."⁴⁶

In contrast to the 1920s, there was little public discussion of domestic servants in the 1930s and still less of their exploitation by employers. Some people complained about it privately, claiming that employers abused their servants ("They are even worse than the 'ladies' of earlier times, these wives of engineers, doctors and 'responsible' cadres"), who were forced into servitude and obliged to accept inhuman conditions because of the housing crisis: "The majority have no bed because there is nowhere to put one. They sleep in the

'bathroom,' 'under the table' or 'on chairs.' God help the servant who gets sick—there's nowhere for her to lay her head."⁴⁷

But even convinced Communists often saw nothing wrong with having servants. John Scott, an American working as a worker in Magnitogorsk and married to a Russian, acquired a maid after the birth of their first child. His wife, Masha, a teacher, had no problems with this, despite her peasant background and strong Communist convictions. As an emancipated woman, she was strongly opposed to housework, and considered it both appropriate and necessary that someone with less education should do it for her.⁴⁸

The taboo on public discussion of servants was partially lifted in the late 1930s, when *Krokodil* carried a series of "servant" cartoons and jokes. One, headed "Advice to young housewives," recommended (presumably tongue in cheek) that the best way to find a servant in Moscow was to take a no. 16 tram to Krasnaia Presnia, go to the Textile Combine there, and pick out one of the workers in the spinning shop. Other *Krokodil* cartoons satirized officials who depended on servants to do their shopping and keep them informed on the problems of everyday life, of which they had little firsthand experience.⁴⁹

Dachas (country homes) and passes to elite vacation resorts and sanatoria⁵⁰ were other important forms of elite privilege. In Kazan, first secretary Razumov set the pattern by building himself a private dacha in the grounds of the "Livadia" estate that he had turned into a luxurious resthome for party officials. Then the leaders of the city soviet undertook to build a whole dacha settlement—using, as was later alleged, money improperly diverted from other budgetary lines (municipal transport and sewage, parks) and contributed by industrial leaders from the discretionary funds—for a "carefully chosen" list of local bigwigs.⁵¹ This was by no means an isolated case. Genrikh Iagoda, head of the OGPU, was one of a whole array of top party leaders in Moscow who "built themselves grandiose dacha-palaces of 15-20 and more rooms, where they lived luxuriously and wasted the people's money." (As the disapproving tone of this quotation indicates, the dacha privilege, like many others, was subject to revocation without notice when the beneficiary fell out of political favor.)⁵²

Writers were particularly favored with regard to dachas. The Politburo's decision to build a new dacha settlement for writers at Peredelkino, a suburban train ride from Moscow, was one of the most dramatic indications of the writer's new status. The construction budget cost was six million rubles, and the settlement was to consist of thirty dachas of four or five rooms each, which were to be allocated by the Board of the Writers' Union for the indefinite use of distinguished writers and their families. The array of literary stars chosen including Boris Pasternak, Isaac Babel, and Ilya Ehrenburg.⁵³

Some dachas were in cooperative ownership and could be bought and sold, usually at very high prices. It was also possible to build your own dacha, although that required not only money but also a great deal of *blat* to get permits and building materials. The daughter of a physician working in the public health ministry described how her father had started building a dacha, along

with his chauffeur, a man with extensive *blat* connections, and a bookkeeper. They had problems along the way (“Father said that it would cost only about 2,000 rubles but in the end it cost us 12,000 rubles and we had to sell a large carpet, as well as the painting by Shishkin and two Italian engravings”), but in 1937 the dacha was finally built—a brick building with shower and bathhouse, heated by a central stove and habitable all year round, which was divided into three apartments, each with their own separate kitchen, living room, and bedroom.”⁵⁴

Crimea was the site of many elite resthomes and sanatoria, to which people came from all over the Soviet Union. The poet Osip Mandelstam and his wife found themselves rubbing shoulders with members of the top political elite, including the wife of future NKVD head Ezhov, in a resthome in Sukhumi. Closer to Moscow, the Barvikha sanatorium was particularly highly regarded. Natalia Sats, director of the Moscow Children’s Theater and wife of the trade minister, Izrail Veitser, spent a week there just before her sudden arrest as an “enemy of the people.”⁵⁵

Some cultural institutions had their own resthomes. Iurii Elagin, a musician at the Vakhtangov Theater in the 1930s, recalls the idyllic holidays that Vakhtangov actors and musicians spent at the theater resthome on an old noble estate, fully renovated, with a “flotilla of boats and yachts on the river” and the dining room provisioned according to government norms. The Academy of Sciences had had its own resthomes and sanatoria, including the Uzkoie estate near Moscow and the Gaspra estate in the Crimea, since the 1920s. Even before the Union of Soviet Writers officially came into existence, its organizing committee acquired rest homes in the Crimea and elsewhere.⁵⁶

Elite children were provided with special summer camps, differentiated, as so often in the Soviet Union, by the rank and institutional affiliation of their parents. Eugenia Ginzburg, then a member of the regional political elite in Kazan, sent her young son on a winter holiday to a government resort where the children “divided people into categories according to the make of their car. Lincolns and Buicks rated high, Fords low. Ours was a Ford, and Alyosha felt the difference at once.” Elena Bonner spent various summers of her childhood in camps under the auspices of the Comintern, where her stepfather worked, and the Moscow party committee, where her mother worked. She also went to the famous Artek camp in the Crimea, a place open to children from around the country who were selected because of some outstanding achievement, but also (of course!) to elite children whose parents could pull strings.⁵⁷

It was standard practice for officials above a certain level to be driven to and from work by a chauffeur. Often these government cars and their drivers were also available for use outside working hours, though this was not officially sanctioned. As Ginzburg’s son noted, the make of car varied according to the rank of the official. Natalia Sats recalls that her husband, the minister, “would send his car for me... I also was entitled to a car because of my job, but my husband called it ‘a kerosene can on wheels’ and tried to steer clear of it at all costs.”⁵⁸

Private ownership of cars was rare, though not unknown. In 1937, when the government tried to limit private car ownership, there were at least 400 private cars in Moscow. While cars were sometimes given as prizes and rewards to outstanding managers, scientists, Stakhanovites, and so on, it is not clear that there was any other legal way to acquire them. As for maintenance, service, and spare parts, the only way to get them was through the garage of some institution (which, as a 1937 government decree underlined, was illegal for private citizens). Despite the practical challenges of car ownership, however, officials still used their connections to get custom-made cars straight from the factory and it was alleged that foreign vehicles acquired for experimental purposes routinely vanished from the shops and ended up in the hands of various officials connected with the automobile industry.⁵⁹

Money salary was always a lesser factor in status and well-being in Soviet society than priority access. Nevertheless, the privileges of the privileged classes were also reflected in official pay scales. Before 1934, there was a "party maximum" on the salaries of Communists. When this was repealed, the Politburo approved a series of salary increases for party and Komsomol officials, bringing regional party secretaries, for example, to 2,000 rubles a month in October 1938. According to one report, the salaries of NKVD personnel rose dramatically at the same period, putting them well above other officials at the same level, including party officials. In 1938, the government authorized "personal bonuses" of up to one and a half times basic salary for "particularly valuable specialists" working for various government agencies.⁶⁰

A privilege unique to the unionized cultural professions—writers, composers, architects, artists—was the existence of special funds that provided material help to union members: travel allowances, sickness and disability benefits, help in obtaining living space, passes to sanatoria and resthomes, even loans. The writers' union fund, Litfond, was the first to be set up (June 1934), closely followed by an architects' fund (October 1934). Funds for musicians and artists followed in 1939 and 1940, respectively.⁶¹

Stakhanovites' Privileges

To say Stakhanovites had privileges is almost a tautology. It was the function of Stakhanovites, as chosen representatives of ordinary people, to be the visible recipients of privilege. They received much the same range of privileges as the political and cultural elites (extra rations, housing, special resort places, priority access of all kinds, and even automobiles).⁶² In addition, however, Stakhanovites were often rewarded directly with consumer goods, from lengths of cloth and sewing machines to gramophones and cars. An important part of the ritual of Stakhanovite conferences, especially those for peasants, was for happy Stakhanovites to give a list of the goods they had been awarded:

I received a bed, a gramophone, and other cultural necessities . . .

Everything I am wearing I got as a prize for good work in the kolkhoz. As well as the dress and shoes, I got a sewing machine in Nalchik. . . . For the harvest I got a prize of a silk dress worth 250 rubles.⁶³

Worker Stakhanovites did not necessarily make such crude announcements of their rewards, but these were always listed in newspapers articles about them.

Aleksei Tishchenko . . . along with his wife Zoia had arrived in Magnitogorsk in 1933 with all their possessions in a single homemade suitcase. By 1936 the couple owned furniture, including a couch and a wardrobe, as well as dress clothes, including two overcoats, some women's dresses, men's suits, shoes. . . . His prizes included a hunting gun, a gramophone, money, and a motorcycle.⁶⁴

A Stakhanovite garment worker from Leningrad was reported to have received a watch, vase, clock, tablecloth, electric samovar, clothes iron, phonograph, records, the works of Lenin and Stalin, and 122 books. Two outstanding Stakhanovite workers were described as wearing their prizes at a New Year's Ball in 1936: "He was dressed in a black Boston suit that fully accentuated his solidly built figure; she was in a crepe de chine dress and black shoes with white trimming."⁶⁵

The function of these awards of material goods was not just to make the Stakhanovites richer and happier, but also to make them more cultured. Often the quality of culture was inherent in the gift itself. "I can report to you that I don't live in my old mud hut anymore—I was awarded a European-style house. *I live like a civilized person*," a Tadjik Stakhanovite told a conference. Beds, gramophones, sewing machines, watches, and radios were all goods that helped raise their possessors out of "Asiatic" backwardness and into "European-style" modernity and culture.⁶⁶

At other times, there was an implied quid pro quo: in return for the goods and services provided to Stakhanovites, it was their obligation to become more educated and more cultured. This is well illustrated in the comments of a leading trade-union official about a Stakhanovite from the Gorky Auto Works, Aleksandr Busygin, and his wife. On the one hand, the official noted all the material privileges Busygin had been given: a new apartment, home delivery of bread after Busygin's wife complained about lines at the bread store, and so on. On the other hand, he emphasized the Busygins' obligation to become more cultured, as was appropriate to their new vanguard status. Busygin's illiterate wife, in particular, had a lot of catching up to do. "A teacher has been sent to work with [her], and now an experienced children's doctor should be made available to her so as to teach her how to bring up a child in a cultured manner, and then she will have time to study."⁶⁷

Thinking About Privilege

Nobody who had privilege in the Soviet Union in the 1930s seems to have thought of himself as a member of a privileged upper class. Rising young managers, upwardly mobile from the working class, were convinced that they remained proletarian at heart. The old intelligentsia, which under the old regime had always resisted the idea that it was an elite, continued to do so: in the wake of the Cultural Revolution, the group's consciousness of being persecuted by the regime was so strong that it seemed to block out any recogni-

tion that it was also privileged. While a socialist emigré commentator might conclude that the intelligentsia as a whole had been bribed,⁶⁸ members of the intelligentsia in the Soviet Union virtually never generalized in these terms, though they often accused specific fellow intellectuals of having sold out to the regime.

Communists with long memories and sensitive consciences were sometimes uneasy about privilege. There had been concern in Communist circles in the 1920s about the “degeneration” of the party in power and its loss of revolutionary spirit. Trotsky, in emigration, took these concerns further when he wrote in *The Revolution Betrayed* of the emergence of a new privileged class. His criticisms would probably have struck a chord with many Communists of the old guard—if they had had the opportunity to read his book, which of course they did not. In the party as a whole, however, this seems to have been less of a sore point than might have been expected. Many Communists obviously felt they needed and deserved their special treatment.

Soviet Communists of the 1930s practiced what Pierre Bourdieu calls “misrecognition” about privilege.⁶⁹ Misrecognition occurs when a group deals with something that might be embarrassing or shameful not only by giving it a different name but also by finding a new mental framework for understanding it. How Soviet misrecognition of privilege worked is illustrated in a memoir of the wife of a high Komsomol official, written half a century later.

We had, as they say, privileges. There were special food parcels, which were given out on Kirov Street, where there is now a book store. We were cut off from the sufferings of ordinary people, and we thought that’s how it had to be. And then, as I reasoned: “Vasilkovskii [her husband] is a senior man, he works a lot, often until late, doesn’t spare himself, brings glory to the Native Land, to Stalin.” Of course a car came to take him to work. We lived on Sretenka in the apartment house for foreign specialists. Big rooms, a library, furniture which was simply given out from the warehouse. We had nothing of our own, everything was government property. . . . Grishka earned the party maximum, I think it was 1,200 rubles. . . . I earned 5,660 rubles. I couldn’t say we had a very glamorous life.⁷⁰

The fact that the amenities of life—car, apartment, dacha—were not owned but were state issue was very important in enabling Communists of the nomenclatura to see themselves as something different from a new nobility or ruling class. On the contrary, they were people who owned nothing! Even their furniture was the state’s, not chosen by them but simply issued, each piece with “a small gold oval with a number attached with two nails,” as Bonner recalls. It was comparatively easy for elite members to see themselves as indifferent to material things when there was no personal property at stake: in the sarcastic words of a disapproving commentary on luxurious living at the Kazan leadership’s dacha, “Lunches, dinners, suppers, snacks and drinks, bed linen—everything was given out free; and the generous hosts, hospitable at the state’s expense, paid not the slightest attention to material considerations.”⁷¹

Louis Fischer, an American correspondent sympathetic to the Soviet Union, was worried about signs of emerging privilege. “Perhaps, in fact, a new class is being born,” he wrote uneasily in 1935. But then he remembered the

Soviet argument that privilege was only a temporary phenomenon, a step on the way to universal enrichment.

The recent increase in the supply of goods and perquisites has invested. . . . privileges with considerable importance. . . . But a still further increase will wipe out many privileges altogether: when there are enough apartments it will not be a privilege to get one. *Privilege is the product of scarcity. Yet it also marks the beginning of the end of scarcity and therefore the beginning of its own end.*⁷²

Describing workers' newly acquired taste for quality goods, a Soviet writer, Pavel Nilin, wondered whether these should be called luxuries. The answer was no. Luxury, as the *Great Soviet Encyclopedia* "authoritatively explains," is a relative concept. "With the growth of productive forces, luxury items may become necessities," and that was exactly what was happening in the Soviet Union.⁷³

Stalin made his contribution to misrecognition by appropriating the term "intelligentsia" to describe Soviet elites as a whole, thus implicitly conferring on Communist officials the cultural superiority of academicians and writers. This conflation of the elites of power and culture was not mere sleight of hand, but conveyed something important about the Soviet mindset of the 1930s. It meant that the social hierarchy was conceptualized in *cultural* terms. Thus, the Soviet "intelligentsia" (in Stalin's broad definition) was privileged not because it was a ruling class or an elite status group, but because it was the most cultured, advanced group in a backward society. It was privileged as a cultural vanguard—and so were the Stakhanovites, whose share in privilege indicated that privilege was not a corollary of elite status. Workers and peasants who had joined the intelligentsia via affirmative action added another facet to the vanguard image, for they, like the Stakhanovites, were forerunners in the masses' upward march toward culture. "We are workers," says the wife of a manager in a novel of the late Stalin period, blithely ignoring both her husband's current occupation and the bourgeois lifestyle of which she has just boasted. "When the government was poor, we too were poor; when the government became richer, we too took heart."⁷⁴

Of course not everybody was convinced by these arguments. Misrecognition was not much practiced outside the circles of privilege, and popular grumbling about privilege was common. "Communists in Moscow live like lords, they go round in sables and with canes with silver handles." "Who lives well? Only top officials and speculators." Some criticism reported by the secret police specifically mentioned the creation of a new privileged class. In the Ministry of Agriculture, for example, there was indignation when separate tables were set up in the cafeteria for people receiving extra rations. According to the police report, people were saying "The point of it is to get rid of equality. [They want] to create classes: the communists (or former nobility) and us ordinary mortals."⁷⁵

During the Great Purges, as we will see in Chapter 8, the regime picked up on this kind of popular objection to privilege, portraying disgraced Communist leaders as abusers of power who had been corrupted by a privileged life style. This appropriation might be viewed as purely cynical, but there is some

evidence to the contrary. Judging by his recollections in later life, Viacheslav Molotov, Stalin's closest associate in the 1930s, really did think that many of the high-ranking Communist victims had gone soft in power and were corrupted by privilege. An unpublished Politburo resolution of 1938 on abuse of privileges suggests that this was a collective rather than personal attitude. Some disgraced party leaders, the resolution noted, had "built themselves grandiose dacha-palaces . . . where they lived luxuriously and wasted the people's money, demonstrating their complete degeneracy and corruption in everyday life." Moreover, the resolution continued, "the wish to have such dacha-palaces still survives and is even growing in some circles" of leading government and party officials. To combat this tendency, the Politburo ordered that dachas should not exceed seven or eight rooms, and that dachas exceeding the norm should be confiscated and turned into government resthomes.⁷⁶

The privileges of Stakhanovites were often strongly resented by fellow workers. Stakhanovites were seen as people who "made money at the expense of the other workers" and "took bread from the mouths of working women."⁷⁷ Other workers sometimes beat up Stakhanovites or damaged their machines.

At the "Red Dawn" plant, during a conversation about the Stakhanovite movement among the women workers of the winding department on 17 October, one worker, Pavlova, announced that she was transferring from 12 bobbins to 16. After the break, worker Smirnova hung a dirty rag on Pavlova's machine and said: "There's a prize for your activism in transferring to more intensive work!"

The authorities liked to attribute anti-Stakhanovite behavior to "backwardness," but Smirnova's case was puzzling and distressing in that she was not a raw recruit from the village:

Smirnova is an old worker, pure proletarian. The factory committee is now trying to find out who could have incited Smirnova and what provoked her to such a protest.⁷⁸

MARKS OF STATUS

In 1934, a mining enterprise in the Moscow region decided to build a fancy dormitory for its best workers. There were to be Oriental carpets and chandeliers, according to a report in the journal *Our Achievements*. Most remarkable was the fact that the dormitory was to have a doorman, who would wear a uniform decorated with gold.⁷⁹

There was something about uniforms that had become deeply appealing to Soviet officials as well as citizens. This was a new departure in the mid 1930s. The Revolution had initially swept away all titles, ranks, and uniforms, regarding them as unnecessary and even absurd marks of status characteristic of an autocratic regime. Epaulettes, insignia, and even military ranks were banished from the Red Army for almost two decades: officers were simply divided into "senior commanders" and "junior commanders." The old uniforms for university and high school students disappeared. Civil service ranks were abolished, as were the different uniforms that had been worn by officials in

different ministries. The old engineers' uniforms, including "a cap with a badge of profession: a hammer and spanner," were still sometimes seen in the 1920s. But during the Cultural Revolution they were ceremonially repudiated. A Leningrad resident recalled "a burning scarecrow dressed in the uniform" being paraded along the street, while in Moscow a German correspondent reported that "a technician's cap [was] burned at night with noisy demonstrations, to celebrate the downfall of the 'caste of engineers.'" ⁸⁰

Then, in the mid 1930s, the tide turned. Titles, ranks, and uniforms were reinstated, and often bore a strong resemblance to their Imperial predecessors. In 1934, a government commission recommended that distinctive uniforms be introduced for personnel in civil aviation, waterways and fishing authorities, lumber export, and the polar exploration agency, in addition to those already worn by railroad personnel and militiamen. All uniforms would indicate rank in the same way, by semicircles, circles, pentagons, and stars, and include a greatcoat and field jacket with leather belts at the waist. For managerial (officer-level) personnel, one shoulder strap was to be fastened to the belt. ⁸¹

The dramatic reversal of the mid 1930s has been attributed to a general process of "embourgeoisement" of the Stalinist regime and repudiation of revolutionary values. ⁸² This is probably true, but we should remember that contemporaries often saw it differently. Communists who had moved up from the lower classes were particularly inclined to see their assumption of distinctions modeled on those of the old regime as simply a proof that the Revolution had finally triumphed: they now had what the old bosses used to have. The Moscow miners evidently felt the same way about their imposing doorman, whose uniform was explicitly modeled on those of the old regime, and gave satisfaction for exactly that reason.

It should be pointed out, moreover, that the appeal of uniforms was not solely connected with status. The return of school uniforms in the second half of the decade, a very popular move, was not a matter of social status, since all pupils went to the same state schools and the only differentiation fostered by the uniforms was between boys and girls. Yet *Izvestiia* reported that "almost every family" was discussing the question of uniforms. A state commission had proposed "electric blue" dresses for high-school girls, but many people had other ideas. The relative merits of berets and caps and long trousers and "sporty knickerbockers" were enthusiastically canvassed. Some people liked the idea of uniforms because they *diminished* social distinctions within the school. Uniforms were associated with order and propriety and the inculcation of responsibility and pride in the collective. ⁸³

Nevertheless, the policy change of the mid 1930s marked the beginning of a process of restoring ranks and uniforms that transformed the appearance of the Soviet civil and armed services. The Red Army came first, with the re-establishment of the ranks of major, colonel, and marshal in 1935. Five military leaders, including Klim Voroshilov, the defense minister, and Mikhail Tukhachevsky, were immediately appointed to the rank of marshal. ⁸⁴ New

uniforms, with epaulettes and insignia reminiscent of the old Imperial Army, were introduced at the same time. A Communist who watched the first public showing of the new dress uniforms at the November parade in Red Square recorded the event in his diary:

Voroshilov received the parade on a marvellous horse in a new marshal's uniform. The marshals . . . stood at [Lenin's] mausoleum with members of the Politburo. The troops were also in new uniform. They have got epaulettes, which have not been seen for 18 years. For the junior officer corps, lance-corporals, sergeants, sergeant-majors, stripes have been reintroduced, for the officers, gold epaulettes.⁸⁵

Although the Soviet Union did not go as far as the old regime, in which every civil servant had had his rank as well as the uniform designating branch of service, it took significant steps in this direction. The NKVD acquired a hierarchy of ranks with new military-sounding titles, ranging from sergeant and junior lieutenant to Commissar General of State Security; its members wore insignia and uniforms whose blue trousers, Robert Tucker tells us, were "the same color as those worn by the uniformed police of tsarist Russia." During the war, for the first time, military-style ranks were introduced for state prosecutors. Soviet diplomats went into uniform at the same period.⁸⁶

Science was one of the few spheres in which the traditional hierarchies of rank were not overthrown by the revolution or even by the Cultural Revolution at the end of the 1920s. Full members of the Academy of Sciences, always referred to by their title, "Academician," stood at the apex of the pyramid, followed by corresponding members. The status of academician was attained not through appointment by the regime but through election by the existing members of the Academy, a tradition that survived challenge by Communist militants. The Cultural Revolution, which hit universities particularly hard, temporarily did away with the traditional hierarchy of academic degrees and titles. But these were restored by legislation of 1932 and 1937.⁸⁷

The cultural sphere acquired a new array of titles and honors in the 1930s. This owed relatively little to tradition and Tsarist precedent but instead reflected the Soviet regime's commitment to high culture and recent rapprochement with the old intelligentsia. The title of "Distinguished Artist" or "Distinguished Scientist" was introduced in the mid 1920s. A higher title, "People's Artist of the Russian (or Ukrainian or Uzbek) Republic, was added a few years later, but both titles were still awarded sparingly. It was not until the mid 1930s, with the creation of a still higher title, "People's Artist of the Soviet Union," that titles began to be distributed with a generous hand.⁸⁸

In the last years of the 1930s, the regime became increasingly generous, if not extravagant, in its award of titles and honors to distinguished members of the artistic, scholarly, and scientific communities. After a festival of Uzbek culture was celebrated in Moscow in 1937, thirteen Uzbek musicians and other artists received Orders of the Labor Red Banner and twenty-five received Orders of the Sign of Honor. At the beginning of 1939, a single decree of the Soviet government awarded orders to 172 writers. A month later the Moscow

Film Studio, Mosfilm, received the Order of Lenin (which could be awarded to institutions as well as individuals), and 139 Mosfilm personnel received titles and awards at various levels for their part in making the films *Alexander Nevsky*, *Volga-Volga*, *Chapaev*, and other Mosfilm successes.⁸⁹

The creation of the Stalin Prizes in 1939 added a new step at the top of the ladder of cultural honors. Stalin Prizes were awarded for outstanding achievements in the arts, literature, scholarship, and science. In the original formulation, ninety-two prizes were to be awarded annually, carrying prize money ranging from 25,000 to 100,000 rubles in addition to a gold medal. The title "Laureate of the Stalin Prize," established by government decree on 26 March 1941, was pronounced with even greater veneration than "Distinguished Scientist" or "People's Artist." They were the Soviet equivalent of Nobel prizewinners.⁹⁰

The intelligentsia was by no means a monopolist in the matters of orders and titles. Orders of Lenin, Orders of the Red Flag, and titles like Hero of Labor were bestowed on a wide range of people, including outstanding "ordinary people" like Stakhanovites and worker and peasant delegates to the Supreme Soviet. These awards had great status value: their recipients had to be referred to by title or rank on all public occasions, like academicians and professors ("Distinguished Artist of the Russian Republic Alekseeva will sing the role of Tatiana"). In addition, the awards had considerable practical value. Heroes of Labor—who had to have had at least thirty-five years on the job in industry, science, government, or public service—received a pension equaling three-quarters of their full wage or salary. Orders carried small monthly cash payments—25 rubles for an Order of Lenin, 10 rubles for a Sign of Honor—plus release from certain taxes and a 10 to 50 percent reduction in one's apartment rent. Order bearers as well as persons with the title of "People's Artist" and "Distinguished Artist" and the like also had the right to a special pension. In a society where access priority was crucial, bearers of titles and orders had priority in getting railroad tickets, rooms in state resthomes, and a host of other things.⁹¹

PATRONS AND CLIENTS

*It is useful to have as a father-in-law a military commander or an influential communist, as a mother-in-law the sister of a high dignitary.*⁹²

In the Soviet Union, for all its apparent bureaucratization, many things actually functioned on a personal basis. This was true of government offices, where the joke was that the only way to get in to see an important official was to say your business was personal.⁹³ It was true in the sphere of supply, where the best way of getting goods was by *blat*, personal connections. It was even true within the sphere of privilege, for commodities like dachas and housing in a ministerial apartment block were in extremely short supply, and mere membership in the eligible group was not enough to secure the prize. To get privileges, you needed contacts with somebody higher up: in short, you needed a patron.

Patronage relations were ubiquitous in Soviet society. Not everybody was fortunate enough to have patrons, of course, but everybody was bound to encounter the phenomenon, if only through the experience of losing out to someone with “protection.” Patronage, like *blat*, was often referred to euphemistically, with an emphasis on the friendship between client and patron. Verbs like “help,” “support,” and “come to the aid of” were often used to describe patronage transactions. Written appeals to patrons requested their “advice” and “help.”⁹⁴

For ordinary people without special connections, the most likely source of patronage was one’s boss or local party secretary. For a *kolkhoznik*, the *kolkhoz* chairman might (or might not) serve as a patron, as in the example given by one Harvard Project respondent: “The accountant of our *kolkhoz* . . . had very good relationships with the chairman of our *kolkhoz*. He had *protektsiya*. . . . If the accountant wanted to fix up his home and *protektsiya* with the chairman of the *kolkhoz* he would be able to get the best material.” For a journalist, the newspaper editor might serve as a patron; for a worker, the factory director or party secretary or “a friend in the cadres [personnel] department.” To become a Stakhanovite in the celebrity sense, a patron, usually a local party secretary, was absolutely necessary.⁹⁵

The intelligentsia—or, strictly speaking, the “creative intelligentsia” of writers, artists, scientists, and scholars—was in a class of its own as far as patronage was concerned. In the first place, patrons were exceptionally highly placed, often at Politburo level. There probably was no Politburo member without his stable of intelligentsia clients, since without them one could not have the reputation as a cultured man that Politburo members, as well as lesser mortals, cherished. In the second place, the system of intelligentsia privileges described earlier in this chapter virtually required a patronage network to allocate them. Finally, it must be said that members of the creative intelligentsia, with centuries of practice with imperial and aristocratic patrons behind them, displayed greater assiduousness and flair as clients than almost any other social group.

Nadezhda Mandelstam, wife of the poet Osip Mandelstam, described her first conscious recognition of the patronage system:

In 1930 in the little Sukhumi resthouse for bigwigs where we ended up through an oversight of Lakoba’s, Ezhov’s wife was talking to me: “Pilniak goes to us,” she said. “And whom do you go to?” I indignantly reported that conversation to O.M., but he quietened me down: “Everyone ‘goes [to someone]’. Obviously it can’t be otherwise. And we ‘go’. To Nikolai Ivanovich.”⁹⁶

“Nikolai Ivanovich” was Bukharin, already a falling star in the party. Ezhov was a rising star, head of the personnel department of the Central Committee and in a few years to become the infamous head of the secret police during the Great Purges. The Ezhovs, it would appear from the wife’s comment, were actively seeking intelligentsia friends (clients) who would do them credit. The writer Boris Pilniak was not their only catch. Mikhail Koltsov, famous essayist and editor of the journals *Krokodil* and *Ogonek*, also came into the Ezhovs’ orbit in the second half of the 1930s. Ezhov’s wife, Evgenia, herself a journalist,

had many friends in the cultural world; the writer Isaac Babel was not only a friend but also a former lover.⁹⁷

Many members of the intelligentsia must have recognized their own day-dreams in the fantasy sketched by the writer Mikhail Bulgakov of Stalin himself extending his protection:

Motorcycle. . . . brnm!!! In the Kremlin already! Misha goes into the hall, and there sit Stalin, Molotov, Voroshilov, Kaganovich, Mikoyan and Iagoda.

Misha stands in the door, making a low bow.

STALIN: What's the matter? Why are you barefoot?

BULGAKOV (with a sad shrug): Well . . . I don't have any boots . . .

STALIN: What is this? My writer going without boots? What an outrage! Iagoda, take off your boots, give them to him.⁹⁸

In real life, personal meetings of intelligentsia clients with Stalin or other highly placed patrons were relative rare. The usual pattern was to solicit their patrons' help by letter (always hand-delivered), and receive (if they were lucky and the patron was able to help them) a telephone call in return.⁹⁹

Political patrons could assist intelligentsia clients in a number of ways. They could help them obtain scarce goods like apartments or places in an elite resort. They could protect a client who fell into disgrace (though this was of course not always possible: during the Great Purges, such protection became very difficult and dangerous). Finally, they could intervene on behalf of a client in professional disputes. This was a service that clients often requested, and it meant that the incidence of "state" and "party" intervention in cultural affairs was even greater than it would otherwise have been.

Patronage was one of the important mechanisms for distributing scarce goods. The archive of Viacheslav Molotov, head of the Soviet government, is full of appeals for such goods, especially housing. Writers, musicians, scientists, artists, and writers, all approached Molotov, addressing him by name and patronymic in their letters and putting their requests on a personal basis, as befitted clients writing to a patron. The young writer Pavel Nilin, whose thoughts on the relative nature of luxury we encountered earlier in the chapter, was one of those whose appeal to Molotov was successful (he got a one-room apartment of 18 square meters, double the size of his old one). The writer Aleksei Tolstoi, legendary possessor of the "bottomless bank account," got an eight- to ten-room dacha, though to be sure he had asked for eleven rooms.¹⁰⁰

Requests for protection against defamation or attack were also common in Molotov's mailbag. A non-party scientist appealed for protection against the harassment of a powerful Communist colleague, a historian asked Molotov to help squash a libelous rumor that he had been a friend of a Trotskyite, and a poet complained about a devastating review his work had received in *Pravda*.¹⁰¹ Other leaders received similar appeals from clients. An actress turned to Iakov Agranov, a high NKVD official, for help when her husband was in trouble. When the composer Dmitrii Shostakovich fell into disgrace over

his opera *Lady Macbeth of the Mtsensk District*, he naturally appealed to his friend and patron, Marshal Tukhachevsky.¹⁰²

Clients often appealed to patrons to intervene in professional disputes. Lysenko's feud with the geneticists, for example, was the subject of many appeals from both sides. Physics was also a subject of appeals and counter appeals. For example, a group of Communist philosophers sought Molotov's support for a controversial attack on "idealism" in physics published in their journal, while Kapitsa wrote to Stalin and Molotov in defence of the "idealists," characterizing the journal's intervention in physics as "scientifically illiterate" and deploring the assumption that "if you are not a materialist in physics . . . you are an enemy of the people." Artists, writers, and actors were equally prone to appeal to patrons to resolve professional disputes.¹⁰³

Certain leading members of the cultural and scholarly professions, such as Petr Kapitsa and Sergei Vavilov in the natural sciences, acted as representatives of a whole group of clients in dealing with highly placed patrons. They assumed this broker function because of their professional stature and position (presidents of the Academy of Sciences, secretaries of professional unions, and directors of scientific institutes had it automatically) and their established connections with various government leaders. Sometimes brokering was a matter of representing the professional interests of a group, as when Aleksandr Fadeev, secretary of the Writers' Union, wrote to Molotov to convey the distress of the literary community that no Stalin Prizes had been earmarked for literature (this was quickly remedied) and raise other questions of professional concern such as royalties and taxation of writers' earnings. Sometimes it meant interceding on behalf of subordinates, as when the head of a construction project wrote to the chairman of the Leningrad soviet on behalf of engineers threatened with deportation as "social aliens."¹⁰⁴

Many "broker" interventions involved arrests within the professional community that the broker represented. Kapitsa, for example, appealed to Stalin twice about the arrest and imprisonment of the physicist Lev Landau. Sergei Vavilov wrote to Lavrentii Beria (head of the security police) in 1944 attempting to gain release from prison of a young astronomer. Maxim Gorky was famous for such interventions on behalf of Petrograd intellectuals during the Civil War and continued the practice in the 1930s. The theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold frequently appealed to his patrons Avel Enukidze and Iagoda on behalf of arrested friends and acquaintances in the theater world.¹⁰⁵

In his memoirs, Iurii Elagin tells the story of the epic "battle of patrons" between two well-connected theatrical figures, L. P. Ruslanov, administrator of the Vakhtangov Theater, and A. D. Popov, director of the Moscow Red Army Theater. Ruslanov and Popov lived in the same apartment house, and the trouble arose when Popov hung flowerpots from his balcony that Ruslanov regarded as a potential danger to passersby. Using his contacts, Ruslanov got an order from the head of district militia to remove the flowerpots; Popov trumped this by getting permission to keep his flowerpots from the head of militia of the city. Ruslanov then went to the chief director of militia of the whole Soviet Union for a removal order, to which Popov responded

with a letter from Voroshilov instructing that he should not be further harassed about his flowerpots. But Ruslanov was the winner: he went to Kalinin, president of the USSR, and obtained an order that the flowerpots should be removed.¹⁰⁶

Apocryphal or not, this story is a nice illustration of the hierarchies of patronage that could be invoked by persistent and well-connected clients. The Vakhtangov Theater, according to Elagin, had its set of middle-level patrons in the pre-1937 period, including Maxim Gorky, Enukidze, and Iakov Agranov (deputy head of OGPU), who “were always ready to do everything possible for our theater.” But there were also even more highly placed individuals, notably Politburo members Voroshilov and Molotov, who could also be called on in extreme cases.¹⁰⁷

The benefits to clients in Soviet patronage relations are obvious, but what about the benefits to patrons? These seem to have been the same ones that have inspired patrons throughout the ages, namely, a belief that patronage of the arts sheds luster on the patron, enjoyment of social contacts with members of the cultural haute monde, and pleasure in the flattery that it is clients’ duty to offer. Voroshilov “loved to play a bit at being, so to speak, a patron of the arts, a protector of artists and so on,” according to Molotov, who noted that real friendship existed between Voroshilov and some of his clients, like the painter Aleksandr Gerasimov. To Ivan Gronskii, a serf’s son who became editor of *Izvestiia* and patron of a group of old-school realist artists, the fulsomely expressed admiration of “famous old masters of painting” was both flattering and embarrassing. Effusive tributes to politicians emphasizing their cultural expertise were the stock-in-trade of grateful clients: for example, the writer Galina Serebriakova, dacha neighbor of many political leaders, wrote of Politburo member Valerian Kuibyshev that he was “a many-sided man, a great connoisseur of art and literature, enchanting, uncommonly simple and modest in approach,” remembering in particular his aesthetic response to a beautiful sunset.¹⁰⁸

Of course there were perils in being a patron, as well as being a client. Clients might praise their patrons’ generosity—but too fulsome expressions of enthusiasm for a local leader could provoke the accusation that he was developing a local “cult of personality,” and Stalin was notoriously sensitive to signs that his subordinates were developing their own followings. Voroshilov’s friendship with Gerasimov and other artists was not well regarded by Stalin: according to Molotov, he saw dangers in close personal contacts between the political and cultural worlds “because artists, they’re irresponsible people. They are harmless in themselves, but around them swarm all kinds of dubious riffraff. They exploit that connection—with Voroshilov’s subordinates, with his family.” Gronskii’s patronage of the realist artists, cited above, could have gotten him into trouble. The day after a group of his “clients” had escorted him home as a gesture of appreciation of his intervention at an artists’ meeting, Gronskii received a telephone call from Stalin with the abrupt query (which he understood as a veiled threat): “What kind of demonstration was that yesterday?”¹⁰⁹

For clients, there were also dangers. Ezhov's patronage was surely dangerous in the long run to his clients, most of whom perished in the Great Purges after his fall. The patronage of Bukharin blighted the career of a whole cohort of young Communist scholars after he was disgraced as a Rightist. This could also happen at less exalted levels. As a journalist respondent in the Harvard Project put it, "Protection is a dangerous affair. . . . if you have a friend, that's good, but if tomorrow he is arrested, that is bad. Because when your friend is arrested, you also get into difficult straits. The police are not only interested in him, but in his friends as well. When Yagoda was arrested, so were those with whom he had connections. . . . If you work on a newspaper and your editor protects you, that's good, but it is only temporary."¹¹⁰

Patronage exists in all sorts of societies. The feature that distinguished Soviet patronage in the Stalin era from other varieties was that the state was the monopoly distributor in a context of shortages of all goods and services. State monopoly meant that *allocation* was a major function of Soviet bureaucracy. Shortages meant that access was a matter of priority and privilege. There were formal rules about priorities, but these did not solve specific allocation questions, all the more since the eligible prioritized group was always larger than the sum of goods available. This was where patronage (and its close relative, *blat*) made their contribution. The ultimate allocational decisions were made by bureaucrats—but on personalistic, not bureaucratic-legal reasons. Members of the intelligentsia tended to rely more on patronage than *blat* because they had closer personal relations than most citizens with Communist high society. Their privileged status as a group did not automatically confer privileges on any single individual. Individual members of the intelligentsia realized their claims on privilege the same way would-be Stakhanovites did it—by finding patrons to sponsor them.