

Zitierhinweis

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habe man auf Unterhaltung statt auf Politik gesetzt, um die Menschen, abgesehen von den Dissidenten, ruhigzustellen und sie gleichzeitig davon zu überzeugen, dass das Leben im Sozialismus stressfreier und angenehmer ist als im Kapitalismus. Kompliziert sei es dann aber mit der Perestrojka geworden, da nunmehr die Konservativen in der KPČ Probleme mit der sowjetischen Politik hatten. In der Folge seien auch die offiziellen Medien diskussionsfreudiger und politisch offener geworden. Der Prozess der Abkehr vom stalinistischen Denken sei nicht mehr aufzuhalten gewesen und habe letztlich zum Ende des kommunistischen Regimes geführt.

Was den besonderen Wert der Arbeit ausmacht, sind die vielen Text- und Bildbeispiele aus Presse, Literatur und Archiven, durch die eine lebendige Vorstellung von über vierzig Jahren tschechoslowakischer Geschichte und von der Interaktion zwischen Gesellschaft, Politik, Medien und Kultur vermittelt wird. Die Studie ist klar strukturiert und in einer sehr eingängigen, jederzeit nachvollziehbaren Diktion gehalten. Es wird gezeigt, wie ein kleines Land sich im Spannungsfeld zwischen eigener Geschichte und internationalen Verflechtungen, zwischen Handlungsmöglichkeiten und -einschränkungen, zwischen Macht und Unterordnung usw. bewegt und sich dabei verändert hat. Eine Aufschlüsselung nach tschechischen und slowakischen Medien hätte womöglich interessante Befunde und ein differenzierteres Bild ergeben. In konzeptueller Hinsicht ist es etwas bedauerlich, dass in der Untersuchung auf eine Reflexion und Einordnung des eigenen Forschungsbeitrags verzichtet wird. Dafür hätte sich gut das Schlusskapitel angeboten, das leider über den Status eines bloßen Resümées nicht hinauskommt. Dennoch ist der Verfasserin eine beeindruckende Gesamtleistung gelungen. Da die beschriebene schicksalhafte Phase der tschechoslowakischen Geschichte zunehmend im Dunkel der Vergangenheit verschwindet und dringend der Erinnerung bedarf, möchte ich das sehr lesenswerte Buch allen Interessierten zur Lektüre empfehlen.

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Annina Gagyiöva

Vom Gulasch zum Kühlschrank. Privater Konsum zwischen Eigensinn und Herrschaftssicherung im sozialistischen Ungarn (1956–1989)

Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2020. X, 252 S., 32 Abb., 4 Tab. = Studien zur Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte Ostmitteleuropas, 30. ISBN: 978-3-447-11489-9.

Annina Gagyiöva's book challenges the still widely held perception in the West that modern mass consumption and consumer culture were alien to "real and existing socialism" and the one-party states of East-Central Europe. The monograph, which is based on her doctoral dissertation with the same title, shows that consumer culture not only failed to pose a major threat to the existence of the Kádár regime in Hungary between 1947 and 1989. It also demonstrates that state-controlled private consumption also functioned as a means to restore, consolidate and preserve power. The Kádár regime stumbled upon consumerism as an instrument of power and an ideology to legiti-

mize one-party rule almost by accident; after the suppression of the 1956 Revolution by Soviet troops, the new political elite sought to forge a new compromise, indeed an unspoken deal, with the population. This unspoken deal promised higher wages, less control and terror, more consumption and constantly rising living standards in return for compliance and retreat into private lives. This compromise went against the original goals of the regime as well as the values of the first generation of communists, such as full equality, solidarity and self-restraint bordering on puritanism. The hardliners believed that the new compromise made an unnecessary concession to their enemy and their values, such as greed and petty bourgeois egotism. To satisfy its side of the bargain, the Kádár regime was prepared to get into debt to increase the population's standard of living and keep the shelves full of consumer goods. The seemingly insatiable appetite of the population for more, better quality and mainly imported goods increased the foreign debt and undermined public respect for both the state and home-made products. Unable to pay its bills, the government liberalized the market in the late 1970s and early 1980s, ceasing to subsidize many basic goods and services. The practice evoked a public outcry from the population, and corroded the legitimacy of the Kádár regime, thus contributing to its demise in 1989.

The book consists of an introduction, nine chapters, conclusion, bibliography and index. The first chapter traces the origins of "Gulash Communism" back to the chaotic months after the defeat of the 1956 Revolution which forced the political elite to rethink its social and economic policies. On the basis of the minutes of the city administration in Budapest, the author shows how the city administrators in their dual functions as party officials and consumers helped to shape the regime's new approach to the everyday problems of the population. The city administrators pushed for the building of modern supermarkets and department stores to satisfy public demand for more and improved quality consumer goods. The second chapter sheds light on the failed attempt of the political elite to control the distribution of products and services via the trade unions to ensure fairness and equality. However, the practice of trade union officials to distribute household appliances based on social needs and political criteria faltered due to public resistance as the consumers no longer regarded the possession of a washing machine as a privilege but rather as a basic right. Chapter three examines the place of the private economy and entrepreneurs in the socialist state. In the late fifties and early sixties, Gagyiova argues, the state tolerated the existence of the private sector in order to reduce bottlenecks in production and distribution. However, after the introduction of the New Economic Mechanism in 1968, which sought to introduce market elements and Western practices into the planned economy, the state actively supported small businesses to ensure the steady supply of more and better-quality consumer goods. Then, it opened the door to shopping tourism: first, through liberalization of travel, made possible by the cancelling of visa requirements with the neighboring states in the mid-1960s; this was followed a few years later by the introduction of the so-called blue-passport which enabled a growing number of people to travel to the West; then, visa requirements to visit Austria were removed in the late 1970s; and, last but not least, the state introduced "the world passport" in 1988. Chapter four demonstrates that the liberalization of travel also promoted illegal and semi-legal activities, such as smuggling, trafficking, and black-marketeering; since the same activities also involved civil servants, such as border guards and custom officials, shopping tourism corroded the moral fabric of the regime reducing citizens' respect for both law and order and for their guardians. The state also tried to profit from increased tourism and the ever-increasing hunger for consumer goods by setting up Intertourist shops, where foreigners (mainly

Hungarian émigrés) and natives with ready access to Western currencies could buy high-quality domestic or imported goods. Even earlier the state set up the IKKA system, a state-run clearing house, which allowed émigrés and foreigners alike to send packages to their relatives in the 1950s and 1960s. The packages first included basic food items that were expensive or not available in stores, such as Pick salami, rum, tea or coffee. Later on, one could send household appliances and even cars, thus seriously reducing the waiting list for automobiles. Both the IKKA and Intertourist shops proved to be highly profitable; however, in the final decade of the regime, their profit margin was reduced as a result of the liberalization of travel, particularly shopping tourism in Austria. More importantly, as chapter five shows, establishing such state-run businesses failed to prevent the outflow of hard currency; nor did it improve the balance of trade with the neighboring states significantly. Finally, the very existence of such shops undermined the regime's rhetoric about socialist equality and weakened people's respect for domestic products, the home currency and indirectly for the socialist regime.

Chapter six examines the long-term consequences of market reforms and the political elite's use of consumption to engender loyalty and increase the legitimacy of the Kádár regime. An increased state deficit, caused in part by the oil crisis, growing indebtedness and galloping inflation after 1979 forced the government to end its policy of subsidizing consumption, including the consumption of food. The continued influx of Western-made and expensive luxury goods further widened the gap between the have and the have-nots (the high earners and those who had access to hard currency and the rest of the population). Chapter seven analyses the origins of the so-called lifestyle debate which revolved around the psychological impact and political consequences of consumerism. Even though the debate had been won by pragmatists, such as János Kádár, who saw consumption as both a legitimizing force and a means to improve people's lot the intellectual elite's discomfort about mass consumption and consumer culture never fully disappeared. Chapter eight examines the rise of advertising in Hungary in the 1950s and 1960s and its evolution in the final decades of state socialism. Until the end of the sixties, advertising remained low-key; its main function was to inform the public, in neutral language, about the availability of new goods and change the cultural habits of (and, thus, civilize) the lower classes. After 1968, the role of advertising was to create a market for locally produced goods and services, and thus support Hungarian businesses. In the final decade of the Kádár regime, the state and the political elite used advertising to bolster public support for the regime by drawing attention to cheap and easily accessible food items. The last chapter sheds light on the crisis of state socialism in the 1980s: on the rise of a new social elite which owed its wealth and influence not only to its connections to the establishment, but also to speculation, smuggling and other illegal or semi-legal activities. Their conspicuous consumption angered the population which bore the brunt of galloping inflation and liberalized prices for basic consumer goods. While the living standards of the majority declined drastically in the 1980s, a significant minority increased their consumption via self-exploitation and spending their savings. The public, or at least the majority of the population, interpreted these trends as a form of betrayal by the Kádár regime. Their conclusion was only partially correct, however: they failed to notice that the same policies which had helped to increase their standards of living in the 1960s and 1970s proved to be one of the sources of their misery in the 1980s. Socialist consumerism, like the socialist welfare state,

collapsed because it had been built on a weak economic basis and on a shaky political foundation, on foreign loans and the political need to legitimize the one-party rule.

While there are excellent studies in Hungarian on private consumption and consumer culture under Communism, they generally suffer from two weaknesses which Annina Gagyiova's book was able to avoid: they are normally weak on regional comparisons and tend to shun theory. Gagyiova's book places the story of mass consumption and consumer culture in Hungary after 1956 in a wider geographical frame; it also makes valuable and relevant references to recent theories on Western consumerism and globalization. The monograph is based on an excellent collection of secondary sources and primary documents; the latter include correspondence between party and state offices; national and local newspapers, social science periodicals, the main comic weekly, police files, trial documents, published collections of interviews and the files of Radio Free Europe in Munich. The book is richly illustrated and cogently argued, it represents a highly enjoyable read. It is my hope that the study will be translated into English and Hungarian (and thus will reach a wider audience) and that the book as a whole, or at least its best chapters such as the one on advertising, would become required reading for undergraduate or graduate courses on Hungarian and Eastern European history.

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György Majtényi

Luxury and the Ruling Elite in Socialist Hungary. Villas, Hunts, and Soccer Games

Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2021. 353 S., 25 Abb. ISBN: 978-0-253-05592-7.

György Majtényi, who teaches at the Károly Eszterházy Catholic University in Eger, has written an impressive book about the social and cultural history of the ruling elite of Socialist Hungary. Based on extensive archival research and interviews, and using sophisticated cultural theories, the author provides us with a profound image of the inner workings, unwritten rules, and symbolic conflicts of the Hungarian nomenclature from the late 1940s to the late 1980s. The new elite had not only to deal with the well-known, and very obvious main contradictions (in Marx' terms: *Hauptwidersprüche*) of a political system with a Communist *telos* which could not cover up the widening gap between the ideological goal of a just, egalitarian, and equal society on the one hand, and the reality of stark social and economic differences on the other. Built on the Stalinist model and modified after 1956 by János Kádár, this complex system of privileges, of allocation of specific, exclusive spaces, objects and consumer goods for the ruling party elite offers insights and glimpses into the politico-symbolic functions of this system. Another strength of this book is the broad historical and sociological perspective on the culture of this elite which is also embedded in a wider time frame that includes the whole 20th century, and, although indirectly, the first decades of the 21st century, when a new