

SUMMARY

Between the utopia of modernization and the realities of the era

Everyday life in Moscow, Kyiv, and Minsk during the Leonid Brezhnev years (1964–1982)

This book is devoted to everyday life in the capitals of the founding states of the Soviet Union — Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus — during the era of Leonid Brezhnev's rule as leader of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (1964–1982). Moscow, Kyiv, and Minsk, industrialised, largely Russian-speaking cities in the European and Slavic parts of the USSR, were at that time the most representative examples of Soviet modernity. The standards of living achieved in these cities, especially in Moscow, were to be replicated by other cities in the Soviet Union and ultimately influence progress in rural areas.

The everyday life of the inhabitants of the USSR's European metropolises is examined in this book in the terms of modernisation processes. Research of this type requires an analysis of two dimensions. Firstly, the modernisation project itself, which is always the product of the elites and is pushed through by them, and secondly, the social practices that result from the implementation of this project. For this reason, the analysis conducted in this book takes place on two levels. The first attempts to reconstruct how the model of a Soviet citizen's everyday life was supposed to look during the period of so-called developed socialism. It is therefore a study of the vision of everyday life that the USSR authorities promoted in their propaganda. Due to the conceptual breadth of 'everyday life,' it has been narrowed down in this work to housing, trade, food, clothing, transport, and leisure time. These were the specific aspects of everyday life that contributed most to the Soviet modernisation project during the late socialist period.

The second level of the analysis concerns how everyday life really looked for the inhabitants of a Soviet metropolis during the Brezhnev era. To determine this, it was necessary to contrast the propaganda vision of everyday life in late socialism with the realities of the

era in order to seek out answers to the questions of how comfortable the lives of average residents of Soviet metropolises in Europe were; to what extent they felt the tension between collectivist utopia and individual consumerism; and finally, how they remember the Brezhnev era from the perspective of time.

The book consists of seven thematic chapters. The first, entitled *Faces of an era*, is general in nature and provides the historical framework for further discussion. It describes the key aspects of the political, economic, and cultural changes that took place in the Soviet Union from the mid-1960s until Brezhnev's death. The inclusion of this chapter was dictated by the fact that everyday life, however we understand it, cannot be divorced from historical, political, economic, and socio-cultural reality. The everyday life of specific individuals, or more broadly, entire groups of people, is always conditioned by a number of determinants that a study must take into account.

The second chapter, *We live in a microdistrict. Housing and everyday life on the housing estate*, discusses the assumptions and implementation of Brezhnev's housing construction programme, undoubtedly the most important element of social policy in the USSR. It presents ways of obtaining a flat, advice on furnishing it, and the practice of living in a housing estate, especially in the early days when the estate's infrastructure was still in its infancy. In terms of furnishing a flat, the key category turned out to be *ujut*—individually understood comfort and cosiness of the home space.

The third chapter, *Everyday and non-everyday shopping*, is devoted to a number of issues related to obtaining various items, from everyday food purchases to regularly purchased clothing to the occasional purchase of large items such as furniture, audio/video equipment, and household appliances. This chapter presents the types of commercial establishments operating in Brezhnev's USSR and discusses the availability of goods, as well as strategies for coping with shortages, including queuing lists, buying in bulk and for exchange, and entering the so-called black market system, i.e., a network of mutual contacts used to obtain scarce goods.

Chapter Four, *From the state menu to traditional recipes. Nutrition and the organisation of food in public spaces and at home*, discusses the main themes of late Soviet propaganda discourse on food. In addition, it illustrates the actual eating habits of the inhabitants of Moscow, Kyiv, and Minsk and examines the development of public catering in these cities, along with the problems that plagued it. As it turns out, despite actively encouraging Soviet citizens to eat in the *obshchepit* (public eateries), conditions did not improve throughout Brezhnev's rule. What was most lacking on the tables of Soviet metropolis residents was meat, and the state's main strategy for masking this shortage was a campaign to promote fish and seafood — the most important example of taste engineering under Brezhnev.

The fifth chapter, *Theoretically practical and realistic — fashion, clothing, and clothing availability*, reports on Soviet discourse on fashion. This message was not entirely consistent: on the one hand, it was acknowledged that Soviet citizens had the right to comfortable and, above all, attractive clothing and even to change their collections, but on the other hand, it was postulated that they should not succumb to fashion whims and should construct their wardrobes in a common-sense manner. These postulates essentially revealed the state's inability to satisfy its citizens' aspirations as consumers, which was particularly noticeable in the case of clothing. For this reason, people, especially young people, were

willing to incur huge expenses and risk contact with counterfeiters in order to obtain fashionable clothing, above all, the must-have item of the time, jeans.

Chapter Six is titled *Transport — truly massive*. Firstly, in addressing issues related to the modernisation of public transport in Moscow, Kyiv, and Minsk, it discusses the plans for expanding these metros — the most modern and flagship means of public transport in the USSR — as well as replacing the rolling stock of road-based means of transport with newer models, including imported ones. Secondly, this chapter shows how important a role the *contract of the century* and the construction of a car factory in Togliatti played in the development of Soviet motorisation, thanks to which the car became a real, though not immediately available, option for the ordinary citizen.

Finally, the seventh chapter, *Use of free time is a nationwide issue. Soviet man after work and on holiday*, attempts to determine how the inhabitants of Soviet metropolises spent their free time, both that available after work on a daily basis and during holidays and vacations. It turns out that there was not much free time daily, as a large part of the day was taken up by work, commuting, and, in the case of women, household chores. On weekends, city dwellers enjoyed relaxing in nature. In addition, this chapter also discusses ways of celebrating public holidays and private celebrations. It shows how trips abroad, available to only a few, were a distant dream.

Leonid Brezhnev's eighteen years as First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union went down in history as an era of stagnation. However, studies of everyday life in the USSR's European metropolises reveal how very interesting and momentous phenomena took place there between the mid-1960s and the early 1980s, such as a consumer revolution and a shift towards moral conservatism, individualism, and privacy. The echoes of these phenomena were clearly audible during Gorbachev's *perestroika*, at the time of the collapse of the USSR, and later in the newly constituted independence of the states that emerged after its collapse. These phenomena were not solely caused by grassroots social practices but were also partly the result of changes in propaganda discourse, which during the Brezhnev era promoted a vision of everyday life that was almost deceptively similar to the Western model of the welfare state. The examples of Moscow, Kyiv, and Minsk, metropolises that were given special attention by the authorities, show that the fundamental, though not fully realised, changes in the sphere of everyday life that took place under Brezhnev essentially undermined the very meaning of building communism as such.