

Liberating Consumption, Urban Communities, and Women’s Activism during Late Stalinism

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On October 10, 1952, a crowd of sixty Muscovites gathered in a grocery in Sokol’niki district not to buy bread, butter, or meat but to meet with the retail staff and district inspectors to discuss the store’s service and goods. The first three speakers, all female, complained about the delayed delivery of milk and the low quality of garlic sausages. Two other women accused the salesclerk, Maslova, of cheating people. One of them had apparently caught Maslova shorting a customer by secretly putting a 50-gram package of cheese on the scale when she weighed the butter. Another participant took issue with the accusation, claimed to have witnessed the whole incident, and declared that all the accuser’s purchases weighed correctly when double-checked. At that point another woman stepped in to say that this pro-Maslova witness did not actually live in the neighborhood, did not regularly shop in this store, had family ties to some of the salesclerks, and had come to whitewash “the thieves-deceivers.” “We ask you not to believe any henchmen (*stavlenniki*),” she ended her speech. The district inspector, after hearing all the stories, promised to investigate the matter and, if the accusations proved true, to fire Maslova. A higher inspector from the Grocery Department of the Moscow City Executive Committee, who reviewed the meeting’s minutes twelve days later, also insisted that the case not be buried in red tape and that the inspector report the results of her investigation.¹

Voluntary gatherings of store patrons, such as this one in a Sokol’niki grocery, were called *pokupatelskie konferentsii* or *konferentsii pokupatelei* (customer conferences) or *konferentsii potrebitelei* (consumer conferences)

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1. The Department of Post-1917 Documents at the Central State Archive of the City of Moscow (TsGAGM), fond (f.) 216, opis’ (op.) 1, delo (d.) 783, ll. 189–190 (consumer conference minutes [hereafter CCM], Store No. 34, Sokol’niki district, October 10, 1952). All consumer comments cited in this article were made by women, unless otherwise specified.

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and were held in some of the Soviet Union's large cities in the early post-war years.² The Moscow municipal authorities resumed the pre-war practice of meetings with consumers in March 1947, a few months before the state abolished the ration-card system, undertook currency reform, and restored relatively unrestricted retail trade. Consumer conferences constituted an ideologically safe form of proletarian governance that existed within prescribed limits in privileged urban locations like the capital city. Well before consumer culture advanced to the forefront of the political agenda during the Thaw and the period of developed socialism, consumption proved to be a key sphere in which Stalinist municipal officials saw an opportunity to liberalize socialism after the war. City authorities hence facilitated embryonic institutions of proletarian governance by engaging urban communities in managing retail affairs, which in turn raised hopes among the working class that socialism could be rebuilt by consent and not only by coercion. By converting stores into venues for public gatherings and discussions about trade, Stalinist city executives ensured that the urban working class possessed a means of communicating with the authorities who could thereby better gauge popular opinion and satisfy consumer demands. What is important to underscore is that these post-war attempts to liberalize society were strictly limited to local politics and were obstructed by the lack of resources at low- and middle-rank officials' disposal. The Kremlin higher-ups might not have forbidden consumer conferences from the onset, but they also showed no intention in amplifying their role. Instead, in the first post-war decade, Iosif Stalin and most of his top-rank supporters opted for the politics of subjugation to reimpose the party's control over society. The uneven spread of consumer conferences across geographical lines testifies that it was often Stalinist managers on the ground who shaped the scope of acceptable liberalization.

No degree of liberalization would be possible, however, without the commitment of the urban women whose civic engagement consumer conferences aroused. The municipal authorities, by seeking to mobilize consumers through store gatherings, unintentionally advanced women's activism grounded in communal consciousness. As gender historians explain, this type of activism usually stems from women's belonging to poor or working-class neighborhoods and from their deep roots in a local community. Feelings of affinity thus prompt women to defend the rights of their community members. Soviet female urbanites indeed constituted the most engaged conference attendees since they frequented their local groceries and bakeries and knew many other customers and retail staff personally. As the case with Maslova shows, women observed who lived and shopped in their neighborhoods and what familial relationships connected people together. It is noteworthy that in a competition for credibility, the outsider who defended Maslova lacked those all-important ties to the local community. Women's close connections with

2. Important conferences occasionally received press coverage in central newspapers and were mentioned in laudatory collective letters to Stalin; see, for example, "Tekstil'shchiki izuchaiut spros potrebitelei," *Izvestiia*, August 9, 1949, 1; "Konferentsiia pokupatelei, posviashchennaia kachestvu tkanei," *Izvestiia*, November 24, 1949, 1; TsGAGM, f. 1953, op. 2, d. 111, l. 122 (transcript of Central Department Store workers' meeting, February 24, 1950).

their neighborhoods empowered them to be confident consumers, genuinely interested in helping with the store's problems. That is the reason conference participants considered it as important to unmask Maslova's cheating as to complain about the low quality of the garlic sausages. Soviet women hence developed comprehensive, community-based knowledge of the economy and skillfully employed it as leverage in their interaction with the authorities.

Drawing on women's bonds with local communities, city officials gathered economic information about consumer demand, the quality of goods, and people's spending habits and shopping strategies. Urban women, however, often expanded the agenda of consumer gatherings, raising issues of the local community's safety, hygiene and health, emotional comfort, and mutual trust. The local store was at the center of communal life in working-class neighborhoods and so lent itself well to serving as a place where the Stalinist state and the workers could find common ground. Therefore, female urbanites used their economic expertise, which city authorities sought to access through consumer conferences, to carve out part of a state-curated public space in which they exercised a measure of control over their neighborhoods' well-being. To explore these processes in detail, this article focuses on the conferences of 1947–53 in Moscow, where they represented a mass phenomenon. The main corpus of primary sources for this analysis consists of more than a thousand consumer conference minutes from the Grocery Department collection at the Central State Archive of the City of Moscow, which historians have never previously scrutinized.³

The Politics of Consumption after the War

During the Second World War, consumption in the Soviet Union deviated considerably from the mid-1930s socialist ideals of “cultured trade,” which justified an increase in material welfare as cultural progress.⁴ The war brought austerity back. Nazi Germany captured the most fertile agricultural land in Belarus, the Caucasus, and Ukraine, and the remaining farms, whose efficiency and productivity had already been undermined by collectivization, could not sustain the whole population. The Soviet authorities had to abandon many economic policies they had just recently deemed crucial for the building of prosperous socialism. Industrialization, collectivization of agriculture, and state-regulated trade gave way to private initiative and self-regulation.⁵ The only food the state guaranteed to all nonagricultural

3. Of 1,200 minutes in the Grocery Department collection at the Central State Archive of the City of Moscow, 16 were compiled in 1947, 187 in 1950, 460 in 1951, 421 in 1952, 41 in 1953, and 75 in 1954. I have not found any minutes from 1948 or 1949. The Grocery Department was a subdivision of the Main Trade Authorities within the Moscow City Executive Committee (*Upravlenie torgovli prodovol'stvennymi tovarami Glavnogo upravleniia torgovli Mosgorispolkoma*).

4. David L. Hoffmann, “Mass Consumption in a Socialist Society,” *Stalinist Values: The Cultural Norms of Soviet Modernity, 1917–1941* (Ithaca, 2003), 118–45; Julie Hessler, “Cultured Trade: The Stalinist Turn Towards Consumerism,” in Sheila Fitzpatrick, ed., *Stalinism: New Directions* (London, 2000), 182–209.

5. For more on war-time consumption, see William Moskoff, *The Bread of Affliction: The Food Supply in the USSR During World War II* (Cambridge, Eng., 1990); John Barber

workers during the war through the ration system was bread. Proteins, fats, and sugar, though prescribed in ration cards, often remained in short supply. To provide other foodstuffs and necessities for the civilian population, the authorities eased central planning and relied on local initiatives, occasionally even enforcing self-reliance upon producers and consumers. In early 1942, the state granted industrial enterprises the right to establish their own subsidiary farms or to cooperate with nearby state farms through newly created departments of worker supply. Urban dwellers were also legally allowed to set up their own private plots and gardens.⁶ In each case, the state willingly allocated land parcels to enterprises and urbanites, hoping that local autonomy, private agriculture, and decentralized procurements would improve consumption in the cities. Peasants intensified the production of food on their private plots to sustain their families and to sell the surplus on the market at unregulated prices. Private initiative stimulated markets, and war-time outdoor marketplaces flourished to accommodate the exchange of goods outside state-controlled channels. Peasants sold their produce or bartered it for bread; urbanites sold their used clothing, shoes, and household items; black marketeers speculated in ration cards and stolen supplies.⁷ Decentralized, liberalized consumption proved indispensable for the population's survival during the war.

After the war ended, the Stalinist regime sought to regain political control over society.⁸ In this regard, consumption quickly became a politicized issue with high ideological stakes. In the last years of the war, many Soviets had been exposed to material life under western capitalism. When fighting the Nazi army in Europe, Soviet officers and soldiers witnessed the capitalist lifestyle and brought a massive volume of trophies home. The regime's fears of soldiers coming back from Europe as "political westernizers" and of the masses worshipping foreign commodities were real.⁹ State officials launched a series of policies to return to pre-war normalcy. But what did that normalcy mean? For the higher Stalinist authorities, a return to normalcy in consumption signified coercive re-centralization. The collective farm again stood at the forefront of agricultural production, and the newly annexed territories of western Belarus and western Ukraine experienced intensive and brutal collectivization. The currency reform of 1947 targeted those entrepreneurial

and Mark Harrison, *The Soviet Home Front, 1941–1945: A Social and Economic History of the USSR in World War II* (London, 1991); Wendy Z. Goldman and Donald A. Filtzer, eds., *Hunger and War: Food Provisioning in the Soviet Union during World War II* (Bloomington, 2015); Brandon Schechter, *The Stuff of Soldiers: A History of the Red Army in World War II through Objects* (Ithaca, 2019); Wendy Z. Goldman and Donald A. Filtzer, *Fortress Dark and Stern: The Soviet Home Front during World War II* (Oxford, 2021); Jeffrey Kenneth Hass, *Wartime Suffering and Survival: The Human Condition under Siege in the Blockade of Leningrad, 1941–1944* (Oxford, 2021), 43–88.

6. Goldman and Filtzer, *Fortress Dark and Stern*, 111–14.

7. Julie Hessler, *A Social History of Soviet Trade: Trade Policy, Retail Practices and Consumption, 1917–1953* (Princeton, 2004), 251–52, 268–73.

8. Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Postwar Soviet Society: The 'Return to Normalcy,' 1945–1953," in Lloyd E. Lee, ed., *World War II: Crucible of the Contemporary World* (New York, 1991), 248–75.

9. Schechter, *The Stuff of Soldiers*, 214–42.

peasants and urbanites who had gained significant profits during the war. The reform's goal was to wipe out their cash earnings.¹⁰ Between 1946 and 1948, several state decrees re-established severe punishments for stealing public property and put an end to private initiatives such as petty hawking, billiard rooms, small cafes, and takeout food stalls that had proliferated after 1945. In the end, the 1948 campaign against "privateers" liquidated any prior concessions to decentralization in the consumer sector of the economy.¹¹ Instead, the Stalinist regime prioritized a state-regulated distribution system with its state-owned retail outlets, centralized procurement, and administratively set prices. Even the famine of 1946–47 did not derail this approach and only briefly postponed the implementation of some policies.¹² In fact, post-war trade was designed to facilitate consumption among the main beneficiaries of late Stalinism—the professional middle class of factory managers, engineers, and party personnel with high salaries and privileged access to the distribution system, whose political loyalty the regime secured through the "Big Deal" social contract.¹³

But was the "Big Deal" exclusive and inevitable? Was it the only interpretation of pre-war normalcy harbored by state and party officials who, as Vera Dunham famously argued, simply stopped pretending in the immediate post-war years that ideological concessions to the middle class were temporary? Could the workers secure their own social contract with the Stalinist state? While the Moscow city authorities shared some visions of normalcy with the Stalinist party elite, they nevertheless attempted to revive a somewhat different set of pre-war socialist principles. Like the top Kremlin politicians, city officials favored state-regulated distribution. Yet, at the same time, repressive methods alone hardly guaranteed the satisfaction of people's needs. Moscow municipal executives instead viewed consumption as a sphere that lent itself well to the revival of proletarian governance and popular control over the management of the economy. These policies resonated with the sentiments of the masses as people hoped that the end of the war would bring fairness and social justice and initiate a more liberal political order with increased rights of participation in public life.¹⁴ Consumer gatherings in stores were a good start in this direction as workers' active contribution to trade oversight represented a sure sign of less restrictive socialism. In March 1947, without waiting for currency reform and the nationwide abolition of rationing, the Moscow city authorities launched consumer conferences as part of the capital's return to pre-war normalcy.

10. Kristy Ironside, *A Full-Value Ruble: The Promise of Prosperity in the Postwar Soviet Union* (Cambridge, Mass., 2021), 20–21.

11. Julie Hessler, "A Postwar Perestroika? Toward a History of Private Enterprise in the USSR," *Slavic Review* 57, no. 3 (Fall 1998): 516–42, 530–42.

12. Julie Hessler, "Postwar Normalisation and Its Limits in the USSR: The Case of Trade," *Europe-Asia Studies* 53, no. 3 (2001): 445–71.

13. Vera Sandomirsky Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Durham, 1990).

14. Elena Zubkova, *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions and Disappointments 1945–1957*, trans. and ed. Hugh Ragsdale (Armonk, NY, 1998).

Working-Class Women and Communal Consciousness

The Soviet state first introduced consumer conferences before the war as a way of engaging with its Stalinist working-class vanguard. Sources mention the earliest gatherings occurring in late 1935, almost immediately after the beginning of nonrationed distribution. The fancy *Gastronom* stores in large cities such as Moscow and Kharkiv attracted up to a few hundred people to these meetings in 1936.¹⁵ Conferences, together with goods exhibits, visitor albums, consumers' letters to newspapers, and complaint notebooks, aimed to develop "cultured trade" by facilitating shopping for record-breaking Stakhanovites and promoting a "dream world" of future abundance for other workers. As Amy Randall argues, these consumer feedback institutions provided a highly curated experience as they mostly channeled popular grievances in a controlled public sphere and reinforced the Stalinist regime's legitimacy through linking citizenship with the "cultured consumer."¹⁶

The conferences of the 1930s may have imitated earlier, probably more democratic undertakings spontaneously organized during NEP before the establishment of the food rationing system of 1929–35. For example, the newspaper *Sredne-Volzhskaia Kommuna* (Middle-Volga Commune) and the local union of trade workers arranged a "dispute" (*miting-disput*) between retailers from state trade cooperatives and housewives on February 22, 1929.¹⁷ The event drew a crowd of people: only seventeen consumers out of more than fifty volunteers had a chance to speak. During the dispute, housewives publicly expressed their dissatisfaction with retail problems and sought ways to resolve the issues with store staff.¹⁸ Because of enormous interest, the newspaper decided to prolong the dispute and gathered people again three days later in a movie theater.

After the war, the Moscow and Leningrad municipal authorities resumed conferences in grocery stores, bakeries, department stores, bookstores, and some specialized shops.¹⁹ Further research is needed to clarify how conferences functioned in other regions and cities, but they surely represented a mass phenomenon in Moscow after March 1947.²⁰ During the first three months, sixteen grocery stores in twelve Moscow districts organized conferences with

15. Russian State Archive of the Economy (RGAE), f. 7971, op. 1, d. 363 (consumer conference transcript, *Gastronom* No. 5, Kharkiv, June 27, 1936) and d. 364 (consumer conference transcript, *Gastronom* No. 2, [likely Moscow], August 31, 1936).

16. Amy E. Randall, *The Soviet Dream World of Retail Trade and Consumption in the 1930s* (London, 2008), 134–57.

17. "Miting prodavtsov i domokhoziaek," *Sredne-Volzhskaia Kommuna*, February 27, 1929.

18. State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), f. R-5468, op. 12, d. 422, ll. 1–88 (transcript of the dispute "Store Director–Salesclerk–Shopper," 1929).

19. GARF, f. R-4851, op. 4, d. 108, ll. 1–31 (CCM, Bookstore No. 5 "Technical Book," Leningrad, April 18, 1947); Central State Archive of Cinema, Sound, and Photo Documents in St. Petersburg (TsGAKFFD), photo no. 78821 (conference of consumers and suppliers, department store "Sports and Hunting," Leningrad, February 15, 1949); photo no. Ar-5054 (Bookstore "Technical Book," Leningrad, January 19, 1948).

20. Ivanovo also held consumer conferences after the war; see Russian State Archive of Cinema and Photo Documents in Krasnogorsk (RGAKFD), photo no. 0145428 (consumer

more than 1,900 attendees, 145 of whom delivered speeches.²¹ Inspectors from the municipal Grocery Department distilled the best practices of these first months into a memo "Meetings with Shoppers" and recommended them for future events.²² To ensure a high level of attendance, conference organizers were strongly advised to post announcements in stores, adjacent apartment buildings, and the workplaces of principal customers fifteen days in advance, while salesclerks were to remind shoppers about the event.²³ Grocery district officials and inspectors selected retail outlets, though when consumers identified poorly performing grocery stores and bakeries, conferences were occasionally convened there at people's request.²⁴ Usually, the store director would begin with a report on the store's performance followed by the audience's remarks. "The main attention should be given to consumers' active discussions during the debate," insisted the guidelines.²⁵ To warrant accurate records, consumer representatives sometimes joined the presidium and might even be assigned to keep minutes, though the final version always seemed to be a district grocery inspector's responsibility.

Participation was voluntary. There is no evidence that anyone was punished or rewarded for participating or not participating, and some scheduled conferences were canceled because not a single consumer had appeared.²⁶ Voluntary attendance explains why the Grocery Department strove to elaborate upon how to attract potential attendees. The department advised store managers to ask the most active speakers for their home address to invite them to subsequent conferences. A few organizers indeed followed this recommendation, which may have affected how candidly consumers expressed their opinions. But this might also have had the opposite effect, and people could have interpreted such personalized attention as a sign of respect. One female consumer received an invitation letter from her neighborhood's grocery store delivered to her home, which to her served as proof of her significance and worth: "I was so very touched that our trade workers value their customers."²⁷ In most cases, however, when stores were determined to attract more attendees they did not reach out to patrons individually but preferred to work with apartment building management (*domoupravlenie*). Besides retail staff and

conference, Ivanovo, 1949), photo no. 0145084 (consumer conference, Ivanovo department store, 1949).

21. TsGAGM, f. 216, op. 1, d. 405, l. 1 (memo "Meetings with Shoppers," June 5, 1947).

22. *Ibid.*, ll. 1–8.

23. *Ibid.*, d. 626, l. 118 (invitation letter for a consumer conference, Proletarskii district, 1950).

24. *Ibid.*, d. 703, l. 69 (CCM, Store No. 40, Kirov district, April 12, 1951); d. 705, l. 189 (CCM, Store No. 58, Zhdanov district, February 11, 1951); d. 706, l. 313 (CCM, Store No. 23, Kirov district, July 25, 1951); d. 783, l. 146 (CCM, Apartment Building Shop No. 11, Kirov district, September 18, 1952).

25. *Ibid.*, d. 405, l. 4 ("Meetings with Shoppers").

26. *Ibid.*, d. 706, l. 22 (report on consumer conferences at Krasnogvardeisk district groceries held on September 29–30, 1951). In September 1951, the Molotov Grocery District Trade Unit organized only three out of eight scheduled conferences because its staff was preparing the new crop for storage. TsGAGM, f. 216, op. 1, d. 706, l. 24 (letter from the Molotov district director to the Grocery Department, October 3, 1951).

27. TsGAGM, f. 216, op. 1, d. 705, l. 213 ob. (CCM, Store No. 1, Stalin district, May 27, 1951).



Figure 1. Staff of Demonstration Store No. 12 of the Sokol'niki District Grocery Trade Unit at a conference with shoppers, Moscow, March 4, 1947. Source: The Department of Post-1917 Documents at the Central State Archive of the City of Moscow, f. 216, op. 1, d. 405, l. 66a.

consumers, public inspectors and representatives of the city authorities—the Grocery Department and the District Grocery Trade Unit (*raipishchetorg*)—attended conferences (See [Figure 1](#)). The City District Executive Committee (*raispolkom*) members did so as well, though less frequently.

Many Muscovites enthusiastically supported the new initiative: the number of participants varied from a few dozen to several hundred, depending on the day and time. Best attended were the conferences on Sundays, the only day off in Stalin's time, and some districts organized sessions only on Sundays to ensure good attendance.²⁸ For many urbanites, conferences demonstrated

28. The Moscow Bread Trade Unit (*Moskhlebtorg*) organized consumer conferences in bakeries under the Grocery Department's supervision. These conferences usually hosted 10–30 consumers, bakery staff, and inspectors, occasionally joined by representatives of bread plants. Bakeries sometimes collected attendees' home addresses. On the one hand, this fact makes their reports on the number of participants more trustworthy. On the

Stalin's care for people and occasionally gave them a chance to speak directly to the "big shots."²⁹ In February 1951, one female consumer, present at a store's conference in Dzerzhinskii district, gave an emotional speech whose sentiment many must have shared: "This is my first time attending such a conference, and I have been moved to tears: we are gathered, we are hearing their reports, we are taken into consideration in a way that is impossible in any other country."³⁰ In November 1950, the statement of another housewife resembled that outburst: "I have been living in this building for twenty years and not even once has the RPT [district grocery trade unit] addressed us, people and consumers, with requests for [us to tell] them what goods are lacking; the store director has never rendered an account to people. We are so proud of this [conference] and ask [the store] to keep communicating with us, while we in return will help the store at any moment."³¹ The retail personnel and local authorities often reinforced these feelings, confirming in front of the audience that with the help of conferences, "our party and government hear[d] the voice of the consumers."³²

Conferences were open to everyone with no preselected delegates, restricted membership, registration control, or voting cards, so the authorities never officially geared these meetings toward any particular social group nor gave orders to exclude anyone: male consumers and non-Moscow dwellers attended them and regularly gave speeches. Yet, women from local working-class communities constituted the most vocal, confident, and knowledgeable speakers. Unfortunately, the preserved conference minutes rarely contain lists of all participants, so it is difficult to reconstruct the gender breakdown of those who attended but did not speak. On a few existing lists, women considerably outnumber men: at one bakery's conference in 1951, of twenty-three participants, nineteen were women.³³ Two archival photographs—one showing a 1947 conference in Moscow (See [Figure 2](#)) and another depicting a 1948 conference in Leningrad (See [Figure 3](#))—feature fewer men among attendees, while most participants were women, sometimes accompanied by children. As these photographs show, many women came from the working class and only a few represented the higher social classes. Additionally, these events spotlighted female public activists (*obshchestvennitsy*) from various voluntary and state institutions, such as people's controllers, activists representing apartment buildings (*zhensovet doma*), and elected deputies of Moscow executive organs.³⁴

other, the relatively low attendance rate may suggest that people avoided conferences that required them to submit their personal information.

29. TsGAGM, f. 216, op. 1, d. 626, l. 32 (CCM, Bakery No. 351, Dzerzhinskii district, December 13, 1950).

30. *Ibid.*, d. 705, l. 132 (CCM, Store No. 14, Dzerzhinskii district, February 16, 1951).

31. *Ibid.*, d. 626, l. 57 (CCM, Store No. 1, Stalin district, November 29, 1950).

32. *Ibid.*, d. 706, l. 142 (CCM, Store No. 41, Kirov district, September 27, 1951).

33. *Ibid.*, d. 703, l. 136 ob. (CCM, Bakery No. 108, Frunze district, March 15, 1951).

34. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 123 ob.–124 (CCM, Store No. 15, [unknown district], June 21, 1950) and l. 170 (CCM, Store No. 62, Shcherbakov district, March 31, 1950); d. 626, l. 86 ob. (CCM, Store No. 31, Shcherbakov district, November 23, 1950); d. 703, l. 76 (CCM, Store No. 37, Kyiv district, March 22, 1951) and l. 128 (CCM, Store No. 41, Leningrad district, March 30, 1951); d. 705, ll. 195–196 (CCM, Store No. 7, Leningrad district, February 2, 1951).



Figure 2. Customer conference in Store No. 12 of the Sokol'niki District Grocery Trade Unit, Moscow, March 4, 1947. Source: The Department of Post-1917 Documents at the Central State Archive of the City of Moscow, f. 216, op. 1, d. 405, l. 65a.



Figure 3. Conference of shoppers and salesclerks in Store No. 65 of the Petrograd District Grocery Trade Unit, Leningrad, February 1948. Photo Chronicle LenTASS. Source: Central State Archive of Cinema, Sound, and Photo Documents in St. Petersburg, archival no. Aa-49173.

Why did women participate so actively in consumer conferences? This question relates to the broader issue of how consumption empowered women in the Soviet Union—an issue that remains largely unexplored in the scholarly literature and to which I hope to draw attention with this article. The Soviet Union did not ignore the cause of women's rights. Soviet women had full political rights under the law—in fact, more legal equality than most women anywhere in the world, though the possibilities to gain the benefits from it remained limited in many cases. In the 1920s, before Stalinism restored more traditional, heteronormative and pronatalist gender policies, many Bolsheviks envisioned and actively promoted women's emancipation through unveiling campaigns in Central Asia, anti-religious propaganda, the teaching of literacy skills, the legalization of divorce, and the promotion of modern birth-control practices and child-care services.³⁵ This emancipation, however, was to be achieved primarily through women's new role as workers, not by mobilizing them as consumers. Stalin's forced industrialization further strengthened this model of emancipation: the proliferation of gigantic construction sites resulted in labor shortages and therefore enormously increased women's educational and employment opportunities in the 1930s.³⁶ Although the Stalinist state reinforced traditional values of femininity, motherhood, and domesticity between 1934 and 1944, this conservative move did not override the state's earlier commitment to female participation in paid work.³⁷ The mass culture of the 1930s glorified the “double burden” of the

Historians associate *obshchestvennitsy* with the *dvizhenie zhen*, or the wives' movement. But my sources suggest that in the post-war years, the term *obshchestvennitsy* might not have been limited to the wives of managers and party cadres, as it was in the late 1930s. Moreover, men also called themselves *obshchestvenniki*; see TsGAGM, f. 216, op. 1, d. 783, l. 108 (CCM, Store No. 8, Kyiv district, November 23, 1952). I therefore define the term *obshchestvennitsy* more broadly as “female public activists.”

35. Richard Stites, *The Women's Liberation Movement in Russia: Feminism, Nihilism, and Bolshevism, 1860–1930* (Princeton, 1978); Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women, the State, and Revolution: Soviet Family Policy and Social Life, 1917–1936* (Cambridge, Eng., 1993); Diane Koenker, “Men against Women on the Shop Floor in Early Soviet Russia: Gender and Class in the Socialist Workplace,” *The American Historical Review* 100, no. 5 (1995): 1438–64; Anne Gorsuch, “‘A Woman Is Not a Man’: The Culture of Gender and Generation in Soviet Russia, 1921–1928,” *Slavic Review* 55, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 636–60; Elizabeth A. Wood, *The Baba and the Comrade: Gender and Politics in Revolutionary Russia* (Bloomington, 1997); Choi Chatterjee, *Celebrating Women: Gender, Festival Culture, and Bolshevik Ideology, 1910–1939* (Pittsburgh, 2002); Marianne Kamp, *The New Woman in Uzbekistan: Islam, Modernity, and Unveiling under Communism* (Seattle, 2006).

36. Melanie Ilič, *Women Workers in the Soviet Interwar Economy: From “Protection” to “Equality”* (New York, 1999); Melanie Ilič, ed., *Women in the Stalin Era* (London, 2001); Wendy Z. Goldman, *Women at the Gates: Gender and Industry in Stalin's Russia* (Cambridge, Eng., 2002).

37. Victoria Bonnell, “The Peasant Woman in Stalinist Political Art of the 1930s,” *The American Historical Review* 98, no. 1 (1993): 55–82; Mary Buckley, “The Untold Story of Obshchestvennitsa in the 1930s,” *Europe-Asia Studies* 48, no. 4 (1996): 569–86; Susan E. Reid, “All Stalin's Women: Gender and Power in Soviet Art of the 1930s,” *Slavic Review* 57, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 133–73; Thomas Schrand, “Soviet ‘Civic-Minded Women’ in the 1930s: Gender, Class, and Industrialization in a Socialist Society,” *Journal of Women's History* 11, no. 3 (1999): 126–50; Lynne Attwood, *Creating the New Soviet Woman: Women's Magazines as Engineers of Female Identity, 1922–53* (New York, 1999); David L. Hoffmann, “Mothers

working mother, and production, not consumption, was to pave the way for women's empowerment and liberation.

If there ever was a moment in Soviet history when consumption could potentially mobilize women, the early post-war years were that moment. Millions of men had been killed in the devastating war, and those who survived often came home with physical handicaps and mental scars. Women—also scarred by the war from both experience of direct combat and arduous toil on the home front—kept the economy running by serving as an essential labor force after the war ended. Yet, the state encouraged women to undertake another task, to give birth to a new generation that would replace the dead and thus alleviate the huge demographic crisis caused by Stalinist repressive policies and the war.³⁸ As a result, women found themselves not only reconstructing the national economy, but also nurturing young children, nursing their wounded husbands and other male relatives, and heading their household economies through shopping and home management. All these tasks expanded women's already significant role as consumers and leaders of domestic affairs. No wonder then that when the Moscow authorities started holding consumer conferences at stores, women seized this opportunity to obtain a measure of control over their families' and neighborhoods' well-being.

Consumer conferences gathered women together, taught them skills of public speaking, and encouraged them to articulate their own understanding of socialism. As one woman shyly admitted in 1952, she did not live in Moscow and could not speak very well, yet she decided to carry on and to make herself heard—even if clumsily and in colloquial language.³⁹ Those unable to attend occasionally sent notes or letters with requests that these be read aloud to the audience. One woman leaving for a vacation one day before a conference wrote a note to the chairperson and asked that it be considered “as her statement at the meeting.”⁴⁰ We should not assume, however, that women automatically received the right to speak publicly about the economy just because they were seasoned shoppers. Some male conference participants blatantly admitted that their wives conducted the day-to-day shopping, but when it came to public speaking at a consumer meeting, these men showed

in the Motherland, Stalinist Pronatalisms in Its Pan-European Context,” *Journal of Social History* 34, no. 1 (2000): 35–54.

38. Greta Bucher, “Struggling to Survive: Soviet Women in the Postwar Years,” *Journal of Women's History* 12, no. 1 (2000): 137–59; Susanne Conze, “Women's Work and Emancipation in the Soviet Union, 1941–50,” in Melanie Ilič, ed., *Women in the Stalin Era*, 216–34; Anna Krylova, *Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front* (Cambridge, Eng., 2010); Yoshie Mitsuyoshi, “Maternalism, Soviet-Style: The Working ‘Mothers with Many Children’ in Post-War Western Ukraine,” in Marian van der Klein, Rebecca Jo Plant, Nichole Sanders, and Lori R. Weintrob, eds., *Maternalism Reconsidered: Motherhood, Welfare and Social Policy in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 2012), 205–26; Alexis Peri, “New Soviet Woman: The Post-World War II Feminine Ideal at Home and Abroad,” *The Russian Review* 77, no. 4 (October 2018): 621–44; Mie Nakachi, *Replacing the Dead: The Politics of Reproduction in the Postwar Soviet Union* (Oxford, 2021).

39. TsGAGM, f. 216, op. 1, d. 783, l. 15 (CCM, Store No. 15, Kyiv district, December 14, 1952).

40. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 99 (CCM, Store No. 31, Sokol'niki district, August 6, 1950).

up themselves.⁴¹ Women had to fight for their right to speak, and those who succeeded were actively involved in discussions, frequently voiced their contempt, and served as witnesses in disputes. In 1950, a group of conference participants felt so enthusiastic about the possibility of asserting their public presence that they decided to write about their experience in the shop's wall-newspaper. Elizaveta Bobritskaia, a student and first-time conference attendee, and E. Dubinskaia, a female worker at the Stalin plant, described the meeting thus:

When we entered Store No. 31 of the Sokol'niki RPT, we were surprised by an unusual sight. In the store, all consumers present were sitting around a table, at which the store director, Comrade Kelshtein gave a report about the store's performance. . . . This conference raised a great feeling of satisfaction. It truly represented an educational effort for both the store's production workers and consumers. Such phenomena in our life constitute sprouts (*rostki*) of an authentically socialist way of life (*podlinno sotsialisticheskii byt*). We thank you for this initiative and believe that such conferences should be organized systematically for mutual benefit.⁴²

By highlighting the egalitarian nature of the event, during which consumers and sales workers could meet like equals, enlighten each other, and achieve reciprocity, these two women associated consumers' involvement in managing retail affairs with true socialism. Consumer conferences as a form of proletarian governance might have been rudimentary, but their very occurrence emboldened women to criticize the existing social order, if only implicitly, as not completely genuine to their understanding of a socialist way of life. What is more, store gatherings prompted participants to assert their own importance as consumers in advancing undertakings that represented to them authentic socialism.

Women surely participated actively in common discussions in stores, but can we consider their actions through the lens of women's activism, given that they spoke alongside men at these conferences, did not attempt to question the established gender divisions and hierarchies, and often corroborated the testimonies of male consumers? How should we interpret these women's actions if they did not advocate for any feminist cause and women's rights? To answer these questions, I draw on an insightful distinction between feminist, female, and communal consciousness proposed by gender historian Nancy Cott.⁴³ Cott employs this categorization to make sense of women's numerous public and collective actions that have not been necessarily or solely feminist. The concept of communal consciousness is particularly relevant for thinking about post-war Soviet women. Viewed through Cott's framework, Soviet women's communal consciousness was grounded on solidarity with men and

41. *Ibid.*, d. 704, l. 45 (CCM, Store No. 40, Zhdanov district, May 26, 1951). Many men, probably quite justly, claimed to be experienced shoppers and regular patrons.

42. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 100 (L. Bobritskaia and E. Dubinskaia, "Otlichnaia initsiativa," 1950).

43. Nancy F. Cott, "What's in a Name? The Limits of 'Social Feminism'; or, Expanding the Vocabulary of Women's History," *The Journal of American History* 76, no. 3 (December 1989): 827–29.

women of the same group. Instead of rejecting the traditional gender division of labor, women accepted it. Moreover, they shared a sense of obligation to provide food and shelter for their families and in times of crisis or hardship they stood on behalf of the community they inhabited with their men and children. Cott warns against generalizations about women's activism based on a particular model of the western middle-class feminist tradition: "If the history of black and working-class women's community lives and public actions has not lined up with the feminist equal rights tradition, that is largely because their self-assertion seems to have derived from the sense of family or community membership, rather than from individualist impulses."⁴⁴ Female Muscovites did not go as far in their collective actions as Cott describes in her examples of direct and oftentimes violent confrontations of working-class women with the authorities and businesses through food riots, street demonstrations, and boycotts. Nevertheless, Soviet women's tactics of skillfully employing their practical knowledge of the economy in consumer conferences to improve their families' and neighborhoods' well-being should be acknowledged as yet another example of women's activism. This activism's significance in Soviet people's daily lives might be even greater than in democratic countries, given how risky it was to engage in open street protests under the Stalinist regime.

Communal consciousness indeed betrays itself in women's close ties with neighborhoods, city areas, or former villages and towns included in Moscow's administrative borders. Conference participants almost never called themselves Muscovites, rarely placed their neighborhoods within Moscow, and did not use the official designations of Soviet-formed city districts. Instead of being inhabitants of Sokol'niki, Shcherbakov, or Stalin districts, in accordance with official designations, they used traditional names for their places of residence such as Domnikovka, Potylikha, township Tekstil'shchiki, Vladykino, Izmailovo, the workers' township of Fili, and the like.⁴⁵ According to this popular image of urban mapping, Moscow was confined to central areas, so people often used the expression "to go to Moscow" when they needed to travel to the city center to buy goods absent in local stores.⁴⁶

Many conference speakers introduced themselves in such a way as to prove their deep roots in the local community and their loyalty to the shop as customers. "I have been living in this apartment building for twenty years," said one woman before providing any feedback on a store's services and products.⁴⁷ "I am a patriot of this store and have been making use of it since 1924," said another.⁴⁸ Consumers almost competed for the honor of being the longest-served and most loyal customer; some even recalled their pre-revolutionary connections with the community.⁴⁹ Other people underscored their financial loyalty: "I have been living in this district for thirty years, and all

44. *Ibid.*, 828.

45. For another example of Muscovites' neighborhood feelings, see Katherine Zubovich, "The Fall of the Zariad'e: Monumentalism and Displacement in Late Stalinist Moscow," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian & Eurasian History* 21, no. 1 (Winter 2020): 73–95.

46. TsGAGM, f. 216, op. 1, d. 703, l. 76 (CCM, Store No. 37, Kyiv district, March 22, 1951).

47. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 24 (CCM, Store No. 16, Shcherbakov district, September 13, 1950).

48. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 104 (CCM, Store No. 27, Shcherbakov district, June 18, 1950).

49. *Ibid.*, d. 703, l. 102 (CCM, Store No. 36, Bauman district, March 12, 1951).

my money went only to this store," declared one woman.⁵⁰ Patrons sometimes gave their own names to shops, which they freely employed at conferences: if consumers liked an outlet, such as Store No. 7 in Sverdlov district, they would call it "Pravda store"; if they despised it, as in the case of Store No. 18 in Pervomai district, they would call it "Chichikov's store," alluding to Nikolai Gogol's wheeler-dealer from *Dead Souls*.⁵¹ The store "Pravda" was so famous that consumers from settlements adjacent to Moscow knew it by this name. Non-Moscow residents who attended consumer conferences there in 1952 sought to be acknowledged as regular patrons. As one of them, Aksenova, a suburbanite who lived near the Lopasnia railway station, proudly stated, she had been commuting to "Pravda" for the last three years, avoiding other shops on her way there.⁵²

More often people called the stores they patronized simply "ours." When one female consumer's neighbor informed her that a conference was going to be in the "professors' store," other co-residents in the apartment hastened to correct her that the shop was "theirs" now—a conversation she proudly recounted in front of the conference attendees a few days later.⁵³ In 1950, local consumers, including a female public activist for an apartment building (*obshchestvennitsa doma*), told a Shcherbakov district inspector that the inhabitants of "our big building" considered Store No. 31 "theirs," so when authorities wanted to remake it, they fought to keep the store. This female activist justified their position by noting that consumers had already shaped the store according to their needs: at the beginning, the retail personnel were rude, so she herself approached the store manager with complaints that resulted in the firing of some staff; now the salesclerks had become accustomed to the local customers. The inspector confirmed that this outlet was to be turned into a dairy and promised to relay the women's words of protest to the authorities.⁵⁴

Store managers and inspectors clearly understood these connections, openly calling store gatherings "regular patrons' conferences" (*konferentsii postoiannykh pokupatelei*).⁵⁵ They invited patrons to contribute to wall-newspapers or organized them into activist groups (*aktivy*) that could help solve store problems.⁵⁶ In 1951, for example, the director of one Zhdanov district bakery that had not fulfilled its target plan asked patrons to advertise the bakery among their neighbors in order to attract new customers.⁵⁷ The status of a long-time community member and a patron conferred the authority to

50. *Ibid.*, d. 703, l. 155 (CCM, Store No. 50, Shcherbakov district, March 18, 1951).

51. *Ibid.*, d. 705, l. 128 (CCM, Store No. 7, Sverdlov district, February 11, 1951); d. 783, l. 74 (CCM, Store No. 18, Pervomai district, November 30, 1952). The informal names appeared in men's comments.

52. *Ibid.*, d. 861, l. 33 (CCM, Store No. 7, Sverdlov district, December 14, 1952).

53. *Ibid.*, d. 706, l. 11 (CCM, Store No. 2, Sverdlov district, September 16, 1951).

54. *Ibid.*, d. 626, l. 86 ob. (CCM, Store No. 31, Shcherbakov district, November 23, 1950).

55. *Ibid.*, d. 703, ll. 148–149 (CCM, Bakery No. 727, Zhdanov district, March 28, 1951) and ll. 180–181 (CCM, Bakery No. 714, Zhdanov district, March 16, 1951).

56. *Ibid.*, d. 703, ll. 40–41 (CCM, Store No. 14, Kirov district, April 15, 1951); d. 705, l. 72 (CCM, Store No. 22, Kyiv district, February 16, 1951).

57. *Ibid.*, d. 705, l. 53 (CCM, Bakery No. 734, Zhdanov district, March 14, 1951).

demand the best products and services, as well as the legitimacy to testify about store problems and achievements. Regular patrons often served as credible witnesses in disturbing or ambiguous situations.⁵⁸ Some even assumed that their special role entitled them to buy goods out of turn.⁵⁹

Mutual trust and respect underlaid the social contract between consumers and state-institution representatives. Regular customers formed close personal relationships with managers, salesclerks, cashiers, butchers, cleaning ladies, and maintenance workers. Retail staff transformed from a depersonalized collective of strangers into “cashier Tasia, an honest woman who [always] gives exact change,” or into saleswomen “little Ania” and “big Ania,” who was “very attentive to the consumer.”⁶⁰ A man who, in the eyes of city bureaucrats, was a salesclerk at Store No. 16 in the Shcherbakov District Grocery Trade Unit became the aged butcher Sergei Vasilievich from the best butcher shop in Domnikovka in the eyes of local people.⁶¹ Maintaining intimate ties between staff and customers helped accommodate people with special needs. A 75-year-old woman, a store’s patron since 1924, praised the store personnel’s “tactful attitude toward us blind people.” Considerate staff returned forgotten money and goods to the blind and patiently listened to the deaf.⁶² Disabled people themselves or their neighbors and relatives, including wives who took care of their disabled or sick husbands, came to conferences to tell the audience and authorities how people with special needs were treated and, if warranted, to thank the sales workers.

The highest level of trust between consumers and retailers developed when the latter managed to accommodate child shoppers. Children commonly shopped for their families, especially while their mothers busily took care of other domestic tasks, and occasionally attended consumer conferences. The best praise a store could receive from customers was a statement that it did not cheat children. Once, a conference hosted a girl who testified about her consumer experience: “I like this store very much. I have frequently come here, and nobody has ever cheated me here. My mother sent me here to tell you about this.”⁶³ Other mothers relayed numerous stories of how their sons and daughters had been treated. If children were accused of being mischievous, their mothers defended them as responsible consumers. One female consumer refuted a common accusation that children drank milk on their way home: in her view, this was just an excuse for dishonest salesclerks to conceal

58. In 1951, one consumer aptly presented herself as a credible witness to defend a wronged saleswoman: “I am a regular patron . . . and happened to be in the store when the citizen was writing this complaint. . . I put forward a proposal not to give a book of complaints to people in a state of intoxication. I am so angry at the complaint because that citizen was so drunk.” TsGAGM, f. 216, op. 1, d. 703, l. 39 (CCM, Store No. 14, Kirov district, April 15, 1951).

59. *Ibid.*, d. 784, l. 198 (CCM, Store No. 16, [unknown district], August 26, 1952).

60. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 24 (CCM, Store No. 16, Shcherbakov district, September 13, 1950); d. 703, l. 18 (CCM, Store No. 8, Kyiv district, May 6, 1951).

61. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 23 (CCM, Store No. 16, Shcherbakov district, September 13, 1950).

62. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 81 (CCM, Store No. 10, [unknown district], July 6, 1950); d. 626, l. 93 (CCM, Store No. 3, Krasnogvardeisk district, October 29, 1950).

63. *Ibid.*, d. 705, l. 132 ob. (CCM, Store No. 14, Dzerzhinsk district, February 16, 1951).

that they shorted children when measuring the milk.⁶⁴ Another woman, a mother of many children, did not have time to make purchases on her own, so she often sent her five-year-old child to shop, but the child was constantly deceived and given sugar crumbs instead of sugar: "I ask [you] to take children who are customers of this store seriously," she insisted, echoing many other parents.⁶⁵

The personal relationships developed between customers and sales personnel meant that the latter also became members of local communities. Consumers therefore often cared for the needs of shop employees, their working conditions, financial hardships, health, and emotional well-being. At a conference in 1950, a woman affirmed a salesclerk's rudeness but added that her ailing arm caused her to be rude to "old customers."⁶⁶ Others justified staff's surliness with remarks about their exhaustion or war experience. In November 1950, a female customer, drawing upon women's solidarity, blamed the store's trade union for failing to take an interest in how its members lived. She added that a cleaning lady kept the halls spotless but, without a husband to lend a helping hand, did not earn enough to provide for her two children. The same was true of a cashier who had three children and a husband in prison. Notably, the inspector for Stalin district agreed that both women, even the one with the imprisoned husband, deserved help from the union.⁶⁷ Consumers defended the dignity and physical safety of retail workers even when transgressions occurred for the consumers' benefit. A conference for Store No. 40 in Zhdanov district on May 26, 1951, adopted a resolution that the director's performance was "extremely unsatisfactory and even disgraceful." Participants conceded that he had renovated the store and kept it very clean but castigated his maltreatment of employees: he routinely berated salesclerks in front of customers and once even slapped the face of a subordinate. In his own defense the director explained: "I was rude with salesclerks only because I demand [good work] from them, but they did not comply, and that is the reason why I involuntarily have to be rude with them."⁶⁸ Neither people nor the Grocery Department accepted his excuse: he was fired shortly after the conference. Surely, not all conferences were as effective in firing abusive managers as this one, but practically all strove to maintain stores as safe communal spaces that guaranteed mutual trust, emotional comfort, personal dignity, and physical safety.

With customer-staff relations so personal, consumers reacted painfully when the social contract of mutual trust and respect was violated or terminated. For example, one woman was angered at being treated "like a dog" who deserved to have only stale bread.⁶⁹ When the staff at Store No. 21 refused to replace spoiled sour cabbage, another angry woman "gave no thought for the

64. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 79 (CCM, Store No. 7, Sokol'niki district, August 21, 1950). Her statement is a bit ambiguous and might also be interpreted as an accusation against children.

65. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 115 (CCM, Store No. 13, Kirov district, June 20, 1950).

66. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 187 (CCM, Store No. 25, Zhdanov district, February 17, 1950).

67. *Ibid.*, d. 626, l. 57 (CCM, Store No. 1, Stalin district, November 29, 1950).

68. *Ibid.*, d. 704, ll. 44–47 (CCM, Store No. 40, Zhdanov district, May 26, 1951).

69. *Ibid.*, d. 705, l. 210 (CCM, Store No. 26, Dzerzhinsk district, January 28, 1951).

money that [she] had paid for it and threw [the cabbage] all over the store.”⁷⁰ People protested that some customers were prioritized over others because of family connections, friendship, or favors. In March 1951, when the amount of a certain product per person was limited, “pets” of salesclerks at Store No. 11 in Zhdanov district could buy one kilogram of onions and two bags of flour, whereas others could only hope to get 500 grams of onions and no flour at all.⁷¹ One woman managed to buy thirteen parcels of flour thanks to a salesclerk who rented a room in her apartment.⁷² Indecent or indifferent retail staff could threaten local communities’ moral health, proliferating drunkenness, theft, and bad language. The most common complaint was directed at salesclerks who sold vodka illegally or semi-legally and thus facilitated men’s heavy drinking, domestic violence, and the corruption of families.⁷³ One woman accused a salesclerk of selling her husband vodka on credit, taking his official pass as collateral.⁷⁴ Another woman begged officials to ban the sale of vodka at a retail stall located near a school, and a male deputy of the district executive committee, present at the conference, supported her request, confirming that “schoolchildren were passing by and listening to all kinds of swearing and obscenities.”⁷⁵ Consumers regularly reminded store chiefs that shops were centers of communal life and, as such, should contribute to the safety and comfort of neighborhoods.

Communal consciousness not only spurred individual acts of protest, but also encouraged women to confront party, state, and municipal institutions as a group of consumers. Conferences indeed enabled zealous female urbanites to conjure up the very possibility of collective actions and therefore sustained elementary forms of self-organization. In September 1951, one angry woman, dissatisfied with a meat factory supplying cutlets too sour to eat, demanded that district grocery officials take the consumers’ complaints seriously, otherwise “we will write [a letter] to the Ministry of Trade.”⁷⁶ The same month, another female patron on behalf of local consumers asked their grocery administration to repair a store refrigerator and to pump water out of the basement. If not, warned the woman, “we will gather a delegation and will have to go to the district executive committee.”⁷⁷ It is hard to say whether conference attendees ever fulfilled their threats and approached the higher authorities collectively. In one recorded case, a copy of a collective letter, signed by sixteen people, addressed a consumer conference chairperson, not an official institution.⁷⁸ Nonetheless, even if collective actions remained only a lingering possibility, the reiteration of such warnings in people’s speeches

70. *Ibid.*, d. 704, l. 53 (CCM, Store No. 21, Sokol’niki district, June 15, 1951).

71. *Ibid.*, d. 704, l. 221 (CCM, Store No. 11, Zhdanov district, March 24, 1951).

72. *Ibid.*, d. 705, l. 131 ob. (CCM, Store No. 4, Dzerzhinsk district, February 25, 1951). The accuser’s gender is unclear.

73. *Ibid.*, d. 626, l. 111 (CCM, Store No. 1, Dzerzhinsk district, September 24, 1950); d. 704, l. 148 (CCM, Store No. 5, Sokol’niki district, May 11, 1951).

74. *Ibid.*, d. 704, l. 222 (CCM, Store No. 11, Zhdanov district, March 24, 1951).

75. *Ibid.*, d. 782, l. 68 (CCM, Store No. 40, Soviet district, June 24, 1952).

76. *Ibid.*, d. 706, l. 130 (CCM, Store No. 24, Stalin district, September 16, 1951).

77. *Ibid.*, d. 706, l. 140 (CCM, Store No. 4, Stalin district, September 7, 1951).

78. *Ibid.*, d. 704, l. 178 (collective letter, May 27, 1951). The copy only indicates the number of signatures.

during conferences reinforced the feelings of “we, consumers” among working-class Muscovites and emboldened them to utilize consumption as a political tool.

Local Knowledge of the Economy and Communities' Rights

Soviet working-class women skillfully employed their knowledge of the economy to gain more rights for their communities and to ensure the well-being of their families. The municipal authorities valued the insider information that local women could offer them. Female shoppers developed into ideal interlocutors in conversations about consumer demand, the quality of goods, spending habits, and shopping strategies. Naturally, demand for goods was a significant topic during consumer conferences. The policymakers hailed annual reductions in prices as a great achievement of the Stalinist state that allowed workers' purchasing power and standard of living to increase.⁷⁹ But supply and demand became woefully out of balance. After price reductions, women from Moscow's poorer communities continued shopping for cheap products, and with each drop in state-set prices, low-cost foodstuffs vanished from store shelves more quickly than before. Female consumers vocally complained about shortages of inexpensive products as the major problem. As one woman explained: “we consumers had to run all over Moscow in search of these goods [macaroni] and we consumers immediately form a huge line wherever we have found macaroni.”⁸⁰ Indeed, in 1950 and 1951, people usually overcrowded grocery stores for macaroni, cereals, and wheat flour. One Vladykino director aptly captured the situation in working-class neighborhoods when explaining the store's failure to meet 1949 sales targets: “Only cheap goods such as macaroni, cereals, and pastry are demanded and being sold here. But we are given a full assortment. So, what we have is that cheap goods get quickly sold out, whereas more expensive ones remain [unsold]; consumers are indignant at us for not having cheap goods but only expensive ones.”⁸¹ The worst lines occurred to acquire flour. People would remain in those lines overnight, with mothers usually bringing children in the often-vain hope of procuring more parcels. If flour had been apportioned arbitrarily, women rushed to conferences to restore fair food distribution and social justice, as did one mother who stood in line with two children but received parcels for only one of them.⁸²

Shortages were not the only issue consumers addressed. Conference participants provided the city with insider economic information about their buying strategies, which revealed the geography of shopper flows. In 1950, one woman shared her own and her neighbors' shopping strategies at a conference in Kirov district: their district store used to be the Central Cooperative

79. Kristy Ironside, “Stalin's Doctrine of Price Reductions during the Second World War and Postwar Reconstruction,” *Slavic Review* 75, no. 3 (Fall 2016): 655–77.

80. TsGAGM, f. 216, op. 1, d. 703, l. 11 (CCM, Store No. 28, Komintern district, May 13, 1951).

81. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 183 (CCM, Store No. 6, Shcherbakov district, January 31, 1950).

82. *Ibid.*, d. 704, l. 159 (CCM, Store No. 10, Kalinin district, April 1, 1951); d. 784, l. 6 (CCM, Store No. 5, Sokol'niki district, September 29, 1952).

Union shop, which had sold low-quality goods and cheated in weighing, so consumers “got out of the habit of [shopping at] this store and [started] going to Piatnitskii market and buying needed goods on the way.” She rediscovered the store almost accidentally when she came the other day and bought clarified butter, which appeared to be very fresh.⁸³ A nearby district grocery certainly was not the only option for local females to buy food for their families. After the abolition of ration cards, retail outlets sometimes struggled to have regular customers that could help fulfill sales target plans. The main competitors to district groceries were private markets and the *Gastronom* and *Bakaleia* chain stores. Private markets remained by far the strongest adversaries, despite all the state attempts to curtail the entrepreneurial spirit after the war. Some women explicitly threatened their store chiefs with the possibility of shopping at another grocery or buying from private suppliers so that the retail workers would make an effort to “keep [their] customers.”⁸⁴

Female shoppers also exposed the adulteration of goods and schemes using false weights and measures devised to fool them. Watchful women, like those featured at the beginning of this article, told inspectors how sales workers added water to sour cabbage and milk or cheated with scales.⁸⁵ One consumer observed how a shop assistant tied a rope to scales to manipulate the weight of fish.⁸⁶ Another patron disclosed how saleswoman Ivanova, giving no respect to working-class people, cheated them with wrapping paper: “[she] wraps [goods] with a large piece of paper but [puts] a smaller piece of paper on the other side of the scale; this way she gives 10–15 grams short weight, but for us, these 10–15 grams mean a lot.”⁸⁷ Indeed, female residents of outer districts coming from low-income working-class communities were incredibly observant and sensitive to minuscule discrepancies in weight and prices. Purchases weighing 5–10 grams less than requested or change several kopeks short due to the lack of small coins could make a great difference to them. At first glance the amount does not seem significant, but as a massive and recurring problem, these practices mainly targeted financially vulnerable groups with low wages, so women stood up for their families and neighbors.

In exchange for insights about how the economy operated within their communities, conference attendees expected from Moscow municipal authorities certain privileges and rights, among which protection from “outsiders” was the most pressing. Working-class consumers, both women and men, demonstrated significant suspicion and even hostility toward those who were considered “outsiders.” They insisted on the exclusion of outsiders as consumers without full rights. Patrons often blamed outsiders or “accidental (*sluchainye*) consumers” for souring good relationships and mutual respect between store staff and locals. The notion of the “accidental consumer” was

83. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 50 (CCM, Store No. 19, Kirov district, August 22, 1950).

84. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 212 (CCM, Store No. 10, Stalin district, January 31, 1950); d. 705, l. 185 (CCM, Store No. 44, Zhdanov district, February 11, 1951).

85. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 170 (CCM, Store No. 62, Shcherbakov district, March 31, 1950), l. 203 (CCM, Store No. 22, Stalin district, February 22, 1950), l. 210 (CCM, Store No. 9, Stalin district, January 31, 1950).

86. *Ibid.*, d. 704, l. 164 (CCM, Store No. 22, Sokol'niki district, May 30, 1951).

87. *Ibid.*, d. 703, l. 34 (CCM, Store No. 7, Stalin district, May 4, 1951).

likely contingent on the demographics in a particular district. Class identity remained a key component of belonging, so people from working-class communities often identified their social betters as “outsiders.” One female consumer complained that a store refused to sell her a chicken, but when another woman wearing a hat appeared, they sold her two chickens, no questions asked.⁸⁸ Another woman resented the unequal treatment of customers when scientific workers or personal car drivers were illegally serviced out of turn with no regard for workers.⁸⁹ One more group that did not properly belong consisted of those urban dwellers who still possessed private plots or kept livestock, because they were believed to buy up cheap cereals to feed their cattle, while the rest got nothing.⁹⁰

Yet, neighborhood affinity was no less important—sometimes more important—than class solidarity. On one occasion, workers from nearby plants and factories who jammed a store during a lunch break were accused of always wanting to cut in line and disrupting the proper order.⁹¹ The most easily identifiable outsiders, however, were non-Moscow dwellers, commuters from suburban areas or nearby villages and towns. They functioned as scapegoats to be blamed for shortages of goods, questionable service, and unhygienic conditions. For one female Muscovite, her store's inability to eliminate complaints could be easily comprehended: apparently, complaint-writers were “station-people (*vokzal'nye liudi*) who spread panic over goods, bought up all the goods, and then wrote down complaints.”⁹² Other consumers revealed how much inconvenience commuting buyers caused them: “there were a lot of outsiders (*postoronniia publika*), that is, suburban dwellers (*prigorodnaia*), in our shop; sometimes there were so many suburban dwellers with sacks that it was impossible to pass.”⁹³ One woman pointed out that due to an adjacent railway station, their store serviced many “bulk buyers who bought sacks [of goods],” and salesclerks reluctantly worked with consumers who needed only one herring, for example.⁹⁴

Dwellers of smaller towns, suburbanites, and peasants with big sacks coming from railway stations to Moscow to sweep goods from store shelves were such convenient sacrifices for the cause of cementing community ties that even store directors and district authorities used their images to excuse retail imperfections. In May 1951, the official Andrianova, who attended almost every conference and basically served as the spokesperson of her Oktiabr' district trade unit, replied to remarks about the lack of macaroni and millet by saying that “those goods were in high demand among consumers, especially those coming [to buy] from villages.”⁹⁵ A similar attitude toward non-Moscow

88. *Ibid.*, d. 783, l. 14 ob. (CCM, Store No. 15, Kyiv district, December 14, 1952).

89. *Ibid.*, d. 704, l. 211 (CCM, Store No. 35, Leningrad district, May 28, 1951).

90. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 184 (CCM, Store No. 6, Shcherbakov district, January 31, 1950); the comment on cattle comes from a male consumer.

91. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 79 (CCM, Store No. 7, Sokol'niki district, August 21, 1950).

92. *Ibid.*, d. 625, l. 105 (CCM, Store No. 27, Shcherbakov district, June 18, 1950).

93. *Ibid.*, d. 703, l. 29 ob. (CCM, Store No. 3, Oktiabr' district, November 22, 1951); the speaker's gender is unclear.

94. *Ibid.*, d. 703, l. 102 (CCM, Store No. 36, Bauman district, March 12, 1951).

95. *Ibid.*, d. 704, l. 186 (CCM, Store No. 11, Oktiabr' district, May 11, 1951).

dwellers prevailed among the bakery trade unit officials of Lenin district. In April 1951, the deputy director of the unit admitted at one conference that they did not plan to supply the bakery with flour because of “the [railway] station located nearby.” In response, one woman who had heard rumors about this decision before the conference pleaded with the officials to cancel this plan and to supply their working-class district with flour.⁹⁶ By 1952, when the situation with low-cost products had worsened, the pressure from visitors on the Moscow retail system increased. In July 1952, one Kalinin district director told conference participants that the grocery store, which was intended to provide for the local population, had in practice evolved into a shopping place for non-Moscow residents from the nearby towns of Novogireevo, Chukhlinka, Kuskovo, and Perovo.⁹⁷

To defend what local communities understood as their rights and privileges, beginning in 1951 consumer conferences demanded that store managers sell high-demand products such as macaroni and millet only in the evening when workers usually returned home. In this way “the out-of-towners from the suburbs” (*priezzhie iz zagoroda*) would not be able to buy up these goods.⁹⁸ In August 1951, consumers of Store No. 28 begged the director not to sell cheap products and goods in short supply on Sundays: “it is better to sell them to patrons than to those who visit Perovskii market,” most likely referring to both peasants and private-plot owners who came to sell their food-stuffs on those days, as well as Moscow dwellers from other districts. At the same conference, another consumer called for setting up regular shop duty (*dezhurstvo*) on Sundays to defend the grocery from “drunkards and black-marketeers.”⁹⁹ Patron requests to reserve goods for evening hours were in fact illegal, but at least two district trade units—Oktiabr’ and Molotov—sided with Muscovite workers and openly supported this policy.¹⁰⁰ At a consumer conference in August 1952, one Molotov district official instructed the store director “to listen to the voices of Moscow shoppers and to organize the sale of these goods in a way that would allow only Moscow shoppers to buy them.”¹⁰¹ The municipal Grocery Department, learning of this practice from the conference minutes, apparently turned a blind eye to this transgression.

The Moscow city authorities, to ensure the loyalty of the urban working class, acknowledged some rights and privileges of their communities and offered concessions to locals. The representatives of the two sides met in stores to discuss people’s grievances and to reach common ground. The Moscow Grocery Department relied on the frankness of consumer comments to manage the retail system, and its staff rarely challenged the way these conferences operated. Some lower district authorities and store managers, as the most vulnerable to criticism from both consumers and departmental chiefs,

96. *Ibid.*, d. 704, l. 255 (CCM, Bakery No. 277, Lenin district, April 16, 1951).

97. *Ibid.*, d. 782, ll. 1–2 (CCM, Store No. 11, Kalinin district, July 6, 1952).

98. *Ibid.*, d. 706, l. 54 (CCM, Store No. 17, Pervomai district, September 27, 1951).

99. *Ibid.*, d. 706, l. 205 (CCM, Store No. 28, Pervomai district, August 19, 1951). The two comments directed against outsiders came from men.

100. *Ibid.*, d. 782, l. 99 (report on consumer conferences in Oktiabr’ district stores in April 1952); d. 784, l. 79–79 ob. (CCM, Store No. 20, Molotov district, August 14, 1952).

101. *Ibid.*, d. 784, l. 79 ob.

occasionally attempted to minimize the influence and publicity of people's gatherings. Shop directors sometimes advertised upcoming meetings poorly, while district inspectors occasionally blatantly fabricated conference minutes or erased sensitive information, such as references to the party affiliation of an accused employee.¹⁰² These subversive actions, however, rarely found support from their supervisors, who saw more economic and political benefit than harm from these meetings, except for criticism of the party, which remained a sensitive issue. As for the Moscow party committees, their members hardly attended any consumer gatherings and stayed overall indifferent to surveilling the meetings' ideological orthodoxy. Only after Stalin's death in 1953, when his high-ranking political successors, such as Georgy Malenkov, Nikita Khrushchev, and Anastas Mikoyan, embarked on a project to expand the consumer economy, did the state authorities set apart public meetings in stores for the more ambitious task of mobilizing the post-Stalinist consumer-citizen on a nationwide scale.

In the early post-war years, consumer conferences constituted an ideologically safe form of proletarian governance. Confined to large cities, privileged Moscow in particular, gatherings of regular store patrons boosted the regime's political popularity among the working class: they made the workers feel respected, valued, and deserving of accountability from officials. The municipal authorities, the primary proponents of consumer conferences, envisioned such meetings as a return to proper socialism. Whereas Stalin and other members of the Kremlin political elite launched a wave of repressions to resume the regime's control over society after the war and to establish a strong grip over private initiatives, the Moscow executives called for stores to become public spaces for consumer advocacy and solidarity through officially curated forums. The role of working-class women from poorer neighborhoods proved crucial in this process. The Soviet state did not mobilize female consumers intentionally, but women seized the opportunity when they saw it. United by their communal consciousness and shared responsibility to feed their families, women skillfully adjusted the agendas of consumer conferences to meet their needs more efficiently. Female shoppers armed the city authorities with unique economic knowledge about people's consumption habits and shopping strategies, demanding in exchange a decent life and respect for their families and communities. Consumer meetings permitted acts of individual protest and even kindled rudimentary forms of collective action, which ensured a degree of social justice within urban communities. Women's activism therefore was a significant factor that molded Soviet working-class consumers into a political force during late Stalinism. On the whole, consumer conferences helped the urban working-class maintain hopes that the Soviet state's proletarian governance was not an empty promise and that the end of the war could bring a more liberal social order, at least in privileged metropolises like Moscow.

102. TsGAGM, f. 216, op. 1, d. 705, l. 214 (CCM, Store No. 1, Stalin district, January 16, 1951). In August 1950, one inspector of the Sverdlov Grocery District Trade Unit simply copied the minutes of a conference held three months earlier to concoct new minutes. See TsGAGM, f. 216, op. 1, d. 625, ll. 73–74 and ll. 143–145.

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