

XENIA CHERKAEV

SELF-MADE BOATS AND SOCIAL SELF-MANAGEMENT

The late-Soviet ethics of mutual aid¹

Figure 1 shows a self-made kayak stuck on the rapids nearby what used to be Leningrad. Years after I saw this boat myself, I ran into a man whom I had known to have used it, and I showed him this photograph, hoping it might surprise him. But my interlocutor wasn't surprised. "I don't know whether that's the particular boat," he told me, "the thing is, they all looked the same." Indeed, this kayak is a representative example of the types of boats that were made in Leningrad in the 1970s and 1980s. And its unremarkable nature is one of its most remarkable features: although such boats were made from factually stolen industrial materials, they mostly looked the same because they were made following officially published how-to guides. The boat thus illustrates an apparent contradiction of late-Soviet life: the state itself seems to have supported the breaking of its laws. Below, I explain this contradiction in greater detail, and I propose that we can resolve it by abandoning the widely accepted focus on illegal, illicit and second economies to instead focus on ethics. I suggest, specifically, that we understand the creation of such objects through the ethic of collectivism and "comradely mutual aid," foregrounded by the 1961 Third Party Program as the method by which Soviet society would develop "social self-management" and outgrow the socialist state, into true communism.

1. My sincere gratitude to the Wenner-Gren Foundation and the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies for sponsoring the research upon which this article is based; to two anonymous reviewers for helping me clarify my argument; and to Elena Tipikina and Erin Yerby for helping me finalize it.



Fig. 1: Self-made kayak on the rapids.

How-to guides and how to get materials

This article draws on my 2011-2012 ethnographic fieldwork, conducted in St. Petersburg and its adjacent factory towns. Focusing on the everyday moral logics of Soviet and Russian irregular exchange, this project had several concentrations: I sought out former factory workers to ask them about the household goods they made at work and smuggled home; I sought out former hobby collectors to ask them how they cultivated their collections despite the threat of being charged with criminal “speculation”; and I sought out former outdoor enthusiasts (*turisty*) to ask them how they got their gear. I quickly found that most Leningrad-based *turisty* were also gear constructors. Many former Leningrad climbers, skiers and kayakers had striking technical expertise and vibrant stories about how they managed to make everything from parkas and tents, to ice-axes and camping stoves out of irregularly obtained industrial materials. Many of these objects were still around in 2012, and some were still being used.

In their conversations with me, speakers tended to narrate the construction of gear as a collective action, one in which various people used their personal connections to obtain various hard-to-procure materials. When these stories touched upon actions that were obviously illegal, the apparent crime was often narrated as a necessary and victimless act that benefited a collective of people, and the illegality of which was overshadowed by this greater collective good. “I could provide happiness (*oschastlivit'*) to myself, to my friends!” a mathematics professor joked, recalling that he could easily swipe technical alcohol from work in the 1980s, and that he once bartered some for brand new nylon industrial air-filters, from which climbers sewed mountaineering backpacks. The swap happened at the factory at

night, and he left up over the roof and down the fire-escape to avoid plant security, elated: “It was amazing happiness!”

The literature on illicit economies is decidedly skeptical of such claims of obtaining for “friends.” Ledeneva’s influential *Economy of Favours* (1998), for example, suggests that “*blat*,” the circumvention of formal distribution rules through informal social relationships, worked by what she calls a “‘misrecognition game’ – in which *blat* remains obscured by the rhetoric of friendship, etc. in one’s own case, but could easily be recognised in the case of someone else.”² But the “amazing happiness” of the mathematician’s narrative is a strongly positive emotion: a heroic feeling of social greatness. It is hardly the sheepish attempt to disguise mercantile interest with “altruistic motives of friendly help.”³ Perhaps more importantly, the mathematician’s narrative framing of having obtained the nylon air filters for friendship is hard to write off as “misrecognition” because the value of this heist itself depends on subsequent personal, friendly, communal relations. A bag full of industrial air-filters is useless to someone without polyurethane – a material intended for sound isolation in tractors and tanks, slabs of which were cut in half lengthwise with an electrified wire and used in backpack construction (fig 2); it is useless without the technical skills and knowledge of how to make such a backpack; and it is most obviously useless without a team of fellow mountaineers with whom to go into the mountains.

When people told me stories of having made gear from materials obtained through illicit purchase, their narratives typically stressed the particular social details of the exchanges, rather than the calculation of benefits and costs. Most often, these exchanges involved bottles of alcohol, “small cash,” or “the price of a bottle”: material measures of value that, as Douglas Rogers eloquently illustrates, are hard to disentangle from other social relations into the mere quantifiable settlement of debts.⁴ Thus Lesha, the man who is depicted in figure 1 approaching the kayak in order to free it, explained that he could easily get medical alcohol from the hospital where he worked as a medical examiner, and that he once traded a liter of it for two ax-heads, made for him at the Baltiiskii plant:

It was impossible to carry [the ax-heads] out through the pass-gate, but it was possible to throw them over the fence. So this is what happened: I went up to the fence at a certain place, at a certain time. And a certain person named Erik, who worked there at the Baltiiskii plant told me – I still remember it: at exactly 8:45, my mug [lit. *morda*: snout] will appear over the fence. And that’s how it happened, at 8:45, his mug appeared, threw down a package and disappeared. I picked it up; it contained two ax-heads of fantastic quality.

2. Alena Ledeneva, *Russia’s Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking, and Informal Exchange* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 9. For an anthropological critique of Ledeneva’s position, see: Caroline Humphrey, “Favors and ‘Normal Heroes’: The Case of Postsocialist Higher Education,” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory*, 2, 2 (December 19, 2012): 22-41.

3. Ledeneva, *Russia’s Economy of Favours*, 42.

4. Douglas Rogers, “Moonshine, Money, and the Politics of Liquidity in Rural Russia,” *American Ethnologist*, 32, 1 (February 2005): 63-81.



Fig. 2: Self-made backpack. Notice the polystyrene foam shoulder straps.

An opportunistic endeavor, the illicit obtaining of materials is often hard to segregate narratively from other actions of the collective process of constructing gear. When I photographed the above-described ax-heads, they were in the care of Sasha, one of Lesha's boat-mates, stored in the warehouse of the publishing house where he worked. Previously, Sasha had worked as a driver at a factory that made airplane parts. Drivers stand around a lot between runs, and when he heard someone mention an unguarded pile of titanium pipes, Sasha took advantage of downtime to smuggle some off factory grounds and stash them in his garage. There they spent several years, until he and Lesha decided to turn them into external backpack frames. For this, the titanium pipes were filled with sand, bent over an oil radiator, and subsequently soldered at the physics institute (titanium has to be soldered in an inert environment, with argon gas) for another liter of distilled alcohol, and finally, like the ax-heads, thrown over the fence.

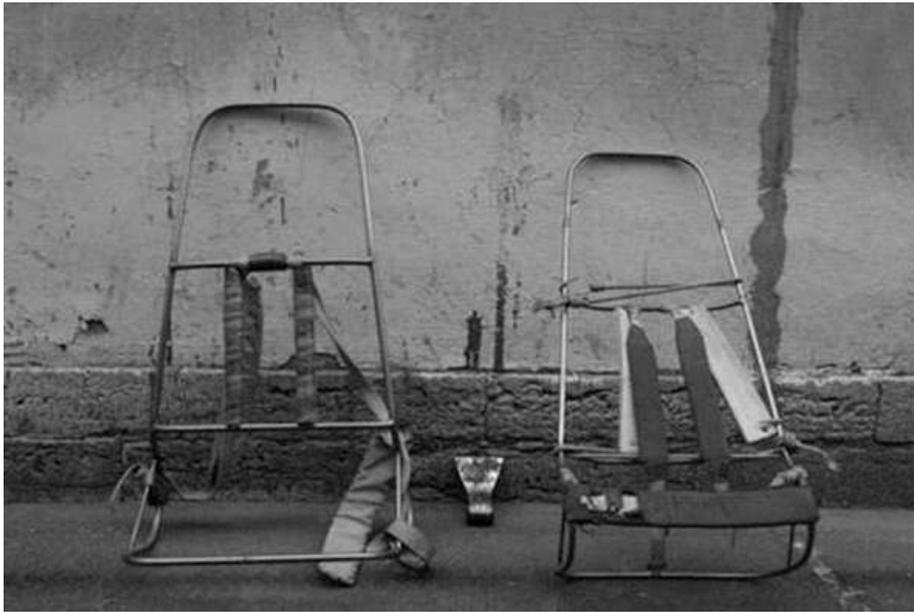


Fig. 3: Self-made backpack frames and ax-head.

The kayak shown in figure 1 was also constructed through a series of collective, factually illegal, actions. Carcasses of such boats, which can be folded up into a backpack for easy transportation, are made of duralumin pipes (fig. 4). And getting this metal “was an actual criminal operation,” explained another former-Leningrad kayaker (a man who, at the time of interview co-owned an outdoor goods store): “There was a guy who, over the course of about 5 years spent his nights at the metal warehousing base by Rybatskoe [an industrial suburb of St. Petersburg] – he’d go over there, swipe the pipes, and only certain kinds of duralumin worked – sometimes he’d stash them somewhere and come back for them later.” Other speakers offered friendlier narratives: “The pipes we’d heist from sprawling, poorly-guarded warehouse lots around the city’s outskirts. Four kids would climb into the lot after dark – it was guarded by a guy and a dog, but they were either sleeping or watching TV – and haul the pipes to some deserted place, from where we’d sort and bundle them and take them home on public transportation.”

Duralumin is an industrial metal, an aluminum-based alloy, whose lightweight and non-brittle qualities make it most useful for constructions that need to be light and strong, like airplanes.⁵ Or like kayaks. To form the carcass of the above-pictured boat, lengths of duralumin pipes were fixed together with snaps made by boiling down polyethylene. This carcass was then covered with a lining of polystyrene foam (see figure 5), sourced at the Kirovsk plant, where it was intended to be used as soundproofing material for tractors and tanks. “We just took it from the warehouses,” explained the mathematician, whose story of “amazing happiness”

5. For the history of the development of lightweight alloys, including duralumin, for the Soviet airplane industry, see Nikolai Bobovnikov, *Istoriia metallurgii legkikh splavov v SSSR: 1917-1945* [History of the metallurgy of lightweight alloys in the USSR: 1917-1945] (M.: Nauka, 1983).

is quoted above: “Didn’t strip any live tanks or anything like that.” Covering the polystyrene-lined carcass is a skin made from a tarp of a TransAvto long-haul truck, which gear constructors recall buying from truckers for a bottle or small cash, or just cutting off the trucks. The hydrodynamics of this particular boat were calculated at the Ioffe Physics Institute, which was also the source of tetrahydrofuran, a chemical used to glue together sections of truck tarp to form the kayak’s outer membrane.



Fig. 4: Self-made kayak assembly detail: duralumin pipes.



Fig. 5: Self-made kayak assembly detail: carcass covered with padding and skin made from truck tarp.

This boat is quite representative of late-Soviet Leningrad self-made kayaks because, as I mentioned above, quality base models for such boats were outlined in officially published DIY guides. Indeed, such guides often recommended the use of explicitly industrial materials like duralumin, titanium and tetrahydrofuran.⁶ Figure 6 reproduces a diagram from the book *Self-Made Touring Gear* detailing kayak construction. The caption to this diagram reads: “For carcass construction (pict. 85), it is best to use duralumin tubes D16T or D1T, with 1-mm-thick walls and the diameters: keelson – 25, stem – 22.”⁷



Fig. 6: Picture 85 from the book *Self-Made Touring Gear*.

6. Notably, DIY gear construction guides published after the 1960s often suggest the use of industrial metals, like duralumin, to make everything from camping stoves to tent poles (A. Berman, *Puteshestvie na lyzhakh* [Ski trip] (M.: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1968)); and suggest using industrial material like phenoplast and polyurethane as an environmentally friendly way to insulate tents in the winter, in “our century of polymers,” instead of chopping pine branches (V.V. Maerkovich and Iu. A. Gur'ian, *Na skaly!* [To cliffs!] (L.: Lenizdat, 1971)). These titles are part of a wider DIY literature: as Alexey Golubev and Olga Smolyak note, “the Brezhnev period saw a dramatic rise in the circulation of magazines and the number of brochures and books which offered all sorts of advice on how to make things with one’s own hands using simple technologies and available materials” (“Making Selves through Making Things,” *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 54, 3 (2014): 518). Very rarely, some such texts cite the store *Iunyi Tekhnik* as a place where recommended materials can be bought (Valentin Stroganov, “Odnomestnaia razbornaia baidarka ‘Taimen’ [Single seater collapsible kayak ‘Taimen’],” *Katera i iakhty*, 51 (1974): 90-93); but most texts are silent on the question of where readers can obtain the recommended industrial materials. “There are many types of ice screws: regular (round), cork-screw, spiral,” explains Nikolai Volkov in his 1974 book *Sport Trekking in Mountains*. “Old types of screws are made of steel, most self-made screws are made of titanium or duralumin.” The question of how one might obtain titanium or duralumin to make one’s own ice screws, however, is beyond the scope of the book (*Sportivnye pokhody v gorakh* [Sport trekking in mountains] (M.: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1974)). By contrast, early-Soviet DIY gear construction guides are often explicitly concerned with which materials can be bought (V. Semenovkii, *Snariazhenie turista* [Gear for the tourist] (M.: Gos. izd., 1929)); and those published in the 1930s-40s emphasize readers’ capacity to independently produce tourist gear “out of the most ordinary materials,” including silk, satin, percale, down feather and rubber glue (D. Zatulovskii, *Kak samomu izgotovit' turisticheskoe snariazhenie* [How to make your own tourist gear] (M.: Profizdat, 1939), 2). While such materials were neither cheap nor easy to find, they were also not industrial materials but consumer goods.

7. P.I. Lukoianov, *Samodel'noe turisticheskoe snariazhenie* [Self-made tourist gear] (M.: Fizkul'tura i sport, 1986), 85.

In the summer of 2012, I met with Boris Lazarevich Kashevnik, author of several belay devices described in the book *Gear for Alpine Touring*,⁸ and specifically of the “bukashka” belay device, versions of which, Kashevnik told me, were used in the 1982 Soviet Everest expedition (fig. 7). I asked Kashevnik whether the book was ever condemned for advocating the illegal appropriation of resources. But the question surprised him:

Why would it be condemned? Well, if you get caught, you might get a talking to... but they won't take you to court for a book!

And if you made it at the plant, well depends on which plant, whether it's a classified enterprise. Look, it didn't interest or disturb anyone that you made mountaineering gear – but misappropriating Socialist Property, there was an article [of the legal code] about that.

See, you have to distinguish between what was prohibited and what wasn't – it wasn't forbidden to publish anything, but how you'll manage to make it, that's your problem. Maybe someone knows how to, himself – maybe I have a lathe bench at home...



Fig. 7: The “bukashka” belay device. Designed by Boris Lazarevich Kashevnik.

There were several factory-made models of kayak sold through state sporting goods stores by the late 1980s, and former Leningrad kayakers recall that, at least in Moscow and Leningrad, most everyone who wanted such a boat could find a way to get one. They also recall that these factory-made boats were heavy and unwieldy, good for paddling around lakes but not good for white water, and that they had to be modified for serious trips. But neither these self-modified factory-made boats, nor their technically superior self-made counterparts, were excluded from officially supported tourist institutions: both kinds of boats could be taken on officially

8. L.B. Direktor, *Snariazhenie dlia gornogo turizma* [Gear for alpine tourism] (M.: Profizdat, 1987).

organized boat trips, financed through enterprise trade-union organizations, and both could be used to earn merit distinctions in highly regimented Soviet sport.⁹ Likewise, the climbing gear that was handcrafted at work and smuggled out past enterprise pass-gates could be used in state-financed base camps, to which subsidized tickets were distributed through climbing clubs at institutes, enterprises and universities. Boris Lazarevich himself was an instructor at such a base camp for a number of years. Thinking of people organizing their own mountaineering trips, he turned to his wife and started laughing:

I see now, over there [in the US] they have their own ideas – they think that we could just buy climbing gear and go into the mountains. It wasn't like that with us. Mountains are very dangerous. This is why everything was regulated. Rules, preparation, various norms. A very well developed system.¹⁰

Economics and ethics

How can we understand the production of such things? It does not easily fit into the dominant theoretical frameworks through which illicit transactions in Soviet-style economies have been understood. It is not, for example, easily framed through the concept of a “second economy,” which Gregory Grossman famously defines as “all production and exchange activity that fulfills at least one of the two following tests: a) being directly for private gain; b) being in some significant respect in knowing contravention of existing laws.”¹¹ The self-made gear I describe above seems to fail the first of the “second economy” tests: speakers insist that it was not made for private gain. The overwhelming majority of my interlocutors said that they made gear for themselves and for their friends, and that maybe they swapped gear, but that they did not construct gear to turn a profit. And while I often heard people joke about pilfering materials to make personally useful things, these stories typically framed such apparent theft as collective actions, victimless crimes, and

9. Thus the distinction between factory-made, self-modified and self-made was a gradual one; and indeed, some self-made boats subsequently became base-models for new factory-produced models. For an autobiographical story of the creation of the factory-produced Taimen kayak, see Valentin Strogonov, “Otkrovennye rasskazy starogo lodochnika [Honest stories of an old boatsman]” (<http://parusanarod.ru/bib/books/strogonov/>. Accessed Aug. 20, 2018).

10. For a history of the Stalin-era origins of Soviet mountaineering camps, see Eva Maurer, “Alpinism as Mass Sport and Elite Recreation: Soviet Mountaineering Camps under Stalin,” in Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker, eds., *Turizm: The Russian and East European Tourist under Capitalism and Socialism* (Ithaca – London: Cornell University Press, 2006). Kashevnik’s sharp condemnation of independent mountaineering is specifically addressed at large-scale ascents, rather than at local camping and rock-climbing. The latter was quite popular among late-Soviet Leningrad climbers, and also found official support in form of published trail guides. See for example, Maerkovich and Gur’ian, *Na Skaly!*

11. Gregory Grossman, “The ‘Second Economy’ of the USSR,” *Problems of Communism*, 26, 5 (Sept. 1977): 25.

transactions necessitated by the material needs of some particular social collective. Soviet enterprises are, after all, well-known for spoiling the resources they had managed to hoard, and Soviet leaders themselves had long publicly lamented that “in many enterprises, equipment, raw materials, processed materials, tools, things for which our industry has a desperate need, are piled up wherever they happen to fall, spoil, rust, become useless.”¹² Sometimes, such ostensibly misused material could be put to rational use through personally brokered transactions, which were sometimes perfectly legal. And so self-made gear also fails the second “second economy” test: it was not *necessarily* made in knowing contravention to rules, regulations and laws.

Notorious for generating material shortages, the centrally planned Soviet economy drove actors to hoard materials.¹³ Hoarding itself exacerbated shortage, but it also generated stockpiles of surplus material. And while most of the stories I heard about self-made gear certainly involved “some knowing contravention of existing laws,” it is critical to point out that speakers did not categorically differentiate between legal and illegal transactions: in both cases, narrative stress fell on effectively tapping unused stockpiles through personal relations, and on putting these stockpiles to a practical, often communal use. Indeed, on closer examination, some of these irregular transactions turned out to also be perfectly legal. Thus Ivan, a former-Leningrad climber and present-day entrepreneur, explained how he had once made a down jacket for high-altitude climbing: he said that he happened to be working near a feather-and-down factory,

so I went in to talk to the head engineer, who scratched his head and said, ‘listen, the best would be if you found a way to take our eider down. We have an untouchable reserve of it from the Ministry of Defense that’s expired but, since it’s considered group “A” material – like precious metals, stones – we need permission from the ministry for its processing.’ It had already expired, but it was group “A,” so they couldn’t process it. Well, what to do? ‘Write, the guy tells me, to the Vice Minister of Meat and Milk production.’ And I wrote that we were such heroes, we were going up this very difficult mountain, that we would bring glory to our country and to the city of Leningrad, and therefore we ask you to please give us, for cash payment, so many kilos of down. And it worked! I had the first down jacket like that, and then, with my help it took off ... we used tons of eider down! [laughs]. That’s how it all worked... or it would have rotted.

The shells for these down jackets had to be made of cauterized nylon, which was terribly difficult to get. But a friend of Ivan’s happened to have a girlfriend working

12. Georgy Malenkov, 1941. Cited in Joseph Berliner, *Factory and Manager in the U.S.S.R.* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), 96.

13. See Janos Kornai, *Economics of Shortage* (Amsterdam: North Holland Publishing Company, 1980); Katherine Verdery, *What Was Socialism and What Comes Next?* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 17-38.

in an out-of-the-way railway station, which happened to have yellow cauterized nylon curtains in its offices.

So he thought fast about it, came to me, and we scratched our heads and went to see the station manager. Listen – we tell her – why don't you let us make you real curtains: with frills, with folds, they'll be awesome. We'll take these and give you new ones. We need this thing, and you'll get some nice curtains. And along the way we learned that the railroad had cauterized nylon in all the station offices on this line. The nylon was originally intended for military use – not parachutes, because it breathed too well, but something else, I don't know what. It was new, so maybe it had also expired and had to be utilized, I don't know. The railroad, for me and my friends, our nylon came from there. Other *turisty* got it from other sources, but we never had to seek those out, because we had enough.

The down jackets for Ivan's entire community of climbers were thus constructed from industrial materials obtained *irregularly*: through personal relationships in which particular people worked together to redistribute their enterprises' stockpiled materials in circumvention of the planned economy's quota-based distribution. But this irregular redistribution was also *legal* (or at least, in the curtains' case, seemingly victimless): the eider down was purchased from the factory, at State price and by permission of the Minister of Meat and Milk Production; and the curtains were fairly swapped out.

Conceptual frameworks like the “second economy” cannot help us understand such transactions, because these frameworks are fundamentally concerned with private interest. Indeed, this question – of private interest, private property and private spheres – forms one of the dominant scholarly puzzles concerning Soviet-style societies. Liberal economists have long held that a “socialist” economy, based on central planning rather than privately interested market exchange, is not possible in principle. Lacking privately motivated exchange, such an economy would lack free market prices; and, without market prices, it would have no mechanism by which to determine the most effective solutions.¹⁴ If such an economy were possible at all, it would certainly be inefficient, because the central planner would never be able to account for its endless contextually specific complexity, for questions that can only be resolved by the “man on the spot.”¹⁵ Indeed, there is no scholarly disagreement about the fact that the Soviet economy did not function as planned. The fact that it managed to function at all, despite its endemic distribution problems, is often noted to have had much to do with the irregular transactions people performed to keep things circulating, and specifically with the “USSR's

14. Foundational to this critique is Ludwig von Mises' *Economic Calculation in the Socialist Commonwealth* (Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute, 1990), first published in 1920.

15. F.A. Hayek, “The Use of Knowledge in Society,” *The American Economic Review*, 35, 4 (1945): 524.

shadow economy and the rest of its underground – misappropriation, corruption, organized crime” that existed in the fertile shadows of command.¹⁶

Corollary to the illicit persistence of privately-motivated market exchange, scholars have noted citizens’ private spheres persisting “despite ideological prohibition”¹⁷; have analyzed the “determination of Soviet citizens to define and defend private life”¹⁸; have aligned the socialist notions of public and private with “a discursive opposition between the victimized ‘us’ and a newly powerful ‘them’ who ruled the state.”¹⁹ Such analyses of socialist private spheres, like analyses of illicit socialist markets, tend to draw a distinction between private interests and public policy; to focus, in other words, on how “the imperative to be honest and ethically responsible among those who counted as ‘us’ contrasted with the distrust and duplicity in dealings with ‘them’ and with the official world generally.”²⁰ This assumed opposition is inherent to the definitively opposed concepts of public and private. But it occludes an important economic and ethical logic. This logic is that of the personal: a regime of ethics and property based on mutual aid and usufruct, rather than on acquisition and exchange.

In this article, I approach the well-trodden field of centrally planned economies’ irregular transactions from this other, non-private, angle. I propose that, if we take the institution of personal ownership seriously in its own right – instead of dismissing it as “a legitimizing cover for the acquisition of property that was private in all but name”²¹ – a particular *a-legal* logic emerges: a logic whose ethical demands are not against the law, but beside it. Below, I examine the legal logic of personal ownership; I show how the 1961 Third Party Program extended this legal logic to the ownership of immaterial personal ethical states; and I suggest that this

16. Gregory Grossman, “Historic Role of the Soviet Underground,” in Stephen F. Cohen, Andrew Schwartz, and John Zysman, eds., *The Tunnel at the End of the Light: Privatization, Business Networks, and Economic Transformation in Russia* (Berkeley: University of California at Berkeley, 1998), 24. For an analysis of such necessary irregular transactions as “planning cum improvisation,” see Raymond Powell, “Plan Execution and the Workability of Soviet Planning,” *Journal of Comparative Economics*, 1 (1977): 51-76. For an analysis of these transactions as “bargaining,” see Vitalii Naishul’, “Liberalism, Customary Rights, and Economic Reform,” *Communist Economies and Economic Transformation*, 5, 1 (1993): 29-44. For an analysis of the interrelation between planning and market during the first three five-year plans, see Elena Osokina, *Our Daily Bread: Socialist Distribution and the Art of Survival in Stalin’s Russia, 1927-1941* (Armonk, NY: Sharpe, 2001).

17. David Crowley, “Warsaw Interiors: The Public Life of Private Spaces, 1949-65,” in Susan E. Reid and David Crowley, eds., *Socialist Spaces: Sites of Everyday Life in the Eastern Bloc*, 181-206 (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002), 188.

18. Deborah Field, *Private Life and Communist Morality in Khrushchev’s Russia* (New York: Peter Lang, 2007), 103.

19. Susan Gal, “A Semiotics of the Public/Private Distinction,” *Differences*, 13, 1 (January 1, 2002): 87.

20. Ibid.

21. Lewis Siegelbaum, “Introduction,” in *Borders of Socialism: Private Spheres of Soviet Russia* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan US, 2006), 6. Citing Stephen Lovell, “The Making of the Stalin’s Era Dacha,” *The Journal of Modern History*, 74, 2 (June 2002): 283.

late-Soviet valorization of ethics is key to understanding the above narratives of self-made gear.

My understanding of “ethics” draws broadly on what Michael Lambek calls “ordinary ethics”: I am concerned with the tacit evaluations of goodness that inform everyday practice. Taking “ethics to be fundamentally a property or function of action rather than (only) of abstract reason,”²² studies of “ordinary ethics” are fundamentally concerned with contextual, first-person evaluation, and, in the end, with Aristotelian striving. In this article, I take this concern with ethical striving to solve an inverse problem. Performing a sort of archeology of ethics, I deduce the values for which speakers find it virtuous to strive by attending to how they valorously describe their past actions. Valorous narratives frame actions in positive terms: as something to be proud of. Reading such narratives with attention to how they depict irregular transactions, my aim is to locate the values that are held to be ethically determining: held to be “ends such that our not choosing them reflects on us rather than undermining their status as ends.”²³ I am concerned, in short, with *how* people describe what they did. I am interested in deducing the concepts that speakers mobilize to narrate their irregular transactions proudly; and, more broadly, interested in how people position themselves as ethically righteous, how they represent “their relation to [their real] conditions of existence.”²⁴

Historical epochs cannot, of course, be analyzed through memoirs. Speakers’ present-day assumptions are bound to color their narratives of the past. But a virtue-based analysis of oral history gives me a thread by which to trace an ethical platform that I then find supported in historical texts – late-Soviet media accounts, juridical texts, political speeches and Party documents. Specifically, I note a curious overlap between how contemporary speakers ethically position themselves in narratives of irregular late-Soviet transactions, and how authoritative late-Soviet texts propose to decentralize administrative state control in favor of “social self-management.” Unlike studies analyzing the *practices* of late-Soviet filching – practices, by which theft was persecuted and by which workers made personally useful things²⁵ – this article is concerned with ethics and narrative. I do not suggest that the speakers who claim to have been motivated by friendship and mutual aid were really thus motivated in practice; nor do I suggest that speakers are deluded in such claims and were actually motivated by acquisitive interest. Indeed, different people may narrate the motivations behind one and the same action differently: a sympathetic person may explain an irregular transaction as a necessary action of

22. Michael Lambek, “Introduction,” in *Ordinary Ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2010), 14.

23. Charles Taylor, “The Person,” in Michael Carrithers and Steven Collins, eds., *The Category of the Person: Anthropology, Philosophy, History* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 266.

24. Louis Althusser, “Ideology and the Ideological State Apparatuses,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001), 109.

25. See Olga Smolyak’s “Sovetskie nesuny [Soviet *nesuny*],” *Otechestvennyye zapiski*, 1, 46 (2010): 311-318 and “Rabota na sebia [Work for yourself],” *Laboratorium*, 6, 2 (2014): 21-57.

mutual aid, an unsympathetic one may say that it was nothing more than selfish theft. What interests me in such descriptions is not whether such actions were truly as selfless (or selfish) as the speakers claim, but the fact that narrating an irregular action as socially necessary mutual aid makes it commendable. This interests me because this assumption – that helping others out of difficult situations is righteous, even if it involves factually illegal actions – is characteristic not only of former-Leningrad residents' stories about illicitly transacting around the state's rules. It is also characteristic of the official late-Soviet program of “social self-management,” which advocated “comradely mutual aid” as a way of constructing the communist future, in which the law would become unnecessary and the state would wither away.

Socialist property and comradely mutual aid

In 1959, Khrushchev declared that the “withering away” of state institutions would not leave society ungoverned: the death of the state would not be like the emptiness left behind after tree branches are stripped of their leaves, but “the development of socialist statehood into communist social self-management.” The building of communism is a continuous process, to be achieved materially, by creating “complete abundance for the satiation of everyone's needs,” and to be achieved morally, by perfecting “socialist labor relations [... to become] based on the comradely cooperation, friendship and mutual aid of all of society's laborers.”²⁶

The “withering away” of the state had been the ultimate goal of the Soviet political imaginary, its *raison d'être*, since the 1917 Revolution.²⁷ But this ultimate goal was formulated in different ways at different times. Early-Soviet jurists expected the ultimate liquidation of private property to give rise to a non-legal order, in which “the withering away of the categories of bourgeois law – the categories themselves, and not this or that particular rule – can under no circumstances mean their replacement by some new categories of proletarian law.”²⁸ Three decades

26. N.S. Khrushchev, “Kontrol'nye tsyfry razvitiia narodnogo khoziaistva SSSR na 1959-1965 gody [Control figures for the economic development of the U.S.S.R. for 1959-1965],” *Vnecherednoi XXI S'ezd Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuz: stenograficheskii otchet* [21st Extraordinary Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: stenographic report. (M.: Gos. izd. politicheskoi literatury, 1959)], 102, 94, 96.

27. Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 20.

28. Evgenii Pashukanis, *General Theory of Law and Marxism* (1924), quoted in Harold Berman, “Soviet Family Law in the Light of Russian History and Marxist Theory,” *The Yale Law Journal*, 56, 1 (November 1946): 36. For a discussion of early-Soviet jurists' theories from the standpoint of late-Soviet legal theory, see the introduction to E.B. Pashukanis in V.N. Kudriavtsev, S.N. Bratus', L.Ia. Ginzburg, L.S. Mamut and V.S. Nersesians, eds., *Izbrannye proizvedeniia po obshchei teorii prava i gosudarstva* [Selected works on the general theory of law and state] (M: Nauka, 1980); from the standpoint of mid-century American comparative law, see Harold Berman, “The Challenge of Soviet Law,” *Harvard Law Review*, 62, 2 (December 1948); from the standpoint of a contemporary legal history of property law, see Boris Mamlyuk, “Early

later, Khrushchev's proposal to develop socialist statehood into communist social self-management supposed a very different juridical model: one in which there was "no essential conflict between the person and the society (or state), such as is suggested in the terminology of 'private' and 'public'."²⁹ This essential conflict – between private and public – was resolved by the 1936 Stalin Constitution. Proclaiming "socialist property" to be the "sacred and inviolable basis of the Soviet order," the Constitution guaranteed citizens' personal rights within this state-led monopoly; and on this new socialist basis, it created a new stability of laws, allowing for "the wholesale restoration of these 'bourgeois' institutions [of money, property, the family, criminal sanctions, the state, law]."³⁰ Specifically, along with the right to labor and rest, the right to vote and the right to social security, the Constitution guaranteed citizens the right to own, use and inherit "personal property," as their rightfully earned share of the socialist whole.³¹

The right to such personal property was initially established in relation to obviously material things. The "basis of Soviet citizens' personal property is socialist property," juridical textbooks explain, and "the source of personal property is socialist labor. Each Soviet citizen, whether he works at a factory or at a plant, on a collective farm or at a social or government enterprise, participates in socialist production; and this participation in the collective socialist production is the source of his personal property."³² This logic was then extended to that immaterial property which, like authorship, is directly related to material relations. And then, in the early 1960s, it was extended to explicitly immaterial, moral spheres: to the protection of personal ethical states like honor and dignity.³³ Guaranteeing the citizen's

Soviet Property Law in Comparison with Western Legal Traditions," *Research Handbook on Political Economy and Law* (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2015), 454-80.

29. James Spindler and Harold J. Berman, "Soviet Comrades' Courts," *Washington Law Review*, 38, 842 (1963): 846.

30. Berman, "Challenge of Soviet Law," 235-236.

31. Behind this declared state monopoly of socialist property lies the violent dispossession of citizens of their land, freedom and property through the actions of collectivization, forced labor and property nationalization. But, as Pavel Campeanu writes in "Genesis of the Stalinist Social Order," although "Stalinist primitive accumulation had the same content as the capitalist model, expropriation, it employed the same basic instrument, violence; and in principle it embraced the same object, the producers [...] these similarities were embedded in a social context which was totally different" (*International Journal of Sociology*, 18, 1/2 (1988): 116; *International Journal of Sociology* 18, 1/2, "The Genesis of the Stalinist Social Order" (Spring - Summer, 1988), pp. 1, 3-159, 161-165" <Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20629985>>. Namely, socialist primitive accumulation did not dispossess one class for the benefit of another, it dispossessed everyone for the benefit of those who successfully joined the state-led bureaucracy: it combined the violence of dispossession with a system of moral, legal and material entitlements, extended to those who could legitimately claim use and benefit rights in that expropriated monopoly.

32. S.I. Vil'nianskii, ed., *Sovetskoe grazhdanskoe pravo: uchebnik dlia iuridicheskikh shkol* [Soviet civil law: textbook for law schools] (M.: Iuridicheskoe izdatel'stvo NKIu SSSR, 1940), 72.

33. For a detailed analysis of this transformation, see Xenia Cherkaev, "Dostoinstvo lichnosti kak lichnaia sobstvennost': Metamorfoza rossiiskikh zakonov o porochashchikh svedeniakh

right to “demand that society’s moral-political evaluation of his person (*lichnost’*) be formed on the basis of the correct perception of what he had done and what he had not done,”³⁴ the 1961 Foundations of Civil Jurisprudence decreed that personal ethical status was subject to legal protection by the logic of property law: just as personally owned property derived from and co-constituted the entirety of socialist material relations, so did personal ethical states derive from and co-constitute the evaluative framework of socialist morality.

And all the while, the law did not *evaluate* subjects’ ethical states. It left such regulation to quasi-judicial social collectives. As Oleg Kharkhordin details in his study of the *Collective and the Individual in Russia*, such *kollektivs* were a specifically Soviet institution of small-group cohesion and social (self-) surveillance, which became all-prevalent in the 1960s, “spreading horizontal control throughout the whole body social.”³⁵ It was only as a member of such a collective that a citizen could have his/her ethical status protected by the new civil code, because “personal honor is indivisible from the honor of the collective,” as the 1961 textbook of *Marxist Ethics* explains: “The feeling of honor, like the feeling of duty, can only grow and fortify within a collective, by accomplishing socially important tasks.”³⁶ Such collectives were *quasi-judicial*. *Marxist Ethics* gives examples of collectives united by employment, by their members’ shared obligation to manage socialist property at the “factory, enterprise, collective farm, military regiment.”³⁷ But it also explains that “the Soviet person, regardless of the specific position he occupies, is *always* a member of some certain collective” and strives to help that collective “accomplish the tasks with which it is faced in a commendable way.”³⁸ Indeed, the Soviet collective, the *kollektiv*, was defined not by the particular institution in which a group of people was collectively employed, but rather by the “internal system of relations of comradesly cooperation and socialist mutual help” that arose between people working together to achieve a socially necessary socialist goal.³⁹ And thus the “collectivization of life” that Kharkhordin notes to have created a “mega-*kollektiv* called the Soviet people” in the 1960s was comprised not only of formal, enterprise-based collectives, but also of informal collectives within those formal collectives, and of “informal collectives outside the official terrain altogether.”⁴⁰

[Personal Dignity as Personal Property: Metamorphosis of Russian Laws Concerning Defamation],” *NLO*, 3, 151, (2018): 65-80.

34. O.S. Ioffe, “Novaia kodifikatsiia sovetskogo grazhdanskogo zakonadatel’sтва i okhrana chesti i dostoinstva grazhdan [New codification of Soviet civil law and the protection of citizens’ honor and dignity],” *Sovetskoe gosudarstvo i pravo*, 7 (1962): 64.

35. Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 294.

36. Aleksandr Shishkin, *Marksistskaia etika: khrestomatiia* [Marxist ethics: a reader] (M: Izd. Instituta Mezhdunarodnykh Otnoshenii, 1961), 56.

37. *Ibid.*

38. *Ibid.*, italics added.

39. Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual*, 89.

40. *Ibid.*, 294, 303.

In all cases, these social entities were understood to unite people striving to better society: in their formal employment positions as well as in their personal lives.

Striving, indeed, was critical to the Soviet political imaginary. Justified by its claim to strive for universal human equality, the Soviet project, as Susan Buck-Morss points out, unfolded in time, with the Communist Party leading the workers of the world to liberation, and constructing state institutions as need be. So that,

whereas political parties in nation-states compete to gain control of a preexisting apparatus and thereby *become* the state, the Communist Party *constructs* the socialist state. It creates and uses state institutions to administer party policy [... but] the state is understood as a temporary expedient that will ultimately ‘wither away,’ an anarchist vision to which even Stalin paid lip service and which Khrushchev revived in political rhetoric in 1959.⁴¹

But Khrushchev and the other architects of the Third Party Platform did not simply “revive” the early-Soviet intention to get rid of the state. They specifically proposed making legal administration unnecessary by letting personal ethical striving take over: by making social organizations take up the task of administering society. The law, in this reform logic, is not abolished but out-grown. The law is not wrong, just inadequate. Framing Soviet people as ethical subjects, the Third Party Platform encouraged them to take an active personal stake in furthering collective interests where the law fell short. By claiming – falsely – that political crimes were no longer committed in the Soviet Union,⁴² Khrushchev declared that such “unprecedented unity of the entire population’s political convictions”⁴³ showed that society was ready to take over the state’s administrative tasks – from the organization of medical care and physical education to the prevention of crime. Implemented in a series of quasi-judicial institutions,⁴⁴ this call to de-centralize social administration rested on the valorization of “Communist Morality” over and above the law. “Our country’s various legal codices are now complemented by the Moral Codex of the Builder of Communism, which is part of the [Third] CPSU Program,”

41. Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld*, 20.

42. Over 4,600 people were found guilty of anti-Soviet agitation between 1956 and 1960, nearly half of them in the two years before Khrushchev’s speech. See: Vladimir Kozlov, Sheila Fitzpatrick, and Sergei Mironenko, eds., *Sedition: Everyday Resistance in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev and Brezhnev* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 45.

43. Khrushchev, “Kontrol’nye tsyfry,” 103.

44. For a discussion of the role that late-Soviet quasi-judicial social institutions played in the administration of justice, see Harold J. Berman, “The Educational Role of the Soviet Court,” *The International and Comparative Law Quarterly*, 21, 1 (1972): 81-94; and for a detailed analysis of one such institution, see Spindler and Berman, “Soviet Comrades’ Courts.” For a discussion of the late-Soviet “prophylactic” policy towards dissidence, see Vladimir Kozlov’s introduction to Kozlov, Fitzpatrick, and Mironenko, eds., *Sedition* (“The Meaning of Sedition,” 25-64). For an analysis of the juridical debates about whether social bodies could be empowered to mete out juridical sentences, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Social Parasites. How Tramps, Idle Youth, and Busy Entrepreneurs Impeded the Soviet March to Communism,” *Cahiers du Monde russe*, 47, 1 (2006): 377-408.

the renowned jurist Olympiad Ioffe explains. “This document must become the fundamental law for Soviet people in their relationships with each other, with the state and with society.”⁴⁵ And the demands of this document largely boil down to comradesly mutual aid. As the 1963 *Agitator’s Handbook* explains:

The ethical standards of the new society, its ethical commandments, are set forth in the *Moral Codex of the Builder of Communism*, which is sewn through with the ideas of collectivism and humanism: man is to man – a friend, a comrade, a brother! That makes sense. Collective consciousness is begotten by the very nature of the socialist order, which provides a firm economic and social base for collectivism [...] Collective consciousness finds its expression in people’s fundamental awareness of their social duty, in each person’s feeling of personal responsibility for the fate of the collective and society as a whole, in selfless comradesly mutual aid.⁴⁶

Mutual aid – as an ethical demand – obviously predates the 1960s. Mutual aid is a human universal, a religious ideal, an Anarchist and Communist virtue, and an indispensable ethical stance for people living in a poorly planned, shortage-ridden bureaucratic structure: where “the hard-headed Soviet businessman,” as Joseph Berliner puts it, “cannot take the position that the laws are sacrosanct.”⁴⁷ In the hundreds of personal oral histories collected by the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System shortly after World War II, speakers recall of their lives in the Stalin-era Soviet Union that, “people have to help each other. [...] We all worked together to falsify the reports,”⁴⁸ that, “those who drink vodka together are good friends and in their working relationship they are much more lenient towards one another,”⁴⁹ that, “often workers would come and beg for bread and I would give it to them and write it off under the name of waste, in Russian *brak*.”⁵⁰ Valorizing comradesly mutual aid as the way to build communism – as everyone’s ultimate goal – the Third Party Program aligned Soviet collectives’ formal social obligations with the everyday ethical stance upon which speakers relied to frame their irregular actions in socially righteous terms. Thus formulating the Soviet system’s ultimate aims in a believable way, the Program also diversified the methods by which citizens were encouraged to strive for those ultimate aims. While Stalin-era

45. Ioffe, “Novaia kodifikatsiia,” 71.

46. M.A. Morozov, ed., *Spravochnik agitatora* [Agitator’s handbook] (M.: Gos. izd. politicheskoi literatury, 1963), 145.

47. Berliner, *Factory and Manager in the U.S.S.R.*, 222.

48. Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System, Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 338/(NY) 1390. Male, 52, Great Russian, Buyer of materials and supplies for factories. Widener Library, Harvard University. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:962324?n=8>

49. HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 19, Case 358. Male, 25, Great Russian, Mechanic. <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:955638?n=13>

50. HPSSS, Schedule A, Vol. 27, Case 523. Male, 40, Byelorussian, Dispatcher (employee). <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:959080?n=8>

voluntary social organizations motivated people to invest their leisure time and personal efforts in the state's militaristic goals,⁵¹ their late-Soviet counterparts encouraged citizens' own self-realization by helping to "improve cultural services and recreation facilities for the working people; encouraging physical training and sports," with the goal of achieving the "all-around harmonious development of the individual."⁵² Publicist texts and specialized discourses quickly picked up the demands of the new Party Program: true summits were no longer taken by everyone's unfaltering obedience to a hierarchical structure of command, but by the voluntary unification of many different individuals in one common cause. "In a complete reversal of the earlier Stalinist discourse on *al'pinizm*," notes Eva Maurer in her study of Thaw-era high-altitude mountaineering texts, "mountaineering's private aspect was now publicly staged, emphasizing a sense of community and friendship among individuals and downplaying political connotations."⁵³ But it is important to recognize that what Maurer notes as the "private aspect" was actually *personal*: based on the assumption that through their personal striving, individuals would create the greater collective good, "that success was only possible if leaders took into account and allowed for the individuality of all participants."⁵⁴

Indeed, the widely noted fact that 1960s publicist texts valorize independence and personal initiative specifically concerns the valorization of independent personal striving for the overall greater good.⁵⁵ Discussing independent hobby collectors in a 1961 article, the public intellectual Iraklii Andronikov notes that while collectors

51. For a study of Stalin-era hobby organizations, see William Odom, *The Soviet Volunteers: Modernization and Bureaucracy in a Public Mass Organization* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973); Jonathan Grant, "The Socialist Construction of Philately in the Early Soviet Era," *CSSH*, 37, 3 (1995): 476-93; Xenia Cherkaev and Elena Tipikina, "Interspecies Affection and Military Aims: Was There a Totalitarian Dog?," *Environmental Humanities*, 10, 1 (2018): 20-39.

52. CPSU, *Programme of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union: Adopted by the 22nd Congress of the C.P.S.U. October 31, 1961* (Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1961): 97-98, 109.

53. Eva Maurer, "Cold War, 'Thaw' and 'Everlasting Friendship': Soviet Mountaineers and Mount Everest, 1953-1960," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 26, 4 (March 1, 2009): 492.

54. *Ibid.*: 495.

55. Thomas Wolfe thus argues that post-Stalin journalism increasingly stimulated personal critical thought, projecting "the image of the person as a critical thinker focused on the problem of what it is to construct or enable a critical society" (*Governing Soviet Journalism: The Press and the Socialist Person after Stalin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 2); and Iliia Kukulini argues that, in the wake of the Third Party Platform sci-fi texts in popular science magazines were increasingly concerned with personal subjective questions about "how to perfect [one's] own thinking to better understand what could be done with technology," rather than with questions about perfecting the technology itself ("Periodika dlia ITR: Sovetskoe nauchno-populiarnye zhurnaly i modelirovaniia interesov pozdnesovetskoi nauchno-technicheskoi intelligentsii [Periodicals for Engineers: Soviet Popular Science Journals and the Shaping of the Late-Soviet Scientific and Technical Intelligentsia's Interests] (*NLO*, 3, 145 (2017))). Even women's personal consumerism, as Susan Reid notes, had "an important public role to play in the transition to communist self-government," ("Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev," *Slavic Review*, 61, 2 (2002): 249).

may be accused of hoarding rare things that ought to be in museums, they actually provide a great public service by finding and organizing material that would otherwise be lost. Listing a plethora of subjects – pictures of bridges, sayings and aphorisms, paintings and postcards – he asks whether the state can, and whether it ought to, keep a salaried museum worker “who would dedicate his life to collecting fans and binoculars? Or to subsidize the decades-long acquisition of gingerbreads? And all the while the two and a half thousand ginger breads collected by Vinogradov are an entire section of folk art.”⁵⁶ The fields of knowledge to be beheld are so complex and variegated that they can only be attained through the individual, personal striving of citizens who have taken upon themselves the personal responsibility of furthering the collective good. The only smirch on this system of social self-management is the selfish consumerist greed of private interest. Andronikov continues:

We must definitively distinguish between those who direct their efforts and funds to find, assemble, preserve for history creations of human genius and labor and those who buy things and resell them under the guise of collecting, thus exploiting authentic collectors. A true collector is an enthusiast; the *spekuliant* is a criminal. The former doesn't spare himself for social interests, the latter doesn't spare social interest in his personal, profit-driven, goals. The former is driven – or, as the lawyers say, motivated – by the usefulness he'll bring to society, the latter is driven by greed. What could they have in common?⁵⁷

More to the point of this article's opening question of irregular transactions and illicitly obtained materials, many late-Soviet films and cartoons tacitly condone maverick actions that disregard the rules, showing protagonists' primary obligations in terms of collectivist ethics rather than formal adherence to laws. Exemplary are films like the 1964 patriotic war-drama *Father of a Soldier*, which shows Soviet people defending their country during the Great Patriotic War by repeatedly breaking the Soviet State's regulations and rules.⁵⁸ The film shows an elderly Georgian peasant who travels from his village to a front-line hospital to visit his wounded son, only to find that he is already discharged back to the front. Against regulations, hospital staff are persuaded to let him see his son's room, where his son's former roommates convince him to go find his son on the front lines. He hesitates, because he has no traveling papers, until he meets a soldier who convinces him to illegally sneak aboard a freight train, and subsequently vouches for him when a sentry arrests him at gun point. In the chaos created by advancing German forces, the peasant cannot find his son. But he follows an army regiment which he convinces to take him on, against the rules, despite being too old; and whose discipline he routinely breaks, refusing to be delegated secondary, less dangerous

56. Iraklii Andronikov, “Mysli o sobiratel'akh [Thoughts about collectors],” *Nauka i zhizn'*, 7 (1961): 48.

57. Ibid.

58. Rezo Chkheidze, *Otets soldata* [Father of a soldier] (Gruziia-fil'm, 1964).

missions. His regiment takes Berlin, and in the last days of battle, he hears his son singing, and then finds him mortally wounded, just in time to have him die in his arms. A film about good people retaining humanity in the face of horrendous conditions and helping each other overcome difficulties by all available means, *Father of a Soldier* shows that laws and regulations must sometimes be circumvented for the good of the common cause. These rules themselves are well-intentioned and necessary, just sometimes inadequate. It is, of course, generally proper that military hospitals strictly regulate who is allowed to enter, that civilians not be allowed up to the front lines, that regiments not enlist those who are not legally allowed to serve; but, if these regulations hinder the greater good, then people should help each other get around them.

It is, I want to suggest, in this ethical discourse, in these terms of “comradely mutual aid,” that we can make sense of this article’s opening story about the joy of absconding with a full bag of nylon industrial air-filters, procured for a flask full of technical alcohol. “I could provide happiness (*oschastlivit’*) to myself, to my friends!” the hero of this happy heist told me: “It was amazing happiness!”

The plans of the party – the plans of the people

It is often noted that people did not take late-Soviet ideological demands seriously, and that they “used Communist morality for their own ends.”⁵⁹ I certainly have no grounds to argue against such assertions. But I also want to suggest something else: that by paying close attention to how those “ends” are narrated, we can see a curious alignment between the formal demands of collectivism, and the informal explanations speakers give of their own irregular practices. This approach does not pretend to determine “true” motivation. It does not suggest that late-Soviet irregular actions were actually as selfless as they are depicted in films like *Father of a Soldier*, nor does it assume that behind such ostensibly selfless acts lurks a “misrecognition”⁶⁰ of acquisitive interest. It insists only that ethical claims are a worthwhile object of analysis in their own right. Paying attention to what people say about why they do things shows the centrality of “comradely mutual aid” to a shortage-ridden economy that, it has often been noted, would have stalled in its endemic shortages and stockpiles had people not kept materials circulating through irregular, unplannable, personal transactions. And while the ethical evaluation of any particular action is always in the eye of the beholder, notice what such possibility of ethical evaluation allows. By opening a space in which to analyze actions according to their presumed motivations, the valorization of mutual aid over and above the law allows speakers to explain properly motivated irregular actions in terms of ethics, rather than economics: as personally responsible, socially

59. Deborah Field, “Irreconcilable Differences: Divorce and Conceptions of Private Life in the Khrushchev Era,” *Russian Review*, 16 (1998): 610.

60. Ledeneva, *Economy of Favours*, 9.

upstanding actions that help a collective attain its goals. And this makes those necessary but unplanned transactions by which people kept this economy running appear to be an entirely non-economic question: it allows an economy reliant on “planning cum improvisation”⁶¹ to appear predictably managed. In other words, the valorization of Communist Morality over and above the law also helps bolster the ideological image of the law itself.

Davis Center for Russian & Eurasian Studies, Harvard University

xenia.cherkaev@gmail.com

61. Powell, “Plan Execution and the Workability of Soviet Planning,” 74.