A Reflection on Diane Koenker’s Lecture
- “Vacations, Tourism, and Socialist Consumption in the Post-Stalin USSR”

On September 6th, Professor of History Diane Koenker gave a very interesting lecture that challenged me to reevaluate some of my conceptions of the Soviet Union. With a specialization in twentieth century Russia and social history, she examined the evolution of travel, vacations, and tourism in the USSR. She highlighted that rest was an integral component of Soviet life, but it was not until after WWII that the travel industry began to grow. Professor Koenker explained that the post-WWII travel industry was defined by travel for rest and travel for sightseeing/adventure; both forms of travel were based on a socialist purpose, which was geared to serve the state. Travel for rest intended to allow Soviet citizens the opportunity to recuperate and return to work healthier, refreshed, and ready to contribute to the socialist cause. Travel for sightseeing/adventure was geared towards building a communal relationship with one’s travel companions. It was not meant for pure enjoyment. This type of travel consisted of excursions to remote locations rather than urban centers where hotels were not available to accommodate groups of Soviet citizens. This is important to note because it was a reflection of the state’s ideology. She explained that hotels were seen as bourgeoisie, which therefore hindered their development in the USSR.

Professor Koenker demonstrated that by the 1970’s, these two types of travel blended together to create a new type of socialist vacationing. I found it particularly interesting when she discussed the ways in which capitalism and socialism combined in the realm of Soviet travel. Vacationing took on a capitalist form, in that travelers sought to distance themselves from state control, and they began to desire travel designed and undertaken on their own terms. Family travel as opposed to collective group travel grew in popularity. However, vacationing still possessed a strong socialist component. For example, she mentioned that vacations were obtained through trip vouchers, there were limited choices for travel destinations, and the Soviet elite tended to have more vacationing privileges. Additionally, her lecture highlighted how the rise of vacationing makes a strong statement on socialist consumption in the USSR. As the travel industry grew, Soviet citizens began to demand greater comforts in travel, as well as more options for travel destinations, as they expected the state to fulfill these demands.

Professor Koenker’s study makes a very important contribution to REEES, in that it challenges the conception that the Brezhnev Era was a time of complete stagnation. This is certainly not the case if we examine the growth of vacations, travel, and tourism at this time. I know that I was forced to reconsider my conceptions of the USSR in the 1970’s. Furthermore, her lecture demonstrated how a consumer culture took on a distinct form after WWII, and that a blending of capitalism and socialism existed. This lecture also forces us to challenge any
preconceived notions of the USSR as total socialist entity in all aspects of life. I found it particularly interesting that she discussed how personal and state goals could exist in harmony. Travel gave citizens the increased independence they desired. However, at the same time, they were not further distanced from the state. In actuality they became more loyal to it because it allowed new and exciting freedoms in their lives.

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