

GLEANNING FOR COMMUNISM

THE SOVIET
SOCIALIST
HOUSEHOLD IN
THEORY AND PRACTICE

XENIA A. CHERKAEV

CORNELL UNIVERSITY PRESS

Ithaca and London

Introduction

Households and Historiographies

I wander around, by myself I just wander around
and I don't know what do with myself
and there's no one home, nobody's home
I'm as leftover as a pile of scrap metal.

—Viktor Tsoi, “The Idler” (1982)

Studies of the Soviet project often begin with an image of failure, so I will begin with my own; this book is the outcome of a project that seemed theoretically promising but turned out to be utterly untenable. In 2010, I came to St. Petersburg, Russia, to study whether local assumptions that certain well-used things are emotionally warming could be understood as popular commentary on the specifically post-Soviet experience of disposable goods. I reasoned that people who were used to conditions of material scarcity may be struck by the repetitive silence of disposable things, which are made to be used once and thrown away. But I was wrong. A series of blind taste tests showed that a well-made copy was just as good as the real thing: aura was not a physical quality. The folk philosophy I had hoped to explain by a semiconscious reading of the indexical marks of past use was better explained as another fetishism. And in just a few months of fieldwork, my project lay dead. I was growing increasingly apprehensive of what I would say to the Wenner-Gren Foundation, whose money I was nonetheless spending.

This project, as it collapsed, bequeathed me an interest in the things that were made “on the left,” that is, illicitly, at late-Soviet enterprises and smuggled home past the pass gate. These things were many and varied—from kayaks and sauerkraut buckets, to glass trinkets, tombstones, and

knitting needles—and many were strikingly beautiful. They had first interested me as a sort of artisanally made and long-living antithesis to the disposable, and then I kept seeking them out for the heroic, funny, and often riveting stories people told me about their creation.

While finding and cataloging such things helped fend off the feeling of failure, the lack of a clearly planned project still left quite a bit of free time, and so I was happy to oblige a friend who asked whether I would go down to Kolpino, an industrial satellite town a few train stops south of St. Petersburg to pick up a bagful of apples from a friend of hers, who had been blessed with such a surplus that season that she had begun an online campaign to find them new homes: in organizations for children and retirees, with moonshine-makers, zoo keepers, stable-hands, and everyone in between. Dobrova—the woman who had too many apples—lived on the side of a stream about a kilometer away from the train station, in a neighborhood that is best described as a deindustrialized suburb of an industrial satellite city. In this neighborhood of gravel-paved streets, where the service-station served as the grocery store, retired factory workers lived in hardy single-story wood-heated houses, next to middle-class families in suburban-style houses with indoor plumbing, next to migrant laborers in shacks made from, and heated by, packing pallets. Dobrova's house was like that of the factory workers but with running water. She had lived in the neighborhood for about five years by the time we met. In 2006, when her mother died, she moved in to take care of her ninety-two-year-old grandmother. Then her grandmother died also, but Dobrova stayed on. And then, just before we met, she lost several jobs to the megacorporation Gazprom, which was extending its auspices further into ever new areas unrelated to the sale of natural gas, replacing employees with its own loyal cadres in every new realm it touched. So Dobrova also had quite a bit of free time. We quickly became friends and I moved in.

The house had a definite history. It was built, I was told, circa 1946 by Uncle Grisha, who received the plot of land as a decorated frontline fighter, and had managed to obtain building materials while working as foreman of a POW labor brigade. The labor brigade had been tasked with building a bridge over the river Izhora, and it is anyone's guess what materials went into building that bridge, but Uncle Grisha's house was definitely built out of larch: a rot-resistant timber, which hardens with age, does not grow in the area, could have hardly been bought in 1946, and which Uncle Grisha modestly masked with drab wooden siding.

Half a century later, and after Uncle Grisha's death, a local branch of the Azeri mob moved in with a setup for the production of bootleg liquor. And then Uncle Grisha's niece sold the house to one of her coworkers—to Dobrova's mother—cheap and as is.

Thus in 1994, Dobrova's mother organized an operation of the police special forces to seize what was legally her property, moved in, and began a new round of home improvement. The house's veranda was roofed with sheets of industrial aluminum, left by the evicted bootleggers in reparation; the fence was covered with paint bought from the foreman of a railroad maintenance crew; a new stovetop (figure 0.1) was cut to size from a sheet of titanium alloy intended for submarine armor and hauled off factory grounds by a plant locomotive driver named Sanya, the occasional romantic partner of Dobrova's ex-boyfriend, whom Dobrova's mother welcomed as family. In the early 2000s, a work crew laying fiber optic cable along the Moscow–St. Petersburg rail line was persuaded to chop a few coils from their countless reels, and a walk-in greenhouse was set up in the yard: polythene stretched over this skeleton of blue cable casing (figure 0.2). Most important, the house's communications were greatly improved. Dobrova's mother paid people from the water company to run a pipe to the house from the municipal pump, and she



FIGURE 0.1. Hairless cat asleep on a titanium alloy stove top. Image courtesy Elena Tipikina.



FIGURE 0.2. Walk-in greenhouse frame, made of fiber-optic cable casing. Image courtesy Elena Tipikina.

paid people from the electricity company to hook up another input line, bypassing the meter. By the time I moved in, Dobrova had managed to legalize both of these initially illegal actions of home improvement. But, excepting the new middle-class suburban-style houses, hers was still one of the few on the block with running water.

As is well expected of households (Polanyi [1944] 2001), Dobrova's ran not on measured exchange but on reciprocity. Indeed, for measured exchange there was not much resource. Dobrova's main source of cash income was from a room she rented out in St. Petersburg, and from small ghost-writing jobs, for which she was typically paid in bags of pet food; a friend of hers employed by an international pet food company wrote off the bags as promotional material, and Dobrova sold them to acquaintances at a significant discount. But while she rarely had cash, she often had stuff, which she shared quite easily. She shared water with Shura, the neighbor on the left—a retired factory worker whose only other access to water was at the municipal hand pump down the street; with Pavel, the neighbor on the right, who had a high managerial position at an enterprise separating oxygen for Kolpino's metal factory and paid for his house's running water on the meter; with the migrant workers across the street, who came over with buckets when the hand pump

froze over or broke, as it frequently did. She shared horse manure, gotten in gratitude for acting as MC on a horse show, with anyone who wanted to come pick some up. She shared the rabies vaccine with the neighborhood cats, against their feline wills but with the consent of the owners. Favors and debts circled around the household and through it: domestic and semidomestic animals lived here and nearby, were brought for weekend stays, were born, and died; friends came by with bottles of wine and spent the night; neighbors came over to borrow some cash, return a favor or bring by a bottle of beer; acquaintances drove up to buy discounted pet food. Imported delicacies regularly graced the table, gleaned from work by a friend employed in the veterinary border patrol unit of the St. Petersburg port, through which they were shipped to the city. I distinctly remember shark fin, eel, and an entire head of semi-hard cheese, something like Jarlsberg. Former factory workers came over, as did future Gazprom middle managers, former KGB operatives and present-day businessmen, taxi drivers and foremen, balletmeisters and accountants, botanists and stuntmen, veterinarians, dentists, and biologists working for the city's water works.

Talking to people in this Kolpino neighborhood about the personally useful things that they had managed to make “on the left” at work in Soviet times, two things became quickly apparent. The first is that the stories people told me about Soviet times often concerned transactions that happened well into the early 2000s: transactions, for example, by which the above greenhouse and stovetop were made. The second is that people often contrasted this Soviet era to the 2010s narrative present, in which, I was told, everything had been sold (*vse prodano*), and everything had been bought (*vse kupleno*). This buying and selling was not market exchange. It was dispossession and the shadowy usurpation of power: complaints about how everything had been sold pointed to communal resources being sold out to private interests; complaints about how everything had been bought pointed to the clandestine purchase of favor that was assumed to structure access to institutions, resources, and opportunities. Uniting these complaints into one recognizable discourse was the widely discussed image of corruption (*korrupsia*), of “the abuse of public office for private gain,” as the World Bank defines it, of officials using public infrastructure for their own selfish ends: organizing yacht trips with money that should have gone to fund hospitals, selling off public parks to private condo developments.

But the many informal transactions that I heard about, saw, and took part in while I lived with Dobrova in Kolpino were not said to be

the result of corruption at all. They were said to be the result of good relations, neighborly help and people being decent. This, for example, was how Dobrova explained the house's electrical situation. The second input that had been jerry-rigged to circumvent the meter had started to smolder by the time Dobrova moved in. But when she disconnected it, she found that the house's legal two-kilowatt input was insufficient: if the water heater was running, the washing machine would cut the breakers; if the kettle was on, nothing else could be. So Dobrova went to the offices of the electricity company, asked for an official appointment, and showed the inspector two sets of bills. "Here are the bills my mother paid," she told me she told him, "And here are the ones I pay now. Notice that hers are for forty-five rubles, and mine are for four hundred. How do you think that worked? That's right—she was stealing electricity from your company. And I—for reasons of personal safety and convenience—I don't want to do that. But now tell me, how can I upgrade the electrical input to where I can run a washing machine and a boiler? I have a ninety-two-year-old war veteran to take care of." Officially upgrading the electrical input was prohibitively expensive: it required replanning the entire house, which cost thousands of dollars. But the inspector found a way to resolve the situation. He asked how recently Dobrova's mother had died, and whether the death was sudden. "Here's what you do," she told me he told her: "Go buy a six-kilowatt meter and order a routine meter-replacement, and I will tell the guys the story. They will run the line to your house and replace the old meter with the new one. And then a few days later an inspector will stop by and ask how come you have six kilowatts—and you will say: I have no idea, mother just died, and I don't know what she did with the documents."

Seen in these terms, the scheme by which the house got six kilowatts is not corrupt—not even by the World Bank definition. It is not corrupt because it is not privately motivated. The official did not sell off public infrastructure to build himself a yacht; he helped Dobrova navigate a bureaucratic system that had put her into an impossible position: into a situation in which her ability to take care of her elderly grandmother depended on jerry-rigged electrical wiring, which was not only illegal but also unsafe. I heard many such stories of grace, human decency, and neighborliness from my friends in St. Petersburg and Kolpino. And there is no shortage of similar stories in texts documenting informality, (post)socialist second economies, and other actually lived economic

practices. But often, these stories are studied skeptically. Exemplary of such skepticism, Alena Ledeneva's influential *Russia's Economy of Favours* (1998) argues that "blat," the circumvention of formal distribution rules through informal social relationships, worked by 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" (Ledeneva 1998, 9). The analyst's skepticism of the speaker's "rhetoric of friendship" here rests on her certitude of actual motivation. What really drives people to circumvent the formal rules? Are speakers' actions really as friendly, selfless, and neighborly as they claim? This question—unanswerable by social science, best left to the omniscient readers of human souls—may be raised by theories of misrecognition because it is immediately sidestepped. Analysts know acquisitiveness and greed to lurk behind that rhetoric of friendship in which speakers misrecognize their own intentions. The analyst sees the specks that speakers cannot see in their own eyes, as well as the logs they recognize in the eyes of others. What *really* drives people to circumvent the rules, it is assumed, is private interest.

But if the rhetoric of friendship can thus be said to be an obfuscating mask, so can a rhetoric of private acquisitiveness. Setting aside impossible questions of true motivation, the more interesting question for social science may be how people recognize the ethical values for which they strive: how they position themselves as ethical actors, and how they imagine themselves to relate to the world. And in this, scholars of misrecognition are doubtlessly right: such ethical evaluation is a question of point of view, a value judgment in the eye of the beholder. A sympathetic person may explain a particular action as valiant, neighborly, and decent; an unsympathetic one may say that it was nothing more than selfish theft. What I find interesting about such descriptions is that I repeatedly heard the same values heralded: when talking about how they made and obtained things illicitly from their late-Soviet workplaces, people condemned acquisitive theft while celebrating maverick actions for the collective good. It was this ethical stance that speakers commonly associated with Soviet times, even when describing events that happened after the USSR had collapsed. And when I turned to historical documents, I was surprised to find that such associations were more than just nostalgia. They were historically sound: the ethical stance of mutual aid upon which I heard speakers draw in their descriptions of Soviet times helped Soviet enterprises meet their economic plans, despite endemic shortages,

by framing irregular but necessary transactions as a social good. It was heralded by popular media texts, newspapers, films, and children's cartoons. And in some sense, it was the whole point: ideological statements, party policies, and legal codes all recognized that helping one's fellows do what needs to be done, and even going around the law to do so, was central to the project of building a truly communist society, in which state institutions would become unnecessary as people learned to live ethically, allowing the law to wither away. Underlying such theories of social self-management was a property regime that guaranteed specifically nonprivate ownership rights: that guaranteed citizens the right to "personal property."

This book tells the history of such personal ownership, and of the socialist household economy in which it functioned; of how this political, economic, and social formation ran, how it collapsed, and how I heard its history narrated two decades later, in the 2010s. The story begins, in chapter 1, with a distinction I heard repeatedly associated with Soviet times, the distinction between private greed and personal investment in collective projects. Chapter 2 traces this distinction to the legal definitions of personal and socialist property: the bedrock property regime upon which Stalin-era legal scholars legislated a modern industrial society that would function by the nonmarket logics of householding, whose members would be guaranteed personal stakes in the commonweal rather than private possessions. Chapter 3 then follows the logic of this property regime through the history and historiography of Nikita Khrushchev's reforms, which explicitly foregrounded collectivist ethics as the way to build stateless communism. Chapter 4 shows the tragic success of Mikhail Gorbachev's perestroika reforms, which unfurled the delicate tension upon which this property regime relied: the tension between individual collectivist interests and the interests of the socialist household economy in toto. A short conclusion takes this book back to its historical present: to the spring of 2022, when many of the people around me in St. Petersburg knew not to "talk about politics" but easily justified Russia's undeclared war on Ukraine by a particular historiographic narrative about the Soviet past.

A study of how the socialist household functioned, how it collapsed, and how it was remembered, this book is thus also about that spectral image that anchored twentieth-century liberalism as its nefarious antithesis; the image of the paternalist totalitarian state, whose jealous political control over the economy leads it to trample over all that which ought to be private. Underlying this nefarious image, and

the “state phobia” it justified (Foucault 2008, 76), is the question of how individual interests ought to relate to the public good in a large modern society, which, it is assumed, cannot possibly function by the nonprivate logics of householding.

This book tells the story of a large modern society that did.

Corrupt Totalitarianism

I am certainly not the first to point out that actions may be corrupt from one point of view and perfectly ethical from another (Smart 1993; Gupta 1995). The definition of corruption is itself notoriously slippery. Anticorruption organizations like Transparency International define it as the “abuse of public office for private gain,” or as “the abuse of entrusted power for private gain,” or they choose to forgo definitions entirely. “The TI [Transparency International] chapter in Denmark,” writes Steven Sampson, “has recently removed the definition of corruption from its statutes, concluding that it constituted an impediment to its work. Corruption is now whatever TI defines it to be” (Sampson 2005, 121). By some of its broadest definitions, as the usurpation of common resources for individual use, corruption can be said to be as old as politics itself: a “most dangerous threat to [the] political legitimacy” of all orders grounded on the notion of popular sovereignty, with its fragile fiction of citizens’ equal political rights (Muir and Gupta 2018, S12). By other definitions, it is an explicitly modern problem. In his 1968 opus *Political Order in Changing Societies*, Samuel Huntington finds corruption especially prevalent in societies undergoing “rapid social and economic modernization,” wherein the new expectations, demands, and possibilities of political and economic modernity come to be improperly aligned with traditional social entitlements and obligations (Huntington 2006, 59).

But the corruption that concerned Huntington and his mid-twentieth century colleagues is not the same as that which came to be incessantly discussed in the 2010s. For one thing, for Huntington, corruption was not a sign of structural moral failure. As traditional societies developed toward modernity (which in Huntington’s text is the image of his own contemporary American greatness), corruption could actually be good. “A society which is relatively uncorrupt,” he writes, “a traditional society for instance where traditional norms are still powerful, may find a certain amount of corruption a welcome lubricant easing the path to modernization” (Huntington 2006, 69). In the 2000s and 2010s, such

statements were no longer acceptable. Around the world, corruption accusations were framed in reference to the anticorruption “industry” that, supported by organizations like Transparency International and the World Bank empowered “integrity warriors” to battle corruption in the name of good governance (Sampson 2005, 108). This “global morality discourse” of anticorruption gave analytic coherence to a plethora of disparate claims about bribery, nepotism, patron-client relationships, gifts, favors, and favoritism (Sampson 2005, 108). It provided people across many geographic locales with a discourse to narrate what was wrong, unethical, and untimely about their own societies. Its breadth spanned postcolonial and postsocialist locales (Hasty 2005; Smith 2018; Morris and Polese 2014), and reached into the very center of modernity itself: into the “heartlands of advanced capitalist democracy.” Seen as the “greatest single threat to democracy” outside war, it was noted to haunt “modern politics and economics, threatening the legitimacy of states and markets while simultaneously animating repetitive, incomplete attempts to cleanse and legitimate the political economic order” (Haller and Shore 2005, 10; Muir and Gupta 2018, S5).

The haunting quality of this twenty-first-century image of corruption names the transgression of a critical but factually untenable category distinction: that between public and private realms. And while Huntington also defined corruption as “behavior of public officials which deviates from accepted norms in order to serve private ends” (Huntington [1968] 2006, 59), it was only after the end of the Cold War that such behavior became a haunting global concern. Studies of the global anticorruption industry often note the twenty-first-century image of corruption to be the incessant shadow of neoliberal governance, spurred by the very privatization and structural adjustment programs that claim to stamp it out, driven by moral claims to equality and “an ‘audit culture’ stressing accountability, openness, transparency and unambiguous indicators” (Sampson 2010, 275; Haller and Shore 2005). They trace the emergence of such anticorruption discourses to a series of resolutions adopted in the mid-1990s by institutions like the UN and the World Bank (Wedel 2012). And they repeatedly return to the question of why this global morality discourse emerged when it did: “what about the contemporary moment makes corruption such an obvious and concerning problem to so many people in such different contexts?” (Muir 2018).

One answer lies in the end of the Cold War, and in the central role a certain image of Soviet socialism played in neoliberal thought. On the most basic level, corruption fits nicely into the ideological void left ready for it in the liberal political imagination by that “unabashed

victory of economic and political liberalism” (Fukuyama 1989, 3) that was widely celebrated for having defeated the totalitarian menace. To scholars of postsocialist Eastern Europe the alignment of corruption and totalitarianism will likely seem unsurprising. Post-Soviet states are not only noted to be the “birthplace of the anti-corruption industry” (Sampson 2010, 264) but are also often denounced for corruption in explicitly totalitarian terms. Investigations of Russia’s “kleptocratic tribute system,” for example, are not uncommonly prefaced by speculations about why it took “Western policy and academic communities so long to embrace this view of the Russian political system as a steel hand in an initially velvet glove? We may never know precisely when the current regime decided to do what they have clearly done, any more than we know on which day Stalin stopped being a pencil pusher and decided to imprison millions in the gulag, or even when Hitler hit on the idea of exterminating the Jewish population of Europe” (Dawisha 2014, 4).

Drawing a straight line between Vladimir Putin’s Kleptocracy, the GULAG, and “the idea of exterminating the Jewish population of Europe” sounds wild. But it flies by unnoticed in texts like Karen Dawisha’s well-received *Putin’s Kleptocracy: Who Owns Russia?* Hitler, Stalin, and Putin easily flow together as representatives of that totalitarian, corrupt, barbaric, and improper modernity against which the liberal political imaginary struggles to define itself (Buck-Morss 2002). The fundamental pathology of this improper modernity lies in its mismanagement of the distinction between public policy and private interest. Today this purported mismanagement justifies the global moral governance of anticorruption. Throughout the Cold War, it justified liberal pundits in framing the world’s recent history as that of “the desperate struggle of lovers of freedom prosperity and civilization against the rising tide of totalitarian barbarism” (Mises 1951, 13).

Totalitarianism, the “theoretical anchor of cold war discourse” (Pietz 1988, 55), was already a driving concern at the 1938 Walter Lippmann Colloquium, where the term “neoliberal” was adopted (Reinhoudt and Audier 2018).¹ It remained central to postwar popular and academic liberal thought, helping channel “the anti-Nazi energy of the wartime period into the postwar struggle with the Soviet Union” (Gleason 1995, 3; Adler and Paterson 1970). But the roots of totalitarianism run deeper: to the question of whether people in modern societies relate to their collectivities differently than do their nonmodern peers. This question preoccupied much nineteenth-century critical thought. It was a question of the one and the many, of progress gained and of paradise lost, of

whether something had fundamentally altered for humankind when it slipped from socially embedded economies into publics, stranger sociality, and scientifically rational thought.

Early anthropology contributed to this discussion with ethnographic studies of “primitive” nonmarket economies (Pearson 2000; Elyachar 2020). And in this usage, the term “primitive” was not an expression of scale. It was an expression of radical alterity, marked as savage deficiency: complex economies were not built up of more primitive elements. Quite the opposite, Euro-American philosophers and ethnographers showed time and again that the social worlds of modern and primitive man differed radically. The differences were twofold. On the one hand, the modern condition was alienated, while the primitive was immediate. For better or worse, moderns understood things, beings, and relationships in relation to abstract universals, like commodity value (Marx [1867] 1976), standardized public goods (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 164), socially disembodied narrative forms (Benjamin [1968] 1936) and contractual systems of law (Maine 1906, 267). Primitives did without such abstractions: without abstract labor time, certainly, but also without abstracted standards of measurement, naming, and historical time (Malinowski [1922] 1984; Boas 1895; Evans-Pritchard 1940, 105). On the other hand, the modern condition depended on the acquisition of things, while “primitive man [expressed] an aversion to economic exchange” (Simmel [1907] 1971, 43–69) and instead preferred to focus on gifting things out (Mauss [1925] 1990).

The suggestion that acquisitive material trade was not the original economic relation captured the Euro-American public imagination well beyond the academy (Murnau 1931). But was such trade a necessary outcome of modern alienation? Must acquisitive trade and the mediation of abstract third terms go together? In his scathing 1920 denouncement of the Bolshevik Revolution, Ludwig von Mises famously claimed that they must. The relation between them, he argued, was the very basis of modern rationality and freedom: individuals’ peaceful co-operation hinges on their ability to make rational choices about their production and consumption of things, and such choices are possible only when a system of competitive market price expresses the true value of every commodity. If we are to be rational moderns, our complex economies must therefore be based upon the market exchange of private property. An economy without such exchange would be ultimately irrational, and it would be inherently despotic: in the socialist claim to dispense with

private property, Mises saw nothing less than a threat to civilization itself (Mises [1922] 1951, 511; [1920] 1935).²

The theories that have become known as neoliberal trace their own origins to this claim of the inherent irrationality—and consequent despotism—of nonmarket modernity. And so, although the real history of socialism’s role in the rise of neoliberal theory and practice cannot be boiled down to this simple standoff between markets and planning (Bockman 2011; Sanchez-Sibony 2014), these mythic origins remain important precisely as myth: one that has justified neoliberal policies by insisting that only the headless mediation of a market economy can properly situate individuals in modern society. Against the terror of total control, wherein “economic planning would involve direction of almost the whole of our life” (Hayek [1944] 2007b, 127), the early neoliberals insisted that modern man lives in peace with his fellows only when each seeks his own individual good, with market price mediating such independent desires to the scarcity of desired goods. Moral and evolutionist, and often racist (Slobodian 2014), this narrative equated social progress with commercial relations; collectivism with moral failure; socialism with civilizational regression (Whyte 2019; Hayek [1979] 1998, 153–76). Fostering theories about how to govern social life by the competitive logics once thought reserved for the market (Foucault 2008; Brown 2015), it justified policies characterized by the privatization of objects to be used in this competitive game: not only formerly collective property, but also social relations not formerly thought to be property at all (Elyachar 2005).

This book is written at a moment of widespread disgruntlement with this particular version of liberalism; at a moment in which academic and publicist discourses across many languages, localities, and political party affiliations were searching for alternatives to the global morality regime of good neoliberal governance. I began ethnographic work on this project in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis, in which US banks foreclosed on private mortgages and the Federal Reserve bailed out the banks, stabilizing the financial sector but leaving its moral foundations shaky. I wrote it in an era when publicist, economic, and social science literature discussed the crisis of markets, liberalism, and the environment (Roitman 2013; Boyer 2016; Masco 2017); when anthropological literature increasingly commented on the duplicity of the 1990s “transitions to democracy” (Kalb 2009; Hickel 2015); when scholarly and publicist texts turned with renewed concern to questions

of moral economy (Palomera and Vetta 2016; Rakopoulos and Knut 2018; Skidelsky 2014).

The concept of moral economy once allowed E. P. Thompson to show that eighteenth-century British food riots were rebellions “in defence of custom,” driven not only by biological hunger but also by the demand for customary economic rights (Thompson [1991] 1993, 9). Time and again, crowds facing grain shortages and spiraling food prices did not simply loot the necessities that they could not buy. They seized stores of grain, sold it at the customary price and returned the proceeds of such sales to the owner. “It is not easy for us to conceive,” Thompson wrote, “that there may have been a time, within a smaller and more integrated community, when it appeared to be ‘unnatural’ that any man should profit from the necessities of others, and when it was assumed that, in time of dearth, prices of ‘necessities’ should remain at a customary level, even though there might be less all round” ([1991] 1993, 252–53). In the 2010s Thompson’s proposal was easier to fathom. As scholarly texts argued that “moral economies” had been made unthinkable under the specter of totalitarianism (Rogan 2017, 9) and that democracy itself was becoming unthinkable under the specter of neoliberal governance (Brown 2015), popular movements on both the right and the left challenged the separation of economic realms from social, political, and moral questions. It was not hard to imagine that the “deplorables” roiling against extractive transnational capital’s refusal to put America First (Povinelli 2017) made demands similar to those of the eighteenth-century rioters, who stormed barges to keep grain on local markets (Thompson [1991] 1993, 295).

Similar to Thompson’s illiberal crowds, many of the people I met in and around St. Petersburg in the 2010s wanted their state to provide fair distribution rather than transparent institutions. And thus at a time when the US media regularly accused Putin of being a “Threat to Liberal Democracy” (Diamond 2016), a common Russian complaint was that he was too (neo)liberal; that the state he headed did not do enough to provide its citizens with free healthcare, schooling, roads, train travel, and stable employment; that it, instead, allowed private profit to be made from the sale of its natural resources. This made corruption an easy topic of conversation, and one explicitly concerned with the acquisitive dispossession of common resources. Narratives of such dispossession often harked back to perestroika, when “all those thieves” who cared solely about their own pocketbooks, wrecked the Soviet Union and sold it off. And often, they condemned the law that allowed the commons to

be thus legally dispossessed. In this moral discourse about the political economy, corruption was the existence of corporations like Gazprom—a private natural gas company in which the Russian state owned a majority share. While my political science colleagues at Harvard told me that Gazprom was not corrupt insofar as it contracted above board and paid taxes on its employee salaries, my Russian friends told me that it was the essence of corruption, precisely because it did so. That a private corporation selling the country's natural resources could pay its employees' astronomical salaries legitimately and fully taxed, while impossible tax rates forced small businesses to pay their employees in laundered unrecorded cash, made it the epitome of corruption; it proved that the laws were written in its favor.³ Speakers often traced the origins of this corrupt Putinist state to the Soviet Union, and the perestroika (lit. "reconstruction") reforms that brought it down. Some insisted that the USSR had disintegrated when glasnost opened society's eyes to the regime's immoral violence; others insisted that it collapsed as a result of a plot to destroy the great military super-power; still others assumed that it had simply ground to halt, having run out of steam, money, and resources. But most everyone agreed that perestroika enabled wide-scale theft, and that this theft has profoundly structured Russia's political, legal, and economic landscape.

Economics and Households—and Property

The Soviet Union, as is well known, had little respect for private property. And the question this raised—the question of how a large, industrialized state could function without a market defined by privately motivated exchange—is one of the gnawing problems of twentieth-century political thought. For liberal theorists, this question raised the specter of totalitarianism; for their Soviet counterparts, it formulated a method by which the state would be made to "wither away" (Lenin [1918] 2014).

At heart, this liberal-socialist standoff was about the question of the one and the many, of how individual interests may be ensured in a modern society of strangers. We now know a good deal about the economic side of this historical conversation: how Soviet economists grappled with questions of value and planning, supply and demand (Barnett and Zweynert 2008; Boldyrev and Kirtchik 2017) and how neoliberalism developed in conversation with socialist economics (Bockman 2011; Rupprecht 2022). But the Soviet answer to the question of the one and the many—with its accusation of individual-crushing totalitarianism—has

remained unexamined. And for a good reason: because its root claims baffle our scholarly optics. They mix morality, politics, and economics, those three aspects of life that should be kept separate in the analysis of industrial modern worlds.

This book is a historical ethnography of this dark side of the moon, of the *sotsialisticheskoe khoziaistvo*, the socialist household economy.

It sounds strange to describe the economy of a modern twentieth-century state as a household—because we typically think of the economy as something that explicitly excludes both the private sphere of the household and the political sphere of the state. But this definition is new. “As recently as the 1920s,” writes Timothy Mitchell, “Palgrave’s *Dictionary of Political Economy* contained no separate entry for or definition of the term economy. It used the word only to mean ‘the principle of seeking to attain, or the method of attaining, a desired end with the least possible expenditure of means’” (1998, 85).⁴ Mitchell traces the history of the notion of the economy to the emergence of econometrics, whose natural-science language allowed economic processes to be studied as objective facts removed from the social concerns they express. Drawing on Philip Mirowski (1989), he traces the rise of this mathematical language to the post-1870s shift in economic thought: from the classic economic theory that value derived from the labor cost of production to the marginal utility theory that derived value solely from consumers’ subjective desire. If value expresses what the market’s consumers are willing to pay, then the economy can be studied apart from substantive and political questions: it can be divorced from the private realm of the household and the political realm of the state. But while this new way of figuring economic transactions became central to both liberal and socialist economic thought (Steedman 1995; Bockman 2011), early Soviet leadership rejected it outright. The theory of marginal utility stood accused of being an *Economic Theory of the Leisure Class*, as Nikolai Bukharin ([1919] 1927) termed it, of being a theory that could only make sense from the perspective of the rentier, who takes no part in production, whose only interaction with society is based on his own acquisitive wants. And so from the 1920s on, marginalism in Russia was effectively banned (Allisson 2015, 173).

Bukharin was a leading Bolshevik revolutionary, and a head editor of the *Big Soviet Encyclopedia*, whose first volume (1926) includes a long critique of the Austrian school’s marginal theory of value. His criticism formed part of a wider early Soviet discussion of bourgeois science, which stood accused of a twofold mistake: of studying social relations as motionless structures that do not implicate the scholar himself or

herself, and of studying individuals' relationships to these social structures as purely subjective psychological phenomena (Vološinov [1929] 1986; Arvatov [1925] 1997). Neither approach could grasp the true nature of social life, Soviet critics argued, because neither took seriously the generative relations of production that characterized society and implicated the scholar within it. Predictably Marxist, the Soviet solution focused instead on the historically contingent and class-driven generation of things, meanings, and power (Kiaer 2005; Tret'iakov [1929] 2006). And the point was not just to study these material relations but also to change them, to thereby eliminate the coercive superstructures they supported. These superstructures included morality and law which, as the leading legal scholar Evgeny Pashukanis argued, would both wither away in a communist society, in their very form (Pashukanis [1924] 2002, 61). The social person of the future would be driven not by abstract notions of duty or fear of criminal sanction, but by a joyful collectivist striving: submerging his ego in the collective, he would find "the greatest satisfaction and the meaning of life in this act."⁵ A tool used to create this "new, higher, more harmonious form of link between the personality and the collective," early Soviet property law therefore recognized private property only as a temporary concession, a relation slated for extinction (Pashukanis [1924] 2002, 160).

But how would an economy work without private property? Mises famously claimed that such an economy would be impossible—because the state is too large to be run as a household. "Only under simple conditions," he writes, "can economics dispense with monetary calculation. Within the narrow confines of household economy, for instance, where the father can supervise the entire economic management, it is possible to determine the significance of changes in the processes of production, without such aids to the mind, and yet with more or less of accuracy" (Mises [1920] 1935, 102). But a national economy would be impossible to plan through use-values alone. Even if the goals of production could be established, the steps needed to achieve those goals would be impossible to calculate without a functional value mechanism: "the human mind cannot orientate itself properly among the bewildering mass of intermediate products and potentialities of production without such aid. It would simply stand perplexed before the problems of management and location" (Mises [1920] 1935, 103). In this reading, households delimit the sphere within which private economic interests may be disrespected. On all greater, properly economic scales the subjection of private interest to public policy would necessarily produce chaotic results.

Following this liberal analytic, studies of the Soviet economy have often described it as a large corporate structure under centralized, top-down control—something like a countrywide factory (Sutela 1991, 7)—and have explained the fact that it did somehow manage to function by the illicit persistence of private interest; by the unplanned exchange, bargaining, and other actions of the “second economy” that prospered in the fertile shadows of command (Grossman 1963, 1977). An analogous argument has been made about the persistence of citizens’ private lives despite ideological prohibition (Field 2007; Reid and Crowley 2002). Allowing that the concepts of public and private may be defined in particular and explicitly socialist ways, such approaches hold that the notions themselves are opposed and mutually exclusive. Susan Gal’s pivotal work, for example, shows that state-socialist notions of public and private were defined in relational metaphors rather than spatial ones. But it assumes that the notions themselves were opposed: that socialist notions of public and private chart “a discursive opposition between the victimized ‘us’ and a newly powerful ‘them’ who ruled the state,” whereby the citizens’ “imperative to be honest and ethically responsible among those who counted as ‘us’ [is contrasted to the . . .] distrust and duplicity in dealings with ‘them’ and with the official world generally” (Gal 2002, 87). Attempts to overcome this binary logic often run into the problem of mutually exclusive terms; Yurchak’s deterritorialized publics of *svoi* (our people) may be unstable, shifting, and not defined vis-à-vis state institutions (2008, 117–18), but they semantically imply a *chuzhie* (not-ours). If there is an inside, then there must be an outside. If there is an us, then there’s also a them.⁶

This mutually exclusive oppositional quality is inherent to the concepts of public and private. But it occludes an important economic and ethical logic: that of Soviet citizens’ constitutionally guaranteed rights to a personal share of the “growing wealth of the socialist homeland” (Rubinshtein 1936, 42–43). Definitively, this personal share was not private. It was not alienable from the greater socialist whole and could not be opposed to it, because it was one of its constitutive parts.

Sacred and Inviolable

By 1938, both Pashukanis and Bukharin were purged. With their deaths closed the era of Soviet legal and political thought that Western scholars typically find most theoretically promising—and the story of Soviet socialist household economy began. Its story is that of the

answer Stalinist legal scholars presented to the accusation of totalitarianism in the debate of the one and the many; of the *sotsialisticheskoe khoziaistvo* they legislated; and of the collectivist logics that kept it functional despite its poor planning.

In Russian, the term *khöziaistvo* describes substantive economies of all types, from the national economy (*narodnoe khöziaistvo*), to individual households, and even individual playrooms. “Pick up your *khöziaistvo*” one might say to a child upon walking into a room strewn with Legos. Grammatically, the term implies a subject position: a *khöziaïn*, who takes dominion over the *khöziaistvo*, a head of household. In some cases, this subject position might remain indefinite. This was the case with the *narodnoe khöziaistvo*, when it emerged in the nineteenth century as a translation of concepts then popular in the “pan-European shift in economic thought, away from a conception of government and economy as the management of sectors, goods, and territories (and, through these categories, people) to a conception of government of people comprising the economy” (Kotsonis 1999, 37). In these nineteenth-century discussions, writes Yanni Kotsonis, the proper role of the state in managing this *khöziaistvo* was an open question. Some argued that *narodnoe khöziaistvo* existed only as a function of the state; others, that it “should imply that ‘a subject is absent’ (*otsutstvuet sub*”ekt) and . . . should also lack a sense of a ‘single will’ (*edinnaia volia*) embodied in the state, so that the ‘popular economy’ might be ‘regulated but not administered’ by the state” (Kotsonis 1999, 38). By contrast, *sotsialisticheskoe khöziaistvo* had both a single will and a subject position, as well as a goal: it was led by the party and strove for communism, that nonlegal order in which the coercive state would be made to wither away.

Like all households, the *sotsialisticheskoe khöziaistvo* had a material base: one theorized in direct contradistinction to the primitive accumulation of capital. In the early 1930s, after fifteen years of “socialist accumulation” had violently dispossessed most owners of their private property for the benefit of the industrializing socialist state, an infamous antitheft law was implemented. It punished all theft of collectivized property, no matter how minor, with ten years’ incarceration or death. Stalin justified this socialist law against gleaning with explicit allusion to the legal history of prior enclosure acts: socialism, he explained, must “declare communal property sacred and inviolable” to overcome capitalism, just like capitalism had itself managed to break the preceding feudal order by declaring private property sacred, and punishing in the harshest way violators of its interests (Khlevniuk et al. 2001, 240–41).

Thus drawing its rationale from the prior criminalization of customary use-rights, the law also radically reinterpreted this legal history. Private enclosures destroy a collective's right to use property in favor of an individual's right to possess it. The decree of August 7, 1932 forbade illicit possession but said nothing of illicit use.

Foundational documents of the socialist household economy drew on key liberal tenets and tweaked them accordingly. Borrowing from the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen the notion that citizens' right to property is "an inviolable and sacred right," the 1936 Stalin Constitution declared socialist property to be "the sacred and inviolable foundation of the Soviet system." Taking from liberal constitutions the insistence on individual citizens' private rights, it proclaimed individual rights to be personal. 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. And this idiosyncratic form of ownership posed no risk to the sacred wholeness of socialist property, because it was essentially usufruct; it was theorized as each individual citizen's stake in the inviolable commons.⁷

The propaganda maelstrom released in celebration of Stalin's Constitution heralded the co-constitutive nature of personal and socialist property as the basis of a truly democratic new social order: the answer to bourgeois-liberal fascism (Wimberg 1992, 315). Legal journals did also. At the urging of Prosecutor General Andrei Vyshinsky, Soviet legal scholars reiterated Stalin's rebuttals to liberal accusations of tyrannical irrationality, particularly his insistence that "collectivism, Socialism, does not deny, but combines individual interests with the interests of the collective. Socialism cannot abstract itself from individual interests" (Stalin 1934; Vyshinsky 1935).⁸ Only socialism, they argued, could provide true support for individual citizens' flourishing, because only socialism seamlessly integrated the individual into the collective. "Personal property in the USSR cannot be counterposed to collective property," Vyshinsky explained to Soviet law students. "It does not conflict with the latter, the two are harmoniously congruent. The growth of collective property provides for the growth of citizens' personal property. In turn, the growth of personal property promotes the development of citizens' culturedness, industrial and social activity, which itself leads to the growth and strengthening of collective property" (Vyshinsky 1938, 189).

Little turned out as planned. But as they worked to formulate a new legal philosophy by which civil law would work without private

ownership, Soviet legal scholars isolated the principle that did, in fact, hold the *sotsialisticheskoe khoziaistvo* together: a political morality of collectivist use-right. As in premodern European political imaginary, the socialist household was a moral entity whose members “had positive moral and ethical obligations to themselves, to others, and to the society as a whole” (Koziol 2011, 188), foremost, the obligation of mutual aid. In the face of endemic shortages, enterprise managers relied on their personal connections to secure their material inputs, and could therefore never take the position “that the laws are sacrosanct” (Berliner 1957, 222). Through the optics of private exchange, such unplanned redistribution looked like criminal misappropriation and shady dealings—and this is how liberal analysts have typically understood it.⁹ But in their own stories, socialist managers described their informal transactions as friendly mutual aid and “rescue in time of need” (Berliner 1957, 187); they framed them as ethical neighborly actions, carried out for the greater good.

Mises was right in a sense: the corporate structure that was the planned Soviet economy was neither effective nor rational. But, to recall his formulation, households differ from factories, not only in size. They also differ in their organizational logics, in that factories are organized by rational relations while households are organized by ethical ones. Ideal factory workers carry out their tasks according to regulations, undistracted by personal obligations, while household members are committed to each other through unquantifiable ties of obligation and entitlement, care and well-being, commitment and confidence, communality and affection, honor and pride. These socially embedded relations typically fall to the wayside as regimes of private property replace traditional custom and use with possession and contract (Polanyi [1944] 2001, 57). But they were the spirit and lifeblood of the socialist household economy, whose enterprise managers were expected to act as *khoziaeva*, as usufruct owners who “show ‘initiative’ and take vigorous measures to safeguard [their] flow of materials” (Berliner 1957, 222; Rogers 2006; Schechter 2017).

The line between such conceptual categories—between the factory and the household, the formal and the ethical, the public and the private—is notoriously slippery. It is in the eye of the beholder, a question of ethical framing rather than of objectively verifiable fact. It is elusory, and it is constitutive. By framing certain relations as ostensibly personal, private, and noneconomic, it safeguards the rationality of that which is thereby said to be properly economic and public. For example, while the market obviously cannot function without its next generation of

workers, the assumption that bearing and raising this next generation is a question of private familial intimacy produces the image of public economic spheres as free, fair, and universally accessible (Gal 2005; Bear et al. 2015). The Soviet Plan relied on a similar sleight of hand. It worked not by the iron laws of allocation but by “planning cum improvisation” (Powell 1977), and the latter depended on the personal ethical relations Soviet people formed with each other as members of the socialist household, striving for that household’s ultimate communist aim—or, at least, for their local collectives’ immediate goals.

Khoziaeva got their materials from other *khoziaeva*; the socialist household was comprised of a multiplicity of nestled households, all the way up to the ministries, and all the way down the work group. Successful Soviet managers maximized their allotments of socialist property, minimized required outputs, and stockpiled excesses whenever possible to create “intentional leftovers” (Bize 2020, 474) that could then be redistributed as need be for ostensibly upstanding ends: to resolve newly arising shortages, to help the members of other work-units resolve their shortages, or simply to make useful things—like kayaks and tombstones—for personal use.

Which Collective? Whose Common Good?

For the group of theorists who met in Paris in 1938 to discuss Walter Lippmann’s *Good Society*—and for those who followed in the neoliberal tradition thereafter—substantive economies spelled the death knell of freedom precisely because they necessitate a *khoziain*: someone who chooses the ultimate aims for which all are then forced to strive. Beyond the bounds of the family household, such common aims were seen to be inherently despotic. “Collective action in the interest of all can only be made possible if all can be coerced into accepting as their common interest what those in power take it to be,” writes Friedrich Hayek in an early essay on Nazi-Socialism. “At that point, coercion must extend to the individuals’ ultimate aim and must attempt to bring everyone’s *Weltanschauung* [worldview] into line with the ideas of the rulers” (Hayek [1933] 2007, 247).¹⁰

This question of ultimate aims also formed a central problem for academic historiography of the Soviet Union. Were Soviet subjects passive brainwashed cogs in a system that administered their lives from above? Were they materially interested cynics, perpetuating the system without caring much about its stated ideological aims? Or were they motivated

also by a sincere belief in, as Stephen Kotkin put it, “Marxism-Leninism, the official ideology of the Soviet state . . . a powerful dream for salvation on earth, and one that spoke the language of science” (Kotkin 1995, 225)? In the mid-1990s, Kotkin’s work kicked off a new historiographic interest in subjectivity.¹¹ Focused on the language in which one becomes a subject, these studies, as Sheila Fitzpatrick writes, understood ideology not as a body of canonical Marxist-Leninist texts but “more as *Weltanschauung*—something collectively constructed rather than imposed” (Fitzpatrick 2007, 87).

But what was the content of this Soviet *Weltanschauung*? For what ultimate aim did members of the socialist household strive? In this book, I answer this question by shifting its terms. Following Louis Althusser, I understand ideology as notions by which we make sense of our place in the world—by which we imagine not just our conditions of existence, but above all our “relation to those conditions of existence” (Althusser [1970] 2001, 164). To locate these notions, I turn to the material base: to these conditions of existence. In the Soviet Union, that material base was the planned economy, whose imperfect distribution system brought everybody together. Different Soviet collectives imagined their own common good differently—according to regional, ethnic, class, and gender differences, differences in personal taste, family history, and difference of epoch—but there was one ideal on which almost everybody agreed. Most everyone agreed on how a person ought to relate to this material base. Collectivism was not only the ultimate aim toward which the *sotsialisticheskoe khoziaistvo* formally strove, it was also the ideology that kept it functional in the face of its poorly planned economy. People drew on collectivist idioms of neighborly mutual aid to explain their formally irregular actions, which kept the socialist household (and their individual households) functional in the face of endemic material shortages. And the logic of socialist and personal property, therefore, created a certain harmony between the aims of the party and the plans of the people.

But this apparent harmony hinged on a delicate tension: on the idea that seeking the good for one’s particular collective also furthers the cause of the socialist household itself. Soviet legal scholars addressed this tension with the notion of *khozraschet*, which, they argued, emerged in the 1930s as a specifically socialist principle. During the New Economic Policy era, state socialist enterprises were obligated to perform economic calculations—known as *khoziaistvennyi raschet*—when dealing with market actors. But in the early 1930s, party officials and legal

scholars presented *khozraschet* as a fundamentally new dialectic unity of individual enterprises' material interests and the socialist plan that was specific to the planned economy, impossible for "a private entrepreneur, the bearer of private property, [who] is by nature individualistic and disorganized. He has 'his own plan.' We cannot speak of his planning, for in the conditions of the proletarian revolution, for him, in the end, there is only planned death" (Rubinshtein 1933, 52).

Party leaders called on the principle to "strengthen economic organizations' initiative and give them a certain amount of independence, while simultaneously establishing their definite responsibility for completing state tasks according to contract" (Molotov 1933, 16). And legal scholars explained this apparently double demand of obedience and independence with the specifically socialist nature of *khozraschet*: the fact that a "certain independence within the limits of a given whole" (Rubinshtein 1933, 52) was possible only within the planned socialist *khoziaistvo* based on socialist property.¹² Pointing to the socialist household's unresolvable tension, *khozraschet* never ceased to be theoretically murky. Managers tried for large-scale embezzlement sometimes turned to the principle in their defense—not always successfully (Cadiot 2018, 259)—and still in the late 1970s, civilists lamented that "the literature lacks a sufficiently clear and precise definition of the concept" (Rakhmilovich 1977, 19). In practice, it was a principle of semihard budget constraint that was called upon to keep managers from conducting their horizontal trade as pure barter. In the words of Prosecutor General Vyshinsky, *khozraschet* was to teach managers to "count money, teach them to value this money, to save this soviet ruble and soviet kopeck and thereby to learn to accumulate funds for socialist construction" (Vyshinsky 1931, 3). *Khozraschet* demanded that horizontal transactions between enterprises be calculated in money—but, of course, without market price.

And then it proved lethal. By the mid-1980s, the idea that markets automatically generate the most effective solutions had become a sort of international common sense, even within the Soviet Union. Betting on this commonsensical truth, Gorbachev's perestroika reformers proposed that fortifying *khozraschet* with market mechanisms would force Soviet people to take greater personal responsibility for acting as their enterprises' *khoziaeva*. They proposed, specifically, that forcing enterprises to acquire their own inputs through horizontal inter-enterprise trade, while allowing them to sell their deadened material stockpiles at the state-set price and for the benefit of their own work-collectives, would

make people “face the necessity of feeling that they are the authentic *khoziaeva*” of the socialist enterprises that employed them (Abalkin 1987, 84). These reforms promised not only to perfect socialism and speed up the socialist household economy that had become stagnant. They also promised to de-Stalinize Soviet society; to liberate Soviet people from the irrational, oppressive, and wasteful bureaucratic rigidity of the “Stalinist administrative-command system” that tied managers’ hands and crippled their mindsets, that got in the way of Soviet people’s personal ethical, rational, collectivist actions.

And in a sense, they were successful. But what they sped up, in practice, were the customary use-rights that had been the planned economy’s personal shadow. By encouraging people to sell their enterprises’ ostensibly deadened stockpiles of socialist property for the good of their own particular collectives, perestroika unfurled the delicate tension upon which socialist property relations hinged; it placed the collectivist good of particular collectives into direct conflict with the good of the socialist household as a whole.

In the 2010s, when I asked people about their self-made Soviet things, I often heard narratives in which the terms Soviet and perestroika were used to describe actions that had actually happened well after the Soviet Union itself had collapsed and the perestroika reforms that had destroyed it were over. People used the term perestroika when talking about the era’s widespread dispossession of collective infrastructures, and used the term Soviet when talking about the enterprise-based actions of personal reciprocity, collectivism, and mutual aid upon which they relied to make do in these economically hard times. The two terms described similar transactions from radically different points of view, two moral-economy views on the same era: perestroika referred to the dismantling of socialist infrastructure as seen in terms of private interest; Soviet referred to the same actions as seen in terms of personal, collectivist entitlements and obligations. But I rarely heard the term “perestroika” used to describe the economic reforms of Gorbachev’s perestroika itself (1985–91). Across the board, people tended to associate Gorbachev’s reforms with political, ideological, and ethical changes. And when asked specifically about the economic reforms of perestroika, they often talked about the properly neoliberal reforms of the 1990s, politicians like Egor Gaidar and Anatoly Chubais, and policies like currency deregulation and privatization vouchers. This was true of those who heralded perestroika as the collapse of the totalitarian state and of those who denounced it as a plot to sell out the Soviet Union to foreign interests.

By 1990, Gorbachev's reformers had broken up into bitterly opposed factions, which vigorously blamed perestroika's disastrous outcomes on each other's stalemating and indecision. But circa 1986–88, they were still very much in consensus. Gorbachev's speeches, texts of his leading economic advisers and of popular Soviet publicists, economists, politicians, and the texts of the 1987 and 1988 reform laws all worked around the same theory, the one that was laid down in 1986, at the 27th Party Congress. This theory is that if workers' material well-being were tied more directly to their enterprises' success at inter-enterprise trades, personal profit would become both stick and carrot: naturally punishing the lazy, rewarding the industrious, and making "the work collective genuinely interested in the best, the most effective use of the resources assigned to it" (Abalkin 1987, 86).

Introducing horizontal inter-enterprise trade with no intention of liberalizing prices or legislating private possession, this project seems contradictory from the standpoint of market economics. But the creation of a market economy was never its stated goal. Its goal, instead, was to perfect socialism. And the method by which the reformers proposed to do so seemed reasonable. Simply put, they proposed that liberating management from the unwieldy demands of central planning would create an ethically self-governing system: that requiring work-collectives to seek out their own trade partners would materially stimulate them to be assiduous with the socialist property they manage, to be resourceful with their own worktime, to be inventive, and to strive with more vigor for the greater social good.

Theorized in the collectivist logic of socialist property relations, this was an ethical project. Intending to liberate people from the planned economy's Stalinist micro-management, to stimulate workers' feelings of personal responsibility for socialist property, foster initiative, and make people "feel that they are the *khoziaeva*" (Gorbachev [1986] 1987, 84), it created conditions in which the collectivist personal use of socialist property sped up so profoundly that the state monopoly over socialist property collapsed. Economic historiography typically explains the Soviet collapse as the result of uncontrolled private interest: as the result of "Gorbachev's piecemeal reforms [in which], communist terror was removed, but market discipline was not established, [allowing] workers and managers [to rake] off enterprise income that used to go to government" (Sachs 1991), as "legal changes and declining supervision" allowed certain "well-connected individuals" to "pry assets from the grip of the Soviet state" (Barnes 2006, 43). But reading the perestroika

reformers' texts through the prism of socialist property law suggests another explanation. It suggests that Gorbachev's reforms stalled the economy not by liberating private interest but by rousing personal ethics. By economically obligating people to personally manage socialist property for the greater collective good, perestroika took off the limits of how ethical one could be. Placing the ethical obligation to further collective interests into direct conflict with the dispossession of collective infrastructures, it ran afoul not of actors' private greed but of their personal obligations.

Thus, in a twist of poetic justice, collectivist social self-management did make the socialist state wither away; it fractured the socialist household into a myriad overlapping personally managed usufruct monopolies, which distributed the socialist property allotted to them for the benefit of their own particular socials (Humphrey 1991; Filtzer 1991; Burawoy and Krotov 1992). And what was left? A plethora of conspiracy theories about how Gorbachev had sold out the Soviet Union to foreign interests; a plethora of commonsensical explanations about a teratological marketless state succumbing finally to the natural market forces of history; and the common assumption that perestroika was a primarily political and ideological (and perhaps moral) reform project, whose economic side was haphazard, half-baked, and indecisive. This book's insistence that perestroika was both decisively implemented and thoroughly theorized begs the question of what the reformers were thinking. The idea that Soviet state socialism could be fixed simply by raising efficiency, changing mindsets, and cutting waste may seem ludicrous: a misguided attempt to raise the efficiency of an inherently flawed system, an attempt whose very failure proves the ultimate triumph of markets over totalitarianism. It is true that the market alternative also creates massive inequality, sectarian strife, and an environmental disaster that may soon kill us all. But, global policymakers assure us, this can be fixed with minor tweaks to the system. All that is needed is more technology, more efficiency and, finally, more morality, all of which may be profitably provided by the market system itself (Zizek 2009; Hickel and Khan 2012; Peebles 2018).

In this shadow of liberalism's own apparent speed up, this book reexamines the Soviet attempt to build a modern, self-governing, efficient, and democratic society. Starting with popular historiographies of "the Soviet," it tells a story of central planning and stateless government, civic morals and citizens' property rights, individual interests and the commonweal, as seen through the prism of collective interest.

Chapter Outline

Each of the four chapters that follow is framed by an ethnographic riddle: a question that came out of my fieldwork, and whose answer I found in the theory and history of socialist property law. The overall riddle is this: Why did people in Russia in the 2010s narrate the past in ways that were often at odds with the factual truth of chronology? The first chapter sets out this question, and the next three chapters trace its development through three major shifts of socialist property law—under Stalin, Khrushchev, and Gorbachev. Each shows how these developments created, altered, and then destroyed the socialist household economy. Throughout, the book remains anchored to the 2010s of its ethnographic present, driven by the question of what truth there is in the popular historiography of Soviet times. It finds this truth in the political morality upon which the socialist household was founded and by which it ran: on its particular political morality of collectivist use-right.