

## (Re)digesting Communism\*

▼ **Abstract** This article discusses how cultural food studies have contributed to the historiography of twentieth-century European communism “from below”. It offers an overview of the extant research: of its main themes and methodological discussions. However, it also identifies major gaps. It argues that this sub-field offers an enormous, so far unexploited potential to provide insights into the construction of gender roles, national identity and state attempts to control consumption, among other topics. The article also outlines the contribution of this volume to the different strands of the historical debate on how to re-conceptualize communism as experience.

▼ **Keywords** European communism; Communist food; Cultural food studies; Historiography

▼ **Résumé** Cet article explique comment les études culturelles sur l'alimentation ont contribué “par le bas” à l'historiographie du communisme européen du XX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Il offre un aperçu des recherches, des principaux thèmes et des discussions méthodologiques tout en identifiant également des lacunes importantes. Il montre l'énorme potentiel, encore peu exploité, des problématiques possibles parmi lesquelles la construction des rôles attribué au genre, l'identité nationale, les tentatives de l'État pour contrôler la consommation. L'article présente aussi les contributions du numéro spécial aux différents volets du débat historique sur la manière de conceptualiser le communisme en tant qu'expérience.

▼ **Mots clés** Communisme européen; Alimentation communiste; Études culturelles de l'alimentation; Historiographie

---

\* This special issue of *Food & History* would not have been possible without the Research Foundation – Flanders (FWO). FWO provided the main financing for the international conference “Food and Drink in Communist Europe”, which took place in April 2018 in Brussels and served as the starting point for these selected articles. FWO also supported the creation of the artistic cover of this issue and the English language editing. We are also grateful to the Flemish Interface Center for Cultural Heritage (FARO), the Social and Cultural Food Studies (FOST) research group at the University of Brussels (VUB) and the Interfaculty Centre for Agrarian History (ICAG) at KU Leuven for their support of the international conference.

All the authors and editors are obliged to the English-language editor Sophia Kleinsasser, who managed to untangle our sometimes overly complex or unclear sentences into readable texts.



**Figure 1.** Andrei Filippov, *The Last Supper*.

Photo taken by Albena Shkodrova at an exhibition at the Centre Pompidou in 2017.

The selective quality of historical memory, its capacity to forget while remembering, has shaken the idea of history-writing as an innocent occupation in our growingly reflective societies. Contestations over historical narratives have been taking place in all corners of Europe, and the communist past of Eastern Europe creates particular tension. Leaving with bitterness the communist period, many countries from the former Soviet bloc struggled to achieve a balanced form of democracy. Some of them continue to do so – the contemporary popularity of Orban in Hungary and Kaczynski in Poland could further be viewed as a revolt against constitutional liberalism.<sup>1</sup>

The crude version of the market economy into which these societies were plunged in the post-communist years pushed many social groups to look back at the recent past, seeking to reassess interpretations within early post-communist historiography. In this process, they had little to build on besides rising levels of nostalgia: the regimes of the Eastern bloc had rewritten their national histories under the guiding and watchful eye of the Soviet authorities, thereby producing narratives strongly informed by the ideological agenda of the period.<sup>2</sup> With the pre-communist past reinvented and the data from the period disputable, in the 1990s historians faced (once again) the challenging task of thoroughly reconsidering the twentieth century.

At first, in the aftermath of the Cold War, social studies were overwhelmingly focused on political and economic history from above, examining the clash between communist ideology and its critics. As a reaction to it, from the late 1990s, scholarly interest in the cultural and political history of communist everyday life grew. Considering that communist states directly interfered in individuals' lives, early on in the new century many scholars discovered the potential of everyday life studies to construct a more nuanced interpretation of the past. In order to decipher how such ideological order coexisted with the messiness of everyday life, they researched many themes: from the experience of concentration camps to communist attempts to instrumentalize luxury, fashion and the early pleasures of tourism.

As consumption was considered to be a particularly weak spot, one largely responsible for the collapse of the communist world, it quickly became a principal line of research. From an analysis of shortages, it soon expanded to cover the modernization of communist everyday life and the creation of the communist consumer: restricted, instructed and negotiating routines between ideology, necessity and everything that was able to emerge in between.

One of the early focuses for sociologists, anthropologists and historians concerned the alternative networks of exchange which citizens created to overcome shortages and find unofficial ways to obtain goods and services, and to achieve status. This research delivered insights into issues such as how to conceptualize the routine sort of corruption with which communist societies

---

1 Ivan KRASSTEV, *After Europe* (Philadelphia, 2017), p. 81.

2 Stefan BERGER with Christoph CONRAD, *The Past as History: National Identity and Historical Consciousness in Modern Europe* (London, 2014), pp. 312-14.

were ridden – Alena Ledeneva, for example, argued that *blat*, as the alternative network of exchange was called in Russia, was integrated into society to the extent that it disabled the differentiation between friendship and the use of friendship.<sup>3</sup> This theme also allowed scholars to consider the evolution of late socialism as a concealed and adapted form of market economy.<sup>4</sup>

Over the last two decades, a large body of communist consumption research has discussed the nature of communist-style modernization and the popular, material culture that it produced. Considering the Soviet modernization goals, Susan Buck-Morss argued that East and West were chasing essentially the same utopia, the same ideals of mass culture.<sup>5</sup> The influential work of Jukka Gronow revealed how Stalin strategically planned to deliver luxury to the masses.<sup>6</sup> The impact of US consumer practices and technologies on communist Europe at the start of the Thaw was addressed in an exceptional pan-European perspective in the volume *Cold War Kitchen*, edited by Ruth Oldenziel and Karin Zachman.<sup>7</sup> More recently, several volumes of essays on Russia,<sup>8</sup> Eastern Europe<sup>9</sup> and Yugoslavia<sup>10</sup> have been published, contributing to a lively debate on the various aspects of consumption, the limits of ideology and the freedoms and agency taken by subjects of the communist state. The line of research on consumption was further developed by studying the pleasures of communist times – indulging in the oxymoronic tinges of such a formulation of the topic are the volumes by David Crowley and Susan E. Reid,<sup>11</sup> and as well as by Cathleen Giustino, Catherine Plum and Alexander Vari.<sup>12</sup> Tourism, fashion and free time were also researched and offer different insights into the complex world of communist consumption.

Looking into the perspectives “from below”, scholars have used everyday life to see with fresh eyes the challenging issues of how individuality was

- 
- 3 Alena LEDENEVA, “From Russia with Blat: Can Informal Networks Help Modernize Russia?”, *Social Research*, vol. 76, no. 1 (2009), p. 258; also Larissa Adler LOMNITZ, “Informal Exchange Networks in Formal Systems: A Theoretical Model”, *American Anthropologist*, n.s., vol. 90, no. 1 (1988), pp. 42-55.
  - 4 Deyan DEYANOV, “Третите мрежи” [The Third Networks], in *Kritika i humanizam* (Sofia, 1992); Ivan CHALUKOV, “Социализмът като общество на мрежите и проблемът за икономическото развитие” [Socialism as a Society of Networks and the Problem of Economic Development], *СОЦИОЛОГИЧЕСКИ ПРОБЛЕМИ* [*Sociological Problems*], no. 1-2 (2003), pp. 106-30, amongst others.
  - 5 Susan BUCK-MORSS, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 7.
  - 6 Jukka GRONOW, *Caviar with Champagne: Common Luxury and the Ideals of the Good Life in Stalin's Russia* (Oxford, 2003).
  - 7 Ruth OLDENZIEL, Karin ZACHMAN (eds), *Cold War Kitchen: Americanization, Technology, and European Users* (Cambridge, 2009).
  - 8 Choi CHATTERJEE et al., *Everyday Life in Russia: Past and Present* (Bloomington, 2015).
  - 9 Paulina BREN, Mary NEUBURGER (eds), *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe* (Oxford, 2012).
  - 10 Breda LUTHAR, Maruša PUŠNIK, *Remembering Utopia: The Culture of Everyday Life in Socialist Yugoslavia* (Washington, 2010).
  - 11 David CROWLEY, Susan E. REID, *Pleasures in Socialism: Leisure and Luxury in the Eastern Bloc* (Evanston, 2010).
  - 12 Alexander VARI, “Escaping the Monotony of Everyday Life Under Socialism”, in Cathleen GIUSTINO, Catherine PLUM and Alexander VARI (eds), *Socialist Escapes: Breaking Away from Ideology and Everyday Routine in Eastern Europe, 1945-1989* (New York, Oxford, 2013), pp. 1-26.

constructed in a world nominally designed to be collective;<sup>13</sup> if and how privacy was conceptualized; how the sense of morality was shaped and what it consisted of;<sup>14</sup> how ideology was internalized and reworked in people's everyday lives;<sup>15</sup> and how society developed alternative networks not only for material but also emotional support.

## The lens of food in European communism studies

In this quest, cultural and historical studies of food have played a significant role. Considerable attention was paid to the use of food for political purposes and its role as a **carrier of ideological messages** to direct everyday practices, gender roles and the nature and environment of domesticity. Gronow showed how Stalin pushed through irrational investments in the production of vodka and champagne in order to convince Soviet citizens of the material success of the consolidating multinational state. Paradoxically, this move legitimized the consumption ideals of pre-Soviet times, whose denial the new state had been constructed upon. The situation was also an early manifestation of the challenge communism faced in bringing together the ideology of austerity and the ideal of material well-being.

Research on the political use of food has also focused on **ideology in cookbooks**. It has investigated how modernizing lifestyles were conceptualized and how they evolved, projected on the ideal citizen and his/her nutrition. These aspects of Stalin's rule were examined through the Soviet cookbooks, published between the 1930s and 1950s, which, according to Gronow and Zhuravlyev, outlined the vision of a new communist citizen "with greater needs and capabilities"<sup>16</sup> and the possibility of a new, industry-based Soviet haute cuisine. In the same vein, Edward Geist observed how the Soviet vision of modernity in foodways, as visible in the *Book of Tasty and Healthy Food*, was in fact a fusion of American industrial models, pre-Soviet, bourgeois Russian cuisine and nutrition science.<sup>17</sup> Wendy Bracewell identified cookbooks as "the quintessential example of a prescriptive text for the potential consumer", and noted that, in their own way, they simultaneously created consumption expectations which the state could

- 
- 13 Larisa HONEY, "Pluralizing Practices in Late-Socialist Moscow: Russian Alternative Practitioners Reclaim and Redefine Individualism", in Neringa KLUMBYTE, Gulnaz SHARAFUTDINOVA (eds), *Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964-1985* (Lanham, 2012), pp. 117-42.
  - 14 Neringa KLUMBYTE, "Soviet Ethical Citizenship: Morality, the State, and Laughter in Late Soviet Lithuania", in Paulina BREN, Mary NEUBURGER (eds), *Communism Unwrapped ...*, pp. 91-116; Alexei YURCHAK, *Everything Was Forever Until It Was No More* (Princeton, 2006).
  - 15 Christina KIAER, Eric NAIMAN, *Everyday Life in Early Soviet Russia: Taking the Revolution Inside* (Bloomington, 2006).
  - 16 Jukka GRONOW, Sergey ZHURAVLYEV, "The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food. The Establishment of Soviet Haute Cuisine", in Jeremy STRONG (ed.), *Educated Tastes* (Lincoln, 2011), pp. 24-56, p. 24.
  - 17 Edward GEIST, "Cooking Bolshevik: Anastas Mikoian and the Making of the Book about Delicious and Healthy Food", *The Russian Review*, vol. 71, no. 2 (2012), pp. 295-313.

not meet. Her research on culinary advice in Tito's Yugoslavia demonstrates how communist regimes ended up trapped in their great juggernaut of consumption.<sup>18</sup>

Cookbook research illustrates how communist regimes tried to raise a controlled, restrained, ideologically customized consumer.<sup>19</sup> Such studies across the communist bloc also show that even if the main ideological discourses were taken from, and often controlled by, Moscow, at a national level they evolved in their own ways, sometimes adhering to the early ideology more than those in the USSR. One such close look has suggested that the renegotiation of dominant discourses produced inconsistencies and that the ideology was mended to bridge the gaps which had opened between the basic tenets of communist teaching, evolving propagandist discourses and actual practice.<sup>20</sup>

Cultural food studies have proved particularly useful for research on the modelling of **gender roles**. Almost three decades ago, sociologist Marjorie de Vault argued that the work surrounding food preparation defines the family,<sup>21</sup> pointing to how women's relationship with food fundamentally shapes gender roles. The anthropologist Carole Counihan broadened this understanding. Surveying bread preparation in Sardinia and gender-making in mid-twentieth-century Florence, she concluded that domestic cooking is both imposed on women and empowers them. She observed that women who refocused their efforts from domestic to public success developed ambiguous attitudes and experienced their reduced involvement in home cooking as a loss.<sup>22</sup> Such insights raise interesting questions regarding the ways in which women experienced communism, the ideology and practice of which pushed them both away from and towards traditional food practices.

Notwithstanding this demonstrated potential, food studies have rarely been used in research of gender under communism – even if gender has been a central topic of scholarly research. For example, in an entire, recent volume specifically dedicated to gender politics and everyday life in communist Eastern and Central Europe, which offers a rich spectrum of perspectives on housing, reproduction, work and even domestic violence, not a single chapter was dedicated to how

---

18 Wendy BRACEWELL, "Eating up Yugoslavia. Cookbooks and Consumption in Socialist Yugoslavia", in Paulina BREN, Mary NEUBERGER (eds), *Communism Unwrapped ...*, pp. 169-96.

19 Edward GEIST, "Cooking Bolshevik ..."; Jukka GRONOW, Sergey ZHURAVLYEV, "The Book of Tasty and Healthy Food ..."; Ivan ELENKOV, "Идеологически послания към всекидневието на 60-те години на XX век през погледа и паметта за дребните неща" [Ideological Messages on Everyday Life of the 1960s through the Perspective and Memory of Little Things], *СОЦИОЛОГИЧЕСКИ ПРОБЛЕМИ [Sociological Problems]*, vol. 3-4 (2011), pp. 136-47.

20 Albena SHKODROVA, "From Duty to Pleasure in the Cookbooks of Communist Bulgaria: Attitudes to Food in the Culinary Literature for Domestic Cooking Released by the State-Run Publishers between 1949 and 1989", *Food, Culture & Society*, vol. 21, no. 4 (2018), pp. 468-87. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15528014.2018.1480647>

21 Marjorie DEVAULT, *Feeding the Family: The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work* (Chicago, 1991).

22 Carole COUNIHAN, "Food, Power, and Female Identity in Contemporary Florence", *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power* (New York, 1999).

gender was constructed or negotiated by women in regard to family foodways.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, it seems paradoxical that so little literature on this exists. The profiling of women as workers and fluctuating efforts to reduce their household chores via public catering or advanced cooking equipment (which never materialized) have been investigated in Russia under Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev<sup>24</sup> and in Zhivkov's Bulgaria.<sup>25</sup>

Official discourses on women's role in food preparation have been addressed in the above-mentioned studies of cookbooks as well as in the small body of research on communist public catering strategies. But the agency of women in defining their own roles in communist Eastern Europe has rarely been discussed. One exception is a study on how scarcity of food products in Romania, however burdensome, diminished the disparity between gender roles and added creativity and pride to the home-cooking process.<sup>26</sup> Additionally, three recent studies of alternative recipe collections and cookery scrapbooks in communist Bulgaria<sup>27</sup> and Russia<sup>28</sup> demonstrated how complex the meanings of home cooking were to women in their everyday negotiations of the system.

A very recent addition is *Seasoned Socialism*, a collection of articles focusing heavily on gender constructions around food procurement and preparation in the late Soviet Union.<sup>29</sup> Investigating Soviet dacha life, anthropologist Melissa Caldwell provided a closeup of alternative food procurement practices that were, by nature, gendered.<sup>30</sup> An important contribution made by *Seasoned Socialism* is its attention to male experiences in regard to food procurement – a perspective little addressed not only by communist food studies but by cultural histories of food in general.

One aspect of communist modernization – related to the construction of both the ideal woman and the correct communist consumer – was the development of the **public catering system**. In cultural studies, the establishment of canteen

23 Shana PENN, Jill MASSINO, *Gender Politics and Everyday Life in State Socialist Eastern and Central Europe* (New York, 2009).

24 Ibid.; Susan E. REID, "Cold War in the Kitchen: Gender and the De-Stalinization of Consumer Taste in the Soviet Union under Khrushchev", *Slavic Review*, vol. 61, no. 2 (2002), pp. 211-52.

25 Albena SHKODROVA, "Home Cooking from a 'Slavery' to a 'Right'. The Impact of State Socialist Feminism on Domestic Cooking Practices in Bulgaria", *Food & History*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2019), pp. 115-37 <https://doi.org/10.1484/J.FOOD.5.117098>

26 Jill MASSINO, "From Black Caviar to Blackouts. Gender, Consumption, and Lifestyle in Ceausescu's Romania", in Paulina BREN, Mary NEUBERGER (eds), *Communism Unwrapped ...*, pp. 226-49.

27 Albena SHKODROVA, *Соц гурме [Soc Gourmet]* (Plovdiv, 2014); Albena SHKODROVA, "Home Cooking ..."; Maria PIROGOVSKAYA, "Taste of Trust: Documenting Solidarity in Soviet Private Cookbooks, 1950-1980s", *Journal of Modern European History*, vol. 15, no. 3 (2017), pp. 330-49 <https://doi.org/10.17104/1611-8944-2017-3-330>; Anastasia LAKHTIKOVA, "Professional Women Cooking: Soviet Manuscript Cookbooks, Social Networks, and Identity Building", in Anastasia LAKHTIKOVA, Angela BRINTLINGER, Irina GLUSCHENKO (eds), *Seasoned Socialism. Gender & Food in Late Soviet Everyday Life* (Bloomington, 2019), pp. 80-110.

28 Albena SHKODROVA, "Home Cooking ...".

29 Anastasia LAKHTIKOVA et al., *Seasoned Socialism ...*

30 Melissa L. CALDWELL, "Dacha Labors: Preserving Everyday Soviet Life", in Anastasia LAKHTIKOVA, Angela BRINTLINGER, Irina GLUSCHENKO (eds), *Seasoned Socialism ...*, pp. 165-92.

culture in Europe starting in the nineteenth century has delivered important insights into how the rationalization of foodways ran in parallel to the rationalization of work. The establishment of canteens in large German factories in the nineteenth century followed a pattern that was quite literally borrowed by the Soviet and then Eastern European communist regimes. There are indications that there was a flow of ideas on public nutrition, probably a mutual one, between capitalist and communist industrialization developments, but these have not yet been studied. Quite to the contrary, the link between German industrialists' ideas for providing good nutrition to workers in order to ensure their efficiency by investing in canteens and later by introducing culture and entertainment<sup>31</sup> have never been compared in a study with the same reasoning in the Eastern bloc. The latter has been interpreted by scholars exclusively as a revolutionary denial of the past (for example, by Borrero, among many others),<sup>32</sup> which is how the communist ideology preferred to present it.

The communist strategies for public catering and their mutations in Yugoslavia were researched by Slobodan Selinić. He explored the documented twentieth-century growth of the canteen network across the various republics and provided evidence of the states' efforts to organize modern public nutrition based on scientifically established standards. His article argues that the state of the canteens, including discrepancies in their numbers across the republics, reflected the development disparity between areas of the federation.<sup>33</sup>

My own research on communist strategies to expand the canteen network and the recollections of their users' experiences has delivered a confirmation of the period's social stratification and another illustration of the inability of the communist state to bring together strategy and practice. The formation of hierarchies, which expressed divisions in the nominally egalitarian society, clearly stood out in the memories of contemporaries. Numerous oral and written sources demonstrate the lack of coordination between the comprehensive strategies for nutrition and actual cooking, which was shaped by shortages, incompetence and systemic faults, rendering any attempt at control futile.<sup>34</sup>

While the existing research on the topic registers multiple faults on many levels, it also suggests that the states critically monitored the process and, on a strategic level, tried to improve the canteens' performance and adapt to what state-employed strategists considered proper nutrition requirements and practices. The historiography confirms that food was seen as an organic part of

31 Ulrike THOMS, "Industrial canteens in Germany, 1850-1950", in Marc JACOBS, Peter SCHOLLIERS (eds), *Eating Out in Europe* (Oxford, 2003), pp. 351-72.

32 Mauricio BORRERO, "Communal Dining and State Cafeterias in Moscow and Petrograd, 1917-1921", in Musya GLANTS, Joyce TOOMRE (eds), *Food in Russian History and Culture* (Bloomington, 1997), pp. 162-76.

33 Slobodan SELINIĆ, "Друштвена исхрана у Југославији 1945-1950" [Public Catering in Yugoslavia 1945-1950], *Chasopis Arhiva Srbije i Crne Gore* [Archives of Serbia and Montenegro], vols 1-2 (2008), pp. 59-69.

34 Albena SHKODROVA, *Soc Gourmet...*, pp. 235-44.



the entire modernization project, instrumental to the creation of an economically efficient society organized upon communist principles. It suggests that the ideology-based strategies were reconsidered and adapted to the unfolding economic reality which the communist systems produced. As one example, Mary Neuberger observed how the Bulgarian regime struggled to showcase the idea of the good life under communism in the restaurants constructed on the Black Sea coast to cater for foreign tourists. She concluded that they were both trying to shape Bulgarian modernity and exhibiting its problems, such as shortages and management limitations.<sup>35</sup>

The way **food scarcities** were defined, and the way they themselves defined the nature of communist modernity, have also become the subject of investigation. Narcis Tilbure, for example, showed how the informal networks of goods' exchange in Romania resulted in the development of drinking and smoking rituals of these exchanged goods, often stolen from the state, and how these rituals grew to be associated with masculinity and masculine success.<sup>36</sup> Malgorzata Mazurek also observed how scarcity of food and other goods influenced the morality of Polish society, rendering the quality of resourcefulness a virtue, one related to diligence and creativity, as a family defence.<sup>37</sup> Katherine Pence focused differently, investigating how GDR citizens coped with the deficits of coffee, and her research suggested that this shortage made the contrasts with West Germany more palpable and obvious, fuelling direct confrontations between consumers and the regime.<sup>38</sup>

Given that shortages are considered a central evidence of the communist systems' failure, it is puzzling that no systematic research has yet been done on what they consisted of in any of the former communist countries. Some research has been done on different changes in consumption and the replacement of certain products with others. Maja Godina Golija<sup>39</sup> and Martin Franc<sup>40</sup> both observed that meat lost its status as a festive ingredient and became part of the everyday menu, as it was considered central to good nutrition and hence one of the markers of successful development in the communist lands.

- 
- 35 Mary NEUBURGER, "Dining in Utopia: A Taste of the Bulgarian Black Sea Coast under Socialism", *Gastronomica: The Journal of Critical Food Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4 (2017), pp. 48-60, <https://doi.org/10.1525/gfc.2017.17.4.48>.
- 36 Narcis TILBURE, "Drink, Leisure, and the Second Economy in Socialist Romania", in Paulina BREN, Mary NEUBERGER (eds), *Communism Unwrapped...*, pp. 259-81.
- 37 Malgorzata MAZUREK, "Keeping It Close to Home. Resourcefulness and Scarcity in Late Socialist and Postsocialist Poland", in Paulina BREN, Mary NEUBERGER (eds), *Communism Unwrapped...*, pp. 298-320.
- 38 Katherine PENCE, "Grounds for Discontent? Coffee from the Black Market to the *Kaffeeklatsch* in the GDR", in Paulina BREN, Mary NEUBURGER (eds), *Communism Unwrapped...*, pp. 197-225.
- 39 Maja GODINA GOLIJAJA, "Hrana in praznovanja. Meso in mesne jedi v prazničnih jedilnih obrokih na Slovenskem" [Food and Festivals: Meat and Meat Dishes in the Festive Meals in Slovenia], *Etnolog [Ethnologist]*, vol. 75 (2014), pp. 59-79.
- 40 Martin FRANC, *Rasy, nebo knedlíky?: postoje odborníků na výživu k inovacím a tradicím v české stravě v 50. a 60. letech 20. Století [Race or dumplings? Attitudes of nutritionists to innovation and tradition in the Czech diet in the 1950s and 1960s]* (Prague, 2013).

The specific distribution of food within centralized economies via official channels and alternative exchange networks has also been viewed as exposing the stratification of communist societies, egalitarian though they were in ideology. The issue has been discussed by many, including Gronow,<sup>41</sup> and a particularly interesting comparative perspective was also made between the communist states of the USSR and the People's Republic of China by Xueguang Zhou and Olga Suhomlinova.<sup>42</sup>

Lately, food has come into focus as an instrument to solidify the socially constructed **notion of nationhood** – one of the central issues in studies of communism. The role of nationalism in “making” and “unmaking” the communist bloc has been actively debated in recent years, and there seems to be no agreement on the matter.<sup>43</sup> Food can be a very insightful key to explaining the issue; but at the same time, it has not been properly exploited to find the answer.

How cookbooks give shape to the concept of national cuisine was perhaps first researched by Priscilla Ferguson, Arjun Appadurai and Massimo Montanari.<sup>44</sup> Building upon solid research on the link between food and identity, Atsuko Ichijo and Ronald Ranta investigated the attribution of national identity to food on several levels: they argued that the notion of national cuisine reinforces the idea “that the world is meaningfully divided into nations”.<sup>45</sup> The issue of national identity under communism is a particularly interesting one, as it was seen to clash in many ways with communist internationalism.

Still, food has been very seldom used to obtain insights into the process – two of the rare exceptions being Irina Glushchenko's research on the forging of Soviet cuisine<sup>46</sup> and Astra Spalvena's study of gastronomical exchange within the Soviet Union in Latvia.<sup>47</sup> Particularly interesting in this sense is Franc's investigation which explored the impact of other socialist cuisines on foodways

---

41 Yukka GRONOW, *Caviar ...*, p. 123.

42 Xueguang ZHOU, Olga SUHOMLINOVA, “Redistribution under State Socialism: A USSR and PRC Comparison”, *Research in Social Stratification and Mobility*, vol. 18 (2001), pp. 163-204, [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0276-5624\(01\)80026-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0276-5624(01)80026-3).

43 Walter A. KEMP, *Nationalism and Communism in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union: A Basic Contradiction?* (New York, 1999); Mark R. BEISSINGER, “Nationalism and the Collapse of Soviet Communism”, *Contemporary European History*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2009), p. 331, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0960777309005074>.

44 Arjun APPADURAI, “How to make national cuisine: Cookbooks in contemporary India”, *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, vol. 30, no. 1 (1988), pp. 3-24; Massimo MONTANARI, *Food is Culture* (New York, 2004); Priscilla Parkhurst FERGUSON, *Accounting for Taste: The Triumph of French Cuisine* (Chicago, 2006).

45 Atsuko ICHIJO, Ronald RANTA, *Food, National Identity and Nationalism* (London, 2016), p. 170, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137483133>.

46 Irina GLUSHCHENKO, “Идеальный шашлык: Интеграции различных кулинарных практик в советскую кухню в период индустриализации (1930-50-е годы)” [The Ideal Shashlik. Integration of various culinary practices in Soviet cuisine in the period of industrialization (1930-1950)], in Franz NORBERT, Nina FRIEß (eds), *Küche und Kultur in der Slavia: eigenes und Fremdes im ausgehenden 20. Jahrhundert* (Potsdam, 2015), pp. 109-30.

47 Astra SPALVENA, “Gastronomical Exchange in Soviet Cuisine: On the Example of Latvia”, *Proceedings of the 21th International Ethnological Food Research Conference* (Frankfurt am Main, 2017).

in Czechoslovakia.<sup>48</sup> He argued that the practical proximity of Western cuisines was seriously contested by the flows of communist tourism, which circulated almost exclusively within the communist bloc. My own investigation of the incorporation of “Russian salad” (known in Russia as “Olivier”) in Bulgaria’s foodways illustrated the fluidity of the notion of nationhood and its ability to escape prescriptive ideological orders.<sup>49</sup> However insightful, this research has only provided a taste of how efficient food studies could be in revealing how ideologies intended to design everyday life were translated into reality.

In general, food under communism remains heavily understudied. As things stand, there is a significant body of research on communist food in Soviet Russia, and the GDR has also been quite extensively explored, but studies on the rest of Eastern Europe are rudimentary. Not only does the potential of food studies remain unexploited, but the scholarly analysis of food during communism remains patchwork, random and confined to isolated clusters.

One of the reasons is that the science has been quite systematically neglected in many post-communist countries in general, resulting in a scarcity of national studies and impeding the dissemination of results. The latter is challenged even further by the multiplicity of languages, preventing much of the research from leaving national borders. Additionally, available EU support has been used with varying success across Europe, leaving most Eastern European countries among those, gaining the least amount of funds for scientific research.<sup>50</sup>

In comparison to the national perspectives, the potential regional ones have been even less explored. This gap is enormous, considering that the exchange of food and cuisines within the communist bloc was structurally facilitated and actively practised by means of exchanging culinary advice, intensively trading food between the countries, and importantly, active tourism within the communist bloc. Finally, the East-West perspective has been as good as absent; the membership of Eastern European states in the European Union seems to have melted the last residues of interest. Ever since, Europe seems to have plunged into either national, or global, but hardly ever regional or cross-cultural research, especially when it comes to everyday life.

## The contributions to this dossier

In April 2018 we organized an international conference in Brussels which was intended to bring together, in its own right, the scattered research on food and

48 Martin FRANC, “Fraternal Cuisine: Czech Society and Culinary Transfer from the USSR and Other Countries of the Soviet Bloc, 1948-89”, *Soudobé Dějiny [Contemporary History]*, vol. 3 (2017), pp. 312-34.

49 Albená SHKODROVA. “Investigating the History of Meanings of a Dish. An Enactivist Approach to the Life of the Russian Salad in 20th Century Bulgaria”, *Volkskunde*, no. 3 (2018), pp. 343-64.

50 European Commission DG RESEARCH AND INNOVATION, *Horizon 2020 in Full Swing. Key Facts and Figures 2014-2016* (Brussels, 2018), p. 29, <https://doi.org/10.2777/316104>. According to EU statistics, Bulgaria, Poland and Lithuania receive less than a quarter of the average for member countries’ EU contributions; the Czech Republic, Romania, Slovakia, Croatia and Hungary receive less than half. Only Lithuania, Slovenia and Estonia reach the average level or higher.

drink under communism, and to encourage studies which would bridge the national research within a greater map of the lands east of the Iron Curtain. As a result, we collected fine-grained research on a variety of themes, contributing to contemporary debates in communism studies and opening or deepening existing themes in historical and cultural food studies.

**Nancy Nilgen's** fine investigation into the negotiation between publishers and readers which drove the publication of cookbooks in the GDR opens important perspectives towards the agency of consumers under communism – a direction of research whose importance Susan Reid, Alexei Yurchak and many other scholars have emphasized.<sup>51</sup> An article which similarly detaches scholarly research from the categories of the Cold War was contributed by **Mircea-Lucian Scrob**. He explores the consumption of bread in Romanian communist villages and convincingly shows that the mid-twentieth-century Eastern European history of food consumption should not be reduced to a history of shortages and should take into account the specifics of communist modernization. Revealing how the traditional corn-flour *mamaliga* was replaced by industrially produced bread, Scrob offers insights into the restructuring of everyday life hierarchies. In this way, he continues the line of investigation led by researchers like Franc or Godina-Golija. His work confirms Bren and Neuburger's point that it is also worth considering the region's history in ways other than those defined by "Western narratives of the consumer experience" (although the question remains of how far it is possible to completely ignore them).<sup>52</sup>

Three articles in this dossier focus on the nutrition ideologies and infrastructures developed under communism – in the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria. Anthropologist **Melissa Caldwell** takes a very innovative look at nutrition ideologies, exploring the idea of bio-nationhood. Opening a historical perspective back to the early eighteenth century, she outlines long-standing attempts to forge unity based on incorporated food and drink. Social reformers' ideas of the nutritional and digestive health of subjects/citizens as constitutive of national (Imperial, then Soviet) identities, were found by Caldwell to perpetuate in contemporary Russia. Her research originally identifies the continuity between nineteenth-century understandings of the social and political as related to (territorially grounded) diets, the communist idea that personal nutrition is by no means a private matter and the contemporary perception of the potential of human guts to express "both geopolitical and microbial territoriality". Her contribution is also in linking developments under Soviet communism with the internal logic of older Russian history, as opposed to only with models borrowed from the West.

**Martin Franc** takes a closer look at the dominant nutritional ideas typical of Eastern European communist regimes, showing the power struggle around a seemingly monolithic discourse. His research reveals how a few experts held

51 Susan E. REID, "Cold War in the Kitchen..."; Alexei YURCHAK, *Everything Was Forever...*

52 Paulina BREN, Mary NEUBURGER, "Introduction", in Paulina BREN, Mary NEUBURGER, (eds), *Communism Unwrapped...*, pp. 6-7.

exclusive authority over formulating positions on rational nutrition – a fiercely guarded territory – preventing any possible polyphony of expert opinions. On the other hand, mostly behind the scenes, their ideas were constantly disputed and ignored by food technologists and other food production professionals and their political supporters. The study, which covers the Czech lands, shows that inconsistencies between these specific ideological lines and their application were the result not only of failures in the system but also of the inconsistency of its design.

**Stefan Detchev's** investigation into the canteen network in communist Bulgaria similarly shows how the practice deviated from its original ideas. Concentrating on the specific domesticated model of using a public catering network to modernize the population's foodways, he shows how strategists promoted ideals beyond the reach of the population, whose menu remained dominated by bread and broad beans. While state-owned organizations created some relatively sophisticated restaurants, these remained inaccessible to common Bulgarians. The disparities Detchev finds, though, are not one-way. His article also shows that the rise of a new consumer culture in the 1970s and 1980s rendered the quality of catering provided by the public network inadequate.

Post-communist and contemporary strategies for rethinking the communist past are addressed in the articles by **Anu Kannike** and **Ester Bardone** on Estonia and **Alex Condrache** on Romania. Together, they outline well the attitudes of different generations from the vantage point of our times. Making use of the ethnographic collection of the Estonian National Museum, which preserves 92 written answers to the questionnaire "Food Culture in the Soviet Time" (2002-04), Kannike and Bardone demonstrate the ambivalence of older generations towards the past and define their attitudes as "post-colonialist". Albeit speaking rather positively about everyday life under communism, the respondents to the questionnaire also employed strategies to justify their participation in the common abuse of state resources by trying to distance themselves from the Soviet order. While Estonia's earlier agriculture was destroyed by the Soviet Union, respondents associated their private foodways from the period with pre-industrial farm production, emphasizing the paradoxes of communist industrialization. Condrache's article, in contrast, focuses on newer discourses of recollecting the communist past which refer to the younger generations. Analysing newly constituted humorous narratives touching on food-related memories from the communist period, he concludes that this specific form of nostalgia, which is still developing today, is made possible by an ironic reading of communist everyday life. Questioning any type of dogmatism in the recollections of the period, this new attitude is a sign of an unsettled past (and one, still unsettling to many).

This special issue of *Food & History* illustrates the strong potential of food studies to address the key open debates on communism. As an intersection point between economics, politics and culture, and between the production and consumption of food, people's foodways offer profound insights into this historical period. They urge scholars to seek more holistic, less simplifying explanations of social practices and orders that acknowledge the role of the human body. In a

certain sense, cultural food history is by default more humanistic than the political and economic enquiries that have dominated historiography in the last few centuries. Because of this quality, food is a particularly useful lens through which to look at Eastern European communism beyond its overexploited dichotomies.

The contributions to this dossier are grouped around the themes of modernization and memory; these show the fluidity and complexity of the social matter behind what sometimes are interpreted as monolithic ideologies. They also reveal the nuances with which different nations have domesticated these ideologies. The three different takes on state nutrition discourses and practices show not only the multiple perspectives such investigations can open but also the variety of ways in which ideological teaching (and here I mean “ideology” very broadly) takes shape, embedded in different historical backgrounds and contemporary cultures.

The research confirms, on the one hand, Yurchak’s argument that dichotomies are not sufficient to explain everyday life experiences in communist Europe. But it also indicates that, in general, a less reductive approach is needed, one that can accommodate contrasting experiences and not give priority to one perspective over another. Such an approach does not simplify or strive for generalizations but acknowledges the complexity of everyday life and its tendency to escape uniformity, even in highly controlled systems. The articles presented also show that the dichotomies which often formed the basis of everyday sense-making were part of this complexity and should not go ignored or underestimated.