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Slavonic and East European Review, Volume 101, Number 3, July 2023,  
pp. 486-514 (Article)

Published by Modern Humanities Research Association

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/see.2023.a912468>

SLAVONIC &  
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REVIEW



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# The Strange Case of the Disappearing Soviet Waiter

DIANE P. KOENKER

THIS article was inspired by my own experience of dining out in Intourist restaurants in the 1970s, where the waiters disappeared after serving the last course, and it seemed impossible to get a bill and to pay; or a whole line-up of tuxedoed waiters could be seen ‘propping up the wall’ at the back of the half-empty dining room, with no interest in attending to their customers. My research on Soviet consumer culture and the service sector has led me to realize that my foreigner’s experience was hardly unique, and it was not simply due to a Soviet contempt for capitalist tourists. Take the example of a trio of customers at the Moscow Volga restaurant in May 1957. Hoping to have dinner, they sat at an uncleared table for fifteen minutes before anyone appeared to remove the dirty dishes; it was another hour before a waiter took their order, and their food came only forty minutes later. ‘And we want to note, that all this time while we were not being served, the waiters were sitting and calmly conversing among themselves.’<sup>1</sup> Numerous cartoons in *Krokodil’* confirmed the stereotype of the neglected Soviet restaurant patron.<sup>2</sup> Bad restaurant service is the theme of El’dar Riazanov’s 1965 satiric comedy, *Daite zhalobnuiu knigu* (Give me the Complaint Book).<sup>3</sup> Soviet officials acknowledged the problem in their own closed deliberations. Many of the staff in restaurants and cafeterias

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Earlier versions of this article were presented at the 2018 convention of the Association for Slavic, East European and Eurasian Studies in Boston, Massachusetts, at the University of Tallinn and in the SSEES Interdisciplinary Research Workshop. I am grateful to all discussants and participants for their helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup> Tsentral’nyi arkhiv goroda Moskvyy (hereafter, TsAGM), f. 224 (Moscow Restaurant Trust), op. 1, d. 108, l. 21.

<sup>2</sup> For example, *Krokodil’*, 8 (20 March 1965), p. 5; *Krokodil’*, 11 (20 April 1965), p. 7; *Krokodil’*, 11 (20 April 1965), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Daite zhalobnuiu knigu* (dir. El’dar Riazanov, Mosfil’m, 1965).

were unwelcoming to customers, admitted the chair of the Trade Union of Trade and Public Catering Employees in 1967. ‘There are restaurant patrons who’ve waited an awfully long time without any attention from the serving personnel.’<sup>4</sup>

Why was service in Soviet restaurants so consistently and uniformly bad? Why did waiters refuse to seat customers when their restaurants were half empty, why did meals take an hour to be served, why did waiters short-change their customers when it came time to pay the bill? There are many explanations, some of which surfaced at the time. The poor performance of Soviet waiters mirrored the Soviet economic system as a whole, and perhaps the problem was socialism itself, where the public ownership of the means of reproduction (nourishing the population) provided neither effective incentive systems (carrots) nor plausible methods of discipline (sticks). Finding the right incentives — a perennial problem of the Soviet economy — played a widely discussed role. Appeals to ideology and enthusiasm clearly failed to motivate workers in the restaurant trade. The endemic scarcity of socialist economic systems was readily observed in Soviet restaurants: the public catering sector lacked sufficient food supplies, tables or serving personnel to serve a growing urban population. But the problem goes deeper than the socialist shortage economy. Other explanations were more specific to the sector. Officials bemoaned the quality of the individuals who staffed the public catering sector, who lacked education and motivation. The best and the brightest Soviet youth preferred to work in production or in glamour fields like physics or medicine.<sup>5</sup> Blame also fell on poorly organized workplaces and incompetent or indifferent management. Underlying these observations was the fact that jobs in restaurant service in particular and in service in general were held in very low esteem. It was difficult to attract people to a sector that was so despised. Beyond the endemic issue of shortages, I would argue that the indifference of waiters toward their customers may have been a logical reaction to low esteem and inadequate rewards. It was also a product of socialist job security, which provided an opportunity to exert control over the workplace in defiance of official norms and prescriptions and without risk of dismissal.

<sup>4</sup> Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (hereafter, GARF), f. 5452 (Trade Union of Trade and Public Catering Employees), op. 37, d. 892, l. 55.

<sup>5</sup> V. N. Shubkin (ed.), *Trudiashchaisia molodezh’: obrazovanie, professiia, mobil’nost’*, Moscow, 1984, p. 80. For similar concerns with respect to sales clerks, see Diane P. Koenker, ‘The Smile behind the Sales Counter: Soviet Shop Assistants on the Road to Full Communism,’ *Journal of Social History*, 54, 3, Spring 2021, pp. 872–96.

This article explores the experience of dining out in the Soviet Union of the 1960s, that moment in the consumer history of the USSR in which fulfilling the promises of Communism appeared within reach for the majority urban population of the country. In the century of the cosmos and of atoms, bemoaned another union official, why couldn't the problem of restaurant service be solved?<sup>6</sup> I will examine the role of the restaurant in the dining options of the Soviet urban population, the organization of restaurants, and the culture of service and status of the waitering trade. For reasons of space, I am going to focus on the front of the house, although the failures of the cooks in the kitchen also drew censure and satire. As a waiter in a *Krokodil*' cartoon from 1961 warns, 'If you knew what was awaiting you, you wouldn't ask me to hurry'.<sup>7</sup> I will examine questions of economics and economic reform to investigate how the socialist economic system tried to produce efficient and pleasurable restaurant experiences. Finally, I will attempt to reconstruct the perspective of the Soviet waiter him or herself, to explore how they justified the behaviours decried by officials and customers both domestic and international. This exploration reveals a paradox between competing ideals of the 'good life': one of technologically driven satisfaction of biological needs, and the other of a psychologically rounded balance between work and life, in which the whole person merited respect.

Scholars of post-war socialism have increasingly turned their focus to the question of socialist consumer regimes and whether socialist consumption differed qualitatively from its capitalist counterpart. Under capitalism, theorists argue, consumers purchase goods as much for their sign value — what they convey to others about their status and identities — as for their utility, or use value, inevitably contributing to production and overproduction of goods in order that some might become the 'latest thing'.<sup>8</sup> Rational socialism, however, would avoid this trap of conspicuous consumption through the inculcation of a socialist aesthetic based on utility, simplicity of form and moderate choice. Recent studies of consumer practices in socialist Europe, however, have emphasized that socialist

<sup>6</sup> GARF, f. 5452, op. 37, d. 955, ll. 158–59.

<sup>7</sup> *Krokodil*, 10 (16 June 1961), p. 14. The Soviet restaurant and stolovaia kitchen is a subject of my further research.

<sup>8</sup> Thorstein Veblen, *The Theory of the Leisure Class: An Economic Study of Institutions*, New York, 1899; Mary Douglas and Baron Isherwood, *The World of Goods: Towards an Anthropology of Consumption*, 2nd edn, London, 1996; Frank Trentmann, *The Empire of Things: How We Became a World of Consumers, from the Fifteenth Century to the Twenty-First*, New York, 2016.

consumers too used their purchasing decisions to express their sense of distinction.<sup>9</sup> They also question the argument that socialist regimes only reluctantly supported consumerism as a concession to their materialist subjects. Rather they argue that consumption was a fundamental element of the original socialist promise. It is my contention that in the decade of the 1960s (which I suggest began in 1957), Soviet citizens and government began to act on this promise, exercising choice, establishing schools of taste, seeking to understand and satisfy consumer demand. They did so in a framework of increasing international consciousness, stimulated by the expansion of international tourist travel, and by the publicity given to the cultural exchange of films, literature and the arts.<sup>10</sup> Soviet dining culture was part of this new socialist consumer regime.

### *Dining out in the USSR*

Soviet public catering had originated in the hungry years of the civil war as a way to optimize scarce food supplies. ‘People’s catering’ (*Narpit*) concentrated on provision of noon meals in factory canteens in the 1920s, to ensure labour productivity and economies of scale, but also as a way to permit women to leave their domestic roles and join the ranks of paid labour. For some visionaries, public catering would eventually replace all domestic meal preparation.<sup>11</sup> By the late 1950s, ‘public catering’ (*obshchestvennoe pitanie*) had grown into an institutionalized network of eating places ranging from hole-in-the-wall snack bars or *bufets* with

<sup>9</sup> Paulina Bren and Mary Neuburger (eds), *Communism Unwrapped: Consumption in Cold War Eastern Europe*, Oxford, 2012; Cristofer Scarboro, Diana Mincyte and Zsuzsa Gille (eds), *The Socialist Good Life: Desire, Development, and Standards of Living in Eastern Europe*, Bloomington, IN, 2020; Patrick Hyder Patterson, *Bought and Sold: Living and Losing the Good Life in Socialist Yugoslavia*, Ithaca, NY, 2012; Natalya Chernyshova, *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*, London, 2013; Susan E. Reid, ‘Socialist Modern – This Is Tomorrow! Becoming a Consumer in the Soviet Union’, in Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker (eds), *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World*, Bloomington, IN, 2013, pp. 25–65; Anna Ivanova, *Magaziny ‘Berezka’: paradoksy potrebleniia v pozdnom SSSR*, Moscow, 2018; Anna Ivanova, ‘Rich Hairdressers and Fancy Car Repairmen: The Rise of a Service Worker Elite in the USSR and the Evolution of Soviet Society in the 1970s’, *Journal of Social History*, 56, 4, Summer 2023, pp. 856–81.

<sup>10</sup> Diane P. Koenker, ‘The Taste of Others: Soviet Adventures in Cosmopolitan Cuisines’, *Kritika*, 19, 2, Spring 2018, pp. 243–72. See also, Anne E. Gorsuch, *All This Is Your World: Soviet Tourism at Home and Abroad after Stalin*, Oxford, 2011; Eleanory Gilburd, *To See Paris and Die: The Soviet Lives of Western Culture*, Cambridge, MA, 2018.

<sup>11</sup> In Moscow, the Public Catering Committee was created in February 1918. Mauricio Borrero, *Hungry Moscow: Scarcity and Urban Society in the Russian Civil War*, New York, 2003, p. 150; Irina Glushchenko, *Obshchepit: Mikoian i sovetskaia kukhnia*, Moscow, 2nd edn, 2015, ch. 2; Julie Hessler, *A Social History of Soviet Trade*, Princeton, NJ, 2004, pp. 177–79.

stand-up tables, to snack bars specializing in *pirozhki*, *blini*, *pelmeni* or *shashlyk*, to workplace canteens (*stolovaia*) of varying levels of quality and tone, to youth cafés, and to the pinnacle of the public catering pyramid, the restaurant.<sup>12</sup> If the ice cream café had become newly chic in the urban capitals, the *stolovaia* remained devoted to serving the largest number of patrons in the shortest period of time at the lowest cost. Its standardized offerings and indifferent service became irreparably linked with the word *obshchepit* (public catering) in post-Soviet memory.<sup>13</sup>

The country of ‘cosmos and atoms’ had pledged in the late 1950s to introduce ‘progressive forms’ to the retail trade sector to provide consumers with shopping and dining experiences appropriate to a modern developed society. In the public catering sector, progressive forms of trade included the transfer from table service to self-service in *stolovaia*s, the use of semi-prepared foods in restaurant kitchens, the reorganization of restaurant and *stolovaia* kitchens to provide take-away dishes, and the expansion of restaurant service to cater banquets for work and family celebrations, including jubilees, anniversaries and weddings.<sup>14</sup> In other words, the regime aimed to offer efficiency but also the occasional opportunity for luxury. By 1963, a Moscow official boasted that 90 per cent of its establishments operated on the principle of self-service, and the pages of the industry’s monthly journal, *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, was full of features on the latest technology in cafeteria lines and steam tables.<sup>15</sup> Even more progressive would be the replacement of serving personnel altogether through the expansion of automatic food vending machines. The state planning agency Gosplan had promised in 1960 to produce a half million vending machines by 1965, selling not only carbonated water,

<sup>12</sup> The Moscow restaurant trust, only one of the components of ‘obshchepit’, enumerated thirty-six *restorany*, sixteen *kafe* and *zakusochnye*, twenty-six *stolovii*, 238 *bufety*, nine *avtobufety* and seven *kulinarnii magaziny* in its network in 1958, with the capacity to serve 17,589 people at a time. TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 108, l. 5. These numbers exclude the parallel dining institutions that belonged to organizations and agencies, most famously the restaurants of the Union of Writers and Union of Journalists, and including ‘Professors’ dining rooms’ in universities. See also Lynn and Wesley Fisher, *The Moscow Gourmet: Dining Out in the Capital of the USSR*, Ann Arbor, MI, 1974; Alison K. Smith, *Cabbage and Caviar: A History of Food in Russia*, London, 2021, pp. 258–65; Darra Goldstein, *The Kingdom of Rye: A Brief History of Russian Food*, Berkeley, CA, 2022, pp. 58–62.

<sup>13</sup> Anna Mass, ‘Moskovskoe kafe’, *Smena*, 1, 2, 1968, pp. 8–10. To compare a restaurant to a *stolovaia* was an insult. TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 286, l. 70. On cafés, see also, Gleb Tsipursky, *Socialist Fun: Youth, Consumption, and State-Sponsored Popular Culture in the Soviet Union, 1945–1970*, Pittsburgh, PA, 2016. On the *stolovaia*, see Glushchenko, *Obshchepit*, pp. 184–85.

<sup>14</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 164, ll. 139–40.

<sup>15</sup> GARF, f. 5452, op. 37, d. 482, l. 28.

but flowers, pasteurized milk, bread, salt, sugar, groats and conserves.<sup>16</sup> Already in 1958, the journal *Obshchestvennoe pitanie* was reporting on snack bar automats in Gomel' and Erevan.<sup>17</sup> The waiters' profession was in its last years, mused a journalist in 1965: cybernetics and button-pushing would take over, and customers could just press 'cold appetizers', 'hot dish', 'drinks' and even 'tip'.<sup>18</sup>

Automats aside, promises to consumers also included expansion of the dining-out network. In 1959, the Soviet government threw down its marker for improved consumer life, with a decree that called for the expansion of public catering, to make it mass, convenient and profitable.<sup>19</sup> In 1959 the city of Moscow, the largest in the country, numbered a miserly sixty-four restaurants for its population of six million people, and the Moscow restaurant trust now announced plans to create twenty-three new restaurants between 1959 and 1965.<sup>20</sup> In 1961, the country operated 147,000 public dining enterprises, serving fifteen billion dishes a year. Its goal was to double this number in ten years. The ambitious party programme of 1961 had boasted that by 1980, 80 per cent of all meals would be consumed in public eating places.<sup>21</sup> Most of these new enterprises would be workplace canteens, but expansion plans also included cafés and restaurants.<sup>22</sup> Leningrad public catering officials proudly announced the opening of eighteen new enterprises in time for the fiftieth anniversary of Soviet power in 1967, including the Hotel Sovetskii with a thousand-seat restaurant, two bars, four bufets, a stolovaia and an eighteenth-floor café. The floating restaurant Dolphin opened just in time for the November holiday.<sup>23</sup>

Restaurants would offer Soviet consumers the opportunity for luxury and relaxation on special occasions. In contrast to the midday stolovaia dinner with its limited choice and rapid turnaround, restaurants offered expansive à la carte menus with starters, soup, main courses and dessert,

<sup>16</sup> 'Tsvety v liubuiu minute', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 3 November 1960, p. 2; *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 3, 1959, p. 62; *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 3, 1963, p. 62.

<sup>17</sup> *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 8, 1958, p. 44 (Gomel'); 10, 1958, p. 24 (Erevan).

<sup>18</sup> S. Leonidov, 'Chelovek i professiia. Eto vsegda nuzhno', *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 7, 1965, p. 13.

<sup>19</sup> 'In the Party and Central Committee and the USSR Council of Ministers: On further developing and improving public catering', *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, 11, 9, 1959, pp. 44-45 (orig. *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*, 28 February 1959).

<sup>20</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 163, l. 18.

<sup>21</sup> G. Korovkin, 'Dlia blaga sovetskikh liudei', *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 10, 1961, pp. 4-6.

<sup>22</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 277, l. 50. There were ninety-four restaurants listed in the 1973 *Moskva 1973: Kratkaia adresno-spravochnaia kniga*, Moscow, 1973, pp. 631-33.

<sup>23</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 286, l. 36.



and a rich assortment of beverages. Most employed dance orchestras, and a night out in a restaurant was expected to constitute an entire evening's entertainment.<sup>24</sup> But Soviet restaurant dining had its critics. For some Soviet patriots, restaurants represented a throwback to the discredited NEP era of conspicuous consumption. As A. N. Ershov, the head of Moscow's public catering administration, asked in 1961, 'Do we really need restaurants in our current conditions? Aren't they survivals of an old capitalist society?' In the old days, he reminded his audience, restaurants served as sites of debauchery for the rich.<sup>25</sup> Even in more recent times, 'He goes to restaurants' implied someone who earned money illegally, a *stiliag*.<sup>26</sup> By the 1960s, the restaurant had become increasingly identified as a place for heavy drinking rather than eating. As the state cracked down on alcohol consumption, restaurants became a notorious and popular refuge for drinkers.<sup>27</sup> Throughout the 1960s, the sale of alcohol in restaurants often reached 50 to 75 per cent of the total revenue,<sup>28</sup> and rules against serving more than 100 grams of vodka to a customer were treated as a joke.<sup>29</sup> Restaurants themselves profited by maximizing the sale of alcohol, which required no kitchen labour to produce and not very much to clean up. Waiters especially liked the easy way that serving alcohol boosted the size of the bills and the percentage added for service, and they treated teetotallers with hostility.<sup>30</sup>

The drive for progressive trade and cultured service attempted to replace this reputation with the idea of the restaurant as a destination for leisure and entertainment, a place to celebrate important events in one's life and career, an opportunity to enjoy Soviet luxe. One Korolev, a representative from the Hotel Moskva's restaurant, emphasized in 1968 the special role of Moscow restaurants: not a place where people come simply to eat something quickly and then leave, but a cosy, welcoming space organized for the relaxation of its patrons. It should have a pleasing interior, and its

<sup>24</sup> Confirmed by personal account from a Russian language teacher in Moscow in 1973.

<sup>25</sup> TsAGM, f. 2 (Moscow City Committee of the Trade Union of Trade and Cooperative Employees), op. 2, d. 626, ll. 10–11.

<sup>26</sup> A. Rubinov, 'Siadem za stol!' *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 23 August 1967, p. 13; Ark. Minchikovskii, 'Vser'ez o restoranakh. V chas sukhogo zakona', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 25 January 1967, p. 13.

<sup>27</sup> *Krokodil'*, 5 February 1966, p. 2.

<sup>28</sup> Georgia National Archive, f. 2006 (Republic Ministry of Trade), d. 1632, l. 6; d. 2459, l. 108; A. Volkov, E. Egorov, A. Lasin, 'Za sobstvennuu produktsiiu – v dva raza bol'she. Novoe v oplate truda ofitsiantov', *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 11, 1962, pp. 55–56.

<sup>29</sup> TsAGM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, ll. 51, 63.

<sup>30</sup> *Krokodil'*, 20 May 1957, p. 14.



serving staff should be smartly dressed and courteous.<sup>31</sup> Restaurants offered a space for civic and private banquets to observe birthdays or weddings. Moscow's Budapesht restaurant reported that in the fourth quarter of 1962 alone it had arranged over one hundred banquets, including twenty-three weddings.<sup>32</sup> *Obshchestvennoe pitanie* regularly provided advice to waiters and restaurant managers on methods of staffing and serving the banquet table.<sup>33</sup> Restaurants organized special events to make their customers feel more welcome, including thematic balls, special tastings of international foods, 'days of the hunter and fisherman' and special vegetarian days. The workers at the Hammer and Sickle Factory had forged a special relationship with the restaurant at the Ukraina Hotel, coming on Sundays with their families to sample highlights of Ukrainian cuisine.<sup>34</sup> Restaurants increasingly sought to create their own unique brands, and chefs were encouraged to develop their own house specialties. 'We want every restaurant to be celebrated for its own distinctive dishes', insisted I. D. Shevelev, the head of Moscow's public catering administration in 1968.<sup>35</sup> In the 1960s, the restaurant, with all of its extensive service staff, had become a legitimate scene of Soviet public life.

In theory, Soviet restaurants would be accessible to all strata of Soviet society, as the Ukraina's outreach to Hammer and Sickle Factory workers attests. In practice, restaurants remained the privilege of Soviet officialdom, foreign delegations, foreign tourists, Western graduate students with foreign currency stipends, and those earning money in the black or grey markets.<sup>36</sup> Ordinary working people and students visited restaurants rarely if at all: once in five years, averred a correspondent to *Literaturnaia gazeta* in 1969.<sup>37</sup> 'People with modest budgets rarely go to restaurants — they're

<sup>31</sup> The director of the fictional restaurant Oduvanshik gives a pep talk to her staff emphasizing precisely these qualities in the film, *Daite zhalobnuiu knigu*.

<sup>32</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 246, l. 21.

<sup>33</sup> Examples can be found in N. Nadezhdin, V. Krasil'nikov and N. Krasil'nikov, 'Restorany i obsluzhivanie. Obsluzhivanie banketov', *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 9, 1966, pp. 58–61; N. Nadezhdin, V. Krasil'nikov and N. Krasil'nikov, 'Svadebnyi banket', *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 6, 1971, pp. 62–63.

<sup>34</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 272, l. 21.

<sup>35</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 286 (Stenogramma sobranie aktiva tresta ot 2 Feb 1 1968 'Itogi raboti predpriatii tresta za 1967 g.'). l. 55.

<sup>36</sup> This generalization is supported by Soviet feature films from the period, such as *Daite zhalobnuiu knigu*, in which the patrons include public catering officials and journalists.

<sup>37</sup> Anatolii Zakharovich Rubinov Papers, 1968–1996. European Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC, Box 3, Folder 6, Letter 41611/25 (K.A.M., a machine builder from Gor'kii).

expensive', wrote another correspondent to that paper. A family of three or four might go out for a celebration, or to meet friends from the front.<sup>38</sup> Thus, a restaurant evening was almost always a special occasion.<sup>39</sup> In the course of this research, I asked a number of Russian academics about their restaurant experiences in the 1960s, the years of their student days. None of them could afford such a luxury, they told me. Moreover, asserted one Muscovite in a letter to *Literaturnaia gazeta* in 1969, workers did not go to restaurants and didn't need to: they should be reserved for tourists as a mechanism to extract foreign currency.<sup>40</sup>

The Soviet waiter was the final point of contact in the long supply/service chain that began with the state farm (or alcohol factory) and ended at the table. Behind the scenes, the restaurant director organized the entire operation of the enterprise, from planning to purchasing to the kitchen to accounting to service. In the kitchen, the cooks were asked to produce tasty dishes according to plan and from often uncertain supplies. Their creativity was celebrated in the pages of *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, but their low level of skill was also held up for criticism in closed-door meetings and in the pages of *Krokodil'*. Directors also came under attack for their inattention and low skills.<sup>41</sup>

In this article, I am concerned with the front of the house, the 'hall', the public face of the restaurant staffed by the maître d'hotel and the waiters. Waiters comprised the largest number of service staff in Soviet restaurants. According to the two Soviet censuses of 1959 and 1970, the number of waiters across the Soviet Union grew from 184,000 in 1959 to 204,000 in 1970, an increase of only 11 per cent. In the Russian Federation, the number of waiters did not grow at all.<sup>42</sup> The overwhelming proportion were women: 98 per cent in 1959, and 96 per cent in 1970.<sup>43</sup> Waitresses were especially prominent in the less prestigious public catering enterprises: in stolovaias (when they were not self-service), bufets, cafés and snack bars. In my own experience in the 1970s, I encountered waitresses in the upscale Professors' dining room at Moscow State University and in cafés attached to the Praga and Natsional' restaurants, but in those and other restaurants' main halls, the waitering staff was male.

<sup>38</sup> Rubinov Papers, Box 3 Folder 6C, Letter 41622/25 (A. D., Moscow).

<sup>39</sup> Rubinov Papers, Box 3, Folder 5, Letter 41645/25 (S. I. L., Lviv).

<sup>40</sup> Rubinov Papers, Box 4, Folder 7, Letter 113/25 (Pensioner V. V. M., Moscow).

<sup>41</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 107; d. 108; d. 286. In 1958, only half of Moscow's restaurant directors had completed grade school. (d. 108, l. 32).

<sup>42</sup> *Itogi vsesoiuznoi perepisi naseleniia 1970 goda*, Moscow, 1972–74, vol. 6, tab. 2, p. 19; tab. 3, p. 29.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 6, tab. 18, p. 166.

Between 1959 and 1970, the number of cooks and auxiliary personnel about doubled: public catering expanded, but waiter service did not.<sup>44</sup> In Moscow, arguably the showplace of Soviet dining culture, males were more predominant in the trade. The Moscow restaurant trust in 1958 employed 5,661 women (68.2 per cent) and 2,640 men (31.8 per cent) in its establishments. Most had at least three years of experience, and 30 per cent had been at their jobs more than ten years.<sup>45</sup> Waitering here was a profession for a lifetime, not a casual stopgap on the way to another career. As far as I can tell, there was no separate staff to clear tables. This was the job of the waiter, and one of the symbols of bad restaurant service was tables that remained uncleared for successive seatings of customers.<sup>46</sup> In addition to these servers, restaurants also employed cashiers, who not only handled the customers' payments brought to them by waiters, but also rang up each individual order to the kitchen and billed the responsible waiter. At the end of each day, they verified the total cash received from each waiter.<sup>47</sup> Bufet servers provided the same service for alcohol and cold drinks: waiters 'purchased' these items in order to serve them at the table. These transactions gave cashiers significant informal power in the restaurant economy.

The role of the *maître d'* was changing in 1960s Moscow. In many establishments, his job was to oversee the functioning of the dining room, serving as the director's deputy and remaining aloof from the customers. But in more progressive restaurants such as the Praga, the *maître d'* was taking a more active role in serving: these *maître d'*s greeted guests and showed them to their table, gave skilled consultation in choosing food and drink, assisted the waiter and handled the bill at the end of the meal.<sup>48</sup> At the start of 1958, the ratio of waiters to *maître d'*s was twenty-three to one.<sup>49</sup> Cashiers and most wait staff were female, and the *maître d'*s seemed almost exclusively to be male.

Waitering was hard work. According to a *Komsomol'skaia pravda* account in 1968, foreign specialists claimed that it was the second most difficult profession, after mining. Waiters made repeated trips to and from the kitchen, carrying heavy trays of dishes each way. The news article estimated that a waiter walked forty kilometres per daily shift, carrying

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., vol. 6, tab. 2, p. 19.

<sup>45</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 108, l. 32.

<sup>46</sup> *Daite zhalobnuiu knigu* provides a vivid example, as the protagonist and his friends sit waiting to order amidst a stack of dirty dishes.

<sup>47</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 231, l. 19.

<sup>48</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 231, l. 4.

<sup>49</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 163, l. 10.

two-and-a-half tons a day. By comparison, the average postal route was a mere sixteen kilometres. The waiter's work day lasted from noon until one in the morning, with a two-hour break between the noon rush and the evening meal.<sup>50</sup> By the time they finished cleaning up after the evening shift, public transport had stopped running and they either had to walk home or pool for taxis.<sup>51</sup> And the job entailed more than taking orders and serving. As a Riga waiter noted in another journal article, the waiter must also arrange his assigned tables, making sure they didn't wobble, ensure that the place settings were in order and confirm that fresh flowers were displayed. He had to look after his own appearance, knowing every day he must look ready for a holiday stroll. A waiter should be always prepared with her pencil in hand, never in her pocket or under her arm, equipped with matches and bottle opener, and an extra order book in her pocket. Even more important, a waiter had to understand the needs of her guests, to be able to advise them on the menu, and to assess their mood in order to make them feel welcome and at ease. She should pay special attention to regular customers, to the elderly, invalids, and to VIPS.<sup>52</sup>

Yet the Soviet waiter or waitress did not receive the respect that a coal miner or even a postman could expect. A *Komsomol'skaia pravda* correspondent decided to go under cover in 1968, learning a few tricks of the waiter's trade at Moscow's elite Aragvi restaurant and then job-shadowing a veteran Leningrad waiter as he did his work. 'Each one of us, dear reader, agrees that the occupation of waiter is not what people dream about even when they are in school', he wrote:

So much has already been written about the family 'tragedies' when the daughter goes to work behind a shop counter, when the son enrolls in cooking school [...]. But if a guy goes to be a waiter — that's even worse.<sup>53</sup>

One year later, a writer in *Literaturnaia gazeta* concurred that restaurants in the Soviet Union had long been viewed as unsavoury places, but while

<sup>50</sup> Ignatenko, 'Ofitsiant', *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, 14 November 1968, pp. 2, 4.

<sup>51</sup> GARF, f. 5452, op. 37, d. 955, ll. 180–85.

<sup>52</sup> Leonidov, 'Chelovek i professiia'; N. Tsyplenkov, 'Gde nachinaetsia vzaimnaia vezhlivost'?, *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 7, 1969, pp. 56–57; N. Nadezhdin, V. Krasil'nikov and N. Krasil'nikov, 'Pravila i tekhnika raboty ofitsiantov', *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 3, 1973, pp. 60–61.

<sup>53</sup> Ignatenko, 'Ofitsiant', *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, p. 2. On the role of the Aragvi and Georgian cuisine in Soviet dining, see Erik R. Scott, 'Edible Ethnicity', in Scott, *Familiar Strangers: The Georgian Diaspora and the Evolution of Soviet Empire*, Oxford and New York, 2016, pp. 87–122.

that reputation had finally been overcome, negative attitudes towards wait people had not. 'And that's why there is a severe shortage of cadres in the service sector.'<sup>54</sup>

Part of the stigma came from the Soviet ambivalence towards restaurants as pleasure zones, as I have already mentioned. Part of the stigma came from the conviction that producers of material things were more valuable to society than providers of services, as I have written elsewhere.<sup>55</sup> But waiters themselves contributed to this image through their own behaviours. As the stories that began this article attest, Soviet restaurant service was notoriously slow. 'Waiters have developed the idea that restaurants are meant for rest', said one Moscow public catering official in 1968. A recent check had revealed that customers in the Praga restaurant had waited thirty minutes for a waiter to appear, and in the Sovetskii, it took customers one hour and twenty minutes to be served, when the restaurant was only 20 per cent full.<sup>56</sup> At the Slavianskii Bazaar, only tables of four were served promptly; couples had to wait to be teamed up, and even then, it took forty minutes for a waiter to take their order. And the waiter himself was dressed so slovenly he should not have been permitted to serve, alleged the customers.<sup>57</sup> A Russian trade official recalled a case in which a waiter at the Ural restaurant spilled a plate of salad onto the floor, and merely scooped it up and served it to the patron.<sup>58</sup> Rudeness and drunkenness among wait staff were commonly noted at regular meetings of the restaurant administration.<sup>59</sup>

The dishonesty of many waiters (and their managers) also contributed to the negative image of the trade. A waitress at the Sovetskii restaurant was caught substituting inferior cognac, serving only two portions of meat instead of three, and omitting the crab from the Stolichnyi Salad.<sup>60</sup> Cheating on the bill was common.<sup>61</sup> One experienced restaurant patron wrote to the editors of *Literaturnaia gazeta* that he had spent his entire

<sup>54</sup> Liubov' Iunina, 'Kak li strashny chaevye?...', *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 12 February 1969, pp. 10–11.

<sup>55</sup> Koenker, 'Smile behind the Sales Counter'; and Diane P. Koenker and Benjamin Bamberger, 'Tips, Bonuses, and Bribes: The Immoral Economy of Service Work in the Soviet 1960s', *Russian Review*, 79, 2, April 2020, pp. 246–68.

<sup>56</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 287, ll. 53–54.

<sup>57</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 286, l. 50.

<sup>58</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 108, l. 85. At the same restaurant, customers complained of splinters and hair pins in their food.

<sup>59</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 108, ll. 108, 93; d. 272, ll. 26–27; TsAGM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, ll. 16–17.

<sup>60</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 272, l. 26.

<sup>61</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 286, l. 31. More examples can be found in TsAGM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, ll. 18–21.

life eating at restaurants, and he insisted that waiters would almost always cheat their customers, giving you 150 grams of vodka instead of the 200 you paid for, or ‘accidentally’ charging a higher price for a menu item than what had been posted.<sup>62</sup>

Soviet customers wanted better treatment, food and service, and they knew they were entitled to register their dissatisfaction in the obligatory complaint book.<sup>63</sup> Every enterprise was required to maintain such a book and to provide it when requested. Trade officials were supposed to regularly review these books and use their contents to evaluate performance, to shame, and to suggest improvements. Some establishments went to great lengths to prevent their customers from accessing these books;<sup>64</sup> others simply ignored them. The complaint book motif was so standard that *Krokodil* could generate a laugh when the book was used to provide something positive: a customer at an outdoor café demanded the complaint book from a terrified waiter, but then used it to shade his table from the sun.<sup>65</sup> When restaurant officials reported on conditions in their sector, their accounts were based largely on reviews of these collections of complaints.<sup>66</sup> The head of the Moscow restaurant trust in 1958, for example, noted that 136 complaints about bad service had been logged, compared to sixty-nine in 1957, and the director of one restaurant had to be reprimanded for withholding the book from his customers.<sup>67</sup> Another admitted the number of complaints would have tripled had the complaint book been more readily accessible.<sup>68</sup> A Leningrad restaurant official ten years later noted all the positive improvements that had occurred in their network, but acknowledged that the restaurant Moskva had received forty-five complaints in the previous year, a sign they were still not performing well enough.<sup>69</sup>

It is reasonable to assume that Moscow and Leningrad were most amply endowed with restaurant places and skilled restaurant staff, but in fact, it was public catering in the Baltic republics that offered the most successful examples of service and dining innovation. In early 1969, a

<sup>62</sup> Rubinov Papers, Box 5, Folder 8, Letter 1497/25 (A. G. M.).

<sup>63</sup> *Krokodil*, 5, 1972, p. 14.

<sup>64</sup> *Krokodil*, 15 May 1969, p. 13.

<sup>65</sup> *Krokodil*, 19 July 1971, p. 8.

<sup>66</sup> See also, Marjorie L. Hilton, ‘The Customer Is Always Wrong: Consumer Complaint in Late NEP-era Russia’, in Hilton, *Selling to the Masses: Retailing in Russia, 1880–1930*, Pittsburgh, PA, 2012, pp. 231–63.

<sup>67</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 108, ll. 19–20.

<sup>68</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 107, l. 63.

<sup>69</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 286, l. 37.

delegation from the Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Georgia (a region known for its culture of hospitality) visited Moscow, Leningrad, Tallinn and Riga. They were especially taken with the high level of public catering in Tallinn, which included many specialized cafés and restaurants, often located in atmospheric vaulted cellars, such as the Hungarian-style Café Solnek. Tallinn's eating places catered to a segmented clientele, rather than for the Soviet everyman: the variety restaurant Aurora worked from 9 pm to 3 am, with a floor show at 10.30 pm; a pastry café attracted mostly men. In the Gulf of Finland, the city had outfitted a sailing ship as a floating restaurant, open from 5 pm to 3 am, which had recouped its 30,000 ruble investment in only six months. They noted approvingly that all the restaurants in Riga and Tallinn featured their own distinctive décor, dinner plates inscribed with the name of the restaurant, and uniforms unique to each establishment. (The Tbilisi delegation recommended that the Georgian Ministry of Trade also acquire a sailing boat to convert into a restaurant, and to open in Tbilisi subterranean restaurants outfitted to represent Georgia's distinctive regions.)<sup>70</sup> A feature in *Obshchestvennoe pitanie* celebrated the exemplary work of young Riga waiter Karl Bilders, acknowledging the renowned tradition of service in the Baltic cities. Without fuss, Bilders noted the mood of his customers, tactfully suggested dishes to order and how to combine elements from the menu. He took care with his appearance. In his previous job at the Riga airport restaurant, he served many transit passengers, and determined to give each of them a good impression of the city through the quality of his service.<sup>71</sup> A young Leningrad waiter enthused about his exchange visit to Riga, noting the way in which Riga waiters challenged one another to improve their culture of service and admiring the tastefully decorated Riga restaurants. Like the Georgian delegation, he vowed to apply these lessons to his own workplace back home.<sup>72</sup> But both in the Soviet capital and in most of its provincial cities, poor service and monotonous menus remained the norm.

#### *Economic reform: Motivating the Soviet waiter*

Complaints, journalism, popular film and self-assessments provided ample evidence of the problems in restaurant service. Comparisons with dining culture abroad or in the Baltics revealed alternative models.<sup>73</sup> Finding

<sup>70</sup> Georgia National Archive, f. 2006, d. 2407 ('Otcety o rezul'tatakh komandirovokakh dlia izucheniia peredovogo opyta organizatsii torgovli v g. Moskvu, Leningrada, 8/V/1968 po 9/II/1969'), ll. 20–23, 30.

<sup>71</sup> Leonidov, 'Chelovek i professiia', pp. 12–14.

<sup>72</sup> GARF, f. 5452, op. 37, d. 1513, ll. 180–81.

<sup>73</sup> See Koenker, 'Taste of Others'.



a solution was a constant preoccupation of officials. Did the answer lie in better education and training, in organization, or in economics and incentives? Throughout the 1960s, planners and specialists explored techniques for improved management practices. They turned increasingly to mechanisms of market research in order more efficiently to match supply with demand. Architects and economists lent their expertise to advising on how optimally to build and organize restaurant dining.

Of course, the overriding economic fact of Soviet life was that *everything* was in short supply, not only good service. Restaurant managers complained constantly about their inability to source the ingredients they needed for dishes on their menus. At the Belorusskii Railway Station restaurant, the head chef Rybkin bemoaned in 1961 the disappearance of many cuts of meat: he had worked there eleven years, he used to have chops, and now he did not; he listed many items on the menu, but few could be served because there was no entrecote, filet or onglet of beef.<sup>74</sup> Again in 1967, chef Aristov from Moscow's Sovetskii restaurant recited a litany of shortages: his restaurant couldn't get tomatoes and cucumbers even when they were plentiful in stores; in a country of forests and steppe, there was no game for his kitchen; during the winter only root vegetables were available, even though traders were bringing fresh greens from the south to local markets. The only spices he could secure were bay leaves, pepper, salt, cinnamon, and the occasional clove. But to make popular Georgian dishes, he moaned, he needed cilantro, plums and spices that could not be found.<sup>75</sup>

Supplies that restaurants and stolovaias could obtain were often of poor quality. Stolovaia cooks complained they were cut off from top quality ingredients and had to settle for second and third grade items that not even food stores could sell.<sup>76</sup> The Sovetskii restaurant chef Kozyrev complained in 1958 that he couldn't obtain greens for his kitchen, and the 'suckling pigs' they received were big enough to ride on.<sup>77</sup> Nine guests from India reported they had got food poisoning at the Ukraina restaurant in 1958.<sup>78</sup>

Or instead of serving their customers, restaurants were incentivised to take the food products they received and sell them directly on the street. The manager of Magnitogorsk Stolovaia Number Six took the beef stewing meat he had bought for a ruble a kilo and asked a kitchen worker to sell

<sup>74</sup> TsAGM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, ll. 47-48.

<sup>75</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 277, ll. 40-44.

<sup>76</sup> GARF, f. 5452, op. 37, d. 651, ll. 35-36.

<sup>77</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 107, l. 27.

<sup>78</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 107, l. 62.

it on the street at a 10 per cent markup. She was also 'not shy' and sold it for one ruble fifty kopecks.<sup>79</sup> Both enterprise and seller profited from this arrangement, but the stolovaia patron went without meat. In Moscow, workers at the Moskva restaurant set up a stall and sold black caviar to passers-by, netting 40,000 rubles for the restaurant. The plan requirements did not distinguish between food sold inside the restaurant or on the street. It was common, said a Ministry of Trade official, that 'goods of high demand are sold on the right and on the left'.<sup>80</sup> Food sold on the street contributed to the restaurant's bottom line, but it also meant there was less in the kitchen to serve the seated customers.

The shortages extended to dishes, utensils, and technology. One waiter complained of the motley assortment of unmatched serving platters, and a cook about the dismal quality of chef's knives. In 1958, he said, 'Pretty soon Soviet people will be flying to the moon, and we still haven't solved the problem of knives'.<sup>81</sup> A restaurant official from Uzbekistan lamented in 1968, they lived in the atomic age, they flew to the moon and around the earth, but they couldn't even produce an ice-making machine. The Uzbek national dish *lagman* was notoriously labour-intensive, and he rejoiced when he was able to purchase an Italian pasta machine at a Sokol'niki trade fair, but after only a few uses it broke down. Why couldn't Soviet science make a pasta machine, he wondered.<sup>82</sup>

Regardless of the supply problem in the 1960s, restaurant officials thought they could motivate their waitering staff to provide cultured and timely service. As always in the Soviet sphere of work, socialist incentives — exhortation and emulation — played a role in encouraging performance, although it is hard to gauge their effectiveness. Posters hung behind the scenes encouraged wait staff to help others do their jobs: 'Waiter! Your comrade has a large number of guests. Help him quickly serve them.'<sup>83</sup> Special days honouring various specialties, such as 'day of the maître d'' and 'day of the pastry cook', cast celebratory attention on exemplary performers and served to instruct others in how better to perform their jobs.<sup>84</sup> Schools of Communist labour also mobilized collective energy that shared techniques and etiquette of serving patrons,

<sup>79</sup> E. Kolkov, 'Rabotat' po starinke nel'zia', *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 7, 1963, p. 43.

<sup>80</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 107, ll. 40–41.

<sup>81</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 107, l. 26; GARF, f. 5452, op. 37, d. 71, l. 89.

<sup>82</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 286, l. 19.

<sup>83</sup> *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 11, 1960, p. 37.

<sup>84</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 272, l. 20; d. 286, l. 16.

teaching newcomers how to set their tables and serve banquets.<sup>85</sup> Socialist emulation campaigns pitted individual work places against one another in pledges to improve performance but also to share experience and learn from one another, as with the Leningrad visitor to Riga noted above. Slogans such as ‘Raise the culture of service every day in every workplace’ also served an exhortatory function.<sup>86</sup> Production conferences brought together management and labour to discuss problems and collaborate in their solutions.<sup>87</sup> But these practices, part of the Soviet repertoire of non-pecuniary incentives since the 1920s, seem to be more notable for their absence in the 1960s than their effectiveness.<sup>88</sup>

Another mechanism for motivating and stimulating waiters was proper training. At the beginning of the 1960s, a six-month course for waiters was standard but widely considered to be inadequate, and officials recommended establishing one- or two-year courses, following the examples of other socialist countries.<sup>89</sup> In 1962, only eighteen thousand students a year graduated from Soviet ‘trade-culinary schools’, out of seventy thousand annual recruits to the sector.<sup>90</sup> And not all of these courses offered training for waiters.<sup>91</sup> Even a year-long course failed to prepare waiters adequately, said a restaurant manager in 1968. Up to 70 per cent of such graduates lacked the necessary skills or knowledge to provide proper service.<sup>92</sup> More effective was to use experienced waiters and waitresses — the ‘golden fund’ — to tutor new wait staff under their direct supervision.<sup>93</sup> But this was slow and expensive in terms of labour time. Increasingly, restaurants turned to evening schools to provide formal training — in foreign languages and other skills — for their staff. One

<sup>85</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 286, l. 16.

<sup>86</sup> GARF, f. 5452, op. 37, d. 1332, ll. 67–68; TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 108, l. 37; f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, ll. 35, 82. But socialist competition was unpopular. TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 272, l. 31; d. 286, l. 29.

<sup>87</sup> TsAGM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, l. 25.

<sup>88</sup> The trade union chief Shalaurova noted as much in her speech to the VII congress in February 1972. GARF, f. 5452, op. 37, d. 1513, ll. 104–05.

<sup>89</sup> GARF, f. 5452, op. 37, d. 955, l. 8; TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 277, ll. 8–9; TsAGM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, l. 94; *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 5, 1969, p. 62.

<sup>90</sup> ‘Podbor, rasstanovka i vospitanie kadrov reshait uspekhi dela. Vserossiiskoe soveshchanie rabotnikov torgovli i obshchestvennogo pitaniia’, *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 6, 1962, p. 14.

<sup>91</sup> Georgia National Archive, f. 2006, d. 1421, lists the training objectives for cooks and for sales clerks only.

<sup>92</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 287, l. 10.

<sup>93</sup> TsAGM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, l. 94; ‘Podbor, rasstanovka...’, *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 6, 1962, p. 14; A. Michurin, ‘Dorogoi tvorcheskikh poiskov’, *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 5, 1969, p. 29.

Leningrad waiter described a ‘school of young waiters’ in his restaurant that held twice-monthly classes demonstrating new approaches to service.<sup>94</sup>

The Soviet socialist economy never abandoned its commitment to material incentives, despite the well-known joke ‘They pretend to pay us, and we pretend to work’. By the 1960s, there was little challenge to the primacy of material incentives as the best way to motivate good work. Rather than debate whether money stimulated workers to provide good service, officials discussed the best methods of monetary compensation. Soviet waiters received a base salary whose level depended on their skill grade and experience. Notably, their wages were among the lowest in the USSR in the 1950s, and in order to improve service in public catering, in 1959 the government decreed raises of up to 40 per cent for cooks and waiters.<sup>95</sup> At the exemplary Sovetskii restaurant, for example, a waiter’s pay rose from 60 rubles a month in 1959 to 92 in 1961. The average pay of waiters at the Praga in 1961 ranged from 85 to 89 rubles, depending on the month. Maître d’s there earned 100 rubles.<sup>96</sup> But away from the capital’s elite restaurants, waiters — almost all of them women — earned closer to 30 to 40 rubles a month.<sup>97</sup> Attempts to improve the economic lot of waiters and cooks continued into the 1960s. By 1970, the average worker in public catering and trade earned 95 rubles. (A skilled coal miner made 133.)<sup>98</sup> The outstanding Leningrad waiter Rudol’f Egorov, subject of a *Komsomol’skaia pravda* profile in 1968, earned 90 rubles for his work as a fifth rank waiter, and he also often took home a monthly bonus of 20 rubles.<sup>99</sup> (I will return to Egorov.)

From this salary, waiters were expected to pay for summer and winter uniforms, and pay could be docked for breakage of dishes, damaged tablecloths and napkins, and customers who left without paying. New uniforms cost 170–80 rubles, more than two months’ pay. Even when management subsidized the purchase of uniforms, they had to be tailor-made at prices the subsidy did not cover.<sup>100</sup> A 1963 exposé in *Izvestiia*

<sup>94</sup> GARF, f. 5452, op. 37, d. 1513, ll. 133, 138, 179.

<sup>95</sup> GARF, f. 5452, op. 37, d. 258, l. 52. See Kristy Ironside, ‘Income Redistribution without “Leveling”’, in Ironside, *A Full Value Ruble: The Promise of Prosperity in the Postwar Soviet Union*, Cambridge, MA, 2021, pp. 54–88. This raise was part of a general programme to level up the least-well-remunerated workers in the Soviet economy, most of them employed in service.

<sup>96</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 231, ll. 5–7.

<sup>97</sup> TsAGM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, l. 51.

<sup>98</sup> GARF, f. 5452, op. 27, d. 1513, ll. 332–33.

<sup>99</sup> Ignatenko, ‘Ofitsiant’, *Komsomol’skaia pravda*, 14 November 1968, p. 4.

<sup>100</sup> TsAGM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, ll. 41, 44, 51, 52, 65, 69, 92, 98.

alleged that in addition to paying for breakage, waiters had to pay bribes up and down the internal chain of command, from the cashier to clear their accounts in a timely way, to the head waiter according to ‘the unwritten rule’.<sup>101</sup> Workers in public catering also pointed out that compared to industrial workers, they received far fewer non-pecuniary benefits such as vouchers to rest homes and sanatoria, and nursery and summer camp places for their children. As one waitress pointed out at a 1961 meeting of Moscow waiters, despite women being the majority of the sector, they were not provided with nurseries and pioneer camps for their children. And she complained further, ‘We never receive vouchers for sanatoria. Are we somehow different from everybody else?’<sup>102</sup>

Could all of these problems be solved by simply raising wages and providing sufficient housing, childcare and rest home spaces? The level of wages in public catering increased throughout the 1960s, but complaints about quality and service did not disappear. Soviet planners and restaurant officials also discussed and experimented with new forms of pay and new systems of service. Above all, they grappled with the question of whether and how to reward good service without the odious bourgeois practice of tipping.

The basic form of payment for waiters was an amount based on the sum of the bill — a service charge, with adjustments for experience and level of skill.<sup>103</sup> In Kyiv, one reported practice was to pay waiters a given rate per 100 rubles of receipts, with bonuses for the overfulfillment of planned receipts depending on the level of skill.<sup>104</sup> In some places, waiters received a supplemental bonus if they could use a foreign language.<sup>105</sup> The customer did not see the service charge, rather it was built into the price of the meal. Such a system of remuneration encouraged waiters to sell high-priced items such as caviar and alcohol, and to ignore modest-looking customers. So the public catering administration continually attempted to adjust the

<sup>101</sup> E. Garina, ‘Budte khoziaevami’, *Izvestiia*, 2 August 1963, p. 3. In tsarist times, new hires and subordinates were expected to treat their supervisor with a round of drinks, *magarych* (maybe). See Laura L. Phillips, *Bolsheviks and the Bottle: Drink and Worker Culture in St. Petersburg, 1900–1930*, DeKalb, IL, 2000. The practice was condemned by the Soviet regime, but it continued.

<sup>102</sup> TsAGM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, ll. 99, 101; f. 224, op. 1, d. 107, ll. 28, 47; d. 277 (1967), ll. 20, 33, 67; d. 108, l. 47 (1958); GARF, f. 5452, op. 37, d. 955, ll. 184–85 (1967). The union claimed to have solved the day care problem by 1967, asserting that only 300 of 3,000 families remained on a waiting list for places. GARF, f. 5452, op. 37, d. 955, l. 107.

<sup>103</sup> As in TsAGM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, l. 12 (1961).

<sup>104</sup> *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 6, 1973, p. 61.

<sup>105</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 108, l. 35.

percentages and the indicators in order to maximize revenue, minimize labour costs, and still keep the complaint book idle.<sup>106</sup> The economic reforms of the mid 1960s aimed to simplify the planning indicators and to encourage enterprises to make their own management decisions. Thus, restaurants were measured by only two things: the sale of their own product (as opposed to something purchased from a third party — alcohol) and ‘profitability’ — a rough bottom line. Waiters would earn a higher percentage of the revenue for selling house-made production than for alcohol.<sup>107</sup> They were encouraged to contribute to ‘cost-consciousness’ by reducing waste and becoming more efficient: profits would be returned to the firm in the form of social spending on housing and childcare.

Other restaurants experimented with paying waiters through a service charge added directly to the bill and clearly visible to the customer. The new Rossiia and Arbat restaurants in Moscow introduced this reform in late 1968 as a way to eliminate tipping and encourage good service. The bill clearly indicated that 5 per cent had been added ‘to the waiter for service’. And waiters knew that they would lose that increment if a complaint was filed. As a result, wrote the directors of the two restaurants, take-home pay grew significantly, labour turnover was reduced and service had been improved.<sup>108</sup> A visiting delegation from Georgia commented approvingly on this experiment, noting that the extra charge for service had added 80 to 100 rubles to a waiter’s monthly pay, which could now total 200 rubles. (An exclamation point appears in the document next to this number. Remember a coal miner earned around 130 rubles.)<sup>109</sup> In a variant at the Kyiv restaurant Dinamo, patrons paid 4 per cent extra for service, and they were told the sum that would be shared among all of the serving personnel at the restaurant, from cooks to dishwashers to coatroom attendants. The number of tables assigned to each waiter was reduced from twelve to ten, and as a result, service had improved, the restaurant served more meals, and waiters’ wages had risen 29 per cent.<sup>110</sup>

Some restaurants sought to improve service and interest waiters more in their work through structural reform inspired by professional visits

<sup>106</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 108 (1958), l. 58.

<sup>107</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 277 (1966), l. 6. But such a system had already been implemented in Leningrad in 1962. Volkov et al., ‘Za sobstvenniiu produktsiiu’, *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 11, 1962, p. 55, and in Moscow by 1961 (TsAGM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, l. 57).

<sup>108</sup> ‘Ofitsiantu za obsluzhivanie’, *Vecherniaia Moskva*, 27 February 1969.

<sup>109</sup> Georgia National Archive, f. 2006, d. 2407, ll. 5–6.

<sup>110</sup> A. Vetrova and V. Ospishchev, ‘4% ot summy scheta: chto eto dalo’, *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 6, 1973, p. 61.

to restaurants in socialist Europe. Instead of waiters serving only their individual set of tables, they worked as teams of three or four, either dividing the roles of order taker and server, or making sure that one team member was always in the dining room to attend to the needs of their patrons.<sup>111</sup> Other restaurants experimented with assigning the bill-paying function to the *maitre d'*, freeing the waiter to focus on service and eliminating the temptation to pocket the change either as a tip or illegally.<sup>112</sup>

Tipping in the Soviet Union was officially proscribed as a demeaning holdover from capitalist times, which placed the server in an inferior position to the guest. It was characterized as an infection, an insult, and a source of shame both for the recipient and the tipper. It led to favouritism in restaurants, encouraging waiters to treat big tippers with extra care and to ignore customers who clung to the Soviet anti-tipping morality. Some Soviet waiters defended the practice as a necessity to supplement their low wages, and some customers suggested that tips might be seen as a kind of personal bonus, a recognition of overfulfilling the plan at the point of service. Other waiters proudly refused to accept gratuities as unbecoming to a Soviet person.<sup>113</sup> Restaurant officials hoped that instituting clear service charges would wean customers away from the practice of tipping and make the reward for good service transparent, rational and still financially meaningful.<sup>114</sup>

By the second half of the 1960s, alongside the economic reforms that sought to incentivise good service, there came to be promoted a new, professional standard of restaurant service. The waiter's job was not merely to transmit the customer's desire to and from the kitchen, but to shape the customer's total experience. The waiter now aspired to be a psychologist who could assess the customer's mood and adjust their interaction accordingly. The exemplary Leningrad waiter Rudolf Egorov explained that his job entailed more than 'serving and feeding'. The 'Egorov method' involved making the customer feel comfortable, as if she were at home. He could produce a smile by telling his customer, 'I've brought you the left

<sup>111</sup> TsAGM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, l. 93; d. 224, op. 1, d. 108, l. 54; f. 224, op. 1, d. 231, l. 48 (1962).

<sup>112</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 231, ll. 4, 48.

<sup>113</sup> Koenker and Bamberger, 'Tips, Bonuses, and Bribes'. The article is based on a series of letters sparked by the 1969 article in *Literaturnaia gazeta*: Liubov' Iunina, 'Tak li strashny chaeve?...?', 12 February 1969, pp. 10–11. The letters are held in the Rubinov Papers.

<sup>114</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 108 (1958), ll. 57–58. Words of Miroliubova, director of restaurant Severnyi in Moscow.



chicken leg, it's fatter than the right'; he studied the mood of each customer and treated them accordingly: the shy ones with care, the rude ones with reserve, the insulted with tact. He would sometimes advise on the choice of a meal. And as an involuntary witness to intimate conversations, he took care to be discrete.<sup>115</sup> Tarasov, a waiter at Moscow's Volga restaurant, emphasized that the essence of cultured service was to love and respect the customer's psychology:

Our job isn't only to give out the food and drink that the customer orders, no, that's not all. It's important to create conditions of warmth and hospitality in order to enable positive impressions. We want the people who come to our restaurant to be pleased and not annoyed.<sup>116</sup>

A Frunze waiter, S. A. A., echoed this philosophy in his letter to the editors of *Literaturnaia gazeta*: 'An experienced waiter has to be both psychologist and artist, able to figure out the mood and desires of the patron.'<sup>117</sup>

Such aspirations had been expressed since the 1930s as part of the Soviet drive for 'cultured service'.<sup>118</sup> But they received new affirmation through the concrete experiences of Soviet travellers abroad, who encountered standards of service that were totally different from expectations at home. Waiters in Hungary drew frequent praise for their professional treatment of their customers. As one traveller wrote to *Literaturnaia gazeta*, Hungarian waiters' 'professional experience teaches them to be attentive, nicely dressed, and psychological. They deal politely with people who are new to the restaurant experience. They can recognize the difference in behaviour between a married couple and a couple who are not married'.<sup>119</sup> Another Budapest visitor testified to the high level of service in its restaurants:

You're struck by the affability of the waiters, their attention and interest in their customers. When he comes to take your order, he always greets you first, and when he presents the bill, he wishes you well and invites you to come back again.<sup>120</sup>

<sup>115</sup> Ignatenko, 'Ofitsiant', *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, 14 November 1968.

<sup>116</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 287 (1968), ll. 27–29 (l. 29). This is essentially the pep-talk given to the assembled waitresses in *Daite zhalobnuiu knigu*.

<sup>117</sup> Rubinov Papers, Box 3, Folder 6, Letter 680/25.

<sup>118</sup> Amy E. Randall, *The Soviet Dream World of Retail Trade and Consumption in the 1930s*, Basingstoke, 2008; Hessler, *Social History of Soviet Trade*.

<sup>119</sup> Rubinov Papers, Box 3, Folder 6, Letter 300/25.

<sup>120</sup> 'V restoranakh Budapeshta', *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 4, 1959, p. 61.

A Moscow restaurant official noted that foreign restaurants everywhere — but not in Moscow — strove to create a good mood, from the glass of water (and hot towels in Japan) served while the customer studied the menu, to their knowledge of the menu items, to their impeccable uniforms.<sup>121</sup> In one Yugoslav restaurant, said another traveller in his account in the industry journal, you didn't see waiters hanging around a table or 'propping up the wall'; they were few but they were always at your service.<sup>122</sup>

Soviet officials and customers apparently knew what good service looked like. What about the waiters? How did they understand the challenges or attractions of their work? As always with histories of working people, sources from those observing and criticizing waiters are easier to come by than sources generated by the actors on the restaurant floor. The trade journal *Obshchestvennoe pitanie* published many articles giving advice to waiters, sometimes written by waiters themselves, such as features by three veteran waiters describing how properly to set the restaurant table or how to create a good mood for the customers.<sup>123</sup> Other testimonials that appeared in *Obshchestvennoe pitanie* may be presumed to reflect an editorial agenda but they can also offer insight into waiters' own experience. The stenographic reports of trade union meetings reveal more open and frank discussion, although here too the recorded words of union delegates were spoken in aid of particular agendas and by chosen and approved representatives rather than the rank-and-file.

In March 1961, A. N. Ershov, the head of Moscow's public catering administration, addressed a meeting of waiters to discuss the dismal state of service in the trade. At the moment of the launch of an ambitious new party programme, Ershov outlined a history of bad service and bad attitudes and concluded:

Restaurant workers do not appreciate the fact that in our conditions, a restaurant is not a place for getting customers drunk, for burning through life, and gluttony. It's a place for cultured leisure, gatherings, and gaiety.<sup>124</sup>

In response, waiters talked about customers who ruined tablecloths with their cigarettes or who bolted without paying, about dealing with

<sup>121</sup> TsAGM, f. 224, op. 1, d. 287, ll. 41–42. The commentator was A. N. Ershov, who would lambast the 1961 meeting of Moscow waiters for their shortcomings (see below).

<sup>122</sup> M. Pol'skii, 'Iz Iugoslavskikh vpechatlenii', *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 12, 1966, p. 57. See Koenker, 'Taste of Others'.

<sup>123</sup> For example, Nadezhdin, Krasil'nikov and Krasil'nikov, 'Restorany i obsluzhivanie'; Nadezhdin, Krasil'nikov and Krasil'nikov, 'Pravila i tekhnika raboty ofitsiantov'.

<sup>124</sup> TsGAM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, ll. 26–27.

inadequate food supplies. They spoke about customers who refused to accept the 100 gram limit on vodka sales and then wrote a complaint about the server. 'You spin like a fox in front of them, and then they go and write a complaint', reported waitress Vybornova.<sup>125</sup> All the boss saw was the written complaint, not the pressure from the customer that the waitress break the rules.

Above all, these waiters emphasized the fact of their low pay. If some of them cheated the customer, it was because they needed to make ends meet. If their service was substandard, it was because they had to cover four tables instead of three in order to survive. 'We're given three or four tables, and we run, excuse me, like donkeys.'<sup>126</sup> They compared their miserly pay with the handsome salaries of their bosses, and noted how the pay mechanisms perpetuated their poverty. Rates were higher for serving dishes à la carte, but these could not be ordered before 5 pm. Working mothers were more likely to be assigned to the day shift, missing out on the more lucrative evening service. Paid on a percentage of sales, most of this went to pay for uniforms and broken dishes, leaving little pay to take home. If pay was higher, there would be fewer violations, said waiter Loginov from the Moskva restaurant.<sup>127</sup>

Women spoke of their particular grievances in addition to low pay: inadequate childcare and housing. Waitress Rybakova from the Luzhniki restaurant 'Olimpiada' described the worries of the wait staff there, almost exclusively women. 'Why has none of the speakers said anything about the sore point of kindergartens and pioneer camps? Almost all women have children, but there is no provision of camps and nurseries'. The summer months, when work at the restaurant was at its peak, were especially hard on these women, who worried about their children left to the whims of fate. 'If a waiter comes to work nervous because she has nowhere to leave her children, she will relate badly to the customers. She thinks constantly about home and worries what's happening there'.<sup>128</sup> Other industries provided housing for their workers, but not trade and public catering. Gruzhevskaja, a waitress at the Sofia restaurant, lamented that although she had been born and raised in Moscow and had worked at the restaurant for ten years, she lived in a cellar, 'and I can't get out of it'.<sup>129</sup> Rybakova challenged her fellow waitresses to speak up about the lack of housing, but

<sup>125</sup> TsGAM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, l. 51.

<sup>126</sup> TsGAM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, l. 50.

<sup>127</sup> TsGAM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, ll. 109, 54, 69, 98.

<sup>128</sup> TsGAM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, l. 100.

<sup>129</sup> TsGAM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, l. 109.

Beliakova, from the Peking restaurant, noted that they were unable to find redress for their poor conditions. They gave up their health for their work, but got no thanks, only complaints:

When we speak to someone with any kind of question, we're answered with 'a chicken is not a bird, a woman is not a person'. Why make such a comparison? Everyone knows that there are many women leaders in our country.<sup>130</sup>

We see here, even allowing for the filter of trade union discourse, a profession with substandard wages and working conditions, which encouraged some waiters to cut corners and cheat the customers. It was also a profession dominated by women, whose double shift of home and wage work was never properly appreciated, let alone compensated.

If we fast forward to 1970, we find that the published testimonials of wait staff had taken on a new tone. During the 1960s, pay had been raised, and economic reforms had aimed to make the industry more productive, more efficient and better remunerated. Catering officials sought to counter the prevailing negative attitudes toward workers in the service sector with a new campaign to elevate their profile. Three waiters writing for *Obshchestvennoe pitanie* emphasized that the qualities required for good service — politeness, attentiveness, anticipation — were not just desirable, but necessary, just as a musician needed a developed ear and a sharpshooter needed good eyesight.<sup>131</sup> Waitress-in-training Nadezhda Vetrova wrote in 1973 about why she chose this career:

In my view, above all a waiter should be attentive to people. I believe that our basic, chief task is to give joy to people. And they will always respond with the same. When I enrolled in the school for maître' d's and waiters, I had to cope with a lot of opposition from my relatives and from my friends. Only now I understand that they spoke like that because they didn't know the wonderful feeling you get when your guest leaves the restaurant in a good mood, when they say to you as they depart, 'Thank you so much'.<sup>132</sup>

Waitering was now offered to the public as a calling, an honourable occupation no less important than any other.<sup>133</sup> And yet the public

<sup>130</sup> TsGAM, f. 2, op. 2, d. 626, l. 98.

<sup>131</sup> Nadezhdin, Krasil'nikov and Krasil'nikov, 'Pravila i tekhnika raboty ofitsiantov'.

<sup>132</sup> Iu. Mumrikov, 'Shkola gostepriimstva', *Obshchestvennoe pitanie*, 4, 1973, p. 30.

<sup>133</sup> Another example is the Leningrad waiter V. P. Vaver, who came to waitering after an

remained unpersuaded and waiters continued to resent their low status and low pay, as letters to the newspaper *Literaturnaia gazeta* in 1969 revealed. Discussing whether tips should be permitted, waiters acknowledged the new language about the role of wait staff in creating pleasant conditions for the diners. Both L. G. from Donetsk and A. S. A. from Frunze wrote that the press had been writing frequently about service and the work of waiters as being second in difficulty only to miners, but they insisted that it was difficult to live on wages of 60–80 rubles a month, standard in the sector. A. S. A. added that in addition to low pay, he didn't know a single waiter who had received an apartment, not to mention a discounted voucher to a health resort. Acknowledging the role of waiter as master psychologist, he asserted that the lack of compensation was the main reason for poor service.<sup>134</sup>

*Conclusion: The revenge of the Soviet waiter*

At the start of the 1960s, Soviet officials decided that Communists deserved a greater variety of opportunities for dining out, and they decreed a massive expansion of eating places of all sorts.<sup>135</sup> By the end of the decade, that expansion had been realized, attracting more customers than ever before. A great deal of the expansion was meant to take place in large and self-service stolovaias, applying technology and economies of scale. The number of waiters barely increased between 1959 and 1970. In this sphere of mass public catering, the Soviet waiter was meant to disappear, to be replaced by cafeteria steam tables, stolovaia trays and vending machines. But the expansion was also aimed to include the restaurant experience and to elevate it to a pleasurable entitlement of the Soviet public, providing them with a comfortable and cosseted night out with family or friends, with ample good food and entertainment, allowing them to return home in a sunny mood and proud of the socialist system that provided this privilege.

Experienced diners read these signals, and they now demanded the level of service that many had first encountered abroad. First-timers needed service that included the attentive guidance of their waiter through

initial career as a metalsmith, confessing in 1972 that he was attracted by the high spiritual human qualities of the role. GARF, f. 5452, op. 37, d. 1513, l. 178.

<sup>134</sup> Rubinov Papers, Box A, Folder 7, Letter 935/25 (L. G.); Box 3, Folder 6A, Letter 680/25 (A. S. A.).

<sup>135</sup> In the Party and Central Committee and the USSR Council of Ministers: On further developing and improving public catering', *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, 11, 9, 1959, pp. 44–45 (orig. *Pravda* and *Izvestiia*, 28 February 1959).

their dining experience. The expansion required reforms to improve the material incentives for conscientious and caring service, the creation of a modern class of psychologically savvy waiters and waitresses proud of their work and of their role in providing cultured leisure for their customers. But the examples given above, the satirical cartoons in *Krokodil'* and my own and others' experience suggested that for every Rudol'f Egorov, there were hundreds of other waiters and waitresses who had failed to be motivated by the regime's efforts to instil a new style of service in Soviet restaurants. On 19 July 1977, the Central Committee of the Communist Party and Council of Ministers of the USSR issued yet another decree on the development of trade and public catering. 'The quality of service does not correspond to the growing demands of the population', it admitted, not for the first time. It called on all state agencies to attract more and better-educated cadres to the service sector and to instil in them a high level of dedication to their jobs. But the bulk of the decree focused on producing more and better *things*: more meat and vegetables coming from collective farms, more semi-prepared foods to improve the quality and variety of public catering meals and more automobiles to move the raw materials from one place to another.<sup>136</sup>

Was the continuing disappearance of Soviet waiters simply the product of the shortage economy or did it also reflect the continuing aversion of the Soviet public towards service workers? Somehow, Soviet economic planners never figured out how to recognize and reward the value added by service. Waiters in their turn read these signals and exercised the monopoly power they possessed in the restaurant hall. Resisting the generally low level of remuneration attached to this work, the waiters disappeared and took their own leisure time when and where they felt like it, regardless of the complaint book or their 'socialist obligations'. As the waiter said in 1961, 'If you raise our pay, there will be fewer violations'. In 1984, *New York Times* correspondent John Burns wrote: 'Faced with inadequate supplies, low salaries, and endless lines of customers, many Russians in customer-service jobs lapse into an indifference bordering on contempt.'<sup>137</sup> And this attitude carried over into post-Soviet times, as with the young McDonalds trainee who asked his supervisor: 'Why do we have to be so nice to the

<sup>136</sup> *Pravda*, 19 July 1977, pp. 1–2. See also the *New York Times* article on the decree, Malcolm W. Brown, 'Soviet Asks New Consumer Era: Better Goods and Polite Service', 20 July 1977, p. 2. Brown reads a plea for 'dedication' in the decree as 'courtesy', but I believe the difference is significant.

<sup>137</sup> John F. Burns, 'In Russia, Many Are Customers, Few Are Served', *New York Times*, 25 February 1984, section 1, p. 2.

customers? After all, WE have the hamburgers, and they don't!<sup>138</sup> As long as waiters or shop clerks had control over the goods that customers wanted, they knew they could complete their shifts without psychology, smiles, or care for the customer. And it seems that none of the economic reforms designed to incentivise courtesy or service made much of a dent in this culture.

Soviet restaurant managers had many tools to try to incentivise attentive service, including wage reform and service charges, training, public recognition and professional pride. But while they had many carrots, they possessed few sticks to discipline unwilling waiters, not to mention the ultimate punishment of dismissal. Not only was it extremely difficult to fire a bad worker in the Soviet economy, there were already too few waiters to staff the expanding restaurant sector. A bad waiter was more productive than no waiter at all. Nor were restaurant managers under much pressure to provide their customers with the level of service that officials and *Krokodil'* demanded: there were simply too many potential customers hoping to enjoy a leisurely meal chasing after too few places. There were no restaurant reviewers or guidebooks to advise customers on how to choose their dining out destination; the Soviet public did not have much choice. Waiters may have been looked down upon by those whom they served, but they had the hamburgers their customers wanted. Waiters used their power over the menu, the order, and the delivery of food to exact their revenge on those who went to restaurants. This everyday resistance was a logical outcome of the unequal power differential endemic to the economy of shortages. Waiters were in short supply too.

The disappearing waiter represents the continuing ambivalence of Soviet socialism about service work more generally. Many of the letters responding to *Literaturka's* tipping article made explicitly negative comparisons between the 'genuine' producers of *material value* and the providers of service. Only industrial workers contributed real value to the country, wrote one correspondent, because they manufactured material things.<sup>139</sup> Factory work is hard, wrote a Riga engineer. How can this compare to restaurant staff who carry their trays past tables and dance floors. 'Excuse my harshness, but such a comparison insults the dignity of a working person.'<sup>140</sup> For such citizens, maybe the Soviet waiter was *meant* to disappear, to be replaced by self-service cafeterias and take-away

<sup>138</sup> Peter Frase, 'In Defense of Soviet Waiters', *Jacobin*, 2, 2013 <<https://jacobin.com/2013/02/soviet-waiters-emotional-labor-customer-service>> [accessed 10 April 2023].

<sup>139</sup> Rubinov Papers, Box 4, Folder 7, Letter 2997.

<sup>140</sup> Rubinov Papers, Box 5, folder 7, Letter 2490/25.



kitchens that would issue meals to be consumed at home. In this vision of socialism, there was no room for restaurant meals and the people who served them.

As long as the majority of the population treated service providers with scorn, perhaps it was difficult for the regime to justify investments that would improve the material position of waiters. As long as the material position of waiters was too low to motivate good service, they would continue to work as they had always done, on their own terms, hanging out in the kitchen instead of attending to their customers, cheating on the bill and short-pouring the vodka, without a smile, please or thank you.