

## Cars for Comrades: The Life of the Soviet Automobile

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**Reviewer:**

Erik Landis

*Cars for Comrades* is a kind of ‘total history’ of the automobile and ‘car culture’ in the Soviet Union, one that is exhaustively researched and engagingly written. Consisting of six chapters, Professor Siegelbaum’s book covers a wide range of topics, from the early development of the technology and the arrangements for its production, to the construction of roads and the supporting infrastructure required for the development of automobile use, to the growing market for cars as items of mass consumption and as icons of popular culture. It is one of those rare historical studies that focuses on a particular subject but which succeeds in touching on a vast number of important themes – political, social, and cultural – that relate to the wider history of a unique epoch and its people.

The first three chapters of *Cars for Comrades* provide case studies in the development of the Soviet car industry, each concentrating on one of the principal automotive manufacturing plants. Each developed an identity of its own, grounded in the styles and types of automobiles manufactured, but primarily through the communities that built up around the individual plant. While these are the most ‘technical’ chapters, indulging discussion of engine types and design specifications that (while necessary) are probably more appealing to the closet ‘gear-heads’ among Modern European historians, the opening chapters of the book provide Siegelbaum with an opportunity to develop the discussion of individual and collective experiences of work and of working life under Soviet socialism, themes around which he has forged his reputation as a professional historian.<sup>(1)</sup>

In telling the stories of AMO-ZIL (located in Moscow), GAZ (Nizhnii Novgorod), and GAZ (Togliatti),

respectively, Siegelbaum covers a lot of ground, touching on themes such as foreign investment in the industrializing Soviet Union, the crash construction of one-plant cities, the politics of central planning and of the Communist Party, as well as the challenges of adaptation to the post-Soviet market. In the latter two cases, foreign automotive companies were involved in the construction of major hubs of the Soviet automotive industry: the Austin Company, a specialist construction enterprise from the United States, was heavily involved in the planning and construction of the entire "Socialist City" complex in Nizhni Novgorod, which would eventually become the home to a community of well over 100,000 persons after the Second World War, while the construction of the Togliatti plant was enabled by the conclusion of a commercial agreement in 1966 between the Soviet state and the Fiat Company worth over \$900 million, the largest such deal ever signed by the USSR. While these chapters are filled with discussion of the commercial negotiations and decisions that determined the development of the domestic car industry, as well as details regarding the car models that came off the assembly lines of these three plants, Siegelbaum is at his best when describing the daily challenges and satisfactions of individual workers and their families drawn to these three sites of the Soviet industrial landscape. The social impact of urbanization and the endurance of shortages and other consequences of poor planning were far from unique to the automotive industry in the USSR, but Siegelbaum's archival research and oral history bring tremendous texture to these three portraits of Soviet industrial life.

The early years in the development of the Soviet automotive industry were in the late 1920s and 1930s, when the motorcar represented for some an essential part of the modernization of the Soviet Union, an element of industrialization that would complement the railway network in integrating the vast, centrally planned economy. Early advocates pushing for state investment in the domestic production of motorcars echoed the growing public image of the automobile in the West as the symbol of the modern age, both as a triumph of mass production and as a product of mass consumption. Long captivated by the achievements of the Detroit automotive industry, advocates in the USSR claimed that the triumph of socialism could never be achieved without the adoption of the motorcar as a quintessentially modern technology, the hopes for which echoed Lenin's own advocacy of electrification at the end of the civil war. While production levels remained low for many years, organizations promoting automotive development within the Soviet state arranged auto rallies across the USSR to test the endurance of both drivers and cars alike, but mainly to raise public awareness of the automobile and to boost public investment. They also raised awareness by demonstrating the distance the USSR needed to travel in order to rival the industrialized societies of the West. In the very first issue in 1928 of *Za rulëm* (Behind the Wheel), the official publication of Avtodor, the main automotive advocacy group, statistics were produced that demonstrated just how limited the existing infrastructure in the USSR was; whereas in the USA, there were 450 km of roads for every 10,000 people, in the Soviet Union that total was 1.7 km.<sup>(2)</sup> The media coverage and attendant publicity surrounding auto rallies staged throughout the late 1920s and 1930s highlighted the poverty of the USSR's road system, which had barely been extended since the days of the civil war, as a vital element to the campaign encouraging the 'automobilisation' of the country.

While technology and production statistics remained the benchmark for evaluating the Soviet Union's advances under the first five-year plans of the 1930s, the greater transformation in the mentality of the people was never far from the minds of acute observers of the 'Stalin revolution', just as it had been central to Lenin's musings on the need for 'cultural revolution' in the early 1920s. The famous Russian humourists, Ilf and Petrov, known for their satires such as *The Twelve Chairs* and *The Golden Calf*, penned a travelogue in which they described their own journey through America in the mid-1930s, and in their chapter devoted to the 'remarkable network' of roads crossing the landscape of that country, emphasising that what they described was 'life, and not only technology'. The roads, and the automobiles that travelled on them, were a part of individual and collective experience in the United States, in a manner that was still a distant dream for the Soviet advocates of the passenger car. Predictably, though, the greatest early advances in road construction, and indeed in the expansion of car ownership and operation, were made on national security grounds rather than on any more profound concerns relating to the transformation in the mentality of the Soviet people.

Of course, the automobile is one of the most iconic mass-produced products of the 20th century, one whose connotations of individualism and independence became synonymous with popular understandings of America and American-style capitalism. Indeed, the automobile probably did more to *embourgeoiser* individuals and cultures than any single invention. Therefore, as a product of mass consumption, the car represented a vexing problem for Communist Party leaders committed to central economic planning and to the ideal of collectivism over pernicious individualism. Although it is surprising just how little this troubled commentators in the Soviet Union at the time of the birth of the Soviet automotive industry, the automobile became a component of a larger dilemma facing the Soviet leadership after World War II. Even before comparative living standards became a part of the Cold War struggle, the Soviet leadership faced pressures to improve the quality of life among its citizens and increase, particularly, the provision of consumer goods. The Party leadership proved responsive to these pressures, albeit not in an uncomplicated and direct manner. [\(3\)](#)

With only small gains during Stalin's final years, compromised in part by the demands of reconstruction and the effects of massive harvest failure, the Khrushchev years by comparison proved a boom time for Soviet consumers, with the provision of housing – private rather than communal apartments – the signature investment made by the state. Private cars, however, were deemed a step too far in the direction of individualism, and inefficient and ultimately unsatisfactory rental schemes were devised as an alternative, complemented by investment in public transport. Yet despite the public rhetoric of the Soviet leadership denouncing private car ownership – rhetoric that inevitably filtered down to the street but only had a small and selective influence on popular attitudes – car production and ownership expanded during Khrushchev's tenure in power.

The state's decision to permit the expansion of car ownership and in the driving public is described by Siegelbaum as a 'Faustian bargain' in which the Soviet leadership temporarily secured the acquiescence of the population. While Siegelbaum does not argue the point particularly forcefully, he clearly does see the Soviet Union as an interesting test case for the concept of 'automobility', most importantly articulated by the sociologist Brian Urry. [\(4\)](#) For Urry, the societies that embrace the passenger car become locked into a system that is self-organising, autonomous, and, it would seem, universal, exercising a profound influence on individuals and society at large. This involves a move away from public transport, of course, but it also means the development of attendant technologies and infrastructure, from roads to reliable supplies of petroleum. While recent authors have developed the history of the automobile and the influence it has upon culture in more predictable contexts [\(5\)](#), Siegelbaum's story of the automobile under Soviet socialism represents an interesting testing ground for evaluating the universalizing aspects of car ownership and use. The history of the automobile, the iconic image of Western individualism and freedom, in the USSR, the beacon of socialism and the promise of a Communist future, becomes a case study in the failure of the Soviet Union to construct and sustain an alternative to Western modernity.

There is no single answer as to quite why car ownership would expand so rapidly under Leonid Brezhnev, but it was certainly in keeping with the ideological laxity and materialism of the day, both qualities personified by the car-loving General Secretary. The state at this time played its own significant role in undermining any popular commitment to collectivism through the creation and tolerance of shortages – long-standing characteristics of the planned economy that were only accentuated with the expansion of the range of consumer goods promised to the Soviet population. Siegelbaum appears to suggest that the expansion of car ownership in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s deepened the Soviet people's attachment to the private world of commerce more by necessity than by desire.

Rather than being a clear manifestation of individualism and a demand for autonomy or freedom, car ownership forced conscientious and enthusiastic drivers deeper into the underground economy because of the scarcity of spare parts, gasoline, and professional repair services. For example, Siegelbaum cites statistics that illustrate the limited provision of services for motorists at a time when car ownership was expanding rapidly: 'In 1963, there were some seventy thousand individually owned cars in Moscow and all of eight STOs [service stations, distinct from simple petrol stations]; by 1980, the number of service stations

had increased to thirteen, but the number of cars had risen to an estimated 250,000'. With the state unable or unwilling to meet demand for attendant services, car owners entered into the shady world of midnight auto-parts bazaars, the black market for gasoline (which predictably dwarfed the official market), as well as a whole host of under-the-table interactions with the state officials, from licensing bureaus to traffic cops, that were pursued out of necessity.

Mindful of the eventual collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, one is tempted to ask whether there is something essential to passenger car ownership and use that instills an individual desire for autonomy, or if the car simply satisfies an essential human need for such independence and freedom? Of course, it was not popular revolution that brought the USSR to an end, but the weight of its innumerable internal contradictions, among which must be included 'car culture'.<sup>(6)</sup> Certainly the fall of the Soviet Union brought with it an explosion of car ownership, much more an expression of suppressed demand than a reflection of failing public services. The wealth that has soared in the country has continued that trend, making Russia one of the markets that the major automobile manufacturers (with more hope than confidence) will have to rely upon in the present economic climate. But the challenges of 'automobility' remain, for while the availability of cars is ever expanding, investment in infrastructure has remained woeful, parking and traffic in the major cities is atrocious, and corruption among state officials has gone largely unchecked. In spite of the authoritarian methods of the Kremlin, and the high popularity ratings of the Russian leadership, one of the groups most consistently involved in protests and acts of defiance over the past three or four years has been motorists, from disgruntled commuters refusing to respect the express lane reserved for high state officials in Moscow, to anti-tax protestors in Vladivostok. While popular revolution is not even remotely on the horizon, cars and car ownership have not only proved a manifestation of post-Soviet freedom and autonomy, but they have also proved an interesting force for the definition of collective grievances and even collective acts of protest.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

## Notes

1. Siegelbaum's other major publications broadly deal with the politics and culture of the urban working class, particularly in the 1930s. See Siegelbaum, *Stakhanovism and the Politics of Productivity in the USSR, 1935–1941* (Cambridge, 1988) and Siegelbaum and Andrei Sokolov, *Stalinism as a Way of Life: a Narrative in Documents* (New Haven; London, 2000). Perhaps not coincidentally, Siegelbaum is Professor of History at Michigan State University, located not far from Detroit and what is, at the present moment, still the home of the US automotive industry.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. *Za rulëm* first appeared in 1928 and continues publishing to this day. The magazine is one of Siegelbaum's principal sources, providing a chronologically ordered touchstone for understanding the concerns and hopes of motorists in the USSR.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Vera Dunham, *In Stalin's time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Durham 1990); Elena Zubkova, *Russia After the War: Hopes, Illusions, and Disappointments, 1945–1957*, trans. by H. Ragsdale (London, 1998); Julie Hessler, 'A postwar perestroika? Toward a history of private enterprise in the USSR', *Slavic Review*, 57, 3 (1998), 516–42; Mark Edele, 'Soviet veterans as an entitlement group, 1945–5', *Slavic Review*, 65, 1 (2006), 111–37.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. See, for example, Brian Urry, 'The "system" of automobility', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 21, 4/5 (October 2008), 25–39.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. For instance, the recent book by Cotten Seiler, *Republic of Drivers: A Cultural History of Automobility in America* (Chicago, 2008). [Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Another recent book on Soviet automobiles – more for the non-academic enthusiast, but still thoroughly worthwhile – indirectly highlights another of these contradictions, unexplored by Siegelbaum. Andrew Thompson's *Cars of the Soviet Union: the Definitive History* (Yeovil, 2008) contains many lavish photographs of Soviet car models drawn mainly from contemporary marketing literature and advertising copy. As such, it raises curious questions about how the Soviet Union marketed its cars abroad. Obviously, many of those exports were within the Soviet bloc, but at the

height of Thatcher's premiership, the Lada was one of the ten best-selling automobiles in the United Kingdom. [Back to \(6\)](#)

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