

Building communism by numbers: The Third Program of the CPSU and the economics of Soviet welfare targets

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Abstract

This article reinterprets the Third Program of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union) in 1961 as a rational, auditable social contract for the Soviet one-party state rather than a utopian manifesto. Reconstructing its Stalin-era prehistory—from drafts by Dmitry Manuilsky, Mark Mitin, Pavel Yudin, and Andrei Zhdanov between 1938 and 1947 to those generated under Nikita Khrushchev between 1958 and 1961—we show how successive elites translated ideological rivalry with the West into a ledger of quantifiable welfare obligations (expressed in per capita food, housing, goods, and the duration of the working day). The program’s distinctive function took shape within the traditional context of foundational Soviet documents: constitutions which codified the status quo and party programs that projected a development path for 20–30 years into the future. Under Khrushchev, academic economists “scientized” this practice, elevating consumption indicators and “scientifically grounded norms” to the core of a national strategy for the USSR: “communism in the main” by 1980. Conceptually, the program operated as an authoritarian commitment to build a socialist welfare state—a self-binding social contract that stabilized the post-Stalin transition but also generated path dependence, constraining later reform efforts. Empirically, we document the program’s internal tensions (communal services vs. individual household needs; socialist ethics vs. personal ownership) and its comparative ambitions (to catch up and overtake the United States in per capita welfare). The result is a reframing of Soviet modernity as a project in which technocratic calculation, welfare egalitarianism, and Cold War benchmarking were fused into a pragmatic, auditable program of one-party rule.

Keywords: Third Program of the CPSU, one-party state, authoritarian welfare state, credible commitment, per capita benchmarks, consumption and living standards.

JEL classification: B24.

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1. Introduction

Historians have long treated the Third Program of the CPSU (Communist Party of the Soviet Union), solemnly adopted at the 22nd Party Congress in October 1961, as an unmistakably Khrushchevian artifact—an exuberant manifesto of “catch up and overtake” optimism tied to the drama of de-Stalinization. Such a view, however, obscures a deeper genealogy. Plans to replace the obsolete 1919 Party Program surfaced repeatedly from the early 1930s onward, only to be deferred, first by the drafting of the 1936 Constitution and then by wartime and postwar upheaval. Two drafts of a new program were prepared in 1938 for consideration at the 18th Party Congress in 1939, which then convened a twenty-four-person commission chaired by Joseph Stalin himself to develop the final text. When the German invasion stalled this effort, a fresh commission was assembled under Andrei Zhdanov in July 1947. This one produced four even more sophisticated drafts, replete with quantitative targets that promised the doubling of industrial output, the trebling of steel and oil production, and, strikingly, outstripping the major capitalist countries in per capita manufacturing in twenty years’ time. Although the project was shelved after Zhdanov’s death, these drafts reveal that what became the Third Program in 1961 rested on a multilayered Stalinist substrate.

Recognizing this longer arc permits a conceptual reappraisal of the Third Program. The 1961 document can be read not simply as a late-Khrushchev utopia but as an attempt to construct what might be termed a “metricized sovereignty covenant”: a mechanism through which the Soviet leadership, from Stalin’s first commissions to Khrushchev’s final edits, sought to translate the abstract quest for communist supremacy into an auditable ledger of welfare guarantees. By combining the teleological rhetoric of Marxist–Leninist progress with the calculative techniques of Gosplan economists, the Program outlined a path-dependent “authoritarian welfare state” arrangement that was intended to manage the post-Stalin transition and to reorient the command economy toward consumption. At the same time, this framework introduced rigidities and expectations that later complicated reform initiatives from the Kosygin experiments to perestroika, highlighting the tension between its ambitions and the institutional and economic constraints within which it operated.

Viewed through this lens, the Third Program illuminates the broader Soviet story between the early 1930s and the 1960s. It shows how successive leaderships sought to convert the USSR’s ideological rivalry with the capitalist West into concrete, statistically verifiable pledges—first in the tentative industrial benchmarks of the 1938 drafts, then in the ambitious twenty-year welfare projections of 1947, and finally in Khrushchev’s celebrated promise that Soviet per capita output would surpass that of the United States by 1970. Each iteration strengthened the expectation that socialism’s legitimacy would henceforth be measured in concrete terms of refrigerators, pensions, and square meters of living space rather than by the earlier utopian promises of leveled wages, communal living, post-materialist modes of consumption, and radical egalitarianism.

Our article employs this reconceptualization to make three claims. First, it reconstructs the neglected Stalin-era drafts, demonstrating their defining influence on the 1961 text. Second, it situates the program within comparative theories

of authoritarian welfare policies, arguing that specific socioeconomic promises can operate as powerful mobilization devices in nondemocratic regimes. Third, it traces the unintended long-term consequences of this “metricized covenant,” showing how the very indicators that bolstered legitimacy in 1961 generated reform-blocking rigidities by the 1970s.

It is therefore useful to treat both the Stalin-era drafts and the 1961 Program not as isolated political artifacts, but as successive attempts to institutionalize a particular vision of social welfare into a codified, quantifiable form that can be read through familiar economic frameworks. In Bergson–Samuelson terms (Bergson, 1938; Samuelson, 1947), these texts amount to an unusually explicit social welfare function: they single out a narrow set of arguments—per capita availability of key foodstuffs, housing space, basic durables, and services—and assign them fixed target levels, implicitly assuming a strongly egalitarian, consumption-centered structure of social preferences in which progress is measured by the convergence of individual bundles toward a common norm. At the same time, by embedding these promises in long-term plans, they make it clear that the leadership was trying to find a political answer to the intertemporal trade-off between consumption and accumulation familiar from modern growth theory (Barro and Sala-i-Martin, 2004), committing the regime, at least rhetorically, to a timetable of rising household consumption that would inevitably restrict the resources available for investment and defense. Finally, viewed through the political-economy lens developed by Acemoglu and Robinson (2006), the Stalinist projects and the 1961 Program can be interpreted as instruments of credible commitment and performance-based legitimacy in a nondemocratic setting: in the absence of electoral accountability, the Party bound itself to observable welfare benchmarks as a way of signaling distributive intent. Yet the very act of transforming aspirational goals into numerically defined obligations hardened these benchmarks into self-imposed constraints, narrowing the regime’s room for maneuver and making subsequent revisions of the welfare promises politically and institutionally costly.

By restoring the prehistory of the Third Program and foregrounding its logic of a metricized social contract, the study offers a novel vantage point on Soviet statecraft across four turbulent decades—one that invites us to reconsider how even the most autocratic systems intertwine ideological ambition, technocratic calculation, and mass consumption in their pursuit of durable rule.

2. The party program as a strategic charter

The Soviet polity rested on an institutional dyad whose workings are often misunderstood. From Vladimir Lenin’s days, the party claimed the prerogative of charting the strategic vector of development, while the state—the Council of Ministers, ministries, planning agencies, and courts—implemented whatever line the Central Committee chose to promulgate. Modern scholarship therefore distinguishes between the “constitutional” and the “programmatic” layers of Soviet norm-making. The Constitution of 1936 (and its 1977 successor) codified existing social relations, solemnizing the distribution of property and the prevailing institutional setup. By contrast, every draft of the party program—from the stillborn versions of 1938 and 1947 to the definitive text of 1961—prescribed

future arrangements, projecting the economy and society forward by twenty or even thirty years.

Recent work on socialist governance shows that this separation of registers was not a rhetorical quirk but a functional necessity. Because the all-Union party leadership wielded sovereign authority that did not require it to compete for an electoral mandate, it required an alternative mechanism for signaling long-range intentions both to its own officials and to the population at large. The program was, at least in theory, designed to fill that gap. By embedding quantitative milestones—measured in per capita electricity supply, kilograms of meat, or hours in the working week—it translated ideological ambitions into a ledger of obligations against which progress toward the communist future could be audited.

This dynamic differentiates the Soviet case from almost every other example of modern economic governance. Twentieth-century capitalism certainly produced ambitious plans—whether France’s Monnet Plan (1946) or Japan’s MITI forecasts—but none were incorporated into the ruling party’s constitutional core, nor did they stake political legitimacy on the delivery of concrete welfare commitments. The People’s Republic of China has adopted five-year plans since 1953, yet no Chinese document has ever pretended to map the road to a classless society within a single generation. What the CPSU attempted, therefore, was *sui generis*: a program-state in which the party’s self-imposed timetable to “communism in the main” stood above statutory law and day-to-day administrative instruction.

The historiography of Soviet modernity further clarifies why such a mechanism mattered. Studies of consumption and social policy demonstrate that, by the mid-1950s, refrigerators and wages had become the primary idiom through which citizens assessed regime performance. To promise that the housing shortage would be “completely resolved” by 1980 was thus framed not simply as propaganda, but as a calculated wager that demonstrable mass welfare would do more to secure popular consent in the post-Stalin decades than the theoretical attainment of socialism and, ultimately, communism (Fehér et al., 1983; Gordon, 1988; Cook, 2013).

From a comparative perspective, the Third Program of the CPSU may be read as an extreme form of what North and Weingast (1989) term a credible commitment—deployed, paradoxically, by an authoritarian elite. The leadership published a timetable that could not easily be revised without confessing to failure. This likely explains part of the reason why the party did not ratify a program during the 1930s and 1940s. It is also why, when growth slowed in the 1970s, the very metrics inscribed into the program in 1961 boxed reformers into a fiscal corner. Path-dependence theory predicts precisely such gridlock: once the party elevated statistical welfare targets to the status of quasi-constitutional norms, any deviation would threaten the basis of its legitimacy.

In short, the Program cannot be treated simply as a decorative ideological text. Within the architecture of the Soviet party-state, it was intended to function as a strategic planning charter, elaborating upon the Constitution as a blueprint elaborates upon an elevation drawing of a completed building. Few other polities—not even those that practiced indicative planning—attempted to codify such distant horizons in a single party document. This attempt, however, also illustrates a characteristic pattern of Soviet governance: the projection of far-reaching, numerically specified goals whose formal status outran the state’s

capacity to adjust them to changing economic conditions. The Program's ambition to legislate a welfare trajectory is therefore best understood not only as evidence of institutional boldness, but also as a source of subsequent tension between declared objectives and the constraints of implementation.

3. Situating the Third Program within three converging fields of debate

The reinterpretation advanced in this article rests upon—and seeks to reorder—three bodies of scholarship: (i) comparative analyses of authoritarian welfare states; (ii) cultural-historical accounts of Soviet modernity and consumption; and (iii) theories of credible commitment and path dependence. Taken together, they provide the conceptual framework for treating the 1961 Program as a metrized social contract rather than a purely ideological proclamation.

Early comparative work assumed that universal social welfare was the preserve of liberal or Christian-democratic polities (Titmuss, 1958; Esping-Andersen, 1990). Soviet-type systems were relegated to footnotes as “production-oriented” hybrids. A landmark essay on “Soviet welfare-state authoritarianism” by Breslauer (1978) broke with that assumption by showing how distributive performance could compensate for the absence of electoral accountability. Subsequent theorists (see Fehér et al., 1983) reframed paternalism as a deliberate strategy for manufacturing consent: unelected dictatorships could base their legitimacy on meeting ever-rising expectations.

The opening of the archives in the 1990s then supplied decisive empirical evidence. Ivanova (2011) demonstrates that, once emergency rationing ended, Soviet policy moved toward a universalist model financed by general taxation—something that approximates Titmuss's institutional type under one-party rule. Cook (2013) in his cross-system comparison confirms that late-Soviet entitlements were more extensive than those in many middle-income democracies, thereby underscoring the analytical heft of Breslauer's category. Finally, the prescient observation by Nove (1964) that living standards had become the idiom of regime legitimacy gains fresh resonance when set against the Program's monetized economic commitments.

Collectively, this literature legitimizes treating the Third Program as a self-binding welfare contract—one that promised measurable gains in income, housing, and leisure in lieu of representative politics.

The second field interrogates the cultural grammar of Soviet modernization. Plaggenborg (2006) traces the technocratic ethos of the 1930s; Siegelbaum (2008) follows the automobile from symbolic trophy to mass commodity; Hessler (2004) and Reid (2009) reveal how consumer goods and domestic space became primary sites where Soviet citizens evaluated state performance; Varga-Harris (2015) and Crowley and Pavitt (2008) extend that insight into the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras. These studies converge on a core claim: by the mid-1950s, refrigerators and dachas, not steel output, defined the horizon of socialist aspiration.

Placing the Third Program within this historiography highlights two long-term shifts. First, the metricization of aspiration: successive draft commissions (1939, 1947, 1961) translated abstract aspirations into auditable indicators—kilos of meat, square meters of living space, and hours in the working week. Second, the rise of universalist egalitarianism: welfare entitlements ceased to be oc-

cupational perquisites and were recast as citizenship rights independent of the quantity and quality of labor performed (CPSU, 1961). The program thus crystallized an underappreciated half-century of Soviet efforts to tie modernity to measurable well-being.

Political-economy scholarship on credible commitments (North and Weingast, 1989) and institutional path dependence (Pierson, 2000; Mahoney and Thelen, 2010) offers the third analytical lens. These works argue that formal rules, once embedded, narrow the range and scope of future choices by raising the political costs of any subsequent reversal. Applied to the Soviet case, the Program functioned as a self-imposed rule: by publishing official timetables for income growth and consumption levels, the leadership raised the reputational penalty for shortfalls. This mechanism helps to explain why the welfare bias introduced in the 1961 text constrained subsequent reforms—from Kosygin’s pricing experiments to Gorbachev’s fiscal dilemmas—long after the original drafters had departed the scene.

By weaving these three literatures together, the present article reframes the Third Program as the pivotal juncture where authoritarian-welfare practice, consumer-centered modernity, and long-term planning technologies intersected. This triadic perspective both illuminates the Program’s immediate political utility and exposes the path-dependent rigidities that it bequeathed to late-socialist economic governance.

4. The first two party programs: The 1903 and 1919 antecedents to the 1961 covenant

A full appreciation of the Third Program’s intellectual genealogy requires a brief survey of its two predecessors, each of which reflected a distinct phase in the evolution of Soviet Marxism-Leninism.

Although a rudimentary program was adopted at the Russian Social-Democratic Labor Party’s founding congress in Minsk (1898), it was the 2nd Party Congress in August 1903 that produced the first authoritative text. Drafted chiefly by Vladimir Lenin and Georgy Plekhanov, the document divided its aims into a “minimum program”—the immediate overthrow of tsarist absolutism and the creation of a democratic republic—and a “maximum program”—the eventual expropriation of the capitalist class and transition to socialism (Lenin, 1903).

The minimum planks were strikingly concrete for the period: universal suffrage, an eight-hour working day, equality for all nationalities and religions, and the transfer of land to the people. Yet the text also insisted that these democratic reforms were merely a staging post *en route* to proletarian power. Contemporary observers—including police agents whose reports have survived in the archives—were quick to note the novelty of a revolutionary party that proclaimed such a precise social agenda (Carr, 1950). The 1903 Program thus functioned as both a mobilization charter for underground agitation and a doctrinal anchor that kept the fractious social-democratic movement oriented toward an eventual socialist transformation.

The seizure of power in October 1917 rendered the 1903 text obsolete. At the 8th Congress of the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks) in March 1919, delegates endorsed a wholly new program—henceforth counted as the party’s

second. Composed amid the emergency of the civil war and under Lenin's close supervision, the 1919 document redefined the Party's *raison d'être* as the "dictatorship of the proletariat," tasked with abolishing private ownership of the means of production, eradicating class distinctions, and ushering in a world revolution (RCP(b), 1919).

While the text retained certain democratic motifs—internationalism, gender equality—it broke decisively with the earlier minimum–maximum dichotomy. Economic measures were foregrounded: nationalization of industry, compulsory labor service, monopolization of foreign trade, and the introduction of centralized planning. Historians have noted that many clauses foreshadowed the GOELRO electrification plan adopted the following year (McCauley, 2014). The program also established the principle that the Party, not Sovnarkom, set the strategic horizon—an institutional hierarchy that would endure throughout the Soviet period.

Read in sequence, the first two programs trace the Bolsheviks' metamorphosis from a conspiratorial opposition bent on democratic revolution into a governing elite committed to constructing a socialist command economy. The 1903 text centered on political rights and class mobilization; the 1919 text recast those ambitions as the administrative tasks of economic transformation. Both, however, remained essentially teleological—they specified end-states rather than numerical milestones.

It was precisely this absence of quantification that the various incarnations of the Third Program set out to correct. By embedding development targets—real-income growth, housing norms, labor-time reductions—into the Party's constitutional-type charter, the drafters converted ideological promise into a metricized social contract. The trajectory from 1903 through 1919 to 1961 therefore marks a progressive tightening of the linkage between Marxist teleology and concrete, measurable obligation—an arc crucial to the argument advanced in this article.

5. Stalin-era antecedents: the unrealized "third program," 1938–1947

By the early 1930s, the Soviet leadership was convinced that the 1919 Party Program no longer captured the reality of a "completed socialist society." In a private memorandum to Viacheslav Molotov (26 September 1935), Stalin drew a sharp conceptual boundary between constitution and program: the former must codify what had already been achieved, whereas the latter should articulate "what we are still striving to win." From that injunction flowed a succession of drafting initiatives whose cumulative intellectual residue would later inform the 1961 text. In October 1938, Stalin circulated two preliminary blueprints to members of the Politburo,¹ one prepared by Dmitry Manuilsky at the Comintern secretariat, the other authored jointly by Mark Mitin and Pavel Yudin (Simonov, 2019).

Manuilsky's memorandum proposed a two-part document: a declaratory preamble affirming that the USSR stood "on the threshold of complete communism," and an annex including thirty-two production targets—among them the ambition to overtake U.S. steel and electricity output by 1955. Mitin and Yudin, by contrast, framed their version around the thesis that the country had entered a "higher phase of the dictatorship of the proletariat," downplaying numeric

¹ The supreme policy-making body of the CPSU.

goals but stressing ideological consciousness, universal secondary schooling, and a projected six-hour working day (Simonov, 2019). Although neither text reached plenary debate, both accepted that any future program had to include quantifiable objectives. That insight marks the birth of the Soviet practice of metricizing ideological commitments.

At the 18th Party Congress (March 1939), Stalin chaired a twenty-four-member commission—Molotov, Zhdanov, Khrushchev, Lazar Kaganovich, Lavrenty Beria among them—that was charged with producing a new program for the 19th Party Congress to be held in 1941. Surviving chapter outlines, published by Trushkov (2018), reveal an emphatically economic cast: the doubling of industrial output and the tripling of crude-oil production for a population of 250 million citizens by 1960, crowned by the pledge that Soviet society would “approach the living standards of the foremost capitalist countries.” Zhdanov’s marginalia repeatedly demanded further quantification and a dedicated section on the everyday lifestyle of private citizens (*byt*) (Simonov, 2019; Trushkov, 2018). The onset of war in June 1941 terminated the project, yet these drafts indicate that a welfare-centered metric was already being tentatively explored as a yardstick of socialist success, even if Stalin himself regarded many of Manuilsky’s more utopian goals with hesitation and would return to similar themes only in a more cautious and tightly delimited form after the war.

The victory in the Great Patriotic War in 1945 revived the need for a new party program. In connection with plans to finally convene the 19th Party Congress, the Central Committee began discussing a new phase in the effort to develop the needed document in February 1947.² On July 15, 1947, the Politburo appointed Zhdanov to head a thirteen-person subcommission whose members included Mitin, Yudin, Mikhail Suslov, Otto Kuusinen, and Gosplan chief Nikolai Voznesensky.³ The group operated with unprecedented speed: following a preprepared general outline, four editorial brigades produced competing drafts between July 25 and 28, 1947. All the drafts accepted Zhdanov’s scheme of a bipartite text—“General Achievements” and a 20- to 30-year action plan steering the USSR toward communism (Simonov, 2017). They also wove Gosplan’s General Perspective Plan into the future program’s clauses, promising to eliminate the housing shortage and income tax for workers and to legislate a minimum family income and a forty-hour workweek “without any loss of pay.” Mitin and Yudin’s version, in particular, foregrounded consumer benchmarks, although it noted that “limited time for thorough elaboration” restricted this work.

Stalin followed the process closely and read the Mitin–Yudin draft with particular care, correcting language and requesting the distribution of all the drafts to the full Politburo. His interventions consistently pressed for more precise welfare ratios, further entrenching the principle that ideological credibility now rested on auditable statistics. Zhdanov used these comments and the results of three further subcommittee meetings to coordinate the development of a new synthetic draft text that combined the strongest elements from the four editorial brigades’ draft

² The Russian State Archive of Contemporary History (RGANI), F. 2, Op. 1, D. 14, L. 21–23, 30. For the revised membership of the commission, see The Russian State Archive of Socio-Political History (RGASPI), F. 77, Op. 4, D. 18, L. 51.

³ RGASPI, F. 17, Op. 3, D. 1066, L. 12.

programs. This document was then revised and submitted to Zhdanov in its final form in December 1947.

In 1948, Zhdanov struggled with health issues as well as a widening crisis abroad with Yugoslavia and, at home, with increasing demands to reform the Central Committee apparatus. In July, he was dispatched for medical treatment to a sanatorium in Valdai, where he died shortly thereafter. This series of events orphaned his work at the Third Program; without him, when the 19th Congress finally assembled in 1952, it had to limit itself to revising only the party statute. Yet the 1947 exercise bequeathed two durable legacies: (i) a template for integrating long-term welfare indicators into a foundational party covenant, and (ii) the strategic logic—already present in the prewar work of Manuilsky and the Mitin–Yudin brigade—of proving the superiority of socialism through per capita consumption metrics rather than heavy-industrial production volume alone.

When Khrushchev’s commission resumed work on the program in 1958, it did not start from scratch. The Stalin-era drafts had normalized the expectation that any new program ought to articulate specific welfare commitments and present them as the very measure of socialist modernity. Consequently, the Third Program’s eventual pledge to “surpass the United States in per capita output by 1970” was less a Khrushchevian innovation than the logical culmination of a twenty-year ideological trajectory. Far from being a rupture, the 1961 Program completed a process set in motion by Manuilsky, Mitin, Yudin, and Zhdanov: the transformation of the party’s guiding charter into what this article terms a social contract—a self-binding promise that fused ideological teleology with technocratic numeracy and, in so doing, locked the Soviet polity into an authoritarian welfare covenant that would define its political economy for the next quarter-century.

6. Drafting the Third Program under Khrushchev, 1958–1961

Although a program commission was elected at Stalin’s final party congress in 1952, it lay dormant during the succession struggle that followed his death. Only after the 20th Party Congress in 1956 did the Presidium agree to revive the project. Even then, no substantive work began until the defeat of the “anti-party group” in mid-1957 eliminated most of the opposition that Khrushchev faced in the party leadership. From late 1958 onward, a skeleton commission headed by Khrushchev himself and including Kuusinen, Suslov, Anastas Mikoyan, Petr Pospelov, and Boris Ponomarev met sporadically to sketch out a plan for the new document. These efforts were ratified by the Presidium on December 14, 1959 and confirmed by a written directive three days later. The order instructed the drafters to produce a text that would cover “a period of fifteen to twenty years during which the foundations of a communist society shall be completed” and to build the entire section on economic development around “the electrification of the whole country” as the main source of growth (Khrushchev, 2006).

Implementation fell to Ponomarev, who was released from his other duties and dispatched to the Central Committee sanatorium Sosny outside Moscow to develop a new draft with the aid of about a hundred economists, philosophers, and statisticians. Fokin (2017) shows that their point of departure was the General Prospective Plan through 1980, drafted in 1960 by the State Scientific-Economic

Council (Gosekonomsovet) under Aleksandr Zasyadko. This group's 480 archival files supplied nearly all the numerical baselines later embedded in the program.

Early drafts, discussed in the Presidium on December 14, 1959, already bore Khrushchev's stamp: demands for a forty-hour workweek without loss of pay, state support for children and pensioners, and free meals "within one or two five-year plans." Over the next fifteen months, the Sosny group produced revision after revision, each calibrated to the Seven-Year Plan adopted at the 21st Party Congress.

Sixteen months later, in late April 1961, a complete manuscript of the new Third Program reached Khrushchev's desk. He then dictated forty-six pages of revisions, warning against promises that "we will not be able to keep," yet insisting on the controversial claim that the USSR would outstrip the United States in per capita output by 1970. His edits retained the earlier stress on electrification and consumption, fusing Leninist symbolism with Cold War benchmarking.⁴ The Presidium approved the redrafted text on May 24, 1961; the Central Committee Plenum endorsed it on June 19. In a calculated gesture of "party democracy," the Presidium ordered publication of the draft program in *Pravda* and *Izvestia* on July 30, 1961, launching a six-week national discussion.

By mid-September, the newspaper editors reported that almost 44 million citizens had attended workplace or neighborhood meetings devoted to the draft and that they had received 29,070 letters about it. Although much of the exercise was choreographed, it supplied the drafters with popular cues (requests for higher pensions, better housing norms) and burnished Khrushchev's claim to have buried "the cult of personality" beneath collective deliberation (Fokin, 2017).

A lightly amended draft reached the 22nd Congress on October 17, 1961. The program was adopted on the final day, October 31, after holding marathon sessions extolling its pledge to "complete communism" within two decades. In structure, the text mirrored Ponomarev's Sosny blueprint: a theoretical Part I focusing on historical materialism and a prescriptive Part II filled with specific welfare milestones—the abolition of the housing shortage by 1980, meat and dairy consumption "exceeding present American levels" by 1970, and a 30-hour working week on the horizon (Fokin, 2017).

The Khrushchev-era program was neither a hastily constructed propaganda campaign nor a clean break with Stalinism. Rather, it was the culmination of practices first rehearsed by Manuilsky, Mitin, Yudin, and Zhdanov in the late 1930s–1940s, now rendered feasible by the technocratic muscle of postwar planning agencies. The Sosny drafters' reliance on the General Prospective Plan confirms the article's larger argument: that the program functioned as a metrized social contract, translating ideological ambition into an auditable matrix of welfare promises whose lineage stretched back—albeit fitfully—to Stalin's own commissions.

7. An industrial-military blueprint with a promise of plenty

The Politburo order establishing a secretariat for a new party program in mid-1938⁵ arose from a stark realization: if the USSR was moving toward

⁴ RGANI, F. 1, Op. 4, D. 17, L. 1.

⁵ RGANI, F. 3, Op. 22, D. 107, L. 71.

the “higher phase” of socialism, it faced a simultaneously sharpening clash with the capitalist world. Manuilsky’s draft of August 3, 1938 translated that Stalinist axiom of intensifying class struggle into a detailed agenda for heavy-industrial expansion, national defense, and social welfare.

At its core, the draft is a manifesto of accelerated militarization. It calls for a ten- to fifteen-year drive to multiply overall output, construct new industrial regions, complete national electrification, modernize rail and road transport, and build a vast chemical sector—each item explicitly framed as a precondition for the “decisive defense of socialist achievements.”⁶ The underlying logic is clear: only an economy capable of sustained armaments production can deter the external enemies who, by the regime’s own theory, will become more aggressive as the Soviet Union approaches communism.

Yet Manuilsky’s blueprint is not a one-sided militarist document. In the same breath, it insists that socialism’s advance must be measured by the “rising living standards of the Soviet people.” Echoing the slogan “life has become better, life has become more joyous,” the draft devotes an entire section to the consumer sector, instructing planners to develop textile, clothing, footwear, and furniture industries “so that in the coming years all needs of the Soviet population are fully satisfied.”⁷ The improvement of everyday life is further elevated into a geopolitical instrument. As Soviet wages, housing, and amenities climbed, workers and peasants abroad were expected to compare their own lot with Soviet prosperity and to turn against their capitalist rulers—thereby converting domestic consumption into a weapon of ideological propaganda.

Among the surviving drafts of this party program, one annotation in Stalin’s hand offers a blunt verdict on the continuing utility of classical Marxist teleology. Midway through Manuilsky’s text the author paraphrased, almost verbatim, Friedrich Engels’s celebrated prediction that, once communism had achieved material abundance, “the state of the transition period will wither away... administration of people will give way to administration of things; the machinery of state power will be consigned to a museum beside the spinning wheel and the bronze axe.” Lenin had already canonized the passage in his work “The State and Revolution”, and Manuilsky inserted it as a flourish that linked the projected Soviet trajectory to the orthodox canon.⁸ Stalin’s reaction, scribbled twice in the margin opposite the quotation, was as short as it was sweet: “Ha-ha-ha.” The brevity is itself eloquent. Writing in August 1938—after the Anschluss, during the Spanish Civil War, amid skirmishes with Japan on the Far Eastern frontier—Stalin dismissed as naive the notion that the Soviet Union could dispense with armed force or state coercion at the very moment when global conflict loomed. The sarcastic annotation signals more than irritation with Manuilsky’s rhetoric; it crystallizes Stalin’s strategic judgment that the Marxist—Leninist promise of a stateless future had no operational relevance for a polity girding itself for global war.

The episode illuminates the internal hierarchy of priorities that shaped Manuilsky’s abortive 1938 Program. Heavy-industrial expansion and military preparedness were non-negotiable; visionary claims about the disappearance of

⁶ RGANI, F. 3, Op. 22, D. 107, L. 110–112.

⁷ RGANI, F. 3, Op. 22, D. 107, L. 117–118.

⁸ RGANI, F. 3, Op. 22, D. 107, L. 83.

the state were, at best, metaphors to be indulged in calmer times. By mocking a text sanctified by Engels and Lenin, Stalin effectively placed national security above doctrinal continuity, giving the drafting commission an unmistakable signal: the new program should anchor its legitimacy in material power, not in the eschatology of a withering state. In retrospect, the marginal “Ha-ha-ha” stands as the moment when the utopian core of classical Marxism was finally and irreversibly subordinated to the geopolitical imperatives of the USSR.

Elsewhere, Manuilsky was equally innovative. As noted above, his draft recasts the Soviet citizen not as a self-denying ascetic but as the beneficiary of the party-state’s productive triumphs. Shorter working hours and wider access to material goods were to be promised once heavy industrialization had laid the requisite material foundations. Indeed, these two agendas are presented as mutually conducive rather than mutually exclusive. By establishing “the cheapest and best products in the world” as a formal target, Manuilsky signaled that consumer production had become a metric of socialist superiority, on a par with steel tonnage or electrification rates.

Institutionally, the program project also performs a novel function. Whereas the 1936 Constitution recorded the status quo of socialism as having been achieved, the prospective program sketches a binding economic and social horizon some two decades ahead. It operates simultaneously as a mobilization charter for the defense sector and as a social contract assuring society ever-rising welfare. Few contemporary states—capitalist or socialist—attempted to legislate so distant and integrated set of production and consumption targets within a single planning document.

In sum, the 1938 Manuilsky draft embodies a dual imperative characteristic of the Soviet idea in the late 1930s: relentless preparation for conflict and the simultaneous promise of popular affluence. Heavy industry and military capacity appear as the indispensable shield behind which a society of abundance will emerge; rising consumption, in turn, was expected to fortify domestic morale and erode the legitimacy of capitalism abroad. The draft thus foreshadows later Soviet efforts to present the Party as provider as well as guardian, demonstrating that, even on the eve of war, the leadership sought to reconcile the demands of an industrial-military frontier with the aspiration to make Soviet citizens “live better and more joyously” (Simonov, 2019).

In later sections of the draft the promise of abundance moves decisively from the industrial workplace to the context of everyday life. Having justified rapid heavy-industrial growth as the sinews of national defense, the text turns to the countryside and announces the party’s intention to raise the “cultural level of the kolkhoz village to that of the socialist city.”⁹ This rural transformation was to begin with housing: the familiar wooden or mud huts with thatched roofs were to be replaced by architecturally “attractive” stone dwellings equipped with running water, bathing facilities, sanitation, electricity, telephones, and radio. Such specifications convert Stalin’s slogan “life has become better, life has become more joyous” into a concrete blueprint for Soviet modernity. The peasant is no longer cast as a patriotic ascetic, but as a future resident of a fully serviced, hygienic, and technologically connected household.

⁹ RGANI, F. 3, Op. 22, D. 107, L. 90.

The same logic of planned affluence extends to the sphere of per capita consumption. Declaring that the party will “strive for the transition to the free provisioning” of basic goods and services, the draft identifies bread as the first commodity to be supplied at zero cost, to be followed—as social wealth rises—by vegetables, dairy products, meat and fats, as well as communal utilities, public entertainment, and eventually clothing and footwear.¹⁰ Distribution of free goods and services is not presented as a distant utopia; according to Manuilsky, it is directly linked to the projected upswing of socialist agriculture and industry. The party thus commits itself to converting productive success directly into tangible, universal benefits, anticipating the welfare-state rhetoric that would later dominate postwar discourse.

Housing policy receives equally expansive treatment. The draft calls for a “massive turn” in construction so that every family would enjoy a bright, spacious flat “equipped with all cultural conveniences,” including scientifically rationalized communal dining, automated laundries, and modern clubs, libraries, nurseries, and shops.¹¹ The apartment block of the future is envisioned as both a domestic sanctuary and a node in a wider ecosystem of mechanisms designed to harness household labor and expand leisure. Health provision follows the same integrative principle: according to the draft program, the party pledges to extend the USSR’s network of medical clinics, lengthen life expectancy, and raise birth rates, making the population’s health a measure of socialist progress.

These passages reinforce the dual logic discussed above. Heavy-industrial production and military preparedness remain paramount, yet they are justified not by ascetic sacrifice but by the promise of rapidly expanding welfare. In effect, the draft forges a new social contract: the population will endure intensified industrial mobilization in exchange for a future of material plenty and cultural uplift. By embedding that bargain in this party program proposal—rather than in ordinary legislation—the leadership sought to elevate welfare commitments to the same normative plane as ideological doctrine and defense imperatives. The result is a more ambivalent synthesis: a prewar Soviet blueprint that seeks to wed the martial priorities of an insecure great power to a far-reaching vision of mass consumption and social entitlement, positioning the state simultaneously as protector and generous provider, yet one in which Stalin also voiced skepticism about the most radical elements of this utopianism—such as eliminating differences between town and country, transforming patterns of consumption, and sharply reducing the working day.¹²

Whereas Manuilsky supplemented his industrial-military agenda with an elaborate commitment to consumer entitlement, a competing draft prepared by Mitin and Yudin adopts a noticeably sparer welfare idiom. Like Manuilsky, the authors anchor their argument in the Marxist proposition that “the highest productivity of social labor guarantees abundance” and will eventually permit the principle “from each according to ability, to each according to need” to operate in full.¹³ Yet the route to that abundance is plotted almost exclusively through the accelerated growth of productive forces.

¹⁰ RGANI, F. 3, Op. 22, D. 107, L. 117.

¹¹ RGANI, F. 3, Op. 22, D. 107, L. 120.

¹² RGANI, F. 3, Op. 22, D. 107, L. 190–193.

¹³ RGANI, F. 3, Op. 22, D. 107, L. 139.

The economic section opens with a catalog of infrastructural imperatives—mass electrification, comprehensive mechanization and automation, an expansion of the chemical industry, modernization of transport networks, and the conversion of agriculture to a “large-scale industrial footing.” Only after this litany of heavy-industrial projects did the drafters concede that light and food industries must, at a later stage, “grow at ever-increasing speed, gradually outstripping heavy industry,” so as to supply the necessary volume of consumer goods.¹⁴ In other words, the consumption turn is acknowledged, but as a derivative effect of an overwhelmingly production-centered strategy.

Mitin and Yudin’s timetable for social benefits is correspondingly restrained. The party, they write, may within the next decade move to the free provisioning of bread and meat and begin preparing public dining, laundries, and other communal services free of cost. No broader catalog of household amenities, rural reconstruction, or cultural facilities is laid out, however, and the transformational rhetoric of telephone lines, running water, and automated laundries that animates Manuilsky’s text is absent here. Welfare, according to Mitin and Yudin, was to serve as an indicator that the USSR’s industrial engine had accelerated to cruising speed rather than as one of the actual drivers of that acceleration.

Both drafts thus share the late-1930s conviction that the USSR must strengthen its economic sinews before class conflict reaches its projected climax, and both envisage the eventual abolition of monetary exchange. The divergence lies in emphasis. Mitin and Yudin treat consumer abundance as the logical consequence of victorious industrialization, whereas Manuilsky frames it as an integral part of both economic development and mobilizational propaganda. The coexistence of these alternatives inside a single Politburo file underscores the fluidity of prewar program thinking: agreement on the strategic primacy of heavy industry coexisted with debate over how boldly the party should pledge near-term improvements to everyday life.

This tension would resurface in every subsequent attempt to draft a new program. Whether welfare was to serve as a mobilizing promise in the present or as a deferred dividend of industrial triumph remained unsettled—yet the very act of inscribing either version into a prospective party program showed that mass consumption had entered the repertoire of Soviet statecraft alongside steel, electricity, and armaments.

In the immediate aftermath of the victory in the Great Patriotic War in 1945, Stalin returned to the long-deferred task of designing a new program for the party, entrusting day-to-day stewardship to Zhdanov and four editorial brigades. The brief was clear: to translate the war’s lessons into a postwar blueprint. As in the prewar iterations, the primacy of heavy industry was reaffirmed—not as a doctrinal reflex but as an inference from the conflict itself, which had demonstrated that the sinews of national power were forged in steel, electricity, chemicals, and transport. The new drafts therefore projected a further surge of capital construction, comprehensive electrification, an enlarged chemical complex, and the modernization of rail and automotive transport, with agriculture to be drawn more tightly onto an industrial footing. As before the war, consumer welfare played a role in the discussion, but now there was general agreement that the industrial

¹⁴ RGANI, F. 3, Op. 22, D. 107, L. 152–160.

core would secure both strategic autonomy and a material base for elevating mass consumption. In short, the postwar project centered the program on a key lesson of the war: that industrial capacity was the decisive precondition for sovereignty, security, and, ultimately, communist abundance. As Trushkov (2018) observes, the Zhdanov project confirms the party leadership's dual preoccupation with industrial might and living standards. Archival drafts and minutes reveal the leadership's attempt to codify, within a one-party charter, both the geostrategic logic of the security state and the social priority of the welfare state.

A revealing point of departure is Stalin's reaction to a formula proposed by Mitin and Yudin in their new 1947 draft. Their program proposal defined the USSR's decisive economic task as the imperative to "catch up and overtake the most advanced capitalist countries, including the USA," a wording Stalin curtly dismissed in the margin with the notation "Not that."¹⁵ The reprimand was not merely stylistic. Mitin and Yudin had diverged too strongly from a contemporaneous Agitprop "Program Outline" that had already specified the benchmark: "to catch up and overtake the main capitalist countries... in the production of goods per capita."¹⁶ Surpassing capitalism was to be demonstrated not by aggregate volumes alone, but by what was made available to each Soviet citizen to personally consume.

That orientation is most visible in the final 1947 redaction of the program. There, the leadership states that solving the main economic task would both create the very abundance required for the transition to communism and, in the process, ensure economic independence, raise defense capability, and shield the USSR from any "eventualities" connected with the capitalist encirclement.¹⁷ This clause bound welfare, sovereignty, and security into a single program logic: per capita plenty becomes both the material of communism and the armor of the socialist state.

Equally striking is the explicit sequencing of industrial priorities. The final 1947 draft declares that once a powerful heavy-industrial base is established, it will be both possible and necessary—while preserving the prominent role of the heavy-industrial sectors—to "sharply increase" the volume and priority of economic sectors producing goods for consumption.¹⁸ This explicit mention of light industry sought to transform Soviet discussions of consumer plenty from propaganda into policymaking.

The minutes of Zhdanov's August 1947 working group on the program show how contentious this transition proved in practice. Dmitry Shepilov urged that the program should prioritize social and cultural needs—education, health, cinemas, resorts—a ranking that caused Voznesensky to retort brusquely: "first cinemas and sanatoriums, and then bread?" Konstantin Ostrovityanov insisted that while consumption needs related to primary necessities (above all bread) should be satisfied as soon as possible, talk of "a culture of abundance" was conceptually tone-deaf, especially in regard to the outside world. "How will they understand this abroad?" he asked.¹⁹ The exchange captures a genuine dilemma:

¹⁵ RGASPI, F. 558, Op. 11, D. 123, L. 34.

¹⁶ RGASPI, F. 77, Op. 125, D. 476, L. 7.

¹⁷ RGASPI, F. 629, Op. 1, D. 128, L. 34.

¹⁸ RGASPI, F. 629, Op. 1, D. 128, L. 36.

¹⁹ RGASPI, F. 77, Op. 4, D. 18, L. 13–14, 17–18.

should communism's promise be realized first through public services or at the kitchen table?

The final text of the program resolved the issue in favor of Ostrovityanov and Voznesensky. It mandates a gradual shift from labor-based distribution to need-based distribution, but only as “economic possibilities” permit, proposing to accomplish it through the steady growth in real wages and systematic consumer goods price reductions. The sequencing is unambiguous: food first (bread, meat, sugar, vegetables, fats), then essential industrial goods, and then finally the full range of consumer products. Personal accumulation and ownership of consumer goods for private and household use is explicitly retained, and the growth of these patterns of consumption is described as a driver of production itself.²⁰

Taken together, these materials show that the Zhdanov-era program did more than just echo the prewar pledges of abundance. It recast the party's program as a long-range script for governance linking per capita benchmarks to state security, rebalancing industry toward the consumer, and specifying a formally staged route from wages-and-prices to needs-based provision — and, unlike Manuilsky's more radical 1938 blueprint, this more modest version elicited no recorded objections from Stalin. In embryo, the architecture that Khrushchev would later metricize is already present here: socialism's legitimacy is said to rest on individual consumption patterns, and the program is designed to make that claim both quantifiable and auditable.

If Zhdanov's rebalancing of the covenant toward consumer industry marked a structural turn, the most revealing commentary on its cultural and normative implications comes from theses circulated by a group led by Georgy Aleksandrov. Strikingly, these authors proposed that the party should sponsor the production not only of staples and durables but also of automobiles, musical instruments, high-quality clothing and footwear, porcelain and crystal, furniture made from precious woods, jewelry, and other items that “adorn life, satisfy diverse individual tastes, foster new cultural habits and needs, and educate the all-round personality.”²¹ In other words, the program was to engage in questions of taste and fashion: socialism would prove itself by cultivating refined consumers in addition to eliminating scarcity.

The reaction within Zhdanov's working group to this proposal was instructive. Yudin dismissed the passage as ill-conceived — an ornamental list unsuited to such a fundamental document.²² Petr Fedoseev, one of Aleksandrov's coauthors, conceded that the section was poorly written — above all, there was a failure to indicate that only “staple foods” at minimal cost would be secured within five to ten years.²³ Such objections did not simply police rhetorical excesses; they probed a deeper problem that haunted all of the program drafts: how was the USSR to reconcile the provisioning of rising needs with the politics of egalitarian credibility?

The drafts prepared at Zhdanov's request crystallized the fault lines. In their subcommittee discussions, Shepilov pressed for a clear statement that the communist

²⁰ RGASPI, F. 629, Op. 1, D. 128, L. 39–40.

²¹ RGASPI, F. 77, Op. 4, D. 18, L. 42–43.

²² RGASPI, F. 77, Op. 4, D. 18, L. 41.

²³ RGASPI, F. 77, Op. 4, D. 18, L. 49.

principle of distribution should be considered a leading issue, yet he also implied that public services—education, health, leisure—ought to head up the transition.²⁴ Ostrovityanov countered that high cultural needs are born “on the basis of bread” and argued that the first goods to be distributed for free according to need should be staple foods. He warned, moreover, against conceptual inflation: one cannot “distribute culture according to need,” and such careless phrasing would invite ridicule from abroad.²⁵ The exchange makes visible the tension between the program’s two registers: socialist civilization demanded communal public services while socialist legitimacy required private household goods.

The second line of debate concerned the status of personal property under a socialist regime moving toward needs-based provisioning. Ostrovityanov insisted that the growth of material needs is itself a “highly progressive factor,” the very motor that would drive new branches of production. That said, he rejected any romantic claim that labor would become a game, or that individual material interests might disappear.²⁶ Mitin, for his part, cautioned against formulations that seemed to promise the unlimited accumulation of personal property under communism. What ought to grow is consumption, he argued, not property as such; otherwise one might risk communism being depicted as a “society of wealthy private proprietors.”²⁷ Here the commission confronted a definitional crux: how to affirm the individual’s material horizons without reinscribing a proprietorial ethos that was at odds with the communist telos.

The resolution to this issue was eventually codified in the final redaction of the 1947 program draft. The text retains the stress on private ownership of articles of personal consumption and household use while making two principled innovations. First, it anchors the transition to need-based distribution in material preconditions—high productivity, the abundance of consumer goods, and a rise in “communist consciousness”—and mandates it to occur only gradually, according to actual economic opportunities. Second, it elevates the growth of consumption to doctrinal status as a driver of production itself.²⁸ In effect, the program acknowledges that socialist modernity requires not only more production, but the cultivation of more differentiated desires, even as it polices the language of ownership to avoid bourgeois connotations.

Read alongside Zhdanov’s industrial rebalancing, the Aleksandrov episode clarifies the conceptual horizon of the late-1940s program project. The party leadership sought to support popular tastes without legitimizing ostentation; to promise refinement without abandoning the primacy of basic necessities; and to cater to personal interests without dissolving the collective. The resulting formula—which tracked needs rising in step with productivity and consumption shifting from staples to mass-demand items—offered a coherent governance script. It prepared the ground for Khrushchev’s later metric turn by articulating, with unusual candor, that communism would be judged not only by steel and sovereignty, but by what Soviet citizens might reasonably expect to own, use, and enjoy in their everyday lives.

²⁴ RGASPI, F. 77, Op. 4, D. 18, L. 43.

²⁵ RGASPI, F. 77, Op. 4, D. 18, L. 45.

²⁶ RGASPI, F. 77, Op. 4, D. 18, L. 45.

²⁷ RGASPI, F. 77, Op. 4, D. 18, L. 47.

²⁸ RGASPI, F. 629, Op. 1, D. 128, L. 42.

8. Economists enter the drafting room

The revival of program-writing under Khrushchev differed from earlier Stalin-era attempts in one structural respect: it drew systematically on the expertise of the USSR Academy of Sciences. A revealing case is a 1958 memorandum submitted by Anushavan Arzumanyan, Director of the Institute of World Economy and International Relations, to Leonid Brezhnev, then the CPSU Secretary responsible for economic questions.²⁹ Arzumanyan begins his memo with a blunt axiom: the central economic task of the USSR is to “catch up and overtake the United States in per capita output of the most important industrial and agricultural products.” Unlike the prewar program drafts, which subordinated welfare to heavy-industrial production, this memorandum treats relative living standards as the primary metric by which socialist success must be gauged. To operationalize that goal, the author proposes a battery of statistical indicators—labor productivity, national income, gross industrial and agricultural output, the energy endowment of production, and, crucially, “the level of the population’s material and cultural life.”

The memorandum then itemizes a list of tangible, naturally measured benchmarks: textiles, footwear, household machines, radios, televisions, refrigerators, washing machines; grain, milk, meat, fish, eggs, sugar, vegetables, and fruit.³⁰ These commodities are not illustrative but constitutive: their per capita availability was to serve as a public scoreboard in the Soviet—American rivalry. The logic is explicit: once the USSR had equaled or surpassed the United States and the leading West European economies according to these indicators, Soviet citizens would enjoy a “sharp leap” in material and cultural welfare, thereby confirming the superiority of socialism.

Two conceptual shifts set Arzumanyan’s argument apart from the 1938 and 1947 drafts. First, the economist treats welfare as an independent variable of legitimacy rather than a deferred dividend of industrialization. Second, he introduces a moral corrective to simple statistical comparisons: because socialism does not allow for the “parasitic” appropriation of national income, Soviet per capita consumption should be judged against the working-class share of American consumption, not against an unadjusted national average that includes bourgeois extravagance. Thus, the memo embeds an egalitarian calculus into international benchmarking, tightening the link between social justice and geopolitical prestige—something that, in practical terms, also put American standards of living within more immediate reach of Soviet economic development.

By circulating such material to Brezhnev—and through him to the program commission—academic economists like Arzumanyan helped to translate Khrushchev’s rallying call to “overtake America” into a quantifiable and auditable matrix of welfare targets. In the process they redefined the function of the party program: no longer merely a political covenant, it had become a technocratic template whose fulfillment could be charted year by year on the basis of refrigerators, kilograms of meat, and television sets per capita. The Arzumanyan memorandum therefore marks a decisive step in the “scientization” of the party’s program,

²⁹ RGANI, F. 5, Op. 30, D. 254, L. 49–94.

³⁰ RGANI, F. 5, Op. 30, D. 254, L. 67–68.

shifting the axis of competition from blast-furnace tonnage to the measurable comforts of everyday life and entrenching in society the idea that the party's future authority would rest on its ability to institutionalize—and to deliver—quantified promises of mass prosperity.

9. The 1961 Program between ideology, welfare, and Cold War competition

Post-Stalin politics required a new grammar of communication between the rulers and the ruled. The leadership needed a medium through which it could promise—and be seen to deliver—material improvement without relinquishing either ideological primacy or administrative control. The Third Program, adopted at the 22nd Party Congress in 1961, answered precisely those needs. It translated the evolving moral economy of socialism—already noted by contemporaries who spoke of a society that wanted to raise consumption levels—into a system of quantifiable and auditable commitments. In doing so, it reframed the party's bond with citizens: not simply as that of a revolutionary vanguard, but as a ledger of welfare guarantees to be honored within a defined event horizon (Fokin, 2017).

The turn to living standards did not emerge *ex nihilo*. By the mid-1950s, large-scale reforms and an expanded repertoire of social programs had already made social policy a principal instrument of regime stabilization. The Program formalized that trajectory in quasi-constitutional language. It set per capita benchmarks for foodstuffs and durables, announced the intention to eliminate the housing shortage, and linked shorter working hours to an expanded network of services associated with an urban, industrial way of life. These commitments were framed comparatively: the text invited evaluation against the advanced capitalist world and envisaged a Soviet standard of living that would at least match, and in some passages surpass, Western levels. In this sense, the Program articulated a consumer-centered vision of socialist modernity, while simultaneously reserving for the Party the authority to define the relevant indicators and the timetable of their fulfillment.

At the same time, Khrushchev's public statements insisted on a hierarchy of ends that insulated the project from crude economism. At the 21st Party Congress in 1959, he warned against equating communism with the simple escalation of wages; instead, the essence of the transition lay in the organization of production and distribution so that human needs were satisfied as a matter of social right rather than market reward. The program adopted that stance by distinguishing between the rate of production and the rate of consumption, explicitly coordinating the latter with the former. The sphere that “creates value for the satisfaction of human needs” was declared the decisive arena of development; yet the text also reiterated a classic injunction of scientific communism: growth in collective provisioning should cultivate solidarity, not officially sanctioned indulgence. Luxury and caprice, coded as the residue of the exploitative classes, marked the moral boundaries of legitimate desire.

Rather than a stable “settlement,” this formulation amounted to a precarious compromise. On paper it combined an obligation to deliver rising, measurable well-being—more meat and milk, textiles and footwear, household appliances and housing—with the claim that such gains would be channeled through mechanisms that reaffirmed collective purpose, from price reductions and social funds

to a gradual shift from distribution “according to labor” toward “according to needs” as productivity and “communist consciousness” advanced.³¹ The result was a technocratic script that sought to instruct citizens how communism would be built in the idiom of kitchens, laundries, and leisure, but that also rested on untested assumptions about the feasibility of simultaneously expanding consumption, preserving egalitarian distribution, and maintaining high rates of accumulation.

In retrospect, the 1961 Program stands at the intersection of three projects: a welfare state without an electoral mandate, a consumer modernity disciplined by socialist ethics, and a planning regime accountable to a comparative audit. It was at once a social contract and a didactic text, promising per capita comforts while policing the line between legitimate needs and bourgeois excess. That duality—consumption as validation of socialism and as an instrument of socialist social engineering—was not an inconsistency but the very mechanism by which the post-Stalin leadership sought to secure popular consent in an age in which prosperity, no less than production, had become the currency of state legitimacy.

At the center of the 1961 Program stood a deceptively simple proposition: the immediate economic task was to build the material and technical base of communism. Khrushchev’s own emendations drove the point home, insisting that “the sphere in which value is created for the satisfaction of human needs is the principal sphere³²”—it was the hinge on which progress toward communist distribution would turn. In public he rendered the same thought in vernacular form—what his son later paraphrased as a rejection of any “trouserless communism”: abundance, not mere redivision, would legitimate the social contract. Yet the program was not only a plan; it was a mobilization script. It sought to enlist the subjective factor—the Soviet person—as the principal productive force, and to teach that person how individual aspirations would align with the party’s long-term commitments. In that sense, the document’s intended audience was also its intended instrument.

The pathway was articulated as a two-stage scheme. First came a catch-up phase in which the USSR would equal or surpass the leading capitalist countries in labor productivity and in per capita output of goods. Only then, in the approach to the “higher phase” of communism, would the deep social transformations occur: the attenuation of inherited distinctions, the training of most manual workers to become engineering technicians, and the attainment of an output level sufficient to supply all members of society with consumer goods in quantities adequate to satisfy their needs. The sequencing here is crucial. Consumption is promised expansively, but its pace is governed by the growth of productivity and the planned remaking of the labor force itself.

The program also located those promises within a theater of performative competition. Khrushchev’s 1959 visit to the United States, and the domestic echo of slogans about “overtaking America in meat and milk,” sharpened an already extant intuition: legitimacy in the post-Stalin era would be adjudicated in kitchens and on the street no less than in blast furnaces. One can reasonably infer that the communism this document envisioned was to look like American affluence under Soviet political tutelage—a horizon of refrigerators, well-stocked larders,

³¹ RGASPI, F. 586, Op. 1, D. 201, L. 34.

³² RGASPI, F. 586, Op. 1, D. 201, L. 34.

and well-maintained housing, as well as public guarantees and socialist distribution. The text's practical ambition was to identify the levers—an upgraded industrial structure, a modernized agriculture, expanded public services—through which that standard could be reached and regularized.

There was, however, a tension at the core of this covenant. The program promised rising per capita welfare but relied on a developmental system that, in the civilian sphere at least, remained largely imitative. Much of the command economy's technological progress still followed a pattern of emulation, importation, and reverse engineering; organizational routine was believed to satisfy the plan more readily than risk-bearing novelty. In effect, the program promised to win a competitive race whose course it helped to define, but with a team that was trained to follow rather than lead. This did not negate the credibility of the commitment—targets could be, and for a time were, approached—but it did saddle the system with contradictions: between the bravado of ambition and more sober incentive structures, and between the timetable for rising consumption and the tempo of technological change.

Seen in this light, the Third Program sought to square a circle. It married a rigorous doctrine of material preconditions to an ideology of rising needs; it made citizens the authors of the material base even as it cast them as beneficiaries of its dividends; and it transformed the public Cold War rivalry into a ledger of private household goods. The ambition was clear: to make affluence the vernacular of socialism without relinquishing the command economy. The difficulties were equally clear: how was the USSR to sustain that vernacular under a planning regime that was not designed to generate innovations on which its comparative abundance would ultimately depend?

The 1961 Program's promise to build communism “in the main” by 1980 reframed utopia as a schedule of deliverables. Rather than reflecting the ideas of Efremov or Strugatsky brothers (famous Soviet science-fiction writers), the text specifies a practical, auditable social compact: a shorter working day; good housing with the lowest rents in the world; decent clothing; well-fed, well-cared-for children; free education with state stipends; universal medical care free of charge; ample retirement pensions; and the abolition of personal taxes within five years. The emphasis was not on a metaphysical “transition” but on a complement of material rights and amenities that defined, in concrete terms, what life under late socialism ought to be like. “In the main” thus signals a threshold logic: once a stipulated set of living-standard indicators was attained, the further development of communism would consist of their consolidation and extension, not in a qualitative leap of social being (Fokin, 2017).

This logic was operationalized in the Proposals on the Prospects for the Development of the National Economy (1960), where consumption—not production—became the baseline metric. An array of “scientifically grounded norms” translated the program's rhetoric into per capita entitlements: meat intake was to climb per capita from about 32 kg (38% of norm) in 1958 to 85 kg (100%) by 1975; eggs from 113 (28%) to 394 by 1975; sugar from 25.4 kg (59%) to 43 kg by 1980; vegetables from 74 kg (48%) to 148 kg; and fruit from 10 kg (10%) to an extraordinary 106 kg by 1980. Conversely, bread and potatoes—which were consumed at levels far above the recommended per capita diet—were to fall to 120 and 103 kg, respectively, to be replaced by higher-value foods. The same

arithmetic governed durables: refrigerators, washing machines, and cars were slated to increase thirty- to forty-fold. With a planning coefficient of 3.2 persons per household, televisions, radios, refrigerators, and sewing machines were envisaged for every family by 1980; washing machines were expected to reach most families as well. This family-level granularity is telling: kitchens, wardrobes, and leisure are all audit points within the program's ledger of success.³³

This private household arithmetic sits uneasily alongside other elements of collectivist design that the same documents continue to advance. A seven-fold growth of public dining, laundries, and dry cleaners coexists alongside ambitious targets for household refrigerators and washing machines. This begged the question: if the home is to possess all the means for food preparation and clothes washing, why also expand communal services so dramatically? Equally, the promise of ubiquitous television and radio sets privileged family-centered leisure at the very moment that the state was investing in mass cultural infrastructure. These tensions do not merely betray inconsistencies in the program's drafting. They instead expose the party leadership's absence of a settled imaginary for the future of communist everyday life and, in response, a hedging strategy: plan for both private appliances and collective provisioning, with the assumption apparently being that practice would decide where the equilibrium would prove sustainable.

Two further aspects deserve emphasis as well. First, Soviet citizens are cast less as active consumers than passive ones. Norms specify how much fruit they ought to eat, how many garments they should own, and what appliances they should possess. The human subject is maximally rationalized without enjoying real agency; the dignity on offer is that of a guarantee that general needs will be satisfied rather than individual preferences. Second, production, distribution, and consumption are fused into a single calculus. To avoid shortages or surpluses, the planning apparatus commits to producing exactly what will be consumed and to shaping consumption patterns so that they fully exploit what has been produced. This had the unintended effect of creating a system so lockstep as to discourage spontaneity or creativity in problem-solving. It promised stability and equality, but at the price of suppressing the downtime and unpredictability where innovation, variety, and taste often emerge (Bakanov and Fokin, 2019).

Read together, the Program and its Prospects can be interpreted as an attempt to produce a moral-technical script for "communism in the main": a threshold of audited well-being, specified in calories, garments, and appliances per person, to be reached by fixed dates and subsequently treated as normal. On paper, the use of measurable indicators promised clearer benchmarks against which officials and citizens alike could judge performance. At the same time, the design exhibited significant structural weaknesses. It left unresolved the basic choice between prioritizing collective infrastructures and private equipment; it assumed that a single, scientifically derived bundle of goods could represent the heterogeneous and evolving preferences of a large society; and it encouraged planners to equate the specification of norms with effective control over production, distribution, and consumption. In practice, these features limited the Program's capacity to guide resource allocation and to accommodate uncertainty, even as they raised expectations that the announced standards would be met.

³³ RGAE, F. 7, Op. 3, D. 71, L. 5–9.

From the standpoint of economic theory, however, the Program's reliance on a single, codified set of "scientifically grounded" consumption norms exposes a series of fundamental limitations that qualify any tendency to treat it as an internally coherent welfare charter. Aggregating heterogeneous and evolving household preferences into a fixed vector of target quantities presupposes a degree of stability and commensurability that modern demand theory itself has struggled to justify: the attempt to translate the "needs of the Soviet people" into a canonical basket obscured the diversity of income constraints, life-cycle patterns, and regional conditions that shape actual consumption choices, and it left no systematic way of incorporating preference shifts driven by technological change or cultural differentiation. At the same time, mid-twentieth-century Soviet and Western economics did not offer planners a practical theory of demand for many goods at once: there was no widely accepted way to describe how households would allocate their budgets across a large bundle of goods as incomes and prices changed, and thus no solid basis for translating the normative consumption norms into consistent sectoral output targets and relative prices. The Program thus rested on a fragile theoretical bridge between macro-level promises and micro-level behavior: while it endowed the leadership with a highly visible dashboard of indicators, it also created what might be called an "illusion of control," in which the specification and periodic revision of consumption norms were taken to imply mastery over a complex, interdependent system whose informational and incentive problems remained unresolved. In practice, precisely those features that made the Program attractive as a metricized covenant—its concreteness, its numerical precision, its apparent transparency—simultaneously limited its capacity to guide feasible allocation decisions and to accommodate uncertainty, thereby hardening aspirational targets into rigid constraints that planners could neither fully rationalize nor credibly adjust.

10. Conclusion

In this article we argue that the Soviet party program operated as a strategic charter—a metricized sovereignty covenant—that complemented, rather than duplicated, the constitutional order. Whereas the Soviet constitution codified the achievements of the institutional present, the program bound the polity to a predictable and auditable future, converting esoteric ideological aspirations into a ledger of welfare commitments whose fulfillment could be measured in kilos of meat, square meters of fabric, and household appliances per person. This division of labor within the Soviet social contract made the program an unusually powerful instrument of rule: it clarified priorities for planners, signaled intentions to citizens and foreign observers, and supplied a common vocabulary through which the center and periphery could negotiate obligations.

The political economy of this arrangement was Janus-faced, however. On the one hand, quantified promises functioned as a credible-commitment device in a one-party state without electoral mandates: by correcting the perennial problems of economic supply and demand, they helped to stabilize the post-Stalin transition and to link ideological legitimacy to civilian living standards rather than mass coercive sacrifice. On the other hand, the very act of inscribing per capita benchmarks at the quasi-constitutional level produced path dependence. Once

per-household refrigerators, food supply, and housing norms had been elevated to the level of litmus tests for the regime, policy space was dramatically narrowed. Reformers between the 1960s and 1980s therefore faced a dilemma familiar to politicians in competitive electoral democracies: commitments that legitimize today become grounds for impeachment tomorrow. Future attempts to reallocate investment, liberalize prices, or stimulate innovation risked conflict with the program's social contract of satisfied needs.

The program also formalized a distinctive vision of consumer-centered modernity under socialist auspices. It promised both communal infrastructure (public dining, laundries, medicine, and education) and an expanding repertoire of private, domestic comforts (refrigerators, washing machines, televisions), without resolving the tension between the collectivist and private idioms of the good life. That ambiguity was politically expedient—different audiences were encouraged to hear what they liked—but it was also prohibitively costly, requiring the plan to fund overlapping forms of provisioning and to choreograph production, distribution, and consumption in a closed circuit that left virtually no room for variety or innovation. In this sense, making ideology quantifiable in material terms delivered clarity and discipline in the short run, but at the price of increasing brittleness and obsolescence over time. It also pushed the more utopian vision of communism—a fully egalitarian, propertyless order without a state-controlled economy—so far into the background that it became almost impossible to imagine in practical terms.

A further clarification follows from this analysis and bears directly on how the Program conceived of welfare. Soviet planners understood the socialist “welfare state” as operating primarily through the price system and the mass availability of cheap consumer goods, rather than through an ever-expanding architecture of cash transfers and social insurance. Pensions, universal health care, education, and employment guarantees were already institutionalized by the early 1960s; what the Third Program added was a commitment to narrow remaining inequalities by raising the supply of key consumption goods while progressively lowering their prices. In this respect, the Soviet approach differed from the canonical capitalist welfare state, which seeks to mitigate market-generated inequality by taxing higher incomes and redistributing resources to the poor through targeted benefits. In market economies, welfare policy remains a corrective superstructure built on top of structurally unequal capitalist relations; in the Soviet case, by contrast, the absence of a competitive market and private ownership meant that social justice was to be realized by engineering a more egalitarian consumption bundle for all through planning and price policy. This made the socialist route to welfare appear more direct, but it also meant that the state assumed undivided responsibility for any shortfalls: when shelves were empty or norms unmet, there was no “market failure” to blame, only a visible failure of the Party's own metricized promises.

Comparatively, the Soviet case illuminates a broader dynamic of simultaneous authoritarian durability and fragility. Many nondemocratic regimes seek popular legitimacy; few, however, elevate welfare metrics to the level of foundational doctrine and then yoke them to twenty- or thirty-year horizons. Where they do, three lessons follow. First, metricized governance can substitute for electoral mandates, but only while growth and administrative capacity can sustain produc-

tion targets. Second, the realizability of those targets must be managed: when measures become unrealizable, they invite cheating, misreporting, and misallocation. Third, promises of permanence require some provision for consumer flexibility—an institutionalized way of revising benchmarks without signaling failure. The Third Program had many strengths as an instrument of mobilization and communication, but it lacked any mechanism for course correction.

Analytically, recasting the program as a metricized social contract invites a re-centering of the historiography on Soviet modernity: one that treats welfare egalitarianism, technocratic calculation, and Cold War benchmarking as co-constitutive rather than ancillary to ideology. It also opens a comparative agenda: to trace how other one-party states and developmental autocracies have used quantifiable social promises to sustain rule, and with what consequences for course correction and reform. The larger claim, then, is not simply that the USSR promised refrigerators; it is that it institutionalized this promise—binding itself to an auditable future that secured consent while it lasted, and constrained change when it faltered.

Acknowledgements

The article was prepared as part of the RANEPА state assignment research program.

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