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## **Iryna Skubii**

PhD in History, Candidate of Sciences in History

Mykola Zerov Fellow in Ukrainian Studies

The University of Melbourne

Grattan St., Parkville Victoria 3010, Melbourne, Australia

Email: [iryna.skubii@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:iryna.skubii@unimelb.edu.au)

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9349-8933>

### **SOVIET MATERIAL CULTURE AND ITS (UN)SEEN TEMPORALITIES**

Book Review: Deschepper J., Kalashnikov A., Rossi F., eds.

Time and Material Culture: Rethinking Soviet Temporalities.

Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2025. 276 p.

*This review gives a summary of the edited collective volume and places it in the context of studies of Soviet material culture and time. The review highlights the main themes showcased in the book, such as material objects, space, communism, clothes and fashion, museums, accommodation, and architecture, all drawn together with the idea of time and its representation in material culture. While paying attention to insightful theoretical*

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*and methodological contributions by the editors and authors of the volume, the review invites readers to think further about the meanings of material objects and their temporality in geographically diverse regions of the Soviet Union in historical and contemporary contexts.*

**Keywords:** Soviet, time, space, material culture, temporality.

The book reviewed here starts with an introduction featuring Vasyl Yermilov's<sup>1</sup> work «Memorial Plaque», which he created for an anniversary of Lenin's death in 1924. The editors — Julie Deschepper, Antony Kalashnikov, and Federica Rossi — state that Lenin's death joined the Marxist «chronology as a central event» and «marked down a new stage of history on its glorious march to the utopian communist future» (Deschepper, Kalashnikov, Rossi 2025, 2). Yet, what is more striking is that Yermilov used the Ukrainian language to mark this crucial date in the communist history. Looking at it from a today's perspective opens another view on meanings of culture and language in the «communist future». It is even more striking now — amid Russia's war against Ukraine, when the city where Yermilov lived and made this plaque, where the first Ukrainian centre of contemporary art (named after him) is situated<sup>2</sup>, is constantly being hit by Russia's weapons. So, when reading this collective volume, it is hardly possible not to ask oneself such questions as: What does Soviet materiality means today? What are its visible and un(seen) temporalities of its meanings? What do we actually know about the significance and time frame of Soviet material objects, as well as of how they could be manipulated? How has this temporality changed in recent years, and particularly during the war waged by the former Soviet centre against one of its former constituent republics? Even though these questions are not directly discussed in the book, still, the reader would think (at least I thought) about them while reading one chapter after another. This exercise seems to converge with the main goal of the collective monograph — to rethink Soviet temporalities — included in its title.

The edited volume unites under its cover texts on a broad range of subjects concerning material culture, time, and space. Each chapter focuses

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<sup>1</sup> In their introduction, the editors use another version of the artist's name — Iermilov.

<sup>2</sup> “About”. The Yermilov Centre: website. URL: <https://yermilovcentre.org/about/> (accessed: 10.02.2025).

on a particular material object, while the book as a whole intends to analyse time and space in the visual arts, architecture, films, literature, and fashion. The book's theme pertains to one of the most vibrant interdisciplinary fields in Soviet studies and the humanities overall, namely material culture studies and the history of time. Though both fields are already well-researched, the book allows us to see new perspectives and rethink Soviet temporal and material orders<sup>3</sup>. The editors made an effort to represent diverse regions of the vast Soviet Union through a careful selection and curation of chapters on Belarusian, Ukrainian, Georgian, Russian, and Central Asian history. However, the majority of studies are predominantly based on Russian language sources, reflecting the current state of the field, which has only recently began to engage with the totality of diverse language landscapes.

The book consists of eleven chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion (both provide a helpful framework for the collective effort). The first part — texts by Heather D. DeHaan, Nastia Volynova, Julie Deschepper, and Nelly Bekus — is built around alternatives, dissonances, and disjunctions in Soviet time and material culture space. The authors aim to understand alternative temporalities of Soviet history by exploring such spaces as Baku after the Second World War, the Great Volga project in the context of rapid industrialization, Soviet heritage «popularization» in Brezhnev's period, and socialist architectural projects in Minsk after the Second World War respectively. This section walks the reader through pieces of Soviet time, scattered between several geographical, urban, and ecological spaces, all fixated on the idea of reshaping in order to serve the ideological and economic goals of the party.

The second part focuses on representation, imaginations, and narratives. All four chapters in this section look at how materiality is mirrored in non-material settings through ideas, space, and time. The authors, Reed Johnson, Ekaterina Knoblauch, Sofia Dyak, and Federico Marcomini, study representation of time in posters, film-making objects, architecture,

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<sup>3</sup> For a novel interpretation of Soviet domestic space and time shown with the example of Russia, see: Friedman R. *Modernity, Domesticity and Temporality in Russia: Time at Home*. London New York Oxford New Delhi Sydney: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022. 240 p.

and nomadic housing. In this part, Sofia Dyak's entry presents a unique view of the Soviet materiality by comparing it with the pre-Soviet one. This chapter focuses on two city-planning projects in Lviv before its incorporation into the Soviet Ukraine. Unlike many other cities, Lviv didn't suffer much destruction during the Second World War (Deschepper, Kalashnikov, Rossi 2025, 125). Dyak suggests the metaphor of «accommodation» to understand how the city and its residents adjusted themselves to the Soviet reality (Deschepper, Kalashnikov, Rossi 2025, 126).

The third part touches upon bodily experiences with materiality, their perceptions and representations. Looking at items in a personal wardrobe, on a fashion catwalk and in a literary museum, James Rann, Ekaterina Kulinicheva, and Olga Voronina respectively unpack meanings of the body and their temporality in various personal items. The authors aptly illustrate how one's overcoat, a bust of a poet, or fashion in general could be viewed as something that «stitches» the time(s) together, makes a famous person sacred, or engages with multiscale industrial temporalities. While Rann's and Voronina's chapters draw on examples that represent the centre, Kulinicheva's chapter looks at both the inside/inner and outside/global contexts of Soviet fashion and its cultural landscapes. Nonetheless, this section leaves the reader with a desire to learn more about the multiplicities of perceptions of time on the Soviet «periphery».

The book ends with Alexey Golubev's insightful conclusion on the matter of time and historical transformations of materiality. Indeed, it is hard to disagree with Golubev that historical objects are «anything but innocent witnesses to the past», nor are they passive (Deschepper, Kalashnikov, Rossi 2025, 256). He looks at how historical objects and structures leave their mark on societies that outlived a historical period, how the past occasionally shows their attachment to several time scales, or as he himself puts it, how historical events can be both synchronic and diachronic (Deschepper, Kalashnikov, Rossi 2025, 256). In fact, the book as a whole is also a vivid and material example of diachronicity, as proven by the continuing presence of Soviet materiality through written words and ideas, resulting in what Golubev calls «conflicting historicities» (Deschepper, Kalashnikov, Rossi 2025, 256), when objects from different times coexist in one physical reality.

Reflecting upon the book and its themes, one could continue to consider the human side of relationships with material objects and time under the Soviet rule: Who used those objects? Who lived in those urban projects? Who read those political posters? Who saw those amateur films? Who could actually afford the socialist fashion? Who bought magazines and advice literature on fashion? Who bought magazines and advice literature on fashion? Who could actually afford the clothes advertised? Who could actually purchase the clothes advertised? Thinking that this would open up another set of stories of inequality in the Soviet society regarding access to food, clothes, housing, and museums. From this perspective, one could see another dimension of relationships with material culture and time, another time scale, when some national, regional, and indigenous areas lagged behind the centre and its vision of time and space. Asking such questions can show us that it was not in fact about ownership but rather about admiration, imagination, and adjustment to what was available.

As a scholar of Soviet Ukrainian consumption and material culture, I was impressed with the variety of theoretical views on and methodological approaches to Soviet materialities and time. The book will be of particular interest to anyone starting to explore the ways in which material culture can be viewed in the context of time. Yet, being a scholar from and of Ukraine, I believe that there is still more to be explored or at least raised in the discussion on that subject. Though the book addresses different spaces and alternatives, dissonances, and disjunctions in the chronopolitics of (pre-)Soviet material culture landscapes, its main focus is centred on the urban space. The only partial exception is Federici Marcomini's chapter on the temporalities of nomadic architecture in Central Asia (Deschepper, Kalashnikov, Rossi 2025, 146–163). The fixation on urban spaces seems quite obvious, given that the Soviet state and communist ideology strove to build a «socialist city» and its utopian future, inscribed in the very names of such projects<sup>4</sup>. However, when

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<sup>4</sup> One of the «socialist city» projects was implemented in Kharkiv, then the capital of Soviet Ukraine. «New Kharkiv» was built around the Kharkiv Tractor Plant in 1929–1933, that is, during the major famine of 1932–1933, known as the Holodomor. On «New Kharkiv», see *Socialist City New Kharkiv. Konstruktyvizm Kharkiv*. URL: <https://constructivism-kharkiv.com/obiekty/63-26-45-sotsmisto-khtz> (accessed: 05.01.2025).

considering the forced collectivization of agriculture and the sedentarization of nomadic peoples, one can find many examples of dramatic transformations of temporalities in rural spaces across the Soviet Union, particularly in the «peripheral» republics. Thus, the reason why such vast landscapes remain outside the scope of the book lies in a much stronger representation of the urban history in the Soviet studies scholarship and the lack of specialists in rural history. Lastly, one might ask what kind of story we would like to tell and hear about the Soviet society and its relationships with material culture and time. Obviously, the story of peasants and everyday relationships with time and material objects would be much more dire given the history of the Soviet famines, particularly devastating in rural areas of Ukraine, Kazakhstan, Moldova, and Russia (the Volga region, North Caucasus, and the Don oblast). Still, the focus on material culture is a timely endeavour given Russia's war against Ukraine, a vivid and tragic consequence of the long and violent dissolution of the Soviet empire.

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## **Ірина Скубій**

докторка філософських наук з історії, кандидатка історичних наук  
наукова дослідниця з українських студій імені Миколи Зерова

Університет Мельбурна

Вул. Граттан, Парквілл Вікторія 3010, Мельбурн, Австралія

Email: iryna.skubii@unimelb.edu.au

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9349-8933>

### **РАДЯНСЬКА МАТЕРІАЛЬНІСТЬ ТА ЇЇ ЧИСЛЕННІ ТЕМПОРАЛЬНОСТІ**

Рецензія на книгу: Deschepper J., Kalashnikov A., Rossi F., eds.

Time and Material Culture: Rethinking Soviet Temporalities.

Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2025. 276 p.

*Це рецензія пропонує огляд редакційної колективної праці, ставлячи її в контексті студій з історії радянської матеріальної культури та часу. Огляд висвітлює основні теми, які розглянуті у книжці, такі як матеріальні речі, простір, комунізм, одяг та мода, музеї, житло та архітектура, кожна із яких поєднана між собою ідеєю часу та його репрезентації у матеріальній культурі. Крім уваги до цікавих теоретичних та методологічних підходів редакторів та авторів цієї публікації книжковий огляд запрошує читачів до подальших роздумів над значеннями матеріальних речей та їхніх темпоральностях у різноманітних географічних просторах та регіонах Радянського Союзу як в історичному, так і сучасному контекстах.*

**Ключові слова:** радянське, час, простір, матеріальна культура, темпоральність.

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