

## John Bushnell

**Sergei I. Zhuk. *Rock and Roll in the Rocket City: The West, Identity, and Ideology in Soviet Dnepropetrovsk, 1960–1985*. Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson Center Press; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. xvii + 440 p. ISBN 978-0-8018-9550-0.**

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At one level, Sergei Zhuk tells the story suggested by the title—that of the arrival of rock music in the Ukrainian city of Dnepropetrovsk, which was closed to foreigners from 1959 onward. Zhuk repeatedly asserts that, because the city was off-limits to Westerners (many of whom, in Zhuk’s telling, came to the Soviet Union bearing rock music), the city’s rock fans had only limited access to rock records. Especially in the early years, they or their black market providers travelled to other cities, above all L’viv (a cultural emporium because of the number of visiting Poles), to obtain stock. Nevertheless, the history of rock music in Dnepropetrovsk followed the same trajectory as in “open” Soviet cities: jazz arrived in the mid-1950s, the Beatles by the mid-1960s, then heavy metal; in short, musical tastes followed Western trends, with an admixture of official and unofficial Soviet bands. As elsewhere, rock fans used whatever means they could to record and rerecord whatever they could get their hands on (including, interestingly, taking advantage of local facilities that recorded “musical greeting cards”). As everywhere, rock music was what young people wanted to listen and dance to and what musicians wanted to play. Despite efforts by Komsomol and cultural officials to ensure that Soviet tunes had priority, the public more or less got what it wanted, often with the connivance of these same officials or through the musical black market that seems to have operated out in the open and to have been subjected to serious harassment only occasionally. When commercial dance halls opened, the sponsors had a commercial interest in providing the music patrons desired. Because Zhuk conducted interviews with participants (fans, culture officials, former black marketers, and a former KGB agent) and because he has drawn on local police, Komsomol, Communist Party, and other documents, he is able to provide a comprehensive map of the many ways in which young people in Dnepropetrovsk acquired Western music and information about their favorite bands, official efforts to offer a domesticated alternative, and the countervailing efforts of cultural organizations to exploit the market for rock music.

But Zhuk goes beyond this familiar story in a number of ways. In the first place, he sketches a social history of rock music, drawing in part on surveys conducted by local cultural organizations. He presents this history as a tale of dual decline: from musically complex jazz to primitive but danceable *popsa*, and from intellectually elite

jazz aficionados to ill-educated working-class youth who encountered rock music only in the 1970s. Zhuk suggests that rock reached the masses late because they did not live in dormitories where tapes circulated and could not afford what was offered on the black market. This is a plausible hypothesis; however, since almost all of his sources on consumption come from the upper rungs of the intellectual hierarchy, he has no first-hand information about what working-class youth were listening and dancing to in the 1960s. And it is at least suspicious that Zhuk associates “democratization” with a surge in bad taste; it appears that his standard of “good” rock music is what his own generation favored in their youth.

Zhuk also has a great deal to say about the institutional context, indeed the institution building, associated with rock music. At different times, clubs, dance floors, discotheques, cafes, and restaurants were opened as venues for music and dance, their purpose being both to cater to and to monitor and control young people’s musical interests. The controls were generally subverted, while the institutions became sources of income for sponsoring organizations. Commercialization became particularly important during the perestroika years, when the Komsomol profited from both ticket sales and (above all) alcoholic beverages. Much of the profit was diverted into Komsomol organizers’ pockets (apparently as much for organizational as personal benefit) and became an important source of entrepreneurial capital in the late-Soviet and post-Soviet years. This latter story is broadly familiar, but Zhuk provides illuminating detail about the Dniepropetrovsk case.

Rock music, as Zhuk shows, was about much more than music and dance: it had social, institutional, and economic effects. Zhuk also points to the intersection of rock music and religious revivalism in and around Dniepropetrovsk, effected by the rock opera *Jesus Christ Superstar*, which caused many fans to seek out information on the underlying Bible story. More interestingly, Zhuk credits rock music culture—including not just Western music but Soviet bands and Western and Soviet movies that featured rock music and musicians—with Russifying Dniepropetrovsk’s young people. Chapters two and three of Zhuk’s study deal with efforts by university students and intellectuals to promote Ukrainian language and culture during the 1960s. They understood post-Stalin cultural liberalization to include the resuscitation of Ukrainian culture. By the late 1960s, arrests and publication bans had ended that effort, but of course could not alter private sentiment. It was rock music, according to Zhuk and his informants, that undermined Ukrainian language and culture. While amplified Ukrainian folk rock enjoyed brief popularity as a component of the approved Soviet alternative to Western rock, Russian became the dominant language of local rock bands and came to be perceived as the language of cultural modernity. Ukrainian was associated with provincialism, so Ukrainian youngsters ceased to speak and read it.

While Zhuk’s history of rock music is a very important contribution to late-Soviet social and institutional history—in that respect, it goes well beyond other studies of rock music in the Soviet Union—it does have faults. It is needlessly repetitive. Zhuk often gives the impression that he believes in the literal truth of almost everything his informants and police documents tell him. I’m sure he knows better, but he uncritically repeats, for example, police statements that particular movies or

particular music produced youth crime waves, or a Komsomol report arguing that listening to foreign radio increased youth alcohol consumption by 35 percent. Police treatment of the rock-music black market—located in plain sight on the city’s main street—remains unexplored. Zhuk reports only a single serious effort, in 1972, to shut it down. Can that actually have been true? Politics plays no role in Zhuk’s history of rock culture. Rock musicians in Leningrad and Moscow believed that their music was inherently oppositional, that it was a vehicle for truth as against Soviet falsehood, and many of their fans had the same attitude. In Zhuk’s account, in Dnepropetrovsk those ideological overtones were for the most part absent. It is interesting that a 1968 KGB survey of local letters sent to foreign radio stations (requesting particular songs, for instance) discovered no negative remarks about Soviet society. KGB and other officials were deeply suspicious of rock music (or pretended to be: by the 1980s many of them shared the musical tastes of the youngsters they monitored), but, on Zhuk’s evidence, rock fans did not think their favorite music amounted to social or cultural critique. If this is true, that may have been because they lived in a society saturated with rock music. Perhaps. However, I do think that part of the appeal of rock music was not that it was anti-Soviet but that it was un-Soviet: too exciting to be Soviet. That is, that it was an ontological alternative to everything Soviet.