



BRILL

## Book Review



Sergei Zatravkine and Elena Vishlenkova, *“Kluby” i “getto” sovetskogo zdra-  
vookhraneniya* [*“Clubs” and “Ghettos” of Soviet Healthcare*] (Moscow: SHIKO, 2022),  
pp. 352, \$30.00 (hardback), ISBN 978 5 907348 26 4.

The Soviet Union stood out as the most prolific producer of historical national self-mythology, even among the totalitarian states of the twentieth century. While most of these myths were critically analyzed, shattered or altogether dispelled in the last three decades – at least in Western academia –, that of Soviet healthcare has until recently remained largely intact. There is still a strong popular belief that the USSR developed a healthcare system that was ubiquitous, efficient, just and completely free of charge. This standpoint is equally shared by medical professionals, historians of medicine, and more broadly by members of the public. That is why, unlike other iconic Soviet subjects, such as industrialization, free education, science, technological progress or mass culture, studies in the history of socialist medicine have not identified any serious paradigm shifts. This is not to say that major historiographical trends were completely ignored. Some novel methodologies did penetrate this discipline, but such influential approaches as the social and cultural history of medicine, global health, transnational history, or even subaltern studies were only tangential to its solid core, which rests on a fundamental premise that Soviet healthcare was among the best in the world, a novelty with which the Soviet healthcare organizers enriched world medicine.

The new book by Sergei Zatravkine and Elena Vishlenkova, published in late 2022, signifies a radical change in the traditional scholarly account of Soviet healthcare. It would not be an exaggeration to say that this monograph has already sparked tectonic shifts in the tight Russian community of historians of medicine. Titled *“Kluby” i “getto” sovetskogo zdravvokhraneniya* (“‘Clubs’ and ‘Ghettos’ of Soviet Healthcare”), the book marks a seminal watershed in the historiographical tradition: from encomium or, at least, varying degrees of recognition of the merits of the Soviet healthcare, to a deconstruction that strips

it down to its ideological Bolshevik kernel, exposing an underlying medium of political manipulations beneath a mythologized humanistic crust. This long-awaited study features novel research optics and a thorough fact-based critical approach to the most iconic attributes of Soviet healthcare, from ideological principles and organizing methods to canonical texts of Soviet history of medicine, and from medical statistics to organizational models of socialist healthcare throughout the entire Soviet period.

From the very outset, this book implies controversy, and has hence promoted much debate. The title reflects the key conceptual frame of the whole study. Pierre Bourdieu's sociological optics used for research on enclosed and contrasting social spaces, metaphorically expressed as "clubs" and "ghettos," strips Soviet healthcare of its trusty ideological shell of medical humanism, self-denial, and martyrdom, revealing a grim environment underneath, in which medicine was utilized as an instrument of control, coercion, and manipulative co-optation.

The book consists of three chapters. Chapter 1 meticulously examines the shaping of the image of Soviet healthcare. Chapter 2 reveals the inner workings of mass healthcare of "the Soviet style" with all its problems and deficiencies. By contrast, Chapter 3 leads the reader into the oasis of well-being, which was what was enjoyed by those few who could access Kremlin medicine. By juxtaposing the Soviet mass (or "ghetto") healthcare and the elitist ("club") Kremlin medicine, Vishlenkova and Zatravkine masterfully bring the title metaphor into effect, much to the benefit of the entire volume.

Chapter 1 is the conceptual "spearhead" of the study, strategically venturing deep into the mechanics of mythmaking, from fluid fundamental principles of "socialist medicine" to purposes and methods of distorting medical statistics to attempts at the creation of canonical texts to shape a general mold of Soviet history of medicine and, simultaneously, the core of the existing scholarly community in the field. The authors skillfully combine official published sources with valuable and previously unknown archival documents from the Semashko Institute for Public Health, the former headquarters of historical myth-making in the field. Zatravkine and Vishlenkova take us on a depressing, yet extremely illuminating journey into the evolution of the heroic epic of Soviet healthcare, revealing political reasons that previous scholars could only guess at, but now have a good opportunity to see and assess for themselves.

Chapter 1 is, in my view, the strongest, most important part of the monograph. Zatravkine and Vishlenkova convincingly show how the consecutive stages of political regression of the Bolshevik regime caused deterioration of the seemingly promising Semashko model from the moderately optimistic "red medicine" of the 1920s to segregational "class medicine" of the 1930s. It is to the

authors' credit that they managed to explain not only the internal logics of this pitiful downfall, but paid due attention to the personalities behind these processes. Paraphrasing the notorious catchphrase of the Stalin period, every process described in the book acquired a name, family name, and patronymic.

The last subsection of Chapter 1 features a thorough analysis of how "narrative molds" of the history of Russian medicine were made. Not only is this part a true gem of the entire book, it is an important breakthrough in the whole discipline. Aptly using their access to the archives of the Semashko Institute, the authors illustrate the attempt to create a canonical text for the history of Russian medicine with intricate details exposing political mimicry and motives of the would-be apostles of the late-Stalin era. This valuable insight into the inner workings of the key ideological forge of Soviet history of medicine is both timely and thought-provoking. As per my understanding, it also indirectly explains why the authors abstain from a historiographical debate: they illustrate the extent to which the corpus of Soviet historiography of medicine is itself biased and unreliable.

If Chapter 1 forms the conceptual framework of the study, Chapter 2 is its empirical backbone. This chapter studies the basis of Soviet healthcare – medicine for the masses, or the "ghetto" as the authors view it. Here Zatravkine and Vishlenkova enter a field fraught with controversies, difficult to negotiate. The ground on which they tread is unsettled, and it bristles with highly debatable issues, from the choice of primary sources and subjects, to the choice and use of statistics. However, the authors manage to escape most traps, creating a convincing and informative, if somewhat linear and monotonous, panorama of the real state of grassroots Soviet healthcare. The accents in Chapter 2 are cleverly placed on the key issues of drug shortages, the quality of medical institutions, services and cadres, the healthcare reforms of the late 1940s through to the mid-1960s, and the stagnation and decline of the medical sphere during late socialism. The abundance of statistical tables, which may be confusing to the untrained eye, tells a different story to an eye of a historian of medicine. The statistics, deliberately taken only from the official Soviet publications, demonstrates a paradoxical degradation of the Semashko model in the country for which it was originally intended. The authors stress the fact that Soviet biopolitics was completely irresponsible and unsustainable where the masses were concerned, and I can hardly disagree with this standpoint.

Yet, as the authors demonstrate, the USSR did, indeed, manage to create a state-of-the-art European healthcare. Only it was very small in size and completely segregational by nature. Vishlenkova and Zatravkine call the "Kremlin medicine" the "club medicine," as Bourdieu's binary frame suggests. In Chapter 3 they utilize methods borrowed from ethnography, social and cultural

anthropology, heavily relying on ego-documents. Plausible and efficient in our thematic context, these research tools have not yet been utilized to full capacity. The memoir section begs to be expanded, while such things as interviews have been totally excluded. However, Zatravkine and Vishlenkova skillfully use another important primary source – caricatures. While these deceptively simple sources need dedicated analysis in a separate book, in this monograph they serve important ends: they highlight topical issues in the “ghetto” of Soviet healthcare, break up the monotonous character of some parts and, finally, compensate for the perceptible paucity of “grass-root” reactions usually expressed in such documents as complaints and letters to the editors.

In my view, Chapter 3 was intended as a crescendo of the whole book. It surely is, but not without some minor dissonances. Convincingly portraying Kremlin medicine as an oasis of health, well-being, and longevity for a handful of top Communist officials, the authors also view it as the key instrument of Soviet medical “soft power” on the international stage. Here is where I disagree with them. The Kremlin medicine was a carefully guarded resource, accessible only to a loyal handful of foreign Communists, and as such, it reached something of a climax in the last two decades of the USSR. By the time the Kremlin medicine was ripe, the USSR had already actively used medicine as a “soft power” tool in Asia via the People’s Commissariat for Health. Soviet hospitals had already spawned as far away from the borders of the USSR as Hejaz and Yemen. On the other hand, the authors’ account of Kremlin medicine as a means of internal co-optation, a “soft power” instrument for domestic purposes, is original and plausible.

The book by Zatravkine and Vishlenkova is a long-awaited top-quality critical enquiry into the history of Soviet healthcare. Hopefully, it will prove to be a catalyst not only for discussion in the Russian community of medical historians. I anticipate it to mark a watershed between historiographical traditions: between the history of Soviet healthcare as a heroic epic and the objective deconstruction of Soviet medical practices down to their deepest and most disguised subtexts. The monograph also clearly demonstrates the huge potential for collaborative projects between historians of medicine and those with more involved medical backgrounds.

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