

Masses Taking Over The Square Soviet Festival Culture

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The ordered occupation of public space by the masses played a central role in the rituals of the Soviet state. Drawing on a long Russian tradition of holidays, they meant to present an incontrovertible picture of the happy marriage between leaders and citizenry. But they may also have lead to the economic collapse of the Soviet Union.

Reviewed: Мальте Рольф, *Советские массовые праздники (Soviet Mass Festivals)*, Moscow, ROSSPEN, 2009 (translation of *Das sowjetische Massenfest*. Hamburg, Hamburger Edition, 2006).

The Russian translation of Malte Rolf's monograph *Das sowjetische Massenfest*, published by ROSSPEN publishing house in its reputable *History of Stalinism* series, should prove beneficial to both the book and its readers. Making the book available for readers outside of the small circle of metropolitan polyglots, it also gives Russian historical science, traditionally strong on facts and figures but ill-disposed towards theoretical sophistication, an example of a happy marriage between a thorough empirical research and an ambitious theoretical agenda. Rolfe's book makes extensive use of Russian provincial archives, as well as dozens of interviews with local survivors of Stalinism, and puts Soviet mass festivals at the crossroads of history, sociology and anthropology.

Malte Rolf's style, happily preserved in V. Altukhov's elegant translation, eschews the traditional division between concisely formulated "theoretical" postulates and their extensive empirical "proofs" (or "refutations"). Following a clearly (but not *too* clearly) signposted route, it flows smoothly, highlighting difficulties and offering solutions at hand. In contrast to the majority of historians, Rolf takes it upon himself to scrutinize key concepts necessary to the definition of the place of mass festivals in social life. Having sketched out the general theoretical framework suitable for describing Soviet mass festivals, he then moves on to define their systemic and genealogical specificity against the backdrop of Russian and Soviet history.

Between Theatre and Ritual

Firstly, Rolf is concerned with assigning their proper place to such festivals in the existing taxonomy of social performances. Rolf correctly points at the heterogeneous nature of Soviet public gatherings, which recycled various forms of ritualistic and theatrical events (p. 8). One can only wish he had pressed this issue somewhat further. Indeed, the difference pointed out by Roy Rappaport between theatre (where performances are temporary limited, roles routinely exchangeable, and outcomes have no direct bearing upon human life) and ritual (where such limitations are largely nonexistent), seems important enough to merit further discussion and perhaps more detailed classification as well.

Secondly, Rolf tries to present ritual at the intersection of power and society. To be sure, this is a formidable task, and any attempt at ridding this perennial dichotomy of its usual inconsistencies and almost ubiquitous tautologies should be commended. Nevertheless, his definitions of power and society seem to rest, at least in part, on essentialist premises which hinder the development of the multi-dimensional context in which he tries to locate the events he is writing about. In particular, describing society as a system of communicative environments *outside* of the Soviet state and party apparatus is tantamount to denying any spontaneous, unscripted or deviant interaction within Soviet institutions. Rather improbable from a theoretical standpoint, this supposition is also hardly compatible with the materials collected, for instance,

by Lorenz Erren, who has shown that even the local party meetings in 1930s could quite substantially deviate from script.¹

Other theoretical inquiries in the book concern the usefulness of such notions as “political religion” (rightly discarded as a mere metonymy possessing low explanatory value), and “cultural memory”—which the author deems potentially useful but never actually employs in the book, due perhaps to the fact that, despite all efforts of communication specialists from Howard Innis to Michael Giesecke, we are still far from any systematic knowledge of the storage and transmission of information in social systems (p. 14, 295).

Finally, Malte Rolf points at the crucial and often overlooked problem hindering our understanding of totalitarian society: the fact that the self-representation of the Bolshevik and Nazi leadership is often confused with its popular perception (p. 294). Rolf vows to remedy this situation by looking closely at the interiorization of ritual practices in individual experiences (p. 22). Unfortunately, following well-trodden path, Rolf looks for such interiorizations mostly in autobiographical narratives, which tend, for various reasons, to replicate official models, leaving us in a vicious circle charted but never transcended by idealist philosophy.

Marching Through Buildings

Early revolutionary holidays, with their scenes of uncontrollable looting, drinking and mobbing of “power representatives” (any passer-by who could be associated with the “old order”) (p. 64, 240) hints at Eleusinian mysteries, the liberating power of which Vyacheslav Ivanov, a symbolist poet and philosopher intimately acquainted with the culture of Ancient Greece, strove to recreate in Soviet mass theater. The topsy-turvy world of the first post-revolutionary mass gatherings also points to Mikhail Bakhtin’s somewhat overused notion of carnival: a temporary suspension of the earthly and heavenly hierarchy which does not blow the world apart, because it preserves the platonic duality of ideal truths, albeit in an inverted way (no masquerade would succeed if the masks’ signifieds, be it the devil or a priest, were not

¹ Lorenz Erren, “Stalinist Rule and its Communication Practices: An Overview,” In Kirill Postoutenko (ed.), *Totalitarian Communication: Hierarchies, Codes and Messages*, 2010, Bielefeld, transcript-Verlag, 2010, p. 43-66.

recognizable). Clearly, quite a number of early revolutionary artists with a modernist pedigree enthusiastically subscribed to this vision of carnival; see, for instance, Alexander Blok's poem *The Twelve* or Sergei Eisenstein's movie *October*.

To his credit, Rolf treats these and other fictional genealogies of Soviet mass events *cum grano salis*, focusing instead on the specific role of the festivals in Soviet social life. He closely follows the gradual unification and stabilization of Soviet holiday calendar in 1920s-1930s, which ultimately became impervious even to the large-scale calamities such as the purges of 1937-1938 (p. 10, 114, 202). It seems obvious that such a degree of stability would have been unthinkable without the bureaucratic rationalization planned by Bolshevik leaders and achieved, fittingly, by an anonymous army of mid-level party managers (p. 26). This *Gesamtkunstwerk* of sorts encompassed both the process of festival *preparation* (hanging out flags, building temporary tribunes, rehearsing orations etc.) and its media *post-production* (p. 224): generating and spreading standardized expectations beforehand and offering their ideological packaging afterwards, the state-controlled media were apparently entrusted with valorizing participation *en masse* without leaving too much room for individual views and practices. As for what happened between those stages—the festival itself—there seemed to be a clear sequential order where the ideologically relevant and principal part (columns marching through city centers next to the tribunes sitting state and party officials) was followed by “spontaneous” festivities (concerts, films, and dance) aimed at channeling positive and negative emotions, which could have otherwise lead to the Dionysian extravaganzas discussed above.

Malte Rolf is careful to highlight the gap between this totalizing ideology of national unification and the actual participation record, which reflected, for instance, the failure of Bolshevism to win the countryside. Indeed, starving peasants stood away from Bolshevik festivities, and such principal Soviet holidays of the 1920s as the Day of The International Solidarity of Workers, the International Women's Day and the Day of The Paris Commune were generally not observed in the villages (p. 169, 189, 196, 199-200).

The Totalitarian “Economics of Expenditure”

Rolf’s most significant achievement lies in the meticulous reconstruction of the allegorical function played by mass Soviet festivals in Bolshevik ideology. Reminding of the significance of the medieval mystery plays, the power of Soviet rites was apparently so profound that even the local topographies had to adjust to it: in Voronezh, a provincial capital, the central square—the focal point of Soviet festivities—was fittingly renamed after the 20th anniversary of the October revolution and embellished with Lenin’s statue (p. 152). In Novosibirsk and Moscow, churches that happened to stand in the way of the marching crowds were demolished (p. 155), and the never-built gigantic Palace of Soviets was planned in such a way that the festival processions could march straight through the building (p. 155-156). Even more important were the dynamic allegories: as the collective fetish—the “masses” taking over major public spaces—symbolized the victory of Bolshevism over counter-revolution, ceremonial scenarios centered on immovable, silent party leaders standing in the tribunes and graciously accepting greetings of enthusiastic crowds mirrored the power relation between semi-transcendental, silent man-gods on the top and their numerous, mutually interchangeable followers (p. 160-302).

Rolf’s analysis becomes even more convincing as he demonstrates the deep entrenchment of Soviet mass festivals in the communicative asymmetries of the totalitarian state. The ever-widening semantics of the term “holiday” in the Soviet Union, which in the 1930s could refer to just about anything from elections to life in general, effectively intensified the pressure upon ordinary citizens (required to actively demonstrate their loyalty on numerous occasions) and leaders (forced to respond by distributing cash prizes, free sanatorium vouchers and other forms of protection against the perennial shortages of the Soviet economic system (p. 162, 164, 219)). Inevitably, in a system where traditional forms of empowerment such as election or heredity were destroyed or degraded (p. 324), mass festivals were increasingly seen “from above” as loyalty checks. They resulted in mobilization campaigns, coercion, sanctions for non-attendance and—if everything else failed—statistical manipulations of participation data (p. 95-96). “From below”, a Soviet holiday was seen as a rare chance to extract economic or other symbolic capital from the state, which, in its turn, could hardly afford to put its systemically relevant omnipotence into doubt (p. 224).

Only briefly suspended in 1921-1927 during New Economic Politics, which saw festivals' budgets shrink substantially (p. 84), this ruinous "economics of expenditure"² gradually made the Bolshevik state and Soviet economy fall apart, although it seems doubtful that planned economy, coupled with media monopoly, could have tolerated any more efficient system of redistribution. Supported by copious archival research, this interpretation looks highly convincing, and the only possible disclaimer concerns the degree of its applicability to other similar contexts. Having presided over a much more activist and personalized cult than the Stalin, Hitler could not confine his public performance to the role of "immovable mover" merely glancing at "masses" from a pedestal-like tribune.

Russian Festival Culture

Rejecting at the outset the simplistic translation of politics into the terms of religion, the author of *Soviet Mass Festivals* could hardly avoid discussing interrelations between Soviet secular and Russian religious holidays. Given the rich tradition of accommodating polytheist rituals by Christianity in general and its Orthodox version in particular, it is not unexpected to see the partial transfer of some general reverential practices—such as the veneration of "icons"—from religious to state absolutism: indeed, the huge portraits of state leaders were a staple of each and every Soviet demonstration. More surprising is the survival of religious holidays—irrespective of particular confession—in the private calendar of both educated and uneducated Russians. Wolf's data reveals the superiority of the Christian festive calendar over the Soviet one for much of the 1920s, and their more or less peaceful coexistence thereafter (p. 12, 208, 235). The perception of Bolshevik festivals as "sectarian" processions by Russian peasantry long after the revolution is also of some interest (p. 237): considering the long and stormy tradition of religious dissent in Russia, one could see this categorization as logical from the peasants' standpoint, particularly given the fact that it was shared by such outspoken advocates of Bolshevism as the American communist John Reed.

² In the words of George Bataille (Bataille, G. « La notion de dépense » [1933], *Œuvres complètes* I, Paris, Gallimard, 1970, p. 302-20).

Last but not least, Malte Rolf undertakes an ambitious and extremely well-informed comparison between totalitarian mass festivals in the Soviet Union, Germany and Italy. Fortunately, his analysis does not stop at superficial similarities typically mentioned and commonly overemphasized by scholars: rather than invoking a Russian *Sonderweg* over and over again, he traces the development of Russian festival culture back to its initial Europeanization carried out by Peter the Great (p. 41). Malte Rolf is very successful in demonstrating the gradual isolation of the Soviet festival model achieved through the aggressive monopolization of European revolutionary symbols and “unquestionably positive beliefs” such as “truth” or “freedom” (Teun van Dijk).³ Neither the Fascist nor even the Nazi state subscribed to such a conceptual autarchy in their symbolic repertoire; Lenin’s contempt for the idea of world revolution and, in particular, his Nietzschean fixation on power for the sake of power, might have been helpful to explain this phenomenon.

Due to its comprehensive grasp, theoretical refinement and stylistic elegance, *Russian Mass Festivals* is a pleasure to read and use in the classroom; for any serious research of 20th century public culture, it is truly indispensable.

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³ Teun A. van Dijk, *Ideology. A Multidisciplinary Approach*, London, Sage, 1988, p.121.