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Celebrations, Complexity, and Contradictions: The Soviet Union on Parade

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Karen Petrone examines the staging, dynamics, and myriad problems of parades in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. Beneath the glossy surface of what might seem to be a cut and dried subject, she finds a host of issues that should provoke new thought and debate about Stalinism and the entire Soviet project. Her book will be of considerable interest for anyone from the level of advanced undergraduate up.

Stalin, whether mouse, man, or monster, presided at least nominally over various campaigns that aimed to transform the USSR. Time after time, these projects had unintended consequences and petered out in a morass of surface compliance, resistance, and apathy. This was true of the prosecutions for theft of socialist property, the drive of 1938-40 for increased labor discipline, and the suppression of jazz, to name a few instances. Karen Petrone adds considerably to our knowledge of campaignism in the Soviet Union in her effective dissection of parades and celebrations, including the Pushkin Centennial of 1937. The USSR was a big, tough country that defeated the German Army, but it could not organize a parade properly. Celebrations "sometimes revealed chaos, inefficiency, and disorder" (p. 4).

As this happened, "Soviet ideologues" could not "control the way that the official discourses they created were used by others or entirely eliminated alternative worldviews." Approved political discourse could also be used to "express alternative, unofficial, and subversive viewpoints" (pp. 2-3). Here Petrone draws on and acknowledges the work of Stephen Kotkin and Sheila Fitzpatrick, for example. But she goes farther to show how even the state at its most celebratory and ritualistic moments could provoke disturbing questions about policy and reality among the citizenry. Some Soviet festivals even became Bakhtinian in their carnival-like reversal of accepted notions of order and respectability. Holiday practices were sometimes "contests over the meaning of the New Soviet Man" (p. 8). (By the way, when will we stop translating *chelovek* as man, and not person?) An example of such contests is the valorization of heroes in a supposedly egalitarian society. In a poignant instance, people of less than highly attractive physical appearance were frequently excluded from prominent positions in parades, leading them at least to question the values of the regime.

Festivals of the 1930s sometimes presented a "stark contrast to reality," for example when they "redefined the end of famine as 'prosperity"' (p. 16). The point is well taken, although Petrone does not consider the impact of advertising and escape films across the globe that portray fantasies hardly corresponding to daily life. Socialist realist art and advertising, as we know, depicted not what was but what was supposed to be.

Citizens, even entire peoples and republics, were used as objects and symbols in parades. Belorussia was reduced to border posts and guards, Uzbekistan to cotton. Georgian women symbolized fertility and submissiveness to Moscow as they offered grapes and tea, which central authorities had ordered them to produce, for public displays. Petrone's point is solid, yet today Uzbekistan continues to produce as much cotton as possible and to use it as a symbol, while the Georgians would love to grow and sell a lot more grapes than they do now. When Middle America elects a Corn King and Queen at a festival, the fact that the idea is a local initiative does not negate the use of women (and men) as symbols to promote a product and even an ideology. Petrone might have extended her comparisons beyond noting that German parades in the 1930s had a much stronger erotic, specifically homoerotic, element than did their Soviet counterparts.

Many official celebrations raised questions or problems. As the state tried to make life more joyous, Petrone notes, it also conducted terror. It lauded not a Soviet au-

thor in 1937, Gorkii having conveniently died, but the greatest prerevolutionary poet, a nobleman. Much of the material produced for the Pushkin celebration was of poor quality, arrived late, or was not available, particularly in the countryside. The plays and stories about Pushkin emphasized that he had been killed by the autocracy, a notion that could have raised questions about the police in the USSR. The poet's brave criticisms of the social and political order received considerable attention. In other new or newly revived kinds of public entertainment, disaster struck–many a fir tree caught fire, causing injuries and deaths, for example. Thus people were left with many opportunities to consider the meaning of events for themselves.

Petrone maintains that such mental processes occurred in an environment without alternative discourses; the state provided the discourse. But in fact millions of people alive in the late 1930s had been adults before the Revolutions of 1917, and there is much evidence that in regard to religion, for instance, they often spoke to younger people about their views. Life itself, as Petrone notes in a number of places, presented an alternative discourse to official views. She discusses some of the satirical work of Mikhail Zoshchenko and notes that it challenged pompous official images, but she does not underscore the ways in which his humor could have helped point to a discourse beyond or counter to official Soviet parlance.

Perhaps the most intriguing section of her work is not on celebrations per se but on the gendered publicity and near worship accorded to aviators and polar explorers. The latter and other adventurers were Soviet male heroes who conquered a "feminized nature." But as they did so, their outlook toward women was not always clear. Otto Shmidt displayed "contradictory and unsoviet feelings toward the women in [his] camp" (p. 72). Ivan Papanin was somewhat feminized on his ice floe because he had to do "women's work," as he put it, in the kitchen. Nonetheless, Petrone comments, the "circle of polar comrades was extended to include the country's leaders," who then formed part of a "super masculine club." Women reached these lofty heights only as pilots, so that the "form of valorizing heroes prevented women from achieving the full status of their male counterparts." It was "harder for females to bridge the enormous gap between citizen and hero" (pp. 63-4).

While women's image became more complex as seen from the ice, air, and forests, some nationalities were dehumanized from the same vantage points. Some contemporary Soviet accounts suggested that the Chukchi were not people, even when they helped explorers or downed pilots.

Much more important in opening new perspectives to Soviet citizens, in Petrone's view, was the Stalinist constitution of 1936. It represented an "enormous change in rhetoric" and a wealth of new ideas. It "tapped into the prerevolutionary discourse" and was an "alternative to Soviet practices" that "destabilized the status quo between local Soviet officials and Soviet citizens" (p. 201). The discussion around the constitution stirred up old resentments by giving rights to priests and kulaks; at the same time, it raised expectations that were not fulfilled.

On all these celebratory fronts, "the bargains [à la Vera Dunham's Big Deal] of the 1930s were constantly undone and renegotiated" between people and state (p. 207). *Life Has Become More Joyous* thus presents a fascinating look at how, even in its most public and publicistic moments, the Soviet state hardly avoided extensive interaction with its people. In that process, much was unexpected, while much else went wrong from the leadership's point of view. The people had to do a lot of thinking for themselves as they sorted out both the images before them and their role in producing or interpreting them. Karen Petrone has provided a rich study, for an area one might have thought would be simple for the state to control, of how and why that was so.

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