H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Brian LaPierre. *Hooligans in Khrushchev' s Russia: Defining, Policing, and Producing Deviance during the Thaw.* Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2012. 264 pp. $29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-299-28744-3.

Reviewed by Stefan B. Kirmse
Published on H-Soz-u-Kult (July, 2013)

B. LaPierre: Hooligans in Khrushchev's Russia

LaPierre's book is a well-written and useful addition to the study of Soviet politics and society after Stalin. Focusing on the development of "hooliganism" as a category of crime, it offers a new perspective on the effects of central policy on people's daily lives and on the ways in which ordinary citizens experienced and helped to shape these policies. LaPierre explains the rise and fall of hooliganism as a mass phenomenon in the 1950s and 1960s in terms of changing definitions of crime and their local implementation and creative adaptation. The book thus exposes the Khrushchev years as a period of confusion, contradiction, and inconsistent judicial practice.

Thanks to its focus on the making and unmaking of petty crime, the book is of equal interest to scholars of high politics and historians of everyday life in the Soviet Union. As it is ultimately about the social construction of deviance, it may also appeal to many sociologists, social anthropologists, and scholars working in the field of cultural studies.

LaPierre begins his discussion with the assertion that hooliganism was an ever-present part of Soviet society. This claim is part of a social constructivist argument for which the author relies on the sociological and anthropological literature on deviance, and labelling theory in particular. Understood in this manner, hooligans were not so much the result of rapid social change, urbanization, and industrialization; nor was the hooligan a demon created by public discourse. Instead, as a highly fluid and flexible category, mass hooliganism was the result of shifting definitions and of the ways in which law-enforcement agents and other individuals used this label in everyday interpersonal encounters. Showing how judges, police, defendants as well as relatives, neighbours, and co-workers of potential and convicted hooligans felt empowered by ambiguously defined laws and used them for their own devices, LaPierre offers a timely challenge to the totalitarian model of Soviet society.

To back up his argument, LaPierre traces the use of hooliganism as a legal category from high Stalinism to the mid-1960s. The confusion surrounding the category and its rapidly increasing application were primarily due to a succession of decrees that complemented each other and left much room for local interpretation. They were linked to the multiplication of the category's meanings (which included ill-defined distinctions between "petty", "simple", and "malicious" hooliganism). They were related to the fact that in the late 1950s many cases of domestic abuse came to be treated as hooliganism. And finally, the mass mobilization of citizens in comrade's courts and auxiliary police contributed to the expansion of types of people and actions considered deviant.

In addition to examining policing, petitioning, and prosecution practices, the book analyzes statistical data on criminal convictions. This analysis not only confirms that the rise and fall of hooliganism as a mass phenomenon were linked to individual decrees and their local implementation but also shows that the hooligan was usually an average person. The vast majority were not regime critics but ordinary people whose formerly innocuous behaviour - cursing, shouting, and pushing people around - was suddenly outlawed. While this argument is persuasive for the most part, it slightly downplays the fact that robberies, street violence, and domestic abuse were often very real.

LaPierre's discussion of the changing treatment of hooliganism over time suggests progression from cautious reform and experimentation to conservative repression. Yet, the narrative is far from linear. First, the author casts doubt on the image of Khrushchev's "Thaw" as a period of liberalization, arguing that greater tolerance in some fields was accompanied by the intensified social disciplining of state-defined undesirables and the extension of Stalinist policing tactics. Popular violence was now considered legitimate and necessary in the battle against hooliganism and thus became an integral part of the work of auxiliary police and comrade's courts. Sec-

ond, LaPierre shows that even though efforts to decriminalize minor misbehaviours and improve rather than isolate convicted hooligans dominated in the late 1950s, soft and hard lines on hooliganism always coexisted.

On the whole, LaPierre interprets the mass persecution of hooligans under Khrushchev as a tool for civilizing the working class, which the party elite claimed to champion but could neither understand nor esteem. The campaign was an attempt to promote a vision of a model society populated by polite, productive, and politically literate subjects.

Regardless of its merits, LaPierre's innovative argument suffers from several shortcomings, especially a number of overambitious claims and the failure to put hooliganism into a broader comparative perspective.

LaPierre offers neither a critical reflection on his sources nor on the way he uses them. In many chapters, he relies on complaints - complaints about hooligans, about the auxiliary police, about the hard line on crime, about the soft line on crime. Yet, he does not address the specific nature and distorting effect of these sources. Writing complaints was part of Soviet communication culture. Judges, local functionaries, journalists, and other citizens wrote them to discredit people, or to gain advantages. Many complaints were driven by expedience. A trained judge's complaint about a comrade's court, or a local press diatribe against lax punishments, served as tools in power struggles and cannot be taken as innocent portrayals of reality. The reader is left to conclude that almost nothing worked in Khrushchev's Russia. A more balanced use of sources, however, may have brought to light very different perceptions, for many people experienced the 1950s and 1960s as a period of pacification and normalization.

The author often draws sweeping conclusions from a few cases (for example, in the sections on prison infrastructure, the fast-track processing of petty hooliganism, or the auxiliary police). The evidence is far too patchy and anecdotal to back up the claim of a return to Stalinism (even a partial one), or the malfunctioning of the law-enforcement system as a whole. Instead, it merely confirms that the Khrushchev era was about experimentation, trial-and-error, utopian visions, and pragmatic attempts to deal with flaws. LaPierre's exclusive focus on hooligans also undermines his generalizations about the bleakness of everyday life in Soviet cities: from the perspective of hooligans, local leisure culture is bound to look drab. What is concealed by this perspective is the fact that many people did not experience everyday life in such a way.

Second, the almost complete lack of comparisons leaves the reader with the impression that there was something intrinsically Soviet about binge-drinking and petty crime in factory towns (which was just as common in many other industrial settings), and about the social construction of crime. Yet, as Frank's analysis of crime in late imperial Russia carefully documented (alongside more general sociological literature), crime is a contested metaphor about social order whose definition changes in relation to elite fears, fiscal needs etc. Stephen P. Frank, Crime, Cultural Conflict, and Justice in Rural Russia, 1856-1914. Berkeley, CA, 1999, esp. p. 3, 7, 9, and chapters 1 and 2. The Khrushchev years may have been special in their mass application of anti-hooliganism laws. The practice of creating crime and criminalizing misdemeanours, however, can be observed at many times and places, and hardly proves the Soviet Union's repressive nature (consider the fact that public drunkenness is penalized in many Western states!).

In sum, while this ambitious and inspiring study casts new light on state-society relations under Khrushchev, it would have done well not to overstretch its claims about the bleak and repressive nature of everyday life in these years.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Stefan B. Kirmse. Review of LaPierre, Brian, *Hooligans in Khrushchev' s Russia: Defining, Policing, and Producing Deviance during the Thaw*. H-Soz-u-Kult, H-Net Reviews. July, 2013.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=39612

Copyright © 2013 by H-Net, Clio-online, and the author, all rights reserved. This work may be copied and redistributed for non-commercial, educational purposes, if permission is granted by the author and usage right holders. For permission please contact H-SOZ-U-KULT@H-NET.MSU.EDU.