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When We Were Happy: Remembering Soviet Holidays¹

I. Happiness in Russian Culture: Introductory Remarks

The specificity of the concept of happiness in Soviet culture is best understood against the background of how this concept was traditionally interpreted in Russian culture. Vladimir Dahl's authoritative defining dictionary of the Russian language, first published in 1863, accorded two meanings to the word. The primary meaning is given as *success, lucky chance, something unforeseen but desirable*. The secondary meaning refers to 'happiness' in the sense that this word would be used in English – *bliss and the*

¹ This article is an expanded and adapted version of our chapter in M. Balina and E. Dobrenko, *Petrified Utopia: Happiness Soviet Style* (London, 2009). Our main source is specially-conducted interviews carried out by Alexandra Piir in St Petersburg during January and February 2007. These interviews are cited with the prefix 'H[oliday]-07'. On the methodology and selection of informants, see further below. We also cite two other interviews, both conducted by Alexandra Piir as part of work for other projects. The interview with the prefix 'EU-SPb 01' forms part of a project on the city courtyard in Leningrad being carried out for Alexandra Piir's candidate's dissertation, while the interview prefixed 'Oxf/Lev' was part of a project on the history of childhood sponsored by the Leverhulme Trust under grant no. F/08736/A ('Childhood in Russia: A Social and Cultural History': see www.mod-langs.ox.ac.uk/russian/childhood). The authors would like to thank Catriona Kelly for her translation, and also for many helpful editorial suggestions and supplementations. [The title of the original, *schastye po prazdnikam*, is difficult to render adequately in English. The phrase *po prazdnikam* means something that happens rarely, close to 'once in a blue moon', so that there is an implied pun: people were happy on holidays, but they also weren't happen very often. There is so far as I know no phrase in English that will capture the full significance. Editor.]

complete fulfilment of one's wishes [Dal 1955: IV, 583].¹ While a number of articles published recently have dealt with the place of *schastye* in the Russian linguistic world-picture, its semantic universals, so to speak (see e.g. [Vorkachev 2001]; [Kolesov 2002]; [Shmelev 2002]; [Zalyaleeva 2004], etc.), these seem to have left out something of fundamental importance to the understanding of the word – what one might term the ‘metaphysics of happiness’ in Russian tradition.

As has often been noted before, both nexuses of meaning are derived from concepts of fortune and fate, one’s ‘portion’. The basic morphological and semantic component of the word *schastye* is easy to identify – *chast* (a piece or portion of something, cf. *uchast*, ‘fate’). The prefix *s*” (*сѣ-*) with reduced vowel ” has been identified as originally meaning ‘good, kind’, which means that the whole word can be interpreted as meaning ‘kind fate’, ‘good fortune’ [Fasmer 1971: III, 816]. It is indicative that as recently as the nineteenth century, the word *chast* and the word *schastye* were interchangeable, as in expressions such as *svoei chasti (uchasti, schasty) ne minuesh* [you can’t escape your fate]; *chas pridet i chast (dolyu, schasty) prineset* [the hour will come and bring your fate]; *siden sidit, a chast (dolya) ego rastet* [he’s rooted to the spot but his fate is waxing], and so on [Dal 1955: IV, 583].

In the late nineteenth century, A.A. Potebnya noted that, according to Russian folk beliefs, ‘*there exists on this earth a finite quantity of happiness and unhappiness, sickness, good and evil, without there being excess in anything. If one person falls sick, that means he has been overtaken by a sickness that has quit or killed off someone else*’ [Potebnya 1989: 486]. Just so, if someone has been overtaken by good luck or happiness, then that means someone else has been overtaken by the opposite (*schastye perekhodya zhivet*, ‘good luck/happiness moves around’).

From these assumptions about the fortuitous and finite nature of happiness in turn flow several other important propositions:

- First, there exists such a thing as happiness in sum, the happiness of everyone collectively;
- Second, the ‘extent’ or ‘quantity’ of this ‘happiness in sum’ is defined or fixed in advance, so to speak; its extent is non-negotiable;
- Third, a good many sources suggest that an idiosyncratic principle of compensation or supplementation is in operation; the precise

¹ There is an etymological link between these two concepts in English too – cf. the terms ‘happen’, ‘happ-stance’, ‘happy-go-lucky’ – but of a ‘buried’, rather than obvious, kind. The word ‘fortunate’ (rather Latin in English) captures the two senses of the Russian term. Cf. German *Gluck/gl cklich*, French *bonheur/heureux*, etc. [Editor].

amount of happiness that has vanished in one place will reappear in another [Zhuravlyov 1999: 114]. In addition this principle applies not just to happiness/luck (fate), but to everything that can be measured. It follows logically from these principles that God does not increase the sum of human happiness, but simply regulates the way it is disposed: compare the proverb: *Bog ne gulyaet, a dobro peremeryaet* [God does not move about/mess about, he divides and re-divides the good things of life]. He cannot increase or reduce the total quantity of happiness, but he can assign more or less to a given person. Whichever way, everyone will be assigned their own portion of happiness and unhappiness. Everyone has their fate. And in turn, the idea of a variety of different manifestations of happiness/unhappiness in different individuals is, one might say, built into the basic concepts of the nature of happiness. Also notable is the fact that the traditional concept of happiness placed a high value on the welfare of the group overall (if X was unhappy, the fact that Y was happy offered some consolation), and the fact that the notion of personal responsibility for happiness (as expressed in, say, recent Western advice literature about ‘how to be happy’ etc.) had no place at all in Russian traditional culture.

It was precisely with regard to diversification that concepts of happiness evolved over time: from the notion that there were many different ways of being happy developed the widespread idea that every person had his or her own individual concept of happiness. At first sight this idea seems to have empirical value too, but one ought to bear in mind that the totality of ‘modes of happiness’ within a given cultural tradition is in practice constrained. Individual concepts of happiness have to be integrated with those held by other members of society, to have (in however limited a sense) a general significance — for otherwise personal concepts of happiness would be meaningless: the phenomenon could simply not be named at all.¹

Research on the usage of the word *schastye* in Russian literature and journalism carried out by S. G. Vorkachev [Vorkachev 2001], A. P. Zalyaleeva [Zalyaleeva 2004] and others confirms that existing perceptions of happiness may be assigned to a typology (and this despite the profusion of idiosyncratic visions and representations of happiness that one finds in literature, especially poetry). Elements

¹ Of course, this was not the only thing that held back the proliferation of individual definitions. Language itself places limits on such proliferation. As with any other phenomenon, one can only discuss happiness in the terms already available to one, and the drive behind language is, as Boris Uspensky has pointed out ([Uspensky 1974]), is towards making abstractions concrete. For example, it is possible to say in Russian *schastye razbilos* (‘my, etc., happiness has broken’, as one would say of glass or of a mirror) [cf. ‘my heart is broken’, Trans.], but one cannot say *schastye promoklo* [my, etc., happiness is sodden] or *schastye prosokhlo* [my, etc., happiness has dried up]. Imaginative literature, and particularly poetry, is engaged in a constant struggle with such linguistic restrictions, but even poetry is to some extent the victim of pre-existing set phrases.

relevant to this typology include the localisation of happiness (whether this is seen to inhere in a person or be exogenous to him or her); the link between happiness and tranquillity on the one hand, or activity on the other; the ways by which happiness is acquired; and so on. The prevailing concepts of happiness are in turn generated by combinations of these various different elements. For instance, a formula such as *prostoe chelovecheskoe schastye* [ordinary human happiness, roughly ‘nice normal happiness’] assumes that happiness is located in the world at large and that people ought to value what they have, because otherwise they may only realise what it means when they have lost it. Here, happiness is associated with tranquillity, with the general order of things, with serendipity, the capacity to find delight in the ordinary: *‘Happiness is everywhere. Maybe there it is:/ That autumn garden back behind the shed/That pure air, pouring through the window’*, as Ivan Bunin wrote in his poem ‘Evening’ (1909). This ‘epicurean’ concept of happiness (as one might describe it) exists alongside a ‘stoic’ conception, according to which happiness is located within people themselves, in their capacity to stick to the path of virtue and not succumb to temptation, to create a state in which happiness is possible without reference to external circumstances: In the words of Pushkin’s contemporary Evgeny Baratynsky: *‘But the real kind of happiness/Is nowhere but in ourselves’*.¹ Very widespread also – most famously in the poetry of Alexander Pushkin himself – is the idea that happiness simply does not exist, or that its existence is an illusion. One of Pushkin’s most famous poems begins, *‘There is no happiness on earth, but only peace and liberty’*; another refers to happiness’s *‘devious shade’*. There are many other less well-known concepts of happiness too.² Of all the multiple intellectual baggage associated with happiness, the most influential in the Soviet period was a high-Romantic conception that linked happiness with struggle, passion, self-immolation to the good of a higher ideal – as in Pushkin’s epistle to Alexander Chaadaev: *‘My friend, have faith: she will arise/The star of captivating happiness/And on the shards of autocracy/Others will scratch our names’*. As these few quotations already illustrate, Pushkin’s own concepts of happiness were contradictory – but it was only the last lines, about the ‘star of captivating happiness’, that found their way into Soviet textbooks.³

¹ Evgeny Baratynsky, ‘Chorus for the Name-Day of My Uncle Bogdan Andreevich Boratynsky, to be Sung by his Little Nieces’ (1817).

² On this see further [Vorkachev 2004].

³ For example, Aleksei Gonchukov, an official at the Kirov factory, paraphrased Pushkin in a poem from his unpublished 1952 diary about his workplace, which reads: ‘My friend [also the Soviet word for ‘comrade’], have faith: she will arise/The dawn of captivating happiness/Our factory will arise from sleep/And once again on its scrolls/They will write wonderful deeds’ (Central Archive of Political History, St Petersburg, f. 4000, op. 18, d. 335, l. 6). [Editor].

Popular literature such as advice tracts also played a role in developing concepts of happiness among its extensive readership. Even the titles of such publications are suggestive: *Happiness is Being Satisfied with What You Have and Knowing How to Use God's Gifts*; *Happiness and Wealth, Health and Strength: Cheap Dishes for the Lenten Table*; *Happiness in Life: Get Everyone to Love You*; *Happiness through Health*; *How to Have a Happy Family Life*; *A Happy Life Right into a Ripe Old Age – Keeping Your Nerves Healthy and Strong*.¹ Readers were being nudged in the right direction, told in the most literal way what to do so they could be happy. Here, it was concrete things – physical and moral health, the family and family values – that were held to be at the root of happiness. Such ideas also played a role in the Soviet era, though in a more muted way than Romantic notions of the ‘struggle for happiness’.

II. Life Has Become More Joyful: The Contours of the New Happiness

It is this foundation on which, in the Soviet period, the various ‘experiments with happiness’ were carried out. The earlier picture of an infinite variety of different levels and types of happiness was simplified and standardised as never before, while at the same time the idea of happiness as ‘collective’ and ‘assigned’ persisted. One could say that happiness was reduced to a kind of social ‘common denominator’ that levelled down individual discrepancies in the concept of happiness, producing an enormous synthesis, a kind of ‘state-sponsored view of licit happiness’, as it were. Highly indicative in this sense are the final sentences of Arkady Gaidar’s famous story for Soviet children *Chuk and Gek*, first published in 1939: ‘*What happiness was, everyone understood for himself or herself. But at the same time everyone also knew that they had to live honest lives, to work hard and to love and cherish that huge happy land that was called the Country of the Soviets*’.

The discussion in this essay will focus on the new concept of happiness that came into being in the age of high Stalinism. The concept of happiness that was framed at that point proved tenacious enough to survive de-Stalinisation into the late Soviet period – indeed, it is still relevant at the present time. One could say that the ‘canons of Soviet happiness’ were laid down at this era. They were propounded ‘from above’ – by the Party leadership, and by the Soviet artistic establish-

¹ In the original: [Anon], *Schastye – v dovolstve zhiznyu i v umenye polzovatsya darami bozhiimi*. Nizhnii Novgorod, 1908; ‘Neizvestnaya’ [pseud.] *Schastye i bogatstvo, zdorovyie i sila. Postnoe deshevoe pitanie* (SPb., 1908); O. S. Kenin *Schastye v zhizni i lyubov ot vsekh*. Vologda, 1909; [Anon], *Schastye v zdorovyie*. SPb., 1909; [Anon], *Schastye semi* [pamphlet on insurance]. SPb, 1909; [Anon], *Schastye v zhizni do vysshei starosti – zdorovyie, ustoiichivye i vynoslivye nervy*. Vyborg, 1916.

ment, or to be more accurate, by those of its members, writers, artists, and film directors, who not only sensed the 'demands of the epoch' (what was referred to at the First Congress of Soviet Writers as 'the social command'¹) but were prepared to respond to these and to communicate them to the Soviet masses in accessible artistic form.

At this point, several questions arise that are directly germane to the issue of how 'Stalinist happiness' was defined and to the issue of the way that definitions of happiness changed over time.

Where does happiness come from, or alternatively, Who assigns happiness? In traditional culture, the assigner of happiness, as mentioned earlier, is God. Under the Stalinist regime, God's functions were transferred to Stalin himself, who, famously modest, was pleased to allow the Party or state (or the Motherland) occasionally to figure in this role too. As a matter of fact, 'Stalin', 'Party' and 'state' functioned as synonyms – as in expressions of gratitude such as 'Thank You, Stalin, for Our Happy Childhood!' 'Thank You, Motherland and Party!' (the reason behind the gratitude was a secondary consideration). The full formula ('Thank You, Stalin, Motherland and Party...') supplies all three hypostases of the Leader.

How is happiness achieved? In Christian tradition, God is the regulator of happiness, and the ways of Providence are unknown to ordinary mortals. Accordingly, the process by which happiness is achieved also remains mysterious. Happiness can be the lot not just of a person who is obviously worthy of it, but also of a person who does not (in the eyes of other human beings) appear to deserve it. What is mysterious is understood in turn as fortuitous: chance is so undependable that it is perfectly possible for someone worthy to benefit, yet on the whole, the unworthy appear to benefit more often (increasing the sense that chance cannot be predicted in advance). This perception of events means that the assignation of happiness is associated as strongly with chance as it is with God (or indeed more strongly with chance: cf. the central place of this force in Russian tradition, right up to the level of personification – *ego velichestvo sluchai* (His Majesty Chance) disposing over happiness (*happy chance*)).

Of course, this situation placed in sharp focus the issue of justice in the disposal of happiness, an issue resolved by the idea of posthumous rewards for virtue. One of the most widespread views of happiness was that those who were most deserving would not receive their reward on this earth. They would, however, be admitted to bliss and glory after their lives came to an end, in compensation for what they

¹ The term 'social command' appears to have been invented by Osip Brik in the mid-1920s, but was adopted by the ideologues of Socialist Realism in the early 1930s. [Editor].

had failed to receive in the material world. This is not to say that well-merited earthly happiness was not held to exist at all, but it was taken to be much rarer than fortuitous happiness, on the one hand, and just rewards achieved posthumously on the other.

None of these established ways of achieving happiness – by chance, or according to the will of Providence, or in the afterlife – fitted the new situation, where Stalin was the new regulator of happiness. Like everything else in Soviet society, happiness was supposed to function according to a particular set of rules – the Leader’s own. Happiness, therefore, had to be not a matter of chance, but of fixed principles – everyone benefiting according to their deserts. In practice, though, establishing exactly who deserved what (despite the pervasiveness of surveillance in Soviet society) proved rather too complicated and demanding. It was a good deal easier to bestow happiness on ‘the Soviet people’ in general. But how was happiness to be arranged in socio-economic conditions that were, to put it mildly, often less than ideal? The simple way out was to retain and foster the traditional view of happiness as a category of collective rather than individual significance, but to realise this in a way that was useful to the new society.

Whether private individuals actually were happy was a matter of indifference, so far as the Soviet government was concerned: no interest was taken in this question. Happiness acquired an absolute significance: ‘universal happiness’, the happiness of all working people, of the world proletariat, of the Soviet population generally. Happiness was evoked with reference to concrete individuals only where these individuals expressed an ideal of overall significance – for instance, if a person considered him- or herself happy to *die in the struggle for universal happiness* (this formula was extremely widespread in the Stalin era). The now widely-used formula ‘I wish you happiness in your private life’ (as employed when wishing people a Happy New Year, for example) dates from the post-Stalin era and was especially characteristic of the years under Brezhnev and later. At all events, personal happiness was politically acceptable only when it was compatible with the collective strivings of Soviet society.¹

In general, the sphere of the personal and private was compressed, in Stalinist culture, to the absolute minimum. The entire person, emotions and all (including happiness and the reasons for this) was supposed to be on view. The proper Soviet person had nothing to hide. Only someone out of sympathy with Soviet power could possibly feel such a need. At the same time, this official view did not signify that the private sphere in fact did vanish completely. On the

¹ For an interesting discussion of the relationship between the collective and the individual in Soviet society, see [Kharkhordin 1999].

contrary – for at least some members of Soviet society (the so-called ‘internal émigrés’ in the intelligentsia), this sphere acquired an unprecedented symbolic importance, and people made much bigger efforts to keep it from sight than they had in previous eras.

The content of universal, suprahuman happiness

Thus, it was enough for someone to be a Soviet citizen and to live in the Soviet Union to experience universal happiness. This was ‘happiness by passport’, so to speak. Those who enjoyed this privileged access to happiness in an overall sense were in turn able to enjoy happiness at various subsidiary levels: dying for the Motherland, or (a less elevated, but still worthy and useful version of the same fate) labouring tirelessly for the benefit of the nation. In times of peace, it was especially the latter destiny (the happiness of labour) that inspired Soviet artists and writers. In 1994, an exhibition organised at the Russian Museum in St Petersburg, ‘Agitating for Happiness’ displayed a range of enormous canvases commemorating the official ‘social optimism’ of the 1930s and 1950s: Vasily Efanov’s group portrait of Stakhanovites and Soviet Wunderkinder, *The Aristocrats of the Land of the Soviets*, Yury Pimenov’s *Physical Culture Parade*, Alexander Gerasimov’s *Hymn to October*, and so on. Such scenes of heroic life and labour were also depicted in countless posters dating from the Stalin era. It would be fair to say that calls to be happy were produced on an industrial scale.¹

Such calls to happiness did not of course suggest that the path to bliss was open here and now. Happiness was firmly located in the future – which in turn was invariably referred to by such adjectives as ‘bright’ or ‘happy’. Thus, Soviet happiness was a typical example of so-called ‘*deferred happiness*’. This might, indeed, be described as the central idea of Communism as understood under Soviet power: universal happiness will arrive at some point (unspecified) later on, but for now everyone has to expend all their energy in making the bright future arrive. In other words, it was assumed that only the descendants of those living in the Stalin era, and not these people themselves, would live in a society of peace, perfection, plenty and brotherly love. It was precisely universal happiness that would triumph in the Soviet heaven, and that meant that all previous versions of happiness

¹ It seems appropriate to mention here that this ‘production of happiness on an industrial scale’ was also manifested in the construction of one of the main symbols of the approaching socialist heaven – the seaside resort of Sochi. In 1934, the Soviet government gave the project the status of a ‘shock building programme’, the same as the industrial giants of Magnitogorsk, Kuzbass and the Dneprostroi Hydro-Electric Power Station. In time it turned out that this ‘resort’ was actually a socialist heaven in the strictest sense – one to which only the chosen ones in Soviet society could gain access (Stakhanov, the writer Nikolai Ostrovsky, Vasily Blyukher) (see Elizaveta Listova’s 2006 film *The Soviet Empire*. Sochi).

(whether as emerging from chance or as the reward of virtue) would simply dissolve. And happiness itself would be different, ‘real’, of a kind unknown before the Soviet period (which meant, by extension, that what was termed ‘happiness’ before the Soviet Union existed was actually not happiness at all. In the past, people had either known full well they were miserable – the case with peasants and workers – or they had been living a lie).

The Soviet Union spent more than 70 years constructing its ‘bright future’, but the longer the building went on, the further away the future seemed to get (in practice, if not in theory).¹ At the same time, these utopian ideals represented, for many Soviet people, the sole motivation and meaning in life. It is no accident that in the years after the construct of inevitable happiness fell apart, many members of the older generation began feeling that life had disintegrated. Once the Soviet system collapsed, people lost what had constituted the main meaning of life for them – belief that miracles could happen.

The ‘bright future’ was like a monster from fable: it needed human sacrifices. Accordingly, it was essential to be ready to sacrifice oneself at a moment’s notice. The idea of *happiness through sacrifice* was not simply a motto (*we’ll all die as one/in the struggle for it*), but underpinned the entire strategy for raising the growing generations. After the publication of Nikolai Ostrovsky’s *How the Steel was Tempered* (the first full edition appeared in 1935), Pavka Korchagin, the book’s hero, became a model for many generations of Soviet young people. There was an unvarying schema for your school essay on the topic, ‘My Understanding of Happiness’. First you had to set down how Pavka had understood happiness (happiness was being involved in the struggle for righteousness, you had to lay down your strength and your life for the cause), then your own understanding (which, of course, was supposed to be exactly like Pavka’s). Educational websites on the Internet still provide model essays on the topic, ‘How Pavel Korchagin Understood Happiness and How I Understand It’. One such begins thus:

I’m happy because I have a Motherland for which I am fearlessly prepared to lay down my strength and my life... I have the strength to educate myself and to work, my hands are not tied, I can fight for my ideal, no-one shall break the wings that have been given to me by my native land so that I can create and love.

¹ There were in fact moments when Party leaders suggested that the fateful boundary would be crossed pretty well tomorrow morning. At the Twenty-Second Congress of the Communist Party in 1961, Khrushchev declared that by 1980 ‘the current generation of Soviet people will be living under Communism’.

And so on it goes. Finally, we get to the epilogue:

*Pavel Korchagin surrendered his youth so that I could be happy. My duty is to sacrifice all my strength so that my children are happy. That is where my happiness lies!*¹

The future poet David Samoilov's diary of the years 1935-1936 (written when he was fifteen, and published as 'Diary of a Happy Boy') employs closely similar rhetoric. *'My dearest dream is death for our country, for my ideal. I am joining the Komsomol and if war breaks out I will be the first to go to the Front, to fight till victory is ours. So what if I'm young! The children of the Paris Commune fought just like the adults did, after all!'* (Entry of 12 October 1935) [Samoilov 1999: 157].

The paradox has often been noted: the prison camps are bursting at the seams, the largest political purge the world has ever known has just been launched, and at exactly that point are released a swathe of unprecedentedly cheery film comedies (*The Merry Lads* (1934 – the first smash hit Soviet film comedy), *Circus* (1936), and *Volga Volga* (1938)). Songs of the day – most famously, *Song of the Motherland*, the central set-piece in *Circus* – were in the same vein:

A spring wind blows over the land.
Every day life grows more joyous.
No-one in the world is able
To laugh and love like us!

From the set of *The Merry Lads* on the Black Sea, at Gagry, the film's cameraman wrote: 'The film is utter trash, you couldn't miss that for a moment, but it'll be a smash hit.' However, as the journalist Elena Kiseleva has recently noted, the film's script-writer, the dramatist Nikolai Erdman, 'was not able to enjoy the fruits of success. He was arrested in Gagry',² and later exiled to Siberia, whence he returned to Moscow only in 1951.

We now come to the delicate, and at some level unanswerable, question of **the impact of Soviet realia on happiness** – not just in the sense of how far people believed in the official ideal of happiness, but of how far it was possible to believe in happiness of any kind (and even to be happy), given the real circumstances of Soviet life. So far as the official ethos of Soviet happiness itself was concerned, realia did not constitute a problem, since it was in any case designed to conceal these. Being happy was the civil duty of every Soviet person. It follows that in this sense being happy expressed loyalty to the state and to the political status quo.

¹ (www.school-city.by/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=5385&Itemid=141).

² Elena Kiseleva, Pravda, 14 September 2002: <http://news.pravda.ru/culture/2002/09/14/47050.html>.

The second, and far more difficult, question concerns the extent to which happiness in the ordinary sense, happiness as it would be understood in other societies, was compatible with the repressive nature of Stalinist society. Finally, only those who lived at the time can answer it. In her preface to David Samoilov's 1935 diary, his widow Galina Medvedeva-Samoilova (born in 1938) writes:

Happiness can come about, and it does come about in times that seem, objectively speaking, totally black, and that's one possible answer to the question often asked today: "How on earth did you live during the Terror, the War, the Period of Stagnation, and so on?" I always remember the astonishing story told by the dramatist Alexander Gladkov, who had heard it from Boris Pasternak, about how two people in Petrograd were so in love that they simply didn't notice the 1917 revolution, didn't realise it had ever happened [Samoilov 1999: 149].

As Yevgeny Yevtushenko wrote in his poem, 'Stalinist Happiness', people felt 'tiny joys in the face of huge disaster', and felt them more often than one might imagine.

Even after Stalin's death, the alternating 'thaws' and 'frosts' of the era notwithstanding, the Stalinist canon of happiness did not undergo significant changes, and it continued to shape personal experience as well. The remainder of the article is devoted to a study of the relationship between 'official' and 'personal' concepts of happiness in the post-Stalin era with reference to one especially important context – the state holiday or festival (1 May and 7 November).

III. When We Were Happy

The two types of happiness prevailing under Soviet power – the official version set out in ideology and the personal, unofficial variety – came together in an especially complex way in the *gosudarstvennyi prazdnik* (official state holiday).¹ There were, of course, other sites in Soviet culture where individual happiness was free to merge with collective happiness, but the holiday was probably the only context in which the two kinds of happiness regularly co-existed.² The fusion came about not simply because the state holiday

¹ There is a substantial literature, both in Russian and in Western languages, on the Soviet festival, particularly of the pre-war era. See, for example [Lane 1981]; [von Geldern 1993]; [Rolf 2000]; [Petrone 2000]; [Dushechkina 2002]; [Malysheva 2005]. However, this material is devoted primarily to the institutional organisation and ideology of the festivals, rather than to their emotional resonance, the topic of our investigation here.

² Other such sites included the park of culture and rest and the seaside resort, but holidays were much more accessible – not everyone could visit the seaside and not every town and village had a park of culture and rest. The infrequency of holidays for 'ordinary' Soviet people (in the broadest sense – those from outside the political elite – is an important social fact in the Stalin era. [Editor].

had two separate parts – official (the demonstration) and unofficial (the family celebration), but for other reasons as well.

First, there was a long-standing and persistent tradition according which holidays were a time at which ‘collective happiness’ was assigned in a different and fairer way than in ordinary life. It was customary both in cities and in the countryside, before 1917, to ask beggars into your home on religious holidays and to offer them hospitality and gifts. The idea was that these were days when everyone was supposed to enjoy their portion of happiness, and when that portion was supposed to be the same for everyone. Thus, collective happiness on such days worked on egalitarian lines.

Second, during holidays everything was ‘on view’, ‘in front of people’. This made it impossible to indulge in undeserved happiness or good fortune – it would be roughly the same as wearing a stolen medal (disgraceful and certain to be found out). At holidays, like it or not, people exposed their personal happiness to public judgement. And every holiday guaranteed everyone the chance of being happy – if only because they have the chance of participating in the general holiday atmosphere. Conversely, people who did not take part in the general celebrations attracted suspicion. They probably had some way of being happy by themselves, some dishonest way, some secret way. These two perceptions of the holiday – as an egalitarian event and one where a public display of propriety was essential – were to acquire a highly specific resonance under Soviet power.

The remainder of our essay examines the Soviet holiday and its links with happiness, drawing for the most part on semi-structured interviews conducted with ten informants (five female, five male) now in their late 60s and 70s (dates of birth range from 1927 to 1940).¹ They come from a variety of social backgrounds – working-class, state official, military, Soviet intelligentsia. All except one were born in Leningrad or moved there in early childhood. All of them were living in Leningrad at the period described – the post-war decades – and all received an extended education (including not just secondary, but also higher education). All later held white-collar or administrative positions, or in the professions (that is, they were members of the intelligentsia). One of the informants is a former Party worker and ‘responsible official’, several others were Party members, though without holding office; one held firm anti-Soviet views from an early age (he describes himself as a former dissident). They are accordingly all representatives of the well-educated urban population, i.e. members of the social layer that was the primary target for Soviet

¹ Two further interviews – with informants born in 1918 and in 1940 – while not cited directly, form part of the background to the discussion.

propaganda about happiness, while Leningrad itself, the ‘cradle of the Revolution’, was one of the two most important centres for demonstrations in the entire Soviet Union (the other, of course, being Moscow).¹

As many previous discussions of oral history have emphasised,² what people remember about events is partial and fragmentary, and strongly influenced by later experience (which here includes the festivals introduced since Soviet power collapsed, felt by many older people to be ‘inauthentic’). All of these elements characterise the oral testimony cited here too. However, the question of the ‘authenticity’ of this testimony in a factual sense is not of direct concern to us, since our primary aim is to establish the emotional resonance of Soviet holidays for those who participated in them, and not to catalogue ‘what actually happened’ at such festivals. We have therefore not offered commentaries on the factual accuracy or otherwise of the testimony cited, concentrating on what it reveals about informants’ recollections of the past, and the role of this in their world-view.

‘The main’ holidays

By ‘holidays’, informants recalling the Stalin era (and indeed the Soviet period generally) overwhelmingly have in mind state (official) holidays, such as the anniversary of the October Revolution (7–8 November) and 1 May:

Those festivals had status. A high status, you know what I mean. A birthday wasn’t a holiday, for instance, not even a jubilee³ – but those days had a high status [H-07, PF1, woman b. 1939].

People do sometimes recall other holidays (23 February, ‘Red/Soviet Army Day’, 8 March, ‘International Women’s Day), but this is much rarer.⁴ Christmas and Easter are generally the only religious holidays to figure.

¹ All names of the informants have been changed in order to protect their anonymity. The full list of those cited is: PF1, Inf. 1, female, b. 1940; Inf. 2, female, b. 1939; PF3, male, b. 1940; PF 4, Inf. 1, female, b. 1927, Inf. 2, male, b. 1929; PF5, female, b. 1931; PF6, Inf. 1, female, b. 1932, Inf. 2, male, b. 1933, PF8, male, b. 1931, PF9, male, b. 1929.

² See e.g. the recent discussion, ‘Forum 4’, in *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, No. 3 (2006), pp. 319–431, especially the comments by Vitaly Bezrogov, Larry Holmes, and David Ransel.

³ A jubilee is a ‘round number’ birthday, such as thirty, fifty, sixty, etc. (five-year intervals are often marked as well). These tend to be celebrated in much more style than ordinary birthdays, particularly at places of work. The term can also be used for important wedding anniversaries, e.g. twenty-five years, forty years, fifty years. [Editor].

⁴ Interestingly, an informant interviewed in connection with the history of childhood explicitly recalled that 8 March was not a ‘festival’ in the ordinary sense back in the pre-war days: ‘The eighth of March, that was simply a day of international solidarity, it wasn’t a special day for women. The two things are totally different.’ He also recalled the exceptional importance of a revolutionary holiday ‘forgotten’ in the Stalin era, the anniversary of the founding of the Paris Commune (CKQ-M-03 PF5A, p. 4. Interview conducted by Catriona Kelly. See www.mod-langs.ox.ac.uk/russian/childhood). [Editor].

At the same time, the significance of holidays did alter during the Soviet period. The status of 1 May and 7 November diminished, while the status of Victory Day (9 May) was significantly enhanced. Suspended from the calendar in 1947, it was reinstated in 1965, and thereafter became a central event. Celebrating 23 February and 8 March became especially popular in the Soviet workplace from the 1960s onwards. The de facto decrease of anti-religious activism from the mid-1970s onwards made it easier for people to celebrate Christmas and Easter.

Yet at the same time, 7 November and 1 May continued to be considered central throughout the whole of the Soviet period, since these days witnessed the enactment of the complete holiday scenario, including parades and ‘demonstrations’. Sometimes informants do not even mention these holidays, because the fact that they celebrated them is considered obvious; in other cases, the ‘main’ holidays are seen as something beyond interrogation, as something sacred. In this context, the observation of a young woman born in the Brezhnev era is revealing:

Int.: So what holidays did your family celebrate:

Inf. Well, all the usual ones, right? New Year, birthdays, and the demonstrations, of course, that was something sacred.

Int.: Something sacred?

Inf.: Yes, we really worshipped them [Oxf/Lev SPb-03, PF14, woman b.1969].

It was, indeed, the demonstration that represented the essence of the state holiday, so important that the word itself (as above) could replace the word for ‘holiday’. It is accordingly the demonstration on which the remainder of this article focuses. A detailed description of the demonstration (routes, procedures, rituals) is outside the remit of the discussion; we are primarily concerned to capture the atmosphere and emotional world of the holidays that our informants themselves saw as primary.

The demonstration

The Soviet ‘demonstration’ was, it has to be said, a decidedly odd occasion. In Russia before the October Revolution of 1917 (as in other European countries to this day), the term *demonstratsiya* meant an impromptu manifestation of political protest or worker solidarity. Once the Bolsheviks established control, this type of event – briefly legal under the Provisional Government – was once again banned, and *demonstratsiya* came to mean the opposite of what it once had. It now referred to an officially sanctioned parade, drawing on the established symbolism of the European Left (red

flags, revolutionary songs, political slogans and chants), but supporting the government, rather than expressing opposition to this. Or, to be more exact, the ‘oppositional’ character of the demonstration began to be directed at ‘external enemies’, ‘the forces of world capitalism’, and so on – for instance, officially 1 May was known as ‘The Day of the Fighting Forces of the International Proletariat’, while in fact its role in Soviet society was to parade the ‘unity of party and people’. At the same time, the ‘people’ themselves were supposed to ‘demonstrate’ (in the most literal sense) their progress in building Communist society and to express their warm approval of the Party’s ‘chosen course’, while the role of the ‘Party’ itself, as represented by dignitaries from the local Communist committees and the urban and rural administration, was to accept the show of loyalty and to urge ‘the people’ on to further heroic achievements.

Thus, in essence the only spectators of the demonstrations were supposed to be the dignitaries standing on the tribune: everyone on the streets was meant to be part of the demonstration. In reality, however, everybody was a spectator as well as a participant. Not for nothing do people often say that you went along to ‘watch other people and show yourself off’.

The actual context for the demonstration created by the members of Party committees and by the management of workplaces was, it should be said, not exactly celebratory. The Party committees and managements at places of work were responsible for *obespechenie yavki* [guarantee of appearance – a standard phrase from Party jargon], and they made sure to start the process well in advance.

Beforehand... in October, say [for the 7 November demonstratsiya], there'd be a Party meeting, they were supposed to be held every month, and a resolution would be passed requiring all the Communists to attend the... the demonstration. Reminding you, so to speak. It wasn't exactly an order, but every time there'd be this resolution that the Party membership considered that most or all of the Communists should take part in this and this and so on. It wasn't something absolute, not like an order, but it was your Party duty. The Komsomol didn't work like that, but the Komsomol organisations would get together Komsomol members before holidays: 'Seventh of November coming up, mind [...] we're going to gather together... at whatever time it was, we'll look forward to seeing you, come along...' So preparatory work did go on. Reminding you, so to speak [H-07, PF9, man b. 1929].

Our informants’ memory does not stretch back to the 1920s, when, according to some sources, workers and officials had to sign an official form certifying that they had taken part in the *demonstratsiya*. In their recent social history of Leningrad in the 1920s and 1960s,

N. Lebina and A. Chistikov [2003: 137] cite a letter complaining of this practice dating from 1925:

If they don't find your signature, then you're declared a counter-revolutionary. During the parade they divide you up into groups of ten and the leader of each group is warned that he'll be considered personally responsible if anyone slopes off before the end of the ceremony.

Over the decades that followed, attitudes to the requirement to attend demonstrations altered. On the one hand, people were aware, without being reminded, that they needed to go, but on the other hand, they were increasingly inclined to see this as a tedious duty. By the 1970s, as our informants recall, many people attended the demonstration as 'insurance', to avoid getting into trouble at work:

Inf. 1: *You went along, but often you went along because you were scared someone would notice you weren't there. [...] Otherwise you risked getting hauled up: 'So why weren't you there? Bla-bla-bla-bla-bla.' And then you'd have problems with your references, going on trips, or whatever...¹*

Inf. 2: *With trips abroad, yes, with trips generally.*

Inf. 1: *With trips, you'd be seen as 'unreliable'. So, well... 'ideologically unsound',² was that the phrase? [...] Well, someone who wasn't politically conscious, all in all. What you're supposed to do is this, and they just upped and didn't do it, didn't turn up. And you had to. So, well... And so, this kind of... Jesuitical process set in... sort of. It wasn't exactly an order, it was an annoying requirement. That you had to go [H-07, PF6, Inf. 1 – woman b. 1932; Inf. 2 – man b. 1933].*

The compulsory nature of the demonstration was carried through into its organisation as well. While the crowds were supposed to be 'demonstrating' their loyalty to the system, the close contact between Party and people, and the fact that loyalty was not something that could be taken wholly for granted (popular protest remained a real threat throughout the Soviet period), meant that strict regimentation was necessary.

Rooted in the religious procession (*krestnyi khod*) on the other, the demonstration was also directly derived from the military parade of tsarist days. If the first tradition explains people's readiness to turn

¹ The informant is referring to official trips to 'houses of rest' in seaside resorts etc., which were organised by trade unions in places of work, and from which people could be disbarred on grounds of bad conduct. [Editor].

² Literally, '[ideologically] unsustainable' [*nevyderzhannyi*], a standard phrase of political disapproval. [Editor].

out for these occasions in the early days of Soviet power, not to speak of the presence of ‘icons’ (in the shape of portraits of Soviet leaders),¹ the second was a good deal more pervasive. The *demonstratsiya* had a military flavour that extended not just to the vocabulary used (*sbornyi punkt*, ‘mustering point’, rather than ‘meeting point’, *marshrut dvizheniya*, ‘operations route’, *kolonna*, ‘troop column’, *stroi*, drill, and so on) but to the way everything was organised (the fact that people were lined up in columns, marching along the street like soldiers on parade, and so on). Our informants well remember all this:

The point is that a hard-and-fast programme had been set down for these occasions long before the war. Affecting what? The routes the columns used. The way that the streets were decorated. The slogans [...] people were supposed to carry. The portraits they had in their hands. The mustering points. The place where a given group of marchers joined up with the sub-column. The place where sub-columns from a certain district joined up with the main column. And the overall route was laid out in the smallest detail [H-07, PF9, man b. 1929].

It might seem likely that this context of compulsion would have undermined people’s ability to see this obligatory and regimented festival as a ‘holiday’ in the ordinary sense and their capacity to feel a sense of inner participation, to join in the ‘universal joy’ that was being proclaimed throughout Soviet society. But in fact, our informants’ recollections uniformly present a very different picture.

‘We were born and brought up with the sense it was a holiday’

For the vast majority of people, the emotions inspired by the demonstration were positive – a sense of joy and wonder. A strong sense of nostalgia is present even in the comments of one of our informants who classified himself as a ‘dissident’. Though once he was an adult he did his best to avoid any official occasions of any kind, his childhood memories of the demonstration are perfectly idyllic.

Many people explain their joyful feelings quite simply: they just *knew* this was a holiday, they were *used to* celebrating state festivals:

Int: *So what created the holiday atmosphere on 1 May and 7 November?*

Inf: *You know, it was really our sense that it was a holiday. That was it, you had a kind of sense in your soul it was a holiday. You were*

¹ Cf. the description of how spectators of demonstrations in Kazan in the 1920s were known to drop to their knees and make the sign of the cross when they saw the crowds go by with their clusters of portraits [Malysheva 2005: 208].

aware it was. *We knew it well, it was our holiday, had been since we were children!* [H-07, PF2, woman b. 1921].

We were sort of born and brought up with the idea that this was a holiday. Because all those strikes and May protest demonstrations and so on, they were just part of history. They meant nothing to us! 1 May was just a holiday, it was the start of spring. That was it [H-07, P6, woman b. 1932].

You know how children got involved in the holiday? People used to take them along. We sat on our dads' and mums' shoulders with little red flags. And then there were the things they used to sell, those little devil things, 'away-aways' [=squeakers]. You'd blow into them, and then they'd let out [this squeal], 'Away-away-away-ee-ee-ee...' So there'd be them, and the red flags, and 'mother-in-law's tongues', and balloons, all that... [...] There were loads of those things for sale, and people bought them. And the big strong parents would have children sitting on their shoulders, the dads would. [...] Or if a child was capable of marching, if he was ten or twelve, he'd walk alongside his parents and demonstrate his solidarity and power, so to speak. Of course, the meaning of the holidays didn't sink in at all. It was just clear it was a holiday, loads of people, music playing, ice cream for sale, you see? Everyone really dressed up, everyone in a good mood and so on, music playing. Then everyone going off somewhere afterwards. They'd get to Palace Square and then go in their different directions, back home [H-07, PF9, man b. 1929].

Once people had acquired the sense that they simply *knew* these were holidays and had *got used* to celebrating, the Party authorities no longer had to use particularly strict ways of getting people to turn up. And if special sanctions were required in the mid-1920s, and the general atmosphere of fear that gripped the country in the late 1930s meant that not turning up was out of the question, then by the post-Stalin years most people took their participation in the demonstrations for granted – or at least, that is what they were supposed to feel:

*You just used to turn up to the meeting and say, 'We'll all be there at ten tomorrow...' You were kind of supposed to, you couldn't imagine anything else. It wasn't an order as such, it was simply notice given that we'd meet up tomorrow here or here. **No-one** [raps fist on table] shouted at you or banged the table. [...] It was taken for granted it couldn't be any other way. And how else? [H-07, PF6, woman b. 1932].*

The holiday and political repression

The conflicting elements in people's emotional responses to the Soviet holiday can take very different configurations in their recollections. It would seem to be obvious that in some cases the habit of

going along to demonstrations and sharing in ‘universal joy’ cannot have let people completely overcome the grim, not to say threatening, context in which these festivals took place – the political repressions of the Stalin years and the stressful and deprived conditions of everyday life. In this respect, highly indicative is a fragment from the oral reminiscences of a schoolteacher born in 1939, who first of all announces, ‘Well, as for the political repressions, I know nothing at all about them’, and then literally a minute later comes out with the following story:

It happened on the eighth of November, on October Revolution Day. It's such a wonderful holiday. We used to love that holiday because there was such a holiday atmosphere on the streets, all that noise, the loudspeakers talking, everyone was so cheerful, singing and dancing, dancing in the streets. [...] We'd be celebrating all out. You'd feel this sense of celebration inside. You know, we did know how to live back then, never mind what they tell you, Communists and all that, no freedom. It was like Esenin says: "If Holy Rus' [sic] calls out to you:/Leave Holy Rus', and live in heaven!"/I shall say: 'I need no heaven/Give me my motherland!'" Do you understand? That's how I felt from childhood onwards. And I remember how those parades and those holidays, those state holidays – they made us feel so proud, such a feeling of celebration. [...]

*So it was the eighth of November. And Mama was doing the washing. It was the holiday, she had to do the washing. She was getting on with it. And that little girl, my little niece, little Nadya, she'd managed to wee all over herself. And my mother, well, it was really hard getting hold of material of any kind... And I'd been out in the country in forty-five, somewhere the Germans had occupied, and later the Red Army drove them away with their tails between their legs, and they turned and fled, leaving cartloads of stuff behind. And the villagers helped themselves to all that stuff. There were German parachutes in them – silk, wonderful white silk. But it had swastikas on, black swastikas.¹ And they gave Mama some of that silk too, when she turned up to fetch me. But what on earth was she to do with it – with swastikas all over it? So she made nappies out of it! Well, what else was she to do with it? It seemed a shame to throw it away. [...] And then, that evening, it was dark already, this black maria turns up [suppressing laughter]. You understand? And they knocked us up, and they said, "So is that your washing hanging out in the back yard?" Mama says, "Yes." "Come with us, then." [...] We're all shaking like leaves. **Because we'd heard that when a black maria turns***

¹ A parachute with swastikas on is an unlikely object, but in the popular imagination (conditioned by war films), the swastika is the essential signifier of ‘German’. We repeat that we are concerned with the ‘nostalgia value’ of these texts, and not with their documentary value.

up, they'd take someone away you know where...¹ [...] And then she told us, that is, she told my papa, that they'd taken her to the White... whoops, I mean the Big House on Liteyni Prospect.² [...] They took her to some boss type, in his separate office, and they start asking, "So why were you hanging out a Nazi flag on 8 November, of all days?" So then my mother, she was crying her eyes out of course, she [got the point] and said: "What do you mean, flag? It's only a nappy... I've got a little baby... it's my grandchild, my first grandchild. Right? You can't get material for love or money. I've two other little girls to dress..." So they kept her in for quite a while. Interrogated her several times. And eventually some man there, some boss type, he said, "All right. But please — OK, you're using it as a nappy, fair enough, but please bear in mind you can't hang things like that out on 8 November. So burn it right away or chuck it out. That rag, I mean..." [...] So it all passed off all right in the end.³

A kind of 'double holiday' took place: the much-loved anniversary of the Revolution coincided with a family anniversary: the day that Mama wasn't sent to prison, though she might well have been. At the same time, the informant claims to 'know nothing about' the repressions. Thus she attempts to purify her story about higher values (love of the Motherland, unquestioning belief in the 'bright future') of everything that might lower these ideals. She is well aware of the fact that the November holiday and the Stalinist repressions might be seen as being in some kind of contradictory relationship to each other. Whether consciously or not, she sets out her own private narrative in order to stress, rather, the harmony between the two things. The 'repression' motif is presented as a minor mishap by comparison with the universal expression of joy: in her own interpretation, rather than making the celebration seem hollow for her family, it gave them extra reasons to celebrate the anniversary of the Great October Revolution: this was the day when Mama had been spared imprisonment, by a wise 'boss type' (*nachal'nik*) for her inadvertent mistake. Otherwise, repressions count as 'the everyday' (*budni*) and have nothing to do with the holiday scenario.

Judging by what our informants say, the pressure that could be applied before or after a holiday (hortatory reminders that taking part was essential, sanctions applied to those who 'bunked off') usually did not stop people from enjoying and immersing themselves in the

¹ Emphasis inserted.

² The informant has mixed up the White House (the seat of the Russian government in Moscow, where the attempted uprising took place in September 1993) and the Big House, the colloquial name for the headquarters of the secret police in Leningrad-St Petersburg. [Editor].

³ EU Pb-01, PF-10, female informant, b. 1939.

holiday experience. Sometimes, the division of the festival and its general context is explicitly recognised: a kind of ‘defensive reaction’ sets in:

Inf. 1: *I must say that since we’d grown up with all those mendacious exhortations, and our parents did everything they could to make us conform, to take away any dissident thoughts we might have had, we really did see those days as holidays. It was a holiday, and that was it! Well, of course, you really didn’t want to get up first thing in the morning and go to the dem... But the demonstration itself, now that was fun! It was fun gathering together, and shouting and bawling out something!*

[...]

Inf. 2: *You had this kind of subconscious sense of liberation from... well, you were living in that world, with all its conventions, and with everything. To hell with it all – having fun meant having fun, even in those conditions. It was a holiday, why put yourself in a bad mood?*

Inf. 1: *It was a kind of herd instinct. A herd instinct they’d instilled in you from childhood, it triumphed over everything else. But it kind of ebbed away somewhere, it... ebbed away. It’s disgusting, let’s not think about it. It’s a holiday, after all! It’s a holiday!*

Inf. 2: *There just weren’t any other holidays* [H-07, PF6, Inf. 1 – woman b. 1932; Inf. 2 – man b. 1933].

The ‘assimilation’ of the holiday

Alongside interaction with the holiday as such and its context, there were other ways of turning the state holiday into an event that brought joy to ‘ordinary people’. Perhaps the most widespread was undermining the elevated style that characterised official understandings of the holiday. This could be effected by, for example, transforming the scale of the occasion (so that ‘a universal’ holiday became one with private significance), by undermining the whole idea of the state holiday (ignoring its ‘elevated’ meaning and concentrating instead on ‘ordinary human joys’), by cocking a snook at the official imagery associated with the holiday or ironically adapting the slogans associated with it.¹

¹ For a selection of such parodies, including, for example, V. Patryshev’s ‘Clarion Calls of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union to the World of Plants and Animals’, see < <http://www.big-library.info/?act=read&book=5651>>. (Accessed 15 August 2009). Examples include: ‘Grapes and barley! Act decisively in order to re-orient the liquid you produce and make a greater contribution to the fight against drunkenness and alcoholism!’ ‘Bedbugs and cockroaches! Undergo *perestroika* and break with the parasitic way of life!’ ‘We joyfully greet the heroic efforts of the green parrots’ bloc to undermine the evil work of neo-colonialism! Fraternal greetings to the marsupial community of Australia and to the animal world of Asia, Africa, and Latin America!’

Inf. 2: *It was a corporate occasion more than anything else. With everyone all together.*

Inf. 1: *And you have to say it does make you much closer... the collective. Because say it's really small, then it's just one united group, but if it's fifty or sixty people, then there are these small groups, they hook up depending on their interests and they swap gossip and things or they sing or...*

Inf. 2: *Someone will have a bottle of cognac stuck in his pocket. And then on the quiet he'll... one-two-three...*

Inf. 1: *[...] While the column's standing there, people are amusing themselves. You might get dancing, singing, whatever, and drinking, and jokes. [...] Then you'd get to the Champs de Mars, and the whole crowd would spread out and people would wander all over the place.*

Inf. 2: *Yes, and the first thing you'd do if you had a portrait to carry would be to dump it somewhere, get rid of it. [...]*

Inf. 1: *Because it, because no-one gave a hoot where it was. It was – yippee! Well, someone who was a real Party faithful might go and hand it in where you were supposed to. But some people just didn't care. Well, see, what I want to say is that there was a real holiday mood. Solidarity of labour, First of May, all that – poo!*

Inf. 2: *Everyone's yelling, so you yell too.*

Inf. 1: *Yes, 'Hurrah-ah-ah!' And people would also yell, 'Long live the CP and little B!'¹[Laughs]. That happened too. [...] Yes, you got real hooliganism, of the political kind. That did happen [H-07, PF6, Inf. 1 – woman b. 1932; Inf. 2 – man b. 1933].*

A widespread way of 'making the holiday your own' and undermining its 'universal' status was the creation of special corporate traditions that acted as a counterbalance to the homogeneous official ones. Moreover, some of these traditions (such as those connected with drinking) were from the first recognised as incompatible with those of the official holiday and were cultivated precisely for that reason. As a result, they created what one might term 'loopholes', the capacity to enjoy the festival in a low-key, but idiosyncratic way:

We had our own traditions. Well, at LISI² [...] there was a hard-and-fast tradition. We'd march from LISI [...] along Izmailovskiy [prospekt] to... Admiralteiskiy prospekt, and then along there to

¹ From the official title of the Communist Party before 1952, VKP (b) – The All Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks). 'B' can also be the first letter of the word *blyad* (whore), a highly abusive term, hence the remark about hooliganism. [Editor.]

² Leningrad Institute of Civil Engineering.

[Palace] Square itself. And we'd go past that building (I can't remember what it's called), the one with the lions outside holding those huge spheres, those lions. It was great – you had to go and lift the director – the heads of institutes weren't called rectors back then – up on to one of the lions, and the deans as well. And not let them down till they paid a forfeit. [...] And the forfeit, and every one of them had to pay it, mind, was about half a student's monthly grant. It was two or three hundred roubles you got back then.¹ They'd always pay a hundred. And then all the students who were in the march would peel off. They'd go off and buy some port or something,² it didn't matter what [H-07, PF1, woman b. 1939].

Inf: I remember that at the institute where I worked, the Institute of Socio-Economic Problems, there was this bloke [...] He had this drape coat, or gabardine or something, very swish. And he deepened the pockets of the coat and he shoved something like a hot water bottle or a rubber container holding two litres [of vodka] down there, it had a stopper in the top end, yes, and a tube hanging out. And he stuck that tube through [i.e. made a hole in the coat to feed it through] and he brought it up under his collar. Like the astronauts do, yes? Then he'd squeeze it [with his elbow from outside] and take a nip from the tube.

Int: So what did he have in there?

Inf: Vodka. Two litres, because he used to treat his friends as well [...] Everyone knew exactly what was going on and they'd line up by him like a petrol pump. And have their little drink. And he'd be delighted. Standing there like nothing's going on! But he's squeezing and we know he's squeezing, and we know that when he does, the vodka's flowing. If you ask me, that's when the holiday stopped being something special (H-07, PF9, man b. 1929).

At the same time, different phases of the *demonstratsiya* were regulated at different levels – lightly at the beginning of the procession and much more heavily close to the tribune. Entry to the area around the tribune was not possible without special passes, but no identity checks were made at earlier stages. Every district had several 'muster points' where those working for a particular factory or institution would gather. Here the 'troop columns' would be formed up. However, at this point the atmosphere was relaxed and people would joke and have fun as they met up. While officially speaking, the parade past the tribune on Palace Square was the high point of the occasion, many of the demonstrators themselves, to judge by their

¹ The informant is referring to prices before the currency reform of 1961, i.e. 20-30 new roubles.

² i.e. Soviet port, portvein, a sweet fortified wine that did not much resemble the real wine from Oporto. [Editor].

memories, thought otherwise. It was the section of the march immediately preceding the final parade that was the most emotionally resonant for them:

People have the banners there, everyone's cheerful. Lined up in columns. So, you see, at that point there's more relaxed socialising and jollity going on, because they're not really fully formed yet, the columns, see? It's more people sorting out for themselves where they feel comfortable and at ease. And everyone's in those small local groups, enjoying themselves. And they're singing and dancing, and generally... It really felt like a holiday, no doubt at all about it. [H-07, PF1, woman b. 1940].

Every district had its own route, which was organised so that everyone would arrive in time at the central square. Since everyone knew the order of ceremonies well from previous demonstrations, it was common for people to join up en route, particularly since the procession frequently came to a halt ('*They'd go about two hundred metres and stop. And they walked slowly anyway*').

The preference for the less official and ceremonial side of the holiday also made itself felt in the fact that by no means all the demonstrators in fact took part in the parade in front of the tribune – in fact many had no intention of doing so, especially in the last stages of Soviet power. As the columns approached the centre, people found themselves in a rigidly-defined corridor with traffic moving strictly in one direction, police, army, and heavy goods vehicles to either side. Now it was impossible either to join the procession or to move away from it. And so people who did not intend to 'demonstrate solidarity with the powers that be' would try to slip away from the column before it reached the 'final straight'. Before the war, as our informants remember, there were few people who behaved like this, but their numbers grew later on:

I'm certain that before the war [...] not coming along to the demonstration, and even more leaving without having some 'good reason' (in inverted commas) would have been... how shall I put it... well, of course no-one actually got into trouble because of that, but it was kind of, not done, shall we say. If you'd bothered to turn up, you were supposed to stay around till the end. Otherwise what? Say you'd got as far as the Stock Exchange, the Rostral Columns, and then you broke ranks. That looked bad. We were supposed to go in one big group. So before the War, I think, all the pre-war holidays – if people turned up, then they went as far as Palace Square.¹ But after the War, when people's enthusiasm wasn't so great and their attitude

¹ Sic. In fact, between 1918 and 1944, 'Palace Square' was known as 'Uritsky Square'. [Editor].

to that holiday [had also changed], well, then quite a number of people used to slope off [H-07, PF9, man b. 1929].

‘Real’ holidays

Alongside the ‘main’ state holidays, which sometimes struck even people who had been brought up with them as somehow a little artificial, synthetic, or regimented, there were also holidays that almost everyone felt to be ‘real’ holidays, without any of these elements of falsity. The only Soviet calendar festival that our informants mentioned was Victory Day. But alongside memories of the first celebration of this day in 1965 (which was, as people remember, ‘orchestrated’ only to a limited extent) our informants also recollected a number of one-off holidays. For older people, events such as the welcome parades for the Chelyuskin and Papanin pilots, for Chkalov and the women aviators who took part in the so-called ‘Far Eastern marathon flight’ (Valentina Grizodubova, Marina Raskova, and Polina Osipenko) are cases in point. Younger informants recall with deep emotions, sometimes even with tears in their eyes, the festival that took place when Yury Gagarin made the first manned flight into space. Events of this kind were regarded by people as ‘real’, spontaneous rather than regimented, even if they sometimes used the familiar scenarios of the established state holidays. For instance, when remembering the festival that took place on 12 April 1961, one of our informants describes how the ordinary scenario shifted into an impromptu celebration that – he and other people believe – took place all over the Soviet Union:

I think that as soon as we heard [about Gagarin’s flight] we rushed into the street without a stitch on, and scribbled in pencil on something white, and then ran off again. And all the cars came to a halt. They must have heard too. [...] And it was the first demonstration I’d ever seen without all those slogans – ‘Onward to the Victory of Communism!’ and that stuff. [...] And there were lads and girls hugging and kissing each other! Well, I didn’t join in any of that, I just walked along having a good look. I’m thinking: have a look at this, all this – wow! All of it, all of it, is just so amazing! Since, so to speak, it’s not ‘Up the Soviet Union!’ and all that. [Laughs] [H-07, PF3, man b. 1940].

Inf. 1: *The Ninth of May, of course that was a holiday, a completely different kind of holiday. It was... well, not really a Soviet festival, it was a universal one. That was all there was to it. It didn’t produce any sense of resistance.*

Inf. 2: *It didn’t produce any resistance. Specially as they didn’t drag you out to the demonstration. [...] No, the Ninth of May wasn’t like*

that. It wasn't an ideological kind of thing, there was a real inner drive to mark that day.

Inf. 1: *Especially if there were veterans around. People who'd been through all that dreadful stuff. [...] If there were veterans around, you'd get some flowers and a little gift for all of them. It was something sacred. It was a real inner drive, there was no pressure [H-07, PF6, Inf. 1 – woman b. 1932; Inf. 2 – man b. 1933].*

At the same time, the very fact that 'real', 'popular' festivals could be celebrated, and spontaneous demonstrations occur, indicates the extent to which the 'elevated' scenario of the Soviet festival itself had been assimilated by the population, and the extent to which it, in addition, touched off a genuine resonance and met actual inner needs.

The holiday and everyday life

The background to people's reactions to holidays is always everyday life, which they are seen as at once interrupting and counter-pointing. In other words, everything about a holiday (or most things about it) is unusual – as linguistic usage in Russian makes clear, opposing *budni* (ordinary days, working days) to *prazdniki* ('days of idleness'). The exceptional character of the holiday was especially clear under Soviet power: these were days on which for a short time the hardship of everyday life, the generally run-down and chaotic nature of this, could be forgotten for a short while. Of course, implicitly these hardships are present in the recollections, but direct references to them are made only in cases when the informant is trying to emphasise that festivals were special days:

Inf. 1: *The little ones used to be running round there, so happy. And the whistles would be blowing, and they'd be tossing streamers around, and there'd be little flags and ice-cream.*

Inf. 2: *They'd be giving out chocolates and sweeties.*

Inf. 1: *We couldn't afford that then, it wasn't for every day. But that was...*

Inf. 2: *Not for every day.*

Inf.: *No, it wasn't, of course. It was a holiday [H-07, PF1, Inf. 1 – woman b. 1940; Inf. 2 – woman b. 1939].*

Inf. 1: *And then there was music thundering everywhere, everywhere in town. All those loudspeakers were switched on, the music was bawling out of them, all these stirring marches and...*

Inf. 2: *Songs.*

Inf. 1: [The March] of the Enthusiasts and so on. 'We're – the best, the very...' and all that stuff.

Int.: So all that also helped make a festival [atmosphere]?

Inf. 1: It did help make....

Inf. 2: And they broadcast it all on the square, those calls to arms.

Inf. 1: ...against the silence. And suddenly everyone bursts out singing! It was all worked out really well ideologically. They loaded people – like with vodka. Loaded them. Loaded them from nappy age up. [...] And the main thing was, you'd walk down the road itself, not the pavement. Right down the middle. It sort of made things different. You'd go along with your mates. [...] And the sun would be out, and it's all so good, those artificial flowers, those red flags – mmm! Against the grey life we usually had [H-07, PF6, Inf. 1 – woman b. 1932, Inf. 2 – man b. 1933].

You could walk right up Nevsky, where the cars usually go. But we could go right up the middle of the street, in broad daylight. And all that... you got this feeling it was a holiday, a celebration. [Oxf/Lev SPb-03 PF15, woman b. 1969].

As one of our informants recalls, the background to people's reactions to the demonstrations in the post-war years could be the general lack of male attention on ordinary days: on holidays this (as should be the case on a festival day) was shared out on a 'fairer' basis – everyone got their turn:

You see dear, you have to remember that the population was... well, there were many more women than men. There was a bit of a shortage of men after the war. And women... well, how do I put this: they wanted to show themselves off. Sort of flirting, well, that may not be the right word even, this sort of light-hearted whatever... [...] Because people were there without their families. They'd all turn up from one workplace, from a factory or whatever. And if people were singing and dancing together, someone might give you a quick cuddle, anyway, the men would pay court to you. It was a holiday, after all. They might pay court, they might even kiss you on the cheek or something. It was an essential part of life, and usually it didn't exist. Life was tough, very hard, we lived very hard in material terms, and you had no chance of that [flirting]. And there was a chance for that [on big holidays]. If you were thirty-five, forty, forty-five, fifty – the demonstration was all you really had [H-07, PF1, woman b. 1939].

Against the dreary background of Soviet everyday life, with its greyness, its deprivation, and its disorganisation, it was easy for festival organisers to create an occasion that would raise people's mood.

The sound world of the holiday

A festival day would begin with unusual sounds.¹ The morning stillness would be riven by cheery ‘holiday’ songs pouring out of the loudspeakers rigged up on lamp-posts and so on down the streets:

So how did those festivals begin? What did you wake up to? [Sings]: ‘It’s a beautiful morning!...’ Every loudspeaker in town would be bawling away, all at once. ‘It’s a beautiful morning, colours so tenderly...’ and all that. ‘The whole Soviet Union awakens at dawn. A light breeze darts...’ All those fine lovely poems [with heavy irony]. Well, OK if it had been one loudspeaker, but it was the whole damn lot of them!

[H-07, PF3, man b. 1940].

The out-of-the-ordinary sound regime was the first element in the ‘technology’ by which the holiday mood was created. It is worth bearing in mind here that *homo sovieticus* was conditioned to be extraordinarily aware of noise. The sound of strange footsteps or a car passing at an unexpected time could convey a sense of serious political threat. The holiday racket put an end to subconscious worries of this kind and this made it relaxing; it was possible to feel safe. In addition, holidays allowed people a rare chance to make noise *themselves* – to shout, sing, play musical instruments.²

After the War, the holiday din was supplemented by *salyuty* [rounds of fireworks] (traditional on holidays before 1917, and revived in 1943).³ This new noise gave people the chance to yell ‘Hurrah!’ after every round was fired. But even without this, sounds of all kinds proliferated. Almost everyone remembers music, song, noise of various kinds:

Inf. 2: *You have to say, [Soviet] agitation and propaganda did have its effects. It was a regular thing, especially on holidays and the days leading up to them. Those radio transmitters, those loudspeakers on the streets...*

Inf. 1: *Music right away, music.*

Inf. 2: *So you started feeling cheerful.*

¹ For a discussion of the festival noise environment in the general context of city sounds see Vladimir Lapin, *Zvuki i zapakhi Peterburga*, St Petersburg, 2007. [Editor].

² Such an opportunity was welcome in a city with formidable regulations related to noise abatement. City regulations of 1970 forbade ‘loud music, song, and other noise that disturbs the peace of the citizenry in streets and courtyards between 11 pm and 7 am’; by 1972, such noise was forbidden at all times of day. See *Byulleten Ispolnitelnogo komiteta Leningradskogo gorodskogo soveta* No. 20 (1970), p. 16; *ibid.*, No. 21 (1972), p. 14. [Editor].

³ The parades themselves were suspended during the war years, but revived once the Blockade had ended. [Editor].

Inf. 1: ‘It’s beautiful morning...’ That was the song.

Inf. 2: And you felt that you had to rush along to those demonstrations...

[H-07, PF4, Inf. 1 – woman b. 1927; Inf. 2 – man b. 1929]. .

The brass bands were playing. All along the streets there were brass bands, the brass bands were playing. Yes. [...] It was all so interesting, I’m telling you, brass bands everywhere! And music coming from the loudspeakers! Thunderous noise! No gun-rolls before the war, mind you. [H-07, PF8, man b. 1931].

It was... music... it was all so... I’ve told you all the things that influenced us. Music, of course. Of course. If you turned off the music, it would just be an ordinary procession: clip-clop.

[H-07, PF3, man b. 1940].

The colours of the holiday

Once the unusual, but immediately identifiable, sounds of celebration had drawn people on to the street – as might happen even if they had no intention of going on the demonstration – they would be confronted by unusual sights as well:

Inf. 1: It wasn’t a Brazilian carnival, of course, it was a Soviet carnival. A flaming red,¹ Soviet carnival. People were wearing red carnations, ribbons, all that. [...]

Inf. 2: Flags hanging out. And balloons. They weren’t usually for sale... they’d be hanging there on sticks, tied to threads. Sort of bouquets of balloons. The children loved that.

Inf. 1: It all seemed... seemed... how do I put this... so colourful enough back then. Ordinary days were so grey, that was the background, holidays seemed really colourful by contrast.

[H-07, PF6, Inf. 1 – woman b. 1932); Inf. 2 – man b. 1933].

This ‘riot of colours’ that our informants remember is often supplemented by another detail – glorious weather. In reality, the weather did not always live up to expectations (especially in November), but in retrospect people ‘retouch’ it:

And somehow it was always, I remember that well, it was always a sunny day. Always, I remember, that picture – a sunny day!

[H-07, PF3, man b.1940].

¹ The word *kumachovyi* is impossible to render exactly. It refers to a harsh red cloth such as was used for official flags and banners in the Soviet era. [Editor].

The weather motif is also significant because people one knew as well as the streets one knew looked different on holidays. Everyone tried to dress up in new (holiday) clothes, particularly on 1 May. There is a historical reason for this: before the Revolution, Easter had been the time for new clothes, and 1 May new style and Orthodox Easter often fall close together, so that the assimilation of traditions from one festival to the other came about easily. One of the main motifs of stories about 1 May is new clothes. Reminiscences about this detail go back before the War too:

Ooh, now the First of May – that really was amazing. But they never let us, we thought it was warm enough, but Mama, I can remember it as though it were yesterday, she used to sew us little coats with shawl collars and little hats, and we'd be all dressed up, and we wanted to look our best, because the little dresses she used to make us, they were lovely as well.

[H-07, PF5, woman b. 1931].¹

Not surprisingly, memories about clothes are even more widespread with reference to the post-war era, by which time things had become a little easier in material terms:

The flags, the colours, the music, it all put you in a good mood immediately. All of it! Everyone came out, and the main thing was – everyone was wearing new clothes. New clothes! See. [...] Back then people had strict ideas about work clothes and holiday clothes. And everything nice was for holidays, for the First of May [...] now, here I'm judging by my own experience: new shoes from Skorokhod,² a nice new suit. Well, really everyone came out – to have a look at everyone else. What everyone had on, what new things everyone had bought...

[H-07, PF3, woman b. 1940].

Holidays did not end with the demonstration. They often involved celebrations at 'parks of culture and rest' as well, and it was standard in many districts for there to be a 'film show' (screens might be improvised from the blank walls on the sides of buildings or fixed up on top of lorries):

¹ Cf. a comparable memory from a woman born into a working-class family in Moscow in 1936: 'On the First of May you could go out dressed up, that really was a holiday, we went to the demonstrations, and I remember that like nothing else! Mama always used to make us something. Vitalik would get a new shirt and I'd get a new dress, now New Year's considered a big holiday, but before the you went out on the streets used to be. Well, 'before', I don't know, but that's how we used to live. Because we didn't have the means to make anything for New Year. We did it for the First of May!' (Oxf/Lev M-03 (Moscow, 2003), PF-19A. Emphasis original. Interviewer Yuliya Rybina). [Editor].

² The main footwear factory in Leningrad, literally 'Quickstep'. [Editor].

And over at that whatsit, Kirov Palace of Culture, they'd give a film show on the street. And there'd be films on the streets here too, and in lots of other places all over Vasilievsky Island, and in other parts of the town all the more so. [...] They'd show 'Chapaev'... that was the kind of film you got back then... 'A Girl with Character' too. Well, I can't remember them all. All those films, those patriotic films. [...] And there'd be lorries on some streets, with screens on top, and they showed the film there, with projectors. They used lorries, not just walls. The lorries had big screens on top, and they had all the equipment, a projector and everything... And people crowded round. We sometimes even watched from the wrong side, from the back side of the screen. [...] You see, it's transparent, right? [H-07, PF8, woman b. 1931].

Food and drink in abundance

The Soviet holiday, like archaic rituals [Baiburin 1993: 201-23], was organised so that all the senses, all the channels of communication with the external world were played on to the maximum possible degree. This overwhelming load meant that tactile and taste impressions also formed part of the total experience of the holiday. The impression of there being mountains of food was an important component in the celebratory atmosphere: one could say that informants recall holidays as the living embodiment of the 'abundance' promised in the key cookbook of the Stalin years (and later), *The Book of Tasty and Nutritious Food*. Not everyone remembers being able to enjoy the delicacies on sale, but at the very least they could enjoy the look of them: After the hunger of the Blockade and the immediate post-war years, the food stalls evoked a particularly emotional reaction:

Inf.: *Well, there were tables out with all these sandwiches, fruit, soda water, what else, lemonade, beer.*

Int.: *Right along the street?*

Inf: *Yes, that's right. So, on holidays the streets got turned into a, how do I put it, restaurant, let's put it like that, crudely speaking. Yes. Lots of streets, in the centre of town I mean, Bol'shoi Prospect on Vasilievsky Island, or Bol'shoi Prospect on Petrograd Side and a few other, they tot turned... All the places the demonstration went down, it didn't go down all the streets. On Vasilievsky, it went down Bolshoi Prospect, mainly. And then down the [University] Embankment, and then across Palace Bridge. Whoops, I mean, first it went down Syezdovskaya Line, and then on to the Embankment. And people gathered in different places. So there'd be this sort of unified stream from different lines, from different ones. Right. And the same in every district. Wherever there was a central street, they'd*

put out those tables, and all kinds of food it was hard to buy otherwise would be out there. You see, it wasn't easy getting food back then – before the war, and just after [H-07, PF8, man b. 1931].

The informant here mentions 'beer' being on sale, but when it comes to hard liquor, information differs considerably. Some informants recall that people used to lay in stores of spirits in advance, the point being that one could not buy it on the day. The following recollection comes from the 1960s:

True, you have to bear in mind that all the shops selling alcohol along the demonstration routes were closed. [...] All of them. I can remember that for certain, because my mate Tolya Simanovsky, he always used to say, 'Hell, that bar¹ there's closed, would you believe?' 'You said it!' So you had to go off somewhere, God knows, to... Detskoselskii Prospect² to find a shop that was open. But no-one was going to drag off that far. So you couldn't have a drink, you see, dear?³ [H-07, PF1, woman b. 1939].

However, other informants recalling an earlier period remember that the streets turned into one long line of refreshment stalls:

Inf. 2: They had buffets set up on the ground floors. You'd go up to the windows and they'd pour you out a vodka, you could buy sandwiches...⁴

Inf. 1: Yes, they were giving people the chance to knock back one or two. [...] It wasn't a case of getting sozzled, just of raising enthusiasm and so on.

Inf. 2: Yes. [...] That was in forty-eight, forty-seven, right after the War. The time they did away with rationing, and all that. When there was something around to eat [H-07, PF6, Inf. 1 – woman b. 1932; Inf. 2 – man b. 1933].

Inf.: There were lots of people up to that.

Int: You meant that people would take drink along, or they'd buy it out on the streets?

Inf.: You could buy it, you could buy it. I'm not... I can't say whether you could get vodka, but you could certainly get beer and wine. But

¹ Ryumochnaya, a shop selling wine and spirits by the glass for consumption on the premises. [Editor].
² A main street in the Moskovsky District of Leningrad, in the south of the city, now known as Malodetskosl'skii Prospect. [Editor].
³ Bars were closed so that people did not wander off there rather than taking part in the demonstration, and also to make it more difficult for people to turn up at the parade already drunk.
⁴ This refers to official stalls set out for the day, not to private enterprise on the part of those living on the ground floors. [Editor].

probably people took it with them usually. I think. [...] Because we, when I was working [at the factory], I took it with me. We'd take, I'd have – I was head of a section then, and I'd be allocated a hundred and twenty litres of ethylene a month. It was no problem to siphon off a couple to take [H-07, PF 8, man b. 1931].

As one can well imagine, 'taking stuff along' was an extremely common practice. People tried not to advertise what they were doing, which led to miracles of inventiveness, as in the case of the person described above with his 'petrol tank' of vodka under his coat. At the same time, our informants remember that people 'kept themselves in hand', as was natural enough, bearing in mind that at later stages of the *demonstratsiya* they would be right under the eye of various 'responsible people', not to speak of plain-clothes policemen and KGB agents. Yet people also knew that on 'universal holidays' the police were more indulgent with people who'd had a drop too many, since this was interpreted not as ordinary reprehensible drunkenness, but as participation in 'universal joy':

The police just knew all about it. They... they... of course they got instructions and whatever. Don't lay a finger on the drunks, just get them home, home, home. [...] No, there were sobering-up stations for the use of those who needed them, you might say. But they tried to do it softly-softly. [...] So what if a person had had a few! [...] Well, basically, the police chief might say to his subordinates: 'You have to bear in mind people are really making a great effort at work. They've been looking forward to this for months. If one or two of them overdo it, do your best to help, so to speak' [H-07, PF11, man b. 1929].

In the end, the question of whether the authorities actively encouraged the sale of spirits to get people 'warmed up' or, on the contrary, tried to stop this altogether by closing shops and bars is of marginal importance. One way or another, they were attempting to regulate alcohol consumption in a way that reflected ideological perceptions of the ideal popular festival. So much everyone can remember, even if they have now forgotten whether drinking was foisted on people or actively banned. Interesting, too, is the fact that the motif of *resistance* invariably crops up in one form or another: *they* closed the booze shops and the bars, but *we* found a way round that; *everyone* tried to get the women drunk, but *I* wasn't having any of it, and so on.

The paradox of solidarity

Music, bright colours, food and drink were all important constituents of the Soviet state holiday, but the vital core of the occasion lay somewhere else: in proxemics, the sense of communality with a multitude of brightly dressed and benevolent people on streets that

would have been half-empty on ordinary days. Often what people say is very close to the official model of ‘Soviet happiness’, or at any rate represents some kind of response to this. Yet at the same time people do their best to insist that their way of reacting to holidays was not something that was simply imposed on them: the phrases about solidarity really had inner meaning:

You know, strange as it may seem, the fact that they ground into us that it was a festival of solidarity, of communality and so on, it sank down inside. [...] I was only a girl then. Do you see, dear? But I still felt it. Nobody ever said it directly. But when you got out on to the street – that sense of communing with other people! [...] They’ve all opened up, they’re full of goodwill, all together! Not everyone for himself, but everyone all together. [...] It’s an amazing feeling. Because it was as though anyone ever explained to me things would be like that. It was a sort of internal feeling. [...] Right, we sort of felt, right, that... right... we were all together...

[H-07, PF1, woman b. 1940].

This particular informant has an obvious sense of embarrassment about the resemblance between her feelings and the official rhetoric of the day (‘the triumph of solidarity’, the ‘unity of Party and People’, ‘the Soviet people as a single community’), but she sees the holiday as an occasion when ‘unity’ in a real sense actually did exist. What is more, it was exactly this sensation that, for her and others, made a state festival into a real holiday. Of course, any holiday in any culture is meant to weld participants into members of a community – whether this is a family, a village, a parish, a work collective. Soviet state festivals gave people the chance to sense particularly acutely their membership of an entire nation: awareness of common nationality was raised to new levels, altering the quality of experience. It is not surprising that the Stalinist motif of communing with ‘the entire country’ as a special feature of major festivals survived long after 1953:

You see, it was this sense of communality, you feel that you’re just some little person in the midst of that great mass, of that... of that nation.

[EU Pb-01, PF-10, woman b. 1939].

Some lines of Mayakovsky’s from his narrative poem *Vladimir Il’ich Lenin* come to mind: ‘I’m happy to be a small part of that vast force./ that even the tears in my eyes are everyone’s’.¹ The sense of being

¹ Mayakovsky continues: ‘It is impossible to commune more fully and purely/With that great feeling under the name of class!’ The word ‘commune’ is the one used for the religious act of communion. [Editor].

part of a vast crowd of people not only represented the quintessence of the festival, of the holiday atmosphere in a pure sense, but also generated a kind of hierarchy of different holidays. No family festivals (birthdays etc.) or community holidays such as New Year could compete with state holidays, since the sense of ‘belongingness’ was not inspired by these.

The result of this was the emergence of a paradoxical situation: on the one hand people often tried to make holidays seem less official, more ‘their own’, which meant transferring the scale of the occasion, turning it into something that was of primarily private and not ‘universal’ importance. On the other hand, the sense of fusion with the huge mass of people was precisely what gave the holiday its particular atmosphere, which in turn fostered the sense in many that fusion and unity were not imposed on people, but genuine. This emerged particularly clearly in the case of ‘real’ holidays, such as Gagarin’s flight into space.

The waning of these ‘universal’ holidays attracted different responses from different people. Some were delighted, others distressed. But now, even those members of the older generation who took a sceptical view of Soviet festivals often feel a degree of nostalgia. It is not just the festivals that have vanished, but the sense of universal celebration, a sense that people had grown used to:

Well, I'm telling you, dear, people are kind of atomised in the ordinary way, yes? Everyone shut up in their own family, with this and that emotional concern. And when you have the chance to go out on the street and feel that all these people, these strangers, are feeling warm towards you, it's a holiday for them too... And everyone wants to be together and to express that sense of joy, that pleasure, all together, see dear? And that was really good. You felt, you felt with every pore, that it really was a holiday. [...] And then it all ebbed away. That sense of it being a holiday ebbed away. That sense of unity with people. Everyone had their own affairs to worry about, their own view of things, their own way of looking at all that, you see dear? So that's how it began, the sense of people being separate from each other [H-07, PF1, woman b. 1940]

As we see, a kind of symbiotic interaction between the official and the personal views of happiness was characteristic for the world-view of several generations of people socialised under Soviet power. For many of them, including the generation that has been represented here, the sense of separate happiness, ‘private’ happiness was simply not satisfying. Now Soviet festivals, which once offered the witnesses of ‘glorious days’ the supreme opportunity to feel personal and collective happiness at the same time, have vanished. People feel

cheated. As one participant in a recent internet forum put it: ‘They’ve stolen a little bit of my happiness’.¹

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¹ Recently, to be sure, the mood of those who feel nostalgia for the Soviet past has become more optimistic, since there is a strong sense that the old ideals are returning. As is hardly surprising, the old formulae of Soviet happiness have not gone away. They were simply awaiting renewal, a renewal that has now begun. See, for instance, a recent report on the activities of a new children’s movement attached to United Russia, the Mishki (Teddy Bears): *The little Mishki decided immediately to ask President Putin to head their movement, and they offered thanks to him for everything he had done with a slogan adapted from the Stalin era: “Thank You, Putin, for Our Stable Future”* (<medikportal.ru/engine/print.php?newsid=8281&news_page=1>. (Accessed 12 July 2008). [The site medikportal.ru has now disappeared from the Internet, but for material on the revival of the Pioneers, see <http://ipim.ru/discussion/581.html>. Accessed 15 August 2009. Editor].

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Translated by Catriona Kelly

But when and how can we reclaim the freedom to travel? That is what I have spent the week assessing, at least for the English: Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have yet to spell out what changes they may make. The road to freedom starts by going backwards: the rules will get tougher before they get easier. By 29 March the stay-at-home rule should be lifted – replaced by another Soviet-style policy, “stay local”. This is guidance rather than law, and I predict it may be widely ignored. So can we once again board buses, boats and planes? To translate from bureaucratese: We’re all going on a summer holiday – we just don’t know where, when or how. Read More.

New Year was the favourite holiday for children, because there was so much winter fun,’ recalls 55-year-old Natalia Ledovskikh, from Novosibirsk. ‘We spent lots of time outside skiing, skating, sledding down the hills and playing with snowballs – even if it was -30 degrees outside. We never felt the cold.’ Mealtimes were one of the most important elements of marking the winter festivities, and that was made easier after the Second World War when ration cards were no longer used. ‘After the war everyone would bring whatever they could for the New Year dinner,’ says Valentina. By the 1970s when food once again had become scarce in the Soviet Union, special New Year food sets appeared, mainly in the cities. She is really happy when we are on holidays in the beach. And you Ann? What are you doing? Dear Ann, This is a photograph of my family on holidays. We are having a good time in France. The weather is sunny and hot today. In the picture, we are at the beach in Coliere, a little village in the South of France. I am swimming in the sea because the water is very hot. I love it. My brother are playing with the sand. He likes building sandcastles when he goes to the beach. My sister is sunbathing because she loves the sun. My dad is fishing with the fishing rod. Also, he is listening to the radio. My mum is reading a book next to my sister. She is really happy when we are on holidays in t