

Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics

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glorified the military as a fighting machine²⁴⁵ and as the defender of the country of soviets²⁴⁶ and the achievements of October.²⁴⁷ It was also the army of liberation, as two posters from 1939 make clear.²⁴⁸ An important strand of the military focus was on aeroplanes and the air force, which supplemented the prominence of aviation in popular culture at this time. Posters showed the ‘proud falcons of our motherland’,²⁴⁹ planes flying in formation over troops below,²⁵⁰ and even engaged in aerial combat.²⁵¹ This built on the established focus on aviation in the regime’s symbolism.

‘Life has become more joyous’²⁵²

Stalin’s aphorism encapsulated a central focus of the myth of building socialism, and thereby of the metanarrative, in the second half of the 1930s, the projection of an image of a prosperous society with the people living well. With socialist realism conceiving of the future as immanent in the present, the depiction of prosperity and happiness was seen as neither just descriptive of contemporary reality nor projecting the future, but the tying of these two together. The image of a prosperous society was projected through depictions of scenes in which well-dressed happy people lived their lives in pleasant and congenial surroundings characterised by a standard of living that far exceeded that which they were actually experiencing; their living and work locations, the array of consumer goods available, their clothing and their leisure pursuits all suggested a material standard of living significantly higher than they were currently enjoying.²⁵³ From this time, material well-being was shown as being central to life under socialism, in stark contrast to both the West and tsarist Russia.²⁵⁴

A prominent theme, particularly early in the 1930s, was the importance and value of communal facilities (clubs, dining rooms, recreation facilities like theatres and parks), including how they released women from the ‘slavery’ of work in the kitchen.²⁵⁵ The freedom and equality of women was a significant part of the image that was presented in the 1930s.²⁵⁶ A striking representation of this is to be found in Yury Pimenov’s 1937 painting ‘Novaia Moskva’.²⁵⁷ This is a view from the back seat of a car being driven by a woman down Okhotnyi Riad from Teatral’naia towards the new building for the Council of Labour and Defence (now the State Duma building) with the new Moskva Hotel on the left. The allegory is clear: a young woman driving a modern car into the transformed centre of the socialist capital. Public catering and communal dining rooms were also an important theme at this time,²⁵⁸ as was the provision of school and day-care facilities²⁵⁹ and recreation facilities, especially the new Central Park of Culture and Rest.²⁶⁰ Recreation facilities encouraged a healthy

lifestyle, something that was also pressed by a concern in posters for promoting physicultural and sporting activity and was justified in part in terms of helping people to contribute more effectively to collective endeavours.²⁶¹ The fruits of Soviet production were also noted, sometimes with the implication that these were to be used for socially useful purposes; for example, the photographic equipment that should be used ‘in the service of socialist construction’.²⁶² Sometimes the symbol of the new life was much more prosaic, as in the 1934 poster citing Stalin’s words that each kolkhoznik would have his own cow.²⁶³ The new, ‘cultured’, style of life was presented as being related to hard work in the construction of socialism.²⁶⁴ In one famous poster,²⁶⁵ peasants are said to now be able to enjoy a human lifestyle if they work honestly, with the illustration showing a smiling man, woman and child, with in the foreground a record playing on a record player, in the background a number of books including volumes by Lenin, Stalin and Gorky, and in the middle an electric light-bulb. The poster thus combines happy people with literacy, electricity, honest work and socialism. Babies and children were shown as enjoying a happy childhood ‘under the Soviet star’,²⁶⁶ while the depiction of happy children with their smiling mothers was also a common image; in a poster from 1937 a happy woman and child (who is holding a model of an aeroplane) are being used to urge people to vote for the ‘socialist motherland’ and a ‘happy life’.²⁶⁷ People were shown as being valued on the basis only of their personal qualities and contribution, not their position, nationality or gender, a situation said to be in sharp contrast with that which prevailed before 1917.²⁶⁸ National questions had been resolved through the Leninist national policy.²⁶⁹ The contrast between Soviet times and those of the tsar was presented as being stark, with those prior to 1917 suffering under oppression and poverty while Soviet citizens relaxed and enjoyed a full and fruitful life.²⁷⁰ From the middle of the decade, posters made much of Stalin’s comment that ‘life has become better, comrades; life has become more joyous’,²⁷¹ showing happy people along with Stalin’s words; in one such poster from 1936, below three smiling citizens looking at a newspaper, there is also a caricature of Hitler who is sad because the people are happy.²⁷² An important symbol of the advanced society being created (like the tractor in the countryside) was the aeroplane and flying. In the middle of the decade this was often in the form of a celebration of the Soviet Union’s heroes of the air who had flown on record-breaking flights to the Arctic or the US,²⁷³ but generally the advance of the country was suggested by planes in flight,²⁷⁴ often in great numbers; one particularly striking poster shows many red planes flying above a large march in Red Square.²⁷⁵ The aeroplane symbolised the quest to transcend the limits of time and space, to construct a new

world which would burst the limits of the old and emerge as the model of socialist modernity. The aeroplane was directly and unambiguously linked with progress towards the socialist future.²⁷⁶ The Arctic flyers seemed to personify Stalin's aphorism that 'there are no fortresses that bolsheviks cannot take'.²⁷⁷

The new and happy life was also reflected in advertising posters. Posters appeared advertising mundane personal items like cigarettes²⁷⁸ and alcohol,²⁷⁹ but there was also attention to luxury items and the sorts of goods which denoted a higher standard of living. Examples include shoe polish,²⁸⁰ crab meat,²⁸¹ cosmetics,²⁸² confectionery,²⁸³ toothpaste,²⁸⁴ and even a fur mantle.²⁸⁵ Films remained popular subjects of posters at this time.²⁸⁶ While many of these things would not really be considered luxury items, nor were they the sorts of things that were likely to be seen to be appropriate to advertise to the poor. They assumed a certain level of disposable income which went with the view that the new world being created would be one where material scarcity would be absent.

The new and happy life was associated with the 'new Soviet man', an individual whose qualities and characteristics were appropriate to the new age of socialist plenty and happiness. Campaigns had been conducted since the early 1920s emphasising improvements in personal behaviour, but these were expanded significantly in the 1930s. Such campaigns focused on things like hygiene, good work practices, sobriety, abstinence from gambling, literacy, physical culture and productive leisure, the use of 'cultured' language, modesty, anti-religiosity and family values. Opposition to sexual licence, pro-natalism, and motherhood campaigns promoted cultural norms designed to produce a person who was 'kul'turnyi', or cultured.²⁸⁷ In physical terms, the 'new Soviet man' was characterised by masculine good looks, a determined stature and gaze and an apparent athleticism, while the 'new Soviet woman' was both feminine and physically robust, 'broad-shouldered, broad-hipped, big-boned'.²⁸⁸ All possessed a self-confidence, a maturity of judgement and a powerful sense of self. But it was a sense of self which was achieved through membership of the collective. Thus as in the cults of the heroes, individual qualities were embedded in the collective.

This focus in the myth of building socialism upon the happy and prosperous lifestyle was the aspect of the metanarrative which, in the 1930s, one would have expected to have been most likely to have been met with popular scepticism and disbelief on the part of significant parts of the population. For most people, living conditions remained poor while the uncertainties created by the terror must have meant for many the antithesis of the happy life projected in the myth. Clearly, many people were aware of the gap between image and reality, and scholars have

pointed this out,²⁸⁹ but it is not clear what the consequence of this was. Many are likely to have accepted the socialist realist position that the images portrayed the future rather than the present, a view consistent with the aspirations, hopes and expectations of those who had flooded into the cities in search of a better life. For such people these images constituted the promise of the future rather than a reflection of the present, and therefore their lack of correspondence with contemporary reality would not necessarily have cast doubt on the veracity of the regime's metanarrative. While doubtless many others were less sanguine about the images, even the doubters (at least in Moscow) would have recognised the major changes made to the urban fabric of the capital.

Building the socialist city

The most important symbol architecturally of the bright communist future was to be the never-completed project for the construction of a Palace of Soviets. Virtually from the outset of Soviet rule, there was a feeling within the leadership that there was a need for an iconic building which would represent the new regime and communism both for the people within the new state and for those abroad. As early as November 1918 Kamenev had envisaged a 'palace of the people' which would be looked to not only by the people of Moscow but by the entire international proletariat.²⁹⁰ In December 1922 at the first congress of soviets in Moscow, Sergei Kirov (at the time the head of the Communist Party of Azerbaijan and a candidate member of the CC) called for

the construction of a fitting monument within which the representatives of labour could meet . . . this building should be a symbol of the growing might and triumph of communism not only among ourselves but also over there, in the West . . . we have wiped from the surface of the earth the palaces of the bankers, landowners, and tsars . . . let us build in their place the palace of the workers and the labouring peasants, let us bring together everything in which the Soviet lands are rich, let us invest all our worker-peasant creativity in this monument and show our friends and enemies that we 'semi-Asiatics', we at whom the world continues to look down its nose, are capable of embellishing this wretched earth with monuments such as our enemies could never imagine, even in their dreams.²⁹¹

Kirov proposed the construction of this workers' palace on Okhotnyi Riad. However with Lenin's death in 1924, the perceived nature of the building began to change, so that instead of being the symbol just of the radiant communist future, it would also be a memorial to the dead leader. Although this emphasis upon the building as a memorial to Lenin²⁹² dissipated, especially after the construction of the permanent mausoleum on Red Square in 1930, its symbolic importance remained supreme. This

and images were liberally spread around the exhibition) were enjoying the bountiful plenty of socialism. The exhibition was representative of the society and its plenitude. It was shut in 1941 at the outbreak of the war.

Major transformation had occurred in Moscow by the time of the war. However although significant changes had been made in the centre of the city, it is clearly not the case that the city was reworked into a new, obviously socialist, form. The Metro, Gorky Street, the reworked area along Okhotnyi Riad, new apartment buildings in the centre, the large-scale road paving and some other buildings may have given a sense of the bright and radiant future, but much of the city remained untransformed when the war broke out. Furthermore, not only was most of this development in the central parts of the city, but much of the new accommodation was for the elite, broadly defined, rather than the working population. This was in stark contrast to the pattern of housing provision in the 1920s which was directed primarily at the working class and reflects the emphasis on merit rather than egalitarianism in the regime's symbolic order. Nevertheless by the end of the 1930s, Soviet public speakers and publicists waxed lyrical about 'socialist Moscow', its achievements, and its role as a beacon to the world's proletariat and symbol of the future. In 1935, Kaganovich had declared that the redevelopment of Moscow disproved the criticism that the Soviet Union offered a 'barracks socialism'; this was the prefiguring of the life to come,³³² with the reworked centre a clear representation of the building of socialism in practice.

Ritual

The reworking of the centre of Moscow was designed in part to facilitate enhanced performance of public ritual activity, something which took on a higher profile at this time. Ritual continued to express the principal theme of the regime's metanarrative, the achievement of socialism through popular commitment, social unity and Stalin's guidance despite the extent of opposition. Public demonstrations on the regime's major feast days were more organised, structured³³³ and militarised during this period than they had been in the 1920s. From 1928 parades became, in Stites' words, 'more rigidly organized, politicized, militarized, and standardized'.³³⁴ The message of the celebration was combative, with sharp hostility to both foreign opposition and the hidden enemy within, and criticism of those workers who were not fully committed to the cause; marching workers carried placards reporting their plan over-fulfilment and promising to do even more in the future. A visitor to Moscow described the 7 November 1929 parade. He described how processions came along all the arteries into Teatral'naia Square, forming a human river. They carried

flags, emblems and inscriptions on calico and moved towards Red Square. They sang songs, which those on the pavement joined in. The columns were constituted by different groups, each preceded by their own placards, emblems and sometimes music, and they often carried animated silhouettes worked by levers. Some silhouettes were related to the type of work the people did, such as a train for the railway workers; others were satirical and poked fun at enemies like Poincaré and Lloyd George. They also often carried proclamations, like 'We are realising the plan in four years' and 'We form the labour front for socialist construction'. The overwhelming sentiment, according to this observer, was one of joy.³³⁵ As the processions proceeded, there were often speeches, poetry readings, theatrical and musical performances, much of it improvised and impromptu.³³⁶ City buildings were decorated with banners, as were the Kremlin walls, and the marchers saluted 'reverently' as they passed the Lenin mausoleum on which the leaders stood.³³⁷ The parades were also on a larger scale, and often characterised by large physical culture demonstrations.³³⁸ According to Stites,³³⁹ the number of troops and variety of units deployed in front of the Kremlin increased each year (except 1934 when there was a campaign for diplomatic peace and security) with a peak in 1939. The number of aircraft overflying also increased during this period. These demonstrations celebrated socialist achievements, emphasising the building of socialism and, in the second half of the 1930s, the friendship of the peoples of the USSR. The marchers carried placards through which they 'swore to their leaders to fulfil their plans, held up evidence of their recent achievements in the form of production graphs, repeated work ethic oaths, displayed shame boards, and endorsed competition in the argot of combat.'³⁴⁰ They also parodied enemies, both at home and abroad. The laudation of Stalin was a major theme, especially later in the decade. The report of the celebration of the day of physical culture in 1935³⁴¹ is indicative of this. Five thousand Pioneers march into Red Square:

Their glances turn to the left side of the mausoleum where Stalin stands, smiling. The children carry slogans of woven natural flowers: 'Greetings best friend of the Pioneers, comrade Stalin!' 'Thank you comrade Stalin for a happy life!' The slogans soar over the column of pioneers from Dzerzhinsky region. From afar is heard a growing drone. Aeroplanes appear.³⁴² They are arranged in such an order that they form the word 'STALIN'. The name of Stalin soars over Moscow. Into the square comes the sports organisation, the Spartacists. At the head of the columns are huge placards with gold letters: 'Greetings great Stalin'. With a song ending with the cry 'Stalin hooray!' forces of the Red Army go past the mausoleum.

Ritualised demonstrations/parades became particularly prominent during the 1930s, seemingly gathering impetus in the middle of the decade.

These parades, demonstrations, carnivals and celebrations were means of emphasising national prosperity and the happy life. Lines of laughing and smiling people carrying symbols of high levels of production and high material standards of living reinforced the impression of prosperity and contentment with the comfortable lifestyle. In December 1935 (a month after Stalin's 'life has become more joyous' comment) the New Year's tree was re-introduced (it had been abolished in 1928 in the drive to do away with Christmas) and the commemoration of the centenary of Pushkin's birth (February 1937) was announced. In 1936–7 there were campaigns devoted to the new constitution and in preparation for the December 1937 Supreme Soviet elections. The celebration of arctic and aviation heroes was prominent while preparations for the celebration of the twentieth anniversary of the October Revolution took place on a larger scale than previously. In addition, a number of new celebratory days were created: Air Force Day (third Sunday in August beginning in 1933; this joined Red Army Day and Border Guards Day established in the 1920s), All-Union Railway Worker Day (first Sunday in August beginning in 1936), Navy Day (last Sunday in July beginning in 1939) and All-Union Physiculturist Day (second Saturday in August beginning in 1939). These joined International Women's Day, International Youth Day, and Shock Workers Day.³⁴³

At the official level, significant signs of hierarchy were re-introduced, reflecting the more general emphasis on merit over equality that was also implicit in the contemporaneous promotion of heroes. In 1934 the title 'meritorious artist' was introduced and academic degrees were restored. In 1935 military ranks and saluting were re-introduced, while among officials ties, white shirts and shiny black shoes became a kind of 'uniform',³⁴⁴ although Stalin continued to wear the simple military-style jacket he had regularly worn. New awards for personal achievement were created: the Order of the Red Banner of Labour (1928), the Order of Lenin and the Order of the Red Star were created in 1930, the Hero of the Soviet Union in 1934, Order of the Mark of Honour in 1935, the Badge of Honour in 1936, Hero of Socialist Labour in 1938, and the Stalin Prize for literature in 1939.³⁴⁵

At the more personal level, the re-emphasis on the family led to the disappearance of those invented ceremonies of family and community that had been introduced in the 1920s. The campaign against religious belief was pursued particularly vigorously in the early part of the 1930s, with church closures and the attempt to abolish Christmas. The qualities of the new Soviet man noted above were central in the imagery of the time. This also pervaded the party, with a code of behaviour emerging for party members, which included politeness and decorum, cultured

behaviour, civility (and therefore a rejection of the sort of tough guy profile that had become common in the 1920s), a rejection of all forms of dissolute behaviour, and a commitment to and knowledge of Marxism-Leninism.³⁴⁶ During this time, party life also became more ritualised.

Perhaps the clearest instance of this was the treatment accorded to the leader. The Soviet system was one that did not have elaborate rituals for the crowning of a leader in the way that monarchies had. The post of party leader, the General Secretary, had been established in 1922 but was not mentioned in the formal party Rules until 1966, even though during the 1920s this was emerging as the most important position in the political system. There was no elaborate ceremony for the filling of this position; formally it was decided by the CC at a meeting immediately after the party congress had finalised the new composition of the CC itself. However as noted above, during the 1930s the announcement of the name of the General Secretary, Joseph Stalin, was invariably the occasion for tumultuous popular approbation by the assembled party members. It was not simply upon announcement of Stalin's election that such applause and approbation broke out, but upon the mere mention of his name. The sort of affirmations of popular love and respect noted above in discussing the cult became a standard feature of party meetings, which were thereby transformed into occasions for the laudation of the leader. This ritualised laudation of the individual seemingly became one of the central purposes of party meetings. However, although the celebration of Stalin was a key element of such meetings, his personal involvement in those meetings was not as an emanation of power or glory. Generally he did not chair the meeting, he tended to sit among the meeting presidium and to one side rather than in the centre, and his demeanour was always one of modesty and almost self-effacement. In his person and the way he presented himself, he seemed the very antithesis of the all-powerful *vozhd*. But through this projection of Stalin, the myth of leadership had been transformed; the metanarrative now vested leadership in the charismatic individual rather than the infallible party.

The laudation of the leader in party meetings was one aspect of the way in which those meetings during the 1930s became even more straitened and stylised than they had been in the late 1920s. When leading party figures gave reports, they were listened to in silence except when 'spontaneous' applause broke out either at the mention of Stalin's name or at something that the speaker said, or there were shouted affirmations (e.g. 'totally correct', 'that's right') of specific points. Generally other speakers arose to affirm the report, often adding embellishments of their own, but never deviating from the master narrative that was running through proceedings. The report was accepted unanimously, including

the 'Report of the CC' which was delivered to each congress by the General Secretary. Votes for positions were not always declared to be unanimous with, for example, the election of membership of the CC being characterised by a sliding scale of 'votes against' various candidates. This was, in part, a mechanism for differentiating between the *vozhd* and his comrades. But all of these votes were overwhelming.³⁴⁷ The ethos of party meetings was one of unanimity. Opposition was not to be expressed. Indeed, those who were accused of involvement in oppositionist activity were required formally and openly to confess their malfeasance and throw themselves on the mercy of the party. This was a major feature of the show trials noted above, but it also occurred in party fora, where other party members were also invited to criticise the malfeasant.³⁴⁸

The major form that this took in the party was 'criticism-self-criticism' meetings. From the outset, these had been a means of promoting lower-level criticism of leaders, but it had generally only taken place when prompted from above. During the 1930s, on the back of calls for criticism and self-criticism from the centre, the party emphasis from the early 1930s on individual responsibility,³⁴⁹ and the search for those who were not performing satisfactorily, this became a major weapon in the struggle to remove deficient local and middle-ranking leaders.³⁵⁰ Imbued with the rhetoric of democracy and rank-and-file control over the leaders, criticism-self-criticism meetings became ritualised and stylised in a form that lasted into late Stalinism.³⁵¹ Participants in the meeting would be called upon to criticise a particular leader, his actions and/or views. The critics were expected to take their lead from the chair of the meeting, usually a leading figure higher in rank than the person being criticised, or from recent authoritative articles in the press. At the conclusion of the criticisms, the person being criticised was expected to make a full confession of his/her failings and promise to work hard to overcome them. Abject confession was the only way such a person could hope to avoid serious consequences, but even this was often not enough. What was particularly important about this was the expectation that all members of the meeting would be involved in this process. It was not just about rooting out unsatisfactory performance; it was about collective incorporation into regime activity. Where this differed from the situation in the 1920s is that this was now also being required of elite members of the party rather than just those on lower levels, and it was more pointedly directed at individuals in contrast to the more collective focus of the 1920s.³⁵²

Unanimity was also a feature of all Soviet elections, not just the party. The declared turnout was always close to 100 per cent, of whom a similar proportion supported candidates of the 'bloc of Communists and non-party people'. Candidates would attend public meetings, give addresses,

always following the master narrative contained in the party's and its leaders' statements, but they would stand unchallenged, further demonstrating the unanimity of the Soviet community. Outside election campaigns, popular meetings were often called to mobilise the populace around the latest campaign. At such gatherings the attendees were encouraged to become involved in public activity and, through their involvement, to commit to the regime and its aims. One important instance of this sort of meeting was those called to discuss the show trials and their results.³⁵³

By the end of the 1930s the Stalin cult had become the centrepiece of the Soviet metanarrative and the essential element which gave meaning to all the rest. In the metanarrative, time and space were conquered as fantastic achievements were realised through the efforts of the Soviet people led by comrade Stalin. The normal constraints of time and space were transcended as socialism was built; five year plans achieved in four years, hero projects brought to fulfilment against seemingly overwhelming odds, and heroic record-breaking exploits in all fields of endeavour. And the presentation of that society had, by the late 1930s and under the influence of socialist realism, taken the form of an idealisation of life characterised by happy people living in bright newly constructed urban environments, labouring in pleasant workplaces, living in spacious apartments with an array of consumer goods, and enjoying leisure time in congenial surroundings. While everybody knew that this idealised image had not been realised, the scale of change actually achieved and the promise this held for the future meant that this future seemed to be not something cut off from the present, but immanent in contemporary Soviet society. The claimed achievement of socialism in 1936 meant that structural change of major dimensions was not needed for the achievement of the communist ideal. But although this bright future was immanent in the present, its emergence was neither automatic nor inevitable. It required the guidance of 'the helmsman' and 'genius leader'. It was only through his guidance that the present had been gained; the retelling of history from a teleological perspective both collapsed the distinction between past and present and effectively elevated Stalin to the position of the *deus ex machina* of history, the figure without whom the course of history would be very different. Stalin had to continue to fulfil this role, and thereby guarantee the shift into communism. In this way the Stalin cult gave coherence and meaning to the Soviet metanarrative as a whole. The teleological aim, communism, and the guarantor of its achievement, Stalin, were intimately linked because it was only through the latter that the present made sense and the future could be achieved.