Rolf, Malte


The University of Pittsburgh Press deserves praise for translating from German a groundbreaking work on Soviet mass festivals. This book, originally published in 2006 as *Das sowjetische Massenfest*, appeared in Russian in 2009 as *Sovetskie massovye prazdniki*, but proved unavailable to a broader English-speaking audience until now. In this well-researched book, Malte Rolf examines how mass Soviet celebrations and festivals served as a tool for Bolsheviks to enact their rule, both in how they publicized political goals and managed the population, and how they enacted the regime's policies in everyday life, two intertwined and mutually dependent issues. The basic planning and staging of festivals was determined by discussions among policy-makers in the capital, with different voices pulling in different directions, and the Party having final say. Central policy on festivals was enacted throughout the USSR through a series of commissions at the regional and local levels. The process not only reflected centralization, but also maintained and even developed regional specificities. The Soviet authorities used festivals to instill their revolutionary vision of the new order of things, which was portrayed as the idealized model for emulation for all those who walked, or were forced to walk, in the festival columns, in which everyone who belonged in the Soviet order had to find a place, or be left behind.

Experts hoped that the festive music, festive emotions, and festive mood would serve to instill Soviet official values, particularly by causing an emotional impact. Still, mass celebrations went far beyond the intentions and models that were prescribed by Moscow, since they served as the meeting place for different people, which turned the celebrations from official ceremonial events to genuine, everyday life cultural events. Soviet festive culture included both activists and the apolitical. Official festive forms were likewise adapted to and co-opted for personal needs and desires, and the heavy top-down bureaucratization was overcome in some cases. Hybrid festive cultures were created, which had both official and traditional elements.

In the NEP, Rolf finds a tension between how authorities saw festivals. One viewpoint saw its purpose as enlightenment of the population. In contrast, another perspective saw festivals as a field for the autonomous self-expression of the proletariat, where the working class would construct its self-consciousness, which should be free of external, top-level direction and guidance. However, festivals grew more standardized, professionalized, and centralized throughout the late 1920s and into the 1930s, as festivals grew
larger and required greater resources and effort. Increasingly from the mid-1920s, “initiative from below” in festival planning was equated with the creative artistic activity of small artistic collectives that were based in clubs or enterprises. However, these groups enacted the directives of the festival commission as opposed to organizing events which expressed their own desires. From 1927, with the Cultural Revolution’s emphasis on the struggle with religion and tradition and the state’s attempts to instill a new way of life and Soviet calendar, the focus on better organization and planning of festivals resulted in the idea of the festival as self-expression of its participants falling by the wayside. Although the authorities continued to emphasize the significance of “initiative from below” in Soviet festivals, planners now clearly had to obey the central plan and fulfill the function of a transmission belt, bringing the directives of the central festival commission to the masses. This development marginalized the idea of autonomous experimental self-expression of the grassroots.

Rolf compares Soviet, Nazi, Fascist, and interwar U.S. celebrations. He finds that when they came to power, the three dictatorships put significant effort into creating new centralized systems of celebrations and festival calendars as a means of demonstrating their authority and acquiring social legitimacy, while also reflecting new social structures and goals. Differences included the fact that the USSR’s celebrations were less focused on the military and war, less tolerant of hybrid traditions due to ideology, and less oriented toward inspiring emotional ecstasy. Instead Soviet festivals were focused on generating disciplined, conscious enthusiasm, where all the initiative and decisions came from Stalin, while the masses enacted these decisions in a disciplined fashion. In the United States, celebrations were more pluralistic, less centralized, and provided much more space for local and corporate initiatives, although there was a cohesive format for official, national celebrations.

While celebrations were minimized during the war years and had a more decentralized nature, after 1945, festivals returned as an important part of social life, and they continued to be subjected to the discipline and control of the state. Furthermore, the exportation of Soviet celebrations to Eastern Europe was integral to the socialist takeover in these states. Rolf argues that Soviet official celebration culture was very stable after 1953. There were some changes having to do with de-Stalinization, such as the removal of Stalin’s statues and symbols. Yet, rather than allowing for the development of alternative cultural practices, the post-Stalin leadership sought to fill up the holes left by de-Stalinization with new causes for celebration. This helps explain the fast growth of official holidays and the creation of new Soviet rites of passage. The Soviet celebration landscape became increasingly multilayered, and more