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SOVIET SECULAR RITUALS OF LATE SOCIALISM: IDEOLOGY, AESTHETICS AND STRUCTURING OF THE LIFE CYCLE¹

This chapter is devoted to the phenomenon of Soviet secular rituals prescribed by the Commission on Soviet traditions, holidays and rites operating in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic from 1964. As the Commission was at its most active during the second half of 1970s and in the early 1980s at that time special instructions for the rituals of marriage, childbirth and funerals were published. My aim was to present a detailed description of the ceremonial procedures as recommended by the commission as well as analyzing their significance as a propaganda tool. According to my findings they were supposed to perform at least three roles. Firstly, they served as a substitute for religious rites. Secondly, they were to structure the life cycle of the Soviet man. Finally, the Soviet rituality of the period of late socialism was strongly associated with the need to create opportunities for mass consumption.

Key words: Soviet Rituality, Life Cycle, Late Socialism, USSR, Soviet Ukraine.

In the mid-1970s, Soviet rituals constituted such an extensive complex that its constituent elements could be divided into five groups². The first group was made up

¹ The full version of this text was originally published in Polish: Marta Studenna-Skrukwa, "Społeczeństwo socjalistyczne, tak jak każde inne, nie może obyć się bez swoich świąt i obrzędów" – przyczynek do badań nad świecką obrzędowością w ZSRR doby Leonida Breżniewa", in *Lituanistyka i wschodoznawstwo. Studia dedykowane Profesorowi Krzysztofowi Pietkiewiczowi*, eds. Grzegorz Błaszczyk, Grzegorz Skrukwa and Marta Studenna-Skrukwa (Poznań: Wydział Historii Uniwersytet im. A. Mickiewicza w Poznaniu, 2020), 391–401. I would like to thank Dean Józef Dobosz for permission to reprint.

² See: Валентина Келембетова and Владимир Кувед, Краса новых обрядов. Фотоальбом (на украинском языке) (Киев: Издательство Политической Литературы Украины, 1983).

of the highest-ranking, massively celebrated state and revolutionary holidays, which had the status of non-working days³. The second group consisted of numerous industry holidays in the USSR, as well as rituals related to the career path and the functioning of workplaces. These included, among others: the rite of being a worker, the custom of honoring leaders and veterans of work, ceremonies related to the launch of production, implementation of the plan, exceeding the norm, giving a name to an enterprise or institution, as well as the celebration of the harvest. The third group included holidays of regional importance relating to local revolutionary events (e.g. the Kyiv Uprising in January 1918) or to pre-revolutionary folk traditions taken over by the Bolsheviks (e.g. the Sorochine Fair). The fourth group consisted of rituals of passage – the Soviet *invented traditions* of the era of Leonid Brezhnev, i.e. rituals related to the public sphere on the occasion of: the first day at school, handing over the passport of a USSR citizen (meaning reaching the age of majority) or being called up to the army, as well as secular wedding ceremonies, giving a name and a funeral. This category also includes the attempt to create the house-warming party (Russian: *новоселье*), i.e. the ceremony of moving into a new apartment, the promotion of which was associated with emphasizing the success of Brezhnev's most important modernization project – the large-panel housing program⁴. The last, fifth, category included holidays and customs related to the cycle of the seasons (e.g. New Year's Day, Welcoming Spring, Golden Autumn Festival), which were deprived of elements of religious worship. This was achieved by transforming the functions and meaning of the accompanying attributes, e.g. during the picnic, exhibitions were organized where Easter eggs were sold as examples of folk handicrafts of ethnographic importance, not religious artifacts, while traditional Christmas decorations were replaced with «progressive» lights in the shape of airplanes or baubles with a space emblems.

³ The regulation of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR of October 1, 1980 established the following national holidays: October Revolution Day (November 7 and 8), Lenin's Birthday Day (April 22), International Workers' Solidarity Day (May 1 and 2), Victory Day (May 9), Constitution Day (October 7), USSR Foundation Day (December 30), Soviet Army and Navy Day (February 23) and International Women's Day (March 8); Указ Президиума Верховного Совета СССР «О праздничных и памятных днях» от 1 октября 1980 г., Ведомости Верховного Совета СССР, no. 41 (2063), 1980, ст. 846; New sociological research proves that this canon turned out to be very durable. In Ukraine, twenty years after the collapse of the USSR, the percentage of people celebrating some of the Soviet holidays significantly exceeded those who declared that they would celebrate Ukrainian national holidays. In the first half of 2013, the most popular in Ukraine were International Women's Day (86.1%), Victory Day (75%) and Defender of the Fatherland Day (69%); André Liebich, Oksana Myshlovska, Viktoriia Sereda, Oleksandra Gaidai, Iryna Sklokina, *The Ukrainian Paśi and Present: Legacies, Memory and Attitudes*, in *Regionalism without Regions. Reconceptualizing Ukraine's History*, eds. Ulrich Schmid and Oksana Myshlovska (Budapest–New York: Central European University Press, 2019), 101–102, 104, 116.

⁴ Official recommendations regarding house-warming party were not formulated, but the organization of such a ceremony was promoted in the propaganda literature and in the press. People receiving housing were encouraged to take over the modified rituals related to moving into a new house in the country (e.g. traditional singing was proposed to be replaced with music from a tape recorder), and the party for guests was advised to be modest and sober. See e.g.: Wiktor Lewaszow, “Otrzymaliśmy mieszkanie”, *Kraj Rad*, February, 17, 1963, 20–21.

The development of rituals in the USSR in the 1970s and 1980s, including the processes of secularization of traditional rituals related to the life cycle and the sanctioning of specific rites of passage in the public sphere, was in my opinion connected with the new formula of social integration proposed by Leonid Brezhnev. In March 1971, during the 24th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, the Secretary General announced the formation of «a new historical community of people – the Soviet people»⁵. While this term was already used to mean the entire population of the USSR, in the era of the so-called developed socialism, it served as an ideological concept that replaced Khrushchev's promise to build communism over the course of two decades. In contrast to previous periods in the history of the USSR, in which the ideological discourse was future-oriented, the Brezhnev era referred to the past more often. The work of the revolution, half a century of building socialism and the experience of the «Great Patriotic War» were to form the bond of society. On the practical level, the concept of the «Soviet people» was an attempt to satisfy the romantic national aspirations (including those of ethnic Russians)⁶ awakened during the thaw. It was then stated that «a socialist society, like any other, cannot do without its holidays and rituals»⁷.

⁵ In original: «новая историческая общность людей – советский народ»; Отчетный доклад Центрального Комитета КПСС XXIV Съезду Коммунистической Партии Советского Союза, in XXIV Съезд Коммунистической Партии Советского Союза, 30 марта – 9 апреля 1971 года. Стенографический отчет (Москва: Издательство Политической Литературы, 1971), 101; Translating the term *советский народ* into English raises many complications. I assume that the English word *people* better reflects its character, although this term undoubtedly referred to a community with the features of a community of a national type. The elements which, according to the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, were to constitute it were: the socialist system, Marxist-Leninist ideology, fidelity to the ideals of communism and internationalism, and the language of communication within it was to be the Russian language. At the same time, it was supposed to be a «new social community», thus referring to the Soviet definition of the word *народ* – devoid of class antagonism. It was defined as an inter-ethnic community (Russian: *интернациональная общность* or *объединение*) within which there was «further rapprochement of national cultures», i.e. not the liquidation of individual nations making up the USSR, but a more advanced process of giving them a new quality. So it was not supposed to be a new nation or a supranational community. This is probably why the concept of *советский народ* and not *советская нация* was created. See: Большая Советская Энциклопедия, 3rd edition, ed. Александр Прохоров, vol. 17 (Москва: Советская энциклопедия, 1974), s.v.: *Народ; Нация*; ibidem, vol. 24/1, s.v.: *Советский народ*; Ruslan Rasiak, «“The Soviet People”: Multiethnic Alternative or Ruse?», in *Ethnic Russia in the USSR, The Dilemma of Dominance*, ed. Edward Allworth (New York: Pergamon Press, 1980), 160–161; Grzegorz Demel, «Ukraiński naród radziecki – kilka uwag z perspektywy wielokulturowej. Część 1», *Zeszyty Naukowe Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego. Prace Etnograficzne*, vol. 39, (2011): 29–30; cf. Roman Szporluk, *Dziedzictwo imperialne a sowiecki problem narodowościowy*, in idem, *Imperium, komunizm i narody. Wybór esejów*, trans. Szymon Czarnik and Andrzej Nowak (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Arcana, 2003), 179–180.

⁶ More broadly: Oleh Fedyshyn, «The Role of Russians Among the New, Unified ‘Soviet People’», in *Ethnic Russia in the USSR*, op. cit., 49–158; Ruslan Rasiak, op. cit., 158–170.

⁷ Центральний Державний Архів Вищих Органів Влади та Управління України [further: ЦДАВО], ф. Р-2, оп. 13, спр. 9745, «О состоянии формирования и внедрения в быт новых праздников и обрядов в Республике». Доклад тов. Стеценко С.Е. на расширенном заседании Комиссии по изучению и внедрению новых гражданских праздников и обрядов Украинской ССР. 6 июня 1975 года, к. 64.

During this period, there were lively discussions in expert circles about the place of rituals in Soviet society. There was no longer any question of forcing new forms of morality on the basis of a party directive, and specific rites were treated both as a subject of scientific research and a result of the utilitarian application of science. Previous works on Soviet rituals allow us to see this stage as an element of the fight against religion as well as the result of «research» on demand in the USSR. Analyzing the socialist rituals of Soviet Muslims in the Brezhnev period, Alla Vazierova and Alexei Molkin discovered party documents that confirm this⁸. In 1962, the Office of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union for the RSFSR approved and sent to local party organs a note from the chairman of the Council for the Russian Orthodox Church at the Council of Ministers of the USSR, which included the following:

«the participation of residents of many regions of the RSFSR, and in particular young people, in religious rites such as: “wedding”, “baptism” does not result from the degree of religiousness of people, but from the fact that the registry offices register marriages and newborn children on a daily basis, without the proper solemn character»⁹.

The note was written as part of the second wave of Khrushchev’s anti-religious campaign in 1958–1964 and proves that the source of Soviet rituals was the fight against religion. In addition to the negative dimension, which were the actions of demolishing churches and persecuting clergymen, attempts were made to implement a positive program in the form of creating alternative, progressive secular rituals¹⁰.

At the same time, it signals the party’s opening to the «voice of the people», which during the so-called late socialism sought opportunities to meet its needs in terms of aesthetics and consumption. As a consequence, on February 18, 1964, the Council of Ministers of the RSFSR issued the ordinance¹¹, on the basis of which it was decided to establish commissions for rituals at local Councils of People’s Deputies throughout the republic. The institution whose task was to coordinate their work was to be the Commission for the development and implementation of new secular rituals, appointed by

⁸ Алла Вазерова and Алексей Молькин, “Социалистическая обрядность» советских мусульман в 1960–1980 гг. (на примере Среднего Поволжья)”, *Современные научные исследования и инновации* (e-journal), no. 2, part 3, 2015, <http://web.snauka.ru/issues/2015/02/46418>, accessed: 21.04.2020.

⁹ In original: «исполнение населением ряда областей РСФСР, в особенности молодежью, религиозных обрядов: “венчаний”, “крещений” происходит в ряде случаев не в силу религиозности людей, совершающих эти обряды, а в результате того, что органы ЗАГСа проводят регистрацию браков и рождения детей буднично, без надлежащей торжественности», Ibidem.

¹⁰ Елена Жидкова, “Советская гражданская обрядность как альтернатива обрядности религиозной”, *Государство, религия, церковь в России и за рубежом*, no. 3-4 (30) (2012): 408.

¹¹ Постановление Совета Министров РСФСР от 18 февраля 1964 года «О внедрении в быт советских людей новых гражданских обрядов», Электронный Фонд Правовой и Нормативно-Технической Документации, <http://docs.cntd.ru/document/885249509>, accessed: 24.04.2010; Certain forms of secular rituals in the USSR were implemented as if from the bottom up even before the publication of the above-mentioned Ordinance.

the Legal Committee of the Council of Ministers of the RSFSR¹². The republican commission was immediately entrusted with the development of scenarios for carrying out rituals on the occasion of: a wedding, giving a name to a newborn child, giving a passport and «other important events in the life of Soviet people», and their publication was also announced¹³. The executive committees of local Councils of People's Deputies were instructed to start work on creating infrastructure for the implementation of the new Soviet rituals (including the construction of wedding palaces), it was also announced that the product range related to the implementation of rituals (clothing and attributes) would be expanded, and specialized shops and service points would be created. (e.g. photographer, car rental)¹⁴. This was to enable secular rites to be given a solemn setting desired by the society.

An important role in shaping the Soviet rituals was played by the Republican Commission for the development and implementation of new secular holidays and rituals established in 1969 under the Supreme Council of the Ukrainian SSR. From 1978 it was active at the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian SSR as the Commission for Soviet traditions, holidays and rites [hereinafter: CfSTHR]. It was the central Ukrainian institution of the highest rank in the USSR, dealing with all matters of secular rituals in Ukraine. The commission developed the ideological foundations and detailed instructions for carrying out specific rites, which were published under the name of recommendations. In addition, it dealt with staff training, popularization activities and the analysis of statistics illustrating the implementation of the new rituals¹⁵. Under the auspices of this center, official recommendations for individual rites were published, which were widely echoed throughout the USSR. The interest in these recommendations has been confirmed by numerous requests to the chairman of the CfSTHR, Stepan Stecenko, for sending copies of the publication, providing additional materials and templates for the recommended attributes, and for consultations from various parts of the USSR (including from the analogous Azerbaijan SSR Commission or the Soviet rituals in the Kyrgyz SSR and the Kazakh SSR)¹⁶. It is very interesting that such requests

¹² The surveyed material shows that the republican ritual commissions established in various parts of the USSR constituted the highest institutional level in terms of the implementation of secular rituals, i.e. that there was no central trade union commission dealing with this issue. The propaganda message emphasized that the new Soviet rituals were not created in a vacuum, but on the basis of the progressive traditions of the peoples of the USSR. There is no doubt, however, that the barely preserved color of national cultures was limited to ornaments, so it was not about respecting local traditions. It seems that the central government of the USSR treated the promotion of secular rituals as a soft power element that did not require coordination at the Moscow level. This issue was also not a priority: the first All-Union Seminar on Soviet rituals was held in Moscow in 1964, and the next in Kiev, 14 years later; Елена Жидкова, *op. cit.*, 413.

¹³ Постановление Совета Министров РСФСР от 18 февраля 1964 года, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ See: Амар Аль-Анні и Наталія Кузіна, «Державна політика по впровадженню радянської обрядовості в Українській РСР», *Етнічна історія народів Європи*, vol. 38, (2012): 41–42.

¹⁶ ЦДАВО, ф. Р-2, оп. 14, спр. 819, Листування з організаціями та окремими громадянами з питань обрядовості, к. 1–249.

also came from the RSFRR, which may confirm my assumption about the leading role of Kyiv as a center for shaping secular rituals in the USSR. The analysis of Stecenko's correspondence with Yulian Bromley, director of the Nicholas Miklouho-Maclay Institute of Ethnography of the USSR in the years 1966–1989 and a longtime advisor to Brezhnev, shows the requests coming from the RSFSR in an official letter dated March 15, 1978, Stecenko, thanking Bromley for the invitation to participate in the publication on new rites in the social and family life of the peoples of the USSR, at the same time informed about the fulfillment of the request [my underlining – MSS] regarding the message: «two copies of the article entitled “The development of the Soviet rituals in the Ukrainian SSR”, three sets of recommendations for the rituals “Wedding”, “Giving a name”, “Funeral” implemented in the Ukrainian SSR, as well as sending several other additional materials»¹⁷.

In the context of the cultural changes of the Brezhnev era, the Soviet wedding, naming and funeral ceremonies were of particular interest as the basic – from the anthropological point of view – elements of the rituals of each society. In the middle of the 1970s, the Commission on Soviet traditions, holidays and rites at the Council of Ministers of the Ukrainian SSR published «Recommendations for the rites “Marriage” and “Giving a name”», as well as «Recommendations for the “Funeral” rite»¹⁸. These publications were preceded by several years of consultations within the bodies subordinate to the Commission and the relevant structures of the party apparatus. They were presented as an official interpretation of Soviet rituals, based on the experience of the socialist secularization progressing in the USSR and on «progressive folk traditions»¹⁹. Concentration on revolutionary values and symbolism, as well as, which is characteristic of the Brezhnev era, interwoven into the essence of the rites related to the message about the “Great Patriotic War”, were to make them applicable in all parts of the Soviet Union. The possible use of elements giving the Soviet rituals the color of the cultures of individual nations of the USSR could not go beyond decorative functions. There is no doubt, however, that Soviet rituals, shaped within the post-Christian, European, Slav-

¹⁷ In original: «По Вашей просьбе направляем два экземпляра статьи под названием “Развитие советской обрядности в Украинской ССР”, три комплекта рекомендаций к обрядам “Бракосочетание”, “Рождение”, “Похороны”, внедряемых в Украинской ССР. Образцы обрядовой атрибутики даны в прилагаемых рекомендациях. Фотографии и негативы к ним по обрядам “Бракосочетание”, “Рождение” и “Похороны”, а также гранки первой верстки нового обряда “Торжественное вручение паспорта гражданина ССР” высылаем дополнительно». Ibidem, к. 166; The cited document is a response to Bromley's letter, which is not kept in this archival unit. It would be crucial to decide whether the request resulted from the appreciation of the CfSTHR's efforts and the willingness to disseminate the forms of rituals it proposed, or whether it was rather a form of center control over the periphery. Nevertheless, in the 1970s and 1980s, many book publications promoting the new Soviet rituals appeared in Kiev, which referred to the recommendations of the CfSTHR.

¹⁸ ЦДАВО, ф. Р-2, оп. 13, спр. 9748а, Рекомендації до обрядів «Одруження» і «Народина (українською і російською мовами)», к. 1–70; ЦДАВО, ф. Р-2, оп. 13, спр. 9748а, Рекомендації до обряду «Похорон (українською та російською мовами)», к. 70–99.

¹⁹ Валентина Борисенко, Валентина Келембетова, Анеля Обергинська et al., Радянські свята і обряди у комуністичному вихованні (Київ: Видавництво Політичної Літератури України, 1978), 6.

ic and urban cultural environment, universalized the features of this milieu, without referring to the traditions of Caucasian or Central Asian cultures. On the one hand, it deepened the domination of the European metropolis over the civilizational diversity of the USSR, sanctioned by the authority of the state and party. On the other hand, the dissemination of the «new Soviet rituals» created an opportunity to weaken the patriarchal traditions based on male violence present in the nomadic peoples of the Caucasus or Central Asia (e.g. forced marriage by kidnapping a woman)²⁰.

The ceremonies of the wedding, naming and funeral opened the possibility of meeting the consumption needs of the society, which, as I indicated, consistently increased. In the 1970s, prosperity occupied a key place in the official discourse of the party and was an important element of the policy pursued by the Brezhnev's team. The solemn celebration of holidays and rituals was thus in line with the broadly understood culture of Brezhnev's consumerism²¹. The study of the content of the recommendations for the wedding, naming and funeral rites also allows for the analysis of the attitude of the authorities towards the privacy issue of Soviet citizens during this period. On the one hand, the Brezhnev era saw a partial departure from pompous mass events, liberalization of morals and consent to more individual ways of spending leisure time²². On the other hand, the state was looking for new, soft ways to shape the world view of its citizens. Jane Zavisca, who studies housing development in Russia, noticed that with the implementation of the large-panel housing program, the state provided citizens with television, i.e. entertainment that encouraged them to stay at home²³. However, it was only state television, with an official propaganda message, and thus still giving the opportunity to shape tastes and behavior patterns. In my opinion, on the same principle, the state wanted to be present also during rituals related to the most private sphere of life. This is clearly indicated by the definition of marriage contained in the CSTHR recommendations:

«A wedding is one of the most solemn and responsible events in life that confirms starting a family. The fact of starting a family imposes on the young couple serious obligations towards the state and society related to the moral responsibility for the upbringing of children»²⁴.

²⁰ Постановление Совета Министров РСФСР от 18 февраля 1964 года, op. cit.

²¹ More broadly in Natalya Chernyshova, *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era* (Abingdon-New York: Routledge, 2013).

²² See e.g.: Christian Noack, «Brezhnev's 'Little Freedoms': Tourism, Individuality, and Mobility in the Late Soviet Period», in *Reconsidering Stagnation in the Brezhnev Era: Ideology and Exchange*, ed. Dina Fainberg and Artem M. Kalinowsky (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2016), 59–76; Grzegorz Skrukwa, „Radziecka plaża czarnomorska: między kolektywnością a intymnością”, in *Zmysłowy komunizm. Somatyczne doświadczenie epoki*, ed. Małgorzata Bogusławska, Zuzanna Grębecka and Robert Kulmiński (Warszawa-Kraków: Libron, 2014), 119–120.

²³ Jane R. Zavisca, *Housing in New Russia* (Ithaca-London: Cornell University Press, 2012), 44–45.

²⁴ In original: «Бракосочетание – одно из наиболее торжественных и ответственных событий в жизни человека, которое знаменует создание новой семьи. Семья возлагает на молодую чету

Marriage was therefore not so much a relationship of two people with each other, but a relationship of the couple with the state, which also implied an obligation to have children. Privacy was to be controlled by the participation in the ceremony of people who were «called» by the state as witnesses: representatives of local Soviets of People's Deputies, associates, komsomolists, social activists, and even representatives of trade unions. The relationship of a newborn child with the state was established during the naming ceremony, which was symbolically confirmed by handing the child a star stamp with the name and date of birth engraved (which is significant – it was funded by relatives, not the state)²⁵.

Organizing a secular funeral was the most problematic, especially when the deceased was not a war veteran and it was not possible to use the military setting. Even official Soviet statistics also show that the secular funeral was the least popular rite²⁶, as if people, faced with the final matters, were not tempted by the consumption offer (the indications even suggested the color of the coffin)²⁷, and were less worried about state control.

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The outlined contribution to the research on secular rituals in the USSR opens a series of further research questions, including one about the interpretation of quasi-religious threads, about the re-traditionalization of family values and a very interesting issue of implementing secular rituals in practice. Within the latter, the problem of costs immediately emerges. And it is the issue which shows to the greatest extent that the Soviet society of the Brezhnev era, although deprived of the enemies of the people, remained hierarchical.

высокие обязательства перед государством и обществом, связанные с моральной ответственностью за воспитание детей». ЦДАВО, ф. Р-2, оп. 13, спр. 9748а, Рекомендації до обрядів «Одруження» і «Народини», к. 17.

²⁵ ЦДАВО, ф. Р-2, оп. 13, спр. 9747, Примерный порядок проведения обряда «Рождение», к. 131.

²⁶ ЦДАВО, ф. Р-2, оп. 14, спр. 820, Данные о работе ритуальных служб Минжилкоммунхоза УССР и внедрении советского обряда «Похороны» в 1976 году (по сведениям ЦСУ при СМ УССР, Минжилкоммунхоза УССР и Совета по делам религии при СМ УССР), к. 34; Державний архів м. Києва, ф. Р-984, оп. 1, спр. 841, *Планы мероприятий улучшения ритуального обслуживания населения и справки о их выполнении за 1978 год*, к. 8–11.

²⁷ ЦДАВО, ф. Р-2, оп. 13, спр. 9748а, Матеріали к гражданскому обряду «Похороны», к. 112.