Becoming Soviet: The Transformation of Everyday Life in Stalin's Times

by Malte Rolf

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In April 1939 the provincial Siberian town of Stalinsk – today known as Novokuznetsk – prepared for the upcoming May-Day-celebrations. On the outskirts of the city, on Tsekhovaia-street, residential building No. 24 a housewife-committee gathered to ensure that their apartment block would look spotless on this important holiday. No drying of clothes on the balconies was allowed during the next weeks, windows were to be washed and garbage on the front lawn to be removed. Finally, the building was supposed to be decorated with red flags and all residents had to show up for the festival’s demonstration in their best suits. All of this was accurately documented in handwritten protocols that amounted to almost 30 pages by May First.

These provincial protocols conformed to the standard script of a well-ordered Soviet festival in Stalin’s times. In fact, the protocols differed little from the ones the Politburo produced in Moscow. The only differences were that it was not typed but scribbled with a pencil and that there probably was more garbage in front of Tsekhovaja 24 than in the Kremlin.

Such documents point to a fundamental logic that dramatically transformed everyday life in the USSR. They demonstrate how much the norms of a Soviet way of life turned into routine in the microstructures of society. The housewives of Tsekhovaia ulitsa in remote Siberia had internalized the standards of Soviet normality.

By 1939 they knew perfectly well how to prepare for an official celebration. No question, they had learned the basic rules of appropriate behavior in a Sovietized society.

This was the result of a longer acculturation process – a process I want to call “inner Sovietization.” This was a process in which norms labeled as “Soviet” made their way into the everyday life of the inhabitants of the USSR, transforming even the inner peripheries of the vast country.

During the October revolution and Civil War the Bolsheviks established what they called “Soviet power”. But, as they soon learned the hard way, the road from political domination to cultural hegemony was going to be long and difficult. To foster the latter they started numerous acculturation campaigns – campaigns that aimed at teaching people a Soviet way of life.
In my paper, I want to track exactly this process of Soviet acculturation. I want discuss how and why in the end of the 1930s citizens had managed to “speak Soviet” on Tsekhovaia ulitsa and in many other places of the internal peripheries of the USSR.

Scholars have gotten very far in describing this process of disseminating Bolshevik norms. Those of you who are familiar with the historiography of Stalinism will remember Stephen Kotkin’s famous portrayal of barrack number 8 in Magnitogorsk. Here, in this industrial town in the Urals, construction workers put a list on the wall of all inhabitants, a list that indicated the social status and class criteria of the individual dwellers. Clearly, the residents of barrack number 8 knew how to represent one’s own identity in the adequate way. They had adopted a mode of “speaking Bolshevik”, as Stephen Kotkin so aptly put it.¹

Other scholars, such as Igal Halfin and Jochen Hellbeck, have taken the argument even further when tracing official identity markers in the diaries and other personal documents of Soviet citizens. They have tried to show how much the party’s ideological discourse produced a “Stalinist self” or even “soul”. The regime’s language and its ideological categories became critical building blocks of a person’s identity-shaping.

Seen from this perspective – it was, of course, very much inspired by Foucault - the regime inscribed itself in the identity of an individual, in his or her making sense of the world.

This identity-molding potential of the Soviet regime is a crucial and fascinating issue, I believe. But the problem remains that there are very few documents like such diaries.

> image 1: Children in a NKVD’ orphanage in Novosibirsk (1930s)

Let me draw your attention to this image just for a moment.

And to give you some explanation: This is in fact a rather depressing photo: It shows an orphanage of the Interior Ministry in Novosibirsk. Here, children whose parents had been

¹ Novokuznetskii filial Gosudarstvennogo arkhiva Kemerovskoi Oblasti (NFGAKO), f. R. 1, op. 1, d. 267, l. 71-120.
killed or deported during one of the terror campaigns were brought up and were Sovietized. The banner reads: “Long live the First of May!”

Although it seems quite obvious that the regime had inscribed itself into the children’s bodies, it would still be impossible to find out if and how these children “worked on their selves” or not. We will hardly find a diary of anyone of them.

In general historians of the Soviet Union under Stalin are faced with the lack of autobiographical sources that would allow the kinds of inquiry such scholars as Halfin, or Hellbeck pursued.

But one could go even further in a critical assessment of these rare sources. One could argue that such diaries were precisely the place for a Soviet self-representation of identity. Yet other, more practical dimensions of a person’s everyday life might have generated very different identity markers.

We should be very careful not to privilege diaries as the most “genuine” source if we want to get a full picture of identity-formatting. Identity-building in all of its complexity took place not just in first-person writing, but also in forms of social interaction and everyday communication.

This explains the focus of my paper. Rather than discussing how the mental landscape of the few who wrote diaries looked like I want to investigate the processes by which a broader spectrum of society was touched by Soviet standardization. How did Soviet norms manage to shape the social interaction and public communication of a vast majority of citizens?

With many of these citizens – like these children from Novosibirsk – living in provincial cities or remote areas; far away from Moscow and the Kremlin.

> image 2: A. Zhuravlev: First of May, Novosibirsk (1938)

So, I want to illustrate how people all over the USSR got accustomed to Soviet forms of public performance.
But why, one might ask, is this process of “becoming Soviet” important for our understanding of the USSR? As we know from the history of the nation-state, the making of citizens who shared much of the nation’s horizon goes a long way in explaining their stability. In this “peasants into Frenchmen – process”, to cite Eugen Weber, nation-building worked via the nationalization of a given society’s communication and social interaction.

The boundaries of the nation became the boundaries of the shared horizon of references of most of the people living in this state.

The Soviet Union was as an extremely diverse, multinational Empire. Here, the challenges of creating such a shared horizon were even greater than elsewhere. And the Bolsheviks were quite aware that in the long run only an internal cultural standardization of the vast country would guarantee their staying in power. Many of the revolutionaries came from the peripheries of the former Russian Empire. They had witnessed first-hand the inability of the ancien regime to overcome its complexity and to mold the many diverse subunits into a unified horizon of communication and culture.

This is why Bolshevik social engineering from the outset aimed at creating a standard culture. Moscow’s new rulers tried to disseminate even to the margins of the state and the society what they first called a “revolutionary” and later a “Soviet” way of life.

But in the 1920s the Bolsheviks had to realize that their power to do so was rather limited. The first post-revolutionary decade turned out very frustrating and much of the Bolshevik’s viciousness in later years was in fact rooted in this experience.

Let me give you some examples of such limitations. My main case are the official festivals of that time. I refer to this case not only because I have studied these celebrations for my PhD dissertation and the book that resulted from it.² I use it because rituals are an excellent seismograph of the regime’s potential to mobilize its population and thus of its power to make people relate to the officially promoted norms. Also, the festivals themselves were a key feature of the new way of life the regime propagated. And finally, they were a formative institution in the Soviet acculturation process. Or, as Soviet festival experts put it, they were “schools of the street.” Here, citizens would learn the appropriate ways of conduct simply by joining the festival crowds.

Organizing large mass festivals worked quite well by the end of the 1920s in the metropolitan areas of Moscow and Leningrad. At first celebrations were rather modest, but in 1927, with

the tenth anniversary of the October revolution, party-state leaders and festival experts called for a radical shift: From now on, Soviet ceremonies were given the highest priority in the regime’s cultural activities. The following years saw a rapid growth in the number of festivals and in the investment of resources in the staging of such rituals.

In Moscow or Leningrad the party-state was indeed able to mobilize hundred thousands of citizens to participate in such celebrations. Yet the situation in the internal peripheries of the Bolshevik’s empire was very different. In provincial towns like small Voronezh (south of Moscow) or remote Siberian Novosibirsk things were a lot more complicated. First of all, scarcity placed its constraints on local mass festivals. In Novosibirsk even ten years after the revolution red flags were rare items. Local organizers complained that – since people brought along anything that was of red color – celebrations didn’t look very impressive but rather like a carnival.

> image 3: First of May, Novosibirsk (1929)

Pictures like this one still give a good sense of just how unimpressive Soviet rituals were at the end of the 1920s. The crowd that gathered to watch these strange Bolsheviks march was much larger than the group of Bolsheviks itself.

Indeed, low attendance at celebrations was a big problem for the authorities. The propaganda apparatus struggled with absenteeism during the festival’s demonstrations. The percentage of a city’s population showing up at these marches was a testing ground for local party leaders. Here, they needed to prove that they could mobilize larger parts of the indigenous population.

But outside Moscow and Leningrad only tiny groups of demonstrators would gather. In Tbilisi in 1928 a Bolshevik eyewitness made fun of the local May-Day-celebration because there were more cows on the streets than participants.
And as this photo by Arkadii Shaikhet shows, his exaggeration was only a slight one. Likewise, in Voronezh internal reports noted bitterly that in 1929 the May-Day-demonstration had attracted only very few enthusiasts while at the very same time the Orthodox churches were packed for the Easter mess.

The bitterness of such reports shed some light on Bolshevik self-perception in these years. Despite their monopoly on political power, they saw themselves marginalized within a society that was hardly influenced by Soviet cultural norms. This perception, in fact, was largely correct. The radicalism of the Bolshevik’s cultural revolution of the 1930s was rooted in this experience of marginality and frustration.

The impact of the sad state of Soviet festivals should not be underestimated: On May First everyone could see how the party-state performed in mobilizing people – especially when Easter celebrations were taking place literally next door. Party leaders themselves were quite aware that the struggle over the streets and public places reflected the basic struggle of the regime over cultural hegemony.

Ten years after the revolution they realized that a rapid inner Sovietization could only be reached by resorting to violence and in a bitter fight against the “enemies of revolution” whom they now spotted everywhere. In the following years anyone who did not show up at a demonstration turned from a mere “absentee” into an opponent of the regime. From here it was only a small step towards the labeling of “enemies of the people,” who became omnipresent during the years of terror in the second half of the 1930s.

The period of the so-called “cultural revolution” of the years of 1929 to 1932 and the following decades of Stalinism were, I would argue, very much alike. Norms, officially sanctionized as “Soviet”, were aggressively promoted and all forms of deviance and otherness were persecuted - first with the full power of the state's propaganda machine and soon with the help of the secret police. In fact, this aggressive, intolerant nature of the Soviet
acculturation-project was one of its essential characteristics to the very end, although the level of violence and terror was of course reduced after Stalin’s death.

Still, the very content of what was defined as Soviet standard culture did change over time. There could only be one “Soviet norm” – but this norm was in temporal flux. Competing agencies fought over the canon of Soviet culture, usually stigmatizing the competitors as being “deviant”, as “violating the general party-line,” and so on. I have tried to show elsewhere--in a Slavic Review article some of you may have read--that this shaping and re-modeling of Soviet culture was not a simple top-down process.³

Defining Soviet culture was not monopolized by the Politburo members or Stalin, although, of course, their voice was a very loud and powerful one. Instead, there were a variety of agencies involved in the ongoing negotiations on what would be defined as “Soviet”. I have tried to show which role the various “experts” of different fields of culture played. To give just one example: It was the architects themselves who defined to a large extent what a “Soviet architecture” was supposed to look like and who shaped the style that later became known as Stalin’s architecture.

> image 5: Soviet Architecture (B. Iofan, V. Shchuko, V. Gel’freikh: Project of the Palace of Soviets 1932/33)

So, even the tightly defined canon of Soviet culture was subject to change. What interests me in my paper is how these Soviet standards became increasingly all-embracing.

The new Soviet culture gradually intruded all areas of life, including the everyday. The propagated guidelines of a “zhit’ po sovetskii” – literally: “living in a Soviet manner” – touched even on such seemingly trivial issues like body hygiene or how to furnish your

apartment. The resulting new “Soviet human being” – the *Sovetskii chelovek* – was supposed to be the nucleus of a new Soviet civilization with its own cosmos of values, norms and regulations.

On the one hand, this distinctly Soviet way of life politicized the everyday. Even mundane behavior, if labeled as deviant, could easily be turned into a political crime. But on the other hand it de-politicized the formerly ideological project of the Bolsheviks. This is, why I would argue that the question at stake in the 1930s was not so much if one had learned to “speak Bolshevik”. In my view, the key question was whether one had been acculturated enough to be able to “live in a Soviet manner”. While “Bolshevik” applied to ideological issues and was pretty much limited to internal Party discourse, the label “Soviet” encompassed the life of all citizens in its entirety. The “Soviet way of life” was a horizon of cultural norms that constituted the frame for people’s behavior, their social relations and public communication. And as we know from the diaries I referred to in the beginning, for some people it also turned into the primary point of reference in their making sense of themselves.

The Soviet acculturation-process had become all-encompassing. By the end of the 1930s the regime had managed to penetrate most of the fields of social and cultural interaction.

But even in Stalinism, inner Sovietization was still an ongoing process - and there were many stumbling blocks in the way. To illustrate, I would like to use another example from Soviet festival organization. In 1939, there was a major scandal at the prestigious “Chkalov”-factory in Novosibirsk. Less than 60% of the company’s workforce had turned up at the demonstration of the 22nd anniversary of the revolution. Or, put differently: More than 40% of the employees of one of the state’s model-factories in Siberia had not attended the most important celebration.

At first sight it seems as if things hadn’t changed much since the 1920s. It seems as if even in times of the Great Terror the driving force of inner Sovietization was not as strong as the regime would have liked. But if we take a closer look at the incident at Chkalov factory, things begin to look different.

During the inquiry that followed the disastrous attendance of the festival, the harsh weather conditions on the anniversary day emerged at the main motivation for not showing up. Absentees pointed at the sudden onset of winter: Just a week before temperatures had dropped abruptly to minus four degrees Fahrenheit. The employees complained that they had not been provided with the adequate footwear on time and that female workers in particular were not
able to leave their children at the company’s day nursery because it was not heated. A few of those questioned indicated that this might have been the work of wreckers and enemies.

As we can reconstruct the affair, it seems that most people got away with these excuses. In the following, agitation work on the shop floors was intensified. Such pressure did seem to work: In 1940 attendance at the anniversary-demonstration was up to more than 90%.

What does this local scandal – and of course there were similar cases all over the USSR – tell us about the inner Sovietization-process? In fact, it is quite astonishing how many people dared not to show up at a state’s celebration during the height of Stalinist terror. But this can hardly be interpreted as some form of basic “otherness” or even as a hidden transcript of resistance. The explanations given during the inquiries show how much people already operated within the framework of a Soviet way of live. One core element of this Soviet lifestyle was state paternalism. The state was the institution to address whenever one needed something that could not be bought in the shops. And there wasn’t much to buy in shops in these times of deficit – and definitely no affordable winter boots.

Another core element of the Soviet system was management-bashing. Since the 1920s, the authorities promoted a culture of denunciation directed at subaltern bureaucrats. This culture blossomed during the Great Terror in the years 1937-39. In these years Soviet citizens were encouraged to write complaints and to “unmask” wreckers wherever they saw them. And many of the citizens followed this call.

Clearly, the regime-sponsored arguments – a state falling short of its paternalistic obligations due to bad local management and possibly even the activities of wreckers – this logic had been perfectly internalized by the employees of the Chkalov-factory. Thus, on the one hand, this local scandal is a window on how the party-state reacted on such incidents: it sent out an army of agitation-workers, while other officials and secret police agents interrogated and intimidated everyone involved.

On the other it shows how well shop-floor workers had already learned to express themselves according to a Soviet hierarchy of values.

The regime’s willingness to resort to violence and terror was a strong factor pushing inner Sovietization. In order to survive in the Stalinist USSR, it was crucial to learn the rules. But this is only part of the story. I think we also have to image the process of Soviet acculturation as a self-fulfilling prophecy. We here have a kind of self-accelerating dynamic that changed
the context of people’s lives. In the 1930s the Party-state apparatus expanded rapidly – and there was hardly a way to escape this bureaucracy for individual citizens. A wide variety of institutions mushroomed that carried Soviet standards into the microstructures of everyday life. Much like the Nazi-institution of the *Blockwart*, the Soviet house committees took care that the regime’s norms of language and behavior were observed in every courtyard. Think only of the housewives’ committee in Stalinsk with which I began this talk: There were, in short, always a lot of people living next door who scrutinized public and semi-public communication.

But such disciplining and repressive dimensions of totalitarian rule still do not fully explain the dynamics of inner Sovietization. The other side is marked by the suggestive power of an ever more changing *Life-World* and the simultaneous utopian discourse. What had only been a vague promise of a Socialist future during the 1920s turned into a manifest Soviet universe by the end of the 1930s. Soviet city building of the 1930s is a good case in point—it shows how the gradual Sovietization of space radically changed the physical environment in which people lived.

Official discourse promoted the image of the path to a brighter future. Every single new Soviet building or other reshaping of urban space was portrayed as a representation of the future in the present. This narrative promised: in future it will look like this everywhere and for everyone. This utopian discourse of course had older roots, but it became more convincing, as the *Life-World* around turned more and more Soviet.

It made a difference if Soviet festival organizers in the 1920s had to cover the facade of pre-Revolutionary buildings with a couple of red flags in order stage a Soviet surrounding or if they could let people march on the newly build Stalin avenue against the backdrop of Soviet architecture. By the end of the 1930s they could present such Sovietized space even in distant reaches of the empire.
When comparing these two images of May-Day demonstrations in Novosibirsk the change becomes obvious. The first photo depicts May Day in Novosibirsk in the early 1930s – a wasteland still serves as the stage for a Soviet festival.

The second image gives an idea of what the Soviet center in Novosibirsk was going to look like, even if in 1934, the date of the photo, this was still an ongoing process of urban Sovietization. For example, the huge Soviet opera-theater on the main square was still a construction site.

Soviet propaganda worked as self-fulfilling prophecy as follows: The more a Soviet cultural environment gained in intensity, the more the regime’s promise of a complete Sovietized future won plausibility. In such an atmosphere it was heavy burden to be excluded from those to whom belonged much of the present and all of the future. Anyone not able or not willing to speak and act Soviet was doomed to live on the margins of society.

Even those who were critical toward the Stalinist system had to relate to this process of inner Sovietization in one way or another. Here I do want to refer to autobiographical writings of
that time – even if not interpreting them as “logbooks of the self”. What interests me in my paper, is how their authors described the everyday and how much this reflected a Sovietized Life-World.

Consider the example of Mikhail Shabatin who lived in the small town of Riazan. His diary covers the 1930s. It is an interesting piece since it portrays everyday live in provincial Russia during Stalinism. And it allows deep insights into the growing intensity of a Sovietized cosmos of interaction and communication. There was hardly a week in Shabatin’s life without some contact with the authorities, hardly a day on which he was not forced to engage in some kind of Soviet-speak. Shabatin described most of these encounters without traces of feelings of alienation – the picture that emerges from his diary is one of Soviet normality. A normality that is beyond wonder or doubt, since it belongs to the realm of the unquestionable and inevitable.

Sovietization worked on the very basic levels of perception and orientation. For instance, Shabatin often commuted to the newly built Soviet center of the town. Although places like Riazan, Voronezh or Novosibirsk were small and rather neglected in comparison to Moscow, even here Soviet city building in the 1930s resulted in a radical transformation of urban space. Everywhere the very center of the town was relocated, with a Lenin-square and -statue as the new focal point of urban topography. It was a new Soviet ground structure that remolded the cities’ life and those of their inhabitants. Quite literally there was no way around the new central square that was surrounded by Soviet-style architecture and plastered with Soviet symbols.

This spatial Sovietization was accompanied by a temporal one: here, too, diaries demonstrate how much a Soviet order of time was accepted as the basic structure. This is even true for diary-authors who were critically assessing the party-state. There are quite a few diaries in which the authors expressed their discontent with the Stalinist system – quite often, official celebrations prompted such critical comments. Here, on May-Day or during the anniversary of the Revolution, the regime staged itself and thereby also unwittingly inspired criticism. And yet even these critical voices reflected the ongoing Sovietization of time. By understanding the official holidays as dates for drawing up a balance on the Soviet regime, authors in fact reproduced a Soviet chronology, whether they liked it or not. They had internalized the fundamental logic of the “Soviet calendar” since they followed the time-setters of the official festival catalogue.
To give another example: The starting point of a diary of a young girl from Moscow was already much Sovietized. When Nina Kosterina’s decided to write a diary in the summer of 1936 she began with a retrospective on the year’s days that had been “imprinted in my memory”.

Right next to her own birthday it was the May-Day-celebration she memorized as an extraordinary date and that she associated with much gaiety and festival mood. In the 1930s the Soviet holiday had made it into the inner circle of outstanding time-spaces of the story a young girl from Moscow tells about her own life.

Inner Sovietization thus affected the most basic dimensions of the ways in which people made sense of the world--the way they perceived time and space, the way they lived their lives in accordance with the surrounding social environment. Anyone who has ever tried to not celebrate a festival that everyone else celebrates knows how difficult this is. You may not like thanksgiving – but there is no way of getting around it. This was also the case in a Sovietized society by the end of the 1930s. Within a decade the Soviet acculturation-project had managed to reshape people’s life-world to the core.

Of course, there was always a gap between the choreographies staged on the Red square and those in the provinces.

> as we can see on the two images.

> image 8: Soviet sport parades of the 1930s (in Moscow; photo by A. Rodchenko)

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But although the sport parade in Novosibirsk might have needed some more polishing, there can be no doubt about the density of such Soviet rituals even in remote Siberia. By the end of the 1930s these events dominated the annual cycle of Novosibirsk’s citizens just as much as of their compatriots in Moscow.

Having said all of this, I would like to emphasize that the Soviet acculturation process did not produce the monotony one might expect. First of all, the new Soviet norms of language and cultural practice were truly meaningful to many contemporaries. They were cornerstones of making sense of the world, but they also worked well when people pushed their own personal agenda. In my book I give examples of citizens who employed the rhetoric or symbols of the Soviet universe to promote their own goals. A Soviet celebration could always be used to claim a couple of new boots or to get heating for the kindergarten, as we saw in the case of the Chkalov-factory in Novosibirsk.

But there is another point I would like to stress here. The Soviet acculturation process did not produce the kind of monolithic personality the regime had intended to achieve. People became Soviet insofar as they operated within a Sovietized frame of references, but, of course, they did not turn in the kind of pure “Soviet human being” the propaganda state had advertised. In many respects they remained paradox, ambivalent and multi-faceted personalities.

Nothing shows this more clearly than the regime’s efforts to Sovietize emotions. This is why in the last part of my paper I want to discuss how much an inner Sovietization also shaped the emotional landscape of the USSR.

Let me first turn to the regime’s emotional policies. These were crucial to the project of creating a “Sovetskii chelovek” – the Soviet human being. Soviet codes of feelings were
disseminated through a variety of media, such as literature, but also movies or the arts. They provided role models of adequate emotional conduct for a Soviet man or woman. The panorama of feelings that suited the *Sovetskii chelovek* was broad: it included hatred for the enemies, bravery and endurance in times of struggle. At the core of a Soviet universe of emotions were feelings of happiness or joy.

But Soviet happiness was not propagated as a kind of relaxed joy. Happiness was supposed to be enthusiastic. *entuziasm* – was the feeling of the day. It was the adequate vocabulary of the time to publicly describe one’s state of mind when it came to rituals or collective work task.

And propaganda images like these provided the role model of a happy, joyful and enthusiastically working Soviet citizen.

> image 10: Tatiana Iablonskaia: *Bread* (1949)

Enthusiasm was the terminology of public communication of the 1930s; the regime highly privileged this feeling over other forms of emotion talk. Soviet enthusiasm had a collective underpinning and a strong sense of boundless voluntarism. Valentin Kataev’s famous novel *Time, forward!* presents it in an ideal-typical fashion – the collective enthusiastic work force makes production-records possible that countered the cautious calculations of timid bureaucrats. Soviet enthusiasm was always object-bound, always oriented toward a goal. It was directed towards the so-called “building of Socialism in one country” often embodied in concrete party leaders.

Mass choreographies and their propaganda representations of the 1930s show this notion quite clearly.
As we can see, for example, on the painting of Aleksandr Samokhvalov: The enthusiasm of the Soviet crowds here is orientated towards the local party leaders.

Looking at such images, one could argue that we have been talking about party-state-sponsored emotions so far – something that had little or no connection with people’s “real” feelings. And indeed, many participants of the mass celebrations might have felt rather indifferent or – while waiting in long festival lines – were simply bored.

Still, most of them had learned to perform the kind of emotion that was expected by the regime. They exactly knew at what point in time they were supposed to cheer enthusiastically.

When passing by the leader’s reviewing stand for example was a good moment for doing so.

This in fact was part and parcel of the Soviet acculturation process: People were trained in knowing how to perform appropriately at a certain point, including the public performance of emotions.
Many Soviet citizens, especially in the later post-Stalin years, made a clear distinction: They produced a binary model in which “real” and “authentic” feelings belonged to their “private sphere”, while the “public” was stigmatized as an outer world of “false” emotions and “disguise”.

But it would be problematic for historians to reproduce this division in their interpretations. Private and public codes of emotions both belong to the emotional universe of a person. They constitute a set of different emotional communities, to use Barbara Rosenwein’s term. Depending on the context, a person can move from one emotional community to another. In this perspective, any attempt to construct a hierarchy of more or less “real” emotional communities seems quite arbitrary. We should focus on the diversity of emotional coding that was available to the historical subjects, rather than judge what was “real” and what was “fake”.

Soviet official emotion talk constituted one emotional community that was extremely relevant in the 1930s. It provided a set of regulations for affective expressions a person needed to observe. Whoever wanted to participate in any form of public communication needed to know and follow these emotional norms.

In this sense the process of inner Sovietization provided citizens of the USSR with specific skills to navigate their feelings and to perform appropriately. The resulting homo sovieticus was, of course, not monolithic and in no way the regime’s blueprint simply put into practice. But despite his or her emotional complexity and ambivalence – coding one’s emotions according to an official norm of feelings was an ability Soviet citizens internalized over the years. And this was one important aspect of “becoming Soviet”.

Let me now move towards my conclusion and briefly venture into the post-war period.

All of the examples I have given so far show that Soviet acculturation was a long-term process. It took years until Soviet culture had become hegemonic in the spatial and social peripheries of the Soviet Union. This was nothing specifically Soviet. Eugene Weber’s “Peasants into Frenchmen-process” also took some 50 years.

But in the Soviet case, the 1930s were a decisive decade. Most of the key elements of a Soviet way of life were shaped in these years and stayed untouched after the war. Also, as I have argued, only in the 1930s did a Soviet life-world gain the intensity that was necessary to force a vast majority of the population into the Soviet frame of references. And no doubt, the violence and terror of Stalinism played a crucial role – learning how to speak, behave or feel Soviet under these circumstances was a tool of survival. Thus, in the 1930s the vast and diverse cultural landscape of the USSR became more and more streamlined by Soviet standards.

This process of acculturation continued in the post-war years. On the one hand the official cultural canon diversified after Stalin’s death. It lost its extreme self-referentiality. Also, new forms of subversion and dissent arose. On the other hand, with rapid urbanization and the rise of mass education and media, ever more citizens were drawn into cultural spheres dominated by Soviet norms. Becoming Soviet was now something most of them already had internalized during their school years.

I believe we need a lot of additional research on this intensified acculturation process, research that takes, for example, a closer look at the Soviet sixties. This was a generation influenced by Khrushev’s Thaw, but also one socialized within a largely Sovietized cultural framework.

Personally, I just started such a research project. I want to find out more about the fusion of very different cultural horizons, which is why I chose to study a periphery that was annexed to the USSR only shortly before the War: The Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, founded in 1940. I cannot go into details in my paper, but I want to indicate that in this particular case we can study the impact of forced cultural Sovietization within a society that strongly defined itself by national-ethnic categories.

Let me draw your attention to Soviet-Lithuanian celebrations like this:
Even at first glance we can discern the national, pre-Soviet tradition of such rituals. But one might just as well point to the strong influence of cultural Sovietization. For example, one could track the choreographies of such folklore festivals back to the 1930s:
Here we have typical Rodchenko images of such Soviet folklore celebrations. Also, one could stress their Union-wide standardization during Stalin’s times. Thus, one could argue that even such national, in our case, Lithuanian, representations were formed by the process of inner Sovietization.

To conclude, in the long run inner Sovietization reshaped the framework in which cultural practices – including forms of national representation – could operate. By remodeling the most basic structures of the Life-World, Soviet acculturation defined the boundaries of the field on which people lived and interacted. “Becoming Soviet” did not mean that everyone became alike. It meant that most of the people accepted the limits of this field as an unquestioned part of the normality of their everyday lives.