

Shortly before the May 1 celebrations in 1941, Georgi Dimitrov, secretary-general of the Comintern, wrote in his diary, “Participating in demonstrations is an important political act and not a mere formality.”¹ He expected Moscow’s entire adult population, except for the ill, to show up for the procession. This official expectation well describes the nature of mass political celebrations in the Soviet Union. Festivity was part of politics, and festive Soviet events expressed a very specific kind of authority.

The mass political celebrations the Bolsheviks implemented to gain social control are the topic of this book. These official festivities served two functions: they were not only an instrument for publicizing political objectives and manipulating people but also a medium for showcasing the regime’s policies. Staging power and making it real were reciprocal.

Mass festivities drained a large portion of Bolshevik and other federalist budgets for culture. The Soviet Union was after all not only a “propaganda state”; it was also a “staging dictatorship.”² Propaganda for the most part involved public displays representing dogma, norms, and dreams. Of all of the staged events, celebrations received the most official support. Occasions to celebrate preoccupied a burgeoning group of activists, exhausted ever more resources, and mobilized more and more people until they eventually—at least in Georgi Dimitrov’s mind—brought “everyone” together to become one huge celebratory community.

The early Bolshevik celebrations from the years of the Revolution of 1917 and the civil war had themselves been mass rallies of considerable size.³ In 1927, the event marking the first decade of Soviet power set a precedent for inflating celebrations in a way that was to continue throughout the 1930s. Ceremonies became ever more elaborate, and the number of official red-letter days rose. “Celebration” was a title that began to crowd out other designations until even the election of the national soviet and, indeed, even life itself in the Soviet Union came to be called a *prazdnik*—a celebration.⁴ It had become a sign of the times and the regime’s expectations of itself, and it continued until the “Great Patriotic War” cut back the organizing of festivities.



Sport Parade on Red Square, photograph by Ivan Shagin (1932). © Svetlana Schagina. Copy courtesy of the Museum for Art and Crafts, Hamburg.

Although this book addresses the festivals held throughout the Soviet era, it focuses in particular on the years 1917 to 1941. It explores how and why, during these two long post-revolutionary decades, the Soviet *prazdnik* became a privileged medium of the party-run state and how it maintained that status. Why did the regime stage pompous mass celebrations? Why did it invest time and money in producing festive and sport parades and in shaping a collective attitude of celebration across the country? Both acknowledged and self-proclaimed experts shaped the idea of what an official celebration was meant to achieve and could achieve. Exploring the discourse among the powerful and the less powerful on the significance of these festivities can help us understand what was important to the party-run Soviet state in the period between the wars. Who came up with the idea that the mass *prazdnik* might be a good tool for propaganda? What did they expect of festive choreography?

Naturally, planning and organizing mass festivities was not discussed at the center of power in Moscow alone. As a cultural practice expected to materialize across the entire Soviet Union, celebrations needed a well-developed planning apparatus. It took a closely meshed network of commissions to execute grand festive spectacles in all the many regional and local contexts. This organizational machinery made Soviet celebration operations a complex and complicated matter because, although an event was planned for the entire Soviet Union, it always involved communication between Moscow and the provinces and all the difficulties that such communication entailed. The implementation of Moscow's ideas of celebration in regional contexts brought to light both the expectations for countrywide standardization and the strength and evolution of regional peculiarities. It also



May First at an orphanage operated by the NKVD in the 1930s. Source: Regional Museum of Novosibirsk, no. 14989/16.

sheds light on the complexity of the cultural industry of the Soviet Union. This book introduces the reader to the governorate and region of Voronezh and the Western Siberian territory, especially the region of Novosibirsk, as examples of areas at the periphery of the Soviet Union. How did provincial cities like Voronezh, Novosibirsk, or Kemerovo plan and execute Soviet celebrations? What influence did Moscow have on regional and local festivities in the oblasts?⁵

The Bolsheviks used celebrations both at the center and at the periphery of the union in equal measure to stage a new, Soviet order. By playing out their revolutionary ideas of a new era, of urban topography, and of the relationships between sovereigns and subjects within the context of a celebratory event, they tried not only to spread these ideas but also to make them become reality. It was often within the context of being presented in a festive event that the desired order first took effect at all. When, if not on a holiday, could people gain experience with the new Soviet calendar? How else, if not with a festive parade, could new public spaces be filled with life? These state-staged events were more than merely “pleasant illusions” for a dictatorship that in reality was a reign of suppression and terror. They were a method for spreading the regime’s new and changing notions of order, for communicating the desired model to all who participated in the parades, whether voluntarily or involuntarily. The juxtaposition of celebration and terror was particularly characteristic of the Stalinist regime. Festive events and how they changed with time became a part of Soviet reality with which people had to coexist and for which they had to take sides. Some were parades of beautiful and radiant athletes dressed in white; others were marches of orphans in gray smocks.

Mass political celebrations actually went far beyond the plans and purposes

of party officials in Moscow and Novosibirsk. As a segment of culture, Soviet celebrations first became effective on a broad scale through the personal communication that took place beyond party committees. The daily grind of both dearth and terror had various effects on festivities, but a celebration remained above all a time of human encounter. Party members spoke with non-party members, farmers with city folks, people from Tomsk with people from Novosibirsk, religious people with atheists, and individuals with state institutions. This communication among people from different levels of hierarchy and power changed the Soviet celebration from a prescribed festive day into a real cultural practice. Some of these encounters ended in violent clashes of hostile camps, while others ended in negotiations. Soviet celebratory operations had enthusiasts and naysayers: official standards were sometimes accepted but changed to meet local needs, and, on some occasions, strategies were developed for evading forced celebration. It was this multifaceted social transformation of the party-dictated act of celebrating that made the Soviet *prazdnik* become a phenomenon in its own right, much different from what the jubilee committees had envisioned. The interaction between the power and society led to hybrid cultures of festivity, where official specifications and obstinate traditions crossed one another in many different ways.

The Soviet *prazdnik* was embedded in and constantly interacting with other cultural practices. What we know about the *prazdnik*—how it was planned and how it turned out—illustrates the origin and framework of the cultural canon contrived by the party-run state. Information about the *prazdnik* shows how potentially effective this officially sanctioned culture was in real social settings, but it also shows how difficult it was to implement. This becomes particularly clear when we examine places far from Moscow and Leningrad and see how festive events were handled at the regional and local level. There, the cultural practice of Soviet celebration is exemplary of the many points at which communication took place between the powerful and the less powerful. We can assess the nature of the Bolshevik regime as a propaganda state and event-staging dictatorship by, if nothing else, comparing its efforts to how other authoritarian regimes handled celebrations.

Among other things, focusing on the Soviet *prazdnik* allows us to examine cultural processes of longer duration. It is easy to print a new calendar, but changing how people feel about cultural festivities is not something that can be dictated. At first, Soviet holidays were simply set by the regime and had to assert themselves in the heterogeneous landscape of other festivities across the Soviet Union. Effectively validating Soviet *prazdnik* norms was a long-term process, one that was interrupted from 1941 to 1945 and lasted beyond 1953. The Soviet *prazdnik* had to alter traditional celebration customs, fuse with them, or replace them. Through this process of “inner sovietizing,” official standards increasingly found their way into the lives and homes of the people. The Soviet *prazdnik* remained relevant even after the war and after Stalin’s death, and it still influences festive culture in contemporary Russia.

The history of how official standards asserted themselves in the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1930s is often told as a narrative of failure; it is almost always told

as a story of deficits. The same is true for the story of the prazdnik.⁶ It is hardly surprising that the Bolsheviks could not achieve their goals of reorganizing society, culture, and festive customs to match “pure theory.” For one thing, there was no isolated *single* demand for cultural norms of a purely Soviet mint. There were many opinions, some even contradictory, on what a Soviet celebration had to be and what it was supposed to accomplish. Another issue was that overall circumstances, particularly in provincial Russia, made it difficult to organize festivities without friction and obstacles. And yet, any view that judges Soviet life in terms of some allegedly “normal state of things,” with smoothly running cultural machinery, ignores the Soviet reality in which people lived without the things that provide tidy standards of comparison that historians like to apply. This book tells of that reality, complete with its deficits, defects, and distortions.

That is not to say that beyond Soviet standardizing nothing else existed. There were religious festivities and ethnic festivities, too. These events were, however, indirectly challenged by the unreasonable demands of a regime that sought to marginalize them. It would be worth investigating these independently practiced rituals that upheld tradition in defiance of official recommendations. This book touches on those areas only inasmuch as they reflected a counterscheme to the Soviet celebration. They did that often enough as harsh competitors in the struggle for authority in interpreting the world. And yet we have only an inadequate view of those cultures, namely, as seen through the lens of those planning and organizing Soviet celebrations. In the late 1920s, in his novel *Emvy*, Yury Olesha described the Soviet celebration as clearly dividing those who may participate from those who are excluded. The book tells, if we follow Olesha’s metaphor, the story of those on one side of the fence, where the band plays to kick off the celebration, and of those behind it who feel shut out. It says nothing of those who ignore the boundary or of those who do not even get to see it.

Thus, the present study takes the official culture of festivities and uses it to sketch the process within which the ideas of the small party elite became cultural standards with which a large number of people had to cope. It is about assimilating people into a milieu containing a new, official canon of practices, symbols, and rhetoric—coerced integration, as it were, and no less powerful. The Soviet mass political celebration was one of the most important means to that end and became a part of the Soviet normalcy that developed from that point forward.

Concepts and Research Approaches

What follows is a summary of the key concepts used in this study, focusing on notions and theories from recent research. These explanations will be rudimentary, of course, but they are necessary to situate this book within the wider context of current theoretical and conceptual discourse on the topic.

Celebrations

There have been a number of isolated investigations into exactly what celebrations of various kinds are in varying contexts. Conspicuous, at first, is how remote these

studies are from theory and, as a result, how much they widen the field of research. In the past, attempts have been made to identify precisely what constitutes a celebration.⁷ More recent research—even in whole anthologies devoted to the subject—tends to contextualize celebrations but not to expound on them in terms of being a basic cultural phenomenon.⁸ Perhaps Hermann Bausinger is right in saying that the huge variety of celebrations resists theoretical classification.⁹

Still, there is a set of theoretical assumptions shared by all. The most general assumption is that there is a distinction between celebration and day-to-day life. Celebration has been called “one of everyday life’s moratoriums.”¹⁰ It constitutes a time that in principle—though the boundaries may not always be clear—is separate from everyday routine and is seen as a “counterpoint” to it.¹¹ Celebration permits behavior, symbolic practices, and utterances that more or less otherwise clearly violate the normal, everyday expectations of a particular group or society.¹² But restricting acceptance for that behavior, those practices, and such utterances to the festive period makes a celebration an integrable and acceptable part of the social fabric.¹³

On the other hand, in recent years there has been more study of the “festive” aspect of dictatorships.¹⁴ Here we must admit what can be said of celebration in modern industrial society in general: demarcations become more rigid. Celebration occupies less space on the calendar, but the extent to which it is planned and controlled increases constantly.¹⁵ Today, the moratorium from daily life often means only that we drop regular work for a while.¹⁶ But even that description reflects only part of the picture when we think of how festivities are becoming ever more commercial or how—as in the Soviet Union—work itself may be declared a festive act. What makes a celebration a celebration is still up for debate. And yet, for neither modernity nor postmodernity does celebration seem to be losing significance.

The importance of celebrating flows from the many functions that it has for human beings living together in groups large or small. Celebrating creates a sense of community and identification.¹⁷ That can happen by conveying a sense of collective “cultural memory,” by regularly repeating sacred or profane events that give order to the year, by displaying the community’s or its leader’s authority and power, or by conjuring a sense of community in emotional ways.¹⁸ The tendency in more recent research is to investigate how celebrations are related to manifesting directives for organizing public space and time.¹⁹ Scholars are simultaneously exploring the potential that festivities have for setting physical standards for our bodies and clothes, and even for our sense of self.²⁰ Celebrations are seen as vehicles of integration, although they simultaneously leave out fringe groups, however these may be defined.²¹

Festivities are the object of what Christel Lane—with Soviet rituals in mind—has called “cultural management”: the deliberate organizing, by a group of planners, of cultural events or contrived holidays that replace traditional celebrations and serve as a strategic means for dealing with social and political challenges.²² The people involved are as varied as the festivals themselves, which range from celebrations organized by the established regime, to those organized by people

who want to participate in that regime, or those who want to bring down the governing elite.²³

What these views of festivals have in common is that those involved in the events agree with the notions of order manifested by the celebration, which, in turn, constitute the very condition that makes the celebration possible in the first place. The celebration raises the level of approval for the underlying order, but when approval cannot be achieved, a potential “subversive dimension” may develop. A celebration remains a phenomenon that the members of the festival committee cannot entirely control. This is as true of premodern festivities as it was for the staged celebrations of modern dictatorships.²⁴

As diverse as are the places and times whose celebrations have been declared objects of historical study, the basic underlying question asked by the majority of scholars is almost always the same. It is always about the role that celebrations play in making people a part of a certain scheme, integrating them into a particular social group, and/or making them part of a particular political system. This basic question of how staged festivities integrate people within society is also one of the main themes of this book. The Bolsheviks sponsored festivals and demonstrated authority by inventing new reasons for celebration, seemingly making Nietzsche’s word their national agenda: “I shall teach a superior kind of art, not the art of artworks, but the contriving of celebrations.”²⁵ Bolshevik celebrations were events initiated and controlled by the party-run state. In terms of Mikhail Bakhtin’s dichotomy, they were celebrations of the “official culture.”²⁶

Bakhtin’s dichotomy once again brings up a distinction made in research, namely, of celebrations being either part of a “festivity” or part of “daily routine.” Even celebrations organized by dictators were exceptional events that clearly differed from daily routine. Government functionaries consciously strove to make festive days differ from the daily grind by giving the red-letter day priority and all kinds of prerogatives. It was expressed, in part, by terminology. The terms *prazdnik*, *prazdnestvo*, and *torzhestvo* that were used officially to designate Soviet festival operations were antonyms of everyday *budniy* and *povsednevnyy*.²⁷ The Soviet *prazdnik* implied clearly defined exceptional circumstances, a “moratorium from everyday life.” It also semantically lost its connotation of rest (*otdykh*) and leisure (*dosug*, *bezdel’ë*). The semantic field that Vladimir Dal’ had itemized for Russian terms for festivity in the nineteenth century had largely disappeared by the late 1940s, when Sergey Ozhegov wrote on the same topic, and it is absent entirely from methodical prewar writing about the Soviet *prazdnik*.²⁸ Instead, official usage then saw “festivity” and “work” as compatible concepts. People could work on festive days, and working itself could be declared a festive activity.²⁹ And yet, even when festivities were combined with work, the exceptional nature of festivity remained. Red-letter-day activities were special and symbolic.³⁰ Fliers prepared workers for their Soviet holiday and described how it was to differ from everyday routine. Through careful preparation for the festive event, Soviet planners maintained the sense of festivity that had accompanied the old religious holidays and that the word *prazdnik* had originally connoted.³¹

The idea that *prazdnik* production was something special was at first simply a claim made by the propagandists themselves. It reveals nothing of how supernumeraries forced to fill in the scene felt about the event. The chronotope of the official *prazdnik* did not necessarily match the semantic content of the word *prazdnik* expressed in the phrase, “Budet i na moey ulitse prazdnik” (On my street, too, there shall be a feast).³² The feast in this phrase stands for a moment of personal pleasure and joy. Whether, where, and how the governmental planting of a *prazdnik* coincided with individual associations of happiness is one of the themes of this book. As to terminology, this study first follows the official usage of the word and addresses a broad range of cultural phenomena. The rhetoric of the times permitted calling even the election of the highest-ranking soviet a *prazdnik*, and thus, those events too, in their nature of being staged festivities, will be discussed in the present work.³³ We must examine and understand the terminology Soviet planners of festivities used if we are to discover something about their worldview. We cannot approach them with a normative preconception of what a celebration is or is not.

The present work does not strictly distinguish “festivity” from “ceremony,” as Winfried Gebhardt suggests we should. Inspired by ideal types à la Weber, Gebhardt characterizes a festivity (German: *Fest*) as an emotional-affective means of socialization and a ceremony (German: *Feier*), as a value-rational means of collectivization. This view separates and conceptually fixates an ecstatic, escapist kind of celebrating from a solemn, value-stabilizing kind of celebrating.³⁴ Gebhardt has not only been inconsistent in his own use of that terminology (using the word *festivities* to characterize what—according to his own theory—ought to be called ceremonies), but his historical study is also a good example of what happens when ideal types, like those taken from Max Weber and devised originally to function as hypothetical constructs for the purpose of analysis, suddenly morph into supposedly ontological facts. When we compare the historical material of the analysis with ideal-typical categories that have developed new life of their own, the result is a story of deficits because the historical past cannot measure up to the demands made by those categories.

In contrast, Ruth Koch has convincingly shown that while in the German language the terms *Fest* and *Feier* do not cover exactly the same ground, their meanings are not distinct enough for each to govern a semantic field of its own such that we might precisely determine an independent meaning for one or the other.³⁵ If we return to the context of Soviet terminology at the time in question, we also do not find there any clear conceptual distinction between what is considered “festive” and what is considered “ceremonial.” The words *prazdnik* and *prazdnestvo* were commonly used, as was *torzhestvo*, a word being used predominantly to describe larger festive occasions.³⁶ Nonetheless, the terms are for the most part interchangeable. There was also in use the word *massovoe* or *narodnoe torzhestvo*, which means the tumultuous crowd of the folk festival section of a Soviet celebration.³⁷ Thus, for the most part, the Russian language, too, allows using words for “festivity” and “celebration” synonymously.

Rituals

As ritual acts, celebrations are part of a larger canon of rituals. Research has come to call a wide range of social and cultural practices “rituals.” We take it for granted today that we use the word *ritual* in nonreligious contexts.³⁸ Research responded to that extending of the semantic field with theoretical reflection on the phenomenology of rituals. While these studies are diverse, there does seem to be a general consensus that what characterizes rituals is their high degree of standardization and stylization, their repetitive nature, and a certain amount of perseverance despite historical change. Rituals occur at times and in places set aside specifically for that purpose; they have their own *raison d’être* and are practices performed in a particularly expressive manner.³⁹

Current research into rituals examines a wide variety of theoretical contexts. Arnold van Gennep distinguishes rites of passage from cyclical (annual seasonal) rituals.⁴⁰ Émile Durkheim saw rituals as a way of simultaneously creating, testing, and validating collective beliefs that revive and continually renew a sense of community and that help individuals to internalize the social world around them.⁴¹ More recently, the concept of “performance” has encouraged researchers to scrutinize the ways in which actors performing in rituals interact with their audiences. It has also been found that both an outsider perspective and the insights of those who accept and perform ritualized roles are constitutive of ritual acts.⁴²

The question of the true nature of rituals is also linked to that of their purpose. They are said to have meaningful functions and to somehow be related to social “reality.” A ritual encompasses the time and place when and where a community or society exhibits, experiences, and thereby actually first constitutes its basic beliefs.⁴³ Rituals shape the social world and its order, and they legitimize that order by linking it to a mythical origin. Through rituals, an individual internalizes collective experience, expectations, values, and taboos.⁴⁴

A number of authors, Émile Durkheim being the first, have stressed the role of rituals in stabilizing a sense of community. Ritual acts generate a feeling of solidarity with the group as a whole and with the norms it represents. This legitimizes existing hierarchies and encourages the reproduction of authoritarian structures. Research has given particular attention to rituals of power and how they work.⁴⁵ But the use of rituals for creating identity and enforcing norms is not a privilege of rulers; it happens at all levels of power, in many kinds of conflicts, and within very diverse institutions.⁴⁶

This book examines rituals staged by a totalitarian, party-run state that made participation in those rituals mandatory for its citizens. We must keep this context in mind when discussing the celebration as a public, ritual act in which citizens, by participating in the ritual performance, were effectively to declare their active support for the party-run project of reshaping society and humankind in general. Marching in the parade meant playing an assigned role in a public ritual. It says nothing about whether that role was internalized or not. Whether and how that occurred is one of the themes of this book.

Symbolic Politics, Ceremonial and Political Productions

This book combines politics-oriented cultural history with a cultural history of politics.⁴⁷ It is about the employment of celebrations and rituals for the purpose of producing and exercising political power. Festive productions are more than simply a political instrument for masking or “aestheticizing” political reality.⁴⁸ Celebratory productions are at the heart of exercising power; they are “symbolic politics.”

Murray Edelman wrote two essays on the “symbolic dimension” of politics.⁴⁹ His insights are still relevant for research. Politics, he writes, works on two levels: one is that of political reality and the other is the symbolic conveyance of that reality.⁵⁰ Generally, when times get difficult, the importance of symbolic politics increases. People are no longer directly involved in large political or social institutions; their involvement is “mediated by identifying with symbols.”⁵¹ Within politics, a symbol can represent and “convey” something greater, a “different, not [immediately] accessible reality.”⁵²

Many scholars whose works follow Edelman’s idea view the symbolic conveyance of political decisions as a reality in itself, an independent influential factor within the constellation of political struggle. Even so-called “empty slogans” of symbolic politics have a way of being effective.⁵³ Symbolic politics is all about legitimizing authority and creating loyalty. Power needs symbols, and it needs to be conveyed symbolically; it uses symbols for political purposes and, to that extent, plays symbolic politics. “Symbolic politics” does not mean “feigned politics” that covers up “real politics”; it means how politics is communicated.⁵⁴ The emphasis is on making politics and power visible. Several studies have shown that making authority visible helps generate political power. Public—including festive—events are one way of making authority visible and communicable.⁵⁵

This situation applies to more than the relation between rulers and the ruled. Many studies on ceremony in feudal courts have shown that staged events not only entertain the people and mask the power that rulers hold over them but are also occasions when rulers first become truly aware of their place within the given scheme of power.⁵⁶ Ceremonial events thus have an eminently political nature that also normatively affects the power elite. Recent research guided by semiotics has focused on the potential of “*repraesentatio maiestatis*” for constituting authority.⁵⁷ Studies have shown how the visibility of power and hierarchy is a prerequisite for the public’s awareness of power and hierarchy and for stabilizing those structures.⁵⁸ The importance of visibility has to do with the symbolic nature of the public demonstration of status, how the ruling elite see themselves as distinct from others, and how they communicate with the general population.⁵⁹ Ceremonial events are part of an “information system” used by a certain group to continually confirm its own inner cohesion and to distinguish itself from others by displaying distinct characteristics, as well as to communicate its own right to power to outsiders.⁶⁰ The semiotics of these events can basically be understood as what Horst Wenzel once called interpreting their “perspective of their own importance.” How elements

are arranged in pictures and choreography is not simply a matter of central spatial perspective; it has just as much to do with the significance that the developers of such images and events place on certain symbols that represent the status of those indicated by the symbols.⁶¹ In other words, the semiotics of these events involves decoding principles of representation and understanding the intrinsic standpoint of contemporaries within the “semantic universe” that they populate, particularly the universe of those who produce cultural events.⁶²

The shared insight of research on medieval feudal court ceremonies and ceremonies of early modern times is that authority does not simply exist but needs symbolic representation on the public stage in order to be recognized, accepted, legitimized, and stabilized. The “reality of symbols” and the power of symbolization are at work here.⁶³ “Ritual is not a mask of power, but a power itself,” as David Cannadine has written.⁶⁴

Bolsheviks, Experts, and Demonstrators

Dictatorships first contrive festivities and then celebrate, but every planned celebration needs participants for the whole thing to work. This book attempts to do justice to both sides: those who devised and prepared “times of jubilation” and those who attended such events.⁶⁵ And yet, the choreographers who directed the parades and those who let themselves be guided rarely have clearly recognizable faces. We search for the actors but find none with sharp profiles. A few words must be said about this situation.

It is basically a matter of who was involved. For the most part, the top-level party leaders were not involved in organizing and executing celebratory events. The highest leaders rarely said anything about decision making regarding celebrations, although the plans for all important events certainly passed through their hands and they regularly spent hours on grandstands watching the crowds go by. Just why they did so and why they called mass celebrations an “important political act” is something this book will discuss.

Most, if perhaps not all, of the decisions related to mass political celebrations were made by the “middle cadre”—the people to whom Stalin enjoyed giving a toast. They made the decisions in both Moscow and the remote regions. Yet, when one scavenges the archives, one finds that this group looks rather pale and lacks a high profile. The actors are unknown; there are few traces of them.⁶⁶

So we must also ask whether tracking down individuals and reading their personal files would add much to what we know. Provincial actors in particular were chiefly concerned with simply executing the plans prescribed by Moscow. They proceeded in their own way and with imagination, but they were still only small gears in the larger mechanism of festive operations, although the latter could not have kept going without them. These actors were exchangeable and indispensable at the same time: any one person could be substituted, but, as institutionalized personnel, they were indispensable for running cultural celebrations in their own hometowns.

Still, it is equally difficult to depict the many festival experts at work in Mos-

cow and Leningrad. Except for a few prominent and relatively influential people, like Anatoly Lunacharsky, Nadezhda Krupskaya, Peter Kogan, or Nikolai Podvoyskiy, most of the authors of papers on how to design festivities remained anonymous. Scholars do not know how much influence they had on the state and party committees assigned to work on celebrations, nor do they know which of the methodical exposés people in those committees actually read and which of them turned up in remote regions. And yet, in the greater picture, the writers of these papers on methods of celebration did help develop functional attributes and aesthetic standards. But here, too, we know as little about their influence as we do of their biographies. They did at least publish their views and make them known in a manner sanctioned by the state.

That was not true of those commanded to act out the “time of jubilation.” The many participants and their roles in festive operations are central to this book, which explores how, within the context of social interaction, they ran, refused, and/or adopted the official canon of celebrations. But here, too, from among the “masses” participating in the celebration, and even from the group of those who refused to participate, it is rarely possible to identify any individual person—and when it is possible, it is usually because that person in some way came up against party-run institutions, perhaps as an object of surveillance, a petitioner or someone making a demand, an informer, or an alleged barrater. Even then, it is almost impossible to discover this unknown actor who turns up in the spotlight of documents briefly, only to return to the shadows of all that was not recorded. We rarely know more about those who participated or refused to participate in the regime’s festive rituals than the simple fact that they did.

The general framework within which scholars learn more about how people behaved at mass political celebrations remains their encounters with the party-run state. A few diaries add personal aspects to what has been recorded, but these, particularly in rural areas, are rare finds and often influenced by the regime’s rhetoric. In the course of this book, readers will meet some diary keepers who noted their impressions and the occasions for celebrations, but these will be few. A systematic search for diaries would be a worthy research project of its own.

Basically, scholars must abandon the goal of writing a history of the culture of celebrations as seen from outside of the regime, a goal that presupposed that such a perspective would produce the “true story.”⁶⁷ There were, of course, times and places where people held festivities beyond the requirements dictated by the regime, but the records provide little access to those times and places. To try to reconstruct such events in the context of a regime that kept close watch on its citizens is futile. All we would find is what the regime thought of those activities and not what those activities meant in themselves.

This book, then, is about *Soviet* celebrations. It is devoted explicitly to celebrations organized by the regime, as well as the ensuing encounters between the powerful and the common people. These categories need explanation, however. Discussion of a “regime” and “society” is based on a dichotomy that has recently been found controversial. For one thing, it seems questionable to use the word

society in the Soviet case if what we mean by society is what Max Weber meant. Regarding conditions of totalitarian dictatorship, we can hardly speak of socialization as being a rationally motivated balancing or combining of individual interests.⁶⁸ And whatever beginnings of a civil or bourgeois society may have arisen after tsardom faltered, the Bolsheviks thoroughly shattered them through years of revolution and civil war. In contrast to subsequent theorists, however, Weber made no attempt to monopolize concepts. "Society" can be seen as something other than a normative model. In the following chapters, I use the terms "society" and "social interaction" to designate the realm of communication in the Soviet Union that involved people who were not directly a part of the state's authoritative apparatus. That is not to say that the regime did not influence that realm. However, it does mean that the Bolshevik dictatorship's power machinery did not cover the full range of social interaction for people in the Soviet Union. The effectiveness of power rhetoric had its limits; in many communicative situations, it was taken up, adopted, altered, or simply ignored. In this study, "social" indicates spheres of communication that were not independent of the party-run state but that did lie beyond the state's direct access.

Much research and many conferences have elaborated the dichotomy of the individual and the regime in the Soviet Union, and rightly so.⁶⁹ It is almost impossible to clearly discriminate between the "system" and the "subject." The discursive demands made by the "system" had considerable influence on the "subject's" expression of self, even if only at times when the "subject" was forced to communicate with the "system." In many contexts, including that of the Soviet mass political celebration, the "system" was constitutive for the "subject": the system made the rules for behavior and opinion. There was no "reality" outside the offers and impositions of the regime.

And yet, we must remember not to confuse the regime's expression of rules with their actual implementation. There were spheres of communication that eluded regulation and control by the regime and that preserved other, traditional, prerevolutionary discourse and protected it. These spheres can be captured in terms and concepts. This book highlights incidents from everyday life that tell us about these "environments," that is, the concrete life circumstances and everyday situations that protect individuals. For an individual, the element of personal environment gives meaning and weight to cultural activity and customs; here, they are linked to the subjective perception of the actor. Here, allegedly "objective" social constructs such as the family, officials, or the state and its celebrations become phenomena that are experienced, interpreted, or even actually manifest.⁷⁰ It was within these contexts that official dictates to celebrate had to pass muster; this is where people interpreted or reinterpreted the norms set before them, where they weighed their options and either adopted or declined prescribed prototypes for festivities. It was within this context that the culture of celebrations dictated by the party-run state first became living culture.

It is also important to explore the environments of those individuals who stood outside the power apparatus and who belonged to neither the small circle of the

party elite nor other traditional circles. These environments were not entirely free of the regime's rules either. In them, however, official norms penetrated a context that included other conceptions of norms and codes of behavior. Within that context, some official norms were acknowledged and adopted, but, at the same time they were colonized, in other words, they were imaginatively, stubbornly, and idiosyncratically aligned with other norms and reshaped to meet local needs.⁷¹

It is precisely this pattern that becomes visible when, within the overall network of relationships and communication, we distinguish the powerful from the less powerful. Any all-inclusive notion of power that has no antonym will be of little help. If power is everywhere, then it is nowhere.⁷² Instead of thinking of power as being omnipresent, we need to look at how—in a variety of social circumstances—the powerful in the party-run state tried to make the less powerful listen. The Soviet celebration was one means: it provided an opportunity for the powerful to convey authority and try to make that authority real. In doing so, they encountered a society that saw them—in turn—as “the others,” a society that already had a number of cultures and its own occasions for celebration and that did not simply follow the official dictate to celebrate. We need not write a history of mentalities to know that culture is very complex.⁷³ Ways of celebrating continued to exist side by side, competing with one another, influencing one another, and sometimes forming new hybrids. The history of the encounter of cultures is thus also a political story: the very fact of celebrating shows how the powerful asserted their authority over the less powerful.

Regional History

This book explores the way that celebrations were planned and discussed in the norm-defining center in Moscow and how celebrations were planned and carried out in Voronezh and Novosibirsk. The focus here is on both the capitals of these provinces and the administrative units and local centers under their control. However, this is not the story of celebrations in Voronezh or Novosibirsk, Pavlovo or Kemerovo. Instead, these cases are seen as exemplary of how celebrations were executed in the provincial areas of the Soviet Union. This type of approach has gained increasing attention as the importance of doing regional research comes to the fore. Following this focus on micro-history, regional historians have come to underscore the importance of their research in making more general statements that apply beyond the borders of the region under study. In this sense, as objects of study, regions become touchstones for overriding hypotheses, allowing scholars to test them on concrete, isolated cases.⁷⁴

Still, the writing of regional history remains to a great extent bound to an approach that developed when historians tried to grasp the “history of society” as a whole. This approach normally involves a complex description of social and cultural relationships for a specific region.⁷⁵ It also holds for research on celebration that has now discovered the realm of the regional. For instance, studies into the phenomenon of celebration and its regional dimension within the German nationalist movement of the nineteenth century generally concentrate on a region still in

need of comprehensive investigation. A festivity is always part of the history of a region, even when it is tied into the larger context of the nation-state.⁷⁶

For Russia and the Soviet Union, the historical study of regions has just begun.⁷⁷ This book is not a regional study in the conventional meaning of the term, however. My focus is not on regions *sui generis*; I see them as test cases for an overarching inquiry into the relationship between the center and the periphery and the processes of “inner sovietizing” the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR).

Looking at Voronezh and Novosibirsk, Rossosh and Kemerovo, I explore how the culture of celebration dictated by Moscow fared in regional and local contexts.⁷⁸ The relationship between the center and the periphery within the framework of the political party’s apparatus and its manner of planning is of particular interest. This work explores a topic of culture that until now has been basically considered an aspect of the genesis of the Great Terror.⁷⁹ What was communication like between Moscow and regional capitals? How was union-wide standardization achieved? Did some regions resist pressure to become uniform? Exploring regional contexts is also of interest in the study of the history of Soviet celebrations because it shows—under the conditions of the provinces in an institutionally underdeveloped, party-run state—how the central dictate to celebrate played out across the country, where and when it overlapped with traditional kinds of festivities, and what areas of the vast RSFSR could not, or not adequately, be reached by Soviet celebratory operations. We can expect findings other than what we get when examining Moscow alone, where regulation was stricter.⁸⁰

Most of the material for this study comes from the regional archives of Voronezh and Novosibirsk.⁸¹ Most important, no doubt, are the documents produced by the state and party apparatus’s celebration committees. This is also true for the provincial material and for that from Moscow, where Soviet celebrations were planned.⁸² The paperwork issued by these institutions reveals the relationship between the various levels of festivity organizers; it bundles the wide range of correspondence that arose around a celebration. In contrast, writings on the theory of celebration tell us the most about the ideas and visions that the Soviet planners had about the significance and the purpose of their occasions for celebration. In the 1920s and 1930s, a number of event experts wrote didactic papers about the propagandist and educative function of mass political celebrations. Several sources also document the aesthetic side of Soviet festivities. Newspaper reports, photographs, posters, and paintings show that in staging these celebrations, the “masses” were considered “ornamentation.”⁸³ Naturally, these sources do not tell us what the people expected to participate in these “times of jubilee” actually thought about them.⁸⁴ To discover that, one must examine personal testimonials of various kinds.⁸⁵ One can find personal opinions in letters and papers in regional archives, as well as in diaries, many of which have been published.

Few historians have drawn on documents from archives to study the phenomenon of mass political celebrations in the Soviet Union for the years from 1917 to 1941. Past research clearly reveals what remains to be done. In general, in

comparison to other, similar fields of study, the study of celebrations in the Soviet Union is just getting started, while, for example, it is already well under way for architecture, literature, and film. In addition, some periods have been researched to a highly varying degree. The early post-revolutionary period and, with some qualification, the 1920s have been researched.⁸⁶ But few historians have tackled the long decade of the Great Revolution and prewar Stalinism.⁸⁷ The history of the Soviet celebration from the revolution to World War II, or even beyond, has yet to be written. Thus, this book makes a start. It examines Soviet celebratory practices from the 1920s through the 1930s, what lasted and what changed about them, and then locates that development within a larger context of the history of celebration.

Most available work is also limited geographically: little research focuses on Soviet celebrations outside of the large urban centers of Petrograd/Leningrad and Moscow. Studies that do cover the provinces do so exclusively for the first decade following the revolution.⁸⁸ In contrast, we know little about how regional and local celebrations were organized during the period of the first three Five-Year Plans.

Finally, most of the work done on celebrations in the Soviet Union has methodical deficits. Rarely has the Soviet celebration been understood as a realm of communication, a place of encounter for the regime and the people, where they observed and influenced one another. That is precisely what this book intends to do.

Of course, the Soviet culture of festivities did not emerge on a blank slate and did not come out of the blue. It grew on a colorful landscape of prerevolutionary festivities dating from the tsarist period. And it also preserved some traditional forms of celebration that existed long prior to 1917. Chapter 1 tells of that prehistory and those celebrations.