

SOCIALIZATION OF SOVIET YOUTH DURING THE “THAW” PERIOD: EXAMPLES OF ALTERNATIVE IDENTITIES IN THE ARKHANGELSK REGION.

Summary

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One of the important preoccupations of the historiography of Soviet society is the study of youth issues in the USSR. Through studying the transition into adulthood under the Soviet regime, we are able to make broader generalizations about the formation of the “Soviet person” as a category of personhood. Although during the “Thaw” period the state focused on so-called “problems of youth” and actively mobilized the new generation in solving various issues of “adult” politics, 1950s–1960s youth remain understudied compared to their age-peers of Stalin’s epoch (Fürst 2010) or the “late socialism” era (Yurchak 2006; Zhuk 2010).

Youth in Soviet discourse was constructed as a specific “social-demographic group” (Kon 1974), existing in a stage of transition into a mature (physiologically as well as ideologically) condition. Among the specificities of the attitudes towards the new generations in the USSR, two that should be noted in particular are the treatment of youth as a resource for building society and a pedagogical pathos grounded in communist ideology. Such perspectives can be considered as a singular, albeit overly ideological, variant of “youthist” conceptions (Omel’chenko 2005:9).

As an alternative to youthism, I ground my analysis in the category of “social identity,” which is understood as the result of the emergence, within an individual, of certain traits that can be a basis for comparing one’s social experience with the experience of other individuals or social groups (Taylor and Spenser 2004; Simonova 2008). The construction of identity structures the behavior of the individual, allowing him to identify himself with social micro-units (family, social circle) or macro-units (gender, class, nationality). One’s social identity is organized in a complex fashion and allows for a choice of one constituent part (gender, professional, national, or other identity) depending on the situational context. The development of “symmetry” between the individual and socially prescribed

identities (Berger and Luckmann 1966:263) allows the individual to assume a certain position in society, to become a full member, to undergo socialization.

The socialization of Soviet youth was subordinate to the ideology of the dominant regime: young people were required to become not only adult members of society but also "Soviet people." Komsomol was an important instrument of socialization: within its framework young people simultaneously became objects and subjects of socialization. Deviations from the Soviet norm, if noticed at all, were acknowledged only as singular and insignificant (*XIII s"ezd* 1959:310–311). The differentiation of the younger generation (by gender, age, profession, nationality, and place of residence) had only minor effects on the mechanisms of socialization. Appeals to "all Soviet youth" in the Charter of the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League (*Vsesoiuznyi Leninskii Kommunisticheskii Soiuz Molodezhi—VLKSM*) and speeches by Party and Komsomol leaders support the argument that the socialization of youth in different regions of the USSR was done in accordance with the same blueprint, although of course there could be variations.

Thus, the socialization of Arkhangelsk youth (both in terms of the construction of individual identity and the ideological work of the local Komsomol bodies) was affected by Arkhangelsk's status as a port city where hard-to-get products and alternative news sources were accessible. At the same time, the identity of the majority of young Arkhangelsk residents was founded on the same traditional values as that of the residents of villages and small towns. In assessing the activities of the regional authorities, it is important to note the typical (for the provinces) conservatism and caution in decision making—a habit formed by practices of anticipating the reaction of the center.

This article considers the conflicts that arose from the juxtaposition of individual identities of young residents of the Arkhangelsk region with the prescribed Soviet identity. Some of these conflicts pertained to actions by young people who did not doubt their own "Sovietness" but whose initiatives were interpreted otherwise by their Komsomol and Party superiors. Interestingly, both the organizers of the initiatives and those in power relied on the foundational documents of VLKSM. The Komsomol Charter postulated that "the most important principle of VLKSM's work is the initiative and self-direction of all its members and organizations" (*XIII s"ezd* 1959:323). On the other hand, Komsomol's activity was limited by guidelines about the Party leadership of Komsomol—the main principle of the "mutuality" between the Soviet ideological organizations for the adults and the youth.

In analyzing a labor conflict that took place in 1957 in a kolkhoz named after Joseph Stalin—a conflict whose main participants were students sent to help the *kolkhozniki*—as well as a series of critical publications in the regional Komsomol newspaper *Severnyi komsomolets*, I conclude that, even without casting doubt on their Sovietness, young citizens of the USSR were not insured against criticism and repression. Appeals to the foundational documents of VLKSM and reinterpretations of established Komsomol practices could be construed as non-Soviet behavior. The generalities and double-meanings of the language used in Komsomol documents resulted in the possibility of the ideological nucleus of the Soviet identity becoming

redefined, incorporating new elements or being reduced to a “geographic marker” (Fürst 2010:4, 200). Conformity to the prescribed identity was judged not by the young people’s convictions but by their manifestations of loyalty.

The second part of the article focuses on critical performances by the youth of the Arkhangelsk region. I trace the ways in which anti-Stalinist actions and utterances were gradually supplanted by a clearly articulated political critique of Khrushchev’s regime. The formation of such critical positions could stem from either a visceral recognition of the incongruence between the party slogans and the everyday reality or from an in-depth familiarity with the works of Marxist canon and the writings of Eastern European socialists. In dissidents’ actions, the impulsiveness that youth in general is prone to became entangled with conspiratorial, underground practices borrowed from the Russian revolutionary movement of the nineteenth–early twentieth century. Nevertheless, the majority of utterances and actions by dissidents remained within the framework of the socialist paradigm. The redefinition of one’s own Sovietness was achieved by reinvigorating it with ideological purity, while the prescribed Sovietness remained unchanged despite Khrushchev’s anti-Stalinist initiatives.

In the context of such ideological ambiguity in the second half of the 1950s, even non-political action could be interpreted as “anti-Soviet” statements. For instance, a voluntary resignation from Komsomol, justified as “we do not have communism” (*Stenogramma sobraniia* 1956:89ob), could be merely an instance of the adolescent crisis of personal identity. But demonstratively breaking ties with Komsomol tended to be an exception rather than the norm for those who refused to accept the prescribed social identity. It was more common either to stop participating in the activities of Komsomol (such as paying dues or attending meetings and cultural events) or to demonstrate performative loyalty thus safeguarding one’s private world from outside intrusions.

All these strategies (from social mimicry to demonstrative opposition between the self and the communist norm) can be found in the behavior of *stiliagi*—the first Soviet youth subculture, which appeared in the USSR in late 1940s–early 1950s. The fluid boundaries of this subculture (Fürst 2010:231) complicated identifying its members as such and allowed for the term *stiliaga* to be used for marking different forms of deviance (Rot-Ai 2004). Who was called *stiliaga* depended on the habitus of the speaker. Hence, for the Komsomol activists from rural regions any deviation from the usual appearance and behavior indicated “serious pedagogical shortcomings.” At the same time, urban Komsomol members would at times defend the desire to dress fashionably.

This subculture makes particularly evident the conflict that could arise when comparing one’s own identity with the prescribed one. Members of the subculture accentuated their deviation from “normal” members of society through the use of marker objects, slang, and their search for spaces exempt from control. For *stiliagi* kindred spirits were young people imitating the “Western” style of behavior. But for those not involved in the subculture, despite the absence of the demonstrative juxtaposition between one’s identity and “the norm,” the demarcation between

"us" and "them" could also be successful: such inner circle could be found among family, friends, school comrades, or pen pals.

The regional data have allowed me to analyze how, through the identification and censure of "incorrect" actions, the concept of "Soviet youth" became fleshed out. Such an "apophatic" definition of Sovietness was no less effective than the positive examples. By becoming familiar with stigmatized types of behavior through the press and in everyday life, young people were supposed to be socialized into the proper lifestyle. Identifying with "Soviet youth" was the first step towards becoming a full-fledged member of society, a real "Soviet person."

One might think that the closed nature of Soviet society, its heightened ideologization, and the different forms of control over individuals would have ensured that the socialization process was always successful. Nevertheless, examples of the voluntary or involuntary lapses away from the path of proper socialization are testament to the fact that during the "Thaw" period Soviet citizens acquired some freedom of self-definition and the possibility of keeping one's individual identity without harmonizing it with the prescribed one. The gradual ossification of the prescribed identity that started around the same time—and the emergence of more appealing alternative identities—resulted in the Soviet society becoming, despite its visible ideological uniformity, a network of loosely linked and mostly ideologically indifferent communities. This process achieved its apex during the era of late socialism (Yurchak 2006), which, to some extent, ensured a lack of opposition to the political reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. But on the other hand, the long-standing habit of social mimicry and the lack of experience of participation in real, rather than ritualized, politics meant that there was no sustained support for those reforms either.

Authorized translation from Russian by Veronica Davidov

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