New directions in Soviet history

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Contents

Notes on contributors
Preface

Part I The Politics of Soviet History

1 Gorbachev and history
PIERRE BROUÉ

2 Revolutionary lives: public identities in Pravda during the 1920s
JEFFREY BROOKS

Part II Social Change and Cultural Policy

3 Entertainment or enlightenment? Popular cinema in Soviet society, 1921–1931
DENISE YOUNGBLOOD

4 The centre and the periphery: cultural and social geography in the mass culture of the 1930s
JAMES VAN GELDERN

Part III Politics, Industry and Shopfloor Relations

CHRIS WARD

6 The politics of industrial efficiency during NEP: the 1926 rezhim ekonomii campaign in Moscow
JOHN HATCH

7 The Moscow party and the socialist offensive: activists and workers, 1928–1931
CATHERINE MERRIDALE
The centre and the periphery: cultural and social geography in the mass culture of the 1930s

James van Gelden

In the mid-1930s, Soviet society struck a balance that would carry it through the turmoil of the purges, the Great War and reconstruction. The coercive policies of the Cultural Revolution were replaced or supplemented by the use of inducements. Benefits were quickly apparent: education opened professional opportunities; a stable countryside improved dietary standards; increased production and income encouraged consumerism. A lightened mood swept the nation. Women wore make-up; young people revived ballroom dancing. Life, as Stalin said, and Lebedev-Kumach's popular song repeated, had become better and happier.

The stability gave some groups, for example, the new 'middle class', a measure of economic and social security that encouraged them to identify with the Soviet system. Yet it was not founded solely on a rational, if short-sighted, perception of personal advantage. Consumer shortages continued throughout the 1930s; agricultural and housing supplies stayed below 1928 levels. The regime maintained its support during the purges, not only with prospering bureaucrats, but amongst those who fell. The feeling survived the Great War and the years after, when comfort and security were noticeably absent. The most permanent support of Stalinist society was a sense of pride and participation, shared by many social groups, that weathered the ravages of tribulation. Society forged a new identity that integrated citizens excluded by the Cultural Revolution.

The nature of this new identity is best sought in mass culture, produced for the people by the state-controlled media. To consider the mass media a reflection of popular attitudes is, of course, problematic. Popular taste was often overridden by political considerations. Discussion was one-sided, dominated by the state; popular participation was limited to the consumer option. Yet the mass media were part of the social fabric. By the mid-1930s, informal social discourse from unofficial gatherings to neighbourly gossip had been subverted. Bilateral forms of communication were cut off, creating a void. If there was a national consciousness, it was informed by the mass media. The party squelched the Cultural Revolution's sectarianism and created a culture shared by the whole country. Restrictions placed on the makers of culture actually opened it to most of the audience: mass culture spoke the language of most people, and used them as its heroes. It represented socialist society in ways that allowed for popular identification.

Media culture was not limited to its political messages which often invited scepticism. Beneath them were less formalized beliefs that helped explain the social dynamic. During the mid-1930s, power was centralized; society became increasingly hierarchical; citizens were deprived of many rights. Yet the dissatisfaction aroused by these measures coexisted with a sense of participation. The Cultural Revolution's aggressive political demands had excluded most people from the category of contributing citizens. The mid-1930s redrew the national identity to include them. This chapter will look at the mass media's cultural geography - its representation of relations between centre and periphery, and its ability to integrate parts of the country into the whole - for reflections of the social geography. The attitudes underlying them suggest one cause for popular identification with Soviet society in the mid-1930s: the consolidation of the centre did not exclude those outside, it aided their integration.

The centralization of power, a process observable throughout revolutionary history, was accelerated by the Great Leap. The mid-1930s saw a continuation of the trend, but in ways that often contradicted earlier policies. Investment was shifted from the periphery - the hero projects in the Urals and elsewhere - to the centre. Magnitogorsk found desperately needed funds moving back to Moscow, and fewer projects outside the capital were initiated. Resources were diverted to non-productive construction in an overcrowded capital. Some projects were economically justified (the Moscow Metro, the Moscow–Volga Canal), but others were not: the Exhibition of Economic Achievements and several Lenin monuments among them. An economically sound project like the Moscow Metro mocked utility with its stations clad in semiprecious stone.

Rebuilding Moscow bolstered its symbolic role as centre of the country. It was the capital, focus of political and economic life, and the visible face of the Soviet Union, representing it to Soviet citizens and the world. The plan for a new Moscow had cultural implications beyond
its economic consequences. It acted as a model for the state, where power radiated out from the centre to the periphery. The city was to be rebuilt from a medieval to a modern pattern, its crooked alleys replaced by straight thoroughfares. The plan showed the ambiguities of mid-1930s Soviet taste: it facilitated linear communications, but it also preserved a circular structure marking the centre of the city (and thus the country) in the Kremlin. Modern concepts of city planning: the decentralized ‘green’ city of Barsch and Ginzberg’s 1930 Moscow plan, or the linear city of Leonidov’s Magnitogorsk plan, were passed over for the ancient model of concentric circles radiating from a fortress centre. The symbolic emphasis on the centre overrode economic need. Removing the Chinatown Wall and Iberian Chapel could have channelled transport efficiently through the city, yet instead the space was devoted to expanding Red Square, an impediment to traffic. Red Square is the ritual centre of the Soviet Union, where May Day and 7 November are celebrated, a role enhanced by the new space.10

Moscow centralism was not new to the 1930s; its cultural definition, however, was. The shift of investment from the periphery to the capital signalled a new hierarchy of values, by which society’s attention shifted from the many to the one outstanding representative. It was neither democratic nor egalitarian; yet the media encouraged the people to identify with the projects. Grandiose projects in the centre were a source of pride shared by all. The Moscow Metro, for instance, was a constant topic of mass culture, and it was a source of national, not Muscovite pride. The theme ran from newspaper campaigns to children’s books.11 Muscovite youth used the subway as a meeting place for dates; provincial visitors toured the facility as a national landmark. It was incorporated into the culture of the masses.

The strengthening of the centre was to the advantage of all, as was evident in depictions of the centre’s counterpart: the periphery. From its inception, Soviet power struggled with huge territorial expanses: by military means during the Civil War, by electrification during NEP, with factories and dams during the industrial revolution. These were, for the most part, lands untouched by civilization. The media showed various attitudes towards the hinterland. The Cultural Revolution typically saw the periphery as savage and hostile. It gained value only when subjugated by the socialist order, that is, when it was industrialized. The cultural geography of the time saw cities – industrial, socialist, the centre of power – as benevolent, and the hinterland malevolent, a place of dark forests, raging rivers, retrograde traditions and socially hostile elements. To the engineer Margulis in Kataev’s Time Forward!, the great expanses were ‘cumbersome’.12 Nature had no autonomous value; it was neither romantic nor beautiful. If for another age the phrase ‘nocturnal spectres, pathless forest . . . marshy miasmas’ would have evoked mystery, in Leonov’s Sol’ (Soviet River) it concealed a hermitage bent on sabotaging the pulp-mill project.13 The outer regions, with their dark peasants and elemental nature, provided the villains of industrial novels like Sol’ (1930) and Gladkov’s Energia (Energy, 1933). They had to be conquered, usually by representatives of the centre, Komsomol members and workers sent by Moscow.

Hostility to the periphery had softened by the mid-1930s. The mastery of Soviet man over nature was deemed as important as ever in songs, essays and movies. Even the ‘March of the Jolly Fellows’ (1934) proclaimed My pokoryaem prostranstvo i vremya, My molodye khozyaeva zemli! (We conquer space and time, We are young masters of the land!).14 Yet the attitude was supplemented by a great pride in the vast frontier, which, as it had for nineteenth-century Americans, provided a new source for the national identity. There was consonance between Soviet man and the periphery. The outer bounds of the national identity had shifted from the West, where internationalism had once pointed, to the eastern regions of Soviet Russia. The Internationale, the national anthem since the revolution, was replaced unofficially by ‘Song of the Motherland’ (1936). Its refrain proclaimed the new-found benevolence of uncharted spaces:

Shiroka strana moia rodnaja,  
Mnogo v nei lesov, polei i rek.  
Ja drugoi takoi strany ne znaia  
Gde tak vol’no dyshit chelovek.15

(Broad is my native land  
It has many forests, fields and rivers  
I don’t know of any other country  
Where man breathes so freely.)

The new consciousness helped redefine Soviet notions of heroism, which had often been tied to territorial expansion. Heroes of the Cultural Revolution had been conquerors of open space: the young builders of Magnitogorsk, the collectivizers of virgin lands. Cultural geography mapped the Soviet Union as a set of socialist islands – progressive cities, industrial projects, kolkhozes – immersed in a sea of hostile influences – the open spaces. By the mid-1930s the periphery no longer seemed alien or hostile. The map was redrawn to include the great expanses, all in one way or another considered ‘Soviet’ (in the cultural as well as political sense). The demarcation was not by points – the islands – but by the great outer boundary enclosing the country.
There was a new and powerful consciousness of the border. Socialist conflict arose not when the centre penetrated the periphery, but when outsiders (foreigners) violated the outer boundary. For earlier revolutionaries, the border had been a symbol of enlightenment and sanctuary, but by the mid-1930s it became a symbol of hostility. The border was inviolable, and its sanctity gave mass culture a new adventure hero: the border guard (NKVD pograničnik).16

For the mid-30s, heroism lay not so much in subjugating the hinterland as in discovering and exploiting its riches. Mass culture found a new type of hero in geologists searching Siberia and the Arctic for natural resources. They became stock figures in adventure films like The Bold Seven (1936), Gold Lake (1935), Moon Stone (1935), In the Far East (1937) and The Golden Taiga (1937). The change in attitude touched new industrial projects. Ivan Kataev's account of the building of Khibinogorsk treated open space as a tabula rasa for the new socialist culture.17 As he wrote (in an assumed dialogue with the Second Revolution), 'it turns out that not only historically inhabited regions are fit to be cultivated for socialism, but also regions previously untouched by human hands'. The periphery was no longer hostile; and its affinity to Moscow was represented in the concluding paragraph, when the narrator's gaze travelled over the expanses to the Kremlin Chimes - symbol of Moscow centralism.

The most prominent variations on the pioneer-hero were pilots and polar explorers. The development of an advanced aviation industry and a generation of capable designers had put Soviet aircraft among the world's best; and with them came a generation of daring pilots. Soviet pilots set world records for flight altitude, endurance and distance, and they competed with athletes and movie stars for celebrity status. At the top of the aviation elite was the arctic pilot; in fact the highest Soviet medal, Hero of the Soviet Union, was first awarded to seven fliers who rescued the crew of the Cheliuskin from ice floes.18 Pilots such as Babushkin provided a new model for the Soviet hero: brave, modest, taciturn - and non-party.19 The most famous flyer, Valerii Chkalov, became an international hero by leading two flights over the North Pole. A darling of the mid-30s mass media was Professor Otto Schmidt, leader of the Cheliuskin expedition. Schmidt became the subject of newsreels, newspaper essays, even comics.

Aviators and explorers had also earned renown during the Cultural Revolution. What was different about the mid-30s was how they earned celebrity, and how it was described in the media. The Cultural Revolution saw practical purposes for exploration and aviation: opening land for mining and industry, building an air defence against the hostile capitalist world.20 By the mid-30s, the foremost purpose was national prestige: Chkalov's flight from Moscow to Alaska had marginal military value, but it brought glory to the Soviet Union.21 A new attitude toward nature could also be seen in the Arctic explorations and flights. Nature remained something to be conquered; yet conquest demanded not subjugation or destruction, but the ability to live in harmony with the elements. Moscow was no longer alien to the periphery.

For Soviet mass culture, as has been true of many other cultures, nature and the periphery stood as metaphors of society. The pattern of classification and association observable in cultural geography, by which consolidating the centre helped reintegrate the periphery, was also applied to social groups. Society became stratified; power and attention were focused on a new elite. Yet coincident with the consolidation of the elite was an attitude of social inclusivity. Classes and institutions deemed hostile by the Cultural Revolution once again found a place in Soviet society.

The evolution of a geographical hierarchy, with Moscow on top, coincided with the stiffening of social hierarchy. Its upper rungs, on the model of Moscow, monopolized attention and investment. The new emphasis on hierarchy was most evident in a tendency to praise leaders of all kinds. Bards wrote paens to Stalin;22 films presented him as Lenin's closest comrade. Leadership itself, regardless of its politics, became an object of praise in films like Peter the Great (1937–1939), Alexander Nevsky (1938) and Suvorov (January 1941). The tendency was not limited to political life. Ranks and uniforms, already a norm for the military, were re-introduced to the civil administration, the foreign service, even the railroad.23 Outstanding workers, artists and scientists were singled out for praise and given economic privileges. The Stakhanovite movement restructured production processes on the model of Moscow centralism: a balanced distribution of responsibilities and privileges was replaced by hierarchy, under which many workers supported the efforts of one. In sports, mass participation, emphasized by the revolution and the Cultural Revolution, was eclipsed by outstanding achievement; investment shifted from mass sports clubs to elite central institutions such as Moscow Spartak.24 Old sports like production gymnastics and non-competitive mass games were replaced by competitive sports, which called for winners and losers, and thus hierarchy. Athletes were strictly ranked by titles (e.g. Master of Sport), with corresponding uniforms, badges and privileges.

The introduction of hierarchical centralism might have weakened the social position of the average citizen. But closer inspection of the mass media suggests that the new values offered something to all levels of the
population. Social legitimacy was concentrated in the centre not as a monopoly, but as a point of distribution. There was a new understanding of Soviet citizenship that allowed for the symbolic distribution of status from the centre to the periphery. The model was mirrored by the cultural geography. Moscow centralism had included greater respect for the periphery. The hierarchy of places was not so much a deprivation of the periphery as a concentration of efforts from all directions on one spot. Elevating Moscow elevated the entire Soviet Union. This vicarious pride was repeated with the accomplishments of the new elite. Soviet citizens basked in the glory of achievements in which they had no direct part. The daring of pilots, the strength of athletes and the productivity of Stakhanovite workers were the effort of an entire nation, and every citizen could justly feel pride in them. Stakhanov was expressing a common sentiment when he said:

"Every improvement in the work of the individual contributes to the general welfare. The Soviet people know, they see and realize, that the better work progresses, the wealthier the country becomes... Loving their homeland, they love their machines, their factories, their work."

Elite status and its attendant celebrity were available to groups excluded by the Cultural Revolution. For the revolution, the path to heroism and celebrity had been through the party. One had first to declare allegiance, then paths were opened. The mid-30s offered celebrity to a broader range of citizens; the unspoken guidelines had changed. While the party was still a path to celebrity, celebrity was also a path to the party. The new heroes were not always party members, and their accomplishments were often apolitical. The new success story was fictionalized in the poor shepherd Kostya in *Jolly Fellows*, or the title character of *The Flying Painer* (1936), and it found real-life models in newly celebrated pilots, athletes and workers. Yet the broadening of political standards did not imply a loosening of discipline. The new non-party heroes expressed a stronger appreciation of social hierarchy and political guidance than previous heroes had. The headstrong, politically correct and sometimes arrogant heroes of the Cultural Revolution – Communism and Komsomols – had, despite their acceptance of party discipline, been allowed to resist its restraints. A party organizer sent to the hinterlands to build an industrial complex could act without orders from Moscow, or even ignore them; collectivizers worked independently, and could outdo the political centre in enthusiasm. Heroes of the mid-30s acknowledged the centre's primacy more clearly than their predecessors; it was, in fact, a condition of their celebrity. Citizens were encouraged to pursue and realize their individual potential provided that, in the end, they gave proper credit to the social system. The system condemned those who, after attaining their goals, tried to rise above the collective. The protagonist of the movie *Goalie* (1936) rose from factory-floor worker to star soccer player; yet his final ambition, to represent the Soviet Union in international play, was satisfied only after returning to the team he had abandoned on his rise to the top.

Celebrity in the mid-30s could only be attained with the hierarchy, and it was conferred by the hierarchy. Celebrity was expressed in a series of personal relationships: leader and people, director and worker, parents and children. Social roles were, in essence, personalized; the apex of the hierarchy was embodied in the person of Stalin. Stalin's personalization of social hierarchy offered average citizens a way to identify with the political system. It bolstered a belief in direct contact between the top of the social order and the masses that institutionalized power had weakened. Even in the most imposing rituals of order, like the Red Square demonstrations, the myth of direct contact was maintained. The event, it must be remembered, was not seen directly by most of the population (entrance was strictly controlled), but through newsreels, which could include a clip of Stalin atop the mausoleum waving to the crowd and acknowledging marchers with a finger or a wink of the eye.

The personalization of politics also contributed to a belief in the direct and immediate transmission of legitimacy and celebrity. Unknown but worthy citizens like Stakhanov or the *kolchoz* activist Pasha Angelina could win instant recognition from the centre. Mass culture offered countless examples of how the centre – Stalin and the Kremlin – was aware of what was happening throughout the country, and would reward commendable efforts. The transition was always sudden: Stakhanov went straight from simple coal-miner to national hero, the peasant Angelina was given all the trappings of power – from transport in a luxurious Lincoln sedan to election to the Supreme Soviet. Fictitious models were provided by Grigorii Alexandrov's popular films, *Jolly Fellows* (1934) and *Volga-Volga* (1938). These were stories of simple musicians living in small towns on the Russian periphery. Local authorities do not recognize their talents; but by a series of fortuitous circumstances, they make their way to Moscow. There they are recognized – the hero of *Fellows* ends up in the Bolshoi Theatre.

The direct transmission of status bolstered the hierarchy by acknowledging its prerogatives. Legitimacy and celebrity were passed on person to person in a mentor–student (*pitomets or rospitannik*) relationship; the old notion of party discipline was translated into a new value system.
The system was used by Stalin himself in the *Short Course*, which claimed party leadership had been passed on to him by Lenin; the claim was supported and acted out in sculptures, paintings and movies. A ritual evolved in the mid-30s to represent the transfer of status: individual heroes came to the Kremlin to be acknowledged by the leadership. Stakhanov was called to the Kremlin for a congress of Stakhanovites, Pasha Angelina for a *kolchoz* workers' congress. Chkalov's famous flights were consecrated by a similar ritual. The flight plans were drawn up by the country's foremost experts, and prepared by a team of pilots and engineers. Yet the flights could not begin until permission was given by Stalin. This moment, when Chkalov's crew was summoned to the Kremlin and granted approval, became a central moment in the retelling of the story. Stalin offered a few words of fatherly advice:

I explained I fly valuable experimental planes that must be preserved no matter what. During a test flight my thoughts are directed toward bringing the plane back to earth safely.

'Your life', said Comrade Stalin, 'is more important to us than any plane. Make sure to use a parachute if needed.'

When social roles were embodied by people rather than collectives, individual lives seemed more valuable.

The ritual of acknowledgement conferred instant status; it allowed average citizens to bypass the middle ranks of society on their way to the top. According to the mass media, the centralization and personalization of power in the mid-30s offered greater opportunities to the masses; it was the middle of the hierarchy that suffered. The defeat of oil-rich local bureaucrats by popular initiative, usually assisted by the centre, was a standard part of mid-30s success stories: Alexandrov's films, the mythology of Stakhanovism. The middle ranks were a source of mass culture villains, as in *A Great Citizen* (1937); and they were the constant target of media campaigns. Amateur theatre groups attacked bureaucratic ineptitude; satirists like Zoschenko, Ilf and Petrov, Kol'sov mocked institutional inertia. They were free to skewer the bureaucracy as long as they did not attack the centre. The strictures they worked under, which seem obvious to the present-day reader, were not necessarily evident to their audience, who saw satire as a needed avenue of petition. The pattern, as has been observed many times, was a revival of the pre-revolutionary myth of the good tsar and bad civil servants: there was a strong popular fealty to Moscow unshaken by local bungling. In fact it was strengthened by mass media revelations: the belief went that, if only Stalin knew what was going on, the problems would be corrected.

Cultural and social geography in the mass culture of the 1930s

One of the assumed roles of the 1930s mass media was to facilitate direct communication between the leadership and the population in a way that bypassed the bureaucratic middle. One interpretation of the role is consonant with the totalitarian model of Soviet society: the mass media were a transmission belt of party policy to the obedient people. Yet communication ran in two directions: relying on existing institutions, the media published information on middle-level abuse of bureaucratic power. Theatre groups, 'sketch-writers' and worker-correspondents acted as government agents; but they were agents of the centre directed at the middle. They were intermediaries representing the little man and ensuring the just operation of Soviet power. Their work was aided by a remarkable institution, the letter to the editor. Citizens could use this channel of communication to petition higher authorities against the local abuse of power. Extensive publicity was given to instances when justice was served, and people were encouraged to report all abuses.

The centralization of Soviet society in the mid-30s opened a new range of passive roles, like the vigilant letter-writer, to the masses. Mass action in the Cultural Revolution had been a matter of doing: collectivizing the countryside and industrializing the periphery, doing mass calisthenics, writing poetry in workers' clubs. For the mid-30s, it was a matter of seeing. The mass media had become the dominant model of social intercourse, and their ability to frame the citizen as a passive viewer penetrated other aspects of social life. The passive spectator became, in many ways, a model of the Soviet citizen. Political and social discourse was redefined by the spectator-performer relationship. During the first decade of the revolution, political communication often occurred where audience participation was encouraged - mass rallies, newspaper readings, mock trials. Contact between performer and audience was direct. A new set of institutions and practices evolved in the mid-30s to accommodate the citizen-spectator. An expensive showcase for the economy, Moscow's VDNKh, was built; voting was ritualized, recorded on newrel and distributed about the country; show trials afforded a purging of alien elements. The Constitution of 1936 was presented in folk poems and stage tableaux, and, on special occasions, the leaders viewed and were viewed by the nation from atop Lenin's Mausoleum. The leadership took measures to assure citizens that their needs as spectators were given proper weight - even as their passive role was being underlined. Plans for important monuments were exhibited for public review, the Constitution and other legislative acts were subjected to public comment. The public had no more influence in the decision-making process than did a Supreme Soviet ballot, but it was nevertheless an essential ritual of participation.
The role of Soviet citizen found increasingly circumscribed models. When a society stabilizes citizen roles, it also limits social mobility and activism. The mid-30s saw the model Soviet citizen's attention shift from public roles - the workplace and political activism - to private roles, particularly those centred in the family. The family, sorely buffeted by the first fifteen years of Soviet power, was stabilized.42 Divorce, formerly a matter of one party signing a register, was granted only at the consent of both, and a stiff fee was charged for the proceeding; bigamy, which had been encouraged by light laws and lax prosecution, became subject to stiff penalties. The strongest measure was the controversial 1936 law abolishing abortion.

The revision of marital customs eliminated cherished rights. What was gained in the deal? If the media were to be believed, the life of a model Soviet citizen during the late 1920s and early 30s had been emotionally unwarding. It seemed that satisfying one's ambition, whether through greed or socialist altruism, impeded personal fulfilment. Communist activists sacrificed their private lives for the good of a society that often distrusted or despised them. What was worse, they could not depend on their families, an institution that they themselves had weakened, for emotional support. One of the stock figures of NEP and the Cultural Revolution was the Communist who sacrificed love for the cause. The prototype was Gleb Chumak of Gladkov's Cement (1925), but the figure was repeated in the engineer Uvadaev of Leonov's Sor; in the heroes of Time, Forward!, whose wives leave them or give birth while they break construction records; the loveless Communist of Glebov's Inga, who in her devotion to duty ceases to be a woman. The apex of the trend was Pavlik Morozov, who sacrificed his family in the battle for collectivization.43

By the mid-30s, this stock figure was an object of condemnation or mockery in films like The Enthusiasts (1934) or A Chance Meeting (1936). The revolutionary ideal of free sexual relations gave way to monogamous relations. Monogamy was not only encouraged by the government for various policy considerations, it became fashionable. 'Show' marriages were featured in the press.44 Love and marriage were in effect de-ideologized; romantic love became a standard plot mechanism for films such as The Rich Bride (1937). Documents of earlier times were even translated to fit the new tastes; when Furmanov's novel Chapaev (1923) was filmed in 1934, a love motif (Petka and Anka the Machine-Gunner) was added.

The new family was cast in the image of the state.45 The Soviet Union was a great family, in an over-used metaphor of the time. The values of patriotism and family went hand in hand: each assigned similar hierarchical roles and responsibilities. In 1934, the word rodina, the country as mother, was revived. Citizens were children, expected to give obedience and loyalty, and to receive parental care and support in return; Stalin was of course the father. The family, like the state, was held together by respect, supported by a hierarchy of obligations extending from the bottom up and the top down. Both parents and children had defined roles. Children were encouraged to respect their parents; hero pioneers of the 30s, like Timur of Gaidar's Timur and his Squad, were always considerate of their elders. In return, the duty of parents was to care for their children and raise them as healthy members of the collective. High state officials gave living demonstrations of the ideal: Stalin paid a visit to his old mother in Tiflis;46 the story of Lenin's New Year visit to a children's colony was revived and given broad publicity.

Women were the mainstay of the new family. They were given new obligations that focused their identity on the roles of wife and mother. The most important role a woman could play was to marry and have children; mass media of the thirties showed these women to be the happiest. Motherhood was the most cherished desire of even the zealous tractor driver Pasha Angelina.47 Sex roles were increasingly differentiat ed by the mass media. Rights given by the revolution were taken away, paths to social recognition were cut off. Heroines like the hardened commissar of Vishnevsky's Optimistic Tragedy (1933) were replaced by the heroines of Girl-Friends (1936), whose contribution was in filling the female role of nurse. A woman's path to recognition was through her unique feminine qualities, as Lebedev-Kumach's Merry Girl-Friends' (1937) made clear:

Idem, idem, veselye podrugi! Strana, kak mat', zovet i liubit nas! Vezde nuzhny zabotlivye ruki I nash khoziaskii, teplii zhenskii glaz.

A nu-ka, devushki! A nu, krasavitsy! Puskai po o nas strana, I zvonki pesniu puskai proslaviatsia Sredi geroev nashi imena!48

(Let's go, let's go, my merry girl-friends! Like a mother, our country calls and loves us! Caring hands are needed everywhere As is our warm and overseeing women's eye.

Well now, girls! Very well, my beauties! Let the country sing about us And may our names in sonorous song Be glorified among the heroes!)

Cultural and social geography in the mass culture of the 1930s
To compensate for the loss of active participation, Soviet society acknowledged passive contributions to the national welfare, and transferred social status to these new roles. Mass culture offered women a path to social recognition inactive since the revolution: tangential status—status awarded for the merit of another. Secondary contributions (similar to the spectator-citizen) to the country were acknowledged. When a famous man was honoured, the supporting role of his wife, which had previously been ignored, was highlighted and commended. The wives of the pilot Chkalov and the shock-worker Stakhanov were used as models for Soviet womanhood; there was a congress of wives of industrial managers in the Kremlin. Wives sacrificed their careers for their husbands, accepted their essential family roles, and freed their husbands for their great exploits.

The role of motherhood received growing recognition. Building a strong family and raising healthy children was a contribution to the state. The child reared in the new Soviet family was a prepared citizen. The most famous child-rearing primer of the Cultural Revolution, Anton Makarenko’s Road to Life (1933), emphasized the role of the social unit in rearing children. In his second important work, A Book for Parents (1937), Makarenko emphasized family roles as the foundation of society. Poorly-raised children could not be good citizens; raising a family depended on mutual love and respect between parents, and the freely given obedience of children. The man who was a good husband and father, and the woman who was a good wife and mother, were making a valued contribution to Soviet society.

The mid-30s redefined the ways a citizen could be integrated into Soviet society. The tendency was evident in changes to a theme prominent since the revolution: redemption. Socialism, it was believed, offered worthless individuals a chance to remake themselves, to give their lives some purpose. For the Cultural Revolution, salvation came from a change of environment. Wreckers and thieves were removed from old associates and brought to the White Sea Canal Project. Homeless waifs were resettled in Makarenko’s colony. To become a model citizen, a ‘Soviet person’, one had to surrender one’s background and the identity attached to it. Prominent figures like Levinson of Fadeev’s Rout or Pavel Korchagin of Ostrovsky’s How the Steel was Forged found an exit from personal difficulties through their social or professional identities. Man was remade by labour, by surrendering personal comfort for the communal welfare; he could, in a most extreme metaphor, become a machine.

Towards the mid-30s the process by which an individual becomes a Soviet person changed. The exclusive standards that kept many groups outside the pale were weakened. Perhaps the most remarkable return was the peasant, who had disappeared from the mass media as a positive image. The typical peasant of the twenties and early thirties was, at best, ignorant: the peasant mother of the literacy campaign’s ‘Mama, if only you could read you could help me’ poster (1923), or the peasant of smychka posters gratefully accepting proletarian tutelage. The peasant heroes of Pogodin’s Tempo (1929), Avdeenko’s I Love (1933) or Dovzhenko’s film Ivan (1932) saved themselves by leaving the countryside and becoming proletarians. A peasant could be saved, but only by ceasing to be a peasant.

Cultural Revolution attitudes towards the peasantry resembled attitudes towards the hinterland: industrial activists felt their duty was to destroy nature when it stood in their way; collectivizers believed they were right to crush kulaks. With the consolidation of the kolkhoz movement in the mid-30s, the peasantry was rehabilitated, both in law and culture. The 1936 Constitution provided for the equal representation of workers and peasants in the legislature (as opposed to a 1:5 ratio). With new rights came new duties: peasants were subject to civil military training from 1937. Films of the period showed kolkhoz peasants defending the frontier alongside border guards. Collectivization created a new range of positive images for female peasants. The outstanding example was Alexandra Sokolova of Member of the Government (1939), but the type could be found elsewhere. The figure was a curious amalgam of traditionally feminine qualities and new Soviet ways. Using her fine human understanding and perseverance, she was able to covert the countryside to the Soviet system and win Moscow’s recognition. Yet she did not lose her rural identity.

Hybrid identities allowed Soviet society to assimilate folk cultures. The process resembled the redefining of the geographic periphery: the map was redrawn to include most of the population through the intermediacy of the centre. The state patronized the return of folk creativity to national attention; by doing so, it ensured its own primacy. Russian folk culture had been a bête noire of the Cultural Revolution. It was seen, like the geographic periphery and the family, as a repository of values antithetical to the Soviet state: patriarchy, the private property instinct, religion. Groups dedicated to its preservation, like the Andreev Orchestra of Russian Folk Instruments or the Poletinsky Folk Chorus, came in for harsh criticism. The Cultural Revolution saw only one possibility for peripheral cultures: to undergo radical change and accept the ways of the centre.

Hostility towards peripheral cultures eased by the mid-30s. Peasants and nationalities no longer had to surrender their unique identities to
become part of the Soviet nation. Folk culture was accepted for a number of reasons. The most obvious being that it supported the surge in nationalist sentiment. Yet it must be remembered that the folk cultures of the nationalities, which were rehabilitated at the same time, did not support great Russian nationalism. Perhaps the only common feature of all Soviet folk cultures, and the one most commonly exploited by the mass media, was that they provided a rhetoric of hierarchy and patriarchality absent in other cultural traditions. Russian and Central Asian bards sang songs in praise of Lenin, Stalin, even the Constitution, Transcaucasian and other minority cultures.

The centre's ability to control relationships within media culture (which folk culture had become) was demonstrated by a film we have already seen: acknowledgement by the Kremlin. Once the primacy of the centre was acknowledged, folk culture was no longer contrary to Soviet citizenship. The acknowledgement had its obvious manifestations in eulogies to Stalin and Soviet power, but its less obvious and more important facet was that Moscow, represented by the mass media (radio, film, recordings) was now the disseminator of folk culture. Like so many other parts of Soviet culture, folk culture became a spectator entertainment. Traditional folk culture was a local phenomenon: it was transmitted orally within a community, with direct contact between performer and audience. The 1930s assimilation of folk culture was initiated not by the local community, but by the centre. Scholars were sent to the countryside to find outstanding folk performers. They collected anthologies, published them in Moscow, and sent them back to the countryside. Folk performers like Lidia Ruslanova and Maria Kriukova won a nationwide audience for the first time, but their celebrity was won at the expense of removal from the folk community. The centre's ability to control relationships within media culture (which folk culture had become) was demonstrated by a ritual we have already seen: acknowledgement by the Kremlin.

Revised interest in folk culture in 1935 led to a burst of activity. Stalin visited a Bolshoi Theatre performance of popular song and dance on the October anniversary; there was a Moscow Olympiad of folk music; folk companies discovered by researchers were brought to Moscow to perform. Russian folk culture was celebrated, but so were Ukrainian, Transcaucasian and other minority cultures.

The social stability struck in the mid-30s was not dependent on prosperity and opportunity alone; it lasted through times of dire economic need. Its cultural foundations rested on a rethinking of the Soviet national identity. Geographical and social boundaries shifted to include vast expanses of the country excluded by the Cultural Revolution. Previously, the Soviet population had been divided into the small group of faithful and the great grey masses. Now, Soviet citizenship in its ideal sense was extended to the masses, whose support of the state was not always active and not always political, but still valued. New classes and groups were given access to the ranks of the elite without the need to surrender cherished personal and cultural identities. The rights and duties of social initiative were concentrated in the hands of a few, but the acknowledgement of passive contributions and tangential status allowed average citizens to feel they were contributing to the national welfare. They were acknowledged by the state, and were in turn ready to acknowledge its primacy.

Notes

7. Good examples of these attitudes can be found in Katherine Clark, The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual (Chicago, 1985), or Regine Robin, Le réalisme socialiste: une esthétique impossible (Paris, 1986).
8. Scott, Behind the Urals, pp. 70–8.
11. See, for instance, Geprl Rasskazy i stikh o Metro (Moscow, 1936). Stories.
reflecting the mass media's standard viewpoint for peasants and provincial
visitors are: E. Tarakhovskaja, 'Song of the stars'; Tarakhovskaja, 'The
wonder-stairs'; E. Blaginina, 'Can you really ride like that?'; F.
Zamaldinov, 'I too was in Moscow'. The common and probably aporyphal
story of the peasant and subway related by Walter Durany, I Write as I
Please (New York, 1935), pp. 338–9, is indicative of this sentiment.
12. Valentin Kataev, Time, Forward!, trans. Charles Malamuth (Bloomington,
15. Ibid., p. 167.
16. Border guards appeared in a vast array of films of the mid to late 1930s: e.g.
Aerograd (1935); Seekers of Happiness (1936); Mariiine Post (1938); The
Commandant of Bird Island (1939); and Courage (1939).
17. Ivan Kataev, 'Lednaya ellada', Nashi dostychenii, no. 7 (1937), with
several reprints.
18. See the front page stories of Pravda, 13 April 1934. Thanks to Andrew
Lownesten for his research on the Chelushkin incident.
19. The first of Babushkin's main heroic deeds took place in 1928; he did not
join the party until 1935. See his autobiography in Kak my spasali
Chelushskite (Moscow, 1934). Of the numerous journalistic accounts, the
most interesting are probably 'Nashi letchiki i nashi samolyety zasluzhili
vsemirno priznanie', Pravda, 12 April 1934; and 'V lagere Shmidt',
Pravda, 12 March 1934.
20. Contemporary attitudes towards aviation were expressed in Ever Higher
(1931, Pavel German): 'My rozhdenny, chot skazku sledet' by Il'ia
Preodolet', prosrastvans i prostor, Naz rasum dal stal'nye ruki-kril'a, A
vmeso sredi splanenniy motor, Vse vyhe, vyhe i vyhe, Streimmy
my polet nashiikh pti, I v kazhdom praporrru dixhot, Spokoistvo nashiikh
granits'; Russkie-sovetskie pesni, p. 80.
21. See the congratulatory telegram given Chkalov in Vancouver by the
Americans (led by George Marshall!) at the end of the film Valery
Chkalov, or Spasenie Chelushskite – pobeda vse strany: svietel'stro
moshchi proletarskogo gosudarstva', Pravda, 13 April 1934.
22. For example, Salomeia Neris (Lithuania), 'Poem of Stalin'; Livia Deleanu
(Moldavia), 'The people's love'; Aaly Tokombaev (Kirgizia), 'To Stalin';
Tirzo Tursun-Zade (Tadzhikistan), 'The sun of the world'; Gevork Emin
(Armenia), 'I am unwaveringly loyal to him'.
23. See Roy Medvedev, Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of
25. Aleksei Stakhanov, The Stakhanov Movement Explained by Its Initiator
(Moscow, 1939), p. 23.
26. Chkalov joined the party in 1936, Stakhanov in 1936 and Pasha Angelina in
1937; all after their rise to celebrity.
27. The pattern could be found in novels like Sor' and Time, Forward!, or in
the collectivization campaign of the '25000ers'; see Lynn Viola, The
Best Sons of the Fatherland: Workers in the Vanguard of Soviet
Collectivization (New
York, 1987).

47. Tret’iakov, ‘Deviat’ devushok’, p. 314. A fictional equivalent of the same dilemma was to be found in the film *Rich Bride* (1938).


49. Wives were standardly referred to in the many newspaper articles of the time. In addition, see the wives’ articles in *Pravda*, 24 July 1936, p. 4.


51. Ibid., p. 241. See Fitzpatrick, ‘“Middle-class values”’, for the middle-class nature of the trend.


55. *The Soviet Political Poster* (Moscow, 1984), vol. 2, nos. 42 and 47.

56. The new attitude towards peasants could be found in the fictional defence film *If War Comes Tomorrow* (1938).


59. For instance, N. Vigiliantsky, ‘Velikii perelon’ (1934), reprinted in *Vchera i segodnya*, pp. 289-304, or the film *Wonder Worker* (1936). The type was repeated in war posters, and by the same actress in the film *She Defends the Motherland* (1943).

60. Faiz Iskander pokes gentle fun at this connection in *Sandro of Chegem*, trans. Susan Brownsberger (New York, 1983).

61. See, for instance, the poems collected in *Pod solntsem Salinskoi konstitutsii*.