

ARTICLES

The Shaping of Soviet Workers' Leisure: Workers' Clubs and Palaces of Culture in the 1930s

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A doorman opens the door onto a hall finished in burnished birch. The buffet is decked out with glass whatnots, real chinaware [and] soft armchairs. Behind each table are busts, pictures and mirrors. . . . A trio is playing.¹

In his recent ethnographic history of the Nivkhi of Sakhalin Island, Bruce Grant employs the “Soviet House of Culture” as a metaphor of cultural construction and the “hybrid identities produced by the Soviet state.”² Yuri Slezkine’s rendition of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) as a communal apartment (*kommunalka*), where each national group had its own room but shared the kitchen, bathroom, and corridors, serves a similar metaphorical purpose, enabling the reader to envision the complexities of superstate–nationality interaction in more familiar spatial terms.³ Both the communal apartment and the house, or palace, of culture were venerable Soviet institutions. Each was the product of the reimagining of sociability in the wake of the October Revolution, representing different types of imagined communities that only subsequently assumed material reality. The communal apartment has been the subject of novels (both utopian and dystopian), film, song, painting, economic and cultural history, and several (absurdist) exhibits.⁴ By contrast, little attention has been given to palaces of culture or to the less grandiloquently titled workers’ clubs.⁵

This article foregrounds workers’ clubs and palaces of culture as sites of organized leisure and cultural activities. It pays particular attention to the architectural and spatial dimensions of clubs and palaces, to the content of activities available in them, and to the clientele they served. Since I am primarily concerned with industrial workers, I have chosen to concentrate on the network of clubs and palaces of culture sponsored by trade unions to the exclusion of those run by municipal and rural soviets, the army, or the League of Communist Youth (*Komsomol*). Most of the material on which I draw is from the 1930s, the decade when, like much else that was “soviet,” organized culture assumed the shape it would retain for decades to come.

I argue that in organizing culture for workers, the clubs and palaces of culture brought power to bear on identity. Like Fascist Italy’s *dopolavoro* (off-work program) and Nazi Germany’s *Kraft durch Freude* (Strength through Joy), these

institutions sought to “nationalize” leisure by encouraging “the active involvement of subaltern groups in their social and cultural experiences.”⁶ Benito Mussolini could proclaim “all in the state, nothing outside the state,” but the Stalinist state was more inclusive and, at the same time, more ruthless in eliminating alternative institutions as well as individuals and whole social groups considered unredeemable. Unlike their Italian equivalents, Soviet clubs did not have to compete with the parish circles, Rotary Clubs, or the private meeting places of the bourgeoisie that remained outside the fascist orbit. Yet the very absence of public alternatives paradoxically made it possible for clubs to accommodate and even promote an eclectic range of practices which allowed participants to inhabit the spaces provided for them, adopting them as their own.

The origins of workers' clubs can be traced back to the last two decades of the nineteenth century when a number of liberal philanthropic societies and individuals founded “people's houses” (*narodnye doma*). These provided workers and their families an opportunity to socialize, attend lectures, read, and in other respects improve themselves. After the 1905 revolution, activists in Russia's fledgling trade union movement built on these foundations by establishing educational and cultural societies, usually in working-class districts. By 1913, there were 237 such societies, with a marked concentration in the capital cities of St. Petersburg and Moscow, as well as Khar'kov and Kiev. The names of some of them—“Knowledge Is Strength,” “Knowledge Is Light,” “Source of Light and Knowledge,” “Enlightenment,” “First Society for Sensible Entertainment”—suggest that delivery from the “darkness” of illiteracy, superstition, and the tavern was a key aim of organizers, if not the dues-paying membership.⁷

After the October Revolution, individual factory committees, the trade unions, the movement for a proletarian culture (*Proletkult*), and the Bolshevik party all founded clubs. Competition—for facilities, resources, and workers—was intense.⁸ So too was the debate, conducted in journals, at conferences, and in the press, about the role that clubs were to play in the new society. Various characterized as a “public hearth,” “a universal studio . . . [and] living laboratory,” “a smithy in which proletarian class culture is forged,” and “life itself,” the clubs of the immediate postrevolutionary years were a key battleground in the Bolsheviks' prosecution of the “third front,” that of culture, and, more broadly, the struggle to determine the meaning of the October Revolution.⁹ Most clubs endeavored to perpetuate the enlightenment functions of the prerevolutionary societies; others sought to promote a revolution in daily life (*byt*) and encourage the creative self-expression (*samodeiatel'nost'*) of workers; still others were overwhelmed by the necessity of providing food to a hungry clientele. Some clubs tried to do it all, but as Lynne Mally notes, “the ideal mix of education, creation, and conviviality was difficult to find.”¹⁰

By ushering in the return of cafés, taverns, commercial theater and cinema, dance halls, and more generally an “urban cultural market,” the New Economic Policy (NEP) accommodated an array of alternatives that was bound to complicate the tasks of club activists. John Hatch, who has written extensively on Moscow's clubs of the 1920s, speaks of them as “places where the artifacts of

popular, commercial, 'bourgeois,' and official, or soviet, culture interacted and competed for popular ascendancy."¹¹ Debates frequently appeared in the trade union press and on the agendas of conferences of club activists over whether clubs should primarily serve a factory-worker clientele or an entire district (*raion*); whether they should be segregated on the basis of age (some for adults and others for youth); whether performances in clubs by professional actors violated the commitment to the creative self-expression of workers; and whether club administrators should permit drinking ("the tavern in the club") and other popular pastimes ("catering to the street") that did not conform to the more elevated and puritanical culture approved by Communist leaders but did raise revenue.¹²

Lurking behind these debates was anxiety about what effect post-civil war demobilization and a return to some semblance of stability might have on the transformative agenda of the party. Herbert Hoover could campaign successfully for president of the United States on the basis of a "return to normalcy," but normalcy was precisely what the vanguardist Communist party leaders as well as the cultural avant-garde feared. Fear of infection from the revived bacillus of "bourgeois" values, fear that the "private" and "personal" (read sexual) would overwhelm public life and the commitment to building communism was endemic to the compromise that NEP represented.¹³ Workers' clubs were a microcosm of NEP's ambiguities. Leon Trotsky, speaking to club activists in 1924, could condemn both "indifference to problems of daily life" on the one hand and "fantasizing about daily life on the other." But between these two extremes lay a vast gray area, exemplified by one club that granted a lunch counter concession to a private individual because the cooperatives that were initially approached refused, claiming they could not make a profit without selling beer.¹⁴

Even while they debated the functions of clubs, party and trade union activists recognized the importance of the physical environment to the consciousness of their clientele. As sites for the acculturation of the masses, clubs presented an irresistible challenge to architects. Initially, they were encouraged to think in grand terms. The call for the construction of a Palace of Labor in Moscow, issued by the First Congress of Soviets of the USSR in December 1922, enlisted architects in a project inspired by the proletariat's putatively global mission. In expressing the need for a structure that would "serve as an emblem of the forthcoming triumph and might of Communism," that would show "both friend and foe alike that we 'semi-Asiatics' . . . are capable of ornamenting the sinful earth with monuments that our enemies cannot dream of," Sergei Kirov sounded themes that were both illustrative of the revolutionary fantasies of those years and "foreshadowed the city-sculpting monumentalism of the high Stalin period."¹⁵ However, the forty-seven projects that were exhibited, each more grandiose and fantastical than the last, were quite beyond the means of a state that had just emerged from a civil war and was intent on reducing costs wherever it could.¹⁶ The palace that would have replaced the Kremlin as the focal point of Moscow was never built, and not until the competition for a Palace of Soviets a decade later were architects recruited to design a building on such a scale.

Instead, they turned toward the club, a more modest representation of the future communist society, but one that still lent itself to bold initiatives. In its effort to design the future, the Society of Contemporary Architects (OSA) placed “new types of clubs” high on the agenda of its one and only conference in April 1928. The clubs that the rapporteur, Ivan Leonidov, envisioned would be “conductors and condensers of socialist culture.”¹⁷ They would no longer be a single building but an entire “urban zone” reserved for cultural activities. Ample use of new materials and technologies—glass walls, loudspeakers, and giant screens—would break down the barrier between what went on in and outside of the clubs. Through the use of movable partitions, different groups of different ages could simultaneously pursue their interests without getting in the way of each other; the theater—already having assumed tremendous importance for club activists—would reach its apotheosis in the theatricalization of everyday life.¹⁸

Of the clubs that were actually constructed in the late 1920s, those designed by Konstantin Melnikov were easily the most recognizable and controversial. In an era when most artists and writers banded together in one or another movement—OSA and ASNOVA (the Association of New Architects) being the two that vied for supremacy in architecture—Melnikov was unusual in going it alone. Not long after the completion of the cylindrical house he built for himself in Moscow, Melnikov was commissioned by the Union of Chemical Workers to do four clubs; two more were designed for the Union of Municipal Workers, one of which was built. Although differing radically in appearance, each building consisted of elementary geometrical shapes (cylinders, rectangles, triangles, and semicircles) and contained a large auditorium which could be subdivided into smaller halls and assembly rooms. They all relied on inexpensive and readily available building materials and were designed to minimize maintenance and heating costs.¹⁹

Frederick Starr argues that the clubs were expressive of Melnikov's belief that “architecture must foster the utmost pluralism and sense of individual identity within the emerging urban labor force” and that by virtue of the fact that the trade unions approved his avant-gardist designs, they may have shared his outlook.²⁰ What workers, the mass consumers of Melnikov's clubs, thought of them is not clear. Apparently, they were not consulted, for, as the architectural historian V. E. Khazanova points out, any disapproval by the masses was likely to be interpreted as a sign of petty-bourgeois ignorance (“*meshchanstvo*”).²¹

There were, however, critics who correctly surmised that the party's willingness to permit expressions of pluralism and individual identity was wearing thin and who claimed to know what the proletariat wanted. In August 1929, the All-Union Society of Proletarian Architects (VOPRA) issued its manifesto on proletarian architecture (based on “an application of the method of dialectical materialism”), which denounced both formalism and constructivism as inappropriate to “the economic foundations of the transitional period.”²² VOPRA was only one of many organizations founded at this time that proudly wore the label of proletarian. Part of a broader phenomenon that historians have termed the Cultural Revolution, these organizations drew their inspiration from the mil-

itancy of the civil-war period which the Stalinist faction's attacks against "Rightists" within the party seemed to revive.²³

Although it was still possible in 1930 for an overwhelmingly positive assessment of Melnikov's clubs to be published, the weight of opinion was now shifting against them.²⁴ The State Academy of the Arts (GANKh) devoted separate sessions of its architectural section to the Frunze, Rusakov, and Kauchuk factory clubs. The Academy's members found them wanting in their "subordination of social functions to the principle of individualism," their conformity to the "abstract-idealist style of the bourgeois intelligentsia (of the industrial period)," and, in general, their failure to express "proletarian ideology."²⁵

These criticisms were repeated in a survey of ten Moscow workers' clubs (four of which were designed by Melnikov) that appeared in 1932.²⁶ It was probably scarce comfort to Melnikov that the other six clubs fared no better. The Rot-front club, designed by S. Pen to resemble a steamship, exhibited the "class-enemy ideology of the aesthetization of the machine" which "has nothing in common with the creative method of proletarian art"; the Proletarii club of metalworkers was a "model of petty-bourgeois style in the epoch of imperialism," and so forth.²⁷ But what, then, was this proletarian art? What should a workers' club look like?

This "crisis of identity" experienced by workers' clubs in the late 1920s and early 1930s was not only a matter of the narrowing of aesthetic possibilities.²⁸ The massive influx of peasants into urban areas combined with the shutting down of commercial establishments that previously had catered to workers meant that public facilities, among them clubs, would have to absorb new functions and engage in new organizational arrangements to meet the new, unexpectedly large urban population. Thus, architects who thought they were anticipating the future suddenly were confronted by an unstable present that wrought havoc with their projections.

The competition held in 1930 to design a Palace of Culture for Moscow's Proletarian District well illustrates the impasse. As mandated by the Union of Metallurgical Workers, the Palace was to be on a large scale, covering two hundred thousand cubic meters of space. It was to include an auditorium seating five thousand, a cinema for one thousand, a library, and rooms for physical culture, child care, a cafeteria, and other facilities. But scale alone does not account for why, despite much fanfare, the jury was unable to select a winning entry from among the forty-six projects submitted, or why even after a second round none was chosen.²⁹

Part of the explanation would seem to lie in the symbolic significance attached to the project. The Proletarian (until April 1929, the Rogozhsko-Simonskii) District was home to the Sickle and Hammer (SiM) metallurgical factory, the Dinamo motor plant, and the AMO (renamed in October 1931 the Stalin) automobile works, all prerevolutionary factories that had undergone or were scheduled for renovation and expansion.³⁰ But it also contained the very unproletarian Simonov monastery, which was among Moscow's oldest, and in the view of one historian, "probably the premier monastery anywhere in Rus-

sia.”³¹ Here, then, was an opportunity to rid the capital of a relic of old Holy Moscow in the interest of promoting the new “metal Moscow” (*Moskva metallicheskaia*). As laconically related by *Izvestiia* several years later, “the residents of the Lenin *sloboda* [settlement] heard the chime of the Simonov monastery for the last time in the Fall of 1929, and in 1930, the monastery was demolished.”³²

Or not quite, for several buildings were spared as historical monuments. This is noteworthy because the proposal from the Moscow Architectural Society incorporated the monastery’s remnants into its design, thereby committing the sins of “eclecticism” and reaction. Ivan Leonidov’s proposal for a cultural complex suffused with a park-like atmosphere bore the imprimatur of OSA and apparently attracted the greatest attention. However, it too was rejected on the grounds of taking excessive liberties with the meaning of a palace of culture, or in the parlance of the time, of exhibiting “petty bourgeois wrecking” tendencies.³³

No other proposal was so savagely attacked, but all were found inadequate in that they failed to design a theater that could both promote interaction between performers and audience (the “mass action theater” still in vogue at the time) and accommodate several thousand people. Eventually, in 1931, the impasse was broken when Aleksandr and Viktor Vesnin, founding members of OSA, received the go-ahead to build the Palace. Combining elements from several of the rejected proposals but remaining faithful to their own constructivist orientation, the Vesnins organized their project in three stages: a small auditorium for one thousand people (completed in 1933); a T-shaped club facility containing a library, winter garden, observatory, restaurant, and so forth (completed in 1937); and a large theater accommodating an audience of four thousand (never constructed).³⁴

The Palace of Culture of the Proletarian District thus represents something of a watershed. Its construction on the site of the Simonov monastery marked a new stage in the struggle against religion and the consecration of clubs and palaces of culture as secular temples. Unlike many clubs that were housed in former churches, the Palace was a purely Soviet building—in fact, part of a whole new complex that made the old district unrecognizable. As *Pravda* noted on the eve of the club facility’s opening, “the old Simonov *sloboda* [settlement], noted for its monasteries, hovels, brawls, and impassable puddles, has been transformed during the years of the Great Socialist Revolution, into the industrial center of the capital.”³⁵ The destruction in 1931 of Moscow’s Church of Christ the Savior to make way for the (never to be built) Palace of Soviets probably owed something to the same impulse.³⁶

Both the scale and layout of the Proletarian District’s Palace made it possible to accommodate a variety of activities simultaneously. This did not so much resolve as take the urgency out of the debate about the functions of clubs. It also reflected the trend toward the consolidation of club construction. If previously clubs tended to serve workers from a single enterprise, then from the early 1930s they were built for groups of enterprises and even whole urban districts.³⁷ Although trade union activists themselves remained somewhat uncertain about the

substantive differences between a club and a palace (or house) of culture, the larger the structure, the more likely it was to be called a “palace.”³⁸

But by the time of its completion in 1937 the Palace of Culture of the Proletarian District was a relic of a bygone era. It was the last such structure of the Stalin era to be built according to constructivist principles. As the Soviet architectural historian Andrei Ikonnikov explains, “with the notion of the palace becoming a symbol of the new culture, the customary formal features of ‘palatialness’ were also introduced into Soviet architecture . . . [T]he impressive monumentality of the various versions of neo-classicism seemed to reflect the country’s immense economic and cultural achievements.”³⁹ It also indirectly reflected the marginalization and eventual elimination of modernists from the Soviet architectural fraternity.⁴⁰

The “notion” that Andrei Ikonnikov mentions soon became ubiquitous. Decorative columns (*kollonichki* as opposed to *kollony*), balustrades, fountains, and statues adorned such “club giants” (i.e., palaces of culture) built in Magnitogorsk, Stalingrad, Murmansk, Baku, Kuibyshev, and the Kirov district in Leningrad, to name but a few. These embellishments were imitated in rural clubs and appeared on the facades and interiors of theaters, cinemas, metro stations, and apartment and administrative buildings constructed throughout the USSR. For better or for worse, they remain among the emblematic features of high Stalinism.

Did the achievement under Stalin of a uniformity of architectural language—the language of neo-classicist monumentality—have a parallel in the nature of club activities? Did the elimination by the end of the 1920s of avant-garde and commercial cultures lead to a confrontation in the clubs between the popular and official Soviet versions? Before tackling these questions, it is necessary to critically examine the terms in which they are asked. Fortunately, several scholars have provided the guidelines for doing so.

In their different ways, both Boris Groys and Katarina Clark have pointed to important traits that both avant-gardist culture of the 1920s and the Socialist Realism of subsequent decades shared. These included inter alia a contempt for the market, the desire to transform rather than merely represent life, the erasure of the epistemological distinction between high and low art, and a belief in a single, all-encompassing (“totalistic”) artistic vision. While Clark also has stressed certain “antinomies”—for example, iconoclasm versus monumentalism, or a carnivalesque spirit (the subversive laugh) versus formulaic satire (the frozen smile)—Groys’s assertion that Socialist Realism was “the continuation of the Russian avant-garde’s strategy by other means” provocatively challenges the hitherto prevailing notion of rupture.⁴¹ Avant-gardist-style clubs and their Socialist Realist successors did differ in their design, the materials they used, and their referentiality. Nevertheless, the aim of making form serve function—the creation of the New Man—was clearly evident in both genres.

The blurring of the conceptual dichotomy between Russian modernism and Socialist Realism is paralleled by that between popular (*narodnaia*) and commercial cultures. Pointing to the indubitable popularity of commercial cinema

of the 1920s, Denise Youngblood has argued that it and commercial culture in general bridged the gap between popular culture and the avant-garde.⁴² Similarly, the prerevolutionary popularity of such pulp-fictional heroes as Nat Pinkerton, Tarzan, and Deadwood Dick carried over into the Soviet period and even spawned some no less popular “Red” imitations.⁴³

If the categories by which cultural historians traditionally navigated through the early decades of Soviet power are now thought to be less distinct, bleeding into one another as it were, what of popular and official “Stalinist” culture? These too, according to Régine Robin, need to be reconceptualized not as “two groups with waterproof partitions between them” but as related by a process of acculturation facilitated by “cultural intermediaries” who, “straddling two social worlds,” served as “true cultural relays.”⁴⁴ Robin identifies these intermediaries as a “heterogeneous group” consisting of *aktivy* [activists] in the Communist party, the Komsomol and the trade unions, the worker and peasant correspondents, village reading instructors (*izbachi*), widowed or divorced women, shock workers, brigade leaders, and, later, the Stakhanovites, “born of the people [and] promoted for a time to the rank of heroes.”⁴⁵

The list of cultural intermediaries is obviously expandable. But what of the spatial dimensions of acculturation, that is, the sites where it was likely to occur? They certainly would include the Red corners mentioned by Robin, as well as the shop floor and the mass-circulation newspapers to which Soviet citizens sent millions of letters annually. But no less so than these other sites, clubs comprised what Robin refers to as a “cultural base of a total *vospitanie* [education].” Like other bases, they worked on four “levels”: the cognitive (access to knowledge), symbolical (“a new social imaginary”), axiological (“values or ideology, or, if one prefers, that of propaganda and agit-prop”), and cultural (“new social codes”).⁴⁶

But this is only one side of the coin. Aside from acculturation or “bringing a public culture to light,” clubs functioned as sites for friendship-making and bonding, courtship, informal exchanges of information, sheer entertainment or fun, and a host of other purposes not officially acknowledged or sanctioned. This is not to deny that a genuine thirst for knowledge or learning new social codes existed among many Soviet workers. But it is to suggest that knowledge-seeking was not incompatible with various forms of sociability, the thirst for which—and fulfillment of—may have been no less strong.

During the 1920s, as John Hatch has shown, clubs struggled to compete with more traditional sites of working-class leisure such as taverns and dance halls. If the situation in Moscow was any indication, they succeeded in attracting a primarily youthful clientele, although often by reproducing rather than replacing what was available elsewhere. The curtailment of commercial outlets and the ousting of the trade union leadership coincided with a radical shift in the official orientation of clubs away from cultural enrichment (pejoratively labeled “*kul'turnichestvo*”) and toward the inculcation of “proletarian culture.” Part of the Cultural Revolution, this “proletarian episode” was characterized by a narrowing of permissible discourse in the name of a mythological proletarian purity.⁴⁷

We have seen how in the case of architecture the shift engendered a crisis of identity for clubs. Proletarianism, however, played itself out differently with respect to different activities. In theater, for instance, attacks on both the avant-garde and classical repertoires gave unprecedented sway to *samodeiatel'nost'* (creative self-expression) within the clubs. It was during the Cultural Revolution that agitprop brigades, consisting for the most part of young shock workers, came into their own. Agitprop theater typically concerned itself with theatricalizing issues of everyday life, especially from the shop floor. Adapting techniques pioneered by the semiprofessional Blue Blouse Theater and the Komsomol-sponsored Theater of Worker Youth (TRAM), the brigades served, according to one historian, as “links in a two-way process of communication.” While transforming “the official language of communiqués into vivid examples of how new policies could potentially aid workers,” they also “gave voice to serious problems in the lives of everyday citizens” and thus “helped to soften at least a few blows of the industrialization drive.”⁴⁸

More research is needed to assess the popularity of such theater. One wonders, for instance, about the reception given to performances aimed at extracting funds for the industrialization drive (for example, by extracting pledges from the audience to support the government's bond program) or the even more frequent pillorying of sluggards, absentees, and the like.⁴⁹ Popular or not, the militantly proletarian and anti-intellectualist thrust of amateur theater eventually lost favor with party authorities. In the spirit of the party's resolution “On the Restructuring of Literary and Artistic Organizations,” issued in April 1932, “participants in workers' clubs and youth groups . . . received the message that works they composed themselves were possibly politically suspect and almost certainly without aesthetic value.”⁵⁰ Thereafter, performances by professional theater companies and reproductions of their repertoires dominated the stages of the clubs (and even more so the Palaces of Culture).⁵¹

Constructing an analogous chronology for films is complicated by the fact that the overwhelming majority of films shown in clubs throughout the 1920s and 1930s already had had their first runs elsewhere. This meant that the “progressive and persistent devaluation of cinema” that Denise Youngblood associates with the Cultural Revolution and in support of which she cites a “catastrophic decline in production and importation” (from 233 new titles in 1926 to thirty-five in 1933) would not have been felt at the same time—or to the same extent—in the clubs.⁵² Thus, despite the fact that only five foreign films were imported in 1931 and none in 1932, a shock worker at Moscow's Fifth Sewing Factory could report (in February 1932) that “foreign films such as Douglas Fairbanks [sic]” were still being screened at the local club.⁵³

To be sure, Kostromin, the worker whose remarks were recorded in the stenographic report of a “conversation” between “comrades” from the Central Council of Trade Unions (VTsSPS) and Muscovite shock workers, made it clear that he considered such movies “not for workers.” But if foreign films were inappropriate for Soviet workers, what kinds of Soviet films were appropriate? “Proletarian cinema” was the answer given by *Kino i zhizn'* (“Cinema and Life,”

renamed *Proletarskoe kino* in January 1931), the journal of the Association of Revolutionary Workers of Cinematography (ARRK).⁵⁴ Unlike the case of theater but similar to proletarianizing efforts underway in architecture and literature, this did not mean art *by* the masses but rather *for* them.⁵⁵ It did not mean the so-called “left” cinema, denounced for its “formalist” and “documentarist” pretensions, but rather movies that were “intelligible to the millions.” To find out which films were intelligible, *Kino i zhizn'* advocated concentrating “primarily on workers' clubs, where there is an organized audience that goes to the cinema not just for entertainment (that too is necessary) but to satisfy its thirst for knowledge, to improve its cultural and political level.”⁵⁶ The problem was that whereas the Soviet film industry was converting to sound productions, virtually none of the clubs had sound projectors.⁵⁷ Club audiences were thus hardly in a position to guide filmmakers.

In any case, the ARRK, like its literary analogue, the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP), was only a would-be cultural intermediary whose own pretensions to proletarianism were always suspect and whose impact was largely destructive. By 1933, *Proletarskoe kino* tellingly had become *Sovetskoe kino*, and the ARRK, “both maker and victim of cultural revolution, was for all practical purposes destroyed.”⁵⁸ The kind of cinema that emerged in the wake of the Cultural Revolution was designed to fit the emerging Socialist Realist bill. It was a cinema full of simple heroes (like Chapaev) and boisterous music-making ensembles who get to turn the tables (sometimes literally) on the bosses and perform against the backdrop of recently completed Soviet architectural monuments.⁵⁹ By all accounts vastly popular, such films portrayed the mythological triumph of the *narod* (people), and in the case of the musical comedies, the club (embodied by the amateur performers) in the cinema. Entertainment, it would seem, had won out over political and cultural improvement.

This was at least partly true of real clubs as well. Two images of the club emerge from the mid-1930s: a rest home and a pleasure palace. “Cheerful, joyous rest—this is what workers demand from the clubs on their holidays,” the trade union's journal *Klub* reported.⁶⁰ Seeking to accommodate this demand, the journal ran such advertisements as the following:

Comrades! You and your family can spend any free evening or day-off in the club and rest well. . . . The club is clean, bright, cozy, and contains much greenery. There is an information bureau staffed by experts to handle all your questions on legal matters, inventions, the raising of children, physical culture and tourism, and adult education. . . . Come to the club with your children. There are rooms for preschoolers and school-aged children. Open from 11 to 11.⁶¹

Khazanova speaks of a veritable “cult of cleanliness and coziness” and with good reason. Instructions such as the following in reference to the construction workers' club in Omsk were typical: “The club must be well-lit, clean, warm and with a sufficiently spacious cloakroom to permit the visitor to remove outer clothing, hats and galoshes. Rooms should contain urns and spittoons.”⁶² As for dining

facilities, the epigraph to this article depicts the café at Leningrad's Palace of Culture of the Vyborg district, the last word in tastefulness.

At the height of the Stakhanovite movement, Leningrad clubs sought to cater to these outstanding workers' needs by offering "collective days of Stakhanovites' rest." These consisted of assembly at 9:30 A.M., followed by light physical exercise, breakfast, an excursion to a museum or exhibition, lunch, a quiet hour (radio, newspaper and journal reading), a lecture on art, conversations, games, dancing, and an evening show. As one appreciative Stakhanovite supposedly remarked after experiencing such a regimen, "We didn't know how to relax, because we were not taught this."⁶³

Clubs that fell short of Stakhanovites' standards of relaxation were asking for criticism. Despite its reputation of being among the best in Ivanovo *oblast* (region), the Nogin Factory's club in Vichuga received criticism from Evdokia Vinogradova, the factory's (and indeed the entire textile industry's) most outstanding Stakhanovite. "There is no well furnished room where you can sit and listen to something, or simply talk with comrades," she complained.⁶⁴ But elsewhere, such as at the Klimov factory outside of Moscow, workers who approved of their club could be found uttering: "I love our club"; "I became a cultured person thanks to the club and simply can't live without it"; or "For me, the club is like my own home [*rodnoi*]."⁶⁵

The other image, that of the pleasure palace, revolved around dancing. Khazanova contends that in the mid-1930s a veritable dance craze swept the clubs:

Dance (literally) occupied an unprecedented amount of space. Circles and studios, lobbies and recreation rooms were crowded with dancers. Dance schools proliferated. Dances were organized during intermissions and after performances. . . . The uncontrolled nature of the dance even began to raise serious fears about its insouciance which neither the sharp words of feuilletonists nor the exhortations of club activists could vanquish.⁶⁶

The craze was not restricted to Russia proper. "Western dances," it was reported from the Baku oil fields, "are the main diversion of youth. They pay to dance and dance for free [*tantsuiut platno i besplatno*], on any occasion and without cause, before meetings and after them." They danced so much and in such a "vulgar" manner that some of the older folk were prompted to ask the club's director to reduce the number of dances to three per month.⁶⁷

The image of "joyful, energetic" young people dancing their way through the mid-1930s is in striking contrast to the grim political events of that period. To explain this and other pleasurable activities in terms of escapism is, as Richard Stites has noted with respect to popular culture in general, a truism.⁶⁸ Workers did go to the clubs and palaces to escape, not only from politics but from overcrowded apartments, indifferent and surly sales clerks, the drudgery of work, shortages, etc. Moreover, what they escaped into was, in its way, no less "Stalinist" than the political repression for which the 1930s is so well known. But

the power to which workers were exposed in the palaces of culture and clubs was not raw, coercive power. More restrictive than during NEP, it also was more conservative and at the same time more eclectic than during the Cultural Revolution, and came “cooked” in the language of cleanliness, coziness, and fun. (“Life is joyous, comrades.”)

The parallels with the mass organization of leisure in Fascist Italy as described by Victoria de Grazia (and fondly recalled in Fellini’s film *Amarcord*) are inescapable. Carnival festivities, public feasts, masked balls, choirs decked out in updated “traditional” dress, displays of technological achievements, the architectural ransacking of the classical to serve the modern—all designed with thinly disguised political messages—were as much a part of the repertoire of the *dopolavoro* (Italian Fascist off-work program) as they were of Soviet workers’ clubs. This was especially the case in the mid- to late 1930s when both political regimes were beginning to take on an air of permanence, if not stability. Indeed, to the extent that the purges of 1936–1938 threatened the Stalinist regime with self-destruction, it was all the more important to organize recreational pastimes and link them with state beneficence. Analogous to the Fascist-inspired organizations, workers’ clubs and palaces of culture provided the regime with “a highly articulated institutional framework” for incorporating what previously had been autonomous social expressions.⁶⁹

Illustrative of this dimension of Stalinism were the ceremonies accompanying the opening of the Palace of Culture of the Proletarian District on December 5, 1937. Taking the form of a popular festival (*narodnoe gul’iane*), they included games, fireworks, dances, live music by both amateur and professional concert and jazz orchestras, a midnight performance by Gorky Park’s Theater of Masks, a screening of the recently released film *Pugachev* (Petrov-Bytov, 1937), an exhibition in the lobby of “Twenty Years of Soviet Graphic Art,” and other activities that went on until the wee hours of the morning.⁷⁰ All this within a veritable Soviet House of Culture.

NOTES

1. *Klub 8* (1935):38.

2. Bruce Grant, *In the Soviet House of Culture* (Princeton, 1995), xi.

3. Yuri Slezkine, “The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism,” *Slavic Review* 53 (1994):414–52. For the USSR as a “super-state,” see Moshe Lewin, *Russia/USSR/Russia: The Drive and Drift of a Superstate* (New York, 1995).

4. For the treatment of the communal apartment as “the cornerstone of the now disappearing Soviet civilization,” see Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia* (Cambridge, MA, 1994), 121–67, quotation on 123. See also Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (Oxford, 1989), 200–4, 213–19; and Albrecht Martiny, *Bauen und Wohnen in der Sowjetunion nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg* (Berlin, 1983), 20–24, 138–58. The avant-gardist artist Ilya Kabakov has made the *kommunalka* the subject of paintings and exhibits. See Blair A. Ruble, “From *Khrushcheby* to *Korobki*,” in *Russian Housing in the Modern Age: Design and Social History*, ed. William Craft Brumfield and Blair A. Ruble (Cambridge, UK, 1993), 232–33; and Dina Vierny et al., *Fondation Dina Vierny-Musée Maillol* (Paris, 1995), 128–29.

5. Western scholarship on workers’ clubs and palaces of culture has been limited to the

formative decade of Soviet power and the post-Stalin decades. In addition to articles by John Hatch cited below, see Gabriele Gorzka, "Proletarian Culture in Practice: Workers' Clubs, 1917–1921," in *Essays on Revolutionary Culture and Stalinism*, ed. John W. Strong (Columbus, OH, 1990), 29–55; and Anne White, *De-Stalinization and the House of Culture: Declining State Control over Leisure in the USSR, Poland and Hungary, 1953–89* (London, 1990).

6. Victoria de Grazia, *The Culture of Consent: Mass Organization of Leisure in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge, UK, 1981), 2. For the Nazi German equivalent, see Detlev Peukert, *Inside Nazi Germany: Conformity, Opposition and Racism in Everyday Life* (New Haven, 1982), 194–95, 239–40.

7. Victoria E. Bonnell, *Roots of Rebellion: Workers' Politics and Organizations in St. Petersburg and Moscow, 1900–1914* (Berkeley, 1983), 328–34.

8. Lynne Mally, *Culture of the Future: The Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley, 1990), 187–89.

9. *Ibid.*, 184; *Rabochii klub* 4 (1923):4; V. Pletnev, cited in L. Trotsky, "Leninism and Workers' Clubs," in his *Problems of Everyday Life and Other Writings on Culture & Science* (New York, 1973), 313. For Trotsky's own formulations—"a bridge from the everyday life of the working man or woman to the life of the citizen" and a "school for civic awareness"—see 293. For culture as the "third front," see Michael David-Fox, *Revolution of the Mind: Higher Learning Among the Bolsheviks, 1918–1929* (Ithaca, NY, 1997), 2–3, 6–13. The other two were the military and economic.

10. Mally, *Culture of the Future*, 188.

11. John Hatch, "Hangouts and Hangovers: State, Class and Culture in Moscow's Workers' Club Movement, 1925–1928," *Russian Review* 53 (1994):98.

12. For discussions of these debates see Hatch, "Hangouts and Hangovers," 97–117; John Hatch, "The Formation of Working Class Cultural Institutions during NEP: The Workers' Club Movement in Moscow, 1921–1923," *The Carl Beck Papers in Russian and East European Studies*, no. 806 (Pittsburgh, 1990).

13. As Lenin's widow, Nadezhda Krupskaya, told the Sixth Congress of the Komsomol in 1924, "Perhaps earlier it was not clear that a division between private life and public life sooner or later leads to the betrayal of communism. We must strive to bind our private life to the struggle for and the construction of communism." Quoted in Eric Naiman, *Sex in Public: The Incarnation of Early Soviet Ideology* (Princeton, 1997), 92. Naiman's book is a fascinating analysis of sex as a metaphor for insecurities brought on by NEP.

14. Trotsky, "Leninism and Workers' Clubs," 302, 305.

15. Sergei Kirov, *Izbrannye stati i rechi, 1912–1934* (Moscow 1957), 150 ff.; Tim Colton, *Moscow, Governing the Socialist Metropolis* (Cambridge, MA, 1995), 218.

16. On projects for the Palace of Labor, see Anatole Kopp, *Town and Revolution: Soviet Architecture and City Planning, 1917–1935* (New York, 1970), 55–58; Kopp, *Constructivist Architecture in the USSR* (London, 1985), 39–43; K. N. Afanas'ev and V. E. Khazanova, eds., *Iz istorii sovetskoi arkhitektury, 1917–1925 gg.: Dokumenty i materialy* (Moscow, 1963), 146–51.

17. Kopp, *Town and Revolution*, 94. *Town and Revolution* celebrates the exuberance and bravado of architectural modernism in the NEP years. "Like electrical condensers that transform the nature of current, the architects' proposed 'social condensers' were to turn the self-centered individual of capitalist society into a whole man, the informed militant of socialist society in which the interests of each merged with the interests of all" (115). See also El Lisitsky's references to clubs as "social power plants" (*soziales Kraftwerk*) and "workshops for the transformation of man" in El Lisitsky *Russland: Die Rekonstruktion der Architektur in der Sowjetunion* (Vienna, 1930), 46, 84.

18. Ivan Leonidov, "Proekt kluba novogo sotsial'nogo tipa," *Sovremennaiia arkhitektura* 3 (1929):103–13; V. Khazanova, *Klubnaia zhizn' i arkhitektura kluba*, 2 vols. (vol. 1: 1917–32; vol. 2: 1933–1941) (Moscow, 1994), 115.

19. For discussions and illustrations of Melnikov's clubs, often cited as the quintessence of Russian architectural modernism in the 1920s, see Kopp, *Constructivist Architecture*, 139–40; Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: The Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and 1930s* (New York, 1987), 434–35, 440–45; and S. Frederick Starr, *Melnikov: Solo Architect in a Mass Society* (Princeton, 1978), 127–47.

20. Starr, *Melnikov*, 147.

21. Khazanova, *Klubnaia zhizn'* (vol. 1), 45. For the predominantly negative reactions of workers, as expressed in a survey of 1926, toward avant-gardist theatrical productions and literature, see Evgenii Dobrenko, "The Disaster of Middlebrow Taste, or Who 'Invented' So-

cialist Realism?," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 94 (1995):774–96. Starr notes in passing that Melnikov's trade-union patrons "preferred a less venturesome structure" to the first variant of his Svoboda factory club (150).

22. Quoted in Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers*, 601. On VOPRA, see Hugh D. Hudson, Jr., *Blueprints in Blood: The Stalinization of Soviet Architecture, 1917–1937* (Princeton, 1994), 118–46.

23. Sheila Fitzpatrick, "Cultural Revolution as Class War," in *Cultural Revolution in Russia, 1928–1931*, ed. Sheila Fitzpatrick (Bloomington, IN, 1978), 8–40.

24. See N. Lukhmanov, *Arkhitektura kluba* (Moscow, 1930). Lukhmanov's criticisms were largely directed at the failure of the unions to take into account future possibilities and requirements (53–55).

25. K. N. Afanas'ev, ed., *Iz istorii Sovetskoi arkhitektury 1926–1932 gg. Dokumenty i materialy: Rabochie kluby i dvortsy kul'tury, Moskva* (Moscow, 1984), 37–38, 45–46, 48–49.

26. V. S. Kemenov, ed., *10 rabochikh klubov Moskvyy* (Moscow, 1932).

27. *Ibid.*, 64, 66.

28. Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers*, 436. Khazanova also refers to a "crisis of the club" among architects in *Klubnaia zhizn'* (vol. 1), 107. For the argument that what was happening at this time was not so much a narrowing of aesthetic possibilities as a shift in sensibilities, see Vladimir Papernyi, *Kul'tura Dva* (Moscow, 1996).

29. For details of the competition, see Afanas'ev, *Iz istorii Sovetskoi arkhitektury 1926–1932*, 83–104.

30. On the Proletarian District and its factories, see Kenneth Strauss, *Factory and Community in Stalin's Russia: The Making of an Industrial Working Class* (Pittsburgh, 1997), 33–44; and David L. Hoffmann, *Peasant Metropolis: Social Identities in Moscow, 1929–1941* (Ithaca, NY, 1994), 127–57.

31. Colton, *Moscow*, 21.

32. *Izvestiia*, October 8, 1933.

33. Afanas'ev, *Iz istorii sovetskoi arkhitektury 1926–1932*, 85–91.

34. Andrei Ikonnikov, *Russian Architecture of the Soviet Period* (Moscow, 1988), 156–60. For illustrations, see Kopp, *Constructivist Architecture*, 119–23. The project was plagued by shortages of materials and cost overruns. By 1936, 5.4 million rubles had been spent, three million of which were supplied by the trade unions. Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), fond 5451, opis' 19, delo 416 (Resolutions, memoranda, information and correspondence of VTsSPS, union councils [and] central committees on the construction, financing and operation of clubs, palaces and parks of culture and recreation), list 88.

35. *Pravda*, December 4, 1937, 6.

36. The Church was rebuilt in the post-Soviet period under the patronage of Moscow's mayor, Yuri Luzhkov. The Warsaw Palace of Culture, erected in the early 1950s on the site of the former Russian Orthodox cathedral, served at least two symbolic purposes.

37. The trend was signaled by M. Il'in, "Ot kluba k Dvortsu kul'tury," *Brigada khudozhnikov* 5/6 (1931):7–8.

38. See GARF, f. 5451, op. 16, d. 766 (Stenogram of the all-Union conference on palaces of culture in Leningrad), December 28–30, 1932, ll., 9 ob.-91.

39. Ikonnikov, *Russian Architecture of the Soviet Period*, 177–78.

40. Hudson, *Blueprints in Blood*, especially 166–216.

41. Katarina Clark, *Petersburg: Crucible of Cultural Revolution* (Cambridge, MA, 1995); Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*, (Princeton, 1992). See also Groys, "Birth of Socialist Realism from the Spirit of the Russian Avant-Garde," in *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment*, ed. John Bowlt and Olga Matich (Stanford, 1996), 193–218. See also Clark, "The Avant-Garde and the Retrospectivists as Players in the Evolution of Stalinist Culture," in *Laboratory of Dreams*, ed. John Bowlt and Olga Matich, 259–78. Quotation on 196.

42. Denise Youngblood, *Movies for the Masses: Popular Cinema and Soviet Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge, UK, 1992), 220.

43. For some examples, see James von Geldern and Richard Stites, eds., *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia* (Bloomington, IN, 1995), 32–52.

44. Régine Robin, "Stalinism and Popular Culture," in *The Culture of the Stalin Period*, ed. Hans Günter (London, 1990), 19, 21.

45. *Ibid.*, 26–28.

46. *Ibid.*, 21–22.

47. See the classic study by Edward J. Brown, *The Proletarian Episode in Russian Litera-*

ture, 1918–1932 (New York, 1953). For other dimensions, see Fitzpatrick, *Cultural Revolution in Russia*.

48. Lynne Mally, “Shock Workers on the Cultural Front: *Agitprop* Brigades in the First Five-Year Plan,” *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 23 (1996):269–70. The development of this form of theater and official efforts to control it can be followed in such journals of the period as *Klubnaia stena*, *Klub i revoliutsiia*, and *Za agitpropbrigadu i TRAM*.

49. For evidence of hostile reactions among Leningraders to compulsory deductions to raise funds for state loans in the latter half of the 1930s, see Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934–1941* (Cambridge, UK, 1997), 35–37, 40.

50. Lynne Mally, “Autonomous Theater and the Origins of Socialist Realism: The 1932 Olympiad of Autonomous Art,” *Russian Review* 52 (1993):212.

51. Much the same can be observed with respect to choirs. By the mid-1930s, the Piatnit-skii Russian Folk Choir was supplying “folk” songs, composed by its codirector, Vladimir Zakharov, to amateur choirs. Susannah Smith, “State Patronage and ‘People’s Music’” (unpublished manuscript presented at Midwest Russian Historians’ Colloquium, University of Illinois, April 1997), 7–8.

52. Denise Youngblood, “The Fate of Soviet Popular Cinema during the Stalin Revolution,” *Russian Review* 50 (1991):162. See also Peter Kenez, “The Cultural Revolution in Cinema,” *Slavic Review* 47 (1988):414–33.

53. GARF, f. 5451, op. 16, d. 753 (Conversation of Sec. VTSPS Comrade Abolin and Director of Cultural Work Comrade Chernyi with shock workers of factories on cultural work), February 9, 1932, l., 65. For data on imported films, see Youngblood, “Fate of Russian Popular Cinema,” 153.

54. On ARRK see Peter Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society, 1917–1953* (Cambridge, UK, 1992), 105–10. Kenez (109) incorrectly dates the first issue of *Proletarskoe kino* as December 1931.

55. Despite a resolution of the party’s central committee in January 1929 calling for the promotion of proletarian author–scriptwriters and advisers to directors, nothing much came of it. See Richard Taylor and Ian Christie, eds., *The Film Factory: Russian and Soviet Cinema in Documents 1896–1939* (London, 1988), 253–54, 278–79, 291–92.

56. *Ibid.*, 297. This is my English translation of an editorial from *Kino i zhizn’* 18 (1930): 5–6.

57. Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, 137 reports that in May 1931 only one cinema in the entire country was capable of playing sound films and that even two years later only three hundred of a total of thirty-two thousand projectors were equipped with sound.

58. Kenez, “Cultural Revolution,” 421.

59. Reference is made here to *Chapaev* (G. and S. Vasilev, 1934) and the three great Soviet musical comedies by G. Aleksandrov—*Happy Go-Lucky Guys* (1934), *Circus* (1936), and *Volga, Volga* (1938). For descriptions and analysis, see Kenez, *Cinema and Soviet Society*, 172–76; and Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society since 1900* (Cambridge, UK, 1992), 88–92.

60. *Klub* 1 (1936):9.

61. *Klub* 17 (1935):15.

62. Khazanova, *Klubnaia zhizn’* (vol. 2), 13, 29, 60; *Klub* 7 (1936):25.

63. *Klub* 4 (1936):18. For another such “day” organized for Stakhanovite construction workers in Ivanovo, see page 11.

64. *Klub* 20 (1937):24. See also *Klub* 4 (1936):6, 22, 32, 47.

65. *Klub* 20 (1937):58–60.

66. Khazanova, *Klubnaia zhizn’* (vol. 2), 61. And not only workers’ clubs. For a diary account of a Moscow mining institute student who organized dance classes in his spare time and learned to dance, thus coming “to sense the beautifulness and success of life in a joyful energetic mood,” see Véronique Garros, Natalia Korenevskaya, and Thomas Lahusen, eds., *Intimacy and Terror: Soviet Diaries of the 1930s* (New York, 1995), 264–68.

67. GARF, f. 5451, op. 19, d. 416, l. 175; d. 413 (Stenogram of conference of veteran producers of the Stalin District [Baku–LS] on further work of the palace of culture), May 22, 1935, ll., 9, 24.

68. Stites, *Russian Popular Culture*, 96.

69. De Grazia, *Culture of Consent*, 186–98. Quotation on 186.

70. Khazanova, *Klubnaia zhizn’* (vol. 2), 106. The opening coincided with the first anniversary of the adoption of the Stalin Constitution. Some thirty-five hundred workers from five factories in the vicinity reportedly attended. *Pravda*, December 4, 1937, 6.