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How to Have a Rest in the Arctic: Leisure Activities of the Soviet Polar Explorers in the 1930s

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Abstract. Mid 1930s characterized by a change in cultural imperatives: instead of the Spartan and anti-bourgeois ideals of the NEP and industrialization period the authorities proposed a lifestyle full of abundance. The words of I. Stalin: “Living has become better, comrades; living has become happier” was perhaps the most popular slogan. The 1930s were also characterized by the Arctic exploration activity peak, which was to become an objective symbol of the Soviet social experiment success. But was there a place for leisure in it? The aim of the research is to answer this question by investigating the issue of leisure practices of Soviet polar explorers. The author came to conclusion that leisure of the polar explorers was a rest in the style of socialist realism – idealized and unrealistic, practically leaving no hint of deviance or contradiction with the established cultural imperative. They listened to music from Soviet musical comedies, read the right books, played chess, not cards, studied foreign languages and were actively involved in political education. The only weaknesses available – smoking and alcohol – were the means to calmly think over the situation or celebrate a public holiday, once again realizing the importance of their work for the benefit of the socialist homeland and being inspired to new exploits.

1. Introduction

The rise of the Bolsheviks to power as a result of the October Revolution of 1917 meant not only a change in the policy and economic policy of Russia, but also dramatic changes in social life. State policy, combined with such factors as the Soviet state high degree of autonomy, the ongoing economic crisis, the breakdown of secular traditions and the growth of urbanization of the population, led to the beginning of the formation of a completely new Soviet man. In this regard, historians should pay attention to a relatively new direction for historical science – the history of leisure, being an important part of the uneventful history of everyday life.

With the development of civilization, free time was becoming increasingly important in human life. This phenomenon was defined as a “leisure society” or even a “leisure revolution”. Leisure activities also played an important role in Russia. The vector of leisure culture development was significantly changed in the post-revolutionary period, when the state began to fight against many “remnants of the past” and strive to control and regulate every society sphere. This led to fundamental changes in the daily life of Soviet people, to a change in the worldview paradigm and a modification of leisure models and practices.



Mid 1930s characterized by a change in cultural imperatives: instead of the Spartan and anti-bourgeois ideals of the NEP and industrialization period the authorities proposed a lifestyle full of abundance. The words of I. Stalin: "Living has become better, comrades; living has become happier" was perhaps the most popular slogan. It was also associated with the slogan "work productively, relax culturally", which is considered to belong to the First Secretary of the Central Committee of the Komsomol A.V. Kosarev. The state became more loyal to forms of leisure, previously subjected to persecution. Jazz and foxtrot, the "pre-revolutionary" menu in expensive restaurants, tennis and much more became acceptable again for Soviet citizens.

The 1930s were also characterized by the Arctic exploration activity peak, which was to become an objective symbol of the Soviet social experiment success. The Soviet part of the Arctic became a field of fascinating experiments run by engineers, scientists and politicians to build socialist happiness. But was there a place for leisure in it? In this study, we will try to answer this question.

The issues of the history of the Soviet Arctic exploration invariably attract the attention of researchers due to this region's geopolitical relevance at the present stage [1]. Issues of Soviet everyday life and leisure are also given much attention to [2]. At the same time, the organization of leisure activities and the development of recreational resources of the North are covered only in relation to periods close to modern times [3].

2. Findings

The exploration of the Arctic was associated with the Soviet hero formation – a polar explorer (pilot, scientist, winterer or cultural worker, engaged in the education of the indigenous northern peoples). As M.G. Agapov and V.P. Klyueva state, the "attraction of the North" was no longer a hobby, but a "disease" [4]. Polar pilot M.V. Vodopyanov admitted that the one who had been in the North would be longing to go there again and again; "to become obsessed with the North" was almost the fate of a simple Soviet romantic boy. For example, this kind of boys can be found in the novel "The Two Captains" by V. Kaverin.

Conquerors of the Arctic of the 1930s were introduced by Soviet propaganda as peculiar examples of Soviet people, even improved versions of them. These were heroes like warrior hero of Russian folk epics. They replaced the backward past with victories, accomplishments and exploits of the present and fantasies of a beautiful future. Powerful icebreakers arrived to replace the sailboats of the bravehearts of the XIX century, which very soon were to be replaced with high-speed Arctic trains, submarines or electrically-powered spacecraft. "The whitest spot on the earth's map" was conquered at an accelerated, revolutionary pace by large birds "with red stars on their wings", controlled by polar explorers, warmed by Stalin's care [5]. The new man of the Arctic was perfectly described in series of stories "the Soviet Arctic" by Boris Gorbatov, who in the 1930s, as a special correspondent for the newspaper "Pravda", spent the winter on Dikson Island and participated in a flight over the northern sea route: "They arrived, these people, with families and children, with tractors, cows and musical instruments, with table lamps, gramophones and safety razors. They did not want to put up with anything: be it nature, or deprivations; they started to defeat them. Ice? They pushed ice with icebreakers. Blizzard? They pierced snow blasts with airplanes. Loneliness? They lifted the radio masts into the sky. Hardships? They built spacious houses, greenhouses, baths, hospitals, and barns." [6].

News from the fronts of the conquest of the Arctic contains almost no information about leisure activities of these "supermen". Topical magazines such as "the Soviet Arctic" or "the Soviet North", as well as popular science magazines, covered new victories over the forces of nature, recent climate studies, navigation, Soviet technical innovations used by polar explorers, economic prospects for developing the region, etc. [7]. Special attention was given to the Stakhanov movement in the Far North. In particular, the head of the Political Directorate of the Main Directorate of the Northern Sea Route under the Council of the People's Commissars S.A. Bergavinov argued that the "examples of the Stakhanovites" should become "the guiding light in the work of each of our workers, a polar explorer, a sailor, a pilot, a hunter, a scientist, and a political worker!" [8]. To some extent leisure activities might include cultural work among the indigenous population: the establishment of schools, cultural centers,

campaigns against religion, which involved activity outside of work [9]. There are no special descriptions of the free time of the polar explorers. Leisure in the Arctic might be possible only after the exploration of the lands, only in the future. In the meantime, one had to work hard for the achievements planned. A similar picture was in the "export version" of the Soviet Arctic. For instance, "the Soviet Arctic" pavilion presented at the 1939 exhibition in New York, informed about the history of the Arctic, its development, territory, economic potential, technology, economy and culture, but there was no leisure [State archive of the Russian Federation. F. 5673. Op. 1. D. 108. Materials about the Arctic pavilion. L. 9].

The memoirs and diaries of famous Soviet polar explorers of the 1930s, which were massively published almost immediately after the end of their expeditions, give a first insight into their leisure activities. Of course, these publications were originally intended for the general public, so it would be naive to assume the possibility of finding in them something in contrast with the values and norms proposed by the authorities. They carried a certain pedagogical and educational function, contributing to the image of the Soviet hero. Thus, turning to them helps to get an idea of a certain ideal leisure of Soviet people.

Leisure and free time during the expeditions were something short-lived and therefore especially valuable. Polar explorers emphasized that they brought their whole self to work. I.D. Papanin wrote: "We are swamped with work!"; "I want to work my head off" [10]. In his book, written for preschool children, he explained: "We worked seventeen to eighteen hours a day. We had a lot to learn. How deep is the ocean at the pole? What is happening at the bottom? What is the water in the ocean like and where is it flowing to? Do animals live in it? Where is the ice floe taking us to? There were many questions. It was possible to answer them only after a lot of work. And we worked hard" [11]. Rest, restoration of strength and undermined health were pushed to the side: "It is fine: will be healed in Matsesta [resort on the Black sea coast – I.S.]" [10: 238]. Nevertheless, some time for rest was needed, because "although we are not discouraged anyway, at the same time, at times, there is a desire to briefly distract ourselves from daily routine and everyday worries" [10: 63].

Listening to the radio was one of the most affordable recreational options. After data transmission, affairs discussions and communications with radio amateurs around the world, which was a part of the work, the polar explorers were listening to letters from their relatives from the Big Earth. Radio sessions "with relatives, with wives, with friends" were even organized for the followers of Papanin [11: 21]. Music, of course, mostly popular Soviet music was played on the radio. "The song helps us build and live" from the film "Jolly Fellows" (1934), "A Brave Captain Lived ..." from "The Children of Captain Grant" (1936) and "Wide is My Motherland" from "Circus" (1936) can be safely called the soundtracks of the life of polar explorers. They gave optimism, helped not to lose heart even in difficult situations, inspired new labor feats. "Chelyuskin" crew member P. Buyko recalled that singing was a common leisure activity [12: 545-546]. Pilot I.P. Mazuruk before leaving the followers of Papanin gave them a gramophone and wrote on the red cover: "the one who walks with a song in the life will never be lost!" [10: 63], [11: 14]. Concerts were arranged especially for the followers of Papanin, and once they managed to listen to the concert of the Red-Bannered Red Army Song and Dance Ensemble from Paris [10: 133].

A significant part of leisure was what can be attributed to educational work and political education. When waiting for their rescue operation the Chelyuskinites were listening to lectures thanks to the efforts of O.Yu. Schmidt. The variety of topics he could talk about with subordinates was amazing. According to the diary of the expedition zoologist V.S. Stakhanov, the following topics were among them: "The main provisions of Freud's theory", "On sexuality and views on it", "On the history of South America and its current state", "On Norse mythology", "On modern Soviet poetry", "On modern science and scientists", "On aerial exploration of a sea animal in Chukotka" [13: 48-49]. They also read poems by Heine, articles from the English geographic magazine (about penguins in Antarctica, about the ancient culture of America). Other experienced polar explorers also gave lectures. A cookhouse worker on "Chelyuskin" Z.A. Rytsk, wrote in her diary: "One of the senior comrades talks about his travels every evening. Everyone enjoys the stories" [14: 373]. Over time, the Chelyuskinites began to publish the wall

newspaper "We Will Not Surrender", which contained materials about the Arctic and famous travels and travelers [15].

The followers of Papanin also organized conversations. For example, one evening they condemned Chkalov's flight through the North Pole [10: 37]. On January 22, the day of the death of V.I. Lenin, the station's radio operator and well-known radio popularizer E. Krenkel made a talk about "Bloody Sunday", and then they "were talking for a long time about Lenin" [10: 250]. On November 7, the day of the anniversary of the October Revolution, they staged an impromptu demonstration: "I was ahead [Papanin – I.S.] carrying the flag of the USSR. Shirshov, Krenkel and Fedorov were behind me with rifles. We were walking under the banner with a portrait of Comrade Stalin". Then they shot fireworks [11: 31]. Such activities didn't contribute much to rest; they were aimed at political education – part of the cultural leisure that was promoted by the authorities.

Polar explorers were keen on foreign languages. Hydrobiologist and future Minister of the Navy of the USSR P.P. Shirshov studied English at the drifting station "North Pole-1" [10, p. 180]. English and German courses were held on "Chelyuskin". There were also courses of geology and "current politics and Leninism" [13: 40]. Thus, the emphasis was on the fact that polar explorers should be not only strong and courageous, but also well-educated. Mastering new skills and knowledge during leisure time is a common appeal in Soviet journalism of the period under study.

Reading was also a significant leisure activity. A young navigator of "Chelyuskin", M.G. Markov, risking his life, saved the third volume of "And Quiet Flows the Don" by M. Sholokhov from a sinking steamer [13: 43]. In addition to this, the Cheluskinites' library included "The Song of Hiawatha" by G. Longfellow, one of the parts of A.F. Pisemsky's "People of the 40s" and a volume by A.S. Pushkin [16: 261]. One of the expedition members had R. Kipling in English. According to the memoirs of P. Khmyznikov, the secretary of the expedition S. Semenov had "Pan" by K. Hamsun [15: 137]. "Izvestia" special correspondent and expedition participant B.V. Gromov wrote that "the books were like hot cakes, people shared them, being the only one to read a book was considered luxury" [16: 261]. At the drifting station "North Pole-1" I.D. Papanin read "An American Tragedy" by T. Dreiser, and E. Krenkel read "Peter I" by A.N. Tolstoy [10: 178, 222]. Almost all of the books mentioned were classified as desirable for reading: examples of socialist realism, classics and books of foreign authors recognized in the USSR.

As for the games, the most common among polar explorers was chess, which can be explained by its accessibility and popularization in the USSR, it was also a substitute for gambling. The followers of Papanin constantly played chess: during a storm, when weather conditions did not allow them to work, when they couldn't sleep, etc. [10: 238, 258, 259, 290]. The game was also popular with the Chelyuskinites [13: 43], [16: 50]. Games that required a lot of physical activity, the availability of equipment and a recreational ground were practically inaccessible under conditions of life in the ice. However, in the camp of O.Yu. Schmidt some crew members of the sunken icebreaker had more free time and tried to play some kind of hockey using simple sticks instead of hockey sticks [16: 249]. One of the followers of Papanin, P.P. Shirshov, once told his comrades: "We should have brought a soccer ball here. Then we might have time for spots". E.K. Fedorov replied sarcastically that then they would have to order fur athletic shorts and invite bears to build teams [10: 102].

Some leisure activities, which are frowned upon or even recognized as deviant nowadays, were acceptable. Firstly, a significant number of the polar explorers smoked and the Soviet press did not keep it secret. Smoking provided short breaks and an opportunity to discuss and ponder on current issues [12: 545]. Of course, smoking was frowned upon, especially when it came to smoking children or long breaks in factories, but it was an acceptable part of the image of a real Soviet hero.

The reasonable use of alcohol was also permissible. It was allowed to drink alcohol to warm oneself quickly and as an integral attribute of a holiday. It is significant that in the children's version of his book, I.D. Papanin, describing the celebration of November 7, uses only the word "feast" [10: 30]. However, he mentions that at the end of the expedition, just before the arrival of the icebreakers, beer and tangerines were airdropped [11: 42]. In the "adult" version of the book, he already described that on November 6 they "were feasting" till 5 in the morning, drinking "alcoholic tincture" [10: 189-190]. The

first festival with alcohol was held in honor of the monthly anniversary of the station – lunch was served with “a bit of brandy” [10: 50]. Brandy was also used to celebrate the day of elections to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR [10: 218]. And for the New Year, a bit of brandy was served with a bottle of hidden alcoholic tincture [10: 231-232]. Alcohol, like music, was supposed not only to amuse, but also to inspire to work and accomplishments. So, after the celebration of the award of the title of the hero of the USSR to I.D. Papanin, and the “Order of Lenin” to the rest of the driftage participants a keg of brandy was opened, and then everyone “kissed, congratulated each other and took an oath to do everything in power, work and work until the last minute, as much as possible to justify the credence given” [10: 56].

The authorities suggested that children should join the exploration of the Arctic. They wanted to instill the idea that success in the Arctic was a victory of the Soviet system and that everyone could become part of it. And this could be done most qualitatively precisely by integrating the theme of the development of the North into leisure practices. In the fairy tale “the Arctic”, published in 1940, icebreakers and airplanes help defeat the evil King of Cold and help the good wizard Grandfather Frost and his granddaughter Arctic. Atamans of the polar armies can stop neither the “heroic ship” nor the wondrous large bird “with red stars on its wings” using ice rings [17]. The exploration of the North was an essential topic of children’s periodicals. Children had to empathize with polar explorers and dream of inheriting the helm in the future. They were called upon to be included in the exploration and conquest of the North. So, they were advised to follow the fate of F.B. Farikh, a famous polar pilot, who made the first flight in the history of Soviet aviation over the entire Arctic in winter conditions: “Get a map, children! Draw a dotted line on the pilot Farikh forthcoming flight route, and then carefully monitor the flight and mark the path traveled by the aircraft with a thick black line” [18].

Radio technology was supposed to serve the pioneers, which along with electricity became a symbol of Soviet modernization in the early Soviet period. When young readers of “Pionerskaya Pravda”, who were “dreaming of becoming explorers of the Arctic” congratulated the polar explorers on the beginning of spring and asked to talk about the Arctic, “the radio brought answers from the distant polar stations, from the coast of the Arctic Ocean, from the deserted, harsh islands of the Arctic” [19]. E.T. Krenkel encouraged pioneers to monitor the life of polar explorers with the help of the radio: “Children! Those of you who have shortwave receivers can follow the life of the North Pole polar station not only from newspaper reports. I will keep in touch with the shortwave listeners of the Big Earth in my spare moments” [20].

In the same radiotelegram E.T. Krenkel reported that “the best radio equipment was made for the Soviet polar station” [20]. This remark reveals that the younger generation was to understand that the technical development used to make discoveries in the North was the merit of the Soviet government. The new system gives birth to a new man armed with new technology – a picture that must be in contrast with the pre-revolutionary one. This was reflected in the exposition of the Museum of the Arctic, opened after careful preparation in early 1937 in Leningrad. The pre-revolutionary land of penal servitude and exile, “the land of icy silence” was presented to the visitors as “a land of extraordinary and unexpected discoveries”, which “spoke” thanks to technology: “Every year there are more and more propellers in the sky. Icebreakers are moving further and further, people are moving north. The Soviet Arctic is singing new, joyful songs printed in new letters of the new alphabet in new books” [21].

3. Conclusion

The materials available on the life of the first Soviet polar explorers, the brave conquerors of the Arctic, unfortunately, do not give us a complete picture of their leisure practices. Books about their travels and discoveries, their memories and diaries should be considered as a declaration of ideal or permissible leisure for the true builder of communism. It is significant that during the same period special attention began to be paid to the leisure activities of the members of the Stakhanovite movement – one more role model. They were supposed to be role models not only in terms of work; they were to attend theaters, concerts, dress decently, read books [22]. The leisure of the polar explorers was a rest in the style of socialist realism – idealized and unrealistic, practically leaving no hint of deviance or contradiction with the established cultural imperative. They listened to music from Soviet musical comedies, read the right

books, played chess, not cards, studied foreign languages and were actively involved in political education. The only weaknesses available – smoking and alcohol – were the means to calmly think over the situation or celebrate a public holiday, once again realizing the importance of their work for the benefit of the socialist homeland and being inspired to new exploits.

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