

The Sovietization of Commemoration:
The Anti-Religious and Ideological Functions of Soviet Secular Life-Cycle Rituals

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Introduction

In the late 1950s, Soviet authorities resurrected efforts to create a socialist ritual system, which, according to official indications, proved quickly successful. Writing in 1976 for *Pravda*, two students of philosophy claimed a victory for this Soviet secularization endeavor: “Dozens of new civil rituals have become firmly implanted in our country,” each performing its essential “atheist function.”¹ Prompted by the 1950s anti-religious campaign, the second incarnation of the Soviet ritual system included a wide range of observances, such as induction rituals, national holidays, and secular life-cycle ceremonies that directly challenged religious practices. These life-cycle rituals were not the overtly political rites of the 1920s, but more personal markers of the major transitions in an individual’s relationship to society, namely birth, marriage, and death. Those tasked with developing the secular ceremonies depicted them as new Soviet creations inspired by progressive national traditions and imbued with ideological content that would further Communist education. In practice, however, the secular life-cycle rituals relied heavily on the forms of their religious counterparts to convey socialist ideological messages. Despite official confidence, the Soviet life-cycle rituals largely failed as tools in the postwar ideological campaign. Though they enjoyed varied levels of success as religious replacements, the secular life-cycle ceremonies generally lacked the ability to instill uniquely Soviet socialist values.

The Evolution and Development of Secular Life-Cycle Rituals

Promoted by pragmatic Party leaders, the first Soviet life-cycle ceremonies were explicitly political rites with some grassroots origins intended to educate the developing masses in Communist ideology. These rites, however, enjoyed minimal popular support. As the rise of Stalin brought the political fall of secular ritual supporters and increased denunciation of rituals

¹ N. Andrianov and A. Belov, “Problems of Social Life: New Rituals for Soviet People,” *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 28, no. 21 (1976): 19, from *Pravda*, May 28, 1976.

as anti-Marxist, secular life-cycle ceremonies fell into decline from the late 1920s to the early 1950s. The launch of Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign in the mid-1950s, combined with greater state concern about the aesthetic quality of everyday culture, renewed interest in developing uniquely Soviet commemorations of major life transitions. Committees within each republic developed and implemented ceremonies with the dual goals of superseding religious observances and promoting the socialist values of scientific atheism.

In the early Soviet period, the question of creating new rituals provoked tension between the Bolshevik emphasis on rational education and the practical concerns of Party leaders. Because the Party saw religious loyalties as an obstacle to the establishment of a rational society, it supported the creation of new holidays and life-cycle rites, which incorporated Soviet symbols and often specifically targeted religious observances. In a series of "Problems of Everyday Life" articles in 1923, Leon Trotsky praised examples of new life-cycle rituals arranged by local factories or Komsomol committees in place of religious ceremonies, arguing that incorporating propaganda in the marking of important life events had strong potential to transition family life away from religious dependence. An anti-religious propaganda report from the same year encouraged the local development of Red Christenings, also called "Octoberings" (*Oktiabriny*), and Red Weddings.² A 1924 Komsomol "Octobering" emphasized society's duty to raise new citizens in the Communist spirit, with the mother announcing that the "child belongs to me only physically. For its spiritual education I hand it over to society."³ At Komsomol-hosted Red Weddings, community members exhorted the couple to consistently advance the Soviet cause.⁴

² Cap Binns, "The Changing Face of Power – Revolution and Accommodation in the Development of the Soviet Ceremonial System: Part 1," *MAN* 14, no. 4 (1979): 588, 594-595.

³ Christel Lane, *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society: The Soviet Case* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 63.

⁴ Jennifer McDowell, "Soviet Civil Ceremonies," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13, no. 3 (1974): 268.

Stalin's consolidation of power by the mid-1920s centralized Party control of the state and society, ending the Komsomol's localized, disparate approach to organizing secular ceremonies. As the denunciations of Trotsky mounted, the Party took an increasingly anti-ritual stance, insisting that attempting to transform society through ritual was neither revolutionary nor rational. The Red Christenings and Weddings that survived became pure propaganda tools organized for non-Party members to demand their commitment to Communism. Amid the social instability that began with the implementation of the First Five-Year Plan in 1928 and continued through postwar recovery, Soviet life-cycle ceremonies fell out of practice. In the presence of more pressing demands on state resources, officials disparaged such observances as wasteful, meaning births, marriages, and deaths were, at most, recorded at registration offices. Though new holidays honoring Bolshevik history and working groups were organized in the later Stalin period, the state continued to deemphasize the previously developed life-cycle rituals.⁵

As he secured leadership of the Soviet Union in the late 1950s, Khrushchev revived attempts to institute a system of Soviet life-cycle ceremonies in connection with his anti-religious campaign. Beginning in 1957, the state increased both the repression of religious observance and the promotion of secular atheism.⁶ Backlash against religion did not solely shape the proposed secular replacements for religious life-cycle rituals, however. Progress in Soviet economic recovery allowed the state to provide resources for ceremonies that would improve the aesthetic quality of everyday life.⁷ Accordingly, the Komsomol framed the new rites as vehicles

⁵ Binns, "Part 1," 596-598, 601; Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 28; McDowell, "Soviet Civil Ceremonies," 267; Cap Binns, "The Changing Face of Power – Revolution and Accommodation in the Development of the Soviet Ceremonial System: Part 2," *MAN* 15, no. 1 (1980): 170, 173.

⁶ James von Geldern, "1961: Fight Against Superstition: Khrushchev's Anti-Religious Campaign," *Seventeen Moments in Soviet History*, www.soviethistory.org (accessed February 22, 2014).

⁷ Jeanmarie Rouhier-Willoughby, *Village Values: Negotiating Identity, Gender, and Resistance in Urban Russian Life-Cycle Rituals* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica, 2008), 15.

for color and optimism in young people's lives.⁸ The Baltic Republics led the early development of postwar secular life-cycle rituals, followed closely by Leningrad, where the Komsomol established its inaugural "Wedding Palace" in 1959. Following success in these areas, the Knowledge Society, the leading atheist organization in the Soviet Union, approved in 1960 the experimental introduction of similar ceremonies in larger Soviet cities, which continued particularly in Russia and Ukraine into the early 1960s.⁹

State-encouraged public discussion about the new life-cycle rituals among academics, politicians, and everyday citizens during the late 1950s and early 1960s coalesced around common developmental considerations. Most fundamentally, articles in newspapers and journals contemplated the social function of rituals in Soviet life. In a 1959 *Izvestia* piece, V.I. Kozlov, the chairman of the Belorussian Soviet, referenced the role of life-cycle rituals in "strengthening the family nucleus of society," a key building block of Communism.¹⁰ A 1961 *Kommunist* article emphasized secular life-cycle rites as essential tools in the fight against religion because they targeted the tenacious survival of religious loyalties in everyday practices. In highlighting the edifying role of new rites, the author insisted that they instill "the high and noble norms of socialist society and the features of the moral makeup of Soviet man."¹¹ Folk and national culture also came into focus as drivers of effective new rituals. An *Izvestia* reader from Tula Province called on ritual developers to analyze "the sources of folklore, and, starting with the best achievements of the past, to create something new and better."¹² Stressing the need to refer to national traditions in creating Soviet rites, the *Kommunist* writer maintained that "a 'concoction'

⁸ Binns, "Part 2," 173.

⁹ Ibid.; McDowell, "Soviet Civil Ceremonies," 268-269; Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 46.

¹⁰ V.I. Kozlov, "Yes, Soviet Ceremonies are Needed! Family Happiness," *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 11, no. 44 (1959): 33, from *Izvestia*, November 4, 1959.

¹¹ I. Kryvelev, "An Important Side of Everyday Life," *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 13, no. 23 (1961): 11, from *Kommunist*, May 1961.

¹² Yevgeny Kriger, "Shall We or Shall We Not Have New Soviet Ceremonies? The Argument Continues," *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 11, no. 49 (1960): 26, from *Izvestia*, December 5, 1959.

of the new out of nothing, an artificial implantation of customs alien to people, cannot be successful... Nonreligious holidays and rites [must] stem from what is to some extent known and customary to people.”¹³ “Colorful” folk elements were discussed as one way for Soviet ceremonies to fulfill another of their essential functions: providing an emotional outlet during times of transition. Sociologists Krianev and Popov described rituals as “the external manifestation of man’s emotional life” and argued that emotionally disengaged ceremonies would also fail to properly instill ideological messages.¹⁴

After this period of discussion, the state attempted to bring more central direction to the creation and organization secular life-cycle rituals. Until the mid-1960s, different groups and authorities had independently implemented forms of rituals specific to their local areas, though many were adaptations of popular Baltic and Leningrad models.¹⁵ In May 1964, the Central Committee sponsored an All-Union Conference on the Problems of Soviet Ceremonial Rites in Moscow. The conference produced the framework for the development and dissemination of new ceremonies, which were to correspond to the current stage of the public’s socialist development, incorporate “communist morality” as well as national traditions, balance rationality and emotion, and guide participants toward atheism.¹⁶ Following the conference, the Party organized republic-level committees composed of “ritual specialists” to oversee the development of new ceremonies. Ritual specialists included authorities from the Party, Komsomol, and cultural councils as well as professionals with backgrounds in philosophy and propaganda. Guided by area Party members, local committees adapted their republic committee’s proposals to

¹³ Kryvelev, “Important Side,” 11.

¹⁴ Iu. V. Krianev and P.S. Popov, “The Emotional Effect of Religious Ritual and the Process of Overcoming It,” *Soviet Sociology* 2, no.4 (1964): 57, from *Voprosy filosofii* no. 9 (1963).

¹⁵ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 16.

¹⁶ McDowell, “Soviet Civil Ceremonies,” 269; Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 46-47.

local circumstances or, in some cases, developed their own ceremonies.¹⁷ Under this structure, the 1960s and 1970s saw the greatest attention to Soviet life-cycle ritual development, although a union-wide “uniform pattern of organization or hierarchy of authority” was never organized.¹⁸

Between the 1920s and the 1960s, the Soviet state’s official position on rituals and its perception of life-cycle ceremonies evolved. Though the Red Christenings and Weddings of the 1920s reflected a revolutionary desire to restructure society, the Stalin era branded life-cycle rituals as anti-Marxist because of political and economic factors. With the onset of Khrushchev’s anti-religious campaign, secular rituals again came into favor because of their perceived ability to promote and reinforce socialist values. The Soviet conception of life-cycle ceremonies expanded from encompassing strictly ideological functions in the 1920s to incorporating aesthetic, emotional, and traditional cultural aspects in the 1960s. As the Khrushchev era drew to a close, the Party attempted to streamline disparate ritual development efforts, but stopped short of full centralization to allow for regional variations.

Secular Life-Cycle Rituals in Practice

In seeking to displace religion in Soviet society, ritual specialists prioritized the development of secular life-cycle rituals that served as direct alternatives to religious rites, particularly christenings, weddings, and funerals. In place of religious principles, these rituals advanced secular Soviet values. They sought to strengthen the family as a unit of building Communism, promote atheism, and emphasize the relationship between individuals and the state. Though the rites presented the state as providing for its citizens, they also reminded individuals of their duties to the state and society. Secular life-cycle ceremonies were not identical across the Soviet Union because of the lack of a centralized ritual system and the stated goal of

¹⁷ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 26, 47-49; Rouhier-Willoughby, *Village Values*, 8.

¹⁸ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 48; Rouhier-Willoughby, *Village Values*, 179.

incorporating national traditions. Their forms were generally standardized across the republics, however, because local versions of the ceremonies were often designed from a small number of successful models.

With the institution of a civil birth ritual, Soviet authorities sought to replace the role of baptisms and christenings in fostering religious loyalties – both in the child and its parents – by providing exposure to secular values. Local Party and Komsomol organizers developed the original postwar ceremony in Leningrad in 1963, which incorporated some elements of the 1920s Red Christenings and became the prototypical Soviet birth ritual.¹⁹ The registration bureau employee or local official who conducted the ceremony opened with remarks about the integration of the newborn in Soviet society: “A Soviet citizen – the future builder of the radiant communist society – has been born” or “Remember that from the first day – he grows not only for you but for all our great Soviet people.”²⁰ The officiant then announced the child’s name and officially presented him or her as a citizen of the Soviet Union, after which the national anthem played and the parents received a certificate of registration. At this point, the child’s “honorary parents,” who were respected members of the community, agreed on behalf of society to contribute to the child’s proper moral formation.²¹ Addressed to the parents, the officiant’s final remarks generally included a last patriotic appeal and a reminder of Soviet parental duties, with the child’s birth referred to as “a joy not only for you but for our whole society...From childhood implant in [your children] love of work and of our great Motherland.”²²

Certain elements were specific to particular cities or regions as well. In the Leningrad “Palace of the Newly-Born,” which opened in 1965, the ceremony featured newly written secular

¹⁹ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 69; Binns, “Part 2,” 178; McDowell, “Soviet Civil Ceremonies,” 272.

²⁰ McDowell, “Soviet Civil Ceremonies,” 273.

²¹ *Ibid.*; Binns, “Part 2,” 178.

²² Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 71.

hymns and included recognition of the newborn's grandparents in an effort to prevent them from "infecting" the child with religious feeling.²³ Continuing a trend from the 1920s, the rite in the Krasnodar region of western Russia involved a local troop of Young Pioneers, giving the child an early introduction to Soviet social organizations.²⁴ Also reflecting society's commitment to the new citizen, the Latvian ceremony included local kindergarteners in national costumes, who gave parents blue or pink candles to light.²⁵ In Ukraine, the rite functioned as a pact between the child's family and the state and raised the pursuit of Communism to the level of a religious obligation. In the words of the Ritual Elder to the parents, "Remember about your holy duty before our socialist society – to raise your son (daughter) as a worthy fighter for the full triumph of communism...[S]ocialist society guarantees and offers your son (daughter) its citizenship."²⁶

Ritual specialists devoted the most effort to perfecting the Soviet wedding ceremony. The innovation of Wedding Palaces did much to increase participation in secular weddings, providing a straightforward yet sufficiently special ceremony for everyday citizens. By 1972, 600 Wedding Palaces operated union-wide, and by 1976, each larger city and town in the Soviet Union had at least one.²⁷ As part of the Soviet shift toward the "monumentalism" of public spaces beginning in the 1930s, Wedding Palaces tended to be large, grand buildings conveying authority and order.²⁸ Formerly the stately residence of an imperial official, the first Wedding Palace in Leningrad offered luxurious features, including chandeliers, gold accents, and a marble staircase to the main ceremonial room.²⁹ Newly built Wedding Palaces incorporated a similar grand staircase from the foyer to the ceremonial hall as well as high ceilings, white stone, and red

²³ Binns, "Part 2," 178; Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 70.

²⁴ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 72.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

²⁷ Binns, "Part 2," 177.

²⁸ Rouhier-Willoughby, *Village Values*, 151.

²⁹ V. Dubrovin and I. Moroz, "Palace of the Happy," *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 11, no. 42 (1959): 26, from *Komsomolskaya pravda*, October 24, 1959.

carpet and upholstery. In their “monumentalism,” Wedding Palaces tended to unintentionally echo the design of churches because of the lack of other architectural references, though Soviet designers attempted to balance these religious allusions with elements of Soviet simplicity and rationality.³⁰ Writing in 1972 for *Sovetskaya kultura*, a Soviet architect described the difficulty in finding a balance between emotional expression and socialist restraint in Wedding Palace design: “There should be something unusual and grand about the setting for such a distinctive ceremony as a wedding, with its fusion of art forms. Yet...[i]f he lets his imagination soar and designs something that is majestic and aspires upward, he will be told that it resembles a church. Yet more pedestrian designs look like stores.”³¹

The ritualized registration of marriage in Wedding Palaces took similar forms across the Soviet Union. In the typical ceremony, the couple – the bride in a white wedding dress and the groom in a dark suit – entered the ritual hall to Mendelssohn’s “Wedding March.”³² Described as “a room of vast proportions,” the ritual hall commonly featured a substantial desk for the registration book, a bust of Lenin, and flowers.³³ The officiant, generally a female Wedding Palace employee or a deputy from the local soviet, received the couple and confirmed their desire to marry. The bride and groom then signed the marriage register, and the “best man” and “maid of honor” subsequently signed as witnesses. The signing of the registry was the key element in the ceremony, with the couple presented as husband and wife afterwards.³⁴ The couple then placed rings, described as symbols of “faithfulness and mutual love,” on each other’s

³⁰ Rouhier-Willoughby, *Villages Values*, 151-152.

³¹ M. Limonad, “The Ceremony Needs a Home,” *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 24, no. 51 (1973): 23, from *Sovetskaya kultura*, July 22, 1972.

³² Binns, “Part 2,” 177.

³³ Rouhier-Willoughby, *Village Values*, 151.

³⁴ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 75-76; Binns, “Part 2,” 177; Bette Chambers, “Eye Witness to a Soviet Wedding,” *Humanist* 47, no.1 (1987): 14.

fingers and kissed.³⁵ In another moment of civil significance, the officiant presented the couple with their marriage certificate, which represented state recognition of the new family, before ending with congratulatory advice for the couple. The ceremony generally took about thirty minutes, though some lasted only ten to fifteen.³⁶

One of the defining characteristics of secular Soviet weddings was the officiant's pronouncements throughout the ceremony about socialist responsibilities in marriage and family life. The Leningrad ceremony script, for example, defined the Soviet conception of marriage and delineated the rights and duties of both the couple and the state: "[T]he Soviet family is...the most important cell of our state. Soviet law protects the family and facilitates its strengthening. Having made the family union you do not only take on new civic rights but also new great civic obligations...Are you prepared to create a harmonious, strong family...and to provide a fitting education for your future children?"³⁷ The Soviet understanding of family life, then, inextricably linked marriage with raising children, tasking married couples with laying the foundation of a Communist society. The 1987 version of the Moscow ceremony expressed this principle most directly: "Build up a strong Soviet family. The stronger your family becomes, the stronger shall be our society."³⁸ The more politically-charged Ukrainian script situated Soviet views on family life in the context of the broader socialist struggle, addressing the bride and groom as "the daughter and son of your heroic people, its hope and future" whose family would serve "our socialist state, the immortality of the Soviet people and...your personal happiness."³⁹ Though the couple's personal feelings were acknowledged, ideological considerations outweighed them.

³⁵ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 77.

³⁶ Chambers, "Eyewitness," 15; Binns, "Part 2," 177; McDowell, "Soviet Civil Ceremonies," 275; Rouhier-Willoughby, *Village Values*, 157.

³⁷ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 76.

³⁸ Chambers, "Eyewitness," 15.

³⁹ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 78.

Considered innovative and complex, the Ukrainian rite incorporated other unique elements. The typical Ukrainian Wedding Palace featured an eternal flame at its entrance, and the wedding ceremony began with the lighting of a torch from this flame that was carried into the ritual hall.⁴⁰ While it was reminiscent of the strong presence of candles in Orthodox rites, the flame imbued the ceremony with a patriotism that the couple was expected to foster in their new life. As stated toward the end of the ceremony, “And all through your life carry the flame of love and devotion to our Motherland, the fire of the heroes’ hearts, defending its freedom and independence, [and] increase the glory of our great Soviet Motherland!”⁴¹ The Ukrainian rite also integrated traditional folk customs of the *ruzhnik*, an embroidered runner representing the couple’s newly united path, and costumed folk singers.⁴²

A range of administrative problems plagued secular weddings. In urban centers, complaints about rushed, impersonal ceremonies prevailed. Responding to reports of long lines and harried crowds, a Moscow Soviet deputy criticized the city’s Wedding Palace shortage and admitted that “[w]edding rituals frequently do resemble an assembly line,” with at least thirty ceremonies performed in each palace every day.⁴³ A Soviet architect blamed this “production line atmosphere” on the poor traffic flow of many Wedding Palace designs.⁴⁴ Less populated areas faced issues with the availability and quality of Soviet weddings. Even by the mid-1970s, the ceremonies were not offered in every part of the Soviet Union, and some were administered in abridged or group form.⁴⁵ Press discussions of the uneven dissemination of secular rituals

⁴⁰ Binns, “Part 2,” 177.

⁴¹ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 79.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴³ “Continuing with a Subject: Waiting Line for the Wedding,” *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 27, no. 42 (1976): 18, 19, from *Literaturnaya gazeta*, October 6, 1976.

⁴⁴ Limonad, “Ceremony Needs a Home,” 23.

⁴⁵ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 79.

typically ended with calls for more widespread adoption of successful organizational models, which provided little practical help for areas lacking resources or motivation.⁴⁶

Commemorations around death were the least developed of all the Soviet life-cycle rituals. Secular funerals for prominent officials had been held since the early Soviet era, but only began to be adapted for average citizens in the mid-1960s as ritual specialists determined how to acknowledge “unheroic” deaths.⁴⁷ As with other life-cycle ceremonies, Leningrad boasted the most robust secular burial rite. After a period of open-casket paying of respects at the deceased’s home, the typical ceremony began with a procession to the graveyard, sometimes accompanied by a performance of the Soviet anthem. The officiant, often a young man, then eulogized the deceased at the graveside, a funeral square, or a House of Mourning before allowing family, friends, and co-workers to make remarks.⁴⁸ In conclusion, the officiant declared, “A citizen of the USSR has completed his life’s journey. The motherland says farewell to its son. May fond memories of him remain eternally in your hearts.”⁴⁹ As the coffin was lowered, loved ones threw handfuls of dirt into the grave. In some urban areas, cremation with a small remembrance rite served as an alternative, though its practice was not widespread because of Orthodox prohibitions and the importance of the gravesite in Russian commemorative folk traditions.⁵⁰

In alignment with atheist values, Soviet funerals focused on the temporal world, rather than religious notions of death and the afterlife. As part their training in the late 1970s and early 1980s, funeral officiants were instructed to connect the deceased’s personal achievements to the work of the living.⁵¹ The central religious concept of “eternal life” was replaced with the idea

⁴⁶ Andrianov and Belov, “Problems of Social Life,” 19.

⁴⁷ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 82; Binns, “Part 2,” 180.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*; Rouhier-Willoughby, *Village Values*, 178, 188.

⁴⁹ Binns, “Part 2,” 180.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*; Rouhier-Willoughby, *Village Values*, 182.

⁵¹ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 82-83.

that the deceased remained alive in memory only if the living continued their work toward Communism: “Life continues, and everything that the deceased has managed to achieve will continue. His causes are alive in ours, his beginnings we shall complete, everything is left up to men.”⁵² Asserting that “everything remains with people,” the Soviet ritual specialist Ugrinovich wrote in 1975 that “a person’s true immortality is composed of his actions, of his actual legacy,” according to socialist atheism.⁵³ He also stressed the role of Soviet funerals in building socialist unity by allowing communal expressions of grief and support.⁵⁴ Though ritual specialists spoke of the need for secular funerals to “sen[d] [the deceased] off on their final journey,” scientific atheism included no assurances of a final destination.⁵⁵ While it offered guidelines for the living, Soviet ideology lacked answers to the existential questions surrounding mortality, and as a result, the Soviet funeral rite was the least developed of all the secular life-cycle ceremonies.⁵⁶

Though most of the secular life-cycle ceremonies could be found throughout the Soviet republics, their level of development depended on the available financial and creative resources, with Leningrad providing effective models for much of the Soviet Union. Secular life-cycle rituals stressed the participants’ new relationships – and new responsibilities – to the Soviet state. Even the Soviet funeral rite called upon the mourners to continue striving toward Communism. Though they included new secular elements, Soviet life-cycle rituals often borrowed at least the form of the religious rites they were intended to replace, and the degree of difference between the content of the secular rites and their religious counterparts became a factor in the “success” of the new Soviet ceremonies.

⁵² Ibid., 84.

⁵³ Rouhier-Willoughby, *Village Values*, 215.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 217.

⁵⁵ Andrianov and Belov, “Problems of Social Life,” 19.

⁵⁶ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 41; McDowell, “Social Civil Ceremonies,” 278.

Assessing the Success of Secular Life-Cycle Rituals

While a 1975 article declared it was “safe to conclude that the Soviet ritual has supplanted the religious ceremony,”⁵⁷ the evaluation of postwar Soviet life-cycle rituals requires the consideration of several elements. Even for rites that enjoyed relative overall popularity, levels of participation differed depending on a number of factors, including geographic location and level of traditional religious commitment. In spite of the inroads secular ceremonies made in Soviet life, the practice of religious rites continued to varying degrees, as did the incorporation of religious symbolism in the secular rituals. Moreover, these repurposed elements were not necessarily interpreted according to their new atheist meanings. The most decisive – and most challenging – measure of success for the Soviet life-cycle ritual system was its ability to promote socialist values as a force of its own, distinct from the anti-religious campaign.

While Soviet authorities tended to portray the new secular life-cycle rituals as widely successful, participation varied among regions, with regional differences closely linked to historical religious variations, and among the rites themselves. Within Russia, the new rites were most popular in urban areas, where the anti-religious campaign and pro-scientific atheism propaganda were stronger, and least popular in rural areas, where religious belief remained embedded.⁵⁸ The most widespread acceptance and performance of the secular life-cycle ceremonies were found first in Estonia and Latvia, where the established Lutheran Church exerted only a limited influence; then in Leningrad, where the Orthodox Church traditionally enjoyed less social authority; and in Ukraine, where, anomalously, religious belief also remained relatively strong. The rites were least accepted in areas where religion played a central role in

⁵⁷ Boyev and Ugrinovich, “Ceremonies in Soviet Society,” 20.

⁵⁸ McDowell, “Soviet Civil Ceremonies,” 277.

defining nationality, particularly in Catholic Lithuania and Muslim Central Asian republics.⁵⁹ Because the incorporated elements of the “pre-Soviet past” were restricted to Slavic Christian culture, implementing the new Soviet rituals in Central Asia involved the difficult task of introducing foreign cultural traditions. Moreover, much less concerted efforts were made within Central Asia to develop new secular rituals as alternatives to Muslim rites with specific references to Islamic culture.⁶⁰

Given the most developmental effort and resources, secular weddings became the most popular of the Soviet life-cycle ceremonies, with practice in both urban and rural areas. Many areas reported 70 to 95 percent participation in secular weddings, with the bulk of the remaining couples opting not for religious ceremonies, but for a simple registration at a records bureau.⁶¹ Estonia, where about 30 percent of weddings were held in churches when the secular ceremony was first introduced, reported only a 2.5 percent rate of religious weddings after ten years, culminating in a 92 percent drop in religious ceremonies by 1975.⁶² Even a village in the traditionally more religious western Ukrainian province of Volhynia reported that all weddings during the mid-1970s were performed through the Komsomol.⁶³ Keeping in mind the unreliability of Soviet official statistics, secular weddings were likely also more common than other ceremonies because they were the only option for couples to gain state validation of their marriages. With the establishment of civil marriage in 1917, church ceremonies lost all legal recognition, and only marriages registered with the state were considered legitimate.

⁵⁹ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 242.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 232-233.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁶² Boyev and Ugrinovich, “Ceremonies in Soviet Society,” 12.

⁶³ Yu. Yelchenko, “Soviet Rituals: From Experience in Ideological Work,” *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 27, no. 42 (1976): 18, from *Kommunist*, September 1976.

Additionally, widespread church closures during Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign made a Wedding Palace ceremony the only opportunity for a "formal, public celebration" of marriage.⁶⁴

Though it was practiced by a significant minority, the birth ritual was not widely performed, with the strongest acceptance found in the western Soviet Union, excluding Lithuania.⁶⁵ By 1981, Ukrainian urban centers, the Russian Krasnodar region, traditionally Lutheran areas of the Baltics, and parts of Moldova saw 80 to 90 percent participation levels in secular birth ceremonies while the rate of Leningrad newborns registered in the city's Palace of the Newly-Born approached 60 percent.⁶⁶ Areas with high participation had corresponding sharp declines in baptisms and christenings: in Estonia, for example, about one in ten babies were christened in 1968 compared to slightly more than half a decade earlier.⁶⁷ Because of its extremely limited adoption, Soviet studies often ignored the performance of the secular funeral ceremony.⁶⁸ Very few cities offered a well-developed Soviet funeral rite, which was completely lacking in strongly religious areas like Central Asia. As the notable exception, the Estonian capital of Tallinn reported performing secular funerals for 74 percent of its deceased in 1970.⁶⁹

While Soviet discussions of new ritual success invariably included statistics about decreased participation in religious rites, the practice of religious ceremonies survived even amid more aggressive promotion of secular life-cycle rituals. Evidence collected by outside researchers suggests that a non-trivial minority of Soviet citizens participated in both religious and secular life-cycle rituals or incorporated overtly religious elements into their personal

⁶⁴ Rouhier-Willoughby, *Village Values*, 59, 9.

⁶⁵ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 68.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 246.

⁶⁷ Boyev and Ugrinovich, "Ceremonies in Soviet Society," 20.

⁶⁸ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 246. For example, Boyev and Ugrinovich make no mention of secular funerals in their *Nauka i religia* discussion of the success of other new rituals.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 86, 246.

celebrations, such as the blessing of a wedding with icons.⁷⁰ The power of tradition compelled some Soviets who otherwise lacked strong religious ties to take part in religious rites. A 1978 Soviet study described “religious hedgers” as “actually unbelievers, who in essence practice only two sacraments, those of christening and burial” because of the traditional associations of these rituals with eternal salvation.⁷¹ The continued observance of religious life-cycle rituals could also be attributed to a sense of family duty: in traditionally religious families, in particular, “failure to follow church rituals is perceived as disrespect for elders and violation of the kinship connection and traditions of the preceding generations.”⁷² Soviet studies tended to interpret such survivals of religious rituals not as indications of the failure of the overall atheist mission, but as signs that secular rituals needed to be made more appealing.⁷³

Concerning specific religious rituals, baptisms and christenings remained popular across much of the Soviet Union. Some religious believers baptized their children secretly in out-of-town churches to prevent acquaintances from discovering their religious loyalties. One such mother reported travelling to Moscow for her child’s baptism, showing that religious practices survived even in secular major cities.⁷⁴ Religious weddings were most prevalent in Catholic Lithuania, where half of urban couples and almost all rural couples opted for church ceremonies, and Muslim Central Asia.⁷⁵ In both regions, couples who participated in secular Soviet weddings commonly followed them with religious rites.⁷⁶ Overall, though, funerals remained the most

⁷⁰ Ibid., 250.

⁷¹ V.D. Kobetskii, “Study of the Processes of Overcoming Religiosity and of the Dissemination of Atheism [Part 3],” *Soviet Sociology* 30, no. 2 (1980): 85, from *Sotissologicheskoe izuchenie religioznosti i ateizma* (1978).

⁷² N.S. Vasil’evskaia, “A Preliminary Concrete Sociological Study of Attitude Toward Religion in the Contemporary Urban Family,” *Soviet Sociology* 8, no. 3 (1974-1975): 75, from *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma* (1972).

⁷³ V.D. Kobetskii, “Study of the Processes of Overcoming Religiosity and of the Dissemination of Atheism [Part 2],” *Soviet Sociology* 29, no. 1 (1980): 59, from *Sotissologicheskoe izuchenie religioznosti i ateizma* (1978).

⁷⁴ Rouhier-Willoughby, *Village Values*, 89.

⁷⁵ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 80, 82.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 80; Binns, “Part 2,” 177.

common.⁷⁷ Though this was partially because the deceased tended to be older and more religious, Soviets continued to turn to religion for consolation and answers about death. As one woman explained, “In Soviet times if people went to church, it was associated precisely with funerals.”⁷⁸

Even where participation in Soviet life-cycle rituals far exceeded the performance of religious rites, elements of religious traditions remained in the new secular ceremonies. Though a 1963 article about “overcoming” religion mentioned candles as a “superstitious” element in religious rituals, candles were incorporated in some versions of Soviet birth and burial ceremonies.⁷⁹ While the secular birth rituals referenced candles as symbols of the joyful entry of new life, the secular funeral rite offered no newly defined significance. Lane argues that by using the candles merely to lend a somber atmosphere and not imbuing them with new meaning, ritual specialists allowed participants to hold onto religious associations with candles.⁸⁰ The “honorary parents” of the birth registration so mirrored the function of godparents in Christian birth rites that some secular ceremonies referred to them using the religious term. Though the secular godparents’ duty to guide the child’s upbringing came from society, not a religious authority, the framing of their responsibilities was markedly similar.⁸¹ The exchange of wedding rings also survived into the secular ceremony virtually unchanged, with the Ukrainian rite calling the rings “a symbol of marital faithfulness and of the indestructibility of marriage ties,” a conspicuously religious assertion for a state with the institution of civil divorce to make.⁸²

While theoretically rejecting the most content from its religious predecessor, the secular funeral retained the most religious customs of the Soviet life-cycle ceremonies. While the body

⁷⁷ Binns, “Part 2,” 180.

⁷⁸ Rouhier-Willoughby, *Village Values*, 218.

⁷⁹ Krianev and Popov, “Emotional Effect,” 55.

⁸⁰ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 198.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 78.

remained at home, family members routinely held a vigil, often including the recitation of prayers by an older woman and the lighting of candles, as Orthodox tradition dictated. Borrowing from the Orthodox phraseology, ritual specialists attempted to redefine the idea of “eternal memory” in secular funerals to refer not to an immortal soul, but to the lasting example the deceased provided to Soviet society in his or her pursuit of Communism. Interviews indicate, however, that participants in Soviet-era funerals did not interpret the reference to “eternal memory” in these secular terms. After initially discouraging the practice because of its presence in religious funerals, ritual specialists reinterpreted the throwing of dirt on the lowered coffin as a simple farewell gesture, rather than an allusion to the body’s return to the earth as the soul travelled to heaven.⁸³ While authorities expressed little concern about including pre-Soviet, often religious traditions “in a redefined form” in Soviet ceremonies, the actual development and practice of secular rites often placed little priority on fully reinterpreting symbols adopted from religious rituals.⁸⁴

Soviet authorities did not see secular life-cycle rituals solely as a means of eliminating religion, however. As the continued observance of religious rites showed, the Soviet ceremonies were not powerful enough by themselves to instill scientific atheism; as McDowell argues, the success of the life-cycle rituals remained dependent on other atheist propaganda efforts.⁸⁵ Rather, the state ultimately intended for the secular ritual system to stand on its own, promoting uniquely Soviet socialist values. From the beginning of the postwar debate, arguments in favor of new Soviet rituals highlighted their role in “the socialist way of life of the working people of town and countryside.”⁸⁶ By the mid-1970s, ritual specialists conceptualized secular ceremonies as

⁸³ Rouhier-Willoughby, *Village Values*, 177, 178, 187, 193

⁸⁴ Boyev and Ugrinovich, “Ceremonies in Soviet Society,” 20; Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 235.

⁸⁵ McDowell, “Soviet Civil Ceremonies,” 278.

⁸⁶ Kryvelev, “Important Side,” 10.

“reflect[ing] the Soviet way of life...and the standards of Communist morality” as well as “promot[ing] the more rapid and profound assimilation of political or social ideas...in the communist upbringing of workers.”⁸⁷ In particular, ideal Soviet rituals were to “develop a unity of purpose,” instilling stronger connections to the collective and commitment to its betterment.⁸⁸

To a significant extent, the Soviet life-cycle rituals incorporated effective references to these socialist ideals. Delineating the relationship between the family and the state, the ceremonial birth registration officially welcomed the new Soviet citizen into the collective and fully integrated the parents into the pursuit of Communism through family life. The wedding ceremony, which uniformly promoted the family as the building block of socialism, took on even stronger patriotic and ideological tones in versions, such as the Ukrainian, that included the eternal flame. When the flame was referred to as a symbol of “those who gave their life...for the communist ideals,” the wedding day became not just about recognizing the couple, but about linking them to the great Soviet past, present, and future.⁸⁹ Though even ritual specialists acknowledged them as largely unsuccessful, Soviet funerals theoretically emphasized the finality of death and promoted the work of the collective.

The definitive obstacle to the success of Soviet rituals, though, was a pronounced disconnect between the ideological intent of life-cycle ceremonies and the individual motivations for participation. Rather than primarily serving the ideological functions articulated in their scripts, the ceremonies allowed Soviet citizens to satisfy their desires to commemorate significant life events. As indicated by the few Soviet surveys on the new rites, participants saw them mainly as opportunities for festive celebrations or societal recognition: “[W]hat people like about these events are meeting friends, being the object of attention and concern, festivity, color,

⁸⁷ Yelchenko, “Soviet Rituals,” 18; Boyev and Ugrinovich, “Ceremonies in Soviet Society,” 12.

⁸⁸ Yelchenko, “Soviet Rituals,” 17.

⁸⁹ Lane, *Rites of Rulers*, 77.

and variety. Ideological content – Marxist-Leninist ideals, patriotism, etc. – [...] appears to be virtually ignored.”⁹⁰ Participation in the secular rites did not imply an embrace of ideology so much as a toleration of it as part of the available life-cycle rituals. Savoring the personal recognition and relatively lavish ceremonial setting, newlyweds likely enjoyed the celebratory aspects of their wedding day more than they considered the ideology of the secular wedding rite.⁹¹ They may even have viewed the secular ceremony as a “pro forma obligation” before the true festivities began with family and friends.⁹² Even in the absence of detailed participant surveys, the increase in divorces and decrease in births as the Soviet period progressed suggests that secular birth and wedding ceremonies could not alone instill Soviet family values.⁹³ As Rouhier-Willoughby explains, it was not necessarily, or even commonly, true that the “messages [ritual specialists] sent would be received intact.”⁹⁴ While Soviet leaders saw rituals as tools to establish socialist values, they could not control how participants interpreted the rites.

The performance of Soviet life-cycle ceremonies in the postwar period was uneven at best. From a strict statistical standpoint, only weddings enjoyed enough popularity to make them viable replacements for religious observances. All the rites faced problems, however, and none completely eliminated the practice of religious ceremonies to mark major life transitions, even in predominantly secular areas with well-developed Soviet rituals. Though secular life-cycle rites readily absorbed state-approved ideological messages on paper, they possessed only a limited ability to convey Soviet values and, therefore, failed to function as strong ideological tools. By all indications, Soviet citizens participated in secular ceremonies to the extent they derived

⁹⁰ Binns, “Part 2,” 183.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 179.

⁹² Rouhier-Willoughby, *Village Values*, 158.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 175.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 123.

benefit from them, whether in terms of legal recognition or celebratory expression, but they did not become more ideologically committed to the Soviet cause through the experience.

Conclusion

The Soviet experiment with secular life-cycle rituals produced decidedly mixed results. Soviet ritual specialists found themselves caught between radically changing the form of life-cycle ceremonies – as attempted in the 1920s – and maintaining enough familiar aspects to ensure participation. Trends in the postwar period erred toward the latter, with often unrealized attempts to fully redefine the religiously inspired components. Though the state encouraged the incorporation of national elements as means of encouraging more traditional – or “backward” – regions to adopt secular rituals, such integration was only well-developed where enthusiasm about the new rituals already existed, including Latvia and Ukraine. In some respects, the Soviet ritual campaign created popular institutions, as evidenced by the crowds seeking ceremonies at Wedding Palaces. It becomes more difficult to gauge how participants responded to the rituals’ ideological messages, however, because of the lack of evidence. Soviet-era surveys and post-Soviet era interviews indicate, though, that the ideological content of the rituals was largely ignored, or at least not internalized. While some Soviet life-cycle ceremonies made inroads in reducing religious observances and, therefore, were somewhat effective tools in the anti-religious campaign, they do not appear to have increased adherence to Soviet socialist values on their own. Further investigation of postwar propaganda tactics would give greater insight into the comparative performance of secular life-cycle rituals in the late-Soviet ideological campaign.

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