

# Petrified Utopia



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## Happiness Soviet Style

Edited by

MARINA BALINA  
EVGENY DOBRENKO



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# INTRODUCTION

Marina Balina and Evgeny Dobrenko

In his new book *Happiness: A History*, Darrin McMahon refers to the observation made by Hegel: ‘One may contemplate history from the point of view of happiness, but history is not the soil in which happiness grows. The periods of happiness in it are the blank pages of history.’ But what are the ‘periods of happiness’ in history, and were there, in fact, such periods in history (even if we allow them to be ‘blank pages’)? Obviously, the yearning for happiness is one of mankind’s fundamental needs, and its fulfilment is the basis for a person’s creative activity, filling the sphere of his/her imagination. The yearning for happiness is a quite individual need, and this is why drama arises from the historical impossibility of harmonising individual happiness with the overall social project. Without doubt, the Soviet era attempted to achieve just this harmony. It was, however, an era of shortages everywhere. The only thing that it provided in abundance was the historical cataclysms that followed hard upon each other, any one of which might well comprise an entire era in the history of a nation. The Russian revolution was an attempt to fast-forward history. Today, what it produced—the Soviet era—has itself become history.

Marxism, which the Russian revolutionaries invoked, was least of all concerned with the private (or bourgeois) ideal of happiness. It operated with the masses and the classes, and was concerned with the problems of equality and social justice. The individual, and his/her yearning for happiness, were present in it only in an indirect way. Only in the general class struggle was the attainment of the ‘centuries-old dream of mankind’ possible.

The pursuit of collective happiness is traditionally considered a utopian ideal that structured multiple aspects of Soviet culture, a fact recognised not only by literati, but also by numerous scholars in varied disciplines ranging from cultural and literary studies to sociology, history, anthropology and political science. Several groundbreaking studies in the literary and cultural

history of the former Soviet Union have changed our understanding of the Soviet past. However, none of these studies has paid enough attention to an important theme in the cultural history of Soviet society—the pursuit of happiness. Although specialists in Soviet culture repeatedly invoke various manifestations of happiness in works of literature and film in their research, it has yet to be investigated as an independent subject.

Social Utopia is always aimed towards the pursuit of happiness; but contrary to individualistic bourgeois ideals, socialist Utopia (much like a nationalist or religious Utopia) is rooted in the impossibility of achieving individual happiness without first embracing collective happiness. As such, socialist Utopia is built upon the fundamental assertion that individual salvation is not possible without collective salvation, a concept that in Russia had a long history tied in with Orthodoxy, and which left a profound stamp on the Russian national consciousness. From a social and cultural point of view, the most interesting aspect of this dynamic is the tension between committing oneself to the collective ideal and the natural human desire to pursue individual happiness. In the process of adaptation to collective values, individual aspirations must be adjusted accordingly, not the least of which are the changes to the formation of self-identity. Given this context, the problem of happiness extends beyond our understanding of the historical Soviet or East European experience, and thus demands a greater perspective regarding our perception of the ways in which the individual and collective understanding of happiness play out, as well as the exploration of the means of achieving happiness within this polemic. Of particular importance is the study of how the personal and intimate are subordinated to social conventions, and how this process transforms personal ideals, such as moral or material values, among others.

The aim of this book is to investigate the various social and artistic practices through which the idea of happiness in Soviet culture is manifested and to analyse the formative influences of this key notion on social sensitivities, identity, and society's sense of meanings and values. Our objective is to introduce the reader to the most representative ideas of happiness and the common practices of its pursuit that shaped everyday Soviet life and cultural discourse from the early postrevolutionary years to the later period of Stalinist and late Soviet culture. This volume examines different manifestations of happiness in literature and visual culture—from children's literature to official high literary canon, from architecture to popular film, from cookbooks to textiles, and from the culture of consumerism to the paradise of goods depicted in Soviet posters and paintings. This book will redefine the preconceived notion of Soviet happiness as a product of official ideology imposed from above and expressed

predominantly through collective experience. The articles in this collection will provide evidence that the formation of the concept of individual happiness was not contained by the limitations of the important state projects that were controlled by state policies and aimed towards the creation of a new society. The state-sanctioned blueprint for happiness in socialist society was provided for its citizens in various forms of media, but a closer reading of these artifacts reveals the 'slippage' between the public and private spheres of the Soviet experience.

The very concept of happiness is an integral part of the individual human code, but by virtue of its social significance, it could not be ignored by the socialist state, which strove to swallow up any enclaves of autonomy. The concept of happiness is not a phenomenon that is defined simply. It is a product of societal and individual aspirations and values, which in turn are a product of the interaction between societal and individual experience and which thus constantly change in tandem with these experiences. One could say that happiness is the product of personal, public, and ideological design. Any Utopia (which is implicit in the very etymology of this word) has something to do with a nonexistent *topos*. In other words, the two sides of a Utopia are the modal and the spatial. As a social *Utopia*, happiness has for its reverse side the *reality* of living societal and personal experience, which at the same time is also the experience of consuming the ideological constructs of happiness. The other key aspect of the Utopia is the problem of *topoi*. This book is constructed in accordance with these interconnected basic aspects of our subject.

The utopian aspect of happiness under Soviet conditions is most of all linked to the social modelling of consciousness. In the foreground of this are the strategies for inculcating the notions about happiness constructed by authority into the individual consciousness of the people. The criteria for collective happiness, just as the criteria for personal success and the prerequisites for social mobility, are subjected to continual transformation and correctives in accordance with the changing directives of the state. Soviet society itself was in a process of constant dynamics that was unprecedented in Russian history. But no matter what the differing social situations that took shape in Soviet society were (as the result of emigrations of the cultural elites, civil war, collectivisation, forced industrialisation, the Great Terror, devastating war and de-Stalinisation), the authorities were not only obliged to 'include' private aspirations (which changed in tandem with the social structure of Soviet society itself) in the model of collective happiness, but also to fit them into a constantly redrawn ideological frame. What 'happiness' officially meant and what it meant at the level of personal aspirations never coincided; what is more, this disparity was different in 1917, 1937, 1956 and 1987.

The prototype of the Soviet Utopia was childhood, which was projected onto both the sphere of personal life and the realm of national history. As Catriona Kelly demonstrates, the ‘happy Soviet childhood’, since it was the product not only of social policy and the activities of the new political and ideological institutions, but also of ideological manipulation (for example, through the creation of a steadfast aversion to the image of prerevolutionary childhood), by the 1930s began to be perceived as the most visible indicator of the success of the new government in materialising its concern for its small citizens, and as proof of the inalienable right of Soviet children to a happy life; thus, it was consolidated in the masses’ consciousness. Adducing numerous interviews, Kelly demonstrates the striking stability of this utopian construct even in the post-Soviet period, which manifested itself in a consistent unwillingness to reject the image of collective Utopia shaped in the Soviet person and led to a negative perception of post-Soviet reality.

Indeed, the task of removing the negative turned the process of presenting reality into a key political problem for Soviet culture. The revolutionary discourse of Utopia had run its course by the late 1920s. The Stalin era was a time of already-triumphant Utopia, and the orientation towards the future of revolutionary era was replaced by the apologetics of already-present happiness—‘Socialism in One Country’. The Stalinist revolution that occurred in 1929 was tied to forced collectivisation, which, in peasant Russia, became a true civil war. This is what makes the strategies through which the ‘domestication’ of *kolkhozes* (a form of collective farming in the Soviet Union) took place in Stalinism all the more interesting. This transformation reached its apogee in the genre of the ‘kolkhoz epic poem’, which flourished in the postwar decade. As Evgeny Dobrenko demonstrates, the kolkhoz epic became the consummate embodiment of happiness achieved because it found a unique stylistic formalisation for the world simulated in it.

Another quite significant aspect is the visual demonstration of materialised communist ‘abundance’. As Helena Goscilo shows, when the ascetic ideology of the earliest days of the Soviet republic was replaced by the Stalinist promise of a ‘cultured, prosperous life’, the mythical amenities of the Soviet Utopia began to take on a material dimension. In anticipation of a consumers’ paradise, Soviet citizens were obliged to learn the ‘culture of consumption’. This new problem was primarily solved with the aid of advertising and representational art.

However, being constantly ‘nourished’ in a visual way, Soviet utopian consciousness had to be brought back down to reality. One of the most famous examples of this was the publication, in the late 1930s, of the *Book About Tasty and Healthy Food* (*Kniga o Vkusnoi i Zdorovoi Pishche*). In his analysis of this book, perhaps one of the most popular books ever issued by

Soviet publishers, Gian Piero Piretto examines the process of adaptively applying the collective Utopia to the family: the consumers' Utopia 'In One Family' became a projection of 'Socialism in One Country'. The utopian impulse assumes the form of culinary recipes in a country experiencing complete shortages, as if confirming the 'reality' of the collective dream of abundance and happiness for all. In his scrutiny of the Stalin-era editions of this book, Piretto examines the strategies for propagandising the new Soviet 'culturedness' as a most significant component of the Soviet conception of 'happiness' (beginning with the numerous colourful illustrations and ending with the likewise numerous and detailed demands for proper table service and rules for 'cultured' behaviour at the table). This book not only described an already-realised abundance but also transformed it into an almost tangible (and even edible!) product, thereby instilling confidence about the attainability of the promised dream: one need only follow the established rules and the happiness of the 'full cup' table would become possible, neutralising the absence in Soviet stores of the majority of the ingredients needed to make this or that dish, the absence of anything like suitable conditions for preparing them in communal kitchens and the impossibility of finding the utensils and accommodations needed for 'table service'.

The dissonance between the ideological construct of Soviet happiness—the 'horizon of expectations' offered by the government—and the practical embodiment of the Soviet Utopia led to the appearance of an extraordinarily protean model of reality, wherein the boundaries of the ideal itself constructed by power were constantly 'eroded' under the influence of everyday Soviet life.

The new state collided with the already-formed 'human material' that it was faced with remaking after the patterns of new social and aesthetic norms. It seemed that this problem could be most easily solved in the children's collective, where the 'relics of the past' had not yet firmly enough taken root. The cataclysms of the first decade of Soviet history (revolution, civil war, hunger, large-scale migration of the rural population in the early 1920s, as well as the 'de-kulak-ing' and destruction of the countryside) turned millions of children in Russia into homeless orphans. Children's homes and colonies for underage offenders were transformed into breeding grounds for Soviet anthropological experimentation. On the basis of 1920s and 1930s children's literature, Marina Balina demonstrates how the notion of happiness was transformed in the children's collective, where the greatest pains were taken to squeeze the idea of family—this traditionally necessary element of a child's happiness—out of the children's consciousness. Despite the great demand for texts in which the privacy of family happiness is supplanted by the collective Utopia of depersonalised collective happiness, the stories about the reformed vagrants usually conclude in a complete 'family-like' vein: the authors either

allow their heroes to find their lost parents or else offer them new ties that reproduce family relationships—older mentors that replace fathers and mothers, close friends who become almost siblings, and love affairs. In all of this, the collective is deliberately reduced to the dimensions of a manageable, but nevertheless happy, small union.

The privatisation of happiness extends to various spheres of everyday practices. With the 1930s arrival of the Stalinist ‘culture of abundance’, the very concept of the lifestyle of Soviet people changed as well. The long-standing debate about beauty versus utility that had coursed through classic Russian literature came to an end in the Stalinist era—as did everything else—with the triumph of harmony: synthesis of the useful and the beautiful. Soviet happiness not only had to be tasty and beautifully served, but also pleasant to the touch. As Emma Widdis demonstrates in the case of the culture of texture and textile, the idea of prettification of one’s living space, which, in the ascetic revolutionary culture, had been considered petty bourgeois, became newly legitimate and thus part of the vocabulary of the Soviet media. Thus, in Soviet women’s journals, practical advice about how to best ‘dress up’ one’s space and oneself became widely touted, and room was made for sewing patterns, as well as samples of embroidery and appliqués. Needlework, an activity that combines texture and touch, became an important instrument for concretising the aesthetic aspirations of the new way of life. The powers that be embarked on an attempt to shape sensory experience and to mastermind the creation of a new sensuous world for the Soviet people. At the same time, all these homemade (or rather, home-altered, given the constant shortages) items bore the stamp of individual taste, although it was a taste harmonised in accordance with the new Soviet aesthetic code.

The culmination of private happiness in the 1950s was the move from overcrowded postwar *kommunalki* into the separate apartments that Nikita Khrushchev began to bestow on his fellow citizens. An apartment for a single family was an extremely personal space, although the setting was limited by the authorities: there was no right to choose the neighbourhood, and there were strict limits on the metric area allotted to each member of the family. And no matter how ironically these apartments are remembered today—with their tiny bathrooms, diminutive hallways, narrow kitchens into which one could barely squeeze a table and chairs, and incredible ‘sound proofing’ that made the voices of neighbours in the enclosed stairways penetrate the thin walls even more—they were nonetheless a step towards private happiness, and the collective remained outside, more and more displaced into the arena of annoying ‘idle newspaper talk’. The authorities had long instructed Soviet citizens in a ‘culture of consumption’ that was merely theoretical, due to the absence of goods; at last, these citizens got an opportunity to put