Having Fun in the Thaw: Youth Initiative Clubs in the Post-Stalin Years

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Abstract

This essay explores a novel cultural institution of the Thaw, youth initiative clubs. Created in 1956, these clubs offered young people an opportunity to take a leading role in organizing and managing cultural activities at the grassroots level. These new organizations emblematized what the author argues represented a major shift by the Thaw-era authorities to inspiring youth initiative from below as a means of forging a post-Stalinist model of young citizens characterized by enthusiasm and autonomy and thus seen as capable of taking charge over building communism. At the same time, the Soviet leadership intended youth initiative clubs to increase social control by getting young people into official cultural collectives. A close investigation of the youth initiative club movement reveals that these diverse goals bred some tensions at the ground level. Young club activists, empowered by top-level calls for popular initiative, struggled to overcome the opposition of certain entrenched bureaucrats who refused to discard the Stalinist emphasis on obedience and discipline. In other cases, club members pursued activities that departed from the intentions of the Kremlin itself. Nonetheless, the essay finds that many young people found friends, emotional support, a source of meaning, and a great deal of fun within youth initiative clubs. The author therefore shows that official Soviet collectives were not invariably repressive institutions that minimized individual autonomy, but could instead provide significant opportunities for popular agency, grassroots organization, and pleasurable entertainment, illustrating concordances between the Soviet population and the government.

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depicted as a time of cultural militancy, when official policy denied the population's desires for truly enjoyable cultural fun. Newspapers carried stories condemning clubs for focusing on dances and movies, instead demanding more politicized activities. Komsomol leaders, such as Komsomol first secretary N. A. Mikhailov, called for "vigilantly defending youth from pernicious foreign influences."