

Social engineering of Soviet leisure time: on the basis of the oral history

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Abstract. Despite a considerable interest in the Ukrainian humanities to the Soviet period and to the study of everyday life in that epoch, there does not exist any work so far, in which the issue of leisure time of Soviet people is researched. At the turn of the 1950-1960-ies of the XXth century, the notion of leisure time or free time obtains an official recognition. The idea of Soviet citizens as having their own time resource, a little remainder of time which is not spent on socially useful work, or on everyday activities or transport, gets an official recognition. The idea of free time is demonstrated through certain official policies, supported by official documents. In the given article, the author will point out to a system of actions of Soviet social engineering involving the leisure time of Soviet people. On the basis of oral historical narratives of former school teachers, the author will analyze the leisure time of teachers in the second part of the XX-th century in the villages of Halychyna. We shall mostly deal with the so-called “serious” spending of leisure time such as reading books, Soviet newspapers, visiting village clubs, and so on. At the same time, leisure-time of village teachers, which was, as contrasted to that of city teachers, much more “modest” in its choice, less active and of a much shorter duration, will take form. On the whole, the sphere of leisure time in the Soviet era was transformed into an object of cultural policies and a matter of control on the part of the state and the party authority organs.

Keywords: Soviet leisure time; village teachers; oral history narrative; Western Ukraine; Soviet Ukraine.

1. Introduction

One¹ of the priority trends in modern Ukrainian humanities is the study of Soviet everyday life. For instance, the monography series of the Institute of History of Ukraine, National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, under the name of *To the History of Everyday Life in Ukraine*, initiated in 2010, already counts 10 books².

The monographies of the series *Structures of everyday life*, founded in Kharkiv in 2008, by Olha Lalastruk, Roman Liubavskyy and Iryna Skubij, treat issues of space and time characteristics of everyday life of early Soviet period [Koliastruk 2016; Skubij 2017; Liubavs'kyj 2016].

Attention to the Soviet period is not accidental, but rather, a well-grounded and logical process of re-thinking of the history of the whole 20-ieth century in Eastern Europe. These are those “bloodlands”, which Ukraine was part of, as well [Snyder 2018].

Herein, I make an analysis of the practice of leisure time in the broad context of free time. It (free time) was one of important constituents of Soviet social engineering in the structure of the society’s everyday life. All the free time of teachers, their rest-time presented a certain range of possibilities, practices proposed and considered as solely correct for the Soviet Man.

Free time is a historical category which is the opposite of the time assigned for making one’s living. Free time is an interdisciplinary and a common notion with different definitions. The definition I chose and which expresses most profoundly, in our view, the given notion, is that of the French sociologist Joffre Dumazediera. He wrote that free time is all the activities which a person is engaged in or devoted to of one’s own free will and with different purposes: for entertainment, for acquiring new knowledge, new information, for self-education, and for voluntary participation in social life, besides professional, family and social duties. The notion has a quantity and quality dualism. The aspect of quantity can be measured and is the basis of analysis of the time budget. Personally, I am interested in the quality constituent of free pastime, which represents the quality of life or, as the sociologist wrote, a style of behavior [Dumazedier 1967]. Modern Italian researchers bring in a new vision to the study of leisure. Free time is the time earned over work and represents the space of escape and entertainment that mankind practice by placing themselves in a mass culture. It is, in the retrospective, a historically and culturally situated conception, which does not correspond to the way

¹ The article is based on a research grant from CIUS at the University of Alberta, Memorial Fund named after Mykhajla, Volodymyra and Oli Hal'chuk.

² URL: http://resource.history.org.ua/cgi-bin/eiu/history.exe?&I21DBN=EJRN&P21DBN=EJRN&S21STN=1&S21REF=10&S21FMT=JUJ_all&C21COM=S&S21CNR=20&S21P01=0&S21P02=0&S21P03=I=&S21COLORTERMS=0&S21STR=jittia

in which many societies conceive time and live in it. What is observed today, in particular, is the emergence of a new concept of «busy leisure», a context of social practices that associate with the principles of leisure and self-realization, the values of collective life sublimated in the social solidarity. Transformation of the value and experience of free time can be interpreted as a consequence of the condition of material deprivation which isolation and social inequality produce, as result of job changes, increasingly flexible, precarious or part-time increasingly characterized by short-term and rarely oriented social relationships to building stable bonds. In such a context, where collaboration is disqualified both in terms of production activities and in terms of social networks, the need to collaborate becomes more necessary [Lusini, Meloni, Zanotelli 2019].

The aim of the given article is to present and analyze common leisure practices of Soviet teachers in Western Ukraine, all the while taking into consideration the main driving force which consisted in the worked-out system of actions of Soviet social engineering with its “appropriation” mechanisms of a person’s time. The latter developed within the current of Soviet project of modernization. Concurrently, I sought answers to questions which often rose during the analysis of oral historical narratives, namely: Did the teachers organize their leisure time themselves or did they become subjects of choice of proposed ways of spare time spending?

The first group of sources for writing an article was composed of oral historical narratives. I recorded oral stories told by women working as teachers in the Soviet time at village schools of Western Ukraine. Therefore, in the article, attention will be paid to the leisure time of a Soviet woman. The second group of sources was made up of both published and unpublished official Soviet documents about cultural life in Western lands of Ukraine. I have studied orders, circulars, instructions from the fund of Department of People’s Education. These documents are kept in the State archive of Lviv region (DALO) and the State Archive of Ivano-Frankivsk region (DAIFO). The Soviet documents will help to elucidate the system of social engineering in the sphere of leisure time of Soviet teachers.

2. The stories told by Soviet teachers

In my work with oral historical narratives I adhere to the principles laid out by the Ukrainian scholar Helinada Hrinchenko [Hrinchenko 2012]. Chiefly, it consists in avoidance of imposing authority roles between the researcher and the narrators with the view to minimize the influence on constructing the text of oral stories. It includes negation of the researcher oneself as an “objective” observer and an “all-knowing” interpreter of narrators’ stories. When working over oral stories, I gave a predominance to story-narrators,

so that their judgements, their considerations, interpretations, commentaries could be maximally “heard”. On the other hand, I make it a prerogative to introduce us in the context of historical events, as well as to make analysis of the life-story of a person combined with the analysis of narration about the life-story. I do not not intend to draw attention to interestingly told stories or to provide arguments, on their grounds, for some conclusions or a point of view. I just aim at “hearing their voices” most exactly. These are half-structured oral historical narratives, in which the narrators told about their daily life, about the peculiarities of the teacher’s professions and the Soviet time, on the whole. In the given article, I quote several fragments of different stories. The narrators told, therein, about their rest time, about spending their free time and their personal interests.

The first fragment of the story reads as follows:

The cinema mechanic lived in Skoly, but he came from Kamianka. We loved Indian films most of all, the whole village would come to them. I went there, too. I liked Indian films. As for reading, I read a lot of books, I am reading them now, as well. I liked the book *The Last Sabre* and I liked such about spies, oh, such books I liked! But, I do not remember much. I used to borrow them from the library and I had many books at home. I read now, as well³.

A second fragment of another teacher’s story:

In this picture, all of us, the teachers at their leisure time, went to the lake, caught fish, cooked fish soup, and this is how we spent our rest-time. And here, we are with our children near that same lake, a hut used to stand there, and here, our children are resting near the lake, and here are the teachers alone. At the week-end we used to take a boat put onto a cart and go to the lake. In this picture, here, we are at the lake [the narrator shows a photo from her home archive – O.H.] And here, we are with our children on a hiking tour, it was the year ’65 or ’64. We found the graves of perished soldiers in the war. [the narrator shows a photo from her home archive – O.H.]⁴.

And here below is the last example:

You know what kind of life it is in the village, you come home, I had a family, first, you wait for the children to come back from school, then, the children drive the cows to the field, and I make ready and go with my husband to the field, to the hay. In the winter, there was nowhere to go. Only to the club, to the cinema, there was the cinema at that time. We used to be taken to the cinema. So, we watched a film, or some dancing was organized in the club. Mostly, it was the school which organized such concerts. I taught singing there, so I was an organizer of all that, of such concerts. However, I felt enthusiastic about it,

³ An interview with Ms. Kateryna Kh., a teacher, a pensioner; b. 1936, recorded on July 5, 2015 in the village of Kamiatka, Skoly district, Lviv region. Oksana Hodovanska’s a.personal archive.

⁴ An interview with Ms. Maria K., a teacher, a pensioner, 1944, recorded March 16, 2017 in the village of Borshchovychi, Pustomyty district, Lviv region. Oksana Hodovanska’s a.personal archive.

I was interested in all that. I am not a professional musician, just self-taught. I used to prepare all the concerts, we gave them in the club for every state Day, now it does not exist anymore. Pupils participated in them, and our director, he is working now in the district administration, he was an organizer of a drama society. We staged tremendous performances. We would go with performances to the neighboring villages. I would spend days and nights in this school. For I was always busy. I used to go for rehearsals on Sunday, for the children would shepherd the cows, there was no time. And I taught them myself in this way. My husband bought me a radio, I bought all kinds of song records, and I would sit in the evening and listen to them. I liked listening to them very much. I read newspapers, we had to sign up in the compulsory order, my husband had to⁵.

My first generalizations about the practices of leisure time of women-teachers are based on their remembrances. In the oral historical narratives, they are presented by fragments-descriptions about watching emotionally loaded films, reading books and newspapers, listening to the radio and musical programs, participation in amateur drama performances in the village clubs. And also, spending their leisure-time at the lake or the river bank during sightseeing tours or landscape seeing tours, as well as at summer pioneer camps. Most often, such leisure-time was of short duration and was practiced together with the family, with fellow teachers, friends, or together with their pupils. Also, the most popular places for resting were the outskirts of villages and towns. Sight-seeing and landscape seeing tours were made within the residential and working areas. Often, trips, excursions, or celebration activities were thematic, devoted to certain dates of Soviet red-letter days in the official calendar. Or else, to the events of the local history of Soviet victories. For example, a search and renovation of graves of the killed Soviet soldiers in WW II. The pioneer camps, landscape tours, trips, excursions were made by the afore-made itinerary plans, “in the places of military glory”.

3. Social engineering of Soviet free-time: mechanisms and actions.

I have studied both published and unpublished archive documents of Soviet time and, hereafter, I cite one fragment. It is a record about cultural and educational institutions in Volyn' region, made in 1951, under the name of *The general network of cultural and educational institutions*:

⁵ An interview with Stepania D., a teacher, a pensioner; 1947; recorded July 5th, 2015 in the village of Kamiatka, Skoly district, Lviv region. Oksana Hodovanska's a.personal archive.

Name of cultural and educational institution	as of 1.01.1950	as of 1.01. 1951
Town palace of culture	1	1
District palaces of culture	30	30
Village clubs	580	651
Houses of reading	300	229
Regional libraries for adults and children	2	2
Town libraries for adults	3	3
Town libraries for children	2	3
District libraries for adults	30	30
District libraries for children	12	12
Village libraries	208	220
Kolkhoz libraries	518	702

As for allocations for cultural and educational work, the following were made: in 1949, 13 127, 6 thousand rubles were allocated, of which 11 719,9 thousand rubles were spent, which makes 87,4%. In 1950, 15 078 thousand were allocated, of which 15 141 thousand were used, which makes 100,4%. In the two years time, within the cultural and educational institutions of the region, the number of amateur artistic, political and agronomic societies increased (the figure data are added – O.H.). The main drawbacks in the work of cultural and educational institutions was that the ideological level of cultural and educational work was at the low level, and did not correspond to modern tasks and requirements. A number of cultural and educational institutions did not become the center of socialist culture in the village. 40% of the heads of village clubs, houses of reading had a four-year schooling (it was a very low one according to the Soviet system – O.H.) [Halaychyk, Luts'kyj, Mykytiv, Slyvka 1995, 656-658].

Soviet documents as one of the sources of study of the life of teachers represent a facts-based information resource. They speak the language of figures, have their content and represent a work of Soviet time. Their language and style of writing is the Soviet “new speak”. However, the official documents are not sufficiently reliable sources due to an overdue attention to

the formal legal side. Formality and ideology are the characteristic features of the documents of popular education. Yet, they help to elucidate the system of Soviet socio-engineering in the sphere of leisure time of Soviet teachers. No efforts or money were spared on the social and cultural work in the Soviet Union. A lot of money was allocated on building village clubs, houses of reading, and their equipment, on the purchase of new books and newspapers for libraries. In villages, the number of work places in the given domain was increased, by enlarging the staff and introducing new occupations, such as “artistic directors”. All this was done with the purpose to make these institutions “centers of socialist culture” in the village.

Basing on the analysis of typical decisions, directives, protocols of meetings, papers of regional divisions of popular education, documents of cultural work and ideology and propaganda activities of regional committees and district committees of the Communist Party of Ukraine in western regions of Ukr.SSR, we can ascertain the existence of a typical Soviet social engineering. It forced people, subject to total pressure, to be continuously involved in public life. Social engineering had as its purpose not only to control and keep people in fear, but also to fill in most efficiently their leisure-time, so as not to admit any other activity [Hnatiuk 2015, 272].

Organization and the necessary presence at thematic school evenings, participation in celebration demonstrations or celebration meetings, public readings or discussions of political events, all these were part of the Soviet ritual, one of the ways in which the government would get control over its citizens, in our case over the teachers.

When analyzing relations of Soviet people over time, the Ukrainian researcher Olena Styazhkina points out to the practical steps of appropriation (“nationalization”) of time by the Soviet state. They (the steps) were realized through: a) changes in the calendar and planification (introduction of plans and the so-called five-year plans); b) repressive and penal practices against “the wrong” use of time; c) subjugation of the element of free time; d) organization (disorganization) of structures of everyday life; e) social policies as gifts of months and years of non-working life [Stiazhkina 2017, 70].

Calendar changes concerned, first of all, introduction of new celebration days with a gradual riddance from the old ones. Culture of celebrations introduced by ideologists of Bolshevism in the 1920-ies, aimed not only at indoctrination and integration of the history of revolutionary movement, but subjugation of the element of free time, which could result in demonstrations or strikes. Eventually, demonstrations of May 1st and 2nd and November 7th and 8th became an imitation of the actions that people had practiced in the past, and which people, torn out of the understood traditional society, could still attempt at. Carnivalization and professionalization of celebration days, repetition of scenarios, their realization, formed new rituals, in the practice of which the

society brought in its own corrections. In the 1960-1980 home scenarios of celebrations of the 7th and 8th of November for a great number of people (not for all) did not differ much from traditional holiday celebrations, marked at Christmas or March 8th [Stiazhkina 2017, 74].

Subjugation of the element of free time has different dimensions: verbal, organizational, level of care, and a repressive one. The Soviet understanding of free time involved connection of the latter with working time. Free time is the time free from work, its synonym is the non-working time. Pondering over the essence of these words, one can notice a certain deviant connotation inherent in them concerning “freedom”, because “free time” had to be subordinated to working time, as deriving from it. Hence, the use of the word “day off” as “off” from the working place. The element of time frightened the Soviet government. For, what did people do after work? From the mid-40-ies Stalin proposed the concept of “culturality”, which marked significantly the practices of appropriation (“nationalization”) of free time. His strategy consisted in that leisure time had to be useful and such that would make the person fit for the future. Non-useful leisure was the “lot” of the “bourgeoi”, the “enemies”, the “saboteurs”. Gradually, leisure time was becoming such that it did not belong fully to the person. It was modeled, controlled, organized through artistic societies, trips, the use of free time as a resource of non-paid work the *subotnykys* (the Saturdays work), the *nedilnykys* (the Sundays work), reports of Komsomol members and Communist members about the socially useful work and the practical spending of leisure-time. Punishment, mostly a moral one, was in form of social blame or reproof of those who were not active in new cultural and sports projects; it would become one of the repressive mechanisms of subjugation of leisure time. Free time became part of the “cultural revolution”. However, the belonging of it to the person him/herself remains an open question. In the system of formation of the Soviet culture of celebrations and subjugation of the element of free time, the government as an anonymous force, has its assistants, time organizers, who are considered as its real owners. They are the secretaries of regional committees, district committees, directors of enterprises, schools, leaders of the party, trade unions, the Komsomol, cultural organizers, and so on. These people influenced directly and bade for the time of other people, their subordinates. They were the ones who decided about the time of «a monthly work gathering», or of a meeting or lectures, or of “a Saturday work gathering” or the time of “help to the kolkhoz” or “a vegetables factory”. The non-readiness to understand the time as such that belongs to a person was enhanced by “the charitable social acts” (in the language of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union “care for workers”), namely, laws, directives, orders, regulating other aspects of life outside the work. Among them, there is a term of paid maternity leave for child care, fixing of the pensioner’s age, a

possibility not to work for «merit of long-year service», «work in the North», «a paid yearly vacation», «hospitals», and so on [Stiazhkina 2017, 76, 77-79].

Social engineering of free time of Soviet teachers had its peculiarities. Teachers functioned as agents for construction of Soviet society. Support of teachers from the State strengthened their status and role in the society. In the villages of Western Ukraine, there was a special respect and the understanding of significance of the profession of a teacher, views formed still from before the Soviet times. For the pre-Soviet teachers were the ones who modernized the traditional village culture of Ukrainians and they were important agents of the Ukrainian national project. In the Soviet times, their significance was enhanced.

The reasoning of the famous sociologist John Urry about leisure and the countryside as a «special place» is very to the point for my research topic. The Soviet western Ukrainian village was regarded as «a traditional institution» and Soviet village teachers were appear to be “naturally” part of the countryside. In the Soviet times, western Ukrainian villages became the “countryside” for housing many hobbies activities and associations, especially, those concerned with various kinds of conservation, sport and hobbies [Urry 2002, 222].

Soviet ideologues tried to create a “Ukrainian Soviet village” notion as that of “a representation of Soviet space”. The Soviet ideology of the Ukrainian countryside is significantly different from the concept of the ideologies of space associated with the countryside, namely that of “Englishness” or “Scottishness” as revealed by particular rural images [Urry 2002, 228].

And I absolutely support the conclusion of John Urry about the fact that what takes place in the countryside in the Soviet time cannot be separated from much wider changes in the economic, social and cultural life, particularly those changes which occur within what might appear to be distant Soviet towns and cities. In the twenty-first century the Ukrainian village has changed but it actually retains much of the countryside as a «representational space», of a memory and the nostalgia [Urry 2002, 229].

4. Proposed conclusions

In the Soviet times the process of feminization of the teacher’s profession was finally completed. The greatest percentage of women, out of the overall number of workers and employees in the mid-80-ies of XXth century, was concentrated in public education – 75%, in culture – 73 %, librarians and bibliographers – 91 % [Stiazhkina 2010, 218]. A significant prevalence of women among the teacher staff in the villages of Soviet Ukraine enables us to analyze leisure time of a working, professionally fulfilled woman in the village. The leisure time of a teacher depended greatly on the village mode

of life, on husbandry work, which were part of the woman's everyday duties. Women-teachers in the village had a plot of land, fields, an animal husbandry to look after. The rhythm of domestic and family life of a woman-teacher was very much similar to the life of most ordinary village women. The similarity is well seen in the family duties: care for children, care for the sick, elderly relatives, parents, also doing the housework and husbandry work. The gender peculiarities of Soviet everyday life were defined by the difference in the availability of free time. It was always planned and objective-oriented. While for many men (not for all), it was rather a tragic fact than a beneficial one. Some of them would «improve», in their mind, the social life, some would «better» home appliances [Stiazhkina 2010, 220].

On the basis of the used resources it can be affirmed that the professional activity of women-teachers, the belonging to the professional group of teachers, and more largely, to the “the social class of village intelligentsia” put certain restrictions on their everyday life and their free time, as well. The teacher's free time became profession-related, and took on features of “a complement” to her work. Partly, it was a break from the professional activity, but at the same time, it was preparation for it.

Leisure-time and practices of its spending were closely related to the professional activity of women-teachers with various social duties and activities. And they were the basic form of political self-education. For instance, such serious occupation in leisure time as reading books borrowed from village libraries, the obligatory reading of newspapers. Also, attending the village library, watching fiction, listening to radio programs, participation, and most often organization of thematic celebrations, evenings, concerts, performances, and such like. Unlike the leisure-time of teachers in towns or cities, their village counterparts' spending of leisure-time was much more “modest” in choice and possibilities. For example, attendance of one and the same institution of culture (the village club) and a long waiting for the show of new films. Village leisure-time was not long, and usually connected with school vacations. An active spending of leisure-time was obligatory, i.e., participation in tourist and landscape hiking tours together with colleagues and pupils. Thus, the difference between public and private leisure of a female teacher has become very blurred. Free time did not belong entirely to the Soviet teacher. Free time was more of an autonomous space than a phenomenon opposite to working time. We can assume that the educational space has turned teachers' free time into quality time. In their free time they managed to create an informal cohesion within the teaching community, between teachers and their students, between teachers and their fellow villagers. And this allows us to rethink the social relations of communication with an impact on the emotional balance, feelings and desires of both teachers and their environment [Lusini, Meloni, Zanotelli 2019, 1-8].

A well-known dissident, a teacher, a member-founder of the Ukrainian Helsinki group Oleksij Tykhyj wrote in his article entitled *The free-time of workers*, as follows:

The worker should employ his free time, as he knows and as he can, and no one can make any orders, directives, instructions as to how to use it. Any use of force regarding this right will lead to an active resistance from those to whom they order, require or force to do. So, there remains only to organize and provide a possibility for the cultural and the useful for both a worker himself, for the people to whom he belongs, for the society and for the whole humanity [Tykhyj 1982, 28].

Instead, the Soviet social engineering created orders, directives, instructions as to how to employ one's free time, and put them in practice. Also, it organized, ordered and demanded. Teachers were rather like its "objects". Yet, teachers, the same as other USSR citizens learnt to abstract themselves, stay away from interfering and an overdue publicity. They "recognized" the social falsehood that was present in statements of the authorities. All this took place against the background of a seeming support of the law and care for the "everyday life of workers". The oral narratives of women-teachers enabled to perceive a certain "subjectivation" of teachers' leisure time. Which can be seen in emotionally sincere wishes, desires, a will and a need to carry out one's favorite occupations. Even though the choice of leisure-time practices was very restricted, and the time assigned to them was very insignificant.

The cultural and educational work, the ideological and propaganda activities of regional committees and district committees of Communist Party of Ukraine in western regions of UKrSSR, normative documents of divisions of education represent actually the Soviet social engineering, a tool of disciplining people. It was carried out through the work of numerous commissions, methodological unities, pedagogical councils, the *subotnyky* (Saturday workdays), "socialist competitions", demonstration of Soviet posters, and others. The disciplining of teachers was made through compelling them constantly to be involved in the public life, and the concrete proposed practices of leisure-time. The Soviet social engineering aimed not only at controlling and keeping them in fear, but also at filling up most efficiently their time so as not to admit any other activity. It wanted to realize the concept of "culture-ness (a state of culture)" with its own ideological basis in formation of Soviet regime. The common practices of "culture-ness" were reading, watching films, listening to radio programs, spending actively leisure-time.

In the core of its ideology, the Soviet Union recognized the theory of work value, which considered work as a basis of personal value and a way to social prosperity. Labor, work was a duty of all the citizens of the USSR. Along with the organization of necessary conditions for productive work, the socialist system also included an efficient leisure-time. The Soviet social engineering

worked out and realized the mechanisms of appropriation (“nationalization”) of people’s time.

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