



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

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Title of research proposal

Proletarian Tourism and Vacations in the USSR

Topic of research

This project explores the practice of tourism and vacations in the Soviet Union over time, beginning with the Stalin period and continuing to the eras of Khrushchev and Brezhnev. The study also investigates the existence and reinforcement of social distinctions that were expressed through individuals' choices of leisure travel: between manual workers and intellectuals, men and women, and ethnic urban Russians (the travelers) and the non-Russian peoples whose territories most attracted Russian tourists.

Relevance and contribution to field

In exploring the leisure practices and policies of the Soviet Union from the 1920s to the 1970s, this study seeks to explain the survival of the Soviet regime not only as result of fear and repression but also as a product of benefits and the inculcation of patriotism. Tourism was a mechanism for the manufacture of national identities and the creation of citizens. As a study in social history, it emphasizes the ways in which ordinary citizens made choices and adapted to available leisure opportunities as well as about the regime's efforts to structure cultural and behavioral norms. As a study in cultural history, it emphasizes the norms and meanings attached to opportunities to travel inside the Soviet Union and beyond on the part of citizens, tourism and resort officials, and the regime. It stresses that a study of everyday life, even private life, can help explain the longevity of the Soviet system, the ways in which the regime adapted to meet technological and economic constraints, but also how it adjusted to the consumer

desires of its citizens. It also suggests some of the limits of the socialist economic system, a failure to respond to changing consumer demand, unacceptable rationing options, and a lack of imagination that contributed to the unlamented collapse of the socialist system.

As a study of the “tourism and vacation industry” in the Soviet Union, the project emphasizes the peculiarities of the socialist approach to leisure, the legacies of which still structure consumer preferences and the tourism industry today. In particular, the sharp division in Soviet times between “vacation” – which for decades was justified in strictly medical terms (as prophylactic or for recuperation) – and “tourism” – rugged travel for the purpose of knowledge-building and self-reliance – had its institutional counterpart in separate administrations for tourism and excursions, on the one hand, and resorts and rest homes, on the other. The idea of a consumer-driven “tourism industry” (despite the existence of the commercial firm Intourist) that corresponded to economic principles was still unpopular as late as the 1970s. These administrative habits have made the creation of local and regional tourist bureaus difficult to implement: tourism is turf to be fought for rather than an external good that makes everyone better off. The preference for the capital- and labor-intensive spa vacation also continues to this day. The practices of tourism and leisure travel that developed in Soviet times – the legacy of socialism – need to be understood in order to make policy decisions about planning for tourism and transportation needs in today’s Russia as well as for tapping the market for Russian tourists abroad.

Approach and research methodology

The project employs traditional historical methodologies: it primarily uses textual sources from archives and libraries. In Moscow, I consulted materials from central state trade union and health administration archives and the local Moscow oblast archive (administrative documents, annual reports, verbatim accounts of annual conferences, comment books from participants in sanatoria, on cruises, and other travel). I also utilized factory newspapers in the Russian State Library. In the Sochi city archive, I utilized materials from the local tourist agency and from local sanatoria, including comment books and annual reports. I also utilized items of visual culture: documentary films and photographs preserved in the Russian State Archive of Cinema and Photographic Documents; and I collected items of popular culture: feature films and music from the period. I also engaged in informal interviews with citizens who had traveled in Soviet times.

Summary of research findings and preliminary conclusions

The study has three broad aims. One is to offer an exploration of tourism in an authoritarian socialist system. A second goal is to use tourism and leisure travel in order to explore the evolution of Soviet socialism over time. Finally, I intend to explore how touring and vacations reflected or shaped continuing social stratifications. I outline my findings and preliminary conclusions concerning these three aims below.

Like tourism elsewhere, in both authoritarian and “liberal democratic” societies, tourism in the Soviet Union possessed an explicit nation-building mission. Travel exposed citizens to one another and to different parts of their country. Sites to be visited – factories, construction sites, scenes of revolutionary or military valor, regions of pristine natural beauty, locations of the transformation of traditional ethnic cultures into modern

Soviet ones – emphasized the transformatory power of the socialist system and the role to be played in that transformation by the citizen travelers, whether backpackers on a two-week journey through the Urals or vacationers looking out on the Black Sea from their Crimean health resorts. As Soviet tour groups began to visit countries of eastern Europe in the 1960s, pride in their own national achievements (their role as World War II liberators, as economic beacon, as space pioneers) was often more palpable in the reports of tour group leaders than curiosity about fraternal socialist countries. Travel, especially group tours and spa vacations, brought together Russians and Tatars, Ukrainians and Uzbeks in a shared leisure experience of sightseeing, team work, and cultural consumption, and many personal accounts made special mention of meeting fellow citizens “from all corners of the Soviet Union.”

Unlike tourism elsewhere, however, tourism and vacation travel in the Soviet Union was singularly purposeful. The goal of the annual vacation was to recover from the rigors of work and to return healthier and more productive than before. Vacations in rest homes and sanatoria were explicitly linked to their therapeutic properties; but all travel was highly medicalized. In theory, scarce passes to health resorts and rest homes were issued on the basis of medical need and paid for by state social insurance funds. Later, individuals were permitted to purchase their packages to sanatoria or on group tours, but the link between workplace need and an individual’s rest remained very strong throughout the Soviet period. Such travel was hardly about “getting away from it all,” since “it all” was the highly valued world of socialist labor. Instead, vacation travel was meant to make Soviet citizens better as laborers and as citizens. In the early 1930s, package tours to production sites emphasized the exchange of production experience as the goal of one’s vacation: workers would bring back new knowledge to their jobs. In the 1960s, groups from Soviet trade unions frequently complained about the absence of such visits to “fraternal enterprises” when they traveled abroad to the socialist countries in eastern Europe. Both tourist travel and stationary vacations emphasized that acquisition of knowledge and culture were critical aspects of the experience. Tour guides provided historical, scientific, and ethnographic commentaries as their charges trooped through Caucasus mountain passes or sailed down the Volga from Moscow to Astrakhan: their scripts were carefully vetted by central authorities. The cultural activities at rest homes and sanatorii included a heavy diet of lectures (on medical, artistic, and political themes, especially, starting in the 1950s, on “the international situation”). The vacation was a place where one could become more cultured: whether sitting in musical salons devoted to various genres and composers, attending theatrical performances, learning ballroom dances, reading books and contemporary journals, viewing documentary films, or being exposed to new cuisines or “European” table manners.

Tourism and vacations in the Soviet Union were a collective enterprise (although I have argued elsewhere that even such tourism created a space for tourists to escape from the mass). Travel by individuals or even by families was logistically very difficult and officially discouraged. A typical tourist trip required the travelers to assemble at the starting point of their journey. In rugged tourism, the preferred kind up until the 1970s, the group developed coherence and mutual respect through initial days of training for their hiking or boating adventure through nature. Tourists could also travel in ready-made groups, and there was an elaborate set of rules for how to form the group and to prepare it for the coming rigors of the tour. Four to six was an ideal size for a boating trip along one of the river systems of the country; typically 20 or 30 formed groups traveling to eastern Europe; tourist trains and boats carried several hundreds. The

group provided mutual surveillance, perhaps (especially abroad), but also protection, familiarity, and comfort. The expertise of guides, cultural organizers, activity leaders, and of course physicians and nurses were best deployed on behalf of groups, not individuals, and the network of service created a peculiar sense of all-encompassing care and security that appealed to these groups of travelers. One did not even venture onto a beach without a prescription for how many minutes of sunlight to enjoy, and medical personnel were always present to monitor the correct dosages. Tourists consistently praised this “care” and “attention” provided by the state, the party, or the factory committee issuing the vacation voucher, and their letters back home reiterated their gratitude for the opportunity to rest or travel. The regime made no secret of the priority given to the “best workers” in issuing travel passes: vacation travel and tourism were rewards for loyalty and hard work, not an entitlement. In exchange for this gift, the recipients typically pledged themselves to redouble their work efforts once they returned to production. All travel and tourism thus officially served the good of the collective, not the individual.

The enterprise of leisure travel demonstrated surprising continuities over the seventy-year history under study, and also some surprising discontinuities. Institutionally, the structure of tourism was remarkably similar in the late 1920s and the early 1960s, when activists attempted to stress tourism’s “voluntarist” and “popular” qualities. In the 1920s and early 1930s, activists insisted that the basic unit of tourism be the factory-based cell. From the late 1930s, bureaucratic institutions took over the management of tourism, but again in the early 1960s, following the adoption of the Communist Party’s utopian party program, tourism was to become “populist” again, and elected tourism councils, including both paid bureaucrats and local volunteers, coordinated tourism activities. Great energy was expended to ensure that such councils were formed in every district and every factory identically across the Soviet Union.

The balance between purpose and pleasure in touring also shifted over time. While the emphasis on utilitarian travel, as indicated above, remained a major theme throughout the Soviet period, there were times when this trend became less rigid. In the late 1930s, I will argue, tourism and health resorts were looking a lot more like “fun” and much less like “utility.” This trend was reversed after the war, both because of economic shortages but also for ideological reasons. The productivist purpose of travel (including nation-building and knowledge-generating) became much more pronounced in the postwar years. By the late 1950s, during the period when Khrushchev was attempting to rekindle ideological zeal in the population, tourism became explicitly linked with patriotism and industrialism. Tourists were encouraged to embark on theme trips linked to the anniversary of the October revolution or of Lenin’s birth. Itineraries would include stops at sites of “military, revolutionary, or production valor” and would include “unforgettable” meetings of tourists with local military, revolutionary, or production notables.

Nonetheless, by the 1960s and 1970s, another theme could be observed in the tourism discourse, once again that of pleasure. Health spa vacations looked more and more like pure vacations, fun for the sake of fun, with medical therapy thrown in for good measure. Tourists demanded more comfortable accommodations: cruises on the Black Sea became very popular, and tourism officials pledged to replace canvas “tour bases” with multistory tourist hotels in the major travel destinations around the Soviet Union. The differences between the “rest home” and “tour base,” once very stark, now began to disappear. (At the same time, because state facilities did not meet the growing demand, hundreds of thousands of Soviet citizens began to travel on their own, as “wild”

vacationers.) The rhetoric of vacation shifts in the 1970s as well: vacations were touted now for improving quality (and longevity) of life rather than raising one's productivity.

While not a central focus of this project, the economic history of tourism offers insights into the gradual decay of the socialist planning system. While some economists called for the elevation of tourism to an "industry" (and others looked admiringly at the much more successful tourist industry in Bulgaria), the managers of sanatoria, rest homes, and tourist bases struggled with an economy of growing shortages, of improbable plans and the impossibility of fulfilling them, of unfinished construction projects, and the siphoning of public resources for private use. One sees also an utter lack of imagination on the part of these managers, who year after year repeat their "annual reports" almost verbatim, content to include in next year's plan the same mix of activities and goals as in all the years before. Despite growing evidence of shifting consumer demand (for traveling in couples, for souvenirs, for more variety in dining options), the central planners seemed unable to respond.

Finally, one can observe changes in the content of tourism and vacation travel. The opportunity to travel abroad was a major enterprise that took on mass form in the 1960s, when up to 300,000 Soviet citizens traveled in groups annually, mostly to socialist eastern Europe. Such travel offered new opportunities for patriotic nation-building. Soviet travelers could now see themselves in the mirror of others. They traveled very much with the attitude of the advanced and successful older brother, the liberators of eastern Europe; they expected deference as well as friendship and were often surprised when they did not receive it. As Anne Gorsuch has argued elsewhere, comparisons were not always reassuring – such travel allowed Soviet citizens to see themselves in comparison with others unmediated by regime norms. The comparisons (for example, the array of goods available in Budapest or Prague shops) were not always favorable and sometimes came as a shock.

At home, tourism officials worried about a loss of control over the content of tourist travel. A rise in interest in Russia's past in the 1950s and 1960s led to guides on the ground paying more attention to monuments of ancient architecture (which often were churches) than to sites of military, revolutionary, and production glory. The whole point of tourism, from the beginnings of the Society for Proletarian Tourism in the 1920s, was to create a society of autonomous self-activating Soviet citizens, but when the kinds of activities began to proliferate and diversify, tourism officials became uncomfortable. From the historian's perspective, however, it is remarkable that tourism practices remained so uniformly supportive of the regime's policies over this period. No one questioned the right of trade unions to issue passes to rest homes and sanatoria, and they merely continued to grumble about the utter chaos of the transportation system and the inability to secure a train or plane reservation. (Hardly a single report of a tour group going abroad lacked criticism about the way Intourist had handled its travel arrangements.)

The third area of investigation is the way in which tourism reflected and maybe structured social stratification in Soviet society. Officially, "workers" were meant to be the primary beneficiaries of the generous provisions for health resorts as well as tourism, and managers paid careful attention to the social composition of travelers and vacationers right into the 1970s. An analysis of this data is not possible for this preliminary report, but some preliminary observations can be offered. The received wisdom is that the "middle and upper" classes (engineers, officials, intellectuals) traveled

more than workers (and may have preferred to travel more than workers did); if workers did receive passes to health resorts, they came in winter, while the elite received their vacations in summer time. This seems to be borne out by documents for sanatorium visits in Sochi, but further analysis is required. What is most interesting is that there is absolutely no discussion of the significance of these data which were quite painstakingly compiled from the 1920s to the 1970s: if occasionally officials called for a greater proportion of “workers” to be served, they did not bother to explain why this was necessary or why workers were so underrepresented. A similar silence emerges with respect to gender and nationality. Statistics on both suggest that most travelers were women and Russians. But nobody discusses whether this is a good or a bad thing, or how it might be changed. (Tourists themselves, especially women, appealed for an equal number of men and women on the trips.)

Once on their journeys or at their destinations, it appears that the “experience” of travel and vacation is very similar for all social groups: party officials may have had more tennis courts at their sanatoria and rest homes, but the menu of cultural activities did not vary by type of vacation institution. Everybody danced to the accordion, record player, or orchestra, young and old, bureaucrat and factory worker. Everyone watched the same films and heard the same concerts of amateur folk performers night after night. The “Tourist SSSR” badge earned by participating in a stipulated number of overnight trips and demonstrating an array of skills such as fire-starting and compass work, did not distinguish between manual and mental workers. Abroad, it may be that groups of workers traveling to eastern Europe were less critical travelers than groups composed of white collar workers and intellectuals. Production trade union group reports tended more to describe their itineraries and praise the beaches of the fraternal socialist countries than to reflect critically or comparatively on the societies they visited. But these observations are very preliminary.

Suggestions for future research

There are a number of issues that could be explored in greater detail than I am able to do in this project: focusing on particular regions (the Urals, the Baltic states, the Far East) or modes of tourism (cycling, boating, automobile, hiking). But three larger topics also emerge from this preliminary work. One is the business of tourism itself, and the economic impact of tourism and vacations on the non-Russian locals among which much of this tourism took place. (The files of the health resort supply organization, Kurorttorg, would be of use here.) The provision of goods and services, training of staff, decisions about production of postcards and souvenirs would provide a history of some value to contemporary tourism industry planners.

A second area is mobility more broadly: travel, transportation, and movement, not just for vacation as in this study, but for business (the *komandirovka*), cultural exchange, science, or punishment. Scholars are now at work on studies of the Soviet automobile and the postwar train journey, but there is much more to be learned here.

Finally, the history of the business of tourism and its shortcomings raises the question of the service ethic in Soviet culture. Retail trade officials in the 1920s lamented the “low culture” and indifference of shop assistants toward their customers; tourism officials paid attention to complaints about poor and sloppy service in dining rooms, sanatoria, and tour bases and they always promised to do better. But they did not reflect on the causes

of this poor service, beyond low pay, lack of training, and the need for more socialist competition and other incentive mechanisms. Is the absence of a service ethic a common feature in Soviet societies because of its basic ideology of collectivism? Of the emphasis on production over consumption and hence the devaluing of jobs connected to consumption? A product simply of inadequate resources? Or does the absence of a service ethic run much deeper in Russian culture?

Recommendations for the US policy community.

The role of tourism in international relations and in international trade is by now well established. The peculiar history of Russian tourism and vacations can help shape policy in two areas. One is attracting Russian tourists to the United States. Their expectations are shaped in part by their Russian experiences, where the medicalized vacation is still highly prized, employees hope to receive discounted vouchers for travel in groups to rest homes or abroad, and all-inclusive packages provide the maximum of predictability.

A second area is in providing advice and capital to the tourist industry in Russia and other former Soviet republics. Nongovernmental organizations and consultants are advising local governments on how to develop their tourism industries without being aware of this peculiar history, including the still sharp distinction between “tourism” meaning travel along an itinerary, and “vacation,” meaning staying in one place, preferably with a beach and a lot of sun. The development of “attractions” and destinations received little attention in the Soviet past: there were and are no amusement or theme parks. Tourism can be a powerful engine for economic development (and independence from a central state). The Russian hospitality industry is developing rapidly but is perhaps not entirely cognizant of how its industry’s history is not quite the same as that of the consumers it hopes to attract. The history of Soviet tourism can help to explain the cultural legacies of socialist vacation practices that shape today’s supply and demand.