

CHAPTER THREE
FROM CAFÉ TO CONTEST

New Year's Variety Shows and the Soviet Festive System

Holiday broadcasting offered Central Television another framework for evaluating and negotiating audience needs, beyond the daily routines and quotidian demands that were exposed by sociological research and embodied in the daily and weekly television schedule. Among the most important holiday programming events were musical variety shows, part of a longstanding variety and cabaret tradition in Russia. These holiday variety show broadcasts offered an opportunity to explicitly dramatize and reimagine the relationship between state and citizens, cultural authorities and audiences, in a heightened, festive setting. Precisely because of their close connections to the most important annual political rituals, holiday variety shows were among the most experimental genres on Central Television. Like other symbolically important genres, holiday variety shows underwent a dramatic transformation in 1968–70. Over the course of the 1960s, the most important variety show on Central Television, *Little Blue Flame* [*Goluboi ogonek*] (1962–present), gradually became a holiday program, with its broadcast eventually limited to a handful of annual festive dates. Set in a café, *Little Blue Flame* depicted a harmonious Soviet

public that celebrated intelligentsia heroes and gratefully received gifts of entertainment from them. From 1970 onward, *Little Blue Flame* was displaced by a New Year's musical contest called *Song of the Year* [*Pesnia goda*] (1971–present) that searched for new ways of unifying the Soviet television audience, experimented with methods for measuring audience tastes, and explicitly negotiated generational and social conflict in a divided audience.

Television in the Soviet Festive System

Soviet holiday celebrations had always been an essential medium for defining and promoting new revolutionary and Soviet social relations and symbolic systems, for imagining the communist future and bringing it closer.¹ They were also one of the primary means by which the Communist Party sought to mobilize the Soviet population and disseminate political messages, to both urban elites and non-Party, remote, and rural audiences.² By the mid-1930s, the Soviet holiday calendar structured economic production, the distribution of consumer goods, and even the interactions between Soviet citizens and the state—holidays were the best time to make demands on the state for a promotion or better housing.³ Holiday symbolism and dates also powerfully shaped the content and production of Soviet media.⁴ The symbolic and economic importance of holidays was not, of course, unique to the Soviet context, but the Soviet state faced the particular dilemma of revolutionary states: having to create or elevate new holidays and co-opt or repress old ones.⁵

From its earliest broadcasts, television had sought a place at the center of the Soviet festive system. Television's early, experimental years before the war, and its first postwar decade, had imitated the holiday orientation of Soviet radio. Among the very earliest, experimental television broadcasts in Moscow was a film recording of the Revolution Day parade on Red Square.⁶ The first live television broadcast from Red Square was in May 1956, becoming a regular tradition subsequently (figure 4).⁷

Like Soviet radio, television also broadcast whatever popular entertainments it could acquire during the festive period surrounding holidays and Party Congresses.⁸ By the mid-1960s, the high-stakes live parade broadcasts were preceded and followed by hours of special popular entertainments,

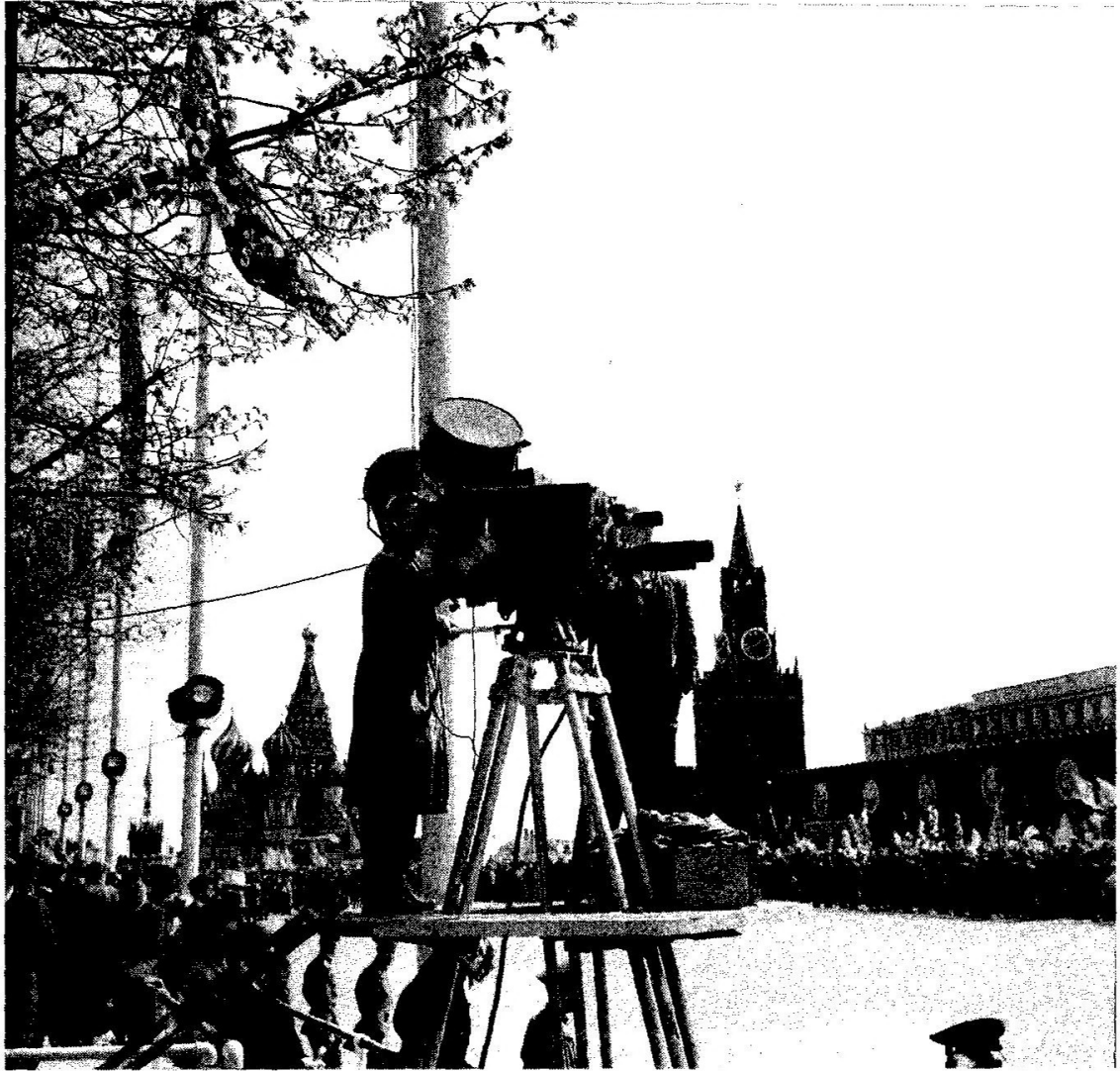


FIGURE 4. “Central Television Studio operator reports from Red Square during the celebration of May 1.” D. Chernov, 1959. (GBU “TsGA Moskv”; used with permission)

including films, plays, championship soccer and hockey matches, reviews of the year in figure skating, humorous sketches, made-for-television movies, and especially concerts.⁹ By 1971, the five major state holidays (March 8, May 1, May 9, November 7, and December 31–January 1), plus Party Congresses and Central Committee Plenums, were each accompanied by special entertainment programming that lasted for at least two and as many as ten days; lesser holidays, like the days celebrating various professions, were marked by evening concert programs. Even smaller, noncalendrical festive occasions, such as the visit of a foreign leader or the national holiday of another socialist country, were reflected by special, thematically related

entertainments in the television schedule.¹⁰ In 1974, Central Television had to remind its staff that broadcasting episodes of the American cartoon *Mighty Mouse* was not an appropriate way to mark Richard M. Nixon's visit that year.¹¹

How did this situation emerge? The idea that television would celebrate festive occasions with popular entertainments was far from the only possible understanding of television's relationship to holiday times in the late 1950s. Many other accounts of how television should contribute to the Soviet festive system circulated from the late 1950s onward. During the Thaw, many inside and outside of Central Television saw the medium *itself* as festive in a way not limited to traditional holidays, capable of bringing on a heightened state in viewers as they encountered almost any subject matter on screen, at any time of year. They understood television as a way for viewers to meet and learn from the heroes of the Thaw—artists, intellectuals, scientists, and cosmonauts—and to experience the new vitality of everyday Soviet life.¹² Youth Desk members, who saw early Bolshevik mass festivals as an important precedent for their work on television game shows, also put festivity at the heart of their understanding of the medium as a whole: television ceremonies and games offered a way to not only visualize the future, but also bring it into being. Other theories emphasized television's affective power, its ability to shape viewer "moods" for calendrical holidays. This meant aligning viewers' feelings with the holiday calendar, offering popular entertainments to enhance feelings of well-being on politically important dates.¹³ This account of television's role during Soviet holidays resonated with viewers, many of whom saw television as a way of pleasantly passing the new leisure time that resulted from Khrushchev's shortening of work hours.¹⁴

The two television holiday shows considered here, *Little Blue Flame* and *Song of the Year*, stood out from the general background of the Soviet festive television schedule. They were special occasions in their own right, explicitly prepared for by Central Television and anticipated by TV viewers long in advance of their broadcasts. They offered their own rituals and liminal moments, and presented a fully realized alternative to the hierarchical representation of Soviet society provided by the Red Square demonstrations.¹⁵ The evolution of *Little Blue Flame* illustrates how these competing visions of television's role in Soviet life shaped Central

Television's holiday programming, leading to the emergence of the musical variety show as the centerpiece of Central Television's holiday program lineup.

The most famous Soviet holiday show of all, *Little Blue Flame*, was originally conceived as a weekly variety show and broadcast every Sunday from 10 p.m. to midnight—a regular, routine event that was nonetheless seen as festive, by virtue of its illustrious intelligentsia guests and café setting.¹⁶ By 1970, however, *Little Blue Flame* was exclusively a holiday program, broadcast five times a year, on March 8, May 1, May 9, November 7, and the night of December 31–January 1. The transformation of *Little Blue Flame* from a weekly program into a holiday show took place gradually, as a solution to the specific problems of television broadcasting in the Soviet 1960s.