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## **Invention of a Tradition: the Communist *Subbotnik* of 12 April 1969 in the Latvian SSR\***

**Keywords:** *subbotnik*, *talka*, LSSR, tradition, 1969

### **Summary**

The few existing studies on Soviet *subbotniki* have mostly underlined their paradoxical nature: originally promoted by Lenin in 1919 as a “Great Initiative” of voluntary collective work, they soon became mechanisms of forced mobilisation, later declining and being mocked as hollow rituals under Brezhnev. Scholars such as A. Yurchak or Psikunov and Rakov proposed interpretations to explain how the phenomenon continued, though concluding on its ideological emptiness. Our hypothesis is that the communist *subbotnik* of 12 April 1969 in the Latvian SSR exemplifies not merely a late Soviet ritual, but an “invented tradition” strategically blending Soviet ideology with local cultural practices, particularly the Latvian *talka* (‘joint clean-up’), thus producing an event that was performative. To explore this claim, we rely on extensive archival research in the Latvian State Historical Archives, complemented by press sources, visual materials, and oral history interviews collected at Daugavpils University. The administrative unity of the republic provides a laboratory for precisely and exhaustively retracing the process of tradition invention. In less than a month, despite many other obligations, the Latvian activists could mobilise nearly one million people for collective working for free. But the authoritative mechanisms that made this performance possible were also those that embodied local solidarity, re-scripting its identity inside the union implying also reinforcing its own specificity and needs.

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\*This research was conducted as part of a doctoral contract with the Paris 1 Pantheon-Sorbonne University (Paris, France), under the supervision of François-Xavier Nérard within the laboratory SIRICE.

## “Tradīcijas izgudrošana”: 1969. gada 12. aprīļa komunistiskais *subotņiks* Latvijas PSR

**Atslēgvārdi:** *subotņiks*, talka, Latvijas PSR, tradīcija, 1969. gads

### Kopsavilkums

Nedaudzajos pētījumos par padomju sestdienas talkām (*subotņikiem*) tiek uzsvērts to paradoksālais raksturs: sākotnēji V. Ļeņins *subotņikus* pozicionēja kā brīvprātīgā kolektīvā darba “lielo iniciatīvu”, bet drīz vien tie kļuva par piespiedu mobilizācijas mehānismu. Brežņeva laikā *subotņiki* panīka. Zinātnieki A. Jurčaks, M. Piskunovs un T. Rakovs centās rast skaidrojumu, kā šī parādība saglabājās, taču secināja, ka tā ir ideoloģiski tukša. Pētījuma autores hipotēze ir tāda, ka 1969. gada 12. aprīļa komunistiskais *subotņiks* Latvijas PSR ir ne tikai vēlīna padomju rituāla, bet arī mākslīgi “izgudrotas tradīcijas” piemērs, kas stratēģiski apvieno padomju ideoloģiju ar vietējām kultūras praksēm, īpaši Latvijai tradicionālo talku, tādējādi radot performatīvu notikumu. Lai apstiprinātu šo apgalvojumu, tika veikti pētījumi Latvijas Nacionālā arhīva Latvijas Valsts arhīvā, ko papildina preses, vizuālo materiālu un mutvārdu vēstures interviju, kas savāktas Daugavpils Universitātē, analīze. Latvijas PSR administratīvā vienotība nodrošina iespēju precīzi izsekot tradīciju inovācijas procesam. Mazāk nekā mēneša laikā, neskatoties uz daudzām citām saistībām, Latvijas PSR aktīvisti 1969. gadā spēja mobilizēt gandrīz miljonu cilvēku, lai konkrētā sestdienā strādātu bez maksas. Taču šo eksperimentu padarīja iespējamu arī asociācija ar tradīciju, kas iemiesoja vietējo solidaritāti, pārveidojot tās identitāti Padomju Savienības ietvaros.

### Introduction

“Comrades! Let’s work together as one man in the Saturday’s communist *talka*.”

No stranger can explain the mysterious meaning of this hieroglyph. First, because only us, working all together, can do as much as one. Then, it would be quite long to explain what the “subbotnik” is. It is known that the Saturday’s communist *talka* is a seventy-year-old tradition in the struggle against ruin. And if in 1918, this struggle against ruin only happened in the Moscow-Sortirovochnaya station, it is now all over the country. The same hidden meaning, only known to us, is found in our other slogans”. (Zadornovs 1989<sub>b</sub>)

This highly ironic article complements the opinion on *subbotnik* (Goleškova, Šagadaeva 2021) in “Subbotniks: From the Great to the Meaningless”. This paper opened the way to the study of one of the many objects too little known outside the former Soviet Union to attract attention, and too familiar to ex-Soviets to attempt to explain it. The authors therefore return to these 70 years of existence of the *subbotnik*, the “Great Initiative” of the workers of the Moscow-Kazan Sortirovochnaya (railway yard) depot, hailed as such by Lenin who tried to establish it as a new experience of collective work, on the scale of the whole Soviet Union, on the 1 May 1920. The ambition to forge a new ethic of labour was diverted into the forced industrialisation,

becoming one of the many techniques of over-mobilisation. Leonid Brezhnev's attempt to revive this practice in the 1970s is described as a failure, arousing at best a form of nostalgia, if not mockery and disgust at the constraint of simulating work on a day of rest. The authors thus accept the conclusions of a French sociologist R. Hervouet, who has worked on the permanence of this phenomenon in Belarus (Hervouet 2013), but highlight by contrast the ignorance of other Westerners. Similarly, the opening quote, extracted from an article first published in March 1989 in the Russian-language edition of the Latvian Komsomol, *Sovetskaya Molodež*, then translated into Latvian a month later for *Vaduguns*, the newspaper of the Communist Party of the Balvi (Latgale) district committee, skillfully and impertinently subverts the clichés of the Soviet press language (he can cite off the top of his head the name of the station where the mythical first *subbotnik* took place, but makes a gross mistake in the date, since it took place not in 1918 but on 12 April 1919) to underline its absurdity in the perception of an imaginary foreigner. It is thus a perfect illustration of the mechanics of authoritarian language described by A. Yurchak (Yurchak 2005) in his famous essay *Everything Was Forever Until it Was No More*, through the use of which those who lived in the Soviet period recognise themselves as “us/*naši*”. In the original English version of this book, the author deployed a battery of concepts from French studies at American universities to explain how these hidden meanings allow one to overcome the contradictions they contain, while in the Russian version of the work he tended rather towards the opposite approach of introducing the Russian-speaking public to Western conceptions based on these familiar realities. And these tools prove to be effective, employed also by Piskunov and Rakov (Piskunov, Rakov 2020; Piskunov, Rakov 2021) to explore using a more historical methodology the *subbotnik* tradition resumed in 1969 as an example of a late Soviet ritual, supported by varied materials and sources, from the newspaper *Pravda* to personal diaries, from Moscow to Novosibirsk. These authors repeatedly note the ineffectiveness of this working day, but they try to reach beyond the apparent absurdity of the phenomenon to understand why it still took place.

Indeed, it appears, on the one hand, that the definition of the *subbotnik*, even among the ex-Soviets, is not as clear and consensual as thought, that it has changed over time and space, but also that the event has always benefited undeniable success, at least in terms of formal participation, to the point that in some places it has survived the collapse of the Union, suggesting it was not held together solely by threat. This does not, however, lead to a conclusion that it is devoid of ideological substance, as might be suggested by studies which, in their attempt to offer a point of view that is both global and precise, tend to sacrifice one for the other. The Latvian field allows us to resolve this methodological problem, appearing both as a miniature version of the Union but also distinguished by its particular history. In Latvia, *subbotniki* were held during the year 1919 inspired by the first “Great Initiative”, not even in springtime (when Stučka's Soviet regime was still prevalent in the capital) but in autumn, and not in May 1920 when the Soviets had already lost the territory. *Subbotniki* reappeared in 1940 and afterwards with the post-war reconstruction, vaguely referred to as additional days of work for rebuilding the public space and equipment. The Sovietised Republic provided classic archival sources, governmental and party political institutions, as well

as press materials with a number of photographs and even filmed documentaries for the period under consideration. However, our problem also concerns issues of close relation to language, which leads us, in search for a definition that is both personal and collective, to take advantage of another local specificity which is the constitution of oral archives. Indeed, the fact of renewing a practice forged and experienced 20 years before adds a national dimension to the problem which justifies further specifying our concepts. Moving from ritual to invented tradition, as defined by E. Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm 1983), allows us to explain what, in its reinvention on 12 April 1969, makes *subbotnik* a successful performance in the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic (LSSR).

### **The call from Moscow for youth initiative**

Latvian political organisations already had a lot to accomplish in 1969, particularly in terms of celebrations. The specificity of Latvian history produced a delay for many Soviet foundations on its territory, which represented both a form of stigma for the republic, but at the same time an opportunity to demonstrate loyalty to the Union, a way to stand out in the calendar and attract the attention of other republics. Indeed, the bureau of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Latvia (CC LCP, the highest authority, a restricted executive body, meeting once a month) made these events a priority. In minutes No. 105 of 3 January 1969 (in the documents from the Party archives funds (LNA LVA FPA 101. f., 33. apr., 19. l.), the first topic to be addressed was the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Soviet power in Latvia. Indeed, the first Soviet Republic of Latvia was proclaimed on 17 December 1918, with Pēteris Stučka as the head of its government, and a first congress of workers, peasants, and soldiers was held on 1 January, 1919. The wording suggests a continuity between this entity and the current regime, clearly erasing the twenty years of independence, which implies a reflection on the media coverage of this revisionist interpretation, the second point on the agenda. This is an example of the formulation of an authoritarian discourse in terms borrowed from Yurchak, but it did not take place in the 1950s following Stalin's death, a time when a movement from the very top of Latvian political organisations to negotiate greater autonomy had been harshly repressed during a purge that lasted from 1959 to 1962 (Loader 2018). Since then, Latvian activists have had to adopt a demonstrative attitude of their exemplarity, which is notably the issue of a second celebration of the 50th anniversary, that of the Komsomol of the Republic on the agenda of minutes No. 108 of 4 February 1969 (LNA LVA FPA 101. f., 33. apr., 20. l.). During this event, the youth organisation received in Riga with much *éclat* the delegations from all over the Soviet Union, which had already celebrated their respective anniversaries a year before.

In addition, the Republic also pursued the Soviet agenda, according to which the main deadline was the centenary of V. I. Lenin, scheduled for 22 April 1970. It was announced as a major event, and had a specific interpretation in the field of production. Indeed, it was the subject of two meetings of the CC LCP's activist body (a consultative body, bringing together, once a quarter, party members as well as representatives of bodies specifically concerned with the agenda), when workers, followed by peasants,

made “Socialist commitments for a worthy celebration of the 100th anniversary of V. I. Lenin” (LNA LVA FPA 101. f., 33. apr., 8. l.). The meeting did not hold a debate; the materials had been previously prepared, on the basis of which each production unit considered its possible participation, which were pooled and made official by the public announcement at this meeting. It was only after these commitments had been made that the idea of organizing a *subbotnik* appeared for the first time in an appeal published by *Komsomolskaya Pravda* and reprinted in *Sovetskaya molodež* (SM) on 15 February. It very symbolically presented as the initiative of a collective of workers (in fact Komsomols) from the Moscow-Sortirovochnaya depot who proposed to reproduce as a part of commemoration the “Great Initiative” on a Union-wide scale. Such an approach could have simply remained ignored — other excesses of zeal sometimes received no response, or were even reprimanded — but this one found a particular support in the Party, as revealed by another article in *Cīņa* (newspaper of the LCP) on 8 March about the Plenum of the CC of the CPSU. It revealed that the initiative was promoted there by V. Grishin, First Secretary of the Party of the Moscow City Committee and, above all, candidate for the Politburo. The success of the event then depended on the indirect approval of the candidate, and therefore became a major issue.

The question was therefore who should answer the call, determining the scale of the event as a tribute to commemorating Lenin, but whose merit belongs above all to the living authority who promoted it and thus benefits from its aura. The Komsomols responded, first from the “Lenin” Chemical Fiber Factory in Daugavpils on 28 February in *SM* No. 42, which gives an idea of the process by which a veritable race for enthusiasm unfolded:

“The floor is given to Vera Grabkova, Groupkomsorg of the “50 Years of Komsomol” unit. She is holding a newspaper in her hand. Everyone has probably read the letter from the Komsomol members of the Moscow-Sortirovochnaya station, but this call is now ringing out from the podium. “I propose to support this initiative. In memory of the 50th anniversary of the first *subbotnik*, which aroused such enthusiasm in Lenin, let’s also organise a *subbotnik* on the 12th of April!”

“Who is “for”?” asks Lina Stuklova, Komsorg of the workshop. “Unanimity! I propose calling all the young people in our factory to demonstrate with us that day...” The factory Komsomol committee approved the decision of the girls from the winding workshop and decided to ask the Gorkom to forward this “invitation” to all the grassroots organisations in the city.

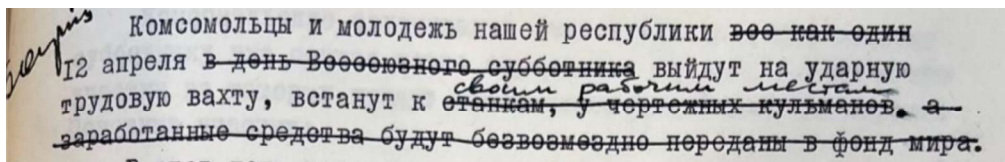
“And what’s wrong with you?” Vidavsky asks one of the activists, a tall, thin man, whose face suddenly darkens. “Lina beat us again...” We also discussed it in secret at home and decided to organise a *subbotnik*. We were supposed to take the decision at the meeting the day after tomorrow. I thought it would be a “surprise”...“You need to think faster!” Lina sneers.” (Pletikos 1969)

In the profusion of disordered proposals, there was certainly a media narrative that portrays enthusiasm and spontaneity, but behind it systematically lie relations of “political loyalty” (Piskunov, Rakov 2021). A first synthesis in Latvian comes from the CC of the Komsomol of the Republic in *Padomju Jaunatne* No. 52 of 14/3/1969 “Visi uz komunistisko sestdienas talku!” which states that “for a long time, from the first days of the existence of Soviet power, “Saturday work” and “youth” have been

inseparable.” Indeed, it should be noted that the decree generalising the 5-day work week with 2 days of rest was only published in March 1967. Until then, the main obstacle to the organisation of *subbotniki* was that Saturday was a working day. The article reviews various examples of initiatives across the Soviet Union and suggests “transferring the money earned to the heroic fund for peace in Vietnam.” However, the connection with the preparation of Lenin’s centenary calls for even greater ambition.

### Legacy and obsolescence of the over-mobilisation regime

At its meeting on 1 April, the CC LCP bureau in its decision “On the running of *subbotniki*, celebrating the 50th anniversary of the 1st communist *subbotnik*” (LNA LVA FPA-101. f., 33. apr., 36. l., 22. lp.) indicated that the event is taking another dimension which requires the Party’s leadership. The main correction made to the Komsomol synthesis lies in the clarification that the profits collected will be allocated to the “fund for the accomplishment of the five-year plan”, but it also indicated more generally that the appeal now concerned all workers and not only the Komsomol members, while specifically targeting “the collectives of industry and construction, collective farms and state farms, the city and region of Riga”. The fact that it did not mention the initiatives of other localities, notably those of Latgale which have shown themselves to be particularly enthusiastic, reveals the symbolic importance attributed to the capital of the Republic and sounds like a call to order. The response was not long in coming: a telegram was sent on 3 April by the CC of Latvian Komsomol directly to the CC of the Moscow Komsomol which provided a detailed summary list of the various planned actions. On the draft of this document (picture 1) there appear eloquent corrections which attest to a concern for the wording<sup>1</sup>:



1. Picture. Source: LNA LVA FPA-201, f., 4. apr., 87. l., 55. lp.

Therefore, the youth organisations no longer had control over the situation; they had to act under the supervision of the Party, and also in concert with the authorities of the productive apparatus, factory directors and heads of kolkhozes and sovkhoses, in a typical Soviet political campaign mode, the *štáb*. This term literally means headquarters, it designates the meeting of representatives of these three institutions at the most local level of the production unit, responsible for executing the organisation of a specific task. The *štáb* may possibly have a dedicated room or space, which was

<sup>1</sup> “The Komsomols and youth of our Republic as one, on the 12th of April ~~day of the all-Union subbotnik~~, will go to perform shock work ~~on the machines and drawing boards\*~~ at their workstations\* ~~and the funds collected will be paid into the peace fund~~”

supposed to dissolve once the task is completed. It is on this mode of execution that the effectiveness of the mobilisation particularly depended.

Indeed, First Secretary of the CC of the LCP, Augusts Voss gave a glowing assessment of the event on the very evening of 12 April. In this document, he stated little about the organisation, although he mentioned the central role of these “operativnye štaby.” However, he claimed a participation of 900,000 people, which is equivalent to more than two-thirds of the working population, an impressive figure for an event organised in less than a month. His interest, however, seemed to be more focused on the 360,000 “real” workers, providing a day of free labour whose total value was estimated at 16 million roubles. His interpretation was guided by the filter of commitments for a worthy celebration of Lenin’s centenary for the fulfilment of the five-year plan; he particularly emphasised the 10 to 20% increase in productivity compared to usual quotas. He also made a point of indicating the two most important factories in Riga, VEF where 14,000 workers are said to have participated, and REZ, but also some 17,000 railway employees and 20,000 employees of 47 enterprises under the Ministry of Food Industry, students from the Proletarsky district of Riga who came to work on the construction sites of the “Rigastroy” trust in the historical city center of the capital, the Kirovsky district. The only example outside the capital that was directly cited is the kolkhoz “30 years of October” in the Rezekne district, confirming a centralising tropism. Above all, it would seem that the document was produced at 6 p.m.; even imagining the office of the First Secretary overwhelmed by hundreds of phone calls from all over the country, these estimates cannot be considered as a reliable and detailed survey taking into consideration all the factors and in particular the costs of starting production excluding wages, but rather as a prescription, recording the political success of the day.

A second report for the department responsible for monitoring the implementation of the decisions of the Bureau and the Secretariat of the CC of the LCP, produced by the instructor of the Department of Industry and Transport D. Mitenberg with a little more hindsight, on the following 2–3 May, confirmed and even slightly increased the figures regarding participation, announcing a total of 925,000, of which 475,000 worked at their own workplaces. It did not, however, provide figures for the overall value of production, but did list some results that are far from equivalent: a harvest of 977,000 roubles in cash, and the production of “various appliances for an amount of 54,800 roubles, agricultural machinery for 132,500 roubles, furniture for 105,000 roubles, 28,600 pairs of leather shoes, 22,100 pairs of rubber shoes, 1,000 washing machines, 92 domestic refrigerators and many agricultural products” (LNA LVA FPA-101. f., 33. apr., 75. l., 375. lp.). These data support the position of Goleškova and Šagadaeva (Goleškova, Šagadaeva 2021) that, despite Augusts Voss’s concerns and the considerable mobilisation effort, the profitability of this day was far from being as interesting as hoped. There are plenty of reasons to believe that the “funds for the fulfilment of the five-year plan” do not constitute a separated fund from the ordinary accounting of state enterprises, to which workers can contribute directly in cash. The ideal of a day of collective work thus being transformed into a new tax to which everyone was kind of obliged. It is also interesting to note that most of the reports

of the Komsomol organisations on the celebration of Lenin's centenary neglect to mention the *subbotnik* (LNA LVA FPA 201. f., 5. apr., 34. l.). This, however, amounted to adopting the First Secretary's definition and ultimately neglecting what constituted the essential experience of this day on the ground for those who actually contributed to it.

### **Ambivalent political effects under a traditional skin**

While it is reasonable to doubt the economic effectiveness of the initiative from a planning perspective, the fact remains that the *subbotnik* experienced a revival in 1969, successfully establishing itself as a Soviet tradition, including in Latvia, where participation data were similar in the subsequent years. Voss's report already suggested some explanations for this success, describing the event as "a bright holiday of labour (...) covered in the national and local press, and with visual propaganda." A new ambition is revealed behind this very conventional statement: the *subbotnik* moves from spontaneous enthusiasm to an organised labour celebration. This idea is further reinforced by the concluding sentence of the document: "Workers of several enterprises proposed organising a mass communist *subbotnik* every year." This is an obvious example of Hobsbawm's claim about repetition being one of the constituent elements of tradition (Hobsbawm 1983, 1-14). Significant resources were deployed to support this process, including a normative discourse widely disseminated in the press, but also the creation of posters and placards that reinforced the identification of the event with other celebrations, as for example represented in the photograph of artists A. Lāce and A. Zubrovičs from the aesthetic technique department of the Riga Electrical Component Manufacturing Plant (RER) painting placards on 10 April in preparation for the event (picture 2).



2. Picture. A. Lāce and A. Zubrovičs painting placards.  
Source: Latvian Audio-Visual Archives, LNA KFFDA-F1-4 45101.

The documentary newsreel “Padomju Latvija No. 10” of April 1969 (LNA KFFDA-8-2-2391) opens its presentation of the *subbotnik* with an orchestra playing for the workers (2:35)<sup>2</sup>. The use of music is also part of the strategy of creating an exceptional moment, of associating positive emotions with this workday.

These efforts to warm the atmosphere also highlights another major aspect of the *subbotnik* practice as a social performance. The majority of participants in this day were in fact those who did not contribute to their regular workplaces, but who went to perform other, more manual tasks. The documentary also shows some examples of this, symbolically in the sequence at Šķīrotava (between 2:40 and 5:00), a railway yard south of the capital; the various clothing, railway workers’ uniforms, but also women dressed in corporate clothes, probably secretaries, and others more casually dressed, men in tank top and others in white-collar suits; horizontal work is staged on this same area of the railway yard. The situation is comparable to the housing construction sites of Ventpils (6:30). Voss’s report also mentioned this aspect regarding the REZ factory: “The management staff carried out significant work in the supply areas, in the storage of raw materials and furniture, as well as in cleaning the grounds and premises. Many retired factory veterans also took an active part in the *subbotnik*.” The *subbotnik* was an opportunity to represent one’s place in society, to demonstrate one’s social utility. In this sense, it also gave visibility to those usually excluded from the world and representations of labour: retirees, but also children and those who worked to look after them. While it promoted a particularly rigid and anachronistic picture of work, it also revealed, in practice, the full diversity of activities that were useful to the community, in the public sphere. Ultimately, the core of this experience consisted of cleaning, maintenance, and environmental beautification work. Voss mentioned some 120 000 people active in the streets of Riga on this day. As for the LNA KFFDA’s collection of *talka* photographs from 1940 to 1990, the vast majority of the 300 pictures depict outdoor activities, especially of those taken before 1969.

This aspect finally allows us to raise a problem that lies in the translation of the term *subbotnik* into Latvian. After twenty years of independence, the country did not join the Soviet Union of its own free will, nor through a revolution of the proletarian masses, but through a military invasion. Latvians were thus abruptly introduced to the Soviet way of life, and then rediscovered the existence of *subotņiks*, as spelled in the newspapers<sup>3</sup>. However, this transcription disappeared after the war, gradually replaced by the term *talka*. Its definition in the *Tezaurs* remains very generic:

“To perform joint work voluntarily, without remuneration (usually by invitation) to provide assistance (to a person, a household, etc.). The name refers to an invitation to a neighbour to work together on a farm, where, at the end of the work, the host offers the participants drinks, and the hostess a hearty feast, during which songs and a social gathering with dancing and games take place.” (Talka)

<sup>2</sup> LNA - KFFDA-F8-2-2391, these newsreels were shown in cinemas before the movies.

<sup>3</sup> Based on a keyword search in the Periodika.lv database, which contains a significant portion of the press from this period, 40 occurrences between 1940 and 1941.

To grasp the full richness of the connotations to which this term refers, the use of archives compiled by the Oral History Center of Daugavpils University (DU MV) proves particularly illuminating. This term appears in around forty interviews, which confirm the major elements of the previous definition (agricultural work, mutual aid, conviviality). However, its meaning is more precise: it refers to an ancient tradition in the Baltic region, but also in parts of western Russia and Ukraine, under the term *toloka*<sup>4</sup>, linked to the specific climatic conditions of spring in continental areas, when the melting snow allows the land to be reclaimed, which then requires a significant increase in labour force. Talka is thus often associated with the potato harvest in June (DU MV: 126), or with the brewing of beer (DU MV: 774, 847, 970, 1042). Furthermore, the interviews reveal an active uptake of this tradition under the Ulmanis regime, a period in which the talka was directly associated with the celebration of Jāņi (summer solstice, DU MV: 82, 131, 820):

“In my childhood, back in Ulmaņa times, there were always those *talka* work parties. Always somewhere in the family, before Jāņi, there were those *talka* gatherings. Because there was always a threshing floor, well, to take care of the consequences of the work, you know. So they would bring manure from the cowshed to the threshing floor before Jāņi, because the cowsheds were deep. And then they would always organize *talkas*. So at Jāņi, somewhere in the family, there was a *talka*. That’s how they celebrated. They’d spread manure, bring straw to fill the cowshed, a proper layer of straw. And then, there was the shouting and drinking, always bringing beer and cheese. And the young boys and girls, they would play with the girls in the straw [*narrator laughs*]. And [*narrator clears throat*] first, they would go to the pond to wash, and then there would be splashing with water and pulling and the boys would tease the girls. (...) That went on until, until the German times, that was during Latvia’s independence, and then they partied all night. And yes, they burned the Jāņi bonfires and jumped over [the fire], and all sorts of games and dances. Earlier, the youth would do a lot of games [*narrator clears throat*]” (DU MV: 82)

It therefore appears that this choice to translate the *subbotnik* is a mistake, or even a falsification. It must, moreover, systematically be completed with the adjectives “sestdienas” or “komunistiskas” to be understood in this sense. However, the characteristic elements of the renovation of *subbotnik* as undertaken in 1969 demonstrate an attempt to bring the two traditions together, or rather to assimilate the positive image of the Latvian practice in order to blend it into the communist tradition.

## Conclusion

It was not until *Perestroika* that the term *subbotniks* reappeared in the press, for example in the introductory quote to this article. At that time, environmental activists began to reclaim the *talka* form to raise awareness of local patrimony, and it was therefore important to re-establish the distinction with the Soviet tradition. The attempt at fusion, however, had effective results, and the *subbotnik* experienced a certain dynamism during the period of late socialism due to its ability, borrowed from local tradition, to stimulate convivial social relations through a useful activity. To endure, a

<sup>4</sup> This term is used in Russian, at the same time as that of *talka* in Latvian, in the interview DU MV: 648.

ritual must have efficiency; it can only survive by renewing its meaning when confronted with different contexts. The *subbotnik* was experiencing a resurgence precisely because of its ability to meet the needs of the Soviet authorities, on the one hand, as a Leninist tradition. It thus fulfilled all the functions described by Hobsbawm (Hobsbawm 1983, 9): representing social cohesion, legitimising institutions, enabling socialisation through the inculcation of value systems and codes of conduct. The particularity of the *subbotnik* as a tradition was the recognition that it was invented, but the 1969 version could rely on the myth of the “Great Initiative” and even more draw on a more ancient tradition, allowing communism to be naturalised by inscribing it in this immemorial temporality. If the principle of unpaid labour may appear absurd at a first glance, at least experienced as an additional constraint by its contemporaries, its restoration in fact operates a discreet movement of affirmation of collective work in the service of the common interest – which is not devoid of ideological meaning, but turns out by this very fact to reinforce the gap with the authoritarian discourse that nevertheless made it possible.

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