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Back in the USSR

Vadim Nikitin | The Nation | December 21, 2011



Supporters of the Russian communist party attend a rally to protest against violations at the parliamentary elections and the policies conducted by current Russian authorities in Moscow December 18, 2011.
REUTERS/Mikhail Voskresensky

For most 14-year-olds, the first year of high school is mortifying enough without having to make justifications for an entire country. But as the only Russian kid at an international school in England in the late 1990s, that's exactly what I was forced to do. Russia's spectacular economic collapse after the end of the Soviet Union, the ignominy of having "lost" the cold war, as was claimed in the West, and President Boris Yeltsin's embarrassing public behavior did not make it any easier.

My personal drama peaked on International Day in 1998, when students had to give talks about the history of their native countries. It was my chance to rehabilitate Russia. Gesticulating wildly, I presented a country that had given the world Lenin and Gagarin, defeated Nazi Germany, shot down the American U2 spy plane flown

by Gary Powers in 1960, funded third-world revolution and created an alternative social, political and economic model that gave the mighty United States a run for its money around the globe.

When I described 1991 as the year that, "unfortunately, the USSR collapsed," the middle-aged teacher stood up, cut short my talk and abruptly dismissed the class. Visibly shocked and angry, she grabbed my arm and whispered hoarsely close to my face, "Nothing good ever came out of the Soviet Union, and if I hear you praising that evil system again, you will not be allowed to speak during the next period." Feeling like a true Soviet dissident—though a pro-Soviet one!—I kicked off my next class with a grandstanding disclaimer: "The following presentation will be short, because I have been censored. Ms. Robson does not want you to know the history of my country!" Though I made more friends that day than I had during all my middle school years, what seemed like a daring gesture was something ordinary Russians had long been doing back home since 1991: looking back at the Soviet Union for comfort and pride.

The coming of age of Russia's first post-Communist generation has done little to dampen society's preoccupation with the Soviet past, particularly the Brezhnev years of the mid-1960s to the early '80s. As the immensely popular television journalist Leonid Parfyonov remarked, "The Soviet Union has not gone away—it is the matrix for our present civilization." Twenty years after the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Russia is once again a de facto single-party state (the December parliamentary elections have been widely condemned as rigged); Prime Minister Vladimir Putin is touting a Eurasian Union that would reunite former Soviet republics; and one of Russia's most highly subscribed satellite channels, Nostalgia, is dedicated to playing old films and even reruns of Soviet news broadcasts.

Several books recently published in Russia reflect on various changes in the memory and contemporary meaning of the Soviet Union. What emerges is the progression of Soviet nostalgia from a reaction to the chaos and material deprivation of the 1990s to a more diffuse lament and search for particular spiritual and emotional values.

Throughout the '90s, many Western scholars and journalists were as perplexed and outraged as Ms. Robson by the growth of Soviet nostalgia, sometimes blaming an alleged primeval Russian longing for authoritarianism and sometimes blaming Putin. In that climate, any attempts to connect pro-Soviet feeling to the destructive post-Soviet social and economic policies of Yeltsin and his US-backed advisers were tantamount to justifying the horrors of Stalinism. Yet as the threat of Communist restoration waned (if it ever existed) and Yeltsin began to fall out of favor in Russia and to a certain extent in the West, the mainstream US media belatedly embraced the idea of Soviet memories as a therapeutic balm, a kind of chicken soup for the post-Communist soul. By then, however, the Russian people's relationship with their past had already moved on.

The first post-Communist decade had left Russia in ruins. Economic shock therapy, hyperinflation and the disintegration of the welfare state, including the collapse of the health system, contributed to a precipitous fall in living standards and life itself. Between 1990 and 1994, average life expectancy declined from 69 to 65. The drop for men, from 64 to 57, was so great that a Western health economist told the *New York Times*, "There is no historical precedent for this anywhere in the world." Just as the nation was humiliated abroad by the eastward expansion of NATO and at home by poverty and the bloody quagmire in Chechnya, Russia was being carved up by a small group of self-proclaimed capitalists, known as oligarchs, who with the Yeltsin government's support orchestrated a massive insider privatization of the most lucrative state-owned industries. Little wonder, then, that Putin's 2005 characterization of the Soviet breakup as "the greatest geopolitical catastrophe of the [twentieth] century" resonated with so many Russians.

Not surprisingly, until Yeltsin's departure from the Kremlin in 1999, positive attitudes about the Soviet Union were inversely proportional to Yeltsin's popularity, strongly suggesting that longing for the past reflected an implicit criticism of his government's ruinous policies. As living standards, salaries and personal safety plunged, poll after poll detected a new nostalgia for the old regime. By 1995 Yeltsin's disapproval rating, at 69

percent, was close to the proportion of people, 63 percent, who assessed positively their former lives in the Soviet Union.

Since 2000, when Putin became president, roughly the same percentage of voters have approved of him as once disapproved of his predecessor. However, there has been remarkably little change in the polled levels of pro-Soviet nostalgia. Even as people's lives became more stable, prosperous and content, and even as satisfaction with Putin's Kremlin grew, 58 percent of Russians surveyed in a 2009 Pew Research Center poll agreed that "it is a great misfortune that the Soviet Union no longer exists." A 2011 poll by Russia's nongovernmental Public Opinion Foundation found that 59 percent regretted the end of the USSR. Clearly, Soviet nostalgia can no longer be viewed as simply an expression of dissatisfaction with the current Russian leadership and its policies.

Psychologists and some sociologists consider nostalgia a defensive emotional response to situations of overwhelming change. But Russian sociologist Leonid Gudkov, director of the Levada Center, which conducts regular public opinion surveys, believes the opposite might have occurred in Russia. For Gudkov, the transition from Communism has been characterized more by continuity than discontinuity. Leaving aside obvious outward changes, such as the Kremlin's professed new capitalist and democratic ideology, the use of czarist-era symbols and the tricolor flag, the Soviet endoskeleton—its authoritarian politics, police and military structures, and state bureaucracy—has remained remarkably intact (and even grown, in the case of the bureaucracy). The key aspect of continuity with the Soviet system, according to Gudkov, lies in the Soviet Person, an archetype that still underpins the psychology and self-identity of today's Russians. Could nostalgia for the USSR simply be this internally displaced Soviet Person pining for home?

From 1989 to 2004, the late Yuri Levada, a respected sociologist and Russia's most authoritative pollster, conducted a series of public opinion surveys designed to investigate the national character. Since his death in 2006, the project has been carried on by his successors, Gudkov and Boris Dubin. Published in 2008 in the book *The Post-Soviet Person and Civil Society*, their conclusions were discussed in September at a special conference in Moscow titled "A Soviet Person or a Modern One? Russian Values and Political Culture."

Assessing democracy's failure to take root in post-Soviet Russia, Gudkov and his co-authors do not blame extreme economic inequality or government authoritarianism of the past twenty years but the persistence of a Soviet mentality handed down for generations. The Soviet Person's dependence on the state enacts "a symbiosis of repression and the adaptation to it," a "passive, dream-like belief that things will somehow get better," coupled with the absence of "a sense of responsibility." The Soviet Person "blames his predicament on the government, the boss, the West; anyone but himself." All this, Gudkov and others argue, describes the archetype of a perpetual adolescent.

Beyond the question of whether these characteristics are Russia-specific, Gudkov seems to blame the people themselves for the mismanagement and undemocratic abuses of their rulers since 1991. His narrative also glosses over those instances when Russian citizens did try to take the initiative—for example, by freely electing a legislature (the Congress of People's Deputies and its Supreme Soviet) in 1990, only to see it shelled into submission by government tanks, under Yeltsin's urging, in 1993. Surely mass economic disenfranchisement and Yeltsin's super-presidential Constitution played as significant a part in stifling democratic consolidation as a set of vague character traits.

Nevertheless, even Gudkov's critics accept that seventy years of insular, authoritarian and idiosyncratic rule have produced at least some of the negative qualities attributed to the Soviet Person. But those qualities can also carry a compelling flip side, according to philosopher and close Gorbachev associate Valentin Tolstykh's *The Way We Were: The Soviet Person as He Is* (2008), an impressionistic memoir of ordinary life in the USSR after World War II. For instance, though sheltered, naïve and conformist, the Soviet Person, writes Tolstykh, was also trusting, communal and idealistic, qualities that find little scope for expression in Russia's current cutthroat capitalist system. "The essential traits of the Soviet Person: collectivism, internationalism,

and awareness," laments Tolstykh, have been replaced by indifference. Far from Gudkov's uncharitable portrayal, the Soviet experience actually produced a unique and admirable kind of person whose "very real potential was ineptly squandered and destroyed" after 1991.

Tolstykh is not alone in feeling that "life was harder in the Soviet Union, but there was more heart," as a commenter puts it beneath a web video clip of the closing ceremony of the 1980 Moscow Olympics. Another commenter, reacting to a song by Soviet rock legend Viktor Tsoi, writes, "It's not the [Soviet] system that I liked, but the people who lived in it, the sense of something genuine and real that we had back then."

In his influential study of Soviet life and Russian attitudes about the Brezhnev era, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, University of California, Berkeley, sociologist Alexei Yurchak, a former Soviet citizen, writes, "An undeniable constitutive part of today's phenomenon of post-Soviet nostalgia is the longing for the very real humane values, ethics, friendships, and creative possibilities...that were as irreducibly part of the everyday life of [late] socialism as were the feelings of dullness and alienation." Yurchak quotes a man who recounts that "the 'crash of Communism' was also, in retrospect, the crash of something very personal, innocent, and full of hope, of the 'passionate sincerity and genuineness' that marked childhood and youth."

It's no coincidence that aspects of youth and childhood figure so prominently in contemporary Soviet nostalgia, or that it is directed not at the Stalin era but at the Brezhnev era (to which a third of Russians would like to return, according to a 2005 poll), for that was when most of the authors featured here, now in their 50s to early 70s, were themselves young. One could even argue that contemporary nostalgia for the "era of stagnation," as Gorbachev characterized that period, is overdetermined: at once a longing for the innocence of youth and the relatively sheltered life under late socialism, before the damning disclosures of glasnost and the full-blown cynicism of the '90s—a longing for actual youth as well as for the metaphorical adolescence that Gudkov attributes to the Soviet state of mind.

The pervasiveness of such feelings may help explain the meteoric success of *Namedni*, or *Not So Long Ago*, a decade-long multimedia project by journalist Parfyonov. His superstar status, built on his coolly ironic personality and strong sense of integrity, accounts for the rest. Begun as a TV series in the late '90s, it has spawned a line of bestselling books. In its first incarnation, *Namedni* featured Parfyonov narrating selected events from a representative year in a decade of Soviet history, beginning with 1961. Using archival footage and green-screen technology originally used in the film *Forrest Gump*, Parfyonov inserted himself into historical reels, doing things like standing next to Nikita Khrushchev or shopping in the first Soviet supermarket. In its wry, apolitical collage of high politics, pop culture and everyday objects, the show treated the Soviet Union as an open-ended, value-neutral phenomenon.

If Parfyonov did not directly denounce the Soviet Union, then neither did his broadcasts or subsequent books sentimentalize it. "Many people feel tenderness for the Soviet system. Even our leaders feel that way," Parfyonov said in a recent interview. "And judging by how little modern Russia has moved on from the Soviet Union, our nation as a whole has yet to recognize the old regime's moral failings."

The multivolume glossy, expensive books arising from the *Namedni* project, the latest of which was published in November, feature a grab bag of large color photographs, news clips, interviews and narratives about every year from 1961 to 2005. For instance, 1962 spans physicist Lev Landau winning the Nobel Prize, the launch of milk in plastic bags, the Cuban missile crisis and the Soviet debut of the Hula-Hoop. The books target readers who lived through Soviet times as well as those who, like me, were too young to have experienced the Soviet Union and want to know more about their parents' generation.

The volumes are a runaway success despite their high price, and this reflects a growing trend. In the past year alone, at least three other books showcasing Soviet material culture have caught the popular imagination, even on the other side of the old Iron Curtain. *Made in Russia: Unsung Icons of Soviet Design*, edited by Soviet-born American writer Michael Idov and featuring contributions from the likes of bestselling writer Gary

Shteyngart, is a breezy English-language meditation on such Soviet staples as folding cups, Lomo cameras, fishnet shopping bags and rustic cars. Olga Dydykina's coffee-table volume *We Lived in the USSR* is a kind of Dorling Kindersley travel guide to the Soviet Union, with hundreds of photos and a dictionary of Soviet-era expressions. And Frédéric Chaubin's *Cosmic Communist Constructions* celebrates forgotten examples of late-Soviet architecture. What these books have in common is a tone of what Russian-born American scholar Svetlana Boym termed "reflective nostalgia," the kind that "lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time."

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But for some Russians, such an ironically detached, materialistic and even quasi-archaeological approach to the USSR belittles the spiritual, interpersonal aspects of the Soviet past. "I don't give a damn about vintage telephone handsets or '70s record players. Those old things are not what we miss," said my 62-year-old father when I asked him if he liked watching *Namedni*. "I miss the way people were, the way we felt, the way society was." Nor is it only the older generation that feels this way; many young Russians also "miss" the USSR, even though they never actually experienced it.

Irina Gluschenko, associate professor at Moscow's Higher School of Economics, recently asked her students to describe their feelings about the Soviet era. Their responses showed that if Soviet nostalgia was once a reaction to post-Communist poverty and turmoil, today, at least among a portion of Russia's more educated and upwardly mobile youth, it is seen as an antidote to the consumerism, anomie and lack of spirituality that blight these beneficiaries of Russia's increased wealth.

"The Pioneer camps, the Young Communist League—all that united people," writes one student. "Today, people inhabit their computers and apartments without even knowing who lives next door." Another lamented the passing of the "unhurried spirituality" of Soviet life. Even the formerly negative aspects of that life, like consumer-goods shortages and queues, are sometimes reinterpreted as sources of simplicity, creativity and innocent pleasure. The Soviet Union's darker aspects, such as censorship, surveillance, repression and travel restrictions, did not feature in the responses.

"A post-Soviet person is one who is lost in this world. He is totally naked—spiritually, materially, nationally," declared a 17-year-old to Serguei Oushakine, a Princeton-based Russian anthropologist and author of *The Patriotism of Despair*, an examination of Russia's postsocialist identity. "The partial rehabilitation of the Soviet Union represents an attempt to graft Soviet values onto the realities of capitalism," writes Irina Gluschenko. This rehabilitation takes official and unofficial, cultural and commercial, forms, from the reinstatement of the Soviet red star insignia and red military banner in the Russian army to the reintroduction of updated Soviet packaging of consumer products.

Yet paradoxically, writes Gluschenko, the ubiquity of such symbols has diluted the essence that gave them their appeal in the first place. Indeed, the popular objects and rituals Putin has resuscitated—the old Soviet anthem, the Victory Day parade and even the Cheburashka cartoon character, currently the Russian Olympic team mascot—were beloved not in themselves but because of their strong emotional links to Soviet values, which are at odds with the commercial and political imperatives behind their revival.

In his study of nostalgia for the Tito period, Slovenian sociologist Mitja Velikonja describes a struggle between top-down and bottom-up nostalgia. The first involves the production and mass distribution of symbolic objects, "a kind of nostalgia engineering, management or marketing," while the second describes the noncommodified, nonmaterial culture of nostalgia among the grassroots, contained in stories, collective memories and general attitudes—in other words, "a heartfelt nostalgia." Over the past decade in Russia, an elaborate superstructure of top-down nostalgia has emerged alongside bottom-up nostalgia. Commodified and stripped of context, these reincarnated totems were initially popular but now ring increasingly false among a growing number of people who nonetheless retain an authentic longing for aspects of the late Soviet period.

Putin may have initially derived some political capital from encouraging Soviet nostalgia, but its magic is clearly wearing thin. "The past cannot be the future," proclaims Mr. Freeman, a popular anonymous animated character in a hit YouTube video critical of the government.

Nevertheless, a rejection of official Soviet nostalgia should not be read as a rejection of nostalgia per se: two of the main beneficiaries of the humiliating showing of the ruling United Russia Party in the December parliamentary elections, the Communist Party and A Just Russia, also position themselves as nostalgic parties (the Communist Party even featured Stalin on some of its election posters!).

Although many Russians remain attached to the Soviet Union, the relative constancy of that fondness obscures tectonic shifts in the attitudes and dynamics that underpin it. No longer is Soviet nostalgia merely a flailing response to crisis, a denunciation of the government, a desire to turn back time or the helpless lament of those left behind by the new system. Today's Soviet nostalgics can be young or old, right-wing or left-wing, regime loyalists, anti-regime nationalists, liberals or even apolitical hipsters. But the nature of their longing has gradually shifted away from a desire to restore the USSR, something 75 percent of Levada poll respondents supported in December 2000 but only 53 percent did this past November. Soviet nostalgia is becoming more reflective, personal and independent, and thus less subject to political manipulation. In bringing back aspects and techniques of Soviet rule, Putin may have missed a fundamental point about nostalgia: that people long to relive the past only when they are sure it is irretrievably gone.