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## Young Russians' View of Their Family's Soviet Past: Nostalgic, Post-Utopian or Retrotopian?<sup>1</sup>

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*This article presents analysis of interviews with young Russians about the lives of different generations of their families in the Soviet Union. The analysis shows that the ideas about the life in the USSR and about family pasts are very fragmented and scarce, and it does not seem to the young people that this past affects their lives today. Nor does the question of the connection between the past and present seem interesting or relevant to them. The narratives about life in the USSR often idealize the circumstances and conditions of this life, but the young people do not express any nostalgic attitudes towards the Soviet past. One of the main findings of the analysis was the extreme inconsistency in the descriptions of life in the USSR, judgments about it and in stories about the attitudes of older relatives. Such contradictions do not seem to be a distinctive feature of the younger generation, but rather continue a Soviet tradition. Overall, young people's attitude to the Soviet past is determined by at least three factors: the political situation in present-day Russia, the post-utopian heritage of the USSR and pan-European retrotopian tendencies.*

**Key words:** Soviet past, family memory, historical consciousness, post-utopian society, cultural patterns of time

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## Introduction

“The occupation with past events does not only happen from the present, but also feeds back to this present and generates new perspectives on the future” writes Achim Landwehr [Landwehr 2016, p. 301]. This interdependency between past, present and future in people’s thinking does not allow for an unambiguous demarcation between them; the transitions are fluent. In line with Weber one could say “past”, “present” and “future” are a form of ideals, i.e. epistemological instruments which in their pure form do not exist within the meaningful reality of people. Halbwachs pointed out that in the collective memory, the past is preserved in the present, but the present finds its way into the past [Halbwachs 2005]. In relation to the future it is certain that its visions are greatly influenced by past and present experiences [Lübbe 1983; Hölscher 2017]. It is precisely along these lines that Landwehr suggests substituting the strict historical order of succession with models of intertwining when it comes to the thinking of people as “one cannot unequivocally say whether a given phenomenon belongs to the past, is present, or indicates the future. At respectively differing times it will be capable of all of these and therefore remain unpredictable” [Landwehr 2016, p. 304].

Thus, when it comes to the perception of the Soviet past, such individual and collective conceptions are constitutive parts of the present and will certainly affect the future. To me, examining the perceptions of the Soviet past is therefore about current social thinking, in which the communicative and cultural memory (cf. [Assmann 2006]) of the past intertwine with the perceptions and interpretations of the present, and with images of the future.

I am, therefore, interested in the younger generation who do not have any personal experiences in the Soviet Union (i.e. those born 1988 and later). Their retrospect on life in the Soviet Union stems from mediated experiences: from stories told within the family and from school, through the media and literature, and through cultural artifacts. Nora noted that we “do not have any idea what our offspring will someday have to know about us to understand themselves” [Nora 2002]; it is initially uncertain which representations and interpretations of the Soviet past one will find in the thoughts of the young people of today. I am interested in the transformations the events and experiences of the past underwent and are still undergoing in the collective memory of the young, who themselves did not have these experiences and who did not live through these events. Which of the past events are relevant or interesting enough to them to be transferred into their memories and integrated into their worldviews. Put differently: How do young people make the Soviet past meaningful to them?

## The study<sup>2</sup>

Between 2014 and 2016 in Moscow and St. Petersburg, 20 interviews with young people 18–28 were recorded. They were either university students or recent graduates.

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<sup>2</sup> In parts the implementation of this research and the students who took part in it are depicted in the article “The Soviet past in the perceptions of young Russians” [Shor-Chudnovskaya 2017]. This paper will highlight other research results that are not discussed in the aforementioned article or are only touched upon in it. To do this, it is necessary to repeat the most important features of the interviews conducted and to elaborate on some details.

All the interviewees were previously unknown to me. They were referred to me through colleagues at the universities or through students that had already participated in the study. Although this was a small study, focusing on students from Russia's two largest cities, the results provide valuable evidence of the retrospective view of Soviet history among young people in Russia today.

To approach the research question, I decided to focus the interviews on the interviewees' family histories. I used the communicative transmission of knowledge and memory in families by Welzer, which uses conversational remembering [Welzer 2001]. I asked young people to tell me about the life of their parents, grandparents and, if possible, earlier generations. I was interested in *what* these young people know about these lives in the Soviet Union, *how* they envision this life. Except for age and background as a student, no further selection criteria were applied, which also means no specific requirements about the family history. It was therefore pure coincidence that almost all participants had family members that had been victims of state violence or reprisals in particular in the first decades of Soviet power. However, with a few exceptions, the interviewees did not pay much attention to these incidents. The tragic fates of (usually) their great- and great-great-grandparents were only mentioned incidentally, the details sketched out without emotion.

The unusual format of a "recorded conversation about one's family's past" with a stranger was not always easy. The students seemed to be uneasy about the topic and their reactions sometimes varied from bemused to anxious to my questions. I was confronted with the problem of constructing the conversation in a way that it was not perceived as pressing. The interview was therefore characterized by caution and a certain reticence. I sought to avoid value judgments about historical events or taking a political stance.

Many of the interviewees stated that they had not taken part in such a talk before, nor asked themselves such questions in general. The interview situation in the frame of my study offered them the opportunity to make "discoveries" about their own historical origin, to refresh certain mental connections or to initiate new reflections. They turned out to be quite curious about their own historical origins, which often made the initial uncertainties and caution fade – at least partly – into the background over the course of the interview. Despite their visible tension, at the end of the interview the interviewees seemed to be grateful for the opportunity to reflect on their family history. More than a few seemed almost disappointed when the interview ended. One could see the urge in them to deal with the past – precisely through dialogue – and to examine and question that past in order to put it in more comprehensive historical contexts.

Overall, knowledge about the history of their own family was very modest. My questions about the time period before their birth, about the youth of their grandparents or even their parents were difficult to answer. Time and time again they stated that they knew barely anything or nothing about how the members of their own family had lived 30, 40 or 50 years ago. Many answers started with this confession. Afterwards, I could witness how the students, animated through my inquiries, tried to imagine how their grandparents fared in their youth. They dug up family legends, stories or details up from their memory. All the interviewees knew more than they initially thought they knew.

Offering historical terms such as "Thaw", "Stagnation" or "Perestroika" as stimuli rarely helped. Quite the opposite: it frequently caused the interviewees additional

difficulties relating personal stories to dry historical terms. There were only two historic events the interviewees could locate exactly in their family history: the Great Patriotic War and the so-called “roaring nineties” (not, however, Perestroika before that)<sup>3</sup>. In particular the latter were of high relevance to my interviewees because they understand *their time* as the time of overcoming the “roaring nineties” and therefore see it as an important, personally meaningful caesura.

Of the seven Soviet decades, the young people primarily know the last, although they often confused exact dates. They could talk about Perestroika but from the context of their accounts it became apparent that they meant the time after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Or they talked about their grandparents in the early 60s and thought they were talking about the stagnation under Brezhnev. If one ignores the incorrect historical details and mixed-up dates, the last decade of the USSR remains the time, which they could best conceive as “Soviet”.

### **A completely different country: profit and loss**

The interviewees were convinced that the country in which the lives of their parents and grandparents took place was completely different from Russia as it is today. Their wording was unambiguous: the Soviet Union was “a totally different”, “abruptly disappearing” country, an “utterly different epoch”, a “time that has nothing in common with the contemporary time” and varies “very much from the present” or it is different from the present “like heaven and hell”. They recognize hardly any connections, parallels or continuities between modern day Russia and the Soviet Union. To the same extent to which their verdict is unequivocal, the students had a hard time explaining more precisely what the otherness of the Soviet Union and these “strong differences” in comparison to today were.

The most obvious differences are primarily changes in the field of technological development. They mentioned technological innovation, gadgets and media that did not exist before. Second was usually the changed economic conditions like the market economy, dealing with money and property and the strong consumerist orientation of life in contemporary Russia. They talked about the fall of the iron curtain and the possibility of travelling abroad.

It was apparent from the interviews that the young people are absolutely aware of the fact that the life in the Soviet Union was a lot plainer, not comparable to the consumer and information society of today, that it involved many deprivations and dangers and still – they emphasize this *still* – they feel a certain jealousy when looking back on the life of their parents and grandparents, although this does not mean that they want to go back to this time. Elena<sup>4</sup> (22) from Saint Petersburg said:

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<sup>3</sup> For the results of the research concerning the commemoration of the October Revolution, the events during the years of the establishment of Soviet power as well as during the ‘Perestroika’ and the first years after the collapse of the USSR see: [Shor-Chudnovskaya 2017].

<sup>4</sup> All names have been changed.

*In earlier times people were more generous. Today, all our relations are shaped by the market and there is no social protection. Everyone wants something. Now it is only about profit for oneself and it is difficult to anticipate what somebody will do to you, nobody knows what will happen to you, But I do not want to go back to the past, I actually like the present.*

Polina (21) from Saint Petersburg painted a similar picture:

*When I think about the time when my mother was young, I have a very idyllic picture in mind. I imagine that everything was so quiet, so predictable. And somehow, well, the people were different too, somehow more friendly, less corrupted than they are today. Everything was still Soviet (laughs).*

This theme resurfaced when she later talked about her grandmother:

*You know, back then the people had no internet. They did not have many of the conversations of today. But they were happier, truly full of the joys of life. Anyway, my grandmother always thinks back with such a feeling. Well, how shall I put it? She remembers her youth full of relish; she says she liked this time. [...] There was more simplicity, more naturalness, more openness, somehow people were better than today. That's what I think.*

Another recurring difference between then and now was that the young people talked with conviction about the fact that the life in the Soviet Union was “a lot freer” than their current one in post-Soviet Russia. Through comparing, for example, the youth of their grandparents with their own, they noted regretfully and with a certain feeling of envy that their grandparents were “freer”.

However, from the context of the interviews it became apparent that by “freedom” they primarily understood a more relaxed, predictable life, the absence of the pressure and stress of everyday life, “more spare time” and “less traffic”, “more positive news” and “more security”. Inna (24) from Saint Petersburg, for example, describes this “freedom” as follows:

*It was the freedom of a comparatively quiet life, as if you don't have to worry about getting a job. If you want to, you will learn a profession and then you will also work in this profession or in any other you chose. You will have an apartment, maybe not right away, but at some point and that you know.*

It is a highly idealized conception of the life in the (later) Soviet Union. However, these idealizations are deeply rooted in the ideas of the young and strongly associated with the notion of “freedom”. When they talk about a “freer life”, they talk about the social security that they themselves have never experienced, but project onto the Soviet past. Inna continues:

*I see a lot more differences between today and back then than similarities. [...] I can't be sure that I will find work, I can't always be sure that I will have an apartment, that I have money to pay the rent. I can't be sure, whether I will be able to travel wherever I want to. Though today allegedly all borders are open, in a certain sense they are nevertheless closed, only differently. It is about money, that is, you don't always have the means to travel. That's how it is.*

Maxim (27) from Saint Petersburg also emphasizes this difference when talking about his parents (and therefore about the eighties):

*Well, I think in the sense of social protection, they felt a lot safer. [...] I mean, like me, for example (I don't know if it's true for everyone), but it scares me that you can barely plan anything. I mean, even in the short-run I can't plan anything with certainty. So much depends on coincidence. And my parents, well, even shortly before the collapse of the Soviet Union, I know they felt differently than I do today.*

The complaint of having to handle many uncertainties in the everyday life and to be completely on one's own or dependent on the vagaries of the market, especially when it comes to solving problems such as work and housing, recurs in almost every interview. While in many other studies the loss of Soviet social security is bemoaned as well (cf. [Rezanova 2011, p. 369]), what we are dealing with here is above all a remarkable interpretation of this social security. When the older generation bemoan the loss of social security or state services, they usually stress that *instead* of security there came freedom (and they often are unhappy with this trade off). However, the interviewees offered the opposite interpretation. Their room to maneuver or their perceived freedom do not exist or have decreased, precisely because the Soviet social security, whatever this means to them, is not there anymore. In their mind life in the Soviet Union, protected through state services, was in that specific sense freer. That freedom that was lost together with the fall of the Soviet system.

The theme of freedom also arises in another context. Every time the young people talked about the subjectively perceived advantages of life in the Soviet Union, they also talked about Soviet images of the future. In their mind, their parents, grand- and great-grandparents had no fear, no worry about the future. They were “freed” from such feelings. In this sense too the life in the USSR was “freer”.

As an example, Elena again:

*I don't think that [my grandparents] were worried about the future. I don't think so because they always think back so optimistically, so joyfully. [...] I thought about it and I realized that they were much more protected back then. [...] At least they had hope [...] and we don't. [...] And my parents, they could always imagine, at least somehow, as long as the Soviet Union existed, what they were going to do. [...] They always had an idea about what there will be to do and I don't, I have no idea.*

Many of the interviewees expressed regret about the fact that this image of the future had changed. One student got to the heart of it: “We don't move towards improvement anymore”. Inna paints a similar picture: “Today I don't feel so secure when it comes to my future. It is often very uncomfortable because I don't know what is going to happen.”

Alexander (18) from Moscow draws attention to the deeply changed view on the future:

*Back then our country had much more security. [...] Many of our citizens were strongly convinced that we are, you know, the best country in the world. There was intensive propaganda that we are living in the best of all worlds. In the sense that we are building a bright communist future, in which everyone will be well off. [...] There prevailed a joy of*

*having been born in this country. [...] And today this conviction, this security, does not exist any more. I mean, for me personally it doesn't.*

Maxim also tries to recreate the particular view of the future his grandparents held, even if he does not use the word “future”:

*I mean, of course they were communists, but not in the political sense, just like that, in a physical sense. They lived as such. This is how they created a big construction site in Chuvashia back then [1960]. It was somewhat of a miracle. Who builds new cities from the ground up nowadays? And back then they built a city in the wilderness, [...] it grew within two decades, from nothing. How can one imagine this feeling?! [...] This was their life. I have no idea if they were thinking about it, but they were active participants in the course of history itself.*

At this point Maxim became a little emotional. However, none of the interviewees showed open sympathies for communist ideologies. No one had looked into it more closely and actually knew the principles of communist ideology. Terms such as “utopia” or “communism” were, if at all, either used in a neutral or in an ironic way, while in most interviews they were not mentioned at all. This utopian coloring of the attitude towards life in the USSR, which persisted up until the 1970s and reached a final short peak during the Perestroika before it died out, evokes not only curiosity but also something like envy in the interviewees. They sense a certain conviction in their families in the Soviet Union – even if today they know it was a misplaced conviction – that the deprivation and suffering were temporary and that life will slowly get better, that the chosen direction of development is the right one. This conviction was carried by fundamentally long-term and optimistically colored future visions. It looks like the young are missing this attitude towards life and that future, despite the fact that otherwise I could detect hardly any longing in relation to utopian motivated action in their remarks.

## Contradictions and ambivalences

Their perception of the Soviet past is marked by many contradictions and ambivalences. Their stories from time to time lack logic and their feelings are highly ambivalent. In their perception of the Soviet past regret and admiration, envy and fear, interest and ignorance co-exist in the same way as the city of Saint Petersburg (Leningrad in Soviet times) and the Leningrad *oblast* (province) co-exist today.

This “logic of contradiction” comes across the most concisely in the words of Inna. To my question of what she generally understands under the term “Soviet”, she answered: “Well, ‘Soviet’ means to me, I mean, to me personally, something pretty robust, stable, but short-living, fragile” and laughed. When I point out that these adjectives contradict each other, she admitted it and explained, “Yes, yes, but in my head these adjectives remain connected. The Soviet Union is, to me, it means freedom, on the one hand, and many constraints, on the other. Hmm”.

One should not simply classify and dismiss the contradictory accounts of the young as an error in reasoning. They associate the retrospective perception of life in the Soviet

Union with mixed feelings and ambivalent interpretations. This is partly due to the nature of the phenomenon discussed in the interviews. For without knowing, Inna repeats the title of Alexei Yurchak's book, published in 2006 "Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More". Yurchak claims to have dedicated his anthropologically designed study to the peculiar logic of the Soviet system, in particular to its later phase when the persuasive power of the ideological postulates had ceased. According to Yurchak this was a logic, which was indeed compatible with paradoxes and ambivalences, even more, they were downright constitutive of it [Yurchak 2006].

According to Yurchak, the peculiar logic of contradictions and ambivalences affected the thought and worldviews of the people, in particular, in the later Soviet Union, independently of whether they were dedicated Soviets, prosecuted dissidents, banned artists from the underground or indifferent people who lived in an inner emigration. All of them, Yurchak emphasizes repeatedly, shared a peculiar ambivalence in their thought. In their collective perception, the Soviet system was "at the same time [...] meant for eternity and ready to collapse" [Yurchak 2014, p. 553].

This ambivalent logic Yurchak ascribed to millions of Soviets, has nothing to do with the well-known "double-talk". The deliberate strategy of "double-talk", which secured survival and many social advantages in totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, means that the people control themselves consciously or subject themselves to self-censorship. They take different roles in different social contexts (e.g. at home and at work), or hold different (or even contradicting) views to avoid a conflict of loyalties and to avoid becoming victims of state reprisals. It is about using a binary logic as a basis to differentiate between two realities (e.g. one at home and one at work) and to behave accordingly within them, to openly position oneself against the Soviet power within a trusted circle and feign a loyal political conviction in a more formal context.

The ambivalences and contradictions Yurchak showed in the thought of the Soviets and which are repeated in the conversations with the young people of today's Russia about the Soviet past are of fundamentally a different nature. They are not always conscious and cannot therefore be used strategically. Yurchak makes a case for not conceiving the Soviet system through binary concepts and for not ascribing the subjects a schizophrenic fragmentation into two or more realities. According to Yurchak ambivalences and paradoxes constitute *the only possible reality*. The paradoxes and ambivalences created by the subjects are to be understood as inherent elements of the inner logic, for it is only through them that any construction of meaning was made possible for the subjects within totalitarian or authoritarian conditions. Yurchak sees people as cultural subjects, who never subject themselves completely to existing conditions, but rather establish consistently new contexts and are also always capable of acting beyond the determining factors (cf. [Shor-Chudnovskaya 2017]). He views the resulting paradoxes and contradictions as tokens of freedom and autonomous action.

In the interviews this ambivalent echo from the past is encountered constantly. However, this is not an echo from the past, but a peculiarity of contemporary thought. The Soviet Union was built for eternity but was very instable; it was an authoritarian but at the same time a much more open society, one that had only simple living conditions to offer and at the same time it was a society which made its people happier.

The contradictions which stood out in particular were about experiences of state violence within the family, despite the fact that one would imagine that it is precisely this personal concern that would lessen the ambivalence. The young are quite capable



of talking about how their relatives died in the turmoil of the Bolshevik revolution or during the establishment of Soviet power that followed, and the Dekulakisation campaigns in the countryside. However, if asked directly whether there were victims of state violence in their own family, many denied it, confused or surprised, maybe because they only associate Gulag-victims with that term and have not learned to recognize anything else as “state violence”. On the other hand, a distinct indifference for the victims manifests itself, even in the cases under Stalin, in which relatives were put in camps, were exiled or executed. Despite knowledge about repressions in their own family and about the details, the students do not seem very impressed or emotionally touched by these incidents.

Svetlana Aleksievich whose books are based on numerous interviews conducted in Russia, makes this observation: “Lately I have visited ten Russian cities and interviewed hundreds of people. They do not deny Stalin’s cruelty, the cruelty of the reprisals under him, but they say that Soviet power was more just to the simple man; that he who had money was not as shameless as today; that there was no proliferation of corruption” [Aleksievich 2013, p. 498].

The findings from my interviews correspond to surveys conducted throughout Russia (cf. e.g. [VCIOM 2017]). According to a study published in July 2017 barely half of the respondents condemned the Stalinist purges, 43% deemed them appropriate. And even amongst the offspring of those who were shot or put in camps the numbers are surprisingly low: 57% of the offspring of victims condemn the reprisals, 33% state that it was a “necessary measure” to secure “order within the country” [VCIOM 2017]. Every third person deemed the victims within their own family politically necessary.

In my interviews I repeatedly witnessed that the ambivalence about violence toward their family is difficult for these young people, especially since they do not have any relevant adults capable of helping them with their reflections. Mikhail (22) told me that within his family almost everyone was subjected to persecution or reprisals in one form or another under the Soviet regime. He portrayed his family as a whole as a victim and time and again made ironic comments that under Stalin in his family “everyone had done time”. His narration was sober in tone, but one noticed a certain pride in knowing so exactly the sufferings of his family.

It was mostly his mother who told him about it. She witnessed the collapse of the Soviet Union as a young woman and had been involved in secretly typing out forbidden literature (samizdat). His mother, the daughter and granddaughter of victims of the terror later in post-Soviet Russia voted communist. According to Mikhail, she wanted the communists “to reclaim something of Soviet life. It was her dream, actually not only hers but of many people in her environment”. He tried very hard to logically explain the political choice of his mother who came from a family of victims and he ascribes it to her experience of economic losses after the fall of the Soviet regime. However, his explanations do not sound truly logical even to him.

Even more dramatic is the situation within the family of the Maria (27) from Saint Petersburg. She tells me about having filed an application to clarify the fate of a relative:

*So, my mother’s grandmother [...] was 27, already very independent and had experienced a lot, because when she was 15 they arrested and shot her father and brother [...] shot dead the father and the brother died later in the camps. And nobody, absolutely nobody knew of this until... I... half a year ago, filed the application.*

Maria talks about the reaction of her family and the comprehension of the certainty of her great-great-uncle's death in the camp:

*Well, the reaction was like this: Ah, terrible, terrible, terrible! [...] And my grandfather – he is a Stalinist – he recently hung up a portray of Stalin... He avoids such... well... difficult questions, he ignores them. He says nothing.*

At this point Maria laughs, but her sarcastic laugh cannot hide the fact that she thinks a lot about this story. In a later sequence, on a totally different topic, she comes back to it. She says that she does not have any positive visions for Russian society, because the attitude of her relatives concerns her. To Maria it appears that the contradiction she feels between the dramatic fate of her forebears many decades ago in the gulag and her family's reaction to it in the present was much more traumatic than the reply of the FSB to her application and the details of her great-great-uncle's fate.

Darya (21) describes another intrafamily conflict. She says she comes from a kulak-family. Despite knowing basically nothing about the history of her family in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, she knows at least a few facts about the paternal family history:

*Well, the only thing I know is, for example, they told me that when this dekulakisation took place, my great-grandmother and then my great-grandfather were sent to Siberia and later my great-grandmother came back from Siberia, but my great-grandfather, he stayed there. He was missing, he had probably died.*

Her father, Darya says, as the great-grandchild of a victim of the dekulakisation had always been against Soviet power, because he could not forgive them for having murdered farmers on a huge scale and in doing so ruined the agriculture. According to him it was “barbarity”. Darya gives an account of his critical point of view with a hint of irony and notes that he is the kind of person that is “always unhappy with everything”. She herself is of a different opinion:

*Well, I think, I would say I am maybe more in favor of such methods, I mean, all of these reprisals. They really wouldn't hurt today, e.g., to be directed against some politicians... [...] We could really use Stalin and his methods nowadays, e.g. to fight corruption.*

While her father could never forgive the violence the state committed against his family, Darya seems to have done so.

For such dramatic contradictions as in the families of Mikhail, Maria and Darya, who are representative of many others, there are many explanations. The most common being the sacralization of state power which can be observed in Russia up until today and which tries to excuse crimes committed by the state even against family members [Gudkov 2010]. Alexander Etkind give an alternative explanation for the specific mixing of post-utopian nostalgia and grief in post-Soviet Russia, which also represents a post-utopian society. “[...M]ourning for the human victims of the Soviet experiment coexists with mourning for the ideas and ideals that were also buried by this experiment. This is double mourning, for the people who were murdered for the sake of ideas and for these ideas, which were also killed by this violence – a warped concept in itself” [Etkind 2013, p. 12]. According to

Etkind this “double mourning” would be expressed in the form of indifference, a superficial expression of deep, unresolved grief.

I did not notice any signs of hidden grief in my interviewees, at least not in relation to the victims within their own families. Most appeared unmoved. They talked about their great-grandparents, who were murdered or died in exile as if it was too distant a past to be able to have any feelings for it. It was as if they could no longer bridge this temporal distance. However, what I noticed was a certain confusion in the face of the reactions of the relevant adults in their vicinity. It was in this regard, they appeared emotionally touched.

The paradoxical feelings in regards to the victims of state terror have a long-standing tradition and that a certain fascination over the “ideas and ideals” caused retrospectively – favorably formulated – ambivalent attitudes towards the victims. Immediately after the experiences of violence and even amongst the victims themselves such “ambivalences” were not uncommon. Evgenia Ginsburg and Varlam Shalamov – representative of many other gulag inmates – remained more or less convinced proponents of the communist or Soviet societal model even after years in prisons and camps in which they again and again only barely escaped death. This strange phenomenon of deep “utopian loyalty” of victims and survivors (not to mention their relatives) to the very regime that was wholly responsible for their humiliation and dehumanization, would be unthinkable in for example, the case of the Holocaust. In the discussion of Soviet state terror, various observers underline its paradoxical, incomprehensible “logic”. Etkind said that Soviet state “institutions were also created and run by people who shared the same nature – class, ethnic, and human – as those who were tortured or murdered in the gulag” [Etkind 2013, p. 29].

Platt spoke of a “twofold pain” that the Soviet past is still causing even almost three decades after the dissolution of the USSR [Platt 2012]. A consistent historic narrative in relation to the experiences in the Soviet era is, according to Platt, as impossible as a definite break with this past and a new beginning. In the seven decades of Soviet power *joie de vivre*, utopian confidence, and cultural and scientific life were much too closely interlinked with state terror (the intensity of which decreased drastically after Stalin’s death in 1953) and oppression.

As for Yurchak, for Platt it is about the only possible specific logic in the thought of the people who try to relate in a meaningful way to the experiences in the Soviet Union – for the inner logic of the events at the time demand a very particular meaningfulness and not a general evaluation and condemnation of these historical experiences [Yurchak 2006].

According to Platt, as many “changing and flexible connections between past and present” as possible should be established, which reflexively declare ambivalences to be the norm, expand on them and resolve them [Platt 2012]. He speaks of a “diversity of continuities”, positive and negative, that are necessary to connect the Soviet past to the post-Soviet present, to be able to account for all the historic contradictions. In other words, admiration should be permitted to co-exist alongside the harshest condemnation, contempt alongside nostalgia – to form an appropriate whole based on an understanding of how they are connected to each other.

Within Russian society, though, neither the necessary cultural nor political work has been done. The young people I talked to carry in their own thought much ambivalence inherited from the Soviet Union. This establishes a specific continuity between them and

the past about which we talked over the course of the interviews. However, neither do they recognize this continuity as given nor do they know how to face this problem. None of my interviewees longs in the sense of a classical nostalgia for the return to the Soviet Union (cf. [Levada 2002]). Several of them emphasized without being asked that they would not want to live in this past. What they long for, however, which became clear over the course of most of the interviews, is a past which one could consult better and more fruitfully in regards to their own origin.

## **Retrospective thinking and the image of the future**

The references to the Soviet past of the interviewees can be summarized as follows:

- (1) They do not consider the question of whether the Soviet experiences effect or influence their life in one way or another to be of particular importance. That this connection to the past possibly still exists or could be problematic is not a topic of relevance to them.
- (2) They have a very approximate and often idealized image of life in the Soviet Union and this approximate and idealized image is part of the basis for their critique of the present. I could not detect any nostalgic sentiments or the longing for some kind of return to the Soviet conditions.
- (3) They speak of the past as they do of the present and the future, very apolitically, i.e. as of a fateful necessity, which one could not have and cannot influence, despite the fact that they are virtually unanimous in their criticism of the present conditions.

While the interviews were dedicated to their family's past, they nevertheless contained many statements about the present and the future. It was remarkable how closely retrospection is connected to thinking of the future. Irritation in relation to the (Soviet) past goes hand in hand with an irritated view of the future. Most of the statements in relation to the future were very negative, not uncommonly words such as "crisis", "catastrophe" or "demise" were spoken, which is somewhat surprising in such young people. Olga (22) from Moscow, for example, describes her present compared to the youth of her mother (in the first half of the 1980s):

*Well, I'm not very well-versed when it comes to history, but I think an important difference was that back then she also lived in a very unstable time, but back then the hope for something radically new was strong, but today, today there is no stability either and in the future a catastrophe is waiting.*

Olga was the only one out of twenty students that openly stated at the very start of the interview that she wants to go abroad. She maintained that she was afraid that "the iron curtain would soon fall again" and that by then she already wants to be "on the other side of it".

Representative of many other students is Maxim:

*Well, you know, I do not see any development. And I travel a lot within the country. I also see how it is in the provinces, in the cities and even in the capital cities, unfortunately I don't*

*see any development. The capital cities have both reached a certain level, let's say a certain prosperity, but nothing else changes for the better. And in the provinces everything degrades. People simply move away. [...] And the people... They just think about themselves. They don't come together to do something, no, they take the last the other has. [...] That is horrible. I don't even want to think about it, but the reality is ... well, I have to live through it every day.*

In order to understand how the young people refer to the Soviet past and how this could potentially connect to the image they hold of the future, one would have to face three problem areas at once. The first is the current political regime in Russia. Without going into detail, I agree with Lev Gudkov's summary:

The attitude towards life of the young people who never lived under Soviet power, [...] is hardly any different from that of their parents. [...] We have to understand that it is not so much about what the young people want or how they act, but rather about what the existing social institutions, in which they have to move about and according to the rules of which they have to live, do with these young people. The Soviet human is permanently reproduced, through the fact that the fundamental institutions of the totalitarian system all reforms and modification notwithstanding, exist up to this day. The power vertical which is beyond every social control, the judiciary, dependent on the presidential administration, a political police, a mass army with universal compulsory military service, the world inside camps for inmates, meaningless and manipulated elections, the lack of communal self-administration, a pseudo-parliament and finally an educational system which has practically remained unchanged since the Soviet time and which continuously reproduces the old teaching standards [Gudkov 2016].

Beyond the effective basic political conditions there are two more problem areas on which I want to elaborate on in more detail since they are often given little consideration in this respect. First is the specific characteristic of the *Soviet* past, which predetermines the manner in which it is remembered. Cultural remembering is determined through the factual events of a concrete past. Second are the patterns of how to deal with the past *itself*. Which role is historical retrospection currently taking? How is the historical passage of time understood? Which conceptions of the role and meaning of past experiences are rooted in contemporary Russia?

Without being able to fully analyze these two problem areas, I want to talk here only about a few relevant factors. With regards to the first point it matters greatly, in my opinion, that Soviet culture had a very specific understanding of collective action. The aftermath of this understanding has not been sufficiently analyzed. In a first approach one can distinguish between at least four features of collective action, which have coined the self-image of the subjects of the Soviet Union and which can be traced back to the "utopian constitution" of this society (following [Shor-Chudnovskaya, Benetka 2015]):

- (4) Collective action which pursued a morally charged goal, which might have been rationally justified, this legitimation, however, was of sacral nature.
- (5) The subject of collective action saw itself as dedicated to a just or right thing, which had a positive impact on the (collective) self confidence.
- (6) Through a repressive regime, the controlled collective action was partly subjectively felt to be free or a range of strategies were developed in the thinking and acting to enhance subjectively felt freedom.
- (7) The political sense of time was based on a long-term and far-reaching optimistic vision of the future.

In the course of the erosion of the regime and its ideological foundations there remained in the end four effective disappointments: the illusionary or deceptive character of the collective goal; the untenability of the moral concepts; the illusion of freedom; and the discredited view of future. In addition, there are dramatic paradoxes and contradictions which are peculiar to both Soviet state terror and remembrance. These aspects will remain relevant for the dynamics of societal development in post-soviet Russia in the foreseeable future.

However, now one should consider the wider context, Russian society, however specific it may be, which displays parallels to the societies of East-Central and even Western Europe. This is not surprising as young Russians today have manifold channels of communication at their disposal that go beyond state borders and are not longer socialized within a closed monopole culture. Their attitudes and influences are similar to the ones in Western Europe. One can, therefore, presume, that the “post-enthusiast” society of the former Soviet-Union and the “disenchanted” Western society approach each other in many regards. The specific characteristic of the Soviet past superimposes a specific concept of history and time, which are particular to postmodern thought itself and are becoming more and more subject to sociological analyses.

According to Joachim Fest contemporary European society – late- or post-modernity – is also characterized by a specific need for orientation in relation to the future [Fest 1997, p. 235]. To Fest this need for orientation has its roots in the demise of the Christian certainty of faith. However, currently it matters in particular that, “when this development [the demise of Christianity] started over the course of the enlightenment, a substitute was, so to speak, ready. For the utopias, developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in the confused race for the best of all social systems, which redirected the hope of the afterlife to this world and made people believe that they could realize paradise already on earth.”

Within post-utopian societies, including the post-Soviet one, but also – albeit on a different level – the “postmodern” ones, even this replacement is missing or at least has become anachronistic, and thus no longer credible [Fest 1997]. The future is no longer a place of bold plans and ambitious hopes. Assmann speaks of a crisis of the future in her book about the “rise and fall of the time regime of modernity” (hence the title) [Assmann 2013].

It would be more concrete to speak of a crisis of a *better* future. It was not so much the existence of an image of the future, but its coloring that changed. Crises and destabilisations, rather than development and improvement are anticipated – and this is not a unique feature of the Russian view of the future, but a pan-European problem.

It is precisely this circumstance to which, Zygmunt Bauman dedicated his last book [Bauman 2017], which he calls “Retrotopia” – arguably a synonym for post-utopia and therefore the aftermath of utopian thought. Bauman claims that contemporary society is characterized by postmodern culture’s “retrotopian flirt with the past” [Bauman 2017, p. 18]. He develops a macro-sociological model of contemporary post-modern culture, in which past and future figure with features interchanged with the period of roughly a hundred years ago, for the hopes, according to Baumann, are only projected on the past: “Today it is the future, in which one cannot trust, since it seems completely uncontrollable. It is subscribed to the debit-side due to its (deserved or undeserved) reputation of having been a stronghold of freedom, on which not yet discredited hopes can be put” [Bauman 2017, p. 10].

According to Bauman, retrotopian societies have predominantly reactionary visions and orientations, for one enviously remembers the time in which the hopes for the future

had not yet been discredited. However, these conceptions of the future predict more comprehensive changes, for the world of action is a world of the internally anticipated future [Bakhtin 1979]. To Bauman and to Assmann it is, therefore, about new conceptions of time and about the resulting collective action. Their thesis is that it is not the “future” itself, but rather the collective action that experiences a crisis; that it is not so much the hope, but collective self-esteem that disappeared. What characterizes the society of the post-utopian era today is the peculiar longing for a lost utopian conviction of having the future under control and to be in the right. “Nostalgia”, “post-utopia” or “retrotopia”: all three diagnoses represent the same, namely a cessation of creative power and a bigger, more fearful caution in regards to the future consequences of one’s own action.

However, this strong retrotopian longing, which does not only belong to the people of Russia and does not only refer to the Soviet past, will hardly be able by itself to initiate the necessary corrective actions. What is peculiar in the “retrospective flirt with the past” is that the past receives not more but less attention. In reality it is only further glorified as mythic and thus robbed of its potential. In that way the “retrotopian flirt”, as understandable as it may seem, counteracts the emergence of new forms of accountability for collective action, which are desperately needed in a complex, interconnected, quickly changing world.

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## **Молодые россияне о советском прошлом своей семьи: ностальгический, постутопический или ретроутопический подход?**

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В статье представлены результаты интервью с молодыми россиянами о жизни разных поколений их семей в Советском Союзе. Анализ интервью показал, что представления о жизни в СССР и о прошлом своей семьи крайне отрывочны и скудны, при этом молодым людям не кажется, что это прошлое как-то влияет на их



сегодняшнюю жизнь. Вопрос о связи советского прошлого с настоящим не представляется им интересным или релевантным. В своих рассказах о жизни в СССР молодые люди зачастую очень идеализировали обстоятельства и условия той жизни, но никакого ностальгического отношения к советскому прошлому ими высказано не было. Одним из главных результатов анализа интервью стала крайняя противоречивость в описаниях жизни в СССР, суждениях о ней или в рассказах об отношении к ней релевантных взрослых в семьях. При этом подобная противоречивость, как представляется, не является отличительной особенностью молодого поколения, а продолжает, скорее, советскую традицию. В целом отношение к советскому прошлому у молодых людей определяется как минимум тремя факторами: политической ситуацией в современной России, постутопическим наследием из СССР и общеевропейскими ретроутопическими тенденциями.

**Ключевые слова:** советское прошлое, семейная память, историческое сознание, постутопические общества, культурные модели темпоральности

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