

BALTIC WORLDS

Post-USSR. 1991–2021

Guest editors:
PhD-candidates
at BEEGS

special theme

Introduction.

30 years of forgetting and unforgetting

In 2021 it was 30 years since the dissolution of the USSR. In December 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist, and new circumstances became relevant, the post-Soviet, post-socialist, and post-communist ones. The year of 2021 marked the end of the region's third decade under the sign of "afterness". What came after seemed, at least during 2021, to have almost entirely coincided with what was left after: the USSR's legacy and heritage; its accursed or blessed memories; the private nostalgic longing for it and the retrotopian public policies; political restoration and the remnants of the past in the present-day historical revisionisms. From 1991 the word, post, came to dominate the social realities in our region for 30 years, as well as scholarship about it.

During 2021 CBEES arranged a series of roundtables for a critical reflection on this thirty-year long *durée*. (That we did not know then that it would more or less end abrupt February 24, 2022).

THOSE ROUNDTABLES were covered by PhD-students from the Baltic and East European Graduate School (BEEGS) at CBEES in reports published at *Baltic Worlds* website. Online one can read their

full-length reports of all roundtables and events, here in the following pages we present just a selection of excerpts.

Professor Irina Sandomirskaja, who took the initiative to the series of roundtables at CBEES, in her introduction reflects on it, also in light of the abrupt end of this 30 years' period with the war.

IT WAS AN ENGAGED group of PhD-candidates that formed an editorial board to report on USSR 30 years series 2021. Monthly meetings on zoom were hold around the covering and wider discussions and reflections emerged: on why nostalgia is such a characteristic feature for the region, and on the images of the communist period and the use of the past in contemporary politics. Here in this special theme, we therefore publish a couple of new texts that evolve around the forgetting and unforgetting of the USSR. ✖

Florence Fröhlig & Ninna Mörner

Florence Fröhlig is Director of Studies for BEEGS, Ninna Mörner is editor of *Baltic Worlds*.

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Losing one's way and looking for a future 30 years after

The series of roundtable discussions dedicated to the 30th anniversary of the fall of the USSR was organized during 2021 by CBEES as a palliative measure. The idea was to counteract those destructive effects of the covid-19 pandemic that threatened to disrupt all scholarly activities and dissolved all networks. As it turned out, this would not be necessarily the case. Thanks to the efforts by CBEES scholars, online exchanges were organized that felt weird at first but eventually gave even broader and more variegated perspectives, with relevant topics and an impressively high level of expertise and debate. The role of BEEGS doctoral students in this must be specially stressed.

At their time, Södertörn university and then CBEES and BEEGS appeared as a result of, and in response to, the fall of the USSR. It was the dissolution of the Second World that motivated the Swedish government in the late 1990s to set up a special institution for higher education, to deal with changes and exchanges in cultures and societies around the Baltic Rim including Sweden herself. Yet recently, the need for a special Baltic and East European research agenda started to be questioned, its strategic purpose in the post-Soviet Europeanization appearing already fulfilled. The series of roundtables *Thirty Years After* had an additional objective of checking if the East - West divisions from the Cold War time still applied, and if they did, then, in what way, with what kind of new manifestations and effects, and with which unanticipated outcomes.

These problems were not only taken up in discussions with invited experts but also reviewed in a series of articles published

“THOSE THIRTY YEARS WERE NOW OVER, IRREVOCABLY LOST TO WAR, TERROR, THE RUSSIAN PROPAGANDA'S OBSCENE LYING AND THE RUSSIAN ARMY USING CRUDE BESTIALITY IN WARFARE.”

online by *Baltic Worlds*. It was BEEGS' PhD candidates who thought up the plan and thus provided a record of this complex event and commented on it in a series of reviews and essays. I guess CBEES could not do better providing a unique learning opportunity for the younger colleagues – the unexpected beneficence of the quarantine regime. They also took the initiative of organizing roundtable sessions, one that I thought was the most successful in the series, dealing with environmental impacts of Soviet industrial legacy.

AS I EXPERIENCED those conversations throughout the spring and autumn terms, they developed into a truly and essentially multidisciplinary dialogue: one is almost embarrassed to use these two words nowadays – *dialogue* and *multidisciplinary* – but they quite aptly described both CBEES and BEEGS at their inception until bureaucratic misuse deprived them of all meaning. To participate in such con-

versations, one needs to be able to step beyond the immediate needs of making a career in a certain discipline at a certain institution but learn to understand many different professional languages and to share the general understanding of problems encoded in other people's terms. Matters of transitional justice and memory laws; economic problems in state capitalism; documentary film and its strategy relating to a difficult historical past; the far right and the leftist art activists; urban spaces in transition and Russian post-Soviet literature – this is just to give an idea of the scope. A kaleidoscope of topics not claiming to exhaust the problems but suggesting a possibility of a future knowledge more adequate to the complex realities of the region, both in concepts and in content.

And better competence is indeed going to be required.

AFTER FEBRUARY 24th, the day the post-Soviet Russian Federation brutally attacked post-Soviet Ukraine, we realized that the thirty years before – that very *long durée* after the USSR that we were trying to define in those ten scholarly events throughout the pandemic year 2021 – those thirty years were now over, irrevocably lost to war, terror, the Russian propaganda's obscene lying and the Russian army using crude bestiality in warfare. The three decades after the USSR, as full of uncertainty and contradiction as they had been, now turned openly and unambiguously murderous, a colossal displacement of history that washed off like a tsunami everything that was, is, and was to come. In our discussions of the thirty years long post-Soviet period, we failed to anticipate its violent

finale just a couple of months later. What was wrong with our expertise, then?

The *long durée* of post-Soviet, post-socialist post-Cold War ambiguity now acquired *post factum* a much sharper image; an *interbellum*. Now, looking back at what we did or failed to do in the 2021 series, the legitimate question would be: Has the post-Soviet period, so irrevocably gone nowadays, been the cause of the disaster, or has it served throughout the time as the disaster's braking mechanism and then finally gave way? And can we, indeed,



ILLUSTRATION: KARIN Z. SUNVISSON

think it as an interbellum while in actual reality it was not any period of peace but all transfused with “local” wars including those far away from our borders that were either ignored or trivialized by both the international and domestic public opinion? How did the ambiguities of “post” (“both gone and still present”) affected the ignorance and trivialization? These are by far least important questions now that Ukraine is bleeding but winning, and the frightened world is slowly recovering its senses vis-à-vis Putin's nuclear black-

mail. Still, this will be one of many questions to reflect on in a very near future. CBEES researchers are already planning this year's annual conference with the title, “Where Are We Now?” This is a good strategy, starting with a question, and an honest one, acknowledging that we have lost the way, but are in search of a future. ✘

Irina Sandomirskaja

Professor in Cultural Studies,
Centre for Baltic and East European Studies,
Södertörn University.

Post-USSR 1991–2021.

Excerpts of the online publishing on the USSR 30 years. Full length: balticworlds.com/tags/ussr-30-years/

In December 1991, the Soviet Union ceased to exist, but its material and symbolic legacies still appear powerful enough to obliterate perspectives on the present and the future that has lost its utopian force.

Throughout the year 2021, CBEES arranged a series of roundtable discussions to make sense of this *longue durée* of “afterness”. The coming war and the end of the post-Soviet era we didn’t see coming, but a second reading may recognize signs of a turn to come. The roundtable organizers created international panels for discussion on questions ranging from economics and law to environment and urban space; from the European right to

global art, political and gender activism; the role of contemporary literature and documentary film; theoretical issues of than present-day regionalism and critical methodologies after the end of the post-Soviet. On *Baltic Worlds*’ website all roundtables were covered by PhD-candidates at the Baltic and East European Graduate School at CBEES; Alexandra Allard, Sofia Beskow, Wouter Blankestijn, Cagla Demirel, Martin Englund, Vasileios Kitsos, Maria Mårsell, Cecilia Sà Cavalcante Schuback, Tatiana Sokolova, Ksenia Zakharova.

On the following pages we present extracts, edited by PhD-candidate Jane Ruffino. ✕

POST-SOVIET ECONOMIES. FROM THE MYTH OF TRANSITION TO STATE CAPITALISM AND BEYOND

Roundtable
March 22, 2021

THE POST-SOVIET COUNTRIES’ economic performances have been diverse since the 1990s.

Comparing four countries – Russia, Belarus, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan – Belarus have had the most impressive development, in terms of annual change in GDP per capita, with an explosive growth in the 90s and 00s. This was concluded by Ilya Viktorov, Research Fellow at Stockholm University, in his introduction to the Roundtable “Three Decades of Post-Soviet Economies: From the Myth of Transition to State Capitalism and Beyond”.

The Roundtable was arranged by Ilya Viktorov, Researcher, Stockholm University. Speakers at the event were: Yuko Adachi, Professor at the Sophia University in Tokyo; Viachaslau Yarashevich, Humboldt visiting Researcher at Ludwig-Maximilians Universität in München; Yuliya Yurchenko, Senior Lecturer in Political Economy, University of Greenwich, London; and Yelena N. Zabortseva Associate Professor at University of Sydney.

Viktorov described the transition in the 1990s as ‘a destruction of a developed industrial society and a quick transformation of former post-Soviet republics into a number of developing countries.’

Adachi expressed that informal governance based on Putin’s network has become an operational principle in Russia, both in politics and the economy, with many of these state-owned companies being controlled by people considered to be part of Putin’s inner circle as well as the business elite.

Yarashevich: Belarus is reported to spend a higher share of its GDP on public education, health care, and pensions. Further, since 1990, Belarus have had the lowest infant mortality rate and the highest life expectancy, among these countries.

Yurchenko commented that in terms of welfare provision there is a sort of envy in Ukraine of what is going on in Belarus, as Ukrainian



Former USSR GDP (PPP) in 2019. Source: reddit.com.

state and policy makers have been neglecting its population. But how did Ukraine go from being highly industrialized and educated at the time of transition to being one of the poorest countries in Europe?

Yurchenko explained that there of course are regional differences, as in many countries, but for these differences to lead to armed conflict something more must happened or be added. Yurchenko argued that this something else in this case was the oligarchs going into power pitching different parts of electorates against each other as part of their electoral strategy.

Zabortseva emphasized that although overall ranking is meaningful it is also important to also look at sub indicators. For example, when looking at subcategories of the global competitiveness index Kazakhstan are ranked at the 25th position concerning the labor market.

ALEXANDRA ALLARD

30 years of “afterness”



ILLUSTRATION:
MOA THELANDER

LEGISLATING MEMORY. FROM MEMORY LAWS TO TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE

Roundtable
March 22, 2021

TWO PANELS on memory laws were held on the same day. The panel “Dealing with the totalitarian past: Laws on memory and legislation” addressed the ways different countries have approached the Soviet past in legislation and through “memory laws.” It was arranged by Yuliya Yurchuk and Florence Fröhlig. Speakers at the event included Maria Mälksoo from University of Kent; Andrii Nekoliak from Tartu University; Nataliya Sekretareva from the Human Rights Memorial; and Felix Krawatzek from the Centre for East Europe and International Studies (ZOIS).

This was followed by panel “Memory laws: an interregional perspective on commemoration and legislation.” One aspect that was carried throughout the whole event was a discussion of Western vs. Eastern models of memory laws. It was arranged by Cagla Demirel and Martin Englund. The speakers on this panel were: Jelena Subotic from Georgia State University; Joanna Michlic from the UCL Centre for Collective Violence, Holocaust and Genocide Studies; Johanna Mannergren Selimovic from Södertörn University; and David Gaunt from Södertörn University.

Providing examples from Russia, Ukraine

and Poland, **Mälksoo** emphasized the production of memory laws as a punitive mechanism that serves to protect the image of the state according to security theory.

Nekoliak described how different mnemonic actors in the Ukraine parliament advocated two competing memory models, also referred to as grand narratives: The Soviet-era memory model versus the National-Ukrainian memory model.

Sekretareva argued that Russia will not fully deal with the crimes in the past without distancing itself completely from the communist past. This notion of Russian national identity seems to impact on both mainstream national memory narratives and transitional justice mechanisms adopted for victims.

Krawatzek returned to the aspect of demand, concluding that memory laws are not solely a tool to control the cultural memory from above, but that there is an observable demand for memory laws in the populations.

Subotic highlighted that memory laws emerged in the context of considerations in relation to criminalizing Holocaust and genocide denial; however, they have been increasingly utilized and instrumentalized for nation-building purposes.

Michlic

stressed that the memory laws have been stimulated within a framework that promotes ethno-national unity. Therefore, they tend to marginalize minorities and polarize the citizens within these contexts.

One of the first trials related to rape as a war crime was based on the findings of rape as a modus operandi in a camp located in central Foča. However, **Mannergren Selimovic** observed that over time people’s willingness to talk about these verdicts changed.

The concept of memory laws makes scholars focus on high politics, which is a dead end, in **Gaunt’s** opinion, as long as they do not look at how these memory laws are being implemented, how they affect people’s lives.

Per-Anders **Rudling** gave a talk on memory laws in Ukraine which is also connected to Poland. He described Poland and Ukraine as an old dysfunctional couple that can neither get along nor manage to divorce. Ukrainian memory laws are being mirrored in Poland and vice versa.

CAGLA DEMIREL
& MARTIN ENGLUND

THE RUSSIAN INDUSTRIAL LEGACY. BLIND FAITH IN BIG SCIENCE AND TECHNOCRATIC SOLUTIONS

Roundtable
May 26, 2021

“INHERITING THE Pandora Box: Environmental Impacts of the Soviet Industrial Legacy” explored the relevance of the Soviet environmental legacy and its impact on how we as a society understand our relationship to the environment today.

On the website there are two texts from the roundtable. One is a longer report from the environmental studies’ perspectives, written by the organizers of the roundtable: PhD-candidates Tatiana Sokolova, Wouter

Blankestijn and Ksenia Zakharova. The other is a brief summary of the event from a social studies perspectives, written by PhD-candidate Vasileios Kitsos. The panel featured four speakers: Paul Josephson, Professor in History, Colby College, Waterville, Main; Anna Barcz, Assistant Professor, Institute of Literary Research, Polish Academy of Science, Warsaw; Dimitri Litvinov, Campaigner, Greenpeace Sweden; and Arran Gare, Associate Professor in Philosophy and

Cultural Inquiry, Faculty of Life and Social Sciences, Swinburne University of Technology, Melbourne.

The speakers were united in their search for a hopeful message. They each expressed the need for a continuous cultural and political struggle, for the democratization of science and technology, and for a dialectical, synthetic process philosophy, including the revival of some of the progressive environmental ideas of the pre-Soviet and early Soviet era.

RUSSIA FROM THE OUTSIDE. THE EUROPEAN FAR-RIGHT LOOKS EAST

Roundtable
June 10, 2021

WHAT ROLE DOES Russia play for the contemporary far-right movement? How is Russia perceived "from the outside" (in the viewpoint from Eastern Europe)? These questions were discussed among the four speakers who shared views of Russia from their own national contexts: Ukraine, Slovakia and Poland. The speakers were Jose Pedro Zuquetem Social Sciences Institute, University of Lisbon, Portugal; Andreas Umland, Department of Political Science, Kyiv-Mohyla Academy, Kiev, Ukraine; Tomasz Kamusella, University of St Andrews, St Andrews, UK; and Nina Paulovicova, Centre for the Humanities,

Athabasca University, Canada. The event was organized by Mark Bassin, CBEES, Södertörn University and Per Anders Rudling, Lund University.

"Playing on the growing nationalist spirit, Russia have tried to regain the former connection by campaigning against this turn to the west. This campaigning has been somewhat influential, as it seemed to have played a part in the electoral success of the Ukrainian far right in 2012.[...] Although nationalist attitudes were largely evoked by the Russian attack, they were later used by Russia to re-establish the former connection.

SOFIA BESKOW

ART, GENDER & PROTEST

Roundtable
August 26, 2021

THE PARTICIPANTS in the roundtable were invited to reflect in advance on several questions on art and activism to provide inspiration for the discussion. The four participants were: Victoria Lomasko, artist and author, Dr. Diana T. Kudaibergenova, researcher at the University of Cambridge, Antonina Stebur, curator and researcher, and Dr. Nadezda Petrusenko, researcher at Södertörn University.

**YULIA GRADSKOVA
& MARTIN ENGLUND**



Victoria Lomasko
and her art in 2017.

URBAN SPACE IN TRANSITION. AFTER THE COLLAPSE OF THE USSR

Roundtable
September 21, 2021

THIS ROUNDTABLE offered perspectives on approaches to architectural heritage, and the ways memory has been made and remade in urban spaces since the dissolution of the USSR. It investigated four examples from both Moscow and St. Petersburg. The panel was arranged by Irina Seits, who also joined as a speaker, along with Jan Levchenko, Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Olga Kazakova and Vadim Bass, the European University, St. Petersburg.

Bass addressed the recent competition for the new Museum of the Siege of Leningrad. Introducing his case, Bass made a reference to early attempts to commemorate the Siege, already short after WWII: These



Cinema Rossyia, transformed into a playful pop object. Moscow, 2016.

included triumphal arches, cemeteries and an exhibition which failed to gain a permanent character.

Seits presented the history of industrial

plants St. Petersburg through their names and addressed the practice of renaming as a means to appropriate the heritage in this city.

Kazakova drew attention to an additional aspect of the cinemas, which was their sociopolitical and spatial function. Under Soviet censorship, whenever program directors managed to screen a rare or censored film, they played them in such peripheral cinemas.

Levchenko gave a presentation of characteristics cinematic visions of Moscow in the beginning of the 21st century. As he first argued, the views to a capital city, especially of a totalitarian state, demonstrate the dominant conception of lifestyle.

VASILEIOS KITSOS

FORGETTING AND UN-FORGETTING. 30 YEARS OF THE USSR'S FALL AND SERGEI LOZNITSA

Roundtable
December 1-3, 2021

THE MONTH OF DECEMBER began with three days of a much-awaited Symposium on the 30th Anniversary of the USSR's fall, with the presence of film director Sergei Loznitsa in Stockholm. The Symposium, organized and presented by Professor Irina Sandormirskaja, took place at Södertörn University

and at the Swedish Film Institute between December 1–3, 2021.

Sandormirskaja managed to bring diverse disciplines together for vivid reflections and rich exchange on issues such as the event, image, history, archive, memory, and oblivion, as well as the world of Loznitsa. Invited speakers were the poet Lev Ru-

binstein, the author and Professor Mikhail lampolski, and Professor Andrea Petö. Along with screenings of Loznitsa's films *The Event* (2015), *The State Funeral* (2019), and *Austerlitz* (2016), there were lively discussions with several invited speakers and the audience.

**CECILIA SÁ CAVALCANTE
SCHUBACK**

WHAT IS POST-SOVIET LITERATURE TODAY?

Side-event
December 4, 2021

FOR LARGE GROUPS in the East, the fall of the Soviet Union was like a floodgate opening through which history flowed in. The period following 1991 has been described as transitional, and the literature as post-Soviet. In the panel discussion "Fast forward – Rewind" at the Stockholm Literature Fair at Kulturhuset on December 4, 2021, questions such as how this transition can be understood in retrospect, and how we are to talk about Russian literature of today, were addressed.

According to sociologist Ruth Levitas the Cold war, the spread of capitalism and the fall of the Soviet Union closely interlinked utopia with dystopia. Still, human beings inevitably relate to utopias and establish a relationship with them. Philosopher Ernst Bloch even claims it to be a part of human ontology and emphasises art's potential to visualise and evoke the not-yet-here. After the fall of the Soviet Union expectations on radical social transformation, which lies close to the notion

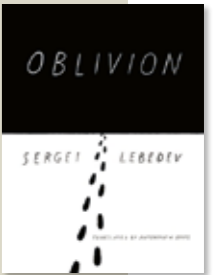
of utopia, was high. The panel discussion – a co-arrangement by the Swedish cultural magazine *Aiolos* and the Centre for Baltic and East European Studies (CBEES) at Södertörn University – revolved around the outcome of these expectations.

The panel consisted of experts in Russian literature and Cultural Studies: Professor Emeritus Lars Kleberg, Professor Irina Sandormirskaja and Lecturer Mattias Ågren. In her introduction moderator Tora Lane, Associate Professor and research leader at CBEES, framed post-Soviet literature as characterised by the relationship with the Soviet Union or Soviet culture and the change this relationship has undergone during the thirty years that have passed since the fall of the Soviet Union. After the fall there was an urge to move fast forward in time. This, said Lane, just like a need to deal with the past – it's myths and lies – characterised the literature during the 90s and beyond.

MARIA MÅRSELL

THE PANEL RECOMMENDS THE FOLLOWING POST-SOVIET LITERATURE AND FILM:

- *Aiolos 72–73* (2021) on post-Soviet literature
- Sergei Lebedev *Oblivion* (Предел забвения, 2010)
- Vladimir Sorokin *Telluria* (Теллурия, 2013)
- Alexander Etkind *Warped Mourning. Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied* (2013)
- Lev Rubinstein *Complete Catalogue of Comedic Novelties* (2014)
- Sergey Loznitsa *The Event* (Событие, 2015)



FARTHER AND FARTHER ON By Lev Rubinstein, translated by Philip Metres and Tatiana Tulchinsky

[...]

28 *Let's go farther.*

29 *Here it's said: "All those craving and lusting, those fighting in vain and those scrambling out of the filth, those half-deaf and those forever hoarse—well, what are we to do with them?"*

30 *Here it's said: "All those striving higher, those sliding into the abyss, those climbing on and out, those hurting and those living through uncontrollable passions, those accustomed to everything, those interesting in their own way—what do they want here? Why should they be here?"*

31 *Here it's said: "All those guilty without sin, those bitten and shy, those intently pondering and those attracted by a barely-audible voice of eternity, those stooped from the backbreaking puzzles of existence, those in undue agitation from God knows what news, those anxiously listening to what is said—where do they find themselves heading?"*

32 *Here it's said: "All those not guilty but confessing, those seemingly cheered up but every other minute falling into depression, those striving to beat their neighbor in grasping what's going on, but not understanding a thing, those dragging the baggage of their own hopes and those affirming that everything is lost, all those now too late, and now too early, those swaying in the weak breeze and those stubborn in their own delusions, those thinking that everything is passed, and those shifting from leg to leg waiting for changes—that's enough already—it's time to stop."*

[...]

46 *Another voice: "So what now? What can I do? There's no way back—it's clear. Stay where I am? Well, no, that's not for me. Should I go and face my fate? Okay, then, I'm ready. (To the audience). And why are you silent? Why aren't you stopping me? Or consoling me? Surely one human word can sometimes save you from ruin. But what am I talking about? Whom am I speaking to? Farewell..."*

[...]



LEV RUBINSTEIN is a Russian poet, essayist, and social activist. He is a founder and member of Moscow Conceptualism. In his "notecard poems", each stanza is represented on a separate notecard. These notecards highlight the text as both an object and a unit of expression. To read the poem, the reader is supposed to interact with the text on a physical level.



The Soviet Union 1970 stamp, *Conquerors of the Space*.

Space nostalgia: the future that is only possible in the past

Why has the Day of Cosmonautics, April 12, never become a national holiday in Russia? by **Roman Privalov**

A popular video, *Russian Space train*, made by a comedian group Birchpunk, gathered more than 4 million views on YouTube. In the 8-minute episode, a train conductor working on board a spaceship composed of Russian train carriages and operating on the line to Neptune makes a home assignment for her English class. In a peculiar mix of Russian and English words, she describes the happenings onboard her carriage, taking place against a view of the galaxy opening up through the windows. The episode is thoroughly nostalgic: it offers popular songs with a guitar accompaniment, tea-drinking from Soviet-style glasses, and a train station on another planet that is simply taken from any Russian provincial town. The comments to the video are thoroughly positive: this short piece simultaneously raises feelings of belonging and of wonder at a seemingly impossible assemblage of Rus-

sian realities, Soviet fantasies, and futuristic projections. These are commonly expressed in opposition to the state-sponsored mainstream movies that give their audience a bitter taste of lost future, with comments such as “at least someone can still make a great movie”.

IS THIS SHORT EPISODE another case of capitalization on nostalgia? In modern Russia, space culture and space politics are commonly seen through the lens of nostalgia and commodification of memory that allows both economic and political capitalization.¹ The legacies of the Soviet space program, of Sputnik, of Gagarin’s flight and of the first spacewalk are turned into a set of easily recognizable symbols that are put on pullovers for sale as much as they appear on election posters. To a large extent, the appropriation of Soviet space legacies seems to coincide with the



appropriation of the commodified memory of the Great Patriotic War. Through the post-Soviet decades, the latter has become an inexhaustible resource for extracting profit, for legitimization of the Russian political regime, and recently also for the market of political repression, with photos taken in wrong places at wrong times and posted later in social media functioning as motives for criminal prosecution. Sometimes, the War and Space appear together: such was the last parliamentary election booster campaign, conventionally titled “The Land of the Winners”, in which the heroes of the Great Patriotic War were accompanied by cosmonauts and space program engineers such as Gagarin and Korolev. The recently renovated memorial sites of the Soviet space program, such as museums and monuments, also increasingly recall the sites of “patriotic education” erected around the memory of the Great Patriotic War. Finally, the recent set of historical space blockbusters: *Gagarin The First in Space*, *The Spacewalk* and *Salyut-7*, all glorifying the pantheon of Soviet space mythology, conjoins the profusion of historic movies and series resurrecting the heroic settings of the war. In general, the nostalgias of the war and space appear to have similar functions in modern Russian capitalism and the political regime accreted to it.

YET THE ANNUAL Victory Day on May 9 brings a climax of mobilization through commodified memory, while April 12 is nearly forgotten. On May 9, there is nowhere to hide for an urban dweller: in all news and all media, in all supermarkets and all parks, “from every smoothing-iron”, as the Russians say, the message of great common victory will reach you. This message is

“WHAT HAPPENS ON APRIL 12 IS RATHER AIMED AT THOSE DIRECTLY INTERESTED IN SPACE.”

supposed to be readily converted into loyalty and pride, – to be fair, this does not always happen smoothly – and also into some, often erroneously underestimated, money. What happens on April 12 is rather aimed at those directly interested in space. The space museums and planetariums provide some events. There may even be an opening of something extraordinary, such as the giant second exhibition hall of the oldest space history museum in Kaluga in 2021, on the 60th anniversary of Gagarin’s flight, that was under construction for more than a decade. Markedly, President Putin was expected to perform the opening of Kaluga’s new iconic landmark but changed his plans just a couple of days in advance. In many of my conversations with Russian space professionals and space enthusiasts, a bitter memory of the half-

century anniversary of Gagarin’s flight in 2011 was disclosed. According to many, the state has almost neglected the occasion. The point of this essay is not to give an explanation of why Russian officials make certain decisions and not others; there might be plenty of mostly profane reasons for this. Rather, the point is to use this observation of neglect as a point of entry to a view on nostalgia that is different from the mainstream, that would see it as a valuable resource that is potentially dangerous for the established order rather than a melancholy and readily-commodified resentment.

Although the attempts to capitalize on space nostalgia clearly recall how the memory of the war is appropriated in modern Russia, it might be no less fruitful to compare April 12 with November 7 – the day of the Great Socialist Revolution, the uncomfortable memory of which seems both inextricable and dangerous. Its centennial in 2017 closely resembled how plenty



a futuristic halo of the Soviet space program as a possible way to comprehend why April 12 never managed to become a full-fledged fantasy world of what Boym terms “restorative nostalgia” like May 9th, and to see which alternative ways to understand nostalgia it may open up. The future-oriented gaze of space nostalgia makes space memory a dangerous commodity for the current Russian elites, one that should be kept at bay and allowed only a certain degree of capitalization, in the same way as fake Lenins can pose as much as they want for tourist photographs on the Red Square, but no occasion should allow any substantial debate on the Revolution.

There is a common perception that nostalgia can be “bad” or “good”, largely coinciding with Svetlana Boym’s division of it into restorative and reflective types.³ The bad, restorative, variety of nostalgia sees itself not as nostalgia, but as the truth. A world of traumatized fantasy that strives

for its own mythological unproblematic past, it is obsessed with rebuilding the past – a place of wonders that never existed and the desire for which often provides the most malformed results stretching all the way into the future. It is to restorative nostalgia, says this common view, that we owe nationalistic upheavals and at worst, conspiracy theories. The good, reflective, type of nostalgia functions differently – it is an ethical, private and painful investigation of the lost past, an attempt to temporarily return there in order to distinguish the avoided possibilities but also to retrace the chosen path. Not surprisingly, it was suggested that the attempt to attribute the political dimension – the possibility of making forms of collective belonging – to reflective nostalgia, which functions rather as a personal or group therapy of sorts, is problematic.⁴

A MORE CRITICAL view on the restorative-reflective divide suggests that actual practices of nostalgia almost always combine elements of both, taking further Boym’s own observation that restorative and reflective nostalgia can be connected to the very same objects.⁵ The Russian Victory Day may offer some examples of how the two branches are intertwined. For example, the “Immortal Regiment”, initially an initiative of local activists

in the city of Tomsk where the locals marched with photos of their veterans, later taken over by Russian officials and turned into an all-national spectacle with nationalistic sentiments, does not necessarily preclude the possibility of ethical reflection on behalf of its participants. Seen from this angle, the common view of “bad” restorative nostalgia and the “good” reflective type appears rather shortsighted. What matters is rather the political and social context which gives particular nostalgic practices their meaning.

Importantly, in such a critical view even the nostalgic attempts labelled restorative should not confuse their critical readers: nostalgia is not a longing for a lost past, but a longing for longing itself, “a desire for desire”,⁶ for “the subject’s memory of their own past investments and fantasies”, for “the imagined futures these fantasies projected”.⁷ It is “a structure of fantasy” that is “perceived as lost”,⁸ not any particular fantasy as such. In this light, space nostalgia points not so much to the specific achievements of Soviet space exploration, as to the possibility to imagine such achievements in the future more generally. The colloquial saying: “Yuri [Gagarin], we f*cked up everything” – that became a popular motto in the post-Soviet Russia, points exactly at this difference. What is f*cked up is not a particular spacewalk or space launch or Soviet Moon program – about which general public tends to know very little, and which function as resources for political and economic capitalization – but rather a possibility of a particular imaginary and feeling of agency associated with it.

STILL, CRITICAL READERS of nostalgia struggle to offer an alternative to the political dimension attributed almost exclusively to restorative nostalgia. Arguably, their reluctance to accept such conceptualization is mostly private and existential, and I share it too: I am nostalgic, and I don’t feel agreement with the idea that it is worthless beyond my own self-therapy. In fact, my experience is very different: my nostalgia, not least that connected to the future-oriented Soviet space mythologies, allowed me to make many meaningful connections in different cities and towns, at conferences and during interviews, in railroad carriages and commuter buses. So I would like to try to offer an alternative that seems more plausible to me.

To do this, I would like to look more closely at how desire is understood in nostalgia scholarship and which political possibilities its understanding allows through a “desire for desire”. Despite a turn from

exact objects of desire to structures of fantasy, the critical takes on nostalgia still seem to operate with the conceptualization of desire most common in analyses of political discourse: a Lacanian-inspired idea of desire as a lack that can never be fulfilled. This view of desire is still object-oriented: it looks for an endless repertoire of replacements for an object that can never be replaced, putting emphasis on the hegemonic shifts of meaning in social and political practices.⁹ From this point of view, “desire for desire” is marked by a certain “lack of a lack”, and restorative

nostalgia closes the possibility of any contingent arrangement which could function as a basis for political resistance and alternative political formations. Reflective nostalgia, on the other hand, aims at overcoming the first of two lacks, thus returning its subjects to normalcy.

This is not the only way to approach desire. In fact, more affirmative views on desire can fit the elusive concept of nostalgia in more satisfactory ways. Through works of Gilles

Deleuze and Felix Guattari, for instance, lack is understood not as a primary basis of desire but as an effect of social production that renders desire a constant phantasmatic compensation for something that is missing.¹⁰ But desire itself is not a desire for a lost object; rather it is a principle of differentiation that manifests itself in “the production of production”, in continuously integrating what appears incompatible.¹¹ In this view, Lacanian desire appears rather reactive, as it is a desire that is desiring its own repression due to the practices of social production, a desire that is desiring a possibility to be managed and stabilized. Indeed, seen from this angle, the nostalgic “desire for desire” may be assumed to disallow desire’s own arrest/suspension and to allow the continuation of “the production of production”. In

other words, Deleuzian accounts could attribute to nostalgia a possibility of reassembling the seemingly obvious identities into aggregations that can be foreseen only to a limited degree. This is because the apparently stable, although contingent, identities constitute the macropolitical level while nevertheless always possessing a micropolitical dimension, in which the fluidity of their pre-given forms becomes obvious and in which desire seeks what escapes them and from them, striving to make new connections.¹² The ways to such new connections are called, conveniently for the space dreamers, “lines of flight”.¹³ Crucially, such a view of nostalgia is also underpinned by Deleuze and Guattari’s rejection of a linear conception of time and the introduction of a temporal logic of immanence, in which the past is never

“THE FUTURE-ORIENTED GAZE OF SPACE NOSTALGIA MAKES SPACE MEMORY A DANGEROUS COMMODITY FOR THE CURRENT RUSSIAN ELITES.”



Soviet poster commemorating Yuri Gagarin’s space flight.

gone, but rather a part of the present, at the same time underlying and challenging the seemingly stable identities of subjects.¹⁴ It is in this light that the futuristic visions of space nostalgia play a crucial role, as longing for a lost future may eventually light up paths to new futures, embedded in the current contexts. The thesis on a future that is only possible in the past, attributed to contemporary Russian space politics and space culture,¹⁵ in this way becomes a revelation of a specific structure of fantasy rather than a statement on particularly sorrowful situation.

THIS IS NOT to say that space nostalgia is not used to legitimate current nationalistic upheavals by state-affiliated actors. To make such a statement would amount to extreme ignorance of the current political context. Rather, what I want to say is that such appropriations do not exhaust the political possibilities of space nostalgia, and that its political possibilities should not be seen as limited to what currently makes sense as “political”. The profusion of grassroots connections, “rhizomatic” if one wants to put it in a more Deleuzian way, that space nostalgia opens up, possesses a no less political dimension than the state-sponsored practices of nostalgia. What are these connections and in which context do they unfold? In recent years, a team of Russian anthropologists has been documenting the practices of horizontal and amateur space exploration in Russia.¹⁶ What they found were networks of space amateurs, launching satellites into the stratosphere, organizing space lessons in schools and maintaining hundreds of museums of cosmonautics throughout the country – very different from the shiny buildings of key and famous state museums, and sometimes located in village sheds with models of spacecraft that locals made themselves from the available materials. We might also consider the recent return of space projects to the domain of futuristic dreaming more generally, and the availability of information on them throughout the Internet. The revival of expansionist projections through neo-liberal fantasies, such as Elon Musk’s *SpaceX* and Jeff Bezos’ *Blue Origin* plans for the Moon and Mars colonization plays with the ideas of futures that are green (as Bezos suggested relocating all industries to the Moon and asteroids) and politically alternative (as Musk noted, Earthly laws will not be applied in extraterrestrial settlements). The official Russian discourse on space does not seem to offer any alternative to these,¹⁷ which causes significant dissatisfaction among the Russian publics interested in space exploration, related not least to a memory of the Soviet space program with its utopian visions. Such reactions are observable in the YouTube comments on the recent Russian space blockbusters, many of which draw a comparison between the Soviet, allegedly ideologically based, space program and the Russian one that seems to make no sense in terms of future projections. Even more so, they are observable in many social media groups related to space, whose members put a lot of energy into ironic mockery of Russian space officials. For instance, the infamous quote by the director of Roscosmos, Dmitry Rogozin, who suggested in 2014 that the USA could deliver their astronauts to the International Space Station with the help of a trampoline if they refused Russian services, led to widely-shared mockery of

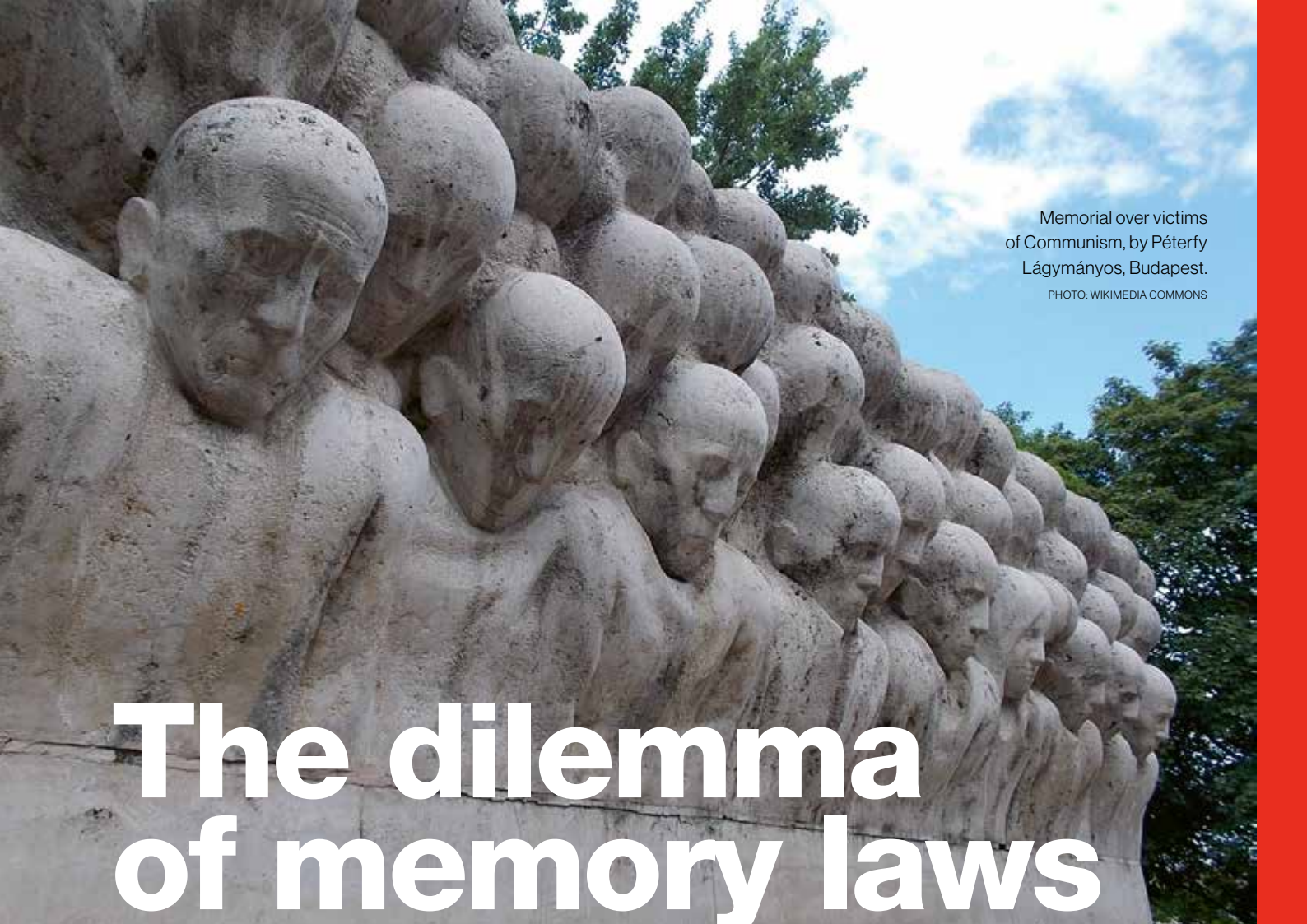
this key Russian space manager as a trampoline jumper, which continues to this day. In this light, fueling up space nostalgia for the sake of economic and political capitalization may be able to unfold “lines of flight” quite unforeseeable and potentially unmanageable by the current Russian elites.

These “lines of flight” might well reflect the very exact line of flight that a Russian spacetrain conductor takes. We leave her on the way to Neptune, seemingly on the outskirts of the Solar system, after an accidental love affair with a paratrooper which bore no fruit. She is moving on to her future, but given the time contraction that happens during space travel, for us the observers she always has one leg stuck in the past. I wonder if in this future, so thoroughly intertwined with the past, April 12 is still ignored – although not because it is dangerous, but because in such a composition of time, specific dates no longer make much sense. ✖

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Memorial over victims
of Communism, by Péterfy
Lágymányos, Budapest.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

The dilemma of memory laws

To restore the dignity of victims without feeding into ultra-nationalism

by **Cagla Demirel**

In their simplest form, memory laws are legal rules that govern selective and state-approved narratives regarding historical events. They can articulate descriptive, declaratory, or punitive legislation regarding nations' past. In this sense, legal governance of narratives and memory of past events can consist of punitive measures or other forms of legal acts such as official recognition and commemoration of historical events and figures. Contested narratives about a nation's past among minority and majority groups or injustices inflicted upon specific minority or ideology groups could be banned from the official memory through establishing and solidifying memory laws. In a broader sense, the memory laws could also be embedded in transitional justice processes and take the form of court decisions as components in settling the truth about the past and shaping memory and historical records.¹ Even though memory is cultural and contextual, it still is subject to contested relations between ethno-religious groups, nations, and nation-states and potentially used for political purposes. Legitimizing state-ap-

proved memories and criminalizing others in varying ways bring about "memory wars" over a shared past between governments and regions. Therefore, memory laws and memory politics are inevitably connected to each other, and the legislation of memory can be considered a piece of a greater mnemonic whole.

ALTHOUGH INITIAL memory laws were implemented against Holocaust denial by Germany in 1985 and Israel in 1986, governance of memory dates back as early as the French Revolution.² More intense discussions about punitive memory laws, as presented by Kaposov, were initiated by the Gayssot Law in France in 1990, banning the questioning and denial of the existence of crimes against humanity and the Holocaust.³ Initiation of these punitive memory laws can be considered a continuation of the Press Law of 1881 in France, which regulates press freedom and responsibilities by criminalizing offensive and defamatory language against an ethnic group, a nation, a race, or a religion. In the same line, early versions of memory laws aimed at pre-

“MANY POST-COMMUNIST COUNTRIES RANGING FROM BULGARIA TO UKRAINE TO MOLDOVA ADOPTED MEMORY LAWS THAT PROHIBIT THE JUSTIFICATION OF THE FORMER TOTALITARIAN COMMUNIST REGIME.”

venting insults against certain groups and offensive expressions regarding their past. Other countries having followed the trend, there has been a significant increase in regulating the writing of history by introducing memory laws, especially after the dissolution of the USSR. Most post-communist countries increasingly imported the concept of “memory laws” from Western European states that replicated laws on Holocaust memory. Similarly, laws against Holocaust denial subsequently spread into other contexts and led to the adaptation of laws on denial of other genocides, as can be seen in the recognition of Armenian genocide in declarative laws and parliamentary decisions or punitive prohibitions of its denial.⁴ Initiation of a criminal code against denial of the Holodomor famine in Ukraine was imitated in the same line.⁵ Further, in post-war Bosnia, history has been primarily constructed by the legislative power of the Office of High Representative (an outside intervener) as shown by the latest decision of the former High Representative banning denial of the Srebrenica genocide.⁶

Shifting focus: From suffering to nationalism

In most post-communist countries after the breakdown of the USSR, memory legislation often aimed at constructing an identity of suffering under Nazism and the totalitarian Soviet regime, which relativized itself according to a cosmopolitan understanding of victimhood⁷ centered on the Holocaust memory. Regulations of memory, in this sense, were considered an indicator of democratic transition and an entry ticket to the European Union. However, especially since the 2000s, there has been a significant shift in the instrumentalization of memory laws towards nationalism. More and more post-Soviet and post-communist states have utilized memory legislation to enforce certain parts and ways of remembering the past while censoring alternative interpretations. In this respect, current memory laws often stimulate within the context of nation-building projects and state valorization. For example, Maria Mälksoo defined memory as a “referent object of security” and associated the use of memory laws with the pursuit of securitization by nation-states.⁸ Thus, fixing memory laws, in general, seeks to secure historical narratives by excluding and even criminalizing alternative views. For example, contemporary Russia illustrates how a memory law (Article 354.1 to the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation adopted in 2014)⁹ is formulated to protect the state’s image according to security theory. It shows a way of creating a “state autobiography” or a sort of “grand narrative.” The 2020 Constitutional Amendment adopted in the Russian Federation included a clause on protecting a historical truth:¹⁰

Article 67.1 of the constitution declares that the Russian Federation honors the memory of the defenders of the fatherland and ensures the defense of historical truth. Diminishing the significance of the heroism of the people in defense of the fatherland will not be permitted.

It is established by the constitution that Russia is the successor of the USSR. Accordingly, narratives emphasizing the Soviet role in World War II with a negative connotation - such as the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact - or rhetoric that compares the Soviet invasion of Poland to the Nazi invasion are deemed offensive to Russia. Under the recent amendments, these are now criminal acts with legal consequences. Correspondingly, Russian laws of 2014 and 2020 criminalize claims about Soviet-Nazi collaboration, and Russia fails to distance the state image from the communist past.¹¹ The strong identification with the USSR seems to impede the potential for dealing with the past crimes if contemporary Russia does not distance itself from the communist past.

Similar formulations of memory laws that construct and re-construct nation-state identities and their grand narratives are also evident in post-communist space. However, countries apart from Russia differed in their framing of post-Soviet legacy. Many post-communist countries ranging from Bulgaria to Ukraine to Moldova adopted memory laws that prohibit the justification of the former totalitarian communist regime. The use of communist symbols and narratives associated with past regimes was banned within the same wave. For example, in Estonia, the narrative of Soviet occupation gained prominence to erase a widespread narrative that suggests Estonia’s voluntary integration with the Soviet Union. Similarly, in Ukraine, there has been a tendency to regulate the interpretation of the past from a nation-state perspective to condemn communist crimes. The memory law adopted in 2016 in Poland prohibited communist propaganda and penalized public pro-communist statements. Moreover, memory laws in Ukraine, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, and Poland all criminalize the denial of the totalitarian communist regimes, unlike the Russian criminal code (2014) that aims to protect the USSR’s image in WWII.

THE STRONG CONTRAST with Russia on this account has been reflected in a “memory war”, especially between Russia and former republics. For example, when the Soviet statue of Marshal Ivan Konev in Prague (which had been vandalized many times) was removed,¹² adoption of Article 243.4 Russian Criminal Code in the Russian constitution made it a punishable offense to damage war graves, monuments, or memorials dedicated to Russia’s military glory or the defense of the Russian fatherland - regard-



Memorial to the victims of the Holocaust, Dachau concentration camp.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

less of the location within or outside of the Russian Federation. Accordingly, similar legislative reactions via memory laws have also been ongoing between former Soviet republics. For example, Ukraine and Poland legislated controversial memory laws regarding the same historical events with varying interpretations (e.g., Volhynia “tragedy” for the former and Volhynia “massacre” for the latter). While Ukraine passed legislation to criminalize those who explicitly discredit the OUN and the ABN (so-called national Ukrainian heroes),¹³ Poland passed a declarative law to define the events committed by the very same “heroes” a genocide.¹⁴

Utilizing memory laws to condemn past crimes by the Soviet regime and emphasize how formerly communist countries suffered at the hands of the USSR indicated a clear break away from the Soviet legacy and fed into re-construction of a nation-state identity. However, especially from the early 2000s, the nation-building projects through regulation of historical narratives shifted towards cleaning the dark spots of nation-states’ pasts to solidify the pureness of the nation via memory laws. For example, a memory law was issued in Poland in 2018 that criminalized any public statement claiming that the Polish people and Poland were responsible for or complicit in Nazi crimes.

The developments mentioned above, which increasingly incited the silencing and censoring nature of memory laws, raised the problem of freedom of speech. In countries like Poland and Ukraine, any narrative that touches upon the nation-state’s compliance with the Nazi regime during World War II led to the criminalization of statements about the past. As the grow-

ing scholarly debate about these prohibitions showed, the new trend of memory laws violates freedom of expression. It also challenges the democratic elements within post-communist Eastern European countries instead of what was expected from their initial formulations (e.g. strengthening democracy and protecting victims’ dignity).

A SIMILAR DISCUSSION about freedom of speech has been ongoing concerning Holocaust or genocide denial in general. Yet this legislation is often considered a safeguard for protecting victims’ dignity. In contrast, the new trend of memory laws only strives to conceal dark spots in the history of nations that might identify them as perpetrators or complicit actors rather than victims within specific periods of history. These developments have a significant impact on scholars and historians. For example, as shown by reactions against Grzegorz Rossolinski-Liebe’s research on Stepan Bandera in Ukraine, the controversies around Jan Tomasz Gross and his book *Neighbours*, and legal disputes around Jan Grabowski and Barbara Engelkind in Poland,¹⁵ enforcing memory laws challenges and stigmatizes scholars; and in some cases, they are even framed as traitors or enemies of the nation.¹⁶

For the time being, the main problem with memory laws derives from the tension between the right of freedom of speech and the prohibition of abuse of the very same right. As many verdicts by the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) established, references to Nazism or the use of Nazi symbols are outside the boundaries of freedom of speech because they include notions of incitement to violence, or they pose a threat to public

order or the rights and reputations of others by distorting the established historical facts. However, the same ECtHR issued decisions stating that prohibiting the denial of Armenian genocide¹⁷ or banning the use of communist symbols are a breach of Article 10 of the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR),¹⁸ which promotes the protection of freedom of expression. These decisions arguably implied that historical events and crimes other than Holocaust must be open to debate and criticism. It puts the Holocaust victims at the epicenter of the victimhood debate. And every victim group worldwide inevitably compares their victim status, rightfulness, and innocence with victims of Nazis, and perpetrators are also relativized accordingly. As the above-mentioned verdicts by ECtHR indicate there is an ambivalence when it comes to other genocides and historical crimes against humanity in other places.

IN CONCLUSION, the legal aspect of cementing selective memories can act out within a broad range of areas. It can be declarative or punitive, national or transnational. It can feed into nationalism or cosmopolitan humanitarianism. In most post-communist countries, 30 years after the fall of the USSR, the use of memory laws centered around the autobiographic narratives of nation-states. Most of the post-communist countries securitize the nation-state via legislating memory by silencing alternative voices and marginalizing other perspectives and narratives, by purifying their history to repair national self-esteem and their national image in world politics. Memory laws perilously become a foreign policy tool at the hands of authoritarian regimes. This problematic political function of memory laws has been fueling the “memory war” between contemporary Russia and former Soviet and communist republics especially for the last two decades. And current Russian aggression against Ukraine is a breakthrough in the memory laws debate because it would be fair to say we are entering a new era in which adopting memory laws is not only problematic regarding the right to freedom of expression. Instead, at the opposite end of the spectrum, a nation-state’s (Ukraine) right to exist is problematized by an aggressor state (Russia) based on history. Thus, inter-state war is (re)defined as a punitive mechanism against how the past is remembered.

On the one hand, free and open debates about the past are still crucial principles according to ECHR, unless they pose distortions of historical facts or offenses to the victims or incite violence. On the other hand, “the memory war” took an extreme form and transitioned from a rhetorical or legal ground to a physical one as can be seen in Putin’s firm reference to the de-communization of Ukraine as one of the causes in his speech declaring war against Ukraine.¹⁹ Thus, the question still stands: How to produce memory laws to restore the dignity of victims without feeding into ultra-nationalism, while the international community still cannot prevent wars making new victims. ❌

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The post-communist legacy in the shadow of the Empire

by Aleksandra Reczuch

Professor Andrzej Leder, psychoanalyst and professor of philosophy, in a conversation with Aleksandra Reczuch about the history and social transformations in the region, the threat of Russia, and the historical memory embodied in buildings, symbols, commemorations, and family albums.



PHOTO: [HTTPS://BIENNALEWARSZAWA.PL/](https://biennalewarszawa.pl/)

The building of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Warsaw always makes me think about Foucauldian power/knowledge – a monumental neoclassical palace built in the 19th century by Stanisław Staszic, a leading figure in Polish Enlightenment, and donated to the Society of Friends of Science after 1823. The building's history is a history of the attempts to organize education under Russian partition and the repressions those attempts faced. The Society of Friends of Science was banned after the November uprising in 1830; later in 1857 the palace became a seat of the Academy of Medical Sciences, the first higher education institution re-established in the Russian partition. As the academy was closed soon after another unsuccessful insurrection in January 1863, in 1890 it became an orthodox church and was renovated by the Russian authorities and remodeled in neo-byzantine style. The building was nearly razed during World War II and rebuilt in neoclassical style after the war. Today it is the seat of the Polish Academy of Sciences, where Professor Andrzej Leder works. He is the author of *Prześniona rewolucja. Ćwiczenia z logiki historycznej* [Sleepwalking the revolution. Exercises in historical logic]. His studies focus on the period between 1939–1956 or even 1989 and analyze the consequences of the radical and brutal change in the structure of Polish society – firstly in the Holocaust and then during Stalinist times, when the remaining elites of interwar Poland were annihilated. Those events, despite their formative aspect, never became a part of the common imaginary of the Polish nation, and are not remembered as revolutionary, but rather as a sense of injustice that has not been accommodated by the collective memory.

We meet in the lobby of the building for the interview about the book, the collective memory of the nations in Eastern Europe, the ways in which the politics of memory influence the discourses of the present, and the common experience of Communism and historical differences.

ALEKSANDRA RECZUCH (AR): Your book *Prześniona rewolucja*: the title can be translated as *overslept* or *slept through revolution*...

ANDRZEJ LEDER (AL): The translation I like is: *Sleepwalking the revolution*.



Tillage, the Polish way. Painting by Józef Chełmoński (*Orka*), 1896.



The aftermath of the failure of the January Uprising. The crowd of captives awaits transport to Siberia. Russian officers and soldiers supervise a blacksmith installing fetters on the wrists of a woman representing Poland. The blonde woman behind her, next in line, may represent Lithuania. Painting by Jan Matejko, 1863.

PHOTO: WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

AR: Oh, that sounds very good! The book presents the thesis that during WWII, and the early years of establishing the communist regime in Poland, the country went through a major social revolution from an agrarian peasant society to a modern industrial one with a visible working class. It was a revolution imposed upon rather than organized by Polish society. Communism and the communist regime played a great role in the modernization processes, yet it seems that the impact that Communism had on creating Polish society in its current form is not remembered; why is this?

AL: As this revolution was performed mainly by two alien and hostile forces – one might even call them empires – Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, there was no feeling of agency in Polish society. For a revolution to become a part of social identity, a common identity, or – to use Charles Taylor's term – part of the social imaginary, it has to become part of the structure, and structure in this theory is the symbolic field of extraction. A historical event such as the revolution has to have some symbolic signifiers which will become a reference point to forge a new identity and in Poland, the main symbols or the main signifiers for this period are the signifiers of the resistance against it. The signifiers brought by it... I would say that Nazi Germany didn't even try to bring any new signifiers which would be comprehensive for Polish society and stand in time, while even if the communists tried to force some kind of social imaginary it was too much connected or copied from the Soviet imaginary to be attractive for Polish society. And in this sense, no, not much was left from this system of signifiers to provide a base, and in this sense, after the Stalinist period, Polish society did not have any positive social symbols that could be connected with this enormous and very profound change.

The imaginary, the points of reference that were available, were the ones connected with the tradition of the Polish intelligentsia, the uprisings in the 19th century, and even today, they still remain the main symbols in the Polish imaginary. Even when there are symbols, signifiers that are still present and cherished in popular memory – for example, Edward Gierek,¹ the good first secretary of the party who really modernized Poland, introduced Poland to the mass and consumption culture as it was known in the occidental world – they are too weak to reshape the way society remembers this period.

AR: And what about social mobility? A large group of people moved from the countryside, from this peasant, feudal environment, to something that you might even call a modern socialist middle class. One might assume it's like a positive move upwards. Is there maybe something that could reshape the memory of that period as something positive?

AL: I do not think that this moment of the social movement could serve as such a symbol; at least it is not narrated in this way. It is also one of the biggest holes in Polish historiography that the emancipatory history is not narrated. It is changing now, let's say during the last five to eight years, where we see research on the history of slavery, of serfdom in Poland,² it is flourishing, and it is a very positive phenomenon, but I think that what this wave lacks is that it

shows only a snapshot of the poverty and oppressive conditions of this serfdom system. Currently, we do not have a way of narrating history which would show the social movement of emancipation. And that even when serfdom was abolished, again, by the emperors of Russia and Austro-Hungary at the end of the 19th century, when mass politics and mass parties were organized, there was a huge shift in the consciousness, attitudes, a spring of political agency, yet it is still not a part of Polish imaginary. We are completely focused on the unfortunate uprising in 1863³ and then on the resurrection of the Polish state in 1918. There is a huge gap in between. Historically, it was one of the most important epochs for modern Polish society, the forging of modern Polish society, so in that sense, we lack this kind of emancipatory history. Having done this, one could then talk about the history of this enormous movement that happened after 1945: from the countryside to the cities, from Eastern Poland to cities and provinces which became Polish after 1945: it is not done. It is to be done.

I think that we are living in very interesting times with the authoritarian or more or less authoritarian regime of Kaczyński because it pushes the citizens, the middle class, to redefine their identity. And I think it will have positive consequences in the end. Well, if we are not pushed out of the European Union. Because if that happens, we will be eaten and digested by the Russian empire. But if we stay in the European Union, I think that this period of the fight for democracy and in some way, the fight against this nationalistic catholic authoritarianism can redefine the Polish social imaginary.

For the generation of people who still remember the penuries of communism, the most important thing was to have basic comfort in life. I am from that generation, but now I see the question of what it means to live in a free society, and how important the questions of human rights are for the generation that does not remember communism.

AR: And what about the threat of Russian imperialism? It seemed that with the war in Ukraine, the threat became real for many Poles. Won't it push people into the nationalist, conservative vision of Polishness?

AL: I would say that it was an object of attention in the first days of the war, the first days of the Russian invasion. Now, I think we have the quite opposite. We, I mean people who are analyzing political consciousness in Poland, are aware that wars always strengthen the government in place. Also, the Russian danger is always a good way to mobilize people in Poland around a nationalistic or military agenda. However, I think that it is not going in this direction. For example, polls do not show growing support for the main political force: Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS, Law and Justice). They also show rather stable support for democratic parties. In my opinion, what we face right now is not a direct confrontation with Russia but the social consequences of the war in a neighboring state. It means immigration. And that is a completely different social experience. For the first time in history, Poland is facing such massive immigration of war refugees and I think that ideas which are promoted in such a situation are different than typical militaristic ideas. This is the question of the organization, the efficiency of the state, and people's activity, NGO activity, or as we call it now: the care capacity of society.

Those are typical democratic themes. And in this sense, I think that if the war continues as it is now, it means that the Russian army is not capable of crushing Ukrainians. The fear of war will diminish in Poland; it has diminished already. And the main problem will become providing help to refugees. Therefore, I think that if we now have to face a direct threat, and I don't think we will, if we are going to be bombarded with an atomic bomb, we will not have the time to discuss it. In this sense, I think it shifts the political situation. It pushes society towards more modern questions than the question of how to fight Russian invaders.

AR: Talking about Russian imperialism and Russian aggression, it is 30 years since the collapse of the USSR, and I was wondering to what extent the Russian invasion of Ukraine can be seen as an attempt to rebuild the empire, to give the people a feeling that Russia is once again a powerful state?

AL: I have a family history with Russia. My family fought tsarist autocracy, then they were in social democratic and communist movements. My grandfather was killed in 1937, in the purges. My father was imprisoned by the Stalinist rulers in Poland. So I have a long experience of thinking, reading, and discussing the question of Russian imperialism and in this sense, my opinion is that first of all, it is not only about bringing back Soviet imperialism; it is Russian imperialism at its core.

Rus, Muscovite Rus, not Kievan Rus, was always an expansionist state, but what is maybe more important is the legacy of the late 19th century. After the failed assassination attempt on Emperor Alexander II, political police became the spinal cord of this state. The tsarist secret police Okhrana and its traditions were copied and continued in Soviet Russia. Cheka, and then NKWD, became organizations that worked in the same manner, then KGB and FSB in the present. As the democratic experiment from the Gorbachov-Yeltsyn times failed, this vertebral column came back to power. The modern Russian state was built on this vertebral column and the *raison d'être*, the core reason

"After the failed assassination attempt on Emperor Alexander II, political police became the spinal cord of this state."



Celebration in 2008 of the former members in the resistance army Armia Krajowa active during WWII.

"We demand bread!", Poznań 1956 protests.

for the existence of this institution is a system of expansion. So, in this sense, Russia cannot accept the failure of the empire. All the symbols Putin uses, all the signifiers of his rule are a strange mixture of Imperial Russia – the two headed Eagle and green uniforms of the soldiers in the Kremlin, which are tsarist uniforms – and Soviet symbols. And I think that until this vertebral column is broken, the Russian state will continue its imperialistic politics, but the problem is that the economic basis of the empire is very weak. It is maybe the last aggressive jump before it becomes vassalized by China.

AR: I was thinking a lot about how this strange mixture of signifiers is going to work together on the discursive level. And how for example the concept of "brotherly nations" is used to justify aggression against an independent state. Can it be understood as a colonial logic, in which the attempt to liberate a certain country is used to rebuild the empire and enslave that country?

AL: I think that there are some similarities between, for example, European colonialism and Russian imperialism on a general level. But I think the sources of these ideologies are different. Modern European colonialism, and I am talking about 19th-century colonialism, not early Spanish or Portuguese colonialism, was based on the idea of modernization – we are colonizing those savages because we want to see them, we want them to act like civilized people – and in Russia the sources of this colonial logic are different. What is at the core is the concept of the third Rome and the necessity to defend it against the enemy, the teleological enemy. Russia will always find itself an enemy, be it American imperialists or Nazis, as Putin now calls Ukrainians, or modern secularized societies. The main point is the defense of the values connected with Orthodox Christianity against this diabolic civilization, the teleological enemy. And when you look at it this way, the idea of *russkiy mir*, the Russian order,⁴ is an emanation of this kind of teleological idea. It is not only the question of political play of power but is the Manichean combat of good and evil. And it has mobilizing power. Even if again, we have the impression that this mobilizing power is not so strong now as it was in the past.

AR: How is nostalgia for the Soviet Union mixed up with those discourses around the ultimate combat between good and evil, defending the *russkiy mir*? And, given the current circumstances, can anyone outside Russia be nostalgic about it? Are people still nostalgic about that Soviet force that was to bring 'the good'?

AL: I think that the nostalgic feelings were at their peak in the late nineties, early 2000, partly for generational reasons. Now we have an adult generation that does not remember the Soviet Union, but I can easily understand that people are nostalgic about the USSR. We know all of this because in Poland, East Germany, in Czechoslovakia, or Czechia and Slovakia, and other countries we have seen nostalgia for the former people's republics. The transition in those countries was often very positive for just one part of the society, and at the same time deeply catastrophic for another part. In Poland, all the big industrial centers were almost completely destroyed. In Russia and all the former USSR republics, it was even more brutal.

I can imagine a lot of nostalgia for the Soviet Union, which was a stable society in the last decades of its existence, not a free society afterward. I think this is why Putin thought that he would be supported in Ukraine as he was in Lugansk and Donetsk in 2014, or in Crimea where, to some extent, he had real support. What he did not understand

was that there was a real revolution in Ukraine and that they have their own new identity which is connected with Maidan and all those revolts and with democratization, looking toward Europe.

AR: What happened to the Soviet identity, the feeling of commonness or togetherness, coming from the shared experience as Soviet people?

AL: I think it is not that strong anymore. Partly, as I said before, for generational reasons. We have already an adult generation which never experienced the Soviet Union. And we can also see it in the Yugoslavian process, where the identity of Yugoslavianness was quite strong, and now does not exist anymore. It is really purely nostalgic and maybe it is questioned by some intellectuals living completely in the past. But then, in ex-Yugoslavia the national identities became nation-states; they are self-ruling crowds now, Serbians in Serbia, Slovenians in Slovenia, etc. And we don't have any kind of popular movement aiming at the restoration of Yugoslavia and I believe this is more or less so also in the former Soviet Union.

AR: When we talk about identities, what comes to my mind is Belarus. In Ukraine, people now are all very much mobilized to fight for their independence and the nation-state, and all those elements that they understand as Ukrainian, Ukrainian culture, and Ukrainian land, and I am wondering whether you can see similar processes in Belarus. We have seen the waves of democratic protests in 2020, but Lukashenko is still trying to push the Soviet narrative, defining Belarus as a Soviet state.

AL: In the Graduate School for Social Research, here at the Polish Academy of Science where I teach, we have and have had students from Belarus, and what they say, and what I also see, is an evolution of the way they define themselves. This discourse has changed during the last ten years. Ten years ago, they were saying as a matter of fact that there is no Belarusian nation; there are tiny circles of intellectuals, artists, political activists, and nationalists who cherish this idea but the popular attitude is that we are soviet people; now, those students are speaking in a very different way. That summer, I think, made possible what happened in many other countries with different uprisings, even the crushed ones. It means that people are identifying Lukashenko not only as an autocrat but also as Putin's puppet. And when they want to identify the difference between Putin's puppets and themselves, they will define it in a national way. They will say: we are different from Russians, and I think this is a nation-in-building.

It is a similar process to the one that happened in Czechia, for example, in the late 19th century. It was a non-existent nation and because of the resistance against Austrian dominance and the activity of a small group of intellectuals, this nation became a nation. And I think this happened in Belarus.

We will probably see again some kind of revolt against Lukashenko's autocratic regime and then Belarus will become a nation-state. Because before it can be a fully democratic state, maybe it must be a nation-state.

The way Lukashenko crushed this wave of protests in the summer is horrible and extremely repressive, but at the same time, at least during the last 30 years, he was trying not to become Russian. So, what he actually was saying was: "Yes, we are like Soviets but also Belarusians and we have our own Belarusian identity". And in this sense, he created a space for Belarusian national sentiment to grow, even if he is now against it.

AR: The final thing I wanted to discuss is the collapse of the USSR and the transition to a liberal economy. We briefly spoke about that, about how it was beneficial for a certain group of people and how deeply traumatic and hard it was for others, mainly industrial workers and those on state-owned farms. In Poland, the main beneficiary of the transition were the people that now can be called the middle-class, but my guess would be that in other countries that were under influence of state socialism similar processes can be observed?

AL: Yes, but I would say that there are huge differences! It can be simplified into two models; We have the middle-class model and the oligarchic model. In Poland, in Estonia and Latvia, for example, we have a more or less a middle-class model. And the reasons for it are different in different countries. For example, Estonia, Latvia, and Czechia were already middle-class societies before the Soviet invasion in the 20th century, and Poland was not, but Poland had a very active working class with strong democratic aspirations.

The Solidarity movement can be read as a history of that type, a history of democratic aspirations. I think that in Russia, they do not have this kind of middle class. And that is why the system is so strongly oligarchic, also in the sense that the only way to become economically wealthy is to be in a vertical position, directly facing the power, political power. This is also the program PiS wants to introduce in Poland, but they face the resistance of the democratic middle class. In Russia, there is no alternative, no democratic middle class outside the big cities like Moscow or St. Petersburg. What is very interesting, when talking about

"I can imagine a lot of nostalgia for the Soviet Union, which was a stable society in the last decades of its existence, not a free society afterward."

Ukraine, is that it seemed it was a society with exactly the same oligarchic system as Russia and now the society is changing. And I do mean it. If I were to compare it with Polish history, I would risk saying that this is a similar process that happened in the seventies and eighties, when some kind of new democratic consciousness was appearing in the society.

And I think that what has happened during the last ten years in Ukraine is the growth of democratic consciousness, but when we talk about Russia, I think they have a long, long way to go before they will be able to have this widespread social identity, which now is present among some groups in Petersburg or Moscow. Really tiny groups, not a whole class in society.

AR: When I think about what you just said, and about the beginning of our interview when we talked about the way Polish society was modernized and the way it moved from a peasant society to a modern middle-class one: Well, of course, communism in Poland and communism in Russia had different shades and they looked a bit different. Modernization in the USSR was much more brutal – forced collectivization, deportations, the gulag system, prisoners as a slave workforce, etc.: All those things did not happen in Poland. But I am still wondering if the communist era in Russia created any possibility or space for a conscious middle-class to emerge outside big cities as it did in Poland?

AL: I think that if Khrushchev had not been swapped for Brezhnev, maybe the evolution of Russian society would have been different. There is one event, a date in Polish history, which is very important and not enough remembered and analyzed: it is the year 1956.⁵ It was a true social revolt. First of all, we had the big strikes in Poznań and then many other places. Then we had a complete change of discourse within the communist regime and it never again became truly communist. It was the most socialist revolt in Polish history. Industrial workers were fighting for workers' councils and one could see the strong influences of the Yugoslavian model where workers' councils had something to say and could influence working conditions.

It was the industrial plants with the struggle for better working conditions, and the fact that new communist discourses appeared, brought by young people in the communist party, activists who were very, very socialist, in the positive sense of this word. It opened the communist party to many other streams of thought, not just hardline communism. I would say also that the history of Polish liberalism connected with the period before the war, so more or less connected with Piłsudski in the first period of his political activity, never fully died. And then there was the tradition of *Armia Krajowa*⁶ which had also a very strong civic and democratic orientation and has been rehabilitated to some extent after the Stalinist period. So all of this exploded. The end of the Stalinist era was also a time of some degree of cultural liberty; translations, and cultural influences from the West started to appear. The party line never came back to communist orthodoxy, which was the case for example in the German Democratic Republic, the Soviet Union under Brezhnev, or Czechoslovakia after the fall of the Prague spring.

I think that gave Poland this space to form a really different imaginary for the new middle class and democratic identity, which was never the case in Russia. Brezhnev absolutely crushed all those kinds of things. ✖

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references

- 1 Edward Gierek was the First Secretary of the Polish United Workers' Party between 1970 and 1980 and the main person behind opening the economy of communist Poland more towards the West. He is still remembered today for his modernization processes like the construction of over 1.8 million apartments, building the first modern motorway between Warszawa and Katowice (called colloquially "gierkówka" even today), and the improved living standard of average Poles.
- 2 Serfdom in Poland became the dominant form of relationship between peasants and nobility in the 17th century and was a

- major feature of the economy of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.
- 3 The January Uprising (1863–1864) was an insurrection in the Russian controlled Kingdom of Poland, aimed at restoration of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. The uprising, the longest in the post-partition history of Poland, is often described as a partisan war and ended in 1864 when the last insurgents were captured by Russian forces.
- 4 Also sometimes translated as Russian world, is a concept of social totality connected with the Russian language and Russian culture based on essentialized identity of "Russianness"

- 5 The events of autumn 1956 are often described as the Gomułka thaw (Pol. *Odwilż gomulowska*), from the name of the First Secretary, during whose rule some liberalization of the communist system was introduced and to some extent the communist terror was limited. The strikes in June 1956 were also the catalyst of those reforms.
- 6 *Armia Krajowa*, [Home Army] was the dominant resistance force during World War II, the armed forces of the Polish Underground State.



SERGEI LOZNITSA'S "NEARING DISTANCING"

The Event (2015) pictures the day of the failed coup d'état in August 1992, which later led to the fall of the USSR.

by **Cecilia Sá Cavalcante Schuback**

The presence of fluid images is striking in Sergei Loznitsa's films. It seems that no communication of an underlying message is taking place, at least not intentionally. Rather, the image itself is the message. The intense contrast and the sound as something which is constantly lacking is salient due to the use of celluloid film and non-diegetic sound. What calls us to an uncomfortable viewing is a "nearing distancing" that feels quite familiar. The presence of fluid images is a presence of distance, a presence of the image, of a representation, as such. And it is *as such* that the image is the message. Moreover, the work of editing is not only technical, but in fact a political gesture in Loznitsa's films that use archival and documentative footage such in *The Event* (2015), *Austerlitz* (2016), and *State Funeral* (2019). We could recall Brecht for the sake of understanding what is at stake politically in Loznitsa's special cinematographic technique. However, I wish to underline the fact that if Brecht's aim was to force viewers into critical mindsets by making the familiar strange, then perhaps we can find a difference in Loznitsa's films in that he makes the strange familiar. This may sound like a simple wordplay, but there is a fundamental and indispensable political difference here that is

necessary in order to understand our contemporaneity in both its positive and its negative aspects.

Distance is crucial for Loznitsa's work: Not only because of the above-mentioned inverting of Brecht's determination of distance, but also when we see that the film director himself left St. Petersburg, where he lived and worked, for Berlin in 2000, precisely to establish a geographic distance to his subject, that is, Ukraine-Russian relations and the Soviet legacy thereby implied. In this sense, distance is necessary for a certain manipulation: To control one's material so that emotion does not take hold of and thus endanger the creative work and its potentials. It is through distance that an estrangement from passive acceptance, enjoyment and immersion is possible. As Loznitsa once said himself, "one must rather take a step back, presupposing a certain duplicity or fracture of personality".¹ This comparison to quantum physics is not vain rhetoric: the principle of superposition, also called *linear function* (which has a temporal accordance to this name), states that overlapping of waves in space results in a disturbance equal to the algebraic sum of the individual disturbances. We can see a sort of analogy in this principle with what has



Sergei Loznitsa at 2010 Karlovy Vary International Film Festival.

Images from the film *Austerlitz* (2016).

been called negative magnitudes that the philosopher Immanuel Kant attempted to “introduce” into philosophy.² Without going into detail, Kant attempts to show that what is at hand is an effort of the mind of which we are conscious through a feeling, a feeling that is numbed-out because of movements that have as an effect the value of coming-out-even.

The double movement of a conscious effort through such a feeling may seem quite contradictory since this feeling would rather be one of indifference or apathy. The point is that the forces, the effort, involved never cease even when in a moment of indifference. Furthermore, this break-even movement achieves more significance when a certain temporality is ascribed to it. Seeing it as a past-future-present will help us understand Loznitsa’s particular technique of rendering the strange familiar, that is, an effect of nearing distancing.

A superposed history

Loznitsa works with history and time as his material. Time is decisive for any sort of filmmaking, but history is particularly significant to his work. To work with history in film, which is an instantaneous artform, means to work with history not only in terms of that particular historical present given in the film, nor the present when the work is carried out, but also in our own present in which we are watching the film as well as the present time and generation we inhabit. What is decisive to comprehend is, however, that one cannot reach our present only from our past: For the past (which was a present) to reach our present, one must go through a future. I am not speaking of time-traveling here, but rather of a projection of hopes and fears, hope and hopelessness, regarding the future which is transmitted from generation to generation. For instance, in the film *The Event* (2015) we follow the images of what happened on the day of the failed coup d’état in August 1992 instigated by a group of Com-

munist Party hardliners who strongly opposed *perestroika*. This event led to the end of the USSR. In this film, the superposed history is clear. The presence of Soviet history culminates in that very event which leads to the end of the USSR, a future that is already in motion before the event, the present, itself. There are, however, two presents to be kept in mind: the present of the time of the event and our watching present. There is also a relation to the Soviet past in that present of the event and the one of our watching present. Likewise, there is a future involved in the present of the event as well as in our own. Historical superposition works thus doubly, in parallel, in this film.

The question of a stasis, of an inertia, is also a constant in the film. It captures a certain ambiguity regarding what this particular event was, overflowing into the ambiguity of what an event as such is. What is clear is the contradictory stasis involved in an event. An event is something that happens, takes place, which is some kind of importance. But in the happening itself we find its inertia. As that which happens, there is nothing *that* happens since it already *is* what happens: its being-event annuls its own “eventness”. The event is thus numb: eventness is numbness. Furthermore, by using the broadcast of Tchaikovsky’s *Swan Lake* instead of news of protestors and the people pouring into the streets, the organizers of the coup could conceal the coup as an event at the same time as they emphasize the event as one. The broadcasts of *Swan Lake* are a constant in the film. It not only works with a dialectic of concealment and emphasis in terms of the footage; it also reminds us to the use and conception of soundtracks, the accompanying music in films for a full-on immersion without distance. It is here that we can find one of the most tangible examples of rendering the strange familiar. The entire film is accompanied by this soundtrack that is out of place, but which attests its veracity. The film distances us insofar that we never see the event as an event on screen while it is still

visibly unseen for us to find it. Moreover, we hear and see what the people on screen see and hear (recreated by sound director Vladimir Golovnitsky) as well as seeing people look straight into the camera which seems as if they are looking the spectator straight in the eye. We are therefore immersed in a sensation of being there where the feeling of uncertainty about the outcomes is reproduced. We are in the present of the event, being in our own present, feeling its future which is our present - because of the past. Time could not be more superposed in a representation than this.

The indifference and apathy in the happening of this event also remind us of our own contemporaneity: the more events, the more happenings, especially the shorter and more instantaneous they are, the more is our indifference and apathy. Indeed, this is a coming-out even in its more general sense. But when looking at this indifference and apathy through a temporal or historical lens we find more to this indifference. It is the sensation of future, of a simultaneous hope and hopelessness, that is, the sensation of future possibilities that is opened up and dissected in the film through our watching present. Our present remembers this sensation by being completely *away* from it. Even though we have not taken part in this event or the Soviet past at all, the transmission and projection of this sensation is too heavy and intimate for us to neglect it. Our present sight is the culmination of the past and future, the present being a peak of inertia with all these temporalities’ forces involved. In this sense, the distance of history and future is always nearing us. Nevertheless, for this distance to near us, a manipulation is necessary, a manipulation in terms of Loznitsa’s editing work.

Editing and the art of manipulation

Brecht’s distancing effect states that it is by making the manipulative contrivance obvious, that is, the “fictitious” qualities of the medium, that one can attempt to estrange the viewer from any passive acceptance and enjoyment of the play as mere “entertainment”. The goal is thus to force viewers into a critical, analytical frame of mind, serving to disabuse them of the notion that what they are watching is a sacrosanct, self-contained narrative. This is the distancing effect which makes the familiar strange. That is, by making the manipulative contrivance obvious one makes the familiar strange. Loznitsa, however, works the ma-

nipulative, manipulates what is manipulated. His documentary films are fundamentally artworks of editing.

State Funeral (2019) shows us the mass hysteria and grief that followed the death of Stalin in 1953 through hundreds of different lenses. Rearranging archival and propaganda footage, Loznitsa gathers “different” perspectives in one big perspective or lens which is Loznitsa’s work proper. Thus we see Stalin’s death and funeral as a culmination of the dictator’s personality cult. Through the gathered footage we can observe every stage

of the spectacle of the official obsequies, which was described by the newspaper *Pravda* as “the Great Farewell”, as well as the dramatic and absurd experience of life and death under Stalin’s regime. Stalin’s personality cult is shown as a form of terror-induced delusion, giving insight into the nature of the regime and its legacy, which still haunts the contemporary world. This is not to say that Loznitsa is the one who sees Stalin this way. Rather, Loznitsa manipulates the manipulative footage that was meant to promote and further Stalin’s personality cult to reveal the

**“FOR THE PAST
(WHICH WAS
A PRESENT)
TO REACH
OUR PRESENT,
ONE MUST GO
THROUGH A
FUTURE.”**



Images from the film *State funeral* (2019).

conditions involved in a personality cult, the religious idolatry at stake in such a cult.

It is clear that the footage used in the film, with scenes of people shuffling along to see the obsequies, reading newspapers, listening to the broadcast about the dictator's death, was meant for a different purpose. Loznitsa shows a solemnity that is zombie-like, where the people are grieving the death of this personality, of this idol, following the obsequies as if it was a sanctified procession. Playing with the religiousness of this event is also a way to play with the hypocrisy involved in this regime. On the other hand, we are intrigued by the filmed faces, where not only a repressed anxiety is clearly visible, but also something hidden is rendered visible. These faces, what they think and feel, are not easily read. Although the many cameras filmed them for a different reason, their faces show that whatever they are thinking and feeling is censored, not only actively by the regime, but also by themselves for their own individual protection. We are constantly in an ambiguity of honesty and suspicion. On the one hand, there are images of real grief. On the other, there are images of suspicious eyes in terms of the camera and the entire spectacle itself. To be in between these two states of emotion, we are also being played in that we feel with them in both senses: grief and suspicion. At the end of the film, seeing the brief note reminding us of Stalin's crimes, we leave uncomfortable, in a completely ambiguous state.

What makes us uncomfortable is not only that we may or may not feel with the USSR, the people and Stalin's legacy, but rather that we are so easily consumed by the product which Loznitsa reveals to us as a product. The consumption of the product which was Stalin and the USSR resulted in an idolatry. What is revealed to us is not only a product, but a consumption of a product in

“THE CONSUMPTION OF THE PRODUCT WHICH WAS STALIN AND THE USSR RESULTED IN AN IDOLATRY.”

which we also are involved with as spectators. Editing work, that is, working with manipulation to reveal truths, aims not only to show us a manipulation, but to manipulate us and show us how we also manipulate, depending on the view and narrative that we have. This aspect of product consumption, and its relation to apathy, is further investigated in the film *Austerlitz* (2016).

A nearing distance

The film *Austerlitz* deals with the Holocaust by observing visitors at the Nazi concentration camps of Sachsenhausen and Dachau. Placing the camera among people, Loznitsa decides to adapt to the screen the exterior of the camps, making the walls and ramparts the frame of the film's subject. Loznitsa never opts for movement; he only changes the location of the camera. What happens thus happens against this framework and imposes an immersion in the past without showing the past itself, letting the past be a part of the present. He then shows the witnesses of this past in the present as not actually witnessing the past, but rather their present: the visitors to the camp are more preoccupied in taking selfies than actually visiting the location. The horrors committed here are present, but they are present in that they are being overshadowed by this obnoxious behavior.

By choosing to see the present, the past appears as something that is becoming a product to be consumed. The film first shows the entry to the camp, then the duration of the visit of different sites dividing the camp, and finally we accompany the visitors to the exit. Their unconscious is captured by the camera. Many times, the visitors are surprised to see the camera when they look straight into it: A surprise that also reaffirms their narcissistic obsession. Nevertheless, what is in question is not to see this



Images from the film *The Event* (2015).

behavior and judge it ourselves, but to realize that we, whether we like it or not, as a contemporaneity, behave exactly like this. The apathy that is shown awakens us to see the horrors of the Nazi crimes within this frame, just as we watch this product-consuming behavior in terms of the framework of a Nazi camp. Not only does this event become a spectacle, but our own spectating becomes an event. What is strange in this image becomes familiar. Moreover, the images we watch are fluid, and in their fluidity, they convey their message as images. It is not the content nor the form that is at play, but rather the image as it is being watched as image. Whatever way we receive the image and interpret it is our own way to deal with the message, but the message itself as it is to be received. As has been said, what is strange becomes familiar, and this is fundamentally Loznitsa's way of bringing the distancing near to us.

A Ukrainian filmmaker

Most films by Loznitsa deal with issues and problems we have inherited from the past. He has been celebrated for his experimental films representing a humanity that is confronted with economic, social, and political upheavals, using the tool of editing to paint his picture. Not only does he approach the Russian moral disintegration, but he also has a strong sense of scenery, of a stable *mise en scène* as daring narratives are shown. However, while writing this reflection on some of his documentary work, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has taken its hold. The dimensions of the war and the effect that it has on artists today are also relevant in the story of Loznitsa's work, at this very moment. Sergei Loznitsa was born 1964 in the USSR, the city of Baranovitchi in Belarus, but later his family moved to Kyiv where he went to school. In 2001 he left St Petersburg, where he had been studying and producing films, and migrated with his family to Germany.

Loznitsa was quick to condemn the war. He also left the European Film Academy, because of their initial statement that



was for him conformist and neutral in regard to Russia. Then the director was expelled from the Ukrainian Film Academy because he critiqued their overall boycott of Russian artists and films. The Ukrainian Film Academy rejected Loznitsa's so-called “cosmopolitanism”.³ The director, in turn, has written an open letter appealing to “keep common sense in this war”, stating that:

a ‘cosmopolitan’ has been called a person who is open to everything new and free from cultural, religious and political prejudices [...] Speaking against ‘cosmopolitanism’, Ukrainian ‘academicians’ use the Stalinist discourse, which is based on hatred, the denial of dissent, the assertion of collective guilt, and a ban on any manifestation of free individual choice.

He further stresses that he always only represent himself, he has never been part of any group or “sphere” or community. Still, he stated that “I am and will always be a Ukrainian filmmaker”.⁴ ✕

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references

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