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BOOK REVIEW

Lingering Aftertaste of the USSR. Review of Dmitrii Travin (2024). Kak my zhili v SSSR [How we lived in the USSR]. Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie

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If a person has never tasted an orange, there is no way to describe its flavor to them. If a person has never lived in the USSR, they cannot fully understand what it was like. Such knowledge is acquired only through personal experience and perception. Thus, attempting to describe "our life in the USSR" seems futile. For those who lived it, any account would feel incomplete and fragmented; for those who did not, it would appear detached and impersonal. Nevertheless, Dmitrii Travin made a leap of faith. As he states, it took him ten years to complete the book, which was published by Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie [New Literary Review] as part of the series "Chto takoe Rossiia" [What Russia Is]. The title of the series subtly alludes to Fyodor Tyutchev's famous poem[1], which asserts that Russia cannot be conceived by the intellect. At the same time, the series' name seems to tentatively claim the opposite, that is, that Russia can, in fact, be understood through reason.

The author identifies as a Soviet "Seventier,"[2] though it would be more accurate to call him an "Eightier," since it was in the 1980s that those born in the early 1960s, including Travin, became actively engaged in social life and co-authored Gorbachev's Perestroika and later Yeltsin's reforms. In the 1970s, they were still in school—passive but thirsty for knowledge witnesses to the final years of socialism. Given that the life they observed unfolded in the 1970s and 1980s, a more appropriate title for the book might have been *How We Lived in the Late USSR*.

[1] Russia is a thing of which
The intellect cannot conceive.
Hers is no common yardstick.
You measure her uniquely:
In Russia you believe (Jude, 2000).

[2] Similarly to "the Sixtiers," prominent representatives of culture and politics with progressive views active in the 1960s.

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At first glance, the book's title might suggest a 500-page nostalgic lament (grieving a loss) for the Soviet past. Some readers, however, may see it as an exercise in USSR-bashing. In reality, it is neither. The author sympathizes with those who mourn the loss of the Soviet system while simultaneously exposing its inherent frailty—often illustrating his points with hundreds of anecdotes, some of them quite funny. He writes:

> To put it simply, we need to understand why we both miss the 1960s–1970s and condemn them at the same time. Which elements of our past were shaped by the social system, and which existed independently? What aspects of our heritage should have been discarded for the sake of progress, and what aspects of our cultural background must we preserve and cherish? (p. 11; Trans. by Sergey Moshkin—S. M.)

Culture receives special attention in the book. How can a young reader—the presumed target audience of the book—truly feel the vibe of Soviet life? Stories of ubiquitous and chronic shortages, "sausage trains," and under-the-table trade can only go so far. Soviet jokes, abundantly scattered throughout the text, cannot help either. Tasting that metaphorical orange is a solution. In a stroke of genius, Travin finds a way to make it possible: he intersperses his narrative with four so-called "movie halls," inviting his young contemporaries to discover the best Soviet films of the era. Indeed, only *those* films, now considered retro and obviously imperfect, can convey the Soviet atmosphere on a sensual level. The author seems to encourage readers to watch *those* films and reflect on *that* era, stating:

> I think that the films created by the Sixtiers is a cultural miracle, whose significance is totally on par with the Russian nineteenth-century literature. I hope that, in the future, they become essential classics for every educated person, both within and beyond Russia. (p. 23; Trans. by S. M.)

For those who long for the Soviet past and imagine how idyllic their life would have been unless reformers like Gaydar and Chubais had demolished it, Travin, a qualified economist and an apt publicist, explains in layman terms why a state-planned socialist economy, once stripped of Stalin's non-economic coercive methods, was doomed to fail. The reason became evident during the "long seventies," the focal period of the book. Economic imbalance and chronic shortages under socialist state planning are not Travin's new discoveries, but not everyone has read works by János Kornai, who untangled the "mystery" of shortages pertaining to socialism. Travin's aim is more modest though equally important: using examples, painfully familiar to the general public, to clearly demonstrate why shortages were an intrinsic feature of the Soviet system. His argumentation is compelling.

During these "long seventies," the country not only exhausted the resources necessary for extensive economic growth—the immensity of the crisis was fully understood only during Perestroika—but also faced a challenge equally threatening to socialism: the embourgeoisement of its population. Alongside economic stagnation,

the 1970s witnessed the rise of consumerism in the Soviet Union. This shift is easy to understand. A new generation had no memories of collectivization or the Great Terror, they had not experienced the war and the post-war famine. Their parents and grandparents struggled to ensure the most possible comfortable future for them. As a result, the Seventiers chose to fight for their personal smooth-running and cozy household rather than for reign of socialism all over the world. This aligned well with the global trend toward consumer society. A lucky purchase of a foreign-made sheepskin coat became much more exciting than those revolutions and their internationalism. The mythologized revolutionary romanticism that had still inspired the Sixtiers, had evaporated, replaced by conformism and pragmatism. Faith in socialism transformed into a watered-down senseless ritual. Travin accurately captures this demise of the 1970s generation, and mentions it throughout the book:

> The allure of Western consumer standards may have angered the parents or grandparents, but the younger generation was nearly entirely captivated by it. (p. 68; Trans. by S. M.)

> The market economy would not arrive for another twenty years, but a keen observer was sure that the Soviet system was living on borrowed time and that it was destined to collapse sooner or later under the weight of consumerism rapidly taking shape in new generations. (p. 301; Trans. by S. M.)

For Travin, a specific symbol of Soviet consumerism is Vladimir Menshov's celebrated 1980 film *Moskva Slezam ne Verit* [Moscow Does Not Believe in Tears]. Unlike traditional Soviet films, where success is measured in awards and career achievements, this film measures it in plain personal happiness. Travin writes:

> Not just plain personal happiness, but to be honest, the happiness of a petit bourgeois, which seemed to be utterly unacceptable in Soviet ethic. *Moscow …* legitimized this lifestyle on the Soviet screen, and it turned out to be beautiful. (p. 396; Trans. by S. M.)

Another key theme in Travin's book is the Soviet individual's acquisition of personal space, that is a literal "room for life." People started moving from miserable barracks and shabby kommunalkas[3] (communal apartments) into private comfortable apartments. This transition started under Khrushchev and had lasted over the late years of socialism until its end. To Travin, communal apartments embodied collectivism at its most oppressive, where day and night one's personal life was observed by neighbors, where one was under constant surveillance and risked being informed on, and where all personal expression was stifled. Under such conditions, people would comply with collectivism, irrespective of aversion it could evoke in them, unwillingly adapting to the overcrowded apartment customs and relinquishing a part of themselves. And only

[3] Apartments where multiple families occupied separate rooms sharing a kitchen, bathroom, and hallway. As V. Vysotsky puts it, "na tridtsat' vosem' komnatok vsego odna ubornaya" [just a single bathroom for 38 tiny rooms].

availability of separate apartments in notorious Khrushchyovkas[4] had put an end to that communal-collectivist hell. As Travin notes,

> privacy was a crucial factor in the emergence of a generational divide. Separate apartments … were instrumental in creating the Seventiers, they dismantled the collectivism of the past, and laid the foundation for an unprecedented level of individualism in the USSR. (p. 131; Trans. by S. M.)

The above is supported by the first "movie hall," which features Yuliy Raizman's film *A Esli Eto Liubov?* [What If This Is Love?]. Travin sees it as more than just a school romance—a common plot in late Soviet cinema. To him, it is a story of "Soviet people claiming privacy, which enables them to preserve their soul, psyche, individuality from external interference" (p. 171; Trans. by S. M.). The film illustrates the growing resistance of the younger generation to Soviet preposterous collectivism reflected in the intrusive oversight of teachers and parents. And the story is set against the backdrop of newly built Khrushchyovkas, symbolizing the rise of personal space.

As a native of Leningrad/St. Petersburg, Dmitrii Travin inevitably offers a perspective shaped by life in a major city. Had the book been written by someone from a small Urals town or a remote steppe village, the retrospective picture of Soviet life would have been different. Certain topics, such as visits to fashionable restaurants and popular theaters, would be absent; while others, uncharacteristic of life in the capital, would take their place. Our lives varied too widely, and our country is too large. Keeping this in mind, the author supplements his own reminiscences with interviews from numerous eyewitnesses, whose testimonies add dimension and versatility to his depiction of everyday life in the USSR. This mosaic of mundane life is made up of sketches about school, military service, living in communal apartments, creative intelligentsia sorting vegetables in warehouses, and many other things. By weaving together these descriptions, Travin unveils the reality far removed from the official exterior of that time and difficult to comprehend from today's perspective. "I sought to strip away the veneer covering our past and reveal Soviet life as it truly was—not as it was proclaimed to be", he concludes (p. 495; Trans. by S. M.). And he succeeds. Upon finishing the book, the reader is left with a lingering aftertaste of the USSR.

References

Jude, F. (2000). *The complete poems of Tyutchev in an English translation: Nature, love and politics*. Durham University.

[4] Khrushchyovkas were standardized apartment buildings constructed en masse from the 1950s to the 1970s, prioritizing speed, affordability, and functionality over aesthetics or comfort.