"Perestroika and the 1990s - those were the best years of my life!" Nostalgia for the post-Soviet Limbo

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9 "Perestroika and the 1990s—Those Were the Best Years of My Life!"

Nostalgia for the Post-Soviet Limbo

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The title of this chapter is not a playful rephrasing of Bryan Adams' 1985 hit *Summer of '69*, but a quote from an interview with Pavel (last name not given), who fondly remembers the atmosphere of the late 1980s when the dismantling of the Soviet system was only a matter of time. Fresh from the army, Pavel took full advantage of the increased business opportunities during the waning years of the Soviet Union first by buying and reselling computers and then by working as a self-appointed art director for Russia's first private record company. Although Russia's music industry and show business were hit hard by the ruble crisis of 1998, Pavel's overall impression of the first post-Soviet decade remains decisively positive: "I travelled all over the world, hung out with musicians and was surrounded by wonderful people (. . .). The 1990s were the only totally happy, meaningful moment in my life" (quoted in Chukovskaia 2016, 253–5).

For anyone familiar with the reputation of the 1990s as a period of total decay and national humiliation, Pavel's rosy memories may come as a surprise. The cliché of the "rowdy" or "cursed 1990s" has become so ingrained in Russia's collective memory that Pavel's story could easily be construed as a provocative display of liberal chutzpah, an insult to the average Russian citizen struggling to get by. It is undeniable, however, that a certain revisionism of the decade "everybody wanted to forget" (Borenstein 2008, 226) has been growing stronger over the last five years. What is therefore more noteworthy than Pavel's individual memories is the fact that they were published in a volume with tens of other eyewitness accounts of the Yeltsin years that diverge considerably from the well-known master narrative of chaos and destitution. Even if *Museum of the 1990s. Territory of Freedom (Muzei 90-kh. Territoriia svobody)*, as the volume is titled, also contains more sobering testimonies, especially from people who had well-established careers long before Gorbachev came to power, the collection as such is a conscious attempt to reconnect with the 1990s and present a platform for people, such as Pavel, who claim to experience nostalgia for what they often refer to as the "drive" and "limitless opportunities" of that time. Characteristically, the editors

use the word "freedom" prominently in the title and another four times in the subtitle to suggest that this was the decade's main, if short-lived, achievement.[1]

From the aspect of social psychology it seems only natural that certain age groups in Russia, as well as in the West, are now rediscovering the 1990s as a time to which they feel peculiarly attached. Fred Davis, one of the first scholars to recognize nostalgia as a potentially productive engagement with the past, has argued that a nostalgic sentiment is a precondition for a generation to conceive of itself as such (1979, 115). At some point any generation will become nostalgic; if not, it is not a proper generation in the sense of an age cohort with a commonly experienced past, its own short-lived fashions and musical tastes. While I agree with Davis that nostalgia is invested with "powerful generation-delineating properties" (192), here I would like to emphasize the specific *functions* nostalgia may perform depending on time, space, and the interests of those involved (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 929). In Eastern Europe, especially in those parts of the region where regime change caused entire countries to dissolve, nostalgia can function as an "oppositional mode of memory," a "weapon," in the words of Daphne Berdahl, that allows marginalized groups in society to resist "official historical knowledge" and construct their own vision of the recent past. Berdahl developed her notion of nostalgia as weapon in the context of *Ostalgie*; nostalgic practices by which eastern Germans have sought to resist the triumphant west-German narrative of national reunification (1999, 205). In my opinion the concept is equally useful when applied to present-day Russia where we can now observe a similar urge to "reclaim" the past from the clutches of officialdom and redefine the first post-Soviet decade in considerably more positive terms. Even if this is not always a conscious operation, and feelings of mild nostalgia do not necessarily signal disloyalty to the present regime, we can observe a growing tendency among opinion makers and "ordinary" Russians to engage with the 1990s in ways that undermine the state-endorsed narrative of a national disaster.

Material that warrants an analysis through the lens of nostalgia is potentially vast and diverse, ranging from lecture series and interviews with key-figures from the 1990s to flash mobs on Instagram and nostalgic lyrics by punk bands and rappers in praise of the decade's "authentic" grittiness. Though I will mention some of these subculture-specific expressions of nostalgia in passing, this chapter is largely confined to two case studies: a recent TV series on Russian shuttle traders, more specifically its reception by viewers active in the well-known discussion list "kino-teatr.ru," and a number of interconnected initiatives to reconsider and possibly redefine the historical significance of the 1990s. While a predominantly negative view of the decade may still prevail, feelings of nostalgia sparked by moments of recognition can clearly be detected in the material examined below. Particularly in online discussions by TV

viewers, personal memories of the Yeltsin years often serve to "correct" the view presented on screen and legitimize one's own claims to expert knowledge. In its most extreme manifestations, this urge to correct and disagree with the "official" take on the 1990s comes close to Berdahl's concept of nostalgia as weapon, but even expressions of moderate disagreement can reflect a sense of loss that is hardly compatible with the decade's one-dimensional awkward reputation.

Defining the Decade: Towards a National Disaster Narrative

Regardless of the label that one prefers to characterize the 1990s, treating a decade as a distinct historical period is in itself an artificial operation that hardly does justice to sudden changes in society or continuities over longer stretches of time. According to Jason Smith, the decade is only an "intellectual shorthand," a convenient "decimal-oriented chronological marker" that leads us to conceive of 20th-century history almost as a succession of "moods" and "fashions" (1998, 264): the "roaring twenties," the "rebellious sixties," the "individualistic seventies" etc. This method of periodization seems more typical for the United States (and by implication Western Europe) than for Russia, where the historical "feel" and mental boundaries of a particular period are usually predicated on regime change and radical shifts in the country's political course. Thus, while there are good reasons to question the validity of expressions such as the "Thaw" or the "Years of Stagnation," it is uncertain whether a label such as the "long 1970s" (suggested recently to delineate the "quiet" years 1968–1982) will ever catch on.[2]

In consideration of all this, the expression the "rowdy 1990s" looks doubly artificial. It squeezes historically very complex processes into the narrow framework of a decade and goes against the national tradition of labeling historical periods by using season imagery and metaphors of construction and growth. Moreover, while historians see the time of Perestroika (1985–1991) as "analytically separate" from the first post-Soviet decade, by the late 1990s Russian citizens often treated these periods as indistinguishable from one another, retrospectively interpreting the first signs of change under Gorbachev as indicative of what would follow under Yeltsin (Shevchenko 2009, 37). On the threshold of the new millennium, with both reformers being increasingly lambasted as the demolishers of the Soviet Union, the popular perception of what had happened to the country still resisted structuring according to "decimal logic." This is in keeping with Serguei Oushakine's observation that by the end of the decade ethnographers, politicians, and other opinion makers bemoaning Russia's demographic decline often tended to "equate the dissolution of the Soviet state with the dissolution of the Russians as a nation" (Oushakine 2009, 80–1). In their opinion, the "Russian tragedy" predated the collapse of the Soviet Union and continued unabated throughout the first post-Soviet decade.

Owing to the interplay of a number of factors, the first post-Soviet decade eventually did come to enjoy the reputation of a distinct era with its specific problems and its own mentality. The most straightforward of these factors is, of course, the succession of national leaders, which coincided more or less with the beginning and the end of the decade (1990/1991: Gorbachev and Yeltsin and 1999/2000: Yeltsin and Putin). This coincidence could only be appreciated in hindsight when it turned out that Vladimir Putin had an entirely different governing style than his predecessor and a steadily growing budget at his disposal.[3] One can speculate that Putin's rise to power exactly at the brink of the new millennium also added to the impression of an epochal change, if only—again—in retrospect.[4]

Another factor contributing to the perception of the 1990s as a distinct period is the dominance of a "crisis framework" through which many citizens perceived daily life just after the break-up of the Soviet Union. As Olga Shevchenko has convincingly shown, this framework did not necessarily reflect a person's individual situation but rather a need to assert one's autonomy and economic adeptness amidst the social misery that was assailing the country. Hence there was the persistent idea among Shevchenko's interviewees that they were doing relatively well as opposed to the country as a whole (2009, 12). Deploying a crisis rhetoric was also a popular strategy among academics and political actors attempting to defend their own interests by painting a dramatic picture of national agony and immanent doom (32–4). In a seminal study on talk and urban lore during late Perestroika, Nancy Ries describes a similar mechanism of generalization by which individual cases of injustice or social decay were immediately integrated in a totalizing disaster narrative. Tales of "complete disintegration" were a popular oral genre that helped create a "sense of shared experience and destiny," thus further contributing to the idea of a permanent national crisis (1997, 46).

The last factor that made the 1990s stand out is the Kremlin's initially modest but ultimately relentless attempts to capitalize on the disaster narrative described above by positing a correlation between the "national crisis" under Gorbachev and Yeltsin, and Russia's overcoming of it once Vladimir Putin took over. This intertwining of the crisis framework and Putin's "redemptive" authoritarianism is reflected, amongst others, in historical cinema, particularly during the years 2004–2008, which often seeks to create diachronic "memory chains" with the aim of linking different periods and suggesting historical parallels (Wijermars 2016, 47; Brouwer 2016). Considering that Russian historical films have always been primarily about "legitimizing the present" (Gillespie 2003, 60) and the state has recently used film quite specifically as a nation builder (Van Gorp 2011, 253–5), it takes little effort to understand that the 1990s loom large in blockbusters such as *1612: Khronika smutnovo vremeni* (1612, A Chronicle of the Time of Troubles, 2007), *Admiral* (The Admiral,

2008), and the TV series *Stolypin . . . Nevyuchennye uroki* (Stolypin. Disregarded Lessons, 2006). On the surface these state-funded productions (or co-funded by Kremlin-loyal oligarchs) deal with entirely different periods, but they invite the viewer to extrapolate the historical events on screen to the recent past and present: the "lawlessness" of the 1990s and the "return of law and order" after 2000 (Norris 2012, 255).

Indirectly these historical parallels also testify to a "normalization of Soviet history" (Kalinin 2011, 158), which is no longer viewed as a failed experiment that lasted over 70 years (a popular notion when the Soviet Union was falling apart) but as an organic part of Russian history. The 1990s, by contrast, are now rarely regarded as a period of *transition* (the optimistic term used at the time) but rather as one of "anomalous social disorder" (Platt 2009, 9), a blind alley that stands out negatively because of its "disruptive" nature. After declaring in 2012 that the post-Soviet period was effectively over (Putin quoted in "Postsovetskii etap v zhizni Rossii zavershen"), Putin and his supporters have become increasingly explicit in condemning the 1990s as a time of social squalor and political chaos (Popova 2012, 236). When asked in December 2017 why his main rival (Aleksei Naval'nyi) wasn't allowed to run for president, Putin reacted by evoking once again the specter of the "chaotic" 1990s and comparing the lenient authorities of that time to a "man lazily picking cabbage from his beard as the country turns into a muddy puddle" (Putin quoted in "Bol'shaia press-konferentsiia Vladimira Putina"). Attending Putin's inauguration on May 7, 2018, even Aleksandr Zaldostanov (aka the "Surgeon"), leader of the motorcycle club "Night Wolves," chimed in, likening the president to a "powerful reactor" whose energy and commitment to the country's prosperity had allowed Russia to overcome the "destruction of the 1990s" (Zaldostanov quoted in "Sochetanie Azii, kolokolov i tekhnologii").

This state-approved demonization of the 1990s shows that the decade has come to serve as the mirror image of some imagined great Russia which is frequently invoked by Vladimir Putin in his speeches and in other forms of official discourse. It is a Russia that is unmarred by former ideological divisions (imperial and Soviet) and consistently heroic in the course of its entire history. While this sort of nostalgia for immutable national origins has been part of Putin's nation-building agenda ever since he rose to power (Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2004, 503; Stepanova 2015, 124–8), more recently it has become a "source of modernization" (Kalinin 2011, 159), a lens for looking at the future. Military operations, sporting events, and cultural projects: all of these seem to originate in a nostalgic vision of former and future greatness that makes the 1990s look bleak and incapable of fostering any feelings of loss.

The next two sections, however, will demonstrate how people resist this one-sided juxtaposition of the "destructive" 1990s to the nostalgically idealized "before and after." They do so either by openly engaging

in a form of counter-nostalgia which rejects the one-dimensional "from-humiliation-to-restoration" narrative, or, less drastically, by rediscovering the decade's less gloomy aspects as they watch and question its representation in prime-time TV drama. *Shuttle Traders* (*Chelnochnitsy* 2016), a series about a group of women eking out a living in the mid-1990s, is an ideal case study for analyzing this latter tendency as it tries to achieve the impossible: to perpetuate the decade's rowdy reputation while complying with the generic demands of the modern fairy tale. This incompatibility led quite a few viewers to criticize the series for its lack of truthfulness and formulate for themselves the "essence of the way things really were" (Davis 1979, 47).

Redoing the Decade: A Fairy Tale About the 1990s or Dark Nostalgia?

Shown on *Rossiia 1* in the fall of 2016, *Shuttle Traders* does little to rehabilitate the 1990s. Racketeering, money extortion, and revenge killings confirm in predictable fashion the decade's reputation as a time of social misery and lawlessness. The series' generalizing slogan ("this was happening to the entire country") clearly draws on the crisis rhetoric discussed earlier, dispersing any doubt as to the magnitude of the national disaster that was taking place. At the same time, the decision to focus on shuttle trade (*chelnochnichestvo*)[5] is quite innovative, as this was a field of work in which women were particularly active and arguably more successful than men (Mukhina 2010; Bruno 1997).[6] Some viewers therefore praised the series as the first attempt to tell the story of Russian women during the 1990s by showing their resourcefulness and ability to navigate Russia's budding market economy. Although the story becomes increasingly ludicrous towards the end, developing into a contrived celebration of family values, the first three episodes or so are still quite plausible and historically accurate. Less convincing is the complete absence of any political context. The main characters—two officers of the Russian air force and their wives and children—do not watch TV or listen to the radio and never discuss politics, even if they have plenty to be embittered about. As a result *Shuttle Traders* paints a picture of the 1990s that is not so much depressing as remarkably sterile and regrettably short of period details.

It is 1994. The Russian army is a shambles, salaries are not being paid, and when one of the children is struck by an exceptionally severe asthma attack, her parents' only hope is an "American medicine of 200 dollars." No longer able to make ends meet, the wives of the officers decide to team up and start working as suitcase traders buying colorful clothes in Turkey and selling them at an open-air market in Moscow. Especially Ol'ga, who is a teacher by training, is initially embarrassed to earn her money as a petty trader (*torgashka*), a detail that accurately reflects how

shuttle traders were sometimes struggling to overcome feelings of shame instilled by Soviet sensibilities about proper labor (Bloch 2011, 329). Equally plausible is the frustration of these women's husbands who cannot accept that their wives are turning into the family's main breadwinners (Kiblitskaya 2000). After an ill-fated attempt to earn a decent living as taxi drivers, the men drift off into shady business stealing gasoline from the army and selling it on the black market or getting entangled in financial affairs.

The financial hardship, stress, and frequent journeys to Turkey do not fail to take their toll. In no less than sixteen episodes we see marriages run aground, promiscuity thrive, and children skip classes to start their own "business." Faithful to the Cinderella plot that permeates so many series on *Rossiia 1* (Sulim 2018), *Shuttle Traders* ends on an optimistic note when the officers and their wives realize that family life is something sacred; they decide to reboot their marriages. In the last scene we see the two families walking towards a church where the newly born, illegitimate son of one of the officers will be baptized. While in the story we haven't moved beyond the year 1995, the in-your-face symbolism of the last scene lends the ordeal of these families a sense of closure, as though they are now morally prepared for a more purposeful life in the new millennium.[7]

Considering the series' unexpected happy ending and the routine-like stigmatization of the 1990s, nostalgia is probably the last word that comes to mind when trying to identify the general purport of this melodrama. The absence of now obsolete commodities (pagers, *barsetki*, stonewashed jeans, raspberry-colored suit jackets) and other period markers (songs, references to political events) makes the 1990s look implausibly sanitized, thus effectively deactivating any potential triggers of nostalgia and recognition. Not surprisingly, in the entire discussion devoted to *Shuttle Traders* on kino-teatr.ru (over 1500 posts),[8] the word "nostalgia" occurs only three times and just once in relation to the series itself. This single instance, however, a comment by a viewer calling herself "Zubrilka," is worth quoting. It shows how nostalgia is instrumentalized to articulate an autonomous position with regard to the contested "essence" of the past, in this case the 1990s.

> I started watching [the series] in order to indulge [my] nostalgia for the 1990s. But I simply don't feel the atmosphere, it doesn't get to me. The adventures of the shuttle traders are shown as a sort of a holiday. The bandits look like clowns, there is no tension, the bus passengers don't look frightened. [. . .] Everything is superficial, shallow [. . .]. There is no coherent story, the desperate situation the country was in back then is missing, [the series] has no atmosphere.

Referring to a scene in which a bus with shuttle traders is robbed by a gang of criminals, Zubrilka's comment illustrates what could be called "dark"

nostalgia; a desire to re-experience or experience vicariously yesterday's anxiety or even fear in the comfortable knowledge of one's present safety. Essentially this is not very different from Svetlana Boym's concept of "reflective nostalgia" in that it also "thrives in the *algia*, the longing itself" (Boym 2001, xviii), except that it involves a sensation of mild horror. Dark nostalgia, then, is a form of reconnecting to the past ("I started watching to indulge my nostalgia") caused by a fascination with some macabre or abhorrent aspect of it ("the desperate situation back then").[9]

In Zubrilka's case, it is the *failure* to evoke feelings of dark nostalgia that she identifies as one of the series' main flaws. Instead of showing the full extent of the shuttle trader's plight, the makers' decision to prettify the 1990s has turned the decade into a cardboard reality. Although Zubrilka was the only one to use the word nostalgia explicitly (*ponostal'girovat'*), many viewers shared her disappointment, arguing or implying that the 1990s as shown in *Shuttle Traders* is simply too good to be true: "It's a glossy, not a TV series" (No. 16, Nord); "Those who don't know the 1990s may like the film, but for me it's all phony ((No. 66, Vol't); "As for the series' credibility, it seems that we are watching a light, simple comedy" (No. 428, Florina). "It's a film, everything is idealized, romanticized" (No. 702, Dzenifer); "I regret to have wasted my time on this fairy tale (No. 741, Sandra VRN).

While I would not claim that all of these comments necessarily betray a nostalgic attitude toward the 1990s, or that reactions to *Shuttle Traders* were exclusively negative, it is clear that, at least in the perception of the viewers quoted here, the series failed to "grasp the essence" of the decade. Despite the fact that viewers widely recognized the shuttle trader as a familiar figure and the series contained some of the stock ingredients of the 1990s (financial hardship, unemployment, humiliating job-hopping, organized crime), something essential appeared to be missing. Attempting to define that "missing something," viewers not only drew on their own memories as a more reliable source of information; they also felt called upon to identify and reflect on the decade's unique characteristics that had apparently escaped the makers. It is here that we can discern the contours of more dark nostalgia and indeed the recognition that the 1990s were a unique and sometimes exciting period.

One of the series' most serious shortcomings, according to disappointed viewers, was its inability to convey the "spirit" (*dukh*) of the 1990s, in particular the "spirit of the market place." On screen, it was "all dummies and props," according to a certain "Vol't" (No. 66), who in a subsequent post shared his own experience as a shuttle trader in the early 1990s. Although he had made only two trips abroad and had enjoyed little success selling his goods at the Luzhniki market in Moscow, the "spirit of the market, its energy and entourage" had made a lasting impression on him. Unfortunately, this was entirely missing in *Shuttle Traders*, and so was the very spirit of the 1990s (No. 188, Vol't).

Another viewer was annoyed by the unnatural orderliness at Ol'ga's market and the social and ethnic homogeneity of its population:

> Where are the vendors of different nationalities, from Slavs to Negros, from former engineers to tattoo-covered ex-convicts, where are the stands with illegal video tapes and CDs, with music to suit all tastes, from *Kombinatsiia* to *Nautilus*? We see nobody playing backgammon or cards, nobody is even drinking [alcohol. O.B.]. And where have the gypsies gone, the pickpockets?
>
> (No. 699, Seryi iz Khar'kov).

On a similar note, but without overt nostalgia, a certain "Semruch" was disturbed by the overall brightness of the series (implausibly, all the episodes appear to be set in the early summer). Especially the portrayal of shuttle traders as well-groomed, high-heeled ladies (**Figure 9.1**) was at odds with the "truth of life" (*pravda zhizni*): "I remember the market places of those days. The stands were penetrated by the wind blowing from every direction; because of the frost the poor women were wearing ten sweaters, body warmers and felt boots size 45" (No. 721, Semruch). As in the previous two examples, personal memories of the time made this viewer disagree with the varnished picture presented in *Shuttle Traders* and advance the bustling marketplace with its concentration of petty crime and different nationalities as the epitome of the "true" 1990s.

Using slightly more abstract terms, a viewer calling herself "Sandra VRN" believed the series had failed to capture that "mix of despair and drive" so typical of the 1990s. This was a time "when the old way of life with its familiar rules had already disappeared and the new way of life was still free of restrictions and offered zillions of opportunities" (No. 736, SandraVRN). Though acknowledging the traumatic loss that many citizens had experienced after the breakup of the Soviet Union, this viewer scorned the makers for ignoring the all-pervasive sense of freedom, which had been such a vital component of the "rowdy 1990s." Semruch, the viewer who disliked the series for its superficial brightness, was implacable: "What can we learn from this creation? About the fate and life of shuttle traders: nothing. About the 1990s: nothing" (No. 1364, Semruch).

Although some viewers were less disturbed by historical inaccuracies and accepted the series as a truthful depiction of the 1990s, there was nearly unanimous agreement that shuttle trading in early post-Soviet Russia was in itself an original and worthy subject for television drama. Who else but shuttle traders had supplied Russia with clothes, shoes, and food in the early 1990s, a certain "Arfa" wanted to know. The story of the shuttle traders was a heroic one that would require more than sixteen episodes if it was to be told properly (No. 1529, Arfa). A viewer from Izhevsk was convinced that "this astonishing and fascinating time"

Figure 9.1 Announcement of the TV series *Chelnochnitsy* (Rossiia1).

would provide writers and filmmakers with inspiration for years to come, and he noted with some disappointment that Nobel Prize winner Svetlana Alexievich had completely ignored these "pioneers of trade" in her book *Second-Hand Time* (No. 229, vladkino). Frustrated with the "mute

models" featuring in *Shuttle Traders*, this viewer imagined a "real" shuttle trader to be an "audacious, superb psychologist" who closely followed the latest trends in fashion but also knew how to negotiate with racketeers (No. 773, vladkino). In the opinion of another admirer, the earliest shuttle traders deserved a monument for opening a "window to Europe" and ending once and for all the time of shortages and coupons (No. 1530, Iaropolk Pomorov).[10]

On the surface the belated recognition of the shuttle trader as a historic figure relates primarily to his or her role as a supplier of consumer goods. Adroit, persistent, and prepared to take risks, in some of the comments the shuttle trader acquires the Promethean traits of a "cultural hero" (Meletinskii 1976) whose exploits lead to a vast improvement of people's lives.[11] Sometimes viewers singled out steadfastness and perseverance as the shuttle trader's most defining characteristics. The suggestion that it was only a small minority of the population that had engaged in shuttle trading (No. 17, Sovunia) and that these individuals were driven only by a desire to make a fast ruble (No. 21, aleksei22) was passionately rejected by other list members on the grounds that shuttle trading was extremely taxing and rarely allowed one to live it up (No. 22, Ellenochka). If anything, shuttle traders demonstrated an extraordinary talent for survival (No. 1529, Arfa), especially women "while their husbands were getting drunk" (No. 18, Argo Leo). To illustrate the stamina of the *real* female shuttle trader, a viewer by the nickname of "Eva Kurt" compared her to Nikolai Nekrasov's well-known heroic Russian woman who "will stop a horse on the run // and storm into a hut on fire" (No. 20).[12]

Implicit in both images (the cultural hero and the heroic Russian woman) is the assumption that shuttle traders were able to muster up some exceptional qualities in response to the extreme circumstances of Russia's rogue capitalism but that the demand for such qualities disappeared once the country switched from the survival mode of the 1990s to a regime of post-transition "normalcy." In other words, as life became less of a struggle in the 2000s, the desperate fighting spirit of the first post-Soviet decade also began to wane. To quote again one of the most active list members on kino-teatr.ru: "it took a truly exceptional person to become a real shuttle trader" (No. 737, vladkino). These words tell us probably more about vladkino's own romantic (and gendered)[13] views on early entrepreneurship in post-Soviet Russia than about the social reality of shuttle traders, but they also signal the loss of a "can-do mentality" for which the 1990s deserve to be remembered. Moreover, the conviction that shuttle traders had "opened a window to Europe" is recognition of their contribution to post-Soviet Russia and by extension of the 1990s as a difficult but meaningful period in Russian history (and not its "blind alley"). While it would be going too far to qualify this as an example of "nostalgia as weapon," the discussion on kino-teatr.ru does illustrate

nostalgia's ability to provide existential meaning by making the past look relevant (Routledge et al. 2011). The 1990s are no exception.

Defending the Decade: Nostalgia as Weapon

Like the series itself, the discussion on *Shuttle Traders* at kino-teatr.ru never acquired an overtly political dimension. Viewers recalled the problems of the 1990s in general terms or by adducing examples from their personal lives, but we find virtually none of the usual Yeltsin-bashing that tends to surface in this context.[14] It would therefore be a mistake to regard the nostalgic voices on this discussion list as directly responding to the vehement degrading of the 1990s by officials and other Kremlin loyalists discussed earlier. These viewers found fault with the makers for not having captured the vibrant atmosphere of the open-air market and, more in general, what they perceived as the true spirit of the decade. It could even be argued that thrill-seekers hoping to indulge in dark nostalgia implicitly subscribed to the traditional view of the "rowdy" 1990s.

Independent media and non-governmental organizations have been telling a different story over the past four or five years. Here we see a more concerted effort to stimulate debate or even redress the critical balance in favor of the 1990s, whether by organizing lecture series and panel discussions for historians and social scientists or by recording the personal and often contradictory experiences of ordinary citizens. *Museum of the '90s*, the 2016 volume mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, is the culmination of this development, bringing together a wide variety of material ranging from interviews to personal letters and diaries, grouped around the central theme of freedom in all its manifestation.[15]

Museum of the '90s is also the title of the overarching project that was launched by the Yegor Gaidar Foundation in 2014. The foundation website provides access to resources for the study of the 1990s ranging from sophisticated economic graphs and Gaidar's personal archive to light-hearted quizzes in the spirit of Trivial Pursuit and a "dictionary of the 1990s." Since 2015 the Yeltsin Center in Yekaterinburg has staged an annual festival, "Island of the '90s" (Yeltsin Center 2017), where visitors can listen to live performances of the decade's greatest hits, brush up their knowledge of early TV commercials, or receive a retro look in the *feshion korner*. These more playful encounters with the 1990s appear to perform the double function of stirring nostalgia in people with active memories of the decade and reaching out to the younger generation who may be susceptible to the lure of the 1990s by the lasting appeal of legendary KINO front man Viktor Tsoi and the period's reputation as the Golden Age of Russian rock. More serious forms of infotainment are offered in the form of lectures and public interviews; the edition of 2017 featured, amongst others, Yeltsin's biographer, Boris Minaev and a "conversation

marathon" in which journalists, entrepreneurs, and politicians shared their memories of the 1990s with their audience.

While collective reminiscing about the past is not necessarily synonymous with nostalgia, retrieving memories in a group of peers can trigger a sudden recognition of aspects that have been overlooked or undervalued. This was graphically demonstrated during the "conversation marathon" in September 2017 when the speakers were asked about their most vivid impressions of the 1990s. Aleksandr Vinokurov (born in 1970), one of the leading figures behind TV Rain, remembered the anxiety with which he had followed the presidential elections of 1996 and, particularly, his determination to cast his vote in the run-off in support of Boris Yeltsin. Comparing the eventful 1990s to the 2000s when "there was only United Russia," Vinokurov concluded: "This is how politics can be, this is how politics probably should be. This is the politics we had" (Vinokurov quoted in "Priamaia transliatsiia").[16] Even if Gleb Morev, editor-in-chief of Colta.ru, emphasized the importance of learning how to approach the 1990s "historically" and study the institute of Russian state power in a "civilized, European way" (Morev quoted in "Priamaia transliatsiia" at 13:35–14:25), the format of "Island of the '90s" offers such a diversity of activities with varying degrees of audience participation that the "non-scholarly" nostalgic experience is taken for granted, if not outright encouraged.

To generate publicity for the first edition of the festival in 2015, Colta.ru organized a Russian version of Throwback Thursday,[17] urging its readers "not to blacken the 1990s" but instead post photos of when they were young and "feel [again] the atmosphere of freedom." Many readers heeded the call and shared their photos from the 1990s, often adding comments that reinforced the life-affirmative impression conveyed by the visual material. One reader, for example, posted a twenty-year-old picture of himself and his wife on Instagram, adding the following caption: "me and my wife striding through Moscow" (*my s zhenoi shagaem po Moskve*). An allusion to one of Soviet cinema's most optimistic and sun-drenched films, these words undermine the "official" view of the 1990s, highlighting instead the value of personal memory.[18] Other posts were even more explicit, showing primarily people in their twenties posing for the camera while clearly having a good time. A group photo showing four friends elicited the following reactions from two of them:

> vasiliev_andrey When we were young and carefree 🤡😊 a picture from the distant '90s ☺️🤡 around 93–94, thank you Tania)) @matveevatanya always nice to remember those times, what fun did we have👍😊 there were huge deficits, but there was friendship 👍✋#nostalgia #youth #nineties #thisisyouth #youngyears **vasiliev_andrey**@matveevatanya yes))) to buy "Dr. Martens" boots you couldn't drink and eat for two months, but even so we had a great time 😊👍

> **vasiliev_andrey**@matveevatanya yeah, we did 👆🏻☺🏻😊
> **vasiliev_andrey**@edaminova shoot, and then we couldn't figure out: which one is mine and which one the "boa constrictor's", then I got it, they are both not mine 😊👆🏻 they were Lerka's)))[19]
> **iradaminova**😊😊😊👆🏻
>
> (vasiliev-andrey 2016)

The most obvious signal words denoting irreversible change and feelings of loss ("carefree," "remember," "those times," "great time") do little to anchor this conversation in the 1990s; they could be used by any generation looking back at its own youth. Yet the fact that these positive memories are articulated despite the mentioned shortages shows how the intimate and happy history of this small group ("there was friendship") outweighs the bigger picture of national destitution. Moreover, although Tania and Andrey do not reflect on freedom as such (as the editors of Colta encouraged them to do), it is implicitly given in the difficult choice between buying food or a pair of fashionable boots. As can be inferred from the rest of the thread, the example of Dr. Martens is far from hypothetical (vasiliev_andrey did own a pair), reminding us of a very real problem that Russians were facing at the time: a steady increase in available goods, including prestigious products from the West, and a dramatic decline in purchasing power. Thus, while acknowledging the (material) problems they had to cope with, these Instagram users remember the 1990s mainly for their friendship and the fact that they were simply enjoying themselves (*bylo klassno*).

Considering the involvement of "liberal" institutions such as the Yegor Gaidar Foundation and the Yeltsin Center, it is small wonder that the project "Museum/Island of the 1990s" was met with furious reactions from the newspaper *Zavtra* (Tomorrow), the traditional red-brown bulwark of Yeltsin opposition. According to Andrei Fefelov, the organizers were nothing but a "small people" (*malyi narod*) whose "nostalgic longing for the 1990s" was proof of their alienation from Russian reality and complete irrelevance as a political factor (Fefelov 2016). Members of the KPFR (the Communist Party) were quick to discard the Colta initiative as a "manipulative political device" (Kostin quoted in "Nostal'gicheskii fleshmob" 2015), while Mikhail Deliagin, an economist and a former liberal, now affiliated with the center-left *Spravedlivaia Rossiia* (A Just Russia), voiced concern that the "liberals" were planning a come-back in Russian politics (Chernykh 2015). The Kremlin-loyal daily *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* (Komsomol Truth), while generously offering a platform to Kostin and Deliagin, pretended to assume an impartial position. It merely asked its readers to decide for themselves whether the decade should be remembered as a "breeze of freedom" *or* for "destructing millions of lives" (Skoibeda and Sazonov 2016). By denying that it could be both at the same time and conveniently ignoring the incongruity

of the choice itself, *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* framed this nostalgia for the 1990s as something immoral, the whim of a spoilt elite for whom the "lives of millions" were less important than the satisfaction of their own petty desires. In the comments section, readers almost unanimously agreed arguing that the decade had brought nothing but destruction and should not be rehabilitated in any way.

While *Komsomol'skaia Pravda* may have wanted its readers to believe that these predominantly negative reactions on its website were more representative of the nation as a whole than the cheerful pictures posted by Colta readers, they only give an impression of the newspaper's own audience and its political preferences. It would be a mistake to think of the discussion it hosted as an opinion poll (just as it would be wrong to treat Colta's flash mob as one). What we can infer from the indignant reactions on the newspaper's website is the continuing relevance of the disaster narrative and the "unseemliness" of feeling nostalgic for the 1990s; indulging in nostalgia is construed either as part of a political strategy that serves the "return of liberals" to key positions in government or as a mere reverie of irresponsible hipsters preferring not to remember the hardship of the common people. What we can also conclude, however, is that this perceived impropriety of nostalgia for the 1990s makes it an effective weapon for challenging the disaster narrative and drawing attention to the decade's achievements. Vinokurov's words on the "politics we had," the repeated mention of "freedom" in Colta's publicity campaigns, and even the apolitical but joyful pictures on Instagram challenge the "official" nostalgia for imperial greatness by breaking the ultimate taboo: to remember warmly and openly a time when the country was maximally exposed to the inroads of the West.

Does this mean that counter-nostalgia for the 1990s is really the exclusive domain of a liberal elite, a "small people," as Andrei Fefelov put it disdainfully? Not quite. Marina Strukova (born in 1975), a nationalist poet, blogger, and regular contributor to *Zavtra* and the literary journal *Nash sovremennik* (Our Contemporary), remembers her involvement in the Neo-Nazi party *Russkoe Natsional'noe Edinstvo* (Russian National Unity) as follows:

> I remember that time as the heyday of healthy nationalism, not the kind of degenerated nationalism we witness today; I remember it for the influence of Russian rock which raised its listeners as free people; for the return of the works of forbidden authors, for a wealth of historical information, some of it quite contradictory, I remember that time for its energy, hope, and inspiration.
>
> (Strukova 2013)

The "fascist" choice of words ("healthy" as opposed to "degenerate") is doubtless unsettling, as is Strukova's general sympathy for a xenophobic

organization that flourished during the "darkest" years of the 1990s.[20] At the same time, much of what is mentioned here looks quite familiar: the return of once forbidden literature and the unrestricted availability of music previously deemed suspicious or even dangerous (like so many of her generation, Strukova is an avid admirer of Viktor Tsoi). Contrary to the majority of her readers, she does not consider the 1990s a "tragedy," an exceptional view to be expressed in *Zavtra*, which is reflected in the essay's affectionate subtitle ("My 1990s"). Essentially, then, Strukova's nostalgia for the 1990s as a time of hope and authenticity is not very different from Vinokurov's regretful reflections on the time when elections still mattered. Like Vinokurov, she associates the decade primarily with "energy, hope, and freedom" and seems very conscious of the opportunities that the 1990s presented to political activists (significantly, the essay opens with an exciting picture of her semi-illegal activities for the Neo-Nazi party). Even if she understands that the older generation will remember Gaidar's economic shock therapy and the (assumed) practice of "sex for a bar of Snickers," Strukova, a "poet and a romantic," sees the 1990s primarily as a "cruel, but merry time" (ibid.).

Strukova's aggressive nationalism and Vinokurov's cosmopolitan liberalism make strange bedfellows, of course, but in their personal assessment of the 1990s they have more in common than one would expect. While they are realistic enough to recognize the 1990s as the time of their youth (late adolescence and early adulthood), they remember the decade primarily for its promises upon which the 2000s failed to deliver. Situated on opposite ends of the political spectrum, they seem to agree that the appropriation of their ideals by the state has led to their corruption, and the 1990s should be remembered as a time of authentic political engagement. While this point of view may be more characteristic of the liberal elite to which Vinokurov belongs, the counterexample of Marina Strukova shows that it is not unique to it.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have deliberately ignored the most obvious instances of nostalgia for the 1990s available, such as Rodion Lubenskii's stated desire to "go back to the '90s" (see the introduction to the volume) or claims made recently by a popular rapper that "back then" he and his bros led "more natural, honest, and truthful lives" (ICE [KTL Dill]), quoted in "Prezentatsiia al'boma" at 2:10). While these words are probably the most convincing evidence that the first post-Soviet decade *is* capable of evoking feelings of loss, they primarily serve a need for group affirmation. They do not challenge other people's views on the 1990s, let alone dispute the official disaster narrative, which, on the contrary, is often used for fashioning oneself as the "last of the decade's Mohicans." For musician and showman Sergei Shnurov, for example, the "adventurous

spirit" of the 1990s is still alive, but only in the music and concerts of Leningrad, his own band (Shnurov 2017).

The viewers and opinion makers discussed in the previous sections were arguably less apologetic of the 1990s than the non-conformists of hip-hop and punk, but they questioned and openly challenged the "official" view of the decade by drawing on personal memories and offering an alternative picture of the way things had "really" been. By adducing this anecdotal and sentimental counter evidence, they aroused the suspicion of Kremlin loyalists wary of a liberal restoration, but in so doing they helped to define and simultaneously break a new taboo: to disregard the national trauma of the 1990s by remembering the decade with a mixture of fondness and regret, that is by remembering it nostalgically.

Nostalgia for the 1990s should not exclusively be understood as a weapon to undermine the official state-supported view of the decade, however. In a somewhat milder form it allowed viewers of the TV series *Shuttle Traders* to express their admiration for a particular group of Russians whose entrepreneurship and determination was felt to be indispensable for the country's post-socialist economy. Recognizing in the shuttle trader the heroic features of Russian womanhood (the "Nekrasov type"), some viewers were inclined to idealize the 1990s as a difficult time that had nonetheless stirred people's (women's) slumbering capacities for achieving the impossible. Taken together, the two case studies show the extreme slipperiness of post-Soviet nostalgia's referent, ranging in this case from the freedom which the 1990s had to offer to the extraordinary mentality required to survive the excesses of that freedom. Nostalgia for the 1990s, then, is as contradictory a phenomenon as the decade itself.

Notes

1. The volume's complete title reads *Muzei 90-kh. Territoriia svobody. Svoboda slova. Svoboda vybora. Svoboda dela. Svoboda byta*.
2. See, for example, the second issue of *Neprikosnovennyi zapas* in 2007, which was entirely devoted to the "long 1970s."
3. For this reason, the first decade of the new millennium is now sometimes referred to as the "affluent zeros" (*tuchnye nulevye*), as opposed to the "meager tens" (*khilye desiatye*) that Russia is currently facing.
4. Particularly among "red-brown" opinion makers such as Aleksandr Prokhanov, his son Andrei Fefelov, and literary critic Vladimir Bondarenko, suspicion toward the ruling elite and Putin personally remained strong throughout the 2000s. When I interviewed Bondarenko on September 10, 2012, he told me that he personally liked many things Putin was saying, but he added in disappointment: "he doesn't *do* anything" (*on ne delaet delo*). It is remarkable how the annexation of Crimea in 2014 led these men to reconsider their stance toward the president and made them oblivious of the critique they had previously leveled at him.
5. Shuttle trade in Russia took off almost immediately after citizens were allowed to travel abroad (1991), creating employment in one form or another for over 40 percent of the working population in the course of the 1990s (Bloch

2011, 323). Import restrictions imposed by the Russian government in 1996 and the financial crisis of 1998 reduced the number of Russians involved in shuttle trade significantly. In the 2000s open-air markets were dominated by traders from Central Asia.

6. The Russian title of the series, *Chelnochnitsy*, refers specifically to female shuttle traders.
7. In September 2018, *Chelnochnitsy* received a sequel of another sixteen episodes (*Chelnochnitsy-2*) situated in 1998. I have watched only the first three episodes but judging by the general description of the series on kino-teatr.ru and some 300 reactions by (loyal) viewers, the love interest seems to have grown disproportionately, overshadowing the struggle-for-life theme of the first series. Even the ruble crisis of August 1998 is only hinted at, but never really explored. For description and discussion of the sequel, see www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/ros/ser/129926/annot/ (accessed October 17, 2018).
8. All comments on *Chelnotsnitsy* can be read at www.kino-teatr.ru/kino/movie/ros/ser/117283/forum/ (accessed on October 17, 2018).
9. I use the term "dark nostalgia" by analogy with "dark tourism," a niche type of tourism, which specializes in visiting places associated with death, massacre, and disasters. More specifically, dark tourism is about visiting sites where some horrible event has occurred that arouses anxiety about the consequences of modernity: the potentially destructive side of science and technology, for example (Lennon and Foley 2010, 11–12). Of course, dark nostalgia is not a critique of modernity but a gesture of resistance intended to preserve one's own "authentic" memory of the 1990s as opposed to the varnished picture offered by *Shuttle Traders*. That feelings of nostalgia can also contain a darker element was pointed out by Davis, who argued that unpleasant memories can be successfully integrated in our mental autobiographies on the principle that "it was all for the best" (1979, 12).
10. The idea that shuttle traders stood at the cradle of the "new" Russia that was emerging after the breakup of the Soviet Union is more common than these few comments suggest. Starting in the 2000s, statues of shuttle traders have begun to appear in Blagoveshchensk, Yekaterinburg, and Berdsk (and in Ukraine and Belarus as well). Usually they are placed at railway stations or near the entrance of a new commercial center where there used to be an open-air market in the 1990s.
11. Interestingly, this idea of the shuttle trader's social usefulness seems consistent with feelings of professional pride which real shuttle traders sometimes experienced. In *Museum of the 1990s*, a certain Liudmila recalls feeling distinctly proud whenever she encountered someone on the street or in the metro wearing "her" clothes ("I had the feeling I was doing something useful . . ."; Trofimova 2016, 340).
12. "V bede—ne srobeet—spaset // Konia na skaku ostanovit, // V goriashchuiu izbu voidet! " (Nekrasov 1963, 24; translation: "In case of emergency she will save // She will stop a horse on the run // She will storm into a burning hut!").
13. List member vladkino erroneously uses the term *chelnok* (shuttle) instead of *chelnochnik* ("male shuttle trader"), juxtaposing it favorably to the female shuttle traders (*chelnochnitsy*) in the TV series.
14. It is conceivable, though, that any comments criticizing Yeltsin and possibly even his heir, Vladimir Putin, were quickly removed by the moderator.
15. Most of the material was originally published on such "liberal" websites as Snob.ru and Colta.ru.
16. The video of the conversation marathon is available on the website of the Yeltsin Center (see "Priamaia transliatsiia" in the bibliography). Vinokurov's comments start at 4:20:10.

17. Throwback Thursday (or Flashback Friday) is a trend on social media platforms such as Twitter and Instagram that allows users to share personal experiences and nostalgic memories by posting and tagging old photos or videos.
18. The film alluded to is, of course, Georgii Daneliia's *Ia shagaiu po Moskve* (1964). The title is translated in English as "I stride through Moscow" or "Walking the Streets of Moscow."
19. "Boa Constrictor" (*Udav*) is in all probability the nickname of one of these group members.
20. It is debatable which years were the "darkest" of the entire decade, of course, but here I am referring specifically to 1998, the year the economy hit rock bottom (Rosefielde and Hedlund 2009, 118–21), and 1999, when apartment buildings in Moscow and Volgodonsk were bombed, allegedly by Chechen separatists.

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