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## **Introduction: the many practices of post-Soviet nostalgia: affect, appropriation, contestation**

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# Introduction

## The Many Practices of Post-Soviet Nostalgia: Affect, Appropriation, Contestation

*Otto Boele, Boris Noordenbos, and Ksenia Robbe*

More than any other recent event, Vladimir Putin's speeches in the wake of the annexation of Crimea raise questions about the political uses of nostalgia in the post-Soviet context. On March 18, 2014, during a carefully orchestrated festive concert in the Red Square, Putin solemnly declared that "after a hard, long and exhaustive journey at sea, Crimea and Sevastopol are returning to their home harbor, to the native shores, to the home port, to Russia!" (Ria Novosti 2014). At first sight, Putin's rhetoric is a schoolbook example of what Svetlana Boym has called "restorative nostalgia," with its characteristic mobilization of collective myths and its wished-for return to, or rebuilding of, a "lost home" (Boym 2001).

On closer inspection, however, Putin's interpretation of the events was less clear-cut. The Homeric story of Crimea's exhaustive journey at sea, and its subsequent sailing back to Russia, allocated the initiative with the peninsula itself, a reading that resonated with the Russian government's emphasis on Crimeans' right to self-determination. Yet, in another speech delivered to Duma Deputies on that same day, Putin implied that it was *Russia* that had returned to Crimea, symbolically reclaiming those Crimean places that were, supposedly, pivotal to Russia's identity. The ancient Crimean site of Kherones, he emphasized, was the site where Prince Vladimir was baptized in the 10th century; Sevastopol was the birthplace of the Russian Black Sea Fleet; and the peninsula still harbored the graves of Russian soldiers from the 19th and 20th centuries.

Flexible as these narratives of "home" and "return" were, a constant factor was their thrust to cultivate a sense of shared belonging. Vladimir's baptism, Putin posited, was a "spiritual feat" that united "the peoples of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus"; and Crimea, "similar to Russia as a whole," had always been a multi-ethnic region where Russians, Ukrainians, Tatars, and other groups had lived side by side for centuries, blending their cultures and traditions over time (Ria Novosti 2014). Through references to a common "home," nostalgic narratives about the return of (or to) Crimea sought to create political consensus among diverse groups, both on the peninsula and in Russia itself. The grandiloquent celebrations of the Crimean campaign thus testify to not only the political force

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of post-Soviet nostalgia but also its frequent inconsistency and “messiness” (Lankauskas 2014, 41).

Let us consider another example of nostalgia, this time with a much narrower appeal and a considerably more prosaic referent. The song “I want to go back to the ’90s” by punk accordionist Rodion Lubenskii and his band “Voice of Omerica” (*Golos Omeriki*) is not only a wistful recollection of the singer’s happy youth but also a testimony to nostalgia’s subversive power, its ability to provoke and undermine hegemonic visions of the past:

Where have the pavilions gone? Where are the knuckles?  
The VHS tapes with Chuck Norris?  
I want to go back to the 1990s.  
(. . .)  
There’s glossies and glamour everywhere,  
But no spiritual nutrition . . .  
Honestly, I have to say:  
Things were better (*pizzhe*) back then!!!!<sup>1</sup>

At first glance the lyrics seem to be an expression of what Gary Cross has called “consumed nostalgia” (Cross 2015, 101), nostalgia triggered by the now obsolete commodities and gadgets of our youth; in this case illegal copies of American action flicks that were sold on virtually every street corner in the 1990s. But the song also reflects a more profound uneasiness about the changes that have occurred in Russia since the start of the new millennium. Released in 2008 after Russia had enjoyed nearly a decade of spectacular economic growth, the song fondly invokes the “rowdy 1990s” (*likhie devianostye*), a time that many Russian citizens would prefer to forget. Instead of aligning himself with the economic success story of the 2000s and welcoming the return of law and order under Vladimir Putin, Lubenskii has the impertinence to embrace the first post-Soviet decade by provocatively celebrating its lawlessness and primitive entrepreneurship (metonymically represented by the knuckles and the commercial pavilions) and suggesting that the decade was somehow more “honest” and “authentic” than the orderliness and shine of the present. In this respect the use of the slang word “pizzhe” “more awesome” is very telling. Supposedly a comparative of the substandard expression *pizdets* (“fuck”), it emblemizes the rawness of the 1990s, as well as the “inappropriateness” of longing back for it.

Together these examples demonstrate that post-Soviet nostalgia is a slippery phenomenon. It has no unified referent, and its political effects are by no means fixed. The term “post-Soviet” in the title of this volume therefore does not simply imply a longing for the Soviet period per se. Rather, it points to a diverse range of nostalgic practices, sentiments, and discourses that are somehow effected by the fall of the Soviet empire

and express efforts to come to grips with the legacy of its existence and demise.

Before exploring and mapping out diverse manifestations of “nostalgia,” however, our understanding of that label must be specified. Recently, criticism has been leveled against the increasing academic interest in the term. According to some, nostalgia has become “a catch-all notion for an array of memory discourses and practices that sometimes share little commonalities” (Berliner and Angé 2014, 5). Others have expressed even harsher objections, arguing that the booming Western academic fascination with Eastern European nostalgia perpetuates deeply engrained stereotypes about the region’s failure to catch up with the progressive and forward-looking orientations of Western modernity (Boyer 2010). As these scholars convincingly point out, nostalgia cannot be taken for granted either as a naturally existing phenomenon or as a self-explanatory analytical concept.

### Defining and Locating Nostalgia in the Post-Communist World Order

What is nostalgia? Is it a feeling, an affect, a disposition, or simply a rhetorical device? For Johannes Hofer, the Swiss student who coined the term in his 1688 dissertation, nostalgia was a medical condition, a feeling of loss and longing stemming from spatial detachment, not unlike homesickness, but more profound and with severe symptoms. At the beginning of the 20th century, the nostalgic subject was often believed to be detached in time as well as in space. A case in point is the notion of “immigrant psychosis” (Dwyer 2015), a mental state with which Russian emigrants were only too familiar after 1917, especially when all hope of returning to the motherland proved futile. Today we think of nostalgia as an emotional response to a rapidly changing world, a defense mechanism against the fleeting of time that allows us to preserve the continuity of personal and collective identities (Davis 1979). Whereas the second part in the compound “nostalgia” has always been relatively stable (*algos* meaning longing, pain), the first part of it (*nostos*—coming home) has become ever more elusive. Precisely because it is located in time, rather than in space, the object of “modern” nostalgia can never be fully retrieved.

Should we, then, conceive of nostalgia as a practice of memory, or is it altogether different from processes of remembrance and commemoration? How does nostalgia “work”? What are its effects? Is it mediated intersubjectively or between people and objects? Finally, what *is* nostalgia’s object? Can we even think of identifying one when, as most scholars agree, “nostalgia (. . .) tells us more about present moods than about past realities” (Davis 1979, 10)? A plethora of studies have responded to these questions emphasizing nostalgia’s positive effects (Davis 1979; Berdahl

1999; Routledge 2016) and attempting to lend more conceptual clarity to the notion of nostalgia. Even a brief summary of proposed types and aspects of nostalgic expressions—such as “private” and “collective” (Davis 1979), “mood” and “mode” (Grainge 2004; Jameson 1991), “restorative” and “reflective” (Boym 2001), “imperialist” and “colonial” (Rosaldo 1989; Bissell 2005)—would constitute a whole chapter. On the one hand, such categories can certainly help nuance our understanding of nostalgia as a cultural phenomenon and provide the tools for approaching a variety of nostalgic practices. On the other hand, they may also obstruct our comprehension of the imbrications between these varied manifestations of nostalgia, or they may, by contrast, simplify very different sentiments and practices by including them under the ill-defined “nostalgia” label. Largely refraining from suggesting yet more categories, in this volume we focus on the aspects of historical change and interaction in nostalgic practices. In other words, our attention is drawn to the working of nostalgia, its interaction with other forms of remembering and its (political) instrumentalization, rather than to expanding existing classifications. For this purpose we define nostalgia rather loosely as a discursive practice stemming from a (shared) feeling of loss and potentially serving any political agenda.

This liberal definition can prove fruitful for the study of nostalgia in post-Soviet contexts, especially in view of the scarcity of research devoted to nostalgic practices in this particular part of the world. This gap is constituted, to an important degree, by the peculiar geopolitics of nostalgia research. While theorizations of nostalgia as a prominent aspect of the (post)modern experience originated in research on Western (particularly US) culture, since the end of the Cold War, Eastern Europe (roughly the Soviet Union’s former satellite states) has become the privileged locus for nostalgia scholarship. As a result, existing research has been tainted by an East-West dichotomy prompting Maria Todorova (2010, 3–4) to point out the moralizing tendency of identifying nostalgia in Eastern Europe (usually labeled as “post-Communist”) as the symptomatic inability to carry out a variant of Western European *Vergangenheitsbewältigung* with regard to the communist past. Even more poignantly, Dominic Boyer has argued that Eastern European nostalgia, and specifically the East German *Ostalgie*, has been a Western projection—a symptom of West Germans’ displacement of the burden of the National Socialist past upon the Eastern “other” rather than an “eastern longing for a return to the GDR or for the jouissance of authoritarian rule” (2006, 362). These identifications of “orientalism” in popular and academic constructions of Eastern Europe as “nostalgic” have given rise to a project of counter-theorizing post-communist nostalgia. This has been achieved by conducting “thick” descriptions of varied nostalgic practices within national and local (urban and rural) settings (Berdahl 1999; Nadkarni 2007; Hann 2014), as well as through the analysis of alternative imaginations of the future within these practices (Boyer 2010; Mišina 2016).

The most consolidated example of such “postcolonial” theorization of nostalgia in Eastern Europe to date is *Post-Communist Nostalgia* (2010) edited by Maria Todorova and Zsuzsa Gille. The contributors to this edited volume do much to “de-essentialize” the concept of nostalgia by studying it as an ironic engagement with the past, a counterweight to the dominant discourse of neoliberalism, or a strategy for political mobilization. By highlighting these multifarious uses of nostalgia in the context of Eastern Europe, the authors succeed in demonstrating its emancipatory potential and debunking the retrograde stigma associated with post-communist nostalgia.

Yet for researchers in post-Soviet and Russian studies, *Post-Communist Nostalgia* leaves many questions unanswered. While interrogating the boundaries between Eastern and Western Europe and pointing to the diversity of nostalgic expressions, the editors seem to introduce yet another set of (geopolitical) oppositions when they claim that next to nostalgia’s subversive modalities “[t]here is the post-Communist nostalgia with a certain tinge of imperial and colonial nostalgia (the case of the USSR and even Yugoslavia)” (Todorova and Gille 2010, 8). For all their deconstructive rigor, at this point the editors seem to relapse into the misleading distinction between “good” and “bad” nostalgia, locating the latter firmly in post-Soviet space. Correspondingly, the volume’s only chapter engaging with an example of cultural production in Russia concerns a novel by Alexander Melikhov—a pertinent reading of nostalgia for the futurity of a Soviet Jewish republic, which unfortunately tells the readers little about more general processes and politics of nostalgia in Russia.

### Nostalgia in Post-Soviet and Russian Studies

One of the first scholars in Russian studies to address these more general trends in discourse and practices of post-Soviet nostalgia was Svetlana Boym, whose seminal study *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001) has provided essential theoretical groundwork for nostalgia studies in post-Soviet contexts and globally. Boym’s distinction between “restorative” and “reflective” nostalgia (an unconditional desire to return or restore the days of yore versus a more wistful and ironic attitude that accepts the “pastness” of the past) has proven very productive, especially if one refrains from applying them as two mutually exclusive categories. The processes analyzed by Boym date back to the 1990s, when the common perception of the Soviet period was that of a disappearing civilization which could be reached back to only across the “break” of an irreversible transition. However, when the Russian state embarked on selectively establishing continuities with narratives, symbols, and practices of the Soviet and imperial periods during the 2000s, the meanings and purported effects of nostalgia started to shift significantly. In Kevin Platt’s words, “far from

being a lost object of desire, the Soviet past has come for many to constitute an important social and political prehistory, a treasure house of timeless elements of a shared identity” (2013, 449–50).

Theorizing this change in his reading of the revived late-Soviet pop-song competition at Jurmala, Latvia, Platt distinguishes between two kinds of meaning pertaining to its organization and interpretation—an ironic “post-socialist nostalgia” (present in the readings that reconnect the present to the cosmopolitan elements of late-Soviet history) and an earnest “post-Soviet retro” one (*ibid.*). This latter form of nostalgia elides the subversive elements of the 1980s musical contest to re-create seamlessly an essentially imperial image of different nations’ peaceful coexistence under the umbrella of the Soviet state. This nostalgic technique has also been discussed by Serguei Oushakine in his analysis of “retrofitting” in the popular cultural production of the late 1990s–early 2000s Russia. In his reading, however, he focused specifically on the pragmatics of form in these nostalgic practices (the *Old Songs About the Most Important Things* [*Starye pesni o glavnom*] being the most well-known example) rather than on their ideological content. According to Oushakine, more than attempting to *restore* a Soviet past, such re-creations of Soviet forms reveal “a longing for the positive *structuring* effect that old shapes [can] produce, even when they are not supported by their primary contexts” (2007, 453–4). Reappropriating the cultural forms of the past, then, should not necessarily be equated to re-imposing the ideology, which they once conveyed.

Observing these different, though often interrelated, tendencies in post-Soviet nostalgia criticism, we further develop this productive tension in our volume by attending to the *dynamics of content* in recent nostalgic practices as well as the *dynamics of form* and its mediation of affect and meaning. In so doing we hope to account for the different and unexpected meanings with which traditional symbols sometimes prove to be invested and for the persistence with which “Soviet” values can manifest themselves in new disguise.

This brings us to a distinction that informs most of the contributions to this volume, but particularly those chapters that deal with instances of (state-)appropriated forms of nostalgia: the distinction between nostalgic sensibilities (feelings of longing for or attachment to a past) and nostalgic technologies (discursive techniques that use the language of nostalgia to shape a sense of affective connectedness to a past). In his examination of the uses of nostalgia as a technology behind President Medvedev’s projects of modernization (2008–2012), Ilya Kalinin argued that

[w]e are no longer dealing with nostalgia and the desire for a return of the lost object, but with a politics whose objective is the positive recoding of nostalgia for the Soviet past into a new form of Russian patriotism, for which the Soviet lacks any historical specificity, but

is rather seen as part of a broadly conceived and comically heterogeneous cultural legacy.

(2011, 156)

Such processes of recoding (from vernacular to official discourses and vice versa) constitute one of the most captivating dimensions of contemporary nostalgia; it is these processes and their politics that our volume sets out to examine. Recognizing the co-presence of “restorative” and “reflective” practices, yet moving towards an analytical understanding of this co-presence in terms of entanglement rather than separate existence, forms our point of departure.

The extent to which restorative and reflective engagements with the past can co-exist and overlap was demonstrated most compellingly by Maja Nadkarni and Olga Shevchenko’s (2004) comparative reading of nostalgic practices in Hungary and Russia during the 1990s by deconstructing the “good” vs. “bad” paradigm that permeates nostalgia studies, a dichotomy that often collapses with “reflective” vs. “restorative” nostalgia. As Kathleen Stewart argued even earlier, “it depends on where you stand” (1988, 228): from one perspective, nostalgia might seem a myth-making strategy (Jameson 1991) and colonizing appropriation (Rosaldo 1989), from another—a tactic of re-creating and re-inhabiting history “from below.” The latter is aptly demonstrated by Stewart’s own research on the coming to terms with the loss of a familiar environment by working class and indigenous communities. Nadkarni and Shevchenko, similarly, observe that “most nostalgic practices tend to fall in-between or, more frequently, function as both [restorative and reflective]” (2004, 505). How they are framed and interpreted is, then, a matter of context and involves, along with the perspective of those who experience and invoke nostalgia, the agency of readers or viewers (in the case of media products) and researchers (in the instances of ethnographic inquiry). This perspective on nostalgia allows for recognizing multiple possibilities of reading as well as the existence of misreadings, such as the common interpretation of the “disaffection and longing caused by the loss of a utopian fantasy [. . .] as a longing for the Empire’s lost greatness” in the nostalgia for the Soviet past expressed by the Russian intelligentsia (ibid., 515). This perspective reveals “how nostalgia becomes an action rather than an attitude, showing how the politics of nostalgia are realized in its applications rather than being inherent in the affective phenomenon itself” (Pickering and Keightley 2006, 937). It is this understanding of contextual entanglement and historical mutability of nostalgia that has guided the setup and perspectives of our volume.

If anything, Nadkarni and Shevchenko’s reading of nostalgia in Russia and Hungary provides an excellent example of a rigorous and context-sensitive comparative study of post-socialist nostalgic practices across the borders of Eastern-Central Europe and Russia (and other post-Soviet



states)—something that the field of Eastern European and Eurasian studies is still lacking more than a decade after the publication of their article. Our volume aims to fill this gap with respect to post-Soviet nostalgia in Russia. While it does not include studies of such practices in other former Soviet republics, several chapters engage with provincial and marginal expressions of nostalgia, both rural and urban, thus complementing the focus of nostalgia studies on metropolitan spaces, works by acclaimed authors, and examples of “high” culture.

## Survey of Chapters

All of the contributions to this volume in one way or another draw on the distinctions outlined above (restorative and reflective nostalgia, nostalgic sensibilities, and nostalgic technologies) while bearing in mind the fluidity of these categories when applied to concrete case studies. However, in terms of the effects that nostalgia produces and the ways in which it can be instrumentalized, we delineate three major lines of inquiry, three “angles” from which the subject of nostalgia is studied in this volume: affect, appropriation, and contestation.

### *Affect*

The first part of this book explores the workings of nostalgia as affect. Ever since Johannes Hofer coined the term in the late 17th century, “nostalgia” has frequently been regarded as an incapacitating mood, a sentimental fixation on a lost home or origin, which affects the individual mind as a disease or spreads epidemically across communities. In this paradigm, those afflicted are thought to be blinded to the here and now, their ability to navigate the complexities of the modern world damaged by insatiable yearning for the irretrievable past. In recent decades, sociologists, anthropologists, and cognitive scientists have vigorously criticized the pathologization of nostalgic sentiments, as well as the implicit celebration of the progressive forces of modernity in these pejorative uses of the “nostalgia” label. They have pointed to nostalgia’s beneficial effects as a psychic coping mechanism (Routledge 2016), or to its functions as an identity-shaping practice, particularly welcome at moments when social cohesion is threatened by historical upheaval (Davis 1979). Still, views of nostalgia as a deluded and irrational mood prevail in public debate and political punditry. Investigating discourses of nostalgia in the wake of the Brexit vote and the 2016 presidential election of Donald Trump, Michael Kenny pointedly asserts that “[t]o have one’s ideas, programme, policies or style labelled ‘nostalgic’ is to be on the [receiving] end of one of the most enduring and non-negotiable insults in modern political discourse” (2017, 258).

Following earlier work in post-socialist studies, this volume aims to steer clear of an interpretation of nostalgia as a symptomatic sentiment,

naturally afflicting those who have been “left behind” by “historical progress.” This is not to ignore, however, nostalgia’s affective dimensions. For many contributors to this volume, post-Soviet nostalgia is a melancholy admixture of warm memories and sore feelings of loss, expressed with varying degrees of self-awareness and ironical distance. This recognition of nostalgia’s emotional aspects need not come with the dualism often encountered in affect studies, by which affective dispositions are seen as detached from cognition, meaning, or intent (Leys 2011, 458). Instead, the volume’s focus on nostalgia’s affective aspects may best be characterized with Raymond Williams’ well-known term “structures of feeling.” Williams used the phrase to describe the evolving communality of experiences and ideas in a particular period: “the affective elements of consciousness and relationships,” as expressed in various forms of cultural discourse (1977, 132). A structure of feeling was never homogeneous and always in the process of being articulated. It denoted, moreover, “not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling thought” (ibid.). Deviating from a notion of nostalgia as an unhealthy and overly emotional form of retrospection, the chapters in Part I demonstrate how post-Soviet nostalgia, while often being deeply emotional, is by no means devoid of cognitive processes of meaning-making. Also, again in alignment with Williams, the contributors to the first part of this book attest that nostalgia is relational: it acquires its affective force in response to other positions or in the encounter with objects or artifacts from the past.

In Chapter Two, Mandy Duijn explores nostalgic attitudes towards late-Soviet toys among the visitors of the internet forum *Toys of the USSR*. Analyzing the comment section, Duijn shows how visitors mobilize the website’s images of toys for emotional evaluations of the Soviet past and the post-Soviet present. The high quality and simple design of Soviet toys are set off against the flashy contemporary toys from China or “the West” that have flooded the post-Soviet Russian market. The significance of Soviet toys thus reaches far beyond the warm memories of (playing with) the objects themselves. Rather, the toys become the occasion for (implicit) criticisms of market-based values, but also serve as mnemonic vehicles for recollections of the Soviet spaces in which these toys were used and of the meaningful, yet vanished, social interactions they enabled.

In the next chapter, Serguei Oushakine further explores the emotional resonances of material objects and specifically of what he calls, borrowing a term from the visual artist Danila Tkachenko, *trukhliashchekas*, the “half-disappeared, decomposing, or abandoned fragments of the past.” Whereas Duijn focused on (internet) communities who cultivated mnemonic relations to objects from their youth, Oushakine is interested in how the tactility of everyday objects from the late-Soviet period enables affective responses among those who have no firsthand experience with socialism. Oushakine analyzes (reactions to) two exhibitions, in Minsk

and Kazan', of ordinary (household) items from the late-Soviet period. Organized according to a generic or associative logic, and devoid of an argument about history, the objects in the exhibits work to stir up visitors' emotional relations to the past, an experience described by older and younger visitors as an "immersion" in the atmosphere of the Soviet Union. Such experiences are often ambiguous in orientation. The objects inspire a desire to overcome "the old" and a concomitant realization of one's continuing collective dependency on it. The same ambiguous orientation Oushakine discerns in the photographic work of Tkachenko, whose recent photo series creatively reformat the material legacy of socialism. Oushakine coins the term "second-hand nostalgia" for all these open-ended, affective, and imaginative encounters with Soviet *trukhliashechkas*.

Kathleen Parthé's exploration of the 21st-century legacy of the Village Prose tradition continues the reflections on nostalgia's affective forces. Towards the end of the Soviet period, Village Prose took on increasingly resentful, conspiratorial, and anti-Semitic undertones. But with the passing away of these original writers, rural nostalgia, Parthé argues, has been detoxified and has been expressed and studied in new ways. While often devoid of the angry discourse of the late-Soviet period, recently published testimonies, ethnographic studies, and memoirs by village dwellers share Village Prose's fascination with vanished rural traditions, costumes, and values. Through their wistful lamentations about the loss of viable rural communities, these recent village voices repeatedly invoke the *malaia rodina*, the little motherland or native region, that serves as the prime marker of shared belonging and that implies a different cognitive map than (nationally oriented) urban expressions of nostalgia. Parthé makes a convincing case for extending research on the emotional life of post-Soviet Russians beyond its habitual focus on the metropolitan intelligentsia.

### *Appropriation*

In the context of late-Soviet and early post-Soviet culture, nostalgia has traditionally been associated with social groups and individuals feeling disempowered and harboring resentment over the seismic changes wrought on the country by Mikhail Gorbachev and Boris Yeltsin. Offering a refuge of sorts to the "losers" of the Soviet collapse, ranging from disgruntled communists and village-prose writers to ordinary citizens whose socioeconomic security was increasingly threatened by the transition to a free-market economy, nostalgia has often been treated in (Western and Russian) popular media as the post-Soviet disease par excellence: the inability or unwillingness to adapt to the rapidly changing conditions in society. The chapters in the second part, however, show that at least since the start of the new millennium these sentiments are no longer the exclusive domain of oppositional forces or marginalized groups. On the

contrary, these feelings have often been successfully co-opted by the state or actors aligning themselves with its restorative and often revanchist rhetoric, a strategy that seemingly annuls the rupture of 1991 and establishes continuities between the Soviet and the post-Soviet period.

Drawing on such different sources as Evgenii Evtushenko's conformist poetry, the work of emigrant writer Aleksandr Zinov'ev, and the immensely popular TV series *The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed* (*Mesto vstrechi izmenit' nel'zia*, 1979–1980), Ilya Kukulkin shows how late Stalinism exerted a strong attraction on intellectuals annoyed by the “cynicism” and “anomie” in Soviet society during the last years of Leonid Brezhnev's reign. The difficult years after the war had also been a time of anomie, these intellectuals believed, but one in which a hard-boiled police inspector such as Gleb Zheglov (the fictional hero in *The Meeting Place*) was still able to bring the worst criminals to justice, even if this required considerable bending of the rules. Although this kind of “popular Stalinism” disappeared with the breakup of the Soviet Union, what remained was the underlying plot structure of a strong personality fighting the glaring absence of ethical standards in society, a “quasi-ideology” that would also inform Vladimir Putin's popular image as the conqueror of Russia's anomie during the “rowdy” 1990s. Initially a critical stance vis-à-vis society's moral corruption under Brezhnev, nostalgia for late Stalinism with its unsentimental treatment of the criminal world eventually morphed into the “tough” governing style for which Vladimir Putin is admired and hated today.

Nostalgia's susceptibility to being exploited in the service of a political agenda is most graphically demonstrated by Emily Johnson in her chapter on the “liquidators cult” of the Chernobyl disaster (1986). A “symbol of everything wrong with Soviet society” in the late 1980s, through various commemorative practices Chernobyl was eventually recast into a “narrative of heroic triumph” in which workers once involved in the cleanup operation came to resemble the familiar heroes of Soviet propaganda. Although this was not a completely top-down process and the survivors had a vested interest in perpetuating the tropes and rhetoric of socialist realism, state institutions were instrumental in the establishment of a thoroughly nostalgic cult that appeared to instill “traditional” Soviet norms of behavior rather than those widely associated with the first post-Soviet decade.

Boris Noordenbos' discussion of the long-term documentary project *Born in the USSR* (*Rozhdennye v SSSR*) similarly revolves around the possibilities nostalgia offers to posit historical continuity and re-establish collective identities. Charting the lives of Soviet-born citizens from age seven when they were interviewed for the first installment (1990), the documentary creates a poignant contrast between the vanished fatherland the interviewees once shared and their dispersion over post-Soviet space and beyond after the collapse of the Soviet system. Noordenbos

shows that the notion of a lost “home,” becoming ever more explicit as the documentary progresses, is less important to the participants than to the maker, whose editing and ponderous voice-over serve to conflate the insouciance of childhood with the pre-capitalist “innocence” of the Soviet Union. *Born in the USSR* is yet another example of how the seemingly apolitical character of nostalgia lends itself for “co-option by the forces supporting political restorationism.”

### *Contestation*

If nostalgia is considered as a cultural practice (Stewart 1988, 227), as a mode of actively engaging with the past by evaluating it against the present and future, it involves an implicit element of contestation. It has been accepted that longing for a past springs from dissatisfaction with what is perceived as dangerously dominant in the present. As a “social” (Davis 1979) or “historical” emotion (Boym 2001) that accompanied the unfolding of modernity, nostalgia has functioned as a mechanism of survival for communities, of protecting individual and collective identities from historical erasure, and of interrogating ideologies of progress. The active, engaged aspect of this practice, however, is often obscured in popular renderings of nostalgia as a melancholic condition. But nostalgia can be “a means of taking one’s bearings for the road ahead in the uncertainties of the present,” a reflection of the “desire for engagement with difference, with aspiration and critique, and with the identification of ways of living lacking in modernity” (Pickering and Keightley, 921).

In post-socialist contexts, instances of critical nostalgia reveal a clash between the currently hegemonic capitalist versions of modernity and their obsolete and discredited socialist counterparts. Under these conditions, nostalgic practices fulfill the function of smoothing the traumatizing effects of the political and socio-economic transitions by “connecting personal biographies to the passing of time and a state” (Berdahl 1999, 203). Although these practices can easily be appropriated by nationalist, imperial, or colonial ideologies, they can also resist the erasure of individuals’ and communities’ earlier experiences and values. Furthermore, as Tanja Petrović shows in her research on nostalgia among the workers at dilapidating factories in former Yugoslavia, such narratives and practices can also be ways of asserting and dignifying one’s place in the changed present by bringing the past experiences and values into it and by resisting their commodification (2010).

But are such contestations of power through nostalgic practices even possible in contemporary post-Soviet contexts, particularly in Russia where “official” strategies of memorialization have been actively redirecting nostalgia for the Soviet towards state-supported nationalist projects? It is important to remember that those renderings of the Soviet are often only loosely related to what people who lived through those times (as

well as the younger generations) find themselves attracted and attached to. As Ilya Kalinin reminds us, within the state-run projects of creating a unified Russian identity, elements of the Soviet past are stripped of any contradictions and merely lumped together with references to earlier periods so that “[e]verything *Soviet* loses its historical specificity as an ideological or social project or as a political and economic alternative to capitalism” (2011, 157–8). As we are witnessing the success of this “nostalgic modernization” over the past decade, nostalgia, ironically, might also act as an antidote to the mass fascination with Russia’s grandiose past re-invoked in the present. Such alternative expressions of nostalgia recuperate quotidian practices, employ ironic modes, and, perhaps most importantly, center on the perspectives of the “others”—those socially, ethnically, or ideologically marginalized within the regimes that claim to represent the majority and attempt to manufacture an image of a unified nation. These practices of nostalgia in Russia might be closer than is often thought to those that have been described and theorized in Eastern European post-socialist contexts. In these practices, nostalgia figures as “an undetermined, undefined, amorphous wish to transcend the present”—“a retrospective utopia” (Velikonja 2009, 548). However utopian and amorphous, this “desire for desire” (Stewart 1993, 23) can be concretized and mobilized in contestations of hegemonic discourses.

The chapters included in Part III explore these possibilities by investigating the dissenting manifestations of nostalgia within cultural expressions that question the nostalgic discourses linked to state ideologies. A revealing example of interrogating the “top-down” attempts at modernization by the local intelligentsia is scrutinized by Marina Abasheva and Vladimir Abashev in their discussion of the state-supported initiative to turn the town of Perm into Russia’s capital of contemporary art. Emblematic of the Medvedev-era projects of “nostalgic modernization,” the “Perm cultural revolution” was initiated by the local government and supported by Moscow as a way of re-branding the town to attract financial investment. The practices of resistance in the heated media debates drew upon local nostalgia that combined quite different elements of Perm’s cultural heritage—the unique wooden sculptures from the 14th–17th centuries and the production of the Soviet military-industrial complex, also referred to as the “gods of Perm” and the “guns of Perm.” These discourses of re-actualizing local identity received a remarkable twist after the publication of Alexander Prokhanov’s novel *Star Man (Chelovek Zvezdy)* which, the authors argue, misconstrued the local resistance as a fight (and victory) of militant Soviet nostalgia against post-Soviet modernization. This contribution lucidly demonstrates both the possibilities of employing nostalgia as a “weapon” for the defense of local cultural values and the difficulties of sustaining its critical mode.

A similar predicament of resisting the nostalgic rhetoric of the (post-)Soviet state, though with a focus on the subversive potential of nostalgia-based

tactics, is addressed by Ksenia Robbe in her reading of three novels by Andrei Astvatsaturov, a St. Petersburg-based writer and literary scholar. The chapter uses the metaphor of counterpoint to conceptualize the texts' employment of nostalgia as a strategy of mimicking and at the same time mocking state-supported discourses that attempt to foster affective links to the Soviet past by using the idiom of "new sincerity." Drawing on Alexei Yurchak's seminal study of the "performative shift" in reproductions of authoritative discourse during the late-Soviet period, the readings trace similar inversions of contemporary hegemonic discourses in Astvatsaturov's novels—a nostalgia "inside out." The chapter, then, situates these subversive tactics within the paradigm of (post-)Soviet tricksterism, as outlined by Mark Lipovetsky, and defines them as "kynical" resistance to the cynicism of officially sanctioned nostalgia. In addressing the traumatic loss of the Soviet, the analysis suggests, the narratives question the official rhetoric of recovering ordinary people's dignity and re-invoke the position of "outsideness" as a way of coping with that trauma.

Finally, Otto Boele explores an emerging topos of nostalgic resistance to the official narratives of history and memory—the alternative memories of the 1990s that oppose the cliché of the "rowdy" or "cursed" decade promoted by Putin and his administration and reinforced by state-supported cultural productions. By analyzing a range of cultural discourses and representations, the chapter outlines different practices of this growing nostalgia and reflects on their effects. On the one hand, we witness mild or less articulated forms of nostalgia that become vehicles for expressing people's pride in the resourcefulness of those who survived the hardships of the 1990s. These forms are perceptively analyzed within the viewers' responses to the TV series *Shuttle Traders* (*Chelnochnitsy*), which appear to resist the film's glossy representations of the period. On the other hand, we see the uses of nostalgia as a "weapon" in contesting the "official" mythologies of the 1990s at the annual "Island of the '90s" festival organized by the Yeltsin Centre that invites its participants to recall the decade's atmosphere of freedom. The readings highlight an intriguing conjunction: while right-wing and nationalist critics were quick to criticize the "liberals" for their disregard of the disastrous effects of the 1990s reforms for the ordinary people, some of their discourses (such as an article by poet Marina Strukova) involved a nostalgia very similar in its longing for the 1990s spirit of freedom.

\* \* \*

We started this introduction with the seemingly facile observation that post-Soviet nostalgia is a messy and slippery phenomenon, especially if we consider the different functions it performs (from contesting hegemonic visions of the past to imposing grand narratives of national glory) and the multiple communities it helps identify, ranging from "simple" age

cohorts and political factions to local groups and the country's population at large. Does this place post-Soviet nostalgia in a league of its own?

Of course, not all of the issues raised in this volume are entirely unique to post-Soviet Russia. For one, the Russian Federation is certainly not the only and not even the first country to “suffer” from “post-empire syndrome” and the imperial or colonial nostalgia that usually comes with it (Haerpfer 2002, 14). But what contributes to the messiness as well as uniqueness of post-Soviet nostalgia is the fact that from an official point of view nostalgia is a relatively young phenomenon. Whereas in the West “modern” nostalgia attracted scholarly attention as early as the 1970s, recognition of its existence in the Soviet Union, with its teleological state mythology, would have been anathema before the “new openness” (Perestroika) under Mikhail Gorbachev. With regard to the ruling elite's official rhetoric this did not change even in the 1990s when Russia was supposed to be equally forward looking and eager to catch up with the “free and democratic” world. Despite its perceived ubiquity, nostalgia remained something one did not want to be associated with.

Adding to the messiness of post-Soviet nostalgia today is the dominance of state-supported media and their persistent engagement in restorative nostalgia, which, as Boym aptly noted, “does not think of itself as nostalgic” (2001, xviii). The restorative nostalgic perceives the present as a distortion of some ideal order and can only envision the future as the reconstruction of that order or its further disintegration. In Russia, this form of nostalgia has translated into a reinvigoration of “aspirations to, memory of, and longing for empire” (Beissinger 2008, 2), whether this is expressed in President Putin's speeches on Crimea returning to its “native shores” or in media productions retrospectively celebrating the Soviet Union as a country free of nationalist divisions. The fact that such sentiments have lost their once “red-brown” aura and now are “officially” endorsed shows how rapidly and radically post-Soviet nostalgia can transform from a “structure of feeling” into a weapon for expressing dissent, and from a weapon into a tool for national restoration that, in turn, can also be subverted and deconstructed. To bring some clarity to post-Soviet nostalgia as a form of action, with all the contradictory aspects this involves, is the main goal of the present volume.

## Note

1. Gde stekliashki? Gde kastety? // S Chakom Norrisom kassety? // Ia khochu obratno v devianostye! [. . .] Vsiudu glianets, da glamur—// Net dukhovnoi pishchi . . . // Govoriu, kak na dukhu—// Ran'she bylo pizshe!!! (Golos Omeriki 2011).

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