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Continuity and Change in Russian Society, c. 1965-2016

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Russia watchers tend to have difficulties finding a middle ground between grinding continuity and radical change. On the one hand, we have the palpable *longue durée* persistence in Russia of strains of patrimonialism, imperialism and xenophobia; the result is much loose talk of 'new Cold War', or 'Soviet legacy', or even the inheritance of Muscovy or the Romanovs. On the other, when we start to examine moments of rupture such as 1917-21 or 1990-92, the candidate 'turning points' are just too numerous.¹ In Soviet history there are a number of clear 'crisis' moments (that is to say, moments when the political leadership decided that the state of the country was critical and attempted a radical solution): Stalin's Great Break of 1929-33, Khrushchev's years of manic tinkering from 1957 to 1962, and Gorbachev's perestroika-cum-constitutional revolution.² But the aim of the Berlin Colloquium was to take a social rather than political perspective and to look for deeper continuities and transformations - to find a new way of conceptualizing periodization over the past half-century or so.

This task requires a productive collaboration between two disciplines: history and sociology. Such an enterprise faces undeniable obstacles. One broad difference lies in temporal perspective: historians tend to take a longer-term view of social processes and causation. Another lies in methodology and research tools: sociologists have mainly been at work on the post-1991 period, which is still largely *terra incognita* for historians, and have at their disposal a more diverse and sophisticated set of research methods. Historians of the 1970s cannot, alas, devise new opinion surveys or conduct real-time interviews. Yet even the readings provided for the Colloquium suggested that there was much to be gained by making history more sociological and sociology more historical: there were striking parallels, for example, between Finn Sievert Nielsen's contemporary anthropological account of the 'islands' of Soviet life in early 1980s Leningrad and Sam Greene's notion of Russians in the early twenty-first century as being characterized by 'aggressive immobility'.³ Together, history and

¹ For a highly illuminating if not entirely convincing attempt to make the case for one particular year, see Irina Prokhorova (ed.), *1990: Russians Remember a Turning Point* (London, 2013).

² Stephan Merl, 'The Soviet Economy in the 1970s - Reflections on the Relationship between Socialist Modernity, Crisis and the Administrative Command Economy', in Marie-Janine Calic, Dietmar Neutatz and Julia Obertreis (eds), *The Crisis of Socialist Modernity: The Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in the 1970s* (Göttingen, 2011).

³ Finn Sivert Nielsen, *The Eye of the Whirlwind: Russian Identity and Soviet Nation-Building. Quests for Meaning in a Soviet Metropolis* (originally published 1986), at http://www.anthrobase.com/Txt/N/Nielsen_F_S_03.htm, and Samuel A. Greene, 'Russia: Society, politics and the search for community', www.eurozine.com (published 2 December 2011). An 'island', in Nielsen's understanding, is a cross between a niche and a community: a place (a factory, a town, a subculture) occupied by Soviet people that largely determines their social capital and access to putatively 'common' resources. This means that

sociology should offer us non-trivial ways of thinking about mid-range continuity and change.

If our measure is social change rather than hard politics, it is a rather futile exercise to look for anything as clear and decisive as 'turning points'. A more productive activity is to think in terms of social order: how it coalesces, how it is reproduced, and how it is disrupted. If post-Stalin Soviet history is our subject, then the most influential notion of order is 'stagnation' or (to use the more upbeat political jargon of the time) 'developed socialism'. The natural assumption would be that this order was overthrown in the upheaval of the early 1990s: contested politics, imperial disintegration, economic crisis and shock capitalism made the experience of social actors in Russia unrecognizably different from ten years before. In the Putin era, however, another theory has gained traction: the notion that Russia is 'turning the clock back' to the late Soviet era, or that, deep down, nothing ever really changed. Is this just a sloppy analogy, or is there something meaningful to be said about continuity over the period c. 1965-2016?

If we are looking for links between the 'long 1970s' of Leonid Brezhnev and the indefinitely elongated 2000s of Vladimir Putin, we may find them not in some generalized notion of stagnation but in a change of social and cultural condition that occurred in the period 1967-73. This, I would argue, was the moment that modern urban society came to maturity in Russia; and, more generally, the moment that Soviet Russian society finally reached a steady state after decades of upheaval. The RSFSR now had a critical mass of second-generation urbanites and urbanized migrants (a more significant measure than the attainment of an urban majority in the USSR as a whole, which occurred in 1962).⁴ Collective farm workers had now had four decades in which to escape the village in a vast and sustained wave of rural-urban migration; the real and symbolic culmination of this process was the granting of the internal passport even to those who remained on the land. The tens of millions of citizens of the RSFSR resident in cities enjoyed a life incomparably more comfortable and urbane than their predecessors in the 1930s or even the 1950s. They had benefitted from more than a decade of the largest housing programme in the world; the *khrushchevka*, for all its leaky plumbing and cramped dimensions, represented a huge improvement in popular well-being.⁵ The depeasantized urban population was

Soviet people could be more active and empowered (in search of an advantageous 'island') than 'totalitarian' theory allowed, but also that Soviet life was opaque, conservative and inequitable. For more discussion of the point, see Gabowitsch, *Putin's Regimes*, 60-2.

⁴ In 1979, for example, 49 per cent of the almost 4 million Moscow residents who were born outside the capital had lived at their permanent place of residence for 25 years or more (so the figure almost certainly understates the duration of overall residence in Moscow). My thanks to Emily Elliott of Michigan State University for these figures, which come from the Moscow city archives and are derived from 1979 census data.

⁵ As argued in Mark B. Smith, *Property of Communists: The Urban Housing Programme from Stalin to Khrushchev* (DeKalb, 2010).

acquiring a quasi-rural bolthole in the form of the mass dacha of the garden plots settlements. The workplace had become more forgiving and more solicitous: not only had Stalinist work discipline been dropped, enterprises and trade unions were doing much more to provide their members with a range of social benefits, while general state provision now stretched to a two-day weekend (from 1968) and a pension system that genuinely made retirement an option.⁶ The authorities had become more responsive to society rather than merely invoking the socialist realist construct of *obshchestvennost'*. Not only had sociology been reborn as a discipline in the 1960s, a sociological sensibility had infiltrated a wide range of institutions – from newspapers who now looked to profile the ‘average’ rather than the implausibly outstanding worker to enterprises that set up ‘social planning’ units to dispense benefits more effectively.⁷

But this was still, of course, a long way from Scandinavian social democracy. Soviet Russia had become a mature welfare state by the early 1970s rather than the pseudo-welfare state of the Stalin era or the raw welfare state of the Khrushchev era. But its provisions were still modest, and it remained profoundly illiberal and repressive: 1967 was, after all, the year that Andropov took over at the KGB, and he would preside over the heyday of that formidable organization during his long period in office. Russia was, quintessentially, still a warfare state. The same year of 1967 also saw the introduction of the twice-yearly draft. Although it was combined with a reduction in the term of service, this measure was designed to boost the number of trained reserves and thus increase the saturation of society by the military.⁸ Far from coincidentally, this was also the moment that the cult of World War II approached its zenith: the lobbying of veterans and the military establishment had been repressed or deflected in the late Stalin and Khrushchev eras, but now it met a sympathetic response from a new party leadership keen to cement its legitimacy.⁹

In regard to the illiberal institutions of KGB and army, as in the realm of urban welfare modernity, we can observe significant shifts in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Repression became more technocratic and targeted under Andropov’s security services, which preferred moral torture to the physical variety and were much of the time engaged in what might be termed public opinion management. The 1970s were in some ways the high-water mark of military prestige in the USSR, but they also saw the start of a process of disengagement between the civilian and the military. Whatever the rhetorical value of the Great Patriotic

⁶ Note the careful analysis of this reform’s achievements and limitations in Lukas Mücke, *Die allgemeine Altersrentenversorgung in der UdSSR, 1956-1972* (Stuttgart, 2013).

⁷ On journalism, see Simon Huxtable, ‘In Search of the Soviet Reader: The Kosygin Reforms, Sociology, and Changing Concepts of Soviet Society, 1964-1970’, *Cahiers du monde russe*, 54/3-4 (2013): 623-42.; on social planning, there is a PhD in progress at the University of Durham by Sheila Pattle.

⁸ William E. Odom, *The Collapse of the Soviet Military* (New Haven, 1998), 47.

⁹ For the full story of the fall and rise of the veterans, see Mark Edele, *Soviet Veterans of the Second World War: A Popular Movement in an Authoritarian Society, 1941-1991* (Oxford, 2008).

War, and however many millions of conscripts were churning through the system, this was not 1941 and no one had any appetite for turning the clock back. This was most obviously true at the elite level, where relations between the CPSU ruling clan and the army top brass became distinctly colder in the second half of the 1970s.¹⁰

The quality of what one might term 'mature' Soviet life is hard to describe with reference to established categories. It was vastly more liberal than hitherto and yet still illiberal, both more urbane and yet enormously militaristic. I would contend, however, that this amounts to useful and stability-enhancing ambiguity rather than weakening internal contradiction. Nowhere is the ambiguity more evident than in the accursed question of Russia's relations with the West. This was the period of the crushing of the Prague Spring but also of Détente. The Soviet urban population was considerably better informed about the wider world than ten or fifteen years earlier due to its higher level of education, opportunities for mass travel to the 'Near West' of the socialist bloc, and access to foreign radio broadcasts. But Soviet Russians remained for the most part impeccably patriotic and indeed nationalistic: the 1970s was the decade when Russophilia became entirely respectable, and when the Russian nation reached maturity safe under the carapace of Soviet great power status. Fascination with the West, even admiration of it, could easily be combined with a deeply held conviction that foreigners misunderstood Russia and that their social, economic and political ways of being had no applicability to the USSR.¹¹

That the creative ambivalence could be sustained so effectively was thanks to the good fortune of high oil prices but also to the last and perhaps most significant shifts that occurred in the first half of the Brezhnev era. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, across the socialist bloc but perhaps especially in the USSR, a modern culture industry came of age. This was largely due to the triumph of television, which around 1970 took over from newspapers, radio and film as the premier medium of Soviet life. The shift from word to image and from big screen to small brought with it a new rhetorical arsenal. While the Soviet censorship apparatus made it difficult for Soviet media to be playful and engaging, television producers nonetheless found new and effective ways of blending entertainment and edification, patriotism and cosmopolitanism. Foreign news coverage might paint a gloomy picture of social and economic problems in the capitalist world, not to mention civil strife and natural disasters, but the very fact that the West was allowed to have these problems made it more colourful.¹²

¹⁰ Bruce Parrott, 'Political Change and Civil-Military Relations', in Timothy J. Colton and Thane Gustafson (eds), *Soldiers and the Soviet State: Civil-Military Relations from Brezhnev to Gorbachev* (Princeton, 1990).

¹¹ This combination of attitudes was largely maintained into the post-Soviet era, to judge by Hilary Pilkington and Elena Omel'chenko, 'Living with the West', in Pilkington et al. *Looking West? Cultural Globalization and Russian Youth Cultures* (University Park, 2002). (This was another text precirculated for the Berlin Colloquium.)

¹² See the new important new study by Christine E. Evans, *Between Truth and Time: A History of Soviet Central Television* (New Haven, 2016).

So far I have sketched out an argument that the first half of the Brezhnev period saw the construction of a new, mature and enduring sociopolitical order. This argument is, however, open to obvious objections from two directions: first, that it neglects deeper legacies of the Soviet era such as Gulag, collectivization, Stalinism and war; second, that it fails to account for the collapse of the Soviet order less than two decades later and perversely underplays the seismic effects of the events of 1989-92 for today's Russian society.

Naturally, all periodization is open to objection and qualification, especially in social history, and it would be obtuse to deny the palpable traces even now of the mass violence and upheaval Russia experienced in the period from Revolution to the aftermath of World War II. We can point to the enduring cult of the Great Patriotic War and to the legacy of the Gulag and forced industrialization for urban development and settlement patterns across the territory of the USSR, and especially in Russia. But these important longer continuities do not necessarily invalidate the notion that an enduring Soviet-Russian social order only truly coalesced in the early 1970s. Today's cult of World War II, on closer inspection, has rather little to do with 1941 or 1945, but is rather to do with the commemorative practices that were institutionalized on a national level in the late 1960s and early 1970s; rather than the collective memory of a national ordeal, it is the memory of a memory cultivated in the Brezhnev era (and it exists in a symbiotic relationship with the oft-remarked phenomenon of nostalgia for the 1970s). As for settlement patterns, the urban geography that makes post-Soviet Russia so recognizably itself was in large measure the creation of the late Soviet period: this is when the company towns – or 'Russia 2' in Natalia Zubarevich's influential analysis – gained critical mass, and when the *mikroraion* supplanted the city centre as the main locus of Russian urban experience.¹³

The second objection – that a focus on the social order of the 1970s obscures the causes and effects of Soviet collapse, and indeed lends itself to facile analogies between late socialism and Putinism – is trickier to meet. It would be absurd to deny that the upheaval of the 1990s shook Russian society to its core: this was a decade of demographic crisis, inversion of occupational and cultural hierarchies, and abrasive marketization. Yet, for all the undoubted drama and trauma of that time, we are still faced with the intellectual challenge of distinguishing between short-term and enduring social changes.

If we take first the case for discontinuity, it is easy to argue that the end of the Soviet Union brought wrenching disruption to people's lives and opened up chasms between the experience of different social groups. One such chasm was generational. Teenagers were likely to face a much rockier ride through the last

¹³ Natalia Zubarevich, 'Four Russias: rethinking the post-Soviet map', www.opendemocracy.net (another text precirculated for the Colloquium). 'Russia 2', in Zubarevich's account, is the blue-collar world of medium-sized industrial towns (mostly up to 250,000 inhabitants). Although heavy industry has lost some of its prominence in these places, they retain 'a strong Soviet ethos and way of life'.

5-10 years of their education than their parents, while the middle-aged were even worse off: they were likely to find their skills and experience devalued and, especially if they were men, faced sickeningly high rates of mortality. To prosper in Russia's 1990s, one had to be physically vigorous and well-networked, and also to be ready to acquire rapidly new forms of social and intellectual capital. In generational terms, this would seem to have placed the under-forties and the better-educated portion of the baby-boomers at a distinct advantage.

The end of the Soviet experience also brought a significant class realignment. The easy availability – in exchange for money – of consumer goods brought an end to the shortage economy with its elaborate superstructure of social networks and hierarchies. The intelligentsia, the traditional high-status group of Soviet society, was widely depicted as being maladjusted and impoverished; in due course it was eclipsed by a thrusting, consumerist 'middle class'. But the consumer bounty for some only made the poverty of the others more palpable. Poverty is largely a relative phenomenon, and the bright lights of the post-Soviet capital cast a sharp light on the predicament of the have-nots. Inequality and deprivation again had a generational dimension, and they also correlated with geography: remote outposts of socialist industry were especially hard hit by the removal of Soviet subsidies and the absence of profitable new lines of economic activity. But what was especially disconcerting about the post-Soviet era was the emergence of the new phenomenon of the 'working poor': those trapped in low-paid employment but without the benefit of the state largesse bestowed on 'deserving' sections of the population such as pensioners, policemen and *chinovniki*. People in this predicament were disadvantaged equally by the redistributive state and by the capitalist market.¹⁴

Russian society since 1991 has also been profoundly marked by the twin phenomena of globalization and decolonization. On the one hand, Russians have had access to an international mass culture on terms not too dissimilar from their peers in Spain or South Korea. They have also benefited hugely from new opportunities for mass tourism and work and study abroad. On the other hand, they have had to come to terms with the fact that their own portion of the globe has got smaller and its borders both more permeable and more contested. There has been violence on the periphery in Transnistria, North and South Caucasus, and now of course Crimea and the Donbass. Some of the violence has come very close to home, as the Chechen Wars led to terrorist attacks on even such central symbols of national achievement as the Moscow metro and the 'hero city' of Volgograd. Migrants have streamed in, most visibly from Central Asia, and the government's heavy-handed efforts to police the flow have only served to underscore how ineffectual the Russian state is in any sphere that requires systematic, long-term and well-resourced policy-making.¹⁵ Even in much more

¹⁴ For a much fuller discussion, see S. S. Iaroshenko, *Bednost' v postsotsialisticheskoi Rossii* (Syktyvkar, 2005).

¹⁵ According to official figures, the number of labour migrants increased by a factor of 11 between 1999 and 2008. Taking into account undocumented migration, they may have accounted for 7-8 per cent of the labour force by the end of that period (and much more than that in conspicuous sectors such as

liberal and law-governed societies, as we have seen recently in the politics of migration in Western Europe, such phenomena place serious obstacles in the way of civilized and rational public discourse. It is little wonder that in Russia they have contributed to a rather ugly case of post-imperial *ressentiment*; ethnic prejudice, partially suppressed or sublimated during the Soviet era of Russian pre-eminence, has now offered compensation for social anomie and (real or perceived) economic decline. A decade ago, an intelligent if optimistic Russian colleague assured me that public opposition to authoritarianism was building, and that Russia's 1968 was not far around the corner; Chechnia, in his interpretation, would prove to be Russia's Algeria. Now it appears that the post-imperial syndrome will be much harder to shift than he imagined.¹⁶

The coexistence of globalization and post-imperial *ressentiment* suggests that we may need an altogether more nuanced set of terms for understanding Russian society over the past 40 years. That society has both been transformed and remained the same. On closer inspection over the longer term of 25 post-Soviet years, some of the changes of the period 1992-2000 look less dramatic. The 'middle class' was in part an ideological construct, devised inter alia by the Minister for Economic Development and Trade, German Gref, to demonstrate that Russia was becoming a modern, prosperous nation in the 2000s.¹⁷ Actually, the line between Soviet intelligentsia and post-Soviet 'middle class' could never be clearly drawn: partly because intellectual and social capital could in the long run be preserved fairly intact across the 1991 divide, partly because people held on the very real capital of housing. Privatization of apartments was less dramatic than meets the eye: a transition from secure de facto ownership to de jure ownership that was not necessarily any more secure. The allocative and intergenerational approach to the housing stock was not replaced by a Western-style housing market: apartments for sale remained far out of the reach of even middle-class Russians, and mortgage financing failed to take hold in Russia.¹⁸ The social mobility of the 1990s began to stall in the mid-2000s, and Russia's 'state-centric development model' began to assert itself once more: if in the Yeltsin era one's life-chances correlated strongly with the ability to find private-

construction). Migrants from Tajikistan – where remittances were higher as a proportion of GDP than anywhere else in the world – accounted for about one-sixth of the flow. See Eugenia Chernina and Michael Lokshin, 'Tajik work migrants in Russia', IZA/Higher School of Economics Workshop: Labor Market Adjustment in the Commonwealth of Independent States, Central Asia and China in the Wake of the Great Recession (Moscow, 2012), at http://www.iza.org/conference_files/LMA2012/chernina_e8228.pdf.

¹⁶ This is one of the main conclusions Lev Gudkov has drawn from his long career of public opinion research: the post-imperial malaise is closely bound up with what he sees as Russia's 'aborted' modernization. See L. D. Gudkov, *Abortivnaia modernizatsiia* (Moscow, 2011).

¹⁷ Note the interesting study of the genealogy of the term, and its role in reconstructing Russian society in the post-Soviet era, in A. T. Bikbov, *Grammatika poriadka: Istoricheskaia sotsiologiia poniatii, kotorye meniaiut nashu real'nost'* (Moscow, 2014).

¹⁸ Jane R. Zavisca, *Housing the New Russia* (Ithaca, 2012).

sector employment, by Putin's second term the state-dominated economy was again offering advantageous niches for many ambitious Russians.¹⁹ Another important long-term continuity is the prominence of the *biudzhetniki*: recall that it was the pensioners, in the so-called 'chintz revolution' of 2005, who were responsible for the most successful case of social protest in the early Putin era. Even the marketization and consumerism of the last 20 years may prove to be not all it seemed at the time: it may have reflected more the changing health of the resource-based economy than any enduring determination to put butter before guns. Let us remember that a less conspicuous consumer revolution was already taking place in the 1970s during Russia's previous era of oil riches.²⁰ Undoubtedly, the material well-being of Russian society rose significantly between the late 1990s and the mid-2000s; many of those impoverished in the Yeltsin era had been pulled up into a 'lower middle class' a decade later,²¹ an improvement that has not yet been wiped out by the recent downturn and goes a long way to explaining the success of the Putin project. But this could represent a lower-middle-income plateau rather than a launch-pad to prosperity. For all the turmoil following 1991, it is likely that the Russian society of 2020 will have more in common with that of c. 1973 than the mid-Brezhnev era shared with the NEP period.

¹⁹ Natalya Tikhonova, 'The Russian roller coaster: changes in social structure in the post-communist period', in Piotr Dutkiewicz, Richard Sakwa and Vladimir Kulikov (eds), *The Social History of Post-Communist Russia* (London, 2016).

²⁰ Natalya Chernyshova, *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era* (London, 2013).

²¹ Tikhonova, 'The Russian roller coaster', 136.