



Olga Smolyak. A Review of **D. J. Raleigh**. *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation*. Oxford; N.Y.: Oxford University Press, 2012. 420 pp.

### A Lyrical Biography of the Cold War

Donald Raleigh's book is devoted to that generation of Soviet citizens who were born in the middle of the twentieth century and witnessed the Cold War. The book's story is closely linked with the author's personal biography, as he acknowledges in his prefatory remarks and in the introduction. A scholar from the US, he is best known to specialists as a historian of the Russian Civil War. However, working periodically in the Saratov archives for over thirty years, he has been able not only to study the history of the beginning of the century, but also to get to know people and to immerse himself in current socio-cultural and economic contexts. Contact with Russian friends gave him the idea of writing a book about a whole generation, and thus expressing the strength of his personal interest in the life-histories of his contemporaries, whom politics decreed should be his ideological opponents for several decades.

We thus have before us a book about those who were born in the USSR in 1949 or 1950, and grew up on films 'about Chapaev',<sup>1</sup> at that time when Stalin abolished rationing and reduced the price of bread (p. 7). The book is written by a man who was also born at that time, in the year NATO was founded, but in a country where cars, television sets, record players, telephones and frozen food were already freely available (p. 6), and who grew up (in his own words) on

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<sup>1</sup> Vasily Chapaev, a hero of the Civil War; a film based on Dmitry Furmanov's novel about his exploits was one of the most popular Soviet films ever made.

the film *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb*. The book is the product of the experience of his personal biography and his own American context, in which his gym master made him exercise so he could be as strong as the Russians (p. 4), and at home the Catholic boy spent hundreds of hours praying for the conversion of the atheist communists (p. 4). At the same time childish fears grew into curiosity, and experience showed up a family resemblance between the two systems (p. 7). Finally it is a book about the generation whose outlook was formed against a background of rivalry between two superpowers and the clash of two ideologies with universal pretensions, two ways of understanding the world.

The representation in the text of the image of the author, his attitude to life, his experience and autobiography, the sources on which the work is based, its objectives, the questions it asks and the method it subscribes to made me as a reader anthropologically receptive and raised certain expectations. What I mean is the sort of focusing of the research viewpoint that Igor Narsky calls 'anthropological authorship', when the centre of attention shifts from historical events and structures to the perceptions and behaviour of the agents that are being studied. The need for this is connected with the reduction in distance between the researcher and the object of research in modern historical studies, which on the one hand allows new topics to be formulated, but, on the other, has changed the position and role of the historian. 'It is quite obvious that where the recent past is concerned, be it the history of childhood in the second half of the twentieth century or of the Cold War, the question of the historian's reflection is the more sharply intensified to the extent that he himself is part of the culture and tradition that he is studying. To be more exact, the object of research becomes, directly or indirectly, part of the researcher's personal biography' [Narsky 2012]. There is no temporal distance in Donald Raleigh's work, and this does indeed attract the reader's attention not simply to the author's observations, but also to his reflections. At the same time the book is written at a cultural distance, which may prove a useful condition for discovering explanatory metaphors, or, if you like, models.

The research is based on a diverse and extensive corpus of sources. This includes the personal observations made by the author during thirty-six years of travelling in the USSR and Russia, starting in 1971, books, films, tape recordings, named informants and photographs supplied by them, and of course the sixty interviews with residents of Moscow, Saratov, Montreal, Portland (Oregon) and Ames (Iowa), and also over the telephone with people in Israel and Cyprus, each lasting from one to three hours and made without assistance between 2001 and 2008. Focussing on how the informants remember their life and describe their biographical trajectory, Raleigh has tried to draw the boundaries between the political, the

personal and the professional. To this end he organised the questions in the semi-formalised interviews around five themes formulated in the initial stages of the research: 1. Who and what formed the outlook of that generation? 2. How was the 'Soviet dream' formed and how was it reflected in people's biographical trajectories? 3. How did that generation overcome the difficult transition to post-Soviet Russia? 4. How did that generation's life experience form and transform Soviet (or Russian) society during and after the Cold War? 5. How do the memories of people who grew up in Moscow differ from those of people who grew up in Saratov, a provincial town closed to foreign visitors and thus without any direct foreign influence?

The author's goal is to show how historical processes were experienced by real people, and to show through life histories how Soviet society at the time of the Cold War functioned at the everyday level (p. 13). He sets about creating a composite narrative out of personal histories told by many people, and to include it in the great historical narratives about the Cold War, the destalinisation of Soviet society, the competition expressed in the slogan 'We shall catch up and overtake America!', the (partial) opening up of the country to the outside world, economic stagnation, dissidence, the transition to the market economy, emigration, and the transformation of class, ethnic and gender relations over the whole of the period studied (p. 12). The author sees his work as a collection of voices in his own 'choral arrangement' (p. 13).

Raleigh's interlocutors were all people who had received their school leaving certificate in 1967 from just one school in Moscow or one school in Saratov, both specialising in English language. They represented a particular tranche of Soviet society: the majority of the pupils at these schools were children of the party elite, government functionaries, the 'creative and technical intelligentsia' or senior officers. But at the same time the make-up of the classes at these schools demonstrated the principle of social equality proclaimed by Soviet propaganda: in both schools there were an insignificant number of children from working-class families (for example, the son of a highly-skilled metalworker who adjusted machine tools destined for export). Despite a difference in living conditions, opportunities and privileges between the families in Moscow and Saratov, all the informants were united by the fact that their parents occupied high positions, if not the highest positions, in the hierarchy of Soviet society. Analysing the biographical trajectories of his contemporaries born in the USSR, the author uses the metaphor of the 'baby boomers', and thereby includes the young people of the Soviet Union in that global space in which consumer standards were being formed, the influence of Western pop culture was increasing, access to education was expanding, and, finally, the youth subculture was making itself heard, offering models of carefree behaviour and

pleasure-seeking. The Soviet baby boomers thus become a generation with the same desires and aspirations as their contemporaries in the West: they aspired to get a good education, make a career for themselves, valued a high standard of living, travelled and expanded their horizons, and were interested in modern literature, music and cinema. In other words, it was a generation of consumers in the incipient Soviet consumer society.

Raleigh divides this collective biography into seven periods, devoting a chapter to each. He does not offer a linear narrative; rather it might be said that the tissue of narrative that the book represents is woven out of stories about particular problems or topics raised by the informants themselves. The author takes it upon himself simply to organise these stories into a connected narrative, starting with the logic formulated in his five questions. So the first chapter is devoted to the roots, as it usually is in any biography. The stories told by the baby boomers about their parents are interwoven with the whirlpool of historical events and thus provide material or examples to illustrate the vicissitudes, contradictions and shortcomings of the social and economic policies of the Soviet Union from the 1920s to the 1940s. The second and third chapters use the baby boomers' reminiscences of their schooldays to tell of the education reforms and the role of the family, school and propaganda in the system for bringing up future builders of communism in the 1950s and 1960s. Raleigh's attention is particularly concentrated on their evaluations of events and phenomena: the launch of Sputnik, manned space flight, the slogan 'We shall catch up and overtake America!', *The Master and Margarita* by Bulgakov, tape recorders, home-made radio sets, Fidel Castro, the Beatles and the 'bards'.<sup>1</sup> The fourth chapter deals with their student years and the problems of identity, self-definition and individualism, examined against the historical situation which had come about at that time, via their attitudes towards the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and to samizdat, and via the sequence of cause and effect between the Six-Day War and their personal histories. The fifth, sixth and seventh chapters are arranged not so much by the age of the subjects, as around the figures of the official leaders: Brezhnev, Gorbachev and Yeltsin. The system of corruption and the black market, 'bendy trams', trips abroad, Afghanistan and the human rights movement become the signs in the narrative that indicate the baby boomers' attitudes towards their own biographical trajectory, the leadership of the state and the fate of the country.

<sup>1</sup> The name given to singers and poets, of whom the most famous was Bulat Okudzhava, usually performing solo and accompanying themselves on the guitar, resembling the French tradition represented, for example, by Georges Brassens, and in many ways the most independent cultural expression that was officially tolerated. [Transl.].

The value of the research undoubtedly lies in the fact that it is based on a huge corpus of personal testimonies. It is the social history of a country written out of the personal experience of one generation and the representatives of a particular stratum. Even so, I would not call it a collective portrait of the Soviet gilded youth, perhaps because the stories told by people from Moscow and Saratov give completely different pictures of life, based on different opportunities. I also found it curious that the aspirations and interests of Raleigh's Muscovite baby boomers are quite different from the portraits of the 'gilded' Ekaterina Moskovskaya and Alesha Paustovsky studied by Natalya Kozlova [Kozlova 2005]. Raleigh's informants describe a different way of life, in which there was a place for 'bendy trams', workplace larceny and queues. This is a fine illustration of the very different results produced by research using different sources. One way or another, as Raleigh shows, all the baby boomers survived the changes connected with the transition of the country to a market economy, retained or increased their social and cultural capital and were able to pass it on to their children (unlike some of Kozlova's heroes from other social groups). Whatever their social or cultural differences, the stories of the 'gilded' baby boomers contain common elements which unite this group not only with other strata of society, but also with the next generation. The author is looking for a Soviet accent, which, in his opinion, lies in the permeability of the border between the public and the private space. Considering that the value of private life and individualism was greater for the baby boomers' generation than it was for their parents, the claims of propaganda to control private life caused the development of double standards of behaviour and a certain cynicism towards life. This conclusion, of course, makes it interesting to draw parallels between the work of Donald Raleigh and Alexei Yurchak [Yurchak 2005].

For all its significance, Raleigh's book does not lead to a breakthrough in our understanding of Soviet everyday life, ideology or collective memory. Its weak point is the quietness of the author's voice. What we have, in effect, is a thematic systematisation and commented reading of the interviews that have been conducted by Raleigh, accompanied not so much by analysis as by observations. As a reader, I was interested to experience 'the joy of recognition', as I independently filled in the significances and codes in the connexion between a historical event and the informants' personal statements indicated by the author. As a researcher, though, I would have liked to see the tasks and methodological premises declared by the author brought to completion. One may distinguish two problematical elements in this book: the substitution of generalising observations for analysis and the failure to notice the contradictions, silences and exaggerations in what the informants say. Thus the author makes the observation that all the informants were members of the Komsomol

and stresses that it was their personal desire to join the organisation; but refusing to become a member risked being stigmatised. But then the author fails to understand either the force of the statement of a personal desire to join the Komsomol, or how the system, society and propaganda all imposed (or failed to impose?) that desire (p. 106). Furthermore, although the author does notice on one occasion that his informants are talking in clichés, he still does not pay particular attention to it and does not try to understand what sort of stock expression it is, or why it is used, nor to express his own attitude to it. If one takes memory to be an interpreter of life events, it is important to observe not only how the selection takes place, but also how and by whom the memories themselves are selected. And then one must not ignore such utterances as ‘the shops were empty, but everyone’s fridge was full’ (p. 225), which is now a stock joke and needs to be looked at carefully if anyone uses it to characterise the economic situation. Despite his thirty-six visits to the Soviet Union and Russia, he does not include his own observations in the narrative, or use them to support, contradict, elucidate or emphasise what his informants have said.

Donald Raleigh’s book reflects the current tendency towards a change in the researcher’s position with regard to the object of research. The author is concerned to write not ‘absolutely objective’ but ‘human’ history, written by real live people, and the researcher creates the conditions in which this history can be heard. Such a work is founded on a profound personal interest, which affects the relationship between the scholar and his source, and his strategy for representing the results of his work. As a result we are given research with a large portion of the author’s lyrical mood, which really is necessary for anthropological history.

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*Translated by Ralph Cleminson*