



*Top: Subway,
Moscow. Photo
©Lise Sarfati,
1994.*

*Left: Kursky
Vokzal, Moscow.
Photo ©Lise
Sarfati, 1993.*

LONGING FOR FUTURE

Understanding '90s Nostalgia

By Daria V. Ezerova

Located in the center of Moscow, Park Muzeon has long been a space for intersecting temporalities: a graveyard for Soviet monuments abuts the boxy edifice of the New Tretyakov Gallery; Zurrab Tseretelli's statue of Peter the Great exchanges glances with a statue of Bolshevik revolutionary Felix Dzerzhinsky ("Iron Felix"), while newly paved bicycle lanes wrap around this palimpsest of Soviet and post-Soviet culture. In September 2015, Muzeon became a true time machine when it hosted The Island of the '90s (*Ostrov devianostykh*)—a daylong festival commemorating what's known as the most tumultuous decade in recent Russian history.

The Island of the '90s had a great many spectacles to offer: '90s paraphernalia, retro outfits, book readings, film screenings, concerts, and talks by cultural figures like music critic Artemy Troitsky, publisher and public intellectual Irina Prokhorova, and performance artist Oleg Kulik. For one day, Muzeon was transformed into an amusement park specializing in time travel, plausibly recreating everything associated with the immediate post-Soviet years. A distillation of nostalgia for the '90s: an era with its own heroes, music, narratives, language, and soundtrack—painfully recognizable yet already distant.

The Island of the '90s, now an annual event in a

number of Russian cities, became the first major acknowledgment of the popular '90s nostalgia that emerged in the 2010s, shortly after the Bolotnaya Square protests. This phenomenon has been expressed through festivals, fashion, food, and music that seek to engage with the legacy of the immediate postcollapse years and revive their grungy aesthetics with meticulous attention to detail. One can even purchase a "Back to the '90s" ("Nazad v 90e") kit, packed with popular '90s confectionaries and a handheld Tetris game. The kit promises "absolutely instant time travel" (*sovershenno momental'noe peremeschenie vo vremeni*), to quote the packaging. But why would anyone

want to relive, however briefly, any part of the decade consistently portrayed as "chaotic" and "turbulent" in Russia's popular imagination? In other words, what made '90s nostalgia possible?

Nostalgia is a difficult word to define. There is no uniform approach to studying it, nor does it reside in a particular academic discipline. As the late Svetlana Boym notes in the introduction to her book *The Future of Nostalgia*, nostalgia has long puzzled literary critics, psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, anthropologists, and even computer scientists. Experienced as a feeling—longing, sadness, ennui—nostalgia is not as innocent as it may seem,



Monument to
Felix Dzerzhin-
sky, "Iron Felix,"
in Moscow's Park
Muzeon.

neither passively contemplative nor politically neutral. Its object is elusive, a desire sparked by a kind of voluntary forgetting: the past that never came to pass, a homecoming to a home that never existed, the good old days that were never really that good. Because of this slippery, subjective quality, professional historians, who tend to be skeptical about memory in general, have been hostile toward the concept of nostalgia: "Nostalgia is to longing as kitsch is to art," writes Charles Maier in his essay "The End of Longing?" "Nostalgia . . . is . . . history without guilt," Michael Kammen notes in *Mystic Chords of Memory*. "Nostalgia [is] an ethical and aesthetic failure," writes Boym. Historians warn us that nostalgia can be a bad romance: its tendency to obscure the hard facts of history can make it a tool of ideological manipulation.

In contemporary Russia—that is, Russia after the Soviet collapse—nostalgia has been one of the most powerful forces both in cultural production and political discourse. But, before any semblance of '90s nostalgia surfaced, there was Soviet nostalgia. The phenomenon, interpreted as Russia's postimperial longing for

the Soviet past, is unusual in two ways. First, it appeared very soon after the end of communism. Second, it has persisted uninterrupted throughout the entire post-Soviet period, surviving the seismic changes that have taken place since '91 and becoming one of the most enduring cultural phenomena in Russia's recent history. The early onset of this nostalgia is easier to explain: casting a longing, backward glance at the past can provide a sense of familiarity and comfort in times of radical realignment, a way to heal the wounds of history and reestablish some semblance of historical continuity. The persistence of this nostalgia, especially in the 21st century, however, is perplexing. Boym distinguishes between two types of nostalgia: restorative, focusing inward on "the longing itself"; and reflective, which attempts an outward "reconstruction of the lost home." But just because they are different does not mean they can't be found together. In order to understand enduring post-Soviet nostalgia and how it eventually sparked longing for the '90s, we need to look at how it shifted from the reflective to the restorative and back again, transforming

at times into something new only to be eventually recuperated by the dominant political culture.

From Old Songs to an Old March

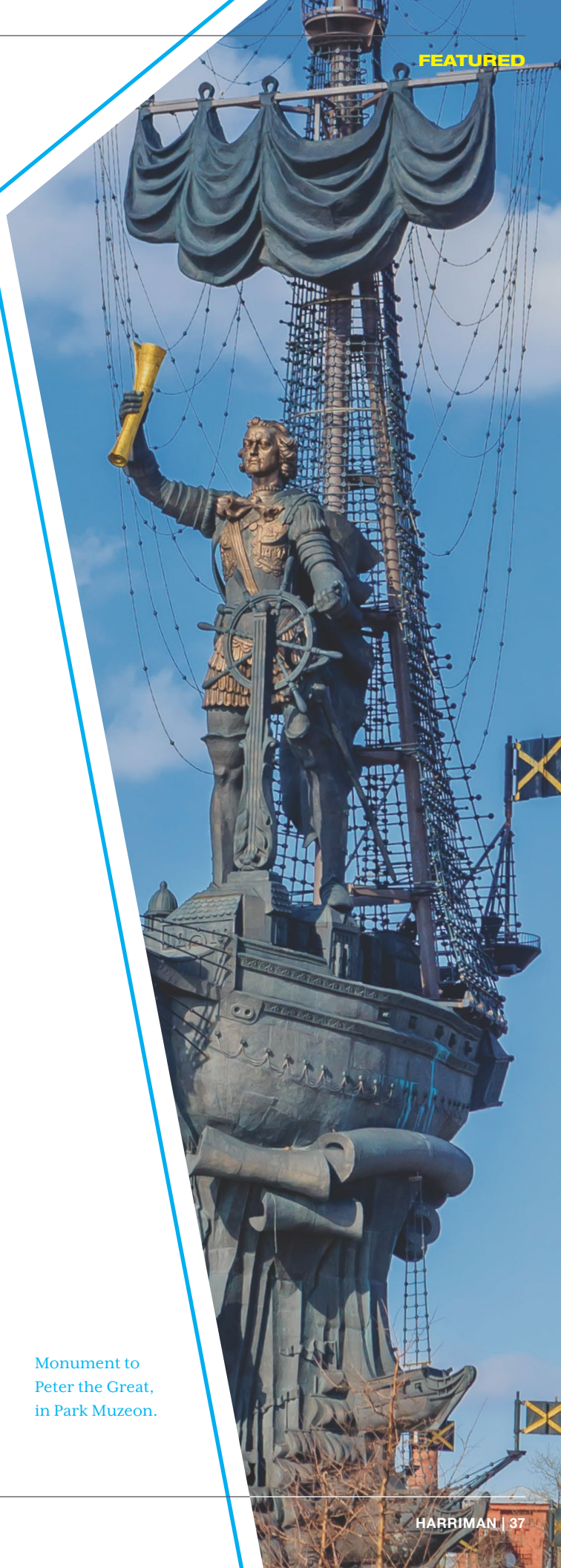
Early manifestations of Soviet nostalgia were in many ways a coping mechanism, a need to hold on to something familiar amid the tumult of the postcollapse years. The success of projects like *Old Songs about the Most Important Things* (*Starye pesni o glavnom*, 1995), which heralded Soviet nostalgia in popular culture, attests to this. A musical comedy produced by Channel One, *Old Songs* premiered on New Year's Eve to uproarious acclaim. The film—an assemblage of discrete scenes in which Russian celebrities perform popular songs from Stalinist-era musicals against a colorful

background of a Soviet collective farm in the style of Ivan Pyr'ev's *Cossacks of the Kuban* (*Kubanskie kazaki*, 1950)—has no real plot. Its popularity was surely a sign of nostalgia, yet it was neither longingly reflective nor restorative. It was *masscult* in times of uncertainty—the film's burlesque register and camp aesthetics deideologized Soviet cultural artifacts, yet managed to create a familiar image, a safe mental space in a precarious political and economic situation.

The stabilization of the Russian economy changed the face of Soviet nostalgia by commercializing and commodifying it. In the late aughts, the high-end GUM department store in Moscow brought back the Soviet era as Disneyland kitsch in a 1950s-style supermarket and cafeteria, Gastronom №1, and Stolovaia 57, which marketed Soviet-style consumer products to Russia's emergent upper middle class. The entertainment industry quickly caught up. In 2013, Valery Todorovsky's popular miniseries *The Thaw* (*Ottepel*) offered a scintillating portrayal of Soviet filmmakers in the 1960s, replete with swing skirts, sleek updos, and vintage cars. In the wake of the global trend of retro chic made fashionable by

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Monument to Peter the Great, in Park Muzeon.





Matthew Weiner's *Mad Men* (2007–15), the series's meticulous attempts to (re)create midcentury glamour with a Soviet twist still contain trace elements of nostalgia, but they are fully relegated to the realm of aesthetics and genre. By the mid-2010s, commercialized Soviet nostalgia lost any depth it may have had by quickly succumbing to the whims of state ideology.

In June 2015, a celebratory national concert, "From Rus' to Russia," was held on

Red Square.

The program promised a variety of performances commemorating "important historical events and our most famous compatriots who made an integral contribution to the development of various areas of our country."* "The March of the Aviators," a Stalinist propaganda song later appropriated by the Nazi SA as an unofficial anthem, was the focal number. This kind of state-sponsored nostalgia masked an underlying condition: a radically conservative turn characterized by historical revision and apologia. The politics

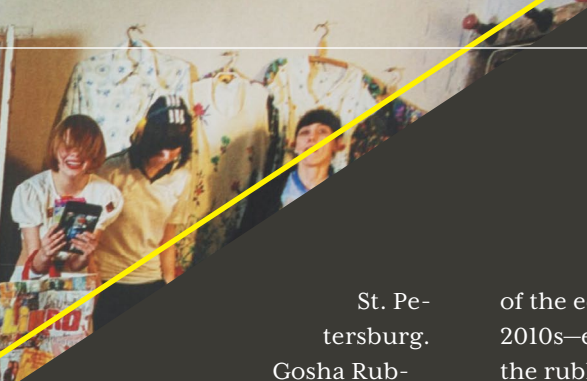
of loss—namely, the loss of the Soviet empire—brought forth restorative nostalgia imposed from the top, often in ideologically suspect forms, after the 2011–13 Bolotnaya protests. It was then, in the moment of post-Bolotnaya frustration, that nostalgia for the '90s began to stir.

Back to the '90s?

In 2018, Russian performing artist Elizaveta Gyrdiva, known professionally as Monetochka, teamed up with film director Mikhail Idov to make a video for her song "90" (*Devianostye*). The clip was stylized as an homage to Aleksei Balabanov's *Brother* (1997) and reenacted the film's most recognizable scenes. Monetochka took on the role of Danila

Bagrov, *Brother*'s lead character and the true cultural icon of the decade. For further verisimilitude, a number of Russian actors and singers from the '90s appeared in the video. Born in 1998, Monetochka belongs to a generation that has no personal memories of the '90s—something she confesses in her lyrics: "Only from songs / I found out, in horror / That they used to kill people in the '90s." And yet her video, charmingly whimsical and surprisingly nuanced, further attests to a renewed interest in the first post-Soviet decade, with nostalgic overtones.

Commodified nostalgia for the last decade of the 20th century is by no means specific to Russia and is often market-driven. After all, New York millennials dancing at a '90s party in Brooklyn are hardly different from their Russian peers at a *Diskoteka Devianostykh* ('90s disco) in



St. Petersburg.
Gosha Rub-
chinsky borrows

heavily from the street style of '90s working-class youths as boldly as Nicolas Ghesquière and Alessandro Michele do in designing their logo-stamped track-suits and jogging pants. Even the sweets neatly packaged in “Back to the '90s” kits are as recognizable in Russia as they are in the West. But is there anything that makes Russia’s new nostalgia for the '90s unique?

On the eve of 2020, the '90s are distant enough to be looked at retrospectively. And yet, if in the U.S. and many European countries, the '90s were marked by economic growth, in Russia the decade started with political turmoil and ended with a devastating financial crash. In short, a time that would be difficult to idealize and romanticize. The fact that these sentiments emerged from the comfort

of the economically stable 2010s—especially before the ruble dropped again in 2016—raises even more questions.

Considering that '90s nostalgia emerged around the time of Bolotnaya, one of the highest moments of discontent and political frustration, it is possible to say that the first post-Soviet decade is now viewed with a sense of loss not just for its vibrant colors but also for the future it promised. This nostalgia is not a longing for the past, but for the future that never came. Despite economic improvements, the 2010s were a turning point in Russian domestic policy, a new period of the long Putin era known for the suppression of domestic opposition and the deterioration of Russia’s relationship with the West. In this atmosphere, the '90s, once portrayed as wild and dark, can be viewed as the halcyon days of nascent democratic

freedoms. As Svetlana Alexievich writes in *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*: “In the nineties . . . yes, we were ecstatic; there is no way back to that naiveté. We thought that the choice had been made and that Communism had been defeated forever. But it was only the beginning.” Or, as Monetochka sings, tongue in cheek, “Good thing, all is different now.”

Coda: Co-opting '90s Nostalgia

The public may have come to romanticize the “wild '90s” as a period of boundless opportunity, but the state continues to push back. Boris Akopov’s *The Bull* (Byk, 2019) premiered at the Winter Theater in Sochi for the Kinotavr Film Festival. A directorial debut for the 34-year-old Akopov, *The Bull* is a criminal drama set in the '90s. It attempts to recreate the decade in painstaking detail. Outfits, makeup, sets, and references to '90s cinema are elaborated with such care that it is almost surprising Akopov chose to shoot the film digitally rather than using 35-millimeter format. However, there are more jarring directorial choices. At the film’s end, the protagonists—survivors of the carnage—are watching Yeltsin’s famous New Year’s Eve retirement address, where he appoints

Vladimir Putin as his successor. The film’s message is clear—the “wild nineties” are over and Russia has entered an age of stability and prosperity. What began as a period drama ended with an ideological climax. And the message was heard. A week after the premiere, *The Bull* won the Festival’s Grand Prix. ■

Daria Ezerova is a postdoctoral research scholar at the Harriman Institute focusing on contemporary Russian culture and society. She received her Ph.D. in Slavic languages and literatures from Yale University.

* <https://tv.yandex.ru/87/program/1514538?eventId=70283081>

The first post-Soviet decade is now viewed with a sense of loss not just for its vibrant colors but also for the future it promised.

Top left: “Island of the '90s” festival participant in Park Muzeon, September 20, 2015.