
*Soviet Baby Boomers*, as Donald Raleigh himself characterizes it, is a collective narrative of life in the Soviet Union from its zenith in the 1950s through the aftermath of its collapse. But this is not a typical chronicle of the decline of Communism. It holds a unique place within the existing scholarship for being among the few Russian history monographs based on oral interviews. Furthermore, the subjects of this book – 29 Muscovites and 31 Saratovites who were born in 1949 or 1950 and came of age in the 1960s – are no ordinary Russians. Educated in magnet schools that emphasized English language instruction to then become successful urban professionals, they were part of a privileged group within Soviet society. Yet this does not mean that they comprised a negligible demographic; they are representative of the twelve million or so Soviet citizens who graduated from college between 1965 and 1982 (11). Moreover, their range of experiences and perspectives – from the capital of Moscow with its favored economic and cultural position in the Soviet Union, to the provincial Saratov, which resembled other closed cities in the country – speaks to a broad fundamental question: what did it mean “to ‘live Soviet’ during the Cold War” (5)?

Raleigh answers this question with remarkable elegance and coherence given the tremendous feat of organization that drawing upon more than 3,500 pages of transcripts from taped interviews surely entailed. His book follows a chronological format intersected by pertinent themes (some, like gender, class and ethnicity, recurrent) and by comparisons between those of his informants who came of age in Moscow and those in Saratov. Illustrating how daily life differed in these two cities, Raleigh also shows that his Muscovites and Saratovites had a great deal in common. This is evident, for instance, in some of their earliest childhood memories. That said, *Soviet Baby Boomers* delivers more than its subtitle suggests; it provides an intergenerational history that extends to the parents (and even grandparents) of the Cold War generation, as well as to their offspring, the “children of perestroika.” And while revealing an array of experiences peculiar to the Soviet Union, it also normalizes Soviet society. Raleigh achieves this by incorporating reminiscences of the most ordinary nature, including ones about teenage pranks and simple pleasures like going to the movies. At the same time, he asserts that the Soviet Union was not impenetrable (particularly once Khrushchev had initiated increased contact with the West), as verified by the experiences of the Saratovites, whose city was inaccessible to foreigners up until 1991 due to its connections to the military.

As Raleigh demonstrates, like learning English, encountering the West was vital in broadening the horizons of the Baby Boomers. His Muscovite informants enjoyed a personal sense of contact with the West already in childhood, when some made pen pals with their counterparts in the United States and England. Then, in the middle of the 1970s, members of this freer cohort were able to travel to capitalist countries. Such opportunities only affirmed their emerging skepticism about official portrayals of the glories of Communism vis-à-vis the supposed rottenness of Capitalism. The Saratovites, meanwhile, were not forbidden from making friends in other countries or traveling abroad, although through their formative years, they were largely restricted to corresponding and visiting with nationals of fellow socialist countries. But even as they awaited their chance to see the West, like untold numbers of other Soviet citizens, they could engage with it in alternative ways. Indeed as Raleigh repeatedly shows, the Soviet Union was far from immune to the postwar globalization of
youth culture. This was pronounced in the realm of music, which seemed especially potent in transforming the outlook of the Cold War generation. As one interviewee remarked, sharing his personal epiphany upon hearing the Beatles, 'It turned out that there, in the West, they don't live so badly after all and they sing well.' (140)

While delineating such patterns, Raleigh defies oversimplification, opting instead to create a mosaic of perspectives. For example, he refrains from overemphasizing the significance of the positive impressions of the West that his informants expressed. As the Baby Boomers themselves collectively indicated, while they were in awe of capitalist abundance, they were also perfectly aware that not all Americans could afford to buy whatever their heart desired. At the other end of the spectrum, Raleighresists politicizing every act of non-conformity that his subjects divulged – once again, true to the composite narrative that emerged from among them. Indeed many seemed to listen to programs from the Voice of America or the British Broadcasting Corporation simply because they were interesting and informative.

Tendencies like these highlight a perhaps surprising feature of the group of individuals Raleigh interviewed: although sympathetic to their causes, none of its members became dissidents. The author accounts for this by explaining that in the Brezhnev era, the most educated constituents of the Baby Boom generation were living the ‘Soviet dream’ – they inhabited decent flats, earned adequate salaries and enjoyed job security alongside paid vacations, and they appreciated their free education and socialized healthcare (222). In this regard, Soviet Baby Boomers provides a nuanced interpretation of the collapse of the Soviet Union that cites material dissatisfaction as but one element of it. To be sure, the Saratovites who endured intermittent shortages throughout their lives and the better-provisioned Muscovites alike, both found themselves resorting to blat (personal connections) for scarce goods as they navigated through the vagaries of the command economy. Yet as Raleigh demonstrates, it was not just scarcity that amplified cynicism, but also the demoralization that attended it. As one informant recalled, having to resort to buying a piece of sausage through the back door of a meat shop where an acquaintance of hers worked was sometimes fraught with humiliation (229-230).

Affronts to their dignity made the Baby Boomers both receptive to Gorbachev and disillusioned with his efforts to reform socialism. Thus, while some commended the Premier for recognizing ‘we can’t go on living like this any longer’ (271), many noted how demoralizing were not only the economic hardships caused by perestroika, but also the revelations of past Soviet injustices made possible by glasnost. Voicing an apparently common sentiment, one interviewee claimed, ‘It was unpleasant to know that you had been deceived for a long time on so many questions.’ (284)

Overall, Raleigh reveals the startling impact of evolutionary forces in the Soviet Union during the 1960s and 1970s like a general rise in education level, professional skills and popular expectations – some of the critical factors that Moshe Lewin had earlier credited for “the Gorbachev phenomenon” (The Gorbachev Phenomenon, University of California Press, 1988). An additional facet of this silent revolution that the Baby Boomers themselves implicated in the very demise of the Soviet Union was a lack of common cause or impetus for some grand gesture of patriotism. Echoing similar assertions among his age cohort, which was shaped by its relatively carefree postwar upbringing, one informant claimed, 'Life without war became more and more significant as people asked “what kind of pants am I wearing? What kind of shoes are these?”' (256)