When Everything Was Forever: An Introduction

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Although individuals and groups had subscribed to the categories of the new Soviet men that had helped build a particular "Stalinist civilization" in the interwar period, it was fear of inner enemies and their repression that reinforced a continued sense of community in the Soviet Union until 1953.[1] World War II not only confirmed the enemy visions fostered in the interwar period but became a crucial reference point for popular Soviet identities even before authorities turned to memorializing it.[2] Accordingly, the force exerted in creating and defending a new, socialist community and the ramifications of this use of force in the lives of different groups present central cornerstones of our framing of Stalinism, even as explanations of its causes and logics vary.[3] As research turns increasingly to the period after 1953, it is both unsurprising and telling that its findings remain strongly linked to the legacies of Stalinism's defining use of force. Still, even as the language of terror continued to inform Soviet society's reckoning with the past, with some historians arguing that external control simply shifted to turn into successful internal discipline, force ceased to be a ubiquitous means to delineate community in the Soviet Union.[4]

As most articles in this cluster stem from papers presented at the conference "The End of the Soviet Union? Origins and Legacies of 1991," held at Forschungsstelle Osteuropa an der Universität Bremen (FSO) in 2011, I would like to thank VolkswagenStiftung for making this conference possible and thus helping to bring the present special section of articles into being. Even though the section's focus has both narrowed and shifted away from the key issues addressed in Bremen, it profited much from the thoughtful, vivid, and sometimes heated discussions between the conference's participants.

1. Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley, 1995).

2. Amir Weiner, "The Making of a Dominant Myth: The Second World War and the Construction of Political Identities within the Soviet Polity," *Russian Review* 55, no. 4 (October 1996): 638–60.

3. In lieu of an extended enumeration of works presenting "totalitarian," "revisionist," or "postmodern" perspectives, see Anna Krylova, "The Tenacious Liberal Subject in Soviet Studies," *Kritika* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2001): 307–31.

4. Denis Kozlov, "Naming the Social Evil: The Readers of *Novyi mir* and Vladimir Dudintsev's *Not by Bread Alone*, 1956–59 and Beyond," in Polly Jones, ed., *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era* (London, 2005), 80–98; Miriam Dobson, *Khrushchev's Cold Summer: Gulag Returnees, Crime, and the Fate of Reform after Stalin* (Ithaca, 2009); Polly Jones, *Myth, Memory, Trauma: Rethinking the Stalinist Past in the Soviet Union, 1953–70* (New Haven, 2013); and Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study in Practices* (Berkeley, 1999).

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Interestingly, this departure from force presents a difficulty in characterizing the time period after 1953 as something other than *post-Stalinist*. Another categorization often found in research about the years and decades after Iosif Stalin's death is *late socialism*, as a variation on the term *mature socialism*, which was in use before the collapse of the Soviet Union. The specifics of both hardly go beyond a general sense of the Soviet system's stability, in the latter case, or knowledge of its eventual demise, in the former. Other traditional characterizations of the decades between 1953 and 1991, including reference to the three iconic Soviet leaders who came to power in this period and use of the thaw, stagnation, and perestroika metaphors, have come under scrutiny. None of them seem to fit the phenomena they are meant to describe quite as well as Stalin's name does for the period in which he was in power. "Stagnation" is increasingly identified as a political ascription brought on by the Gorbachev administration to legitimize the reforms of perestroika. The metaphor of the thaw has become the subject of extended discussions that attempt a departure from binary models while suggesting a shift in focus to processes and dynamics. Highlighting the problems of traditional narratives about the thaw as a time of liberalization which reinforced binary models of Soviet state and society, research has pointed to the dilemmas of de-Stalinization and the Khrushchev era as a time of renewed mobilization.[5]

Other scholars prefer to focus on decades such as the 1960s to get away from established metaphors that often happen to remain linked to the leaders in power. Most recently, the rubric of the "Soviet sixties" has served to challenge the traditional narrative of the impermeable Iron Curtain by demonstrating the presence of transnational networks across the east-west divide while departing from the mere one-way influences usually ascribed to the impact of western radio and fashion.[6] This corresponds but also contrasts with how contemporaries like Petr Vail′ and Aleksandr Genis saw the decade: it remains framed by political events, such as the new Communist Party program of 1961 and the Soviet invasion of Prague in 1968.[7] At the same time, "the sixties" serves as a moniker for a particular generation of Soviet intellectuals, the *shestidesiatniki*—often identified as "dissidents" in the west. Tellingly, it is again their shared experiences of Stalinism and Stalin's death that were crucial for this generation as it came of age during the 1960s with an initial hope for a better (socialist) future combined with an urge to act on that optimism.

5. Most recently, Denis Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd have pointed out how fitting the thaw's weather metaphor nevertheless is, not only because contemporaries themselves regarded it as a constitutive event and appropriate expression of the zeitgeist, but also because of the processual and indeterminate character of this weather condition. Denis Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd, "The Thaw as an Event in Russian History," in Denis Kozlov and Eleonory Gilburd, eds., *The Thaw: Soviet Society and Culture during the 1950s and 1960s* (Toronto, 2013), 18–23, 30–32. See also the contributions in Jones, ed., *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization*, and "The Relaunch of the Soviet Project, 1945–64," ed. Juliane Fürst, Polly Jones, and Susan Morrissey, special Issue, *Slavonic and East European Review* 86, no. 2 (April 2008).

6. Anne E. Gorsuch and Diane P. Koenker, eds., *The Socialist Sixties: Crossing Borders in the Second World* (Bloomington 2013).

7. Petr Vail′ and Aleksandr Genis, *60-e: Mir sovetskogo cheloveka*, 3rd ed. (Moscow, 2001).

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This combination of hope and agency gave them a coherence that, according to Cold War historian Vladislav Zubok, distinguishes them from subsequent generations.[8]

Their experience of the following decades as "grey" at best or as a return of Stalinism in the face of targeted repression against "dissidents" and "refuseniks" seems indeed to fundamentally differ from the views and practices of what Alexei Yurchak has called the "last Soviet generation." While the political elite—thus, mostly members of the so-called Brezhnev generation—tried to avoid any ambiguity by ensuring that no official text transgressed the established norm and forms of official discourse and thus only reproduced standardized, "hypernormalized," and predictable slogans no one paid attention to, the members of the last Soviet generation held a position that was simultaneously in- and outside (*vne*) the official sphere.[9] According to Yurchak, this went beyond the traditional binaries of state and society: Some decided to lead a life full of culture and art within their own networks of friends, where any reaction to the state's claims was beside the point. Other youngsters cultivated what Yurchak calls a pragmatic attitude toward the requirements of the state while interpreting official values and goals in inventive and meaningful ways.[10] Their unifying trait seems to have been the assumption that "everything was forever," thus indicating the effects of Soviet "normalization." Only with perestroika, Yurchak states, did the possibility that the Soviet Union might not be eternal enter this generation's mind.[11]

Yurchak's findings have sparked much discussion, which itself points to the difficulties of characterizing the period after 1953 as something other than post-Stalinist or late socialist. On the generational aspect alone, critics like Kevin Platt and Benjamin Nathans maintain that Yurchak's view of dissent "collapses the enormous diversity of the dissident phenomenon," pointing to a general heterogeneity that also went beyond this very prominent and in many aspects elite section of society.[12] If one adds what Donald Raleigh has called the "Soviet baby boomers" to the picture, while considering that these generations lived side by side most of the time, attempts to pinpoint the character of the years between 1953 and 1991 get even more complicated.[13] Attempts at periodization with reference to leaders, decades, and generations thus mark the difficulty in understanding a society that grew increasingly heterogeneous in these years.

The question is, then, what—in the absence of one unifying denominator

8. Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago's Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, Mass., 2009). See also Dietrich Beyrau, *Intelligenz und Dissens: Die russischen Bildungsschichten in der Sowjetunion, 1917–1985* (Göttingen, 1993); and Ludmilla Alexeyeva, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Age in the Post-Stalin Era* (Pittsburgh, 1993).

9. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2006), 14–16, 26–27, 47–48.

10. Ibid., 23, 28.

11. Ibid., 4.

12. Kevin M. F. Platt and Benjamin Nathans, "Socialist in Form, Indeterminate in Content: The Ins and Outs of Late Soviet Culture," *Ab Imperio*, no. 2 (2012): 316.

13. Donald Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation* (Oxford, 2013).

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like Stalin's persona and the factor of outright force—lent coherence to the Soviet system for another three decades? Not fully satisfied with Yurchak's view of normalization, Platt and Nathans call for the investigation of a post-Stalinist social contract that allowed the party-state to keep up an "ideological illusion" with the implicit consent of the Soviet populace, who, in return for giving up some of their freedoms, gained what the authors term an "imaginary private sphere."[14] This perspective has its merits but also its potential pitfalls, as the focus on an imaginary private sphere and emphasis on ideological illusions bring along not only assumptions of disassociation and retreat from society. They also reintroduce the contested, yet apparently tenacious, paradigm of a binary relation between state and society which Platt and Nathans themselves identify as problematic in Yurchak's work.[15]

To get a better idea of the unifying and stabilizing factors for an increasingly heterogeneous Soviet society, the special section presented here proposes to turn to the instances in which diverse groups and generations marked their feeling, however abstract, of (not) belonging to a Soviet community. *Community* entails a sense of belonging that cuts across generational or social divisions. It is anchored in a common culture based on shared norms, beliefs, values, and experiences that are rearticulated in community members' interactions.[16] This is also true for what we generally term *society*; in fact, community and society are interlinked, constantly renegotiated phenomena.[17] But while an interest in society and its social contracts draws our attention toward more functional aspects of interaction and cooperation between different social strata in heterogeneous modern societies, community entails an emotional dimension along with a subscription to and definition of what unites these different groups.[18] This certainly also brings about pressures and conflicts that acquire particular force when brought on by powerful institutionalized movements with particular missions—the nation and religion may serve as preeminent examples, but so too does the community forged under Stalinism. However, a community would hardly be successful without the inclusion and successful negotiation of different views, beliefs, and wishes.[19] What becomes of such communities as soon as force and violent conflict recede as a major factor points to the other elements that stabilize and

14. Platt and Nathans, "Socialist in Form," 319.

15. Kevin M. F. Platt and Bendzhamin Natans [Benjamin Nathans], "Sotsialisticheskaia po forme, neopredelennaia po soderzhaniiu: Pozdnesovetskaia kul'tura i kniga Alekseia Iurchaka, *Vse bylo navechno, poka ne konchilos'*," trans. N. Movnina, *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 101 (2010): 167–84.

16. Émile Durkheim, *Über soziale Arbeitsteilung: Studie über die Organisation höherer Gesellschaften*, 3rd ed. (Frankfurt, 1999), 102, 183, 228, 285–86.

17. On community and society as intertwined processes, see Max Weber, *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft: Grundriß der verstehenden Soziologie*, 5th rev. ed. (Tübingen, 1990), esp. § 9, "Vergemeinschaftung und Vergesellschaftung."

18. Note also the interest in morality and emotions as crucial factors of social cohesion articulated by the functionalist founding father of sociology. Durkheim, *Über soziale Arbeitsteilung*, 76, 82.

19. For examples of communities' views, beliefs, and wishes being negotiated and integrated within the broader Soviet project in the Stalinist period, see Golfo Alexopoulos, *Stalin's Outcasts: Aliens, Citizens, and the Soviet State, 1926–1936* (Ithaca, 2003); and

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reaffirm an overarching community as it is constantly redefined by the different groups constituting it.

It is this process of redefining and renegotiating community in the late Soviet Union that the articles in this issue are interested in. While they all share a focus on the 1960s as a particular juncture in Soviet history, they also consider the long-term roots and legacies of how quite different Soviet citizens and groups brought forward a sense of belonging at a time when "everything was forever." These groups can be seen as smaller communities in themselves, as they share beliefs, attributes, and identities, such as "scientist" or "writer," that made them distinctive. However, even when they entered discussions about what they saw as crucial for their own communities, they referenced beliefs, experiences, and norms that they shared with other Soviet citizens.

Polly Jones looks at a group that has been the focus of attention for a long time: Soviet writers, whose standing is often related to how their work fits into a period traditionally associated with renewed control and the standardization of both political and artistic writing leading up to the years of stagnation. Tellingly, it was the heated discussion about political literature's form and content at Politizdat—a publisher tied to the party, whose major concern was, after all, the ideological education of the Soviet population—that brought together writers with quite different reputations. Politzdat meant to reinforce emotional identification, especially that of younger readers, with the revolution by establishing a series of artistic biographies about exemplary individuals that was meant to simultaneously entertain and educate. This reveals as much a concern with as an effort to ensure Soviet community coherence with the passage of time. One could see this as an indication that the myth of WWII fostered by the Soviet state at the time was deemed insufficient as a central reference point for a shared Soviet past.[20] But instead of a hypernormalized standardization of official discourse or the creation of mere "ideological illusions" as part of a new social contract, this highly political series encouraged experimentation with aesthetic form and historical content into the 1970s by both "conservative" and "dissident" authors. Jones sees this experimental turn and inclusion of authors with a more critical stance as a primarily pragmatic move on the part of the publishers. She inverts Serguei Oushakine's contention that dissidents mimicked official discourse by pointing out that publishers tried to make the revolutionary narrative more attractive by mimicking a purely literary language.[21] Yet, by encouraging a conversation about the Soviet community's core values and ways of representing them, Politizdat not only enabled a discussion among writers but provided the Soviet public with diverse ways of relating to the revolutionary tradition.

Jones's article reveals the various avenues that this approach afforded writers to reformulate what they saw as crucial for the Soviet community.

Vera S. Dunham, *In Stalin's Time: Middleclass Values in Soviet Fiction* (Cambridge, Eng., 1976; Durham, 1990).

20. Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (New York, 1994).

21. Serguei Oushakine, "The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat," *Public Culture* 13, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 191–214.

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"Conservatives" turned out to emphasize the role of the individual and his emotional relationships for revolutionary tradition; as such, the individual's private life came again to be imagined as relevant for the Soviet community, if in sometimes surprising ways.[22] "Dissident" writers transcended established literary and political norms while publishing with Politizdat but still took part in the state effort to find emotionally engaging reformulations of revolutionary tradition that would be relevant to a diverse readership's relation to the larger Soviet community. Even when they ironized this tradition, these biographies served to address present-day political crises and therefore identified both the historical and the contemporary contexts as a common concern.

Creating common ground for conversation proved to be both unsettling and illuminating in the particular encounters Miriam Dobson discusses in her contribution as well. As Soviet social scientists embarked on a new mission to both research and educate Christian believers after the end of repressive antireligious campaigning, they renegotiated their own self-understanding as a scientific community by moving away from exclusively socioeconomic explanations for religious belief. Like the authors at Politizdat analyzed by Jones, these researchers developed a keen interest in the individual and her personal trajectory among followers of the "backward," "unmodern" practice of religion. As young scientists ventured out to find the contemporary religious "other," however, they discovered the boundary between the supposedly backward believer and the presumably progressive Soviet scientist to be a tenuous one. Although often living on the very margins of Soviet society, believers nevertheless voiced negative attitudes toward the church as an institution which resembled the arguments of antireligious propaganda. They also articulated emotionally charged visions of social justice and the afterlife that drew in imaginative ways on the repertoire of official promises and the Soviet everyday. This reveals the effect the Soviet project had on imaginings of community even among people whose beliefs put them on the fringes of Soviet society. In fact, many of the believers welcomed the unexpected opportunity to speak about their beliefs, which, after years of antireligious campaigns, all of a sudden seemed to matter.

The young scientists conducting the interviews also took both their scientific interest and their educational mission beyond the narrow boundaries of science and antireligious enlightenment. As one of them decided to interview her own mother about her beliefs, the distance between those on the margins and the supposed avant-garde of the Soviet community dwindled through dialogue. Another instance of unexpected intimacy between believer and atheist scientist is shown when one interviewer presented the interview with a believer in the first person, thus virtually becoming the believer himself. Carefully considering the interviews' arrangements, Dobson shows that these conversations were more than standardized enactments of a hypernormalized Soviet ritual, as they afforded both sides an opportunity to identify

22. On the renewed interest in the role of the individual, see the programs of recent conferences on the matter, such as "After Stalin: Subjectivity in the Late Soviet Union (1953–1985)," organized by Anatoly Pinsky at the European University at St. Petersburg, April 25–16, 2014.

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themselves as members of the Soviet community—and in some instances to identify with each other.[23] Along the way, both sides renegotiated this community's norms, beliefs, and expectations by both affirming and departing from them.

The urge to belong to the larger Soviet community could also have unexpected outcomes for groups explicitly supported by the Soviet state, as Claire Shaw shows in her analysis of the deaf community in Moscow in the years between 1954 and 1970. Marginalized as mentally ill before 1917, the deaf community received recognition and support after the revolution while seizing the opportunity to prove itself as a cultured and worthy contributor to the building of communism. Its successes became particularly palpable in the 1950s and 1960s as the All-Russian Society of the Deaf (VOG) managed to build not only industrial enterprises employing deaf workers with its own funds but also large housing complexes accommodating deaf citizens in the middle of the Soviet capital. The VOG's own House of Culture in particular displayed deaf Soviet citizens' culturedness and deaf artists' creative abilities to a hearing audience. Yet, this encounter also made the differences between deaf and hearing citizens more pronounced, as the deaf uses of urban space and the unintelligibility of sign language to the hearing drew a line between the deaf and the larger Soviet community they wanted to be part of. Even love could not overcome the insurmountable division between the hearing and the deaf, according to Soviet films that, despite entirely sympathetic depictions, also exoticized the deaf and thus relegated them to the margins of hearing society. Discussions in the Soviet press about deaf peoples' failures to behave adequately on the streets of Moscow and about deaf WWII orphans who failed to "overcome" their fate in adequate ways by engaging in deviant behavior represented further obstacles to the deaf being accepted unquestioningly as full members of the Soviet family. (Interestingly, the ostensibly shared experience of WWII thus did *not* result in inclusion in the Soviet community in all cases.) The deaf community's reaction to these conflicts reveals a fear of its Sovietness being polluted through the actions of its own members. Deaf activists therefore opted for self-marginalization by advocating a retreat from hearing into deaf spaces in order to secure their community's Sovietness. Thus, they retreated not into an imaginary private sphere but into a space that held highly political meaning for the group.

The uses of urban space as crucial sites for the renegotiation of community is also addressed in this special section's fourth contribution, in which I look at how different groups and generations interpreted the promises and the past of the Soviet project in the capital of Soviet Armenia. Yerevan's architectural layout intertwines the revolutionary mission with the Armenian nation's past and future in a way that proved meaningful when an illegal demonstration called for official recognition of the Armenian genocide and restitution of "Armenian lands" in April 1965. While this demonstration has traditionally been seen as "anti-Soviet" and "dissident" for bringing taboo subjects into the open, I contend that the demonstration, the discussions that unfolded

23. On standardized enactments of a hypernormalized Soviet ritual, cf. again Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 51, and chap. 3, "Ideology Inside Out: Ethics and Poetics."

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around it, and the further evolution of Yerevan's cityscape in fact constituted a particular, but also affirmative, reinterpretation of the Soviet community's norms and beliefs. The demonstration drew on the revolutionary tradition and the repertoire of official Soviet holidays, and petitions called for genocide recognition not only as a matter of solidarity and entitlement stemming from Armenia's membership in the Soviet community but also as a central security issue and proof of the global validity of the Soviet project. Thus, the demonstrators not merely relied on standardized official narratives such as WWII but infused them with locally meaningful perspectives vis-à-vis Soviet authorities and their fellow Soviet citizens. Instead of condemning these interpretations for the sake of an unambiguous official discourse, the Armenian political elite and eventually also Moscow affirmed, if not reinforced, these popular interpretations: the Armenian Central Committee fiercely defended the demonstrators, while Moscow eventually allowed the first genocide memorial on Soviet soil to be erected atop Yerevan's center, embedding the Armenian genocide in the shared heroic past of the Soviet community. All this points to an evolving conversation about the meanings of Soviet community and the beliefs, norms, and emotional bonds constituting it which eventually contributed to the stability and renewed legitimacy of the Soviet project, despite ambiguity and potential for conflict.

The examples provided here thus focus on moments of encounter, conflict, and exchange between different groups in different spheres and spaces, from city squares to private homes, at party, scientists', and publishers' meetings, in different Soviet capitals, and in the provinces. Consequently, the visions of community remained multifaceted and open to change—which might be one unifying characteristic of the years under review here, which span the periods usually associated with liberalization and renewed control. The difficulty in finding one convincing label thus will not be solved by the articles in this issue. Yet, they allow insight into the processes of redefining community in very different instances which in turn might complicate our understanding of the late Soviet period beyond state-society binaries, metaphors of stagnation, and assumptions about a mere standardization of ideology.

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