PLURALIST NOSTALGIES FOR MULTIPLE PERESTROIKAS. BOOK REVIEW:
Li Bennich-Björkman, Sergiy Kurbatov (Eds.) *When The Future Came. The Collapse of the Soviet Union and the Emergence of National Memory in Post-Soviet History Textbooks*

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The current *Zeitgeist* of Eastern Europe is inseparable from the new wave of nationalist illiberalism. On one hand, ethnonational conservatism reassesses and undermines the results of post-socialist state- and nation-building. On another hand, there is a growing nostalgia for the times when non-socialist future seemed so bright and seductive.

This last trend is especially visible in academic literature that was published around the time of Perestroika anniversaries, between 2010 and 2015 and 2020. Helen Hardman published a book on the export of Perestroika to Eastern Europe starting the line of publications on that issue (Hardman 2012). Padma Desai re-wrote and re-published her history of Perestroika (Desai 2014). Deborah Adelman issued her study of *Perestorika children*, their views on politics and freedom (Adelman 2015). Short, but heart-breaking article was published by Henry Hale who argued that the political freedoms of post-Soviet period were a declining legacy of Perestroika (Hale 2016). Many other studies of Central and Eastern European societies were published in the context of Perestroika and her founder, Mikhail Gorbachev (Miller 2012; Gunnell 2015; Keohane 2015; McCauley 2016; Welzel 2016; Sedaitis & Butterfield 2019; Hazan 2019; Minakov 2019). And now came the study, how post-Soviet educational systems "remember" Gorbachev, Perestroika and the USSR dissolution.

Li Bennich-Björkman and Sergiy Kurbatov organized an international research project and edited a book consisting of research papers, each analyzing how Perestroika and the consequent dissolution of Soviet Union is remembered and described in school and university textbooks of Russia (Tregubova et al. 2019), Ukraine (Marchenko et al. 2019), Belarus (Fabrykant & Dudchik 2019), and Moldova (Bencheci & Mosneagu 2019). The book was published within the *Soviet and Post-Soviet Politics and Society* book series, a project that has recently turned into a magistral publishing endeavor on late Soviet and post-Soviet societies and polities.

Researchers organized their joint study around several key questions:

> "How are national memories formed in relation to the collapse of the Soviet Union in these country contexts? What do these processes of memorialization point to in terms of historical determinism, room for agency, and relations within and among society, the public, and the elites?" (Bennich-Björkman & Kurbatov 2019b: 11).

While analyzing the Russian case, researchers found several specificities of Russia's memory of 1985–91. First of all, a difference between "federal" and "local/republican" textbooks. The federal official memory focuses nor on *RSFSR*, but the Union itself, while the Tatar and Chechen textbooks are eager to look at the local processes in the period (Tregubova et al. 2019). Second, generic textbooks look at the USSR as to the Fatherland of that period, though with different geography and demography. Thus, Perestroika has ambivalent image: the time of freedom and the period of "domino" dissolution. Third, Russia is remembered as one of many member-republics subordinated to the Union. Simultaneously, the textbooks have an issue in describing the correlation between people, nation, ethnicity(ies), and society of Russia due to evasive language of USSR description, and contradictions between "federal" and "local" discourses (ibid.).

If Russia's interpretation of Perestroika is described in terms of ambivalence and contradictions, the Ukrainian case is framed with the metaphor of "awakening of Sleeping Beauty." The Gorbachev time in Ukraine is described in terms of beginnings for new cultural and political identity formation, state-building and transformation of economy. Also, researchers pointed out that the revolutionary cycles of Ukraine's development were bringing Perestroika agenda back into force with each revolutionary attempt (e.g. in 2013–14). Another important finding is that in Ukraine Perestroika is remembered as "discontinuity" of the Soviet (negative) giving a way to "national" (positive) society and politics (Marchenko et al. 2019).

The study of Belarus official memory of Perestroika somewhat resembles the Ukrainian one. It also describes Perestroika as period dividing Soviet and independent Belarus. And Perestroika, as a set of policies, is understood as a cause of the USSR dissolution. In addition, the Russian aspect of ambivalence is also present in Belarussian interpretational matrix. But there is Belarussian peculiarity as well: memory of ideological damage to culture and Chernobyl catastrophe are much stronger in the official history that in any other studied case of the book (Fabrykant & Dudchik 2019). It is interesting that Belarussian memory of late USSR is much more pluralistic than one could expect. Authors of this chapter made a good job in showing diversity of Belarussian historical narratives about Soviet Union.

Authors of the chapter on Moldovan case use the metaphor of "a battlefield over identity and belonging", which "is far from [being] settled" (Bencheci & Mosneagu 2019). Memory of USSR, Perestroika and beginning of independence is defined as a set of divisive narrations that refer to current political and social situation in Moldova. Textbooks of main Moldova and its Transnistrian part, as well as of Romania, provide very different and pluralistic views on recent past and beginning of Moldovan independence. In these textbooks, the issue of political culture seems to be dominant in both historical narratives and current politics of identity (ibid.).

In the final chapter, Li Bennich-Björkman and Sergiy Kurbatov made a summary analysis of how Soviet Union's inability "to harness its human dynamism without breaking up or at least substantially re-establishing itself according to new principles" is told in the official post-Soviet histories of Perestroika (Bennich-Björkman & Kurbatov

2019a: 157). The scholars offer to look at these memories in terms of "multiple Perestroikas": a multitude of narrations about recent common past of Soviet peoples who entered new unexpected era with traumas of dissolution, insecurity (especially in the face of dreadful Future), conflicts and poverty; optimism of new nations' building; entanglements of the fight for only historical truth; and pluralism of reactions with some underlining nostalgia for the times when future was not scary.

I find the book and its constitutive empirical and comparative analyses very important. I can describe this importance in two aspects, although it can be much more. First of all, this study proves that, in spite of many "national paths" that post-Soviet nations have chosen to go, the number and the quality of official narratives of Perestroika is structurally alike, and ideologically repetitive. Post-Soviet official histories mainly follow (a) ethnonationalist identitarian, (b) liberal transnational, and (c) local patterns. However, these patterns allow much more contents and focused events in 1985–91.

Second, the stories collected, described, and analyzed by the co-authors of the book, show certain underlining teleological trait: Perestroika led to dissolution of USSR and the beginning of new orders. Even though 1985 (beginning of liberalization), 1986 (Chernobyl catastrophe), or many other local and global events are remembered, it seems that 1991 prevails. Whichever "multiple Perestroikas" we see, they still tell us the same invariant story that every destruction leads to new construction and re-ordering of Cosmos we live in.

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