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Late Soviet Leisure Practices and Their Representation

Abstract

Introduction. The article is devoted to the representation of Soviet everyday life on the Internet. The subject of the study is the media memory of leisure practices in the 1960s–1970s. Memories of spending free time are considered as an element of constructing a collective memory of Soviet life and forming an image of Soviet normativity on the Internet. The author aims to examine the specifics of digital memories of leisure practices of late Soviet everyday life.

Materials and Methods. The basis of the research is the structural-functional method and content analysis of materials on social networks.

Results. The results of the study are that the author has shown using concrete examples that referring to the concept of "spaces of non-attendance" within the late Soviet everyday life makes it possible to understand the attractiveness of the image of the Soviet past in the digital space. The study demonstrated that memories of leisure practices are characterized by an appeal to the personal dimension of everyday experience.

Discussion and Conclusion. The author supposes that the phenomenon of an integration of the ideological myth into memory of the space of private life is connected both with the peculiarities of media memory and with the complex structure of the subject of nostalgic reflection. The results of the study can be applied in planning strategies for the preservation and reproduction of historical memory.

Keywords: cultural memory, media memory, nostalgia, digital technologies, Soviet everyday life, leisure practices

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Оригинальное теоретическое исследование

Позднесоветские досуговые практики и их репрезентация в цифровой среде

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Аннотация

Введение. Статья посвящена репрезентации советской повседневности в Интернет-пространстве. Предметом исследования выступает медиапамять о досуговых практиках 1960–1970-х гг. Воспоминания о свободном время-препровождении рассматриваются в качестве элемента конструирования коллективной памяти о советской жизни и формирования образа советской нормативности в Интернете. Цель исследования – рассмотреть специфику дигитальных воспоминаний о досуговых практиках позднесоветской повседневности.

Материалы и методы. Основу исследования образует структурно-функциональный метод и контент-анализ материалов в социальных сетях.

Результаты исследования. На конкретных примерах показано, что обращение к концепции пространств вненаходимости внутри позднесоветской повседневности позволяет понять привлекательность образа советского прошлого в цифровом пространстве. Исследование продемонстрировало, что для воспоминаний о досуговых практиках характерно обращение к личному измерению повседневного опыта.

Обсуждение и заключение. Обращение к советскому досугу и его дигитальным репрезентациям показало, что присутствие цифровых технологий и их роль в передачи воспоминаний способствуют отчуждению личных воспоминаний. Внимание к фактам рецепции советской повседневности в Интернете позволяет пережить индивидуальные эмоции заново, сопоставив опыт одного человека с членами виртуального сообщества. Делается предположение, что феномен интеграции идеологического мифа в память о пространстве частной жизни связан как с особенностями медиапамяти, так и со сложной структурой предмета ностальгической рефлексии. Результаты исследования могут быть применены при планировании стратегий сохранения и воспроизводства исторической памяти.

Ключевые слова: культурная память, медиапамять, ностальгия, цифровые технологии, советская повседневность, досуговые практики

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Introduction. In recent years, there has been a phenomenal surge of interest in the Soviet past in the Internet: there are numerous communities in the digital space that accumulate memories of a bygone era. The number of scientific studies on the formation and transmission of cultural memory is also high. However, the question of the reasons for the formation of Soviet culture as a subject of nostalgic reflection is insufficiently covered in science.

The causes of nostalgia for the Soviet past are defined based on the general features of nostalgia as the process of experiencing the loss of the imaginary space of home. Collective nostalgia, which shows the connection of a particular individual with the surrounding world, is defined as a longing for the slow flow of time in the past. Nostalgia is interpreted in this approach as an integral part of modern culture [1, p. 299], and its causes are considered to be postmodern identity crises, difficulties of social adaptation, and mass disorientation. The post-Soviet space, in which there was a great shock, the collapse of the socialist country, can be considered as a fertile ground for nostalgia for an era characterised by stability, peace and certainty.

The peculiarity of the author's approach to the topic is the direction of interest in the Soviet everyday life of the 1960s–1970s in order to identify the features that allowed it to become materialised in the form of memories in text, graphic, video and audio formats. According to the author's hypothesis, late Soviet everyday life has characteristics that make it an object of nostalgic reflection.

It should be emphasised, however, that attempts to identify the features of late Soviet culture as a basis for modern nostalgia have been made before, but the emphasis in them was placed on the features of consumer culture [2, 3]. Separately, we can highlight the research of I.M. Kaspje, which clarifies the features of 'nostalgic' Soviet cuisine in order to identify the specifics of the formation of an ideal image that combined 'symbols of past stability and symbols of new consumer opportunities' [4, p. 218]. This approach is quite productive. It seems that analysing the structure of Soviet everyday life, its separate areas that are most actively subjected to nostalgia, and identifying the image of 'nostalgic' everyday life can expand the corpus of domestic memorial studies.

In this article we propose to analyse Soviet leisure: its specificity within everyday life in the 1960s–1970s and the facts of its representation in digital space. The appeal to practices related to free pastime can be explained by their special position within the structure of everyday life. They both allow us to reproduce a special, repetitive course of life and go beyond the necessarily necessary actions within everyday life. The specificity of leisure practices is also connected with the fact that they require a surplus of resources for their own reproduction. Moreover, leisure practices are performed both within private space and in public spaces. These characteristics indicate the necessity to refer to leisure in order to understand the specificity of late Soviet everyday life, in which the legitimisation of free pastime took place.

Materials and Methods. In order to achieve these objectives, we need to turn to the structural-functional method to decompose late-Soviet everyday life into its constituent parts. Following S. Boym, we consider everyday life as a structure that has a rhythm of repetition and habits, an ideology veiled by common sense. It is everyday life that is displayed in memories, as it captures long periods of history and displays them in details without pathos and charisma [1, p. 11]. Everyday life concerns each of us, but is experienced collectively, which allows it to be reproduced in collective memory.

Content analysis of publications in the community 'Leningradets' in the social network VKontakte allows us to identify the specifics of media memory formation, in which Soviet leisure practices are represented. For this purpose, we turn to the proponents of the connective turn in memorial studies, who describe a new structure of memory conditioned

by digital technologies (J. Van Dijck [6], M. Hirsch [7], D.S. Artamonov [8]). We will define media memory as a digitally structured network of memories that connects personal and collective heritage.

Our understanding of nostalgia is based on the theory of S. Boym [1]. We propose to turn the research interest to the process of individual affect generation in the production of collective memories of the past. Nostalgia will be further considered as a process of constructing the past and historical interpretation that determines the identity of a community.

Results. The time frame of the 'long seventies' is usually correlated with the era that began after the 'thaw' and ended with 'perestroika'. Let us call the period under study as the time of life of the last Soviet generation [5, p. 85]. Let us refer to those who caught the late Soviet everyday life and were directly involved in it, but at the same time were quite young at the time of the beginning of 'perestroika' and the collapse of the USSR. It is the conscious life experience of this generation and its digital memories of Soviet (pre-Perestroika) everyday life that interests us.

These people managed to live in that period of Soviet history, when everyday life was legitimised as a place for the realisation of personal intents and interests, above all in the consciousness of the current subjects of everyday life. For the first time in the history of the Soviet state, the distance between the private and the public increased, and distancing oneself from public life and private apoliticality (which could be accompanied by the manifestation of a political position within the public zones of everyday life) became normal. Everyday life in this period began to be settled by man, not to be something 'exotic' [1, p. 51] as in the extraordinary years (post-revolutionary and military). Without catastrophes and social upheavals, the Soviet world acquired completeness and qualitative invariability [9, p. 100].

The possibility of such transformation was explained by the change in the ideological aspirations of the Soviet state: in the mid-1960s, the press established the notion that socialism in the country was at the highest stage of its development [10, p. 89]. The myth of the Soviet way of life began to illustrate not a reference point for a hard-to-achieve future requiring deprivation in the present, but depicted the current breakthroughs and victories associated primarily with the sphere of everyday existence. The advent of communist society was postponed for an indefinite period of time (gradually the deadlines shifted and were no longer taken seriously), but the goal became the preservation of what had been achieved, i. e. the improvement of life in a given period of time [10, p. 91]. The Soviet man of the 1960s–1970s finally got the opportunity to be involved in the processes of consumption and to have access to a comfortable everyday life. This is what created the image of a stable era, which today is attractive for the formation of nostalgic memories.

The relationship between labour and leisure in the structure of everyday life also changed. Leisure became an obligatory part of the Soviet way of life. Ideologically, the antagonism of labour as a form of coercion and leisure as freedom from work inherent in capitalist society was removed: in this period, the Soviet person was free to feel the need for leisure, which is the key to the reproduction of labour resources [10, p. 91]. Despite the control in the sphere of leisure, which continues to be strictly regulated, there are more opportunities to realise their own ideas and aspirations in their free time.

Note that we can make a terminological distinction between leisure and recreation: leisure practices imply something more than just recreation and recuperation. An important criterion of leisure can be considered a more vivid manifestation of aspirations for free and unregulated forms of behaviour [11, p. 229] in the period of time freed from public and private affairs, which a person is obliged to engage in. Leisure is tied to the private sphere, although it can also take place in public areas (palaces of culture and recreation, sanatoriums and pioneer camps). It is leisure practices that can be characterised as a zone of manifestation of the individuality of the 'last Soviet generation', which allows them to be the basis for vivid, emotionally intense memories that can be reproduced in nostalgic reflection.

The Soviet ideological discourse of the 1960s–1970s changed not only in terms of constructing reference points in the present, but also in its essence: it became hypernormalised. This means that the number of phrases and turns in the official language increased, and their form became more complex [5, p. 116]. Many phenomena of everyday life no longer had one clear ideological interpretation, which opened up space for interpretations. Under such conditions, spaces of non-alienation were formed, which existed in parallel to the Soviet reality. They did not challenge Soviet ideology, but they did not live according to its rules. Spaces of extra-alienation provided a 'normal' existence in the Soviet everyday life, compliance with ideological models and satisfaction of their own interests [5, p. 269]. Let us consider the functioning of the spaces of extra-individuality, and turn to the specific ways of combining 'ideologically correct' recreation and individualised pastime according to interests, which created special Soviet forms of leisure. Let us focus on those practices that allowed people to participate in the reproduction of ideological discourse (including the 'normal' Soviet everyday life dictated by it) while constructing their own meanings of private life.

In nostalgic memories in digital space, the subbotnik often appears as an event that embodied the idea of the Soviet way of life to the fullest - the subbotnik involved voluntary collective labour to improve the environment. This form of politically motivated labour, demonstrating, according to Lenin, the initiative and consciousness of workers [12, p. 115], found a second birth in 1969 and was constantly reproduced in the 1970s. At the same time, the late Soviet subbotniks turned

into an empty ritual form, losing their originally deep ideological content [12, p. 118]. In fact, forced participation in such official unpaid events was perceived by people as a way to spend time in the fresh air, socialise with friends in the process of work and change the sphere of activity. Often for participation in them employees were given time off (a paid day, free from work), which created a space and time of extracurricular activities [5, p. 306], when participation in the zone of public expands the zone of free choice of forms of private pastime.

Let us consider the nostalgic image of the subbotnik in social networks. For example, the community 'Leningradets' (with more than 91,000 members) has many materials about subbotniks in Leningrad and the participation in them of representatives of various enterprises and institutions. These include archival video of the 1975 subbotnik, Soviet propaganda posters on the topic, and, more interestingly for analysing media memory, photographs suggested by the group's participants. Personal photos make it possible to synchronise one's experience with the experience of others, turning an individual memory into a part of the general representation of the past [8, p. 71]. This contributes to the construction of a more or less unified image of late Soviet everyday life. The materials and the facts of individual memory they convey order collective memories, ensure the interaction of individuals and confirm the fact of their common identity (belonging to the last Soviet generation that recognises the events depicted in the photo). In the digital space, where the boundaries of oral and written communication are blurred and any communication is mediated by technology [8, p. 76], the community 'Leningradets' becomes a source of cultural memory formation about leisure practices of late Soviet society.

Among the publications there are the following interesting materials concerning the period under study: a photo with the caption 'After the strike work – a legal mug', which records Radium Institute workers after the Lenin's Subbotnik, relaxing together in a relaxed atmosphere and drinking from beer glasses¹; images of young people removing leaves (more importantly, guitars are pictured in the foreground)²; the publication 'Subbotnik at the River Station under construction', which shows a cheerful group posing for a photographer in the foreground³; a photograph of a schoolchildren's school; and a photograph of a schoolchildren's school'⁴. The presence of more formal images that record the process of work does not reject the fact that people will be involved in recreation with friends, or at least have the opportunity for leisure and socialising after the subbotnik or during the break. The unpredictability and unregulated nature of the unofficial part of such rituals is highly valued in generational memory, and this value is further sharpened when one recalls the attendance controls and ideological underpinnings of sabbaticals.

The comments on the photos dedicated to the subbotniks are also interesting: in addition to reproducing the theses about the importance of labour and putting their hometown in order, in which we can see the ideological component of the nostalgic image of everyday life, which allows us to justify its practices, many people remember the free time after the subbotnik or the subbotnik as a place to meet people close to them (those who are captured in the amateur photos). Criticism of the compulsory nature of such events is juxtaposed with memories of how friendly and cheerful everyone cleaned up the city.

In the comments, it is common to search for 'their own' in the photos: those who also studied at this school or worked at a particular enterprise and went out on clean-up days. Some community members add their own photos to the comments. There are attempts to identify places, as well as discussion of the clothes of the people pictured, comparing their financial situation with their own in those years. This suggests that the photographs act as 'memory points' that provide a sensual, material and emotional connection to the past [7, p. 104] and represent an archival memorial practice that retains an embedded dimension [7, p. 74], which allows us not only to see others but also to find 'our own'. This awakens nostalgic feelings. As the researcher of media memory J. van Dijk notes, the general longing for the mood of the epoch is connected with the lived experience, even if it is blurred in memory. The memory that arises from the discovery of a photograph united by the place of action, the participants, or the practice of everyday life captured on it with the viewer, duplicates the initial impression of participation in such events. Associations over time as a result become saturated, and memories of the original experience are influenced by new emotions, which allows to form a nostalgic experience [6, p. 362].

Another property of digital memories that we find when analysing visual materials is the fragmentation of memories and the mosaic structure of media memory [13, p. 133]: photos can be repeated with some frequency, cause different discussions, but usually the comments are short, and readers have to construct an image of the event on their own when comparing someone else's experience and their own. This, together with the nostalgic bias that arises when correlating one's own experience with other people's emotions, allows for the formation of a basic preset about the past, in which

¹ "After the shock work – on the legal mug..." Employees of the Radium Institute after Lenin's Subbotnik, Shvernik Avenue. April 1972. Photo: Alexander Tsaregorodtsev. URL: https://vk.com/wall-126624890 490085 (accessed: 04.04.2025)

² Subbotnik in the Summer Garden. 1983.URL: https://vk.com/wall-126624890_851399 (accessed: 04.04.2025)

³ Subbotnik at the river station under construction. Photo by Nadezhda Morozova. URL: https://vk.com/wall-126624890 766282 (accessed: 04.04.2025)

⁴ After a fun "Lenin's Subbotnik" (scrap metal collection), some of the students of the 10b class of 334 school, April 1974... URL: https://vk.com/wall-126624890_384141 (accessed: 04.04.2025)

there is a certain unified image of Soviet everyday life (even if it probably did not exist when experiencing the events of Soviet life in reality).

Interestingly, another official ritual, the demonstration on the occasion of various holidays (from 8 March to 9 May), in which the subjects of Soviet everyday life participated, was similar to the subbotnik. Despite the fact that these rituals had a strict order and were ideologically regulated, they remained in the memory of generations as folk festivals. The emotional intensity, festive mood, the movement of large groups of people through the streets, among whom were near and dear people, gave such events the status of holidays, interesting to Soviet people [5, p. 241].

It is noteworthy that photos from demonstrations are published in the community 'Leningradets' often on festive dates, which allows us to associate the current holiday with the experience of that time. In the comments we find memories of socialising in the community of their own, time after the official part of the holidays, meeting with friends and relatives, home parties and feasts after the demonstrations.

This selectivity makes it possible to recall forms of free pastime that existed within the framework of strictly regulated rituals (e.g. demonstrations). This makes it possible to create a positive image of everyday life in the 1960s and 1970s, to which one wants to return. The participation of the memory of demonstrations as rituals that had late-Soviet specifics (combining official and unofficial parts, ideological and even apolitical, intimate) in the emergence of nostalgic feelings is vivid proof of our hypothesis about the special place of memories of free pastime in the formation of the digital image of the Soviet past.

Let us now turn to leisure forms of everyday existence, less connected with holidays and rituals. We are talking about the association of people in houses of culture and recreation for free pastime. Hobby clubs and circles were actively created during the life of the last Soviet generation with the support of the authorities. They were a manifestation of that aspect of Soviet state policy in the 1960s and 1970s which ensured free choice and did not create a sense of ideological control in everyday life. Sections and amateur clubs as forms of recreation controlled by the party became a zone of distancing from the public space [15, p. 275], where everyone could choose an activity of interest and find comrades. At the same time, such distancing was possible only in the reproduction of socialist discourse, because the attendance of clubs testified to the achievements of socialism, where everyone can be involved in a common culture [10, p. 91].

The appeal of spending time in such groups today is explained by the great variety of clubs and circles, their wide availability, the presence of professional teachers and interested students. The image of circles in social networks is predominantly positive, and its reproduction is accompanied by comments on the advantages of the socialist social system compared to the capitalist system⁵. They remember first of all that the circles were free and really useful, which often implies the lack of such a variety of leisure places today. Nostalgia in this case acts as a response to the feeling of lack of some opportunities in modernity, as a reaction to the gap between the past and the present [16, p. 454]. Digital memories of circles, sections and other similar collectives show that the nostalgic image of Soviet everyday life can be supported by the reproduction of ideological clichés about its merits, and among them are chosen those that indicate the satisfaction of individual needs of the nostalgic. We can talk about borrowing elements of the Soviet official discourse to justify purely personal interests from the position of a modern person.

Soviet people also devoted their free time to visiting cinemas. Photos of cinemas on social media as digital places of memory also trigger discussions of people's personal interests. Photographs that depict places that no longer exist are particularly revealing⁶, as they evoke nostalgic feelings among communicators due to the loss of specific spatial locations. The role of places and their digital representations in evoking memory is particularly evident in the discussion of cinema-going, as many cinemas were closed after the collapse of the USSR.

In addition, the memory of a viewing invariably triggers the recall of the film and may provoke a revisit. This, in turn, allows the film to fulfil its mnemotic function of capturing and recalling the emotions experienced during the first viewing. Thus, film memories, which, like the musical memories described by J. van Dijk, form a personal and collective heritage from generation to generation through the exchange of stories of experience [6, p. 364]. In this regard, we can recall the virtual communities dedicated to Soviet cinema and Soviet music, which can be considered archives that fulfil a commemorative function.

Discussion and Conclusion. Addressing Soviet leisure and its digital representations has shown that the presence of digital technologies and their role in the transmission of memories contribute to the alienation of personal memories. The facts of the reception of Soviet everyday life on the Internet are mosaic, fragmented, and the reference to them allows us to relive individual emotions anew by comparing the experience of one person with members of the virtual community.

Soviet everyday life, while remaining under the influence of ideology and being constructed by its utopian aspirations, turned after the collapse of the USSR in the memory of the generation into a place where the model of the

⁵ For example: Children's clubs in the USSR. URL: https://vk.com/wall-126624890_805376 (accessed: 04.04.2025)

⁶ For example: Cinema 'Prometheus' 1977. URL: https://vk.com/wall-126624890_945959 (accessed: 04.04.2025)

Soviet way of life was fully realised, the needs of workers were met and political and social equality was achieved. The deeply personal component of memories of the USSR is determined by the fact that people of the last Soviet generation have appropriated ideological constructs about the achievement by citizens of a comfortable, stable existence. This is facilitated by the structure of nostalgia, its desire to return the missing fragments of the present, which the subjects of nostalgia seek in the past.

Within everyday life, predominantly in the sphere of leisure, Soviet people developed spaces of extra-individuality that created places independent of ideological control. They allowed for the construction of personal meanings that became inherently important to people. Leisure activities in zones of extra-alienation are reproduced in digital memories because they generated emotions that remain in memory and are experienced again after long periods of time.

The post-Soviet person, therefore, combines two aspects of everyday culture in memory: its ideological side ('normal' Soviet everyday life, conformity to the Soviet way of life) and existence in zones of extra-independence. Often in media memory, the ideological myth is used to explain the satisfaction gained from participating in leisure practices that did not exist according to the laws of the official system.

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