

DONALD J. RALEIGH, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012)

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*Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation* analyzes the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as the process through which Russia had emerged into a modern, cosmopolite and vastly literate urban society using oral history interviews with the country's first Post-World War II generation. Written by Donald J. Raleigh who is history professor at University of North Carolina and author of several notable works such as: *Revolution on the Volga*, *Experiencing Russia's Civil War* and *Russia's Sputnik Generation*, the book was published in 2012 at Oxford University Press being publicly acclaimed by the critics of the genre.

Using the methodology of oral history, the book brings forth the life stories of sixty graduates of two secondary schools with instruction in English, one in Moscow and the other one in the city of Saratov, focusing, among others, on various topics such as: daily life, public versus private, political aspects, and professional aspirations. As the author of the book highlights in the introduction, he aims at answering several questions in reference to "living Soviet" throughout the Cold War: Who and what shaped the Cold War generation's worldviews while they were growing up? What do their life stories tell us about what constituted "the Soviet dream" and ultimately about the relationship between the growing emphasis on private life after 1945, the undermining of Marxist ideology, and the fate of the Soviet Union? How have they negotiated the challenging transition to a post-Soviet Russia following the collapse of Communism? How have their lived experiences both reproduced and transformed Russian society during the Cold War and afterwards? (p. 5) These questions constitute the core of the research- profoundly embellished by the narratives of the interviewees which openly brought to the fore their lives with joys and sorrows throughout a period which until now was never documented using the methodology of oral history.

The book is structured in seven chapters while also containing an introductory part in which the writer explains the purpose of the book, the methodology used and offers a glimpse into the creative process of his work as well as the motivation behind it. Leaving aside the interesting perspectives into the "Soviet living" offered by those interviewed and Donald J. Raleigh's captivating third person writing style, the book is also enriched by photographs which portray the lives of those living in Soviet Russia.

The first chapter of the book, *The Real Nuclear Threat: Soviet Families in Transition*, focuses on the family and the manner in which it has transformed itself

throughout the period under scrutiny. Thus, are brought to the fore testimonies that refer to the dynamics of family life in a period in which a high percentage of women were employed in various areas including sectors which traditionally were reserved for men. Rearing children and getting married in such a context proved to be a challenge for many women, but not an impossible one to rise up to. Household dynamics are also emphasized as well as the shift from communal to private flats. Last but not least, the chapter manages to tackle how political views affected family life and the manner in which differences of opinions were mediated, also suggesting a hierarchy when it came to the level of implication in the Party's affairs and activities: from those whose life revolved around the various activities promoted by the Party to those who were less engaged.

The second chapter of the book, *Overtaking America in School: Educating the Builders of Communism* highlights testimonies regarding the educational system and its various reforms as well as the manner in which communities related to it. In this sense, some interviewees explain how school was beneficial to low-income families through different activities they organized in order to support with money, food and clothing those less fortunate. The strong bonds created between students regardless of nationality, background or financial situation is highlighted as well. The quality of the educational act is brought under scrutiny, the interviewees offering testimonies in regard to their teachers and the relationships built between teachers and students.

In chapter three titled *Unconscious Agents of Change: Sweet Childhood Creates the Cynical Generation* the emphasis is being placed upon leisure time and the manner in which the interviewees remember spending their free time while growing up. Long lasting friendships and how these were formed are analyzed, as well as the common elements in building such bonds. The interviewees remember that throughout those days, youngsters used to read a lot, being fairly common to discuss the readings afterwards as well as going to the cinema or listening to music. The easy access to Western films is often highlighted as well as their popularity detrimental to the Soviet ones. Such formative experiences among others are wonderfully portrayed throughout the chapter, making it interesting to read as well as revealing the fact that in the end this particular young generation living in the Cold War era in Russia was not that different from the ones living elsewhere, including the young generation in the United States.

In chapter four - *The Baby Boomers Come of Age* the *baby boomers* are slowly making their transition into adulthood so the emphasis is being placed upon the manner in which they relate to the country's realities at this period in their lives. Thus, aspects such as getting into a good university and the criteria needed in order to do so is brought to the fore. In this sense, some interviewees explain the pressure they felt to being admitted into a prestigious university and the overall toll the process of admission took on them. The last part of the chapter consists of

testimonies referring to the jobs assigned after graduating and the overall work experience throughout the period in question.

Chapter five titled *Living Soviet during the Brezhnev Era Stagnation* brings into discussion the Brezhnev era commonly referred to by the interviewees as a period of stagnation and how is remembered by the *baby boomers*. The interviewees from Saratov and those from Moscow have a different pattern of remembering the Brezhnev era since Saratov was a closed town whereas Moscow was not. In this sense, an interviewee from Saratov explained that he was unaware of the experiences he was missing until the Soviet Union opened. By contrast, an interviewee from Moscow acknowledged the privileged status of those living in the capital. As resulted from the testimonies in this chapter, Brezhnev is portrayed in a positive manner when referring to these early years but this image strongly declines as time goes by.

In chapter six- *But Then Everything Fell Apart: Gorbachev Remakes the Soviet Dream* life during Gorbachev's era is brought to the fore while interviewees stress their expectations versus the realities they witnessed throughout that time. This chapter offers significant historical background which makes the oral history testimonies easier to comprehend.

Chapter seven - *Surviving Russia's Great Depression* analyzes the struggles and challenges brought by the 1990's which for many of the interviewees as well as the other Russian citizens proved to be a difficult period paved with economical hardships due to the transition. In this sense, many testimonies speak about failed marriages, depression, frustrations caused by the decline in the prestige of their professions among other hardships. The last part of the chapter has a more positive note to it since it depicts the *baby boomers* hopes for the future.

To conclude, I find it suitable to make use of the publisher's words when it comes to Donald J. Raleigh's *Soviet Baby Boomers* and agree that it "offers an intimate portrait of a generation that has remained largely faceless until now."

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