

Raleigh, Donald J.: *Russia's Sputnik Generation. Soviet Baby Boomers Talk about Their Lives*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2006. ISBN: 0-253-34725-4; 296 S.

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The four men and four women interviewed in Russia's Sputnik Generation all attended School No. 42 in Saratov, a large industrial city on the river Volga, approximately eight hundred kilometres from Moscow. Born in 1949 and 1950, they graduated from the school in 1967, before going on to some form of college or higher education, either in Saratov or Moscow. Now in their mid-50s, they have accrued a range of life experience that includes marriage and divorce, the raising of children, periods of illness, religious conversions, successful careers (and also enforced career changes), trips abroad, and in once case emigration. It is this wealth of experience – and the interviewee's interpretation of their experiences – that Donald Raleigh has recorded in this volume of oral history transcripts. Accompanied by photographs both of the informants' youth and of their recent reunions, this is a well-presented, engaging, and highly readable collection.

We meet Sasha the Muscovite, who was the school's star pupil and went on to a successful academic career at Moscow State University, and the brilliant Arkadii Darchenko who also spent much of his life in scientific research, until perestroika forced him to retrain as a computer programmer. We meet Natalia Altukhova, who works in higher education and lives alone because she never met a man she „could respect,“ and Natalia P., another pedagogue, who taught English and gained a PhD, in addition to marrying twice, raising a son, and travelling to Eastern Europe and Cyprus in the 1970s. The reader encounters Natalia Belovolova, who, as a young child, was raised by her great-grandmother while her mother and grandmother were in the Gulag and Olga Kamaiurova, the daughter of committed communists.

We hear of Aleksandr Trubnikov's career as a scientist in Saratov and his adaptation to life in Israel, and of Gennadii Ivanov's work

as a police investigator. The volume provides intriguing glimpses into Soviet life from the 1950s onwards. We learn of how in the 1950s, an eight-year-old from a „good family“ might be offered hash in the courtyard of his apartment block, of draconian schoolteachers who interrupted lessons on Pushkin at the sight of rebelliously asymmetrical hair-styles, and of marriage proposals made after just twenty-four hours of holiday romance (leading to thirty-one years of happy conjugal life). We hear of children camping on the shores of the Volga, of the burdens placed on young married women stressed by responsibilities both at work and in the home, and of the difficulties and freedoms that 1991 brought.

Raleigh's style of questioning is relatively open-ended, and on each occasion he asks the interviewees to tell him what they think it is necessary for him to understand the formation of their „worldview.“ This points to the underlying question at the heart of this book: What did people believe? When did Soviet citizens come to doubt the system that had raised them? Did they have a moment of epiphany? What caused it?

These questions have long interested historians, and this volume can shed new light. As Raleigh indicates in his introduction, many dissidents have written memoirs, but this can skew our understanding of the period: the volume clearly demonstrates that not all citizens, and not even all members of the „intelligentsia“ were politically opposed to the regime. None of those interviewed were active participants in the dissident movement. Arkadii Darchenko is one of the interviewees most keen to emphasize his scepticism towards the Soviet message, recounting how he listened to foreign broadcasts as a teenager and later read samizdat, yet he was still clearly deeply engaged with Soviet life and values: he was highly committed to his research, prizing hard work above financial reward; he voluntarily took part in construction brigades, and enjoyed doing so; he competed in sporting competitions and was always busy in some kind of collective pursuit. This would fit with the interpretation offered by anthropologist Aleksei Yurchak in his recent study or the beliefs and attitudes held by „the last Soviet genera-

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tion".<sup>1</sup> Yurchak argues against a binary model in which people were either true believers or apostates who rejected everything Soviet. According to Yurchak, even young people transfixed by all things Western – especially music and fashion – did not necessarily reject the fundamental values and ideals of Soviet socialism. Darchenko might have been keen to wear blue jeans, but he still enjoyed participating in the socially useful activities organized by the Soviet state.

Initially less ready than Darchenko to question state propaganda, Aleksandr Trubnikov had experienced some ambivalence towards the Soviet message, becoming aware of some of its flaws and inconsistencies, but admitted that he had been „duped“ by the state – a fact that now angered him. Olga Kamaiurova used similar language, suggesting that she and her husband must have been in a „stupor“. Of the omnipresent propaganda she said: „The hammer and sickle was everywhere. Perhaps it even seemed a bit funny. But then, with the advent of information, it all caved in and I saw the light. Good heavens, where had I been earlier? Where were my eyes, my ears, my brain? How could we fall for all this nonsense?“ (p. 215). Yurchak might be right, too, in his assertion that until Gorbachev came to power few even imagined that the Soviet power could disappear, and yet when the unravelling began, the end seemed perfectly logical and inevitable.

To draw conclusions from this volume, we inevitably ask how typical were these interviewees' experience and memory of Soviet life. Raleigh certainly takes us away from the memories and experiences of the Moscow and Leningrad dissident movement, offering us a window into the lives of a provincial cities scientific and cultural intelligentsia. This is the result of the school he chose: he notes that only 10% of the pupils came from working-class families, the rest from families that could be loosely classified as elite. Their post-school lives also shared certain patterns, with most of them going on to work in universities and research centres, many of them following academic, pedagogical, or medical careers. The volume is inevitably self-selecting in another way: several of the former classmates refused to be interviewed, some were

unable to be traced, or had died. Several informants mentioned former classmates who had not coped with the difficult transition to capitalism, and been destroyed by poverty, ill-health, and drink. The fact that these life-stories all end quite positively reflects perhaps the fact that those who were happy to embark on the process of oral autobiography were those who were relatively happy with what they had to tell.

Such issues of course will impact on what the reader can conclude from this collection. Raleigh himself does not attempt such analysis, deliberately choosing to leave it to readers to „construct their own narrative out of the fragments“ (p. 10). It is perhaps for this reason that this collection will be so useful to those of us teaching post-war Soviet history. The book will provide an excellent starting point for under-graduate classes to explore and debate themes such as political beliefs, careers and family in late Soviet life. For others, it will provide a highly interesting read, and an engaging glimpse into eight lives that begin at the same school but take them all to slightly different places.

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<sup>1</sup> Yurchak, Alexei, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton 2006.