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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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Uppsala and Kyiv, 5 March, 2019
Li Bennich-Björkman, Sergiy Kurbatov

When the Future Came

Li Bennich-Björkman and Sergiy Kurbatov

Introduction

This is a book about how the changes that brought the Soviet Union to its end, and their aftermath, have gradually formed cultural, collective memories throughout the former Soviet Union. Told through the retrospective lens of official history writing in four post-Soviet countries, the rise of a new order has become embedded in the uniquely national experiences of Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova. The book analyzes history textbooks for secondary schools and universities from the 1990s and up to 2012 in these four countries, striving to capture the officially sanctioned national gazes on what constitutes their recent past, gazes that take in the years of perestroika, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the independent statehood that followed, in partly similar, but mostly divergent narratives between the countries and over time. Focusing on the comparative aspects of how national history textbooks in these countries chose to narrate what to the surrounding world often and incorrectly appeared to be a commonly experienced historical process allows us to understand the various trajectories of sovereignty unfolding since independence in 1991 in these four countries, and beyond them in the former Soviet Union in its entirety. These trajectories range from renouncing the Soviet past and embracing statehood and nation-building in Ukraine, to regretting the loss of Soviet community and deemphasizing independence in Belarus. Not least among these four countries, there is also great diversity in how geopolitical orientations developed after the collapse, which is further explored by getting close to the historiographies of each of them. Today, after the Crimea annexation and the war in Eastern Ukraine, Ukrainians have been looking towards Europe more unanimously than before, whereas Moldova is still vacillating, and is now tending to move in a Russian direction.

Belarus has remained closely tied to Russia, upholding federative or confederative tendencies within the region, while keeping a door open towards the European Union through the Eastern Partnership. Russia, with its long history of empire in the region, has not ceased to strive for dominance over the former republics, although in the 1990s it briefly seemed to be coping with the loss of its former centrality in another, less imperative manner. The predominance of growing national consciousness is likewise diverging between the countries. What was the past, as constructed in the textbooks analyzed in the following pages, contributes to justifying and defending these choices.

The idea behind the book grew out of discussions within a research group bringing together scholars and researchers from Ukraine, Russia, Belarus, Moldova, and Sweden. The dramatic events unfolding in the Soviet Union during the late 1980s and early 1990s, which ultimately led to the collapse of the Union and the rise of fifteen successor states, seemed to be understood and interpreted differently within the group depending on the nationalities of the participants. Whereas some aspects, such as the attention paid to the last president of the Soviet Union, Mikhail Gorbachev, recurred in many countries, others left markedly different traces. For example, the Chernobyl catastrophe in 1986 played hardly any role in Moldovan memory-making about this time, though it was ascribed a major role in Ukraine. Even more striking, the perceived significance of perestroika and the collapse as such differed between countries. Did they mark a radical shift, or simply discontinuity that reverted to continuity?

While in the Western literature on Eastern Europe and this era, perestroika, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the emergence of the new post-Soviet states form a compelling narrative of major historical breakpoints, something less dramaturgically and analytically coherent can be glimpsed in the former Soviet Union's own historiographies. Were there indeed such wide discrepancies in what happened when the Soviet Union collapsed and new countries came to life that there would be reason to speak not of one but several perestroikas, with particular national flavors and specific approaches to the past and future?

Not only did initial discussions within the group reveal divergences when it came to descriptions of what happened, but it became clear that normative assessments of the collapse and its consequences varied just as much, perhaps mirroring, we believed, dominant discourses in the countries of origin. Was the collapse of the Soviet Union an opening for progress and new freedom, or was it, on the contrary, to be grieved as a lost opportunity for future generations of post-Soviet inhabitants who were forced to struggle alone to find a way in a neoliberal world, without the soothing community of the Soviet family? Assessments differed profoundly. Where, we started to ask ourselves, did these assessments come from and how were they formed? Why were they so divergent? After all, these countries all shared a reasonably common Soviet past when it came to formal and informal institutions, and had all endured what on the surface seemed to be reasonably similar processes of radical change. Remembering these historic processes that ended the 20th century and marked the beginning of the 21st takes place in many layers and corners of the societies involved, but to see how the "we," the state, chooses to interpret and memorialize these transformations into new existences, and bring it forward to new generations, textbooks are a natural source, one form of officially approved guidelines to the past.

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?

These are the core questions that our discussions pointed to, and that structure the inquiries of the individual country chapters that form the empirical core of this book. These chapters focus on the national contexts of and textbook contents in Russia, Belarus, Moldova, and Ukraine, whereas the comparison—which the country analyses make possible—dominates the last chapter. In that chapter, insights are brought together into an attempt to expose overall patterns of similarities and differences, particularly in addressing the Soviet past, the national consequences of the

collapse, and the overall themes of historical determinism, structuralism, and agency—and, significantly, whose agency.

A Four-Country Study

The four former Soviet republics studied here were all previously part of Tsarist Russia, with some modifications. Bessarabia, present-day Moldova, became part of Tsarist Russia in 1812, but between the two world wars it was a Romanian territory and as such was claimed by the Soviets in 1940. The Transnistrian region was then added to Bessarabia, to form the Soviet Republic of Moldova. The Western Ukrainian regions of Galicia, Volhynia, and Bukovina and Transcarpathia used to be part of the Habsburg Empire until the end of World War I, and then during the interwar period of Poland, Romania, and Czechoslovakia, respectively. Ukraine is thus marked by historical legacies of different empires and states: the main territory of Ukraine was integrated into the Soviet Union in 1922 as a result of tensions and Civil War between the parties involved, while Western Ukraine—as mentioned—was made into Soviet territory much later, at the beginning of World War II as a result of the Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact and its secret division of territories between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. Ukraine offers an interesting complexity, with its present western territories being latecomers, and its Eastern, Southern, and Central parts originally in the Union. The Soviet-enforced collectivization was brutal in Eastern Ukraine, where millions of people did not survive the Great Famine, the Holodomor, of 1932–1933 (Conquest; Applebaum, *Red Famine*). Moreover, tens of thousands of Ukrainians were later deported in the great Ukrainian purges of 1937–1938 (Applebaum, *Gulag*). The Autonomous Crimean Republic had belonged to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialistic Republic, but in 1954 it was transferred to the Ukrainian Soviet Socialistic Republic pursuant to the Decree of the Presidium of Supreme Soviet of the USSR of 19 February. Regional differences in the processes of integration into the Soviet Union came to influence the forms of Sovietization in Ukraine, and subsequently shaped the attitudes of the

population towards Soviet rule. The legacy of these "different" Sovietizations compounds the ambivalence in the national identity of Ukrainians, including in attitudes towards perestroika, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the independence of Ukraine.

The choice of the studied countries is not random. Whereas Russia, most of present-day Ukraine, and Belarus belong to the original group of territories in the Soviet Union as established in 1922, Moldova represents the group of Soviet latecomers (together with the three Baltic States and western parts of Ukraine and Belarus), though sharing with the three others the characteristic of having been strongly formed over time by Russian influences. Today, they are all states, formerly Soviet republics, where the historical and cultural ties to Russian civilization continue to be deep, and where the Russian language is spoken alongside Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Romanian. In contrast to the Baltic States, where the strong positions of the national languages and cultures distinguished them from Russian influences, the countries studied here—except Western Ukraine—have historically been much more integral to Russian civilization, and therefore could be presumed to historicize the collapse and what followed in a more similar way than would the Baltic States or the countries of the South Caucasus. The Soviet experience, proceeding from the Russian center, was familiar in a sense, and not alien, to the main territories of the four countries chosen. Nevertheless, they have also been formed over centuries by different legacies, mentalities, and territorial preconditions, as is clearly demonstrated in the individual chapters following this one.

Analyzing Post-Soviet Textbooks

Analyzing school and university textbooks, while leaving aside other expressions of official historiography such as statues, monuments, and artwork commissioned by the state, means that the textbook is viewed as the major socialization tool of states: education for the generations coming of age. What is being taught in these books forms part of official socialization intended to

create shared values and, not least, shared memories. One of the core assumptions of the influential culturalist theory of how the "soft" resources binding a community together, such as memories, values, and beliefs, are transferred over generations is the importance of early-life socialization (Inglehart and Welzel 94–135, Lockhart 91). Socialization has been understood as the process of transmitting cultural values, either intentionally or unintentionally. Individuals develop their basic orientations and outlooks in a process of cumulative formation in which experiences from different spheres of life are brought together in attempts to form coherent perceptions of the world (Almond and Verba 323–374). The family (Jennings and Niemi; Westholm 137-159), school (Almond and Verba 323–374; Coleman; Eckstein 265–285), the peer group (Coleman), and media and popular culture (Merelman) are all important arenas where individuals interact with one another across generations, and where socialization continuously occurs. The education system has always been a cornerstone of the ideological socialization of society, and schools and universities play important roles in shaping the minds of each generation. Although the individual chapters in this book do not explore how actual teaching practices influence and nuance textbook contents, they do capture—through the textbooks—attempts of socialization in the making. The question of socialization has far-reaching implications for understanding the processes of social continuity and change, since culture, understood as values, convictions, and memories, partly causes action and conditions the speed and depth of social transformation, as sociologist Karl Mannheim had already noted in 1952 (286).

On a personal level, one of the authors of this chapter studied the Soviet version of the history of Ukraine at school and in his initial years of university, though after graduation he instead taught the national version of Ukrainian history. The absence of national history textbooks at the beginning of Ukrainian Independence was acutely felt, and the Ukrainian diaspora and the works of its representatives were the main resources filling this gap. Especially important in this respect was the book by

Orest Subtelny (1941–2016), *Ukraine: A History* (1988), translated into Ukrainian by Yuri Shevchuk and published in 1992. Numerous editions of this book came out during this time.

Methodologically, the individual authors have worked within a common tradition of qualitative research, but using different discursive analytic methods, presented in more detail as necessary in the individual chapters. Otherwise, we have generally striven to make the chapters readable when taken together, although they do differ somewhat in their approaches and emphases. Strikingly, the Belarusian chapter contains an annotated list of school and university textbooks in its annexes, which the others do not. We chose to retain these annexes, since they could contain valuable information for those studying Belarus in particular.

Collective Memory, Memory Politics, and History Textbooks

When a familiar system collapses and the sense of security and safety shatters, the grounds for cultural trauma arise, in what sociologist Piotr Sztompka calls the other face of social change (450). Historians in the analyzed countries address this trauma in various ways: different countries regard the same processes as emotionally traumatic, but also the opposite, as creators of national pride and sentiments of liberation. “All happy families are alike. Every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way”—Leo Tolstoy’s famous observation is true not only of families, but metaphorically of countries emerging from the breakup of the Soviet Union as well. Although perestroika was a common stage experienced by all fifteen Soviet republics, each of them lived it in its own way. Independence came to them all, but how statehood was incorporated into national consciousness varied: while some new states rejoiced, others were more placid, even ambivalent. Understanding how the perestroika period was interpreted in the history textbooks of different countries should start from an understanding of specifics at the factual level. By focusing on what happened, who acted, why, and for what purpose, and what

the consequences were, the interpretation of the recent past follows a common scheme that makes it possible to identify how parts of history are narrated to respond to perceived needs for continuity or change, drama or business as usual. The following analyses of history textbooks used in secondary schools and universities from the early 1990s and up to 2012 present a kaleidoscope in which the nationally elaborated views of the four countries shift from unaffected in Belarus to euphoric in Ukraine, from frustrated in Moldova to contained in Russia.

History is growing in importance in the post-Soviet area, being the tool both to unite a people and to distinguish a people from those of other post-Soviet countries. Two recent examples from the former Soviet sphere illustrate that. Taras Shevchenko National University of Kyiv included a question in the examinations for the 2013–2014 academic year on the authoritarian regime of Victor Ianukovych. Students were asked to describe this regime's violations of human rights, the Revolution of Dignity, and the Russian occupation of Crimea, and were impicitly to identify with the view of the Ianukovych government as illegitimate. Also, on 9 April 2015, four "decommunization" laws were adopted by the Ukrainian parliament: 1) On Access to Archives of Repressive Agencies of Totalitarian Communist Regime of 1917–1991; 2) On the Condemnation of the Communist and National Socialist (Nazi) Regimes, and Prohibition of Propaganda of Their Symbols; 3) On the Legal Status and Honoring the Memory of Fighters for Ukraine's Independence in the Twentieth Century; and 4) On Perpetuation of the Victory over Nazism in World War II of 1939–1945 (all texts in English are available at the Ukrainian Institute of National Remembrance official website, memory.gov.ua). In Latvia, the national assembly decided to anticipate criminal responsibility for denying that Soviet occupation had occurred, declaring that those who deny this fact can be jailed for up to five years. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs evaluated this action as an immoral attempt to modify/reconstruct history.

Falk Pingel has stated: "Through the teaching of history and geography we create a mesh of reference points in time and space.

Where we come from, where we live, are we allowed or are we entitled to live there? History and geography textbooks attempt to explain our roots, how and why we happen to be living in a certain place and how that place can be described and characterized—in other words, who we really are (7)." It is natural that numerous works are devoted to the problems of textbook research in general (Foster 5–20) and of history textbook research in particular (Repoussi and Tutiaux-Guillon 154–170). Especially interesting is research that tries to analyze the particularities of history textbook narratives in times of active nation-building, when such socialization is "defined and controlled by the ambivalent nexus between ideology and political expectations (that history textbooks contribute to national identity and patriotism), curricula assumptions (that quality history textbooks impact on pedagogical outcomes), and academic rigor and objectivity" (Zajda 185–191). The authors of nation-building narratives usually use history textbooks to promote self-determination (Janmaat and Vickers, 267–275) and, in the case of the post-Soviet states, to portray their nations and national histories as the victims of Russian oppression (Janmaat 307–324).

Closely connected to the use of history is the concept of collective memory. Collective memory comprises tales of the past that come to dominate or prevail within a specific group. This is an original definition of Maurice Halbwachs, usually considered the "founding father" of the concept of collective memory. The literature on collective, cultural, or social memory and history has been growing steadily in recent decades, and these concepts have become fashionable in those parts of the social sciences and humanities concerned with identity and the biographical aspects of human life. However, many of the contributions articulate little that is new, and an implicit vagueness is part of the concept's great attraction. However, Halbwachs' basic insight, confirmed in an influential study by sociologist Robert Bellah et al., that collectives become communities because of a body of shared memories and perceptions of themselves, is crucial and underlines the cognitive aspect of community-building. In their inquiry into middle-class American mentality, Bellah et al. introduced the

concept of "community of memory": "In order not to forget that past, a community is involved in retelling its story, its constitutive narrative, and in so doing, it offers examples of the men and women who have embodied and exemplified the meaning of the community" (153).

Collective memories are individually embraced, but they tell about a collective of which individuals feel part, and these memories are a determining element in shaping group identity. Memories are "collective" or "social" as opposed to individual inasmuch as they are shared by individuals identifying themselves as a group and are concerned with essential aspects of that particular group's existence: what constitutes the collective and what are its boundaries, what values it cherishes, and what are its significant points of reference.

Bellah et al. noted that essential elements of the stories constituting the community identify not just virtues and achievements, but also painful shared experiences that point out the fate shared by the community (250–275). Hence, these memories tell "the story of us" and have to be socialized over generations for the group to survive as a collective. The collective could be anything from a family, organization, or particular neighborhood to an ethnic group or state. In the case of the newly independent states founded after the collapse of the Soviet Union, history textbooks created a uniform and didactic "memory space"—"lieu de mémoire" (Nora)—for the official narratives of the past.

In the literature on collective memory, there is a recurrent and often cited divide between the traditionalists, represented by Halbwachs' *Le Mémoire collective*, who reserve the concept for orally transmitted communication, and the revisionists, represented by Jan Assman, who reject this limitation and also consider monuments, written sources, and arts to be transmitters of collective memories. "Cultural memory preserves the store of knowledge from which a group derives an awareness of its unity and pecularity," wrote Assman (130). The major mechanism by which collective memories endure over time is to shape persistent,

but in a sense constructed, identities of "who we are," "who we were," and "how we do things in this community."

Multiple voices contribute to shaping historical memory, forming it into a collective resource. Textbooks are far from the only such voices. Family members conversing around the dining table, writers, artists, and songwriters in their novels, paintings, and lyrics, all these are makers of collective memories (Bergman and Jakobsson 61). Museums are important loci for forming, and sometimes changing, cultural memories, telling about the past, interpreting it, articulating views, and making statements. Individual voices and collective expressions intertwine in creating and constructing beliefs and myths about the past, about what happened and why. All these voices can contribute to, and be used in, ongoing memory politics, or politics of memory, whose traces are also found in the struggle over history textbooks.

However, textbooks differ from many other makers of collective memory in that what is stated is an officially sanctioned and recommended understanding—though more so in schools than in universities in the countries studied here. Whereas works of art, novels, or even museums in the end articulate the voices of individual creators or curators who say, "This is the way I view the past—see it through my eyes," history textbooks say to students, "This is the way we should look at our past, and our surrounding world. This is the way we as a community understand and make sense of what happened." A "we" is therefore assumed to be created. What historians do through history textbooks is, metaphorically, to edit the past, forming it into a narrative of the national collective that resonates with the affections and cognitions of the population. This process is connected with constructing collective identities and incorporating the individual "I" into the collective "we." The population, not least of Russia, as this book demonstrates, could comprise several, coexisting populations whose separate memories need to be articulated to make sense of a perceived complexity. The textbooks in Chechnya and Tatarstan analyzed here edit the past differently from those of Russia.

History is the academic subject through which a governing ideology finds a channel to reach the younger generations to form shared mindsets. Textbooks' explicit function is to form a shared understanding, or "gaze," of the national and international past in the minds of young people, inculcated within the authoritative setting of a school or university.

Required for the effective and long-term stability of society, where highly diverse interpretations of national history undermine community, solidarity, and institutions, a common past is a societal resource of crucial importance. George Orwell wrote in *1984*: "Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past" (44). Of the countries studied here, nowhere is Orwell's statement truer than in Moldova, where the power struggle between the Communists, center/right, and liberals has been heated. When the Communists governed the country from 2001 to 2009, the official history shifted as well. The governing political leaders put their mark on what should be the official gaze of the past. In Ukraine, which constitutes the opposite to Moldova in this respect, the national lens is firmly in place over the twenty years covered.

The Ukranian political leaders "controlling" the past, although struggling over political power, were united in their view of how to remember the past, something that even slightly increased after the Orange Revolution in 2004. Any attempts to denationalize the official version of history faced strong resistance, the best-known example of which was the "pro-Russian" policy of Dmytro Tabachnyk, Minister of Education and Sciences of Ukraine from March 2010 to 23 February 2014. Fairly similar, but played out in a state that since 1994 and the election of president Alexander Lukashenko has been increasingly authoritarian, the past in Belarus is narrated in non-nationalist and non-dramatic terms. Political power has not changed since 1994, and the present government encourages stability and continuity.

Recent developments in Russia since 2014, including the annexation of Crimea, military support for the separatist movement in Eastern Ukraine, and increasingly tense relations with the European Union, will probably be reflected in future

textbooks in Russia, again shifting the national gaze. However, up to 2012, Russian historiography was open to the complexity embedded in a huge country that must hold together many nationalities, as well as crystallize the specific position of Russia as the successor state of the great Soviet Union. Russia, like Belarus, has been moving in an authoritarian direction since the election of Vladimir Putin in 2000, and no struggle over the past has been evident in history textbooks since then. However, the discussion—pointed out in the Russian chapter—of a common history textbook for the entire Russian Federation indicates a desire on the part of the political leadership to simplify historical remembrance.

Radical Change in Turbulent Times

Whatever futures Mikhail Gorbachev anticipated in 1985, when he officially launched the economic reform policies with the forward-looking name of "restructuring" and the encouragement of further "openness," the final dissolution of the Soviet Union and the rise of fifteen successor states was not among them. After "five years of luxury funerals," as people colloquially referred to the 1980–1985 period, when three General Secretaries and various other high-ranking Soviet officials died (Martirossian 100), the time had finally come for renewal. When the Swedish Embassy in Moscow reported home on 12 January 1990, amidst an unfolding Soviet breakup with uncertain results, the report described a highlystrung and tense Gorbachev visiting the defiant Lithuanian Republic in the process of declaring its independence, trying to prevent the further dissolution of the federation:

> With emphasis he pleads for the necessity of keeping the union together, thinking about all ties—not least the economic ones—that unite the republics. That the defence forces also have to be All-Union based was broadcast in the TV appearance. Gorbachev underlined that he was the Chairman of the Defence Council. He sought to find support for a renewal of the federation through allowing the republics wide-reaching political autonomy. From what he said, he seemed to be particularly worried by the prospect of discrimination against minorities (read "Russians") in individual republics. (Swedish Government; *Foreign Affairs Archives*, 1989-1991, translation by the authors).