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States of Missing, Missing States:

Spatializing the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia in Contemporary Post-Socialist Space

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Abstract

The collapse of states like the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, and the subsequent violence and instability in the immediate aftermath of their dissolution, caused a major rupture for many who experienced life under those regimes: of identity, emotions, and material landscapes. But these countries, which no longer exist as states, continue to have an impact. The connection many people still seek, whether in the form of longing, or memory, or even activism, has been labeled as nostalgia and/or dismissed as a form of reactionary politics. Yet it is crucial to attend to the memory and idea of these places that are actively reshaping how some understand their current situations. This presentation will explore the performative effect, and affect, of the memory of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union in contemporary post-socialist space. I will draw from in-depth interviews conducted between 2013-2015. I primarily rely on two case studies of individuals, one in Serbia and the other in Georgia. I identify both as being in acute “states of missing,” made evident by their creation of private museums to Yugoslavia and Stalin respectively. They both offer insight into how individuals spatialize memory. I analyze their narratives through the lens of performativity to illustrate the power these “missing states” still engender more than 25 years after their erasure from the world political map. Furthermore, as cultural performances are not just limited to human actors, these private museums demonstrate how the materiality of these sites are also active co-constructors of meaning in the present.

Keywords: Nostalgia; Place-making; Soviet Union; Yugoslavia; Post-Socialist Space

Introduction

The concept of nostalgia¹ has been unpacked, critiqued, resuscitated, and deployed in a plethora of ways. It is often dismissed as reactionary and exclusionary and is “always suspect” (Atia and Davies 2010, 181). On the other hand, (the same) scholars have trumpeted its “critical potential” (Atia and Davies 2010, 181). Others discuss how it should “rightly” be “considered dangerous” (Ugrešić 1998, 225). But why, what does it do, what does it consist of? Some feel “nostalgic laments can involve both moral critique of the present and an alternative to deal with social changes” (Ange and Berliner 2015, 5). Other scholars have identified gaps in the literature, which has focused primarily on politics and ideology, claiming “this body of literature insufficiently analyses the actual, variegated material manifestations of Ostalgie,” without delving into the “deeper cultural dimensions of the phenomenon” (Bartmanski 2011, 216).

Nostalgic phenomenon are regularly identified in contemporary post-socialist space. I continue this regional focus, hoping to draw attention to an atypical form of nostalgia, the creation of private museums. Why are certain people, as the literature suggests, prone to nostalgia in this region?

For instance, for Russians dealing with the tumultuous 1990s, “nostalgia became a defense mechanism against the accelerated rhythm of change and the economic shock therapy” (Boym 2001: 64). It is important to not overemphasize or misread this phenomenon, as this “has more to do with the drive to criticize the current Russian government than does with any genuine

¹ I will not repeat what has already been said in the vast literature on nostalgia. For broad philosophical explorations, see Boym (2001). For extensive literature reviews, see Ange and Berliner (2015). For nostalgia as an ethnographic conundrum, see Bissell (2005, 2015).

sympathy for the world of communal apartments, collective farms, and the gulag” (Etkind 2013, 41).

Similarly, both the Yugoslav and Georgian experience of the 1990s was one of violence, wars, economic upheaval, and social instability. The politics of memory played a central role in nationalist independence movements throughout the region. According to Outhwaite and Ray,

memorials embed within landscape and ritual discourses of national collectivity complex processes of remembering and forgetting. But they are also ambiguous and open to diverse meanings. This very ambiguity enables the process of memory to be mobilized in the service of national formation, but it can also trigger the release of violence in the name of unexpiated historical wrongs (Outhwaite and Ray 2005, 188).

Symbolic politics are deeply imbricated in these various nationalist struggles and the violence that ensued throughout the 1990s. What did the end of their respective states entail? How can we conceptualize sudden regime change in a nuanced manner, that is sensitive to the drastic changes in people’s everyday lives? Here we can turn to Oushakine, who states that:

the downfall of socialist ideology in the 1990s cannot be limited to the disintegration of a particular value system. It also rendered meaningless the existing rituals of recognition. One’s social status, social achievements, and social biography suddenly became ostensibly devoid of familiar prescriptive clues (2009, 191).²

This observation is insightful in that it highlights how, in many cases, one’s entire social fabric – meanings, practices, and identities – become shattered. The disdain or ambivalence offered by the current regime toward what came before is experienced as so pervasive that even one’s memories are rendered suspect. Thus, nostalgia, and the attempts to soothe it, is a manifestation of confiscated memories (Ugresic 1996). Nostalgic practices can serve to revive alternative

² Similarly for many Georgians, “their personal pasts were rendered void as resources for achieving social status and recognition in the present” (Gotfredsen 2014, 252).

discourses, challenge new conventions, and renew previous practices, as with great social upheaval what was once an accepted official narrative now becomes a counter-memory.

In this paper I will show how this shift – from living in one state, to its disintegration, and the formation of new, explicitly nationalistic states, is experienced by those who go through these disruptions. Some people, and in this paper I will focus my attention on two individuals³ who experienced the demise of two different states – the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia respectively – are experiencing “states of missing,” a form of nostalgia for “missing states.” Nostalgia can be materialized, and thus spatialized, and I will demonstrate how this form of place-making seeks to provide (though will never attain) spatial continuity with the lost places they lament.

Place-making can take many forms. However, it is often not explicitly taken into account in conceptualizations of nostalgia. According to Gotfredsen, when considering nostalgia,

it is not simply what the government articulates (the casting of the Soviet past and communism as evil) but also what such articulations silence (positive memories, the experience of formerly being socially significant, and a present sense of marginality) that produces nostalgia as a subtle political practice (Gotfredsen 2014, 264).

While I agree that nostalgia often is a “subtle political practice,” it can also be not so subtle, when place-making becomes a bold endeavor. In the cases that will be discussed below, we do not see subtle forms of place-making, such as having a private corner in one’s room, but large sites that can be visited. What better way to make the past present, and to resuscitate one’s memory and experiences, than to create places where those pasts matter.

³ I will draw from in-depth interviews conducted between 2013-2015.

In the following section I will offer a way to conceptualize nostalgic that takes into account its varieties and recognizes the central role of spatiality. Then, I will discuss my two case studies, that of a man in Serbia who constructed mini-Yugoslavia, and someone who created a private Stalin museum in Georgia. I close with my conclusions.

(Re)Conceptualizing Nostalgia: Of Continuities, Objects, and Places

A key element in the study of nostalgia is to recognize different practices and discourses that are often all equated under the umbrella term nostalgia.⁴ At the most basic level, we need to acknowledge and then distinguish between nostalgia as a set of emotions and feelings, a politicized set of discourses, and processes of commodification. Scholars have referred to the former as ‘nostalgic mood’ (Jameson 1991) and ‘nostalgic dispositions’ (Angé 2015), while “strategic utterances targeting present benefits” (Ange and Berliner 2015, 10) are referred to as the ‘nostalgia industry’ (Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2004) and ‘nostalgic discursive devices’ (Angé 2015), and commodified nostalgia as ‘nostalgic mode’ (Jameson 1991).

Beyond that, nostalgia can read as a negotiation between two temporalities (‘now’ as the present, ‘then’ as the past) and two geographies (‘here’ in the present, ‘there’ as imagined/remembered from the past).

Continuities

As Ugrešić reminds us, “nostalgia is dangerous because it encourages...remembering. And in the newly established reality everything starts again from scratch. And in order to start

⁴ There are a variety of typologies and distinctions to be found in the literature. For a description of two types of nostalgia, the reflective and restorative, see Boym’s seminal work (2001). For a view that feels this division is not helpful, and who instead offer categories of different types of nostalgic practices, see Nadkarni and Shevchenko (2015). They offer further nuances in the sense that some of what they discuss are different objects of nostalgia, and others vary in terms of the subjects relationship to nostalgia (Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2004).

from scratch, everything that came before must be forgotten” (Ugrešić 1998: 89). Therefore, “the builders of the new state, the new masters of oblivion, are eliminating everything that reminds people of the old country” (Ugrešić 1998: 109). Memory is politicized and nostalgia appears and spreads in order to help reconcile people’s realities with their memories and expectations. One way scholars have conceptualized nostalgia to speak to this issue has been to frame it as a way to bridge the gap between the past and the present, to provide continuity.

Bartmanski offers this analysis:

Fulfilling the role of mnemonic bridges rather than tokens of longing for the failed communist past, they are the regular symbolizations of continuity in the irregular times of transformation. They allow different incarnations of modernity to be concretely reconciled within a single urban fabric. As such they anchor temporal changes in a phenomenological way. They are ‘cultural links’ between the localized histories and the universalizing meanings. Such links provide a sense of connectedness and symbolic coexistence of various icons in a depoliticized way often needed by those ‘exhausted by the excessive amount of history’ (2011, 226–227).

Some acknowledge this as a key conceptual advancement in the study of nostalgia, but with certain caveats:

...nostalgia serves as a negotiation between continuity and discontinuity: it insists on the bond between our present selves and a certain fragment of the past, but also on the force of our separation from what we have lost. Some of the most sophisticated of all analyses of nostalgia have described it in terms of the continuity that it gives to our identity in an age of unsettling change, the false historical discontinuity to which it lays claim, or the agile way in which it balances continuity and discontinuity against one another. None of these readings are quite adequate, though, while they think of continuity and discontinuity as clear-cut opposites (Atia and Davies 2010, 184).

Taking this critique a step further, other have begun to counter the claim that nostalgia fosters continuity:

The very existence of the nostalgic practices of the past decades has thus helped to *create* rather than overcome the sense of dislocation from the socialist past. In

other words, a sense of break from the past is *necessary* for nostalgia to exist in the first place (Nadkarni and Shevchenko 2015, 66; my italics).

What Nadkarni and Shevchenko argue, perhaps counterintuitively, is that these nostalgic practices are producing “a sense of break from the past.” Gotfredsen, while examining the case of Georgia (discussed in more detail below), also shows how the new regime actively produces the discontinuous temporal categories which exacerbate people’s sense of dislocation. She discusses how current governmental narratives construct the Soviet past as external and other to Georgian history, as it “is a symbolic and practical construction of the Soviet era as external and hostile to Georgian politics and nationality rather than as a formative past in which Georgians actively took part” (Gotfredsen 2014, 251).

These discussions foreground temporal, not spatial, continuity. Place-making helps to establish continuity with the places that have been lost, that people seek aspects of to reconnect with. As my case studies will show, we can approach nostalgia more fruitfully when we consider it as attempts by people to generate continuity with their previous lives both temporally and spatially. Next, I turn my attention to objects. While not overtly emphasizing the spatial, material objects are often seen as an anchor for nostalgic sentiments. Once we begin discussing materiality, it becomes easy to examine these issues through a geographic lens.

Objects

It is typical to see nostalgia as centered around memories and longing of the past. While nostalgia is a “longing for something no longer attainable,” it is frequently “manifest through material objects that are, in one form or another, attainable” (Bach 2015, 124). In an anecdote told by Dubravka Ugrešić, the children of a retired Yugoslav couple in Zagreb move them to a bigger, more modern apartment. However, their parents did not like it, as now they did not know

anyone, and they had to dispose of most of their personal items – souvenirs, posters, Tito photos, etc. As Ugrešić relates, “[i]n the name of a brighter future, Stanko and Vera’s belongings, the guarantee of their emotional memory, had been ‘confiscated’” (Ugrešić 1996, 27). This points to the central role that material objects play in these processes. Objects are not just the result of nostalgia, but help constitute it (Bartmanski 2011).

Nostalgia can be about, or grounded in, a particular object, or set of objects, from the past, that provide the emotional resonance and focus for someone. These objects serve as the vehicles and material ways that provide a deep connection, and “gives sensory depth to our awareness of the other places, times and possibilities that are at once integral to who we are” (Atia and Davies 2010: 184).⁵ But where are these objects? How do these objects reshape, and construct new, places? Scholars frequently sidestep or deprioritize questions of place/space, leading to a focus on ideology, representation, or materiality, but not grounded in the everyday places people find themselves navigating through.

Places

Many scholars discuss the importance of place for memory (Lowenthal 1975*). Surprisingly, this acknowledgment has not become prevalent in the literature on nostalgia yet. Some scholars have, however, begun to highlight the role of the geographic:

Nostalgia, in fact, serves as a powerful means of connecting space with time – something that makes it significant for scholars as well as the folk with whom we work in the field...we can readily see how nostalgic discourses often serve to link sociospatial changes with temporal processes, using specific sites as a point of departure for ruminations about history, the passage of life, and the flow of time (Bissell 2015, 219).

⁵ These objects can also serve as a form of cultural intimacy (Bach 2015, 134).

Place is a catalyzing force that helps crystallize nostalgic emotions and practices. I argue that we must also highlight the role of geography – and not just in the sense that the basis of nostalgia is not just a different lost time, but a lost place. In addition, nostalgia can be seen as a form of place-making – in the present – to negotiate and reflect upon and engage with and transform various memories, identities, emotions, and practices about a place – in the past. I wish to reframe these aspatial approaches to nostalgic objects. To just offer a few examples: establishing a small ‘shrine’ of objects to remember an event, or person, or place in the corner of a room; going to a nostalgia-themed bar or restaurant; protesting the removal of a monument; etc. If toppling monuments of the last regime suggests that “monuments were messengers of power, and as such, frequently became scapegoats onto which anxieties and anger were projected,” (Boym 2001: 89), then reinstalling such monuments or other objects of the past, or other places of memory, in their new context, in a new country, or creating new forms of commemoration, can be seen as a furthering the idea of the power of place – funneling people’s nostalgia, hopes, and criticisms of the present.

I argue that much of what qualifies as nostalgia can be read through a geographical perspective, and to examine the processes involved as a form of place-making. People make places through their routines and everyday practices, which then reproduces those very places and demonstrates the spatiality of social life. The relevance of place-making to discussions of nostalgia will become evident when examining how two individuals create their own private museums, dedicated to the past, a material marker in the landscape which guarantees to linger into the future, and as a way to negotiate shifting meanings and power relations in the present.

A Private Stalin Museum in Georgia

Research on nostalgia in Georgia has been scarce; Gotfredsen provides an exception and argues that the Georgian government rendered not only the Soviet past void in Gori, but also people's "personal pasts—social statuses, memories, and dreams" (Gotfredsen 2014, 249). Practices of nostalgia are examples of people's agency: "an active attempt to make present personal pasts and futures that have publicly been rendered absent" (Gotfredsen 2014, 249). She offers a nuanced understanding of how nostalgia is produced as a label to dismiss the concerns and identities of the people so branded. In an interesting argument, she calls for an expansion of the concept of nostalgia, rather than questioning its utility. The same processes of selective memory and coding the (certain aspects and events of the) past as positive, are occurring within dominant political and nationalist discourses in Georgia, but are not seen through the lens of nostalgia. She refers to these competing narratives as uncontested nostalgia, i.e. what is seen as the historical 'truth', and contested nostalgia, that which is "mere nostalgia" and pejorative and not worthwhile (Gotfredsen 2014, 249).

Her article draws mainly from the account of Nuno, a woman from Gori, Stalin's hometown. She contrasts her nostalgic narratives, and those of President Saakashvili and his ruling (at the time) United National Movement (UNM). She points out that Saakashvili also idealizes the past but is not labeled nostalgic. The distinction rests, for her, on how they relate to the future. Her interlocutor is nostalgic precisely because she focuses on the past because there does not seem to be hope for the future, while Saakashvili is using the past to highlight the opposite, optimistic progress for Georgia. Both rely on processes of both forgetting and remembering, and in the UNM case, remembering nationalist figures and events and forgetting Soviet ones. In the end, both narratives are seductive for many.

Yet, there are other way to engage with one's feelings of nostalgia – and that is to produce new places.

Mini-Yugoslavia in Serbia

Memory and the past are a key issue when exploring nationalism as

the nation is a mnemonic community whose *raison d'être* derives from both remembering and forgetting, especially where the past poses a threat to the unity of the nation. Thus memory and its appropriation have become central issues in societies emerging from the erasure of public memory and the survival of counter-memories. While these counter-memories acted as a focus of resistance to official rewriting of history, they could also have deadly consequences – as in the Yugoslavian wars (Outhwaite and Ray 2005, 180).

After transition, this nationalist discourse becomes dominant and the new counter memory becomes Yugonostalgia.⁶ Thus, "...for many inhabitants of former Yugoslavia, along with the war and the disappearance of their country, many other things have been confiscated as well: not only their homeland and their possessions but also their memory" (Ugrešić 1998, 225). One response to this loss is to spatialize their memory, in direct opposition to the dominant discourses and to the erasure of the final overt trace of Yugoslavia that remained.

Blasko Grabic is already at the café in Subotica, dressed in a suit, when I arrive. He proceeds to tell me about his life, his frustrations, life in Canada where he lived for a while, and the problems with the Western style democracy that has been imposed on his country – for over two hours. Then he takes me to Yugoslavia. Did I mention it's 2014? Blasko's idea for the construction of a mini-Yugoslavia came in 2003, when the government decided to change its name from the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro –

⁶ But, in certain cases, this can also emerge as a form of Serbian nationalism, in what Jansen refers to as *Srboslavija*.

vanquishing the term Yugoslavia.⁷ He tells me that he was further upset since government officials made the decision, and not the people. Had there been a referendum, and he engaged in activism in 2003 demanding exactly this, and the populace approved the change, he would have accepted the decision.

When touring mini-Yugoslavia, where development of the site has ceased for quite some time, it could be tempting to draw analogies with the failed socialist experiment. Yet, stalled progress does not discourage him. Blasko feels there is a demand for mini-Yugoslavia, and once he gets the funding his dream will be actualized.

Blasko, it is quite apparent, is a Yugonostalgic. Typically, Yugonostalgia becomes the term applied to disqualify people's memories, identities, and feelings (Ugrešić 1998) and Yugonostalgics are "marked as weak people, unable to adapt to the new circumstances" by nationalists (Petrović 2007, 267). Many Yugonostalgics are nostalgic for lost space (Petrović 2007). This ties into their feelings of loss of an imperial space, a large territory, the privilege of mobility, and the "reduction of their cultural space" (Petrović 2007, 265).

Blasko does not want to see the state he loved so much disappear from the map; he does not want to "see the dream that once was end." Here Blasko is not alone, as a virtual territory was created for those who lost their Yugoslav identities and spaces -- cyber Yugoslavia -- with over 16,000 citizens (Petrović 2007, 268). Blasko, for a small fee, also provides citizenship to his own private Yugoslavia.

Conclusion

⁷ The Federal Republic of Yugoslavia lasted from 1992-2003. The State Union of Serbia and Montenegro existed for only three years, with the Montenegrin independence referendum in May 2006 leading to its dissolution into two independent states: Montenegro and Republic of Serbia.

Questions of memory and how the past is understood is often examined through the lens of nostalgia. There are a multiplicity of nostalgias, and we must remember that people often hold diverse, and contradictory perspectives, exhibiting hybrid attitudes (Kabachnik 2018). We must also recognize that commemorative practices are not only about remembering, but “can also dis-member, un-make, de-construct and mis-represent the past” (Lankauskas 2015, 43). While there are certainly misuses, improper labeling of certain actions and objects as nostalgia, and strategic political agendas being imposed, academics still need to take nostalgia seriously – and see it as an important, powerful, and complex process and not dismiss it or reduce it to mere irony, commodification, or defensive measure.

Instead of seeing the battles over encoding a version of the past or identity into the landscape as simply a desire to return to the totalitarian top-down official narrative, it is useful to see it instead as a search for stability and meaning amongst the multiple narratives and fluidity that embody the present. While post-socialist nostalgia is usually referred to as stemming from post-socialist *transition*, I think it is better to term it a rupture. Nostalgia is more easily produced when what is longed for is traumatically severed from our lives (Ugrešić 1996), and transition is a term that is too elusive to capture the harshness of everyday life for many in the former Yugoslavia and Soviet Union. This rupture is doubly produced by both the policies and practices of the new regimes, and the violence and instability these ruptures enabled (especially in the 1990s), but also by the public who sought refuge from these new social worlds and new realms of meaning and practice through their agency when deploying nostalgia (of whatever type or types). Nostalgia is not (simply) a longing for the past, but instead an attempted re-linking of the past to the present which is necessitated due to the unprecedented speed and monumental shift of the post-socialist rupture (see also Bartmanski 2011). Seeking continuity is required as nostalgic

practices, emotions, and objects are actively producing these broad temporal categories. Thus, nostalgia is productive of the very discontinuity it seeks to bridge.

This article illustrates that lamenting and longing are not the only ways to negotiate nostalgia – the two case studies show how one can try to materialize and spatialize the past in the present as a way to forward one’s goals through place-making practices. This not only expands our understanding of nostalgia to not neglect place, but further underscores the agency of those performing nostalgia.

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