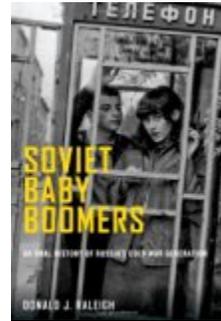


Donald J. Raleigh. *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 432 S. \$34.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-974434-3.

Reviewed by Katharina Uhl

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D. Raleigh: Soviet Baby Boomers

The Russian book market has been flooded over the last years by nostalgic works on growing up and coming of age in the Soviet period. These books have mostly been written by former members of the Communist Youth League (Komsomol) who lament the loss of certainties in post-Soviet education, and praise their own generation. Titles such as “Time, command youth” or “Komsomol – my fate” give a good impression. See e. g. *Vremia, iunosti prikazhi, Cheliabinsk 1998* and *Komsomol – moia sud’ba, Cheliabinsk 2008*. Donald Raleigh’s book, an extended and elaborated version of his work on the ‘Sputnik Generation’ *Soviet Baby Boomers Talk about Their Lives*, Bloomington/ Indianapolis 2006, presents the life stories of representatives of this generation in a coherent account of Soviet history after the Second World War. While the post-war generation in Western Europe and the United States has been already analyzed in detail, this is only the second “generational biography” of the Baby Boomers in the Soviet context, after Alexey Yurchak’s study on the ‘Last Soviet Generation’. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More. The Last Soviet Generation*, Princeton et. al. 2006; for the western context, see e. g. Jean-Francois Sirinelli, *Les Baby-Boomers. Une génération, 1945-1969*, Paris 2003; Landon Y. Jones, *Great Expectations. America and the Baby Boom Generation*, New York 1980, quotation on p. 3. Raleigh’s approach, however, is much less ambitious than Yurchak’s, and he refrains both from referring to an overarching theoretical framework and from drawing far-reaching conclusions on the fate of a whole generation.

Instead, Raleigh concentrates his analysis on a clearly-defined group: his sources are 60 interviews with former students from Saratov and Moscow, who all graduated in 1967 and mainly belonged to the “middle party elite and mass intelligentsia” (p. 22). His approach to memory is refreshingly simple: “The private memories [...] are framed by broader collective memories, by widely shared accounts of events” (p. 14). Although the author is well aware of his permanent presence in the production of his sources and clearly points out his personal background as an American historian who belongs to the same generation, the book lacks a broader discussion of the methodology of oral history. This theoretical and methodological simplicity continues into the style of writing, which provides the necessary background information in plain words, at the same time leaving much room for quotations and detailed stories from the interviews. The book is therefore clearly aimed at a broad readership with little previous knowledge of Soviet history or contemporary Russia.

The structure of the book is equally simple and follows a biographical chronology. Starting with the stories of the baby boomers’ grandparents and parents, Raleigh tells the history of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia through the accounts of their life stories from birth to present, concluding with a look at the present-day lives of their children. Both the interviews and the presentation of the findings are structured according to five guiding interests: the factors that shaped the interviewees’ world-views; what their life stories reveal about the Soviet dream; the negotiation processes that occurred during

the transition from the Soviet system to post-Soviet Russia; the structural differences between Saratov, as a more or less typical provincial city, and the capital, Moscow; and what Raleigh calls “cultural transmission across generations” (p. 5).

Although all these topics are addressed recurrently throughout the chapters, the fate of the ‘Soviet dream’ appears doubtlessly as the leitmotif of the book. The first chapter looks at belief in and cynicism about the promises of communism through an exploration of the attitudes held by the interviewees’ grandparents and parents to the Revolution: most were supporters of the new system and later suffered in the Stalinist purges of the Soviet elite. As a result, the baby boomers grew up in liberal but conformist families in a rather cautious atmosphere. The next chapter focuses on their early school years, which coincided with the launch of Khrushchev’s campaign to build the communist society that lasted until 1980. Most children were fascinated by the promises of the new Party Programme, although even then some were already suspicious because of the deplorable state of affairs they observed around them.

The third chapter looks at the emergence of cynicism during the later childhood years and early youth. The teenagers’ attention was drawn increasingly towards private life, leisure, pop music, and travelling abroad, while politics and ideology became unattractive. Thus the “cynical generation” was born – as one of the interviewees described his age group in contrast to the generation of his parents and grandparents who genuinely believed in the ‘Soviet dream’ (p. 166). The baby boomers’ turn to the private sphere became of prime importance when they started families and settled down in their careers. The fourth and the fifth chapter describe growing disappointment with the public sphere and increasingly cynical attitudes to it: the interviewees joined the Communist Party although they were aware that “the Soviet state had lost

its vitality and imagination” (p. 168) and by the end of the Brezhnev era they “had reached a glass ceiling in regard to achieving the Soviet dream” (p. 266).

Therefore, as the next chapter points out, the baby boomers welcomed Gorbachev’s attempts to change state and society – though in retrospect they condemned the unintended outcomes of these reform attempts, mainly caused, they explained, by their rushed implementation. The seventh and last chapter focuses on how the baby boomers dealt with the “Great Depression” that arose from perestroika and with the loss of “confidence in tomorrow” (p. 312). With the help of “survival skills learned during the Soviet era” (p. 314) the baby boomers adapted to the new capitalist Russia and now observe their children, whom they regard as “freer and more goal-oriented” (p. 353), building their own lives in the new society.

Raleigh’s book tells a coherent story of a well-defined and elitist group of the Cold War generation. It shows how their upbringing during Khrushchev’s Thaw period and their collective experience of the Brezhnev and Gorbachev years shaped the history of the Soviet Union and brought about the transition from socialist to capitalist Russia: “Their lives aligned fully with the social rules and norms of Soviet society that ironically [...] included forces that eventually subverted the system” (p. 13). Although the book does not add a great deal of new information to the field of Soviet history, it offers the first coherent depiction of this generation and provides an insight into its members’ ways of thinking and perceiving Soviet reality. As a result this book will not only be of interest to a general audience unfamiliar with Soviet history and contemporary Russia but also to academic readers who might have heard similarly structured individual stories in Russia but who could not, until recently, refer to a published version of such accounts.

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