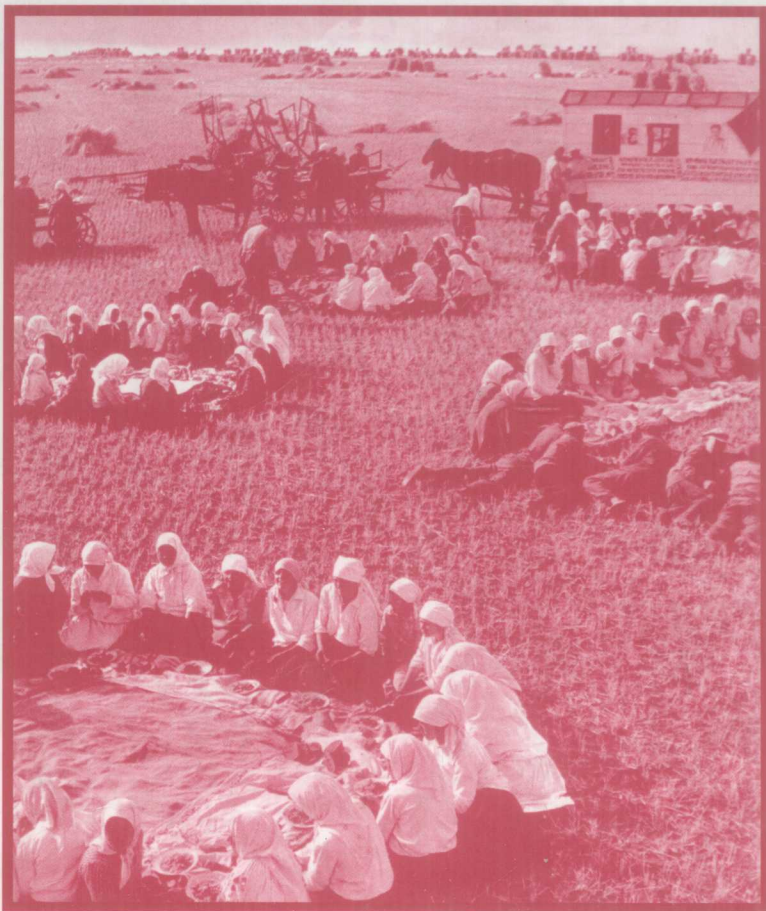


On Living Through Soviet Russia



Edited by Daniel Bertaux, Paul Thompson
and Anna Rotkirch

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN
Memory & Narrative

ON LIVING THROUGH SOVIET RUSSIA

*Edited by Daniel Bertaux,
Paul Thompson and Anna Rotkirch*

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INTRODUCTION

Daniel Bertaux, Anna Rotkirch and Paul Thompson

For a period of over seventy years after the October 1917 Revolution in Russia, talking about the past, either political or personal, became extremely dangerous for many. In a society dominated by a giant system of internal espionage, talking about yourself could always leave perilous clues, hostages to fortune. Who could know which neighbours or friends were informers to the authorities? And to reveal that any relative or close connection had ever been in political trouble, or fought on the wrong side in the Civil War, or was descended from aristocrats or well-to-do peasants (*kulaki*) or even shopkeepers, could put anyone at risk of unemployment or banishment to the political prison camps in Siberia and elsewhere. In such a context, there was no chance of successful interview-based research, either by Russians or by outsiders, and understanding of what was really going on in Russia was thus generally left, in terms of politics, to 'Kremlinologists' whose prime skill was reading between the lines of *Pravda* and other official newspapers or, for economy and society, to a painstaking wringing-out of perspectives from published statistics, policy documents and literature.¹

The situation changed dramatically with the new policy of *glasnost* at the end of the 1980s. In parallel, Soviet society began to re-examine its own pasts, while Russian family members began opening up their own family secrets. The result was a flood of reminiscence, almost nightly on television, and more formally collected by new Russian oral history groups and also by Western researchers. Daniel Bertaux and Paul Thompson both began collecting in-depth life-story and family-history interview material in the early 1990s, working with two overlapping Russian groups of interviewers. The two projects – which we detail in the Epilogue – shared an intergenerational perspective, and gathered altogether fifty family case-history interviews (from the Bertaux project) and forty-seven life-history interviews from a further twenty-five families (from the Thompson project). The most important immediate outcome was a book in Russian published by the Bertaux team, which has proved widely read and influential.² This new book builds on those initial findings, and at the same time brings the two earlier projects together with other more recent work based on different kinds of autobiographical material.

Thus the first four chapters of *On Living through Soviet Russia*, written by Daniel Bertaux, Victoria Semenova and Ekaterina Foteeva, are based directly on the Bertaux project, while a further chapter, by Semenova and Thompson, draws on both the Bertaux and the Thompson interviews. To these we have added two more chapters by other current researchers who have been using life-story interviews (Naomi Roslyn Galtz and Irina Korovushkina Paert), and four others (one each by Nanci Adler, Marianne Liljeström and two by Anna Rotkirch) by authors who have been analysing Russian written autobiographies. This is by definition a unique book, not only because no similar material was collected earlier, but also because, newly released from earlier suppression, memory of the Soviet era was exceptionally full and vivid in the *glasnost* era. Indeed Russia, then in a moment of free flux, has since moved to another kind of fearful society, with its own new barriers to free talking.

The coherence of the book is based on the use throughout of autobiographical material, and this has necessitated some discussion of issues of memory in a formerly totalitarian society. However, while this book does raise important questions of method for future researchers, our aim here is not primarily methodological. It is rather to analyse, through personal accounts, how Russian society operated at a day-to-day level, and also how people coped with these operating mechanisms – topics on which there was scarcely any serious work up to the end of the 1980s.³ This volume contrasts the different social integration of different social groups, from the descendants of the pre-revolutionary upper class to the new industrial working class. It examines in turn the implications of family relationships, working mothers, absent fathers and caretaking grandmothers; patterns of eating together, communal living, and of housing; the secrecy of sex; the suppression of religion; and the small – but, in the context, so relevant – freedoms of growing vegetables at weekends on a *dachi* plot. Because of its basis in direct testimonies, *On Living through Soviet Russia* reveals in a highly readable and direct style the meaning for ordinary men and women of living through those seven turbulent decades of a great European nation.

UNDERSTANDING SOVIET SOCIAL STRUCTURES

Of all the deliberate social experiments which have taken place in human history, Soviet society was one of the largest ever undertaken, and it was sustained over a vast part of the world's surface for as long as seventy years.⁴ It claimed to offer an alternative to capitalism, providing full employment for its citizens, cheap housing for all, free health care and free education. Although we now know that it was a never-achieved utopia which cost millions of lives, for most of the twentieth society it provided a crucial worldwide symbol that there was a viable alternative to capitalism, that the logic of industrial capitalism need not invariably prevail, and that resistance to class oppression could be progressive, on the side of the future. Indeed, without Soviet society, it seems unlikely

that Western Europe would have achieved, between Communism and the pure capitalist market society, compromises in the form of welfare capitalism and the social market – compromises which have more recently become much more difficult to defend. Once represented as pragmatic reforms, they are now criticised as if impossible utopias. Soviet Russia's claims for economic and social success were taken very seriously for decades, both by Russians and by Westerners, and even in the 1960s, it looked briefly as if Russian scientists would succeed in leading the Americans in the race to conquer outer space. The cracks in the Soviet system only began to be widely recognised in the 1970s under the extreme pressure of the armaments race, and its final demise took place with a rapidity which scarcely anybody – either in Russia or in the West – had dared to imagine.

Many older Russian men and women in the early 1990s had memories encompassing the entire Soviet era. They had experienced the drama of its twisting evolution. There was, first of all, the collapse of the old social hierarchies of the Tsar's Empire through its defeat in the First World War and the twin 1917 Revolutions; then a period of chaos, followed until 1920 by Civil War, which cost two million lives. For a while the New Economic Policy of the early 1920s allowed some slow reconstruction, but soon, with Stalin's takeover, much more radical changes set the whole society rocking again.

From the late 1920s Stalin began a series of drastic initiatives for the creation of the new socialist state. The class of medium peasants – branded as *kulaki*, a derogatory word – was eliminated from the countryside and the land turned over almost entirely to collective farming. Small entrepreneurs were also eliminated from the towns, and a massive programme of industrialisation and urbanisation launched. Under the first two five-year plans, from 1928 until 1938, the urban population of Russia doubled. Still more dramatically, Stalin used forced labour from his growing network of prison camps in an attempt to colonise the bleak Russian north, constructing canals and railways through the frozen wilderness and forcing colonists to create new outposts of Soviet society there. (From many such regions, with the collapse of Soviet industry, over half the population has fled back to western Russia since 1990.) Stalin also even set up an autonomous Jewish state in 1928 in Siberia's far east, Yiddish-speaking Birobidzhan, although this eccentric colonisation project proved an early victim, struck by Stalin's own Great Terror in 1936–7.⁵

At the same time, family relationships were thoroughly transformed and the power structures between generations and sexes dramatically altered through the abolition of larger private property, the partial spread of communal forms of housing for the urban working class, and also – at a time when, in Western societies, married women were largely excluded from professional work – a requirement for both men and women to undertake paid work. The numbers of women rose from 24 per cent to 39 per cent of the whole Soviet workforce between 1928 and 1940. In total contrast to the gender conventions of Western culture, Stalin even set up three regiments composed entirely of women fighter pilots, who fought at Stalingrad and in every battle involving the Red Army up

to the defeat of the Nazis in 1945.⁶ More typically, Russian women could be found in a whole range of occupations, from manual jobs in agriculture and industry to skilled and professional work from engineering to medicine.

The third phase was the return of chaos and slaughter with the Great Patriotic War, in which much of western Russia was occupied by Germany, and some 27 million more Russian soldiers and citizens died at the battlefront, in prison camps, or as the result of starvation, massacre and illness. Finally, after 1945 there was a much more ordered phase in the history of Soviet society, beginning with post-war reconstruction, and then from the late 1950s more serious attempts by the Communist elite to raise the ordinary standard of living, produce enough food, get goods into the shops, build family housing, and create a renewed society which really worked. By the 1980s that, too, had failed, and the whole Soviet infrastructure was running down, with food and industrial production in decline and the credibility of the Soviet leadership evaporating. With Gorbachev's arrival in 1985, the final gamble was made: *perestroika* (restructuring), and *glasnost* (the end of secrecy). But the tensions, now released into the open, destroyed the system.

While from the late 1920s, millions of Russians suffered from Stalin's radical strategies to create a new Soviet society, many losing their homes and their jobs, many of them 'repressed' by being kept permanently workless, or made to migrate or serve for years as prison labour (around 11 million exiled or executed), it is equally important to remember how many Russians believed they were indeed helping to create a new world. 'People had real spirit here', one Siberian pioneer remembers.⁷ Even where the changes brought mortal famine to the countryside, which we now know was deliberately imposed by Stalin on groups such as the Cossacks whom he regarded as potential opposition, the victims were simply bewildered, unable to imagine the source of their destructive fate. Ordinary Russians were more likely to pray to Stalin than to imagine him as a source of their sufferings. The relentless propaganda made its impact: the heroic celebratory booklets like *Building the White Sea Canal*, which never mentioned that most of the workforce was convict labour, or the mid-1930s film *Seekers of Happiness*, depicting the journey of an American Jewish family who moved to Siberia to escape the unemployment of the Great Depression. Everywhere, Soviet children were taught through their membership of socialist youth movements the ideals of communism – solidarity, equality, justice, peace, brotherhood, the supremacy of the collective. Equally they learned to disapprove of their opposites – individualism and divisive or 'anti-social' behaviour. We can assume that almost all Soviet citizens to some extent internalised these anti-capitalist and pro-socialist values. Among the strongest believers were the teachers. The Bertaux team collected stories of idealistic young teachers who, even in the 1960s, wanted to bring their educational practices closer to Communism, and moved then to Siberia in order to have the freedom to set up new, more ideal schools. They found other young teachers there with similar attitudes. But, paradoxically, even such efforts to realise the ideals of Soviet society regularly ended

in suppression, and sometimes the repression of their initiators, for changing local institutions without the approval of the relevant Communist Party authorities.

Soviet society was thus not only utopian, but also perplexingly contradictory, and hence difficult for most contemporaries to interpret. Because it fell far short of what it claimed to be, the actual rules of Soviet society had to remain hidden from view – hidden not only to foreigners, but to Soviet citizens too. It was a ‘secret’ society, whose official public pronouncements had to be minutely checked before their release. These pronouncements and the controlled official press and radio became the staple material of Western Sovietologists, who thereby created whole libraries of critical studies of Soviet society without ever being able to gain much understanding of the real lives of Soviet citizens. The only Russians they could freely interview during the whole Soviet period were those who had escaped to the West, and it was never possible to know how far their experiences had been typical.⁸

It is unlikely, in any case, that ordinary Russian citizens could have explained the fundamental workings of Soviet society, precisely because these were deliberately hidden from them. Even in the democratic West, only a minority of specialised professionals fully understand the workings of the capitalist market and its full power – not only because of its complexity but also because its workings also are partly deliberately hidden – although the market is fundamental to the social exchanges and inequalities of Western societies. In Soviet Russia it could be argued that, from the 1950s, the workings of the system and the rules of the game did become increasingly well understood by Russians themselves, and that was one of the reasons for the system’s downfall.

Soviet society was structured around power rather than possessions. Money – despite popular pride in the possession of a stable and reliable national currency – was much less relevant in everyday Soviet life than in the West, because there were severe restrictions on what it could buy: there was no market in housing, few goods for sale in the shops. Many of the key things came free, like health care and education, or very cheap, like bread, housing and electricity. But since supply seldom never enough, access to them was either through the black market – flourishing from the late 1930s, where dealings could be either in cash or in barter – or through accessing a mixture of formal rights and informal network connections. Hence, getting what you wanted depended to a high degree on your networks, your social capital. You could not simply reserve a table for a meal in a restaurant: you had to use your connections to get the table, because otherwise you would be told it was booked, when in fact the food intended for the restaurant might have been bartered by the work team for something more useful to them, say a group holiday in Yalta. It seems that it was connections as means to favours, the informal deals expressed in the rhetoric of friendship which Russians called *blat*, which were the basic currency of Soviet life, the equivalent to money in the West.⁹ But how such connections were built, social capital accumulated, is much less clear. We explore in the chapters which follow how social capital took different forms in different contexts: information

networks for migrants, getting jobs or housing through work contacts, the pull of old family connections, or the transmission across generations of intellectual skills or approaches to dealing with crisis. Family relationships gained a new importance in this economy of exchange, paradoxically precisely at the same moment as the influence of family was being deliberately undermined by government policies in housing and schooling, and at the old elite level family connections had to be hidden for fear of persecution. Connections were therefore perhaps as often made through neighbours and workmates, through specially close friendships (*druzhba*), through politics, and also through religious or political dissidence.

From this followed the Soviet class structure. Again, secrecy made this hard to study, because social classes had officially been abolished. Perhaps this is one reason why there has been considerable contention on the issue, with the views of historians and socialists ranging from those who see the Soviet system as being in reality not significantly different from that of the West, to those who interpret it either as a survival from the past – for example, with ‘Estates’ rather than classes – or as a new and wholly different system.¹⁰ But, for the research projects on which this book is based, we have assumed that there was in practice a hierarchy along the following broad lines. First, at the top there was an upper class of those with access to political power, headed by the *nomenklatura*, with the middle- and lower-level party cadres in their wake. Next there were the two major blocks of the working population at all occupational levels: the urban population, from professionals to unskilled, and well below them the peasantry. However, within these blocks some professions, such as the intelligentsia, or at a lower level, hairdressers or shop assistants, evidently could gain more access to useful connections, yet there has not been enough information to make any systematic distinctions among them. Lastly and much more obviously, there was the large group of marginalised or repressed citizens, the more fortunate of the latter released and ‘assigned’ to the least popular parts of the country such as Siberian outposts, the worst off still prisoners working their sentences in the network of Stalin’s *lager* system. This social structure seems clear enough in retrospect, but it is important to understand that not only is its nature still a matter of debate, but also, more importantly for our purposes, not at all of it was obvious to most of those who were living through Soviet Russia.

The oral and written autobiographies on which this book is based are not only vivid, but also often painful. In one form or another, they all reflect the loss or disappearance of close family members, the sufferings from the crushing of the *kulaki*, from Stalin’s purges, and from two major wars. But it is equally striking that they do not portray an anomic, destabilised population, reeling from incessant and incomprehensible change. On the contrary, many interviews convey a stoic acceptance of difficult life paths, and also moments of stillness. Often they reflect a yearning for order, and a calm associated with the presence of grandmothers, or simple common domestic activities such as gathering berries in the forest, or even an icon left nailed to the wall. They also bring out

the strategies which ordinary people used to better their lives, to find spaces for self-expression, or by word or deed to protest. Both oral interviews and written interviews, in short, reflect not only the great structural clashes of Soviet society, but also, as with ordinary people's autobiographies in the West, how Russians experienced both the stresses and also the small freedoms and pleasures of ordinary life, and how they acted in the face of the structures which framed their life choices.

INTERPRETING AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL MEMORIES

Working with autobiographic memories always raises key issues of validity and representativity, which we have fully discussed elsewhere.¹¹ There are, however, some special problems in interpreting Russian autobiographical material.

The first question is how far, in a society in which both secrecy and deception have been so pervasive, can memories have any validity at all? In Soviet Russia for seventy years, remembering was dangerous, not only to yourself, but to your family and friends. The less that people knew about you and your family story the better, because most information was potentially dangerous, could be twisted into material for a denunciation. In politically comfortable Western democracies, telling stories about yourself is commonplace, the currency of everyday conversation as well as the essence of relationships between intimates. This was not so in Russia. Soviet citizens learned to wear masks in both public and private life, even with close friends and intimates. Irina Sherbakova, for example, found in her interviews with survivors of the gulag that many of them not only concealed their prison years from their own children, who could too easily talk, but even, if they married after their return from prison, from their own spouses.¹² And such habits die slowly. Some of us were struck on early visits to Russia not only by the continuation of personal mistrust (often well-based) between colleagues, but also by how little they are likely to know about each other's personal lives.

One of the first points which strikes a Western life-story sociologist or oral historian is the number of interviewees who mention with regret the gaps in their knowledge of the family's story. This was as true of active Communists as of those outside the establishment. Thus, among our own interviewees, Igor Smirnov (b. 1923), a party political worker with the military like his father, remarked: 'We prefer not to talk about our relatives, who they are.' He knew that his grandmother, with whom he lived as a child, 'was brought up in a noble family, she was a well-bred person ... Unfortunately she never told me sincerely about her life.' Valentin Aleksandrovich (b. 1933), whose mother was a pioneer Communist heroine in Murmansk, was mystified by the joint photographs of his grandparents, in which his grandfather's image had been deliberately cut out: 'I can say nothing about it, because this issue was never discussed in our family. The Civil War mixed people up and people were not ashamed of their relatives, they were simply afraid that ... memories about them would cause troubles for the rest

of the family.' It was still worse for those who knew for certain that their family history was a heavy handicap. For example, the father of Petr Andrienko (b. 1923) had been a village shopkeeper and small trader in machinery, but after collectivisation he was arrested as an 'Enemy of the People' and never reappeared. Afterwards, whenever Petr needed to fill in one of the many forms which regulated Soviet life, for example to get a factory job, he lied about his origins: 'There were questions about your relatives: were they repressed or not? ... That made me very downcast ... No doubt it is better to keep silent about it.'

Hence a significant part of Russian family history was undoubtedly obscured through the need for secrecy over such a sustained period. But a great deal was nevertheless handed down. As these very examples indicate, quite often such family 'secrets' were withheld by one member of a family, but known and transmitted by others. In particular, as Semenova and Thompson show in their chapter here, in many Russian families there were stronger lines of communication between grandparents and grandchildren than between parents and children.

The early 1990s, moreover, may seem in retrospect as years exceptionally favourable to autobiographical candour in Russia. Perhaps the very uncertainty about the future made the appraisal of the Soviet past all the more intense. The era of *glasnost* had initiated a huge questioning of the public past, and there was a vast public outpouring of autobiographical reinterpretation. For the first time since the 1917 Revolutions, many people felt free to speak uninhibitedly, not only about their own lives, but about their parents and grandparents too. The organisation Memorial – whose documentation is used by Nanci Adler in her chapter here – was originally a semi-clandestine dissident network for recording the fates of repressed men and women, but now became transformed into a national exercise for documenting the deaths, deportations and imprisonments suffered by Russians under the Soviet regime of terror. One of its first exhibitions about the concentration camps, held in the Moscow Palace of Culture in 1988, was a particularly extraordinary turning point, seen by thousands of people, where lone old men and women could be seen holding up the names of lost parents, or with notices round their collars – 'Does anyone else remember X Camp?' – just wanting others to remember with; a need which Memorial responded to by setting up monthly memory circles.

Yet at this time the direction of the future was still unclear, so that there was not yet a new self-censorship against the past. Thus, in 1993, Victoria Semenova recorded an elderly woman who had belonged to the top Soviet *nome-klatura*: she described in full her pioneering role as a woman geologist, and her later high responsibility as head of a Ministry. But she began the same interview with a proud declaration: 'I have a long story to tell you about my life. In fact I came from noble origin and my family lost everything during the Revolution. Even my grandson has learned the truth about my origin only recently ...'¹³

Some experienced Russian oral historians argue that, now once again in the post-*glasnost* era, Russians, and particularly older Russians socialised into reticence,

are reluctant to give candid interviews. 'Every Soviet citizen had *two totally different biographies* at hand, each of which could be presented in several versions. They differed from each other in terms of the facts selected, interpretation, the character of presentation, as well as the sphere of public the person ought to speak in.' In the post-Soviet period these habits have often continued, so that people often do not speak in an interview in the way that they would in private conversation. Partly because of the rise of violence and racketeering, and also because some Russians have taken to making money from being interviewed, quite often their 'narratives rather resemble textbook phrases that reproduce officially accepted opinions'. To get 'real' information, authentic personal narratives, these researchers suggest, 'one has either to have high credibility by belonging to the periphery of the respondent's social network, or to get access to his/her "private" realm through a third person enjoying the respondent's trust.' In a recent project at the Centre for Independent Social Research in St Petersburg on ex-Soviet immigrants to Berlin, Viktor Voronkov found that the early interviews resembled newspaper articles rather than personal experience. These first interviews had been conducted by German co-researchers. But when Russian interviewers took over, there was an immediate change in the type of interview. When Voronkov asked his first interviewee what he had told the German sociologist who had interviewed him previously, he was answered emphatically: 'Never mind, I told them as it ought to be!' ('*Tak, kak nado!*')¹⁴

It may well indeed be true that the years in which candour came most easily have passed. Yet it would be a mistake to suggest that, ten years later, Russians are back to a new phase of secrecy as acute as under the Soviet regime. Effective research using life stories, oral history or written autobiographies continues, even if it demands a higher level of skill in gaining the confidence of interviewees. In an interesting new development, Memorial sponsored a national essay contest in 2000 and in 2001 for teenage schoolchildren on 'Man and history, the twentieth century', for which the children were strongly encouraged to do their own interviews. These competitions attracted 1,700 and 2,000 entries respectively. The majority of the entries came from the smaller towns rather than the biggest cities, and a typical entry was a family story based on interviews with various kin, including a grandfather who was a dispossessed peasant.¹⁵ It looks to be far too soon to announce that the new culture of remembering has passed.

We should note that, in any case, telling what 'it ought to be' in an interview can give revealing insights into the social values of a period. Indeed, in her chapter here, Marianne Liljeström uses precisely the formalised character of the published success stories of Soviet women to reveal the qualities which were believed to be crucial for success. In their collection of oral histories with women, *A Revolution of Their Own* (1998), Barbara Engel and Anastasia Posadskaya-Vanderbeck include a number of life stories of Communist activists which – although recorded after the collapse of Soviet power – are equally striking, both in terms of their continuing political faith and in their denial of discrimination against women in Soviet Russia. Interviews such as these are valuable precisely