POST-SOVIET MENTALITY IN THE WORKS OF S. ALEKSIEVICH AND S. LOZNITSA

N. Klimenko

Yale University, New Haven, USA

Scientific supervizor A. Savenko

The rise and fall of the Soviet Union, referred to as the "Great Experiment", was a massive transgenerational cultural phenomenon that resulted in the creation of what may be called a new psychological species known as Homo Sovieticus. Even though the phenomenon of Homo Sovieticus has been well studied [1], the contemporary metamorphosis of the post-Soviet mentality is a fairly undocumented process. Some insight on this transition is offered in the work of Svetlana Alexievich and Sergei Loznitsa, who created a series of documentary-based films and prose collecting human impressions and memories between late Socialism and the modern day. Alexievich and Loznitsa intersect in many ways: their international Belarusian-Ukrainian origin, affinity for documentary genre elements, censorship at home and a rising recognition abroad with Alexievich's reception of the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature and Loznitsa's several triumphs at the Cannes Festival. Even though Alexievich writes mostly about the Soviet Union unlike a younger, post-modern Loznitsa, both of their projects act is a similar spirit as they expose the fundamental shocks of the late Soviet era – the post-war trauma, Glasnost', fall of the communist idea, the turbulent nineties and the evolution of the new protest culture.

The far-reaching cultural and political implications of the transformation of the USSR from the world power to a disjoint group of nation-states makes us wonder whether a new post-Soviet mentality has replaced Homo Sovieticus and how the cultural evidence accumulated by Alexievich and Loznitsa may help us understand it. This essay will analyze a selection of both authors' work and contrast their approaches to depicting the metamorphosis of the soviet mentality. It begins with the ever-present post-war trauma and late-Soviet disillusionment found in *Zinky Boys* by Alexievich [2] and *My Joy* by Loznitsa. It proceeds with Loznitsa's *Maidan* and Alexievich's *Secondhand Time* [3] that show a matured post-soviet reality and new protest cultures. The analysis will show that the rising individual self-awareness of citizens in the post-Soviet space occurred together with

decline in the sense of community, morality, and civil position. As a result, just like individualism has liberated the mindset of Homo Sovieticus during the decline of the union, it later contributed to a society with amorphous, vague ideological framework and a weak ability to defend its political position. This new identity is a mere remnant – or a rebirth – of the Homo Sovieticus.

The late 80s, the fall of the Soviet Union and the turbulence of the 90s became an important historical and psychological benchmark that marked the formal birth of the post-Soviet human. The destruction of the political and economic system was not as painful as the loss of agency and the driving ideology to rely upon. The sense of nostalgia and uncertainty about the future extends into the 2000s with the establishment of Putin's Russia. Even though some early form of protest culture evolves, it also seems to have a sense of dissonance and weakness. As people are not forced to follow the Soviet political position, they fail to develop any political opinions at all and, just like in the Soviet Union, prefer to keep their hardships inside and survive them through.

When it comes to Sergei Loznitsa, his approach to depicting Homo Sovieticus overlaps with Alexievich's techniques as both works criticize the cult of the hero and the military propaganda, as well as equally highlight the traumas haunting the populations after the Soviet regime. As a director mainly operating in the post-Soviet realm, Loznitsa does not focus much on the early reaction to the heroism agenda. Instead, he contributes by displaying the implications of the war trauma and the remnants of the Homo Sovieticus in the modern society. *My Joy* demonstrates that the society is still highly traumatized, haunted by the war rhetoric and is prone to violence. It is explained through the integration of secondary scenes that portray various atrocities and the degradation of military heroism. For example, the house where protagonist Georgi is enslaved is a link between the modern criminal context of the village and the wartime scene where Soviet guerrilla soldiers murder a school teacher that hosts them. The house becomes a continuum of suffering that is transgenerational: the teacher's son who witnessed the murder of his father ends up as a mute who assaults Georgi in the night. It seems as if the distorted image of heroism in the Soviet past triggered misunderstanding and acts of violence between fellow countrymen and continues to redefine the social landscape of small communities like the village in *My Joy*.

Even though *My Joy* does not explore the shock of the fall of the Soviet Union, it shows how the emerged cultural and political void is filled with a new ethical framework – or a lack of thereof. The advent of the 90s, the rising capitalism and business environment, as well as the decay of the regulatory institutions like the court and police created a culture of survival. At the same, time, they become a part of the rising "ethical catastrophe" as argued by Sergey Horujy [4]. This "ethical catastrophe" is defined as the rise of brutality, cynicism, distrust and abuse as a new normalcy that emerged as a result of cruel Soviet regime, the atrocities of war and the degradation of political structures. Loznitsa demonstrate how such degradation of moral and political structures transform the mentality and the concepts of collectivism that are replaced by the ideas of mistrust and individual survival. From the very beginning of the film, anyone who enters the village faces waves of violence – whether it is the two police investigators or driver Georgi. Loznitsa's composite scene of the villagers demonstrates their cultural and socioeconomic similarity – yet a shared sense of suffering and aggression. As a result, instead of a shared sense of ideology or national belonging, the villagers all share the sense of danger and anticipated aggression between each other. Even the regulatory structures such as the police are highly disintegrated: policemen commit corruption virtually every time they appear on screen. Therefore, the individual of the 90s is as vulnerable to the outside social environent as its Soviet counterpart, which explains why both of them fail to acquire a sense of agency within their communities.

Loznitsa's *Maidan* that portrays on the revolution in Ukraine provides hope for an alternative vision of the Eastern European protest culture but also comes as a surprising contrast to Loznitsa's earlier work. The organization of the protests shown is almost sterile: the national anthem in the beginning, the perfect collaboration between people in the tent camps and the proper scenes of clashes followed by public mourning look like an exemplary political protest. The sense of ambition and nationalism are very uncharacteristic of Loznitsa's previous work, where he is being very careful about taking strong stances on the issues of national identity. Obviously, the depiction of protests is an opposite of what Alexievich does in *Secondhand time*, which is published only two years before *Maidan*. Loznitsa is still using the same film techniques and the elements of documentary such as cut-outs of routine scenes or close-up shots of human faces, to represent a completely different argument, a much bolder, louder, but potentially a more naïve political statement. It is unclear whether Loznitsa falls into the trap of the new romanticism, or actually shifts towards a more nationalistic mentality, or is simply trying to make sense of the transforming political landscape.

The difference between *Secondhand Time* and *Maidan* might stem from other fundamental differences between Alexievich and Loznitsa that are less apparent upon first inspection. The first potential explanation might be the regional difference between the politically authoritarian and culturally moderate Belarus and a more democratic, diverse, and unstable Ukraine, which created a divergence between the protest cultures. Secondly, the differences in genre might affect the type of issues both writers explore in their work. Writing in prose, Alexievich is more likely to focus on individual human emotions and is more likely to embrace smaller thoughts as opposed to larger ideas, and she also has more opportunities to interview people, take longer time to write, process her argument and, as a result, embrace the uncertainty of the people. Loznitsa, operating in film, is more likely to be limited in terms of time and financial resources. He has to operate on a faster – and therefore larger – scale, embrace burning ideas and collective emotional flows. Therefore, it is possible that Alexievich and Loznitsa are simply focusing on two aspects of the same issue but end up viewing it from two equally valid perspectives.

In this case, a very important style difference between Alexievich and Loznitsa is the display of human voices. Svetlana Alexievich encourages her characters to speak their mind and express their feelings. The audience of *Maidan* is only exposed to the songs and speeches of the protest's leaders. Even though these voices are incredibly diverse – from female politicians to clergymen – the films feels almost silent without a single word said by common protesters. It makes the audience wonder whether the protesters have their voice in this historical event and what their motivations for being there are. Could they be another example of the "new quiet"? The fact that the protesters are shown so comfortable and indifferent in the routines of the tent camps makes us think whether they are fully embraced in the revolution or are just adapting to the outside circumstances. In this case, *Maidan* might be an example of a process that is transformative and turbulent on its surface but hides the same degree of people's confusion and amorphousness.

Both Alexievich and Loznitsa operate at the complex boundary between the Soviet and the post-Soviet culture. They together create a contemporary critique of the Soviet mentality, as well as successfully describe the qualities of the post-Soviet individual such as post-war fear, the passivism mixed with romantic idealism, and a strong sense of disconnection within the nation. The "homo post-Soveticus" is liberated from certain ideological and political constraints but is highly unsure about what ethical framework they should follow. In many ways, the post-soviet human is a shadow of the highly fragmented Homo Sovieticus. While Homo Sovieticus is a grand idea, the post-soviet mentality is

a filler of the cultural void, a final step of disintegration of the Homo Sovieticus, as well as the end of the post-Soviet mentality as a whole. Within the emerging concept of "post-post-Soviet", both authors rightfully recognize the sense of confusion as the new sociotype is being born. The anthropological projects of Alexievich and Loznitsa, their intersections and also elements of discourse do not just decompose the post-soviet cultural phenomena but create a solid framework for understanding the birth of a new mentality in the "post post-Soviet" space.

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