

Nostalgia for “Golden Age” in Soviet-era culture

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Abstract. The prerequisites for the study are the relevant trends in modern humanities that study the “era of nostalgia”, the “demand for the past” in the culture of different regions of the world (Z. Bauman, S. Boym, D. Lowenthal and others), and the interest of the global science in the processes that occur in Russian culture. The “taboo on nostalgia” (S. Boym) should be overcome in the Russian intellectual milieu (the consequence of revising the Soviet sociocultural experience) as a factor that introduces subjectivity into research. The purpose of the study is to identify the prospects for the comprehensive study of the mythologization of the Russian “Golden Age” and the functions of the neomyth in Russian culture of the 20th century; the goal is to define the specific features of the key stages in nostalgic mythmaking (from pre-Soviet to post-Soviet). The initial hypothesis: although different generations have their motives for seeking the ideal in the “Golden” 19th century, each stage can only be interpreted in the context of the single mythmaking process. Research methods are based on the interdisciplinary approach; the authors summarize research data in the field of literature, cultural history, and cultural sociology. The result of the analytical review in the study is the significant elaboration of the notions of the most important nostalgic “plot” of 20th-century Russian culture: 1) over the previous century, the neomyth of the Russian “Golden Age” is actualized almost continuously; 2) the latent stages of the neomyth have been the time of creative individuals’ personal searches, their fruits being later in demand by society; 3) a long cycle of the retrospective search for Russian culture ends with a complete change in the meaning-making social context in the post-Soviet era. In the conclusion, the prospect for scientific discussion is outlined.

Keywords: nostalgia, neomyth, “Golden Age”

1 Introduction

In the “global epidemic of nostalgia” [1: 14], when the cult of the past universally became “a response to the uncertainty of the future and the absence of a collective public project” [2: 318], a new interdisciplinary scientific field was formed. The structural complexity of the research object is recognized [3: 3–12], the boundaries are being specified. David Lowenthal attempted to determine the place of modern nostalgic Russia in the global cultural context: “Nostalgia is worldwide. <...> Russian nostalgia for pre-Revolutionary troikas, furs, and

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family samovars, epitomized in the Romanov-era novels of Boris Akunin, coexists with wistful memories of imagined idealism and heroic sacrifice in Stalinist times” [4: 38]. The eclecticism of the nostalgic repertoire is interpreted as “local color” which does not exclude typological comparisons.

In another version of the famous book by D. Lowenthal (2004), the same conventional attributes of the past appear [5: 36] but there is no mention of B. Akunin whose literary project was still being formed in the early 2000s. When in 2015 the fiction writer appeared as a “co-author” of a popular image of the past, a mixture of different phenomena occurred: 1) the Soviet stage of nostalgia for the “Golden Age” (it is indicated by the English-language publications in the 1980s, cited by D. Lowenthal in the notes [5: 36]); 2) the current modernity, which corresponds to B. Akunin’s postmodern game. The dynamics of the process puts the researcher in peculiar conditions (“‘History’, observed art-historian Bevis Hillier in 1975, got ‘recycled as nostalgia almost as soon as it happened’” [4: 40]), a new observational perspective arises: the later layers of culture serve as a “filter” for the perception of the previous ones. While such an approach is productive for a researcher of a native (or close) tradition, foreign cultural phenomena turn out to be “encrypted” through contamination. Meanwhile, the task of adequately understanding someone else’s heritage is rightly proclaimed crucial: “Awareness of legacies and histories beyond the confines of our own kinfolk, our own community, our own country, enlarges empathetic understanding. Through foreign pasts we view our own past - indeed, our own being - in comparative context” [4: 102].

In Russian humanities, the issue of choosing a research stance is also acute but for different reasons. The revision of the Soviet socio-cultural experience led to a “taboo on nostalgia” among intellectuals [1:14]. Humanities scholars of the older generation speak ironically about their own experiences in the 1970s–1980s [6: 660], their assessments of the intellectual cult of the “noble past” are most often based on moral reflection but not on an objective analysis of the phenomenon. On the contrary, the distance separating us from the rise of nostalgia for the Russian “Golden Age” at the turn of the 19th century contributes to an unbiased approach to this early stage; the most valuable scientific results were obtained here.

2 Methods

The time has come to comprehensively consider the regularities in the mythologization of the Russian “Golden Age” and the functions of this neomyth in the Russian culture of the 20th century. Until the various facets of such a large-scale phenomenon are reflected, we have no right to reproach outside observers for approximate judgments. The immediate task is to determine the specific features that the main stages of nostalgic mythmaking had in the 20th century. The hypothesis is as follows: although different generations had their motives for seeking the ideal in the 19th century, each stage can only be interpreted in the context of a single process. Problem orientation of the article allows one to choose an interdisciplinary approach; the research data on literary history, cultural history, and cultural sociology are summarized.

3 Results and discussion

National myths about a “better time” (the idealization of England during the time of Elizabeth I, the Victorian era, the *Grand Siècle* of Louis XIV, the “Alexander’s days” in Russia) reveal a general trend: for descendants, the happy “prosperity” of the whole country begins to be associated with brilliant artists. Along with the traditional designation of “century” by the

ruler's name, there is a second name: Shakespeare's era, Moliere's era, etc. The uniqueness of the Russian "Golden Age" is indicated by the complete change of the title name of the era: "Pushkin is the main Russian person who formed the modern language of the nation and the type of its social consciousness in the modern era. Whereas Herzen <...> put the great poet on a par with the greatest Russian political leaders, Akhmatova supported Pushkin's idea of the superiority of the poetic "not built by hands" monument over "monuments of 'rulers of the earth'" in "A Word on Pushkin" (1962) [7: 6]. O. Ronen recalls the tradition "of defining <...> the poetic golden age, or rather poetry itself as the golden age or its tangible manifestation" [8: 26]; it was this view that allowed one to consider the first third of the 19th century "Golden", although as a citizen of his age, Pushkin called that time "iron" and "cruel" [9: 113, 373].

In any approach, the "expression 'Pushkin's era' is more common than 'Alexander's' or 'Nikolay's'" [7: 6]. At the same time, the stimulus for mythmaking was the concentration of many outstanding personalities (poets, thinkers, politicians) and great events (the expulsion of Napoleon in 1812, the capture of Paris in 1814, an attempt at a revolution by the nobility in 1825) in the relative thirty years. The impression of the extreme saturation of the Russian "Golden Age" is reinforced by its very brevity, equal to Pushkin's life span. "The memory of the nation strives to impart an integral, complete look to each major historical character. Proteism is alien to the memory of the nation. The latter seems to "sculpt" its heroes," wrote A.M. Panchenko [10: 422]. Under the conventional name of the "Golden Age", the idea of the unity of peaceful and heroic values was entrenched; at different stages of the existence of the myth, different sides of the past were emphasized but the trend towards synthesis prevailed.

The first stage of idealization was prepared by contemporaries who survived Pushkin (P. Pletnyov, P. Vyazemsky, etc.), whose nostalgia was drawn to the time of their youth. The Fin de siècle situation further contributed to passéism. In the art of this time, the antithesis of modernity "was the "great beginning of Alexander's days", Pushkinian unity of culture, empire, and freedom"; this harmonious unity "was never embodied in the reality of the 1800s–1830s and certainly could not find a place for itself in the Russian reality of the 1900–1910s. But it <...> formed the psyche of a certain sociocultural stratum, that is, was its cultural and historical myth", the myth of the intelligentsia [11: 737]. The feeling of loss (the most important condition of mythologization) was aggravated by the 1917 revolution. A parallel with another neomyth is quite applicable to its consequences: "In France it was not only the *ancien régime* that produced a revolution, but, in some respect, the revolution that produced the *ancien régime*, giving it a shape, a sense of closure, and a gilded aura" [1: 16]. V. Veidle wrote in exile that "Russian culture, created by the nobility, lived such a full and happy life which has never, neither later, nor before, been lived by any culture in Russia" [12: 60].

On the other side of the historical rift, the value status of the past was restored after a pause that was brief on a historical scale. Early symptoms of nostalgia manifested in the works by sincere supporters of the new world: this is Arkady Gaidar who began his journey by praising the revolutionary "school" but found support in the ethics of Pushkin's "The Captain's Daughter" at the time of crisis [13: 161-192]; Mikhail Svetlov who combined "Komsomol romance" with motives of noble valor; the young author of the famous "Envy" (1944) – the future Naum Korzhavin. The supporters made their choice in a situation when the state, which unleashed unprecedented terror, widely celebrated Pushkin's "anniversary of death" (1937), ideologically "appropriated" 19th-century classics. The death "in the midst of a bold, unequal battle" glorified by Pushkin began to seem not only "instantaneous and beautiful" [14: 668], but even festive; "proud patience" of the characters in the poem "To Siberia" [9: 7] was beyond the reach of the outcasts of the new era. The creators capable of moral resistance "consciously and purposefully fought for the right to their own interpretation of the 'Golden Age'" [15: 148–149].

Ample opportunities opened up for cultural and historical analogies in another tragic situation. Novice or future poets and writers who participated in the 1941–1945 war (M. Koulchitski, D. Samoylov, V. Nekrasov, K. Vorobyov, E. Kazakevich, and others) managed to refine the cruel personal experience, focusing on real and fictional heroes of the Napoleonic era [16]: the most popular “doubles” were the poet-hussar Denis Davydov, characters of Lermontov’s poem “Borodino”, Tolstoy’s prince Andrei. Even V. Astafyev who lost all illusions in the war contrasted the noble era of Kutuzov and Bagration with the past in his diaries and letters.

The resurrection of the “Golden Age” became a matter of several generations – starting with young war veterans whose activities determined the atmosphere of the post-Stalin era: their upbringing excluded options for “political, ideological, to a large extent even aesthetic choice” [17: 8, 9]. State “appropriation” of classical literary heritage in the 1930s was also aimed at the absence of alternative: “Russian classics <...> took a central place in solving the problems <...> of the cultural revolution” [18: 191]; “Two generations of Soviet people simply did not know other cultural texts” [17: 14]. Nevertheless, “the actual lack of freedom in search of intellectual nourishment” [19: 138] had a paradoxical result: the literary classics carried a dangerous potential for Soviet like-mindedness.

Svetlov is a special case among the first exponents of nostalgia: his “dreams of the past” not only glorified the courage of the nobility but also revealed the beauty of an old noble estate. Although for the 1930s–40s this nostalgic choice is unique, it foreshadowed the reunification of the two most important components of neomyth – heroism and harmony.

4 Conclusion

The “discovery” of the past by the first Soviet generation remained a latent sociocultural phenomenon for a long time. This situation was inevitable in the Stalinist period when “disagreement <...> or escapism did not have the slightest opportunity to organize”, speak out outside the narrowest circle [17: 14], and during the years of the “thaw” that revived the Soviet project of the future. When, in the second half of the 1960s, the possibilities of “Soviet formalization of their ideals” began to dry up [18: 193], the appeal to the “Golden Age” was prepared by all previous experience. It is significant that the poet David Samoilov, one of the soberest minds of his generation, mocked everyone who was “dissatisfied with the century” [20: 106], was inclined to selectively idealize the people and events of the Pushkin era.

The neomyth “answers <...> not the questions but certain spiritual requests” [21: 173]. The high level of requests could not be universal: some went into the past out of boredom of the official ideology and dull everyday life (in this case, nostalgia is “pleasurable therapy” [4: 47]), others were looking for existential support outside their time.

In the last Soviet 20 years, the “Golden Age” became the source of the main “mythological preforms”, “mythological prototypes” of the life strategies for the intelligentsia [22: 123, 124]. It is important that at this stage the viability of the nostalgic myth was confirmed in a multiple-choice situation [23: 150]. In the increasingly complex cultural space of the 1970s–1980s, Pushkin’s “Golden Age” not only inspired lyrical stylizations and variations, historical novels and films; this was the basis for the development of the “Aesopian language” as well as other creative strategies that made it possible to discuss the pressing problems of our time on the basis of the material of the past.

When there was a complete change in the meaning-making social context in the post-Soviet era, the long cycle of the retrospective search for Russian culture ended. As a historically established phenomenon that has become available for comprehensive study, it has a special scientific value: only against this background can the modern game-based reconstructions of the pre-Soviet past be understood, which outside observers (in particular,

D. Lowenthal) take for the “pervasive” nostalgic tradition of the Russian culture of the 20th–21st centuries.

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