

## The Material Culture of (N)Ostalgie

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[image found [here](#)]

A recent [article](#) by Vadim Nikitin on nostalgia in Russia for the USSR called my attention to a number of current projects and publications that focus specifically on fond reminiscences of the unique material culture of Soviet life:

The multivolume glossy, expensive books arising from the *Namedni* project, the latest of which was published in November, feature a grab bag of large color photographs, news clips, interviews and narratives about every year from 1961 to 2005. For instance, 1962 spans physicist Lev Landau winning the Nobel Prize, the launch of milk in plastic bags, the Cuban missile crisis and the Soviet debut of the Hula-Hoop. The books target readers who

lived through Soviet times as well as those who, like me, were too young to have experienced the Soviet Union and want to know more about their parents' generation.

The volumes are a runaway success despite their high price, and this reflects a growing trend. In the past year alone, at least three other books showcasing Soviet material culture have caught the popular imagination, even on the other side of the old Iron Curtain. *Made in Russia: Unsung Icons of Soviet Design*, edited by Soviet-born American writer Michael Idov and featuring contributions from the likes of bestselling writer Gary Shteyngart, is a breezy English-language meditation on such Soviet staples as folding cups, Lomo cameras, fishnet shopping bags and rustic cars. Olga Dydykina's coffee-table volume *We Lived in the USSR* is a kind of Dorling Kindersley travel guide to the Soviet Union, with hundreds of photos and a dictionary of Soviet-era expressions. And Frédéric Chaubin's *Cosmic Communist Constructions* celebrates forgotten examples of late-Soviet architecture. What these books have in common is a tone of what Russian-born American scholar Svetlana Boym termed "reflective nostalgia," the kind that "lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place and another time."

Here are some links for the projects and publications mentioned in the article:

*Namedni*:

- on [Amazon](#)
- on [Wikipedia](#)
- on [YouTube](#)

*Made in Russia: Unsung Icons of Soviet Design*:

- on [Amazon](#)
- on a [blog post](#) (with images)

*Cosmic Communist Constructions*:

- at [Taschen](#)
- on [Amazon](#)
- on [WeHeart](#) (with images)

[Svetlana Boym's website](#) with media projects and publications

One of the first explorations of this phenomena to make popular headlines in Western Europe and America was the 2003 German film [Goodbye Lenin](#), which told the story of a patriotic East German woman who slipped into a coma just before the fall of the Berlin Wall, and whose son tries hard to protect her from the new world order once she awakens a few months later. One of his main strategies is to meticulously surround her with the rapidly vanishing products to which she has grown accustomed before they are replaced by commodities from the West. (My own relatives, who grew up in East Berlin, report similar post-1989 demand for the few brands of coffee, jam, and cereal that they had grown up with in the face of proliferating but unfamiliar choices, and as a kind of quotidian protest against rapid gentrification by *Wessies*.) Also noteworthy was last year's exhibition of contemporary artists in The New Museum's show ["Ostalgia"](#), which showcased

diverse and highly ambivalent relations with the visual, material, economic and political cultures in Soviet times.

And finally, here are some recent academic takes on the topic (thanks to Bruce Grant at NYU):

- Dominic Boyer, Dominic (2006) "Ostalgie and the Politics of the Future in Eastern Germany." [Public Culture](#) Spring 18(2): 361-381
  - Berdahl, Daphne (1999) "(N)Ostalgie" for the present: Memory, longing, and East German things." [Ethnos](#) 64: 192-211
  - Bunzl, Matti and Daphne Berdahl (2010) *On the Social Life of Postsocialism: Memory, Consumption, Germany*. Bloomington: [Indiana University Press](#).
  - Todorova, Maria and Zsuzsa Gille (2010) *Post-Communist Nostalgia*. New York: [Berghahn Books](#)
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