Article

Under Lenin's watchful eye: Growing up in the former Soviet Union.

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Abstract

Using autoethnography as a primary methodology, I draw on my experience growing up in the former Soviet Union in the late 1970s and 1980s to illuminate the everyday life in the authoritarian regime and its surveillance apparatus. At that point, the corruption of the regime was evident to most citizens as black markets flourished; illegal monetary exchanges were widespread, and bribery became a legitimate institution. However, as the economic sector was slipping out of Soviet control, the public institutions such as media and education were still in the business of propagating Soviet ideology. That ideology permeated every aspect of culture, however, it was not enforced through a top-down surveillance, but rather through an internalized surveillance based in belief and faith in authoritarian institutions of power. As a result, it produced individuals torn between faith in the ideals and the reality of the everyday life. In the essay I plan to examine my own experiences through theoretical lens of self-surveillance to make an argument about the production of subjectivity in authoritarian regimes.

Introduction

*What's the difference between an optimist and a pessimist?
A pessimist is a well-informed optimist and an optimist is a well-surveilled pessimist.*
– Soviet Joke

I grew up under the watchful eyes of Lenin, Marx, and Engels. Every state holiday—and there were plenty of those in the Soviet Union—the factory across the street from the one-bedroom apartment I shared with my parents and grandparents would unveil giant red tapestries with portraits of our founding fathers. Easily 40 feet in length and width, they hung over the factory windows. The red sails billowed in the wind, blocking the light for the workers inside the factory. In the grey landscape of Soviet architecture they were beautiful brilliant crimson pops of color; faces of leaders communicating certainty and watchfulness; the sheen of the fabric in stark contrast with faded bed sheets hung out to dry on neighboring balconies. The contrasts between the beautiful apparatus of authoritarian regime, equipped with its own aesthetic surveillance objects, and the dinginess of the landscape exemplified the contradictions of life in the Soviet Union. In this piece, I draw on my experience growing up in the former Soviet Union in the late 1970s and 1980s to illuminate the everyday life in the authoritarian regime and its surveillance apparatus. At that point, the corruption of the regime was evident to most citizens as black markets flourished; illegal monetary exchanges were widespread, and bribery became a legitimate institution. However, as the economic sector was slipping out of Soviet control, the public institutions of media and education were still in business of propagating Soviet ideology. That ideology permeated every aspect of culture and was based on internalized

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surveillance—a result of practiced *doublethink*. As a result, it produced individuals torn between faith in the ideals and the reality of the everyday life. In the essay I plan to examine my own experiences through theoretical lens of self-surveillance to make an argument about the production of subjectivity in authoritarian regimes.

I grew up in Odessa, Ukraine. I was born in 1975 and we left the Soviet Union as Jewish refugees in the spring of 1989 just several months before Berlin Wall fell. A few years later so did the Soviet Union. The General Secretary Leonid Brezhnev presided over the Soviet Union from 1964-1982 and was followed in short succession by Yuri Andropov (1982-1984) and Konstantin Chernenko (1984-1985), each dying of terminal illnesses. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev became the last General Secretary of the Soviet Union. He presided until the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991. During his time in office, he instituted domestic reforms *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (restructuring) to lead the Soviet Union out of what he termed ‘the era of stagnation’ and what economists and historians have referred to as ‘Brezhnev stagnation’ (Rostow 1990; Strayer 1998).

In this piece I want to address the stagnation and the restructuring as a way of illuminating the role of surveillance during both historical periods. I echo Torin Monahan’s definition of surveillance as cultural practice which indicates “an orientation to surveillance that views it as embedded within, brought about by, and generative of social practices in specific cultural contexts” (Monahan 2011: 496). While in the context of Soviet Union it is completely accurate to view surveillance as a top-down mechanism of oppression I do not believe that it adequately reflects the complicated relationship between Soviet citizens, the government, and surveillance mechanisms. As I reflect back on my experiences I find it imperative to examine how surveillance became an internalized part of everyday life and how spaces for dissent were allowed and encouraged within that system. In that sense, I agree with Hall, Monahan, and Reeves that it is important to examine surveillance as a performance which normalizes surveillance “through near-ubiquitous exposure and quotidian interactions—that is, not merely through general social practices, but through the particular unequal roles assigned to—and played by—individuals” (2016: 154). I am especially curious to examine what kind of state-mandated subjectivities are produced when the state is failing and yet the systems of surveillance are still in place. It is to that that I turn my attention.

The stagnation

A man walks into a shop. He asks the clerk, ‘Don’t you have any meat?’ The clerk says, ‘No, here we don’t have any fish. The shop that doesn’t have any meat is across the street’.

– Soviet Joke

It is perhaps a cliché, but I spent a substantial portion of my childhood waiting in lines for everything from salami to underwear. This was an elaborate process, one that could occupy the entire day. My grandmother started the day visiting the shops and finding out what was being waited for in each one. She would then double back and ask acquaintances to hold her a place in the line. In return, she would hold their place in a different line. Without mobile phones, the system required massive coordination based on experiential estimation of timing and length of each line. It was a masterful exercise in planning. I was dragged along and often asked to hold a place while she looked around. I hated the entire practice with the passion of a seven-year old asked to stand still for hours at a time.

By that time, it was obvious to everyone but the most faithful that the Soviet experiment had failed. The lines were a practical everyday reminder of that fact. So were the dug up ditches left unfilled for years; alcoholic neighbors dying in the staircases of apartment building, and an elaborate system of bribes that held the whole thing together. “The fish starts to rot from its head”, my mother would say. She said a lot of things much worse than that. She hated the hypocrisy and the corruption of the regime. As we watched the evening news, she would verbally eviscerate the party leaders. She was particularly enamored with making

fun of Brezhnev. Later, as she put me to bed she would gently remind me not to repeat anything she said on the playground or in school. This conversation is for the home, for the private, she would say. Otherwise there would be trouble.

The division between private and public lives was evident in the everyday life. On Saturdays people would either work for free at their regular jobs or attend a *subbotnik*—an enforced day of unpaid physical labor to help the Party meet another Five Year Plan. And on Sundays they would go to one of the many black markets that filled the void left by empty stores. These were multiple and expensive. My favorite one specialized in puppies, kittens, and books. While bookstores shelves were filled with biographies of dear leaders, the black market did brisk trade in Dumas, Balzac, and Hugo. The Russians have always had a thing for the French and I left Soviet Union at the age of fourteen well versed in the 19th Century French literature. *Militsiya*—the Soviet police—toured the market as well. Sometimes in the uniform, sometimes not, they stopped by the stalls to pick up a bribe and maybe a book for the kids. Often sellers hummed along to radio songs about the glory of Soviet Union. We were fluent in doublethink.

In his famous novel *1984*—a critique of communist regime and its surveillance apparatus George Orwell described the *doublethink* required to survive a life in the regime:

To know and not to know, to be conscious of complete truthfulness while telling carefully constructed lies, to hold simultaneously two opinions which canceled out, knowing them to be contradictory and believing in both of them, to use logic against logic, to repudiate morality while laying claim to it, to believe that democracy was impossible and that the Party was the guardian of democracy, to forget whatever it was necessary to forget, then to draw it back into memory again at the moment when it was needed, and then promptly to forget it again, and above all, to apply the same process to the process itself— that was the ultimate subtlety: consciously to induce unconsciousness, and then, once again, to become unconscious of the act of hypnosis you had just performed. Even to understand the word “doublethink” involved the use of doublethink. (1948: 22)

It is the doublethink that drove my mother crazy. She had a hard time believing and not believing. I am convinced that if we lived under Stalin she would have been disappeared, so evident was her contempt for the Party. But by that time even the very upper echelons of power practiced consciously induced unconsciousness. The dissonance between the everyday life and the Party ideals was psychologically draining and such life required doublespeak enacted as an act of self-surveillance and perhaps even self-care. This self-surveillance produced a subjectivity that believed and did not believe; knew and did not know; remembered and forgot. Survival in a corrupt authoritarian regime, which long ago stopped believing its own lies, required a suspension of dis/belief. Surveillance has become therefore a continuous performative exercise. The cultural surveillance practices re-enacted the glories of the past as supposed to the possibilities of the future. The Soviet Union might have been glorious, but it was a shadow state inhabited by shadow people. The adults would sadly remark in their private conversations that no one believed anything anymore. These conversations were held in whispers, perhaps not because of an actual fear of the Gulag, but rather as a memory of the time when a Gulag had a physical presence and, with it, ideological certainty. The elderly were often nostalgic for Stalin—“at least there was order”, my grandmother would sigh—her brother was arrested under Stalin and spent a few years in Siberia. The contradictions abounded.

But we knew how to perform. Soviet Union was a country of parades and marches perfectly orchestrated and performed by the culture industry focused on pageantry. In the first grade I learned how to perform military salutes and turns with perfect precision. In school, at the age of seven, we were inducted first into the Little Octobrists—named after the month of Soviet Revolution in 1917—and then into the Young Pioneers. The inductions were a big school affair. You had to “earn” the induction through your grades, and

more importantly, good behavior. And while everyone eventually became pioneers, it was an honor to be inaugurated first. I earned that honor and I was particularly proud to be a part of the Communist future. We marched in circles around the school as the songs of the Great Patriotic War blasted on school speakers. Our pledge was “Always Ready”. We were the future believers. We were the future sacrifice. As the old Soviet joke went, “What is the difference between a pioneer and a boiled egg? Pioneer is always ready and the egg takes five minutes”.

Unlike the economic sphere, the media and education sphere was fully dedicated to propagating Soviet martyrdom of sacrifice for the collective good. The details were often told in murky, if heroic, terms. We were supposed to emanate the sacrifices of the Great Patriotic War generation. The War was seen as the culminating achievement of Soviet regime and the ultimate proof of Soviet superiority. We were the one who stopped the Nazis. We sacrificed 20 million lives to the task. The history was so well rewritten that I did not find out about Hitler-Stalin 1939 pact to divide Poland until I immigrated to the United States. In our version, we were the innocent victims and the Nazis really hated our freedoms. Our lives were possible because of the great sacrifice of our parents and grandparents and now, under the watchful eye of the Motherland, we would have to sacrifice as well. The surveillance apparatus of an authoritarian regime does not just observe and punish; it guides, encourages, and educates. I still vividly remember books about young members of the partisan resistance during the War who were captured and tortured by the Nazis and yet never gave up the location or the plans of the resistance. Their mothers upon learning of their children's noble deaths would weep, but be proud and happy for their sacrifice. I earned to follow their example.

The Restructuring

An American dog and a Soviet dog meet in the park. “So how’s the perestroika going?” asks the American dog. “What can I tell you...” answers the Soviet dog, “They moved the food bowl out of reach, but the chain is longer and now they let me bark as much as I want”.

– Soviet Joke

The adults huddled at the kitchen table and spoke in hushed tones. They grew quiet as soon as I entered the room. This was the spring of 1986 and I was eleven years old. I knew something was wrong. I have not been allowed to go outside for a few days and usually in the spring my grandmother would take any opportunity to send me outside for fresh air. It was beautiful weather and yet the windows were shut closed and wet towels were placed along the windowsills and apartment doors.

On April 26th 1986, Chernobyl nuclear power plant exploded, releasing 400 times as much radioactive material as the Hiroshima atomic bomb. As Sweden reported radioactive readings, the kids in the neighboring town of Pripjat played in the street. The decision to evacuate the town came thirty-six hours later. And it was not until the following day, April 28th, two days after the explosion that the government released a [short statement](#) on the evening news—“An accident has occurred at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant and one of the reactors has been damaged. Steps are being taken to deal with the situation and aid is being given to those affected. The government has formed a committee to inquire into this matter.” The insistence that everything was fine fell on deaf ears in my city located just 300 miles south of Chernobyl. At this point, we all knew better than to trust the evening news. Information was scarce so precautions taken veered into ridiculous: I could not wear short sleeve shirts or drink milk for the rest of the summer. We were lucky that the wind blew north that day carrying the worst of the radiation away from Odessa. The World Health Organization 2011 [report on health consequences of Chernobyl](#) might be disturbing to casual readers, but it is much more frightening to us who are still surviving the consequences of the Soviet regime.

I wanted to focus on Chernobyl as an entry point to the restructuring period to illustrate how hypocritical perestroika and glasnost sounded to Soviet citizens. The cover-up of the explosion stripped away the performances and re-enactments leaving behind nothing but anger at a regime more concerned with preserving appearances than saving its own citizens. A few days after the explosion, [evening newscast](#)

Vryemya (Time) assured that the reports of the devastation were nothing more but Western propaganda. They showed a picture of an intact Chernobyl power plant supposedly taken hours after the disaster as proof that the Western media was lying about the scope of the disaster. The neighboring farms and institutions are working as usual, the reporter reassured, and “While an accident happened, to exaggerate its scope as certain bourgeois sources of mass information have done, is to do nothing but spread gossip.”

In a 2016 account, *Chernobyl Poisoned my Childhood*, Zoya Sheftalovich (2016) remembers growing up in Chernivitz, Ukraine—the same distance from Chernobyl as Odessa, but to the north. They were in the direction of the wind and considerably less lucky than we were in the south. She remembers how the panic was made worse by the lack of reliable information from the government and people’s utter conviction that any information on the news was nothing but lies. She also remembers losing all her hair. Like many others in Chernivitz they were affected by an improper disposal of radioactive waste, which made an already bad situation worse. The stories of government officials leaving town with their families, while reassuring the general populace that there was nothing to fear, infuriated Chernivitz citizens. When they fled the Soviet Union, her mother was not reassured by Gorbachev’s promises of a more open society. Ms. Sheftalovich remembers:

My mother was adamant we should not waste any time. She didn’t trust the shiny, peaceful Gorbachev platitudes. She had heard him say white was black and black was white before, she said, after Chernobyl. “The borders are open today, but they could be closed tomorrow”, she insisted when friends tried to convince her to wait. “Tomorrow, there could be troops at the door”.

Reading this account I was struck how closely it resembled my own memories. We fled the Soviet Union as refugees as soon as we could after the disaster. My mom was adamant that she was done with the country. The lies compounded upon lies, and at some point the surveillance machine had faltered under the weight of its own contradictions. It took Mikhail Gorbachev eighteen days to make a [statement](#) about Chernobyl in which he reassured the citizens that the worst is behind them and that “the inhabitants of the settlement near the station were evacuated within a matter of hours and then, when it had become clear that there was a potential threat to the health of people in the adjoining zone, they also were moved to safe areas” (*AP Press* 1986). He went on to criticize the United States and NATO countries for “an unrestrained anti-Soviet campaign” and “a veritable mountain of lies” aimed at defaming the Soviet Union. But the fear and the rage that spread throughout the country could no longer be contained by statements everyone knew to be false. According to my mother the lies were now actively killing the citizens. The surveillance apparatus had faltered and with it so did our careful performances. My friends and I started to make fun of the same rituals we once worshiped. My grandfather who fought in the war and truly believed the Party propaganda lost his certainty. He still feebly defended the message, but the spark of true faith was gone. I was his beloved granddaughter and he did not dispute the precautions we took despite the Party reassurances.

In 2006, Mikhail Gorbachev wrote an editorial titled “[Turning Point at Chernobyl](#)”, in which he states that more so than his policies of perestroika and glasnost, Chernobyl was the nail in the coffin of the Soviet Union. He also defends the handling of information right after the incident:

The Politburo did not immediately have appropriate and complete information that would have reflected the situation after the explosion. Nevertheless, it was the general consensus of the Politburo that we should openly deliver the information upon receiving it. This would be in the spirit of the glasnost policy that was by then already established in the Soviet Union. Thus, claims that the Politburo engaged in concealment of information about the disaster is far from the truth.... In fact, nobody knew the truth, and that is why all our attempts to receive full information about the extent of the catastrophe were in vain. (Gorbachev 2006)

If this statement is true, and there is no reason to suspect that it is not, it exposes the troubling truth behind the parades, manifestos, and tapestries. The regime was simply incompetent. Held together first by brutal Stalinist oppression and later by performances, pageantry, and doublespeak, it was blown open by a nuclear reactor—the only force violent enough to make survival impossible. One could live with long food lines, forced indoctrinations, and constant presence of surveillance. But the force of violence against the social and cultural body was enough. It was the only thing to stop the performance.

Coda

When I was about seven years old, I stood on the balcony and gazed upon the faces of Lenin, Marx, and Engels. It was a state holiday, but I forget which one. In my hand I held one of my most prized possessions—a United States stamp with an American flag on it. I collected stamps for a couple of years and this stamp was a true “get”—smuggled in by a family friend through channels unbeknownst to me. My school was holding a “Raising Communist Consciousness” event that week and we heard terrifying stories how President Reagan would drop nuclear bombs on our country, killing our mothers, fathers, and siblings. If we were left alive, we would wander the nuclear hellscape only to be arrested and tortured by the invading American troops. I remember how angry I was at the United States in that moment. Surely, I could not have in my possession a symbol of the enemy. Like young war heroes before me, I had to make a sacrifice. I looked at Lenin and tore up the stamp. The tiny pieces whirled in the wind before falling on the ground below. I felt proud. I was one of them. I sacrificed for the country.

As I think back to my seven-year old self on that balcony, I grow more and more convinced that surveillance is not simply an imposition of authority and control, but rather an embodied experience of the everyday life. Any regime of power, authoritarian or otherwise, relies on such internalizations, performances, and mythologies. To think of surveillance as a cultural practice is therefore to accept that its apparatuses give individuals meaning. And these affective utterances of pride, belonging, and sacrifice cannot be dismissed as inauthentic or false simply because they were produced by and through surveillance. Surely the surveillance apparatus of the former Soviet Union was repressive, but it also created as much as it destroyed. Under the watchful eye of Lenin, we performed our faiths and our disobediences. We performed ourselves.

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