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## 'Perestroika' in the Russian Provinces<sup>1</sup>

Due to the efforts of Western historians studying the Soviet period, over the course of the last decade the concept of 'Soviet subjectivity' has established itself firmly in the lexicon of scholars. Through their analysis of 'sources of personal origin' such as diaries and autobiographies, Jochen Hellbeck, Igal Halfin and other historians have shown that Soviet ideology was a constituent factor in establishing the historical subject and its perception of self and the world [Halfin, Hellbeck 2002; Hellbeck 2006]. Thanks to works of this kind, it has become clear how deeply Soviet ideological language was internalised by wide swathes of the population. Similarly, applying the ideas of Michel Foucault to Russian material, Oleg Kharkhordin describes the Party and educational practices in the USSR in terms of techniques for the production of the self [Kharkhordin 1999].

Yet, whereas the case for the interaction or even the harmonious unity of 'subjectivity' and 'Sovietness' looks quite convincing with regard to the 1920s and 1930s, with regard to more recent times, the picture is rather more complex. It would seem that the 'Thaw' and the Brezhnev years can be better understood as a process of

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gradual differentiation within the former conditional unity and an increasing autonomy of the historical subject from Soviet discourse. This process is described in greater detail by Aleksey Yurchak. According to his research, 'the last Soviet generation' seemed to be separate to the ossifying public rituals and ideology, but not in opposition to them [Yurchak 2006].

The swift end to the Soviet era seems to have an intrinsic logic, to be a set point in a defined trajectory. Numerous investigations into 'post-socialism' have dealt with quite different kinds of subjectivity. Yet certain sociologists have claimed that a kind of 'ideally typical' Soviet person possessing a set array of (rather unattractive) characteristics has continued to 'be reproduced' even after the fall of the Soviet Union [Gudkov 2009]. Could Soviet discourse really have disappeared so rapidly? How did this turning point affect the mass everyday level of social life that is traditionally at the centre of anthropologists' attention?

As an avenue of approach for finding answers to these questions, this article proposes the experience of local history from the 1980s to the 2000s in the 'urban settlement'<sup>1</sup> of Sosnovka and the surrounding Sosnovska district in Tambov province. From 2006 to 2009, I carried out field research primarily in Viryatino, a settlement near Sosnovka that was described by Soviet ethnographers in a famous monograph of 1958 [Kushner et al. 1958; see also Alymov 2011]. Over the course of 2010, interviews with 37 inhabitants of Sosnovka itself were recorded. With a few exceptions, those interviewed were people born between the mid-1940s and mid-1950s, so that they belonged to the generation that reached a conscious age during the epoch of 'Mature Socialism' and the ensuing transformations.

Having received the status of 'urban settlement' only in 1966, Sosnovka was at the centre of an agrarian area, and so the overwhelming majority of its inhabitants were peasants and the children of peasants. At the same time, the Sosnovka inhabitants whom I surveyed mainly belonged to a more or less privileged stratum of people engaged in intellectual work – managers, journalists, teachers, doctors and entrepreneurs. The form of the interviews was at once biographical and judgement-based: I asked my interlocutors to describe and evaluate the changes that had taken place from post-Soviet times to the present day in various areas of life: in everyday life, interpersonal relations, social mood, values, ideology and relations with authority.

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<sup>1</sup> 'Urban settlement' [*posyolok gorodskogo tipa*] is a hard-to-translate Soviet term for a large village or small town (replacing the pre-1917 designation *sloboda*). Some are monotowns, centred on one particular plant; in the 1960s, the policy of closing down 'futureless villages' meant that settlements of this kind became new centres for a displaced rural population. [Editor].

The second source for my research was the newspaper of the Sosnovska district, which was renamed three times during this time: from its original title *Leninskaya pravda* (Lenin's Truth) it changed to *Slovo* (The Word) in 1991, later becoming *Sosnovskoe slovo* (The Sosnovka Word) in 1997.

The district press is a valuable source that can be somewhat undervalued by ethnographers. Like every district newspaper, the *Sosnovskoe slovo* reflects everyday life in the region, but from the late 1980s and through the 1990s it was a far from typical local newspaper. At that time, journalists who had received a professional education in central higher education establishments were the backbone of the collective. The creative potential of these authors provided the newspaper with a high level of reflective writing, meaning that it did not simply act as a chronicle or transmitter of official information, but also as a real tool for the community to make sense of the events taking place. The opportunity to write without censorship, which emerged in the late 1980s and coincided with the arrival of a young and progressive main editor, made it possible for the talent of a whole series of journalists to be revealed, and they were to play an important role in the history of not just the newspaper but also in the region as a whole. The high standard of the newspaper is attested to by the fact that more than once it has been named the best publication in Tambov province, and in 1997 it took first place in a nationwide competition, becoming the best district newspaper in Russia.

The creative work and social activity of three journalists from the *Sosnovskoe slovo* are of particular importance for this research project. All three authors, Lyudmila Sergeevna Kudinova, Vera Alekseevna Rozhkova and Larissa Ivanovna Uvarova, belong to the post-War generation. Lyudmila Kudinova and Vera Rozhkova are natives of Sosnovska district, professional journalists who worked for the district newspaper from the 1970s. During perestroika their paths diverged. Following a series of publications about the privileges of the local Party and economic elite that made a big splash, in 1990 Lyudmila Kudinova became a deputy at the Supreme Soviet of the RSFSR (Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic), and joined the 'Democratic Russia' faction. In the first half of the 1990s she was deputy governor of Tambov Oblast, and in the mid-1990s she returned to Sosnovka, where she worked as a teacher and was a deputy at the village council.

To this day Vera Rozhkova continues her work at the *Sosnovskoe slovo*. Her articles might be called an 'encyclopaedia of Sosnovka life'. In the words of Vera herself, she writes mainly about 'everyday issues', primarily about cultural life, everyday existence and the social realm. The leitmotif of her publications might be called 'women's issues', focussing on family problems and young people.

Her articles (generally written under the pseudonym Popova) stand out in their particular ethnographical attention to detail and simultaneous search for a sociological understanding of events, morals and the 'spirit of the epoch'. She adopts an independent critical position, and has always remained at some distance from politics, although of course she welcomed (at least in the beginning) the reforms and liberalisation in social life that came at the end of the 1980s.

Larissa Uvarova is an ambiguous character and is somewhat mysterious. She moved to Sosnovka at the end of the 1980s, and worked at the newspaper from 1989 to 1996. Her articles had a clear journalistic flavour, and even when describing events on a local scale she drew far-reaching social and political conclusions. Towards the middle of the 1990s Uvarova became a social leader, able to bring people together for demonstrations. In 1999, for reasons described below, she was forced to leave the district, and in 2010 she passed away. The people who knew her remember her as a striking orator and leader, an eccentric and sharp-witted person, partial, however, to rather random behaviour. For example, in one of her articles from 1991 Uvarova describes an 'experiment' she carried out to illustrate how serious the problem of theft was: at night she walked past some warehouses and through the whole village with a huge bedtick stuffed full of rags over her shoulder, so that she could see if she would be stopped by the police or any inhabitants. At 1am she made it home safely [Uvarova 1991b: 4].

Alessandro Portelli pointed out that in a certain sense, information from oral sources can never be regarded as false. Even if the facts it contains are subject to distortion, this very distortion reflects the values and views of the informants: '[W]hat is different about oral history is that "false" assertions are nevertheless psychologically "reliable", and this reliability can be just as important as a factually reliable testimony.' [Portelli 1991: 51]. Taking this position, I tried to expose these two strata in both written and oral sources — factual information and values from whose perspective various facts are interpreted. From this point of view, the publications of the local district newspaper, with its many letters to the editor from ordinary inhabitants and articles written by professional journalists describing everyday life in Sosnovka, are thematically closely linked to, and have something in common with, my recorded interviews. They mention the same key events in life in the district; evaluations and opinions given in the interviews often coincide with the general 'ideological line' of the district newspaper. At the same time, the articles allow us to delineate a more factually reliable picture of the past than oral sources, since even when referring to events in the comparatively recent past, the latter are characterised by being chronologically approximate.

In this way, any attempt to compile a 'local history' of Sosnovka over the last thirty years must simultaneously be a narrative that outlines the specific sequence of events, as well as a reflection on how historical memory functions, inevitably interpreting the past rather than becoming its duplicate. Moreover, publications in the *Sosnovskoe slovo* show that reminiscence and reflection on what was then the very recent Soviet past was an important part of the history of the post-Soviet epoch, while my interviews, as though of their own accord, concentrate on comparisons of the two epochs in life of the 'penultimate Soviet generation' (I would like to remind readers that Yurchak's 'last generation' referred to people born between the mid-1950s and early 1970s) [Yurchak 2006: 31–32].

Finally, it is worth clarifying the inverted commas containing the word 'perestroika' in the title. In the course of my field work, I became convinced that the majority of informants understand this concept not in the narrow sense of a specific stage in Gorbachev's politics [Barsenkov 2002: 81], but more literally — as a cardinal change of the whole social order that took place all throughout the late 1980s and 1990s. It is this experience and the way it is understood by the inhabitants of Sosnovka, and by the many Russian places like it, which forms the subject of this study.

### **'When women gather here, they only think back to that period'**

Towards the beginning of the 1980s, Sosnovka was the centre of one of the main agricultural districts in Tambov province. On 1 July 1983, 52,200 people were living in the district, and a little over 10,000 of them worked on the 30 local kolkhozes and sovkhozes. (For comparison, on 1 January 2010 the population was 35,200, of whom 19,400 people were of working age.) The 'urban settlement' and district centre, whose population has consistently numbered a little over 10,000 people, has been home in its time to ten major industries: a meat processing factory, a creamery, an alcohol factory, knitting and furniture factories, several construction, repair and transport organisations, as well as a poultry farm and a large feed works. Many of them had more than a hundred workers. At the present time, none of the old industries still remains, apart from the brick factory, which employs around 500 people.

Whereas in the mid-1980s the district had 62 comprehensive schools and 44 medical institutions (mainly rural hospitals and clinics), in 2010 the district had 11 schools, 26 'branch schools' (small-scale rural schools gain the status of 'branches' of more major ones), and 7 public health institutions (1 district hospital and 6 health-care centres). The number of cultural institutions has more than halved. With few exceptions, former kolkhozes and sovkhozes have collapsed, while agricultural land has mainly been bought up and re-sold by

different investors. The number of those employed in agriculture has also more than halved. In this way, the socio-economic background of the last few decades of the district's history can be characterised as depressive, which undoubtedly has an impact on the cultural processes to which this paper is dedicated [Platitsina 1998; Investitsionnyi pasport].

In their interviews, my interlocutors concentrated on the everyday experience of an ordinary person and assessed different epochs mainly from this perspective. In their reminiscences about the Soviet era this theme was of paramount importance. Without seeking to reduce the voices of the informants — who by no means agreed on all things — to some kind of homogenous 'general opinion', it is possible to isolate a series of leitmotifs and similar formulas. The most obvious and commonly encountered response about the post-Soviet era points out the higher level of social security and stability in an individual's life. Often this concept is formulated in the terminology of the ideology of the time as 'caring for people'. As one of my informants put it, the State's care for its people was manifest 'from the moment of one's birth until school and qualification for a career' (male, b. 1958).

At that time people lived better. When the women gather here to get the milk, they only reminisce about that period, they don't talk about anything else. Because, well, dairymaids and crop growers were worthy people. Anyone who wanted to could go to the sanatorium each year. And almost everyone went. They gave out certificates there, and medals, at every meeting they reminisced about them and honoured them. But now that the Soviet authorities have gone, workers are no longer popular. Everyone's forgotten about them (female, b. 1956).

Evidently, in contrast to modern times, conversations about the Soviet past focus on issues of social justice and the life options available to the children of simple kolkhoz farmers at that time: 'This period was good because of its stability and the way people were treated as individuals, as professionals' (female, b. 1953). When talking about 'the way people were treated as individuals,' my interlocutor, her path having taken her from being a teacher to a major manager at district level, was primarily referring to the opportunity to get a free education and training in a specialist area. The majority of my interlocutors were former village children who had climbed a significant distance up the social ladder during the 1960s and 1970s, and had professions that were prestigious at that time.

Of no less relevance for this rural area is that specialists were given housing to 'anchor the youth in the village'.<sup>1</sup> A former worker at the

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<sup>1</sup> The original phrase, *zakrepiť molodezh na sele* (literally, 'strengthen youth in the village') refers to a policy of social benefits aimed at preventing out-migration to cities. [Editor].

district committee pointed out in her interview that the 1980s were a time when it was possible for a short while to put a stop to the trend of young people leaving thanks to the improvement of labour conditions and, most importantly, the mass construction of housing. She describes 'social care' at the level of the district authorities:

When the manager [of the farm — S. A.] was giving his report, if he didn't build houses, if young people weren't 'anchored' in the farm', if health care was not maintained and disease prevention measures were not carried out [...] then the manager would have to pay. He was always at risk of a telling off and all that. [...] At the time people didn't understand that they got free housing, free medical care, free treatment, whatever it may be, they would send you to a medical centre when some kind of serious operation was demanded. [...] People just didn't value it (female, b. 1950).

The fact that the manager might 'have to pay' for reasons relating to the social situation in his business in the widest sense of the word is confirmed by the former manager of a large kolkhoz: 'I was visiting the district committee office for the very first time, you'll never believe why — because many people from our farm spent a lot of time at the sobering-up centre.<sup>1</sup> [...] Which means I'm not doing enough educational work' (female, b. 1941). Despite the fact that, in her words, specialists were formerly treated quite harshly ('goodness me how they were punished for any action'), she mentions 'discipline' as a valuable and lost concept of the Soviet era.

This comparison of the 'popularity' and later oblivion of the 'working person' has an ethical as well as material dimension. It relates primarily to the work ethic cultivated in Soviet times. This can be seen clearly when analysing newspaper publications. Newspapers in Soviet times were dedicated to agricultural production, and an overwhelming amount of material described the affairs of kolkhozes. Besides socialist obligations, they printed numerous reports, numerical data, stories of socialist competition and so forth. The people on its pages were primarily workers devoted to their business. The headlines of these articles speak for themselves: 'I Found the Path to Life', 'Front-Runner and Social Activist', 'Always At My Post' and so on. They talk about people who, it seems, are entirely immersed in their labour: for example, in an article about a dairymaid called R. I. Safranova, after describing her working day the author noted that she even worries about the cows at home after work: 'I was starting to cook dinner, but my thoughts were still with the farm' [Mikhailova 1985]. In articles about veterans and elderly kolkhoz farmers there were descriptions of how they 'worked from dawn until

<sup>1</sup> A medical facility to 'dry out' on an emergency basis those who had been found drunk and incapable in the street after excessive drinking. [Editor].



dusk', 'did their best' and even as pensioners they 'don't like to sit around doing nothing' [Zabrovsky 1987].

Decades of this kind of ideological seeding naturally bore fruit. In 2003 Vera Rozhkova interviewed an eminent calf-tender, Raisa Zatsepina, one of the 'best people in our province' during the 1970s, and a former member of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. Zatsepina explained how, after starting work at the farm immediately after the end of the seven-year school<sup>1</sup> and 6 months after the birth of her daughter, she 'resorted' to the farm 'not so much because of the money as because of the calves'. Zatsepina described her election to the Supreme Soviet as a pleasant surprise that gave a simple dairymaid the opportunity to see the Kremlin, Moscow, and so on. She received 60 roubles for her work as a member of the Supreme Soviet, but her thoughts, like Safranova's, remained on the farm:

While she was attending the Soviet meetings her heart ached for the calves, even though she had left them with her closest kin. When she returned, she joyfully plunged back into her usual business. She always hurried to the calves. It gave you a particular happiness and pride when you came back of an evening and saw them lying there. Bellies full and well looked after, you'd chuck in a bit more sawdust for them. It was clean, like in a good hospital. During that time she was awarded a Medal 'For Distinguished Labour' [Popova 2003a].

The system of authority in its local dimension during the Soviet era also evokes notable nostalgia. In 1996 *Slovo* published an article entitled 'Where are you Korotkovs, Zarshchikovs and Ozhogins?' hailing various district managers who had gained legendary status. 'Alas they are not here,' laments the author. 'Not that time, not those characters. Irresponsibility leads to the collapse of personality. Today irresponsibility is the most terrible threat we face. The people have lost their faith in the district authorities' [Yurin 1996]. It would be no great exaggeration to say that to this day there is a kind of cult surrounding Nikolai Korotkov, the secretary of the Sosnovska district committee, who managed the region in the 1960s–1980s. He was born in a village in Tambov province in 1924 and progressed from being a bookkeeper's assistant to first secretary and Hero of Socialist Labour. When speaking about Korotkov, Sosnovka inhabitants with one accord recall primarily the fact that almost every day he went to the farms, and 'knew every dairymaid by name': 'It was an incentive. The first secretary knows about you! That means you're somebody' (female, b. 1953). Here is an idealised image of Korotkov the manager as remembered by one inhabitant of the district:

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<sup>1</sup> The *semiletka*, offering an advanced primary education. [Editor].



How often he checked the work of the kolkhoz farmers! He was in the field almost every day. In the autumnal mire he filled the beetroot growers of the Kalinin kolkhoz with enthusiasm. They would expect him and were rather afraid of his arrival at all of the kokhozes, sovkhoses and other businesses. For the inhabitants of our district his office was always the ultimate authority.

Nikolai Petrovich listened carefully to what each visitor had to say, and was sincere in his scolding, his sympathy and his help. 'I'll go to Korotkov, he'll put everything right!' someone upset or in need would think. And he would go to the Party leader as a fair mediator. Our Party comrade was strict but fair to delinquent civil servants of various ranks. They were rather afraid of him, but only because of his fairness, sincerity and his desire to help, and our fellow Sosnovka people loved him [Yazykova 1995: 4].

Korotkov was not only an ideal manager for the inhabitants of the district. His personality (and the 'cult' surrounding it) had the weight of social facts. For example, a doctor with nearly forty years of experience recalls the relationship between an ordinary person and the district authorities as 'shorter and more effective':

Say a conflict had arisen. Someone said 'I'll go to the district committee.' Someone said 'I'll go to the head of the district executive committee. I'll go to the public prosecutor's office.' But where do we go now? (male, b. 1946).

Ask anyone you like, any time: If you wanted to get anything fixed, back then, you just needed to ask Korotkov, he'd deal with it right away. If you had trouble with someone, Korotkov would lay that person's Party membership on the line. Basically it was easier for people to speak to the authorities back then, and citizens are looked upon more favourably if they do (female, b. 1941).

Another feature of the district-level organisation of the authorities, and one which is positively recalled by several Sosnovka inhabitants, was called, in the administrative language of that time, 'personnel development'. The biography of Nikolai Korotkov, who went from being a kolkhoz bookkeeper to first secretary, is an obvious illustration of this principle. The district committee was seeking specialists and kept track of the work of those who were part of the authorities' staff reserve:

There was a reserve at that time, and we worked with them. Now, they just come in from the street and plonk themselves down. Never mind whether it will work out or not, they sit down and start managing. Back then, people used to work with the personnel department. So, for example, I was in the reserve of the education department manager. If there was something somewhere going on they knew about it, they kept track of me: how I'm working, how I'm growing and so on (female, b. 1953).

This principle for selecting personnel managers runs directly contrary to the method used today, in which the regular head of administration chooses his new team.

However, there was another side to 'people's welfare'. The 'dark side' of the paternalistic and 'disciplinary' Soviet regime could be described as an excess of 'care and control'.<sup>1</sup> In an article entitled 'Old Methods with New Slogans', a journalist describes the following incident with embarrassment: a poison-pen letter is received by the district committee regarding the infidelity of the manager of a large enterprise. The poison-pen letter 'gathers momentum': 'Soon the secretary of the Party organisation of one of the biggest enterprises in the district is spying on the manager at the request of his wife to establish whether 'there really is a rendezvous taking place' [Frolova 1987: 3]. A 'case' was opened and the manager was exposed, and the enterprise gave him a 'Party reprimand for his infidelity to his wife', but the district committee, considering this too liberal, excluded him from the Party.

In 1987 this kind of action was already perceived as an impermissible interference into one's personal life, which signals the shifting of borders between the private and the public and the broadening of the space allotted to private life. However, how the district committee interfered in production and one's professional life now evokes unpleasant memories for many people: 'They meddled, crudely meddled in everything, shrugging off all responsibility. That was completely unacceptable' (male, b. 1946). The manager of a construction organisation recalls how he was controlled through the secretary of the Party organisation, who 'constantly reported back on the manager's actions':

I was reprimanded strictly because I had, let's say I'd implemented something new in the organisation but hadn't had it agreed. Of course, I was very upset by this, because I was applying new measures to increase output and the efficiency of labour so that the quality of work could be improved, but as it turned out this was punishable (male, b. 1944).

This cruelty to managers could be perceived as a dependence on the administrative machine and those who personally have authority:

My husband worked as a chief agronomist. He quarrelled with the first secretary of the district committee of the Party. I don't know how we got away without leaving the district. As a rule, in order to get out of this kind of situation you have to move to a different district and look for work on the side somewhere (female, b. 1953).

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<sup>1</sup> What would be called in English, a 'nannyish attitude'. [Editor].

On the other hand, in both interviews and newspaper publications fairly frequently one encounters the opinion that the 'interference in personal life' carried out by women's councils and occupational therapy centres was a positive factor that demonstrated to people that they were 'needed' and suppressed destructive tendencies such as alcoholism and domestic violence.

In an equally negative tone, people of various professions recalled assemblies in Soviet times. A former driver, now an entrepreneur, said:

Back when we had Communism, there were completely doctored records, and what you heard at Party meetings was this terrible blather. [...] Ninety percent of it had no real function at all. You couldn't laugh out loud, but I thought to myself 'Yes, well, when the hell...' I was still young, but there were people who had been in the Party for up to thirty years, probably even more, and I thought 'How can they stand it for their whole life, all this baloney? (male, b. 1959).

A doctor at the district hospital recalls:

How long can you keep talking about what Vladimir Ilych said at the Prague conference? How much time can you spend studying primary sources? It was so annoying. On the one hand it wasn't too bad. They had everyone under control. But for their own ends. The hospital, education. They made decisions, complete dilettantes, all these instructors. It was so annoying (male, b. 1946).

The activity of workers in the culture sector was also controlled by the district committee:

I moved here during the strict Brezhnev era. It amazed me. Firstly, the concerts: *Lenin is still alive* [sings]. It was all so dead boring. Really. The district committee of the Party kept track of the repertoire of the concerts. He came to important events like that. [...] The subject matter was always the same, self-restraint and etiquette. Never failed (female, b. 1960).

However, the main source of dissatisfaction through the most varied strata of the population was, as is well known, the lack of correspondence between declared principles and reality. When analysing the methods and opposition culture of subordinate groups, James Scott noted that as a rule, protest against the regime was framed in terms of the ruling ideology [Scott 1990: 106]. Unlike dissidents who demanded 'adherence to the Soviet constitution', workers and peasants phrased their dissatisfaction in terms of social justice —

<sup>1</sup> In the sense of, 'when the hell is this ever going to finish' [Editor].

a central concept in Soviet ideology. In 1991 a woman who worked at the Sosnovka press wrote a letter to the newspaper summing up her long, sad experience:

Day in, day out it was instilled in us that in our country there is no higher calling than to be a worker. [...] But they write one thing and in fact things turn out to be quite different. So I have decided to tell how it really is, to explain that our workers are the most unappreciated people and are deprived of their rights [Orekhova 1991: 4].

To back up this theory, she wrote about her own attempts to obtain expensive goods that were in short supply: a motorcycle, a car, a washing machine and a petrol-powered saw. Each time these attempts fell through because of some ambiguous actions by State bodies (they announced that motorcycles would be sold for a set amount of potatoes, but did not warn her that it had to be taken to the general store, not the procurement office), or because of an obvious discrimination against ordinary citizens, such as existed on the waiting list to receive an automobile.

A former employee of the district committee believes that factors such as shortages, social injustice and 'envy' were a major part of the population's dissatisfaction during perestroika:

When someone bought a car, people also began to get envious. My money's lying in my savings account, I can't buy anything, but he's driving a car. Envy also created ideas of unfairness and division in people's minds, when the chair of the district consumer union was lord and master. When the first secretary's wife had better clothes than Marya Ivanovna the dairymaid. That was bad, that shouldn't have happened. When items in short supply were brought in for public holidays and so on, people would go shopping: the district and regional elite. [...] People saw this and knew about it. Remember, there was even a slogan 'People and Party are united', only people rephrased it, 'Open your shops and we'll be delighted' (female, b. 1950).

Dissatisfaction of this kind could 'break out' even at Party gatherings. Something similar took place at a closed Party gathering dedicated to the battle against 'pilferers' in one of the town's organisations. The reading out of official documents had to be followed by statements. No one wanted to say anything. Finally one worker was persuaded to speak:

They led him to the stand, where he stood and said: 'What do I say now? Well, for example, I've never once seen the wife of the district agricultural manager at the market.' He began to list all the wives. Then he spoke to the manager of 'Farming Machines': 'Yours too, Ivan Ksenofontovich' (male, b. 1951).

'Pilferers' were, undoubtedly, an everyday reality of Sosnovka's 'grey economy'. One journalist recalls how one evening some 'puffed up' workers from the meat processing factory were going past the window of the proofreaders' room with meat and sausages tied to the inside of their clothing. Uvarova later wrote about work at the poultry meat processing factory:

Many Sosnovka residents remember the times when they were fed from this very place. One of us would come up to the meat factory gate late at night, and from behind it bags and packages of meat would come flying, and they would bring this meat straight home, cheap and fresh. You could arrange with a delivery man to bring liver or fillets for special occasions. Basically, it was a wonderful time. Work at the meat processing factory was considered the most worthwhile and prestigious. They didn't take just anyone there [Uvarova 1996a: 2].

When recalling the domestic side of this 'stagnant' life, people often remark upon the fact that 'the fridges in every home were crammed', although many food products had to be 'procured'. Some goods, such as fashionable clothing, could only be bought in Moscow or Tambov, which included standing in queues for many hours and sometimes humiliation at the hands of 'arrogant shop assistants'. Members of the intelligentsia who did not have their own cattle but got paid a relatively high salary would go to Tambov for butter, sausages, and sour cream. However, 'procurement' was primarily for goods that were in short supply, generally imported and industrial. Carpets, washing machines and other such rarities 'were sought by way of someone you knew, by pulling strings, favours, but nevertheless you acquired it, acquired everything' (male, b. 1955). 'You could procure anything, lots of things could be procured, but nothing legitimately' (male, b. 1946). 'A simple person could not buy good things. Even someone a step above the simple man couldn't. The hierarchy was very clear: workers of the Party District Committee, then workers of the Komsomol District Committee, then trade workers themselves, doctors, and also certain teachers, but they all took advantage, they had access' (female, b. 1952).

These factors played a significant role in the events that took place in Sosnovka during perestroika.

### Perestroika

Despite the ambiguous — to put it mildly — attitude towards the events at the end of the 20th century, one can say that the majority of my interlocutors acknowledged that the resounding speeches about perestroika and overcoming 'stagnation' were linked to concrete hopes. To the reasons indicated can be added the fact that an urge for

change was dictated by a sense of tedium, an understanding of how ineffective the agricultural system was, and impressions of life abroad, which, odd though it may seem, many inhabitants living 'out in the sticks' did have, thanks to a scheme that issued tourist vouchers permitting travel to socialist countries, and which was widespread by the end of the Soviet era. The new general secretary made a positive impression on many. However, the most important process of the early perestroika period was changing the framework and boundaries of public discourse, which gradually came to include previously unthinkable issues and modes of discussion. This process can be traced most effectively through publications in the *Leninskaya pravda* newspaper.

It would be incorrect to suppose that before perestroika newspaper publications had no critical element. From the very beginning the Soviet authorities used the district press not only to praise the regime, but also as a means of criticising negligent managers, and to educate the population about the positive and negative examples of mismanagement, uncultured behaviour and parasitism. It is possible to identify two interconnected vectors of changes in public discourse that were manifested in various newspaper publications: a gradual increase in critical tension in publications and, in the articles of more progressive journalists, the resonant issue of the battle against bureaucracy and the vacuous officious forms of public life.

In 1987–1988 reviews of letters to the newspaper repeatedly remarked upon the abrupt change in the tenor of readers' correspondence:

Reports about ordinary labour successes, sycophantic letters of gratitude and resounding reviews of concerts on special public holidays and other gala events gradually pass into legend. Increasingly there are letters reflecting upon the course of perestroika and democratization in public life, about the flaws in areas such as trade and health, and 'painful' problems in social and cultural life are raised [Post 1988a].

In the following review of letters the author also indicated the growing number of letters about the growing 'lack of culture in our lives' (the impudence of shop assistants and doctors, the neglect of street care and so on): 'The habit of dullness and routine has eaten so profoundly into the fabric of our lives and being that any attempt to disturb it evokes perplexity' [Post 1988b].

A kind of breakthrough was achieved by an article by Lyudmila Kudinova that began with the problems of trade, but later progressed to the theme of the distribution of welfare and social justice that was central to the public consciousness. In this article, which created a tremendous stir, 'Shortage. Who Creates It and Why?', Kudinova 'declares for all to hear what everyone had previously

whispered on street corners', specifically the practice of manipulating the distribution of goods in short supply (from furniture to trimming materials and books), as a result of which many of them ended up with the trade workers themselves, and their relatives and 'clients':

'So I'm not to take anything for myself?' This phrase was heard many times. It sounded certain, tranquil, with a sense that it had formed and been confirmed over many years.

Well, would *you* work in retail without having better clothes and shoes, without eating a bit better, let's say, having tinned salmon and silver carp, or marshmallows and biscuits, drinking Indian tea and instant coffee?! [Kudinova 1988a].

The increased shortages provoked ever greater numbers of questions among the population, and the newspaper did not merely respond with vivid everyday sketches, but also gave a precise answer to the question 'who is guilty?':

That day very early there was a big crowd in the department store at the district centre. The doors to the shop had been propped open in expectation of the shop assistants by those eager to get some good, reliable boots. The whole forbidding look of the crowd said: strangers keep out!

'Wonder what they're like?' someone said.

'Some don't need to wonder. They was walking to work in them boots today already,' someone in the queue said.

'What?!'

'That's my point. You need to know how to fix things, not stand in a queue.'

This vivid description of the incredible crush, when the shop assistants carry several boxes of imported shoes onto the shop floor, is followed by an indication of the 'other side' of trade:

They [the shop assistants — S. A.] didn't hang back, and then, to the sounds of grumbling from the queue, shop assistants from other departments and their friends, and friends of friends all went into the storeroom, and, as they say, out they came tired but satisfied — each one with a new purchase.

'So that's the crux of the matter,' says the quick-witted reader. Absolutely right — the other side of trading. That one like a cat in a bag, which came through the 'back door'. What's that, you don't like it? It belittles your sense of human worth? Offends your feelings? Big deal! Don't have it then — we'll find other people who want it [Korneeva, Kudinova 1988: 4].





‘Contract Prices’. ‘Yes, but who made the contract?’

Artist V. Zhabsky. Slovo. 7 December 1991

A critical event not only in the social but also the political life of the district was the publication of an article by Lyudmila Kudinova entitled ‘Mansions: Why So Many Are Being Built in Sosnovka Now’ [Kudinova 1988b: 2]. This was a reference to the dozens of high quality brick houses that were built at that time in a part of central Sosnovka that locals called ‘Rude Town’.<sup>1</sup> As it turned out, the ‘mansions’ had been erected without going through the proper channels and violated large numbers of building regulations, but most importantly, they were built at the expense of State departments and organisations, which is to say ‘public funds’. Their future owners were the managers of these organisations: from the head of the District Agro-Industrial Association, the district agricultural system, and the services department, to the chief physician of the hospital and the chair of the committee for district control. ‘Mansionism’, as Kudinova wrote, ‘was quite a phenomenon in Sosnovka’, mansions ‘continue to grow like mushrooms before our very eyes’, and it was during this time, when ‘hundreds of families are huddling in poky little rooms in hostels and tumbledown houses, and are creeping into debt, when, having lost all hope of getting a flat, they decide to build one themselves or buy a house.’ The author called for ‘re-establishing social justice on every level’.

<sup>1</sup> *Khamskii*, from *kham*, refers to aggressive and self-promoting rudeness — cf. the dialect use of the English word ‘rude’, as in the Jamaican term ‘rude boys’ (gangsters) etc. [Editor].

When remembering 'Rude Town', people always note that by modern standards, these houses were nothing special — they were no more than good quality, but quite modest 'cottages', nothing in comparison to the real 'mansions' of the 1990s. However, at the time the repercussions were huge. The newspaper received 28 responses, whose authors 'were guided by a heightened sense of social justice awakened by the glasnost years'. The fact that managers 'received preferential social benefits', as the newspaper's review of letters summarised, was a 'social evil' that had become endemic during the years of stagnation [Pochta 1989: 1]. The letters published from enraged readers contained demands to 'root out rudeness', a proposal to give away 'detached houses' to be used as kindergartens, to pass them on to 'simple workers' or families with many children, as well as political demands: 'Isn't it time that the District Committee of the Communist Party and the district executive committee took up a principled and honest position in relation to these shameless people and turned their attention to the needs of the people, and represented their interests?' [Gladilina et al. 1989: 3].

The wave of mass dissatisfaction with the local leadership that arose marked the beginning of Lyudmila Kudinova's political career. In 1989 she published articles on related issues, such as 'The Virus of Exclusivity', which was about the sale by the district consumer union of motor cars to district bosses out of turn. Judging by letters written to the newspaper, the results of the spot-checks and commissions created to examine these cases did not satisfy the population. Kudinova wrote:

We are just waking up from a long slumber, but how painful is this awakening! How we wish to not see trampled ideals, outraged honour and decency all around us, a lack of conscience in those who manage and rule us as we go about fulfilling the five-year plan for milk or meat [Kudinova 1990a: 2].

In 1989 a gathering of citizens in the town of Sosnovka put forward Lyudmila Kudinova as a candidate for the people's deputy of the USSR to counterbalance the candidate traditionally proposed by the Party's district committee 'under orders'. The initiative belonged to a teacher working at the vocational school, N. D. Varchev. Up to this point, Lyudmila Kudinova had not only enjoyed widespread popularity with local people generally, but had also been the newspaper's Party organiser, a member of the district committee. She had the support of some of the 'progressive' Party and agricultural managers in the district. In this way, the district committee, like the Communist Party as a whole, found themselves in quite a contradictory situation. On the one hand, its official policy was, naturally, not to allow Kudinova to be selected. All primary organisations were instructed to let anyone go through but her. In total, nine candidates took part in

the campaign, many of whom were obviously put forward 'as an alternative' to the obstinate journalist. Activists recall the enthusiasm with which people helped to organise Kudinova's pre-election campaign (money for placards, petrol for trips, costs for time off work etc.), and the obstacles they encountered (meeting disruption, rumours and counter-campaigns).

On the other hand, one of the instructors of the ideological department organised a meeting between Kudinova and some work collectives which, of course, could not have taken place without the permission of the authorities, and helped compile the programme. The population's sympathy was unanimously on the side of the journalist. The civic assembly that had launched her candidacy was an extraordinary event. Taking place in the packed hall of the cinema, as a current member of the district committee recalls, this meeting 'was simply overflowing with joy! People were talking so much, and they were so critical of us politicians that everyone in the hall was on their feet applauding'. Kudinova was duly victorious at the elections, beating the 'district committee' candidate by almost 10,000 votes.

The main ideological message which recommended the author of 'Mansions' to the people was, of course, the demand for 'social justice'. Besides this fundamental issue, Lyudmila Kudinova spoke out for the democratic election of Party and government leadership, higher prices for agricultural producers, and independent choice by peasants of the form of economic management they were supposed to live by. She refused to have anything to do with 'Memorial', the national front or the Inter-Regional Group [Kudinova 1990b]. In an interview carried out when I was doing my fieldwork, Lyudmila Kudinova recalled: 'My ideology was to improve the Party, to shake it up so that it would finally face change and perestroika today'. Only later, under the influence of metropolitan luminaries — Yeltsin, Sakharov and other members of the Inter-Regional Group of People's Deputies — did she come to realise the 'naivety' of her reformist ideas of that time.

The atmosphere made possible by such events is difficult to understand without taking into consideration the second change mentioned above: the gradual rejection of public rituals and other established forms of public life. From 1985, one of the most problematic issues, evoking the widest outcry, was leisure facilities for young people: 'The culture club is empty, public events are pompous and boring, and youth work is totally bland' [Pochta 1987]. Vera Rozhkova wrote repeatedly about the 'window dressing' approach and 'conventionalism' of work with schools, cultural institutions and the district cinema, which was the reason why youth leisure was reduced to 'rackety' dance evenings, when there was 'nothing to do sober'

[Popova 1987]. The sense of emptiness and being at a loose end felt by some young men led to vandalism, hooliganism, and mindless theft. Kudinova viewed the solution in freeing the individual's actions from excessive ritualisation. When describing the 1987 competition among local village soviets for the best civil ceremony (naming, engagement, marriage),<sup>1</sup> Kudinova criticised those who were so full of grandeur and pomposity that 'you completely lost sight of the people who were supposed to be at the centre of the celebration' [Kudinova 1987]. In an article about Pioneers' Day, in 1989 Rozhkova compared it to the formerly strictly regulated public holidays, when, after marches, reports and speeches arranged at the square, children would begin to faint. Having rejected this kind of rigid organisation and formalism, the Pioneers organisation had to become a place where the 'rudiments of the future of personality and individuality' were established. At a public holiday in 1989, there was evidence of the new developments, when children talked in their own words about the activities and achievements of their section [Popova 1989].

Another example of this kind of rejection of ritual forms of behaviour was shown to Sosnovka residents by Alexander Lyubimov, the presenter of the then massively popular TV show *View*, who had stood for election as a People's Deputy of the USSR for Tambov province.<sup>2</sup> When going to meet voters he arrived in jeans and a black T-shirt decorated with the emblem of the USSR and the words 'All power to the soviets!'. In an article about this meeting, Uvarova wrote about his uniqueness and even described him as an 'extraterrestrial', striking in his relaxed nature, honesty and his refusal to accept the ideals of the past [Uvarova 1990a: 2].

However, the rapidly worsening material conditions soon changed people's mood. Here, I shall describe the subsequent events of the 1990s–2000s from two viewpoints: 1) changes at the domestic and everyday level as seen through the prism of a discourse about changing character and interpersonal relations, and 2) ideological and socio-political processes as they emerged in the discussion of ideas about the past and in the 'use' of history to define the values of the present.

<sup>1</sup> The late Soviet era witnessed a proliferation of ceremonies such as baby-naming rituals and 'Komsomol marriages', organised to a standard format that included the singing of patriotic anthems, speeches by local dignitaries, Komsomol and Pioneer delegations, etc. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> Alexander Lyubimov (b. 1962) was a leading TV journalist of the perestroika period. *View*, which started being broadcast in 1987, began life as a music magazine programme but then evolved into a current affairs talk show. Briefly banned in 1991, the programme was revived and continued appearing until 2001, when Lyubimov's appointment as deputy director of ORT put an end to his presenting career. [Editor].

### **‘Money ruined the Russian and his soul’**

The relationships between people in everyday life and the related rules and micro-rituals are a complicated issue, and any statements made regarding them always give cause for doubt, and can be considered ‘subjective’ and not necessarily typical. In my decision to include this issue in my conversations with Sosnovka residents I was influenced by one of the first interviews I conducted, in which this issue was raised by a member of the local intelligentsia: ‘Everyone closed up, you could say. Everyone kind of dug themselves into a hole, had less trust in one another, less sense of obligation and less willingness to help. [...] At one point, borrowing money was quite common, but nowadays borrowing money from anyone except a close relative is quite out of fashion’ (male, b. 1949). The structure of this kind of reasoning is also based on a comparison between this situation and past Soviet times. In 2000, the *Sosnovskoe slovo* published an article by a tenth-grader, in which she wrote about the reasons why there was nostalgia for the past. In her words, native Sosnovka residents ‘sigh about the days when there were parades with banners on the first of May’ and celebrations were organised in the park. Trips to the cinema and even to the shops were talking points, whereas now in their free time Sosnovka residents ‘watch their televisions, sit round at home, and play cards’. The author of the letter noted the current lack of communication which forces people to think of the past with nostalgia: ‘Long ago were the days when you might see a small group of people happily chatting and smiling on the street. [...] People are beginning to be afraid of one another, because they have completely stopped communicating’ [Skopintseva 2000: 4].

Many informants formulated their own observations in terms of the changing character of people and their personal relationships in modern times using such strong expressions as malice, envy and greed in contrast to kindness and openness in the past. As a rule, these changes are linked by informants to the stratification of ownership and the abrupt increase in the importance of money.

It’s more or less the same people as always [in the group], but the relations are different. People became different, do you see? So say I remember how I got married here, I moved here when I was eighteen. I came to our street. People would always gather near our house, my father-in-law was an accordion player. Say it’s a holiday, they’d have some kind of celebration. They’ll be just a little bit drunk, nobody was completely drunk, just a little! And they’re singing songs, and socialising and so on.<sup>1</sup> I don’t want to say that my neighbours now are bad. They’re good neighbours,

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<sup>1</sup> The slippage between past and present tense follows the original. [Editor].

God bless them! But it's just the house, that's all! And the fence. There's no socialising, do you see? There's all the division of income, and this is what it causes — dissatisfaction with life and dissatisfaction with one another. Maybe it even causes envy (female, b. 1961).

Observations relating to the role of envy and stratification of ownership and the destructiveness of these for neighbourly and friendly relations are one of the leitmotifs in the reflections of Sosnovka residents about the transformations in recent decades.

There's almost no socialising. Everyone's ground down with their own problems and aren't about to rush over to a neighbour's house for tea. That's one reason. Because everything is expensive, even relatives have stopped going to visit each other. And the third thing is that people have begun to be resentful, probably because they see one person enjoying success without working, while someone else is working hard for peanuts. [...] As soon as our system started changing, can you imagine what questions all those mansions raised in our minds? (female, b. 1945).

The same problems are also experienced by inhabitants living several kilometres away from Sosnovka in the large town of Treti Levye Lamki. A young woman, chair of the town council, remarked upon the characteristic trait of the past: 'Somehow it was simpler. We always had someone staying in our family. Families got together for every celebration. [...] Now it's not like that. Now each family is more isolated'. She named several factors that brought people closer together in the past. First of all, there was no stark stratification, and an approximately uniform level of comfort. Then, gathering the plants from one's vegetable garden at harvest time generally united the forces of several families, who jointly collected the produce from their plots. Nowadays, vegetable gardens are much less frequently cultivated — instead people mainly cultivate seasonal work in Moscow. This leads to a disparity of income as well as a lack of time to spend maintaining interpersonal links, visiting friends or family and celebrating special occasions together with others. The cinema, which was the centre of collective leisure activity even up until the 1990s, squandered this function, eventually becoming a small bar. Television and the spread of Internet access also took their toll. 'Isolation' is said to affect relations between neighbours and attitudes towards children:

Now you try not to let other people in the house, to conceal what you've got there. Suppose you suddenly have too much and others envy you. Or then again, less than someone else. But before, we would skip along without trouble, I don't even know how, five people at a time would come round and there was enough rolls and buns for everyone.



I was the baby of the whole street. My mum, never shy, could send me to one neighbour, or a second neighbour, or a third. And people didn't refuse. [...] Now no one would babysit someone else's child. Basically, they'd say, why should I have that burden? So something in people's minds has definitely changed (female, b. 1977).

Many of my interlocutors pointed out the negative changes in the relationships between people in work collectives, linking this to factors such as the intensification of competition for a shrinking number of jobs, the growing disparity in wages, the poor protection of workers from the authority of the 'bosses' and employers, the disappearance of traditions such as the 'apprenticeship' — novices being mentored by older workers. To comprehend the current situation, however, it is necessary to turn back to the 1990s, a time when, generally speaking, the sources of these problems arose. As early as 1991 the regular author of a local district newspaper wrote:

In seventy years of life under the Soviet regime we have become people of a particular sort. Alongside the good nature of the Soviet person, increasingly negative qualities such as malice, envy and mistrust can also be seen. This has been particularly obvious in recent years. Will this not spill out everywhere during privatisation, when the rich will become richer and the poor poorer? Will farmers' estates, private shops and enterprises not burst into flames and will blood not pour forth? [Yurin 1991].

The turn of the 1990s was, for Sosnovka and for the whole country alike, primarily a time of extreme shortage, unpaid salaries, and an abrupt worsening of the material situation. The planned liberalisation of prices at the beginning of 1992, in the words of Vera Rozhkova, 'completely stirred up our human anthill', and forced people to stock-pile any goods they could get hold of. The newspaper was swamped with complaints at violations of trading rules: 'But our people, simple country people, brought up on the most absurd Soviet idealism, they are all calling for some kind of justice. Even though of course they don't believe in anything themselves' [Popova 1991].

At the same time as the liberalisation of prices at the beginning of 1992, district public opinion got worked up over an 'ugly story', described by Rozhkova in an article of the same name. It was about the New Year presents for the children of workers at the district cinema network. Chocolates and sweet food were given out as gifts through the district consumer association, which only informed the cinema management on 28 December that an 'order' for caramel, biscuits and fondant would soon be arriving. By this point the children of the rural projectionists had already been given gifts in the form of half a kilo of 'greenish little mandarins', therefore the manager and the employees of the accounts department of the



cinema network bought up an entire eleven boxes of the allocated sweets and divided these between themselves. However, the manager of the local cinema decided to blow the whistle. As she wrote in the newspaper: 'Dear children of the local cinema staff! I'm sorry to tell you that the sweeties, biscuits and chocolate bars meant for you as part of your New Year presents have all been eaten by grown-up men and women from the management team. Maybe now they'll be ashamed of what they've done!' [Popova 1992a]. Employees of the accounts department, however, refused to acknowledge their guilt, claiming that they bought the sweets with their own money, and that the manager of the cinema (which was already closed) was simply settling a score with the other management departments because various people had lost their jobs [Ustinova et al. 1992]. In reaction to this story a number of readers' letters were published, and Larissa Uvarova responded in her article. She lamented the 'abrupt fall in moral standards' that allowed so many improper acts to be publicly defended and permitted life according to the formula 'I live how I want, I do what I want' [Uvarova 1992b]. The more moderate Rozhkova pointed out, by way of mitigating circumstances, the general setting of the 'pre-market witches' sabbath', in which 'something happened to the conscience' of many people [Popova 1992b].

The reigning mood of the 1990s in the collective farms and enterprises of the district is often described, in conversations and articles, using the eloquent word *rastashchilovka*, meaning 'pilfering at work':

It is a secret to no one that today on kolkhozes and sovkhozes very real *rastashchilovka* goes on. People thief anything lying around that they happen to spot. And they fight hard to get it.

So, for example, there's a dairymaid coming home from work clutching a jar of milk and some flour in her bag. Is she thieving? Maybe she's taking her due, as the head of one kolkhoz told me. If someone isn't paid for six months, does he then have the right to drink a glass of milk? If a mechanic uses a kolkhoz lorry to fetch firewood, should he be punished? He too is sitting there with no money, and he has a family to look after [Uvarova 1994d].

As early as 1992 Uvarova characterised the situation that had arisen on the district's farms as intolerable:

Firstly, there is a lack of discipline among the livestock breeders. The dairymaid might have a drinking bout, go on the town, and be late for work. The farmyard worker might not turn up at all. The feed carriers may be late, indifferent to their work as animal specialists. Secondly, the livestock breeders may transfer their resentment and their feeling of being tired of this life onto the animals. Gone are the times when the cows were treated tenderly: daughter, mother, provider. Today on the farms, you hear curses



Barter. [The woman is offering the cow a ration coupon that says 'Milk', while the cow offers her one that says 'Hay'.]

Artist V. Zhabsky. Slovo. 10 December 1991

and swearing, the animals are beaten and kicked. They, the poor creatures, withdraw into themselves, they don't give milk, they don't put on weight. Truly, cattle have a bestial life [Uvarova 1992a].

Kolkhoz farmers, whose salaries were mainly paid 'in kind' (with young animals, formula feed etc.), staked everything on their person plots. Larger agricultural concerns in Sosnovka encountered cuts and unemployment. By 1994 many businesses were on the brink of bankruptcy, and jobs were cut (mainly for women and young people), or employees could continue without pay, earning money on the side with other work such as clearing the fields of the surrounding kolkhozes. As a shrewd observer of everyday life in Sosnovka, Rozhkova described the circumstances in labour collectives:

Yes, once upon a time there were mentors. But today a nurse approaching retirement age or already receiving her pension convulsively hangs on to her job, with the strength of a death grip. When a newly-fledged young workmate is brought to her, she looks at this new woman not as the successor to her work, but as a superfluous mouth, a threat to the harmonious work collective.

The situation was aggravated by refugees from countries of the former USSR:

So they come to Sosnovka, not knowing that now you have to pull strings even to be a care worker in a nursing home, that you have to watch out for your job as a stoker in case one of the wretched workers goes on a drinking spree or lets the frost into the boiler room. This doesn't encourage people to become closer to one another, nor does it encourage their moral standards [Popova 1994].

The limitation and violation of labour rights were 'hotspots' of the mid-1990s. The managers of unprofitable businesses avoided 'ballast', and in the words of Rozhkova, work collectives were dominated by 'lawlessness and petty tyranny' [Popova 1996b]. One such story reached court and was made public thanks to the newspaper. Nina Mikhailovna, a painter and plasterer with an eight-year-old child whose husband was unemployed, was dismissed from the municipal housing and utilities department, which she said was the result of a conflict with the head bookkeeper. The conflict had deep 'roots': the head bookkeeper had hindered her from obtaining a place to live, as a result of which Nina Mikhailovna had occupied one of the mansions in the infamous 'Rude Town' without permission. She succeeded in obtaining authorisation and asserted her right to inhabit the domicile in court. However, she was right in the hair of the daughter of the head bookkeeper, who lived in the next-door 'mansion' and also worked at the housing and utilities department. When the neighbours' children fell out, things rapidly escalated, and Nina Mikhailovna was told 'she needn't hold her breath' over keeping her job, a threat that soon turned into reality [Popova 1996c: 3].

Larger-scale clashes between ordinary workers and managers also crept into the heated general meetings where the fate of businesses was decided. For example, by 1996 the meat processing factory, formerly a very desirable place to work, was on the brink of bankruptcy: it was struggling against the competition of other producers, and kolkhozes and sovkhoses were stopping delivering cattle. In order to avoid complete collapse, the manager decided to sell the business to a large factory in Tambov. At the general meeting, it became clear that the management, engineers and technicians were for the sale of the business, while the workers were against. The ensuing debates on the issue provided an opportunity for the workers' accumulated complaints about the management to pour forth. The workers managed to assert the right of the business to be independent, although a year later the factory finally ground to a halt all the same [Uvarova 1996a; 1996b]. At a bread factory meeting at the beginning of 1997, the chair of the district consumer cooperative was openly accused of making enhancements to the construction of a mansion at the company's expense [Popova 1997].

The true stars of *rastashchilovka*, however, were the managers of kokhozes and businesses that had the opportunity to control and direct this process. Uvarova described the deliberate collapse of one Sosnovka company in her article 'I'd Start Working as A Boss Myself...' [Uvarova 1995a]. The company got a new manager in the early 1990s, when 'the managers of many organisations, companies and enterprises completely threw aside all restraint. It was as if someone had instructed them "grab everything that you can lay your hands on." Which they did.' It soon emerged that 'you could have shot a war film' on the site that had once housed the company's health club, canteen, and bathhouse. The employees of the accounts department had bought its computers and televisions at rock-bottom prices, and drivers had made off with the company cars. In 1998, some drivers at the now bankrupt transport company were able to purchase their Kamaz vehicles, but many were 'dumped on the roadside', while the collective of 'shareholders', in Rozhkova's words, 'just fell on their backs and waved their legs in the air' [Popova 1999a]. Unsurprisingly, at meetings following the bankruptcy and the 'voluntary redundancy' of the former manager, the collective 'became enraged' and demanded an investigation and for the manager to be tried in court.

The behaviour of the authorities and managers throughout this period remains to this day a factor noted by my interlocutors when analysing the reasons for the protests and particular mood of the population:

The authorities behaved wrongly. [...] Then the factory was closed and the machinery was sold when it changed from a kolkhoz to Agricultural Production Cooperatives. Now people



Wolf and Sheep. [The wolf is saying to the sheep, 'We've got democracy now, so by all means voice your opinion' – i.e., before I eat you.]

Artist V. Zhabsky. Slovo. 6 November 1993

see the murky water, and as they say, when the water's murky, there's plenty of fish to be caught. And there was a lot of bad feeling. "They grab what they can, like we all always said, while we..." [...] So all the bad feeling, it came from that, and now it's here to stay. Seeing that some people have shops and somewhere to live, [...] but we, the simple people, just have our wages, and we've stayed stuck at the bottom. Though when it comes to brains and professionalism, many people remained at the bottom because of the structure of their mind and their attitude and their political views, they thought people should stick together, that life wasn't for individuals, but for everyone together. So they made their own beds to lie in (female, b. 1953).

Protests by ordinary Sosnovka residents in the 1990s were widespread, and particularly striking in comparison to the absence of comparable social activism in the following decade. The first protest took place in Sosnovka on 19 August 1989. Drivers from the dairy factory, unable to resolve their own problems at the company (they had demanded that the old schedule of work and holidays, overtime pay and so on should continue being honoured) drove their milk tankers out on to the central square in front of the district committee building — where all the official rallies and festivities were held — and the First Secretary himself came out to meet them [Uvarova 1989c: 1]. Subsequently, however, the acknowledged leader and organiser of the protest activity was the trade union of education workers. As early as 1991 its chief warned the district authorities that the teachers' cup of patience was flowing over [Morozova 1991: 1].

Besides the problems that many different residents had in common, teachers had other specific issues: frequently they could not redeem their ration coupons in shops, because the agreed hours for this were mainly in the mornings, during school lessons; rural schools were not provided with fuel; repairs were not carried out; money had stopped being paid for textbooks and pedagogical literature and so on. Rural teachers were gradually shifting to subsistence farming, forced to get up at five o'clock in the morning to set the cows in order and, in Uvarova's words, even during lessons they were thinking about the fact that 'the cow's gone down with something, and the piglet's not eating well'. 'Teachers began to live embittered lives, withdrawing into themselves, losing the feeling of collectivism and simply losing the inner strength to fight for survival' [Uvarova 1995c]. Teachers themselves recall that during those years it was necessary to rely a great deal on help from your parents living in the countryside in terms of foodstuffs and handouts from their pension money, and that you had to borrow a lot of money from your friends as well. In an interview with Rozhkova on the eve of 1 September 1998, a teacher with 30 years' experience expressed gratitude to the 'former underachievers who today work at the market place: they treat us



with understanding, and come to our aid — by loaning us money’ [Popova 1998e: 1].

Evidence of the situation in schools can be seen in the form of a letter published in the *Sosnovkoe slovo* and written by pupils studying at the Tretyelevelamskaya Middle School of the Sosnovka district to President Yeltsin:

Dear Boris Nikolaevich!

We are writing to you as pupils of the Tretyelevelamskaya Middle School with a request that you look carefully at education.

The majority of our parents work at the kolkhoz, they have not received their salary for three years, and we have no possibility of buying textbooks or the equipment we need to study. The textbooks which were given to us for free are now unfit for purpose. There are no visual aids, and we cannot do any laboratory or practical work.

The school has not been repaired for ten years — there is no money — and it is cold because there is not enough fuel.

Money is not assigned to feed the children in the canteen, and parents cannot pay. It is very difficult to learn a new curriculum on empty stomachs and enter institutes of higher education.

Dear Boris Nikolaevich! We implore you to make higher education free because our parents are unable to pay for the fees and we are supplementing the army with the unemployed and criminals [Lukina et al. 1998: 3].

The tipping point in the strike movement was, most likely, the decision made by the district authorities in 1996 to do away with the discount for teachers on utilities bills. From this time onwards, there was a whole succession of pickets and strikes: on 4 October 1996 the administration building was picketed, in March 1997 there was a one-day strike in 29 schools across the district, in April and October 1998 there were protests in support of the nationwide trade union demonstrations and a strike, in November there was an open-ended strike in four schools and in February 1999 the administration was again picketed and there were strikes in 22 schools [Popova 1999b].

All these demonstrations took place under the management of Valentina Ivanovna Morozova, the chair of the district trade union of education workers from 1987–2000. Influenced by the non-payment of salaries and other difficulties, during the 1990s the trade union gradually moved away from its official function, during Soviet times, as an organisation engaging in ‘cultural work’ and distributing vouchers for holiday trips, and moved towards a position of increasingly tough confrontation with the authorities. Administrative

workers tried various means to displace the leader, but thanks to the support of the district's teachers, Valentina Morozova emerged victorious from these conflicts. Despite this, her main aspiration was to 'make contact with government bodies', to make sure that 'the sheep are safe, and the wolves have plenty to eat'.<sup>1</sup> The complication in the trade union chief's position was shown in some rather curious cases, when, alongside the head of the district administration and at his request, she had to visit and 'calm down' the teachers during the strike that she had organised.

Summarising her trade union activity in an interview with me in 2010, Morozova said:

On the whole I am glad to have worked at the trade union organisation. [...] When I wasn't working at the trade union, I thought that if a manager told me to do something, I should follow orders without demur, because that's how I was brought up. Whether he was right or not... But at the trade union I learned how to see what I hadn't been able to before. I learned how to see, to hear people, not just to listen but to hear an ordinary person — a teacher, a cleaner, a logistics manager — and I learned how to understand people at the trade union.

In the 2000s the situation changed. There was a mass exodus of teachers from the trade union. After Morozova left her position as chair, another equally active leader could not be found. However, it would seem that the change in labour relations within education was a more crucial reason for the decline of trade unionism. The former deputy head of the district gave a characteristic example in an interview. In the 1990s teachers and other workers in the social sector were involved in a large amount of protest activity, and the authorities could not ignore them: 'They shook me and the deputy up about social issues in every collective, and they wouldn't let me go until they'd thrashed the life out of me and I left the auditorium looking as white as a sheet'. In the 2000s teachers 'suddenly shut up'. 'Now they won't say boo to a goose, especially people working in the social sector'. The management teams also 'suddenly shut up' after a wave of dismissals of head-teachers (according to the new Labour Code a manager can be dismissed without explanation). As a result, there was no-one to oppose the current policy of conversion of rural schools into 'branches', or indeed their complete closure.

A shortage of leaders also influenced the situation. Many of my interlocutors noted that today's Sosnovka residents 'don't trust anyone'. This attitude towards politics was in many respects

<sup>1</sup> Interview with SA, 2010. [The expression 'the sheep are safe, and the wolves have plenty to eat' refers to the solution to a difficult problem that satisfies all concerned, where everyone 'has his cake and eats it'. Editor].



established by the experience of the 1990s, and similar opinions were heard at that time too: 'We placed our hopes in Lyudmila Sergeevna Kudinova and we were mistaken. We're surprised that people don't go out and vote, but they don't trust anyone or anything. And with good reason' [Yurin 1995]. In December 1990 Lyudmila Kudinova published an article in Tambov about the abuses in the Sosnovka district consumer association. This article, however, caused a backlash: the district newspaper issued a disclaimer on behalf of the trade workers and accusing Kudinova of seeking 'momentary popularity' and 'fixing deliveries of building materials when she needed them, jumping the queue for a colour TV, and getting hold of a bath for her parents through the chair [of the district soviet]' and so on [Ternovskaya 1991]. The court forced the newspaper to make an apology, but soon afterwards relations between the editors and the former journalist were ruptured once and for all during the confused story of the newspaper's coverage of the events of 19–21 August 1991.

Kudinova's memories of these events, when she was actively involved with the democrats, include the following episode: 'We arrived home, in Sosnovka, around midnight. Little Svetlana, my daughter, couldn't sleep. She didn't look herself. In the queue for bread she'd overheard: "Thank goodness they're getting things in order. Now they'll put Kudinova away"' [Kudinova 1991].

In 1993 the conflict between the newspaper and the people's deputy flared up again. The cause was Lyudmila Kudinova's refusal to offer financial aid to one of the head journalists at *Poisk* who had reconstructed the fates of the Tambov soldiers disappeared without trace during the Great Patriotic War (WWII). Various aspects of the deputy's activity underwent an impartial discussion in the newspaper, although the leitmotif of all the publications was disappointment in the 'democrats'. They stood accused, and Lyudmila Kudinova in particular, of obtaining more 'privileges' than those with whom they were competing at the beginning of their political careers. The newspaper printed further publications accusing the politician of obtaining various favours and of failing to offer any kind of help for Sosnovka residents (up until this point Kudinova was the deputy governor of Tambov Oblast). Disappointed voters began to explain her whole 'journey to power' from an ordinary Sosnovka resident as being the pursuit of selfish ends: 'We were promised a capitalist heaven by the President's representative V. Davituliani. "We will put an end to all privileges," came the assurance from L. S. Kudinova. But they were already dreaming of big plots of land seized from collective farms, chic flats in town, visits abroad using the people's money, personal limousines and so on' [Yurin 1993]. The democrats lost a great deal of authority. The Sosnovka district and the whole of Tambov province became part of the so-called 'Red Belt', the main



Deputy. [The deputy is protesting to the devil, 'But I've got parliamentary privilege!'] Artist V. Zhabsky. *Slovo*. 9 September 1993

area of electoral support for the Communists, and in 2000, 'if Russia had voted like our district, the President would be Gennady Zyuganov, if it had voted like our region, we'd have new elections, but Russia voted like Russia' [Esli by Rossiya 2000].

By 1998 the social tension had reached a critical level. The general crisis was worsened in Sosnovka by the government's unexpected New Year 'surprise', which eliminated the community from the list of population centres whose inhabitants had a right to 'Chernobyl' benefits, what the locals called 'the coffin dole'. Commenting on this event, which stirred up the whole of Sosnovka, Rozhkova reminded readers that 'nowadays you cannot forget the sad, proven truth: each successive year is worse than the previous one' [Popova 1998b]. Demonstrations in front of the administration building for the first time now mounted political slogans speaking out against the reforms, the President, and the 'regime' as a whole.

It was against this background that Uvarova gained in popularity. Having taken a harshly critical position in relation to the reforms as early as the beginning of the 1990s, she now became *Slovo's* leading writer of political essays. In 1996 Uvarova resigned from the newspaper and became involved in various public activities: 'As an energetic, active person, she could not be satisfied with the life of a "pensioner". She surrounded herself with people who were discontented — and there were many of them: pensioners, the unemployed — "and raised them up to fight for their disregarded rights". In short, she occupied herself, if one may put it this way, with human rights activities: she organised meetings and protests,

she wrote official objections and complaints, she even, so they say, went personally around the towns with petitions' [Kolebanov 1999].

One of these protests organised by Uvarova took place in July 1998, after rumours had spread around the community about the administration cutting pensions to a minimum. The report about the protest published in the newspaper accused the former journalist of having a 'flippant' attitude and trying to stir things up. The deputy head of the local administration had come to meet with protesters to discuss the social issues, but 'the information given by the public official manifestly did not satisfy Lyudmila Uvarova personally and her tactless replies only served to enrage the pensioners. As a result, the "protest" turned into sordid buffoonery, ending in accusations and insults aimed at the authorities' [Nagaitseva 1998].

Soon after this, a strange story unfolded that put an end to the 'human rights' activity of Lyudmila Uvarova and, so it would seem, forced her to leave Sosnovka. 'For a long time a rumour has been circulating around Sosnovka saying that a brothel is being built,' the newspaper noted in January 1999. The rumour related to a four-storey detached house that was being erected by a local entrepreneur on the outskirts of the town. The owner of the building imperturbably explained to the journalist that he was in fact planning a restaurant and a 'hotel with comfortable rooms', and the local 'old dears' need not worry: the establishment was designed for businessmen from large cities who wanted to 'have a good time with their mistresses' far from prying eyes [Simonova 1999]. Two months later, the editor-in-chief of the *Sosnovskoe slovo* informed readers that Lyudmila Uvarova had extorted money from the entrepreneur, blackmailing him with threats of exposing him to the Tambov press. The author claimed that the former journalist was caught red-handed, and called upon Sosnovka residents to be vigilant 'when choosing their idols' [Kolebanov 1999]. Evidently, this story gave inhabitants of the district further proof that any 'journey to power', indeed any form of public activity, can only be driven by self-interest and an unscrupulous attitude to money.

Similar motifs resounded in Rozhkova's reporting of the conflicts that came to the forefront in the late 1990s — early 2000s and were linked to the community being supplied with gas. Gas was only provided to homes in the community in the 1990s, which put an additional burden on the meagre budget of Sosnovka residents. They were not all able to pay, and the poorest section of the population were only willing to 'join up' to the gas mains toward the end of the decade. However, those who joined up early became acquisitive monopolists of sorts, and sought to control the conditions on which

others joined up later. In several streets, connection was done for nothing, or at very low cost. The price differentials — and particularly the efforts by those already on the mains to charge high prices — caused all kinds of conflicts. Symptomatically, at the centre of one such dispute were the inhabitants of houses in 'Rude Town', who had demanded an excessively high connection charge for late-comers. When reporting on this conflict, the journalist pondered the 'communist capitalists' of the post-Soviet present: 'Today we have one leg "here" and the other "there". We're Communist capitalists. "Everything had got mixed up in the Oblonsky household."<sup>1</sup> [...] How quickly the slogan "man is a friend to his fellow man" defected to "man is a wolf to his fellow man"' [Popova 1998c: 2]. 'We reap what we sow: spite, greed, and aggression... there's almost civil war in Sosnovka' [Popova 1998d: 4].

When reporting the gas wars in Sosnovka and the unseemly role played by former Communists, Rozhkova wrote: 'From what we learned in books, Communists are people who would give the shirt from their back to the common people. Whereas capitalists, again as we were taught, are people who seek to gain from their own capital' [Popova 1998c: 4]. The difference in the system of values and upbringing is of course felt by many. Lyudmila Kudinova confirmed this observation:

It was always instilled in us that you should think of others before yourself. This was instilled in us at home, and by our teachers and instructors. I myself know that they would always say to me: you should think about others! When I went to Moscow, my father said to me: don't you dare rent a flat like the other deputies have done. You'll disgrace me. I got the keys, and went to see it, but I turned it down because I was ashamed. I promised people that I would return to Sosnovka. I promised my father... But from somewhere around the mid-nineties there was a different idea. You should think about how to get on in life, you should show initiative. That's good. My opinion is that unfortunately collectivism and initiative have little in common with one another. So if nature had ordained that it were possible to consider the interests of the community and oneself without upsetting anyone, getting on in life would be very difficult.<sup>2</sup>

This ideological and psychological turning point led to a re-thinking of the Soviet experience, as was reflected in numerous publications written by authors and correspondents in the *Sosnovskoe slovo*. The publications and interviews show how these ideas can become an argument for certain values and a certain way of life. For example,

<sup>1</sup> The famous first sentence of Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> Interview with SA, 2010.

the opposition between the newspaper and the people's deputy Lyudmila Kudinova was expressed in an argument surrounding the terms of address 'comrade' and 'mr/mrs/miss'.<sup>1</sup> In response to Kudinova's accusation that the *Sosnovskoe slovo* was organising a 'propagandistic brouhaha' against her and 'forming an image of the people's enemy', the editor-in-chief wrote:

Dear Miss Kudinova...

That's how it sounds: Miss!!! Tears are brimming in people's eyes, they want to fall to their knees with their arms in the air reaching up to the Lord, to the Ladies. We thank our native, homegrown democracy, we are finally no longer comrades, because this word, they say, comes from the word 'commodity', we're Lords. [...]

Hell! How nice it is to feel oneself a mister! How one wants to pull up one's trousers and run after the democrats, like Yesenin and the Komsomol.<sup>2</sup> Let it roll on your tongue: 'Miss, a coffee in the office, please!' 'Sir! Your Mercedes is at the entrance!' — even if the editorial staff only have one car that 'won't make it to the next stop' [Kolebanov 1993: 2].

Later the author admits that he feels himself to be a 'comrade', since he does not have a flat in Tambov, nor an automobile, nor a dacha.

Another article was entitled 'What Are You Called Now?'. The journalist and head of the club *Poisk* V. Medinsky was puzzled as to 'why Lyudmila Sergeevna calls me and my fellow writers "misters" with such a smirk, is that really now accepted among the latter-day authorities? Dear Lyudmila Sergeevna, you should probably be called Miss' [Medinsky 1993]. In an article with the characteristic title 'I don't trust anyone' another author explained his disapproval of the new terms of address in a similar way:

The editorial staff have now begun to receive letters in which the terms of address 'miss', 'missis', and 'mister' are being used. 'Comrade' has been completely forgotten. [...] Mister is linked in my mind either to someone very noble or very far from our existence. What kind of mister can you have working a wooden plough, or being a cleaner, for example? Mister drunk, good evening to you, sir! [Larina 1993].

<sup>1</sup> 'Mr' [Gospodin], Mrs, Miss [Gospozha] were avoided during the Soviet period, since the literal meaning is 'Lord' and 'Lady' (cf. Herr in German, Monsieur in French, Signore in Italian, etc.) Indeed, even before 1917, and in the Russian emigration, *Gospozha* was considered old-fashioned and often replaced by *Madame*. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> A reference to Esenin's famous poem, 'Vanishing Russia' [Rus ukhodyashchaya, 1924], in which the phrase 'pull up my trousers/and run after the Komsomol' echoes as an ironic refrain. [Editor].



Problems. [One street drinker is saying to another, 'Gawd, Vas, you know that tax declaration, it's just a nightmare...']  
Artist V. Zhabsky. Slovo. 6 November 1993

## History

Historical memory can, on the one hand, be influenced and manipulated, while on the other it reflects values and real historical experience. In this section I will examine the changes undergone by ideas about Soviet history among the inhabitants of Sosnovka and the surrounding area during the period being discussed, relying mainly upon publications in *Leninskaya pravda*, *Slovo* and the *Sosnovskoe slovo*.

The celebration of the seventieth anniversary of the October Revolution was an indicative illustration of how the past was interpreted in late Soviet times. After the traditional procession of ranks of labour collectives and speeches by officials in the central square of Sosnovka, a dramatised performance began, during which 'the 70-year history of our country itself passed before those who had gathered'. Viewers were presented with those 'who affirmed Soviet power, who protected it during the years of the Civil and Second World Wars, who implemented the programmes of industrialisation and collectivisation of the socialist economy'. Perestroika was represented as a continuation of the 'revolutionary transformations', and after the heroes of the past came ranks of those 'who are today creating the future with their own hands' [Oktyabrskie dni 1987].

A year before the jubilee, the district authorities and the editors of *Leninskaya pravda* announced a competition for the best articles on local history. As a result, more than fifty publications were submitted, with reminiscences from participants in various events, Komsomol



and Party workers in the 1920s and 1930s, and veterans of the Second World War. They reminisced about the half-starved existence that their fathers and grandfathers dragged out before the revolution, and the enthusiasm with which collectivisation and the cultural revolution had been implemented in the village. However, the first prize was not awarded, since one of the conditions of the competition was to show the 'links between generations', and how 'education work is carried out in labour collectives nowadays based on the experience and glorious deeds of one's elders' — and this was a task which none of the competitors were successful in tackling.

1989-1990 saw the peak of discussions and critical speeches about the past. Veterans of the kolkhoz movement were beginning to reminisce about the 'excesses' and 'tightening of screws' of the administrative command system. One of them, while continuing to believe that the kolkhoz movement was generally good, reminisced about when he had not obeyed the district committee's demands and refused to take down his grandmother's icons [Uvarova 1989b: 2]. Another lamented the dispossession of the kulaks and that there was no leasing of land during those years [Uvarova 1989c]. In 1990 the official opinion of the district committee was that 'the course taken by the country after the death of Lenin was incorrect', and that the State 'took everything from the working masses [...] while giving them virtually nothing in return' [Yurin 1990]. There was soon a newspaper issue entirely dedicated to the repressed inhabitants of the district. In the leading article, the editor-in-chief wrote about the 'blood and fear' of the Stalinist repressions, and the expression 'let us do everything to prevent fascism from returning in any form' transparently hinted at a comparison between the two regimes [Kolebanov 1990].

However, this critical wave of rethinking the past was soon exceeded by a wave of a much more intensive dissatisfaction with the present, in the light of which all subsequent debates about Soviet times in Sosnovka took place. In these debates an important role was played by the publications of Larisa Uvarova. As early as the end of 1990 she wrote an article entitled 'What Was I Celebrating?', which expressed her disappointment in Gorbachev and the ideas of perestroika. The novelty of the first protests and elections were exchanged for tiredness and despair:

Over five years everything that could collapse did collapse!  
The Union, the army, discipline, morality, patriotism. There's  
no more Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya or Aleksandr Matrosov,<sup>1</sup> no

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<sup>1</sup> Youthful heroes of the Great Patriotic War, who perished fighting the good fight to save the Motherland from the invader. Kosmodemyanskaya was tortured to death and Matrosov flung his body in front of a gun emplacement [Editor].



ideas, no belief. Only the dollar, only dreams of a fairytale life over there, only the desire to grab, to get things for yourself, to trample anyone standing nearby and, one day, to grab something just for you [Uvarova 1990b].

In letters to the editor there was an increasing sense of dissatisfaction with the 'running down' of the past. Their main argument hinged on the image of the ordinary kolkhoz workers of the older generation who had been through the war, and the famine and deprivation of the post-war era, and had lived life honestly and created prosperity for the country through their own toil: 'These people worked round the clock, they always put the public above the private, they did not grumble at hardships, they knew how to endure and love their land fervently and boundlessly' [Mikhaltsova 1990].

In the 1990s the newspaper continued regularly to print portraits of veterans, although they now included numerous 'unembellished' features of the past as well as the didactic contrast with the values embodied by today's generation. For example, a typical sketch of a pensioner couple told the story of the deprivations that had befallen them during the War, as well as of their supreme commitment to work and lifelong labour of love: 'After the war Ivan Nikitovich raised up this kolkhoz on his own shoulders, he wasn't precious about his strength or his health. He didn't want to build anything grand for himself, just a little hut was enough. Not like today's daredevils which spend only a year or two as a chairman, till they've built their own little nest, they've a broad grin on their face as they mess up the economy for everyone else' [Uvarova 1995b].

At times, the motif of the 'outraged faith' of the older generation reached tragic incandescence in the publications in *Slovo*. For example, an interview with the long-term chairman of the millionaire kolkhoz 'Lenin's Path' in Viryatino, Ivan Sadovikov, ended with the following words:

Now Ivan Yefimovich Sadovikov probably has it more difficult than anyone in our district [...] today, at the twilight of his life it turns out it his whole life has gone to the dogs. It was instilled in him that his life was a mistake, that he had rent his heart at work in vain. He sees his offspring collapsing, and social structures dying of which he was once so proud. It's like being present at your own funeral [Uvarova 1994c].

Veterans and representatives of the older generation were evidently among the most active of the newspaper's correspondents and repeatedly expressed their embarrassment and disappointment that 'what had been won by blood is being taken away by everyone, each in his own way' [Dovgal 1993]. Thus, one journalist remembered

the famine of 1946–1947 only in order to point out the unfairness of the accusations levelled at the older generation:

We, the older generation, are being accused of having laboured poorly, we were encouraged when there should have been objections made, generally we didn't live as we should have. And they won't get it into their heads who it was that created everything that is now so mercilessly squandered. Who carried the army on their shoulders? Who fed the bureaucratic system that was bloated to bursting point and completely unnecessary? So all this, superfluous and a hindrance to society, should have been cut and taken away instead of pulling down what worked [Yurin 1991].

As it happens, finding material in the district newspaper that actually does contain such accusations is next to impossible. All the authors in fact acknowledged the indisputable authority of the wartime generation, while Vera Rozhkova compared the 'generation of victors' to her own, to the total detriment of the latter: 'And us? Don't we live with the label of a lost generation and an inferiority complex?' [Popova 1993].

It would be wrong to say, however, that local newspapers did not contain voices that critically assessed the Soviet experience. Fairly widespread, especially at the turn of the 1990s, was the complaint that the peasant had been deprived of the feeling of being a farm owner, turned into a mere 'farm-hand', and that the 'kolkhoz and feudal systems' had ruined the countryside. However, even at that time during fierce debates about the developmental paths of the countryside many authors reminisced about pre-kolkhoz times in exceedingly gloomy style. Warning against the cruelty of private capital and land ownership, a labour veteran recalled one of his uncle's stories about how a Tambov factory owner set the dogs on a blind old man who had worked his whole life in the factory [Lukin 1991]. Another author wrote about his own childhood memories of work as a farm-hand: 'The farm owner made us work round the clock. He fed us with leftovers from the table, and only allowed us to sleep on the floor by the door. One day he would give us a bottle of skim milk and a piece of bread. A cruel rich kulak, I can picture him even now like a huge inflated spider' [Zverev 1990].

By extension, concepts such as 'lords', 'farm-hands', and even 'slaves' achieved wide circulation as a way of describing the new society. In 1992, having visited the farms of the closest kolkhoz to Sosnovka, 'Lenin's Path' in Viryatino, a journalist described the gloomy mood of the workers: 'Business, so they say, is hindered by various rumours. Things like the kolkhozes are being closed broken up, or that the community of peasants will be divided into farm owners and farm-hands' [Korneeva 1992]. Later, the author of

a letter to the editor told of an entrepreneur he knew, who dreamed about 'becoming rich within the law soon, while the rest will be slaves'. Reflecting on the future, he listed certain images he knew from his schooldays: 'Brothers, where are we crawling to, if even a novice millionaire dreams of turning people into cattle. [...] "Your Honour", "blue blood", "someone people get the bagel, some people get the hole in the middle"... and the Aurora will be here in a minute too.'<sup>1</sup> [Filippov 1994]. The words 'lord' and 'landowner' were characteristically used of the new owners of Sosnovka businesses, expressing the attitude people had towards them: 'You would have been better to come to our vodka factory. That's where democracy is. A new business manager [...] behaves like a lord, shouts at everyone and is unbelievably rude. Whatever he says goes' [Ivanova 1995].

The residuum of historical experience and Soviet education was given ideological formulation in a series of articles by Larissa Uvarova about the 'reconsideration' of history on television and in the press. She protested keenly against a radical re-evaluation of historical values, urging people to find the 'happy medium':

Isn't it better to note both the good and the bad in every country and situation? For example, it pains me when people cry day and night over Cornet Golitsyn,<sup>2</sup> while forgetting those whom he shot as mutineer cattle. Now A. I. Denikin is persona grata, admiral A. V. Kolchak is a luminary, baron P. V. Vranghel is a great holy martyr, while the millions of bast-shoe-shod peasants and hungry workers are merely a filthy herd who have failed to understand what they have done or whom they are following. Yet in fact that 'herd' utterly crushed all the well-fed, well-shod and well-clothed Excellencies. And that mainly illiterate 'herd' raised the country up out of devastation, grew its own intelligentsia, won yet another war, and rebuilt the country from the foundations as well [Uvarova 1991a].

Undoubtedly television was the main device for translating the new system of values and behaviour in Sosnovka. The inhabitants' attitude towards 'the box' in the 1990s was, evidently, a sliding scale of feeling of love and hate. On the one hand, the temptation to watch serials and other entertainment programmes was apparently universal. Thus, Vera Rozhkova lamented that there is now 'one god to whom every family prays — "the box". [...] Every right-thinking person

<sup>1</sup> The Aurora was the cruiser from which, according to legend, the first shot heralding the October Revolution was fired. It is still preserved as a museum in St Petersburg. The speaker means that the growing social inequality may provoke another revolution (the phrase about bagels is taken from Mayakovsky's agitational play, *Mystery-Bouffe*) [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> Cornet Golitsyn is the hero of a sentimental ballad about the Russian Civil War (i.e., an archetypal White officer), while Denikin, Kolchak, and Vranghel were real-life military leaders in the White Army. [Editor].

understands that it is a drug, but like a drug addict cannot go without their regular helping of drugs, so each evening we obediently await our helping of junk TV' [Popova 1995]. On the other hand, many components of this 'junk TV' met with rejection, which was also reflected in the judgements made in leading newspapers. For example, *New Year's Lights*, running in 1993–1994, was condemned by Uvarova from a traditional Soviet class perspective as 'kulak revelry' that reflected the morals of the minority leading the country to the 'dizzying heights of capitalism':

I'm not just angry, I'd like to knock the block off those script writers after seeing all those vulgar and stupid 'sketches' taking off pilots, peasants, workers and other categories of ordinary Russians. It's as though you have to hate everything that is Russian, native or even just human, so that you scoff at the majority of people, dishonourably ridiculing their problems. And then, smiling flatteringly, you bow down before the sponsors, those smug little businessmen and people who are so pleased with themselves [Uvarova 1994a].

A little less than a month later Uvarova described an award ceremony she watched for the 'Ovation' award for 'masters of show business' as 'a feast in time of plague' in which the luxury cars and mink capes of the 'masters of life' were combined with 'undisguised porn texts' and other 'quirks' [Uvarova 1994b].

Something which evoked and continues to evoke particular dissatisfaction, as is evident from my interviews, is the violence and



'And you hear the same filth all over the country!' [As the irate radio listener yells this at the radio, what is actually being broadcast is: 'And in Moscow it is currently 8 pm, and in Sverdlovsk 10 pm...']

Artist V. Zhabsky. Slovo. 1991, 24 December, no. 12

sexually explicit scenes in cinema and on television. In the opinion of the older generation, they have a destructive influence on young people. Teachers comment on this in an especially poignant way, feeling themselves in an unequal position when it comes to opposing this influence:

Television is disgraceful. All that explicitness... And what about all those TV series? They just kill people, the tough guys in tough cars with shaved heads, right now that's the kind of hero we have. [...] Now we're studying *Woe from Wit*.<sup>1</sup> So — there's Famusov's society, the children are smart, and the children say: 'And so, and so?' Now you can see the same thing going on all around us. Who is the hero of today's society? Whoever has a foreign make of car and owns a house. The hero of today's society is the object of envy. People try to use him as an example. Young people want to go robbing, murdering, mugging [...] In this respect school has become harder, much harder. We tell them what we were brought up to believe, that there are certain moral boundaries, but they just smile at them. Because that's life. In school they get one thing, but life dictates something else. In real life, they see something else. And they see the same thing on TV. Again and again they show those series, those houses, those mansions... (female, b. 1945).

There was a consistent idea in the minds of my interlocutors, a fixed attitude towards cinema and the media as something that provides an example for imitation and influences people's perceptions and way of life, whether by perpetuating the values of a Soviet upbringing or those of the 'logocentric' Russian culture. In this vein, Rozhkova began an article about a brutal murder committed by an adolescent in 1994 with a discussion about the influence of the cinema generally:

Perhaps we were naive in our false ideology. But we were nevertheless taught that the mind can solve anything. And that first and foremost you have to study, study and study, as grandfather Lenin and all that Communist whatnot<sup>2</sup> instructed us. Of course, even back then, the message we got from life was sometimes, 'where there is strength, brains aren't needed'. But that wasn't the official line. Today all these Schwarzeneggers and Van Dammes that fill our screens propagate a style of life in which everything is decided by your fists. The strongest comes first. There's no point fighting the invincible. Of course, if you are

<sup>1</sup> A famous comedy of words and manners by Alexander Griboedov, written in 1822–1824. Famusov, the anti-hero, and the father of Sofya, with whom the hero, Chatsky, is in love, is a dyed-in-the-wool conservative and the key representative of the unreflective and venal nature of Moscow high society. [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> The Russian is *vsya kommunisticheskaya*, with no noun supplied. [Editor].

someone who's lived a bit and stood their ground then these films are just pleasantly unsettling. And that's all. But if you are sixteen or any other 'teen', you can't be exposed to all that without leaving scars. It's like measles [Popova 1996a].

As we can see, the unpleasantness of the post-Communist present even influenced those who declared their own negative attitude towards the Communists. Thus, the author of a letter calling on others to vote for Zyuganov acknowledged that he never sympathised with the Communists or Communism, and 'the district committee gobbled my grandfather up alive' [Ozhogin 1996: 1]. When the stories of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn devoted to the suppression of the Tambov Rebellion ('Antonovshchina') and the cruelties of the Bolsheviks in the Tambov region were published, the editor-in-chief of *Slovo* — another disappointed democrat — commented:

A one-sided consciousness has been beaten too soundly into us, it's nearly impossible to change. Judge for yourself. Here I am reading Solzhenitsyn's stories, but in my memory something else is coming to the surface — how a quarter of a century ago an old lady I knew reminisced about her grandmother perishing at the hands of Antonovshchina bandits, without trial or investigation, her head taken off with a sabre. That happened. That's the truth [Kolebanov 1995].

The most vivid example of using Soviet 'stock images' for the artistic re-thinking of modern times was a story called 'The Return of Malchish Kibalchish. A Winter's Tale'<sup>1</sup> that was published in *Slovo* several weeks after the signing of the Belovezha Accords. It was a stylised 'monologue' in which Malchish Kibalchish spoke about his second visit to his native land:

And so I, Malchish, Malchish Kibalchish, wanted to be in my native land again after so many years, to see what it is like now and how the Military Secret is kept there. It was a clear winter's day when I returned to Rus. Immediately I knew that the grandson of my creator<sup>2</sup> would be the greatest person in it. And my heart was glad and it occurred to me that he, like no one else, would be keeping the Military Secret and would not allow the bourgeois to be in command where the valiant Red Army had triumphed over them.

Naturally, a bitter disappointment lies in wait for Kibalchish. He does not meet a single smiling face. Everyone runs past 'with little

<sup>1</sup> The hero of the story is taken from a famous children's tale by Arkady Gaidar, *The Military Secret* (1935), a key text of Soviet patriotic education, in which Malchish fights against the sinister 'Boojooi' (bourgeois). [Editor].

<sup>2</sup> The economist Yegor Gaidar, the architect of 'shock therapy', was the son of Timur Gaidar, and the grandson of the novelist. [Editor].

bits of paper in their hands, which they call coupons', and everyone is waiting for a New Year's gift from the grandson Gaidar with the incomprehensible name of 'the liberalisation of prices':

At night they dream of shots in districts near and far, and the nation goes to war with other nations, and they walk around the streets without hiding, Malchish Plokhishes,<sup>1</sup> and everyone parts before them. Factories stand inactive, and the valiant Red Army is no more. Only the bourgeoisie, with whom I fought selflessly, live well.

Malchish tries to reiterate his appeal, but only one feeble old man responds to him, and Malchish Plokhish explains to Kibalchish:

'Don't shout, Kibalchish, no one will come after you any more, the tale about you is a lie and no one needs you any more in this country. We are waiting for the Head Bourgeois to come with sweets and gingerbread. He is our commander now' [Ivanova 1991: 4].

Towards the end of the 1990s and the beginning of the 2000s the end of the Soviet era ceased to be perceived in such a dramatic way. In political and ideological life, the tone was set by the regional movement 'Tambov Revival' founded in 1998, which unites the region's business elite. Its leader, current head of the regional government O. I. Betin, was victorious in the elections against the Communist A. I. Ryabov. An active participant in the movement and its representative in the Sosnovka district, Vladimir Semenovich Bogomolov differentiated between Soviet politicians who made unrealistic promises, and the business managers who were involved in real activity. He called upon people to 'not confuse politics and economics' and thought that turning to Communist ideas might plunge the country into another civil war [Bogomolov 1999]. In an interview with me, Vladimir Bogomolov linked his rather sceptical attitude towards the Soviet authorities with the fate of his grandfather, a priest who was shot during the years of repression.

The Soviet images and memories that were spoken of with an elegiac tone are becoming a thing of the past. In this respect Vera Rozhkova's article in relation to the 'renaming' of the 7 November holiday is typical:

In our dear isolated town there have not been any protests or demonstrations on 7 November for a long time. Neither have there been queues for sausages or shampoo. So why are we so sad?

The 7 November has remained a public holiday. It was announced as the day of reconciliation and accord. A new 'Forgiveness

<sup>1</sup> Plokhish is the villain of *The Military Secret* [Editor].



Sunday'.<sup>1</sup> In the capital they no longer have showdowns between the capitalists and Communists on this day. The boundaries are being washed away. In Sosnovka they have long since forgotten about the protests and demonstrations. But the public holiday remains. So you can make a celebratory 'Russian salad', go to visit people, make sauerkraut, seal up the windows for the winter and make peace with the neighbour that you once quarrelled with about complete nonsense [Popova 2003b].

During the festivities the authorities also used a reconciliatory tone that emphasised the 'processes of unification and consolidation in society' and wished 'goodness, joy and happiness' to everyone, 'regardless of their political views, age or profession' [Segodnya 2003]. In articles about veterans, gone were the dissonant comparisons between their achievements and today's values.

Over the course of the 2000s, the nature of publications in the *Sosnovskoe slovo* has changed noticeably. Gradually the number of critical articles has decreased, and the paper has begun to be dominated by official information and interviews with civil servants, notices about public health, useful advice and so on. The *Slovo* has ceased to be a mouthpiece of public opinion, returning to its earlier informational and propagandistic function. The genre of writing letters to the newspaper has been replaced by mini-postcards with poems wishing the district's inhabitants a happy jubilee celebration and wedding congratulations. These poems are perhaps the main, albeit peculiar, source that reflects the values of today's inhabitants of Sosnovka. In contrast to Soviet times, when people were featured on the pages of the local paper primarily in the role of a toiling worker, today the congratulations exclusively express the values of family, personal happiness, and 'human warmth' regardless of the gender or occupation of the addressee:

May a little less sorrow come your way,  
And may you have plenty of sun today,  
God grant only joy to you,  
And may the sky be always blue.  
Let your cup of happiness overflow,  
And may pain be something your heart doesn't know.

## Conclusion

The material examined here suggests several theoretical points. Evidently this period in the history of Sosnovka, and for the whole country, was a period of rapid change in all areas of life and culture. Owing to the epistemological traditions of anthropology and its

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<sup>1</sup> A Sunday in Lent when Orthodox believers traditionally ask forgiveness of those whom they have offended during the year. [Editor].

dominant preference for synchronic approaches, anthropologists feel much more comfortable about describing 'timeless' structures or, at the very least, relatively stable historical periods. This helps to explain by the dissatisfaction of a number of contemporary anthropologists with Geertz's strategy of 'thick description' and the interpretation of culture as a text. In the opinion of these recent critics, culture (to use the term in general) should be understood not as a 'coherent system of ordered symbols with its own logic abstracted from people's actions, statements and beliefs', but as a 'changing, fragmentary and contested knowledge immersed in human practice', manifestations of which 'are inevitably aspects of domination, authority and resistance' [Kalb, Tak 2005: 6]. As Foucault wrote, 'the history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning' [Foucault 1984: 56].

On the other hand, it is worth remembering the useful observation made by Jochen Hellbeck relating to the history of everyday life. Criticising the tendency of historians of this research area to divorce ordinary life and 'ideology', he points out the danger of 'ignoring the conceptual fundamentals of life that are characteristic of different historical periods' [Halpin, Hellbeck 2002: 246]. In this way, the oral historian/ethnographer/anthropologist looking at the last few decades of Russian history is faced with the difficult task of reading the cultural codes and ideological ideas of people while simultaneously analysing the practices and social relations that have shaped these ideas.

Aleksey Yurchak formulated the category of the 'non-visibility' of 'the last Soviet generation' with reference to the attitude towards Soviet ideology shown in material discovered while he was interviewing city inhabitants ([Yurchak 2006]; see also the discussion in [Platt, Natans 2010]). Similar evidence can be found in material on the Sosnovka 'provinces'. For example, in response to an 'express interview'<sup>1</sup> in *Slovo* in 1992 regarding attitudes towards the 7 November celebrations, Elena, a 20-year-old student, wrote:

We, the 'stagnant' youth, have long since lost our political dimension. We didn't gather at Sosnovka Square when it was filled with red flags for ardent speeches praising the October Revolution. The atmosphere at 'our' 7 of November celebration was human and joyful: 'And my balloon flies up to the heavens!'. Now that joy cannot return [Express Interview 1992: 1].

However, publications in the 1990s and my interviews definitively show that Sosnovka's parting with the Soviet past was by no means a painless process, and that the realities that came to replace it often

<sup>1</sup> i.e. a vox-pop. [Editor].

caused hurt feelings and nostalgia. Attempts to explain this with the help of categories such as 'traditionalism' and especially the 'cultural backwardness' of the provinces are less than productive. After all, the prevalence of traditional attitudes and the relative regularity in the way of life of the typical 'urban settlement' or village during the late Soviet era did not hinder a surge in social activity at the end of the 1980s and protest demonstrations in the 1990s.

From my materials, it is obvious that perestroika was perceived and supported by the inhabitants of Sosnovka primarily as a movement against the privileges of the elite, and its main slogan became the battle for 'social justice'. This later flowed over into the campaign against 'Rude Town'. This movement in Sosnovka in turn acts as a typical example of how the Soviet regime tended to be criticised from the perspective of the ruling ideology itself. In this case, one should not concern oneself with questions about the 'sincerity' of the district's inhabitants and their commitment to the ideals of egalitarian socialism, but rather, analyse how the existing ideology and cultural codes were deployed in this social battle.

'Rude Town', as became clear, was only the first swallow heralding the coming changes. In the stormy debates during the early 1990s that were reflected in the press, seemingly forgotten concepts from early Soviet propaganda sprang back into unexpected life, and there was talk of 'lords', 'farm-hands', 'masters', and even 'slaves'. Yet, in my interviews, these terms and the interpretation of events from this kind of 'vulgar Marxist' perspective were, as a rule, not present. It is obvious that the actualisation of these concepts was not so much a spontaneous 'reminiscence' of Marxist rhetoric and pre-Soviet experience as they were a response to the bourgeois values now being imposed by the media. The cultural situation in the 1980s–2000s was indeed more similar to a battle for 'changing, fragmentary and contested knowledge immersed in human practice', than to a 'coherent system of ordered symbols'. Therefore the 'historical' technique of structuring material 'chronologically' is, in my opinion, not only the most convenient compositionally, but also the most useful heuristically, allowing this battle to be described as a contradictory process unfolding in time. Coming back to 'Soviet subjectivity', it is worth emphasising that from an anthropologist's perspective, the issue is not about the construction of some kind of 'ideal type' with a specific range of consistent characteristics, but rather about the analysis of the situational, intricately dependent, and plastic cultural practices of various groups of the population that have assimilated and used certain features of the (changing and fragmentary) Soviet culture.

The reassessment of historical values in the 1990s by no means signified an unambiguous idealisation of the Soviet setup, though the

values of 'social justice' could be identified both in my interviews and in the publications that I have examined here, and though they were always linked to nostalgia or a positive attitude towards the Soviet authorities. It was, in fact, their commitment to these values that led the population of Sosnovka to a sharp clash with the regime of Party nomenclature during perestroika. Nowadays, there are few opportunities for the open display of such moods. The sense of 'weariness' and disappointment in politics and any form of social activism has been accompanied by a growing atomisation in the population, by the 'departure' into narrow family circles, and a focus on material striving and practical problems. Debates about forms of address have now settled on the neutral 'man/woman', while social events and celebrations in recent years have tended towards de-ideologization on the one hand, and on the other to the search for universals, with the result that they are dedicated to the most basic human characteristics (Family Day, Youth Day, Elderly People Day etc.). Should the values of social justice that are shared by the majority of Sosnovka inhabitants be considered a feature of 'Soviet subjectivity'? Will this idea disappear or transform in the minds of subsequent, post-Soviet generations? These are open questions.

The link between interpretations of the past and fundamental social problems is demonstrated by Vera Rozhkova's highly original analysis of the project 'Old Songs about Important Things', the successes and failures of which she traces to the nature of the epoch being 'sung about'. The first series, with songs from the 1940s–1950s that had become favourites in Sosnovka, was a resounding success. The songs from the 1960s also met with a positive reception: 'Despite the fact that during those years we were far from being a monolithic mass, again these songs fit perfectly into the general story about life back then and into our hearts'. However, by the 1970s the 'Soviet monolith' had already collapsed: '[W]e were no longer a single monolithic socialist mass, but were only held together at the corners by our interests' [Popova 1998a]. As a result, 'Old Songs About Important Things', Series 3, completely bombed.

It follows that views of this kind relative to the past are linked to a widespread discourse about envy, conditionality and a lack of communication in the present, the relevance of which is to this day attested to in interviews. The selectivity of historical memory is demonstrated in the fact that my interlocutors almost never mentioned the existence of 'envy' during Soviet times. One could posit the hypothesis that this elision of 'envy' may be linked to a change in its object: whereas previously the objects were, evidently, mainly bosses and shop assistants, subsequently the assumption of a relationship of inequality spread to embrace the entirety of the population.

At the same time, the critical assessments of present time contained within the interviews make clear the importance for my interlocutors of the values of communication and the support of harmonious social links. One might ask: is this a sign of the collectivism of people brought up in Soviet times, and if so, how has this need transformed in younger generations?

My interlocutors described the changes in human relations in terms of the changing characters of the people themselves. When analysing these comments, we should avoid the naivety that accepts an affirmation of the type 'people have become nastier' as an empirically established fact, as well as the cynicism that discounts people's reflections on their life situation and operates with ready 'truths' suggesting that people are always dissatisfied with the present, idealising the past and suggesting that in the past 'the grass was always greener'. Richard Sennett analysed various aspects of labour relations and values in the conditions of 'late capitalism' in his book with the characteristic title *The Corrosion of Character*. However, Sennett understands 'character' not in the everyday sense, but as the type of person and worker that existed during the era of 'harsh' bureaucratic structures (companies, trade unions and so on) of capitalism in the period from the late nineteenth to the mid twentieth century. Employing the framework of Weber's labour ethics, Sennett traces the changes brought in by the regime of 'new' capitalism (established from the beginning of the neo-liberal reforms of the 1970s–1980s) not only in labour relations but also in the existential principles of human existence, such as the ability to establish long-term relationships with colleagues and other people, to 'draw up' the history of one's life and career as a coherent narrative, and to express an attitude towards work as 'the business of life' (or, on the other hand, a range of interchangeable and 'superficial' skills) [Sennett 1998; Sennett 2005]. Drastic changes in the life of the individual caused, in his opinion, a shift away from 'paternalistic' capitalism towards a system of the 'flexible' social structures of today. The processes examined by Sennett, despite the sociologist's 'americentric' stance, and the methodology that he uses, can be useful for analysing a situation even in places so far removed from the centre of global capitalism as Sosnovka. Furthermore, the insights that come from a comparative approach can help prevent us from trusting excessively ideologically-charged categories such as 'our' collectivism/communitarianism and 'their' individualism, and to charge us to pay more attention to the specific determinants of people's social behaviour.

The basic social process that was conditional for the events and tendencies traced in this article can also be defined as a shift from the 'harsh' structures of Soviet times (with stable employment, often expressed in the form of the 'job for life' and other well-known social

institutions of that kind) towards the 'flexible' realities of today: the collapse of major labour collectives and unemployment, the emergence of a pattern of commuting to Moscow or 'self-employment' as basic forms of material survival, the lack of a distinctive system of values and common ideology. This relates to the devaluation of the values of professionalism and 'craftmanship', which lose their weight in a situation of purely monetarist assessment (according to Sennett, the lever of economic success becomes the ability to shift quickly from one task to another and to keep up appearances in the right way). It also relates to the absence of a real, albeit authoritarian, source of power that is capable of solving the problems of the population (the district committee in Sosnovka or Sennett's 'boss cracking the whip'). An issue that is separate, but possibly also vital to explaining the communication problems that Sosnovka inhabitants encounter, is the practice of commuting to Moscow for 'shift work', which became widespread in the 2000s. This is not only an important factor in property stratification, but is also turning Sosnovka, like many similar villages and towns within a radius of more than 500km around the megalopolis, into something like 'dormitory suburbs' that are, as is well known, unlikely to be characterised by a full social life. Having transformed into an 'open society' and ceased to be a more or less autonomous social body, Sosnovka is therefore taking part, in its small way, in the process of globalisation.

In conclusion, it is my pleasure to sincerely thank all of my interlocutors from the urban settlement of Sosnovka who found the time and desire to share their thoughts with me, as well as the administrative staff of the Sosnovka district, Tambov province, who were so helpful in my field work.

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