

Nostalgia, Anxiety, Politics

Media and Performing Arts in Egypt, Central-Eastern
Europe, and Russia

Edited by

Tetyana Dzyadevych

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Series in Critical Media Studies



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To those whom we lost
And whom we miss

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I am deeply grateful for the unwavering support and encouragement from the administration and faculty of the New College of Florida, which has been ongoing since I first organized a virtual workshop on nostalgia studies. My co-authors and I had the opportunity to meet in the fall of 2021 to discuss our project and see how our chapters could enrich each other and cohere into a comprehensive narrative. Another critical milestone for us was the ASEES 2022 convention, where we presented our work at a round table. The feedback and comments we received from our audience not only brought new thoughts, ideas, and insights but also introduced us to a new contributor.

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Introduction

Nostalgia and Political Symbolism: Post-Communist Performing Arts and Media Production

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Nostalgia is a seductive liar.

George Ball, American Diplomat

Nostalgia is a powerful drug. Under its influence, ordinary songs take on dimensions and powers, like emotional superheroes.

Kate Christensen, American Novelist

The FBI estimates that between 2,000 and 2,500 people entered the Capitol Building on January 6, 2021, looting and vandalizing as they protested the results of the 2020 U.S. Presidential election.¹ For many, this extraordinary attack on the seat of the Congress (and on American political institutions more broadly)² provided a starting point to reconsider some received ideas about American democracy. Many national and international observers began to question the normative political images of the nation as the event raised fundamental concerns about democratic politics, social structure, and cultural memory. The idea for this volume first emerged in response to the bizarre and

¹ Ryan Lucas, "Where the Jan. 6 Insurrection Investigation Stands, One Year Later," *NPR*, January 22, 2022. <https://www.npr.org/2022/01/06/1070736018/jan-6-anniversary-investigation-cases-defendants-justice>

² Lauren Becker, "OPINION: The United States Capitol Attack: What the Capitol Looks Like a Year after the 'Day of Rage,'" Tiger Media Network, Fort Hayes University, January 6, 2022, <https://tigermedianet.com/?p=62674>

troubling semiotic world of the Capitol insurrectionists—to the various codes embedded in the now-familiar MAGA “Patriot” costumes, historical (if often fantastic) vexillology,³ vulgar slogans, and violent collective chants. *January 6* (J6) has thus become a crucial inflection point for thinking about larger contemporary issues surrounding politics, culture, and nostalgia. It compels us to reflect on how nostalgia for the past (in its many forms, individual or societal) can be, and is, employed for different political purposes.

As unprecedented as this event may have been in American political life, it is certainly not without structural parallels in other cultural contexts. For example, the Russian grassroots initiative *The Immortal Regiment* (2011), meant to commemorate fallen World War II soldiers, delivered its patriotic message⁴ with the help of flags, posters, and slogans from the past, often mixing epochs in disparate visuals. While *The Immortal Regiment* has received its share of academic attention,⁵ it is important to emphasize here, once again, its eclectic mix of symbols and narratives, where participants used St. George’s ribbons (which were absent in the USSR), Soviet attributes, Orthodox Christian emblems, and various portraits of dead people, sometimes even people unrelated to the Second World War. For instance, the General Prosecutor of Crimea, Natalia Poklonskaya, carried an icon of Nicholas II and seemed completely undisturbed by the problematic vicinity of the portraits of Bolshevik leaders to the icon of a Tsar murdered by that very same Bolshevik regime.⁶

In the case of both the J6 insurrectionists and the Russian paramilitary celebrations, cultural production of nostalgia is a major tool for structuring feelings of *ressentiment* and *anxiety*. Naturally, the semiotics of nostalgia are not limited to political movements—in fact, some of its most potent forms may be found in a variety of media representations. The current volume is, then, concerned with collective nostalgia as it has been generated, channeled, and weaponized by media production agents. Our work here aims to analyze how the performing arts and media (music, cinema, TV) produce and shape the

³Vexillology: the study of flags, their history, symbolism, and use.

⁴Inês Raquel, “Russia’s Immortal Regiment: Honoring the Dead with Death,” *Yale Journal of International Affairs*, 18 no. 2 (2023): <https://www.yalejournal.org/publications/russias-immortal-regiment-honoring-the-dead-with-death>

⁵Ivan Kurilla, “The ‘Immortal Regiment’: A ‘Holiday Through Tears’, a Parade of the Dead, or a Mass Protest?” *Russian Social Science Review* 62 (4-6), (2021): 307–22. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611428.2021.2002043>.

⁶“Unearthing Russia’s War Dead, Over and Over Again,” 2016. OpenDemocracy (London).

feeling of collective nostalgia. We show how the cultural production of nostalgia reflects distinct social-political contexts and serves distinct political purposes. Although we prioritize post-Soviet cases, we do not argue that the collapse of the socialist bloc in general, and the USSR in particular, has established unique nostalgic precedents. Instead, we engage in comparative analyses and typologically related phenomena. Mechanisms for producing nostalgia and marshaling it for political purposes are broadly similar in most (modern or postmodern) settings. J6 and American mass culture provide a prototype for our differently localized studies of nostalgia production in Egypt, the Balkans, Eastern Europe, and Russia.

It is not our intent to demonize Russia, despite its demonstrable barbarism on the current world stage; neither do we want Russia to be our dominant frame of reference, even if most of our cases here *nolens volens* appeared first in Russia-centric post-Soviet discourse. We have placed the “Russian bloc” in the second part of the book, to give primacy to non-Russian subjects. Plenty of room is made for analyzing the intersections between political processes and instrumentalization of collective nostalgia in Central Europe, especially in Poland and Hungary. Step by step, scholarship of Central and Eastern Europe has established its own distinct field emphasizing the uniqueness and specifics of the region.⁷ However, this particular volume did not prompt scholars of Central European studies to join the discussion about the intersection of politics, media, and nostalgia. Anyway, our work seeks to enlarge the comparative context further still and to cut a path toward an even broader perspective.

We focus our inquiry on collective rather than individual nostalgia, its causes more than its consequences (even when it is difficult to distinguish one from the other), and form before content. In short, seeing the global upsurge of populism and authoritarianism, we asked ourselves two questions: “How did it happen?” and “What role has nostalgia played in it?” This collaborative work states that nostalgia has a dual nature: on the personal level, it might be

⁷ See: Ivan Kalmar, “How Central Europeans Became Central European (Time and Time Again).” In *White But Not Quite: Central Europe’s Illiberal Revolt* (Bristol University Press, 2022), 74–104; Anna Louyest, and Graham H. Roberts. “Guest Editors’ Introduction: Nostalgia, Culture and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe.” *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne Des Slavistes* 57, no. 3/4 (2015): 175–79; Robin Okey, “Central Europe / Eastern Europe: Behind the Definitions.” *Past & Present*, no. 137 (1992): 102–33; Andrea L.P. Pirro, “Populist Radical Right Parties in Central and Eastern Europe: The Different Context and Issues of the Prophets of the Patria.” *Government and Opposition* 49, no. 4 (2014): 599–628.

harmless, but when it infects the collective consciousness and is directed by a third party (neither the creator nor the audience), it easily becomes a tool of manipulation serving economic or political ends—often of a dangerous authoritarian nature. The Introduction aims to sketch the theoretical premises of our collective approach to nostalgia, summarize existing scholarship related to our purposes, and give an overview of the volume's contributions. Besides being an excellent rhetorical tool, the American context helps to outline the typology of the phenomenon with which we are reckoning.

The slogan “Make America Great Again,” emblazoned on identical red hats and worn as identity badges by millions, not only inspired votes for Trump, but also motivated the attack on the Capitol. I am not alone in seeing the event as a seminal case study of global trends, since it has urged a variety of scholars to look closer at the *symbolic power of language* as a means of manipulating collective consciousness. Mathew Flisfeder, for instance, has asked: “When was America great?”⁸ He frames his analysis in neo-Marxist terms, pointing out that Trump’s sympathizers face cognitive dissonance and wish to “bring back the productive and revolutionizing powers of capital, paradoxically desiring the return of both the Fordist father figure of white patriarchal ‘America’ and the transformative power of capital that saw its foreclosure as the only way forward to save the system regardless of its disdain for tradition and family.”⁹ Daniel Hummel approaches Trump’s MAGA movement from a different angle, making a connection to the post-WWII slogan “Wake up, America!” This slogan was promulgated by the contemporary core of Trump’s base in order to gain power by slightly modifying the discourses inherited from Billy Graham, Bill Bright, Jerry Falwell, and Ronald Reagan—and to arrive at support for such a contradictory figure as the multiply divorced Donald Trump.¹⁰ Joyce E. King has claimed that Trump’s rhetoric targets white people especially and insinuates the idea of “Make America White Again.”¹¹

⁸ Mathew Flisfeder, “‘Make America Great Again’ and the Constitutive Loss of Nothingness.” *Third Text* 32 (5-6), (2018), 647–55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2018.1559144>.

⁹ *Ibid.* 651.

¹⁰ Daniel Hummel, “Revivalist Nationalism Since World War II: From ‘Wake up, America!’ to ‘Make America Great Again!’” *Religions* (Basel, Switzerland) 7 (11), (2016): 128. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel7110128>.

¹¹ Joyce E. King, “Who Will Make America Great Again? ‘Black People, of Course...’” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 30 (10), (2017): 946–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2017.1312605>.

This approach of tailoring “nostalgic” slogans to political ends is not alien to the Russian slogan “Mozhem povtorit”/“We can do it again.” Their respective structures, in fact, echo each other: just as everyone can have their own idea about the period when America was great, so everyone can speculate about what is possible to repeat in the Russian case.¹² The act of repetition alludes to some glorious act that might, or should, be repeated. However, everyone is free to surmise as to what exactly should be repeated and by whom. The verb form of the first-person plural implies that it should be a “we,” however. Another similar formula is “Dedy voevali”/ “Granddads fought,” suggesting a certain generational continuity—even an inherited duty—in the shared performance of that nebulous heroic deed.

Naturally, the J6 rioters did not wave Soviet flags or wear Soviet army uniforms (although one camera did capture a Russian Federation flag). Nevertheless, the event—and the symbolic actions accompanying it—prompted me to think about the role of visual culture and political language in structuring collective feelings and group thinking. Specifically, I grew increasingly interested in understanding how such symbolic politics may evoke and exploit the feeling of nostalgia. For me, the event bore striking similarities to the Russian Federation’s symbolic rituals celebrating the 2014 Crimea Annexation,¹³ and to the commemorative marches promoting Russian political memory (or mythology) of World War II, or, as it came to be known, the “Great Patriotic War.”¹⁴

To be fair, Timothy Snyder already warned the global community in his 2018 book *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America*¹⁵, drawing parallels between Putinism and Trumpism. Dissecting the logic that drove the Russian Federation to the Crimean annexation and the early hybrid stage of the Russian war in Ukraine, Snyder emphasizes that it was the same logic which brought Donald Trump to the Presidency. In his chapter “Truth or Lies,” he sums it up

¹² Even at the outset, this phrase was used in a discussion about World War 2; however, its meaning has since evolved and expanded beyond the original context.

¹³ See: Marlene Laruelle, “The Three Colors of Novorossiya, or the Russian Nationalist Mythmaking of the Ukrainian Crisis.” *Post-Soviet Affairs* 32 (1), (2016): 55–74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1060586X.2015.1023004>.

¹⁴ See: Russia & CIS Business and Financial Newswire. 2010. “Military Parades, Marches to Begin Simultaneously in 60 Russian Cities on Victory Day”, 2010; Catherine Schuler, “Staging the Great Victory.” *TDR: Drama Review* 65 (1), (2021), 95–123. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1054204320000118>.

¹⁵ Timothy Snyder, *The Road to Unfreedom: Russia, Europe, America* (First edition. New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2018).

as follows: “Russians supplied the political fiction, but Americans were asking for it.”¹⁶ This logic, in turn, is not dissimilar from what Peter Pomerantsev articulates in his early book *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible* (2014).¹⁷ In his study, he explains how TV production played a part in cementing Putin’s regime and demonstrates the direct connection between the media industry’s growing cynicism and the rise of authoritarianism in the country. His follow-up *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality* (2019) untangles the intricacies of misinformation and manipulation of public opinion.¹⁸ This book, unlike the first one, does not focus exclusively on Russia but gives a global perspective on the issues of information warfare.

Making Nostalgia Happen

Before introducing the contributions to this volume, let me provide some context by situating our work among the existing scholarship in nostalgia studies, with which our contributors have engaged. This review will also allow me to look at the theoretical premises of our investigations. There are several excellent surveys of recent work on nostalgia.¹⁹ For instance, Stefanie Armbruster has provided a thorough overview including various disciplinary and theoretical approaches.²⁰ The relevance of Armbruster’s work for this volume consists of her explanation of how television production triggers feelings of nostalgia in its audiences. Ekaterina Kalinina does something similar, though closer thematically to our book, when she shows how, between 1991 and 2012, Russian cultural production mediated the Soviet past and foregrounded nostalgic overtones.²¹ Kalinina’s study ends in 2012, but one may fairly claim that since 2012 (and especially since 2014), this mediation has received a second wind and become an integral part of state-curated cultural

¹⁶ Ibid. 215.

¹⁷ Peter Pomerantsev, *Nothing Is True and Everything Is Possible: The Surreal Heart of the New Russia* (First edition. New York: PublicAffairs, 2014).

¹⁸ Peter Pomerantsev, *This Is Not Propaganda: Adventures in the War Against Reality* (First edition. New York: PublicAffairs, 2019).

¹⁹ Carmen Valiente Ots, "Nostalgia: A Conceptual History." *History of Psychiatry*, (2014). Accessed May 9, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957154X14545290>

²⁰ Stefanie Armbruster, *Watching Nostalgia: An Analysis of Nostalgic Television Fiction and Its Reception* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2016). Her work also usefully discusses nostalgia in contemporary television in general, with special reference to German and Spanish television.

²¹ Ekaterina Kalinina, *Mediated Post-Soviet Nostalgia* (Sweden: Södertörns högskola, 2014).

politics in Russia. In 2013, Ilya Kalinin claimed, “We are no longer dealing with nostalgia and the desire for a return of the lost object, but with a politics whose objective is the positive recoding of nostalgia for the Soviet past into a new form of Russian patriotism, for which ‘the Soviet’ lacks any historical specificity, but is rather seen as part of a broadly conceived and comically heterogeneous cultural legacy.”²² What in 2013 appeared as “comically heterogeneous” now signals a developing cultural politics aimed at legitimizing the Russian Federation’s expansionist policies.

Since this volume focuses on the contemporary (post-Soviet or post-communist) nostalgic situation, our remarks are most directly in dialogue with *Post-Soviet Nostalgia: Confronting the Empire’s Legacies* (2019),²³ which understands its subject matter as “a slippery phenomenon.”²⁴ Instead of simply registering a longing for the Soviet period per se, “it points to a diverse range of nostalgic practices, sentiments, and discourses that are somehow effected by the fall of the Soviet empire and express efforts to come to grips with the legacy of its existence and demise.”²⁵

Another valuable contribution to the study of the political complexity underlining nostalgic cultural products is the volume *Nostalgia, Loss and Creativity in South-East Europe: Political and Cultural Representations of the Past* (2019), edited by Catharina Raudvere.²⁶ In this collection, devoted to the shaping of “political thinking” by nostalgically inflected cultural production, I would single out Tanja Zimmermann’s chapter, “The Economy of Nostalgia: Communist Pathos Between Politics and Advertisement.” In it, the author claims that in post-Communist countries, “nostalgia is thus not an approach to memory of the past or to an ideal, utopic future, but a creative means of promoting new ideas or products in the present... This strategy, converting an original ethos into a modern form of pathos, is the same in both political propaganda and

²² Ilya Kalinin, “Nostalgic Modernization: The Soviet Past as ‘Historical Horizon’.” *Slavonica* 17 (2) (2011): 156–66. <https://doi.org/10.1179/136174211X13122749974366>.

²³ Otto Boele, Boris Noordenbos, and Ksenia Robbe, *Post-Soviet Nostalgia: Confronting the Empire’s Legacies* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York, NY: Routledge, an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, 2020).

²⁴ *Ibid.*2.

²⁵ *Ibid.*3.

²⁶ Catharina Raudvere, *Nostalgia, Loss and Creativity in South-East Europe: Political and Cultural Representations of the Past* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

commercial advertising.”²⁷ This commercialized and politicized aspect of contemporary nostalgia production is important for our further reflection on the deployments of nostalgia for politically pragmatic purposes.

Nostalgia studies remain in demand because nostalgia keeps resurfacing in different forms of art and in different genres. In other words, there is always room for interpretation because there is always plenty to interpret. Nostalgia, however, is not constant in its manifestations. Fred Davis has commented that nostalgia is subject to ebbs and flows, as well as to different valuations balancing the negative and the positive.²⁸ Davis analyzes the situation in which Western Europe found itself after the collapse of its imperial domination, unable to process the new reality and sometimes prone to the unlikeliest sentiment (for example, some Africans express nostalgia for their colonial past).²⁹ As described by Davis, the post-colonial situation in liberated African countries is similar to the post-Soviet (de facto, post-colonial) situation. Therefore, the Western experience of the mid-twentieth century can help us better comprehend nostalgia in the post-Soviet or post-communist world.

Similar in its conceptual complexity is the article by Alex Moshkin, who studied post-Soviet nostalgia in the Russophone community of Israel.³⁰ His study shows that poetry and visual arts produced by the USSR-born repatriates depict the Soviet Union as an idealized paradise lost, whose reemergence “[derives] from the suffering, humiliation, and rapid downwards social mobility that the Russian-speaking community experienced in Israel.”³¹ The Russian language became a lingua franca for those who relocated from the USSR or post-Soviet countries. He claims that nostalgia, too, became a cementing tool to unite people with similar life experiences and cultural backgrounds, consequently shaping their political identities.

²⁷ Tania Zimmerman, “The Economy of Nostalgia: Communist Pathos Between Politics and Advertisement.” In *Nostalgia, Loss and Creativity in South-East Europe*. Switzerland: Springer International Publishing AG, (2018): 82.

²⁸ Fred Davis, “Nostalgia, Identity and the Current Nostalgia Wave.” *Journal of Popular Culture* 11 (2) (1977): 414–24. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0022-3840.1977.00414.x>.

²⁹ William Cunningham Bissell, “Engaging Colonial Nostalgia.” *Cultural Anthropology* 20 (2), (2005): 215–48. <https://doi.org/10.1525/can.2005.20.2.215>.

³⁰ Alex Moshkin, “Post-Soviet Nostalgia in Israel? Historical Revisionism and Artists of the 1.5 Generation.” *East European Jewish Affairs* 49 (3), (2019): 179–99. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13501674.2019.1715723>.

³¹ *Ibid.*

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