

## Conference Paper

# The Power of the Past. Socio-Cultural Foundations of Retromania in Russia at the Turn of the Twentieth and the Twenty-First Centuries

**Lev A. Zaks**

Liberal Arts University, Ural Federal University, Ekaterinburg, Russia

### Abstract

This article defines and analyzes the phenomenon of retromania in the Russian cultural consciousness. The dominance of the past in the Russian collective consciousness is widely considered to have its roots in the Soviet experience of the twentieth century as part of the world historic experience of the age. In this study, its challenging, of-crisis-proportions semantic character is revealed; together with a material and spiritual-and-soulful weight that creates a strong magnetic pull, i.e. a kind of addiction for its bearers. With retromania, the 'energy intensity' of its substance, significance and burden, produced a deep although unconscious fatigue in the bearers of the experience – former Soviet people with a shared socio-cultural past. This is often transformed into a sense of impotence with regards to the present and the future, acting as an attribute and symptom of the fundamental anthropological crisis which is an integral outcome of the Soviet civilization. Finally, the dependence of retromania on both the nature of the Russian present and uncertainty of the future is shown.

Corresponding Author:

Lev A. Zaks  
 u4345laz@gmail.com

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**Keywords:** retromania, past, present, future, past historical experiences, its semantic, material and energy components, gravity pull of the Soviet experience and fundamental fatigue generated by it.

## 1. Introduction

The ancients have gone stiff and cold,  
 The moderns rage against the old.  
 – A.S.Pushkin. Eugene Onegin  
 (tr. Ch.Johnston)

If you are interested in the past, then your interest  
 has some psychological motivation  
 – Hayden White

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The interest in the past has been a universal feature of people world attitude since the advent of modern man. Retromania is a special case of attitude to the past. This term was coined by an English music critic Simon Reynolds [1] who traced signs of the phenomenon in pop-music. Today it is clear that the phenomenon indicated and outlined by Reynolds is broader and deeper. I understand retromania as such a type of value-based perception of the past when it acquires an autotelic (intrinsically valuable) nature in cultural consciousness, dominates in the system of temporal modalities either putting it to the back-burner, or even crowding out the present and the future from conscious awareness. It is this attitude to the past that we observe in public mind of the post-soviet Russia. But other countries are also not free from this tendency, which, I might add, does not constitute a historic oddity. A larger part of the known human history has been taking place in conditions of a traditional society, and the past has absolutely prevailed not only in its consciousness but also in practices subjugating all aspects and spheres of life without exception both normatively and implicitly.

## 2. Methods

Nowadays the humanities explore and reflect on retromania from the perspective of empirical specificity of various studies, which is made available in the reports of the conference. We are also familiar with a significant amount of theoretical research focusing on multidisciplinary work of the present-day culture with time including the past [2–9]. Here I would like to propose a culturological perspective on today's retromania, its socio-cultural origin.

When the present (no matter how we can understand it) loses its actual existence and becomes the past what links us to it (in such a way that it influences us)? On the surface, or better to say, objectively-factually it is artifacts left behind by the past: things, texts, organizations. All this represents and keeps on its life and work as the 'present'. And what about on the inside, in subjects themselves? Here the past – not as something 'used to take place', but as something meaningful and influential for people of the present – represents itself in a specific type of human information known as *experience*. The truth is that this word/term is multi-layered. It means, firstly, an immediate process of an ideal interaction of a subject/subjectivity with an object. And experience in this meaning constitutes one of the key categories of the philosophic theory of cognition and lately it has played a greater role in a number of human sciences, for instance, in aesthetics [10] and metahistory [11]. Secondly, 'experience' is synonymous to an 'experiment' expressing a natural process reproduced/repeated artificially (by human beings).

I specifically refer to the third meaning: experience as an information result-trace of people past activities which kind of emerged themselves – by virtue of repetition of activities and as a result of objective, inevitable reproduction: ‘imprinting’, ‘locking-in’ and reinforcing/sustaining components and structures of activities in the composition and structure of subjectivity and embodiment of these activities’ actors. It is this meaning that A.S. Pushkin writes about: “experience is son of agonizing errors”. Several important features characterize experience in this particular meaning closest to life of many people (which is particularly important for our topic):

i. Integrity, connectedness in it, in its information continuum-discrete content of ‘what’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ of the activity that created this very experience;

ii. Connectedness and at-oneness in it, in its information ‘space’ of the subject-based and the value-and-meaning-based, the objective and the subjective, which gives intense emotions to the phenomenon of experience;

iii. Predominant non-reflectedness of the very existence of experience, its materiality, influence and content (which does not contradict effectiveness and an opportunity to realize, analyze and to assess it);

iv. Collective character of experience generated in a shared, cooperative human activity, experience that is literary common both substantially and formally;

v. Rootedness of experience as information in habitus, psychosomatic human integrity which adds an interiorized, sacred, ‘deep chested’ character explaining integrity, organics and non-reflectedness of experience to its information content.

A generalized image of grasped in this way experience (whose predicates can be ‘social’, ‘cultural’, ‘socio-cultural’, ‘historic’, etc. depending of various foundations and belonging) can be well expressed by B. Pasternak lines:

Here are all things me:

All that I’ve lived and

All that guides me still through life

My aspirations and foundations

And what I’ve witnessed with my eyes.

It is in this quality that shared experience preserves the past for groups and their members and effects those who live in the present. In this case we should speak about crucial influence of collective Soviet experience (1917–1991) and, broadly, historic experience of humankind in the twentieth century a part of which for the majority of former Soviet and today post-Soviet people (they still constitute a greater part of th RF

population) is experience of the Soviet civilization. And the key and historic challenge of our generation which is far from being solved is to overcome this influence in our socium, culture and ourselves.

### 3. Results

Here it is time and a possibility to formulate a hypothesis of modern retromania nature. It is quite simple: dominance of the past in minds of the post-Soviet society is determined by commanding power of historic experience of the twentieth century and, in the first place, the Soviet civilization, unprecedented in terms of their specific features and outcomes periods of the world history retained in special properties of experience itself. But in contamination (one can say, in historic 'assemblage') with the era of modernity that has ushered in and its context. And these characteristics of the twentieth century itself and its historic experience should be primarily highlighted. Here it is worth underlying that a purely rational analysis 'distanced' from the way experience exists and influences is manifestly insufficient. The nature of this experience, its powerful impact should be felt, perceived by mind and soul – the way it exists for its living bearers: experience is *being-generated and ontological*.

### 4. Discussion

Thus, there are three ontological components as part of the past, its real influence (as apparently the impact of other temporal modalities) and representative historical experience that should be distinguished and, to say once more, perceived:

- i. the informational, or semantic (object value) component, which works as any living actual (i.e. valid) information. That means it directs, programs and manages its own system and activities. Even in intellectual (rational and informational) terms, the experience of the twentieth century is extraordinary in this regard. This was, firstly, the century when culture thesaurus drastically scaled: there was huge increment in new knowledge, ideal models and meanings of nature, society, culture and human being. Particular efforts made by creative culture professionals (scientists, painters, project-makers) contributed to this result. However, the dramatic expansion of social practices, their areas and forms, took place providing new opportunities, rises and falls of human nature, both material, mental, and spiritual. The twentieth century totalitarian societies were particularly strong in those innovated practices, often shocking, terrifying and paralyzing. This was, secondly, the century of revolution in human beliefs and feelings:

there was incredible reshaping and new positions towards traditional 'subjects' including those seemed to have acquired the status of 'absolute truth' and 'eternal value'. Hence, this was, thirdly, the century of radical criticism, relinquishment and disillusionment. Worldviews and value systems went through triumphs gaining tremendous authority, and then fell down leaving ruins in minds and lives in its wake; never before the words like 'myth', 'utopia', 'ideal', 'Absolut', 'truth', 'God' had sounded so often and critically. Except for direct negativism and pessimism addressed to a specific object, so called 'totally negativistic' worldview forms were born or reinforced, such as Nietzscheism, Kafka's alienated consciousness, Camus', Beckett's, Ionesco's existential absurdism and, finally, postmodernist value relativism, denial of absolutes and big narratives, deconstruction as methodology of the absolute doubt in all constructions, utterances and values/beliefs. The permanent spiritual turmoil as a crisis of perceptions, ideas, valuable senses and concepts – this is what the past century, including the Soviet period, looks like in images and ideological or semantic 'concentrates' of its historical experience. It has overshadowed optimistic variants of modernism, social utopias, philosophical positivism, evolutionism and humanism. However, those who had actual experience of this century, as a rule, were unable to see its crisis nature.

ii. the 'tangible' component: 'mass', weightiness of experience. Research discourses usually ignore it; they think it is, at best, a metaphor. Meanwhile, there are some grounds for considering it as an objective factor affecting forcibly, even pressing, all levels of a human being (and existence) – material, mental, spiritual – right with its mass and weight. The weightiness is measured, determined by quantity/diversity, complexity, radicalism of events and the whole reality of socio-cultural life; by the number of people involved in the process, and, finally, by the range and depth of changes subjectively experiencing as shocks. Thus, the amount of loss, damage and victims in the Thirty Years War and the Hundred Years War resulted in tragic strained attitude, worldview and all Baroque culture. In this respect, the Soviet and world historic experience is much more substantial, it creates powerful gravitational field, which restrains currently living people in its orbit with its mainly "evil gravity" (O. Mandelstam). It attracts and subdues their spiritual, mental and physical forces. It produces an ambivalent socio-cultural and psychological situation because of its actual mass – the number of emigrants from the Soviet Russia, victims of the First World War and the Civil War, the Great Famine (Holodomor), the Stalinist repressions, the Second World War, the Holocaust, Hiroshima and Nagasaki. This mass is psychologically and spiritually determined by the scale of devastation, both tangible and intangible, the high incidence of social violence, the years of turmoil, humiliation, minority lawlessness, majority deprivation and defenselessness,

all-pervasive fears, disappointments, enforced separations, frustration, hopelessness, physical pain and moral sufferings of millions. On the one hand, there is full subordination to this gravitational force that paralyzes people's capacities for productivity, freedom, creativity, their will to change and their future (Except for direct powerful pull of the overall massive tragic, the past experience with its evident consequences, there are various transformed, or, in Freud's terms, sublimated forms of existence for this submitting attraction; the remarkable book *A Crooked Grief* by A. Etkind [13] is mainly devoted to this issue.). On the other hand, there are attempts to reflect on tragic experience and its 'gravity' as a challenge, the pursuit of its development and coping, i.e. the situation, in which spiritual and mental efforts are adequate to the huge 'mass' of experience and its gravitational force. However, the latter is a force- and-energy-consuming process. Therefore, here the third component of experience gains prominence:

iii. energy, or power. I should mention that similar to 'tangible' component, experience here takes not only material, "objective" forms, contents and impacts, though interiorized by people, but it also has subjective, spiritual and mental significance and influence. In its representativeness, semantic complexity and weight, this component can maintain spiritual and mental energy of the past sharing it with the present, even as it can absorb energy of the experience bearers and successors. They waste their force in a state of labour-intensive dependency owing to hard and oppressive knowledge, painstaking values and/ or equally weighty value emptiness and hopelessness, voluntary servitude and alienated inhumane sociality. Enthusiasm, "the world historical inspiration" (K. Marx) expresses the positive energetic impact of the experience; meanwhile its negative impact is manifested by *tiredness*. Depending on scale and weight of the negative experience (losses and failures), the tiredness is evidenced in a variety of emotions: from apathy and boredom to resentment, from melancholy to psychological nihilism and behavioral aggression. It also can be seen in a holistic state of people and groups as systems: in their 'habitus', activities, mental and moral strength, their readiness for change, creation of culture, i.e. in the nature of their subjectivity. By its huge weighty engine, the negative experience of the twentieth century, especially the Soviet one, subjugated – we can say trampled down – the spirit, psychology and social conduct of millions of the former Soviet citizens and partly affected new post-Soviet generations. It spawned their profound sense of fatigue, the state of persistent 'social and cultural weariness' that is still being felt and has done much to determine the Russia's failure in evolving from the Soviet, quasi-socialist civilization to the modern neo-capitalist one (S. Hedlund pinpointed the process as "a systemic failure" [12]). Actually, this is the tiredness

from the Soviet-type socio-cultural system represented by historical experience, which is 'enriched' and complemented by tragic experience of the world; incidentally, the Soviet system itself partially produced it. Vladimir Sokolov, a Soviet poet, wrote at the end of the past century:

I am sick of the twentieth century,  
Of its rivers, full of blood,  
Human Rights are no more my reverie –  
I'm not a human, just a mud.

So, in my opinion, Russian retromania as obsession with the past, its authority on consciousness and behavior of the Russians, can be defined foremost by two intrinsic factors of the past:

1. The weight of social and the twentieth century historical experience, both global and Russian, especially the tragic one, gravitational force (pull, power, pressure, enslaving effect) of its mass.
2. The loss of collective and individual energy in the Russian society, i.e. its overall – material, mental, spiritual – tiredness from the Soviet "socio-culture" (the term by I.P. Smirnov) and the tragic history of the twentieth century.

At first sight, these two factors might have had the opposite effect of liberation from the past. If past experience is so hard and painful that its gravity, the weight of the past itself, results in accumulated fatigue, doesn't it make sense to make the life easier, clear the atmosphere of the fatigue, eliminating the power of the past, re-evaluating its experience and going over it, blaze the way into the future? However, it is not that simple.

Those who had been raised by the past cannot get rid of it easily. Like the rock of Sisyphus, it had to be pushed up a hill, this is the power of pull, strength and authority of experience, which became, as V. Lenin would say, "our blood, everyday life and habit". Sisyphus, probably, disliked his rock; meanwhile the former Soviet people cannot separate themselves from the totality of the collective, their 'second nature'. Even knowing the truth of the Soviet system vices, having experienced them, having been given the opportunity to compare 'their own life' and 'the life of the others', they are not able to dissociate themselves from 'their own life'. It attracts them via parity of its own strong gravity and their voluntary submission to it. Existing alternatives and new opportunities opened up seem alien, hostile and frighten with the further burdens. And

their nature, heavily dependent on the past, counteracts the unpleasant memories of the collective past, the rational recognition of its imperfections, to say the least. Finally, several words about tiredness. This is not the situational fatigue, most frequently felt and spoken of by our contemporaries. However, their fatigability in the twenty-first century, undoubtedly, is genetically related to the exhaustion caused by the Soviet socio-culture, produced by its relics and persistence (The emotional state of the Russian present is exemplary. Tiredness is the world that frequently sounds in public. One of the reasons for this new fatigue is the transitional trauma, common to all post-Soviet countries. However, Stompka, who indicated this trauma among the Polish [15] (about cultural trauma also see [16–18]) has recently announced its elimination. This cannot be detected in Russia. The matter is dramatic, continuing destructive remains of the past. Produced by the Soviet system, old fatigue discourages us: there is no strength to adapt new civilization, let alone any social creation. Therefore, the post trauma syndrome continues its work multiplying new tiredness). The tiredness, accumulated in the course of the Soviet history is heavy, fundamental, systemic, rooted in mass subjectivity foundations. This is, we can say, ontological tiredness, which people cannot understand as tiredness from the past and its culture. In fact, they often do not take it for tiredness. It can be seen in their attitudes towards the present and the future.

The integral negative consequences of the twentieth century, the century of the Soviet civilization, including remaining weighty, oppressive and compelling experience and heavy, persistent tiredness, loss of activity that paralyzed subjectivity of the citizens and all society led to general crisis of the post-Soviet Russia. It is the crisis of sociality, culture, mentality, spirituality – the total anthropological crisis of Russian nation, which was defined by Merab Mamardashvili as the ‘anthropological catastrophe’. Yet, even the great Mamardashvili could not imagine the real scale of the disaster. It has become clear for more than thirty years following the collapse of the Soviet rule. Generalizing the previously mentioned, I distinguish two fundamental anthropological consequences–expressions of the total authority of the past and equally total tiredness from it [14]:

1. The inability to create new culture.
2. The inability to live in culture treating it as ‘seminal existence’ (B. Pasternak), in general.

In the current specific historical conditions, the former means that the majority of Russians, including ruling elites, are not able to change completely their mode of life (which determines the essence of culture), to build the civilization radically different from the Soviet one. In simpler words, this is inability to accept capitalism accompanied



by unwillingness and often inherent passive resistance. The latter consequence is even more profound. It is manifested in degradation or loss of basic cultural and anthropological capacities and intentions, both practical and mental, spiritual. This comes out quite clearly in social relations – in real sociality regress because of the loss of capacity to cooperate, to negotiate, to realize people's natural rights. As well as there is a lack of solidarity, self-organization, and a rise in mutual social alienation, apathy, nihilism, aggression, evident moral degradation of society and its citizens alongside with many other symptoms of social anomia. Eventually, this trend inevitably brings society and people back to barbarianism, savagery, animal state.

These are fundamental manifestations of the acute socio-cultural and cultural-anthropological crisis, and even serious critics of Russian political and economic realities – politicians, scientists, journalists – cannot see its scale and intensity. Instead, responsive artists, as they should be, are sensitive to the crisis – it is sufficient to remember films by A. Balabanov, A. Zvyagintsev, Y. Bykov, K. Serebrennikov, V. Sigarev. They are striving for awaking the sleeping minds of the Russian, breaking the haze and daze of the apathy, disinterest and nihilism with their sharp and dramatic reaction. Even the most delicate lyricist Vera Pavlova once 'slipped out' this verse:

A military song  
A bird from the hell is twittering.  
Russia is wrong  
The cure can be embittering.

However, not only the past feed and stipulate retromania as an important component of the general crisis. The vision of any temporal modality is derived from many cultural factors.

A book by M. Yampolskiy, for instance, shows with subtlety the interrelation and interdependence of history, memory, attitude towards the past and 'transcendental', timeless spiritual culture. In fact, this includes 'eternal' values, which are consistent with classics in art, so called 'timeless masterpieces'. I simply want to demonstrate that retromania depends on general temporal structure of modernity, i.e. the present-day Russian society determined by socio-cultural system with its practices and understanding of real correlation between the past, the present and the future. The lack of space suggests only brief tabular enumeration of the points:

TABLE 1: Temporal Structure as a Systemic Ground for Retromania

| The Past  | The Present   | The Future  |
|---|---|---|
| controversial experience with negative dominance of weightiness and tiredness | crisis, totally negative, without knowledge of heritage, its actual presence, but with awareness of the alienated new and the fears of changes; ideological turn to the past as an object to be critically rethought and replaced (progressism), or as an ideal model of the present and the future (conservatism); postmodernism and its contradictory influence on temporal consciousness | ambiguity as a result of the present crisis; fears of radically new future or fears of the progress impacts, ideological vacuum concerning the future |

## 5. Conclusion

Even these short statements are sufficient to see that, in terms of values, the experience corresponds to and ‘resonates’ with the given situation and the significance of our present and future. Their challenges, complexities, human ambiguity and ‘insecurity’ producing a large amount of psychological discomfort, cognitive dissonance, frustrations and collective or individual mental traumas reinforce the attractiveness of the past, though imperfect, but comfortable due to its habitual character and psychological assimilation. Not long ago, in that spirit the genius Rezo Gabriadze answered V.V. Pozner’s question stating that the past was his; everything there was common, comfortable, and cozy for him there; there were his Granny and Granddaddy, his Mom and Dad there. Then he added, that in today’s world we are lonely, alienated from other people. We should understand that only changing the present positively, creating attractive future through successful practices, accumulating new positive experience could cope with the pressures of the past, including retromania, upon us.

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