THE SOVIET TV VIEWER IN THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD: A PORTRAIT IN THE RURAL MILIEU

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Abstract: The article analyses the phenomenon that we have called "the last Soviet television viewers" in the Russian village. This is the generation of people over fifty, who were the first for whom television was the primary medium from their childhood and youth onwards, and who are today the last for whom it continues to be such. Central to the analysis are features of the practice of watching television and interaction with it. The research is based on materials from six field expeditions (2012–2019) to rural localities in Russia. Out of 263 in-depth interviews and observations, 106 were conducted with people whom we categorise as "the last Soviet television viewers". The article studies how television is represented in villagers' everyday life, what is watched in the post-Soviet age, what the relevant practices of watching television are, and how village people relate to television content and technology. The television was and remains the basic mass medium for the group under study, and is perceived as a very important source of content. Many of the Soviet television viewers' practices relating to the media continued into the early post-Soviet period and are preserved in the 2000s. New technology acquired by the informants is adapted until it becomes compatible with the basic practices of everyday life.

Keywords: media practices, TV-viewing, rural settlers, generations.

To cite: Petrova E., Preter V., 'The Soviet TV Viewer in the Post-Soviet Period: A Portrait in the Rural Milieu', *Forum for Anthropology and Culture*, 2023, no. 19, pp. 116–136.

doi: 10.31250/1815-8870-2023-19-19-116-136

URL: http://anthropologie.kunstkamera.ru/files/pdf/eng019/petrova_preter.pdf

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The Soviet TV Viewer in the Post-Soviet Period: A Portrait in the Rural Milieu

The article analyses the phenomenon that we have called "the last Soviet television viewers" in the Russian village. This is the generation of people over fifty, who were the first for whom television was the primary medium from their childhood and youth onwards, and who are today the last for whom it continues to be such. Central to the analysis are features of the practice of watching television and interaction with it. The research is based on materials from six field expeditions (2012–2019) to rural localities in Russia. Out of 263 in-depth interviews and observations, 106 were conducted with people whom we categorise as "the last Soviet television viewers". The article studies how television is represented in villagers' everyday life, what is watched in the post-Soviet age, what the relevant practices of watching television are, and how village people relate to television content and technology. The television was and remains the basic mass medium for the group under study, and is perceived as a very important source of content. Many of the Soviet television viewers' practices relating to the media continued into the early post-Soviet period and are preserved in the 2000s. New technology acquired by the informants is adapted until it becomes compatible with the basic practices of everyday life.

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Introduction

Television was uncontestably the most significant of the mass media in the second half of the twentieth century in terms of its influence on people. In the USSR, as in many Western countries, attention began to be paid to the technology of television even before the Second World War [Boretskiy 2011: 178]. The mass distribution of television across the USSR belongs to the period of late stagnation: in 1960 only 5 % of the population of the Soviet Union were able to watch television [Mickiewicz 1988: 3], but in the 1970s and 80s television coverage approached 100 % [Fomicheva 1987: 78]. Boris Firsov remarked in his book, *Television through the Eyes of a Sociologist*, which came out in 1971, that "[n]either the newspapers, nor the radio, nor even the cinema have been able to captivate humanity so instantly and securely as the screen in the home. Watching television programmes is beginning to take up more and more of people's time. It is natural that, in connection with this, television viewers' earlier interests, habits and ways of spending their leisure time are changing" [Firsov 1971: 6]. Soviet television viewers whose childhood, adolescence and young adulthood coincided with this period practically grew up with television and were socialised by it as well. Practices of watching

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television became a part of these people's everyday life. We have called this cohort "the last Soviet television viewers". We shall give more detailed reasons for this decision below. This article was written based on qualitative data collected in rural Russia. Television came to the village later than to the town, but it became a very important part of life. We made contact with and observed "the last Soviet television viewers" in the rural milieu during our expeditions to the countryside and in the course of our fieldwork there.

Television in the USSR and Russia: from the general to the individual

Kristin Roth-Ey, a historian from UCL and a researcher into Soviet television, has followed Michele Hilmes in calling television "a bad object" for research, noting both its ontological indeterminacy and its continuous connection with its context, in which such a subject for research may be both too big and too small, trivial, unpredictable, etc. [Roth-Ey 2011]. Research into Soviet television is thus no exception to the general rule. Moreover, the study of Soviet television was a complicated task also because Soviet researchers were confined within a strict ideological framework, and those from abroad, while the USSR existed, had limited access to the field, and in particular to data about the television audience. And when the ideological control was relaxed for a time, and the archives were opened in the post-Soviet period, the Russian media system began to change so rapidly that it was hard for researchers to grasp what had been happening back in Soviet times. Kristin Roth-Ey has compared the study of the media audience to the study of the nature of electricity: scholars understand that the audience exists, they place a high value on its significance, but there are never enough data to understand it and grasp the meanings in the media that are significant for it [Roth-Ey 2020].

In the USSR television became a prop of the Soviet system. In the early stages, the topic of Soviet television was for foreign researchers mainly connected with its political context [Roth-Ey, Zakharova 2015; Yablokov, Schimpfössl 2020]. However, the period of the dawn of television technology — the late 1960s and the 1970s — has been studied from various positions. Television had become an important part of everyday life, entertainment and leisure for Soviet people [Mickiewicz 1988; Roth-Ey 2011; Evans 2016], and via these spheres it influenced their ideological attitudes and political views. Television united a very diverse society, and enabled highly debatable phenomena to be accepted as the norm. As in other countries, watching television in the USSR gradually became the unifying centre of family life [Morley 1986].

Kirsten Bönker has studied what the inhabitants of Russia remembered about Soviet television twenty years after the collapse of the USSR

[Bönker 2018]. She notes that television transformed the material culture of Soviet households and their way of life. She concludes that television united Soviet people in "emotional communities" and enabled a common perception and understanding of social and cultural phenomena. This determined their positive attitude towards the Soviet way of life in the post-Soviet period. Bönker did not make it the object of her research to study the nature of her respondents' television watching in the post-Soviet period. The question remained open of what had happened to the viewing experience of this "emotional community" of Soviet people united by a very similar manner of watching television[1] after the dissolution of their country.

In the 1990s, Lev Gudkov and Boris Dubin called Russian society a society of television viewers. In their opinion, television took part in the "massification" of Russian society during those years, but to a large extent according to the old Soviet model, that is without the formation of an elite or the differentiation of institutions, relying on the most conservative groups in society, and the corresponding landmarks and mechanisms, to which Soviet-style mass culture also belonged [Gudkov, Dubin 2001: 45].

In the twenty-first century, researchers observe that watching television is becoming more individualised, it has moved from the living room to the bedroom: in its earlier stages television helped to separate the home from the world outside, but in the first decade of the twenty-first century it separates the personal space of the bedroom from the domestic space of the family [Livingstone 2007]. This tendency is also characteristic of Russia. In 2000 a research project called "Television through the Eyes of Its Viewers" was initiated in Russia, and has become one of the key studies of the subject. In 2010 I. A. Poluekhtova, using data from this project, noted an important new tendency: the individualisation of television preferences. The dynamics of the television audience are determined by a movement from massification to demassification and a change in the character of the use of the medium from the predictable, predetermined, regulated and evolutionary to the spontaneous, multi-factor and high-intensity [Poluekhtova 2010: 76]. It is logical to suppose that digital television, giving the possibility of a greater choice of content, will favour a differentiation of television watching. Since 2013 ideological control over Russian television has become stricter, and it is typical of Russia's new media strategy to adapt global entertainment media formats which include ideologically loaded content to a specific audience [Tolz, Teper 2018]. Researchers note that in the twenty-first century television viewing still has great importance in Russia.

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[1] Kirsten Bönker uses the term *cultural homogenization*.

Research into the media in the Russian village: data and methods

In 2012–2014, the National Research University Higher School of Economics (HSE University) Media Research Laboratory conducted a project on the media consumption of Russian villagers, within which four field expeditions took place. In 2018–2019, within the HSE project "Discovering Russia Anew", the participants in the 2012–2014 expeditions returned to the topic of villagers' media consumption and conducted two more field expeditions. In all, six expeditions took place from 2012 to 2019, to the rural district of Ugory in Kostroma oblast (2012), the Koksovyy rural district in Rostov oblast (2013), the rural district of Seredkino in Irkutsk oblast (2014), the Chistopol rural district in Tatarstan (2014), the village of Glazok in Tambov oblast (2018), and the Gzhel rural district[1] in Moscow oblast (2019).[2]

As a result of the expeditions, 263 in-depth semi-structured interviews were collected on what media were used by the villagers, how they regarded them, and their attitude towards the information they received, the broadcast images and subjects, and so on. As well as the interviews, we collected visual data on the households and observed the practices of media use in the rural milieu.

As a rule, research into media much more often concerns townsfolk. There is extremely little known in Russia about the specifics of interaction with the media in the rural milieu. For this reason, our expeditions were practically exploring a *terra incognita* that we entered with more research questions than already formulated hypotheses in our arsenal. We did, however, have one hypothesis. In 2012, we supposed that access to a large number of channels would make a qualitative change to the practices and content of their consumption, and might reinforce the reception of images of contemporary mass culture, and through it the adoption of its values, the inclusion of people's own village life in the greater whole of the country represented on screen. However, it became clear after the first two expeditions that the expected qualitative change in the practices of watching television was not taking place. The villagers did not accept "new" images, but accommodated them to their own picture of the world [Kiriya, Novikova 2013]. Differentiation is more characteristic of practices of using the internet than watching television. The more data we collected, the more fragmentary the

[1] After the administrative reorganisation of the regions of Moscow oblast, the Gzhel rural district was abolished and the Gzhelskoye territorial administration of the Ramenskoye urban district was established.

[2] The article designates the expeditions as follows: Ugory (rural district of Ugory in Kostroma oblast, 2012), Koksovyy (Koksovyy rural district in Rostov oblast, 2013), Seredkino (rural district of Seredkino in Irkutsk oblast, 2014), Chistopol (Chistopol rural district in Tatarstan, 2014), Glazok (village of Glazok in Tambov oblast, 2018), Gzhel (Gzhel rural district in Moscow oblast, 2019).

media consumption of dwellers in rural localities appeared to us. But after several expeditions it became clear that there is nevertheless a common element in the material, repeated in different regions in every year of the project.

In 2019, as part of the work of the teaching and study group on the media in rural Russia, an analytical model for work on the data was put forward, and all the interviews were encoded in the Atlas.ti system. Two sets of codes were determined: technical (cinema, television, internet, reading, radio, music, telephone, photography) and descriptive (content description, content attitude, practice description, practice attitude, representation). After trying out different combinations of codes and socio-demographic characteristics of our respondents, we realised that there was a group of respondents whose consumption of the media was very similar, and that they were united by practically monolithic, identical practices of watching television. For the most part these were people aged fifty or more. Out of the 263 informants, we identified 106 (61 women and 45 men) who could be called "the last Soviet television viewers".

"The last Soviet television viewers": defining the concept

Why call them this? According to the definition given by Aleksei Yurchak, the last Soviet generation consists of those "who were sufficiently mature to have been entirely formed during the Soviet period". As he writes, "According to such a definition, the last Soviet generation includes people over a relatively wide range of ages, born between the middle of the 1950s and the beginning of the 1970s, who ranged by age during perestroika from school-leavers to thirty-year-olds" [Yurchak 2017: 85]. Mikhail Sokolov notes that the generational difference is one of the most important for describing contemporary Russian social reality: while class "does not work" for dividing society into groups, the generation as a category is the most suitable for this task [Sokolov 2019].

It is interesting that chronologically the periods of the development of Soviet television are very close to the period of the formation of the last Soviet generation. In 1960, when people born in the middle of the 1950s were children, there were only 4,800,000 television sets in the whole of the USSR with its population of 212,400,000 (108,800,000 of them in rural areas), that is, approximately one set for every 45 persons. During their early adolescence, in 1965, when there were 229,600,000 people living in the USSR (108,900,000 of them in rural areas) there were 15,700,000 television sets, that is about one for every fifteen persons. When the generation of the mid-fifties were in their later adolescence, in 1970–1975, there were 60,000,000 television sets in the whole of the USSR with its population of 241,700,000 (105,700,000 in rural areas), that is about

one set for every four people. And in 1981 (population of the USSR 266,600,000, with 97,700,000 in rural areas) there were 75,000,000 sets, that is about one for every 3.5 persons [Sredstva 1985: 120]. Undoubtedly, the sets cannot be regarded as evenly distributed, especially if one compares the town with the countryside, but still... Researchers note that in the Soviet period villagers with television sets watched more than townsfolk. The reason for this was the lack of any leisure infrastructure in rural areas [Bönker 2015]. In the initial stages of the development of television it was the most active persons who were most attracted to the use of this technology, and it was especially interesting to young people. At that time television was, as we would now say, a new medium, and gave rise to many discussions.

In this way "the early last Soviet television viewers", born from the middle of the 1950s to the middle of the 1960s, mostly became acquainted with television as older children or adolescents, whereas "the later last Soviet television viewers", born at the end of the1960s or beginning of the 70s, could have lived with television from their earliest childhood. In any case, this innovation became part of their daily routine, and they may be compared with today's children, for whom the internet is just such an integral and self-evident part of everyday life.

At present, the members of the last generation of Soviet television viewers remain seriously involved in televisual practices. In the Oxford *Dictionary of Media and Communication* viewers of this type are defined as *heavy viewers* [A Dictionary 2011]. For younger generations television watching is no longer so monolithic, and it is closely connected with the use of other media technologies, and parallel media consumption (radio and television, television and internet).

According to research data, the tendency of recent decades is that the average age of television viewers is increasing. In 2008 32 % of viewers were over 55, and in 2018 46 % [Televidenie 2019: 38]. People who are now in their 40s use television and the internet in more or less equal proportions. Young people are more and more attracted to the internet. It can be seen against the background of these tendencies that the last Soviet generation may well turn out also to be the last generation of television viewers who grew up on television content and for whom television has been the basic media technology.

Of course, any division by formal criteria is provisional. One person aged forty-nine may turn out to have television viewing habits that are very like those of a person of fifty-five, while those of another person of fifty-one may be like those of a forty-year-old. We should take note that we began our research with the content of the

respondents' media experience, and only afterwards, when we discovered that it was very similar across a large group of respondents (while this was not the case in any other group) did we see the specifics of a particular generation here.

Television in the rural family and home

It is worth remarking that those informants whom we categorised as "the last Soviet generation" were, when we got to know them in the field, the frankest. This may, indeed, be explained by their age: most of the interviewers (who were students or young colleagues) could have been their grandchildren or younger children, which inclined them to be well-disposed towards them. However, this also showed itself in the way they found it quite easy to talk about television. Whereas young informants were at a loss, unable to say what they used from the media or how, "the last Soviet television viewers", once the conversation had got to the appropriate stage, could talk for hours about what they watched.

At the time of our expeditions all the respondents who were over fifty had a television at home, and in most households more than one. As one respondent remarked, "We live well. Each of us has their own television." There were some households that had more television sets than people living there. Sets were acquired for different rooms ("so as to have something to watch everywhere"), at different periods of people's lives ("once we had money, we bought one", "our son got married, and we bought that television set" and so on). Many respondents have kept old sets that no longer work. In one household, for example, we were told that they had six television sets, but only two that could be watched.

The main television set is in the living room, as a remembrance of the times when watching television was a practice that united the family. Nowadays, though, they do not often watch together. As our respondents explained, everyone has their own interests. Paradoxically, sometimes they even watch the same programme separately. In the house where we noticed this, the woman told us that she had got into the habit of switching on the television in the kitchen first thing in the morning. It is on all day, while she is doing the housework (both in the kitchen and elsewhere). When her husband comes home from work, he goes to have a rest in the bedroom. There he watches "his television", often switching on the same channel as his wife is watching. Identical content is incorporated into different contexts of everyday practices.

It is a characteristic feature of village interiors that the devices for accessing the media functions, as a rule, are the semiotic and aesthetic centre. Moreover, people like to surround the television

with various non-functional objects that have an important symbolic meaning (photos of their nearest and dearest, icons, certificates, cups, statuettes, etc.) [Petrova 2016]. The television is often the newest and most expensive item in the home. It is interesting that when we asked our respondents to switch the television on, even if the interview was taking place in a kitchen or on a verandah or somewhere else where there was a television set, we were sometimes invited into the living room, to be shown "the main television in the house".

If there is only one television in the house, then a significant part of the devices for accessing the media will be concentrated in one place; for example, in the room where the television is one might also see a computer, a music centre (with a newspaper lying on it), while there are no such media devices in the other rooms.

Our interviews usually followed the pattern described below. First our informants told us that they hardly ever watched television, because they had no time, they were too busy (although many of them were pensioners), because they had farm work. Then, in the course of the interview, they would first allow themselves to concede that there were periods — winter, for example, when there is less work to do, and then it would happen that they watched television a lot and for a long time.

The next stage was when we finally established that the television in the informant's house was practically always on; the morning began with it being switched on and the evening ended with it being switched off, though some people even fell asleep to the television. But this was not understood as watching television, since things were being done at the same time, people were preparing food or eating it, or cleaning the house, and glancing at the screen from time to time.

It would then turn out that there were some programmes that would absorb the informant entirely (however, our observation of our informants' television watching showed that even if someone is not doing anything while watching, he or she still gets distracted by discussions with family members or even their own thoughts, which they addresses to the people on the screen).

You know, I don't understand myself what interests me there. I simply get sucked in, and now I sit it out till eleven o'clock every evening. And at nine in the morning I switch it on again (Chistopol, woman, 61).

In interviews with people from households where more than one generation lives side by side, in the part of the interview about television the young people often indicated that the older generation watched television ("I don't watch television, my grandfather tells

me what's been on", "I don't want to waste time on that, my parents can watch and they'll tell me everything that matters"). Within their family relationships, the younger generation often connects watching television with the experience of older generations, but at the same time the television content is an important part of the interaction within the family.

We drew the conclusion that declaring that you watch television all the time would be embarrassing for them, socially unacceptable. Why? Perhaps because when they say "I am watching television" they mean deliberate watching, when someone is doing nothing else but watching. In this way, watching television is firmly interwoven with our informants' everyday life, but they are not prepared to reflect on it as a separate, independent process. What is said on the television penetrates and permeates the usual processes of their everyday life.

Television can thus be called a sort of "flickering object" in the everyday life of our informants. Not only because the screen flickers, but because television broadcasting is not really distinguished as a separate process, it is included in everyday life, and the milieu that arises from television broadcasts is not noticed by its users [McLuhan, Fiore 1968].

What do "the last Soviet television viewers" watch?

The first expeditions' hypothesis was built on the proposition that widening opportunities for access to new content would change the informants' television viewing: new opportunities would become accessible to villagers who were in a situation of informational inequality, and content would be discovered capable of significantly expanding their ideas and points of reference. However, in the end it turned out that practically all our informants only watched an extremely limited selection of channels.

Despite the changes that television has undergone in the twenty-first century — the appearance of satellite broadcasting, which has spread all over the country and introduced into the homes of its users packages with tens or hundreds of channels, including foreign ones and those with contemporary content — our informants prefer two basic types of television content. The first is the content that they are used to from the past, and that they know from the pre-satellite era — "Channel 1", "Russia", "NTV". The second is the new channels accessible thanks to satellite TV that primarily show content from the past (Soviet films and music) — "Star", "Home of Cinema", "Chanson TV", etc.

The first sort of content is watched by practically all the informants from our empirical base. This selection is characteristic of their

viewing over many years. Some informants call the channels "programmes" ("yes, I always watch the first programme", "the first and second programmes — without fail"), as people used to in the Soviet period. Paradoxically, in most cases the informants had the possibility of watching a large selection of channels, and they were well aware of it and even told us in the interviews with a certain bravado or pride how many channels they had.

Int.: *How many channels have you got?*
Inf.: *Oh, lots of them now. Dozens, probably. Such a lot. We've got a dish.*
Int.: *And which channels do you watch?*
Inf.: *I only watch Channel 1. I'm used to it.*
(Gzhel, woman, 57).

We've got nearly a hundred channels. Look [the respondent takes the control and flicks through the channels]. *Well, Channels 1 and 2 without fail. And the rest... when we... I don't remember now* (Koksovyy, man, 67).

It is interesting that such a uniform choice of channels is typical of the situation even when there are several sets in the house and technically there is the possibility of personalising one's choice of content. However, it turns out in reality that the practices of watching television have been personalised, but the choice of content has proved more consistent and universal. We tested this conclusion by comparing it with how our informants used internet resources. It turned out that unlike their television viewing, their experience of using internet resources was too diverse for us to speak, on the basis of our empirical material, of any general tendencies, or even to identify types of its use with any confidence.

Of the two types of television content identified, the first is characteristic of practically all our informants, the second of a significant part of them. That is, according to our data, villagers basically watch either the "universal" set of channels described above, or the "universal" set of channels plus a few specialised ones. This set of channels is not so monolithic, but there is subject matter that is most often represented in this direction of content — Soviet films and music. The return to the screen of an abundance of Soviet cinema and music is indeed closely connected with satellite TV: the channels of the first set broadcast far fewer of such films, and usually show them at holidays, while the "Star" and "Home of Cinema" channels do it every day.

On every expedition we heard from our informants the expression "old-fashioned films", referring to Soviet-made films. It should be made clear here that our informants do not divide Soviet films into periods or tendencies, the way it is done by people in film studies,

for whom Soviet cinema is not a homogeneous mass. Nor do our informants regard films from the time of perestroika as "old-fashioned", as our observations have shown. For example, *The Courier*[1] was described as modern by one of our informants and contrasted with the "old-fashioned". On the other hand, there are no avant-garde experiments (such as Dziga Vertov's), and no ambitious cinematic epics by Eisenstein or musical comedies by Aleksandrov to be found among the films that our informants regard as "old-fashioned". It may be said that the "old-fashioned films" are the mass-market Soviet cinema of the post-war period in such genres as comedy, industrial drama or war films. In our informants' minds *Spring on Zarechnaya Street* (1956) and *Love and Doves* (1984)[2] rub shoulders as parts of a single whole [Chumakova, Khairutdinova 2019].

This does not mean that our informants are unacquainted with "modern" television content: they have seen modern Western and Russian films and serials, television shows, music clips, and so on. What is interesting is that modern Russian films and serials dealing with the USSR are not always perceived as modern, or always distinguished from films made in the USSR.

Nowadays, in our times, they're making Soviet films that are not bad either (Gzhel, woman, 57).

Still, the opposition between "old-fashioned" and "modern" is evident. The "modern" creates bewilderment, incomprehension and alienation.

Some film came on at nine o'clock, I forget what it was called... I don't know, I disliked it so much that I stopped watching […] It wasn't one of ours, it was American, I think... I found it so unpleasant to watch, that's what... well, of course I don't think our directors ever make films like that (Chistopol, woman, 65).

In our view there are several explanations for this incomprehension, bewilderment and alienation. The first is directly connected with the language of the media, the form of communication. Modern media products are distinguished by rapid episodic editing, more intense subjects, and more striking special effects [Novikova, Chumakova 2014]. "The last Soviet television viewers" are simply not ready for this kind of language, and when they had the opportunity of watching what they were used to instead of mastering it, they returned to content with a language that they could understand. The second explanation is connected with the problem

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1 *The Courier*, directed by Karen Shakhnazarov (Mosfilm, 1986). [Eds.]

2 *Spring on Zarechnaya Street*, directed by Marlen Khutsiev (Odesa Film Studio, 1956); Love and Doves, directed by Vladimir Menshov (Mosfilm, 1984). [Eds.]

of the representation of the life the informants live. Many of them say that the village is not represented in modern media products — it is not mentioned in the news or on television shows, and films and serials are also usually about the city. Those that are about the village are popular: for example, everyone knew the 2012 serial "Yefrosinya". But life in that serial was a long way from the life that the villagers live. The "old-fashioned" cinema, though, often shows those problems and values that the respondents are close to and understand.

It was as if we didn't exist in the nineties. Now there is more about us, shall we say, ordinary people like us; you know yourself how many programmes and good old-fashioned films are shown (Seredkino, woman, 62).

In the wider context, researchers connect the popularity of Soviet films with a phenomenon like nostalgia. This is not a local Russian peculiarity; at present nostalgic moods are typical of many countries. Svetlana Boym identifies two kinds of nostalgia: restorative (attempting to restore a mythical collective dwelling place) and reflexive (pining as such). "Nostalgia is pain brought on by a temporal break and disconnectedness […]. Rootlessness is compensated for by a return 'home', preferably to a common collective home" [Boym 2013]. Television allows this "common collective home" to be constructed, uniting viewers with common emotions, life experience, comprehensible and well-loved images. In modern Russia television and cinema overlap in the sphere of the cultural production of "nostalgia" more than anywhere else [Wijermars 2020]. Our data confirm this: television programmes and cinema content are closely connected with each other in our respondents' assessments, the one seems to continue the other, creating a perfectly integral system in the respondents' reception of them. Such a unity provides the opportunity of significant immersion in the broadcast content and favours the creation of that very emotional community of which Kirsten Bönker wrote [Bönker 2018].

In post-Soviet Russia the renewed capacities of the industry have made it possible to create modern screen content of a high quality [Brassard 2021], but interest in the Soviet past grew significantly in Russia in the 2000s. The television industry responded to this demand with nostalgia projects [Khinkulova 2012] that commercialised the nostalgic mood [Kalinina 2014].

It would be an oversimplification to assert that post-Soviet Russian television is a hermetically sealed system that feeds on itself, using the past as a source of images. It would be equally wrong in our view to reduce the understanding of this question exclusively to a desire to return to the Soviet experience. As researchers have noted, the

historically familiar methods of Russian state control over the media are being transformed under the influence of the global media culture. Thus, the heritage of the Russian and Soviet past is not being reproduced but rather reinvented in the context of trans-national experience and popular views, supported by the state, of the construction of community [Hutchings, Szostek 2015]

How do villagers watch television?

As noted above, watching television is rarely perceived by our respondents as an independent activity. What is more, it is closely connected with the habits, routine activities, and usual régime of the day. Depending on the room in which people spend most of their time, that is where they switch the television on. Television sets in the kitchen are often positioned so that they cannot be watched, only listened to, and the picture only occasionally seen when a person turns round towards the screen.

It is possible to identify three basic ways of watching television in relation to other practices: as an accompaniment to other practices, built into the structure of other practices, or independent. By watching television as an accompaniment we mean the sort of situation when the television is switched on in the background while other things (cleaning, cooking, mending, etc.) are being done. The informants seldom remember what they watch at such a time. In such a situation the television is often replaced by the radio. The content has little significance.

I don't watch it [the television], I just like it to be saying something while I'm in the kitchen (Glazok, woman, 59).

It is another situation when there is a particular practice (usually recreational) that watching television is built into. For example, an informant likes to have a rest in his bedroom and watch the television for a while when he comes home from work. Here it is not the content, but the recreational practice that is the defining factor. The content is chosen out of whatever is available at that time.

In the evening I finish all the things I have to do and switch on "Vremya".[1] *Then I watch everything they show until I fall asleep* (Gzhel, man, 54).

The third situation is when it is the television content that determines the structure of the day. For example, respondents try to get home earlier in time for their favourite serial or finish their household chores earlier on a non-working day so as to "watch their programme in peace".

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[1] The evening news programme on Channel 1. [Eds.]

All three kinds of practice connected with the media are quite stable and can last for many years or even decades. We find it significant to note that even in situations when the technology changes, the respondents find that part of it that fits into their existing practices easier to accept. We found an example that illustrates this well on our expedition to the Gzhel rural district in October 2019. Our informant, a fifty-one-year-old taxi driver, told as that before, "when the children were still living with us", the "main" television in their house was in the living room. The whole family often watched it together. After the children left home our informant decided that it would be more convenient to watch the television in the bedroom. Thus, the house acquired another television, which became the main one for a long period. Our informant used to watch the television in the bedroom before going to sleep, while his wife was often watching the television in the living room at the same time. That is how the transition from family to individual television watching that researchers have noted took place in that family. Literally a few years before our conversation during the expedition, our informant had taken the decision to remove the television from the bedroom, because "as he saw it the bedroom was for sleeping and the television had no place in it." However, during the interview he described his practice of watching television contents in the bedroom like this:

Inf.: *Now I take my tablet and open it before I go to sleep. You see, I've got the app here* [indicating the NTV television channel app on the screen].

Int.: *So do you watch the same as you did on the television?*

Inf.: *Well yes, for the most part I watch NTV. Only now I have a tablet* (Gzhel, man, 51).

The close mutual connexion with basic everyday practices helped television viewing to remain a relatively stable system even in a situation of significant technological change.

What do the last generation of Soviet television viewers see?

A loyal attitude to television content is characteristic of the members of the last generation of Soviet television viewers. There are many among the informants who trust the television to a significant extent ("of course we trust it, who else can we trust?").

In this group of respondents there is no demand for exactitude in the data or need to verify it. They do not think it necessary to do this themselves and do not expect it of the television people.

Int.: *Have you ever tried to verify the information shown on television?*
Inf.: *I don't get hung up on such details, I don't have time for that* (Gzhel, woman, 57).

Int.: *Do they show the truth on television?*
Inf.: *Truth? Who cares about the truth? People have heart trouble, blood pressure... But the television works* (Koksovyy, man, 60–65).

A second group understands that television content is not always reliable. When they compare it with what they see in real life, the members of this group are sceptical about television content.

They show palaces on television when people haven't even got a fence (Ugory, woman, 63).

However, members of both groups are characterised by a loyal attitude to television content.

Int.: *Do you trust the news?*
Inf.: *Well, yes, we do. You like to believe that they're not deceiving us* (Gzhel, man, 53).

We're used to believing it. We were born in Soviet times, we believe everything (Chistopol, woman, 65).

We should note that among our informants there are both those who do not use the internet at all, or who use it extremely rarely (once a month, for example, with the help of their grandchildren), and those who are quite active in their use of the resources of the web. With each expedition the experience of internet use among informants from the group of "the last Soviet television viewers" became more diverse. It is most fully represented in our base by material from the expedition to the Gzhel rural district. In our view this is influenced by the facts that Gzhel is in Moscow oblast, that the gradual penetration of the rural milieu by the internet is becoming more intensive and profound, and that we were not only aiming to find similarities with previous expeditions in the Gzhel material, but also looking for new practices. In sum, we were convinced by the Gzhel material that even those respondents belonging to the group of the last rural television viewers who have a quite varied experience of using internet resources and go onto the internet every day have practically the same attitude towards television content as those respondents with no experience of using the internet. Moreover they relate to information on the internet with greater caution than to television content.

Inf.: *I watch the news mostly on television.*
Int.: *And on the internet?*
Inf.: *There's a lot of murky stuff on the internet. I don't trust it* (Gzhel, man, 65).

I trust "Vesti" more. After all, people wouldn't lie on television. But there's a lot of different information on this internet. Some of it is true, and some of it is distorted (Gzhel, woman, 57).

Several reasons can be identified explaining why our respondents are only slightly attracted by new forms of content. They are signalled in the article by Novikova and Chumakova. The first of them is the ongoing crisis of values connected with the collapse of the USSR and the socio-cultural trauma. It already became evident in the years of perestroika that the values of the new society and Soviet values are implacably opposed to each other. In Russia these processes coincided with another stage of technological change. All at the same time people had to search for new values and goals, adapt to the introduction of new technology (such as mobile phones and the internet), and resist globalisation, which had turned from an academic concept into a new perception of reality. The last decades have somewhat blunted the experience, but the conflict of values has not found any resolution. This is particularly acutely felt in rural localities [Novikova, Chumakova 2014].

Kirsten Bönker began her article about the interconnection between watching television and the formation of an emotional community in the Soviet Union by quoting a respondent about how he had sincerely believed that he lived in a better country, and, recalling his experience of watching television, he notes that he had believed that it was all true [Bönker 2018]. This sort of perception is also typical of our respondents. Following the image / juxtaposition given by Christine Evans [Evans 2016] in the title of her book *Between Truth and Time: A History of Soviet Central Television*,[1] we might say that between time and truth, our respondents choose the first. Television content is still more interesting and more significant for our respondents in the post-Soviet period than actual reality. However, it is important to make it clear that when our respondents speak of their trust in television, this characteristic is much closer to an emotional faith than to a rational conviction. This faith relies not so much on assessments of whether television can be trusted as on the emotional connection (television as a source of strong emotions, images, memories) and the desire to maintain that connection.

In her recent book *Losing Pravda*, Natalia Roudakova describes how the Russian media environment is changing in the post-*Pravda* era [Roudakova 2017]. In particular, she compares journalists' attitudes to "the truth" in the USSR and contemporary Russia, and shows that while in the USSR the main emphasis was on passing things over in silence, in the twenty-first century Russian journalists create "parallel worlds" of illusions and images unconnected with reality that distract their audience from what is happening and shift the focus of attention. It is interesting that, on the one hand, villagers are ready

[1] The title plays on both the direct meaning of the words and the titles "Vremya" [Time], the main news programme on Soviet television and "Pravda" [Truth], the main Soviet newspaper, where all significant ideological information was published.

on the whole to believe in these illusory worlds, but on the other they notice that these worlds are different from the one they live in.

Conclusions

We have shown that in Russian rural localities a particular group — "the last Soviet television viewers" — can be identified. This is the generation of people over fifty who have been involved since their earliest childhood in the practices of watching television and have kept them as their basic media practice over their whole lives. Unlike the older generation, they became aware of television early enough for it to become for them a habitual, self-evident medium of mass information. Unlike the younger generation, they were no longer so young when the internet became widely available in Russia.

They are, therefore, people for whom the television was, is, and to all appearances continues to remain the basic variety of the media that they use. As a result of the specifics of the television and the media environment that it forms, and also of the historical legacy of the USSR and of contemporary Russian particularities, the practices of this group are quite monolithic among people who live in villages all over Russia that are quite different geographically, culturally, socially, economically, ethnically, etc.

Television plays a central significance-generating role in the material-symbolic environment of these people's domestic space. Though they have various possibilities for choice of content (from the minimal to the very extensive) the informants prefer a basic set of channels in their viewing. The expansion of technological possibilities has not had much effect on this choice.

Even when there are serious changes in the basic spheres of life, practices connected with the media are often maintained. In this way, many media practices of Soviet television viewers survived the early post-Soviet period and are maintained in the 2000s. Even when the watching of television is individualised, the interconnexion between everyday life and media experience remains unchanged. New technology acquired by the informants is adapted to the point where it becomes compatible with the basic practices of everyday life.

Television is understood as a very significant fundamental source of content. There is a loyal attitude towards it. Even in situations when the choice of content was very different, the attitude towards it was similar. Respondents often found a reflection in television content of their habitual axiological points of reference. Their attitudes towards the content and the technology (in this case television) were interconnected.

We do not know whether our conclusions will be characteristic of the generation of the last Soviet television viewers as a whole, or

whether they are only relevant to the rural milieu. A quest for answers to these questions may become a promising direction in which to develop our research. We shall, however, note certain characteristics of our rural field material that we think significant for the evaluation of the results of the research. According to data from Rosstat, a little over a quarter of the population of Russia is rural.[1] The existing official designations of the concepts of urban and rural are not exhaustive. "In essence we are often dealing not with two opposites, such as the big city and the village, but with a single system of dispersal with a mass of types of intermediate settlements, in which each has fewer rural features and more urban ones than the previous one" [Nefedova 2014: 19]. Moreover, researchers note that Russia has quite a large "hidden rural population", which is included in the urban population by official statistics [Zubarevich 2016: 104]. Therefore, in our view, the conclusions drawn should not be regarded so much as specific to the rural milieu as characteristic of those who have been held back by various limiting factors. As a rule, villagers have limited means and a less favourable environment with a less well developed social infrastructure, which further inhibits the spread of new practices [Radaev 2019: 123]. In the end those practices that are dominant are not erased by different factors, but are clearly expressed and distinctive in the field material.

The article does not by any means describe all the characteristics of "the last Soviet television viewers", and further study of them may provide further details, for example, of their relationships with other media.

Acknowledgments

The article uses materials collected within the framework of projects supported by the HSE Foundation for Applied Fundamental Research: "Transformation of media in Russia in the context of a new communication reality", 2012; "Transformation of Russian television viewing in the context of the emergence of new media platforms", 2013; "Media in a new social, economic and technological reality", 2014, and also within the framework of projects supported by the Program of the Educational Innovation Foundation within the framework of the project "Rediscovering Russia": "Transformation of the media environment and practices of media consumption and media use in rural areas of Russia (case of the village of Glazok, Tambov region)", 2018; "Transformation of the media environment and practices of media consumption and media use in rural areas of Russia (case of rural agglomeration Gzhel of the Moscow region)", 2019. The publication was prepared during the work in the project "Media in rural Russia: technologies, practices, effects" (no. 19-04-041) within the framework of the Program "Scientific Foundation of the National Research

[1] Data from the official site of the Federal State Statistical Service, section "demographics", <https://rosstat.gov.ru/folder/12781>.

University Higher School of Economics (HSE)" in 2018–2019 and within the framework of state support of the leading universities of the Russian Federation "5-100".

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