

From Soviet Drab to Normal Life in 20 Years

By [Nataliya Vasilyeva](#)

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In September 1991, when the Soviet Union was living out its final months, I was a first-grader with one thing on my mind: a red badge with a portrait of Vladimir Lenin as a toddler.

Accepting the badge of a Little Octobrist, a title honoring the October 1917 revolution led by Lenin, was the first rite of passage for every Soviet citizen, to be followed by membership in the Young Pioneers, the Communist Youth League and finally, for some, the Communist Party itself. This was the path to a good education and a successful career.

I was due to get my Lenin badge at the start of the second semester, but by then the Soviet Union was gone — and with it the Communist symbols, heroes and ideals. Like many Soviet children, I lost sight of my future. My teachers were equally confused, no longer knowing what to teach. Even my family's favorite vacation spot was suddenly in a foreign land.

I could never imagine then that the rules I thought of as unbreakable would dissolve one by

one over the next 20 years.

My early childhood was typical for a Soviet kid: a leafy kindergarten, summer holidays on the Black Sea, trips to the dacha, our house in the country. I never felt deprived, though looking back I see that life was not easy.

A small Lego set, a gift from a distant relative, was my favorite toy for years, because so little was available in Soviet stores.

Cartoons on television were so rare that your day was built around them. The news broadcasts I watched with my grandparents every night were about as exciting as a piece of wood. Factories, machinery, rolls of fabrics, workers — that's all I remember.

For food, my parents had “shopper cards” that worked like ration coupons. My and my brother's names were scribbled on the back so we wouldn't have to line up with our parents to get our share.

One year my mother received a pack of sugar cubes for Women's Day — a welcome gift since we had not had any for months.

Food shortages were even worse in Sevastopol, the Black Sea town where my family spent every summer. We used to take butter, sausages and other staples with us from Moscow. That may not sound like a perfect holiday, but Sevastopol, with its wide beaches and cypress groves, felt like the best place on Earth. It is in Ukraine, now a separate country, and I haven't been back since 1991.

One afternoon in fall 1991, my brother and his best friend came home from school with a big box. I was fascinated. English words were written on the top. Inside there was powdered milk and canned ham. My parents told me that it was humanitarian aid sent from Western European countries because they believed Russia to be on the brink of starvation. No one I knew was exactly starving, but no one felt insulted by the gesture either. The canned ham would be stored in the cellar at our dacha for a few more years.

Clothes, too, were in short supply. Like all children, I needed a uniform for school and my mother was clever enough to buy mine in early June, tipped off by a colleague who said more sizes were available then. It proved a wise investment.

The research institute where my mother worked gave parents a bonus in August as “school uniform compensation” to soften the blow of galloping prices. Having bought my uniform months before, my mother went to a jewelry shop and bought gold earrings instead.

By the time I started school, it was clear that the Soviet Union's days were numbered. On Aug. 19, a group of Communist hard-liners had tried to seize power. One of the first acts of Russia's new leader, Boris Yeltsin, was to strip the ruling Communist Party of its powers.

All this might have been lost on a 7-year-old as it was happening, yet even on my first day of school, 10 days after the coup, I was struck by a feeling that something was badly missing. My kindergarten had abounded with Soviet symbols. A portrait of Lenin here, a red banner there. But now at school, the whitewashed walls had glaring blank spots where portraits of Communist leaders once hung.

Second-graders still wore the badges of Little Octobrists, also known as Lenin's grandchildren, and older children wore the red scarves of Young Pioneers. Those 14 and older already were members of the Communist Youth League, which had been necessary to get into a good university and improved one's career prospects.

I was supposed to receive my Little Octobrist badge in January 1992. On Dec. 26, 1991, the Soviet Union formally ceased to exist.

When I returned to school after the New Year's holiday, the textbooks were still full of Communist songs, math problems about Young Pioneers and short stories about Lenin. But the teachers would either skip those exercises and stories or use them without explaining the meaning of the Soviet terms.

Uniforms were no longer required. We could wear whatever we liked. Still, we hardly looked different from one another. Soviet-made consumer goods were of such poor quality and limited variety that we all ended up wearing the same styles and colors, usually brown and black. At least we could wear trousers, which previously were not permitted even in the coldest months.

Our 20- and 30-something teachers did not indoctrinate us in the Soviet system — I suspect they were liberal-minded at heart — but neither did they tell us the most basic things about our country, a sharp contrast to first-grade classes today in which teachers expound on the symbols and history of “our motherland.”

Indeed, since those confusing first-grade days, Russia has undergone an astounding transformation. For one, Russians started shedding their gloomy hues by buying from traders who sold Turkish and Chinese clothes at outdoor markets. Then a consumer boom followed, filling stores with international luxury brands.

Russians now travel the world freely, no longer needing official permission to leave the country. But millions of people lost their jobs or saw their skills and knowledge lose value in the country's nascent market economy. Hundreds of thousands of middle-aged university graduates had to take up menial jobs, sweeping floors or driving buses.

The country's transformation was less hard on younger people in that sense.

My future looked dim in 1991, but the mist began to clear by late 1990s. Society was not giving away jobs as before, but I realized that even without friends or family in high places, I could get on in life by working hard.

Without any party affiliation, I won a state scholarship to a Moscow university. It was not a top college by any means but, desperate to earn a better living than my parents, I hustled and landed a good job at a newspaper. It helped me pay for a journalism course in London.

Twenty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, I work for a U.S. company, drive an American car and travel abroad on vacation as easily as my parents would have traveled to Sevastopol.

And I could not have imagined back then that I would struggle for two days to find someone who could lend me a Little Octobrist badge to photograph for this story.

Nataliya Vasilyeva is a journalist with The Associated Press, which published this essay.

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