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Back in the USSR: Finding Soviet Nostalgia in Moscow

Where to go if you want to glimpse Moscow's Soviet past

By Bradley Jardine

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Museum of Soviet Arcade Games

In a fortified nuclear bunker, sixty-five meters below Moscow, a man sits transfixed by a computer console. Its green text informs him of an impending threat. "On my command, turn the key and prime the weapon," the man behind him barks with the melodrama of a Bond villain. He reaches across the mass of buttons and levers in front of him and turns the key. A countdown begins.

"When the timer reaches zero, turn the second key and hit the launch button!" he commands.

Three. People watch. Two. His finger hovers over the red button. One. His right hand grabs the key. Zero. A nuclear strike against the United States, sworn enemy of

Lenin's Revolution, is launched.

A Requiem for a Dream soundtrack, which echoes through the steel shell of the bunker, brings spectators back down to reality. It is just a game — played out in Bunker 42, a fascinating museum and a relic of the Cold War.

Bunker 42 is just one of a number of venues across the capital embracing a newfound interest in Soviet nostalgia. More than 25 years on from the collapse of the USSR, Russia is reestablishing its influence on the world stage, and memories of the Cold War hold new weight.

Bunker42.com/eng/

115172, 5th Kotelnicheski Lane. 11

Generation Pepsi

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, social welfare gave way to uncertainty and predatory capitalism. Millions lost their jobs. Hyperinflation wiped out Russians' life savings. As cult author Victor Pelevin put it in his novel Homo Zapanians, Russia exchanged "an evil empire for an evil banana republic."

"My family and I suffered great trauma," Olga, a 52-year-old market-stall owner near Muzeon Park, told The Moscow Times. "Our country was the most beautiful in the world, we were proud of it. Then suddenly, it was gone."

The narratives of the older generations share a common thread — the feeling of drifting into the unknown. And Moscow's Park Muzeon, or Park of the Fallen Heroes, is the material manifestation of this drift.

Here you can find statues that were torn down during the collapse of the USSR. Busts of Lenin are thrown around chaotically throughout the park. A noseless Stalin watches on. Even more controversial is the monument of Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Soviet secret police. This was the first statue to fall with the regime.

Their bold outlines, created in traditional socialist-realist style, remind passersby of the one-time ubiquity of the Soviet state.

Muzeon.ru

119049, 2 Krymskiy val. 2

Culinary Revolution

Somewhat at odds with the values of communism, Soviet nostalgia has also crystallised into an easily marketable consumer brand.

The trend is visible across Moscow: from restaurants such as Kommunalka, which borrows its interiors from those of the USSR's communal apartments, to the ironic Soviet-style abbreviations used by bars such as Glavpivmag (built from the Russian words Glavniy-

pivnoy-magazin, or main-beer-store).

The most visible display of Soviet nostalgia is arguably GUM's supermarket, Gastronome No.1. The store is packed with immediately recognizable goods like the USSR's famed Plombir vanilla icecream, marketed as "the taste of childhood." There are strange, cone-shaped glass containers filled with drinkable syrup and even chocolate flavoured butter, a throwback to the days before Nutella flooded Russian kitchens.

For many, products of the Soviet era embody a sentiment of forgotten quality. At a time of sanctions and counter-sanctions, they also cross over into defensive feelings of national pride.

"Food is getting better now, and there are standards again," one shopper told The Moscow Times despite that the quality of food in Russia has actually diminished rapidly since a trade embargo began in 2014.

Many of the new outlets sentimentalize the Soviet era as a time of innocence and simplicity. These ideas, for example, are at the heart of the Varenichnaya No.1 chain of cafes. Old books line the shelves and wall-mounted black and white televisions play Cold War-era movies. You can even try traditional vareniki (dumplings) with a side order of pickled vegetables from jars.

Occasionally, things have gone too far. In December 2016, a Moscow restaurant called NKVD — after Stalin's brutal secret police — opened to widespread criticism. Many condemned the business for profiteering from the victims of Stalin's regime. The building of the restaurant itself was the one-time home of 4 people later executed during the Great Terror.

Gum.ru/gastronome-1

101000, Red Square. 3

Simulating Socialism

Soviet nostalgia is not limited to older generations. Russia's youth has also taken to this bygone era. At the Museum of Soviet Arcade Games, for example, hip Russian teens spend their evenings putting Brezhnevera coins or "commie quarters" into game machines produced by the Soviet government in the late 1970s. The Museum also offers a trendy burger bar, 8-bit gaming soundtracks, and a gray, hard-edged soda machine from the early 1980s.

One of the most popular games in the arcade is Repka (Radish). This is a test of strength that requires the player to pull on a lever as hard as they can in order to pull a radish out of the family garden. The game registers the number of kilos they can pull and ranks the player accordingly. The classics are all here too: the Soviet submarine shooter "Sea Battle," the World War II flight simulator "Dogfight," and the racing game "Magistral." If you visit the museum's website you can even play their online simulations of the games and see inside the machines to get an idea of how they work.

Unfortunately, none of the games keep high scores — Soviet society, after all, didn't believe

in competition. But this doesn't seem to deter the regulars.

"It's a cool place to hang out with your friends," one tells The Moscow Times. "People usually play on their laptops at home, but this is real old school — what previous generations did before they invented the Internet."

15kop.ru

Kuznetsky Most. 12

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