**Long Live the *Kommunalka*!**

**The Tension between Postmodern Poetics and Post-Soviet Nostalgia**

**in Andreï Makine’s Work**

Helena Duffy

(University of Wroclaw, Poland)

Like modernism before, postmodernism has incited a plethora of definitions which are often mutually contradictory or even exclusive.[[1]](#endnote-1) Also, those who theorise postmodernism rarely adopt a neutral position towards their subject, instead joining the camp of the movement’s detractors or that of its advocates.[[2]](#endnote-2) Amongst the contentious issues are postmodernism’s historicity, political engagement or relationship with modernism: whereas some associate postmodern art with a serious interest in history and a strong ideological position,[[3]](#endnote-3) others accuse it of being anti-modern, ahistorical and apolitical. Amongst the latter are Frederic Jameson and Terry Eagleton who link postmodernism to nostalgia, yet not to the genuine ‘revolutionary nostalgia’[[4]](#endnote-4) of modernism but to ‘reactionary nostalgia’ (Eagleton) or ‘nostalgiadeco’ (Jameson),[[5]](#endnote-5) a neologism designating the ‘depersonalised visual curiosity’ of American historicist films that capture the ‘mesmerising quality’ of the 1920s, 1930s and 1950s.[[6]](#endnote-6) For Jameson, Bertolucci’s *The Conformist* (1970) or Polanski’s *Chinatown* (1974) have nothing to do with genuine historicity as they approach the past — or rather the ‘pastness’ — through ‘stylistic connotations’ and ‘the glossy quality of the image’.[[7]](#endnote-7) Sharing the Marxist critic’s position that ‘history of aesthetic styles replaces “real” history’ and that the postmodern return to the past is driven by sentimental nostalgia,[[8]](#endnote-8) Hal Foster contends that ‘this Postmodern Style of History may in fact signal the disintegration of style and collapse of history.’[[9]](#endnote-9) Overtly and vehemently opposing such views, Linda Hutcheon states that ‘postmodern historicism is wilfully unencumbered by nostalgia in its critical, dialogical reviewing of the forms, context, and values of the past’.[[10]](#endnote-10) She adds that although postmodernism resolutely opposes today’s tendency to be enthralled with anything new or novel, it is far from evading the present, idealising the past or recovering that past as edenic; instead, it ‘returns to a re-thought past to see what […] is of value in that past experience.’[[11]](#endnote-11)

By taking up historical subjects while self-reflexively stating the textuality of historical knowledge and questioning the very possibility of knowing the past, of establishing a univocal version of events and of conveying these events in a novel, Andreï Makine’s writing potentially inscribes itself into the current of historiographic metafiction, as Hutcheon dubs contemporary literature that is ‘fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political’.[[12]](#endnote-12) However, Makine’s preoccupation with Russia’s twentieth-century history, which appears to be motivated by what Svetlana Boym defines as ‘a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed’, ‘a sentiment of loss and displacement’ and ‘a romance with one’s fantasy’,[[13]](#endnote-13) jars with the Canadian theorist’s belief in postmodern historicity’s divorce from nostalgia, instead supporting Jameson’s and Eagleton’s position. The fact that most of Makine’s novels portray the USSR as a desirable alternative to the West, to post-communist Russia or even to the Russia of *glasnost* and *perestroika*, thus creates, at least in the light of Hutcheon’s positive valorisation of postmodernism, a tension between the Franco-Russian writer’s poetics and his novelistic treatment of the Soviet era. The present article sets out to explore this tension by focusing on Makine’s depiction of the *kommunalka* (communal apartment) and its extension, the communal courtyard, which, I will argue, the Franco-Russian author turns into figures of wholeness and, consequently, uses to offset the sense of loss and fragmentation both thematised by and reflected in the narrative structure of his prose. In my analysis of *The Hero’s Daughter* (1991), *Confessions of a Fallen Standard Bearer* (1992), *The Life of an Unknown Man* (2009) and *A Woman Loved* (2013) I will investigate the postmodern texture of Makine’s novels whose diegesis is interwoven with metafictional comments concerning the historical novelist’s daunting task, and whose chronology is disrupted as multiple time frames are interlaced. This disjointed narrative dovetails, as I will demonstrate, with stories of lives broken by wars, revolutions and political terror, which separate lovers and deprive children of parents. Yet, in this bleak landscape human happiness persists, its major site being the *kommunalka*, which, as I will show by framing my discussion with the cultural criticism of Svetlana Boym and Erin Collopy, goes against the generally negative evaluation of the chronotope of the communal apartment. Indeed, Makine endows the *kommunalka* with restorative powers and represents as capable of smoothing out social or ethnic divisions, reintegrating victims of social exclusion back into community, or even sheltering individuals from political terror. Testifying to the nostalgia of Makine’s narrators who, styled as the author’s alter-egos, tend to be Russian novelists exiled in the West,[[14]](#endnote-14) this idealistic portrayal of the *kommunalka* is meant, I will posit, to alleviate these émigrés’ feeling of disintegration caused by the debunking of the dream of a radiant future that legitimated communism and organised Soviet life, by the USSR’s ensuing disintegration and loss of superpower status, and by their own consequent sense of homelessness. This means that Makine’s romanticised vision of the *kommunalka*, staged by the author as a microcosm of the Soviet Union, is designed to re-inscribe imaginatively and in the process of doing so glorifies an extinct polity and its way of life.

Conceived by Lenin himself when in 1917 he decreed an expropriation and resettlement of private apartments,[[15]](#endnote-15) the *kommunalka* is a memory of the various forms of pre-revolutionary collective living arrangements that resulted from urban poverty and housing shortages.[[16]](#endnote-16) It is also a clumsy implementation of the utopian dream of a house-commune — introduced in the 1920s to be abandoned in the 1930s[[17]](#endnote-17) — where kitchens and children were to be shared and bourgeois family was to be supplanted by proletarian comradeship. With the newly established minimum living space (ten square meters per person and thirteen per family), most big cities apartments were partitioned, with bedrooms, dining rooms and servants’ quarters becoming all-purpose rooms. Flimsy walls created malfunctional spaces, some of them windowless, while the so-called ‘places of communal use’ — the corridor, bathroom and kitchen — saw ‘endless complaints [being] exchanged among fellow neighbours’.[[18]](#endnote-18) Having transformed, in Boym’s words, the socialist idyll into a socialist farce,[[19]](#endnote-19) the *kommunalka* became ‘an institution of social control and the breeding ground of police informants’,[[20]](#endnote-20) while the Housing Committee that allocated living space was, according to Lidya Ginzburg, an ‘institution of denial of human rights — right to air, to toilet, to space’.[[21]](#endnote-21) The communal apartment is thus generally seen as a pathological element of Soviet life and the metaphor of the worst of the Soviet period.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Implicitly contradicting the afore-cited opinions but aligning his figuration of the *kommunalka* with the post-Soviet and evidently nostalgia-driven celebration of communal living,[[23]](#endnote-23) Makine re-presents the shared apartmentas a continuation (or revival) of inherently Russian communality, actualised by the *mir*, a self-governing community of peasant households dating back to Imperial Russia. Structured by the ideal of *sobornost*, a quasi-untranslatable religious concept designating a common bond uniting members of a community[[24]](#endnote-24) and ‘the capacity to surmount one’s individuality, while maintaining respect for another person’s freedom’,[[25]](#endnote-25) the *mir* ‘helped the sick and old, gave mutual aid to the needy, took care of all its members, and provided warm and supportive atmosphere’.[[26]](#endnote-26) Finally, adapted in the nineteenth century to secular life by the resolutely anti-Western Slavophiles, the *mir* has been seen as a Russian alternative to private life[[27]](#endnote-27) and an antipode to the Western concepts of the individual and identity.[[28]](#endnote-28)

That Makine recognises vestiges of *sobornost* in various forms of Soviet urban life following Stalin’s dissolution of the *mir* in 1929,[[29]](#endnote-29) is confirmed by the writer’s depiction of the *kommunalka* as a locus of solidarity, and of its dwellers as offering each other spiritual support. Such is the case in *The Hero’s Daughter* whose central characters, Ivan and Tatyana Demidov, inhabit a communal apartment during the years separating their unsuccessful attempt to settle in Ivan’s native village after World War II and their move into their own flat during the Khrushchev era.[[30]](#endnote-30) Tellingly, the Demidovs’ two private homes are both sites of tragic events, their *izba* becoming a stage for their first child’s death during the 1946–1947 famine, and their individual apartment witnessing Tatyana’s untimely demise and Ivan’s resulting moral collapse and physical decline. Bereaved and angered by the discrepancy between the official rose-tinted image of postwar reality and their personal experience, after their new-born son’s death the Demidovs abandon the countryside for town where they are received into the fold of a surrogate extended family formed by their new neighbours. It is noteworthy that Makine’s representation of Tatyana’s and Ivan’s relocation fails to reflect Erin Collopy’s remark that moving into a communal apartment ‘added to the overall sense of displacement and estrangement that any resettlement incurs’.[[31]](#endnote-31) Additionally, the Demidovs’ *kommunalka* where two ubiquitous Russian families — the young Fedotovs and the older Fedorovs — rub (literally) shoulders with Sophia Abramovna, a representative of the old Moscow intelligentsia who, as suggested by her patronymic, is Jewish,[[32]](#endnote-32) is shown as capable of dissolving pre-revolutionary class differences as well as generation and ethnic divisions. Although the neighbours may squabble over the use of the shared kitchen or bathroom, after each quarrel they reconcile, as illustrated by this clichéd portrayal of noisy Russian sentimentality: ‘they would make it up around a communal table and, after drinking a few vodkas, would begin to embrace, swearing eternal friendship and abjectly begging one another’s forgiveness with tears in their eyes’.[[33]](#endnote-33) Apart from fostering egalitarianism the *kommunalka* offers a safe haven to those whose lives have been shattered by prewar and wartime violence. If Sophia Abramovna’s unspeakably harrowing experience ofthe *gulag* can be inferred from her wandering gaze or from the uncharacteristically foul language she breaks into when arguing with her neighbours, the Fedorovs have been in limbo since their son went missing in action during the war. As for the Demidovs themselves, the couple’s gradual recovery from their loss is communicated by the scene showing them dance in the courtyard to tangoes pouring from Fedotov’s gramophone. The couple’s festive mood is emphasised by their attire — Ivan sports a jacket with all his medals and Tatyana her wedding blouse —, which connotes the two high points in their lives: their marriage and World War II that turned Ivan from a country lad into a revered Hero and Tatyana into a Hero’s wife: ‘[T]hey danced together, smiling at one another, letting themselves be carried away by the sweet dreaminess of the words [of a song]’.[[34]](#endnote-34) An interesting detail here is the gramophone, which, together with rubber plants, geraniums and all the other ‘domestic trash’, was banned from post-revolutionary living spaces,[[35]](#endnote-35) but which Makine releases from its reactionary connotations by having it serve communal rather than individual entertainment. In short, the years the Demidovs spend in a *kommunalka* are the happiest in their lives, for, like their *izba*, their individual flat is marked by loss and desolation: having been widowed, Ivan succumbs to depressiong, takes to drink, compromises himself by selling off his medals and, finally, tries to take his own life.

The *kommunalka* is even more romanticised in Makine’s second novel, set largely during Khrushchev’s Thaw (1953–1964) that, it must be stressed, together with Brezhnev’s Stagnation (1965–1982), has been the most missed time in post-Soviet Russia where it has been associated with stability and remembered as future-oriented.[[36]](#endnote-36) Although when reminiscing about his childhood from the vantage point of his Parisian exile, the narrator of *Confessions of a Fallen Standard-Bearer* (henceforth *Confessions*) may be sceptical about the official optimism marking Khrushchev’s era, Alyosha Evdokimov’s cynicism never extends to his private — or rather not so private — life in a *kommualka*. While such an uncritical perception of reality may be typical for a child’s perspective, it is surprising that the adult narrator never distances himself from his memories, and that, typically for those being hostage to nostalgia, ‘confuse[s] the actual home and the imaginary one’.[[37]](#endnote-37) In a novel that is both a tribute to the generation of Alyosha’s parents’ and a desperate attempt to counterbalance the protagonist-narrator’s own exilic sense of alienation and fragmentation with images of carefree communality, the enforced comradeship of the pioneer camp Alyosha attended is opposed to the spontaneous and organic solidarity of the housing estate where he lived with his parents. Like in *The Hero’s Daughter*, the *kommunalka* offers refuge to victims of Stalin’s terror and wartime loss and trauma, this time additionally becoming an inward-looking space that, turning its back, as it were, on the oppressive state, provides its residents with a degree of autonomy or even, so it seems, proves capable of sheltering them from the regime’s arbitrary and absurd brutality. Moreover, *Confessions* features no bickering neighbours, queues to the communal toilet or children crushing the residents’ shoes as they tear around the communal hallway on bicycles, as do the Fedotovs’ rowdy sons in *The Hero’s Daughter*. Here all is perfect, the *kommunalka*, anthropomorphised and described with various terms of endearment,[[38]](#endnote-38) being a half-realisation of the house-commune, for while the children are indeed communally raised, women have not been liberated from household concerns, as the Soviet state originally planned.[[39]](#endnote-39) Yet, the mothers’ quasi-permanent presence in the kitchen where they cook, wash and iron, is as reassuring for Makine’s young protagonist as are the goings-on in the courtyard where men discuss politics, *baboushki* gossip and children play at war, all this to the soundtrack of popular songs pouring out of open windows. The only tacit sign that this idyllic life goes on in a totalitarian state is a pair of elegant shoes that is never collected from Alyosha’s father who is a cobbler.

The estate’s afore-mentioned relative independence is largely owed to its familial ambiance, implicit in the name of the town where the novel is set, Sestrovsk deriving from the Russian word for sister. As if they were family members the neighbours embrace when they accidentally meet in the nearby Leningrad and, even before they catch a glimpse of each other, they recognise the characteristic clicking of the metal plates Alyosha’s father hammers onto the soles of their shoes.[[40]](#endnote-40) Furthermore, if the *kommunalki* themselves are filled with the happy noises and smells of housework, the harmony reigning outside is suggested by the narrator’s metonymic use of ‘the whole courtyard’[[41]](#endnote-41) when he speaks of the estate’s dwellers, as well as by the comparison of the sounds and odours emanating from the three redbrick buildings to a symphony:

As soon as [the domino players] began to slam down their pieces with a deafening din the communal symphony of the courtyard found its tempo. On a bench beside each main entrance a row of baboushkas chattered away, attentive to the most minor occurrence in the courtyard. The open windows spilled out their buzz, and with it came the sweetish, soapy smell of big washdays. The old swing groaned out its melancholy music. The shouts of invisible children pealed forth from among the bushes. And like an absolute essential note amid this gentle evening cacophony, my mother’s voice would be heard: ‘Yasha!’.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Arnaud Vareille additionally remarks that Makine highlights the solidarity reigning in the estate and mutes the differences between its inhabitants by grouping them as ‘men’, ‘women’ or ‘*baboushki*’: ‘the communion amongst the neighbours finds its utmost expression in the fact that they are only ever mentioned as groups established on the basis of their gender or age’.[[43]](#endnote-43)

This communal atmosphere assures the process of ‘re-familiarisation’ rather than ‘de-familiarisation’,[[44]](#endnote-44) as intended by the communists when they set out to annihilate the bourgeois family structure by abolishing the individual apartment. In *Confessions* this is illustrated by the story of Alyosha’s father, a former sharpshooter who lost his legs at the front but who, injured by friendly fire, is not eligible for any of the privileges reserved for World War II veterans, including a wheelchair. In the war’s aftermath the double amputee lives a solitary life in an old *izba*, drinking heavily to forget his misery and subsidising his meagre pension by begging. Pyotr Evdokimov’s move into the *kommunalka* is thus depicted as his chance to set up a family, find a new occupation and establish a close friendship with another World War II survivor. Crucially, the *izba* where Pyotr lived is demolished to make space for the housing estate, and Evdokimov’s landlady, Zakharovna, is resettled in one of the *kommunalki*. While Pyotr symbolically overcomes his physical disability when his neighbour, Yakov Zinger, carries him on his back before obtaining for him an invalid car, Zakharovna’s sanity, lost when her son was killed by a bomb during the war, is miraculously restored by the controlled explosion of the pit located in the corner of the courtyard. Echoing the representation of the *kommunalka* in *The Hero’s Daughter*, the ethnic, cultural and class difference between the Russian cobbler of peasant origin and a Jewish urbanite working as a maths teacher is transcended by the two men’s inherent distaste for violence and the shared topography of their wartime experience: [[45]](#endnote-45) ‘For them these Polish [geographical] names, without further comment, were eloquent. A look they both understood, a tilt of the head sufficed’.[[46]](#endnote-46) The two men become such close friends that they appear as ‘a single man’,[[47]](#endnote-47) ‘tall and well-built’,[[48]](#endnote-48) their virtual symbiosis being communicated by the scene showing Yakov carrying Pyotr in his arms so that his friend may realise his dream of mowing a meadow. Moreover, as if the two men were interdependent, they die within weeks of one another, and their deaths foster an indissoluble bond between their sons, Arkady and Alyosha. Significantly, such a representation of Russian-Jewish relations goes against the well-documented Soviet anti-Semitism,[[49]](#endnote-49) illustrated, amongst other, by Boym’s personal memories of the *kommunalka* where her Jewish family was systematically tantalised by its gentile neighbours.[[50]](#endnote-50) As for the estate’s other residents, Lyouba Evdokimova lost her parents during the great purge and Yakov’s wife, also an orphan, last saw her mother and father when on the eve of World War II they left Leningrad for Kiev.[[51]](#endnote-51) Faya Moysseyevna then lived through the siege of Leningrad, which claimed her grandmother’s life and which left her both physically and mentally scarred, as she witnessed cannibalism and her hands were irremediably damaged by frostbite. Notwithstanding these loses and traumas, World War II provides the estate’s inhabitants with a shared identity and a source of pride, as confirmed by two episodes: the evacuation during the pit’s explosion and the expedition to town to buy bread when the local bakery temporarily closes. Stirring up memories of wartime conditions, this mobilisation boosts the neighbours’ solidary[[52]](#endnote-52) and makes them feel as ‘one big family, a united energetic tribe, motivated by a cheerful will to survive’.[[53]](#endnote-53)

Considering that in various belief systems the triangle symbolises oneness, in *Confessions* the *kommunalka*’s therapeutic and unifying potential seems to be inscribed in the shape of the redbrick estate. In Christianity, for example, the equilateral triangle is associated with the Holy Trinity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. This geometric figure can also represent the birth, life and death of a mortal man, or, alternatively, the father, mother and child. All these meanings pertain to the estate featured in *Confessions* which indeed follows Pyotr’s and Yakov’s trajectories from their youth to their death, portrays a trans-ethnic community and stages two one-child families: the Zingers and the Evdokimovs. However unlikely it is given the total absence of references to Judaism in Makine’s writing,[[54]](#endnote-54) the courtyard’s shape may also signify one of the two interlaced triangles composing the Star of David, the missing geometrical figure expressing the Evdokimovs’ gentile identity.

While the *kommunalka*, as nostalgically remembered by the novel’s narrator, can heal wartime wounds, be they physical or psychological, Alyosha conjures up its image as an antidote to his exilic despondency, which illustrates Boym’s point that in order to thrive, nostalgia requires a superimposition of two images: ‘home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life’.[[55]](#endnote-55) Standing in the Carrefour de l’Odéon, a Parisian junction that epitomises the idea of the centre, the novel’s protagonist-narrator feels uneasy and dejected. His ‘ex-centricity’, to borrow Hutcheon’s term referring to postmodern protagonists’ liminality in relation to mainstream culture,[[56]](#endnote-56) transpires from Makine’s depiction of the Carrefour as oppressively hot, noisy and overcrowded. It can also be detected in Alyosha’s disturbing sense of anonymity amidst all the ‘normal people’,[[57]](#endnote-57) from whom he feels estranged by his Soviet childhood, physical and mental scarring resulting from his participation in the Afghan War, and feeling of rootlessness caused by the USSR’s break-up. Additionally communicated by the scattering of the Russian diaspora and the infrequent and haphazard exchanges between its members,[[58]](#endnote-58) Alyosha’s inner fragmentation translates into the disjointed structure of the book which he is writing and we are reading, and which is composed of fragments that the narrator pieces together emulating, in his own words, the painstaking work of an archaeologist or a mosaic artist.[[59]](#endnote-59)

The outcome of Alyosha’s literary endeavour, which is how Makine’s second novel presents itself, appears as a paragon of historiographic metafiction not only because of its poetics of fragment, but also because of its promise to undermine a dominant discourse on the past, namely the Soviet myth of World War II with its emphasis on heroism and survival rather than loss and trauma.[[60]](#endnote-60) Also, *Confessions* emphatically refuse the totalising view of History, instead narrating incomplete *histories* of individuals whose voices have previously not been heard, and overtly question the possibility of constructing a reliable discourse on the past.[[61]](#endnote-61) Yet, in the light of Hutcheon’s theory, Makine’s postmodern aesthetics seems incongruous with Alyosha’s and other Makinean narrators’ nostalgic view of Soviet past and with their lack of criticism towards, to use Boym’s formulation, their own ‘affective yearning for a community with a collective memory’ and ‘longing for a continuity in a fragmented world’.[[62]](#endnote-62) In fact Alyosha quasi-openly acknowledges his nostalgia when he hopes that, despite Arkady’s financial and social success in America, his transatlantic alter-ego is periodically seized by a melancholy longing for his youth. Imagining his friend’s life to be commodity-oriented and requiring the suppression of his Soviet memories, Alyosha pictures a dinner party during which Arkady, already tipsy, starts loudly reminiscing about his childhood. Having embarrassed his guests, who, unlike Demidovs’ neighbours, are manifestly unwilling to engage in sentimental outpourings *à la russe*, he walks away from the table, indignant and despondent.

Because in Makine’s prose the *kommunalka* epitomises the Soviet way of living, it is only natural that its disappearance should be linked to that of the USSR itself. In *Confessions*, for example,the imminent end of the Soviet period is anticipated by the gradual demolition of the triangular housing estate which, significantly enough, coincides with the Soviet troops’ Afghan debacle. The tower blocks gradually replacing the estate menacingly dwarf the remaining two redbrick buildings, one already vacated, the inhabitants of the other one awaiting resettlement. Naturally, the destruction of the courtyard entails the obliteration of communality, evidenced by the individualistic pursuits of those living in the newly constructed tower blocks: while mothers push prams men wash or repair their cars. Finally, the upheaval caused by the construction site reflects the changes brought about by *glasnost* and *perestroika*. That these are negatively valorised by Makine’s second novel also transpires from Faya Moysseyevna’s comment concerning the declining interest in World War II, which she vaguely attributes to Gorbachev’s socio-political reforms.[[63]](#endnote-63)

The causal link between Russia’s progressive transformation from communism to capitalism and the disappearance of the *kommunalka* is also established by Makine’s two more recent novels that show the 1991 law allowing for the privatisation of property as disastrous in consequences not only for society’s poorest members but also for both communality and wartime memory. In *The Life of an Unknown Man*, set at the beginning of the new millennium, Russian society’s new economic divisiveness is symptomatized by the reconsolidation of *kommunalki*. The novel narrates the story of Lev Volsky who, transformed by his traumatic experience of the siege of Leningrad, gave up his operatic career to teach disabled orphans. Having sung on battlefields, fought all the way to Berlin and served his community throughout the postwar period, Volsky finds himself ousted from his *kommunalka*, so that the latter can become some New Russians’ luxury home. In a gesture opposing the 1917 dismemberment of individual apartments, the new rich join several communal dwellings, which they can afford to do thanks to money earned in shady deals and connections to the mafia and/or the power structures. The tasteless golden taps, crass marble floors and enormous plasma TV screens that tirelessly spew out stupefying images, jar with the shabbiness of Volsky’s tiny room where a bedridden man sips cold tea and reads a book while waiting to be evicted.

Similarly, *A Woman Loved* retraces the transformation of a *kommunalka* across time; the novel begins during the Brezhnev era and stages a young filmmaker, Oleg Erdmann, who shares a seven-room flat with fourteen other people. Despite considering communal life ‘everyday hell’, from a post-Soviet perspective he remembers his *kommunalka* with fondness as a place where ‘one could be happy’.[[64]](#endnote-64) Like Ivan Shutov of *The Life of an Unknown Man*, who avidly listens to Volsky’s frontline memories and finds a father figure in the veteran, Erdmann, also an orphan, seeks a maternal substitute in his fifty-year old neighbour, Zoya, who, as Oleg deduces from the style of her kettle, must have lived through World War II. Predictably, the social matrix of Oleg’s *kommunalka* changes during *perestroika* whose crashing force is symbolised by Zoya’s death under the wheels of a train. As those more industrious move out to be replaced by society’s poorest members, Zoya’s room is now inhabited by Gaya, a mother of three whose husband is serving a four-year prison sentence for stealing a frozen chicken. Finally, the end of the USSR coincides with the imminent conversion of Oleg’s *kommunalka* into a single-family home, a process foretold by the cutting down of the tree growing in the courtyard to make space for four-by-fours of the flat’s new owners. Like Volsky’s room for Shutov, for Erdmann, who never moves out of his *kommunalka* even when able to do so, the communal apartment becomes a sanctuary from the destructive capitalism raging in post-Soviet Russia, and a place where the past, and especially the memory of World War II, is preserved and treasured.

What transpires from this analysis is the *kommunalka*’s paradoxical role in Makine’s prose that transforms this prime figure of fragmentation into a space where physical and mental wounds are healed, and broken family life made whole again through spontaneously arisen and supportive relationships. Ignoring or at least downplaying any of its negative aspects, which have been discussed by both scholars and those with first-hand experience of this form of enforced communality,[[65]](#endnote-65) Makinean narrators cast a tender backward glance at the *kommunalka* which, as did the communist authorities themselves,[[66]](#endnote-66) they identify with the Soviet Union or rather, nostalgia being more about time than space,[[67]](#endnote-67) with their own childhood and youth. Also, as I have shown, the *kommunalka* is invariably the locus of World War II memory, which the Franco–Russian author represents as the key narrative of Soviet teleology and whose waning he posits as the reason for — or perhaps the symptom of — the USSR’s collapse. Consequently, what Makine’s novels share with postmodern literature are not only interest in history and self-reflexivity, which allows the narrators of historiographic metafictions to question the convention of the historical novel, but also its self-contradictory character.[[68]](#endnote-68) However, whereas the programmatically paradoxical historiographic metafiction requires readers to both engage with and distance themselves from the story, Makine’s novels offer no space for such emotional and intellectual detachment as their narrators unashamedly wallow in nostalgia, showing very little critical attitude towards their past. On the other hand, despite undermining Hutcheon’s view of postmodern historicism as free from melancholy yearning for the bygone days, Makine’s prose confirms the Canadian theorist’s claim about the political engagement of postmodern art, which, although predominantly revisionist in relation to official historiography, can also be, however rarely, ‘neo-conservatively nostalgic’ or even support a reactionary agenda.[[69]](#endnote-69) Indeed, by exemplifying Boym’s conception of nostalgia as ‘history without guilt’, ‘an abdication of personal responsibility’, ‘a guilt-free homecoming’ and an ethical — if not aesthetic — failure,[[70]](#endnote-70) Makine’s oeuvre gives evidence of its ideological motivations. For, by idealising the *kommunalka* and, by extension, the USSR, the Franco-Russian author deliberately undervalues or even ignores the Soviet regime’s brutality towards both its own citizens and other nations, as well as the reciprocal violence of the Soviet people themselves, for which the communal apartment was one of the archetypal settings.

1. Stuart Sim, *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 2013, p160. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Andreas Huyssen, ‘Mapping the Postmodern’, *New German Critique*, 33, 1984, pp5-52, p9. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. See Elisabeth Wesseling, *Writing History as a Prophet. Postmodernist Innovations in a Historical Novel*, Amsterdam: John Benjamin’s Publishing Company, 1991; Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel*, London: Routledge, 2010 and Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*, Oxford: Routledge, 1988. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Eagleton, ‘Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism’, David Lodge (ed.), *Modern Criticism and Theory. A Reader,* London: Longman, 1988, pp385-98, p389. Here Eagleton constitutes postmodernism as ‘depthless, styleless, dehistoricised [and] decathected’, p386. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of the Late Capitalism*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1991, pXVI. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *Ibidem*, p18. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *Idem*. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Ibidem*, pp19-20. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Hal Foster, ‘(Post)Modern Polemics’, *New German Critique*, 33, 1984, pp67-78, p72. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Linda Hutcheon, *op. cit.*, p89. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. *Ibidem*, p39. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. *Ibidem*, p4. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, New York: Basic Books, 2001, pXIII. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Born in 1957 in Siberia, in 1987 Makine emigrated to France where he still lives. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Svetlana Boym, *Common Places: Mythologies of Everyday Life in Russia*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994, p124. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. *Ibidem*, p129. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. *Ibidem*, pp127-8. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. *Idem*. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. *Ibidem*, p130. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. *Ibidem*, p123. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Quoted by Svetlana Boym, *ibidem*, p129. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Erin Collopy, ‘The Communal Apartment in the Works of Irina Grekova and Nina Sadur’, *Journal of International Women’s Studies*, 6, 2005, pp44-58, p44. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. See Ekaterina Kalinina, ‘Mediated Post-Soviet Nostalgia’, doctoral thesis, Södertörn University, 2014, <http://sh.diva-portal.org/smash/get/diva2:746181/FULLTEXT01.pdf>. Kalinina invokves the television programme *Staraya Kvartira* (*The Old Apartment*), the musical *Pesni Nashei Kommunalki* (*Songs of Our Communal Apartment*) or the restaurant chain ‘Petrovich’. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Georges Nivat, *Vivre en Russe*, Geneva: L’Âge d’Homme, 2007, p31. All the translations from the French apart from those of Makine’s novels are my own. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. *Idem.* [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Wallace L. Daniel, *The Orthodox Church and Civil Society in Russia*, College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006, p74. Makine resurrects the *mir* more directly in *The Woman Who Waited* (2004). Interestingly, like in the novels analysed here, the village of Mirnoe is a site of an intersection of pre-revolutionary communal spirit and enduring memory of the World War II. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Svetlana Boym, *Common Places*, *op. cit*., p3. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. *Ibidem*, p87. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Wallace L. Daniel, *op. cit*., p74. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. The couple probably obtain an individual flat as part of Khrushchev’s ‘One family — one flat’ policy. See Christine Varga-Harris, ‘Homemaking and the Aesthetic and Moral Perimeters of the Soviet Home During the Khrushchev Era’, *Journal of Social History*, 41, 2000, pp561–89. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Erin Collopy, *op. cit*., p45. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. An additional clue is that Abramovna was a victim of the great purge which, many believe, targeted mainly Jews. See, for example, William Korey, *The Soviet Cage*: *Anti*–*Semitism in Russia* (New York: The Viking Press, 1973), p67. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. Andreï Makine, *The Hero’s Daughter*, trans. Goeffrey Strachan, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2004, p34. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. *Ibidem*, p35. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Svetlana Boym, *Common Places*, *op. cit*., p38. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, *op. cit*., pp60-61. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. *Ibidem*, pXVI. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Andreï Makine, *Confessions of a Fallen Standard-Bearer*, trans. Geoffrey Strachan, New York: Arkade, 2000, p71. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Erin Collopy, *op. cit*., p45. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Andreï Makine, *Confessions of a Fallen Standard-Bearer*, *op. cit*., p41. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. *Ibidem*, p27. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. *Ibidem*, p9. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Arnaud Vareille, ‘Du drame de devenir écrivain: *Confession d’un porte*–*drapeau déchu* d’Andreï Makine’, Murielle Lucie Clément (ed.), *Andreï Makine*, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009, pp37-53, p39. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Svetlana Boym, *Common Places*, *op. cit*., p127. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. For a more detailed discussion of Makine’s representation of Jews and the Holocaust, see Helena Duffy, ‘The Jew as St Christopher. The Holocaust and the Participation of Soviet Jews in Russia’s Great Patriotic War Effort in the *Oeuvre* of Andreï Makine’, Peter Tame, Dominique Jeanerrod and Manuel Bragança (eds), *Mnemosyne and Mars. Artistic and Cultural Representations of Twentieth-Century Europe at War*, Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014, pp343-60. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Andreï Makine, *Confessions of a Fallen Standard-Bearer*, *op. cit*., p9. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. *Ibidem*, p76. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. *Ibidem*, p86. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. For a discussion of Russian anti-Semitism see, for example, William Korey, ‘The Origins and Development of Soviet Anti-Semitism: An Analysis’, *Slavic Review,* 31, 1972, pp111-35. [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. Svetlana Boym, *Common Places*, *op. cit*., pp144-45. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. Although this is not articulated, we can assume that they perish in the Holocaust and notably in the Babi Yar massacre which took place on the outskirts of Kiev and where between 29 and 30 September 1941 the Germans shot nearly 34,000 Jews. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. Andreï Makine, *Confessions of a Fallen Standard-Bearer*, *op. cit*., p70. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. *Ibidem*, p60. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. See Helena Duffy, *op. cit*.. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, *op. cit*., pXIV. [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. Linda Hutcheon, *op. cit*., p12 and p230. [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. Andreï Makine, *Confessions of a Fallen Standard-Bearer*, *op. cit*., p5. [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. *Ibidem*, p4. [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. *Ibidem*, p15. [↑](#endnote-ref-59)
60. For more on the cult of World War II, see Nina Tumarkin, *The Living and the Dead: The Rise and the Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia*, New York: Basic Books, 1994. [↑](#endnote-ref-60)
61. Linda Hutcheon, *op. cit*., pp105-6. [↑](#endnote-ref-61)
62. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, *op. cit*., pXIV. [↑](#endnote-ref-62)
63. Andreï Makine, *Confessions of a Fallen Standard-Bearer*, *op. cit*., p100. [↑](#endnote-ref-63)
64. Andreï Makine, *A Woman Loved*, trans. Geoffrey Strachan, London: MacLehose Press, 2013, p15. [↑](#endnote-ref-64)
65. See, for example, Joseph Brodsky’s essay ‘In a Room and a Half’, *Less Than One: Selected Essays*, New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1986, pp447-501. In this essay Brodsky writes that communal life ‘bares life to its basics: it strips off any illusion about human nature…You know the sounds they make in bed and when women have their periods’, pp454-55. [↑](#endnote-ref-65)
66. In 1924 I. Vareikis compared the Soviet Union to a large communal apartment in which ‘national state units, various republics and autonomous provinces’ represented ‘separate rooms’. Quoted by Yuri Slezkine, ‘The USSR as a Communal Apartment, or How a Socialist State Promoted Ethnic Particularism’, *Slavic Review*, 53, 1994, pp414-52, p415. [↑](#endnote-ref-66)
67. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, *op. cit*., p. XV. [↑](#endnote-ref-67)
68. Linda Hutcheon, *op. cit*., pXII. [↑](#endnote-ref-68)
69. *Idem*. [↑](#endnote-ref-69)
70. Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, *op. cit*., p XIV. [↑](#endnote-ref-70)