

ADVERTISEMENT



Los Angeles Times



OPINION

Op-Ed: Hashtags from my Soviet childhood



Statues of Vladimir Lenin in Muzeon Park in Moscow. (Semyon Danilov / Associated Press)

By INNA FALIKS

MARCH 1, 2020
3 AM



Browsing through a trendy boutique in Culver City recently, I came across a framed sign that said “Equality.” It was pink and perched above a shelf with neatly folded jeans on sale for \$450 a pair. I took a photo and laughed until it hit me — this was no laughing matter. Not long after, I visited a private school in Santa Monica where posters, done in a child’s hand, said “Join the Young Proletariat Club — Support the Revolution!”

We now live in a realm of buzzwords, hashtags, slogans that can seduce us with the neatness of tidily packaged concepts in our desire for change. But “equality,” “revolution” and “proletariat” are rendered meaningless in environments where they are overused. We’ve entered an age of Newspeak — though, unlike in “1984,” this is not part of government indoctrination but our own doing.

Having spent my childhood in the Soviet Union in the 1980s, I’ve inherited a knee-jerk reaction to slogans. Soviet buzzwords were the foundation of our reality, overseen by the holy trinity of Marx, Engels and Lenin.

One became a Young Pioneer after three years in the preparatory ranks of the Little Octobrists. We wore baby Lenin pins on our brown, itchy wool uniforms. You can still buy such a pin in Brighton Beach.

ADVERTISING



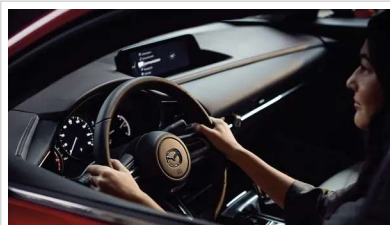
Ads by Teads

Back then, exchanging the pin for the red polyester kerchief of the Young Pioneer felt like an exciting rite of passage into a world of adolescence: unironic meetings, pompous speeches, fortissimo tuba marches. The initiation ceremony meant standing for hours under the hot sun, next to the granite Grandpa Lenin, while the district party official expounded on the five-year plan. Then, a teenager with vodka breath — from the Komsomol ranks! — tied the red kerchiefs around our necks. We would have given our lives at that moment for “Proletariat!” “Revolution!” “Equality!” To our parents, these words meant dreary lines for bread, bribes and crammed communal apartments at best; and denunciations, arrests and murder of millions at worst.

My family immigrated to the U.S. in 1989. Soon after, in 1991, the Soviet empire fell, eventually replaced by the dictatorship we know today.

Just after the Soviet collapse, we returned to Moscow, where I was to compete in the first International Tchaikovsky Competition for Young Musicians. I represented the U.S., playing, among other things, Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue,” the solo piano version.

We stayed in the historic Hotel Moskva, built during the Stalin Terror years, near the Moscow Conservatory where the competition took place and the Kremlin. Provincial Communist Party bosses stayed there when visiting the capital, my dad explained. And now, look at us, penniless Jewish immigrants from Odessa, back to the capital as citizens of the world, making it here without any “*blat*”! (i.e. connections, political or monetary).



SPONSORED CONTENT

2020 Mazda CX-30 first drive review: A stylish SUV that's great... [↗](#)

By Mazda

See what makes the Mazda CX-30 a standout SUV.

We stepped outside the hotel into Manezhnaya Square. A hot air balloon emblazoned with “Glory to Russia!” was prepped for takeoff. Veterans with medals were jogging in a circle around it and singing Soviet anthems, and nearby, a military band in full uniform was getting ready to play. The conductor raised his baton, but instead of a Soviet military march, the band broke into a medley from “My Fair Lady.” The confused city was still steeped in a time when slogans promised meaning and didn’t deliver.

At the conservatory, I sat on the floor in my jeans, like a renegade, surrounded by the Russian contestants in their frilly dresses and stiff shirts. I heard murmurs, “No culture ... what do you expect from an American.”

In my semifinal performance, I bopped, perhaps excessively, to the music’s jolly tunes, a newly American smile on my face. The Russian public loved it, but the stone-faced judges didn’t get it. I was crushed when I didn’t make the final round. The Soviet megalith was gone, but its ways had stayed.

As I ran my fingers over the \$450 jeans at the boutique, I recalled that surreal scene in Moscow, the meeting of the free West with the oppressed East, its slogans now a Felliniesque pastiche. The multiple shades of human experience cannot be reduced to empty Newspeak buzzwords — nor should ideals like equality and democracy.

Inna Faliks is a concert pianist and professor and head of the piano department at UCLA Herb Alpert School of Music.

OPINION

OP-ED

**A cure for the common opinion**

Get thought-provoking perspectives with our weekly newsletter.

Enter Email Address

SIGN ME UP

You may occasionally receive promotional content from the Los Angeles Times.

Inna Faliks

MORE FROM THE LOS ANGELES TIMES



OPINION

Op-Ed: Kids can't write cursive. The world won't end

March 1, 2020



OPINION

Letters to the Editor: Saguaro cactuses were destroyed for Trump's border fence. What an outrage

March 1, 2020



OPINION

Letters to the Editor: Is Trump setting up Mike Pence as the coronavirus fall guy?

March 1, 2020



OPINION

Letters to the Editor: Remember, Democrats, Trump is president because of Bernie Sanders

March 1, 2020

Around the Web

Ads by Revcontent



Heart Surgeon Boils Weight Loss Down to One Thing

GUNDRY MD



How Dogs Cry For Help: 3 Warning Signs Your Dogs Is Crying For Help

DR. MARTY



People Who Retire Comfortably Avoid These Financial Advisor Mistakes

SMARTASSET



3 Toxic Foods For Cats: The One Meat All Cats Should Avoid

DR. MARTY



World Residents Are in a Mad Rush to Get This Face Mask

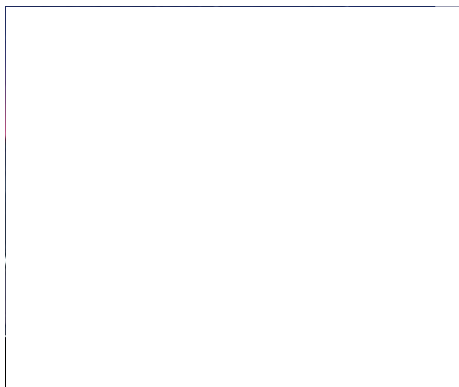
SAFE MASK



Americas #1 Futurist George Gilder's 2020 Prediction Will Stun You

INTERNET REBOOT 2020

ADVERTISEMENT



LATEST OPINION >

OPINION

Letters to the Editor: Another reason school funding measures fail — under-funding by the lottery

March 1, 2020

OPINION

Editorial: Trump's war against immigration is grinding on — with unfortunate success

March 1, 2020

OPINION

Q&A: Amy Klobuchar on the difference between talking a good game and getting things done

Feb. 29, 2020

OPINION

Op-Ed: American Jews have something to celebrate: Mike Bloomberg and Bernie Sanders

Feb. 29, 2020

OPINION

Letters to the Editor: Calling Bernie Sanders a socialist doesn't make him one, so stop panicking

Feb. 29, 2020

ADVERTISEMENT

Getty

Michelangelo: Mind of the Master
Through Jun. 7

Subscribe for unlimited access

Follow Us



