

Teaching the Fall of the Soviet Union Through a Communist Party Membership Card

By Kelsey Rice

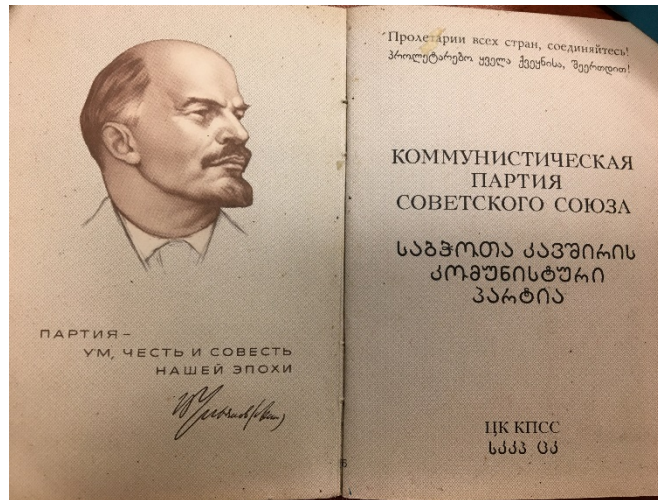
At most institutions of higher learning, the potential for the integration of material culture studies into pedagogy is far greater for the field of American history than global. Almost every college, after all, boasts a collection related to local history or the life of notable alumna. How can instructors of global history lacking access to major collections incorporate material culture into the classroom? One rich area of possibility is for us to turn not only to the museum in our exploration of material culture pedagogy at the university level, but also to our own collections of curiosities, items that would never merit inclusion into a formal collection, that are the natural byproduct of life abroad during fieldwork. This essay will offer a case study of the immense pedagogical potential of a souvenir purchased for a few *Laris* in a Tbilisi, Georgia flea market, selected on a whim and never intended for the classroom.

The object in question is a Communist Party membership card, purchased at a popular flea market that any past visitor to Tbilisi will be familiar with. The market is filled with Soviet era curiosities, both real and, in the case of most of the war medals on offer, counterfeit. Among the many offerings are dozens of Communist Party membership cards, items once of great social value that have been long rendered useless. While in Tbilisi on vacation during my year of research in Baku, Azerbaijan, I selected one such card, once belonging to a woman named Nelly B. It migrated from the bottom of my luggage to the bottom of a drawer upon my return home and there it remained, largely neglected, until I received my first academic position as a professor of Middle Eastern history and was promptly asked to teach Russian history as well.

One of the great challenges of teaching global history, especially at the introductory level, is challenging American students' notions of the inherent otherness of non-Western cultures. In response to this task I introduce all manner of cultural products to my students, including music, photography, and literature. I have found that material culture can serve as one of the most potent tools to de-exoticize the foreign. As Art Historian Jules Prown notes, "Objects created in the past are the only historical occurrences that continue to exist in the present."¹ History embodied in an object can have a profound effect on students, evoking empathy and familiarity in a way written sources often cannot. Allowing students to interact with Nelly's Communist Party Membership Card provided an especially effective approach to teaching the fall of the Soviet Union.

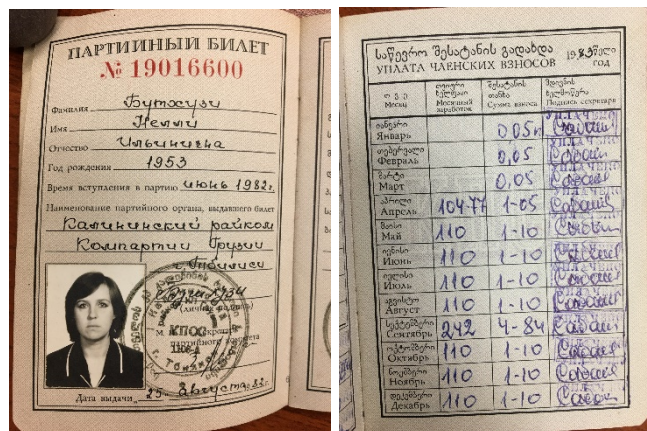
For most students, the card is initially an exotic item. A small red booklet, the first thing they see on the cover is the foreign Cyrillic script. Upon opening it, they are confronted with a severe portrait of Lenin, more Cyrillic script and, even more unfamiliar, the looping script of the Georgian language. Upon turning the page, however, students encounter Nelly's personal details. They see a small black and white photo of a serious young woman whose simple haircut and collared shirt makes her look like someone they would not think twice about passing on the street today. With some provided translation, they learn that Nelly was born in 1953 and joined the Party in 1982, making her 29 at the time of the photo. Leafing through the rest of the booklet, they see neat tables documenting her income and payment of membership dues. They see that Nelly was assiduous in her payments, never missing a month until May 1989, when the payments stop for good. Yet there are many additional pages of blank payment tables remaining in the booklet, dated out to 2003 when, presumably, Nelly would need to get a new card.

¹ Jules David Prown. "Mind in matter: An introduction to material culture theory and method." *Winterthur portfolio* 17, no. 1 (1982): 3.



First pages of Nelly's membership card

Students were able to analyze the card on multiple levels. First, we applied the facts of Soviet history covered in the course to the content of the card. Nelly was born in 1953, the year of the death of Joseph Stalin. Thus, she was born at a time of significant transition, as Nikita Khrushchev embarked upon destalinization and softened many of the policies of his predecessor, releasing political prisoners, ending the Gulag system, and loosening censorship. She spent her childhood and early adulthood under Khrushchev's leadership (1953-1964), and Leonid Brezhnev's (1964-1982.) She joined the party in June 1982, five months before Brezhnev would die. During her brief time as a party member she would see four General Secretaries come and go, from Brezhnev to Andropov, Chernenkov, and finally Gorbachev, markedly different from her own early experience under Khrushchev and Brezhnev as well as that of her parents, who were likely born and grew to adulthood under Stalin's thirty-year reign. Nelly ceases payments in 1989, the year the Eastern European Soviet satellites abandoned communism and people began rising up against Soviet rule throughout the Soviet Republics. The tables for documenting payments date up to 2003, showing the assumption of Soviet officials in 1982 that their government had far more than nine years left to live, underlining how abrupt and unexpected the dissolution of the Soviet Union was.



After establishing the facts of the card, we moved to speculation. Why did Nelly join the Communist Party? Was she a true believer in the politics, or was she seeking the opportunity afforded by

membership? What might Nelly's experience have been during the fall of the Soviet Union? The Union was not dissolved until 1991, yet she ceased paying her dues in May 1989. This is where I inform students that in April 1989 Soviet troops attacked a massive protest in Tbilisi calling for Georgian independence, killing at least twenty people. Could this be why Nelly abandoned her previously untarnished payment record? It seems likely, but we cannot know for sure. We then considered the life of Nelly and her membership card after they parted ways. How did this card end up in a flea market in 2015, where a graduate student in history scooped it up for a pittance, transported it across the ocean, and brought it to where it is now, in 2019, in a classroom at the United States Military Academy? We consider what we have learned about the desperate economic situation of the former Soviet states in the 1990s and wonder if Nelly sold her card out of economic necessity. Or did she hold on to it longer, waiting until Georgia's growing tourism industry made it something worth selling? Is Nelly still alive? She would be 66 in 2019, ancient in the eyes of the college students contemplating her card but still well shy of Georgia's life expectancy of 73. If she is still alive, what might she think about the journey of her card? Would she be amused? Offended? The questions brought up by the presence of the card, so far removed from its original purpose, leads to rich classroom discussion.

When considering how to incorporate material culture into the classroom, those of us teaching non-American history often enjoy fewer resources than our Americanist colleagues. Taking stock of our own collections, however, can often yield rich results. Indeed, in addition the objects themselves, the story behind their provenance, in which we become part of the object's lifecycle, can itself take lessons in fascinating directions.