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The Soviet Union in Angola

Soviet and African Perspectives on the Failed Socialist Transformation

by Jeremy Bervoets

Africa's drive for independence came to a head by the 1960s, at the height of the Cold War. It was seen by the Soviet Union as an opportunity to spread socialism to developing countries, build a sphere of influence and create a bloc in opposition to the West. While Americans feared a communist takeover of the continent, the relationships the USSR forged in Africa did not last long. Hasty and careless evaluation of potential socialist states, emphasis on the military leading violent insurrections, and inadequate aid all prevented the Soviet Union from developing anything more than, at best, friendly associations with countries that would eventually align themselves with the West.

To understand how this happened, this paper will draw upon historical perspectives of Soviet and African thinkers of the time period as primary sources. We shall see that while Soviet historians largely blamed the fragmentation of African societies and the lasting effects of colonialism, African historians pointed to the lack of Soviet interest to help African countries when it did not benefit the Soviet Union. By studying how the situation was viewed from both sides, one can better understand exactly why and how the relationship failed.

In addition to examining the general history of Soviet-African relations, this paper will focus on relations with Angola as a case study. Many African countries cut off economic and diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union during the period from 1965 to 1974, seeing relations with Western Europe and the United States as more advantageous.[1] However, Angola, having received Soviet military support in its struggle for independence from Portugal, was one of its closest allies in the developing world during this time period. Yet even this strongest and most enduring relationship between the USSR and an African state eventually failed, and Angola ended its socialist reforms.

The Rise and Fall of Soviet-African Relations

Part of the reason why the Soviets experienced such difficulty transforming African countries into socialist states was that the Soviets largely lacked an understanding of the continent. Until the death of Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Union had almost no relations with the then-African colonies.[2] Dominated by Western countries, Africans were

considered by the Soviets to be part of the capitalist system. Joseph Stalin maintained a strict, ideological focus in terms of the international socialist revolution and did not believe that the time was right for Africa to make the transition to socialism.[3] He elected to focus on domestic policies until other parts of the world were ready. Stalin was also wary of further agitating national self-determination movements, as this might embolden similar movements that he felt threatened the domestic stability of the USSR.[4] He felt that, in time, support for nationalist movements would subside and the implementation of international socialism would be possible.

Active Soviet-African relations began when Nikita Khrushchev came to power following the death of Stalin in 1953, which coincided with the beginnings of Africa's independence movements.[5] In 1955, the Soviet Union made its first major arms transfer to an African country, Egypt.[6] Within ten years, the Soviets had established diplomatic ties with newly-independent Algeria, Ghana, Guinea, Mali, Sudan, Morocco and Libya. These Soviet allies, referred to as the "Casablanca Bloc" after they had held their first summit in Casablanca, Morocco, were invited to attend the Twenty-Second Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in Moscow in 1961.

At that meeting, Khrushchev announced his doctrine of the "National Democratic State." [7] He outlined two steps that would allow developing African countries to bypass capitalism and advance straight to socialism: the national-democratic phase and the revolutionary-democratic phase.[8] In the first phase, a country simply had to be "anti-imperialist." In the second phase, the country would have to make a commitment to socialism in the socio-economic and political realms. More specifically, a "revolutionary-democratic" country had to have industrialized and nationalized its economy, experienced a cultural revolution that led to a better appreciation of international socialism, and established a vanguard state party in alliance with countries of similar political ideology.[9]

The Soviets under Khrushchev did not get the results they had hoped for. Social fragmentation, weak economies, and violent political rivalries created political instability that prevented African governments from transitioning to socialism. Soviet diplomats largely blamed this political instability on Western interference.[10] However, the Soviet failure was, in large part, a result of errors in Soviet policy and diplomacy. For example, failed Soviet attempts to incite revolution in Egypt, Ghana, Mali and Sudan, which had been allies with or at least friendly toward the USSR, naturally alienated the leaders of those countries and created credibility issues for the USSR in Africa.[11] The military coups in Algeria (1965), Ghana (1966), and Mali (1968) that overthrew pro-Soviet leaders were the final blow to the "Casablanca Bloc" and, in large part, ended the Soviets' legitimacy in Africa. After seeing all the potential socialist states side with the capitalists by mid-decade, Soviet analysts were forced to acknowledge that their goals for Africa had been unrealistic.[12]

The Soviet Union also sought to expand its influence abroad by means other than diplomacy. The Peoples' Friendship University of Moscow, founded in 1960 and renamed after Patrice Lumumba after his assassination in 1961, granted scholarships and degrees to thousands of students from Africa, Asia and the Middle East while indoctrinating them with communist ideology.[13] Although the Soviet state declared itself against racism, these foreign students, primarily those from Africa, faced racism by members of Soviet state institutions in the 1960s and 1970s. African students and African-American residents in the Soviet Union found that opportunities for economic and spatial mobility were extremely racialized and that racial slurs were often used outside official antiracism discourse.[14] Soviet racism faced by Africans partially explains why the Soviets lacked a great understanding of the African peoples.

From 1954 to 1964, the Soviet Union provided a number of African countries with economic aid, primarily in the form of technical assistance in developing infrastructure.[15] However, when an alarming number of these countries began pursuing a capitalist path of development in the mid-1960s, the Soviets under Leonid Brezhnev revisited their strategy for the region and concluded in the late 1960s that economic aid was a limited policy tool and that Africa's transition to socialism would take longer than initially expected.[16]

After 1967, Soviet economic relations with African countries were aimed at commercially benefiting the USSR and establishing greater Soviet influence abroad.[17] By the early 1970s, the Soviets had developed friendly relations with Angola, Benin, Ethiopia, and Mozambique, most of which were European colonies fighting for independence. In the mid-1970s, these countries either gained independence with the help of Soviet military assistance or were led by revolutionary leaders and were allies of the Soviet Union.

After observing the stagnation of African economies in the 1970s, it was decided under Brezhnev that a stage of capitalism was needed before socialism could successfully be implemented. The Soviets borrowed ideas from V.I. Lenin's New Economic Policy (NEP) and applied them to Africa, becoming more tolerant of trade between African and capitalist countries and even encouraging the adoption of some capitalist economic methods.[18] Lenin's NEP proposed that sometimes it was necessary to establish capitalism in a country, industrialize it and initiate trade with other capitalist countries, if only to prepare it for socialism.

However, even this more liberal policy, developed with the benefit of several years of experience interacting with African countries, would also eventually fail. A case study of Angola reveals many of the reasons why this happened.

Soviet-Angolan Relations

In the struggle for independence against imperialist Portugal lasting from 1961 to 1975, three major revolutionary groups emerged in Angola: the Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola (MPLA), the National Liberation Front of Angola (FNLA), and the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola (UNITA). The Soviet Union provided military support to the MPLA, which identified itself as a socialist group, while the FNLA and the UNITA were backed by South Africa and the United States.[19] The Soviets sent military advisers and supported contingencies of Cuban soldiers to the MPLA in its fight for independence and in years after.[20]

The Alvor Agreement, which granted Angola independence from Portugal, established a coalition government among the MPLA, FNLA, and UNITA with Agostinho Neto, the leader of the MPLA, serving as the first president of Angola. However, this government quickly disintegrated, as each of the three organizations sought absolute control of the state. As a result, a civil war broke out in Angola, one that would last over a quarter of a century.

The USSR continued to support the MPLA with military assistance amidst the political instability in Angola. Despite the continuing war, by the end of the 1970s, Angola had become the focus of the Soviets' efforts to spread socialism in Africa. From that point until the end of the 1980s, Soviet diplomats pursued economic and diplomatic relations in a manner that they hoped would promote a less hasty, more comprehensive transition to socialism.[21] However, the civil war would continue until the end of the twentieth century.

After the failures of the Khrushchev era, Soviet leadership put more thought into which countries were most suited to socialism. The criteria that needed to be met by Angola in order to qualify for Soviet aid were similar to, though stricter than, those outlined in the "National Democracy" doctrine. In order to receive Soviet aid, the Angolan government had to have shown significant progress in industrializing its economy, nationalized its industries, instituted land ownership reforms, developed readiness among its people to support a cultural revolution, and established a vanguard party in alliance with countries of similar political ideology.[22] Considering the political instability of Angola at the time, military assistance constituted a large majority of Soviet aid sent there.[23]

The Soviets used the experience and knowledge of the area gained in the 1960s to redefine their strategy in the 1970s. This second approach proved more realistic than the first. However, the Soviet Union failed to establish a socialist government in Angola. This failure, along with the Soviet Union's own political and economic instability at the end of the 1980s, eventually led the Soviets to withdraw from Africa altogether. The reasons for this are complex, and the next two sections of this study will examine these issues from both sides of the African-Soviet relationship in order to better understand them.

The Soviet Historical Perspective

Among Soviet historians writing from the 1960s onward, there were two schools of thought regarding the future of socialism in African countries. The first school held that Russians and Africans were united in their struggle against imperialist oppression, trying to overcome the damaging effects of capitalism, and that both societies were in the midst of a class struggle. Thus, these writers concluded, the Soviet mission was to help Africans realize that the only cure for their social, economic and political problems was the unification of a working class against the bourgeois, Western capitalists; the Soviet duty was to help the continent, whose economy relied almost entirely on agriculture, to develop its industrial sector. [24] These historians believed that African countries were faced with two choices, capitalism or socialism, and that because of their long, devastating experience with imperialism, they would choose the social and economic benefits of socialism.

The second school, emerging later than the first (around 1970), had more knowledge of Soviet-African relations and was less ideological. Members of this school understood the difficulties of establishing a socialist government abroad and found obstacles within African societies that prevented the socialist revolution from taking place. In particular, their analysis pointed to the negative role of the military in developing countries. Aid to Africa was centered on strengthening the military rather than stimulating the economy. These historians argued that the army could not take the place of a political party in mobilizing a country's population and preparing it for socio-economic progress. While the army was instrumental in gaining political independence from European colonial powers, these historians held that the military was not capable of leading its country after independence.

One major theme in the Soviet historical perspective is the reference to a general policy for all African countries. Throughout their works, Soviet historians were concerned with the African continent as a whole, but did not mention specific policies for specific countries or regions. They believed that decades of exploitation during colonial rule had severely damaged the continent socially, economically and politically, and the rapid transition to independence had created an African society without differentiated national identities.

Vasily Solodovnikov, a leading scholar at the Africa Institute in Moscow in the 1960s and 1970s and part of the first school of thought, pointed to the progressive revolutions already taking place in the 1960s as undeniable proof that Africa's socialist transformation was inevitable.[25] Moreover, it was the struggle against imperialism and its aftermath and the desire for socio-economic development that brought Africans and Soviets closer together. He stated, "Soviet scientists, Africanists, and African scientists have one common aim: to contribute by their research to the growth of national consciousness of African peoples." [26] He further wrote, "The main target is to

secure [...] the complete liberation of the African continent from all forms of racial, political, economic, and social enslavement and from all consequences and remnants of such enslavement.”[27] Only via a socialist revolution could African countries escape their enslavement to Western capitalists. At a time when the anti-imperialist revolution was gaining momentum, as Solodovnikov observed, the promotion of socialism in Africa brought the aims of African and Soviet scholars closer together.[28]

Another Soviet historian of the first school of thought, Valery Kudryavtsev, stated that the legacy of colonialism had created a society that lacked a united working class. The colonial-era single crop agriculture showed that African economies were designed to benefit other countries rather than their own.[29] He also associated the lack of industrialization, along with social and economic instability, with the African people’s inability to relate to class struggle. However, once this class consciousness had been realized, socio-economic development and socialist revolution would follow.

Seeing that African economies were being exploited by other countries, Kudryavtsev advocated that African countries following a non-capitalist path should rely on their own capital rather than on foreign capital.[30] By mobilizing internal resources and nationalizing banks, foreign trade, and key branches of industry and communication, these countries could prevent their further exploitation by capitalist economies.[31] Kudryavtsev believed that future socialist states in Africa should be measured by how the average citizen lived, his part in society and his independence from colonial influence.[32] Although Kudryavtsev realized the importance of African countries’ political independence from European colonial powers, he was still concerned with the West’s attempt to establish economic imperialism in Africa.

Georgy Mirsky, a specialist in developing world politics and part of the second school, illustrated how the army was a potential problem. He held that the military was the leader of the socialist revolution in its beginning stages, but if leadership of the revolution was not eventually taken over by the government, the military would develop interests of its own and no longer represent the people. For the time being, the army had taken the initiative of leading the revolutionary struggle because the working class, which should have fulfilled this role, was not present in African society.[33] The absence of a working class united against the bourgeoisie was concerning, but, in time, class struggle in Africa would develop, according to Mirsky.

Mirsky held that ethnic conflict, the largest contributor to social turmoil in Africa, was a lingering effect of imperialism. However, he did not think its impact on society was as significant as class struggle. Mirsky observed that the army had taken the place of nationalism, and possibly even socialism, in the effect it had on unifying a nation’s people.[34] Angola was similar to most other African countries in terms of the social turmoil that had arisen in different parts of the country. The political boundaries set during the colonial period placed members of different ethnic and communal groups in

the same country. The three major military factions in post-colonial Angola—the MPLA, the FNLA, and the UNITA—were supported by different ethnic groups in the country. The MPLA represented the interests of the Mbundu people, who resided around the capital, Luanda; but the FNLA and the UNITA were supported by the Kongo and Ovimundu ethnic groups respectively, which resided in less-populated areas of Angola.[35] As a result of civil war between these factions, inhabitants of rural areas in Angola continued to live without any contact with the capital.

Akhmed Iskenderov, also part of the second school, believed that the military was an effective leader of the socialist revolutions in developing countries. Yet Iskenderov speculated that, if left in the hands of the military, the revolution might take another direction, diverging from the interests of the Soviet Union and the African people.[36] Iskenderov believed that the only way to establish an effective socialist government was to involve the masses. He stated that the army must serve the interests of its nation's people, determine its own place in society and guide economic, social and political development.[37] Although Iskenderov was not very critical of the strategy of using the military to transition to socialism, his work separated itself from other writings of that time period because it was skeptical of the path socialism was taking in Africa.

The Soviet historical and ideological perspective explains the failures of their strategy by pointing to the military for not properly guiding the socialist revolution and African society for not having developed a strong bourgeoisie or proletariat class. What Solodovnikov and others did not foresee is that the Angolan people would have trouble relating to the socialist ideas of class struggle and industrialization. The Soviets were preaching class consciousness at a time when ethnic tension was dividing people more than class and when agriculture, not industry, was the country's largest economic sector. Angola's post-colonial troubles remained even after years of receiving Soviet aid and assistance. The focus on strengthening the military did bring about immediate and radical change, but in the long run, it did not help the socialist cause.

Soviet historians also failed to understand that, by categorizing African countries as either capitalists or socialists, the Soviet Union unintentionally followed a strategy that gave no flexibility to countries that wanted to pursue a neutral stance. During the first phase of Khrushchev's strategy in the 1960s, African countries that hoped to receive Soviet aid were required to end diplomatic relations with Western countries. The Soviet Union's attempt to deter contact with the West, despite the fact that Angola needed more aid than the USSR was giving, showed that the interests of the Angolan people were not always a top Soviet priority.

The African Historical Perspective

Compared to the Soviet historical perspective, African historians tended to focus more on the problems created by Soviet leadership pursuing its own interests while

disregarding the needs of developing African states. One trend present in the African historical reasoning for the Soviet Union's presence in Angola is that Soviet policies were solely opportunistic, operating on a realistic, rather than idealistic, basis. African historians were critical of Soviet leaders, claiming that their lack of initiative in improving the military and economic situation in Angola hindered the revolutionary process. While the USSR supplied weapons and military advisers, it left military unrest to be settled through proxy warfare. The insufficient financial aid given to Angola forced that country to seek financial aid from the West.

Oye Ogunbadejo, a scholar of Sub-Saharan Africa and its political and economic relations with the Soviet Union, makes the argument that neither Soviet nor Angolan leaders were deeply invested in developing a strong alliance with each other. Rather than focusing on political ideology, each side was concerned with the interests of its own country. He points out that the Soviets played an important role in the Angolan independence movement by arming and instructing the MPLA so then, after gaining independence, the Angolan government perhaps felt that it owed something back to the Soviet Union.[38] Beyond that, he says, both sides put pragmatism and national interest ahead of ideology and, as Ogunbadejo points out, this became more apparent the longer the Soviet Union and Angola interacted with each other.[39] Governmental leadership in Angola was interested in consolidating power through relations with the Soviet Union, rather than transitioning to a socialist state.

Although Angola accepted only Soviet economic aid for much of the 1970s, the Angolan economy, already devastated from years of war, continued to suffer.[40] In 1979, Agostinho Neto, the first president of Angola, declared that the country needed to take steps toward capitalism before ideal conditions for socialism could be created, invoking the help of Western countries to aid Angola's economy. The Soviets allowed Angola to receive economic aid from the West, agreeing with Neto that this minor capitalist step was necessary on the path to socialism.[41] Interestingly, Ogunbadejo implies that this was just an excuse not to grant more aid to Angola without acknowledging the fact that, in the late 1970s, the Soviets were also suffering economically. While Angola appeased the Soviet Union by continuing to declare itself a socialist country, it was non-aligned in economic matters, open to receiving aid from both the USSR and the United States. Ogunbadejo writes, "what [President Neto's] country needed most was not ideological puritanism, but the capability to solve the problems of the people." [42]

Ogunbadejo also asserts that, while the Soviet Union and Angola developed a strong military alliance, the Soviets' effort to transform Angola into a socialist country was hindered by focusing too much on military assistance. The Soviet Union never issued any hard currency as part of economic aid to African countries, only offering weaponry and industrial equipment.[43] Regardless, Neto's government was quick to accept Soviet military assistance in order to suppress insurrections in Angola.[44]

Sam Nolutshungu, an expert on Southern African politics, agreed that both Soviet and Angolan leadership were factors in the failed socialist transformation. He points out that, even though the Soviets had supposedly developed a friendly alliance with Angola, they did not take action when there was aggression by the South African military. When military action was necessary, they sent weapons and military advisers and supported Cuban regiments, rather than sending Soviet troops.[45] As Nolutshungu states, "Moscow sent advisers [...] but the Soviet Union did not show the slightest willingness either to undertake an active military involvement [...] or to commit itself to defend, or guarantee the security of, its treaty partners." [46] Further, Nolutshungu wrote that President Neto continued to act out of his country's own interests, accepting Soviet aid under the guise of a country committed to socialism but also working with the West to stimulate the Angolan economy.[47]

Discussing the withdrawal of the USSR from Africa, Nolutshungu states that there was no advantage in creating a Soviet bloc in Africa that was ideologically opposed to capitalism, since financial aid from the West was being sent to Angola and the Soviet Union's other socialist-oriented allies.[48] Reluctant to continue operating in Angola, the Soviets began deescalating relations with Angola during the war in Afghanistan and further during the 1980s, when East-West tensions increased during Ronald Reagan's presidency. Nolutshungu believes that multiple economic crises in the 1970s and 1980s showed Africa's dependence on the West and the Soviet Union's inability to effectively aid African countries' economies.[49] As a result, Moscow focused more on domestic problems and matters of foreign policy that were of higher priority. Nolutshungu, in short, characterizes Soviet relations with Angola in the 1980s as being passive but optimistic for improvement in the future.[50]

The general theme of the African historical perspective is that efforts by Angolan and Soviet leaders to implement socialism were hindered by economic and political instability. The Soviets' military presence was welcomed by the Angolan government because it helped the leadership remain in power amidst insurrection. However, the fact that the Soviets only provided equipment, Soviet weapons, and Cuban contingencies prolonged the problem of political turmoil that had to be resolved after the Soviet Union withdrew its support for revolutionary regimes in underdeveloped Africa. These African historians claim that the Soviet Union was manipulating smaller, vulnerable states in Africa to create a front against the West. However, Soviet military support and economic aid were not sufficient to maintain political stability or to develop African economies in the long run.

Conclusion

As Soviet diplomats realized in the mid-1980s that their efforts to transform Angola into a socialist state had been futile, they began to withdraw from the continent. Soviet leadership conceded that socio-economic conditions had not been developed for the

implementation of socialism. Gorbachev even admitted that he had underestimated the benefits of capitalism for Africa.[51] After decades of attempting to teach Angolans the principles of socialism, Soviet diplomats finally understood that class struggle was not the most important struggle for Africa and even advised African states to develop close relations with the West. The economic problems in the Soviet Union and the international conflicts in which it was involved were adding up; it had to prioritize its resources toward goals other than African socialism. Although the Soviet Union continued to support the Angolan government with military assistance, it was clear that by the end of the 1980s, Soviet diplomats had given up on the strategy to transform Angola into a socialist state.

Three main reasons for the failure of the Soviet strategy of implementing socialism in Angola are present in the Soviet and African historical perspectives: the overemphasis on the military, the relatively small amount of Soviet economic aid and the fact that socialist theory could not be applied directly to Angolan society.

The overemphasis on the military to lead the socialist revolution in developing Angola, as described by African historians, led to militarization in states that were already experiencing civil war and political instability. Increased political instability made it extremely difficult for the Soviets to establish a socialist government in Angola. African historians also point out how the relatively small amount of Soviet aid in comparison to Western aid caused several African countries that were struggling economically to abandon socialism and align themselves with the West. Finally, the Soviet historical perspective, particularly the second school, explains the failure of the Soviet strategy in Angola by looking at the Soviets' inability to apply socialist principles to Angolan society. Both sides eventually came to the conclusion that efforts to spread socialism to Angola were futile since the primary concern of socialism, class struggle, was not present in Africa in the 1970s and 1980s. The Soviet strategy attempted to force African countries to side with either capitalist or socialist thought, but a resounding majority of these countries eventually sided with the former.

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Footnotes

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[2] *Ibid.*, 3.

[3] Stalin, Joseph, *Marxism and the National-Colonial Question* (San Francisco: Proletarian Publishers, 1975), 381; hereafter cited as *Marxism and the National-Colonial Question*.

[4] *Ibid.*, 36.

- [5] Libya declared independence in 1951, making it the first African country to do so after WWII. Egypt gained independence in 1953. Angola, a focus of this paper, was a relative latecomer to independence, gaining sovereignty only in 1975.
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- [8] Nation and Kauppi, *The Soviet Impact in Africa*, 30.
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- [25] *Ibid.*, 359.

- [26] *Ibid.*, 366.
- [27] *Ibid.*
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- [29] Kudryavtsev, V, "Problems and Judgments: Real and Fictitious Difficulties," 21.
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Once Upon a Time in Eastern Europe:

Memoirs of a Soviet Child
by Ekaterina Hansen

To the reader: These vignettes are a collection of personal essays of my childhood experiences growing up in the former Soviet Union and my later impressions based on travels to Ukraine and to Russia as a college student. Please be aware that since most of my childhood was spent in the Ukrainian SSR while it was part of the Soviet Union, and although Russia and Ukraine are now two separate countries, I often speak of them as one due to their similarities. Many of the trends and customs that I describe about Ukraine also apply to Russia and vice versa. Any comments seen as controversial are my own personal views and do not reflect the opinions of any people or organizations mentioned in these narratives. I only hope to provide a deeper understanding of the nuances of Russian culture and how they have changed in the last two decades. As a Russian Studies academic and a fluent speaker of the language, I have a great passion for Slavic culture, and with these essays I hope to share not only my personal experiences, but also historical facts, as they intertwine through my memories. I hope that you, the reader, will find the humor in some of the unusual traditions and the nostalgia for times past.

I. The Soviet Union

In 1990, I was a six-year old girl living in the Ukrainian SSR, in a country called the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. I resided in a three-room *квартира* (flat) with my mother and my *бабушка* (grandmother). As a child, I was ignorant of the severity of the financial and social hardships of my country. We watched Mikhail Gorbachev give speeches on television, and I heard the words *перестройка* (perestroika) and *гласность* (glasnost) repeatedly, but those were grown-up words and I didn't really understand them.

I didn't know then that *perestroika* was a social and economic revolution that had been building up in the Soviet Union for decades, but saw effective changes only in the mid-1980s. When Gorbachev became the General Secretary of the Communist Party, he introduced liberal reforms that enabled the country to move forward toward democracy

and away from conservative socialism. One of his reforms was called *glasnost*, or openness, a policy that made government documents and political information available to the public. Another reform was based on the principle of *perestroika*, or reconstruction; it was meant to motivate government institutions to reconstruct themselves to be less hierarchal and more democratic. These principles of democratization and hope for a market economy slowly dismantled the old ideas of communism. Little did I know then that this strange time of restructuring and reforms would forever change not only the future of my country, but my own life as well.

As a little girl, I lived in the *область* (province) of Voroshilovgrad, a region also referred to as "Donbas" (an abbreviation for Donetsk Basin). The basin was famed throughout the Soviet Union for its rich deposits of coal, discovered by a geologist named Lutugin. I lived in a city named Lutugino in honor of him. As was typical of cities in the USSR named after Soviet citizens, there was a large stone monument to the city's namesake in the center of the city, which is still there. This eastern part of Ukraine always had a unique mix of Russians and Ukrainians, with their two languages being used interchangeably in schools, at work, and in private life. I grew up understanding both languages, but for my first two years of schooling, I studied only Russian. I began studying the Ukrainian language in third grade as a second, foreign language – all children had to learn first and foremost to speak, read, and write in Russian, the official language of the USSR.

My grandmother was in her mid-fifties then and was officially a *пенсионерка* (retired woman), yet she still continued to work at the local bank. For many retired people in the Soviet Union, the pension was not enough to live on, and they continued working even past retirement. When my grandmother was home, she taught me the craft of Russian food-making in our tiny Soviet kitchen with a gas stove. She showed me how to make little Russian dumplings that floated and boiled in the water: we made *пельмени* (with meat or vegetables) and *вареники* (with cheese or fruit). She used to help me bathe in our large, rusty tub after heating up the water with our half-functioning *колонка* (Soviet gas-powered water heater) and washed my hair with just a drop of birch-tree shampoo; she was constantly conserving every household item. She taught me how to knit socks and embroider handkerchiefs, how to pick the best wild mushrooms, how to do arithmetic with an abacus, and how to make homemade jams and *сушки* (dried fruit). She taught me these things that became not only skills to me, but deeply treasured memories and pieces of that enigmatic "Russian soul."

My mother worked as a commercial artist in the city's only factory, the Lutugino Research and Production Roll Company, and spent her work days stenciling in a frigid warehouse studio. With no computer graphic design programs and printers, my mother designed her own stencil patterns and used them to make print materials for the factory by hand: holiday posters, slogans (often with socialist messages), time tables, large announcements, and staff newsletters.

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The factory's main product was industrial rolls used in rolling mills (to roll flour, paper or metal), and its profits were the main source of revenue and employment for the city's residents. The factory was a success then due to its direct transactions with the Soviet government. However, after privatization and perestroika, the factory came under private ownership and had problems functioning in the competitive free-market economy. Although we had always thought of our city as simply a city, one of hundreds like it built by the Soviets, it soon became known by the more specific and undesirable term *моногород*, or single-industry town; its survival was dependent on only one factory. These became common across the post-Soviet space. While the factory was a source of pride for the town while it served a stable command economy, such dependence became highly risky under capitalism because a decrease in demand for a single product could affect the livelihood of an entire community. The factory in Lutugino began to have layoffs, and some residents started to move to larger cities with stronger, more diverse industries. Politicians and economists have recently proposed modernizing, diversifying and/or restructuring factories in order to make them functional and profitable in the new economic environment. But the problem became known and solutions began to be proposed only after hard times had hit.

Back then, in 1990, my mother sat in a lonely job that she was overqualified for. She spent years at the *художественное училище* (vocational art institute) to receive a diploma in Fine Arts and was now reduced to doing menial stenciling work, yet it still paid more than what a fine artist usually earned in the Soviet Union. I knew even then that as a single mother, she had to work to support us.

My parents were divorced and I could sense disapproval from the adults in more traditional families. However, divorce was not uncommon in the USSR. Couples divorced for reasons such as drunkenness and infidelity, or even due to housing problems and lack of privacy. State-issued flats could be obtained only after years of waiting on a list (as was the case with other major purchases, such as cars and television sets), and this forced many couples to cohabitate with their parents. This made living conditions difficult, especially since Soviet flats were only a fraction of the size of the standard American homes that I would grow accustomed to as an adult. In fact, divorce rates in the Soviet Union averaged a relatively high 3.4 divorces per 1,000 people throughout the 1980s, second only to the United States, which had a rate of 4.8 divorces per 1,000. However, due to the legal difficulties and the expense of obtaining a divorce in the Soviet Union, many couples opted for "unofficial" divorce or separation, making the official divorce rates somewhat misleading.

The USSR preached brotherhood and equality, yet our family situation was frowned upon. My mother and my grandmother were both divorced and unmarried women, single mothers, from non-Russian backgrounds (my grandmother was half Chuvash, my mother was part Kazakh), and had limited incomes. Although I never experienced direct discrimination, my mother told me stories from her childhood and adulthood about

enduring snide remarks and racist comments from ethnic Russians about her Kazakh background. The sense of equality in the USSR was very strong in its official political propaganda, but in practice, Soviet citizens often took part in discrimination or were victims of it. For me at that time, the sense of belonging to a minority group created a strong determination to excel in everything, turning me into a typical overachiever, especially at school.

II. The Vacation

It was the summer of 1990, the summer before I started first grade. I was walking on a dirt road in the countryside of Ukraine. It was dusk and I was trailing behind my mother, carrying a heavy suitcase. My legs were aching and I wanted to cry. My mother was clutching her purse and walking at a quick, angry pace. We were walking somewhere on the outskirts of Yuzhnoukrainsk, a young city housing one of the major nuclear power plants of Ukraine, north of Odessa. We had just spent a month visiting my father, who moved there after my parents' divorce and now worked as an electrician at the nuclear plant. My mother wanted us to have a little vacation.

Before we arrived in Yuzhnoukrainsk, we were on a train for about twenty hours, during which time we were robbed while we slept. My ten rubles, hidden inside a match box, were gone, as were some things out of my mother's purse. When we arrived at the train station, it was very early morning and still dark; we were not met by my father, because my mother wanted our arrival to be a surprise. We got on a bus, managed to find his building in the city, and with the help of the *дежурная* (a woman who served as both a janitor and security guard) we went up to his flat. We spent almost an hour beating on his door and yelling out his name before my father sleepily opened his door to find us standing there, his unexpected guests.

The whole month we spent mostly walking around outside, shopping and sight-seeing. The city of Yuzhnoukrainsk was alive with bustle: there were large stores and dozens of different cafés, bazaars, museums, theaters and various ongoing music festivals. When we were at my dad's flat, I sat perched on the window sill and ate entire bags of *семечки* (sunflower seeds), spitting the shells out into the alley below. I watched my father tinkering with his electronic projects. He lived a bohemian sort of life: he had an almost-empty flat that was inside a worker's dormitory building and spent his free days lounging in his room and smoking, or strolling around the city at a slow, relaxed pace, stopping at random cafés to order the darkest coffee and the sweetest dessert. He also had what seemed to me an endless number of somewhat eccentric friends and acquaintances. He took me to visit some of them. He had one male friend who had an earring (which I had never seen before on a man) and a baby alligator which lived inside a glass case in his flat. We went swimming in the local river and then went to the edge of the city and wandered through fields of wild poppies. To me, the entire month had

seemed idyllic and refreshingly new, but then later, as my mother and I were walking aimlessly on that dirt road, the vacation suddenly seemed not so great after all.

We didn't know where we were going; my mother decided to yank us off the train headed back home to Lutugino. She was angry, but not because of the drunken men who harassed her; not because of the conductors who offered her no help; not because of our poverty which didn't allow us to buy a ticket in the more private first or even the second class cabins; not because of my father, who still thought my mother should love him; not because of any of those details. Those things didn't anger her anymore, because such disappointments had become constants in her life. She was angry then for much bigger reasons. I carried our suitcase and I didn't cry.

As I was dragging behind my mother, I recalled the stories my grandmother had told me about her own life, and I felt the pains of all the mothers that came before me. They had all shed tears over the injustices in their lives. I thought of my great-grandmother and felt her anger and pain when her husband's entire family of farmers was packed into train wagons and shipped off to Siberia during Stalin's revenge on the *кулаки* (wealthy peasants). I felt her loneliness as she raised two daughters by herself, poor, unprotected, with her Chuvash roots and her permanent accent that she could never fully hide. I thought of my grandmother, who kept a straight, friendly face while speaking in fluent German to the handsome Nazi soldiers who invaded her village. I thought of her helplessness when her husband kicked her shins with his policeman's steel-toed boots, in his drunken stupor. I thought of her humiliation when she met his second wife, and her desperation in plotting her escape with her three children from the male-dominated Muslim culture of Kazakhstan. I thought of her sacrifice and her courage. I saw my mother. I felt her repulsion at the perestroika-life, which offered no hope. Every day we struggled to survive on my mother's small income and my grandmother's tiny pension. Sometimes we ate potatoes for weeks on end and nothing else. I was always sick, always in hospitals for stomachaches, infections, or the flu. We had barely any heat, barely any furniture or clothes, barely any life at all. So how could I blame my mother for being so angry that night? So angry that she was in a trance; she didn't even realize that I was there, this little girl, carrying all our luggage and keeping back tears of fear.

We eventually hitched a ride with a strange man in a small car with a large St. Bernard in the back seat. He drove us back to Yuzhnoukrainsk, where we were dropped off at my father's building and had to spend the night in the quarters of the *дежурная* because my father, once again, was not expecting our return and could not hear our desperate midnight knocks at the door.

III. The Education

September 1st was always the first day of school and, therefore, the most important day in a Soviet child's life. That day, I would begin the first grade and meet my new teacher. I had my standard brown uniform, which all Soviet children had to wear, consisting of a long-sleeved shirt, skirt and a smock. School uniforms in the Soviet Union were mandatory, and I could have been penalized for not following the rules. On special occasions, like the first day of school, the standard black smock was replaced with one made of white lace and the brown uniform was accented with a white lace collar, cuffs, white stockings and hair ribbons. With my backpack ready and a large bouquet of flowers in hand to present to my teacher, I started marching towards the school with my grandmother. There was a formal ceremony in the courtyard, we were lined up by grade, and then the first-year students were separated into their respective classes. I met our teacher, Viktoriya Vladimirovna, who was young and had a soft, kind demeanor. As she was a recent graduate of the pedagogical school, our class was her first set of students, and so this school year was a new journey both for her and for us.

The school was a three-story building which had been converted into a military hospital during World War II and for this reason had all sorts of secret stairwells and unseen rooms inside. The school's windows were tall and bright, outlined with white lace curtains, through which views of the city and its parks full of tall poplar trees could be seen. Its dark red paint and tall white columns and white window frames all served to enhance the school's regal look. Inside, the classrooms were decorated with rows and rows of beautiful, lacquered desks and shiny linoleum floors, large black chalkboards and bouquets of fresh flowers on each teacher's desk.

My favorite classroom was always the chemistry room, with its heavy wooden cases, stuffed with hard-bound books and sets of empty glass flasks and test tubes. Portraits of the famous Russian scientists Lomonosov and Mendeleev hung on the wall, along with the periodic table (which Mendeleev invented), printed on paper that had faded to yellow. The school seemed to have a majestic elegance to it that no one saw but me, and this made me love it even more. Our school had the title of *School #1* (versus the only other school in the city, *School #2*) and this standardization continued to the name of our class; we were *Grade 1, Class D*. There were a total of five classes in first grade this year, each having its own letter. In *Class D*, there were 31 students grouped together based on the professions of their parents. It was believed that such groupings would help children learn better, yet it also seems likely that it was a tactic by the government to sort children into their respective social classes as young as possible, separating the workers, intellectuals, and government elites, and to promote an unspoken caste system and, thus, social stability within the Soviet Union. Our class, however, was made up of all the miscellaneous professions that could not be grouped into one exclusive category. Our parents were artists and candy factory workers and

nurses. Ironically, it was our class of “misfits” that had the highest marks in our grade over the next four years, showing that diversity could foster excellence.

I used to sit at a wooden desk in the front row of our classroom, which was designed to seat two students. Next to me sat a blonde boy named Sasha. Another ritual of the Soviet school system was to pair the children into boy and girl couples, who had to sit next to each other from first grade through eleventh grade. This practice officially sought to develop camaraderie and minimize distraction (it was thought that girls being seated next to girls would cause too many giggles, while boys next to boys would cause roughhousing and misbehavior). There were eleven grades in the Soviet Union, but no fourth grade. The fourth-grade curriculum was deemed too similar to the curriculum of the fifth through seventh grades and was therefore deleted. *А нулевой класс* (grade zero), essentially another year of kindergarten, was then added in for six-year-olds. While this odd restructuring was somewhat controversial, the system is still used today in Ukraine and Russia.

I was seated in front because I had tested highly in reading and mathematics. Thus, the Soviet schools were able to ignore the less gifted children in the back of the classroom and focus on the children with high academic potential in the front. Yet this created even less motivation for the slower students to keep up, and when they fell behind, they were punished: by being slapped on the hands with rulers; by being made to stand in the corners on their knees, facing the wall; by being asked to leave the classroom altogether. Any divergence from the accepted conventions of student behavior was mocked, punished and corrected. A girl sitting near me, at another desk, wrote with her left hand. The teacher noticed this and forced her to write every lesson with her right hand. It took her much longer to finish, and she was scored low because her penmanship suffered, which was also part of the grade. I was learning that to be different was bad and that all attempts to fit in and excel should be made.

Despite these archaic traditions and rules, I enjoyed being at school and savored every moment of learning. I watched Viktoriya Vladimirovna writing words and phrases on the chalkboard. They were about our Motherland, our "Uncle Lenin" and our glorious, patriotic school. I can still to this day smell the dry aroma of that chalk. There was a map on the wall, but it only showed the Soviet Union and its neighboring republics. I looked forward to physical fitness, where we lined up in rows like soldiers and completed our daily calisthenics.

These exercises, along with other strange rituals, were a regular part of a Soviet child's life. In *детский сад* (kindergarten), we children used to stand in a circle, wearing only our underwear and goggles, in front of a quartz lamp for several minutes per day during the winter months. This was considered essential for avoiding Vitamin D deficiency due to lack of sun in the winter. Ukraine was located in the southern part of the Soviet Union, with plenty of sunlight in the winter – yet breaking this ritual would mean

breaking the standardization of the system. So each child in the Soviet Union, from Leningrad to Vladivostok, no matter what, had to stand in front of those quartz lamps, had to wear the school uniforms, had to recite poems about Lenin and write with their right hand. Even at such a young age, I began to realize that I lived in a country filled with contradictions, where people were encouraged to excel in school and work, while at the same time they were expected to conform and be equal with everyone else.

IV. The Little Red Star

I remember standing in the main hallway of our school, lined up behind my classmates. It was the fall of 1991, and I had started second grade. We were all wearing our uniforms, and today all the girls were wearing the token white smocks and white ribbons. That day was a special day for us: we would be awarded tiny red star pins with Lenin's image on them. We would recite our mission and promise to be "*Всегда готов!*" ("Always ready!"), then we would officially become *Октябрёнки* (Octobers), the first level of the Young Pioneer Organization of the Soviet Union. It was the first step towards becoming a Communist Party member. (Although membership was not officially mandatory, it was an unstated rule that each child had to belong to the Pioneer Organization.)

Yet continuing with that tradition of the Lenin pins was soon proved futile. Later that same year, we watched the political coup on television and Boris Yeltsin at the Kremlin wall. We watched 70 years of socialist power dissolve, and, along with the rest of the world, were shocked that in seven days a self-proclaimed global power and economic giant was crushed.

On the day I received my pin, I felt pride. Perhaps it was my naïveté and constant praise-seeking, but I felt good about belonging to something greater than myself. Since religion was officially banned in the Soviet Union, I grew up not having a sense of belonging to a spiritual organization. The Communist Party was supposed to provide that spiritual purpose for the Soviet people. I knew that the Party held great power in our country; I could see proof of it everywhere. Our school was decorated with portraits of Lenin, with red flags, with sickle and hammer emblems brazened onto the iron fences surrounding the school grounds. Our town square, like most small Soviet cities, housed a large marble statue of Lenin, where I had cut my forehead while playing on the steps at the age of four. I still have a scar from that cut. I call it my Lenin scar.

Besides the obvious iconography of socialism, it was also promoted through national holidays. The calendar year always began with celebrating *Новый Год* (New Year), followed by Soviet Army Day on February 23rd and International Women's Day on March 8th, celebrating our army and the mothers of the USSR. Then there was May 1st which commemorated international labor movements with International Worker's Day. On this day, everyone cleaned the streets and retouched the paint on benches and

buildings in their neighborhoods and places of work. On May 9th, Soviet Victory Day emphasized our victory in WWII. Two more holidays in the fall, USSR Constitution Day (October 7th) and Great October Social Revolution Day (November 7th), reminded us of the socialist movement and the importance of our government.

In the fall, the school used to organize Pioneer Youth excursions in which the entire school marched to the city's *ставок* (small water basin), where we held picnics and games and socialism was promoted. The students brought packed lunches from home. In true Soviet fashion, my grandmother used to pack for me boiled potatoes, boiled eggs, a fresh cucumber, crusty black bread, and a matchbox with salt. Many patriotic songs, poems and our Pioneer Code—which listed the first rule as a vow of loyalty to the Homeland, the Party, and Communism—were recited. I adored these picnics, but didn't care much for the socialist propaganda. I just enjoyed being out-of-doors, and it is these memories of nature that I now cherish the most.

I can still smell the burning leaves from the warm campfire and the sweet aroma of the huge bouquets of lilacs that we made in Ukraine.

V. The Neighborhood

Behind the five-story white stone building where I used to live, which held about one hundred identical flats and tiny Soviet families, there was a park that we called *скверик* (little park). That park was just one of millions that were popping up all over the Soviet Union. Developed during the Brezhnev era to bolster the concrete block housing projects, those parks and playgrounds became even more popular in the early 1980s due to a small baby boom in the Soviet Union. This boom was caused by government-issued financial incentives for parents to have more children in order to increase the country's population. As a result, I grew up with dozens of children my age.

Every weekend, children with their parents gathered on the *детская площадка* (children's playground), or what we also called *наш двор* (our yard). The one in my neighborhood included a water fountain that looked more like a swimming pool, with weeping willows planted around the edges. There were two sandboxes, with large-grained sand, which were refilled weekly by a large industrial truck. There was an outdoor theater, with a large white board for the screen and a projector table in the middle hoisted up on a cement column. Every week, a projectionist show film-strips of cartoons to the children.

There was a cartoon called *Домовёнок Кузя* (Kuzya the Little House Spirit), about a *домовой* (house spirit) from ancient Russian mythology who lives with a modern Soviet family in their modern Soviet apartment. As these mythical spirits were prominent in Russian folklore, well-known to Russians, and because of Kuzya's approachable demeanor, this cartoon was a favorite of many Soviet children. Kuzya is only a baby

house spirit, so the mischievous messes he leaves behind are innocent and forgivable. He serves as a secret companion to a little girl named Natasha, who lives in a regular Soviet flat with her family.

Another cartoon, *Карлсон* (Karlsson), was a Swedish story about a mischievous, chunky man who lives on the roof of a regular apartment building in Stockholm and is a playmate of a little boy named Lillebror (which means "little brother" in Swedish). Karlsson can also fly by touching a button on his stomach, making the fan on his hat turn into a rotor.

It surprises me now that a foreign cartoon about an authority-shirking man received such popularity in the Soviet Union, but it wasn't uncommon to promote international literature and media in the country. However, heavy government censorship was also applied, as most books and children's films were first reviewed for the appropriateness of content and then translated into the Russian language, often with the character's names and places changed to more Russian-sounding versions and any offensive parts removed or reworked before circulation. For example, in *Волшебник Изумрудного города* (The Wizard of Emerald City), a Russian re-telling of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* by L. Frank Baum, Dorothy's name was changed to Ellie and her dog became Totoshka. Our little *скверик* was designed with themes from this story, and statues of all the characters along with wooden children's slides and story boards were placed in different sections of the park.

After *perestroika*, this park, along with other children's playgrounds, became neglected because the local government no longer had funds to support these public projects. The sandboxes gradually emptied, the fountain dried up, and much of the playground equipment, fences, rails, and benches were stolen. All that remains in these parks now are some of the cement statues. The good witch Villina and the Tin Woodsman are still standing; Ellie and Totoshka, made out of wood and more easily appropriated for other uses, are long gone. And gone with them are also the warm, peaceful nights of playing in the yard as colorful cartoons scrolled in the amphitheater and children's squealing laughter pierced the air, as they ran around the fountain and built fairy-tale castles in the sand.

VI. The Goodbye

I was ten years old when I arrived in Moscow for the first time. Tired and cold, I was being pulled by my mother along the platform of the Paveletskaya Train Station on a windy day in May. We came to Moscow to pick up our visas and plane tickets and fly away to a land called America. I had never even seen it on a map, and so my only impressions of America were based on dubbed California soap operas that I used to see on television. My mother was going there to reunite with her new American husband,

making her part of the mail-order bride stereotype of East European women marrying Western men.

After the fall of the Soviet Union, life in Ukraine had become incredibly difficult. When Ukraine was declared an independent democratic state in 1991 and elected Leonid Kravchuk as the first president, the transition at first seemed smooth and barely noticeable. Schools still taught nearly the same curriculum, and the only difference seemed to be the removal of school uniforms. Yet, slowly, the negative economic and social effects of this newly declared independence started to show. Recession hit the country hard, and Ukraine lost 60 percent of its GDP from 1991 to 1999 with five-digit inflation rates. What this meant in a more practical sense was that people's entire savings and retirement accounts were almost instantly reduced to nothing. Food and consumer goods became scarce, and long lines formed at stores for the most basic items such as bread, milk and toilet paper. The currency became so devalued that it took a stack of 10,000 rubles to buy one candy bar. Many workplaces could not pay wages for their employees, giving them IOU notes instead. This led to many strikes, increased crime, and encouraged corruption. This in turn caused many to lose all hope for the future as more people became depressed, even suicidal, and alcoholism increased like never before. The younger generations also faced a bleak future—with the government no longer subsidizing higher education and a lack of job opportunities, many young people started *спиваться* (to fall to drink). Alcoholism, crime, and corruption are all still major problems in both Ukraine and Russia, crippling the countries' economies and the people's morale.

In the midst of this chaos, my mother had found a dating/job agency somewhere in Lugansk, formerly Voroshilovgrad, and signed up to be included in their catalogue. She received a list of foreign men who were interested in writing to her. She wrote many letters to her top picks until only two remained. To the man who would become my step-father she wrote for two years, spending hours bent over the Russian-English dictionary, meticulously translating his every letter and composing responses. We received random packages from him during that period; in his packets were things I had never seen before, such as instant ramen noodles, bottles of ketchup and stereogram calendars. He finally came to visit us in Ukraine in November 1993 and married my mother at our local courthouse. Now that the borders were open and my mother was married to an American, it was time to leave the country. I finished out the fifth grade school year, letting neither my teachers nor my classmates know of our plan to move away. My mother wanted to keep it a complete secret, in case someone plotted to rob us during our trip. I remember her intense paranoia at that time; she kept her wedding ring set hidden inside the hollow part of our curtain rod in the living room instead of wearing it on her finger. Such precautions became necessary from that point on in post-Soviet Ukraine. Before our departure, I also collected the addresses and telephone numbers of all my classmates and neighborhood friends under the pretense that I was making an address book for myself. They had no idea that I was saying goodbye to them

and that I would use the information to send them “Greetings from Florida!” postcards and clippings from Teen Bop magazines over the next few years.

So when my mother and I arrived in Moscow, it was our last stop before our final departure. As we sped across the platform, I looked up and got a quick glimpse of “МОСКВА” monolithically printed on a sign positioned on the roof of the ticket building. It seemed to be intimidating its arrivals. We continued walking and a man around my mother’s age came up to us, smiling with a bouquet of flowers. His name was Viktor Doroshenko and he was my mother’s old art school classmate. He had agreed to let us stay with him while my mother finalized our documents at the US embassy. As is the Russian custom, he kissed my mother on the cheek, gave me a quick hug and took our bags. He led us out of the train station. We went through underground tunnels beneath the busy streets of Moscow, passing dozens of kiosks filled with all sorts of *безделушки* (items of low value)—small, cheap children’s toys, hair accessories, fresh flowers, kitchenware. I was overwhelmed with the sight of all the stores and people; I was used to small cities and empty streets. Viktor took us to his apartment in the eastern residential blocks of Moscow, where he lived with his wife and twin newborn daughters in a one-room flat. From there, on the 15th floor, I peeked out of his kitchen window to view the metropolis below: the cars, the numerous playgrounds, and crowds of people. We spent two weeks in Moscow, sleeping on a pullout couch in the kitchen, while my mother dragged me to the embassy almost daily in hopes of getting our visa approved and glued in our passports. I did not understand why the process took so long. My mother didn’t tell me much, because she was again in some sort of trance.

We spent some of the days sight-seeing. We walked around Red Square and went on rides at Gorky Park, and we even stopped by a McDonald’s, where I quite literally got my first taste of the West. I knew that Moscow was my final farewell both to my childhood in Ukraine and to being surrounded by the Russian culture and language that I was brought up with. This made the city seem gloomy and bleak to me; its gray and monotone buildings reflected the sadness and fear that I felt. For my mother, this farewell had been a long-sought escape. She whispered two words as our plane took off at Sheremetyevo Airport: “Прощай, Москва” (“Farewell, Moscow”). She explained to me later that this word—*Москва*—entailed for her everything painful that she had experienced in her life during the Soviet Union. It was all grouped into one tragic memory in her mind. I remember watching the city disappear behind the clouds as my life was disappearing into the mysterious abyss of the Western world. My mother then became my only link to the home we were leaving behind.

VII. New Year’s Eve

I was nineteen years old on the last night of 2002. I was standing next to that large marble statue of Lenin located in the middle of my childhood city, Lutugino. I had been away for nearly ten years and as I watched the crowd gathering in the square for the

night's New Year's Eve concert, I was filled only with happiness. I did not realize how much I missed everything about that city until I was there again, among the familiar faces of my relatives and friends, among the language and the familiar food, customs and way of life. My mother and I decided to travel back together; she had become a US citizen in 2000 and since I was then a minor, I was naturalized automatically. We were no longer citizens of Ukraine and now had to wait for our US passports to be issued and then for the travel visas to be approved before we could enter Ukraine. Once we received all the paperwork, we were finally able to book our flight to spend a month in Ukraine for the winter holidays.

Upon our arrival in Lutugino, I was startled by the relative smallness of the buildings and hallways, partly because I myself had grown taller and partly because I had become used to the relatively large, spacious rooms and buildings of Florida. The streets in Lutugino had become unkempt, paint on buildings and inside hallways was faded and chipped, rails on staircases were rusty and bent, benches were collapsed or missing. These defects had already started to show during perestroika and only grew worse over the years of my absence. I also noticed bars on windows of first-floor flats and that many had installed a second entrance door as a precaution against robberies. I spent some days walking around the city and taking photographs of some of the city's landmarks, like the WWII tank memorial and the obelisk for the fallen soldiers. I went to visit my school and found my former teachers, who loved hearing about my life in America. I was very happy to find some of my childhood friends; some I found by going to their old addresses, where most of them still lived with their parents, and some I found at their jobs. My father came on a train and we spent many days strolling around the city and through the bazaars, arm in arm, just like we did that summer in Yuzhnoukrainsk, and then we would visit his mother, who would always try to overfeed us with her Russian soups and breads.

On that New Year's Eve, I found myself standing outside on the town square in the midst of a light snowfall. New Year celebrations are still very important in Ukraine and are usually rowdy but fun. This holiday is usually celebrated at home, with one long table set for relatives, friends and neighbors and topped with all sorts of dishes, hearty salads and of course, the traditional bottle of vodka. Children receive presents from Father Frost, the Russian version of Santa Claus, and adults also exchange gifts.

That night, the city officials of Lutugino had planned an outdoor show complete with a folk music performance, speeches by local dignitaries and a fireworks show. The entire event took place on a stage in front of Lutugino's *Дом Культуры* (House of Culture), a Soviet-created institution with reading and chess rooms, gymnastics/dance studios, and large auditoriums. My mother and I watched and videotaped the entire show. Then the newly-elected mayor made a grand speech and invited the audience to a van that served one free shot of vodka to each person.

As the crowd turned and raced toward the van, my mother found an old friend, Rosa, and I scanned the faces in the crowd for former classmates and friends. It was difficult to imagine what the faces of those ten-year-olds might look like so many years later, but I kept searching anyway. And then out of the corner of my eye I saw a face I recognized in an instant. It was Sasha, the boy I sat next to for four years of school. Although I was excited by my discovery, I was reluctant to approach him. My mom's friend Rosa, after realizing the significance of the tall blond I seemed to be avoiding, pulled me towards him and his circle of friends. She boldly tapped him on the shoulder and asked him if his name was Sasha and if he recognized me. He stared down at me with a confused, slightly drunken expression. I removed my winter hat. Suddenly, a wave of recognition hit him and a half-smile appeared on his face. I was pleased that he remembered me.

We stood in the middle of the square, talking and smiling. I discovered that he was working as a *горный мастер* (coal miner), which surprised me, considering that he had once been at the top of his class. We talked until the crowd thinned, my mother and her friend went home, and his friends also gradually disappeared. We were left alone in the wintry street. I still could not believe that the little boy from my school days had grown into this tall, serious man. He led me up a hill towards the apartment blocks of Victory Square and into the enclosure of his friend's flat. We went inside, where his circle of friends, a mix of girls and guys my age, was continuing the New Year's Eve celebration with half-empty bottles of alcohol. Being only nineteen then, I declined offers of vodka and champagne from Sasha's friends and they glared at me with quizzical looks, not comprehending how I could refuse and I likewise could not comprehend why my refusal offended them.

We sat on brightly colored couches, with carpets decorating the walls, ate salads from the table, and watched the annual *Песня Года* (Song of the Year) program on television. Everyone was talking and laughing. I took out a small photo album that I carried with me and showed photos of my life in America: my senior year of high school, filled with dance team performances, pep rallies, homecoming parades, school dances, trips to the beach, and graduation. In these photos were girls dressed in colorful sundresses, with big smiles, standing against the background of Florida palm trees and sandy beaches. I became conscious of the looks I was receiving from my audience and was a bit embarrassed that I had unintentionally come across as bragging about my American life. I grew quieter and looked down at Sasha's hands, his fingers stained and rough from the coal of the mine that entrapped him every day. His eyelids were singed from the powder of this rock, yet his soft blue eyes were smiling kindly from what I could only guess to be happiness at my unexpected appearance on that night. Everyone kept talking through the night, and I kept listening, until the light of dawn began to creep in through the windows.

The following day I went to Lugansk with Sasha and his friends, a city which was now filled with Western stores and products. We took a *маршрутка* (shuttle bus) to get

there, which cost about five Ukrainian *хривня* (*hryvnia*), equal to about one dollar, and Sasha insisted on paying for me. His male chauvinism partially offended me, because I was used to paying for myself and also perhaps because I secretly wanted to flaunt my money. My refusal to accept his payment offended him, too.

On some nights we went to local bars; some were in the basements of residential buildings, and one was inside an abandoned movie theater. These bars had random names, like *Зелёный Попугай* (The Green Parrot) or *Три Девятки* (The Three Nines), and inside there were small tables covered in smoky, dim light. I met some girls from my neighborhood: some of them were at universities in Lugansk, others were working in retail or as waitresses with no career in mind, and some had already become wives and mothers. While I sat in these underground bars with them, I wondered what my life would have been like if I had never moved away. Would it have been like theirs? Most of these girls were now smoking and parading in four-inch stiletto-heeled boots and bright fur coats. There was something intimidating in their lifestyles, as they seemed to have matured much earlier than me, but also something tragic because they didn't have the opportunities that I often now take for granted.

My mother and I were at the Kiev airport in mid-January. We were flying back to the US. We walked through the security check and were rushed aside because of a can of mace spray that I forgot to remove from my purse. The airport manager hovered over us as his eyes shone brightly in expectation of a bribe. My mother was calm and well-spoken—she was used to the audacity of these types of officials. We ended up giving him a twenty-dollar bill. The bureaucrat took the money, shrugged his shoulders in disappointment, and told us that he would toast us over a bottle of vodka. I didn't know whether to be angry at such blatant corruption or to pity this man whose low pay degraded him to harassing foreigners for money. After buying a few *матрёшки* (wooden dolls) and lacquered jewelry boxes at the airport, we got on a plane and headed back to Florida.

This was the end of my journey to Ukraine. The trip changed all my previous perceptions about Ukraine, and the experience of being there again affected me in an unexpected way. I had expected everything to still be the way it was under socialism, heavily structured and government-controlled. I had not anticipated seeing Western stores in my home city or Western clothing worn by my childhood friends, or seeing them in their adult lives. I suddenly wanted to learn more about this new post-Soviet existence and to experience more of it.

VIII. Studies in Moscow

I was walking into a sixteen-story Soviet-built dormitory building in the center of Moscow which housed students from various business schools in the city. It was a warm afternoon in August 2004, and I had just arrived from Sheremetyevo Airport, along with

my over-packed luggage. After my winter visit to Ukraine and its strong impression on me, I had decided to participate in the study abroad program at my university and to spend a semester living and studying in Moscow. I was met at the airport by a young guide from the exchange program, who helped me get to the dorms via shuttle bus and taxi. As we were driving through the city, I caught glimpses of street banners congratulating Moscow on the 857th anniversary of its official founding. The streets were packed almost shoulder-to-shoulder with pedestrians. This was a different Moscow than the one I remembered—this Moscow was sunny, bright, and colorful. We arrived at the dorms and my guide helped me to cram three large suitcases into a typical Soviet *лифт* (elevator), which we took to the third floor. We rang the bell and waited for the double doors to be opened by the woman guarding the floor, the *дежурная*.

I left my luggage in my room, and after obtaining some information from the guide about where to exchange money and where to buy a metro pass, I headed outside alone towards the closest shopping center, located near the Paveletskaya metro station, near the train station of the same name where I had first arrived in Moscow as a child. I was in awe of the city's elegance and grandeur. I realized that in the years that had passed since I was last in Moscow, it had grown into the strong economic center of the Russian Federation. Currently, in 2011, with 10.5 million residents, it is no surprise that Moscow is one of Europe's largest city economies. It comprises 24% of the total Russian GDP. In 2004, it was named the most expensive city in the world and held that title for most of the years following. Moscow had re-invented itself as a cultural, business and fashion center and now housed major international retail stores, hotels, and restaurants and hundreds of exclusive nightclubs, bars, and spas. Many of the consumer products and services which were non-existent during the Soviet Union or limited only to top officials were now available to the public. Seeing this drastic change in 2004 both surprised and pleased me.

Later that day, I met the rest of the foreign exchange students from my floor and we went out on the town in the evening. We ate at the McDonald's across from the Dobryninskaya metro station near the dorms, then moved to a small bar next door and spent the rest of the night chatting, sharing stories about our student lives, and drinking at a long table, covered with glasses of Pepsi, mugs of Heineken beer and bottles of Smirnoff Ice. It was ironic to me that my first night in Moscow was spent with non-Russian students, speaking English and enjoying Western food and drinks, where even the vodka was a Swedish import. Yet that night I also realized that the city was amazingly international and that my stay in Moscow would be even more spectacular than I imagined. As I fell asleep that night in my little dorm room, listening to the sounds of the city from the half-opened window, I smiled and looked forward to rediscovering the city, and with it my understanding of this new Russia.

IX. Retail Moscow

I walked out of a metro station and didn't know exactly what part of Moscow I was in, but I did know that there was a bookstore nearby that I wanted to find. After having been in the city for a few weeks, I was now spending my days like the rest of the foreign exchange students, browsing Russian bazaars, sitting in Cafemax Internet cafés drinking bitter cappuccinos, watching Western films and sitcoms with tolerable dubbing and Russian MTV on the dorm television set with foil paper on the antennae. We ate meals of bread and cheese. I was getting used to seeing the heavy Western influence on Russian culture not only in the TV programs, but also in the music, the fashion and the food. At night, we escaped into the city's night life. We dressed up in high heels and black wool coats, crammed 500 rubles in our pockets, and set off into the city in taxis. We went to clubs like Infiniti, Club First near Red Square, Boarhouse, and Propaganda. We paid cover charges, checked our coats at the door, watched the go-go dancers, took dozens of pictures, and paid \$10 for Red Bull and vodka. On nights like that, surrounded by Western Europeans and other Americans, it was hard for me to remember that I was actually in Russia.

I found the bookstore that I was looking for on the corner of a busy street. The store was a two-story building, and inside it resembled the more Western models of retailing. There were dozens of tables filled with useless knick-knacks that sold for 100 rubles apiece which crowded the passageways of the store. 100 rubles was worth about four dollars in 2004, but was the standard price for useless junk in Moscow. I went to the children's books first, as I always do. I browsed through colorful pages of *Buratino* (a Russified version of *Pinocchio*) and *Ivan Duratchok* (about the adventures of simple but moral Ivan and his two less virtuous brothers). I have made it a habit to buy at least one hard-cover illustrated children's book in every city that I visit. I still have that love for reading and literature instilled in me from my days in the Soviet schools. So I bought a couple of books then and made my way out of the store.

While that experience was tame, shopping in Moscow could often be intimidating, especially in the crowded outdoor bazaars. There, gypsies and Central Asian merchants manipulated the shoppers by harassing them into purchasing items, inflating the price, and exaggerating the quality of the goods. Once they determined you were a foreigner, from your language and clothing, they pulled you into their clothing tents and tried to intimidate you into buying their products. This happened to me while looking for a pair of jeans. Before I knew it, I was in a dressing room, consisting of a curtain hanging across a corner, and jeans of all sorts of colors and brands were produced for me. When I said I didn't want to buy any of them, it was even harder to leave the tent, as the seller stood right between me and the exit. My French roommate, who was with me, finally pulled me out of there, with some pushing and shoving and without saying a word. After that experience, I only went to these bazaars with large groups of friends and did not linger inside the tents.

I remember going to the Izmailovskiy Souvenir Market, which was Russian fairy-tale themed. The decorative woodwork was incredible in itself, but the objects for sale also added to the delightful charm of the market. I had never seen anything like it – there were tables filled with brand new, shiny lacquered *матрёшка* sets, selling for anywhere from \$20 to \$1,000. There were stands with jewelry boxes and decorated eggs, large hand-carved chess sets and amber jewelry. There were stands filled with Russian fur hats and muffs and fur coats of all sorts and colors. There were artists lined up in one row, some drawing caricatures, others selling landscape and still life paintings. Then there were rows of Soviet memorabilia—authentic Soviet Army uniforms and medals, Communist propaganda posters and Lenin pins, even old Soviet appliances. These items had now become a novelty for Western tourists.

I also went to Okhotny Ryad, which had offered three stories of underground shopping since 1997, right next to Red Square. This more "democratically priced" mall supplemented the more glamorous ГУМ (Главный Универсальный Магазин, or "Main Department Store") that ran parallel to the Kremlin wall, held four stories of high-end Western stores and had traditionally been the main shopping center of Moscow.

The interesting thing about Moscow was that despite being so expensive, there were ways to live economically by choosing where and on what to spend your money. As students with limited budgets and no jobs, we eventually learned the tricks to getting cheap products and services anywhere we possibly could. We learned that taking "gypsy cabs" was often cheaper than the official taxis, and that Stolichnaya vodka and Sovetsoye Shampanskoye at the corner shop were much cheaper than equivalents at the Western groceries. We discovered Gorbushka, an electronics store filled with cheap pirated DVDs, and many small *рынки* (markets) that sold cheap counterfeit items. We knew where the cheapest Internet cafés were, which bars had four-for-one drinks, how to get into clubs without paying the cover, and how to haggle taxi drivers and market merchants for still lower prices. While officially very expensive, in practice Moscow could be quite affordable, although often this entailed not entirely legal means of procurement.

X. The Train

I had decided to go visit my family and friends in Ukraine towards the end of September. I spent a month waiting for my student visa to be converted from a single-entry visa (the standard issue for foreign students) to a multiple-entry visa so that I could leave and re-enter Russia without immigration problems. After finally receiving the visa, I flew towards the train station to buy my round-trip ticket. I was stopped by a police officer standing at the entrance to the station and was asked to show my documents. This was not uncommon; many students in our dorms had been stopped during these random checks. Not having your paperwork on you would be a reason for the police to threaten to take you to the police station and, in order to avoid that situation, one would be

forced to give them a bribe. I was already becoming somewhat jaded to this corruption, as just last week, our taxi was pulled over while we were returning to the dorms from a night on the town and the police blatantly demanded a bribe because one of us was missing paperwork. My document check at the train station ended with some jest about Americans, and I walked away. I bought my ticket for the next day and went back to the dorms to pack.

It was September 19th and I realized that I was standing on the same train station platform where, ten years earlier, I had dragged behind my mother as a scared, confused little girl. I saw that same word “MOSKVA” on the roof sign, but it was now lit up with a bright white color against the solid black sky. It now reminded me of the casino signs of Vegas, of nightlife and of freedom. I got on the train and found my *coupé* (a closed cabin with four bunks). I put my things away in accordance with the advice given to me by all the Russian people I knew. I had all my large bills stuffed into my socks, my suitcase was underneath my sleeping bunk, and my purse remained under my pillow so that I would sleep on top of it during the trip. Again, these precautions were exhausting, but necessary. I sat and waited for the other three passengers to arrive. They turned out to be a young Russian woman my age and two Chechen middle-aged men. When the train took off, the two men disappeared to another cabin, where the rest of their friends were celebrating. The girl, I found out, was named Lena and was travelling home to Krasnyi Luch, a city a bit further south than Lutugino. I told her about my studies in Moscow and about my childhood in Ukraine and my trip there two years ago, and she seemed touched by the nostalgic elements of my story. Hours later, the Chechen men returned, reeking of alcohol. They offered us *печенье* (dessert cookies) and slices of *колбаса* (bologna sausage), we denied their offers, and they got offended and started moving closer to us. Then, the train suddenly stopped and voices filled the corridor. The female conductor opened the door, immediately saw the awkward situation, reprimanded the men for their harassing behavior, and told us all to get our documents ready for border patrol.

Two border patrol officers were standing in the narrow doorway of the train compartment and reviewing our documents. Someone made a comment about my American passport, and the young male officer asked me if I liked living in the States and jokingly asked if I would marry him and take him with me to America. I was pleased that he had a sense of humor.

The Chechen men protested against questions from the officers about the reason for their stay in Moscow. They were told to pack their things and to leave the train immediately. One of the men became angry, shouting profanities at the officers and calling them racists. The whole scene started and ended in less than five minutes, as more male officers got on the train and dragged their whole group off. The Beslan school massacre had just occurred that month in North Ossetia, where hundreds of Russian children with their teachers and parents were held hostage by Chechen

terrorists inside a school for three days, leading to 331 casualties. The reports of the massacre were constantly being scrolled on television along with reports of random bombings. People were in fear of metro terrorist attacks and bombings on buses and in apartment buildings. Most of the attacks were by Chechen rebels who were fighting against the policies of the Russian government, an ethnic struggle that had existed for centuries between the two groups.

The whole experience reminded me of the state of the American people after September 11th: the same paranoia, similar political arguments and the same search for a scapegoat. I looked out of the dusty window of the train and saw the Chechen men walking along the platform, escorted by the Russian police and border patrol officers. I imagined that they were probably being taken to be interrogated and then eventually released after paying a sufficient bribe. Yet their removal was still a relief to me, because their harassing behavior could have gotten much worse. I looked over at Lena and saw her smiling to herself.

The next afternoon, I stepped off the train and I was in Lugansk. I saw the arched roof of the train station. The air was warm and smelled of fresh grass and dry dirt. I felt at peace – I was home.

XI. The Dacha

A middle-aged, overweight taxi driver was sitting behind the wheel of an old *Москвич* (a brand of car from the Soviet Union), driving me into the outskirts of Lutugino. I was hiding my JanSport backpack, not talking much, trying to hide my identity. I hadn't seen the city in warm months in many years, so I smiled as I saw green trees and tall grass, wild flowers on the side of the road, and long, decorative concrete fences. The driver asked me which street to take towards my house. I had told him that I lived in Lutugino and studied in Moscow and that I was coming home for a few days. Since it was growing dusk and I did not know the names of the streets, I hesitated and told him that I was not sure where to turn. He looked at me funny and I was sure he realized then that I was not a local. He didn't say anything and kept driving until we got to the five-story disheveled building which housed my grandmother's flat, my former residence. I paid and tipped the driver. He asked for extra for driving me right to the door, so I paid him extra. I took my one suitcase out of the trunk and dragged it up the thirteen steps to the main door. I was relieved that this long, stressful trip from Moscow was over. I sighed with relief and felt tears in my eyes. I knocked on the door and smiled as I saw an old woman, as small as a child, open the door and release the familiar smells of a warm Russian kitchen. I grabbed my *бабушка* and cried into her shoulder.

Hours later, I heard a knock and after hearing a deep voice through the door, I opened it to find Sasha standing there. We went for a walk around the city. After weeks of living in Moscow, there was a certain peacefulness and quietness in that small city. We passed

two-story peach colored buildings built before the Great War, still standing, still surviving, like the people of that little city. We walked to the lower park, what used to be the *Парк Культуры* (Culture Park) under the Soviet Union. The former outdoor *дискотека* (dance area), where in Soviet times young adults spent warm nights dancing, was still there, but the stage had fallen apart. Groups of young teenagers were sitting on benches there, smoking and drinking cheap beer out of tall cans.

We walked towards a little bar, which used to be an ice cream parlor; we ordered local beer in glass mugs and sat down at one of the outdoor plastic tables. We talked about what had happened in our lives over the past two years. I told him about my university courses and my studies in Moscow. I told him about my surprise 21st birthday party, which I had just celebrated in Moscow. I told him about how we danced at one of Moscow's elite clubs and how I had my first taste of alcohol. About how my French roommate left early because of a foot ache and I accompanied her, how we took a "private taxi" back to the dorms, how the driver attempted to lure us home with him and we had to leave the car immediately. How she hobbled and leaned on me, how a man walking a dog tried to help us and then stole her wallet out of her half-opened purse. How in just one night, my birthday night, I saw the best and worst of Moscow. He listened and laughed.

He told me about his work at the coal mine, how he got pneumonia from the cold dampness of the underground and spent a month in the hospital. How the management was holding back pay for the miners, and then how he was promoted to supervisor but with little pay increase and too much politics, so he went back to his position of physical labor. When I asked him about a strange, dark mark on the bridge of his nose, which looked like smeared eyeliner, he became self-conscious and then told me about a tunnel collapse at the mine, where a metal pipe had struck him in the face as the roof was collapsing and he nearly died. He spent another month in the hospital after the accident. He told me that he liked his job because of the friendships with his co-workers, and that he liked the city and had no intention of leaving it.

He invited me to go to his friend's family *дача* (summer house) the next day. His friend Igor brought a girl, Yulia, and I talked to her in the backseat of the car as we drove out of the city in Igor's red Volga. The site of all the dachas looked even more beautiful than I had remembered. We pulled up to a green metal fence, opened the latches and drove the car into the driveway next to a small, brick house. There was a large garden with fruit trees and tomato plants. There was a porch covered in grapevines with large bunches of wild, almost black grapes. Many Ukrainian families owned such dachas, which were usually built in clusters on the outskirts of cities near bodies of water and forests. People went there for long weekends and often lived there for weeks during the summer. We started the barbeque, and Yulia and I went inside to prepare the table. We drank wine, the guys gulped down shots of vodka, and we ate grilled chicken, joking, laughing and talking all night long.

The next day I took my little suitcase, said goodbye to my grandmother and took the overnight train back to Moscow.

XII. The Return

I finished out the semester in Moscow and returned to United States right before the Christmas holidays. I was profoundly impressed by Russia and Ukraine. I could no longer think of the two countries as socialist or backwards, because I had seen entrepreneurial cities buzzing with culture and business and life. I couldn't idolize them either, because I had seen first-hand the crime and corruption and poverty. I had come to my own understanding of these places.

After my studies in Moscow, I returned once more to Ukraine, in the early spring of 2008. I flew through Kiev and, stopping there for one day, set out to sightsee with my former Moscow dorm-mate, Milan. In the four years since our studies, he had graduated from a university in Paris and was now a production manager overseeing the Ukrainian branch of a European grocery chain. I was happy for his success and laughed at his many anecdotes about doing business in Ukraine. He took me around the shops and cafés on Khreshchatik, the main shopping street in Kiev. We visited some of the churches and took a ride on the metro before he dropped me off at the Borispol airport in his chauffeured, private car.

I flew to Lugansk on a small plane, whose engines and propellers made so much noise that I felt I was on a WWII bomber. I was met by my father at the airport, whose friend gave us a ride to Lutugino in his car. During my two-week visit, I saw friends, most of whom had small toddlers or newborns. I bought a prepaid cell phone, my first cell phone in Ukraine or Russia. That's when I realized the strong influence of social networking and mobile technology in Ukraine. Like many third-world countries, Ukraine's infrastructure was weak and phone lines in many areas were either damaged or non-existent. With the advent of mobile phones and wireless Internet, Ukrainian citizens no longer waited for landlines, but simply jumped to using mobile phones and WiFi. It was no longer people's mailing addresses being written down, but instead e-mail addresses, mobile phone numbers, ICQ and Skype names. It was much easier to make plans, I simply sent my friends text messages and we would decide where to go instantly.

Since that last trip, I have stayed in touch with my family and friends not only through e-mail and Skype, but also through the dozens of social networking sites now popular in Russia and Ukraine, such as *Вконтакте* ("InContact") and *Одноклассники* (Classmates). I share digital photos and videos and send instant messages to close friends who are far away, a convenience which was lacking in the 1990s when I first moved to the US. Now, with streaming video on news sites, streaming audio from internet radio, and file-sharing services, I have been able to stay up-to-date with current

Russian and Ukrainian news, popular music, new films and television programs. In this way, I feel connected to a culture that I had limited access to in previous years.

Staying connected also includes being aware of the problems facing Russia and Ukraine today. Although they share some problems, such as rampant corruption, terrorist attacks and weak infrastructures, their economic and political issues differ. Russia's main economic problems involve its dependence on commodity exports. Russia's federal government still heavily influences the private sector, and property rights lack adequate protection. Russia's workforce is also decreasing, while its political system remains controversial and some policies are seen as un-democratic. As Russia is moving forward, its economic conditions are gradually improving as the government plans to invest great sums to improve its outdated infrastructure. One of Ukraine's problems is that it depends on Russia for nearly all its energy resources. However, Ukraine's economy, although smaller than Russia's, is growing and its information technology market looks especially bright.

Both countries, as they move into the future, face difficult challenges. Yet it should not be forgotten that these countries, in less than a century, survived the imperial rule of monarchy, the socialist rule of the USSR, and a raucous conversion to more capitalist, Western forms of government. Such drastic shifts have made the people strong and resilient, marking their future with hope and promise. In my own future, I know that I will continue to return to both countries to pay tribute to these two places that will always be one in my mind—one home, one *родина*.

Luke Fidler is a senior in art history at Reed College. He is completing a thesis on the introduction of the elegy into the cinematic discourse of late/post-Soviet Russia and serves as an editorial intern at [ArtMargins](#). After graduation he hopes to study abroad in Russia to improve his language skills before pursuing graduate studies in the U.S.

The Conscript and the Commander:

The Pictorial Tradition in Sokurov's *Confession*

by Luke Fidler

In *Confession* [*Povinnost'*, 1998] Russian director Aleksandr Sokurov explores the world of post-Soviet naval service in a lengthy, made-for-television documentary. Marked by Sokurov's distinctive use of painterly cinematography, *Confession's* visual qualities distinguish it from typical examples of documentary film. Disavowing conventional narrative structures such as plot, easily comprehensible symbolism, and transparent social commentary, Sokurov constructs a deeply personal vision that challenges the viewer's patience. How, then, is *Confession* to be understood? Stepping back from traditional modes of film analysis and deploying analytic strategies more common to the field of art history, Sokurov's cinematography can be read productively in light of two paradigmatic traditions of image-making: the canon of Western painting from the Renaissance to the Baroque, and the constellation of artistic and spiritual impulses surrounding the Orthodox icon.[1]

Methodology

Precedents exist for this type of analysis. Thus, I will draw upon the methodologies and terminology already established by other authors. First, film scholar and art historian Alexander Nemerov has described the way that repeated frames of imagery interrupt a film's temporal flow.[2] Sokurov blurs the rhythm of *Confession* by returning time and time again to images that become recurrent motifs, burdened with meaning. Rather than reading these kinds of images as allegories concealing definitive meaning, I want to use Nemerov's analysis to understand these scenes as exemplifying the "antinarrative power of stasis," evoking the pictorial conventions of static art.[3] By lingering on, and repeating certain images, Sokurov asks the viewer to read them *as* images, halting the flow of the film.

Drawing on Nemerov's analytic framework, I will closely read two recurrent motifs in *Confession*. The first, the image of a contemplative conscript, asks exactly *what* Sokurov's camera represents—an actor, a character, or an aesthetic signifier? The second, the image of the commander peering out of the battleship's windows, exemplifies Sokurov's preoccupation with looking and blindness.

Additionally, film scholar Annette Michelson discusses the “transvaluation of pictorial values,” as present in Dziga Vertov’s *Three Songs of Lenin* [*Tri pesni o Lenine*, 1934], arguing that the early Russian film functioned as a modernist extension of the Orthodox icon.[4] *Three Songs of Lenin* constructs an iconostasis from images, arranging and augmenting documentary recordings of Lenin himself. These fragments of Lenin draw on the themes and conventions of still images, underscoring their relationship to the icon. Using Michelson’s analytical techniques, I will argue that the icon’s process of mediation provides a key to understanding the ontological function of these motifs in *Confession*.

By applying these methodologies to Sokurov’s film, I hope to come to a deeper understanding of the film and its objectives.

The Conscript

The term “documentary film” generally refers to a non-fiction film characterized by some sort of “creative shaping” of the reality it records.[5] Set on a Russian battleship, *Confession* is a documentary that follows young recruits, seasoned sailors, and their melancholy captain around the Arctic Circle. Sokurov breaks the film into five parts of fifty-two minutes to fit a television-broadcasting schedule. The parts are organized thematically rather than according to any teleological sequence. The fourth part, in which the first motif of my analysis is repeated several times, follows a group of new recruits, unused to the hardship of service at sea, and opens with the conscripts huddling together in the ship’s hold. Tired, hungry, and sick of travel, they sit in near total darkness before being ushered into cursory medical examinations.

Surrounded by the bowed heads and contemplative faces of his comrades, a conscript gazes off-camera, his hands clasped before him in a gesture reminiscent of prayer (Figure 1). Like his fellow conscripts, he has close-cropped dark hair, clean-shaven cheeks, and a youthful, masculine countenance. Like them, he huddles in a heavy overcoat. In the hold’s darkness, a single shaft of light illuminates the conscript, visually arresting the frame.



*Figure 1. The illuminated conscript. Confession (Povinnost').
DVD. Dir. Aleksandr Sokurov.
Chicago: Ideale Audience International, 2004.*

Sokurov, who has asserted in an interview that “the film image must be created according to the canons of painting,” thus uses theatrical lighting and a geometrically arresting composition to emphasize the image as a singular moment.[6] Formally, he invokes the violent chiaroscuro popularized by the Italian Baroque artist Caravaggio, who used light to endow dramatically staged paintings with metaphysical meaning. Sokurov employs similar methods of lighting and composition to transfigure the conscript into a locus of meaning through a strategy of aesthetics.

The Calling of Saint Matthew (Figure 2) supports this comparison and exemplifies the hallmarks of Caravaggio’s art. A strong beam of light illuminates a dark room, singling out the future apostle Matthew. The light picks out the details of Matthew’s spiritual squalor as he gambles and greedily counts his winnings, paradoxically prefiguring his sanctification and laying bare his faults. A manifestation of divine omniscience, the light both reveals and transforms, distinguishing Matthew from his companions.



Figure 2. Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio. The Calling of Saint Matthew. 1599-1600.
Oil on canvas. 322 x 340 cm. San Luigi dei Francesi, Rome, Italy.
Source: SCALA/Art Resource.

Similarly, Sokurov deploys this recurrent image of a frozen conscript to mark a point of transformation. In a concerted effort to break the wall of the image's autonomy, both Caravaggio and Sokurov use these moments of transformation to dramatize their authorial presence. Caravaggio often inserted self-reflexive moments into his paintings, slipping his own face into works and underscoring the theatricality of his compositions with plain backgrounds and harsh, contrived lighting. Similarly, a figure to the left of the

Sokurov's conscript gazes steadfastly at the camera. Film scholar Laura Rascaroli has described Sokurov himself as the “point of origin and of constant reference” in his documentaries, noting that the director consistently pares away the trappings of objectivity.[7] His framing of the conscript thus borrows stylistic conventions from the artists of the Baroque in order to cultivate an aesthetic of subjective experience, translating the pictorial elements of lighting and composition into a statement of filmic self-awareness.

Acknowledging his debt to another Old Master, Rembrandt van Rijn, Sokoruv enthuses that he could “bathe... endlessly” in the craft and artistry of painting.[8] Nevertheless, his relationship with the painting tradition goes beyond a simple appropriation of visual elements. He states, “I was always driven by visual aesthetics, aesthetics which connected to the spirituality of man,” drawing an explicit connection between the visual and the metaphysical, and the ability for images to affect the condition of the soul: whether to uplift or depress it.[9] Put simply, he pours meaning into the manner in which he depicts his subjects. How does he construct this meaning, and what are the ramifications for the reading of his films?

In an early scene in *Confession*, sailors come and go in the fog, (figure 3, below) dissolving into the driven snow while the ship's commander muses, “what era are you from?” *Confession* turns on the existential theme of alienation, reinforced by an unforgiving landscape and the ship's isolation, setting its characters adrift in space and time. As the ship's commander, an actor whose thoughts are narrated by Sokurov himself, ponders questions of collective experience and shared suffering, a point of tension emerges. Pitting the individual's image against communal movements of service (“service” is a more accurate translation of the film's Russian title, *Povinnost*) and standardized behavior, the hallmarks of military life, the film complicates any sense of identification with most of its protagonists by continually embedding them into a sea of similar characters which can make indentifying the characters difficult, much less identifying with them.



Figure 3. The dissolving sailor. Confession.

Sokurov's frozen images make meaning and take "coherent form," as Nemerov puts it, if read in relation to the Orthodox icon.[10] The icon serves as a locus in which deeply-felt anxieties about separation and communication converge. Sokurov has called Orthodox icons "the most brilliant examples" of Russian artistic practice, indicating that they are likely a source of inspiration to him and strengthening an argument for using them as a point of reference for understanding the ontological structure of *Confession*. [11]

Art historian Oleg Tarasov has detailed key qualities of the Russian icon, including "the simultaneous representation of different sides of the object." [12] A strategy of depiction that shifts the object beyond the readily observable, simultaneous representation signifies an augmentation of meaning. Sokurov surrounds his conscript with similar figures; standardized, uniform, they can be read as aspects of the same social body. Indeed, the film treats the conscripts as equal participants of an impersonal process. All the conscripts undergo medical examinations, sleep together, eat together, and work in quotidian shifts. The illuminated conscript (figure 1) represents the sum of conscripts past and present, undistinguishable by "era," a metonymic picturing of raw material. The suffering engendered by military service works universally, its harshness tempered by its lack of selectivity.

Repeated, contemplated, the illuminated conscript can be read according to the icon's logic of meaning that treats the exterior as symptomatic or topographic. While iconophilic apologists like Theodore Abū Qurrah and St. John Damascene argued that icons *represented* rather than manifested divine presence, popular usage contradicted their complex arguments.[13] Gilles Deleuze, for instance, finds that the "purely optical" qualities of the icon *produced* divine essence in an investigation that lays bare the icon's power to make the divine literally present on the mortal plane.[14] The attention paid to the icon's surface, its qualities of color and contour, framing and reflectivity, transformed it into a space that paradoxically constructed divinity while manifesting the direct expression of a divine referent. Most significantly, the icon's surface details map the world of divine. They provide visual access to a timeless space of angels, saints, and other ineffable beings. The icon's details manifest a kind of volume that stretches behind the picture plane.

Philosopher Thorsten Botz-Bornstein has already pointed out the similarity between this mode of approach and Sokurov's cinematography.[15] In this fashion, the conscript's face, his body, his clothes become burdened with meaning. In line with Nemerov's analysis of still images in early Hollywood horror films, this meaning is far from allegorical. Rather, returning to Sokurov's position as the "point of origin" of the film, the volumetric meaning behind the conscript stems from the director's construction of a subjective aesthetic. Describing a relationship with two actors with whom he particularly enjoyed working, Sokurov recalls that "it is first of all very important to embody an idea. They go so far as to forget their own selves." [16] Transfiguring the man he films into "the faithful expression of a truth of his existence," Sokurov aestheticizes the conscript as the manifestation of something beneath the surface.[17] Sokurov attempts to efface the actor, his camera draining the actor of individuality and re-materializing him as a subjective expression of a filmic reality.

The recurring conscript marks the resurfacing of a fragment, one of many in both the film and the ship's microcosmic world. The ship's internal hierarchy, a constructed and self-conscious system, locates transformative power in exteriority and controlled perception. Cultivating a highly artificial reality from the ground-up, the ship surrounds conscripts with role models and re-fashions them from the outside-in. Oleg Tarasov discusses this ontological strategy, as developed in the icon's structured world:

...when a person surrounds him- or herself with icons in the quite literal sense, a reverse mirror effect can easily arise: reality itself can be subordinated in one's consciousness to the sacral mode, and so can appear more authentic than it is.[18]

Sokurov shifts his attention from the ship's ostensible purpose of safeguarding Russia's borders to the "subordinating" of consciousness. The commander laments his own uselessness in relation to his nineteenth-century counterparts, feeling that Russia's abandonment of imperial ambition has stripped military service of its relevancy.

Frederic Jameson observes that “the daily routine of the Arctic Fleet is the very paradigm of a repetitive temporality in which nothing happens.”[19] Lacking military urgency, the ship becomes a self-contained entity, perpetuating its own rhythms of existence, “appearing more authentic than it is” and slowly working through the same “reverse mirror effect” that Tarasov describes.

Nicephorus the Patriarch of Constantinople, who wrote extensively on images, argued that the icon renders clear the parameters of infinity,[20] while Saint Symeon the New Theologian described God’s creation of a fence around the world as a positive activity that concentrated the divine.[21] Both theologians describe a paradoxical bounding of the infinite. Similarly, Sokurov portrays the battleship setting of *Confession* as possessing a limitless capacity to rework humanity through the experience of service. The commander explains his unease with the realization that “what terrified him was not becoming old, but that his ship did not become old, the sea was not old, the air around was not young.”

Cultivating an environment of service that transcends space and time, resonating with models of bounded infinity, the ship itself borrows the icon’s ability to access otherwise-inaccessible arenas. The illuminated conscript, frozen by Sokurov’s camera, thus embodies the workings of the ship’s “sacral mode.”

The Commander

A second recurrent motif, the watching commander, inverts the conscript’s passive receptivity. Struggling for self-awareness, the commander is an anomalous character in *Confession*. Unlike the singled-out conscript, the image of the watching commander contains the seeds of self-awareness but not of self-sufficiency. Recurring as both a prominent theme and a repeated image, the watching commander becomes a vehicle for Sokurov’s reflections on looking and blindness.

The commander’s reflections on history, literature, and service crystallize in a scene of the commander alone in the ship’s tower, surrounded by navigational instruments and gazing at the night through large windows and driven snow (figure 4). Shielded from the elements, he stands in sharp contrast to the conscripts who wrestle with the landscape’s material conditions, hauling coal and thawing ice. This particular image recurs throughout the documentary, marking the commander as a quintessential observer who apprehends the world through vision rather than physical work.

The commander is anomalous in his freedom to look *out*, beyond the parameters of the ship and service. He is aware of the ship’s drift through time and space, exemplified by the movement through the arctic landscapes. Sokurov sets *Confession* amid a spectacular interplay of snowy crags and storm-tossed waves, a nod to the Romantic landscapes of Caspar David Friedrich that underscores a location of the sublime in

nature.[22] The Romantic landscape, with its ability to overwhelm and overawe, threatens the artificially constructed world of the ship and its military structure. As the conscripts huddle in the hold, the commander muses, "...it's good the conscripts don't see these landscapes," landscapes that dramatize hardship and the unforgiving consequences of work. Indeed, the young sailors must acclimatize themselves to the ship's interior before taking in the surrounding landscapes. Beginning in the bowels of the ship, the conscripts move outside gradually, concluding their work in an arctic settlement at the documentary's end.



Figure 4. *The commander*. Confession.

Looking beyond the ship becomes a privilege, a way of placing the ship's hermetic world in a larger context. Nevertheless, the recurrent motif of the commander and his gaze emphasizes the inadequacy of the ability to look out. The commander strains in his looking, hunched over and peering into the dark of night.

The vocalization of his thoughts, voiced by Sokurov himself, confirms that he is trying to grasp something that he cannot. The commander's narrated thoughts become an "eminently personal" discourse that borders on the diaristic.[23] Wandering unseen among the crew, his reflective and longwinded monologue mixes philosophical observations with self-doubt and commentary on the crew's activities. He is revealed as a man who is both unsure of what he sees and insecure in his role as commander; the commander's gaze becomes a device that lays bare a form of blindness.

Blindness, or compromised looking, is an important theme in many of Sokurov's films. In his analysis of Sokurov's *Father and Son* [*Otets i syn*, 2003] film scholar José Alaniz

describes “a complex economy of surveillance” in which various types of looking inflect the relationships between characters.[24] One character’s oblique gaze, directed away from the camera—a “roaming” gaze—both unlocks her from the film’s insular sphere and excludes her from the trust of the all-consuming world of the two protagonists. Sokurov’s *The Second Circle* [*Krug vtoroi*, 1990] features a son whose fascination with his father’s corpse reaches a climax when he pulls back the corpse’s eyelids to marvel at his dead father’s lack of sight. The film scholar Mikhail Lampolski has described *The Second Circle* in terms of “blind zones.”[25]

The commander’s blindness thus becomes a key to understanding how the ship’s “sacral mode” extends to *Confession’s* filmic structure. Sokurov turns the commander’s blindness into a paradigmatic mode of representation, positing “...ideally, the filmmaker would never allow the viewer to comprehend or even perceive the image, at once, in its entirety.”[26] Offering the viewer fragments, in flux, Sokurov engages the icon’s ontological potential. Music, narration, and movement amplify the two motifs analyzed above. Endowed with what Michelson describes as the “glint in the pupil of the eye which confers light and, through light, movement,”[27] invoking the icon’s “semblance of life,” these still images establish their weight through a re-immersion in *Confession’s* larger structure.[28]

Conclusion

The frozen, recurring images of the conscript and the commander act as nexus points around which the temporally-grounded experience of viewing flows. They lodge in the film’s structure, transforming *Confession’s* aesthetic of subjective vision into a meditation on the activity of looking. Sokurov undermines filmic objectivity to narrow the gap between representation and experience. Contemplating the conscript and the commander, his camera suggests that the iconic promise of direct experience retains its relevancy in the medium of film, and *Confession* thus exemplifies what Botz-Bornstein describes as the “inexhaustible” quality of Sokurov’s images.[29] Enriched by their duration, these images describe a particular intersection between the painterly and filmic and suggest a new, aesthetically grounded, model for filmic representation.

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Footnotes

- [1] Sokurov has frequently spoken of his interest in painting, and partnered with the State Hermitage Museum in Saint Petersburg to film documentaries of their holdings. The first, *Hubert Robert, A Fortunate Life* [Rober, *Schastlivaya zhizn*, 1996] examined the work of the eighteenth-century French artist Hubert Robert.
- [2] Alexander Nemerov, *Icons of Grief: Val Lewton's Home Front Pictures* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 4.
- [3] *Ibid.*, 57.
- [4] Annette Michelson, "The Kinetic Icon in the Work of Mourning: Prolegomena to the Analysis of a Textual System," *October* 52 (Spring, 1990): 29.
- [5] Carl Platinga, "Documentary," in *The Routledge Companion to Philosophy and Film*, ed. Paisley Livingston and Carl Platinga (London: Routledge, 2009), 494-495.
- [6] Alexander Sokurov in Lauren Sedofsky, "Plane Songs: Lauren Sedofsky talks with Alexander Sokurov," *Artforum International* no. 3 (November 2001), 126.
- [7] Laura Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera: Subjective Cinema and the Essay Film* (New York: Wallflower Press, 2009), 3.
- [8] Quoted in Kirill Galetski, "The Foundations of Film Art: An Interview with Alexander Sokurov," *Cineaste* 26.3 (2001): 7.
- [9] Quoted in Paul Schrader, "The History of an Artist's Soul is a Very Sad History: Aleksandr Sokurov interviewed by Paul Schrader," *Film Comment* 33.6 (Nov/Dec. 1997): 21.
- [10] Nemerov, *Icons of Grief*, 4.
- [11] Quoted in Sedofsky, "Plane Songs," 125.
- [12] Oleg Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion: Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia* (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 361.
- [13] See Theodore Abū Qurrah, *A Treatise on the Veneration of the Holy Icons*, trans. and ed. Sidney H. Griffith (Louvain: Peeters, 1997), and Robert Grigg's discussion of the popular usage of icons: Robert Grigg, "Byzantine Credulity as an Impediment to Antiquarianism," *Gesta* 26.1 (1987), 2.
- [14] Gilles Deleuze, "Painters Recapitulate the History of Painting in Their Own Way," in *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 103.
- [15] Thorsten Botz-Bornstein, *Films and Dreams: Tarkovsky, Bergman, Sokurov, Kubrick, and Wong Kar-wai*, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2007), 34.
- [16] Quoted in Jeremi Szaniawski, "Interview with Alexander Sokurov," trans. Jeremi Szaniawski, *Critical Inquiry* 33.1 (Autumn, 1996), 15.
- [17] *Ibid.*, 20.

- [18] Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion*, 37.
- [19] Frederic Jameson, "History and Elegy in Sokurov," 6.
- [20] Nicephorus the Patriarch, "Antirrhetic II," trans. Anna Cancogne, in *Fragments for a History of the Human Body: Part One*, ed. Michael Feher (New York: Zone, 1989), 158.
- [21] Saint Symeon the New Theologian, *On the Mystical Life: The Ethical Discourses, Vol. 1*, trans. Alexander Golitzin (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 24.
- [22] Sokurov often acknowledges Friedrich as a significant influence. See Sokurov in Galetski, "The Foundations of Film Art," 7.
- [23] Rascaroli, *The Personal Camera*, 12.
- [24] José Alaniz, "Vision and Blindness in Sokurov's *Father and Son*," in *Cinepaternity: Fathers and Sons in Soviet and Post-Soviet Film*, ed. Helena Gosciolo and Yana Hashamova (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 294.
- [25] Mikhail Lampolski, "Death in Cinema," trans. Anesa Miller-Pogacar, Ludmila Zebrina Pruner, and Allison H. Hall, in *Re-Entering the Sign: Articulating New Russian Culture*, ed. Ellen E. Berry and Anesa Miller-Pogacar (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995): 277.
- [26] Sokurov in Sedofsky, "Plane Songs," 126.
- [27] Michelson, "The Kinetic Icon," 26.
- [28] Tarasov, "Icon and Devotion," 37.
- [29] Botz-Bornstein, *Films and Dreams*, 34.

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The following was written as mid-term essay for SRAS's cultural program in St. Petersburg, "The Russians." Students were encouraged to draw upon not only the program texts, but also on the impressions and experiences gained of Russia and Russians while on-the-ground in St. Petersburg. A select few of these essays have been chosen to be published in this issue of Vestnik.

- Essay -

Russian Cultural Values

By Caitlin Jebens

The Russian culture is as vast and mysterious as Russia's abundant landscape and geographic reach. The subtleties of Russian culture initially enamored me during my first years of college. Now that I am experiencing it first-hand, I have the opportunity to peel back its layers and attempt to understand what makes Russians "tick." Russia has long held a reputation as a country "behind the curve." Throughout history, rulers such as Peter the Great have announced that Russia must "catch up" with Western society. This led to a never-ending identity crisis that still plagues Russia to this day—is Russia West European or simply "Russian?" Though Russia has often tried to match its society with that of Western Europe, it has and will always have a specifically Russian flavor that can be neither replaced nor erased. Its unique values reflect Russia's equally unique historical development. Russian culture values *pravda*, *dusha*, and the in-group, as well as time and money.

Pravda is most often translated as "truth." Each Russian holds a certain belief in a personal "truth." *Pravda* represents what is just and fair; it serves as a moral guideline by which "non-truths" in the world may be evaluated and navigated. The film *Brother 2* addressed the cross-cultural issue of *pravda* between Russians and Americans, claiming the American *pravda* was centered upon money. In contrast, the film claimed Russian *pravda* to be firmly grounded in morality, friendship and honoring one's fellow man.

I have encountered many Russians who hold tightly to their personal *pravda*, especially among the older generation, with whom the country's Soviet past continues to resonate. These elder Russians, when explaining to me their viewpoints on certain matters, claim "it is the truth and there is no other truth." For example, a woman at a metro newsstand informed me Sergei Bodrov (the star of *Brother 2*), on the cover of one magazine, was a "good man," but a woman on the cover of a fashion magazine with a man holding her seductively was "trash," garnering a dirty flick of the fingers on the cover. My Russian culture professor informed our class about what she believed to be the most famous painting in the world. When we offered differing opinions, she claimed

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these were incorrect and hers was the truth. It is my belief that this cultural remnant was formed through the utter loss of control Russians had in their everyday lives during Soviet times. *Pravda* was truth that could be counted on through those years of instability and helplessness under the communist regime of the time.

A similar concept to *pravda*, though harder to translate into English, is the Russian concept of *dusha*. Most translations offer the English word “soul” in place of *dusha*, though some have brought up the limitations of using “soul” as frequently as *dusha* is used. Perhaps this is because the concept of “soul” is not as laden with multiple meanings nor as ever-present in English-speaking cultures as *dusha* is in Russian. The English scholar Anna Wierzbicka claims the Russian concept of *dusha* not only refers to what we imagine “soul” to represent—feelings, emotions and one’s mood—but also to one’s inner life and secret thoughts, their “inner being,” health, an ever-present state subject to change; and yet also the core of one’s being in an everlasting state. According to Wierzbicka, “soul” may serve as an appropriate translation, but the high frequency that *dusha* is used in Russian is odd to the English ear. *Dusha* is a very personal concept, with greater emphasis and priority placed upon it than on the English “soul.”

Russian friendship is another unique and deeply ingrained cultural value that can be defined in the exclusive title of “friend,” or *drug*, as well as the inner complexities of the “in-group,” or *krug*. The interactions of Russian friendships live and grow within the in-group, a close circle of friends that is not easily formed, nor easily broken. In-groups may be formed over long years of growing friendship, through *dusha*-bearing moments of vulnerability and years of trust-building. Given the deep roots of these friendships, one’s duties to a friend are taken very seriously, with many Russians willing to go far out of their way and their comfort zones and spend much time and energy to help a friend. To refer to a person as an “acquaintance,” or *znakomi*, is not an insult in Russia as it may be in some countries, but merely a truthful remark about a less-serious relationship. However, the title of “friend” is a title to be treasured and held up with honor, respect, loyalty and trust. This has also complimented and may be a product of the unpredictability that has plagued Russian history: the in-group offered control, comfort, safety and security among friends who could be trusted and counted upon.

Time and money seem to have a lower priority in Russian culture and society than in others. I have been told by many Russians that Russians simply work to live. There are positives and negatives to this outlook on life. Some positives stand out as obvious—a life not focused on work is a life focused on the more “important things,” perhaps on *pravda*, the well-being of *dusha*, and friendship. It can be argued, however, that emphasis on work does not mean denying the “important things.” In fact, hard work and the ability to witness and reap the fruits of one’s labors are rewards that seem to be missing in Russian society. This often results in a misunderstanding of Russian culture, such that many foreigners feel frustrated, angered and even depressed when dealing with Russians at work. A lack of priority placed on time and money is evident when

some employees do not return after breaks, shops close earlier than their posted times, and prices are raised considerably from one day to another and sometimes simply if the customer is a foreigner. This can be a great problem for many in learning about Russian culture, as it evokes a negative feeling towards a very closed and personal culture.

I have been told by many Russians, however, that once one breaks through the harsh exterior encountered in public, formal instances of day-to-day jobs, encounters on the street and on public transportation, etc., the true warmth, humor and hospitality of the Russian culture may be experienced. I saw this once, when I was able to spend a Sunday afternoon with my friend's parents who live in St. Petersburg. I can honestly say that I have not experienced such hospitality or generosity in my life—and I live in the southern US, a land famous for hospitality! There is something to be said for a culture whose members "keep their cards closely guarded." While it may appear detached or uncaring, the true Russian culture, when experienced in full vulnerability and trust, is a unique phenomenon to be treasured.

Every culture has positives and negatives, but putting those aside, Russia has incredibly distinct and *Russian* cultural values derived from a unique history. Russia, being located far enough from Western Europe to avoid a meshing of cultures with most of the West (that is, until globalization exploded onto the world stage and the Iron Curtain fell), has always seemed an enigma to the outside world. Even to this day, some values such as *pravda*, *dusha*, *krug*, and the Russian perspective on time and money remain a mystery to foreigners and are not always even translatable into other languages. Given its tumultuous history of occupation, expansion, and repressive empires and governments, the Russian culture can seem divided, conflicted, closely-guarded and mysterious. History defines the future, and Russians are living proof of this. However, if one is lucky enough to break through the rough exterior and be welcomed into the mystery of Russian culture, the experience itself is as unique as the culture and the country.

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The following was written as mid-term essay for SRAS's cultural program in St. Petersburg, "The Russians." Students were encouraged to draw upon not only the program texts, but also on the impressions and experiences gained of Russia and Russians while on-the-ground in St. Petersburg. A select few of these essays have been chosen to be published in this issue of Vestnik.

- Essay -

My Assessment of Russian Culture

By Samantha Danfora

Upon my arrival to Russia, I met a woman named Mary who offered some advice for my first trip to this cold and overwhelming country. She told me that as an American who had never lived in a radically different culture, I was in for the surprise of my life. After two months, I can say that Mary was absolutely correct. Though I have kept an open mind and sought out similarities between American and Russian values, I have still been surprised by the vast differences that really separate our views on life and the way we choose to live it.

Between discussions in my culture class, titled "The Russians" and taken through the School of Russian and Asian Studies (SRAS) in St. Petersburg, and discussions with my new Russian classmates outside of the classroom, I have noticed one Russian value that I find particularly refreshing from an American standpoint. The depth and knowledge of history in this country is astounding to me.

The amount of history and number of changes that St. Petersburg alone has seen amazes me, but the fact that the people living here know their history and celebrate the traditions of the past to the extent they do is especially surprising. I have lived in America my entire life, and in my opinion, I have seen a rapid decline in historical knowledge as my generation has progressed. Though I am only twenty years old, I can name the date when the Declaration of Independence was signed and tell you when the Vietnam War ended. Yet kids just a few years younger than me cannot say when Columbus discovered America, or when World War II ended.

Most of the Russian students I have met who are the same age as I am can cite hundreds of years of history and dates from memory. I have had conversations with students in my business class, and they told me all about the communist years and the czars without any effort. I asked if Russian history is taught so thoroughly in all places, but they said that much of their knowledge comes from parents and grandparents talking about their lives while growing up. One of my new Russian friends, Natalya,

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explained to me that many Russian children grow up learning about how their parents were raised and how it was in the old days. She also told me that learning how things were in the past allows them to appreciate the way their lives have improved and shows them just how differently previous generations have lived. She said that a major Russian belief is “if you don’t know your past, then you have no future.” Though we have this saying in America, I have never seen it applied in such a way.

These discussions on history led me to discover a few other Russian cultural values, such as keeping historical reminders without altering perceptions. In Virginia, for example, some people thought the state song should be changed because it used a word that has become politically incorrect a hundred years after it was written. However, altering the song to cover up an unpleasant past will not help people remember how we changed and why.

In St. Petersburg, by contrast, there are still symbols of Communist times all around the city, and I have asked Russians why the symbols did not fall when Communism did. The answer I received from my friends Natalya and Ivan was really unexpected. They told me that tearing down all signs of the Communist regime would be a waste of time and would not change anything that had happened. They said that for them and their parents, the symbols are reminders of the changes of the last 20-plus years and should be valued as such.

I am almost jealous of the level of pride and reverence that Russian people feel for their own culture and history. I see how much of their society has been affected by American culture, and yet they still cling to the idea that by remembering the past and keeping up traditions, they will be able to make their own lives better. My classmate Ivan, explaining his views on Russia’s recent historical changes, told me that, “though most people think the changes after Communism are good, we must remember that there were parts (of Communism) that are not all bad.” He, of course, was not speaking through experience but through the experiences and opinions relayed by his parents and grandparents. He told me that they would talk about how the bad parts of Communism destroyed lives, but also how there were a few good things to come out of it. I was puzzled about why they would tell him about the good parts, since there was obviously a bigger downside. He responded that if they hadn’t brought to light the good parts such as stable pensions, an excellent education system, and wonderful achievements in the arts and sciences, then they could never try to implement them in today’s lifestyle.

It seems that Russians and Americans want to constantly improve their own lives, but most Americans that I know tend to think this can be achieved only by technological advances and progressive social movements. Most of our problems today have been faced throughout history, and yet no one reflects on their origins how they might be prevented from recurring. I feel that since I have been here and spoken with many

Russians, they have proven time and time again that they really grasp the importance of not just remembering the past, but learning from it as well. I hope that more people will promote this practical and helpful value in America.

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- Essay -

An Unfavorable Balance:

Government and Human Rights in the Russian Mindset

By Travis Vincent

Through my studies of Russian culture and history as well as my experiences living among Russians in both St. Petersburg and Vladimir, I have become quite familiar with many of the social mores and peculiarities of Russian life. I find the culture and national identity to be quite fascinating and multidimensional. Perhaps the most interesting trait to me is Russian society's relationship with its government, and particularly the tendency of the Russian public to value economic and political security over human rights. This relationship has a major effect on how Russians view their world. The balance between security and human rights in Russia has always been and continues to be a complex issue in that despite constant pressure for civil liberties, Russian society favors national stability first and foremost.

In understanding why a society would place so much emphasis on stability rather than on basic freedoms, one must place the society within a historical and (particularly for Russia) a cultural context. For the past 200 years, Russia has experienced one cataclysmic event after another. From the Great Patriotic War of 1812, through the emancipation of the serfs, two revolutions, two devastating World Wars, the Soviet experiment, rapid industrialization and urbanization followed by the chaotic privatization and capitalist transition of the 1990s, it is easy to see why Russian society would prefer leadership which offers a certain constancy. In his book, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*, Orlando Figes describes a few of the political views of Sergei Volkonsky, a hero of 1812 and a leader of the Decembrist Uprising, in this way:

Volkonsky's notion of the Fatherland was intimately linked with his idea of the Tsar: he saw the sovereign as a symbol of Russia. Throughout his life he remained a monarchist – so much that when he heard about the death of Nicholas I, the Tsar who had sent him into exile thirty years before, Volkonsky broke down and cried... But Volkonsky's tears were tears for Russia, too: he saw the Tsar as the Empire's single unifying force...[1]

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Developed in the mid 19th century, Volkonsky's views regarding a vertical chain of power accurately reflect many Russians' views today, and yet this passage also displays the dual nature of Russian political orientation and the desire for human rights. The reason for Volkonsky's exile was his push for a constitution which would have limited the Tsar's rule and given more rights to serfs.

This duality is echoed throughout Russian literature and fine arts as well. One specific example is Pushkin's appreciation and sympathy for the "little man," which manifests itself in many pieces including his "Fairy Tales," *The Bronze Horseman* and *Eugene Onegin*. Yet Pushkin later dismissed the rule of the masses as a silly notion and supported governmental censorship, even though he had been personally censored.

Another phenomenon in Russian history may be partially to blame for the predisposition toward secure, but often repressive rule. Although political maneuvering and dishonesty are definitely not specific to Russian politics, Russian society has more than once sacrificed everything, including human rights, for utopian ideals, only to be let down later. In the months prior to the October Revolution, Lenin wrote in *The State and Revolution* that, "Only in a communist society... will there become possible and be realized a truly complete democracy, democracy without any exceptions whatever. And only then will democracy begin to wither away." [2] Although not typical of Lenin, his anti-authoritarian tone implies the temporary nature of the ideal state and a truly free society. By the time Joseph Stalin had consolidated his power as the General Secretary, all notions of this Marxist "government-free" society had completely disappeared. Stalin, in a 1939 telegram to party and NKVD officials, permitted torture and pardoned its earlier use by stating, "The Central Committee of the All-Union Party considers that physical pressure should still be used obligatorily, as an exception applicable to known and obstinate enemies of the people, as a method both justifiable and appropriate." [3] In the end, despite its enormous effort and sacrifice in building the new communist society, Russian society received a Soviet system which was even more oppressive than its predecessor. In addition, the temporary restriction on human rights was made permanent.

Much like the Soviet Marxist ideology, the new ideologies of democracy and market capitalism introduced during the early 1990s greatly appealed to the masses, at least initially. Stephen Kotkin, in his book *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970-2000*, had this to say about Yeltsin and the new ideologies that enveloped the Soviet Union in its final years:

Yeltsin inclined toward the paternalistic identification with the 'folk.' Wielding the common touch Gorbachev lacked, he promised 'radical reform' and a market economy, about which he knew nothing but which he and his supporters imagined would provide the better life and social justice that had been the promise of socialism.[4]

The Russian people had again been promised this justice and liberty and they desired it, but instead they received a vastly corrupt government, hyperinflation, a national identity crisis and rampant violence.

As a result of these great failures, Russians have grown more pessimistic. Today, most believe that with a well-established and powerful leader, there is some possibility for economic and social security, whether or not the rights and opinions of the individual are protected. So although many Russians criticize the current administration's human rights record, they are still reluctant to push for something new. A instructor of mine, who is Russian, once laughed and explained to me the Russian line of thinking about the renaming of the Russian law enforcement agency from "*Militsia*" to "*Politsia*:" "We don't like change. Every time something changes, it is usually for the worse."^[5] His fear of change is congruent with the contemporary mindset of many Russians.

From an American or Western background, it can sometimes be very difficult to comprehend, firstly, why the current administration of the Russian Federation has so much support despite its human rights record, and secondly, why those who disapprove of such authority do not voice their opinions more vehemently. Compared with France, where citizens recently rioted against raising the retirement age, contemporary Russian society is characterized by quiet complacency. However, when looking at the historical, political and socioeconomic development of both Russia and the West, one should realize the futility of comparing the two. For Russia to eventually achieve a greater balance between stability and human rights, it will in all likelihood require significantly more time as well as further economic and social changes. Nevertheless, Russians have never ceased to surprise the world and perhaps there is some room for hope.

Footnotes

[1] Orlando Figes, *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia*, (New York: Picador, 2002), 143.

[2] Robert V. Daniels, ed., *A Documentary History of Communism in Russia: From Lenin to Gorbachev*, (Burlington, VT: University of Vermont Press, 1993), 49.

[3] *Ibid.* 217

[4] Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970-2000*, (New York: Oxford U P, 2001), 96.

[5] Sergei Pshenitsyn, February 2011.



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