

## **LIFE STORIES BETWEEN THE FORMER SOVIET UNION AND THE UNITED STATES**

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the change from the Soviet Period to Transition Period, as reported through the experiences of those who grew up there, as well as from American tourists who have traveled there. Five semi-structured interviews were been conducted. They were transcribed and analyzed inductively to

understand (a) differences in life experiences across cultures, (b) how change in government affects a person's life story and (c) the importance of social traditions. Findings focus on the transformation of economic conditions from the point before the transition to independent republics after the transition. Findings focus on technological expansion and traditions and customs surrounding alcohol consumption.

### **Краткий обзор**

Данная статья рассматривает перемены, произошедшие в период Советского времени до Переходного периода на основе жизненных историй и опыта людей, родившихся и выросших в этой стране, а также американских туристов посетивших эту страну. Было проведено семь полуструктурированных интервью. Интервью были записаны и проанализированы индуктивно для того, чтобы: а) понять различия жизненного опыта людей разного культурного происхождения; б) как изменения в системе государства влияют на историю жизни человека; в) важность социальных традиций. Сведения/находки сфокусированы на преобразовании экономических условий до и после распада Советского Союза на индивидуальные республики. Находки сфокусированы на технологическом развитии, традициях и обычаях сопровождающихся потреблением алкоголя.

### **Introduction**

In 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics broke apart. This has led to a transition period, whereby fifteen independent republics have formed. The study reported in this paper considered the consequences of this transition on those who lived in one of the republics and on tourists who traveled to the areas. How has this transition affected their lives? Was the transition of a crucial marker in history for how these individuals have lived, or has it been a small part of their lives?

It is important to note that this research was conducted in the field by one individual. Therefore, the ideas expressed in this paper are ideas generated through this principle investigator, as well as through the words and actions of five respondents who agreed to participate in the research.

### **Literature Review**

#### *Life Stories*

According to Lomsky-Feder (1995, page 464), life stories are an "individual's description of the course of his or her life" and represent "a collection of events and experiences that the narrator chooses...to present as his or her personal story along a time axis." Life stories serve as the means for illustrating the precise pattern of discourse respondent's chose when asked to reflect upon their personal experiences. They are the frameworks behind how an individual expresses himself or herself, and in the ways they organize and arrange their life into a continuous timeline. This research used the life story method to focus on how transition of regime in the Union of Soviet Social Republics has impacted the lives of those who have lived there and visited there. It is one method of record-keeping individuals use when understanding their life at home, at work, and in the family

#### *Economic Conditions*

Varese (2007) examines the economic conditions of Russia, finding that over the past year the Russian economy has increased by six percent. The economy is stable, but the living situation has grown worse. Many in Russia have died from AIDS and tuberculosis. Health care is expensive and hard to afford.

The respondents' experiences validate Varese's (2007) description of the economic increase in Russia—several describe an increase in material wealth and the growth of banks. The economy may be doing well in Russia, but the personal situations are still strained. They continue to face illness, poor health care, addiction, and disease.

#### *Social Conditions*

Crandall, Senturia, Sullivan, and Shiu-Thornton (2005) focus on domestic violence in Russia. They suggest that one of the primary reasons women come to the United States from an independent republic is to escape abuse. Abuse may be prevalent due to cultural acceptance of traditional gender roles. Women feel subordinate to men, and for that reason, they often chose to accept abuse rather than to escape it. There were no support services for them to turn to. They were not used to asking for help. Asking for help made them feel uncomfortable in America.

### **Methodology**

The data in this study come from five semi-structured interviews gathered through convenience sampling. Respondents were chosen based their travel to the republics and to America. Participants in two organizations at Minnesota State University, Mankato (the East European Student Organization and the Russian language class of the Foreign Language Initiative) were approached to find individuals to interview. The research participants ranged between 18 and 50 years old, knew some Russian, were white, have college education, and have either lived in or traveled to one of the 15 former Soviet republics.

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were used to gather data and five interviews were conducted. Interviews were analyzed inductively for common themes using grounded theory (Charmaz 1990). First,

each interview was transcribed. Second, it was coded and used to “create an interpretation of it, impose an order on it, explicate the relationships between categories, and organize those relationships to communicate ideas” (Charmaz, 1990, page 1170). Memos were then used to “...clarify[ basic codes and revis[it] and fine-tun[e] methodological issues and procedures,” (Loftland et al, 2006, page 210). Then “ideas, hunches, questions, and elaborated categories” were used to find what was significant, so that important aspects could be selected out of the less important (Charmaz, 1990, 1169). These ideas were then used to draw conclusions and to form the findings section in this paper.

## Findings

### *Motivations to Come to the United States...*

Respondents who immigrated to the United States reported various motivations for coming. After the transition, the economy was still not good in the republics. Educational institutions in these areas were not viewed as comparable or as prestigious as American institutions of higher learning. Education is a leading factor for individuals to seek out coming to the United States. Another factor is the possibility of finding a job that pays enough to cover living expenses. The money that individuals from these regions make goes toward resources for survival instead of toward things that they wish to have. The major resource for survival that respondents discussed is “education.” If an individual gains a better education, they may then gain a higher-paying job. As a result, they then may be able to live comfortably upon returning to their home country. Another reason that they may come to the United States is to be able to gain better financial opportunities and to be able to make enough to pay the bills.

### *Economic Conditions*

Before the transition, the economic situation was difficult. Food was scarce, money was hard to get, and alcohol was used as an excuse to escape reality. However, there were a variety of different experiences. For example, one respondent reported having plenty of food while growing up, while another respondent experienced food shortages during the Soviet period. For many years, people throughout the Soviet Union knew of advances in the West. However, they did not have access to them because they could not afford to buy something that was not a necessity.

After the transition, the population has been able to westernize, especially in consumer fashion. Respondents report that there is a difference in the style of dress across cultures. Unlike those from America who dress for comfort, those who are from the republics dress for serious European style. This difference in dress has led to a conflict in social expectations. One respondent reported that, if someone dresses stylishly in non-formal conditions in the United States, others view them as having broken a social norm. A similar trend was reported by an American respondent who has traveled in Russia. She knew that her style of dress was different from those around her, and that they could tell she was from America. This implies that the location of a person’s origin does not matter, but that the act of following the unwritten dress code does. If someone does not follow the dress code, they are subconsciously labeled as an outsider.

After the Soviet Period, the economies in republics have improved. More banks are needed and foreign materials can be bought, such as automobiles and other westernized objects like cell phones. One respondent explains that cell phones were everywhere during her trips to Russia in the early 2000’s. They were used before everyone even had landlines. Another thing that has changed is the increase in the variety of automobiles. Automobiles are everywhere in Russia now, and many of them are foreign-made. People have more resources to pay for vehicles these days and they have influence from outside cultures towards what brand they should buy.

### *Social Conditions*

Social conditions in the republics are characterized by lack of emotional affect, and alcohol abuse. Lack of emotion is specifically experienced by the lack of smiling on streets. Rather than symbolizing coldness, it symbolizes the will for everyone to mind their own business. Another social condition that is important is that of alcohol. Alcohol is an important part of the culture in the republics. It has several roles, from being a crucial part of the economy to the stem of addiction. It is a highly-esteemed traditional value in the republics and is to be taken seriously.

### Lack of Emotional Affect

In the republics it is very rare for anyone to smile while they walk down the street or to show any emotion at all. In the United States, the opposite is true. In the republics, if someone smiles while walking down the street, others are suspicious of their reason for doing so. If they do not have a culturally-acceptable reason for smiling, then those around them may receive them the wrong way.

The lack of emotion on the streets is not something that those from the republics consider to be cold. Rather, as one respondent suggests, it is considered to be part of their culture. They simply do not smile. They are not cold, but they mind their own business rather than greeting strangers, such as is experienced in the United States. There are times when they do smile, but when this happens, it is only done around those that they are friends with. They smile at home when the public pressure is no longer on them. Because it is not common for them to smile, they also know a foreigner is walking on the streets along with them. According to one respondent, foreigners will “walk around smiling, laughing, and jabbering all the time.”

## Alcohol Abuse

Alcohol is an important traditional element in the republics. It permeates almost every aspect of Soviet culture from social etiquette to employment and the economy. It is kept cheap and affordable, so that there are no limits to who can potentially become an addict. Individuals commonly experience it long before they reach the legal age of consumption. In this section, I review three aspects of alcohol culture that are predominate themes in my interviews: tradition, addiction, and alcohol's relation to the economy.

Traditions associated with alcohol are not something that cannot simply be divided from the former Soviet Union culture and not something that can be taken lightly. In the republics, during a get-together, it is more than a mere custom for hosts to offer their guests a drink. Hosts are expected to offer their guests a drink. They take responsibility for their guests and feel responsible for them. They wish for their guests to feel at home and to feel comfortable.

Along with this tradition there is the expectation of the guests to participate. The guests cannot simply deny the offer to take a drink either. They are expected to drink with the family, but are not forced. As Chris, explains drinking holds great importance in Russia and is a part of the culture. It's not something to be taken lately because the people are serious about it. It is a serious matter. While he says that a guest can decline, he then states that it is kind of expected. Guests are not forced to drink, but social norms create pressure to engage in the tradition.

While alcohol is part of cultural tradition, addiction has become a problem in the republics. Work conditions and the lack of work may lead some individuals to take part in drinking daily. In this region, people drink, but they are expected to do so without taking it too far. They are to be familiar with what too much is and how it may affect them. When they take it too far, they may not only drink too much, but they may bring their family into it as well. They may abuse their family or sell their own children in order to score a drink.

The cause for addiction may be tied to the economy. Conditions are not the best everywhere and it is not always easy to get work. In the city of Magadan, where most jobs are seasonal and in mining, money from a paycheck may not go towards things they need to survive. With the difficulty to find work and with pressures at work, an individual gives up what little money they have to pay for alcohol. They then consume it often and become addicted.

The government also makes money off of alcohol by keeping it cheap. With cheaper prices, more people can afford to buy it, which means more may become addicted. This also means more may contribute to giving money indirectly to the government. While streets are not lined with drunks, they do exist and drinking is part of the culture.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

This paper reported insights gained from an analysis of life stories of five respondents. They report on their experiences about the economy and social conditions, both before and after the transition from the Soviet Union to fifteen independent republics. Specifically, they report that before the transition, there were limitations on the availability of food and on technology. After the transition, there have been economic improvements.

The respondents also report that social conditions in the republics include the lack of emotion and the acceptance of alcohol. The lack of emotion specifically includes the lack of smiling on the streets. It is not a symbol of coldness, but rather a symbol of the need for people to mind their own business. The respondents also report that alcohol is a strong part of the culture in the republics. Also, alcohol is a strong part of the economy. It helps run the economy in areas that are financially dependent on people's consumption. Since alcohol is kept cheap, the respondents report that having too much could lead to addiction.

These life stories suggest that there are still more questions about relationships and situations that have changed as the governments have changed. Has the Cold War affected individuals in the former Soviet Union in anyway? Has the Cold War led American to feel animosity towards Russian immigrants? Research could also be done concerning the educational differences between the United States and Russia, and how this affects opportunities for career advancement.

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