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## Narratives from the Former Soviet Union to the United States

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## **Life Stories between the former Soviet Union and the United States**

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the impact of the transition of the Soviet Union on the experiences of citizens from the republics of the former Soviet Union and American tourists. It is an on-going project that will, upon completion in fall 2008, include data collected from at least eight semi-structured interviews. So far, five semi-structured interviews have been conducted with individuals who are from the United States and who have traveled to the former USSR; or were natives of the former Soviet Union. The interviews have been transcribed and analyzed inductively with the goal of understanding (a) differences in life experiences across cultures, (b) how change in regime effects a person's life story and (c) the importance of social traditions.*

*My findings focus on the transformation of economic conditions after the transition and the social traditions surrounding alcohol consumption. Particularly, I show that the transition of the Soviet Union has opened a doorway for economic and technological expansion. It has allowed an increase in availability and acceptance of foreign products such as cell phones and cars. I also detail the traditions and customs surrounding alcohol consumption both before and after the transition. My analysis focuses on the social pressures to consume alcohol and how rates of consumption are impacted by economic and working condition.*

## **Introduction**

In 1991, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics dissolved. This led to a transition period, whereby fifteen republics formed independent governments for themselves. In this paper, I explore the consequences of this regime change on those who lived in the former USSR and resulting republics and also those who traveled to the area. How did the transition of government affect the lives of those originating from the republics and tourists before and after it happened? Was the transition of government a crucial marker in history for how these individuals have lived, or was it merely a small part of their lives?

This paper is organized as follows. First, I review relevant research on the living conditions and economy of immigrants from other countries besides the United States. This is done to build a foundation for the current study, which focuses on the republics of the former Soviet Union. Second, I review the research methods utilized for this study, including the

sampling and analytical procedures that were used. Next, I present my findings on the current condition of the republics, as well as the impact the economy and political regime has had on those from the former USSR as well as American tourists who have traveled there. Finally, I will provide suggestions for future research that could be done in relation to this project.

## **Literature Review**

### **LIFE STORIES**

According to Lomsky-Feder (1995:464), 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 respondents chose when asked to reflect upon their personal experiences. They are the frameworks behind how individuals express themselves, and in the ways they organize and arrange their life into a continuous timeline. For example, in Lomsky-Feder (1995), life stories have been obtained from military personnel about how they reflect their own interpretation of the social world in relation to their mindsets before and after war. This paper uses the life story method to focus on how the transition of the regime in the Union of Soviet Social Republics has impacted the lives of those who have lived there and visited there. It is the method of record-keeping individuals use when understanding their life at home, at work, and in the family.

### **ECONOMIC CONDITIONS**

Varese (2007) examined the economic conditions of Russia, finding that over the past year the Russian economy has increased by six percent and that the financial system is increasingly stable. While the economy is stable, the living conditions for the majority of citizens

within Russia have grown worse. Many in Russia have died from AIDS and tuberculosis. Healthcare is expensive and hard to afford. The economy may be doing well in Russia, but the personal situations for citizens are still strained as they continue to face illness, poor health care, addiction, and disease.

## **SOCIAL CONDITIONS**

Violence has been a theme in Soviet society. Crandall, Senturia, Sullivan, and Shiu-Thornton (2005) examined domestic violence in Russia, finding that one of the primary reasons women immigrate to the United States from one of the republics of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics is to escape abuse. One of the primary reasons abuse is so prevalent is cultural acceptance of traditional gender roles. Women felt subordinate to men, and for that reason, they often chose to accept abuse rather than to leave the home. Others have explained that there were no support services for women to turn to if they were abused (Crandall et al 2005). Soviet women were not used to asking for help and this made them feel uncomfortable once they came to the United States.

## **Methodology**

The data in this study come from five semi-structured interviews gathered through convenience sampling. For all respondents, pseudonyms were used as substitution of real names in order to protect their confidentiality in this study. Respondents were chosen based on their background of travel in the United States to at least one of the 15 former Soviet Republics. Two organizations at Minnesota State University, Mankato (the East European Student Organization and the Foreign Language Initiative, Russian Language class) were approached to find potential individuals to interview. At meetings of both organizations, the topic of the research was

explained and I met with interested individuals after meetings to discuss the project in further detail. Both of the organizations used for recruitment included Russian-speaking individuals as well as individuals who grew up in one of the republics. Subjects ranged between 18 and 50 years old, were white, had some college education, and had either lived in or traveled to one of the 15 republics. One-on-one semi-structured interviews were used to gather data and five interviews were conducted. Most interviews took place at Minnesota State University Mankato, with one being completed at a respondent's home.

Interviews were analyzed inductively for common themes using grounded theory (Charmaz 1990). First, each interview was transcribed. Second, I categorized the data gathered using coding, whereby —[r]esearchers create a conceptual interpretation of the data, impose an order on it, explicate the relationships between categories, and organize those relationships to communicate their ideas to audiences‖ (Charmaz 1990: 1170). After coding a document one or more times, data analysis was taken one step further through the writing of memos. Memos were used for —...clarifying basic codes and revisiting and fine-tuning methodological issues and procedures,‖ as well as to layout specific ideas using evidence from the interviews to draw conclusions about what was being said (Loftland et al 2006: 210). Then —ideas, hunches, questions, and elaborated categories‖ were used to determine —what [was] implicit and what was explicit in the data,‖ 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:

This research is focused on two primary areas, economy and social behavior. It was found that before the transition, the economy within the Soviet Union was harsh. Food was hard

to get as people had to wait in long lines in order to receive their daily rations and educational opportunities were mostly limited to those within the Soviet Union. After the transition, the economy has begun to stabilize and banks have shown an increase in popularity. Independent republics have also allowed their students to study abroad in other countries. Common motivations citizens of the republics have for traveling to the United States are for better educational and career opportunities. Within social behavior, it was found that there are social expectations concerning when it is appropriate to smile. There are also social expectations and social norms concerning the consumption of alcohol, and how alcohol may be a traditional part of the culture in the republics.

### **MOTIVATIONS: Why I wanted to come to the United States...**

In this section, I discuss the various motivations for coming to the United States given by respondents. After the transition, the economy is starting to stabilize in the republics, but has not reached that point quite yet. Educational institutions in these areas are not viewed as comparable or as prestigious as American institutions of higher learning. To have enhanced educational opportunities is a leading reason why individuals come to the United States. Several respondents came to the United States to receive a better education, so that upon returning home to their own countries, they would be able to get better paying jobs. By finding better paying jobs, they will then be able to cover living expenses. In this section I review data from two respondents: Misha, a 25-year-old female from Russia, and Anya, a 40-year-old female from Ukraine, who spoke about why they decided to come to the United States.

The money that individuals from these regions make goes toward ways to increase their standard of living instead of toward material things that they wish to have. The major perceived way to increase their standard of living 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. One example of this is Misha, who came to get a master’s degree in the United States instead of Russia. Misha came to the United States to gain a degree because it would provide better opportunities for her back in her home city. While she had already earned a few degrees back in Russia, she knew that having a degree from the United States would confer prestige and would look great on her resume for a job back in Russia. She stated that her —main reason was to get to degree in the United States, because it would be more prestigious on her resume towards a decent job than a degree from her own country would be.

Anya discussed financial frustration as a reason for coming to the United States. She explained that there was little money for moving forward and finding opportunity for a better life in Ukraine with what was available. Anya stated, —So basically, the price for food, for medical service, for education, for any necessary things we need to get for our lives, (pause) and for this, our expenses and these my payments. There was little money for good opportunities. We needed life better.

Like Misha, Anya also explains that for her family, a better life was needed. Instead of limiting her family to the opportunities that were available in Ukraine, she came to the United States to get a better job in order to pay off living expenses and to provide her daughter with a better education.



## **THE ECONOMY**

In this section, I discuss the differences between economic conditions during the Soviet Period and during the transition period. Before the transition, the economy was in a downturn, food was scarce and money that was made was mostly spent on food or alcohol. Living conditions were harsh and people were desperate. As mentioned above, respondents reported coming to the United States in order to get a better education which would hopefully translate into better paying jobs back home. While the economy improved after the transition, things were far from easy economically. In this section, I first describe the harsh conditions endured during the Soviet period. I next describe some of the factors respondents reported changing after the Soviet period, including not having to use all of their economic resources for basic survival and increased materialism.

### **The Economy Before the transition:**

Before the Soviet Union fell, the economic situation was grim. Food was scarce, money was hard to get, and alcohol was used as a coping mechanism to help deal with the economic issues. After the transition of the Soviet Union, an economic increase occurred, the economy showed signs of strengthening, and more resources were available to Soviet citizens. However, there were a variety of consequences from the economic changes. For example, one respondent reported having plenty of food while growing up during the Soviet period, while another respondent experienced food shortages during the Soviet period.

Chris a male Caucasian tourist in his 50's, stated that before the transition, food was hard to come by. However, after the Soviet period, food was more abundant—so much so that tables were just bulging with it.

Chris: ... when I was first in Russia [during the Cold War], the shelves in the food stores were empty. You know you'd find ah some vegetables in one corner and you'd go down to the bakery and there'd just be a few loaves left. And the meat shop of course was... almost always empty. I do remember though going to a free market in 1981, and there was food there, but of course that was at a higher price....But today, I've gone to the public market. There's plenty of food. There's food everywhere...and the tables were just swaying; they were just bowed.

Anya experienced this phenomenon with an entirely different background. Anya grew up in a fairly well-to-do home in the Ukraine. Anya stated, —So we had enough money to provide food, to provide education for kids, to buy clothes and (pause) basically for everything. So, my childhood was very happy, and I was happy member of this family...||

Anya's family had an adequate amount of food. They also had enough money to educate and clothe Anya and her siblings. She remembered her childhood as being a time of happiness when she was glad to be a member of her family. Anya's narrative divided her life story into two parts: during the Soviet Period and during the Transition Period. After the transition, her second life began and the economy worsened. Her family that was once financially comfortable and happy was no longer able to provide the necessary things needed to survive, like food and hygiene necessities:

After Soviet Union was broken, my second part of my (pause) life started. And, it's not hidden information that after 1991 all our Soviet republics, fifteen of them, they go through the rough time now. Economy went down and our lifestyle and our payments, they just are not enough to provide any, (long sigh), any necessary things. You could not get what you really want.

People in each of the fifteen Republics wanted nice things during the Soviet period, but did not have the money to afford these things. Instead, they used their limited resources to pay for alcohol or living expenses. Chris stated that, for many years, people throughout the Soviet

Union knew of advances in the West. However, they did not have access to them. They could not afford to buy something that was not a necessity.

After the end of the Soviet period, the population has been able to westernize, especially in the area of consumer fashion. Respondents reported that there is a difference in the style of dress across cultures, specifically between America and those originating from the republics. Those who live in the fifteen republics dress very formally, unlike those from America who may wear turtlenecks and shorts to feel comfortable.

However, this difference in dress has led to a conflict in social expectations across cultures. Ivan, a 22 year old male from Turkmenistan, reported that, if one does dress stylishly in routine situations in the United States, they are looked at as being out of place because they have dressed outside of the social norm.

Ivan: ...Um, (pause) \_cause when we just started walking around in Washington D.C., first week we got into States, people used to stare at us. And then we asked like American friends of ah-ours, like what was the reason they were all staring at us. And he said that, we'll always looked dressed up... How they go to work. This how we go to school. We don't (pause) wear shorts to school, sleeping pants, sandals, yeah. We're real formal in Russia and Turkmenistan. That's what different...

A similar trend was reported by another respondent, who suggested that she knew she was able to be singled out as an American when she was touring 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 following the social norms about appropriate dress in a society, is a universal concern and not a concern of just one society. The geography of a person is not as relevant as the social behavior tied to the clothing they wear within their society. If someone does not follow the dress code of their society, they are then assumed to be out of place and are consciously labeled as a foreigner.

### **The Economy After the transition:**

After the Soviet Union fell, the economies in former republics improved so that more banks were needed and foreign goods could be bought. Choices increased among food products, technology (e.g., cell phones), and cars and trucks.

One of the respondents, Anya, explained that the only thing she noticed when she went back home to Ukraine after moving to the United States was an increase in the number of banks. She stated that the only change she saw [since the transition] was the number of banks in Ukraine increased probably in three times. This symbolizes the amount of progression towards independent rule that the country has taken since it has been on its own.

After the end of the Soviet Period, people have spent their money on foreign items such as automobiles and other westernized objects like cell phones. Samantha, a 54 year old Caucasian tourist, explained that cell phones were everywhere during her trips to Russia in the early 2000's. They were very popular and were used frequently: And so a couple of years ago when I went to Magadan and they had cell phones, I was just blown away....everybody in Moscow and St. Petersburg has them and they're texting like crazy. And it's like they...didn't all get landlines before they went to cell phones.

Another thing that has changed since the end of the Soviet Period is the increase in the variety of automobiles. Automobiles are everywhere in Russia now, and many of them are foreign-made. More people have the resources to pay for a vehicle. They also have a wider selection towards which brand of vehicle they can buy, as other countries' products are now able to be bought. Chris comments that: The country is just a wash in Toyotas. And all the other Japanese brands of cars and I noticed this year for the first time that there are Fords and Chevrolets in the streets in Moscow? And this I hadn't seen before.

Chris explained that while Russia is still creating its own cars, Japanese cars are more popular. He also lists several types of cars that he has seen in Moscow, which shows that there is diversity in what vehicles are available for people to buy, and also demonstrates what brands of vehicles are common and considered to be a norm in the modern republics. He explained that in his other tours, he had not seen such a large variety of cars available. It makes sense that this phenomenon has grown since the transition. After the transition, for a few years society was still locked in —Old Soviet Times. It was a new phenomenon to have so many cars. Large portions of the cars were foreign built or made, which shows outside cultural integration, this one being by way of Japan.

## **SOCIAL BEHAVIOR**

Social conditions in the republics are characterized by lack of emotional affect, and alcohol abuse. Specifically, social conditions are characterized by the lack of expressed emotion that is shown on the streets; for example it is a cultural norm to not smile on the streets. However, this lack of emotion does not symbolize coldness. Rather it symbolizes the people's desire to mind their own business. Another social condition that is important is that of alcohol. Alcohol plays an important part in the culture of the former Soviet Union. Alcohol plays several roles, from a crucial role in the management of the economy to the root 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. One example is Misha, a 25-year-old graduate student from Russia. She explained that since she has come to the United States, she has started smiling more. Due to her religion she has always had the likelihood to smile and it is an important part of her life that she cannot live without. In Russia, she would smile while out on the streets or while interacting with others. However, this tended to arouse the suspicion of those around her who thought that she was acting oddly:

Misha: And I can't live without smile. And they thought that I weird and I fake. Some people they like —She's fake. She's smile all the time. Why is she smiling?! But I was sincere with my smiling you know. And, some of them especially the men, the old ones they thought that I'm flirting with them.

She was criticized for smiling and acting contrary to the social norms of her culture. She smiled and was not only received the wrong way by those that thought that she was —weird and fake,<sup>1</sup> but was also received the wrong way by men who thought that she was flirting with them.

The lack of emotion on the streets is not something that those from the republics consider to be cold. Rather, as Ivan 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.

Ivan: But ah, in Russia and Turkmenistan, it's not like they're cold or. Because we just don't do that. That's our culture. Just, we just mind our own business. It's not that we're cold or anything. And if we see someone that we know, then we're going to smile and talk to them. Say, but if we don't know the person, we don't usually smile. And talk.

There are times when they do smile, but when this happens, it is only done around those that they know. They do not smile around strangers. While they may not smile on the streets, they do smile at home when the public pressure is no longer on them. Because it is not common for them to smile, they also know when it is an American or foreigner walking on the streets

along with them. As one respondent, a 54-year-old Caucasian tourist, Samantha, suggests, 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. The government has total control over alcohol. This keeps it cheap and affordable to everyone. Because it is so cheap and affordable, anyone can potentially become an alcoholic.

All of my respondents mentioned the important part alcohol plays in social culture within the republics of the former Soviet Union. It is something that is quite popular and is commonly experienced by individuals long before they reach the legal age of consumption. Alcohol is an integral part of culture and is not something to be taken lightly. In this section, I review three aspects of alcohol culture that were predominate themes in my interviews: tradition, addiction, and alcohol's relation to the economy.

Respondent's suggested that traditions associated with alcohol are possibly a significant part of former Soviet Union culture. In Russia, 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. The drink that they offer their guests, particularly in Russia, is usually straight vodka shots.

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. Guests are not forced to drink, but social norms create pressure to engage in the tradition.

Chris: ...drinking has a large history in Russia. It's... connected with the culture...It's considered that when you get to know people that you'll have a drink with them...It's not something to take lightly. These people are serious about it. And of course you can decline and you can say you don't drink alcohol...but they might consider that to be a little bit odd... it's kind of expected.

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 drink daily. If someone drinks daily, they may become addicted to alcohol. In this region, people are expected to drink, but they are expected to do so without taking it too far. They are expected to have control over how many drinks they have. They are to be familiar with what too much is and how it may affect them. Being addicted may also affect one's health as well as the well being of their family.

A reason why addiction may occur is that people take their drinking too far and lose control. They break the expectations of those around them and have too much. Some may go so far as to sell out their own family in order to score a drink, such as Misha suggested when she said, —And the kids here [at a shelter where she was helping out],... their mothers sell their kids to their older guys and they can...sleep with them just for the bottle of vodka.¶ This shows just how desperate addicts may be and in turn how it can endanger them and their children.

An increase in alcoholism may be tied to the economy. Conditions are poor and it is not always easy to get work. Take for example the city of Magadan, where most of the jobs are seasonal and in mining. When most workers finally get their paycheck, this money does not necessarily go towards food or other things to survive, but instead goes towards alcohol. With the difficulty to find work and with pressures at work because opportunities are low, an



individual gives up what little money they have to pay for alcohol, may consume it often, and become addicted.

The economy is tied very closely to alcohol. In Magadan, besides the economy being led by fishing and mining, it is also run by alcohol. Due to the poor conditions in cities like Magadan, workers succumb to the temptation to find a way to keep their pain away, and that may mean through the immediate gratification of alcohol rather than saving their money to help provide for their family. The money that they spent on the gratification for alcohol provides the economy with funding. The economy depends on their money to keep functioning. 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. When a worker spends their money for alcohol instead of for their family, they can experience emotional stress as well. While streets are not lined with drunks, they do exist and drinking is part of the culture. Economic conditions in the former Soviet Union may cause for some to drink out of desperation for resolve of their personal living conditions. It is then that the frequency of drinking in an area could be dependent upon the economic conditions in that area, and how desperate people are for a resolution of these problems.

### **Discussion:**

In this paper, I explore insights gained from an analysis of the life stories of five respondents. They reported 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 reported that before the transition, there were limitations on the availability of

food and on technology. After the transition, there has been an economic increase. Food is now plentifully available, banks are expanding, technology use is increasing to include cell phone use, and the westernization of fashion is now present, as citizens wear blue jeans and dress stylishly.

The respondents also report that social conditions in the republics include the lack of expressed emotion and the acceptance of alcohol. The lack of expressed emotion specifically includes the lack of smiling on the streets. In the republics this is not a symbol of coldness, but rather a symbol of the need for people to mind their own business. The respondents also report the possibility that alcohol is a part of tradition and culture in the republics. It is taken seriously, in that guests are expected to drink what hosts offers them. If they do not take part in this tradition guests are socially criticized. 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. They state that there are expectations for people to stay away from consuming too much and that doing so would be harmful to their health.

The respondents' experiences also validate Varese's (2007) description of the economic increase in Russia—several describe an increase in material wealth and the growth of banks. While there has been increased financial security 20% of respondents said that they moved to the United States for better opportunities and to get away from violence, which is getting worse in the former Soviet Union.

This study covered why some individuals from the republics may travel to the United States. It also covered how alcohol may be a traditional aspect of the culture in the republics. Other questions remain to be answered. Is alcohol a significant traditional element of the culture of the republics of the former Soviet Union? Are there significant sociological norms and

expectations surrounding the behavior of alcohol consumption within these regions? Or are the life stories conveyed by those in this respondent pool vastly different than a larger population group may have? Further studies could also be conducted concerning the educational differences between the United States and Russia, and how these differences affect opportunities for career advancement. Since 1991, the republics have been transitioning. While they continue to adjust, several new opportunities for sociological exploration will become available, from the transition of education to the continuing progression of the economy.

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### **Faculty Mentor**

Emily M. Boyd is an Assistant Professor in the Sociology and Corrections Department at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She received her BS in Sociology from Radford University and completed her MS and PhD in Sociology at Florida State University. Her scholarship focuses on gender, interaction, sociology of the body, and media studies. She is currently working on a paper entitled —Altering Bodies, Transforming Selves: Masculinity and Femininity on *Extreme Makeover* that examines the construction and performance of masculinity and femininity on reality TV makeover programs.

### **Editor**

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