

Out of the Ruins: Cultural Negotiations in the Soviet Aftermath

Cathy Wanner, Pennsylvania State University

The essays included in this volume represent a selection of the presentations given at the seventh Annual Symposium on Cultural Studies of Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union at Columbia University on March 27 and 28, 1998. The theme of the symposium was "Out of the Ruins: Cultural Negotiations in the Soviet Aftermath" and featured twenty-five presentations. The Symposium was organized by the Research Network for Post-Communist Cultural Studies (SOYUZ) and sponsored by Columbia's Department of Anthropology, the Harriman Institute, and the Columbia Graduate Alumni Association.

The conference benefited from the participation of a number of scholars from across the globe. Although papers ranged greatly across geographic areas (from Kamchatka to Slovakia), and disciplines (the majority of participants were from anthropology, with papers from history, political science, and sociology), in one way or another, all of the papers were based on extensive fieldwork and addressed the processes by which people are trying to reclaim and reconfigure cultural, social, political, economic, religious, artistic, and intellectual authority and identity in post-Soviet times. While these processes are challenged and circumscribed in most cases by existing structures of power and practice, the Symposium papers depicted many instances of profound cultural and social revitalization.

Many papers took the metaphor of ruins as a starting point, addressing the various "afterimages," to use Symposium organizer David Koester's words, which the collapse of empire leaves. Papers dealt with the complex ways in which contemporary cultural processes converse with, build upon, and take energy from the remains of the old State. As semiotician Lily Avrutin noted, every culture need its ruins (metaphoric or physical) because these act as "doorways" into all sorts of sacred things, and offer spaces for ritual journeys into the heart of cultural meanings. Several speakers and attendees challenged the metaphor of ruins when speaking of the former Soviet Union, critiquing the image so popular in the West of a post-socialist society in decay. As many of these papers showed, even in situations of impoverishment and marginalization, people

devise meaningful local solutions and elaborate social and symbolic systems for coping with all sorts of difficulties brought about by the end of Soviet power.

An anthropological approach is particularly valuable to address these issues. Although anthropologists have traditionally contextualized localities by linking local happenings to forces in distant places, the globalization of social processes is deepening and expanding this ethnographic practice. At this historic juncture, ethnographic study in formerly socialist societies takes on increased relevance because of its ability to reveal the ways in which interlocking macro-level structural forces of dependence affect fundamental shifts in patterns of thinking and daily routines. As these essays attest, ethnographic study of cultural change in the former Soviet Union provides snapshots of history in the making, a contribution which is potentially quite useful to the work of other social scientists.

Taken as a whole, these ethnographic essays reveal not only the logistic, but also the theoretical challenges of conducting fieldwork in such a volatile context. New categories and concepts of time, space and self are necessary to bear witness to the scope, breath, and pace of change in the former Soviet Union. For example, a teleological trajectory from "developing" to "developed" is so entrenched in many theories that the idea of unidirectional change is taken for granted (i.e., development theory, modernization theory, and even to a degree political economy). But what we see in the former "Second World," and what our authors depict, is something more akin to "undevelopment," or "de-modernization." So accepted is the assumption of progress that we cannot yet refer to its antithesis except in the hegemonic terms of development and modernization, thereby reinforcing these terms as normative. Similarly, Western notions of unilinear quotidian time as divisible into equivalent units are also inapplicable. Such concepts collide with the vestiges of the socialist practice of "etatization" of time, and have led to the emergence of novel cultural forms of temporality. And yet several authors allude to the lack of vocabulary to describe and label these hybrid concepts of time and how they frame self-conception.

Time is but one element of fundamental importance affecting perceptions of social change addressed in these essays. New borders and venues of mobility, such as "economic tourism," migrant labor, and immigration, have further altered concepts of space, locale, and community. The fall of the iron curtain and the erection of new borders have coincided with the rapid movement of information, capital, and commodities. All have had enormous consequences

for the dynamics structuring communities and for the identity and worldview of their members. We can no longer assume that individuals living in close proximity to one another share a common culture or sense of solidarity. Rather, they are just as likely to have more in common with members of a transnational community based on kinship, perceived common heritage, or class allegiance. This distance from the immediate and closeness to the distant fuels a growing awareness of dispersion and shapes identity politics at this critical juncture.

And yet how does one characterize these new transnational communities? The Russians living beyond Russian borders in the "near abroad" are sometimes referred to as a "diaspora." But is the situation of these Russians analogous to other diasporas? Is "diaspora" the best means of labeling this vast group? These essays suggest that other terms, such as "deterritorialized," "displaced persons," or "ethnic minority," are also problematic. Rather, they argue, the Soviet penchant for bifurcating identities based on citizenship and nationality is being transformed in some areas where cultural repertoires are increasingly built upon the assumption of biculturalness and bilingualism. Qualitatively new types of communities are coalescing as established ones are disintegrating.

Yet, the tensions involved in crafting a nation by launching cultural projects that are blatantly nationalizing are abundantly in evidence in the newly independent states. The marketplace of identities and the competition among groups to capture the allegiance of individuals reaching far beyond the simple rubric of nation-state is a reoccurring theme in these essays. Other states, religious organizations, and new media-based influences have a vested interest in the outcomes of these processes of reorientation which prompts them to take an active role in shaping them. As a Soviet identity begins to fade for some (and continues to tenaciously beckon for others), a burgeoning array of options is available.

In another vein, we see indigenous peoples, especially in Siberia, increasingly looking beyond their borders to global social movements, often those that embrace environmentalism or human rights, as a means of redefinition and empowerment. With the option of repositioning oneself as a native people, a guardian of the global ecosystem, and accessing the resources that the global environmental movement has at its disposal, the ability of states to categorize indigenous peoples as marginalized members of the nation-state rapidly diminishes. It is becoming increasingly difficult for those in power to dismiss the concerns of citizens who inhabit the most remote areas because that is often where the media shines its light.

The aforementioned issues, along with many others, emerge from these essays. The essays are organized in four sections under the rubrics of processes of ruination and regeneration, revitalization, identity politics, and forging new frames of analysis. In the first section, Nelson Hancock's essay looks at the factors shaping Kamchadal identities from the perspective of political economy, and specifically by analyzing the tensions "between a post-structuralist theory of shifting and unstable identity constructs and the material and rhetorical power which images of fixed identities command in the world of politics and economics." Hancock details how tools used in subsistence fishing have been renamed after modern implements, such as the television and computer, as a commentary on ethnic revival and the so-called transition.

Sigrid Rausing conducted fieldwork at a now defunct collective farm in Estonia. She examines the "discourse of drink" at two types of establishments, a bar called "Gorbiland" and garden pavilions, and illustrates how signs of Soviet and Western ideology, which can each be read for a depiction of modernity, commingle.

Melissa Caldwell examines new categories of temporality, of what is "new" and what is "old," as seen through patterns of consumption. As the cultural meanings assigned to temporally distinct categories are reshuffled, she argues that food practices become both markers of time and repositories of time. When impoverished elderly pensioners are given Pepsi for lunch at a soup kitchen in Moscow, Caldwell wonders, is this the "new generation choosing Pepsi" to which the omnipresent advertisement refers?

Under the rubric of revitalization, Alanna Cooper looks at processes of identity negotiation taking place among the Bukharan Jews in post-Soviet Uzbekistan. Multiple transnational "imagined communities" with competing understandings of how Jewish identity is transmitted beckon potential members. Two emissary organizations, Chabad Lubavitch and the Jewish Agency, and the Uzbek state have each articulated guidelines for determining who is Jewish, how a Jewish identity is transmitted, and the implications for citizenship and access to resources. Yet, Cooper asserts Soviet concepts of identity and Judiasm remain tenacious and further confuse the issue. Even for those who come to some understanding of themselves as Jewish, a second question awaits, "What kind of a Jew are you?"

Using ethnographic data, Kira van Deusen illustrates how formerly Soviet citizens with little to no connection to traditional Khakass culture are now embracing such traditional practices

as musical renditions of old legends, clan rituals, and initiation rites in Khakassia. By detailing the rebirth of Khakass shamanic culture, she goes on to suggest that this revival has also become the cornerstone of other movements addressing artistic, cultural, and ecological concerns. Similarly, Eva Jane Neumann Fridman describes the revival of pre-Revolutionary belief systems. She shows how shamanistic practices drawing on Buddhism serve to distinguish the Kalmyks from Russians and from other ethnic groups. Now that a Soviet identity has collapsed, she argues that such new beliefs and practices reinforce a burgeoning sense of Kalmyk identity. Mary Doi continues the discussion of revitalization and authentication by looking at how notions of Uzbek identity are articulated in regional dance performances and in constitutional law. Providing an insightful analysis of an Independence Day concert, she concludes that both the Constitution and various art performances are necessary to establish a new social ordering as a people's trajectory to nationhood necessitates cultural underpinnings to constitutional models and laws governing citizenship.

Margaret Paxson examines the changes in the commemoration of Troitsa (Pentecost), a holiday originally associated with spring fertility rites and more recently known as a "graveyard festival" dedicated to remembering the dead. She analyzes the forces that prompted shifts in the ways that this day has been commemorated over time and the means by which the symbols associated with Troitsa have changed to forge new meanings. Based on fieldwork in a northern Russian village in 1995 and 1996, she argues that this holiday has served a viable function over time as the society lurched from one political regime to another because its commemorations stand "like milestones in a symbolic timescape."

Laura Adams focuses on two key trends in cultural production in Uzbekistan within a context of pronounced dependence of cultural elite on a beleaguered state engulfed in economic crisis. She uses holiday spectacles as a lens through which to see Soviet and post-Soviet schemas of cultural change. Adams notes the degree to which indigenous culture is being privileged over Russian or Western culture and the process by which space is created for regional or ethnic cultural groups to participate in public life.

Farhad Atai's essay focuses on the roll of state cultural policies and state funded cultural institutions, such as Houses of Culture and Writers' Associations, in the Central Asian republics after the fall of the Soviet Union. He analyzes how they are handling the transition to a market economy and assesses what this implies for future artistic and cultural development in the region.

Using the metro as a "topo-trope," Alaina Lemon analyzes the various oppositions, such as past utopia versus present chaos, past dictatorship versus present opportunity, Russia versus the West, which have been articulated in terms of the Moscow metro. She analyzes the metro as a figurative setting for contested ideologies of a society in transition. Ultimately, however, she argues that public transit narratives are a means of discussing who belongs in the city and in the nation.

Petra Rethman's essay addresses a crisis experienced by the Koriaks provoked by a rethinking of the ways in which time and history have been marked by them and for them. Wrestling with inherited narratives and periodizations of Russian history, Rethmann argues that Koriaks are trying to insert themselves into this Russianized framework of historical understanding, which often ignores consideration of non-Russian histories. She concludes that this is part of a Koriak effort to find a new vision, a new way to communicate their history and relationship to their land.

Dale Pesmen analyzes the metaphors used in everyday speech, particularly the notion of the mythical "Russian soul," to garner some coherence and meaning out of the vast turmoil of the moment. Her fieldwork is set in Omsk, a city in Siberia facing an absence of "civilization," as her informants suggest, due to the convulsive changes brought about by the slow dismantling of Soviet practices and the often cruel newfangled substitutes for the old "system."

Hibi Watanabe also alludes to the indecipherable hodgepodge of forces and influences that have infiltrated virtually all aspects of daily life and the incomprehensible contagion of change and inertia that it has bred. If Pesmen's informants were possessed by a sense of "mess," in Buriatia, where Watanabe conducted this research, he was forced to grapple with a "sense of end" as a dominant paradigm for understanding post-Soviet reality. The triad of "post-ness," as he calls it, post-socialism, post-colonialism, and post-modernism, proves of limited use when attempting to analyze forces of change that are perceived as leading to "the end." Rather, he suggests, the advent of such momentous change challenges anthropologists to undertake an anthropology of modernity by revisiting previously held assumptions of socialism, colonialism and modernity which have been thrown into question by the collapse of the Soviet Union and its aftermath.

And finally, Tom Wolfe's essay combines the theme of "ruins" in formerly Soviet society with the state of the American academy. He analyzes the current problems plaguing the

academic establishment and what this bodes for the study of cataclysmic change in other regions of the world. By reconnecting the theme of ruins and regeneration with the ethnographic reality in which many of us live, the essays have come full circle.

Taken together, these essays suggest that unpredictable improvisation is forging new social relations "out of the ruins" of the Soviet system as individuals and states strain to grapple with the surrealism of their daily lives. The exponential arrival of new cultural influences have effectively banished many old social constraints to the dustheap of history. The Chinese curse, "May you live in interesting times," has rarely loomed as large. The "interesting times" in the former Soviet Union are likely to trigger an anthropological version of the same. As we struggle to name what we see, analyze what it means, and describe what we feel in a rapidly changing context, anthropologists engaged in ethnographic research in the "field of miracles," to use the phrase evoked by Pesmen, are likely to be as enthralled as they are challenged.

It is not too much to say that the work that these and other ethnographers are doing will finally be of great historical value. It is at the level of day-to-day existence where the most important social transformations occur and where real change takes hold. When we meet at small conferences such as the Soyuz Symposium or when we pool our work for publication in this special volume of *The Anthropology of East Europe Review*, it is with a great sense of privilege at being allowed to share some of the life experience of our friends and informants, and of being able to speak and write of the momentous transformations in their world and ultimately in our own.