

## Reflections of Consistency and Projections of Ease in Russian Teenagers' Life Stories<sup>1</sup>

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You do not have to take my word for it that Russia has been going through great transformations. Scores of Western, Eastern European, and Russian social analysts have noted - sometimes with pleasure, sometimes with alarm - the sweeping political changes, alterations to the economy, and stunning developments within the public media and information networks that accompanied first perestroika, then the raspad [dis-Union], and now the move toward stabilizatsiia [stabilization] in Russia. Daily newspaper articles, television broadcasts and ordinary conversations among middle-aged and elderly Russians all hinge on this theme of change.

I arrived in Moscow in September 1995 to research the lifeworlds of young people who were growing up in the throes of such political and economic uncertainty.<sup>2</sup> But as I began interviewing 16 year-olds about their years in school and the changes they witnessed there and in the wider world I was surprised, to say the least, to hear them reject my definition of their lives as characterized by change. Instead, as they told their life stories, they stressed predictability, continuity and sameness. Teenagers, the one group about which I was certain would be acutely conscious of their country's transformations, were the only Russians who did not couch their own experiences in these terms.

My bewilderment was compounded by the fact that virtually all psycho-social and cultural theories about adolescence describe this life phase as one of impermanence. Dubbed "a labyrinth of difficult and confusing choices" (Czikszentimihaly and Larson 1984:20) and "a phase of imminence that is not quite imminent enough" (Modell and Goodman 1990:93), adolescence is usually conceptualized as "a fascinating transitional period" (Harter 1990:354) during which teenagers try on and test out identities (Erikson 1963, 1968) as they prepare for the future. Certainly I expected Russian teenagers to think of themselves from within this perspective, and to narrate their life histories as exciting stories of change. But instead, in interview after interview as they first reviewed their past and then turned to the

present they used idioms and images of continuity and sameness. Even when they spoke of their plans and hopes for the future they sounded convinced that these paths were already pre-paved. While usually ending their narratives on an optimistic note, hoping "to live well, to live at ease," hardly anyone linked their individual lives to the events and broader processes that changed their country or the choices and dilemmas that they confront as adolescents preparing themselves for an as yet unknown post-Soviet adult world. This paper is a first attempt to grapple with the puzzle of why.

### Methods

In September 1995 I arrived in Moscow to spend 6 months with teenagers in a variety of schools. While Moscow was my base--the site of participant-observation and the majority of my interviews (61 in six different school settings)--I made field trips to St. Petersburg and Dzerzhinsk where I visited three schools in each city and interviewed 42 teenagers (28 in St. Petersburg, 14 in Dzerzhinsk). I made every attempt to talk with young people from different rungs in the social scale, while avoiding both extremes.<sup>3</sup>

The Soviet school system, and its present day descendant, the Russian school system, has three kinds of (secondary) educational facilities: the eleven-year school complex,<sup>4</sup> the specialized technikum, and the vocational high school (PTU). Some school complexes have devoted grades 8 or 9 through 11 to an enriched secondary education in which students are directed onto a humanities track or a natural sciences track as they prepare to attend a VUZ (a university or institute of higher education) in the years to come.<sup>5</sup> In Soviet times, except for some special schools, all students took the same course of studies to qualify for the attestat zrelosti [secondary school diploma].

Not all children, however, complete 11 grades in school. At the end of 9th grade, exams are given to determine which pupils will continue in the academic

schools, and who will take a vocational program. Towards the end of 9th grade, the school administration and the students--or more precisely, the students' parents--determine who remains in school and who transfers to a *technikum* or to a vocational school.

I spent much of my time in Russia in these various educational settings, watching teenagers in interaction with each other and with their teachers. I was part of many animated and several dull conversations between classes (and sometimes during them!) and on the steps of the school at the end of the schoolday. In addition, I went to the theater with a group of girls and joined a few small celebrations. I also made several visits to teen hangouts in Moscow--Gorky Park and on the Arbat--and watched groups of young people travel together by bus, tram and metro.

All told, I took life history interviews from 103 young people, all conducted in Russian, of course, except for four cases. Two boys at a classical gymnasium in St. Petersburg took the opportunity of the interview to "practice English," while at another gymnasium in Moscow, one girl, who wants to become an English-Russian translator, spoke to me in stilted, almost Dickensian 19th century English. The fourth, also a Moscow gymnasium pupil, gave me the conversational pleasure of her near-native, colloquial American English which she had attained the year before as an exchange student in the United States. In St. Petersburg and Dzerzhinsk I conducted all of the interviews in the students' schools in empty classrooms or the teachers' room. The majority of Moscow interviews occurred in the schools too; however, I was invited home by 14 Moscow students, and five teenagers (of the ten I interviewed from the school right across the street from where I lived) came to my apartment. The interviews lasted from 30 minutes to four hours, averaging at about one hour each.

### **Narrating Life Histories**

I sat individually with over 100 teenagers in order to hear them speak about themselves without the usual audience of several classmates (the *kollektiv*). I wanted them to feel free to construct their life stories, tell about their families, portray themselves as

personalities, and offer their opinions on the world around them. I was eager to know how they situate themselves as young people in Russia, and to grasp how they make sense of their development from child to adolescent on the verge of adulthood (see Watson and Watson-Franke 1985).

As I sat with these young people in their schools, in their homes, and in my little apartment, it became clear that I was one of very few, if not the only adult who had ever asked them to talk freely about themselves and to give their opinions of the world. Many of the teenagers did not know how to tell their stories, although they wanted to.<sup>6</sup> They kept asking me to ask them more questions--to narrow down and define the fields of inquiry. I, however, wanted the interviews to be as open as possible so that the teenagers could present themselves in their own way, according to their personal style.

Typically, the teenagers had difficulty getting started. Most began their narratives on shaky ground, having a hard time remembering anything they deemed worthwhile to tell about their childhood. Many claimed to have no memories prior to age 7, their first year of school:

Ivan: I don't know what to say. Well, kindergarten, then school. Well, all our children start at about 4 years old. Kindergarten and then school, and before that, well, mama.

Liza: It was just an ordinary childhood, I guess, of every child here, and, but you know, I just don't remember very much from my childhood. I remember pretty well the first years of school here, but not the kindergarten.

Once they did begin talking, the teens focused their reminiscences on institutional life: *yasli*, which is nursery or a creche for infants, and then *detskii sad*, or kindergarten, which most attended from age 3 until they entered school as seven-year-olds. Virtually all these teenagers dubbed their childhood years "ordinary," and indeed, with very few exceptions, they all followed the same life course. Only a few girls told me that their mothers stayed home with them so that they did not have to attend kindergarten. Everyone else attended on a daily basis, and some of the youngsters who had no grandparents living with

them, especially those from single-parent families, spent the entire week in the kindergarten, sleeping there each night and returning home only on the weekends.

Those who did portray themselves as out of the ordinary were teenagers who recalled childhood illnesses or disabilities. Some called attention to the fact that they had been "sickly" children, who easily caught cold and consequently spent more time at home than in kindergarten; others told of periods of hospitalization for weak lungs, poorly functioning kidneys, or thin blood. Four boys told me about attending a special kindergarten for children with speech problems because they could not pronounce the rolling Russian /r/ correctly. But even they followed the implicit rule of describing their early childhood as a time of carefree regularity, conformity, and predictability.

While most of the teens skipped over their early childhood, giving but a brief description of kindergarten attendance, a small group focused their reminiscences on homeplace. Some, like Olga, directed attention to their native cities and to the fact that they are permanently rooted there:

I was born in Moscow, and I've never gone anywhere else. I've never had anywhere else to go. I've always been in the same place.

Those who did choose to talk about their homes described difficult living conditions. Unlike the teens who lived in regular apartments, those who started life in workers' dormitories and kommunalki [communal apartments] clearly remember these situations; knowing that these living conditions were not the norm in the 1980s,<sup>7</sup> they discussed them in detail:

Dmitry: At the very beginning I lived with mama in a dormitory. My father left us when I was one year old. And then mama married my stepfather, but I also call him papa. Then we moved. I was already about 3 years old when we got an apartment - no, not an apartment, a room, in a communal apartment, here, not far from here. And we lived in this one room, and then my little brother was born. And we all lived there until just before I went into the first grade, we all 4 of us lived in that little room.

Whether they are from one-parent families, two-parent families, or families with a step-parent (usually stepfather), the teenagers tend to describe their childhood years as "happy," if they remember them at all. Two boys and a girl recall that there was a period of time when their fathers drank heavily, and that there were arguments between their parents. In two of these three cases the parents divorced, and in the other, "now things are fine. My father quit drinking, a long time ago. I hardly remember it at all."

A few girls described how they loved to dance and sing around the house, and Anton told of his "striking feature: I always had a blanket with me, a little one. And if I lost it, I burst out crying. I always walked around with that little blanket, everywhere." But in the main the teenagers omitted descriptions of their personalities and depicted their early childhood as "ordinary," concentrating their reminiscences on the day-care institutions in which they spent the better part of their time.

Another noticeable feature of the majority of these life history accounts is the teenagers' frequent use of the passive voice, especially when describing moments of transition. Rather than "I began kindergarten at age 3," or "I started school when I was seven years old," or "I became an Octobrist in second grade," or "I joined the Pioneers Organization at the end of third," they told me: roditeli menia otdali detskom sadu [my parents 'gave me out' to kindergarten]; kogda mne bylo 7 let, shkola nachilas' kak u vsekh [school started for me at age 7 like for everyone else]; nas prineli v Oktiabriatakh/Pionirskoi organizatsii [we were taken into the Octobrists/Pioneer organization].

This use of the passive voice, I would argue, is not simply a linguistic convention but a reflection of these young people's experience. Several teens told me how teachers in early grades urged pupils to do well because if they did not, they would not be accepted into the Octobrists and Pioneers. And no one could not be accepted. In Katya's words, "It was very important for everyone. You could not, you dared not have even imagined that someone would not become a Pioneer. It was just a disgrace."

The teenagers talk of becoming a Pioneer in the passive voice because the process was passive. They portray their moments of pride at the ceremony that transformed them from little children-*Octobrists* to older, more responsible *Pionners* as deceptive for everyone was inducted into the *Pioneers* sooner or later, and no one changed. It was a normal, necessary part of being a child in the USSR,<sup>8</sup> not a personal or special achievement. Oxana sums up the sentiment: "Yes, I was an *Octobrist*. I was a *Pioneer*. We were all very proud when we first became *Pioneers*. We all wanted to be taken into *Pioneers*, to wear the red tie. Everyday I washed and ironed it - it became simply a ritual. And then, well after we were brought into *Pioneers*, we didn't do anything. It was just, absolutely, the name."

Perhaps this view of their non-change into *Pioneers* explains the almost universal answer to my question about the transformations they witnessed in their schools: What changes? I was certain that as they thought about the centrality of Lenin in the stories and verses they had learned in the first grades, the integral role that *Octobrists* and *Pioneers* had played in the school routine, and the omnipresent symbols of the Soviet regime and the Communist Party that had once decorated classrooms and corridors, eleventh graders would have much to say about changes in their school over the past ten years. The initial reaction of just about everyone, however, was to assert that there have been no changes.

Lyonya: A school is a school, a house of knowledge. As it was, so it is, and so it will be.

Whether or not objectively measurable changes in pedagogical style, content of lessons, and the school atmosphere occurred is impossible to tell because although just about all the teenagers proclaim that there were none, teachers and school administrators adamantly report that there are now enormous differences in every facet of the school routine.<sup>9</sup> In my own observations I saw pupils rewarded with good grades for reciting verbatim from the textbook or from their teachers' lectures, and it was rare indeed to hear a teacher enter into debate with her or his students.

The only change that the teenagers unanimously note is the abandonment of school uniforms that occurred

around the time that the Pioneer Organization was disbanded (1990-1991). Boys, girls, those in Soviet polyester, those in made-in-China sweaters and locally-produced jeans, those in flashy colors or those in dull greys, as well as the tiny minority who look like they stepped off the pages of *Cosmopolitan* magazine (a Russian language edition is very popular among school girls) without exception spoke of the transition from school uniforms to free-style dressing. A few insightful gymnasium pupils in St. Petersburg exclaimed that this was their first step out of *chustvo stada*, the "herd mentality" that they had experienced all their lives.

Paul Willis (1990:85) notes that "Clothes, style and fashion have long been recognized as key elements in young people's expression, exploration and making of their own individual and collective identities. They remain amongst the most visible forms of symbolic cultural creativity and informal artistry in people's lives in our common culture." While reflecting about their school years, teenager after teenager noted that this most basic of outlets had been denied to them and to previous generations. Being able to wear their own clothes, to make decisions about how to present themselves in public, marked an important moment in their lives. It, more than induction into *Pioneers*, or even the political changes of perestroika and disunion, was the most important--and permanent--transition in their lives. And the teenagers discussed it in the active voice.

The passive voice returned, however, in regard to higher education and career goals. And it is not only the young people who pursue less prestigious educational options who discuss their futures as if they are narrowly defined and pre-determined. A large plurality of 11th graders (33 of the 75 I spoke with) want to become "economists" or "lawyers," but they have hardly a clue as to what economists or lawyers do. The teenagers do know, however that these jobs (1) are located indoors in offices where they can sit comfortably throughout the day; (2) are prestigious and place them automatically into the country's "intelligentsia";<sup>10</sup> (3) carry good salaries, and (4) are in demand. All the pupils who aspire to these careers attend preparatory courses at institutes or universities in the hope of improving their chances for admission.

In the main, Russia's teenagers have geared their education and career choices to professions that are in demand and/or to where they have family connections. Unlike previous generations who went into engineering in droves, these young people have witnessed the crumbling of the Soviet infrastructure and massive layoffs that have occurred in the military-industrial complex. They are preparing for jobs in newly important professional spheres - like business and law - but with a fatalism similar to that of their parents as they entered various technical fields or the scientific study of Marxism-Leninism.

Finally, I ended each interview with the question: What are your hopes, dreams, expectations? What do you want for yourself? Typically the answer was: "To get into institute, complete institute, find a good job, have a family. To live well, to live at ease [zhit' khorosho, zhit' spokoino]." The teenagers' projections for the future did not go beyond age 25: a good job, a spouse, a child or two - modest ambitions and aspirations. To ask for more is to tempt fate; to ask for less is not to live.

### **Some Brief Conclusions**

Adolescence in Russia is more a time of being than a time of becoming. Whereas in the West, "youth is frequently seen by sociologists as being in the forefront of social change...the advance party where innovation or alteration in the values of society are concerned" (Coleman & Hendry 1990:202; also Esman 1990:85), Russian teenagers view their final years in school, and even their program of study at a VUZ, as the last time to enjoy their state of dependence and protection, not as an important moment for taking direct action to change their country and change themselves.

In its time, the Soviet government issued child support and student stipends to assure that children--including adolescents--be (dependent) children, free of problems better handled and resolved by adults. It seems that most contemporary Russian parents and their teenage sons and daughters agree for it is rare to see students working part-time or during the summers (German, et al. 1994)<sup>11</sup> although the child support and student stipends issued today by the Russian Federation are far from adequate. Veronika, in summarizing her plans for the next five years,

emphasizes that youth is and should be a carefree time, unburdened with social or familial responsibilities:

Well, I think that this is still the age when I'll still be in school, when I don't have to worry about money or supporting a family. Truly, I want to enjoy the time and the age!

Because children-teenagers have internalized change as the norm, the instability of the moment as the regular state of affairs and recognize the limits of their ability to effect the direction of these changes, the teen years in Russia are not a period of "immanence and becoming." Although Russian adolescents can and do experiment with dress and style, listen to a variety of music, watch (pirated) videos from all over the world, and aspire to professions that simply were not in the orbit of their parents' dreams, they aver that things haven't changed much, that their choices are fixed, and that what they want from life is "to live well, to live at ease."

Unlike the richly experimental moment during perestroika when Russia's youth was engaged in a plethora of subcultural activities (Cushman 1995; Easton 1989; Frisby 1989; Pilkington 1994), in the mid-1990s they are putting their energies into individualistic pursuits--first their schooling, and then their hobbies and friendships. And despite dire warnings that emerged as Russia embarked on its transition to a free market economy, teenagers are not, in the main, dropping out of mainstream society, or seeking instant monetary gratification by peddling souvenirs, cigarettes, tomatoes or themselves for they have seen this trend come and go. Hoping to acquire professions that pay well and that are in demand, Russian teenagers are pragmatic (Korzheva 1995) and even-keeled. They most certainly do not want a return to Communism, and they are repelled by the radical nationalism of Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. Even as they look at their changing bodies and sharpening analytical skills, they admit to being tired of change, and especially of the rhetoric of change, a rhetoric that has pervaded their entire lives. Having witnessed the political and economic ups and downs of perestroika and Soviet dis-Union, and the paucity of tangible transformations that these "changes" brought to their lives, they use their adolescence as a time to

be: students, children, dependents, taking change in stride as a normal part of their everyday life. Rather than making more waves through identity experimentation and subcultural production, they want nothing more from life than to "live well, live at ease" in what they hope will be a calm and prosperous twenty-first century for Russia.

## Notes

1. This is a revised and abbreviated version of my article, "To Live Well, To Live at Ease": Life course Reflections and Projections of Post-Soviet Russian Teenagers, that I presented at the 1996 annual meetings of the American Anthropological Association in San Francisco, and that is scheduled for publication in Adolescence. The research upon which this paper is based was supported by a 1995/96 Individual Research Opportunity grant from the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX) with funds provided by the National Endowment for the Humanities and the US Department of State. None of these organizations is responsible for the views expressed.
2. My grant proposal to IREX was informed by this conventional wisdom, gleaned from journalistic accounts (especially from the New York Times and OMRI reports), academic articles (especially from Slavic Review and Refuge), verbal reports from friends in the immigrant community in the US and Israel, two visits I had made to Russia in 1994 following my first one in April 1993, and from Russian academic colleagues.
3. There is more material on super-rich "New Russians" (including the Mafia and businessmen) and on the dispossessed, homeless than there is on the vast majority of Russia's population. I wanted to avoid falling into the trap of concentrating on the triumphs of Russia's new elite and/or of following homeless teenagers through their scams and struggles.
4. Until 1989 the general secondary school offered a ten-year program of studies. Since 1989 it has become an eleven-year program. All the 1995/96 eleventh graders (who started school in 1986) skipped fourth grade and went directly into fifth. Thus their eleven year program actually consisted of ten grades.
5. Private gymnziums and lycees have sprung up in Russia's major cities, but since I did not visit any of these schools for the (new) economic elite, I will leave them out of the discussion. I did, however, visit three

gymnaziums (one each in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Dzerzhinsk) that are under the aegis and funding of the Russian Federation's Ministry of Education.

6. All the kids in Moscow, and Dzerzhinsk were volunteers. In fact, I had more volunteers than I knew what to do with. The gymnasium pupils in St. Petersburg were all volunteers as well, but homeroom teachers in the two St. Petersburg schools I visited recruited pupils for me. They too reported having trouble selecting from among all the kids who wanted to have an opportunity to talk about themselves to "our American guest."
7. In fact, I was surprised when I took my first interview from a girl who recalled the kommunalka she lived in until age 10, 1989!! Any and all of my friends/informants in New York and Israel - immigrants from the Former Soviet Union - told me in 1984, 85, 87, 88 about moving from communal to state-owned or cooperative apartments no later than the early 1960s, during Khrushchev's regime, the very latest was in the early 1970s (see Markowitz 1993). I had been under the (false) impression that no one in the major cities of Russia lived any more in communal apartments. Of the 103 teenagers I interviewed, two boys - one in St. Petersburg, and one in Moscow, presently live in communal apartments.
8. Of the 103 teenagers I interviewed and several dozen more with whom I had informal conversations, only one boy, Aleksei, never "made it to Pioneers." I was shocked! How could he not have been a Pioneer? He explains:

I didn't like participating--in the old newspaper drives, and in the scrap metal drives, And all kinds of plays that were put on. See, I like them, I just didn't want to participate. I wanted to sit on the side and watch...They just told some of us: Do better in your schoolwork or you won't get into Pioneers. Therefore, therefore, I didn't...See, they took us in on how well we did [in school], our behavior, and desire. And I had no desire.

9. I observed in most if not all the classes I attended that the teachers read lectures to their students and had them copy their words verbatim. Each week or so the teachers collected students' notebooks and checked that lecture notes were properly recorded. When students were called upon to answer questions, they were expected to deliver memorized passages from lectures or textbooks; several kids kept their books open and read from them in order to get an excellent grade for the day's class recitation.

In a few history and literature classes, however, I noticed teachers encouraging their pupils to express their opinions. Some teachers told me that they now have the freedom to prepare lessons as they see fit, to incorporate "new" (i.e., recently revealed and/or permitted material such as statistics about Stalin's repressions, and the poetry of Mandelstam) material into their course outlines, and to present their material in an innovative fashion. Yet students complained to me that while their teachers may tell them to express their own opinions, they are penalized if they do not include in their compositions exactly what they are told.

10. In the USSR and today's Russia, all "scientific workers," administrators, and educators are classified as "intelligentsia." The designation of "white-collar," or managerial-administrative, simply did not exist. Today's businessmen, bankers, marketing and management personnel elicit ambivalent reactions; on the one hand, their elegant offices and large salaries are held in high esteem, but on the other, many see them as modern-day speculators whose wealth is ill-gained (Smith 1990).
11. In my sample of 103, only 3 girls and 5 boys told me of the jobs they hold. Olga works off-the-books as a janitress five nights a week; Lena pastes up advertisements, and Marina sells "shampoos and such that Papa brings home from work" outside a metro station a few mornings a week. Maksim works after school in a produce base; Aleksei worked last summer in the factory that employs his parents; Dima distributes video cassettes for his uncle, and Ippolit worked to get signatures (\$1 per signature) for the political candidate who employs his mother. Sasha boasted that he is a racketeer, and stressed to me that this is good training for becoming a businessman.

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