

INTRODUCTION

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Undertaking anthropological analysis of post-Soviet cultural worlds presents several unique challenges. One is the problem of "starting from scratch," due to the relative scarcity of ethnographic work describing local meanings and practices before the perestroika era. In the field of post-Soviet anthropology, researchers lack, for the most part, existing ethnographic accounts of the societies in which they study. While many ethnographers face this problem to some extent, there is usually an existing corpus of anthropological work about local cultural systems on which to draw, and in dialogue with which to pose one's own theoretical problems, questions, and interpretations.¹

Though ethnology was an important science in Soviet times, Soviet ethnographers were constrained both institutionally and ideologically by the necessity to produce works which conformed to a Marxist paradigm of historical development. As Dragadze put it, "A Soviet anthropologist is a historian, not a sociologist" (1987:155). In general, Soviet researchers were compelled to study the historical development of the cultures of the Soviet Union, and to either ignore manifestations of contemporary local culture which diverged from the presumably internationalized, Sovietized model, or to view (or represent) these as "disappearing remnants" of traditional forms. As a result, while Soviet ethnographers produced extremely rich and valuable ethno-historical accounts (see Dunn and Dunn 1974, Balzer 1992 for selections in English), work on contemporary socio-cultural processes were almost non-existent.²

Although a handful of intrepid ethnographers from Europe and North America (among them Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, Tamara Dragadze, Caroline Humphreys, and Christel Lane) managed to do fieldwork in the Soviet Union in the years before perestroika, it is only since 1988 that significant opportunities have existed for Western ethnographers to work there, especially in urban environments.

This relative lack of ethnographic predecessors means that the accounts now being written of perestroika-era or post-Soviet cultural processes have to "take off running"; ethnographers are faced with the problem of describing cultural practices and local meanings as these manifest in a time of significant upheaval, with all the paradoxes, conflicts, tensions, and forms of resistance and conformity which accompany that upheaval, without the benefit of ethnographically-grounded discussions of the social ironies and complex negotiations of identity which preceded this historical moment. Writing ethnographic studies of the perestroika and post-Soviet eras often, thus, involves providing extensive historical and contextual backgrounds which depict Soviet realities (themselves complex and multivalent) and then situating current findings in discourse with discussions of the past (see, for instance, Pilkington 1994 and Grant 1995, and Schweitzer and Golovko this volume).

A second challenge for post-Soviet ethnography is entailed by the fact that while the post-Soviet context provides ethnographers the opportunity to witness at first hand and record rather unprecedented processes of social transformation, the very rapidity, enormity, and complexity of those transformations can challenge our ability to depict and explain cultural practices and their meanings. As individuals, groups, and nations struggle to "produce themselves anew" we witness, in many cases, a radical and ongoing fragmentation of voices, and a constant shifting of positions both social and symbolic which makes it difficult to "capture" an event or interpret a representation before its meaning is altered or undermined by competing or contradictory events or narratives. While social meanings and practices were never "stable" or unparadoxical in Soviet times, the collapse of the Soviet system has meant the development of new "layers" of representation and negotiation which must be "read" in tandem with the newly problematized (or newly foregrounded) structures and tensions of the past.

If most of the papers in this volume deal with the complexities of working in the post-Soviet environment by tracing local expressions and practices and by focusing narrowly on one domain of late or post-Soviet experience (as the ethnographic method allows us to do), each reveals from its own perspective more general trends in the negotiation of that experience. By closely examining the development of private schools in Ukraine, for example, Cathy Wanner's paper highlights the ongoing tensions between Soviet and post-Soviet constructions of gender, cultural authority, and ethnic identity, tensions which are widespread in the societies of the former Soviet Union. Jennifer Dickinson's study of narratives of the blockade of Leningrad portrays the ambivalence survivors of the Great Patriotic War have towards their wartime experiences, the conflict which long existed between "official" Soviet and personal representations of the war, and the ways in which those competing representations may fuel tension between generations. Both of these papers illuminate the practice of "retelling the past" which can be a key operation in the negotiation of social value and power.

Corinna Snyder centers her paper around her experience of a ritual "visit to the past" through which citizens of Vilnius attempted to experience in a visceral and direct way the "Truth" of their endurance of Soviet rule and their triumph over it, by visiting the former KGB headquarters as it was about to be turned into a museum. Her paper well captures the impossibility of trying to reinvigorate a shared memory of oppression and produce an essence of national unity from it.

Stephanie Platz's paper on kinship in Armenia provides a telling glimpse into interconnected and sometimes contradictory systems of association; her discussion sheds light on the ambivalence citizens in post-Soviet contexts display towards unitary evaluations of such concepts as "state" and "family." Alaina Lemon's paper reveals the ironic twists that her Romani informants give to their identity, and the ways that they play with constructions of their "blackness" to negotiate their social interactions within Russian society. Studies of ethnic conflicts in the former Soviet Union can benefit greatly from this

kind of attention to the intricate ways identity is "lived."

Paula Garb's paper also focuses our attention on the specificities of ethnic relations; she offers a sobering reflection on local modes of conflict resolution and avoidance in Abkhazia, and the critical importance of understanding local ideologies and practices when trying to mediate inter-ethnic conflicts.

Petra Rethmann's paper offers an overview of Soviet methods for controlling the "bodies" of indigenous peoples as a way of shaping the body politic in the Soviet Far East; in this, and her other work on the Koryak people of Kamchatka, Rethmann discusses the interaction between the colonizing force of the Soviet state and local modes of resistance to it. The ongoing research of Peter Schweitzer and Evgeniy Golovko focuses on the inter-ethnic relations of various Bering Straits communities, and suggests that the cultural memory and valuing of cross-Bering exchange has remained continuous, despite international prohibitions against and limitations on such exchange.

A very different kind of cultural "exchange" is depicted in Jennifer Rayport's paper on Leningrad "Indianists" who, even in the Soviet period, tried to replicate the lifeways and values of Native Americans and thus exclude themselves from mainstream Soviet Russian society. This paper suggests the need for further study on practices of resistance to Soviet cultural hegemony and the ways that the post-Soviet experience may either quench or facilitate resistant modes of identity construction.

Finally, Dale Pesmen's paper demonstrates that even something as seemingly straightforward as drinking, when explored through extended ethnographic study, can reveal the paradoxes of power, community, and exchange and the ways that the meanings of these are constantly shifted and constructed in the most quotidian forms of practice.

The papers collected here represent just a small sample of the creative ways that a "new generation" of anthropologists, many of them still working on dissertations, are widening the field of post-Soviet studies. 3 Taking advantage of the recent opportunity to do ethnographic fieldwork, and utilizing the rich

methodologies, theoretical models, and comparative resources available to them from the discipline, anthropologists working in the former Soviet Union, along with colleagues working in Eastern Europe, are already greatly enriching area studies. In addition, they are poised to contribute their detailed observations of societies undergoing enormous, unpredictable, multiple transformations to an anthropological community increasingly concerned with the paradoxes, conflicts, and ambivalences of culture.

Textnotes

1. Obviously, there is voluminous work from other disciplines from which we all can and do draw; however, the absence of a specifically anthropological focus to these works means that we must, in many cases, piece together from political science, sociology, and literature reference material pertaining to the kinds of concerns central to the anthropological project.
2. "There is no Russian culture, only Soviet culture," said one ethnographer to me in 1989, in all earnest, adding with some bitterness, "Russian culture was destroyed by the revolution." Massive upheavals in the social sciences since the collapse of the Soviet Union have given local ethnographers much more conceptual space in which to frame their research interests, but this opening of intellectual paradigms has occurred in tandem with a calamitous evaporation of research funding opportunities (see Tishkov's description of the "crisis" in Soviet ethnography and the variety of responses to his paper).
3. The rapid widening of the field is attested by the fact that the network of post-Soviet ethnography which we call SOYUZ (with all irony intended!) now has over 150 members. Colleagues interested in post-Soviet cultural studies should see the listing in this volume for information on membership.

References

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