

Notes from the Field: Russia, Summer, 1994

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I recently spent two weeks in Moscow (26 August-7 September 1994) laying the ground work for a year-long ethnographic project I plan to conduct during 1995-96. Intrigued by the radical culture change that is reshaping their country, my goals are to assess how Russian teenagers come of age in such a milieu and to describe what role (if any) they are playing in building Russia's future. Fieldwork, I decided, would begin with school-based observations of teenagers, gradually broadening to include participation in their family life and leisure activities as the year unfolds.

All this sounded well and good to me on paper, but before venturing into the wide world of funding agencies, I wanted to assess the feasibility of the study from both an academic and personal standpoint. I had "heard"- from newspapers, magazines, and expatriates- so much about danger and violence on the streets of Moscow that I was hesitant to spend a year in Russia. I had also "heard" that resentment of foreigners, particularly Americans, is growing, and that students and teachers would not be very cooperative with my research efforts. I had no way of knowing if what "I had heard" would indeed make life as an anthropologist unbearable unless I could come to Moscow, poke my head into a few class rooms, strike up conversations with teenagers, with their teachers, with colleagues in sociology and anthropology, and generally assess the feasibility of the study.

With the help of an IREX short-term travel grant, and the hospitality of friends and friends-of- friends and colleagues at the institute of Sociology (personal connections are still the route to almost everything), I was able to get a brief "feel" for the Moscow scene. Some of the hearsay I had received was confirmed; some now seem exaggerated after two weeks of observation on the Arbat, Moscow's major pedestrian mall, in the subways, on residential streets and in three schools, and conversations with teenagers, teachers, parents, sociologists, ethnographers and entrepreneurs. Much of what I saw and heard disturbed me greatly, but it did indeed confirm the feasibility of my project - and its importance.

Interviews and conversations with leading sociologists and ethnographers about current trends in Russia's political-economy, family life, interpersonal relations, and opportunities for the younger generation in the main, confirmed the impressions I gained over the two weeks.

Whereas a year and a half ago people on the streets of Moscow were engaged in excited political conversations, and dragged me into them as I leafed through journals and looked over souvenirs, now interest in politics has waned and the theme of how to make money has taken its place. Hundreds of technocrats, engineers of various levels, school-teachers and other State employees have left their profession to become "businessmen" - mostly in order to make ends meet, a few hopes of getting rich quick.

As I walked through Moscow from one neighborhood market to another, I couldn't help but notice the huge preponderance of imported products for sale - Cypriot orange juice, Hungarian apple juice, German fruit and yogurt cups, Danish sausage, American chocolate bars and chewing gum, not to mention clothing from Turkey and China - which made me wonder why Russia's factories were not putting out the same items. I raised these issues in my discussions with anthropologists and economists. While some expressed optimism that Russia would soon emerge from its economic (particularly industrial) depression, others declared their fears of a growing tendency among people across a wide spectrum of educational levels and occupations - in particular, their own associates in the social and natural sciences - to support a return to communism, or to create another totalitarian regime of national fascism. Faced of stability - national, professional and personal - as well as the difficulty of making enough money to lead a middle-class life, people are eager to see re-imposed a strong authority to make the streets safe again, reassert Russia's international authority, and give a socially useful place to each citizen. A younger colleague continually expressed the "minority opinion" that the current headlong rush into import or "paper" businesses (auction houses; get-rich-quick schemes) and Mafia control will eventually lead to reinvestment in the infrastructure and a strong, democratic Russia. But in the main, social analysts reported a general entrenchment of political disappointment coupled with the focusing of individual attention on making money.

Colleagues at the Institute of Sociology were also generous in giving me recent reports of research conducted and research-in-progress among Russia's - particularly Moscow's - teenagers. Most of the information gleaned in the past several years - on a wide range of topics from sexual behavior to attitudes toward school - has come the survey of research. no ethnographic studies have been conducted at all so that several researchers expressed enthusiasm for my study. Not only did they acknowledge that in general Russian (i.e. Soviet) sociologists and anthropologists are quite unskilled in qualitative research methods but also that with their constricted budgets it

made more sense for their Institute to focus on survey research, which could reach more people over a shorter amount of time, than to support a few individuals in the field for year-long periods.

Back out on the street, I observed and talked with teenagers at leisure on the Arbat on August 30 and 31st. For the past several years, teenagers have been congregating at the "Graffiti Wall" at a well known street corner. In April of 1993, during my first visit to Moscow, young people there were eager to talk to me, a visiting American, about changes in their country, about rock music, and to ask me about American teens. This time, the teenagers had a hastily scrawled NO PHOTOGRAPHS sign taped to a wall, and were quite diffident when I approached them. They pointed at the sign, pointed at my camera and told me that "This isn't a zoo." I responded, "Of course this isn't a zoo. It's an interesting place with interesting people." they shifted uncomfortably on their cushions and answered my questions about the upcoming school year. Several told me that they were not going back to school, they preferred to "just sit." When I asked them what they would do when winter came, a bright-eyed girl replied that there was a pipe a few meters down that provides heat, and they would "just sit" there. This "nothing to do-nowhere to go" attitude prepared me for some of the conversations with the teens in school. I attended the September 1st school opening ceremonies the next day at the Izmailovskaya Gymnaziia, the new name of Moscow public school 1507. This new name reflects the school's intent to recreate a classical European educational environment. One astute analyst told me that it has now become difficult to find a school not proclaiming itself to be a lycee or gymnasium. At the Izmailovskaya I witnessed a parade of parents with video cameras recording their 7-year old children's entry into school and noted the contrast between the gala new clothes on the small children and the jeans and sweaters on teenagers. I was stunned by the lack of ideological statements or symbols in this 70-year old, traditional Soviet ritual. The State was not invoked the school director's welcome speech, and while flowers were placed on a monument commemorating the Second World War, no veterans took the stage or made speeches. Just before the incoming first grade paraded into the school building to initiate the school year, two second-graders, dressed in folk costumes of colorful felt, came up to the podium bringing bread and salt, traditional items of greetings and housewarming. Otherwise, save for a lone Russian flag, there were no signs of nationalism, religion, or any ideological movement.

In the day that followed, I observed upper-grade mathematics, geography, history classes in three very different Moscow schools - the Izmailovskaya Gymnaziia, School No. 1234 in the mainly middle class Arbat district, and School No. 712 in a working-class district and held group conversations with students during the last 10-15 minutes of their classes while virtually all the students expressed their desire to continue on for higher education, several teens told me that they have no expectations for the future, cannot say where they will be in 10 years, 5 year or next year because they do not know what will be tomorrow. Those with some certainty about what they wish to study stressed economics, banking and finance. One young man said he wanted to be a police investigator to end much street crime. But basically the teens complained of lack of stability, uncertainty regarding their future, and a lack of structured activities. This attitude particularly striking in the working-class school where students shouted, "Nyet Pionirov, nyet Komsomolov, nyet nichego!" (No young pioneer corps, no young Communist league, no nothing!) in response to my question about what they do in their leisure time. They were distressed that there are no longer state-wide guidelines and activities to shape their life and cynically doubtful that they can do anything at all to remedy the situation.

What do they do? Drink beer or talk on the telephone with friends, watch television, and of course, do their homework. One boy told me that he wants to emigrate the U.S. and asked me if I could be his sponsor. But in general, as far as I could tell from my brief encounters, these young people see themselves spending their lives in Russia. They laughed at me when I suggested that they could structure the course of their country's future, countering my optimism with their observation that with the insecurity (nestabilnost') in Russia's economy and political system, it is best to make no plans at all. They portrayed themselves as passive leaves blown about by the caprices of time, somewhat bitter and quite resigned.

Of course, I cannot and will not generalize from a few conversations over a two week period. I am simply reporting what seems to be general trends of disappointment and frustration deriving from a grave feeling of uncertainty about the future. I hope to return next year to investigate further what it is like to come of age in a changing Russian culture in search of itself.