FROM RUSSIA WITH LOVE: A TRANSNATIONAL HISTORY OF POST-SOVIET WIVES AND THEIR AMERICAN HUSBANDS

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis addresses the motivations and experiences of post-Soviet women who married American men though internet agencies in the 1990s and 2000s. I explain the historical context for these migrations, unpack the mechanics of international marriage, and shed light on the experiences of Russian women and their marriages in America.

As the post-Soviet period enters the discipline of history, I aim to complicate earlier scholarship which focused on the legal side of international marriage as an industry, without thorough exploration of the individuals involved. My research, based heavily on eight interviews conducted during the summer of 2021, emphasizes the agency of Russian women as they consciously sought loving marriages and material security, while simultaneously navigating the gendered strains of the Soviet collapse.

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my husband Tanner, who has been a constant source of support during my master's degree and who has believed in me from the very beginning. It is also dedicated to my advisor, Dr. Julie Hessler, who let me take on this project and who has given me the chance to grow as a person and a historian. Lastly, it is dedicated to my interview subjects for being open with me and trusting me with their stories. Without them, I would not have been able to write this thesis.

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NOTES ON MY INTERVIEWS

Interviews were all conducted in the summer of 2021, some online and some in person. I advertised my study on social media websites including Facebook and Reddit in groups targeted at regional Russian American communities, survey participation, and general local community engagement. I also advertised my study on several regional Craigslist pages for major cities in the Western US and in a Russian-language newspaper. For the privacy of my interview subjects, certain names have been changed.

INTRODUCTION

In September of 2004, 26-year-old Yulia and her young daughter left their home city of Yekaterinburg, Russia for a small rural town in California. That same year, 47-year-old Anya made a similar exodus, emigrating from the city of Izhevsk to a rural town in Washington state. These emigration stories, although their actors came from different regions and were nearly two decades apart in age, had one thing in common. Both women were taking part in a phenomenon that had been growing in the former Soviet Union since the mid-1990s: international marriages between post-Soviet women and American men, brokered through online marriage websites.

The international marriage phenomenon fits into the broader trend of late and post-Soviet emigration. Of the 1,130,000 citizens who left the Soviet Union between 1948-1989, 40% departed following Gorbachev's reforms in the years of 1987-1989.[1] Another 450,000 people followed them from 1990 to 1991. In May of 1991, the Soviet parliament abolished previous barriers that had impeded emigration, resulting in a deluge of emigres. The largest numbers of registered emigrants left in the early 1990s - about 700,000 in 1992 and 500,000 in 1993.[2] After that, emigration began to slowly decrease.

The late and post-Soviet emigrants were characteristically different than earlier, politically motivated "defectors" who had found their way across the iron curtain during the Cold War. After the 1980s, Soviet citizens had their own economic interests in mind as they fled. Fearing the social conflict and material scarcity that followed the reforms, emigrants sought stability and a temporary reprieve from the worsening conditions of the perestroika period.[3] Like

[1]Lilia Shevtsova, "Post-Soviet Emigration Today and Tomorrow," *The International Migration Review* 26, no. 2 (1992): 241–57, https://doi.org/10.2307/2547055.
[2] Ivan Aleshkovski, Alexander Grebenyuk, and Olga Vorobyeva, "The Evolution of Russian Emigration in the Post-Soviet Period," *Social Evolution & History* 17, no. 2 (2018): 140–55, https://doi.org/10.30884/seh/2018.02.09.
[3] Shevtsova, "Post-Soviet Emigration Today and Tomorrow."

the emigrants of the late 1980s and early 1990s, the women who left for marriage did not have a political motive. They saw the landscape of increasing alcoholism, gang violence, gendered discrimination, and material scarcity and decided that they might be better off having a family somewhere else.

In the US, the international internet marriage phenomenon was preceded by an entirely different history. The practice of American men ordering "Mail-Order Brides" had its roots in the 19th century.[4] In the early days of the industry, foreign women would list themselves in catalogues to be mailed by postal service and correspond via letter with interested American men. These correspondences usually took place in the American West, where there were large populations of working men and a shortage of marriageable women. Much like with internet marriages of the 1990s and 2000s, these early "Mail-Order Brides" communicated long-distance with the intention of marriage even before they met their American husbands in person.

By the mid-1990s, the erosion of the iron curtain and the internet boom had launched the global economy into overdrive. This digital network of communication and commerce enabled American men to "meet" foreign women with greater ease. Women could list their names and pictures on international marriage brokering webpages. Men could then click on these images, read short "biographies" of these women as well as a description of what they were seeking in a partner, and purchase access to their addresses to correspond with them by letter, and later by email. If romance bloomed, men could pursue regular telephone conversations, then fly out and visit, and if it was determined to be a viable match, he could pay a lawyer associated with the

[4] Ericka Johnson, *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband: Russian-American Internet Romance*, *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband* (Duke University Press, 2007), https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822389750/HTML. 12.

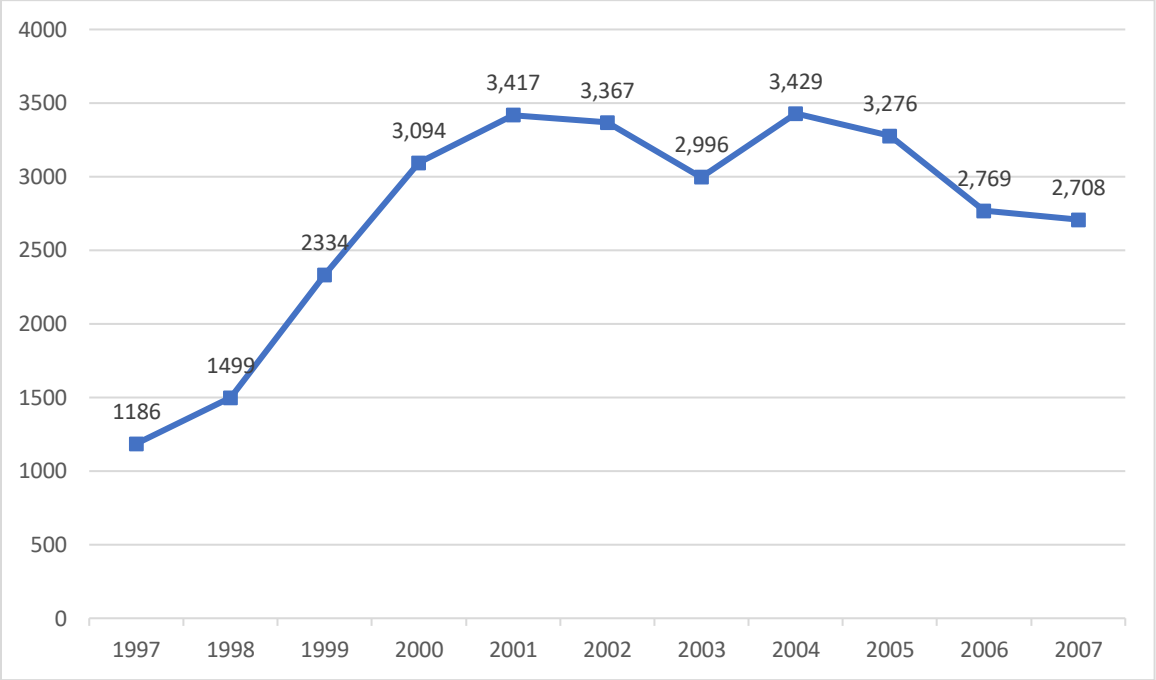
industry to arrange for the immigration of his new wife. By the end of the decade, there were dozens of such websites for men to choose from, often with ethnic and racial themes.

A study from 1999 indicated that anywhere between 4,000 and 6,000 internet-brokered marriages occurred between American men and foreign women per year. Most of these women came from Asia (particularly the Philippines), Latin America, and Eastern Europe (including the republics of the former Soviet Union).[5] Orientalism, the long-standing stereotypes that portrayed Asian women as feminine and submissive, colored the language that industry used to advertise foreign women. Racial stereotypes highlighting the "obliging" nature of Asian wives transferred onto women of non-Asian ethnicities as the industry expanded.

By 2001, ten years after the Soviet collapse, one study estimated that 250,000 women from former Soviet territories had listed themselves on these webpages.[6] On average, from 1997-2007, 3,000 Fiancé (K-1) visas from former Soviet countries were approved per year. Due to the massive popularity of international marriage websites, it can be inferred that many of these engagements were brokered online.

[5]Donna M. Hughes, "The Role of 'Marriage Agencies' in the Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking of Women from the Former Soviet Union," *Http://Dx.Doi.Org/10.1177/026975800401100104* 11, no. 1 (July 20, 2016): 49–71, https://doi.org/10.1177/026975800401100104.
[6]Tania Rands Lyon, "Housewife Fantasies, Family Realities in the New Russia.," in *Living Gender After Communism*, ed. Janet Elise. Johnson and Jean C. Robinson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007). 25-26.

Figure 0-1: K-1 Visas Issued to Individuals Originating From FSU Countries



Source: Nonimmigrant Visa Statistics. U.S. Department of State — Bureau of Consular Affairs. 1997-2020.

Given the racist and sexist histories of this industry and the very real vulnerabilities that international marriage posed for women, the previous scholarship – mostly in the field of American law -- has largely taken a critical perspective on internet marriage between American men and post-Soviet women. Even some Russianists, such as Tania Rands Lyon, saw trends towards gender neo-traditionalism, or a return to the traditional gender roles of woman as homemaker and man as the public actor in the early post-Soviet period, as a resurgence of patriarchal control. To some, this indicated that women would no longer experience the relative equality they enjoyed during Soviet times. Similarly, post-Soviet women enacting the Western, male fantasy of the perfect pre-feminist homemaker - docile, agreeable, traditional yet sexual - made some scholars question the industry behind transnational marriages.

Donna M. Hughes, who wrote extensively on the topic, argued that there was never any legitimate industry that matched Western men with Eastern women: there was only a shadow market that profited off their trafficking.[7] Christine S. Y. Chun stated that these American agencies exploited racial and economic circumstances to commodify and market women from developing countries.[8] Vanessa Brocato similarly argued that the industry capitalized on racist and sexist stereotypes to perpetuate these power imbalances and violated the human rights of women.[9] Svitlana Taraban pushed back on these arguments, particularly in the case of women from former Soviet countries.[10] She insisted that the industry provided new-found mobility to post-Soviet women. In traditionalizing their gender roles and playing the part of the damsel in distress, women were able to supersede their dire economic and social circumstances.

Oddly absent from this debate were the voices of the women themselves. In 2007, Ericka Johnson set out to interview Russian women who were interested in finding a partner through international marriage websites. Johnson's book, *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband,* featured a narrative documenting the author's interviews with these women, interspersed with contextual information that informed the reader on the post-Soviet economic and social backdrop of this phenomenon. An inspiration to this project, Johnson's collection of interviews set out to answer the question of why women were seeking this kind of relationship. As an initial exploration, Johnson unpacked some of the complex feelings Russian women had on love, marriage, and the

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[7] Donna M Hughes, "The 'Natasha' Trade: The Transnational Shadow Market of Trafficking in Women," *Journal of International Affairs* 53, no. 2 (2000): 625–51.
[8] Christine S.Y. Chun, "Mail-Order Bride Industry: The Perpetuation of Transnational Economic Inequalities and Stereotypes," *University of Pennsylvania Journal of International Economic Law* 17 (1996): 1159-1160.
[9]Vanessa Brocato, "Profitable Proposals: Explaining and Addressing the Mail-Order Bride Industry through International Human Rights Law," *San Diego International Law Journal* 5 (2004): 225–66.
[10]Svitlana Taraban, "Birthday Girls, Russian Dolls, and Others: Internet Bride as the Emerging Global Identity," in *Living Gender After Communisn,* ed. Janet Elise Johnson and Jean C. Robinson (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007).

material survival after perestroika.[11] She revealed that many women were displeased with the increasing culture of alcoholism, joblessness, and extramarital affairs among Russian men. She also revealed that women were aware of the risks of international relationships, and that horrifying rumors of trafficking and organ harvesting that were associated with leaving the former Soviet Union were not enough to dissuade them.

However, Johnson's discoveries only began to reveal the motivations and experiences of these women. Fourteen years after her book was published, enough time has gone by that we can compare the expectations and desires of these women with their realities in America. By conducting interviews with Russian women who married American men approximately twenty years ago, I was able to document some of the outcomes of their international marriages. Furthermore, enough time has passed that the perestroika and the post-perestroika period are beginning to enter the discipline of history. It is now possible to reflect on the prismatic ways in which public Soviet ideology, and its unofficial mirror in the private sphere, factored into women's expectations of love, marriage, and family, and encouraged them to marry abroad.

I interviewed eight women, the eldest of whom was born in 1957 and the youngest in 1978; most were born in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This study is not nearly conclusive, and this research is not nearly sufficient, but it provides the loose shape of qualitative population study and some fascinating similarities. For instance, three quarters of my interview subjects had children before their international marriages, many were previously married, and they ranged in ages from 26-57 at the time of their international marriages.

While more interviews should be conducted to get a truly representative pool for quantitative analysis, the qualitative material that came up during these interviews provides a

[11]Johnson, *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband: Russian-American Internet Romance*.

fascinating outlook on the often-overlapping perspectives, yet divergent outcomes of these women's marriages. These women, who came from varying levels of material stability and had varying levels of English language ability, often had similar insights about men, other women, and gender relations. They also described similar challenges in overcoming culture shock, finding work, and developing their relationships.

The interviews provide similar representation of women who identify themselves as happily married, widowed, divorced, and dissatisfied with their current marriage, which reflects the complexities of each individual husband and wife. It is important to remember that broader trends of gender relations in the Soviet Union and the United States, international communication via the internet, and post-Soviet emigration reflect slightly differently in the light of each individual's story. I hope that my chapters can utilize the stories of individuals to begin to piece together a larger narrative about international marriages, using the oral histories to expand on, complicate, and enrich their greater context. In this thesis, I argue that to understand international marriage between post-Soviet women and American men, scholars must look at the stories of individuals, as well as the mechanics of the industry.

In the first chapter, I discuss the factors that led to the internet bride phenomenon in the Soviet Union. Leading up to the collapse of the Soviet Union, women had been long worn down by the contradictions of their gendered reality and the romanticized, utterly false equality which they were promised. The double standards of official ideological conceptions of love, work, material stability, and equality were increasingly transparent as these women reached adulthood during perestroika in Russian provinces. In the 1990s, when instability and violence had reached a peak, post-Soviet women took it into their own hands to harness these ideals and mobilize

themselves out of these living conditions. Faith in these ideals had not collapsed, but the crumbling of the Soviet Union forced women to seek these ideals outside of their native home.

In the second chapter, I contrast American stereotypes about "Mail Order Brides" with the marriage experiences of post-Soviet women and American men. I explore the factors that made certain American men interested in Russian women. Then, I explore the ways in which post-Soviet women were aware of and engaged with international marriage, both on a personal and a business level. What were women looking for when they sought international marriages and how much did they understand the process? I highlight the contrast between women who spent significant time getting to know their future husbands and women who got married more quickly.

In the third chapter, I investigate the different kinds of adjustments women had to make when coming to America. I compare the initial period of linguistic and cultural adjustment with ongoing adjustments in women's occupations and families. Did American men help or hinder their wives in this period of transition? How did changes to American law impact them?

CHAPTER I: INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGE AND THE SOVIET DREAM

INTRODUCTION

Born between the mid-1960s and mid-1970s, most Russian women who became involved in international internet marriages came of age during the time of perestroika. They witnessed a stark disconnect between traditional Soviet ideals and the necessity for personal advancement during a time of economic strife. As these women began to get married, have children, and look for work, they were navigating a system on the brink of collapse. Perestroika put pressure on their experiences in both the public and private spheres and left them feeling uncertain about their futures in Russia. These pressures came across clearly in my interviews, which demonstrated a broader picture of young women coming of age in provincial Russian cities during and after perestroika.

In conversation with a scholarship of Soviet ideals, marriage practices, generational perceptions, and economic realities, this chapter explores the ways that Soviet ideals continued to shape Russian women's perceptions, despite the breakdown of Soviet economic and political structures. During perestroika, economic uncertainty caused a "crisis of masculinity" among of Russian men, exacerbating behaviors that were already putting strain on their marriages, such as drinking, cheating, and not being involved in family life. After the collapse, women were able to use networking skills that had been developed in a late Soviet context, in the new context of global digitization. Seeking progress beyond their circumstances, these women sought opportunities for old ideals of love, and material stability, by pursuing a new solution: emigration by way of internet marriage agencies.

FROM A 'HAPPY SOVIET CHILDHOOD' TO A PERIOD OF ECONOMIC STRESS

Valeriya was born in Kazan, in 1972. She remembered a carefree childhood with a lot of independence: playing outside, knocking on the doors of her friends without formal arrangements, and taking public transportation at a young age. "When you are a child," she told me, "You think everything is nice and beautiful."[12] Valeriya attributed the independent nature of her childhood to the relaxed culture of the 1970s, but perhaps more importantly, it is representative of a uniquely Soviet ideal.

From its inception as a socialist state, the Soviet Union had placed a particular emphasis on childhood. In the days of Stalin, children were common subjects of socialist realism: innocent, peaceful, and free of the burdens of the adult world. The universal ideal of a happy childhood, attainable only through the concerted efforts of Soviet adults to "protect" their children from political strife represented the seeds of such equality for adults. The idea of a "Soviet childhood" acted as a social adhesive long after the days of Stalin. In the eyes of Soviet adults, childhood was a powerful aesthetic convergence of the nostalgic past and potential future.[13] Therefore, it was paramount that children like Valeriya were given plenty of freedom, while also being shielded from "political issues."

Unfortunately, there was no metaphorical shield large enough to hide the social and financial issues in the late Soviet period, and by the 1970s, discourse about ideals had largely disappeared, leaving a firmly established "public ethic" on matters ranging from childhood, to marriage, to career. Public ideological representations – ranging from speeches, to slogans, to

[12]August Brereton, Valeriya interviewed on August 2 2021, on Skype, August 2, 2021.
[13]For a more extensive study of Soviet childhood, see Catriona Kelly, *Children's World: Growing Up in Russia, 1890-1991* (New Haven, Connecticut; London: Yale University Press, 2007).

visual media – were so standardized in the late Soviet period that, as Alexei Yurchak argued, they "no longer had to be read literally, at least in most contexts, to work perfectly well as elements of the hegemonic representation."[14] The "Soviet Baby Boomer" generation, examined in detail by Donald Raleigh in his illuminating oral history *Soviet Baby Boomers,* had long lost faith in the idea of a "potential future" represented by Soviet childhood and had instead busied themselves with trying to better their current lives, here and now. As one of Raleigh's interview subjects eloquently stated, his generation had made the "crucial distinction between working within the system and believing in it."[15]

The Marxist-Leninist ideals of the past, ubiquitous and unquestioned as they were, did not represent their reality. Instead, ideals of a utopian future had shifted into more attainable ideals of better education, satisfying work, good housing, and close personal bonds including friends, marriage, and family. How different were these concepts in actuality? Both ideals prioritized children and emphasized intergenerational progress. The difference was small, but important. A newfound cynicism towards the Soviet system drove these "Soviet Baby Boomers" to seek that progress on a personal, as opposed to societal, level. This manifested in a few different ways.

In the private sphere, the official ideals of a marriage based entirely on love lagged behind the social and economic realities for women, which led Baby Boomers to seek alternatives. While the popular ideals of marriage were reiterated publicly by nearly everyone, divorce, abstinence from marriage, and pragmatic forms of marriage became popular ways for women to navigate their changing world. In the public sphere, official systems remained nominally unquestioned, while informal networking, bribery, and shadow markets took over

[14]Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (Princeton University Press, 2013), 14.
[15]Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012)., 219.

their power. In the Russian “Rust Belt" of provincial, industrial cities, this phenomenon was particularly grave. With a worsening economy, shortages of food and domestic goods hit these regions hard while the control of the official market was replaced by gang-operated shadow markets. Informal networking became an essential skill to further one’s own material status.[16]

In the early 1980s, the facade of official ideals that the Baby Boomers had once used to cover their personal motivations disintegrated and they began to criticize the stagnant planned industrial economy more openly. As they became more politically conscious, they realized that their “Soviet Dream” was not attainable within the constraints of the Soviet system and many lobbied for reform. Going into perestroika with high expectations, Baby Boomers were devastated as their dreams of personal progress were met by large-scale economic and social turmoil. At the same time, the sun set on their children’s “Soviet childhood.”

This was the cultural climate in which my interview subjects came of age. They understood love to be paramount but, for many, practically impossible. They were raised to firmly value children and the future, but to be skeptical of men and marriage. With the passing of glasnost and perestroika, they were thrust from idealistic childhoods into the jaws of economic decline. As Soviet structures crumbled, so did many of their first marriages, jobs, and prospects in a post-Soviet Russia.

As Valeriya became a teenager during perestroika, the sudden severance from her happy childhood was incredibly impactful. In 1994, she graduated from college and became a music teacher, but could not afford to move out on her own. Even her parents, both long-time

[16] For a more detailed history of late Soviet trade networks and the black market, see Alena V. Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking, and Informal Exchange*. (Cambridge, UK ; New York, NY, USA: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Natalya Chernyshova, *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era* (New York: Routledge, 2013.)

employees at a local factory, would wait patiently for their salaries. As Valeriya put it, they just kept working even while "everything was falling apart."[17]

However, even as the system fell apart, the "Soviet Dream," as redefined by the Baby Boomers, remained intact. Their children, particularly their daughters – who experienced the impacts of the collapse in a number of gendered ways – were encouraged to navigate the emerging system in new and creative ways; to make it work for them; to push it as far as they could to further their own progress and the progress of their children. "Progress" for my interview subjects meant something very different than it had to their Baby Boomer parents. With the internet boom, the introduction of a global digital economy, and the availability of emigration visas, the "Soviet Dream" of the 1990s didn't have to be attainable in the former Soviet Union. Husbands, friends, satisfying work, better housing and schools for their children – it could all be found somewhere else.

AT THE JUNCTION OF IDEALS AND REALITY

Many of the women who I interviewed came from non-traditional families. Ellie, who was born in the hidden city of Nizhnekamsk in the late 1960s, stated that her mother divorced her real father when she was five, because he was constantly cheating. She only remembers seeing him about three times. When her mother married a second time, Ellie was happy for her, until her stepfather became an alcoholic.[18] Like Ellie, Yulia, of Yekaterinburg, was abandoned by her father when she was young. "I never asked my mom why, because it was a sad subject," she

[17]Brereton, Valeriya interviewed on August 2 2021, on Skype.
[18]August Brereton, Ellie interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington, August 5, 2021.

stated, “He’s in Moscow right now, with another family.”[19] With no father in the picture and a disabled mother, her grandmother ended up being her primary caretaker.

Vera, born in 1966 in the town of Volga, did not have grandparents in the picture and she recalled her mother struggling to take care of her alone. She told me that her father had a drinking problem and wasn’t a family-oriented person. Because her father did not help out around the home, Vera’s mother, a devout Christian, did not have even enough time to get her baptized, something Vera said that she “always felt guilty about.”[20]

As children, these women observed and absorbed messages about gender relations in the postwar Soviet Union. They understood that it was commonplace for men to drink, cheat, and not be present in family life. As they became adults, they also understood the sheer numerical disparity between men and women in the Soviet Union that made it possible for men to maintain a culture of misogyny and still find willing wives. “I think, in Russia, this was going on because lots of them died in the World War [...],” Anya stated, “We have more population of women compared to men’s population. And they die at younger ages.”[21] This observation was factually correct. Two generations after the war, the female population in Russia still surpassed the male population by seventeen percent.[22] Even more strikingly, that same year, Soviet women lived on average ten years longer than Soviet men.[23]

Like the idealization of a Soviet childhood, Soviet conceptions of “love” and “marriage” had deep ideological roots. As far back as the revolutionary period, Lenin opposed “vulgar and

[19]August Brereton, Yulia interviewed on August 2 2021, on Zoom., August 2, 2021.
[20]August Brereton, Vera interviewed on July 11 2021, in Oregon, July 11, 2021.
[21]August Brereton, Anya interviewed on July 16 2021, on Zoom., July 16, 2021.
[22]Russian Federal State Statistics Service., “‘Male and Female Population of Russia from 1960 to 2020 (in 1,000s).’ Chart.,” Statista, November 12, 2020.
[23]US Census Bureau., “Life Expectancy at Birth in the United States and Soviet Union in Select Years between 1970 and 1988, by Gender.,” Statista., August 1, 1991.

dirty marriage without love" as antithetical to the Communist ethic.[24] The natural intersection of love and marriage remained a central feature of Soviet realism under Stalin, who also promoted a message of stability within the family unit – the concept of true love being forever.

These ideals shaped official cultural norms and remained fairly static throughout the entire Soviet period. For instance, a condemnation of "mercantilist marriage" was reflected in polls of Soviet citizens between the 1960s and 1970s. Most people across different fiscal groups, geographic regions, and professions believed that a marriage should only be conducted based on love with no consideration for material concerns.[25] However, as my interview subjects came of age in the 1980s, it was impossible for them to ignore the complications of a changing gender dynamic that were making this ideal largely impossible. As sociologist Vladimir Shlapentokh argued in the early 1980s, "while Soviet people attribute great significance to love at an abstract level, the pragmatic concerns facing people in their daily lives seem to compel them to accept less than they consider ideal."[26]

Even while ideals of love-centered marriages were publicly endorsed and even publicly promoted on the individual level, women's behavior was stigmatized, while men were allowed more leniency. For instance, in the 1970s, the social expectation for a man to marry a woman he impregnated had eroded, but the stigma of being an unmarried woman with a child had not.[27]

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[24]Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Love, Marriage, and Friendship in the Soviet Union : Ideals and Practices* (New York: Praeger, 1984). 20.
[25]Wesley A. Fisher, *The Soviet Marriage Market: Mate-Selection in Russia and the USSR* (New York: Praeger, 1980). 21.
[26]Shlapentokh, *Love, Marriage, and Friendship in the Soviet Union: Ideals and Practices*. 45.
[27]Leonid Zhukhovitsky, "The Family and Society," *Novosti Press Agency*, 1990. 53.

Unmarried women with children, and women who remained unmarried past their early twenties, fell into a growing category of "old maids," who were seen by Soviet men as viable mistresses, but never wives.[28] This stigma figured prominently in my interview subjects' stories.

"In Russia, it doesn't matter how pretty you are – if you have kids, if you're a certain age, that's it," Svetlana, a translator from Kazan stated, "Your life as a wife is done. Nobody's gonna marry you. We wanted family happiness and Russian men didn't want to marry us."[29] Svetlana's comments offer some context as to Vera's nonchalant attitude towards her father's alcoholism. Vera told me that, despite her father's unwillingness to help around the home, that was just the way it was. It had been a late marriage and he had a good position at work. She saw how her mother struggled to care for her, but divorce and remarriage was not an attainable solution.

Vera's frank observations reflected a change in the way Soviet citizens discussed love and marriage after perestroika. By 1988, the tension regarding the subject of old maids was so great, that an article was published in the weekday magazine *Semya* [Family] stating it was better to marry someone you didn't love than to wind up an old maid.[30] This shift from earlier, more idealistic conceptions of marriage signified a growing openness about the discrepancies between official Soviet culture and the day-to-day realities for Soviet women. It also publicly acknowledged a growing trend of alternatives: divorce, solitude, and pragmatic marriages were all becoming visible options for Soviet women.

For many Soviet women who had married young in the 1960s and 1970s, divorce was their less-than-ideal solution of choice. As demonstrated by Ellie's parents, divorce was becoming increasingly accessible in this period. In 1965, the legal procedure for divorce was

[28]Johnson, *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband: Russian-American Internet Romance*. 8.

[29]August Brereton, Svetlana interviewed on July 28 2021, on Zoom., July 28, 2021.

[30]Zhukhovitsky. "The Family and Society," 52- 53.

simplified and by 1970, the Soviet Union had the highest divorce rate of any country besides the United States. By 1977, one in three marriages in the Soviet Union ended in divorce. Most of these divorces were initiated by women, who cited the alcoholism, violence, and infidelity of their partners as a reason.[31]

For some women, one less-than-ideal solution was simply to stay unmarried. The objectively high female labor force participation in the USSR caused single women to be less reliant on a husband for their material survival, enabling them to "hold out" for longer, or forever. Eighty-eight percent of divorced women in the late 1970s did not remarry and one-third of single women in the Soviet Union did not get married at all.[32] An increase in extramarital cohabitation between men and women also pointed to the general disillusionment that Soviet women felt towards the institution of marriage.

From the 1970s onwards, Soviet women also began to navigate their way around the love-to-marriage structure by seeking marriages of convenience. After all, the laws that required cohabitating couples to be married by no means required them to be in love. These pragmatic marriages would allow women to propel themselves into better living arrangements, attain residency permits, and avoid undesirable government assignments.[33] Even more common was a marriage model where women selected their grooms based on the traits of attentiveness, fidelity, and fairness as opposed to passion.[34] When women sacrificed passion for stability, it was their children who were the ultimate beneficiaries. Growing up in a household with two stable parents was indicative of a higher level of material and emotional support.

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[31] Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers,* 201.
[32] Shlapentokh, *Love, Marriage, and Friendship,* 46; 135.
[33] Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers,* 201.
[34]Shlapentokh, *Love, Marriage, and Friendship,* 99.

The women who would become involved in international marriages grew up bearing witness to the marital troubles of the generation before them. Understanding the gendered predicament of their time and place did not, however, equate to these women abstaining from their own love affairs. “Some people say things that happen in your life, they are meant to be, even if it’s not good, it still comes to your life to have some kind of lesson,” Natasha, a factory worker from Kalin, told me, before describing the relationship she had been in prior to her international marriage.[35]

Even Ellie, who grew up with an absent father and alcoholic stepfather, had not been dissuaded from the idea of finding love. Ellie got married at the age of seventeen to her first love who was only one year older. “The marriage was terrible,” she said, “Two very young, undeveloped people.”[36] Ellie stated that, despite her mother and father’s divorce and her stepfather’s alcoholism, she “grew up on” the idea of meeting a man, falling in love, getting married, and sticking with it even when it wasn’t working. “He was using it very well,” she told me, “he was happy. He was cheating. He had his wife – and I was just supposed to stay home and take care of the kids.”

Ellie and her first husband had two children together. Her first child, a girl, “did not satisfy” her husband, so they tried once again for a boy and were successful. “I was programmed,” she said, “I must give him a son.” As Ellie got older, she did not dare divorce him, because she feared being seen as an “old maid” and not being able to remarry – which would put the material security of her two children at stake.

[35]August Brereton, Natasha interviewed on August 6 2021, in Washington, August 6, 2021.
[36]Brereton, Ellie interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington.

Natasha expressed a similar story. While she was not married, she began dating her ex-boyfriend when she was eighteen in 1992. They dated for a long time and eventually moved in together and Natasha became pregnant. At first, they were both happy, but after the baby was born, things soured. Her ex had expected a boy, but the baby was a girl. "At first, I thought it was love, but then it turned out to be a sickness, a disease. I was so attached to him. I couldn't imagine that I'd be without him, like 'I'm going to die'," Natasha explained, "Something changed in my body after I had my baby."[37]

Natasha's mother had warned Natasha against her boyfriend, but she hadn't listened. After she had her baby and saw how he treated her daughter, she finally let him go. "He was jealous of her," Natasha told me, "He would sit on the couch, for example, I would ask him to hold the baby and he would put her next to him on the couch. He was selfish – loved himself very much. He started saying things about the baby and would completely ignore her, and I decided he wasn't going to change."[38] Natasha explained that it was a societal issue with many Russian men. "The female population is larger than the male so males are totally like 'I can have the kid with this girl, I can have this girl, I can have this girl. [...] They like fun and going out and stuff, but they don't want to take anything serious. So, I was just living my life with my parents and my baby, I wasn't looking for love."

Women who did not have the luxury of familial help as single mothers struggled to get by. The father of Yulia's baby was never in the picture and although she never regretted giving birth to her daughter in 1999, it was hard to raise her. Yulia was unmarried, her mother was disabled, and her grandmother was too old to act as a caretaker. She worked small seasonal jobs

[37]Brereton, Natasha interviewed on August 6 2021, in Washington.
[38]Brereton, Natasha interview.

during summers, unable to truly pursue a career while she took care of her young daughter alone.[39]

AN ECONOMIC CRISIS (OF MASCULINITY)

As the youngest of my interview subjects, Yulia was only seven years old at the beginning of perestroika. She had fond memories of her childhood, unburdened by the stark political and economic changes that were happening around her. For most of my interview subjects, this was not the case. As teens and young adults from 1985-2000, many of these women felt the impacts of perestroika and the subsequent economic shifts in a surprisingly gendered way. That is to say, the effects of the economic decline on the men in their lives infected their relationships.

When Svetlana moved to Kazan in the mid-1980s, things started out all right. She met her ex-husband at the aircraft academy where they were students together. They got married in their second year, and they had two children together. It was only after graduating, in the early 1990s, that Svetlana's life began to fall apart. "I was lucky to run into perestroika," Svetlana claimed with an obviously sarcastic laugh, "I went to the profession, but I didn't have a job. I couldn't work so I stayed home."[40]

Svetlana blamed the economic situation following perestroika for her divorce. "My husband went to work, we studied together, we married when we were students, and it was not successful because they didn't pay money. He went to work every day and they gave us, maybe, a bag of potatoes or flour. Food." The couple lived together for three years, but Svetlana's ex-

[39]Brereton, Yulia interviewed on August 2 2021, on Zoom.
[40]Brereton, Svetlana interviewed on July 28 2021, on Zoom.

husband had trouble coping with the fact that he could not provide for the family, and the financial tensions fractured their relationship. As she put it, "Perestroika helped us successfully destroy the marriage because I don't think there is a man in the world who could tolerate the fact that he cannot provide for the family."[41]

Svetlana's story speaks to two larger social trends. One was the expectation for men to be primary providers, despite women being increasingly involved in the workplace. The other was a crisis of masculinity that followed perestroika, when men could no longer perform that role.

In the late Soviet period, married men and women started out on relatively equal footing, at similar levels of education, and with similar incomes. By the end of the 1970s, female labor force participation in the USSR was extremely high by world standards, and women's labor contributions were a celebrated success, accelerating the productivity and standard of living significantly.[42] The expectation (and often, desire) for women to seek work outside of the home increased, as did state structures to alleviate the burden of childcare. In Eastern Bloc countries, generous maternity leave policies, as well as public crèches and kindergartens were initiated to support working women.[43] As helpful as these advances were, they did not remove the blockades women faced when simultaneously trying to move forward in their careers and raise a family.

The first issue was the societal pressure for women to be the primary caretakers of the home. Even though they were now working full-time, often specialized jobs, married women were expected to take a "second shift" to cook, clean, and care for the children. Many men not only took a complete disinterest in the private sphere, but did not view women as workers,

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[41]Brereton, Svetlana interview.
[42]Richard Anker, "Comparative Survey," in *Working Women in Socialist Countries: The Fertility Connection*, ed. Valentina Bodrova and Richard Anker (Geneva: International Labour Office, 1985). 1-2.
[43]Kristen R. Ghodsee, "Gendered Impacts of Privatisation and Austerity in Eastern Europe," *The Lancet* 393, no. 10171 (February 9, 2019): 519–20.

despite their labor contributions. As Natalia Bekhtereva, the Director of the Institute of Experimental Medicine put it, "If [a woman] is intelligent, people would speak of her as an 'intelligent woman', not a researcher, not a worker, only an 'intelligent woman.'"[44]

The second issue was that women could not advance at the same rate as men. Whereas American working women often postponed childbearing to adapt to an expanding labor market, Soviet women tended to give birth soon after marriage. This could postpone their entry into the labor force by almost one year.[45] Once in the labor force, women with children were not always able to come into work during non-work hours or access the required training to achieve promotion.[46] As a result, men advanced at their jobs, while women were left behind, and the wage gap increased. In a marriage that had started out on equal footing, differences in social status between husbands and wives would begin to emerge, usually ten to fifteen years after the wedding.[47] Therefore, even as the ideal of "equality in the workplace" seemed on the surface a remarkable success, men were still socially expected to be the primary providers.

The problem of a "double burden" for Soviet women, famously depicted in Natalia Baranskaia's 1969 novella "A Week Like Any Other," had not found its resolution by the time Svetlana "ran into perestroika." It was quite the opposite. The abrupt reforms that restructured the

economy in the late 1980s caused the budget of social services to be slashed, forcing many women, who were employed in the public sphere, back into the home.[48] When women were able

[44]Zoya Pukhova, "For A Better Life and More Good Will," *Novosti Press Agency*, 1988. 8.
[45]Barbara Anderson, *The Life Course of Soviet Women Born 1905-1960* (Urbana: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1986). 212-224.
[46]Pukhova, "For A Better Life and More Good Will." 14-20.
[47]Shlapentokh, *Love, Marriage, and Friendship,* 95.
[48]Ghodsee, "Gendered Impacts," 519-520.

to remain in the workforce *and* earn more than their husbands despite these barriers, it could leave them unimpressed.

Anya, a businesswoman from Izhevsk, and her ex-husband divorced in 1985, five years after they had married. "The marriage was not successful because we were very different people. Basically, he liked to sleep by himself and all the time, I was with the kids myself and I provided more income than he did," she stated.[49] According to Anya, her ex-husband would still visit their two children and even lived with Anya from time to time, before they separated completely in 1997. As the primary provider of income and the primary homemaker, Anya was able to provide her kids with a good education and everything that they needed, without feeling like she had to settle for her husband's bad habits.

Daria, a pediatric surgeon from Smolensk, met her first husband in medical school and married in 1988. While she did not blame her husband's inability to find work on bad habits, she did note that, during their post graduate degrees, she worked, and he did not. Daria stated that she was on friendly terms with her ex, but that they simply spent too much time together. They went to school, ate meals, and did homework together so often that her first husband would jokingly say they were "one year for three." After the divorce, Daria took on a side business in real estate, in addition to her medical practice, to provide for her daughter.[50]

As perestroika paved the way to a total collapse of the Soviet system, many women were not as fortunate as Anya and Daria. A BBC article from 2000 stated that more than 168 million people in the former Soviet Union were living below the poverty line in 1993-1995, an exponential increase from the fourteen million in poverty under communism.[51] Soviet women

[49]Brereton, Anya interviewed on July 16 2021, on Zoom.
[50]August Brereton, Daria interviewed on June 28 2021, on Zoom., July 28, 2021.
[51]Fiona Werge, "Child Poverty Soars in Eastern Europe," *BBC News*, 2000.

were also the first to lose their jobs. Moscow unemployment figures from 1991 demonstrated that seventy percent of those who registered as unemployed, in the first six months after the unemployment offices opened, were women.[52]

As a result of job loss among women, men were suddenly expected to become the sole providers for their families, in an economic climate where single-earner families were not able to maintain their standard of living. Young adults were also more likely to lose their jobs, which only heightened the pressure on young, married Soviet men. Rates of alcoholism, crime, and suicide soared among young men, which in turn affected the lives of their wives and girlfriends.[53] Ironically, this crisis exacerbated the very behaviors that women were rejecting. In this way, the economic crisis became a crisis of masculinity.[54]

PERESTROIKA AND COLLAPSE IN THE RUSSIAN RUST BELT

All the women who I interviewed had sought some level of higher education and most pursued a highly specialized career. Some, motivated by pragmatism or passion, sought high-earning careers in medicine and finance. Others sought the fulfillment of a career in the arts. Of the eight women interviewed, only Yulia, the youngest of my interview subjects, who entered the workforce in the mid1990s, reported dissatisfaction with her career path itself. Many found their

[52]William Moskoff, *Unemployment in the Soviet Union* (Washington D.C.: National Council for Soviet and East European Research, 1992). 8.
[53]Lyon, "Housewife Fantasies, Family Realities in the New Russia." 28.
[54] For a more detailed history of the development of Soviet masculinity and femininity, see Sarah Ashwin, *Gender, State and Society in Soviet and Post-Soviet Russia*. (London ; New York: Routledge, 2000); Barbara Evans Clements, Rebecca Friedman, and Dan Healey, *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture*. (Houndmills ; New York: Palgrave, 2002.); Lynne Attwood, *Gender and Housing in Soviet Russia*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013.); Francine Du Plessix Gray, *Soviet Women: Walking the Tightrope.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990.); Rebecca Kay, *Men in Contemporary Russia : The Fallen Heroes of Post-Soviet Change?* (Aldershot, England ;Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2006.)

higher education limited by their social and financial status, but still, at least at one point, enjoyed their jobs.

From the middle of the 1980s to the end of the 1990s, material shortages caused by the economic turmoil of perestroika began to affect the lives and livelihoods of these women. Gorbachev's attempts to reform the lagging planned economy while simultaneously upholding socialism, were riddled with misfortune and miscalculation. Government funds were put to waste trying to restore the now-obsolete heavy industry sector, as opposed to reviving the production of consumer goods. In 1986, world oil prices fell, curtailing trade, and the Soviet Union's new-found reliance on Western imports resulted in shortages of domestic products.[55] At the same time, agricultural producers had realized the profitable potential of selling to black markets instead of official markets, which caused a food shortage in the state-run groceries.

By the time that Eastern bloc countries were declaring their sovereignty in the early 1990s, Russia's "Rust Belt" of provincial, industrial cities had proven itself ineffective at quashing the criminal underworld. From the 1970s onwards, the primary controlling force behind material production in cities like Kazan had transitioned from the official market to unofficial shadow markets, operated by gangs.[56] The "Kazan Phenomenon" as it was termed by journalists, hit a peak in the 1990s, when there was no effective government left to curb it. In cities like Kazan, gang violence turned city blocks and manufacturing plants into arenas for civil unrest.[57]

As Stephen Kotkin argued, it was not foreign interference, oligarchy, or cultural ineptitude that defined the chaos of the wild 1990s, but the Russian Rust Belt, whose

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[55]Stephen Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). 65-66.
[56]Svetlana Stephenson, *Gangs of Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).
[57]Francis Clines, "Street Gangs Return, and Soviet City Is Chagrined," *"Kazan Journal" in The New York Times*, July 13, 1989. 4.

"combination of economic deadweight and scavenging opportunities" made it the perfect breeding ground for entrepreneurial scam artistry and opportunistic gain.[58] In these regions, bribery and networking had been codified during the late Soviet period, but it was the post-Soviet period that first left these networks unmitigated. Therefore, it is no surprise that many of the women who left Russia to marry American men were from military-industrial "Rust Belt" cities like Kazan, Kaliningrad, Yekaterinburg, Izhevsk, and Nizhnekamsk.

If the late Soviet period offered a lesson in corruption to financial opportunists, it also offered a lesson in survival to young women. Women were familiar with navigating the nuanced cultural and economic circumstances that routinely held them back, despite being ostensibly "equal" to their male peers. When Svetlana could not find work as an engineer with two small children during perestroika, she adapted. Towards the end of her first marriage, she returned to university to study English, and by the time of her divorce, she was already working as an English teacher. When she moved back to Kazan with her children in the mid-1990s, colleagues at the university helped her find a job tutoring American missionaries and their families in Russian.

"There was so much *'freedom',"* Svetlana stated, with a knowing eye roll and punctuated airquotations, "that the worst came out of people and the best came out of people. People who were feeling like they could steal, they started to do that. People who could not, they were just trying to survive."[59] As for Svetlana, she sold her jewelry to cover the tuition for her second education and relied on her parents to help feed her kids. "Without my parents, what would we

[58]Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted,* 117.
[59]Brereton, Svetlana interviewed on July 28 2021, on Zoom.

do?" She said, "I think in tough times, when they have real love inside the family, they get close with each other. If they don't have love, they split, like what happened with my husband."

For women who had established careers, but were divorced with children to support, the 1990s in the Russian Rust Belt were not much easier. Completing her postgraduate education as a medical student in Kazan, Daria described the period between 1994 to 1996 as incredibly hectic. The chaos only intensified with her divorce in 1995. In addition to teaching and researching during the day, and working during the night, Daria had to take on a side business in real estate to sustain her family.

"It was a rough time because it was a very criminal business," she recalled, "Did anyone ever mention to you, they call them "black real estate people"? So, a lot of people were killed, in a way to acquire their properties. It was a rough time. We had to be very careful how we were working in that time because we were working with highly professional people and our parents helped us acquire the clients, and we were securing them, uh, clean properties, and we were buying them, and they were entitled to money. They were receiving money; this was a rough time. But we survived!"[60]

Anya, another divorced working professional with children, reminisced that both her success and adaptability had been influenced by her father. Her father's education had been interrupted as the family was forced to relocate due to the Kyshtym disaster; a radioactive contamination that occurred at a nearby plutonium plant, when Anya was six months old. Even though Anya had only been a baby, the relocation had a huge impact on her. "My father always told me I needed to be very practical, to have degrees that were practical to life to be successful

[60]Brereton, Daria interviewed on June 28 2021, on Zoom.

and have money," Anya stated, "So I started work in the restaurant business and then I went to college at the same time, evening school."[61]

"I was very oriented to have my own income, so I worked at a confectionery and even there, my salaries were higher than my father's salaries," Anya said.[62] The eldest of my interview subjects, she began her studies at an elite English language college for mathematics. After that, she did two years of restaurant business college, three years of food production college, and five years of financial management at university – all while pursuing related work. As she finished up her final degree, the Soviet Union collapsed.

"It was kind of an opportunity for looking for something outside of the country," Anya said, "because my father was half-Jewish and he worked on the TV, so he always wanted to travel, but that was not a possibility in the Soviet Union at the time. It was in my brain all the time. I was dreaming all the time: I am not here; I am somewhere else."[63]

While those who had established careers were pivoting jobs and adding additional sources of income to adapt to the changing times, those who were entering their first jobs in tandem with the collapse faced a different set of problems. As the economy worsened, higher education became increasingly competitive and state structures became increasingly corrupt. *Blat*, or the use of contact networks and money to attain status, goods, and services informed the everyday realities of the late Soviet period and shaped the mafia state that controlled markets in the wild 1990s. Therefore, an essential skill in both periods was informal networking and maneuvering around a lack of such networks.[64]

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[61]Brereton, Anya interviewed on July 16 2021, on Zoom.
[62]Brereton, Anya interview.
[63]Brereton, Anya interview.
[64]Alena V. Ledeneva, *Russia's Economy of Favours: Blat, Networking, and Informal Exchange* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

"At that time, everything was bribing," Vera told me, "If you had the money, you could get into the college, pass the test."[65] Vera did not have the connections to get into architecture college in Saratov, so she instead took a "prep year" in Moscow, where she was able to eventually go on to study architecture. After she got her diploma, she began working at an engineering firm in Smolensk, but the timing of her new job, in 1991, meant that payment was promised, but rarely received.

"It was the beginning of the 'communist struggle'," Vera told me. She would make contracts with customers, and they would promise that they would pay, but it was beginning to become clear that the economy was affecting them. "It was better to make it [contracts] and maybe money would come," Vera said. When the firm made money, however, Vera recalled that it would go straight into her boss's pocket. At the height of these struggles, Vera emphasized the importance of making connections around her new workplace. The women she worked with would help her by sharing groceries, rationing tickets, and leftovers if they had a bigger family. "You stand in line – two hours, three hours – it became very difficult to live," Vera said, "It became a struggle. Simple, everyday life was affected."[66]

Everyday life across the Soviet Union, however, was far from equal. Women in the Russian Rust Belt bitterly acknowledged the differing realities between a city like Moscow and a city like Kazan or Nizhnekamsk. Formed as a work settlement, around a petroleum-production plant in 1967, petroleum was by far still the largest industry in Nizhnekamsk when Ellie began work in 1988.[67]

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[65]Brereton, Vera interviewed on July 11 2021, in Oregon.
[66]Brereton, Vera interview.
[67] Nknh.ru., "Nižnekamskneftexim," Istorija Kompanii PAO, 2021, https://www.nknh.ru/about/info/history.

"The city was based on chemical petroleum," Ellie told me, "It maybe sounds rude, but half the city was working on petroleum production. We were just seconds from petroleum productions. There were some jobs in different locations inside the town like the cafeteria or something else, but it was not prestigious. I don't know if it was a good salary or not. My mother was working on petroleum production and my stepfather was working on petroleum production, so so did I."[68] Ellie stayed at the plant for twenty years, where she worked in chemical analysis, monitoring quality control of the chemical production in the plant.

While Ellie enjoyed her career, she also understood the limitations of life in a small provincial city. Most importantly, the economic hardships she experienced would not have been felt in Moscow. "Moscow had everything," Ellie told me, "Moscow had food. The provincial states and cities, we had a special system." This system involved *talons,* or rationing tickets, which limited food for Ellie and her family in the early years of her career. After the *talons* were spent, they couldn't buy anything unless they went to the black market. However, at the time, Ellie did not know much about her neighborhood black market, and she didn't have the money to spend on extra food anyway. Her family made do, surviving only on what they could buy with the *talons.* "I actually appreciated it happening even though it was a hard time," Ellie said, "Because otherwise, we would still be sitting behind the iron curtains probably."[69]

Natasha, who finished her primary education in the city of Tver just a couple hours north of Moscow, was able to see the differences between Moscow and the Russian Rust Belt firsthand. A hobby artist, Natasha had been rejected twice from art school, supposedly due to her academic record. After her second rejection, Natasha decided to take her art skills into the

[68]Brereton, Ellie interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington.
[69]Brereton, Ellie interview.

workforce and found an entry-level job at a cotton fabric plant, working on a copy machine as a textile printer. In 1993, Natasha moved out of her parents' house and in with her boyfriend. They lived together until 1997, when the couple split after her daughter was born.

"If I was older, I would have been more aware of what was happening," Natasha told me, but perhaps she was more aware than she gave herself credit for.[70] Natasha remembered taking the southbound train to Moscow with her family, to pick up butter and salami because their local stores were empty. In Tver, Natasha recalled *talons* being given to people to get their allotment of bread.

Natasha also noticed the rapid deterioration of the value of money. When Natasha was a child, her parents had invested in her wedding fund, making yearly deposits until she was sixteen. The time to collect the money fell during the chaos of the 1990s, and the entire fund was hardly enough to buy a pair of shoes. When Natasha picked out a simple pair of heels, she remembered her mother both laughing and crying hysterically.[71]

Yulia also remembered the changing times from the perspective of youth. She remembered long lines at the stores, empty shelves, and using tickets to stay in line and pay for food. Because she was younger, she told me it was not that bad, but she remembered the shortages distinctly. Who you knew, how much money you had, and where you worked determined what you would receive just as much as the *talons* did. For instance, it was easier for rich people and people who "knew someone" to get meat. However, Yulia's mother worked in a tissue factory and could bring home tissues to use as toilet paper. Other people she knew had to use newspapers.[72]

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[70]Brereton, Natasha interviewed on August 6 2021, in Washington.
[71]Brereton, Natasha interview.
[72]Brereton, Yulia interviewed on August 2 2021, on Zoom.

For Valeriya, a single student studying to become a professional pianist, the support of her parents was essential. Even after she graduated in 1994 and became a music teacher, she continued to live with her parents in Kazan. Valeriya's parents, both factory workers, helped to feed her and provided her with housing in their subsidized apartment. She was in her twenties and ready to leave, but couldn't, given that she was not making enough money to support herself and was not interested in marrying a Russian. "I gave up on Russian men because of their mentality," she told me, "Husband working, working wife, come home, so she immediately – wife – goes to the kitchen, cooks for him and he doesn't help, plus on top of everything, he has a mistress."[73] At the age of twenty-eight, Valeriya found the solution: an international marriage with her American husband.

If the "Russian Rust Belt" exemplified the devolution of Russian structures into chaos, corruption, and violence from the mid-1980s through the 1990s, it also exemplified the evolution and adaptation of young Russian women. Women were able to pivot their careers, learning new skills that better suited them in a post-Soviet world. They worked multiple jobs to provide for their children. They navigated informal networking blockades, relied on their previous networks, and formed new networks of their own. With this history in mind, it is no surprise that these same women also saw an opportunistic window in the changing emigration policy. Maintaining ideals of a love-filled marriage, they harnessed the changing technology to hatch an escape plan. Understanding the importance of a network, women would not rely on international marriage just for themselves, but also for their friends, colleagues, and sisters.

[73]Brereton, Valeriya interviewed on August 2 2021, on Skype.

TRUE LOVE AND AN EXIT VISA

Most of the women I interviewed had never intended to find a husband abroad. For most of their lives in the Soviet Union and for prior generations, the option had simply not existed. In the 1970s, laws against marrying foreigners restricted Soviet women from the possibility.[74] My interview subjects, who lived in closed cities or far away from Moscow, were unlikely to encounter, let alone form relationships with, outsiders.

Emigration had also not been a consideration. It was only with the reforms of the 1980s, that voluntary emigration began to emerge as a possibility. In 1989, for the first time, large groups of ethnic Germans, Jews, and Greeks were allowed to leave the Soviet Union and shortly thereafter, others followed. In 1993, emigration laws were formally liberalized. The Russian Constitution of 1993 stated that not only was everyone free to leave the Russian Federation, but that Russian citizens also had the right to freely return to the Russian Federation if they so desired.[75]

Even after emigration was legalized, there were many barriers that dissuaded women from seeking international marriages. A 2001 poll revealed that no more than 12 - 12.5 million people in Russia had ever used the internet, out of a population of over 145 million.[76] Very few households had home computers. There was also the language barrier: while there were women who possessed some level of English skills, most could barely communicate with their potential suitors, let alone understand how to market themselves in a foreign language.[77]

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[74] Fisher, *The Soviet Marriage Market,* 255.
[75] Aleshkovski, Grebenyuk, and Vorobyeva, "The Evolution of Russian Emigration in the Post-Soviet Period." 142.
[76] Yuri Perfiliev, "Development of the Internet in Russia: Preliminary Observations on Its Spatial and Institutional Characteristics," *Eurasian Geography and Economics* 43, no. 5 (2002): 411–21.
[77] Taraban, "Birthday Girls, Russian Dolls, and Others: Internet Bride as the Emerging Global Identity." 116.

To an opportunist, the gradual introduction of international internet marriage websites in the 1990s provided the perfect opening to make a profit. For a fee, young women would correct each other's English, archive and distribute addresses of potential suitors, and style each other for photographs.[78] One young woman, interviewed by Erica Johnson, created her own home-made catalogue of Western men, based on letters that other women had received. She then offered her own matchmaking and styling services, for a small fee.[79] Because men were not seeking a particular woman, but instead a woman of particular characteristics, it didn't matter if the respondent was the initial recipient of the letter. It only mattered that the woman who responded matched the description of the kind of woman he was seeking.

In the mid-1990s, as Svetlana finished up her second education in English, the idea dawned on her to start her own marriage agency. "Because I studied language, I used that skill in any opportunity I could to make money," she told me, "I was raising kids all by myself, my husband was unable to help me. So, I started a marriage agency online and I had it for a very long time, for about 12 years. I worked with my friends first. I started with my friends; most of my friends were never married or divorced or widows with children."[80]

For women who would have otherwise been considered old maids, marriage abroad provided an opportunity to solve both their economic and romantic problems, all at once. Women like Svetlana's friends were fed up with being given the runaround. "They dated for years waiting for that special decision," Svetlana explained, "so we thought 'Screw you!' We're going to mail my girls to another country. That had started already, and I saw others were doing it and it was quite successful."[81]

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[78]Johnson, *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband: Russian-American Internet Romance*. 39.
[79]Johnson. 60-62.
[80]Brereton, Svetlana interviewed on July 28 2021, on Zoom.
[81]Brereton, Svetlana interview.

When I asked her how her agency worked, Svetlana explained that her friends benefitted both from her English skills, and access to her computer: "I have a friend, let's say, and she really wants to marry someone and I convince her, 'let's try. Foreign men are much more courteous.' and they are – all of them are – much more ready to marry. So, she brings me her pictures and I post them on their behalf somewhere. At that time, lots of agencies posted for free and for free for men too, because right now, they charge for everything. And then, responses! When responses came, I showed it to my girls, if they like it, check, let's respond."[82]

Svetlana made most of her money, not on the matchmaking itself, but on the agreement that, if her clients were to marry, that they would give her a hundred dollars. She also made money translating letters. "Girls didn't pay me, men do," Svetlana told me.[83] The money would travel from the bank accounts of foreign men to the accounts of Svetlana's clients, who would then transfer it to Svetlana for payment. At first, Svetlana and her clients would write their replies by hand, but it took months to respond to a letter. After about five or six years, she decided to investigate the online platforms to find a reliable messaging service. "It was very interesting because my first post I made in a marriage agency, not for myself, but I tested the agency to see if it is reliable enough to put my girls there," Svetlana told me.[84] Through that fateful post, Svetlana would accidentally meet her own future husband.

For many women who did not speak English, the prospect of going through an agency like Svetlana's to find love was daunting. "I wasn't really planning to do this," Daria told me, "This was a joke of my sister. My sister was already arranged, and she found her fiancé and she was planning...she already got the visa, and she was doing a picture through the photography agency

[82]Brereton, Svetlana interview.
[83]Brereton, Svetlana interview.
[84]Brereton, Svetlana interview.

and she asked me, let's go together because I'm going to fly out and who knows when we will see each other, so I kind of put my guard down and we took the picture. She turned around and she applied for an agency without my knowledge...for me!"[85]

Daria had no clue what her sister had done, even as men started to write to her. "She called me one day and she said 'today, you're cooking dinner.'– like I have nothing else in my life, I am cooking dinner for you! – and she said, 'I have something very important to say' and she came to my house with five letters from my future husband, and she said 'it seems like he is very interested in you.'"[86]

With the help of a translator, Daria's sister had begun a simple correspondence with the man, as though she was Daria. Daria's sister told her that it was her choice whether to continue the correspondence or throw the letters in the garbage. At that point, Daria had been divorced for about three and a half years, she had one child, she was invested in her career, and she was almost thirty – all of which stacked the odds against her for finding a second husband in Russia.

"I was highly professional, it was fifty men and myself, and one surgeon, but they all were younger or they were married, or not interested in any relationship," Daria told me, "So this was a rough time when you want it and we kind of grew in Russia – to have a marriage, to have a family– it was how we grew, it was how our parents teach us."[87] Daria was not the only woman I talked to who had had someone else forcefully encourage her to seek a husband abroad. Natasha had heard of these kinds of marriages, but she did not think it was possible for herself to fall in love with a foreigner. "When you meet someone accidentally on the street, or on the bus, or in the library, it's one thing," she told me, "When you intentionally go to a place, and fill out

[85]Brereton, Daria interviewed on June 28 2021, on Zoom.
[86]Brereton, Daria interview.
[87]Brereton, Daria interview.

your age, height, and weight, and you're looking at a man, it's almost like…it kind of feels like it's a store. Like you're a thing and someone's going to buy you."[88]

Natasha's good friend, however, had met someone online and didn't want to go alone. She started urging Natasha that she should submit her own application, until finally, one day, she took Natasha to the marriage agency without telling her what it was. Despite Natasha's reservations, she decided to fill out an application.[89] Anya also stated that she uploaded her profile with the help of a friend who was already registered and Yulia met her husband with the help of a friend who, much like Svetlana, was working as an independent interpreter.[90]

In Vera's case, her close friend Nadia had already emigrated when she decided to help Vera join her. Nadia was Jewish, and she and her husband had left, first to Israel and then to America, before Vera could follow her. "We had so many letters, just back and forth, back and forth to each other," Vera said, "We were kind of like sisters, almost, in a way. She was like, 'Vera, I promise you, you will come to America.'"[91]

Nadia had been sending Vera the profiles of single guys from Texas, and even Australia, but both women wanted to be closer to make sure Vera was safe. In 1999, Nadia managed to secure a tourist visa for Vera to come out and visit her. In the span of a month, before Vera's visa expired, Nadia and her husband worked to help Vera find a local man on the American singles website to marry.[92]

International marriage agencies offered a stage where young women could finally use the hard-practiced survival skills that they had developed in the late Soviet period to navigate

[88]Brereton, Natasha interviewed on August 6 2021, in Washington.
[89]Brereton, Natasha interview.
[90]Brereton, Yulia interviewed on August 2 2021, on Zoom.
[91]Brereton, Vera interviewed on July 11 2021, in Oregon.
[92]Brereton, Vera interview.

themselves away from the increasing economic and social hardship of the post-Soviet period. For young women who wished to further their circumstances, but saw no opportunity in Russia, international marriage offered both material stability and a second chance at love. Upon arranging their own international marriages, it was pragmatic to network a marriage for a sister or close friend, as women offered a proven network to one another in times of hardship. In this way, international marriage was an extension of the pragmatic network building that had enabled women to navigate patriarchal systems and support one another before.

For English speakers and those who owned computers, international marriage offered an opportunity to cater to the demands of a rapidly changing market. It was an extension of survival skills that had enabled women to care for themselves and their children through shortages and layoffs. In this way, international marriage agencies in post-Soviet Russia were not so much a dazzling new phenomenon of globalization, but instead, the final expression of a Soviet Dream towards intragenerational progress.

CHAPTER II: NAVIGATING A DIGITAL MARKET

INTRODUCTION

Without a nuanced understanding of the Soviet past, Westerners have understood post-Soviet women who married American men largely through their own subjective lens. In an American context, "Mail Order Brides" have been presented by the marriage industry as victims of economic collapse, by a feminist scholarship as victims of transnational exploitation, and in popular culture as conniving exploiters of American men. In American culture, international marriage has been framed in the context of a transaction as opposed to a relationship. The economic language used by the industry had little to do with women or their experience, but likely developed in this way to appeal to men seeking financial affirmation of their masculine status.

That idea that Russian women were highly attuned to the process of their own emigration has not yet had much of a role in the discourse about international marriage. Yet, relying on Soviet and post-Soviet survival skillsets, Russian women proved savvy navigators of their own virtual image and key players in the overall success of the industry. In the entrepreneurial spirit of post-Soviet Russia, many women were also deeply involved in the business side of international marriage.

On the other hand, while Russian women were interested in the stability of American life, they were certainly not the "gold diggers" portrayed in American media. Most were primarily interested in finding a compatible partner and many took great care to evaluate potential suitors for compatibility, despite economic and linguistic disadvantages. The women who took less time

with their international marriages were hardly profiteers. This choice could cost them tremendously, as a lack of compatibility reflected in the overall success of their marriages.

THE MAKING OF AN INDUSTRY

Ellie's husband Todd was drawn to the idea of dating a Russian woman after a series of bad dating experiences with American women from *Match.com.* He told me that when he met American women on *Match.com*, they would express that they had multiple dates lined up, inquire about what kind of car and house he had, judge him based on his religious preferences, and make him feel like dating was a competition. "I won't use the B word," he told me, "but for a lot of American women, that's the label."[93]

"Instead of meeting women that were monetary based or objective based - like 'what package do you bring to support my choice of making a family?' - I said, 'let's find a culture that's actually more interested in the relationship than the business of the relationship," Todd told me, "[...] I shouldn't have to batter my head against the wall to justify who and what I am, and what I believe in, so I'm going to go somewhere where there's already people who are willing to work."[94]

His search for a culture of women who he perceived as unconcerned with his financial status and personal choices eventually led him to connect with Russian women online. Todd's account of his dating experiences brings about an important question: how did American men find their way to Russian women, and why Russian women in particular? When Ellie and her husband got married in 2008, the international marriage industry was already in full

[93]August Brereton, Todd interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington, August 5, 2021.

[94]Brereton, Todd interview.

swing for over ten years, with references to Russian brides saturating American television and news. However, the American image of Russian women as ideal domestic partners was not a long-standing trope. This image was only crafted in the 1990s, specifically for the purposes of international marriage agencies.

According to Tatiana Osipovich, before the 1990s, Soviet women were portrayed in American media as "strong, self-sufficient, and less than feminine creatures."[95] They were seen as laborers, officials, and housewives -- sturdy, stern, and driven. Robert L. Griswold similarly argued that in early Cold War, the ills of communism were portrayed as a shapeless, genderless uniformity, and the bodies of Soviet women were depicted as similarly androgyne. Nina Khrushchev, who visited the United States in the 1950s, was able to humanize the face of Communist women, allowing a secondary perception -- a kind, grandmotherly figure, still unsexed but now endeared to traditional American sensibilities of what a woman should be. As the Space Race heated up, a third perception of Communist women emerged: they were scientists in lab coats and astronauts in rocket ships. Once again, the focus was not on her body, but on her position in the Soviet workforce.[96]

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the image of the Russian woman shifted from someone who was a part of the Communist system, to someone who was victimized by it - a treasure hidden away from the rest of the world behind the iron curtain. In 1996, Scanna, an

[95]Tatiana Osipovich, "Russian Mail-Order Brides in U.S. Public Discourse: Sex, Crime, and Cultural Stereotypes," in *Sexuality and Gender in Postcommunist Eastern Europe and Russia*, ed. Aleksandar Štulhofer and Theo Sandford (New York: Haworth Press, 2005). 239.

[96]Robert L. Griswold, "'Russian Blonde in Space': Soviet Women in the American Imagination, 1950–1965," *Journal of Social History* 45, no. 4 (June 1, 2012): 881–907.

international marriage website, told their consumers that "most of what you think about Russian women is probably inaccurate. What you haven't seen is that Russian women are among the most beautiful women in the world."[97]

American men, who were employed in lower-earning positions and felt threatened by a newly invigorated population of working American women, were the prime demographic to seek international marriages online. One 1998 study found that about half of the American consumers of the marriage brokering industry had two or less years of college education.[98] This profile was representative of American men in general, excluding the minority of those with extended higher education. As Marcia Zug argued, it was men in working class positions who were most affected by the changing job market in the United States.[99]

Men in this demographic expressed their perception of a growing divide between themselves and American women. 1992, dubbed "The Year of the Woman" by *Time Magazine* represented a wave of women stepping into political positions.[100] Third-wave feminism became increasingly normalized in American culture throughout the 1990s, as smart, independent women took central roles in American media, from children's TV shows to popular musicians who incorporated feminist themes into their songs. Working women shifted from occupying "traditional" jobs like secretaries, nurses, librarians, telephone operators and teachers, to broader employment into previously non-traditional jobs like bartenders, truck drivers, and electrical engineers (although they remained the minority in the highest paying professions.)[101]

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[97]Scanna, "Russian," http://www.scanna.com/russian.html; archived at Wayback Machine., December 21, 1996.
[98]Marcia Zug, "Mail Order Feminism," *William & Mary Journal of Women and the Law* 21 (2014). 159-62.
[99] Zug, 159–62.
[100]Marjorie Julian Spruill, *Divided We Stand: The Battle Over Women's Rights and Family Values That Polarized American Politics* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2017). 316 - 323.
[101] Carol Kleiman, "Womens' Work in the 90s Has Few Boundaries," *Chicago Tribune*, 1996.

The "democratization" of American feminism into American pop culture invited a reactionary current of men, tropified in political discourses as "Angry White Men." The term "Angry White Men" described a certain subset of white male conservatives who reacted against the increased presence of women and racial minorities in the workforce, which they perceived as challenging their masculine status as providers.[102] The term was subsequently associated with white male violence including the violent sieges at Ruby Ridge and Waco, in 1992 and 1993 becoming a "catch all" term with seriously negative connotations. Ironically, the treatment of "Angry White Men" in scholarship and media as a mass movement of violent bigots solidified this gendered divide.

To American men who were insecure about the changing workforce, the idea of reclaiming their status as providers was particularly appealing. International marriage websites emphasized the financial crisis imparted on women by the collapse of the Soviet Union to capitalize on this desire, using language like "Russian princesses waiting for their American princes."[103] These sentiments reaffirmed American patriarchal supremacy and cast Russian women as trophies to be won. Tatiana Osipovich argued that in the case of Russian women, it also symbolically reinforced the Cold War victory of American Capitalism over the Communist enemy.[104] As gendered tension in America rose, the emerging post-Cold War economy set the stage for the creation of an online international marriage industry.

In the early 1990s, a collision of profound societal changes created a breeding ground for a new epoch, the Information Age. In 1991, the collapse of the Soviet Union unveiled a market sector which had previously been restricted from the global exchange - as Russia rapidly

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[102] Michael Kimmel, *Angry White Men: American Masculinity at the End of an Era, Nation Books* (New York: Nation Books, 2013).
[103] Osipovich, "Russian Mail-Order Brides in U.S. Public Discourse: Sex, Crime, and Cultural Stereotypes." 240.
[104]Osipovich. 234.

privatized, liberalized, and integrated itself into global networks of trade. In 1992, the International Telecommunications Union, initially developed to help connect nations via telegraph, radio, and telephone, was restructured to regulate evolving technologies, such as the mobile phone. Simultaneously, early uses of SMS messaging and the creation of the World Wide Web in the same year, ushered in a new age of international digital communication.[105]

The rising use of digital currency, including digital currency exchange services that allowed the conversion from one kind of national currency to another, rapidly expanded global trade networks.[106] The collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of a globally interconnected marketplace cemented the American mood of Cold War victory. It also put American men, even those in low-earning occupations, in a financially favorable position to Russian women.

All American men with internet, regardless of financial status, could access the digital marketplace. However, the process of finding a Russian bride could be quite an investment. For example, at Anna's Russian Romance, the Russian sub-corporation of the larger international marriage broker Heart of Asia, men could register a profile and browse women's profiles for free but pursuing communication with women could get pricey. Addresses at which the women could be contacted were sold on a sliding scale, with a discount for quantity: fifteen dollars for one address, thirty-five dollars for five (or seven dollars an address) and sixty dollars for fifteen (or four dollars an address). Additionally, for men to list their own photo and short biography on the

[105]Ursula Huws, *Labor in the Global Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age.* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2014). 20.
[106]Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society: With a New Preface, Volume I, The Rise of the Network Society: With a New Preface, Volume I: Second Edition With a New Preface* (Somerset: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

website, Anna's Russian Romance charged $150, and to mail this information, it was an extra $50.[107]

Beyond the purchasing of addresses, men could take advantage of additional services provided by international marriage sites. Translation services were frequently offered through agencies, which ensured two-way translation of letters between English-speaking men and Russian-speaking women. Some agencies offered options for men to purchase bouquets to be delivered to their potential brides, lawyers who specialized in "fiancée immigration," and even rooms which could serve as neutral ground for men who wished to visit women in person. This combination of relevant services made marriage agencies a "one stop shop" for international marriage-related needs.

Some websites simultaneously advertised "Romance tours" to men who were willing to travel to former Soviet countries and meet multiple women for a "romantic vacation." Testimonial comments on webpages indicated that "romance tours" had very little to do with dating and marriage, and everything to do with sex.[108] For many of the men seeking international marriage, "romance tours" were not a relevant service. One man, who had found his Russian bride online, stated that "romance tours" seemed uncomfortably like a form of trafficking.[109]

For men like Todd, who were seeking a long-term romantic partner, the rates of successful marriages reported by the industry were a strong factor in its favor. "As you know, a lot of marriages are 50-50 at best and, as you've probably done research, international marriages

[107]Anna's Russian Romance, "How It All Works," http://annasrussian.com/; archived at Wayback Machine., December 12, 1998.
[108]Johnson, *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband: Russian-American Internet Romance*. 130.
[109]Johnson, 130.

are 80%+," he stated.[110] Similar figures were reported in 2000 on *Russianbrides.com* by Larry Holmes, an immigration attorney contracted with the agency.[111]

"Approximately 75% of the clients who travel to a foreign country to meet their future wife [..] get engaged from the first trip. Of the remaining 25%, almost all tell me "It was the vacation of a lifetime" and that they plan to return ASAP," Holmes wrote, "Of those who get engaged and for whom I obtain a Fiancée Visa, approximately 75% get married within 90 days of the woman's arrival in the U.S. Of the remaining 25% of the cases, it does not work out and the woman returns to her home. To date, to the best of my knowledge, our divorce rate is under five percent."[18]

For men pursuing a serious relationship and who felt that American women were no longer a viable or desirable option, international marriage websites advertised educated, beautiful women who were interested in pursuing a "traditional family life."[112] The industry promised that these women, coming from the financial ruins of the former USSR, would not be dissuaded by a lesser income or lower status. They would be happy simply to have a man - any man - who wished to enter a committed relationship and who could provide them with a relatively superior quality of life. This was a narrative embraced by the international marriage industry, academic and legal scholarship, and the American media. For Russian women, however, it was simply not the case.

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[110]Brereton, Todd interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington.
[111]Larry Holmes, "About," http://www.russianbrides.com/about.htm; archived at Wayback Machine, October 17, 2000. Conversely, secondary literature on the topic has reported almost the exact opposite information. Living Gender after Communism contributor Svetlana Taraban claimed that divorce statistics and domestic violence in internationally brokered marriages far exceeded those of domestic marriages between American men and women, citing one study that suggested that up to 80% of marriages between Russian women and American men ended in divorce after only two to three years." Neither claim cited sufficient evidence and to date, no study has been proved conclusive.
[112]Scanna, "Russian."

AGENCY IN AGENCIES

Many of the women with whom I spoke downplayed their own involvement in their international marriages. “There is kind of a stigma,” Natasha told me, “a lot of people laugh at it and are not taking it seriously [...] People whose wives came in as brides, whatever they call it, it’s not nice what they say.” For this reason, Natasha said that she preferred to keep the story of her international marriage private.[113]

The negative image of “mail order brides" has been pervasive in various American cultural contexts. The very act of embedding marriage into a system of economic exchange is antithetical to American marriage ideals of tradition, love, and personal choice. With language that emphasized the leniency and domesticity of Russian women and a clientele of supposed “Angry White Men,” the international marriage industry inevitably concerned a budding feminist scholarship, who portrayed internationally-married Russian women as victims of trafficking.

Much of the scholarship, written in the context of human rights law, problematized the global-financial aspects of the industry. Vanessa Brocato wrote that, “to secure potential brides, the MOBI [Mail Order Bride Industry] recruits women in developing nations who have been made vulnerable by daily violations of their human rights. Marriages resulting from the MOBI often perpetuate these human rights violations.”[114]

However, in their portrayal of Russian women as victims of a human rights violation, these scholars did not address the agency that Russian women had within their own marriage process. Russian women had a complex understanding of the international marriage process,

[113]Brereton, Natasha interviewed on August 6 2021, in Washington.
[114]Brocato, “Profitable Proposals: Explaining and Addressing the Mail-Order Bride Industry through International Human Rights Law.” 227.

including its many risks. Ellie remembered lots of TV programs in her hometown in 2007 extensively covering Russian women seeking international marriage, being trafficked and sold for sex work and body parts. She would come into work and her coworkers would gossip about it, which made her feel uncomfortable to speak about her own international relationship. Ellie was quite sure, however, after extensive contact with not only her future husband, but also her future mother-in-law, that they were the real thing.[115]

The objectifying language and structure of the industry was certainly noted by Russian women, who were no strangers to being treated as inferior. Like the American scholarship, Russian participants in international marriage were often uncomfortable with the transactional structure of these websites. However, having come of age in the often risky and patriarchal world of the late Soviet Union, women were primed for interpreting and navigating such structures, often relying on each other – and their own gut instincts – and emulating the strategies which they observed to work. The international marriage industry in an American context was, without a doubt, a systemic extension of patriarchy and Western supremacy which "Orientalized" Russian women and fed into racist and sexist preconceptions. However, just because the industry was predatory did not mean that its female participants were prey.

The Russian language side of the industry, targeted at women who would potentially be interested in international marriage, featured detailed informational pages, which balanced the risks and merits of the process, as well as providing step-by-step guidance on how to go about the process. Much of the information featured in these "guides" validated perceptions of gendered and financial tensions extant in the former USSR. However, instead of trying to "sell" women on the concept of an international marriage, guides such as the one put forward by the

[115]Brereton, Ellie interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington.

"Alena International Marriage Agency" encouraged women to think long and hard before embarking on the potentially traumatic experience of emigration. These guides were also rich with advice that could help women with limited financial resources form strategies to best navigate a global marriage market that was targeted towards a more affluent, technologically savvy audience.

The Alena International Marriage Guide validated Russian women's concerns about the culture of patriarchy and the economic crisis in Russia. It provided statistics that painted a grim picture of the future of unmarried Russian women. Concerns about Russian men that came up in many of my interviews were also mentioned in the Alena guide. "It is well known that our women outnumber our men," the guide stated, "Statistics reveal that for one hundred women there are only ninety-seven men. That means for every one hundred women, three will inevitably wind up on their own!"[116]

Besides the sheer numerical divide, the guide also stated that men were more susceptible to disease and died earlier than their female counterparts. As a result, it claimed, every tenth Russian woman over the age of thirty-five would not be able to find a marriageable partner. It described "bad habits" such as drunkenness, laziness, infidelity, and a lack of desire to improve themselves as culturally pervasive among Russian men.[117]

International marriage could be a way for women to change their lives for the better, to attain a "dignified and interesting life in a dignified country and a dignified future for [their] children." The guide painted a picture of life in America that included a loving husband, a home with a large kitchen full of appliances, owning a car, hospitals with qualified personnel, stores

[116]Alena International Marriage Agency, "Sovet 1," http://alena.syktyvkar.ru/advice1.shtml; archived at Wayback Machine, April 4, 2003.

[117]Alena International Marriage Agency.

with a variety of tasty and healthy products, and the opportunity to "grill kebabs in the garden" and "relax by the sea every weekend."[118]

However, alongside this rosy picture of a "dignified" American lifestyle, the guide was explicit about the challenges Russian women could face while starting their new lives. "Moving to another country to start a different life is a serious personal trauma," the guide clearly cautioned, and the decision was not to be taken lightly. Being far from family and friends could be isolating and the pressures of a new language and culture could be tremendously stressful. The guide also mentioned that upon immigration to another country, these women may have to give up their beloved professions. "From a Russian perspective, the fate of a housewife looks attractive but when you have to live this way day after day, month after month, you will inevitably go crazy," the guide warned, "No amount of money and convenience will be a joy." Thus, to maximize the chances of satisfaction, the guide offered advice on how to create an attractive, successful profile.

The photograph was integral to making a first impression. Men would begin their search by browsing through photos on the screen "choosing the women who catch their eye," so it was important for women to find a professional photographer and wear makeup and stylish, feminine clothing. The guide also advised against overly sexual poses, very high heels, and swimsuit/lingerie photos which could attract the wrong type of attention. It was important for photos to emphasize sincerity and friendliness because "practically all men who apply to marriage agencies experience some difficulty communicating with the opposite sex" and a friendly smile was inviting to this shy demographic of suitors.[119]

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[118]Alena International Marriage Agency.

[119]Alena International Marriage Agency, "Sovet 3," http://alena.syktyvkar.ru/advice3.shtml; archived at Wayback Machine, April 4, 2003.

In addition to guides, women relied heavily on other women for help creating successful profiles. Match-making was a communal process, and the line between friendly guidance and marketable service was not always clear. Women would help each other translate, compare letters that they had received, and style each other for photographs. Sometimes, they would receive money directly from men for these services, but other times they would expect to receive a kick-back from the gifts Western men sent to their friends. When Yulia initially listed her profile on a marriage site, she did not speak any English so her friend Katya helped with translation. However, when her American suitor began sending little gifts for her daughter, Katya demanded that Yulia share with her, or else she would reveal that it wasn't really Yulia writing the letters. Katya, like Svetlana and many others, was not officially affiliated with a website and instead provided her English language skills to her friends and acquaintances as an independent interpreter.[120]

The heavy involvement of Russian women in their own international marriages complicates the narrative that these women were hapless victims of a kind of trafficking scheme, perpetuated by a Western industry for the purpose of entrapping disadvantaged women. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian women had both the networks and skills to exercise personal agency in their quests for upward mobility, in both material and romantic aspects of their lives. Through detailed guides, Russian women were able to get a realistic picture of both the benefits and risks of international marriage. Similarly, these guides helped women present themselves in a way that would attract "ideal" husbands and maximize their chances of a successful life in America.

[120]Brereton, Yulia interviewed on August 2 2021, on Zoom.

American legal scholarship, which focused on an Americentric portrait of the international marriage industry, introduced a false dichotomy: Russian women versus American businesses who exploited them. In actuality, Russian women were deeply intertwined in one another's international marriage processes, creating a communal network through which they could help one another actualize a "dignified" future.

A PERSON OR A PLACE?

While scholarly depictions of the industry were prone to highlighting "Mail Order Brides" as victims of systemic oppression, popular culture provided fodder for yet another stereotype: "Mail Order Brides" as conniving manipulators, seeking the relative wealth and status of their American husbands for themselves.

Negative portrayals of "Mail Order Brides" as "gold diggers" were made abundant in entertainment media of the early 2000s, such as the 2001 film "Birthday Girl," which portrayed a "Mail Order Bride" as a criminal con artist. These tropes are still perpetuated in a contemporary context; for example, the 2018 Simpsons episode "From Russia Without Love" portrays a "Mail Order Bride" using a fake Russian-language marriage contract to steal the rights to her husband's property.[121] As scholars understated the amount of savvy that Russian women displayed in navigating the international marriage industry, American popular media overemphasized their motives as calculating and money-hungry.

Natasha expressed that there may have been some women who came to America looking for money and opportunity, but there were others who were primarily looking for a soul mate.

[121] "Birthday Girl" directed by Jez Butterworth (Miramax Films, 2001); The Simpsons, season 30, episode 6, "From Russia Without Love" directed by Mike B. Anderson, Matthew Nastuk, aired November 11, 2018, on Fox.

"There were two categories of girls [...]," she told me, "The girls who really want to meet somebody, it doesn't matter if this person has money, doesn't have money, cars, houses, whatever. They are particularly looking for a soul mate. And some girls were like 'Oh, I want to get a green card, I want to move, I want to get there, and I don't care.' They would say openly, 'I don't need him. I just need him to get there.'"[122]

Through her experiences working in the industry, Svetlana gained her own insight on what other women were looking for. "The request was very straight forward," she told me, "I'm looking for a life partner who I want to marry, and I have a kid, or I don't have a kid, but the condition is I am not wasting time just to be friends. I would like to know more about you and if something works between us, I would like to marry." Svetlana's clients were mostly around the age of thirty: educated, smart, and beautiful women who were, as Svetlana put it, "too smart" to marry local men. "They certainly didn't want to live in Russia, that was another condition," she told me, "Although some of them said we can try and live in Russia, but that was not realistic. No foreigners could live in Russia at that time."[123]

Most of the women who I interviewed were quick to specify that they did not primarily view their marriages as an avenue for upward mobility. Instead, a compatible relationship, with mutual respect and attraction was the most important criteria. Women carefully screened men through the entire process, evaluating the potential for compatibility through their photos, letters, phone calls, and sometimes simply based on their own intuition. Many women did express their desire to leave Russia, but this desire was primarily linked to feelings of a "hopeless" dating culture and a precarious future, as opposed to a desire to become rich.

[122]Brereton, Natasha interviewed on August 6 2021, in Washington.
[123]Brereton, Svetlana interviewed on July 28 2021, on Zoom.

The Russian language guide on the Alena marriage agency recommended that women write down a list of qualities that they wanted to find in a potential partner, such as age, appearance, character, profession, financial status, and family status. The guide advised that they should split the list into two categories, one for necessary characteristics and the other for desirable characteristics. It warned women that, "if you don't have a clearly defined goal, any man can impress you, and it won't always be the right partner."[124] Russian women were quick to dismiss American men who they perceived as having undesirable attributes, and sought men who instead presented themselves as attractive, romantic, committed, and mature.

The Alena guide emphasized that photos were an important way for women to make a good first impression, and this was true for men as well. On Elena's Models, the international marriage website where Ellie met Todd, photographs of men would be displayed in a column. Women could then click on the photos to read a man's profile. Ellie was the first to reach out, because Todd's profile picture caught her eye. "When I saw his photo, his face looked familiar to me," Ellie told me, "So I sent him a letter and I asked him, 'You are actor? Or you are someone famous? How do I know you?' and that's how it starts."[125]

The long-distance communication process also played a huge role in how Russian women responded to the advances of men. Women wanted to make a personal connection with men and feel courted. Short letters, or letters that were not personal enough, were seen as a red flag. One of Ericka Johnson's interview subjects expressed that if men got information from her biography wrong, or did not personalize their letters, she would not respond.[126] Along these lines,

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[124]Alena International Marriage Agency, "Sovet 4," http://alena.syktyvkar.ru/advice4.shtml; archived at Wayback Machine, April 4, 2003, 4.
[125]Brereton, Ellie interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington.
[126]Johnson, *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband: Russian-American Internet Romance*. 25.

advice from the English-language side of the industry cautioned men against using a *Xeroxed* copy of one letter with each recipient's name written in at the top.[127] Women wanted to feel special and see an effort on the behalf of men, and as technology developed from snail mail, to email and phone calls, and finally to instant messaging services, it became more and more possible for women to have extended communication with prospective partners, and thus make those judgment calls.

In the early years of her agency, Svetlana helped her clients write letters by hand. It took months to get responses to these letters. After five or six years of using handwritten letters, Svetlana decided she wanted to find a website that used an email service. She made herself a test profile on an agency to see if it was reliable enough to use for her clients and that is when she was contacted by her future husband.

"I told him, 'I'm not interested, I'm just a tester and he said 'why not? Let's talk." and he called me. We talked for four hours the first time. I did not mind! I liked the way he spoke, he was very intelligent and then…he sent me flowers. [...] He was a man with three boys he was raising himself and he was a general contractor," Svetlana told me.[128] Svetlana said that her husband, who had recently passed away six months before the interview, was a very generous person and made quite good money. In Spring of 2001, he read an article about a widower who had lost his house to a bombing in Afghanistan. Svetlana's husband had decided to build a new house for this man for free and he was looking for an interpreter. He was also looking for a wife online.

[127]Russianbrides.com, "Writing Page," http://www.russianbrides.com/writingpage.html; archived at Wayback Machine, April 15, 2001.
[128]Brereton, Svetlana interviewed on July 28 2021, on Zoom.

"He saw my profile and he checked and saw "wow, Kazan is very close to Afghanistan," Svetlana winked at me, "It's not. It's not close, but on the map it is. He said, 'let me check that girl, maybe they speak the same language.' He had no clue about languages in Russia. And he asked me if I knew anybody in Afghanistan and I said, 'no I don't, but I know a person who was a missionary there not a long time ago, I can hook you up.' That was when we talked the very first time, that was four hours. So, I connected him to that missionary who went to Afghanistan and that guy said to him 'If you're suicidal, go ahead. The majority of those guys are scum and they will just kill you and take your money. Instead of going to Afghanistan for vocation, just come to Russia and meet that girl. If you want to find someone, this is the one. She is single and she is Christian and she knows English and she's good.' He recommended me, and that is how we started to go into a relationship deeper, because when somebody recommends you and you know that somebody, this takes it to a different level."[129]

Svetlana's husband visited her twice during the two years they were waiting for her visa to be approved, and he even sent his oldest son to meet her. They emailed four or five times a day, and when it became an option, started communicating on AOL Instant Messenger. He also called her frequently, racking up huge expenses. "I remember his first bill was $800," Svetlana said with a laugh, "He said we need to kind of cut it off!"[130]

Sometimes, it took meeting in person to determine whether a match was viable. Anya dated several men who she had met through international marriage websites before marrying her American husband. One man from Barcelona invited Anya to visit him for a week and, while she found the experience very interesting, she quickly realized that his personality was not for her.

[129]Brereton, Svetlana interview.
[130]Brereton, Svetlana interview.

"He was very nervous, very impulsive and so I came back," Anya said.[131]

In 2001, Anya and her husband started exchanging letters. She noted that he was very frank and open with her about who he was, what he had, and what he was looking for. Anya did not expect to wind up with him because he was also exchanging letters with other women, and she was very busy with her career and children. "My intention was to find the right person, not just to escape the country or live in the United States," Anya told me, "I could see that he was good and supportive, but I was not sure it would happen, but it happened."[132]

On Valentine's Day, Anya's husband sent her flowers, told her he wanted to marry her, and asked to come visit her that summer. Anya told her husband that she already had plans to visit another potential suitor in Norway over the summer. He said that in that case, he would come next month. Anya was impressed by both his romantic gestures and the commitment he displayed and when they finally met in person, Anya's feelings about her husband were confirmed. "We matched with each other, it was a surprise, just so amazing. From different culture, from different country [...] like two dolphins get along, communicate and understand each other."[133] After his first visit, they started the process to get Anya a fiancée visa, and then he brought his daughter for another visit that summer. The visa was granted three years later, and they married in 2004.

Sometimes, women relied on what was simply a gut instinct. "If it's fate, if the person that I love, like my soulmate, is not in this country, [...] I decided for myself – sometimes you

[131]Brereton, Anya interviewed on July 16 2021, on Zoom.
[132]Brereton, Anya interview.
[133]Brereton, Anya interview.

have this kind of feeling like something flips right here," Natasha told me, gesturing to her heart, "you have this feeling like electric shock – that I would consider maybe talking to him. If not, I would not bother spending any time on it."[134]

When a man was coming to visit the agency from abroad, Natasha would sometimes go out to a cafe with him, but if she did not have the initial gut feeling that he was the one, she would not pursue a relationship. A lot of the men that visited her were over 60, which was older than her father. The first thing she noticed upon encountering her American husband's profile was that he was attractive and younger even than she was - and that his last name, in Russian, translated to "angel."[135] Shortly after getting into contact, Natasha's husband visited her and her young daughter, usually shy and withdrawn, immediately warmed up to him. Natasha viewed each of these circumstances as signs that he was her soulmate, and her intuition eventually paid off as the couple got closer and closer, eventually marrying in 2002. Natasha told me that her husband was not rich, but they were deeply compatible with one another.[136]

While aspects of a perceived "American" lifestyle were certainly a draw for Russian women to become involved in international marriages, the primary motivator was the potential for compatibility. Russian women carefully evaluated American men based on characteristics they were looking for in a long-term relationship, such as attraction, enthusiasm, and commitment. Driven primarily by a desire to have a successful marriage and future, Russian women sought international marriages with a clear sense of multifaceted, self-actualizing purpose - not as "gold diggers" or profiteers. However, certain factors like time pressure and language barriers could impact women's abilities to make these important decisions.

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[134] Brereton, Natasha interviewed on August 6 2021, in Washington.
[135] For the privacy of the interview subject, surname has been changed to an equivalent concept.
[136]Brereton, Natasha interviewed on August 6 2021, in Washington.

For women like Svetlana, who spoke excellent English, it was easier to evaluate the compatibility of potential suitors. English speakers could draw their own conclusions about the profiles of men and were better able to spot red flags in the long-distance communication process. They never had to worry about a friend or agency mistranslating letters, either to or from their suitors, and thus, were able to experience a more straightforward line of communication. More importantly, having English skills in post-Soviet Russia was financially valuable. Svetlana was able to utilize her language knowledge to become a language instructor for missionaries, as well as an independent translator for other women seeking international marriage. This relative material stability allowed her to take more time in the process of finding a compatible husband. Taking time to communicate long-distance allowed couples to more carefully evaluate and likewise, led to better matched partnerships.

Those who lacked the language skills experienced a disadvantage, both with evaluating their suitors and often, with a more urgent financial component to their desires for emigration. “I think I always wanted to have a better life than I had because I come from a very small town 13,000 people. Life wasn’t that great and when I moved to Moscow, everything was so great, the galleries and the museums. I came back home, where it was a very small town, where there wasn’t a pool of people who could be on my level, and – nice guys and everything – I just didn’t see myself right there. I just didn’t want to come back, I did everything I could to not come back,” Vera told me, “Everyone talked about America: have the perfect baby, baby become the citizen, and after that mother automatically gets [citizenship].” Vera saw how her mother had struggled to help her achieve a better life and wanted to do the same for her children. “Once you

come here," she told me, "it didn't matter. You can marry, you can divorce. It was all to come here."[137]

Vera came to Portland, Oregon on a one-month tourist visa in 1999 to visit her friend Nadia. Almost immediately after she arrived, Nadia and her husband started to help Vera look for an American man to marry in that time frame so she could get permanent residency nearby. Vera went on a few dates with American men, but because her English was not very good, she relied heavily on Nadia and her husband to screen her suitors for her. Vera remembered Nadia vetoing one suitor – who happened to be Nadia's uncle – for being overly focused on Vera's sex appeal.

When Vera began to date her husband, she quickly realized that he was not what she had been expecting. She recalled spending hours dressing up for a date, for him to take her to the zoo. "It was different," she told me, "He was from a divorced family, was in his early forties, and didn't have a lot of money."[138] Regardless of his class status, Nadia and her husband told Vera that he was a good guy.

"They understood Americans," Vera told me, "They said 'he's not gonna take you to Hawaii'. It's not like everyone has a honeymoon, but those words stuck in my mind."[139] Vera married her husband before her visa's expiration, knowing very little about him and with very little ability to communicate with him. Nadia helped her through the paperwork to obtain permanent residency. "In the US, everything seemed to happen really fast," Vera told me.[140] In less than a month, she had gone from a single Russian resident to a married resident of the US

[137]Brereton, Vera interviewed on July 11 2021, in Oregon.
[138]Brereton, Vera interview.
[139]Brereton, Vera interview.
[140]Brereton, Vera interview.

and the gravity of those rapid changes was overwhelming. Likewise, Vera quickly realized that her new family's financial status did not match up to the vision she had had of life in America.

Daria, who made good money as a physician in Russia, was not in a rush to get married for financial reasons, but she was looking for a swift change. She had her own flat, her own car, and her own business, but she was also nearing thirty, recently divorced, and a single mother. Wanting desperately to settle down, Daria prioritized a partner who was serious about getting married. These time constraints limited the process of long-distance communication and Daria's lack of English skills added another layer of difficulty to communication.

With the help of a translator from a marriage agency, Daria spoke to a few suitors who wanted a relationship, but none of them were "ready to get married." Her American ex-husband, who was 46 at the time of their marriage, caught her eye because he dreamed of getting married quickly and having a child of his own. For Daria, it was this willingness to commit and progress in the relationship that made him stand out. "It was a kind of deal," she told me, "We get together, we end up married, and we will have a child right away, so it was no playtime."[141]

Soon after Daria began communicating with her ex-husband in 1999, she started to have issues with her translator. "At that time in Russia, our agency wasn't very good," she told me, "They played us. Somebody from the agency was actually asking for money from him [in letters supposedly written by the agency's clients], which one was from me."[142] Daria gave her ex-husband the phone number of an English-speaking friend, who confirmed that the agency was trying to scam him. Her ex-husband then got the agency to give him her direct contact

[141]Brereton, Daria interviewed on June 28 2021, on Zoom.
[142]Brereton, Daria interview.

information. In October of 1999, she invited him to Russia, and he asked her to marry him right away.

Because the period of their courtship was so brief, her English skills were not well-developed, and she had lost the help of the agency, Daria unfortunately misread her ex-husband's interest in her status as an interest in her personality. Her ex-husband, a truck driver, was amazed when he found out that Daria was a physician and told her he had always wanted a smart wife. Later, she found out that he was under the impression that she could become a physician in the US and thus, become the breadwinner of their new family. This miscommunication caused subsequent problems in their relationship, leading to their eventual divorce.[143]

While it proved a challenge, a language barrier was not always the inevitable downfall of an international marriage. Some couples took their time creatively maneuvering around these communication difficulties and finding ways to adapt. When Natasha initially met her husband in person, they had a translator who accompanied them to a room at the agency where they sat and talked for hours. The second time he flew out to see her, they didn't have a translator, but instead relied on a "tiny little dictionary." It also helped that her husband knew some Russian, that he was actively taking Russian classes, and that the agency provided an English teacher for women, at no charge.[144]

While she waited for her paperwork to be finalized at the American embassy, Natasha's husband would call her every day and send emails. She didn't know enough English yet to reply so she relied on Google translator. "I still have those emails now," she told me with a laugh, "I

[143]Brereton, Daria interview.
[144]Brereton, Natasha interviewed on August 6 2021, in Washington.

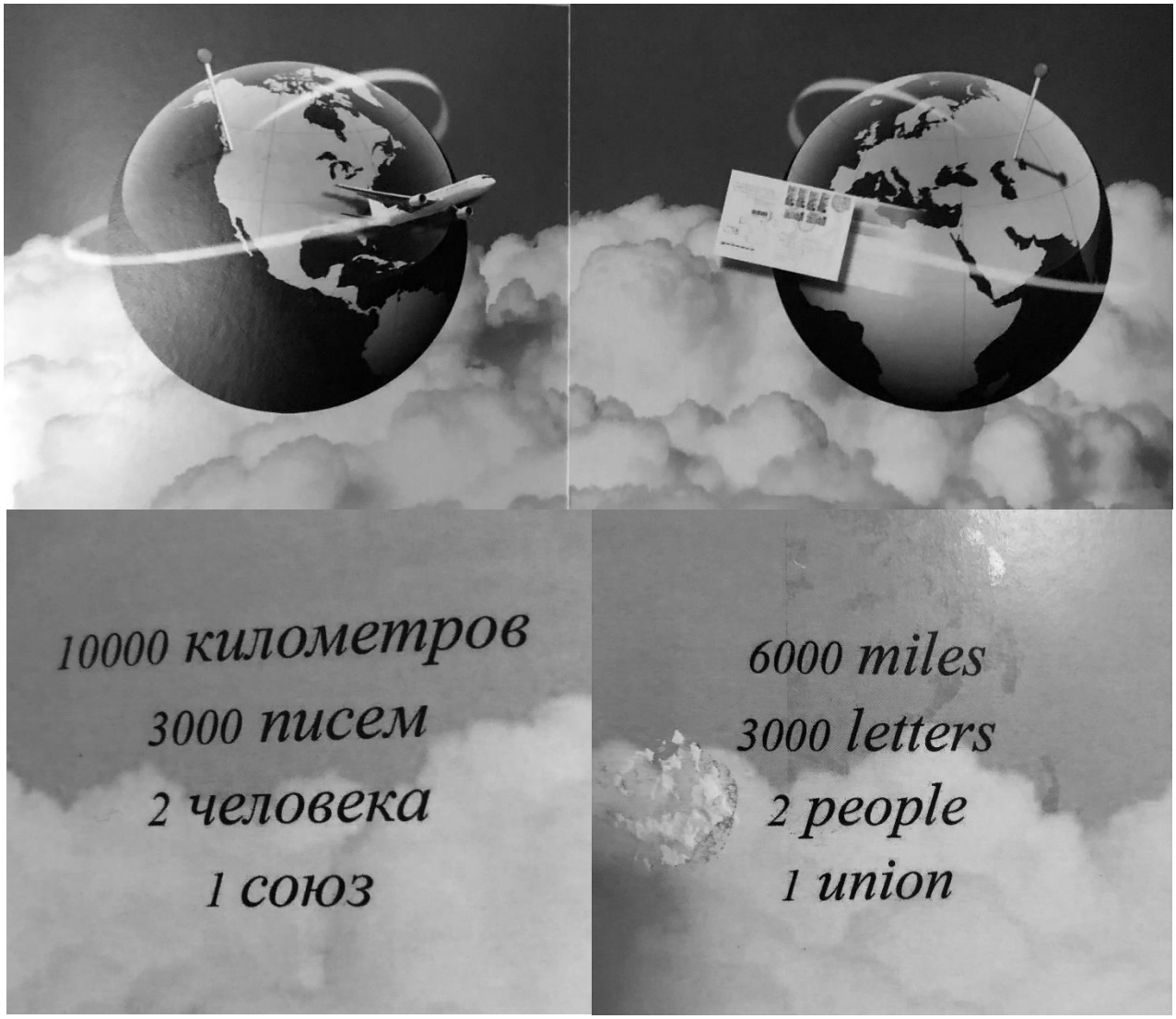
read them and think 'you're joking! How did he understand what I wrote?' We were on some kind of level – understood each other, had the same thoughts and likes."[145]

Ellie and Todd described a similar experience with the foibles of online translation in the years leading up to their 2008 marriage. "I would write an email in Microsoft Word basically and then stick it into an online translator and hope for the best," Todd told me, "[...] And then she would look at it and go 'what is this garbled mess?' because, like, the word "stick" – whether it's a stick from a tree or stick something against the wall – it's the same word but how it translates is different. [...] We had to use very basic words or else they wouldn't translate."[146]

The couple also experienced communication issues due to the differences in internet speed in the US and Russia. Ellie owned a computer, but it was on a dial-up modem, so when her husband would send her emails with links to different web pages about life in America, she couldn't access them. Despite the technology and language barrier, Ellie and her husband managed to speak on the phone about twice a week and email twice a day. By the time they got married in 2008, they had sent over 3,000 emails back and forth. Navigating the communication barrier was a challenge which they tackled together, and which brought them closer as a couple. Fig. 2-1 features their wedding invitation which serves as a visual representation of their bilingual marriage.

[145]Brereton, Natasha interview.
[146]Brereton, Todd interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington.

Figure 2-1: Ellie's Marriage Invitation



Source: August Brereton. 2022.

The long-distance communication process was the single most decisive factor for both Russian women and American men in determining the compatibility of their potential partners. American men initially started a search for a Russian bride out of a perceived incompatibility with American women, so it was important to them that their international relationships felt

different. As Valeriya's husband told me, "I wanted a chance at a real family. [...] The problem was that my life experience was so radically different. The most important thing is that I felt like I had to keep my mouth shut about so many things and I wanted to be open in my own house."[147]

Likewise, Russian women understood that in order to find compatible partners and successful futures through international marriage agencies, they had to navigate certain patriarchal structures. Performing a certain kind of approachable, domestic femininity, they were able to adhere to the constructed fantasy of "Russian brides" that was advertised by the industry. Many of these women benefitted not only from their own roles as "brides" but also in roles of businesswomen working officially or unofficially within marriage agencies. Women not only exercised personal agency in establishing connections overseas, but they were often able to help maneuver connections for other women, thereby transporting their networks from East to West.

As they were externally conveying an ideal image of "Russian brides" to American men, Russian women were simultaneously making their own decisions and carefully interpreting the images, words, and actions of foreign men, disembodied in cyberspace. Russian women prioritized men who they found attractive, who exuded qualities of romance, commitment, and enthusiasm, and who gave them a good "gut feeling." Women who were able to clearly communicate with their prospective husbands over a long period of time generally had the greatest success finding compatible partnerships. While the language barrier could pose a challenge, it did not necessarily make communication impossible, and with enough time and effort, men and women were able to get a clear picture of their potential for compatibility.

Previous bodies of legal scholarship classified Russian women as victims of the international marriage industry, while pop culture portrayed them as exploiting it for their own

[147]Brereton, Valeriya interviewed on August 2 2021, on Skype.

financial gain. In actuality, Russian women were active participants within the industry, taking the opportunity to use a new line of communication to romantically-interested, relatively affluent Western men. In the entrepreneurial spirit of post-Soviet Russian society, Russian women uncovered a serendipitous solution aligned to remedy both their romantic and economic plight. Only through their own careful navigation of these networks, were they able to actualize this potential.

CHAPTER III: ADJUSTING TO AMERICA

INTRODUCTION

On April 26th, 2002, Natasha got a letter from the marriage agency that it was time to interview at the embassy in Moscow for her fiancée visa. The interview was at seven in the morning, so she spent the night with her uncle who lived nearby and departed early in the morning. Natasha and her daughter waited in a long line for their turn to interview. "It was kind of surreal," she told me, "I couldn't believe what was happening."[148]

When it was their turn to come to the window and interview, Natasha was shaking with fear. She expected a series of hard questions, but instead the agent simply asked how she met her fiancé and where she was going and told her to come back to the embassy at four in the afternoon to pick up the visa. Because she didn't have a cell phone, Natasha immediately found the nearest internet cafe to let her fiancé know the good news. He quickly emailed back that he was buying her plane tickets right away, and soon Natasha and her daughter found themselves boarding a huge airplane, guided by Natasha's gut instincts as they took a "leap of faith" into a new life.[149]

The vulnerable position of post-Soviet women involved in international marriage has led to criticism of the industry as exploitative and unsafe. As Christine Chun pointed out, re-establishment in a foreign country separated women from cultural and familial support structures

[148]Brereton, Natasha interviewed on August 6 2021, in Washington.
[149]Brereton, Natasha interview.

and encouraged a fiscal and emotional dependency on their husbands.[150] The language barrier severely impacted women who were not yet proficient in English, limiting their ability to integrate in American society. There was often a job adjustment. For women with children, moving away from their own mothers, who often took on a share of the childcare, could be a burden.[151] Another concern was a lack of female companionship or the ability to make friends.[152] While each of the listed concerns carried elements of truth, post-Soviet women proved to be creative and adaptive individuals. Carefully selecting a compatible and supportive husband helped women navigate the difficulties of relocation, as they maintained and built Russian networks, integrated to American culture, and adjusted to unforeseen difficulties in the home and workplace.

When asked if they would go back and repeat their international marriage journey, every single woman I interviewed said some version of "yes." That is not to discount the hardship of the process. As Daria put it, "If I knew how it would be, I probably would find it scary, even considering my strong character. […] If someone told me how rough it would be, I'm not sure I would be strong enough to jump in." She explained that now that it is all said and done, she does not regret it. "This experience made me so much stronger," she told me, "I know another language. I have another daughter, each one beautiful. […] I cannot imagine not having her."[153] While Russian women underwent hardship during the marriage and emigration process, the trauma of international relocation did not outweigh its positive impacts – particularly reflecting

[150] Chun, "Mail-Order Bride Industry: The Perpetuation of Transnational Economic Inequalities and Stereotypes." 1882.
[151] Jennifer Utrata, *Women Without Men: Single Mothers and Family Change in the New Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015).
[152] Johnson, *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband: Russian-American Internet Romance*. 32.
[153] Brereton, Daria interviewed on June 28 2021, on Zoom.

perceptions of intragenerational upward mobility that were only possible through international marriage.

CULTURE SHOCK

When Ellie stepped off the plane in the Seattle airport in 2008, the first thing she noticed was the clean, oceanic smell of the air. Todd explained that her home in Nizhnekamsk was basically one big petroleum factory – a polluted area, or "dead zone" with little wildlife. In addition to the "tasty air," Ellie was struck immediately by the greenery, squirrels, and birds.[154] Svetlana, who immigrated to San Jose, California, was also immediately taken by the environmental differences – specifically the weather. "I came in my fur coat and when I landed in the airport, I looked around and everyone was in shorts and a tee shirt and I was in a fur coat!" she said, "That was my first shock, that fur coat I never wore. [...] I was just impressed with the climate and that was the most appealing to me, because when you see flowers all year round, it helps. It makes it easier."[155]

While some of the women who I interviewed noted initial positive impressions, all of them expressed the severe impact of the culture clash that they experienced upon arriving in the US. Marriage guides, Russian media, and word of mouth gave women some impression of the difficulties of life abroad, but women were not hit by the realities of such an adjustment until they were experiencing it. How could they be? Many of these women, raised in the Russian provinces, had been subject to an informational and material "iron curtain" as they grew up, far beyond that of their peers in larger, wealthier cities like Moscow.

[154]Brereton, Ellie interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington.
[155]Brereton, Svetlana interviewed on July 28 2021, on Zoom.

Language was a huge factor in the trauma of relocation. For Ellie, who moved with very limited English language skills, the initial year was the hardest. Ellie's husband was working outside of the home and Ellie, held back by her limited English, did not hold a job for the first nine months. "You're used to working, you're used to doing something," Tood told me, "So that created an impact where she felt she was no longer useful and had explicit culture shock. Family's gone, friends are gone, support system's gone, different house, different language, an abundance of things and you kind of shut down a little bit."[156] Ellie was depressed and soon began having dizziness and panic attacks. She visited several doctors who tried to prescribe her anti-depressants, which only worsened the experience of a culture clash. "I don't like it!" Ellie said, "I came here to find the reason and get rid of it. I don't want pills for depression."[157]

The solution to Ellie's difficulties turned out not to be medicine, but instead picking up a part time job at a department store that did not require much speaking. "I found out I need to be physically moving," she told me, "I don't like sitting."[158] From there, Ellie acquired another job as a pharmacist in Bellevue's Russian community, where she did not have to use English at all. With her mental health in mind, Ellie and Todd dialed back what had started as a complete immersion into English, easing Ellie into the transition. They bought Russian language books so Ellie would have a space to decompress from American reading and television and eased into the process of language classes at a slower pace.

For Natasha, the language barrier was incredibly difficult, more so than even the culture clash. At first, she remembers feeling uncomfortable as Americans would smile and make small talk with her, but soon she was grateful for the friendliness, as people were patient with her

[156]Brereton, Todd interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington.
[157]Brereton, Ellie interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington.
[158]Brereton, Ellie interview.

developing English skills. She recalled that an hour or two before she went to the grocery store, she would write down English phrases in Russian so she could communicate. "English was a huge hurdle," she told me, "I was like 'how am I ever going to learn how to do this?'"[159] Natasha's husband was her number one support during this time. "He was so understanding. He knew it was very hard to go through this adjustment, he was helpful and supportive and would practice with me, and help me dial and call my parents almost daily," she said, "When I didn't want to be bothered, he gave me the space I needed. I was supported all the time."[160]

Yulia told me that dinners with her late husbands' family were uncomfortable because of the language barrier. When they would laugh around the table, she worried they were laughing at her. Like Ellie, Yulia enrolled in college classes to help with her English but because the commute was forty-five minutes via car, Yulia had no choice but to drop out. Her late husband lived in a small town outside of Sacramento and Yulia felt stifled in what she described as a "village-like" space. It was a fifteen-minute drive just to go the nearest store, and Yulia could not drive, which severely limited her mobility.[161]

Eventually, she overcame some of these difficulties with the help of her husband, who helped her learn how to drive and scheduled her classes with an instructor. Once Yulia could drive, things got a little bit easier. She was able to connect with the semi-local Russian community through an app called NextDoor, where she would look for people with Russian names and reach out to them. Through these individuals, she was able to meet more people, and eventually she established a kind of Russian social network for herself.[162] The need for connection with other Russian-speaking women was a sentiment shared among most of the

[159]Brereton, Natasha interviewed on August 6 2021, in Washington.
[160] Brereton, Natasha interview.
[161]Brereton, Yulia interviewed on August 2 2021, on Zoom.
[162] Brereton, Yulia interview.

women. “When I go to new places, I always look for Russian people first,” Valeriya told me, “It’s easier to get connections with Russian people.”[163]

While the transition to American life could be immensely stressful for Russian women, the emotional and fiscal reliance on American men was frequently mitigated after a period of adjustment, often with the help of the men themselves. Forum posts made in 2006 indicated that, instead of exploiting the imbalanced power dynamic, American “Mail Order Husbands” would encourage their new wives to foster a sense of independence and find a place within the local community. When asked the top three ways husbands eased their wives’ transitions, common themes were that he helped teach her English language and other practical skills (like driving a car and arranging doctors’ visits), helped her meet female friends, helped her communicate with her family back home, and provided moral support.[164] These comments largely resonated with the stories I was told by my interview subjects.

The forum comments also pointed to the transitions men had to make by accepting a new woman from another culture into their homes. One commenter stated that he made arrangements with his work to be with his wife for the first week, and anytime thereafter if she needed help for the following six months. Another stated that he let his wife know she could change anything within the home to make it feel more comfortable to her, giving her a sense of shared space so she would not feel like an interloper. Websites geared at prospective husbands suggested downloading Cyrillic fonts on the home computer prior to the woman’s arrival so that she could communicate with her family as well as buying prepaid calling cards for long distance

[163] Brereton, Valeriya interviewed on August 2 2021, on Skype.
[164] “Topic: The 3 Things You Did to Ease Your Wife’s Transition?,” *Russianwomendiscussion.Com*, 2006, http://www.russianwomendiscussion.com/index.php?topic=1161.0.

calls.[165] As Todd put it, "We kind of hybridized the house so it was more accommodating to take the stress away."[166]

While legal scholars warned of foreign women's dependency of their American husbands, advice websites for men took up the assumption that men would want their new wives to become independent as soon as possible. Ironically, men were eager to help with the American acculturalization of brides whom they had sought out specifically for their Russianness. In the eyes of men, "Russianness" was defined not by financial dependence, but by a perception that Russian women were "less judgmental" and "more tolerant" of men than American women. The vague language of Russian women's "tolerance for American men" on MOBI websites led to a range of interpretations, with some interpreting it to mean a tolerance for abuse, whereas men like Todd indicated that what mattered to them was Russian women's ambivalence towards men's' financial status and religion (factors he viewed as deal-breakers for many American women).[167]

For women who had the time to focus on finding a compatible match during the long-distance communication process, the initial power imbalance between wives and husbands was less of an issue. Both husbands and wives embarked on a mutual adjustment process to cultural differences in the home. Reflecting on her late husband, Svetlana told me, "We did have clashes and we did have hard times, but my husband was very smart and very intelligent, and I was intelligent enough to understand that I need to break some of my habits and way of thinking, or the marriage will not work. So, we worked on that. It was not easy." Svetlana's husband gave up

[165]Johnson, *Dreaming of a Mail-Order Husband: Russian-American Internet Romance*. 117.
[166]Brereton, Todd interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington.
[167]Brereton, Todd interview.

watching TV in the bedroom because Svetlana didn't like the noise. Likewise, with five teenagers in the house, Svetlana had to give up cooking Russian food because "nobody ate it."[168]

Food was a subject that came up in multiple interviews, especially regarding the initial period of adjustment. Like Svetlana, Valeriya stopped cooking Russian food because her children did not like it. "They are American kids," she told me.[169] On the other hand, to ease adjustment, Ellie and Todd moved away from the American diet and switched over to more of a Russian one, as Ellie began to do more of the cooking.[170] As with cooking, American grocery shopping was also a challenge, even for English-speakers. "In Russia, you never had the choice between ten different mayonnaises or ketchups," Svetlana told me, "Here, you go, and you see, like, fifty ketchups and you will not believe how shocking was it! Often, I left the store with empty hands and a headache."[171]

Another adjustment that several women told me about was with their personal sense of style. Katharina Klingseis argued that women in post-Soviet Russia used fashion, particularly glamorous fashions, to emphasize their own taste, class, and status.[172] Glamor was symbolic of the ability to self-govern and provided a feeling of self-determination for women like my interview subjects, who came of age during the Soviet Union's collapse. In America, where many women dressed more casually, it took time to adjust. "It was very hard for me to get rid of high heel shoes," Svetlana told me, "I was wearing them all the time, my husband suggested me to buy sneakers and I said, 'no, this is not lady's shoe.' […] We went to a house – a very, very

[168] Brereton, Svetlana interviewed on July 28 2021, on Zoom.
[169]Brereton, Valeriya interviewed on August 2 2021, on Skype.
[170] Brereton, Ellie interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington.
[171] Brereton, Svetlana interviewed on July 28 2021, on Zoom.
[172] Katharina Klingseis, "The Power of Dress in Contemporary Russian Society: On Glamour Discourse and the Everyday Practice of Getting Dressed in Russian Cities," *Laboratorium : Zhurnal Sotsial'nykh Issledovaniĭ* 3, no. 1 (2011): 84–115.

rich house – and they had expensive hard wood floors. And with my high heels, I damaged those floors. That was the last time I wore heels in America."[173]

Likewise, Yulia said that at first, the way women dressed in America was shocking to her, particularly in the small town where she lived. She recalled a time a lady had asked her why she was wearing heels in the middle of winter. "I started wearing more casual clothes to blend in," Yulia told me.[174] Elena Petrova, the author of a "Russian Bride Guide" for men, based on her own experiences with international marriage, explained to her male readers that this phenomenon was likely to happen. She confessed that when she first moved in with her husband, she wore a full face of makeup and looked like a supermodel, even when relaxing at home. After a period of adjustment, she began to adapt to a more American sense of style, lessening her makeup and wearing jeans.[175]

The period of adjustment in an international marriage, while in some ways more jarring, encouraged women to engage with American culture, as opposed to staying in Russian-speaking pockets of American society. Valeriya told me that the entire process of emigration and adjustment was made easier because she married an American man. If she had left with a Russian husband, she said, it would have been harder to be flexible. "There are certain elements of Russian culture that are rigid, strict, inflexible…" she told me, "It's easy to adjust in the US, I don't know if my husband could adjust in Russia."[176] Valeriya smiled at me, and I thought back to her description of growing up as a young musician in Kazan. "You'd have to be born in Russia to live in Russia," she explained.

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[173]Brereton, Svetlana interviewed on July 28 2021, on Zoom.
[174]Brereton, Yulia interviewed on August 2 2021, on Zoom.
[175]Elena Petrova, "Russian Brides Cyber Guide: A Russian Woman About Russian Women," Womenrussia.com, 2005.
[176] Brereton, Valeriya interviewed on August 2 2021, on Skype.

During an initial period of extreme culture shock, Russian women were able to rely on their husbands, families back home, and new communities for support. English language proved to be one of the most pressing challenges after emigration, and was mitigated by these pillars of support, as women attended ESL classes and bettered their English skills. Navigating the American driving culture, finding work, and connecting with local Russian communities also took away some of the initial loneliness. Other forms of cultural adjustment came with time.

Furthermore, it was not just Russian women who were adjusting to American life, but American men who were adjusting to lives with Russian women. In many cases, the period of mutual adjustment could help to strengthen trust within marriages and solidify marital bonds. That is to say, while Russian women bore the brunt of adjustment as newcomers to the US, a well-chosen husband could be a source of support, as opposed to oppression. However, beyond the initial period of adjustment, career and family adjustments proved to be ongoing hurdles for Russian women who were adjusting to American life.

RUSSIAN WOMEN – AMERICAN LIVES

It was typical for Russian women in international marriages with American men to be highly educated specialists. In fact, according to the Vice Counsel for Immigrant Visas at the U.S. Embassy in Moscow, most Russian women in international marriages were far better educated than their American husbands.[177] International marriage was an attractive option to specialists because this demographic of women was more likely to be able to financially support themselves through a divorce or to focus on their education, instead of having children at a young age, thereby being single in their late 20s to 30s.

[177]Zug, "Mail Order Feminism." 162.

While women advertised their domestic qualities online, it was understood (and sometimes even encouraged by their American husbands) that they would likely want to continue their careers in America. Unfortunately, the American labor market was riddled with barriers that slowed, or even prevented, women from replicating their careers in the US. These barriers included discrepancies between Russian and American technology, licensing, and networking culture. Svetlana told me that many of the women she had translated for had continued their careers in other (mainly Western European) countries – even with a language barrier. In America, it was harder.[178]

For Ellie, language was only her first hurdle in the workplace. The Russian pharmacy in Bellevue gave Ellie a little extra time to adjust linguistically, as she worked with Russian-speaking clientele.[179] Eventually, however, she decided to leave her job at the pharmacy because she wanted to improve her English. Ellie picked up second language classes at the local community college and began to work at the community college's cafeteria as a barista. It was convenient to go to work between classes and the new job enabled her to practice her English skills. While Ellie enjoyed work, it was not comparable to her career back in Russia.

Ellie had been a chemist at the petroleum plant in Nizhnekamsk, working with benzenes and polymers, but she found that she lacked some of the requirements to continue this career in America. "You have to have computer skills," Todd told me, "Hers was traditional – 1960s and 70s – it's all by beaker and flask, you do it by hand. Here in America, it's all customized computers and so forth. Her knowledge level was high, but her technical skill level wasn't there. […]."[180]

[178]Brereton, Svetlana interviewed on July 28 2021, on Zoom.
[179] Brereton, Ellie interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington.
[180] Brereton, Todd interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington.

When she had finished at the college, Ellie got a job at a hardware store, where she learned technical language on the fly and faced discrimination from customers for her accent and developing English skills. “People would come in and see the pretty white girl and I start speaking and then they hear my accent, they’d say ‘oh.’, turn around and walk away,” Ellie told me.[181] At the time of our interview, Ellie had found a job she enjoyed, working on a ferry in the Seattle area.

In Daria’s case, it was not technological, but legal barriers that prevented her from continuing her career in America. As a pediatric surgeon, her license to practice medicine was not transferable overseas. At the time of her emigration, Daria had understood that it would be hard to transfer her medical license to the US, but she had thought it would be possible. Her ex-husband had also expected her to be able to continue this job in the US, subsidizing his income as a trucker, and pushing them into a new class bracket. The loss of Daria’s “dream job” and the economic losses that came with it made for a difficult transition. “My husband wasn’t making very much,” Daria told me, “He can support us in a way to just provide food on the table and a roof over head, but […] I struggled because, for my daughter, I could not even afford to buy barbie for her.”[182]

As soon as Daria got her social security and permission to work, she got a job as housekeeper at a local hotel. “It was rough after being a pediatric surgeon in Russia,” she told me.[183] The stress of the adjustment put pressure to her developing relationship. “When here, the process was a little rough-tough, because we needed the married, we needed the social security, we needed the paper, I needed permission to work, I needed to start to speak,” Daria said, “[…]

[181]Brereton, Ellie interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington.
[182]Brereton, Daria interviewed on June 28 2021, on Zoom.
[183]Brereton, Daria interview.

One day, I bought the cigarettes and I smoke, and I left them on the balcony. When he came home, he was furious because when he came to meet me, I was not smoking [...]. I used to, but he never asked me, and I never revealed. Anyways, he was so upset, he told me he would send me home! […] I told him 'I will go home when I decide to go home, I am not some package, not some mail package."[184]

After her divorce, Daria did in fact decide to go back to Russia for one year to work as a doctor again. "I like to have dual citizenship because I am a free person," she explained, "Nobody keeps me here, nobody keeps from Russia. […] I'm not a refugee. It was all done of my free will. So, I can stay here, I can go there; I'm an absolutely happy person because I do what I want to do."[185] She has now worked for fifteen years in the American medical industry, first as a phlebotomist and then as a nurse. While it is not the same as being a doctor, Daria enjoys her job.

For Valeriya, a musician, American job opportunities were not always plentiful. This was compounded by the fact that she and her husband frequently relocated for his job as an electrical engineer. For a while, while they lived in Hawaii, Valeriya's husband made connections with a choir and landed her a job as a piano player at a church, and as a tutor in a private school. However, when they moved to the north side of Hawaii after four years, Valeriya was too far away to feasibly continue these jobs. She considered getting a degree in radiology to find a more stable line of work but chose not to – a decision she still sometimes regrets. Since then, their family has relocated several more times, which has impacted her ability to network with Russian

[184]Brereton, Daria interview.
[185]Brereton, Daria interview.

communities, maintain a permanent job, and make deep friendships. “It’s one thing when you see people every day, and another thing when moving constantly,” she told me.[186]

The second ongoing hurdle faced by post-Soviet wives in America was adjustments within the family. Women, especially those who emigrated in the early days of the international marriage industry, were not always clear on the immigration guidelines regarding children. The law stated that children under twenty-one could travel with their mothers to the United States up to a year after their mother’s approval. For children who were older or already married, the process of getting a visa was more complicated and difficult.

When Anya married her husband and came to America, her daughter was twenty-three and her son was twenty-four, slightly above the age cut off. Being separated from her children was the hardest part of her decision to come to America. “I miss my children,” Anya told me, “Very difficult and emotional, even though they are adult children.”[187] Anya’s son followed her to America in 2010 but at the time of our interview, her daughter was still awaiting immigration. “Her case is already approved but something happened with the embassy in Moscow. We are hoping, we are waiting,” Anya said.[188] Her granddaughter is even attending the same college for English that Anya attended as a young adult to prepare for the move.[189] Like Anya, Ellie has struggled with one child in America and one in Russia. Her son had already joined her in America, but at the time of our interview, her daughter was still working on immigration. Ellie’s son came early to avoid mandatory service in Russia’s army. “They don’t come out of the army very well,” Todd told me, “They’re brutalized. Ellie was very nervous about this.”[190]

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[186]Brereton, Valeriya interviewed on August 2 2021, on Skype.
[187]Brereton, Anya interviewed on July 16 2021, on Zoom.
[188]Brereton, Anya interview.
[189]Brereton, Anya interview.
[190]Brereton, Todd interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington.

Children twenty-one or younger had more leniency with the immigration process. If they immigrated within a year of their mothers' visa issuance, children were not required to fill out a separate visa petition. However, if a year passed from the time a mother's K-1 (Fiancé) visa was issued, children would lose eligibility for a simpler K-2 visa and would be required to file a separate immigrant visa petition which could take a long time to process.[191]

Sometimes, women with children who did not get a K-2 visa within the one year cut off were not aware that the longer they waited to get visas for their children, the more difficult the process could become. Natasha recalled that she almost left her daughter with family, with the intention to bring her to America later when she was more established. She was grateful that she listened to her gut instincts that told her to bring her daughter immediately, because she found out after the fact that it wasn't always easy for children to emigrate on their own. "One of my friends left her daughter at age four and saw her for the first time again when she was fifteen or sixteen," Natasha said.[192] This kind of extended separation could, of course, be seriously traumatic and impact adjustment.

Women who moved with young children, or who gave birth in the US, faced a different problem. They found their lives impacted by the familiar intersection of a "double burden" between domestic work and career advancement, particularly without the help of their own mothers. *Babushki,* or Russian grandmas, performed an important function in the lives of post-Soviet single mothers. A common household structure relied on the labor of the grandmother for childcare and domestic tasks, while the single mother took on the traditionally masculine role of financial provider. As sociologist Jennifer Utrata argued in her study of post-Soviet single

[191]US Department of State - Bureau of Consular Affairs, "Nonimmigrant Visa for a Fianc(é)e (K-1)," https://travel.state.gov/content/travel/en/us-visas/immigrate/family-immigration/nonimmigrant-visa-for-a-fiance-k-1.html#16, n.d.
[192]Brereton, Natasha interviewed on August 6 2021, in Washington.

mothers, this family dynamic was so culturally pervasive that a *babushka* providing domestic assistance to her daughter was an expectation, not a service.[193]

Russian women in international marriages, without the support of a *babushka*, often had to sacrifice their careers. Yulia, the youngest of my interview subjects, did not work when she arrived in America in 2004. In 2005, she gave birth to her second child, and in 2008, she gave birth to her third. Her late husband was their primary source of income until he passed away suddenly in 2010. "I was left with three kids," Yulia told me, "Almost twelve, five, and two. They were little and I was all by myself and didn't know what to do."[194] Yulia's in-laws stepped up to help take care of her in this time of immense grief, but she also found them to be controlling. Yulia's father-in-law opened a restaurant, where she worked for a year before going to college to become a pharmacy technician. However, Yulia did not get a chance to work in her field of choice because in the middle of her training, she became pregnant with her fourth child.

Likewise, Vera told me that she had just started taking language classes at a local college when she got pregnant. "It was not what I intended to happen, and I was not ready emotionally, financially," she told me.[195] She hoped she wasn't pregnant because there was already so much going on, and because she had already started to notice fundamental personality differences between herself and her husband. The pregnancy and distance from her own mother exasperated Vera's stress: "I felt by myself, no mom, no nothing."[196]

After a very difficult pregnancy, through which Vera had to stop taking language classes entirely, she gave birth to her daughter. In those early years, Vera noticed that the typical milestones of childhood development were delayed. Eventually, it became apparent that her

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[193]Utrata, *Women Without Men: Single Mothers and Family Change in the New Russia*.
[194]Brereton, Yulia interviewed on August 2 2021, on Zoom.
[195]Brereton, Vera interviewed on July 11 2021, in Oregon.
[196]Brereton, Vera interview.

daughter had cerebral palsy. Vera was overwhelmed by the constant stream of appointments – physical therapy and surgery -- and she felt lonely. “I couldn’t pull all the strings,” she told me.[197]

In the bigger picture, Russian wives in America were able to adjust to differences in language and culture. After the culture shock wore off, issues that affected their day-to-day lives, such as employment and family problems, remained. For women who had gotten to know their husbands well before marriage, men generally offered support in navigating these barriers. However, in cases like Daria’s and Vera’s, where spouses did not know each other well before marrying, unexpected life events added tremendous strain on top of an already strained adjustment period. These initial fractures could lead to serious long-term problems within their relationships.

MARITAL TROUBLES

Natasha told me that she had many friends who had also arrived in America on fiancé visas. Unlike Natasha, many of them had had bad experiences and gotten divorced. Reflecting on the differences between these marriages and her own, Natasha explained that a lack of open communication could be a marriage’s downfall.[198] When women misrepresented themselves in the initial communication to quicken the process of finding a husband, it was a red flag that an international marriage would not last. A rushed marriage decision could jeopardize an already difficult situation. A strong couple could brace for the many unexpected hurdles of international

[197]Brereton, Vera interview.
[198]Brereton, Natasha interviewed on August 6 2021, in Washington.

marriage, in the realms of language, culture, career, and family. An incompatible couple would find the transition more difficult.

This second category of international marriage has long occupied a more visible position in the American consciousness. For a Russian woman, the combination of the wrong husband and limited resources could be deadly. The murder of Anastasia Solovieva King, an 18-year-old bride from Kyrgyzstan who was strangled to death for trying to file for a divorce, was sensationalized by American Media as a cautionary tale of the dangers international marriages pose to women.[199]

Internet brokered international marriages were noted in multiple legal sources to have high rates of domestic violence, although the increased risk of violence was never proven.[200] This discourse has led to increased legal precautions for the protection of women. In the initial few years of the international marriage industry between the former Soviet Union and the United States, fiancé visas only maintained their validity if couples remained married for at least two years. In 2001, amidst growing concern for the welfare of immigrant women, Congress re-evaluated the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) to permit abused, immigrant spouses to self-petition for permanent residency without meeting the "two year" quota.

However, as Marcia Zug noted, "when the Immigration and Naturalization Service examined the self-petitions made by abused immigrant women in order to determine, as Congress had asked, 'the extent of domestic abuse in mail-order marriages,' it concluded that

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[199]David Foster, "Slain Bride's Parents Tormented by 'If Onlys.'," *Los Angeles Times*, 2002.
[200] Brocato, "Profitable Proposals: Explaining and Addressing the Mail-Order Bride Industry through International Human Rights Law." 228.; Osipovich, "Russian Mail-Order Brides in U.S. Public Discourse: Sex, Crime, and Cultural Stereotypes."235; Tini Tran and Lorenza Munos, "From Russia With Love: Mail-Order Bride Service.," *Los Angeles Times*, 1998.

only one percent of the abuse cases brought to their attention involved women who had met their husbands through mail order bride companies."[201]

In 2005, the US Congress passed another law to further protect marriage-based immigrants, which required the distribution of informational pamphlets translated into the immigrant partner's native language. These pamphlets would explain the nonimmigrant visa application process, the illegality of domestic violence in the United States, domestic violence and sexual assault services and hotlines, and other legal information. In addition, international marriage brokers would be required to collect and provide background information about their US clients, including marital history and violent criminal history, to their foreign spouses.[202]

While this legislation clarified aspects of the immigration process and offered protections and resources to Russian women, it did not fully mitigate ongoing stressors of the emigration process for women who did not know their husbands well before marriage. This was because marital difficulties could be overshadowed by emigration and adjustment problems. For example, balancing employment and childcare with a very limited network was not always preferable to remaining in an unhappy marriage.

As of the time of our interview, Vera's daughter was in college, but Vera was still struggling. She still did not work and was having marital problems with her husband because, as she put it, "I didn't know him when I married him." Vera expressed that she felt that she had good taste, and her husband was "just a guy."[203] She felt that her husband had driven a wedge between her and her best friend Nadia, who had been deeply involved with her emigration, because he felt that Nadia looked down on her. Vera told me that he had pushed her away from

[201]Zug, "Mail Order Feminism." 162.
[202]One Hundred Ninth Congress of the United States of America, "Violence Against Women and Department of Justice Reauthorization Act of 2005" (2005).
[203]Brereton, Vera interviewed on July 11 2021, in Oregon.

her Russian friends and he had not supported her visiting her aging mother back in Russia. "We live life separately," Vera told me, "He works, is responsible, but we struggle sometimes. Sometimes I wish I never married him."[204] Divorce had not been on the table, because, until very recently, Vera needed time to take care of her disabled daughter.

At the time of our interview, Vera was grieving Nadia's recent death. After spending many years cut off from her Russian circle, the COVID-19 pandemic and Nadia's illness made Vera want to reconnect. "COVID taught me so much to be human," Vera told me, "It beat me so much, COVID, like a bat." She recalled cooking one final meal with Nadia just before she passed. "[My husband] has a different way of feeling," she told me, "He's not like me."[205]

Yulia similarly found herself in a situation where the increased protections for immigrant spouses did not help her marital struggles. After her late husband passed away, Yulia eventually got back into the American dating scene. She met her current husband at the gym. Soon after getting together, they had a child together – Yulia's fourth.[206]

"We've had a few moments…episodes…times when it was hard," Yulia said. She explained that she is just trying to keep the family together and not hurt her youngest with a divorce, but there are times when she wishes she could walk away. Over the course of their eight years together, Yulia told me there have been several instances of domestic violence. She has attempted to make reports but the DA has ruled in her husband's favor, stating that it was self-defense. "You can't prove certain things, even if it's the truth," she told me, "They'll say 'we hate you, you're a foreigner.' […]"[207]

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[204]Brereton, Vera interview.
[205]Brereton, Vera interview.
[206]Brereton, Yulia interviewed on August 2 2021, on Zoom.
[207]Brereton, Yulia interview.

After she had established a criminal record over her husband's claims, Yulia found that law enforcement did not take her reports seriously at all and would side her with husband over her. The last time, after making her promise to not seek divorce, her husband wrote a letter to the DA saying it was mutual and that he would like to drop the case. Yulia said that she is worried if she seeks divorce, he will hit himself against the wall and say she did it. "There is no trust, there is no feelings, there is just fear," she told me, "How am I going to live now like nothing happened?"[208]

In unhappy marriages where divorce was a viable option, it could certainly improve womens' quality of life. In many ways, Daria and her husband had a good relationship, but in the end, it was not compatible. "He was a nice person, good and kind, but I believe he was a little bit of an over spender. […] He was not a person who really, really tried hard," she told me, "We ended up having a bankruptcy, over all because of his spending. I mean, not without my help, but anyway, I tried to tell him we need to be careful with money, we have to save, but it ended up not being possible. […] You cannot fight every single day and some days, on weekends. I wanted to go on vacation, but we don't have the money for paying the house, so it was just rocky and stuff."[209]

After the bankruptcy, Daria tried to form a spending plan to get them back on the right track, but her ex-husband refused to try it. They had been married for nine and a half years, with multiple children. However, Daria understood that it wasn't going to work between them in the long term and got a divorce. As a nurse, she now lives comfortably on her own. "When I came

[208]Brereton, Yulia interview.
[209]Brereton, Daria interviewed on June 28 2021, on Zoom.

here, I had one hundred dollars in my pocket," she told me, "Right now, not even close to that. […] I mean, I am not a rich person but I am a very sustained person. I have enough."[210]

The answer to the question of why some international marriages fell apart and others thrived is deceptively simple but has been overlooked because of how the topic has been approached. By framing international marriage exclusively in an American legal context, scholars have treated it as a transactional procedure with a customer [husband] and service provider [wife]. This approach to the discourse has resulted in many practical changes to American law that mitigate some of the dangers for immigrant women. However, by only framing international marriages in this context, the subjects of international marriages have been dehumanized and their marriages have been treated as one dimensional.

Criticisms in the 1990s and 2000s that led to American legal reform, simultaneously protected vulnerable women and contributed to their marginalization. Tatiana Osipovich argued that isolating Russian brides as victims of domestic violence fed into the false perception that American women did not experience the same issues, thereby making it an "immigrant problem."[211] By the same token, the scholarship focused solely on the vulnerability of these women in the United States. The experiences of Russian women were not approached from a post-Soviet perspective and the high domestic violence statistics in the former Soviet Union were never considered.[212]

By treating international marriages first and foremost *as* marriages, it becomes clear that an international marriage is only as strong as a couples' relationship. Of course, the transnational

[210]Brererton, Daria interview.
[211]Osipovich, "Russian Mail-Order Brides in U.S. Public Discourse: Sex, Crime, and Cultural Stereotypes." 235.
[212]Mikhail Artamoshkin, "Interv'yu Ispolnyayushchego Obyazannosti Nachal'nika Departamenta Okhrany Obshchestvennogo Poryadka MVD Rossii General--leytenanta Militsii Mikhaila Artamoshkina," *Interviewed by Gazete «Shchit i Mech»; Accessed via the Wayback Machine*, January 24, 2008.

and transcultural circumstances of international marriage are more prone to predicating unexpected challenges than a domestic marriage. If anything, these circumstances only further highlight the similarities between what makes a successful marriage dynamic in each case. These characteristics are familiar American marriage ideals such as communication, trust, love, and a willingness to adapt.

REFLECTIONS ON INTERNATIONAL MARRIAGE

Reflecting on their international marriages, my interview subjects unanimously agreed: knowing what they know now, they would do it again. Of course, these reflections came with different connotations. For women who were happily married, the answer was a resounding yes. For women who were divorced, widowed, or in unhappy marriages, the answer came with qualifiers. They would do it again, but only if they didn't find a man in Russia. They would do it again, but only for the sake of their children.

As a case study, eight women and one man is quite small. It is certainly not enough, and it leaves plentiful room for more research on the topic – something I plan to pursue. However, the diverse experiences of these individuals provide a sketch for a new way to approach international marriages between post-Soviet women and American men. This range of perspectives, however small, helps us see a transnational historical context which complicates an Americentric scholarship. We can see the outline of Soviet survival skills and ideals, even as women traded their heels for sneakers.

Shortly before our interview, Natasha had celebrated her nineteenth anniversary with her husband. They have had a plan from the very beginning, paying into a special retirement account with the goal of settling down in Canada some day. She explained to me that it was all about

attitude. “When other people don’t have something interesting to do, they get bored,” she told me, “but I think there aren’t enough hours in a day. When I was born, I was almost dead, but I survived! The doctor said I wouldn’t survive until one, but at seven months old, I started running! […] The doctor said ‘well okay, but she probably wont be able to have kids. I have three!”[213] Natasha responded to my study because she wanted to show people that international marriages weren’t all sad stories.

Ellie and Todd’s marriage has taken both spouses out of their comfort zones. As they continue to finalize Ellie’s daughter’s immigration, they are adjusting into their multi-generational home. Thanks to Ellie’s propensity for family, Todd enjoys a rekindled relationship with his parents and Ellie’s children enjoy living with their grandparents. Ellie still enjoys the climate of Washington state. “If you are living in paradise,” she told me, “You don’t need to go anywhere else.”[214]

For Vera, it all came down to her daughter, who had just started college. Vera wanted to give her a life she could sustain with her disability. “I want her to thrive and have a better life than I have,” Vera said, “That’s what Russians always want, to give their kids a better life than mom and dad.” She told me that, yes, even she would do it all again. She always wanted this. “Anywhere would be better than Russia,” she said.[215] Likewise, Daria told me that she would do it again, even after reflecting on how difficult it was raising her kids with no support system. “The experience made me stronger, I know another language, I have another daughter. […] I can’t imagine not having her. It is probably my greatest joy, you know?”[216]

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[213]Brereton, Natasha interviewed on August 6 2021, in Washington.
[214]Brereton, Ellie interviewed on August 5 2021, in Washington.
[215]Brereton, Vera interviewed on July 11 2021, in Oregon.
[216]Brereton, Daria interviewed on June 28 2021, on Zoom.

Yulia emphasized that for her, it had less to do with the country and more to do with her relationship. “If I found a Russian guy who was nice to me, I don’t know if I’d do it again, but since I’m here, I’m comfortable,” she told me, “No country is perfect. In every country, there’s good people.”[217] She might have considered going back if it was just her, but for her kids, she would rather to stay here. She came here for her late husband and it would take a guy as nice as her late husband for her to leave.

Anya reflected that international marriage offered her an opportunity that she never would have had otherwise, to find the right person through the internet. She told me that she wishes that Russians and Americans could have more contact on a personal level and develop their understandings of one another. “Not politicians,” she said, “but basic people.”[218] Similarly, Valeriya stated that with her husband’s help, it was easy to adapt. “In another life, I would move to the US again,” she told me, “I might get a different degree though.”[219]

Lastly, Svetlana eloquently reflected on how her international marriage completely changed her frame of reference: “I like the expression ‘pursue your dream’,” she told me, “I remember when I was maybe fifteen or twelve, I was dreaming about a horse, and I was dreaming about – not the ocean. I did not imagine I would see the ocean. By the sea, riding that horse by the sea. That was such as abstract dream that it was like I was thinking, ‘it’s just a dream. It’s not going to happen. Not in Russia where it snows six months a year.’ Well, I’m fifty-five, I have an orange mustang and I drive to the ocean. I live in, I would say, the best place in the world. […] I have a garden, I have a very small, nice house, and I had a very good

[217]Brereton, Yulia interviewed on August 2 2021, on Zoom.
[218]Brereton, Anya interviewed on July 16 2021, on Zoom.
[219]Brereton, Valeriya interviewed on August 2 2021, on Skype.

husband. And I think I'm pretty happy. And if I didn't move, I would find that happiness in Russia, but I sure love roses in my garden all year round."[220]

[220]Brereton, Svetlana interviewed on July 28 2021, on Zoom.

CONCLUSION

Stephen Kotkin wrote that, following perestroika, "Most ordinary people had anticipated the onset of American-style affluence, combined with European-style social welfare. After all, these were the rosy images of the outside world, transmitted by glasnost, which had helped destroy what was left of their allegiance to socialism. But instead, the people got an economic involution and mass impoverishment combined with a headlong expansion of precisely what had helped to bring down the Soviet Union – the squalid appropriation of state functions and state property by Soviet-era elites."[221]

The "ordinary people" in Kotkin's example were old enough to be politically engaged, at least to some degree, before perestroika itself. For instance, Donald Raleigh's "Baby Boomer" interview subjects, experiencing perestroika as established adults, embraced what they saw as a much-needed reform.[222] For their "Gen X" children, especially for those outside of Moscow where amenities were much less readily available, perestroika and its fallout were hardly distinguishable.

This younger generation did inherit, however, a form of their parents' idealism. It was this idealism that caused women like Svetlana to dream of a better future, even in the incredibly difficult times that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union. Post-Soviet women saw the collapse of the Soviet Union as a continuation of unrest that characterized their teenage years. The skills that they developed in this time to network, adapt, and survive played a huge role in the actualization of their dreams.

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[221]Kotkin, *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse, 1970-2000*. 116.
[222]Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia's Cold War Generation*.

When the internet provided a global network for communication and exchange with the United States, Russian women adapted. They set out to realize their dreams of security and happiness, not by taking political action within a Russian framework, but by leaving entirely. Women found opportunities to monetize their English skills in the budding international marriage industry and they petitioned for friends and sisters to join them as they moved across the world.

As they came to America, Russian women relied on their old Soviet skill sets and adapted again. Adjusting to new relationships, cultural norms, and language took time, and certain challenges were particularly hard to circumvent. Unexpected career changes, long-term separation from family, and unplanned pregnancies put additional strain on international marriages. Women who already had established long-term relationships with their American husbands were more successful at weathering the additional strain of unexpected challenges, whereas women who did not know their husbands struggled. However, on the whole women would not go back and change their decision to come to America. Many were successful at realizing their childhood dreams of stability and love. Others saw the potential for the next generation to achieve this progress.

The contributions of previous scholarship on this topic have played an important role in offering additional protections to immigrant women. However, by approaching the topic as a contemporary legal issue, they have only been concerned with the industrial side of what is ultimately a multi-dimensional, human story. Thirty years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, we can begin to examine international marriage between post-Soviet women and American men through a transnational historical lens. Only by addressing the voices of the women involved in

international marriages, can we begin to understand the role these marriages occupied in their day-to-day lives.

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