

RETHINKING SOVIET-AMERICAN IDENTITY IN A
POST-SOVIET WORLD (1991 – 2016)

by

MARILYN PIKOVSKY

A THESIS

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Approved: Katya Hokanson

Katya Hokanson

This thesis examines the generational gap between second generation of Soviet-Americans and their Soviet-immigrant predecessors. I use the term ‘Soviet’ as an umbrella that encompasses not only ethnic Russian identity but also those of the fifteen republics. The era of the Soviet Union exhibited several cultural, political, and economical transformations that altered the way in which Soviet citizens lived their life, causing many to immigrate to the United States. Today, there are large populations of Soviet-Americans that exist across the United States; many of them have adjusted their own cultural identity to blend American and post-Soviet culture. By comparing and contrasting the historical and social trends of both the Soviet time period and today’s Soviet-American generation, I come to the conclusion that the attempt to abide by both Soviet and American customs has led to the emergence of a Soviet-American hybrid subculture and that its uniqueness stems from Soviet influences passed down through generations. It is my hope that this analysis will lead to a stronger understanding of the basis of this new subculture and will help with its assimilation processes.

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Introduction: A Brief Summary on the Organization of this Work

The Nature of this Thesis

My sole reason for researching this topic stems out of my own personal experiences of being raised in a Soviet immigrant household. Having been born in the United States, I was aware that my family's dynamics were entirely different than that of other American families, and although I had been raised to follow my family's cultural customs, I personally had a difficult time identifying strictly as 'Soviet', the nationality my family associated with, 'Ukrainian', the country of where my parents and brother were born, 'Russian', the primary language my family speaks at home, or even 'Jewish', our prescribed religion that I did not know anything about. My parents and brother had emigrated out of the Soviet Union in 1989, and as immigrants in the United States, they were able to use any of the previous labels without constraints because those ethnicities were common in Soviet society. I, on the other hand, had always struggled to describe my identity.

I felt that I never fully connected ethnically as 'Russian-Soviet-Ukrainian-Jewish', as I was not born in the Soviet Union and because I am more Americanized than my family. Nor do I feel completely 'American', as I was raised with Soviet traditions and customs. After having met others who were in a similar situation, I realized that this struggle is common for those who were born in the United States, or immigrated to the United States at an early age, and have lived in a Soviet immigrant household. As I learned about post-Soviet culture and its existence today in the United States, I began to uncover interweaving paths of similarity in cultural values, language,

and upbringing. What I found led to the decision to research this topic more intimately in order to develop a clear framework of cultural patterns that exist in the daily life of these individuals.

Defining the Term ‘Soviet-American’

The post-Soviet subculture is often accompanied by an element of cultural confusion. Today Soviet immigrant communities in the United States represent all fifteen post-Soviet states, including the geographic locations of the Baltic States, Central Asia, East-Central Europe, Eurasia, and the Southern Caucasus; nevertheless, many of these immigrant families refer to themselves as “Russian”, either voluntarily or out of habit. The term ‘Soviet-American’ incorporates the unique ethnical approaches to language, history, culture, education, tradition, and religion; however, it also illuminates familial customs that contain Soviet influences, as it is what Soviet immigrant families had adapted to while living in the Soviet Union. Using the term ‘Russian-American’ often excludes those whose families have originated in other countries within the Soviet Union, aside from Russia. For the purposes of my thesis, I will be referring to those raised in the United States with ethnic influences from Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan as ‘Soviet-American’.

It is important to point out is that large portions of Soviet immigrants culturally label themselves as ‘Russian-Jewish’ or ‘Soviet-Jewish’. While ‘Jewish’ is often regarded as only a religion in other nations, it was primarily considered to be an ethnicity in the eyes of the Soviet government. It was the only nationality within the former Soviet Union that did not have a nation or an area of origin. Those who identify

as ‘Russian-Jewish’ or ‘Soviet-Jewish’ typically do not actively practice Judaism but rather have Jewish values and maintain strong Soviet influences. My usage of the term ‘Soviet-American’ also applies to Russian Jews or Soviet-Jews.

Methods of Research

While formulating my thesis, I have encountered one major dilemma: Soviet culture and every one of its disciplines contains too wide a range of subjects for any scholar to include in one work. My analysis of post-Soviet culture would have been nearly impossible had I not tightened the focus of my research. With that in mind, I elected to divide my thesis into three chapters that enable my research to maintain focus whilst delivering information in a clear and concise manner. Throughout those chapters I compare the cultural and societal trends in the Soviet Union up until its collapse in 1991, provide an analysis of Soviet assimilation in the United States, and complete an analysis of cultural characteristics of Soviet-American individuals, while exploring the factors that have aided in the development of the current Soviet-American lifestyle.

I chose to delve into the social, economic and political pillars of the Soviet culture and found that today’s Soviet-American citizens have difficulty integrating Soviet and American cultures into one, as both cultures tend to clash in several significant aspects. What remains of the Soviet culture in the United States are large immigrant communities that continue to follow Soviet ideals and maintain Soviet standards while living with the luxuries of the United States. My main argument is that this Soviet-American subculture is distinct and understanding its complexity is an essential component to assisting members of its society. To be clear, I do not believe that Soviet culture is stagnant: the last couple of decades have shown us that post-Soviet

society is constantly adjusting and readjusting under innumerable cultural, social, political, and economic changes. By attempting to understand the Soviet Union's diverse culture in its current form, we can begin to create necessary resources that will help today's Soviet-American population.

My approach during the research process generally focused on the accounts of numerous individuals who have shared their personal experiences being raised with Soviet and American ideals. Their information was obtained through personal interviews, videos, and posts from social media and various scholarly sources. Since I am drawing comparisons between several generations of Soviet-American families, my thesis work contains background on classic Soviet traditions, modern Soviet-American culture, social standards, immigration patterns and assimilation processes. To my knowledge, there has not been any research conducted on distinct post-Soviet émigré subcultures. This thesis serves as the first step towards unraveling the complexity of post-Soviet identity and understanding the unique niche of the Soviet-American culture, one that consists of individuals that have difficulty fully immersing themselves in either American or Soviet culture.

Identifying the Problem

My objective is to highlight the common factors between the Soviet period and today's Soviet-Americans by defining the cultural characteristics of those currently living with a Soviet-American identity. The Soviet Union, as an entity, existed for less than a century, which may raise the question as to why I have elected to focus on this time period with respect to today's American lifestyles. The answer is this: very little research exists on post-Soviet culture and how it has evolved beyond that of the Soviet

period. As I stated above, my aim is to demonstrate that particular cultural trends in the Soviet period have resurfaced as an evolved subculture in today's Soviet-American society.

Although the second generation of Soviet-Americans share similar characteristics with those from other ethnicities, Soviet-Americans are a distinct group because of their unique blend of Russian and English languages, their shared history of familial hardship in the Soviet Union and their immigration processes, their fusion of Soviet and American cultures, their family's high expectations for academic success, and their similar approaches to religion. I argue that, together, these values create a hybrid identity that is unique to those who have been raised in the United States with a Soviet immigrant household.

To be caught between their heritage and American Culture is a difficult balancing act for most Soviet-Americans. They are often torn between following their family's Soviet ideals and following the ideals of the outside world around them. This is the dilemma in which the current generation of Soviet-Americans find themselves. In order to combat the internal struggle, modern Soviet-Americans have amalgamated the two worlds they live in. The research conducted in this paper is intended to aid in better understanding the cultural gap in generations, and how each has adapted to the ever changing environment in which they live.

Notes on Soviet-American Terminology

Depending on the extent to which they speak Russian, many Soviet-Americans today communicate with each other using a blend of Russian and English. Most Russian heritage speakers will have some knowledge of spoken Russian; however, their accents,

writing, and reading abilities may vary immensely. At times, these individuals will Russianize a sentence by adding a Russian ending to an English word; this occurs when an English word is difficult to translate into Russian, the Russian word is forgotten, or as a speaking normality. Throughout the thesis, I include information from a sample of videos produced by Soviet-Americans; as most of these videos jump between Russian and English, I will be providing direct translations and the context needed to understand them.

Chapter 1: Historical Context of Soviet Identity

Soviet History and its Importance

Although this work primarily focuses on the establishment of a new Soviet-American subculture, a significant portion of references made in later chapters will not be as well understood without the proper context of Soviet history. Today's Soviet-American subculture continues to maintain a Soviet mentality, as most of the Soviet-American population has only recently made the United States their permanent home. This Soviet mentality is comprised of various factors and conditions that families living in the Soviet Union had to endure. To understand the values and actions of Soviet family members living in the United States today, it is important to note how the former Soviet historical patterns had impacted their mindset. In this chapter, the topics of national identity, Soviet control, social structures, education and welfare, Communist living conditions, religion, celebrations and cultural traditions will be examined further.

There have been a total of four major waves of migration out of the Russian Empire, Soviet Union, and the Russian Federation: the first was during the 1880s and lasted through 1914, the second wave occurred from 1920 to 1939, the third wave fell between 1945 and 1955, and the fourth wave began in the 1970s and continues today. The causes of migration are often related to "economic hardship, political repression, religious discrimination, or a combination of those factors".¹ Within the four waves of migration with the first two have fully assimilated with American culture; however, the other two have yet to complete that process.

¹ Magocsi, Paul Robert. "*Russian Americans*." Every Culture. Web. 25 Jan. 2016.

Discovering which of the recent waves of migration a Soviet individual arrived to the United States in is just as important as knowing why they emigrated out of the Soviet Union in the first place; both factors of ‘when’ and ‘why’ are necessary for understanding how these immigrants are living their life in the United States today. If we were to examine the past two waves of Soviet migration to the United States more in-depth, we see that these immigrants brought with them their personal experiences involving: Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Gorbachev’s diverse leadership styles; World War II; the Cold War era; Soviet economic stagnation and widespread corruption; the invasion of Afghanistan; and the collapse of the Soviet Union.² These key events resulted in the circumstances that these Soviet immigrant families had to live with until they were able to seek refuge in the United States. These experiences continue to be ingrained in the minds of Soviet immigrants as they reminisce about their homeland. That being said, much of the Soviet-American identity, especially that of the first and second generations, is not only comprised of cultural habits, but rather a shared history of hardship.

The hardships were intertwined throughout many key events within Soviet history. With every Soviet leader, there were new challenges accompanied by the challenges of the previous leader. In 1924, dictator Joseph Stalin came to power; he was known for the adoption of a series of Five-Year Plans to transform the peasant society into “an industrial superpower” and he exercised “totalitarian control over the economy, administering all industrial activity, and establishing collective farms... [Controlling] every aspect of political and social life”. Those who would oppose Stalin’s rules were

² "Soviet Union Timeline." BBC News. 31 Oct. 2013. Web.

often detained and sent to a Gulag [labor camp in Siberia] or even executed.³ Through the collectivization of Soviet agriculture and through Stalin's 'reign of terror', the worst famine in history took place. Stalin and Adolf Hitler had signed a nonaggression pact in 1939, the day before World War II had officially begun. Soon after, Stalin proceeded to launch invasions in several Eastern European countries. In 1941, Germany broke the nonaggression pact by invading the Soviet Union, catching the Soviets unaware. In response to German troops reaching Moscow, Stalin "directed a scorched earth defensive policy, destroying any supplies or infrastructure that might benefit the enemy". In the Battle of Stalingrad, the Red Army was able to defeat the German troops, causing them to eventually retreat from Russia.⁴ Before his death in 1953, Stalin also oversaw a series of arms races and the start of the Cold War.

Stalin's death caused several changes in Soviet policy; however, the Communist Party continued its rule. Nikita Khrushchev was soon promoted to head of the Communist Party. From 1958 to 1964, Khrushchev led the Soviet Union serving as its premier. While in Stalin's inner circle, Khrushchev "[instituted] a bloody purge of perceived enemies"; however, as leader of the Soviet Union, he was known for the following events: leading a de-Stalinization period, initiating the Cuban Missile Crisis, approving the assembly of the Berlin Wall, defeating a revolt in Hungary, and introducing the initial space race. Khrushchev's fall from power took place in 1964, when he was forced to resign as the head of the Communist Party and as premier. His resignation had been attributed to "the break with China and food shortages in the

³ "Fall of the Soviet Union." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, 01 Jan. 2011. Web.

⁴ "Joseph Stalin." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, 01 Jan. 2009. Web.

USSR”; furthermore, high-ranking Soviet officials had been “bothered by what they saw as his erratic tendency to undercut their authority”.⁵

Following Khrushchev was Leonid Brezhnev who became General Secretary of the Communist Party and later head of the Communist Party, head of the state, and President of the USSR. Brezhnev became notable for his “Brezhnev Doctrine,” which “declared that the USSR could intervene in the affairs of any Eastern European nation if communist rule was threatened”. The doctrine, which was created after he declared the invasion of Czechoslovakia, was used as justification for Soviet invasions. Brezhnev continued his leadership until his death in 1982; in his last five years, Brezhnev managed to lead an expensive invasion of Afghanistan and increase tensions in the Cold War.⁶ Brezhnev’s death led to several subsequent leaders who would pass away shortly after obtaining leadership. KGB chief Yuri Andropov took over after Brezhnev but passed away in 1984; Konstantin Chernenko then replaced Andropov. In 1985, Chernenko passed away as well.⁷

Mikhail Gorbachev replaced Chernenko as General Secretary of the Communist Party while Andrei Gromyko became president of the Soviet Union. Within this period, Gorbachev rose to power and instituted two of his major reforms: perestroika, economic and political restructuring, and glasnost, political openness. While Gorbachev may have had the intention of making the Soviet Union more prosperous, Soviet citizens were left frustrated with the lack of goods and promised ‘openness, especially after the Chernobyl disaster. In Gorbachev’s farewell address, he summarized the issues at hand

⁵ "Nikita Khrushchev." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, 01 Jan. 2009. Web.

⁶ "Brezhnev Is Soviet President." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, 25 Jan. 2016. Web.

⁷ "Soviet Union Timeline." *BBC News*. 30 Nov. 2015. Web.

by stating, “The old system collapsed before the new one had time to being working”.⁸ The key events of Soviet history are frequently marked and categorized by the leaders who caused them, and while a variety of outcomes emerged from each leadership style, each time period in Soviet history serves as the basis of the mentality that many Soviet immigrants brought them to the United States.

Understanding the Soviet Lifestyle

The Soviet Union, formally known as the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics or USSR, was officially recognized in 1922 and it lasted until 1991. The Soviet Communist Party, through the leadership of Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Gorbachev, enforced strict policies that served as the basis of the Soviet lifestyle. In all 15 republics, the Soviet Union strove to unite citizens under similar values to form a collective Soviet society.⁹ According to the January 1989 census, the Soviet Union grew to an overall population of 286,717,000 people; included in the data set were the countries identified today as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belorussia, Estonia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lithuania, Moldova, The Russian Federation, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Ukraine, and Uzbekistan. Russians dominated the distribution of nationalities in the Soviet Union, comprising 51% of the Soviet population, while Ukrainians represented 15%, Uzbeks represented 6%, Belorussians represented 3.5%, and the other 100 nationalities represented 24.5%.¹⁰

⁸ "Fall of the Soviet Union." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, 01 Jan. 2011. Web.

⁹ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pgs. 40-41.

¹⁰ Zickel, Raymond E., and Eugene K. Keefe. *Soviet Union: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991. Print. Pg. XLVI.

Through the use of force and fear, Stalin's regime attempted to promote the idea of Soviet togetherness to "prevent the disintegration of the Soviet empire". In approximately seventy years, the leaders from the Soviet Union eliminated its previously established sub-nationalities in an attempt to create, "a family of nations living harmoniously together, [with] each national culture adding to and enriching the new Soviet culture and promoting the development of a single Soviet nationality".¹¹ Although the Soviet Union had an assortment of cultures and identities, its goal of establishing Soviet unification made it clear that diversity was not welcomed with respect to Soviet interests. In order to maintain a hold over its citizens and to eliminate ethnically diverse groups, the Soviet rule promoted the idea of "Russification" or "Sovietization":

While Sovietization never overtly advocated cultural assimilation, it did presume that Soviet citizens would use the Russian language as the primary "all-union" language and expected Soviet citizens to adopt "modern" lifestyles that often drew on Russian models.¹²

The Russian model of education, politics, and administration became the overall dominant representation of Soviet philosophy. The process of Sovietization also promoted a transformation of "all aspects of life from religion and culture to social and gender roles, and even everyday speech, legal norms, and agriculture."

The Russification process involved implementing Russian culture and language in non-Russian speaking communities, increasing Russian bureaucracy, and "assimilat[ing] non-Russians culturally... to make Russians out of Poles, Uzbeks, or

¹¹ Zickel, Raymond E., and Eugene K. Keefe. *Soviet Union: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991. Print. Pgs. 135-137.

¹² Weeks, Theodore R. "Russification/Sovietization." *European History Online (EGO)*. Institute of European History (IEG), 03 Dec. 2010.

other non-Russians”.¹³ Countries such as Ukraine and Belarus were considered to be “sub-categories of the Russian nation”. The Sovietization process differed from Russification in that it enforced modernization, which encouraged “processes as industrialization, urbanization, and the growth of state intervention in everyday life, from universal education to military service to the welfare state”. The goal of Sovietization was to create a new non-ethnic identity called ‘Soviet’. This new identity would strip away cultural individuality and make a person “superior”, as all individuals would become “progressive, educated, and scientific, and would, of course, speak Russian, either as a native tongue or as a second language”. Beyond that, Soviet ideals forced the belief in total equality between men and women. “Sovietization furthermore demanded that women be treated as absolute equal partners in the building of socialism.”¹⁴

Russification and Sovietization made it more difficult for an individual to practice their culture if it was not Russian to begin with. While the act of practicing a non-Russian culture was not outlawed in the Soviet constitution, it was condemned through other means. Through the process of cultural integration, most religious and ethnic practices faced discrimination and persecution. In most cases, people who were born in another Soviet country, such as Ukraine, habitually identified themselves as Russian to avoid discrimination. For some Soviet immigrants in the United States, Russification and Sovietization continue to play a large role.

¹³ Weeks, Theodore R. "*Russification/Sovietization*." European History Online (EGO). Institute of European History (IEG), 03 Dec. 2010.

¹⁴ Weeks, Theodore R. "*Russification/Sovietization*." European History Online (EGO). Institute of European History (IEG), 03 Dec. 2010.

Living with Soviet Political Rule

In 1924, the Soviet Union adopted a constitution which included policies on the regulation of nationalities. The document states, “Every citizen of the Soviet Union is also a member of a particular nationality, and a citizen’s internal passport identifies that nationality”.¹⁵ Beginning in the Tsarist Empire, citizens were required to carry passports after the age of 16. While mainly used as a form of identification and for keeping Soviet records up-to-date, this requirement also created opportunities for discrimination. The effect of having an individual’s sub-nationality exposed in important documents made inequality ever more present and it perpetuated the idea of exclusion. Upon presenting their documentation, Soviet citizens often had to face the following restrictions: limitations on traveling, inability to change homes within cities, difficulties in obtaining jobs, as well as possible deportation.¹⁶

The Soviet government’s attempt to create a cohesive Soviet nationality for all had ultimately failed. Even though the Soviet constitution stated, “all nationalities are equal,” this rule was not well enforced as each passport listed an additional nationality that people were labeled with for the duration of their citizenship in the Soviet Union. The passports allowed for many ethnic groups to be targeted and victimized, particularly for entry into certain schools and employment opportunities. These documents were frequently utilized under Stalin’s reign to persecute people with

¹⁵ Zickel, Raymond E., and Eugene K. Keefe. *Soviet Union: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991. Print. Pg. 195.

¹⁶ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 64.

specific backgrounds.¹⁷ With the variance in Soviet leadership styles, the Soviet Union became vulnerable to social unrest and political turmoil. In Raymond E. Zickel and Eugene K. Keefe's book, "*Soviet Union: A Country Study*", the authors describe the condition of the Soviet Union by stating, "[The Soviet Union's] wars, famines, purges, and epidemics have left an enduring imprint on the society and on its ability to reproduce and renew itself". The quote demonstrates how the structure of the Soviet regime has made itself susceptible to catastrophic events overtime. While Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Gorbachev's maintained diverse leadership styles, the situations that arose caused the Soviet Union and its people to experience an endless cycle of repression.

Towards the end of the Soviet Union, there were, "declining birth rates, increasing divorce rates, a trend toward smaller nuclear families..." As a result, the Soviet Union experienced a significant amount of human loss. The factors that caused this included, "migration, tension among nationality groups, uneven fertility rates, and high infant and adult mortality became increasingly acute and various social programs and incentives were produced to deal with them."¹⁸ As issues kept appearing in Soviet society, many of the aforementioned factors continued to increase. Until Gorbachev made the attempt to loosen government restrictions on Soviet citizens, the Soviet government used the tactic of instilling fear to maintain control over its citizens. In "*Daily Life in the Soviet Union*", Katherine Bliss Eaton described this exploitation by

¹⁷ Zickel, Raymond E., and Eugene K. Keefe. *Soviet Union: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991. Print. Pg. 195.

¹⁸ Zickel, Raymond E., and Eugene K. Keefe. *Soviet Union: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991. Print. Pg. 116.

stating, "... Anyone at any time could be turned into a political criminal, because all crimes could be interpreted as crimes against the state: grand and petty theft, negligence in the workplace, arson, attempts to emigrate or publish abroad, and so on."¹⁹ This was highly encouraged in the Stalin era and it continued until the collapse of the Soviet Union. The impact of those fearing criminalization caused many to discuss and conduct matters in private.

Severe and strict censorship laws were among the many enforced restrictions throughout the Soviet Union, as they had been in the Russian Empire. The national Soviet newspapers, including *Pravda* (Truth in Russian) and *Izvestia* (News), were issued every day and their contents were under heavy surveillance by the Soviet regime. The featured stories would frequently be "dry", "predictable", and the publications affordable for most readers. Journalists were to report on subjects that the Soviet government approved of; they were either told to refrain from or delay reporting on, "news about disasters in the USSR, such as plane crashes and natural disasters; work-related injuries; morale in the military; special payment and treatment for athletes", as these topics may have been too controversial.²⁰ The absence of a free press would, at times, put people in serious, if not life-threatening, danger. With the prime example of the 1986 Chernobyl disaster in Ukraine, many people were unaware of a nuclear power plant that exploded near them. As a result of refusing to share this information with the general public for three weeks, millions of Soviet citizens were exposed to nuclear radiation. Though Gorbachev had encouraged the Glasnost reform, many Soviet citizens

¹⁹ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 56.

²⁰ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 271.

began to feel distrust towards their government. The virtue of public space began to disintegrate and the trend of meeting in private spaces formed out of the necessity to have private conversations or conduct religious practices in secrecy.

As people began gaining access to radios and foreign stations, the Soviet government attempted to keep people from listening. They did this by, “threatening to arrest listeners, jamming broadcasts, confiscating radios, prohibiting the manufacturing of shortwave radios inside the USSR... and trying to pressure foreign governments to stop broadcasting to its citizens”.²¹ Due to the threats made towards the news industry, the general populace felt afraid to speak their mind.²² The inability to speak freely in public took its toll on Soviet citizens and caused many Soviets to fear authority figures and attempt to avoid discovery at all costs. As a result of the Soviet regime controlling places that would normally promote expressive conversations, the private setting of an individual’s home became the space for playing music, reciting poetry, exchanging underground tapes, circulating forbidden art and literature, debating politics, and maintaining relationships. Collective fear of authority, repression, and discovery became common aspects of Soviet culture. Those aspects still haunt many Soviet immigrants and keep them from trusting government systems today.²³

The Backbone of Soviet Social Structure

The lifestyle in the Soviet Union revolved around status, wealth, and material items. The citizens who were able to move upward within these three categories

²¹ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 274.

²² Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 271.

²³ Nelson, Davia, and Nikki Silva. "How Soviet Kitchens Became Hotbeds Of Dissent And Culture." *NPR*. 27 May 2014. Web.

seemed to have more privilege in Soviet society. According to Raymond E. Zickel, “Social position was determined not only by occupation but also by education, party membership, place of residence, and even nationality. Membership in the ruling group, the Community Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), aided career advancement”. Soviets were generally classified into four socio-occupational groupings, “the political-governmental elite and cultural and scientific intelligentsia; white collar workers; blue-collar workers; and peasants and other agricultural workers.” Many citizens relied heavily on furthering their education, gaining public influence, and improving their social and professional connections, doing so allowed them to gain more privileges in Soviet society.²⁴ Digging into the constructs of Soviet social structure is critical to understanding why Soviet immigrant families stress what they consider to be elements of success, i.e. materialism, social status, academic prestige, wealth, a high-paying career. .

In the Soviet Union, class distinction was extremely apparent, and at least nominally, workers were given precedence. As an example, an individual’s social status and career path determined the amount of grocery rations they could receive. Those who were “blue-collar workers, workers in war-related industries, scientists, and technicians” were given first priority for food rations, while “white-collar workers” were given second priority, dependents of the preceding categories would get third priority, and the children would get last priority.²⁵ Soviet social status also declared which small luxuries and clothing one would be able to obtain. Those who had better

²⁴ Zickel, Raymond E., and Eugene K. Keefe. *Soviet Union: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991. Print. Pg. 211.

²⁵ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 122.

connections were able to acquire better fabric, yet individuals with lower standing were left with poor quality clothing.²⁶ The Soviet state often favored workers; however, those with prestige, or white-collar jobs, were able to exert power through connections and party affiliation.

Although many families would fall within the same social class year-after-year, most ambitiously hoped that they or their children would advance through the social system.²⁷ Due to the “centralized and bureaucratic official structure of the Soviet Union in 1989”, people were not able to become wealthy within Soviet society unless they achieved high social status. “The paths for achievement remained fairly fixed, and an individual’s upward progress was usually slow”. As a means of gaining social mobility, Soviet citizens often took part in corruptive acts, including nepotism and cronyism, to receive social advancement.²⁸ Families of a “political elite, intelligentsia, and white-collar worker” had a higher chance of sending their children to universities. Without having established a higher status in society, children of lower classes, including agricultural workers, “began their careers without higher education and remained at the same socio-occupational level as their parents”.²⁹

Soviet Education and its Prominence in Soviet Society

The Soviet constitution held education in high regard, as it guaranteed its citizens the right to “free, universal, and multilingual” education. The education system

²⁶ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 123.

²⁷ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 113.

²⁸ Zickel, Raymond E., and Eugene K. Keefe. *Soviet Union: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991. Print. Pg. 227.

²⁹ Zickel, Raymond E., and Eugene K. Keefe. *Soviet Union: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991. Print. Pgs. 211-212.

in the Soviet Union was similar to the traditional European system where formal exams were conducted, classrooms had a strict teaching atmosphere, teachers were designated as authority figures, courses involved a significant amount of memorization and homework, school uniforms were enforced, and there was a five-point grading scale.³⁰ However, the content taught was heavily controlled, structured, and often included Soviet values. While this educational system was made available to every Soviet citizen, the quality of the instruction had frequently fallen “below standards achieved in the west”.³¹

Children were encouraged to avoid speaking their native language and learn Russian instead. The Soviet Union heavily promoted the idea of Russification to Soviet students in order to sever cultural ties between them and their “ancestral traditions”.³² Education was essential to reaching social mobility; it determined a person’s occupation and their position in Soviet society. Unlike the United States, Soviet citizens had to have some formal education in order to advance through a career. Fewer opportunities existed to those who lacked academic experience. Those who were unable to complete their secondary education, “left school after eight years, received only factory apprenticeship or an unskilled job”; whereas individuals that completed a secondary education were “placed in a skilled or perhaps a low-level white-collar position,

³⁰ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 211.

³¹ Zickel, Raymond E., and Eugene K. Keefe. *Soviet Union: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991. Print. Pg. 243.

³² Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 45.

depending on the type of secondary school attended”. Soviet citizens who desired to obtain a professional or bureaucratic position had to have a higher level of education.³³

Rather than applying to a school based on its merits, they would often select an institution that had a higher acceptance rate to increase their chance of expanding their education. If not accepted, the students would face the risk of having fewer employment opportunities.³⁴ In addition to selecting an appropriate academic field, students also needed to have proficiency in the Russian language. Russian was the most common language spoken in government organizations, as well as economic, social, and cultural institutions. Students who wanted to work in these fields, let alone receive admission into a school, had to demonstrate their ability to speak it fluently. Many classes were conducted exclusively in Russian and the majority of their books contained Russian text.³⁵

Obtaining academic achievement was known to be the fundamental start towards working one’s way towards success; without it, Soviet citizens were generally left without opportunities. This mindset regarding education is ingrained in Soviet culture and continues to be enforced today on younger generations of Soviet-Americans. To a majority of Soviet immigrants, higher-education serves as the stepping-stone towards reaching success in any country, including the United States, regardless if other methods or opportunities exist.

³³ Zickel, Raymond E., and Eugene K. Keefe. *Soviet Union: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991. Print. Pgs. 217-218.

³⁴ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 217.

³⁵ Zickel, Raymond E., and Eugene K. Keefe. *Soviet Union: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991. Print. Pg. 140.

Living in Communist Conditions

As technology advanced, more households were able to acquire goods such as “small refrigerators, sewing machines, radios, TVs, stereo systems, tape recorders, vacuum cleaners, washing machines, and cars”.³⁶ While certain goods were more accessible, there were fewer improvements on housing, food supply, and infrastructure. The shortages of consumer goods encouraged people to steal from the government and add to the development of the black market.³⁷ Housing opportunities were scarce, cramped, and often lacked amenities. According to Katherine Bliss Eaton in “*Daily Life in the Soviet Union*”, “Who got what kind of living space depended mainly on money, social class, and how authorities decided to allocate precious housing”.³⁸ To provide financial support when necessary, it became customary for grandparents to live with their children. In addition to finances, their support extended to “tending grandchildren, cooking, cleaning house, gardening, or simply searching and waiting in line for groceries and other consumer goods”.³⁹ As housing became more and more difficult to come by, newlyweds and even divorced couples had to continue sharing their living quarters together along with their extended family.⁴⁰ On average, Soviet families “either shared an apartment with other families, using the bathroom and kitchen in common areas, or lived in a very small private apartment”.⁴¹

³⁶ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 124.

³⁷ Zickel, Raymond E., and Eugene K. Keefe. *Soviet Union: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991. Print. Pg. 93.

³⁸ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 155.

³⁹ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 127.

⁴⁰ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 170.

⁴¹ Zickel, Raymond E., and Eugene K. Keefe. *Soviet Union: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991. Print. Pgs. 223.

The everyday routine of a Soviet citizen relied on gender roles. If men were not enlisted in the military, they were found at work. Women were generally also expected to work, although they were also expected to stand in line for goods and conduct household chores.⁴² The custom of lining up played a significant role in Soviet culture. In order to obtain almost any product, Soviet citizens were forced to stand in line, sometimes for several hours; typical systems had someone waiting in three lines: first to indicate what and how much one wanted to buy, second to pay, and third to pick up the purchase. Most products would appear unpredictably while others were sometimes difficult to obtain. Eaton states, “When that happened people tried to gather as much of the product as they could, for their immediate family, for friends and relatives, for stockpiling, and for barter.” Line forming would commonly serve as a signal, which would lead to people “quickly grab[ing] a place in line and only then inquir[ing] what was for sale”.⁴³

The act of acquiring certain items held much more significance in Soviet culture than that of American. The ability own goods meant that one could potentially be able to entertain and impress important guests, take part in trade, show status, etc. Through an American lens, this Soviet approach towards obtaining goods can be interpreted as being ‘materialistic’; however, to Soviet citizens, acquiring goods became more valuable and useful in Soviet society. Consequently, the lack of goods made many Soviet immigrants extremely resourceful, be critical of the wasting of food, and appreciative of the goods they are able to obtain.

⁴² Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 115.

⁴³ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 116.

Soviet Stance on Religion

The Soviet Union attempted to have a widespread separation of church and state where religious teachings and worship were prohibited from all schools. According to Eaton, “It was a teacher’s duty to detect and be ready to combat religious beliefs transmitted to young children, often by *babushki* (grandmothers). Many people were sent to the gulag for trying to give their children formal religious schooling”.⁴⁴ As an official policy, atheism was endorsed by the Soviet Union; even more so, it discouraged people from participating in religious activities, including “fasting, baptism, Sunday school classes, bar mitzvah ceremonies, circumcisions, and so on”. Those who chose to openly practice religion were usually refused career advancement opportunities, had issues with local authorities, and faced religious discrimination.⁴⁵

After several decades of being subjected to an anti-religious doctrine, many Soviets were able to remember which religious belief their family was associated with, but not how to practice it. Although Christianity, Islam, and Judaism were among the most popular religions in the Soviet Union, those that continued to have strong religious roots were forced to practice in the shadows.⁴⁶ Over one-third of the Soviet population had claimed to have a religious belief while the other two-thirds of the Soviet population did not. Eaton states, “About half the people, including members of the

⁴⁴ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 225.

⁴⁵ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 281.

⁴⁶ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 285.

CPSU and high-level government officials, professed atheism. For the majority of Soviet citizens... religion seemed irrelevant”.⁴⁷

Celebrations and Traditions

To encourage the idea of atheism and to create a holiday that everyone could equally practice, the Soviets substituted “pre-Revolutionary Christmas festivities” with New Year’s Eve and New Year’s Day celebrations. The tradition involved people exchanging presents or cards, giving toys to children, making a festive meal, decorating a fir tree with ornaments and lights, and having routine visits from *Ded Moroz* (Grandfather Frost) and *Snegurochka* (Snow Maiden). Towards the end of the Soviet Union, it was popular for people to travel to the Red Square to watch the tower clock strike midnight and welcome the New Year. The Soviet government would play the national anthem and light the sky with fireworks. Partying would continue at home, with more feasts, drinks, and celebrations on TV.⁴⁸ The two weeks before and a few days after the New Year’s Eve are also full of festivities. Many people would celebrate by “enjoying illuminations, ice sculptures, ice slides, New Year skits, free concerts, champagne, food, and everything else that the festival has to offer”.⁴⁹ To this day, Soviet-created traditions, such as New Year’s celebrations, continue to be practiced by Soviet immigrant households in the United States.

⁴⁷ Zickel, Raymond E., and Eugene K. Keefe. *Soviet Union: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991. Print. Pgs. 184.

⁴⁸ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 264-265.

⁴⁹ Gall, Timothy L., and Jeneen Hobby. "Russians." *Worldmark Encyclopedia of Cultures and Daily Life*. 2nd ed. Vol. 5. Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Cengage Learning, 2009. 418-23. Print. Europe.

The Soviet Union's communist principles were present during any significant milestone. Furthermore, Soviet policies heavily influenced people's day-to-day lives in the matters of national affairs, living conditions, access to resources, and religious stances. While aspects of this identity may not be favorable, it does contribute to the actions, expectations, and dynamics of a Soviet immigrant household. Even though the Soviet Union had formed and experienced a collapse all within the span of a single century, it still holds a strong influence on those who claim Soviet roots decades later.

Chapter 2: Soviet Social Frustration and Assimilation

The Necessity to Emigrate

After years of having to endure political hardships, religious repression, and a lack of resources, many Soviet citizens pursued the opportunity to exchange their Soviet citizenship for another. Soviet laws regarding emigration were strict until the end of the Soviet era; until then, many were confined to Soviet borders unless they were able to declare a Jewish identity.⁵⁰ There were two major factors that kept people from voluntarily migrating out of the Soviet Union: the first was the “state ownership of the land” and the second was the “system of internal passports that regulated where people live and work”.⁵¹ Once the opportunity did arrive, a significant number of Soviet citizens attempted to emigrate.⁵² In 1980, 15 million Soviet citizens changed their place of residency, both with the state’s approval and without. Zickel and Keefe made reference to the number of Soviet citizens who chose to emigrate by stating, “According to figures released in 1989, some 140,000 persons emigrated from the Soviet Union in 1987 and 1988. Overall, observers estimated that as many as 500,000 émigrés, mostly Jews, Armenians, Germans, and Poles, were allowed to leave between 1960 and 1985.”

The United States became a popular destination for immigration. Some Soviet citizens viewed the United States as their opportunity to discover career or economic opportunities, escape discrimination or persecution, practice rights freely, or live a life

⁵⁰ Magocsi, Paul Robert. "Russian Americans." Every Culture. Web.

⁵¹ Zickel, Raymond E., and Eugene K. Keefe. *Soviet Union: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991. Print. Pg. 122

⁵² Magocsi, Paul Robert. "*Russian Americans*." Every Culture. Web.

without a constant fear of violence.⁵³ Since the 1970s, there have been 7,000,000 émigrés that have arrived in the United States permanently from the former Soviet Union. In addition, 5,500,000 individuals of Soviet background have entered the country with a refugee status. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States received an additional influx of 150,000 Soviet immigrants.⁵⁴

Soviet Jews

Soviet Jews represented a large portion of immigrants that came to the United States within the most recent waves of immigration. As a result, the second generation of Soviet-Americans is largely comprised of those identified with a Soviet-Jewish background. Although ‘Jewish’ is considered to be a religion in other countries, it was viewed more as an ethnicity in the Soviet Union. While being considered as such, Soviet Jews experienced similar traumas and the “overall privations of Soviet life”. However, what distinguished Soviet Jews from other subsets of Soviets was the fact that they speak a different dialect of Russian, established a unique blend of Jewish and Soviet values, and had certain cultural practices that were not well accepted by the Soviet government.

Life in the USSR for Soviet Jews did not only include day-to-day challenges, it was also laced with discrimination:

Life in the Soviet Union was fraught with corruption, bureaucratic abuse, and shortages of basic necessities, including housing, childcare, and

⁵³ Zickel, Raymond E., and Eugene K. Keefe. *Soviet Union: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Research Division, Library of Congress, 1991. Print. Pg. 122

⁵⁴ Birman, Dina, Edison Trickett, and Rebecca M. Buchanan. "A Tale of Two Cities: Replication of a Study on the Acculturation and Adaptation of Immigrant Adolescents From the Former Soviet Union in a Different Community Context." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 35 (2005): 83-101. Web.

food. To get ahead at work, to obtain an apartment or decent medical care, one needed to have connections and, often pay bribes. This was even more necessary for Jews, who already were handicapped by discrimination.⁵⁵

Being Jewish in the Soviet Union meant that there were fewer opportunities available, especially for education and employment. A quota would often be set to regulate how many Soviet Jews were allowed to enroll in academic programs and work in certain fields. As was the official policy in the Soviet Union for Jews, “the fifth line of all internal passports, birth certificates, etc., [stated that the] nationality is ‘JEW’”. Their documents were easily accessible, making it impossible for Soviet Jews to abandon or hide their ethnicity in order to avoid further discrimination. Having these documents left a “formidable handicap for young people trying to make their way in the Soviet world”.⁵⁶

In accordance to the label of ‘Jew’ on important Soviet documents, Gal Beckerman, the author of “*When They Come for Us, We’ll Be Gone*” stated, “We wouldn’t know a piece of matzo from a piece of challah, but every time we applied for a job, apartment, a library card, we were reminded that we were Jewish”.⁵⁷ Throughout years of having to endure these hardships, a significant portion of Soviet Jews exchanged their Soviet citizenship for a different one. After an emigration ban was lifted on Soviet-Jews, the United States received a large wave of Soviet-Jewish

⁵⁵ McGoldrick, Monica, Joseph Giordano, and John K. Pearce. *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*. New York: Guilford, 2005. Print.

⁵⁶ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pgs. 290-291.

⁵⁷ Kievsky, Boris. "Don't Call Me Russian: The History of a Nationality." *YouTube*. YouTube, 26 July 2011. Web.

refugees, many of whom arrived from the 1970s to the early 1990s.⁵⁸ According to Eaton, “Anti-Jewish policies ... to live in a homeland of their own or just to escape the hardships of Soviet life, impelled Jewish dissidents to demand that the government actually enforce the human rights promised in the Soviet constitution, including the right to leave.”⁵⁹ In order to emigrate out of the Soviet Union, Soviet Jews were given the opportunity to leave as long as they were ready to abandon their Soviet citizenship.

The Soviet Union had the largest Jewish population in the world until the early 1970s. By 1980, the Soviet-Jewish population declined to third place, as many had decided to emigrate.⁶⁰ In 1971, emigration laws eased under Brezhnev’s leadership and Jews were slowly able to leave the Soviet Union. This was made possible through the Brussels Conference, which exhibited the unification of Jews globally to Jews from the Soviet Union, and the United States’ attempt to alleviate its hostile relationship with the Soviet Union. A year later, President Nixon expanded trade agreements with the Soviet Union through a treaty, which resulted in the Soviet Union granting more exit visas.

Subsequently in 1974, the United States Senate approved what is known as the Jackson-Vanik amendment. This amendment was created with the intent to restrict trade with countries that limit emigration, as it is deemed a human right. With the assistance of the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), many Soviet Jews resettled through “transit camps in Italy and Austria and on to the United States and Israel.” The final

⁵⁸ Karlin, Anatoly. "The 5 Types of Russian American." *Da Russophile*. 11 June 2012. Web.

⁵⁹ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 293.

⁶⁰ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pg. 290-291.

wave of Soviet-Jewish emigration took place in the early 1990s, following the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁶¹

In a YouTube video titled, “*Don’t Call Me Russian: The History of a Nationality*”, presenter Boris Kievsky discusses Russian-Jewish identity. This particular video has been used as a tool for explaining to others about the identity of Soviet Russian Jews on Facebook. Kievsky first addresses the topic through a historical approach, more specifically, he explains how Sovietization had “disconnected the Jewish population from its roots and from Western Jewry alike”. The result of being left without connections to Judaism has caused Soviet Jews to be stripped of religious ties and have nothing to bind themselves to other practicing Jews. Kievsky concludes his historical explanation by stating, “Jews self-identifying (or letting themselves be identified) as “Russian” denies the hundreds of years of discrimination, living under anti-Semitic oppression”; he refers to this conundrum as “Rus-holm syndrome”.

Through Kievsky’s research, he has determined that there are four distinct characteristics of Soviet Jews. The first is that they have a common language; after the influence of Sovietization, the main language Soviet Jews were left with was Russian. Secondly, Soviet Jews share a long and difficult history together; they were able to survive through various accounts of “oppression and extermination”. The third characterization is that Soviet Jews have a hybrid culture, which, is not considered to be fully Jewish or fully Soviet, but rather a mix of both:

⁶¹ Magocsi, Paul Robert. "Russian Americans." Every Culture. Web.

The Jewish culture is mostly wiped out but a lot of it is held underground by our own grandparents and is passed down to us. And it is integrated with the Soviet culture. ... We have still Jewish values. Religion is gone but we still have a huge value on family, education, and many other traditional staples of the Jewish life.

And lastly, Soviet Jews have pride. The Soviet-Jewish identity, as an individual or as a community, has been able to withstand turmoil and move on. In addition, Soviet Jews continued their lifestyle by immigrating to the United States and creating “thriving communities with huge capitalistic ideals”. According to Kievsky, these factors culminate a new Jewish nationality, stating, “The Russians may have labeled us with it but today we own it. It is ours.”⁶²

The Migration of Soviet Academics

Another prominent group of émigrés are Soviet academics. They arrived in the United States during the 1990s after the Soviet state lost its capacity to compensate citizen’s salaries regularly. The majority of Soviet academics left the Soviet Union to pursue career opportunities with the intention of coming back after they established themselves, though, many decided to stay in the United States permanently. The individuals from this group are known to live in university towns, be “highly intelligent”, have “a reliable cash flow”, and have “career progression”.⁶³

These groups of immigrants rarely have ill will towards their country of birth, to which they refer to as ‘rodina’ [motherland] or Rossiia-matushka [little mother Russia]. They leave as a last resort, in search of opportunities because of severe circumstances,

⁶² Kievsky, Boris. "Don't Call Me Russian: The History of a Nationality." *YouTube*. YouTube, 26 July 2011. Web.

⁶³ Karlin, Anatoly. "*The 5 Types of Russian American*." *Da Russophile*. 11 June 2012. Web.

but continue to support the country from which they originated. Most individuals are considered to be “well-educated”, “cosmopolitan people”, of the “professional class”, and have an easier time assimilating to the American lifestyle while still maintaining a “deep connection to Russian culture”. A good portion of these individuals are continuing to migrate to the United States today in order to seek better careers and to enhance their education.⁶⁴

Soviet Immigrants in the United States

Through an interview conducted by Yelena O. in Maryland Heights, Montana for the Library of Congress, a Ukrainian immigrant named Svetlana K. was asked a series of questions regarding her family’s decision to emigrate out of Ukraine soon after its collapse. Her reason for selecting the United States was to “have a better life and so her daughter wouldn’t be as sick as she was after the Chernobyl accident”. In response to the question of “How does life differ in the United States?” Svetlana’s answers were that Ukraine was not as “highly technical” as the United States and that people actually have the opportunity to own their own homes and are able to own more than one car in the United States. Svetlana was astonished by the fact that Americans can move out of their parent’s house after the age of eighteen and can live independently.

In order to help Svetlana and her family settle smoothly into American society, the United States government provided assistance for the first four months and the Jewish Federation helped them for the four months following this. The assistance from both helped Svetlana “find a place to live and stabilize their lives so they wouldn’t have

⁶⁴ McGoldrick, Monica, Joseph Giordano, and John K. Pearce. *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*. New York: Guilford, 2005. Print.

any problems”. Although she plans on visiting Ukraine sometime in the future, Svetlana does not plan on moving back. To this day, Svetlana continues to eat Russian food, watch Russian programs, and participate in Russian cultural activities. “They remind her of her home, a place that she doesn't want to forget.”⁶⁵ Although there were significant hardships in the Soviet Union, Soviet immigrants were still raised with a culture that does not align naturally to the American lifestyle. To Soviet immigrants, such as Svetlana, the main intention for immigrating to the United States was to not abandon heritage, but rather to practice it freely while taking advantage of opportunities and resources that were unavailable in the Soviet Union.

Svetlana is one of many immigrants to have left the Soviet Union after its collapse. In another interview conducted for the Library of Congress, Maureen M. in New York, New York asked a Ukrainian immigrant named Mariya S. a similar series of questions. In response to why her family left the Soviet Union, Mariya stated, “I guess the main reason my family emigrated from Ukraine was because of the popular trend of Eastern Europeans, which was immigration to the United States. However, economic reasons were definitely a major factor in my parents’ decision”. More specifically, a situation Mariya’s parents encountered in Ukraine were a constant lack of jobs and pay. “For example, someone would work for two months and not get their paycheck until the fourth month”. After learning about how there were better paying jobs available in the United States, Mariya and her family made the decision to immigrate. While it was not easy, Mariya learned to speak English by surrounding herself with people who spoke it. After living for some time in the United States, Mariya claimed that, “It was well worth

⁶⁵ *"Interviews with Today's Immigrants."* Library of Congress, 23 Sept. 2006. Web.

it” because of the greater career opportunities and that her new life in the United States has “secured her a comfortable and successful life in the future,” something Ukraine was not able to offer.⁶⁶

The last two waves of Soviet immigration led to the establishment of Soviet immigrant communities in New York City, Philadelphia, Boston, and other northeast metropolitan cities. More immigrants have settled in other major American cities such as Chicago, Cleveland, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, and Los Angeles. When it comes to assimilating into American culture, Soviet immigrants have, for the most part, succeeded with the assistance and resources made available to them. However, there exist a few groups of Russian-speaking immigrants that have “avoided acculturation and maintained the traditional lifestyle they brought from the homeland”. A few of these groups include Orthodox Christian Old Believers and the non-Orthodox Molokan Christian sect.

Adolescent Soviet Immigrants

While Soviet immigrant families might have difficulty adapting to American customs, the second generation of Soviet-Americans have their own struggle. Dina Birman, Edison Trickett, and Rebecca M. Buchanan conducted a study titled, “*A Tale of Two Cities: Replication of a Study on the Acculturation and Adaptation of Immigrant Adolescents from the Former Soviet Union in a Different Community Context*”. The study was conducted to determine if there was “a potential cultural incompatibility in retaining both cultures [Soviet and American], as the adoption of one aspect of the new

⁶⁶ “*Interviews with Today’s Immigrants.*” Library of Congress, 15 Oct. 2005. Web.

culture may be related in losing it to the old”. To go more in-depth, the study focused on the acculturation process through the processes of: “language competence,” by looking at a person’s ability to converse in the languages of both cultures; “identification,” the way in which a person accepts membership in both cultures; and “behavioral participation,” how a person interacts within the environment of either cultures.

The domains in which adolescents are involved is another important element in this study. It evaluated an individual’s engagement with family, school, and peer groups to more accurately reflect the requirements for adaptation. For adolescent immigrants, it is more common to adapt to some domains more so than others. For instance some adolescents may adapt to their native culture with their family but be not as adaptive in their behaviors and interactions school. On the other hand, an adolescent may assimilate to American culture through academics but not form relationships as easy with other peers. If there are other peers who have a similar Soviet-American background, the adolescent is more likely going to form a social circle with them on the basis of shared cultural heritage. The ability to speak Russian is a “positive role in adjustment,” which leads to “predicted support from Russian peers in the positive direction”.

According to the study, there are some domains that [Soviet] and American acculturation has contributed positively to and there are some aspects of this acculturation process that it has contributed negatively to. In regard to American acculturation, it was discovered that there were no negative impacts and that it positively impacted school outcomes through increased grade point averages, fewer absences, and higher school participation, as well as support from American peers.

[Soviet] acculturation led to more absences in school and a lower grade point average. Adolescents are known to gain English-speaking abilities faster than adults. Nevertheless, a consequence of this is that Soviet-American adolescents tend to lose their Russian language skills as a compromise, “[making the] new language... becoming more dominant over time”.

In addition to having to adapt to both cultures, the study also found that [the lack of a Soviet immigrant] community affects whether or not Soviet adolescents experience discrimination, especially the “level and intensity, or stressfulness, of perceived discrimination”. Essentially, the higher the amount of discrimination reported, the higher the amount of stress was experienced. In retrospect, a “reactive identification” was also discovered, meaning that adolescents who did face discrimination were “more likely to embrace their native identity and reject identification with American culture”. The study concluded that those who immigrate to the United States from the former Soviet Union are more likely to encounter an entirely different academic and communal environment as well as undergo a unique process of acculturation that can easily change in variance depending on their location of residence.⁶⁷

While the study explored how a [Soviet] community plays a role in the acculturation and adaptation process, it did not necessarily portray the dynamics of living within a post-Soviet family, which is also important for adaptation. Today’s second generation of Soviet-Americans is comprised of factors listed from the

⁶⁷ Birman, Dina, Edison Trickett, and Rebecca M. Buchanan. "A Tale of Two Cities: Replication of a Study on the Acculturation and Adaptation of Immigrant Adolescents From the Former Soviet Union in a Different Community Context." *American Journal of Community Psychology* 35 (2005): 83-101. Web.

aforementioned study as well as Soviet historical influences that shaped the mentality of their immigrant family members.

With respect to the development of a post-Soviet identity in the United States, it is important to understand an immigrant's migration experience, even more so: when they arrived in the United States, which identity they currently belong to, and how they have adapted to living in the United States thus far.

Chapter 3: The Soviet-American

A New Soviet Subculture

After several decades of Soviet immigration to the United States, many of the Soviet customs and cultural values are still practiced today in Soviet immigrant households, thus, causing younger generations of Soviet-Americans to be well acquainted with Soviet traditions. Among the societal expectations of being fully ‘Americanized’ as a result of being raised in the United States and fully ‘Soviet’ as a result of being immersed in Soviet immigrant customs from birth, Soviet-Americans have created their own method to handling these expectations of maintaining a dual-identity: humor. Through the progression of technology, people have been coming together to share relatable life circumstances or to find others with similar backgrounds through social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, and Vine. These online outlets have especially impacted people of the Soviet-American community. Many Soviet-Americans, particularly the younger generation of social media users, have been posting or commenting about their own cultural experiences that relate to common instances that occur when living in a Soviet immigrant household. What is unique about these videos is that we find numerous individuals coming together to discuss similar situations they have encountered.

Soviet communities across the nation are experiencing a new breed of cultural identity, one that has been influenced by Soviet and American ideals as well as the changing world around it. In an attempt to showcase aspects of Soviet-American identity, a Ukrainian-born actor by the name of Gary Cherkassky, also known as Garik

Suharik and Gary Spielberg, co-created a series of videos that highlighted common phrases that a Soviet immigrant grandmother would say. Two years after Cherkassky's birth, in 1990, his family decided to immigrate to the United States where his family expected him to utilize American opportunities and become a lawyer. Going against his family's desire, Cherkassky decided to pursue acting instead. Today, he is most notable for his role as "Baba Fira".

On February 19, 2012, Cherkassky's first video featuring Baba Fira premiered on YouTube. The video featured Cherkassky as Baba Fira [grandmother Fira] and Ari Barkan as Joseph, Baba Fira's grandson. The two act out various scenarios that tend to occur between Russian-speaking grandmothers and their grandchildren. They focus on topics ranging from perceived laziness, being forced to eat, academic prowess, poor career choices, romantic life, appearances, superstitions, and more. What is truly remarkable is not necessarily the content of the video, but rather its reception. Since its upload date, over 426,000 people have liked the video and close to 1,000 people have commented on it, with many of those comments coming from the most recent generation of Soviet-Americans marveling on how accurately the video represented their own family dynamics.⁶⁸

Due to the reception of the original video, Cherkassky produced several other videos that showcased other situations many Soviet-Americans could relate to. Through his self-established Facebook group titled, "*Brooklyn Russian Vines*", Cherkassky began posting short, under a minute in length videos, otherwise known as "Vines".

⁶⁸ Cherkassky, Gary, Ari Barkan, and Alex Tsatskin. "S*** Russian Grandmas Say." YouTube. 19 Feb. 2012. Web.

While most videos continue to include Baba Fira, Cherkassky has expanded the content of his videos to feature: his sister, his dad, himself, and other Russian-speakers that have created their own videos with relatable and humorous material. The majority of these videos are known to have a blend of Russian and English. The presenters often introduce the topic in English, and then act out the conversation themselves using familiar Russian verbiage to depict the scenario that occurs within the topic. On average, the videos feature only one to two people acting out situations that occur daily in a Soviet immigrant household.

Shortly after posting his first video, Cherkassky began receiving recognition from Russian speakers all over the United States. While these videos are intended for humor, they are grounded in reality. In the video titled, “*Russian Grandmas are Hypocrites*”, Cherkassky demonstrates the scenario of how a grandmother is unhappy with her grandson’s profession but continues to boast about her grandson to others. Cherkassky demonstrates this scenario by speaking with a Soviet-grandmother accent, crying to her grandson about him needing to find a new specialty because him becoming an actor is “not normal”. The scene then cuts to the same grandmother talking to a friend over the phone stating that her grandson is a well-known movie star.⁶⁹ A few of the videos that have received the most Facebook ‘likes’ and ‘shares’ include, “*Russian Grandmas Loves Sending Packages to Soviet Union*”:

GRANDMOTHER: Gary, listen, you have a lot of clothes, you should go through them. Maybe you’ll find something that doesn’t work for you anymore.

⁶⁹ Russian Grandmas Are Hypocrites. Perf. Gary Cherkassky. Facebook. Brooklyn Russian Vines, 15 Nov. 2013. Web. 782 likes, 49 shares.

GARY: Grandma, everything fits.

GRANDMOTHER: I want to send a package to Ukraine.

GARY: Grandma, send off whatever you want. But everything of mine is fine for me. ... Grandma, where is my black jacket?

GRANDMOTHER: The one that looks like a black garbage bag? I sent it to Ukraine!⁷⁰

“*What Russian Dads Think of Christmas Day*”:

CHILD: Dad wake up!

FATHER: What?

CHILD: Where are my presents?

FATHER: What presents?

CHILD: For Christmas?

FATHER: What Christmas? We give presents on New Years. I was sleeping you woke me up! We still have to see how you behave. Go read a book. Presents, she wants?!⁷¹

And, “*Russian Grandparents Never Throw Out Food*”:

GRANDMOTHER: Gary, listen, I bought you that smoked fish and no one is eating it.

GARY: Grandma, I am not hungry, thank you.

GRANDMOTHER: I don't understand, you asked for this smoked fish and you aren't eating it. Go eat it quickly. [Grandma smells the fish].

IT'S ROTTEN! Gary, smell this.

GARY: Grandma, throw it away! [Out of nowhere Gary's grandpa appears].

GRANDFATHER: Leave it alone! I will eat it!⁷²

While these videos do not portray typical Soviet stereotypes, they do demonstrate how Soviet influences affect everyday interaction between older and younger Soviet

⁷⁰ Russian Grandmas Loves Sending Packages to Soviet Union. Perf. Gary Cherkassky. Facebook. Brooklyn Russian Vines, 18 Nov. 2013. Web. 1,100 likes, 81 shares.

⁷¹ What Russian Dads Think of Christmas Day. Perf. Gary Cherkassky. Facebook. Brooklyn Russian Vines, Dec. 25 2014. Web. 1,100 likes, 175 shares.

⁷² Russian Grandparents Never Throw Out Food. Perf. Gary Cherkassky. Facebook. Brooklyn Russian Vines. Nov. 20, 2013. 1,000 likes, 83 shares.

generations. In an attempt to make the content more relatable to the younger generation of Soviet-Americans, the videos include: both Russian and English languages, scenarios where it is difficult to understand the actions of older Soviet generations, and highlight the duality of both Soviet and American lifestyles. Among these video posts, you will find repeated comments such as, “So much [truth]”⁷³; “This is me and my parents everyday!”⁷⁴, and “... So on point”.⁷⁵

The hardships experienced by those from the Soviet Union have influenced how Soviet families adapt to American culture today; through that adaptation, a new subculture of young Soviet-American individuals have attempted to blend the American lifestyle they are currently being raised in and the Soviet lifestyle that their families continue to promote. The main values and ideas that stand out within the Soviet-American subculture are being able to: maintain both Russian and English languages, Soviet heritage and American culture, as well as Soviet and American traditions. Although results may vary depending on familial customs, additional characteristics of this subculture include shared family history, meeting expectations for academic and career success, as well as having atheistic stances on religion.

Within the same year that Cherkassky began posting his short videos, another Facebook group by the name of “Russian Jew Vines” became popular as well. The group immediately grew to thousandths of followers within the timespan of a few

⁷³ Quote by Michella Nedashkovskaya, Nov. 18, 2013. Russian Grandmas Loves Sending Packages to Soviet Union. Perf. Gary Cherkassky. Facebook. Brooklyn Russian Vines. Nov. 18, 2013. 1,100 likes, 81 shares.

⁷⁴ Quote by Melena Rimsy, Nov. 20, 2013. Russian Grandparents Never Throw Out Food. Perf. Gary Cherkassky. Facebook. Nov. 20, 2013. Brooklyn Russian Vines. 1,000 likes, 83 shares.

⁷⁵ Quote by Arthur Shevardnadze, Dec. 25, 2014. What Russian Dads Think of Christmas Day. Perf. Gary Cherkassky. Facebook. Brooklyn Russian Vines. Dec. 25 2014. 1,100 likes, 175 shares.

months. Today, the group has close to 60,000 followers and is continuing to produce videos weekly. Although members of the Russian-Jewish community post the videos, Soviet-Americans from a variety of immigrant backgrounds can relate to most of the topics that are presented. Depending on which topic is posted, Soviet-Americans nationwide use the post as a means of speaking to others from the same background. A popular trend occurring through this group is that those who relate to the video share it with other to demonstrate the situations they live with day-to-day.⁷⁶

Each video, or Vine, generates a significant amount comments from people who either share the experience of being raised in a Soviet-American lifestyle, or who know of others living with similar circumstances. All of the videos address issues, stereotypes, and common interests regarding Soviet-American identity, including: parents or grandparents disciplining their young, general stereotypes of Soviet immigrant families, Soviet food culture, educational expectations, expectations of the family, videos from the USSR or the Russian Federation, cultural identity confusion, family members reminiscing about the Soviet Union, getting in trouble for staying out too late, expectations of chores, language barriers, comparing and contrasting between Americans and Soviet-Americans, parents who act hypocritically, the blending of both cultures, Soviet superstitions, and general Soviet-American stereotypes.

The aforementioned Facebook videos topics play a large role in defining the Soviet-American subculture. Among the most popular are family discipline, family stereotyping, and Soviet food culture, education expectations, and familial expectations. It is evident that the topics gain more popularity if they contain some subject matter on

⁷⁶ "Russian Jew Vines." *Russian Jew Vines*. Facebook, Web.

Soviet influences within Soviet immigrant households. Many non-Soviet-Americans have stumbled into these videos, frequently commenting that they do not understand the humor or even the verbiage used. On the other hand, when Soviet immigrants are shown these videos, they too claim they do not understand the humor and that the videos themselves are disrespectful.⁷⁷ This just shows how exclusive these videos are to members of the Soviet-American community and how Soviet influences play a large role in the formulation of this subculture.

In Fig. 1, with the exception of the topic titled “Hypocritical Parents,” the average video receives 2,000 to 3,400 Facebook ‘likes’. Fig. 2 demonstrates which topics have had more videos produced above a certain threshold of Facebook ‘likes’. As mentioned before, the top five most popular topics all relate to Soviet ideals enforced by Soviet immigrants in the United States (Fig. 2). Family discipline is the most ‘liked’ of the topics and the reason for this is that Soviet immigrants have a more intense way of disciplining their young in comparison to how Americans discipline their young, making it all the more relatable in Soviet-American culture. The videos pertaining to this topic has reached to approximately 80,000 Facebook likes. The other topics, including ‘Stereotyping of Family’, ‘Soviet Food Culture’, ‘Education Expectations’, and ‘Familial Expectations’ all lead back to the Soviet lifestyle immigrant families experienced while in the Soviet Union. To understand today’s Soviet-American subculture, it is essential to learn about the circumstances that caused it to develop.

⁷⁷ What mothers think of Russian Jew Vines... Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 20, 2013. 3,600 Likes, 118 shares.

Average Facebook Likes Per Video

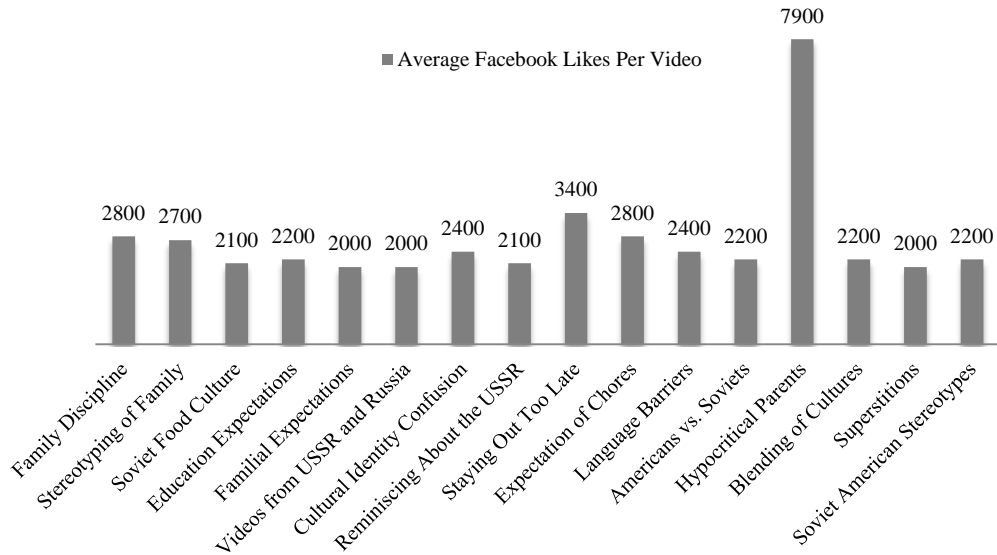


Figure 1: This graph portrays the average amount of Facebook ‘likes’ per video within the Facebook group called “Russian Jew Vines” since March 1, 2016.

Total Facebook Likes Per Category

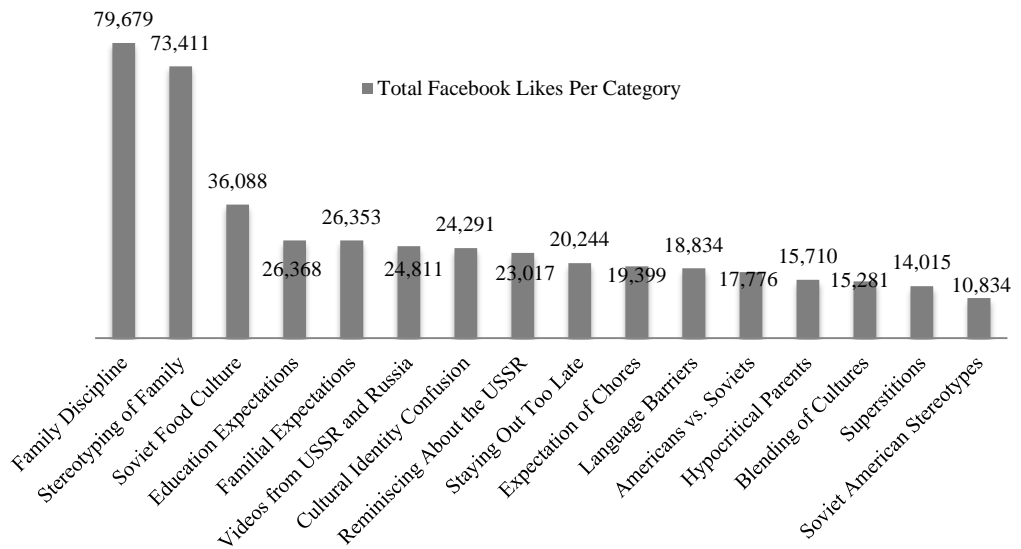


Figure 2: This graph depicts the total amount of Facebook ‘likes’ per category within the Facebook group called “Russian Jew Vines” since March 1, 2016.

Although there is no doubt that these videos produce humor, they also affect people emotionally. As they expose the realities of living in an immigrant household, the videos create an opportunity for Soviet-Americans to feel understood and belong to an identity that is shared by thousands of people who also understand the amount of accuracy associated with each video. For the purposes of this thesis, the *Russian Jewish Vines* videos are used as a tool to determine which characteristics, situations, and experiences best describe the Soviet-American community as a whole. Of the aforementioned sixteen topics covered by *Russian Jewish Vines*, the following topics of “Family Discipline”, “Education Expectations”, “Soviet Food Culture”, “Cultural Identity Confusion”, “Language Barriers”, and “Superstitions” generated the most discussion and will thus be further explained in this thesis with respect to its Soviet context.

Family Discipline: Obligations and Expectations

The most popularly discussed topic on “Russian Jew Vines” and even “Russian Brooklyn Vines” is how Soviet family members discipline their young. According to these videos, the Soviet immigrant method of discipline is often harsh, strict, and involves a significant amount of guilt tripping or scolding. In the video titled, “How Was Life in the USSR?” a boy named Gregory acts out a scenario where he innocently questions his father about life in the Soviet Union to which his father immediately reminds him of how thankful he should be for his life in the United States:

CHILD: What was life like in the USSR?

FATHER: There was no food. No water. And the Jews were hated. And you are not thankful!⁷⁸

With comments such as, “My dad everyday,” this topic video grew to 3,500 Facebook ‘likes’ and was shared a total of 285 times.⁷⁹ The comments also discuss how this type of guilt tripping and scolding is used on a day-to-day basis to remind children of the hardships the parents went through to get them to where they are today.

In the video titled, “When You Ask Your Parents to Buy You Something,” a teenage boy asks his father to purchase him a computer because everyone has one. This reasoning is highly common for young individuals to use when they are attempting to persuade their parents; the video, on the other hand, demonstrates how a Soviet immigrant would react instead:

SON: Dad, can you please buy me a computer? Everyone has one! And I don’t even have one!

FATHER: What do you want? A computer? I didn’t even have toys at your age. Ha, a computer he wants! Olya, did you hear?!

⁸⁰

This video generated close to 7,700 Facebook likes and was shared 585 times. The comparisons made towards life in the Soviet Union occur often throughout the videos. ,

Another aspect of familial obligations and expectations is the common occurrence of parental figures having an intense discussion with their children about

⁷⁸ How Was Life in the USSR? Perf. Gregory U. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 13, 2013. 3,500 likes, 285 shares.

⁷⁹ Quote by Polina Goldberg, Nov. 13, 2013. How Was Life in the USSR? Perf. Gregory U. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 13, 2013. 3,500 likes, 285 shares.

⁸⁰ When you ask your parents to buy you something... Perf. Val. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 28, 2013. 7,700 likes, 589 shares.

their expectations. In the video titled, “Russian Moms Exaggerate Everything,” a mother sits her son down to scold him about having a lack of respect and no plans for the future:

MOTHER: As of recently, you’ve had no respect for your parents. None. What are you planning on doing with your life? All of your friends will be driving Mercedes and they’ll forget about you. And you’re just going to sit here. Have you been doing drugs?⁸¹

The video received a vast amount of comments that illuminated similar experiences shared by others, such as, “My mom literally said that to me today,”⁸² “Seriously happens to me everyday... even on the phone,”⁸³ “Story of my life right here,”⁸⁴ and “... Accurate. For me, it’s like this: [you’ve been carried away], [you’re out of your mind], [give me your computer and phone].”⁸⁵

Many Soviet-Americans actively responded to videos involving the expectations of Soviet grandparents. Some of these expectations are about keeping up with appearances, laziness, weight control, and achieving accomplishments such as getting married, buying a house, and of course, obtaining a prestigious career. In the video titled, “Russian Grandparents be Like,” a grandfather begins to scold his grandson for his weight and how he is underdressed:

⁸¹ Russian Moms Exaggerate Everything. Perf. Val. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Jan. 27, 2014. 3,200 likes, 278 shares.

⁸² Quote by Sofiya Shreyer, Jan. 27, 2014. Russian Moms Exaggerate Everything. Perf. Val. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Jan. 27, 2014. 3,200 likes, 278 shares.

⁸³ Quote by Diana Razumow, Jan. 27, 2014. Russian Moms Exaggerate Everything. Perf. Val. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Jan. 27, 2014. 3,200 likes, 278 shares.

⁸⁴ Quote by Igor Galitskiy, Jan. 27, 2014. Russian Moms Exaggerate Everything. Perf. Val. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Jan. 27, 2014. 3,200 likes, 278 shares.

⁸⁵ Quote by Ortal Alschitz, Jan. 27, 2014. Russian Moms Exaggerate Everything. Perf. Val. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Jan. 27, 2014. 3,200 likes, 278 shares.

GRANDFATHER: Did you eat?

GRANDSON: Yes, I am full. Thank you.

GRANDFATHER: I can't tell. Grab your things, we are going to Costco. Why are you standing around? They're closing early today. Why are you standing around? Get a shopping cart. Look at how you're dressed! Where's your...? Where's your scarf? Zip up your jacket!⁸⁶

A few of the comments that followed were, "... He's just imitating the things Russian grandparents worry about when you're around ... If you were Russian this would be very relatable"⁸⁷ and "My life summed up in 15 seconds..." this previous comment alone reached 109 Facebook 'likes'.⁸⁸

In another video, called "Russian Grandmas!" we see an individual named Danny Poleshchuk, who is dressed traditionally as a Russian grandmother. The scenario involves the grandmother immediately jumping to conclusions when providing her grandson with money for ice cream:

GRANDMOTHER: Oh you need ice cream! Here's \$100. While you're at it, maybe you'll meet a girl, buy a house. Who knows!"⁸⁹

This video also acquired repetitive comments regarding other immigrant family members behaving the same way: "Oh how accurate ... my mom now a days,"⁹⁰ "Story

⁸⁶ Russian Grandparents Be Like. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 15, 2013. 4,200 likes, 267 shares.

⁸⁷ Quote by Daniella Xayutina, Nov. 15, 2013. Russian Grandparents Be Like. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 15, 2013. 4,200 likes, 267 shares.

⁸⁸ Quote by Karina Shulik, Nov. 15, 2013. Russian Grandparents Be Like. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 15, 2013. 4,200 likes, 267 shares.

⁸⁹ Russian Grandmas! Perf. Danny Poleshchuk. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 11 2013. 2,700 likes, 165 shares.

⁹⁰ Quote by Emiliya Noga, Jan. 11, 2014. Russian Grandmas! Perf. Danny Poleshchuk. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 11 2013. 2,700 likes, 165 shares.

of my grandma...”⁹¹ “... Just like my grandma”.⁹² In “Bad News For Babushka,” we see a similar scenario regarding expectations. A grandmother begins to cry when her grandson admits that he does not want to be a doctor.⁹³ This video received a variety of humor-intended responses such as, “That’s ok. You can be a lawyer”⁹⁴ and more relatable responses including, “[This is] pretty much the reaction I got 5 [years] ago. They’re still convinced I’m a type of doctor though...”⁹⁵

Other videos within the topic of familial expectations included scenarios that ranged from starting a family at a younger age, with grandfathers stating, “When I was eighteen, I was already married, I was in the army and you... you’re a lazy person that doesn’t do anything,”⁹⁶ to eating properly in order to make a good impression on potential future spouses: “...When I am home, I feel like I can eat however I want to eat. But when grandma comes around, she’s like, “What is this?! Look at how you care for yourself! Do you think someone is going to marry you like this, yes? Funny girl,”⁹⁷ to family member having pride in their accomplishments, “In Russia, I was the master of physics. Here, I conduct a car service”.⁹⁸

⁹¹ Quote by Kelly Lovee, Nov. 13, 2013. Russian Grandmas! Perf. Danny Poleshchuk. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 11 2013. 2,700 likes, 165 shares.

⁹² Quote by Llona Marie, March 25, 2014. Russian Grandmas! Perf. Danny Poleshchuk. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 11 2013. 2,700 likes, 165 shares.

⁹³ Bad News for Babushka. Perf. Dennis Dontstop. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 11, 2013. 1,200 likes, 56 shares.

⁹⁴ Quote by Daniel Zak, Nov. 11, 2013. Bad News for Babushka. Perf. Dennis Dontstop. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 11, 2013. 1,200 likes, 56 shares.

⁹⁵ Quote by Anna Gfld, Nov. 13, 2013. Bad News for Babushka. Perf. Dennis Dontstop. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 11, 2013. 1,200 likes, 56 shares.

⁹⁶ Happy Belated Birthday Albert Barkan! Perf. Albert Barkan. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Dec. 30, 2013. 2,000 likes, 57 shares.

⁹⁷ Eating. Perf. Monica Riskevish. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 17, 2013. 2,700 likes, 120 shares.

⁹⁸ Russian Grandpas Be Like. Perf. Albert Barkan. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 11, 2013. 1,100 likes and 52 shares.

Education Expectations

After having to endure a wide variety of restrictions and limitations within the Soviet Union, many Soviet immigrants today feel as if their children have many more opportunities in the United States than they did. As a result of having this mentality, Soviet immigrants tend to encourage their children to go above and beyond by achieving academic and career success. In the video titled, “100 on Spanish Test!!!” Robert Lemberg acts out the following scenario:

GRANDSON: Babushka, Babushka! I got a 100% on my Spanish midterm.

GRANDMA: Oh good. You will be speaking Spanish very well when you will be a doctor.⁹⁹

Along with this video was a comment, “Yes! The only job a Russian can [have] is a doctor”; this remark alone reached 98 Facebook ‘likes’.¹⁰⁰ As is evident through the numerous Soviet-American individuals who responded to this video, a common characteristic in Soviet-American households is the family’s emphasis on obtaining a higher- education and what they perceive as a successful career.

A common goal for Soviet immigrant families is to preserve customs and culture while becoming successful in the United States:

When pressed about their aspirations for their children, the Russian parents spoke convincingly about wanting their children to be successful Americans. This goal was usually qualified with their additional intent to have their families maintain their Russian culture. Parents wanted to

⁹⁹ 100 on Spanish Test!!! Perf. Robert Lemberg. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 11, 2013. 970 likes, 43 shares.

¹⁰⁰ Quote by Anna Kovaleva, Nov. 11, 2013. 100 on Spanish Test!!! Perf. Robert Lemberg. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 11, 2013. 970 likes, 43 shares.

have their children to preserve the language, religion, and important customs from their Russian heritage.¹⁰¹

Through the Soviet-American perspective, this added pressure causes many Soviet-American individuals to feel as if they have to live up to familial educational expectations and prioritize education over everything.

The feeling of living up to someone else's expectations is demonstrated in the video titled, "Russian Dads Be Like" where a father has a discussion with his son about why he had not been earning higher grades than other students:

FATHER: Why don't you have good grades like your friend?

SON: My friends get bad grades.

FATHER: Hey, I am not concerned about other people's children.¹⁰²

The irony of the conversation caused people to make comments such as, "That's my dad right there. Why are Russian dads like that???"¹⁰³ and "Are you channeling my father directly?"¹⁰⁴ Another video titled, "What is Important for Russian Parents" portrays the situation of parents expecting that their children to prioritize education over everything:

¹⁰¹ Delgado-Gaitan, Concha. "Russian Refugee Families: Accommodating Aspirations through Education." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 25.2 (1994): 137-55. *JSTOR*. American Anthropological Association. Web.

¹⁰² Russian Dads Be Like. Perf. Jakob. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 24, 2013. 3,600 likes and 206 shares.

¹⁰³ Quote by Nika Kravchenko, Dec. 2, 2013. Russian Dads Be Like. Perf. Jakob. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 24, 2013. 3,600 likes and 206 shares.

¹⁰⁴ Quote by Diana Guner Doss, Nov. 24, 2013. Russian Dads Be Like. Perf. Jakob. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 24, 2013. 3,600 likes and 206 shares.

FATHER: You finished school, but what about your grades?

SON: Grades? Hmm, grades aren't important. What's important is health.

FATHER: I'll show you health.¹⁰⁵

Among the many comments for this video, one that stood out happened to speak on behalf of the perspectives of those who experienced the Soviet education system and has high expectations on education as a result:

Has anyone here actually went to Russian school? ...All we did was math, Russian and literature. That was the main focus for any student and the marks, therefore, were and still are a big part of my life. My parents would kill for something less than 75%. What kind of Russian parent doesn't want their kids to be smart and go off to university?¹⁰⁶

Since much of the aspirations of Soviet immigrants tend to involve their children achieving education and success, as it can be beneficial anywhere, it is no wonder why many Soviet-Americans relate to '*Russian Jewish Vine*' videos regarding this particular topic.

With parents who are often unable to speak English fluently, many Soviet-American adolescents are left to learn English using their own methods and obtain extra assistance on certain academic topics. Another difficult aspect concerning immigrant families and educational expectations is that many are unfamiliar with the American school system and cannot help but compare it with the Soviet system of education:

¹⁰⁵ What is important for Russian parents?? Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. May 5, 2014. 1,800 likes, 134 shares.

¹⁰⁶ Quote by Lloha Najmuddin, May 5, 2014. What is important for Russian parents?? Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. May 5, 2014. 1,800 likes, 134 shares.

... The Russian community, as a whole, is quite critical about their schools. The adults believe the American schools are insufficiently rigorous when compared to schools in the former Soviet Union. When parents receive complaints about their children cutting classes in high school, they maintain that it is the school's responsibility to keep the children in class, and they proceed to compare the American school to Soviet schools, where such truancy would have severe consequences for the student.

Through a Soviet immigrant mentality, obtaining an education is necessary to receive future access to opportunities, and without it, the children will amount to nothing. "The families' literacy skills in their native language, as well as their experience and participation in the education system of their former homeland, all contributed to their understanding of what they had to know to ensure their success as participants in this society".¹⁰⁷ For Soviet-Americans living in a Soviet immigrant household, to stray away from these educational expectations is to disappoint the entire family, as they are not making proper use of the resources that their family made available to them.

Soviet Food Culture

At the heart of many Soviet-American families is a distinct set of recipes that combine original Soviet dishes with American bought ingredients. Nevertheless, most Soviet immigrants continue to eat the Soviet cuisine they are accustomed to and as a result, the younger generations of Soviet-Americans are raised eating such foods. When it comes to bringing food to school, many Soviet-American children will regularly undergo a deep series of questioning since Soviet foods often bear little to no

¹⁰⁷ Delgado-Gaitan, Concha. "Russian Refugee Families: Accommodating Aspirations through Education." *Anthropology & Education Quarterly* 25.2 (1994): 137-55. *JSTOR*. American Anthropological Association. Web.

resemblance to typical American food, an example being an open sandwich with dark bread and Soviet prepared meats.¹⁰⁸

When at home, the Soviet immigrant families expect their children to eat Soviet dishes, mainly because of the time and effort spent on preparing the food. In this aspect, Soviet-American children have a more difficult time branching out of Soviet cuisine. According to an article titled, “Russian Food” published by *Travel All Russia*, “[It is rare to] see a Russian eating peanut butter, apple sauce, cheddar cheese, American-style sandwiches, Mexican food, or many Italian dishes”. These families normally eat mayonnaise-based salads, heavy meat or fish courses with mushrooms or potatoes, and a plethora of soups.¹⁰⁹

In a Vine titled, “All Russian Food,” a Soviet-American named Monica Riskevish discusses the struggle of explaining unusual Soviet foods to others. Riskevish uses the example of ‘gulupty,’ which is “meat wrapped in cabbage, topped with sour cream”. The common reaction she receives is, “What is that?” and her response is to just assure them that the dish is good. This Vine generated 1.8 thousand Facebook ‘likes’ and featured a significant amount of comments where people mentioned their own experiences of having to explain Soviet foods, such as “selodka pad shuba [selyodka pod shuboy] or “haladetz” [kholodets]. The comments associated with the post about “haladetz” reached close to 600 Facebook ‘likes’. The topic of food in

¹⁰⁸ Pugachevsky, Julia. "17 Bizarre Foods Every Russian Grew Up With." *BuzzFeed*. 03 Oct. 2013. Web.

¹⁰⁹ "Russian Food." *Travel All Russia*. 11 Aug. 2015. Web.

Soviet-American culture is immensely popular; it is a cultural norm that many can relate to.^{110 111 112}

In a Soviet-American household, it is a common rule that when food is prepared at home, it must be eaten until there is nothing of it left. The Vine titled, “Russian Moms When Son/Daughter Brings Home Sushi,” demonstrates a scenario of what happens when a family member goes out to dinner rather than eating leftovers at home:

SON: Hi, mom.

MOTHER: What did you buy?

SON: I bought some sushi, mom.

MOTHER: Sushi?! Do I not cook enough for you? Do you open the refrigerator or not? Look at this! The borscht has already gone bad. That’s it, I’m flushing it down the toilet.¹¹³

In a Soviet-American household, it is expected that no foods go to waste. Those who had lived in the former Soviet Union when food was scarce and at times, unaffordable, formed this type of mentality; as a result, many Soviet immigrants are not as accustomed to eating out.¹¹⁴ Much of the Soviet diet is “based on crops that can thrive in cold climates, such as grains (rye, barley, buckwheat, and wheat), root vegetables (beets, turnips, potatoes, onions), and cabbage”. Depending on social class, efficiency

¹¹⁰ All Russian Food. Perf. Monica Riskevish. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Dec. 9, 2013. 1,800 likes, 87 shares.

¹¹¹ Quote by Diane Goldenberg Kuraev, Dec. 9, 2013. All Russian Food. Perf. Monica Riskevish. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Dec. 9, 2013. 1,800 likes, 87 shares.

¹¹² Quote by Vera Tsimmerman, Dec. 9, 2013. All Russian Food. Perf. Monica Riskevish. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Dec. 9, 2013. 1,800 likes, 87 shares.

¹¹³ Russian Moms When Son/Daughter Brings Home Sushi. Facebook. Brooklyn Russian Vines. Nov. 26, 2013. 828 likes, 90 shares.

¹¹⁴ "Russian Food." *Travel All Russia*. 11 Aug. 2015. Web.

of store management, food availability, Soviets were left without a wide range of ingredients for creating meals:

From the time of the Russian Revolution in 1917 until 1981, all of the restaurants [and most stores] in Russia (then part of the USSR) were owned and operated by the government... In 1981 President Mikhail Gorbachev began reforms that culminated in the 1991 breakup of the USSR and the beginnings of a democracy. But the sale and purchase of food was still regulated by the government as of the end of the twentieth century.¹¹⁵

However, over the course of history, more ingredients and dishes became available. As a result, typical Soviet cuisine became a blend of dishes from other nations within the former Soviet Union.¹¹⁶

A good portion of this Soviet cuisine made its way into American kitchens, after several waves of immigration. Soups are one of many traditional dishes that are eaten in Soviet-American households; with the most popular being: ‘borscht’, which is made from meat, beets, and cabbage; ‘schi’, which has cabbage, turnips, carrots, onions, leeks, and beef; and ‘solianka’, which is a fish soup made with onions, tomatoes, cucumbers, lemon, butter, and sometimes beef. The soups commonly feature potatoes, dumplings, or sour cream and at times, are eaten with “traditional dark Russian bread ... made from rye, through wheat is used increasingly”.¹¹⁷ In addition to soup, there are other trademark dishes that are well known to Soviet immigrant families. Blini, which is similar to a thin pancake or a crepe, can either be eaten plain, be served with sweet toppings such as cherries or as a savory dish by adding caviar and sour cream. In a

¹¹⁵ "Russia." *Food In Every Country*. Advameg, Inc. Web.

¹¹⁶ "Russian Food." *Travel All Russia*. 11 Aug. 2015. Web.

¹¹⁷ Magocsi, Paul Robert. "Russian Americans." *Every Culture*. Web.

similar fashion, varenyki are dumplings that can be filled with anything, although more commonly, they are filled with fruit.

Salads are a staple of Soviet cuisine. The most common salads prepared are vinaigrette, which is made with beets, potatoes, pickles, and pickled cabbage, and olivie, which is a form of potato salad. Herring under fur coat, or selyodka pod shuboy, shares similar ingredients as vinaigrette; however, it is considered to be a layered cake, “with salted herring, cooked vegetables, and a coat of grated beets and mayo”.

Kholodets, referred to as “meat jello” by Soviet-Americans, is a dish with chicken, carrots, herbs, and garlic submerged in gelatin. Other common foods and drinks one would find in a Soviet-American household are pickled jars of mushrooms, tomatoes, or cabbage, raw pig fat called ‘salo’, ‘Kvas’ which is a drink made from rye bread, and ‘kompot’ which is a type of fruit punch drink made by boiling fruits.¹¹⁸ Pelmeni and piroshki, which are two different types of cooked dough that are usually filled with meat, are also popular dishes within the Soviet-American culture. As for desserts, the most popular are chocolate, pastries, and cakes.¹¹⁹

Aside from well-known Soviet dishes such as borscht or beef stroganoff, most Soviet foods are considered to be strange to others who are unfamiliar with them. In a BuzzFeed video titled, “Americans Try Bizarre Russian Foods for the First Time,” a total of eight non-Soviet-Americans taste Soviet foods such as, herring under fur coat [selyodka pod shuboy], Russian bologna [doktorskaya kelbasa], pickled tomatoes, kholodets, and salo. One of the responses to eating selyodka pod shuboy was that “it

¹¹⁸ Pugachevsky, Julia. "17 Bizarre Foods Every Russian Grew Up With." *BuzzFeed*. 03 Oct. 2013. Web.

¹¹⁹ "Russian Food." *Travel All Russia*. 11 Aug. 2015. Web.

doesn't smell terrible but it looks weird..." or that it looked like "fish with purple mayonnaise on top." The majority had negative reactions to eating the dish. The Russian bologna was better received; however, many complained, stating, "It doesn't really taste like anything". The pickled tomatoes, on the other hand, had mixed reviews. The tomatoes were described as "wet" and with "a lot of flavor". One person claimed that they "like it so much" while another person mentioned that "the garlicky-ness of it helped [her] get through it".

When the group of people tasted kholodets, they had extremely negative reactions. Many of whom responded with comments such as, "look at it jiggle", "I don't know if I could this", "it's the texture!" and "This is so gross". The last food the group tasted was salo. All eight were hesitant about trying it; they claimed that there was no smell, "it's so tough", and "it's so salty". A few of the tasters had more positive things to say in comparison with the previous dishes, stating, "I think I'm into it," "If I had to choose between the meat jello and this, I think I would take like 20 of these," and "I would say this is probably the best thing we have had today".

To others, Soviet food may be considered strange and unappetizing, while to those who are raised on it Soviet cuisine almost becomes almost a delicacy when made properly. Although younger generations of Soviet-Americans attempt to display more independence than the previous generations, they become easily bribed by homemade Soviet cooking. This is demonstrated by Cherkassky in a Vine titled, "I Love Katleti" [a form of Soviet-style meatballs]:

MOTHER: Gary, I am making food. Go lay the tablecloth, get plates

SON: Mom, I am not hungry

MOTHER: Okay, I will remember that. Then you won't get kotleti

SON: Hold on mom, I am coming! I love kotleti!¹²⁰

Because of the cultural importance of food in Soviet history, today's Soviet-American generation shares the same appreciation for Soviet cuisine, while also being able to indulge in food from other cultures.

Cultural Identity Confusion

After years of undergoing Russification and Sovietization, there is no easy way to label the ethnicity of a Soviet immigrant family, especially in the United States.

Thus, a common occurrence that has affected many Soviet-American individuals is their difficulty in explaining their ethnicity to non-Soviets. Cherkassky, depicted this situation early on in his videos early on by portraying a conversation that normally occurs with Americans who attempt to understand his cultural background:

AMERICAN: So Gary, are you Russian?

CHERKASSKY: I speak Russian.

AMERICAN: So where are you from?

CHERKASSKY: I am Ukrainian.

AMERICAN: So do you like speak Ukrainian?

CHERKASSKY: No, I speak Russian.

AMERICAN: And you're Jewish?

CHERKASSKY: Yes.

AMERICAN: So, you're Ukrainian Jew?

CHERKASSKY: Russian Jew.

CHERKASSKY: Honestly, this is so confusing.¹²¹

¹²⁰ I Love Katleti. Perf. Gary Cherkassky. Brooklyn Russian Vines. Jan. 28, 2014. 839 likes, 109 shares.

¹²¹ White People Questions Part 1. Perf. Gary Cherkassky. Brooklyn Russian Vines. Sept. 28, 2014. 873 likes, 271 shares.

The topic was addressed several times in the other Facebook group, “*Russian Jew Vines*” in a similar manner by an individual named Albert Barkan:

AMERICAN: What nationality are you?

BARKAN: I’m Jewish.

AMERICAN: That’s a religion!

BARKAN: No, not in Russia.

AMERICAN: Oh, so you’re Russian?

BARKAN: No, Russian-Jewish.

AMERICAN: Right, so you’re Russian.

BARKAN: Oy vey.¹²²

The topic of identity has always been confusing for Soviet-Americans as each individual interprets it in their own way. Barkan attempted to clear up the confusion that was taking place in the comments section of the previous video, by stating, “... Russian Jews are not ethnically Russian because they do not, in origin, trace their roots to Russia... That is why they are considered a separate ethnic group, and that is why they have historically been considered “foreigners” in Russia, even if their families have been there for 700 or so years.”¹²³ Many other commentators continued to argue whether or not “Russian Jew” served as a proper label of ethnicity. Several people had similar comments such as, “Russian and Russian Jew are two completely different things,”¹²⁴ while others were more astonished by how well these videos related to them:

¹²² Cultural Confusions. Perf. Albert Barkan. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 29, 2013. 2,300 likes, 292 shares.

¹²³ Quote by Albert Barkan, Nov. 30, 2013. Cultural Confusions. Perf. Albert Barkan. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 29, 2013. 2,300 likes, 292 shares.

¹²⁴ Quote by Jennifer Shatsky, Jan. 28, 2014. Cultural Confusions. Perf. Albert Barkan. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 29, 2013. 2,300 likes, 292 shares.

“Why is this sooo true? ... This is what we’re like when people ask us where we’re from”¹²⁵ and “Even worse when you’re a Ukrainian Jew who speaks Russian...”¹²⁶.

A year later, David Sirota posted another video about Soviet-Americans and their nationality:

SIROTA: Yeah, I am Russian

AMERICAN: Where are your parents from?

SIROTA: Kiev

AMERICAN: Isn’t that?...

SIROTA: Okay, let me explain...¹²⁷

This time, however, the video’s comments section included posts about how humorous this situation was rather than many people attempting to dissect the proper ethnic terminology. While the inability to explain one’s ethnicity comes off as amusing in the videos, it does put various Soviet-Americans in a type of limbo where they are unable to relate to other ethnic groups. A prime example of this is when Soviet-American Jews have a difficult time relating to Jewish-American communities, as many Soviet-American Jews tend to have Jewish values but do not practice the religion. In contrast to American and Jewish traditions, Soviet-Americans differ in how they celebrate the holidays. This too adds confusion to the frequently asked question about why one would have a tree and presents on New Year’s instead of Christmas. In one of Sirota’s other videos titled, “Merry Chanukmas,” he states, “If you have a Christmas tree in your

¹²⁵ Quote by Yana Miska, Nov. 29, 2013. Cultural Confusions. Perf. Albert Barkan. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 29, 2013. 2,300 likes, 292 shares.

¹²⁶ Quote by Leonard Ferdman, March 8, 2014. Cultural Confusions. Perf. Albert Barkan. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 29, 2013. 2,300 likes, 292 shares.

¹²⁷ Russians and their Nationality. Perf. David Sirota. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Feb. 21, 2014. 2,200 likes and 225 shares.

house and you're Jewish, you're probably Russian."¹²⁸ In accordance to this comment, an individual reached 249 Facebook 'likes' by commenting, "Call it by its real name, it's a New Year's tree!"¹²⁹ While another individual stated, "This is such a hot topic this time of the year".¹³⁰ As it affects most Soviet-Americans, cultural identity confusion will continue to serve as one of the many facets that establish a Soviet-American identity.

Language Barriers

In the United States, Russian is the tenth most spoken language.¹³¹ In the state of Oregon, Russian is the third most popular language.¹³² It is considered to be the largest Slavic language and for many of today's Soviet-Americans, it is the main language of communication for conversing with family and friends. It is common in a Soviet immigrant household for parents and grandparents to preserve the Russian language as much as they can with younger Soviet-American generations in order to preserve heritage.¹³³ Although efforts are made to keep the Russian language from dying out in Soviet immigrant households, most second-generation Soviet-Americans are struggling to speak Russian without imperfections. This common occurrence also happens to be what many Soviet-Americans relate to in the Facebook videos.

¹²⁸ Merry Chanukmas!!! Perf. David Sirota. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Dec. 9, 2013. 3,100 likes and 360 shares.

¹²⁹ Quote by Aleksandr Kuperman, Dec. 9, 2013. Merry Chanukmas!!! Perf. David Sirota. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Dec. 9, 2013. 3,100 likes and 360 shares.

¹³⁰ Quote by Pearl Morgovsky, Dec. 10, 2013. Merry Chanukmas!!! Perf. David Sirota. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Dec. 9, 2013. 3,100 likes and 360 shares.

¹³¹ "The Most Spoken Languages in America." *WorldAtlas*. 30 Dec. 2015. Web.

¹³² Binder, Melissa. "Russian Is the Most Common Language in Oregon Behind English and Spanish. Surprised?" *Oregon Live*. The Oregonian, 16 May 2014. Web.

¹³³ Magocsi, Paul Robert. "Russian Americans." *Every Culture*. Web.

The “Russian Jew Vines” Facebook group created an image that states, “Babushka but I don’t know how to say ___ in Russian...”¹³⁴ This form of post also caused many Soviet-Americans to comment and share their own experiences as a heritage speaker. One of the comments was, “I find that I skip from language to language... Sometimes I can’t remember a word in Russian so I say in English, and other times I can’t remember a word in English so say it in Russian!!!”¹³⁵ Though, in another video posted by Monica Riskevish, viewers negatively commented on her Russian-speaking abilities. As a result, many individuals began commenting about how she is not “Russian,” while another individual commented, “Here are some [whines] of people, who do not live in Russia, so their life is different from life in Russia, but they are still Russian – it is their ethnicity, they adapted Russian culture and made their own.”¹³⁶ Throughout the comments section, there were other individuals who claimed that they have the same situation as her.

It seems that a common expectation that Soviet-Americans have is that they must be able to maintain both English and Russian to the best of their ability. What may also add to a Soviet-American’s distinct way of speaking is the usage of English words in a Russian sentence. An example of this would be a post created by “*Russian Jew Vines*” that states, “When Your Parents Tell You to do Something and They Speak in

¹³⁴ Babushka but I don’t know how to say ___ in Russian... Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Oct. 27, 2015. 380 likes, 24 shares.

¹³⁵ Quote by Anastasia Harrold, Nov. 29, 2015. Babushka but I don’t know how to say ___ in Russian... Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Oct. 27, 2015. 380 likes, 24 shares.

¹³⁶ Quote by Valeria Shotashvili, Nov. 22, 2013. Eating. Perf. Monica Riskevish. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 17, 2013. 2,700 likes, 120 shares.

Renglish Like, “[Go] Cleanat”.¹³⁷ Others have commented with additional phrases used in their household such as, “Ya shas budu kykat” [I am about to cook]¹³⁸ and “Go hike [equals] hikar,”¹³⁹ overall, stating that their families speak “Renglish”¹⁴⁰ and that this form of colloquial Russian is a general part of their life as a Soviet-American.¹⁴¹

Russian heritage speakers, or those that have been exposed to Russian at home as a first language, have little to no accent when speaking Russian. However, according to the author of *“Portraying Heritage Language Speakers”* Francois Grojean stated, “[Heritage speakers] acquire the majority language (e.g. English) either as very young children through contact with people outside the home or when they started going to school”. It is common for heritage speakers to change their dominant language once they begin going to school, making them lose confidence in ability to speak their first-language over time. Grojean also discussed how “The domains of use of the heritage language may often be limited (e.g. home, family, and some friends), and very often these bilinguals may not know the vocabulary of more specialized domains”. Without formally studying Russian, many of the heritage speakers do not learn to read and write, let alone be able to produce “adequate translations”. “Even though language heritage speakers are a special class of bilinguals, they have a real head start in their first

¹³⁷ When Your Parents Tell You to do Something and They Speak in Renglish like “[Go] Cleanat”. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Oct. 14, 2015. 1,700 likes and 292 shares.

¹³⁸ Quote by Daniel Remigaylo, Oct. 14, 2015. When Your Parents Tell You to do Something and They Speak in Renglish like “[Go] Cleanat”. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Oct. 14, 2015. 1,700 likes and 292 shares.

¹³⁹ Quote by Ilya Nikitin, Oct. 15, 2015. When Your Parents Tell You to do Something and They Speak in Renglish like “[Go] Cleanat”. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Oct. 14, 2015. 1,700 likes and 292 shares.

¹⁴⁰ Quote by Bella Bee, Oct. 22, 2015. When Your Parents Tell You to do Something and They Speak in Renglish like “[Go] Cleanat”. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Oct. 14, 2015. 1,700 likes and 292 shares.

¹⁴¹ Quote by Esther Morgolin, Jan. 25, 2016. When Your Parents Tell You to do Something and They Speak in Renglish like “[Go] Cleanat”. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Oct. 14, 2015. 1,700 likes and 292 shares.

language and culture which can blossom to more complete competence in the right environment”.¹⁴²

To evaluate the proficiency of Russian heritage speakers, the authors of “Russian Heritage Learners: So What Happens Now?” Olga Kagan and Kathleen Dillon stated, “we need to take a closer look at the differences in waves of immigration”. Those who have roots tracing back to the first two waves of Russian immigrants have been fully assimilated into American culture. “They may have a family interest in learning the language, but they have no functional skills”. The most recent waves brought individuals with a “wide range of language competencies” and more importantly, each wave depicted the amount of Russian that is passed down amongst younger generations. “Russian heritage learners are the children of the third, fourth and later waves of immigration whose level of competency in Russian is directly tied to the amount of education they received in the former Soviet Union”.¹⁴³

The use of language within a Soviet-American household also works in the opposite way. The more assimilated generations of Soviet-Americans have the responsibility of handling the language barriers that their families struggle with. In a video Cherkassky posted, he explains a recent situation he had with his father filling out an application over the phone:

DAD: Gary

GARY: What dad?

¹⁴² Grojean, Francois. "Portraying Heritage Language Speakers." *Psychology Today*. Sussex Publishers, LLC, 15 Mar. 2012. Web.

¹⁴³ Kagan, Olga, and Kathleen Dillon. *Russian Heritage Learners: So What Happens Now?* Special Anniversary Issue ed. Vol. 50. *Slavic and East European Journal*, 2006. Ser. 1. *The Slavic and East European Journal*. American Association of Teachers of Slavic and East European Languages. Web.

DAD: I am here filling out an application. What does “fierst” mean?

GARY: What? What did you say?

DAD: “Fierst”?

GARY: I don’t understand what you’re saying? What “fierst”?

DAD: It says here “fierst” name?

GARY: First name!¹⁴⁴

The video highlights an occasion where a Soviet-American adolescent has to assist their family with overcoming English barriers. The barriers, both with family members learning to speak English properly and vice versa with Soviet-American youth attempting to speak Russian properly, can lead to miscommunication between Soviet-American youth and their family members.

While instances of miscommunication between Soviet immigrants and their Soviet-American children tend to be a common issue, another issue that does arise is a Soviet-American’s sense of shame or embarrassment on account of their immigrant family member while out in American society. At times, the Soviet-style of thinking continues to model how an immigrant approaches certain conversations and situations while living in the United States; this aspect alone often keeps Soviet immigrants from assimilating into American society and is often the leading reason for second generations of Soviet-Americans to poke fun at family members, feel elements of embarrassment or shame, or get frustrated at their inability to understand.

Of all the challenges that accompany a bilingual individual, miscommunication is the most difficult to alter. And as demonstrated by a video called “When You Have to

¹⁴⁴ Russian dad filling out application. Perf. Gary Cherkassky. Facebook. Brooklyn Russian Vines. Aug. 22, 2014. 1,000 likes, 152 shares.

be the Translator at Your Own Parent Teacher Conference,” the language barriers can also result in a situation where Soviet-Americans can take advantage of their parent’s poor English-speaking skills:

TEACHER: Hi, you’re Val’s mother? It seems to me that your son is signing off on his tests on his own.

SON: He said that I am the best student.

MOTHER: Oh! Good! Good!¹⁴⁵

Along with the video, there was a comment made by Soviet-Americans who stated, “I used to do the same until they finally learned...” This comment itself reached 50 Facebook likes.¹⁴⁶

Superstitions

Finally, another common cultural tradition that most Soviet-Americans can relate to is the constant reminder of Soviet superstitions and bad omens. While other cultures may have superstitions that keep them from doing certain things, Soviet immigrant families take it to a whole other level. In a video titled, “Russian Superstitions,” a young boy starts whistling inside the house. His father immediately begins to shout, “What are you whistling for? We are all going to lose our money if you do!” The same young boy puts keys on the dining table and instantly, his mother began to shout, “Do not put the keys on the table, we will all lose our money!” Towards the

¹⁴⁵ When You Have to be the Translator at Your Own Parent Teacher Conference. Perf. Val. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. March 16, 2015. 2,400 Likes and 267 shares.

¹⁴⁶ Quote by Dorfman Yahfeem, March 16, 2015. When You Have to be the Translator at Your Own Parent Teacher Conference. Perf. Val. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. March 16, 2015. 2,400 Likes and 267 shares.

end of the video, the boy decides to open an umbrella inside the house, making both parents shout, “We do not open those inside! It is bad luck!”¹⁴⁷

In addition to the bad omens that boy has already performed, many viewers chimed in through their own experience with superstitions by adding, “... He forgot the one where if you come back to your house because you forgot something, you need to look in the mirror before you exit again”¹⁴⁸ which received a total of 283 Facebook ‘likes’, “If you [have] hiccups, [it] means somebody is remembering you...”¹⁴⁹ “I’m surprised they didn’t put the ‘don’t sit on a corner or else you won’t get married’ one,”¹⁵⁰ and “You forgot to step over somebody”.¹⁵¹

Within the topic of superstitions and bad omens, another video was posted about a boy attempting to step out of his room without any socks or shoes. Out of nowhere, his grandmother appears and shouts, “Put on slippers or you will get sick!”¹⁵² A viewer of this video commented, “I don’t think I’ve ever walked in the house barefoot, because if I do, I will get sick, get a bladder infection, not have babies, so my mom won’t have grandkids. (Russian slipper logic)”¹⁵³ while others discussed common Soviet superstitions and omens that are well known to Soviet-Americans: “How grandparents

¹⁴⁷ Russian Superstitions. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. March 11, 2014. 5,200 likes, 646 shares.

¹⁴⁸ Quote by Lillian Pinsky, March 11, 2014. Russian Superstitions. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. March 11, 2014. 5,200 likes, 646 shares.

¹⁴⁹ Quote by Meri Liberman, March 11, 2014. Russian Superstitions. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. March 11, 2014. 5,200 likes, 646 shares.

¹⁵⁰ Quote by Alisa Kozyreva, March 11, 2014. Russian Superstitions. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. March 11, 2014. 5,200 likes, 646 shares.

¹⁵¹ Quote by Victor Leznik, March 11, 2014. Russian Superstitions. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. March 11, 2014. 5,200 likes, 646 shares.

¹⁵² Tapochki. Nuff Said. Perf. Nathaniel and Ben. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Sept. 1, 2014. 2,300 likes, 265 shares.

¹⁵³ Quote by Leora Noor Eisenberg, Sept. 1, 2014. Tapochki. Nuff Said. Perf. Nathaniel and Ben. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Sept. 1, 2014. 2,300 likes, 265 shares.

freak out when you sit on the concrete,”¹⁵⁴ “[If you sit on the concrete], you’ll get a bladder infection and then you won’t be able to have babies,”¹⁵⁵ “If you go outside with wet hair, you will die,”¹⁵⁶ “How Russians freak out about whistling indoors,”¹⁵⁷ and “Russian cold remedies”.¹⁵⁸ Through another video titled, “Everything You Do is Bad Luck. Whistling Inside? Congratulations, You’ve Just Earned Yourself a Life with No Money,”¹⁵⁹ a few other viewers commented, “...Don’t leave your meal in your plate, or you’ll get [an] ugly wife,”¹⁶⁰ and “My babushka [grandma] says walking barefoot when you’re sick is a bad omen [because] mourners don’t wear shoes”.¹⁶¹

It is evident that superstitions and bad omens are a popular topic discussed by many Soviet-Americans and is a large part of their culture that has been passed down from generation to generation. According to *WeirdRussia.com*, other notable superstitions include travelers and those seeing them off “[sitting] for a moment in silence before leaving the house” for a long journey. Doing so provides an opportune time for travelers to have time and think about anything they may have forgotten.

¹⁵⁴ Quote by Karina Kissick, June, 10, 2014. We Are Looking for New People to Send Us Vines or Even Vine Ideas. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. June 10, 2014. 97 likes, 0 shares.

¹⁵⁵ Quote by Leora Noor Eisenberg, June, 19, 2014. We Are Looking for New People to Send Us Vines or Even Vine Ideas. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. June 10, 2014. 97 likes, 0 shares.

¹⁵⁶ Quote by Katya Popovich, June, 11, 2014. We Are Looking for New People to Send Us Vines or Even Vine Ideas. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. June 10, 2014. 97 likes, 0 shares.

¹⁵⁷ Quote by Sasha Kayola, June, 11, 2014. We Are Looking for New People to Send Us Vines or Even Vine Ideas. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. June 10, 2014. 97 likes, 0 shares.

¹⁵⁸ Quote by Francesca Shamis, June, 10, 2014. We Are Looking for New People to Send Us Vines or Even Vine Ideas. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. June 10, 2014. 97 likes, 0 shares.

¹⁵⁹ Everything You Do is Bad Luck. Whistling Inside? Congratulations, You’ve Just Ensured Yourself a Life With No Money”. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Oct. 21, 2015. 1,300 likes and 181 shares.

¹⁶⁰ Quote by Ferid Rustem, Oct. 21, 2015. Everything You Do is Bad Luck. Whistling Inside? Congratulations, You’ve Just Ensured Yourself a Life With No Money”. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Oct. 21, 2015. 1,300 likes and 181 shares.

¹⁶¹ Quote by Melissa Duchan, Oct. 21, 2015. Everything You Do is Bad Luck. Whistling Inside? Congratulations, You’ve Just Ensured Yourself a Life With No Money”. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Oct. 21, 2015. 1,300 likes and 181 shares.

Selected bad omens in Russian culture include: making your bed, wearing anything new, or cutting your fingernails on examination day, breaking a mirror and looking at one's reflection, stepping on another person's foot as it may lead to future conflict, not celebrating birthdays early, talking about future success, returning home for forgotten items, giving gifts of sharp objects (knives or scissors), birds flying into a room or birds tapping on a window, buying items for a newborn baby before it is born, stepping over people who are on the ground, unmarried people sitting at the corner of a table, giving an animal as a free gift, gifting a purse without putting any money inside of it, licking food of a knife, whistling in the house, and walking underneath or ducking under the arm of another person.¹⁶²

The Underlying Truth

Through these Facebook posts, many have questioned the purpose of these videos and whether or not these videos are intentionally offensive. The answer? It is unclear, however, what is to be certain is that these videos dig into the Soviet-American subculture more deeply, exploring common behaviors that exist in a day-to-day Soviet household and allowing people to relive familiar situations through someone else's eyes. Looking past all of the humor, we find common disconnects between the second generation of Soviet-Americans and their immigrant families. Much of this could be attributed to the lack of cross-cultural communication, which not only affects how an immigrant converses with other Americans, it also impacts how they begin to understand their own children as they are being raised with American influences.

¹⁶² "Russian Traditions and Superstitions." *Weird Russia*. 31 Aug. 2014. Web.

While Soviet immigrant families attempt to encourage a proper balance of Soviet and American culture, many find that their children may be leaning towards one culture more than the other. In retrospect, the videos portray how the second generations of Soviet-Americans are showing signs of difficulty in understanding their parent's mentality; they know that their parents are foreign to American customs but they tend to not understand why their ideals are formulated as such. As the Facebook videos demonstrate, Soviet-Americans acknowledge the differences in culture within their household and the outside world, and they learn to live with it, even though some Soviet principles may clash with today's American norms.

In another example of Facebook videos from "*Russian Jewish Vines*," a video titled, "If You Won't Eat What Mama Offers, You're Gonna Starve," shows an individual named Phil informing his mother that he is hungry but does not want to eat her soup:

SON: Mom, I want food.

MOTHER: There's really good soup from yesterday.

SON: No mom, I don't want soup.

MOM: You don't want to eat my soup? I am going to have a heart attack. That's it. This means you're not hungry.¹⁶³

This video represents a common conversation that occurs when Soviet-Americans want other foods, but because of their family's mentality on eating everything to keep food from going to waste, must eat what is prepared at home first. Topics such as these generate more and more Facebook likes each day. Furthermore, there are other Soviet-

¹⁶³ If You Won't Eat What Mama Offers, You're Gonna Starve... Perf. Phil. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Oct. 11, 2015. 949 Likes and 115 shares.

Americans, who do not create videos themselves, but take the opportunity to provide their own personal experience concerning the topic. In the comments section in the aforementioned video, several individuals wrote, "... This is pretty much what it's like living with my parents,"¹⁶⁴ "[This is] so accurate, even the kitchen is the same"¹⁶⁵ "[Then you're not hungry]... How many times I've heard that phrase...?"¹⁶⁶ "This is basically my life... This whole channel relates to me 100%. Every video makes me [crack up]"¹⁶⁷

As the Facebook videos have demonstrated, there are an abundance of topics that many members of the Soviet-American subculture can identify with, regardless of which country their roots originate from. Throughout each video, we see how Soviet-Americans relate to one another, whether it is provided in the video itself or if it is within the thread of comments. The relatable qualities can be apparent in the way that a Soviet-American speaks, addresses situations, assists their family with language barriers, has language barriers themselves, undergoes a series of questioning about identity, and even how they view certain societal standards. Although the videos are made for the purposes of humor, they expose a cultural reality that many individuals can relate to.

¹⁶⁴ Quote by Artem Suvorov, Oct. 11, 2015. If You Won't Eat What Mama Offers, You're Gonna Starve... Perf. Phil. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Oct. 11, 2015. 949 Likes and 115 shares.

¹⁶⁵ Quote by Rose Yakubov, Oct. 11, 2015. If You Won't Eat What Mama Offers, You're Gonna Starve... Perf. Phil. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Oct. 11, 2015. 949 Likes and 115 shares.

¹⁶⁶ Quote by Anna Pivchik, Oct. 12, 2015. If You Won't Eat What Mama Offers, You're Gonna Starve... Perf. Phil. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Oct. 11, 2015. 949 Likes and 115 shares.

¹⁶⁷ Quote by Nir Rozenberg, Nov. 14, 2015. If You Won't Eat What Mama Offers, You're Gonna Starve... Perf. Phil. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Oct. 11, 2015. 949 Likes and 115 shares.

Conclusion

The New Generation of Soviets in the United States

The Soviet-American subculture specifically applies to those who have been born or raised in the United States and have been brought up with Soviet influences. After several waves of Soviet immigration to the United States and as seen through the ongoing growth of Social media participation, it is evident that there exists a significant number of individuals within the United States who identify with the specific characteristics of a Soviet-American. Through this research, I have come to the conclusion that the emergence of the Soviet-American subculture is filled with complexities but also recognizable shared experiences. To validate my conclusion, I have conducted interviews with six members of the Soviet-American subculture. The individuals interviewed all grew up in a Soviet immigrant household and have different experiences being raised in the United States. All individuals are bilingual, they each have families that have originated from varied locations within the Soviet Union, and they have a diverse understanding of the term ‘Soviet’.

The six individuals include Sasha Stepanova, whose family emigrated from Russia in 2005; Lena Blackburn whose her mother was born in Ukraine and whose father is an American – Blackburn was born in Ukraine but spent more than six years in Latvia before moving to the United States in 1999; Tatevik Mazmanyanyan, who was born in Russia but lived in Armenia for eight years before she and her family moved to the United States; Anna Pikovskaya, who was born in Oregon and whose family emigrated from Ukraine in 1992; Liz Prishchenko, who was born in Oregon and whose family

emigrated from Ukraine in 1991; and Lizka Vaintrob, who was born in Massachusetts and whose family immigrated from Ukraine in 1991.

The individuals interviewed come from diverse cultural backgrounds and grew up in or are currently living in a Soviet immigrant household. All six practice certain aspects of Soviet culture, even though all of the individuals have differences in ages, currently live in different cities throughout the United States, and have different subsets of Soviet nationality. They also happen to share similar qualities in how they live their day-to-day life in the United States. Depending on whether or not the language is used for employment purposes, all six individuals speak their native language at home and speak English when out in public. When asked which language they prefer to use, all six individuals commented that their usage of both languages is an equal blend and that it depends entirely on whom they are speaking with.

All of the individuals have taken efforts to maintain their native language; Stepanova studied Russian at a local university and moved to a larger city to be surrounded by more Russian-speakers, Mazmanyán watches television and listens to music in her native language, studies Russian at a local university, and practices it with her family, Pikovskaya tries to speak Russian around other Russian-speakers, Prishenko studied Russian as a child and continued her studies throughout college, she also practices Russian at home, and tries to read novels and news in Russian, Vaintrob practices her Russian at home, and Blackburn practices her Russian when she is with family.

In regards to their ethnicity, Stepanova, Vaintrob, and Blackburn identified as Russian, although Blackburn was born in Ukraine. Blackburn stated, “Being born two

years after the dissipation of the Soviet Union put me into an awkward limbo but I definitely always say I am Russian if people ask”. Mazmanyán identified herself as Russian-Armenian, Pikovskaya identified as Caucasian, and Prishchenko identified as Russian-speaking Ukrainian. Although all six claimed to have practiced what they considered as “Russian customs”, with the exception of Stepanova, Mazmanyán and Prishchenko, the remaining interviewees had difficulty identifying which of their cultural customs stemmed from Sovietism.

While all interviewees may take part in following cultural customs, the three interviewees who were able to discern between Soviet and Russian customs had provided certain examples as to which customs they considered as “Soviet”. Stepanova maintains Soviet culture by celebrating New Year’s annually and never showing up to a guest’s house empty-handed; Mazmanyán’s family follows Soviet traditions by cooking and eating Soviet cuisine, respecting elders, bringing alcohol and nice chocolates to a guest’s house when formally invited, believing in superstitions, and liking the finer things in life; and Prishchenko considers herself to be unintentionally raised with Soviet traditions and customs, mainly being taught to have the Soviet mentality of family and community dynamics in regards to cooking and eating together as well as being involved in each person’s life.

To go further in depth, Mazmanyán stated, “Soviet culture is very relevant to me. I find it more difficult to connect with others at times, in terms of their morals compared to mine. It is easier to connect with friends who are also immigrants since they understand me better”. Apart from Blackburn, all interviewees claimed that Soviet or Russian culture has played a large role in their lives, especially cuisine and the belief

in superstitions. In regards to observing heritage, all six interviewees mentioned its importance because it describes who they are. The best aspects to having a dual cultural identity include: being bilingual and having the ability to “bring different ideas to those around you,”¹⁶⁸ “having a lot of things going for you because of your identity. It is an added benefit,”¹⁶⁹ “having the chance to learn more and be so open-minded to learning,”¹⁷⁰ “speaking another language,”¹⁷¹ “Being able to understand two different worlds and getting to choose the type of lifestyle I want to live,”¹⁷² and having “much more perspective on things; I am forced to think to decide which of the viewpoints on any topic is more correct, or sometimes to come up with an entirely new viewpoint because neither seems satisfactory”.¹⁷³

To contrast their viewpoints on the best qualities of a dual-identity, I asked them about the worst. All six had diverse responses. Vaintrob commented:

Obviously, I do feel lonely sometimes, as I cannot completely identify with any of the cultures. I cannot say that I belong to the "Americans" group, or the "Russians" group. Talking to my peers is often frustrating, because my culture - what I grew up in - is completely different. Even my parents cannot always relate to my experiences, thoughts, and situation, because they, while exposed to American culture, are not growing up surrounded by it. In other words, I feel that I have a huge advantage - the independence to think about things - and I also sometimes feel lonely.

Stepanova mentioned that not knowing how to relate to some people was the worst part whereas Blackburn mentioned how being more Americanized causes her to not be negatively impacted by her heritage. Prishchenko brought up the notion of frequently

¹⁶⁸ Stepanova, Sasha. "Being Raised With Soviet Culture." E-mail interview. 7 Jan. 2016.

¹⁶⁹ Blackburn, Lena. "Being Raised With Soviet Culture." E-mail interview. 11 Jan. 2016.

¹⁷⁰ Mazmanyanyan, Tatevik. "Being Raised With Soviet Culture." E-mail interview. 20 Jan. 2016.

¹⁷¹ Pikovskaya, Anna. "Being Raised With Soviet Culture." E-mail interview. 10 Jan. 2016.

¹⁷² Prishchenko, Liz. "Being Raised With Soviet Culture." E-mail interview. 24 Mar. 2016.

¹⁷³ Vaintrob, Liz. "Being Raised With Soviet Culture." E-mail interview. 29 Mar. 2016.

being misunderstood or offending others. With a similar response, Mazmanyán commented, “The worst thing is being at home and my father not liking the idea of American culture, which makes it difficult. I can’t use English expressions and translate them because it doesn’t make sense and [it] often offends my parents”. Pikovskaya states that one of the negative attributes included the possibility of others within the culture to be racist or judgmental.

All but Blackburn and Vaintrob had opinions about what Soviet ideals are outdated. Stepanova felt all of them are outdated; Mazmanyán thought the tradition of marrying into the same ethnicity is outdated as well as the strict stance against LGBTQ communities; Pikovskaya expressed that the idea of not wasting food due to shortages of resources and famines is old-fashioned; and Prishchenko felt that the belief in superstitions are outdated as it is passed on for generations with no scientific evidence as proof. Prishchenko also mentioned that the Soviet mentality of “beating the system” through maintaining a network system of family and friends is outdated as well, since in the United States, people receive better access to resources. With respect to changing aspects about American culture, Blackburn mentioned that her family would change the laziness of Americans, as well as their sense of entitlement, and how they tend to want something for nothing. Mazmanyán would change the way American children treat their elders by giving them more respect. Pikovskaya would make people be more straightforward and Vaintrob would change the narrow-mindedness of American views.

The topic of family encouraging the prospects of education led all six interviewees to share similar answers. Each of them mentioned how their family encouraged them to reach academic success. Stepanova commented, “Yes, they

definitely stressed that I do well in school, which ultimately lead me to pursue scholarships for college, then encouraged me to go to college and get a good job that paid well”. Blackburn, on the other hand, stated, “My mother has always been very strict about school, grades, and my approach to a career. Simply put, get everything done as fast as possible. Don’t take time off and don’t take any breaks”. Mazmanyán stated, “My parents have always supported me through every choice I have made, and living around them I have always wanted to work in the medical field. I have been raised well disciplined, and I always enjoyed education, so my family didn’t have to push me towards attending a university”. Prishchenko stated, “My mom and dad always encouraged me to study hard and have perfect grades. They expected me to be a successful professional and nothing less. And they [currently] desire that I marry and have kids, sooner rather than later”. Vaintrob stated, “I have grown up with the belief that education is incredibly important, that a good family, [more specifically] an affectionate one, is essential, and that career is not everything. I think these are general immigrant beliefs and mentalities, especially the first two”.

When answering the question of whether or not the interviewees have met others with similar Soviet and American backgrounds, they replied, “I have met some people with similar backgrounds, mainly at my university,”¹⁷⁴ “Not many. I’ve met some people through my mom but not really anyone my age, I would like to though,”¹⁷⁵ “Every Russian and Armenian I meet has a Soviet background that is similar to

¹⁷⁴ Stepanova, Sasha. "Being Raised With Soviet Culture." E-mail interview. 7 Jan. 2016.

¹⁷⁵ Blackburn, Lena. "Being Raised With Soviet Culture." E-mail interview. 11 Jan. 2016.

mine,”¹⁷⁶ “Yes, many Russians are similar,”¹⁷⁷ “Yes, mostly everyone who immigrated here or has family that immigrated here from the Soviet Union has very, very similar backgrounds, fears, joys, prides, etc. I can relate to them more than Americans,”¹⁷⁸ and “Yes, we have several family friends with children whose culture is similar to mine. I also go to a yearly “Russian” camp near Massachusetts where there are many kids my age and a bit older with very similar backgrounds. They feel automatically much closer than others, especially at first”.¹⁷⁹

These interviews suggest that Soviet rules, societal standards, and overall communist ideals were spread throughout the U.S.S.R., making it common for several people of different national origins having a significant amount of cultural identity in common. Thus, the title of ‘Soviet-American’ best depicts today’s new subculture as it is able to incorporate the diversity of those who had born in the Soviet Union and immigrated to the United States at an early age or those who had been raised with Soviet influences as an American-born as a result of immigrant family members passing it down to them, intentionally or unintentionally. Due to the Soviet Union having been comprised of a variety of nations, today’s Soviet-Americans have varying ethnicities; however, their families are mostly familiar with the Soviet lifestyle that was strictly enforced until its collapse in 1991. Whether an individual’s family originated from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Belorussia, Moldavia, Ukraine, Georgia, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, or even Kirghizstan, there exists

¹⁷⁶ Mazmanyanyan, Tatevik. "Being Raised With Soviet Culture." E-mail interview. 20 Jan. 2016.

¹⁷⁷ Pikovskaya, Anna. "Being Raised With Soviet Culture." E-mail interview. 10 Jan. 2016.

¹⁷⁸ Prishchenko, Liz. "Being Raised With Soviet Culture." E-mail interview. 24 Mar. 2016.

¹⁷⁹ Vaintrob, Liz. "Being Raised With Soviet Culture." E-mail interview. 29 Mar. 2016.

enough underlying common factors to create a unique identity that many Soviet-Americans can relate to.

The Characteristics of a Soviet-American

The extensive research, with the utilization of videos, posts, comments, interviews, articles, and scholarly research within this paper, has allowed me to formulate the following conclusion: the Soviet-American subculture has the characteristic of being able to connect with others that share the similar experience of living in a Soviet immigrant household while having to adapt to American culture. This puts Soviet-Americans in the unique position to be able to have mutual experiences exclusively within the Soviet-American community. Along with this ability to share, many Soviet-Americans are bilingual, often being able to jump, at times without realizing it, from one language to another. Another dominant trait that distinguishes this subculture from Soviet immigrants or American citizens is their struggle in adapting to both Soviet and American cultures fully. These traits, among many more, are the primary reasons as to why the Soviet-American community should be considered as its own subculture within the American population.

Other general characteristics of Soviet-Americans include being extremely familiar with Soviet culture, having family members who share common experiences with other Soviet immigrants, meeting high expectations for academic and career success, having certain stances on religion, as well as celebrating a blend of Soviet and American traditions. The shared languages, shared family history, shared culture, shared values on education, shared tradition, and shared perspectives on religion ultimately creates a hybrid culture which contains both Soviet and American values and only

applies to those who have a dual Soviet and American identity either at birth or at an early age.

These facets of Soviet-American identity also extend to several notable celebrities who were raised with similar circumstances. A film and television actress by the name of Mila Kunis had been born in Chernivtsi, Ukraine in 1983 and had immigrated to the United States at age seven. She and her family decided to emigrate out of the Soviet Union in order to escape religious persecution.¹⁸⁰ Singer, pianist, and songwriter Regina Spektor had a similar experience to Kunis. She was born in Moscow in 1980 and had immigrated with her family to the United States at the age of seven as a result of religious persecution.¹⁸¹ Sergey Brin, the co-creator of Google, was born in Moscow, Russia in 1973; however, to escape religious persecution, his family immigrated to the United States in 1979 while Brin was six years old. While in the United States, Brin pursued his education at Stanford. Soon after, he met Larry Page and the two created a search engine.¹⁸² In addition to this list, other notable Soviet-Americans include authors Anya Von Bremzen and Gary Shteynart, tennis players Maria Sharapova and Anna Kournikova, and actresses Milla Jovovich and Olesya Rulin.

Helping The Second Generations of Soviet-Americans

Unlike the first generation of Soviet immigrants before them, the members of Soviet-American subgroups have had fewer resources to help them with adapting to the

¹⁸⁰ "Mila Kunis Immigrant Actress." *Mila Kunis Immigrant Story*. Immigration Direct, 24 Dec. 2012. Web.

¹⁸¹ Mead, Wendy. "Regina Spektor." *Bio.com*. A&E Networks Television, Web.

¹⁸² "Sergey Brin." *Bio.com*. A&E Networks Television, Web.

standards of both cultures. Many Soviet immigrant families address this issue by sending their American born children to Russian language schools in the United States or simply allowing them to integrate to American culture entirely. There is hardly an in between. Resulting consequences of this matter include: adolescents arguing with family members regarding their expectations versus American expectations, having a lack of parental guidance on American-based situations, being unaware of available resources success, or even having a disconnect with family or native culture.

While there exists a variety of organizations that assist bilingual communities, many of them do not necessarily have the capability to assist Soviet-Americans with the issues mentioned earlier. In addition, the lack of heritage Russian language programs limits the options that Soviet-Americans have in order to develop their Russian-speaking proficiency. Most are limited to taking introductory Russian courses, which often start with basic language techniques or travel to a location that does offer a immersive Russian heritage-speaking program. Without having more resources available, the Soviet-American population risks losing their Russian-speaking ability as they integrate into American culture more fully. To evaluate the type of resources and programs needed for Soviet-Americans, current Soviet-American communities need to be studied and mapped out.

With the universal push for education brought on a majority of Soviet immigrant families and having participated in the American education system, the younger members of this subculture are immensely open-minded, well-educated, and seem to have an interest in new ideas. As a result, a generational gap can form. As we learn more about the Soviet-American subculture, it is imperative that we learn how to close

it. Not much research exists today on the matter of helping future generations successfully integrate to a dominant culture and their native culture; however, it needs to be pursued more in-depth as investigations on the topic can assist the thousands of Soviet-Americans adjust to living with a dual-identity and give them the resources to communicate cross-culturally.

Immigration will continue to grow in the United States and more families will have children that undergo the constant struggles of living in an immigrant household while having to adapt the American customs. The Facebook videos have already illuminated how many Soviet-American lives are affected by everyday miscommunications, and with ongoing posts concerning the hardships of living in an immigrant household, it is clear that there are not enough resources to help these individuals integrate into both cultures more smoothly. We need more efforts towards promoting cross-cultural communication, not just between families, but within American society as well. Thus, additional organizations and programs need to be made available to those have challenges with Soviet-American assimilation, doing so will help these individuals with all aspects of their lives as well as build a community that can exist beyond the virtual sphere.

Brief Chronology of the Soviet Union in the Twentieth Century

The information for this appendix was obtained through three different sources: BBC's timeline of the Soviet Union, Katherine Bliss Eaton's timeline in "*Daily Life in the Soviet Union*," as well as the Jewish Telegraphic Agency's timeline of Soviet-Jewish emigration.^{183 184 185}

Collectivization and Purges

- 1922 Soviet Union is officially recognized.
- 1924 Soviet Union implements a constitution; Lenin passes away and is replaced by Joseph Stalin.
- 1928 First of the Five-Year Plan causes revolution. Collectivization of agriculture ensues.
- 1932-1933 The great famine.
- 1936-1938 Stalin orders trials, detainment, and the execution of those who oppose him.
- 1939 Soviet Union and Nazi Germany sign a non-aggression pact.

World War II and its Aftermath

- 1941 Germany invades the Soviet Union and surrounds Leningrad. Soviet counter-offensive saves Moscow.
- 1943 Germans fail to take Stalingrad and retreat.
- 1945 Soviet forces invade Germany.
- 1949 Soviet Union tests and explodes its first atomic device.
- 1953 Stalin dies. Georgi Malenkov succeeds Stalin as prime minister and Nikita Khrushchev becomes first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.
- 1953-1954 Gulag prisoners begin to return.

Post-Stalin Thaw

- 1956 Khrushchev begins the process of destalinization. Hungarian revolt is suppressed by Soviet troops.
- 1957 First earth satellite, Sputnik, successfully launches and orbits the Earth.
- 1958 Khrushchev advances as prime minister.
- 1961 Yuri Gagarin becomes the first man in go into orbital flight.
- 1962 Cuban missile crisis emerges over the existence of Soviet missiles in Cuba.

The Brezhnev Era

- 1964 Khrushchev is replaced by Leonid Brezhnev. Aleksey Kosygin becomes prime minister.

¹⁸³ "Soviet Union Timeline." BBC News. 31 Oct. 2013. Web.

¹⁸⁴ Eaton, Katherine Bliss. *Daily Life in the Soviet Union*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2004. Print. Pgs. XV-XVII

¹⁸⁵ "The Soviet Jewry Campaign: A Timeline." *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*. 70/Faces Media, 19 Nov. 2007. Web.

- 1968 Soviet troops invade Czechoslovakia. Creation of “Brezhnev doctrine”, “giving communist countries the right to intervene in other communist states whose policies threaten the international communist movement”.
- 1969 SALT-1 arms control agreement is signed by the US and the Soviet Union, signaling the beginning of cooperation.
- 1971-1973 Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union increases.
- 1974 Soviet Union loosens its emigration policies in return for trade with the US.
- 1975 The Jackson-Vanik Amendment challenges Soviet restrictions on Jewish emigration.
- 1975-1977 Jewish emigration decreases significantly.
- 1977 Brezhnev elected president.
- 1977-1979 Jewish emigration increases again then stops abruptly after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.
- 1979 SALT-2 agreement is signed between the Soviet Union and the US. Soviet Union begins invasion of Afghanistan.
- 1980 Nikolay Tikhonov replaces Kosygin as prime minister. Kosygin dies.
- 1982 Brezhnev dies and is replaced by KGB chief Yuri Andropov.
- 1984 Andropov dies and is replaced by Konstantin Chernenko.

Glasnost, Perestroika, and Chernobyl

- 1985 Chernenko dies and is replaced by Mikhail Gorbachev as general secretary of the Communist Party. Andrey Gromyko becomes president. Gorbachev begins the policies of openness, or glasnost, and restructuring, or perestroika.
- 1986 Chernobyl disaster causes areas in Ukraine, Belarus, and beyond to be showered with radioactive material.
- 1988 Gorbachev replaces Gromyko as president. Soviet restrictions on Jewish emigration ease, causing half a million Jews to leave in the following two years.
- 1989 “Revolutions of 1989 see the toppling of Soviet-imposed communist regimes in central and Eastern Europe. Events begin in Poland and continue in Hungary, East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and Romania. In East Germany, an unprecedented series of mass public rallies leads to the fall of the Berlin Wall. Elsewhere in the USSR: Soviet troops leave Afghanistan; nationalist riots put down in Georgia; Lithuanian Communist Party declares its independence from the Soviet Communist Party; first openly contested elections for new Congress of People’s Deputies, or parliament.”

End of the Soviet Union

- 1990 Gorbachev opposes independence of Baltic States and imposes sanctions on Lithuania; Yeltsin becomes president of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic.
- 1991 September – Congress of People’s Deputies votes for the dissolution of the Soviet Union. December – “Leaders of Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus sign agreement setting up Commonwealth of Independent States. Gorbachev resigns as Soviet president. US recognizes independence of remaining Soviet republics. Russian government takes over offices of USSR in Russia.”

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- Quote by Lloha Najmuddin, May 5, 2014. What is important for Russian parents?? Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. May 5, 2014. 1,800 likes, 134 shares.
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- Quote by Melena Rimsky, Nov. 20, 2013. Russian Grandparents Never Throw Out Food. Perf. Gary Cherkassky. Facebook. Nov. 20, 2013. Brooklyn Russian Vines. 1,000 likes, 83 shares.
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- Quote by Michella Nedashkovskaya, Nov. 18, 2013. Russian Grandmas Loves Sending Packages to Soviet Union. Perf. Gary Cherkassky. Facebook. Brooklyn Russian Vines. Nov. 18, 2013. 1,100 likes, 81 shares.
- Quote by Nika Kravchenko, Dec. 2, 2013. Russian Dads Be Like. Perf. Jakob. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Nov. 24, 2013. 3,600 likes and 206 shares.
- Quote by Nir Rozenberg, Nov. 14, 2015. If You Won't Eat What Mama Offers, You're Gonna Starve... Perf. Phil. Facebook. Russian Jew Vines. Oct. 11, 2015. 949 Likes and 115 shares.
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